



DCPsych thesis

Exploring the journey of parenting to understand parents' perceptions of their families' relationships

Warde, A.

Full bibliographic citation: Warde, A. 2022. Exploring the journey of parenting to understand parents' perceptions of their families' relationships. DCPsych thesis Middlesex University / New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling (NSPC)

Year: 2022

Publisher: Middlesex University Research Repository

Available online: <https://repository.mdx.ac.uk/item/1006vq>

Middlesex University Research Repository makes the University's research available electronically.

Copyright and moral rights to this work are retained by the author and/or other copyright owners unless otherwise stated. The work is supplied on the understanding that any use for commercial gain is strictly forbidden. A copy may be downloaded for personal, non-commercial, research or study without prior permission and without charge.

Works, including theses and research projects, may not be reproduced in any format or medium, or extensive quotations taken from them, or their content changed in any way, without first obtaining permission in writing from the copyright holder(s). They may not be sold or exploited commercially in any format or medium without the prior written permission of the copyright holder(s).

Full bibliographic details must be given when referring to, or quoting from full items including the author's name, the title of the work, publication details where relevant

(place, publisher, date), pagination, and for theses or dissertations the awarding institution, the degree type awarded, and the date of the award.

If you believe that any material held in the repository infringes copyright law, please contact the Repository Team at Middlesex University via the following email address: repository@mdx.ac.uk

The item will be removed from the repository while any claim is being investigated.

See also repository copyright: re-use policy: <https://libguides.mdx.ac.uk/repository>

**Exploring the Journey of Parenting to Understand Parents'
Perceptions of their Families' Relationships**

Arlene Warde

M00558007

New School of Counselling and Psychotherapy (NSPC)

Department of Psychology, Middlesex University London

DCPsych Counselling Psychology and Psychotherapy by Professional Studies

Dr Niklas Serning

Dr Rochelle Johnson

April, 2022

Words: 63995/71273

Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the ongoing support of my peers, supervisors, tutors, and staff from NSPC. Gary, Natalie and everyone in our Friday group have shone a continuous light for me to follow. Niklas, Rochelle, and Pamela have provided invaluable encouragement, wisdom and support. Sasha and Jo have provided ongoing reassurance and guidance.

To my Mam and Dad, I will forever appreciate you for giving me the exact foundation that I needed and for never stopping along your journey of parenting. To Noel, Cailín and Leon, this research would not have been possible without the sacrifices you all made to support me. To my friends and family, you know who you are, thank you for the non-stop support, check-ins, cups of tea, cupcakes, listening ears, and motivational promises. Everyone in my support bubble has contributed to this research journey more than they will ever know and for that I am eternally grateful.

My greatest thanks goes to my participants, who took the time out of their busy lives to sit with me and talk candidly about their personal experiences.

Abstract

This dissertation explores the experiences of parents' journeys of parenting and seeks to understand their perceptions of their families' relationships. Seven sets of co-parents, a total of fourteen participants, were interviewed using paired depth semi-structured interviews. The interview data was analysed using a thematic analysis. The current study adopts a critical realist ontological position and an epistemological position of contextualism. A thematic analysis was used to analyse the data as this method gives the freedom to have the structure placed upon the method determined by the needs of the research study.

Two superordinate themes were identified, with each containing three subordinate themes, which collectively have a total of eight themes. The first superordinate theme highlighted the parents' experiences of their parenting relationships, in relation to three subordinate themes; that of 'parental solidarity', 'differences in individual parenting styles' and 'parents connecting with each other through their shared role of parenting'. The second superordinate theme identified the parents' experiences of their parent-child relationships, in relation to three subordinate themes; that of 'parents tune into their children's needs', 'parents connecting with their children', and 'parent's aspirations for their children's futures influences their ways of being with their children'.

Existing literature on parents' experiences of parenthood and of parenting interventions was utilised to shed light on the study's findings. The clinical significance included a recommendation for the application of the findings to a parenting intervention that centres around supporting the development of healthy co-parenting relationships and strengthening familial relationships. Further qualitative research on this specific type of intervention as experienced by a diverse demographic of co-parenting units is recommended.

Keywords

Thematic analysis, paired depth interviews, experiences of parenting, familial relationships, co-parenting.

Statement of Authorship

This dissertation is written by Arlene Warde and has ethical clearance from the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling and the Psychology Department of Middlesex University. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling and the Psychology Department of Middlesex University for the Degree of Doctor of Existential Counselling Psychology and Psychotherapy. The author reports no conflicts of interest and is alone responsible for the content and writing of the dissertation.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	2
Abstract.....	3
Statement of Authorship.....	4
Introduction.....	8
Literature Review.....	9
Existential and Theoretical Context of Parental Identity and Co-Parenting	10
Support of Parenting Partners in Parenting Interventions.....	16
Parents’ experiences of Parenting Programme Interventions.....	18
Parents’ experiences of their Parental Relationships.....	27
Conclusion of the Literature Review.....	35
Methodology and Method.....	37
Methodological Approach.....	37
Epistemological and Ontological Position.....	37
Methodologies: Quantitative versus Qualitative.....	38
Qualitative Methods.....	40
Paired Depth Interviews.....	46
Research Questions.....	48
Ethical Considerations.....	50
Method.....	54
Design.....	54
Participants.....	54
Procedure.....	56
Method of Analysis.....	57
Validity	62
Reflexivity.....	64

Results.....67

 Superordinate Theme 1: The Parenting Relationship.....68

 Theme 1.1: Parental Solidarity.....69

 Theme 1.2: Differences in Individual Parenting Styles.....88

 Theme 1.3: Parents Connecting with each other Through their Shared Role of Parenting.....99

 Superordinate Theme 2: The Parent-Child Relationship.....114

 Theme 2.1: Parents Tune into their Children’s Needs.....115

 Theme 2.2: Parents Connecting with their Children.....125

 Theme 2.3: Parent’s Aspirations for their Children’s Futures Influences their ways of Being with their Children.....141

 Conclusion.....149

Discussion.....150

 The Parenting Relationship.....150

 Parental Solidarity151

 Differences in Individual Parenting Styles157

 Parents Connecting with each other Through their Shared Role of Parenting..160

 The Parent-Child Relationship.....163

 Parents Tune into their Children’s Needs and Relate to their Individualities165

 Parents Connecting with their Children Through Play and Being Present.....167

 Parent’s Aspirations for their Children’s Futures Influences their ways of Being with their Children and the Boundaries that they Hold for them.....170

 Critical Reflections & Methodological Considerations.....171

 Clinical Implications & Future Recommendations.....174

Dissemination.....	178
Conclusion.....	180
References.....	183
Appendices.....	203

Introduction

The overall aim of this study is to form an understanding of how parents' experience their journey of parenting. The objectives set out to achieve this aim are to explore, with parents, how they perceive familial connectivity and what perceptions they hold of their families' relationships. For the purpose of this study, 'the family', is being defined as a unit of two parents who are cohabitating and parenting together their child/ren. The study will use semi-structured paired depth interviews with its participants, whereby both parents attend together and open ended questions are posed. In this study, the questions will look at the both parents' perceptions of their experiences of parenting, with a particular focus on how they do or do not experience familial connectivity within their families' relationships.

The study will commence with a review of the existing literature in the area of parenting, detailing viewpoints largely from qualitative research but featuring quantitative research also. It will then provide a detailed account of both methodology and method, outlining the ontological and epistemological base to the approach of study. The rationale for using paired depth semi-structured interviews for gathering the data and a thematic analysis for analysing the data will be provided. The method adopted in utilising the thematic analysis will be outlined in a step by step manner. The chapter that will follow, will be that of the results of the study.

The results will be described in detail, categorised by the superordinate and subordinate themes that are identified through the process of the thematic analysis of the data. Excerpts of the data will be used throughout the exploration of the themes to provide the reader with a clear understanding of the data to which the analysis is applied.

Following this detailed analysis will come a discussion of the themes in relation to existing research, in the form of studies explored in the literature review and additional applicable research. Clinical implications of the research will be explored and recommendations for future research will be made. Critical reflections and methodological considerations will be identified prior to the conclusion of the study.

Literature Review

Within this chapter I will provide a review of a sample of the literature written to date on topics related to the journey of parenting and how parents experience their familial relationships. I will draw particular reference to studies that influence the design and the direction of the current study. I will illustrate how this research project builds on the existing research and fills some of the gaps identified therein. The intended outcome of this literature review is to form, for the current study, a clear rationale for its choice of direction, sample, and methodology.

I commenced the review of the literature by conducting a search of the online databases using both journal searches for articles and library searches for relevant books. The inclusion criteria of this search were sources that were in English or translated to English, were peer reviewed and a priority for recent publications. The databases used included the following: Summon via Middlesex University Unihub, Google Scholar, British Library Electronic Thesis Online Service (EThOS), PubMed, Psych Lit, ScienceDirect and Web of Science. The search terms included were: 'family relationships', 'familial relationships', 'co-parenting', 'parents' experiences of parenting', 'existential perspectives parenting', 'dual interview parenting', 'experiences of parenting programmes', 'parenting relationships', 'parents' perceptions', and 'parenting journey'. The papers that are reviewed herein were selected after exploring a broad range of research papers related to studies of perceptions of parenting. This selection was based on their relevance to the current study's research question and the level of influence they had on shaping the direction of and appropriately contextualising the present research study. Given the qualitative nature of this study, the studies selected for review are largely of a qualitative nature, although some of these qualitative studies originate from the data of quantitative studies. The present study focuses firmly on parents' experiences of parenting as opposed to quantitative outcome measures.

In this review of the literature, I will first outline an introduction to an existential and theoretical context to parental identity and co-parenting. I will then explore research in relation to the

relevance of experiencing the support of a co-parent when engaging with a parenting intervention, which provides somewhat of an historical and contextual basis to the use of the perspectives of both co-parents together in the current study. This will be followed by a detailed exploration of parents' experiences of engaging with parenting programme based parenting interventions, utilising two meta-syntheses of the qualitative data that is available to date on this topic. Lastly, I will explore some of the research conducted in relation to parents' experiences of their parental relationships. I will do this by first looking at a recent meta-synthesis of the qualitative data available in relation to parents' experiences of their parental relationships and then by concluding with an outline of a quantitative study that identifies an existential connection to these experiences.

Existential and Theoretical Context of Parental Identity and Co-Parenting

Given that the current study explores with co-parents their perceptions of how they experience their familial relationships, it is useful to provide an introduction to an existential and theoretical context of parental identity and of co-parenting. I will imbed existentially and theoretically the differential journeys towards parental identity achievement and the socio-cultural role of co-parenting.

Existentialism is concerned with existence and with being in the world, as such it is useful to provide an existential context to becoming a parent, a journey that begins with the creation of new life. Becoming a parent serves as a significant life event, and as with most human experiences it can be mapped out using the four worlds of existence identified within existential theory (Binswanger, 1963; Deurzen, 1997). The transition that takes place for both parents when they have a child affects all levels of existence (Arnold-Baker & Donaghy, 2005). Within the physical dimension of human existence, a child is physically brought into the world via the body of the mother. Within the social dimension of human existence a new co-parenting relationship and family unit is formed as well as changes to the social connections within the

broader community for all members of the family. Within the personal dimension of human existence parents engage in a journey of incorporating their parental identity into their self-identities. Within the spiritual dimension of human existence, parents consider what it means to them to be a parent and how that changes their way of being in the world. Also within the spiritual dimension, parents start to see the world from a different perspective and consider if the world is fitting with their hopes and ambitions for their children's future growth and development. Within existentialism, one of the existential givens is freedom, we are free to choose how it is that we are in the world but with our choices come responsibilities. Sartre (1943) describes humans as being condemned to freedom given the weight that one must carry of being responsible for every aspect of all that one chooses. With regards to choosing the path of being a parent, the comorbid set of responsibilities that commence during pregnancy and continue on through the child's lifespan can be anxiety provoking for parents. Along the journey of being a parent, every choice that one makes comes with a dual set of responsibilities, those that impact oneself personally and those that impact the child and/or potentially the family unit. Greenberg (1985) described becoming a parent as requiring the greatest level of responsibility encountered to date. During a person's transition into being a parent the journey towards identifying as parent commences. This transition towards parental identity achievement involves adopting a different perspective of one's self, one's relationships, and the broader context of one's world. The transformative process of incorporating parental identity into one's self-identity is deemed to be a necessary part of the journey of becoming a parent (Stern, 1995).

Existentialism views the self as unfixed and capable of this type of continuous change based on the choices we make and on our lived experiences in the world (Sartre, 1943). How we are in the world as individuals changes and develops through the lifespan. We are born requiring the care of others and many people grow to be the providers of care for others. Throughout this life journey of growth and development our self-identity changes as our roles shift. Adopting the role

of parenting brings about a journey of incorporating the role of being a parent into one's self-identity.

Fadjukoff *et al.* (2016) analyses parental identity formation in a group of same age Finnish women and men at three intervals across a fourteen year period. Gender differences were analysed and separate findings were reported for mothers and fathers in instances where significant gender differences were found. Fadjukoff *et al.* (2016) defined parental identity as a person's identity as a parent which is measured by the firmness of commitment they have to their role of parenting and by the level of exploration they engage in to shape their views on matters pertaining to parenting. The role of parenting is identified as being central to the lives of many adults and as involving "emotions, thoughts, values, and beliefs" along with entailing "interaction both with children and with other adults around them" (Fadjukoff *et al.*, 2016, p. 89). The process of merging the experience of being a parent into an individual's self-identity takes place as a person transitions into parenthood and develops their own style of parenting. In addition to changes in personal identity, the identity of the relationship between the two parents changes to include the dimension of being co-parents. The social worlds of the parents can also change, to adapt to the broader needs of the family unit. Given the personal, interpersonal, and social context of parenting the process of transitioning towards parental identity achievement can be seen as a developmental process that takes place through the journey of the lived experience of being a parent in the world. Genesoni and Tallandini (2009) found that men specifically find it difficult to readjust their personal needs and expectations in response to associated parental responsibilities. Fadjukoff *et al.* (2016) found that at each of their three intervals of enquiry, the level of parental identity achievement was higher in women than in men. A potential contributor to this is that women tend to be more exposed to care giver type social roles from a young age through play. Women too experience directly the growth of the child in-utero and the process of birthing the child. Additionally, mothers tend to be the parent that is most responsible for the provision of childcare and associated child-rearing responsibilities

(Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009; Kamp Dush, 2018). Parental identity achievement was found to be positively associated with having an authoritative parenting style, whereby parents adopt an approach that is responsive to a child's needs, nurturing and supportive, with firm and consistent boundaries that are child-centred in nature (Fadjukoff *et al.*, 2016; Baumrind, 1966). Parental identity stability was found to be higher in women than men with 42% of women and 36% of men maintaining parental stability over time, with findings indicating varying and fluctuating individual identity patterns (Fadjukoff *et al.*, 2016). Fadjukoff *et al.* (2016) recommend that further studies be conducted to explore fully the nature of the gender differences found in parental identity achievement and the association between this and exhibited parenting style. McHale *et al.* (2004) describes parenting as the most fundamental task of adulthood and identifies this task as taking place collaboratively between at least two caregivers in the majority of family systems. However, despite this, most research studies on parenting and families don't specifically account for the collaborative element of the co-parenting role. Rather, studies of this nature have tended to utilise accounts of one parent and one child, with the view of the parent being that of the mother in a great deal of studies. When studies started to look at co-parenting specifically they tended to be focused on co-parenting amongst divorced, separated or non-cohabitating parents. Feinberg (2002) sets out to analyse and collate the findings of the studies that have looked at aspects of co-parenting with the purpose of devising a co-parenting model that relates primarily to families of two people in a relationship with each other whilst parenting their children. Feinberg (2002, p. 173) defines the co-parenting relationship as "the way that parents work together in their roles as parents". Feinberg's (2002) model of four interconnected elements of co-parenting does not set out to be an exhaustive description of co-parenting, but rather, it provides a framework for co-parenting theory, research and intervention. The first element of co-parenting identified in Feinberg's (2002, p. 176) model is "support versus undermining in the parental role". This relates to co-parent's level of support for each other and respect for each other as competent parents with important contributions to be made to the

shared role of parenting their children. Parents who demonstrate support for each other will acknowledge and respect boundaries put in place by their co-parent by upholding them alongside their co-parent rather than opposing or undermining them. The adoption of an authoritative style of parenting has been linked to experiencing positively the co-parenting relationship (Abidin & Brunner, 1995).

The second element of co-parenting identified in Feinberg's (2002, p. 177) model is "childrearing disagreement", which relates to parents disagreeing about matters specifically related to childrearing. The disagreement about childrearing practices in itself is not particularly problematic, when parents manage and negotiate these disagreements respectfully whilst maintaining a mutual support of each other's positions. However, where parents disagree about matters fundamental to childrearing it can present as inconsistent parenting practices.

The third element of co-parenting identified in Feinberg's (2002, p. 177) model is "the division of duties, tasks, and responsibilities", which relates to the manner in which household tasks and childrearing responsibilities are divided between co-parents. Becker (1981) proposed a model of specialisation, whereby familial efficiency is achieved through one parent, traditionally the father, focusing on paid market work, whilst the other parent, traditionally the mother, focuses on unpaid nonmarket work consisting of childrearing and household responsibilities. A lot has changed since Becker's (1981) model, making it feel very much outdated in a modern day context whereby more women graduate with a degree than men (Diprete & Buchmann, 2013) and the majority of married women are employed (England, 2010). However, whilst both genders report having a preference to share both market and nonmarket work with their partners, traditional gender norms have been found to remain, particularly amongst parents (Pedulla & Thébaud, 2015). Kamp Dush (2018) utilised time diaries with both co-parenting males and females who were transitioning into parenthood to assess how both genders spent their time. It was found that fathers spent more time in leisure activities whereas mothers spent more time engaged in nonmarket work. On non-workdays, fathers were found to spend 35% –

47% of the time that mothers were engaged in childcare and housework, enjoying leisure time. Whereas, mothers were found to spend 16% - 19% of the time that fathers were engaged in childcare and housework, enjoying leisure time.

The fourth element of co-parenting identified in Feinberg's (2002, p. 177) model is "parents' management of interactional patterns", which contains three aspects, "conflict, coalitions, and balance". The first aspect relates to the manner in which conflict between the co-parents is managed. Exposure to mismanaged or unresolved interparental conflict can impact upon the development of emotional regulation abilities of the children and on the sense of emotional security within the family. Conflict in itself is not the main cause of concern, as total withdrawal from communication in relation to a conflict can be as negatively impactful as active conflict. Conflict within a co-parenting relationship can be constructive when parties remain respectful of each other's positions and when the conflict is managed appropriately towards a suitable resolution. The second aspect of this element of Feinberg's (2002, p. 178) co-parenting model relates to "co-parental coalition versus triangulation of the child in an overt or covert parent-child coalition". It is the responsibility of the co-parents to manage appropriately together, all intrafamilial relationships. Margolin *et al.* (2001) identified a link between marital dissatisfaction and triangulation of children. The third and final aspect of this element of Feinberg's (2002, p. 178) co-parenting model is "balance" which relates to "the relative proportion of time each parent engaged with the child in triadic situations". Within a co-parenting relationship, how much direct engagement each parent has with their children when both parents are present is an interactional pattern that requires joint management by the co-parents. Feinberg (2002) suggests that this comprehensive co-parenting model be utilised to inform a co-parenting intervention program that is preventative in nature. Recommended goals for an intervention that targets co-parenting specifically are to "improve parent adjustment", "improve the couple or marital relationship", "improve parenting and child outcomes", and to "improve co-parenting in divorced families" Feinberg (2002, p.183-188).

Support of Parenting Partners in Parenting Interventions

I will review here a paper that contributes a perspective to the field regarding parents' experiences of having and of not having spousal support within a parenting intervention. Mockford and Barlow (2004) published a paper on findings that they describe as "unintended consequences of attending a parenting programme" (p. 19). These unintended consequences were derived from an earlier study, whereby Mockford (2000) interviewed mothers, who had attended a parenting programme, to find out about the effects that attending the programme had on their family lives. Several valuable outcomes were identified, in line with other research studies in this area. However, the study also revealed a difficulty the mothers experienced in implementing these valuable outcomes gained from attending the parenting programme. Specifically, mothers reported having difficulties with implementing the programme recommendations when their co-parenting partners had not attended the programme with them. Mockford and Barlow's (2004) paper focused on this unintended outcome from Mockford's (2000) earlier study. Specifically, the research conducted by Mockford and Barlow (2004) looks at the effects that a parenting programme may have on family life when only one parent, mostly the mother, attends the programme. The rationale for having a sample consisting of parent sets for the current research study was contributed to by Mockford and Barlow's (2004) findings. Research dating back over forty years has suggested that for a parenting programme to have an impact on family life, only one parent needs to attend, as possibly when the study took place one parent may have been largely responsible for the parenting (Firestone *et al.*, 1980). It is arguable however, that whilst this may have been the case in 1980 when the study was published, structural changes have taken place in families since then and present-day families can be seen to rely more on the entire parenting unit. Present day family structures are diverse and in two-parent families there is a tendency for both parents to work, with parents sharing or outsourcing childcare. This is as opposed to family structures of the past, where in two-parent families the father's time was typically spent working whilst the mother's time was largely spent

at home. With the number of mothers in the workplace incrementally increasing through the years, children are being cared for by their fathers more than would have been the case when maternal employment rates were lower (Hennessy *et al.*, 1992). There is currently little evidence concerning the impact to the family of the socio-cultural changes of more families having both parents working and caring for children together creating busy modern-day lifestyles. It is suggested that the overall effect has been to make the task of parenting more difficult as each parent juggles multiple roles (Mockford and Barlow, 2004).

The findings of the Mockford and Barlow (2004) study indicates that the attendance of a second parent at a parenting programme, in two-parent families, is “preferable in order to provide support and encouragement in implementing the required changes” (p. 225). For consideration also, is the potentially negative impact of only one parent, from a co-parenting unit, attending a parenting programme. This negative impact was identified by Mockford and Barlow (2004) as occurring as a result of the attending parent changing their approaches to situations without the other parent's involvement. Thus, potentially leading to discrepancies in the parenting and tensions between the parents. Recognising this potential negative impact is important, as research suggests that the emotional and behavioural wellbeing of children can be adversely affected by parental conflict, particularly when the parents' arguments are about the children themselves (Golombok, 2000).

Another main finding from Mockford and Barlow's study (2004) was that the parent attending the parenting programme struggled to engage with the non-attending partner to change their parental habits, along with finding it difficult to make time to parent together. It appears that, in addition to requiring the support of a partner on a parenting programme, not having a co-parenting partner there adds additional pressure to the attending parent to redeliver the programme at home. During this time at home the focus of the attending parent ideally would be on implementing the goals from the programme instead of re-teaching the programme to the other parent. It appears that having one parent gaining more parenting skills than the other

parent can lead to inconsistencies in the parenting. This can result in the less informed parent being criticized for current practices or being preached at by the more informed parent, resulting in the non-attending parent potentially pushing back against what the attending parent is trying to implement in the home (Mockford and Barlow, 2004). Experiencing these co-parent relational difficulties as a result of trying to implement skills acquired through a parenting programme may take away significantly from the overall outcomes of the intervention on family life. Supporting the findings of Mockford and Barlow (2004), one of the outcomes of the systematic review of Kane *et al.* (2007) was parents identifying, through participation in a parenting programme, the need for support from their respective parenting partners.

Parents' experiences of Parenting Programme Interventions

I will review here papers that contribute perspectives to the field regarding parents' experiences of having attended parenting programme parenting interventions. Kane *et al.* (2007) conducted a systematic review and synthesis of qualitative research studies to identify what makes parenting programmes meaningful and helpful to parents. The research examined findings in relation to parents' experiences and perceptions of parenting programmes to identify the key factors that parents perceived to be of value. The study identified that parenting programmes are at the heart of intervention strategies for parents of children with emotional and behavioural problems. Additionally, the study identified that meta-analysis of randomised control trials have indicated that such programmes can improve many aspects of family life. Part of the rationale for Kane *et al.*'s (2007) study was an identification by Moran *et al.* (2004) that despite there being a research culture of evaluating the impact of parenting programmes it remains largely unclear what elements of these programmes are actually meaningful and helpful to parents. Kane *et al.* (2007) suggest that the studies reviewed "have started to provide the information needed... to ensure that parenting programmes meet parent's needs and have the potential to improve engagement and the promotion of parent and child well-being" (p. 785). Although, in

the decade since the study of Kane *et al.* (2007), there have been some qualitative studies that have homed in on what parents' experiences of these programmes are. Nevertheless, the studies reviewed by Kane *et al.* (2007) provide a useful foundation to understanding how parents experience this type of intervention.

For their systematic review Kane *et al.* (2007) selected four papers that used qualitative methods to ascertain the experiences of parenting programmes had by parents of children with behaviour problems. The four reviewed studies were derived from an initial 367 references, from which 40 studies were selected as relevant. Following a full review of those papers it was identified that only six studies had used qualitative methods and met the relevant inclusion criteria. After conducting a quality assessment of the remaining six studies, two papers were excluded; one as it did not make the methodology used clear and the other as it was from the same dissertation data as one of the other's selected but had a narrower focus than the one chosen to remain in the systematic review. The four studies remaining evaluated a variety of parenting programmes delivered in various settings, a summary of which can be seen in Table 1, Appendix A. Whilst using different theoretical orientations each study collected its data using in-depth interviews that were recorded and transcribed in full prior to data analysis (Kane *et al.*, 2007). Several constructs emerged from the systematic review which were combined to form the following summary picture:

Prior to taking part in a parenting programme many parents experienced feelings of powerlessness and felt that they had inadequate knowledge in relation to their children's behaviour. The programmes aided the acquisition of knowledge, skills and understanding, and together with feelings of acceptance and support from other parents in the parenting group, enabled them to regain control and feel more able to cope. (Kane *et al.*, 2007, p. 791)

Interestingly the knowledge the parents gained directly from the programme only in part contributed to the broader outcomes of the parents regaining control over and confidence in

their parenting abilities. The shared experience with other parents and the support they felt from knowing others were having similar experiences to their own, also contributed to the achievement of the broader outcomes gained from participation in the programme. In getting to this summary of outcomes the reviewers identified four main interconnected themes that emerged - control; guilt; social/cultural/group influences; knowledge and skills; and mothers' needs. Regarding the theme of 'control', it was found that parents felt 'out of control' prior to the parenting programme as they were unable to adequately discipline their children. Through gaining knowledge and skills around this in the programme they were able to feel more confident in their abilities and more able to cope, presumably as they started to feel empowered to get back into a position of feeling in control appropriately. Under the construct of 'guilt', it was suggested that the parents were blaming themselves for their children's negative behaviours as they evaluated their parenting skills as poor and as negatively impacting on their children's behaviours. It is suggested that the parenting programme participation brought about a shift in focus from one of self-blame to a more proactive stance of finding ways to move forward and manage issues better. In terms of the theme 'socio-cultural and group influences', it appears that the participants were so consumed with blaming themselves for their children's problematic behaviour this actually prevented them from seeking help for fear of rejection. A positive impact of the parenting programme in this regard thus appears to have less to do with the actual programme and more to do with the recognition that they are not alone in their struggles. Participants appear to have been positively impacted by becoming engaged in seeking out help and connecting with the other parents seeking the same help. Regarding the 'knowledge and skills' construct, the review found that the studies had shown that parents had felt, prior to the parenting programme, that they did not have adequate skills or knowledge to manage their children's behaviours. However, once their parenting skills were enhanced through participation in the programme, they were able to use these in different settings, were more able to empathise with their children's needs, and felt more connected with their children. The final

construct of 'mothers' needs' emerged after the parenting programmes when participants were implementing the outcomes of the programmes at home. Mothers' identified feeling unsupported by spouses at the same time as feeling that too much was expected of them by their spouses. Extending from these four themes emerging from the systematic review, the reviewers identified what they suggest are key factors that are conducive to promoting parent child-wellbeing. These factors that they suggest are to be taken into consideration when engaging parents in parenting programmes are summarised in Figure 1 (Kane *et al.* 2007, p 790).

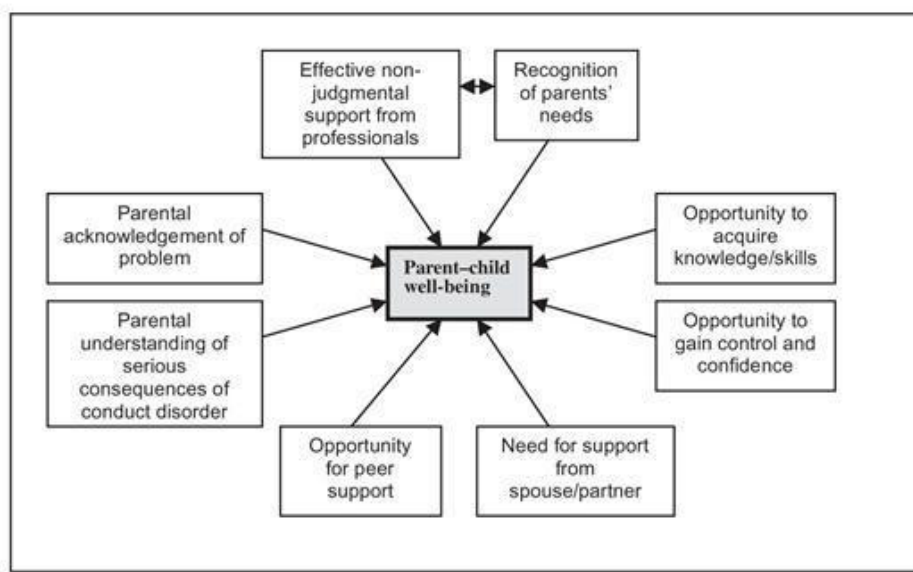


Figure 1. Line-of-argument synthesis: addressing parents' needs and promoting parent-child well-being.

Within Figure 1, it can be seen that two of the synthesis outcomes are acknowledging that there is a problem and recognising the serious nature of conduct disorder. However, given the overall outcomes of the synthesis it feels as though the ways in which parenting programme participation changed parents' perceptions would be useful to parents without a named problem. As such, moving from a clinically reactive approach to supporting parents, to a preventative approach that is non-problem focused and more existential in ethos. It is recognised by the Department of Health UK that support should be given to parents before small problems with their children grow into major difficulties (*Supporting Families*, 1998). This could potentially

reduce the likelihood of a parent feeling as though they have lost control, thus reducing the likelihood of a child responding to this lack of parental control with conduct problems. From the range of studies in Kane *et al.*'s (2007) systematic review it can be seen that the primary focus of much of the research in this area revolves around clinical groups, where participants have children with conduct problems. The rationale for having a sample that consists of parents from a non-clinical group, who have a child or children without a notable conduct problem, for the current research study was contributed to by Kane *et al.*'s (2007) findings.

Up until 2020, Kane *et al.*'s (2007) paper was the only meta-synthesis of qualitative studies looking at parents' perceptions and experiences of parenting programmes. In addition to the age of the paper being a limitation currently, the paper is also limited by its inclusion of only four studies, all of which examined parenting programmes delivered in groups, in Western settings, specifically for parents of children with conduct problems. Since 2007, however, there has been an increase in the number of qualitative studies looking at parents' experiences of parenting programmes. Butler *et al.* (2020) conducted, to date, "the largest and most comprehensive review of qualitative literature of parents' perceptions and experiences of parenting programmes" (p. 197). In line with the Medical Research Council process evaluation framework (Moore *et al.*, 2015), this type of systematic review and meta-synthesis can inform the adaptation of currently used parenting programs and the development of new parenting programmes, in line with the emerging needs of parents.

For their systematic review Butler *et al.* (2020) selected 26 papers that used qualitative methods to ascertain the experiences of parenting programmes had by a total of 822 parents. The 26 reviewed studies were derived from an initial 2738 references after duplicates were removed from the cross-database selection of records. From the 2738 articles screened, 48 studies were initially selected as relevant. Following a full review of the papers it was identified that only 26 studies had met the relevant inclusion criteria. The remaining 22 papers were excluded on one of the following grounds: they didn't meet the defined criteria of a parenting programme, they

were not published in a peer-reviewed journal, interview or focus group were not the qualitative methods of data collection used, or not all parents/caregivers had attended or been invited to attend a parenting programme (Butler *et al.*, 2020). The review focused on studies of parents of children who did not have a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder or an intellectual or physical disability. Evidence suggests that experiences of parents of children with these diagnoses are significantly distinct from the experiences of parents of children without such a diagnosis (Bourke-Taylor and Jane, 2018). After conducting a quality assessment of the remaining 26 studies, using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2014) checklist for qualitative studies, no papers were excluded as in terms of methodological quality, all papers scored as being high or moderately high. Whilst some issues were identified in some of the papers, they were not excluded based on quality as there is not a widely accepted method for doing so (Thomas and Harden, 2008). The 26 studies reviewed evaluated a variety of parenting programmes delivered in various locations between 2001 and 2018, a summary of which can be seen in Table 2, Appendix A. Whilst using different theoretical orientations each study collected its data using interviews or focus groups.

Three themes were developed from the systematic review which give distinct avenues of insight into how parents perceived and experienced the parenting programme intervention that they were a part of. A summary outline of these themes is presented in Table 3, Appendix A. The overarching themes, and thus the directions that the findings take are: 'A family's journey'; 'aspects perceived to be important or valuable'; and 'challenges or difficulties'. Of particular interest from these findings, relative to the current study's aims, is the first overarching theme of 'a family's journey'. This theme includes sub themes that are broken down into the experiences and perceptions of the families in relation to: their parenting journeys 'prior to the intervention'; the 'outcomes' of the intervention; and their parenting journeys 'post intervention'. The findings of the first sub theme are in relation to the parents' experiences of their parental journey 'prior to the intervention', which indicate that parents' perceive there to be difficulties within themselves,

within their children, and within their relationships with their children. The second sub theme of the family's journey relates to 'outcomes' experienced from being involved with the intervention and these findings are broken down into three categories of change experienced, namely changes within the parent, changes within the child/ren, and changes within the family unit. In relation to 'changes in the parents', four different types of changes were categorized. The first change experienced by parents was a shift around their engagement, whereby an initial hesitance changed to an internal willingness to participate in the parenting programme. The second change experienced by parents was the development of their parenting skills, whereby they described having existing skills reinforced, new skills acquired, and self-regulation strategies learned. The third change experienced by parents was the development of their understanding of their children and improvements in their relationships with their children. These changes are described as being contributed to by the parents spending more time playing with, showing affection towards, and listening to their children. The fourth change experienced by parents was an improvement in their well-being and in their self-view. These changes are indicated as being contributed to by the parents gaining a sense of confidence, control, and self-awareness in their parenting. In relation to the 'outcomes' sub theme, 'changes in the child', parents perceived there to be improvements in their children behaviourally, socially, educationally, and in their confidence. In relation to the 'outcomes' sub theme, 'changes in the family', parents perceived there to be improvements in the quality of their family lives overall. This is described as being contributed to by the parents experiencing clearer expectations of each other, better teamwork, and more supportive and communicative co-parenting. The third and final sub theme of the family's journey relates to the parents' experiences 'post intervention', in which the parents detailed their perceived challenges and successes in maintaining the outcomes achieved from the parenting programme participation. Whilst the way in which parents maintained their outcomes from the programme varied, a prominent experience post intervention appears to be the parents' seeking some form of ongoing support.

The second overarching theme identified was 'aspects [of the parenting programme] perceived to be important or valuable'. This theme includes sub themes that are broken down into the experiences and perceptions of the parents in relation to the programme 'group leader or facilitator', the programme 'content and delivery', and the 'value of the group'. Parents appear to value having a facilitator who is supportive, non-judgemental, flexible, and who is able to navigate the dynamics within the group whilst also supporting the formation of peer relationships and taking on board participants' contributions to the group. Parents appear to value programme content that promotes the provision of positive attention to children and content that is delivered in a collaborative manner, using techniques such as role play, which emphasises expectations for change that parents' feel are realistic. The provision of individualised support within the intervention is also something that parents appear to value, alongside practical considerations such as the provision of refreshments, convenient locations and times, and childcare services. Parents appear to value the group that they become a part of by virtue of attending the parenting programme. The group in itself appears to help parents feel less alone with their experiences and to garner support for themselves from the other parents.

The third, and final, overarching theme identified was that of the 'challenges and difficulties' experienced by parents participating in the parenting programme. This theme consists of sub themes that are broken down into the experiences and perceptions of the parents in relation to the 'barriers to engagement or to attendance', 'programme content', and 'suggestions for improvement'. The first sub theme of 'challenges or difficulties' experienced relates to the barriers to attending a parenting programme that parents identified having experienced. These barriers experienced appear to have come in three distinct forms. The first of which is described as a fear of receiving judgement from other parents and professionals, and as a distrust within the group environment either manifesting itself as a fear of being reported to child protection authorities or as finding it hard to take part fully in the group. The second barrier to engagement with a parenting programme identified is a lack of support, made in particular reference to co-

parents in two-parent families where only one parent attended the programme. The third type of barrier identified was a range of contextual barriers such as the parents' perceived severity of their children's difficulties, finding the time, adverse life events, overwhelm, work commitments, and associated financial costs. The second sub theme of 'challenges or difficulties' experienced relates to the parents' perceptions of the 'programme content'. These difficulties relating to programme content included parents perceiving the content not to be developmentally appropriate, not liking the use of technical language, finding the video-based material unrelatable, and not finding the time for implementing recommended play time at home. Identified as frequently occurring is parents expressing a dislike for the promotion of the use of time outs as a disciplinary method. The third sub theme of 'challenges or difficulties' experienced relates to the parents' 'suggestions for improvement' to the parenting programme. The suggestions made include having programmes more tailored to the specific presenting needs and cultural contexts of those attending; in two-parent families having both parents attending; and increasing the delivery time of the parenting programme to allow for content to be covered in greater detail and to allow for behavioural change in the home to start taking place. The findings of Butler *et al.*'s (2020) systematic review both consolidated and expanded upon the findings of the review of Kane *et al.* (2007). Identifying from a broad range of studies that took place with different populations in various cultural settings, several key findings in relation to parents' experiences of parenting programmes gives a thorough insight into what parents found to be of value, what challenges they experienced, and into their perceptions of their journeys of parenting. Whilst these findings are incredibly valuable to assist with developing and delivering parenting programmes into the future, I find it particularly interesting to see the insight into the journey of parenting in itself provided by the findings. Gaining further and more specific insight into this journey of parenting is the aim of the current study, whereby I feel that the findings will make a useful contribution to the existing data that provides glances at these experiences through variable specific lenses. Experiencing a parenting journey akin to that

described by Butler *et al.* (2020) in the findings, is potentially achievable without getting to the crisis point that many parents appear to get to prior to engaging in a parenting intervention. These outcomes identified by parents extend beyond changes in themselves, into changes within their children and within their family as a whole. The current study seeks to find out more about how parents from the general population experience these relational aspects of their parenting journeys.

Parents' experiences of their Parental Relationships

I will review here research that contributes a perspective to the field regarding parents' experiences of their parental relationships. The relational aspect of a co-parenting journey, when researched, is often looked at from the perspective of new parents during the early stages of their parenting journey when they are transitioning to parenthood. During the transition to parenthood, it is reasonable to expect changes in the relationship between the new co-parents as they adjust to this new role after previously being a couple. Whilst each parent is of course on their own journey, when the journey involves parenting it becomes a multi-dimensional relational experience. Looking at how these familial relationships are experienced by parents is important on an individual level, as experiencing a relationship that is of a good quality is conducive to an individual's overall well-being (Proulx *et al.*, 2007). These relationships are also important from the perspective of the child within the family, as the calibre of the parenting they receive and of their parent-child relationship is impacted by the quality of their parents' relationship with each other (DCSF, 2010). There are differences in the existing data about the impact of having children on a couple's relationship. Some research suggests that couples without children may be happier (Hansen, 2012) and that transitioning to parenthood reduces marital stability (Ahlborg *et al.*, 2009). Other research suggests the opposite, namely that parents are more satisfied with their relationships than couples without children (Guttmann and Lazar, 2004) and that transitioning to parenthood increases marital stability (Roy *et al.*, 2014).

There are likely many factors that contribute to how a couple's relationship is impacted either positively or negatively by becoming a parent, factors which are difficult to account and control for in research studies. Here I will look at two main papers that provide some insight into the existing research on the relational aspect of parenting; one paper is a meta-synthesis of the impact of becoming parents on the couple relationship (Delicate *et al.*, 2018), and the other paper is a study that provides an existential perspective on the first child's impact on the parental relationship (Prinds *et al.*, 2018).

