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Towards a path of Personal Growth:
A qualitative study on the effects of Parent Effectiveness Training beyond communication skills

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Abstract

Most studies on parenting intervention courses focus on their effect and effectiveness in relation to specific areas of interest. In this study, the Parent Effectiveness Training (PET) workshop is examined in a more holistic manner, in an attempt to shed light on its role as an agent of personal growth. Applying the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) paradigm, six semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore in depth the personal experiences of six mothers of similar socioeconomic background who met the study criteria and successfully attended and completed the workshop. The participating mothers, pre-workshop, showed high levels of stress, disillusionment and disorientation. The analysis reveals that their controlling aspect was a major influencing agent in compromising the wellbeing of the family. Post-workshop accounts showed apparent and clear trends towards less control, better problem solving capabilities, improvements on levels of emotional wellbeing and a shift towards warmer and more secure relationships. It is believed that these results were attained through a process of change and becoming, which took place at a deeper experiential level, sensitizing the participants' level of awareness, empathy, congruence, acceptance and respect. This suggests a process of personal growth in line with the principles of the Humanistic approach and philosophy, which goes beyond the mere attainment of communication skills.

1. Introduction

In my very first steps as a counselor I was often faced with clients who were expressing feelings of despair and intense worry concerning the well being of their children. They appeared very confused in dealing both with daily issues and more complex or crisis situations. As a person-centered counselor I was not supposed to intervene, guide or advise my clients, even though at times I felt that a very simple solution was at hand. Therefore I had to force myself to silence and remain loyal to my active listening skills, much to the frustration of my clients and their desperate need for helpful and concrete advice. My clients' expectations, coupled with my own feelings of frustration, drove me to become actively involved in the Thomas Gordon parenting program, Parent Effectiveness Training (PET) (Gordon, 2000).

To become a PET facilitator was not a simple task at the time. Although no such training was available in Greece, I was determined enough to go through all the necessary motions to be trained and certified across the Atlantic in the USA. Looking back at events, I believe what drove me to get involved in PET was something more than my desire to be of better service to parents who felt lost in their parenting role. Somewhere deep down lay a conviction that if parents could raise their children in a healthier manner then maybe their children would suffer less, not only as children and adolescents whilst under the family roof, but as adults. It seemed to me that preventive measures were a sound alternative to corrective measures.

The feedback I have been receiving from PET-trained parents made it evident that the Gordon Model delivered a very useful set of communication skills, which not only dealt with every day practical problems, but also played a crucial role in establishing warm and caring relationships and taught parents to deal more effectively with intricate situations. I also came

to realize that the Gordon model offered something of more essence and depth than a mere set of useful communication skills. It introduced attitudes emerging from Carl Rogers' humanistic philosophy, which are necessary if the skills are to have a real impact in the short as well as the long term. If parents were prepared to embrace the philosophical aspect of the Gordon model by recognizing its seed in themselves, then their skills would evolve as a natural consequence of their stance towards life. Workshop after workshop I witness parents embracing these principles with a sense of relief, as if they recognize not only the wisdom entailed in them but also an intrinsic connection to them.

Within my role as facilitator of PET I came to realize that parents were not only reporting very positive feedback in their daily parenting issues, but also showing changes in their general outlook and attitudes, and making important realizations about themselves, their children and their relationship with them. It seemed to me that something of greater significance was taking place during the sessions, which I can only describe as parents undergoing a process of personal growth. To name but a few changes, parents seemed to become more open, receptive, self aware, sharing, honest, accepting, willing to recognize the wider picture; less authoritarian and consequently more democratic, willing to recognize and defend their needs and to support mutuality and cooperation; willing to explore their values, even modify them and to be more open and accepting of the unfamiliar. In addition, parents reported that such changes were affecting not only their parent/child relationship but also relationships with friends, other family members, colleagues and acquaintances.

It became evident that a large number of parents attending PET workshops were not just developing communication skills in an uninvolved and detached manner, following a set of prescribed and rehearsed motions, but also developing as persons. What drove me to this research topic was a need to check this impression of mine against the actual experiences of

parents. Such a finding would shed light into the qualitative attributes of PET as a means of assisting parents in a more profound way. McLeod (2011) in his opening chapter describes the benefits of qualitative research in terms of providing ultimately better service to clients by enhancing our knowledge on a particular field of interest. Consequently a qualitative approach seemed the most appropriate vehicle in an attempt not only to capture their experiences, but to also honor the views of those most affected by a parenting program, namely the participating parents. If it can be substantiated that there is some truth in that PET workshops may also have personal growth effects, then such knowledge may serve for further research into assessing parenting workshops and planning of such.

2. Literature review

The following section is divided into 4 sub-sections each dedicated to specific fields of interest relevant to this research. No study was found that directly deals with parenting programs in relation to their effect on personal growth and thus the first section deals with articles that portray the direction pursued by the vast majority of research pertaining to the effectiveness of parenting programs. Considering that PET is a non-punitive model of rearing children, it is also compared to the notion of Authoritative parenting as expressed by Baumrind (1991) to clarify any misconceptions about similarities and differences. The second section is devoted to the notion of personal growth as conceived by two prominent figures of Humanistic psychology, Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. The third section deals with the effects a group may have on its participating members. This is relevant to the PET workshops, as these are interactive workshops, which usually involve six to twelve participants. Finally, the last section is meant to assist the reader to achieve a better understanding of the underlying theoretical background of PET and the main principles leading to its implementation.

2.1. Parenting programs, parenting styles and the Gordon model

The majority of research on parenting programs deals with their effectiveness with respect to the teething problems that inevitably unfold within family relationships. It concentrates mostly on parenting programs for effectiveness (Herman et al, 2011; Sanders, 1999; Robinson, Robinson, & Dunn, 2003), or with measuring the efficacy of a particular parenting model in dealing with a variety of problem situations, such as substance abuse and academic achievement (Cohen, 1997; Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts & Fraleigh, 1987), or promoting desirable behavior patterns on the part of both parents and children (Lundahl, Risser & Lovejoy, 2006).

A number of studies concentrate on the effects of PET in the rearing of children. One of the major concerns of PET is to promote family democratic processes and PET proves effective in curbing authoritarian attitudes (Mitchell & McManis, 1977). In another study the results indicate that PET helps parents adopt healthier attitudes towards their children with beneficial effects on their children's self-esteem (Cedar & Levant, 1990). Sensitizing parents to become more empathic is also an important aim of PET. Therien (1979) concludes that, parents attending PET, not only become more empathic but achieve long lasting results. Wood (1985) concludes her study with the suggestion that PET is an effective answer to both authoritarian and permissive parenting, and a potent agent of better relationships. Davidson & Wood (2004) report on the positive results observed when students and school aged children adopt skills that are taught in PET workshops.

Amongst the numerous parenting programs, PET and Nonviolent Communication stand apart from the rest of the programs in that they don't advocate any use of parental power whatsoever (Lemmens, 2011). Even highly acclaimed programs such as STEP, Triple P, *Parenting with Love & Logic*, *Active Parenting Now* and *How to Talk So Kids Listen and*

Listen So Kids Will Talk make some use of parental power (ibid). Lemmens reports of an online poll and a study, both of which portray how ingrained spanking is in our culture as a measure of discipline. The poll took place in 2005 (ABC News, 2005) and the recorded percentage of spanking approval by parents reached the astonishing figure of 65%. Similar trends, albeit better, were obtained in the study, whereby the "offending" parents engaged in regular spanking exceeded 50% (Taylor et al., 2010).

Other studies make comparisons and draw conclusions on variations of impact on families of different socioeconomic structures and levels of education, demographic constructs and cultures (Leijten, Overbeek & Janssens, 2012). Pinsker & Geoffroy (1981) make a comparison between PET and a Behavior Modification parent training workshop. The results show that both workshops are effective but in different fields of concern, with major differences on the direction of the intervention. The Behavior Modification model concentrated on techniques that would bring about direct changes in the behaviors of children, whereas the PET model concentrated on changes that parents would bring about on themselves with respect to their own communication skills. In effect, the Behavioral model assumes that the children are in need of some "fixing" whereas the PET model assumes that the communication patterns of the parents and consequently those of their children need "fixing". This is a major difference in stance with regard to the direction of the intervention, i.e., in the former the intervention is externalized towards the children as opposed to working on one's self first and, by extension, on one's children through modeling, influencing and teaching, as in the case of PET.

In an extensive study by Baumrind (1991), a number of parenting styles were rigorously compared to establish the impact each style may have on forming various characteristics of a child's personality. Examples of such characteristics were autonomy, social consciousness,

maturity, resilience, optimism, competence, achievement, self-regulation, conformity, emotional balance, and propensity towards alcohol and drug use. The results, although not totally one-sided and conclusive across all attributes, favored the authoritative parenting style including armoring against alcohol and drug use. It is interesting to note that Baumrind uses two behavioral parameters - demandingness and responsiveness - to arrive at four parenting styles as summarized in the table bellow:

Baumrind's Parenting Styles

	Demanding	Undemanding
Responsive	Authoritative	Permissive
Unresponsive	Authoritarian	Disengaged

Table 1

Authoritative parents maintain high scores in demandingness and responsiveness: demandingness in the sense that children are required to abide by parental requirements and responsiveness in that their needs and emotions are catered for. Although punitive measures are not used indiscriminately and "unreasonably" they are not ruled out as a means of discipline and are deemed necessary under certain situations including physical punishment. Authoritative is not to be confused with Authoritarian parenting. Authoritarian parents demand blind obedience and will readily use punitive measures to make sure the rules are adhered to; on the field of responsiveness their score is extremely low. Permissive parents are on the opposite side of authoritarian. They have very few expectations on the one hand and are very responsive on the other, producing a general feeling of laxness. Disengaged parenting is diametrically positioned to authoritative parenting. These parents are

uninterested to either offer nurture or make demands on their kids. Children of disengaged parents generally feel neglected and unloved.

Although the Gordon model may also be regarded as a balanced model in terms of demandingness and responsiveness, there are important differences on two fronts: the underlying philosophical stance and issues of implementation (childrearing practices), namely the *why* and the *how*.

On the first, the Gordon model is based on the principles of the Person centered approach, according to which respect of our fellow human beings constitutes a fundamental non-negotiable position. Any and all disrespectful acts cannot be and are not supported or recommended. Baumrind's parenting model is based on the notion of the optimal child outcome. Baumrind in her article titled "The Discipline Controversy Revisited" (Baumrind, 1996, p. 405) points out that the "desirable child outcome" will determine the "consequent childrearing objectives". For example, socialization is an important aspect of the optimal child outcome. In effect Baumrind maintains that if we can decide as a society what final product we want, i.e. what adult we desire at the end of the production line, then we can readily program the production process to handle the raw materials, i.e. the infants. Although this may be a pragmatic way of looking at parenting, it totally lacks the human element. Children are not a commodity for shelf display and consumption. This is not to say that parenting models should not have objectives but that both the objectives and the childrearing practices should be the outcome of a particular philosophical and ethical stance.

With regard to the second implementation, the Gordon model exhibits a sophisticated system of communication skills with two aims of equal importance: firstly to be effective in obtaining the objectives and secondly to attain them in a manner that is in full compliance

with the stipulated philosophical stance and ethical values. Punishment, therefore, in all its forms and manifestations not only is excluded as a means of obtaining objectives but is not necessary. This is in contrast to Baumrind's model of authoritative parenting which relies heavily on the behavioral paradigm of control and reinforcement. It is interesting to note that Baumrind (1971) observed that a number of parents under study would not fit any description according to the familiar four parenting styles mentioned earlier. She addressed it as the harmonious parenting style, which was characterized by high warmth, moderate control and high tolerance. The sample of parents was small and their children consisted of six girls and two boys. The results obtained were very similar to those obtained under authoritative parenting. Baumrind considered this as an anomaly and didn't take much notice of it. The notion of tolerance attains a prominent position in Greenspan's (2006) three factor model of parenting. He adds tolerance to Baumrind's two factor model of control and responsiveness to support a parenting model, the evidence of which, Baumrind so conveniently dismissed as an anomaly. Wood (1985) suggests that the harmonious parenting style resembles PET. Perhaps so, in that PET is closer to the harmonious style than the authoritative. However, PET as an approach, is not a particular advocate of tolerance. The word tolerance has endemic the connotation of forcing oneself to be lenient or permissive or turning the blind eye. This would go against the philosophical grain of the Gordon model, which abides with the principle of congruency. Gordon explicitly addresses permissiveness in a question and answer section to clarify any possible misinterpretations of his parenting model (2000, p. 5):

Q: *Is this another permissive approach to raising children?*

A: *Definitely not. Permissive parents get into as much trouble as overly strict parents, for their kids often turn out to be selfish, unmanageable, uncooperative, and inconsiderate of the needs of their parents.*

Q: *Will parents lose their influence [ ]? Will they abdicate the responsibility to give guidance and direction [ ]?*

A: *[ ] Later chapters [ ] deal with how to modify unacceptable behavior of children and how to influence them to be considerate of your needs as parents.*

On the issue of punitive measures there is considerable debate between the opponents and the advocates of such measures. An interesting study (Wegner, 2005) titled "Discipline in the Book of Proverbs: To Spank or not to Spank", favors spanking and mentions both Gordon and Baumrind. The Book of Proverbs, as one of the Wisdom Books of Hebrew Scripture (including the Christian Old Testament), unfolds a number of statements, which make it very clear that punishment is an appropriate disciplinary measure. This study concludes with nine guidelines relevant to spanking as recommended by The Family Research Council. All nine statements deal with how spanking should be properly delivered and the epitome of these nine sentences comes in the last (2005, p. 732) which goes as follows: "Hugging the child afterwards [after spanking] is recommended". Interestingly enough, Wegner mentions in the opening paragraph (2005, p. 715) a quotation from Gordon: "If parents could learn only one thing from this book, I wish it were this: each and every time they force a child to do something by using their power or authority, they deny that child a chance to learn self-discipline." Gordon is only mentioned to display opposites in parenting practices, starting from Watson's warning to parents not to display their love towards their children, through Benjamin Spock's more balanced approach between loving and disciplining, and ending with Gordon's model that "strongly discourages disciplinary measures". In the conclusion of the same study, Baumrind is quoted: "I am not an advocate of spanking, but a blanket injunction against its use is not warranted by the evidence. It is reliance on physical punishment, not whether or not it is used at all, that is associated with harm to the child". This statement sounds quite mild compared to how she presents her views on punishment in her article "The Discipline Controversy Revisited" (Baumrind, 1996, p. 412). She leaves no doubts about the use of punishment and goes to huge lengths to defend punitive measures, including corporal punishment: "Authoritative parents endorse the judicious use of aversive consequences, which may include spanking". Baumrind's article is an ambitious and well presented attempt to defend the indefensible. According to the Gordon model, spanking even in its lightest form together with all other forms of punishment are unacceptable as a disciplinary tool. On a similar note, Baby (2013) argues that the recommendations for harsh disciplinary measures as portrayed in the Old Testament can only be interpreted in a metaphorical sense and thus although disciplinary measures are necessary, these should be always seen in the spirit of the teachings of Christ, which necessarily exclude all kinds of punishment.

In recent years, there is a strong and increasing movement against violence and all its related expressions. The "anti-spanking" front has an important ally, the United Nations, which through its Committee on the Rights of the Child (UN. Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007) makes it very clear what constitutes corporal punishment:

"The Committee defines 'corporal' or 'physical' punishment as any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however, light. Most involves hitting ('smacking', 'slapping', 'spanking') children, with the hand or with an implement – whip, stick, belt, shoe, wooden spoon, etc. But it can also involve, for example, kicking, shaking or throwing children, scratching, pinching, burning, scalding or forced ingestion (for example, washing children's mouths out with soap or forcing them to swallow hot spices). In the view of the Committee, corporal punishment is invariably degrading. In addition, there are other non-physical forms of punishment which are also cruel and degrading and thus incompatible with the Convention. These include, for example, punishment which belittles, humiliates, denigrates, scapegoats, threatens, scares or ridicules the child."

It is evident from the above definition that "innocent" disciplinary measures such as timeout or forcing a child to stand facing a wall for periods of anything between a few moments to a few hours is also cruel and degrading.

Gordon's views are supported by a growing number of non-punitive child raising models and non-violent movements that form a credible attempt to offer alternatives to the outdated punitive models of discipline. For example, along the line of PET communication skills are Judy Arnall's disciplinary tools detailed in her book "Discipline without distress" (Arnall, 2007) that can effectively promote discipline, putting aside punitive measures altogether.

Rosenberg (2003), who studied under Carl Rogers, developed the Nonviolent Communication process (NVC), whereby people can strengthen their relationships by surrendering their "ammunition", applying principles of respect and becoming sensitive to their empathic cords.

What differentiates PET from the majority of parenting programs is its departure from the behavioral paradigm and its opposition to all punitive and/or "violating" actions, however light or severe. Its effectiveness relies solely on developing and maintaining caring and nurturing relationships. This attribute of PET may be particularly conducive to assisting parents towards their personal growth. The focus of this research will concentrate on how parents perceive their experience of attending a PET workshop and whether this experience can lead to a claim that beyond improving their parenting skills, parents are motivated to go along a journey of personal growth. Therefore, this research will not evolve around the effectiveness of the program but on its effect on parental attitudes and behaviors in terms of personal growth. Underlying this statement is a claim that PET workshops have a twofold result: In the first instance they have a problem-solving effect that benefits both parents and children in their every day and long term dealings, which is the outcome of adopting particular communication skills, and in the second instance they have a personal growth effect that is the outcome of the philosophical stand and values underlying PET, namely that of the humanistic orientation. The core philosophical principles and the proposed skills of communication come hand in hand, as the skills taught are only the natural extension of a specific internal state that is governed by exactly those philosophical principles and values that are imbedded in the Person-Centered Approach. Carl Rogers' three core conditions (Rogers, 1989), which are necessary to encourage psychological growth in person-centered therapy, are embedded and present in every aspect of the PET workshop. Thomas Gordon, a student and colleague of Carl Rogers, had the insight back in 1962 to incorporate the person-

centered principles in a structured, workable and clear but at the same time sophisticated parenting program. Gordon's approach emphasizes effective communication and problem-solving skills (Gordon, 2000). Active listening is at the core of this model, in a commitment to develop strong relational ties. His book presents "a comprehensive philosophy of what it takes to establish an effective *total relationship* with a child, in any and all circumstances" (Gordon, 2000, p. 5). The quality of the relationship is of utmost importance and the proposed communication skills have a twofold purpose: to serve the relation long-term and to assist the parent in dealing with the family problems and challenges.

2.2. Personal Growth

It is important to establish the context within which the wording "personal growth" will be used in this study. Pertaining to counselor and psychologist training, and a general consensus that therapists should undergo some sort of personal development, Irving & Williams (1999) make a clear distinction between personal development and personal growth. Both concepts involve a process of change and of "becoming", as well as the acquisition of knowledge; however, personal development is more focused on specific knowledge, can be planned and attained through training and one can be aware of it happening, whereas personal growth is more holistic, it occurs as a result of one's experiences and one may become aware of it in retrospect. Personal growth, however, may be closely linked to personal development, in that by pursuing personal development (through training), personal growth may be attained as an outcome. In addition, personal growth implies a value statement of a positive connotation and thus presupposes adherence to a particular theory or philosophy (ibid, p. 521):

> *"The concept of growth or growing only makes sense, then, in terms of some particular philosophy. It deals with the general, be it a person's place in society, the cosmos, or his/her relationship with his/her God. Hence growth is always to be judged against some higher-order criteria. In contrast,*

development is a much more down-to-earth term, where criteria may be both

more specific and more transient."

