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## The Child Maltreatment Survivor's Description of the Process of Becoming a Parent: A Grounded Theory Study

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## The Child Maltreatment Survivor's Description of the Process of Becoming a Parent: A Grounded Theory Study

### Abstract

This research study was conducted to investigate the processes experienced by survivors of child maltreatment as they became parents. The study utilized a grounded theory approach to answer the research question, "How do survivors of child maltreatment experience the process of becoming a parent?" The goal of the study was to generate a theory about the actions, interactions, and emotions experienced by survivors of child maltreatment as they became parents. It was the intention of this study to enhance the knowledge base of the psychological profession. The research problem, the methodology chosen to answer the research question, and the findings of the data analysis are discussed in detail, as well as how the results of the research study relate to past research findings on the topic and the field of psychology. The results of this research study indicate that child maltreatment survivors desire to achieve an evolved parental identity, more specifically a parental identity that was a more developed form of the parental identity that had been achieved by the abusive parent(s) that served as their role model in childhood. The context and processes, as well as the factors identified as influential during the transition to parenthood, that influenced child maltreatment survivor's ability to meet their goal of acquiring an evolved parental identity are also discussed.

### Keywords

Child Maltreatment, Transition to Parenthood, Grounded Theory

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Child maltreatment occurs in every society and has stimulated a lot of public attention and research, not to mention support in the form of funding for research, but incidence rates continue to rise (Devaney & Spratt, 2009). Using 2007 value, it is estimated that child maltreatment costs \$103.8 billion each year in the United States, and this estimate only reflects costs specific to the victim (Wang & Holton, 2007). Costs, related to the perpetrator or the victim's family, and intangible costs, including quality of life or pain and suffering, are not included in the estimated costs. According to the National Institute of Justice Research Report (Miller, Cohen, & Wiersema, 1996), if both tangible and intangible costs were included, personal crime would cost victims approximately \$450 billion each year, and even though violence committed against children "is one of the least well-documented areas of personal crime" (p. 1), it "accounts for a significant portion of our nationwide victim costs" (p. 2). Due to the challenges associated with estimating the costs of child maltreatment, the estimates are reported to be conservative, meaning that the total costs associated with child maltreatment may be even higher. Reports of incidence rates may also reflect conservative estimates.

The results from three congressionally mandated national incidence studies have been reported and compared in an effort to evaluate the incidence rate, severity, and demographic distribution of child maltreatment (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996a). The data collected from these national incidence studies was also compared to data collected in previous studies in order to identify trends. These studies utilized nationally representative samples, two standardized definitions of child maltreatment, and identical definitions for child

maltreatment between the second (NIS-2) and third (NIS-3) national incidence study. Regardless of which definition was used, the more stringent Harm Standard or the broader Endangerment Standard, the incidence of child maltreatment increased significantly from the NIS-2, conducted between 1986 and 1987, and the NIS-3, conducted between 1993 and 1995. In fact, the number of children seriously injured and endangered quadrupled over this period of time. Because the incidence rates increased under both the Harm and the Endangerment Standard, it seems implausible to suspect that the increases reflect merely increased recognition and reporting of child maltreatment. In the executive summary of the Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect, Andrea Sedlak and Diane Broadhurst (1996a) expressed that it was “unreasonable to suppose that quadruple the number of seriously injured victims of abuse and neglect existed at the time of the NIS-2 and somehow escaped notice by community professionals” (Implications, para. 2). Since the population of the United States increased approximately 16% from 1980 to 1995 (Lahmeyer, 2003), it also seems implausible that the differences were due to increases in the rate of population. Sedlak and Broadhurst (1996a) report that the increase in incidence rates within the group considered to be seriously injured is significant, and seems to indicate that within the United States there has been a genuine increase in not only the scope but also the severity of child maltreatment.

According to the Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect, children were reported to be 1.6 times more likely to experience maltreatment in 1993 than they were in 1986 (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996b). In the United States between the years of 1990 and 1991 child maltreatment reports increased by six percent (Brosig & Kalichman, 1992). Child fatalities resulting from child maltreatment have also continued to increase throughout the years with approximately 1,356 reported fatalities in 2000 (Peddle, Wang, Diaz, & Reid, 2002), an estimated 1,530 in 2006 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2006), and approximately 1,760 in 2007 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2007a). The National Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research (2002) reported that in the year 2000, child maltreatment was the second leading cause of death for children less than four years of age in the United States. Children under one year of age were identified as being the most likely to experience child maltreatment (2006), and the most likely to die as a result of child maltreatment (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2007a; 2009).

Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz (2009) provided verification that American children or adults are more likely to be physically assaulted within the family than within any other context. According to Child Welfare Information Gateway (2006), almost 80% of the individuals responsible for maltreating a child were identified as the parents of the child, and of that 80% over 90% were the biological parent of the maltreated child. According to this estimate, more children suffer at the hands of their adult caregivers or parents than suffer as a result of fires, motor vehicle accidents, suffocation, drowning, choking, or falling.

Many of the perpetrators were also reported to have been victims of violence (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2009). Evidence has been found that supports the notion that parents who survive maltreatment in childhood are more likely to maltreat their offspring (Kempe & Helfer, 1972). Studies such as the one conducted by Milner, Robertson, and Rogers (1990) have presented evidence that a significant relationship exists between a history of child maltreatment and adult physical child abuse potential. These findings were also supported by Simons, Whitbeck, Conger, and Wu (1991) who reported that grandparents who harshly parented their children were more likely to have adult children who harshly parented their own children. These studies support the ideas presented within the intergenerational hypothesis.

The intergenerational hypothesis is one of the explanations found in the literature to explain the etiology of child maltreatment. According to Kempe and Helfer (1972), past experiences of abuse in childhood are imprinted, and influence a child maltreatment

survivor's ability to parent their own children. Kempe and Helfer explain that the more abuse a survivor of child maltreatment experiences in childhood, the higher the chance that they will abuse their offspring, and the less chance that they will seek help. Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz's (2009) landmark research study, utilizing a nationally representative sample, provided evidence that parents who experienced violence in the form of physical punishment in their families of origin were significantly more likely to be abusive to their own children in adulthood. This landmark study provided support for the intergenerational hypothesis by tracing family violence through three generations. Violent grandparents were more likely to have children that were violent towards their spouses and their children, and the children were more likely to be violent toward their siblings and their parents.

Croghan and Meill (1999) on the other hand pointed out that the intergenerational hypothesis, that forms the basis of many research studies on maltreatment, has been criticized as neglecting to account for the influence of gender, culture, socioeconomic status, and sociopolitical factors. Research in this area has been described as weak because it is based upon information derived from theoretical papers, case studies, clinical interviews, agency records, and questionnaires (Zigler & Hall, 1989). The evidence that has accumulated about the intergenerational hypothesis does not support the view that past abuse strictly determines future parenting behaviors (Loseke, 2005). As was stated by Kaufman and Zigler (1987), although experiencing maltreatment in childhood may increase the risk of becoming an abusive parent, the route between experiencing maltreatment and becoming abusive isn't straightforward or inevitable. After reviewing 60 studies on the intergenerational transmission of child abuse, Oliver (1993) found that one third of survivors of child maltreatment perpetuate the cycle of abuse, while one third break the cycle of abuse, and the remaining third is at risk of becoming abusive if they experience social stressors.

Having experienced maltreatment in childhood may predispose survivors of child maltreatment to continue the cycle of violence within their own family, but social factors also influence whether or not violence occurs (Straus et al., 2009). Factors such as stress, the number of children in the family, and the power distribution in the marriage have been found to be related to rates of child maltreatment and spouse abuse. Instead of focusing specifically on social factors related to child maltreatment, some researchers have focused on how social factors interact with other factors. Belsky (1980) focused on the interaction of multiple layers of forces that work together to explain the etiology of child maltreatment. Belsky explained that factors within the individual, family, community, and culture interact and influence parental behaviors. According to Belsky (1984), parental functioning is determined by forces within the parent including their history of abuse, forces within the child including personal characteristics, and forces related to the context within which the parent and child live. Multiple forces within the individuals, and within the environment, interact in a complex way during the transition to parenthood, and work together to determine parenting behaviors.

