

**MOTHERS' UNDERSTANDING OF CHILDREN'S SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

by

Natalie J. Moore  
B.A., Florida Institute of Technology, 1995  
M.Ed., The University of the West Indies, 1999

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## Abstract

This qualitative study was used to examine mothers' understanding of children's social and emotional development in terms of the ways it is seen to manifest in children, indicators and facilitators of competence, and the parental role in fostering development. This research also intended to provide an avenue through which parents' voices might be reflected in the child development literature. Utilising a multiple case study method, data were collected from 5 mothers of preschoolers via a series of interviews and journal entries. Thematic analysis indicated that mothers understood their preschoolers' social and emotional development as the increasingly spontaneous use of prosocial behaviours, and that they understood this development as a product of processes that included adult intervention, children's direct experiences, observation and maturation. This analysis also revealed specific tasks that mothers performed in supporting the social and emotional development of their preschoolers. However, their articulation of the ways in which children's social and emotional competencies develop was not fully reflected in the tasks they performed. That is, the mothers reported that they supported their preschoolers' social competencies in ways that have been substantiated in the research literature. However, a majority did not report performing tasks central to facilitating their preschoolers' emotional competencies. This finding suggests that although parents may appear to be well able to support their children's developing social and emotional competencies, children may be missing out on some necessary parts of their emotional learning.

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## I: INTRODUCTION

Social and emotional competence is integral to psychological well-being. However, not every child has access to contexts that promote social and emotional competence. That is, development of social and emotional competencies is environment-dependent: children acquire social skills or, possibly, manifest skill deficits, within early socialisation contexts (Ladd, 1999). Therefore, in addition to the individual or group, efforts to support children's social and emotional competencies may also target children's social environments.

Parents are, therefore, in a unique position to create a protective framework that reduces their children's vulnerability to risk factors. Parents determine children's social environments, are integral to children's first socialisation experiences, and have an enduring influence on children's development. Given the importance of environments that support early social and emotional development, there is a critical need to understand factors related to parental influence on children's social and emotional development.

### *Purpose of the Study*

My purpose in this research was to investigate the ways in which parents understand their children's social and emotional development. To do this, I examined parents' perceptions of their preschoolers' social and emotional development and, in particular, the processes through which social and emotional competencies are seen to manifest and grow, the ways in which these competencies are facilitated, and the parental role in this process of development. The gathered data facilitated understanding of the readiness and capacity of parents to support children's early social and emotional development, and also illuminated parental needs for support in facilitating children's social and emotional competence.

This study contributed to research literature that addresses the social and emotional competence-promoting contexts that parents are able to provide. Ultimately, the findings are intended to inform research literature on child development by highlighting parents' understanding of the processes of early childhood development. In particular, these findings can be used to shed light on parents' areas of need in fostering children's social and emotional competence, to offer additional avenues for supporting children's social and emotional development, and to inform children's microsystems about ways in which effective social and emotional competence-enhancing opportunities might be increased. By investigating parents' understanding of the ways in which their children's social and emotional competence is facilitated, and by articulating these in light of research literature

about children's social and emotional development, this study also expanded the repertoire of indicators considered in research on social and emotional development.

### *Background and Rationale*

Social and emotional competence is important to healthy development and is, therefore, critical to every child's life success (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004): Socially and emotionally competent children are able to recognise and regulate their emotions, control impulses, take others' perspectives and empathise, and establish and maintain healthy cooperative relationships (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), 2003).

Social competence is defined as effectiveness in interaction (Rose-Krasnor, 1997), that is, the performance of socially valued behaviours designed to meet one's needs. Social competence is further characterised by the successful attainment of social goals. Emotional competence is defined as effectiveness in dealing with emotions (Saarni, 1999). Like social competence, emotional competence may also be demonstrated in interaction with others, particularly in the ability to discern and empathise with what others may be experiencing. However, the foundation of emotional competence is the effective recognition, expression and regulation of one's own experience of emotion. Further, the constructs of social and emotional competence are intertwined (Saarni). Social competence is conceptualised as having emotional competence as its foundation: "the ability to manage emotional expressiveness and reactions to others' emotions are important regulators of social interaction" (Denham & Grout, 1993, p. 205).

Competence in the social and emotional domain is viewed as a protective factor in that both short- and long-term outcomes experienced by individuals demonstrating higher levels of social and emotional competence are markedly different from the outcomes of people who demonstrate lower levels of competence. Unfortunately, a growing number of children do not meet these criteria for social and emotional competence.

A lack of social and emotional competence is broadly conceptualised as an enduring pattern of emotional and behavioural problems. Negative consequences of lacking social and emotional competence include poor physical and mental health, aggression and other antisocial tendencies, school failure, unemployment, and criminality (Keating & Hertzman, 1999; Tremblay, 1999). Behaviours such as poor impulse control and aggressive and antisocial tendencies appear to have an early age of onset, and seem to be increasing both

in frequency and severity (Schwartz, 1999). For children who manifest these behaviours, developmental trajectories tend to be more negative than those with late onset, as problems tend to increase in severity, and increasingly costly long-term intervention may not be accessible or successful (Bricker et al, 2004.). Since it is more difficult to change negative patterns than it is to prevent them earlier in development, social and emotional problems that are not detected early may become established and have enduring effects that are difficult to change later in life (Keating & Hertzman). That is, these problems, not remedied, intensify with age and frequently lead to more serious disturbances (Beelmann, Pfingsten, & Losel, 1994; Schwartz). The healthy development of children, and social and emotional competencies in particular, must, therefore, be a primary concern.

There exists a wide range of effective strategies aimed at enhancing children's prosocial views and behaviours (Schwartz, 1999), many of which are implemented within children's school settings. Intervention is indicated when children have difficulty demonstrating requisite skills, and targets symptomatic individuals or groups in order to limit conditions in which psychosocial problems are likely to occur. Prevention programs aim to foster such learning before children begin to experience symptoms indicative of difficulties. While school is a primary setting for children's socialisation, school-based programs that target the individual child may be inadequate to create significant, lasting change (Ringeisen, Henderson, & Hoagwood, 2003). Greater success has been found when programs are implemented as part of a comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach to nurturing children at home, at school, and in the community (Beelmann et al., 1994; CASEL, 2003; Denham & Weissberg, 2003). This has prompted a shift in trend from short-term school-based programs for specific problems, to comprehensive, multi-year approaches designed to affect a wide range of behavioural and academic outcomes. However, it is questionable whether children are able to utilise the skills learned in the classroom to out-of-school contexts (Porath, 2001).

In addition to context, age is a consideration. There appears to be a sensitive period for the development of emotion understanding in young children (Pons, Lawson, Harris, & de Rosnay, 2003), and therefore, the amenability to change of emotional and behavioural problems in young children (Joseph & Strain, 2003). Thus, preschool and early school grades appear to be an especially favourable time to initiate early identification and to facilitate children's social competence (Webster-Stratton, 1993).

Children's learning always has previous history (Vygotsky, 1978), and children's earliest relationships are inarguably those formed in interaction with primary caregivers. Therefore, preschool years may also be an important time to explore what, through their observations of and interactions with children, parents understand about their children's social and emotional development. The timing is also ripe for attempting to isolate the effects of the home environment; as children are exposed to more years of formal schooling, their interactions and experiences with others will likely affect the influence of learning within the family environment (Pons et al., 2003).

#### Theoretical Underpinnings

There is growing recognition that the teaching of social and emotional skills is most effective when it is supported by the larger environment surrounding the child and, especially, the systems that most directly influence the child's life. The social environment forms the context within which children develop, and the nature of the environment guides children either toward or away from prosocial behaviours and beliefs (Hawkins, Smith, & Catalano, 2004). Thus, the environments within which children grow are critical to their success. It follows, then, that enriching the child's ecology offers added opportunities for positive growth and healthy development.

The theoretical bases of this study serve to highlight the importance of focusing on parents' understanding. First, ecological systems theory provides a perspective on the multiple systems that influence an individual's development. In particular, Bronfenbrenner's (1986) model indicates that the system closest to the individual is likely to be most influential. Families are arguably the systems closest to the individual. They provide enduring influence and it is within this system that individuals learn and grow. Bronfenbrenner's work, therefore, directed my attention to the family system, and in particular to parents as creators of the type and nature of contexts in which children develop. However, an ecological perspective, while it acknowledges the influence of systems, is not able to explain the specific ways in which a particular system influences an individual's development.

Within the family system, parents are critical to children's development. Therefore, it is important to understand the specific ways in which they influence children's development, and further, how they think about child development. Therefore, I focused on Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social development which established important ways in which parents

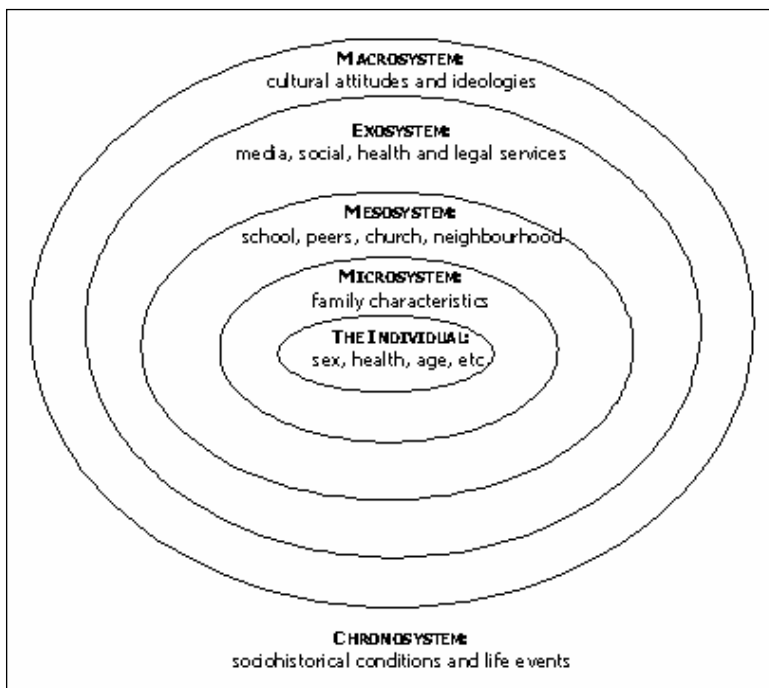
influence children's development. It is from a Vygotskian perspective that this study's research questions were generated. What follows is an introduction to the aforementioned theories and their relevance to this research.

### *Ecological Systems Theory*

Multiple influences come to bear on an individual's social and emotional competencies; social and emotional development is complex and dynamic, and encompasses individual factors as well as characteristics of the family and social environments, and their interactions. Therefore, in addition to individual biological and psychological characteristics, developmental risks can come from direct threats in the social environment, as well as from the absence of normal, expectable opportunities (Garbarino & Ganzel, 2000). These individual characteristics or environmental factors may be protective or may place a child at risk. Additionally, there is an additive effect of risk and protective factors; the presence of more risk factors and/or fewer protective factors tends to increase the likelihood of developmental problems. Thus, in order to alter or prevent a negative developmental trajectory, the number of risk factors to which a child is exposed must be decreased and/or the number of protective factors increased.

The contextual factors that influence a child's development are best illustrated using Bronfenbrenner's (1986) ecological model. Within his model, Bronfenbrenner depicts factors that influence individuals as concentric circles. The home environment is included in the smallest circle, as it is seen as one of the factors located closest to the individual who is situated at the nucleus (Figure 1). This home component of the *microsystem* encompasses family characteristics, and is thought to influence child development most directly. The *mesosystem*, which includes the school and community, is next in proximity indicating that, while it is influential, there is, perhaps, somewhat less influence as compared to the microsystem. A child is unlikely to interact directly with factors that comprise the outermost circles of the *exosystem*, *macrosystem* and *chronosystem*. These refer to systems such as governing boards and policy-making bodies that influence access to resources such as schooling and health care, the larger cultural context and events that occur within or define a period of time. These systems also have an impact on the social contexts in which each child grows. Ultimately, however, proximal factors, those closest to the individual, tend to be more readily observable and may, therefore, be more easily accessible to change than distal factors.

Figure 1. *Bronfenbrenner's Model of the Ecology of Human Development*



The first and most enduring context of child development is the home. It is, therefore, a context likely to have a strong, lasting influence on an individual's development. Since the presence of risk factors and/or the absence of protective factors may compromise children's social and emotional development, the acquisition of social and emotional competencies

cannot be expected to occur automatically. Intervention may, therefore, be needed to facilitate children's social and emotional competence.

Parenting is an accessible proximal factor that may be amenable to change and, is therefore, a potential protective factor that may be used as a buffer against risk factors, increasing the likelihood of positive developmental outcomes. The exploration of parents' perceptions of children's social and emotional development may, therefore, be helpful in uncovering their readiness to facilitate children's social and emotional competence. In particular, the inclusion of parents' conceptualisations of developmental influences, including parenting roles and tasks, may assist in establishing a likely baseline for parents' skills in supporting children's social and emotional development. It may also highlight specific ways in which adults might be supported to facilitate children's social and emotional competencies. In this way, this research may be conceptualised as laying the groundwork for ecological intervention not only with children, but with proximal factors in children's environments.

### *Family Socialisation*

Family systems are often children's earliest and most enduring influences. Early family socialisation processes greatly influence children's social and emotional competence and reflect growth, skill acquisition and amenability to change in the early childhood period of development (Guralnick, Neville, Connor, & Hammond, 2003; Ladd, 1999; Maccoby, 1992; National Research Council and Institutes of Medicine, 2000; Pons et al., 2003). More specifically, the bond with primary caregivers is critical to childhood development, and it is chiefly within this context that the development of social and emotional competences are believed to occur (Schwartz, 1999). Parental characteristics are important predictors of children's social competence (Diener & Kim, 2004). Factors such as parenting skills, parents' psychopathology, and parental conflict have profound effects on child outcomes and may place children at risk (Webster-Stratton, 1993). Further, children with early onset social and emotional difficulties are believed to have acquired these maladaptive behaviour patterns in the home (Walker et al., 1998). Thus, an interactive perspective is recommended that, apart from child factors, takes into account the social context of development and, in particular, the highly influential roles of primary adults, most often the parents. Taken together, these factors present a compelling argument for why parents, parenting and the parent-child relationship are critical targets for continued study.

Parents are a child's first teachers, the primary creators of the settings in which children develop, and they control children's access to resources (Maccoby, 1992). The parent-child relationship plays an integral role in the child's development and, more to the point, parent action in the form of socialisation strategies is related to children's social competence (Guralnick et al., 2003; Maccoby). However, Maccoby suggests that parents may be ill-equipped to assume the tasks required of this role and may, therefore, require support to effectively facilitate children's social and emotional development. For these reasons, one of the goals of this current study is to examine parents' understanding of their role in children's social and emotional development.

While cognitive interventions have had some success with altering parenting behaviours, a 2003 study by Pickett, Marlenga, and Berg indicates that, on its own, increased parental knowledge of child development may be insufficient to effect parents' behaviour change. For parents, therefore, supporting children's social and emotional competence may entail not only awareness of the importance of this domain, but also the

knowledge, ability, skill, and willingness to foster social and emotional competencies. The implication here is that in order to change behaviour, interventions cannot rely solely on the presentation of relevant knowledge. In order to effectively increase learning and, thereby, development, discrete skills or tasks, the learning environment (e.g., available content and opportunities for learning) and the learner's level of development in the subject area must also be taken into account.

### *Vygotsky's Social Development Theory*

Vygotsky's (1978) theory of development informs this study as it emphasises the influence of social context as well as the importance of matching learning to developmental level. The most effective teaching, Vygotsky asserted, takes into account the learner's next immediate area of development: "those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). This area, the zone of proximal development, is defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, p. 86).

Vygotsky (1978) further proposed that development rests on learning. That is, development is the end result of internalised learning, and children learn both through imitation of and instruction from adults:

Learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers. Once these processes are internalised, they become a part of the child's independent developmental achievement. From this point of view, learning is not development; however, properly organised learning results in mental development and sets in motion a variety of developmental processes that would be impossible apart from learning. Thus, learning is a necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing culturally organised, specifically human, psychological functions. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 90)

Vygotsky seems to suggest that parents must be cognisant of children's current level of competence in order to effectively facilitate development. A Vygotskian perspective is, therefore, central to this study.



In this research, the aforementioned theories guided the review of literature and the formulation of the research questions. An ecological systems perspective implies, then, that the foundation for children's social and emotional development is laid long before school-based peer socialisation. Further to this, the principles of family socialisation and social development direct us to examine the family and, in particular, parents as sources of influence on children's development. Through what they teach, what they model, the opportunities for learning that they create, and the environments that they provide, adults and more capable peers lay the foundation for children's future social and emotional development from birth. That is, as the more capable *other* in the dyads that facilitate children's development, it is important to examine parents' understanding of children's social and emotional development.

To effectively support children's social and emotional development, it is necessary for parents to provide effective learning opportunities within children's zones of proximal development. Similarly, if parents are in need of support in order to facilitate their children's development, in order to target parental zones of proximal development, parents' current understanding must be examined. Thus, in this research, I examined parents' currently held understandings of the nature and processes of children's social and emotional development, the ways in which children's social and emotional development is facilitated, and parental roles and tasks in supporting children's social and emotional development.

#### *Why Understanding?*

Parents' beliefs about children and children's behaviour as well as their knowledge of child development influence parents' interactions with their children (Harkness & Super, 1992; Martin & Johnson, 1992; Miller, 1988; Rubin & Mills, 1992; Palacios et al., 1992). However, constructs like *beliefs* and *understanding* are vague and difficult to operationalise.

Parents' knowledge of child development, as defined by Benasich and Brooks-Gunn, is an "understanding of developmental norms and milestones, processes of child development, and familiarity with caregiving skills" (p. 1187). The term *knowledge* implies objective qualities, such as familiarity with certain facts. However, terms such as beliefs and understanding encompass the ways in which certain knowledge is comprehended, and they also entail subjective components such as perceptions and points of view. Therefore, I reviewed research literature that investigated parents' knowledge as well as literature that studied parents' beliefs.

Parents' beliefs about child development, defined as cognitions that guide their behaviour (Martin & Johnson, 1992), best approximated the construct that I wanted to explore. However, I approached this research with the awareness that there are several difficulties with the term *belief*. First, there is no one widely held definition of beliefs on which researchers agree. Beliefs also tend to be unstable and difficult to access. Further, while beliefs may be a source of parenting behaviours, they are not the only source of behaviour. We must also consider other properties of beliefs. For example, a particular belief may be expressed differently by different people, and even by different behaviours in the same person. Further, people's actions are not always in accordance with their beliefs. They may also act emotionally, spontaneously, out of habit, or in response to situation-specific stimuli. Therefore, it is possible to believe in something and fail to live up to it.

Despite these difficulties, it is still likely that the greater the overlap between developmental theories and the ways in which parents understand children's social and emotional development, the more likely it will be that parents interact with children in ways that support their social and emotional development. Therefore, I chose to use the term *understanding*, and to define parents' understanding of children's social and emotional development as encompassing parents' knowledge and beliefs, their observations and interpretations of children's behaviours, and the processes through which they think these competencies are acquired and develop.

#### *Significance of the Study*

The ways in which parents view growth in children's social and emotional development appears to be a key factor in facilitating their optimal development. Research has focused on children's problem behaviours and not on contextual factors that foster social and emotional competence. Research in the area of children's social and emotional development abounds with behavioural processes and outcomes, and has traditionally measured the quantity and quality of parenting behaviours in relation to measurements of children's social and emotional competencies in order to illuminate predictive factors. However, cognitions are precursors to affect and behaviour and may, therefore, provide another avenue through which to provide support. But, because behaviours have been the main targets of evaluation and intervention, less is known about parents' perceptions of the processes of social and emotional development.

This study, therefore, focused on parents' understandings of children's social and emotional competencies and how they are facilitated. It utilised a normal sample rather than a clinical sample, in naturalistic rather than experimental laboratory conditions, and collected narrative rather than statistical data. More importantly, however, by thematically examining parents' observations about children's social and emotional development, it illuminated areas in which parents might be supported in order to facilitate their children's social and emotional competence.

#### Relevance to Counselling Psychology

To be most effective, it is important for mental health professionals to move beyond the development and testing of clinically focused treatments, and to address contextual factors that are critical to the success of sustainable psychological assistance. Unfortunately, these factors are all too often ignored (Ringeisen et al., 2003). It is from this developmental ecological perspective, as well as from the investigator's training in Counselling Psychology and experiences working with children and families, that this study and its research questions were generated.

Counselling psychology builds on strengths and resources. Thus, I investigated parents' understanding in order to increase our knowledge of parents' views as well as to explicate areas of strength and need for parents as they facilitate their children's social and emotional development. It is hoped that findings gathered from this study and future studies of this view will be used to inform support structures for parents to more effectively meet children's social and emotional developmental needs, thereby reducing children's risk for mental health problems by enhancing protective factors in their social environments. Psychoeducation, prevention and consultation are emerging roles for counselling psychologists, and facilitating public health in the social and emotional domain is, therefore, an important means of reducing the antecedents of psychological problems and decreasing the need for later targeted intervention.

#### *Research Questions*

Through this study, I accessed parents' understandings of children's social and emotional development in order to bridge the gap between the extant quantitative literature and parents' experiences. Bearing in mind Vygotsky's principles of social development and the importance of the zone of proximal development, I created research questions that targeted parents' competencies in the area of child social and emotional development.

Specifically, parents' understanding of children's social and emotional development was examined in terms of these main questions. First, what do parents understand social and emotional development to be, and how do they observe that it is manifested in children? Second, what do parents understand about how social and emotional competencies are fostered? And, finally, what do parents understand about the parental role in children's social and emotional development?

## II: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

*“Society as a whole tends to believe that ‘good’ parenting leads to effective child rearing and optimal child outcomes”* (Benasich & Brooks-Gunn, 1996, p.1186).

Children are socialised by the interaction of forces within and outside the family (Taylor et al., 2004). They learn and practice newly acquired skills within early socialisation contexts, and social and emotional competencies begin to develop, providing a foundation for future growth in the social and emotional domain. Parents, the determiners of these socialisation contexts, family norms, and children’s access to resources, play a critical role in children’s development. According to Vygotsky, to effectively facilitate development, parents must provide competence-enhancing opportunities within children’s zones of proximal development. Given their importance in children’s early learning environments what, therefore, do parents think and do that influences how their children develop emotionally and socially?

Despite the complexity of influences on children’s social and emotional development, and the bidirectional nature of parent-child interaction, this study focused on the contributions of primary caregivers, parents, to the acquisition and growth of children’s social and emotional competencies. Parents’ characteristics, in particular, contribute to children’s social and emotional competencies (Kagan, 1999), with interaction style, emotion expression, reaction to children’s emotion displays, and the social opportunities they facilitate for their children thought to have the most impact on children’s social and emotional development. While research has indicated the centrality of these factors to children’s social and emotional development, it is not known if parents’ understandings also reflect these factors.

In this chapter, I present an overview of the existing literature on the primary ways in which parents influence their children’s acquisition of social and emotional competencies. I then address the literature on parental knowledge and beliefs about child development as it pertains to child outcomes, and review this literature in light of parental influence on children’s social and emotional development.

### *Parental Influence*

While there are several contributing individual and environmental factors, the complex interplay of which determines child outcomes, it is often assumed that poor child outcomes can be attributed to poor parenting. That said, the parent-child relationship is

especially influential because of its prominence in children's early experiences. Parents influence their children's social and emotional development in important ways. First, parents' characteristic expression of emotion socialises their children's acquisition of social and emotional competencies, as do the ways in which parents react to children's expression of emotion. Further, both parenting and social and emotional development occur in social contexts. Thus, parentally-facilitated social contexts are other key influences. These influences, as well as patterns of parent-child interaction, create the environments in which children develop.

#### Parental Expressions of Emotion

Parents' expressed emotions create the affective environment in which children learn and grow, and these characteristic patterns of emotion expression have been found to predict children's emotional competence (Denham & Grout 1992, 1993). Over the course of several research studies, Denham and her colleagues (Denham & Grout, 1992, 1993; Denham et al., 1991) investigated the ways in which parents' emotions influence children's social and emotional competence. They found a relationship between mothers' expression of emotion and preschoolers' emotion regulation, assertiveness and sadness (Denham et al.). They concluded that witnessing parents' emotions effectively schools children on which emotion displays are likely or acceptable in specific situations, how and when to express emotions, and with what frequency and intensity (Denham & Grout, 1992; 1993). In addition to specific affective expressions, children learn the processes associated with understanding and regulating displays of emotion (Denham et al.). Children's expressiveness, understanding and regulation of their own emotions, and their responses to peer emotions are especially influenced by parental emotion expression (Denham & Grout, 1992; 1993).

In terms of emotion expression, parents who tended to display more positive emotions are contrasted with those whose emotion expression is largely negative. Parents who displayed more positive emotions were characterised as warm and supportive; their children were found to display more empathy (Zhou et al., 2002). Mothers who express positive emotions, encourage children's positive expressiveness, and minimise negative expression (Denham & Grout, 1993) may in fact facilitate children's ability to call on the social and emotional resources necessary for peer relationships (Denham et al., 1991). Overall, therefore, parents' emotional positivity is thought to predict "developmentally

appropriate emotional and behavioural competence with peers" (Denham et al., p. 248). Positive parental expressiveness is associated with children's empathy, the development of which is a key precursor to social and emotional competence.

Conversely, parental expressions of negative emotion were found to be associated with poor child outcomes. Denham and her colleagues found that mothers' inability to regulate hostility and to interact with positive emotion predicted preschoolers' withdrawn, non-assertive peer interactions (Denham et al., 1991). A subsequent study revealed that parental expressions of anger predicted children's externalising behaviour problems, particularly "aggressive, antisocial behaviour" (Denham et al., 2000, p. 39). Moreover, Denham and her colleagues noted that "parental anger was most influential as a disorganiser of the behaviour of those already at risk, indicating the *interaction* of parental anger and early vulnerability" (Denham et al., 2000, p. 39). Children's emotional competence may, therefore, be adversely influenced by an affective environment that is consistently negative: "For example, if mothers often feel angry or sad, children may internalise these states and experience them in a variety of situations. They may learn less affective reactions to others' emotions because of their own emotional dysregulation" (Denham & Grout, 1993, p. 207). These findings suggest that parents' habitual expression of negative emotions, particularly their inappropriate expressions of anger, are especially detrimental for young children, and that the repeated exposure could, understandably, have enduring effects.

It is important to note that not all expressions of parental anger are harmful to children. Denham and Grout (1993) suggest that when parents respond to their own anger in ideal ways, their children may learn to respond prosocially to peers' negative emotion; preschoolers whose mothers responded optimally to their own anger, that is "calmly and without answering anger," were found to be "less prone to negative emotion" (p. 207). Further, "mothers' negative expressiveness can motivate young children's sympathy and reparations when they later witness others' distress, perhaps because of their experience with empathy toward mother and guilt over transgressions which made her angry" (Denham & Grout, p. 224). While the actual display of negative emotion during interaction may be dysregulating for children, "parents' experience of negative emotion, paired with less tension displayed during interaction, appears to expose the child to potentially useful

socialisation" (Denham & Grout, p. 224). Thus, children may benefit from negative parental expressions if parents are able to manage the ways that they display negative affect.

Similarly, highly positive parental displays of emotion may not uniformly predict positive outcomes in terms of children's emotional characteristics. Denham and Grout (1993) found that mothers' self-reports of high levels of externalising or positive emotions predicted preschoolers' displays of greater overall emotionality, as well as lesser ability to "interact in an affectively positive way" (Denham & Grout, p. 224). Whereas exposure to high levels of parental externalising emotions predicted increased emotionality in preschoolers and diminished positive peer interactions, these children also appeared to be more empathic towards peers' emotion displays. Thus, it seems that parental emotions inappropriately expressed and in inappropriate amounts may impede young children's developing emotional and social competencies and foster guilty feelings. However, parents' emotional expressiveness also facilitates children's empathy.

Parents' reactions to their own emotion expressions also influence children's emotional competence. However, differing outcomes have been observed for explanations of and apologies for displayed emotions. For preschoolers, these parental reactions have been identified as important means of socialising empathic skills and prosocial reactions to the distress of others (Denham & Grout, 1992). Denham and Grout found that mothers who used clear, moderately intense expressions of and explanations about their emotions had children who were judged to be more prosocial and socially competent. It appears that, by expressing and explaining their emotions, mothers are actually coaching their children about emotional expressions and the situations in which they are expressed (Denham & Grout). However, children's sadness was related to parental apologies for anger, while increases in emotion knowledge and social competence were associated with parental apologies for sadness (Denham & Grout).

"Parents who manage their own frustrations when interacting with their children also may be more able to use negotiation and rational guidance in dealing with child misbehaviour, to allow a measure of autonomy, and to acknowledge the child's feelings" (Denham et al., 2000, p. 24). It seems, therefore, that the parent's task is twofold: first, to manage his or her own emotion expressions and, second, to tune in and respond to the child's needs in ways that facilitate learning emotional and behavioural management.



### Parental Reactions to Children's Emotion Expressions

The ways in which parents respond to children's displays of emotion also serve to socialise children's social and emotional competencies. Along with parental expressions of emotion, parents' reactions to children's emotion displays are believed to create the foundation for children's social and emotional competence (Denham & Grout, 1993). In fact, maternal reactions to children's displays of emotion and, in particular, mothers' responsiveness when children are distressed, have been found to predict children's emotional competence (Denham & Grout).

In terms of responsivity, parental warmth predicts children's competence in the social and emotional domain (Zhou et al., 2002). Zhou and his colleagues define this warmth as "parents' general tendencies to be supportive, affectionate, and sensitive to the child's need, as well as to express approval and direct positive emotion and behaviours toward the child" (p. 895). Denham and Grout (1993) concur with Zhou, finding that mothers who were able to discern and react optimally to subtle signs of their children's tension or fear were "generally more affectively positive during mother-child interaction" (p. 222). In this study, timing and form of mothers' contingent emotional responding appear to define its desirability. Denham and her colleagues extend Zhou's definition, portraying the optimal affective environment as not only a supportive presence but also parental provision of a structured environment, a "nurturant, child-centred approach" and a "de-emphasis on harsh (restrictive, reactive) methods" as critical to facilitating children's social and emotional competence (Denham et al., 2000, p. 40).

Affective environments and parents' responses to children's emotions are thought to be even more potent than parentally displayed emotions as correlates of children's emotional competence (Denham & Grout, 1993). Parke and his colleagues (2002) suggest that parental reactions to children's emotions are also a potential link between family and peer contexts. It is thought that children generalise maternal reactions to their emotion displays to their own expressiveness and prosocial reactions to peers' emotions displays (Denham & Grout). Thus, the ways in which parents react to children may predict children's emotional and social competence, as emotion expressiveness in the family context is closely related to children's social competence with peers. Parents, creators of their children's earliest social environments, are, therefore, an important influence on children's social and emotional development.

### Parentally Facilitated Social Contexts

Social factors both within and external to the family system shape children's social and emotional development (see also Taylor et al., 2004), as "parents and peers operate together in the socialisation process" (Parke et al., 2002, p. 159). This view is shared by Hartup (1989) who delineated the purpose of each type of relationship. While it is within the parent-child relationship that children acquire social and emotional skills, peer relationships provide opportunities for practicing and refining these skills, and developing competency. Family and peer socialisation contexts are also closely linked, particularly for young children as, in addition to the impact on the home environment, parents determine key social contexts for children, such as neighbourhoods, day-care, schools, and the friends and family with whom children interact.

#### *Family and the Home Environment*

Children's social and emotional competence is thought to derive from early family socialisation processes (Ladd, 1999; Maccoby, 1992; Pons et al., 2003). The family is the primary socialising agent and it is within this system that the foundation for future social relationships forms (Parke et al., 2002). While the critical nature of mother-child interaction is widely acknowledged in research literature, the family is also recognised as "a social system in which fathers, siblings and the marital relationship are all viewed as playing important roles in children's social development" (Parke et al., p. 156). Therefore, general family functioning, as well as dyadic relationships within the family unit, are especially influential. Via the home environment, the parental role both directly and indirectly influences children's development, determining the nature of contexts within which children learn and grow, and also teaching, advising, and guiding children.

Patterns of family socialisation contribute to children's social and emotional development (Denham & Grout, 1993). Parents, heads of the family, create family norms. Within each family, communication patterns and affective and behavioural styles are intrinsic to a family group. Within a family, the number of people in the household, the number and birth order of siblings, and the relationships each parent has with each child all serve to create a context within which children develop. Sibling relationships are perceived to be a valuable means for children to acquire and practice social skills and develop social and emotional understanding, as children tend to have more egalitarian relationships with their siblings, and these skills may also generalise to relationships with children in other

contexts (Parke et al., 2002). The relationship between children's parents is also thought to influence the development of social and emotional competencies. Marital conflict, in particular, appears to contribute to a detrimental environment, and is linked with poor parenting and consequently, poor social adjustment for children (Parke et al.).

### *Friendship Networks*

"Friendship based on a reciprocal relationship between two individuals makes a distinctive and unique contribution to children's social adaptation" (Parke et al., 2002, p. 158). Therefore, another way in which parents influence children's social and emotional development is through their role in regulating children's social opportunities with peers. Friendships are crucial to the acquisition and refinement of social and emotional skills and, as children grow older, peer influences become increasingly important. Parents have an impact on peer relationships through their roles as gatekeepers and monitors of children's activities, settings, and extra-familial social contacts (Parke et al.). Parents arrange social activities for children, and provide added opportunities for the acquisition and practice of social skills. In fact, parents who initiated a larger number of play contacts were found to have children who displayed more prosocial behaviour (Diener & Kim, 2004; Parke et al.). Parke and his colleagues also suggest that, in addition to regulating children's social opportunities, parents' direct advice-giving (for example, not only how best to negotiate peer situations but also which peers to select) also influences children's peer relationships.

In addition to creating child-focused interactions, parents' own social networks influence children's social adjustment. Not only do the children of parents' friends provide socialisation opportunities, but both parents and children experience increased social support via these networks. Parents, in particular, have greater access to adults who are likely to encourage similar values and prosocial behaviours (Parke et al., 2002). In terms of future outcomes, "adolescents who reported high degrees of contact among their parents, friends, and their friends' parents, as well as high levels of interaction with non-family adults, were less deviant and higher in academic achievement than their peers who were less socially integrated" (Parke et al., p. 165). This is yet another way in which children's early social experiences can determine their chances for later life success.