Another concept that requires some clarification is self-awareness. Donati & Watts (2005) in their review of the relevant literature, conclude that self-awareness constitutes a goal for personal development, as well as a vehicle in attaining it. In addition they postulate that self-awareness may be manifested in different fields of interest to include inner self-awareness of the more fluid human operations, such as, thoughts, feelings, sensations, needs, fantasies and so on; self-knowledge of aspects that are of a more permanent nature, such as, personality traits, values, attitudes and interests; and outer self-awareness to describe awareness of one's behavior and sensitivity in realizing how others perceive this behavior. However, self-awareness may not necessarily lead to personal development. Mearns (1997) argues that self-awareness alone is not sufficient and that it is the first of a three stage process, to be followed by the stages of self-understanding and self-experimentation.

It is important to remind the reader that PET stands for Parent Effectiveness Training and it is about training parents to become more effective in their parenting role. It concerns, obviously, training of parents and not of counselors; however, it seems plausible that the above principles may be relevant to PET.

The notion of personal growth is closely related to the characteristics of a fully functioning person as described by Rogers. These characteristics can be briefly described as follows (Rogers, 2004, p. 187):

> *"An increasing openness to experience"*, this is to be aware of one's experiences and feelings and to be able to work through negative feelings without being defensive.

"Increasingly existential living" - to live in the here and now and adapt to it, not get stuck in the past or lost in the future.

"An increasing trust in his organism" - to think, feel and act in ways true to one's whole self, according to one's own values, perceptions and needs.

It is important to note the wording that Rogers uses when referring to these qualitative characteristics. "Increasing" indicates movement as opposed to a static state describing achievement. Even the slightest movements towards the specified directions indicate change and constitute a small step towards what Rogers calls the good life (ibid, p. 186): "The good life is a process, not a state of being. It is a direction, not a destination". Thus these notions are directional and qualitative, and do not constitute a call for reaching a finishing line.

Personal growth can also be seen in terms of Roger's theory of the seven stages of process, which stages form a trend during therapy that leads to personal growth (Merry & Lusty, 1993):

Stage one: clients are quite defensive, rigid, unwilling to talk about themselves and open up. At this stage a person would be unwilling to undergo therapy unless required to do so.

Stage two: their discussion evolves around events and others without relating to their own emotions and issues. One would expect them to be less rigid but have the tendency to deny responsibility and blame others or the environment for any misfortunes they may be experiencing.

Stage three: clients are more apt to discuss about themselves but in a somewhat detached manner. They will talk more about the past than the present, especially when it concerns feelings. They approach the world in terms of black and white, failing to perceive the numerous tones of grey.

Stage four: clients discuss deeper feelings of their past and may explore present feelings but in a more cautious and timid manner. Clients may start accepting responsibility, spotting patterns, relating to their therapist.

Stage five: they discuss present situations and emotions and are more willing to explore their inner self. Present feelings are not so threatening and can be brought to the surface to be attended and processed.

Stage six: clients can be congruent about experiences that were denied and blocked from awareness. Their awareness is more holistic than fragmented. They are more understanding, accepting and nurturing to themselves and others.

Stage seven: client can continue growth in an independent and autonomous manner without facilitation. Realized changes are there to stay and further advancements are possible. Client has sufficient internal processing skills to deal with life, emotions and situations. Client is confident, self-directed following his own locus of evaluation and free from fixed ideas of the past.

These stages point towards being more open to examine important issues, to be less defensive, to be able to examine one's own thoughts, feelings and behaviors; to be able to get in touch with one's deeper emotions, to have an increased readiness to accept responsibility, to become less rigid and to be able to look at matters from different points of view; to have an increased willingness to explore issues that may be daunting or threatening, increased self-awareness, awareness of how one relates towards other human beings and the environment, becoming more empathic, looking after one's own needs and those of others; becoming more independent in decision making and freeing oneself from rigid constructs, social pressures and prejudices, developing one's own internal guide and following with more confidence a personalized internal wisdom.

The notion of personal growth is also associated with Abraham Maslow's notion of self-actualization (Maslow, 1970) and his theory of hierarchy of needs. According to Maslow, self-actualized people share certain characteristics (Schultz & Schultz, 2013, p. 253):

Clear perception of reality

Acceptance of self, others, and nature

Spontaneity, simplicity, and naturalness

Dedication to a cause

Independence and need for privacy

Freshness of appreciation

Peak experiences

Social interest

Deep interpersonal relationships

Tolerance and acceptance of others

Creativeness and originality

Resistance to social pressures

In addition to these characteristics it is important to look at Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs. In summary, for someone to reach self-actualization it is necessary to fulfill his human needs at various levels. In this process, reaching self-actualization requires that the needs at the various levels are sequentially attained starting at the first level concerning the physiological needs, through the safety, social, esteem and finally self-actualizing needs. It is thus important to consider the effect of PET workshops in supporting parents to fulfill such needs. In the actual world these needs are interrelated and interwoven, meaning that the intricacies of how each of these needs is fulfilled will affect the attainment of needs at other levels. For example, a person's work is imminent to his physiological needs considering that a great part of his income is spent for goods necessary for his survival, such as food, shelter,

heating etc. However, the conditions of work may be related to adjoining levels of needs. Working under conditions of high stress and insecurity will affect safety needs in terms of the need to be free from psychological fear. If work environment with colleagues is highly competitive and hostile, then social needs within the work environment will be threatened and unfulfilled. Similarly, a mother who experiences high levels of stress in the upbringing of her children, may feel inadequate as a mother (social and esteem needs), fearful of the future (safety needs) and unfulfilled as a human being (self-actualizing needs). Another point to consider is that often parents in their endeavor to fulfill one particular need may undermine another need. Often enough the undermined need is more crucial and fundamental and parents who don't realize this are sacrificing higher needs to attain lesser needs. For example a mother who is worried and preoccupied with school performance may sacrifice her relationship with her child through threats, punishments, heated conflicts and alienation. Her need to fulfill her esteem needs (a good mother has to ensure academic excellence for her kids) is undermining her social needs (harmonious, loving and caring relationship with her family).

The use of Maslow's theory to help make sense of the results in various studies is not a novelty, as scales pertaining to the findings of Maslow have been used extensively. The Personal Attitude Survey is a list of 65 items composed from 11 self-actualizing features. Sumerlin and Bundrick (1996) studied this index for validity and relativity to Maslow's self-actualizing characteristics. The study concluded that a shorter list of 40 items and a brief list of 7 items achieved high scores of correlation and was in accordance with Maslow's theory and concepts. The Brief Index consisted of seven factors as follows: Core Self-Actualization, Jonah Complex, Curiosity, Comfort with Solitude, Openness to Experience, Democratic Character, and Life Meaning and Purpose.

In another study Shostrom's Personal Orientation Inventory (POI) was reviewed for reliability and validity (Tosi & Lindamood, 1975). The POI was designed to measure personal growth or self-actualization as outcomes of counseling and psychotherapy. The long list of 150 items represented 12 main characteristics based mainly on Maslow's theory but also incorporated the influence of other contemporary figures.

The above theoretical background will be of great assistance to draw conclusions from the experience of parents as these will unfold in the transcripts of the interviews. For the purposes of this thesis it is necessary, therefore, to capture the spirit of Rogers' and Maslow's theories. The following list is designed to record this spirit in terms of attributes, signs of which one would expect to recognize in the transcripts of the participating parents:

Awareness: Parents show signs of being closer to their feelings and thoughts, are more aware of their actions and the effects of these actions on themselves and the important others.

Responsibility: Parents realize their share of responsibility in the various issues they are facing and act to deal with their own shortcomings.

Less Defensive and rigid: To be open to new ideas, as well as, accepting and understanding of the "different". Related to both the above characteristics, a parent will be more open to introspect and become aware of attitudes, patterns, convictions and values, to reflex upon these and be willing to reexamine and reevaluate his position.

Realistic: To be able to distinguish between wishful thinking and hard facts. To be more in the here and now rather than stuck in the past or some idealized reality. In order that problems are solved effectively, it is necessary to recognize the real facts and act upon them.

Able to problem solve effectively: Although parents are usually extremely problem-solving oriented, often in actual life fixing one problem means creating an array of new problems. It would thus be expected of parents to problem solve in ways that have holistic positive effect,

that is, a positive impact on the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of children, with long term results.

Confident: Parent to trust he is on the right track following his own locus of evaluation. Not guided by society's numerous conditions of worth, the "ought's", "musts" and "shoulds".

Creative: The problem-solving process of brainstorming requires resourcefulness, imagination, inventiveness, flexibility. The parent is willing to test new ideas and depart from the old and stagnant problem-solving tactics.

Accepting: Parents are often critical of their family members, failing to realize important needs and emotions of their children. Important others are blamed, criticized, punished, belittled and humiliated, a practice that not only ruins the relationship but also has adverse effects on their children's emotional health. The key to be accepting is to empathize, that is to be aware of what goes on in the hearts of others, to be gentle and understanding, and be open to multilevel experiences.

Assertive: To be able to defend one's needs inoffensively. To know one's worth and rights and pursue one's needs in a respectful and considerate manner.

Democratic: Parents' authority through merit as opposed to that arising from power has positive effects on children as they will benefit from their parents wisdom, expertise, knowledge and experiences. Authority, however in the form of exercising power may have adverse effects. The shear size and strength of the parent allows him to be threatening and punishing. His mental superiority allows him, if he so wishes, to be manipulative; his access to a bank account to reward, bribe, make concessions and consequently also threaten with the withdrawal of these. On the other hand, a democratic parent is just, understanding, compromising, recognizes and respects the fundamental rights and needs of children.

Congruent: To be in touch with the true self, with one's deeper feelings and thoughts. To live according to what one is and not according to what one would like or ought to be. Children need to recognize the human part in their parents as opposed to a rigid and stagnant parenting role so that they may experience a true and warm relationship.

2.3. Group Effect

Another important consideration related to personal growth is the effect of group dynamics on each member of the group. To avoid any misconceptions, PET workshops are not encounter groups or therapy groups. It is not within the scope of PET to be therapeutic or to deal with personal issues. The activity taking place within a PET workshop can be described as work done in a group consisting of parents, which aims to help them become more effective in their parenting role, reduce child and adolescent problem behavior and lay the foundation for a warm, respectful, democratic and loving relationship. The workshop introduces psycho-educational components, exercises and role-play to promote self-awareness. In addition, participants share feelings, thoughts, experiences and realizations which, at times, may resemble encounter groups. Work outside the PET workshop consists of practice at home under true conditions and acquiring further insight through studying the book *Parent Effectiveness Training* (Gordon, 2000). It thus has some similarities with the process that students undergo to become Person-Centered Counselors, whereby they are taught the principles of the Person-Centered Approach, undergo rigorous training, are required to study and produce written work, and are active participants in encounter group sessions.

Besides the similarities in process, it is interesting to observe the similarities in outcome. Whitaker (2008, p. 161) maintains that group therapy promotes change in its participants in the direction of:

> *"less painful existence, learn new behavior, and learn to think of himself and others in new terms. In short, he may be helped to discard old, maladaptive ways of thinking, behaving, and dealing with others and make new, more adaptive patterns a part of his way of life. [ ] Group therapy assumes that the group situation [ ] can provide a setting for desirable personal change."*

Although it is evident that PET participants are not clients aspiring to therapeutic goals, it does involve parents who wish to improve their communication and parenting skills in what may be considered as one of their most important life roles, namely that of being parents. Similarly, PET facilitators do not act as therapists, even though often enough, they are also therapists in profession. Inarguably, the set up underlying these two situations is substantially different; however, the process and the outcome do have similarities. Parents often benefit from workshops in the directions specified above. PET workshops encourage their members to try out and practice new more appropriate behavioral patterns in a safe and accepting environment that will serve the family and the parents' interpersonal relationships. As a consequence, parents can be anticipated to experience less anxiety on matters relating to family issues, to learn new behavioral patterns and develop new insights as to their own constructs and that of others. In a study concerning how parents experienced parenting programs, the results were indicative of the group effect (Kane, Wood & Barlow, 2007):

> *"The acquisition of knowledge, skills and understanding, together with feelings of acceptance and support from other parents in the parenting group, enabled parents to regain control and feel more able to cope. This led to a reduction in feelings of guilt and social isolation, increased empathy with their children and confidence in dealing with their behavior."*

What PET workshops offer are in line with the findings of Miller and Sambell (2003) of what parents feel they need. The study shows parents were after three orientations of support: The *dispensing* model of support, which is of an educational nature and relates to the knowledge and information conveyed by a professional to help parents deal with their family problem areas. The *relating* model of support, which relates to the group dynamics, whereby parents feel they are listened to, feel relaxed, accepted and appreciated, and realize other parents share similar problems to theirs. Last, the *reflecting* model, which as the name may suggest, supports parents to reflect on their problems, relationships, values and attitudes and helps them develop a better understanding of the mechanics of their relationships.

In his work on encounter groups, Rogers (1973) observes changes in attending individuals in the following ways: Individual change, in that group members modify their self-concepts and make significant changes in the direction of their lives; they undergo significant qualitative and communicative changes in the way they relate to their immediate family; they make organizational changes in their work environment. The first two, individual change and communication change, can readily be associated with parents attending a PET workshop. Organizational changes can also be related to the parenting process if one considers that a family and its immediate environment constitute, in effect, an organization with intricate dynamics whereby personal parental change may be of significant importance.

Yalom (1985) describes how, in the 1960s, groups consisting of company personnel, training in human relations (T-groups) transformed into group therapy for "normals". These groups dealt with issues of personal growth and were considered educational groups and not therapeutic. The word "education" was not used in the traditional sense, but was meant in the sense of personal change. The group members were healthy individuals who were also successful members of society; nevertheless, they experienced feelings of tension, anxiety, insecurity and discomfort (arising from conflicting values). They also had issues of congruence, appearing to others as fairly secure persons, while hiding their more fragile constructs at all costs. This hindered their communication with self and others and a common goal was set by the facilitators, namely to address the issue. The groups that represented this new tendency went under a variety of names or labels, such as, "personal growth", "human potential", "human development" and "encounter groups". The term encounter group was Carl Rogers' term to describe authentic encounters during which members and facilitators would explore matters of incongruence, bring into light deeper concerns, reexamine values and so on. Encounter group leaders would differ immensely from traditional group therapists. Group therapists acted in a more detached and impersonal way, showing a more or less

austere professional front. Facilitators, however, displayed a lot more of their human side, were more flexible and addressed group members as equals, even though they had an advantage in terms of skills and knowledge. As Yalom points out (1985, p. 532):

> *"Furthermore, the leaders sought to transmit not only knowledge but also skills, expecting the group members to learn methods of diagnosing and resolving interpersonal problems. Often they explicitly behaved as teachers-for example, explicating some point of theory or introducing some group exercise."*

An interesting finding that came into light concerning the effectiveness of groups, after an extensive controlled research, by Liberman, Yalom and Miles in 1973, showed that the important factor for change was not the leaders' technique based on the ideological school they represented but on their score on four important variables: "Emotional activation (challenging, confronting, modeling by personal risk-taking and high self-disclosure)", "Caring (offering support, affection, praise, protection, warmth, acceptance, genuineness, concern)", "Meaning attribution (explaining, clarifying, interpreting, providing a cognitive framework for change; translating feelings and experiences into ideas)" and "Executive function" (ibid, p. 536). Of these four variables, caring and meaning attribution had a linear relationship, i.e., the more the better, while emotional stimulation and executive function had a curvilinear relationship, i.e., the right dose was important, neither too much nor too little. Based on this research, Yalom concludes that it is essential to add a fourth factor to Carl Rogers' three necessary conditions, namely the cognitive function of the leader (1985, p. 537):

> *"What seems important is the process of explanation, which, in several ways, enabled participants to integrate their experience, to generalize from it, and to transport it into other life situations."*

Thus PET workshops have a lot in common with the way Yalom perceives encounter groups. PET facilitators do actually pay attention to, and portray, all four variables as described above.

Nicholas Hobbs states that even though groups are usually very diverse in composition and purpose, there is a common characteristic in what members share (Rogers, 1951, p. 279): "All shared this favorable characteristic: they felt keenly the discrepancy between themselves and their aspirations for themselves, and they actively sought help." This is also an accurate description of the reasons a parent would join a parenting workshop, namely to raise their parenting skills to a level that will allow them to be more congruent in their parenting role. On the question of values, Hobbs (ibid) states in very specific terms that the facilitator does not impose his own value system, as members may adopt it unquestioningly, influenced by the supposed expertise of the facilitator. However, members within the group do profess differing or even conflicting values and this rich exchange is very useful in expanding the views and consciousness of its members without the risk of feeling the pressure to either accept or reject them. Groups portray another important function, which is to offer each group member the opportunity to help another member. This process of mutually helping each other has the twofold benefit of being helped and being a helper (ibid). This "comradeship" concerning the exchange of values and of being a helping agent is often manifested in the PET workshops. Time after time members exclaim how another member helped them realize something of real and constructive importance.

2.4. Parent Effectiveness Training

The PET workshop is divided into five well-defined areas of concern depending on who owns the problem (practical or emotional) in the family; for each area a different set of communication skills is recommended (Gordon, 2000). The first area concerns

communication skills which act as a helping and supportive agent when the child owns the problem and is experiencing emotional tension. These are the "helping skills" consisting of attending, passive listening, remaining silent when appropriate and active listening. The three core conditions of genuineness, empathy and unconditional positive regard are integrated into the process underlying these skills. The second area deals with situations whereby the child's behavior is unacceptable to the parent in that it prevents him/her from satisfying a need. Evidently the problem belongs to the parent and "confrontation skills" are called for, namely the "I-message". The I-message is a simple, clear and honest message accompanied by a respectful but assertive attitude that is not insulting, or abusive, or punishing. The essence of this message is to describe (a) the non-acceptable behavior (b) the undesirable tangible effects the parent is undergoing and (c) the emotions concerning the undesirable effects that the parent is experiencing. It thus consists of three parts, the description of the behavior in a non-critical manner, the description of the true tangible effects and the description of the primary feelings concerning the effects. The aim of the I-message is to communicate information on the lived experience of the parent, to sensitize the empathic chords of the child and to initiate a behavioral change. If there is a reaction of defensiveness or resistance on the part of the child then the parent switches to active listening to ease the emotional temperature in an act of respect and care, only to return to an I-message once the child has been fully heard and understood. This shifting between I-messages and active listening in called "gear shifting". It requires full awareness in the here and now, emotional agility and commitment to the relationship (ibid). The third area of concern is when the needs of both parent and child are in conflict; both sides own the problem and "conflict resolution skills" are called for. The conflict is resolved by a democratic process, namely the skill of the "no-lose" method (ibid, p. 218). Very briefly the two sides discuss and define the conflicting needs, brainstorm for solutions, evaluate them, choose a mutually acceptable one, proceed to the implementation and check on the effectiveness of the solution. What predominates in this

deeply democratic process is the respect of both the parent's and child's needs and a commitment that the parent will not expend his position of power and authority. The fourth area deals with situations that involve conflict of values. The values' conflict resolution skills involve a number of options aimed at influencing the other party: modeling the desired behaviors, acting as a consulting agent, using I-messages and active listening, and using the "no-lose" method. However, the primary and most challenging action a parent can take before resorting to the influencing tactics is to question, scrutinize and reevaluate the value in question and decide whether to keep, modify or discard. Lastly, there is the "no problem area" whereby neither party faces emotional discomfort. This is the area that is utilized to promote relationship bonding through the so called "relationship skills", consisting of various I-messages to express positive feelings, to prevent conflicts, to share values and to express needs, wants and preferences. Another important feature of the workshop is for parents to become aware of their own problematic behavioral patterns that block communication and place the relationship under strain. These patterns are referred to as the "communication roadblocks", which produce resistance, resentment, frustration and maladaptive behavior on the part of the children. Thus the Gordon model is a model that promotes transparency, self-awareness, warmth, acceptance and love but at the same time is demanding in defending the parental needs, and challenges unacceptable behavior in a firm, respectful, non-punitive and non-authoritarian manner.

