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Research article

## Children as agents of adults' psychological well-being

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### Abstract

**Introduction.** The article presents the results of theoretical and empirical analysis of the role and significance of children in the context of individual life, personal development, and adults' psychological well-being. It argues that children exert an influence on daily lives and well-being of adults, both as an objective life circumstance and as active co-agents in the life process.

**Materials and Methods.** The hypothesis concerning the relationship between the personal meaning of a child and the psychological well-being of an adult was tested through empirical studies. The studies involved three participant groups: parents (N = 1965), infertility patients (N = 165), and pedagogical professionals (N = 240). The personal meaning of a child was assessed using the Value of Children Scale and the Semantic Psychobiographic Analysis. The psychological well-being of adults performing parental functions was measured using a variety of scales, including the Life Satisfaction Scale, the Subjective Happiness Scale, the Concise Meaning-of-Life Crisis Questionnaire, the Positive and Negative Affect Scale, the Parental Stress Scale, the Parental Burnout Questionnaire, the Parental Self-Attitude Questionnaire, and the Diagnosis of Activity Experiences. For infertility patients, the Infertility Management Scale was used, while the psychological well-being of pedagogical professionals was measured using the Satisfaction with Career Scale, the Experiences in Vocational Activity Questionnaire, and the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale.

**Results.** The personal meaning of a child for an adult serves as a valid empirical marker of the strength and direction of its impact on psychological well-being. Distinct psychological types of personal meaning highlight the specific roles children play in the lives of adults. A positive meaning indicates that a child is a condition for adult psychological well-being, while a negative meaning reflects that a child contributes to psychological distress in areas such as reproduction, parenthood, and professional pedagogical work.

**Conclusions.** The findings suggest that children are active co-subjects of life and significant agents in the psychological well-being of adults.

**Keywords:** psychological well-being, hedonia, eudaimonia, existence, personal meaning of a child, terminal meaning of a child, pragmatic meaning of a child, value of children

## Научная статья

## Дети как агенты психологического благополучия взрослых

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**Аннотация**

**Введение.** Представлены результаты теоретико-эмпирического анализа места и роли ребенка в контексте индивидуальной жизнедеятельности, личностного развития и функционирования, а также психологического благополучия взрослого. Формой психического отражения объективных детерминационных связей, в которых ребенок находится к процессу и результатам реализации личностных интенций взрослого, выступает личностный смысл ребенка для взрослого. Основываясь на том, что психологическое благополучие-неблагополучие производно от прогресса практической реализации лично значимых интенций, этот личностный смысл рассматривается как субъективный индикатор воздействия ребенка на благополучие взрослого.

**Материалы и методы.** Общая гипотеза о взаимосвязи личностного смысла ребенка с психологическим благополучием взрослого тестирулась в цикле эмпирических исследований, охвативших родительскую (взрослые люди, воспитывающие ребенка/детей, N = 1965), клиническую (пациенты репродуктологического профия с диагностированным бесплодием, N = 165) и профессиональную (специалисты педономического труда, N = 240) выборки. Диагностика личностного смысла ребенка осуществлялась методиками «Шкала ценностного отношения к детям» и «Смыслометрический психобиографический анализ». Психологическое благополучие взрослых, выполняющих родительские функции, оценивалось «Шкалой удовлетворенности жизнью», «Шкалой субъективного счастья», «Кратким опросником смысложизненного кризиса», «Шкалой позитивного и негативного аффекта», «Шкалой родительского стресса», «Опросником родительского выгорания», «Опросником родительского самоотношения», методикой «Диагностика переживаний в деятельности». Психологическое благополучие взрослых, проходящих лечение от бесплодия, определялось на основе «Шкалы совладания с бесплодием». Психологическое благополучие работников педономического труда измерялось посредством «Шкалы удовлетворенности карьерой», «Опросника переживаний в профессиональной деятельности», «Уtrechtской шкалы увлеченности работой».

**Результаты.** Полученные данные свидетельствуют, что личностный смысл ребенка для взрослого является валидным эмпирическим маркером силы и направленности влияния первого на психологическое благополучие второго. Психологические типы личностного смысла ребенка высвечивают особенные функции, которые он выполняет в контексте индивидуальной жизнедеятельности и психологического благополучия взрослого. Позитивный смысл сигнализирует о том, что ребенок в жизни взрослого выступает условием психологического благополучия, тогда как негативный смысл указывает на то, что ребенок обуславливает психологическое неблагополучие взрослого на глобальном и доменном уровнях, в частности, в сферах репродукции, родительства и профессиональной педономической деятельности.

**Заключение.** Результаты исследования позволяют заключить, что дети являются активными со-субъектами жизни и влиятельными агентами психологического благополучия взрослых.

**Ключевые слова:** психологическое благополучие, гедония, эвдемония, экзистенция, личностный смысл ребенка, терминальный смысл ребенка, прагматический смысл ребенка, ценностное отношение к детям

## Ontology of Adult Life as Coexistence with Children

Children are an inevitable part of adult life across its various periods and spheres. While the very ontology of adult life is the one of shared being (coexistence) extending not only to other adults but also to children, the psychological effects, mechanisms, and patterns of how children shape adult lives remain a relatively understudied area in contemporary psychology. Psychology, pedagogy, and many other sciences examining adult-child relationships tend to overestimate adults' contribution to children's psychological pathway and to underestimate children's impact on adults' mental development, functioning, health, and well-being.