The transition to parenthood may be particularly stressful, and weaken child maltreatment survivors' ability to parent effectively. In an attempt to understand the experience of becoming a parent, some researchers have focused on exploring the transition to parenthood. The transition to parenthood, described as a crisis by both Hill in 1949 and LeMasters in 1957, has inspired research on the topic of how parents adjust to the birth of a child (Cox, 1985; Terry, 1991). Cowan and Cowan's (1992) ten year longitudinal study reported evidence in support of the notion that the transition to parenthood was experienced as a crisis, but added that the outcome would not inevitably be disastrous. Although LeMasters (1957) reported that marital conflict increased significantly during the transition to parenthood, Cowan and Cowan (1992) found that relationships, in which both partners experienced low levels of conflict in their family of origin, experienced significantly less decreases in marital satisfaction than partners that both came from high conflict families. The

results of this study indicate that experiences within the family of origin can potentially be passed on like an invisible legacy from generation to generation.

Cowan and Cowan (1992) pointed out that old issues can potentially resurface and influence not only the marital relationship, but also the relationship between the parents and their children. Unfortunately, not successfully transitioning to the role of a parent can have tragic consequences. Whether the transition to parenthood is termed a crisis (Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Hill, 1949; LeMasters, 1957) or a normal developmental experience, the outcome could either be positive or negative dependent upon various factors (Miller & Sollie, 1980). Belsky (1984) indicated that the ontogenic origin of the parent represents only one of three influential forces that determine parental functioning, and discussed the value of integrating research on the determinants of parenting and the literature on child maltreatment.

This research study integrated the research surrounding the transition to parenthood and survivors of child maltreatment by focusing on the process of becoming a parent for adult survivors of child maltreatment. The findings from this study provided insight into how survivors of child maltreatment experience the process of becoming a parent utilizing a grounded theory approach. The goal of this study was to explore process as it pertains to a complex issue. Complex issues demand equally complex strategies for exploration. Grounded theory is a method of exploration that seeks to not only understand but also explain complex situations and provides researchers with the tools necessary to explore complex phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The theoretical framework of this study was based upon Corbin and Strauss's approach to grounded theory research.

## **Method**

While conducting research in the 1960's Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss developed a methodical way of studying dying that they named grounded theory, because it was a systematic approach to theory development that was grounded in the data from which it originated (Charmaz, 2006). Until then researchers, predominantly utilizing a positivistic paradigm to approach research questions, contributed scientific knowledge that refined and verified existing theories, but did not generate many new theories, and disregarded research questions that could not be answered using positivistic methods. Glaser and Strauss offered an alternative method to address research questions, verify existing theories, and create new theories that could then be verified in the future employing a positivistic approach.

Since their discovery, Glaser and Strauss have deviated in their approaches to grounded theory research (Charmaz, 2006). Glaser has remained true to the original version of grounded theory which emphasized comparative methods, while Strauss and co-author Juliet Corbin have incorporated technical procedures to enhance data analysis. Since Anselm Strauss's death Juliet Corbin has published the third edition of their book, "Basics of Qualitative Research" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Within this edition Juliet Corbin acknowledges the influences of both pragmatist and constructivist viewpoints on their approach to grounded theory, and provides detailed explanations about techniques that researchers can use to make sense out of their data. This research study utilized Corbin and Strauss's version of grounded theory to guide data collection, data analysis, and theory building.

Corbin and Strauss (2008) point out that qualitative researchers seek to make discoveries by crossing the threshold into the participant's experience and viewing that experience from the viewpoint of the participant in an effort to add to and further develop empirical knowledge. The grounded theory approach to research, developed by Corbin and Strauss, was used to explore the experiences of child maltreatment survivors as they

experienced the process of becoming a parent, analyze and synthesize the rich and detailed descriptions of their experiences, and discover an explanatory theory.

## **Participants**

Eight parents who were child maltreatment survivors between the ages of 38 and 55 years that had experienced the transition to parenthood participated in this study. Each participant kept a journal to record their thoughts about their experiences as they transitioned to parenthood, relayed those experiences to the researcher during a semi-structured face-to-face audio-recorded interview, continued to add to their journals after the interview, conveyed any additional information recorded in their journals during a follow-up interview, and provided feedback about the resulting theory. The participants in this study were recruited from six sites that offer mental health services, one local church, and one educational institution.

Demographic information deemed relative to this study was collected pertaining to each of the participants. The information collected during the course of this study revealed that all of the participants were married at the time of the interview. Eight of the participants identified themselves as Caucasian and one participant identified themselves as both Caucasian and Hispanic. The participants ranged in the number of children they had at the time of the interview from one to four children. Six of the participants indicated that they were female and two of the participants indicated that they were male.

## **Sampling**

The researcher utilized purposeful sampling as the sampling method for this study. Adults between the ages of 18 and 55 years who experienced maltreatment in childhood, experienced the process of becoming a parent, and agreed to participate in the study were asked to take part in this study. These participants were purposefully chosen to participate in this study because they lived the experience and were therefore capable of providing a comprehensive understanding of the process of becoming a parent for survivors of maltreatment. Purposeful sampling is used when the goal of the study is to obtain a deep understanding of a phenomenon of interest, and must therefore seek out specific individuals who lived the experience and have the capacity to provide in-depth information about the experience (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling also became the foundation for the constant comparison of concepts that occurred during data analysis and led to the development of a theory that is grounded in the data from which it emerged (Creswell, 2007). This sampling strategy is also consistent with the grounded theory method used in this study that was established by Corbin and Strauss (2008).

In order to locate participants for this research study, the researcher sent letters to over 100 mental health professionals and mental health agencies in eastern Pennsylvania, requesting assistance with the recruitment process. The researcher also requested the assistance of one local church and community college. If the site agreed to assist in the recruitment process and the location was approved by the Institutional Review Board, they were asked to distribute an advertising poster. Six mental health professionals and one local church and community college agreed to assist in the recruitment process. At the community college location, the advertising poster was distributed to the college faculty members and administrative offices. The researcher decided not to utilize the student population at the community college to avoid the possibility of coercion brought on by the researcher's role as an instructor at the college.

The recruitment flyers included an explanation of the purpose of the study, a description of the research study, details about the inclusion criteria, and contact information. The recruitment flyers requested that potential participants contact the researcher by telephone. During the initial telephone conversation, the participant was provided with an opportunity to ask questions about the study and was advised that participation was strictly voluntary, and was able to be discontinued at any time without consequence. Participants that met the inclusion criteria and agreed to participate were provided with a copy of the consent form, counseling referral list, and reflective journal for their review. Any participant that did not meet the inclusion criteria for the research study was thanked for taking the time to contact the researcher.

The number of participants for this study was dependent upon the progress and results of the data analysis. The transcribed interviews were analyzed, and during the analysis process concepts were identified by the researcher. Once the properties and dimensions of the concepts or categories were sufficiently developed, coding for both context and process was completed, and the relationships between the concepts was delineated, sampling ceased because saturation was achieved (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The number of participants was determined by the saturation of the emergent concepts. According to Creswell (2007), 20 to 30 participants are recommended in order to achieve saturation. Patton (2002) suggests that the minimum number of participants expected to achieve saturation should be reported with the declaration that the participants will continue to be added, beyond the reported number, until the data reach saturation. For this study the sample size was expected to be approximately 8 to 14 participants, or enough to achieve saturation, meaning that participant selection ended when new patterns and themes ceased to emerge from the data, and concepts no longer required development.

The sample size and sampling strategy chosen were recommended by both Creswell (2007) and Patton (2002) for research studies utilizing grounded theory as a methodology. The choice to utilize a purposeful theoretical sampling strategy was also consistent with the methodological approach of Corbin and Strauss (2008). Participants in this study were selected that had the experience necessary to provide in-depth information relevant to the research question. As patterns or themes emerged, additional sampling, within the confines of the inclusion criteria, was conducted to further the development of the theory about the experience of becoming a parent for survivors of child maltreatment.

## **Interview**

The first contact with each participant consisted of a telephone call from the participant in response to the advertising poster. During this telephone call the researcher described to the participant the details of their involvement in the study and requested information to ensure that each participant met the inclusion criteria of the study. If the participant met the inclusion criteria and agreed to participate in the study, the researcher mailed the participant a notebook that was used to journal anything that came to mind in relation to the research question, a copy of the consent form for them to review prior to the face-to-face interview, and a confirmation of the location and time of the face-to-face interview. Each participant had at least one week to write in their journal prior to the face-to-face interview and each journal contained the research question.

All of the interviews were conducted at one of three sites. All of the sites provided a private comfortable space within which to conduct the interviews. The participants were able to enter and leave the sites without having to provide a reason for their presence at that location. Prior to each interview the researcher documented the mental processes experienced by the researcher so that those mental processes were brought into the researcher's awareness



(Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This technique was used to limit the influence of the researcher's biases. Once the participant voluntarily signed the consent form and provided the demographic information requested on the back of the consent form, the interview commenced.

