

Lived Experiences of Adults Raised in Hurried Parenting Environments: A Phenomenological Study

Celiz Pinto¹, Dr. Richa Gupta²

¹MSc Psychology, JAIN (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru, India

²Associate Professor, MSc Psychology, JAIN (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru, India

Abstract: *The present study explored how adults retrospectively understood childhood experiences they perceived as characteristic of hurried parenting and how they perceived these experiences in relation to adult coping, stress, anxiety, emotional well-being and resilience. Existing research has examined individual parenting practices associated with childhood stress and adjustment, but less is known about how adults make meaning of multiple, overlapping experiences of childhood acceleration. A qualitative phenomenological design was adopted. Twelve adults aged 25–40 years were selected through purposive sampling. A researcher-developed 24-item screening questionnaire covering six conceptual dimensions was used for eligibility screening; it was not a validated psychological measure. Individual semi-structured interviews comprising 17 questions lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. Interview data were analysed inductively using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). Four overarching themes emerged: Childhood Replaced by Adult-Like Expectations and Responsibilities; Losing the Space to Simply Be a Child; Learning to Manage the Self Through Control, Suppression and Adaptation; and The Adult Legacy of Having Grown Up Too Soon. Participants described anxiety, perfectionistic tendencies, emotional suppression and difficulty resting or seeking support, alongside independence, discipline, adaptability, empathy, resourcefulness and resilience. The findings suggest that hurried childhood is experienced as multidimensional and context-dependent. They highlight the importance of balancing expectations and responsibility with autonomy, emotional support, rest, play and developmentally appropriate childhood experiences. As the study relies on retrospective accounts, it does not establish causal relationships.*

Keywords: Hurried parenting; hurried child; lived experiences; phenomenology; coping; resilience; adult psychological functioning

1. Introduction

Childhood is a formative period in which individuals develop autonomy, emotional regulation, relationships and a sense of competence. Parenting practices and family expectations can support these processes when they are developmentally appropriate and accompanied by emotional support, opportunities for choice, rest and play. Difficulties may arise when children experience persistent pressure, limited autonomy or responsibilities and expectations they perceive as premature.

Elkind's (1981) concept of the hurried child describes childhood experiences in which children are encouraged to grow up too quickly or are expected to meet demands associated with later developmental stages. Hurried childhood is not simply a matter of having a busy schedule. It may involve a combination of achievement pressure, highly structured routines, reduced opportunities for unstructured play, premature maturity and responsibility, perceived conditional approval, and expectations surrounding emotional expression.

Related perspectives help illuminate different aspects of this experience. Lareau's (2003) account of concerted cultivation describes the organisation of children's lives through structured activities and intensive parental involvement, while Self-Determination Theory emphasises the importance of autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Research on parental achievement pressure has linked perceived pressure with stress and test anxiety (Kang et al., 2021), while literature on parentification suggests that early

responsibility may be associated with both vulnerabilities and adaptive capacities (Dariotis et al., 2023; Masiran et al., 2023). These perspectives do not imply that parental involvement, ambition or responsibility is inherently harmful; the meaning of such experiences depends on their intensity, context, developmental appropriateness and the support available.

Much existing research examines particular parenting practices or psychological outcomes separately. Less qualitative attention has been given to how adults retrospectively understand several overlapping experiences as part of a broader childhood environment and how they perceive these experiences in relation to adult coping and well-being. The present study addresses this gap by exploring adults' lived experiences of hurried parenting, including perceived difficulties and adaptive strengths.

2. Conceptual Context and Research Gap

The concept of hurried parenting is best approached as a constellation of experiences rather than a fixed parenting style or a single measurable behaviour. In this study, the concept included accelerated achievement expectations, highly structured routines, constrained autonomy, premature responsibility, perceived performance-contingent regard and expectations about emotional expression. These dimensions provided a framework for identifying potentially relevant participants; they were not used as a pre-set thematic codebook. This distinction allowed the interview analysis to remain responsive to the meanings participants gave to their experiences.

Volume 15 Issue 10, October 2026

Fully Refereed | Open Access | Double Blind Peer Reviewed Journal

www.ijsr.net

The literature reviewed for the dissertation suggests that structured activities and parental involvement can offer learning opportunities, social participation and skill development. The concern is not structure itself, but whether expectations are experienced as excessive, developmentally premature or difficult to negotiate, and whether children retain opportunities for rest, play, emotional expression and age-appropriate dependence. Similarly, responsibility may foster competence in some contexts, while becoming burdensome when children are expected to manage concerns without adequate support.

