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Exploring the parent-family worker relationship in rural family support services: "you build a relationship... and before you know it you start working on the problems that you have got"

Elizabeth Reimer, Southern Cross University

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Exploring the Parent-Family Worker Relationship in Rural Family Support Services: “You build a relationship… and before you know it you start working on the problems that you have got.”

A Thesis Presented to the Australian Centre for Child Protection and School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy, Education, Arts and Social Sciences

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In Fulfilment of the Requirement

Of the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Elizabeth Claire Reimer

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<tr>
<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
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<tr>
<td>AIHW</td>
<td>Australian Institute of Health and Welfare</td>
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<tr>
<td>DADHC</td>
<td>Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care</td>
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<td>DoCS</td>
<td>NSW Department of Community Services</td>
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<td>NSW Family Services Inc.</td>
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Abstract

Building working relationships with families where child neglect is an issue is well known to be challenging, due to problems in engaging and retaining families and preventing worker feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Despite this, some professionals achieve successful and effective relationships with such families.

This study uses an interpretivist research methodology, principally drawing on hermeneutics and qualitative methods, to explore perceptions of parent-family worker relationships in a sample of regional family support services in New South Wales Australia. The eight families participating had completed a period of intervention with a family support service after some level of child neglect-related issues had been identified. The study presents a triangulated perspective on the relationship dyads by including the perceptions of the parent and worker involved in the relationship, as well as each worker’s supervisor.

The thesis locates the study within the wider body of literature related to child neglect and the working relationship. It includes literature on family-based practice (specifically family support and home visiting) and other professional issues affecting the relationship, such as rural-based work, supervision, the work environment and ethical practice.

Whilst, due to the small sample size, there are constraints on the generalisability of the study’s findings, they support the existing literature, especially in relation to the early, middle and late stages of the relationship. The findings also provide new insights, particularly about how workers balanced “personal” and “professional” styles of relating, and how this was mediated and monitored through supervision.

A high degree of authenticity was found to be fundamental for building trust in the early phase of the relationship, which in turn facilitated parents disclosing issues of deep concern to them. Once established, the relationship provided an environment in which parents said they were highly responsive to the workers’ suggestions and challenges, an observation supported by workers. The ending phase was characterised by a sensitive and nuanced process of semi-withdrawal, marking a transition to an informal and ongoing “open door” to the service. This was supported by the work environment.

The study generated a number of propositions for professional practice, organisational management, professional education, government policy and future research. These include the following propositions:
• Facilitating good relationships in family-based practice addressing issues of child neglect involves workers being able to help parents move from a position of distrust and ambivalence, to one of trust and acceptance of the need to address issues which impair parenting.

• There appear to be specific worker actions and attributes which facilitate the formation of trust and which support the maintenance of good working relationships.

• Given that parents report being more responsive to workers they perceive to be “real in role”, workers need to be equipped and supported to balance traditional “professional” norms of service delivery with highly individualised and “personalised” ways of relating to parents.

• In view of the finding that good relationships in family-based practice endure beyond casework closure, organisations and funding bodies need to make provision for this.

• Management, and in particular supervision, plays an important role in enhancing good relationships in family-based practice by providing a flexible and supportive work environment.
Declaration

I declare that this thesis presents work carried out by myself and does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university.

To the best of my knowledge it does not contain any materials previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; and all substantive contributions by others to the work presented, including jointly authored publications, is clearly acknowledged.

Name: Elizabeth Claire Reimer

Signature: [Signature]

Date: 24 February 2010
Acknowledgment

Completion of this study would not have been possible without the generous contribution of many people.

First and foremost, acknowledgement and sincere thanks must go to the participants involved in this study. I pay my respects and appreciation to the parents, family workers and supervisors who participated in the interviews, and to the service managers for their consent. The participants’ frank and detailed accounts of their stories, and their perspectives on what they had experienced provided the rich data that formed the basis for interpretation. Without this, the thesis would be by no means as exhaustive and compelling as it is.

Second acknowledgement goes to my supervisors: to Professor Dorothy Scott, Director of the Australian Centre for Child Protection at the University of South Australia, and to Professor Anne Graham, Director of the Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University. I thank them for their wise and patient guidance.

Thirdly, I would like to recognise with utmost gratitude and some apology the support of my partner Sam Kendal, who for fours years bore the daily brunt of this journey of discovery.

Finally, special thanks go to my parents, for their unending support and encouragement, and particularly to Dad for his proof reading efforts. I would also like to thank Professor Marianne Berry, Professor of Social Welfare, the University of Kansas and Ms Sue Richards, Chief Executive Officer, NSW Family support services Inc. for believing that I could succeed in this study and for inspiring me to try.
The best training for charitable work must come from life itself. If we take no interest in the joys and sorrows of human beings, if we show neither judgement nor energy in the conduct of our own affairs, if life seems to us, on the whole, a flat and unprofitable affair, then no amount of reading will transform us into good friendly visitors. Given the tactful, kindly spirit, with a dash of energy added, study and experience can teach us how to turn these to the best account in the service of others.

