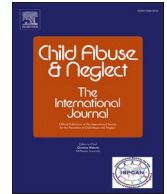




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## Constructing the ‘zero family’: Breaking the intergenerational transmission of maltreatment from the perspective of care-experienced parents

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Several studies have explored the mechanisms of intergenerational transmission of child maltreatment (ITCM), which also involves care-experienced parents; however, what is less explored is their direct experience, especially regarding resilience processes.

**Objective:** Developing the theoretical framework of ITCM through an exploration of the perspectives of those who appear to have interrupted it.

**Participants and setting:** A sample of 27 Italian parents - with experience in foster and/or residential care - who have broken the ITCM, completed an in-depth interview between May 2021 and February 2023.

**Methods:** A Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014) approach was adopted in carrying out the interviews, which focused on daily experiences of parenting (Morgan, 2011) and on factors perceived as supporting ITCM interruption. Data were analyzed using open, focused and theoretical coding; the analysis itself was discussed with a consultative board of care-experienced parents.

**Results:** The study highlighted important aspects that, from parents' perspectives, play a role in breaking ITCM: for instance, how their parenting experience is a challenging process of constructing what they term ‘zero family’. Furthermore, starting a family from scratch requires coming to terms with the past, re-imagining oneself as a parent, and managing the complexity of everyday life despite such tensions.

**Conclusions:** The results throw light on how the transition to parenthood itself is perceived as a significant developmental opportunity for the interruption of ITCM. However, many problems persist, foregrounding the relevance of discussing possible supports to strengthen parenting agency and skills. Such a discussion should therefore be increasingly informed by ecological approaches and parents' perspectives (also on everyday practices and life contexts), thus avoiding the risk of pathologizing responses.

### 1. Introduction

Among parents with personal experiences of engagement with child protection systems in their own childhoods, several have themselves been victims of maltreatment and experienced out-of-home care interventions; thus care-experienced parents represent a potential example of intergenerational cycles of maltreatment (Pecora et al., 2010). Innumerable studies have explored the strength

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(Madigan et al., 2019) and mechanisms of cycles of maltreatment and reached interesting conclusions regarding the objective conditions that produce them, for instance parental psychopathology, experiencing multiple forms of maltreatment and other adversities, mothers' histories of IPV and problems with their partners (Langevin et al., 2021). However, the direct experience of the parents themselves is less explored, as is that of those, a good percentage, who – despite initial disadvantaged conditions - manage to become 'good enough' parents (Greene et al., 2020; Thornberry et al., 2012). This is the subject of my study, which intends to broaden the theoretical framework concerning intergenerational cycles of maltreatment through an exploration of the perspectives of those who have seemingly broken them.

The study involved care-experienced parents (with experience in out-of-home-care) who have been able to build positive parenting practices in bringing up their own children. The aim was to identify how they managed this through exploring how they make sense of their daily practices (Morgan, 2011). Specifically, I studied parents' subjective perceptions of protective factors and – conversely - of what may render them vulnerable, and explored their strategies for managing the challenging task of child-rearing.

### 1.1. Care experienced parents and breaking the intergenerational transmission of maltreatment

Past studies exploring the life course trajectories of individuals who experienced time in protective care during childhood are controversial: while some have stressed how being a victim as a child involves a high risk of becoming an abusive parent, other scholars have been critical of this standpoint (e.g. Greene et al., 2020).

Many scholars have underlined how care-experienced people are exposed to numerous challenges as parents. For instance, such studies highlight early pregnancies occurring frequently while in alternative care or soon after leaving the child protection system (CPS) (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Gill et al., 2020; Taussig & Roberts, 2022). Additionally, these parents face the long-term impact of traumatic childhood experiences, including the encounter with the CPS (Stein & Dumaret, 2011), and in many cases mental health problems (Devaney et al., 2023; Gypen et al., 2017; Straatmann et al., 2021). The latter can also negatively impact satisfaction with one's intimate relationships and parenting role, as highlighted in a recent longitudinal study conducted by Refaeli et al. (2022) in Israel. On the socioeconomic front, these parents show low educational levels and precarious economic situations (Currie & Spatz Widom, 2010; Shpiegel & Cascardi, 2018), aspects that also emerged as highly significant in the reduction (or reproduction) of what some authors call the intergenerational transmission of placement in OHC (Brännström et al., 2022; Mertz & Andersen, 2017). For instance, a Welsh study, involving 206 care leaver parents between the ages of 16 and 21, found that more than a quarter of their children were themselves taken into care (Roberts, 2021).

Lately, however, while several researchers have documented the strength of intergenerational transmission of positive and negative dimensions in relation to very different domains of life - such as, for instance, health (Coneus & Spiess, 2012; Whitaker et al., 2010), education (Feinstein, 2003), socioeconomic status (Carvalho, 2012), attachment (Van Ijzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2019), and parenting behaviors (Kovan et al., 2009) - the evidence regarding child maltreatment seems less robust. Indeed, recent reviews and meta-analyses of existing research have led many authors to suggest treading cautiously when using the concept of ITCM, as concerns have arisen regarding the appropriateness of studies, for example regarding the choice of cases, the frequent use of data referring to retrospective recall, and poor operational definitions of maltreatment (Madigan et al., 2019; Newcomb & Locke, 2001; Thornberry et al., 2012). Further studies employing more rigorous methodologies have revealed a prevalence of discontinuity over continuity (Augustyn et al., 2019; McKenzie et al., 2021). For instance, Augustyn and colleagues found that "84% of the childhood-limited maltreatment victims and 66 % of the adolescent maltreatment victims did not subsequently engage in maltreating behaviors" (Augustyn et al., 2019:67). Considering these studies, it is possible to state how the majority of those who were maltreated as children break ITCM.

While acknowledging skepticism about automatically equating being a victim with becoming a perpetrator, research recognizes that most parents who maltreat their children were themselves victims of maltreatment (75 % or more) (Greene et al., 2020:12). We can therefore compare care-experienced parents as highly exposed to ITCM, with those who succeed in parenting potentially able to break such cycles. That makes it particularly interesting to examine the factors that help many parents to overcome their disadvantaged childhood.

