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Parental burnout as a challenge for the parent-school partnership

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Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problems: This article analyzes the parent-school partnership in the context of parental burnout (PB). PB is a syndrome characterized by parents' exhaustion resulting from prolonged stress and a chronic imbalance between demands and resources. It has serious negative consequences for the parent, the child, and the parent-child relationship. PB also affects children's academic achievement.

Research methods: The methods employed include a critical analysis of the literature on PB, the risk and resources model of PB and its relationship to parent-school cooperation. However, this review does not meet the criteria for a systematic review.

Article structure: The article consists of four parts. The first two focus on PB and summarize the main findings concerning the phenomenon. The third part examines academic achievement and PB, while the final section discusses the parent-school partnership and its challenges, particularly in relation to parental stress and PB.

Research findings: The parent-school partnership is a crucial yet challenging endeavor. Research indicates that teachers often perceive parents as overly demanding and difficult, rarely viewing them as partners or allowing them to play an active role in the school community. Teachers' comments and actions may contribute to parental stress and burnout; therefore, suggestions have been made for improving communication and collaboration with an emphasis on parental well-being.

Conclusions: PB is a serious condition with potentially significant negative ramifications. Teachers are often on the front lines and can either alleviate or exacerbate parental stress. Thus, it is important to discuss

***Keywords*:**
parental burnout,
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how to support parents and to reconsider the parent-school partnership in order to create a more supportive environment.

Introduction

Parental burnout (PB) is a syndrome of parental exhaustion resulting from prolonged stress and inadequate support systems (Mikolajczak & Roskam, 2018). It leads to feelings of being overwhelmed, as well as emotional distress and disconnection from one's child. PB is associated with a lack of resources for managing everyday parenting challenges. Although the phenomenon is not new and has been documented in literature since the 1980s (Mandecka, 2019; Mikolajczak et al., 2023), it has garnered increasing attention, particularly over the past decade. Today, PB is the subject of numerous studies and is widely discussed in popular media and online (Mikolajczak et al., 2023), which underscores the seriousness of this issue and its consequences for parenting. This article aims to discuss PB in the context of parent-school cooperation. Based on existing research, the first two sections focus on PB, particularly the risk and resources model. The next section investigates how PB affects children's school performance. The article concludes with practical guidelines for supporting parent-school cooperation in the context of PB.

Main characteristics of parental burnout

Research on PB stems from the idea that any area of life that is both meaningful and stressful can lead to burnout (Bianchi et al., 2014; Mandecka, 2019). Thus, the phenomenon cannot be confined to work-related conditions; it can also occur among pupils, students, and parents. Early PB research focused on emotional exhaustion and a loss of meaning in child-rearing among mothers. Attention then shifted to parents of children with chronic illnesses, life-threatening conditions, and disabilities (Mandecka, 2019).

More recently, researchers have refocused on parents of children without special needs, arguing that attitudinal changes toward child-rearing—

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such as the promotion of close parent-child relationships and strong parental involvement in children's development—have placed increasing pressure on parents (Godawa, 2022; Mikolajczak et al., 2023; Wiśniewska-Nogaj, 2025). For some, parenting has become a burden (Roskam et al., 2018). Research shows that PB differs from job-related burnout, depression, and general anxiety disorder (Mikolajczak et al., 2020).

Four core symptoms characterize PB (Schittek et al., 2024):

1. Exhaustion in one's parental role—physical, emotional, or both. The exhaustion is severe, intense, and chronic, and it cannot be alleviated simply by a night's rest.
2. Emotional distancing from one's children—in contrast to job-related burnout, parents do not dehumanize their children but instead focus on providing basic care (e.g., feeding, putting them to bed) without emotional involvement. Burned-out parents tend to distance themselves emotionally rather than physically. They also become less involved, responsive, or sensitive to their child's needs and less connected to their children.
3. Loss of parental fulfillment—exhausted parents no longer enjoy being with their children. They lose the joy, satisfaction, and pleasure of parenting and feel less effective. In other words, they are simply fed up with being parents.
4. A strong contrast between current and previous feelings and behaviors, as well as between how they imagined parenting before becoming parents and how they experience it now (e.g., the kind of parent they wanted to be versus the kind of parent they have become). This discrepancy between imagined expectations and reality becomes an additional source of distress, contributing to feelings of shame and guilt (Roskam et al., 2021b).