### Parent-Child Interactions

Parent-child relationships are integral to children's development (Maccoby, 1992). In addition to their roles as regulators of children's emotional and social experiences, parents

perform multiple roles as teachers, guides, coaches, monitors and advisors of their children. Relationships between parents and children, therefore, provide opportunities for children to acquire the social and emotional competencies necessary for building and maintaining future relationships. To this end, both the style and content of parents' interactions with their children influence children's social and emotional development, and the nature of this parent-child relationship either supports or inhibits children's developing competencies (Denham et al., 1991; Laible, 2004; Maccoby). Research literature on this topic often presents as dichotomous parents' characteristic styles of interaction. For example, sensitive interaction styles are contrasted with intrusive styles. Parents' interaction is also characterised by its content, that is, the quantity of positive support provided, the amount of autonomy allowed, and the degree of willingness to discuss emotions.

For the child, the influence of the parent-child relationship has effects that extend beyond the relationship, situation and time, as successful negotiation of this early relationship is thought to prepare the child for effective interaction with peers in the school years. Events that occur in the context of parent-child interaction are thought to influence children's social behaviour in other settings and at later times as, in the context of new relationships, children build on their previous interactive experience with parents (Maccoby, 1992). Denham and her colleagues (1991) investigated the influence of the quality of parent-child interaction on children's peer interaction, and concluded that preschoolers' social and emotional competence is in part dependent on "maternal interactional behaviour" (p. 247). This view underscores the importance of parents' sensitivity to the developing preschoolers' behaviour (i.e., structuring experience while allowing the child autonomy, and leading the child to social and cognitive successes (Hartup, 1989)).

Parents' characteristic styles of interaction have been shown to predict children's social and emotional competence with peers. Whereas parents' warm, sensitive interaction styles are found to be related to children's positive social outcomes, parents' controlling, intrusive interaction styles are related to negative social outcomes for children: "Parents who exhibit negative affect, who are over-controlling, and who are more distant in their interactions have children that are less accepted by peers or socially skilled" (Parke et al., 2002, p. 160). Similarly, a review by Collins and his colleagues found links between "harsh, coercive parenting" and children's "selection of antisocial peers" (Collins et al., 2000, p. 228). It is possible, therefore, that children choose antisocial peers because their behaviours

are familiar or that, being less socially competent, these children find acceptance with peers who possess similar levels of competence. Taken together, these findings indicate antisocial outcomes for children whose parents typically interact with them in harsh or coercive ways.

Parents' interaction may also be defined by the nature of support that they provide for children. Diener and Kim (2004) found that less positive maternal support predicted preschoolers' social withdrawal. Denham and her colleagues (1991), in their examination of the balance between maternal support and mothers' allowance of autonomy, found that three maternal characteristics predicted preschoolers' social and emotional competence: "ability to support the child and to create appropriate structure and limits; lack of hostility and confidence in successful interaction; and allowance of autonomy" (Denham et al., p. 247). Maternal support and allowance of autonomy predicted an "age-appropriate ability to assert oneself socially" whereas "maternal lack of support and allowance of autonomy predicted sadness" (Denham et al., p. 248). For these researchers, the results of this study suggest that children are less likely to experience and exhibit sadness if their mothers share tasks and allow their preschoolers to experience success. Thus, parents' provision of a balance of positive support and autonomy appears to be essential in order for their children to reap positive social and emotional outcomes.

Parents' willingness to discuss emotions with children is another way in which the content of parent-child interactions plays an important role in children's emotion awareness and understanding (Parke et al., 2002). Children may be directly influenced by parent-child interactions that include guidance in affective problem-solving and decision-making, processes which facilitate emotion understanding by making explicit the underlying causes, reasoning, and appropriate reactions (Laible, 2004; Parke et al.). Children are thought to internalise parental values in this way, as parents who explain, reason and link children's misbehaviour to consequences facilitate children's internalisation, while lack of explanation is likely to inhibit internalisation (Laible).

Qualitative and quantitative characteristics of parents' discussion of emotions are also related to children's social and emotional development. Frequent emotion-laden discussions were found to promote children's social and emotional competencies, whereas mere discussion of rules was not (Laible, 2004). In terms of the elaboration and clarity of parental discourse, children who scored higher on emotion understanding and behavioural internalisation had parents who discussed past misbehaviour with them in a clear,

elaborative manner (Laible). This likely facilitates understanding of the messages parents are trying to convey as well as parents' perspective, and may, therefore, facilitate children's perspective-taking ability (Laible). The use of elaborative discourse within parent-child interaction may also create a warm "interpersonal atmosphere, which has been linked with advanced levels of emotional and moral development" (Laible, p. 176). The works of Laible, Parke and colleagues evidence a cognitive avenue for increased social and emotional competence that complements the behavioural knowledge that children acquire via parent-child interaction. Their research suggests that parents' emotion awareness, understanding and skill, as well as parents' beliefs that parentally-facilitated situations are important means for children's social and emotional development, are crucial to the accurate and reliable communication of social and emotional information to children.

In sum, the literature indicates that children who experience positive social and emotional outcomes are found to have parents who facilitate environments characterised by key features. Parents' expressions of emotion and their subsequent reactions to these emotion expressions are particularly important, as are parental reactions to children's expressions of emotion. Through interacting with parents, children learn guidelines about expressing and responding to emotions: the type and frequency of situationally appropriate emotions. Thus, parental emotions, appropriately expressed, promote children's empathy, the foundation for social competence. In addition to parental emotion expression, parents who respond appropriately to their children's expression of emotion – that is, parents who are attentive and act to meet children's needs – are associated with children who demonstrate increased social competence. Parental willingness to discuss emotions is also linked with children's increased social and emotional competence. Moreover, parental explanations about their own emotions facilitate children's emotion understanding and internalisation and, therefore, are thought to increase their emotional and social competence. Parents' characteristic style of interacting with children is also important in facilitating positive social and emotional outcomes for children: parents who are warm, sensitive and nurturing, express positive emotion towards children, and balance autonomy with structure and support. It is likely, therefore, that when home environments and social opportunities that parents create also embody these characteristics, children's development of social and emotional competence is well supported.

Research literature that reflects the ways in which parents influence children's development of social and emotional competencies often utilises data collected via parent-child interactions. However, parents' views are not often reflected. Many studies have utilised self-report and observational data about maternal behaviours, data collection methods which do not explore meaning. Thus, parents' understanding about the acquisition and growth of children's social and emotional competencies, as well as their perceptions of their influence on children's social and emotional development are not yet known.

#### *Parental Knowledge of Child Development*

Parents' knowledge of child development is associated with children's competence. Research literature suggests that the ways in which parents understand children's behaviour, and the ways in which parents interact with their children may both be influenced by this knowledge (Benasich & Brooks-Gunn, 1996). While parental knowledge of child development, defined by Benasich and Brooks-Gunn as an "understanding of developmental norms and milestones, processes of child development, and familiarity with caregiving skills" (p. 1187), appears to be enhanced by educational means, the change in knowledge does not presuppose a concomitant change in parenting behaviours. On its own, parents' knowledge of child development has been found to account for only a small percentage of the variance in child outcomes. Presently, research in this area seeks to further illuminate characteristics that mediate the relationship between parents' knowledge of child development and child outcomes.

While educational methods have had some success with parents, it is clear that parental knowledge of child development may not predict behaviour change in parents. Pickett, Marlenga, and Berg (2003) concluded that child development knowledge alone was insufficient to alter behaviours of parents such that they no longer exposed children to known hazards. This study found that some farm parents continued to assign their children dangerous occupational tasks that violated guidelines for developmentally appropriate agricultural work, despite these parents' demonstration of a high level of knowledge of developmentally appropriate equipment and tasks according to stage of child development. It is likely, then, that there is a more complex relationship between parents' child development knowledge, their understanding of the parenting role and the parenting functions that they choose to perform.

In a 1984 study, Stevens also demonstrated that parental knowledge of child development does not directly translate to the quality of child outcomes. Stevens investigated the significance of the relationship between parents' knowledge about child development and their parenting skills. Parenting skills were defined as having two components: Parents' ability to design a "supportive learning environment" and to "interact in ways that stimulate a young child's development" (Stevens, p. 241). Findings reflected a positive but weak relationship between parental knowledge and skill in supporting children's development, in that "80% of the variance in parenting skill was not accounted for by predictors in this study" (Stevens, p. 243). Thus, it seems that there are aspects of the relationship between parental knowledge of child development and parenting skill yet to be uncovered, and further investigation is needed in order to shed light on factors that foster parents' ability to provide a supportive environment that facilitates healthy child development outcomes.

Like Stevens, Benasich and Brooks-Gunn (1996) drew similar conclusions in a prospective longitudinal study in which they examined maternal attitudes and knowledge of child development on child cognitive and behavioural outcomes. In this research, parent competence was defined in terms of the quality of the home environment, and child competence in terms of the number of child behaviour problems. The main finding indicated that, while significant, there was only a small effect of maternal knowledge of development on child outcomes. Again, only a modest percentage of variance was accounted for, indicating that parental knowledge alone is insufficient to create change in child outcomes. This prompted Benasich and Brooks-Gunn to recommend further examination of the obscure relationships between parental knowledge, beliefs, behaviours, and child outcomes.

Benasich and Brooks-Gunn (1996) suggested that since parental knowledge influences children both directly through interaction and indirectly through the home environment, its influence may be enduring and stable. And, since parental behaviours are unlikely to change significantly over time without intervention, this child-rearing climate may have an enduring impact on child outcomes. This, therefore, suggests that parents and, more specifically, their parenting behaviours and the environments that they create for children, are valid avenues for investigation when seeking to improve child outcomes. However, as changes in parental knowledge have not proved to be sufficiently influential to effect changes in parenting, cognitions are another likely target because of the impact they



have on behaviour. The Benasich and Brooks-Gunn study supports this rationale: “One of the implications of this study is that maternal beliefs *are* associated with maternal behaviour and child outcomes, and that those beliefs and behaviours might be modified to optimise child outcomes” (Benasich & Brooks-Gunn, p. 1202).

Researchers have also attempted to more clearly understand the role of parental beliefs as an intervening variable in the relationship between parents’ child development knowledge and behaviours, and child outcomes. Findings indicate that parent education programming is successful in increasing parents’ knowledge of child development. However, as previously established, this increase in knowledge does not directly translate to changes in parenting behaviour. The weak findings suggest that there is a gap between knowledge acquisition and skill application. Thus, in order to be effective, support for parents must target more than child development knowledge alone. It seems that parents who are aware of the influence of their behaviour, and who understand the ways in which environmental factors influence development, are better able to behave in ways that support their children’s development (Stevens, 1984). It is possible, therefore, that parental knowledge of child development and parental behaviours may be mediated by insight and conviction, or belief.

#### *Parental Beliefs about Child Development*

Parents and their psychology are key influences in the developmental environment (Miller, 1988; Super & Harkness, 1986). Thus, parental beliefs are of interest in child development research because of the influence that these beliefs have on parent-child interactions, the child development context and, thereby, on children’s developmental outcomes. In her investigation of the relationship between parental beliefs about development, socioeconomic status, parental teaching strategies and family constellation, McGillicuddy-Delisi (1982) determined that parents do indeed have beliefs about how children develop, a finding echoed by Miller. Both McGillicuddy-Delisi and Miller concluded that not only do parents have specific beliefs about child development, but that these beliefs are a source of parental behaviour with children and, further, predict child development outcomes.

Parents’ developmental beliefs – the cognitions that guide their interpretations of children’s development – are the tools that they use to interpret children’s daily behaviour. These beliefs also guide parental behaviours (Martin & Johnson, 1992). Further, while some

parents have been found to have a “somewhat sophisticated understanding of child development theories and learning, most employ a ‘naïve psychology’ to interpret their observations of growth and change” (Martin & Johnson, p. 106). It is within this framework of beliefs, these interpretations of reality, that parents make decisions about how to socialise their children (Harkness & Super, 1992). Thus, what we know about how parents think about child development helps to inform us about their parenting behaviours and, further, to make connections to child outcomes in light of their growth environments (Palacios et al., 1992).

It follows then that parental beliefs are important because they affect child development through their influence on parents’ behaviour; the ways in which parents think and feel about children and their behaviour are related to the ways that they interact with them (Miller, 1988; Rubin & Mills, 1992). Rubin and Mills’ research premises that “parental beliefs have an *indirect* effect on children’s social and emotional development through their impact on parental behaviour” (p. 46). They examined the stability of the relationship between parents’ thoughts and feelings about social development and children’s social behaviours. Findings indicated that mothers’ beliefs were “moderately stable” and that mothers believed that children acquired social competence mainly via “self-mediated learning” (p. 50). While similar in focus and findings to Benasich and Brooks-Gunn’s (1996) study, Rubin and Mills’ research targeted social outcomes and introduced the idea of children as actively seeking rather than passively receiving skills within parentally-facilitated learning environments.

In addition to their interaction with children, parental beliefs about child development influence the daily environments parents choose for children (Palacios et al., 1992). Palacios and his colleagues proposed a model that “predicts a connection between what parents think, the way in which they organise the child’s life and stimulate the child in learning situations, and the child’s developmental scores” (p. 77):

The Zone of Proximal Development does not exist in the child waiting for the adult to discover it, but is created in the course of social interaction and arises from the previous developmental level of the child and the adult’s interaction strategies. *In order to create it, the adult should be capable of recognising that the possibility of development exists, that he or she can contribute to making this possibility take effect, and that this involves the utilisation of certain strategies* [italics added]. What

we are talking about is the parents' representation of the child, of his or her present and potential development, and of their capacity to influence him or her and to do so in the best possible way. From the Vygotskian standpoint, the interaction that generates development is that which is situated within the Zone of Proximal Development. (p. 76)

The authors hypothesised that parents whose developmental expectations conform, more or less, to the expectations of developmental psychologists are better able to foster healthy child outcomes through parent-child interaction as well as through "the richness and variety of the physical and social environment" (Palacios et al., 1992, p. 77).

Findings supported Palacios et al.'s (1992) hypothesis, indicating that *interactionist* parents seemed better able to engage the child within the Zone of Proximal Development. Parents who perceived children's psychology in terms of the interaction of nature and nurture were more likely to see themselves as influential in the process of child development. These parents adapted their interactions with children to provide stimulation that stretched the children's capabilities while still within attainable limits for the children. Conversely, parents who conceptualised development as innate tended to minimise the parents' role in child development. Parents who viewed development as subject to either primarily innate or primarily environmental influences, tended to interact with their children "more at the level of what is present, rather than what is possible" (Palacios et al., p. 90). Thus, parents are believed to react to children's behaviour based on the attributions they make about the source of the behaviour (McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 1992).

Palacios and his colleagues (1992) also explored sources of the differences between parents' beliefs about child development and their behaviours. They proposed two sources – parental perceptions of their ability to influence how children develop, and parents' knowledge about the processes of child development – and asserted that greater knowledge is related to greater richness of children's daily environments. However, regarding knowledge, their analyses implicated parental ideas about children rather than education level: "More adaptive child-rearing behaviours are associated with either relatively sophisticated belief systems about development or relatively accurate conceptions of children's ability" (p. 277). This work of Palacios and his colleagues supports the importance of parent-child interaction, the notion of children as active learners, and places the onus on parents as the members of the parent-child dyad who are expected to understand and

respond to children's developmental needs by providing opportunities for growth at every stage of development.

Despite the recognised connection, there is a problematic relationship between beliefs and behaviour (Harkness & Super, 1992). Like the relationship between parental knowledge of child development and parenting behaviour, the connection between parental beliefs and behaviour is weak (Palacios et al., 1992; Sigel, 1992). Disappointingly, Sigel concluded that "although it seems reasonable to contend that what a person believes guides his or her action, the empirical data do not provide the kinds of information that support this conviction" (p. 433).

While there may be modest findings in the beliefs-behaviour literature, the beliefs-development research yields more promising results. Miller (1988) offered several possible explanations for this. First, he suggested that parental beliefs are unlikely to be accurately portrayed in observations of parental behaviours as beliefs may be more readily apparent in parent-child interactions across time. Miller also noted that

Not all important parental beliefs are likely to be expressed in direct interaction with the child. The parents' structuring of the early physical environment... examples of potentially important parental decisions that are not clearly captured in discrete behaviours... For these reasons, the measurement of parental beliefs may sometimes tell us more about the parent-child relationship, and be more predictive of the child's development, than is true of measures of parental behaviour. (p. 277)

A few studies have attempted to extend knowledge of parental beliefs and child development outcomes in the social domain. Mills and Rubin (1990), in their research on parents' beliefs about children's social behaviours, found that parental beliefs predicted whether or not parents chose to intervene in children's social behaviour, as well as the socialisation strategies that parents' chose. Mills and Rubin reasoned that parents were less likely to intervene when they attributed the child's behaviour to a stable internal factor such as a trait, perhaps because they believed that traits were unmodifiable (Mills & Rubin). However, Mills and Rubin also posited the possibility that parental choice about whether to intervene may reflect their beliefs of how influential they believe themselves to be on children's social behaviours.

Martin and Johnson's (1992) research also conceived of parental beliefs as relating to child outcomes. They argued that, since parents' beliefs guide their interpretation of

children's behaviours, if the lens through which parents interpret and relate to children is faulty, then children are left with inaccurate self-perceptions which then influence their development. This mechanism is influential in two ways, both in terms of the opportunities that the parent provides for the child, and in the experiences the child chooses. Therefore, Martin and Johnson suggested, it is important for parents to understand the ways in which they influence children's development, and qualitative studies exploring parental beliefs are needed in order to enhance understanding.

In McGillicuddy-DeLisi's (1992) research on parental beliefs about child development and the impact of these beliefs on children's personal-social development, she determined that, prior to examining the relationship between the constructs, it was necessary to determine the nature of parental beliefs in terms of the processes to which they attribute development as well as the influence of individual differences, if any, on beliefs. She concluded that parents were more likely to attribute children's personal-social development to social interaction, traits and learning over affective or gender differences (McGillicuddy-DeLisi). This is encouraging information as, first, it implies that parents see children as active agents in their own growth (à la Vygotsky) and, second, that parents believe that children's development is, at least in part, learned and thus subject to influence or teaching. However, it was not indicated in this study if parents endorsed parentally-facilitated environments as important to development and whether, and if so, how, parents perceived the parental role in children's social and emotional development.

Researchers agree that there is a dearth of literature that addresses the nature of parental beliefs about children's social and emotional development, and even less about parents' beliefs about their own influence in this developmental domain (McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 1992; Mills & Rubin, 1990). "Our understanding of parents' beliefs might be broadened by a more open, exploratory line of study to complement the relatively focused approaches that have dominated thus far" (Miller, 1988, p. 280). While the influential nature of family environments is acknowledged, parents' understanding of the specific processes by which parents influence children's social and emotional outcomes has not yet been specified.

#### Concluding Thoughts

Beliefs are but one source of behaviour; both contextual and individual differences exert influence on behaviour, precluding the strength and reliability of the belief-behaviour

relationship (McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 1982; Palacios et al., 1992). On a more hopeful note about beliefs, however, Sigel (1992) suggests that “the greater the overlap between the knowledge domain of the belief and the task to be taught or learned, the greater will be the relationship” (p. 453).

Research indicates that parents do indeed hold tacit theories of child development. In order to bridge the gap between parents’ implicit theories and explicit theories grounded in research findings, the nature of parental beliefs and the extent to which they correspond with the research literature in this area must be explored. This research is necessary to effectively support parents to provide growth-enhancing environments and opportunities that facilitate optimal developmental outcomes for children. To accomplish this, parents must be aware of the processes through which children acquire social and emotional competencies, ways in which these competencies are hindered and fostered, as well as the processes through which parents might effectively facilitate children’s social and emotional development.

In terms of parental beliefs and child development outcomes, research has focused largely on cognitive skills. Miller’s (1988) review of research about parental beliefs and child outcomes in the cognitive domain concluded that parental beliefs do indeed predict “the quality of the child’s cognitive functioning” via the parent-child relationship (p. 278). A similar relationship has been found in the literature on parental beliefs and child social and emotional outcomes; parental beliefs have been found to influence child outcomes through parental behaviour in interaction with children.

Children’s social and emotional development is influenced by variety of factors that produce enduring effects and lead to long-term child outcomes. The extant literature indicates that children’s early interactions with parents set up children’s expectations about later social interactions. Through the parent-child relationship, children also learn how to express and understand emotions. Thus, parents characteristics and, in particular, parents’ beliefs about social and emotional competence are conveyed to children.

Despite educational methods targeting parental knowledge, the research literature has indicated that increasing parents’ knowledge of child development does not, on its own, alter parenting behaviour. Similarly, parenting behaviours may not accurately reflect parents’ beliefs. However, research has indicated greater reliability in the relationship between parents’ beliefs and child development outcomes. Unfortunately, there is limited

research on the nature of parents' beliefs about children's social and emotional development.

In this study, I investigated parents' understandings of children's social and emotional development as, in addition to the definition of beliefs as cognitions that guide interpretations, the term understanding encompasses parents' thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and points of view. Utilising a qualitative research design, I explored parents' understanding of children's social and emotional competencies and the means by which these competencies are thought to develop. Additionally, I sought to understand if, and if so how, parents perceive the parental role as facilitative of children's acquisition of social and emotional competencies.

### III: METHOD

*"Infants, children, and adults construct their understandings from experience... What they know of reality is only what they have come to believe, not what they have verified outside their experience" (Stake, 1995, p. 100).*

The purpose of this study is to bring new understanding to the body of literature on children's social and emotional development, in particular, knowledge that illuminates parents' understanding of the processes through which children develop socially and emotionally. Parents are acknowledged to be children's first teachers, and the creators of children's earliest growth environments. Therefore, their understandings of child development influence children's growth. Although parent-child interactions have frequently been used as a context for data collection, parents' voices are not typically reflected in the research literature which largely represents quantitative approaches. Through the in-depth study of multiple cases, I used this research to explore parents' thoughts, observations, conceptualisations and expectations about children's development of social and emotional competence. Findings aggregated across cases are presented in an illustrative, theme-based report (Stake, 1995).

#### *Research Design*

Qualitative research facilitates the investigation of individuals' experiences in a particular context where quantitative approaches may not provide enough exploration of meaning (Polkinghorne, 2005). Through organisation, description, clarification and analysis, themes are drawn from collected data in order to provide fuller understanding of a phenomenon and the human experience.

#### The Case Study Method

Case studies are preferred when a researcher desires rich description and increased understanding of complex social phenomena bounded by time and context (Creswell, 1998; Yin, 2003). More specifically, case studies are chosen to address "how" and "why" research questions (Yin). This method is considered to be a comprehensive research strategy that includes design, data collection and analysis, whereby single or multiple cases are explored through the detailed, in-depth collection of data, involving multiple sources of information rich in context (Yin; Creswell).

The case study method is appropriate for this research because of its degree of fit with the central research question – how parents understand the processes through which



children's social and emotional competencies develop – and the study's focus on contemporary events situated in real life context (Yin, 2003). That is, the research questions all inquire about the manner or way in which parents understand children's social and emotional development. Further, the questions seek to uncover the extent of parents' understanding through the meanings they attach to their children's behaviours. A case study approach is, therefore, particularly well-suited as it targets process-oriented, contextually grounded discovery (rather than isolation and confirmation of variables). The target of study, parents' understanding of children's social and emotional development, is embedded in parents' daily life and interactions.

One advantage of the case study method is its increased capacity for capturing both range and depth of participant perspectives. Its strengths include reliance on multiple sources, the converging evidence of which supports inferences made about the data (Yin, 2003). Flexibility is another benefit of the case study method whereby initial data collection informs the study's plan (Yin). However, there are no prescribed data collection techniques in the case study method. In addition to interviewing, data collection may include naturalistic observation, archival documentation or other artefacts. The accessibility of the findings of case study research is yet another strength; case study research is directly applicable to practice, and case reports can be made amenable to academic and non-academic audiences (Yin).

### *Multiple-case Designs*

Multiple case study designs are preferred over single case designs because findings are likely to be more robust than if only a single case was used (Yin, 2003). The multicase study starts with a central phenomenon that connects all the cases (Stake, 2006). Thus, the main criterion for selecting cases is the degree of fit with the phenomenon under study (Stake). The multi-case design, like other research syntheses, focuses on the aggregation of findings across cases (Yin). Further, individual cases may be used solely to provide an evidentiary base for cross-case analysis and the findings presented in the study's final report (Yin).

This multicase study focused on the detailed, in-depth exploration of the phenomenon of interest, parents' understanding of children's social and emotional development, using the data set as the evidentiary base for analysis. This researcher's approach to multiple-case design intended that the contribution of this study would be a

cross-case analysis and interpretation of the phenomenon under investigation (Yin, 2003). Thus, the individual case was intended to play a supportive role. My purpose was not to portray individual cases but rather to present a synthesis of what can be learned about parents' understanding, organised around key topics such as how parents perceive their role in facilitating children's social and emotional development. The goal, then, was to systematically examine the entire data set and to seek commonalities in parents' understanding of children's social and emotional development. An advantage of this design is that when a final report is presented in terms of the initial research questions, findings are concise and readily accessible (Yin).

#### *Criticisms of the Case Study Method*

Case study research has been criticised for lacking rigour and for having limited representativeness, qualities which are believed to render this approach appropriate only for descriptive research or the early exploratory phase of research studies. However, the multiple sources of evidence and systematic analysis required of credible case study research support its rigorous nature.

Representativeness is no more intended of the case study approach than it is of qualitative research as a whole. Generalisation to large populations has never been the aim of qualitative research, the small targeted respondent pool of which inhibits its representativeness (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Cases can, however, contribute to the understanding of a phenomenon and other similar cases (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2003). Therefore, the findings of this study reflect the views of informants and are not intended to represent the understanding of the entire population of parents. Finally, the case study method continues to be heavily utilised, particularly because of its applicability to practice-oriented research which, in itself, speaks to researchers' endorsement of the continuing relevance of this method.

#### *Procedures*

##### Participants

Each case consisted of a parent and her preschooler (Table 1). The participants were 5 adult females ranging in age from 23 to 56 years. In terms of education level, one participant reported high school completion and vocational training; four participants reported completing graduate degrees. Participants all reported that they were in committed, cohabiting relationships with the male co-parents of their preschoolers, and all

but one were married. Participants' preschoolers were 3 females and 2 males ranging in age from 3 years 11 ½ months to 5 ½ years. The preschoolers were all first born children with at least one younger sibling. Three of the children had had prior preschool experiences. Additionally, because data collection spanned the end of the summer and the beginning of the new academic year, four of the preschoolers transitioned into new school settings during this time.

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

| <b>CASE</b>                   | <b>B</b>        | <b>C</b>         | <b>D</b>           | <b>E</b>         | <b>F</b>                |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|------------------|--------------------|------------------|-------------------------|
| <b>Age/Sex</b>                | 56/F            | 34/F             | 23/F               | 38/F             | 32/F                    |
| <b>Education</b>              | Graduate degree | Graduate degree  | High school        | Graduate degree  | Graduate degree         |
| <b>Occupation</b>             | Asst. professor | Stay-at-home mom | Real estate (p/t)  | Stay-at-home mom | Environmental scientist |
| <b>Relationship status</b>    | Cohabiting      | Married          | Married            | Married          | Married                 |
| <b>Age/sex of preschooler</b> | 5 ½/M           | 4/F              | 4 ½/M              | 5/F              | 4/F                     |
| <b>Age/sex of sibling(s)</b>  | 13 mos./F       | 2/F              | 2 ½/M<br>14 mos./F | 3/M              | 8 mos./M                |

### *Recruitment*

Participants voluntarily responded to recruitment flyers (Appendix A) distributed at local preschools as well as by word of mouth. The flyers briefly introduced the study and invited interested parents to contact the investigator for additional information. This initial contact served to further describe the study, to explain the level of participation expected from respondents, and to set up the meeting time for the first interview. Respondents all elected to receive the letter of informed consent (Appendix B) by e-mail rather than by post, and it was sent so that it arrived at least 1 day prior to each participant's first personal interview. The letter of consent was reviewed with each participant and signed prior to formal data collection.

The criteria by which respondents were deemed qualified to serve as cases were as follows: Informants were fluent in written and spoken English, primary caregivers of at least one child of pre-school-age, and had no previous formal education or training in child development or parenting skills. Additionally, they were willing to share personal information about their family including composition of family, ages of family members, education levels, and ethnicities. Finally, informants indicated availability and willingness to participate in the

series of weekly interviews and journaling necessary for the four weeks of data collection required for this study.

### *Sampling*

Sampling is the process of selecting which types of cases to include, which people to observe or interview, in which settings, and about which events and social processes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In multiple case study research, the phenomenon under study determines case selection (Stake, 2006). Thus, the purpose of qualitative sampling is the careful selection of a small number of information-rich cases for in-depth study of the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 1990). Purposeful sampling is “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 1998, p. 61). Within this frame, specific sampling strategies are chosen in accordance with “the purpose of the study, the resources available, the questions being asked, and the constraints being faced” (Patton, pp. 181-183).

For this study, I intended to combine characteristics of two sampling techniques, an approach that Patton (1990) terms combination or mixed purposeful sampling. Intensity sampling and maximum variation sampling are two strategies thought to facilitate pattern induction (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Intensity sampling yields information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon of interest (Patton). In intensity sampling, respondents are viewed as the expert holders of specialised knowledge about a phenomenon (Miles & Huberman). Maximum variation sampling facilitates the observation of the construct under study in different contexts: “If a finding holds in one setting and... also holds in a comparable setting but does not in a contrasting case, the finding is more robust” (Miles & Huberman, p. 29).

Determining the sample size is a tradeoff between breadth and depth (Patton, 1990). Thus, this research studied a small number of participants via repeated contacts over time, in order to plumb the depths of their understanding about children’s social and emotional development. Stake (2006) suggests that researchers also consider that there is greatest potential to learn the most from cases that are the most accessible. Stake cautions that the benefits of the study will likely be limited if more than 10 cases are chosen, as the complexity provided by the number of unique interactions between cases is more than can

be comfortably accommodated. Selecting only two or three cases is also not ideal as there will be limited interactions between cases and contexts (Stake).

The parents who volunteered all met eligibility criteria, and were accepted as study participants. The final study sample comprised five cases which included parents of male and female preschoolers who were willing and able to articulate their understandings to the investigator, and who had the time required to do so. The data collected for each case was rich with daily processes and parents' cognitions about their children's development of social and emotional competencies. Thus, the final sample evidenced the phenomenon of interest and therefore met criteria for intensity sampling. However, the cases were very similar in setting. This lack of diversity failed to meet criteria for maximum variation in case contexts and, therefore, had implications for the findings, as will be discussed in the final chapter.

#### Data Collection

Data collection consisted of one in-person, semi-structured interview of approximately 60 minutes, four weeks of journal entries, four weekly follow-up interviews of approximately 15 minutes each, and a member-check, the details of which will be addressed later in this document. With the exception of the journals, both the raw and transcribed data were stored electronically with password protection.

There are three principles of data collection for the case study method that also serve to increase the reliability and validity of a research study: the use of multiple sources of evidence, a case study database, and a chain of evidence (Yin, 2003). Unlike other types of research, the case study method utilises multiple sources of evidence. This allows the researcher to have converging lines of inquiry and evidence, and supports the findings which are more convincing because they are based on information from several sources. The study's central phenomenon was corroborated using three sources of evidence and this triangulation of data increased construct validity. The member check was also used to corroborate data previously gathered from each participant.

The importance of a case study database in maintaining the evidentiary chain comprises Yin's (2003) second and third principles of data collection. The creation of a central source for the evidence base against which case study reports may be verified increases the reliability of the case study. To this end, the raw data comprising the evidentiary base for this study, which included documentary evidence such as interview transcripts, participant journals and member checks were organised and stored in a case

study database. The use of a database maintained the chain of evidence in that it facilitated the tracing of conclusions through the data and back to the research questions. Like the database, a chain of evidence contributes to the study's reliability.

### *Interviews*

This research is based on the assumption that parents hold implicit theories of child development, and that the understandings inherent in their personally held theories may be accessed through skilful questioning. Interviews were, therefore, the primary instruments used for data collection, and were electronically recorded for later transcription.

Interviews are the method of choice for case study evidence when investigators aim to elicit information that would be otherwise unobservable, and particularly when the desire is to explore meanings that might be overlooked using quantitative methods (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Interviews reflect individual constructions and are especially effective tools when the objective of a study is to capture, understand, and explain people's ideas, perceptions, feelings, attitudes, motivations, and opinions. Using interviews, the investigator is free to probe for further articulation of ideas, and to explore unanticipated issues raised by informants. Through careful and systematic analysis of the collected data, the investigator is afforded insight into the thoughts and perceptions of participants.

For the purpose of this study, a semi-structured personal interview, approximately 60 minutes in length, was used. In order to take advantage of its flexibility, this interview took the format of a guided conversation rather than that of a structured query (Miller, 1988; Yin, 2003). In this way, participants' responses to questions elicited follow-up questions and probes during the interview, thereby generating data that reflected the further expansion of participants' ideas. At the end of this interview, participants were asked to provide personal and demographic information about themselves and their families.

In order to access parents' tacit understanding, the interviews targeted parents' observations and conceptualisations about children's development of social and emotional competencies. Open-ended questions promote self-disclosure and were, therefore, used to elicit responses from participants as they reflected on their knowledge, perceptions, observations and beliefs, and the implications for children's social and emotional development. In addition to eliciting currently held understandings, the interview process was intended to facilitate emergent conceptions and understandings (Kvale, 1996). It is

possible that newly constructed articulations elicited by interviews reflect parents' general beliefs about children (Miller, 1988).

The investigator was guided by an interview schedule (Appendix C) constructed using themes identified in the literature as integral to the constructs of social and emotional competence. This interview schedule invited each informant to address the same issues and also provided the investigator with facilitating questions that encouraged informants to elaborate further. In this way, a strength of the interview is its ability to tap a depth of information that few other instruments are able to access.

A skilfully constructed instrument is critical to the quality of the data: "The more standardised the interview protocol (with little expectation of on-the-spot interpretation and probing), the less an expert interviewer is needed" (Stake, 2006, p. 22). Stake suggests research literature as the basis for the investigator's research questions which, in turn, generate the questions for informants. In addition to this literature-based knowledge, the investigator's experiences and reasoning also came to bear on interview questions, which were then modified through consultation with the research team and pilot testing.

The interviewer's role was that of a seeker of knowledge, which allowed the interviewee a teaching role. Yin (2003) considers the interviewer to have two main tasks: First, to adhere to the interview schedule and, second, to ask questions in an unbiased manner. This naïve stance of the interviewer entailed setting aside assumptions, and seeking interviewees' unbiased perspectives on the topic of study.

### *Journals*

"For case studies, the most important use of documents is to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources" (Yin, 2003, p. 87). Thus, each informant was asked to make journal entries in the weeks following the personal interview. The daily entries were intended to capture parents' thoughts and observations about children's social and emotional development given their recent discourse on the subject. The data collected were added to the interview data and analysed similarly. This documentary evidence elaborated each informant's system of understanding about children's social and emotional development. Guidance for the journal entries was provided with each journal (Appendix D).