What does research say about this? Few scholars have dealt with this issue. Exceptions include the recent scoping review conducted by Langevin et al. (2021) to synthesize the psychosocial risk and protective factors studied in the ICTM framework. The authors circumscribe these factors within individual characteristics (e.g., history of mental illness, parents' self-control), childhood adversity (e.g., timing of mothers' childhood sexual abuse, exposure to more than one type of maltreatment), relational characteristics (e.g., perception of social support, supportive relationships between parents) and context characteristics (e.g., socioeconomic status). Finally, the authors pointed out how both contextual protective factors and resilience processes have been less explored, and suggest that future research should investigate such issues (Langevin et al., 2021: 683).

The present study aims to better understand such neglected aspects (Siverns & Morgan, 2019). Accordingly, it adopts a viewpoint that may be sensitive to the perspectives of individuals, that is how such parents construct and position themselves in complex situations that have often been examined almost exclusively through the lens of risk factors. Accordingly, a study of resilience processes that sets out to heed life contexts thus also entails foregoing a purely individualistic reading of an experience, such as parenting, which by its nature is embedded in sociocultural dimensions. This choice is consistent with the views expressed by Bakketeig et al. (2020) in a study that aimed to investigate the outcomes of pathways in CPS through accessing the meaning of care leavers' daily practices:

deficit-focus indicates an individually responsabilizing tendency – it functions as a dividing practice of exclusion and objectification in Foucauldian terms (1982) to increase the distance between “them” and “us”, and situate risk within the individual parent (usually the mother) and family, rather than in the intergenerational reproduction of socio-economic inequalities.

(Bakketeig et al., 2020: 7)

### 1.2. The Italian context

According to the most recent report on children and youth in alternative care by the Italian Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2022), by December 31, 2019 there were 13,555 children in family foster care and 14,053 in residential care (about 3 per thousand of the underage population). The care typology indicated as preferable by the relevant law (L.149/2001) is family foster care or alternatively family-type residential care; the choice of care typology made following an assessment of the best option for the child. For the purposes of this paper, it is useful to highlight how Italian CPS is characterized by a *hybrid* working orientation (Segatto et al., 2022), recently defined by some scholars as a shift to a “family orientation approach” despite which, nonetheless, “the centrality of the family (or the child) is not accompanied by the necessary resources and policies to provide the required services” (Bertotti et al., 2023:271). Regarding leaving care pathways, there are no structural and universal measures to support this delicate transition phase. Starting in 2010, a strong focus on this issue began to develop in Italy; however, an experimental policy was only initiated in 2018 (Pandolfi et al., 2020) and provides no specific interventions for care leaver parents. For individuals who experienced care and who have not maltreated their own children, there are no specific support measures, other than those generally reserved for parents, which are notoriously undeveloped in Italy (Daly, 2013).

### 1.3. Current study

The study aimed to broaden the theoretical framework relating to intergenerational cycles of maltreatment through exploring the perspectives of those who have seemingly broken them. In particular, I explored how care-experienced parents construct their parenting in their daily lives (Highmore, 2002), focusing on their perceptions of resilience processes. Such information offers an important contribution regarding the supports that need to be offered to parents to sustain the interruption of cycles of maltreatment (Chamberlain et al., 2019). The study is exploratory and does not allow for the identification of intervening factors; it does however allow for empirically grounded hypotheses regarding how to promote protective factors. Indeed, much has been written about ITCM, but the views of those who break such transmission cycles are less explored; in addition, certain groups of parents, such as fathers (Dandy et al., 2020; Tyrer et al., 2005) and parents of school-age children have been less involved in research.

In conducting this study, I used an approach oriented to ‘family practices’, namely, one that explores how people describe and make sense of their daily activities as parents (Morgan, 2011). This theoretical framework makes it possible both to study family life in its dynamism, and to understand the ways in which people recognize and define parenting, eschewing aprioristic and standardized views of how it should unfold (Mauri, 2023).

Furthermore, considering the many dogmas and implicit evaluations to which parenting is subjected, I intended to connect ways of narrating everyday practices with normative constructs of parenting. Among these, special attention was given to how parents position themselves in relation to the ideology of intensive parenting. This ideology, which seems to be spreading more and more in Italy (Fargion, 2021), assigns parents, and mothers in particular (Hays, 1996), the ability to shape their children's lives and thus to guarantee them a successful future. Many authors, including Shirani et al. (2012), highlight how

within intensive parenting culture parents are seen as inadequate risk-managers [...] and are encouraged to rely on expert guidance. Critics have argued that this undermines parental confidence, placing undue pressure on parents, who are positioned as ultimately responsible for but incapable of ensuring their child's optimal development [...]. Therefore parenting becomes a source of risk and anxiety as what happens is viewed as the product of individual, autonomous choices.

(Shirani et al., 2012: 26)

In a society that expects parents to be the only managers of the risks associated with raising children, how do care-experienced people who have been exposed to extremely fragile parenting models - so much so that it has led to their own removal in childhood - position themselves? I postulate that contextualizing parenting within its sociocultural context can help moving away from an individualistic view that ignores the structural inequalities affecting care-experienced parents; it can also emphasize similarities with the parenting experience per se, avoiding the risk of reification or pathologization.

Thus, the research questions addressed here read as follows:

RQ1: How do care experienced parents explain the process of interruption of the ITCM in their daily lives?

RQ2: What factors do they perceive as supportive of such an interruption?

## 2. Methods

The principles of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) informed all study decisions with respect to sampling, data generation and analysis. This approach shares most of its methodological assumptions with positivist grounded theory (GT); for example, the analysis occurs simultaneously with data collection and consists of data coding. The analysis thus entails an inductive process of developing theoretical categories, with each step increasing the level of abstraction. However, in constructivist GT data are

seen as constructed, and analyses are understood as a series of interpretive actions rather than as objective reports.

