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**PECULIARITIES OF EMOTIONAL BURNOUT IN GRANDPARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES**

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**Abstract**

The article raises the question of the resource capabilities of the generation of grandparents raising children with disabilities. The reasons that increase the importance of the institution of parenthood in the upbringing of children with disabilities are described. The burnout syndrome is considered as a mechanism of psychological defense. The analysis of studies shows that the syndrome of emotional burnout in grandparents and the specifics of helping them in overcoming and preventing the syndrome of emotional burnout are not well understood. The article describes the results of only the first - diagnostic stage of the study. Diagnostic studies made it possible to get an idea of the feelings and experiences associated with burnout and to determine its level according to three subscales: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduction of personal achievements. To understand the severity of the syndrome, the presence / absence of successive stages of the development of the process of emotional burnout was determined. A socio-statistical description of the adult sample of research participants is presented. The results of a study of the emotional burnout of grandparents raising preschool children with disabilities are presented. The specificity of the manifestations of the emotional burnout syndrome in grandparents in relation to its manifestation in the generation of fathers and mothers is described. Conclusions are made about the causes, frequency of occurrence of the burnout syndrome, the degree of its severity, and the specifics of the manifestation of the syndrome in the generation of grandparents.

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*Keywords:* Educational resources of grandparents, depersonalization, support strategies, burnout syndrome, the phenomenon of ancestry, emotional burnout of grandparents



## 1. Introduction

An analysis of modern scientifically grounded technologies for supporting families raising children with disabilities allows us to speak of the extreme importance of the family's internal resources (Petrova et al., 2016; Prikhodko & Yugova, 2015; Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2016; Stafford et al., 2016; Tkachenko & Evdokimova, 2012; Tkacheva et al., 2014). A special area of scientific study is the prevention of emotional burnout of close adults (Bazaleva, 2017; Efimova, 2013; Leiter & Maslach, 2016; Mikolajczak et al., 2019; Psychological support for parents..., 2019; Vodopyanova & Starchenkova, 2017).

The attention of domestic and foreign researchers is rightly focused on effective ways to help mothers (Bazaleva, 2017; Burisch, 1993; Efimova, 2013; Mikolajczak, & Roskam, 2018; Psychological support for parents..., 2019). It should be noted that a number of scientific works are also devoted to the paternal role in the socialization of a child with disabilities (Borisenko, 2017; Chikalova, 2016; Ustinova, 2016; Zagvyazinsky & Chekhonin, 2017). Meanwhile, the role of grandparents at the birth of a child in a family, especially a “special” child, is extremely high. Note that with a steady increase in life expectancy, not only grandparents, but also great-grandmothers and great-grandfathers are actively involved in upbringing (Baxter & Warren, 2016; Bulygina & Komarova, 2019; Glaser et al., 2018; Hank et al., 2018). However, the educational resources of the ancestor generation have not been sufficiently studied (Krieger, 2016; Kuzmishina, 2014; Voloshina & Bratchikova, 2018).

## 2. Problem Statement

The relevance of the study is associated with the increase in life expectancy in general and “healthy life” in particular, recorded in recent decades by domestic and foreign statistical data (Rosstat, 2020; Shubat, 2020). Researchers note the trend of demographic aging of the population. According to UN forecasts, by 2050, the share of the world's population over 65 will increase from 9% (2019) to 16% (Rosstat, 2020).

This means strengthening the role of older people in the socio-economic development of society. Another circumstance that actualizes the consideration of the phenomenon of ancestry as an important educational resource is the tendency of an increase in the number of divorces and single-parent families at the birth of a child with disabilities. It is obvious that children in single-parent families are even more in need of the socializing potential of the institution of grandparents (Shubat, 2020).

However, the issues of parental assistance in the upbringing of children with certain nosological forms of developmental disorders have not been specifically studied. The specificity of helping grandparents in overcoming and preventing burnout syndrome is not built, it requires conceptualization and technological elaboration.

Our study, conducted from 2017 to 2020, revealed a key contradiction between the recognition of the importance of the institution of ancestry in the upbringing of children with disabilities and the lack of theoretical and methodological development of the problem of preventing the emotional burnout of grandparents.

The burnout syndrome described by the American psychiatrist Freudenberg (1974) is considered

today as a psychological defense mechanism. It consists in the form of a complete or partial exclusion of emotions in response to selected psycho-traumatic influences and allows you to dose and economically spend the body's energy resources. Synonymous with *burnout syndrome*, the terms *mental burnout syndrome* and *burnout* are used (Leiter & Maslach, 2016; Vodopyanova & Starchenkova, 2017).

Comparative analysis of multivariate burnout models: two-way (Dierendonck et al., 1994), three-way (Maslach & Jackson, 1981), and four-way (Frith & Mims, 1985; Iwanicki & Schwab, 1981) reveals that one of the manifest signs of burnout is the growing emotional exhaustion. It is accompanied by changes in communication, the development of negative socio-psychological attitudes towards oneself and loved ones, indifference to one's own life, destruction of the value system, a decrease in internal resources, an increase in the risks of developing psychosomatic diseases (Bazaleva, 2015; Vodopyanova & Starchenkova, 2017).

