

Shifts from Circle of Security Parenting

01-02-2023

Theme: A New Perspective on One's Past

Shift/Capacity	Parent Quote
A common theme that the participants came to realize that they had not had their emotions validated and had lacked adequate role models in relation to becoming parents themselves.	<i>“I have grown up with a father who hasn’t been present. And I see what I have lacked there, right, and my mother was depressed when I was growing up, and she was a single mother and sole provider, so I see what kind of limitations I have had (...) And I see how it has affected me.”</i>
They expressed an understanding that emotional patterns are established early in life, and that the past in this sense leaves traces in the present. For instance, participants described patterns of overprotection, emotional suppression, or disconnection that they linked to their own background.	<i>“Because of things that happened when I was little, I am very overprotective of those around me.”</i>
A new ability to take the perspective of one’s parents and a greater understanding for and empathy with them.	<i>“When I know how her childhood was, I understand very much why she does things the way she does.”</i>
A new ability to take the perspective of one’s parents and a greater understanding for and empathy with them. This enabled the realization that parents had a difficult background themselves, and in many instances were trying their best with the limitations they had. A few had also been able to talk to their mothers about these issues in a non-blaming manner, thereby contributing to an improved relational connection.	<i>“When I know how her childhood was, I understand very much why she does things the way she does.”</i>
Participants expressed their wish to do things differently than their parents, to disrupt the problematic emotional patterns that had been repeating themselves across generations. They presented an increased awareness of what they wished to break with, and what they saw as valuable and wished to carry with them going forward. As such, the painful realization that their own past was more troubled than originally thought became a resource and motivation for change.	<i>“That I won’t have to transmit it, because that’s what I have been fearing, that I will transmit what mum has done because I don’t want that to happen.”</i>

Theme 2: Seeing Oneself More Clearly: Increased Capacity to Recognize and Tend to One's Own Needs

Shift/Capacity	Parent Quote
Nearly all the participants described an increased awareness of their inner experiences, and greater understanding of their own reactions and behaviors. This included being able to sense and notice feelings and sensations in a nuanced manner, to tolerate distress better, to be more aware of their boundaries, and to detect dysfunctional patterns as they were unfolding. In a variety of ways, participants gave voice to experiences of being able to give room for and make use of their emotional reactions – in contrast to these reactions being seen as merely unwanted or disruptive.	<i>“I have begun to learn to know when different emotions arise, instead of being like totally overwhelmed by them.”</i>
Several participants used the notion of “shark music” from the course to make sense of their own reactions. That is, they linked their own current emotional patterns to aversive experiences from their own childhood. In that way, reactions the participants had been ashamed of could be understood and normalized as consequences of maladaptive learning. This insight could in turn either help them not to act on these impulses, or to be able to be less judgmental of themselves when old patterns were repeated. Some participants also expressed greater clarity about their particular vulnerabilities, such as being tired or having difficulties with certain emotional reactions in their children.	<i>“In a way, handling things much, much better now after the course, after getting to know that shark music and when it comes. And not necessarily starting to work on it, but being able to place it. It can be here now and then I can take care of the kids.”</i>
A few participants also mentioned seeing both one's own children and other people more clearly and with more empathy after the course. This was described in terms of “waking up again”, or “coming out of a slumber”, accessing curiosity as a resource.	<i>“I think I became more curious. About her as a human and as a person. I used to think that she's just a copy of me and my husband, but then I started thinking and being more aware of her being her own person.”</i>
About half of the participants also described an increased acceptance of their own feelings, experiences, and limitations following the course. Some felt that there was more room to make mistakes, and not having to be perfect as a parent or as a person. Some gave voice to a more non-judgmental attitude to the shifting nature of emotional experience, and being able to allow and give space also to uncomfortable experiences.	<i>“Yes, ehm, when people said something that perhaps wasn't even meant to be mean, but I got so sad. So just being able to accept the fact that they did it, that's the way it is now. That is, I am ... I am sad. That's, that's the way it is.”</i>
Many participants also experienced an increased ability to gather themselves in emotionally challenging situations. This included descriptions of emotional reactions being experienced as less intense, as well as feeling calmer, more patient, and less stressed. Another notable feature here was descriptions of emotions appearing, but without escalating. Participants were either able to stay with emotions and allow them to pass, or they would use effective strategies to regulate their emotions—such as staying calm in the face of strong feelings, counting to ten, taking pauses or telling themselves that it's okay not to be fully in control.	<i>“Well, really pausing for a bit, and managing to think first. Because what it was like for me, I had blown a fuse so many times with my kids. So, I have been working on that. Pausing, calming myself, and then stepping into the situation. Taking, eh, taking a bit of a time-in with myself.”</i>