Mary Richmond (1899)

*Friendly visiting among the poor: A handbook for charity workers*
Chapter One  Introduction

1.1 Identification of the Research Problem

Much research and theorising in the human services sector occurs around the safety, welfare and well-being of children. This subject area, known broadly as child maltreatment, encompasses four sub-types that relate to poor care and protection of children. These are commonly referred to as child neglect and physical, emotional and sexual child abuse.

One of these sub-types, child neglect (subsequently referred to here as “neglect”), is of particular concern. Neglect is now often considered the most commonly experienced form of child maltreatment and the fastest growing in many parts of the world (Smith & Fong 2004). Researchers agree that neglect is perhaps the most intractable form of child maltreatment and that families where neglect is an issue are often the most difficult to engage in services (Berry, Charlson & Dawson 2003; Smith & Fong 2004), and prematurely leave services more often than families involved in other forms of child maltreatment (Daro 1988). Working with families where child neglect is an issue has also been found to impact negatively on workers’ morale and sense of professional accomplishment (Smith & Fong 2004; North Eastern Health Board & Horwath 2005; Watson, White, Taplin & Huntsman 2005).

Dore and Alexander (1996) argue that the “helping alliance”, or client-worker relationship, is crucial to effective engagement and intervention with families where neglect is an issue. Whilst there is some evidence to support the important role that the client-worker relationship (hereafter referred to as “the relationship”) plays in neglect intervention (Kenemore 1993; Dore & Alexander 1996; Scottish Executive 2006), it remains a largely unexplored facet of intervention with such families.

And as will be outlined in chapter three, there is widespread agreement that the relationship is “a primary prerequisite to effective assessment and intervention in child welfare” (de Boer & Coady 2007: 33). Others argue that effective interventions with families where neglect is an issue involve a nurturing-type approach (Gaudin 1993b; DePanfilis 1999), where workers and parents develop working partnerships based on empathy and mutual trust (Stevenson 1998; Berry, Charlson & Dawson 2003; Watson et al. 2005). In Australia, work of this nature is often conducted in non-government community-based family services1 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2001).

Empirical understanding of family support methods, hereafter called family work, is disproportionately underrepresented in social science discourse compared with that of other

1 Also known as Family Support Services
ways of working with vulnerable people with psycho-social problems. Whilst there is a long tradition and an accumulation of family work practice wisdom, it has not been thoroughly and extensively examined in an empirical way (Tilbury 2005). In light of this, relatively little is known about the nature of the relationship in family work generally, although a body of knowledge is beginning to emerge.

1.2 Aim
The aim of this research is to explore how parents, family workers, and supervisors in family support services work with families experiencing neglect issues understand the nature of the parent-worker relationship: its purpose, value and meaning. This will involve exploring reported perceptions of their experience of the relationship, the meanings they ascribe to these experiences and factors perceived to affect the development of the relationship.

1.2.1 Research Questions
• How do family workers and parents experience the parent-worker relationship, including their perception of the purpose, value and meaning of this relationship?
• How do workers’ supervisors perceive the working relationship, in particular their role in relation to its development?
• How do family workers, their supervisors and the parents with whom they work perceive and make sense of the factors which affect how parent-worker relationships develop over time, and the impact of these?

1.3 Researcher’s Background
The focus for this research has arisen from, and been shaped by, my work as a policy analyst in the child and family sector; specifically within the context of NSW Family Services Inc. (FamS). I have never practised as a family worker, but have had some experience in developing working relationships with children. This has occurred through working as a primary school teacher, carer in medium term out-of-home care residential homes, and as a children’s worker in a family service with a strong educational focus. Most of my welfare career has involved working in policy and research settings. I was in the interesting situation of not having experienced the types of relationships I was exploring in this study. In my policy position at FamS, I consulted with, provided information to and advocated for the member agencies of FamS where the supervisors and family workers involved in this research worked. Through this involvement I already had some level of trust with this work environment and with many of the supervisors and family workers involved. This helped to open the door for the research.
The origins of this study were my informal conversations with family workers who sometimes conveyed experiences of failure in their work with neglecting families, of how they were unable to engage with parents of neglected children long enough, and effectively enough, to bring about beneficial change for the children, and how there were expectations that they develop close relationships with their clients while at the same time adhering to strict professional boundaries in relationship building. Such conversations, combined with my hermeneutic philosophical orientation, inspired both curiosity about professional engagement and my desire to assist family workers strive to work with parents.

Finally, my recent relocation to the region where the participants live and work helped them feel a sense of connection and strengthened their desire to help a researcher living in their own area.

1.4 Research Methods
Interpretive social science provides a way of examining the dynamics of these relationships. It enables in-depth exploration and interpretation of the participants’ perspectives of how they experienced and understood the relationship. A hermeneutic philosophical orientation in particular assists developing an understanding of participants’ actions and perceptions of these relationships.

Qualitative research methods were utilised to collect and analyse data from nine parents, eight workers and four supervisors (speaking about eight cases) during the course of this study. Such methods enable researchers to unearth the meanings given to issues by those involved, and to gather this information in a way that captures the complexity, depth, contradictions and nuances present (Ruckdeschel, Earnshaw & Firrek 1994; Kincheloe & McLaren 2003; Stark & Torrance 2004). Furthermore, one of the lead proponents of the importance of the working relationship has argued that further research from the perspective of participants is required “as it permits the opening of the ‘black box’ of the client’s experiential world and the development of micro theories of alliance” (Horvath & Greenberg 1994: 6).