Delicate *et al.* (2018) conducted a systematic review of the existing qualitative research that focused on exploring how couples experienced their transition to parenthood, to provide "a more in-depth understanding of this complex phenomenon" (p. 89). The review synthesised data from studies that looked at the lived experience of couples in Western society in relation to their relationships during their transition to parenthood. For their systematic review Delicate *et al.* (2018) selected 12 papers that each used qualitative methods to ascertain the experiences had by a total of 334 parents. The initial database search for the systematic review of the literature took place in 2016 and after duplicates from the searches were removed 2596 studies were identified, of which 147 studies remained following abstract level screening. During the full text level screening 135 studies were removed on the basis that they did not indicate the presence of a couple relationship in the sample, were in book or report format, used a quantitative methodology, took place before 1996, provided no postnatal data, or had a non-Western sample. After conducting a quality assessment of the remaining 12 studies, using the COREQ checklist (Tong *et al.*, 2007) and the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2014) checklist for qualitative studies, no papers were excluded as in terms of methodological quality, all papers were considered reliable. The 12 studies that were included in the meta-synthesis were published between the years 2001 and 2015 and are summarized in Table 4, Appendix A. Six themes were developed from the systematic review which give distinct avenues of insight into how parents perceived their experiences during their transition to parenthood. The participants

in the studies reviewed were in a post-partum period ranging from 6 weeks to 3.5 years. A summary outline of these themes is presented in Figure 2 (Delicate *et al.*, 2018, p. 89). As illustrated in Figure 2, four of the themes identified, that of 'adjustment phase', 'focus on the baby', 'communication', and 'intimacy', all highlight parents' experiences as being both positive and negative. Whereas the theme of 'strain on the relationship' reflected only negative experiences of parents and the theme of 'strengthened relationships' reflected only positive experiences of parents.

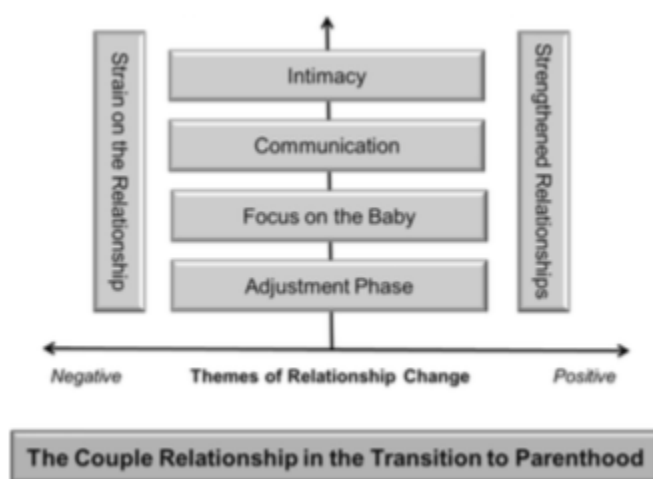


Figure 2. Diagram of identified themes in Delicate *et al.* (2018, p. 89)

The findings of the first theme are in relation to the parents' experiences of the 'adjustment phase' as they transitioned into parenthood. This phase signifying a period of change within the couple's relationship was frequently identified, however this change was not always experienced negatively. It was identified as a period of survival whereby the needs of the baby were the parents primary concern and sexual relations between the parents were halted. Some tensions were identified as having been experienced between parents as they adjusted to their new roles, with a tendency towards gendered stereotypes with respect to dividing up household duties and time spent caring for their child. It appears that some parents experienced positive

support from their co-parenting partner during this period of adjustment to parenthood. Delicate *et al.* (2018) identify these findings as being in line with those of a meta-synthesis conducted by Nelson (2003) on women's experiences of their transition to motherhood, whereby it was outlined that "changing relationships with partners was evident, with a shift in roles aligning to gender stereotypes" (p. 94).

The findings of the second theme are in relation to the parents' experiences of the 'focus being on the baby' as they transitioned into parenthood. The theme identified parents experiencing changes within their relationships as a result of them being both physically and emotionally focused on the baby. Some parents experienced this negatively, in that they felt there was not enough physical or emotional energy left to give to one another, and some described their intimacy needs being met by their baby rather than by their partner. On the other hand, some parents described this focus on the baby as having a positive impact on their relationships with each other, whereby they experienced a feeling of wholeness within their family unit and closeness with each other as a result. Highlighted by some parents was a feeling of not being prepared for the changes within their relationship stemming from the transition to parenthood and a feeling that being informed during pregnancy to expect this relational change would have been helpful to them.

The findings of the third theme are in relation to the parents' experiences of 'communication' with each other as they transitioned into parenthood. Some parents appear to have experienced their communication with each other negatively in various ways, such as a lack of communication with each other, tension in their communications, arguments with each other, or their communication centering around their baby and the practicalities of everyday life.

However, not all parents experienced the changes in their communications negatively, some saw all forms of their communication with each other as an important tool in supporting their navigation through their transition to parenthood.

The findings of the fourth theme are in relation to the parents' experiences of 'intimacy' with each other as they transitioned into parenthood. Some parents experienced this transition as negatively impacting their relationships in terms of a lack of sexual relations due to tiredness, the baby being physically present, variable desire levels between partners, and sex becoming less of a priority. From some women's perspectives, their sexual relationship was impacted negatively as a result of their body self-confidence and sensuality reducing due to the physical impact on their bodies of having and feeding their baby. The parents appeared to infer there being a circular relationship between their experience of a lack of sex and of a lack of tenderness, intimacy, and affection towards each other. On the other hand, some parents experienced positive changes to their intimacy, tenderness, sexual relations, and bodily confidence, during their transition to parenthood.

The findings of the fifth theme are in relation to the parents' experiences of the transition period causing a 'strain on their relationships'. How parents experienced this strain in terms of severity appears to differ from couple to couple. There is a suggestion that perhaps this variation relates to issues that are present within a relationship prior to having a child becoming magnified after having a child (Faircloth, 2015). It is also indicated that this strain felt by parents during this time is a short-term response to the period of adjustment experienced whilst they work to re-balance their lives to take account for the addition of their first child.

The findings of the sixth, and final, theme are in relation to the parents' experiences of the transition to parenthood 'strengthening their relationships'. The parents describe feeling positive about now being a family, feeling that their relationship deepened, and feeling closer to, and more understanding and supportive of each other.

The findings of Delicate *et al.*'s (2018) systematic review provide a comprehensive view into the lived experience of parents in Western societies during their transition to parenthood. This study is useful in synthesising viewpoints of mothers, fathers, and couples in relation specifically to their relationships during this phase of their lives. The studies reviewed provide a balanced

insight into these lived experiences, illustrating both the positive and negative experiences of parents when commencing their parenting journey. The focus of this study is somewhat narrow and consequently the findings do not provide any insight into matters more broadly concerning parents' lived experiences such as their relational and familial history, their experiences of having more than one child, and their experiences beyond the first three years of parenting. Whilst this study's focus was on the transition to parenthood stage of the parenting journey, evidence suggests that relationship satisfaction declines over the three years following the birth of a first child (Trillingsgaard *et al.*, 2014). As such, the findings of this meta-synthesis are only specifically relevant to these three years and only marginally so, given that 11 out of the 12 studies had participants who were within their first year postpartum. With the peak of the relationship decline occurring at three years post postpartum it would be interesting to see how parents experience their familial relationships after that period. As such, the rationale for having a sample for the current research study consisting of parents who have a child or children between the ages of two and seven years or are their child/ren's primary carers for more than three years, was contributed to by these findings (Delicate *et al.*, 2018).

With much of the research on parenthood focused on the first three years postpartum, it is useful to use this as a foundation of understanding parents' experiences through their journey of parenting. Prinds *et al.* (2018) is one such paper and it provides an existential perspective on the first child's impact on the parental relationship. The study considers how one experiences the transition to parenthood may be influenced by dimensions related to existential meaning making. The study looks at the experiences from mothers' perspectives only, as research suggests that the significance of meaning-making becomes more intense during a woman's transition to motherhood (la Cour & Hvidt, 2010). Prinds *et al.* (2018) considered that "if making meaning of life is challenged when becoming a mother, the relationship to the partner might be challenged as well" (p. 2).

Prinds *et al.*'s (2018) study used data that was collected via a national questionnaire sent in 2011 to Danish mothers who had given birth to their first child in 2010. The questionnaire had been sent to 913 mothers and 517 mothers responded, of which, 499 women's responses were included in the study as the responses of those who did not have a partner when their child was born were excluded. The data consisted of the responses given to five of the questions in the 46-item questionnaire. These five items were "designed to provide knowledge about perceptions of partner relationship related to secular orientations in existential meaning-making" (Prinds *et al.*, 2018, p. 2). The five items along with the percentage of respondents that agreed with each item can be seen in Table 5. It is noted in the paper that 8 and 13% respectively indicated that they did not know what to answer to questions 3 and 5.

Table 5. Percentage of mothers agreeing to items on existential meaning-making in partner relationship (Prinds *et al.*, 2018, p. 4)

Item & Number	% Agreed
1. Thoughts and conversations between self and partner	85.6
2. Forged stronger ties between self and partner	89.0
3. Linked our relationship to something bigger than ourselves	59.7
4. Gave rise to more conflicts between self and partner	43.3
5. Dreams leading to reflections on self and family	62.2

Of the respondents, 85.6% indicated that having a baby gave rise to them having thoughts of and engaging in conversations with their partners about how the transition to parenthood had changed their lives together. The findings also indicate that a large percentage of respondents (89%) reported feeling stronger ties to their partner during their transition to motherhood, whilst a minority percentage of respondents (43.3%) reported experiencing more conflicts during this phase than prior to their child being born. These percentages indicate that more conflict is not

necessarily an overall negative experience for all parents and does not necessarily prevent against forming stronger ties with a partner, this is in line with other findings indicating challenging yet rewarding aspects of parenting (Delicate *et al.*, 2018; Spiteri *et al.*, 2014; Trillingsgaard *et al.*, 2014; Xuereb *et al.*, 2012). The two items that referred to deeper existential experiences were the items that more respondents had difficulty knowing how to respond to. Additionally, as the items were delivered via questionnaire it is not possible to ascertain what meaning was interpreted of those two items by those who did respond, particularly in item 3 where 'something bigger than ourselves' can be interpreted in a number of ways. Prinds *et al.* (2018) indicate that the findings in relation to this item, in which 59.7% of respondents agreed with, "suggest that first time mothers find making meaning of life with regards to their partner altered" (p. 4). In relation to the final item, in which 62.2% of respondents agreed with, it is indicated that new mothers have dreams that lead to reflections on themselves and their family. This finding is in line with that of, Lara-Carrasco *et al.* (2014), which indicates that the sleep of new and expectant mothers can be disturbed by heightened dream levels. However, it is suggested that these are often linked to normal mood and normal emotional concerns (Lara-Carrasco *et al.*, 2014).

Although by virtue of the quantitative nature of this study broader and more complex interpretations of the data cannot be made, it is a useful contribution to knowledge, from a mother's perspective, about how relationships between parents can evolve during their transition to parenthood. Finding out more about the evolution of these parental relationships in a qualitative manner and from the perspectives of co-parenting mothers and fathers are part of the concluding recommendations made by Prinds *et al.* (2018) and form part of the rationale of the direction of the current study.

Conclusion of the Literature Review

In conducting the current research study, I set out to contribute to the qualitative research on parenting, but also to potentially bring an existential lens to the area. I identified a need for this contribution by noticing that, whilst the qualitative research in the field is looking at experiences from a parenting perspective there is a tendency for this to be done in a manner that is highly outcome focused. In relation to the research pertaining to parents' experiences of parenting programme interventions, this creates a ridge between looking at how parents report a programme impacts them and actually seeing how parents view their parenting after engaging in such an intervention. In the planning of the current study, I explored the value of researching the lived experiences of parents once they had gained the parenting skills and knowledge to promote connectivity within their familial relationships. I felt that this knowledge would contribute to the existing body of research that looks at the impact of attending a parenting programme intervention from a user's perspective. As such, the current study, when in its infancy, set out to shift the focus from the qualitative measure of outcomes from programme intervention participation onto the real-life experiences of the parents. To separate further from less organically occurring explorations of parenting experiences, I felt that the current research could meet its aims by recruiting parents for participation from the population without the condition of them having engaged in a parenting intervention. In this way the present study was able to align its focus purely on the aim of understanding how parents experience their journey of parenting together, without an influence of how parents may or may not have engaged with a parenting programme. Additionally, the rationale for having a sample consisting specifically of parent sets for the current research study was contributed to by Mockford and Barlow's (2004) study, whereby they looked at the effects that a parenting programme may have on family life when only one parent, mostly the mother, attends the programme. The rationale for having a sample that consists of parents from a non-clinical group, who have a child or children without a notable conduct problem, for the current research study was contributed to by Kane *et al.*'s (2007)

findings. From their systematic review it was seen that the primary focus of much of the research in this area revolves around clinical groups, where participants have children with conduct problems (Kane *et al.*, 2007). Additionally, it was seen from the findings within the systematic reviews of Kane *et al.* (2007) and Butler *et al.* (2020) that in advance of reaching out for support in relation to their parenting, parents experience a range of negative thoughts about their parenting. These thoughts leave them feeling out of control of their parenting role, thus potentially giving rise to more conduct problems being displayed by their children. The outcomes identified by parents after engaging in a parenting intervention extend beyond changes in themselves, into changes within their children and within their family as a whole. Finding out more about the evolution of these parental relationships within the family unit in a qualitative manner and from the perspectives of co-parenting mothers and fathers are part of the concluding recommendations made by Prinds *et al.* (2018). These recommendations form part of the rationale of the direction of the current study. The current study seeks to find out more about how parents from the general population experience these relational aspects of their parenting journeys. The sample range is restricted to parents who have a child or children between the ages of two and seven years or are their child/ren's primary carers for more than two years. The rationale for having a sample for the current research study within this range was contributed to by the study of Delicate *et al.* (2018) which indicates that most of the studies in relation to parents' experiences of their parenting journeys are concerned specifically with the transition to parenthood phase of this journey. Further details of the sample used in the current study will be discussed in the methodology and methods chapter.

Methodology and Method

Methodological Approach

I will outline here the methodological approach of this research study, by first identifying the ontological and epistemological positions that framed this approach. I will then briefly outline a choice of methodologies and the rationale for the qualitative approach that was selected for this study. Thereafter, I will describe a selection of the qualitative methods that I explored in choosing what I felt was the right one for this study. Lastly, I will explore the rationale for using semi-structured paired-depth interviews for data collection and will outline the questions used in the research interviews.

Epistemological and Ontological Position

I will identify the ontological and epistemological positions that provide a framework for the methodological approach of this study. Holloway and Todres (2003) outline the importance of qualitative researchers making their epistemological and ontological assumptions explicit, rather than simply providing an outline of how they apply a particular research method to their collected data. Ontology is concerned with what there is to know in the world and epistemology is concerned with how one can come to know what there is to be known (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Willig, 2013).

Ontology can be described along a spectrum ranging from relativism to realism. The relativist position is essentially viewing what there is to know about the world as only being accessible to those in the world through their own perceptions. On the opposite end of the spectrum is the realist position, which is defined by there being an objective reality, which is accessible to all equally and exists independent of people's perceptions of it. The position that I hold, and thus is the position held in relation to this research study, is that of critical realism, which sits along the spectrum between relativism and realism. The critical realist position maintains that there is true

knowledge in the world to be known, however, by virtue of human beings coming to know that knowledge, it becomes influenced by personal perceptions (Willig, 1999). Braun and Clarke (2013) explain that within the critical realist position “knowledge is viewed as socially influenced”, and so “it is thought to reflect a separate reality that we can only partially access” (p.27).

The epistemological position that I hold and assumption that underpins this research study, is that of contextualism. In placing epistemological positions on a spectrum, contextualism sits between positivism and constructionism. A contextualist position sees reality as existing within a particular context. In contextualism, rather than there being one objective reality, there are true realities, which exist in particular contexts (Tebes, 2005). This position sees knowledge as emerging from contexts whilst also viewing knowledge as being true in certain contexts.

Within this research study, I existed with the participants' subjective accounts of an aspect of their relational being in order to tap into the authenticity of their existence together as parents. I set about doing this with the broader purpose of potentially making a difference to how counselling psychologists engage parents in interventions. Within the position of a critical realist, I was able to continually reflect on my role as researcher when existing with both the participants themselves and with their interview transcripts. I was conscious of the social context, within which the knowledge that I was trying to access, existed. I continuously reflected on my own position in relation to this knowledge that I was accessing to facilitate an ongoing consideration of the validity of what was being extracted from the data. The account that I give of the analyses acknowledges the active role that I as the researcher played in identifying and selecting the themes of interest to report on.

Methodologies: Quantitative versus Qualitative

A helpful starting point in this section is to differentiate between what is meant by a methodology and a method. Silverman (1993) illustrates this differentiation by defining the term ‘methodology’

as a “general approach to studying research” (p.1) and defining the term ‘method’ as “a specific research technique” (p.1). Defining these terms is useful in providing somewhat of a structural hierarchy, whereby the ontology prescribes the epistemology, which prescribes the methodology and in turn the methodology determines the methods. Methodological approaches to research can take the form of quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods. With quantitative research the data collected are numerically based and the research questions tend to investigate relationships between variables in an objective manner, producing results that can be generalised to a broad population (Tolich & Davidson, 2003). Whereas with qualitative research the data collected are words, in verbal or in written form, and the research questions tend to concern themselves with analysing meaning, which is accessed in context by a reflexive researcher who recognises and accounts for the subjectivity involved in the process (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

The methodological approach of this research study was chosen based on that which was being sought by the research question alongside the ontological and epistemological positions that I as the researcher hold. These held positions alongside the chosen methodological approach determined a range of methods that were potentially suitable to use to meet the aims of the research study. In this research study I explored the journey of parenting, with sets of parents, to understand parents’ perceptions of their families’ relationships. Given the research question’s aim to explore this element of the participants’ lived experiences, alongside my epistemological and ontological positions, a qualitative methodological approach was chosen. In line with these held positions and the aims of the research I narrowed the qualitative methods down to three potentially suitable methods to choose from - interpretative phenomenological analysis, grounded theory, and thematic analysis. Each method chosen is one that allows for direct contact with participants, to access their communicated perceptions of their experiences along the parenting journey within their families. Each method is one that facilitates me to analyse the

data collected through interviews and, thereafter, to identify themes or categories from my analysis of the data.

Qualitative Methods

Choosing a Method. In the process of choosing a qualitative method to align with that which was being explored by the research questions and my epistemological and ontological positions, I explored three potentially suitable methods - interpretative phenomenological analysis, grounded theory, and thematic analysis. I will provide a comparative outline of these methods here with the purpose of communicating the process that I engaged to select a suitable method for this study. To conclude, I will discuss the rationale behind choosing the approach of thematic analysis over that of both interpretative phenomenological analysis and grounded theory.

Grounded Theory. The research method of grounded theory (GT) was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) so that researchers had a method via which new theories could emerge. Research that uses GT as their method, can develop theories that are contextually specific to the data from which they emerge. The process of the method is flexible and encourages researchers to continuously consider all stages of the data collection and analysis, in line with the method's aim to facilitate the emergence of theory. GT has a starting point within the research whereby the researcher's focus is on what is being investigated rather than on a definite research question. The purpose of having this type of openness within the initial research question when using GT, is to prevent contamination of that which can emerge from the data. The initial focus of the researcher using GT needs to be open ended and limited in assumptions. As the research progresses the research question becomes more solidified. This progression from an open-ended topic of research to a solidified question of research takes place as the researcher categorises, codes, and engages in a constant comparative analysis of the data. Using GT is fitting with a researcher aiming to learn more about social processes and

in doing this the researcher adopts the role of an observer. Whilst GT allows for an element of flexibility, is analytic in nature, and facilitates the exploration of social processes in the context of their environments, I felt that it was not the most suited method for the current research study. This decision was based, most prominently, on the basis of the focus of this research having been set from the outset with a solidified research question. Additionally, I felt that my role as a researcher within this study needed to be more active than the role of the researcher as an observer within GT. This led me on to explore interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), in which the aim is to learn about the psychological processes of the individual worlds of its participants, and in doing so the researcher becomes actively involved in the process with the participants. GT shares some elements with IPA, with both methods using “categorization in order to achieve data reduction, which, it is hoped, will produce some form of general understanding or insight into the fundamental process (GT) or essence (IPA) that characterizes the phenomenon of interest” (Willig, 2013, pp. 98-99). It was, however, the distinctions that led me to move from GT to explore IPA for the current research study. Smith *et al.* (2009) outline that an “IPA study is likely to offer a more detailed and nuanced analysis of the lived experience of a small number of participants whilst a GT study of the same broad topic is likely to wish to push towards a more conceptual explanatory level” (p. 202).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. IPA was founded by Smith (1997) and is defined as “a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences” (Smith *et al.*, 2009, p.1). IPA is used by researchers interested in the perceptions of everyday experiences of people when those experiences in their personal or social worlds become significant. Smith *et al.* (2009) describe our experiences as moving from those of the everyday to those of significance through a process whereby “we are constantly caught up, unselfconsciously, in the everyday flow of experience” then, “...as soon as we become aware of what is happening, we have the beginnings of what can be described as ‘an experience’ as opposed to just experience” (p.2). When encountering an experience, there

is an awareness of the happenings within the experience and a reflection on these happenings. Whilst reflecting on what is happening during an experience there is a sense-making process taking place. During IPA interviews these sense-making reflections, that the person is engaging in about their experience, is what the researcher attempts to tap into. The IPA researcher can engage with the reflections, thoughts, and feelings that are experienced in the process of making sense of a significant lived experience (Smith *et al.*, 2009). IPA positions experiences as not being absolute, rather as being significant due to the person drawing significance from them. IPA views experiences as taking place in context, as such, adopting this approach to investigating lived experiences with a relational aspect is useful. IPA recognises the socio-cultural aspect of existence and as an approach it encompasses all that the socio-cultural context brings. In IPA, the role of the researcher draws from underlying theoretical perspectives of hermeneutics and ideography. The hermeneutic theory of interpretation informs the processes engaged in with IPA, as the researcher plays a key role in interpreting the information received by the participants. The researcher plays an active rather than a passive role in gathering data when using IPA. The researcher engages in a shared experience with the participants on their journey of accessing, through the researcher's own interpretations, the participants' experiences as they perceive and give account of them. When sharing the space with participants, the idiographic nature of IPA can be seen, whereby focus can be placed on looking beyond the language used by participants, to see the concepts and ideas that they are communicating. As the researcher tries to get as close as possible to the lived experience of the participants their own pre-conceptions form a barrier to accessing the participants' experiences directly or objectively. Smith and Osborn (2008) outline that "a two-stage interpretation process, or double hermeneutic is involved. The participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world" (p. 53). Given this integrated role of the researcher, using IPA requires a level of reflexivity on the behalf of the researcher. The aim of an IPA study is to detail the perceptions of the studies'

participants and for the researcher to commit to sticking with an analysis of the individual cases rather than producing generalisations (Langdrige, 2007). Without predetermined aims held by the researcher and with their integrated role, the approach of IPA can provide the participants with the space and support to give a true insight into the phenomenon being studied.

The discovery of themes within IPA, and the categories then identified, somewhat mirrors the approach of GT. However, forming a theory is not the aim of IPA, rather each of the participants' experiences are fully engaged with, individually, and only thereafter are potential themes identified. The exploratory nature of IPA deemed it a suitable approach for consideration for use with the current research question, as the purpose of the study is not to form a theory or to construct new ideals, rather it is to seek inside information about the processes of individuals in their social roles of being parents. A great strength of IPA is its ability to reveal unanticipated phenomena given that the approach is data-driven rather than theory-driven (Shaw, 2001). This allows participants to tell their own stories about their experiences without being biased by predetermined notions that a researcher presents to them (Shaw, 2001). The focus that IPA places on the gathering of data from individual participants poses a difficulty, however, for the current study. Anticipated difficulties at the analysis stage of the research as a result of the data having been gathered from paired depth interviews led to the decision to explore options for an alternative, more flexible, methodology. When looking closely at the aims of the current research study, alongside the epistemological and ontological positions surrounding the study, the essence of the study is to get as close as possible to how the parents, together, experience their role as parents. The use of IPA would be better suited to the study if it were examining how each parent made sense of their parenting world, as an individualistic experience from their own unique perspective. As such, thematic analysis was explored, and in turn chosen over IPA for the current study.

Thematic Analysis. One of the most influential papers in setting thematic analysis (TA) aside as a methodology in its own right is that of Braun and Clarke (2006). TA is described as:

“...a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 6). One of the main benefits of TA is its flexibility as a method. Although Braun and Clarke (2006) set out a six-step guide to carrying out a TA, they do so whilst “ensuring flexibility in relation to how it is used, so that it does not become limited and constrained, and lose one of its key advantages” (p. 5). In line with the flexibility of the method, Willig (2013) outlines that “thematic analysis can be used to address research questions from different epistemological perspectives” (p. 59), but that it is particularly well suited to types of research asking a question about “people's conceptualisations or ways of thinking about particular social phenomena” (p. 59).

A potential limitation of TA is that, given that the methodology does not lay out the epistemological orientation, the researcher could possibly proceed without explicitly stating this, or considering their position. Holloway and Todres (2003) identify the importance of a researcher not just applying the method to data but making their epistemological and other assumptions explicit. A TA, which is not located epistemologically, can be seen as a “shopping list of themes which do not represent anything in particular and which often reflect the topics included in the researcher’s interview agenda” (Willig, 2013, p. 65). Conversely, a good quality TA is “the product of a combination of theoretical knowledge and understanding, as well as the ability to systematically yet creatively thematize and interpret data” (Willig, 2013, p. 66).

In choosing a method for the current research study, I considered these limitations and placed the research epistemologically herein. The current study adopts a critical realist ontological position and an epistemological position of contextualism. Given the freedom within TA to have the structure placed upon the method determined by the needs of the research study, I selected it as the method best suited to use to analyse the data in this study. “Through its theoretical freedom, thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 5). The research question in this study explores sets of parents' perceptions of their experiences of

parenting, in relation to their families' relationships. In this research question the social phenomenon of parenting is explored, whereby parenting pairs are given the opportunity to communicate together, to the researcher, their subjective experiences of this element of their lives together. This study explores parents' lived experiences along their journey of parenting together, beyond theoretical assumptions or preconceived ideas. In doing so, this research attempts to get close to accounts of what parents are experiencing in their perceptions of their roles, how they experience this in their own unique ways and how this shapes their personal and social worlds. This study provides an exploration of the universal nature of the shared experience of parenting amongst several parent sets consciously processing similar phenomena and their subjective accounts of how this shapes the way in which they view their existence as parents. As Willig (2013) identifies, most thematic analyses address research questions about subjective perceptions. Lending from the inherent flexibility of TA, the role of the researcher can take different forms. "The position of the researcher is not fixed by the choice of thematic analysis as a research method. Rather it is determined by the research question and the status of the themes in the analysis" (Willig, 2013, p.66). The current research question aims to understand parents' perceptions of their families' relationships along their parenting journey. The role of the researcher, in gathering this information, is to get as close to the experiences of each of the parent sets as possible. Willig (2013) describes the role of the researcher when seeking knowledge of this nature, as akin to a "person-centred counsellor who listens to the clients account of their experience empathetically, with an attitude of unconditional, positive regard and without questioning the external validity of what the client is saying" (p. 16). In conducting the research interviews, I drew on both my mediation skills and existential counselling skills to access the experiential worlds of the participants. I acknowledged, throughout my role as researcher, that I was being active within the process of accessing the experiential worlds of the participants. An element of interpretation was used to draw meaning from the emergent themes in relation to the areas of focus of the research question. The aim

that I held as a researcher was akin to that described by Willig (2013), as one that aims to “generate knowledge about the quality and texture of experience as well as about its meaning within a particular social and cultural context” (p. 17).

Paired Depth Interviews

A paired depth interview is defined as one researcher interviewing two people together (Houssart & Evens, 2011) for the purposes of collecting information about how the pair perceives the same phenomenon (Arksey, 1996). Paired interviews are used in the current study to capture the perceptions of parenting from both parents in a parenting set, together. The in-depth paired interview brings to the research the relational aspect of parenting; something that would not be captured as well by interviewing each member of the parenting set individually. Morris (2001) describes paired interviews as unfolding as the participants interact with one another. The primary appeal of utilising paired depth interviews in the current study is that it allows the interactions between each parenting set to be captured by the research. For optimum use of paired depth interviews, both members of the parenting set are encouraged to participate in the discussion that occurs during the interview in as equal a manner as is possible (Wilson *et al.*, 2016). In exploring the best fit approach to take to gather the data required to answer the current research question, in line with the epistemological and ontological positions held, the use of small focus groups and individual semi-structured interviews were considered. Krueger (1994) places paired interviews in a category on a continuum between individual interviews and mini focus groups.

During the process of selecting a suitable approach to take in the current research study several studies that used paired depth interviews, as identified by Wilson *et al.* (2016), were explored, and strengths and weaknesses of the approach were considered. Hight (2003) identifies paired depth interviews as being easy to set up and as having a relatively low attrition rate. Morris (2001) suggests that this may be because of the tendency for the pairs to have an existing

relationship. It is also suggested that it is in the instances where the paired participants have a previously established relationship with each other that the paired depth interviews work best. Each of the parenting sets participating in the current study have been engaged in their co-parenting journey for a minimum of two years, as per the identified inclusion criteria, as such their co-parenting relationship is well established prior to the research interview. Paired interviewing emerged during the 1960's in the realm of research on marriage and family counselling. Ehrenkranz (1967a) identified a benefit of such interviews being that husbands and wives could work together to address issues and conflicts in order to gain new skills and awareness. In Wilson's (2014) study that used paired depth interviews to explore the lived experiences of single mothers and their sons, each member of the seven participant sets were found to have been of assistance to each other in identifying characteristics that were in question during the interview. This, in turn, assisted towards the capturing of a fuller understanding of the phenomenon (Wilson *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, Morris (2001) suggests that because of the nature of the relationships in paired depth interviews the generation of meaningful themes can take place. One potential concern about the use of paired depth interviews for family-based research is the possibility of conflict within the interview between the parents or one parent heavily dominating the other parent. A disadvantage of paired depth interviewing, identified by Wilson *et al.*, (2016), was the possibility of one person dominating the interview leaving the other without the space to express themselves. Furthermore, it was identified that participation in the paired depth interview could cause problems for the pair that had not previously emerged for them (Wilson *et al.*, 2016). Despite these concerns, it is possible to view conflict as a part of relationships and consider that potentially a more naturalistic perception of experiences can be gained from a paired depth interview wherein the two parties do not agree on everything. By being in the room as the researcher, facilitating the discussion between the two interviewees, the non-verbal interactions and power dynamics between the couple are observable and contribute to the research. Within the interview, the co-parents

provide access to how they actually are together as communicative partners, rather than relying solely on their verbalisations of this. Additionally, paired depth interviews make it easier for the researcher to expose areas of disparity, tension, and conflict between couples than would occur if only one member of the pair was interviewed or if each member of the pair was interviewed separately (Arksey, 1996). Furthermore, an inherent limitation of relying on individual self-report means of data collection is that people only have “partial access to their own thoughts” (Polkinghorne, 2015, p. 136). Whereas when collecting data from paired depth interviews an element of triangulation can take place whereby participant sets can verify and correct accounts for each other whilst also filling in gaps or details that an individual may omit on their own (Wilson *et al.*, 2016).

A key element of the current study is having the views of the parents heard as a unit. Wilson *et al.* (2016) identify another benefit of using paired depth interviews as their ability to enable the voice to be heard of those who otherwise may not be heard. For instance, many studies on parenting use individual semi-structured interviews which largely tend to be attended by the mother. This leads to the view of the parent who is absent from the interview, being inferred from what the interviewed parent is reporting. Conversely, by using paired depth interviews to gather the data in the current study, a rich and unique viewpoint of co-parents discussing together their perceptions of their shared journey of parenting, is contributed to the existing research.

Research Questions

In line with the research question of this study, I set out the following group of questions for use in the semi-structured paired depth interviews:

- Opening question:
 - Tell me about your experiences of your parenting journey thus far?
- Questions to target the research question’s area of focus:

- How do you experience your relationships within your family?
 - Possible prompt: your relationship with each other as parents, with the children...
- In what ways do you feel that you work together in your role as parents?
 - Possible prompt: for example, times when you feel you are both on the same page
- How do you deal with differences in your approaches to parenting?
 - Possible prompt: for example, times when you may have a differing opinion than your partner
- Could you tell me about your experiences of connectivity within your family?
 - possible prompt: times when you feel connected together as a family unit
- Could you tell me about your experiences of dysconnectivity within your family?
 - Possible prompt: times when you feel that your family isn't gelling together
- How do you experience the parenting skills that you use within your family?
 - Possible prompt: any type of parenting skill that you feel works well or doesn't work well for you or your family
- In what way do you experience the attachments within your family?
 - Possible prompt: this relates to the sense of security you feel the child/ren get from you both as parents
- Questions for further expansion:

(Used to expand on questions above as appropriate)

 - Could you expand on your perceptions of that please?
 - How has this been for you as a family, do you feel?
 - Can you tell me more about how that experience is for you?
 - How does this impact you as a team, do you think?

- Closing question:
 - As we come towards the end of our interview time, how are you both feeling about what emerged from our discussion here today?

Ethical Considerations

A research study of this nature cannot be commenced without ethical approval from authorised persons representing the accrediting university. It is vital to ensure that, as a researcher, due consideration is given to all potential risks associated with carrying out a study and that all aspects of the research are conducted in an ethical manner. In the planning of this research study, I prepared and applied for ethical approval and risk assessment to the joint ethics committee of the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling and of Middlesex University Department of Psychology. Upon first review by the committee the board granted ethical approval but with a few conditions. I amended the study's proposal in line with those conditions and the resubmitted ethics application was granted full approval from the board. This process provided me with the opportunity to clearly set out the ethical bounds of the research project prior to its commencement. A difficulty arose in the study's realisation, whereby it proved very difficult to find parent sets who met the initially proposed inclusion criteria of being born between 1977 and 1983. As such, I was granted ethical approval to make the amendment which removed the age bracket of the parents, leaving only the age bracket of the children for homogeneity. Even with the change to the inclusion criteria, it was not as easy as anticipated to find parent sets whose families met the remaining inclusion criteria and who were willing and logistically able to participate in the study. As such, interviews took place with seven parent sets rather than the originally anticipated eight. One limitation of qualitative studies of this size is that data saturation isn't reached due to the small number of participants, as such the findings are not generalizable. However, the findings provide stakeholders with insight into the experiences of participants in the areas of focus. This information has the potential to be utilised to inform the

direction of parenting and family-based interventions. It too contributes to the existing knowledge in this field by illustrating the viewpoints of co-parents' perceptions. Another potential limitation within the current study is the possibility that full disclosure hadn't been made by participants in the inclusion/exclusion criteria declarations. Additionally, information was not known about participants' states of being prior to participating in the study.

I carried out the research study in accordance with the principles outlined by both the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct and the PSI Code of Professional Ethics. An important point of ethical consideration in the carrying out of this study was to ensure that, in so far as is possible, no harm came to the participants through their participation. Participants were each given detailed information, in the form of a participant information sheet (see appendix), about the study to allow them to provide informed consent to participate. This document outlined exactly what partaking in the study involved, the possible advantages and disadvantages of participating, and information about how their information would be utilised. To supplement the participant information sheet, I was available to answer any questions that they had about their participation in the study. All participants were informed verbally and in their information sheets, of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Participants each signed a consent to engage in the research form (see appendix) confirming their voluntary participation and in this form, it was outlined again their right to withdraw from the project at any time without any obligation to explain their reasons for doing so. When carrying out the interviews I exercised caution in ensuring that any psychological impact of participating in the semi-structured paired depth interviews was minimised. One area of consideration in this regard had been the possibility that within the dual interview only one parent would speak or that one parent's viewpoint would dominate that of the other parent. As a contributory preventative measure for dealing with a potential issue in this regard, I completed a mediation training workshop which provided me with skills to manage situations whereby two people are expressing views that may not agree with each other. To further provide for allowing each parent to have space to express

their viewpoints the interviews were given a duration time frame of between 60 and 90 minutes. Another point of concern that I noted in advance of the interviews was the potential for the participants to become distressed during the interview. Whilst the questions were focused on experiential matters and did not directly ask of anything overtly traumatic, given the semi-structured nature of the interview, an emotive personal experience of the participants had the potential to arise and cause distress. Additionally, given the dual nature of the interviews, whilst one of the parents in the interview may have been comfortable discussing such a sensitive matter, the other parent may have found the experience upsetting. I noted in advance of the interviews that if there was evidence of such an impact on any of the participants during their interview, I would raise this concern for discussion with the participants in order to decide together about stopping or continuing on with the interview. Following each interview, there was a debriefing whereby the participants were given the opportunity to talk about their experience of being interviewed and to flag anything that the process may have brought up for them. I gave each participant a debrief document that contained a list of support organisations' contact details should any participant have felt the need to talk more about any issues that may have arisen for them or any difficult feelings that they may have experienced during the interview process. The well-being of the participants has been always of paramount concern to me throughout the study. Given the methodological approach used herein an element of interpretation was necessary, as such, I was reporting in the write up of this study concepts or ideas that I interpreted from the interviews but that the participants may not have been consciously aware of. I was aware of the potential impact of this on participants throughout the process of the analysis and I was mindful of managing these potential impacts in an ethical manner. As the study has a small number of participants and given that they attended for interviews in their co-parenting pairs, their narratives are potentially identifiable. Within the process of writing the analysis I focused on my subjective account of what the participants discussed. I selected the data extracts in a manner whereby specific details of the participants'

lives were not revealed, only their perceptions of their experiences. I referred to the participants' children in a gender-neutral manner and I edited the data extracts in a manner that protected the children's identity; for instance, by not revealing details about the children, such as their gender, age, school, extra-curricular activities, places of holidays, etc. I asked the parents to refer to each other throughout the interview in a relational manner rather than by name, and this is illustrated in the transcripts. For illustrative purposes I referred to the parents by pseudo names in the analysis write up. I selected the pseudo names from lists of names deemed to be frequently used. When not using their pseudo names, I referred to the parents by their self-identified gender pronouns and/or their self-identified parental role throughout the write up of the analysis.

I appreciate the sensitive nature of the data that I hold in relation to the participants, and, at all times, the data was stored in a password-controlled computer, owned and possessed by myself. The data was gathered and stored in a manner that is compliant with the provisions of the General Data Protection Regulations (EU) 2016/679.

Method

I will outline here the method adopted in carrying out this research, by first identifying the design of the study and then outlining the procedure followed regarding the recruitment and interviewing of participants. I will then outline the procedure that I followed in the actualisation of the research, followed by details of the six phases of the analysis process. Thereafter, I will detail the ethical considerations that I explored in relation to the potential impacts and risks of carrying out the research. Lastly, I will outline aspects of the validity of the study and of the reflexivity with which I engaged whilst carrying out the research.

Design

This research study was conducted utilizing a qualitative methodology. Purposive sampling was used to recruit a small homogenous group of participants, in line with the inclusion criteria of the study. Data was collected via semi-structured paired depth interviews and digital recordings of the interviews were transcribed. The interview transcripts were analysed using a thematic analysis. This analysis sought to understand how the parents experienced their journey of parenting with reference to the parents' perceptions of their families' relationships.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit 14 participants, made up of 7 sets of co-parents, to attend for one semi-structured in-depth interview per participant pair. A recruitment information poster was shared on social media platforms and was circulated via email by relevant national organisations who had the ability to reach many parents. For reasons of anonymity and participant confidentiality the relevant organisations will not be named. When prospective participants expressed an interest in participating in the study, a research compatibility form was sent to them. Via this form, relevant demographic information was gathered, a summary of which can be seen in Table 6.

Table 6. *Participant Demographics*

Pseudonyms	Co-Parents' Age Bracket	Co-Parents Marital Status	Nature of Relationship to Children	Children's Ages
Mia and Liam	36-45 years	Married	Biological	2 and 5 years
Emma and Noah	46-55 years	Married	Biological	7 years
Ava and Oliver	36-45 years	Married	Biological	3 and 6 years
Harper and Mason	36-45 years	Married	Biological	6 years
Charlotte and Henry	36-45 years	Married	Biological	4 and 6 years
Sophia and Ben	26-35 years	Married	Biological	2 years
Amelia and Lucas	36-45 years	Married	Biological	3 and 5 years

This information provided allowed the researcher to ascertain the participants that met each of the inclusion criteria. Participants confirmed that they were the parents of children aged between 2 and 7 years old. Participants confirmed that the children were without a clinical diagnosis, in line with the aims of the study. The parents confirmed that they were, together, the primary caregivers for the children. In the event of the children not being the biological children of the participating co-parents, participants were asked to confirm that they were the primary carers to the children for a minimum of two years prior to participation. Included in the demographic information gathered was how proficient in English the participants deemed themselves to be. The exclusion criterion for participants was a lack of English proficiency, as this was likely to obstruct data collection and analysis. Each participant signed a consent form to partake in the study after having read through their information sheet and having been given time to have their questions regarding the study answered. Prior to the commencement of the study each participant had completed the research screening form, had received the participant information document, and had signed the consent to engage in the research form. These three documents, along with the recruitment poster, can be found in Appendix B.

