

Partnerships for Children and Families Project

**Invisible Lives:
The Experiences of Parents
Receiving Child Protective Services**

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SOCIAL WORK



August 2003

PARTNERSHIPS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES PROJECT
INVISIBLE LIVES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF 61 PARENTS RECEIVING
CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES.

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INTRODUCTION

Involvement with child protective services (CPS) may be expected to be a stressful experience for parents. Usually their involvement is involuntary, initiated because someone believes they are not caring adequately for their children: this tells them that the community, or someone in the community, does not approve of them as parents. As families who become involved with CPS tend to be economically deprived and socially marginalized, they may view agency intervention as one more sign that they are not accepted by their community. Moreover it brings the fear of losing their children, perhaps forever. In this context, it is especially important to understand parents' perspectives, so that service providers can respond sensitively to them through the crisis of CPS entering their lives. A sensitive response contributes to a good working relationship, and to the parents' sense of being respected and valued, conditions that are essential in helping them to improve their family situations.

This research report explores the experiences of sixty-one parents who have had substantial involvement with CPS, with a focus on their own perceptions of this involvement. To better understand the context of parents' experiences, we asked them to discuss freely their histories, their daily lives, their relationships with family, friends, neighbours, and more formal sources of support. We did not interview CPS workers or foster carers. Other team members in the Partnerships for Children and Families Project did include workers in their interviews; for our part, it was a massive task to organize the

data from lengthy interviews with 61 parents, thus the inclusion of other viewpoints was beyond our capacity.

In soliciting the opinions of parents about the positive and negative aspects of their experience with CPS, we have been mindful of the great difficulties under which Ontario Children's Aid Societies are operating. As with most of the members of the Project team, the first two authors have been employed in CPS agencies, so we are familiar with the stressful working conditions, and the severe limitations on time available to spend with families. A 2001 workload study of Ontario Children's Aid Societies found that front-line workers are spending less than 30% of their time in personal contact with families and children (OACAS, 2001). Most of workers' time tends to be spent on paperwork--to meet the increasing demands for accountability from the provincial government, and the legal requirements involved in carrying out their mandated role of protecting children.

Given the above restrictions on service, we still believe that it is important for the parents' perspective to be heard, so that the limited time spent with them may be as productive as possible. Our findings provide a picture of difficult lives and insufficient support from families, communities, and formal services. Many of the parents were themselves raised in abusive or neglecting homes, often with parents who abused substances. Many mothers were currently living in very challenging situations, with: physical and mental health problems; partners who were unsupportive and/or abusive; and children with serious emotional, behavioural, and developmental problems. Most of the parents were doing their

best to meet their children's needs. They sought informal and formal support, especially at times of crises in their lives, but were often disappointed in the response to their requests for help. On the other hand, they appreciated the help that was forthcoming from friends and community services, and they valued the good aspects of their family lives, such as sharing of parenting, and family recreation. Their reports of experiences with CPS suggest that the families needed much more help than most workers were able to provide, although there were some excellent examples of workers finding appropriate services for the family and developing positive relationships with the parents. From this study, it appears that a much enriched child welfare system is needed if these vulnerable families are to be given the sustained support they require, so they may face the many challenges in their lives and provide adequate care to their children.

The findings include a description of the methodology used for the study, and the findings in three major categories – parents' lives, formal and informal supports desired and used by parents, and parents' experiences of CPS interventions. Each of the three categories has a number of themes. The themes for parents' lives are: family history, family struggles, family strengths, and struggles with children; themes for formal and informal supports are: social service organizations, friends and neighbours, extended family members, and places of belonging in the community; and the themes for parents experiences of CPS interventions are: service experiences, qualities of worker, and experiences with court. The report concludes with some recommendations for improving the fit between family needs and CPS.

Methodology

Because the goal of this study was to understand, in depth, the perspective of parents receiving child protection services, we chose to use a qualitative approach. Qualitative research can deepen our understanding of the lived experiences of individuals, by eliciting details about their feelings, thought processes, and emotions that may not be possible through a quantitative design (Straus & Corbin, 1998). Qualitative data also provides an understanding of the context of people's lives and events, captures the diversity within groups, and enhances the inclusion of participants' perspectives (Fetterman, 1989).

Research Design

An exploratory qualitative design was employed for the study. A semi structured interview schedule was used to collect data from parents, as described below. The interviews were audio taped and later transcribed. Two research assistants, using the qualitative analysis software program NVIVO, analysed and organized the data.

Selection of Participants

The participants for this study were recruited from two CPS agencies servicing two of 53 regions in Ontario, Canada. Thirty-nine parents (64%) were recruited from one agency and 22 (36%) another. Each agency identified families by selecting files at random and telephoning parents to request their

involvement. Those who agreed were identified to the researchers who arranged to interview them at home.

Data Collection

Masters level social work students who had experience working with child welfare service participants conducted the interviews. In addition to bringing their experience to the study, the interviewers were given comprehensive two-day training on conducting qualitative interviews. The training included information about the project, orientation to qualitative interviewing, conduct during interviews, review of the interview schedule, completion of consent forms, sharing the information letter with participants, reading articles relating to qualitative interviewing, and conducting mock interviews.

The semi-structured individual interviews with participants lasted 1 ½ to 2 hours and usually took place in their homes. The interviews were with the family's primary caregiver, usually the mother; only with one family were both parents interviewed. In addition, interviewers collected limited demographic information from service participants at the beginning of the interview such as age, gender, marital status, and number of children.

Parents were engaged in one-on-one dialogue with interviewers to explore dimensions of their everyday lives and were encouraged to reflect on their experiences with CPS. Service participants were asked to think about the important events in their lives, particularly, events that had occurred over the past five years, and to describe these events. Participants were then asked about

when they became involved with the child welfare system and when this involvement stopped, followed by questions that asked them to discuss the most important things, both good and bad, that had had an impact on their lives. Questioning was then divided into three broad categories – daily living, service involvement, and conclusion – with each category having a number of sub-questions and probes. The goal of the semi-structured interview was to obtain as comprehensive a picture of service participants lives as possible with a particular emphasis on child welfare services and on family life.

Data Analysis

Data analysis commenced after all interviews were completed. All three authors worked on developing and defining codes from themes and insights that emerged from the four transcripts. The third author and a master's level social worker then coded and organized the data using the qualitative software package NVIVO (QSR NUD*IST Vivo) for organizing non-numerical data. They coded the first three interviews independently and, as they found a good level of agreement in the coding, one coder was used for each of the remaining transcripts. Coders were asked to code all statements that were relevant to the coding scheme in order to guard against selective attention to points of particular interest to the coders. As each transcript was coded separately, the coders entered journal memos when the data suggested additional categories or themes for coding. These themes were then discussed among the researchers to ensure that all the relevant categories, themes, and sub-themes had been captured.

Limitations and Strengths of the Study

The limitations of this study are similar to those of most qualitative studies in that the findings are not generalizable. The findings relate to the sample studied, and provide insights into the lived experiences of this group of parents involved with CPS. The transferability of the findings – the likelihood that another similar study would provide comparable findings – is increased, however, by the large sample size that resulted in considerable saturation of themes. Moreover, the credibility of the findings is enhanced by the inclusion, in the report, of a number of quotations to illustrate themes. The quality of the data collection was also ensured by the considerable initial training given to interviewers, and the quality of data analysis was ensured by having four researchers examine the same transcripts to develop the coding scheme.

SAMPLE

For the 61 families in the sample, 57 (93%) of the interviews were with mothers only, 3 (5%) were with fathers only, and 1 interview was joint. The age of the participants ranged from 16 years to 47 years, with a mean of 31.66 years. The marital status of the participants was: single = 27.9% (17), married = 24.6% (15), living common-law = 16.4% (10), divorced = 16.4% (10), separated = 13.1% (8), and widowed = 1.6% (1). Ninety five percent (58) of the participants were born in Canada while English was the first language of 98.4% (60) of the participants. Participants had between one and six children, with a mean of 2.18.

The number of years that participants had been involved with CPS ranged from 0.08 years to 15 years, with a mean of 2.4 years.

PARENTS' LIVES

Parent History

Themes reflected in the findings included: disruptions, childhood abuse, and insecurity.

Disruptions

Many of the parents had not finished their education, and some had moved into marriage and/or parenthood at an early age. Twenty-one parents (34%) indicated they had dropped out before finishing high school, and a few explained this on the basis of early parenthood. Pamela, 27, separated, with four children, said: "I was still in high school and I quit to look after these children." Eleven of the mothers mentioned that they had been very young when they were married or became parents. Jane, married, with three children, said: "I was only 17 and my husband was 22, going on 12."

Childhood Abuse

Seventeen mothers (28%) said they were abused by family members while they were growing up; five of the seventeen specifically mentioned being sexually abused by their fathers, while a sixth said both she and her husband were survivors of incest. Tess, 23, recalled:

My Dad sexually abused me from the age of five until 10...because of the abuse that I suffered from my Dad...and the neglect, I would find myself walking down the street and seeing other kids with their fathers and seeing a happy relationship. I resented those kids.

The remaining twelve mothers were not clear about the nature of their abuse, or specifically mentioned physical abuse; some mothers made connections between this and their present problems. Kitty, 38, said that abuse by her mother caused her to confuse abuse with love, and Kitty linked this with her own tendency to form relationships with men who abused her.

Insecurity

Insecurity in their families of origin stemmed from substance abuse by parents, and family breakup. Eleven women and one man reported that one or both of their parents were substance abusers, usually with alcohol. Jenny, 32, made a link between her mother being an alcoholic and her own drinking: "You see, the way my Mom lives is the same way I'm going; but I don't want to take that road--I want to take a different road". Cal, 33, described his early drinking habits: "I used to hang out with my Dad's buddies...they drank, and that means I started drinking early, at 15...by 19, I was right into it."

Eight parents in the study mentioned breakup in their families of origin. Nellie, 24, singles said, "I didn't know my real Dad, so I made a fantasy life for myself". Three of these parents from disrupted families had been placed in foster care. Six women said they had left home at an early age because of family conflict. Wanda, 20, single, went back and forth between her parents who were

separated. She described being “kicked out” by both parents, beginning at age 14, because of minor disagreements.

Parents also mentioned mental health problems, such as schizophrenia and depression that affected their parents or the parents of their children’s fathers. Lydia, 44, said: “I believe now that my Mom was manic depressive...she was either trying to kill herself or running away from [the family?].” Some parents had witnessed their fathers abusing their mothers. Anna, 25, recalled: “My Mom and my Dad used to fight and I’d just get in between them to break it up, which was really hard.”

Family Struggles

The in-depth interviews with parents, largely mothers, suggested that they struggled with a range of conditions in their current families that would be expected to create extreme hardship, and obstruct the development of a supportive environment for their children. Problems noted by the family were: unsupportive relationships (61%), wife abuse (34%), non-violent oppression (25%), substance abuse (33%), problems with physical health (33%), with mental health (31%), poverty (38%), unemployment (20%), disability (11%), transient lifestyle (54%), isolation (23%), and socially toxic environments (26%).

Unsupportive Relationships

Thirty-seven parents (61%) spoke about unsupportive relationships with their partners: lack of participation in household chores and decisions (n=25); a lack of connection (n=23); poor communication (n=22); no unified front with the

children (n=20); marital infidelity on the part of the partner (n=20); arguments, put-downs, and a general sense of not being appreciated by their partners (n=18). The data, mainly provided by mothers, suggested that they were largely carrying the child rearing responsibilities, with little or no emotional or financial support from their partners.

Melinda, 38, mother of 3, noted that the father of her children took no responsibility for childcare, yet he seemed to wield greater power in the relationship:

I felt angry that it was easy for him to give up. Here I was, stranded with these kids. First he says 'No, we'll stay together for the sake of the kids', then he didn't want to stay together for the sake of the kids. I feel now in hindsight I should have said 'Let's split up'. We still resided in the house but in separate rooms. And now, this year, it's just kind of crashed down, like it's done, it's over, the house is sold. So, it seems like such a waste of time... I was pregnant but lost the baby. That was very emotional, that's when he told me it was all over. It was very devastating. [I had to provide my own emotional support] because he abandoned me emotionally. He said 'It's your topic, not mine, I'm going to work. I'll drop you off at the hospital and pick you up'. That was it.

Joan, 43, noted that she received very little help from her partner:

He doesn't help me with the baby – he'll drive my teenage son around, but that's about it. He doesn't help around the house, he doesn't cook or clean or do anything with the baby...[after the baby] He didn't bring me food or flowers or a card, he was like "This is great--look what I did!" and takes credit for the baby and now he wants another. He doesn't do anything and I'm losing it. I'm exhausted. She doesn't sleep.

Jenny, 32, also identified the lack of help and support from her partner: "I felt like a single parent, even though I was living with him, I felt that he was never there. And even sometimes, he was here, well he wasn't really, because he's always doing his own thing".

Susan, 40, mother of 3, noted the lack of communication with her partner and the compromises she had to make:

His attitude was 'I'll take care of the kids because I can't work'. So I sort of gave in to the trade-off. Okay, he's there constantly which means that I can get ahead in my job, but I also don't think his philosophy of life and bringing up children is correct either. There was an actual decline in everything. He had chosen not to participate in being anything other than a person who lived in our home, but he was an adult who should have been able to take care of the children.

Wife Abuse

Twenty one mothers (34%) reported violence toward them by their partners. The violence ranged from slight to extreme, with mothers reporting: choking, grabbing, kicking, punching, shoving, hair pulling, smashing beer bottles on the head, and force feeding. One mother described a broken jaw and nose. Mothers noted that it was difficult to know what triggered the violence but it appeared that "some small thing would trigger it". The women reported an overwhelming sense of fear, vigilance in trying to understand their spouse's mood, and one described extreme anxiety, resulting in nausea and throwing up during the violent episode. Mothers had also been hit while pregnant and assaulted by their partner's family members. Mothers reported feeling isolated and unsupported after the incident, and some did not call the police, based on previous experience when the partner was not charged. A violent episode was noted by Paula, 40, mother of two who stated:

When I walked in the back door he was there--he just grabbed me and threw me out in the garage. I was begging him to stop and he goes, 'You're out of this house, if you fricking come back here ...' We were down the street and he was yelling 'You fucking bitch, you're going to

pay. You will not do this to me, you're not welcome, you have nothing anymore and I'm going to destroy you and your life is finished' and he just wouldn't stop. I ran from him, but he caught me and threw me into the snow bank on the next street. I just curled up in a ball. I thought 'You're right, I'm a loser, just do anything you want to me but I'm not fighting back, I can't fight you'. I told him 'I have no coat on, give me my coat and my purse' but he says 'You're not having a thing from this house.'

Clearly, the abuse affected Paula's self esteem leaving her feeling unworthy.

An instance of the police not responding was remembered by Daisy, 37: "When I was first with him I told him if he hit me I'd call [the police] and within a minute I called the cops on him, but they didn't charge him and I never called again for five years. So, it kind of took me back".

An incident of violence during pregnancy was recalled by Betty, 29, mother of 5: "I left my ex-husband because he was abusive. I was six months pregnant with my daughter and he bruised me from the ribs up and the ribs down; but she was fine, and basically I haven't had a lot of contact with him since then".

Confusion about what triggered the violence was noted by Felicity, 40, mother of 6: "He just does it. It could be first thing in the morning--breakfast is not ready; he could have just come home from work, or something is out of place, or stupid little things like that could trigger him and he would just lose it".

Pamela, 27, mother of 4, described the extreme abuse that she suffered, which included sexual abuse:

He had handcuffed my foot to his arm when we slept, and my girlfriend happened to call over there because they hadn't heard from me in three days. He was pulling my hair and stuff. One time I puked all over my food and he tried to force it down me. Tried to force me to eat it. He was giving me weird food to eat, saying, "Oh, it's good for the baby. I thought, "He's the father of my child--he's just being protective--he wants his kid to be fine' so I figured, "Why not?" But

you know, he'd bring home this funky looking food, and I wasn't going to eat it but he'd literally either tie my hands down to the chair or sit on me and force me to eat it. I'd sit there and cry and beg him not to make me eat those things.

Pamela noted another incident:

All the children witnessed their father rape me right on the living room floor. He used to take the phone cords and wrap them around my neck. I'd lie in bed and he'd like strangle or choke me until I'd pass out literally from gasping for air. I constantly had bruises on my throat".

Tess, 23, remembered the lengthy duration of the abuse:

It started at nine o'clock at night and it didn't end until 2:30 in the morning. And through the course of those hours he strangled me three times, threw me from where the high chair is to the bedroom twice, picked me up by my throat and threw me up against that wall there, and punched me in the head.

Non-violent Oppression

Fifteen mothers (25%) identified non-violent oppressive relationships with their partners. These women experienced: overt and subtle control, being ordered around, being yelled at, blamed, and being 'kept in line'. Ten of these mothers said they were afraid of their partners or ex-partners. For some this control and interference continued even after separation.

Paula, 40, discussed the verbal put-downs and the extreme levels of control from her ex-partner:

My ex would be putting me down very much. He would say that I did not do anything around the house, but I did--I kept a great house but, you know, it's just hard listening to that. He couldn't say anything good to me. He told me I looked awful all the time...He wouldn't let me go out, not even to go to the gym. It was crazy, it was just nuts--he had taken all the money away from me, my credit cards, my cell phone, and I asked for it back and he said "Nope, you don't need it." If I wanted anything from the store I had to give

him a list and he would get it for me. I wasn't allowed to go anywhere.

Stella, 39, commented on the yelling and blaming that she experienced:

He never threw anything at me, and he never hit me, because I won't tolerate physical violence. But then he started yelling at me, and blaming me for things that just happened, I mean, just really stupid things. He would imagine things that weren't happening. And would accuse me of a bunch of stuff, that was just really nothing, just accusing me.

Daisy, 37, commented on the level of control:

As long as I go along and clean up the garbage and the crap everything is great. As soon as I step out of line and try to be independent and do things the way I want to do it, all hell breaks loose.

Fay, 32 noted her ex-partner's efforts at controlling her freedom:

I felt like I was living back at home--I couldn't do anything. He just doesn't trust. I would be cleaning up after three kids and be doing lots of things. I got my own car again, and all my bills are in my name. I pay all my bills. It's not like before, when we were so far behind because he was always spending money on other stuff instead of on bills.

Bonnie, 34, discussed the controlling behaviour that continued even after her divorce:

After this many years down the road, he's got [son] in his custody and he's controlling things again. It almost felt like I was getting punched all over the place again, and it was awful...I felt this emotional bashing.

Connie, 38, was so fearful for her life that she called her mother to alert her to this:

Then I grabbed my purse, and we went down to the store, where I phoned my Mom--because he wouldn't even let me use the phone, nor would I want to, because he could hear everything. So that's why I went to a payphone. I told my Mom and let her know what was going on, in case something happened.

Agnes, 49 noted her partner's increasing control over her:

It kept building up and building up. He was becoming overly obsessed in possessing me and owning me. I was like a piece of property to him. It got to the point where I told him, "If you really think you own me, in order to stop me from what I'm going to do, then you'd better kill me."

Substance Abuse

Twenty parents (33%) identified problems with substance abuse within the family, by their partners and sometimes by themselves. Both alcohol and drugs were noted as problems, although alcohol (n=20) was mentioned more often than drugs (n=8). With regard to drugs, 'pot', 'weed', cocaine, and uppers were mentioned. Specific problems with partners who abused substances were: drinking and driving, becoming depressed, or being 'obnoxious.' For their own part, mothers talked about going out with friends for a party and using alcohol, to get away or to have a break.

Fay's comments identified the various aspects of substance abuse for her family and many others:

He's got a drinking problem, so that always brings him down. He would be threatening and would come over and be drunk. Even when I picked up the kids from him he was drunk. Sometimes I went out drinking myself or with friends.

Twenty-five year old Lara's comments were typical of those of a number of parents: "He drank a lot, and did a lot of drugs". Pat, 23 noted about her

husband: "He is a good person when he's not drinking. But when he's drinking he's a complete jerk. He is a really obnoxious drinker, like someone you can't stand to be around". Nellie, 24, commented on her own problems with alcohol and drug abuse: "I had a joint if I was feeling sad, or a glass of wine when things weren't going well. I am a recovering addict".

Problems with Physical Health

Twenty parents (33%) identified a number of health problems that affected the family's daily life. These were: asthma, complications with pregnancy, epilepsy, severe flu, osteoporosis, scoliosis, pneumonia, Crohn's disease, heart condition, rheumatoid arthritis, extreme underweight, and brain tumour. One mother noted her husband's epilepsy.

Abby, 39, talked about her struggles with osteoporosis and the difficulties of managing it:

My osteoporosis, it's up and down. Now I am feeling stronger, again as long as I keep the hands going. But it's hard to deal with at a young age. Once I get my rest, I'm fine with it. But I have to keep up the walking that's why I walk to the [CPS] building. But no heavy lifting, like moving furniture.

Bonnie, 36, noted that stress aggravated her illness and the lack of a diagnosis left her sick for a long time:

I was really sick at the time. I wasn't diagnosed until a couple years later with Crohn's disease, and I was very sick all the time from that. Any stress kind of aggravated it all the time, and there were a lot of problems there.

Joan, 43, commented on her health problems that were aggravated by stress:

I've had a number of head injuries, and stress is a contributing factor as well. I have been sick with seizures. The first time I had 12 in one day. They couldn't figure out really what was going on, so they pumped me full of some seizure drugs and I kept having more seizures while at [name of hospital]. I was in the hospital for two months after having [daughter].

Mental Health Issues.

Nineteen parents (31%) identified mental health issues as impacting their lives. Concerns about mental health problems included: depression (n=17), extreme depression (n=10), bipolar disorder (n=4), panic, anxiety, nervousness (n=8), anger with self and severe crying bouts (n=5). Five parents felt so depressed that they had wished to commit suicide and two parents had attempted suicide. Medication also left some parents feeling groggy. Three parents identified that their spouses were depressed and the hardship this caused for the family.

A number of parents had thoughts similar to Emma, 31, who noted that her depression led her to having suicidal thoughts: "I wanted to commit suicide--I was very depressed in my marriage--I was thinking of hanging myself." Emma's depression was so severe that she went to the extent of thinking out her method of suicide. Paula, 40, shared that taking medication created side-effects.

I was getting shaky and upset and it just never stops. I told him to get the kids out of there but he said 'No'. I did not want the kids to see the crazy mother they truly have. I felt like 'Oh God, I don't know what you're [spouse] up to at this point. I had finally gone on Zoloft, but at this time I was fearful of him finding that out.

Not only was Paula suffering from depression but she did not have a support system to help her through this difficult time. Indeed, Paula had to hide the fact that she was on antidepressants

Carrie, 41, shared how debilitating her depression was, both for herself and for her family, and her concern about the impact of her depression on her children:

Now I can start to go out on my own a little bit, bit by bit. I used to be so terrified, I used to panic a lot and get sick a lot. It became too much for my kids and my ex-husband. But you just get some days that are good and some bad days. My kids, especially my son, are always asking me how I get by.

Hanna, 22, shared her struggle with depression and her inability to keep jobs because of it:

It's a real pain in the butt. I'm not trying to get on disability to be lazy. I've tried to get jobs before, I've got denied so many times and with my depression it doesn't help any and with two kids. I don't have a lot of time to do things. All I know is it doesn't take much for me to cry and I worry a lot.

Brenda, 32, shared her struggle with keeping her job while trying to recover from her depression:

I had a bout of depression, and it got to the point where I couldn't leave my house anymore. The doctor said she couldn't see me and I phoned my mom in tears because the doctor couldn't see me. It was bad. And I didn't know what it was at the time. I just knew something was wrong. When I saw the doctor, she wanted me to take a month off work. I get into trouble for taking the week off! She said 'Take at least next week'. Nope, I'm back at work on Monday or I'll lose my job. She prescribed some medication and it really helped. I used to think, "It's all in your head--what do you mean you're depressed, come on, get up and get at it." I guess I'd reached a point where I couldn't do it anymore.

Poverty

Twenty-three parents (38%) noted concerns with regard to their financial situation. They struggled to pay bills for basic necessities and essential items such as rent, food, diapers, medication. Those on welfare found that they were unable to meet their needs from this income, while some noted that they made decisions to move in order to cut back on their cost of living.

Stella, 39, with four children, noted her struggle to make ends meet:

I can't afford to get kicked out of here. And it's not like I have cable TV. The only cable I have is the internet. I have the phone set up for long distance because their grandparents live in London, so they can phone their grandparents long distance, and chat for as long as they want. I keep my bills as low as I can. I have to have gas to get back and forth to work. And it's just that by the time you pay all of your living expenses, there really isn't a hell of a lot left over.

Worries about having enough money for food and the high cost of living were evident in sixteen year old Denise's comment:

"I have money put away just in case I run out of food and stuff like that. But bus tickets--just for 20 of them is \$30, and 20 can go in a few days. That would be over \$200 a month and bus passes are a hundred and something. If you want to go get something for yourself, you don't, because you don't know how much money you'll have left or if you'll run out of food."

The struggle to survive on a very inadequate income was captured by Anne, 25, who noted: "My rent was \$650 and I was getting \$720. That's not a lot of money. I had to buy diapers, groceries. He [baby] was on medication at that time and he went through a bottle every hour." The fact that any unforeseen expense can have a major impact on the family was evident in 44 four year old Lydia's comment: "We're not going to have July's

rent because the van broke down twice in two weeks, that cost us a thousand dollars and we had to buy a car”.

Sheila, 31, noted the need to make decisions about moves and other life situations because of extreme financial hardship:

We moved out to a farm; [husband] had been on unemployment and a friend of ours had told us about a five bedroom house for \$500, so we couldn't pass up. Finances were very tight and this was another reason that my husband wanted to look at the other option. He said to me, "I'm not saying I want you to have an abortion, but I want you to have an open mind to it." We knew that things were tough. That was one of our reasons for moving into a cheap house.

Employment Problems

Twelve parents (20%) cited problems relating to employment that affected their family lives: not having work, being laid off, having multiple jobs, being unable to keep a job because of child care and health care responsibilities, and wages being too low to meet daily basic needs. Examples of their concerns were: "My husband has been out of work for three years;" "My boyfriend is not working, so it's hard;" and "...and then he was off work, and I was off work, so it was hard." Donna, 39, described her husband's unstable employment: "Since our marriage 17 years ago, he has probably had 12 jobs." Edna, 43, discussed the crisis of being laid off: "My husband had several jobs here, but got laid off almost instantly from the first job he got when we first got here. It was most devastating. We thought 'Oh, no, what have we done!'"

Marilyn, 18, captured the no-win situation for parents when they are in casual employment and have health problems. When they take time off to attend to their health or emotional needs, their situation deteriorates:

I've had lots of jobs. I got fired from my last job because my grandmother died and I had to take time off. That was really upsetting. I came home crying and thinking, "What am I going to do--I have no money." ...Then I was working at [a coffee shop], and I told my boss I had to take some time off, because I was having surgery on my mouth. She said, "Oh that's fine," but the next day I called her before I went to work, just to see if I could get off early because I had a dentist appointment and she fired me. The last three jobs I've had I was fired. It seemed like it was going to keep going, and every time I got fired, it was for nothing.

Low paying work, the daily demands of the workplace, and the struggles of making ends meet were recounted by Emma, 31, mother of two, who noted:

Because I haven't worked since they were babies and I was on Mother's Allowance for so long – I think I was on it for three or four years – it was hard. After their dad left, I had a job but I found it really hard to keep it up. I was at Eaton's and I got complaints about my hair and my shoes, and about how my hair dye was growing out and I needed to get my hair done. I couldn't keep with the coiffure and look I was supposed to have, so I left. It was costing so much in day-care for the amount of time that I was at work. I was paying more for day-care than I was making, so I ended up leaving there and I cared for kids at home.

Emma's comments illustrate her resourcefulness, as she found a way to earn money by staying at home and running a day-care service.

Jane, 25, with 3 children, noted how the lack of focus in their lives relating to employment, together with having children early, can leave families in a rut:

We were kids growing up together and neither of us really knew what we were doing with anything. We had nothing--neither one of us worked--we were bums--we were just awful. And we both grew up pretty quickly with the kids, but still didn't know what we wanted to do. I worked part-time at odd jobs, he worked odd jobs too, and we just bounced from job to job.

Disability

Five parents (8%) identified issues relating to a disability. One parent identified her severe learning difficulties, while the rest noted physical problems relating to car accidents. Kitty, 38, mother of three, commented:

Well, I have learning disabilities and I have bad vision. I was born 'premature,' so I have a syndrome that affects your whole body. I can't do certain things, such as reading, and just going through life with this disability is pretty hard. Dealing with children is difficult because I have to try ten times harder and understand so much more. You have to make out what you can do and go about the way you think you should go about, in general. It made school hard, it made the kids growing up hard because I couldn't read to the children or help them with their homework or their reading like most parents can.

Felicity, 40, noted the severe consequences on her family of her injuries from a car accident:

He [husband] has to stay at home because I've got a full plate and I have to go to various specialists. Right now I'd be in bed sleeping, if this was a normal day, and I wouldn't get up until supper time, and then I'd go back to bed afterwards. I have such high levels of pain now that I take huge amounts of morphine and antidepressants.

Transient Lifestyle

Parents involved with CPS are often perceived to have a transient lifestyle. Some of the reasons for this were revealed by 34 parents (56%), who mentioned a range of contributors to their family's decision to move: Parents moved because of rent increases, to obtain better housing, to escape rough neighbourhoods, being in transition while waiting for public housing, and because their homes became too cramped as their children grew. Younger parents moved in with their parents temporarily because they needed either physical or

emotional support, or were moving away from abusive partners. Parents also moved in order to find work.

Jane, 25, married, commented on the number of moves that they had to make, because of a growing family as well as finances:

We have had a lot of moving around because our family grew quite quickly. We rented a house, and it got really expensive so we had to move again; and we moved into an apartment to save money for a house. But we could not stay there, as it was too small when I became pregnant.

Tanya, 24, noted the changes in their living arrangements because of landlords changing their minds about whether to allow children in the accommodations or not: "They said we could stay there and have the baby but then all of a sudden she changed her mind and said 'You can't.'" Elsie, 25, noted the many moves that she had to make to secure suitable housing:

It was tough on [son] living in a hotel and then at my mom's for a couple days and then back with us and then the apartment after a few weeks and then we got housing. And the second place after the hotel was gross. It was just one bedroom, the living room, the kitchen and it was from hell.

Grace, 32, noted the need to move because of finances, space and problems with her spouse:

We were renting a townhouse there. We needed a little bit more space, so we rented there for a while. Then we had separated for the first time. Financially I couldn't stay where I was so I had to move. So my daughter and I went back to the old building we were in – on the same floor, just a different unit.

From the above, it is evident that the parents themselves were distressed by the many moves they had to make. As the following

discussion will show, they recognized that these moves contributed to greater isolation and eroded essential social supports.

Isolation

Fourteen parents (23%) identified stress in their lives because of isolation and loneliness, often from living in a rural location. Their examples included: having no sense of community; being alone at home with no help; not knowing anyone in the town where they lived; living in an area that had no facilities for families; not being able to afford long distance phone calls to family and friends; and losing contact with friends after having a baby. Some parents who felt isolated and lonely because they had moved revealed that they had been in the new location for up to five years; this suggests it was very difficult for them to develop friendships after a move.

Connie, 38, noted the isolation for her family because of their location: "It's lonely because we live way out by the road going towards [name of town]. I feel trapped living way out there." Joan, 43, became isolated when she had a baby:

Things change when you have a baby. I've had a few friends--their kids are the same age as my son or a bit older, and they don't hang around me anymore. I just think, 'I'm still the same person--so what if I have a baby.' I found it really isolating having her and I think it was really hard, with my hospital stay, to keep connected. I hardly see anybody anymore.

Arthur, 27, shared how difficult it was for him with no help: "I have them and have to take care of them on my own with nobody--not even my mom would. Just to have that extra person there!" Natalie, 25, also noted the sense of isolation because of not having support nearby: "It was very hard. It was long distance for

me to phone my parents in Cambridge. And I did not know anyone here and there was nothing to do in town.”

Denise, 16, like the others, shared her loneliness and sense of isolation, and of being alone with no support system: “I can’t get out and do anything because he [child] won’t stay with anybody. I’m living on my own now and that’s difficult. I just moved from Manitoba a couple of years ago, not even five years”.

Sheila, 31, like Denise, did not feel connected after being in a community for a considerable period:

I find it difficult because I feel secluded. Even after the five years of living here, I only know one or two people. The neighbours are pretty far. I’d have to walk a fair bit to see them. The kids take the school bus to school, I like it here, it is peaceful, but I am lonely.

These parents’ comments suggest that it is difficult for them to achieve a sense of belonging and to build up networks when moving.

Socially Toxic Environments

Sixteen parents (26%) raised concern about the neighbourhoods in which they lived or had lived. Their concerns were: lack of privacy, and gossip that resulted in relationship problems with neighbours; conflict with neighbours; unsafe environment because of drug dealing and drug use in the area; and “rough and mean” neighbourhoods affecting children. Neighbourhoods can often provide a supportive environment for parents, however, many of the parents in this sample experienced their neighbourhoods as unsupportive or hostile.

Neighbours interfering in their lives and gossiping about them was a complaint made by many families. Merle, 39, observed:

I don't know, but they just know your business, and you have to try and keep it to yourself. When one person knows it, they blab to everybody else and then everybody knows it.