3. Research Question

There has been ample research - mostly quantitative - into the effects and effectiveness of parenting programs in varying situations of parent, child and environment characteristics pertaining to specific problem situations. The results are very useful in establishing cause and effect conclusions that help towards the design, improvement and assessment of parenting

programs. The focus is on a comparison of the "before" and "after" aspect of parenting intervention.

This study is interested in *what* happens to parents between the "before" and "after". It aims to capture the scent of the lived experience parents undergo. It is more about the internal changes and shifts taking place, which are expressed in terms of attitudinal changes that ultimately shape behavior. Therefore, this research will deal with *how parents experience the process of change in terms of their feelings, attitudes and behaviors after completing a PET workshop*.

4. Method

4.1. Design

Most research in the field of parenting programs is based on the quantitative paradigm with a long history of accrued useful knowledge. The present research could have well been quantitative, drawing conclusions that would be relevant to larger groups. However, much of the richness contained in the more focused participant-centered approach of qualitative research would have been lost. For the particular aims of this research it was deemed necessary to concentrate on a detailed and precise account of the lived experiences of the central figures under study, namely the parents, and thus the qualitative paradigm was considered more appropriate. In Carla Willig's own words "Qualitative researchers study people in their own territory" (Willig, 2008, p. 9). We are thus guests into the hearts of people, exploring how they experience and perceive their environment. They are trying to make sense of their experience and we in turn are trying to make sense of their accounts (Smith, Flowers, Larkin. 2009).

Similarly, this thesis aims to deal with the meanings a small number of parents attribute to their experience of attending a PET workshop. The focus of the study will be to capture as

vividly and accurately as possible how parents experience changes in their attitudes and behavior, shifts in their level of awareness, improvements in their family relationships and any other realizations they feel significant, and to subsequently explore these methodically and rigorously to give a meaning that is purposeful to the study in question. Thus the chosen method of analysis will be Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative research method aiming to bring into light the perceptions of the participants, what the researcher makes of these and how these are related to this particular study. Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews to give necessary freedom of expression to participants within the context of interest of the researcher.

4.2. Method of Analysis

The essence of IPA analysis can be described as the process by which the researcher captures and records what he believes to be the significant realizations of the participants, which he subsequently uses for the purpose of his research. Thus the responsibility of the researcher is quite daunting when one considers that on the one hand it is accepted that he can only be subjective in his interpretation of the participants' interpretations and on the other hand that he is expected to give an account which is not arbitrary. This puzzle of giving a subjective, responsible account of the lived experience of third persons under the inescapable reality of double hermeneutic dynamics is solved through the rigorous and scholastic analysis of the accrued transcript texts. In the words of Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p. 36) "Interpretations must always be grounded in the meeting of researcher and text". The method of analysis followed in this thesis is in accordance with the six steps of analysis as suggested by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (ibid):

In step one the transcript texts were read and reread to achieve a high level of rapport with the lived experience of the participants. In this endeavor, the recordings were also heard

several times to get acquainted not only with the participants' accounts but also with the color and tone of voice. Non-verbal cues and signs in posture, mannerisms or otherwise that were present during the interview were also brought to memory to achieve a more holistic perspective of the participant's world. Step two involved taking notes on the right margin of the text predominantly at two levels, the one being of phenomenological and the other of an interpretative nature. In the first instance the notes concerned what seemed to be important in the eyes of the participants and thus were purely descriptive. In the second instance the notes gave an account of how the truth of the participants impressed the analyst in relation to his research. The third step involved the extraction of themes from the notes that took place in step two. Themes, in effect, represent the codification of important findings into meaningful words or small sentences, which arise from the concerted effort to shed light into the participants experience by both the participant's account and the researcher's understanding. Step four involved a process whereby emergent themes of similar meaning were grouped together under master themes, the so called super-ordinate themes. The outcome of this step is the emergence of a smaller number of super-ordinate themes, each of which represents meaningful relevant themes. In step five all remaining participant transcripts underwent an identical process of study, note taking, theme-extraction and clustering. At this stage of analysis it was important to be open enough to recognize unprecedented emerging themes or even themes of opposing meaning. Step six involved finding meaningful patterns across the six transcripts. Although the idiographic element was vividly present in each step of the analysis, it was also evident that the participants shared a great deal in relation to experiences, feelings, concerns and expectations. What was evidently different was the set up, the surrounding environment, the people involved, the actual unfolding of events, yet in many instances a distinct common taste, so to speak, was very much present. It is these instances of shared experience amongst participants that step six attempted to capture.

The results of the six step process are summarized in (Table 3) and record a number of super-ordinate themes that were relevant to a great extend to all six participants. It was deemed more appropriate in the analysis which follows to concentrate only on super-ordinate themes, as the lower level themes were deemed too participant-specific and would render the analysis extremely long, detailed and cumbersome. Such provision may be appropriate in certain cases as is evident from the following quote of Smith, Flowers, Larkin (2009, p. 109) "super-ordinate themes may be more powerful as an organizing device and it may be that, by the time of writing up, the important thing is to show how the super-ordinate theme is present for each participant, and that lower level themes have become redundant". In this thesis, the themes have served their purpose and are now considered redundant. Therefore, for purposes of simplicity, the super-ordinate themes will be referred to as themes.

4.3. Procedure

Prospective participants were approached by telephone to inquire their willingness to participate in the research. No information sheet was presented to them due to the already established relationship during the workshops. Instead, the following information was conveyed to them: It was explained that the research was not concerned with the efficacy of the workshop but with the general qualitative impact it may have had on the lives of the participating parents. They were told that the interview would be held at a time and place convenient to them, it would last up to approximately one hour and their anonymity would be respected and secured. The interview would be digitally recorded and transcribed and that all data referring to their identity would be duly erased or changed. Finally, participants were told that at the time of the interview, they would be required to briefly consult their PET workbook to refresh their memories of some of the issues they were facing before the commencement of the workshop.

The number of participants was limited to six and the final participating parents to be included were selected on a "first come first served" basis, pertaining their willingness and availability to participate. Parents who were willing to participate but had not satisfied attendance and participation criteria were excluded from the research.

Before the interviews were conducted, two pilot interviews were arranged with a parent not to be included in the study, who was willing to assist the researcher to finalize and fine tune the interview questions in order to ensure that these would serve the research adequately. Additional prompt questions were also catered for to assist in the collection of data if necessary (for the Thesis Questions to Participants see Appendix 1).

The next step was to arrange for a mutually convenient time for the interview to take place. Upon meeting, the participants were handed two sets of copies of the appropriate Letter of information and Letter of consent to be duly signed by both parties, each party keeping a copy of such. Before commencement of the interview, a few moments were spent collecting some data of demographic interest (Table 2). During the interviews special attention was paid to present the questions in a conversational manner in order to promote continuity and flow during the encounter.

4.4. Participants

The sampling strategy is an important consideration when recruiting participants. Considering that the number of participants is small, it is extremely important that their selection and recruitment is impartial in order to produce unbiased results that will withstand the scrutiny of the qualitative paradigm. However, random sampling without inclusion or exclusion criteria may render the results too chaotic to make it possible to draw useful conclusions. Because of the idiographic mode of inquiry in IPA some homogeneity is called

for and thus purposive sampling through inclusion and exclusion criteria was considered appropriate. Within these criteria, participants were selected randomly to provide an unbiased group for study. In the words of MacLeod, J. (2003, p. 31) "The more clearly that inclusion and exclusion criteria can be stated at the start, the less likely it will be that unwanted biases will creep in as the study proceeds".

The first criterion was related to attendance and participation. PET workshops are relatively demanding in terms of participants being present in all workshop gatherings and actively participating in the group activities. Often enough parents miss classes due to health reasons. The most common health reason is kids getting sick and parents having to look after them. Therefore only parents who attended all or at least 90% of the meetings were eligible for participation. A second criterion closely related to attendance was the commitment of participants to satisfy the homework requirements of the workshop. The necessary homework is threefold: to read/study the book *Parent Effectiveness Training*, read/study the exercise book and complete the exercises, and last but not least to practice at home and elsewhere the learned communication skills. To this effect, parents were asked if they had performed their homework duties with relative diligence. Parents who did not were readily excluded. Another criterion was related to the experience and effectiveness of the workshop facilitator. At the time of the research, the number of workshops held under the researcher's facilitation totaled approximately 50 over a time span of 4 years. Thus workshops conducted in the first 2 years of the researcher's career as facilitator were excluded to ensure a higher level of competence. Also recent workshops were excluded to ensure the study was relevant to parents who had concluded the workshop at least six months before the interviews in order to record a more lasting imprint of the workshop. In an effort to ensure that all prospective participants had witnessed almost identical workshop conditions, only workshops that took place in one quarter were included. Taking the above into consideration, the pool of possible participants

was recruited from workshops which took place during the 4th quarter of 2012. Finally, only parents with children older than 3 and younger than 18 were included, to ensure participating parents faced challenging issues and had ample opportunities for practice. No other demographic concerns were taken into account, such as socioeconomic background, gender, family structure, ethnic origin, number of children and so on, although a closer look at the following participant profile table portrays a fair amount of demographic homogeneity. Fathers were not excluded from this research by design, but their absence was the result of both the general poor participation of fathers and a coincidence that during the quarter of 2012 only one father out of 21 participants attended the workshop, that is 5% of prospective candidates. The father in question was approached but was rejected due to his poor participation record.

Participants' profile

Name	Age	Work Status	Nationality	Family Status	Children Gender/age	SES Status	Work Status
Maria	46	Working	Greek	Married	Boy 15 Boy 13 Girl 11	Middle	Yes
Christina	36	Working	Greek	Married	Boy 7 Girl 6	Middle	Yes
Elena	47	Working	Greek	Single	Boy 14	Middle	Yes
Aphrodite	45	-	Greek	Married	Boy 13 Girl 5	Middle	Yes
Olympia	37	Working	Greek	Married	Girl 9 Boy 7 Girl 5	Middle	Yes
Alexandra	48	Working	Greek	Single	Boy 15 Boy 12	Middle	Yes

Table 2

4.5. Reflexivity

The parenting workshops I facilitate represent in my heart something far greater and significant than just getting along in my profession. It is about being of assistance to parents who feel disillusioned and disappointed in their parenting role. Thus I see myself as serving parents, but together with them, at a deeper level, as serving their children. This concerted effort of parent and facilitator resembles a prevention crusade which aims to lessen the impact of miscommunication, misinformation, ignorance and unhealthy practices. Given the effort and commitment I expend within my role as a workshop facilitator it is only natural I would welcome results that compliment my work. As I view this restlessness of mine as an ambitious attempt at rendering my life all the more purposeful, I feel the responsibility to take a step back and consider how this emotional position of mine may affect, bias or distort the process of collection and interpretation of research data.

In addition, I cannot omit my own family background and the baggage coming with it, good and bad. I can readily distinguish that my difficulties in life stemming from my early years and the accompanying parenting issues, have played an important part in my involvement with counseling and parenting workshops. This is not because I have suffered as a child or as an adult, but because my life would have been so different had my parents been more attentive at times, less interventional at other times and yet more guiding when in need of orientation. To this effect the Gordon model represents, in my eyes, a vehicle towards freedom, emotional health and actualization – an opportunity all human beings deserve. It is evident that I believe the Gordon model is a lot more than a set of communication skills and

extends itself into a way of being, coexisting and interacting with our fellow humans. Thus, one more step back is called for to protect this research from exaggerations and false inferences.

Both these points were present in thought as a "fire curtain" in the preparation of the interview questionnaire, the actual interviews and the analysis of the transcripts.

On the preparation of the interview questionnaire, in view of the fact that the questions were semi structured in design, it was important that each question would be specific enough to gather data relevant to the research and abstract enough to allow freedom of expression. As far as being specific, it was important that the questions would not be leading. The same applied for any necessary subsequent prompting. Thus the interviews were conducted in a spirit of detachment towards the aims of the thesis and warmth towards the participants.

It is important to note that while listening to the participants' recordings and reading and rereading their transcripts, I was brought closer to their experiences. This close interaction often made me preoccupied as to how I may become more facilitating, how I can conduct these workshops more effectively and how parents can profit from every drop the workshop has to offer. To this effect, Yalom's (1985) four important variables made a huge impression on me, as it reemphasized that my contribution as facilitator had important multilevel effects in assisting parents to attain their goals. Although continuous improvement is within my culture, it gave me an extra push to be more vigilant and restless towards this direction.

4.6. Ethical issues

Utmost care was observed to preserve the anonymity of the participants. On the issue of confidentiality, participants were informed that in case quotations from the transcripts were used in the thesis, these would not in any way endanger their privacy and anonymity and that the study would not disclose information in a way that may lead to their identification. Thus total confidentiality was not offered to the participants, as such an undertaking would render the research impossible. In fact, qualitative research in most cases reveals a great deal of the private experiences of participants and as such, confidentiality in the strict sense of the word is severely compromised. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p. 53) put it as follows: "anonymity is all that qualitative researchers can offer. To say that something is 'confidential' is to say that no one else will see it, and this is not the case". Thus, to preserve anonymity and confidentiality to the extent that it serves the principle of privacy and anonymity, the following measures were observed: Personal details such as names of participants and their relatives, email addresses and telephone numbers were either erased or altered on all relevant documents, computer files and transcripts. In particular, any emails exchanged were erased permanently after serving their purpose. The recordings after serving their purpose will be permanently erased and requests from participants to have a copy of such will be honored. Similarly, transcripts were duly codified, personal details altered and files code encrypted. A copy of the transcript was also sent to participants if requested, duly codified. In addition, participants had the right to withdraw at any time before, during or after the interviews without the need to offer any kind of explanation, or to be held accountable for any inconvenience caused to the researcher.

Another important consideration was my dual role in relation to the participating parents. The first role was that of the facilitator for the duration of the workshop and the second was that of the researcher at the time of the interviews. During PET workshops, in most cases,

facilitators and participants alike develop a close, warm and caring relationship. Thus, if participants felt the interview was about evaluating the workshop and the facilitator's performance, this may have driven them to be economical with the truth and try to round up sharp edges, if any. It was thus important to appease any uncomfortable feelings, so that parents would concentrate on their experiences without feeling apprehensive or enter into some self imposed censorship. To remove any such reservations, I informed parents explicitly at the start of the interview that the aim of the interview was not one of evaluation (of either the course and/or the trainer), but one of recording the texture of their experience.

This dual role of facilitating and researching implies another danger. As stated earlier, IPA is all about extending our understanding and knowledge of how participants make sense of their experience on a particular theme of interest. It is endemic of the IPA paradigm that this knowledge will be recorded through the researcher's engagement with and interpretation of the participant's transcript. However, in this study the researcher has also been engaged with the participants on a face to face encounter throughout the duration of the workshop. It is thus important that the "workshop engagement" does not interfere with the "transcript engagement" and that the researcher will register accurately the content of the transcript and maintain partiality and loyalty to the interview material and not to any impressions and biases linked to the workshop that would contaminate the findings.

Other ethical issues were also catered for, such as precautions to potential risks to the participants and subsequent use of transcript data, a detailed account of which was recorded in the Letter of Information (see Appendix 2).

5. Analysis

5.1. Introduction

When studying the transcripts it becomes evident that parents attending the PET workshop undergo important shifts in posture and attitudes that draw an impression of a *new emerging self*. This emerging self can be viewed in terms of three distinct phases that capture the essence of how parents experience change. The first phase is related to their realization that some of their attitudes and behaviors are contributing adversely towards the family's wellbeing, coupled with their willingness to act upon their unhealthy practices. The second phase has to do with the process that takes place during and after the workshop, which allows changes in their attitudes and behaviors. The third is related to an assessment as to where they stand vis-à-vis their problems and difficulties and the improvements they believe they have achieved after the completion of the workshop. Thus we have three broad areas of concern, in the form of core themes, as follows: "A snapshot of 'Before'", "Self in process" and "A snapshot of 'After'" each of which encompasses a number of themes as follows:

The Emerging Self

	A snapshot of "before"	Self in process	A snapshot of "after"
T	– My controlling self	– Awareness	– Old habits die hard
H	– My lost self	– Empathizing	– Effective problem solving
	– My vulnerable self	– Accepting	– Feeling better
E		– Respecting	
M		– Letting go: Allowing others to grow	
E		– Group imprint: When parents join experiences	
S		– Moving from "I ought to" to "I need to"	
		– Taking care of my needs	

Table 3

In the first section, *A snapshot of before,* there are three themes that describe the three broad problem areas the parents were facing before the commencement of the workshop, as perceived by them, at the time of the interview. The themes in section 2, *Self in process,* portray the elements that bring about change when considering the problem areas pre-workshop in section 1 and comparing it to section 3. Section 3, *A snapshot of after,* represents an assessment of the post-workshop results. It is important to add that the *before* and *after* are not static points as would appear in a speed race with a start and finish line but more like a snapshot of two instances of a non-ending process of movement and change. The purpose of this research is to capture a particular taste or quality of this movement, namely that of personal growth.

Before commencing the analysis, it is important to consider the predisposition of parents prior to attending a parenting workshop. Parents will not usually join a workshop to kill time. A PET workshop is demanding in terms of time and effort, and at times parents have to endure a process that entails painful realizations. Therefore, the majority of parents would join a workshop with (a) purpose and (b) expectations. (a) Purpose, in that some displeasure is present as to how they perform their parenting role, how their children are evolving and the impact their parenting style has on their children, themselves and their relationship; at best a confident and content parent will be looking for improvements in what he considers successful parenting. (b) Expectations, in that they are aiming to improve and develop their parenting skills in order to attain a variety of goals. It is evident that parents are looking for some kind of change that will alleviate their family issues. Thus the analysis that follows has two main purposes: The first is of a phenomenological nature in that it analyzes how parents experience change and the second is of an interpretative nature in that the researcher interprets these experiences and explores whether these may be of some interest to the aims of the study. In the following sections the themes will be analyzed one by one to portray the

connection between phenomenological and interpretative aspects. To assist the reader and establish some continuity, the transcript extracts for each theme appear in the same participant order, i.e., always starting with Maria, then Christina, Elena, Aphrodite, Olympia and ending with Alexandra.

5.2. A snapshot of "before"

In this section the three themes are: *My controlling self*, *My lost self* and *My vulnerable self*, which form the three broad problem-areas that parents talked about and which represent common areas of concern of all six participants. When parents feel comfortable in their workshop environment, they will usually disclose aspects of their personality, attitudes or behaviors, which contribute towards the family problems and are a main source of tension in their relationships. In the following section, the three themes will be analyzed one by one.

5.2.1 My controlling self

One of the striking realizations when looking into the participants' transcripts is their controlling aspect, as manifested in their daily family dealings. Maria very early on in the interview reveals her practice of excessive control and intervention:

> *"I am very controlling and I assume ownership of the problems of the whole world."*

> *"The most important problem in my relationship with my kids is that I don't respect their space [ ] I believe things should be done in a certain way [ ] I forget it is their own space."*

> *"[As a result of the workshop] something I have achieved to a great extend is not to judge, [ ] pronounce a verdict and assign punishments"*

It is evident that Maria is aware of her intervening and controlling tendency. She is not happy with her critical and punishing side, and readily realizes that such an attitude and behavior lacks respect towards her children. Despite the fact that she has taken important steps in

dealing with controlling issues, she still perceives herself as "controlling" as is evident in the above opening statement. The changes she has made have not yet been fully registered in her self-image. There is also a side of her that takes up the role of a "superwoman" whereby she assumes more responsibility than she can deal with and this is expressed in an exaggerated statement of assuming "ownership of the problems of the whole world", a characteristic that is extremely self-consuming and self-defeating.