Every interview was guided by the same open ended question, "Please tell me in as much detail as you feel comfortable sharing about your experiences as you became a parent" and followed by open ended questions when deemed necessary to gain a deeper understanding or clarify what was being stated. Each participant was allowed the freedom to relay their experience in their own words. Toward the end of the interview each participant was asked to share any of the thoughts that they had recorded in their journal that they felt might deepen the understanding of their experience of becoming a parent. After each interview the participant was asked to reflect on the interview and their experience, and to continue writing in their journal. Each participant was then provided with a counseling referral list for their reference.

At the completion of each interview the researcher maintained observational field notes that documented contextual information about the interview including nonverbal forms of communication that were observed during the interview. Initial insights, personal reactions, thoughts, questions, and possible directions for future interviews were written in memos for future reference. One week after the interview the participants were contacted and asked to share the thoughts that they recorded in their journals. These thoughts were recorded, added to the end of their interview, and used as data during data analysis. The participants were then contacted once the data analysis was complete to provide input on the theory that developed from the analysis of the data. Member checking or asking the participant's reaction to the analysis of the data was used in an effort to preserve the voice of the participant, ensure that the data reflect the participant's experience, and as an additional measure to limit the influence of researcher bias (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). These techniques are consistent with grounded theory research and were used to sensitize the researcher to the data, and limit the influence of researcher biases.

## **Data Analysis**

The data analysis for this study was conducted using the systematic approach to grounded theory research described by Corbin and Strauss (2008). The data collected from the audio-recorded semi-structured interviews and the audio-recorded follow-up interviews was transcribed by the researcher and copied into the MAXQDA analysis program. The transcribed interview was checked against the audio-recording to ensure the accuracy of the transcription and strengthen the reliability of the results of the data analysis.

## **Open Coding**

According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), open coding is the first stage of data analysis. During this stage of analysis the data was broken apart, line by line or segment by segment, and each line or segment of the data was labeled with a concept that expressed the researcher's interpretation of what was being expressed in that particular segment of the data. The MAXQDA analysis program allowed the researcher to attach concepts to words, sentences, or entire sections of text within the interview. It also provided the researcher with the ability to code segments of text with more than one concept, and code entire paragraphs with one concept while coding sections within the paragraphs with separate concepts. This provided the researcher with the opportunity to code entire sections of the text with one concept, representing what was being expressed by a story in the interview, while at the same

time separately code segments within the story representative of other concepts. At this stage of the analysis of the data, all of the concepts were considered provisional and capable of being modified as subsequent data was analyzed. During the open coding of the data the researcher identified 29 concepts. These concepts are included in Table 1 and encompass the lower level concepts within this table.

During the open coding of the data, the beginning stages of axial coding commenced in the form of memo writing. Memos were titled with the concepts that emerged during open coding, and were used to document the internal dialogue between the researcher and the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The researcher asked questions about the relationships between concepts, examined the data closely by making comparisons, and wrote memos to document the initial reflections about what was being expressed in the data. Memos were used to expand upon the concepts that emerged by recording the relationships identified between concepts, structuring the concepts into categories based on the identified relationships, and filling in the properties and dimensions related to each concept. The concepts that emerged from the data collected during the first interview continued to be developed and were verified during the analysis of the data collected from subsequent interviews.

The data obtained from each subsequent interview was again broken down during the open coding process and compared to the data that was previously collected (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Segments of text in subsequent interviews, identified as conceptually the same as segments of text from latter interviews, were coded using the same concept label. Anything new learned about that concept was documented in a memo in an effort to fill out the properties and dimensions of the concept. New concepts that emerged were added to the list of codes, and memos were again written to identify relationships between the emerging concepts, and begin the process of structuring the concepts into lower level or higher level concepts. With each interview, the data analysis became more focused in an effort to expand upon the properties and dimensions of the concepts, and identify the arrangement of higher level and lower level concepts. As the properties and dimensions were being filled out, and the concepts were starting to be ordered into a hierarchy according to their relationship with one another, the beginnings of axial coding were being conducted.

## **Axial Coding**

Axial coding consists of expanding lower level concepts and relating those concepts to broader or higher level concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Memos were labeled according to the concept or concepts that they explored. According to Corbin and Strauss memos are used to open up the data for exploration, identify and develop the properties and dimensions of concepts and categories, make comparisons and ask questions of the data, elaborate the paradigm, and develop a story line about the phenomenon being studied. The memos were used by the researcher to document initial reactions to the data, organize and keep track of ideas that required further exploration, and maintain a trail of the sequence of ideas that were generated as the analysis moved forward. Axial coding asks the questions, “who, when, why, how, and with what consequences” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 199). Memos were used to document the answers to these questions and explore the relationships between the 29 concepts that emerged during open coding.

The properties and dimensions, identified while writing memos about the concepts that emerged during open coding, provided insight into the relationships between concepts, and how to arrange the concepts into a hierarchy whereby the higher level concepts were supported by the lower level concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Higher level concepts, called categories, were identified that provided information about what a group of concepts represented or signified. For example, the researcher explored all of the data related to the

following concepts: capacity to trust, adequacy of knowledge base, feelings about being prepared, ability to process past experiences and heal, influence of mental health, awareness of the continued influence of past experiences, ability to establish connections with other and feel/express love, ability to obtain support, and ability to communicate. Text segments and memos revealed that all of these concepts were related to the participant's perception of their ability. Participants talked about their ability to trust others and themselves, the adequacy of their knowledge base, how prepared they felt to take on the responsibilities of parenthood, their ability to process their past experiences and heal, the influence of issues related to mental health on their ability, the ability to understand how their past experiences were influencing their current behaviors, their ability to form connections with others and express their emotions, their ability to obtain support, and their ability to communicate. Ability was then labeled as the higher lever concept or category that was used to describe the relationship between this set of concepts. Table 1 represents the results of the axial coding of the data and lists the higher and lower level concepts that emerged during this phase of the data analysis.

**Table 1: Results of Axial Coding**

Higher Level Concepts/Categories	Lower Level Concepts
Ability (431)	Capacity to Trust (9) Adequacy of Knowledge Base (21) Feelings about Being Prepared (18) Ability to Process Past Experiences and Heal (40) Influence of Mental Health (36) Awareness of the Continued Influence of Past Experiences (49) Ability to Establish Connections with Others and Feel/Express Love (143) Ability to Obtain Support (66) Ability to Communicate (49)
Involvement/Interaction with Others/Supports (310)	Role Model (30) Professional/Governmental Involvement (33) Family of Origin (145) Spouse/Partner (63) Child (39)
Responses to Parenthood (306)	Reflecting on the Desire to be a Parent (39) Experience of Pregnancy/Conception/Birth (30) Comparing Expectations with Experiences (28) Formulation of Goals and Desires (30) Pretending/Hiding (25) Thoughts about the Perception of Others (12) Gaining a New Understanding of Past Experiences (45) Protecting the Child (64) Developing Strategies and Coping Mechanisms (33)
Reflections on and Evaluations of Parenting (305)	Comparison of Self to Perpetrator Parent (72) Reflections on Ability/Decisions/Knowledge (48) Comparing Parental Behaviors to Past Experiences (48) Comparing Parental Behaviors to those Perceived as Normal (31) Reflections about the Future of the Child (24) Finding Value/Meaning in Parenthood (82)

The four higher level concepts or categories shown in Table 1 originated from the lower level concepts that emerged from the data during open coding. These categories were based on each participant's interpretation of the factors that significantly influenced their experience of becoming a parent as a survivor of child maltreatment. These categories were verified throughout the data analysis process by comparing them to data collected in subsequent interviews.

### **Ability**

Ability refers to the child maltreatment survivor's ability to navigate the challenges associated with the transition to parenthood. Factors that the participants identified as influencing ability included their capacity to trust, the adequacy of their knowledge base, their feelings about being prepared, their ability to process past experiences and heal, the influences of mental health issues, their awareness of the continued influence of past experiences, their ability to establish connections with others and feel/express love, their ability to obtain support, and their ability to communicate. These factors were all indicated in each interview as being important influences on the ability of the child maltreatment survivor to cope with the challenges presented during the transition to parenthood.