### *Weekly Interviews*

Similar to the journal, weekly interviews (Appendix E) were used to create an ongoing dialog that facilitated participants' continued reflection on the phenomenon under

study, and allowed the investigator to witness their emerging understanding. These interviews were approximately 15 minutes in length, and informants all chose to complete these via telephone rather than in person.

#### *The Pilot Case Study*

Prior to the start of formal data collection, the study was piloted with one individual who met the research criteria. A well-planned pilot, with a respondent drawn from the target population, is important to successful data collection (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). In fact, Yin (2003) considers the pilot case study the final preparatory stage for data collection, helping to enhance data collection plans both in terms of the content as well as the procedures to be followed. In particular, the pilot study helped to refine the lines of questioning for the interview and conceptual clarification for the research design (Yin). While a pilot case is primarily of interest to the investigator, and the data collected are used solely to refine the execution of the study, as expected, the pilot case report explicated lessons learned about, and modifications executed for, research design and data collection (Yin).

*Pilot; Case A: Jeanie and her son, Conner.* Jeanie, 42, and her husband are parents of two children: a boy of 4, and a girl who is 2. Jeanie is college-educated and a stay-at-home mother. She and her family live in California's Central Coast region in the U.S.A. Jeanie completed all of the data collection components, and information from her case was used to refine the study procedures. In general, for questions where Jeanie seemed to have difficulty or asked for clarification, the wording was altered to assist participants' understanding. Changes were made to both the main and follow-up interview protocols based on this pilot case, and the data collection documents were reformatted for ease of use.

#### *Data Analysis*

*A good listener hears the exact words used by the interviewee (sometimes, the terminology reflects an important orientation), captures the mood and affective components, and understands the context from which the interviewee is perceiving the world. But the listening skill also needs to be applied to the inspection of documentary evidence, as well as to observations of real-life situations. In reviewing documents, listening takes the form of worrying whether there is any important message between the lines; any inferences, of*



*course, would need to be corroborated with other sources of information, but important insights may be gained this way.* (Yin, 2003, p. 60)

Solving qualitative problems entails “discovering what occurs, the implications of what occurs, and the relationships linking occurrences” (Merriam, 1998, p. 61). Therefore, to move beyond rich description it is necessary to systematically and interpretively analyse the data. Data analysis is the process of giving meaning to data via organisation, categorisation, interpretation and linkages, and occurs from the data collection stage through to the writing of the final report. However, there seems to be no single means on which investigators agree regarding the analysis of case study data. In this study, using qualitative content or thematic analysis (Patton, 1990), both deductive and inductive strategies were utilised to analyse the data. In early analysis, deductive means entailed the use of a priori codes determined by the research questions. Later, continued development of the analytic framework was supported using a posteriori codes determined via inductive analysis.

In the early stages of data analysis, the researcher conducted a general review of the collected data in order to get an overall sense of the entire database (Creswell, 1998). The evidence from each case was thoroughly read and re-read, and important ideas identified and categorised into codes. Codes are descriptive labels assigned to meaning units, and serve to summarise and organise raw data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Meaning units are groups of words or statements that share the same essential meaning and are related to a code. Units of meaning were identified as follows for each of the three research questions.

In order to answer the first research question which explored parents’ understanding of social and emotional competencies and their observations of development, participants were asked to share stories about their preschoolers’ friendships, sharing, and responses to others’ emotions. They were also asked about their preschoolers’ expressions of happy or excited feelings, as well as expressions of sadness, anger, frustration and disappointment. In addition to these emotions, four participants included stories about their preschoolers’ experiences of fearful or anxious feelings. (It was on this basis that the coding category *Expressing Anxious, Fearful Feelings*, discussed below, was created.) Meaning units for these questions were participants’ observations of their preschoolers’ behaviours.

Also, in this first research question, parents were asked to recall if and, if so, how their preschoolers' social and emotional skills had changed, and to consider what behaviours they might observe in the future that would indicate improvement in a particular skill. Thus, meaning units for this line of questioning were participants' observations of past changes and expectations of future changes in these skills.

The second research question explored parents' understanding of the ways in which social and emotional competencies are fostered. Participants were asked to share their views about how children come to be able to get along with others, to share, and to understand what others are feeling. For this research question, meaning units were identified as parents' perceptions of general ways in which children's social and emotional competencies are facilitated.

The third research question examined parents' understanding of their roles in facilitating children's social and emotional development. Throughout the interviews and journals, parents were asked if and, if so, how they were involved in helping their preschoolers to navigate social situations and to manage emotions. Parents were also asked to share stories about discussing emotions with their preschoolers. Therefore, for this question, meaning units were specific tasks that parents reported performing in order to support their preschoolers' development of social and emotional competencies.

The study's research goals guided early coding. That is, each research question was deconstructed and its components identified in order to create a start list of descriptive codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994) (Table 2). Using this start list of a priori codes, raw data were repeatedly examined. Groups of words, statements or sentences were matched to definitions in the start list of codes, and were extracted. Data coded in this manner formed the foundation for addressing each of the three research questions. Using this deductive approach, the research literature and the study's theoretical bases informed data analysis and emergent findings.

Table 2. *Start List of Codes*

| Research Question | Code Label        | Code Description  |
|-------------------|-------------------|---|
| 1                 | Nature (N)        | essential characteristics of a social or emotional behaviour that parent observes; more descriptive, general  |
| 1                 | Process (P)       | changes in child's behaviour that parent observes; examples   |
| 2                 | Facilitation (F)  | parent's beliefs and/or perceptions about the ways in which social or emotional competence is supported or not supported; conceptualisations; more observational, general |
| 3                 | Parental Role (R) | the ways in which parent thinks and/or acts to facilitate child's social and emotional competence; more experiential, specific  |

During data analysis, as codes changed or emerged, data were repeatedly reviewed. As new codes emerged, previously coded text was revisited and coded, and data from multiple sources were used to support each code (Creswell, 1998). Glesne and Peshkin (1992) caution that it is likely that more codes will be developed than can be sustained, and that as re-reading and re-interpretation occur, the researcher should also expect the blending of codes to occur repeatedly. Some text segments seemed to fit in more than one code, while other segments seemed not to fit and were discarded. This winnowing of data began early in the coding process and continued until all the text segments were either subsumed under codes or discarded (Glesne & Peshkin). The analytic framework became more complex during the search for patterns as new codes emerged in order that all data might be subsumed (Glesne & Peshkin; Patton, 1990) (Table 3). The investigator facilitated this convergence by seeking recurrences in the data (Patton).

Table 3. *Example of the Analytic Framework*

| Literature-based Category: | Current Observations | Recent Changes | Anticipated Growth |
|----------------------------|----------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| <b>Sharing</b>             |                      |                |                    |

*"Sometimes we will find significant meaning in a single instance, but usually the important meanings will come from reappearance over and over" (Stake, 1995, p. 78).*

Within the coded data relevant to each research question, an inductive approach was used to promote further analysis. Repeated reviewing of the data facilitated moving beyond first impressions and simple meanings in the search for patterns and consistency (Stake, 1995). This early interpretive process entailed a search for common concepts by which groups of codes could be linked into categories. The repeated re-reading and

subjective interpretation of these data generated *themes*, or categories of findings into which codes were classified (Patton, 1990). Coded data were repeatedly categorised for best fit as themes and sub-themes emerged and were continually refined. As expected, the number of categories expanded as the study database was repeatedly reviewed (Creswell, 1998). This classification process continued until all of the codes had been subsumed under the small number of themes on which findings were reported. Inductive approaches such as this are recommended when the research aims to increase understanding of a phenomenon by developing summary themes from complex raw data.

The study's themes were refined and strengthened, in order that cross-case findings might be supported with sources of evidence from each relevant case (Stake, 1995). Finally, to facilitate further interpretation, this identification of themes was followed by evaluations of the relationships between themes and cases. Utilising the emergent themes, the investigator made inferences about these relationships in order to form larger meaning and draw conclusions (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994), as presented in the Discussion chapter. Like codes, each inference had a single focus and was supported by evidence (Stake, 2006). This level of interpretation intended to surpass immediately apparent meanings, to seek deeper, more hypothetical interpretations of the data given their context (Kvale, 1996) (Table 4). The theoretical bases of the study as well as the investigator's views informed this interpretation (Kvale).

Table 4. *Example of Interpretive Coding*

| <b>Code: Parental Role (R)</b>                     | <b>Category</b>    | <b>Sub-theme</b>                       | <b>Theme</b>                     |
|--|--------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| Explained importance, limits & benefits of sharing | Encouraged sharing | Encouraged socially desired behaviours | Facilitator of Social Competence |
| Modelled sharing                                   |                    |  |                                  |
| Implemented sharing strategies & guidelines        |                    |  |                                  |

#### *Criteria for Judging Quality*

*"Qualitative research... recognises that invalidities and advocacies are ever present and turns away from the goal as well as the presumption of sanitisation" (Stake, 1995, p. 95).*

Case studies require extensive verification, the strategies of which are best applied throughout the conduct of each case (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). Issues of credibility and dependability include ensuring that selected measures relate to the phenomenon under study and to the study's objectives; that procedures are operationalised; that converging

lines of evidence support inferences made from the data; and that the domains to which findings can be generalised are clearly established.

Establishing dependability minimises bias and facilitates a study's replication by demonstrating that the procedures of a study can be repeated (Yin, 2003). In this research, issues of dependability were addressed by operationalising the processes of data collection and analysis which facilitated the possibility of future replication.

Issues of credibility are related to the trustworthiness of the researcher and to methodological rigor (Patton, 1990). Credibility was addressed by acknowledging the investigator's subjectivity, which is found later in this chapter. Credibility was also established through the use of converging sources of evidence, as well as through the explication and transparency of the chain of evidence by which inferences are made. The use of multiple cases also supported credibility in so far as the aggregated findings presented in the final report were underpinned by evidentiary data from each relevant case. Credibility was also buttressed by the use of member checks, which provided an additional method by which to verify findings. The use of rich description and contextual grounding also provided a foundation for the transferability of inferences across cases.

#### Ethical Considerations

An ethical issue of great concern for this research study was participants' right to privacy, although informed consent and protection from harm were equally important. The privacy of participants and their data was protected in two ways. First, participants' identities were obscured by the use of pseudonyms, as were their preschoolers'. Second, access to collected data was limited to the primary investigator and the co-investigator.

Another consideration was the possibility that involvement in this research could lead participants to question their parenting skills and/or experience psychological discomfort. Participants were apprised of this possibility as a part of the informed consent procedure. The investigator was transparent about the nature of the study as well as about the fact that interviews would be recorded. Participants were also informed of their right to terminate involvement in the study at any time. Given that this research sought the discovery, exploration and greater understanding of mental representations to uncover perceptions of which parents may previously have had only limited awareness, participants were informed that involvement in this study could result in unexpected thoughts and feelings. In order to mitigate the likelihood of psychological distress, interviews ended with

participant debriefing, and care was taken to end interviews on a positive note, emphasising each participant's parenting strengths. Protection from harm included ensuring that case reports accurately portrayed participants. This was conducted in collaboration with each informant via the member check during which each parent was encouraged to provide feedback on her contribution to the multi-case report. Despite this, it was possible that some participants might have benefited from additional processing of their new awareness. Thus, local resources for community based counselling were provided in order that participants, if they chose to, could discuss any thoughts and feelings which arose from their participation in the study.

#### Researcher's Subjectivity

*Qualitative research... champions the interaction of researcher and phenomena. Phenomena need accurate description, but even observational interpretation of those phenomena will be shaped by the mood, the experience, the intention of the researcher... Research is not helped by making it appear value free. It is better to give the reader a good look at the researcher. (Stake, 1995, p. 95)*

*"Continual alertness to your own biases, your own subjectivity, also assists in producing more trustworthy interpretations" (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 147).*

Clarifying the investigator's assumptions, worldview and theoretical orientation are ways of enhancing internal validity (Merriam, 1998). Approaching this study, I believed that early experiences have a large and enduring impact on child outcomes. I also believed that, while they desire positive outcomes for their children, many parents are not aware of the necessity of providing social and emotional growth-enhancing experiences or may be unsure of the ways in which they can create these experiences. Therein lies my view that social and emotional competence is neither merely innate nor a function of biological maturation, but rather the outcome of a combination of individual biological and psychological characteristics as well as competencies and understandings gained through experiences. Further, I believed that parents' currently held perspectives about children and their emotional and social development greatly influence children's outcomes, and that parents are able to access and willing to articulate these views via skilful questioning. My approach to this study, therefore, rested on the assumption that individuals have their own personal ideas, perspectives, opinions, and understandings about how children develop socially and emotionally, and that the task of the investigator was to access or elicit these.

My assumptions were inextricably intertwined within this study in terms of my understanding of the constructs, my choice of research instruments, which influence and are influenced by, the focus I chose for this research, and the methods by which I chose to investigate the research questions. Additionally, the questions I chose to ask, as well as the central issues that I identified as having emerged in the literature, reflected my own views and biases. Again, as the constructor of interpretations, my influence was evident in the themes chosen as significant when categorising and analysing the collected data. My educational and professional backgrounds, experiences, and training influenced what I attended to and what I determined to be significant. As a counsellor, I also assumed that my skills in clinical interviewing, assessment and conceptualisation would facilitate the processes of data collection and analysis. Thus, it was my continual task to maintain awareness of my biases, and to be open to multiple perspectives.

#### Member Checks

*"We always present the repeating ideas and relevant text to our participants and ask them if we have gotten their stories right"* (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 45).

The use of member checks facilitates a study's credibility. To this end, study participants were invited to examine their contributions to the cross-case report, and critical feedback about the accuracy with which they were represented was incorporated into the final report. Participants were offered the choice to discuss the findings and to make comments and suggestions by telephone or by e-mail.

Three of the five participants provided comments. Overall, they agreed that the quotations utilised were representative of their thoughts and that the themes generated from the analytic and interpretive processes seemed to be accurate. They also commented on the utility of having had the opportunity to reflect on their parenting practices.

#### *Significance and Contributions of this Research*

*"We need to proceed by looking at the substantive concerns of the members of society while simultaneously examining the constructive activities used to produce order in everyday life"* (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 719).

The primary research objective was to enhance understanding of parents' perspectives on child social and emotional development, and how, in parents' opinions, this development is facilitated, particularly within parent-child interactions. The intention was to highlight areas of strength, as well as areas requiring support, that would better equip

parents to facilitate experiences that enhance children's development of social and emotional competence. To do this, parents' strengths and needs, as indicated in the findings, were compared to research literature which indicated specific parenting tasks as associated with children's social and emotional competence.

The extant literature indicates that social and emotional competence is a foundation for success, while poor social and emotional skills have the potential to set children on negative developmental trajectories ending in poor life outcomes. While studies have utilised parents when evaluating children's social and emotional competence, parents' perceptions have been curiously absent. This study intended to allow the voices of parents to inform the child development literature base, thereby bridging the gap between social and emotional outcome studies and parents' needs for support to effectively facilitate their children's healthy social and emotional growth.



#### IV: PEOPLE, STORIES AND PATTERNS

*"Stories are our way to illuminate the path and find common ground"* (SARK, 1997, p. 125).

This multicase study was used to investigate parents' understandings of the ways in which young children develop socially and emotionally. I believed that knowledge of the ways in which parents understood these processes would illuminate parents' readiness and capacity to support their children's early social and emotional development, expand the repertoire of indicators considered in social and emotional developmental research and contribute to research literature that informs programming for parent education, prevention, and early intervention.

##### *Organisation of the Chapter*

Chapter IV presents the findings of this study, and is organised according to the three main research questions that guided the investigation:

1. What do parents understand social and emotional development to be, and how do they observe that it is manifested in children?
2. What do parents understand about how social and emotional competencies are fostered?
3. What do parents understand about the parental role in children's social and emotional development?

This chapter presents a synthesis of key findings across five cases, each comprising a parent and a preschooler. Parents shared their views about children's social and emotional development via the telling of stories about their everyday observations of their preschoolers. Data collected in interviews and journals were analysed thematically in order to answer the research questions. Therefore, the evidentiary base of this study's findings consists of direct quotations from participants.

First, case vignettes are used to introduce the participants. The presentation of the findings follows, and is organised topically around the research questions. For each research question, themes are discussed individually and illustrated with supporting evidence in the form of sample responses from participants. The themes and sub-themes revealed by the data are arranged according to the broader concepts of social development and emotional development. In order to adhere to the previously stated focus of this study, direct quotations from participants are used to illustrate their perspectives and to represent their voices in this research.

*Case Vignettes*

*Case B: Stephanie and her son, Billy.* In her mid fifties, Stephanie is mother to a 5 year old boy and a 13 month old girl, both adopted as infants. She and her partner are full-time college professors. Two dogs, three cats and a fish complete their household. They live on California's Central Coast in the U.S.A.

About herself, Stephanie said,

I do have a pretty volatile temper. I've spent my life getting it under control. He was our first. I waited the longest time for him, so he was my whole life. And I think we could be better models but I was wearing myself out trying to be perfect. And so we're not as understanding as we should be. Again, we're not perfect. And I'm always on my case to be perfect and, at the same time, I can't be, so it's distressing sometimes. I said, you know, he's just going to have to love me for who I am because I'm not perfect.

Stephanie also said that she and her partner have very different parenting styles and she wonders about how that affects her preschooler.

Stephanie described Billy as social, friendly boy. She said, "He's a friendly kid, people love him, people are drawn to him. He's got this magnetic personality." Stephanie has also noticed that Billy is able to make connections with other children easily. She explained it in this way: "He is a really empathic kid. He's very outer-directed in kind of an odd way for a preschooler. He's very much connected to other kids... He has a real understanding of where other people are coming from." In her opinion, Billy craves togetherness: "It's the strangest thing, he was never meant to be an only child, he's always wanted that connection. Family is very important. That's a big word for him now, we're a family."

An issue with which Billy seemed to be trying to come to terms was the fact that he is adopted. Stephanie reported that, on a recent trip to the store Billy asked, "Mommy, why did you pick me?" Another recent concern for Billy was the way he looks. He has noticed that that he is different from his parents as well as most of the other people in his school and town. Stephanie said,

He's started to notice he doesn't look like us. He's also started to notice that he doesn't look like a lot of the people around him. It's, 'I want to look like so-and-so and so-and-so.' He says, 'No, I'm Black, White is good.' I can't get him to wear

shorts. He doesn't want to wear shorts because he doesn't want people to see his black skin.

*Case C: Victoria and her daughter, Mariah.* Victoria is a 34 year old mother of two girls ages 4 and 2. They live in a rural area on California's Central Coast in the U.S.A. She is currently a stay-at-home mother while her husband serves in Kuwait.

About herself, Victoria said, "I'm a perfectionist and I've often downplayed my own accomplishments." Victoria admits that being the sole caregiver to her children for the past 10 months has made her feel very tired. She often feels pulled by the differing wants of the girls and says that being unable to meet their demands concurrently is very difficult for her.

Victoria also noticed that she had been more verbal about her feelings of late and said that this is both because she has no one else to talk to and for the purpose of modelling desired options for emotion expression for her daughters. Either way, talking about feelings, hers and theirs is a daily occurrence, and an important tool in her parenting strategy. In particular, Victoria reported empathising with her daughter about the frustrations of being the older sibling, as she herself has a younger brother. In fact, Victoria often seemed to call on her own childhood experiences in order to be more empathic when interacting with Mariah.

Victoria described Mariah as a sweet, thoughtful girl: "She's always trying to bring me things that she thinks will make me happy or help me out or that kind of thing. Really sweet." She said that Mariah is also "wicked smart" and has "very high expectations of herself." She explained,

She's always been incredibly observant, very observant, notices things I never notice. And she pays attention to everything and kind of takes it in. She can quickly see through things, and come up with ideas that even I don't think of. She's very clever and quick to come up with ideas.

She also said that, "Mariah is very rule-oriented, she very much believes there is this way the world works according to rules. And when somebody doesn't follow them, she gets very offended." She also described Mariah as very competitive and striving for greater independence:

I think that she feels that on some level her worth must be... tied to that. I don't know why. And she's always been like that, very much like it can't be somebody else offering her the solution, it has to come from herself. But I'm guessing maybe she

just... somehow, it makes her feel whole or complete to be able to find her own way and do it herself. I think some of it's competitive sometimes but sometimes it's also just a challenge to herself. She has it in her mind how she wants it to go. She really wants to be more independent than she is... but is still a baby in lots of ways and needs her mama to be there, you know. She craves it but she's a little scared of it. And I've been watching her take more and more steps towards independence, like being much more comfortable with me dropping her off at school, and being away from me. But at the same time it definitely has created some anxieties in her and I'm just kind of watching her try to make some of those steps. It's all really new for her and me to try to deal with too.

*Case D: April and her son, Ryan.* April is 23 years old and works part time in real estate. Her family lives on California's Central Coast in the U.S.A. She and her husband have three children together, boys who are 4 and 2, and a girl who is 1 year old. Additionally, her husband's 10 year old son from a previous relationship stays with them on the weekends and many holidays.

April described herself as an easy-going person. She said, "I don't get upset too easily. I've got a lot of patience... but if I've had it, I've had it." April noted that she often had difficulty articulating her emotions, although she realised that this was an important part of communicating effectively with her children:

It's hard for me to get the words out there. I can think it all, and it sounds great in my head, but when I actually sit down to talk about it, I don't want to say, you you you you you! I want to say, this is the way that I feel when this happens or, I need to...

April also indicated that, in terms of her home life, she prefers structure: "I don't like not knowing. I like having a plan, I like having a system. I have a routine, and I have certain ways that I like to do things."

April described Ryan as a smart, sensitive, helpful boy. She pointed out that he is thoughtful, and as a big brother, is always aware of his younger siblings. Ryan is also very active and prefers outdoor activities like fishing, biking and skateboarding:

He's very caring, he's very thoughtful, he's very much 100 percent little boy. At 3 ½ he learned how to ride his bike without training wheels. And he likes to skateboard, he likes, he *loves* to be outside. When he gets tired he gets very sensitive, but he's

very compassionate. He's very thoughtful, he thinks about me. Last week he brought in a whole bunch of jasmine and said, 'Here, Mom, this is for you. Doesn't it smell pretty?' He's very sweet, he's very smart.

According to April, Ryan can also be "very headstrong" and she noted that she sometimes considers him to be excessively particular about certain details: "very anal and almost OCD about certain things."

*Case E: Kim and her daughter, Renée.* Kim, 38, is a stay-at-home mother. She and her husband have a daughter who is 5 and a son who is 3. They live on California's Central Coast in the U.S.A.

Kim described herself as a contemplative person and, as such, is aware of and works to compensate for her shortcomings. She said:

I know that I am a perfectionist, and that I, unfortunately, am probably modelling that. I'm really into analysing and reflecting. I have never known myself – and I'm still working on it – as well as I do now. But I have kids, so I'm constantly, maybe I'm just too in my head, but I'm constantly learning through my children what kind of a person I am.

Kim recognised the magnitude of her role as a parent: "I take my job as parenting really serious, and I just feel like I have a really big responsibility to do a good job." Kim noted that, growing up, she did not have good parenting role models and, concerned about the possible effects of this, she prepared for her own role as a parent by collecting and reading myriad books on the topic. Kim continues to utilise this strategy and is also an active member of a parent discussion group.

Kim described Renée as a confident, creative, intelligent girl. Most of all, Renée is very social. Kim said:

She would be happy to barely to be home. She loves people. She really just thrives on being with other people, and having friends, and just having fun. She lives for other people, especially her peers, already. She came out of the womb social. Everybody has remarked, since she was born, on how alert and social she is.

Kim also remarked on Renée's growing independence:

She's not so dependent. She just seems more and more like an independent being. I don't know. I mean like she got up, I said, 'Get yourself dressed.' She got herself

dressed. She's brushing her own teeth. I mean, she's just totally growing into this role.

An area of concern for Kim, however, was Renée's tendency towards perfectionism:

She puts so much pressure on herself. And I'm realising she's a perfectionist because she says things like, 'Well, I want to do it perfectly.' I think she also just approaches things in that way. Like, she's super confident, not in everything, but I think she thinks once she sets her mind to some thing she can do it. And if she can't, it's very frustrating. She's really driven. I think she thinks if she tries hard enough that she should be able to do it.

*Case F: Mika and her daughter, Alyssa.* Mika is a 32 year old environmental scientist. She and her husband have two children, a girl, 4 and a boy, 9 months. They are from Ireland and currently live in a suburb of Vancouver, Canada.

Mika reported that her family has a Catholic heritage. She spoke about her childhood experiences in relation to the choices she makes as a parent. Mika recalled,

I grew up in a household where there was a lot of suppressed emotion, and it just wasn't who I was. It wasn't naturally the way I was, and I was determined that it wasn't going to be the way it was with my children.

Mika also took her own experiences into account when deciding how to discipline her preschooler. She said, "I wouldn't generally chastise her in front of other children because I remember what that felt like as a child, and it's very embarrassing."

Mika described Alyssa as an articulate child, and noted that she particularly enjoyed Alyssa's enthusiastic nature:

Her language skills have always been excellent. She's very articulate and speaks very clearly. When adults ask a question she is well able to answer them and articulate for herself. She's quite an enthusiastic child and will be quite easily brought along with what another child will be showing her. So if she goes into someone's house and they will go, 'Hey, look at this!' She'll be like, 'Oh wow, that's great!' Or you know, she'll go along with it. She's pretty easy-going.

Mika said that Alyssa is not a "nurturer" or a "girly girl, in the sense of like she has no interest in dolls." Rather Mika described her as outgoing and confident – "She's definitely type A, out in front" – competitive and athletic:

She is very competitive; that is very strong in her. Well, she thrives in a competitive environment in many ways. She will push herself an awful lot further when there is someone to compete with. And I think to a certain extent she's been, she's fortunate enough in that she is pretty athletic. So she generally does do quite well in a sort of a sporting situation. She's also pretty bright, so she hasn't ever been sort of, she hasn't ever sort of felt let down by her own ability in that respect. So I think she just feels that the natural order of things is that she is on top.

Finally, Mika pointed out that Alyssa "really thrives on that external affirmation." She said of her daughter,

She doesn't like people to think badly of her. In a classroom she is like a model student. Put her in a classroom situation and she, well, she's competitive first of all, she wants to be the best. She also *really* wants to please her teacher.

### Research Question 1:

The first research question asked, *What do parents understand social and emotional development to be, and how do they observe that it is manifested in children?* Participants were asked to share stories about their preschoolers in a variety of situations. They were also asked to describe how their preschoolers expressed emotions. Parents were then asked to recall if and, if so, how their preschoolers' social and emotional skills have changed, and to consider what behaviours they might observe in the future that would indicate improvement in a particular skill. Data that captured participants' observations of their preschoolers' social and emotional behaviours were coded as "Nature," and data that reflected the ways in which parents perceived changes in these skills were coded as "Process." These data were then further refined into themes and sub-themes. In terms of social skills, participants were asked about their preschoolers' friendship, sharing, and responses to others' emotions. For emotional skills, they were asked about their preschoolers' expressions of happy or excited feelings, as well as expressions of sadness, anger, frustration and disappointment. In addition to these emotions, four participants shared stories about their preschoolers' experiences of fearful or anxious feelings.

Participants' responses indicated that they conceptualised social and emotional development in terms of incremental changes in preschoolers' past and present behaviours characteristic of a particular skill. For each skill, participants also articulated their thoughts about their preschoolers' next phase in development in terms of expected future behaviours. In particular, parents seemed to perceive as improvement the increasing frequency with which their preschoolers' behaviours demonstrated consideration of others.

Parents reported that their preschoolers were still more likely to convey emotions physically rather than verbally. Recently, however, their preschoolers' verbal communication had increased, as had their openness to, awareness of and interest in other people. When interacting with others, participants noted that their preschoolers also seemed to be coming to rely less on parental support and intervention. Parents expected that, as their preschoolers' social and emotional competencies continued to develop, they would require even less parental intervention and would be better able to regulate their physical expressions in favour of increased verbal communication.



*Making and Getting Along with Friends*

This category represents parents' observations of the ways in which their preschoolers come to be able to get along with others and make friends. Participants noted that, recently, their preschoolers had been displaying an increased interest in other people, and that having friends had recently become very important to their preschoolers. Further, they observed that their preschoolers seemed to consider every child they met to be a friend. April said, "He's really interested in people. He thinks that everybody's his friend really, even his older brother's friends are his friends." Further, Stephanie described how important it was to her preschooler to have friends. She said,

Other kids are very important to him. Billy's gotta have friends. He's *got* to have friends. He's desperate if he doesn't see at least one friend a day. He *has* to have the interaction with other kids. He meets somebody and he declares they are his best friend. And he has a relationship with the kid across the street, and they just seem to fight all the time. But he keeps saying well he has to see this person, he has to see this kid, because he's his best friend.

Kim noted that her preschooler initiated social interactions with peers wherever they went:

Renée is very social, she is very interested in other people. She considers people that she just meets are her friends. She says hello to everyone and tries to set up play dates with people, you know, at the library, anywhere. For example, she had a friend over a couple weeks ago, simply because she saw her on the playground, luckily at school, because she does try to make play dates with people we literally meet in the street or something. She waves at passing cars. But she went up to this girl and she said, 'I want to have you over. This is my phone number, tell your mom to call me. I want you to come over on Friday.'

Participants indicated that their preschoolers played well with children with whom they had things in common, that is, similar ages, locations, interests, abilities, and understanding of the rules of play. Victoria illustrated with an example about Mariah's interactions with a long-time friend. She said,

One of them is an old friend from Los Angeles that we still see every few months, and she's also wicked smart like Mariah. And so the two of them get together and they play super well, because they both understand the rules and how to play. How to discuss, how to share, how to like... you know, the whole thing. Negotiate like,

we'll take turns on this, and we'll share that. Watching her with her four-year-old friend that we visited yesterday, they're very good at working things out and sharing and problem solving as they go. And so, for instance, one of them will say, 'Oh, I want to go on the seesaw.' And the other one would say, 'Oh, but I really wanted to ride in the little car.' So then there's a discussion that ensues where Mariah will say, 'Well, how about if we seesaw first and then we go in the car?' And then they heartily agree and they help each other get on the seesaw. And they go for a few minutes and then they say, 'Okay, it's time,' and then they get off and go in the car and drive around. They like to play similar games. Like, they wanted to play hide and go seek. So Mariah said, 'I like to count.' And her friend says, 'I like to hide.' And they said, 'Well that worked out!'

Parents witnessed their preschoolers coming to terms with social mores, such as giving and receiving gifts, being aware of and including others, cooperating, and making apologies. Mika recalled a recent occasion: "Alyssa received a birthday present in the mail – money in a card. Once we had read the card she suggested instantly that we should call up the sender to thank them." While, in Stephanie's example, she showed Billy's awareness of others:

Toward the end of the game he did go out to play again and, during the play, Maya fell down. Billy stopped, ran back, and helped her get up. That little gesture between two friends was the talk of the game. Everyone was impressed by how chivalrous it was.

In another story about making friends, Stephanie told of her preschooler's delight at discovering friendship's rewards:

Billy is settling into school and making friends. Walking home today we brought one of his new friends home with us – he lives around the corner and we are making friends with his parents. The boys played great together and they gave each other a toy to borrow. When Ryan left, Billy told me how great it was to have a friend to loan toys to, like this was a great discovery. What a great kid that a great discovery for him is that you can find people you trust enough to lend them your toys.

In terms of getting along with other children, participants' stories also indicated the inconstant nature of preschoolers' relationships with their siblings. While sibling interactions can provide growth experiences for preschoolers, they may be characterised by great

affection and harmonious play as well as by the expression of emotions such as frustration, anger and jealousy. Sibling relationships seemed to create additional opportunities for play as well as for expressing caring.

Kim and Victoria agreed that their children “have tons of fun together when they're getting along” (Kim). When they laugh and play together, Victoria said, they do not argue or fight. From April's, Mika's and Stephanie's stories, it seems that with younger siblings, preschoolers may adopt more nurturing roles. Stephanie said of Billy's relationship with his baby sister, “He takes care of her. He tells her he loves her all the time. It's so funny, when I brought her home, he said, ‘Well, I really wanted her brother, but she's pretty neat.’” Mika reported on this frequent theme of Alyssa's interactions with her baby brother, “Alyssa was helping her baby brother to crawl. She was encouraging him and cheering him on.”

Participants' stories also indicated that sibling relationships elicit strong emotions for preschoolers. Kim illustrated with an example of interactions between Renée and her younger brother:

She's pretty bossy with him, and for a long, long time he just was like a little puppy who did everything she said. He's just starting to assert his independence, and when that happens, they just fight. He, you know, because he wants it or she wants it. Also, he wants to be with her all the time. Do everything she's doing. Sometimes she just wants to be alone, she wants him out of there because he wants to do whatever she's doing but he doesn't have the motor skills, so he'll be knocking things over or whatever. So they get along well when they're getting along. When they're not, they're screaming and may even like, resort to like physical violence, you know, they are just like pushing each other or whatever.

Stephanie noted that Billy is sometimes jealous of his little sister. She said, He says, ‘You're always doing stuff for her.’ He has a little bit of the sibling thing. Last night it was, ‘I'm always mad at you because you love her more, and you do more for her.’ Well, he's having trouble with that.

Like Billy, Mariah is sometimes envious of the time that her little sister commands. Victoria noted that Mariah “often comments that she wishes I could hold her more or that her sister wasn't there.” Victoria also demonstrated Mariah's struggle to reconcile her feelings towards her little sister:

One time, after she was mad at her sister for touching something... we were talking and she was telling me how she really was just wishing that she didn't have a sister. And I was saying, 'Yeah, I can see that sometimes it would be easier not to have a sister.' And she, then she kind of started turning it around on me and talking about how, well but it is fun when Sasha and I play this or that. And it was interesting that she kind of, it was almost like she was defending her sister as soon as I started saying it would be nice if you didn't have to deal with her. But it's like she almost started being protective, kind of taking over, which was interesting.

Participants reported that their preschoolers sometimes had difficulty interacting with younger children and with older adults. Mika observed that Alyssa is not typically interested in playing with younger children. She said,

We have children to the house here, they won't necessarily always be the same age as her. A lot of the times they're a little bit younger than she is, she'll play with them if they come up to her, you know, if they engage with her. She's not one to go over and go, 'Come on, little Tom' who's maybe two, 'come on over here and I'll show you how to do this.' Like she's not necessarily nurturing that way.