This research trend has its roots in social ideas, stereotypes, regular attitudes, and common social practices that entrench and reproduce an adult-child status inequality in age-based relationships (Karpinsky 2023; Miklyaeva 2014). When we consider findings from socio-psychological research on interpersonal significance — that is, subjective importance of one person to another — it becomes clear that adults are significant or supremely significant for children. Adults, however, predominantly attach significance to people of their age or older, and generally do not see children as significant individuals, with the exception of their own grown-up children (Kondratyev 2011; Kronik, Kronik 1989; Blyth et al. 1982; Buhl 2009; Garbarino et al. 1978).

This trend can be naturally explained by the fact that adults play a leading and dominant role across many types, forms, and spheres of interaction with children. Nevertheless, this real and unavoidable asymmetry in adult-child interactions should not ignore or minimize the contributions and influences children exert on adult lives. Regardless of their various positions, roles, and functions, they contribute to adults' lives as active agents rather than a passive background.

Describing a child as an 'agent' conforms with an interdisciplinary theoretical approach. This perspective views children in their diverse daily relationships with adults as proactive actors and active producers of their own development rather than merely passive recipients or controlled dependents (Green, Nixon 2020; Lerner 1982; Levison et al. 2021). Within the limits of their age-

specific biological, social, and psychological capacities, they act as subjects of their own life world and path. They build their lives within the same space and time as adults, asserting their own childhood needs, motives, and values, which quite frequently diverge from and are inconsistent with adults' interests. Because of their immanent activeness, children become agents within adult life, influencing it in many respects.

Children shape adults' lives in two distinct ways. First, simply by being born and present, they become a reality that adults must adapt to. In this sense, the child acts as an 'agent' just like any other 'acting force,' whether animate or inanimate. Second, as children grow — physically, socially, and mentally — they become an independent subject. Through their own choices and actions, they begin to actively intervene in adults' lives, becoming a life partner and co-subject. Here, an 'agent' refers to the child as an 'acting person.' So, whether as an objective circumstance or an active subject, a child is truly agentive in an adult's life, substantially shaping its course and outcomes.

One of the areas of modern psychology explores children's place and role in adults' lives by examining the dependence between adults' psychological well-being and their parental status and the number of children they have. This interdisciplinary field is at the intersection of reproductive psychology, the psychology of parenthood, lifespan developmental psychology, and positive psychology. Having emerged over forty years ago, it remains highly relevant, largely because decades of investigation have failed to produce a consensus on psychological phenomenology, mechanisms, and patterns of how children and parenthood affect different components (cognitive, affective, motivational), levels (sub-domain, domain, global), and types (hedonic, eudaimonic, existential) of adult psychological well-being. Findings from individual theoretical-empirical studies and systematic and meta-analytical reviews point to very few overarching patterns. In most cases, research reveals multiple-path, multi-directional, and multi-order effects children exert on adults' psychological well-being (Gupta 2022; McLanahan, Adams 1989; Nelson et al. 2014; Nelson-Coffey, Stewart 2019; Nomaguchi, Milkie 2020; Umber-son et al. 2010).

A critical assessment of the methodology, theory, methods, and findings in this area sug-

gests that the inconsistency of empirical results and their theoretical explanations stems from overlooking the key mediating factor which acts as both a mediating and a moderating variable in the influence produced by children and parenthood on adults' psychological well-being. This fundamental factor, which serves as the core structural and functional link (enabling interconnection and transfer) in the psychological mechanism via which children affect adult development, functioning, well-being, and health, is the personal meaning of a child (Karpinsky 2024a; 2024b).

## Adult Psychological Well-Being: Hedonia, Eudaimonia, and Existence

Understanding the relationship between a child's personal meaning and an adult's psychological well-being requires a clear insight into the nature, essence, mechanisms, and patterns of well-being itself. In the broadest sense, psychological well-being, also referred to as well-being, flourishing, or mental health, is a state accompanied by positive feelings, optimal functioning, and one's progressive development.

If we synthesize the concepts proposed by various schools of thought, approaches, and models, we end up with *psychological well-being as an integral, continuous, and dynamic mental state arising given satisfaction, or at least potential satisfaction, of one's individual needs, realization, or at least potential realization of one's personal values, and resolution, or at least potential resolvability, of one's existential dilemmas*.

The integral nature of psychological well-being supposes that its subjective phenomenology brings together a wide spectrum of cognitive, affective, and motivational mental phenomena along with their behavioral expressions. This quality also indicates that well-being involves the convergence of mental phenomena of different levels and orders, which originate and operate across various life domains, such as professional, marital-family, leisure-recreational, and many other specific activities. In essence, psychological well-being is a complex, multimodal, and multi-level phenomenon.

Despite its collective and integrative nature, the term 'psychological well-being' currently has a rather definite meaning and scope. There is a strong alignment of various definitions regarding the composition and structure of the men-

tal phenomena and behaviors that act as indicators of both well-being and ill-being. While different theories identify different components of psychological being, also called indicators, ingredients, or markers, they all view it as a complex, multidimensional phenomenon (Diener et al. 2018; Huppert, So 2013; Iasiello et al. 2024).

Considering its persistence and variability over a lifespan, psychological well-being falls into the category of mental states relevant not to discrete, short-term life situations but to extended segments of a person's life path and longer periods of development. This stability over time does not rule out situational variations and momentary fluctuations. Research shows, however, that psychological well-being tends to fluctuate around an individual baseline level, returning to and stabilizing at it following some deviations. This trend is specifically put into focus by two theories: the set-point theory, or the happiness baseline concept (Fujita, Diener 2005), and the dynamic equilibrium theory (Headey, Wearing 1989).