Each participant expressed that trust was an influential factor that affected their experience as they transitioned to parenthood. Although trust itself influenced the experience for each participant, it influenced each participant in a unique manner. Trust involved trusting themselves to not perpetuate the cycle, trusting that they had an adequate knowledge base from which to draw upon to be an effective parent, trusting their spouse to provide support and effectively parent, trusting their support systems, trusting that reaching out for support will result in a positive outcome, trusting that others will understand, and trusting that others can help. Trust can be placed on a continuum from being unable to trust, "I learned not to trust people so I didn't really reach out when I really needed advice," to being able to trust, "eventually they had a worker come out that I felt like I could trust more, you know, and I think it is getting better." The ability to trust influenced the child maltreatment survivor's capacity to connect with others and obtain support which ultimately influenced their ability.

Survivors of child maltreatment also expressed that the adequacy of the knowledge base that they acquired prior to the transition to parenthood, as well as the adequacy and accessibility of knowledge during the transition to parenthood, influenced the experience. Verbal expressions ranged from feelings of acquiring an inadequate knowledge base, "I had this completely warped idea of what true love what true sexuality is about what true parenthood was about," to feeling as if they had acquired the knowledge necessary to succeed, "there were these boys, literally boys that brought these babies home, and all of them shared in sort of helping them to raise us, I mean it was without question, so I think a lot of the nurturing and that kind of thing I learned from them you know, maybe not in a specific way but in an emotional way" and "I felt like I learned how to be anything different than my parents by kind of like reading books, and kind of looking through other peoples' lives in different little ways, like just being there in somebody else's house, seeing a mother or grandmother just doing something that my mother would never do." Feeling as if they were capable of gaining the knowledge necessary to succeed influenced the child maltreatment survivor's perception of their ability during the transition to parenthood.

Child maltreatment survivors talked about their perception of being prepared to take on the role of parent. Being prepared ranged from feeling prepared to take on the role of parent, "I think that I felt, but I felt very, very, prepared to do so. I don't think, I mean I was only 22, I never felt scared about it or nervous about it. It was like I absolutely need this" to feeling as if they were not prepared, "It was so, so, sad. When I became a mom I wanted that

so bad but not at that time. I wasn't ready." Whether or not the child maltreatment survivor felt prepared to take on the role of parent altered the experience.

Each survivor of child maltreatment talked about events or experiences that influenced their ability to process their past experiences and influenced their ability to heal. Experiences in life whether they were due to self-reflection or experiences with other people including members of their family of origin, their therapist(s), or their partner, influenced the child maltreatment survivor's ability to heal. "Knowing myself and being able to connect what I went through as a kid, and process it, and feel it, and put it out there without judgment, has completely affected who I am as a parent." Where each survivor was in relation to the healing process influenced their experience of parenthood.

Mental health issues related to the survivor, family of origin, or child were indicated to be influential during the experience of becoming a parent. One participant recounts, "I had just stopped drinking alcohol" and reflects on how her state of mental health altered her perception of her experiences as she transitioned into the role of a parent. Mental health issues ranged from severe disturbances of mental health to no disturbances of mental health. Mental health issues influenced the child maltreatment survivor's ability to process their experiences, bond with their children and others, reach out for and accept support and practical help, trust their parental skills, feel understood, feel adequate as a parent, and adequately respond to the challenges associated with becoming a parent. Child maltreatment survivors that perceived themselves as inadequate due to mental health issues questioned their knowledge base and ability to prepare for and take on the role of parent.

Whether or not the child maltreatment survivor was aware of the continued influence of past experiences on their current behaviors impacted the experience of parenthood. The influence of this awareness and how they responded to this awareness altered how the child maltreatment survivors reacted to others including their child or children, "I am tapped out touch wise very easily, and like my 8 year old is very touchy feely and he always wants hugs and that is not me, and I feel really bad because I can't, and I know he can't understand why, I can't tell him look I am really tapped out, I have to hug your sister all day and by the time you get to me, and it's not personal to him or even my husband, I have the same problem with him, but you come near me and I it's like ugh, you know, I cringe like I would rather throw up right now then have you touch me." Being aware of the continued influence of abuse allowed participants the opportunity to find alternative ways to respond to the obstacles presented as they navigated the channels of parenthood. Past experiences were expressed to be "kind of like a ghost creeping back for a second and yeah I am not afraid of you, go home." Participants expressed that without that awareness "how can you not repeat what you lived, how do you, you know, unless you learn to grow and you get into therapy, and you know counseling." Awareness of how the past experiences were still influencing your life was seen as an influential force during the transition to parenthood.

The ability of child maltreatment survivors to form connections with others and express their feelings was perceived, by the participants in this study, to be one of the most influential factors over the course of the transition to parenthood. The ability of survivors to connect with others ranged from being fully capable of expressing feelings and forming connections, "to my daughter that bond was always there from that moment, you know, there is definitely this parental bond" to being unable to form a connection with others including their partner and/or child, "it is hard to kind of connect with people." The ability to connect with others directly related to the participants' perception of being supported during the transition to parenthood and accessing practical help including knowledge about child care.

Child maltreatment survivors talked about not only being capable of reaching out and connecting to others, but also the necessity of being capable of obtaining support. Support was perceived by participants to be either easily obtained, "When I had my son my in laws

were there any time I needed them. They were six miles away and literally I could call them at three in the morning, and did, and they showed up, so I was very thankful to have that” or inaccessible, “I was like, that was one of those times when I really realized, as far as me having supportive parents, it was like nobody was there.” Both the ability to connect with others and obtain support influenced the child maltreatment survivor’s ability to respond to the challenges associated with parenthood.

In order to reach out to others and obtain support, child maltreatment survivors needed to be capable of communicating effectively. Communication skills directly influenced the survivors experience by either leaving them feeling alone and without support, “When I do try to talk to someone, I realize that I can’t talk to anyone. I have these questions, my sister doesn’t know either, and we don’t know where to go with the questions” or understood and supported “I remember when I just couldn’t get anywhere with my mom, or couldn’t, I felt like I couldn’t talk to anybody about anything, that surprisingly enough my dad was there.” One participant expressed finding a way to communicate through writing. She stated that she “always preferred writing then talking.” Finding a way to effectively communicate was indicated as being an important factor during the transition to parenthood because it influenced their ability to express, and seek assistance in meeting, their needs.

Each of these concepts influenced the child maltreatment survivor’s perception of their ability and altered the experience of the survivor over the course of their transition to the role of parent.

### **Involvement/Interaction with others/supports**

The involvement and interaction with others during the transition to parenthood played a significant role in the child maltreatment survivor’s experience. The role models that the child maltreatment survivor referenced or patterned their behavior after influenced their experiences during the transition to parenthood. Role models were perceived as either helpful, “I have had people in my life that have stepped in, (a friend’s) mom, my high school friend’s mom who have stepped in and been kind of mothers or kind of guidance” or unavailable, “So it was like years and years of on the job training, trial and error, because I had nobody showing me anything.” The presence or absence of role models influenced the experiences of child maltreatment survivors during their transition into the role of parent.

Professionals and/or governmental agencies involved in the lives of the child maltreatment survivors during the transition to parenthood were also perceived to be positive support systems, “I think in some respects counseling, parenting classes, all that kind of stuff just helps, it provides an extra layer, and the whole concept of support, I have people that I can turn to and say you know what the hell is up with this,” unavailable, “there was no agency to go to,” or negative influences, “this doctor said I am not allowed to discipline them in any way shape or form, they thought I would go overboard, so then I got more afraid that I was already going overboard.” The type of influence, incurred by child maltreatment survivors, that professional and/or governmental agencies provided altered the experiences of the survivors as they became parents.

The family of origin exerted influence over the child maltreatment survivor’s experience of parenthood whether or not they were present during the transition to parenthood. Every participant in this study talked about the influence of their family of origin on their experience of parenthood whether or not the family of origin was actively involved in the child maltreatment survivor’s life. Family members were perceived as either involved or uninvolved, and either way their involvement was perceived as being positive, neutral, or negative. “My mother was extremely critical, my father was non-existent, and but my other relatives were somewhat not very welcoming to say the least.” The family of origin also

exerted influence over the experience of the child maltreatment survivor's offspring, whether or not they were present and involved, because their presence or absence influenced the thoughts and/or behaviors of the child maltreatment survivor. The experiences of parenthood caused child maltreatment survivors to reflect on their past experiences within their family of origin, and respond both behaviorally and emotionally to their past interactions with, and the continued involvement members of the family of origin.