PB develops in stages (Roskam et al., 2021a), which suggests that it is a process that unfolds over time. The first symptom is exhaustion, followed by the others. Emotional distancing was previously believed to be the second symptom; however, current research indicates that all symptoms

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worsen after exhaustion emerges and can reinforce one another (Kalkan et al., 2022). Moreover, the developmental nature of PB shifts the difficulty from the parent (exhaustion) to relationships (e.g., emotional distance) (Schittek et al., 2024). Its processual character creates opportunities for early interventions and support for parents. PB typically arises after a period of acute stress, during which parents begin to feel overwhelmed by chores and demands and stop seeking solutions to problems related to child-rearing (Bayot et al., 2024).

The level of PB varies across countries and cultures (Roskam et al., 2021a). Cultural values (e.g., a high level of individualism) are considered to play a significant role (Matias et al., 2023; Mikolajczak et al., 2023; Ren et al., 2024). The highest scores are found among Western parents, where up to one in twelve (8%) exhibit symptoms of PB. Several possible explanations exist, such as the aforementioned level of individualism or the pressure to engage in active parenting focused on the child's needs and development (Matias et al., 2023; Mikolajczak et al., 2023). In Poland, PB levels are among the highest globally, with approximately 7.7% of parents exhibiting PB symptoms (the third highest among 42 countries, after Belgium and the U.S.). The mean result suggests that more parents experience severe PB symptoms and/or parental stress more frequently, even if they do not meet the criteria for a PB diagnosis.

There is ample evidence that PB has detrimental effects on parents' well-being and behavior toward their children (Roskam et al., 2018; Roskam et al., 2021b). A longitudinal study by Chen and colleagues (2021) found that PB leads to internalizing and externalizing problems among adolescents through increased parental hostility. PB among mothers can lead to poorer social adaptation and a lower sense of security among adolescents (Song et al., 2024) and can negatively affect adolescent development (Wang et al., 2023). Generally, burned-out parents exhibit higher levels of neglect and violence toward their children (Hansotte et al., 2020) and tend to emotionally distance themselves (Gillies & Roskam, 2019).

PB can lead to suicidal and escape ideation among parents (Mikolajczak et al., 2019), as well as psychological forms of escape, such as alcohol use (Mikolajczak et al., 2018). Due to changes in brain function

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(dysregulations in the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal [HPA] axis), burned-out parents often present somatic complaints and sleep disorders (Brianda et al., 2020). Furthermore, PB increases conflict between partners (both in intensity and frequency) (Mikolajczak & Roskam, 2018) and is believed to alter family dynamics and reduce the likelihood of having another child (Bogdán et al., 2024).

Parental burnout – between demands and resources

The last decade of PB research has focused on identifying relative risk and protective factors. Protective factors decrease the likelihood of PB, while risk factors exacerbate it. None of these factors are determinative. Moreover, protective factors are the opposite of risk factors, not merely their absence. To illustrate this, Mikolajczak and Roskam (2018, p. 2) note that having enough money for everyday life does not necessarily mean having sufficient financial support for full-time assistance with domestic or parental chores: "PB develops when parental resources are insufficient to meet the demands (whatever they are)" (Mikolajczak & Roskam, 2018, p. 2). This indicates a long-term imbalance between demands (risk factors) and resources (protective factors).

Based on PB research, Mikolajczak and Roskam compiled a list of protective and risk factors in 2018. They concluded that sociodemographic variables had either a trivial effect (parent's gender, child's gender, number of children, family structure, family recomposition, education, age of respondents, socioeconomic status of the family) or a small effect (child's age, work schedule). The most relevant factors were parental characteristics (particularly high levels of perfectionism and neuroticism as risk factors), characteristics of the relationship with the other parent (such as relationship satisfaction, support, agreement between co-parents, and endorsement by the partner as resources), as well as child-rearing practices (e.g., positive parenting as a protective factor).

In 2023, the list was updated, and the results were similar—variables such as age, educational level, number of children, or time spent with

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them have little or no effect. The predominant risk factors are family disorganization, neuroticism, and perfectionism. The latter trait requires further explanation: perfectionism is believed to be linked to individualistic cultures (Mikolajczak et al., 2023) and has been addressed in programs for burned-out parents (Brianda et al., 2020). However, perfectionism has different facets and not all contribute equally to PB. The most detrimental effects are associated with perfectionistic concerns in two domains: parenting and work, that is, when a parent fears making mistakes both as a caregiver and an employee. Moreover, self-oriented perfectionism (perfectionism imposed by parents on themselves) has a particularly harmful impact on PB.