As with younger children, getting along with older people also seemed to present a challenge for some preschoolers. Victoria indicated that Mariah seems to have difficulty interacting with older adults. In this example about a visit with Mariah's paternal grandparents, she said that her preschooler appeared to be very unsure about how to interact:

She sees them every few months but they don't treat her as most adults do – they kind of 'baby' play with her and she doesn't seem to know how to respond. She usually hides by me and asks to leave. She often would hide – saying 'I want Mama' or just ask to leave.

Participants identified recent improvements in their preschoolers' friendship skills as independent play and problem-solving, initiating interactions and adjusting play to accommodate new peers. They also reported that their preschoolers seemed to require less parental intervention when playing with friends. Victoria noted that in the past, Mariah seemed to need her support during playtime:

She was reticent to be with other kids without me being right next to her. She seemed to need me as a security blanket. She always wanted me to be right there: 'Mommy, can you come too? Mommy, will you play with us?'

More recently however, Victoria reported that Mariah has started to play with her friends and to resolve conflicts without Mom by her side. She observed that, with her encouragement, Mariah is also starting to approach new peers. Similarly, April noted that Ryan seems better able to adapt to situations with children he does not know well, and that she is less likely to have to intervene. Like Victoria and April, Mika noticed that recently her preschooler more readily initiates peer interactions:

She's also, just recently I would say, started to have the confidence to go up to children in the playground and ask can she join their game. Before she would go up and she would sort of stand beside them and want to, you know, hang around with them or start running around with them.

In addition to her increased readiness to approach new children, Mika noted that Alyssa's conversational skills seem to have improved. Similarly, Kim observed a general increase in Renée's interest in other people and willingness to initiate interactions. She said,

She just feels so much more confident and can approach kids and talk with them. Also I think, before she used to sort of just hang back also and do a lot of observation, and now she's involving herself more.

Participants observed that more recently their preschoolers also seemed to be making an increased effort to get along with younger children and with older adults. With younger children, preschoolers seemed to adopt nurturing or leadership roles. Where previously her preschooler would have been uninterested, Mika observed that Alyssa initiated interaction with a young guest to their home. She said that Alyssa,

Led an elaborate play session with Tom (2 years old). She established herself in the leadership role. Previously she would have been more concerned about keeping herself happy and not too interested in the younger child. When Tom didn't follow her instructions, she became quite insistent.

Victoria's stories illustrated Mariah's efforts to be more adaptable and to allow other adults to do small things with her, whereas she would previously have relied only on her mother. On a visit with some family friends, Victoria observed Mariah take a first step:

And afterwards there was a small gift shop and she noticed something that she wanted to buy. I said, 'Well, I can help you in a little bit.' But she didn't want to wait. I said, 'Why don't you go with Randy over there and check it out? Maybe he can help you shop.' 'No, I want Mama.' But I was taking a long time. So finally she said, 'You know, I think I can go over there with Randy and do that.'

Victoria reflected on the likelihood that Mariah would have responded similarly in the past, I think she would've been too shy to even try. She would've just waited for me, to finish what I was doing, patiently. But I think she would've waited and made sure that it was her mom that went over there with her and held her hand.

Victoria also witnessed Mariah making the effort to accommodate her grandparents, something that had been challenging for her in the past. Despite her feelings of frustration at not being listened to, Victoria witnessed Mariah making an effort to interact with them.

Today she exhibited many of her usual behaviours (hiding, asking to leave) but she tried to initiate interactions with them that she did enjoy – playing a 'hide the hat' game or setting the table. She was trying to play with them in ways that work for her.

Parents thought that if their preschoolers' friendship skills were to continue to improve, they would observe increases in willingness to play with peers without parental involvement and initiating peer interactions. Victoria thought that she might notice Mariah being less reliant on maternal support in friendship interactions. She said,

She'll be really interested in trying out things with new kids. She'll go up and approach them. Maybe just be more willing to do it more often... As she's going to start going to school in the Fall, I'm hoping she'll start doing some of that stuff at school without mommy around and not be so worried about that. She would continue to try new ways of interacting with other kids and rely on me less to bail her out of situations that were uncomfortable for her.

Victoria also hoped that, in the future, Mariah would also be more open to other adults:

I think for me it's just a willingness to have other adults help her, whether it's grandma, grandpa, daddy when he's around or anybody else besides mama, instead of relying almost completely on mama to do it. A continued willingness to go visit them [grandparents], and try new games with them. I think that a big improvement would be for her to play with them without having mom by her side.

Kim thought that, for Renée, continued improvement would include being nicer to her brother:

Just things like talking to him in a really nice voice. I wouldn't even have to intervene and say, you know, 'Your brother's really tired.' I guess I would just see her sort of doing it on her own instead of me having to prompt it or, if I did sort of prompt it, then again there would be no sort of obvious resentment when she gave it up [the toy]. Or encouraging him, inviting him to do things with her, instead of like, 'Hey, can your brother play with you?'

### *Sharing*

Sharing, the willingness or ability to enjoy one's belongings with others, is a social skill described by participants in terms of their preschoolers' ease in sharing or the lack thereof. Parents reported that, for their preschoolers, sharing is a newly acquired skill and, in many instances, a reluctant practice. However, sharing skills have become especially important because of their preschoolers' increased interactions with other children.

Participants reported that coming to be able to share was sometimes a struggle. Of Billy, Stephanie said, "Sharing is always problematic. He's probably learned to do that here at school, and he's learning more now with his sister. It was hard, he didn't want to do it, but he seems to understand it now. He shares."

Victoria reported that sharing has been a definite challenge for Mariah:

Mariah is very protective of her *stuff*. Extraordinarily protective of her *stuff*. If ever her sister touches something without asking, or grabs it, Mariah just loses it, and gets very mad, and has a lot of trouble trying to verbalise back to her sister what she wants. And then it's just like, 'I need that right now!' She often focuses on the object she wants and can't think about anything else until she gets it back.

April described her preschooler's coming to be able to share as an easy process. She said, "Ryan is pretty good about sharing anything and everything. He's really easy to share with." However, others participants reported that, only in some instances were their preschoolers eager to share. Stephanie said that Billy was eager to share his room with his new sister:

He can't wait for us to move her into his room and get bunk beds, because he really wants her in there. He said, 'That's good, I don't like being alone in there.' He really wants to share his living space with her, which is just amazing to us.

Participants observed that sharing is facilitated by well-defined rules such as time limits and turn-taking. Victoria recalled that in the aftermath of one playdate Mariah was particularly excited. She said,

She really likes older kids, because they really follow the rules, in her mind. Like, we played with an eight and nine-year-old the other day. And she said, 'Mama they knew all the rules!' She's like, 'She told me I couldn't play with that doll, because it was her special one,' which she totally gets because she has special stuff. 'And then she gave me choices, and I picked that one because I didn't like the bears. But it was great! ...they really knew how to play Mom.'

Victoria said that Mariah also creates rules and limits when playing with her younger sister. She reported that,

A lot of time she puts time limits on things. She says like, 'Okay you can hold my toy in the car until we get to where we're going and then you have to give it back.' 'Well... you can touch it for just one minute, and then you have to stop.' She says, 'Okay your time is up!' before the minute is up, really. And so she kind of negotiates it like that with her sister a lot. But it's usually on her own terms.

Mika said that Alyssa, like Mariah, plays well when the rules are followed, and has difficulty sharing her own toys,

She's well able to wait in line. She's *well* able to do that and quite happy to wait her turn and will admonish other children for not waiting their turn. She definitely has a harder time sharing in this house, her things.

Therefore, in order to facilitate sharing with visiting friends, both Victoria and Mika used a sharing strategy that encouraged their preschoolers to put away the toys that they are not prepared to share.

In terms of changes in sharing skills, participants reported that in the past, their preschoolers were more likely to refuse to share, to cry or to complain to adults when other children would not share with them immediately. Mika said,

She's had tantrums, well I wouldn't say tantrums, but got upset about people taking things and not, playing with something and then not letting her have it. So she has come (in a shrill crying voice), 'He won't share with me and he's not giving it back.'

Victoria said,



When she was really little, she did not want to share. She didn't even want to talk to the kids. Like when she was younger, other kids were too much of a threat to her. Like, 'They might touch my stuff' - she's always been very protective of stuff, since like really young. She'd be like, 'No, Mom, I don't want to go to play dates because I don't like other kids touching stuff.'

More recently, parents observed that their preschoolers' sharing skills seem to have improved, and that they seemed to be sharing more willingly. Victoria reported that she has noticed marked changes in Mariah's sharing with her sister. She said,

During the last few months, things have improved dramatically with their discussing. Like Sasha, at two years old, is very good now at saying, 'Mariah, may I please touch your thing?' Even without me reminding her sometimes. And Mariah is more likely to say yes now than she used to be. For a long time it was only nos to that question. And now there are some yeses with conditions.

She said that sharing rules have also increased the likelihood that Mariah will share with friends:

She's become much better with that now that she has her own place to keep stuff. She is changing in that she now can accept like there are things that can be shared, there are things that don't have to be shared. And she also has really changed along the line of, instead of just hiding something, like, allowing someone to ask for it and giving them a small chance to look at it or something like that.

Kim said that Renée's awareness of others and her increased ability to take turns has facilitated sharing:

She's learning to take turns, and that when a friend comes over, that she'll share her things and even let that person maybe choose first. When she had that girl over a couple weeks ago, they were playing dress-up. And they put on dresses and their crowns, and Renée said, 'Mom, Callie has a crown, and I don't have one and I want one.' And she found one, and she was happy.

Victoria articulated that, if Mariah's sharing skills continued to improve, she would expect to observe "a movement toward more discussion and compromise – less crying and stubbornly refusing to share."

### *Empathy*

Empathy, awareness and responsiveness to others' experiences, is a skill described by participants in terms of their observations of the ways in which their preschoolers behaved in response to others' expressions of emotion. In particular, parents noticed that their preschoolers responded to others' expressions of sad emotions by saying and doing things to help them feel better such as offering care, comfort and support.

Stephanie reported that even Billy's teachers have recognised his eagerness to comfort others. She shared,

They've even noticed it here at Village that if another child was upset, he'd come up and hand them a tissue and try to make them feel better. And when his sister is crying or upset, he wants me to do something. Or *he* really wants to do it himself now. He wants to pick her up and make her feel better, and wants to play with her. Kim observed that her preschooler, like Stephanie's, tended to do things to help others to feel better. She observed during the first week of school,

Renée went to the other side of the rug where her friend was, and just sat by her and held her hand. And then she did that again with another person several days earlier. He was crying at the door, didn't want his mom to go, and she went out the door to him and said, 'Come on, come into the classroom.' And she took him by the hand and took him in.

Victoria noted that her preschooler's tendency is also to do things to help the upset person feel better. She recalled how Mariah tried to help her when she accidentally ran over the family's pet:

I was really sad that I killed the cat, and she was trying to comfort me and tell me I think there's two ways to think about it: 'I think about it two ways, Mommy. One, it was just an accident and it was really nobody's fault or two, it was really half your fault and half Caramel's fault. Like, you could've looked out the window and seen her or she could have moved away from the car.' And, you know, trying to make me feel better. Whenever she feels like someone's sad, she tries to do something for them. She knows that her daddy's gone and kind of lonely. So she writes a little card, gets the envelope together, puts a lollipop in it and tapes it up and says, 'Here, Mom, mail this to Daddy.' And so she's always trying to like get things to send to him to make him feel better.

Participants reported that another way in which their preschoolers responded to others' emotions was by trying to help solve the problem. Victoria reported,

When her sister cries, Mariah is quick to give her what she wants. If her sister's upset about something and I'm trying to get the two year old to use her words more instead of just saying 'Waaaah!' And so Mariah will be, 'No, Mom, it's that her little toy fell on the floor. Can you please get it for her?' Because she wants her to feel better, you know? She's trying to resolve it for her sister as fast as possible. So that happens a lot. She's an advocate for her sister. While mom's trying to instil some other behaviour, she's trying to resolve the my-sister-feels-bad problem.

April and Victoria recalled that, in response to their own verbalisations of emotion, their preschoolers responded by using empathic statements. Victoria observed, "She'll try to empathise with me. She'll say you know, 'I know how you feel. I get so *frustrated* when Sasha touches my stuff!'" Similarly, April remembered the way in which Ryan responded to her feelings of annoyance. She said,

I was having a conversation on the phone and he saw that I was upset and getting angry that my husband was fishing and I thought that there was other things that he could be doing: 'Man, I just hate it when Poppa goes fishing all time!' And then he says, 'Because he doesn't take me.'

Participants also noted that their preschoolers sometimes dismissed others' emotion expressions or observed without seeming to react. Mika indicated that Alyssa does not typically respond to others' displays of emotion. She said,

She can just as easily dismiss emotional situations as well. I don't think she's that sensitive to other people's unless they're outward displays of tears and they're usually over a physical thing or a sharing thing that she's been involved in. Unless they were hurt... like if she saw them bump themselves, she might say that they bumped themselves. She's quite happy to leave them at it if she's not involved.

Kim noted that Renée often seemed to avoid addressing others' expressions of emotions. She recalled,

Another friend was over one day, and we were talking to the neighbour, and her dog, our neighbour's dog, just jumped up and bit her friend in the eye. I could tell she [Renée] felt bad. She didn't know what to say or do. She was concerned about her, but then, you know, the girl's crying and I took her inside, and I'm trying to get

ahold of her mom. And Renée was like totally moving on, wanting me to like do something for her or play.

When involved in causing harm to another person, parents pointed out that their preschoolers sometimes seemed unsure of how to respond. They said that their preschoolers tended to react with remorse, tearfulness, and sometimes seemed unable to respond at all. Participants suggested this might be due to feelings of embarrassment. For example, Kim recognised that her preschooler seemed to have a difficult time expressing concern for others' feelings. She said of Renée, "She'll knock someone over, she knocked somebody off the slide yesterday at a party. And she just turned around and looked at him." Kim also recounted,

She had a friend over and somehow she hurt that friend. Oh, she had a wand, and she was pretending to do a spell and she hit her on the head or something with the wand. And the friend got very upset. And she [Renée] couldn't react. She didn't know how to react. That day she even like physically tried to hide.

Mika reported that, like Renée, her preschooler also seemed to have a difficult time communicating regret to the person she hurt. She offered an example of Alyssa on the playground,

Another thing that has happened a few times, maybe at a playground or something where she would accidentally, maybe she accidentally ran into a smaller kid and they fell over and started crying. And she would get very upset about that because, and she would always come running straight over to me and she'll be secretly crying, like not letting anyone see. She'll usually be saying to me, 'I said sorry to her, I said sorry' (in a tearful voice). After an episode like that, if she has been crying, she'd be self-conscious about going over to see was she okay.

Participants reported that they have observed changes in the ways that their preschoolers respond to others' emotions. They noted that, in the past, their preschoolers appeared to be both less aware and less interested in others' expressions of emotion. More recently, their preschoolers seemed to be gaining an awareness of their impact on other people and how others might be feeling. Victoria reported that she has seen definite changes in Mariah's awareness of and responsiveness to others' expressions of emotion. She recalled,

When she was younger, like when Sasha was an infant and cried, Mariah would still try to cheer her up by like doing a little dance or something to get her to laugh, but she didn't seem as upset about the fact that Sasha was upset. Same thing with animals. I've watched her pet a cat, pull its fur, and not really care how the cat reacted, to now trying to be very gentle and nice to the cat. I think that, two years ago if she had hit me, she wouldn't have even felt bad about it. But as she's gotten older, I think she starts to really see how other people feel when she does things. Kim also observed improvement in Renée responsiveness to others' feelings. She noted, "She used to like knock somebody over and just keep running or whatever. Now at least she'll stop." She also reported that in the past, Renée rarely empathised with her little brother: "She'll hurt his feelings, she'll push him down, he'll be hurt, she doesn't care, she doesn't have time for it." Kim said that she and her husband have been teaching Renée how to respond to others feelings, with positive results: "Her brother fell and split his head right here on his eyebrow... When she heard, she came running into the bathroom to see what happened, and she was so upset. And she hugged him and gave him two kisses."

*Expressing Happy, Excited Feelings*

*"I think you could see that their eyes were lit up, their face would be so, you know, their smile would be big, they would just want to know more, and be curious and jump up and down. You know, a smile, for me, is really all it takes" (April).*

This category represents participants' perceptions of the ways in which their preschoolers communicated feelings of happiness or excitement. Participants observed that their preschoolers expressed happy or excited feelings both physically and verbally. Some of the situations that seemed to elicit the expression of happy or excited emotions included participation in a favoured activity or the anticipation or arrival of a long-awaited item, event or person.

In terms of physical displays of happy feelings, parents reported that smiling, laughing, playful and exuberant behaviours are some of the ways in which their preschoolers communicate this emotional state. Victoria described a typical expression for Mariah. She said,

She does get kind of giddy and goofy, and her favourite thing is to try to get the little two-year-old into mischief. We went to a fabric store to pick out material for her Halloween costume (a snake) and her sister's (a tiger). She was so full of

energy, goading her sister into running around the store, looking at items, and giggling and laughing and being very loud.

April reported that Ryan is less effusive in his expression. She said,

He does this big boy look where he gets his neck really up high, he smiles and you can like hear the excitement in his voice when he's talking. He tries not to smile but he gets this proud look on his face.

Parents reported that their preschoolers' verbal expressions of happy or excited feelings included talking about the event repeatedly with lively, animated delivery.

Stephanie said, "Pictures, he's very into pictures of stuff. So he'll bring me pictures and show me how cool it is. He just talks about it, 'Oh, look at this! That's so cool, Mom.'" Kim recalled Renée's expression when a long-awaited day finally arrived. She said,

She was really looking forward to this water party that she went to yesterday. So she kept asking me, 'How many more days, how many more days?' And so then that day when she woke up I said, 'Today's the day.' And she was like, 'Yeah, yeah, water party, water party!' So she like repeats the word over and over, and jumps up and down, and just has this big smile on her face.

Mika said that Alyssa's verbal expressions are also exuberant,

So like it can be very simple stuff like getting ready to go swimming. And she loves to go swimming so, 'Hey Alyssa, we're going swimming.' And she's like, 'Hooray, yes!' And her eyes are lighting up, and she's going, 'Okay, I'll get my swimming bag!' And she gets excited and she wants to go and get ready and, you know, participate fully in the organisation of a favourite event.

Victoria indicated that Mariah's excited verbal expression is typically accompanied by characteristic physical movements. She illustrated with an example of Mariah getting a little toy from a vending machine. She said,

She basically like does a little dance, talks about it, 'Mama, you get to be the little character.' Like I have to be a little object, it was a little die, and I had to talk for it. 'What did you see when you were in there waiting for so long? What did you talk about with the other toys? Where did you come from? How long ago were you made? Where were you made? When did you make it here?' And I have to answer all these questions for her, and I just like have to be the thing. And so that's usually

like excitement, it like turns into play, we kind of do that. And then she does a little happy dance all the time, happy, moving her little body around.

Preschoolers sometimes seemed to have difficulty expressing or managing happy or excited feelings. Victoria noted that sometimes Mariah became so excited that she was unable to calm herself, while Kim said that Renée sometimes seemed unsure of how to express happy, excited feelings:

Sometimes she doesn't even know how to deal with those feelings, and she will just kind of be like pulling on my leg or she just wants me to look at her face, she's like (miming a big grin), 'Look, I'm excited.'

In general, if children of preschool age were unable to cope with overwhelming feelings of happiness or excitement, participants thought that they might display a variety of less appropriate behaviours. Stephanie suggested that excitement, much like anger, could be a strong emotion that might overwhelm preschoolers. She said, "I would imagine that a kid who's not able to handle the ecstasy or the happiness well is going to go into meltdown." Kim thought that preschoolers might display excessive expressions of excitement or, alternatively, might not express their feelings at all. She said,

Just like holding on or shaking your leg when they're excited or, you know, just being a little bit over the top with their excitement, I guess, not knowing how to express it. Or, I guess the other thing they could do is just not express it.

Participants reported that, in the past, their preschoolers expressed happy or excited feelings less effusively. However, they seemed to agree that their preschoolers were better able to verbalise their happy or excited feelings as they got older. Mika explained,

I think we're seeing more of it, more outward expression of excitedness and understanding about, because often, yeah, I think there's just more smiling and more delight in her face as she's got older. And she just appreciates things more. I have found that the older she gets the more excited she gets about things. And being able to anticipate things in the future as well. When she was younger the responses would have just been that more subdued.

Kim noted similar changes in her preschooler's expressions: "She's more outspoken about them, more able to express them. She's just way more outgoing about when she's happy. Before maybe she would just maybe smile." April, Stephanie and Victoria also said that their preschoolers were now better able to articulate their feelings than when they were younger.

Victoria said, "I think she might say more, like, 'Oh I am really happy!' or excited, where she didn't verbalise that before."

*Expressing Anxious, Fearful Feelings*

This category represents participants' perceptions of the ways in which their preschoolers communicated feelings of anxiety or fear. Participants reported that their preschoolers conveyed feelings of fear and anxiety verbally as well as physically with tearful, avoidant behaviours. They observed that, more recently, their preschoolers seemed to be experiencing increased levels of anxiety and fear. They gave examples of the children's expressed fears about growing up, night time fears, and an increased reluctance for their parents to leave them.

Victoria noted an increase in Mariah's anxious, fearful feelings. She said, "I think the changes lately have all been that she's becoming more anxious and more fearful." Victoria proposed that Mariah's nervousness about starting school may have created fearful reactions in other areas of her life. She reported,

I think school has been a big emotional struggle for her. She really likes it and I get comments like, 'Well, why can't I go to school every day?' But I also get like, 'Why do I have to go? I really want to stay with you, I miss you.' I think she's still feeling very conflicted about school. She doesn't like being away from me. And she's become a little more clingy, I guess lately, just really hesitant to have me leave her at other times now. Especially going to bed has become really hard, and she's very scared of the dark. She's become even more so since she started school.

Stephanie noted that her preschooler, Billy, has also been experiencing increasingly anxious, fearful reactions in many situations. She said,

He wants to go play with his friends, but he's afraid to go over to their house and ask himself, so one of us has to go with him. He's afraid to go to the bathroom alone. One of us has to accompany him everywhere. There seems to be this new clinginess, this fear, that he wants our protection all the time.

Participants also pointed out that their preschoolers seemed to be exhibiting fears about growing older. Stephanie reported,

He will say, at the darndest times, 'I'm scared.' And I'll say, 'Well, what honey?' He doesn't know what. I'll say, 'Okay, well, hold my hand,' or he'll get under my shirt.



Sometimes, he wants to be carried into bed. There's this big thing, I want to be a baby again.

Similarly, Kim noticed that Renée has been lamenting having to grow up. She recalled, She always said, 'I want to stay four forever,' before she turned five. Oh, and after the wedding, she was crying because she doesn't ever want to move away from us like that woman is moving away from her family. She definitely really gets sad when she thinks about having to grow up.

In addition to fears about growing older, participants noticed that their preschoolers have been demonstrating an increased reluctance for their parents to leave them. Stephanie noted that these fears have been present for Billy both sleeping and waking:

He's having nightmares about being left alone. He says, 'You left me, you left me alone! And I'm so alone and you're leaving me alone.' We went down to Farmers' Market on Monday, and it came back up, 'Don't lose me this time.' He clings to me when I leave him now: 'Well, are you and Daddy both going to come?' He's really emphasising family now, he wants us all together.

Victoria reported that recently Mariah also seems to be increasingly reluctant for Mom to leave. She said, "She just either tells me like, 'I don't want you to go, I already missed you today at school, so don't go work out,' you know, when I go to work out in the evenings."

Participants observed that, recently, their preschoolers' night time fears also seem to have increased. Victoria's example illustrated the ways in which their bedtime routine has changed. She said,

It's almost like going to bed is scary for her now. And she's been struggling with that. And she's very interesting because she doesn't want to be afraid of the dark. And so she'll have nights when she'll say, 'I'm not afraid, Mommy. You can turn off all the lights, and I'll be totally fine.' And then other nights when she says, 'Oh, I'm scared, I'm scared, I'm scared,' over and over and over again until she finally falls asleep. She did not use to hide under the covers at night, and she didn't, you know, and she was able to kind of conquer more. Like after five minutes she'd be able to settle down and fall asleep. And now sometimes it will last like 20, 25 minutes before she's able to settle down. She even had a nightmare last night about a monster, which she's never had before. So I think we're still kind of going downhill on this one.

Stephanie reported that recently Billy too seems less able to overcome his night time fears:

And he's sleeping in with me more now than by himself. He seems afraid of a lot of things. He's afraid to go to sleep by himself, so one of us... it used to be that it was an option for us to stay in there when he went to bed. Now we have to because he's afraid.

Parents also reported that transitioning between places and activities and, in particular, adjusting to new people, skills and situations, was often a challenge for their preschoolers. Victoria noted that, for Mariah, adjusting to new people has always been struggle. Stephanie's son Billy however, struggles with transitioning between activities or situations. Stephanie said,

He doesn't transition well. You know, most kids you think five minutes. But you've got to give him a half hour. You can't push him ahead of time either. He'll fuss, and if he feels overwhelmed by having to make a transition, he'll just sit and stare. And if he doesn't have that time to prepare, he can't make the transition, he gets very upset.

Kim observed that Renée also experiences difficult transitions, both with leaving enjoyed activities such as the end of a school or a play date, as well as entering new situations. Kim said,

She definitely has a hard time with change. I mean, when I went to pick her up after school on Tuesday, she was like, 'No, I want to stay longer.' And then again, when I picked her up on Wednesday she was like, 'I don't want to leave.' She also started dance class last week, and she had difficulty joining the class. She started to cry, and didn't know how to handle it. She was really nervous, and hiding behind my legs, and like burying her head in my legs not wanting to go in. She, I could tell, was panicking. Like, she was starting to cry, putting her hands over her face. Just really anxious. And she ran out and said, 'No, no, I can't do it.'

Participants' stories illustrated that transitioning to school was a challenge common to their preschoolers. Victoria and Kim both said that arriving at school on the first morning was difficult for their daughters. Victoria said that, "On the drive, which is about a half hour drive there, she was definitely getting nervous on the way. And when we got there, she said, 'I'm scared, I'm scared.'" Victoria said that Mariah later reported that she had had an

enjoyable first day. However, later that week, Mariah seemed to have difficulty reigning in fearful feelings as she had on the first day. Victoria wrote,

    Mariah cried when I left her at school this morning. She said she was scared and clung to me. When I returned 3 hours later, she was smiling, greeted me, and told me about her day – the fun activities, the new friend she made, and how she had been ok.

Kim recalled that Renée struggled both with the start and with the end of the school day. She said,

    When we walked up and we got close to the door she was turning her head and kind of burying it in my side or whatever, not wanting to look at anyone. And then we were like, 'There is Sarah, there is Sarah!' And then she still was not saying anything. And then Sarah walks up and I think she said, 'Hi Renée.' And they grabbed hands and they ran off to the playground. And then when I picked her up, when she saw me, she had this like angry look on her face like she might throw kind of a fit or a tantrum. She was like, 'Gosh school's already over.'

Stephanie reported that Billy's fearful feelings seemed to overwhelm him, and his verbal and physical expressions of these feelings continued each morning during the first few weeks at his new school. She said, "Billy grabbed my leg and wouldn't let go, literally screaming and crying and making a real ruckus." Initially, Stephanie reported that she was hopeful and felt quite lucky when she witnessed Billy's reaction on learning he would be going to a new school: "He popped out of the car ran up the hill and kind of did this Rocky thing on the steps going, 'I'm going to make all *new* friends!'" She noted that this differed from the ways in which he responded when he first started preschool: "We went through easily two months of drop-off hysterics. And of course, as soon as we left he was fine." However, by the time the first week of school arrived, fearful, anxious feelings seemed to have overwhelmed Billy's excitement. She said,

    I dropped him off again today. We go through the drop off routine and then I go to leave and he's clinging and crying and screaming and making just an awful racket ...and the teacher literally having to peel him off of me. He hollered all the way. I mean walking into the classroom, he's hollering all the way: "I hate school! I'm not going to stay at school!"

Participants noticed changes in the ways that their preschoolers managed feelings of anxiety or fear. Kim illustrated this with a story about Renée's recently started dance class as compared to their past experiences with gymnastics and ballet. First, with ballet, Renée was not able to stay in the class:

She talked about how much she loved ballet, but when I would actually make the call to try to set up a trial class, she wouldn't even go into the class. And then we'd end up driving away. And her saying like, 'I changed my mind, I just want to dance at home.'

Then with gymnastics she was able to stay, but only with Mom's support and participation in the class:

She has been taking gymnastics, but until quite recently, I had to go out there with her and do the warm-up for a little while. I was probably the only mom, until she felt comfortable enough for me to, you know, let her continue by herself.

Most recently however, after her initial anxiety about starting a new dance class and not having the appropriate gear, Renée was able to stay in the class and seemed able to enjoy it. Victoria acknowledged similar experiences with Mariah:

She did not want to be in gymnastics class and cried and ran to me. I let her calm herself and decide whether she wanted to return to class. She would return usually within 5 minutes. And over time, she just got more and more comfortable staying with her teacher and not needing me to be there by her side.

Parents also reported changes during their preschoolers' first week of school. Kim noted that while Renée had some difficulty at the start of the week, this changed quickly: "She's running into school, even by herself. I can even drop her off if I need to."

April too reported a marked difference in Ryan's transition to school this year, noting that he no longer experienced tearful separations as he had when he began preschool:

In the past he gets really clingy, and he wants me to hold him, and he doesn't want me to leave, and he breaks down in tears. Every day that I dropped him off at preschool he would cry and had separation anxiety. He didn't adjust very well, he didn't adapt well. He did by the end of the day, but every day he had to go to school was an issue.

April wrote that things with Ryan are very different this year with the transition to his new school: "He gets up no problem in the a.m., gets himself dressed, there's no tears

or reluctance when I drop him off." In general, April noted, Ryan now seems to adjust more easily to new situations.

Like April, Victoria noticed changes in Mariah's behaviour when transitioning to school. Victoria reported that, during the last year, Mariah's fears about beginning school changed to excitement: "She has been excited about school for the past 3 months play acting school days with me often." However, Victoria recalled that, in the past Mariah seemed to be terrified of the idea of school:

She used to be very scared of the idea of going to school and being away from me. She would cry just thinking about school a year ago and tell me that she didn't want to learn anything so she didn't need school. She used to just out of the blue start crying hysterically and say, 'Please don't ever send me to school.' I don't know what it was that she thought school was, but something about it really scared her.

Although Mariah expressed fearful feelings on the first morning, she was eventually able to have a good day:

She was able to enjoy the day despite her initial fears, and she became calm. To be in a room full of total strangers for 3 ½ hours and be okay with that, to find her way and have fun and enjoy herself even though she was nervous, that was a really neat thing.

By Stephanie's report, there was not much change between Billy's reactions to starting preschool last year and his new school this year. Stephanie said, "Looking back, I would say it was what he's going through now, only just at a three-year-old level, not quite as physical, more emotional." However, just a few weeks into the new school year, Stephanie was feeling encouraged by the changes she observed in Billy's behaviour:

He's really interacting with his teacher more, and the drop-offs at school have been much better. He still doesn't like going every day, but he's pretty good-natured about it once he gets there. And every morning he gets up and he builds a Lego to take to school to show teacher 'cause she's shown a real interest in that.

In terms of continued improvement in the ways that their preschoolers' transition, participants said that they would hope to observe less reluctance and more willingness. April suggested that improvement in Ryan's expressions of anxious or fearful feelings might be characterised by verbal communication about his feelings and what was causing them: "Probably, I'd want to hear more communication. I would probably have to be the one

starting it, but for him to verbally say, 'I'm scared,' or not. Probably him expressing more of a reason as to why."

Victoria reported, however, that she would want to observe a decrease in Mariah's reluctance to starting the school day. She said that she would also want to see behavioural indicators that Mariah is better able to manage her feelings of anxiety or fear, particularly at bedtime:

Emotional improvement signs in this case will be a willingness to go to bed frequently, steps toward falling asleep in her own bed, a lessening of her fears. So I think moving back towards the other direction, feeling a little more secure. Baby steps, not having the covers over her head or, I don't know, just accepting that the shadow of the fan is just a shadow of a fan and nothing else.

Kim hoped that in the future Renée would come to be able to transition more easily. This would be indicated by specific behaviours:

She would walk in and maybe say hello to either her teacher or a student in the class... If she was able to say, when I come to pick her up, 'Mom, hi.' And you know, be ready to go. That when it's time to say goodbye, that she's able to just go, 'Bye!' And maybe give the person a hug or something, but be able to go and look forward to coming again.

Likewise, Stephanie wanted to observe behavioural changes in Billy: "That he just goes to school like every other kid with a smile on his face instead of a scowl for everybody."

#### *Expressing Sad, Angry, Frustrated, Disappointed Feelings*

This category represents participants' perceptions of the ways in which their preschoolers communicated feelings of sadness, anger, frustration and disappointment. Participants reported that their preschoolers expressed these feelings in both physical and verbal ways. They observed that their preschoolers seemed to become easily frustrated and angered and that, in the face of these feelings, they seemed less able to manage their behaviour. That is, their preschoolers seemed less able to restrain emotional outbursts in favour of more tempered responses or constructive behaviours when they were angry or frustrated.

From participants' stories, preschoolers' feelings of sadness, anger, frustration and disappointment seemed to be precipitated by thwarted desires or expectations. Mika said that Alyssa "got frustrated by a friend who wouldn't let her be first." Stephanie observed

that, lately, Billy seems easily frustrated. She said, "He's frustrated at everything these days. He got upset this morning because the alarm didn't go off." April explained her observation of Ryan's frustrated feelings with a recent example:

He has a bike at grandma's house, and he has a bike at our house, and he wanted to take the bike that we had from our house over to grandma's, and bring that bike over here. But I told him I didn't have time to take everything out of the back to put his bike in. And he was pretty upset about that. He had a little fit for a minute, but then he was okay with it.

Participants reported that, for their preschoolers, physical expressions of sad, angry, frustrated and disappointed feelings included tears, tantrums, aggressive behaviours, and various combinations of these. Kim and Mika provided examples of their preschoolers' tantrum behaviours. For Kim's daughter, Renée, feelings of frustration erupted the first time she tried to tie her shoes:

She is trying to learn how to tie her shoes, and she just thinks it's really frustrating. And she just kind of threw a tantrum over it, like she was screaming. She was quite convinced that she was going to be able to do this. At first she just didn't even want me to show her how to tie a shoe, she was just going to put them on and tie them. Then she tried and she couldn't do it, and she freaked out. When she couldn't do it right, or if I touched it or talked when she was trying to do it, she just started screaming and crying. And kicking! She had this kick. She doesn't try to kick me, but she just kicks in, like I guess, frustration, you know, when she gets really upset.