Christina runs a business of her own and thus struggles to cope with both her parenting and work responsibilities. She reveals her own controlling side several times during the interview and when things get out of hand, she becomes, in her own words, a shouting "bitch":

> *"I would continuously tell (my son) you haven't done this, you haven't done that [ ] bla bla this and bla bla that and this was a big problem at the time"*

> *"Therefore I was irritated and since Pandora's box was wide open, I would release (all hell)"*

> *"I had become a bitch, really a bitch"*

Elena exhibits similar behaviors:

> *"It is just that parents want their children to be like little soldiers because it is more convenient"*

> *"[ ] I used to shout about everything [ ] a shouting bitch"*

In the first instance she generalizes and exaggerates in using a metaphor, and in the second instance she portrays the folly of the matter: to shout without reason, to shout about everything, to become utterly disagreeable.

The controlling aspect of Aphrodite manifests itself in her belief that children can be molded at will, shouted at, ordered around, manipulated and oppressed:

"You receive a baby and you can do whatever you want with it (in terms of making it what you want it to be)."

"For God's sake I want to sleep, shut up everybody."

"If you don't do this, then you can't do that or I won't buy you that or we won't go on that excursion."

"I would virtually lift my son out of the house, push him into the car and throw him into the swimming pool."

Perhaps Olympia is a lady of few words, but her message comes clean and resolute:

"I wanted things my way. End of story"

Similarly, Alexandra describes:

"I would hear no other way. The way I thought things ought to be done was the way I expected them to be and I would insist."

It is important to note that excessive control does not always occur because of some character trait on the part of the parent. It can often evolve as a practical coping mechanism in an effort to deal with the various and numerous parenting responsibilities or in an effort to keep up with some exterior norm that acts as a guiding tool as to how things ought to be done. More of this in the following sections *my lost self* and *my vulnerable self*.

5.2.2 My lost self

Another important and interesting finding is the tendency of parents to believe that things ought to be done in a certain way. It is not always clear who or what forces parents to think and behave in certain ways, but there is certainly some deterministic element in the apparent lack of alternative choices:

Maria: *"I thought I was obliged to lead them"*

Christina: *"I do it because the school has put me into this way of thinking [ ] the school draws you (into thinking this way) [ ]. I had this impression that my son ought to be in a certain way; and I expected him (to deliver the goods)"*

Elena: *"[ ] because of fear or because of his eloquent and persuasive way (her son's father) of presenting matters, my judgment was confused [ ]. [ ] It felt like walking on a tight rope and never managing to make it through to the other side. Always falling"*

Aphrodite: *"[ ] because I had to. All kids do it (swimming lessons), why not mine?"*

Alexandra: *"I think that I was anxious and nervous (because) I had to be strict in order to be able to control them"*

In the case of Maria the pressure of doing things in a certain way emerges from a source she is unable to trace, more like some kind of introjected "orphan" value. In the case of Christina, the authority figure comes in the form of an expert, namely the school. In both cases we can distinguish a desire to move away from an "ought to" position towards a more autonomous and personalized evaluating process. Elena presents a case whereby her own values were suppressed in view of the threatening figure of her son's father. She felt she always fell short of his excessive demands. Aphrodite, however, is drawn into some kind of competition in the likes of: "If other kids do it, so should mine". This is often common practice, whereby families enter an unending spiral of competition to keep up with each other or to satisfy their need of belonginess. Alexandra believes there is no other way than to play the part of the strict mother in order to have some control over her kids with adverse effects on her own emotional world.

5.2.3 My vulnerable self

A point that deserves special mentioning is the manifestation of a vulnerable side which the participating mothers exhibited during the interviews. Not only does it come into contrast with their controlling aspect but it is also closely related to it. Too much control means too

much work, too much policing, too much disappointment, too much fighting, too much agony, too much physical and emotional fatigue.

Maria at various instances:

> *"I used to feel lost", "It makes me feel less anxious", "I assume ownership of the problems of the whole world"*

The burden of looking after the whole world is too much. Maria feels uncertain, ineffective and lost without some kind of guiding tool to get her through the stormy waters. Feelings of anxiety, frustration, loneliness and inadequacy may also be present and this is no surprise if one assumes excessive and uncalled for responsibilities.

The vulnerability in the case of Christina is portrayed by her admitting to losing control and expressing an exaggerated statement of inadequacy:

> *"Losing it completely [ ]"*

> *"Each one of us drowns in our own drop of water"*

The underlying feelings are those of worry and agony coupled with feelings of inadequacy, frustration and failure.

In the case of Elena this is portrayed a number of times during the interview, whereby the feelings of being overwhelmed and debilitated are obvious:

> *"I stopped panicking [ ] I need peace and joyfulness [ ] overbearing problem that is burning hot [ ] I was looking at the ceiling for 3 whole days [ ] no time to deal with my needs [ ] it was a make or break situation with my son [ ] I never looked after me. It is suffocating [ ] to be told to climb Everest wouldn't be so daunting"*

Aphrodite captures her desperation in the following words:

> *"You don't have the right to allow yourself to be your children's slave"*

Olympia does not exhibit signs of weakness apart from disclosing her complaint that when in need of help, nobody is there to offer it:

"I feel the pressure but I don't want to show it"

Alexandra is another mother "victim" of her relentless devotion to her children and negation of her own needs:

"I would not externalize my needs [ ] I was drowning inside but I preferred to oppress myself (to attend their needs rather than mine) [ ] it felt terrible"

It is obvious that the controlling aspect of mothers, coupled with the excessive demands of the western modern society backfires relentlessly on the unsuspecting mothers. It seems to them they are doing their best but it is never enough. Worst of all, it isn't recognized. It is so lonely.

A snapshot of before pictures overburdened mothers with endless responsibilities and excessive expectations, who feel lost and inadequate in their mothering role. To make things more cumbersome, they are required to act in ways that will be acceptable to various authority centers, call it society, peer pressure, companion partner, teacher, parent or other introjected values. In this over-demanding environment, mothers, in order to cope, often get carried away and resort to behaviors that are incongruent with their overall image of a gentle, patient, soft-spoken, caring and respectful mother. There is escalation towards behaviors of excessive intervention and coercion, aggression, losing control and submitting to pressures of conditional positive regard. It is evident from the transcripts that the mothers in question are putting up a struggle to move away from behaviors they deem inappropriate and/or ineffective. These behaviors are usually related to particular issues, for example a parent losing patience in the morning when his children are delaying departure for the 5th time in a row. At such times he may experience a wide range of unpleasant feelings, such as anger,

frustration, anxiety, despair, feelings of failure and inadequacy, only to be accompanied later by feelings of guilt and remorse for reacting in an aggressive and punitive manner. It is important to distinguish the two aspects of such situations. The one is related to an excessive self-assertive side of the personality and the other to a more vulnerable side. We have on the one hand a parent that needs to get things done here and now and therefore his controlling self takes charge of the situation. When things don't turn out as expected, he resorts to asserting his authority with screams, threats and punitive measures. There is thus an escalation of events whereby the parent plays a multiplicity of roles, ranging from that of a controller, to that of a policeman, judge and jury. And then we have a more covert situation concerning the vulnerability of the parent who is daunted by the amount of tasks he has to perform, trying to beat the clock, a victim of the demands of modern life, who experiences feelings of disappointment, hopelessness, frustration, discontent, failure, despair and guilt. Power struggles are overwhelming and exhausting at best. In both cases parents are willing to distance themselves from and to move towards more effective and rewarding interactions.

5.3. Self in process

One would expect parents who join a workshop to be willing to part with beliefs, tendencies and behaviors which they deem ineffective in outcome and stressful emotionally, mentally and physically. This demands awareness of their contributing input towards the family issues. However, parents do not always exhibit such elements of self-awareness. Parents often believe that alleviation of their issues will come about when their children are "fixed" and often expect to attain from seminars and workshops those tools that will allow them to guide, manipulate or even force their children into the desired behaviors. PET workshops work the opposite direction. It is through parental change that children act more maturely, cooperatively and respectfully. Parents get to realize that they are part of the problem during

PET workshops and are willing as a result to examine and depart from personal constructs that impede family wellbeing.

In this section the themes represent changes in the constructs of participants as these are manifested in the transcripts. These changes portray the unfolding of a process rather than the arrival at the finishing line or the attainment of specific goals. Special attention is dedicated on the subject of awareness due to the fact that it plays a commanding role for effecting change.

5.3.1 Awareness

Perhaps the most striking change in the constructs of the participants is their increased level of awareness, that is, their sensitization into observing parts of their own existence and/or that of others. Its presence was felt throughout the transcripts of all six participants and its effects seemed to be present in the unfolding of most emerging themes. In addition, the notion of awareness seemed to have a prominent role as an instigating factor to promote change in the way participants think, feel and behave.

Maria makes a number of statements that portray very clearly her increased levels of self-awareness:

> *"I am still at times quite interventional [ ] (but) I understand when I make a mistake."*
>
> *"I have this compass [ ] thus I know when I diverge or when I am on course"*
>
> *"I am aware that when I become controlling [ ] I don't respect my child [ ] and show lack of acceptance"*
>
> *"In front of my kids I make a dreadful mistake [ ] I am fully aware of this"*

For Maria, her workshop learning transforms into a portable compass that prompts her at all times of her whereabouts and destination. One can observe that she is very much aware of her behaviors and their effect upon others without, however, making special mention of her feelings. This is not the case with Christina, who in contrast, reflects on her feelings on a number of occasions:

> *"I said to myself: 'Don't talk now. You first have to get in touch with your feelings."*

> *"There are things that have made me angry but what is the underlying feeling? Is it hurt? Is it disappointment? [ ] What is it that made me so angry?"*

> *"For sure when I get myself into the process of finding my feelings, something I never used to do, evidently (something) changes inside me [ ] the fact that I try to sense the problems and to reflect on how to solve them [ ] is helpful"*

> *"I sat down and said to myself [ ] 'Think now; is it so important for you that your son excels at school? Why? To become an academic or what? This self active listening [ ] helped me understand why I do it and (for who's sake)"*

Elena, a single and working mother, has to deal with the difficulties of raising her 14 year old adolescent son whilst in his rebellious stage. She manifests increased awareness of her son's positive qualities which enables her to be more accepting and appreciating, to bridge the gap between herself and her son, and nurture their relationship:

> *"I realized that the way George thinks is totally orderly and logical [ ] if you focus on his strong points and his potential instead of picking on his faults [ ] he can be really mature"*

> *"I learned to distinguish [ ] between the (heated and exaggerated) behaviors of the moment and what really lies underneath them and I stopped panicking [ ] I saw a side of my son that was not allowed to emerge"*

> *"I mean that it was my accomplishment because it is I who had to change or to look at things from a different angle [ ] I believed he was manipulative but actually he is not [ ] to the contrary, I was amazed with so many unexpected (positive) behaviors of his [ ] I was helped to see George as a separate being   [*

] and to treat him as a person and not as child that I wish to mold [ ] He is a person in his own right with his distinctive personality and needs. It is so simple! I had not realized it."

Aphrodite is a mother of a 14 year old son and a 7 year old daughter. Most of her issues are with her son and she has come to important and life changing realizations:

"I have realized how important communication is [ ] to be close to them and to accept them as they are. This has calmed me down with respect to my deep concern about my son (my aspirations about him) [ ] I thought I was a failure as a mother and I was relieved when I realized that this is how human beings are (they follow their own course) [ ] therefore I need to follow my child in his choices rather than try to steer him; I have to support him attain his own goals."

"He cries it out loud [ ]: 'I don't do it to annoy you. It has nothing to do with you.' If you only listen to your child; I believed he did it on purpose to create havoc and get on my nerves [ ] Your child will give you clues: 'mummy please hug me [ ] (or) I want to feel you are my mother'. [ ] (You must) learn to listen to your child; It will not (always) tell you openly like 'I need to talk to you' but (will throw at you a cue) [ ] and if you miss it, it's gone for ever. Here (refers to the workshop) you get the spirit (of how to decode messages) whereby you say 'I got it. This is the message'"

In the above extract, Aphrodite's awareness is sensitized to read her children's covert important messages. She continues with her insight in realizing the importance of looking at the wider picture:

"The important thing is not if my daughter finished her meal or whether my son ended the academic year with exceptional grades; it is the greater picture that counts, which you don't realize because you see it in small frames. This (realization) calmed me immensely [ ] time stopped chasing me."

Olympia has three children of 11, 13 and 15. It is only normal that her daily time schedule is extremely demanding. She realizes that although her autocratic style may be effective at times, it creates feelings of resentment and doesn't serve her relationships. She also realizes

how meticulously she kept avoiding asking for help due to her belief that this would equal a confession of weakness.

"I now consider what each of my kids is up to (to grant them some extra time if necessary) [ ] I have the impression they see me differently now (more lovingly)".

"I have revised some constructs of mine [ ] I detect that I am learning to choose what is important and what not, whether it is related to my kids or our home or my work and if I realize that I am stirring things up [ ] I urge myself to stop [ ] what helps is to ask 'what does the situation need' (as opposed to what I need) [ ] I detach myself [ ] If I explode, I will get things done faster but then I will feel awful [ ] there is better clarity (now)"

"I like it when someone looks at what I am looking at through a fresh pair of eyes [ ] it might broaden my vision because when I am involved I may be missing something [ ] in our group I often made realizations [ ] (for example) I thought I was not a strict mother but through this process I realized that I was rigid and unbending [ ] that I have excessive demands of my kids [ ] I thought my approach to children was very appropriate; however, in reality I came across as threatening [ ] I believed I didn't have an agenda but the agenda was there alright, neatly hidden"

"Through the role plays I saw parts of me I didn't know of [ ] I have started to observe myself and I think I don't hide from my self that much [ ] I am more transparent [ ] if things don't turn out according to my plan, I will not put the blame on others because I (now) know I had preempted the outcome in my own mind"

"I don't want to burden myself (with a conflict) if my colleague cannot handle the situation [ ] I consciously choose not to make an issue of it not because I am soft or scared [ ] but because I want to behave in accord with how I feel [ ] I am more aware of what I really want and who I am [ ] I feel awful (when I pick a fight) and I know I choose not to because it doesn't help me"

"And I started thinking that maybe when I feel under pressure [ ] I don't express it [ ] I would have to learn to ask for help [ ] I now ask for help."

Alexandra also makes important realizations related to her contributing effect to problem situations. One can recognize an increasing self-awareness of her failings and the consequent

countermeasures she undertakes to bring about change. She becomes more attuned and sensitive to her children's needs and feelings and develops her empathic qualities not only with her children but also with her other important relationships; she becomes less interventional by recognizing the aftermath of increased stress, tension and anxiety. She decides to bring to an end a warfare which she admits is a creation of her own.

> "It is as if I have tuned my antennas and now I can listen to them [ ] as if I had my ears closed. I now sit down and think "what does he need to be pleased? What is he thinking or feeling? [ ] Maybe he's right after all. Actually he is right.""

> "Often I react without thinking [ ] I then realize I could have ignored the problem which I myself exaggerated"

> "It is as if a have a different kind of maturity [ ] a kind of emotional intelligence which I did not possess [ ] as if I could not grasp (their) emotions"

> "My perception of things has changed, I was not empathic [ ] It is as if I didn't realize the importance of relationships. Now I see relationships differently; not only concerning my kids but also my friends, parents, siblings [ ] I care more about them and their feelings [ ] it is as if there was something missing, that was put into storage [ ] (instead) of being at the forefront"

> "I had intense feelings of anxiety [ ] I didn't know what to do. I felt a heavy weight upon me. Now I feel more pliable in managing things, I have a lot more understanding [ ] and this helps to have less conflict [ ] to have more quality time and less stress and tension"

> "I want an end to this battle and warfare we used to have; we have calmed down [ ] actually I have calmed down, my kids are just a reflection of me"

The above extracts portray in vivid terms areas in which all participants exhibit increased levels of awareness. It is important to note that for some mothers awareness is manifested as self-awareness and for others as situational awareness. In both cases, the mothers are assisted either in realizing problem areas of their own behaviors or in becoming more sensitive and attuned to the experiences of important others.

5.3.2 Empathizing

Parents are taught in the workshops how to and when to active listen. The three necessary conditions (empathy, acceptance and congruence) are presented to them and extensive training takes place in the form of exercises, role plays, homework and practice at home under true conditions. It is true that parents will not meet the three necessary conditions at all times, yet even under imperfect conditions it seems they are doing better than otherwise. The fact that they are willing to listen, coupled with true caring proves effective enough to make the difference even if their active listening skills are in need of polishing. Thus, empathy may be manifested irrespective of active listening skills either as a state of being or by behaving in a manner that implies empathy. For example, an aloof mother who has become more sensitive and empathic may manifest such change by personally nursing her child when sick.

Maria in the following extract shows she is determined not to confront her son for what she believes to be poor choices of friends, but instead decides to be open enough to discuss the matter with her son and explore the dynamics leading to his choices. In the second extract Maria makes a statement that proves her resolute commitment to be empathic:

> *"The reason why my son hangs around with these kids is that his two best friends have left town and he feels lonely; like all youngsters he doesn't want to be alone, he wants to satisfy his need for belongingness. By understanding the reason for his behaviour, my own reaction is different (non-critical of him and his friends) [ ] I try to understand their personality (of her two sons), to accept them and contemplate how I may counsel them."*

> *"By trying to comprehend my kids and blaming myself when I fail to do so, I think I end up loving them all the more and enjoying them all the more"*

Christina in her own words describes how she has internalized the process of active listening:

> *"With my kids I can be empathic [ ] I mean when I sit down to listen, I really listen; I don't do it just because it is recommended in a workshop."*

Elena finally gets the message by being empathic to her son's crying out for less control:

> *"He is right because a 15 year old doesn't understand health issues and he tells you 'I am on vacation and I also have to study. Isn't this enough? Why should I go to bed this early?'"*

Aphrodite attunes to her son's interests and is able to respect his choices:

> *"Whenever I have tried to enter his world [ ] I realize how sophisticated his interests are"*

Olympia mentions her experience of empathy metaphorically:

> *"I think I have entered more deeply into their shoes"*

Alexandra makes her point very clearly on the following occasions:

> *"I listen (metaphorically) to what the other wants [ ] what is he thinking of, what is he feeling, maybe this would please him"*

> *"I change my role, that is, I depart from my point of reference to enter his, to look at things from the perspective of my child"*

> *"I get into the shoes of my kids, my parents (and) those close to me, and I try to understand how they feel"*

It is clear from the above extracts that empathy not only acts as a soothing agent in the hearts of children, but also broadens the understanding of parents to help them redefine their stance towards their children and their family issues, and ultimately to strengthen their relationships.

5.3.3 Accepting

At various instances parents showed increased levels of acceptance and often talked of the beneficial effects such change brought to their relationship. It is interesting to note that mothers with adolescent children had more severe issues of acceptance, as it involved matters related to important values. Mothers of younger children had to deal mostly with issues of daily practical importance. Olympia, for example, with three young children, brought up the issue of acceptance only in relation to adults. Not all parents referred to acceptance using the

word 'acceptance' but were describing it in terms of leniency, compliancy, being more understanding, being less judgmental and critical, being at ease, easing up on expectations, seeing matters from a different perspective, respecting differences in personalities and so on.