Procedure

The following procedure, prior to being carried out, was approved by the board of ethics of the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling and the Psychology Department of Middlesex University. Participants were invited to partake in the study voluntarily and were informed of their freedom to withdraw from the study at any time via their participant information sheet. Prior to the commencement of the study each participant had completed the research screening form and had signed the consent to engage in the research form. Each pair of co-parents engaged in a semi-structured paired depth interview with the researcher. The rationale behind the use of a semi-structured approach was to encourage depth and flexibility and to allow new concepts to emerge (Dearnley, 2005). As such, via this method, it was possible to access new information not documented in the literature. The rationale behind the use of paired depth interviews was that they have the potential to mirror what occurs in the lives of parents where two people are parenting together. It is argued that in such situations, compared to conducting individual interviews with each of the parents separately, the use of paired interviews leads to an engagement that is more “continuous, iterative, interactive, dynamic, holistic, and above all, synergistic” (Wilson *et al.*, 2016, p.1565). In the semi-structured paired depth interviews, participants were asked several questions pertaining to their perceptions of their experiences of parenting, more specifically, in relation to their experiences of their parenting skills and of their experiences of connectivity within their families’ relationships. The interviews took place in therapy rooms provided by a national organisation, which for reasons of anonymity and participant confidentiality will not be named. The organisation had rooms available for use in several locations thus enabling the provision of geographical convenience for participants. The rooms provided a safe and comfortable space for the participants’ interviews. These therapy rooms were private and quiet enough so as not to interfere with the recording process. The interviews followed a semi-structured plan and took between 60 and 90 minutes. Once the interview was concluded the researcher stopped the recording device. The researcher read

aloud the debrief information and provided each parent with a copy of this document should they have required further support following from the interview. This debrief document can be found in Appendix B.

Method of Analysis

Analysis took place using a thematic analysis that followed the six-step guide developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.16-23) and will be outlined here structured by these six phases of analysis. In line with the flexibility of the method of thematic analysis, the guidelines for the process are exactly that, guidelines, and I followed them in a manner that provided structure to the process without inflicting rigidity onto it. I approached the analysis as a process that was allowed to take place over the time that it needed. My engagement with the process was not one of linear progression, but rather it took place in a manner that allowed space for moving forward through the data as well as moving back through it as required.

Phase 1: Familiarising Yourself with the Data. I was familiar with the data from the outset as I held the position of research interviewer in the process of collecting the data. Within the interview process I was actively involved by asking questions, probing answers further, facilitating dialogue between the interviewees and by actively listening whilst being present with the participants as they shared their experiences of their parenting journeys. When asking probing questions I remained with the words or sentiment communicated by the participant and through repeating these back to them I was able to probe further into their worlds as they tried to communicate with me their perceptions of their lived experiences. For example, when participant Ben was describing an element of his parenting experience, I provided him with an opportunity to say more about his experience in a descriptive manner.

I think for the most part we try to be on the same page, like we check in with each other, that's us trying to be on the same page, the same approach, doing things together (Ben,

00:07:13). And what type of things do you feel that you both are on the same page with in terms of your parenting? (Interviewer, 00:07:29).

Through this engagement with the data as it was being gathered, the familiarisation began. After each interview I reflected on my role and documented the way in which I experienced the process. I noted in my reflection diary the thoughts and feelings that the content of the interview ignited in me, the ways in which I was initially interpreting the narrative of the interviews, the initial impressions that I had of how the parents were experiencing their journeys together, and my preliminary analysis of what was being communicated about these experiences. Each interview was recorded using an Apple voice recording device. The interview recordings were transcribed using an online application called 'rev', where all files are encrypted when at rest and in transit. I proofed each transcription against the interview recording, which was the first experience of being close to the data outside of the interview setting. I actively read each of the transcripts alongside the audio of the corresponding interview, with pauses after each sentence or so for editing and clarifying. This process brought me close to the data and reminded me of the non-verbal aspects of the communication held within the data. I took note of these additional elements of the data during this immersive stage of sitting with the data. Next, I read through the edited transcripts without the audio and immersed myself in what the participants were saying to me and to each other. I took notes on initial ideas and impressions that I was experiencing from this stage of being immersed in the text of the data.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes. I transferred each interview transcript into NVivo and utilised this computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software to organise the data. I coded the transcripts one by one through a process of reading and considering each segment of data, then identifying units of meaning held within the data. Each unit of meaning became a code with its own identifying name. Codes consisted of segments of data, rather than only individual lines, to allow for the context of the unit of meaning to be captured within the code. Most of the segments of data were coded, with some segments being assigned more than one

code. The process of initial coding was a lengthy one; I considered each segment of data carefully before coding it, I revised each transcript a second time before moving onto the next one, and I revised the full set of transcripts before moving onto the next phase of the analysis. The coding process was data-driven, whereby all aspects of the data were considered, with codes applicable to the data in its entirety. I revised all the data that was contained within each code and considered the meaning of this data in relation to the name that I had given the applicable code. During this phase I was not concerned about the relationships between the codes, but rather I was coding all aspects of the data including elements that were somewhat contradictory to the primary narrative of the transcripts. Throughout, I noted in my reflection diary what this process was bringing up for me. Sitting very close with participants' narratives over a long period of time ignited my own thoughts about not only the data, but also about my own life experiences. A sample of the codes that I assigned to extracts of the data at this stage of the process can be seen in Appendix C, in the manner in which I organised them on NVivo.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes. I continually reflected on the codes until I identified underlying meaning patterns that formed themes. The data, in the form of codes, during this phase, came together to provide a meaningful narrative of the participants' experiences. I grouped the individual codes into themed categories according to relationships that I felt existed between the codes. Some outlier codes, that I felt did not fit into the formed themes, I categorized together at this point so as not to discard any code prematurely. I also didn't, at this point, distinctly place codes into a hierarchy of themes and sub-themes, rather I focused on the relationships between the codes in the context of the participants' whole narratives. However, I started to garner a sense of what codes were standing out prominently and would potentially be themes in their own right. There were various possibilities of how the codes could be arranged as many of them were interlinked in some capacity. I arranged and rearranged them several times, constantly reminding myself to focus on the relationships that stood out between the codes and then the themes. I wanted the relationships between the codes to form themes that

mirrored closely the relationships between the presented narratives of the participants. A view of a part of the process in reaching the end product of this stage of analysis can be seen in Appendix C. Here I used an excel document to organise the codes into themes and subthemes in a manner that provided a structure that was as close as possible to the impressions gained from the data itself.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes. I started this phase of the analysis process by first examining each theme in its own right and then each theme in relation to the full spectrum of themes. Patton (2002) identified that within an analysis themes should have internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. I reviewed each theme individually by reading and rereading all the data that was contained within each one, whilst examining if each theme encapsulated the meaning contained within its data consistently. I remained in this element of the process until I was satisfied that the end resulting themes were internally homogenous. I then reviewed all the themes together, examining each one in its own right in relation to each of the other themes. I continued with this element of the process until I was satisfied that each theme stood alone independent of the others and was externally heterogeneous. I created a thematic map to allow for the connections between the themes to be visible in order to contribute towards the development of an explanatory framework. I structured the themes into the thematic map in a manner that I felt made sense from a reader's perspective and that reflected the overall content of data collected. With this structure in situ, I re-read each of the themes to check that I was satisfied that nothing that was in place required re-coding. I found this phase the most difficult to emerge from as the richness that I felt from the data, having been so close to it for so long, made putting an end point in place for the re-coding difficult. It is possible that the coding process is one that would not come to a natural end, it was up to me to feel satisfied with what was achieved from within the process and to bring the thematic map forward. The first draft of this thematic map can be seen in Appendix C. During this stage of the analysis process I took on board the words of caution from Braun and Clarke (2006) "as coding

data and generating themes could go on ad infinitum, it is important not to get over-enthusiastic with endless re-coding” (p. 21).

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes. I started this phase by sitting with the thematic map and focusing on the story that it was telling, ensuring that I felt satisfied that it captured the essence of data gathered within the study. I divided the themes into two superordinate themes, which I felt broadly encapsulated the overarching directions in which the data took. I then brought each theme individually through a process of definement and refinement (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Within each theme I analysed the data that had contributed to the theme, focusing on extracting the essence of the theme and the words from the participants that communicated to the reader this essence. I categorised each theme into subordinate themes, whereby each section illustrated a different element of the same theme. I analysed what was interesting about each piece of data that was going to feature in the final report. I considered this in the context of the experiences that the participants were communicating during the interviews and in the context of the research question. I was consciously searching for the meaning behind the excerpts of data so that I could communicate this to the readers of the study. For each sub-theme within each theme, I revised their assigned title names in relation to the data contained within each one and in relation to the meaning that I was attributing to the data as I analysed it. I revised each theme and sub-theme looking at the scope that they covered until I was satisfied that they were telling a story in a clear and concise manner, but with enough detail to adequately convey to the reader the essence of the participants' contributions. A peer researcher reviewed the data sets to add to the validity of the identified themes and categorized subthemes. This set of themes and subthemes can be seen in Appendix C.

Phase 6: Producing the Report. To write the report I needed to combine extracts of the data along with my interpretations of the data, in a clear, concise and coherent manner which communicated to the reader the themes identified in the study of the research question. As I

wrote, the theme tree evolved further with sub themes growing to allow for a clearer presentation of the data and to highlight matters that were prominent within the data. The scope of what was possible to write within the report narrowed, whereby I selected to communicate deeply the main areas of focus, rather than illustrating a broader scope but in less depth. After writing each theme and subtheme the names and organisation of the themes was revised to ensure clarity for the reader. The final theme names can be seen in a table in Appendix C.

In producing the report I selected data extracts for each sub theme which illustrated the interpretative narrative that I was writing. The extracts were selected based on what illustrated the points most clearly and on how they contributed to the interpretation of the overall theme. Data and interpretations of said data were used from each of the participants in the study. Whilst being conscious of avoiding any repetition of data extracts and interpretations, I illustrated the variety of viewpoints expressed by the participants in relation to common themes. Within this interpretative phase I was driven by asking myself the questions recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), as I sieved through the data being analysed within each theme: “ ‘What does this theme mean?’, ‘What are the assumptions underpinning it?’, ‘What are the implications of this theme?’, ‘What conditions are likely to have given rise to it?’, ‘Why do people talk about this thing in this particular way (as opposed to other ways)?’, and ‘What is the overall story the different themes reveal about the topic?’” (p. 94).

Validity

Research validity concerns itself with the extent that a piece of research shows what it set out to show. In relation to this study, the research is valid when it achieves its aim of understanding parent’s perceptions of their families’ relationships. The process of conducting a research study that produced valid results started, for me, at the outset of the study, whereby I identified my epistemological and ontological positions which identified how I believe knowledge can come to be known. As previously outlined, this study was conducted from a critical realist position,

whereby finding an absolute and objective truth was not the aim of the study. Rather, the findings of the study were deemed valid through providing an accurate account of my perceptions of the participants' perceptions of their experiences of their parenting journeys. Contributing to the validity of the research was the purposive recruitment of a homogenous sample of seven co-parenting pairs. The sample size indicates data saturation isn't reached due to the small number of participants, as such the findings are not generalizable. However, the findings do provide a valid insight into the experiences of the fourteen participants who co-parent their children, all aged between two and seven years. These findings may represent the experiences of other co-parents who are also at this stage of their parenting journeys. Further studies would be required to determine the reliability of this potential representation. The validity of this study was assessed utilising the four principles of Yardley (2000, 2008). I selected this set of criteria to use for the task as each of the validity principles are theoretically neutral and each of the criteria are flexible.

The first principle is that of sensitivity to context whereby the researcher is sensitive to the context of the research. This includes mindfully contextualising the research theoretically, socio-culturally, ethically, and interpersonally. I demonstrate application of this principle through my in-depth investigation into the method used compared to potential alternative methods and through the grounding of the research into the context of its methodological landscape and epistemological underpinnings. Throughout the interviews open-ended questions were posed with space given to participants to provide their unique answers relevant to their socio-cultural context. I was mindful of keeping a contextually open relationship between myself and the participants during the interviews and of maintaining the context of the participant's accounts throughout my analysis. This principle is also supported by my commitment to being a reflexive researcher throughout each stage of the project.

The second principle is that of commitment and rigour with which the study was conducted in relation to the processes of collecting the data, analysing the data, applying the method, and

engaging with the research topic. This principle is supported throughout this research project in my commitment to and rigorous application of the method in relation to the interviews and consequent analysis. This commitment and rigour is further supported through the broader elements of my supervised studies and practices in counselling psychology and psychotherapy. The third principle is that of transparency and coherence, which is supported through the presentation of the research study herein. I have provided a transparent account of how the research was actualised and of how the findings were derived through my interpretation of the narratives of the participants. I have provided a coherent account of these findings, utilising data extracts for transparency, whilst illustrating areas of coherence and incoherence within the participants' accounts of their experiences.

The fourth principle is that of impact and importance whereby, in the context of the aims of the study, the applicability or impact of the results is assessed. In line with the critical realist positioning of the research I view the impact and importance of the findings of this study to be experienced differently by the various potential stakeholders. The purpose of the study was to contribute to the existing knowledge base, a viewpoint from co-parenting pairs on how it is that they experience their journey of parenting in relation to their familial relationships and I feel that this contribution has been made. Each set of participants, at the end of their interview, described having found value in the process of exploring their experiences of their parenting journey.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity relates to the way in which a researcher's personal experiences and belief systems can impact upon the research study. Without my personal experiences and set of beliefs I would not have undertaken this study; as such I do not see these influences as biases to be eliminated but rather as contextual influences on the process of the research that need to be taken account of. I have a personal and professional relatedness to the topic of the research, which I feel is

important to disclose herein. My interest in carrying out this inquiry started some years ago when I became a parent, as my experience was that what I had perceived the parenting journey to be like and what this journey was actually like, were two very different things. Through this journey I experienced struggles with adjustment and with figuring out who I was in the context of my new family structure. As a parent, co-parenting young children with my partner, I have lived the experience that was explored in this research. From my personal experience of being a parent I am au fait with the trials and tribulations that can be encountered along the journey. However, throughout the research study, which was open-ended in nature, I needed to be mindful of the possible tensions between my experiences of being a parent and the individual experiences of other parents. I appreciate the importance of recognizing that every parent's journey is unique to them, and it was these differential experiences that I wanted to get close to through this research. I am personally driven to contribute to a society that understands the importance of supporting familial wellness and that sees how unsupported difficulties within all types of familial relationships can have a lasting impact that travels through generations. Throughout the research process I remained aware of my own position and practiced suspending my suppositions in this regard.

My professional journey for more than a decade has been concerned with working with children in the context of their worlds, particularly educational and familial contexts. Hearing directly from children how their contexts and particularly how their relationships with their families influenced their perception of their being was particularly striking to me. I have also worked directly with parents in a variety of contexts, as an educator, therapist, and mentor. It is my view that supporting a person who is a parent through their own existential issues can not only provide for a more fulfilled life for the person, but it can have a knock-on impact on how the person approaches parenting their children, thus having a positive impact generationally. These beliefs that I hold about my work certainly informed and motivated this research study, but for the

findings to be of real value outside of the context of the research, I needed to suspend these beliefs when engaging with the collection and analysis of the data.

Given my personal and professional relatedness to the experiences at the heart of this research I found that the different stages of the research evoked various personal responses in me. I engaged with several support systems throughout the research process, namely personal therapy, peer support, research supervision, and a reflective research diary. I found my personal therapy sessions an invaluable space to discuss the feelings that I was having in relation to my own family life as I was sitting with the experiences of others' parenting journeys over an extended period given the stages of data collection, transcription, analysis, and write up. I experienced a particular difficulty processing the juxtaposition of experiencing a feeling of reduced connectivity with my own family as a result of my commitment to the research, whilst examining other parent's beautifully connected narratives about their familial relationships. I felt that as I analysed the data, I was tempted to judge my own family life comparatively. Another useful space to discuss and share feelings evoked through the research journey was a peer support group that I was engaged with. Being able to share collective experiences in the group space assisted with my reflexivity. I utilized my research supervision to keep me on track with the data analysis and the process of unfolding that was taking place as I engaged with it. There were periods during the analysis that I felt myself moving into a space of avoidance, seeking to return to the perceived haven of reading others' published literature, and through the support of my supervisor I was able to overcome these personal obstacles and return to the task at hand. Given the non-linear nature of the research journey and the ebb and flow of my engagement with it, I found it particularly useful to engage reflectively with the process through entries in my research diary.

In the following chapter I will outline my findings, the results of my analysis of the participant presented data.

Results

I will outline here the results of the analysis of the current study as presented in superordinate and subordinate themes. Identified in this analysis were two superordinate themes, that of ‘the parenting relationship’ and that of ‘the parent-child relationship’. Each superordinate theme has three themes, which collectively have a total of eight subordinate themes that will be discussed here individually. The full spectrum of the results can be seen in Table 7.

Table 7: Summary of Resulting Themes for Research Question: Exploring the Journey of Parenting to Understand Parent’s Perceptions of their Families’ Relationships

1. The Parenting Relationship
1.1 Parental Solidarity
1.1.1 Aligned core values
1.1.2 Communication
1.1.3 Being a team
1.2 Differences in Individual Parenting Styles
1.2.1 Influence of own upbringing on parenting style
1.3 Parents Connecting with each other Through their Shared Role of Parenting
1.3.1 Together incorporating being a parent into self-identity
2. The Parent-Child Relationship
2.1 Parents Tune into their Children's Needs
2.1.1 Parents relate to their children's individualities
2.2 Parents Connecting with their Children
2.2.1 Parents connect with their children through play and being present
2.3 Parent's Aspirations for their Children's Futures Influences their ways of Being with their Children
2.3.1 Parents hold boundaries for their children in line with their aspirations for them

I will commence by detailing the results of the parents’ experiences of their parenting relationships, related specifically to their experiences of parental solidarity, of the differences between their individual parenting styles, and of connecting with each other through their shared role of parenting. I will then delve into the parents’ experiences of their parent-child

relationships, related specifically to their experiences of tuning into their children's needs, of connecting with their children, and of how their aspirations for their children's futures influences their current ways of being with their children.

Superordinate Theme 1: The Parenting Relationship

The nature of the parenting relationship was perceived as the most prominent aspect of the parenting journey experienced by the co-parents interviewed. The ways in which the parents communicated with each other and supported each other was a key factor in determining the parents' perceptions of their families' relationships. I will examine these perceptions in relation to the parenting relationship by first looking at the most compelling theme that emerged, that of parental solidarity. I will then explore the parents' perceptions of the differences between their individual parenting styles by looking at how these differences are experienced and accommodated by the parents, as well as how the development of these styles were influenced by their own upbringings. Finally, I will look at how the parents experienced themselves connecting with each other through their shared role of parenting.

1. The Parenting Relationship
1.1 Parental Solidarity
1.1.1 Aligned core values
1.1.2 Communication
1.1.3 Being a team
1.2 Differences in Individual Parenting Styles
1.2.1 Influence of own upbringing on parenting style
1.3 Parents Connecting with each other Through their Shared Role of Parenting
1.3.1 Together incorporating being a parent into self-identity

Theme 1.1: Parental Solidarity

The most prominently emerging theme of parents' perceptions of their families' relationships, in this study, was that of the parents experiencing a sense of parental solidarity; "...something which is good for them, actually, we are on the same page. That's the best." (*Harper, 00:33:20*). Here I will delve into this theme, looking at the context from which it emerged from the parents interviewed and at my analysis of the meaning in what they were discussing in this regard. This theme emerged largely from parents communicating an emphasis being placed on the importance of having, with each other, a unified approach on matters concerning their parenting.

It's important that we deliver them whatever we agree on. Maybe we can have a discussion offline. But when we are talking to them, we should be on the same page. Most of the time, we are on the same page... (Mason, 00:37:51).

These parents described having an agreement that this unified approach is all that would be presented to the children. An agreement appears to be made between the parents in advance and then delivered to the children. This is so that the children are not experiencing the parents in disagreement with each other. "*We try not to disagree in front of them...*" (*Emma, 00.24.01*). There was a sense of protecting the children by being unified in their presence, rather than exposing them to their parents disagreeing or having heated discussions. One set of parents describe making a decision together to have the children protected from any of their arguments. "*And, as like every relationship, we've had open discussions with each other but we'd never have a screaming match in front of the children. That's one conscious decision we've made.*" (*Oliver, 00:27:22*). This decision was described as having come about as a result of the parent having experienced this type of exposure as a child and feeling strongly about it being something they wanted to protect their own children from exposure to. This extended onto protecting their children from topics related to matters that would be potentially burdensome for the children. As such, whilst they feel they portray, to their children and to others, a very open approach to parenting, actually there is a lot going on between the two parents to set a safe

scene for this appearingly open approach. *“We might sound like we’re very open parents. We don’t discuss external stuff, the kind that’ll hurt the kids.” (Oliver, 00:46:30). “There’ll be a lot they don’t hear.” (Ava, 00:46:36). “They don’t hear a lot of the stuff.” (Oliver, 00:46:37).*

Protecting the children and doing what they feel is best for them appears to be the motivation behind many of the parents’ adoption of a unified approach to parenting consistently in front of the children.

Sometimes you kind of have to roll with situations, especially united in front of the kids, right? You know we can’t have one of us saying one thing, and the other is saying the other thing. And the kids not knowing what they’re actually doing, you know? So, we have to weigh in with each other, even if we think that they’re not 100% behind it. But, for the... There’s nothing perfect. But, at the end of the day, our best intentions are for the kids and to have them happy... (Henry, 00:20:42).

The prioritization of holding a solidified approach to their parenting is one that places the greater goal of maintaining the children’s wellbeing before any personal differences of opinion felt by a parenting partner, in that moment when the children are present. This extends to situations where one of the parents does not feel that the exact right approach is being taken at that time.

I’m on the same page as she is, whether that’s the right or wrong page I don’t think that matters. It’s that I don’t deviate from her or go after something different and then neither of us know what’s going on and the kids don’t either. (Liam, 00:06:12).

In doing so, the parents implied that through this unified approach to situations all members of the family know what is going on at any one time. Creating this regulated space for children to exist within, a space where parents show consistent solidarity, allows for a safe boundary to be held by parents allowing children to feel secure. The parents place more importance on adopting an aligned approach to parenting than on adopting an approach that they feel is right within a given situation. This appears to be supported by their knowledge that they can discuss it later, when the children are not present. *“We say even if we’re doing something slightly*

wrong, let's just stick with it and we can have the conversation afterwards.” (Mia, 00:06:42).

Supporting each other both in the moment and in the follow up emerged as an important factor in maintaining consistent solidarity in their approach with their children.

I think as a couple we're close, we watch each other and we kind of talk about it, and we try not to intervene with each other ... So, it's important that if one has ... so if I said... X is banned from the iPad for a week ... (Oliver, 00:17:12). That you've to back them up (Ava, 00:17:20).

There is a sense of needing to relate to each other to understand what is happening in the moment and to trust the co-parent to put in place what needs to be implemented to hold the boundary for the children. The co-parents having each other's backs appears an important facet in allowing boundaries to be consistently held within the family. However, the nature of family life is such that a vision of there being one rule that will fit all people in all situations, doesn't fit. An element of flexibility and negotiation appears to feature across approaches.

There has to be give and take... But, at the same time, you want the rules and boundaries to kind of stay very much intact if they're going to respect you, and listen to you, and kind of new to a perspective (Charlotte, 00:15:38). Yeah. There's no hard and fast rules... (Henry, 00:15:54).

The parents appear to strive for a balance between guiding the children to show respect, to listen, and to take on a perspective that is different to their own, through their approach to parenting, and maintaining the parent agreed rules of the family. This balance is a state that appears to require an openness to flexibility. One parent described the way in which their own parents created this balance within their approach to maintaining parental solidarity. They identified this positive lived experience as a child as an inspiration to carry a similar approach into their role as a parent.

And the best part, what I've seen in my parents are they're always united... If my mother says no, the answer would be no from my father as well... And I definitely want to

implement the same for my child because in that way, at least they will learn to value their parents, first, and they will know the meaning of no means no, and discipline, and all this. But my partner, he is a very soft parent, so I'm the villain in the house. And that's the thing we want to improve (Harper, 00:28:12).

The balance struck here appears to have been done through each parent taking on the lead role in different areas of parenting. However, it appears as though this can lead to the parents taking on different roles within the family, and this is something that is likely to take a number of navigational discussions before getting the balance that serves the family the best.

Aligned Core Values. I noticed within the interviews that as the co-parents spoke about situations that indicated their experiences of parental solidarity, they were in supportively agreeing with each other as they spoke, as such demonstrating this parental solidarity within the interview. There were many affirmative gestures used alongside their verbal support of what each other were saying. Additionally, when the parents were speaking about differences that they had encountered in their approach to maintaining what was in line with their core values, this was done in a manner that remained consistently supportive of each other. There was a sense that once the core values were aligned, the broad general approach to parenting adopted by both parents, in their unique way, was in line with these core values. *"...We tend to be on the same page I suppose for a lot of those major things like our core values as well, like the kind of things we want to instil in our children."* (Sophia, 00:08:14). From this stable foundation, the parents appeared to be able to have conversations, about the day-to-day strategies adopted to achieve their goals, that were both reflective and supportive. There was a sense of the agreed goals, based on their common core values, providing them with a navigational tool that they could support each other to return to when one, the other or both veered off track in approach. *"For major things, we do back each other. Whereas for some small things, then one of us might give in but for major decisions we always agree in that sense."* (Noah, 00:23:53). This core value system being at the base of the parents aligned approach is recognised as something that

evolved naturally for the parents, rather than it being something more conscious. *“It’s not like we sat down and came up with that, it just kind of evolved.”* (Emma, 00:38:31). *“Evolved, yeah.”* (Noah, 00:38:33). Through the alignment of core values, approaches can unconsciously evolve which puts the parents on the same parenting page. One set of parents spoke about feeling that these values were a part of similarities drawn between the contexts that they came from and grew up in. This appears to communicate the idea that the commonalities they brought into parenting were based on how they had developed as individuals prior to coming together. *“I do think our values are the same. Yeah, I think we come from similar families with similar attitudes.”* (Emma, 00:30:16).

Within the families there was a consensus amongst the parents that they held the same broader goals for their children as their co-parenting partner and that having this in place informed the way in which they made day to day decisions or formed routines.

I think for the most part we try to be on the same page, like we check in with each other, that’s us trying to be on the same page, the same approach. Doing things together. Our general approach really, in what we want from them, what is the best way to nurture them. When it comes to things like correction and punishing, dealing with the tantrums.... That was something that we both agreed on so we kind of have that, their needs first essentially. We try to get on the same page. (Ben, 00:07:13).

The broader operating system of their family units linked back into the values they held through the goals they set for themselves and their children. As the parents' discussions progressed, the link emerged between what was happening within the family units back to the parents' core value system as influenced by their own familial context and individual way of being in the world. Emma and Noah spoke about the things that they held as important for their family as evolving from when the children were younger and remaining consistent to date. *“It kind of evolved”* (Emma, 00:40:57). *“Yeah, when they were younger”* (Noah, 00:40:59). *“Yeah, we always put them to bed together, yeah. We did always do that.”* (Emma, 00:41:00). *“Yeah. I think it’s*

important..." (Noah, 00:41:07). These parents identified holding that consistency they spoke of not only with the day-to-day value-based routine, but with the bigger decisions related to their family. When one's values are aligned, it appears to motivate both parents naturally to stay within the structure they have set up, as it is in line with their authentic way of being. *"The fact that we're consistent..."* (Emma, 00:23:06). *"In the bigger decisions."* (Noah, 00:23:08). This concept travelled through the parents' narratives about their parenting journey, with many linking what they are doing as being a little different from each other in approach but always working towards the same aligned goal. Amelia and Lucas spoke about their broader goal being that the children are happy, but also tied in areas of moral development that they unilaterally agreed upon and reinforced with their children on a day-to-day basis. *"Yeah. Well, we all have the same goal, it's the same goal at the end of the day."* Lucas (00:19:18). *"We want them to be happy at the end of the day."* Amelia (00:19:20). For this family the areas that they agreed they always held the boundary firm on, was having manners and being inclusive of others. This is something they held in high regard and actively set out to nurture in their children through modelling and consistent boundary holding.

"Like, we're huge for manners. So, we push manners in this house. A thank you and a please... We will correct them if they don't... Stuff like that, and we do push that. And we do push inclusion... So, we always push inclusion... Don't we?" (Lucas, 00:38:53). *"We do now in fairness, we do."* (Amelia, 00:40:42).

These parents relate back to being on the same page regarding these matters that are important to them both when they speak about their life in general, and attribute this as a factor in making their lives a positive experience. Having an outlook for your family that is aligned with your co-parent appears to contribute towards a sense of a family life that works.

"I'd like to think our life is very positive. It works. I shouldn't say it works, but we don't have too many barriers, do we?" (Lucas, 00:59:59). *"No. We'd be very on the same page, like we're very..."* (Amelia, 01:00:12). *"We know what we want for our kids, as*

well, isn't it" (Lucas, 01:00:23).

Oliver and Ava shared a similar sentiment, attributing an alignment of core values as being central to their perceptions of their family unit. *"Our core values are very much aligned. What's best for the kids and us. And that's the most important thing. Best for kids and us."* (Oliver, 00:40:51). Oliver and Ava elaborated further on the link between their shared view of what is important to them and how they align these values to orient the goals they have for their children's future. This appears to be shared between them and consistently upheld.

"We'll have core values about school and education and learning and about all that kind of stuff so we're very strong about that and kind of, yeah. So, our core values are there." (Oliver, 00:43:45). *"Well looked after."* (Ava, 00:44:07). *"Yeah, well looked after."* (Oliver, 00:44:08).

Throughout these elaborations it was evident that the parents were closely aligned with what they were speaking about, they verbally agreed with each other, used affirmative gestures, and elaborated each other's points with ease.

Communication. I asked the parents to elaborate on what they felt brought them to the way of being that they were describing when they spoke of their parental solidarity. Some alluded to a connected way of being with their co-parent, that extended beyond intentional support, and into a realm of interpersonal connectivity.

It's probably been having the ability to know what each other are thinking and know what each other are expecting. When you walk into a situation and you know, you hear the tail end of something, but once we know each other well enough that we're not saying things or doing things just for the sake of it and being conscious of that. (Henry, 00:19:42).

It appears the parents experience a connection with each other that allows them to trust what the co-parent is doing in a situation that they have not been privy to the entirety of. This way of being results from solid communication pathways between the parents, but the parents allude to going beyond communicating about the situations that are happening or about their parenting.

Rather, they indicate the sharing of each other's emotional and cognitive processes to allow for that deeper understanding of their co-parents' position at a given time. One of the parents makes this link directly, between communication and connection on another level, going hand in hand and being an important feature of their relationship. *"It's funny. It's important to stay connected, I suppose. Communication is a big, huge thing, as well. And knowing how each other feels and what we think and all that. It's a big thing to be connected, I think."* (Charlotte, 00:31:24). Having these open channels of communication seems conducive to being able to find a balance between being connected with each other, with the children, and with their individual selves. Ben and Sophia discussed the importance of being able to find space for oneself as well as being present with each other and with their children. There was a sense of aspects of a conscious process being involved with supporting each other to be present for each other and for their children, as well as modelling this present way of being for their children.

...Just watching yourself, just being present within the moment. Whatever else is in the back of your head try to push it aside and just be in the moment with them and attentive. (Ben, 00:50:20). I think that's a conversation we would have had a good few times as well, isn't it? And I would have said ah get off your phone. It's a common problem. (Sophia, 00:50:45).

As Ben and Sophia spoke about their process of finding this balance, the element of connection beyond communication emerged. There wasn't a problem indicated about what was happening in that moment, but rather there was an understanding of the co-parents position at that time and a knowledge that this was something the co-parent needed and wanted support with. Through this understanding a connected conversation appeared to be able to take place where one parent would support the other to return to the present moment. This supportive approach allows the person to see what they are missing out on in each moment when not being connected. The co-parents' understanding comes from the process of pre-establishing

knowledge of each other's aligned positions on the overarching way of being, which can get lost in the moment or via external sources of distraction that can infiltrate our home worlds via our mobile devices. Connectivity is not the equivalent of always agreeing with another. As such, I explored with the parents, how they were in situations where they found that they were not on the same page as each other, given that so much emphasis overall had been placed on this way of being. This united connectedness that the parents communicate as being central to their role as parents, is something that appears to buffer against potential negative consequences of identifying an approach or a behaviour exhibited by one parent that the other parent does not agree with. *"There are times we've both lost the head with the kids and one of us will say to the other afterwards, there's no real need for that or we will pull each other up on stuff."* (Mia, 00:21:26).

For the parents to be on the same page as each other in the manner described, good communication is a key foundation. The ability to tune into another person is required in order to see their perspective alongside your own, and to then connect with each other's perspective in a manner that allows both parties to carry out an aligned action. *"Communication is key, I think. We spend a lot of time talking about decisions we're making, making sure we're both happy..."* (Oliver, 00:38:30). Spending time sharing each other's' views on matters and allowing the making of decisions to be a communicative process featured in many of the parents' narratives. *"We talk about stuff."* (Lucas, 00:21:29). *"Yeah, we do..."* (Amelia, 00:21:35). *"We discuss everything in relation, none of us are a lone ranger here..."* (Lucas, 00:21:46). Within this discussion there was an element of valuing the co-parents position and viewing both parties as equals in the process. There was a sense of all decisions being made through communication with each other and on a foundation of seeing each other as equal partners in the relationship. *"And that it's an equal relationship, that it's equal..."* (Oliver, 00:20:37). This experience of equality within the relationship was elaborated on in a manner that looked at a comparison view of what the relationship would be like if there wasn't the experience of equality; anticipating that

the integrity of the relationship would be challenged by one adopting a dominant and the other a submissive role.

...Actually, that's the whole relationship out the window, if you're that dominant stance.

...We always stand shoulder to shoulder and there's none of us dominant over the other because at the end of the day if there was that case then one of us would have to end up being dominant or submissive. Destroy the relationship (Oliver, 19:57:00).

During the times when the co-parents are experiencing differences of opinion they remain equal partners, standing together to find a resolution for the issue or to find the best outcome for the family. Having this view of each other as equal partners both working together to make the household function in a manner that is aligned with your overarching vision is one that came up for Amelia and Lucas as they faced a complex decision based on changed needs within the family.

...When things come along, you deal with it and that's it. And if it didn't work, we'd discuss that, too. If we had to discuss it. But I would never tell you to X, Y, Z, we're a pro and con type of house, we do weigh up... (Lucas, 01:12:08). We weighed it up and brought it all to the table. (Amelia, 01:12:25). We do. I'm not her boss and she's not my boss. (Lucas, 01:12:28).

Adopting this process of weighing matters up as equal voices within the relationship was one that featured for other parents. There was an element of viewing these decisions as matters of great importance, because each decision that was being made not only impacted each parent as individuals but impacted the whole family on different levels. *"So, we'll try and talk, decisions that affect them. And the ramifications of what they're doing as well..." (Oliver, 00:14:44).*

Talking to each other appears to be the most powerful tool for working around and through these important decisions that families face on a day-to-day basis. *"Every decision that's been made we talk about. We analyse our decisions; we reflect on our decisions. We made some significant decisions last while... and basically we talked about it..." (Oliver, 00:21:56). "We*

would talk a lot.” (Ava, 00:22:03). “Yeah, we would, it’s important.” (Oliver, 00:22:10). The aim of this approach of talking through all aspects of the situation in the process of making decisions allows both parties to have their views heard and sets the scene for a compromise to be reached if required. “Doesn’t work unless you’re communicating... You have to communicate. And we have to find middle ground.” (Oliver, 00:22:22). Ava and Oliver elaborated on their process of finding middle ground when both parties entered the decision-making process from different positions. The first step of this process for them appeared to be acknowledging that they each will have a different position and accepting that; this is the starting point of their discussion, hearing the others perspective. “I think starting off everyone’ll have their opinion... Like, being human, I’ll have an opinion, she’ll have an opinion... Then we’ll sit down and kind of talk about that...” (Oliver, 00:22:42). An important element to their process appears to be that within their relationship both parties are open to changing their position, through discussion, with the border aim of making the best decision possible for their family. Having this common mindset appears key to the success of these types of communications within their relationship. “You can’t just set your mind and say, ‘No, it’s not happening.’ You have to talk it out and like that, find middle ground” (Ava, 00:25:59). Having an emphasis on finding a middle ground between both parties’ views in order to make the best decision necessitates both parties to be able to let go of their original position. Being able to do this is a process within itself and along the co-parents’ journey of adapting to communicating well with each other, came an acceptance of letting go of elements of one’s own position, for the purpose of making the best overall decision.

We’ll always find middle ground, we’ll always find middle ground, we’ll never not find middle ground, adapt to communicating. Yeah, there is still one of us that’ll walk away that we’d have to kind of go, ‘Right, let’s just accept that. That’s the way it is.’ But... because we’re communicating, we’ll make the best decisions (Oliver, 00:24:19)

The confidence that these parents had in their ability to find a common ground, always, once

they were communicating, appeared as central to the process as the aim of finding the best outcome to the situation at hand. This confidence was one that appeared to exist within themselves and within their relationship. There was a sense that these co-parents were really hearing each other within their discussions. Amelia and Lucas described how this process of hearing each other is a key element of identifying if there are differences of opinion to be worked out or if you are on the same page as each other. When effectively communicating with each other and hearing the whole story or the whole of the other's perspective the parents can come to realise that their positions are more aligned than thought when entering the discussion. Initial impressions of another's position can be incorrect as we are consumed with identifying our own position before being able to take on another's.

When you listen to the whole story, because when I started telling you the story, you were very strong on X... then, by the time I finished the story and you heard it in total, you were like, 'Yeah.' (Amelia, 00:23:27). So, possibly we weren't that different on that thing, so, were we? (Lucas, 00:23:32). We were on the same page. Yeah. (Amelia, 00:23:49). It goes back to, I suppose, when I listen then properly again, you were right. Yeah. (Lucas, 00:25:03).

This discussion was regarding both parents' views on a matter regarding their children where initially they felt that they came to the discussion from different perspectives. However, in keeping with their overall aim for the children to be happy, and both seeing different potential routes to that happiness, a discussion was needed to see both points of view. From there, they were able to arrive together at what they felt was the most appropriate route to achieving that goal, at that point in time.

How we communicate and connect with others in our world in a day-to-day manner is one matter, however, being able to communicate and connect with another in a useful manner during an unexpected period of heightened stress is a more difficult task. Through the connectivity experienced by the parents in tuning into each other to align their approach to their

role as parents, the connection appears to grow stronger in situations of crisis in a manner that brings about a tuning into each other without the limitations that language can bring.

I feel when there's a crisis like, say if a crisis being say one of them gets sick all of a sudden late at night, we don't really need to verbalize much to get things done and to put it right. It is like we seem to understand each other without conversation then (Mia, 00:09:46).

This fundamental understanding of each other is a trait that appeared to feature under the surface of many of the ways the parents discussed matters related to their being on the same page as each other, including seeing value in the ways their co-parent differed from them. Embracing differences in each other's approach to situations within the family was portrayed positively as parents identified the benefits of having these differences once the overarching goal was aligned. This can be seen amongst Lucas and Amelia's discussion:

We're on the same page with discipline and kind of what we want in them (Lucas, 00:14:46). Sometimes, I probably am a bit stricter, and I think that stems from me being around them more (Amelia, 00:14:52). ...We never clash over it (Lucas, 00:19:22). No, no, no...I think it's nice that we are different, because if you were strict and wanted everything to be like me then that's not a healthy environment for them (Amelia, 00:19:30). You're not strict or anything like that (Lucas, 00:19:41). No (Amelia 00:19:42). You kind of have to push the routine more, because you would be under pressure some mornings for school and stuff like that... (Lucas, 00:19:46).

Appreciating these varying approaches displayed by each other requires a recognition of the other individual's distinct position in the world and an understanding about how this may bring about differing ways of doing things. These parents looked at how these differences can be impacted by extraneous variables, whilst Sophia and Ben identified the way in which their differing responses to their children garnered inconsistent reactions from their children.

I think we had a few of those conversations, didn't we, not what was going on with our children but how we were responding and the difference. It wasn't just about them... but the role that we were taking in it and our response. I think we had a good few conversations... (Sophia, 00:13:32).

In looking at the child's development the parents looked at the child in the context of their approaches to parenting. The open channel of communication allowed for a reflective conversation that supported each other in realigning their approaches as needed. Adopting an openness to change as time goes on, as children develop, or as changing factors necessitate appears to be important in supporting these channels of communication. This openness lends itself to being ready to see another's perspective, different to one's own. That can be in the form of the co-parent's perspective or in the form of facilitating the child to try something new and gauging from their experience of it, if it is something that will contribute to the overall goal held by the parents for the child in the context of their family.