The dynamism of psychological well-being results from the fact that this state is reflective of the continuous dynamics of a person's real-life interactions with the real world — namely, the constantly shifting balance between the internal necessities (needs and values) and the objective possibilities and capacities available to fulfill them. All psychological approaches support the view that well-being stems from the progress, or success, in fulfilling personally significant intentions (motives and strivings). Conversely, ill-being results from a lack of possibility or capacity to fulfil them (Karpinsky 2016; Leontiev, Suchkov 2015; Klug, Maier 2015; Ng et al. 2012). As E. Deci and R. Ryan note on this subject, '[...] satisfaction of [...] needs is, indeed, associated with psychological well-being, whereas failure to satisfy the needs is associated with deficits in well-being' (Deci, Ryan 2000, 233). From this standpoint, psychological well-being in general and its various manifestations can be seen as by-products and unintended consequences of successfully fulfilling one's internal needs and personally significant intentions through engagement with the world.

Given the polymotivational nature — the diversity of driving intentions — of an individual's life, psychological well-being or ill-being also becomes inherently heterogeneous. One should identify at least three types of psychological well-

being: hedonic, eudaimonic, and existential, using qualitatively different sources of human motivation to distinguish them. Under this framework, hedonic well-being refers to a state that reflects the degree of satisfaction, or fundamental potential for satisfaction, of individual needs. Eudaimonic well-being is a state that signals the degree of fulfillment, or fundamental potential for fulfillment, of personal values. Finally, existential well-being denotes a state that informs us about the degree of resolution, or fundamental resolvability, of a person's existential dilemmas. Thus, individual needs, personal values, and existential dilemmas serve as distinct foundations for qualitatively different types of psychological well-being: hedonia, eudaimonia, and existence.

This means that to describe phenomenology and explain the mechanisms and patterns governing how children influence adult psychological well-being, we must identify an objective dependence of an adult's needs, values, motives, goals, objectives, and other personally significant intentions on a child. This very dependence constitutes the objective relationship that is subjectively reflected in the personal meaning of a child for an adult. Personal meaning is thus the key to understanding the effects a child exerts on an adult's psychological well-being.

### **Personal Meaning of a Child: Essence and Concept**

The scientific and practical problem described above has been subject to consistent theoretical, psychometric, and empirical interpretation within the concept of the personal meaning of a child (Karpinsky 2023). This concept fills some of the gaps and resolves a number of discrepancies in the scientific understanding of children's contribution to the mental development and functioning of adults, including their influence on psychological well-being.

As part of this concept, the personal meaning of a child, like any personal-meaning formation within the human psyche, serves two specific functions: reflective and regulatory. In its reflective aspect, personal meaning acts as a mental reflection of a child's objective place and role in an adult's life — more precisely, the objective relationships the child enters during and as a result of the adult's fulfillment of personally significant intentions. In its regulatory aspect, it

acts as a mental regulator of the adult's communication and interaction with the child, both cognitive and practical. It specifically provides a motivational and semantic framework for all kinds of adult activities: cognitive (such as social perception of the child), communicative (for instance, formal and interpersonal communication with the child), and practical (including daily care, education, and treatment) — across various adult-child interactions throughout life.

The personal meaning of a child is, first and foremost, a subjective understanding and experience of objective deterministic relationships — both causal and goal-oriented — between an adult's pursuit of significant intentions and a child as either an actual (present) or potential (planned or expected) life circumstance. In a subjectively transformed way, this meaning reflects a child's objective place and role within an adult's individual life pathway. In other words, children's objective importance lies in fulfilling adults' needs and motives, embodying their values, and achieving their goals and objectives. Adults thus recognize children's functional significance as an objective life circumstance that shapes the process, results, progress, and ultimate outcome of their own life. An objective foundation for this personal meaning is life relationship between an adult as a subject of one's own life and a child as a condition of that life. In this relationship, a child, through one's mere passive presence and/or active engagement, significantly impacts the productivity (success) of an adult's life project — sense of purpose and related goals, plans, and programs. Consequently, personal meaning constitutes the core of an adult's subjective, biased attitude or internal (personal) stance toward a child.

We can also define personal meaning as *individualized and contextualized significance of a child for an adult*. Any personal meaning has three inherent attributes: *objectivity* (it is always the meaning of something, i.e. of a specific object); *subjectivity* (it is always the meaning for someone, i.e. for a specific subject), and *contextuality* (it is always set within a specific context, i.e. specific spatial-temporal conditions of subject-object interaction). The unique qualities of the meaning-generating object, subject, and context determine the individualized and contextualized psychological nature of personal meaning.

When an adult derives meaning from a child, the psychological qualities of that personal meaning are conditioned by several factors. First, the meaning is engendered by the adult's own individuality, motives, and strivings — needs, values, motives, goals, and objectives. Second, the personal meaning is influenced by the child's uniqueness, primarily distinct physical, social, and psychological traits. Third, a specific life context in which the adult and the child interact and the meaning is generated plays a crucial role. The child's personal meaning emerges as his or her personalized significance for the adult, one that is deeply individualized (reflects the particularities of both the child as an object and the adult as a subject of comprehension) and contextualized (rooted in the unique life situation in which they 'encounter' each other). In the end, the personal meaning captures, in a subjectively filtered and transformed way, the essential characteristics of the adult as a life subject, the child as a life circumstance, and the situation itself with all of its macro and micro-level conditions in which real or ideational adult-child interaction takes place.