Furthermore, the research adopted a participatory approach, aiming to construct knowledge collaboratively with the individuals concerned (McLaughlin, 2010). Finally, an advisory board was convened in order to improve the overall credibility of the findings and to facilitate the process of data interpretation. It consisted of 12 study participants, all with experiences in care. Their roles were to: 1) test and discuss the research tools, 2) discuss results and 3) participate in dissemination activities.

## 2.1. Sample

I interviewed 27 parents, whose main characteristics are described in Table 1. Among these, 19 had entered the care system before 2001, the date when all Italian institutes were closed by law, although the deinstitutionalization process had in fact begun earlier. The inclusion criteria were as follows: having had experience of alternative care, whether in residential or foster care; being parents not involved in CPS and perceived as well-adjusted; lastly, having at least one child under 18 years of age. I chose to focus on parents who had no contact with CPS at the time of the interview, who stated their own satisfaction with the parenting experience, and who were reported (by CPS professionals or activists) as good parents, as arguably such parents do not reproduce the experience of maltreatment they experienced in their own childhood.

Furthermore, the study did not focus on a specific type of maltreatment, but rather on those included in the WHO definition, namely “all types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power”. This heterogeneity was also found in the subjective perceptions of maltreatment experienced by participants (Table 2), who in many cases, and in keeping with the literature, recounted having experienced multiple and often coexisting forms of maltreatment.

The sampling strategy was theoretical; the interview outline was partly adapted on the basis of the unfolding data analysis, in accord with a GT approach (Tarozzi, 2008). As affirmed by Conlon et al. (2020), in GT “the point of reference becomes the emergent insights that fill out the dimensions of the category, not coverage of all dimensions of the characteristics of the study population” (Conlon et al., 2020:955). In my study, 17 participants were initially purposively sampled for maximum variation in relation to some criteria of significance in the study of intergenerational transmission of maltreatment. That means that I attempted to obtain as varied a sample as possible in relation to parents’ gender, children’s age, education and characteristics of care experience (type, length and

**Table 1**  
Participants’ characteristics.

Characteristics	n (%)
Gender	
M	10 (37)
F	17 (63)
Age	
<30	7 (26)
30–40	13 (48)
>40	7 (26)
Education	
Sec. school or less	7 (26)
High school	15 (56)
Degree	5 (18)
No. of children	
1	14 (52)
2	9 (33)
>2	4 (15)
Children’s age	
<6	19 (70)
6–18	26 (96)
Romantic relationships	
Single	2 (7)
Divorced	4 (15)
Permanent partner	21 (78)
Years in care	
<6	8 (30)
06–10	7 (26)
>10	12 (44)
No. of placements	
1	13 (48)
2	8 (30)
>2	6 (22)
Type of care	
Foster care	3 (11)
Residential care	18 (67)
Both	6 (22)

**Table 2**  
Participants' perceived maltreatment.

Perceived maltreatment	n (%)
Physical abuse	5 (19)
Emotional/psychological abuse	16 (59)
Child neglect	19 (70)
Sexual abuse	4 (15)

instability of care) (Buisman et al., 2020; Mertz & Andersen, 2017; Wall-Wieler et al., 2018). In the next phase, I aimed to achieve theoretical sampling as the saturation of meanings, that is when no more new concepts emerge and when a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon develops (Hennink et al., 2017). Although I had initially planned to interview 30 parents, I postulate I achieved such a saturation of meanings through the involvement of only 10 more parents, thus reaching a total of 27 participants, and through discussing the final GT with the interviewees.

## 2.2. Data collection

The study received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Trento (Prot\_2021-022). Recruitment took place mainly through care leavers associations and snowball sampling, and to a lesser extent through social services and the third sector. Parents were first contacted by phone, when the nature of the initiative was explained to them; subsequently they were sent the informed consent and data processing authorization forms. In a second telephone conversation, the various aspects of the project were discussed in detail, including how the research would be conducted, and any doubts that arose were clarified. After the second telephone meeting, almost all the parents I contacted chose to join the research. Only two parents I contacted decided not to participate: after scheduling the interview appointment, they asked to postpone it and subsequently could no longer be traced.

Initially, I had planned to conduct two interviews per participant: the first to get to know each other and begin exploring the study topics, and the second to expand on emergent themes. This choice was also informed by ethical considerations, namely that it would be preferable not to force interviewees into overlong interviews when dealing with sensitive topics. In fact, the interviews turned out to be very rich, and no participants expressed difficulty in participating in long interviews, except in one case for purely practical reasons. In addition, at the end of each interview I explored the emotional aspects of their participation so as to benefit from their evaluation of the meeting. This additional moment of verification also prompted me to confirm the choice of conducting only one interview with each participant.

Regarding the interviews, each parent was asked to speak about their own daily experience: the main issues linked to parenting, in particular the parent-child relationship, as well as formal and informal networks. Rather than asking the interviewees specific questions about their experiences in care, I allowed experiences to emerge as they saw fit. The audio-recorded interviews took place online between May 2021 and February 2023, with each lasting approximately 2 h. I also collected observational notes for each research participant.

## 2.3. Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed, anonymized, and then analyzed with the support of NVivo12 software. First, I chose seven interviews and carried out the open coding process paragraph by paragraph, assigning each one a label. For instance, one paragraph was categorized as 'feeling loved by a parent who makes a mistake' and another 'feeling you exist for someone'. I then looked at which concepts emerged across the interviews, beginning to focus on the most recurring categories, such as the emergence of the importance of feeling loved by someone in the construction of one's parenting. The first concepts identified were then grouped in more inclusive categories such as 'someone to start from'. At this stage it was also important to write memos of my own reflections on the most significant aspects. Finally, through constant comparison between data, memos and labels, I refined coding by identifying the central category and relating the categories to each other in order to explain the parents' conceptualization of the interruption of the ITCM. As presented in the results section, at this point what emerged was that in the construction of the 'zero' family an important step was to 'value positive relationships', that is the theoretical category to which those previously described referred. The GT was thus elaborated, and then discussed with an advisory board of care experienced parents. I chose to form this advisory committee with the aim of discussing the research in order to achieve a shared construction of meanings and interpretations. In this particular case, six parents were willing to read the description of findings and to meet with me individually for approximately 30 min to talk. During such conversations, they were asked to highlight what they saw as most significant, to take notes, to describe the main emotions they felt after reading the results, and to share in which parts they recognized themselves or felt a distance from their own experiences. They subsequently provided photographs of their work. All the parents recognized themselves in the findings; some also expressed a sense of gratitude for seeing their experiences at the center of a research project, and pride in having participated. Some said they felt understood, but the reading had not provoked strong emotions. For others, confronting their and other parents' experiences generated difficult emotions; it was thus very important to be provided with a space for discussion. Regarding content, we discussed the analysis point by point; I used parents' comments mainly to refine, interpret and discuss the GT. For instance, the 'zero' family concept was widely shared, although some pointed out how this does not mean erasing everything pertaining to their past. In this case, as in other passages, I rephrased the description, leaving more room for the highlighted aspects.