Whilst the parents discussed a great deal about their experiences of parental solidarity, they too gave an insight into experiences of the times when they were not feeling aligned with each other in terms of their parenting. These times were reflected on, by the parents, as being some of the toughest in their relationship. They indicated that their experience of their communication breaking down, largely due to external sources of stress, was the root of the issue during these times.

You're not communicating the way you should be. Well, it's very hard to communicate when you're stressed... I'll stop talking to you when I should talk to you. So that makes it harder, and it continues internally. It manifests in different ways then (Ben, 00:14:54). I tend to have to kind of pull it all out of you a bit (Sophia, 00:15:09).

Sophia and Ben reflect on their way of being during this time when the stress was impacting Ben's ability to keep the channels of communication open, whilst Sophia was trying to support him to continue talking. Ben describes this experience as impacting him within himself and in

turn drifting into other situations contributing to an overall feeling of disconnection, which they both experienced as difficult to come back from.

...I think sometimes it was hard for us to find our way back to each other because we'd just get past the conflict on that particular day... and then we would be right back into it again. And sometimes it felt like change was very slow to come, and that's very challenging (Sophia, 00:19:39).

This experience of feeling disconnected from your co-parenting partner is one that takes time to reverse and being within this experience for an extended period appears to have a dividing impact on the parents. Sophia and Ben reflect that *"It definitely put us in opposite camps for a while I think"* (Sophia, 00:20:29). *"Yes, I agree with that"* (Ben, 00:20:34). This experience of being in an opposite position to your co-parent is one that appears to have had a much broader impact on the parents as individuals. From what the parents were describing, it sounded like this experience brought them as individuals to a more primitive position where they were limited to focusing on their immediate needs and those of their offspring. When they were in these separate 'camps' they were not able to consider the other person, they just focused on surviving in the moment.

...When you start going into your own camp, everything becomes about survival. And you might as well not be together or live in the same house because you're just looking after your needs and obviously our children's... Because when you're so defensive like that, literally, you're just like, I have to cope with today and get through... (Sophia, 00:20:46). Yes, I agree with her, everything that she is saying. Survival, thinking about yourself and obviously them as well. It was like tagging in a lot of the time (Ben, 00:22:46).

The ripple effect of experiencing this disconnected way of being is evident in Sophia and Ben's narrative. Charlotte and Henry describe their experience of feeling disconnected from each other and how this had an impact on the functionality of the family unit and on the parents'

coping abilities.

It's very hard to function normally when you're disconnected because it does feel like you're being pulled and dragged in every different direction. And you can't give 100% to any one person in the family. As my husband said, you're shorter with each other, and you're... (Charlotte, 00:34:25) ...Less able to deal with that situation then (Henry, 00:34:48). It's just harder going, you're less tolerant and things seem a lot bigger than they are (Charlotte, 00:34:49).

When presented with a situation that places the parents in a position of disconnection, what is happening around them appears to be perceived as more challenging in parallel with them perceiving themselves as less able to manage the presenting situation.

Being a Team. The parents describe their approach to parenting as being that of a team, whereby everyone has an overarching sense of what the team members are doing. As with any theoretical team, it consists of a group of individuals coming together to dedicate themselves to a shared goal. Indeed, this does not require absorbing all of oneself within that team, instead individual interests and approaches can exist in matters that are not related to the specific task of the team. A team within which the members are not solidly connected is a team that can potentially be under threat. The parents identify the importance of standing solidly connected within their team, as the consequence of not doing so is that the children would identify any areas of disconnection. There is an ongoing sense of the feeling experienced by the parents being that of keeping connectivity, not only for themselves as a pair, but for the family as a unit.

I think when you make that agreement with each other, you are a team and children know that. I think children who've had parents who aren't working as a team and children will pick that apart easily. They know where the cracks lie. I think it's the one part of our lives where we're very together compared to say maybe your hobbies or your interests.

We both have things that we like to do on our own, but when it comes to parenting it's shoulder to shoulder the whole way (Mia, 00:06:49).

Liam and Mia allude to their team as being their family as a whole but suggest that the two of them together work as a micro team within their family structure. Having a connected approach to parenting appears to allow for the parents to own any errors in their ways and resolve them in the moment. The parents also communicate by setting the same bar for their children as they do for themselves with their children. *"We've no problem apologizing to our kids either and saying, 'Mommy's sorry. She shouldn't have done that. I'm sorry for shouting.' What we expect from them, we also let them know that they should expect that from us"* (Mia, 00:21:40).

For parents, setting up these expectations for themselves and for their children, appears to facilitate a set of boundaries that the family as a team can operate securely within. Individuals can have their roles and become familiar with what they are to do within these roles. This allows for consistency within the family and provides a sense of a routine, in terms of knowing what the others are doing within their roles in the team. *"...We're very much a team still, as a family. And even the children will know that, that we're a team and we work together. And we try and instil that, to watch out for each other"* (Charlotte, 00:05:26). In addition to knowing their roles, a big part of experiencing the family as a team appears to be the sense of collaboration. The parents describe a way of working together, with each other and with their children, in supporting each other and in creating a shared collaborative way of being. *"Their night-time routine is when we're both home, it would have been inclusive of both of us. We each had our role to play.... we know what we're both doing and what our role is and then we embrace that"* (Sophia, 00:24:20). Whilst Sophia and Ben illustrate their experience of working collaboratively as a time when they are all together, having a sense of being a part of a team isn't limited to when the members are physically together. Being a part of an operational team doesn't mean always being together, but rather factoring each other in and in a way, utilising all resources on the team to deal with situations as they arise, as Amelia and Lucas illustrate:

We have a system (Amelia, 00:12:30). If something was bothering one of the children, I might be told when I come home that night. My wife would have dealt with it that evening but the next morning then I come in on it...and we'll deal with it then. We might not be there to tackle things together all the time, but we do follow each other up on stuff (Lucas, 00:12:31). Yeah, yeah (Amelia, 00:12:58). We back each other up... (Lucas, 00:12:59).

There was a sense during this discussion of the parents having each other's back whilst they both worked together to have their children's backs. There appears to be a consistent view held of their family as a whole unit working together, even when all members are not physically together. This experience of the whole family working as a team appears to allow the impact of extraneous variables to appear manageable within the household, for example different work schedules, different extra-curricular activities, etc. Emma and Noah describe their approach to working out the day-to-day routine with the whole family; *"...We sit down and we have a quick chat a few times a week and try to roughly plan out the week"* (Noah, 00:20:07). *"...We outline to the kids, well this is happening this week so remember this or..."* (Emma, 00:22:03). There is a clear sense of collaboration within this approach, but they also have adopted individual roles to share the responsibility of the children's extraneous commitments. *"We tend to organize the activities by: I take care of this bunch of activities, and he takes care of another bunch of activities"* (Emma, 00:26:43). Through these relatively small everyday occurrences of working together comes a bigger feeling of being on the journey of parenting with their co-parent. *"I don't feel on my own as a parent. I don't think that either of us makes decisions unilaterally."* (Emma, 00:20:45). Part of this feeling of being on the journey with the co-parent is that decisions are made with the other person and the children in mind. There is a sense of the parents looking at what is best for the whole family in this process of making decisions. The family unit is the team and for the team to function well the individual activities are decided upon in a manner that

works for the team. Emma describes this in relation to making decisions about the children's activities by looking at what was fitting not only for the individual child, but for the family.

I think if they are starting something, or if they are stopping something then we will both agree on that and there have been a couple of things that I've stopped and it's just because it just wasn't working, probably, for the family more than anything else (Emma, 00:21:07).

When something isn't working for the team or when a member of a team is feeling out of sync with the others this can have an impact on the functionality of the team. This is comparable to what happens within a family unit where individuals will experience different struggles at different times, and these can impact the family as a whole. Identifying when there is one of the team needing the extra support and accommodating that or facilitating that for this person appears to be a remedy adopted by Amelia and Lucas. When experiencing a time of personal overwhelm from within the family Amelia felt that a break away was needed as not doing so was going to have an impact on wellbeing. Amelia reflects on the power of having the ability to voice this experience with her co-parent:

I'm happy to say that I could say that. Because a lot of women bury themselves in it, and it makes things get worse and worse. I turned around to him one day and I said, 'Oh, my God, I can't. I need to step away from everything for a while' (Amelia, 01:11:01).

A part of having the ability to verbalise the need for a break, is having a co-parent who is opened to receiving this message, or indeed who identifies this need themselves. The experience described here is that it was recognised by the co-parent that, whilst they were both on the same journey, their lived experience of that journey was very different at that time. The roles of the parents needed to be flexible enough so that when one parent stood out of the equation for a period the family remained functional, with the co-parent taking on all necessary roles at that time, for the sake of the family as a whole. There was a sense of this act of a parent taking a step back and the other stepping forward being an important piece of maintenance for

the family at that time. Oliver describes this element of maintenance within their family also.

“...We’re a strong, secure family unit and we maintain that lot. We maintain it a lot. We look at it all the time” (Oliver, 01:00:36). The process of maintaining the family unit appears to be something that is done consciously here to hold onto the strength and security within it.

Theme 1.2: Differences in Individual Parenting Styles

Emerging from this primary overarching theme of relating to each other as parents, was the theme of differences in individual parenting styles. Herein I will explore how the parents experience the differences in their parenting style to that of their co-parents. I will outline the ways in which the parents describe accommodating the individual elements of each other's parenting styles. I will then look at the sub-theme of the parents' perceptions of how their own upbringing influenced their individual style of parenting.

Within their parenting relationships, the parents identified differences that they experienced between their parenting style and that of their co-parents. The parents spoke of differences between themselves and their co-parents as people. Then they drew parallels between the natural differences between them and the differences they experienced between each other's parenting styles.

I think it would be our nature... (Emma, 00:16:57). Be our nature, yeah. Yeah, I grew up in the countryside so I like to be outside, I don't really like being inside very much. I think my wife; newspaper, book, cup of tea, sit down, read it. (Noah, 00:16:59).

Emma and Noah illustrated this natural occurring difference in how they are as people and their natural way of being. This transcended into their tendencies in parenting, where it seems natural that one would parent in a manner that aligns with how they are in the world generally.

My husband would be more the outdoor parent, and I'd be the more indoor parent. So, I do more cuddles, reading stories, homework... I'm definitely indoors. And you're more outdoor, riding bikes and sports (Emma, 00:14:57).

It appears the parents were making a conscious effort to have their children's way of being in the world somewhat balanced between the two parents' ways. Whilst they identified that the children would align more naturally with Emma's preferences, they consciously provided them with opportunities to experience Noah's preferred way of being. Noah described his tendencies as being influenced by how he spent his childhood, and so it is in this manner that he would like to influence his children.

There was much discussion about the way the parents handled matters related to discipline and the differences between individuals' approaches to this. This appeared to be central to the way in which the parents' identified themselves within their roles in the parenting relationship. Noah describes himself as being the parent who is more reactive in the moment but then smooths things over with the children afterwards, whereas Emma describes herself as the parent who is more level across situations and presents a consistency in her approach.

I'm probably the parent who would give out to them for 10 minutes and then we'd go off do our own thing, and then maybe head off to the shop and buy an ice-cream or something... (Noah, 00:22:32). If I say no, then it's no. Yeah. I don't tend to buy them things in shops, I'm softer in some ways and harder in other ways (Emma, 00:22:54).

When talking about their parenting, the parents phrase it in a manner that places it as part of their identity. They place themselves in categories of being this type of parent or that type of parent; preconceptions perhaps of what form a parent can take.

I probably would be the stricter one. I am the stricter one. I am (Amelia, 00:15:52). It's needed though, because you do need the routine (Lucas, 00:16:01). ...I'm very pedantic on routine. And I know I am. And you'll be a bit more lenient (Amelia, 00:16:04). I pull back (Lucas, 00:16:42). Yeah, he would pull back. He'd give in to them (Amelia, 00:16:42).

Amelia spoke about her view of how she is within her parenting role in comparison to how her co-parent is within his role. They proceed to explore this in the context of the broader

functionality of their roles and look at environmental reasons for what contributes to each parents' role identity.

Sometimes, I probably am a bit stricter... I think that stems from me being around them more (Amelia, 00:14:52). ...Yeah, but it's not like I go up and say, 'You're over the line' or anything like that. She might just drive it home a bit more than I would (Lucas, 00:15:01).

Amelia is identifying that she is being the way she is within her role as parent as a result of the functionality of her role. She describes being the one who is with their children more during the day-to-day routines of getting out to school in the morning and to activities in the evening. In her discussion, she has the support of her co-parent in identifying these contextual differences. However, these differing roles, when viewed from the position of the person who feels that they need to be the one who is stricter in their approach, can bring about frustrations.

Sometimes then I feel it annoys me because when he does reappear then on the scene, everything's about him. And he's always the fun guy. And then, I can understand that he wants to be the fun person, because he's gone three or four days without seeing them (Amelia, 00:06:46). I feel like I have to make up for not being here (Lucas, 00:06:59). Then it frustrates me because I'm like, 'I'm always the one doing the boring things and having to do the mundane day-to-day stuff' (Amelia, 00:07:07).

Whilst empathising with and understanding the differences between the roles that both parents have, when this crosses over into how they each are within their role as parent, it can bring up a feeling of annoyance within the relationship. Harper and Mason identified within their relationship; similar roles being adopted where one parent was identifying as the stricter parent whilst the other was presenting as the more fun parent. *"She's taking them in a disciplined direction, and I'm just giving them some of the enjoying moments"* (Mason, 00:33:01). Emma and Noah also discussed frustrations that can arise within their relationship as a result of their different parenting styles. They appear to look within the individual's natural dispositions in their seeking to understand the emergence of these differing styles.

Like if he says he's going to do something, it gets done, but if I say I want to do something it could be months and I'd say that could be quite frustrating, so ... (Emma, 01:02:16). Yeah, I like to get things done, and make a decision and just go do it, but I suppose getting back to the parenting, one thing I'm probably lacking is maybe consistency and a bit more strictness in rules and things (Noah, 01:02:28).

Both Noah and Emma recognise within each other, the limits of their own ways. They empathise with how their natural dispositions transcending into their parenting, can lead to a lacking in some parental areas and to some frustrations for their co-parent. Their insight into how these differences play out in day-to-day scenarios is admirable and they both illustrate an example of how their different styles can clash with each other:

They come home and say where's my jacket and I'll say well it should be hanging where your jackets hang and it's like I try and teach them to take care of themselves (Emma, 01:03:24). Of course, I'd probably give in and say well they're not going to hang up their jackets, so no point in having a row. But then maybe once every two months then I'd have a big argument with them about not hanging up their jackets. And I spent the previous two months letting them off (Noah, 01:03:37).

The inconsistency that is described in this example of having two different styles within one situation, demonstrates an unfavourable outcome for all members of the family. Within this discussion too, however, is an insight into how each parent manages conflicting situations themselves, in line with their own personal disposition. There is evidence of the awareness that the parents have of both their own and their co-parent's natural dispositions and how these can be displayed in their parenting.

If the kids are already upset, I kind of try not to make them more upset. Sometimes I feel my husband adds fuel to the fire... (Emma, 01:04:46). Probably, yeah. (Noah, 01:05:02).

The parents see their differences in handling certain situations and can reflect on this with each other. In acknowledging these differences, they are able to see alternative ways of dealing with

situations than the one that comes naturally to them. Sophia and Ben describe an opportunity existing within the acknowledgement of their differences:

I think we challenge each other though. I think that's fairly normal. I think no two parents do exactly the same thing, which is fine. But we check in with each other. We might say, 'Oh this works for me' or 'Maybe try this', especially now that the tantrums have set in. I think we're still in the early days there with that as well (Sophia, 00:06:18).

Within this relationship the parents normalise their differences and utilise their recognition of these to support each other in seeing another way of doing things that might be useful to incorporate into their style. There is a sense of utilising their different styles to find out what works best to help them face typical parenting challenges. Harper and Mason discussed acknowledging differences in their styles in a similar manner, whereby these differences were utilised to support each other to grow within their parenting journey.

Initially...we were not connected as parents because maybe I was having different thinking... We used to have some kind of debates... because even if they're having some temperature or some cold, we used to ... She used to run to the doctor. And I used to say, 'It's okay. Take care, it will be alright... Let the medicine work.' Sometimes those used to be the situations (Mason, 00:43:58).

These differences in style, whilst utilised to support each other to find a balanced approach, appeared to cause disconnection early in the parenting journey. Whilst on the same journey, the parents are individual people with different life experiences and different ways of processing their roles as parents. Being able to acknowledge these individual differences seems important in finding a way to appropriately support each other. Harper describes her style initially as being the result of her feeling worried about their child's well-being and this worry being influenced by her feeling of self-doubt as a result of not having any prior experience of caring for a child.

I was worried about them since they were born, and I was a bit worried that if things will go wrong, how far it will go, and so it was a bit scary for me. I don't have any experience, so I was a bit concerned (Harper, 00:44:41).

Expressing these feelings with her co-parent, it appears, helped them to learn together from each other's natural dispositions and individual parenting styles. Mason describes this journey of learning together as one that continues to provide learning opportunities. *"...Initially, we were not very much in sync, together, but slowly, slowly, we learned. And still, we are learning."* (Mason, 00:45:02).

At times the parents describe themselves as being opposite in their approach to situations but remaining connected to each other through their understanding of the need to accommodate the other's different approaches to that situation. Mia and Liam identify the benefits, within their family, of having a balance between the styles that herself and her co-parent have. *"It's important for kids to have both ... if we were both my way, there wouldn't be a whole lot of play time... yet if we were both my husband's way, there probably wouldn't be any clean clothes, food, or hygiene"* (Mia, 00:25:12). Creating a balance for the children appears to be a common theme that emerged amongst parents as they discussed their acceptance of differing styles of parenting. Perhaps sharing the parenting journey with someone who can complement your style with their different approach is a positive experience for the family as a whole. Charlotte and Henry identify how their differences merge, without explicit intent, to create a balanced experience for their children. *"...I suppose we are not opposite, but we are different. That probably just feeds into the kids, as well, that without us even saying anything, they end up with a good balance, maybe"* (Henry, 00:18:25). Interestingly, they identify their experience of each other as being different, but not opposite, which indicates an element of complementary rather than contradictory differences. There is a sense of collaboration taking place between the parents in situations where they find they have differing approaches. This in itself is possibly a means of finding a personal strengths-based approach to the task at hand, whereby one parent

will take the lead on a way of being that aligns more naturally to them and less naturally to the other parent.

Part of that comes from me knowing that you'll pick up what I drop. Not in terms of clothes, but I can afford to play with them because I know that food can get organized if the two of us are in the house together...I think that's part of our relationship too is I know that I can afford to play with them a bit more because the other things will still get done (Liam, 00:25:38).

Liam's reflection is a useful perspective, whereby one parent can be the way they are because the other parent is being a different way. The existence of one style provides the space for the other style to exist. This sense of collaboration appears to allow for both parents to be as individuals with their own unique approach to parenting in some situations. This space for individuality appears to be something of importance to the parents.

Well, I don't always believe the whole, there's no I in team. I think there always should be an I. You can't lose sight of your I, if you like, and I think that you need to be an individual within the team. To know what your individual beliefs are, like my husband his beliefs are 'it's okay to fall a bit, it's natural' ... he needs to hold strong to that belief, whereas if he listened to everything I said, I'd be like, 'No, you can't let them fall.' Then it's not really a team anymore, it's a dictatorship really. You need the differences as well. It's I suppose how you manage them. (Mia, 00:30:22).

Mia and Liam place a focus on the way in which these differences in styles of parenting are managed within the unit and identify this as being a key factor in how the differences are experienced by their children. Overall, the parents appear to think quite fondly of the differences that can emerge in their day-to-day familial engagements. An appreciation is shown for how, that which the other brings to the table, compliments the parenting journey. As Harper and Mason discuss how these differences are experienced by them, Harper identifies the experience of having a co-parent with a different style as a privilege. *"I am very lucky to have*

that kind of support because I can never be that free or loose... and they're more connected. But I might change my role after 18, so that's my plan, not before that" (Harper, 00:39:56).

Influence of Own Upbringing on Parenting Style. Within the parents' discussions about their individual styles of parenting, came reflections on the influence of their own upbringings on the development of their styles of parenting. When talking about how each of them are individually as parents, it appeared to bring their minds back to when they were children. They shared how their experiences of being parented at that time influenced how they are parenting today.

It's funny how your parents are definitely your role models. And whether you like it or not, you're absorbing what they're saying, and you're absorbing how they deal with things. I suppose nobody's perfect, and I was lucky I had really good parents. But they weren't perfect. So, you try, and you learn from, I suppose the things they might not have dealt with so well and try and deal with them better yourself because times are different now. But, at the same time, we were happy, but... Yeah. Definitely, I think its history repeating itself. But it's good, I think, if you're conscious of it, and you're actively trying to change some things in line with the way things are now, if that makes sense (Charlotte, 00:23:10).

Charlotte speaks of the influences of her experience of being parented, on her experience of being a parent. In illustrating this, she regards herself as lucky to have had positive influences and role models. Charlotte also acknowledges that her parents were parenting in a very different time, and so some of the approaches that they would have used don't directly transfer into what is required in today's world. There is a sense of it being a useful process to engage in; that of reflecting upon the individual's own experience of their parents and acknowledging how these impacts, in some way or another, how they parent. The awareness of this influence appears to give the ability to actively shape the way it will impact upon how it is that a person is as a parent. Charlotte uses some of the memories of her childhood that have stuck with her to

try to change the way in which her children experience their childhoods. This process of drawing influence from her own childhood appears to have had influence over the shaping of one of the overarching aims that she has for her children:

...For them to develop and to see healthy relationships would be a big thing... You often think back to your own parents, and when you were young, and... if mom and dad ever had an argument, I'd remember it. And that's what really sticks in my mind at how young I was, and the things I can vividly remember. Not that I had a bad childhood, I didn't. But I do remember some of the things that weren't so nice, and I don't want that, I suppose. You don't want to carry that forward. Or you remember the days you were supposed to go somewhere, and things didn't work out, and you didn't, and the disappointment. You want to try and make that... You just want to make life the best that it can be for the children and for yourselves, to create happy memories (Charlotte, 00:22:09).

Being conscious of what she as an adult can remember experiencing at an early age, for Charlotte, appears to be a key influence of her own upbringing on her parenting. This sense of trying to learn from what was experienced negatively in their own time of being parented emerged in many of the parents' discussions of their own parenting. Oliver communicates there being a strong influence of his childhood experiences on the direction of his parenting. He is very clear about protecting his children from the experiences he had as a child. He relates to the very different upbringing his co-parent had in forming this pathway for their children.

Like we'd have both experienced very different lives growing up... I'd experienced some difficulties growing up and I've made some very strong conscious decisions of what I want my kids to be, in line with my wife's decisions. I was witnessing things I shouldn't have been witnessing very young, so I never want that to happen. I won't let it happen... (Oliver, 01:01:02).

In addition to using his experiences to inform what it is that he needs to protect his children from experiencing, Oliver too indicates that he needed to go through a process of seeing his own

autonomy in shaping how it was that he was going to be as a parent. Believing and accepting that one has control over how they pave the path for their children appears to be an important part of this process. Oliver appears to be reconciling his thoughts on how his path as a parent is not determined by how he was parented.

I'm adamant that stuff that happened to me doesn't mean it's going to happen to the kids so I need to accept that too and I have and I am and I am sort of accepting that and you know, but it's tough (Oliver, 01:01:13).

How one experiences their childhood does not have to dictate how one is as a parent. In many of the parents' discussions herein, there appears to be a greater sense of setting out to do something different in their role as a parent than was done by their parents. Charlotte outlines a process of setting out to do something different in her and her co-parents roles as parents than what they feel their parents did with them.

I think our parents...dealt with things maybe differently. Like now just being more open to things and talking about things and understanding instead of kind of dismissing the kids' feelings. That's something we're really trying not to do at the moment, just being conscious of how they're feeling, and just making them feel important or giving them a little bit of confidence. Because it's probably not something we consciously grew up with, but we're more conscious of it now because times are changing and things are changing, and they have to be ready to deal with stuff, I think (Charlotte, 00:22:59).

There is a conscious intention set by these parents to do something different to what their parents did. They are placing a different emphasis on their children's' feelings than was placed on their feelings as children. Charlotte attributes this process as contributing to a broader goal for their children; that of building their self-confidence. This appears to be something that she feels wasn't supported when she was growing up. She attributes that to differences in what is required of a person in the world today and into the future than what would have been perceived as being needed when she was a child. Charlotte attributes the style of parenting that she has

adopted as being fitting with the needs of the world we are in presently. This appears to be indicating that supporting a child's emotional awareness is something that is more important now than when she was a child. The old saying of 'children should be seen and not heard' is one that appears to be abolished in this style of parenting where the child is viewed as being equally as important as an adult.

Like new style parenting or just being more in tune with the children's feelings instead of telling them, 'Go in there and be quiet. Do what you're told to.'... You're not just dismissive, and you're making them feel as important because they are... (Charlotte, 00:24:03).

As Charlotte reflects on the development of her parenting style, she doesn't express an abolishment of the way in which she was parented, but rather describes utilising it as a base upon which to build her own style of parenting that she feels is fitting for her present world.

"We're doing our best, I suppose. We're not trying to reinvent the wheel. We're building on how we were brought up. We're trying to tweak it so that we're with the modern times..." (Charlotte, 00:56:07).

The mention of the difference in society now to when these parents were growing up occurred several times throughout their discussions. Mia and Liam reflected on these

differences but also found a commonality in what they view as important in their parenting and in what they experienced in their childhoods. *"I suppose even though our parent's generation was very different, both our upbringings were consistent, and that consistency is so important"*

(Mia, 00:06:26). This consistency in their parenting was a key feature of how they described their approach with their children, and they linked it back to how their parents parented them.

Moving away from looking at the generational differences in parenting styles, Mia and Liam identified a common feeling of security as a key memory for them from their childhoods and describe this as a key factor in what they aim to provide for their children.

I know we've pointed out a lot of differences with our parents' generation and their parenting style, if you like, but the biggest memory from both our childhoods we've talked

about has been put to bed at night, cosy, warm, with your belly full...We always knew that when we woke, they'd be there and that, even though we've all had different upbringings to a certain sense and all that, that's the majority of our memory from childhood is being cosy, warm in bed, feeling safe and secure. For all the differences in the two generations and all that, I think it's profound that that's the biggest part of both our memories and what a lovely feeling that is (Mia, 01:02:43).

This feeling from their own childhoods is a memory that they share despite having very different upbringings. It is a feeling they aim to provide for their children, however different their parenting style is to that of their parents. Harper and Mason also talk about taking influence from their parents' way of being with them and transferring this into a way of being with their own children, but also adopting a different approach to reaching the same end goal.

Pampering and pampering. That is actually in our system, like if we're feeding our child by our own hands that's not making them independent. This is what we have seen since childhood. So now we realize, 'No, this is not the right way.' Making them independent doesn't mean you don't love them. It means you're making them capable of doing things on their own (Harper, 00:26:58).

Harper describes their parents as making them feel loved through this system of pampering where they were doing everything for the children, however, they have come to recognise that there are alternative ways of achieving this for their children. They describe learning that fostering independence in their children is also showing them love, alongside supporting their development.

Theme 1.3: Parents Connecting with each other Through their Shared Role of Parenting

Emerging from the primary overarching theme of the parents relating to each other as parents, was the theme of the parents connecting with each other through their shared role of parenting. Herein I will explore the parents' experiences of this parental connectivity by looking at the

challenges and changes that they encountered along this journey of connectivity. I will then outline the experiences that the parents had during the process of together incorporating being a parent into their self-identities.

The feeling of being connected with each other that came about through their roles as parents was identified by the parents in their discussions about their experiences of their parenting journeys. For Sophia and Ben, this parental connection they experienced in their relationship came prior to them having children, through their joint caring of their animals.

“I think the fact that we had animals for nearly as long as we’ve been together, we kind of always had that kind of connection as part of our relationship in a type of parental...” (Ben, 00:36:35). *“Yes, I would agree with that. If you do have a sense of parenting animals’ kind of does give you a bit of trial for ... especially our animals because they were always sick. There was always caring involved”* (Sophia, 00:37:14).

The key component that they appeared to draw from this source of connection to each other, is that they were both responsible for the welfare of animals who were in their care and who had added vulnerabilities requiring their input, in a parental type of way. In a sense they had to work together to provide this specific type of care to those that needed them. This idea of needing to work together also arose in Henry and Charlotte’s description of their experience of coming together to unite forces to embrace upon the journey of parenting.

It probably forced us to work together very efficiently, maybe. And having to work as a team, because there was no other choice really. It was like... (Henry, 00:03:18). We needed each other (Charlotte, 00:03:39)... Kind of made us stronger probably as well, you know. But definitely we had to get into a rhythm, and there was no other option in one regard (Henry, 00:03:40).

Coming together to work towards a shared goal in a united manner can contribute towards people coming closer together and form a stronger connection. To work efficiently and get into a

rhythm of things, as Henry describes, together with another person involves a great deal of seeing what each other are doing and working collaboratively towards a shared goal. These conditions, combined with the fact that there is a child who needs caring for, appear to be a unique opportunity for forming a stronger connection with a co-parenting partner. The role of parenting together brings additional dynamics into the family system. For Mason and Harper, they describe their familial unity as a joint achievement, whereby they came together to learn, as a family, how to grow together. *“We’re feeling happy that they’re growing with us, and we are also growing with them. And at least so far, we are really happy that they’re going in a good direction. And we feel like we have achieved something...”* (Mason, 00:01:40). This joint sense of achievement is something that appears to be the result of a learning journey, embarked on together. Along this learning journey of parenting, the co-parenting partners are presented with situations and dynamics that didn't exist for them prior to becoming parents.

It’s like a very beautiful journey, kind of learning for us more than them. Because it’s like all the time, we are learning some other new things, like how to handle the situations, all the situations will come in front of you that we never realized as a couple (Harper, 00:02:30).

Whilst experiencing the learning journey positively and embracing the sense of achievement met along the way, the parents describe feeling a greater sense of understanding of each other. There is a sense of the parents uniting through their self-doubt and questioning of skills related to their parenting and providing a relational support to each other in this regard.

So now, we’re more as parents than a couple, so it’s like ...more bonding towards understanding each other. All the time, we are thinking, like, ‘Are we a wrong parent or a right parent?’ and we don’t have any manual wherein we can check, ‘Okay, this is the situation, and this is what we have to do’ (Harper, 00:03:29).

The role of being co-parents appears to have dominated their relationship status. Later in their discussion, they outline in greater detail how this balance in their relational identity shifted drastically. “So, we’re 80% parents and 20% couple” (Mason, 00:14:52). As the parents discussed their co-parenting identity, they did so in a manner that appeared connecting and comforting for them. It was like a new lease of life to their relationship, having this shared interest in parenting their children, that was very novel for them.

It’s like we are happy with that as well because it’s something like a common interest. So, we have a common interest... When we talk about them, we really enjoy it. We don’t really mind that we are not talking about each other, or we’re not really having personal talks. I think we both are understanding that and it’s going on without thinking actually (Mason, 00:16:17).

When identifying with each other as co-parents and experiencing this positively, it is not surprising that the parents are happy to be engaging with each other largely about this element of their worlds. This is the piece of their individual worlds that they now exclusively have in common, and it appears to be an element of their being that they fully embrace together. Lucas and Amelia also describe their experience of parenting as having strengthened their connection to each other. Whilst experiencing greater connectivity with each other through their shared role, they describe speaking directly about each other personally, less often. However, they appear to be content with this as both of their energies are channelled into their shared interest in their children.

Like when we come home from work, we kind of ask how are the children? How was their day? We never ask each other how our days have been...We talk about that for half an hour. We won’t want to talk about anything else then, so we leave our own days behind...I suppose the children are the common ground, so that’s what brings us together... (Lucas, 00:04:59).

There is a clear sense of their children being their shared interest and consequently enhancing this connection between them both as co-parents. It appears it isn't their children per se that brings about this experience of togetherness. Rather it is the interest in their children that both of the parents share, resulting in their children being the primary focus of the co-parents' day-to-day narrative. This experience, described as leaving the tales of their own days behind them in favour of discussing their children, is one that they appear to have given prior thought to. Amelia describes considering if it was unique to herself and her co-parent or if there was a general sense amongst fellow parenting peers that conversations about the children dominate the day-to-day narrative.

... I often wonder, 'Does this go on in every other house? Are we the only people that spend our whole lives talking about the kids?' And all my friends tell me it's the same, that they're all the same, that it does go on in their houses too. And like you were saying, every conversation is about them. Now I have to get better, we are going to get better at doing something for just us (Amelia, 00:05:12).

Whilst Amelia described finding it a commonality amongst their peers, that talking about their children dominated the co-parents' conversations with each other, there remained a sense that this was to be seen as a situation that needed improving on. Perhaps there remains a need to find the space for a narrative that involves just the two people, about themselves, outside of their co-parenting identity and all that is encompassed within that.

There appears to be an element of a momentary sacrifice along the parenting journey whereby personal interest needs and some relational needs are relegated by the more immediate needs of all or one of the children. *"There were times when other people were left out, or when we had to put ourselves last, or our partners last, or our older children or whatever. And connections probably weren't as good as they should be..." (Charlotte, 00:24:47).* Interestingly, whilst identifying periods of experiencing weaker parental connections, there is an idea maintained

that these connections should be experienced in a different way; that having strong parental connectivity is something to be strived for. Experiencing this stronger parental connectivity is something that is described as happening through the parents connecting with their children, especially as their children grow and develop into being their own individual selves.

There is more of a connection because you're identifying how you connect with them, in what way, or what brings out the best in them. Definitely, we're more connected because we're getting more time together and just more time out to talk. It's still hectic, but I think that connectivity overall is definitely more positive and improving (Charlotte, 00:25:17).

As children move through different stages of development this allows for different types of connections within the family unit. At times the parents will feel a strong sense of parental connectivity and at other times, they will not feel this, but it will remain as a place within their relationship to get to again. Sophia and Ben describe what seems like an ebb and flow to the relationship as it adjusts itself initially to the identity of being co-parents. Even when adopting these roles within their relationship is experienced as happening in a relatively easy manner, there remain moments that are experienced as being difficult.

... I think in some ways we fell into those relationships quite easily. And then I think sometimes when things got hard, we would think back to where we were and we'd think, 'Oh, why aren't we as together now as we were then? Is there something wrong? Is this normal?' But yes, I think we're okay... (Sophia, 00:38:44).

It is reasonable to expect a journey that is completely shared with another person to have its ups and downs. A process of reflection appears to take place whereby one may not fully experience their sense of connectivity until such time that they feel less connected together and look back to a time when they were experiencing a different feeling. For Sophia and Ben there appears to have been a relatively easy period of settling into feeling connected as co-parents. However, during times when things were difficult in their worlds, they experienced feeling less

togetherness. It appears there is a process of normalising and accepting this ebb and flow of connectivity within the parental relationship.

I think the only relationship that might have been tested or suffered, if you like, would have been our relationship, which I think is normal because we're the ones that are going to be most affected by the change. Because there is a change, there's a 'what we were' and there's a 'what we are now' whereas there isn't that for our children (Sophia, 00:39:24).

These changes in how they experience their connection to each other appear to be linked to the broader changes that they experience in transitioning into being parents. These transitions continue as they enter new stages of the parenting journey as their children grow and develop. The experience of change being unique to the parents is an interesting reflection. They observe that children are born into the co-parenting relationship, making it as such. However, the parents have experienced being connected in another way prior to becoming parents and so their experience of change is unique to them.

The experiences of change in the parents' connectedness were discussed in the context of the broader way in which they experienced change within themselves and towards each other along their shared journey of parenting. This experience of change is identified from the moment they have their first child; this is the moment they shift within their relationship from being a couple to being co-parents. Harper describes this shift in their relationship identity: *"That was the last day, when we moved to the hospital, as a couple, and now, we are parents. Even if they're not around...we'll be discussing them only, in our private time as well...."* (Harper, 00:02:55).

Immediately this change within the relationship relates to a change in mindset; the children become a whole part of the co-parents' thoughts and narratives. Even when the children are not physically present, they remain psychologically present for their parents. Harper describes this identity shift as being a deep rooted, permanent one:

So that mother and father feeling is always at the back of the mind. It will never leave you. That's what I experience, even if you're in the office, a movie, everywhere, that is always in your conscience and your soul, and you will definitely change completely (Harper, 00:03:29).

The change described feels like it is all consuming, existing within the person, between the parents, and across contexts. Trying to adapt to this new way of being and of thinking, appears to be something that takes time. Having a new role within one's life, that is shared with another person, appears to take time to adjust to. The position of thinking of oneself individually becomes dominated by thinking of the family unit collectively. Mason and Harper describe their experience of initially feeling a sense of loss for what this new way of being was preventing them from doing for themselves, but overtime becoming adjusted in mindset to their new way of being.

...Initially, we used to feel actually that we are so busy with them, we're not getting our own time, and all that. We're not able to do this or that. But maybe it is now, we're in that system itself. Now, we are habitual to it, and our plans are now according to the family now, so not to two people (Mason, 00:17:02).

It appears once the parents became adapted to the changes in their family system, they were able to adapt their thinking to automatically plan for themselves in the context of their family or for the family. The changes within the family system appear to be systemic; encompassing changes within each person and changes in the relationship between each other. *"I think what we demand of each other has changed. We've changed ourselves. I think as people we've changed a good bit"* (Sophia, 00:40:22). In addition to the personal and interpersonal changes between themselves, the parents identified an element of change in what they expect of each other since becoming co-parents. The expectations one has of another person appears to change when both people, through this shared journey of parenting, become responsible for a

third person. These expectations of each other appear to centre around what the parents expect each other to be for their children. There appears to be an element of connectivity through this process of change, whereby new focuses and priorities streamline, leading to a way of being that is more aligned with each other. Charlotte identifies these changes in priorities as having a positive impact on how the co-parents relate to themselves and to each other.

You become less selfish, and your priorities change completely. There was no room anymore for petty little disagreements, or anything that might have been there before the kids came along. And was very much focused on the kids, and our priority was surviving and getting through it as best we could, I supposed. And, yeah, it did definitely make us stronger. It was tough, but we've kind of come out the other side, thankfully intact, together (Charlotte, 00:03:57).

It appears as though when both parents shared the view that the children were their priority, they were able to support each other to get through the times that were difficult for them. The result of which appears to be the parents feeling a stronger sense of togetherness. It also appears that when the co-parents place their focus on the children there are less disagreements between them in general. There is perhaps a sense of letting the small things go so that they can both remain focused on their shared priority. Mason and Harper discuss their experience of feeling more connected with each other in their role as co-parents as they consider the impact of their actions on themselves, each other, and their children. They too describe letting go of their small differences of opinions to focus on the greater good of the family as a whole.

We are more connected and attached. Even if we have any differences, we can actually ignore or avoid them just because now, we are a family. We are not just two. What are the consequences of if we do anything? That's including all of us. Earlier, we used to think about two. So, we're changing and we have changed (Mason, 00:54:29).

The significant difference for the parents appears to be in the first stages of parenting where they discover that there are consequences of their individual actions on their whole family. Their thinking moves from being about themselves as a duo, to thinking about the new family of three. Mason and Harper reflect on how they managed disagreements prior to becoming co-parents. They outline their thinking behind the change that they have experienced in their approach to managing disagreements between themselves.

Earlier on, we did have days where we don't ... aren't on talking terms, two, three days, we will not talk to each other. But now, I haven't seen that kind of thing because...we always think immediately, after an hour what will be the mood of the house, and how it will affect us all (Harper, 00:54:42).

Prior to having children, the parents would have been able to sit in disagreement without impacting upon anyone other than themselves. A big change that they have experienced in this regard is that now their minds immediately forward think about how their management of the disagreement will impact upon the overall environment of their family. This appears to help them reflect in the moment on the potential adverse impact of their actions and they adapt according to what they anticipate as being best for the family as a whole. Mia and Liam describe their experience of change in this type of thought process, and they appear to reflect on it positively.

Whatever our differences, that's what I like about this thing, that we're keeping our egos aside and saying sorry immediately, making the things normal... It's like more accepting and more keeping your egos or whatever to the side, so that is actually helping. Always, first thing that will come is like, "What they will think, what they'll learn. Are they happy?'. Then everything will go just like, 'That's not very important' (Mia, 00:55:20).

There appears to be a thought that their own sense of self, in such a given moment, needs to be put behind the greater interests of the family. When the parents experience disagreement, the remedial goal isn't to solve the disagreement, but rather to manage it in a manner that models

something useful for their children. There is also a sense of an acceptance taking place in this process that appears to be useful for the parents in framing matters that they don't agree on. There is a sense of this process being about moving from a somewhat ego driven place of self-importance to a place of prioritising the importance of the family.

