

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Role Reverser: Growing Up Too Soon

By Gregory L. Jantz, Ph.D.
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In this article, psychologist Dr. Gregory L. Jantz tells the story of Adam, a boy who was forced to grow up too soon. As you read, take notes on how and why Adam was forced to grow up.

- [1] Adam had no joy in his voice. He answered my questions in a monotone way, letting me know with every syllable how much he didn't want to be there. Adam's father, Frank, did want him to be there. Adam's mother, Judy, really didn't care, just as long as she didn't have to pay for it. She was just along for the ride.

Adam lived with his mother and saw his dad every other weekend. Frank had watched his happy, laughing son slowly fade. The parents had divorced when Adam was eleven—not an easy age. He was fourteen now, and Frank was convinced something was wrong. It wasn't just a phase Adam was going through.

Talking with Judy did no good at all, Frank explained. She had reacted violently and said he was trying to accuse her of being a bad mother. What did he know about what it was like to raise a child alone? All he had to do was take Adam a couple of days every other week. He had no idea how hard it was!

Frank had suggested having Adam start spending more time with him, but she blew up, saying the only way it would happen would be "over my dead body!"

- [5] At first Judy had been reluctant¹ to take Adam to therapy at all, but then his grades started to suffer, and he was having trouble with kids at school. So she reluctantly agreed. Adam had no choice but to go.

For a while, I just spent time with Adam, finding out what his life was like. He didn't open up right away, but that really wasn't necessary for me to see what was going on. Just a few sessions with him and I knew what was wrong. When Adam's parents divorced, he had lost his mother and his father. They had ceased to exist.

For Judy, Adam was no longer her child. He became her companion, her confidant. She poured out on him how lonely she was feeling and how much Frank had hurt her. She told him that she didn't know what she would do if it weren't for him. He was all she had left in the world.



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1. **Reluctant** (*adjective*): feeling or showing hesitation or unwillingness

Adam cleaned the apartment when she was too tired, which was often. He cooked supper for them so she could unwind after work. He did the laundry, ran errands, and took care of her physical needs. Adam stopped being a child and became the parent to his mother. Their roles were all of a sudden reversed, and Adam felt the weight of adulthood before he was ready to shoulder it.

To make matters worse, Adam lost his dad at the same time. Whenever he went to Frank's for the weekend, it was one big party—movies, pizza, sporting events on television, and one-on-one games played outside. His dad didn't want to hear about the bad times; he just wanted his buddy back again. He wanted the Adam who played and laughed and didn't have a care in the world. Adam stopped having a father and found a pal instead.

- [10] The pressure to provide whatever his parents needed from him was too great. Adam had to reclaim his parents and his childhood. He had to stop being his mother's caregiver and his father's buddy all of the time.

Fortunately for Adam, his parents were able to take stock and realize what they had been doing. They hadn't meant for it to happen, but it had. Together they began to rebuild their lives and reassume their proper roles.

Children often enjoy reversing roles with their parents for a short time. The toddler brings Mommy her favorite blankie when she's taking a nap and tucks it lovingly under her chin like Mommy has done hundreds of times for her. The adolescent pals around with his dad over the weekend, just the two of them. These reversals provide children with a glimpse of what life will be like when they're older. While children enjoy these special moments on occasion, they shouldn't have to live that way, thrust into adulthood too early and denied childhood along the way.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: What does the word “monotone” most closely mean as it is used in paragraph [RI.4] 1?
 - A. Sharp; pointed
 - B. Flat; expressionless
 - C. Shaky; uncertain
 - D. Repetitive; boring

2. PART B: Which phrase from the paragraph best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. “no joy in his voice”
 - B. “He answered my questions”
 - C. “with every syllable”
 - D. “he didn’t want to be there”

3. Summarize in 3-5 complete sentences how Adam’s relationship with his parents changed and how this change affected Adam. [RI.3]

4. How, according to the author, can role-reversal be a positive thing in a child’s life? [RI.3]
 - A. If it is initiated by the child and not forced, role-reversal can be a fun activity and change for children.
 - B. Role-reversal is a crucial part of a child’s development, preparing them for when they will eventually have to take care, or “parent,” their own parents/elders.
 - C. Occasional role-reversal allows children to experience what future relationships and duties will be like, preparing their eventual transition into adult life.
 - D. Occasional role-reversal allows children to experience what future relationships and duties will be like, making them appreciate their carefree childhood even more.

5. Which of the following best states the author's likely purpose for writing this article? [RI.6]
- A. To discuss the importance of childhood and the effects long-term role-reversal, as well as denied childhood, can have on a person
 - B. To condemn divorce for its effects on any children involved
 - C. To promote the idea of gradual adolescent responsibilities, arguing that children are much more capable than we think
 - D. To support the concept of an extended childhood, if one has been denied this important period in one's life

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Is a “role-reversal” a good thing or a bad thing? Why? Cite evidence to prove your answer.
 2. How do you predict that Adam will be affected by this “role reversal”? Support your answer.
 3. Make a list of other scenarios in which a child would be forced to grow up too soon.
 4. Should we value our childhood? Explain your answer.
 5. In the context of this story, what makes a family? Are parents supposed to fulfill one role, and children another? Can there ever be exceptions? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.