Mika reported that Alyssa's outburst occurred in response to a sharing situation that seemed not to go as she had expected:

Alyssa had a tantrum! I encouraged her to lend her bike to her buddy Adam on the way home from the park. When he didn't return it after 10m [metres], and I told her that he could go as far as the pole, she burst into tears and danced a jig in protestation! So she was quite happy to give him a go, instantly hopped off and handed over her helmet, and showed him how to tie it on. And then five seconds later, wanted her bike back. And she was crying, and she was stamping her feet, and she was standing in front of the bike going, (in a shrill crying voice) 'I want my bike back!'

Tearful behaviours were another way that preschoolers responded to feelings of sadness, anger, frustration and disappointment. Victoria said that Mariah typically bursts into tears when her feelings are hurt. Similarly, Mika reported that Alyssa responded with tears to a scolding from her Dad:

He was very stern with her and she was devastated. So she burst into tears, jumped up, ran away from the living room and ran up the stairs and sat on the stairs sort of silently crying but making noise at the same time to make sure that we knew she was crying.

Victoria reported on an occasion when Mariah became frustrated when practicing her letters, and also burst into tears:

The other day she wanted to write her alphabet. We got along to U and then all of a sudden V came. And she could not make a sharp point. And she was so frustrated, and crying and crying. And so I am trying to point out, 'Look at all these things you did, it's amazing! You just wrote A through U! I mean, Oh my gosh! You couldn't do that a week ago!' But she doesn't focus on that, she's just about the V. She finally made a V that was acceptable, she did WXYZ and was done. But it took about 10 minutes of crying to get that V out.

Victoria noted that Mariah also dissolved into tears on a recent occasion when she was disappointed because she was not able to spend as much time with her grandfather as she had expected. She said,

She absolutely loves playing with him and being with him. And he had to work a lot this week. And so she was very disappointed most days that he wasn't around to play with more and that when he was, he was too tired to play the same ways that he usually did. It all kind of culminated the day he left us at the gate at the airport, as we boarded our plane. And she just cried and cried and cried.

Like Victoria, Kim witnessed her preschooler's tears of disappointment in a similar situation: "One thing she did today is she totally burst into tears. When it was time for Eileen to leave she really started bursting into tears and everything, not wanting her to go." Mika reported on Alyssa's tears of disappointment during a play date. She wrote,

Alyssa had a meltdown during a game of 'tea party' because Adam poured his own tea! She left the room crying because Adam had 'ruined the game.' When Adam arrived, the first thing she invited him to do was to have a tea party with her. So she



had filled up her little teapot with water and they were sitting on the ground with all the places nicely set and the toy cookies on the plate and things like that. And Adam had the absolute cheek to pour his own tea. And she was absolutely devastated. She flounced out of the room in complete tears that Adam had ruined the game. She said, (in a shrill, tearful voice) 'Oh Adam, Adam he poured the tea, and he ruined the game, and he's not supposed to do that, and he spilled it on the floor.'

Participants reported that their preschoolers also responded to feelings of sadness, anger, frustration or disappointment with aggressive behaviours. April noted that Ryan does not typically choose aggressive behaviours. However, on one recent occasion, "He found a shiny rock, he thought it was cool, he bopped his brother on the head with it." Stephanie also gave examples of the ways in which Billy might aggress when he is angry or frustrated. She said,

He rushes at me and hits me. He gets mad sometimes and he goes to hit the dog. When he gets frustrated, he'll throw a toy. Several weeks ago he got frustrated and punched a hole in the wall. He does have a very low frustration level, and if he can't do something right the first time, he gets mad and then he won't do it. He tried riding a two-wheeler once and couldn't do it, got mad, threw the bike down, and wouldn't touch it for months.

Mika explained that Alyssa borrowed from Lava Girl in order to cope with a frustrating situation:

She's quite competitive. She likes to be first. She's quite happy to wait her turn, but if there is an option, she'd like to be first. Alyssa is a very active, sporty little girl and she is always running ahead on the walk home. So we have, usually the typical run of things is that there's Alyssa in front, there is me and Adam's mom, and then there's Adam behind. That's sort of the general sequence. Anyway, for whatever reason today Adam and Alyssa were running out ahead. Next thing, Adam started running in front of her and blocking her way, being in front. Sort of like veering in front of her all the time. And she stopped, and she just like stamped her feet down and (growled), and her fists were clenched down by her side. And then, he had run off ahead, and she ran up after him and started lava-ing him. She stamped her feet, balled her fists and let out a suppressed yell and then up and lava-ed him.

Participants described characteristics of their preschoolers' physical expressions of sad, angry, frustrated and disappointed feelings as including growling, glowering, pouting, foot-stamping, defiance and general grumpiness. They reported that escaping or refusing to participate in upsetting situations was another way in which their preschoolers exhibited these feelings physically. Victoria reported that Mariah's emotion expressions were sometimes conveyed by removing herself from a situation:

    Mariah was angry with her sister because she (her sister) would not respond to Mariah's requests to close the door to the tent and stop talking to her. Mariah asked her sister to change her behaviour, they agreed on a new course of action. That worked for 5 minutes, then her sister offended Mariah again. Mariah left and played in her room with the door closed for about 10 minutes. She asked me not to let her sister in when I checked on her.

Mika said that Alyssa's expressions were often further defined by her body language. She explained, "She was annoyed, and she huffed off. Like a dramatic stamp out of the room with her frowning face on." Stephanie pointed out that Billy tends to "glower and pout." In one example, she reported that, when Billy was disappointed about being unable to walk to school one morning, not wanting to go in the car, he sat in their front yard. Stephanie said that, finally, he "came out and got in the car and grumped all the way to school."

Participants reported that their preschoolers also conveyed feelings of sadness, anger, frustration and disappointment verbally. From parents' illustrations, preschoolers' verbal expressions seemed to consist of communications about their internal states, the bothersome external stimuli or both.

One type of verbalisation appeared to communicate preschoolers' internal states, and seemed to describe the preschooler's experience that resulted in the expressed emotion. For example, Victoria recalled,

    Sasha pinched Mariah. And Mariah was very upset, very mad. And we, I just talked about it like, 'Did it hurt you?' She's like, 'Well yeah, but it hurt my feelings that she would do it, *and* my skin hurts,' you know. We kind of talked about all the different levels of the hurt, and that sort of thing...

Another type of verbal communication appeared to draw attention to the environmental stimuli involved, and was sometimes accompanied by a statement of what the preschooler wished would happen or stop happening. April offered an example about

Ryan's expression of emotion when he learned that the family's kitten was going to a new home. She said, "Ryan was pretty upset about it. He was crying, he was crying. He was upset and he said, 'Don't take the kitty. That's my kitty, that's my baby Smoky.'"

Some preschoolers' verbal expressions of sad, angry, frustrated and disappointed feelings referred to both their internal and external experiences. Kim recalled that a frequent expression of emotion for Renée is "I am so mad at you." Victoria reported that Mariah often explodes when her sister touches her things without permission: "Mama, Sasha's sitting on my rainbow pillow and she didn't even ask! And I asked her very politely to please move off and she said no! And now I don't know what to do and I'm very mad!"

Participants also identified tonal characteristics of their preschoolers' verbal expressions of sad, angry, frustrated and disappointed feelings, notably, whining and growling. Whereas Mika and Victoria reported that their daughters growl when they are especially annoyed, Stephanie indicated that Billy's verbal expressions may be characterised by whining. For example, she said, "He decided in the middle of practice that he didn't want to play anymore. And so he came over to sit and whine on me." April reported that Ryan "talks through his teeth, which I hate. Or sometimes he does this 'Grrr!' kind of thing. He gets this tone in his voice."

Participants noticed that, for their preschoolers, feeling ill, tired or hungry adversely affected their ability to manage their behaviour. Victoria told of Mariah's uncharacteristic behaviour when she was feeling tired:

We also had a big meltdown one night. We'd been in the car for 7 ½ hours, she was tired, she hadn't napped the whole time. And she was really tired going to bed. She did something she'd never really done before, which was she wanted something from me and she just kept asking over and over in kind of a rude tone of voice for it. And I couldn't get it for her and she was upset about that. And she just kept saying, 'I want it now, I want it now, I want it now.'

Mika noticed that, in addition to tearfulness associated with over-tiredness, Alyssa was also more easily distressed when feeling ill:

Being below par, she just was so easily knocked into tears. So there was like, any little bumps or, you know, they had all the birthday presents and she was all excited, and then they went off and played together for half an hour. And I'd say in half an hour there was probably four falling-into-tears episodes, just things that normally

would not have knocked her at all. And it was just interesting to see how easily, how so much more vulnerable she was emotionally when she wasn't feeling well. And she was obviously tired as well. She was tired and sick so there were several bouts of tears over small issues.

When Ryan was hungry or tired, April recognised a diminished ability to respond to instructions she gave him. She said,

The things that stick out the most, the circumstances are when there hasn't been enough sleep or enough food. Even to this day too, if he's hungry or if he's tired, he's kind of rambunctious, and doesn't listen very well to what I'm asking him to do... Kind of just lives in his own head and does whatever he wants. And I have a certain way that I need them to act in a store... It's more difficult to do so when you're hungry and when you're tired. Those are the times I think of when he hasn't lived up to something.

In general, if children of preschool age were unable to manage well their feelings of sadness, anger, frustration and disappointment, participants seemed to agree that they would be more likely to utilise physical expressions or acts of aggression. Stephanie said, "A kid who can't is still hitting and kicking other people at this point." Like Stephanie, Mika also thought that, if unable to cope with these feelings, preschoolers would aggress:

I think outward shows of aggression are generally how children who can't manage their feelings will tend to react to situations. They lash out at their siblings or their friends or their parents... Or just, you know, complete dissolving into tears and, you know, screaming tantrums.

April expanded on this definition. She said, "I've seen kids have tantrums, I've seen kids throw things, I've seen kids take things."

Participants also thought that not addressing the emotion, by ignoring it or by withdrawing, for example, would be other behaviours they might observe. Victoria offered, "Not so healthy is probably letting physical reactions take over and/or just ignoring it or breezing over it, that kind of thing." Kim thought that the child might demonstrate a lack of awareness of how to make the expression match the emotion experienced. She said,

I think you might start to notice, a lot of, I don't know if antisocial's the right word but, inappropriate behaviour. Like a sad child who didn't know what to do when he or she was sad, I would assume that child would maybe become withdrawn. An

angry child would probably throw a tantrum or hit. Yelling, hitting, crying loudly, gosh anything! Hurting themselves, being aggressive towards others, I think antisocial, withdrawn.

In terms of communicating feelings of sadness, anger, frustration or disappointment, Kim also thought that children's failure to attain effective communication skills would have potentially far-reaching consequences:

I think it would be difficult, it would start to become difficult for that child in friendships and stuff because it makes everyone feel uncomfortable when somebody's acting that way. And it would start to impact not just their friends of course, their kindergarten, it might impact the child's *even learning*. So yeah it would impact personal relationships, parents, I mean, because that's exhausting if your child is... not acting correctly.

Participants thought that if children of preschool age were well able to manage sad, angry, frustrated and disappointed feelings, parents might observe increased verbal communication, particularly in terms of explaining the issue and articulating the emotion. Stephanie thought, "A kid who can, I want to say is more verbal about it, is more able to put the words to it, because the words have been given to them." Similarly, April indicated that,

A person who is able to communicate is probably able to handle their, if you're able to say look I'm really upset right now, or I'm really sad, or you can tell that I'm really excited, I think a kid that's able to, you know, have a sense of grasp on each one of the feelings, I think he'll in turn have an advantage over a person who doesn't know how to communicate or who doesn't explain themselves.

If they were well able to manage these feelings, parents thought that in addition to articulating the emotion, preschoolers might also address the issue with the other party or seek adult intervention to do this. Victoria said,

I guess to me like handling the feeling well is kind of expressing your feeling, and then, you know, if there is points of that feeling that need to be dealt with by another person or include another person, discussing the issue with them, and then coming to a resolution about it.

Mika agreed and thought that preschoolers who were well able to manage these feelings might also recognise when adult assistance was needed. She said,

I think maybe they tend to come to the parent if they're in a difficult situation or whoever is in charge of the situation, and like if they get very upset about something, you'll see them running off to the parent and going, 'So-and-so has done this to me and I don't like it.' I think that's probably, they are handling it a bit better.

Participants noticed changes in the expressions of sad, angry, frustrated, and disappointed emotions as their preschoolers got older. Participants reported that, in the past, their preschoolers' expressions of sad, angry, frustrated or disappointed feelings were characterised by crying, complaining, aggressing, yelling and escaping from upsetting situations. More recently, participants reported that, while their preschoolers continued to communicate feelings of sadness, anger, frustration and disappointment physically, they were also better able to express themselves verbally.

In terms of changing physical expressions, Mika recognised that recently Alyssa has been less likely to burst into tears, and more likely to "huff off." Stephanie and Victoria both noted that their preschoolers continued to struggle to contain their physical expressions of emotions. Victoria said, "I think they've become more intense. I think that she has even more trouble dealing with them sometimes."

Participants agreed that their preschoolers seemed better able to articulate their emotions. Victoria also noticed that the way Mariah expresses herself verbally has changed. She said, "When she has a problem with me, she will state it to me now, and say, 'You know what? I'm mad at you because...'. She's never been so calm when addressing her anger." Kim reported that she has also observed marked changes in Renée's emotion expression:

I think in the last week and a half, especially, she's become much more verbal about her emotions. Especially anger and frustration, which have always been the hardest for her. She is able to articulate them much better. So when she articulates them, though it's very dramatic, it's much more appropriate than in the past. She's pretty good about really trying to use her words instead of when she's upset just resorting first to hitting my son. She'll try to talk to him about it or ask for help if she needs it. So she's just improving on articulating it and managing it and knowing like maybe not like panicking, like knowing I'm having this feeling, this is how I deal with it.

Participants also reported that despite feelings of sadness, anger, frustration or disappointment, their preschoolers were sometimes able to follow social rules such as

generating more appropriate options for behaviour, compromising, and tempering expressions of emotion. Stephanie, Mika and Victoria commented that their preschoolers appear to opt for behaviours that they had not used in the past. Stephanie noted, "Billy's better able to wait to get his needs met. He was patient and waited quietly until his uncle noticed him and remembered he said they would play." Mika noticed Alyssa making an effort to moderate her feelings of disappointment and to behave in more socially acceptable ways when she loses at playing board games. She reported,

One day we were playing and she lost and she was quite annoyed. And she gets up and she walks to the corner of the room and she sort of composes, like wrestles with herself for like 10 seconds and then she turns around with this angelic face on her, 'Well done, Mom!' But for the most part now she's able to congratulate the winner.

But if she loses, she wants to play another game so that she can win the next time. Victoria observed that Mariah, "tried hard to communicate with her sister and when it didn't work, she opted to do something else." Recently, she has also noticed that Mariah, instead of allowing emotions to overwhelm her ("dissolving into tears over it or becoming really upset and, kind of, physically taking it out on her sister"), was able to discuss the situation with Victoria, asking questions and trying to understand.

In terms of future behaviours, participants expected that continued improvement in their preschoolers' expressions of sad, angry, frustrated or disappointed feelings might be characterised by a decrease in physical reactivity and an increase in verbal communication. With regard to addressing sad, angry, frustrated and disappointed feelings, participants hoped that their preschoolers would be less physically reactive. That is, they would be able to convey these emotions more calmly. Kim explained, "She just needs to learn not to just be out of control when she's upset or frustrated."

Participants hoped that their preschoolers would be increasingly able to choose more moderate behaviours to express their emotions. Kim suggested,

I think I'd look for an expression of, I guess using words, an expression of sadness or disappointment, but without crying or yelling... just using words about how disappointed she is or unhappy she is or may be asking if, you know, well can she stay longer or can this happen?

Participants also hoped that their preschoolers' verbal communication would continue to increase, and that they would address the issue with the other party,

necessitating fewer parental interventions. For Mariah, Victoria hoped that she would be able to “express her anger verbally, not physically.” More specifically, Victoria outlined, Mariah would be able to,

Tell me her thoughts and feelings and needs, so we can have a conversation and come to a resolution. She would continue to discuss problems with peers, utilising my help when necessary, but asking me for help less and less as time passes.

Like Victoria, April and Mika also hoped that their preschoolers would be able to address the issue with the other party. For example, April said, when there is a conflict with his brother, perhaps Ryan could approach it in this way: “Say, ‘Hey Carter, can you please give me that back?’ And if he can't handle it himself, then call Mom.” Mika advocated a similar strategy for situations where Alyssa and her friend disagreed. She said, “I think it would be talking, saying to Adam, ‘Adam, no. I'm in charge of pouring the tea, and you're not supposed to do it.’”

In addition to being able to better verbalise what's going on for her emotionally and to regulate how she reacts if she does have an emotional reaction, Kim also hoped that Renée would have more realistic expectations of her achievements. She said,

Although I don't want to hope for too much, that eventually she'll become... less hard on herself and more able to forgive herself when she can't do everything, and do things perfectly. And that she'll develop more realistic expectations. Still have high standards you know but, you know.

#### *Question 1 Summary*

Parents seemed to understand preschoolers' social development as increasingly frequent and sustained changes to more socially desired behaviours. In particular, participants were asked to discuss their preschoolers' friendship, sharing and empathy skills. Parents reported that their preschoolers seemed to have an increased interest in having friends. A recent change they observed was their preschoolers' ease of play with peers, necessitating less parental involvement. Parents also noticed that their preschoolers were increasingly able to conform to social mores such as showing appreciation and making apologies. They thought that continued improvement in their preschoolers' friendship skills might be characterised by the increased willingness to play with peers without parental support, as well as by increasing initiations of and adjusting to play with new peers. Participants also reported that sharing seemed to be a difficult practice for their



preschoolers. More recently, however, parents observed that their preschoolers' willingness to share has increased. Finally, participants shared that, in response to others' expressions of emotion, their preschoolers said and/or did things that seemed to be intended to help others feel better. They also observed that their preschoolers sometimes seemed to have difficulty knowing how to respond to others' emotions. Therefore, parents thought that in terms of continued improvement in their preschoolers' empathy skills, they would observe an increased awareness of others and their experiences.

Parents appeared to understand children's emotional development as increased verbal communication of feelings, and decreased physical expressions. In particular, participants discussed the ways in which their preschoolers expressed happy or excited feelings, anxious or fearful feelings, and sad, angry, frustrated or disappointed feelings. Parents reported that their preschoolers' expressions of happy or excited feelings were characterised by animated verbal and physical behaviours, and that they sometimes seemed to have difficulty managing the expression of these feelings. They thought that indicators of future growth would consist of increased verbal communication of these feelings. Participants also noticed that, recently, their preschoolers' seemed to be experiencing more anxiety or fear. A particular struggle for children this age seemed to be transitioning to new schools. Parents noted that while managing anxious feelings continued to be a challenge for their preschoolers, lately they seemed better able to endure anxiety-provoking situations. They thought that continued growth would consist of increased verbal expressions of anxious feelings, and decreased physical expressions. Finally, in terms of expressions of sad, angry, frustrated, or disappointed feelings, parents reported that their preschoolers seemed to be easily frustrated or angered, and communicated these feelings both in physical and verbal ways. Participants also noticed that their preschoolers seemed to have particular difficulty managing feelings of anger or frustration and at these times they often resorted to physical expressions. Still, parents thought that more recently their preschoolers appeared to be better able to utilise verbal expressions. They thought that continued improvement would entail decreases in physical reactivity and increases in verbal communication.

### Research Question 2:

The second research question asked, *What do parents understand about how social and emotional competencies are fostered?* Parents were invited to reflect on how they thought children came to be able to get along with peers, to be able to share, and to recognise and respond to others' feelings. They were also asked if and, if so, how parents were involved in these processes. Finally, participants were asked to share their views about what children and parents needed in order to facilitate children's social and emotional development. Data that captured participants' perceptions of the ways in which children's social and emotional learning is supported were coded as "Facilitation," and further refined into themes. Participants' responses indicated that they conceptualised children's acquisition of social and emotional competencies as products of direct experience, observation, adult intervention and maturation.

*"How do you think that children your preschooler's age come to be able to get along with others? Are parents involved with helping preschoolers to get along with others? And, if so, how?"*

*Adult intervention.* According to participants, adult intervention plays a key role in facilitating preschoolers' ability to get along with others. In terms of helping children to get along with others, this was the most heavily endorsed category and was supported by four of the five participants, who indicated that adults support children both by providing guidance and by mediating children's social interactions.

Victoria, Kim and Mika indicated that parents and other adults provide guidance through talking with children or telling them how to get along:

Obviously teachers and other adults tell them about how to interact. It doesn't necessarily have to be parents. I mean if there are a few teachers, and there are good teachers, like a good teacher who is intuitive, and takes the child under his or her wing (Kim).

Victoria shared that in order to foster Mariah's social competence, she sometimes tells her stories about when Mom was a child and how she dealt with similar situations with her younger brother. She said, "I think that helps her kind of think about it and process it too."

Participants also indicated that mediation of children's social interaction was another way that adults helped children to get along with others. April explained her point of view:

I think it's the mom's job or the dad's job to stop talking with the other parents and to go over there, get in their face, and say, not in a negative way, but get down to their level and say, 'Look, sorry you guys can't fight with this. How about you, who had the bike first? Okay, well if he had the bike first, he has it for a few minutes.

Then you get to go do something else. And that way we both get to have it.'

Similarly, Victoria said that while she is less involved now than when her preschooler was younger, she still monitors play and is vigilant for signs of conflict indicating that her assistance is needed. She also encourages her daughter to verbally express her needs. Likewise, Mika watches for escalating behaviours, and uses that opportunity to remind Alyssa of how she is expected to behave in a situation. Mika added that they may also discuss what happened later and talk about other ways to approach conflicts in the future.

Two participants expanded on this category. Mika introduced the idea that, in addition to adult guidance in their social interactions, children also need to be allowed some leeway for initiative: "I think it needs to be directed to a certain extent, but then we need to allow them to figure it out for themselves as well." Kim offered an opinion on possible consequences for children who lack guidance. Without adequate guidance from adults, she suggested, children may have negative outcomes: "I just think that's when you get these kids that have trouble. Like antisocial, or even just like behaviour problems. I don't know, that's what I would guess, that they just have a difficult time."

*Direct experience.* Four participants endorsed the importance of direct experience – both time and opportunities to interact – as a means of facilitating children's ability to get along with others. Their responses indicated that, through experience, children learn social rules. Victoria indicated that socialisation experiences were the primary means by which preschoolers come to be able to get along with others: "I think that it is experience, number one. The more that they are around other kids, the more they learn about social rules and social interaction." April suggested that early socialisation experiences might have an enduring impact on children's social skills: "The more exposure that they get and the more interaction that they get from early on is how they can adapt to different situations, and adapt to new people and just get used to it."

Further to this, Kim and Victoria said that children learn via the consequences of their behaviours when interacting with others. In this way, future social behaviour is shaped by children's past experiences. These parents said that, in their opinion, when children

experienced desired outcomes in response to their behaviours, they were more likely to want to try that behaviour again:

I think that the biggest thing that has helped her has been bonding with this one friend. I think that has really helped Mariah see that you can interact with another kid and it doesn't have to go, like they're not going to grab your stuff all the time. You can kind of learn how to play (Victoria).

However, undesired outcomes may make children more likely to try other ways of interacting:

Like I said, trial and error, because I think they are self centred just naturally and so they gradually learn, if I just shout this out or if I just say, mine or whatever, I get this reaction. So they begin to hone appropriate skills (Kim).

In fact, Victoria thought that children's experiences with social interaction need not be agreeable in order to promote their learning to get along. She said, "I think some amount of conflict and altercation is good. You have to learn how to deal with it because it's part of life. And I think having a sibling is a great learning place for that."

*Observation.* According to three participants, in addition to adult intervention and their own experiences, children acquired social skills by observing others. Victoria said, "I think they also watch the parents and if I'm talking to my friend or my husband, and we have an altercation or something, she watches that and learns from that modelling behaviour what to do." Kim also agreed that modelling is an important way in which children come to be able to get along with others:

Part of it is they see how I act with them, how I act with my husband, how I act with other people. Some children I think, naturally have that knack, and their parents might be really gregarious and outgoing. And so like I said really modelling, unconscious modelling, plays such a big factor.

*Maturation.* Two participants, April and Victoria, suggested that maturation also facilitates children's ability to get along. They indicated that this might be the result of a combination of factors that included getting older, increased awareness of and experience with other people, and the emerging ability to be able to take others' perspectives.

I think in the last month, especially, as we've been nearing preschool, she's been becoming more aware of spending time with other people. And so she's slowly been stretching her wings, and experiencing more time with other people and that sort of

thing. And it's been a slow process, but I see her growing towards strangers. And usually over time she gets to know them (Victoria).

In sum, participants perceived that children come to be able to get along with other children through adult provision of guidance including discussions and interventions as needed, while also allowing children some measure of self-direction. Equally important were children's direct experiences. Participants' responses suggested that observation of others' interactions is also a factor in fostering children's ability to get along with others. However, maturation, the least endorsed category, seemed somewhat less so.

Further, participants Kim and Victoria indicated that children's ability to get along is supported by the interaction of multiple factors. Kim credited a combination of experience and adult intervention. She said, "Kids come home with stories, and you talk to them. Play dates. At her age, when she was three and four, we went along, and we sort of helped them get along." However, for Victoria, in addition to factors external to her preschooler, her perspective included internal processes:

But I think that through the discussions plus the experiences, albeit small positive ones with her sister, she has become a much better negotiator. I think those are the three things. Just experience, direct teaching by adults, and then just watching the behaviour of others and kind of internalising it.

*"How do you think that children your preschooler's age come to be able to share? Are parents involved with helping preschoolers share? And, if so, how?"*

*Direct experience.* As with helping children to get along with others, four of the five participants endorsed direct experience as an important means by which children come to be able to share. In particular, participants identified that children come to be able to share by experiencing the consequences of sharing as well as because of situational demands. Stephanie perceived that the consequences of not sharing served to encourage preschoolers' sharing behaviours: "They learn if they don't share then they don't have the companionship, which seems to be very important to kids this age. If they don't share, other kids are not going to play with them."

In addition to consequences, Kim and Victoria implicated children's thoughts and feelings about sharing experiences. For Victoria, there were behavioural and cognitive components of coming to be able to share. She said,

I think that the more positive experiences she has, the more likely she is to try it again. And the more likely her sister will follow the rules and give it back when she's supposed to, the more likely she'll try it again with her sister. And so it seems like a trial and error sort of thing, and also just a general understanding that people aren't there to just take your stuff.

Likewise, Kim thought that the feelings children experienced following a sharing situation would shape future sharing behaviours:

I'm sure there are situations at school and the adult's not looking, that they see the person hogging it, and maybe they feel how they feel. And I would assume that then it's easier for them to share. And also, like I said, I think that they want to be good friends because they like friends and they realise, you know, if I just hog all the time that doesn't promote having friendship.

In terms of children's direct experiences, Kim and April supported the idea that children come to be able to share because of the demands inherent in their environments, such as presented by peers at school and siblings at home. April observed,

I think they have to develop that, if there's only one thing and there's three kids, then... everybody's going to have to play together. I think it's probably the more siblings you have, the environment that you have growing up, because you're not going to have five PlayStations or five, however many children you have you're not going to have that many. So the kids just have to adapt and learn how to interact and share things.

It is possible then, that younger siblings come to be able to share more quickly or easily because the family constellation into which they are born already contains at least one other child with whom they must share. Victoria supported this idea: "The two-year-old is way better at sharing at her age than Mariah was when she was two because I think she had to practice it now already from birth, pretty much."

*Adult intervention.* All five participants indicated that adult intervention plays an important role in preschoolers' adoption of sharing behaviours. In particular, their examples illustrated how parents are instrumental in creating and implementing sharing rules and monitoring their practice. Victoria shared her experiences:

Negotiating the rules of sharing. Monitoring the sharing, coming up with ideas on how to share: Are we going to take turns? Are we going to do it for a certain amount

of time? Are we going to, you know, I mean, we have one swing to swing on and everyone wants to use that swing. So we get in line. There's a friend over, there's three people in line. And one person gets on, and everyone else helps push them. They take three turns, and then the next person. So you know, we just learn about the different ways to share. And I think I introduce those, they definitely do not come up with those on their own, you know. Definitely a lot of parent-led practice. Participants also reported that they explained the necessity of sharing, and encouraged their children to take others' perspectives. Kim said,

I just tell my daughter like, 'Let's take turns, you both want to play with it. Or you play with it for a little bit, and then give it to somebody else, because he or she wants a turn.' If somebody else had something that she wanted, I would have said, 'Well, I know you really want that, that looks like a fun toy. Let's let so-and-so play with it and then maybe when he's done, he will give it to you.' So just the whole taking turns thing. Also, when she doesn't want to share, empathy. 'How would you feel if that person was holding onto it?'

*Maturation.* Three participants suggested that maturation plays a role in children's coming to be able to share: "I think all the switches in the brain go on. I believe that we're born with all the switches in place, but stuff has to turn them on" (Stephanie). Their responses also implicated cognitive development in sharing, and pointed to the interaction of perspective-taking and coming to understand what sharing means, in addition to direct experiences with sharing.

Victoria said that children come to be able to understand the time-limited nature of sharing:

I think part of it is just a maturing process. Like as you get older, you start to understand that if you give an object away it will come back. You start to understand that people aren't out to get your stuff, they're just interested in it and it's not forever that it will go away. And I think once those things start to be commonplace, then you become more willing to let something go for a short time. I also think she... really enjoys sharing things with mommy. And I point that out.

Mika also illustrated the importance of children's coming to understand the duration of sharing when taking turns:

I think the classic thing about sharing is that you tell children to share, and then if the other child won't give them the thing straight away, they complain that they are not sharing. So getting the whole concept of sharing as passing it along when you've had a play with it, and you need to give a person their go.

*Observation.* Only one participant supported the idea of learning by observation as a factor in children's coming to be able to share. Stephanie said, "I really think we are examples, and they have to see that example. I think through example, because we share." Stephanie also implied that there is great complexity in preschoolers' coming to be able to share: a combination of adult intervention in facilitating children's experiences that enables preschoolers the maturity to be able to share. She explained, "I think that we try to give them a rich enough environment that a lot of those switches are turning on."

As with getting along with others, direct experience and adult intervention were the factors most endorsed by participants in preschoolers coming to be able to share. More specifically, participants identified that the consequences of sharing and situational demands were likely important influences on children's sharing behaviours. The influence of adult intervention though encouraging and monitoring sharing was seen to be important, as were processes of maturation. However, observational learning was not widely supported as contributing to children's coming to be able to share.

*"How do you think that children your preschooler's age come to understand what other people are feeling? Are parents involved in helping preschoolers understand what others are feeling? And, if so, how?"*

*Adult intervention.* All five participants indicated that adult intervention is important in helping children understand what others are feeling. Participants said that adults intervene to promote children's articulation of their emotions, and they all commented on the necessity of adult facilitation of this skill.

I think it's important to name emotions. So I was sad that time. And then, when she is emotional over something, acknowledging what it is, telling her what it is she's feeling. Because she doesn't know that she's disappointed because she can't go where she wants to go or do what she wants to do. So I think we need to articulate them to children. Articulate it. And I encourage her to do that quite a bit. Like, 'So, what's the problem?' You know, when she's crying over something or in a huff over something. 'What's the problem, what's going on? Okay, this is what's happened,



you're disappointed, you know...' I don't think they know these things intuitively at three (Mika).

Parents seemed to agree that it is important for children to voice rather than suppress emotions. To this end, Victoria supports validating all emotional experiences. She said,

I think it's good that she expresses her emotions about that sort of thing. And I don't think there's anything inherently wrong with crying to express your emotions. That's a big thing that I talk about a lot. I've always been a big proponent of, what you feel, you feel. You know? And it's okay to feel it. It's not always okay to act on it in certain ways, you've got to find good ways to act on it, but you can feel what you feel (Victoria).

In this category, parents also illustrated the ways in which encouraging children's verbal expressions of emotion facilitates children's awareness of alternate ways to convey feelings:

Letting her know like that it's okay to have that feeling but the way you expressed it is not okay, and then helping her come up with alternatives that are acceptable, through books, through discussions. But we sometimes read books, like there are several books, I'm sure you're familiar with them, like *When Sophie Gets Really, Really Angry*, and I can't think of the others. Yeah, so we read books, and talk about it, about the book and then try to incorporate that into our lives. Even some of the TV shows, like the *Berenstain Bears* or something sometimes (Kim).

By participants' accounts, verbal expressions seemed to be a preferred way of communicating feelings, lessening the likelihood and the need for children to express emotions in physical or other less desired ways:

Some five year olds just suffer in silence, in total fear of what's going to come next. Yes, I think we're just seeing it manifest because we've taught him to be verbal. Don't tell my kid to suck it up. Tell him to have a good cry and then go out and do it, you know. Yes, it's like it's all right to be angry. It's all right to be angry, but you can't hurt other people and break things when you do it. It's all right to be angry and go punch a pillow. It's all right to be angry and do this, but you can't hurt us or the animals or anything. And I think the more we give him the words so he can say that, 'I'm having a bad day, this is so frustrating, this makes me so mad,' that kind

of thing, that he can then deal with it in non-physical ways. But if a kid's not given the words to deal with it, to express it, they're going to have to deal with it in physical ways (Stephanie).

Adults also intervened in order to draw attention to others' displays of emotion as a means of teaching children about emotions. Victoria shared:

Our role has been to kind of negotiate interactions between ourselves by helping her feel how she's feeling and how we're feeling about something – she and her sibling, or just somebody randomly that you see, who might be feeling a particular emotion. Usually they are the more negative ones because they are more obvious to notice in somebody. 'Why is that person shouting? Why is that person crying?' You know, and talking about it. Maybe if you put her in a room and had her watch movies of people she'd come to it eventually, but I think it helps having somebody point it all out.

Victoria said that she also creates learning opportunities from everyday occurrences, and fosters Mariah's understanding by naming her own emotions: "Having me state my emotions and my state of mind when I'm acting certain ways helps her connect that too."

It appeared that this strategy was also used to help children understand how others might be feeling in particular situations, and to increase their awareness of ways in which they might respond. In addition to her own responses, Kim said that she highlights other people's experiences and invites Renée to consider how she might feel if she were in that situation:

For Renée, I would say that she's going to learn it by, partially how I react to her, do I have empathy? ...and again just the talking it through, like what I said, you know, just even telling her, 'Your friend's hurt, your brother's hurt, this is what you do when somebody's hurt.' Or, 'How would you feel if this happened to you?'