Together Incorporating Being a Parent into Self-Identity. As the parents discussed their shared journey of parenting, they spoke about the individual process of merging the idea of being a parent with their existing self-identity. Whilst this is described as a process taking place over time, the parents also discussed having an idea in their minds, before having children, of what that identity would be like. However, they then found the reality a very different experience than what they had envisaged. Ben and Sophia described their prior expectations being idealistic compared to the reality of the earlier days of being a parent.

I think at the start I struggled a little bit with no time anymore. I kind of had this mentality that things will go back to normal. Then about I'd say about six months down the line before I realized that this is the new normal. And soon as I accepted that I kind of had a different outlook on things and things kind of got better from there onward (Ben, 00:01:42).

In Ben's description of the time during the early days of becoming a parent, there is a feeling of him trying to hold onto his sense of self and waiting for that way of being to resume. However, over time he appeared to recognise that changes and developments were happening within himself as he adjusted to the identity of being a parent. Accepting that his way of seeing the world differed after becoming a parent, appeared to be a key factor in this process. *"Yes, when they arrive your whole mentality just changes completely. You start looking at the world in a different way. You were doing a great job, so I was never worried about anything" (Ben, 00:44:00). "Thanks" (Sophia, 00:44:25).* This process of adjusting to the new experience of seeing the world through the eyes of a parent appeared to be eased by the knowledge that their

co-parent was taking care of things with their child. It is an interesting recognition that both parents, whilst experiencing this adaptation to parenthood together, are doing so in different ways and at a different pace. This is perhaps influenced by the different functional roles the parents have during the initial stages of the parenting journey. Charlotte gives a rather intimate description of her experience of adapting to the change in her sense of self after becoming a parent.

You change your person, for a woman your body changes, everything changes, your image, your self-confidence, your job, everything. So, it's huge. And you probably lose confidence, as well. But you definitely learn that it's not about you anymore really. It's about you sharing your life. It was first your partner to share your life, but then kids... (Charlotte, 00:39:13).

There were so many facets to the experience of change described, but the one that is communicated with most certainty is that you learn that you are not centre stage in your own life anymore. There is a sense that the process of becoming a parent in itself is one facet of the change that is impactful on the parent. However, the element of adapting to the experience of now sharing your life journey with your children, appears to be another facet of the change that is impactful on the parents. There is a sense of the parents getting lost in this process and needing to take time to step back and relate to themselves.

...You forget who you are. You get lost. I certainly got lost in all the... I think we both did in the amount of nappies and bottles, and priorities. So, it's nice to put yourself first again, for even one evening. And it's good to do that. It's good for you (Charlotte, 12:59).

Charlotte reflects back on the time when she was in the younger stages of their journey of parenting and identifies an experience of having lost herself. She describes this reflectively from her current position, wherein she is experiencing their children as becoming a little more

independent. This she feels is affording her the opportunity to reconnect with herself and to try to remember who she was again.

So, it's great now because we're getting the space again to get out again to start to live a little and remember who we were. That's important to me. I lost my whole identity, I think, along the journey. And forgot who I was and what I used to do. You miss your friends, as well, because they've all gone off and had kids, as well. But yeah. It's better now. But it's definitely a selfless time when you have small kids, but it will come back around, hopefully (Charlotte, 00:40:24).

Charlotte's description is one that portrays a feeling of being lost within herself along her journey of parenting. There is a sense of a sacrifice of oneself and one's social connections in favour of the demands of their younger children. It appears as though these earlier days of parenting are experienced in a rather lonely manner. Amelia and Lucas describe the contrast between their thoughts and hopes about the parenting journey versus the reality when the time came.

I think you were very naïve at the start when we had the first one. 'Oh, everything will be great' (Amelia, 01:07:11). It's grand and people will call and everyone's happy, next thing the people leave (Lucas, 01:07:17). Yeah. I found it very lonely, very lonely. Very, very lonely (Amelia, 01:07:18). Yeah (Lucas, 01:07:21).

Perhaps the anticipation of greatness makes the harder moments of the lived reality more difficult to cope with, given that they are contrary to the anticipated experience. A juxtaposition is drawn between the experience of the very beginning of the parenting journey, when friends and family are all around, and that of the reality of when the initial surge of visitors comes to an end. Coupled with this experience of loneliness appears to come a sense of the identity of being a parent becoming all consuming. In addition to feeling a loss of oneself, the parents' life starts to feel consumed by the children. *"Like I found I had lost myself a bit. I had nothing going on in my life apart from them" (Amelia, 01:09:57).* There is a sense of the parents becoming so fully

immersed in the life of being a parent, that it becomes consuming of them as a person.

Similarly, as the parent adapts to this new part of their life journey and gets a sense of who they are in this new context, a readjustment of their own needs and values appears to take place.

Henry describes his experience of the early days of the parenting journey as one that immersed him fully.

I was kind of totally immersed in it, and maybe the monotony of it...From the early days, we were in it, and then we just weren't able to get out of it, as such...You come out of a lot of maybe different dynamics than you would have been in. It's an unconscious thing... (Henry, 00:40:46).

There is a sense of an unconscious shift in what becomes the parent's life during the time of transitioning into parenthood. More so than actively giving up certain things in their life, the shift appears to be something that happens naturally as the parent becomes immersed into the day-to-day experience of parenting. Whilst initially the experience of this time, as recalled by the parent, appeared to be almost entrapping, there was a sense of a mindset change taking place over time. This appears to have brought about an acceptance and a contentment to their new way of being.

...Things change, and your priorities change, as well. So, things that were important to you before are not important to you anymore, also (Henry, 00:41:42). That's true, too (Charlotte, 00:42:03). That's kind of the natural progression of life, I suppose, isn't it? (Henry, 00:42:05).

Arriving at this place where the identity of being a parent becomes incorporated into the parent's way of being appears to be something that develops over time. The developmental growth of the parent appears to be something that is experienced alongside the children's growth and development. There is a sense of learning during this time; learning alongside one's child how to identify as their parent. Mason and Harper describe how they have experienced their journey

of parenting as one with many learning opportunities for them personally, as they grow to incorporate being a parent into their self-identities.

It's like more of a learning thing. I learn to be more patient. That's the best part that I ever learned. And it's like connecting with your child and all, and how their emotions, how to tell them both wrong and right. And first of all, you have to follow that. We can preach many things, but when you have to do it every day in your own life, that is a little difficult (Harper, 00:03:51).

There is a sense of the parent learning to become someone that the children need them to be. They appear to do this through connecting with their children's way of experiencing the world. In the parents' teaching of their children, they are learning themselves. The parents forge a new way of being in the world for themselves. This is influenced by their learning of how to be, in a manner that models a way of being that they want for their children. Harper provides a simple example of an everyday change that started through teaching their children about healthy drinks.

I remember I used to love ... We both used to love cola drinks, and since then we started telling them, 'This is bad,' and realized we have completely stopped [drinking them] now for years. Now, we don't dare to drink in front of them. Not even in their absence Now, it's gone from our habit...So it's very good ... And early sleeping, disciplined life more. That's the best... (Harper, 00:04:25).

Through modelling in themselves what they want to portray for their children, the parents have developed new lifestyle habits that remain consistent all of the time, not just in the presence of the children. There is a sense of satisfaction from the parents with the adoption of these habits and the type of lifestyle that they have built for themselves, around what they perceive their children's needs to be. Whilst the parents describe experiencing the transition to identifying as parents as difficult, they describe later experiencing this time of their lives most positively.

But later on...we realize, 'This is the best part of our life,' and a very new experience. You've never experienced, without being a mother, like how actually a mother thinks (Harper, 06:00:01).

There is a sense that as the parent embraces this new experience they learn to identify with a new way of thinking. This experience of thinking like a parent is one that appears to be un-anticipatable prior to actually becoming a parent. Incorporating this new way of thinking as a parent into one's identity is something that appears to occur over a period of time but not progressively, in a linear manner. There is a sense of their being an eb and flow to this process.

Superordinate Theme 2: The Parent-Child Relationship

The parent-child relationship emerged as a prominent aspect of the parenting journey experienced by the co-parents interviewed. I will examine the parents' perceptions in relation to the parent-child relationship by first looking at the most compelling theme that emerged, that of the parents tuning into their children's needs. I will then explore the parents' perceptions of how they connected with their children by looking at how they experienced the ebb and flow of connecting and disconnecting with their children, as well as the circumstances that they found conducive to feeling connectivity in their relationships with their children. Finally, I will look at how the parents experienced their own aspirations for their children and how these aspirations impacted upon the parents' relationships with their children.

2. The Parent-Child Relationship
2.1 Parents Tune into their Children's Needs
2.1.1 Parents relate to their children's individualities
2.2 Parents Connecting with their Children
2.2.1 Parents connect with their children through play and being present
2.3 Parent's Aspirations for their Children's Futures Influences their ways of Being with their Children
2.3.1 Parents hold boundaries for their children in line with their aspirations for them

Theme 2.1: Parents Tune into their Children's Needs

Emerging from the second overarching theme of the parent-child relationship, was the theme of the parents tuning into their children's needs bringing a sense of child-centricity to their relationship. Herein I will explore the parents' experiences of their child-centric parenting journeys where they are guided by their children's fundamental needs and by their perceptions of their children's relational security. I will examine how the parents tune into and relate to their children's individualities as they grow and develop.

The parents describe instances where they are guided in their parenting by the needs of their children. These needs change throughout day-to-day situations and, more broadly, as their children grow and develop. For the parents, tuning into and striving to meet their children's fundamental needs appears to be a core element of the way in which they experience their parent-child relationships. *"That's a skill we're learning to kind of listen to them more, each of them with their needs and what gets the best out of them"* (Charlotte, 00:52:45). There is a sense that this way of being is something that the parents learn; they consciously set out to listen to the needs of their children and discover that by doing so, they get the best out of their children. It would appear that when meeting the children's needs is prioritised, there is greater contentment within the home in general, which has a positive impact on the household. Whilst meeting these needs requires accommodations from the parents, it would appear that the end justifies the means. For Charlotte and Henry, identifying that their children needed more time in the morning led to them getting up earlier to give their children that time and consequently avoided stressful encounters surrounding breakfast each morning.

Just getting a happy atmosphere in the house, I suppose. We're kind of more conscious of that and giving them the time to... like waking up early in the morning and giving them half an hour to eat their breakfast, instead of before we were giving them 10 minutes and wondering why they didn't eat it straight away. We're moulding our lives around their

needs, we'll say, and trying to provide the best environment for them... (Henry, 00:06:11).

This idea of shaping one's life around the needs of the children does appear to have positive outcomes, however, there is also a sense of a sacrifice being made by the parents in the process. Charlotte and Henry articulate this idea of making personal sacrifices to do what is needed to make things easier for the children. *"You make sacrifices, I suppose"* (Charlotte, 00:06:59). *"Yeah. You do. You're really doing everything for what makes it easy for the kids"* (Henry, 00:07:00). This sense of a personal sacrifice in favour of what is best for their children is something that appears in relation to the day-to-day structure of family life, but also in relation to broader decisions such as a parent returning to work or not. Harper and Mason describe situations in relation to both types of scenarios that are indicative of underlying sacrifices that they have made in prioritising what they perceive as their children's needs. *"They can't stay there. They will be crying' and all those things, was probably another reason for not bringing her out of the house and started thinking about her career because she was more concerned about our children"* (Mason, 00:25:32). In Mason's description of Harper not returning to work when planned, he outlines how the perceived need for the children to be cared for at home was prioritised over Harper's need to go to work. As the discussion continued, they described making the return to work only after they perceived their children's needs to have changed; whereby they were sending them to childcare for their own developmental needs rather than to facilitate the parents' needs to work. In addition to this broader decision following the lead of the perceived needs of the children, Mason and Harper describe making considerable changes to their day-to-day ways of being, in line with what they perceive their children need to experience from them, as role models.

We should do more; they will learn by seeing us. That's how we both are trying like, 'Do these things, follow the things, follow the rules.' And we both are not having any bad

habits like smoking, drinking or anything. In that way, they're very safe. In that way, all those things are not there in the home (Harper, 00:57:31).

In addition to the perceived needs of the children leading the way for parents' day-to-day lifestyle choices, there too is a sense of the parents tuning into the developmental pathways of the children. In doing so the parents appear to be sensing that the children are learning from their direct experiences with their social world, as opposed to seeing the children as more passive learners. This element of tuning into the children's developmental needs appears relevant to the child-centric journey of parenting, as the developmental needs of the child change over time, thus impacting change in the parenting. *"You think you have a routine set with what you're doing but then they will change again developmentally and behaviourally as well and you have to rise to the next challenge that they've changed everything again"* (Sophia, 00:04:00). Seeing these developmental needs of the child, perhaps indicated through their behaviours, appears in itself, a key component of the parents' experiences. In meeting these changing needs, the parents describe, at times, a deliberate need to disconnect from the children in the here and now. The purpose of which appears to be child-led, whereby the parent shifts their focus, in a given moment, onto meeting the child's need that they feel a behaviour may be stemming from. There is a sense of the child's fundamental needs directing the relationship in those moments.

"When they come in from creche some evenings if they're hungry and tired, and they're just giving out and you can't put the food in front of them quick enough. I disconnect from that...If I get the food out in front of them and get them into their beds, it's good that they want to be there [in bed], then that's the job done. That's what they want. Disconnecting there I don't see it as an issue" (Liam, 00:41:56).

These presenting needs of the children appear to be experienced as a key factor in their parent-child relationships. The child appears to be heard and responded to, but within a boundary set by the parents. The description given by the parents indicates a parent-child relationship that is

consistent with limited interference from external factors, even such as the parents' own desires at a given time. In addition to Liam discussing his experience of disconnecting from everything to meet their children's emerging needs, Mia shared her experiences of watching Liam put his own needs to one side to meet those of their children.

"I've watched my husband out in the garden with them flying the kite. It would be a cold, wet day...He can be exhausted coming home from work, but he'll put on the wellies and the raincoat, and he'll put on their rain stuff and their wellies and out they'll go and he'll do it. I think it's his willingness to go with whatever the kids want. If their behaviour has been good, which is positive reinforcement, he is doing it. Not letting things like the elements or the time of day or any of those kinda things get in the way. He'll just go for it" (Mia, 00:53:10).

In this description, the experience of the parents appears to be one of prioritising the needs of their children, in that moment, over their own needs. However, as the parents shared this experience, it was done so with what appeared to be joy. There appeared to be a feeling of satisfaction achieved through overriding one's own needs at a given time, to share in an experience with their children, that is led by their children's needs at that time. There is a sense here of embracing where following the child's lead can take the parent. Henry and Charlotte share their experience of letting the children lead the way with their recreation time. They describe finding it more beneficial this way to everyone in the end, even though they will generally 'do' less but 'be' more.

Sometimes if you take their lead, a lot of time you end up doing nothing. But sometimes they just need that time out with us being present (Charlotte, 00:51:09). And then, not rushing around trying to be at this place and at that thing that might be good for them, this thing that could be great for them. If you're not aware, you'll end up in probably unfamiliar environments for them, and they're not comfortable at all. You know, that's

grand some of the time. But there are times when they are comfortable, and they are happy, and they are doing what they want to do (Henry, 00:51:31).

There is a sense that for these parents allowing themselves to follow the lead of the children appeared to be a process. They appeared to first let go of their idea of what the children would like or enjoy before settling into being with the children in a way that was dictated by their presenting needs. There was a sense that when the parents were leading the way the recreation time was ending up feeling uncomfortable for the family, whereas when the parents followed the lead of the children, they were able to spend their time with their children, comfortably and happily. It appears that once the children's needs are identified and met, the family enjoy their time with each other, which can lead to the parents and children having shared interests that they can mutually enjoy themselves doing. *"There's a lot of stuff on with the kids at the weekend and bits and pieces that I want to be there for. Like I said, this weekend's first weekend away camping, thoroughly enjoyed it like"* (Oliver, 00:53:53). Oliver describes a new interest, which he enjoys spending time doing with his children, that developed from an emerging interest of his children. When the parents can share in an activity, which is something that meets the needs of their children, it can provide opportunities for relationship strengthening for the parent and child, as they spend time together in mutual enjoyment. Throughout the parents' discussions of their relationships with their children there is a sense of there being a connectivity between the parents and their children that leads to the parents tuning into their children's needs. The parents appear to relate to their children and to each other around these identified needs of their children. There appear to be differences between how each parent connects with these needs and indeed between how the children communicate or seek out having these needs met. However, within the families' relationships there appears to be space for the children to impact upon the parents and to direct the relationship to where they need it to go. The children's willingness to do this is something the parents' view as an indicator of the children feeling secure within the parent-child relationship. *"I think the kids are secure*

knowing I'm there and they leave their dad when they're hungry. They'll be like, 'Well, let's go find Mom because we know she has it sorted'" (Mia, 00:38:29). There is a sense of the parents consciously noticing, or looking for, indicators from their children that they feel secure within the parent-child relationship. Mia and Liam present a scenario that gives a sense of them taking the lead from their children when looking at indicators of relational security and instances of potential insecurity.

A sense of security...I would notice when they go to bed at night, they are happy to go to bed and they're wrapped up warm. I think if they had any insecurities, they wouldn't go to sleep. We can just put them in their room and go through the bed routine with them. Close the door, turn off the light, and they're gone. I think that's the biggest testament for me that they feel safe (Liam, 01:00:34).

As Liam shares his experiences with their children that indicate to him that they feel secure in the safety of their familial relationship, Mia extends the scenario. In her description, she illustrates an element of insecurity presented to the children, by way of being in a new environment, that was remedied by the parents recognising this need for reassurance and responding to it accordingly.

We noticed when we went away...we did all of the same things, and our children came out of the room. My husband looked at me and he said, 'What's that?', I said, 'They're just checking.' Because they knew we were in a different country, so they needed to check. They checked maybe twice. 'Are you there?', 'Are you in the room?' I suppose instead of meeting that with, 'Get back to bed', we met it with a hug and kiss, 'We're here, we know we're somewhere different, but we're here and we'll be in the room all night. We'll be in the room next door and then when we come to bed, we'll be beside you.' It just shows you that if you do explain ... they were fine but did need to do a little check (Mia, 01:01:05).

The relationship appears to allow for the children to play a significant role, which in turn, is responded to by the parents. There is a sense of a relationship with the children being supported by responsive parenting, whereby the parents are reflecting collaboratively about the children's perspectives of what is happening, when it is happening. This, in turn, appears to be informing the parents' responses to their children in the given situation. The action of the parents in providing a response that is fitting with the children's needs, appears to contribute to contentment within the parent-child relationship. The parents appear to look for indicators of this sense of contentment within the children. Sophia and Ben discuss their observations of their children as they seek out indicators of how content and secure, they may be.

I suppose they're generally quite happy in their disposition. They will go potter off and play on their own. But likewise, they can come looking for you. Mama? Dada? Where are you? Kind of thing. So, I think there is a bit of balance there. Some days they might not come looking for you at all... (Sophia, 00:57:59).

The parents' experience appears to be one of following the children's lead, to be with them in a manner that allows for them to express their needs as they arise, rather than having the parent pre-empt them. There is a sense of the parents feeling that their children know that they are there for them and that they know that the relationship allows them to express their needs. For the parent, there appears to be a trust within the relationship that the child will give communicative signals and will seek out comfort when needed.

And other days they might look for you more. I think that can change with where they're at or how they're feeling whether they're a little sick or whatever.... When they're distressed as well, I guess they are upset, but they can be comforted quite quickly as well (Sophia, 00:58:39).

There is a sense of the need for relational security being experienced as a key element within the parent-child relationship. The parent views the connectivity being sought out by the child through the lens of the child; an analysis takes place of the range of needs that may be

communicated at this time. The parent appears to meet this need through the provision of comfort giving, which remedies the situation for the child. The child appears to feel secure in their experience of having navigated their way to relational comfort by themselves, as it is received by them in response to their expressed needs.

Parents Relate to their Children's Individualities. The parents' descriptions of their relationships with their children appeared to be respectful of the individual characteristics and needs of their children. Seeing their children as individuals, moving along their own developmental pathways, appeared to contribute positively to the parents' experience of tuning into their children's unique set of needs. *"We shouldn't really expect all the kids to be with the same capabilities and development. Every kid is different, and they have their own way to develop themselves"* (Mason, 00:12:16). For Mason and Harper, they had discussed initially being concerned about how their children were developing in relation to other children in their extended family. However, over time, they learned that it was more beneficial for them to focus solely on their children and what they needed at a given stage in their development. Charlotte and Henry also describe shifts in how they turned into their children's individual needs as time went on in their parenting journey. In comparison to when their children were younger, the parents describe being able to sit with and observe their emerging needs more as they got older.

We get a chance now to sit down and observe the kids more, and it's a nice experience because we see what works. We see what triggers certain behaviours. We see when they clash. I think we're better able to identify it because we're not in that cloud of busyness anymore... our relationships are definitely more positive (Charlotte, 00:09:36).

There is a sense of the parents being able to garner more clarity around their children's needs as they experience having more time to tune into and observe how their children are being. This appears to have a circular effect whereby the more time that is given to observing the emerging needs the more time the parents and children have to connect with each other, as challenging

behaviours become less frequent. This seems to have an overall positive impact on how familial relationships are experienced. Seeing their children as individuals with unique needs is something that appears to have facilitated the parents in seeing their children as people who require differing responses, which again is described as being much different to when their children were babies.

We're getting to treat them more as individuals, and they all have individual needs. And we can recognize that they're also different. Whereas before this, they were all babies doing the same thing. Now, we have much different things going on...Based on their personalities, you have to diversify it enough to be able to be conscious that what works for one doesn't work for the other (Henry, 00:27:19).

This seeing of their children and getting to know them as the individuals they are, as they grow into themselves, appears to bring a sort of ease to the parents. They appear to view their children more in terms of what they need, rather than trying to focus on making a particular parenting approach work for all of the children, irrespective of the type of people they are. The journey of getting to know their children as their individual selves is not, however, without challenge. Charlotte describes requiring a great deal of patience to travel along this journey with growing and developing children. *"Patience is a big one with small kids. And to be kind to them, and I suppose respectful to them because they're little individuals, as well" (Charlotte, 00:42:20).* Alongside having patience with their children, the parents describe being respectful of them as individuals. There is a sense of an element of the parent-child relationship being the experience of parents seeing their children as separate to themselves. The parents appear to see their children as individuals deserving of being shown kindness and respect as they grow into themselves, even when it tests their own patience. In the context of relating to their children's individuality, Emma and Noah discuss how they simply don't have an enjoyable time together if they go against what they feel their children are and are not interested in. *"There's some things we've kind of said, yeah we won't take the kids to that because they won't enjoy it, and if they*

won't enjoy it, we won't enjoy it, so there's no point dragging them" (Emma, 00:52:41). The parents recognise that their children can have separate interests to them and to each other and when it comes to planning how they will spend their time, they are respectful of that. Oliver and Ava discuss the process that can come behind this type of outcome, whereby their children are involved with the decision-making process of matters that concern them. *"We'll try and involve them with the decisions that affect them. Wouldn't that be..."* (Oliver, 00:14:38). *"Mm-hmm" {affirmative}* (Ava, 00:14:42). These decisions are seen as unique to each child and their individual needs. The parents discuss aiming to support their children with the process of making decisions about choices that present themselves to each individual child.

Myself and my wife had talked a lot about it and then we had sat down with the child, and we had talked to them about it to get them to see what they wanted to do. So, they're involved in the decision making, and they understand the decision they're making and the ramifications of the decisions too...They made a good decision, a very wise decision I think (Oliver, 00:09:01).

The parents portray there being supportiveness in how they relate to their children's individuality within the parent-child relationship. There is a sense that the parents are keen to support their children, individually, through decision making processes to help their children to understand how to make choices about their own lives. There are, however, parental boundaries around these choices, whereby opportunities are presented to each child so that they have the exposure to a variety of life experiences. Once the parents have presented the children with the experience, the parents shift their role to one of supporting the child to make up their own mind about each experience.

We get them involved in everything and they make their own mind up. They choose what they want to do (Oliver, 00:48:25). *Ya, get a taste for it and then if they want to keep going, and if they don't, that's fine too* (Ava, 00:48:32).

The parents don't force their desires for their children onto them, but they also don't remove the element of choice via non-exposure. There is a sense of the parents building upon their relationship with their children by providing them with relevant options and then respecting their individual choices thereafter.

Theme 2.2: Parents Connecting with their Children

The second of the three themes that emerge from the overarching theme of the parent-child relationship, is that of the parents connecting with their children. I will explore this by looking at the emerging areas of how the parents experienced feeling connected, disconnected, and reconnected with their children. I will also illustrate how the parents experienced their connections with their children through being present with them and through play.

The parents shared their experiences of feeling a sense of both connectivity and dysconnectivity within their relationships with their children. Even when physically not with their children, the parents describe a feeling of being connected with them remaining. The parents describe experiencing a feeling of enhanced connectedness when they are physically back with their children. Mia discusses feeling a removed sense of connectivity with their children even when engaged in other tasks; there is a sense of her perceiving her presence being felt within the relationship even when she isn't physically present. *"I know they still know I'm there and they know where to get me when they need whatever. I do still feel connected, but the direct connection is definitely aside from me when I'm away from them doing the jobs" (Mia, 00:38:48).*

In looking at how Mia experiences this feeling of indirect dysconnectivity, there is a sense of her own perceptions of how she was parented in childhood bearing influence on the level of awareness that she has around her connectivity with their children. *"I'm aware that I am {disconnected}. It gives me memories of answers my mother gave me as a child. Not that they upset me as a child, but it's like I registered them, going "there's that voice" (Mia, 00:40:02).* Mia describes becoming aware of how she is with their children when she is experiencing a

disconnection, as a result of having her primary focus on something else at that time, as being related to how she recalls experiencing this type of momentary disconnection from her mother as a child. This, however, isn't something that the parent equates as a negative experience. Rather, there is a sense of her accepting experiencing dips in feelings of connectivity with their children and drawing benefits from these periods of dysconnectivity for their children. The parent links these periods of disconnection, with their children being able to develop independence skills that are required for their own journeys to adulthood. Perhaps this perception links back to the parent's feeling of how she came to have her independence skills developed through how she experienced being parented. There is a sense of normalising both periods of connectivity and dysconnectivity within the parent-child relationship. *"I think it's normal...It's the way life is. You can't always be connected, and I think kids need to have that little bit of independence... I think sometimes being disconnected gives a child the opportunity to be just independent"* (Mia, 00:40:50). Whilst speaking about the positive gains for their children that can be achieved through experiencing periods of being disconnected from their parents, Mia describes how difficult this was for her to facilitate when their children were younger. There is a sense, from the parent's recall of the earlier days of experiencing a physical disconnection from their children, of an internal battle having taken place. This battle appears to have been perceived as being one of putting her own need to be close to their children aside, so that their children could form a sense of security in the experience of their parents coming back to them. The parent appeared to battle between her cognitive approach to parenting in that situation and her emotional needs. Mia describes this phenomenon as one where she experienced physiologically the impact of the separation but that this was eased by her cognitive experience of what she understood of child development.

With my first child, leaving them with someone else and walking away when they're crying. Every ounce of your body as a new mother is saying get back there now this instant. Having that knowledge of how an insecure attachment can develop, it gave me

actual strength to go, no it's okay. They're not dying. They're with a brilliant person who's going to mind them. I will be back in five minutes. Doing that and coming back and reassuring them that, yeah Mom goes out, but I will be back. We could really see a change in them as well that within a week they were secure, and that if I walked out, I will be back...I think it gives me a lot of strength knowing that, because especially as a first-time parent, for me anyway, every part of your body's screaming at you to go back and just hold them forever (Mia, 00:57:19).

There is a sense of importance being placed on doing what is right for the children in terms of their long-term functionality in their world, potentially above what feels right for the parent in that moment. From what came up for the parent during the sharing of this experience, there was an impression of an immediate personal sacrifice taking place for the sake of the children's future development, as foreseen by the parent from those early days.

They became very independent, social little children...which I think if I'd have listened to every bit of my physical body, that might have been a barrier. I think I was quite aware...I just thought no, I don't want my children to be anxious every time I'm not there. That's not the real world (Mia, 00:58:39).

Looking at the future development of their children was the key motivator for this parent in separating from their children for periods from a young age. Other parents discussed their experiences of organically separating from their children for work or school, and how they felt that the reconnection upon return home was beneficial in itself to the familial relationships as a whole. For Henry, there is a sense of feeling the connectivity with their children through his experience of reconnecting with them when coming home from work each evening.

I feel a reconnect...like you're greeted at the door, and everybody is happy and excited. And you know what it feels like to be home, and then you're kind of back into the routine again...I feel as though if you can start the day like that, and you can come home in the evening like that, then it's kind of contributing to, maybe unconsciously, to have the

whole unit happier, have your own kind of air, just contributing something (Henry, 00:29:46).

There is a sense of the parent, when returning to the home, being transported back into the world of their family, creating a shared experience of revived connectivity amongst the family as a whole. The parent describes aiming to create the anticipation of this feeling when parting with their children in the morning; in their process of disconnecting, setting themselves up for the positive feelings of the reconnection in the evening. Charlotte and Henry discuss how their anticipated moments of connectivity is what enables their abilities to disconnect. Once the security of the connection is formed within the relationship, their children appear to be able to disconnect and reconnect as they need to, thus facilitating their independence.

I feel when they've been connected, when they have our undivided attention, they are at their happiest. And it doesn't matter what comes at us or where we are, or who's there, or who's acting whatever way, if they can come back and check in with us knowing that that attachment is there, they'll go off again and do their thing (Charlotte, 00:53:13).

There is a sense of the experience of being connected with each other, as being key in establishing this feeling of security for their children, within the parent-child relationship. Charlotte discusses her efforts to consciously provide opportunities for this feeling of security to develop with each of their children. She describes doing this by allocating a few minutes of alone time with each child so that they experience their parents being there, fully present, for them alone. *"I suppose being there for them...or maybe taking them out just away for even 10 minutes on their own. Giving that one-to-one time, just assuring them and showing them extra attention, that kind of thing" (Charlotte, 00:54:40).* This sense of providing their children with reassurance by connecting with them, to allow for periods of a physical disconnect, is reiterated by Henry. He describes the daily separation for night-time as being a time that their children seek that reassurance from their parents, before settling down to sleep. The parent describes

how this highlight for him that their children just need to reconnect with their parents, even for a quick moment, to top up their feeling of security when they need it.

It's even the smallest, like at night-time or whatever, and they come out of the room and they're shouting, they're all crying and looking for you and whatever, you know that once they get you for two minutes, they're happy as Larry then to go back to sleep again in their own room or whatever. It's just us. It's just that little time there that you just need to reconnect (Henry, 00:55:09).

There is a sense of the parent experiencing, as a key factor in providing reassurance for the children, the simple presence of the parents. For the parents, having this openness to being present with their children can help them to achieve a feeling of contentment within their relational connectivity, suffice to allow their children to be content to sleep independently. There is a sense of the parents being supportive of their children when they need them. Emma and Noah describe their experience of feeling that supporting their children by showing up for them plays a key role in the relational connectivity between themselves and their children.

We support them... there are some things we always both go to, and we show our support for them, and I think that's something we do well...And we do our best to listen to their stories...I think they know we think they're important and they know that we will stick up for them (Emma, 01:06:54).

This concept of turning up for their children, is one that appears to describe a great deal for the parents. It conveys not just physically being present to support their children, but also communicating to the children that their parents are in their corner, valuing their position in the world. Connecting with their children by playing a supportive role in their worlds is something that is experienced by Emma and Noah as being appreciated by their children. *"They thanked both of us separately and more than once and said thank you for coming, that means a lot. And I didn't think it would mean as much to them as it seemed to..." (Emma, 01:06:54).* The experience of the parents was one of being involved with their children in a supportive capacity

through activities that their children were engaged with, independent of their parents. The parents didn't need to show up, but doing so because they wanted to, appeared to be something that meant a lot to their children. Whilst they were disconnected physically during the activities described, they were connected beforehand and afterwards, perhaps allowing a sense of supportive connectivity to remain throughout. Emma describes their children enjoying physical affection on a daily basis prior to disconnecting physically from each other when going their separate ways for the day. This physical contact appears to be something of value to both the parents and their children.

I value the physical contact from them, the hugs. I hug them and kiss them every day...So that's important to me...And they hug and kiss me back and I give them a hug and kiss them on the head when I leave them to the carpark at school every morning and it's not like oh, get away from me, you're embarrassing me, they actually like it (Emma, 01:08:12).

There is a sense here of this physical connectivity being an important element of the parent-child relationship that is valued on a daily basis, particularly when the parents and children are separating physically for the day for work and school. Noah extends on this by describing the reconnections that take place when the family members come back together at the end of the day, whereby there is a sense of connectivity being experienced by verbal communicative means. *"Yeah, I think they can talk to us, I don't think they have any huge secrets or that, they come home, tell us about their day"* (Noah, 01:09:05). Emma and Noah appear to experience contentment with their time apart from their children, and vice versa, through maintaining strong communicative and affectionate connections with each other during their time together. The parents describe extending this time together by being involved in some capacity with teams their children are involved with. This is something they describe as being of value within the relationship, as whilst they are not physically present with their children throughout the team activity, they are involved in the background which brings a sense of togetherness for the family.

The parents describe feeling a sense of connection with their children through their involvement and perceive this to be a positive experience for their children also. *“We have seen that in that they have said they like that we’re involved. Us being involved makes them feel special. That helps them get more involved. They see everybody’s involved, I suppose” (Emma, 00:33:54).*

There is an overarching sense of the parents experiencing enjoyment from being a part of their children’s worlds, and that they perceive from their children a reciprocal enjoyment of their involvement. Ava and Oliver contribute to this sense of parents experiencing enjoyment from being connected with their children, by illustrating their experience of disconnecting from their children only to realise that they both prefer being with them.

It was quite funny because it was the first time we’d gone away together in a long time. You said, ‘You’re going to think it’s so wrong of me for thinking this. I’d really want to be home with the kids.’ And I kind of go, ‘Well that makes two of us, because that’s exactly where I thought I wanted to be.’ We’ll be very close with the kids. Very close with the kids. Like you see some people would go away for a week without the kids, we’re kind of going, ‘Oh no, oh goodness no. No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no.’ (Oliver, 00:35:37).

In their description of their experience, the parents identified both feeling as though it was wrong to prefer being all together as a family rather than being away together as a couple. The parents identify that they enjoy being with their children and prefer to have their children with them, rather than to have them cared for by others. The parents’ experience of this appears to be stemming from two sources; the first is identified as their sense of connectivity within the parent-child relationship, and the second is identified as their preference to be positioned as the people that their children take influence and receive care from.

I’d say it’s just our connection with them (Ava, 00:36:42). And we’ll always worry about the kids when they’re with someone else. I’m not saying we wouldn’t worry because our kids are probably fine but we would be concerned that ... you know, the best influences

come from us...the direction they're getting should always come from us (Oliver, 00:36:46).

In being mindful of the influence's others have on their children the parents describe spending as much time as they can between them with their children, doing everyday things together. Amelia and Lucas appear to share this sentiment, whereby they experience both within themselves and from their children, that there is a greater sense of security when the whole family is together. *"I do think they have a thing where they feel 100% more secure when all of us are together"* (Amelia, 00:55:30). The parents describe it as being their preference to have all of their family together, reconnecting with each other outside of their work and school commitments. There is a sense of experiencing connectivity within the parent-child relationship by being present with each other through their day-to-day life experiences.

Parents Connect with their Children Through Play and Being Present. Experiencing a sense of connectivity within their parent-child relationships through being present with each other as a family was shared by the parents. There is a sense that the connectivity experience is not based on doing something specific or going somewhere special; rather it is the *not* doing and instead focusing on being present, that appears to accommodate a sense of tuning into each other through a rather simplistic shared experience. For Mia and Liam, there appears to be a sense of great connectivity being felt when the household chores are dropped spontaneously, and time is spent with each other as a family.

The sun came out and I said, 'Let's jump in the car and just go down {to the beach} for half an hour, an hour with the kids. We did. We just dropped everything. Wellies and coats in the car. The sun was out, it was absolutely beautiful. It was just lovely, wasn't it? (Mia, 00:34:31). Yeah, it was...spontaneous. (Liam, 00:35:04). We took loads of pictures and we had real ... we didn't even bring so much as a bucket and spade. My little ones dug holes with their hands (Mia, 00:35:05).

There is a sense of the family's' experience of connectivity having been enhanced by the spontaneity and lack of planning for this time being spent together. There was an element of novelty to the experience whereby the family being together was, in that moment, preceding everything else in their worlds; being together was their top priority. The parents reflect on this type of shared experience as being in line with their natural way of being, but they extend that it is not the only manner in which they can experience relational connectivity.

To me, that was real connecting, that real quality time with each other where you just drop all the jobs and actually spend time together. You could see in the kids they just loved it and we loved it too. I suppose we're outdoorsy kinds of people. I also think of the time we'd have a treat and have pizza on the couch in front of the tele and that's really connecting as well, but just in a different way (Mia, 00:35:17).

It seems that the experience of feeling connected as a family through being present in the moment with each other can come in many shapes and forms, from trips to the beach to watching a movie. The key underlying element appears to be that of being present with each other and having nothing else on the agenda at that time. Charlotte and Henry discuss their range of experiences of feeling connected together as a family, and the benefits that they feel this has for both themselves and their children. For the parents, familial togetherness can be centred around planned outings and through incorporating the whole family into structured activities, such as the training of one of their children's sports teams. There is a shared interest at play, whereby the whole family can enjoy being together whilst engaging in an activity that they individually enjoy an element of.

We get to do more nice outings, and we could go to the cinema once every couple weeks. We go swimming weekly together (Charlotte, 11:44:00). One child is going for football training, and sometimes we bring the rest of the kids into that environment, as well, like play around. So, it's kind of us all as a family getting out together to go and enjoy the same kind of things (Henry, 00:11:56).

Charlotte and Henry highlight that their experience of familial connectivity is, however, not centred around what they are doing together. Rather, the key factor is that they are engaging with each other in a manner that is free from the usual busyness of their lives. They describe simple day to day activities, which at the weekend can be partaken in by the whole family whereby they fall into sync with each other's ways of being. Holiday time, they describe, as the ideal in terms of feeling the benefits of connectivity for all of the family; benefits that the parents describe as extending far beyond the time that they are actually on holiday.

Like we went on a family holiday there and it was the best thing we ever did. Because everyone was definitely more in harmony and in sync and connected and happier. And we all kind of knew how each other worked and gave each other space, and it was just lovely... But, sometimes, like the weekends, if we have something like a movie evening, or just simple stuff or go for a walk or go to the park. I think it's when you take a time out from just the hectic ness of life and just... get a chance to connect to them (Charlotte, 00:28:09).

There is a sense of the hectic nature of life for a young working family, being a barrier to overcome to experience familial connectivity. The parents describe the value of their holiday time together being that of, not being somewhere specific on a holiday, but rather of having everyone's focus on simply being together. This experience of familial togetherness appears to allow for not only togetherness as a unit, but also individual time between each parent and each child. The benefits of which, the parents describe, as being long lasting for their children. They equate the experience to one that fills their children up with what they need, which is perceived as being dedicated present time with their parents.

Like you were saying that the holidays make a huge difference. Especially when we're so many together, and it's hard to give them that time. Then, when you're on holidays, it's like an overload of what they were missing, they're getting. They completely change as children. Then, it's like you're just plugging them in and powering them up again for

another few months. I think we see huge benefits in that of them getting that because we're right there beside them from morning till night, and it's 100% attention for anybody who wants it. And there's nobody left out (Henry, 00:30:25).

In addition to feeling that this dedicated time for enhanced connectivity is of benefit to their children, the parents describe it as being of value to themselves also. They describe this connectivity time, away from day-to-day stresses, as helping to guide them forward along their parenting journey. “*You can actually see out the window, and you're being okay, we've got this now, so let's go forward*” (Charlotte, 00:49:53). There is a sense that when the parents feel connected within their parent-child relationships, they experience a feeling of renewed confidence in their parenting that allows them to see the path forward. Emma and Noah reflect on their experience of having time away. They describe setting aside a few weeks each year to travel to where they can go back to basics to focus on being with each other and enjoying each other's company.

Yeah, and when we go on holidays... we usually take three weeks of holidays, all of us and we head off, and we go to the campsites and we don't make friends with other campers...we're both quiet introverted...It's a big chunk of time where we spend time together completely... (Emma, 00:48:51).

As the parents describe their time together on holidays, a sense of the family experiencing togetherness through all of it emerges. It seems that whilst the parents and their children do not spend every minute together whilst on holidays, there is a sense of the parents being fully available to their children throughout these few weeks. The parents describe a feeling of enhanced connection between themselves and their children during this time, whether that is in doing things together that they enjoy or by all relaxing in proximity to each other. Noah and Emma identify themselves and their children as generally having similar interests and so, tending to be able to find things to do together that they share an interest in. The parents note that they encourage these interests, which are similar to their own, in their children.