This personal meaning regulates how adults understand, communicate with, and behave toward children in all life domains and situations in which children are the key elements or prerequisites of adult activities. Children may occupy various positions in the structure and context of adult activity: they can be a motive for it, its end goal and outcome, an intermediate goal or objective, a tool or a method, a favorable or unfavorable external condition, or even a co-subject. When children make an objective structural part of an adult's activity and/or influence its process and outcome as an external condition, their personal meaning becomes involved in the mental regulation of that activity. It is noteworthy that this meaning is a phenomenon of meaningful nature which is responsible for motivational (drive) regulation. Depending on its specific psychological properties — such as topology, intensity, and modality — children's personal meaning can foster internal or external motivation, or conversely, amotivation or demotivation in adults. Personal meaning determines both the strength of an adult's motive, depending on the topology and intensity of this meaning, and the direction of action, depending on modality.

There are specific adult behaviors and activities of which children are the direct object and/or primary outcome. The goal itself may be to bring them into the world, socialize them through education and parenting, provide them with healthcare, social, legal, and psychological support, and otherwise foster their comprehensive and diverse development. This 'child-centric' focus is found in such types of voluntary adult activity as procreational reproductive and socializing parental behavior, as well as in child-related professions dedicated to children, such as childcare, teaching, pediatric medicine, child psychology, etc. In such domains as reproduction, parenthood, and child-related professions, a child's personal meaning for an adult carries the greatest functional weight. It functions as the primary regulator (motivator / amotivator / demotivator) and, consequently, a central determinant of an adult's psychological well-being or ill-being. In other words, adults' attitude toward a specific child or children in general is a major factor affecting their productive development, effectiveness, psychological well-being, and health in their roles as a subject of reproduction, parenting, and child-focused professional work.

It is worth mentioning that the regulatory function of a child's personal meaning is not limited to these specific child-centered behaviors and activities. Quite naturally, the role of a child's personal meaning is typically salient in their motivational regulation since the child is typically integrated into the activity's internal structure. In such cases, a child acquires personal significance for an adult as an independent value, an ultimate motive, or an intermediate goal or objective. However, there is a vast range of other activities in an adult's life where a child functions as an external, accompanying condition, objectively facilitating (promoting) or hindering (impeding) the realization of adult motives, goals, and objectives within those activities. In these instances, while the child's personal meaning is not a core motivational factor, its regulatory function still extends to each of these activities.

Thus, the personal meaning of a child for an adult is, first, a specific form of mental reflection of the objective determinative (causal and teleological) connections between the child — as an actual or potential life circumstance — and

the process and outcomes of the adult's pursuit of personally significant intentions (motives and strivings). Second, it is a specific form of motivational and meaning-related regulation that guides the adult's interpersonal cognition, communication, and interaction with the child across various life domains and situations, particularly within specific child-centered behaviors and activities.

### **Psychological Typology of the Personal Meaning of a Child**

Although personal meaning is an individualized 'significance for me', the rich diversity of children's personal meanings for adults can be subject to scientific psychological classifications and typologies. An essential characteristic such as individualization pertains primarily to the content (semantics) of personal meaning, although it also possesses a number of formal psychological properties (topological, intensive, modal, temporal, etc.). These properties also imply extensive individual variability and inter-individual variation of personal meaning, albeit allowing for the identification of its typological invariants. While the personal meaning of a specific child for a concrete adult is always singular (individual) as far as the content is concerned, it conveys specific and universal features of the adult's meaningful relationship to children (it is typical) by its formal properties.

The psychological concept we are developing applies the following functionally significant properties as classification and typology criteria to the personal meaning of a child for an adult:

- *topological criterion* — the child's place in the psychological structure of the adult's individual activity / integral life, which serves to differentiate between *terminal meaning* (the child as the ultimate motive behind the activity / the supreme value of the adult's life) and *pragmatic meaning* (the child as a concomitant circumstance conditioning the procedural and resultative side of the adult's activity / life);
- *modal criterion* — the direction of the child's influence on an individual activity / integral life of the adult, which serves to differentiate between *positive meaning* (the child acts as a positive motive / value or circum-

stance concomitant with the success of the adult's activity / life) and *negative meaning* (the child acts as a negative motive / anti-value or a circumstance concomitant with the failure of the adult's activity / life).

Four psychological types of personal meaning of a child for an adult can be identified at the intersection of the topological and the modal criteria: 1) positive terminal (*value-based*) meaning; 2) positive pragmatic (*instrumental*) meaning; 3) negative pragmatic (*obstructive*) meaning; 4) negative terminal (*anti-value*) meaning (Karpinsky 2023).

These types of personal meaning differ substantially from the functional point of view. Children with different types of meaning not only occupy a different place within an individual life but also perform different types of functions within the adult's personal development and functioning. Each psychological type of personal meaning reflects a special place of the child in the adult's life and, consequently, the specific functions directed at psychological well-being. Personal meaning is thus the understanding and experience of subjective significance ('significance for me') determined by the child's objective functional significance in the adult's life.

### **Polyfunctionality of a Child in an Adult's Life**

Children act as a multi-functional life circumstance in adults' life. The psychological type of children's personal meaning signals different kinds of functions they perform in adults' personal development and functioning as subjects of both specific activities and their whole life.