The involvement and interactions with the spouse or partner also had an impact on the child maltreatment survivor's experience. Spouses or partners influenced the child maltreatment survivor's experience by either providing support or creating further challenges. Child maltreatment survivors that perceived their spouse or partner to be supportive reported being better able to navigate the challenges of parenthood during the transition than survivors who perceived their spouse or partner as either unavailable or creating further challenges for them to overcome. As one participant expressed, "I have a wonderful husband who understands, and stands behind me, and is a united front with me, and I think that that's huge. We both have the same parenting and we both wanted the same things" while another expressed, "My husband, he has a multitude of his own problems so it's, I have really lacked that, but now that I realize that I have to actively seek that for myself, that it's come to a point where I can't you know, I need to find other ways to lessen the burden on me." The perception of the availability or supportiveness of the spouse was indicated to be influential to the experience of the survivor of child maltreatment.

The child's health, temperament, and gender, as well as the circumstances surrounding the child's birth were also indicated as having been factors that influenced the child maltreatment survivor's experience of becoming a parent. Factors related to the child influenced the bond between the child maltreatment survivor and the child, which ultimately had an effect on the child maltreatment survivor's experience of becoming a parent. Issues related to health and gender were specified as significantly influential, "He was colicky so we dealt with 15 weeks of screaming hard which was very, very, hard, very, very, hard" and "For some reason because she was a girl I wanted her to have the most in life." All of these concepts, related to the involvement with and interactions with others or support systems, were influential forces that impacted the child maltreatment survivor during the transition to parenthood.

### **Responses to parenthood**

The child maltreatment survivors that participated in this research study responded to parenthood by reflecting on their desire to be a parent. Participants described either having a desire to be a parent, "I did the home thing. I just wanted to grow up and have my own life, have my own family. I guess to find some happiness and people who would love me, like if I don't have that I will just make some" or feeling as if being a parent was something to be avoided in order to avoid perpetuating the cycle, "I was actually very afraid to become a parent because I was afraid I would be her." Along with the desire to be a parent, participants talked about the influence on their experience of the circumstances surrounding conception, pregnancy, and birth. Factors such as whether or not the pregnancy was planned, whether or not there were difficulties conceiving, and factors related to the birth experience were all reported to have an impact on the transition to parenthood. Even the timing of conception was indicated to be a factor that influenced the experience of the child maltreatment survivor, "I wanted to be a mom, but I wanted to be a wife first."

During the transition to parenthood, child maltreatment survivors compared their expectations of what would happen during the transition to parenthood with their actual experiences. Discrepancies or inconsistencies between expectations and experiences

influenced the experience. “Everybody was like it’s going to be great, you will have a kid, and everything is wonderful, and so I thought I was the only one. I really did.” Discrepancies caused child maltreatment survivors to question their ability which in turn influenced their ability to reach out to others, communicate with others about their experiences, and obtain support.

During the transition to parenthood, child maltreatment survivors reported formulating goals. The goals and desires expressed by the child maltreatment survivors were significantly influenced by the child maltreatment survivor’s past experiences within their family of origin. Child maltreatment survivors who experienced a lack of protection from others formulated goals related to protecting their child, “I wanted to protect my kids even if it was from me.” Each survivor’s goals were directly related to their past experiences of child maltreatment and had the same message, “I didn’t want to be like my parents.” The goal of every participant was to become, or achieve an identity, that did not resemble the identity of the perpetrator parent(s).

Over the course of the transition to parenthood, child maltreatment survivors expressed pretending or hiding aspects of the self or their experience, and this response influenced their experience of parenthood. Survivors of child maltreatment expressed hiding things like their true thoughts, desires, needs, and aspects of their past and/or present experiences. Child maltreatment survivors expressed being fearful of being misunderstood, being perceived as abnormal, or provoking unwanted negative responses from others, that could impact their lives and the lives of their family. The inability to be truthful about their experiences had an effect on their ability to obtain validation, support, and practical help. It also provided a barrier between the child maltreatment survivor and others, and influenced their identity and experience as a parent. One participant recounts, “I don’t find a lot of people that understand life I guess, like some parts of life, so I kind of just stick to myself.” Pretending or hiding was also used as a protective mechanism to shield the experiences of the child.

The child maltreatment survivor’s thoughts about the perceptions of others influenced their behaviors during the transition to parenthood, and their experience. The perception of others influenced aspects of the transition to parenthood from altering the child maltreatment survivor’s desire to be a parent, to altering their behaviors and experiences as a parent. The perception of “they told me that I was going to be the next Andrea Yates” led one participant to question her ability and second guess her behaviors as a new parent to the point that she expressed constantly struggling to figure out what was right, “I knew in my head that it was wrong, but then I thought well maybe she is right.”

The child maltreatment survivors that participated in this study all expressed gaining a new understanding of their past experiences, which led to either some form of empathy toward their perpetrator parent or a deeper understanding of why their parent may have been abusive toward them when they were a child. “I knew my mom loved me but I knew that she was really hurting, like there was obviously some reason she was treating us like that.” Child maltreatment survivors reflected on their experience of parenthood, and translated the knowledge that they gained from their experience as a parent, into new understandings of what their parents were going through when the survivor was a child. This allowed them to gain new insight into the factors that may have influenced their parent’s or parents’ ability to parent effectively. This new insight may or may not have resulted in forgiveness but either way it did provide the child maltreatment survivor with insight into their past experiences.

Throughout the transition to parenthood each survivor of child maltreatment expressed a desire to protect their child whether it was protecting the child from themselves, their family of origin, their environment, or life challenges. Participants stated that they felt a sense of awareness of the possibility that something could happen to their child or children, “I



am hyper-aware that there is dangers” and responded to this by being protective, “I am hyper-vigilant about taking care of my kids.” The need to protect varied for each participant according to what each participant perceived as dangerous and warranting a protective response.

In an attempt to deal with the challenges presented during the transition to parenthood, the child maltreatment survivors each responded by developing strategies or coping mechanisms that helped them to manage and/or overcome challenges. The strategies that they implemented dealt with issues related to their own behaviors, including their ability to parent, and the influence of others. One participant would “keep it in my head like people are always watching me, I kind of keep in my head that maybe there is a nanny cam you know, in my mind I try to create this idea that I was being watched so that I wouldn’t hit him, and wouldn’t get frustrated with him.” This participant found a creative way to protect her child. Child maltreatment survivors also reported developing strategies to deal with the influence of the perpetrator parent(s), “I just put boundaries on where I will let them affect my life” and “she knew my father and there was no way she was going to subject him to his care.” This concept overlapped with the concept of protecting the child because finding creative ways to cope with anxiety and controlling the influence of the family of origin were methods used by child maltreatment survivors to protect their child.

All of these concepts were classified as being related because they were all ways in which child maltreatment survivors responded to parenthood.

### **Reflections on and evaluations of self**

All of the child maltreatment survivors reflected on their experiences and made evaluations of the self as parent. In order to evaluate their parental skills and identity of self as parent, child maltreatment survivors made comparisons of themselves to their perpetrator parent(s). Expressions like, “I wasn’t that name calling maniac,” in which the survivor compares their behavior as a parent with their perpetrator parent, were located in each interview. Of specific importance to the child maltreatment survivor was the perception of a difference between themselves and the perpetrator parent(s). Perceived similarities and differences influenced the child maltreatment survivor’s evaluation of self and perceived parental identity.

Child maltreatment survivors also reflected on their perception of their ability, the decisions that they made during the transition to parenthood, and the knowledge or lack of knowledge available to them along the way. Expressions about ability or lack of ability were found in each and every interview, “I don’t know how to play with them because I never had toys” as well as expressions about how knowledge or lack of knowledge influenced the experience, “I always had a certain amount of insight into myself, and that too, I was lucky enough to be an educated person my whole life, my mother’s family had money so I always got to go to private schools, so I had a little bit more of the world opened up to me than I think the average abused person.” Perceptions of ability, decisions, and knowledge influenced the child maltreatment survivor’s evaluation of their parental skills and ultimately their parental identity.

Child maltreatment survivors made comparisons between their behaviors as a parent and their past experiences as a child. Some experiences were perceived as similar, “we were sitting and eating dinner last night at the table, because that’s one thing that we do as a family every day, which I love, and that’s a thing that I actually took from my mother” while others were not, “just this normalcy about it that was nice, something that I never saw as a child, whenever I got off the bus or whenever I walked home it was to an empty house.” The child maltreatment survivors also compared behaviors that they perceived to be normal or

appropriate to their own behaviors in an effort to evaluate themselves as a parent. These types of comparisons had a direct influence on the child maltreatment survivor's feelings of self efficacy and evaluation of the self as parent.