Maria at various instances indicates that her levels of acceptance have improved. She is less critical and although she disapproves her son's friends, she manages to be more lenient and tolerant, if not more acceptant of his right to choose his own friends:

> *"I think that this workshop has helped me immensely to become more lenient"*

> *"I accept his choice of friends [ ] his needs, his will, his behaviour and his personality"*

> *"I try to be less of a judge and less critical and a lot more acceptant and the result is that I have a deeper love because I think you love someone when you accept him"*

Christina's increased level of acceptance allows more freedom of expression at home, even though order and tidiness may be compromised. Equally, she has become less demanding of her son and this improved their relationship immensely:

> *"I have become more compliant; I would return home [ ] (and) see socks and shoes all over the place and I would start shouting 'why don't you pick up your stuff' [ ] I don't do this anymore"*

> *"When my son realized that I was more at ease and that I am not (any more) the mother that expects one thousand things of him, i.e., good behaviour, good student, no TV [ ] that I don't have all these expectations [ ] in the last three months I have changed immensely [ ] our relationship has improved [ ] (matters) had deteriorated because I had the impression that my son had to be somehow and I expected him to (conform) [ ] and you cannot do this to your child, you really cannot."*

Elena accepts that she can't expect her aging mother to change her attitudes. Instead she changes her own behaviour and this appears to have influenced her mother's behaviour:

> *"For example, concerning my mother, taking into consideration that she is of a certain age and that she won't change, things may have improved because I say things differently or because I have accepted certain situations"*

It is usual for parents to think of their children as an extension of their own self and expect them to share the same attitudes and values. It often comes as a disheartening shock when a parent realizes this can't be so; Elena's increased levels of acceptance and love for her only child helps her to move forward:

> *"Another thing which is the outcome of the workshop is that whatever your child may be, you love it. This is a fact, we know it, but yet we don't know it. Let your child be itself"*

Aphrodite also had expectations of her children. When these were denied, she was flooded with feelings of disappointment, frustration and anger, and felt a total failure. Acceptance brought her peacefulness:

> *"To be close to them, to accept them as they are, this is what has calmed me immensely in all my agonies and fears"*

> *"I saw things from a different perspective, that he has a personality of his own, that he is who he is - I respect my needs but also yours – this is very important. [ ] I don't negate feelings, especially those of children; one thinks that one can tamper with feelings [ ] If a grownup tells you 'I have a headache', you will never reply 'No you don't have one'"*

Olympia by increasing her acceptance levels can enjoy her relationships with fewer conflicts:

> *"In general [ ] I don't make an issue of things indiscriminately [ ] I am more accepting now [ ] there is no need to crucify (someone)"*

The same applies to Alexandra. Acceptance is expressed by being more lenient and understanding. When she relaxes her demands upon her children, she can readily enjoy the brighter side of things:

"I used to be more strict, with not much understanding and I had intense feelings of anxiety [ ] I didn't know what to do. I felt a huge weight upon me. Now I feel more pliable as to how I will manage things, I have a lot more understanding [ ] and this helps to have less conflicts [ ] to have more quality time and less stress and tension"

Acceptance has unique effects on people. It unfolds their human side and makes them less punishing to self and others. All six mothers to a lesser or larger extent experienced increased levels of acceptance which served their relationships and gave them some peace of mind.

5.3.4. Respecting

Parents often become so over-controlling, overprotective and overbearing that their children feel suffocated and violated. Usually, controlling parents believe it is their duty to be so; good parents act this way, even if it is not in their blood-stream. On the receiving side, children do not welcome control, especially when it is excessive, uncalled for, inappropriate and disrespectful. A controlling parent who doesn't get his way voluntarily will usually resort to authoritarian measures ranging from rewarding and gentle "arm twisting" to enforcing through threats, punishments and intimidation. Young children may object, resist and become argumentative; this restlessness, however, is usually compromised with patience, endurance and forced obedience. After all, children of pre-school and lower school ages are very much dependant on their parents. However, revolt is only round the corner, as soon as the balance of power shifts. Parents rarely realize they are reaping the fruits of their own actions. Even if they suspect they have somehow contributed to the outcome of events, they feel they don't deserve such retaliatory behavior and will often complain how difficult, disrespectful, ungrateful and obstinate their children are. After all, their intentions were noble and their actions were only the result of their endless caring and love. Adolescents, however, see matters from their own perspective. Although they may realize that their parents do love

them, they also believe very strongly that they have the right to their own life; that they have important needs and they should be allowed to make their own choices and chase their dreams in any way they feel fit. In addition, adolescents often feel strong and indestructible, and this can only aggravate matters. Thus one observes an awkward and oxymorous situation: on the one hand the parents' desire to cater for, protect, guide and intervene, and on the other, their children assuming such desire as an offensive act of disrespect and an impingement on their freedom. It is evident that this combination may become extremely toxic and explosive.

The Gordon model, however, is a predominantly democratic model of rearing children. This is not to say that intervention is absent, but it is a different kind of intervention. It is intervention in the sense of influencing though modeling, counseling, discussing and allowing for natural consequences of educational impact. An example of a natural consequence would be the following: instead of checking a child's sport bag to make sure all necessary swimming gear is catered for, the responsibility is left with the child. If some gear is missing, the child will miss its swimming session. Using power to compel is limited to a bare minimum, in effect when matters of health and safety are under serious threat. It is a measure of last resort, serving the role of impeding and protecting rather than of punishing.

In the workshops, parents realize the dangers of excessive control and are willing to revise their behaviors. In the extracts which follow, parents show clear signs of this understanding and are prepared to actively fight against this tendency of unreasonably limiting their children's freedom and become more respectful and acceptant.

Maria, a mother of two teenage sons and one daughter in puberty exclaims that the main reason she joined the workshop was to tame her long arm of control:

"Yes, (I allow them) to acquire gradually the capability to organize their life under their own initiative. [ ] I was extremely interventional through out their life and on a daily basis. For sure things are better now, because I try to control it. I use the appropriate skills [ ] to allow them participation in decision making"

She also realizes the adverse effects this may have on the behavior of her son. When children are deprived of their freedom and are duly controlled they will resort to all sort of behaviors to get their needs met:

"Before the workshop I would have exhibited a much more interventional behaviour which would have resulted in resistance and lying. I would have said 'I don't want you to hang around with those guys and (my son) would have (pretentiously) agreed, and he would have done exactly the opposite"

Maria concludes:

"I have understood that to control or to direct in this manner [ ] shows lack of respect"

Christina has younger children and becomes aware that she often crosses the line of respectful behavior:

"From the moment the bed-time ritual would commence up to the point they would close their eyes I was constantly (nagging them) [ ] you haven't done this, you haven't done that and this was a big problem"

In the following extract Christina realizes she went a step too far to get things done her own way with her seven-year-old son:

"I would do crazy things like one time my son had reading problems (and I was making him read time after time) and he was screaming 'no more' and I would reply 'five more times, you really need this, five more times'. (Now) I have stopped (doing this). We talked about the issue and what can be done about it and I discussed it with his teacher [ ] I can't play the role of teacher [ ] I will not force my child to read five more times because you (the teacher) believe I should do so [ ] this will destroy our relationship"

In her own words, Christina would never listen. This has changed not only with her children but with all her relationships:

> *"I have learned to listen more; I would never listen. [ ] I listen a lot more to my kids, husband, friends and everybody. I don't interrupt as I used to; before they would even finish their sentence (I would butt in) [ ] even if it was small talk"*

On another occasion, expressing her needs in a respectful manner helps her attain a more amicable relationship with her husband:

> *"He appreciates (my husband) that I speak to him in a different manner; had I spoken to him as I used to [ ] I would have said: 'you are really a lazy bastard. While you are laying out flat on the sofa watching TV, I haven't stopped working for a second. Can't you get up and help me?' Our relationship has changed and he appreciates very much (my new manners)"*

Elena with her fourteen years old son in full revolt realizes she can't go very far if she continues to be oppressive:

> *"I make an effort not to be so abrupt because generally I am brash as a person"*

> *"When I am not forceful, when I don't put pressure on him to do this or that, he does everything [ ]. My son has this (habit), if you get on his back [ ] he will react, he will get mad at you and he want give in an inch"*

> *"I was shouting only to shout [ ] I haven't stopped shouting altogether; I am human you know [ ] if it gets out of hand (and I start shouting) I will apologize"*

> *"I do not nag him so much. [ ] I would have put away the router and the computer [ ] (if I was to continue with) this style of upbringing (I could have equally) sent him to a military academy"*

Aphrodite at various instances makes it very clear how important it is to respect her adolescent son in his choices. She also feels great relief to be free from the role of the oppressor:

> *"Therefore I need to follow my child in his choices rather than steer him; I have to support him attain his own goals", "Learn to listen to your child", "I stay*

next to him and I listen, I don't scare him with threats", "From our first (workshop) session I understood how important it is not to label or criticize your child", "I don't annul their feelings", "(It is so important to) respect their needs", "It is emancipating to feel you don't need to pressure your kids to do things"

Olympia, a mother of three younger children does not face important issues. However, she feels immensely relieved to be able to approach unacceptable behaviour in a non-offensive manner:

"Something magical happens when instead of telling him 'you are so grumpy' I say 'when you speak to me in this manner, I feel [ ]'"

"It is as if [ ] I am not scared to say what's on my mind [ ] (because) it doesn't create a conflict"

Alexandra, a single mother of tow adolescent sons, in an effort to cope with the daily overload of duties would take very little notice of their needs and find herself entering warfare all the more often:

"(It is) as if I had my ears closed. I now sit down and think "what does he need to be pleased? What is he thinking or feeling?", "(I thought) I had to be strict in order to rule them", "I want an end to this battle and warfare [ ] actually I have calmed down"

It is impressive that mothers not only become aware of their controlling side and the adverse effects this may have on their relationships within and outside the nuclear family, but can achieve spectacular results in curbing such behavior relatively quickly and effectively.

5.3.5. Letting go: Allowing others to grow

Allowing others to grow into independent, autonomous, confident, creative and self-disciplined persons is one of the important goals of the Gordon model. Maria, a predominantly controlling parent in her own words, realizes how important it is for her kids

to control their own space, to participate in decision making, to solve their own problems, and to strengthen their internal locus of evaluation:

> "[ ] it is their own space and they should be able to have a saying about it"

> "I urge them: "you must find a solution, not me [ ] I don't know; I wasn't there and I don't have a view; it is for you to solve. [ ] I try to resolve in whose jurisdiction lays the problem, and if it is not in mine, then I distance myself"

> "I have told them that except in matters of safety or some issues concerning their education [ ] in all other cases [ ] I will not intervene"

> "When I use my authority (with punishments or rewards) [ ] (I now know it) creates insecure persons. Likewise, rewards [ ] when you punish or you reward, you are controlling their life"

Christina questions some of her more fixed ideas and has become less coercive on important issues, such as school grades and screen time. There is a clear shift towards discussing and explaining the reasons for certain prohibitions as opposed to the old school of thought along the lines: "you do so because I say so".

> "(I thought to myself) is it so important that your son becomes an outstanding student?"

> "With my son I will tell him I have read a research that says [ ]. (My husband and I will say) 'We don't want to expose you to such dangers' [ ] (whereas) in the past I would have told him this is what we have decided, end of story"

Elena used to be very protective of her adolescent son and always tried to smooth out the sharp edges between her son and his father. She realized this does not help her relationship with her son and decided to allow him to problem-solve his own difficulties and give him space to mature:

> "I believe they are both grownups (her son and his father) [ ] (and therefore) I will not get involved [ ] it is obvious that the problem is between the two of them"

Aphrodite, a mother who loves sports and would like her son to take up this healthy habit, readily understands that oppressing him not only will not bring about the desired result, but will shatter their relationship. She couldn't have put it in more explicit words:

> *"Therefore I need to follow my child in his choices rather than steer him; I have to support him attain his own goals"*

> *"It is very stressful to be oppressive, to build walls and block their progress and if you look at it in terms of personalities, I gave birth to one kid with this personality and another with that personality. Let them follow their own path, they may become something else than what I would have wish them to be"*

Olympia, a mother of three younger children has a heavy daily load to manage. Letting them deal with their own problems not only helps her deal with her load but also acts as a maturing exercise. In addition, by including her children in the problem solving processes, she helps her kids become more autonomous, creative and self-disciplined:

> *"I was a typical (controlling) mother whereby I would shoulder problems that clearly belonged to my kids [ ] (this new approach) is magical; let your kids solve their problems and let me solve mine"*

> *"I include my children in the problem solving process"*

Alexandra believed that she had to go against her nature and become a strict, shouting mother in order to turn her kids into worthwhile citizens. This attitude drove her younger son to become very uncooperative and rebellious:

> *"(Before) I was very anxious and very nervous; (I thought) I had to become strict in order to 'define' my children"*

The importance of *Letting go: Allowing others to grow* lies in the fact that one of the most important roles of parents is to help their children attain the necessary skills, attitudes and values which will support them not only to cope and survive, but also to carry them through into a meaningful and satisfying life.

5.4.6 Group Imprint: When parents join experiences

The presence of the group has the effect of increasing the level of awareness and promoting effective problem solving. Parents realize that they are not alone in one of the most demanding roles they will ever be called to. The feeling of belongingness is soothing and empowering. In addition, listening to others and their issues tends to put problems into a more realistic perspective. This induces parents to be less demanding and controlling, more relaxed, proactive, realistic and knowledgeable.

In Maria's case the group had an eye-opening influence and increased her problem solving skills by taking preventive measures, such as planning ahead, taking precautions and educating herself. In addition, the group helped her not to exaggerate the problems she was facing. Being realistic helps her to see problems within context; not to panic or to go overboard with extreme actions and behaviors that will only aggravate matters:

> *"(By listening to other members of the group and broadening my awareness) it was very helpful to be able to plan ahead for either current problems or future problems [ ] and also to place within context the magnitude of the problems I am facing"*

Christina gets strongly motivated to do whatever is necessary to insure her relations are kept alive, loving and harmonious:

> *"I was affected because you listen to a variety of problems, because each one of us is immersed in his own issues, and especially when you hear about older children [ ] because I got scared with the idea that in five years from now I may lose touch with my son, daughter and husband [ ] because relationships are alive and may deteriorate with time [ ] and all this (the Gordon model) gives me hope that I can do it, to give myself the chance to be different so that they become different and not to spoil my relationships [ ] I was awakened"*

Elena is empowered by the group's feeling of togetherness:

> *"(Being in a group) makes you realize other aspects and situations and other people and other ways of thinking and not to feel alone in a world that only you are having a hard time"*

Aphrodite defines time and relationships in a new perspective that is less pressing and allows having more gratifying moments. She realizes that relationships are for ever and that one should protect them at all costs:

> *"(The fact that within the group there were mothers of children of all ages made me realize) that from the moment you give birth to a child, this relationship is for ever [ ] from your tummy till the day you die. [ ] It's a never ending process which continues till you die. This is a huge issue [ ] the interaction (with the group) calmed me down [ ] in that time stopped pressing me"*

For Olympia the group had a calming effect over her tendency to get everything perfect according to her own needs and desires and made her aware of a more dynamic outlook of events:

> *"This process helps me a lot to decompress [ ] and to look at the issues with a more balanced perspective because it is easy to get carried away [ ] and then in the group you talk about it and you listen to yourself speaking (about how you dealt with the various issues) and you listen to how others view it and you immediately see another side to it and (this helps you) look at matters from a more useful angle [ ] to put things into perspective [ ] and to anticipate and prevent or at least to be more aware of what is to come as your children grow up"*

For Alexandra the group has also a mirroring effect; she recognizes in the behaviors of other members her own traits, sensitizing her self-awareness and realizing she is not happy with the way she handles difficult situations:

> *"(The group) for sure helped me because you acquaint yourself with how other parents think and deal with situations and it is helpful to listen to their experiences [ ] and to see things from a different perspective. [ ] It makes you look at your problems as if from the outside [ ] and it makes you realize that you also react in a similar fashion [ ]. You see in others your own reactions (and*

you realize) that you dislike them. [ ] You come to the conclusion that maybe you should also think about bringing about some change"

To conclude, the group may have multilevel effects on the participants; to name but a few, it promotes awareness, sense of belongingness, acceptance, empathy, sharing of feelings and experiences, congruence and problem solving.

5.3.7. Taking care of my needs

"Taking care of my needs" may also be seen in terms of "defending my boundaries" against impinging others. Defending one's needs doesn't always involve or require a conflict. According to the Gordon model boundaries are either communicated explicitly to make important others aware of one's needs and thus more accommodating, or defended assertively to mobilize empathy and cooperation. Whichever way, respect is always at the forefront; needs are assertively pursued without offending, accusing or belittling the other party. It is interesting to note that on issues related to their own wellbeing, all but two mothers (Maria and Christina) showed sacrificial attitudes:

Maria was resolute enough to attain her personal needs even before joining the workshop:

> *"The truth is that I never had a problem attaining my needs (laughs) [ ] At first I would fight for my needs and later on I found ways to go about my needs in a more diplomatic way, respecting the other person and being aware when to insist and when not to. [ ] (The workshop) taught me to be more respectful and more effective but I never had a problem being assertive on this matter"*

Christina has a supporting family that helps her attain many of her personal needs by allowing her time and space:

> *"I live in a family that allows me time [ ] to do things [ ] I always had the time to go out with my girlfriends, to go out for a walk, to go to the gym [ ] I had this support".*

However, when it comes to conflict of needs, Christina admits she would more often than not lose control and become fearful of harming her relationships. At such moments the workshop proved catalytic in keeping matters under control:

"The fact that I approach issues concerning me and my husband more politely [ ] is appreciated and he has also changed. [ ] I (will) tell my husband that I have all these errands to do and prompt him to help me [ ] (within my family) I will lose control one out of ten; it used to be nine out of ten"

Elena would silence any displeasure she felt with her mother, accumulating anger and frustration. Although she has not resolved the underlying tensions, she has learned to speak her mind:

"Concerning my mother, I now more or less speak my mind. I never used to do so; [ ] if something annoys me, I will say so"

Elena would also feel guilty if she expressed a need of hers; as if she didn't deserve it. She has now learned a way to become more assertive without feeling guilty:

"My needs always came last, and at some point you collapse. The I-messages taught me to express some of my needs without getting the feeling that I am demanding or that I am harming someone; that it is wrong [ ] to say 'I would like this to happen'. (This new attitude) is a great leap forward. [ ] It is a way (of expression) that I feel is acceptable, [ ] it is a soft way [ ] I didn't know how (to ask) and therefore this was of great help to me"

Aphrodite makes her own little rebellion. A vibrant lady with many interests, she deprived herself from channeling some of her energy to satisfy needs of her own. Although her self-sacrificial attitude was in effect self-imposed, it felt as if she was obliged to do so by some outside force, as if "this is how things are done"; a "good" mother is fully devoted to the upbringing of her children and doesn't have the right to even think of her needs never mind to go after them:

"As a parent, but also as a human being when you disagree (about something), you don't need to quarrel [ ] (but) to find a way to express that you also have needs [ ] you have this right [ ] because as a parent you feel that you don't. You don't have a personal life, you don't have needs, you don't even have the right to say 'I want some peace and quite [ ], (or) I need to wash my hair.' [ ] This year I made (great improvements) [ ] because it was very important for me to say 'I want to be next to the sea all day long'. I managed to realize my most important need for my summer vacation"

"I learned to say 'I also have the right' [ ] in most cases you give in [ ] It is great when you can say 'hey guys, I would like this' [ ] We were reminded here (at the workshop) that parents do have needs [ ] I had forgotten [ ] that you are allowed to be assertive (in attaining your needs)[ ] and that your kids will understand"

Aphrodite also makes a suggestion for good child rearing practices, which makes sense if one considers that too often mothers go overboard to accommodate the wants and needs of their children:

"This is a magnificent lesson for the child itself while growing up; in its first relationship and interaction [ ] if he respects the needs of his mother, tomorrow he will respect the needs of his wife. [ ] it is educational [ ] (in order) not to bring up egotistical children. [ ] as a mother, you ought to convey this message [ ] in the same manner you teach table manners"

Olympia did not want to show signs of weakness. She is also a woman of few words and doesn't like to whine and grumble. This, however, backfired; her extended family environment always thought she never really needed help as she was strong, autonomous, self-sufficient and independent. Not only she was deprived of help in times of need, but she felt neglected and unsupported. If she decided to speak out her mind, she would hide the softer vulnerable side and instead show her teeth by being abrupt and critical:

"With my sister [ ] I had the opportunity to disclose certain things which I wouldn't have done otherwise. I found the way to speak what's on my mind. [ ] I am not the type that will exclaim "what you are doing is bugging me'. Usually I

will keep things to myself [ ] and suddenly something happens and everything gets on my nerves (and I explode) and then everybody wonders what happened. I think it is better to convey the message in a more diplomatic and painless way, without criticising"

"I now think [ ] I am not afraid to say what is bugging me [ ] I will do it in a manner [ ] (that won't) create havoc"

"And I started to realize that when I had difficulties, I kept it to myself and I didn't externalize it and therefore it was my responsibility to learn to ask for help when I need it. [ ] (Now) I won't beat around the bush for so long"

Olympia discloses that although she is wholeheartedly attentive and caring towards her children, she feels she deserves some of her own nurturing treatment:

"I am more communicative. If I am not in the mood I will let you know; and the outcome will be different if I tell you [ ]. I have this tendency to be attentive to my children [ ] I like being giving, but now I do it differently. [ ] I take some distance and I give myself the opportunity to have my bath and prepare myself in comfort or to relax for ten minutes or to say that I don't want to play right now"

Alexandra on the issue of being sacrificial is no different. A hard working mother with no time to spare would expend all her energy to cater for her two sons. She even came to the point of depriving herself from the small pleasures of life, such as going out for a walk:

"I have started being a lot more assertive concerning my needs and I realize that my children respect them [ ] I do not suppress myself (anymore), I express my needs [ ]. I never used to speak out, I was drowning on the inside, in other words, I preferred to oppress myself, for example to forgo going for a walk"

According to the Gordon model, it is of utmost importance that parents pursue and defend their personal needs; a dissatisfied and unhappy parent who doesn't get his/her needs met, may not be able to follow through his parental duties effectively and may be risking early burnout.