Esther, 32 had a similar sense about being wary about the neighbours;

she noted:

Well, if you talk about anything, they twist it into another story, and make it sound worse than what it is. That's why I really don't talk to to many of the neighbours. There's only maybe four of them out of this whole neighbourhood that I speak to because they're the only ones that I can trust. You don't talk to too many, because you just get backstabbed.

Elsie, 25 commented on conflict with neighbours and how that can contribute to what may seem to be a transient lifestyle, yet parents may be attempting to find safer neighbourhoods for their children: "It just wasn't the way I wanted. To be living in that way. Just conflict with neighbours. I just left".

Susan, 40, mother of 3 noted the disturbances that arose in her neighbourhood: "We had six months of trouble over there and they're finally gone, but we have another house where people come and go at all hours of the day and night, that we really wish weren't there."

Children learning inappropriate behaviour from other children was noted by Kitty, 38, mother of 3: "Well, my children attacked me for years, and I thought 'What did I do to them?' but the area I lived in did that to them. Seeing other children abuse their parents, so they just [copied them]."

Jane, 25 noted her concern about the rough neighbourhood as well as the drug-dealing that was taking place there:

I just found the neighbourhood was so rough and mean, and there were drugs being sold, people just in and out, smashing beer bottles

all night on the weekends--every weekend, and big parties and just not a place you want to raise your family. It's just not the place you picture when you're having babies and you've got little girls running around, and you don't picture them running around among broken beer bottles. It just was awful. Once my daughter was old enough to actually play outside I said, 'That's it, we're leaving.'"

Jane's comments clearly indicate that parents want to provide safer environments for their children.

Concerns around being watched and labeled were raised by Brenda, 32:

Living in a townhouse complex, there were a lot of your stereotypical welfare person, and I was really kind of scared moving in there. My son wasn't the cute little baby boy anymore and now he was starting to become an individual and he has a really bad temper, I was worried about that.

The violence in her neighbourhood was commented upon by Grace, 32: "We are aware that it is a very bad neighbourhood. I can't remember how long ago it was that, just down the street, a four year old boy was just randomly beaten by a teenager." Nina, 21, also noted the roughness and violence in her neighbourhood:

They're not regular kids. They are the ones that blew up the bus behind the factory. They sit here, they watch, throw eggs. They don't they think they'll cause an accident. They throw rocks at cars that go by. We had to call the cops one time, because a guy in a black sports car stopped and was about to knock them all out. So we called the cops. More to save them from getting their butts kicked, and also from him getting his butt kicked.

Strengths in Families

Parents discussed their family strengths in relation to employment, neighbourhoods and housing, recreational and leisure activities, self-

improvement through education, and intrafamily relationships. The information they gave about strengths, however, was overshadowed by the struggles reported above: the strengths took up only half as much space as the struggles in the interview transcripts. The points that parents made about family strengths showed that they were making efforts, with limited resources, to rise above the challenges in their lives, such as difficult childhoods, poverty, and abusive partners.

Employment

Employment, by one or both partners, was mentioned by 41 of the 61 parents (67%). Of these, 21 (34%) made positive statements about: having well-paid work, liking one's job, and working at more than one job. Wendy, 37, was pleased to be working: "When my son was old enough, I went out and got a job, and it's been great...totally different from living 'on the system,' I'm now earning my own money."

Neighbourhoods and Housing

Although parents often had mixed feelings about their neighbourhoods, positive comments were made by 31 parents (51%). They looked to their neighbourhoods for a sense of belonging and support in caring for their children. In terms of belonging, they described their neighbourhoods as friendly (n=10), helpful (n=5), close-knit (n=3), and not interfering (n=3). With respect to their children, they described their neighbourhoods as good for their children (n=7),

and mentioned neighbours who were interested in and helpful with their children (n=3),

Friendliness was described by Pat, 23, married: “They don’t look you up and down and turn their noses up. They speak...they try to converse with you.” She compared her present neighbourhood to another one she sometimes visited: “...when we’re walking around over there, people just look at you as though you’re worth nothing.” Describing support with child care, Jane, 25, explained: “You stay within this complex...it’s very family...everybody knows you, everybody knows whose kids belong to whom, so if my four year old’s outside playing...I don’t have to be sitting on the step the whole time.”

Housing was described in a positive way by eight parents (16%). Their comments included: feeling good about their homes, having bought their own homes, fixing up their homes, and staying in one house for years. Cal, 33, a single father, described his feelings about his house: “It feels great...I love it...all my power is here—it’s right here. This is my place.”

Recreation and Leisure Activities

Family and personal recreation and leisure activities were mentioned by 36 parents (59%). Family activities were described by 28 parents (46%). These included taking their children camping, walking, swimming, to the park, on family trips, bicycling, shopping, reading to them, watching movies, teaching them, volunteering at school or recreation center, and acquiring a pet. The choice of

activities reflected the economic restrictions on these families, as they tended to be modest, low-budget pursuits.

Jane, 25, described camping with her children in a trailer: "...they love to swim, playing the sand, go over to the snack shop, and having camp fires. They love to roast marshmallows, and it gives us more of a chance to talk.

Edna, 43, appreciated opportunities provided at her community center.

They have a homework club...when she (daughter) is off school, she can go there. They always have activities at Christmas, like carolling and Christmas parties...and books for the child's birthday. I really enjoy the community centre.

Only ten parents (16%) spoke about sending their children to activities such as Scouts, Beavers, cadets, organized swimming, soccer, summer camp, and the community centre. This small percentage may have reflected lack of funds, because most of these activities have fees and requirements for equipment, which may put them out of reach for low-income families. Even when the organizers are willing to waive the expenses for low-income families, some parents find it demeaning to ask for special treatment. Esther, 32, described her son's involvement in Beavers: "they get to do different things...crafts and activities, and he gets badges, and they sell popcorn every year, and he's been a top salesman for the past two years."

Only six parents (10%) mentioned their own leisure or recreational activities. The activities included socializing in a recreation group, attending a parenting program, reading, writing, enjoying music, artistic pursuits, weight-training, walking, and visiting extended family. Grace, 32, enjoyed writing: "I do a

lot of reading...writing...I'll take a journal out to the park, where I grew up, and just write."

Self-Improvement through Education

Twenty (33%) of the parents mentioned that they had returned to school to continue their education or acquire training. This was related to the high drop-out rate, described earlier under Family History. It may also be related to the policy of the provincial government since under a right-wing government all mothers on social assistance, who have no children under school age, are expected to find work (volunteer or paid) or to enter education or training. Connie, 38, divorced, felt encouraged by her experience of returning to school; she mentioned her good marks, saying: "After what I've gone through, for seven and a half years, things were looking up for me."

Intrafamily Relationships

Parents discussed intrafamily relationships in three areas: their relationships with partners; support received with child care from partners, who were often not the child's parent; and parent-child relationships.

Fifteen parents (25%) discussed their relationships with partners, which included: sharing work, activities, and feelings, demonstrating caring, problem-solving, loving and receiving love, mutual trust, and being well treated. A dramatic demonstration of caring by her partner was recalled by Pamela, 27, who had been a substance abuser and a prostitute. "I'd kill for that man...because he

literally found me in an alley all drugged out...I think I had been up for ten days with no food, no sleep, and I looked like hell...He picked me up and gave me a life...He got me clean.”

Fifteen mothers (25%) discussed support received with child care from their partners, which included: relating well to children, engaging in activities with them, and treating partner’s child as one’s own. Fewer than three parents mentioned: taking child to daycare or school, caring for infants or sick children at night, changing diapers, and empathizing with parent about a difficult child. Sheila, 31, separated, described her partner’s supportiveness with her son as an infant:

[Son] was a very colicky baby—I would be up at two in the morning, and he would even help with that. In the morning, he’d have to work, but he’d get up and take (son) for a walk in his stroller to try and settle him down, let me get some rest—it was teamwork.

Nine parents (15%) discussed parent-child relationships, which included: spending time with one child alone; enjoying their children; trying to improve communication; helping a child with self esteem; and gaining the child’s trust. Jenny, 32, said: “The kids brought a lot of joy to me...just hearing them laugh, and walking for the first time.” Jodie, 41, was very concerned about her pre-school daughter: “(in the evening) I usually talk to her, see how her day was...I have to really watch how I ask for information...(when I ask specific questions) then she’ll sit there and talk.” Pamela, 27, noted that her relationship with her children had improved since Pamela stopped abusing drugs, especially her relationships with her eldest daughter, who was nearly 12:

She's very comfortable in talking to me about anything and I love it, because I feel she's opening up to me, that she realizes that her Mom's not this messed up person anymore...she (daughter) is not just another mouth to feed...she's a living breathing somebody, a special person...they all are.

Love and respect for their children was evident in many of the parents' comments about parent-child relationships.

Struggles with Children

Parents described a range of issues with their children that increased the stressors in their lives. The children in the study ranged from (we said .08 years earlier) 16 months to 16 years and parents struggled with negative experiences of their children, extreme changing moods, and developmental challenges (15%).

Negative Experiences of Children

Eight (13%) parents reported that their children had endured negative experiences that had caused them physical and psychological trauma. The parents described these experiences as sexual abuse, physical assault, punitive behaviour, and neglect. The perpetrators of these acts were adults in the family or strangers in the community. For example, Kathy's son said, "Daddy put my body in hot water", Dorothy, 46, said, "my daughter was sexually assaulted by her big sister's husband", and Midge, 39, said, "the man took [her daughter] into the bathroom [in Zellers] and asked her to perform oral sex on him." The "inappropriate touching" or "sexual abuse" was sometimes reported as having occurred at a very young age. Barb, 40 and divorced, indicated that the father had abused their son when he was five months old, and Sheila, 31 and

separated, said her son had been “sexually molested at only a couple of weeks old”. Sheila described her husband’s harsh treatment of their children that led to their separation:

...for instance if their beds weren’t made properly, then [he would make them] strip it down, do it again...but what had made me leave my husband was that he had hit [son1] and kicked [son2]...I remember one incident [when] I was outside doing some yard work and [son1] came outside to tell me that dad was beating up [son2]. That he was actually hurting my child. I went in and [son2] was cowering on the floor by the fridge and he got up and ran downstairs to his room and I ran after him. And he told me, ‘Get away, get away, Dad’s really mean!’ I looked at him and on the side of his face he had a big red mark, and he said that Dad had kicked him.

Some parents reported that their children continued to receive maltreatment from ex-spouses and other caregivers. Dorothy, 47 and divorced, believed that her ex-husband, who was neglectful and maltreated her son and daughter when they were visiting with him, had also sexually assaulted her son.

Barb, 40, viewed her ex-husband’s parenting as harmful to her children:

...they’re swinging on the step. They’re not being supervised. [son] gets hurt, all these bad scabs. [I ask] “Oh what happened to you?” “Oh! I fell.’ “What did Dad do?” “Nothing, just told me to sit down.” [Son] has been thrown outside, and has been told that he can’t eat more than one sandwich...I’m sure there’s a law somewhere stating that the kids have to eat!

Cal, a single father, found his father’s girlfriend to be over zealous with disciplining his son:

She’s a bit of a bitch I guess. You can’t force kids to eat their supper...she would smack him under the belt to make him go to his room, or sit in a chair, or the last time she made him go outside with no coat on in the snow on the porch.

Changing Moods.

Eleven parents (18%) said their children appeared to have attention deficits or had volatile moods. Attention deficits in the children resulted in problems at home and school. Midge's daughter was often reprimanded at school for "not paying attention, getting up, wandering around, and not completing [her] work". Hence, parents were frustrated with children not listening, ignoring them or others, and not communicating. Ruth, 30, explained her frustration in communicating with her son:

...we've gone through a lot with him – like the listening and the frustration and...he does not listen a lot of the days, and it makes it harder on you...when you talk normally to [son], I don't know if he ignores you or shuts you out."

Other parents described their children as swinging from happiness to fear and anger, contributing to sleeplessness, hyperactivity, verbal assault, and physical aggression. Ruth, 30, explained how her son would get "excited and all wound up" when around unfamiliar people. His mood would swing from being "fine, happy, playing and then the next minute...throwing something against the wall...he's like a light switch."

When Midge's daughter was angry she would swear at her mother and call her names. She was "expelled on and off from school since Grade 6" for being verbally abusive to the teachers.

Cal's 8-year old son was "outspoken" and aggressive toward anyone who he thought was trying to bully him: He'll chase you. He'll lay a beating on you. Two years ago, he was only in Grade one...and he put [a Grade five student] in the dentist office. He knocked his front tooth out...

Dorothy, 47, said that her children did not know how to deal with their conflicts and often used anger to settle their disputes. Her son would “fight”, “push”, “hit”, “choke”, and “kick”. On occasion he had even threatened to kill with a knife – and then with a gun.

When siblings were involved, parents were concerned that they would copy the negative behaviours of the problem child in the home. Dorothy, above, felt that her younger son was following in the footsteps of her teenage son, who was wandering off at night, playing with pocketknives, and had burned the playhouse down. Parents felt helpless at controlling this effect on siblings. Ruth, 30, said, “...it wasn’t too bad when it was just him [but] now it’s harder...he doesn’t really realize that [daughter] is watching him.”

Developmental Challenges.

Nine (15%) parents reported that developmental disabilities impeded the growth and community integration of their children. All these parents discussed various causes and symptoms related to their child’s developmental disability. As well, some parents described the psychological impact of a developmental disability on a child, and how the school system had failed to meet the special needs of their children.

Parents stated that developmental challenges had been caused due to complications at birth such as the “cord was wrapped around his neck” and the baby “was blue, not breathing”. While growing, the children showed symptoms in the form of medical problems, such as, hypothyroid disease, impaired kidneys

and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). These children had impaired functioning and this interfered with their physical development, attention span, and learning processes. Parents described speech difficulties – “everything was ‘grunt and point’ as he still wasn’t speaking”; weak bladders – “neither one of them can control their bladders”; no concept of time – “when you say ‘September’ or say a day, he does not understand how far or how long that is”; and challenges with reading and writing – “a five minute story takes an hour”. Wendy, 37, explained that ADHD with her son meant that he refused his medication, he was “edgy”, “can’t sit long”, and was easily distracted:

I have noticed that if I am in the room and [husband] is with him, it [school work] can’t be done. I have to leave for [husband] to be able to work with him...because, [if] there are too many people, there’s no way [he can learn].

Having a developmental disability had a psychological impact on some children. Parents said their children “couldn’t do things like the other children [at school]” and, when the children became aware of their differences, their self-esteem suffered due to embarrassment and frustration. Dorothy’s son struggled to Grade 5, but made “a really good connection” with the principal of his new school who arranged for an ability test and introduced him to a special program. However, she felt that her son was “really embarrassed about that...and with him having difficulties at school it is really hard now because he doesn’t fit in. It is more his mindset.” On the other hand, Kathy, 34, married, said that her son’s teachers did not question his disengagement in class until he was in Grade 4. His lack of expression was simply attributed to being shy:

He wouldn't put up his hand in class, so they didn't know what he knew...he refused to talk from Junior Kindergarten to Grade 4 [when] they literally forced him to talk." As a result, he was kept back a grade when he reached Grade 3.

Having special needs meant that the children required additional support at school. However, parents were disappointed with the lack of resources, and exclusionary practices in the school system. Sheila's first son had Tourette's Syndrome and was still not speaking at 2 years old. His school was unable to accommodate his challenges:

...in Kindergarten he was expelled indefinitely. They didn't even want him to go through the school system. He wasn't able to sit properly, and at times, with the Tourette's, he would swear or have uncontrollable blurts.

Wendy's experience with the school system shows how the lack of appropriate resources for children with developmental disabilities may perpetuate negative behaviours:

In the last two years my son might have gone to school 13 times...My son will sit there and click a pen, and he'll get suspended for five days. He fights a lot at school, he's got a foul mouth and that will give him suspension right off the bat. So it's been like in and out. And my son's been pushed through school – he hasn't passed a grade yet...each year he's been placed into the next grade, he's never passed it. So, he's never passed a grade in his life! He even failed Kindergarten and they just placed him in the next grade... My son's got grade 3 or 4 reading, and maybe grade 2 writing... And for the last three years...he's getting the same work that he got three years ago, and he knows that work. They've got to start giving him more to do instead of giving him the same stuff – he's not going to go anywhere that way...nowhere at all. I think we could do a better job at home than what the school has done.

Summary of Parent Lives

Parents had difficult, disrupted, and insecure childhoods and had experienced childhood abuse. Twenty-one parents (34%) did not finish high

school, 17 parents (28%) reported being physically/sexually abused, and 11 (18%) reported substance abuse by their parents. Family breakdown, witnessing abuse of their mothers by male partners, and conflict with parents was also noted as being traumatic.

Parents in this sample also described a range of problems that impinged on their families, including: unsupportive male partners (61%), wife abuse (34%), non-violent oppression (25%), transient lifestyle (54%), poverty (38%), substance abuse (33%), problems with physical health (33%), mental health problems (31%), poor neighbourhoods (26%), isolation (23%), unemployment (20%), and disability (11%). Thus, many of the mothers were in oppressive relationships with partners who were either abusive or controlling, while many mothers felt unsupported by their partners. Differentiating the types of conflict for the mothers helps us to better understand the complex and particular ways in which they were unsupported, if not abused. Many mothers felt unsupported when their partners did not contribute in household chores, caring, nurturing, or disciplining children, and helping during difficult and stressful times. These women felt strongly the day-to-day challenges of raising children within this unsupportive context. This lack of support was especially problematic for mothers who were already feeling isolated and burdened. The abuse they experienced included extreme violence, such as hitting punching, and kicking, as well as controlling behaviour such as partners scrutinizing all their movements and actions.

Poverty and unemployment further contributed to isolation and to the absence of social supports and networks. Lack of resources also resulted in

parents living in 'rough' neighbourhoods where they felt labeled, scrutinized, and isolated from their neighbours and the larger community.

Mental health problems, disability, and substance abuse were also present for many parents. Within this context, parents strove to provide for their children, and sought support in this task. Parents endeavored to find appropriate housing, and to protect their children from rough neighbourhoods. Parents struggled to find employment, and took casual, low paid, insecure jobs so that they could support their families. Parents often had employment that did not offer them security or allow them the flexibility to attend to personal, childcare, and home-related needs. This left them vulnerable to losing their jobs when they were absent for personal reasons. The low wages from their jobs combined with child care costs, left leaves them struggling with trying to make ends meet.

Within the unsupportive contexts noted above, some parents were coping with children who presented special challenges. Some children had been physically/sexually abused. Parents also described children with ADHD, and other mental health and physical health problems that were present from an early age. The behaviours of these children with which parents had to contend appeared to escalate during adolescence. Parents felt overwhelmed by unsuccessful efforts to advocate for their children in the school system and in the social service system. They struggled to obtain the help they felt their children needed and sometimes approached CPS to obtain this help. However, this help was not always forthcoming.

Parents talked about family strengths in relation to employment and income, neighbourhoods, housing, recreational and leisure activities, self-improvement through education, and intrafamily relationships. Two-thirds of parents mentioned that they, their partner, or both, were working; one-third of parents made positive statements about their work, mostly about being well paid or liking their jobs. Just over half the parents (51%) were positive about their neighbourhoods, with the most frequently mentioned themes being the friendliness and helpfulness of neighbours. Good housing was mentioned by only 16% of parents, with a common theme being the sense of comfort and satisfaction about having one's own home, which had often been a challenge to achieve. Most parents were employed, and those who had economic stability, good neighbourhoods and housing appreciated this.

Many parents (59%) discussed leisure and recreational activities. Family activities, mentioned by 46%, tended to be low-cost pursuits, such as camping, walking, swimming, going to the park, and family trips. Only 16% of parents mentioned sending their children to community activities, such as Boy Scouts, possibly because the costs made this prohibitive. They tended to choose inexpensive family recreational activities, and tended not to send their children by themselves to non-family activities. Only 10% of parents mentioned engaging in their own activities for pleasure: these were diverse, but were also low-cost activities, such as reading. Many mothers (33%) reported their own achievements in self-improvement through education, often linked with having ended their regular education prematurely.

Regarding positive aspects of intrafamily relationships, 25% of parents discussed relationships with their partners, 25% discussed support received from partners with child care, and 15% discussed their own relationships with their children. By far the most common theme in relationships with the partner was “sharing” of work, activities, and feelings. Support with child care focused on behaviour that demonstrated the partner’s interest and affection for the child, especially when the child was not the partner’s own. They valued partners who shared the work of the family with them. As for parent-child relationships, the only recurring theme was the concept of spending time with one child, to improve the parent-child relationship. Most parents spoke positively about their children, and showed love and respect for them.

Comparing the struggles of families with their strengths, it is apparent that the overwhelming problems of childhood neglect and abuse, serious relationship deficits, including horrendous abuse for some, lack of resources, and a socially toxic environment can constrain parents’ capacity to provide the nurturing environment for their children that they want. Many parents were exhausted and discouraged by the demanding nature of their lives.

FORMAL AND INFORMAL SUPPORTS

Apart from services used from CPS, parents mentioned four other areas in the community where they accessed formal and informal supports: social service organizations (85%), friends and neighbours (82%), extended family members

(74%), and places of belonging in the community (56%). These areas of support provided physical, spiritual, emotional and psychological benefits to the parents.

Parents usually accessed support in times of crisis. These crises revolved around a shortage of funds to pay for basic living needs, needing shelter, addressing the challenging behaviours of their children, fleeing from an abusive partner, and dealing with health emergencies. Parents also sought support for supplementing income, improving relationships and parenting skills, respite from children, upgrading skills for better employment, leisure opportunities, and recreation.

Social Service Organizations

Fifty-two parents (85%) in the study said they had accessed professional and social supports from service organizations in their community other than the CPS agency through which we had met them. The organizations accessed included: social service programs such as Big Brothers/Sisters, shelters, food banks, thrift stores, children's mental health centers, community outreach programs, health services (such as mental health centers, psychologists, family physicians, psychiatrists, counseling, behaviour modification, speech pathology), and correctional services regarding children (e.g. police, probation officers).

Other services that parents reported using were counseling (52%), income security (16%), parenting groups (13%), daycare (11%), daily living supplements, i.e. food, diapers (8%), respite care for children (8%), and shelter (8%). In addition, fewer than five parents (8%) reported using each of the following services: assessments (e.g. psychologist, psychiatrist, physician, paediatrician),

anger management, behaviour management, speech therapy, alcohol anonymous, drug rehabilitation, self-esteem groups, abuse groups, “buddy” programs, camps, police protection, subsidized transportation, and budgeting workshops. Although it was not usually evident from the interviews how the parents were referred to these services, a few parents reported that they were referred by their health providers (e.g. physician, mental health clinic, mother and baby clinic) prior to becoming involved with CPS, and a few reported being referred by CPS. A majority of parents (52%) reported that the services were generally helpful (52%) however, a substantial minority (36%) mentioned challenges and disappointments in accessing services

Helpful Services

Thirty-two parents (52%) felt that the services helped to relieve mental stress, build parenting skills, give direction, identify valuable resources, and enable personal growth. Emma, 31, used respite care frequently for her son with multiple disabilities, while she was attending school. Bonnie, 36, and her husband learned from a parenting group how to handle their son’s anger:

...I learned how to not let him win...I thought he was in a war with himself, like he was so angry all the time...and just different strategies on trying to help him control his anger differently. And listening to other parents [helped] – [before that] I was thinking ‘Maybe I’m the only one and my kid’s weird and maybe something is wrong with him’.

Pamela, 27, separated, learned to appreciate her worth from a self-esteem group:

I'm a person, I'm worthy, I have self worth, I deserve respect, I deserve to be loved, I deserve to be happy and all of those things [she did not have before].

Vanda, a widowed mother, used a Big Brother program for her son and found it to be a real bonus:

[Her son and his Big Brother went] fishing, golfing, playing baseball...Like I'm not a fisherman, I don't golf. It's just different things that I wouldn't normally take him out and do. And he's been a great support for my son – that male figure, because he's never really had that.

Some parents found that the trusting and compassionate approaches of organization heads (e.g. school principal, police) were a source of support. This was described by a divorced mother who had a son with ADHD, and found the community approach of a local police officer to be caring:

He really cared--he just didn't do his job, but he cared about us...a couple of times my kids went downtown and he would drive by and say, 'You guys, get home, your mom's looking for you.' I didn't even tell him, but he was looking over my shoulder so I thought he was very supportive. Very great.

Altogether 32 parents (52%) used a counselling service, and for some this experience was very positive. Nellie, 24, went to counselling for a year and a half, and expressed that her counsellor saved her life:

And I had a really good worker who saved my life. She was the greatest person I had ever met. And she helped me work on [my problem] and work on learning to trust people again.

Tess, 23, also said that her counsellor was excellent:

...She's optimistic--she verbalizes the positive things that I'm telling her. She says, 'That's great, keep doing it.' She gives me the motivation. Every two weeks I get to go and talk to her. She gives me names and numbers of people that I can contact if I've got a problem I need to deal with. She's just a good listener and she's got good

advice. If you were to take a look at her notes from when I started until now, there's a big difference.

Laurie, 23, married, said that she could trust her marital counsellor because she did not judge her and was on her side:

It didn't matter what I had done or what I had thought about doing, it was a matter of I had to like me and what was going on with me, before I could pursue anything with us [myself and husband].

Unhelpful Services.

While the services received were seen as helpful, 22 parents (36%) spoke of challenges in accessing services, including: inflexibility of services that compromised the quality of supports received, fragmentation of services, poor skills of service providers, mismatched services, and stigma attached to service use.

Joan, a tired mother with an infant, was told that she did not fit the criteria for home help:

...because I wasn't in a wheelchair...And I said, "Here's this kid that's so hyperactive and never sleeps or anything else, and I still don't fit." Now if she was seven or eight and diagnosed with hyper-activity, then fine, but nothing before that...The public health nurse came in and phoned people and she said, 'This is insane'. She said, 'I couldn't function'. There are all these people saying you need the help. Well, where the hell is it then?

A recurring theme was the frustration expressed by parents with the fragmentation of needed services. Parents who had a child with a disability were the most burdened by system barriers and lack of resources for their children.

Emma, 31, discussed how the supports for her son with multiple disabilities disintegrated after he started school:

...Since he's been in school he has lost a lot of support and assistance. Before you go to school you have all these people to help do programming with him and a lot of physio and a lot of OT [occupational therapy] but since he's been in school there's not been really much. One time we never had met a physiotherapist for almost two years and then they phoned us and they were leaving and somebody else was joining – you can never keep track of them.

Fragmented services were also experienced in other sectors. Lydia, 44, reported that a helpful counselling service for her son was interrupted by lack of resources:

...Community mental health was helpful. I actually got a counsellor who could handle my son, accepted my son, and made concessions. We were going to the office and that wasn't working, so our counsellor suggested that we meet at home because it was my son's territory and maybe he would feel more comfortable. I was blown away! I had never ever had anybody who thought about what my son might like! The counselling helped immensely. Then our counsellor got sick and we were left hanging. Again, fell between the cracks in the system...The next thing I know, it's seven months later and I'm getting a call from another counsellor telling me he's taken over. After seven months – there was no communication for seven months. So for seven months my son and I hung – didn't know if and when our counsellor was going to come back.

In addition, Wendy, 37, described how she was obstructed by long waiting lists, when she was trying to access a program for her teenage son in desperate need of one-to-one support:

I've been fighting for it for almost five years and I did get him accepted but they told me that once he went back to jail, I would have to start the process all over again...they have a group home [that is] one on one and I'm trying to get my son involved with that because that's what he needs and it's hard because there are never any beds available. A bed came available and my son was in jail so he got pushed away again...by the time I get help for him, my son is going to be 20 years old.

Betty, with five children, was so disillusioned with the five year waiting list for affordable housing that she didn't even bother applying. Midge, 39, described

how parents are fuelled by anxiety due to waiting lists and changes of therapists.

Her 5-year old daughter, with complex psychological problems, had the following experience:

The therapist had just got to the point where they were getting to the dolls and they were going to talk about things, and then, that was it -- they pulled out. They had gotten a little girl's confidence, when she had worked so hard, and then 'gone'. She [daughter] wouldn't go back, even at five/six years old, she would not go back, because she had made a friend, and she could talk to somebody, but then she'd have to work on the whole process over again...And then we got another therapist – she was okay, [but] was away all summer. And there were only certain days she was there. So it broke down. I don't understand--if you have somebody who has a lot of problems and you have to work with them for a long time, then why would you give them somebody who is on contract? And especially with a small child where you have to build up her confidence – get her confidence.

Further, Kathy, 34, married, felt that this shortage of resources created a system where parents were judged unequally:

We fought with the school trying to get Special Ed for my son but they wouldn't listen. I know it's tough for them because the government's made it so hard for them with the cutbacks. But I see a kid in the school who has Special Ed because he has a behaviour problem. My kids don't ...and I'm thinking my kids are slow in education, so why don't they [get help?].

Parents who were in financial hardship felt, even more acutely, the inequality in access and opportunity for a quality life. Eleven parents (18%) noted the hardship caused by insufficient funds to pay for even basic living needs. Barb, 40, with four children:

[I wish that] welfare would start thinking about people who have families because there's not a lot of money out there for mothers to buy our kids stuff as prices keep going up. You're paying \$20 for diapers alone and then there's formula, and regular groceries. Doctors want you on 2% milk for the kids and being on welfare you only have limited money to work with and you have to pay your bills on top.

Wendy, 37, said, “Being on the system is hard. You go day by day – some days you would eat, some days you wouldn’t eat--because there is never enough to go around for a month.” Financial hardship limited many other possibilities for parents and families. For example, if parents had to travel distances for therapy or medical care, they were unable to handle the transportation costs. Brenda, a single parent trying to better herself through schooling, explained how recent cutbacks in social assistance had affected her access to daycare:

...Mike Harris [then Premier] came in and he slashed my cheque by \$158 a month...My net income in a month was maybe \$650 and I paid rent, heat, hydro, phone, cable, and transportation back and forth from school. Well the next year Mike Harris said, “Oh, you’re going to school? That’s it, you get nothing. Go live off OSAP [Ontario Student Assistance Program].” Actually I lost my mother’s allowance title and I was cut off subsidized daycare. Now what am I supposed to do? Live off OSAP and pay after school daycare prices?

As a result of prolonged struggles with the service system, Emma, 31, explained how she had to become more assertive to compete for scarce and disjointed services:

You talk to one, [then] another one comes the next time, and they don’t make any sense. Some are very supportive and some aren’t. Some don’t even want to meet with you. Like the one lady [who was working with Emma’s son], I said to her, “I’d like to have a home visit with you,” and she said, “Why?” I said, “Well because I think it’s important that I see what you’re doing and that I can implement the programming at home.” She was very distressed that I wanted to see her here, and we got through that...like I used to be very soft spoken, but now it’s like, “You’re going to come to my home!” And she did eventually come and now she comes every week. So it pays to be a bitch. ...if you’re not bitchy with these people you get forgotten, you just become a number.

In addition, parents felt added pressure when service providers seemed lacking in skills or insensitive to their needs. Nola, 27, and single, who had

accessed counselling all her life, described her anger at the manner of one particular counsellor:

...I sat down in her office and she said 'What can I do for you?' as if I was wanting a pack of cigarettes! It's bad enough when you sit down in front of someone you don't know and you're blabbing your whole story... You'd think, being trained as she is, she would know how to state things and get you to answer questions without 'So what can I do for you?' So, that totally rubbed me the wrong way, just my whole hour with her was hell. She made me feel very uncomfortable. She made me feel that, [she was thinking] "Oh god, like I haven't heard this story 50 times today and god, this is old." That's how she made me feel so I walked out of there and never went back.

As well, parents voiced concerns about the lack of protection for vulnerable children. Emma, 31, and her husband felt that service providers were ill-equipped to protect their child with a disability:

...because my son doesn't have a voice for himself, we truly believe that the [service providers] are not standing up and being advocates for him. And that's our greatest upset, is that for children that don't have a voice, who can be their voice if you're not trusting their parents?

Another related theme raised by parents was the mismatch of the service itself. When Dorothy's 16-year old son with a developmental disability went missing, she felt that she had no support from the law to allay her anxiety:

My son took off fishing and didn't come home for over 24 hours. I'm worried. This is a 16 year old who is physically 16, but not 16. I wondered, 'Did he drown?' So I went to the police station with a picture. And basically I was told that he can be gone as long as he wants, 'cause he's 16 years old.

Arthur, 27, felt that his single parent group was a complete mismatch for his needs. He found that he had nothing in common with the participants in his group who were his parents' age.

Hence, parents stated that the services offered tended to be residual and short term, i.e. family members learned some skills that ameliorated the situation temporarily, but the services did not address the underlying problems. Parents with complex needs felt that short-term and interrupted services wiped out the gains as their problems mounted over the long term. Further, some parents struggled with the stigma attached to services that they were compelled to use. For example, Bart, a divorced father of three, felt ambivalent about using the Food Bank. He struggled with the stigma associated with this service and felt that he had somehow failed in his responsibilities:

I used the food bank a lot that first year...that was quite depressing. So when it came to going to the food bank it was like, 'We all have to eat, even though I don't want to be here.' 'Cause it made me feel like I wasn't keeping up my end of the deal here. Well, that bothered me a great deal, but at the same time, they were very helpful

Friends and Neighbours

A substantial number of parents (50, 82%) cited friends and neighbours as a source of support, helping to meet physical and emotional needs. Dorothy, 47 and divorced, expressed her feeling that her friends were indispensable and that she would not have survived without the people in her life who knew her well:

I mean, you can know people, but not know them. But these people, I've known for five, seven years. So they know me and my wants. They know my good points, they know my bad points.