It was interesting but you know, we're lucky that we're all interested in the same kind of things...And again we're encouraging that (Emma, 00:51:55). Yeah so, we'd pick the activities that we think that all of us would like and enjoy (Noah, 00:52:28).

It appears that the experience of connection in this instance isn't just through doing something specific together, but rather it's held within the shared experience. This shared experience appears to be felt as connecting as there exists, within the members of the family, a shared disposition towards that type of experience. The essence within the families' experiences of connectivity appears to be that of simply being together, irrespective of what they are doing particularly. Amelia and Lucas share their experience of homing in on this time together over and above what they do together as a family. *"It's just about us being together. They don't care what we're doing or where we are. Long as it's all of us"* (Amelia, 00:11:48). This shift in focus has led the family towards doing more things within the home together, whereby the time is spent together, engaged in shared activities rather than getting to and from structured outings. The parents describe every day chores becoming opportunities for familial connectivity as their children seek out their own opportunities to connect with their parents by joining in with the shared household duties.

They want to come around and clean with me (Amelia, 00:18:00). But that's a thing of doing something with you as well though, I think (Lucas, 00:18:02). Yeah, I think it's about spending time (Amelia, 00:18:04) ...I think that's just trying to be in your company, it's not that they're, that they want to be cleaning (Lucas, 00:18:28).

As the parents describe this experience of connecting as a family there is a sense of jobs needing to be done in the house, but that this is not becoming a barrier to having the family spend time together. The parents get the jobs done and their children get involved with them; there is again a sense of a connectivity through a shared experience together, albeit via an everyday chore. The parents speak of this time together as being loved by both themselves and their children. *"We're all together doing a job, but we're all at it together"* (Amelia, 00:32:55). The

family appears to feel most connected within their parent-child relationships when all members of the family are together, proximate to each other and able to spend quality time together. Within the relationship, physical affection appears to be valued by all with the parents placing great importance on this for their children.

Yeah, our family hug or something like that (Lucas, 00:10:29). They're very into that. And I find they find that more rewarding than handing them a toy...It's not the material things, it's the quality of time together (Amelia, 00:10:51).

For the parents there is a sense of placing great value on being with their children to hug them, over and above anything of material value. Sophia and Ben discuss the simple ways in which they experience familial connectivity through just being with each other and hugging each other. *"Yes, it's not material. They're the important parts. They are the parts that we enjoy" (Ben, 00:23:47). "When we're having family hugs" (Sophia, 00:23:55). "We're quite affectionate in general" (Ben, 00:23:56).* For these parents the experience of connectivity is deemed as not being achieved through materialistic means, but rather through the experience of physical means of affection between themselves and their children. The experience of physical touch playing an important role in feeling a sense of connectivity within the parent-child relationships was discussed by Ava and Oliver. *"We hug a lot. We're big into hugging... We'd hold hands...We think that's important...We have fun...We like to show love to each other, let the kids see love" (Oliver, 00:26:54).* Through experiencing hugging and holding hands the parents are not only feeling this sense of connectivity themselves with their children, but also, they are consciously setting out to display signs of love and affection for their children. There is a sense of their feeling that it is important for their children to experience love in their worlds and that they incorporate this playfully throughout their days with each other. This connected time together, displaying love and affection, appears to be of great importance to the parents. Early on in the discussion Sophia and Ben identified the times that their family were all together, just

being, without distraction from everyday life, as being of great importance to them in terms of their experience of their parenting journey.

You do need to hold on to those quiet moments, those little nuggets of where it is just us and we are all just together. Not thinking about cooking dinner or what's next or who's working or who's minding them tomorrow, just the here and the now. Because if you don't do that, I think it just feels like work and effort all the time that you are constantly expelling this mass amount of energy into parenting and keeping everything going (Sophia, 00:05:22).

This time being with each other appears to do more than provide the family with the opportunity to experience connectivity within the parent-child relationship. It appears as though the value of having this connected time with each other allows the parents to experience joy in being parents, who can be clouded by the everyday demands entwined within the parenting journey. It appears to give the parents the chance to see the essence of parenting rather than predominantly seeing the workload of juggling the demands of logistically figuring out family life. The parents discussed their experiences of connecting with their children through the medium of play. It appears as though playfulness is a key connectivity tool for the parents and that the parents place great importance on facilitating play within their families. There is a sense of the parents entering into their children's worlds through play, as a means of connecting with their children. For Mia and Liam, they describe always making room for play in their day.

We just close the doors and play in a section. I really feel like even if it's only for five minutes a day, that it happens. I think in some ways I probably take it for granted the idea of connectedness because I like to nearly ensure it happens...It's not something that's held for Sunday or something like that. If it's just for five minutes and then it's wrapped up because someone has to go to bed, well fair enough (Liam, 00:37:01).

There is a feeling here of the parent closing off a space for that connectivity through play to happen. In a way, the parent is forming a physical play space, creating a boundary between it

and the world, and placing their full attention on being with each other in the play at that moment. Whilst Mia and Liam see play as a primary element of their daily lives with their children, Harper and Mason find that it works best for them to set aside a day in their week for play. This is a day that is solely for the family to be together and to be fully dedicated to play, without distractions of other people or of household chores. The establishment of this day came about as the parents felt that as life became busier, with their children having started school and with them having resumed full time work, opportunities for play were lessened.

Earlier, we used to play a lot of games and all. Now, I'm trying to establish a system wherein at least in a day, we'll not meet anyone on Sundays, and that's our family time.

That's it. No friends, nobody. It's just us... no housework, nothing, just to play and sit and spend time at least one day in a week (Harper, 00:46:19).

Creating a protected time and space for the family to be together and to play together seems to be important for the parents. There is a sense of urgency about this need to have a dedicated space and time to connect with each other, as the parents discuss it. Perhaps there is a feeling of when life gets busy with work, school, and other independent activities, the connectivity within the parent-child relationship requires a commitment to be maintained. Mason outlines a secondary value of having this space together, to play and to be. *"Listen to each other. That might bring the debates down and more bond towards each other and understanding"* (Mason, 00:46:28). Through the play and through the uninterrupted time together there is space created to listen to each other and to understand each other. The parent appears to feel that this brings about a greater sense of alignment with each other and consequently results in less disagreements within the family. Charlotte and Henry describe their attention being drawn to ways in which they can enhance the communicative exchanges that take place within their parent-child relationship. They describe there being a correlation between experiencing connectivity with their children and communicating playfully with them.

Getting down to their level...Actually getting down to your knees and talking to them at their level rather than looking down at them, and possibly giving them hugs and stuff like that. Where before, I wouldn't have even...thought that mattered, but now I see the benefits of...playing with them and wrestling and doing all kinds of superhero stuff with them (Henry, 43:59:00).

There is a sense of the parent's experience of connected communication taking place through the parent entering their children's worlds through play and through them being at the same physical level as their children. For the parent, presenting their message in a manner that aligns with their children's way of interacting with the world, appears useful in terms of supporting their experience of connectivity within their parent-child relationship. Relating with their children by entering their worlds through play appears to be a key experience of the parents. *"I actually get down and play with them and read to them...Getting down and into their worlds, I suppose, being a childlike"* (Charlotte, 43:34:00). The parents describe feeling most connected with their children when being child-like themselves. Whilst their children are described as being given space to play independently and on technology, the parents appear to feel that engaging with each other in play is more valuable. There is a sense of preferring to be engaged together in simple, uncomplicated play encounters involving imaginative-play toys and the natural environment of the outdoors. *"They just want to sit down and play with dinosaurs or go out and walk around picking up bugs and stuff. Sometimes it's just the simple things"* (Henry, 50:44:00). There is a sense of the parents returning to basics, using simple play encounters to experience a sense of connection between themselves and their children. Sophia and Ben share their experiences of feeling most connected with each other as a family as occurring when engaged together in play. *"I think it's the simple moments when we're all playing together"* (Sophia, 00:23:34). The value of these play experiences appears to be both for the parents and for their children. Bringing a sense of fun into the relationship with their children appears to be a strong feature in how they connect with each other. Ava and Oliver identify as being fun parents with

their children when the opportunities arise. *“We have lots of fun doing it too, we’ll have good fun, we’re big into messing and jumping round the house and singing in the car and sort of, so we’re fun”* (Oliver, 00:29:32). As the parents describe their fun time together with their children there is a sense of this being experienced in a manner that is mutually enjoyable for all. There is a feeling that parents are not having fun with their children for the sake of their children, but rather are genuinely enjoying this time together as a family. Whilst these play opportunities appear to be sporadically occurring, Noah describes how he experiences connectivity with their children through their mutual involvement in more structured play activities. *“A lot of my relationship with the kids is through sports and then I’m involved with them...”* (Noah, 13:49:00). Whilst the parent feels that these play opportunities together are a key element of their relationship with each other, he also balanced this view by indicating that perhaps the structure around the activity, in some instances, leads to less time being able to be spent with each other directly. Whilst a bond appears to be created within the parent-child relationship through this shared activity, the parent appears to feel that, at times, it leaves little room for other more naturally occurring play and connectivity opportunities. The greater good of partaking in this activity together, as perceived by the parents for their children in terms of them having enhanced social play opportunities with peers, appears to outweigh such potential disadvantages.

Theme 2.3: Parents’ Aspirations for their Children’s Futures Influences their ways of Being with their Children

The last of the three themes that emerge from the overarching theme of the parent-child relationship, is the theme of the parents' aspirations for their children's future influencing their way of being with their children in the present. I will explore this by looking at how the parents perceive their experiences of their ways of being with their children as being influenced by their aspirations for their children's futures. I will also illustrate how the parents experience holding

boundaries for their children and how these boundaries are perceived to be in line with the hopes and ambitions that the parents hold for their children.

The parents describe being influenced in their way of being with their children from when they are young, by their aspirations for their children for when they get older. Sophia and Ben describe a conscious process of exposing their children, from a young age to opportunities that they feel would be of benefit to them as they grow older. This influence, of how they hope their children to be, on how they are with them in the here and now, however, does not appear restrictive. The parents describe focusing on exposure to certain experiences in their children's early years so that their children can develop and expand upon these in line with their own interests as they grow.

We'd be very conscious of that now while they're so young because it starts so young. You need to give them the direction or the opportunity or the passion for certain things while they're young so that they can then nurture that themselves or let it grow or develop and see where it goes. Or change along the way as they get older, they might move from different interests, from one interest to another and that's fine and I think we'd be supportive of that (Sophia, 00:09:36).

The parents emphasise their openness to supporting whatever path their children decide to take themselves as they grow and develop. They appear to feel that their parental role is to expose their children to a wide variety of possible passion pathways that can be nurtured should their interests take them in such a direction as they grow. The parents relate the aspirations that they have for their children to how they feel that they are as people. The parental inclination towards a certain way of being appears to, in itself, bear an impact on the ambitions held by the parents for their children and to consequently impact their way of being within the parent-child relationship.

I suppose we'd be passionate about being outside and being in nature. That is something that we want our kids to have as well so that we can have certain things on a

family level that we can enjoy together hopefully for the rest of our lives (Sophia, 00:10:03).

There is a sense from the parents that their hopes for their children, as aligned with their natural way of being, will bring about a shared interest between themselves and their children. There appears to be an extended hope that this aligned interest and way of being will be conducive to maintaining a connected parent-child relationship throughout their lifespans. There is a sense of an established commonality that the parents share, now being transferred into their parenting so that it can transcend onto their children. The influence of how the parents identify as people on the ambitions they hold for their children is illustrated by Emma and Noah. They identify their conscious efforts to expose their children to their moral philosophical position of feminism, in line with their ambitions for their children.

One thing that would be important to me as a parent, I would like them to be feminists.

And I think their father models good behaviour because he does cook, he does clean, he does nurture, and I think that's very important and as well, I suppose seeing me go out to work... (Emma, 00:41:49). At times they've asked me about famous people or scientists or things. I always try to name a woman, explain what they did and what they do (Noah, 00:42:47).

The influence of their own positions in the world on their hopes for their children and on their way of being with their children is evident. The parents describe making a conscious effort to create exposure to gender balanced roles, both inside and outside the home, to instil this way of being into their children. There is a sense of creating a space inside the family home that is conducive to a way of being in the world outside of the home, for their children, in line with their parents' ambitions. Charlotte and Henry describe their hopes of giving their children all that they can within the family home to support their abilities to cope with the challenges they feel that their children will face in the world as they grow. There is a sense of the parents' ambitions for

their children being for them to be more prepared for these anticipated worldly challenges, than perhaps they were.

You're just hoping you're creating better individuals, or giving them a better chance at life, or a better set, and equipping them with, I suppose, tools with whatever comes their way. We're just trying to make life easier for them at home for them because they face enough challenges when they get out into the big bad world (Charlotte, 00:07:04).

The aspirations held by the parents for their children appear to centre around creating an environment that will foster the growth of their children into the type of people who they feel will be ready for the world outside of the familial environment. This aspiration also appears to influence what the parents feel their children should be introduced to in terms of activities outside of the home. However, fulfilling these aspirations, in a practical sense, appears to bring about its own set of challenges for the family.

You're trying to do your best for your kids by introducing them to everything, but by introducing them to everything and not only a specific couple of things, you're actually not bringing anything to the table. Where you're half doing everything, and you're rushing around. You know you can't do everything because you're just creating stressful environments then by trying to achieve too much (Henry, 00:48:35).

It appears as though the parents feel that the benefits of trying to expose all of their children to everything that they perceive to be good for them, struggle to outweigh the challenges brought about by the practicalities of doing so. There is a sense that overdoing it with fulfilling their aspirations for their children can end up achieving, for them, the opposite of what was intended; that is, their children being exposed to stress rather than to opportunity. Over time, Henry describes coming to realise, when it comes to fulfilling their hopes for their children in this regard, that “*less is more*” (Henry, 00:49:00). Contemplation of a similar nature appears to take place for Amelia and Lucas, who describe themselves as consistently being engaged in a conversation with each other about what is best for their children at a given time. “*How they're*

doing or what we want from them..." (Lucas, 00:21:04) "Yeah" (Amelia, 00:21:08). The parents describe negotiating a balance between exposing their children to what they feel is good for them, in line with their aspirations for them, and being mindful of not adding stress to their children's lives unnecessarily. "There are sometimes when I feel like we're always like, 'Come on, come on, we have to go here.' Yeah, sometimes you think...the poor things. It's a constant rush" (Amelia, 00:42:52). The experience of the parents appears to be one of rushing and racing to get their children to all that they need to get to. This, however, appears to be balanced by limiting their children's activities to those that the parents perceive to have benefits that outweigh these challenges. One example given by Amelia and Lucas is their decision to continue with swimming lessons for their children as they feel it is necessary for them, despite it being, at times, a difficult experience for both the parents and their children.

But I still think we're doing the right thing (Lucas, 00:43:46). Ya that they're able to swim (Amelia, 00:43:49). Learning how to swim now is as important as anything, and for their own safety. Who knows when that could happen or that they could get out of difficulty if needed be (Lucas, 00:43:50).

It appears as though there is a greater good being met for their children, whereby the parents feel that having their children engage in this activity will allow them to acquire a skill that can potentially be used to save their lives into the future. There is a sense of weighing up the experience of stress or anxiety potentially created by going to an activity, against the value that exposure to this activity can hold for their children. This process is one that is experienced through the nature of the aspirations held by the parents for their children.

Parents Hold Boundaries for their Children in line with their Aspirations for them.

As the parents explore their experiences of their parent-child relationships they discuss the boundaries that they hold, for their children, within these relationships. These boundaries appear to connect with the aspirations held by the parents for their children. Sophia and Ben share their perceptions of how they need to be when holding certain boundaries for their

children. They aim to do this in a manner that is conducive to a way of being that fits with the aspirations that they have for their children's development. *"They're looking to you to calm them, to be the stone. If you can't do that for them, then they have nowhere to go with their feelings and their emotions. So they spiral even more. My logical brain knows that..."* (Sophia, 00:48:32).

Whilst the parents describe their experience of recognising cognitively what needs to be done to fulfil the objective of their ambitions, they also share their experience of struggling, in the moment, to deliver on their intentions.

In the moment (Ben, 00:49:06). In the moment...I think it's human to react, but again it's something that you build on. You want to be better at. You want to master it freely, especially if you have more kids. That means more challenges. More tantrums. You'd like to think that a lot of these skills, because you practice them so much, you become very good at them. And that's what I would like (Sophia, 00:49:14).

There is a sense of the parents holding onto the ideal of how they want to see themselves putting boundaries in place for their children. They describe committing themselves to practice accomplishing the skill of enacting boundaries in a manner that aligns with the aspirations that they hold for their children. Charlotte and Henry share their experiences of encountering challenges when it comes to being consistent in enacting boundaries.

For example, electronics...they always want electronics, but we're very strict on it. But, sometimes one or other of us might just need that extra few minutes, and just say, 'Here, just give it to them.' Then, the other might say, 'I gave it to them already, they've had enough today.' We try to do it. It's very hard (Charlotte, 00:14:27).

The parents battle between what they feel is required of them to align with their aspirations for their children and what they feel is needed in a given moment, in situations where these two ideas differ. The parents appear to place a value on holding the boundaries consistently for their children to facilitate their development in a manner that is in line with their parents' aspirations

for them. The parents also appear to appreciate that there are times when they need to let these boundaries relax in a moment when another need prevails.

There has to be give and take. It's very hard because you do need that breather sometimes, and it's not the end of the world if they have it 10 minutes extra. But, at the same time, you want the rules and boundaries to kind of stay very much intact if they're going to respect you, and listen to you, and take to a new perspective (Charlotte, 00:15:38).

From the parents' discussion there is a sense that the objective of maintaining the boundaries is for their children's greater good and that implementing these boundaries can, at times, go against that which is convenient for the parents. The boundaries set by the parents for their children appear to align not only to the aspirations that they hold for their children, but also to their own moral values. Amelia and Lucas discuss their experience of upholding boundaries for their children, which are aligned to the values they want their children to have as they grow up, stemming from the values they have for themselves.

We know what we want for our kids, as well, isn't it? (Lucas, 01:00:23). Yeah, we're both...let's not lavish them with material things all the time (Amelia, 01:00:25).

Yeah...going back to the manner's thing, if you get something, you say thank you for it, and you realize that you're after getting something you know (Lucas, 01:00:35).

These boundaries around manners and materialism are upheld by the parents in line with how they are as people and in line with what they want for their children's development. The parents communicate a great sense of pride when they see these values in action in their day-to-day experiences with their children. *"We can walk into a toyshop with them and buy something for someone's birthday, and they wouldn't ask us for anything" (Lucas, 01:00:58). "And I'd be very proud of that" (Amelia, 01:01:04).* The parents share their experience of maintaining these boundaries with their children in a manner that is clear and consistent. From what the parents

describe, it seems as though there is a predictability surrounding the parents' responses to their children's requests that emerge in a manner that is not aligned with their parents' aspirations for them.

And they might be in there and say, 'Oh, I like that.' 'Well then, put it on your list, and we'll see what Santa says.' And 'Okay.' And that's the end of it, and there's no dramas, there's no kick-off. It's back into the car and that's it. Or, they might say, 'I want a treat.' 'But it's the middle of the week and it's a random day. You're not having a treat. You have to earn a treat.' And we'd both be very like that (Amelia, 01:01:20). Yeah, absolutely (Lucas, 01:01:46).

There is a sense of predictability created by the parents holding these value-based boundaries, making it relatively easy for their children to respond to. From what the parents describe there is no reactivity to their responses, given by their children. The boundaries appear to be upheld through a routine set of responses that their children expect. The parents maintain this consistency to support what it is that they want for their children. There too is a sense of routine being a key factor in maintaining a boundary for the greater good of their children, in the example provided by Ava and Oliver.

We have our routine (Ava, 00:58:38). Yeah (Oliver, 00:58:50). Brush their teeth, go to the bathroom, read stories, tuck in, kiss goodnight, and lights out and they always get their routine unless now and then there's something on, they're late going to bed (Ava, 00:59:02).

As the parents shared their example of a routine that is maintained in their family, it was communicated as a boundary that was present for their children, rather than for the parents. They expanded their discussion to outline the value of maintaining this routine for their children and the presence of predictable responses to their children's requests to veer from the routine. Whilst there are occasional exceptions, the parents describe consistently maintaining the boundaries that they have in place for their children. The presence of boundaries appears to be

experienced as both a cornerstone of the parent-child relationship and as a key contributor to the process of aligning the parents' aspirations for their children.

Conclusion

I have outlined here the results of the analysis of the current study as presented in the two superordinate themes that were identified in this analysis, that of 'the parenting relationship' and that of 'the parent-child relationship'. In the chapter to follow, I will discuss these results, structured by the superordinate and subordinate themes, in relation to existing research in the field.

Discussion

The journey of parenting was explored by conducting paired depth semi-structured interviews with seven sets of co-parents in a quest to understand parents' perceptions of their families' relationships. The data, in the form of transcriptions of the interviews, was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The findings resulted in the identification of key themes in relation to co-parents' journeys of parenting with particular reference to their experiences and perceptions of their familial relationships. Herein, I will discuss the two superordinate themes identified in the analysis of this study, that of the parents' perceptions of how they experience their parenting relationships and their parent-child relationships. I will discuss these themes in relation to literature discussed within the literature review and in relation to additional research that applies specifically to that which emerged from the study's findings. I will embed these findings, where applicable, to key existential and developmental psychology theories.

The Parenting Relationship

In looking at how parents experienced their parenting journeys, with particular reference to their familial relationships, one of the two central themes that arose was the parenting relationship. The parents described their perceptions of their parenting relationships in relation to their experiences of parental solidarity, of the differences in their individual parenting styles, and of connecting with each other through their shared role of parenting. The importance of good quality parental relationships is highlighted by Majoribanks (2016). The findings of the current study indicates that in parents' direct experiences of their parenting roles, they perceive their co-parenting relationships to be of importance. Amato (2005) found a positive connection between parental relationship quality and positive outcomes for children and families. Moore *et al.* (2011) found that "parents' relationship quality is very consistently and positively associated with a range of child and family outcomes, including: child behavior problems (externalizing), child

social competence, child school engagement, child internalizing (depression), parent-child communication, and parental feelings of aggravation” (p. 1). Goldberg and Carlson (2014) found a reciprocal relationship between the relationship quality of parents and their children’s behavioural problems, with their study suggesting that positive interactions between parents are of benefit to children who live with both of their parents. One of the primary theoretical viewpoints concerning how parents’ relationships with each other can impact upon all members of the family is that of family systems theory (Bowen, 1966). Many of the sub-themes that were found in the current study can be imbedded within family systems theory which indicates that “multigenerational patterns of family interaction, assigned roles within the family, social triangulation, and the tendency for all emotional systems to seek and maintain homeostasis function to affect behavior and emotional health” (Holden, 2010, p. 53).

Parental Solidarity

Experiencing parental solidarity was described by parents as being a particularly important feature of their co-parenting relationship. This relational way of being constituted having a personal set of core values in relation to parenting that aligned with those of the co-parent, having a commitment to aligning personal parenting positions with those of the co-parent, maintaining open channels of communication with the co-parent, engaging with differences that arise with the co-parent, and being committed to a team based approach to parenting with the co-parent.

The results of the current study identify the parents' experiences of parental solidarity through their holding of a united front with their respective co-parents in their approaches with their children. They describe it as a naturally occurring process based on the alignment of their aspirations of the type of family that they will be. Their ability to do this is indicated as one that requires a relatively strong sense of self, whereby their individual positions can be adjusted based on a perceived greater need to hold a position of solidarity with their co-parent in a given

moment. This is not described as a parent versus child approach, rather its rationale is indicated as the parents protecting their children from exposure to parental conflict. They are providing their children with consistency in terms of their parenting and their implementation of boundaries. From an existential viewpoint, the parents' discussions of their sense of self, indicated as playing a role in their way of being along the parenting journey, is fitting with the personal dimension of human existence identified within existential theory (Binswanger, 1963; Deurzen, 1997; Deurzen and Adams, 2011). Their sense of individual self-worth along this journey was identified through their assessing of their strengths and weaknesses, their struggles between their freedoms and responsibilities, their experiences of their changing identities and their reconfigurations of their corresponding sense of self. Carbines *et al.* (2017) identifies that parents in the earlier stages of the parenting journey consider how their parenting role affects them as individuals. In line with what was identified by participants in the current study Carbines *et al.* (2017) outlines a participant describing having just been responsible for themselves for a very long time and even when in a relationship with their partner, retaining their own individuality, indicated by their freedom to do things by themselves and their freedom to be by themselves. The role of being in a co-parenting relationship appears to cause a shift in this sense of individual freedom, whereby individualistic thoughts are replaced with collective thoughts. The needs of the children or of the family unit are put to the fore of the parents' individual needs. Carbines *et al.* (2017) outlines parents' experiences of this shift of viewpoint by describing parents' experiences of making decisions prior to being parents compared to after becoming parents.

Prior to parenthood, each participant had developed a sense of self...their choices were often made in response to how they would be affected as individuals. On becoming parents, they reported developing new viewpoints from which they considered and responded to parenting situations. The personal viewpoint, developed from childhood,

was expanded with viewpoints related to the infant, the other parent, and the family unit (Carbines *et al.*, 2017, p. 228).

This shift of viewpoint appears to be experienced by parents not only as impacting their sense of self but also impacting their outputs into the world and their ways of doing things. The shift brings them into the social dimension of their existential world whereby they experience a polarity of submission versus dominance in trying to navigate the juxtaposition of their own viewpoints with those of their co-parenting partners (Binswanger, 1963; Deurzen, 1997; Deurzen and Adams, 2011). It appears as though finding a balance in this realm is conducive to co-parents being able to consistently support each other's positions when engaging with their children. Seeing each other's views as equal, rather than one being submissive and the other dominant appears key to establishing this practice of parental solidarity, whereby positive communications take place between the co-parents, around the position that is upheld with their children.

Aligned Core Values. Stemming from the personal positions of each of the parents in a co-parenting unit, were their own core values, that related to how they saw their positions in the world, how they navigated their moral development, and how they envisaged passing these values onto another generation. Looking at this momentarily through an existential lens, this discussion of their core values is fitting with the spiritual dimension of human existence identified within existential theory (Binswanger, 1963; Deurzen, 1997; Deurzen and Adams, 2011). Their core values appear to create a spiritual dome in which they can navigate their way through the journey of parenting that they were on. Their sense of purpose along this journey was identified through their values, belief systems and ways of meaning making. Prinds *et al.* (2018), whilst focusing on the earlier stages of the parenting journey with new mothers specifically, suggests that parenthood "can facilitate considerations of existential meaning-making" (p. 5) and recommends further research to explore how "motherhood changes existential meaning in life" (p. 5). Prinds *et al.* (2018) also identifies the value of parents having

an awareness of the existential dimensions of the changes in their relationship with their partner that is likely to take place upon entering parenthood. Having aligned core values appears to make the changes that come with moving from being a couple to being co-parents easier to manage. Carbines *et al.* (2017) describe three elements of parental reflections that relate to their parenting journeys; namely their past experiences of being parented, their present experiences of their day-to-day reality, and their future desires of the type of family they aspire to shape and develop. All of these dimensions come together in influencing the steps the parents take as they navigate their way through their co-parenting relationship to support their parenting journey.

Communication. Falling into sync with a co-parenting partner, is described as happening in a naturally progressive manner, however it is also identified as being aided significantly by having a constant supportive pathway of communication open with each other in relation to the shared role of parenting. Having these open channels of communication seems conducive to being able to find a balance between being connected with their respective co-parent, with their children, and also with their individual selves. Spending time sharing each other's views on matters and allowing the making of decisions to be a communicative process was a key feature of the parent's descriptions of how they remained in solidarity with each other. Carbines *et al.* (2017) found the power of communication identified by co-parents as occurring through engaging in a constant reflective process with each other by asking questions about how they handled situations and discussing together if there was potentially a better way to go about things in the future. Linking the parents' shared points of view back to their personal growth as individuals, Carbines *et al.* (2017) also identified that "although each participant developed individually as a parent, the presence of two parents with responsibility for the same children created the need for a joining viewpoint from which to consider family management" (p. 229). This personal growth as individuals appears to allow for supportive communication pathways to remain open between the co-parents, based on their common interest in and

responsibility for their children. In terms of the parents' sense of having shared values and connections with each other, this was indicated as playing a role in their way of being along the parenting journey. Their discussion of this is fitting with the social dimension of human existence identified within existential theory (Binswanger, 1963; Deurzen, 1997; Deurzen and Adams, 2011). Their sense of their social selves along this journey was identified through their acknowledgement of their relational connectivity's, their openness to connect with each other and to accept a relational way of being with their respective co-parenting partners.

Tensions were identified as having been experienced by the parents whilst existing within a relational way of being with each other. These times of tension are reflected on, by the parents, as being some of the toughest in their relationship. The main element of their experiences of these tensions was that of their communication systems breaking down, largely resulting from sources of stress external to their relationship. Whilst the current study did not explore specifically these external sources of stress, it was indicated as stemming from juggling demands from a variety of sources, including work, childcare, and broader family members. Marjoribands (2016) identified a common theme arising in research being that of parents experiencing negative impacts on their relationships from having an increased cost of living when having children combined with a potentially reduced capacity to work as a result of having children. In managing these stresses that infiltrated the parents' relationship there was a tension between introversion and extraversion. When leaning towards the introvert side of the scale, communication would be experienced as breaking down as the parent internalised the stress and did not share or discuss it with their co-parent. The systematic review of Delicate *et al.* (2018) identified parents experiencing negative communication when said communication was insufficient (Ahlbourg and Strandmark, 2001) and argumentative (Sevón, 2012). However, disagreements were found to not always be experienced as negative and actually seen as an important part of forming a healthy relationship (Premberg *et al.*, 2008). When the parents were in disagreement they were still communicating, which appears to be experienced as less

problematic than disengaging from communication and internalising difficulties individually. The effective use of communication with each other, supporting and respecting each other's viewpoint even when different to each parent's original position appears to be a key tool in maintaining the co-parenting relationship. As such, disagreements can be conducive to a healthy co-parenting relationship once the channels of effective and supportive communication remain open. For parents transitioning into parenthood, effective communication was identified as being a useful navigational tool during this adjustment period (Ahlborg and Strandmark, 2001). Furthermore, Bateman and Bharj (2009) found that having good communication within a relationship can protect against relationship breakdowns.

Being a Team. The parents identified their way of working together as a family as being akin to that of the workings of a team. Specifically the parents identify themselves together as being like a micro team existing within the macro team of the family as a whole. At times, the tension between competition and cooperation appears to be experienced by parenting when navigating their way of being with each other in relation to parenting their children. The team appears to work well when parents feel connected with the other family members, but the parents describe feeling that if either of them feel disconnected that this has a knock on impact upon their children. As such, the goal of the parents appears to be to keep the team connected and functioning. Carbines *et al.* (2017) found that parents equated their parenting unit as a team working together, whereby they were “developing mutual understandings with the other parent to guide how they cared for their children” (p. 229). Whilst being a part of this team involves the development of a mutual understanding between co-parenting partners, this does not require absorbing all of oneself within that team, instead individual interests and approaches can exist in matters that are not related to the specific task of the team. However, when it comes to decision making, it appears as though parents look at what is best for the whole family in this process. The family unit is the team and for the team to function well the individual activities are decided upon in a manner that works for the whole team.

Differences in Individual Parenting Styles

A primary way in which each individual parent contributed an element of their individualised selves to the parenting relationship was through adopting a style of parenting that was individual to them and often differed from the style adopted by their co-parent. Experiencing differences in their parenting styles and embracing the differences in styles practiced by their co-parenting partners was described by parents as being particularly important features of their co-parenting relationships. This individualised way of being in relation to their children was contributed to by the influence of how each parent was parented, on the parenting style they had adopted upon stepping into parenthood.

The findings of the current study indicate that parents experience differences in their parenting styles when compared to their co-parents and that these differences appear to line up with each other's individual way of being. One's individuality and personal way of being in the world allows for naturally occurring differences in how each person is as a person and this appears to transcend into individuals' tendencies in parenting. Whilst it seems natural that one would parent in a manner that aligns with how they are in the world generally, it appears that frustrations can arise within parents' relationships as a result of their differing parenting styles. These tensions appear to align with a competitive versus cooperative polarity and how they impact upon the co-parenting relationship depends on how they are managed by the respective parents. A key factor in whether parents experience these differences negatively or positively appears to be related to how supportive they perceive their co-parent to be with respect to these differences. Even in situations where co-parents experience each other as being opposite in their approaches to situations, it is possible for co-parents to remain connected to each other through their ability to accommodate the other's different approaches to that situation. In their formation of a co-parenting model, Feinberg (2002) identified as the first component of co-parenting that of the parents' experience of "support versus undermining in the parental role" (p. 176). In forming this component of the co-parenting model Feinberg (2002) identified parental

supportiveness as it featured in other related research findings. Parents' supportiveness can be experienced by affirming each other's parenting competencies (Belsky, Woodworth, and Crnic, 1996), by respecting the contributions made to the parenting by each other (McHale, 1995), and by honouring the decision made and authority shown by each other (Weissman and Cohen, 1985). Whilst the contribution of the latter study, conducted almost 40 years ago, is questionable in a modern day context and in the context of the current findings whereby authority did not feature in the parents' accounts of their experiences of parenting, the element of honouring a co-parents position is supported by the current findings. Some parents identified, in the current study, as adopting a best foot forward style approach to their differing parenting roles, in line with their natural personal dispositions. When the differences can be identified as complementary rather than contradictory, there is a sense of collaboration taking place between the parents in situations where they find they have differing approaches. Taking into account the variable contexts of the adopted approach to parenting and supporting each other in identifying these contextual differences appears to be a feature of the experiences of the co-parents. The parents also make reference to identifying with the broader functionality of their differing parenting roles which contributes to creating a balance for the children. Creating a balance for the children in how they are parented appears to be a common theme that emerged amongst parents as they discussed their acceptance of differing styles of parenting. This perspective progresses the focus from that of accepting a differing parenting style of a co-parent to seeing a value in both styles at play. In a way, the existence of one style provides the space for the other style to exist. This supportive co-operative approach facilitates both parents engaging in this interpersonal position as individuals with their own unique style. Having a supportive space for individuality within parenting appears to be something perceived positively within parents' experiences. Butler *et al.* (2020) describe parents experiencing improvements in their overall well-being and in their view of themselves after they experienced their approaches to parenting being affirmed. Whilst these affirmations were provided through a parenting intervention, it is

possible that affirmation from a co-parent would provide similar benefits, outlined specifically by Butler *et al.* (2020) as the parents “feeling empowered, gaining confidence in their parenting ability...a reduction in self-criticism [and] feelings of guilt...” (p. 192). The experience of having a parenting approach that is aligned with that of a co-parent whilst also being supported and affirmed to adopt a style of parenting that is in line with an individual's natural dispositions, may be of benefit in itself to an individual's overall well-being.

Influence of Own Upbringing on Parenting Style. A key individual experience brought into the co-parenting relationship by each parent was that of how they were each parented. When the parents discussed their individual styles of parenting they reflected on the influence their own upbringings had on the development of their styles of parenting. The process of reflection was noted as being useful in itself and is perhaps a consideration for parenting interventions to facilitate said reflections. The potential benefits associated with making space for this type of reflection to be undertaken by parents in the course of a parenting intervention is supported by Levac *et al.* (2008) and Wolfe and Haddy (2001). This process involves reflecting upon one's own experience of being parented and acknowledging how this impacts, in some way or another, how a parent's individual style of parenting is developed. Having an awareness of this influence can contribute to the parent being able to actively shape the manner in which it will impact upon how it is that they are as a parent. The contribution can be in a manner that motivates a parent to change the way in which their children will experience their childhoods, particularly when the parent had experienced an adverse childhood experience. Butler *et al.* (2020) found that parents engaged in a process of reflecting on their experiences of being parented during the course of their participation in a parenting programme. This process is described by Butler *et al.* (2020) as one experienced by parents as being “difficult and distressing” (p. 191), as it consisted of the parents “recognising this influence on their approach to parenting and the challenge of breaking the intergenerational cycle” (p. 191). The added complexities associated with transitioning to parenthood for parents faced with the challenge of

breaking intergenerational cycles is identified by Christie *et al.* (2017) and Madden *et al.* (2015). The contribution of the influence of how one was parented on how one parents can be in a manner that does not abolish the way in which one was parented. Rather, this influence can be utilised as a base upon which to build a parents' own style of parenting that is perceived to be best fitting for the societal context in which the parenting is taking place. Irrespective of the manner in which one's own experience of being parented contributes to how one is as a parent, having the belief and accepting that one has control over how they pave the path for their children appears to be an important part of the reflection process for parents.

Parents Connecting with each other Through their Shared Role of Parenting

It was found that parents perceive a sense of connectivity with their co-parent by virtue of sharing their experiences with each other along their journey of parenting. The sense of feeling connected with each other through their shared role of parenting is described as being established through having common goals for their children's care that they unite together in working towards. The results also indicate that parents experience challenges to their feelings of connectivity with each other and changes in how they connect with each other over time. Another element of the parents' experiences of connecting with each other through their shared role of parenting is that together they added to their individual self-identities the role of being a parent.

The findings of the current study indicate that along the shared journey of parenting, parents experience a sense of connectivity with their co-parent. Additionally there are times when they experience challenges to their connections with each other and changes to the way in which they feel connected with each other. The process of coming together to work collaboratively towards their shared goal, combined with there being a child who needs caring for, appears to be a unique opportunity for forming a stronger connection with a co-parenting partner. Sharing this stronger connection with each other appears to contribute towards the parents experiencing

their journey together as one where they can share their self-doubts about their parenting skills, to learn and grow together by providing relational support to each other. Butler *et al.* (2020) found, in relation to changes within the family experienced by parents following a parenting intervention, that “participants in two-parent families noted an improvement in communication with their partner, feeling closer and more supported by their partner allowing them to co-parent more effectively” (p. 193). Parents appear to experience their engagements with each other as largely being about the parenting element of their worlds. Having this piece of their individual worlds exclusively and mutually in common with their co-parent appears to be an element of the parents’ being that is fully embraced together. This feeling of connectivity that is experienced by co-parents is perhaps contributed to by the unique combination of elements that make up a co-parent’s way of being whereby they are regularly closely proximate to each other and engaging in reciprocal social interactions that are required to coordinate their mutual care of their children. Azhari *et al.* (2020) conducted a study that investigated “the influence of the physical presence of a co-parenting spouse on parental brain responses”, looking particularly at the influences on brain-to-brain synchrony, which is defined as the “matching of behavioural and physiological signals between two individuals” (p. 1). They found that brain-to-brain synchrony was enhanced in attentional and cognitive control mechanisms, uniquely, by the presence of participants’ co-parenting spouses. These findings indicate that having a co-parenting spouse present “might facilitate matched executive control processes that could help to organise couples’ upcoming joint behaviours” (Azhari *et al.*, 2020, p. 4) and are in line with the findings of Saxbe and Repetti (2010) and Diamond *et al.* (2008). Whilst synchrony is generally regarded as a positive aspect of relational being, Azhari *et al.* (2020) highlight that this is not always the case, as for co-parents it may contribute to them being more easily impacted by each other when in stressful situations. As is indicated by parents’ experiences in the current study, “caring for a child is an intensely demanding task that is qualitatively different from other life experiences” (Azhari *et al.*, 2020, p. 4; Deater-Deckard, 1998; Östberg and Hagekul, 2013). Throughout the journey of

parenting, parents appear to experience changes in their feelings of connectedness with each other and this is indicated as being experienced in the context of change within themselves and consequently in how they are with each other. A significant period of change for parents comes during the first stages of parenthood where they are adapting to a new way of being and of thinking. Having a new role within one's life, that is shared with another person, appears to take time to adjust to. Particularly with parenthood as one's position of thinking of oneself individually becomes dominated by thinking of the family unit collectively. The meta synthesis of Delicate *et al.* (2018) found that a period of short term strain can be experienced by parents as they adjust to their new roles as parents (Sevón, 2012; Deave and Johnson, 2008), but that parents can find greater strength within their relationship with each other once they have navigated together through this transition to parenthood period (Deave *et al.* 2008).