5.3.8. Moving from "I ought to" to "I need to"

In the analysis of *My lost self*, a number of statements were analyzed that indicated parents often felt the pressure to conform to expert pre-prescribed or socially accepted practices, which did not exactly meet their own needs, temperament or values. Parents would thus be in a state of incongruence, departing from actions and behaviors that would feel right to them, only to conform to such that would satisfy exterior norms. This section refers to the same statements and focuses on signs showing the participants are acting now more in accord with their own inner calling.

Maria manages to make important steps towards freeing herself from the invisible hand that drives her to be overwhelmingly controlling:

> Before: *"I thought I was obliged to lead them"*

> After: *"I (now) try to distinguish in which areas I can counsel them (instead)"*

Christina makes her own revolution against the school establishment and frees herself from peer pressure, as she is determined to protect her relationship with her kids. At the end of the day, she thinks, why should external values determine her own behavior? It's really not worth it, she concludes:

> Before: *"I do it because the school has put me into this way of thinking [ ] because the school draws you (into thinking this way) [ ]. I had this impression that my son ought to be somehow; and I expected him (to deliver the goods)"*

> After: *"This thing with the school was constantly on my mind [ ] (my son) to return from school, to sit down and study, to sleep on time, I mean I had become a bitch [ ] and then I said to myself 'think a little bit; is it so important for you that your son excels [ ]'. [ ] being empathic towards my own feelings [ ] to understand why I do it; do I do it for me? Do I do it for the mother of xyz? [ ]. It is so obvious; it is because the school has put you into this trip. [ ] All this (process) helped me immensely; I literally had a discussion with myself [ ]. [ ] I*

have relaxed and I am not (anymore) the mother that expects one thousand things (from my son)"

Elena's case is more complex. Just after the workshop a number of changes took place in the relationship between her son and his father. Communication between them broke down and Elena thereafter had to deal with her son alone. During the interview Elena was asked whether the changes she experienced were related or not to the workshop, in view of the other important changes taking place in her life and her son's life:

> Before: *"[ ] because of fear or because of his eloquent and persuasive way (her son's father) of presenting matters, my judgment was confused [ ]. [ ] It felt like walking on a tight rope and never managing to make it through to the other side. Always falling"*

> After: *"This (i.e., the changes in the relation of son and father) has nothing to do with the workshop. [ ] Most probably, (however) if I had not joined the workshop, things within me wouldn't have been clear, things may have unfolded otherwise, events may have taken place earlier or I may not have stayed out of it [ ]. The end result may have been the same but the way it would have unfolded, how much I would have involved myself, in what position I would have brought myself, my son and his father may have been different. [ ] It was definitely better this way [ ] the fact that I didn't involve myself (a result of the workshop) has freed me from having feelings of remorse and guilt [ ].*

Aphrodite departs from a competitive stance to one that is guided solely by the wish to protect and nurture the relationship. Even parents get carried away by peer pressure and the need of belongingness, and thus may become extremely demanding on their kids. Aphrodite realizes that family belongingness is more important to peer belongingness and makes an important u-turn in attitude and behavior:

> Before: *"My neighbor's and my cousin's kids learned to cycle by the age of six and my son doesn't even want to ride one [ ] All kids did it (swimming lessons), why not mine?"*

> After: *"(It is not a) relationship of events, whether my son can wash alone or (what have you) [ ]. It is very liberating not to feel the need to put pressure on your kids to do things"*

Alexandra talked herself into becoming a strict mother in order to meet some idealized parenting role; a good mother cannot lose control, especially a single mother. How will she manage her two growing sons? She was forced by some "invisible hand" to refute her own values and needs and now she is meeting up again with her soft, caring and loving part:

> Before: *"I think that I was anxious and nervous (because) I had to be strict in order to be able to control them"*

> After: *"(I believe my kids would now say about me) I have become more understanding, [ ] more relaxed, more calm"*

In the above extracts mothers revealed a tendency to move away from pre-prescribed actions and behaviors and follow routes closer to their own needs and values. This brought about a relaxation on their excessive demands and helped them to become less controlling by adopting behaviors which aimed to influence rather than to enforce. To a large extend discussions, active listening, I-messages, problem solving skills and counseling replaced the use of threats, punishments and rewards.

5.4. A snapshot of "after"

In this section, "A snapshot of after", the three corresponding themes deal with the overall impact of the workshop. In the first instance, *old habits die hard*, it is shown that although a ten week workshop may act as a powerful kick start, parents feel there is still a way to go to fully assimilate the new and get rid of the old. The second theme, *effective problem solving*, deals with the success that parents experience in dealing with their family problems. The third, *feeling better*, gives an account of the improved emotional state of parents.

5.4.1 Old habits die hard: Struggling for change

Old habits can prove very resistant. They seem to be deeply rooted and unprepared to be given up without a fight. After all, they have been serving a purpose and have been delivering results albeit some casualties; a controlling parent may get quick short-term results, especially when it comes to "easygoing" preschoolers and first grade children. In effect it is convenient but at a price; the relationship may fall apart in the long run and signs of revolt can be detected even at these tender ages. It is this price that drives parents to continue fighting for change.

Maria makes use of the word "endeavor" thirty five times. She is a bright, successful and hard working mother who likes to get things done right and fast. Her children may have other plans for themselves and work at a different pace. It is a true struggle for her to tame her controlling self:

> *"The truth is that as far as rewards are concerned I haven't changed very much. I have tried, however, to shift the responsibility of their attainment. It is like getting a bonus at work if you do your job properly. I make it appear as if it is up to them (to receive the reward) and not up to me (to grant it). I cannot say that I have been successful in this matter. Although my conviction has changed (she sees the merit of abolishing rewards), my behavior has not."*

This is a very interesting acknowledgement on the part of Maria. She has made huge improvements in abolishing punishments, but it is almost impossible for her to lose total control on issues she feels are imminently important. She thus makes a desperate attempt to disguise the rewards in order to manoeuvre herself closer to her understanding that rewards are not pedagogical.

Christina's struggle is different to that of Maria. Christina has worked hard to become less explosive and to be more understanding and accepting. She recognizes the positive steps she

has made but she is not totally happy. She still feels she has not fully assimilated the skills; they do not come about as second nature:

> *"I have learned to listen more [ ] I have done lots of practice but more work is required (laughs) [ ] (I would like to use active listening) more often, to internalize it. [ ] I can enter the process but this does not happen effortlessly, I mean I have to think of my responses. [ ] I would like it to be more spontaneous, I mean the change inside me to be even greater, because now it goes through my head, I mean it does not come directly. I am not me 100%"*

Respectively, she recognises that there is still a long way to go with her relationship with her mother, as she hasn't really bothered to do very much about it:

> *"For example, with my mother I haven't worked on it and things are not improving, she still torments me, as I torment her"*

Elena is on an uphill course. Her adolescent son who is in full rebellion doesn't make things easy. Her worries are at a peak and the skills come in handy as fire fighting measures. At moments of despair it is difficult to fully abide to the Gordon model, especially when the skills are not fully assimilated. Elena, at times, struggles not to lose control:

> *"I haven't stopped shouting altogether. I am only human"*

> *"I have an issue with active listening. I believe you need a three months course to master it because you are required to change your reactions on the spur of the moment; therefore we are talking about absolute reprogramming"*

> *"I don't want to be untrustworthy. Therefore at times I have to bite myself to put a check on this thing (my controlling self) because it wants to come out before I even open my mouth"*

> *"(with the Gordon model) you open new chapters [ ] you open a chapter because you know it is useful [ ] (and you think) yes I have made a step, but there are many more to come (steps)"*

Aphrodite makes it very clear that she still has a long way to go to improve further her relationships with her children:

"I think I am still in deep water but I can now breathe which is a big step"

She is determined, however, to do what is necessary to bridge her relationships, especially the one with her son. She feels she has, at times, neglected him and readily takes responsibility for their estrangement:

"I haven't had many opportunities to spend quality time (with my son) and this is a mistake [ ] but I am working on it [ ] I would like to come closer to him, I have driven him away [ ] I am in the right direction"

"I believe [ ] that working with yourself is something you are entitled to but also an obligation towards your surroundings (family and immediate others)"

For Olympia the skills don't always come naturally. There is still work to be done so that they become second nature:

"I know that I still make a lot of mistakes [ ] and I may get angry [ ]. At times I don't like what I hear and I realize that I hold myself not to (explode)"

The same applies to Alexandra. Her obstinate younger son often drives her crazy and she loses control. She realizes that there is still work to be done and that to be effective, change must take place at a deeper level:

"I don't always manage [ ] There are still times of despair [ ] I know that patience and effort is required and more work on my side [ ]. Problems seemed larger than me. Now I see I can cope with them but some times I am overwhelmed [ ] It also has to do with how you have learned to operate; it is as if we are trying to change ourselves"

From the above extracts it can be seen that the *old* self is still present and interfering with the *new* self; the *before* with the *after*. Thus the *Self in process* encompasses the new and the old, just as a train at a specific point in its journey comprises of specific passengers. As it stops at the various stations, some passengers descend and some ascend. As the train moves on from

station to station, many of the initial passengers have descended but some remain onboard. In fact some may still be there at end of the journey.

5.4.2 Effective problem solving

In families with small children, the majority of problems are usually of a practical nature, that is, to cater for the needs of the children, look after their health and safety, to manage the large number of daily duties and errands. When children enter adolescence, matters may become more volatile. There may be power struggles, defiance and rebellion, issues of attitudes and values, and an atmosphere of estrangement whereby relationships are severely tested and redefined. This should not come as a surprise, since the younger the children, the more they depend upon their parents on their daily needs and are more prone to be obedient or accommodating. Older children become more independent and will have the tendency to rebel against the wishes of their parents, especially when parents are inclined to use their authority or try to limit their freedom.

Thus effective problem solving is not limited to solving practical problems faster, better and with less effort. It also involves nurturing the relationship above all. A good, loving, solid and harmonious relationship will act proactively. If conflicts do occur, these will be governed by decency and mutual respect. To this end, any measures or changes that serve the relationship may be considered to be contributing to the problem solving process. The same applies when one takes his distance purposefully in order to serve the relationship. It is not necessary to always intervene, control, coordinate or take sides. Especially on the issue of taking sides in conflicts between siblings or any two parties, the Gordon model advocates to either stay away or take on the role of mediator. Another important problem solving practice is not to act under pressure but instead take time to reflect and act when calm and composed. Taking care of one's needs is also a preventive measure that serves problem solving. Parents

not meeting their own needs will become restless, less patient, and become argumentative and difficult to please. Thus taking care of one's own needs helps to reduce problems. Problem solving is also related to being realistic in demands and expectations, and being confident in one's parenting role. In the transcripts that follow, a number of parents speak of their newly obtained "GPS" capability, that is, to know where they stand, what they want and how to go about it. This allows them to plan, redirect when necessary, and take into consideration their needs and wants and those of their family members.

Maria realizes that allowing self-regulation is more practical in that it is less time-consuming, alleviates the load of worries and work, diminishes conflicts and allows child self-regulation. For example, Maria would get involved in the quarrels of her children taking up the role of supreme judge. This aggravated the situation and made problems a lot more intricate:

> *"I forget it is their own space [ ] and of course it is more practical (if I leave it to them) [ ] It is a huge weight to carry if you have to coordinate everyone [ ] I resolve if an issue is out of my jurisdiction and thus I don't enter a conflict and this improves my relationship"*

Maria also finds it alleviating to have a guide that vigilantly informs her whereabouts, if she is on the right track and how to converge in case she derails:

> *"A very important change is that I can (now) make out what is the problem exactly, [ ] who owns it, how it should be dealt with. [ ] I now feel more confident as to what to do or not do (and whether) I am on the right track or not and this calms me down because [ ] I used to be confused not knowing if I make grave mistakes"*

Christina is now able to deal with problems in a more controlled and composed manner by avoiding impulsive and hasty reactions:

> *"The fact that I reflect on a problem and plan ahead as to how to solve it is a big internal change, something I never used to do"*

Similarly, she is more aware to take preventive action to avoid problems altogether. The Gordon Model maintains that the majority of problems can be avoided by being proactive, modifying the environment and promoting a cooperative and caring spirit:

> *"I will often think about my problems overnight and I will deal with them the next day [ ] (because) in the moment of heat you don't have time to think and you will react in the same way you have been reacting for the past thirty six years"*

> *"When I relaxed and I started tuning into his needs (her son) and got involved with his issues and anxieties, and by the way I was part of his anxieties, I realized that my child was soothed and relieved. [ ] He would hug me more often, ask to do things together [ ] was a lot less reactional towards me [ ] he stopped wanting to get even with me"*

Elena's biggest problem is the lack of communication with her son and his rebellious and uncooperative behavior. There are some contradictions in her descriptions, most probably arising by the ambivalence she feels towards his behaviors:

> *"(Despite) much effort on my part, I do not see dramatic changes with my son, just that he has become more cooperative"*

In another instance she describes:

> *"I saw a child that if you focus on his good qualities and capabilities instead of nagging on his shortcomings [ ] he is a different person, totally mature. He may react on the moment but then he sits and reflects and works on it"*

It is evident that Elena is investing in her relationship and her efforts are paying off. She is still unsure however, of the improvements and can't readily relax and assume everything will be fine. There are unresolved issues that are out of her control. She thus decides to support her son in any way she can:

> *"I will stand by my son so that he rises to his full potential, which I was not able to do before [ ]. I know it is not going to be easy as if I had a magic wand, but*

in any case I know where I should be heading and I know that with patience I
will make it or at least I will try because I know it is not only up to me"

It is interesting to note that she uses the phrase "rise to his full potential", which coincidentally was spoken in English and is transcribed verbatim although the interview was in Greek. Elena's knowledge of the English language is obvious; however, she has no Person centered background other than the PET workshop.

Aphrodite's case is further testimony that Gordon's concepts act as a compass for parents called upon to deal with difficult situations:

> *"I have a new way of thinking about my problems; [ ] I always have in my mind*
> *my aim; it helps me to know my destination [ ] this helps me to be able to go*
> *after it. [ ] If I change the way I think, then I can change my behavior"*

Aphrodite was fully aware that her relationship with her son was alienated and at times stressful. She was obviously unhappy with this state of affairs and was determined to "fix" it by undergoing herself significant changes in attitude and behavior; the fruits of her efforts are revealed by her son in one small astonishing and moving statement:

"Finally, you do love me".

Olympia also presents changes in attitude that reduce the conflicts within the family. As her children are of a younger age, most of her problems are relevant to practicalities:

> *"I don't flare up as much as I used to; I listen to myself when I give an*
> *instruction and it is with more love, it is in a sweeter tone. [ ] Maybe I am more*
> *positive. I don't go out to pick a fight"*

> *"The home rules used to be contested (all the time) and I had difficulty in*
> *having them observed. I would say 'no football in the sitting room' and I wasn't*
> *listened to. I would then have to physically take the ball. This does not happen*
> *anymore. [ ] Maybe my messages became more clear and more (resolute) [ ] it*

is as if I pick my battles now; there used to be too many (of these rules) and I have reduced my demands and focus on what is really important"

"I am helped immensely to think in terms of 'what does the situation need' [ ] because I don't focus on myself or my anger; I detach myself a little bit"

"In the calm moments I have more chances to express what my needs are, what is stressful for me, what angers me and it seems we enjoy more our good moments [ ]. There is a more cooperative atmosphere and [ ] when I ask for help and (equally) offer my help, the tension evaporates; I feel we are not antagonistic (any more)"

Alexandra's main problem was the tension she and her sons felt within their relationship. Her controlled and detached attitude did not help her attune with important others. The workshop assisted her to become more empathic and softer in attitude:

"With my kids my relationships are definitely better, with a lot more understanding on my part. [ ] They are a lot calmer because there are not so many conflicts. [ ] there (used to be) conflicts with little essence which I will forego now. [ ] It is as if I have a different kind of maturity, [ ] an emotional intelligence that I didn't possess, as if I could not recognize what someone else felt"

She also invests in the 'no problem area' to bond with her sons. This does not only give her moments of pleasure and appreciation of family togetherness, but also helps in times of conflict to lessen the tension and reach appeasement faster:

"I pursue more good moments, it is very beneficial. [ ] I think this improves the relationships [ ] and helps immensely when conflicts do occur"

Although in PET workshops parents train to improve their parenting practices, the effect is often felt in other relationships as well:

Maria: *"I am more confident how to deal with matters not only with my children, but my husband as well"*

Christina: *"I was helped very much in my relationship with a colleague of mine with whom I had nasty conflicts"*

Aphrodite: *"It was not my priority to focus on them (other relationships). However, in general I learned to voice my needs"*

Olympia: *"(With my colleagues) I think I have changed stance [ ] I will consciously decide I will not go into a 'tit for tat' confrontation; it is not what I want [ ] (With my husband) I express the effects (of his behaviour) upon me instead of criticising his behaviour and this has magical results"*

Alexandra: *"I see my other relationships differently; I wasn't involved in listening [ ] I try to switch places and understand why someone said something. [ ] I do it with my parents, my immediate environment and my friends, and (trade places) to see what I would feel (if in their shoes). I have tried active listening at work and realized it works really well"*

Effective problem solving comes in many colors and sizes. It depends on the existing family issues and their severity, on the age of the children and of course on the personalities of the parties involved. Frequently, untying just one knot may trigger a domino effect to bring about changes in many other areas. The quality of the relationship is of utmost importance to prevent problems in the first place, to tackle them in a respectful manner as and when they arise and to deal with them in a way that promotes growth, maturity and interpersonal closeness.