The present study therefore focused on retrospective meaning-making. Rather than assessing parents or diagnosing participants, it explored how adults interpreted their childhood experiences and perceived their relevance to coping and psychological functioning in adulthood. This approach was intended to preserve variation across accounts and avoid assuming that a particular experience necessarily produces a specific outcome.

3. Aim and Research Questions

The study aimed to explore the lived experiences of adults who retrospectively perceived their childhood as characterised by hurried parenting and to understand how they perceived these experiences in relation to adult coping, stress, anxiety, emotional well-being and resilience.

The study addressed five questions: (1) How do adults retrospectively describe their experiences of hurried parenting? (2) What coping mechanisms do they describe in relation to these experiences? (3) How do they perceive the relationship between childhood parenting experiences and adult stress and anxiety? (4) What resilience and adaptive strengths do they describe? (5) How do they make meaning of these experiences in relation to current psychological functioning?

4. Method

Research design and participants

A qualitative phenomenological design was used to examine participants' subjective experiences and the meanings they attached to them. The study included 12 adults aged 25–40 years, selected through purposive sampling. Eligibility required participants to identify childhood experiences relevant to hurried parenting, recall and describe those experiences, and provide informed consent for an individual interview and audio recording.

Research tools

A researcher-developed 24-item screening questionnaire was used to assess eligibility. It covered six conceptual dimensions: (1) academic pressure and achievement expectations; (2) overscheduling and structured childhood routines; (3) limited opportunities for unstructured play and autonomy; (4) premature expectations of maturity and responsibility; (5) conditional parental regard and achievement expectations; and (6) emotional socialisation and expression. Each dimension was represented by four items rated on a five-point Likert scale. The questionnaire was developed for screening and was not a standardised,

psychometrically validated or diagnostic instrument. Its dimensions were not treated as predetermined themes in the analysis.

A researcher-developed semi-structured interview schedule containing 17 questions explored childhood context, parental expectations, routines and free time, emotional experiences, retrospective meaning, coping, stress and resilience. Interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' consent.

Procedure and analysis

Potential participants received information about the study and completed the screening questionnaire. Eligible participants were informed about the interview process and their rights, and informed consent was obtained before interviews. Recordings were transcribed for analysis. Participant codes were used, and identifying information was excluded from reporting. Interviews were analysed using inductive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with transcripts, initial coding, grouping related codes, developing and reviewing themes, and refining the final thematic structure. Themes were developed from the interview accounts rather than imposed from the screening framework.

Ethical considerations

Participation was voluntary. Participants could decline to answer questions or withdraw, and interviews were approached sensitively because they involved potentially personal childhood experiences. Confidentiality was maintained through participant codes and the exclusion of identifying information from the findings.

5. Findings

Four overarching themes were developed from participants' accounts. Their experiences varied, and contextual circumstances such as financial scarcity, digital exposure, cultural navigation, family conflict, caregiving, relocation or religious environments were considered relevant only when participants connected them with premature responsibility, adult-like awareness, emotional roles, reduced autonomy or expectations they experienced as developmentally early.

Theme 1: Childhood Replaced by Adult-Like Expectations and Responsibilities

Participants described childhood as shaped by expectations to achieve, perform, adapt, take responsibility or manage concerns they perceived as extending beyond ordinary childhood roles. The theme comprised three subthemes: pressure to perform, achieve and meet expectations; premature responsibility and self-management; and early exposure to adult concerns. Experiences ranged from academic and specialised performance expectations to household duties, financial concerns, caregiving, family tension and responsibilities in institutional or cultural settings. Several participants described learning to be capable, composed or self-sufficient early. These experiences were not uniform: responsibility sometimes felt empowering, but participants also described situations in which adult support or age-appropriate dependence felt limited.

Theme 2: Losing the Space to Simply Be a Child

This theme captured participants' perceptions of reduced opportunities for freedom, spontaneity, exploration and age-appropriate dependence. The subthemes were reduced freedom, play and spontaneity; learning that personal needs came second; and performing maturity instead of experiencing childhood. Some participants recalled highly organised routines involving schoolwork, tuition, music, sport or specialised performance, while others described free time being constrained by family responsibilities or circumstances. Participants also described postponing personal needs, concealing uncertainty or feeling expected to appear mature. The central issue was not structure alone, but the perceived lack of space for self-directed activity, mistakes, rest and childhood experiences without a defined adult purpose.

Theme 3: Learning to Manage the Self Through Control, Suppression and Adaptation

Participants described ways of managing demanding circumstances through emotional suppression, self-containment, control, productivity, problem-solving and self-reliance. The subthemes were emotional suppression and self-containment; control, productivity and problem-solving as coping; and hyper-independence and difficulty seeking support. Several participants described keeping sadness, fear, frustration or uncertainty private in order to remain functional, avoid burdening others or maintain an image of competence. Others described responding to pressure by organising, working harder, solving problems or maintaining control. These strategies helped participants remain dependable and capable, but some also perceived difficulty slowing down, processing emotions, accepting care or asking for help.