**Building the «zero family»**

<b>Coming to term with the past</b>	<b>Re-imagining oneself as a parent</b>	<b>Managing the complexity of everyday life</b>
Learning to protect themselves	Finding different ways	Seeking a strong connection with children
Rebelling against a destiny which seems already written	Dealing with triggers that catapult into the past	Worrying about children's happiness
In negative landscapes, being able to value all positive relations	Coping with the fear of failure	Struggling with idealized standards of parenting

Fig. 1. Results overview.

### 3. Results and discussion

Here I introduce and discuss the GT analysis which identified as a core concept in parents' representations what the interviewees refer to as the 'zero family', that is a beginning without a background. From this - the main concern of participants - three categories were identified to make sense of their experiences. Such categories are further developed as in Fig. 1 with the aim of conceptualizing parenting experiences which recur in the narratives, and of illuminating a process of striving to become a good parent that needs to be continuously retraced and renewed.

#### 3.1. The arduous process of building the 'zero family'

Albeit with different shades, and consistently with other studies (Siverns & Morgan, 2019), many of the interviewees portrayed the experience of becoming parents as a new beginning, imbued with the hope that their children will have a happier childhood than theirs. Giona,<sup>1</sup> one of the interviewees, told how his childhood was impacted by family violence and a father with alcohol problems, which resulted in his feeling challenged in striving to be a good father. He thus recounted the birth of his first child:

I really felt this energy of restarting, of wanting to see the positives, of seeing that there is this creature that is yours.

This entailed not only starting as a father, but also perceiving fatherhood as a chance to gain new connections with oneself and the world:

It was almost like smashing a shield, with which up to that point you had to protect yourself from the outside world.

The metaphor of parenthood as something that enables one to "smash a shield" clarifies how the birth of the child was experienced as a promise of authenticity, an opportunity to regain possession of a part of oneself that previously had to be kept hidden, and that being a father allowed one to express. A mother also shared the desire enshrined in the parenting project to express herself as an adult who could counteract her experience as a daughter by proving herself capable of protection and care:

I wished to be a mother even before, when I was still a teenager, sometimes I fantasized [...] I didn't want to be the daughter anymore, but I wanted to be the one who provides the safe haven.

This experience of rebirth was described by interviewees as characterized by a strong discontinuity with their own experiences as children. Although this was to some extent challenged in everyday parenting experiences (see paragraphs on triggers and fears of failure, 3.3.2 and 3.3.3), it was as if becoming parents entailed a demarcation from the past, and the beginning of an entirely new story. Some parents experienced the new family as the one where they symbolically restarted their family tree, as stated by a father:

She and I are Adam and Eve. We are the first ones. My family tree starts when my son was born.

Similarly, a mother not only perceived restarting as a strength of her parenting project, but also highlighted critical issues or challenges, such as loneliness, in not being able to rely on an extended family network:

We are kind of a 'zero family', from which we start again. So, the concern and care that I undoubtedly have toward my child, even too much sometimes, in my opinion is to compensate for the absence of other figures. You know the saying "it takes a village to raise a child"? [...]. In our case there are not many *others* for the children.

For interviewees, being the 'zero family' was also connected to having completed a journey that enabled their self-construction by distancing themselves from past experiences. They therefore perceived this not only as a new beginning, but also as the end of a journey that had previously engaged them; this is what enabled them to start afresh. This process began with distancing oneself from and reframing one's past while coping with its consequences, and continued with the endeavor to build everything from scratch. There were many accounts of the daily struggles to conduct this new project while confronting the challenges described in the next paragraphs. For example, a father told of ordinary daily life incidents (such as children's expressions of jealousy) which he perceived as threatening to the overall construction of his parental role, thus making him feel inadequate.

When I discussed this concept with the advisory committee, however, parents emphasized how they mostly kept their distance from traumatic and negative experiences, while investing a great deal of effort in maintaining a connection with positive aspects of their childhood.

#### 3.2. Coming to terms with the past

The first area emerging as significant in the construction of the 'zero family' concerned coming to terms with one's past as a child. This did not begin with the transition to parenthood; in fact many of the interviewees situated the beginning of this process earlier, in some cases in their time in care. As in other areas, this process was not described by parents as something that was resolved once and for all, but as an ongoing task.

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms assigned by the researcher.



### 3.2.1. Learning to protect themselves

Respondents were confronted from childhood with relationships perceived as violent, abusive, or neglectful. These could relate to the family itself, or in some cases also to CPS, as in the account of a mother who experienced as traumatic an abrupt placement against her will. Parents assigned a crucial role in their parenting experience to the possibility of protecting themselves from relationships experienced as negative. This accords with a recent study involving 21 adults with childhood maltreatment experiences (Schneiderman et al., 2023). Indeed, it appeared that the responsibility to protect their children triggered a motivation to protect themselves in the first place, as one father stated:

I started protecting myself when protecting me meant protecting my son.

In many cases, it was the birth family which was seen as posing a threat to their own and their new family's well-being, as another father stated:

I don't want my (birth) family, the most destructive thing I have ever known in my life, to destroy my own family. I keep them well away from my actual family, the one I have built by myself.