Mika explained her belief that exposing children to the realities of emotion-filled situations in age-appropriate ways facilitates their ability to cope with emotions:

I think an openness of emotion is a good thing. I think it's helpful as long as it's kept simple. I really do believe in exposing them to the full ranges of emotion. You know, I wouldn't shield her from the news of death or news of sadness... If it was appropriate to tell her, I would tell her and I would tell her as, you know, like a friend. It is sort of obviously trying to relay quite complex emotions, well, just trying to prepare her for if that did happen. I wouldn't *not* tell her because I believe – you

might think I'm being very morbid with her – but I just think it's important that she understands life and death. And not that she understands it, but that she is exposed to the realities of life and death and, with time, she'll obviously begin to understand it. I just have seen, I've seen parents shield their children from bad news and I have seen their children get worried... And I always felt it was not the way to do it. I say, you tell children factual information and you don't need to get, you know... I just think they can potentially process, while my child seems to be able to process it quite pragmatically and take on board what she can at the time and leave the rest, you know. I would like her to know that this is what happens and to always know it. I think that rather than being shocked by something later on. I just want her to assimilate these realities of life without it ever being a major shock.

*Observation.* Four participants endorsed observation as another means by which children come to understand what people are feeling. Their responses suggested that an important way in which children learn how others are feeling is by observing them. Like Stephanie, Kim thought that parentally-modelled behaviours influenced children's emotion understanding. She said, "I really believe that a lot of things they learn, they learn unconsciously just by living with us. I'm sure a lot of the ways she reacts is by watching the way I react" (Kim).

Further to this, April explained that the finer points of emotion expression such as body language, facial expression and tone of voice, are clear indicators of emotion, and that children may be able to discern the nature of the emotion even if they are unable to understand the cause:

I think they can tell in their tone of voice, they can tell in their facial expressions, they can tell, you know, however, even the words that are spoken you can just tell what, if somebody's in a good mood or a bad mood or not really understand what affected them but that they are probably not happy or they are happy about it.

*Maturation.* Three participants indicated that maturation plays a role in children's coming to understand what other people are feeling. Their responses indicated that children's developing brains, with time and experience, become increasingly able to process emotional cues. They seemed to suggest that this, along with the advent of perspective-taking, can result in the ability to empathise. However, participants also supported the idea that while the ability to understand what others are feeling develops spontaneously for

some children, for other children, it is a skill that must be learned. For example, Stephanie explained, "I think it's a stage. I think some kids just have an innate ability to empathise. Other kids need to learn it. And kindness comes from understanding. Other people have feelings."

Like Stephanie, Kim supported the idea of an inborn ability to understand how others may be feeling. She also thought that the interaction of the developing brain and children's experiences contributed to this understanding:

I think some kids, I would guess, are born with it. You see some kids and they are so caring. Their brains, they're changing, developing, they're doing what they do. And then also, she's maturing or whatever... I think so much of it is as they get older just sort of naturally something's happening in their brains and what they're able to process, and then more life experience (Kim).

Victoria thought that, more specifically, recent cognitive growth has allowed her preschooler to see things from others' perspectives:

She's started to see how her actions can affect something else. I think that she's kind of started to feel sad that she caused hurt to somebody. As she's gotten older, I think she starts to really see how other people feel when she does things.

*Direct experience.* Children's experiences were also thought to play a role in how they came to understand what other people were feeling. While April indicated that she believed children came to understand what others were feeling through the combination of adult intervention and experience, Stephanie thought that children attained this skill from enduring challenging life situations: "I think it's just experience. Sometimes you just have to put up with the hard times and realise that this too shall pass" (Stephanie).

In sum, participants indicated that children come to understand and react to what others are feeling mainly through adult intervention that supports articulation of emotions as well as awareness of others' emotions. Learning by observation and maturation were also seen to play important roles in the acquisition of this skill. Direct experience, the least endorsed category, seemed to have a lesser role in supporting children's emotion understanding.

*"What do you think is needed to help children become socially and emotionally skilled?"*

To conclude this line of questioning, participants were asked to reflect on what they thought was needed to help children become socially and emotionally skilled. Their

responses confirmed earlier ideas they offered about what facilitated children's attainment of social and emotional competence: direct experience, adult intervention and observation.

First, parents indicated that children needed experiences in the form of growth-enhancing environments that included opportunities for social interaction and guidance from adults. Victoria reported, "Interactions with other people and children. Definitely some sort of adult guidance. And just practice." Kim introduced the idea that in addition to growth enhancing experiences, children also need caring adults who possess certain characteristics: "I really think that young people need adults, adult role models, and adults who believe in them. And I think it's probably better and easier if it's a parent." In particular, it was seen as important that adults promote children's verbal expression of emotions. Mika expressed that, "Communication is the key, and I think assigning words to emotions is definitely very helpful. So I think that just allowing them to know what it is they're feeling and articulating that between you is definitely helpful." Parents also thought that children needed opportunities to learn through observation: "I think kids learn what they see. When it comes right down to it, all we can do is offer ourselves and say, you know, we're here when you need us, and try to model good behaviour" (Stephanie).

*"What do you think that parents need to know in order to support their children's social and emotional skills? If parents wanted to learn about how to improve their skills in supporting children's social and emotional development, how do you think that they would most want to learn?"*

Participants reflected on parents' needs and indicated that, in order to provide the best support for their children's social and emotional development, parents needed to possess certain skills and resources. These included a specific perspective about children and parenting; an awareness of children's needs as individuals and how best to respond to these needs; an awareness of individual strengths and needs both personally and as a parent; a means of remediating these needs; and a support system.

Victoria and April expressed that, in order to best support their children's social and emotional development, parents needed to have a specific attitude about children, their needs and how best to interact with them. April thought that parents needed to know how to communicate with their children and to ensure that they are integral parts of their children's lives. Victoria's viewpoint was that,

Parents need to have a mindset that their children are people, just like their coworkers, just like their friends. And they are not pets, they are not belongings, they are people. And I think if you sit with that mindset then I think you can just really try to communicate with your child as if you would communicate with anybody else, albeit on a different sort of level, but still they are people with feelings, and thoughts and ideas. And if you open yourself up to that, I think it can really help them come to new ideas as well.

Stephanie and Mika suggested that it was important for parents to have the ability to attend to and to respond appropriately to children's needs. In particular, Stephanie thought that parents could be more attuned to what children were not yet able to verbalise:

We're not very good at nonverbal anymore, which is too bad. How to better read some of the nonverbal, since they don't have the verbal. Parents need to know when to shut up and listen, when to listen to the kid. Kids just want to be heard. And we don't realise that, we don't think they have anything to say. Well, it doesn't sound like they have anything to say because they don't have the words for it. And once they've had their say, it's like, 'Okay, now I can move on. I just want somebody to know why I'm unhappy.'

Similarly Mika pointed out that parents' approaches to supporting children's social and emotional competence would be most effective if they took into account the individual characteristics of the parent and child:

I think that the dynamics of it are quite, the needs are very much determined on the child that you have and the parent you are. I think the vast majority of parents parent in mind to having happy children that are content and have a sense of self-worth. I think that's sort of the primary goal of most parents. But how you achieve that is a very unique recipe to the dynamic in the household and the child you're dealing with.

In order to assist their children's social and emotional development, participants thought that parents would benefit from increased awareness of their own social and emotional competence. In particular, they reported that parents needed to be aware of the examples they model for their children. As Stephanie said, parents need "to learn that they really are watching and listening to what you do and be very cognisant of that." She

thought that not only awareness but honesty was important in order to effectively support children's social and emotional development:

Be honest with them. It doesn't do any good to do something yourself and then expect the kid not to do it. I'm really having to acknowledge how fallible I am, and be honest about that. You want to model good behaviour but you're not perfect. You're going to make mistakes and own up to it. Don't present yourself as being perfect when you're not, because they can't live up to that (Stephanie).

Kim suggested that parents might make greater efforts to regulate their emotion expressions. She illustrated,

I think they need to really spend some time thinking about themselves and their own strengths and weaknesses socially and emotionally. When I'm angry, I really try to still maintain decorum and respectful language. Whereas my gut would just be like, want to just yell.

Kim summed it up, indicating that while the influence of adults' characteristics, children's experiences, and the experiences that adults create for the child are important, children also need to value themselves, and to feel valued:

They need adults in their lives who possess those skills. They need lots of practice at using them with peers and adults. And they need adults that not only are skilled at using them, but that use them not just with themselves but with the child. I think they need confidence, they need to have their basic needs met, and to feel believed in, to feel loved. We didn't even talk about any of this. But they need all those things too so that they can be in a place to learn the skills.

Participants said that parents needed to know when and how to seek to improve on their own social and emotional skills. They listed resources that they had discovered, such as formal continuing education classes, parent interaction classes, parent-child socialisation groups, parenting books and articles, parenting discussion groups, and online forums.

Finally, participants also thought that, in order to foster children's social and emotional competence, a support system of adult peers was important for parents: "I think parents, they also need support, friends, each other, an outlet. They need a release like free time, they need people to talk to about it" (Kim). According to Mika, this support system can also provide parents with other ways in which they might intervene to assist their children: "Probably the best way to learn is by sharing experiences. Somebody has been through

what you've been through before, and even if you get a couple of little tidbits that help out in the situation, that's very useful." Victoria, Stephanie and Mika noted that in addition to good sources of parenting information, talking to other parents can also help to normalise parenting experiences. Stephanie remarked, "I know other moms and they are just great. I mean, they really, they know the right thing to say. They keep it in perspective for me."

#### *Question 2 Summary*

Parents' responses indicated that they conceptualised preschoolers' acquisition of social and emotional competencies as products of adult intervention, direct experience, observation and maturation. Overall, adult intervention was the category most indicated by parents' responses. In fact, it was the category most endorsed in terms of helping children to get along with others, to share and to understand what others are feeling. Participants also thought that children's direct experiences were very important in their social and emotional development and, after adult intervention, this was the next most supported category. Most parents reported that it was a key factor in facilitating children's abilities to get along with others and to share. However, direct experience was not heavily endorsed as a contributor to children's understanding of others' emotions. In terms of fostering social and emotional competencies, observation and maturation were somewhat less supported categories. However, most participants indicated that observation was important in helping children to understand others' feelings.

Additionally, participants indicated that in order to promote children's social and emotional development, it was necessary for parents to be aware of their preschooler's needs, their own needs and strengths, and various ways in which those needs might be addressed. Participants also said that it was important for parents to have a support system of peers.



### Research Question 3:

The third research question asked, *What do parents understand about the parental role in children's social and emotional development?* In their interviews and journals, participants discussed situations that occurred in the recent past, and described their preschoolers' behaviours as well as their own behaviours, thoughts and intentions surrounding various everyday events. Data that captured the ways in which participants thought or acted to foster their preschoolers' social and emotional competencies were coded as "Parental Role." Participants' responses were further categorised into three broad themes or facilitative roles: Facilitator of Social Competence, Facilitator of Emotional Competence, and Advocate for Social and Emotional Well-being. Under each theme, sub-themes emerged reflecting the tasks participants perceived as comprising that role.

#### *Facilitator of Social Competence*

In terms of the role of facilitator of social competence, participants reported that they

- Talked with their preschoolers about friendship and created opportunities for socialisation;
- Encouraged socially desired behaviours by focusing on the importance of sharing, and by providing situation-specific suggestions of things to say and do;
- Discouraged undesired social behaviours with explanations, behavioural reminders, monitoring interactions and intervening when necessary, and applying negative consequences.

#### *Facilitated Social Interaction*

*Talked about friendship.* Parents are involved with helping their preschoolers learn to get along with others. To this end, participants reported discussing and explaining friendship ideas and parameters with their preschoolers. Stephanie shared that Billy seemed perplexed one day when the neighbour with whom he was playing ran off to play with someone else. Stephanie said that she explained to Billy, "Well, he played with you for a while. But now he wanted to play with somebody else. So you go find yourself somebody else to play with." In Kim's family, they use a little saying to remind her daughter Renée about the reciprocity of friendship. She said, "We always tell Renée, 'If you want to have a friend, you need to be a friend.' It's just a saying we use with her."

Kim also noted that Renée considers anyone she meets to be a friend, a concept that Stephanie and Mika echoed about their own preschoolers. However, Kim also reported that Renée sometimes exchanges phone numbers and invites to their house children she has only briefly met. Kim voiced the importance of bounding this practice without crushing Renée's natural affinity for people:

I try to explain to her that I know she's really excited but people don't always feel comfortable getting together with people that they don't know. And that some moms won't feel comfortable just letting their kids come over if they don't know me. I kind of wait until the situation is over and then I try to just talk to her about that. And I was helping her with making friends because she was doing this all the time. And then when she started school, I was like, 'Let's focus on, well who are some of the kids in your class?' I said, 'I know these moms or they know me, would you like to have one of these people over?' Just to help her. But I tell her, 'I know you really love people, it's a great quality, really friendly.'

*Created social opportunities.* Like Kim, the participants all reported that they created opportunities for social interaction to facilitate their preschoolers' play with peers. April reported that, while most of Ryan's peer interactions occurred within their family, she sometimes arranged other opportunities for play: "We rarely hang out with little friends. Our family is so large, it's just us most of the time. Mostly, when I try to arrange playgroups it's usually with my friends." When Renée communicated her interest in having a classmate over to their home to play, Kim said that she initiated contact with the parents. And for Stephanie, apart from taking her son Billy to the skateboard park and arranging with parents of his friends for their children to meet at a neighbourhood park, she routinely gets up early on Saturday mornings to take Billy to soccer games, an activity in which their entire town is involved.

In addition to providing the frames in which their preschoolers' socialisation with peers can occur, participants reported further involvement. As with Stephanie, combining their preschoolers' extra-curricular interests with opportunities for social interaction is a strategy that Kim and Victoria use. For example, when Renée expressed an interest in dancing, Kim went with her to meet the dance teacher and to get more information about the class. Similarly, Victoria used an activity that Mariah liked as an opportunity to practice social skills when they signed up for gymnastics.

Victoria said that she plays an integral part in supporting Mariah's social learning: "In our family parental involvement is really, really a necessary thing to help her kind of figure out how to work with other kids." Victoria said that she not only plays with Mariah when invited but also helps to create and arrange playtime activities and rules of fair play when her daughter plays with peers: "I set up the game and once they were playing happily, I left the immediate scene."

#### *Encouraged Socially Desired Behaviours*

*Fostered sharing.* Sharing appears to be a significant aspect of social skill acquisition for preschoolers. From participant responses, important aspects of socialising their preschoolers included explaining about sharing and its limits and benefits, modelling sharing, and implementing sharing strategies.

Participants reported that they explained to their preschoolers the benefits, consequences and limits of sharing. Like Kim, participants reported telling preschoolers that "it's good to share" and, like Stephanie and April, that sharing is simply something they must learn to do. Victoria explained to Mariah the time-limited aspects of sharing as well as its benefits and consequences:

I was saying the other day, you know, a lot of times if you don't share with kids they won't want to play with you and be your friend. I try to point out instances where she is sharing with others and reaping the benefits from it, and try to show her that it's a two way street. We talk a lot about how the coolest toy is the one in someone else's hand, so if you're holding it someone's going to want to see it. And how that doesn't mean they want it forever. That's a big deal for us, like they're not taking it away forever.

April says that she deals with sharing in a direct manner, telling her children, "Look, this is just how it has to be. These are your toys, they will always be your toys. But when your friends come over you need to share with them."

Participants noted that they also modelled sharing behaviours. Stephanie made a point of modelling sharing and showing Billy how he benefited from it. She said, "At meals we share food, 'Here try some of this, try some of that.' They learn that there's so much bonding, human bonding is done over food." Victoria reported having had a recent opportunity to model, explain and reinforce Mariah's sharing behaviour when they were out collecting leaves with Mariah's class: "I was giving it to Julie because she didn't have any. I

was trying to help someone else and I explained that to Mariah. I thanked her for helping Julie.”

Participants described the ways in which they implemented strategies and guidelines for sharing. Victoria said that she introduces ideas about ways to share, and negotiates and monitors the rules of sharing: “We’ve just discussed that there are certain things that are special toys that you don’t have to share.” Like Victoria, Mika reported that this sharing strategy has also been successful with her daughter, Alyssa:

When someone’s coming over, I tell her that she has to put away things that she’s not prepared to share. So it’s like, ‘What don’t you want them to play with? Let’s put it away in your bedroom and then everything else has to be fair game for them.’

Intervening to ensure that sharing rules are adhered to is another common task for participants. Kim recalled one play date where she intervened to facilitate sharing. She remembered telling Renée,

‘Remember she’s your guest and you can wear that crown all the time when she’s not here. She’s only here for a short time, so let’s let her wear that crown. You have other crowns, let’s see if we can find another crown for you.’

Similarly, Mika reported that sometimes, as the parent, she must insist on sharing even when her daughter protests: “No, he’s a guest in your house, you have to share.” April reported that she too intervenes to enforce sharing:

I do a lot of that with them, just looking in their eyes, getting down to their level and saying, sorry but there’s more things to be playing with. If he had it first doesn’t mean that you can go get it. I know it’s a fun toy but you guys are going to have to share it. That’s part of sharing.

*Provided examples.* Participants modelled and instructed preschoolers on desired social responses by providing them with examples of things to say or do in specific situations. In particular, they gave guidance about elementary social mores, such as making introductions, saying thank you or sorry, and asking after a person’s well-being.

Both Mika and Victoria have been guiding their preschoolers in ways to initiate contact. Mika reported: “I have been encouraging that as well, encouraging her to ask them their name and tell them her name so that she will have that initial introduction.” In addition to encouraging Mariah to connect with peers, Victoria recalled how, in one situation, she

pointed out some ways that Mariah might interact with a younger child: "I made a few comments, such as, 'Nehemiah loves grapes. Can you help him eat some?'"

Along with easing social interactions, participants reported encouraging preschoolers' courteous behaviours. Kim recalled reminding Renée, "Say thank you for having me." Mika said that Alyssa is encouraged to be a good sport even when she loses: "I'd go over and say, now don't forget to congratulate whoever won." She also noted that Alyssa seemed to struggle with ways in which to respond if she, for example, accidentally bumped a peer on the playground. Mika said,

I would generally have to say, 'Why don't you go over and ask him if he's okay? Why don't you go over now and see if she's okay?' I'd often have to just bring her over and be quite non-judgemental about that because I know she's upset about it. So and just say, 'Come on let's go to see if she's okay. I think she probably is, but let's just check, and you can ask her is she okay.'

This echoes what Kim teaches Renée: "I tell her, if somebody's hurt, you need to be like, 'Are you okay?'"

Mika described that, increasingly, instead of intervening directly, she has been supplying Alyssa with phrases she can use to resolve playtime conflicts with her cousin:

Over time we've been encouraging them to deal with it themselves. I would tell her what she should maybe say to him that would help, and to stop, so that they wouldn't lash out at each other. So at this stage, I tend not to go in and, 'What happened here? What did you say, what did you say?' I try to encourage her to figure it out for herself and like I say, give her some sentences or some questions to ask him or things to tell him. So, 'Tell him you don't like it when he does that and not to do it again.' And we'd be saying, 'Go back in and tell him to share...'

Participants' responses indicated that making apologies is also an important social skill and is therefore encouraged. Stephanie said that they make a point of this in her family:

We're both very careful, when we make a mistake, we say we're sorry. So he learns it's okay to be wrong and it's okay to say you're sorry. That I'm not perfect, he doesn't have to be perfect. You just have to recognise and take responsibility. She said that she tells Billy, "You know, we don't do that. Say you're sorry and that you won't do it again." Victoria reported that in her family, they use apologies as a means of

helping the wronged party feel better: "In the last year or so we've really worked on this idea that if you apologise, then it helps."

*Discouraged Undesired Social Behaviours*

Parents reported using verbal interventions, such as discussions or explanations to discourage their preschoolers' undesired behaviours. In some situations, participants chose to address the behaviours as they occurred. At other times, they waited to discuss behaviours more thoroughly with their preschoolers. Participants reminded children of the negative consequences for undesired behaviour as a means of discouraging it, and watched for signs of escalating behaviour for cues about when and how to intervene, and which strategy to use. They also provided cues or reminders about more desired behaviours, bore in mind age-appropriate expectations for children's behaviour, and enforced consequences.

Like Mika and Victoria, April reported that she addresses undesired behaviour on the spot: "We usually handle situations right then and there. We talk about it, get over it. If there's discipline that needs to be involved or whatever it's usually handled right then." However, for Mika and Victoria, removing their preschoolers from the immediate situation is a key component in their strategies. Victoria's aim seems to be de-escalation. She said,

What I do is try to pull her out of the situation and talk about it. I would just try to pull her aside somewhere a little quieter and help her kind of be in a calmer place. See if I could just kind of slow her down by doing what she needed, like playing a game or whatever but kind of in a slower, calmer way. So she could slow her body back down.

Mika indicated that because she remembers the embarrassment of being chastised in public when she was a child, she is careful to speak privately with Alyssa:

If there's a scene over something, I like to take her outside, and go, 'This is inappropriate, and I expect you to go back in and apologise for that.' If she's been completely out of line that would generally be how I would deal with that.

However, to promote Alyssa's awareness of alternative behaviours, Mika noted that she sometimes addresses a situation more thoroughly at another time:

Sometimes we will talk it over again later on... like it's not as if I bring her up all the time, but we do sort of chat over in a sort of friendly conversational way about things that have happened in the day and maybe it's that wasn't the best way to go about it and maybe we can think about doing it the better way next time.

*Discussed, explained.* Participants reported that they intervened verbally, with discussions or explanations in order to curb their children's undesired social behaviours. They also seemed to talk about the negative consequences of these undesired behaviours and to encourage alternative behaviours by helping children to generate options or by providing them with examples of more desired behaviours.

Kim reported that, in order to engage Renée in helping to solve a problem, she sometimes chose to reintroduce the issue for discussion at a later time. April indicated that she uses explanations and illustrations to address Ryan's undesired behaviours:

I expressed to him that that's not the way. I'm trying to teach him to always be honest and upfront, for more reasons than one. You're going to get in more trouble if you lie to me. You have to be honest with people or people are never going to believe you. I told him about the story about crying wolf...

*Monitored and intervened.* Participants endorsed the importance of parentally mediated social interaction for their preschoolers, and seemed to conceptualise intervention in varying degrees. One way that participants facilitated their children's social competence was by intervening judiciously. Stephanie reported that, as much as possible, she refrains from interrupting Billy's interactions with his sister:

Most of the time he's pretty good with her and I let him. And I watch. I don't want to always be butting in to what he's doing because he's going to have to establish, and he is establishing, his own relationship with her and he's establishing his own relationship with other kids. And so I try to just observe as much as possible, and only intervene if there is a danger or something, or if he's not being gentle with her or something. If they're fine, I don't want to hear any crying.

Parents pointed out that they were also vigilant for signs of escalating behaviour and intervened in social interactions when needed in order to redirect play and to head off escalating behaviours. Like Stephanie, Victoria articulated similar criteria for when she might be needed to mediate sibling interactions:

If we're boiling up, I'll intervene and try to help her negotiate. Give her some ideas of things to say, give her, you know, some ideas of things to do, or help the sister say some things that can help Mariah. Give her outs and that kind of thing. But if it starts to turn physical, or if someone starts crying I'll say, 'Hey, do you guys need

help in there?' And they'll tell me yes or no, and I'll come and help negotiate the issue.

Mika described needing to intervene in a somewhat more complex social situation. She tried to help Alyssa understand when a socially desired behaviour – offering to a guest an item that they admired – crosses the line. She reported:

I did make the distinction that it was something that someone had given her, so that it wasn't appropriate for her to pass that on. I told her it was very nice to offer it but really since it had been given as a gift, she would be better off keeping it herself.

*Reminded of acceptable behavioural options and/or consequences for continued misbehaviour.* As another means of discouraging undesired social behaviour, participants utilised reminders of desired behaviours or of negative consequences for continued undesired behaviours. April explained that she tends to deal with misbehaviour by detailing both benefits and consequences. Kim shared a saying that she uses with her daughter. It comprises both a reminder of the desired behaviour and implies the consequence if that expectation is not met. She tells Renée: "When we leave nicely, then we get to come back."

One day when they were out shopping, Victoria spelled out in stages the behavioural changes that she wanted her daughter to adopt:

I asked her to calm down and use a quieter voice. I finally whispered into her ear that I didn't like her behaviour and she needed to be quieter if we were to stay in the store. I politely asked her stay near me and lower her voice, then I more emphatically whispered my expectations to her and the consequences if they were not met.

*Were mindful of age-appropriate behavioural expectations.* Participants reported having ideas about age-appropriate behaviours and privileges, and used these ideas when interpreting if and how to censor preschoolers' behaviour, and when explaining to their preschoolers that behavioural expectations have changed from when they were younger. When her daughter's behaviour about sharing her bike escalated, Mika said that, after the incident, she told Alyssa that: "It was completely unacceptable. And I thought she was behaving like a two-year-old, and really now that she was four that sort of behaviour was not on. And it was never going to get her what she wanted anyway." Similarly Kim told Renée that behaviour which was tolerated when she was toddler was no longer appropriate:



"That's when you were one, but now you're five." Victoria also noted that her expectations for Mariah's behaviour have changed:

I come down harder on Mariah which I think Mariah thinks is unfair, which it is. But I think it's also age appropriate. Maybe I should discuss that fact. You are older and I expect different things because you have this ability to do different things.

This is a consideration for Stephanie too, who tempers her behavioural expectations for Billy by reminding herself, "I just have to keep remembering that he's only five." Age appropriateness also comes into play when older children are allowed to do things that younger siblings are not. As Victoria reported, "I said, well, you're older, you're able to do that. Two-year-olds don't get to do that."

*Enforced negative consequences.* Participants applied punishment or withdrew privileges in response to their preschoolers' undesired social behaviours. Mika reported that, in response to her daughter Alyssa's poor sportsmanship, her family has a new rule: "We got to the point where we wouldn't play with her. We wouldn't play any more games if she was overtly disappointed and grumpy if she lost." April found that restricting access to a favoured item is a particularly effective consequence with her son, Ryan. She recalled,

We had taken it away because he, the other night I was having a conversation with his big brother. I was bathing the two little ones and Ryan found a rock and hit his brother on the head with it... You don't do that kind of thing. So he got his pocket knife taken away because, the spanking, the timeouts, I found that if you take something away that really means a lot to them, then they're going to learn not to do it again.

Similarly, she wrote that she withdrew playtime when she caught her son being dishonest: "He had to go straight to bed as quick as we got home, and no bike or skateboard until further notice!!!"

#### *Facilitator of Emotional Competence*

For participants, facilitating their preschoolers' emotional competence seemed to comprise two main categories, under which several tasks were subsumed. Participants indicated that they

- encouraged preschoolers' emotion awareness, expression and management, and
- responded to their children's expressed emotions.

*Encouraged Emotion Awareness, Expression and Management*

In order to facilitate preschoolers' emotional competence, participants apprised them of anticipated events, and helped preschoolers to express and manage their emotions and to problem-solve choices for emotion expression. They encouraged their children to be aware of others' emotions, and utilised awareness of their own emotions and coping to more effectively respond to preschoolers' expressions of emotion.

*Prepared for upcoming situations and facilitated transitions.* All five participants reported that they prepared their preschoolers in advance for upcoming situations they were likely to face, and facilitated the transition to those new situations. They did this by explaining to or discussing with the preschoolers what they might expect to happen, and the behaviours that would be expected of them in these situations. The intent of preparing the children in this way seemed to be to promote management of emotions and behaviours by fostering familiarity and shaping expectations of the situations they would encounter. In their stories, participants provided examples of situations where they employed this strategy, both with positive emotions such as building anticipation and excitement, but also to cope with possible feelings of fear, anxiety or sadness. Transitions and, in particular, first week of school transitions were a common hurdle that their preschoolers were struggling to navigate.

One of the ways in which participants facilitated their preschoolers' emotional competence was by encouraging the children's awareness and articulation of emotions. Participants encouraged their preschoolers to label and articulate their emotions about upcoming events. For example, Victoria said that she and Mariah discussed that it is possible to experience multiple emotions concurrently. Victoria seemed to use opportunities like these to normalise Mariah's feelings about starting school:

Well we've been talking about it a lot leading up to it. How she's excited, but also nervous. How you can feel two things at the same time, and that everybody will be nervous, not just her. And even I was going to be nervous on my first day working.

All of the participants seemed to encourage their preschoolers' emotion management by preparing them for what to expect. Both April and Stephanie took a step-by-step approach to what was going to happen when they prepared their preschoolers for the first week of school. Stephanie said,

We walked to school in the morning and I would go through the scenario. The practice of, 'Okay we're going to go in, you're going to hang up your pack. You're going to turn your card over saying you're here. You're going to go read the board, you're going to do this... And then I'm going to kiss you and leave. And you know I will be back to pick you up.' I made him walk through it with me about three times on the way down there.

April's strategy for the new school year was similar to Stephanie's. She reported telling her boys,

'Okay, I've made the call, you guys are starting school tomorrow. We're going to go get some school clothes, it's time for school to start, everybody's starting school on Tuesday, and you guys, you're part of it.' So I think that probably, the prepping them for it. And me getting excited, and explaining what school is, and what you do there, and how there's kids your own age, and it's good for you. All those scenarios, all those things.

April said that this is a strategy she has been using more frequently of late:

Every night when I put them in bed I tell them what the next day is, and the events that are going to happen the next day, and kind of prepare them for what's to come. So when they wake up in the morning they know what's going to happen.

For example, she prepped Ryan when their family went to visit some new friends. April recalled, "I told him that he was going to be up late because we were going to be over at these people's house, that he really needed to behave himself and be a really good boy."

Mika also reported that she is a strong proponent of this strategy. Holding in awareness Alyssa's competitive streak, Mika discussed her upcoming birthday party:

In advance, we had sort of had the talk about the sharing and all that sort of thing. And I'm a firm believer in prepping a child for what's going to happen, and who's going to come, and what's going to go on at the party, and all those sort of things. My plan for Saturday is, over the next couple of days, you know, to describe what's going to happen when somebody else wins. She'll go over and congratulate them, and then, hopefully, in another game she might win and we'll congratulate her. And it's going to be so much fun, and it's all about playing the games.

Victoria took a long-term approach to preparation. In order to prepare her preschooler for starting school, she enrolled Mariah in gymnastics class so that she would

have experiences socialising with new children and being away from her mother for finite periods of time. Victoria said that she also had been using role-plays to help Mariah prepare: "We have been working toward this day for at least a year– play acting school days."

*Facilitated problem-solving.* Another way in which participants facilitated emotional competence was by involving their preschoolers in problem-solving their emotion expression and management. Of Renée's expression of angry feelings, Kim said, "I've tried to do that with her, actually sit down with her, not in the moment, and say like, I'm really worried about this problem. And then have us brainstorm all the things she could do." Victoria takes a similar approach with her daughter. She recalled inviting Mariah to offer options for what they could do when Mariah feels frustrated: "I'll say, 'What will help you? What can we do that will help you feel better about this?'" This approach worked for them in other situations, like with Mariah's determination to conquer her fear of the dark. Victoria recounted,

I gave her the problem and asked for solutions. I made boundaries/limits on the solution. I accepted her idea and helped her follow through. My attempts to control/rationalise her thoughts had not helped, so I turned the problem over to her and asked for input.

*Facilitated awareness of others' emotions.* For emotion awareness, participants also encouraged their preschoolers' to consider others and how they might be feeling. Victoria reported that, in general, she and Mariah talk about their own and others' emotions every day. She said,

Just somebody randomly that you see, who might be feeling a particular emotion. I think just over and over us talking about, 'Look at so and so, hear the baby crying, what do you think is wrong with that baby in the store?' Or whatever. 'Make a sad face, make a happy face, make an angry face, tell me how you're feeling.' Talking about all those things, I think, has made her more aware, given words to it and helped her to kind of see it in others, maybe where she couldn't see it before.

Kim, concerned about her preschooler's responses to others' emotions, took advantage of a teaching moment to increase Renée's awareness of how her friend might have felt. After one situation where she witnessed her daughter interacting with some friends, Kim recalled discussing it with her:

I just wanted her to really be aware of how that girl might feel when they all go to kindergarten together, and how she might have felt at first when you were just dancing together and not dancing with her. I just asked her, 'How do you think Lindsay felt?' And I just suggested that the next year she be aware of being welcoming to both girls, *and* willing to meet other friends. Anyway, I just encouraged her to work on it.

*Were aware of, managed and discussed their own emotions and coping.* In order to foster their preschoolers' awareness, expression and management of emotions, participants reported that they also talked to their preschoolers about their own emotions. Kim said, "I try to use feeling statements with her about my own feelings: 'I felt embarrassed when you used a loud voice to me in front of the others.'"

Victoria reported taking a similar approach to encouraging Mariah's emotion awareness. She said,

I talk about how I'm feeling about things and marrying it with my behaviour. I just say, 'You know what? I'm really frustrated today, and this water stuff's not working.' Or, 'I'm really tired, and I just need to rest for a few minutes.'

Kim and Victoria also pointed out that managing their own emotions and expressions was important to facilitating their preschoolers' emotional competence. Victoria shared,

My other challenges sometimes are not letting my own anger take over when I see her doing something I don't want her to do and just trying to stay calm and help her get through it without expressing my anger about how she's behaving, you know, in an unproductive sort of way. And I can let her know I'm disappointed and I'm angry but I don't need to go overboard on that.

Victoria concluded, "Me stating about my own stuff has really helped her."

Like Victoria, other participants noted that articulating emotions with their preschoolers seemed to be having positive results. Mika said,

I'd usually go, 'You know, I'm actually quite grumpy today.' And then, and she is getting quite good at saying, 'You know last night, I was a bit grumpy.' And then I would say, 'Yes you were a bit grumpy.'

Parents said they noticed that when they were able to manage their own emotions, they were better able to respond effectively to their preschoolers. Much like Victoria's response, Kim said,

I got mad at her and just said, 'Go to your room until you're calm, and then we'll talk about it.' I was able to say it with so much love instead of being mad at her for how she was acting. And I just felt so much better about making her go to her room. She still resisted, she went and then I felt like our conversation afterwards was so much more fruitful because I didn't get mad at her so we didn't have to talk about 'I'm sorry that I yelled at you' and kind of cloud it.

*Responded to Children's Expressions of Emotion*

In order to facilitate emotional competence, participants reported that they responded to their preschoolers' emotions. More specifically, they tended to respond to preschoolers' expressions of emotion by attending to the emotion, by focusing on the observed behaviour, and by reasoning with the preschooler. In some instances, participants also reported attending to their own emotions.