5.4.3 Feeling better

The testimonials of feeling better are numerous and scattered throughout the transcripts. Many of these signs are phrases or words that follow a description of a positive outcome due to workshop attendance and the use of communication skills. Thus, in most cases, the events leading to these outcomes and the outcomes themselves are omitted, to avoid repetition, as such have been described elsewhere in the analysis.

Maria's main issue is to curb her over-controlling self while still maintaining her role as an influencing agent on matters she considers extremely important. Feeling better manifests itself as follows:

"I feel less anxious",

"This was a huge weight I had to carry" implying she feels relieved.

"I am more confident"

"I feel I am heading towards the right direction and this has a calming effect on me", suggesting that Maria feels more secure.

"I used to be confused"

"I love them more [ ] I cherish them more (her children)"

"I enjoy time together a lot more"

"I love our relationship more"

"I hug them more"

"I have presumably become more mature"

"My children reciprocate"

Maria feels more confident, self fulfilled and secure in her parenting role, allowing for less stress and anxiety, and promoting quality time with her family. She can enjoy her children, love and hug them and appreciate their relationship. She is also the recipient of her children's appreciation of the changes they recognise and the changes she recognises in them; they have become more cooperative and loving.

Christina's main worry and preoccupation was her deteriorating relationship with her young son. She realized that she was becoming too oppressive being drawn by her concern about her son's school performance. She now feels matters have been reversed. In describing her

experience of change she can't hide her excitement. She can now enjoy quality time, hugs, warmth, peace and appreciation.

> "What can I say? This love explosion towards me (from my son) [ ]."

> "(The workshop) has revived the good moments which had almost disappeared."

> "(He started) hugging me more often, he wants us to do things together [ ] as if he doesn't want to get back at me any more."

The next extract is very revealing of Christina's realization of her maturing self:

> "You mature through all this, it stirs up things [ ] There is no doubt about it, I believe it made me more mature. You mature anyway as you grow older through your experiences, step by step [ ] but this was a big step forward;

The problem Elena is facing is complicated and difficult to deal with. She is desperately trying to act as a balancing agent in her son's deteriorating relation with his father and soothe the rebellious outbursts. She is content that she can better cope with problems and shows optimism for the days yet to come. She has moved from being panic stricken, lost and disillusioned, to being able to compose herself, feel stronger, more resolute and confident. Family matters need time, patience and delicate handling. She now views her son in a more holistic way, she recognizes his strong points and has become more acceptant; she has the chance now to enjoy some family time and share with her son the simple things of life. She also has the pleasure to watch her son become more interested in his school life and his future:

> "There is definitely an improvement in our relationship. [ ] a great number of things have changed in the dynamics of our relationship [ ] we have come closer to each other, there is almost an overturn of the situation."

> "Not that he will spend lots and lots of time with me, however, he will spend some time with me. He is not permanently wired (on his i-pod). [ ] We now discuss, we watch TV together, we (even) got a dog"

"There is more balance now. I know where I stand, I know what I can do [ ] I know where to aim at and I now that with patience I will make it."

"I don't take things so seriously anymore."

"Things have started clearing up in me."

"Not to feel guilty believing I could have done things differently."

"We are on a much better route now; a much better route. [ ] (at times) the situation is perfect and he (her son) is exclaiming mummy, mummy."

"I like the feeling that I am not alone in this world."

"[ ] he wants to do well at school, he wants to succeed in life, he has dreams, he wants to go to university [ ] these are important positive steps, because you can't built on the negative [ ] I am so surprised with so many behaviours that I never expected of him."

Aphrodite's *feeling better* is related to being free from always pleasing others at the expense of her own needs and in making important steps to bridge her estranged relationship with her son:

"I found balance."

"This has calmed down all my anxieties and fears."

"I can breathe now (I was drowning).*"*

"I felt very well [ ] I became a different person."

"I felt exonerated [ ] which acted as a huge relief."

"I am becoming more just."

"My relationship with my son is getting better [ ] and this is very positive."

"(I have become) confident."

"Finally, you do love me" (statement from her son).

"I look at time with more maturity."

> *"(To feel) you are not obliged and not feel guilty about it."*

Olympia had the habit of consuming herself with matters which on second thought were not worthy of getting involved in. She manages to tame her anger outbursts and to reciprocate loving gestures with her children:

> *"Perhaps I have a more positive outlook."*

> *"They (my kids) are softer on me."*

> *"In my work environment I feel very much at ease with them."*

> *"I arrive (i.e., achieve things) with less effort and faster than what I would have otherwise."*

> *"It is magical."*

> *"As if I don't get so angry [ ] I don't have such a short fuse."*

> *"These were quite frightening [ ] and now they are demystified."*

> *"I know where I stand and where I want to be [ ] there is greater clarity."*

> *"(I now know) how to handle difficult situations without consuming myself."*

> *"[ ] we enjoy our leisure time more [ ] in a calmer manner [ ] I cherish such time more."*

> *"In general I am content [ ] I don't spoil my mood, I let things be."*

> *"My kids (now) tell me 'it is so wonderful when we are together' or 'I want us to have more time together' [ ] they will tell me 'mummy I love you' more often [ ] (or) 'you are the best mum in the world' [ ] and they have this tendency to protect me."*

Alexandra felt disorientated between being too soft at times and too harsh at others. She would go overboard in one moment and overcompensate in the next. This brought her confusion, disillusionment, sadness and feelings of hopelessness. She is now more realistic on the magnitude of her problems; problems are not inflated into unmanageable monsters and

she feels more secure and confident in dealing with them. She can defend her needs and assume more control over her own life. Finally, her relationship with her children changes drastically. It is more loving, caring, respectful and harmonious:

> *"I see my problems as smaller than before [ ] I wouldn't be able to deal with them. [ ] I see them differently, as if I am more mature [ ] like an emotional intelligence I didn't use to have."*

> *"I am assertive with my needs and my kids finally respect them."*

> *"It felt very good that I managed to do it (go mountain climbing) and felt satisfied"*

> *"I seek to have quality time with them and it does a world of good. [ ] It improves our relationship and smoothes the edges when things turn sour."*

> *"I am more caring of my relationships and their feelings."*

> *"I used to feel an immense weight upon me. Now I feel lighter, that I am going to make it; I have more understanding [ ] and this helps to have less conflicts; (I) have more quality time and (I) avoid all these tensions."*

> *"After the workshop I went to a psychologist [ ] and it helps me; not so much any more in relation to my kids but about me, my parents and all that."*

Feeling better is about the emotional impact of the workshop upon the participating parents. It does not represent a blissful account of a happy-end story, but more so of a process whereby uncomfortable feelings are dealt with and soothed and gradually replaced by increased internal peace, optimism, hopefulness, content, confidence and joy.

In conclusion, the analysis showed a great deal of interrelation between the themes. At times, participant extracts touched numerous themes indicating that the process of change does not take place in the form of a linear sequence, where participants attain first an increased level of awareness, then move on to become more empathic and so on. Change seemed to be more multi-level and multi directional. For example, parents may have at times used the skills in a

more mechanical, detached and incongruent manner which, however, brought about positive results (*effective problem solving*). During this process, the interaction with their children may have sensitized their empathic cords (*empathizing*) before they themselves became aware of the intimate interaction that was taking place. At the end of the interaction, parents may have also felt positive feelings (*feeling better*) and upon reflection they may have discovered that their level of acceptance had increased (*awareness* and *acceptance*).

What also became evident in the transcripts was the commanding role of controlling issues, the prominence of which was felt throughout the analysis. The parents appeared to be victimizers and victims of controlling elements, proving how much control permeates our society and our everyday activities. Parents also showed their desire and commitment to relieve themselves and their children from being controlled and controlling, by getting in closer touch with their inner wisdom and finding a "magical compass" that gives them a sense of security in their parenting role.

The analysis also showed that the mothers in question were overwhelmed by the weight of responsibilities and demands made on them. This proved detrimental not only to themselves but also to the rest of the family members. An important lesson was learned, namely that "if I am to nurture my family, I need to be nurtured as well."

Relationship issues were also at the forefront of the analysis. These were directly influenced by issues of control which all the parents exhibited and these in turn influenced the satisfaction of needs on both sides, that of the parent and that of the child. It also became apparent to all participating mothers how important it is to work towards a warm, loving, harmonious and lasting relationship.

6. Discussion

6.1. Introduction to discussion

The analysis of the themes in the previous section dealt with how parents experienced the process of change in terms of their feelings, attitudes and behaviors after completing a PET workshop. The findings comprise an aggregate of the sense that parents make of their experience and the sense that the researcher makes of their account. The analysis points towards an *emerging self* in order to describe the changes parents undergo and is represented by three core themes as follows: *a snapshot of before*, *self in process* and a *snapshot of after*. The first core theme consists of three themes that describe the main problem areas that parents, explicitly or implicitly, are troubled by. These are *my controlling self* to portray their long arm of control, *my lost self* to describe their disorientated locus of evaluation and *my vulnerable self* to describe the hopelessness and discontent that parents feel when they forgo their needs. The second core theme, *self in process*, consists of eight areas portraying the process of change that occurs during the workshop, related to awareness, empathy, acceptance, respect, allowing important others to grow, group impact, being assertive of one's needs, becoming more autonomous and congruent. The last core theme, *a snapshot of after* is, in effect an evaluation of how each mother, in her own words, has progressed in time, comparing the *before* with the *after*. It consists of three themes as follows: *old habits die hard* to describe that change is gradual and ongoing; *effective problem solving*, which is self-explanatory; and *feeling better* to give an account of the positive changes at an emotional level.

For the discussion that follows it is important to keep in mind that the themes belonging to the three core themes are interlinked and interrelated and therefore to discuss them one by one would disrupt the continuity and the "sense-making" of the study. It is evident from the transcripts and extracts of the analysis that controlling issues are the main source of

dysfunction in the families represented here. There is no question that problems are part of life and therefore the main issue is how to deal with them and not how to eradicate them. Our western culture operates and relies on a mixture of a democratic and an authoritarian paradigm. One can vote and one can speak his mind, however, most institutions to which one belongs are based on a system of punishment and reward, administered by authority figures. As Gordon points out (2000), authority is not bad in itself. It is how it is used that is important. When power is used to force or manipulate the weaker party, it is equivalent to asking for trouble. More specifically, when parents resort to their *controlling self*, they make use of their power to control their children; as a result, they set in motion a long list of coping mechanisms in their children. It is going to be either war, or submission, or withdrawal, all of which will pose serious problems to the family. Similarly, *my lost self* in effect describes a parent that is controlled by a third party, knowingly or not. Examples are the "controlling aspect" of a person, group, organization, institution or social norm that steers a parent's behavior and draws him away from his own locus of evaluation in reaching congruent choices. Equally important in terms of controlling issues is *my vulnerable self*. It describes a parent who is overwhelmed by the oncoming events, the daily workload and the numerous responsibilities and ultimately loses control of his own life. Given that issues of control permeate almost every aspect of the findings and themes of this study, the question of control will be at the centre of the discussion and will be studied in relation to the rest of the themes, the literature and personal growth.

6.2. Discussion

A snapshot of before describes the broader goals of change that the participating parents are willing to explore, understand and change. This need and urge, on the part of parents, to mobilize themselves and act is very clearly manifested during the PET workshops. This urge

can be paralleled with Rogers' notion of the forward-moving tendency pertaining to therapy (Rogers, 1951, p. 489):

> *"The therapist becomes very much aware that the forward-moving tendency of the human organism is the basis upon which he relies most deeply and fundamentally. [ ] Here the therapist is very keenly aware that the only force upon which he can basically rely is the organic tendency toward ongoing growth and enhancement."*

Evidence of such a forward-moving tendency may be considered as the starting point of a journey of change which mobilizes parents to better themselves. From the analysis it became evident that one of the problems that parents face is their controlling attitude and all its subsequent implications affecting the wellbeing of the family. The usual conflict-creating issues parents face with their children are school performance, excessive screen time, bed time issues and morning getting-ready issues; sibling conflicts; safety and health issues; value issues related to manners, looks, choice of friends and life styles. The usual way parents deal with these is to administer excessive control and when this doesn't work, to expend their authority with punitive measures. Parents in effect are trying to enforce discipline. Gordon (1989, p. 3) observes that there is a major difference between the noun *discipline* and the verb *discipline* and that the noun as opposed to the verb rarely arouses any controversy:

> *"You seldom hear any controversy about the noun discipline. Everybody seems to be in favor of that kind. The word conjures up order, organization, cooperation, knowing and following rules and procedures, and a consideration for the rights of others.*
>
> *The verb to discipline in my Random House Dictionary is defined as 'to bring to a state of order and obedience by training and control' and 'to punish or penalize; correct, chastise.'"*

It is evident from the transcripts that the parents' solution to their problems is to promote discipline, but they fall into the trap of using control and enforcement to achieve this end.

And hence the paradox: this controlling attitude gives rise to a greater number of problems which have severe consequences on the parent/child relationship. The daily work-load and responsibilities that mothers have to deal with is burdened even further. It comes as no surprise that mothers find it extremely difficult to cater to their own needs. Mothers often can't help but feel demoralized, discouraged and frustrated, risking early burnout. Pelsma (1989) showed that among non-working mothers parenting burnout had similarities to occupational burnout on two of the three general scales of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), namely emotional exhaustion and feelings of lack of personal accomplishment. Parents joining PET workshops corroborate such findings, as they become over-involved in their parenting role, assume responsibilities belonging to their children and deny or ignore their own needs. As parents increasingly assume responsibility to shape their children into some sort of super-child, they will resort all the more to controlling and authoritarian practices, putting the relationship itself on the line. Grolnick's (2003) title prompt to his book *The Psychology of Parental Control* is indicative: "how well-meant parenting backfires". He portrays how parents through their love and concern, become controlling by adopting the stick and carrot approach, that is, the approach of negative reinforcement, namely punishment, including threats of withdrawing their love and acceptance, and the approach of positive reinforcement, namely rewards. In both cases, the aim is identical, that is, to coerce the child into the desired behavior. Grolnick points out the difference between *being in control* which has a positive connotation and *being controlling* which has a negative one. A parent in control supports the autonomy of his child, promotes independent problem-solving and involves the child in the rule-making process. A controlling parent, however, forces a child to behave in certain ways; the child seemingly conforms, but the merits for such behavior, if any, are not internalized. Grolnick maintains that there are three factors that impel parents into becoming controlling: pressures from the environment that ultimately create stress; pressures from the child itself, relating to the characteristics of the child, such

as, temperament, level of competence or other considerations, as for example the presence of ADHD; and pressures from within, whereby parents are led to be controlling because of internal psychological processes and an extreme focus on children's performance in fields such as that of academics and sports. Grolnick's conclusions are that controlling parents may bring about short-term compliance, without however a corresponding internalization of the underlying value and accompanied by poor long-term results. Autonomy-supporting parenting, however, will achieve long-term outcomes with positive effects on the parent-child relationship. When considering the effects of parental control on various facets of the child's emotional and physical health, the results are not at all complementary. Barber (2002) portrays the intrusiveness of psychological control on children and adolescents which results in internalized and externalized problems. Interestingly enough the findings show that academic achievement is also impaired, as opposed to what most parents would expect. In another study (Arredondo et al, 2006) parental control is shown to hinder healthy eating and exercise practices. Joussemet et al (2008) found that bullying was associated with mothers' controlling practices. Children between the ages of 6 and 12 manifested problems of physical aggression and outweighed other risk factors, such as parental separation. Parental control was also shown to be linked with shyness and anxiety disorders in children (Wood et al, 2003).

It is important to clarify that excessive control need not necessarily be associated with physical punishment. Shouting, threatening, assigning timeout, forbidding, rewarding, manipulating, exerting emotional blackmail are some examples of exercising power and control. Excessive control may manifest itself in many guises such as "helicopter parenting". Very briefly, helicopter parenting concerns parents of college-aged individuals who interfere in their children's dealings with university issues that seem inappropriate considering the age of their offspring. A number of recent studies attempt to record the effects of such parental

interventions. In one study (LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011) the evidence shows that helicopter parenting adversely affects the psychological well-being of students and is related to a rise in levels of anxiety and depression medication. Similar findings were reported by Schiffrin et al (2013).

It is evident from the above that controlling issues are at the centre of family issues. Gordon in his preface gives an accurate account of what his teachings aim at (p. XIV, 2000):

> *"I came to realize that as people use these methods and skills, their relationships become more and more democratic. These democratic relationships produce greater health and well being. When people are accepted, when they are free to express themselves and can participate in making decisions that affect them, they enjoy greater self-esteem, are more self-confident, and lose a sense of powerlessness that's always present in autocratic families."*

Looking more carefully at Gordon's above account one will observe that the word "more" is used three times and the word "greater" two times. It is clear that these words point towards a process of change and it is exactly this process that is described by the core theme *Self in process* and demonstrated through its corresponding themes. The workings of the PET workshops are also closely associated to the notion of personal development as expressed by Irving & Williams (1999). To remind the reader of the relevant section in the literature review, personal development "involves a process of change and of 'becoming', as well as the acquisition of knowledge; [ ] (it) can be planned and attained through training". This is exactly what takes place in the PET workshops. Parents are taught skills and are exposed to the person centered philosophy. They practice and re-practice and experience to their bone the difference between controlling and being in control. They learn to influence and inspire as opposed to oppress; they learn to be assertive instead of resorting to punishments and rewards. They learn how to encourage instead of criticizing and humiliating; they learn to cooperate and model these behaviors instead of opposing, fighting, shouting and threatening;

they learn to invite participation in the making of rules and model democratic processes as opposed to announcing decrees and being autocratic.

Awareness plays a crucial role in initiating this process of change and "becoming". For the purpose of this study, awareness is meant to include awareness of one's environment and self-awareness. Thus, awareness helps parents to observe how matters are evolving, how events and important others are affecting their life and the family dynamics, how children are developing and what signs of problem behavior are being manifested; how they themselves are contributing to the unfolding of events and what thoughts and beliefs urge them to behave in certain ways. They learn to get in touch with their deeper feelings, recognize them, come to terms with them and realize their significance. Awareness, however, is more than observing, as it entails the capacity to realize the importance of what is evolving in one's environment and in one's self. Most of the times parents fail to realize the future unfolding of events as a continuation of the present and as a result of their actions. To this effect the workshop is extremely useful in sensitizing the levels of awareness that parents exhibit. Mearns (1997) argues that for purposes of counseling training, awareness is only the first of three steps to lead to personal development. He maintains that the trainee counselor needs to raise his therapeutic skills beyond merely portraying them for working at relational depth with a client and that congruent functioning is necessary (ibid, p. 94):

> *"Congruent functioning requires a stillness and fearlessness within the person of the counselor. Achieving that personal stillness and fearlessness requires that the course member first becomes aware of the fears, then comes to understand the fears and third, begins to experiment with increasingly fearless relating. [ ] the course member becomes aware that not all her fears have a live basis in the present – many are 'ghosts' from the past. [ ] experimentation with self might come as a natural consequence of awareness and understanding."*

This three-step process that Mearns talks about can be also recognized when considering the training parents undergo under the Gordon model. At the beginning parents feel uneasy when

they apply the skills; their behavior seems to them unnatural and foreign. It is not exactly congruent. However, they go through the motions, at first mechanically, and attempt to do their best. They are also fearful of abandoning the security of their old construct and their habitual methods of parenting. The new is interesting, attractive, alluring and promising but also strange, unknown, frightening at times and difficult to implement. Awareness and understanding of the shortcomings of the *old* is slowly replaced by awareness and understanding of what the *new* has to offer. "Experimentation with self" takes place during the workshops with exercises and role plays, and at home under true conditions. Parents, day by day come to feel more and more at ease in their new emerging self and the portrayed motions are increasingly replaced by congruent interactions. The three step process is also assisted by the group dynamics present in the workshop. Parents, in exposing and sharing their experiences, support awareness and understanding and have a strong effect on each other. Experimentation at first takes place in the safe confines of the group. Parents through their training experience, share mutual support and help each other realize mistakes and unhelpful conduct, feel accepting and accepted, acquire a sense of belongingness. The analysis of the theme *Group imprint: when parents join experiences* as well as the literature on Group Effect strongly supports this.