*A positive terminal meaning* presents children as a supreme personal value, positioned at the very top of adults' motivational hierarchy. By acquiring such meaning, they take on the specific functions that personal values perform in human activity and life. The unique value regulation functions that children assume within an adult's life are as follows:

- *a meaning-generating function* (the child and parenthood as sources of life purpose and meaningfulness);
- *a subordinating function* (the child as a leading life guide, the key value priority, and the primary meaningful argument in making life choices and decisions);

- *a developmental function* (childbearing and parenthood as major personal development objectives);
- *an identification function* (the child and parenthood as ‘identifiers’ of adulthood and maturity as well as foundations for social and personal identity and personal autonomy);
- *a hedonic function* (the child and parenthood as ‘generators’ of positive affect, subjective standards of ‘good life’, and foundations for satisfaction with life and happiness);
- *a eudaimonic function* (the child and parenthood as subjective criteria for life productivity, self-realization, and overall success, sources of life strivings, and prerequisites for self-respect and self-efficacy);
- *personalization and self-transcendence functions* (the child and parenthood as conditions for a personal ‘presence through another person’, symbolic immortality, and coping with death anxiety).

It is evident that with this type of personal meaning, children produce a comprehensive impact not only on adults’ hedonic and eudaimonic but also existential well-being by alleviating feelings of meaninglessness, constraint, isolation, and fear of death. Furthermore, in this case, adults’ individual sense of life purpose becomes objectified in and associated with children. Consequently, children also take on a whole set of exclusive functions inherent in life purpose as a regulator of adults’ individual life and personal development. Many life-purpose regulation functions — specifically, *protective (anti-stress), emancipating (volitional), and evaluative functions* among others — provide significant advantages for adults’ hedonic, eudaimonic, and existential well-being (Karpinsky 2019).

*A positive pragmatic meaning* suggests that children perform important *instrumental and resource functions* in adults’ life, acting as a condition that facilitates a full satisfaction of certain needs and a productive realization of specific values for adults. This function, however, is not limited to children’s ‘technical’ role as a mere tool, means, or method for fulfilling adults’ personally significant motives and strivings. From a certain age, the child is present in the adult’s life not so much as a passive condition but as an active

co-subject (a partner, helper, soulmate, etc.) who, through one’s own decisions and actions, provides multifaceted social support to the adult, thereby contributing to his or her life success and prosperity.

*A negative pragmatic meaning* implies that the child performs *obstructive and barrier functions* in the adult’s life. This means that by their mere existence, children complicate and hinder the processes by which adults satisfy their individual needs and fulfil their personal values. While maturing as subjects, children gain the capacity not just to be a passive obstacle but to actively oppose adults in cases where their needs and values clash. Thus, whether as a passive life circumstance and/or an active subject in their own life, children become a hindrance to adults’ adaptation and self-realization, thereby diminishing their hedonic, eudaimonic, and existential well-being.

Finally, a child with *a negative terminal meaning* is a life circumstance which is fundamentally incompatible with the satisfaction of the basic needs and realization of the supreme values of the adult. In this case, the presence or birth of children creates a critical or even extreme life situation — a scenario where normal life, which presupposes full need satisfaction, intensive self-development, and productive value realization, becomes impossible. With this type of personal meaning, adults see children as an anti-value — a dominant negative motive that drives them to avoid, shun, and distance themselves from all interaction with children. This applies to all stages, from the birth and education to choices regarding one’s own profession, residence, leisure as well as social, business, and personal contacts, all excluding children. As an anti-value, children carry out the same functions in adults’ life as valued children would but do so in an opposite manner. In such cases, it is the absence rather than presence of children that is seen as a subjective standard of ‘good life’, a measure of life success, a condition for self-realization, and a central objective of adult personal development among other things.

We can conclude that different types of personal meaning reveal distinct directions in children’s influence on the three basic forms of adult psychological well-being: hedonic, eudaimonic, and existential. While performing

multiple functions in an adult's life, a child with a positive terminal meaning exerts a comprehensive, predominantly positive effect on all forms of adult well-being. Such children help adults to satisfy their needs and realize their values, thus fostering both hedonia and eudaimonia. Children with a negative pragmatic meaning, conversely, hinder the satisfaction of needs and realization of values, thereby threatening the adult's hedonia and eudaimonia. Such children become a fundamentally superfluous circumstance which, given the adult's established life structure, motivational hierarchy, and value priorities, undermines all the types of psychological well-being altogether.

It is crucial that given the multitude of motivations in an individual's life — the multiplicity of meaning-generating needs, motives, and values — children tend to hold *multiple meanings* for a given adult. This means adults can have several types of meaning-related attitudes at the same time, while children fulfill different types of functions within the mechanisms of adults' psychological well-being, generally acting as a *polyfunctional* life circumstance. More specifically, a child can represent a self-sufficient life value (positive terminal meaning) while also serving as a tool for advancing some of the adult's life values and impeding others (positive and negative pragmatic meanings). For the vast majority of adults, the personal meaning of a child is not of a single 'pure' type but is rather *hybrid* (terminal-pragmatic) by topology and *conflicted* (positive-negative) by modality. It follows that the same child shapes the psychological well-being of the same adult in varying and diverging ways, stimulating and enhancing some aspects of well-being while suppressing and weakening others.

### **The Principle of Activity Mediation in the Personal Meaning of a Child and an Adult's Psychological Well-Being**

Importantly, the main determinant of an adult's psychological well-being or ill-being is neither the child nor the child's personal meaning of a child. Instead, it is the objective possibility and actual ability to build one's life in accordance with this personal meaning. A general psychological principle holds that *adults achieve the*

*highest level of well-being when their objective life conditions enable them to act towards children in a way that aligns with their personal meaning for them.* Therefore, the determination of adults' psychological well-being by children and parenthood follows a well-known general *principle of activity mediation* (Asmolov et al. 1979; Leon-tiev 1999).