Friends and neighbours were important for providing emotional support (66%), for creating opportunities (30%), facilitating fun in their lives (18%), and supplementing material shortages (5%). Hence, it was apparent that friends and

neighbours were a welcome support system for parents who endured extreme challenges in their lives.

Emotional Support.

Forty parents (66%) found their friends to be essential for preserving their emotional health by: providing respite from the children, helping out in a crisis, giving ‘counseling,’ and motivating the parent to change. Hanna, 22, had friends from school who lived in the building and who helped with a babysitter for an emergency. Dorothy’s friends took her three children “every once in a while if things get really heavy”. Sometimes this respite at friends provided a positive environment for the children. For Dorothy who was divorced, having married friends was particularly beneficial for her youngest son:

...he doesn’t spit there, he doesn’t curse there, he doesn’t smoke cigarettes there. He just becomes this different child – this child who is respectful and says ‘please’ and ‘thank you’, and I’m thinking, ‘What am I doing wrong?’ But then again, she has her husband there. And he’s a very nice person.

Having friends was a great asset in a family crisis. Barb, divorced, phoned a friend when she was desperate: “I phoned [a friend] to see if she could come over and try and talk to [son], calm him down, find out what his problem is. [The friend] phoned the police and the police came because [son] bashed my phone”.

Parents could have a trusting relationship with friends, to whom they found it easy to talk, and who were not “judgmental or biased”. Thus, parents often used their friends as “sounding boards,” and experienced sympathy and empathy in these. Emma’s friend was a “...real sympathizer who will wipe my tears...let [me] just pour it on and give me a lot of sympathy.” This empathy stemmed from

having experienced similar challenges, such as children with ADHD, troubles and conflicts in accessing services, or being a single parent). Kathy, 34, spoke of this shared empathy: “[My friend was] very understanding, by our side for the whole ordeal [of my child being apprehended by CPS], because she went through it with her own son. She more or less put us on the right track”.

Friends were a support in making life changes. When Lydia, 44, was struggling with an abusive relationship, a friend came to her rescue:

I was finally getting sick of it, sick of it, sick of it, and then I met a really good friend who turned around and told me that’s not right to be treated like that...it’s not right for somebody to be treating another person like that. It’s not right. You don’t get treated like that, you don’t sit there and take that.

Lydia’s desperation was picked up by this good friend who “showed me the light.” and became a “backbone” to help her leave a bad relationship.

Nellie, 24, who had lived through stressful experiences of rape, abuse, shelter and street living, found friends to be invaluable. For example, when she was homeless, she found a friend in the street who “taught her the way of the street – how to be safe and how to stay clean and watch for this and watch for that.” When Nellie became pregnant, she could not survive as a single mother and became dependent on a controlling and manipulative husband. Again, it was a friend who supported her through her separation from her husband. This friend also supported her at the point when CPS apprehended her daughter, and became an advocate and facilitator for supervised visitation with her daughter.

Hence, friends were not just listeners but also mentors, advisors, and motivators, to parents facing stressors in their lives. Parents said that they

learned about themselves and about life itself through their friends. In fact, many parents used a network of friends to match with their specific needs. For example, Vanda, 43 and widowed, would call one friend if “I was sick” and another “if I was depressed and needed cheering up.” Emma, 31, also had friends who met different needs: “I know who to call for what. If I need sympathy I call one, if I need structure I call the other...Some friends are like my mother [who would] give [me] a kick in the butt and say, ‘Smarten up!’”

For Angela, 41, married, who felt housebound with two children and was taking home courses, friends were available online. These friends could be reached at anytime to chat and overcome her isolation:

I can have people in my house. I go downstairs, find people, talk. Say, “I gotta go,”--come back up and study. And I've had a visit with all kinds of people, all over the world. And nobody's been in the house. He [her husband] can't say “Who's been here?” And I go back to studying...I don't have to worry about the mess, or the cost or, when he's not home, being able to have my friends in.

Creating Opportunities

Eighteen parents (30%) said that having a network of friends meant that they could access opportunities in the community, such as transportation, housing, and jobs. Daisy, 37, separated, had three children and no vehicle. She had to rely on a friend from another town to take her for groceries. Tess, 23, and her children lived with two friends for a month, which enabled her to save money to get her own apartment. Sheila, separated with four children, was offered a job by an elder who lived in her area. Working in the janitorial business, cleaning banks and lawyer's offices, she felt that she “was contributing towards the bills

and stuff. I was very proud.” It seemed that a sense of belonging and participation in the community was created through their friendships.

In addition to concrete gains, friends provided intrinsic opportunities to reciprocate, as in sharing child care. Angela, 41, described how this reciprocating gratified her: “When my friends need me, I like that, because that’s partly what fills me up--knowing that someone else needs me.”

Facilitating Fun

Eleven parents (18%) described sharing leisure and recreation with their friends, opportunities that often included their children. Dorothy’s son enjoyed visiting his mom’s friend, who had a snowmobile and a pool. Other friends took him to shows and tobogganing. Parents socialized with their friends by talking on the phone/online, visiting with each other over a coffee, “hanging out,” “going to the bar to have a couple drinks,” “going camping,” or “sitting at the park and having lunch.” These leisure moments were often venues to let off steam, to talk, to listen, to “take a break from the kids” and “to not have to worry about anything except having a good time.” For example, Lydia and her friends organized a “ladies day” to have a break from their children: “There’s three of us going out to the lake...we’re going to get our bathing suits, pack a picnic lunch, and we’re just going to lay in the sun and talk and swim.”

Supplementing Material Shortages

Three parents (5%) mentioned that friends and neighbours provided assistance when financial resources were low. Stella, 39, divorced, spoke about

the generosity of her friend: “My girlfriend came over and said, ‘Let’s go shopping’...So I went with her. She gave me a basket, and she said, ‘Get whatever you want’...She bought me about a hundred and fifty dollars worth of food.

Barb, 40, with four children was helped by friends who gave her “...clothes that are too small on their children” or bus fare if she had to go to the hospital.

Extended Family Members

A third source of support for parents was extended family members. Forty-five parents (74%) identified their birth parents, siblings, parents-in-law, grandparents, and aunts as people they could turn to for material resources and emotional support. Of all the extended family members, mothers were cited most frequently (26%) as the source of help.

Extended family members were important sources of emotional support (69%), accommodation (21%), childcare (20%), and money (18%) for basic needs, such as, paying for rent, groceries, laundry, baby clothes. Finally, the following types of help were each mentioned by one or two parents: transportation, owning a vehicle, accessing medical services, moving, household chores, budgeting, finding jobs, and facilitating visitation with their children by becoming the designated CPS guardians.

While 74% of parents found extended family members to be helpful, 44% reported a lack of support from some or all extended family members.

Emotional Support

Forty-two parents (69%) said they received emotional support from extended family members to handle their daily living challenges and crisis situations. They described their extended family members as “wonderful,” “supportive.” and “helpful”. They gave “good advice,” provided encouragement, kept the parent “grounded,” served as a “backbone for any type of stress,” and were readily available at any time. Tess, 23, single, said that she was very close to her mother and could call her at work or at home whenever she was frustrated:

...if there's a world's greatest mom right now, she definitely deserves a month long paid vacation. She does so much for me. My daughter's father hasn't been in her life pretty much since day one, and my mom takes my daughter once a month so that I can get a break...[If] I need something, she's always there--always.

Jane, 25, married, described her mother as:

...my second best friend next to my husband. I tell her everything. We talk about everything. I can get angry with my mom and I can tell her I'm angry with her and at the same time we'll go shopping.

Jane, 25, was also blessed with the “best grandmother on the planet. She spends time with [my children] because she wants to, not because I need a babysitter.” Gail, 34, separated, received support from her sister who offered a listening ear:

...my sister said if you ever need anybody to talk to, and you don't want to talk to Mom, you can always come over this way and talk to me. And the thing is I've always done it for her sons...because I have been closer in age to her boys.

Nellie, 24, single, felt the emotional support of her father who believed in her ability as a parent:

My Dad's always known from day one how much of a good parent I am and how much [her daughter] changed me from who I used to be, into settling down, taking responsibility for myself, and for [daughter].

Esther, 32, divorced, also described how her step father was supportive:

...whether we do right or wrong, he supports us either way. He doesn't get angry and say, "Oh well, you're stupid"...and walk away...And he was there throughout my pregnancy, and [when I] delivered both my kids. So it's been a great experience because my kids have a bond that nobody can break. And I've had a few people try to break it, and they just can't.

Apart from birth families, some parents found strong support from their in-laws. Betty, 29, always called upon her husband's family for support. "They're more like a family. They're always there. They've taught me more family values than my mother ever did."

Emotional support from extended family members helped parents to refocus on believing that "things will change" and seeing "beyond the rainbow."

Hilda, 23, described how her parents always kept her focused when she had no more energy to fight the struggles of life:

Because there were many times where I said, "That's it--I'm taking my kid and I'm running away from it." If it wasn't for my Mom and Dad saying, "Hold back a minute--you can't do that!" or "You're going to jeopardize yourself, you're going to lose your kid, you're going to go to jail for kidnapping." If it wasn't for them I'd lose my head – so they kept me pretty grounded.

Accommodation

Thirteen parents (21%) described housing crises, when they could not keep up with rental payments, when they were in the midst of change (e.g. moving,

separating, having a baby), or when their current living situations were inhabitable. Many family members offered shelter to parents in crisis. Connie, 38, divorced, recalled: "It was really hot that summer...and my Dad couldn't see [daughter] and I cooped up in this small hotel room. So [he] would come and pick us up and drop us off [to the hotel room later]...to stay overnight".

When Betty's in-laws found out she was pregnant with twins, they insisted that she move in with them so they could help her with her babies, in addition to her three young children with special needs. Family support was especially comforting when parents had a newborn in their lives. Fiona, 25, single, was very grateful when she and her baby were invited to move in with her aunt.

Sometimes, parents had access to properties owned by family members. This provided security and affordable rental arrangements. Midge, 39, felt very lucky when her in-laws let them live in a grandfather's home after he had passed away. She described this event as "lucking out, being here...and escaping. I mean--I love it!"

Child Care

Twelve parents (20%) mentioned that extended family members were a constant resource for child care. Parents found this support convenient to access, readily available, safe, and familiar for their children. Edna, 43, married, noted: "It's nice actually...I don't even have to plan [for] a babysitter...if something comes up on the spur of the moment I can just say, 'Mom, are you going to be home?' So it works out perfectly".

Some parents were able to link up with several family members who could be called upon at a moment's notice. Esther, divorced, and Jodie, married, would call upon their grandparents and siblings. Arthur, a separated father, depended on his great aunt, sister, and grandmother to watch over his children.

Extended family members were also flexible in how they supplemented child care. They could come in for a couple of hours when parents were going to scheduled activities (e.g. medical appointments, shopping), or when needing emergency help or respite with a child (e.g. when a child became sick, when a baby was unsettled). Lena's mother took her baby "...so I could sleep. Because she would cry all day, all night, for like four days straight...nonstop."

In addition, family members assisted with taking the children to their activities in the community (e.g. school). Betty, with five children, found her family's support extremely valuable: a grandmother and aunt actively shared in the care giving role of her children: "Grandma takes [two children] to one daycare and aunt takes [son] to the daycare where she works, so they're gone all day". Betty also noted that family members provided breaks for her and her children: "One aunt would actually take two of the older three once a month for a weekend...and then my other aunt would take them once in a while."

Money

Insufficient income to meet basic needs was mentioned by 11 parents (18%). Extended family members were aware of this poverty, and often supplemented the basics for the children by purchasing school lunches, baby

clothes, diapers, equipment, etc. Being on low income, parents experienced shortfalls during the month while they were waiting for their next social assistance payment. When Tess's problem of a meager allowance was compounded by her boyfriend's substance abuse, it was her mother, brother, and grandmother who helped her out:

...Like two weeks ago I needed \$20 to get me through for two days because [my] daughter needed diapers. I didn't get my money from social services until two days later so [my brother] lent me the [money] to get me through the next two days and then I paid him back...

At certain times, parents had to forego shopping for food, or using heat and water. At these times, parents like Fay, 32 and separated, turned to family members who offered intermittent support: "My family has always been [there]. We are not close but [if] I need 40 bucks or a bag of milk, they're there...My parents would come down and bring me ...potatoes and carrots...and give me money over the phone". In contrast, Bart's mother offered regular help to supplement his low income. She always did the weekly laundry for his three children, which as he said, "is [worth] a lot of money".

Unhelpful Members of Family of Origin

Twenty-seven parents (44%) expressed disappointment at the lack of support from some (30%) or all (15%) of their family of origin. Parents gave the following reasons why their family members were unhelpful: a history of poor relationships between parent and family member (16%); disapproval by family members of parent's lifestyle and partner choices (16%); family member's wish to

control parent's lives (11%); and overt hatred by family members toward parents (7%).

Ten parents (16%) described a history of poor relationships with their family members. Nola, 27 and single, said that her relationship with her mother had always involved a lot of fighting and disapproval. Pat, 23, could not trust her mother with her children because she felt that her mother was "...not like a normal everyday grandmother." She commented: "She won't interact with her grandkids...how hard is it to pick up your granddaughter or grandson, put them on your lap and read a book? ...She doesn't even do things like that".

Betty, 29, had tried to maintain relations with her family but failed. She "closed the doors" on her family who did not show any interest in her welfare. She said, her mother was "too busy" and, even if she called and left a message, her mother never returned her calls. Esther, 32, divorced, and Joan, 43, married, had siblings living in town but it was difficult to have positive relationships with them and their families because of minimal contact and no reciprocity. Poor relations with family members caused some anxiety to parents. Joan, 43, was concerned that her two children would not know their grandparents; her father, in particular, had only seen her daughter twice.

Ten parents (16%) felt that the conflict in their relationships with their family of origin resulted from disagreement with the choices they made in their lives. For example, family members confronted them about their parenting styles. Lara, 28, said that her parents continually nagged her to learn about parenting

because they felt she was not a good mother. However, as a mother of three, she felt:

I've raised [daughter] who is 12 now, and I've done a pretty good job myself. It just bothers me, because they talk about how I should be treating my kids and meanwhile, they didn't do a pretty good job themselves...I don't like them at all, I want to live my life and be happy. I don't want to have somebody telling me what to do in life. Because nothing – nothing I seem to try to do makes them happy.

Wendy, 37, living common-law, had conflict with her parents when she was single and decided to keep her unborn child: "...right from the beginning they didn't want me to have my son and all I heard was, 'Why don't you adopt him out, why don't you adopt him out?'"

Another point of contention with family members was the choice of partners. Jenny's situation demonstrated how family members became estranged when they did not accept her partner. She was keeping her distance from her three brothers and three sisters because they didn't like her husband. Although Jenny, 32, missed her family she felt that it was "...not worth having them if they're going to judge you by seeing your partner." Also, Ruth, 30, said her father was always putting her boyfriend down because he came from a family with a history of alcohol abuse.

Regarding disagreements around lifestyle choices, seven parents (11%) mentioned that some family members pressured them to conform to their ways of thinking. However, as Melinda, 38, separated, noted, "...pressure from family members is unhelpful". For Melinda, a similar attitude from her ex-husband compounded these pressures of being told "...what to do, or what you should be doing, or what you're not doing". Some parents felt that the only way out of this

pressuring environment was to stay away from their families of origin. Ruth, 30, was frustrated with the arguments between her boyfriend and her father, and felt that she would have to give an ultimatum to her father to make a choice of blessing her relationship or staying away.

Parents felt that their families did not believe in their abilities, and did not listen to their points of view. Moreover, disapproving family members began to take over and control their lives. Some family members even opposed them to the extent of reporting them to the CPS. Abby, 39, married, felt that her "...grandmother is taking full control, and it's not a nice feeling. I am feeling forced out of the marriage." When Abby tried to stand her ground, her grandmother phoned the CPS. Lara, 28, was very stressed with her family who frequently called the CPS about her: She noted: "It's pretty stressful when you think they are family [and] they should help...But if I talk to my parents, they don't want to listen".

The rift between Lara and her extended family was widened further when she felt her brother and CPS colluded to take her children away:

It's hard to think that your brother can take your two kids away, and CAS allowing it. [I have] a lot of hate feelings towards it. I said [to brother], "You can't take the kids!" and he said, "You watch, I'm taking the kids. They're not coming back with you."

Finally, four parents (7%) felt that family members acted in hateful ways toward them and their children. Nellie, 24, said that her boyfriend's mother "used to watch him beat me up and didn't care...I was like a maid, like Cinderella." Daisy, 37, noted that when she was out of town for the weekend, her apartment was ransacked. The landlord had contacted her mother who knowingly

misinformed him that Daisy had gone “out West” and did not tell her mother when she would be back. As a result, the landlord changed the locks and Daisy could not get into her own apartment upon her return. Daisy felt that her mother’s behaviour towards her was an “act of hatred.”

Parents further noted their children experienced hatred or favoritism from extended family members because of their gender or parentage. Pamela, 27, believed that her mother was vindictive toward her son because he was a “male child”, and Lara, 28, felt her family was malicious toward her son because he had a different father from the other two children. Lara felt this stigmatized her son, undermined her status with her daughter, and fragmented the relationships among her children:

And they tell [daughter] that [son] is not her real brother...you don’t tell kids that, because it weighs on them. I think that’s why they fight...I saw the kids weren’t getting along, because [daughter] got things from my parents [and the son] didn’t...and he got grounded, but she didn’t...And [daughter] would call them [grandparents] and ask them to help me out, talk to me, because I’m going crazy...and that’s the reason they would phone the CPS...I think that destroyed the kids too.

Places of Belonging in the Community

A fourth area of support mentioned by thirty-four parents (56%) was having places in the community where they felt they belonged. Parents used these places as resource for supplementing material needs, emotional support, expanding their network of friends, recreation, personal growth, and spiritual healing. These places (such as churches, Rotary Clubs, support circles, fitness centres, parks, schools, and libraries) were sought according to the sense of belonging, warmth, and acceptance that they offered to parents and children.

Place of Worship

Twelve parents (20%) mentioned being connected with their church groups. For some, church was a family tradition that they liked to continue; for others, it was a relatively new experience. This was a place in the community where parents and children could regularly participate in spiritually healing services. Parents' feelings about going to church included "it makes me feel complete," "everything in my life has a meaning," "it makes me feel better to take [my son] because it makes him feel better," "God watches us," "I can turn to him and say things and he answers me," and "I am powerless to my drug problem - God is my power". Angela, 41, married, found security in carrying God in her heart all the time:

It's extremely important to me. It's everything to me. Without it, I'm nothing...I have an inherent feeling of nothingness...this inherent feeling of "I can do nothing", that damn voice that says "you're not good enough". Having God there makes it make sense. It fills something that is empty, bleak, vast emptiness.

Parents said their churches organized many leisure and recreational activities for their children. These were safe places of healthy fun for children that parents could access. Dorothy, 47, sent her son to different church-organized groups, such as the "youth group" and "kid church" where they did "fun things" like "jello contests." She felt that the pastor was protective of her child, who had a disability, and noted that the pastor organized bus transportation.

Church was also a place where parents felt "warmth" and a welcoming environment, where they were accepted unconditionally for who they were.

Sheila, 31, separated, was infused with the “acceptance” and “overabundance of love” which helped her to come out of her shell. She joined a church with her four children and started teaching Sunday school. She described this experience: “Wow! I felt so good about myself. I noticed a big difference in my children in the way they behaved. I could see how good they felt, and the way they talked to me – there was more respect”.

For a few parents, involving themselves in the care of other children built their confidence, raised their self-esteem and taught them new skills. Marilyn, 18, became involved with her church through “Adventure Zone”, a program for kids 5 – 14 years. Very soon she became a leader of all the ten-year old girls. This raised her self-esteem and helped her to develop personal skills in working with children as Marilyn noted: “I like it. It makes me feel like somebody. Like the kids, when I get there, they’re all saying ‘Mrs. [____]’.” You kind of have control and they do what you say. It’s cool. It’s like having ten kids instead of one”.

At church, parents found friends who were helpful and empathetic with their situation and facilitated further community contacts. Angela, who lacked confidence in looking for a job, was advised by a church friend to call another church member who had some seniority in his place of work and assisted her to find a job: “He got me right in. I was so thankful for that, because I was so afraid of going after a job. How am I going to do this? You know, I’m at home...I got the job”!

Church members were also a resource for material needs. Dorothy, involved with CPS for 10 years said: “If it hadn’t been for the church last year, I wouldn’t have had any Christmas gifts at all. A bunch of friends got together and gave me six hundred dollars”. Georgia, 42, found her pastor’s role very valuable in connecting her family with culturally sensitive services to prepare them in a crisis. They were able to locate Christian counseling and host families for their son, who was mandated by CPS to be removed from the home and separated from his brother. Georgia and her husband were thankful that they could ease their son’s traumatic separation from family by maintaining some faith and community involvement.

Other Places of Belonging.

Twenty-two parents (36%) identified other places of belonging in their community that facilitated their spiritual and emotional well-being. Fourteen parents (23%) mentioned their participation in therapeutic leisure activities such as social clubs, gardening, reading, writing, poetry, song, dance, walks, computer, TV, and exercise. Nine parents (15%) reported benefits from places where they worked or went to school.

Stella, 39, divorced, was a dedicated walker at lunch time as she could not afford a gym membership. She found exercise very therapeutic and used every opportunity to work out, bike, swim, and canoe. Grace, 32, found the park in her neighbourhood a place where she could vent her feelings in isolation: “And if I’m

angry, well, the paper just happens to get a little more deeply embedded by the pen. No problem because that's my private journal".

Natalie, a single mother, found the public library a rich resource for books on parenting. Vanda, a widowed mother of three, loved her weekly visit with a group of single mothers, where she could release her stress:

And they know what the stress of it is all about and we basically discuss what our problems are, and go over things to try and find different ways to handle situations differently, rather than getting all upset.

Parents who enjoyed their school or work places described a sense of achievement, support and friendship from people they came in contact with, and an outlet from pressures at home.

Tess, 23, said that her children always came first but she needed that "six to eight hours of mental stimulation that has to do with some form of intellect. I get to relax when I'm at school – my mind is in exercise instead of my body."

Arthur, a young single dad, found good mentors in his teachers and football coach:

I used to hang out with bad kids in a bad area and my teachers would say 'You're a fast runner, why don't you join track?' And then they pushed me into sports, and the stability of schoolwork and going to sports gave me that focus and dedication...and I had my football coach--[when my wife left] he was like, "Well, what do you think your Dad would do [if his wife left]?" And I was like. "Probably keep the kids", and he goes, "Well then, there's your answer."

Melinda, 38, who had just had a baby and gained a lot of weight, found that working kept her active, gave her a break, helped to "bring in a few pennies" and "meet people". For Grace, 32, her job of "delivering a measly newspaper" gave her exercise, served as a distraction from her life at home, and provided an

opportunity to socialize. She noted: “[I talk with] people who are sitting out on their verandas or some people will come right out of their house because they see me coming and they’ll sit and have a conversation”. For Paula, 40, divorced, having a paying job made her feel “more of an equal” – it gave her a voice and showed her worth: “I set up this computer program, things that I didn’t even imagine that I could do and I was just incredibly proud of myself”.

Summary of Formal and Informal Supports

Parents reported that, in addition to CPS, they accessed supports from social service organizations, friends and neighbours, extended family members, and places of belonging in the community (e.g. church, Rotary Clubs, fitness centers, park). This support was essential for preserving emotional health, supplementing material shortages, providing shelter, expanding social networks, and providing opportunity for recreation and leisure. In addition, the parents’ community was instrumental in facilitating personal growth, academic learning, jobs, spiritual healing, and a sense of belonging.

While 74% of parents identified one or more extended family members who had been a source of support in their difficult lives, 30% of parents identified an extended family member who had been unhelpful, and 15% of parents said they had received no support from any of their family of origin. Parents felt that the lack of support from family members was due to a history of poor relationships that made it difficult to trust, family members’ disapproval of their lifestyle and partner choices, family members wanting to pressure and control parents’ way of life, and

family members showing an overt dislike toward the parents and their children.

A substantial number of parents (85%) reported accessing professional and social supports from service organizations in their community. The main services they used were counselling, income supplementing, parenting groups, daycare, daily living supplements, respite, and shelter. Parents used social services, other than CPS, in times of crisis revolving around a need for shelter, respite, income, shortage of food, children's challenging behaviours, relationship breakdowns, and health complications. While a majority of parents (52%) found these services were helpful, 36% encountered many challenges and disappointments in accessing services. This was as a result of fragmented, inflexible, and mismatched services, long waiting lists, unhelpful service providers, and a feeling of stigmatization for using certain services. Hence, while many parents reported that, while services helped to diffuse stress, build skills, and strengthen personal growth, others experienced the services as residual, and disjointed, making them ineffective in addressing underlying complex problems. It was clear, however, that social service organizations were a necessary and integral part of community supports for parents in the study.

Parents' Experiences with Child Protective Services

Positive Services Experiences

Many parents mentioned CPS workers who made them feel supported and valued, and approached them respectfully. These workers made them feel supported and valued by: making good referrals; being emotionally supportive;

providing concrete help. Respectful approaches included explaining CPS processes and limits, and allowing parents some choice in how services were delivered. Moreover, some parents mentioned foster carers to whom they were grateful for being good to their children, and who welcomed the parents to be included in their children's lives.

Feeling Supported and Valued

Good referrals by workers were mentioned by 21 parents (34%). These included: arranging for their children to go to daycare, camps, counseling, education, psychological assessment and treatment, temporary placement, as well as referring parents for psychiatric treatment. Emma, 31, married, sought help from CPS after she had broken her son's crib in anger, and was given a number of helpful referrals:

When I told them how angry I was...they gave me names of the mental health clinic; I got a counselor, I got support in for the child, I got...you name it, I got it on a silver platter. They were so willing to help me and so understanding.

Emotional support was mentioned by 19 parents (31%). They appreciated workers who: listened to and gave recognition to their feelings; praised them for seeking help; responded promptly to phone calls; were non-judgmental; and supported them in parenting their children. Paula, 40, divorced, recalled her first encounter with her worker: "As soon as she walked in the door, she said, 'I'm really sorry about this. I can tell that it's been very hard on you...I will make it as easy as I can. We have to follow up all calls and I will have to speak to the

children.” The worker spoke with the children separately but, as Paula said, “...was very quickly back to me.”

Concrete help was mentioned by 16 parents (18%), including help in obtaining money, food, and shelter, as well as in-home help with children. Dorothy, 47, divorced, was enthusiastic about the “Family Preservation” workers who came in to help with her children who were often angry and aggressive: “...the third one came and just spent a lot of time with [youngest son]. And they were great...they were wonderful!”

Respectful Approaches

Explanations of processes and limits was mentioned by nine parents (15%). Their anxiety was relieved when workers explained agency processes, and/or reassured them when they did not intend to take their children. Denise, 16, single, recalled that, instead of taking her baby, the worker “supported me...explained things to me like she’s not coming here to take him away—she’s here to explain stuff.”

Allowing choices was mentioned by six parents (10%) who said their workers had given them some choices, including: the timing of appointments, the kind of help parents wanted, and the selection of a foster home for their child. Betty, 29, living in a common-law union, expressed appreciation for CPS because, “They’re asking me how I need help and listening to me.”

Good Foster Carers

Seven parents (11%) expressed their appreciation of foster carers who were good to their children, or included the parents in their children's lives. Kathy, 34, married, was grateful to a foster carer couple, both teachers, who helped her children with their special educational needs, even after their return home: "[Male foster carer] came here to help us with the way he did homework with them. Then we just watched on...that helped. They were very helpful with us and great to the kids...the kids just loved them!"

Negative Services Experiences

The negative experiences with CPS, as described by parents, fell into four broad categories: "omission of services," feeling unfairly treated, feeling harassed, being traumatized by CPS taking their children; and concerns/complaints about foster care. These experiences might be expected to arouse fear or anger in parents, and some of them expressed such feelings directly.

Omission of Services

Parental comments reflecting omission of services included: being initially defined as ineligible for service; receiving less help than expected; and feeling depersonalized by worker turnover.

Ineligibility for service was mentioned by nine parents (15%), who recalled being told, when they first requested help, that they were not eligible or would

have to wait for services. Jane, 25, married, called for help saying she had “a child who I’m going to hurt and I don’t want to, but I’m losing it here. And they gave me a few numbers and that was about all they did. ...If you weren’t beating your kid they didn’t have time for you.”

Receiving less help than expected was mentioned by 32 parents (52%), who were disappointed in the CPS response to their requests for services. Their concerns included: difficulty in accessing or communicating with workers; scarcity of counseling and in-home services; and little help for children with special needs. Daisy, 37, separated, was shocked that no one visited her for five months after her three children were returned: “I could have been doing anything [to them]. [During the placement] I was never allowed to have them on my own.”

Feeling depersonalized by worker turnover was mentioned by nine parents (15%) who felt frustrated or deserted by the changes. Nellie, 24, commented on her most recent change of workers, when the previous worker quit the agency after a month: “I was getting sick of worker after worker...because they ask you the same questions over and over again...none of them really knew me.” Jodie, 41, married, had a supportive worker, but she left the agency: “I kind of felt we were deserted.”

Unfair Treatment

Parents who felt unfairly treated included those who felt they had been unfairly judged, given too little information by CPS, and misled or betrayed.

Feeling unfairly judged was mentioned by 19 parents (31%), who felt the agency had been too critical of them or set unfair standards. Lara,

28, living common-law, was upset that CPS had a history of her life and seemed to use it against her: "...I don't think that's right...they should bring up my whole life history." Hanna, 22, living common-law, felt the agency judged her too quickly: "I admit my place was messy, but if they had given me a little time to prove that I'm not a neglectful parent, I wouldn't be in this trouble right now."

Receiving too little information was mentioned by 16 parents (26%) who said they were not given adequate explanations of how CPS functioned, or were not given important information about their children in care. Nola, 27, single, had her children taken away, and was confused about how to obtain information from the agency:

I don't even know who I'm supposed to speak to [among different workers] ...they didn't tell me the rules of the organization...they just had the audacity to take them [her children] like that...I thought they would come to your home and talk to you.

Stella, 39, divorced, was upset that she was not allowed to see her file: "You're not allowed to see your file—you don't know what other people have said about you, or what's written down about you. I was livid about that. 'Don't tell me that I can't see that—that's about me!' As a point of information, there is legislation in Ontario to support this right to information, but anecdotal information, in addition to this research, suggests that agencies are reluctant to share files with parents.

Some parents were upset that they were not told about the foster home where their child was placed, or not informed when their children had problems in care. Sandy, 22, single, found out her daughter was in hospital when she came

for her regular visit. Georgia, 42, married, was upset that she wasn't told her son was changing foster homes until the day before his move: "There was no input as far as we were concerned." Moreover, the worker with whom Georgia talked could tell her nothing about the new foster home, because another worker had arranged it.

Harassment

Parents who felt harassed spoke about being scrutinized, invaded, threatened, attacked, or harassed.

Scrutiny was mentioned by 13 parents (21%), who felt uncomfortable about close monitoring of their parenting behaviour, or resented agency involvement in their visits with children during placement. Wanda, 20, single, had bad memories of being videotaped through one-way glass before her infant son was taken away from her:

They [police were involved] were in the other room with a video camera watching us... it felt like the whole day, and then finally they said, 'Okay, we're taking (son) into custody,' and that's when I broke into tears and I said, 'Listen, I almost died for this baby, why would I ever want to hurt him.'

Other examples of scrutiny were having their food supply checked, and being questioned about the suitability of their friends and relatives to care for their children. Elise, 25, single, objected to the agency's rule that people who supervised her children should have a police check: "...if you're going to ask my friends if they have charges against them, most of them do...my father has been in jail most of his life, and I'm not going to stop him seeing his grandchildren."

Regarding the monitoring of parent-child visits, Kathy recalled, “A worker was behind the glass where nobody could see her...they were taking notes of what we [she and her husband] said and did—it was like you were in prison.”

Feeling invaded, threatened, or attacked by CPS was mentioned by 20 parents (33%). They felt invaded when workers interviewed their children without their knowledge, arrived in their homes with an officious manner, or took a police-like approach to searching their homes. Stella, 39, divorced, recalled: “I was very offended at the fact that, they just yanked my kids out of their classes, and interviewed them behind my back. I felt raped.” Bart, 34, a divorced father, said the worker came “...storming in, ‘Have the kids got food? Have the kids got clothes?’...she went right through the whole place, checking.”

Parents described threats that invoked the fear of losing their children. Melinda, 38, separated, said she had refused to talk with a new CPS worker (her third different worker) arguing that her son was soon to be admitted to a children’s mental health centre, and the worker countered with, “Would you prefer to tell this to a judge?”

Being harassed was mentioned by 10 parents (16%), who felt that CPS approaches were oppressive or controlling. Hanna, 22, living common-law, felt the agency expected too much: “One worker comes in one day and then a worker comes out the next day and...we’re expected to go to “Healthy Babies, Healthy Children” [a weekly prevention program] and this is too much.” Hanna also resented what she viewed as workers’ attempts to control her:

...constantly handing me these schedules for housework...I don’t need that stuff...I do know how to clean my house...and this

schedule saying 12:00 is my bedtime and I have to get up at 7:00 in the morning...like they're telling me what to do, when I can do it, how I have to do it and how I have to live...