*Attended to preschoolers' emotions.* In responding to their preschoolers' expression of emotions, participants attended to the emotion. They reported clarifying and validating their children's experiences, and reassuring them. One way in which participants seemed to attend to preschoolers' expressed emotions was by asking clarifying questions to better understand their experiences. Victoria articulated her general strategy: "First I get the blow-by-blow of what happened, and then I say, 'Well, how did you feel when this happened?' And we talk about each thing." She continued, providing several examples of the questions she might ask: "What is it that worries you? Are there things you don't sometimes like to share? Sometimes when you're angry do you do things that you wish you hadn't done?" Similarly, Mika reported that she would say, "What's wrong? It's okay."

Participants' stories also demonstrated the ways in which they listened, reflected, validated and normalised the emotions communicated by their preschoolers. Stephanie said, "We're trying the best we can to say 'Yes, you can be angry and frustrated. Yes, it's okay to be angry. We all get angry. We all get mad, we all get frustrated.'" Victoria and Kim gave illustrations of the ways in which they empathised with their preschoolers. Victoria said,

I try to empathise: 'I know how you feel, I was there too.' I listened to her. I expressed how the issue must be important to her. I was saying, 'Yeah, I can see that sometimes it would be easier not to have a sister.'

Kim gave a recap of her typical approach,

I try to say 'it sounds like' and then look at how she says it. So I was like, 'It sounds like you're really sad that she had to go. It sounds like you're really mad that she said she was leaving soon and then I said it's time to go.'

In attending to their preschoolers' emotions, participants also provided support, comfort and reassurance for them. Parents illustrated the ways in which they provided reassurance when their preschoolers are nervous. April told Ryan, "There's nothing to be afraid of, Mama and Papa are here. I just said, 'Come here and I'll hold you.'" In light of Mariah's nervous feelings about her first day at a new school, Victoria said, "I told her she was safe at preschool, I knew she was scared, that I would be back after lunch." Stephanie's school drop-off strategy included reminding Billy of a book they had read together. She recalled, "We did *The Kissing Hand* a long time ago. So sometimes I'll say, 'Where am I?' And he'll put his hand to his cheek." This example from Kim illustrated how all of the types of participant responses can work together:

I asked her what she was worried about, what she was concerned about. I pointed out that there were other girls who didn't appear to have tap shoes on. And that all the other girls had their first dance, ballet as well, and they totally understood why she didn't have tap shoes, that they had gone through this too. And I just said, 'It's okay, and, we'll get them. Go in and give it a try.' And I said, 'If you don't like it, you don't have to join. We are just trying it.'

*Focused on the ways in which the emotion was expressed.* In responding to their preschoolers' expressions of emotion, participants sometimes focused their attention on the ways in which the emotion was conveyed. In these situations, the parents seemed to respond by directing the preschoolers towards preferred alternative behaviours and expressions of emotion. They also responded by reminding preschoolers of negative consequences they could expect if they did not alter their undesired expressions of emotion.

Victoria and April instructed their preschoolers to rephrase their verbal expressions. Victoria recalled telling Mariah, "That's not a polite way to talk to me. I need you to be more polite." April recounted her response: "I have to look back at him and say, 'You can't talk to Mama that way. I understand that you're upset right now, but this is the way that it has to go.'"

Stephanie and Mika focused on behavioural expressions of emotion and reported telling preschoolers to perform preferred behaviours. Stephanie said,

If he gets mad and he's acting out, I say, 'You've just got to bring it down a little bit, kid, because this is getting out of hand.' And I go, 'Well, I don't know what to do either!' Like he's having a tantrum or something and I'll say, 'Well we just need to take a deep breath and calm down.'

Similarly, Mika recalled the way in which she responded to Alyssa when she became upset and abandoned playing with her friend:

I told her really that she needed to pull herself together and that Adam was her guest, and she needed to go down. If she wasn't prepared to go down and play with him with a happy face, she really needed, she should consider going to her room because no one wanted to play with a grumpy, crying girl.

Finally, in responding to their preschoolers, participants reminded them of the negative consequences that they would earn for continued undesired expressions of emotion. For example, Mika said, "I told her that if she didn't stop sulking we would have to leave." Likewise, Stephanie told her preschooler that he would be removed from the situation. She said, "I just grab him and sit him down and tell him to stop and tell him the consequences. 'If you don't stop, then yes, we'll go home, but you're not playing. You're sitting on the spot. You have to stop this behaviour, you're a big boy.'

*Reasoned, discussed, explained.* Participants used rationale to try to alter preschoolers' emotions or expressions of emotion. Kim and Victoria both reported having used reasoning to attempt to temper their daughters' feelings of frustration. About their first frustrating morning of attempted shoe-tying, Kim recalled,

I kept telling her, 'Look, it takes people a long time to learn how to tie their shoes.' And I said, 'You know, you can't expect to do it right away. It's going to take you at least a couple days or a week.' I just said that is what happens for most people. That is a reasonable expectation for yourself.

Victoria illustrated the way in which she approaches discussions with Mariah. In this instance, Mariah was very upset after having been hurt by a friend who refused to apologise. Victoria reported:

We just talked about it, and I told Mariah what I thought about two-year-olds versus four-year-olds, and that I don't think Lily intended to hurt her. I think she was just trying to show her something right in her face maybe. But, you know, that she wasn't trying to injure Mariah when she did it. I said, 'Well, I don't think two-year-



olds look at the world the same way as four-year-olds. And she didn't realise she would hurt you.'

Stephanie shared how she used explanations to try to help Billy manage anxious feelings about transitioning to his new school:

I kept pointing out, 'You know, you're closer here at this school than you were at your old school. You know where home is, you can walk home in 10 minutes. You know I'm not far away...' And I said, 'If you ever get scared, or you don't feel well, just have them call me and one of us will come get you. You know, you're not stuck here.'

When they gave away their cat's kittens, April, to lessen Ryan's sadness about that loss, explained the situation to him. She reported,

The way that I handled it was, 'Smoky's able to have more kitties.' I said, 'I'm sorry but, you know, your brother had planned this. He had asked us and we said it was okay, but don't worry about it. I know you didn't get to say goodbye to the kitty, you got to love it a little bit.' But I was like, 'Smoky's able to have more kitties. Someday she'll have more kitties.'

*Attended to own emotions.* When responding to their preschoolers' emotions, participants sometimes attended to their own feelings. In these instances, parents seemed to react to their preschoolers' expressions of emotion by articulating the emotions that the children's behaviour elicited for them, the parent. For example, Stephanie said,

I finally just told him the other day, I said, 'Billy, you know, I'm really tired of the drama and the showboating and everything that you're doing. I'm really tired of it, I don't want to watch it.' I said, 'Billy do you know what embarrassed means? I mean, you're embarrassing yourself and you're embarrassing me.'

Mika's response resonated with Stephanie's. She reported,

I was a bit frustrated and annoyed, to be honest. I just felt, here we go again. When I went to talk to her, I asked her what was wrong, but I sort of made a jeer. I wasn't really that happy with her reaction to the situation and she really needed to get a grip.

Participants also attended to their own emotions by responding to their preschoolers in a manner similar to which the participant would want others to respond to them. Stephanie explained,

My way is, if he is out of control, or just angry or frustrated or whatever he is, I go totally quiet. I practice ignoring him. Because I know that my way when I'm mad or upset or frustrated, I go silent. I deal with it myself. I don't want to talk about it.

*Advocate for Social and Emotional Well-being*

Participants' roles in facilitating their preschoolers' social and emotional competence included that of advocate. Recurring threads running through their stories indicated the nature of their concerns about their preschoolers' social and emotional well-being, as well as the tasks that comprise this role. Parents indicated that they:

- maintained awareness of their children's characteristics and needs,
- desired specific social and emotional outcomes for their preschoolers,
- conceptualised parenting roles and tasks they expected to undertake,
- recognised parenting challenges they have encountered in supporting their preschoolers' social and emotional development, and
- would seek resources to better address their parenting concerns.

*Considered Preschoolers' Characteristics and Needs*

Each parent's story illustrated the ways in which she considered her preschooler's unique characteristics and needs in her decision-making. One of Stephanie's initial concerns was the type of schooling environment that would best suit Billy's needs:

I would not normally have been drawn to putting him in preschool, except at the time I thought he was going to be an only child, and so I knew that he had to establish peer relationships. I investigated Montessori and different places and decided that this better fit his personality. I was afraid that if I kept him at home he would just wither.

Recognising that he seemed to have a difficult time making transitions, she said of Billy,

I think he must mentally rehearse a whole lot. And when he is done rehearsing and feels confident, then he just does it. He won't do anything until he feels confident doing it. And if we force him to do it, or we make him do it, and he's not ready, it doesn't do any good.

Stephanie said that one of Billy's characteristics was that he seemed to need additional time to make transitions. With this in mind, she was especially concerned about helping him to cope with his growing anxiety about the upcoming move to a new school:

We do things to keep him occupied but, at the same time, he's just got to deal with that, I don't know how. As he goes through life he's going to have anxiety about what's going to happen in the future, and he just has to learn to deal with it. So it's just a matter of waiting out the next couple weeks until he actually goes to kindergarten and realises that it's going to be okay. We can tell him it's going to be okay, but it's one of those things where he doesn't have the experience to know it's going to be okay. He just has to find out. I thought well, should I home school him and keep him home? Because his anxiety is killing all of us. But no, he's going to have to go through it.

To this end, Stephanie began to orient Billy to his new school during the summer.

Kim reflected on her daughter's seeming lack of awareness of others' feelings, as well as on Renée's tendencies toward perfectionism. She spoke about the way in which she addressed one incident with Renée and her friends:

The way I reacted was deciding that this is something I'm going to have to talk to her about, and help her see how that might make the other girl feel. I said, 'You don't have to have equal friendships with everyone. It's okay to be really, really good friends with Sarah but you need to be inclusive and be open to this other girl and other people.'

Throughout her stories, Kim cited situations that showed her increasing awareness of the ways in which Renée pushed herself to perform perfectly:

I've realised that I've got a child who puts immense pressure on herself. I guess I had an inkling or whatever but I didn't realise the extent of how much drive she has. So that definitely has set off kind of a red flag for me, and I asked already one educator and I'm going to... I have a parent discussion group. I'm going to ask the leader of that if she can recommend something that I can read about helping somebody manage perfectionism and this like drive, whatever overachieving drive, so that she doesn't, I don't want her to end up with any kind of self-esteem issues or who knows how it can play out. And I don't want to, I don't want to unconsciously promote that.

Recognising this, Kim decided to change her approach to working with Renée. She said, By making her erase her As or erase her numbers and stuff and do them again because I was like, 'This has to be your best work, it has to be really neat.' And I

realised that I don't need to say those kinds of things because she already has enough going on inside.

*Were Mindful of Desired Social and Emotional Outcomes*

Participants articulated their concerns about and desires for their preschoolers' long-term social and emotional outcomes. For Stephanie, it was important that Billy grow up to be compassionate. Of her goals for her children, she said, "I don't care what else they do in life, I want them to be kind." And, for Billy in particular, Stephanie wanted him to become emotionally resilient in order to cope better with difficult transitions. She described it this way:

The next challenge will come up. And each time he has this memory of, well, I made this change and it was okay. So by the time he gets old enough, it's like, oh yeah we'll live through this. I don't think any of us, we can't teach them that.

April indicated the importance of protecting Ryan from future vulnerabilities like peer pressure and ensuring positive long-term outcomes for him through the teachings she is providing as he grows:

If you train your child the right way, I think they can grow up to be decent, well mannered and thoughtful people. Considerate, respectful and all of those things. I don't want my child, my four year old, to be capable of tricking people or, you know, telling people fibs. I don't want to raise my boys to just be little hoodlums. If other kids are doing things that he knows that's not the right way to do, I don't want him to feel like he has to do it or give in to peer pressure, or go throw rocks at the school window. I don't want him to be part of that. I want him to know there is good and there is bad in life, and we're all human. I want to raise them the way that they are productive and, you know, not in jail.

A thread that ran through several of Kim's stories about her daughter, Renée, was the importance of fostering her awareness of the consequences of her actions and of others' feelings, and to help her to learn empathy.

I would like to hope that she just learned just even like a little bit, she became aware of the situation, the possibility that a friend could be excluded. I feel concerned. You know it makes me wonder, well, first of all, why. And then wondering, because again I really believe that a lot of the things they learn, they learn unconsciously just by living with us. And I'm like, 'Do I not show empathy? Do

I need to work on that?' And then the other thing is I worry about just her as a person. I want to help her to be the best person she can be, so I definitely want to work with her more on this skill, which I do. When it happens I definitely talk with her about it, but maybe I need to work on that some more.

Mika wanted to help Alyssa temper her competitiveness, and to shift from seeking external approval to relying on an internal sense of a job well done:

I want her to be conscious of other people's ability... taking pride in her own achievements without having to brag about them to everyone else. I want to encourage her to be more self-satisfied in her achievements than always looking for the external thing. I mean, obviously, as a parent I will always give it to her. But I just feel that she needs to sort of feel happy with what she's done herself, not feel the need for that external affirmation.

*Recognised Their Challenges in Supporting Preschoolers' Social and Emotional Development*

In addition to considering their preschoolers' individual characteristics and needs, participants seemed to conceptualise their parenting challenges in light of desired social and emotional outcomes for their children. April reported that one of her main challenges was having enough time to create the learning opportunities she wants for her children. Another challenge, she said, was being an effective disciplinarian:

I could probably use some help with getting them to mind me. When I say something I mean it, and I don't mean it in 10 minutes, I don't want to ask you five times to do something, I need it now.

A pressing concern for Stephanie was whether her interventions were reaching Billy in ways that were useful for him. She explained:

I'm usually trying to figure out how his little brain is processing stuff. And I know that I may be saying something, that he's hearing something totally different, but I don't know what it is. And I also have to realise that I need to say some things only once and he hears it. Even though he doesn't indicate it. And the scary thing is I never know what he's picking up, or how he's processing it, because again, they don't have the vocabulary to express it.

Mika indicated that her challenges included Alyssa's competitiveness, and helping her to adopt more socially appropriate ways of expressing feelings of disappointment. Her

concern is that in doing this, she might unintentionally communicate to Alyssa that she should stifle her expressions of emotion in general:

I wrestle with that a little bit too because I really don't want to suppress these emotions but at the same time you have to teach that it's inappropriate to react like that when you're just playing a board game. It's something I struggle with a little bit because I feel, obviously, as her parent, I'm her greatest advocate and I want to encourage her, and have a very positive environment. But at the same time, I don't want her being a cocksure child who, you know, which I, I know she's only small but, I do sometimes see her like bragging about what she can do, and the other person can't do it. And we do have, we have to have little talks about that because I wouldn't like to see her grow up to be someone who brags about her abilities.

Mika said that she was also concerned about how to introduce to her daughter the idea that all strangers may not be safe without curbing Alyssa's natural friendliness.

That's actually a little bit of a tricky one because, while I obviously encourage her to be friendly and open, especially in that sort of context of hiking along where people tend to be fairly friendly to each other, it's hard. I sometimes wonder how I should balance that with the whole stranger-danger issue, you know. So I think that is a challenge, but I think for now, when I'm with her still a lot or when she's not in her own company in these situations I would be happy to see her continue on that basis of being open and friendly and honest with peers. For now I just focus on telling her that she's not allowed to go anywhere without asking me. You know, that sort of being the message I've been trying to... So hopefully, if we can continue to play on that, she can hold her own if she gets talking to somebody who wants to encourage her to do something she doesn't want to do. It's a frightening thought.

Third, Mika wondered about the best way to encourage Alyssa to intrinsically value an activity without seeking external praise.

I've been thinking about that a little bit actually. I mean, it started like if she's doing coloring or something like that, and she'll show me her coloring book that she's coloured in. And she'll ask me what I think of it, and I'll try and bounce it back to her and ask her what she thinks of it. 'And is she proud of it? And does she think she did her best job?'

Victoria articulated that she has struggled with her daughter's growing independence, finding her own ways to cope with emotions. She recognised that it was sometimes difficult for her to accept Mariah's ways of dealing with her emotions.

My challenges are that sometimes I just want to make it all better for her, and I can't, and she doesn't let me. She needs to do it herself, and that's very hard for me. I just want to be there to hug her, but she doesn't want that. It's just me trying to learn how to accept them [Mariah's emotions] as they come and not make her feel like they're not right. Sometimes it's hard to do that as a mom, even if you believe it. Sometimes when you're in the middle of dealing with it, it's tough.

*Conceptualised Parental Roles, Tasks and Goals*

Participants seemed to perceive their parental roles in light of their preschoolers' individual characteristics and needs, desired social and emotional outcomes for their preschoolers and the parenting challenges they experienced. For example, Stephanie appeared to see her parental role as provider of support, reassurance and safety. She said, "A lot of times as parents we're helpless. I mean we can't live our kids' lives, we can't make them see that it's going to be better. We can assure them."

Kim appeared to see her role as championing her preschooler and seemed to consider it her task to figure out how best to help Renée cope. In particular, Kim found that communicating to Renée her positive expectations for behaviour has had promising results. She explained,

I think I've been expecting more out of her, and she's been rising to the occasion. I realised that the more I expect out of her and the higher... the more I show that I believe in her, the more she begins to believe in herself. And the more I ask of her, things that she truly can do, the more she can do, and the more she wants to do. And also, I just realise that like, so basic and obvious, you know, positive things kind of, when I'm positive, when I'm encouraging, when she's doing well, she feels so good that she wants to keep doing well, and keep feeling that way.

Kim explained that, in order to more effectively support Renée's social and emotional development, she needed to continue to increase awareness and management of her personal struggles, such as putting aside her own feelings, and restraining her own perfectionist tendencies: "I'm putting aside sort of myself and my ego somewhat to just kind of try to be there for her. That's more important."

Victoria appeared to see herself as a companion and guide whose approach is to encourage her preschooler to consider other perspectives and experiences. She said, for example: "Just trying to get her to try more and be more daring about stuff. Be willing to put herself out there. 'If you want to play with somebody, then just ask. The worst thing they can do is say no.'"

April seemed to view her parenting role as that of protector and guide, helping Ryan to learn and to value their family's behavioural standards:

Our job as parents is to protect our kids. Although I appreciate and I value Ryan's thoughts and his opinions and I'll definitely take it into consideration, but it's not one of those things where it's my way or the highway... It's just the way I want to do things and the way that my husband wants to do things. When you grow up you can raise your kids the way that you want to, but this is the way that I've chosen.

*Consulted with Friends, Other Parents and Professionals*

Three participants indicated that if they were concerned and unable to resolve issues that their preschoolers were facing, they would seek information and assistance. April indicated that apart from seeking help for Ryan if he experienced a problem, she would want to learn how to better manage it as well. She said that her assistance-seeking strategy and the professional she would choose to consult with would depend on the nature and severity of the issue her preschooler was facing.

Stephanie shared some of her history of seeking professional consultations about Billy's experiences. For example, she reported consulting with his paediatrician when Billy was slow to talk. In the more recent past, in light of his friendly nature, Stephanie worried about Billy's safety and apprised his preschool teachers of her concerns:

I had to stress here at the school, they do the good-touch bad-touch, because I really want him to learn that you don't take up with just anybody. When we take him anywhere, you *do not* leave with anybody but us. We have to really drill him on this because he would just go off with somebody because they are his best friend.

Similarly, she consulted with teachers at his new school when Billy experienced a difficult transition and continued to tantrum every morning for weeks after the new academic year had begun.

Kim recalled that she enlisted the teacher's help to promote Renée's friendship skills:



I just talked to her teacher two or three times and got information about what... I wanted to make sure what she was saying, that she was perceiving the situation correctly. I wanted to find out from the teachers how they were seeing the situation. I made them aware of just how much it was influencing Renée and making her feel bad. And so then we all worked together to tell her how to be a friend. We worked with her to learn that maybe you just need to walk up, you can't just hang back. You have to ask if you can play. It's not like they're excluding you, some people were, but anyway. I know the teachers can provide that as well, but they weren't aware that she was having as hard of a time as she was with it. They thought she was maybe not as sensitive as she was.

### *Question 3 Summary*

In terms of supporting social and emotional development, parents appeared to function in the roles of facilitator of social competence, facilitator of emotional competence, and advocate for preschooler's social and emotional wellbeing. Within these roles, participants reported that they performed various tasks.

In terms of facilitating social competence, parents talked with their children about friendship, created opportunities for social interaction, encouraged sharing behaviours, discussed desired and undesired social behaviours, modelled desired behaviours, monitored and intervened as needed to redirect behaviours, reminded children of negative consequences for continued misbehaviour and enforced those consequences.

In order to facilitate emotional competence, parents promoted their children's awareness, expression and management of emotions by preparing children in advance for situations they would face, helping them to make transitions and encouraging their awareness of their emotions, others' emotions and parents' emotions. Participants also responded to their preschoolers' emotion expressions by attending to the expressed emotion, focusing on the undesired expression, and using rationale.

In addition to their roles as facilitators of children's social and emotional competence, parents acted as advocates for children's social and emotional wellbeing. In this role, parents recognised their preschoolers' individual characteristics and needs and, in light of these, articulated desired social and emotional outcomes. They also reported awareness of their own challenges in supporting their children's social and emotional development. Parents shared their conceptualisations of their parenting roles with regard to

their preschoolers' characteristics and desired social and emotional outcomes for their preschoolers. Finally, participants indicated that they would seek professional support if they perceived that their preschoolers were experiencing difficulty developing social and emotional competencies.

## V: DISCUSSION

How do parents understand children's social and emotional development? This study examined parents' understanding of children's social and emotional competencies, their perceptions of how these competencies develop, and the roles that parents play in the process of social and emotional development. I proposed that parents' understanding influences their parenting behaviours and, in particular, the tasks they perform within the parenting role. Because parents' views are not reflected in the research literature about children's social and emotional development, I hoped that this study would illuminate specific areas of strength as well as areas in which parents might need support to foster children's optimal social and emotional outcomes. I also hoped to augment the extant quantitative literature with the richly descriptive words of parents, their experiences and their views.

Using a multi-case method, I utilised a month-long series of interviews and journal entries to collect data that reflected parents' ideas about their preschoolers' social and emotional development. Thematic analysis indicated that parents viewed their preschoolers' development as the increasingly spontaneous performance of prosocial behaviours, and that this growth was the product of a combination of processes that included adult intervention, children's direct experiences, observational learning and maturation. Finally, this analysis yielded various parenting tasks from which emerged three main themes. That is, parents saw themselves as having three primary roles in supporting the social and emotional development of their young children: facilitator of social competence, facilitator of emotional competence, and advocate for children's social and emotional well-being.

In this chapter, I discuss the contributions of the cross-case findings in light of current research literature, and explore the implications of these findings in terms of theory and practice. I also use this chapter to explore the limitations of the study and directions for future research.

### *Contributions*

#### Parents' Understanding of Social and Emotional Development

The first two research questions explored parents' understanding of children's social and emotional competencies by examining parents' observations and interpretations of their preschoolers' behaviours. With these questions, I aimed to uncover parents' perceptions of

indicators of social and emotional development and processes that facilitate the acquisition and development of their preschoolers' social and emotional competencies.

Findings indicated that parents viewed friendly, helping, sharing or comforting behaviours as desired social competencies, and that they perceived the development of these competencies in the increased regularity with which children demonstrated interest in, openness to and awareness of other people, and spontaneously performed prosocial behaviours, necessitating less parental intervention. In terms of emotional competencies, parents reported that verbal communication of emotional experiences was preferable to physical expressions. They expected that the development of their preschoolers' emotional competencies would entail increased emotion management resulting in fewer physically reactive behaviours as well as the increased verbal communication of emotions. Given these findings, parents' general understanding of their children's social and emotional competencies and their expectations of the development of future competencies reflect characterisations found in research literature which defines social and emotional competence as a set of skills, knowledge and abilities related to recognising and managing emotions, communicating clearly, developing positive relationships and avoiding negative behaviours (CASEL, 2003).

It is important to uncover parents' understanding of children's social and emotional development because this understanding is related to the ways in which they interpret children's behaviour, interact with and provide learning opportunities for their children (Benasich & Brooks-Gunn, 1996; McGillicuddy-Delisi, 1992; Miller, 1988; Palacios et al., 1992). Ultimately, parents' understanding of children's social and emotional competence is related to children's social and emotional competence. Further, parents whose developmental expectations are similar to the expectations of developmental psychologists are thought to be better able to foster healthy child outcomes through parent-child interactions as well as through the provision of appropriately stimulating environments (Palacios et al.).

Parents perceived that children's social and emotional development was facilitated by adult intervention, direct experience, observational learning and maturation. Adult intervention was the most endorsed facilitator of children's social and emotional competencies, followed by direct experience. Additionally, parents viewed observational learning and maturation processes as contributors to children's development of social and

emotional competencies. While two parents thought that learning by observation contributed to fostering sharing, it was endorsed by four of five participants in terms of fostering children's understanding of what others feel, second in that category only to adult intervention. Thus, these parents seemed to view the development of their preschoolers' social and emotional competencies as overwhelmingly parentally-mediated. This finding is important to note since it implies that parents do not view children's social and emotional development as innate, occurring automatically. In fact, from their perspectives, parenting behaviours are most influential as indicated in their involvement in three of the four facilitators of children's social and emotional development.

Parents' responses demonstrated the ways in which children's social and emotional development is facilitated within parentally-mediated opportunities. Specifically, in addition to guiding children's social interactions, parents model social and emotional behaviours that children observe and, in this way children also acquire competencies. Parents also provide and create social situations in which children are able to learn by interacting with and observing the behaviours of others. Finally, parents intervene to mediate children's social interactions, to promote prosocial behaviour alternatives, to encourage emotion awareness, articulation and regulation, and to respond to children's emotions.

The importance of parental involvement is supported by research literature which indicates that the acquisition and development of social and emotional competencies occur in early socialization contexts which ultimately have great influence on children's social and emotional competence (Guralnick, Neville, Connor, & Hammond, 2003; Ladd, 1999; Maccoby, 1992; National Research Council and Institutes of Medicine, 2000). These contexts include the family, peers and parents' friends; situations that are all created by parents. Further, these findings are consistent with the idea of engaging children in the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). That is, parents who view children's development as the interaction of innate abilities and environmental opportunities are more likely to provide stimulating experiences that both extend children's capabilities and allow them to experience success (Palacios et al., 1992).

The findings of this current study indicate the importance of parentally-mediated facilitation. However this was not consistent with the findings of Rubin and Mills (1992) who investigated mothers' beliefs about developmental influences on their preschoolers' social competence, and concluded that these mothers believed their children's social competence

to be largely self-mediated. Given the proactive socialisation strategies employed by the mothers in this present study, Rubin and Mills' finding stands in direct contrast to these participants' understanding of how their children develop social and emotional competencies and the role of parents in this development, as will be discussed later in this chapter. The disparity of these findings also begs the question of whether social outcomes for children differ for children whose parents understand social and emotional development as parentally-mediated and actively promote children's developing competencies, and those whose parents who do not.

#### Parents' Understanding of the Parental Role in Children's Social and Emotional Development

The third research question explored parents' perceptions of the ways in which they influenced children's acquisition and development of social and emotional competencies. In terms of fostering children's social and emotional development, parents saw themselves as performing three roles: facilitating social competencies, facilitating emotional competencies, and advocating for children's optimal social and emotional outcomes given each child's needs. Within each role, parents performed various tasks.

Parents indicated that they supported children's development of social competencies in several ways. First, all of the participants reported that they facilitated social interaction by talking about friendship with their preschoolers and by creating opportunities for them to play with peers. Encouraging socially desired behaviours was another way in which parents reported that they fostered their preschoolers' social competencies. The specific tasks they undertook included talking about, modelling and implementing strategies for sharing, and providing situation-specific examples of socially desired behaviours. All five participants reported that they took active roles in facilitating sharing, and three said that they assisted their preschoolers by providing them with options for desired social responses. Third, parents supported children's social competencies by discouraging undesired behaviours. This support included having discussions about undesired behaviour, monitoring and intervening when needed, reminding of negative consequences and of preferred behaviours, considering age-appropriateness of expectations for preschoolers' behaviour, and enforcing consequences. Each of the aforementioned tasks was reported by at least three participants.

In terms of the ways that parents supported children's social development, these findings fit with research literature that details the varied ways in which parents foster

children's social competencies. It is seen as important that parents arrange for social opportunities with peers, monitor and mediate children's activities, and give advice about how to negotiate social interactions (Parke et al., 2002). Additionally, the number of play opportunities that parents create for their children is thought to be directly related to children's level of prosocial skill (Diener & Kim, 2004; Parke et al.).

In terms of facilitating their children's emotional competencies, parents encouraged children's emotion awareness, expression and management, and responded to their children's emotion expressions. In order to encourage emotion awareness, expression and management, parents reported that they prepared their preschoolers for and facilitated transitions, assisted with affective problem-solving, encouraged awareness of others' emotions, and managed and discussed their own emotions and coping. All of the parents reported that they prepared their preschoolers for and facilitated transitions. Transitions can be especially distressing for children, and learning to successfully adjust to transitions is associated with positive outcomes (Dishion & Stormshak, 2007).

In terms of awareness of their own emotions, regulating emotions and discussing their emotions with their children, two participants, Kim and Victoria, provided a majority of the responses in this category. Parents' reactions to their own emotions is thought to influence children's emotional competence by teaching them empathic skills and prosocial reactions to others' distress (Denham & Grout, 1992). These two participants also reported using affective problem-solving with their preschoolers and encouraging their awareness of others' emotions. Discussing emotions with children is another important means of facilitating their emotion awareness and understanding (Parke et al., 2002).

When responding to their preschoolers' expressions of emotion, parents reported that they attended to the emotion or the undesired expression of emotion, and used reasoning, discussions or explanations. In terms of attending to their preschoolers' emotions by asking clarifying questions, providing validation or reassurance, two participants, Victoria and Kim, again provided a majority of the responses in this category. The other three participants did not report that attending to their preschoolers' emotions in this way was a consistent strategy that they used to facilitate emotional competence. Attending to children's emotions, particularly when they are distressed, is especially important as it has been found to predict children's emotional competence (Denham & Grout, 1993; Zhou et al., 2002).

Parents' facilitation of children's emotional competencies appeared to be less robust than their facilitation of social competencies. Whereas the social facilitation tasks that parents reported paralleled research literature in this area, many of the recommended emotional facilitation tasks were not reported by three of the five participants. That is, while all five participants reported encouraging their children's emotion awareness, expression, and management via preparing them for and facilitating transitions, this is the only task in the theme of facilitator of emotional competence in which all of the participants are represented. For other tasks that comprise the role of facilitator of emotional competence, only two of the five participants consistently appear. Specifically, April, Mika and Stephanie responded less often and in fewer task categories than did Kim and Victoria.

Further review of the evidentiary database also showed that Kim and Victoria were the two participants who seemed to consistently attempt to reflect and validate their preschoolers' emotion expressions, to seek clarification of their preschoolers' experiences, and to offer support and reassurance when their preschoolers seemed to be experiencing distressing emotions. This review also indicated that, while all of the parents reported using rationale to respond to their children's emotion expressions, Stephanie, for example, almost to the exclusion of other types of responses, tended to respond to her son's emotions or expressions of emotion with explanations about why he should feel or act in other ways. Stephanie's responses also indicated that she seemed to have difficulty distinguishing Billy's feelings from her own. That is, while she appeared to think that she was responding to her son's emotions, her words reflected what she seemed to be experiencing. In this example, in response to Billy's tantrum behaviours during the morning transition to school, Stephanie reported having said to him:

'Billy you know I'm really tired of the drama and the showboating and everything that you're doing. I'm really tired of it, I don't want to watch it.' I said, 'Billy do you know what embarrassed means? I mean, you're embarrassing yourself and you're embarrassing me.'

Billy's protests about going to this new school, crying and screaming that he did not want to stay there, might be seen to reflect fearful or anxious feelings, or perhaps frustration. This behaviour, however, did not seem to indicate embarrassment on his part.



Parents' ambivalence about how to address children's emotions was also evident. For example, when asked what she might do if her preschooler experienced difficulty expressing happy or excited feelings, April responded:

I would talk to his paediatrician probably and see where I can go. What's going on, why can't he show me that he's happy? Is there something that I'm doing wrong? Is he really not happy? You know, I don't know. That's what I would do, seek help...  
Tickle him.

On the one hand, this parent indicated that difficulty with expressing emotion may be significant enough that she would choose to seek professional help. Yet, in the next breath, she seemed to contradict herself by suggesting that the distraction of tickling could remedy this problem.

It is possible that parents may be reticent or unsure of how to address their children's emotions or expressions of emotion, which may in turn limit children's learning opportunities. For example, when asked about how she debriefs her preschooler's distressing emotions or undesired expressions, Stephanie shared that she prefers not to bring it up. She said, "If we have a good day I try not to probe too much because I don't want to wreck it. I want him just to enjoy having a good day." However, conversations about distressing emotions or undesired expression are important to help children to understand, label and express their feelings, and to learn more acceptable options for behaviour.

To effectively facilitate children's emotional development, research indicates that there are several key parental tasks. First, emotion-laden discussions are found to promote children's social and emotional competencies (Laible, 2004). Discussing emotions with children is important in that it encourages children's awareness and understanding of emotions (Parke et al., 2002). Conversations that include affective problem-solving are also thought to help children to internalize the values that parents are trying to convey (Laible; Parke et al.). Second, through parental expressions of emotion children learn socially acceptable ways to express emotions (Denham & Grout, 1992; 1993). Through parental expressiveness they may also learn empathy, a key component in social and emotional competence. Children also learn how to understand, regulate, and express emotions when parents model these skills (Denham et al., 1991; Denham & Grout, 1993). Further, when parents use clear, moderately intense expressions of and explanations about their emotions,

their children are judged to be more socially competent (Denham & Grout, 1992). For example, when parents are able to respond calmly to their own feelings of anger, their preschoolers are less apt to display negative emotion (Denham & Grout, 1993). Conversely, parents' poor regulation of anger predicted externalizing behaviour problems in children and, in particular, withdrawn, non-assertive peer interactions, and aggressive, antisocial behaviours (Denham et al., 1991, 2000). Further, parents' ability to regulate their own emotions is related to their ability to attend to children's emotions (Denham et al., 2000). Third, the ways in which parents respond to children's expressions of emotions, especially when children are distressed, have been found to predict children's emotional competence. That is, mothers' responses to children's emotion expressions are related to children's emotion expressiveness as well as children's responses to peers' emotions (Denham & Grout, 1993).

In sum, parents' understanding of their children's social and emotional development reflects characterisations found in research literature and theories of development. Participants also indicated that they understood parental mediation to be a significant contributor to preschoolers' developing social and emotional competencies. This understanding reflects Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory which views children's development as facilitated by interactions with more capable others. This view of children's social and emotional development as parentally-mediated is also important because parents whose ideas align with those of developmental psychology are thought to be better able to facilitate children's developing competencies. In terms of parentally-facilitated social development, parents' understanding of their tasks fit with research literature that details the varied ways in which parents foster children's social competencies. However, parents' facilitation of children's emotional competencies appeared to be less consistent. That is, two participants provided a majority of the responses and many of the recommended emotional facilitation tasks were not reported by three of the five participants. It is possible that parents may be unsure of specific strategies that effectively support their children's emotional competencies, which may in turn limit children's emotional development.