During the transition to parenthood child maltreatment survivors reflected on the future of their children, and how their behaviors now will ultimately influence the future of their child. "They are not going to want to get physical with their spouse, they are not going to want to do drugs, they are not going to want to come home drunk, they are not going to see a father that cheated on his wife." These reflections are indications of how child maltreatment survivors envision the future of their child, and how they perceive their envisioned future relates to the child maltreatment survivor's current behaviors. Whether or not child maltreatment survivors perceived their parenting as similar to or different from the parenting they experienced in childhood, they reflected on how their behaviors as a parent would influence the future of their offspring.

The child maltreatment survivors that participated in this study also reflected on the meaning of parenthood and what they valued about the experience. Each participant had their own unique way of placing value on the experience, but every participant talked about what being a parent meant to them. "I have shown that I am normal, like any other human or parent in the world, but to ratchet that up and take it to the point of the beatings that I endured as a child, and the put downs and the abuse on a daily basis, it's never happened, and to me that is almost my badge of honor, that's been my trophy when I look back on my life." As child maltreatment survivors looked back on their experiences in childhood and their experiences as a parent, they expressed finding value or meaning in the experience of being a parent. Their ability to provide their children with experiences that differed from their own provided them with a sense of accomplishment and pride. This influenced their ability to achieve satisfaction in parenting and helped them establish their parental identity.

Each of these concepts related to the child maltreatment survivors evaluations of the self as a parent.

### **Coding for Context and Process**

While the categories formed during axial coding were being explored and their properties and dimensions were being developed, the researcher was continually going back to the data to explore both context and process so that a deeper understanding of the experience was achieved, and the analysis was moved toward integration and ultimately theory development. Context refers to the "set of conditions that give rise to problems or circumstances to which individuals respond by means of action/interaction/emotion" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 229) and process refers to the "ongoing responses to problems or circumstances arising out of context" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 229). This analytical task involved expanding the previously identified concepts by writing memos that more closely explored the relationships between concepts. By exploring process and context the conditions that survivors of child maltreatment faced during the transition to parenthood were uncovered as well as the ways that they responded to those conditions through action, interaction, and emotion. The question that was used to guide this exploration was, "How do survivors of child maltreatment overcome obstacles and manage their problems in an effort to increase their chances of obtaining their goals?."

The goal of every survivor of child maltreatment in this study was the same and entailed not repeating the behaviors of their perpetrator parent. The goal was to be different from their parent(s), or in other words to achieve a parental identity that was an evolved version of the parent(s) that they experienced. The goal wasn't to be a perfect parent, but in essence it was to achieve an evolved parental identity. Child maltreatment survivors wanted

to achieve an identity that had evolved from their past experiences, and had ultimately become something different and better, so that their children had healthier childhood experiences.

The categories, “ability” and “involvement/interaction with others/supports,” were identified as the categories that related to the context in which child maltreatment survivors were striving to obtain this goal. The child maltreatment survivor’s perception of their ability and the involvement and interactions the child maltreatment survivor had with other people including their support systems, were the conditions involved during the transition to parenthood. The responses to these conditions, during the transition to parenthood, included the categories, “responses to parenthood” and “reflections on and evaluations of parenting.” These categories were considered to be part of the process, or how the child maltreatment survivors responded to the context through action, interaction, and emotion. In other words, the child maltreatment survivor’s perception of their ability and the involvement and interactions that they had with other people in their lives influenced their responses to parenthood and their reflections on and evaluations of parenting. The interaction of the concepts within each of these categories, along with the interaction of each of these categories with one another, influences and produces variety in the experience of the transition to parenthood for child maltreatment survivors.

### **Selective Coding**

Up to this point concepts and categories were identified and verified throughout the data collection process. Each successive interview provided additional data that filled out the details of the concepts and categories and elaborated on their relationships (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Once the categories were considered to be saturated, data collection ended. Saturation was achieved when groups of well-developed interrelated concepts emerged from the data, were organized into categories, and new categories ceased to emerge from new data collections. These concepts and categories were then integrated into an explanatory theory that provided a deeper understanding of the process of becoming a parent for survivors of child maltreatment.

Selective coding involves integrating the data and linking categories through relational statements until one core category emerges as a central issue that ties all of the other categories together (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The main issue discussed by each and every participant in this research study, that provided a way to bring all of the categories together, was the child maltreatment survivor’s desire to achieve an evolved parental identity. Every participant in this study expressed that their main goal as a parent was to evolve and enact behavior patterns with their children that differed from the behaviors of their parental role models in childhood. The context within which each child maltreatment survivor attempted to achieve this goal, and the specific strategies that they used to obtain this goal differed, but the factors influencing the attainment of the goal, and the responses to those factors, were capable of being organized into categories common to each interview.

The context or the conditions, that caused problems or circumstances during the transition to parenthood, to which the child maltreatment survivor had to respond, that influenced or caused the goal to change, and that influenced or shaped the strategies and eliminated consequences included “ability” and “involvement/interaction with others/supports” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Survivors of child maltreatment experienced circumstances that either obstructed or facilitated their capacity to achieve an evolved parental identity. Their perception of their abilities in various aspects of their lives influenced their capability of acquiring an evolved parental identity. Specific abilities, such as the ability to trust, acquire an adequate knowledge base, prepare, process past experiences and heal,

manage mental health issues, understand the continued influence of past experiences, establish connections with others, obtain support, and communicate were identified as factors that significantly influenced the child maltreatment survivors progress toward their goal of achieving an evolved parental identity. The child maltreatment survivors involvement with and interactions with others including role models, professionals, members of their family of origin, their spouse or partner, and their offspring were also indicated as being contextual influences that influenced the survivor's ability to obtain their goal.

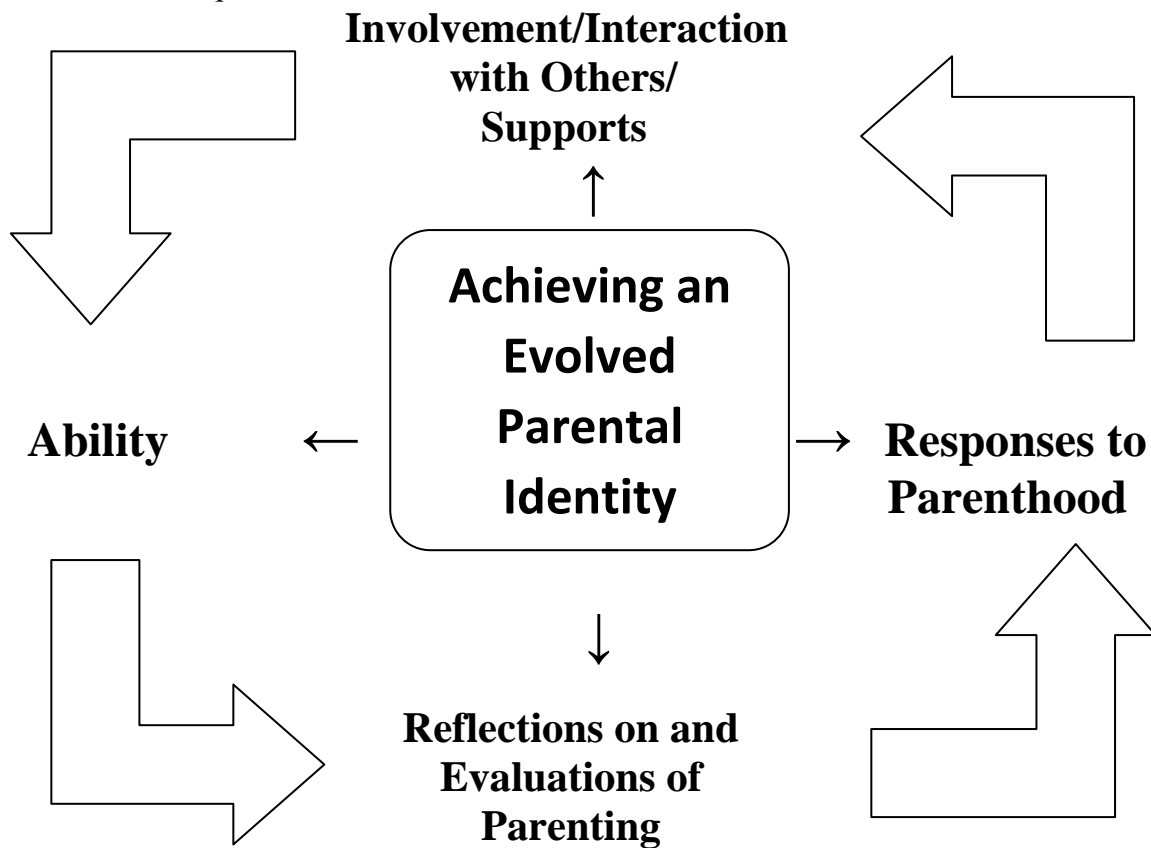
The context brought about process which includes the strategies or the actions, interactions, and emotions that resulted from trying to obtain the goal of achieving an evolved parental identity, and the consequences for using those strategies. Process encompassed the categories "responses to parenthood" and "reflections on and evaluations of parenting." The context, or the child maltreatment survivor's abilities and the people involved with and interacting with the child maltreatment survivor, brought about responses to parenthood and influenced child maltreatment survivor's evaluation of the self. Child maltreatment survivors responded to their context by reflecting on their desire to become a parent, thinking about the influence of conception, pregnancy, and birth on their experience, comparing their expectations of parenthood with their experiences, formulating goals and desires for the course of their journey as a parent, pretending or hiding aspects of the experience, thinking about how others perceived them as a parent, thinking about their past experiences and acquiring insight, initiating efforts to protect their offspring, and developing strategies and coping mechanisms that could assist them in their effort to achieve an evolved parental identity.