Mikolajczak and colleagues (2023) argue that risk and resource factors must be treated with caution because most studies are cross-sectional, and the research lacks cross-cultural and causal approaches. Several areas remain understudied, such as the role of mental overload, information overload, and the impact of social media and new technologies on PB. Moreover, some variables can act as both risk and protective factors, depending on cultural context (Matias et al., 2023; Mikolajczak et al., 2023). One of these factors is emotional competence (EC). Intrapersonal EC is linked to the ability to identify, understand, and regulate one's emotions, focusing on one's internal state, and can serve as a protective factor. Conversely, interpersonal EC focuses on the emotions of others and can come at a prohibitive cost for some parents (Lin et al., 2023).

Ren and colleagues (2024) adopted a different approach to protective and risk factors. They embedded these factors in ecological systems theory and divided them into four systems: macro-, exo-, meso-, and micro-. The macrosystem is associated with personal and cultural values (such as the importance of individualism in a given country or for an individual), while the exosystem focuses on organizational or community factors, such as social support or child behavior problems. The mesosystem focuses on interpersonal factors, for example, marital satisfaction or the quality of the relationship with the co-parent and the child. Finally, the microsystem describes individual factors. In addition to the aforementioned personality traits, variables such as self-compassion and

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concern for others, a mother's attachment style, and a high need for control appear to be significant for PB. However, Ren and colleagues (2024) do not indicate how strong the impact of each variable is on PB.

To sum up, in general, sociodemographic factors have a smaller effect than parental characteristics. Mikolajczak and colleagues (2023) find this to be an encouraging result because some of these factors are impossible (e.g., age) or very difficult to change (e.g., neighborhood). The most important risk factors are the personality traits of the parent (more than those of the child). Parents who are highly neurotic, overprotective, rigid, perfectionistic, anxious, or possess low self-esteem, as well as those exhibiting poor or non-adaptive self-regulation strategies and difficulties in responding to their children's needs, are more prone to PB (Piotrowski et al., 2022; Mikolajczak et al., 2023; Ren et al., 2024). A lack of institutional and social support, combined with high social demands and pressures on parents, plays a crucial role. Risk factors also include difficulties in co-parenting relationships and family dysfunction. Piotrowski and colleagues (2022) also note that a stable parental identity—i.e., identifying as a parent and deriving satisfaction from that role—can protect against PB.

PB is also connected to the fact that current demands on parents are higher than ever. Today, parental responsibilities are more time- and energy-consuming (Wiśniewska-Nogaj, 2025). There is social pressure to be active, engaged, and creative in parenting, which can be highly stressful for some parents (Piotrowski et al., 2022). Moreover, social pressure can lead to the development of unrealistic beliefs among parents, making them feel inadequate, as if they do not meet social standards. This can cause frustration, anxiety, and stress, leading to the perception that parenting requires excessive effort while offering minimal rewards. Some studies indicate a mediating role of perceived family support and psychological resilience, particularly among parents of school-aged children (Zhao et al., 2023).

Several therapeutic options exist to address PB among parents; however, their efficacy remains uncertain. The primary question is which interventions produce long-lasting effects. The following are some of the methods adopted (Brianda et al., 2020; Bayot et al., 2024):

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1. Non-directive interventions—Parents are heard in nonjudgmental settings, where other parents offer their support and unconditional positive regard. This intervention aims to rebuild parents' strengths, enabling them to find their own way out of PB.
2. Directive interventions—This group-based program actively addresses the imbalance between resources and risk factors through psychoeducation and targeted exercises, focusing on parents' psychological traits (e.g., perfectionism), child-rearing practices (e.g., autonomy demands), and family functioning (e.g., relationships with and support from the co-parent).

Both approaches appear complementary; therefore, a program combining both methods (the "Parenting in Balance Program" [PBP]) is currently being evaluated (Brianda et al., 2020; Bayot et al., 2024). Programs are also emerging based, for instance, on mindfulness practices (Bayot et al., 2024; Urbanowicz et al., 2024a) and stress reduction methods (Urbanowicz et al., 2023). The CARE (Coherence, Attention, Relationship, Engagement) intervention, derived from positive psychology and designed to increase parental resources and strengths, has also been tested (Urbanowicz et al., 2024b). Generally, all examined interventions led to a reduction in PB and accompanying symptoms such as parental neglect, abuse, and biomedical markers such as hair cortisol. Overall, PB interventions can be crucial in addressing PB symptoms. However, there remain some uncertainties (e.g., the effectiveness of programs for parents with different initial levels of PB). Moreover, the area of early-stage intervention and prevention seems underdeveloped. Supporting parents with minor or no symptoms (who belong to high-risk groups) appears essential.

Parental burnout and children's educational achievement

PB is known to affect children's well-being as well as their educational achievement. However, most studies have been conducted in cultures that place a high value on education and view it as a means of improving

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one's life (e.g., Mainland China, Vietnam). Consequently, there may be doubts about how well these results can be applied to the Polish education system. Moreover, the mechanisms linking PB to lower educational achievement are not entirely clear (e.g., studies often do not account for child traits such as intelligence, motivation, or behavioral problems). Nevertheless, some conclusions can be drawn.