<p>“Increased self-care was another facet of this theme for many participants. It concerned being more aware of and considerate towards own needs, using supportive self-talk, seeking support in others, as well as doing constructive activities. Some also described being more able to stand up for themselves and setting clear boundaries.”</p>	<p><i>“At the same time, I can tell my kids that, you know what, right now mommy is really tired. I need to be allowed to relax. I didn’t dare to say that for the world.”</i></p>
<p>Finally, half of the participants described being on an ongoing trajectory of learning and change. This was related to attitudes of not having to be perfect but being allowed to work on things without necessarily getting it right at first. The changing of patterns was seen as a process that the participants had begun, but that was by no means finished.</p>	<p><i>“You are never fully educated as a parent. You aren’t. And that’s so nice, I think, just being able to remind myself a little about these things.”</i></p>

Theme 3: Becoming a More Competent Parent

Shift/Capacity	Parent Quote
<p>All participants shared how the COS-P course in various ways had changed their perception of the parenting role. They gave descriptions of feeling safer, stronger, calmer and more clearly in charge as a parent.</p>	<p>I got stronger. Now they know it's mom. Mom's the boss.”</p>
<p>Many participants had adopted the COS-model and concepts from the course and used them on a daily basis. Many referred to how they used the Circle to observe and understand their child and its needs in challenging situations.</p>	<p>Because you can easily place him in a category in those situations – where is he on the circle?”</p>
<p>The same mother described how the circle helped her understand that when the child moved away from her, it meant that the child felt safe and wanted to explore, and that it was not a sign of rejection.</p>	<p>“Now it’s like, you know what, he’s so secure in himself. He’s enjoying himself with others because he knows that mommy is there.”</p>
<p>They had seen the importance of being able to acknowledge and accept the child’s feelings, instead of meeting them with rejection or distraction. This was accompanied by an increased ability to provide the child with more space to express and act in accordance with their feelings.</p>	<p>“I can relax and receive his feelings, and be in touch with his feelings, and accept that, okay, now he’s angry, and it’s okay. Now he’s grumpy and that’s okay. And now he wants to joke around, and now he wants to explore and then he must be allowed to do so. So, I sit back a bit more, and let him find his way and figure out things on his own.”</p>
<p>The notion of “shark music” was also important for many participants to understand how their own background and experiences affected how they met and communicated with their child. This understanding helped them cope with their own anxiety and meet the child in a better way.</p>	<p>“I think it’s very much about using the shark music we learned about (...) I try to analyze myself and think like, okay, can I handle that he is sad right now? Or can I handle that he is angry? If I don’t, I try to think about the reason that I don’t, that I get it [the shark music], that I can’t stand this. And then I try to get a grip on that.”</p>