Feeling misled or betrayed was mentioned by 10 parents (16%), who felt the agency had not been open with them during the investigation or decision-making, and another three (5%) who spoke of being betrayed. Examples of being misled included being pressured to sign voluntary care agreements to avoid court; being reassured that children would be left at home or placed only briefly, then having them removed or kept for a longer time.

An example of betrayal was when parents shared information with a worker and found the information was later used against them. Hilda, 23, living in a common-law union, felt misled about reassurances she was given about her daughter's placement:

They had promised me that [daughter] would be coming home that night...[after visit to hospital] they said that they were keeping her. And I said, 'You told me that if nothing was wrong she could come home.' They said, 'I'm sorry, we have to protect the children first and we were trying to calm you down at your house.' Which I didn't think was fair—they lied to me.

Tess, 23, single, felt betrayed when her CPS worker spoke in Court about disclosures Tess thought she had made to the worker in confidence:

I told my social worker about my past suicide attempts [five years earlier]...so she could better understand why I sympathized with my boyfriend's suicide attempt...and she put this into documents [for court]...I'm a completely different person today...and she had the nerve to put my suicide attempts in those legal papers...she was grasping at straws to put in anything negative she could and that's how I took it.

Tess's feeling illustrates the complexity of the CPS worker's role as both helper and authority figure. The worker might have minimized Tess's sense of betrayal by explaining to her in advance why she felt she had to put this information in her Court affidavit.

Traumatized by Sudden Apprehension

Eleven parents (18%) spoke about the sudden apprehension of their children and the traumatic effects on them. Some would have liked a chance to call in a supportive family member to avert the need for placement. Four of the eleven families (7%) objected to the public manner in which their children were taken and/or the number of people involved, including police. Kitty, 38, single, recalled: "They came into the mall, in public, and snatched my kids right out of my hands...having people see this and having them ripped out of my arms and being treated as if I was a bad person...I ended up in hospital for a long time."

Pat, 23, married, described having her infant daughter taken while she was still in hospital after giving birth: "...the [CPS] worker came back with three police officers, three nurses, the 'head honcho' guy from the hospital and they took my daughter." The involvement of police created a nightmarish scenario for Hilda, 23, in a common-law union, described:

They came here with four police officers pounding on our door...they surrounded him [her boyfriend] and two Family & Children's Services [CPS] workers were on each side of me, and they said they were taking [daughter] to the hospital.

Anger and fear about CPS interventions could be inferred from many of the parents' reports; however there were only seven parents (11%) who

expressed anger directly, and three (5%) who expressed fear. Regarding anger, Kathy, 34, recalled: "They brought a detective in...they asked me all these questions about [son] having marks on his fingers. At that point I just wanted to shoot them all." Fear was expressed by Freda, 32, single: "You think nightmare things—'Oh my God, Children's Services are going to come in and take my children...you always hear of horror stories and people telling you..."

Concerns/complaints about Foster Carers

Concerns about foster care included: dissatisfaction with the care given to their children, parents feeling excluded themselves, lack of satisfying access, and difficulty with children after placement.

Serious dissatisfaction with the care their children received was expressed by four parents (7%). Christine, 39, divorced, visited her son's foster home and described it as "gross," because of many pets and their excrement, as well as "...empty beer bottles all over the place." Kitty, 38, single, noted that her two boys, 3 and 4, appeared "scruffy" and unhappy on her office visits with them, and was suspicious that they might be sexually abused in foster care.

Feeling excluded or denigrated by foster carers was mentioned by six mothers (10%). Pamela, 27, separated, felt threatened by the foster mother "having my girls call her 'Mom'." She asked the foster mother not to do this because "...that's messing up their heads." The threat was increased for Pamela by her knowledge that the foster carers had made an attempt to adopt her daughters. Melinda, 38, separated, felt denigrated by her son's foster mother who "told me I was a rotten mother and used swear words with me."

Limited access to their children in care was mentioned by six parents (10%). Complaints included: the foster homes were too far away; the agency gave them too little time with their children, or interfered with the visits. Pat, 23, married, felt deprived of being with her infant daughter, with whom she had three two-hour visits per week: "I never got to be with her for the first six weeks of her life...it was extremely hard." Pat was also uncomfortable that workers were "watching me through a glass" when she was lying on a couch with her daughter, talking to her, and rubbing her head.

Difficulty with their children after intervention or placement was mentioned by five parents (8%). Jane, 25, married, recalled: "...my oldest daughter just broke down into tears, when she told me the CPS had come to the school and interviewed her and her sister." Jane said her younger daughter, 6, became

...ten times worse for me [after the interview at the school]...They told her what a mom can and can't do...she told me she was going to run away...she had her bags packed and was going to my girlfriend's house.

Kathy felt undermined by the treatment her children received by foster carers who had more resources than she did. She had the impression that the foster carers bought a toy for her children on every visit to the grocery store; on their return home, the children continued to expect these treats, and Kathy had to explain that she couldn't afford them.

Qualities of Worker

Parents made many comments about the positive or negative qualities they perceived in their workers.

Positive Qualities

Parents mentioned the following positive qualities that they appreciated in workers: caring (51%); genuine (43%); empathetic (31%); exceptionally helpful (18%); non-judgmental (13%); and accepting (10%).

Caring

Thirty-one parents (51%) identified aspects about their worker that made parents feel cared about, particularly during their most difficult times. These workers made special efforts to support them during crisis periods, and provided instrumental help such as organizing Christmas gifts, bringing groceries, baby formula, and baby food. With regard to support, Wendy, 37, recalled:

She took me,...she talked. We worked things out when I was going through difficulties...at one point I just wanted to give up everything...and she was right there for me.

Not surprisingly, instrumental help was especially valued, as noted by Tanya, 24, single mother of one:

Then we had this one worker who came in every week...and said, 'Oh how's everything doing' and she brought formula every time she came –baby food for him and things like that, every time. And she just said, 'What's the problem, any problems or anything?'

Similarly, Tess, 23, noted: "She was willing to help. There was one incident where I got myself in a situation where I didn't have groceries for myself, so she brought me some. She brought the blanket that's on the couch for [daughter]. She's a great person."

Jenny, 32, mother of two, commented on the help her worker provided during the holiday season: "She [worker] had us through Christmas, and she

asked me to make out a list for the kids, for Christmas, if they wanted something special...which was pretty nice.”

Finally, the worker’s caring was evidenced by particular actions such as spending time with the parent and making special efforts, so that the parent felt supported, as observed by Marilyn, 18:

So she took me to the place. She talked to me all the way there, and it was a twenty-minute drive. I thought, ‘Okay, now you’re just going to drop me off, I don’t know any of these people and all that,’ but she didn’t. She came in, talked for a few hours, and got me settled.

Genuine

Twenty-six parents (43%) identified aspects of worker’s behaviour that related to being genuine: being down to earth, not belittling, keeping parents informed, having a sense of humour, being relaxed, and being ‘like an old friend.’ Dorothy, 47, divorced mother of three, commented: “[The worker] tends to come in, and she basically has a really good sense of humour. I really appreciate that.” Midge, 39, observed: She was just like somebody who you could sit down and talk to, it was just like...a friend—an old friend.

Having a worker share relevant personal information gave parents a sense that the worker was being open. Nola, 27, a single mother of two, said: “[The worker] called me and said, ‘Okay, my daughter is going into labour any day now, so I’ll be off for the next couple weeks’...that was very nice of her to call me.”

Bonnie, 38, married with two children, described her worker as being down to earth and open about sharing information:

...he was very good...[son] really liked him. He [son] thought [the worker] was like a big buddy. He was so down to earth with us, he

wasn't like a phony, trying to be this big office guy, he wears regular clothes, very relaxed, tells you how it is, doesn't try to put out a phony thing. Like [son] is really trying to push things lately and he [worker] lets you know what's going on, he's not hiding anything. And that's good because we need to know that, and we'd always have that contact where if there was an incident where [son] came for a weekend visit and something went on, I'd let [worker] know. And they would work with it that week.

Empathy

Nineteen parents (31%) identified aspects of their relationship with workers that indicated empathy: the worker seemed to be 'on their side', seemed to 'feel for them,' shared some of their (the worker's) own experiences, and gave them positive reinforcement. Kathy, 34, married mother of 3, noted: "The one we started with, she was very understanding. This was the Intake worker. She was more on our side as well."

The importance of workers understanding the parent's life situation was conveyed by Pat, 23, who noted: "She [the worker] does feel for me, she does feel for our situation, and everything. She has been good."

Parents appreciated workers who provided positive feedback, as indicated by Tess, 23, a single mother: "...it was just very positive—she was very positive. She emphasized the good things, and she didn't always agree with some of the views I had, but for the most part she tried to understand." From the last statement, it is evident that workers could be viewed as empathetic even when they did not agree parents on everything.

Workers sharing relevant personal information contributed to parents having a sense that they were understood. Sheila, 31, mother of four, commented:

I think part of it was because I knew she was a parent herself, which makes a difference for me. I don't know why—just because they know from first hand, not just observing from somebody else. She can relate more to some things that were going on in my life.

Fay, 32, a single mother of two, had a similar opinion: “She was a single mom too, so I guess we had more things in common. So it made it easier to talk to her, and just to get it off your chest, you know.”

Exceptional help.

Thirteen parents (21%) noted that some workers did more for them than expected, by offering concrete suggestions, advocating for them, going out of their way to find suitable resources, and providing help for children's problems. Kitty, 38, single mother of 3 noted: “She was very useful—she gave me [information about] some situations that I had never thought about, or things to do that I never considered that might work for me.”

Dorothy, 47, mother of three, felt that workers did a lot for her, because she realized they were overburdened:

...I mean, I called them, they came out and started the ball rolling and everything ... they did all the work. I think there's too many children and not enough workers. So, a few times they've called and said, 'We know we're supposed to meet you this afternoon and can't come, an emergency came up, we have to go to Court.'

Hilda, 23, described the worker's perseverance in advocating for help for Hilda's mentally challenged child, thereby ultimately helping Hilda:

... the [worker], she's nice... you get some of them that are mean, and you get some of them that are nice. They understand you and they're concerned about you and they're willing to help you and not willing to destroy your family. They're just there to help. That was what she was like...she put up with my bad attitude. She persuaded me into going for things with her that I didn't want to. Like getting her [child] tested for autism. I didn't want to do that at first and she said 'Well maybe we could try, you don't have to, but it won't hurt'.

Listening

The worker's ability to listen to the parent's story was identified by 11 parents (18%) as contributing to a positive relationship. It made parents feel respected and valued, and gave them the opportunity to tell their side of the situation. Angela commented: "I felt like she was listening to me, and she believed me, and that my side of the story was being heard. If I had to listen to all this, then I better get to tell my side too.

Sometimes parents felt that it was the first time they had really been heard. Natalie, 32, a single mother, stated: "Well, I felt for the first time, I felt that somebody was actually listening to me." Wendy felt similarly:

...she listened to me. She didn't jump in like the other workers and say how it is. She listened and understood what I was saying.

Non-judgmental

Eight parents (13%) made favorable comments about workers who did not judge them or 'put them down'. These workers appeared to remain neutral, encouraging parents to sort out differences, and not placing value judgments on the parents. Ruth, 30, with two children, recalled:

She didn't come in and say these are the parents and you're the kid so they're right and you're wrong. It was more like, 'This is her story and this is your story, so put them together and get along, you have to live together, so you're going to have to get along.' ...the workers are not there to judge you or to put you down. They're there to help you.

Carrie, 41, commented on her relationship with her worker whose non-judgmental attitude made her feel: "... a lot more comfortable. If I had a bad day with her [child] I could say, 'You would not believe what that kid did to me today' and it was just comfortable talking to him." Valerie, 18, put it very simply: "What was helpful was basically that she never judged me".

Accepting

Seven parents (10%) appreciated workers who accepted them, treated them with respect, 'like an adult', and approached them with encouragement, rather than scrutiny. Wendy, 37, described her worker's accepting attitude:

...she used to catch me in lies a lot ...but then I stopped all that...and got back on track but...she was good to me. I used to smoke dope and she knew I did ...and I would never deny it to her, you know what I mean. One day I tried to deny it to her, but she could smell my apartment, so how are you supposed to deny it? But that was the only bad thing that I had at that point when she was there ...and she just says; 'Work on it, you'll get through it, you can quit.'

Negative Qualities

Parents mentioned the following negative qualities in their workers: judgmental (46%); cold and uncaring (44%); poor listeners (38%); critical (38%); and insincere (20%).

Judgmental

Twenty-eight parents (46%) felt their workers passed judgment on them without acknowledging the limited choices the parents had in their lives.

Judgmental attitudes were inferred by parents from: workers' tone of voice; their physically checking the home; and accusing parents of mental or emotional instability. Being judged by workers was especially threatening to parents in view of the worker's power. Pat, 23, shared her interactions with a worker in this regard:

She told me, 'You realize you're never going to get your daughter back until you admit the truth?' I am admitting the truth—my husband only hit me once, and my husband is not an alcoholic, like a diehard alcoholic. He does have a drinking problem, not a major one, but he has slowed down.

Cold and Uncaring

Twenty-seven parents (44%) spoke about their workers being cold and uncaring, describing them as rude, abrupt, unhelpful, and showing a lack of concern for the parent's feelings, e.g. when removing a child. Christine, 39, mother of five, recalled the insensitive words of the worker who removed her children:

"Oh, well, just consider it a long vacation," she said, "You could use one." You don't go saying that to a parent. And she was a parent herself—that's why it took me off guard. I thought to myself, you must be a real "bimbo". But that's what she said. "Consider it a long vacation." I said, "I don't want a long vacation...of any kind."

This uncaring attitude was captured by Melinda, 38, separated mother of three:

"Every emotion is getting torn apart and I'm going crazy and she's asking for my address. So—'unfeeling' is what I felt."

Pat, 23, had a sense of coldness from her worker when he took her baby into care: “He did not show that he cared at all. He was more concerned with taking the baby...they should have more feelings towards the people they are working with.”

Not listening

Twenty three parents (38%) felt that workers did not listen to them, describing workers as being preoccupied and busy, only interested in questioning while not listening to the parent’s answers. Georgia, mother of 2, spoke about her experience regarding her child in foster care:

That was one of the frustrations that we found—“We've known this child for a few years, we do understand what you're dealing with, please accept some of what we're saying, and you know act on it, rather than waiting until you find it.”

The parent’s sense that workers were not listening tended to invalidate the parent’s relationship with, and knowledge of, the child, and to prevent the formation of a positive alliance that could result in case resolutions.

Not listening was also linked to not providing concrete help, as noted by Lara, 28, a mother of three who recalled: “I find her just – telling us what to do – she’s not helpful, she complains every time we ask for a voucher, and it's like she doesn't want to listen to our feelings or our thoughts or anything.”

Parents’ desire and need to have their full story heard was captured by Sheila, 37, mother of four: “I feel really frustrated because they don’t realize... they just look at the small picture.” In a similar vein, Emma, 31, commented: “...

it's like they're not even paying attention to you half the time that you're talking to them."

Critical

Twenty-three parents (38%) commented on workers being too critical of them: Being "one-sided" and not allowing parents any "say"; not seeing the parent's viewpoint; making parents feel as though they were on trial; only focusing on the negative and not mentioning the positive, particularly in written court documents; constantly bringing up past problems; and not understanding the life problems confronting the parent. Lack of understanding of the many problems confronting parents is commented on by Nellie, 24:

...but when it came to [the worker] who was about my age, she didn't have a clue what was going on. She would sit there and say, "...Oh, it's not that hard". And I said, "Are you a mom?" She said "No.". And I said, "Well, you don't know what you're talking about."

Kathy commented on the tendency for workers to be negative: "Everything's negative, so how is the family supposed to get anywhere when they put nothing positive in [worker's written statement for Court]? So of course the judge is going to see negative."

Laurie, 23, noted the feeling of being extremely criticized by her worker: "He just made me feel like I was on trial." Sheila, 27, also commented on how critical her worker was:

My worker, I know, doesn't have children. To have your own children or to read a book, I know it's different. [If you] have your own children, especially to deal with the difficulties that my two have, you would understand more instead of being so critical.

Insincere

Twelve parents (20%) felt that their workers were insincere. Parents described workers as sarcastic, devious, or “conniving,” and withholding information from the parents. At worst, they found it unconscionable for workers who were in communication with the parents, yet would apprehend a child without the parent being forewarned. Sarcasm in the worker’s tone was perceived by Lara, 28, mother of 3, who disagreed with her children’s worker that their counseling could be discontinued:

I said, “Well, they should go a bit longer as they need it.” And she said, “Well, I can’t force them.” I said, “Well, when they come home, I’ll be bringing them to counseling,” and she said, “Well, good luck to you.” You know, like she’s sarcastic.

Parents’ negative reactions to sudden apprehensions have been discussed earlier – these experiences caused parents to distrust the workers involved.

Court Experiences Causing Delays

Eight parents (13%) identified that delays in court had a negative impact on the family. Parents noted that adjournments of hearings delayed the return of children home, that court was sometimes delayed because of lack of preparation by CPS, and that delay in getting the initial hearing was extremely painful, as it prevented parents from seeing their children after the crisis of an apprehension.

Parents were concerned that the lack of visitation, especially after the initial apprehension, affected the parent child bond. Kathy, 34, noted:

It took a whole year for the kids to come home... So that took a little longer, we went back to court in December. We had to get the court remanded to another date and there was something else

where we had to be remanded again. The papers weren't in or something. It was remanded to January, then they took another four months to bring the kids home. Went back to court on May 23rd, and that's when they came home. So it was a tough year.

Lara, 28 noted the impact of the adjournments and the delays on the children:

The only thing that upset me was they said it would only take six months, but it took a year, because of the court and stuff. They kept remanding it, when the CAS didn't have all their paperwork done. It took a year. And the kids were quite upset about that too, because they figured they were coming home in six months.

Wanda, 20, raised her concern about the impact on bonding with her son resulting from a Court-related lapse in access after the initial apprehension:

They give you five days to get a lawyer and everything prepared and stuff, then you need an extension because the lawyer doesn't have all the papers and you've just received them. We had the baby taken away on a Friday and on the weekend there's no lawyer's offices usually open so we had to wait until Monday. We had to go into the legal aid office and get legal aid and get a lawyer for Court on Wednesday. The lawyer just said, "Well, I'll put it off and you know, we'll get an extension on this, and I'll get everything ready and we'll find out what happens." And I agreed to that but that was basically the end of a whole week and finally I got to see my son after spending a whole week away from him. They only want to give me visitation for one day a week for one hour and that's not enough time to bond with my son.

Betty, 29, expressed her distress at court adjournments due to CPS not having their paper work completed:

They weren't ready for Court, they didn't have the papers, so the children did not get returned to us. They said they just didn't have enough time and I guess it's quite normal that it's presented to get remanded the first time. We didn't even go into the Court room. They just went in to say they were not ready.

Betty talked at length about the many adjournments before any decision was made in her situation. As with the other parents, Jodie, 41, commented on the

how long the Court process took: “And the whole process, it’s just been dragging on it seems to me, because they’re saying it was something in the past.”

Likewise, Nellie, 24 expressed her frustration at the number of adjournments:

“And we went to Court, and it was adjourned. I asked my lawyer ‘why do you adjourn, why don't you let me say what I wanted to say?’...I must have gone to Court so many times – to the point where I was blue in the face.”

Positive Court Experiences

Eleven parents (17%) recalled their Court experience as positive. Parents noted that the judge was responsive to and asked for their input, sided with the parent, instead of with CPS, and reprimanded CPS for having insufficient information to bring the matter to Court. Others said that the judge sided with them, by ordering access of the child by the parent when CPS was requesting no access, and in some situations the judge gave positive feedback to the parent about their parenting.

Marilyn, 18, was impressed with the judge for asking for her input and for giving her a chance:

When we went to Court, it was always, “What do you want to do,” instead of, “This is what you are going to do.” [The judge] would say, “She’s doing what she has to do, you’ve shown no reason why we need to take [son].” And everybody agreed. The judge said “Fine.” They stamped the papers and that was it.

Bonnie, 36, who felt empowered by the judge’s decision, noted:

Then I started to clue in, like you [child’s father] are not going to be controlling. I didn’t ask you to push me completely out of his life. So we had gone to Court and a judge had ordered that this is joint custody, and any decisions that pertain to [son’s] education, his

health, his mental capacity, were always to be confirmed by both parents.

Arthur, 27 also appreciated that the judge appeared to see his point of view:

They [CPS] were really mad at [children's mother] and I guess at the Court they tried taking it out on me too and the judge said, "Well, what does he have to do with any of this? It wasn't he who applied, it was she." And so they said, "Well, you know, all right." The judge told me "Goodbye--have a good life. Children's Aid, you leave him alone."

Kathy, 34, noted the supportiveness of the Court:

They were 100% supportive. They were more or less on our side. That's when they [CPS] changed. They made a new plan and said "This is what we're going to do for the next six months." Our lawyer said "four months," and they agreed on that. It went really well.

Wanda, 20, noted both her anxiety and relief that the judge was fair in her situation:

I ended up winning him back because they had nothing on me. The judge awarded me custody and I was so nervous, I was throwing-up and running back and forth from the Courtroom to the bathroom because I wanted my baby back so much.

Betty, 29, commented on the judge's decision being fair:

The judge really felt that they didn't have enough. There wasn't much stated. It was to the point that she said to me, "You need to start staying overnight and just get ready to move back in." It was really quick, it was very easy.

Nellie, 24, also noted the judge as being fair:

She [the judge] says, "I have a feeling you guys are incorrect on this one." She told me to stand up, so I did and she said, "I'm pleased with you. You've done a lot to show that you are a caring, considerate mother," and I started crying. And she said, "You can have your daughter back under a supervision order of CAS." Which meant I'd still have a worker come in once in a while to check up on me for six months.

Summary of Parents' Experiences with CPS

The number of parents who spoke about referrals and concrete help indicates that agencies had a good awareness of the resources available to meet the many needs of these families. Parents appreciated referrals that enabled them to access daycare, counselling, assessment, and/or treatment for themselves or their children. They also benefited from concrete help, such as food, shelter, and special education for their children. It was noteworthy that many parents spoke about the emotional support they received from workers, in a context where the agency's role often generates fear and hostility. In particular, the two CPS agencies in the study were, as most other Ontario agencies, going through a period of increased workloads, high worker turnover, with the added stress of heightened government monitoring and public scrutiny. Yet some workers were able to develop trust and warmth in their relationships with parents, despite these tensions and pressures. Parents particularly appreciated workers who listened to and heard them; although this may seem to be an overused cliché, parents gave concrete examples of when they felt heard. Workers who showed caring and empathy in specific ways were also appreciated. Staying with a parent longer than expected during a stressful time, calling to cancel an appointment, and sharing some personal information in a way that showed personal vulnerability were all noted by parents as positive qualities that were appreciated.

Respectful approaches to parents are especially important in a CPS agency, which has tremendous power to engender fear and powerlessness in families. Thus, it is significant that some parents felt they were given good explanations of agency processes, including reassurance about agency intentions regarding their children.

Finally, parents spoke positively about foster carers who treated them well, were good to their children, and taught them better ways of relating to their children. A good relationship with foster carers can help parents to feel more positive about the agency in general, and can also allay fears about their children being lost to them or alienated from them. As agency practice does not usually encourage an inclusive approach by foster carers, it seems to have been the individual carers who reached out to these parents.

Many parents described negative experiences with CPS interventions. Concerns around “omission of services” reflected the rationing of services at a time when agencies were experiencing high demand and limited resources. It is painful for families to be denied help because their child is not yet being abused, to experience minimal contacts with workers, and to have a trusted worker replaced with a stranger. It might be helpful to these parents to be reassured that their requests and expectations were legitimate, but could not be met because of limited resources. This approach might minimize the parents’ sense that no one cared about them or their children. As for worker changes, these are sometimes caused by unavoidable staff turnover; however, some CPS agencies have built in changes as part of worker specialization, e.g. a new worker takes over when a child comes into care. Losing a worker can be a crucial event for vulnerable

parents who are undergoing a crisis in their lives, and their perspective should be considered when weighing the costs and benefits of a specialized service system.

Parents' sense of being unfairly judged, denied information, or being betrayed reflected the agency's mandatory function, which gives them great power over families, and creates understandable fear and anger in parents. Specific qualities of workers such as appearing cold and critical, particularly when removing a child from the care of the parent, and coming across as insincere were noted as hurtful qualities of the worker. It is understandable that workers would pay greater attention to children during the tense time of an apprehension of a child, however, spending extra time, and taking time to support the parent could alleviate some of the concerns noted. From the parents' descriptions of positive experiences, it is clear that some workers are able to soften their intervention with a gentle and understanding approach that recognizes how difficult the encounter is for parents. Often the same parent spoke positively about one worker and negatively about another, demonstrating that the parent had an open mind toward CPS and would respond well to respectful and supportive treatment.

Workers should make sure that parents have sufficient information about how the agency functions, how their family situation is being viewed, and knowledge about their rights. An innovative practice, such as Family Group Conferencing provides a structure that gives parents this kind of information and encourages them to consider all possible alternatives for the better care of their

children. When it is necessary to make public the agency's negative view of a family in Court, workers should prepare the parents for what they will hear. During placement, workers should always inform parents as soon as possible of important developments in their children's lives, such as hospitalization or a move to a new placement. Respectful treatment along the way can help to reduce parents' feelings that the agency is working against them, and enhance their sense of working as partners in the interests of their children.

The parents' sense of being harassed, and being traumatized by removal of their children, seems to reflect the increasing tendency for CPS workers to model themselves after the police, in carrying out their role. The benefits of approaches such as searching a family's living space are probably outweighed by negative effects on the worker-parent relationship. Moreover, the practice of involving multiple authority figures in confrontational apprehensions may ensure that the agency is able to take children into care with minimal resistance; but it creates a nightmarish scenario for both parents and children. Anecdotal evidence from children who have been part of such apprehensions indicates they often feel they have been kidnapped, and have great difficulty in accepting their placements.

Parents' concerns about foster care should be taken seriously. Agencies sometimes have to use marginal homes, because of the chronic shortage of family caregivers. Parents can provide a different perspective, to help workers ensure that adequate care is given to children in a particular foster home. Agencies should encourage foster carers to include parents in their children's

lives: positive reports in this study showed that inclusion can generate appreciation and sense of partnership in parents, which is likely to be experienced as supportive by children. Workers can assist foster carers to be more understanding toward parents by pointing out the larger context of the parents' lives, especially their earlier lives, that has made it difficult for them to become good parents. Finally, foster carers who are inclusive of parents are more likely to keep parents informed about their children, to facilitate increased access, and to maintain some involvement when children are moved back to their own homes.

From the reports of these parents, it is clearly possible for CPS workers and foster carers to develop positive, supportive relationships with parents. It seems that the burden of carrying out CPS functions without adequate resources causes some workers to abandon their social work knowledge and skills, so they become more confrontational and police-like. The workers who had a positive influence on parents were able to establish relationships characterized by caring, and respect, so that parents and agencies could work collaboratively in caring for children in need of protection.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As we examined the extensive data these parents provided, about their histories, daily lives, and interpersonal relationships, we were struck by the barriers they faced in trying to raise their children. Many of the parents in our study did not have a good beginning to their own lives, long before they became

parents themselves. They were often lacking positive models in their families of origin that would help them to assume adult roles. Over 1/4 mothers reported being abused by their parents and almost 1/5 had parents who were substance abusers. A number of parents spoke of the difficulties of being raised in one-parent homes. A number left home at an early age, because of conflicts with their parents. About 1/3 reported dropping out of school and 1/6 mentioned early marriage and/or parenthood. These disruptive early experiences and their doubts about the models provided by their own families meant that many parents lacked a solid foundation for beginning to parent their own children. Despite this, the positive comments of parents about their current families indicated that they were strongly invested in caring for their children, and appreciated any support they received, informally or from agencies such as CPS.

In their daily lives, many of the parents experienced difficulties with their intrafamily relationships, as well as their physical and mental health. Mothers spoke about unsupportive partners, or men who oppressed or abused them, often physically. Substance abuse, physical illness, and mental health were each problematic for about one third of families, respectively. Poverty was an issue for almost 40% of families, and the search for security led over half the families to make frequent moves. Conditions that were largely outside the parents' control—socially toxic neighbourhoods and isolation—were each mentioned by about one-quarter of families. Similarly, unemployment affected one in every five families; and disability, affected one of every ten. Moreover, parents were struggling with children's emotional and behavioural problems, including the after-effects of

experiencing and witnessing abuse, unusual aggressiveness, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, and developmental delays. These problems with daily living reflect the challenging backgrounds of these parents, ever-present conditions such as poverty and socially toxic neighbourhoods that undermined their efforts, and the cumulative effects of these conditions on their children.

Understandably, the families we interviewed would require a great deal of support to overcome the conditions described above. Our findings show that, while considerable support was forthcoming from formal and informal sources, this was probably insufficient to counteract the interactive destructive effects of the conditions described above. Most of the parents (85%) did access some formal supports from the community, usually at times of crisis, caused by lack of money, health emergencies, partner abuse, and unmanageable child behaviour. Half the parents were satisfied with the help they received, while over a third was disappointed, especially because they experienced the services as fragmented and unresponsive. This may be partly related to the crisis nature of their help-seeking. Considering their circumstances, many of the families needed services that were targeted to their special needs and sustained over time, rather than ad hoc responses to crisis. They could also have used support, possibly from CPS, to target the appropriate agencies and follow through on their help-seeking efforts: some parents mentioned the fear of being stigmatized by approaching certain agencies, while others felt they were denied services that they needed.

Regarding informal supports, parents in general can usually get the help they need from family and friends, when they are temporarily overburdened. For

the families in this study, many of whom were chronically in need of support, their family and friends may not have extra resources, may be tired of providing help, or may have serious struggles of their own. Thus, it was not surprising that 15% of parents reported they had received no help from their families of origin, and 30% felt undermined by at least one family member. On the positive side, three-quarters of the parents mentioned support from their extended families and two-thirds mentioned support from friends. This support, however, was clearly not enough, as so many families sought formal support with ongoing crises in their lives, as well as becoming involved with CPS. The potential goodwill and resources of family and friends might be harnessed in a more effective way by CPS workers taking some leadership, e.g. bringing people together in a “wraparound approach” or using family group conferencing. There was no mention of these methods being used with the families.

Given the long-standing challenges in their lives, and the seriousness of their problems that led to CPS involvement, parents’ experiences of intervention are crucial in determining whether they can be helped to provide ‘good enough’ care to their children. Because our data-gathering was parent-centred and relatively unstructured, we do not know how many of the 61 families had children in temporary care; but there was no evidence that any of these families had permanently lost their children. Ideally, CPS should focus on garnering enough support for families so that parents are able to meet their children’s developmental, behavioural, and emotional needs. As the type of CPS support most often mentioned by parents related to successful referrals and concrete

help with necessities, this suggests the level and range of their needs that were not met by the formal and informal supports they accessed independently. The emphasis on referrals and concrete help is also consistent with parents' most commonly cited negative evaluation of CPS, i.e. the omission of services they had hoped to receive. The unmet emotional needs of parents are also demonstrated by the high value they placed on emotional support, even when it came from workers who potentially had the power to break up their families. Although they received some emotional support from family and friends, they clearly needed a great deal of nurturing. Mothers, in particular, who live with unsupportive, oppressive, and abusive partners, and are trying to raise their children in environments that can be unsafe, depressing, and demeaning, require sustained and generous emotional support. When this was not forthcoming from CPS workers, and instead more demands were made on the mothers for better performance, many of them felt unfairly treated and harassed. Some of these negative feelings might be prevented if workers explained to families the limitations under which their agencies are presently functioning, thereby acknowledging that they can only provide part of the help the family requires, and that workers are often too overwhelmed themselves to provide the emotional support the parents need and deserve. As the workplace study that was part of our larger Partnerships Project indicated, many workers are experiencing "burnout" that cripples them in engaging with families. It would help parents' self-esteem to hear this from their workers, rather than to interpret "burnout" behaviour as an indication that they are not worthy of workers' time and emotion.

From another perspective, worker behaviour that is viewed by parents as unfair and harassing may be related to the workers' frustration of working with unsupported and oppressed mothers, who are often overwhelmed by the challenges of parenting difficult children. In informal discussions with workers, we have sometimes sensed this frustration, and we recall it from our own front-line experiences. It may be helpful to view these parents holistically, recognizing that their limitations are understandable, in view of their histories and the barriers they face in their daily lives. We were surprised to find so many positives in the parents' descriptions of their family lives—neighbourhood relationships, family recreation, and mutual support between partners in caring for their children. As an intervention strategy, positive reinforcement to parents about their successes would encourage them to expand the satisfying aspects of their lives, as well as strengthening their self-esteem.

Despite difficult working conditions, over half the parents identified their workers as portraying the essential elements of a good social work relationship. Over half viewed their workers as caring, over two-fifths described their workers as genuine, 30% noted empathy, almost one-fifth mentioned good listening, and one-fifth praised their workers for providing help beyond their expectations. These testimonies from parents show that many CPS workers are able to maintain their professional skills and attitudes, despite an increasingly stressful working environment. It is hoped that the data we have gathered and analyzed, from parents receiving CPS services, can be used to convince government

standard-setters that accountability through form-filling should not be the main activity in a good child welfare system.