Together Incorporating Being a Parent into Self-Identity. Whilst adjusting to the new roles of being co-parents together comes an individual process of merging the identity of being a parent with one's existing self-identity. Premberg *et al.* (2008) found that this process brings about a new affinity for the parents. However, the current study highlights an experience of loneliness during the earlier days of parenting whereby the identity of being a parent feels all consuming. Nyström and Ohrling (2004) found that parents described their first year of parenthood as "living in a new and overwhelming world" (p. 324). During this period of adjustment to parenthood, the findings of the current study indicate that there is an experience of being lost within one's own identity as there is a sacrifice of oneself and one's social connections in favour of the demands of the children. Previous research indicates that the priority of parents during this time is their babies (Delicate *et al.*, 2018; Fox, 2009). This distinct shift in focus coupled with the challenges faced in adjusting to all that is encompassed within the parenting role is indicated as being made more difficult to cope with when parents find that the lived experience is contrary to how they had anticipated it being. The findings of Delicate *et al.*,

(2018) indicate that parents felt unprepared for the relational changes that took place during the early stages of parenthood.

The Parent-Child Relationship

In looking at how parents experienced their parenting journeys with particular reference to their familial relationships, the second central theme that arose was that of the parent-child relationship. The parents described their perceptions of their parent-child relationships in relation to their experiences of tuning into their children's needs, of connecting with their children, and of their aspirations for their children's futures. One of the primary theoretical viewpoints concerning parent-child relationships is that of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988), which proposes that a child's relationship with their primary attachment figure is central to how they develop socially and emotionally as they get older. The type of attachment, as described by attachment theory, that exists between the child and their primary attachment figure is formulated in a manner that defines the relationship as being secure or insecure. Another theoretical framework concerning parent-child relationships is that of family systems theory (Bowen, 1966). Rather than categorising or viewing as linear, the parent-child relationship, within a family systems theoretical base this relationship is viewed as multi-directional and existing in a broader inter-relational emotional unit, that of the family as a whole. Within the current research, the relationships between parent and child as perceived by the parents, were described in a manner that emphasised their connections with each other and how these connections were enhanced by making space in each other's lives for one another. The descriptions of the parents' experiences were not one directional, that is, they were not presented in a manner that alluded to the parent actively directing the relationship and the child being a passive recipient of the type of relationship that the parent was providing them with. Rather, the descriptions of the parents' experiences of their relationships with their children were multi-faceted, whereby the children were actively involved in navigating the relationship

with the parents tuning into their children's needs or into their children's developmental worlds. The bi-directional nature of how the parents experienced their parent-child relationships were apparent in the parents' descriptions. As researchers have looked at parent-child relationships in their own right, they have shown that a positively experienced parent-child relationship can impact favourably on a child's social and emotional development (Strazdins *et al.*, 2006). Conversely, research has also indicated that a negatively experienced parent-child relationship can impact unfavourably on a child's psychological development as they get older (Mallers *et al.*, 2010). Despite the spectrum of research on parenting there appears to be relatively little research that has looked specifically at child-parent relationship quality, specifically with respect to how these relationships are experienced by parents. McAdams *et al.* (2017) examined a link between adolescent self-worth and the experienced closeness within a parent-child relationship, along with expressions of parental affection. Using a sample of twins, they found that there was a link between these two factors which was attributed to exposure rather than genetic overlap. However, the nature of the study was not able to ascertain the direction of this relationship, rather postulated that having a parent-child relationship that was experienced as close and affectionate may contribute positively to the perceived self-worth in adolescence. Accounting for the bi-directional nature of the relationship, these findings may also indicate that adolescents who have a higher self-worth may in turn experience a close and affectionate parent-child relationship. From a behavioural genetics perspective, genetically disposed aspects of a child's way of being can impact upon the responses that they will receive from their parents (Class *et al.*, 2012). However, the longitudinal research study of Birkeland *et al.* (2012), indicates that having a positive parent-child relationship is positively linked to the predictability of future adolescent self-worth. From the findings of the current study the parents' perceptions of the importance of their parent-child relationships is highlighted which appears to be supported by studies that indicate there being a positive connection between the parent-child relationship and future outcomes for the well-being of the child.

Parents Tune into their Children's Needs and Relate to their Individualities

In the parents' descriptions of their perceptions of their parent-child relationships there was an emphasis placed on the parents tuning into their children's needs and accommodating within the relationship the development of their children's individuality. This way of being with their children, for the parents, was categorized by being responsive to their children's individual needs and providing them with a sense of security within their relationships with their parents. The results of the current study indicate that the parents are guided in their parenting by the needs of their children. This approach to parenting is akin to that of sensitive parenting that is generally discussed in relation to parents being readily responsive to their infants cries to support the development of their self-regulation abilities (Easterbrooks *et al.*, 2013). When aligned with attachment theory, children who have been parented using a sensitive approach in infancy are said to become securely attached (Holden, 2010). In line with their presentation of responsive parenting, the parents in the current study describe adapting their approach to the identified changing needs of their children. These changing needs that the parents' identify within their children appear to align with a process of tuning into and recognising the developmental growth that takes place within a child over time. The child-centric approach of the parents appears to allow for the developmental needs of the child to impact change in how the parents' respond to them based on their needs. Additionally, the children appear to be perceived, by their parents, as developing through their direct experiences with their social worlds, rather than being viewed as passive participants in their contextual worlds. The child as an active agent within the parent-child relationship is recognised by Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory, whereby there is an emphasis placed on personal agency such that each person in the relationship can intentionally ignite changes in their environments. In the current study the participants were all self-declared parents of children aged between two and seven years, and during this early childhood stage of development children's neurological function

moves from that of survival mode to a more goal oriented way of being in relation to their emotions, behaviours, and environments (Costa and Kallick, 2019).

Within the current study this journey of parenting in response to children's identified changing needs, is not described as coming without a challenge for the parents. It is indicated that part of this journey involves the parents making personal sacrifices in favour of what they perceive to be best for their children. These sacrifices can be in relation to matters concerning the day-to-day structure of their family lives and in relation to bigger, overarching decisions, such as a parent's return to work. The conflicts experienced by the parents in relation to meeting their own needs versus those of their children's, are identified as an inherent part of the parent-child relationship that is seen as being bidirectional in nature by social relational theory (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2014). The parents in the current study appear to relate to their children and to each other around the needs that they identify in their children. There are, however, differences presented between how each parent connects with these identified needs and between how each child communicates their needs and behaves in relation to their environment to have their needs met. Butler *et al.* (2019) found that parents reported improvements in their relationships with their children following their attendance at a parenting programme, with elements of this relationship improvement being attributed to improvements in the parents' increased understanding of their children's behaviour and to parents' recognition of the importance of listening to their children. In the current study the parents indicate that through listening to and understanding the needs of their children, which can be communicated through their behaviours, they are making space for their children to impact the relationship and to direct it to where they need it to go. The children's ability to do this is something that the parents' view as an indicator of their children feeling secure within the parent-child relationship. Carbines *et al.* (2017) found that parents' maintained, through prioritizing the collective needs of the family, "an environment of security and belonging where each member had a place and was supported" (p. 230). This sense of security within the parent-child relationship appears to be supported by

responsive parenting, whereby the parents reflect collaboratively about the children's perspectives which, in turn, inform the parents' responses to their children. The action of the parents' provision of a response which is fitting with their children's needs, appears to contribute to a sense of contentment within the parent-child relationship. This sense of a multi-faceted experience of the parent-child relationship appears to be akin to the interdependent subsystems within families that is identified within family systems theory (Cox & Paley, 1997). Aligning with this school of thought also is the finding from the current study that indicates a circular effect within the family whereby the more the parents tune into the emerging needs of their children the more positive connectivity time they have with each other as a result of their children's challenging behaviours becoming less frequent. This is indicated as having an overall positive impact on how familial relationships are experienced. A contributory factor to this connected way of being within the parent-child relationship appears to be the parents' experiences of respecting the individual characteristics and needs of their children. For the parents, their experience of seeing their children as individuals who are moving along their own developmental pathways, appears to contribute positively to the process of tuning into their children's unique set of needs, to which they can respond. This journey of getting to know their children as their individual selves is not described as being without challenge; with the exercising of a great deal of personal patience being identified as a key skill to have along the parental journey with growing and developing children.

Parents Connecting with their Children Through Play and Being Present

In the parents' descriptions of their perceptions of their parent-child relationships they explored their experiences of connecting with their children. This way of being with their children, for the parents, was experienced as connecting through play and through being present.

The findings of the current study indicate that parents feel connected with their children even when they are not physically present with them and that when they are reunited after such a

period they experience an enhanced feeling of connectivity. In the parents' discussions there was a normalising or rationalising of both periods of connectivity and dysconnectivity within the parent-child relationship. For instance, in relation to periods of dysconnectivity, the parents identify the times that they do not spend with their children as being of value to their children's development of independence skills. Erikson's (1967) early theory of development suggested that children can develop their emotional independence and their own sense of self by experiencing social relationships that exist separate to their family. In the current study, the parents described being a continued support to their children during times when they were not physically present with them, by showing their children that they are in their corner and that they value their position in the world. They also describe their experiences of being connected with each other as being key in establishing a feeling of security for their children within the parent-child relationship. Davies and Cummings (1994) indicate that adopting an approach to parenting that promotes independence for children combined with parents being attentive, warm and loving with their children can contribute towards children feeling secure within themselves and within their parent-child relationships. The parents describe experiencing connectivity within the parent-child relationship during times when the family as a whole spend quality time together. Highlighted by the parents is that this experience is one of dropping everything and simply being together as a family, rather than being centred around what they are spending time doing together. The key factor appears to be that they are engaging with each other in a manner that is free from the busyness of their day-to-day lives. StGeorge and Fletcher (2012) found that the parent-child bond can be strengthened through enhancing the quality of the time that parents spend together with their children. For the parents in the current study, the experience of connectivity is deemed as not being achieved through materialistic means, but rather through the experience of physical means of affection between themselves and their children. This connected time together, displaying love and affection, appears to be of great importance to the parents. Research indicates that being the recipient of parental love and affection contributes to

children's overall development and wellbeing, evidenced through effective emotional regulation, exercising an ability to manage negatively perceived situations and feelings, and through displaying less behavioural difficulties (Cummings & Davies, 1996; Eisenberg *et al.*, 2005). The value of having this connected time with each other as a family, for the parents in the current study, appears to allow them to experience joy in being parents, which can be clouded by the everyday demands entwined within the parenting journey. This feeling of connectedness as a family appears to be improved through being together through simple day-to-day activities with Welsh *et al.* (2011) indicating that time spent together during family meal-times contributes towards parents' perceptions of family cohesion. The parents describe connecting with their children by entering into their worlds through play, whereby they designate time for playing together as a family. There appear to be two factors to this element of the parents' experience of connectivity, one element relates to the process of play itself, and the other relates to the process of prioritising this time for each other. Carbines *et al.* (2017) identify parents consciously putting boundaries in place in areas of their lives outside of their family to work towards prioritising meaningful family time together. Through the play and through the uninterrupted time together there seems to be a space created for the parents and children to listen to each other and to understand each other. Rucan *et al.* (2012) identify the important role of play in developing harmonious interactions between parents and their children. The experiences of the parents in the current study appears to be of using simple play encounters to bring a greater sense of alignment between themselves and their children which consequently leads to less disagreements within the family. Sylva *et al.* (2004) identified that quality interactions between a parent and child, such as in play, can impact more positively on a child's development than many other factors within a child's socio-cultural context.

Parent's Aspirations for their Children's Futures Influences their ways of Being with their Children and the Boundaries that they Hold for them

In the parents' descriptions of their perceptions of their parent-child relationships they explored how their experiences of their way of being with their children is influenced by their aspirations for their children's futures. The parents also illustrated their experiences of holding boundaries for their children and their perceptions of these boundaries being in line with the aspirations that they hold for their children.

The findings of the current study indicate that the parents' way of being with their children in the here and now is influenced by how they hope their children to be in the future. Additionally, for the parents in the current study, their inclination towards a particular way of being seems to bear an impact on the aspirations that they hold for their children and to consequently impact their way of being within their parent-child relationships. Carbines *et al.* (2017) noted that parents engaged in a conscious process of "modelling behaviors and attitudes they wanted their children to learn" (p. 230), which is embedded within social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) whereby it is postulated that children learn through their exposures to the situational behaviours of their role models. The aspirations held by the parents in the current study for their children seem to centre around exposure to an environment that will foster the growth of their children into the type of people who they feel will be ready for the world outside of the family. The parents appear to place emphasis on modelling for their children and exposing them to concepts and activities that they feel are aligned with these aspirations. Bratton and Landreth (1995) indicate that the observation of an action being carried out can have the same neurological reactions as actually carrying out the action. As such, by embodying a way of being that is in line with the aspirations that the parents hold for how their children will grow to be may be a productive approach. A pitfall, identified by the parents, in trying to expose their children to activities and ways of being in line with their held aspirations for them was that there was a sense of over doing it resulting in the children being exposed to stress rather than opportunity.

Bullock (2002) identified that being exposed to expectations for accomplishment that are excessive and experiencing being hurried or disorganised in day-to-day activities are external sources of stress for children. The parents in the current study describe being conscious of this and attempting to find a balance between exposing their children to what they feel is good for them, in line with their aspirations for them, whilst being mindful of not adding avoidable stress to their children's lives. Doing so involves putting boundaries in place for their children, and the parents describe trying to do this in a manner that is aligned with the aspirations that they hold for their children's development. The importance of upholding boundaries for the greater good of their children is communicated by the parents, even when maintaining these boundaries is not convenient for the parents. The parents highlight there being occasional exceptions to upholding certain boundaries, but that largely these are consistently maintained for their children. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) identifies the role of boundaries created by parents in contributing towards how children develop. From the age of approximately two years, children start to seek out ways to be independent in their worlds and resist compliance with their parents' demands. In line with self-determination theory, parents can support this development of independence by "structuring the environment to promote competence [so that] the environment becomes predictable and understandable, [in turn] children know what is expected of them and how others will respond to them" (Holden, 2010, p. 52). The findings of the current study indicate that the presence of boundaries is experienced by parents as both a cornerstone of the parent-child relationship and as a key contributor to the process of achieving the parents' aspirations for their children.

Critical Reflections & Methodological Considerations

In the design of the study some early decisions that were made included the manner in which the data was going to be gathered and from whom. I feel that having paired semi-structured interviews allowed for the study to provide a unique insight into the lives of co-parents from the

joint perspective of both the parents. Whilst I feel this is a strength, it is wise also to consider the possible limitations brought about by the use of this type of interview. Indeed parents may have presented different perspectives when in the company of their co-parent than they would have if interviewed on their own. I, however, was particularly interested in the dynamics between the two parents as they shared their experiences together. In a way this provides three types of points of view, one view point from each individual parent and then a collective viewpoint presented by them both relationally. The flexibility of the use of a thematic analysis allowed for me to consider each of these viewpoints throughout the analysis, as well as for my own perspective to be brought into the analysis.

I chose to recruit the participating parents based on the stage that they were at in their parenting journey, by defining the age of the children they were parenting in the inclusion criteria, rather than by defining the age of the parents. For the homogeneity of the sample I felt that having parents parenting children in the same stage of development would work better than having parents of a similar age parenting children in different stages of their development. I was particularly interested in looking at the experiences of parents who were parenting children in the life span development stage of early childhood, starting at two years of age. At this stage of development the children are no longer infants and the parents are past the early stages of transitioning to parenthood. Additionally, the upper limit of age seven years was chosen as after the age of seven children move into middle childhood and this stage of development is often accompanied by more formal schooling and peer interactions. During early childhood, children's interactions with their world is generally through play and their family plays a central role in their development. Piaget's (1964) theory of cognitive development identifies that children are in a preoperational stage of development when between the ages of two and seven, as such this time is categorized by symbolic representations of their world and imaginary play central to their way of being. During this early childhood period, children experience their first critical period of brain development, whereby their synapses are developing at a rapid rate allowing them to

interact with information from their worlds in a much different way than during other stages of their development. I feel that it is a unique period of parenting where parents can start to see their children develop as their individual selves and children are able to interact with their worlds in a more meaningful manner. However, the findings of the current study are reflective only of parenting children during early childhood and it is likely that having a sample of parents who are parenting children during another stage of their development would yield different outcomes. Recruiting participants was an element of the research that I naively had perceived as being easy, however the actuality of this process was far more difficult than anticipated. This recruitment difficulty was the first insight into the reality of parents' experiences of their parenting journeys. For two parents in a co-parenting unit, to attend for an interview that was to take up to ninety minutes required a huge commitment on their behaves. Upon reflection, this request in itself restricted those who could participate in the research to participants who were highly motivated to contribute to the research or to those with the resources to have their children cared for whilst they attended for the interview. Providing child-care for parents attending the interview may have increased accessibility to participate thus may have broadened the demographic of participants. Another factor to consider is the potential of the parents who volunteered to attend for interview together with their co-parenting partner may more likely be a parenting pair who are experiencing their parenting journey in a relatively positive and connected manner. It may have been more difficult, for a wide range of reasons, for parents who were experiencing significant struggles along their journey or with their co-parent to put themselves forward for a research interview of this nature.

By design, for the purpose of homogeneity, participants in the current study were all heterosexual co-parenting units. It would be useful to replicate a similar study with same-sex co-parenting units to see if there are further specific considerations that can be contributed from their perspectives. Having a larger scale study that could account for all types of parenting structures would yield findings that would be more generalisable. Whilst the findings of the

current study are idiographic in nature, given the small scale of the study, providing an in depth perspective on this set of parents' experiences was what was best fitting. Having a broader range in the scope of the study may have required sacrifices in terms of depth.

It is worth noting that the data for this study was collected from participants in-person, prior to the coronavirus pandemic. I feel that it is worth considering how the data may have differed if it had been collected after a time when the structure of families changed overnight as a result of pandemic related lockdowns. I analysed the data whilst on a national lockdown and I wonder if that broader context of being at home with my own children 24/7 bore influence on my interpretation of the data. I too consider if the research had been undertaken by someone from a different demographic than myself would the data be gathered and interpreted any differently. I feel that my own journey of co-parenting for the past ten years, including six years as a fostering co-parent, provided a unique understanding of the material presented by the participants.

Clinical Implications & Future Recommendations

The findings indicate that parents' experiences of their journey of parenting in relation to their familial relationships centres around two primary relationships, those between the parents and those between the parent and the child. The insight provided by this study into parents' experiences and perceptions of these relationships can contribute to the field of clinical practice in a range of potential ways which will be discussed herein.

Incorporating the information provided by the findings into the design and delivery of parenting interventions can bring the focus of such interventions onto relationships and supporting families to strengthen their familial relationships. The quality of parents' relationships is recognised by the Department for Children, Schools, and Families (2010) as being important as it can influence both the parenting a child will receive and the nature of the relationship a parent will have with their child. Conversely, parental relationships that are of a low quality are shown to

negatively impact upon parent-child relationships and consequently affect the psychological wellness of a child (Sroufe, 2005). Whilst existing research indicates that relationship based interventions, delivered to parents during the transitioning to parenthood stage of their parenting journey, have been shown to be effective and of benefit to parents (Shapiro *et al.*, 2015; Linville *et al.*, 2017), it has been recommended that further research be conducted to inform the improvement of co-parenting relationship based interventions (Pinquart and Teubert, 2010; Delicate *et al.*, 2018). The findings in the current study highlight how important the relationship between co-parents is and the benefits parents experience by having a supportive and communicative co-parenting partner. For parenting interventions, focusing purely on skills of parenting, the foundation of co-parent support required for implementing these skills in the parenting lives of two-parent families is likely to be under-emphasised. It would appear that through building a supportive co-parenting foundation parents can work together to support each other to learn the parenting skills that they need as they arise, live in the moment. These findings also highlight that parents may find it useful to have the opportunity to be prepared for the relational changes that take place upon entering parenthood. Thus engaging parents at a prenatal stage about the relational aspect of their parenting journey ahead may be of benefit to parents. Having the insight into parents' perceptions of their familial relationships, provides an opportunity for practitioners to learn from parents directly what it is that they experience to be of benefit to and what they experience as challenges to their parenting journeys.

There is a substantial body of evidence that supports the delivery of parenting based interventions that are modelled on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) as these can be delivered in a financial and clinically effective manner to yield improvements in both parents' and children's health and well-being (Barlow and Coren, 2018; Barlow *et al.*, 2003, 2014). The principles of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) are based on the idea that "children change as they grow, and at least some of this change relates to what they learn as they interact with others in their world" (Holden, 2010, p. 46). This principle supports the recommendations

associated with the findings of the current study. Parenting interventions that can be of benefit to parents and families over time as their children grow and change would place emphasis on supporting parents to strengthen their co-parenting relationships. From this positive impacts can be had on their parenting and on their children. There is evidence to support the existence of positive links between the quality of a co-parenting relationship, the quality of parents' parenting, and the overall outcomes for children (Abidin & Brunner, 1995; McHale & Rasmussen, 1998). Delivering parenting based interventions that place a focus on strengthening relationships can also incorporate principles of family systems theory (Bowen, 1966), whereby the interactions between all relational units within the family are taken into consideration.

A unique element of the findings of this study are that they came from the perspective of parents who were at least two years into the journey of parenting children without a clinical diagnosis. The insights provided by this research into the relational aspects of these parenting journeys are of potential value to parents, social workers, family support service professionals, tier one and two mental health professionals, and policy makers in terms of funding projects that support preventative measures applicable to non-clinical groups. The findings can be applied to family and parenting support settings of a non-clinical nature, such as primary care services and support delivered by non-profit/charitable services. The outcomes can be of use in supporting families who require specific support around connectivity, such as foster families, adoptive families, and other families where children may encounter contextual barriers to forming healthy familial relationships, for instance in some cases of parental mental health difficulties. The research findings have the potential to contribute towards building a non-clinical based support program that could be made available to new parents at early stages of their parenting journey. Given that earlier stages of the parenting journey were reflected on by parents who were beyond that stage, as being experienced as difficult, is indicative of there being a value to providing support to parents early on in their journey of parenting. Strengthening the co-parenting relationship in a responsive rather than reactive manner may contribute towards

ongoing unification of families. Looking at the overall financial impact of the breakdown of familial relationships, it would appear that this type of support is worth investing in, given that an estimated societal cost of 48 billion pounds per annum is attributed to the breakdown of families in the UK (The Relationship Foundation, 2016).

For future research studies, it would be useful to gain insight into the experiences of parents, presenting without a clinical need, participating in a parenting based intervention centred around supporting the development of healthy co-parenting relationships early on in the journey of parenting. Additionally, conducting a longitudinal study in this regard may indicate points throughout the parenting journey that this type of support may be most useful. It would be useful to gain further insight into the role that gender plays in shaping parental identity achievement and the nature of one's role within the co-parenting relationship. Given the limited scope of the current study, it was not possible to delve into the complex nature of the potential role that gender may play in how each co-parent experiences their familial relationships. The gendered family process model (Endendijk *et al.*, 2018) provides a framework that may service as a useful guide for future research on the role of gender in co-parent's experiences of familial relationships. Within the current study there were indicators from the co-parents interviewed that differential roles may be played by mothers and fathers in their co-parenting relationship and that there may be gender differences within the experiences of parent-child relationships. From existing research on gender differences in parenting, it is suggested that mothers speak with their children more than fathers do (Leaper *et al.*, 1998), that mothers are more responsive to their children than fathers are (Hallers-Haalboom *et al.*, 2016), and that mothers engage more in play that is cognitive or imaginative in nature whereas fathers engage more in play of a physical or rough and tumble nature (Paquette, 2004). Continuing to develop insight based qualitative research I feel is a useful contribution to the existing research which can contribute to developing and delivering parent centred interventions that parents are motivated to participate in. Butler *et al.* (2020) identify that "the successful implementation of accessible, evidence-

based parenting interventions is dependent on process-orientated insights rather than just outcome data” (p. 177).

Dissemination

The primary end users who might find the information provided by this study useful and beneficial include parents, psychologists, family support and social work professionals, public health nurses, early years care and education professionals, and educators. I plan to engage the targeted end users by publishing blogs on established platforms that are used primarily by parents. I have pre-existing guest blogging experience on relevant parenting platforms that will be of benefit for actualising this element of dissemination. Parents readily and easily access featured blogs on these platforms, so I can present findings in a non-technical and accessible manner for parents via these platforms. To potentially reach more parents, featured blogs of these platforms are often circulated via the organisations’ social media networks.

To help engage the end users who may not have access to these platforms I will engage community based family resource centres to help disseminate the findings and information about the research to families presently seeking support. I will circulate information about the findings directly to communities of professionals working with children and families, such as play therapists, psychologists, social workers, social care workers, family support workers, GPs, public health nurses, and early years care and education practitioners. I work as a part-time lecturer for a third level degree program so I can engage the relevant heads of department to assist with communicating the research findings to academic staff who can disseminate the study’s findings in their teachings of relevant professionals-in-training. I have previously featured on radio and television, regarding topics relating to parenting, and I am media trained, as such I can engage with this medium to disseminate the findings in a manner that will reach the broader target audience.

In terms of more academic-based dissemination I will present the findings and/or elements of the study to relevant conferences as appropriate. The conferences identified thus far to submit abstracts to are UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre Biennial International Conference, Early Childhood Ireland Annual Conference, Cuidiu National Members Conference, Aware Parenting Conference, Tusla National Parenting Conference, and BPS DCoP Annual Conference.

Potential obstacles in the dissemination include copyright limitations based on the professional journal that the research article will hopefully be published in. I plan to overcome this obstacle by sending the abstract for the end paper to a number of targeted journals, and making an informed decision then regarding publishing as I feel it is important to be able to communicate the findings to an audience beyond those that would have access to professional journals.

Sommer (2006) advocates for the dual dissemination of research, whereby studies are written for both academic and non-academic audiences alike, and the researcher takes an active role in disseminating the research directly to the public.

Conclusion

The overall aim of this study was to form an understanding of how parents' experience their journey of parenting. The objectives set out to achieve this aim were to explore, with parents, how they perceive familial connectivity and what perceptions they hold of their families' relationships. The study used semi-structured paired depth interviews with its participants, whereby both parents attended the interview together and open ended questions were posed. The questions looked at the both parents' perceptions of their experiences of parenting, with a particular focus on how they do or do not experience familial connectivity within their families' relationships. The interview data was analysed using a thematic analysis. The research was undertaken from a critical realist ontological position and an epistemological position of contextualism. A thematic analysis was used to analyse the data as this method gave the freedom to have the structure placed upon the method determined by the needs of the research study. Two superordinate themes were identified, with each containing three subordinate themes, which collectively have a total of eight themes.

The first superordinate theme highlighted the parents' experiences of their parenting relationships, in relation to three subordinate themes, that of 'parental solidarity', 'differences in individual parenting styles' and 'parents connecting with each other through their shared role of parenting'. The findings indicated that parents placed a lot of value on establishing and maintaining a supportive and communicative co-parenting relationship with each other. They described adopting an aligned approach to their parenting that they felt was built upon a foundation of having core values that were aligned, which transferred into how they were as co-parents. Whilst there was a strong sense of the parental solidarity, they too described times where they were in disagreement with each other. However, through supportive and respectful communication where both parents had the space to express their view they would work out their differences. The parents experienced their co-parenting journey as one that they felt equated to being a part of a team, whereby one needed to consider not only themselves, but the

rest of the team too, in anything that they did or decided upon. Whilst working collectively in this respect, the parents also identified making space for each other's individual approach to parenting and appreciating the balance that having both styles at play brought into their family. They described these styles as working together in a complimentary manner rather than a competitive manner, and there was a sense of the presence of one individual style allowing the other style to exist. The parents engaged in a reflective process about how their individual styles are influenced by the manner in which they were parented. The process of reflection appeared to empower parents to shape how their experiences of being parented impacted upon how they were as parents, with some identifying actively breaking intergenerational cycles. Through shaping how they were as parents together along their journey the parents described feeling an overall sense of a strengthening of their relationship by virtue of becoming parents. However the transition into this role was reflected upon as being a difficult and at times a lonely period of their journeys. This was experienced as a significant period of change for the parents where they were adapting to a new way of being and of thinking. The transition into parenthood was experienced as a time when one's position of thinking of oneself individually becomes dominated by thinking of the family unit collectively. Whilst adjusting to the new roles of being co-parents together the parents were experiencing an individual process of merging the identity of being a parent with their existing self-identity; a process that was not experienced without challenges.

The second superordinate theme identified the parents' experiences of their parent-child relationships, in relation to three subordinate themes, that of 'parents tune into their children's needs', 'parents connecting with their children', and 'parent's aspirations for their children's futures influences their ways of being with their children'. The findings indicated that parents tuned into their children's needs and related to their children's individualities in their approach to their parenting and in their relationships with their children. The parents were mindful of meeting the children's fundamental needs as a priority often above their own needs. Whilst often

centring their own ways of being around the needs of their children, the parents were encouraging their children to grow and develop into their own unique selves. The more the children grew and developed the more there was a sense of the parents getting involved with the lives of their children and connecting with them as the individuals they were. Tasks and commitments both within and outside of the family household led the parents to disconnect from the familial relationships periodically from time to time. Other times there were experiences of dysconnectivity for the purpose of getting something done or moving a busy day forward. The parents described favouring time together where they were being present with their children or having space to play together. There was a sense of reducing interference from the outside world and connecting inwards as a family unit by tuning into each other through play or through simple physical and mindful presence. The parents described at times being guided or influenced by their aspirations for their children's futures and for their relationships with their children. The parents provided their children with opportunities to experience things that were in line with their own interests or with ways of being that they valued. The parents described providing boundaries for their children and boundaries to their relationships with their children in a manner that was conducive to the growth and development of the children in line with the aspirations that they held for them.

References

- Abidin, R. R., Brunner, J. F. (1995). Development of a Parenting Alliance Inventory. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology, 24*, 31–40.
- Ahlborg, T., Misvaer, N., & Möller, A. (2009). Perception of marital quality by parents with small children: a follow-up study when the firstborn is 4 years old. *Journal of Family Nursing, 15*, 237–263.
- Ahlborg, T., & Strandmark, M. (2001). The baby was the focus of attention: First-time parents' experiences of their intimate relationship. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences, 15*, 318-325.
- Amato, P.R. (2005). The impact of family formation change on the cognitive, social, and emotional well-being of the next generation. *Future of Children 15, 2*, 75-96.
- Arksey, H. (1996). Collecting data through joint interviews. *Social Research Update, 15*. Retrieved from <http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU15.html>
- Arnold-Baker, C. & Donaghy, M. (2005). Procreation. In Van Deurzen, E. and Arnold-Baker, C. (Eds), *Existential Perspectives on Human Issues: A Handbook for Therapeutic Practice*. Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Azhari, A., Lim, M., Bizzego, A., Gabrieli, G., Bornstein, M. H., & Esposito, G. (2020). Physical presence of spouse enhances brain-to-brain synchrony in co-parenting couples. *Scientific reports, 10*(1), 7569.
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social Learning Theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

- Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 1–26.
- Barlow, J., & Stewart-Brown, S. (2001). Understanding parenting programmes: Parents' views. *Primary Health Care Research and Development*, 2(2), 117–130.
- Bateman, L., & Bharj, K. (2009). The impact of the birth of the first child on a couple's relationship. *Evidence-Based Midwifery*, 7(1), 16-24.
- Baumrind, D. (1966). Effects of authoritative parental control on child behavior. *Child Development*, 37(4), 887-907.
- Becker, G. S. (1981). *A treatise on the family*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Belsky, J., Woodworth, S., & Crnic, K. (1996). Trouble in the second year: Three questions about family interaction. *Child Development*, 67, 556–578.
- Bermudez, J. M., Zak-Hunter, L. M., & Silva, L. (2011). Experiences of parenting classes for Mexican American mothers parenting alone: Offering culturally responsive approaches. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 39(4), 360–374.
- Binswanger, L. (1963). *Being-in-the-world: Selected papers of Ludwig Binswanger*. New York: Basic Books.
- Birkeland, M.S., Melkevik, O., Holsen, I., & Wold, B. (2012). Trajectories of global self-esteem development during adolescence. *Journal of Adolescence*, 35, 43– 54.

Bourke-Taylor, H. M., & Jane, F. M. (2018). Mothers' experiences of a women's health and empowerment program for mothers of a child with a disability. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 48(6), 2174–2186.

Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base: Clinical applications of attachment theory*. London: Routledge.

Bowen, M., 1966. The Use of Family Theory in Clinical Practice, *Comprehensive Psychiatry*, 7: 345-374. In M. Bowen, 1978 (see below).

Bowen, M., 1978. *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*. NY and London: Jason Aronson.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners*. London: Sage.

Bullock, J. (2002). Bullying. *Childhood Education*, 78, 3, 130-133.

Butcher, R. L., & Gersch, I. S. (2014). Parental experiences of the "Time Together" home visiting intervention: An Attachment Theory perspective. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 30(1), 1–18.

Butler, J., Gregg, L., Calam, R., & Wittkowski, A. (2020). Parents' Perceptions and Experiences of Parenting Programmes: A Systematic Review and Metasynthesis of the Qualitative Literature. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 23, 176–204.

Campbell, R., Pound, P., Pope, C., Britten, N., Pill, R., Morgan, M., & Donovan, J. (2003). Evaluating meta-ethnography: a synthesis of qualitative research on lay experiences of diabetes and diabetes care. *Social Science and Medicine*, *56*, 671–684.

Carbines, M., Dickinson, A., & McKenzie-Green, B. (2017). The Parenting Journey: Daily Parental Management in Families with Young Children. *Comprehensive Child and Adolescent Nursing*, *40*, 1-17.

CASP, 2014. CASP Checklists. Retrieved from: <http://www.casp-uk.net>

Christie, H., Talmon, A., Schafer, S. K., De Haan, A., Vang, M. L., Haag, K., Gilbar, O., Alisic, E. & Brown, E. (2018). The transition to parenthood following a history of childhood maltreatment: A review of the literature on prospective and new parents' experience. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, *8* (7), 1-15.

Class, Q. A., D'Onofrio, B. M., Singh, A. L., Ganiban, J. M., Spotts, E. L., Lichtenstein, P., Reiss, D., & Neiderhiser, J. M. (2012). Current parental depression and offspring perceived self-competence: A quasi-experimental examination. *Behavior Genetics*, *42*, 5, 787–797.

Coates, D., Phelan, R., Heap, J., & Howe, D. (2017). “Being in a group with others who have mental illness makes all the difference”: The views and experiences of parents who attended a mental health parenting program. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *78*, 104–111.

Costa, A. L. & Kallick, B. (2019). *Nurturing Habits of Mind in Early Childhood*. Virginia: ASCD

la Cour, P., & Hvidt, N. C. (2010). Research on meaning-making and health in secular society: secular, spiritual and religious existential orientations. *Social science & medicine* (1982), *71*(7), 1292–1299.

Cox, M. J. & Paley, B. (1997). Families as systems. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 48, 243–267.

Cullen, S. M., Cullen, M. A., Lindsay, G., & Strand, S. (2013). The parenting early intervention programme in England, 2006–2011; A classed experience? *British Educational Research Journal*, 39(6), 1025–1043.

Cummings, E. M. & Davies, P. (1996). Emotional security as a regulatory process in normal development and the development of psychopathology. *Development and Psychopathology*, 8, 1, 123–139.

Davies, P. T. & Cummings, E. M. (1994). Marital conflict and child adjustment: An emotional security hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 116, 3, 387–411.

Deater-Deckard, K. (1998). Parenting stress and child adjustment: Some old hypotheses and new questions. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 5, 314–332.

Dearnley, C. (2005). A reflection on the use of semi-structured interviews. *Nurse Researcher*, 13(1), 19-28.

Deave, T., & Johnson, D. (2008). The transition to parenthood: what does it mean for fathers? *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 63, 626–633.

Deave, T., Johnson, D., & Ingram, J. (2008). Transition to parenthood: the needs of parents in pregnancy and early parenthood. *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth*, 8, 30–40.

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11, 227-268.

Delicate, A., Ayers, S., & McMullen, S. (2018). A systematic review and meta-synthesis of the impact of becoming parents on the couple relationship. *Midwifery*, *61*, 88–96.

Department for Children, Schools, and Families (2010). *Support For All: The Families and Relationships Green Paper*. www.dcsf.gov.uk/supportforall

Department of Health (1998). *Supporting families a consultation document*. London: The Stationery Office.

Deurzen, E. van (1997). *Everyday mysteries: Existential dimensions of psychotherapy*. London: Routledge.

Deurzen, E. van, & Adams, M. (2011). *Skills in Existential Counselling and Psychotherapy*, London: Sage.

Diamond, L. M., Hicks, A. M., & Otter-Henderson, K. D. (2008). Every time you go away: Changes in affect, behavior, and physiology associated with travel-related separations from romantic partners. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *95*, 385–403.

Diprete, T. A., & Buchmann, C. (2013). *The rise of women: The growing gender gap in education and what it means for American schools*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Duppong-Hurley, K., Hoffman, S., Barnes, B., & Oats, R. (2016). Perspectives on engagement barriers and alternative delivery formats from non-completers of a community-run parenting program. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *25*(2), 545–552.

Easterbrooks, M., Bartlett, J., Beeghly, M., Thompson, R. (2012). Social and Emotional Development in Infancy. In book: *Handbook of Psychology: Vol. 6. Developmental Psychology* (2nd ed.) (pp.91-120).

Ehrenkranz, S. M. (1967a). A study of joint interviewing in the treatment of marital problems: Part I. *Social Casework*, 48, 498-501.

Ehrenkranz, S. M. (1967b). A study of joint interviewing in the treatment of marital problems: Part II. *Social Casework*, 48, 570-574.

Eisenberg, N., Zhou, Q., Spinrad, T. L., Valiente, C., Fabes, R. A. & Liew, J. (2005). Relations among positive parenting, children's effortful control, and externalizing problems: a three-wave longitudinal study. *Child development*, 76, 5, 1055–1071.

England, P. (2010). The gender revolution: Uneven and stalled. *Gender & Society*, 24(2), 149-166.

Erikson, E. (1967). *Childhood and Society*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Errázuriz, P., Cerfogli, C., Moreno, G., & Soto, G. (2016). Perception of Chilean parents on the Triple P program for improving parenting practices. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 25(11), 3440–3449.

Estefan, L. F., Coulter, M. L., VandeWeerd, C. L., Armstrong, M., & Gorski, P. (2013). Relationships between stressors and parenting attitudes in a child welfare parenting program. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 22(2), 199–208.

Fadjukoff, P., Pulkkinen, L., Lyyra, A. L. & Kokko, K. (2016). Parental Identity and Its Relation to Parenting and Psychological Functioning in Middle Age. *Parenting*, 16(2), 87-107.

Fägerskiöld, A. (2008). A change in life as experienced by first-time fathers. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences*, 22, 64–71.

Faircloth, C. (2015). Negotiating intimacy, equality and sexuality in the transition to parenthood. *Sociological Research Online, 20*, 1–12.

Feinberg, M. E. (2002). Coparenting and the transition to parenthood: A framework for prevention. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review, 5*(3), 173–195.

Firestone, P., Kelly, M. J., & Fike, S. (1980). Are fathers necessary in parent training groups? *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology, 9*(1), 44-47.

Fox, B. (2009). *When Couples Become Parents: The Creation of Gender in the Transition to Parenthood*. Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press.

Furlong, M., & McGilloway, S. (2012). The Incredible Years parenting program in Ireland: A qualitative analysis of the experience of disadvantaged parents. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 17*(4), 616–630.

Furlong, M., & McGilloway, S. (2015). The longer term experiences of parent training: A qualitative analysis. *Child: Care, Health and Development, 41*(5), 687–696.

Garcia, A. R., DeNard, C., Ohene, S., Morones, S. M., & Connaughton, C. (2018). “I am more than my past”: Parents’ attitudes and perceptions of the Positive Parenting Program in Child Welfare. *Children and Youth Services Review, 88*, 286.

Genesoni, L., & Tallandini, M. A. (2009). Men’s psychological transition to fatherhood: An analysis of the literature, 1989–2008. *Birth, 36*, 305–318.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New York: Aldine.

Goldberg, J. S., & Carlson, M. J. (2014). Parents' Relationship Quality and Children's Behavior in Stable Married and Cohabiting Families. *Journal of marriage and the family*, 76(4), 762–777.

Golombok, S. (2000). *Parenting: What really counts?* London: Routledge.

Greenberg, M. (1985). *The birth of a Father*. New York: Avon Books.

Guttmann, J., & Lazar, A. (2004). Criteria for marital satisfaction: does having a child make a difference? *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology*, 22, 147–156.

Hallers-Haalboom, E. T., Groeneveld, M. G., van Berkel, S. R., Endendijk, J. J., van der Pol, L. D., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J., & Mesman, J. (2016). Wait until your mother gets home! Mothers' and fathers' discipline strategies. *Social Development*, 25, 82–98.

Hansen, T. (2012). Parenthood and happiness: A review of folk theories versus empirical evidence. *Social Indicators Research*, 108, 29–64.

Hartwig, S. A., Robinson, L. R., Comeau, D. L., Claussen, A. H., & Perou, R. (2017). Maternal perceptions of parenting following an evidence-based parenting program: A qualitative study of Legacy for Children. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 38(4), 499–513.