<p>Some participants found new ways of helping their child deal with anxiety, fear and overwhelming emotions. They also emphasized the change they saw in the child when they managed to handle the child's feelings more flexibly. Situations that previously would have escalated and become conflict situations, were now resolved calmly.</p>	<p>"You know, it's easy to escalate a conflict with kids. If you in a way can't stand to listen or just walk away, it just makes it much worse. Or it explodes if you start to argue against. So, I've noticed that if you just let them be, or in a way are there and curious as to why, it's like they get the real feeling off their chest, and then it immediately subsides."</p>
<p>Some participants shared how they now thought about the reason behind the child's emotional expression and behavior, and thus had gained a new understanding of the child's intentions. Linked to this was also fewer negative attributions about the child's motivation. These emotional expressions in the child would previously have created unrest and discomfort in the adult and could at times lead to rejection of the child. A better understanding of the child's intention had therefore contributed to a new way of meeting the child for these participants.</p>	<p>"And I learned much about how children never choose to be difficult. They never do. It is practically their last resort of getting attention. That became a lightbulb moment for me."</p>
<p>Some of the participants also shared how they had become better able to see the child as a child, not as a tiny adult. This opened up new curiosity and openness towards the child. Several participants described how the communication with their child changed, in that they gave the child more room for speaking freely and participating more actively in the family's daily life.</p>	<p>"It was almost as if when they had things to tell me, I could suddenly just walk away, right? (...) But now I let them finish talking. And we talk about things in a more thorough way, and they are allowed to voice their opinions and participate in activities in a whole new way."</p>
<p>A few participants, who had previously struggled with the child's need for physical closeness and soothing, experienced being better able to cope with this following the COS-P program. From seeing the child's behavior as an expression of clinginess, they were now able to recognize it as an expression of a legitimate attachment need.</p>	<p>"It was very instructive and there were many aha-experiences, about how extremely dependent they are on us, how much they need us."</p>
<p>Some participants said they had become more aware of the responsibility they have as an adult in the relationship with their children.</p>	<p>"I carry it with me and bring it out in order to remind myself: you are supposed to be stronger, you are supposed to be wiser, you are supposed to be safer. It is you who are the caregiver."</p>
<p>Several participants also experienced that the course had helped them understand their own need for control, and how this could prevent the child from exploring. They described having to work on letting go of the child and managing their own reactions evoked by the child's need to explore.</p>	<p>"To accept that I have to work on myself to give them that freedom. That it's natural, that I don't need to hold their hand. And that they are little free people that are supposed to experience things."</p>
<p>Some participants also expressed that although they now better understood what their child needed, they still at times found it difficult to respond adequately.</p>	

Other Program Outcomes

The COS-P program is aimed at facilitating parenting skills by way of learning about normal expressions of developmental needs and the attachment dynamics between safety seeking and exploration or individuation. The participants clearly in diverse ways conveyed an experience of having been strengthened as parents through new modes of understanding their children and more rewarding and meaningful ways of interacting with them. They experienced themselves as empowered: as more competent and confident caregivers, and as in charge of the situation, while being flexibly attuned to the psychological needs of their children. These are qualities that have been found to be associated with beneficial developmental trajectories (Albanese et al., 2019).

It is perhaps more intriguing that participation in a program that to such a large degree is dedicated to parenting, led to participants experiencing changes in the attitudes and relationship to themselves. In line with previous qualitative research, these beneficial developments included being better able to notice, stay with, and accept feelings and emotional reaction patterns (Gilhooly, 2018), as well as an increased awareness of their boundaries and a greater emphasis on self-care (Maxwell et al., 2021b). These are factors that are empirically linked to mental health and well-being, such as flexible emotion regulation (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010) and the use of acceptance-based strategies to manage psychological distress (MacInnes, 2006; Tibubos et al., 2019).

Specific changes include parents' increased capacity for self-compassion and emotion regulation, increased empathy for the child, increased sense of mastery of the parenting role, and a shift in focus from child (mis)behavior to parent-child relationship (Gilhooly, 2018; Maxwell et al., 2021b). Our findings also expand on existing knowledge, by exploring the parent perspective of participation in depth, and reporting exclusively on the parent perspective (in Maxwell et al., 2021b only facilitators are quoted regarding a shift from child behavior to relationship, for example). Our findings also contribute with new knowledge by showing how participation in the COS-P program influenced the way participants viewed and understood their own past relational experiences, and how they used this new and more nuanced understanding as a resource for acceptance and self-compassion, but also as a motivation for working hard to break unhelpful intergenerational patterns.

Source

Jorunn Helle, Jon Vøllestad, Elisabeth Schanche & Signe Hjelen Stige (2022). From seeing difficult behavior to recognizing legitimate needs – A qualitative study of mothers' experiences of participating in a Circle of Security Parenting program in a public mental health setting, *Psychotherapy Research*, DOI: [10.1080/10503307.2022.2132888](https://doi.org/10.1080/10503307.2022.2132888); <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/10503307.2022.2132888?needAccess=true&role=button>.

File location: COSI/Resources/Shifts from COSP