We hypothetically assumed that the presence of complex multilevel symptoms of mental loss in grandparents due to prolonged mental stress and distortion of life meanings associated with the upbringing of grandchildren with disabilities requires special resource-replenishing support strategies.

### **3. Research Questions**

- 3.1. How common is burnout syndrome and what is the degree of its severity in grandparents?
- 3.2. What is the specificity of the manifestations of burnout syndrome in the ancestors in relation to its manifestation in the generation of fathers and mothers?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the diagnostic phase of the study was to identify signs of emotional burnout in grandparents.

Let's make a reservation that during the research we understood the burnout syndrome in the context of Efimova (2013) as “a multidimensional construct that includes a set of negative psychological experiences and maladaptive behavior of parents associated with child-parent interaction in the process of caring for children” (p. 103).

### **5. Research Methods**

The methodological basis of the research was the theory of personality and its relations, cultural and historical concept, a systematic approach to families raising a child with developmental disabilities, the theory of emotional burnout.

In the course of a study conducted on the basis of the Regional autonomous social service institution “Rehabilitation Center for Children with Disabilities” in Veliky Novgorod, flexible multifactorial strategies for the prevention of emotional burnout in the parents of children with disabilities were developed and successfully tested.

In this article, we will focus on the description of the results of only the first - the diagnostic stage

of the study.

The subjects of the study were 65 grandparents from Soletsky, Demyansky, Valdaysky, Borovichsky, Novgorodsky, Moshenskoy, Krestetsky and Starorussky districts of the Novgorod region, accompanying grandchildren with disabilities during the course of rehabilitation at the Regional autonomous social service institution “Rehabilitation Center for Children with Disabilities”.

Let us present a socio-statistical description of an adult sample of research participants. Of the 65 participants, the majority were grandmothers (41). There were 17 grandfathers, 5 great-grandmothers, and 2 great-grandfathers. In 6 cases, the grandparents are guardians of special grandchildren and perform the role of substitute parents in relation to them. Mothers are deprived of parental rights (3 cases), are in places of imprisonment (2 cases), and are on the federal wanted list (1 case).

In terms of age parameters, the sample revealed a wide range of differences (from 42 to 81 years). 29 grandparents work and accompany their grandchildren during the rehabilitation session during the next vacation (specially timed to coincide with the terms of rehabilitation); 36 people are retired. Interestingly, only 25 grandparents permanently live with the child and his parents, 6 grandparents raise grandchildren without parents in their home, 19 people live separately, but in close proximity to the child's parental family, 21 grandparents live in another city or village, but accept active participation in education. A child with disabilities is the only grandchild / great-grandchild of this grandparent in 42 cases, the eldest grandchild in 11 cases, and the youngest in 12 cases. In two cases, grandmothers accompanied not one, but two grandchildren during the rehabilitation period.

The children's sample included 67 children aged 3 to 7 years with various nosological forms of developmental disorders. Of these, 18 children have severe and multiple developmental disorders, 26 children had mental disorders of varying severity, 11 children had sensory disorders, 10 children had disorders of the musculoskeletal system.

The questionnaire “Parental Burnout” by Vodopyanova and Starchenkova (2017), modified by Efimova (2013) was used as a diagnostic tool. The questionnaire contains 22 statements about feelings and experiences associated with burnout and allows you to determine its level on three subscales: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduction of personal achievements. The statements about feelings and experiences in the modified “Parental Burnout” questionnaire related to activities related to the care, development and education of children.

To understand the severity of the syndrome, we used the stepwise classification of Burisch (1993). We hypothesized that the adults participating in the study may have one of the sequential stages in the development of the process of emotional burnout described by Burisch (1993) (warning phase, phase of decreased activity, phase of emotional reaction, phase of destructive behavior, phase of psychosomatic reactions, phase of severe disappointment and a feeling of emptiness).

To identify the specifics of the manifestations of emotional burnout, a conceptual analysis of domestic and foreign studies concerning the phenomenon of ancestry was carried out. We assumed that, in spite of a number of common manifestations of emotional burnout of grandparents and parents raising preschoolers with disabilities, the generation of grandparents / great-grandmothers / great-grandfathers has specific features of the syndrome manifestations.

## 6. Findings

Analysis of the “Parental Burnout” questionnaire developed by Vodopyanova and Starchenkova (2017) and modified by Efimova (2013), found signs of emotional exhaustion in 57 grandparents. They manifested themselves in feelings of emotional overstrain, loss of interest in the family and in the environment in general, in indifference or emotional oversaturation, in a feeling of emptiness, a feeling of exhaustion of one's own emotional resources of “muffling”, “dullness” of emotions, manifestation of symptoms of depression, outbursts of anger, in emotional breakdowns.

Analysis of the graded classification by Burisch (1993) showed that signs of depersonalization (depreciation) were manifested in 48 study participants. They showed a tendency towards the development of a negative future, the formalization of contacts with children, a decrease in empathy, a loss of responsiveness, the substitution of deep emotional connections by providing routine regime moments (feeding, washing, a child, taking to kindergarten, etc.).