As child maltreatment survivor's experienced the transition to parenthood they also reflected on and evaluated themselves as a parent and their ability to assume the parental role. Child maltreatment survivors compared themselves to their abusive parent(s), reflected on their own ability, decisions, and knowledge, compared their parental behaviors to the behaviors of their own parents, compared their behaviors to behaviors that they considered to be normal, reflected on the influence of their parental behaviors on the future of their offspring, and reflected on the value of the parental experience. All of these factors influenced the child maltreatment survivor's ability to see themselves as an effective parent and feel accomplished in their quest to achieve an evolved parental identity.

## **Resulting Theory**

According to the theory that resulted from this research study, child maltreatment survivors entered into parenthood with various abilities from which they could draw upon to meet the challenges presented during the transition to parenthood. These abilities influenced and were influenced by the child maltreatment survivor's capacity to elicit support from, connect with, and control the influence of the people involved in their lives. Outside forces or individuals that influenced the behaviors and thought processes of the child maltreatment survivor had an effect on how the child maltreatment survivor responded to parenthood, and their evaluations of themselves as a parent. How child maltreatment survivors responded to the challenges associated with parenthood and evaluated themselves as parents influenced their ability to achieve an evolved parental identity. Child maltreatment survivors perceived themselves to be successful at taking on the role of parent when their parental identity was perceived to have evolved from their past experiences. Identification as a successful parent was directly related to the child maltreatment survivor's ability to grow, change, progress, advance, or move forward from the parental role model that they experienced in childhood. A condition/consequential matrix, that provides a visual representation of the resulting theory was created and is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1  
Conditional/Consequential Matrix



### Member Checking: Validating the Theory

During the selective coding process the logical consistency of the theory was evaluated, categories were fully developed, excessive details within categories were minimized, and the theory was validated (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This theory was validated by calling each participant, relaying the theory to each participant, and asking them how well the resulting theory matched their experience. The researcher was able to obtain feedback from all of the participants that were involved in this research study. Each participant expressed being able to recognize themselves within the resulting theory and expressed feeling as if the resulting theory accurately reflected their experience. When asked to provide input on the resulting theory participants expressed things like, “I like the way you summed up the findings and I completely concur. The matrix was easy to follow and made sense to me. I feel like you encapsulated the essence of our interview very well,” or, “Yes, that fits absolutely; I think I personally made a decision. When I became a parent I knew that I had work to do. I am still evolving and always learning and I am even trying to take it to the next level. It all, all of that fits my experience.”

According to the results of the data analysis, as child maltreatment survivors experience the transition to parenthood they are guided by their desire to attain an evolved parental identity. The data analysis revealed four categories that described the context and process involved when survivors of child maltreatment experience the process of becoming a parent. The context categories included “ability” and “involvement/interaction with others/supports.” The process categories included “responses to parenthood” and “reflections on and evaluations of parenting.” The core category used to provide an explanatory

framework for the experience of a child maltreatment survivor during the course of becoming a parent was the “achievement of an evolved parental identity.” Child maltreatment survivors expressed that they desired to achieve a parental identity that resembled an evolved form of the parental identity that had been achieved by their abusive parents. This desire was central to the experience and was related to all of the categories that emerged during axial coding. The common theme of desiring to achieve an evolved parental identity was expressed in every interview and factors related to this theme were identified as “ability,” “involvement/interaction with others/supports,” “responses to parenthood,” and “reflections on and evaluations of parenting.” The theory that resulted from the selective coding process was then relayed to and verified by each participant that took part in the research study. The findings of this study provided insight into the experiences of child maltreatment survivors as they transitioned to the role of parent, and identified factors that the child maltreatment survivors described as influential forces in their ability to obtain their stated goal of achieving an evolved parental identity.

### **Discussion, Limitations, Recommendation, and Conclusion**

Past research on the intergenerational hypothesis has provided evidence that child maltreatment survivors are predisposed to maltreat their offspring (Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Egeland & Sroufe, 1981; Haapasalo & Aaltonen, 1999; Herrenkohl et al., 1983; Heyman & Slep, 2002; Hunter & Kilstrom, 1979; Kaufman & Zigler, 1989; Straus et al., 2009). Belsky (1984) suggested that multiple factors interact and influence parental behavior including factors associated with the individual, within the family, and within the community and culture. The literature on both the intergenerational hypothesis and the determinants of parenting supports the notion that multiple factors interact and influence the ability of individuals to parent effectively. This notion is supported by the results of this research study, which identified both the context and process categories that interact and influence the experience of child maltreatment survivors.

While exploring the differences between families that do and do not repeat the cycle of abuse, Hunter and Kilstrom (1979) identified the following differences which were support by the results of this study: social network, feelings about pregnancy, factors associated with the father, ability to provide details about their abuse and express their emotions about their experiences, awareness that their past abuse makes them more vulnerable to becoming abusive, and the expression that they are motivated to break the cycle. According to the results of this study, the ability to obtain support, the experience of pregnancy, involvement and interactions with the spouse/partner, ability to process past experiences and heal, ability to connect with others and express emotions, and awareness of the continued influence of past experiences were influential factors across the transition to parenthood for child maltreatment survivors. Also in line with the results of this study was the desire of the child maltreatment survivors to break the cycle of abuse. This goal was achieved by the child maltreatment survivors participating in this study by achieving an evolved parental identity.

The findings of this study are consistent with the findings of Egeland, Jacobvitz, and Sroufe (1988). Egeland, Jacobvitz, and Sroufe found that mothers who broke the cycle of abuse were more likely to have experienced a supportive, non-abusive adult during childhood, be involved in a healthy and satisfying relationship, and have participated in therapy. The findings of this study confirm that role models, the involvement of and interaction with the spouse or partner, and the ability of the child maltreatment survivor to process past experiences and heal were all factors associated with achieving their goal of an evolved parental identity. Supportive, non-abusive adults could have acted as role models, the interactions with the spouse or partner would include interactions within the relationship, and

therapy could have been used as a mechanism for processing past experiences and healing. Each of these factors was found in both studies to influence the experience of the survivor of child maltreatment.

The findings of the present study support previous findings reported by Russell (1974) who identified factors associated with experiencing a crisis during the transition to parenthood for both men and women. Factors similar for men and women included those related to pregnancy, conception, birth, the spouse/partner, and the baby. These factors were also identified as influential forces across the transition to parenthood for both men and women participating in this study. The results of this study provide additional evidence that the experience of conception, pregnancy, and birth, involvement and interactions with the spouse or partner and child influence the child maltreatment survivor's experience across the transition to parenthood.

This study also offers evidence supporting the findings of Cox, Paley, Burchinal, and Payne (1999). Cox, Paley, Burchinal, and Payne provided evidence that the ability to problem solve, level of depressive symptoms, gender of the child, and planning of the pregnancy were associated with marital satisfaction during the transition to parenthood. Each of these factors including marital satisfaction emerged from the data in this study. Ability was identified as a main category in this study influencing the attainment of an evolved parental identity. The influence of mental health, factors related to the child including gender, and the experience of conception, pregnancy, and birth were all found to impact the child maltreatment survivor's attainment of an evolved parental identity.

The work of Cowan and Cowan (2000) suggests that women who have a positive relationship with their husband are capable of forming positive relationships with their children, regardless of whether or not they resolved their negative past experiences. This provides evidence that having a positive relationship with a spouse or partner may buffer against the effects of negative past experiences. The results from the present research study provide support that both the involvement and interactions of the survivor of child maltreatment with their spouse or partner and the ability of the child maltreatment survivor to process past experiences and heal impact the ability of the child maltreatment survivor to obtain an evolved parental identity. It is possible that these factors interact and influence the impact of one another.