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SOCIAL WORK



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Partnerships for Children and Families Project

**Invisible Lives:
The Experiences of Parents
Receiving Child Protective Services**

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SOCIAL WORK



August 2003

PARTNERSHIPS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES PROJECT

INVISIBLE LIVES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF 61 PARENTS RECEIVING CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES.

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INTRODUCTION

Involvement with child protective services (CPS) may be expected to be a stressful experience for parents. Usually their involvement is involuntary, initiated because someone believes they are not caring adequately for their children: this tells them that the community, or someone in the community, does not approve of them as parents. As families who become involved with CPS tend to be economically deprived and socially marginalized, they may view agency intervention as one more sign that they are not accepted by their community. Moreover it brings the fear of losing their children, perhaps forever. In this context, it is especially important to understand parents' perspectives, so that service providers can respond sensitively to them through the crisis of CPS entering their lives. A sensitive response contributes to a good working relationship, and to the parents' sense of being respected and valued, conditions that are essential in helping them to improve their family situations.

This research report explores the experiences of sixty-one parents who have had substantial involvement with CPS, with a focus on their own perceptions of this involvement. To better understand the context of parents' experiences, we asked them to discuss freely their histories, their daily lives, their relationships with family, friends, neighbours, and more formal sources of support. We did not interview CPS workers or foster carers. Other team members in the Partnerships for Children and Families Project did include workers in their interviews; for our part, it was a massive task to organize the

data from lengthy interviews with 61 parents, thus the inclusion of other viewpoints was beyond our capacity.

In soliciting the opinions of parents about the positive and negative aspects of their experience with CPS, we have been mindful of the great difficulties under which Ontario Children's Aid Societies are operating. As with most of the members of the Project team, the first two authors have been employed in CPS agencies, so we are familiar with the stressful working conditions, and the severe limitations on time available to spend with families. A 2001 workload study of Ontario Children's Aid Societies found that front-line workers are spending less than 30% of their time in personal contact with families and children (OACAS, 2001). Most of workers' time tends to be spent on paperwork--to meet the increasing demands for accountability from the provincial government, and the legal requirements involved in carrying out their mandated role of protecting children.

Given the above restrictions on service, we still believe that it is important for the parents' perspective to be heard, so that the limited time spent with them may be as productive as possible. Our findings provide a picture of difficult lives and insufficient support from families, communities, and formal services. Many of the parents were themselves raised in abusive or neglecting homes, often with parents who abused substances. Many mothers were currently living in very challenging situations, with: physical and mental health problems; partners who were unsupportive and/or abusive; and children with serious emotional, behavioural, and developmental problems. Most of the parents were doing their

best to meet their children's needs. They sought informal and formal support, especially at times of crises in their lives, but were often disappointed in the response to their requests for help. On the other hand, they appreciated the help that was forthcoming from friends and community services, and they valued the good aspects of their family lives, such as sharing of parenting, and family recreation. Their reports of experiences with CPS suggest that the families needed much more help than most workers were able to provide, although there were some excellent examples of workers finding appropriate services for the family and developing positive relationships with the parents. From this study, it appears that a much enriched child welfare system is needed if these vulnerable families are to be given the sustained support they require, so they may face the many challenges in their lives and provide adequate care to their children.

The findings include a description of the methodology used for the study, and the findings in three major categories – parents' lives, formal and informal supports desired and used by parents, and parents' experiences of CPS interventions. Each of the three categories has a number of themes. The themes for parents' lives are: family history, family struggles, family strengths, and struggles with children; themes for formal and informal supports are: social service organizations, friends and neighbours, extended family members, and places of belonging in the community; and the themes for parents experiences of CPS interventions are: service experiences, qualities of worker, and experiences with court. The report concludes with some recommendations for improving the fit between family needs and CPS.

Methodology

Because the goal of this study was to understand, in depth, the perspective of parents receiving child protection services, we chose to use a qualitative approach. Qualitative research can deepen our understanding of the lived experiences of individuals, by eliciting details about their feelings, thought processes, and emotions that may not be possible through a quantitative design (Straus & Corbin, 1998). Qualitative data also provides an understanding of the context of people's lives and events, captures the diversity within groups, and enhances the inclusion of participants' perspectives (Fetterman, 1989).

Research Design

An exploratory qualitative design was employed for the study. A semi structured interview schedule was used to collect data from parents, as described below. The interviews were audio taped and later transcribed. Two research assistants, using the qualitative analysis software program NVIVO, analysed and organized the data.

Selection of Participants

The participants for this study were recruited from two CPS agencies servicing two of 53 regions in Ontario, Canada. Thirty-nine parents (64%) were recruited from one agency and 22 (36%) another. Each agency identified families by selecting files at random and telephoning parents to request their

involvement. Those who agreed were identified to the researchers who arranged to interview them at home.

Data Collection

Masters level social work students who had experience working with child welfare service participants conducted the interviews. In addition to bringing their experience to the study, the interviewers were given comprehensive two-day training on conducting qualitative interviews. The training included information about the project, orientation to qualitative interviewing, conduct during interviews, review of the interview schedule, completion of consent forms, sharing the information letter with participants, reading articles relating to qualitative interviewing, and conducting mock interviews.

The semi-structured individual interviews with participants lasted 1 ½ to 2 hours and usually took place in their homes. The interviews were with the family's primary caregiver, usually the mother; only with one family were both parents interviewed. In addition, interviewers collected limited demographic information from service participants at the beginning of the interview such as age, gender, marital status, and number of children.

Parents were engaged in one-on-one dialogue with interviewers to explore dimensions of their everyday lives and were encouraged to reflect on their experiences with CPS. Service participants were asked to think about the important events in their lives, particularly, events that had occurred over the past five years, and to describe these events. Participants were then asked about

when they became involved with the child welfare system and when this involvement stopped, followed by questions that asked them to discuss the most important things, both good and bad, that had had an impact on their lives. Questioning was then divided into three broad categories – daily living, service involvement, and conclusion – with each category having a number of sub-questions and probes. The goal of the semi-structured interview was to obtain as comprehensive a picture of service participants lives as possible with a particular emphasis on child welfare services and on family life.

Data Analysis

Data analysis commenced after all interviews were completed. All three authors worked on developing and defining codes from themes and insights that emerged from the four transcripts. The third author and a master's level social worker then coded and organized the data using the qualitative software package NVIVO (QSR NUD*IST Vivo) for organizing non-numerical data. They coded the first three interviews independently and, as they found a good level of agreement in the coding, one coder was used for each of the remaining transcripts. Coders were asked to code all statements that were relevant to the coding scheme in order to guard against selective attention to points of particular interest to the coders. As each transcript was coded separately, the coders entered journal memos when the data suggested additional categories or themes for coding. These themes were then discussed among the researchers to ensure that all the relevant categories, themes, and sub-themes had been captured.

Limitations and Strengths of the Study

The limitations of this study are similar to those of most qualitative studies in that the findings are not generalizable. The findings relate to the sample studied, and provide insights into the lived experiences of this group of parents involved with CPS. The transferability of the findings – the likelihood that another similar study would provide comparable findings – is increased, however, by the large sample size that resulted in considerable saturation of themes. Moreover, the credibility of the findings is enhanced by the inclusion, in the report, of a number of quotations to illustrate themes. The quality of the data collection was also ensured by the considerable initial training given to interviewers, and the quality of data analysis was ensured by having four researchers examine the same transcripts to develop the coding scheme.

SAMPLE

For the 61 families in the sample, 57 (93%) of the interviews were with mothers only, 3 (5%) were with fathers only, and 1 interview was joint. The age of the participants ranged from 16 years to 47 years, with a mean of 31.66 years. The marital status of the participants was: single = 27.9% (17), married = 24.6% (15), living common-law = 16.4% (10), divorced = 16.4% (10), separated = 13.1% (8), and widowed = 1.6% (1). Ninety five percent (58) of the participants were born in Canada while English was the first language of 98.4% (60) of the participants. Participants had between one and six children, with a mean of 2.18.

The number of years that participants had been involved with CPS ranged from 0.08 years to 15 years, with a mean of 2.4 years.

PARENTS' LIVES

Parent History

Themes reflected in the findings included: disruptions, childhood abuse, and insecurity.

Disruptions

Many of the parents had not finished their education, and some had moved into marriage and/or parenthood at an early age. Twenty-one parents (34%) indicated they had dropped out before finishing high school, and a few explained this on the basis of early parenthood. Pamela, 27, separated, with four children, said: "I was still in high school and I quit to look after these children." Eleven of the mothers mentioned that they had been very young when they were married or became parents. Jane, married, with three children, said: "I was only 17 and my husband was 22, going on 12."

Childhood Abuse

Seventeen mothers (28%) said they were abused by family members while they were growing up; five of the seventeen specifically mentioned being sexually abused by their fathers, while a sixth said both she and her husband were survivors of incest. Tess, 23, recalled:

My Dad sexually abused me from the age of five until 10...because of the abuse that I suffered from my Dad...and the neglect, I would find myself walking down the street and seeing other kids with their fathers and seeing a happy relationship. I resented those kids.

The remaining twelve mothers were not clear about the nature of their abuse, or specifically mentioned physical abuse; some mothers made connections between this and their present problems. Kitty, 38, said that abuse by her mother caused her to confuse abuse with love, and Kitty linked this with her own tendency to form relationships with men who abused her.

Insecurity

Insecurity in their families of origin stemmed from substance abuse by parents, and family breakup. Eleven women and one man reported that one or both of their parents were substance abusers, usually with alcohol. Jenny, 32, made a link between her mother being an alcoholic and her own drinking: "You see, the way my Mom lives is the same way I'm going; but I don't want to take that road--I want to take a different road". Cal, 33, described his early drinking habits: "I used to hang out with my Dad's buddies...they drank, and that means I started drinking early, at 15...by 19, I was right into it."

Eight parents in the study mentioned breakup in their families of origin. Nellie, 24, single said, "I didn't know my real Dad, so I made a fantasy life for myself". Three of these parents from disrupted families had been placed in foster care. Six women said they had left home at an early age because of family conflict. Wanda, 20, single, went back and forth between her parents who were

separated. She described being “kicked out” by both parents, beginning at age 14, because of minor disagreements.

Parents also mentioned mental health problems, such as schizophrenia and depression that affected their parents or the parents of their children’s fathers. Lydia, 44, said: “I believe now that my Mom was manic depressive...she was either trying to kill herself or running away from [the family?].” Some parents had witnessed their fathers abusing their mothers. Anna, 25, recalled: “My Mom and my Dad used to fight and I’d just get in between them to break it up, which was really hard.”

Family Struggles

The in-depth interviews with parents, largely mothers, suggested that they struggled with a range of conditions in their current families that would be expected to create extreme hardship, and obstruct the development of a supportive environment for their children. Problems noted by the family were: unsupportive relationships (61%), wife abuse (34%), non-violent oppression (25%), substance abuse (33%), problems with physical health (33%), with mental health (31%), poverty (38%), unemployment (20%), disability (11%), transient lifestyle (54%), isolation (23%), and socially toxic environments (26%).

Unsupportive Relationships

Thirty-seven parents (61%) spoke about unsupportive relationships with their partners: lack of participation in household chores and decisions (n=25); a lack of connection (n=23); poor communication (n=22); no unified front with the

children (n=20); marital infidelity on the part of the partner (n=20); arguments, put-downs, and a general sense of not being appreciated by their partners (n=18). The data, mainly provided by mothers, suggested that they were largely carrying the child rearing responsibilities, with little or no emotional or financial support from their partners.

Melinda, 38, mother of 3, noted that the father of her children took no responsibility for childcare, yet he seemed to wield greater power in the relationship:

I felt angry that it was easy for him to give up. Here I was, stranded with these kids. First he says 'No, we'll stay together for the sake of the kids', then he didn't want to stay together for the sake of the kids. I feel now in hindsight I should have said 'Let's split up'. We still resided in the house but in separate rooms. And now, this year, it's just kind of crashed down, like it's done, it's over, the house is sold. So, it seems like such a waste of time... I was pregnant but lost the baby. That was very emotional, that's when he told me it was all over. It was very devastating. [I had to provide my own emotional support] because he abandoned me emotionally. He said 'It's your topic, not mine, I'm going to work. I'll drop you off at the hospital and pick you up'. That was it.

Joan, 43, noted that she received very little help from her partner:

He doesn't help me with the baby – he'll drive my teenage son around, but that's about it. He doesn't help around the house, he doesn't cook or clean or do anything with the baby...[after the baby] He didn't bring me food or flowers or a card, he was like "This is great--look what I did!" and takes credit for the baby and now he wants another. He doesn't do anything and I'm losing it. I'm exhausted. She doesn't sleep.

Jenny, 32, also identified the lack of help and support from her partner: "I felt like a single parent, even though I was living with him, I felt that he was never there. And even sometimes, he was here, well he wasn't really, because he's always doing his own thing".

Susan, 40, mother of 3, noted the lack of communication with her partner and the compromises she had to make:

His attitude was 'I'll take care of the kids because I can't work'. So I sort of gave in to the trade-off. Okay, he's there constantly which means that I can get ahead in my job, but I also don't think his philosophy of life and bringing up children is correct either. There was an actual decline in everything. He had chosen not to participate in being anything other than a person who lived in our home, but he was an adult who should have been able to take care of the children.

Wife Abuse

Twenty one mothers (34%) reported violence toward them by their partners. The violence ranged from slight to extreme, with mothers reporting: choking, grabbing, kicking, punching, shoving, hair pulling, smashing beer bottles on the head, and force feeding. One mother described a broken jaw and nose. Mothers noted that it was difficult to know what triggered the violence but it appeared that "some small thing would trigger it". The women reported an overwhelming sense of fear, vigilance in trying to understand their spouse's mood, and one described extreme anxiety, resulting in nausea and throwing up during the violent episode. Mothers had also been hit while pregnant and assaulted by their partner's family members. Mothers reported feeling isolated and unsupported after the incident, and some did not call the police, based on previous experience when the partner was not charged. A violent episode was noted by Paula, 40, mother of two who stated:

When I walked in the back door he was there--he just grabbed me and threw me out in the garage. I was begging him to stop and he goes, 'You're out of this house, if you fricking come back here ...' We were down the street and he was yelling 'You fucking bitch, you're going to

pay. You will not do this to me, you're not welcome, you have nothing anymore and I'm going to destroy you and your life is finished' and he just wouldn't stop. I ran from him, but he caught me and threw me into the snow bank on the next street. I just curled up in a ball. I thought 'You're right, I'm a loser, just do anything you want to me but I'm not fighting back, I can't fight you'. I told him 'I have no coat on, give me my coat and my purse' but he says 'You're not having a thing from this house.'

Clearly, the abuse affected Paula's self esteem leaving her feeling unworthy.

An instance of the police not responding was remembered by Daisy, 37: "When I was first with him I told him if he hit me I'd call [the police] and within a minute I called the cops on him, but they didn't charge him and I never called again for five years. So, it kind of took me back".

An incident of violence during pregnancy was recalled by Betty, 29, mother of 5: "I left my ex-husband because he was abusive. I was six months pregnant with my daughter and he bruised me from the ribs up and the ribs down; but she was fine, and basically I haven't had a lot of contact with him since then".

Confusion about what triggered the violence was noted by Felicity, 40, mother of 6: "He just does it. It could be first thing in the morning--breakfast is not ready; he could have just come home from work, or something is out of place, or stupid little things like that could trigger him and he would just lose it".

Pamela, 27, mother of 4, described the extreme abuse that she suffered, which included sexual abuse:

He had handcuffed my foot to his arm when we slept, and my girlfriend happened to call over there because they hadn't heard from me in three days. He was pulling my hair and stuff. One time I puked all over my food and he tried to force it down me. Tried to force me to eat it. He was giving me weird food to eat, saying, "Oh, it's good for the baby. I thought, "He's the father of my child--he's just being protective--he wants his kid to be fine' so I figured, "Why not?" But

you know, he'd bring home this funky looking food, and I wasn't going to eat it but he'd literally either tie my hands down to the chair or sit on me and force me to eat it. I'd sit there and cry and beg him not to make me eat those things.

Pamela noted another incident:

All the children witnessed their father rape me right on the living room floor. He used to take the phone cords and wrap them around my neck. I'd lie in bed and he'd like strangle or choke me until I'd pass out literally from gasping for air. I constantly had bruises on my throat".

Tess, 23, remembered the lengthy duration of the abuse:

It started at nine o'clock at night and it didn't end until 2:30 in the morning. And through the course of those hours he strangled me three times, threw me from where the high chair is to the bedroom twice, picked me up by my throat and threw me up against that wall there, and punched me in the head.

Non-violent Oppression

Fifteen mothers (25%) identified non-violent oppressive relationships with their partners. These women experienced: overt and subtle control, being ordered around, being yelled at, blamed, and being 'kept in line'. Ten of these mothers said they were afraid of their partners or ex-partners. For some this control and interference continued even after separation.

Paula, 40, discussed the verbal put-downs and the extreme levels of control from her ex-partner:

My ex would be putting me down very much. He would say that I did not do anything around the house, but I did--I kept a great house but, you know, it's just hard listening to that. He couldn't say anything good to me. He told me I looked awful all the time...He wouldn't let me go out, not even to go to the gym. It was crazy, it was just nuts--he had taken all the money away from me, my credit cards, my cell phone, and I asked for it back and he said "Nope, you don't need it." If I wanted anything from the store I had to give

him a list and he would get it for me. I wasn't allowed to go anywhere.

Stella, 39, commented on the yelling and blaming that she experienced:

He never threw anything at me, and he never hit me, because I won't tolerate physical violence. But then he started yelling at me, and blaming me for things that just happened, I mean, just really stupid things. He would imagine things that weren't happening. And would accuse me of a bunch of stuff, that was just really nothing, just accusing me.

Daisy, 37, commented on the level of control:

As long as I go along and clean up the garbage and the crap everything is great. As soon as I step out of line and try to be independent and do things the way I want to do it, all hell breaks loose.

Fay, 32 noted her ex-partner's efforts at controlling her freedom:

I felt like I was living back at home--I couldn't do anything. He just doesn't trust. I would be cleaning up after three kids and be doing lots of things. I got my own car again, and all my bills are in my name. I pay all my bills. It's not like before, when we were so far behind because he was always spending money on other stuff instead of on bills.

Bonnie, 34, discussed the controlling behaviour that continued even after her divorce:

After this many years down the road, he's got [son] in his custody and he's controlling things again. It almost felt like I was getting punched all over the place again, and it was awful...I felt this emotional bashing.

Connie, 38, was so fearful for her life that she called her mother to alert her to this:

Then I grabbed my purse, and we went down to the store, where I phoned my Mom--because he wouldn't even let me use the phone, nor would I want to, because he could hear everything. So that's why I went to a payphone. I told my Mom and let her know what was going on, in case something happened.

Agnes, 49 noted her partner's increasing control over her:

It kept building up and building up. He was becoming overly obsessed in possessing me and owning me. I was like a piece of property to him. It got to the point where I told him, "If you really think you own me, in order to stop me from what I'm going to do, then you'd better kill me."

Substance Abuse

Twenty parents (33%) identified problems with substance abuse within the family, by their partners and sometimes by themselves. Both alcohol and drugs were noted as problems, although alcohol (n=20) was mentioned more often than drugs (n=8). With regard to drugs, 'pot', 'weed', cocaine, and uppers were mentioned. Specific problems with partners who abused substances were: drinking and driving, becoming depressed, or being 'obnoxious.' For their own part, mothers talked about going out with friends for a party and using alcohol, to get away or to have a break.

Fay's comments identified the various aspects of substance abuse for her family and many others:

He's got a drinking problem, so that always brings him down. He would be threatening and would come over and be drunk. Even when I picked up the kids from him he was drunk. Sometimes I went out drinking myself or with friends.

Twenty-five year old Lara's comments were typical of those of a number of parents: "He drank a lot, and did a lot of drugs". Pat, 23 noted about her

husband: "He is a good person when he's not drinking. But when he's drinking he's a complete jerk. He is a really obnoxious drinker, like someone you can't stand to be around". Nellie, 24, commented on her own problems with alcohol and drug abuse: "I had a joint if I was feeling sad, or a glass of wine when things weren't going well. I am a recovering addict".

Problems with Physical Health

Twenty parents (33%) identified a number of health problems that affected the family's daily life. These were: asthma, complications with pregnancy, epilepsy, severe flu, osteoporosis, scoliosis, pneumonia, Crohn's disease, heart condition, rheumatoid arthritis, extreme underweight, and brain tumour. One mother noted her husband's epilepsy.

Abby, 39, talked about her struggles with osteoporosis and the difficulties of managing it:

My osteoporosis, it's up and down. Now I am feeling stronger, again as long as I keep the hands going. But it's hard to deal with at a young age. Once I get my rest, I'm fine with it. But I have to keep up the walking that's why I walk to the [CPS] building. But no heavy lifting, like moving furniture.

Bonnie, 36, noted that stress aggravated her illness and the lack of a diagnosis left her sick for a long time:

I was really sick at the time. I wasn't diagnosed until a couple years later with Crohn's disease, and I was very sick all the time from that. Any stress kind of aggravated it all the time, and there were a lot of problems there.

Joan, 43, commented on her health problems that were aggravated by stress:

I've had a number of head injuries, and stress is a contributing factor as well. I have been sick with seizures. The first time I had 12 in one day. They couldn't figure out really what was going on, so they pumped me full of some seizure drugs and I kept having more seizures while at [name of hospital]. I was in the hospital for two months after having [daughter].

Mental Health Issues.

Nineteen parents (31%) identified mental health issues as impacting their lives. Concerns about mental health problems included: depression (n=17), extreme depression (n=10), bipolar disorder (n=4), panic, anxiety, nervousness (n=8), anger with self and severe crying bouts (n=5). Five parents felt so depressed that they had wished to commit suicide and two parents had attempted suicide. Medication also left some parents feeling groggy. Three parents identified that their spouses were depressed and the hardship this caused for the family.

A number of parents had thoughts similar to Emma, 31, who noted that her depression led her to having suicidal thoughts: "I wanted to commit suicide--I was very depressed in my marriage--I was thinking of hanging myself." Emma's depression was so severe that she went to the extent of thinking out her method of suicide. Paula, 40, shared that taking medication created side-effects.

I was getting shaky and upset and it just never stops. I told him to get the kids out of there but he said 'No'. I did not want the kids to see the crazy mother they truly have. I felt like 'Oh God, I don't know what you're [spouse] up to at this point. I had finally gone on Zoloft, but at this time I was fearful of him finding that out.

Not only was Paula suffering from depression but she did not have a support system to help her through this difficult time. Indeed, Paula had to hide the fact that she was on antidepressants

Carrie, 41, shared how debilitating her depression was, both for herself and for her family, and her concern about the impact of her depression on her children:

Now I can start to go out on my own a little bit, bit by bit. I used to be so terrified, I used to panic a lot and get sick a lot. It became too much for my kids and my ex-husband. But you just get some days that are good and some bad days. My kids, especially my son, are always asking me how I get by.

Hanna, 22, shared her struggle with depression and her inability to keep jobs because of it:

It's a real pain in the butt. I'm not trying to get on disability to be lazy. I've tried to get jobs before, I've got denied so many times and with my depression it doesn't help any and with two kids. I don't have a lot of time to do things. All I know is it doesn't take much for me to cry and I worry a lot.

Brenda, 32, shared her struggle with keeping her job while trying to recover from her depression:

I had a bout of depression, and it got to the point where I couldn't leave my house anymore. The doctor said she couldn't see me and I phoned my mom in tears because the doctor couldn't see me. It was bad. And I didn't know what it was at the time. I just knew something was wrong. When I saw the doctor, she wanted me to take a month off work. I get into trouble for taking the week off! She said 'Take at least next week'. Nope, I'm back at work on Monday or I'll lose my job. She prescribed some medication and it really helped. I used to think, "It's all in your head--what do you mean you're depressed, come on, get up and get at it." I guess I'd reached a point where I couldn't do it anymore.

Poverty

Twenty-three parents (38%) noted concerns with regard to their financial situation. They struggled to pay bills for basic necessities and essential items such as rent, food, diapers, medication. Those on welfare found that they were unable to meet their needs from this income, while some noted that they made decisions to move in order to cut back on their cost of living.

Stella, 39, with four children, noted her struggle to make ends meet:

I can't afford to get kicked out of here. And it's not like I have cable TV. The only cable I have is the internet. I have the phone set up for long distance because their grandparents live in London, so they can phone their grandparents long distance, and chat for as long as they want. I keep my bills as low as I can. I have to have gas to get back and forth to work. And it's just that by the time you pay all of your living expenses, there really isn't a hell of a lot left over.

Worries about having enough money for food and the high cost of living were evident in sixteen year old Denise's comment:

"I have money put away just in case I run out of food and stuff like that. But bus tickets--just for 20 of them is \$30, and 20 can go in a few days. That would be over \$200 a month and bus passes are a hundred and something. If you want to go get something for yourself, you don't, because you don't know how much money you'll have left or if you'll run out of food."

The struggle to survive on a very inadequate income was captured by Anne, 25, who noted: "My rent was \$650 and I was getting \$720. That's not a lot of money. I had to buy diapers, groceries. He [baby] was on medication at that time and he went through a bottle every hour." The fact that any unforeseen expense can have a major impact on the family was evident in 44 four year old Lydia's comment: "We're not going to have July's

rent because the van broke down twice in two weeks, that cost us a thousand dollars and we had to buy a car”.

Sheila, 31, noted the need to make decisions about moves and other life situations because of extreme financial hardship:

We moved out to a farm; [husband] had been on unemployment and a friend of ours had told us about a five bedroom house for \$500, so we couldn't pass up. Finances were very tight and this was another reason that my husband wanted to look at the other option. He said to me, "I'm not saying I want you to have an abortion, but I want you to have an open mind to it." We knew that things were tough. That was one of our reasons for moving into a cheap house.

Employment Problems

Twelve parents (20%) cited problems relating to employment that affected their family lives: not having work, being laid off, having multiple jobs, being unable to keep a job because of child care and health care responsibilities, and wages being too low to meet daily basic needs. Examples of their concerns were: "My husband has been out of work for three years;" "My boyfriend is not working, so it's hard;" and "...and then he was off work, and I was off work, so it was hard." Donna, 39, described her husband's unstable employment: "Since our marriage 17 years ago, he has probably had 12 jobs." Edna, 43, discussed the crisis of being laid off: "My husband had several jobs here, but got laid off almost instantly from the first job he got when we first got here. It was most devastating. We thought 'Oh, no, what have we done!'"

Marilyn, 18, captured the no-win situation for parents when they are in casual employment and have health problems. When they take time off to attend to their health or emotional needs, their situation deteriorates:

I've had lots of jobs. I got fired from my last job because my grandmother died and I had to take time off. That was really upsetting. I came home crying and thinking, "What am I going to do--I have no money." ...Then I was working at [a coffee shop], and I told my boss I had to take some time off, because I was having surgery on my mouth. She said, "Oh that's fine," but the next day I called her before I went to work, just to see if I could get off early because I had a dentist appointment and she fired me. The last three jobs I've had I was fired. It seemed like it was going to keep going, and every time I got fired, it was for nothing.

Low paying work, the daily demands of the workplace, and the struggles of making ends meet were recounted by Emma, 31, mother of two, who noted:

Because I haven't worked since they were babies and I was on Mother's Allowance for so long – I think I was on it for three or four years – it was hard. After their dad left, I had a job but I found it really hard to keep it up. I was at Eaton's and I got complaints about my hair and my shoes, and about how my hair dye was growing out and I needed to get my hair done. I couldn't keep with the coiffure and look I was supposed to have, so I left. It was costing so much in day-care for the amount of time that I was at work. I was paying more for day-care than I was making, so I ended up leaving there and I cared for kids at home.

Emma's comments illustrate her resourcefulness, as she found a way to earn money by staying at home and running a day-care service.

Jane, 25, with 3 children, noted how the lack of focus in their lives relating to employment, together with having children early, can leave families in a rut:

We were kids growing up together and neither of us really knew what we were doing with anything. We had nothing--neither one of us worked--we were bums--we were just awful. And we both grew up pretty quickly with the kids, but still didn't know what we wanted to do. I worked part-time at odd jobs, he worked odd jobs too, and we just bounced from job to job.

Disability

Five parents (8%) identified issues relating to a disability. One parent identified her severe learning difficulties, while the rest noted physical problems relating to car accidents. Kitty, 38, mother of three, commented:

Well, I have learning disabilities and I have bad vision. I was born 'premature,' so I have a syndrome that affects your whole body. I can't do certain things, such as reading, and just going through life with this disability is pretty hard. Dealing with children is difficult because I have to try ten times harder and understand so much more. You have to make out what you can do and go about the way you think you should go about, in general. It made school hard, it made the kids growing up hard because I couldn't read to the children or help them with their homework or their reading like most parents can.

Felicity, 40, noted the severe consequences on her family of her injuries from a car accident:

He [husband] has to stay at home because I've got a full plate and I have to go to various specialists. Right now I'd be in bed sleeping, if this was a normal day, and I wouldn't get up until supper time, and then I'd go back to bed afterwards. I have such high levels of pain now that I take huge amounts of morphine and antidepressants.

Transient Lifestyle

Parents involved with CPS are often perceived to have a transient lifestyle. Some of the reasons for this were revealed by 34 parents (56%), who mentioned a range of contributors to their family's decision to move: Parents moved because of rent increases, to obtain better housing, to escape rough neighbourhoods, being in transition while waiting for public housing, and because their homes became too cramped as their children grew. Younger parents moved in with their parents temporarily because they needed either physical or

emotional support, or were moving away from abusive partners. Parents also moved in order to find work.

Jane, 25, married, commented on the number of moves that they had to make, because of a growing family as well as finances:

We have had a lot of moving around because our family grew quite quickly. We rented a house, and it got really expensive so we had to move again; and we moved into an apartment to save money for a house. But we could not stay there, as it was too small when I became pregnant.

Tanya, 24, noted the changes in their living arrangements because of landlords changing their minds about whether to allow children in the accommodations or not: "They said we could stay there and have the baby but then all of a sudden she changed her mind and said 'You can't.'" Elsie, 25, noted the many moves that she had to make to secure suitable housing:

It was tough on [son] living in a hotel and then at my mom's for a couple days and then back with us and then the apartment after a few weeks and then we got housing. And the second place after the hotel was gross. It was just one bedroom, the living room, the kitchen and it was from hell.

Grace, 32, noted the need to move because of finances, space and problems with her spouse:

We were renting a townhouse there. We needed a little bit more space, so we rented there for a while. Then we had separated for the first time. Financially I couldn't stay where I was so I had to move. So my daughter and I went back to the old building we were in – on the same floor, just a different unit.

From the above, it is evident that the parents themselves were distressed by the many moves they had to make. As the following

discussion will show, they recognized that these moves contributed to greater isolation and eroded essential social supports.

Isolation

Fourteen parents (23%) identified stress in their lives because of isolation and loneliness, often from living in a rural location. Their examples included: having no sense of community; being alone at home with no help; not knowing anyone in the town where they lived; living in an area that had no facilities for families; not being able to afford long distance phone calls to family and friends; and losing contact with friends after having a baby. Some parents who felt isolated and lonely because they had moved revealed that they had been in the new location for up to five years; this suggests it was very difficult for them to develop friendships after a move.

Connie, 38, noted the isolation for her family because of their location: "It's lonely because we live way out by the road going towards [name of town]. I feel trapped living way out there." Joan, 43, became isolated when she had a baby:

Things change when you have a baby. I've had a few friends--their kids are the same age as my son or a bit older, and they don't hang around me anymore. I just think, 'I'm still the same person—so what if I have a baby.' I found it really isolating having her and I think it was really hard, with my hospital stay, to keep connected. I hardly see anybody anymore.

Arthur, 27, shared how difficult it was for him with no help: "I have them and have to take care of them on my own with nobody--not even my mom would. Just to have that extra person there!" Natalie, 25, also noted the sense of isolation because of not having support nearby: "It was very hard. It was long distance for

me to phone my parents in Cambridge. And I did not know anyone here and there was nothing to do in town.”

Denise, 16, like the others, shared her loneliness and sense of isolation, and of being alone with no support system: "I can't get out and do anything because he [child] won't stay with anybody. I'm living on my own now and that's difficult. I just moved from Manitoba a couple of years ago, not even five years”.

Sheila, 31, like Denise, did not feel connected after being in a community for a considerable period:

I find it difficult because I feel secluded. Even after the five years of living here, I only know one or two people. The neighbours are pretty far. I'd have to walk a fair bit to see them. The kids take the school bus to school, I like it here, it is peaceful, but I am lonely.

These parents' comments suggest that it is difficult for them to achieve a sense of belonging and to build up networks when moving.

Socially Toxic Environments

Sixteen parents (26%) raised concern about the neighbourhoods in which they lived or had lived. Their concerns were: lack of privacy, and gossip that resulted in relationship problems with neighbours; conflict with neighbours; unsafe environment because of drug dealing and drug use in the area; and “rough and mean” neighbourhoods affecting children. Neighbourhoods can often provide a supportive environment for parents, however, many of the parents in this sample experienced their neighbourhoods as unsupportive or hostile.

Neighbours interfering in their lives and gossiping about them was a complaint made by many families. Merle, 39, observed:

I don't know, but they just know your business, and you have to try and keep it to yourself. When one person knows it, they blab to everybody else and then everybody knows it.