A reduction in parenting achievement was found in 43 participants. The manifestations of the reduction in parental achievements were a decrease or simplification of actions associated with caring for children, a decrease in a sense of competence in performing the role of a close adult, dissatisfaction with oneself, a decrease in the value of one's activity, a sense of guilt, a decrease in self-esteem, a decrease in the significance of the results achieved, both in life and raising a child.

The warning phase was observed in 9 grandparents. She somewhat disguised burnout and was characterized by an excessive enthusiasm for caring for a child and a rejection of needs unrelated to her. The entire life of the grandparent was centered around the child, to the detriment of personal interests. Symptoms of general exhaustion can be considered as the first alarming signals: a constant feeling of fatigue, sleep disturbance.

The phase of decreased activity was detected in 11 people. They experienced an increase in emotional and physical exhaustion due to constant involvement in the life of a special child. To compensate for fatigue, the grandparents began to reduce communication with the child, showed less and less sincere interest and participation. At the same time, they began to demand more from the child, expecting him to behave as usual.

The phase of emotional reactions was characteristic of 7 grandparents. They had less and less contact with the child. Noticing this, the children reacted with whims and demands for attention. In response, the grandparents were angry with the children, while feeling guilty at the same time.

The phase of destructive behavior was observed in 12 people. The level of fatigue and accumulated negative emotions became so intolerable in them that the psyche began to defend itself against them. This was manifested in a decrease in interest in the child, in the emasculation and automation of relations with him.

The phase of psychosomatic reactions was also characteristic of the 12 grandparents. Chronic suppression of emotions led to psychosomatic reactions, frequent illnesses.

Finally, the disappointment phase was observed in 14 people. They felt the strongest disappointment, emptiness, and apathy. Everything that recently formed the basis, the meaning of life, turned out to be indifferent.

Thus, in terms of degree, the sample of grandparents turned out to be heterogeneous.

Conceptual analysis of the specifics of the manifestations of emotional burnout revealed the predisposing factors providing this specificity. Thus, in 33 cases, the grandparents associate the occurrence of developmental disorders with the wrong upbringing of the child by his mother and father, or in general with the wrong, from their point of view, the way of life of the parents. For example, the grandmother of six-year-old Sasha R., who has a moderate degree of intellectual disability, blames her daughter, Sasha's mother, for the boy's lack of speech: "Why would a boy start talking if she was on the phone all the time! Twang-twang, and jingle-jangle. I was always reading to her (meaning Sasha's mother in childhood). I had connections in the bookstore. I used to buy books! I would buy her Chukovsky, and Barto, and all kinds of encyclopedias. I used to tell her what was happening in life. About a thunderstorm, and about snow – where it comes from, and how cat's children are called. I always took her to the garden. She called everything – here are cucumbers, here are green apples, then there will be red ones. That's how it is to be with a child, and not stare at the screen all the time, with the child left to his own devices!"

In 14 cases, the parents' catastrophic depreciation of their own lives, the tragic experience of the interruption of family history and procreation due to the difficult condition of the child were characteristic. So, the de-darling of seven-year-old Denis U., who has an autism spectrum disorder, tells with heartache about several generations of their family, about the traditions of masculine skill (fishing, traditional for Starorussky subregion) and about the meaninglessness of "life without continuity".

In 23 cases, the grandparents were afraid "not to have time to raise a sick child" because of their considerable age and state of health. For various reasons, they did not consider the child's parents as participants in the upbringing process at all, considering caring for their grandson as their "calling" and life purpose. Therefore, the grandmother of four-year-old Stasik M., a boy with infantile cerebral palsy, considers the behavior of her son (Stasik's father) as frivolous, infantile. According to her, he met Stasik's mother while still a student. The relationship was optional. Soon the parents parted. The mother left the newborn boy in the maternity hospital, having issued a refusal. All this took place in a small town where people know each other. The very next day, grandmother learned that her grandson, born deeply premature and in a difficult state, had been abandoned by his mother, who had left in an unknown direction. My father soon left to finish his studies in another city. From that moment on, all the life meanings and aspirations of the grandmother are associated with nursing the boy. "Let him live longer with me", she says, "and be glad. They (parents) are empty space. I only live to bring him up. I will do everything for him".

A specific feature of the manifestation of burnout syndrome in grandparents in the context of raising children with disabilities is a pronounced somatic component of the syndrome. In 58 cases, the participants in the experimental group showed manifestations of bodily weakness, functional disorders, for example, persistent insomnia, and decreased immunity.

## 7. Conclusion

Summing up the results of the study, we conclude that:

- grandparents are a significant educational resource in the socialization of children with disabilities;

- their educational potential is determined by demographic transformations taking place in society in recent decades;
- the category of grandparents of children with disabilities has high risks of burnout syndrome;
- the grandparents show signs of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, reduction of parental achievements of varying severity;
- the grandparents have a pronounced somatic component of the burnout syndrome;
- grandparents need resource-replenishing technologies aimed at overcoming and preventing burnout syndrome.

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