It is thus important to have a look at what kind of "experimentation" takes place in the workshops. The issue of excessive control arising from the position of authority, and by extension the use of punishments and rewards, is of paramount importance and is discussed extensively throughout the workshop. Equally, the skill of active listening is taught with vigor and perseverance, as it represents the epitome of respect which is at the centre of the Gordon model. As far as active listening is concerned, parents soon realize how difficult and demanding this process is, but also recognize the "*magical results*" in the words of Olympia. Not only is it required of them to be empathic and accepting but also to be authentically so. It

is true that parents put up a struggle to get it right, but what's more important is their determination to gradually become more empathic, accepting and respectful in their general outlook towards their children. In the analysis of the relevant themes (*empathizing, accepting and respecting*), signs of important shifts in the construct of parents towards increased levels of empathy, acceptance and respect were readily observed. From the children's perspective, such changes are immediately felt. The testimonies of parents show that their children do not always grasp what exactly has changed, but they sense important shifts in the attitudes of their parents. On the surface, parents become more soft-spoken, avoid labels and criticisms, are more attentive, and listen more and try to understand. What is changing in essence is that parents are becoming less controlling and more empathic, accepting and respectful. Parents also learn the advantages of promoting autonomy, self-regulation and self-discipline. A child that is taught to be reliant, risks being so for the rest of his life. No loving parent wishes such an outcome. The theme *Letting go: Allowing others to grow* signifies every human being's right to self-actualization. Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1970) has two sides to it when discussing parent/child relationships. The first concerns exactly the point made earlier, namely, that a parent has the duty to provide whatever is necessary, so that his offspring can have a good chance to self-actualize. The second concerns the parent himself. A parent who meets this duty of his towards his children is laying down the path for his own self-actualization. Not only is he meeting his needs on both social and esteem levels (loving, caring, ensuring a functional relationships and succeeding in his parenting role) but also his self-actualizing needs related to the heritage he is leaving behind; an assessment of his own legacy. Kenrick et al (p. 293, 2010) have suggested a renovation of Maslow's pyramid whereby self-actualization is "demoted" and the top level of the pyramid hosts three types of reproductive goals, one of which is parenting:

> *"Consequently, we have removed self-actualization from its privileged place*
> *atop the pyramid and suggest that it is largely subsumed within status (esteem)*

and mating-related motives in the new framework. [ ] the top of the pyramid includes three types of reproductive goals: mate acquisition, mate retention, and parenting. And consideration of a proximate level of analysis along with life-history theory led us to change the way in which the goals are depicted in the pyramid: Rather than depicting the goals as stacked on top of one another, we instead depict them as overlapping."

Effectively, Kenrick et al (p. 306) with this new approach *"suggest that Maslow's original hierarchy missed the importance of the ultimate goal of successful reproduction"*. Regardless if one agrees entirely with this revisionary account of Maslow's theory and the new demarcations that are introduced, it is evident that parental care occupies a very prominent position in the minds and hearts of people. PET would certainly opt for a kind of parental care which has ingredients of such quality that promote the actualizing process in oneself and in one's offspring (see section on personal Growth in the literature review).

A question that arises is what impedes parents from adopting an actualizing parental care? According to Rogers, it is closely related to the alienation of the human species from its internal valuing process (Rogers, p. 6, 1964):

> *"I believe that this picture of the individual, with values mostly introjected, held as fixed concepts, rarely examined or tested, is the picture of most of us. By taking over the conceptions of others as our own, we lose contact with the potential wisdom of our own functioning, and lose confidence in ourselves. Since these value constructs are often sharply at variance with what is going on in our experiencing, we have in a very basic way divorced ourselves from ourselves, and this accounts for much of modern strain and insecurity. This fundamental discrepancy between the individual's concepts and what he is actually experiencing, between the intellectual structure of his values and the valuing process going on unrecognized within him – this is a part of the fundamental estrangement of modern man from himself."*

Looking back at our participants, Roger's extract seems very relevant to their testimonies concerning *Moving from "I ought to" to "I need to"*. Pre-workshop, the mothers seemed

lost, disorientated and insecure in their parenting role; they would often resort to behaviors which seemed to them necessary and yet these behaviors just didn't seem right to them. Post-workshop testimonies revealed an intense sense of relief, a feeling of "*at last I am getting somewhere*". All six participants talked about a felt sense of acquiring some kind of guidance in the form of a compass or GPS, to guide them and keep them on track. This finding indicates that the participants are reaching their own locus of evaluation and are departing gradually from deeply rooted introjected values. It is also the impression of the researcher that the parents in question are not exchanging one set of old introjected values with a new set they picked up at the workshop. The PET workshop exposes parents to its core principles; however, these principles are presented as a proposition of an alternative parenting philosophy. Although these principles appear novel, there seems to be a deep familiarity and recognition in the wisdom they entail. Most parents identify with them and embrace them with a sense of relief. It is like reuniting with an estranged but beloved close relative. This deep knowledge that parents come to reunite with is referred to by Rogers as the *wisdom of the organism* (ibid). From this wisdom a valuing process emanates, the outcome of which is described by Rogers as follows (ibid, p. 9): "*These common value directions are of such kinds as to enhance the development of the individual himself, of others in his community, and to make for the survival and evolution of his species.*"

From the transcripts it is evident that parents increasingly come to trust their own internal valuing process and are able to gradually distance themselves from social norms and other external pressures. This apparent shift towards a more internal valuing process supports mothers to deal with their *vulnerable self* and in *taking care of their needs*. The mothers in question readily realize that forgoing their needs doesn't pay service to themselves or anyone else. The workshop gives the opportunity to parents to question, reexamine and reconsider their values. This fresh look and internal resonating allows parents to decide whether to keep,

discard or modify some of their values in order to find a new direction that assists them in meeting their deeper needs.

The last group of themes, under the section *A snapshot of after,* is an account of the participants' experiences with regard to the impact of the workshop upon them. *Old habits die hard* is indicative of the *process* entailed in personal growth as opposed to *arriving* at a destination. It is evident from the transcripts that the mothers often had to struggle to remain loyal to their newly attained internal compass. At times this proved extremely difficult, as the mothers in question were still under the influence of habitual behaviors that would barge in and "sabotage" the otherwise good intentions. It is also evident that parents do not all follow the same path, with major differences as to how they relate to the underlying philosophy of the Gordon model and how they develop and implement the skills. This is evident when one considers the nuances of *how* parents change in the analysis of the various themes. For example, Maria's increased level of awareness is related more to her behaviors, whereas Christina's to her feelings; and Elena's to the cues and clues she receives from her son's behaviors. PET workshops aim at teaching practical communication skills and in sensitizing parents to a philosophy and a parenting model that is democratic, humane, sensitive, caring, accepting and respectful. It is then up to the parents to keep up the momentum and embed even further their newly acquired skills and follow their inner wisdom.

Moving on to *Effective problem solving,* the analysis of the transcripts offered ample evidence of the benefits attained by the participating mothers. On a practical level, the transcripts revealed that parents improved their problem solving capabilities. However, the most important element to support the problem solving effectiveness of parents was the enrichment of their relationships with warmth, acceptance, respect and mutual understanding. Speaking of these qualities, an important prerequisite was for parents to discipline their long arm of control. The controlling issues of parents have been extensively presented. What

becomes clear is that a great number of problems that families face are self-imposed through excessive parental power. A vicious circle is thus formed, whereby excessive control induces problem behavior on the part of children and such behavior calls for more control and punitive measures. And so the story goes and the relationship keeps on deteriorating. It can be safely argued that PET workshops support parents to intervene and cut in on this vicious circle and u-turn its direction. To imbue a relationship with respect in its deepest sense and follow a democratic model of parenting, eradicating punitive measures would probably be one of the most congruent gestures of a parent's inner wisdom.

In looking at the post-workshop emotional world of the parents it is important to note that although *feeling better* may be related to problems being solved or because an aim has been attained, it is more about a state of being. The recorded experiences of the participants indicate a more holistic imprint that affects positively the quality of life of the participants. It is also evident from the analysis, that most accounts of *feeling better* concern positive feelings related to their improved relationships and consequently the work done by parents to reduce their control and enrich their relationships with acceptance, empathy and respect.

The experiences of the participants, as presented in their accounts, indicate an emerging self that has realized shifts in personal attitudes, beliefs and behaviors and it is argued that these changes are indicative of personal growth, surpassing the boundaries of personal development, as portrayed by Irving & Williams (1999). Personal development undoubtedly occurs during PET workshops. However, apart from the acquisition of specific knowledge, parents benefit in ways that are more profound and holistic. The participants' testimonies indicate a process of change and becoming which is the result of their *workshop experiencing and comes to light in retrospect*. The accounts indicate that the parents in question changed in ways that were outside the strict confines of a training course, realizing shifts in construct

that are in accord with Carl Roger's notion of the fully functioning person (Rogers, 2004) and Maslow's notion of self-actualization (1970). The evidence that corroborates such a claim lies in the changes the parents underwent in areas such as, increased levels of awareness, understanding, acceptance and empathy; more respectful attitudes towards self and important others; increasingly responsible about one's thoughts, feelings and actions; increased levels of attunement to internal valuing processes and a gradual departure from social pressures and norms; more realistic in their expectations of self and others; improved confidence, creativity and problem solving skills and avoidance of pitfalls; increased assertiveness in pursuing personal needs; significant enhancement of interpersonal relationships with important others; less defensive and rigid constructs; increased levels of congruence; self-disclosing and transparent; adopting increasingly democratic patterns of parenting and gradually resigning from controlling attitudes.

The extracts bellow are the accounts from the transcripts of two participants that vividly portray the holistic impact of the PET workshop, and the salient importance of parenting care and nurturing of relationships.

Christina:

> *"This was a big step forward; a really big step, you go up and up, you become more wise, more insightful, you can process better what you hear, you can react in a better way [ ] it 'rockets' you [ ] it may have taken you five years to start thinking of all these things, because they all sound very logical [ ] they are so appealing, so simple, so humane."*

Aphrodite:

> *"From the moment you give birth to a child, you enter a life-long relationship. This realization means that [ ] I must develop such a kind of relationship that will be functional through all the phases of my growing child right through to adulthood and under all conditions. It is a never ending process that will follow you until the day you die."*

6.3. Implications for parenting workshops and their evaluation

There is no doubt that parenting programs are useful in promoting healthier parental practices. Studies on parenting programs are numerous and produce useful results that shed light on their effects and reveal their strong or weak points. It is important to note that most studies implicitly or explicitly come to conclusions that are grounded in terms of a specific cultural context (Baumrind, 1996). It is obvious that depending on the cultural context, the models will differ in aim, method and results. It would be useful if these are clearly stated in detail so that parents and all interested parties alike are duly informed. Ideally, the theoretical and philosophical background, the aims of the model, the skills to be taught and the method of parental intervention and implementation should be stated simply and clearly.

Another important consideration is the broadness of the model within its cultural context; in other words not only *what* does it encompass but also *how much*. A narrow context will have greater focus and therefore will be easier to measure or assess. A more holistic context will be more attuned to the complications of human nature and thus will be more representatively accurate but more difficult to measure and assess. The more focused the context, the better it can be served by the quantitative paradigm; the more diversified, the more suitable the qualitative paradigm. PET is definitely a parenting program with a holistic perspective, offering "an effective *total relationship* with a child, in any and all circumstances" (Gordon, 2000, p. 5). To be more specific, although PET may offer skills that, for example, will assist parents to tackle problems related to academic performance, it will not do so at the expense of endangering or sacrificing the family relationship.

Thus, comparing and evaluating parenting models of different theoretical and philosophical origins may be tricky. For example comparing a behaviorist model that allows or promotes punitive measures with a non-punitive model, for example PET, may be misleading in its

conclusions. PET invests a great deal on the quality of the relationship and this quality represents a condition for all other aims to be attained. School grades, for example, will not be of utmost priority, although impressive results may be also observed in this field.

Comparing parenting models of similar philosophical background may also be a useful exercise. This would promote a healthy competition to strive for continued improvement and change with the aim to offer parents and their family a better end product. Relevant to this subject is the competence of the trainer or facilitator (Yalom, 1985). Good multilevel competence on the part of facilitators or trainers can contribute towards improved quality of services.

A final note about what could be named an "actualizing parenting model" or a parenting model aiming for excellence. What would be its direction, its major aim? It could be argued that such a model would aim to score high on four counts: *nonviolent* in orientation, *holistic* in aim, *effective* for all parties concerned and with *long lasting* results to accompany the relationship for the years to come. Similarly, as far as evaluating parenting programs, a mixed research model would seem the most exhaustive study tool, as it would combine the breadth of quantitative research together with the depth of qualitative.

6.4. Suggestions for further research

The findings of this study are based on a very small sample and therefore it is not possible to generalize and claim implications relevant to larger populations. However, some of the findings are interesting and thus it would be useful if these could be studied further and tested for being representative of larger populations. More specifically, three important parenting problem areas emerged in this study, namely the controlling aspect of parents, their tendency to resort to outer sources of "wisdom" in their parenting choices and their self-sacrificing

construct. These three areas of concern seem to be related in that they all deal with issues of control; either being too controlling of others or losing control of oneself. The controlling aspect of parents can be seen under the wider context of over-parenting, to include areas such as excessive control, overprotection, monitoring, spoiling, overindulging, punishing and rewarding. New influences, such as, the increasing affluence of western society, the numerous model figures entering family homes via the media and the internet, the surge of modern dangers and the recent high tech revolution, render parenting roles all the more demanding. Bewildered parents, in an attempt to cope with these challenges, are all too skeptical and frightened to give up their controlling attitudes. Although a large percentage of parents may be academically educated, most are parentally illiterate, which renders them also susceptible to exterior norms and pressures. In addition, their perspective of intervention is usually short sighted, as it fails to take into account long term effects and impact.

Having the above in mind, it would seem extremely useful if *non-punitive* and *democratic* parenting programs were extensively studied, with special attention to the long term effects and the holistic impact of such. It also remains to be studied what criteria will be used to make such studies thorough and guiding for all concerned parties. Further research into the Swedish paradigm may prove extremely insightful. Sweden has a long history of cultivating egalitarian values and implementing family policies that have at their centre provisions for the mental health of its children. Sweden has been a pioneer in abolishing corporal punishment since 1979 (Durrant, 1996). In the relevant legislation, the Parents' Code reads as follows: "*Children are entitled to care, security, and a good upbringing. Children are to be treated with respect for their person and individuality and may not be subjected to physical punishment or other injurious or humiliating treatment.*" The significance of the last two words *"humiliating treatment"* should not go unnoticed, as it refers to a number of parenting practices that are readily advised to parents, such as time out. Other countries followed suit to

include Finland in 1984, Denmark in 1986, Norway in 1987, and Austria in 1989. A number of studies took place with interesting results showing promising trends. For example, Haeuser (1988) revealed that the child maltreatment cases treated at a Stockholm hospital declined between 1970 to 1989 by 83% and Gelles & Edfeldt (1986) found that physical discipline and child abuse in the USA was double that of Sweden. These figures cannot go unnoticed and call for further research to sensitize policy makers in other countries.

6.5. Limitations

Endemic of qualitative studies is the usual small number of participants. This characteristic does not allow for application of the findings to larger populations. The small number of participants is also open to the element of chance. Gardner (1993) maintains that there are a number of different types of intelligence, namely: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalist. If, for example, the six participants of this study would have scored high on interpersonal intelligence and intrapersonal intelligence, could this have influenced the findings? Or would the findings be different if the participants had undergone extensive therapy? Similarly, there was a high degree of demographic homogeneity in socioeconomic status, gender, age and ethnicity. For example, if fathers had participated in this study, would they have shown equal self-sacrificing tendencies as the mothers did? The attendance and participation criterion is also to be considered. Had poor attendance been allowed as a participant criterion, would the results of the study have been disrupted? Lastly, as pointed out earlier, the personal attributes and characteristics of the facilitator/trainer is also an important factor to consider. These would be, possessing a deep knowledge of the skills and the philosophical background of the Gordon model; being able to convey these vividly, convincingly and congruently; modeling Gordon's teachings and inspiring the participants; being able to perform his facilitating duties effectively with warmth, care and acceptance.

Although the evidence of this study confirms the claim that PET workshops support and facilitate participants to enter a journey of personal growth, it is important to be aware of the above limitations to avoid general and universal unsubstantiated statements.

6.6. Validity

The subject of good research is an important one for all research as indicated by Fossey et al (2002, p. 718):

> *"What constitutes good research is a question of great importance. We need to know that research is sound to know that its findings can be trusted, and that it provides evidence for understanding events that happen, taking actions, and designing future research. This equally applies to qualitative and quantitative research"*

Concerning qualitative research, portraying the validity of a study may be more cumbersome, as it is not possible to establish the rigorousness of large samples and the unambiguousness nested in numbers as in the case of quantitative research. Stiles (1999) has presented a comprehensive list of good practice criteria which is the outcome of a number of sources of such published lists. Similarly Elliott, Fischer & Rennie (1999) have studied the recommendations of a number of qualitative researchers on quality standards and principles and have developed detailed guidelines to promote good qualitative research, more valid scientific reviews, improved quality control and a steppingstone for advancements in the field of qualitative research.

The issue of validity in this study was adhered to by observing meticulously the recommended procedures as portrayed by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). Some of the measures observed in this study for collecting reliable data and analyzing such are the following: A valid method of analysis was faithfully observed in order to record the experiences of the participants and process the findings. The recordings were heard a number

of times to capture the intricacies in tone of voice and other verbal and nonverbal cues. The transcripts were read and reread to achieve intimate familiarity with the experiences of the participants and to extract meaningful units to serve the aims of the study. As the interviews were translated, special care was observed to record the essence of the testimonies as vividly and accurately as possible. Practical details relevant to the method of analysis, the findings and the interpretations were discussed with the supervisor to ensure loose ends would be addressed and catered for. These steps seem to serve the requirement of permeability (Stiles, 1999), which serves as a countermeasure to the endemic fluidity of qualitative research. To be permeable means to be open and absorbent of any oncoming observation as opposed to being dogmatic and stuck on one's beliefs; to rely on "the capacity of understanding to be changed by encounters with observations" (ibid, p. 99). Thus, although a researcher may enter a study with some firm beliefs or indications of his own, he is required to resonate continuously and honestly with the presenting data. The analysis of the transcripts brought to light a number of important and, to some extent, unexpected findings, such as the significance of control issues, which became a prominent topic to engage with and reflect upon in the study.

This continuous engagement with the presenting data is reminiscent of an intimate dance with one's observations, whereby the steps are continuously improvised and are the result of this intimate interaction.

6.7. Summary

There is evidence that PET workshops, beyond providing communication skills to support parenting roles, may be also facilitating parents to enter a path of personal growth. A key element to this effect is to be found in its origin within the humanistic paradigm. Parents are not only taught communication skills bur are sensitised to reconsider important values of

theirs and come into closer touch with their internal wisdom and modify attitudes such as exercising excessive control, succumbing to social pressures, aspiring to goals that are short-sighted and detrimental to the parent/child relationship. Parents, by looking into the wider picture and paying attention to the long term effects and the total impact of their behaviours, are able to adopt healthier practices, in the direction of the Gordon model and promote healthy relationships and enter a path towards Roger's (2004) notion of the *Good life*.

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