Haskett, M. E., Armstrong, J., Neal, S. C., & Aldianto, K. (2018). Perceptions of Triple P positive parenting program seminars among parents experiencing homelessness. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 27(6), 1957–1967.

Hennessy, E., Martin, S., Moss, P., & Melhuish, E. (1992). *Children and day care: lessons from research*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing Ltd.

Highet, G. (2003). Cannabis and smoking research: Interviewing young people in self-selected friendship pairs, *Health Education Research*, 18(1), 108-118.

- Holden, G. W. (2010). Theoretical perspectives on parenting. In *Parenting: A dynamic perspective* (pp. 27-54). SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Holloway, I., & Todres, L. (2003). The status of method: flexibility, consistency and coherence, *Qualitative Research*, 3, 345-57.
- Holtrop, K., Parra-Cardona, J. R., & Forgatch, M. S. (2014). Examining the process of change in an evidence-based parent training intervention: A qualitative study grounded in the experiences of parents. *Prevention Science*, 15(5), 745–756.
- Houlding, C., Schmidt, F., Stern, S. B., Jamieson, J., & Borg, D. (2012). The perceived impact and acceptability of group triple P positive parenting program for aboriginal parents in Canada. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34(12), 2287–2294.
- Houssart, J., & Evens, H. (2011). Conducting task-based interviews with pairs of children: Consensus, conflict, knowledge construction and turn taking. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 34, 63-79.
- Kamp Dush, C. M., Yavorsky, J. E., & Schoppe-Sullivan, S. J. (2018). What Are Men Doing While Women Perform Extra Unpaid Labor? Leisure and Specialization at the Transition to Parenthood. *Sex roles*, 78(11-12), 715–730.
- Kane, G.A., Wood, V.A., & Barlow, J. (2007). Parenting programmes: a systematic review and synthesis of qualitative research. *Child: Care, Health, and Development*, 33(6), 784-793.
- Kilgour, C., & Fleming, V. (2000). An action research enquiry into a health visitor parenting programme for parents of preschool children with behaviour problems. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 32, 682–688.

- Krueger, R. A. (1994). *Focus Groups: A practical guide for applied research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kuczynski, & Mol, Jan. (2015). Dialectical Models of Socialization. In: *Theory and Method. Volume 1 of the Handbook of Child Psychology and Developmental Science* (pp.pp. 323-368).
- Langdridge, D. (2007). *Phenomenological Psychology: Theory, Research and Method*. Pearson: Prentice Hall, London.
- Lara-Carrasco, J., Simard, V., Saint-Onge, K., Lamoureux-Tremblay, V., & Nielsen, T. (2014). Disturbed dreaming during the third trimester of pregnancy. *Sleep medicine*, 15(6), 694–700.
- Leaper, C., Anderson, K. J., & Sanders, P. (1998). Moderators of gender effects on parents' talk to their children: A meta-analysis. *Developmental Psychology*, 34, 3–27.
- Levac, A. M., McCay, E., Merka, P., & Reddon-D'Arcy, M. L. (2008). Exploring parent participation in a parent training program for children's aggression: Understanding and illuminating mechanisms of change. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, 21(2), 78–88.
- Lewis, E. M., Feely, M., Seay, K. D., Fedoravicius, N., & Kohl, P. L. (2016). Child welfare involved parents and pathways Triple P: Perceptions of program acceptability and appropriateness. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 25(12), 3760–3770.
- MacAdam, R., Huuva, E., & Berterö, C. (2011). Fathers' experiences after having a child: sexuality becomes tailored according to circumstances. *Midwifery*, 27, 149–155.

Madden, V., Domoney, J., Aumayer, K., Sethna, V., Iles, J., Hubbard, I., Giannakakis, A., Psychogiou, L., & Ramchandani, P. (2015). Intergenerational transmission of parenting: Findings from a UK longitudinal study. *European Journal of Public Health, 25*(10), 1030-1093.

Mallers, M., Charles, S., Neupert, S., Almeida, D. (2010). Perceptions of Childhood Relationships With Mother and Father: Daily Emotional and Stressor Experiences in Adulthood. *Developmental Psychology, 46*, 1651-1661.

Margolin, G., Gordis, E. B., & John, R. S. (2001). Coparenting: A link between marital conflict and parenting in two parent families. *Journal of Family Psychology, 15*, 3–21.

Marjoribanks, D., (2016). Happy Families? Family Relationships in the UK Today. *Relate*. Retrieved from https://www.relate.org.uk/sites/default/files/the_way_we_are_now_-_happy_families.pdf

McAdams, T. A., Rijdsdijk, F. V., Narusyte, J., Ganiban, J. M., Reiss, D., Spotts, E., Neiderhiser, J. M., Lichtenstein, P., & Eley, T. C. (2017). Associations between the parent–child relationship and adolescent self-worth: A genetically informed study of twin parents and their adolescent children. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 58*(1), 46-54.

McHale, J. P. (1995). Coparenting and triadic interactions during infancy: The roles of marital distress and child gender. *Developmental Psychology, 31*, 985–996.

McHale, J. P., Kuersten-Hogan, R., & Rao, N. (2004). Growing Points for Coparenting Theory and Research. *Journal of Adult Development, 11*(3), 221–234.

Mejia, A., Ulph, F., & Calam, R. (2015). An exploration of parents' perceptions and beliefs about changes following participation in a family skill training program: A qualitative study in a developing country. *Prevention Science, 16*(5), 674–684.

Mejia, A., Ulph, F., & Calam, R. (2016). The strengthening families program 10–14 in Panama: Parents' perceptions of cultural fit. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 47*(1), 56–65.

Mockford, C. (2000). *Parenting programmes: a qualitative study of 14 mothers' perspectives on the value of parenting programmes to their everyday lives*. MA in Family Research, Oxford Brookes University (unpublished Masters dissertation).

Mockford, C., & Barlow, S. (2004). Parenting programmes: some unintended consequences. *Primary Health Care Research Development, 5*, 219-227.

Moore, G. F., Audrey, S., Barker, M., Bond, L., Bonell, C., Hardeman, W., et al. (2015). Process evaluation of complex interventions: Medical Research Council guidance. *BMJ (Clinical Research Ed.)*, *350*, h1258.

Moore, K. A., Kinghorn, A., & Bandy, T. (2011). Parental relationship quality and child outcomes across subgroups (*Research Brief*). Child Trends: Washington, DC.

Moran, P., Ghatge, B., & Van der Merwe, A. (2004). *What Works in Parenting Support? A Review of the International Evidence*. Home Office Report 574.

Morris, S. M. (2001). Joint and individual interviewing in the context of cancer. *Qualitative Health Research, 11*, 553-567.

Nelson, A.M. (2003). Transition to motherhood. *Journal of Obstetric, Gynaecologic, and Neonatal Nursing, 32*, 465–477.

- Nightingale, D., & Cromby, J. (1999). *Social Constructionist Psychology: A Critical Analysis of Theory and Practice*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Noblit, G. W., & Hare, R. D. (1988). *Meta-Ethnography: Synthesizing qualitative studies*. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Nyström, K., & Ohrling, K. (2004). Parenthood experiences during the child's first year: literature review. *Journal of advanced nursing*, 46(3), 319–330.
- Olsson, A., Lundqvist, M., Faxelid, E., & Nissen, E. (2005). Women's thoughts about sexual life after childbirth: focus group discussions with women after childbirth. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences*, 19, 381–387.
- Olsson, A., Robertson, E., Björklund, A., & Nissen, E. (2010). Fatherhood in focus, sexual activity can wait: new fathers' experience about sexual life after childbirth. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences*, 24, 716–725.
- Östberg, M., & Hagekull, B. (2013). Parenting stress and external stressors as predictors of maternal ratings of child adjustment. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 54, 213–221.
- Owens, J. S., Richerson, L., Murphy, C. E., Jagelewski, A., & Rossi, L. (2007). The parent perspective: Informing the cultural sensitivity of parenting programs in rural communities. *Child Youth Care Forum*, 36, 179–194.
- Patterson, J., Mockford, C., Barlow, J., Pyper, C., & Stewart-Brown, S. (2002). Need and demand for parenting programmes in general practice. *Archives of Diseases in Childhood*, 87, 468-71.

Patterson, J., Mockford, C., & Stewart-Brown, S. (2005). Parents' perceptions of the value of the Webster-Stratton parenting programme: A qualitative study of a general practice based initiative. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 31(1), 53–64.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods* [3rd ed.]. London: Sage.

Polkinghorne, D. E. (2015). Language and meaning: Data collection in qualitative research. *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, 52, 137-145.

Paquette, D. (2004). Theorizing the father–child relationship: Mechanisms and developmental outcomes. *Human Development*, 47, 193–219.

Pedulla, D. S., & Thébaud, S. (2015). Can we finish the revolution? Gender, work-family ideals, and institutional constraint. *American Sociological Review*, 80(1), 116–139.

Piaget J. (1964). Part 1: Cognitive development in children. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 2, 176-186.

Premberg, Å., Hellström, A.L., & Berg, M. (2008). Experiences of the first year as father. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences*, 22, 56–63.

Prinds, C., Mogensen, O., Hvidt, N.C., & Bliddal, M. (2018). First child's impact on parental relationship: an existential perspective. *BMC Pregnancy Childbirth*, 18(157), 1-7.

Proulx, C.M., Helms, H.M., & Buehler, C. (2007). Marital quality and personal well-being: a meta-analysis. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69, 576–593.

Roy, R.N., Schumm, W.R., & Britt, S.L. (2014). *Transition to Parenthood*. New York: Springer.

Runcan, P. L., Petracovschi, S., & Borca, C. (2012). The Importance of Play in the Parent-Child Interaction. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 46, 795-799.

Russell, M., Gockel, A., & Harris, B. (2007). Parent perspectives on intensive intervention for child maltreatment. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 24(2), 101–120.

Sartre, J. P. (1989 [1943]). *No Exit and Three Other Plays*. Vintage Books: USA.

Saxbe, D., & Repetti, R. L. (2010). For better or worse? Coregulation of couples' cortisol levels and mood states. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 98, 92–103.

Sevón, E. (2012). 'My life has changed, but his life hasn't': making sense of the gendering of parenthood during the transition to motherhood. *Feminism and Psychology*, 22, 60–80.

Shaw, I., & Gould, N. (Eds.). (2001). *Qualitative research in social work*. London: Sage.

Silverman, D. (1993) *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analysing Talk, Text, and Interaction*. London: Sage.

Smith, J. A. (1997). Developing theory from case studies: self-reconstruction and the transition to motherhood, in N. Haynes (ed.) *Doing Qualitative Analysis in Psychology*. Hove: Psychology Press.

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method, and Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Smith, J. A. & Osborn, M. (2008). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. In Smith, J. A. *Qualitative Psychology – A Practical Guide to Research Methods* [2nd ed.] (pp. 53-80). London: Sage.

Sommer, R. (2006). Dual dissemination: Writing for colleagues and the public. *American Psychologist*, 61(9), 995–958.

Spiteri, G., Borg Xuereb, R., Carrick-Sen, D., Kaner, E., & Martin, C.R. (2014). Preparation for parenthood: a concept analysis. *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology*, 32(2), 148–65.

Spitzer, A., Webster-Stratton, C., & Hollinsworth, T. (1991). Coping with conduct-problem children: parents gaining knowledge and control. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 20, 413–427.

StataCorp. (2014). *Stata Statistical Software: Release 14*. College Station, TX: StataCorp LP.

Stern, D. (1995). *The Motherhood Constellation: A United View of Parent Infant Psychotherapy*. New York: Basic Books.

Stewart-Brown, S., Patterson, J., Mockford, C., Barlow, J., Klimes, I., & Pyper, C. (2004). Impact of a general practice based group parenting programme: Quantitative and qualitative results from a controlled trial at 12 months. *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, 89(6), 519–525.

StGeorge, J. M. & Fletcher, R. J. (2012). Time for work, commuting, and parenting? Commuting parents' involvement with their children. *Community, Work & Family*, 15, 3, 273–291.

Strazdins, L., Clements, M., Korda, R., Broom, D., & D'Souza, R. (2006). Unsociable Work? Nonstandard Work Schedules, Family Relationships, and Children's Well-Being. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 68, 394-410.

Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., Taggart, B. (2004). The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Final Report: A Longitudinal Study Funded by the DfES 1997-2004. Institute of Education, University of London/ Department for Education and Skills/Sure Start: London.

Tebes, J. K. (2005). Community science, philosophy of science, and the practice of research. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 35*(34), 213–230.

Thomas, J., & Harden, A. (2008). Methods for the thematic synthesis of qualitative research in systematic reviews. *BMC Medical Research Methodology, 8*(1), 45.

Tolich, M., & Davidson, C. (2003). Collecting the data. In C. Davidson & M. Tolich (Eds), *Social science research in New Zealand* (end ed., pp. 121 - 153). Auckland: Pearson Education.

Tong, A., Sainsbury, P., & Craig, J. (2007). Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ): a 32-item checklist for interviews and focus groups. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care, 19*, 349–357.

Trillingsgaard, T., Baucom, K. J. W., & Heyman, R. E. (2014). Predictors of change in relationship satisfaction during the transition to parenthood. *Family Relations, 63*, 667–79.

Vella, L. R., Butterworth, R. E., Johnson, R., & Law, L. R. (2015). Parents' experiences of being in the Solihull approach parenting group, "Understanding Your Child's Behaviour": An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Child: Care, Health and Development, 41*(6), 882–894.

Weissman, S., & Cohen, R. S., (1985). The parenting alliance and adolescence. *Adolescent Psychiatry, 12*, 24– 45.

Welsh, E. M., French, S. A., & Wall, M. (2011). Examining the relationship between family meal frequency and individual dietary intake: does family cohesion play a role? *Journal of nutrition education and behavior, 43*, 4, 229–235

Williamson, M., McVeigh, C., & Baafi, M. (2008). An Australian perspective of fatherhood and sexuality. *Midwifery*, 24(1), 99–107.

Willig, C. (2013). *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology* [3rd ed.]. Berkshire: Open University Press.

Wilson, A. D. (2014). The lived experiences of resilient single mothers who raised successful black men. *Adultspan Journal*, 13, 90-108.

Wilson, A. D., Onwuegbuzie, A. J., and Manning, L. P. (2016). Using Paired Depth Interviews to Collect Qualitative Data. *The Qualitative Report*, 21(9), 1549-1573.

Wilson, R., Weaver, T., Michelson, D., & Day, C. (2018). Experiences of parenting and clinical intervention for mothers affected by personality disorder: A pilot qualitative study combining parent and clinician perspectives. *BMC Psychiatry*, 18(1), 152.

Wolfe, R. B., & Haddy, L. (2001). A qualitative examination of parents' experiences in parent education groups. *Early Child Development and Care*, 167, 77–87.

Woolhouse, H., McDonald, E., & Brown, S.J. (2012). Women's experiences of sex and intimacy after childbirth: making the adjustment to motherhood. *Journal of Psychosomatic Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, 33, 185–190.

Xuereb, R. B., Abela, A., & Spiteri, G. (2012). Early parenting – portraits from the lives of first-time parents. *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology*, 30(5), 468–82.

Yardley, L. (2000). Dilemmas in qualitative health research. *Psychology & Health*, 15, 215-228.

Yardley, L. (2008). Demonstrating validity in qualitative psychology. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (2nd ed., pp. 235-251). London: Sage.

Appendices

Appendix A

Literature Review Supplementary Tables

Table 1. Details of studies included in the systematic review by Kane *et al.* (2007).

Authors & Date	Setting	Parenting Programme
Spitzer <i>et al.</i> (1991)	Group therapy sessions and individual therapist consultations	Webster-Stratton Videotape Modelling Programme
Kilgour & Fleming (2000)	Delivered by health visitors in school	Webster-Stratton Parenting Programme
Barlow & Stewart-Brown (2001)	Delivered by Family Links Nurturing Programme facilitators in school	Family Links Nurturing Programme
Stewart-Brown <i>et al.</i> (2004)	Delivered by health visitors in general practice	Webster-Stratton Parenting Programme

Table 2. Details of studies included in the systematic review by Butler *et al.* (2020).

Authors & Date & location	Participants	Parenting Programme
Wilson <i>et al.</i> (2018), UK	<i>N</i> = 5 mothers with personality disorder of children with behavioural/emotional difficulties	Helping Families Programme
Garcia <i>et al.</i> (2018), USA	<i>N</i> = 35 parents age 29-40 years referred to child-welfare agencies	Group Triple P
Haskett <i>et al.</i> (2018), USA	<i>N</i> = 16 parents experiencing homelessness	Triple P Seminar
Coates <i>et al.</i> (2017), Australia	<i>N</i> = 18 parents self-identifying as having a mental health difficulty	Mental Health Positive Parenting
Hartwig <i>et al.</i> (2017), USA	<i>N</i> = 166 low-income mothers, predominantly Hispanic and Black	Legacy for Children
Errázuriz <i>et al.</i> (2016), Chile	<i>N</i> = 34 parents attending primary care centres	Group Triple P
Duppong-Hurley <i>et al.</i> (2016), USA	<i>N</i> = 27 parents who signed up for but didn't complete a community parenting programme	Common-Sense Parenting

Lewis <i>et al.</i> (2016), USA	N = 47 parents involved with the state child-welfare agency	Pathways Triple P
Mejia <i>et al.</i> (2016), Panama	N = 30 Panamanian parents of adolescents	Strengthening Families 10-14
Vella <i>et al.</i> (2015), UK	N = 10 parents aged over 18	Solihull Approach Parenting
Furlong & Mc Gilloway (2015), Irl	N = 28 Caucasian Irish parents	Incredible Years Parent Programme
Mejia <i>et al.</i> (2015), Panama	N = 30 Panamanian parents of adolescents	Strengthening Families 10-14
Butcher & Gersch (2014), UK	N = 7 white British parents aged 26-35 years	Time Together
Holtrop <i>et al.</i> (2014), USA	N = 20 white parents aged 28-64 years	Parent Management Training
Estefan <i>et al.</i> (2013), USA	N = 21 parents involved with or at risk of being involved with child-welfare system	Nurturing Parents Programme
Cullen <i>et al.</i> (2013), UK	N = 133 parents attending parenting programmes across English local authorities	TripleP, Strengthening Families, Incredible Years, FAST
Houlding <i>et al.</i> (2012), Canada	N = 11 Aboriginal Canadian parents	Group Triple P
Furlong & Mc Gilloway (2012), Irl	N = 13 parents (31 mothers & 2 fathers with a mean age of 34 years)	Incredible Years Parent Programme
Bermudez <i>et al.</i> (2011), USA	N = 20 Mexican American mothers parenting alone	Parenting Through Change
Owens <i>et al.</i> (2007), USA	N = 15 Caucasian parents attending community-based parenting programme	Behavioural Parenting Programme
Russell <i>et al.</i> (2007), Canada	N = 24 culturally diverse parents referred by child protection services	Project Parent
Patterson <i>et al.</i> (2005), UK	N = 26 parents, 22 who attended min 50%, 3 non-attenders, and 1 who dropped out	Webster-Stratton Parenting Programme
Mockford & Barlow (2004), UK	N = 14 mothers	Webster-Stratton Parenting Programme
Stewart-Brown <i>et al.</i> (2004), UK	N = 26 parents in intervention group delivered by Health Visitors in general practice	Webster-Stratton Parenting Programme

Wolfe & Haddy (2001), USA	N = 15 mothers (11 Caucasian women and 4 African American Women)	Listening to Children
Barlow & Stewart-Brown (2001)	N = 11 parents who had attended at least 90% of the programme, delivered in school	Family Links Nurturing Programme

Table 3. Depiction of themes and subthemes in the thematic synthesis of Butler et al. (2020).

A Family's Journey	Aspects Perceived to be Important or Valuable	Challenges or Difficulties
Prior to parenting programme	Group leader or facilitator	Barriers to engagement or attendance: <i>Fear of judgement & distrust of others</i> <i>Lack of support</i> <i>Systemic Challenges</i>
Outcomes: <i>Changes in parent:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Overcoming barriers to engagement</i> - <i>Skill development</i> - <i>Developing understanding & relationship with child</i> - <i>Improved wellbeing & view of self</i> <i>Changes in child</i> <i>Changes in family</i>	Programme content and delivery	Programme content
Post intervention	Value of group	Suggestions for improvement

Table 4. Details of studies included in systematic review by Delicate *et al.* (2018).

Authors & Date & Location	Research Title	Participants
Faircloth (2015), UK	Negotiating intimacy, equality, and sexuality in the transition to parenthood.	<i>n</i> = 30 15 couples
Sevón (2012), Finland	'My life has changed, but his life hasn't': Making sense of the gendering of parenthood during the transition to motherhood.	<i>n</i> = 7 women
Woolhouse <i>et al.</i> (2012), Australia	Interview with sub-sample from a prospective longitudinal pregnancy cohort study conducted 2.5 - 3.5 years postpartum.	<i>n</i> = 18 women
MacAdam <i>et al.</i> (2011), Sweden	Fathers' experiences after having a child: sexuality becomes tailored according to circumstances.	<i>n</i> = 10 men
Olsson <i>et al.</i> (2010), Sweden	Fatherhood in focus, sexual activity can wait: new fathers' experience about sexual life after childbirth.	<i>n</i> = 10 men
Deave & Johnson (2008), UK	The transition to parenthood; what does it mean to fathers.	<i>n</i> = 20 men
Deave <i>et al.</i> (2008), UK	Transition to parenthood; the needs of parents in pregnancy and early parenthood.	<i>n</i> = 44 24 women & 20 partners
Fägerskiöld (2008), UK	A change in life as experienced by first-time fathers.	<i>n</i> = 20 men
Premberg <i>et al.</i> (2008), Sweden	Experiences of the first year as father.	<i>n</i> = 10 men
Williamson (2008), Australia	An Australian perspective of fatherhood and sexuality.	<i>n</i> = 128 men
Olsson <i>et al.</i> (2005), Sweden	Women's thoughts about sexual life after childbirth: focus group discussions with women after childbirth.	<i>n</i> = 27 women
Ahlborg & Strandmark (2001), Sweden	The baby was the focus of attention - first time parents' experiences of their intimate relationship.	<i>n</i> = 10 5 couples


Appendix B

Recruitment and Participation Documents

Research Recruitment Poster.

RESEARCH STUDY

Exploring Parents' Perceptions of their Family's Relationships



Your time needed **90 minutes**
Who attends interview **2 parents/carers**

By participating you are:

- Contributing to the understanding of how familial connectivity is perceived by parents
- Having the opportunity to explore your experiences of parenting in relation to your fundamental parenting skills and to your families' relationships
- Contributing to existing research on familial connectivity, relationships and parenting skills
- Contributing to an evidence base which can in turn inform contextual based psychological interventions

Does your family meet the participation criteria?

1. **Child's Age** - Are one or more of your children between the ages of 2 and 7?
2. **Clinical Diagnosis** - Are your children without a clinical diagnosis?
3. **Carers** - If you are not the biological parents of your child have you been the child's primary caregiver for more than 2 years?
4. **English** - Are you fully proficient in conversational English?

Contact us for more Information on:

Email: [REDACTED]
Phone: [REDACTED]

Participant Screening Form.**Doctoral Research Compatibility Form**

Parent's DOB's

Parents Marital Status

- Married
 Separated
 Co-habiting
 Single Parent

Children's DOB's

Does your child have a clinical diagnosis?

- Yes
 No

If Yes; what is the diagnosis?

Are you proficient in the use of the English language?

Relationship to child

- Biological parents
 Adoptive parents
 Primary Carer's
 Other

If you aren't the biological parents, how long has the child/children been in your care?

Participant Information Sheet.



*The Department of Health and
Social Sciences
Middlesex University
Hendon
London NW4 4BT*



Date: XX.XX.XX

Title:

Exploring the journey of parenting to understand parents' perceptions of their families' relationships

Invitation:

You and your partner are invited to take part in a Doctoral research study relating to your role as parents. If after considering the particulars of this study you both are interested in participating, please email the researcher at x@xx.x. If you would like to discuss anything further prior to committing to taking part a phone call can be arranged.

What is the purpose of the research?

The research herein described aims to form a better understanding of how familial connectivity is perceived by parents in relation to their families' attachment and their fundamental parenting skills. This will be done by exploring with parent/carer units, their experience of their journey of parenting together. For the purpose of this study, 'the family' is being defined as a unit composed of two parents who are cohabitating and parenting together, their child/ren.

Why have I been chosen?

You and your partner have been chosen as you have indicated that you and your partner meet the inclusion criteria outlined in the recruitment material and that you and your partner are open to finding out more about the research study to make an informed decision about participating.

Do I have to take part?

No, it is entirely up to you and your partner to decide whether or not to take part in this study. If you and your partner do decide to take part in this study, you and your partner will be asked to sign a consent form before the interview commences. After you and your partner sign the consent form, you both are still free to withdraw at any time, with no obligation and without giving a reason. If you and your partner withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you and your partner or destroyed.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If after having read this information sheet you and your partner advise the researcher that you and your partner would like to take part in the research you and your partner will be contacted by phone to have the opportunity to discuss with the researcher details of the study and to have any questions you may have answered by the researcher. If you and your partner tell the researcher that you wish to proceed with participating in the research you and your partner will be issued with a preliminary questionnaire that will ask you for three pieces of demographic information, namely, the ages of your children (the study is concerned with the parents of children aged between 2 and 7 years old), and if you are the biological parent of your children (participants who are not biological parents need to be primary carers to the children for a minimum of two years). You and your partner will be asked to sign a declaration to state that you both are guardians of your children. You and your partner will be asked to sign a declaration to confirm that, as far as your knowledge permits, you are compliant with the inclusion criteria (as gathered in your preliminary questionnaire) and exclusion criteria. Exclusion criteria for participation are a lack of English proficiency, which may obstruct data collection, and a diagnosis of any DSM clinical disorder (in your children), as the study is concerned with the perceptions of parents parenting children who do not have a clinical diagnosis.

You and your partner will then be invited to schedule an interview time and date convenient to you both, in line with the availability of the researcher and the room in which the interview will take place. The physical location of the interviews will be therapy rooms provided by X which has locations in three parts of the country, X, Y, and Z. The interviews will take place in a room that will be private and quiet enough so as not to interfere with the process. The interviews will follow a semi-structured plan, where you and your partner will be asked broad questions about how you parent together, about your family's connectivity, and about your parenting skills. You and your partner will be interviewed as a parenting unit, so your co-parenting partner will be in attendance at the interview with you and you will both be given the opportunity to express your opinions in relation to each question. The interview will be between 60 and 90 minutes. The interview will be confidential in nature, insofar as your anonymity will be maintained in all instances, with the exception of the unlikely event of a child protection concern being raised, in which case the provisions of the Children's First Act 2015 must be upheld.

Consent:

If you and your partner do decide to take part in this study, you and your partner will be asked to sign a consent form before the interview commences. After you and your partner sign the consent form, you both are still free to withdraw at any time, with no obligation and without giving a reason.

What are the possible disadvantages to taking part?

As can be possible in any personal exploration of ourselves with another, things that are being talked about could become upsetting and thought provoking for you. Please consider how you will feel talking about yourself and your experiences as this may be a potential trigger for emotional upset. There will be an opportunity at the end of the interview to explore how you are feeling and ascertain if you feel that you are in need of further support. Throughout the interview caution will be exercised in ensuring that any psychological impact of participating in the semi-structured paired depth interview is minimised. If there is evidence of such an impact during the

interview the researcher will raise this concern with you and your partner and a decision to stop the interview can be made. The well-being of the participants is of paramount concern to the researcher at all times throughout the study.

What are the possible advantages of taking part?

By participating in this research you and your partner are potentially:

- Making a contribution to the understanding of how familial connectivity is perceived by parents
- Having the opportunity to explore your experiences of parenting in relation to your to your families' relationships
- Contributing to existing research on familial connectivity but with a qualitative analytical depth
- Contributing to an evidence base which can in turn inform contextual based psychological interventions.

Who is organising and funding the research?

This research is being conducted as part of the researchers' doctoral training at NSPC, in collaboration with Middlesex University.

What will happen to the data?

Each interview will be recorded using an Apple voice recording device. After the interview the recordings will be transcribed and analyzed. Any identifying personal information will be both separated from the recording (all reasonable efforts will be made not to mention names once the recording has started) and then deleted once the recordings have been transcribed. At all times, the data will be stored in a password-controlled computer owned by the researcher. The data will be gathered and stored in a manner that is compliant with the provisions of the General Data Protection Regulations (EU) 2016/679. Anonymised data will be stored securely by the university for a period of ten years, as is the standard for Doctoral research.

Who has reviewed the study?

All proposals for research using human participants are reviewed by an Ethics Committee before they can proceed. The NSPC Ethics Committee has reviewed this proposal.

Conclusion:

The time that you and your partner have taken to read this document and to consider participating is greatly appreciated. Should you at any time require any further information to help you inform your decision you are welcome to contact the researcher.

Supervisor: Dr Niklas Serning (Primary), Dr Rochelle Johnson (Secondary)

Primary Supervisor Contact Details: x@xx.x

Researcher: Arlene Naughten

Researcher Contact Details: email x@xx.x

Consent to Engage in the Research Form.



*The Department of Health and
Social Sciences
Middlesex University
Hendon
London NW4 4BT*



Informed Consent

Title: Exploring the journey of parenting to understand parents' perceptions of their families' relationships

Researcher: Arlene Naughten

Supervisor: Dr Niklas Serning (Primary), Dr Rochelle Johnson (Secondary)

- I have understood the details of the research as described for me in the Participant Information Sheet.
- I have had the opportunity to discuss with the researcher details of the study after reading the Participant Information Sheet.
- I have had my questions answered by the researcher, and confirm that I have consented to act as a participant in the above named research study.
- I have been given contact details for the researcher in the information sheet and I understand that I am welcome to contact the researcher regarding the research at any point in time.
- I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary, the data collected during the research will not be identifiable, and I have the right to withdraw from the project at any time without any obligation to explain my reasons for doing so.
- I further understand that the data I provide may be used for analysis and subsequent publication, and I provide my consent that this may occur.

Print name

Sign Name

Date: _____

To the participant: Data may be inspected by the Chair of the Psychology Ethics panel and the Chair of the School of Health and Education Ethics committee of Middlesex University, if required by institutional audits about the correctness of procedures. Although this would happen in strict confidentiality, please tick here if you do not wish your data to be included in audits: _____

Debrief Document.

*The Department of Health and Social
Sciences
Middlesex University
Hendon
London NW4 4BT*

**Debriefing**

Title: Exploring the journey of parenting to understand parents' perceptions of their families' relationships

Researcher: Arlene Naughten

Supervisor: Dr Niklas Serning (Primary), Dr Rochelle Johnson (Secondary)

Thank you for taking part in this research and making a valuable contribution towards the aims of the study.

The research that you have participated in aims to:

- Form a better understanding of how familial connectivity is perceived by parents in relation to their families' relationships and
- Explore with parent/carer units, their experience of their journey of parenting.

Your time and trust to share with the researcher your experiences is greatly appreciated. As is possible in any personal exploration of ourselves with another, things that were being talked about during the interview can be upsetting and thought provoking for you. In the event that you feel psychologically distressed after your participation in this study, we encourage you to

communicate with the researcher. This debrief is your opportunity to talk about your experience of being interviewed and anything that the process may have brought up for you. If you feel you would like to talk more about the issues which have arisen in the interview process, or any difficult feelings you have experienced in relation to this, there is a list of organisations at the bottom of the page.*

If for any reason you are unable to make contact with the researcher or should you have any complaint, please contact the research supervisor, Dr Niklas Serning on x@xx.x.

***Further Support:**

Tusla Family Support Services - <http://www.tusla.ie/services/family-community-support/family-support/>

ISPCC - Parent Support Line - <https://www.ispcc.ie/services/services-for-parents/414>

Parent Line - Guiding parents, supporting families - <http://www.parentline.ie>

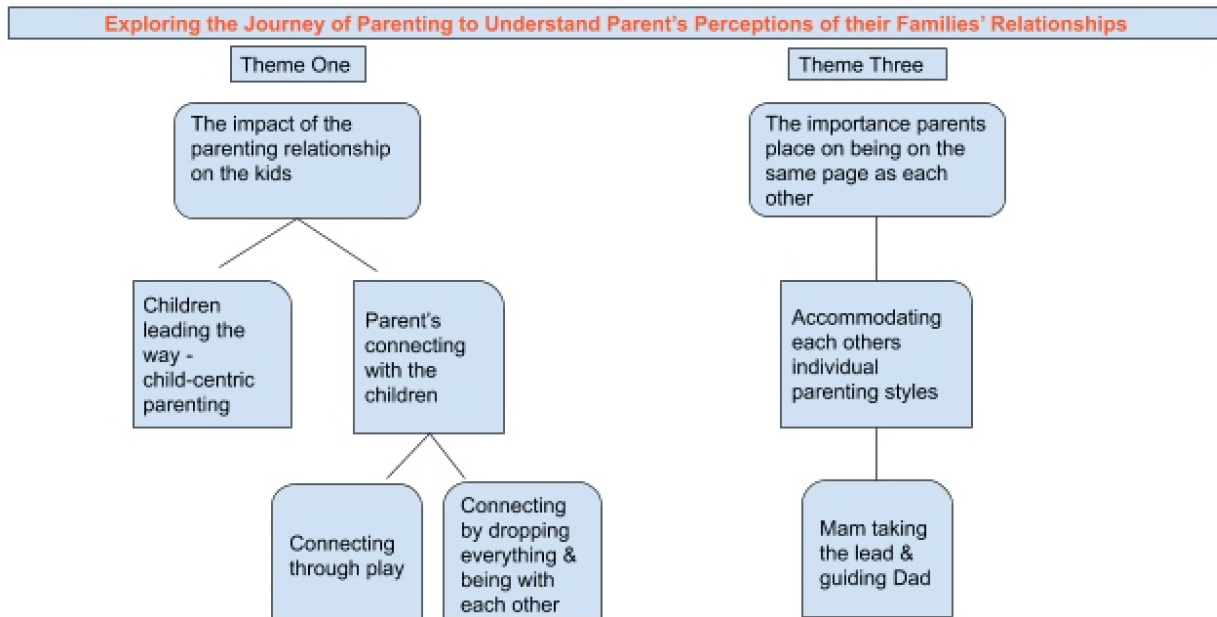
My Mind - Counselling & Psychotherapy Services - <https://mymind.org>

Helplink - Mental health and conflict resolution services – www.helplink.ie

Appendix C

Sample of Data Analysis Stages

Thematic Map for Pilot.



Coding on Nvivo.

Name	Files	Referen...	Created On	Created
Times have changed and continue changing	3	13	24 Feb 2019 at 16:34	AN
Influence of previous relationships	1	3	23 Feb 2020 at 21:33	AN
Influence of own upbringing	5	27	24 Feb 2019 at 17:06	AN
Interviewer commentary	3	15	22 Feb 2020 at 20:19	AN
Impact of parents workload on familial relationships	7	43	24 Feb 2019 at 17:23	AN
Reshaping how personal interest needs are met	7	45	24 Feb 2019 at 17:45	AN
Independence within the relationship	4	12	23 Feb 2020 at 22:12	AN
Impact of external influences	5	18	23 Feb 2020 at 22:08	AN
Connecting with each other without the kids	6	25	24 Feb 2019 at 17:39	AN
Burden of household tasks	3	7	3 Mar 2019 at 16:08	AN
Being there but not present	2	10	4 Mar 2019 at 12:49	AN
2. The importance parents place on being on the same page as each other	7	109	24 Feb 2019 at 16:54	AN
2.3 Parents connecting through the shared journey of parenting	4	19	6 Apr 2020 at 11:20	AN
2.3.1 Together adding parents to self identity	4	17	6 Apr 2020 at 11:29	AN
2.2 Accommodating each family members different way of being in the world	6	40	22 Feb 2020 at 21:10	AN
2.1 Accommodating each others individual parenting styles	7	42	24 Feb 2019 at 22:23	AN
2.1.1 Mom taking the lead and guiding Dad	5	25	24 Feb 2019 at 16:52	AN
1. The impact of the parenting relationship on the children	5	43	24 Feb 2019 at 17:04	AN
1.3 Impact of parents ambitions for children	6	37	22 Feb 2020 at 22:40	AN
1.3.1 Parents holding a boundary for children	4	6	23 Mar 2020 at 16:18	AN
1.2 Parent's connecting with the children	6	24	22 Feb 2020 at 18:34	AN
1.2.2 Connecting through simply being with each other	7	29	3 Mar 2019 at 16:04	AN
1.2.1 Connecting through play	4	11	3 Mar 2019 at 16:08	AN
1.1 Children leading the way - child-centric parenting	7	41	3 Mar 2019 at 13:42	AN
1.1.1 Parents valuing the voice or view of the child (Title TBC)	4	15	9 Mar 2020 at 09:54	AN

Theme/Subtheme Development Process.

	A	B	C
1	Theme	Subtheme	sub/sub theme
2	The impact of the parenting relationship on the children	Children leading the way - child-centric parenting (inc voice/view of child)	
3		Parents connecting with the children	connecting through simply being with each other
4			connecting through play
5		Impact of parents ambitions for the children (inc boundary holding)	
6			
7	The importance parents place on being on the same page as each other	Accommodating each others individual parenting styles	Influence of own upbringing on parenting style
8		Accommodating each family members different way of being in the world	
9		Parents connecting through the shared journey of parenting	Together adding parent to self identity
10			
11	Superordinate Theme	Theme	
12			
13	1. The parenting relationship	1.1 Being 'on the same page' as each other	1.1.1 Core Values are Aligned, 1.1.2 A United Front is Aligned, 1.1.3 Communication is Key, 1.1.4 Conflict, 1.1.5 Team
14		1.2 Individual parenting styles	1.2.1 Experiencing differences in parenting styles, 1.2.2 Accommodating differences in parenting styles, 1.2.3 Influence of own upbringing on parenting style
15		1.3 Connecting through the shared journey of parenting	1.3.1 Parental connectivity, 1.3.2 Challenges to parental connectivity, 1.3.3 Changes to parents' connectivities, 1.3.4 Together adding 'parent' to self identity
16			
17	2. Parent's relationship with their children	2.1 Being child-centric	2.1.1 Child's fundamental needs, 2.1.2 Child's relational security, 2.1.3 Child's individuality,
18		2.2 Connecting with their children	2.2.1 Connecting and disconnecting, 2.2.2 Connecting through simply being together, 2.2.3 Connecting through play
19		2.3 Ambitions for their children	2.3.1 Impact of parents' ambitions, 2.3.2 Impact of parents' boundaries
20			
21	3		
22	Parent's relationship with each other	Different ways of being in the world	
23		Independence within the relationship	
24		Connecting with each other without the kids	
25	4		
26	Experiences of external influences / the juggle of family life	Impact of parents workload on familial relationships (physical - time and space, being there but not present)	
27		Reshaping how personal interest needs are met	
28			

Draft of Theme Table.

The Parenting Relationship	The Parent-Child Relationship
1.1 Being 'on the same page' as each other	2.1 Being child-centric
1.1.1 Core values are aligned	2.1.1 Child's fundamental needs
1.1.2 A united front is upheld	2.1.2 Child's relational security
1.1.3 Communication is key	2.1.3 Child's individuality
1.1.4 Being in 'opposite camps'	
1.1.5 Being a team	
1.2 Individual parenting styles	2.2 Connecting with their children
1.2.1 Experiencing differences in parenting styles	2.2.1 Connecting and disconnecting
1.2.2 Accommodating differences in parenting styles	2.2.2 Connecting through simply being together
1.2.3 Influence of own upbringing on parenting style	2.2.3 Connecting through play
1.3 Connecting through the shared journey of parenting	2.3 Ambitions for their children
1.3.1 Parental connectivity	2.3.1 Impact of parents' ambitions
1.3.2 Challenges to parental connectivity	2.3.2 Impact of parents' boundaries
1.3.3 Changes to parents' connectivity	
1.3.4 Together adding 'parent' to self-identity	

Final Theme Table.

Table 7: Summary of Resulting Themes for Research Question: Exploring the Journey of Parenting to Understand Parent's Perceptions of their Families' Relationships

1. The Parenting Relationship
1.1 Parental Solidarity
1.1.1 Aligned core values
1.1.2 Communication
1.1.3 Being a team
1.2 Differences in Individual Parenting Styles
1.2.1 Influence of own upbringing on parenting style
1.3 Parents Connecting with each other Through their Shared Role of Parenting
1.3.1 Together incorporating being a parent into self-identity
2. The Parent-Child Relationship
2.1 Parents Tune into their Children's Needs
2.1.1 Parents relate to their children's individualities
2.2 Parents Connecting with their Children
2.2.1 Parents connect with their children through play and being present
2.3 Parent's Aspirations for their Children's Futures Influences their ways of Being with their Children
2.3.1 Parents hold boundaries for their children in line with their aspirations for them