Esther, 32 had a similar sense about being wary about the neighbours; she noted:

Well, if you talk about anything, they twist it into another story, and make it sound worse than what it is. That's why I really don't talk to to many of the neighbours. There's only maybe four of them out of this whole neighbourhood that I speak to because they're the only ones that I can trust. You don't talk to too many, because you just get backstabbed.

Elsie, 25 commented on conflict with neighbours and how that can contribute to what may seem to be a transient lifestyle, yet parents may be attempting to find safer neighbourhoods for their children: "It just wasn't the way I wanted. To be living in that way. Just conflict with neighbours. I just left".

Susan, 40, mother of 3 noted the disturbances that arose in her neighbourhood: "We had six months of trouble over there and they're finally gone, but we have another house where people come and go at all hours of the day and night, that we really wish weren't there."

Children learning inappropriate behaviour from other children was noted by Kitty, 38, mother of 3: "Well, my children attacked me for years, and I thought 'What did I do to them?' but the area I lived in did that to them. Seeing other children abuse their parents, so they just [copied them]."

Jane, 25 noted her concern about the rough neighbourhood as well as the drug-dealing that was taking place there:

I just found the neighbourhood was so rough and mean, and there were drugs being sold, people just in and out, smashing beer bottles

all night on the weekends--every weekend, and big parties and just not a place you want to raise your family. It's just not the place you picture when you're having babies and you've got little girls running around, and you don't picture them running around among broken beer bottles. It just was awful. Once my daughter was old enough to actually play outside I said, 'That's it, we're leaving.'"

Jane's comments clearly indicate that parents want to provide safer environments for their children.

Concerns around being watched and labeled were raised by Brenda, 32:

Living in a townhouse complex, there were a lot of your stereotypical welfare person, and I was really kind of scared moving in there. My son wasn't the cute little baby boy anymore and now he was starting to become an individual and he has a really bad temper, I was worried about that.

The violence in her neighbourhood was commented upon by Grace, 32: "We are aware that it is a very bad neighbourhood. I can't remember how long ago it was that, just down the street, a four year old boy was just randomly beaten by a teenager." Nina, 21, also noted the roughness and violence in her neighbourhood:

They're not regular kids. They are the ones that blew up the bus behind the factory. They sit here, they watch, throw eggs. They don't they think they'll cause an accident. They throw rocks at cars that go by. We had to call the cops one time, because a guy in a black sports car stopped and was about to knock them all out. So we called the cops. More to save them from getting their butts kicked, and also from him getting his butt kicked.

Strengths in Families

Parents discussed their family strengths in relation to employment, neighbourhoods and housing, recreational and leisure activities, self-

improvement through education, and intrafamily relationships. The information they gave about strengths, however, was overshadowed by the struggles reported above: the strengths took up only half as much space as the struggles in the interview transcripts. The points that parents made about family strengths showed that they were making efforts, with limited resources, to rise above the challenges in their lives, such as difficult childhoods, poverty, and abusive partners.

Employment

Employment, by one or both partners, was mentioned by 41 of the 61 parents (67%). Of these, 21 (34%) made positive statements about: having well-paid work, liking one's job, and working at more than one job. Wendy, 37, was pleased to be working: "When my son was old enough, I went out and got a job, and it's been great...totally different from living 'on the system,' I'm now earning my own money."

Neighbourhoods and Housing

Although parents often had mixed feelings about their neighbourhoods, positive comments were made by 31 parents (51%). They looked to their neighbourhoods for a sense of belonging and support in caring for their children. In terms of belonging, they described their neighbourhoods as friendly, helpful, close-knit, and not interfering. With respect to their children, they described their

neighbourhoods as good for their children, and mentioned neighbours who were interested in and helpful with their children.

Friendliness was described by Pat, 23, married: “They don’t look you up and down and turn their noses up. They speak...they try to converse with you.” She compared her present neighbourhood to another one she sometimes visited: “...when we’re walking around over there, people just look at you as though you’re worth nothing.” Describing support with child care, Jane, 25, explained: “You stay within this complex...it’s very family...everybody knows you, everybody knows whose kids belong to whom, so if my four year old’s outside playing...I don’t have to be sitting on the step the whole time.”

Housing was described in a positive way by eight parents (16%). Their comments included: feeling good about their homes, having bought their own homes, fixing up their homes, and staying in one house for years. Cal, 33, a single father, described his feelings about his house: “It feels great...I love it...all my power is here—it’s right here. This is my place.”

Recreation and Leisure Activities

Family and personal recreation and leisure activities were mentioned by 36 parents (59%). Family activities were described by 28 parents (46%). These included taking their children camping, walking, swimming, to the park, on family trips, bicycling, shopping, reading to them, watching movies, teaching them, volunteering at school or recreation center, and acquiring a pet. The choice of

activities reflected the economic restrictions on these families, as they tended to be modest, low-budget pursuits.

Jane, 25, described camping with her children in a trailer: "...they love to swim, playing the sand, go over to the snack shop, and having camp fires. They love to roast marshmallows, and it gives us more of a chance to talk.

Edna, 43, appreciated opportunities provided at her community center.

They have a homework club...when she (daughter) is off school, she can go there. They always have activities at Christmas, like carolling and Christmas parties...and books for the child's birthday. I really enjoy the community centre.

Only ten parents (16%) spoke about sending their children to activities such as Scouts, Beavers, cadets, organized swimming, soccer, summer camp, and the community centre. This small percentage may have reflected lack of funds, because most of these activities have fees and requirements for equipment, which may put them out of reach for low-income families. Even when the organizers are willing to waive the expenses for low-income families, some parents find it demeaning to ask for special treatment. Esther, 32, described her son's involvement in Beavers: "they get to do different things...crafts and activities, and he gets badges, and they sell popcorn every year, and he's been a top salesman for the past two years."

Only six parents (10%) mentioned their own leisure or recreational activities. The activities included socializing in a recreation group, attending a parenting program, reading, writing, enjoying music, artistic pursuits, weight-training, walking, and visiting extended family. Grace, 32, enjoyed writing: "I do a

lot of reading...writing...I'll take a journal out to the park, where I grew up, and just write.”

Self-Improvement through Education

Twenty (33%) of the parents mentioned that they had returned to school to continue their education or acquire training. This was related to the high drop-out rate, described earlier under Family History. It may also be related to the policy of the provincial government since under a right-wing government all mothers on social assistance, who have no children under school age, are expected to find work (volunteer or paid) or to enter education or training. Connie, 38, divorced, felt encouraged by her experience of returning to school; she mentioned her good marks, saying: “After what I've gone through, for seven and a half years, things were looking up for me.”

Intrafamily Relationships

Parents discussed intrafamily relationships in three areas: their relationships with partners; support received with child care from partners, who were often not the child's parent; and parent-child relationships.

Fifteen parents (25%) discussed their relationships with partners, which included: sharing work, activities, and feelings, demonstrating caring, problem-solving, loving and receiving love, mutual trust, and being well treated. A dramatic demonstration of caring by her partner was recalled by Pamela, 27, who had been a substance abuser and a prostitute. “I'd kill for that man...because he

literally found me in an alley all drugged out...I think I had been up for ten days with no food, no sleep, and I looked like hell...He picked me up and gave me a life...He got me clean.”

Fifteen mothers (25%) discussed support received with child care from their partners, which included: relating well to children, engaging in activities with them, and treating partner’s child as one’s own. Fewer than three parents mentioned: taking child to daycare or school, caring for infants or sick children at night, changing diapers, and empathizing with parent about a difficult child.

Sheila, 31, separated, described her partner’s supportiveness with her son as an infant:

[Son] was a very colicky baby—I would be up at two in the morning, and he would even help with that. In the morning, he’d have to work, but he’d get up and take (son) for a walk in his stroller to try and settle him down, let me get some rest—it was teamwork.

Nine parents (15%) discussed parent-child relationships, which included: spending time with one child alone; enjoying their children; trying to improve communication; helping a child with self esteem; and gaining the child’s trust. Jenny, 32, said: “The kids brought a lot of joy to me...just hearing them laugh, and walking for the first time.” Jodie, 41, was very concerned about her pre-school daughter: “(in the evening) I usually talk to her, see how her day was...I have to really watch how I ask for information...(when I ask specific questions) then she’ll sit there and talk.” Pamela, 27, noted that her relationship with her children had improved since Pamela stopped abusing drugs, especially her relationships with her eldest daughter, who was nearly 12:

She's very comfortable in talking to me about anything and I love it, because I feel she's opening up to me, that she realizes that her Mom's not this messed up person anymore...she (daughter) is not just another mouth to feed...she's a living breathing somebody, a special person...they all are.

Love and respect for their children was evident in many of the parents' comments about parent-child relationships.

Struggles with Children

Parents described a range of issues with their children that increased the stressors in their lives. The children in the study ranged from (we said .08 years earlier) 16 months to 16 years and parents struggled with negative experiences of their children, extreme changing moods, and developmental challenges (15%).

Negative Experiences of Children

Eight (13%) parents reported that their children had endured negative experiences that had caused them physical and psychological trauma. The parents described these experiences as sexual abuse, physical assault, punitive behaviour, and neglect. The perpetrators of these acts were adults in the family or strangers in the community. For example, Kathy's son said, "Daddy put my body in hot water", Dorothy, 46, said, "my daughter was sexually assaulted by her big sister's husband", and Midge, 39, said, "the man took [her daughter] into the bathroom [in Zellers] and asked her to perform oral sex on him." The "inappropriate touching" or "sexual abuse" was sometimes reported as having occurred at a very young age. Barb, 40 and divorced, indicated that the father had abused their son when he was five months old, and Sheila, 31 and

separated, said her son had been “sexually molested at only a couple of weeks old”. Sheila described her husband’s harsh treatment of their children that led to their separation:

...for instance if their beds weren’t made properly, then [he would make them] strip it down, do it again...but what had made me leave my husband was that he had hit [son1] and kicked [son2]...I remember one incident [when] I was outside doing some yard work and [son1] came outside to tell me that dad was beating up [son2]. That he was actually hurting my child. I went in and [son2] was cowering on the floor by the fridge and he got up and ran downstairs to his room and I ran after him. And he told me, ‘Get away, get away, Dad’s really mean!’ I looked at him and on the side of his face he had a big red mark, and he said that Dad had kicked him.

Some parents reported that their children continued to receive maltreatment from ex-spouses and other caregivers. Dorothy, 47 and divorced, believed that her ex-husband, who was neglectful and maltreated her son and daughter when they were visiting with him, had also sexually assaulted her son.

Barb, 40, viewed her ex-husband’s parenting as harmful to her children:

...they’re swinging on the step. They’re not being supervised. [son] gets hurt, all these bad scabs. [I ask] “Oh what happened to you?” “Oh! I fell.” “What did Dad do?” “Nothing, just told me to sit down.” [Son] has been thrown outside, and has been told that he can’t eat more than one sandwich...I’m sure there’s a law somewhere stating that the kids have to eat!

Cal, a single father, found his father’s girlfriend to be over zealous with disciplining his son:

She’s a bit of a bitch I guess. You can’t force kids to eat their supper...she would smack him under the belt to make him go to his room, or sit in a chair, or the last time she made him go outside with no coat on in the snow on the porch.

Changing Moods.

Eleven parents (18%) said their children appeared to have attention deficits or had volatile moods. Attention deficits in the children resulted in problems at home and school. Midge's daughter was often reprimanded at school for "not paying attention, getting up, wandering around, and not completing [her] work". Hence, parents were frustrated with children not listening, ignoring them or others, and not communicating. Ruth, 30, explained her frustration in communicating with her son:

...we've gone through a lot with him – like the listening and the frustration and...he does not listen a lot of the days, and it makes it harder on you...when you talk normally to [son], I don't know if he ignores you or shuts you out."

Other parents described their children as swinging from happiness to fear and anger, contributing to sleeplessness, hyperactivity, verbal assault, and physical aggression. Ruth, 30, explained how her son would get "excited and all wound up" when around unfamiliar people. His mood would swing from being "fine, happy, playing and then the next minute...throwing something against the wall...he's like a light switch."

When Midge's daughter was angry she would swear at her mother and call her names. She was "expelled on and off from school since Grade 6" for being verbally abusive to the teachers.

Cal's 8-year old son was "outspoken" and aggressive toward anyone who he thought was trying to bully him: He'll chase you. He'll lay a beating on you. Two years ago, he was only in Grade one...and he put [a Grade five student] in the dentist office. He knocked his front tooth out...

Dorothy, 47, said that her children did not know how to deal with their conflicts and often used anger to settle their disputes. Her son would “fight”, “push”, “hit”, “choke”, and “kick”. On occasion he had even threatened to kill with a knife – and then with a gun.

When siblings were involved, parents were concerned that they would copy the negative behaviours of the problem child in the home. Dorothy, above, felt that her younger son was following in the footsteps of her teenage son, who was wandering off at night, playing with pocketknives, and had burned the playhouse down. Parents felt helpless at controlling this effect on siblings. Ruth, 30, said, “...it wasn’t too bad when it was just him [but] now it’s harder...he doesn’t really realize that [daughter] is watching him.”

Developmental Challenges.

Nine (15%) parents reported that developmental disabilities impeded the growth and community integration of their children. All these parents discussed various causes and symptoms related to their child’s developmental disability. As well, some parents described the psychological impact of a developmental disability on a child, and how the school system had failed to meet the special needs of their children.

Parents stated that developmental challenges had been caused due to complications at birth such as the “cord was wrapped around his neck” and the baby “was blue, not breathing”. While growing, the children showed symptoms in the form of medical problems, such as, hypothyroid disease, impaired kidneys

and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). These children had impaired functioning and this interfered with their physical development, attention span, and learning processes. Parents described speech difficulties – “everything was ‘grunt and point’ as he still wasn’t speaking”; weak bladders – “neither one of them can control their bladders”; no concept of time – “when you say ‘September’ or say a day, he does not understand how far or how long that is”; and challenges with reading and writing – “a five minute story takes an hour”. Wendy, 37, explained that ADHD with her son meant that he refused his medication, he was “edgy”, “can’t sit long”, and was easily distracted:

I have noticed that if I am in the room and [husband] is with him, it [school work] can’t be done. I have to leave for [husband] to be able to work with him...because, [if] there are too many people, there’s no way [he can learn].

Having a developmental disability had a psychological impact on some children. Parents said their children “couldn’t do things like the other children [at school]” and, when the children became aware of their differences, their self-esteem suffered due to embarrassment and frustration. Dorothy’s son struggled to Grade 5, but made “a really good connection” with the principal of his new school who arranged for an ability test and introduced him to a special program. However, she felt that her son was “really embarrassed about that...and with him having difficulties at school it is really hard now because he doesn’t fit in. It is more his mindset.” On the other hand, Kathy, 34, married, said that her son’s teachers did not question his disengagement in class until he was in Grade 4. His lack of expression was simply attributed to being shy:

He wouldn't put up his hand in class, so they didn't know what he knew...he refused to talk from Junior Kindergarten to Grade 4 [when] they literally forced him to talk." As a result, he was kept back a grade when he reached Grade 3.

Having special needs meant that the children required additional support at school. However, parents were disappointed with the lack of resources, and exclusionary practices in the school system. Sheila's first son had Tourette's Syndrome and was still not speaking at 2 years old. His school was unable to accommodate his challenges:

...in Kindergarten he was expelled indefinitely. They didn't even want him to go through the school system. He wasn't able to sit properly, and at times, with the Tourette's, he would swear or have uncontrollable blurts.

Wendy's experience with the school system shows how the lack of appropriate resources for children with developmental disabilities may perpetuate negative behaviours:

In the last two years my son might have gone to school 13 times...My son will sit there and click a pen, and he'll get suspended for five days. He fights a lot at school, he's got a foul mouth and that will give him suspension right off the bat. So it's been like in and out. And my son's been pushed through school – he hasn't passed a grade yet...each year he's been placed into the next grade, he's never passed it. So, he's never passed a grade in his life! He even failed Kindergarten and they just placed him in the next grade... My son's got grade 3 or 4 reading, and maybe grade 2 writing... And for the last three years...he's getting the same work that he got three years ago, and he knows that work. They've got to start giving him more to do instead of giving him the same stuff – he's not going to go anywhere that way...nowhere at all. I think we could do a better job at home than what the school has done.

Summary of Parent Lives

Parents had difficult, disrupted, and insecure childhoods and had experienced childhood abuse. Twenty-one parents (34%) did not finish high

school, 17 parents (28%) reported being physically/sexually abused, and 11 (18%) reported substance abuse by their parents. Family breakdown, witnessing abuse of their mothers by male partners, and conflict with parents was also noted as being traumatic.

Parents in this sample also described a range of problems that impinged on their families, including: unsupportive male partners (61%), wife abuse (34%), non-violent oppression (25%), transient lifestyle (54%), poverty (38%), substance abuse (33%), problems with physical health (33%), mental health problems (31%), poor neighbourhoods (26%), isolation (23%), unemployment (20%), and disability (11%). Thus, many of the mothers were in oppressive relationships with partners who were either abusive or controlling, while many mothers felt unsupported by their partners. Differentiating the types of conflict for the mothers helps us to better understand the complex and particular ways in which they were unsupported, if not abused. Many mothers felt unsupported when their partners did not contribute in household chores, caring, nurturing, or disciplining children, and helping during difficult and stressful times. These women felt strongly the day-to-day challenges of raising children within this unsupportive context. This lack of support was especially problematic for mothers who were already feeling isolated and burdened. The abuse they experienced included extreme violence, such as hitting punching, and kicking, as well as controlling behaviour such as partners scrutinizing all their movements and actions.

Poverty and unemployment further contributed to isolation and to the absence of social supports and networks. Lack of resources also resulted in

parents living in 'rough' neighbourhoods where they felt labeled, scrutinized, and isolated from their neighbours and the larger community.

Mental health problems, disability, and substance abuse were also present for many parents. Within this context, parents strove to provide for their children, and sought support in this task. Parents endeavored to find appropriate housing, and to protect their children from rough neighbourhoods. Parents struggled to find employment, and took casual, low paid, insecure jobs so that they could support their families. Parents often had employment that did not offer them security or allow them the flexibility to attend to personal, childcare, and home-related needs. This left them vulnerable to losing their jobs when they were absent for personal reasons. The low wages from their jobs combined with child care costs, left leaves them struggling with trying to make ends meet.

Within the unsupportive contexts noted above, some parents were coping with children who presented special challenges. Some children had been physically/sexually abused. Parents also described children with ADHD, and other mental health and physical health problems that were present from an early age. The behaviours of these children with which parents had to contend appeared to escalate during adolescence. Parents felt overwhelmed by unsuccessful efforts to advocate for their children in the school system and in the social service system. They struggled to obtain the help they felt their children needed and sometimes approached CPS to obtain this help. However, this help was not always forthcoming.

Parents talked about family strengths in relation to employment and income, neighbourhoods, housing, recreational and leisure activities, self-improvement through education, and intrafamily relationships. Two-thirds of parents mentioned that they, their partner, or both, were working; one-third of parents made positive statements about their work, mostly about being well paid or liking their jobs. Just over half the parents (51%) were positive about their neighbourhoods, with the most frequently mentioned themes being the friendliness and helpfulness of neighbours. Good housing was mentioned by only 16% of parents, with a common theme being the sense of comfort and satisfaction about having one's own home, which had often been a challenge to achieve. Most parents were employed, and those who had economic stability, good neighbourhoods and housing appreciated this.

Many parents (59%) discussed leisure and recreational activities. Family activities, mentioned by 46%, tended to be low-cost pursuits, such as camping, walking, swimming, going to the park, and family trips. Only 16% of parents mentioned sending their children to community activities, such as Boy Scouts, possibly because the costs made this prohibitive. They tended to choose inexpensive family recreational activities, and tended not to send their children by themselves to non-family activities. Only 10% of parents mentioned engaging in their own activities for pleasure: these were diverse, but were also low-cost activities, such as reading. Many mothers (33%) reported their own achievements in self-improvement through education, often linked with having ended their regular education prematurely.

Regarding positive aspects of intrafamily relationships, 25% of parents discussed relationships with their partners, 25% discussed support received from partners with child care, and 15% discussed their own relationships with their children. By far the most common theme in relationships with the partner was “sharing” of work, activities, and feelings. Support with child care focused on behaviour that demonstrated the partner’s interest and affection for the child, especially when the child was not the partner’s own. They valued partners who shared the work of the family with them. As for parent-child relationships, the only recurring theme was the concept of spending time with one child, to improve the parent-child relationship. Most parents spoke positively about their children, and showed love and respect for them.

Comparing the struggles of families with their strengths, it is apparent that the overwhelming problems of childhood neglect and abuse, serious relationship deficits, including horrendous abuse for some, lack of resources, and a socially toxic environment can constrain parents’ capacity to provide the nurturing environment for their children that they want. Many parents were exhausted and discouraged by the demanding nature of their lives.

FORMAL AND INFORMAL SUPPORTS

Apart from services used from CPS, parents mentioned four other areas in the community where they accessed formal and informal supports: social service organizations (85%), friends and neighbours (82%), extended family members

(74%), and places of belonging in the community (56%). These areas of support provided physical, spiritual, emotional and psychological benefits to the parents.

Parents usually accessed support in times of crisis. These crises revolved around a shortage of funds to pay for basic living needs, needing shelter, addressing the challenging behaviours of their children, fleeing from an abusive partner, and dealing with health emergencies. Parents also sought support for supplementing income, improving relationships and parenting skills, respite from children, upgrading skills for better employment, leisure opportunities, and recreation.

Social Service Organizations

Fifty-two parents (85%) in the study said they had accessed professional and social supports from service organizations in their community other than the CPS agency through which we had met them. The organizations accessed included: social service programs such as Big Brothers/Sisters, shelters, food banks, thrift stores, children's mental health centers, community outreach programs, health services (such as mental health centers, psychologists, family physicians, psychiatrists, counseling, behaviour modification, speech pathology), and correctional services regarding children (e.g. police, probation officers).

Other services that parents reported using were counseling (52%), income security (16%), parenting groups (13%), daycare (11%), daily living supplements, i.e. food, diapers (8%), respite care for children (8%), and shelter (8%). In addition, fewer than five parents (8%) reported using each of the following services: assessments (e.g. psychologist, psychiatrist, physician, paediatrician),

anger management, behaviour management, speech therapy, alcohol anonymous, drug rehabilitation, self-esteem groups, abuse groups, “buddy” programs, camps, police protection, subsidized transportation, and budgeting workshops. Although it was not usually evident from the interviews how the parents were referred to these services, a few parents reported that they were referred by their health providers (e.g. physician, mental health clinic, mother and baby clinic) prior to becoming involved with CPS, and a few reported being referred by CPS. A majority of parents (52%) reported that the services were generally helpful (52%) however, a substantial minority (36%) mentioned challenges and disappointments in accessing services

Helpful Services

Thirty-two parents (52%) felt that the services helped to relieve mental stress, build parenting skills, give direction, identify valuable resources, and enable personal growth. Emma, 31, used respite care frequently for her son with multiple disabilities, while she was attending school. Bonnie, 36, and her husband learned from a parenting group how to handle their son’s anger:

...I learned how to not let him win...I thought he was in a war with himself, like he was so angry all the time...and just different strategies on trying to help him control his anger differently. And listening to other parents [helped] – [before that] I was thinking ‘Maybe I’m the only one and my kid’s weird and maybe something is wrong with him’.

Pamela, 27, separated, learned to appreciate her worth from a self-esteem group:

I'm a person, I'm worthy, I have self worth, I deserve respect, I deserve to be loved, I deserve to be happy and all of those things [she did not have before].

Vanda, a widowed mother, used a Big Brother program for her son and found it to be a real bonus:

[Her son and his Big Brother went] fishing, golfing, playing baseball...Like I'm not a fisherman, I don't golf. It's just different things that I wouldn't normally take him out and do. And he's been a great support for my son – that male figure, because he's never really had that.

Some parents found that the trusting and compassionate approaches of organization heads (e.g. school principal, police) were a source of support. This was described by a divorced mother who had a son with ADHD, and found the community approach of a local police officer to be caring:

He really cared--he just didn't do his job, but he cared about us...a couple of times my kids went downtown and he would drive by and say, 'You guys, get home, your mom's looking for you.' I didn't even tell him, but he was looking over my shoulder so I thought he was very supportive. Very great.

Altogether 32 parents (52%) used a counselling service, and for some this experience was very positive. Nellie, 24, went to counselling for a year and a half, and expressed that her counsellor saved her life:

And I had a really good worker who saved my life. She was the greatest person I had ever met. And she helped me work on [my problem] and work on learning to trust people again.

Tess, 23, also said that her counsellor was excellent:

...She's optimistic--she verbalizes the positive things that I'm telling her. She says, 'That's great, keep doing it.' She gives me the motivation. Every two weeks I get to go and talk to her. She gives me names and numbers of people that I can contact if I've got a problem I need to deal with. She's just a good listener and she's got good

advice. If you were to take a look at her notes from when I started until now, there's a big difference.

Laurie, 23, married, said that she could trust her marital counsellor because she did not judge her and was on her side:

It didn't matter what I had done or what I had thought about doing, it was a matter of I had to like me and what was going on with me, before I could pursue anything with us [myself and husband].

Unhelpful Services.

While the services received were seen as helpful, 22 parents (36%) spoke of challenges in accessing services, including: inflexibility of services that compromised the quality of supports received, fragmentation of services, poor skills of service providers, mismatched services, and stigma attached to service use.

Joan, a tired mother with an infant, was told that she did not fit the criteria for home help:

...because I wasn't in a wheelchair...And I said, "Here's this kid that's so hyperactive and never sleeps or anything else, and I still don't fit." Now if she was seven or eight and diagnosed with hyper-activity, then fine, but nothing before that...The public health nurse came in and phoned people and she said, 'This is insane'. She said, 'I couldn't function'. There are all these people saying you need the help. Well, where the hell is it then?

A recurring theme was the frustration expressed by parents with the fragmentation of needed services. Parents who had a child with a disability were the most burdened by system barriers and lack of resources for their children.

Emma, 31, discussed how the supports for her son with multiple disabilities disintegrated after he started school:

...Since he's been in school he has lost a lot of support and assistance. Before you go to school you have all these people to help do programming with him and a lot of physio and a lot of OT [occupational therapy] but since he's been in school there's not been really much. One time we never had met a physiotherapist for almost two years and then they phoned us and they were leaving and somebody else was joining – you can never keep track of them.

Fragmented services were also experienced in other sectors. Lydia, 44, reported that a helpful counselling service for her son was interrupted by lack of resources:

...Community mental health was helpful. I actually got a counsellor who could handle my son, accepted my son, and made concessions. We were going to the office and that wasn't working, so our counsellor suggested that we meet at home because it was my son's territory and maybe he would feel more comfortable. I was blown away! I had never ever had anybody who thought about what my son might like! The counselling helped immensely. Then our counsellor got sick and we were left hanging. Again, fell between the cracks in the system...The next thing I know, it's seven months later and I'm getting a call from another counsellor telling me he's taken over. After seven months – there was no communication for seven months. So for seven months my son and I hung – didn't know if and when our counsellor was going to come back.

In addition, Wendy, 37, described how she was obstructed by long waiting lists, when she was trying to access a program for her teenage son in desperate need of one-to-one support:

I've been fighting for it for almost five years and I did get him accepted but they told me that once he went back to jail, I would have to start the process all over again...they have a group home [that is] one on one and I'm trying to get my son involved with that because that's what he needs and it's hard because there are never any beds available. A bed came available and my son was in jail so he got pushed away again...by the time I get help for him, my son is going to be 20 years old.

Betty, with five children, was so disillusioned with the five year waiting list for affordable housing that she didn't even bother applying. Midge, 39, described

how parents are fuelled by anxiety due to waiting lists and changes of therapists.

Her 5-year old daughter, with complex psychological problems, had the following experience:

The therapist had just got to the point where they were getting to the dolls and they were going to talk about things, and then, that was it -- they pulled out. They had gotten a little girl's confidence, when she had worked so hard, and then 'gone'. She [daughter] wouldn't go back, even at five/six years old, she would not go back, because she had made a friend, and she could talk to somebody, but then she'd have to work on the whole process over again...And then we got another therapist – she was okay, [but] was away all summer. And there were only certain days she was there. So it broke down. I don't understand--if you have somebody who has a lot of problems and you have to work with them for a long time, then why would you give them somebody who is on contract? And especially with a small child where you have to build up her confidence – get her confidence.

Further, Kathy, 34, married, felt that this shortage of resources created a system where parents were judged unequally:

We fought with the school trying to get Special Ed for my son but they wouldn't listen. I know it's tough for them because the government's made it so hard for them with the cutbacks. But I see a kid in the school who has Special Ed because he has a behaviour problem. My kids don't ...and I'm thinking my kids are slow in education, so why don't they [get help?].

Parents who were in financial hardship felt, even more acutely, the inequality in access and opportunity for a quality life. Eleven parents (18%) noted the hardship caused by insufficient funds to pay for even basic living needs. Barb, 40, with four children:

[I wish that] welfare would start thinking about people who have families because there's not a lot of money out there for mothers to buy our kids stuff as prices keep going up. You're paying \$20 for diapers alone and then there's formula, and regular groceries. Doctors want you on 2% milk for the kids and being on welfare you only have limited money to work with and you have to pay your bills on top.

Wendy, 37, said, “Being on the system is hard. You go day by day – some days you would eat, some days you wouldn’t eat--because there is never enough to go around for a month.” Financial hardship limited many other possibilities for parents and families. For example, if parents had to travel distances for therapy or medical care, they were unable to handle the transportation costs. Brenda, a single parent trying to better herself through schooling, explained how recent cutbacks in social assistance had affected her access to daycare:

...Mike Harris [then Premier] came in and he slashed my cheque by \$158 a month...My net income in a month was maybe \$650 and I paid rent, heat, hydro, phone, cable, and transportation back and forth from school. Well the next year Mike Harris said, “Oh, you’re going to school? That’s it, you get nothing. Go live off OSAP [Ontario Student Assistance Program].” Actually I lost my mother’s allowance title and I was cut off subsidized daycare. Now what am I supposed to do? Live off OSAP and pay after school daycare prices?

As a result of prolonged struggles with the service system, Emma, 31, explained how she had to become more assertive to compete for scarce and disjointed services:

You talk to one, [then] another one comes the next time, and they don’t make any sense. Some are very supportive and some aren’t. Some don’t even want to meet with you. Like the one lady [who was working with Emma’s son], I said to her, “I’d like to have a home visit with you,” and she said, “Why?” I said, “Well because I think it’s important that I see what you’re doing and that I can implement the programming at home.” She was very distressed that I wanted to see her here, and we got through that...like I used to be very soft spoken, but now it’s like, “You’re going to come to my home!” And she did eventually come and now she comes every week. So it pays to be a bitch. ...if you’re not bitchy with these people you get forgotten, you just become a number.

In addition, parents felt added pressure when service providers seemed lacking in skills or insensitive to their needs. Nola, 27, and single, who had

accessed counselling all her life, described her anger at the manner of one particular counsellor:

...I sat down in her office and she said 'What can I do for you?' as if I was wanting a pack of cigarettes! It's bad enough when you sit down in front of someone you don't know and you're blabbing your whole story... You'd think, being trained as she is, she would know how to state things and get you to answer questions without 'So what can I do for you?' So, that totally rubbed me the wrong way, just my whole hour with her was hell. She made me feel very uncomfortable. She made me feel that, [she was thinking] "Oh god, like I haven't heard this story 50 times today and god, this is old." That's how she made me feel so I walked out of there and never went back.

As well, parents voiced concerns about the lack of protection for vulnerable children. Emma, 31, and her husband felt that service providers were ill-equipped to protect their child with a disability:

...because my son doesn't have a voice for himself, we truly believe that the [service providers] are not standing up and being advocates for him. And that's our greatest upset, is that for children that don't have a voice, who can be their voice if you're not trusting their parents?

Another related theme raised by parents was the mismatch of the service itself. When Dorothy's 16-year old son with a developmental disability went missing, she felt that she had no support from the law to allay her anxiety:

My son took off fishing and didn't come home for over 24 hours. I'm worried. This is a 16 year old who is physically 16, but not 16. I wondered, 'Did he drown?' So I went to the police station with a picture. And basically I was told that he can be gone as long as he wants, 'cause he's 16 years old.

Arthur, 27, felt that his single parent group was a complete mismatch for his needs. He found that he had nothing in common with the participants in his group who were his parents' age.

Hence, parents stated that the services offered tended to be residual and short term, i.e. family members learned some skills that ameliorated the situation temporarily, but the services did not address the underlying problems. Parents with complex needs felt that short-term and interrupted services wiped out the gains as their problems mounted over the long term. Further, some parents struggled with the stigma attached to services that they were compelled to use. For example, Bart, a divorced father of three, felt ambivalent about using the Food Bank. He struggled with the stigma associated with this service and felt that he had somehow failed in his responsibilities:

I used the food bank a lot that first year...that was quite depressing. So when it came to going to the food bank it was like, 'We all have to eat, even though I don't want to be here.' 'Cause it made me feel like I wasn't keeping up my end of the deal here. Well, that bothered me a great deal, but at the same time, they were very helpful

Friends and Neighbours

A substantial number of parents (50, 82%) cited friends and neighbours as a source of support, helping to meet physical and emotional needs. Dorothy, 47 and divorced, expressed her feeling that her friends were indispensable and that she would not have survived without the people in her life who knew her well:

I mean, you can know people, but not know them. But these people, I've known for five, seven years. So they know me and my wants. They know my good points, they know my bad points.