In the interviews there were many examples from everyday life which highlighted a need to set boundaries and safeguard protected spaces. Paradoxically, in some cases this kind of work enabled parents to maintain connections and transform their relationships with their birth families: in several instances, such a relationship was reactivated precisely in the transition to parenting (Mauri, 2023). One mother, for example, recounted:

She [the grandmother] did not come to visit us because I did not want her to endanger my girls, because she was very dirty. [...] After her discharge from the mental health residential care I saw improvements, so then she started to visit us: I made her wash her hands and gave her some of my clothes [...] She is now my girls' favorite grandmother because [...] she plays a lot. She dances and she reads books. She is just the grandmother everyone would like.

This mother's account, similar to those from many other parents, highlighted how the choice to save oneself did not necessarily mean cutting ties with the past. Rather, this was sometimes portrayed as a way of holding together, and accepting, even the most painful parts of one's family. In the interviews, parents did not describe this self-protective posture as a skill acquired once for all, but rather as an ongoing balancing act, sometimes punctuated by physically distancing for long periods. Moreover, parents underlined how the concern to protect oneself was in many cases reinforced through CPS, since the experiences in care allowed them to create protected spaces where they could choose how to position themselves in relation to their birth family. For example, one mother stated:

For many years I had the sole inner mission to save myself, to put myself in a safe situation, even at the cost of neglecting my birth parents. [...] And I think this is important. When there is an initial fracture, when you are born into a family that then breaks up, you have to face a period alone and [...] probably you will have to live with that sadness forever.

This awareness was experienced by interviewees as a necessary step in growing as a person, but also, as parents, to be free from negative conditioning for themselves and their family.

### 3.2.2. Rebelling against a destiny which seems already written

Becoming parents was perceived by interviewees as an act of rebellion against a future that seemed intent on repeating past experiences. Although the parents interviewed, and most care-experienced people, fight against this self-fulfilling prophecy (Augustyn et al., 2019; McKenzie et al., 2021), individual perceptions highlighted a strong fear of not succeeding in being different from one's parents. Interviewees expressed with varying intensities this widespread and recurring fear, which for some was related to the disparagement experienced in the family, or to the social stigma associated with having grown up in a family with many problems. Parents recounted the significant repercussions of stigma, even in their role as parents, as well as the possible (often small) rebellions which enabled them to build alternative futures day by day, as one father stated:

I decided [to leave the school and] find myself a job because [...] it helped me to see that I was able to learn, rebelling against the sense of emptiness and inability. I wanted to prove that I was able to cope on my own, that everything I was told, the label I was given as a child because I came from a disadvantaged family, for me it was the strength to react.

The more or less conscious choice to rebel against a destiny that seemed preordained recurred in the narratives and concerned different aspects of life, such as experimenting in education or work, taking care of oneself, choosing to become parents as in what Gunnarsdóttir and colleagues define as "making strategic life choices" (2021,5). One mother explained how confronting her mother's depression always made her aspire to a happier future for herself, something which she always perceived as an imperative.

This rebellion was also sometimes experienced by interviewees as a redemption from birth families, as a need to prove that they have not been crushed. Carla was expecting her second child and related how complicated it was for her to become a mother, with the frequent fear of not succeeding in this task, and also experiencing great psychological distress. However, it was precisely the redemption from her past that, according to her, helped her not to give up:

It helps me to think that I have to redeem myself. [...] You have no idea how much I would like to show my father, he who has hurt us so much, what I have become today. I would like to tell him "You destroyed my life, you killed my mom, you did the impossible, everything a person should not do, but still I am alive. [...] With all the negative consequences I'm living with. But you didn't kill me".



### 3.2.3. In negative landscapes, being able to value all positive relations

Encountering “Safe, Stable, and Nurturing Relationships” (Thornberry et al., 2013) is a recognized protective factor in the processes of resilience and interruption of ITCM (Egeland et al., 1988; Masten et al., 1990). The parents I interviewed assigned a crucial role in becoming a balanced person, and consequently parent, to some relevant positive relations they experienced in their lives. These relations could have been with siblings, biological or foster parents, or social workers. Interviewees found it very important to acknowledge what it meant to be recognized and heard by those figures. Additionally, acknowledging the crucial role of the relationship with the actual partner, for many, if not for all, was seen as somehow a turning point in their lives. Feeling considered and accepted with their own limits and history was seen as what in many cases enabled them to cope with painful experiences, as well as to invest in the construction of their families. Pietro, a father, expressed throughout the interview a strong sense of gratitude to his wife:

I am who I am also and especially because of my wife, who was the first person to trust me without any doubt, giving me the chance to build a life with her. She did not test me to see if I could, we simply did it. That's how we built our family.

Some interviewees also highlighted the importance of having retrieved some warm memories from their relation with the birth family, memories that made them feel loved, despite acknowledging parents' problems and mistakes, as a father recounted about his own mother:

I am sorry for the way she behaved, however, I am very happy because I felt affection from her. She made mistakes, she was a weak woman, she chose to stay with my abusive father [...] But I felt this protection from my mother. [...] From this I felt her presence and I felt loved.

In the case of Samuele, this positive role was not played by somebody in the family but by a social worker. He described himself as a very attentive dad who values his son's skills and aspirations, very differently from his parents and foster family, and he recounted how crucial it was to encounter a social worker who made him feel seen, understood and valued:

[This social worker] encouraged me to attend a course of photography, I learned how to develop photos. Now it's a passion I keep, because I do photo editing, I can do everything. I never worked as a photographer because then I took other directions. But the approach the social worker had with me is what “seeing people” is like: dialoguing with them, understanding their talent and who they are.

This and other interviews highlighted how good relationships - life-changing ones – arose from people who made them aware of their rights as children by offering supportive relationships or providing access to otherwise unavailable opportunities. A mother pointed out in this regard that:

The residential care staff was so helpful as I had the chance to connect with adults who were devoted to bringing me up and not totally caught up in their own problems. It was indispensable! I don't actually know what I would be as a parent without that experience.