For instance, children's positive terminal meaning is justified provided that adults have an actual possibility to have children, raise them, educate them, devote one's whole life to them, and in some cases build one's professional career around child care. However, when faced with insurmountable obstacles and constraints in having, adopting, or raising children among other things, adults derive psychological ill-being from this positive terminal meaning, as confirmed by psychological ill-being studies involving infertile adults who value children (Karpinsky 2024c)).

Conversely, for an adult with a negative terminal meaning of a child, the same life situation, with no children or possibility to have them, generates happiness and prosperity rather than distress, dissatisfaction with life, existential crisis, or other manifestations of ill-being.

If a child holds a negative pragmatic meaning, achieving and maintaining psychological well-being requires dedicated effort to mitigate, neutralize, or compensate for the child's obstructive impact on the satisfaction of needs and realization of values — in short, on the process and outcomes of the adult's life. Typically, such special measures and efforts involve a strict structuring of life space and time (aimed at disengaging the child from the key spheres of self-realization) and/or a partial delegation of parental functions and responsibilities to other people (the spouse, relatives, hired professionals, educational institutions, teachers, etc.).

This brings us to a conclusion that the decisive factor for psychological well-being is not so much the personal meaning of a child *per se* but an objective possibility and an adult's ability to act in accordance with this meaning in one's daily life. In this context, the methodological concept of the activity mediation of an individual's meaning formations serves as a vital explanatory principle for understanding the psychological mechanisms and patterns of how children influence adult well-being.

## Personal Meaning as Implicit Knowledge and Subjective Truth about a Child's Influence on Adult Well-Being

Every empirically identified meaning of a child, whether positive or negative, is underpinned by a specific function that children perform in relation to adult psychological well-being or ill-being. It is noteworthy that many personal meanings drawn from research participants' everyday awareness reflect the same effects produced by children and parenthood that have been corroborated and confirmed by psychological theory.

For example, when a child holds a positive meaning in terms of implementation of values such as 'communication', 'friendship', or 'having good and loyal friends', this shows that children perform communicative, affiliative, and social support functions in an adult's life. This personal meaning, like many others, finds full confirmation in rigorous scientific data, in particular research on how communication with children and social support from them contribute to various aspects of adult psychological well-being, especially among aging parents (sense of purpose, satisfaction with life, social engagement, etc.) (Grundström et al. 2024).

Overall, the range of empirically identified meanings of children is far greater than the number of patterns in the relationship and dependence between adult well-being and children and parental roles, distinguished by psychological science. Does this mean that some personal meanings that are obvious to everyday awareness but not properly studied in science so far represent subjective illusions of adults?

In our view, not in the least. Personal meanings reflect objective rather than invented, imagined, or apparent dependencies of adults on children. These are not merely known and stated but functionally effective significances that actually guide adult cognition, experience, and behavior regarding children. In daily life they constitute real regulators and the subjective truth of each adult which in a science like psychology should be treated as objective truth. When an adult or an entire group subjectively experiences and articulates a specific meaning of a child, the question is mostly whether we need this meaning to be additionally verified through objective and neutral psychological methods. For instance,

if adults report an obstructive (negative pragmatic) meaning of a child concerning such value as 'health', do we need any dedicated studies to prove the connection between objective deterioration in physical and mental health in adults as they shift their status from having no children to being a parent?

Here one can also mention the relationship and mechanisms of interaction between everyday (implicit) and scientific (explicit) knowledge in psychological science. Within this dichotomy, empirically identified personal meanings of children drawn from adults' everyday awareness belong to everyday implicit knowledge and, in this context, serve two important functions in relation to explicit scientific knowledge. The personal meaning of a child for an adult acts, in the first place, as an empirical criterion for verifying the assumptions and propositions of psychological science about how children influence adult well-being. Second, personal meanings that so far lack relevant theories, concepts, or positions within scientific knowledge serve as sources of new heuristic hypotheses for future psychological research.

Theories, concepts, and models in psychology and related sciences do not come even close to capturing the diversity of children's functions in adult life which is revealed through empirical analysis of personal meaning, or rather personal meanings of a child. While scientific theory attempts to uncover the mechanisms and patterns of children's influence on adult well-being from the outside — from an objective and detached viewpoint of an external observer — empirical study of a child's personal meaning highlights these mechanisms and patterns from within, meaning from the subjective and involved perspective of the adult personally experiencing this influence. The empirically identified range of personal meanings of children for adults therefore proves broader and richer than any theoretical constructs or explanations.

We can quote as an example the meta-analysis by J. Twenge and colleagues which puts forward four models explaining possible pathways by which children and parenthood negatively influence subjective marital satisfaction: role conflict (between parenthood and career), restriction of freedom, sexual dissatisfaction, and financial costs (Twenge et al. 2003). To verify these models through the lens of personal

meaning of a child, we would need to assess its obstructive (negative pragmatic) meaning in relation to such meaning-generating adult values as 'career', 'freedom', 'sex', and 'wealth' respectively. However, the spectrum of meaning-generating adult motives and strivings — and thus the range of possible obstructive meanings of a child — is not limited to these four values. Any otherwise empirically identified meaning could therefore underlie other explanatory models at the theory level.

The empirically identified range of personal meanings of a child for an adult thus serves as a kind of a roadmap that can guide further scientific psychological research into the mechanisms and patterns of how children and parenthood influence psychological well-being of adults.

### **Patterns in the Relationship between the Personal Meaning of a Child and an Adult's Psychological Well-Being**

Children's personal meaning indicates their objective relationship to adults' needs, values, and other personally significant adult intentions. It therefore consistently emerges as an empirical correlate, predictor, and factor for a wide range of adults' psychological well-being indicators.