Friends and neighbours were important for providing emotional support (66%), for creating opportunities (30%), facilitating fun in their lives (18%), and supplementing material shortages (5%). Hence, it was apparent that friends and

neighbours were a welcome support system for parents who endured extreme challenges in their lives.

Emotional Support.

Forty parents (66%) found their friends to be essential for preserving their emotional health by: providing respite from the children, helping out in a crisis, giving 'counseling,' and motivating the parent to change. Hanna, 22, had friends from school who lived in the building and who helped with a babysitter for an emergency. Dorothy's friends took her three children "every once in a while if things get really heavy". Sometimes this respite at friends provided a positive environment for the children. For Dorothy who was divorced, having married friends was particularly beneficial for her youngest son:

...he doesn't spit there, he doesn't curse there, he doesn't smoke cigarettes there. He just becomes this different child – this child who is respectful and says 'please' and 'thank you', and I'm thinking, 'What am I doing wrong?' But then again, she has her husband there. And he's a very nice person.

Having friends was a great asset in a family crisis. Barb, divorced, phoned a friend when she was desperate: "I phoned [a friend] to see if she could come over and try and talk to [son], calm him down, find out what his problem is. [The friend] phoned the police and the police came because [son] bashed my phone".

Parents could have a trusting relationship with friends, to whom they found it easy to talk, and who were not "judgmental or biased". Thus, parents often used their friends as "sounding boards," and experienced sympathy and empathy in these. Emma's friend was a "...real sympathizer who will wipe my tears...let [me] just pour it on and give me a lot of sympathy." This empathy stemmed from

having experienced similar challenges, such as children with ADHD, troubles and conflicts in accessing services, or being a single parent). Kathy, 34, spoke of this shared empathy: “[My friend was] very understanding, by our side for the whole ordeal [of my child being apprehended by CPS], because she went through it with her own son. She more or less put us on the right track”.

Friends were a support in making life changes. When Lydia, 44, was struggling with an abusive relationship, a friend came to her rescue:

I was finally getting sick of it, sick of it, sick of it, and then I met a really good friend who turned around and told me that’s not right to be treated like that...it’s not right for somebody to be treating another person like that. It’s not right. You don’t get treated like that, you don’t sit there and take that.

Lydia’s desperation was picked up by this good friend who “showed me the light.” and became a “backbone” to help her leave a bad relationship.

Nellie, 24, who had lived through stressful experiences of rape, abuse, shelter and street living, found friends to be invaluable. For example, when she was homeless, she found a friend in the street who “taught her the way of the street – how to be safe and how to stay clean and watch for this and watch for that.” When Nellie became pregnant, she could not survive as a single mother and became dependent on a controlling and manipulative husband. Again, it was a friend who supported her through her separation from her husband. This friend also supported her at the point when CPS apprehended her daughter, and became an advocate and facilitator for supervised visitation with her daughter.

Hence, friends were not just listeners but also mentors, advisors, and motivators, to parents facing stressors in their lives. Parents said that they

learned about themselves and about life itself through their friends. In fact, many parents used a network of friends to match with their specific needs. For example, Vanda, 43 and widowed, would call one friend if “I was sick” and another “if I was depressed and needed cheering up.” Emma, 31, also had friends who met different needs: “I know who to call for what. If I need sympathy I call one, if I need structure I call the other...Some friends are like my mother [who would] give [me] a kick in the butt and say, ‘Smarten up!’”

For Angela, 41, married, who felt housebound with two children and was taking home courses, friends were available online. These friends could be reached at anytime to chat and overcome her isolation:

I can have people in my house. I go downstairs, find people, talk. Say, “I gotta go,”--come back up and study. And I’ve had a visit with all kinds of people, all over the world. And nobody’s been in the house. He [her husband] can’t say “Who’s been here?” And I go back to studying...I don’t have to worry about the mess, or the cost or, when he’s not home, being able to have my friends in.

Creating Opportunities

Eighteen parents (30%) said that having a network of friends meant that they could access opportunities in the community, such as transportation, housing, and jobs. Daisy, 37, separated, had three children and no vehicle. She had to rely on a friend from another town to take her for groceries. Tess, 23, and her children lived with two friends for a month, which enabled her to save money to get her own apartment. Sheila, separated with four children, was offered a job by an elder who lived in her area. Working in the janitorial business, cleaning banks and lawyer’s offices, she felt that she “was contributing towards the bills

and stuff. I was very proud.” It seemed that a sense of belonging and participation in the community was created through their friendships.

In addition to concrete gains, friends provided intrinsic opportunities to reciprocate, as in sharing child care. Angela, 41, described how this reciprocating gratified her: “When my friends need me, I like that, because that’s partly what fills me up--knowing that someone else needs me.”

Facilitating Fun

Eleven parents (18%) described sharing leisure and recreation with their friends, opportunities that often included their children. Dorothy’s son enjoyed visiting his mom’s friend, who had a snowmobile and a pool. Other friends took him to shows and tobogganing. Parents socialized with their friends by talking on the phone/online, visiting with each other over a coffee, “hanging out,” “going to the bar to have a couple drinks,” “going camping,” or “sitting at the park and having lunch.” These leisure moments were often venues to let off steam, to talk, to listen, to “take a break from the kids” and “to not have to worry about anything except having a good time.” For example, Lydia and her friends organized a “ladies day” to have a break from their children: “There’s three of us going out to the lake...we’re going to get our bathing suits, pack a picnic lunch, and we’re just going to lay in the sun and talk and swim.”

Supplementing Material Shortages

Three parents (5%) mentioned that friends and neighbours provided assistance when financial resources were low. Stella, 39, divorced, spoke about

the generosity of her friend: “My girlfriend came over and said, ‘Let’s go shopping’...So I went with her. She gave me a basket, and she said, ‘Get whatever you want’...She bought me about a hundred and fifty dollars worth of food.

Barb, 40, with four children was helped by friends who gave her “...clothes that are too small on their children” or bus fare if she had to go to the hospital.

Extended Family Members

A third source of support for parents was extended family members. Forty-five parents (74%) identified their birth parents, siblings, parents-in-law, grandparents, and aunts as people they could turn to for material resources and emotional support. Of all the extended family members, mothers were cited most frequently (26%) as the source of help.

Extended family members were important sources of emotional support (69%), accommodation (21%), childcare (20%), and money (18%) for basic needs, such as, paying for rent, groceries, laundry, baby clothes. Finally, the following types of help were each mentioned by one or two parents: transportation, owning a vehicle, accessing medical services, moving, household chores, budgeting, finding jobs, and facilitating visitation with their children by becoming the designated CPS guardians.

While 74% of parents found extended family members to be helpful, 44% reported a lack of support from some or all extended family members.

Emotional Support

Forty-two parents (69%) said they received emotional support from extended family members to handle their daily living challenges and crisis situations. They described their extended family members as “wonderful,” “supportive.” and “helpful”. They gave “good advice,” provided encouragement, kept the parent “grounded,” served as a “backbone for any type of stress,” and were readily available at any time. Tess, 23, single, said that she was very close to her mother and could call her at work or at home whenever she was frustrated:

...if there's a world's greatest mom right now, she definitely deserves a month long paid vacation. She does so much for me. My daughter's father hasn't been in her life pretty much since day one, and my mom takes my daughter once a month so that I can get a break...[If] I need something, she's always there--always.

Jane, 25, married, described her mother as:

...my second best friend next to my husband. I tell her everything. We talk about everything. I can get angry with my mom and I can tell her I'm angry with her and at the same time we'll go shopping.

Jane, 25, was also blessed with the “best grandmother on the planet. She spends time with [my children] because she wants to, not because I need a babysitter.” Gail, 34, separated, received support from her sister who offered a listening ear:

...my sister said if you ever need anybody to talk to, and you don't want to talk to Mom, you can always come over this way and talk to me. And the thing is I've always done it for her sons...because I have been closer in age to her boys.

Nellie, 24, single, felt the emotional support of her father who believed in her ability as a parent:

My Dad's always known from day one how much of a good parent I am and how much [her daughter] changed me from who I used to be, into settling down, taking responsibility for myself, and for [daughter].

Esther, 32, divorced, also described how her step father was supportive:

...whether we do right or wrong, he supports us either way. He doesn't get angry and say, "Oh well, you're stupid"...and walk away...And he was there throughout my pregnancy, and [when I] delivered both my kids. So it's been a great experience because my kids have a bond that nobody can break. And I've had a few people try to break it, and they just can't.

Apart from birth families, some parents found strong support from their in-laws. Betty, 29, always called upon her husband's family for support. "They're more like a family. They're always there. They've taught me more family values than my mother ever did."

Emotional support from extended family members helped parents to refocus on believing that "things will change" and seeing "beyond the rainbow."

Hilda, 23, described how her parents always kept her focused when she had no more energy to fight the struggles of life:

Because there were many times where I said, "That's it--I'm taking my kid and I'm running away from it." If it wasn't for my Mom and Dad saying, "Hold back a minute--you can't do that!" or "You're going to jeopardize yourself, you're going to lose your kid, you're going to go to jail for kidnapping." If it wasn't for them I'd lose my head – so they kept me pretty grounded.

Accommodation

Thirteen parents (21%) described housing crises, when they could not keep up with rental payments, when they were in the midst of change (e.g. moving,

separating, having a baby), or when their current living situations were inhabitable. Many family members offered shelter to parents in crisis. Connie, 38, divorced, recalled: “It was really hot that summer...and my Dad couldn’t see [daughter] and I cooped up in this small hotel room. So [he] would come and pick us up and drop us off [to the hotel room later]...to stay overnight”.

When Betty’s in-laws found out she was pregnant with twins, they insisted that she move in with them so they could help her with her babies, in addition to her three young children with special needs. Family support was especially comforting when parents had a newborn in their lives. Fiona, 25, single, was very grateful when she and her baby were invited to move in with her aunt.

Sometimes, parents had access to properties owned by family members. This provided security and affordable rental arrangements. Midge, 39, felt very lucky when her in-laws let them live in a grandfather’s home after he had passed away. She described this event as “lucking out, being here...and escaping. I mean--I love it!”

Child Care

Twelve parents (20%) mentioned that extended family members were a constant resource for child care. Parents found this support convenient to access, readily available, safe, and familiar for their children. Edna, 43, married, noted: “It’s nice actually...I don’t even have to plan [for] a babysitter...if something comes up on the spur of the moment I can just say, ‘Mom, are you going to be home?’ So it works out perfectly”.

Some parents were able to link up with several family members who could be called upon at a moment's notice. Esther, divorced, and Jodie, married, would call upon their grandparents and siblings. Arthur, a separated father, depended on his great aunt, sister, and grandmother to watch over his children.

Extended family members were also flexible in how they supplemented child care. They could come in for a couple of hours when parents were going to scheduled activities (e.g. medical appointments, shopping), or when needing emergency help or respite with a child (e.g. when a child became sick, when a baby was unsettled). Lena's mother took her baby "...so I could sleep. Because she would cry all day, all night, for like four days straight...nonstop."

In addition, family members assisted with taking the children to their activities in the community (e.g. school). Betty, with five children, found her family's support extremely valuable: a grandmother and aunt actively shared in the care giving role of her children: "Grandma takes [two children] to one daycare and aunt takes [son] to the daycare where she works, so they're gone all day". Betty also noted that family members provided breaks for her and her children: "One aunt would actually take two of the older three once a month for a weekend...and then my other aunt would take them once in a while."

Money

Insufficient income to meet basic needs was mentioned by 11 parents (18%). Extended family members were aware of this poverty, and often supplemented the basics for the children by purchasing school lunches, baby

clothes, diapers, equipment, etc. Being on low income, parents experienced shortfalls during the month while they were waiting for their next social assistance payment. When Tess's problem of a meager allowance was compounded by her boyfriend's substance abuse, it was her mother, brother, and grandmother who helped her out:

...Like two weeks ago I needed \$20 to get me through for two days because [my] daughter needed diapers. I didn't get my money from social services until two days later so [my brother] lent me the [money] to get me through the next two days and then I paid him back...

At certain times, parents had to forego shopping for food, or using heat and water. At these times, parents like Fay, 32 and separated, turned to family members who offered intermittent support: "My family has always been [there]. We are not close but [if] I need 40 bucks or a bag of milk, they're there...My parents would come down and bring me ...potatoes and carrots...and give me money over the phone". In contrast, Bart's mother offered regular help to supplement his low income. She always did the weekly laundry for his three children, which as he said, "is [worth] a lot of money".

Unhelpful Members of Family of Origin

Twenty-seven parents (44%) expressed disappointment at the lack of support from some (30%) or all (15%) of their family of origin. Parents gave the following reasons why their family members were unhelpful: a history of poor relationships between parent and family member (16%); disapproval by family members of parent's lifestyle and partner choices (16%); family member's wish to

control parent's lives (11%); and overt hatred by family members toward parents (7%).

Ten parents (16%) described a history of poor relationships with their family members. Nola, 27 and single, said that her relationship with her mother had always involved a lot of fighting and disapproval. Pat, 23, could not trust her mother with her children because she felt that her mother was "...not like a normal everyday grandmother." She commented: "She won't interact with her grandkids...how hard is it to pick up your granddaughter or grandson, put them on your lap and read a book? ...She doesn't even do things like that".

Betty, 29, had tried to maintain relations with her family but failed. She "closed the doors" on her family who did not show any interest in her welfare. She said, her mother was "too busy" and, even if she called and left a message, her mother never returned her calls. Esther, 32, divorced, and Joan, 43, married, had siblings living in town but it was difficult to have positive relationships with them and their families because of minimal contact and no reciprocity. Poor relations with family members caused some anxiety to parents. Joan, 43, was concerned that her two children would not know their grandparents; her father, in particular, had only seen her daughter twice.

Ten parents (16%) felt that the conflict in their relationships with their family of origin resulted from disagreement with the choices they made in their lives. For example, family members confronted them about their parenting styles. Lara, 28, said that her parents continually nagged her to learn about parenting

because they felt she was not a good mother. However, as a mother of three, she felt:

I've raised [daughter] who is 12 now, and I've done a pretty good job myself. It just bothers me, because they talk about how I should be treating my kids and meanwhile, they didn't do a pretty good job themselves...I don't like them at all, I want to live my life and be happy. I don't want to have somebody telling me what to do in life. Because nothing – nothing I seem to try to do makes them happy.

Wendy, 37, living common-law, had conflict with her parents when she was single and decided to keep her unborn child: "...right from the beginning they didn't want me to have my son and all I heard was, 'Why don't you adopt him out, why don't you adopt him out?'"

Another point of contention with family members was the choice of partners. Jenny's situation demonstrated how family members became estranged when they did not accept her partner. She was keeping her distance from her three brothers and three sisters because they didn't like her husband. Although Jenny, 32, missed her family she felt that it was "...not worth having them if they're going to judge you by seeing your partner." Also, Ruth, 30, said her father was always putting her boyfriend down because he came from a family with a history of alcohol abuse.

Regarding disagreements around lifestyle choices, seven parents (11%) mentioned that some family members pressured them to conform to their ways of thinking. However, as Melinda, 38, separated, noted, "...pressure from family members is unhelpful". For Melinda, a similar attitude from her ex-husband compounded these pressures of being told "...what to do, or what you should be doing, or what you're not doing". Some parents felt that the only way out of this

pressuring environment was to stay away from their families of origin. Ruth, 30, was frustrated with the arguments between her boyfriend and her father, and felt that she would have to give an ultimatum to her father to make a choice of blessing her relationship or staying away.

Parents felt that their families did not believe in their abilities, and did not listen to their points of view. Moreover, disapproving family members began to take over and control their lives. Some family members even opposed them to the extent of reporting them to the CPS. Abby, 39, married, felt that her "...grandmother is taking full control, and it's not a nice feeling. I am feeling forced out of the marriage." When Abby tried to stand her ground, her grandmother phoned the CPS. Lara, 28, was very stressed with her family who frequently called the CPS about her: She noted: "It's pretty stressful when you think they are family [and] they should help...But if I talk to my parents, they don't want to listen".

The rift between Lara and her extended family was widened further when she felt her brother and CPS colluded to take her children away:

It's hard to think that your brother can take your two kids away, and CAS allowing it. [I have] a lot of hate feelings towards it. I said [to brother], "You can't take the kids!" and he said, "You watch, I'm taking the kids. They're not coming back with you."

Finally, four parents (7%) felt that family members acted in hateful ways toward them and their children. Nellie, 24, said that her boyfriend's mother "used to watch him beat me up and didn't care...I was like a maid, like Cinderella." Daisy, 37, noted that when she was out of town for the weekend, her apartment was ransacked. The landlord had contacted her mother who knowingly

misinformed him that Daisy had gone “out West” and did not tell her mother when she would be back. As a result, the landlord changed the locks and Daisy could not get into her own apartment upon her return. Daisy felt that her mother’s behaviour towards her was an “act of hatred.”

Parents further noted their children experienced hatred or favoritism from extended family members because of their gender or parentage. Pamela, 27, believed that her mother was vindictive toward her son because he was a “male child”, and Lara, 28, felt her family was malicious toward her son because he had a different father from the other two children. Lara felt this stigmatized her son, undermined her status with her daughter, and fragmented the relationships among her children:

And they tell [daughter] that [son] is not her real brother...you don’t tell kids that, because it weighs on them. I think that’s why they fight...I saw the kids weren’t getting along, because [daughter] got things from my parents [and the son] didn’t...and he got grounded, but she didn’t...And [daughter] would call them [grandparents] and ask them to help me out, talk to me, because I’m going crazy...and that’s the reason they would phone the CPS...I think that destroyed the kids too.

Places of Belonging in the Community

A fourth area of support mentioned by thirty-four parents (56%) was having places in the community where they felt they belonged. Parents used these places as resource for supplementing material needs, emotional support, expanding their network of friends, recreation, personal growth, and spiritual healing. These places (such as churches, Rotary Clubs, support circles, fitness centres, parks, schools, and libraries) were sought according to the sense of belonging, warmth, and acceptance that they offered to parents and children.

Place of Worship

Twelve parents (20%) mentioned being connected with their church groups. For some, church was a family tradition that they liked to continue; for others, it was a relatively new experience. This was a place in the community where parents and children could regularly participate in spiritually healing services. Parents' feelings about going to church included "it makes me feel complete," "everything in my life has a meaning," "it makes me feel better to take [my son] because it makes him feel better," "God watches us," "I can turn to him and say things and he answers me," and "I am powerless to my drug problem - God is my power". Angela, 41, married, found security in carrying God in her heart all the time:

It's extremely important to me. It's everything to me. Without it, I'm nothing...I have an inherent feeling of nothingness...this inherent feeling of "I can do nothing", that damn voice that says "you're not good enough". Having God there makes it make sense. It fills something that is empty, bleak, vast emptiness.

Parents said their churches organized many leisure and recreational activities for their children. These were safe places of healthy fun for children that parents could access. Dorothy, 47, sent her son to different church-organized groups, such as the "youth group" and "kid church" where they did "fun things" like "jello contests." She felt that the pastor was protective of her child, who had a disability, and noted that the pastor organized bus transportation.

Church was also a place where parents felt "warmth" and a welcoming environment, where they were accepted unconditionally for who they were.

Sheila, 31, separated, was infused with the “acceptance” and “overabundance of love” which helped her to come out of her shell. She joined a church with her four children and started teaching Sunday school. She described this experience: “Wow! I felt so good about myself. I noticed a big difference in my children in the way they behaved. I could see how good they felt, and the way they talked to me – there was more respect”.

For a few parents, involving themselves in the care of other children built their confidence, raised their self-esteem and taught them new skills. Marilyn, 18, became involved with her church through “Adventure Zone”, a program for kids 5 – 14 years. Very soon she became a leader of all the ten-year old girls. This raised her self-esteem and helped her to develop personal skills in working with children as Marilyn noted: “I like it. It makes me feel like somebody. Like the kids, when I get there, they’re all saying ‘Mrs. [____]’.” You kind of have control and they do what you say. It’s cool. It’s like having ten kids instead of one”.

At church, parents found friends who were helpful and empathetic with their situation and facilitated further community contacts. Angela, who lacked confidence in looking for a job, was advised by a church friend to call another church member who had some seniority in his place of work and assisted her to find a job: “He got me right in. I was so thankful for that, because I was so afraid of going after a job. How am I going to do this? You know, I’m at home...I got the job”!

Church members were also a resource for material needs. Dorothy, involved with CPS for 10 years said: "If it hadn't been for the church last year, I wouldn't have had any Christmas gifts at all. A bunch of friends got together and gave me six hundred dollars". Georgia, 42, found her pastor's role very valuable in connecting her family with culturally sensitive services to prepare them in a crisis. They were able to locate Christian counseling and host families for their son, who was mandated by CPS to be removed from the home and separated from his brother. Georgia and her husband were thankful that they could ease their son's traumatic separation from family by maintaining some faith and community involvement.

Other Places of Belonging.

Twenty-two parents (36%) identified other places of belonging in their community that facilitated their spiritual and emotional well-being. Fourteen parents (23%) mentioned their participation in therapeutic leisure activities such as social clubs, gardening, reading, writing, poetry, song, dance, walks, computer, TV, and exercise. Nine parents (15%) reported benefits from places where they worked or went to school.

Stella, 39, divorced, was a dedicated walker at lunch time as she could not afford a gym membership. She found exercise very therapeutic and used every opportunity to work out, bike, swim, and canoe. Grace, 32, found the park in her neighbourhood a place where she could vent her feelings in isolation: "And if I'm

angry, well, the paper just happens to get a little more deeply embedded by the pen. No problem because that's my private journal".

Natalie, a single mother, found the public library a rich resource for books on parenting. Vanda, a widowed mother of three, loved her weekly visit with a group of single mothers, where she could release her stress:

And they know what the stress of it is all about and we basically discuss what our problems are, and go over things to try and find different ways to handle situations differently, rather than getting all upset.

Parents who enjoyed their school or work places described a sense of achievement, support and friendship from people they came in contact with, and an outlet from pressures at home.

Tess, 23, said that her children always came first but she needed that "six to eight hours of mental stimulation that has to do with some form of intellect. I get to relax when I'm at school – my mind is in exercise instead of my body."

Arthur, a young single dad, found good mentors in his teachers and football coach:

I used to hang out with bad kids in a bad area and my teachers would say 'You're a fast runner, why don't you join track?' And then they pushed me into sports, and the stability of schoolwork and going to sports gave me that focus and dedication...and I had my football coach--[when my wife left] he was like, "Well, what do you think your Dad would do [if his wife left]?" And I was like. "Probably keep the kids", and he goes, "Well then, there's your answer."

Melinda, 38, who had just had a baby and gained a lot of weight, found that working kept her active, gave her a break, helped to "bring in a few pennies" and "meet people". For Grace, 32, her job of "delivering a measly newspaper" gave her exercise, served as a distraction from her life at home, and provided an

opportunity to socialize. She noted: “[I talk with] people who are sitting out on their verandas or some people will come right out of their house because they see me coming and they’ll sit and have a conversation”. For Paula, 40, divorced, having a paying job made her feel “more of an equal” – it gave her a voice and showed her worth: “I set up this computer program, things that I didn’t even imagine that I could do and I was just incredibly proud of myself”.

Summary of Formal and Informal Supports

Parents reported that, in addition to CPS, they accessed supports from social service organizations, friends and neighbours, extended family members, and places of belonging in the community (e.g. church, Rotary Clubs, fitness centers, park). This support was essential for preserving emotional health, supplementing material shortages, providing shelter, expanding social networks, and providing opportunity for recreation and leisure. In addition, the parents’ community was instrumental in facilitating personal growth, academic learning, jobs, spiritual healing, and a sense of belonging.

While 74% of parents identified one or more extended family members who had been a source of support in their difficult lives, 30% of parents identified an extended family member who had been unhelpful, and 15% of parents said they had received no support from any of their family of origin. Parents felt that the lack of support from family members was due to a history of poor relationships that made it difficult to trust, family members’ disapproval of their lifestyle and partner choices, family members wanting to pressure and control parents’ way of life, and

family members showing an overt dislike toward the parents and their children.

A substantial number of parents (85%) reported accessing professional and social supports from service organizations in their community. The main services they used were counselling, income supplementing, parenting groups, daycare, daily living supplements, respite, and shelter. Parents used social services, other than CPS, in times of crisis revolving around a need for shelter, respite, income, shortage of food, children's challenging behaviours, relationship breakdowns, and health complications. While a majority of parents (52%) found these services were helpful, 36% encountered many challenges and disappointments in accessing services. This was as a result of fragmented, inflexible, and mismatched services, long waiting lists, unhelpful service providers, and a feeling of stigmatization for using certain services. Hence, while many parents reported that, while services helped to diffuse stress, build skills, and strengthen personal growth, others experienced the services as residual, and disjointed, making them ineffective in addressing underlying complex problems. It was clear, however, that social service organizations were a necessary and integral part of community supports for parents in the study.

Parents' Experiences with Child Protective Services

Positive Services Experiences

Many parents mentioned CPS workers who made them feel supported and valued, and approached them respectfully. These workers made them feel supported and valued by: making good referrals; being emotionally supportive;

providing concrete help. Respectful approaches included explaining CPS processes and limits, and allowing parents some choice in how services were delivered. Moreover, some parents mentioned foster carers to whom they were grateful for being good to their children, and who welcomed the parents to be included in their children's lives.

Feeling Supported and Valued

Good referrals by workers were mentioned by 21 parents (34%). These included: arranging for their children to go to daycare, camps, counseling, education, psychological assessment and treatment, temporary placement, as well as referring parents for psychiatric treatment. Emma, 31, married, sought help from CPS after she had broken her son's crib in anger, and was given a number of helpful referrals:

When I told them how angry I was...they gave me names of the mental health clinic; I got a counselor, I got support in for the child, I got...you name it, I got it on a silver platter. They were so willing to help me and so understanding.

Emotional support was mentioned by 19 parents (31%). They appreciated workers who: listened to and gave recognition to their feelings; praised them for seeking help; responded promptly to phone calls; were non-judgmental; and supported them in parenting their children. Paula, 40, divorced, recalled her first encounter with her worker: "As soon as she walked in the door, she said, 'I'm really sorry about this. I can tell that it's been very hard on you...I will make it as easy as I can. We have to follow up all calls and I will have to speak to the

children.” The worker spoke with the children separately but, as Paula said, “...was very quickly back to me.”

Concrete help was mentioned by 16 parents (18%), including help in obtaining money, food, and shelter, as well as in-home help with children. Dorothy, 47, divorced, was enthusiastic about the “Family Preservation” workers who came in to help with her children who were often angry and aggressive: “...the third one came and just spent a lot of time with [youngest son]. And they were great...they were wonderful!”

Respectful Approaches

Explanations of processes and limits was mentioned by nine parents (15%). Their anxiety was relieved when workers explained agency processes, and/or reassured them when they did not intend to take their children. Denise, 16, single, recalled that, instead of taking her baby, the worker “supported me...explained things to me like she’s not coming here to take him away—she’s here to explain stuff.”

Allowing choices was mentioned by six parents (10%) who said their workers had given them some choices, including: the timing of appointments, the kind of help parents wanted, and the selection of a foster home for their child. Betty, 29, living in a common-law union, expressed appreciation for CPS because, “They’re asking me how I need help and listening to me.”

Good Foster Carers

Seven parents (11%) expressed their appreciation of foster carers who were good to their children, or included the parents in their children's lives. Kathy, 34, married, was grateful to a foster carer couple, both teachers, who helped her children with their special educational needs, even after their return home: "[Male foster carer] came here to help us with the way he did homework with them. Then we just watched on...that helped. They were very helpful with us and great to the kids...the kids just loved them!"

Negative Services Experiences

The negative experiences with CPS, as described by parents, fell into four broad categories: "omission of services," feeling unfairly treated, feeling harassed, being traumatized by CPS taking their children; and concerns/complaints about foster care. These experiences might be expected to arouse fear or anger in parents, and some of them expressed such feelings directly.

Omission of Services

Parental comments reflecting omission of services included: being initially defined as ineligible for service; receiving less help than expected; and feeling depersonalized by worker turnover.

Ineligibility for service was mentioned by nine parents (15%), who recalled being told, when they first requested help, that they were not eligible or would

have to wait for services. Jane, 25, married, called for help saying she had “a child who I’m going to hurt and I don’t want to, but I’m losing it here. And they gave me a few numbers and that was about all they did. ...If you weren’t beating your kid they didn’t have time for you.”

Receiving less help than expected was mentioned by 32 parents (52%), who were disappointed in the CPS response to their requests for services. Their concerns included: difficulty in accessing or communicating with workers; scarcity of counseling and in-home services; and little help for children with special needs. Daisy, 37, separated, was shocked that no one visited her for five months after her three children were returned: “I could have been doing anything [to them]. [During the placement] I was never allowed to have them on my own.”

Feeling depersonalized by worker turnover was mentioned by nine parents (15%) who felt frustrated or deserted by the changes. Nellie, 24, commented on her most recent change of workers, when the previous worker quit the agency after a month: “I was getting sick of worker after worker...because they ask you the same questions over and over again...none of them really knew me.” Jodie, 41, married, had a supportive worker, but she left the agency: “I kind of felt we were deserted.”

Unfair Treatment

Parents who felt unfairly treated included those who felt they had been unfairly judged, given too little information by CPS, and misled or betrayed.

Feeling unfairly judged was mentioned by 19 parents (31%), who felt the agency had been too critical of them or set unfair standards. Lara,

28, living common-law, was upset that CPS had a history of her life and seemed to use it against her: "...I don't think that's right...they should bring up my whole life history." Hanna, 22, living common-law, felt the agency judged her too quickly: "I admit my place was messy, but if they had given me a little time to prove that I'm not a neglectful parent, I wouldn't be in this trouble right now."

Receiving too little information was mentioned by 16 parents (26%) who said they were not given adequate explanations of how CPS functioned, or were not given important information about their children in care. Nola, 27, single, had her children taken away, and was confused about how to obtain information from the agency:

I don't even know who I'm supposed to speak to [among different workers] ...they didn't tell me the rules of the organization...they just had the audacity to take them [her children] like that...I thought they would come to your home and talk to you.

Stella, 39, divorced, was upset that she was not allowed to see her file: "You're not allowed to see your file—you don't know what other people have said about you, or what's written down about you. I was livid about that. 'Don't tell me that I can't see that—that's about me!' As a point of information, there is legislation in Ontario to support this right to information, but anecdotal information, in addition to this research, suggests that agencies are reluctant to share files with parents.

Some parents were upset that they were not told about the foster home where their child was placed, or not informed when their children had problems in care. Sandy, 22, single, found out her daughter was in hospital when she came

for her regular visit. Georgia, 42, married, was upset that she wasn't told her son was changing foster homes until the day before his move: "There was no input as far as we were concerned." Moreover, the worker with whom Georgia talked could tell her nothing about the new foster home, because another worker had arranged it.

Harassment

Parents who felt harassed spoke about being scrutinized, invaded, threatened, attacked, or harassed.

Scrutiny was mentioned by 13 parents (21%), who felt uncomfortable about close monitoring of their parenting behaviour, or resented agency involvement in their visits with children during placement. Wanda, 20, single, had bad memories of being videotaped through one-way glass before her infant son was taken away from her:

They [police were involved] were in the other room with a video camera watching us... it felt like the whole day, and then finally they said, 'Okay, we're taking (son) into custody,' and that's when I broke into tears and I said, 'Listen, I almost died for this baby, why would I ever want to hurt him.'

Other examples of scrutiny were having their food supply checked, and being questioned about the suitability of their friends and relatives to care for their children. Elise, 25, single, objected to the agency's rule that people who supervised her children should have a police check: "...if you're going to ask my friends if they have charges against them, most of them do...my father has been in jail most of his life, and I'm not going to stop him seeing his grandchildren."

Regarding the monitoring of parent-child visits, Kathy recalled, “A worker was behind the glass where nobody could see her...they were taking notes of what we [she and her husband] said and did—it was like you were in prison.”

Feeling invaded, threatened, or attacked by CPS was mentioned by 20 parents (33%). They felt invaded when workers interviewed their children without their knowledge, arrived in their homes with an officious manner, or took a police-like approach to searching their homes. Stella, 39, divorced, recalled: “I was very offended at the fact that, they just yanked my kids out of their classes, and interviewed them behind my back. I felt raped.” Bart, 34, a divorced father, said the worker came “...storming in, ‘Have the kids got food? Have the kids got clothes?’...she went right through the whole place, checking.”

Parents described threats that invoked the fear of losing their children. Melinda, 38, separated, said she had refused to talk with a new CPS worker (her third different worker) arguing that her son was soon to be admitted to a children’s mental health centre, and the worker countered with, “Would you prefer to tell this to a judge?”

Being harassed was mentioned by 10 parents (16%), who felt that CPS approaches were oppressive or controlling. Hanna, 22, living common-law, felt the agency expected too much: “One worker comes in one day and then a worker comes out the next day and...we’re expected to go to “Healthy Babies, Healthy Children” [a weekly prevention program] and this is too much.” Hanna also resented what she viewed as workers’ attempts to control her:

...constantly handing me these schedules for housework...I don’t need that stuff...I do know how to clean my house...and this

schedule saying 12:00 is my bedtime and I have to get up at 7:00 in the morning...like they're telling me what to do, when I can do it, how I have to do it and how I have to live...