The experiences described in the above extracts were seen by the study participants as resources for their roles as parents when they offered ways to see their children's needs and talents. Indeed, interviewees described how they learned to see their children through the people by whom they themselves felt to be seen.

### 3.3. Re-imagining oneself as a parent

In this section I present how interviewees conceptualized the process of constructing their parenthood. Describing their ways of being parents was strongly connected with breaking up with their childhood experiences, introduced in a previous section (cf. par. 3.2.1 and 3.2.2), and in fact was often described as *Finding different ways*. Despite being perceived as a strong drive in interrupting the ICTM, this discontinuity seemed to expose them to several stresses they had to face, especially when *dealing with triggers that catapulted them into the past or when coping with fear of failure*.

#### 3.3.1. Finding different ways

It is well known that the transition to parenthood is an important stage of human development that in part marks the end of the differentiation process from the birth family, and in part stands in continuity with the experiences lived throughout life (Bowen, 1993). Becoming a parent offers an opportunity for reflecting on what one has experienced as a child. Differently from what usually happens, interviewees saw their ways of being parents as striving to eschew what they experienced in their childhood. A father stated in this regard:

You have in mind that you don't want to make the same mistakes or relive the same things. [...] So actually you have this negative footprint, but you always try to get away from it.

For several interviewees, this tension was expressed in not repeating their own parents' mistakes; this entailed at least guaranteeing that they would always be there, as a father stated:

I was just happy and couldn't wait to prove to my father that it didn't need much, that a little thing was enough, just being there for the children.

For other parents, this distancing process was expressed in their desire to employ educational methods that recognize children as

subjects, unlike what they experienced in their own childhood:

My basic assumption is that children are not objects, you cannot own them. And I have gained this because I myself was treated as an object [...] My goal is "I have to do better" (mother).

It was often what was missing that defined how they wanted to be as parents. The interviews also highlighted that the care pathways represented a chance to understand what might have been different, which rights or attentions were not available in their birth family, also thanks to experiencing a different *normality* when they were in care. One mother stated:

[In care] I saw what I didn't have and understood what I was entitled to. Now I know what it means to give my child the right to have certain things, that is why I would not be able to punish my children: I would not be able to take something away to teach something...

The strong pressure to behave differently, however, risks exposing them to an idealized representation of parental tasks and responsibilities. This highly self-critical approach is confirmed by other studies that highlight the relationship that exists with childhood maltreatment experiences (Birni et al., 2023). This can lead to a hiatus as regards their own parental project, in need of daily revisiting and re-constructing, also by caring for one's own vulnerable parts and facing the fear of failure. A mother affirmed:

I did not know how to contain the crying [of my baby]. I said to myself "I have to breathe, lock myself in another room. I have to go away for a little while. And then come back and look after him again". We always have two sides, the one that we would like to be and we want to show to the world, but there is also the vulnerable one.

### 3.3.2. Dealing with triggers that catapult into the past

For study participants, keeping up with the construction of parenting in strong discontinuity with what experienced in one's childhood was even more complex when confronted with situations that reactivated emotions and responses that led back to that time in their own childhood when they were abused (Christie et al., 2017). A father stated that:

When you become a parent you want to prove to the children that you are the opposite person of what your parents were with you. But at the same time you have demons inside that confuse you. Because all the negativity that you have experienced, which is part of you, sometimes rises to the surface. And you are also afraid that the children will see all this.

Although differences emerged among the interviewees, with such differences probably related to the level of awareness and mentalization of traumatic childhood experiences, many parents reported having to deal with disorienting and difficult emotional feelings (Jackson Foster et al., 2015). For example, one mother recounted her feelings when her daughter witnessed arguments between her and her partner:

It was heartbreaking for me, because in her I saw myself when I was a child and there was violence in my family. Everything you've been through is catapulted back into you and you think you don't decide your life, you just repeat the past. I see myself doing this and I cry.

At the same time, a few parents reported that when some situations triggered childhood memories and feelings, there was also the risk of superimposing them on their children, despite the fact that the new situation was substantially different. A father stated:

Sometimes I got confused between my being a father and my being a son, because I was still reliving my experience as an abused child. [...] This creates mental mayhem and also discomfort and makes it difficult to listen to what your child is really going through. [...] Occasionally I exaggerated, making him feel not up to... That's how I felt.

We can notice that the trauma they referred to is not just the abuse they suffered, but also the experience of being removed from their family. Actually, one of the greatest sources of anguish was the fear of their children being removed from them, even in the absence of risk indicators. For example, a mother who was removed as a child following an emergency admission to hospital because of abuse, recounted the panic she experienced when her daughter was admitted to hospital for a minor domestic accident:

I was reminded of the situation I had experienced. [...] This is a fear that will always be with me. That's the reason why everything must always be fine, and I have to be very careful with my girls.

These emotions were always present in the narratives of parents: a primordial fear that recurs throughout their parenting lives, as expressed in one mother's account:

[the fear of removal] is one of the few things that I've never been able to completely bury or dissolve, because it's so huge as a feeling. [...] I think I will never be able to eliminate it.

### 3.3.3. Coping with the fear of failure

Transition to parenthood exposes all parents to the fear of being unfit for their task. In this regard, interviewees reported having experienced a strong sense of inadequacy, in some cases immediately after realizing they were expecting a child. Even for those with a stable couple relationship, feelings of inadequacy were reinforced by a perception of isolation, without inspirational role models or supportive family members. Although this perception is common to many parents, it emerged with greater intensity in such situations, as evidenced by other research that indicates that experiences of child maltreatment correlate negatively with parental feelings of

competence and perceived social support (Manshadi et al., 2023). As expressed by a father:

Everything started when we found out we were expecting a child. That was the lowest point for my self-confidence. I felt lost, alone, because I had to deal with a situation that was too big for me and with the perception that I didn't have the means to cope.