In recent years, our empirical studies have systematically linked various aspects of an adult's psychological well-being to the personal meaning a child. They have encompassed diverse cohorts of adults: *a parental sample* (people who have given birth to and are raising children), *a clinical sample* (patients with reproduction issues), and *a professional sample* (individuals with child-related professions, such as childcare workers, teachers, pediatricians, and child psychologists).

This series of studies provided a consistent assessment of children's personal meaning. We measured the positive terminal meaning using either a meaning-metric psychobiographical analysis of the child or the Value of Children Scale. The positive and the negative pragmatic meaning was measured using the meaning-metric psychobiographical analysis of the child (Karpinsky 2023; 2024d).

We evaluated the psychological well-being and ill-being of adults raising children with diagnostic indicators used in the following methods. For global assessment, we used E. Diener's Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) and S. Lyubomir-

sky's Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS), both in adaptations by D. A. Leontiev and E. N. Osin (Osin, Leontiev 2020), along with the Concise Meaning-of-Life Crisis Questionnaire (Karpinsky 2019). Within the parenthood domain, we employed a single scored question on parental satisfaction with children; the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) specifically adapted to parenthood (Osin 2012); the Parental Stress Scale adapted by A. A. Bochaver and co-authors (Bochaver et al. 2024); the Parental Burnout Scale by I. N. Efimova (Efimova 2013); and the Parental Self-Esteem Questionnaire by K. V. Karpinsky. We also used the Internality in the Sphere of Family Relations subscale from the Level of Subjective Control questionnaire by E. F. Bazhin, E. A. Golynkina, and L. M. Etkind (Bazhin et al. 1984), and the Diagnosis of Activity Experiences method specifically adapted to parenthood (Osin, Leontiev 2017). For adults undergoing infertility treatment, their psychological well-being and ill-being in the reproduction domain was determined by their experience of an infertility crisis (as a domain-specific type of a purpose of life crisis), measured by the Infertility Management Scale developed by K. V. Karpinsky, A. V. Salmina, and S. L. Boyko (Karpinsky 2023; Salmina et al. 2024). For child-related professionals, psychological well-being and ill-being in their work domain was assessed using the Satisfaction with Career Scale by K. V. Karpinsky and T. V. Gizhuk (Karpinsky, Gizhuk 2017); the Experiences in Vocational Activity Questionnaire by E. N. Osin and D. A. Leontiev (Osin, Leontiev 2017); and Schaufeli's Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) adapted by D. A. Kutuzova (Kutuzova 2006).

A summary table presents correlations between different types of a child's personal meaning and various indicators of adult well-being and ill-being.

The results of this correlation analysis reveal general patterns that link the personal meaning of a child to an adult's psychological well-being or ill-being, both overall and in different life areas. All of the above correlations are mediated by the real functions a child performs in an adult's life. The personal meaning acts as a psychological indicator, while well-being and ill-being are the psychological consequence of the child's objective influence on the adult's life. The personal meaning of a child thus naturally

Table. Correlations between types of personal meaning of a child and indicators of adult psychological well-being

Indicators of psychological well-being	Types of personal meaning of a child		
	Positive terminal meaning (child as a value)	Positive pragmatic meaning (child as an instrument)	Negative pragmatic meaning (child as a barrier)
<i>Parents (N = 1965)</i>			
Satisfaction with Life (SWLS, N = 903)	0.47***	0.19***	-0.18***
Subjective Happiness (SHS, N = 903)	0.37***	0.20***	-0.19***
Agentlessness (Meaning-of-Life Crisis Questionnaire, N = 101)	-0.28**	-0.26*	0.31**
Disintegration (Meaning-of-Life Crisis Questionnaire, N = 101)	-0.30**	-0.18	0.21*
Disregulation (Meaning of Life Crisis Questionnaire, N = 101)	-0.45***	-0.23*	0.28**
Total Meaninglessness (Meaning-of-Life Crisis Questionnaire, N = 101)	-0.43***	-0.24*	0.29**
Parental satisfaction and pride (with children), (N = 903)	0.30***	0.27***	-0.20***
Positive parental affect (PANAS contextualized, N = 903)	0.31***	0.23***	-0.07
Negative parental affect (PANAS contextualized, N = 903)	-0.20***	-0.05	0.22**
Pleasure (N = 450)	0.33***	0.28***	-0.31***
Meaning (N = 450)	0.28***	0.24***	-0.23***
Effort (N = 450)	-0.08	-0.01	0.04
Emptiness (N = 450)	-0.21**	-0.21**	0.07
Parental stress (PSS, N = 279)	-0.17**	-0.25***	0.29***
Parental satisfaction (PSS, N = 279)	0.18**	0.18**	-0.22***
Emotional exhaustion (Parental Burnout Scale, N = 90)	-0.44***	-0.35***	0.37***
Depersonalization (Parental Burnout Scale, N = 90)	-0.07	-0.15	0.15
Reduction of parental achievements (Parental Burnout Scale, N = 90)	0.16	0.40***	-0.39***
Parental Self-Esteem (N = 142)	0.32***	0.40***	-0.38***
Parental internal LOC (N = 142)	0.28***	0.30***	-0.29***
<i>Infertility patients (N = 165)</i>			
Infertility Crisis	0.62***	0.13	-0.09
<i>Vocational pedonomic sample (N = 240)</i>			
Carrier Satisfaction (Satisfaction with Career Scale)	0.39***	0.40***	-0.46***
Vigor (Utrecht Work Engagement Scale)	0.30***	0.33***	-0.35***
Dedication (Utrecht Work Engagement Scale)	0.18**	0.18**	-0.25***
Exhaustion (Utrecht Work Engagement Scale)	0.22***	0.22***	-0.27***
Pleasure (Experiences in Vocational Activity Questionnaire)	0.31***	0.21***	-0.32***
Meaning (Experiences in Vocational Activity Questionnaire)	0.23***	0.21***	-0.36***
Effort (Experiences in Vocational Activity Questionnaire)	-0.26***	-0.23***	0.31***
Emptiness (Experiences in Vocational Activity Questionnaire)	-0.29***	-0.24***	0.35***

Note: \* —  $p \leq 0,05$ , \*\* —  $p \leq 0,01$ , \*\*\* —  $p \leq 0,001$  for certain sample size (N).