Feeling misled or betrayed was mentioned by 10 parents (16%), who felt the agency had not been open with them during the investigation or decision-making, and another three (5%) who spoke of being betrayed. Examples of being misled included being pressured to sign voluntary care agreements to avoid court; being reassured that children would be left at home or placed only briefly, then having them removed or kept for a longer time.

An example of betrayal was when parents shared information with a worker and found the information was later used against them. Hilda, 23, living in a common-law union, felt misled about reassurances she was given about her daughter's placement:

They had promised me that [daughter] would be coming home that night...[after visit to hospital] they said that they were keeping her. And I said, 'You told me that if nothing was wrong she could come home.' They said, 'I'm sorry, we have to protect the children first and we were trying to calm you down at your house.' Which I didn't think was fair—they lied to me.

Tess, 23, single, felt betrayed when her CPS worker spoke in Court about disclosures Tess thought she had made to the worker in confidence:

I told my social worker about my past suicide attempts [five years earlier]...so she could better understand why I sympathized with my boyfriend's suicide attempt...and she put this into documents [for court]...I'm a completely different person today...and she had the nerve to put my suicide attempts in those legal papers...she was grasping at straws to put in anything negative she could and that's how I took it.

Tess's feeling illustrates the complexity of the CPS worker's role as both helper and authority figure. The worker might have minimized Tess's sense of betrayal by explaining to her in advance why she felt she had to put this information in her Court affidavit.

Traumatized by Sudden Apprehension

Eleven parents (18%) spoke about the sudden apprehension of their children and the traumatic effects on them. Some would have liked a chance to call in a supportive family member to avert the need for placement. Four of the eleven families (7%) objected to the public manner in which their children were taken and/or the number of people involved, including police. Kitty, 38, single, recalled: "They came into the mall, in public, and snatched my kids right out of my hands...having people see this and having them ripped out of my arms and being treated as if I was a bad person...I ended up in hospital for a long time."

Pat, 23, married, described having her infant daughter taken while she was still in hospital after giving birth: "...the [CPS] worker came back with three police officers, three nurses, the 'head honcho' guy from the hospital and they took my daughter." The involvement of police created a nightmarish scenario for Hilda, 23, in a common-law union, described:

They came here with four police officers pounding on our door...they surrounded him [her boyfriend] and two Family & Children's Services [CPS] workers were on each side of me, and they said they were taking [daughter] to the hospital.

Anger and fear about CPS interventions could be inferred from many of the parents' reports; however there were only seven parents (11%) who

expressed anger directly, and three (5%) who expressed fear. Regarding anger, Kathy, 34, recalled: "They brought a detective in...they asked me all these questions about [son] having marks on his fingers. At that point I just wanted to shoot them all." Fear was expressed by Freda, 32, single: "You think nightmare things—'Oh my God, Children's Services are going to come in and take my children...you always hear of horror stories and people telling you..."

Concerns/complaints about Foster Carers

Concerns about foster care included: dissatisfaction with the care given to their children, parents feeling excluded themselves, lack of satisfying access, and difficulty with children after placement.

Serious dissatisfaction with the care their children received was expressed by four parents (7%). Christine, 39, divorced, visited her son's foster home and described it as "gross," because of many pets and their excrement, as well as "...empty beer bottles all over the place." Kitty, 38, single, noted that her two boys, 3 and 4, appeared "scruffy" and unhappy on her office visits with them, and was suspicious that they might be sexually abused in foster care.

Feeling excluded or denigrated by foster carers was mentioned by six mothers (10%). Pamela, 27, separated, felt threatened by the foster mother "having my girls call her 'Mom'." She asked the foster mother not to do this because "...that's messing up their heads." The threat was increased for Pamela by her knowledge that the foster carers had made an attempt to adopt her daughters. Melinda, 38, separated, felt denigrated by her son's foster mother who "told me I was a rotten mother and used swear words with me."

Limited access to their children in care was mentioned by six parents (10%). Complaints included: the foster homes were too far away; the agency gave them too little time with their children, or interfered with the visits. Pat, 23, married, felt deprived of being with her infant daughter, with whom she had three two-hour visits per week: "I never got to be with her for the first six weeks of her life...it was extremely hard." Pat was also uncomfortable that workers were "watching me through a glass" when she was lying on a couch with her daughter, talking to her, and rubbing her head.

Difficulty with their children after intervention or placement was mentioned by five parents (8%). Jane, 25, married, recalled: "...my oldest daughter just broke down into tears, when she told me the CPS had come to the school and interviewed her and her sister." Jane said her younger daughter, 6, became

...ten times worse for me [after the interview at the school]...They told her what a mom can and can't do...she told me she was going to run away...she had her bags packed and was going to my girlfriend's house.

Kathy felt undermined by the treatment her children received by foster carers who had more resources than she did. She had the impression that the foster carers bought a toy for her children on every visit to the grocery store; on their return home, the children continued to expect these treats, and Kathy had to explain that she couldn't afford them.

Qualities of Worker

Parents made many comments about the positive or negative qualities they perceived in their workers.

Positive Qualities

Parents mentioned the following positive qualities that they appreciated in workers: caring (51%); genuine (43%); empathetic (31%); exceptionally helpful (18%); non-judgmental (13%); and accepting (10%).

Caring

Thirty-one parents (51%) identified aspects about their worker that made parents feel cared about, particularly during their most difficult times. These workers made special efforts to support them during crisis periods, and provided instrumental help such as organizing Christmas gifts, bringing groceries, baby formula, and baby food. With regard to support, Wendy, 37, recalled:

She took me,...she talked. We worked things out when I was going through difficulties...at one point I just wanted to give up everything...and she was right there for me.

Not surprisingly, instrumental help was especially valued, as noted by Tanya, 24, single mother of one:

Then we had this one worker who came in every week...and said, 'Oh how's everything doing' and she brought formula every time she came –baby food for him and things like that, every time. And she just said, 'What's the problem, any problems or anything?'

Similarly, Tess, 23, noted: "She was willing to help. There was one incident where I got myself in a situation where I didn't have groceries for myself, so she brought me some. She brought the blanket that's on the couch for [daughter]. She's a great person."

Jenny, 32, mother of two, commented on the help her worker provided during the holiday season: "She [worker] had us through Christmas, and she

asked me to make out a list for the kids, for Christmas, if they wanted something special...which was pretty nice.”

Finally, the worker’s caring was evidenced by particular actions such as spending time with the parent and making special efforts, so that the parent felt supported, as observed by Marilyn, 18:

So she took me to the place. She talked to me all the way there, and it was a twenty-minute drive. I thought, ‘Okay, now you’re just going to drop me off, I don’t know any of these people and all that,’ but she didn’t. She came in, talked for a few hours, and got me settled.

Genuine

Twenty-six parents (43%) identified aspects of worker’s behaviour that related to being genuine: being down to earth, not belittling, keeping parents informed, having a sense of humour, being relaxed, and being ‘like an old friend.’ Dorothy, 47, divorced mother of three, commented: “[The worker] tends to come in, and she basically has a really good sense of humour. I really appreciate that.” Midge, 39, observed: She was just like somebody who you could sit down and talk to, it was just like...a friend—an old friend.

Having a worker share relevant personal information gave parents a sense that the worker was being open. Nola, 27, a single mother of two, said: “[The worker] called me and said, ‘Okay, my daughter is going into labour any day now, so I’ll be off for the next couple weeks’...that was very nice of her to call me.”

Bonnie, 38, married with two children, described her worker as being down to earth and open about sharing information:

...he was very good...[son] really liked him. He [son] thought [the worker] was like a big buddy. He was so down to earth with us, he

wasn't like a phony, trying to be this big office guy, he wears regular clothes, very relaxed, tells you how it is, doesn't try to put out a phony thing. Like [son] is really trying to push things lately and he [worker] lets you know what's going on, he's not hiding anything. And that's good because we need to know that, and we'd always have that contact where if there was an incident where [son] came for a weekend visit and something went on, I'd let [worker] know. And they would work with it that week.

Empathy

Nineteen parents (31%) identified aspects of their relationship with workers that indicated empathy: the worker seemed to be 'on their side', seemed to 'feel for them,' shared some of their (the worker's) own experiences, and gave them positive reinforcement. Kathy, 34, married mother of 3, noted: "The one we started with, she was very understanding. This was the Intake worker. She was more on our side as well."

The importance of workers understanding the parent's life situation was conveyed by Pat, 23, who noted: "She [the worker] does feel for me, she does feel for our situation, and everything. She has been good."

Parents appreciated workers who provided positive feedback, as indicated by Tess, 23, a single mother: "...it was just very positive—she was very positive. She emphasized the good things, and she didn't always agree with some of the views I had, but for the most part she tried to understand." From the last statement, it is evident that workers could be viewed as empathetic even when they did not agree parents on everything.

Workers sharing relevant personal information contributed to parents having a sense that they were understood. Sheila, 31, mother of four, commented:

I think part of it was because I knew she was a parent herself, which makes a difference for me. I don't know why—just because they know from first hand, not just observing from somebody else. She can relate more to some things that were going on in my life.

Fay, 32, a single mother of two, had a similar opinion: “She was a single mom too, so I guess we had more things in common. So it made it easier to talk to her, and just to get it off your chest, you know.”

Exceptional help.

Thirteen parents (21%) noted that some workers did more for them than expected, by offering concrete suggestions, advocating for them, going out of their way to find suitable resources, and providing help for children's problems. Kitty, 38, single mother of 3 noted: “She was very useful—she gave me [information about] some situations that I had never thought about, or things to do that I never considered that might work for me.”

Dorothy, 47, mother of three, felt that workers did a lot for her, because she realized they were overburdened:

...I mean, I called them, they came out and started the ball rolling and everything ... they did all the work. I think there's too many children and not enough workers. So, a few times they've called and said, 'We know we're supposed to meet you this afternoon and can't come, an emergency came up, we have to go to Court.'

Hilda, 23, described the worker's perseverance in advocating for help for Hilda's mentally challenged child, thereby ultimately helping Hilda:

... the [worker], she's nice... you get some of them that are mean, and you get some of them that are nice. They understand you and they're concerned about you and they're willing to help you and not willing to destroy your family. They're just there to help. That was what she was like...she put up with my bad attitude. She persuaded me into going for things with her that I didn't want to. Like getting her [child] tested for autism. I didn't want to do that at first and she said 'Well maybe we could try, you don't have to, but it won't hurt'.

Listening

The worker's ability to listen to the parent's story was identified by 11 parents (18%) as contributing to a positive relationship. It made parents feel respected and valued, and gave them the opportunity to tell their side of the situation. Angela commented: "I felt like she was listening to me, and she believed me, and that my side of the story was being heard. If I had to listen to all this, then I better get to tell my side too.

Sometimes parents felt that it was the first time they had really been heard. Natalie, 32, a single mother, stated: "Well, I felt for the first time, I felt that somebody was actually listening to me." Wendy felt similarly:

...she listened to me. She didn't jump in like the other workers and say how it is. She listened and understood what I was saying.

Non-judgmental

Eight parents (13%) made favorable comments about workers who did not judge them or 'put them down'. These workers appeared to remain neutral, encouraging parents to sort out differences, and not placing value judgments on the parents. Ruth, 30, with two children, recalled:

She didn't come in and say these are the parents and you're the kid so they're right and you're wrong. It was more like, 'This is her story and this is your story, so put them together and get along, you have to live together, so you're going to have to get along.' ...the workers are not there to judge you or to put you down. They're there to help you.

Carrie, 41, commented on her relationship with her worker whose non-judgmental attitude made her feel: "... a lot more comfortable. If I had a bad day with her [child] I could say, 'You would not believe what that kid did to me today' and it was just comfortable talking to him." Valerie, 18, put it very simply: "What was helpful was basically that she never judged me".

Accepting

Seven parents (10%) appreciated workers who accepted them, treated them with respect, 'like an adult', and approached them with encouragement, rather than scrutiny. Wendy, 37, described her worker's accepting attitude:

...she used to catch me in lies a lot ...but then I stopped all that...and got back on track but...she was good to me. I used to smoke dope and she knew I did ...and I would never deny it to her, you know what I mean. One day I tried to deny it to her, but she could smell my apartment, so how are you supposed to deny it? But that was the only bad thing that I had at that point when she was there ...and she just says; 'Work on it, you'll get through it, you can quit.'

Negative Qualities

Parents mentioned the following negative qualities in their workers: judgmental (46%); cold and uncaring (44%); poor listeners (38%); critical (38%); and insincere (20%).

Judgmental

Twenty-eight parents (46%) felt their workers passed judgment on them without acknowledging the limited choices the parents had in their lives.

Judgmental attitudes were inferred by parents from: workers' tone of voice; their physically checking the home; and accusing parents of mental or emotional instability. Being judged by workers was especially threatening to parents in view of the worker's power. Pat, 23, shared her interactions with a worker in this regard:

She told me, 'You realize you're never going to get your daughter back until you admit the truth?' I am admitting the truth—my husband only hit me once, and my husband is not an alcoholic, like a diehard alcoholic. He does have a drinking problem, not a major one, but he has slowed down.

Cold and Uncaring

Twenty-seven parents (44%) spoke about their workers being cold and uncaring, describing them as rude, abrupt, unhelpful, and showing a lack of concern for the parent's feelings, e.g. when removing a child. Christine, 39, mother of five, recalled the insensitive words of the worker who removed her children:

"Oh, well, just consider it a long vacation," she said, "You could use one." You don't go saying that to a parent. And she was a parent herself—that's why it took me off guard. I thought to myself, you must be a real "bimbo". But that's what she said. "Consider it a long vacation." I said, "I don't want a long vacation...of any kind."

This uncaring attitude was captured by Melinda, 38, separated mother of three:

"Every emotion is getting torn apart and I'm going crazy and she's asking for my address. So—'unfeeling' is what I felt."

Pat, 23, had a sense of coldness from her worker when he took her baby into care: “He did not show that he cared at all. He was more concerned with taking the baby...they should have more feelings towards the people they are working with.”

Not listening

Twenty three parents (38%) felt that workers did not listen to them, describing workers as being preoccupied and busy, only interested in questioning while not listening to the parent’s answers. Georgia, mother of 2, spoke about her experience regarding her child in foster care:

That was one of the frustrations that we found—“We’ve known this child for a few years, we do understand what you’re dealing with, please accept some of what we’re saying, and you know act on it, rather than waiting until you find it.”

The parent’s sense that workers were not listening tended to invalidate the parent’s relationship with, and knowledge of, the child, and to prevent the formation of a positive alliance that could result in case resolutions.

Not listening was also linked to not providing concrete help, as noted by Lara, 28, a mother of three who recalled: “I find her just – telling us what to do – she’s not helpful, she complains every time we ask for a voucher, and it’s like she doesn’t want to listen to our feelings or our thoughts or anything.”

Parents’ desire and need to have their full story heard was captured by Sheila, 37, mother of four: “I feel really frustrated because they don’t realize... they just look at the small picture.” In a similar vein, Emma, 31, commented: “...

it's like they're not even paying attention to you half the time that you're talking to them."

Critical

Twenty-three parents (38%) commented on workers being too critical of them: Being "one-sided" and not allowing parents any "say"; not seeing the parent's viewpoint; making parents feel as though they were on trial; only focusing on the negative and not mentioning the positive, particularly in written court documents; constantly bringing up past problems; and not understanding the life problems confronting the parent. Lack of understanding of the many problems confronting parents is commented on by Nellie, 24:

...but when it came to [the worker] who was about my age, she didn't have a clue what was going on. She would sit there and say, "...Oh, it's not that hard". And I said, "Are you a mom?" She said "No.". And I said, "Well, you don't know what you're talking about."

Kathy commented on the tendency for workers to be negative: "Everything's negative, so how is the family supposed to get anywhere when they put nothing positive in [worker's written statement for Court]? So of course the judge is going to see negative."

Laurie, 23, noted the feeling of being extremely criticized by her worker: "He just made me feel like I was on trial." Sheila, 27, also commented on how critical her worker was:

My worker, I know, doesn't have children. To have your own children or to read a book, I know it's different. [If you] have your own children, especially to deal with the difficulties that my two have, you would understand more instead of being so critical.

Insincere

Twelve parents (20%) felt that their workers were insincere. Parents described workers as sarcastic, devious, or “conniving,” and withholding information from the parents. At worst, they found it unconscionable for workers who were in communication with the parents, yet would apprehend a child without the parent being forewarned. Sarcasm in the worker’s tone was perceived by Lara, 28, mother of 3, who disagreed with her children’s worker that their counseling could be discontinued:

I said, “Well, they should go a bit longer as they need it.” And she said, “Well, I can't force them.” I said, “Well, when they come home, I'll be bringing them to counseling,” and she said, “Well, good luck to you.” You know, like she's sarcastic.

Parents’ negative reactions to sudden apprehensions have been discussed earlier – these experiences caused parents to distrust the workers involved.

Court Experiences Causing Delays

Eight parents (13%) identified that delays in court had a negative impact on the family. Parents noted that adjournments of hearings delayed the return of children home, that court was sometimes delayed because of lack of preparation by CPS, and that delay in getting the initial hearing was extremely painful, as it prevented parents from seeing their children after the crisis of an apprehension.

Parents were concerned that the lack of visitation, especially after the initial apprehension, affected the parent child bond. Kathy, 34, noted:

It took a whole year for the kids to come home... So that took a little longer, we went back to court in December. We had to get the court remanded to another date and there was something else

where we had to be remanded again. The papers weren't in or something. It was remanded to January, then they took another four months to bring the kids home. Went back to court on May 23rd, and that's when they came home. So it was a tough year.

Lara, 28 noted the impact of the adjournments and the delays on the children:

The only thing that upset me was they said it would only take six months, but it took a year, because of the court and stuff. They kept remanding it, when the CAS didn't have all their paperwork done. It took a year. And the kids were quite upset about that too, because they figured they were coming home in six months.

Wanda, 20, raised her concern about the impact on bonding with her son resulting from a Court-related lapse in access after the initial apprehension:

They give you five days to get a lawyer and everything prepared and stuff, then you need an extension because the lawyer doesn't have all the papers and you've just received them. We had the baby taken away on a Friday and on the weekend there's no lawyer's offices usually open so we had to wait until Monday. We had to go into the legal aid office and get legal aid and get a lawyer for Court on Wednesday. The lawyer just said, "Well, I'll put it off and you know, we'll get an extension on this, and I'll get everything ready and we'll find out what happens." And I agreed to that but that was basically the end of a whole week and finally I got to see my son after spending a whole week away from him. They only want to give me visitation for one day a week for one hour and that's not enough time to bond with my son.

Betty, 29, expressed her distress at court adjournments due to CPS not having their paper work completed:

They weren't ready for Court, they didn't have the papers, so the children did not get returned to us. They said they just didn't have enough time and I guess it's quite normal that it's presented to get remanded the first time. We didn't even go into the Court room. They just went in to say they were not ready.

Betty talked at length about the many adjournments before any decision was made in her situation. As with the other parents, Jodie, 41, commented on the

how long the Court process took: “And the whole process, it’s just been dragging on it seems to me, because they’re saying it was something in the past.”

Likewise, Nellie, 24 expressed her frustration at the number of adjournments:

“And we went to Court, and it was adjourned. I asked my lawyer ‘why do you adjourn, why don't you let me say what I wanted to say?’...I must have gone to Court so many times – to the point where I was blue in the face.”

Positive Court Experiences

Eleven parents (17%) recalled their Court experience as positive. Parents noted that the judge was responsive to and asked for their input, sided with the parent, instead of with CPS, and reprimanded CPS for having insufficient information to bring the matter to Court. Others said that the judge sided with them, by ordering access of the child by the parent when CPS was requesting no access, and in some situations the judge gave positive feedback to the parent about their parenting.

Marilyn, 18, was impressed with the judge for asking for her input and for giving her a chance:

When we went to Court, it was always, “What do you want to do,” instead of, “This is what you are going to do.” [The judge] would say, “She’s doing what she has to do, you’ve shown no reason why we need to take [son].” And everybody agreed. The judge said “Fine.” They stamped the papers and that was it.

Bonnie, 36, who felt empowered by the judge’s decision, noted:

Then I started to clue in, like you [child’s father] are not going to be controlling. I didn’t ask you to push me completely out of his life. So we had gone to Court and a judge had ordered that this is joint custody, and any decisions that pertain to [son’s] education, his

health, his mental capacity, were always to be confirmed by both parents.

Arthur, 27 also appreciated that the judge appeared to see his point of view:

They [CPS] were really mad at [children's mother] and I guess at the Court they tried taking it out on me too and the judge said, "Well, what does he have to do with any of this? It wasn't he who applied, it was she." And so they said, "Well, you know, all right." The judge told me "Goodbye--have a good life. Children's Aid, you leave him alone."

Kathy, 34, noted the supportiveness of the Court:

They were 100% supportive. They were more or less on our side. That's when they [CPS] changed. They made a new plan and said "This is what we're going to do for the next six months." Our lawyer said "four months," and they agreed on that. It went really well.

Wanda, 20, noted both her anxiety and relief that the judge was fair in her situation:

I ended up winning him back because they had nothing on me. The judge awarded me custody and I was so nervous, I was throwing-up and running back and forth from the Courtroom to the bathroom because I wanted my baby back so much.

Betty, 29, commented on the judge's decision being fair:

The judge really felt that they didn't have enough. There wasn't much stated. It was to the point that she said to me, "You need to start staying overnight and just get ready to move back in." It was really quick, it was very easy.

Nellie, 24, also noted the judge as being fair:

She [the judge] says, "I have a feeling you guys are incorrect on this one." She told me to stand up, so I did and she said, "I'm pleased with you. You've done a lot to show that you are a caring, considerate mother," and I started crying. And she said, "You can have your daughter back under a supervision order of CAS." Which meant I'd still have a worker come in once in a while to check up on me for six months.

Summary of Parents' Experiences with CPS

The number of parents who spoke about referrals and concrete help indicates that agencies had a good awareness of the resources available to meet the many needs of these families. Parents appreciated referrals that enabled them to access daycare, counselling, assessment, and/or treatment for themselves or their children. They also benefited from concrete help, such as food, shelter, and special education for their children. It was noteworthy that many parents spoke about the emotional support they received from workers, in a context where the agency's role often generates fear and hostility. In particular, the two CPS agencies in the study were, as most other Ontario agencies, going through a period of increased workloads, high worker turnover, with the added stress of heightened government monitoring and public scrutiny. Yet some workers were able to develop trust and warmth in their relationships with parents, despite these tensions and pressures. Parents particularly appreciated workers who listened to and heard them; although this may seem to be an overused cliché, parents gave concrete examples of when they felt heard. Workers who showed caring and empathy in specific ways were also appreciated. Staying with a parent longer than expected during a stressful time, calling to cancel an appointment, and sharing some personal information in a way that showed personal vulnerability were all noted by parents as positive qualities that were appreciated.

Respectful approaches to parents are especially important in a CPS agency, which has tremendous power to engender fear and powerlessness in families. Thus, it is significant that some parents felt they were given good explanations of agency processes, including reassurance about agency intentions regarding their children.

Finally, parents spoke positively about foster carers who treated them well, were good to their children, and taught them better ways of relating to their children. A good relationship with foster carers can help parents to feel more positive about the agency in general, and can also allay fears about their children being lost to them or alienated from them. As agency practice does not usually encourage an inclusive approach by foster carers, it seems to have been the individual carers who reached out to these parents.

Many parents described negative experiences with CPS interventions. Concerns around “omission of services” reflected the rationing of services at a time when agencies were experiencing high demand and limited resources. It is painful for families to be denied help because their child is not yet being abused, to experience minimal contacts with workers, and to have a trusted worker replaced with a stranger. It might be helpful to these parents to be reassured that their requests and expectations were legitimate, but could not be met because of limited resources. This approach might minimize the parents’ sense that no one cared about them or their children. As for worker changes, these are sometimes caused by unavoidable staff turnover; however, some CPS agencies have built in changes as part of worker specialization, e.g. a new worker takes over when a child comes into care. Losing a worker can be a crucial event for vulnerable

parents who are undergoing a crisis in their lives, and their perspective should be considered when weighing the costs and benefits of a specialized service system.

Parents' sense of being unfairly judged, denied information, or being betrayed reflected the agency's mandatory function, which gives them great power over families, and creates understandable fear and anger in parents. Specific qualities of workers such as appearing cold and critical, particularly when removing a child from the care of the parent, and coming across as insincere were noted as hurtful qualities of the worker. It is understandable that workers would pay greater attention to children during the tense time of an apprehension of a child, however, spending extra time, and taking time to support the parent could alleviate some of the concerns noted. From the parents' descriptions of positive experiences, it is clear that some workers are able to soften their intervention with a gentle and understanding approach that recognizes how difficult the encounter is for parents. Often the same parent spoke positively about one worker and negatively about another, demonstrating that the parent had an open mind toward CPS and would respond well to respectful and supportive treatment.

Workers should make sure that parents have sufficient information about how the agency functions, how their family situation is being viewed, and knowledge about their rights. An innovative practice, such as Family Group Conferencing provides a structure that gives parents this kind of information and encourages them to consider all possible alternatives for the better care of their

children. When it is necessary to make public the agency's negative view of a family in Court, workers should prepare the parents for what they will hear. During placement, workers should always inform parents as soon as possible of important developments in their children's lives, such as hospitalization or a move to a new placement. Respectful treatment along the way can help to reduce parents' feelings that the agency is working against them, and enhance their sense of working as partners in the interests of their children.

The parents' sense of being harassed, and being traumatized by removal of their children, seems to reflect the increasing tendency for CPS workers to model themselves after the police, in carrying out their role. The benefits of approaches such as searching a family's living space are probably outweighed by negative effects on the worker-parent relationship. Moreover, the practice of involving multiple authority figures in confrontational apprehensions may ensure that the agency is able to take children into care with minimal resistance; but it creates a nightmarish scenario for both parents and children. Anecdotal evidence from children who have been part of such apprehensions indicates they often feel they have been kidnapped, and have great difficulty in accepting their placements.

Parents' concerns about foster care should be taken seriously. Agencies sometimes have to use marginal homes, because of the chronic shortage of family caregivers. Parents can provide a different perspective, to help workers ensure that adequate care is given to children in a particular foster home. Agencies should encourage foster carers to include parents in their children's

lives: positive reports in this study showed that inclusion can generate appreciation and sense of partnership in parents, which is likely to be experienced as supportive by children. Workers can assist foster carers to be more understanding toward parents by pointing out the larger context of the parents' lives, especially their earlier lives, that has made it difficult for them to become good parents. Finally, foster carers who are inclusive of parents are more likely to keep parents informed about their children, to facilitate increased access, and to maintain some involvement when children are moved back to their own homes.

From the reports of these parents, it is clearly possible for CPS workers and foster carers to develop positive, supportive relationships with parents. It seems that the burden of carrying out CPS functions without adequate resources causes some workers to abandon their social work knowledge and skills, so they become more confrontational and police-like. The workers who had a positive influence on parents were able to establish relationships characterized by caring, and respect, so that parents and agencies could work collaboratively in caring for children in need of protection.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As we examined the extensive data these parents provided, about their histories, daily lives, and interpersonal relationships, we were struck by the barriers they faced in trying to raise their children. Many of the parents in our study did not have a good beginning to their own lives, long before they became

parents themselves. They were often lacking positive models in their families of origin that would help them to assume adult roles. Over 1/4 mothers reported being abused by their parents and almost 1/5 had parents who were substance abusers. A number of parents spoke of the difficulties of being raised in one-parent homes. A number left home at an early age, because of conflicts with their parents. About 1/3 reported dropping out of school and 1/6 mentioned early marriage and/or parenthood. These disruptive early experiences and their doubts about the models provided by their own families meant that many parents lacked a solid foundation for beginning to parent their own children. Despite this, the positive comments of parents about their current families indicated that they were strongly invested in caring for their children, and appreciated any support they received, informally or from agencies such as CPS.

In their daily lives, many of the parents experienced difficulties with their intrafamily relationships, as well as their physical and mental health. Mothers spoke about unsupportive partners, or men who oppressed or abused them, often physically. Substance abuse, physical illness, and mental health were each problematic for about one third of families, respectively. Poverty was an issue for almost 40% of families, and the search for security led over half the families to make frequent moves. Conditions that were largely outside the parents' control—socially toxic neighbourhoods and isolation—were each mentioned by about one-quarter of families. Similarly, unemployment affected one in every five families; and disability, affected one of every ten. Moreover, parents were struggling with children's emotional and behavioural problems, including the after-effects of

experiencing and witnessing abuse, unusual aggressiveness, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, and developmental delays. These problems with daily living reflect the challenging backgrounds of these parents, ever-present conditions such as poverty and socially toxic neighbourhoods that undermined their efforts, and the cumulative effects of these conditions on their children.

Understandably, the families we interviewed would require a great deal of support to overcome the conditions described above. Our findings show that, while considerable support was forthcoming from formal and informal sources, this was probably insufficient to counteract the interactive destructive effects of the conditions described above. Most of the parents (85%) did access some formal supports from the community, usually at times of crisis, caused by lack of money, health emergencies, partner abuse, and unmanageable child behaviour. Half the parents were satisfied with the help they received, while over a third was disappointed, especially because they experienced the services as fragmented and unresponsive. This may be partly related to the crisis nature of their help-seeking. Considering their circumstances, many of the families needed services that were targeted to their special needs and sustained over time, rather than ad hoc responses to crisis. They could also have used support, possibly from CPS, to target the appropriate agencies and follow through on their help-seeking efforts: some parents mentioned the fear of being stigmatized by approaching certain agencies, while others felt they were denied services that they needed.

Regarding informal supports, parents in general can usually get the help they need from family and friends, when they are temporarily overburdened. For

the families in this study, many of whom were chronically in need of support, their family and friends may not have extra resources, may be tired of providing help, or may have serious struggles of their own. Thus, it was not surprising that 15% of parents reported they had received no help from their families of origin, and 30% felt undermined by at least one family member. On the positive side, three-quarters of the parents mentioned support from their extended families and two-thirds mentioned support from friends. This support, however, was clearly not enough, as so many families sought formal support with ongoing crises in their lives, as well as becoming involved with CPS. The potential goodwill and resources of family and friends might be harnessed in a more effective way by CPS workers taking some leadership, e.g. bringing people together in a “wraparound approach” or using family group conferencing. There was no mention of these methods being used with the families.

Given the long-standing challenges in their lives, and the seriousness of their problems that led to CPS involvement, parents’ experiences of intervention are crucial in determining whether they can be helped to provide ‘good enough’ care to their children. Because our data-gathering was parent-centred and relatively unstructured, we do not know how many of the 61 families had children in temporary care; but there was no evidence that any of these families had permanently lost their children. Ideally, CPS should focus on garnering enough support for families so that parents are able to meet their children’s developmental, behavioural, and emotional needs. As the type of CPS support most often mentioned by parents related to successful referrals and concrete

help with necessities, this suggests the level and range of their needs that were not met by the formal and informal supports they accessed independently. The emphasis on referrals and concrete help is also consistent with parents' most commonly cited negative evaluation of CPS, i.e. the omission of services they had hoped to receive. The unmet emotional needs of parents are also demonstrated by the high value they placed on emotional support, even when it came from workers who potentially had the power to break up their families. Although they received some emotional support from family and friends, they clearly needed a great deal of nurturing. Mothers, in particular, who live with unsupportive, oppressive, and abusive partners, and are trying to raise their children in environments that can be unsafe, depressing, and demeaning, require sustained and generous emotional support. When this was not forthcoming from CPS workers, and instead more demands were made on the mothers for better performance, many of them felt unfairly treated and harassed. Some of these negative feelings might be prevented if workers explained to families the limitations under which their agencies are presently functioning, thereby acknowledging that they can only provide part of the help the family requires, and that workers are often too overwhelmed themselves to provide the emotional support the parents need and deserve. As the workplace study that was part of our larger Partnerships Project indicated, many workers are experiencing "burnout" that cripples them in engaging with families. It would help parents' self-esteem to hear this from their workers, rather than to interpret "burnout" behaviour as an indication that they are not worthy of workers' time and emotion.

From another perspective, worker behaviour that is viewed by parents as unfair and harassing may be related to the workers' frustration of working with unsupported and oppressed mothers, who are often overwhelmed by the challenges of parenting difficult children. In informal discussions with workers, we have sometimes sensed this frustration, and we recall it from our own front-line experiences. It may be helpful to view these parents holistically, recognizing that their limitations are understandable, in view of their histories and the barriers they face in their daily lives. We were surprised to find so many positives in the parents' descriptions of their family lives—neighbourhood relationships, family recreation, and mutual support between partners in caring for their children. As an intervention strategy, positive reinforcement to parents about their successes would encourage them to expand the satisfying aspects of their lives, as well as strengthening their self-esteem.

Despite difficult working conditions, over half the parents identified their workers as portraying the essential elements of a good social work relationship. Over half viewed their workers as caring, over two-fifths described their workers as genuine, 30% noted empathy, almost one-fifth mentioned good listening, and one-fifth praised their workers for providing help beyond their expectations. These testimonies from parents show that many CPS workers are able to maintain their professional skills and attitudes, despite an increasingly stressful working environment. It is hoped that the data we have gathered and analyzed, from parents receiving CPS services, can be used to convince government

standard-setters that accountability through form-filling should not be the main activity in a good child welfare system.

References

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SOCIAL WORK



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