Children themselves were seen as litmus tests calling attention to parents' mistakes, such as failing to keep calm or being as supportive as desired. A mother, expecting a second child and with a demanding job, recounted with much frustration the struggle to manage the gap between her behavior and how she thought a good mother should act:

I have no patience, maybe I contribute to his restlessness. I'm not good at calming him when he cries, when he calls me 'mummy, mummy', but I'm not one of those sweet, nice mummies. No, maybe I'm too hard on him too. [...] So I fear I'm doing badly with my son.

The crucial aspect, and at times a source of anguish, was the fear of being themselves a potential danger to their child. This matches what emerges in the literature review by Sirvens and Morgan: "Despite desires to do things differently some struggled with the belief that they would succumb to what they feared were predisposed generational patterns of abuse and expressed concern that their children might also need protecting from themselves" (2019,9). Interviewees connected this fear with examples from everyday life when they felt they were reaching their own limits. However, the interviews also spotlighted the ways parents found to deal with complex situations and reactions. For example, many parents started psychotherapies, some asked their partners for more support or attention and devoted time to reflecting on themselves and their life. A father stated:

I experienced a strong anger toward my son, I was close to the point of beating him [...] And I got help from the psychologist [...] Because I felt so much guilt and I used to say to myself, "I was not supposed to be like this. I'm re-behaving the same as my parents". And so I had to deal with it because I felt really shitty toward my son and also toward myself.

An important aspect of coping strategies, according to parents, concerned being aware of the option of asking for help: not an easy option, as it may entail exposing oneself and one's failures:

There is the fear of exposure, because if you share a problem outside it is as if you say "look I'm at fault", and you don't know what others might think [...] I also mean that I fear a more general judgment that results in being re-categorized as a crappy parent. (father)

However, despite all the fears of inadequacy and danger, what appeared prevalent was the feeling of doing something positive and beneficial, thus opening up the same possibility of requesting help.

### 3.4. Managing the complexity of everyday life

The interviews were rich in everyday-life narratives that provided access to parents' descriptions of child-rearing practices. Categories emerging from the interview analysis focused on *seeking a strong connection with children*, *worrying about children's happiness* and *struggling with idealized standards of parenting*.

#### 3.4.1. Seeking a strong connection with children

All parents described themselves as highly engaged in the relationship with their children. The search for a strong connection with them was firstly described as an opportunity to strengthen a relationship they felt they lacked as children (Coler, 2018). A mother decided not to work to spend all her time with her children and described this choice as very painful, also believing that "staying at home and devoting myself practically only to them is not a good example". A large part of her interview focused precisely on this choice, reported as highly constraining, despite being reasonable within the context of her own story:

When I think about it today, it is as if I took a luxury that my mother could not take. Because when I was very young she remained alone very early with two little children.... My mother could not stay at home with me. So it was a luxury, but in my opinion it was the only way for me, I couldn't have managed otherwise...

The endeavor to establish a strong connection with children was also shared by a very young mother who described the complexity of managing work and family life, the latter being almost entirely her own responsibility. For her too, the suffering in not having had a family motivated her to build a very strong one; she described herself as a very present mother in her children's lives:

I am really there with my children, I will always be in dialogue with them. I am sure I will get that, because I am already putting all my strength into this now. I want to be that mum you can't do without.

For this mother, as for other parents, the choice of strongly investing in the relationship with the children was also linked to wishing to feel indispensable, which may require an overwhelming sacrifice. Being ready to self-sacrifice also emerged from this father who described himself as totally devoted to his son's education. He stated:

With a child you never take a break [...] In the weekend you have him the whole time, you cannot say "I'm going to take him for a walk and then it's over". After the walk he has needs, it's continuous. If he stays up all night, the next day you go on, it's not like you finish the shift.

Seeking approval of their parental roles was widespread in the interviews, and the relationship with children was considered as a

mirror of this. Receiving confirmation through how children relate to them was described as crucial, a source of self-confidence that parents felt reinforced by:

They ask for a lot of cuddles and if there are problems they talk about them. [...] This helps a lot because you also see this great trust [...] It rewards me so much. Because I think that if there is dialogue it's really great (father).

### 3.4.2. *Worrying about children's happiness*

The choice of the term *worrying* for this category reflects two co-existing attitudes in parents' narratives about their children's happiness. Firstly, worrying by parents can be understood in relation to their prioritizing their children's happiness and well-being, thus guiding their own choices. One mother said:

My son throws tantrums, maybe he is a bit spoilt: he wants everything and gets everything. Because I want to see him happy, maybe because I'm novice as a mum.

The word happiness emerged in numerous examples from everyday life, in which parents told how well-being in the here-and-now became the organizing criterion for moments spent together:

We are very careful to figure out what he needs the most each time and we try to give it to him, which can be messing around, putting on music, smashing everything, throwing a party, playing video games, going to the park or the beach. [...] Anyway, he seems very happy, very curious, very attentive. (father)

Moreover, for many parents, focusing on their children's happiness meant doing everything to "make sure nothing is missing" and creating opportunities, as mentioned above, even making very big sacrifices. As stated by a mother:

If that's not enough, I work harder, I try to do everything not to let her miss anything. [...] I don't like my job, but to make sure that the child has everything, whether it's a sport, a summer center or anything that's good for her, I do everything.

From all interviews, feelings of huge responsibility for enabling children's happiness were mingled with feelings of being burdened and with great tension. This is the second meaning of the term 'worrying'. In their prioritizing what represents the best for their children, the parents shared, for example, some doubts relating to the 'right' long-term educational choices, as indicated by a mother:

In the end I always choose the solution that makes them smile the most. But I'm never sure if it is the right one, that makes them learn something over time.

The perception of being almost the guarantor of their children's well-being was thus portrayed as a double-edged sword by parents, also when they compared themselves with other parents. A mother recounted, for instance, how she perceived herself as more worried than other parents, and as unable to enjoy the experience of being a mother as much as she would like:

I see that [for other parents] there is a little more ease, less fear, in contrast I am often worried or scared. [...] You are more ready to jump in, you can't relax completely, to enjoy motherhood.