Theme 4: The Adult Legacy of Having Grown Up Too Soon

Participants reflected on ways they perceived childhood experiences to remain relevant to adult coping, relationships and emotional functioning. The subthemes were persistent pressure, anxiety and difficulty resting; difficulties with vulnerability, boundaries and connection; strengths, resilience and adaptive capacities; and relearning rest, support and authenticity. Reported difficulties included perfectionistic tendencies, fear of failure, self-criticism, discomfort with inactivity, anxiety, difficulty expressing needs and reluctance to seek support. Participants also identified independence, discipline, adaptability, empathy, resourcefulness, persistence and resilience as valued strengths. Some described becoming more aware of their patterns in adulthood and developing greater comfort with rest, boundaries, support and authenticity.

6. Discussion

The findings support an understanding of hurried parenting as a multidimensional and context-dependent experience rather than a single parenting behaviour. The first theme reflects Elkind's (1981) idea of childhood being accelerated through expectations and responsibilities associated with later developmental stages. Participants' accounts also suggest that acceleration may occur through emotional,

domestic, financial, caregiving, social or moral roles, not only through academic achievement.

The second theme highlights the perceived importance of opportunities for play, autonomy and self-directed activity. Lareau's (2003) work helps contextualise structured and adult-organised childhoods, but organised activities are not inherently harmful. Their significance depends on balance, choice and the child's experience of the demands. Ginsburg (2007) similarly emphasises the importance of play in healthy development. Participants' accounts suggest that reduced freedom was meaningful when structure and responsibility left little space for spontaneity, rest or age-appropriate dependence.

The third and fourth themes illustrate the ambivalence of coping patterns. Emotional containment, productivity, problem-solving and self-reliance may help a child function in demanding circumstances and may later be experienced as strengths. Yet participants also described how these patterns could coexist with anxiety, perfectionism, difficulty resting, emotional suppression or reluctance to accept support. This complexity is consistent with research indicating that early responsibility can involve both vulnerabilities and adaptive capacities (Dariotis et al., 2023; Masiran et al., 2023). The findings should not be interpreted as evidence that hurried parenting causes any specific adult outcome.

The findings also underscore the importance of emotional support and the distinction between encouragement and pressure. Research has associated perceived parental achievement pressure with stress and test anxiety (Kang et al., 2021), while work on conditional parental regard highlights the possible emotional costs of experiencing approval as contingent on meeting expectations (Assor et al., 2004). In the present study, participants' retrospective interpretations emphasised the wider meaning of expectations: whether they could make choices, express difficult emotions, make mistakes, rest and seek support while remaining accepted.

An important contribution of the study is its attention to both challenges and adaptive capacities. Participants did not describe a uniform trajectory from hurried childhood to poor adjustment. Rather, they made varied meanings of their experiences, and some recognised strengths while also reconsidering patterns that no longer served them. The phenomenological approach therefore adds detail about participants' interpretations, without replacing the need for broader quantitative or longitudinal evidence.

Across the four themes, the findings suggest a possible interpretive sequence in participants' accounts: expectations and responsibilities were experienced as shaping the space available for childhood; participants described developing ways to manage those demands; and some later recognised these strategies as both useful and limiting. This is not a universal developmental pathway or a causal model. It is a synthesis of how participants retrospectively connected their experiences and current patterns.

The findings also caution against equating visible competence with an absence of strain. Participants' accounts

suggest that a child who appears organised, independent or emotionally composed may still experience pressure or may have limited opportunities to express uncertainty and seek support. At the same time, it would be inappropriate to interpret independence, ambition or emotional restraint as evidence of hurried parenting in isolation. Meaning depends on the individual's account, the wider family context and whether age-appropriate needs were supported.

The adult experiences described by participants were varied. Anxiety, perfectionistic tendencies, difficulty resting and reluctance to seek help were not presented as inevitable consequences, and the study cannot separate the influence of childhood experiences from other personal, social or developmental factors. The findings are therefore most useful as a way of understanding the language and meanings adults use when reflecting on childhood, and as a prompt for careful inquiry rather than as a basis for prediction.

7. Implications

For parents and caregivers, the findings suggest balancing achievement, structured activities and responsibility with autonomy, rest, play and emotional availability. Responsibilities can be introduced gradually and in ways appropriate to a child's developmental stage. For schools and educators, high achievement or apparent maturity should not automatically be taken as evidence that a child feels supported; space for emotional expression, manageable expectations and self-directed activity remains important.