Parental involvement in the educational process is generally believed to enhance children's school performance (Otręba-Szklarczyk, 2015). It can reduce academic burnout and promote academic engagement. Parental involvement has been categorized into three basic types: academic socialization, home-based involvement, and school-based involvement (Li et al., 2024). However, it requires numerous resources: time, energy, money, and a good partnership with the school. Presumably, PB has a detrimental effect on the level of parental involvement in school, and a lack of such involvement negatively affects children's educational success.

Several studies support this observation. A direct link between PB and school achievement has been found among Vietnamese primary school students (An et al., 2024), Chinese elementary school students (Hong et al., 2022), and Chinese middle school students (Peng et al., 2025). In the latter study, academic self-efficacy partially mediated the relationship between PB and educational achievement and was moderated in the first half of the mediating effect by gender: increased PB led to decreased self-efficacy (which hindered school performance) among female students. This indirect effect was not observed among male students.

In another study involving junior middle school students from Henan Province, results showed that PB led to poorer academic engagement and greater academic disaffection through negative parenting styles (Guo et al., 2024). Moreover, Zhang and colleagues (2023) found that PB affects academic burnout through three mechanisms:

1. It has a direct relationship with academic burnout.
2. It impacts academic burnout indirectly through the mediating role of psychological distress.

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3. It relates to academic burnout through the chain-mediating role of harsh parental discipline.

Another study confirmed that PB mediates the relationship between parental educational anxiety and children's academic burnout (Wu et al., 2022). Peng and colleagues (2025) argue that burned-out parents may show less emotional involvement with their children and may resort to more controlling or punitive parenting behaviors. Instead of supporting their children in facing academic challenges, they may apply harsher discipline. This approach does not resolve students' problems but, in turn, leads to a decline in children's academic achievement.

Parental burnout and the parent–school partnership

It should first be noted that parent–school cooperation has been widely discussed in pedagogical literature. The relationships between parents and teachers are crucial for students' development, academic achievement, and the overall school environment (Hernik & Malinowska, 2015). A positive parent–school relationship enables parents to feel responsible not only for their own child's education but also for that of other students. It also contributes to parents' lifelong development (Śliwerski, 2017).

Consequently, there is an emphasis on improving communication between teachers and parents and on making schools more parent-friendly. Certain activities have been proposed to achieve this goal, such as inviting parents before the beginning of the school year to present rules and expectations, organizing parent meetings, and maintaining communication through various channels (Nadolnik, 2016). Although Nadolnik (2016) argues that these are good examples of school–parent cooperation, doubts persist. Hernik and Malinowska (2015) note that many of these forms are primarily used to address problems with students, leading parents to believe they have little influence on the school. Consequently, they tend to withdraw from school life or become passive participants.

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Moreover, in many cases, parents who wish to advocate for changes at school are viewed as difficult or overly demanding. Paradoxically, although teachers often state that their professional training lacks courses on communication and cooperation with parents, they tend to rank these skills low on their list of professional development needs. This suggests that many perceive communication and cooperation as self-evident or intuitive (Hernik & Malinowska, 2015). Of course, years of experience can facilitate this process, but it does not guarantee that what works well with one group of parents will work with another. The task is demanding for both teachers (who must meet various needs and expectations) and parents (who may bring unresolved issues from their own school experiences).

There is also the question of whether teachers should focus on "cooperation" or "partnership." The latter implies not only a shared goal but also equal status between teachers and parents, which some may find challenging. Some studies indicate that teachers tend to position themselves as experts, superior to parents. They often limit parental involvement to financial and organizational aspects (e.g., supervising children during trips, baking cakes for school events, or helping at festivals) (Zalewska-Bujak, 2020).

Moreover, Zalewska-Bujak (2020) reveals several concerning trends in parent–teacher cooperation. First, most teachers perceive parents as overly demanding and difficult. They believe that parents fail to fulfil their educational responsibilities while placing excessive demands on the school. Furthermore, teachers' statements suggest that schools tend to undermine parents' competencies and blame them for their children's behavior without offering constructive solutions. Teachers often pressure parents to "do something" about their child (e.g., compensate for students' learning difficulties) and to devote significant time to studying and homework without providing any clear guidance.

In summary, teachers' statements imply that their actions may increase parental stress rather than alleviate it, potentially contributing to PB. The precise mechanism is unclear; however, the following conceptual model may help in understanding the relationship between PB and the parent–school partnership (Fig. 1).