Табл. Корреляции типов личностного смысла ребенка с показателями психологического благополучия взрослых

Показатели психологического благополучия — неблагополучия	Психологические типы личностного смысла ребенка		
	Позитивный терминальный (ценностный)	Позитивный прагматический (инструментальный)	Негативный прагматический (преградный)
<b>Родительские выборки (люди, воспитывающие малолетних и несовершеннолетних детей)</b>			
Удовлетворенность жизнью (SWLS, N = 903)	0,47***	0,19***	-0,18***
Субъективное счастье (SHS, N = 903)	0,37***	0,20***	-0,19***
Десубъектизация (ОСЖК-К, N = 101)	-0,28**	-0,26*	0,31**
Дезинтеграция (ОСЖК-К, N = 101)	-0,30**	-0,18	0,21*
Смысловая дисрегуляция (ОСЖК-К, N = 101)	-0,45***	-0,23*	0,28**
Смысложизненный кризис (ОСЖК-К, N = 101)	-0,43***	-0,24*	0,29**
Родительская удовлетворенность (N = 903)	0,30***	0,27***	-0,20***
Позитивный родительский аффект (ШПАНА, N = 903)	0,31***	0,23***	-0,07
Негативный родительский аффект (ШПАНА, N = 903)	-0,20***	-0,05	0,22***
Переживание удовольствия (ОПД, N = 450)	0,33***	0,28***	-0,31***
Переживание смысла (ОПД, N = 450)	0,28***	0,24***	-0,23***
Переживание усилия (ОПД, N = 450)	-0,08	-0,01	0,04
Переживание пустоты (ОПД, N = 450)	-0,21**	-0,21**	0,07
Родительский стресс (PSS, N = 279)	-0,17**	-0,25***	0,29***
Родительская удовлетворенность (PSS, N = 279)	0,18**	0,18**	-0,22***
Эмоциональное истощение (OPB, N = 90)	-0,44***	-0,35***	0,37***
Деперсонализация (OPB, N = 90)	-0,07	-0,15	0,15
Редукция родительских достижений (OPB, N = 90)	0,16	0,40***	-0,39***
Родительское самоотношение (N = 142)	0,32***	0,40***	-0,38***
Родительская интернальность (УСК, N = 142)	0,28***	0,30***	-0,29***
<b>Клиническая выборка (пациенты с диагностированным бесплодием, N = 165)</b>			
Кризис инфертальности	0,62***	0,13	-0,09
<b>Профессиональная выборка (специалисты педоэкономического труда, N = 240)</b>			
Удовлетворенность карьерой	0,39***	0,40***	-0,46***
Энергичность	0,30***	0,33***	-0,35***
Энтузиазм	0,18**	0,18**	-0,25***
Поглощенность деятельностью	0,22***	0,22***	-0,27***
Переживание удовольствия	0,31***	0,21***	-0,32***
Переживание смысла	0,23***	0,21***	-0,36***
Переживание усилия	-0,26***	-0,23***	0,31***
Переживание пустоты	-0,29***	-0,24***	0,35***

Примечание: \* —  $p \leq 0,05$ , \*\* —  $p \leq 0,01$ , \*\*\* —  $p \leq 0,001$  при заданном объеме выборки (N).

correlates with manifestations of the adult's psychological well-being or ill-being. Notably, positive terminal and pragmatic meanings directly correlate with well-being and are in negative correlation with ill-being — the more expressed these types of meanings, the better the adult's well-being. The negative pragmatic meaning shows the opposite pattern: the more pronounced it is, the lower the adult's well-being. These correlation patterns provide evidence for the theoretical ideas about the functions of children in adults' lives, as well as the mechanisms and patterns of children's influence on adult psychological well-being.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we should stress once again an illusory view that adults are superior over children, which is common to everyday awareness and scientific body of knowledge. This is, in fact, a masked form of ageism. In daily life, many adults arrogantly believe that children are unilaterally and entirely dependent on them. Concurrently, psychological science heavily underestimates children's importance in adult world. The truth, however, is that the relationship of personal interdependence and significance between adults and children is bilateral, since children fulfill numerous critical and beneficial functions relevant to adults' own psychological

development and life. When met with the right attitude, they become agents and sources of adults' psychological well-being. This leads us to a vital implication for the practice of everyday communication with children and their treatment: adults are not merely supposed to expect gratitude from children for their involvement in their life but must be grateful for having a child in their own life.

## Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest, either existing or potential.

## Конфликт интересов

Автор заявляет об отсутствии потенциального или явного конфликта интересов.

## Ethics Approval

The author declares that the study complies with all ethical principles applicable to human and animal research.

## Соответствие принципам этики

Автор сообщает, что при проведении исследования соблюдены этические принципы, предусмотренные для исследований с участием людей и животных.

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