For counsellors and mental health professionals, exploring childhood experiences may be useful when clients describe excessive self-reliance, perfectionistic tendencies, difficulty resting, emotional suppression or difficulty seeking support. Such exploration should remain collaborative and grounded in the person's own understanding, while recognising that the same coping patterns may also represent valued competencies. The findings may also inform parenting and mental-health programmes that distinguish supportive structure from persistent pressure to perform or mature prematurely.

In practice, the findings support open-ended exploration rather than assigning a label to a client's childhood. Questions about how expectations were communicated, how mistakes were handled, whether emotions could be expressed, and whether help was available may clarify the personal meaning of early responsibility. Practitioners can also acknowledge that skills such as persistence and problem-solving may be important to a person's identity, while collaboratively exploring whether these skills are accompanied by distress or inflexibility.

For schools, the findings invite a balanced view of achievement and well-being. Supportive structure can coexist with opportunities for play, choice, rest and emotional support. School counsellors and educators may be attentive to persistent self-pressure, over-responsibility or difficulty asking for help, without assuming that any one behaviour has a single cause.

8. Limitations and Future Research

The study relied on retrospective accounts, which may be influenced by subsequent experiences and current interpretations. The sample was small and purposively selected, comprising 12 adults aged 25–40 years; the findings are intended for depth of understanding rather than statistical generalisation. Parenting practices were not independently assessed, and the study did not include parents' accounts. The screening questionnaire was researcher-developed and not psychometrically validated, so it should not be interpreted as a measure of hurried parenting. The design does not establish causal relationships, and other developmental, family, social and individual factors may contribute to adult functioning.

Future research could include larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and perspectives from parents, caregivers, children and adolescents. Quantitative studies using standardised measures could examine associations between specific practices and outcomes. Further work could also investigate protective factors, cross-cultural variation and the role of digital environments in perceived childhood acceleration.

Future qualitative work could compare how adults from different socioeconomic, cultural and family contexts describe expectations and responsibility, while remaining attentive to the fact that similar practices may carry different meanings in different settings. Research including multiple family perspectives could help distinguish between a participant's retrospective interpretation and the intentions or experiences of caregivers, without invalidating the participant's account. Longitudinal designs could examine how children's experiences, coping strategies and access to support change over time.

9. Conclusion

This phenomenological study explored how 12 adults retrospectively understood childhood experiences they perceived as characteristic of hurried parenting. Four themes described adult-like expectations and responsibilities, reduced space for childhood, coping through control and suppression, and the perceived adult legacy of growing up too soon. Participants described both difficulties- including anxiety, perfectionistic tendencies, emotional suppression and difficulty resting or seeking support- and strengths such as independence, discipline, adaptability, empathy, resourcefulness and resilience. The findings highlight the importance of balancing expectations and responsibility with autonomy, emotional support, play, rest and developmentally appropriate opportunities to be a child. These conclusions reflect participants' meanings and perceived relationships, not causal effects.

References

- [1] Assor, A., Roth, G., & Deci, E. L. (2004). The emotional costs of parents' conditional regard: A self-determination theory analysis. *Journal of Personality*, 72(1), 47–88. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022->

- 3506.2004.00256.x (<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3506.2004.00256.x>)
- [2] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
<https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
(<https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>)
- [3] Dariotis, J. K., Chen, F. R., Park, Y. R., Nowak, M. K., French, K. M., & Codamon, A. M. (2023). Parentification and its impact on youth development: A systematic review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(13), 6197.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20136197>
(<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20136197>)
- [4] Elkind, D. (1981). *The hurried child: Growing up too fast too soon*. Addison-Wesley.
- [5] Ginsburg, K. R. (2007). The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bonds. *Pediatrics*, 119(1), 182–191.
<https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2006-2697>
(<https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2006-2697>)
- [6] Kang, M., Lee, W., & Song, J. (2021). A meta-analysis on the relationships of parental achievement pressure with academic achievement, test anxiety, stress, and self-esteem. *Korean Journal of Educational Psychology*, 35(2), 365–392.
<https://doi.org/10.17286/KJEP.2021.35.2.06>
(<https://doi.org/10.17286/KJEP.2021.35.2.06>)
- [7] Lareau, A. (2003). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life*. University of California Press.
- [8] Masiran, R., Ibrahim, N., Awang, H., & Lim, P. Y. (2023). The positive and negative aspects of parentification: An integrated review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 144, 106709.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2022.106709>
(<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2022.106709>)
- [9] Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*. Guilford Press.