#### *The Zone of Proximal Development*

Vygotsky's social development theory informed this study, and is reflected in parents' understanding of children's social and emotional development. His theory holds that learners are working in their zones of proximal development when they are engaged in tasks that

they cannot yet do alone, but can do in collaboration with more capable others (Vygotsky, 1978). This suggests that, in order to work with learners in this zone, it is necessary for teachers to have an understanding of learners' current capabilities. It also suggests that teachers need to have ideas about ways in which they can facilitate new learning. Thus, in terms of this study, it is important for parents to understand ways in which they might effectively facilitate children's new learning or provide *scaffolding* to support their preschoolers' developing social and emotional competencies.

Participants shared instances in which they provided this type of scaffolding for their preschoolers' social and emotional competencies. In particular, parents reported interacting with their children in their zones of proximal development when providing them with desired communication or behaviour alternatives, utilising brainstorming and problem-solving discussions, and facilitating transitions. These parental behaviours provided children with additional tools to navigate challenging situations. In these situations, parents were likely interacting with their preschoolers at the level of what is possible for them to achieve, rather than at their current level of attainment.

Three of the five participants reported scaffolding their children's social competencies. In particular, Mika, Kim and Victoria demonstrated that they provided their preschoolers with communication options to encourage social mores such as introducing oneself, saying thank you and saying sorry. These three parents also provided this type of assistance to help their preschoolers to resolve conflicts. For example, Mika said,

Over time we've been encouraging them to deal with it themselves. I would tell her what she should maybe say to him that would help, and to stop, so that they wouldn't lash out at each other. So at this stage... I try to encourage her to figure it out for herself and like I say, give her some sentences or some questions to ask him or things to tell him. So, 'Tell him you don't like it when he does that and not to do it again.'

In terms of emotional competencies, all five participants reported assisting their preschoolers with transitions. However, responses from three of the five participants, Mika, Kim and Victoria, indicated that they used scaffolding when helping their preschoolers with articulating emotions and affective problem-solving. In particular, Kim and Victoria recalled soliciting their preschoolers' ideas in order to help them to express and manage distressing emotions. For example, in addressing her daughter's expressions of anger, Kim said,

I've tried to do that with her, actually sit down with her, not in the moment, and say like, 'I'm really worried about this problem.' And then have us brainstorm all the things she could do.

All of the participants endorsed adult intervention as an important means by which children's social and emotional competencies develop. However, an examination of the ways in which parents facilitated these competences indicated that their behaviours did not all reflect that they were interacting with their children in zones of proximal development. The reported practices of three of the five participants indicated that they worked with their preschoolers to stretch their capabilities using scaffolding. Two of the participants did not report interacting with their children in this way. Instead, these parents seemed to communicate to their preschoolers which behaviours were unacceptable without assisting them by providing desired behavioural alternatives. This suggests that, in terms of utilising Vygotsky's principles, parents may have an incomplete understanding of effective means of facilitating children's social and emotional competencies.

#### *Social Learning Theory*

In addition to adult intervention, participants indicated that learning by observation contributed to their children's social and emotional development. Therefore, in addition to interpreting the data from the perspective of Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory, I examined parents' facilitative tasks in light of Bandura's (1977b) social learning theory. While social learning theory was not a perspective that initially informed this research study, it provides a complementary view. Therefore, what follows is a brief interpretation of the findings through a social learning lens.

Social learning principles are reflected in the ways that parents understand the facilitation of children's social and emotional development. Parents in this study reported using modelling, as well as behavioural principles such as reinforcement and negative consequences to shape their children's social and emotional development. Social learning refers to any incident in which individuals acquire new behaviour or information about their environment via observation of others. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977b) holds that a combination of social and psychological factors influences behaviour. More specifically, people learn through observing the consequences of their own and others' actions and adjust their behaviour accordingly. That is, learners not only observe how behaviours are performed, but if they observe that models experience desired outcomes as a result of

performing a behaviour, learners are more likely to imitate and adopt that behaviour. Similarly, witnessing negative outcomes reduces the likelihood that a modelled behaviour will be adopted. Thus, a social learning perspective emphasises the link between the individual's behaviour and the environment.

Parents used modelling, reinforcement and negative consequences to facilitate their children's social competencies. By parents' reports, the use of consequences was a popular strategy for shaping children's social competencies: four of the five participants reported using consequences to discourage their preschoolers' undesired social behaviours. To implement negative consequences, parents most often reported that they removed their children from situations in which the undesired behaviour was occurring. However, parents also applied consequences by restricting children's access to favourite activities and possessions. Three participants indicated that modelling contributed to their children coming to be able to share and to get along with others. Additionally, two participants reported using reinforcement to reward their preschooler's desired social behaviours.

Parents reported using modelling and negative consequences to shape their children's emotional competencies. In particular, modelling was endorsed as a means by which parents believed that their children's emotional competencies were facilitated. Four of five participants said that learning by observing others was one way by which children came to understand others' emotions. Three parents illustrated how they matched their verbal expressions of emotion to their behaviours in order to model desired emotion expression for their children. Two participants reported that they used consequences to discourage their preschoolers' undesired expressions of emotion. However, participants' responses did not indicate that they used reinforcement to facilitate their preschoolers' emotional competencies.

According to social learning theory, behaviour is shaped by modelling, rewards and negative consequences. The findings of this study provide evidence that parents use social learning processes to influence children's social and emotional development. Consequences for undesired behaviour were used to shape social competencies more so than emotional competencies. Modelling was more often used to shape children's awareness of others' emotions. However, while parents reported using consequences and modelling to shape children's social and emotional competencies, reinforcement did not seem to be a popular strategy: parents' responses offered only two incidences where reinforcement was used.

In terms of facilitating children's social and emotional competencies, parents who view development in terms of social learning processes might consistently engage in certain behaviours. For example, they would consistently model preferred social and emotional competencies, and reward children's attempts to perform these. Parents' modelling has the added benefit of being cost effective in that it reinforces desired behaviours for the preschooler, and other children in the family will learn from it as well. If the goal is to facilitate children's short-term emotion management and long-term emotional well-being, parents might also reinforce children's expressions of emotion by affirming desired expressions, as well as by listening for and attending to the emotion being expressed (rather than the undesired expression).

Participants reported that because children learn by observation, parents need to be cognisant of what they model. However, social learning processes are more useful for describing what parents do to influence children's social and emotional development than for uncovering parents' understanding of what they do or why they do what they do. Additionally, what parents model may be as important as what they do not model; parents may unintentionally model behaviours which fail to facilitate children's competencies.

While modelling and reinforcement were not popular strategies for supporting their children's developing social and emotional competencies, it appears that behavioural coaching was more commonly used. For example, the application of negative consequences to discourage undesired behaviour was often preceded by reminders of preferred social behaviour. Participants reported that they coached their children, using prompts to remind them of desired behavioural options. In this way, parents seemed to be adept at setting up behavioural expectations and applying consequences for undesired behaviours.

Informing children of preferred behaviour is not a social learning principle, but is more reflective of tenets of Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory. In particular, interpreting the findings through a Vygotskian lens indicated that while all of the participants reported that adult intervention was key to children's social and emotional development, not all of them reported interacting within their preschoolers' zones of proximal development. However, in terms of both social learning theory and social development theory, it is important to note that parents' stated understanding of children's social and emotional development is not accurately reflected in the strategies that they utilised.

### *Implications*

In terms of their children's social and emotional development, the participants in this study reported sound understanding that largely paralleled research literature on social and emotional development. By parents' accounts, children's social and emotional development was manifested in incremental changes towards increasingly spontaneous prosocial behaviour. Specifically, parents perceived social and emotional development in their children's friendly, helping, sharing or comforting behaviours, and verbal rather than physical expressions of emotion. Thus, parents' understanding is akin to research literature which indicates that developing social and emotional competencies include fostering healthy relationships and recognising, managing and appropriately expressing emotions.

Parents' understanding of the ways in which children's social and emotional competencies are fostered reflected the interaction of multiple facilitators. That is, parents reported that a combination of processes including adult intervention, children's direct experiences, learning by observation and maturation foster children's developing competencies. This understanding resembles research literature which indicates that parents who perceive development in terms of the interaction of innate and environmental influences are more likely to provide stimulating opportunities that foster children's development.

Parents also seemed to know a great deal about facilitating their children's social development. Specifically, parents created opportunities for socialisation, and guided and monitored children's social interactions. The ways in which participants supported children's developing social competencies also aligned with research literature on social development. Research indicates that parents who actively facilitate social opportunities for children, are found to have children who are more socially competent.

There were several ways in which participants supported their children's developing emotional competencies. They reported encouraging children's awareness, expression and management of emotions, as well as responding to their children's expressions of emotion. Research reveals that children learn empathic responding and how to express emotions by witnessing parents' expressions of emotion, by parents' warm, responsive, supportive reactions, and by parents' frequent emotion-laden discussions. However, many participants seemed to know less about these effective means by which they might facilitate their children's emotional development.

Overall, findings suggest that it is not parents' understanding of children's social and emotional development *per se*, but rather their understanding or lack of understanding of specific tasks that comprise the role of facilitator of emotional competence that influences ways in which they attempt to facilitate children's emotional competencies. This research indicates that, despite their demonstration of sound understanding of social and emotional competencies and the ways in which they are facilitated, in practice parents' facilitation of children's emotional development may fall short.

By failing to effectively foster children's emotional competencies, parents may unintentionally worsen or maintain the struggles their children are experiencing (Dishion & Stormshak, 2007). Further, children may inadvertently acquire maladaptive skills. I do not mean to imply that parenting behaviours cause children's misbehaviour or undesired displays of emotion, or that these are "bad" parents or "bad" children. The participants in this study were a non-clinical population. Over and above this, the participants all appeared to be concerned, conscientious parents who were tuned in to their children's needs, and aware of the ways in which they might seek professional assistance, if warranted. In fact, each parent in this study articulated desired outcomes for her preschooler's social and emotional development based on the child's individual strengths and challenges. However, given the research literature on child development and, in particular, the murky relationships between parental knowledge, beliefs, behaviour and child outcomes, it should not come as a surprise that in this study parental tasks were not found to be accurately aligned with parents' reported understanding of the processes of children's social and emotional development.

So, what mediates parental knowledge of children's social and emotional development and child outcomes? This study's findings suggest that it may be parents' awareness of the specific ways in which to effectively intervene in order to influence desired social and emotional outcomes. However, it is likely that, in addition to parents' understanding, many personal and relational variables rest in the gap between their goals for their children and their parenting behaviours (Rubin & Mills, 1992). Regardless of the specific mediators of parents' knowledge and child outcomes, practitioners who provide support for children and families might consider the utility of ecological approaches to better understand where and how to target intervention (Dishion & Stormshak, 2007).



An ecological approach is a context sensitive, family-centred perspective for studying development. It recommends a move away from the behaviour and functioning of the individual, a traditional focus of the field of psychology, and draws attention to the developmental context (Dishion & Stormshak, 2007). In terms of children's social and emotional development, an ecological lens is important because we know that children's social and emotional competencies begin to develop in children's earliest contexts (Ladd, 1999). These contexts are most often the family system, and ecological characteristics of that system facilitate and maintain children's competencies. While children's developing competencies may be facilitated and maintained by the enduring influence of the family system, problems and deficits may also be supported by the family system. Further, we know that what parents do in interaction with children influences children's social and emotional outcomes (Collins et al., 2000; Denham et al., 1991; Denham et al., 2000; Denham & Grout, 1992; 1993; Diener and Kim 2004; Parke et al., 2002), and that intervening solely with children is unlikely to effect lasting change (Dishion & Stormshak; Ringeisen, Henderson, & Hoagwood, 2003). Thus, to optimise children's outcomes, family relationships and parents' interactions with children are critical targets for research.

Ecological assessment is key to conceptualising the strengths and needs of the family system and can highlight areas in which assistance may be needed (Dishion & Stormshak, 2007). In applying an ecological approach to the findings of this study, it would be useful to explore with parents the ways in which they currently provide support for children's emotional competencies, and to introduce families to empirically supported strategies that are more likely to result in desired child outcomes. It may well be that these participants intended their parenting behaviours to match their understanding of social and emotional development and goals for their preschoolers' outcomes. It is also possible that they are unaware that some of the ways in which they sought to do this were not capable of producing desired outcomes. Thus, supporting parents is an important avenue for promoting healthy child outcomes.

An ecological approach can provide systemic support for parents. And, as intervening with the individual child is unlikely to result in lasting change, intervening with parents alone is also unlikely to be effective. Therefore, ecological assessment would also allow for the exploration of the characteristics of other relationships within the family and

would expand the scope beyond the mother-child relationship as is presented in this research study.

### *Limitations*

In conducting this research, I hoped that elucidating parents' understanding of children's social and emotional development would be useful both in practice, and in generating avenues for further research. However, there are several limitations inherent in qualitative research that must be considered when interpreting these findings.

First, limitations come from the methods utilised. In this study, the number of participants included constitutes both a strength and a limitation. There is greatest potential to learn the most from cases that are the most accessible. However, while the small number allowed for greater depth of exploration of the issues via repeated contacts, more participants may have provided greater breadth in the findings. Further, with volunteers, there tends to be a selection bias. These participants may represent a special category of parents; as participation was voluntary, it is possible that parents who were knowledgeable or experienced in the subject matter chose to participate. I also do not know if the parents in this study were motivated to participate by some unknown factors that may also be related to their understanding of children's social and emotional development and, which may, therefore, have implications for my study and its findings. However, this bias is difficult to overcome without utilising the random sampling of quantitative methods.

The study participants were a rather homogenous group. Although within the participants there is some range in age and education, there appeared to be none in terms of gender, race or sexual orientation. All appeared to be Caucasian, First World females who reported that they were in cohabiting heterosexual relationships with the male parents of their preschoolers. With the exception of one participant, all had graduate level education. Additionally, all of the preschoolers were the oldest of their mothers' children. It is possible that mothers of other races and cultures, with different types of education, and/or with more years of parenting experience hold different views about children's social and emotional development, and those views may align differently with those of Western child development research and theory.

The homogeneity of the participants' circumstances also restricted the researcher's ability to interpret findings across sub-groupings of cases. That is, heterogenous cases would have allowed for the interpretation of parents' understanding of children's social and

emotional development in different contexts. Findings might have been more robust had they been reflected in cases with comparable contexts but not in cases with contrasting contexts (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

A criticism of the research literature on parenting beliefs and child outcomes has been the under-representation of fathers. My intent was to illuminate the processes through which both male and female parents understood children's social and emotional competencies to be acquired and refined. Therefore, it was disappointing, although perhaps not surprising, that no males volunteered to participate in this study. The lack of male participants may mean that my findings are gender-biased. The father-child relationship is undeniably an important part of a child's development. Thus, the findings presented here are but one piece of the picture.

Further to the method, biases are inherent in data gathered via self-report. Interviewing, for example, assumes that informants have complete access to their experiences. However, information collected by self-report can consist only of what participants are able to understand and articulate, what they remember or what stands out for them, and what they are willing to share at a given point in time. Interview data may also be biased if participants provide socially desirable responses in an effort to comply with the researcher, although they may have little to contribute. Along the same vein, the interviewer may respond in ways that reinforce certain types of participant responses, making them more likely to recur. The particular wording of questions may also have unintended influence. However, when the information sought is not directly observable, it is difficult, if not impossible, to gather this kind of data without relying on self-reports.

In this study, my aim in having participants complete a series of journal entries and repeated interviews was to facilitate parents' ongoing consideration of the issues being studied. During the interview process, several participants reported that these were issues they had never before thought to articulate; insights they had never considered. It often seemed that participants were structuring their thoughts and searching for words to represent their ideas even as I was asking the questions. However, I cannot be sure that my aim was achieved. It is still possible that the information sought was not fully accessible to parents. For this study, therefore, a parent's failure to endorse a particular theme may be because her child did not experience that, the parent had not witnessed or interpreted the child's behaviour in that way, or simply because the parent did not recall particular instances

during the data collection phase. Therefore, these are all things to be aware of when reviewing the findings and the interpretations made of them.

This research was also influenced by my subjectivity as a researcher and the theoretical lenses through which I made interpretations. These can also be seen as limitations, in that the questions that I asked and the ways in which I analysed and interpreted the elicited data were based on my own understandings and perceptions. I believe that social and emotional development rests on learning, and that early socialisation contexts play an important part in providing strong, positive foundations for growth or weak foundations that children must struggle to overcome in order to achieve healthy outcomes.

A final limitation of this research was my own oversight. In particular, when asking parents about facilitation of children's social and emotional competencies, a logical next question that I overlooked would have been, "How do you think that children your preschooler's age come to understand and express their feelings? Are parents involved and, if so, how?" I also wish that I had asked participants to reflect on their observations of things that do *not* support children's social and emotional development.

#### *Directions for Future Research*

In addition to giving voice to parents, with this research I hoped to contribute to the child social and emotional development literature by illuminating factors that mediate parenting knowledge and behaviours. Findings suggest that, in addition to their understanding of social and emotional development, parents might benefit from an awareness of specific and effective strategies that facilitate children's social and emotional competencies. The study's findings and limitations suggest directions for future research.

First, it would be useful to extend this study using a larger number of participants as well as participants who vary in gender, race, culture, and family constellation. In particular, one study participant wondered if parenting experiences (and therefore, by extension, the study's findings) might differ for adoptive parents. It is likely that the ways in which parents understand children's social and emotional development is influenced by parents' own experiences. It is also likely that the contributions of fathers or other co-parents may further increase our understanding of the variables that lie between parental knowledge and parenting behaviours.

In addition to further investigating parents' understanding of children's social and emotional development, future studies might explore parents' facilitation of this

development and, in particular, the ways in which parents encourage children's emotional competencies. It would also be important to solicit parents' thoughts about the importance of emotions, and their views about the necessity of less reactive behaviours when experiencing strong emotions and verbal rather than physical expressions: "Why do you think it is important to do it this way?" And, "How is that important to your child/your child's development?"

Interestingly, during the data collection phase of this study, participants spontaneously revealed aspects of their own childhood experiences. While those disclosures were not a focus of the current study, it is likely that parents' childhood experiences are related to their parenting behaviours. Future research might therefore explore parents' childhood experiences and how they relate to their current parenting practices.

Further to their facilitation of children's social and emotional competencies, studies might also explore parents' self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977a). Do parents think that their parenting behaviours are effective in terms of bringing about desired child outcomes? How do evaluations of self-efficacy influence the parenting behaviours they choose? It seems that inherent in self-efficacy is the belief that one's efforts will have the intended result. However, it would also be important to know how and where to direct those efforts. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that little or no effort will be expended on a task unless an individual recognises that the desired outcome is attainable, and is within their scope.

Finally, given the exploratory nature of this study, investigating parents' understanding of children's social and emotional development using other research designs might yield valuable results that further contribute to the knowledge-behaviour gap. For example, research utilising mixed methods could provide the breadth and causality of quantitative research with the depth and richness of qualitative approaches. Longitudinal studies might allow us to see if and, if so, how parents' understanding evolves as their children grow older, and verbal communication takes the place of physical expression. In her member check, one participant reflected that the issues which seemed so central one year ago all seem to have resolved. It would be interesting to do a long-term study to uncover parents' perceptions of how these issues resolved, parents' contributions to resolution, and if their patterns of responding remain the same or change with their children's development and their own experiences. It would also be important to move

beyond the preschool age to gather parents' perspectives on social and emotional development in later childhood.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

This study explored parents' understanding of children's social and emotional development in terms of the ways it is seen to manifest in children, indicators and facilitators of competence, and the parental role in fostering these competencies. In parents' voices, the findings suggest that parents understand children's social and emotional development as the increasingly spontaneous performance of prosocial behaviours, and a shift from more physical to more verbal communication. This understanding parallels social and emotional development as put forth in research literature. In practice, however, there appeared to be some disparity between parents' encouragement of social and emotional competencies.

By exploring processes and teasing out tasks that parents reported, the findings of this study uncovered an important gap in parents' understanding of children's social and emotional development. In terms of social competencies, most of the participants reported that they supported their preschoolers' in ways that research literature has found to be effective. When compared to the research literature, parents' support of children's emotional competencies was significantly less robust. A majority of the participants did not report performing many of the tasks crucial to encouraging their preschoolers' emotional competencies. This indicates that, while parents may appear to be well able to support their children's developing social and emotional competencies, children may be missing out on some necessary parts of their emotional learning.

These findings suggest that parents may require support in order to effectively facilitate children's social and emotional development (Maccoby, 1992). While there is still much to be learned about parents' facilitation role, this study helped to disentangle the threads that comprise parents' understanding of children's social and emotional development and to delineate the processes through which they influence children's development. Further, this study evidenced the important influence of the characteristics of early socialisation contexts on child development, and indicated the utility of environmental avenues of support for children's healthy development.

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***Hello,***

**I'm Natalie, a doctoral student in Counselling Psychology. I'm looking for volunteers to participate in my dissertation research which will involve stories about preschool children.**

**If you are a parent who:**

- **Is primary caregiver for a child of 4 – 5 years old,**
- **Has not had formal training in child development,**
- **Is willing to participate in recorded interviews, and**
- **Is willing to complete journal entries...**

**For further information about participating in this study,  
please contact me by**

**E-mail: [njmoore@interchange.ubc.ca](mailto:njmoore@interchange.ubc.ca)**

**OR**

**Voicemail: (xxx) xxx-xxxx**

**Project title: Parents' understanding of children's social and emotional development  
Principal investigator: Dr. Marion Porath, professor, UBC  
Co-investigator: Natalie Moore, doctoral student, UBC**



## Appendix B: Letter of Informed Consent

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### Letter of Informed Consent

Title of Study: **Parents' Understanding of Children's Social and Emotional Development**

Principal Investigator: **Marion Porath, Ph.D.**  
 Professor, University of British Columbia  
 Dept. of Educational and Counselling Psychology & Special Education

Co-Investigator: **Natalie Moore, M.Ed.**  
 Doctoral Student, University of British Columbia  
 Dept. of Educational and Counselling Psychology & Special Education

Purpose: This dissertation study will explore parents' views about how preschoolers develop social and emotional skills. Research findings will be used to inform child development literature from parents' perspectives.

Participants: You are being asked to participate in this study because you

1. Are an adult caregiver of a child between the ages of four and five.
2. Voluntarily responded to a recruitment flyer.
3. Are fluent in English.
4. Are willing to share information about your preschooler including your observations of your preschooler during events that occur within the family.
5. Are available and willing to participate in the series of weekly interviews and journaling for the 4 weeks of data collection required for this study.
6. Have not received formal training in child development or parenting skills.

Procedures: Your participation in this study will include

- one personal interview with the co-investigator lasting approximately 60 minutes;
- four (4) 15 minute weekly follow-up interviews, either in person or on the telephone; and
- one month of journal entries. Each entry will take about 15 minutes, and will ask you about daily observations of your preschooler, and your thoughts and feelings.

Interviews will be tape recorded and transcribed, and the data stored securely and confidentially. After all the data have been collected, you will be asked for your feedback about your contributions.

- Potential risks: There are no known risks to participating in this study.
- Potential benefits: It is hoped that sharing stories about your child's skills and your involvement in his/her experiences will enhance your understanding of how children's healthy development may be supported.
- Confidentiality: Your participation in this study and your identity will be kept anonymous. All the information collected will be kept confidential and stored securely. Any direct quotes reported in the findings will not contain identifying information.

You may direct your questions or concerns to  
 Ms. Natalie Moore: [njmoore@interchange.ubc.ca](mailto:njmoore@interchange.ubc.ca) or (xxx) xxx-xxxx  
 Dr. Marion Porath: [marion.porath@ubc.ca](mailto:marion.porath@ubc.ca) or (604) 822-6045

If you have any concerns about your rights as a research subject and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the 'Research Subject Information Line in the University of British Columbia Office of Research Services' at (604) 822-8598

***I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary, and that I may choose to withdraw at any time. My signature below indicates that I have understood the above, that I consent to participate in this study, and that I will receive a copy of this consent form for my own records.***

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Participant's Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Co-Investigator's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

## Appendix C: Main Interview Protocol

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Informant's pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_ Preschooler's given name/age: \_\_\_\_\_

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1. Together we will review and sign the informed consent. The limits of confidentiality will be re-stated, as the researcher is ethically bound to report certain offences.
  2. Orienting statement: ***Thank you for indicating interest in participating in my research. For this study, I will be talking to parents to get their views about how preschoolers develop socially and emotionally. I imagine that as the parent of a young child, you have had numerous opportunities to observe your child in action, and to form opinions about how they grow. We don't yet know very much about what parents think about children's social and emotional development. However, parents' views are important because we know that children's early experiences can have long-lasting effects. This study is an opportunity for parents' perspectives to be reflected in the research literature. Therefore, I hope that you will freely and honestly express your observations, views and opinions of how children develop.***
  3. Summarize construct & provide respondent with definition & competencies ([www.casel.org](http://www.casel.org)).  
*A cumulative process that begins early. Interdependency of emotional and social competence. Desired outcomes: Relationship with self (emotional state of wellbeing): emotion awareness, understanding, regulation, appropriate expression; Relationships with others: emotion recognition, understanding and empathic responding*
- 
- ***I hope that you will share with me stories about [your preschooler].***
  - ***Before we begin, do you have any questions or concerns? (Is there anything I can do to help you feel more at ease?)***
  - ***I expect that this first interview will last about 1 hour. I will start recording now.***

### **Tell me about [your preschooler].**

- What do you notice about his/her personality?
- Could you share an example of a time when you witnessed that? Where were you? What was happening? Who else was there?
- What did you say/do?

### Social development

#### **FRIENDS**

- Can you tell me a story about [your preschooler] and his/her friends?
- How does [your preschooler] express his/her friendship?
- How do you think children [your preschooler]'s age come to be able to get along with others?
- Do you notice any changes in his/her friendship skills as [your preschooler] gets older?
- What do you think accounts for this?
- Are parents involved in helping their preschoolers get along with others? If so, how?

#### **SHARING**

- Can you tell me a story about a time when [your preschooler] shared something?
- How do you think children [your preschooler]'s age come to be able to share things with others?
- Do you notice any changes in his/her sharing skills as [your preschooler] gets older?
- What do you think accounts for this?
- Are parents involved in helping their preschoolers share? If so, how?

**EMPATHY**

- Can you tell me a story about a time when [your preschooler] reacted to another person's feelings? What happened? What did s/he do?
- How do you think children [your preschooler]'s age come to be able to understand what others are feeling?
- Do you notice any changes in how s/he reacts to others' feelings as [your preschooler] gets older?
- What do you think accounts for this?
- Are parents involved in helping their preschoolers understand and react to what others are feeling? If so, how?

*Emotional development***NEGATIVE EMOTIONS**

- Can you tell me a story about a recent occasion when [your preschooler] was sad/angry/frustrated/disappointed? How did s/he express this feeling?
- What do you think this was trying to communicate?
- How did you respond?
- What changes do you notice in the expression of these emotions as [your preschooler] gets older?
- What do you think accounts for this?
- For children [your preschooler]'s age, if a child were able to manage sad/angry/frustrated/disappointed feelings well, how might it look different from a child who seemed to have difficulty managing these feelings?
- If [your preschooler] had difficulty managing these feelings, what would you do? Why would you do that?

**POSITIVE EMOTIONS**

- Can you tell me a story about a recent occasion when [your preschooler] was happy/excited? How did s/he express this feeling?
- What do you think this was trying to communicate?
- What changes do you notice in the expression of these emotions as [your preschooler] gets older?
- What do you think accounts for this?
- For children [your preschooler]'s age, if a child were able to manage happy/excited feelings well, how might it look different from a child who seemed to have difficulty managing these feelings?
- If [your preschooler] had difficulty managing these feelings, what would you do? Why would you do that?

**DISCUSSING EMOTIONS**

- Can you tell me a story about a conversation you had with [your preschooler] about feelings? What happened? Where were you? When/what time of day?
- How did you react? What were you thinking then? Feeling?
- What did you hope might be the outcome of that interaction?
- How did [your preschooler] respond? What do you think s/he was thinking? Feeling?
- What do you think s/he learned from that interaction?
- Do you think it is helpful to discuss *your* feelings with [your preschooler]?
- Now that you are recalling this situation, what thoughts are you having? What feelings?

## Facilitating questions:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| ○ Can you tell me about a time when that happened? | ○ What do you make of that? What does that mean to you? |
| ○ Can you say more about that?                     | ○ How do you think that relates to _____?               |
| ○ What might _____ look like?                      | ○ It sounds like you're saying that _____               |



In closing:

- What do you think is needed to help children become socially and emotionally skilled?
- What do you think parents need to know in order to be able to support their children social and emotional skills?
- What are your challenges in supporting [your preschooler’s] social and emotional development?
- If parents wanted to learn about how to improve their skills in supporting their children’s social and emotional development, how would they most want to learn?
  
- ***Is there anything else you’d like to discuss before we go?***
  
- *If I could, I’d like to get some information about you...*

| <b>About you:</b>                                  |             |                      |                    |                 |
|--|-------------|----------------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| <b>DOB/Age:</b>                                    |             |                      |                    |                 |
| <b>Sex:</b>  | Male        | Female               |                    |                 |
| <b>Highest level of education achieved:</b>        | High school | Associate’s degree   | Bachelor’s degree  | Graduate degree |
| <b>Relationship status:</b>                        | Married     | Single/Never married | Divorced/separated | Cohabiting      |
| <b>Age/Sex of each child in household:</b>         |             |                      |                    |                 |
| <b>Other caregivers in the home:</b>               |             |                      |                    |                 |
| <b>Occupation:</b>                                 |             |                      |                    |                 |
| <b>Best day/time to schedule weekly follow-up:</b> |             |                      |                    |                 |

***Thank you so much for sharing your views and your time with me.***

REMIND INFORMANT OF EXPECTATIONS REGARDING FURTHER DATA COLLECTION:  
**JOURNAL & WEEKLY INTERVIEWS.**

## Appendix D: Journal Guidance

Today is \_\_\_\_\_

**Journal***In terms of social and emotional skills, what did you see [your preschooler] do today?*


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*Which of these situations seemed most significant to you?*


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*What did you think?*


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*What did you feel?*


---



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*Would you say that [your preschooler's] behaviour in this situation represented growth in his/her social or emotional skills?*


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---

*If so, what did you notice that s/he used to do in similar situations? How did s/he behave before this?*


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*In terms of that type of situation, what behaviours would indicate to you that [your preschooler's] social skills were continuing to improve?*


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*In what ways were you involved in this situation? What, specifically, did you do or say?*


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*If needed, please feel free to continue your thoughts over page.*

## Appendix E: Weekly Interview Script

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Informant's pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of interview: \_\_\_\_\_

---

***Picture [your preschooler] during the past week. I'd like to ask you a few questions about your observations.***

Social:

- Regarding social skills, could you tell me about the ways you saw [your preschooler] behave this week?
- Was there one of those occasions that stood out for you?
- In what ways were you involved in this situation? What specifically, did you do or say?
- What were you thinking at that time? Feeling?
- Would you say that [your preschooler's] behaviour in this situation represented growth in his/her social skills?
- What do you think s/he was thinking at that time? Feeling?
- If so, what did you notice that s/he *used* to do in similar situations? How did s/he behave before this?
- In terms of [that occasion], what kind of behaviour would show you that [your preschooler's] social skills were improving?

Emotional:

- Regarding emotional skills, could you tell me about the ways you saw [your preschooler] behave this week?
- Was there one of those occasions that stood out for you?
- In what ways were you involved in this situation? What specifically, did you do or say?
- What were you thinking at that time? Feeling?
- Would you say that [your preschooler's] behaviour in this situation represented growth in his/her emotional skills?
- What do you think s/he was thinking at that time? Feeling?
- If so, what did you notice that s/he *used* to do in similar situations? How did s/he behave before this?
- In terms of [that occasion], what kind of behaviour would show you that [your preschooler's] emotional skills were improving?

***This week, in terms of [your preschooler]'s thoughts, feelings or behaviours, what became apparent to you that you hadn't recognised before?***

***This week, in terms of your own thoughts, feelings or behaviours, what became apparent to you that you hadn't recognised before?***

*Is there anything else you'd like to mention before we close?*

## Appendix F: UBC BREB Certificate of Approval



The University of British Columbia  
Office of Research Services  
**Behavioural Research Ethics Board**  
Suite 102, 6190 Agronomy Road,  
Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z3

## CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - MINIMAL RISK

|   |   |                                      |
|---|---|--------------------------------------|
| <b>PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:</b><br>Marion J. Porath  | <b>INSTITUTION / DEPARTMENT:</b><br>UBC/Education/Educational & Counselling Psychology, and Special Education | <b>UBC BREB NUMBER:</b><br>H07-00942 |
| <b>INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:</b>   |   |                                      |
| Institution   | Site  |                                      |
| N/A<br>Other locations where the research will be conducted:<br>Locations convenient to participants. |   |                                      |
| <b>CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):</b><br>Natalie Moore   |   |                                      |
| <b>SPONSORING AGENCIES:</b><br>N/A  |   |                                      |
| <b>PROJECT TITLE:</b><br>Parents' understanding of children's social-emotional development            |   |                                      |

**CERTIFICATE EXPIRY DATE: May 11, 2008**

|  |                                       |               |
|--|---------------------------------------|---------------|
| <b>DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL:</b>              | <b>DATE APPROVED:</b><br>May 11, 2007 |               |
| <b>Document Name</b>                                     | <b>Version</b>                        | <b>Date</b>   |
| <b>Protocol:</b>   |                                       |               |
| Research Proposal  | N/A                                   | May 2, 2007   |
| <b>Consent Forms:</b>                                    |                                       |               |
| Main Study Consent                                       | N/A                                   | May 2, 2007   |
| <b>Advertisements:</b>                                   |                                       |               |
| Recruitment Flyer  | N/A                                   | May 2, 2007   |
| <b>Questionnaire, Questionnaire Cover Letter, Tests:</b> |                                       |               |
| Weekly Interview Script                                  | N/A                                   | April 9, 2007 |
| Interview Protocol                                       | N/A                                   | May 7, 2007   |
| Journal Guidelines                                       | N/A                                   | April 9, 2007 |

The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

***Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board  
and signed electronically by one of the following:***

---

Dr. Peter Suedfeld, Chair  
Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair  
Dr. Arminee Kazanjian, Associate Chair  
Dr. M. Judith Lynam, Associate Chair  
Dr. Laurie Ford, Associate Chair