### 3.4.3. *Struggling with idealized standards of parenting*

I have shown that the strong engagement in their parental roles, including high expectations of discontinuity from their own childhood experiences, exposed parents to great tensions and responsibilities. These seemed to push respondents toward an acceptance of idealized standards of (adequate) parenting. The imperative they experienced of *doing well* seemed very salient in their representations, leading to feelings of inadequacy in evaluating such standards. For example, when they perceived a gap from what they were supposed to be/do, they attempted to compensate at the price of their well-being. A mother affirmed:

They so much need love and also need to see me there. They want me to be there, they let me know and they tell me "mommy come here". And sometimes I do not succeed, because I have to cook or I have to do so many things as well, or because I need time for me. But you try and put everything aside, you have to be there for them.

This mother felt she had to be there, to keep the family system from collapsing, as in her childhood experience. These reflections were shared by another mother who expressed the relevance of her role to the point of always feeling *essential* (Liss et al., 2013):

Attempts to not be there all the time have gone quite badly...although I have tried to find compromises regarding how things were done without me. It's as if I actually find myself in a daily routine where the only way for things to happen is for me to be there.

The issue of establishing balances was very much discussed in the narratives; parents recounted how they had to daily re-create them, find compromises, both regarding their own ideas of optimal parenting, and with people close to them:

What is challenging is the construction of balances, that is, always having to negotiate, to listen, to understand what they want to do, to be able to do it [...] But sometimes I am not able to manage and I am taking those crap pills [to calm me down]. [...] I must say that from this point of view, however, my son has lost nothing, he does not have an absent father who watches television on Sundays. (father)

Significantly, in this excerpt, what emerges is on the one hand the father's great struggle in managing daily tasks (especially

parenting), and on the other that these efforts allowed his son to have a father who through his own sacrifices could offer *quality time* (Kremer-Sadlik & Paugh, 2007). Here, the difficult confrontation with an idealized vision of parenting seemed further exacerbated by the aspiration to offer his children a *normal* life. This striving for normality was highly recurrent in the narratives, where it often appeared decontextualized in relation to experienced situations.

#### 4. Strengths and limitations

As often seen in qualitative research, the study sample is very small: although I had initially planned to interview 30 parents, I eventually interviewed 27. Furthermore, it can be argued that while I gained insights from fathers and some 'single parents', findings reflect more the experience of partnered female parents. However, as mentioned in the sample paragraph, I postulate a good theoretical saturation was reached. As regards transferability, these data are valid in contexts similar to the Italian one, with a hybrid CPS and underdeveloped family support policies. However, the depth of the interviews and analysis, also validated through discussion with the parent advisory committee, supports the value of these data in enriching knowledge about the mechanisms of ITCM disruption through parental theories. Another limitation is that the choice to involve parents with positive parenting experiences could have contributed to an avoidance of the more negative issues. In the event, however, not foregrounding the risk aspects in the interviews did not prevent adversity in current parenting experiences from emerging. Rather, this approach enabled participants to relate how adversity fostered the emergence of parenting skills and resources that might otherwise have remained unexplored. Indeed, I postulate that the main strength lies in having approached the study of ITCM by focusing on the positive learnings from the experience of people who have travelled a difficult journey to successful parenthood.

#### 5. Implication and conclusion

This research contributes to the debate on breaking cycles of maltreatment by exploring the relevant representations and meanings of successful care-experienced parents. How parents represent such processes emerges as nonlinear, constructed over the course of a lifetime, and linked to events and transitions. These occur both in a more psychological and intimate space and in broader life contexts (Gunnarsdóttir et al., 2021; Thomas & Hall, 2008). For many parents the transition to parenthood is perceived as a highly significant developmental opportunity, a chance to build new futures, as well as partly to take care of their past with new strengths. It should be emphasized that, for parents, breaking ITCM does not mean not having "demons", but rather developing daily coping strategies. The concept of 'zero family', new to existing research, capture these experiences, highlighting some relevant aspects that call for future research and offer helpful implications for practice.

Firstly, although the parents involved in the study recount positive parenting experiences, many problems persist, such as fewer available resources (for instance support networks, including family). Furthermore, they face strong pressures to act in discontinuity with their parents, rebuilding everything from scratch. Nevertheless, parents show significant personal strengths. These are partly acquired through Child Protection Systems, such as the ability to protect themselves, and the recognition of their CPS experience as a positive context for their parenting. The interviews also underline the relevance of relationships with birth families and the importance of receiving related help when in care, including for the purposes of positive personal development and future family functioning (Jackson Foster et al., 2015; Mauri, 2023).

Relatedly, what was underlined also in discussions with the advisory board was the importance of more support for parents' agency and coping skills. The complexity of thinking about support for these parents emerged. On the one hand traditional services oriented to parenting skills assessment can increase fears and feelings of being judged (Christie et al., 2017). This attitude does not facilitate parental calls for help whenever needed. On the other hand, there is a risk of constructing stigmatizing responses that are strongly oriented to vulnerabilities in relation to the past of abused children. In fact, this study highlighted everyday skills, but often unseen, needed to cope with the complexities of their parenting experience. Implementing effective practices and policies to support these parents can strengthen those who are succeeding. It may also increase opportunities for parents in more fragile situations than those interviewed to break ITCM. The research shows how this possibility is in fact linked to a process of ongoing coping with the challenges that parents face throughout their lives.

This consideration leads to a third and final reflection, namely how the study participants' accounts highlight the complexity of raising children – as indeed is the case for many other parents who do not share the same adverse childhood experiences. The fact that interviewees' parenting experiences partially match the broader experience of parenting may contribute to avoiding the risk of pathologizing responses through seeing them as solely associated with trauma. Furthermore, adopting research approaches which are oriented to everyday practices could also open up the possibility of supports that may be more attentive to life contexts and inequalities. This knowledge could then be validated in subsequent quantitative studies to make it generalizable to whole populations and raise awareness of the mechanisms of ICTM breakdown through increasingly ecological approaches.

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## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Diletta Mauri:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of competing interest

None.

## Data availability

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