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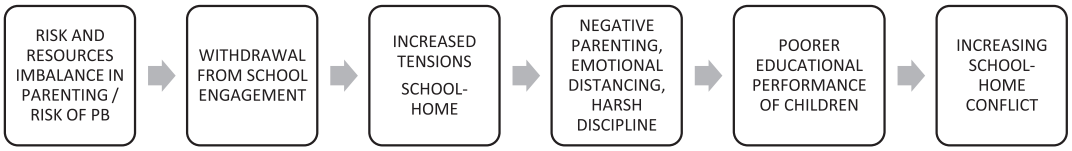
Fig. 1. A conceptual model of PB and the parent–school partnership



The question arises: how can schools partner with parents in a context where many parents suffer from PB or high levels of stress, navigating numerous life demands, often with little or no support? On the other hand, teachers also face many challenges. Their work is not widely recognized as socially important; they are often criticized and must constantly adapt to a changing world. However, burnout among teachers is well recognized, with several solutions available to address it (including health leave). Remedies for PB, on the other hand, are still being evaluated.

Based on the literature review in the previous part of the article, several ideas can be implemented to reduce the risk of PB and improve partnership. It is crucial to acknowledge that parenting is a demanding task and may be more challenging for some parents. Moreover, a teacher with different parenting experiences may find it challenging to understand another parent's struggles. During school meetings, topics regarding parental stress and ways to alleviate it (e.g., seeking help with everyday hassles, learning self-care, including self-regulation practices, and seeking professional help) should at least be mentioned. Interventions for burned-out parents include the development of mindfulness practices, stress-reduction techniques, and emotion self-regulation strategies—similar workshops (although not embedded in eight-week programs) could be offered by school psychologists. Understanding and recognizing the first signs of PB and offering assistance (e.g., free psychological guidance) can minimize the risk of developing further symptoms. Especially, parents of children with special needs might be more prone to PB (Dzielińska et al., 2024).

Much can be achieved through everyday parent–school communication. Teachers should refrain from directly or indirectly criticizing or mocking parents and their parenting. For instance, it is natural for

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children to behave their worst in front of their parents; this does not indicate poor parenting. Rather, it may show that school can be a highly stressful environment for children who lack opportunities to unwind emotionally. Furthermore, parent–school communication should focus on resources rather than demands. For example, if a child exhibits difficult or socially unacceptable behavior or has learning difficulties, teachers should not expect parents to solve these problems on their own. Advice such as "talk to the child" or "do something about it" does not offer real solutions; instead, it shifts responsibility from the school to the parents and increases their stress. By suggesting that a child's unruly behavior is the parents' fault, teachers may reinforce parents' feelings of inadequacy, potentially leading to more negative parenting, overcontrol, and harsh discipline.

Moreover, fear of making mistakes—associated with high self-oriented perfectionism—is one of the most significant risk factors for PB (Mikolajczak et al., 2023). Thus, teachers' comments can contribute to PB and negatively affect children's development. Parent–school communication also involves a range of tasks for parents, such as remembering what to bring, keeping track of children's assessments, and participating in various competitions, among others. Although the role of mental and information overload has not yet been examined in the context of PB, it can be hypothesized that these factors may serve as risks. This calls for schools to recognize the fragility of inviting parents to become more active while avoiding overburdening them with excessive demands.

In conclusion, the parent–school partnership can be a source of stress for both parties. However, teachers, as professionals, should focus on fostering cooperation in a friendly, safe atmosphere while respecting boundaries. Their words, gestures, and actions can either support or burden parents. Teachers must work to create a safe, nonjudgmental, and respectful environment that encourages parental engagement and values their experiences, offering advice when necessary. Non-directive interventions for burned-out parents operate on a similar principle; thus, it can be assumed that teachers' behavior can help alleviate parental stress. Although little is known about the impact of children's school experience

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and parent–school cooperation on PB, the mechanisms discussed above suggest that these factors may contribute to parents feeling overwhelmed and may serve as risk factors for PB.

The discussion presented here is strongly grounded in the Polish educational system; therefore, its cultural limitations should be clearly acknowledged. Specific parent–teacher dynamics, the low professional status of teachers, and the division of responsibilities between home and school may differ across countries and cultures.

Conclusion

Parental burnout is a serious condition with potentially significant negative consequences for parents, children, and the parent–child relationship. It can contribute to students' academic burnout and hinder their school performance. Teachers are often on the front line and can either help alleviate parental stress or contribute to it. Therefore, there should be a broader discussion on how to support parents and reimagine the parent–school partnership to create a more supportive environment.

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