



How Role Conflict Affects Parental Distress: A Path Model through Parental Guilt and Stress

Carlos Vara-García¹ · Paula Vagos² · María del Sequeros Pedroso-Chaparro³ · Celia Nogales-González¹ · Ariadna de la Vega-Castelo¹ · Rosa Romero-Moreno¹

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Abstract

Parenting, while fulfilling, often introduces stressors that can lead to psychological distress. This study explores how role conflict—specifically work interference with family (WIF) and family interference with work (FIW)—relates to parental distress (depression and anxiety), and whether parental guilt and stress may play a role in these associations. A sample of 193 Spanish parents of children aged 0–6 participated in this study. Participants completed validated measures assessing WIF, FIW, parental guilt, stress, depression, and anxiety. Data was analyzed using path modeling, controlling for demographic variables and child health status. Both WIF and FIW were positively associated with parental guilt. A higher parental guilt was associated with higher parental stress, which in turn was linked to increased depression and anxiety symptoms. Only FIW showed direct effects on parental stress and distress, while both WIF and FIW showed indirect effects on distress through parental guilt and stress. The final models explained 21.9% of the variance of parental guilt and stress, and over 40% of the variance of depression and anxiety symptoms. Role conflict significantly contributes to parental distress, with parental guilt and stress playing a potential key factor in this association. These findings underscore the need for holistic interventions addressing both work and family domains, including organizational flexibility and community-based support, to mitigate parental stress and promote family well-being.

Keywords Anxiety · Depression · Guilt · Parenting · Role conflict · Stress

Introductions

A child may be a source of joy and positive emotions to the parent (e.g., a higher sense of life-purpose, meaning, responsibility, and direction in life; Nelson et al., 2014; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2017). However, the acquisition of a new role as parent also implies several life changes (Lévesque et al., 2020), some of which may contribute to the appearance or exacerbation of stress. On many occasions, and because of this stress, parents are described in the literature as being vulnerable to distress experiences, such as high levels of depression and anxiety (Falk et al., 2014). A most recent meta-analysis conducted by Bennet et al. (2026) found that parents with depression and anxiety reported higher levels of parental stress than controls. Another recent meta-analysis conducted by Rusu et al. (2025) found that elevated parenting stress is robustly linked to reduced well-being, with a medium-sized negative association observed across diverse parent samples. During the recent Covid-19 pandemic, parents who followed distancing measures and isolated with

✉ Carlos Vara-García
carlos.vara@urjc.es

Paula Vagos
paula.vagos@ua.pt

María del Sequeros Pedroso-Chaparro
mariadelsequeros.pedroso@udima.es

Celia Nogales-González
celia.nogales@urjc.es

Ariadna de la Vega-Castelo
ariadna.delavega@urjc.es

Rosa Romero-Moreno
rosa.romero@urjc.es

¹ Department of Psychology, Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Alcorcón, Spain

² Department of Psychology, University of Aveiro, Aveiro, Portugal

³ Department of Psychology, Universidad a Distancia de Madrid, Madrid, Spain