There were several gaps in the literature that the present research studied was able to fill. This research study provided insight into mechanisms that may influence the transmission of abuse from one generation to the next and emphasized influential contextual factors. According to Van Ijzendoorn's (1992) review of past research on the intergenerational transmission of parenting, these were aspects that were missing in past research and that were necessary to provide a better understanding of the phenomenon. Widom (1989) reported that past research on the intergenerational transmission of abuse was problematic due to reliance on retrospective reports, utilization of opportunity and convenience samples, and evidence based on the experiences of low income families. The present study did rely on retrospective reports, but utilized purposeful sampling of participants from various economic backgrounds. Dixon, Browne, and Hamilton Giachritsis (2005) expressed that there was a need for research that provided an explanatory model and this research study resulted in an explanatory theory of the processes involved when child maltreatment survivors become parents. Past research has focused predominantly on child maltreatment survivors that perpetuate the cycle of abuse (Walker, 1999) but this research study provided both those that have and have not abused their offspring with a voice. Literature in this area also focused mainly on the experiences of the mother (Belsky, 1980) while this study was able to illuminate both the mother's and the father's perspective. Cowan and Cowan (2000) pointed out that researchers need to focus on how high risk status influences both men and woman.

The present research study generated concepts that will provide professionals with a way of discussing the phenomenon that could promote shared understandings (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) about the experiences of child maltreatment survivors when they become parents. The knowledge gained from this research study will assist professionals in their efforts to respond appropriately and empathetically to the challenges faced by child maltreatment survivors as they transition to parenthood. The results of this study will also illuminate both variations and similarities in the experience of child maltreatment survivors. Psychologists need a holistic view of the experiences of child maltreatment survivors in order to identify factors that could influence the child maltreatment survivor's efforts to parent effectively and formulate effective treatment plans based on this knowledge.

## **Limitations**

According to Corbin and Strauss (2008) quality research is promoted through methodological consistency, clarity of purpose, self-awareness, training in qualitative research, and feeling or sensitivity. Grounded theory was the appropriate research method to answer the research question in this research study. The results of this research study provided an answer to the research questions and the results fulfilled the intentions of the researcher. The procedures that were utilized in this research study were also appropriate to the grounded theory method and used consistently throughout the research study. The purpose of this research study was to build a theory, and this purpose was realized. The researcher was self-reflective throughout the process and remained aware of personal biases and assumptions through the use of journaling and writing memos. The researcher obtained knowledge about grounded theory research during the course of the researcher's education and the research study was supervised. The researcher was able to remain sensitive during the research process by making use of the constant comparative methods. In other words, the researcher actively sought to reduce the limitations inherent in qualitative research.

One of the limitations of this research study pertains to sample size and the inability of the results to be generalized beyond the sample from which it originated. The sample size was appropriate for this research study because sampling ceased when saturation was achieved, which is consistent with the methods of grounded theory research (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Although appropriate for the method, sample size does influence the ability of the results to be generalized outside of the sample, but it should be noted that generalization of the results was not the goal of this research study or grounded theory research. The intention of this research study was to achieve a deeper understanding of the process of becoming a parent for child maltreatment survivors and to develop an explanatory theory about the phenomenon. This goal was achieved by using purposeful sampling to gather data from those most capable of conveying a deep understanding of the phenomenon.

Another limitation of this study involves whether or not the participants provided an accurate depiction of their experience which would reduce the validity of the results of the research study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Several strategies were used to increase the validity of this research study including the use of semi-structured interviews to allow the participants the freedom to relay their experiences without restraint and prevent the information flow from being led by the researcher. According to Creswell (2007) this increases construct validity in qualitative research. The researcher also utilized multiple data sources and achieved triangulation by utilizing several types of data. Multiple perspectives were acquired that reflected not only the experience of mothers but also the experience of fathers, and several types of data were collected including journals, interviews, and observations. The use of different data sources and types of data also adds to the credibility of the research study by providing multiple perspectives. The researcher also increased credibility by exploring



various ways of organizing and explaining the data and verifying the accuracy of the results of the study through member checking. Member checking involves asking each participant if the results of the study accurately depict their experience.

A further limitation of this research study involves researcher bias or interjecting the researcher's personal beliefs and assumptions into the research process and influencing the results of the research study. Researcher bias was strengthened by being open and reflective about personal biases and assumptions in journal entries and memos (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The process of member checking also provided each participant with the opportunity to offer input about the accuracy of the results of the study, and whether or not the resulting theory was reflective of their experience. In an effort to promote sensitivity the researcher became immersed in the data by reading and rereading the data and memos, and writing memos to record the researcher's thought processes and move the analysis forward. The researcher continually went back to the data to check the accuracy of, and find examples to support, interpretations and conceptualizations throughout the analysis of the data.

One last limitation involves reliability or the ability to repeat this research study and achieve the same results (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This study is incapable of being replicated but the researcher did take steps to increase the transparency of the research study. The researcher utilized MAXQDA analysis software to organize concepts and memos in an effort to provide a clear record of the data analysis process. Memos were recorded that documented the thought processes of the researcher as the research progressed. Computer programs like MAXQDA provide an audit trail or accurate detailing of the research process. This type of detail makes the results of the research study easier to evaluate and the evaluations more informed.

The validity and reliability of this research study could have been improved by increasing the number of participants. This would have provided additional perspectives of the experience of child maltreatment survivors when they become parents, and increased validation of the resulting theory. Although the participants that took part in this research study were both men and women providing the perspectives of mothers and fathers, men or fathers were not equally represented. Acquiring an even distribution of male and female participants would strengthen the results that were produced by this research study by providing a more comprehensive view of the experience for both mothers and fathers.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

The findings from this research study provided additional insight into the experience of child maltreatment survivors when they become parents. The knowledge gained from this study provided information about factors that influence the experience of child maltreatment survivors when they transition to the role of parent, and provided an explanatory theory about the processes involved when child maltreatment survivors experience the process of becoming a parent. The identification of both protective and contributory factors could assist psychologists in their efforts to formulate both prevention and intervention strategies.

According to the results of this research study child maltreatment survivors desire to achieve an evolved parental identity, one that evolved out of their experiences in childhood. The context within which child maltreatment survivors attempted to achieve this goal included factors related to both ability and the people involved with and interacting with the child maltreatment survivor. The context of the child maltreatment survivor shaped their responses to parenthood and their evaluations of themselves as a parent. The factors identified as influential during the transition to parenthood influence the child maltreatment survivor's ability to meet their goal of acquiring an evolved parental identity.

The limitations of this research study included the sample size and the lack of being able to generalize the results. Future research could replicate this study utilizing a larger sample comprised of participants from various backgrounds and an equal distribution of both mothers and fathers. Replication of this study would either provide information that confirms the results of the study thereby increasing the generalizability of the results or supply an alternative perspective of the experiences of child maltreatment survivors during the transition to parenthood. Either way additional knowledge would be gained from strengthening and replicating the current research study.

In the future researchers could also utilize quantitative or mixed methods to explore the experiences of child maltreatment survivors when they become parents. This form of research would produce results capable of being generalized beyond the sampled population and provide insight into the relationships between the factors that were identified in this study. Knowledge about the relationships between the identified factors and their influence on the goals of survivors of child maltreatment will expand the current understanding of how specific factors interact and influence the outcome.

## Conclusion

The main focus of this grounded theory research study was to broaden the understanding of the experiences of child maltreatment survivors as they experience the process of becoming a parent. By utilizing a grounded theory approach to the research question, the researcher was able to develop a theory about the context and processes involved when child maltreatment survivors meet the challenges of parenthood. This research study integrated several lines of research including child maltreatment, the intergenerational hypothesis, the determinants of parenting, and the transition to parenthood thereby providing a holistic view of the phenomenon. The findings that resulted from this study are significant because they provide insight into the goals of survivors of child maltreatment during the transition to parenthood and factors influencing the attainment of those goals. The knowledge gained from this study could assist psychologists in their efforts to identify protective and contributory factors so that they can respond appropriately to survivors of child maltreatment facing challenges during the transition to parenthood. Adding to the current knowledge base may alter or improve the responses of psychologists and create new ways of dealing with and understanding the circumstances that are involved when survivors of child maltreatment become parents. It is the hope of this researcher that the results of this research add to the current body of literature and provide information that informs psychological practice.

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