1.5 Significance of the Research
There are many parents and family workers engaging with each other across Australia, but little is known about how they work together; what these kinds of relationships involve, and what supports or limits them. Furthermore, none of the existing published research has explored the relationship in family-based practice from the perspective of more than one of the people involved. Where most existing research has described what the relationship looks like rather than how it is understood, this study sets out to explore in-depth the multiple and layered dimensions of such working relationships. It is important to conduct deep exploratory
research in the pursuit of understanding because this allows for holistic analysis and finely
detailed descriptions of the research topic (Laird 1994; Crotty 1998).

Interestingly, since this study began, a number of studies have been published which are very
salient to the focus of this research. Other researchers have identified similar issues that
require critical attention. In particular, these recent studies have explored notions of
“friendship” within professional relationships. This places the current study within a context
of growing interest in, and exploration of, the nature of relationship-based practice in child
welfare work.

Greater awareness and understanding of the nature of these relationships, and in particular of
the types of issues that arise which facilitate effective engagement and limit premature
closure, will assist in a number of ways. In particular, such research can identify elements of
best practice for the development and maintenance of working relationships during neglect-
related interventions, by drawing on what clients, practitioners and supervisors have said
worked in their situation. It is expected that greater knowledge will enhance the extent to
which family workers and clients can engage and maintain working relationships during
neglect-related interventions, will decrease levels of worker apathy and sense of helplessness
and hopelessness, and so help reduce rates of worker burnout and staff turnover.

1.6 Outline of the Thesis

Chapter Two provides the context for this study. This is usually completed within an
introductory section, however interpretive research recognises that research is bound by the
context within which it is conducted, in particular time and place. Consequently, Chapter
Two provides a comprehensive account of the setting of the context for this research. It
includes an in-depth exploration of neglect as a social issue, along with definitions, history,
incidence, characteristics, effects and interventions. Following this is an outline of the family
support services context in the study, along with aspects relating to their rural location.

Chapter Three outlines the vast array of literature related to understanding the working
relationship, including the extensive body of research on relationships, which have been
shown to have positive results for treatment outcomes generally (Coady 1993; Clemence,
Hilsenroth, Ackerman, Strassle & Handler 2005). However, the discussion will reveal there is
only limited research with respect to neglect specifically (Dore & Alexander 1996). Five
distinct areas of research and thought appropriate to the relationships being studied are
reviewed; child neglect; child protection; family-based practice (particularly in a family
support and home visiting environment); psychological and therapeutic interventions and
working in a rural context. This chapter also includes a review of aspects of the literature on
supervision, professional education and ethical practice regarding such relationships.
Chapter Four outlines the research design and procedures undertaken in this study. This includes the assumptions underpinning the research, philosophical and methodological influences, and details of the methods of data collection, organising and analysis. The ethical considerations in such research, such as duty of care, voluntary informed consent, financial recompense, privacy and confidentiality are identified. Chapter Four also includes a detailed account of the procedures of data analysis. The chapter concludes by identifying a number of limitations to the study, specifically issues relating to size and generalisability, potential bias, ethnic and gender homogeneity and the retrospective nature of the study.

Chapter Five presents the findings of the study. It describes in-depth the reported perceptions of the parents, family workers and supervisors in regard to the relationships in which they were involved. Each relationship is represented by the triad of parent, family worker and supervisor. The chapter includes extensive non-identifiable narrative text to illustrate the patterns identified and to capture the nuanced nature of the relationships. The chapter is divided into four sections which explore different aspects of the relationship: the evolution of the relationship (building, established and ending phases along with key worker attributes and actions), and important influences that are experienced across the entire relationship (in particular the impact of humanistic ways of working).

Chapter Six provides an overview of the strengths of the study, identifies where the findings of this study resonate with, or do not resonate with, that of others, and highlights gaps in knowledge that have emerged. It discusses these in light of implications for professional practice, including management, and education. It also proposes possibilities for further research based on the findings of this study and that of previous research. Chapter Six concludes with the researcher’s final reflections on the study.
Chapter Two  Study Context

The chief context for the study is the field of child neglect. The first section of this chapter provides a summary what is known about this context. It covers definitional issues, historical perspectives, prevalence and incidence, causal and contributing factors, effects and interventions. As argued in Chapter One, much of the intervention in NSW with families where child neglect is an issue occurs within family support services. Section Two of this chapter describes the history and types of family support services involved in this study. The final section of this chapter provides further information on the regional setting relating to where the services in this study are located.

2.1 Child Neglect

While child neglect is not a new phenomenon (Scott & Swain 2002), the way in which it is understood is still relatively undeveloped. Although it is no longer entirely the case that research into neglect “is neglected”, there is still considerably more research that focuses on child physical and sexual abuse (or child abuse and neglect in combination) than on neglect specifically (Zuravin 2001; Smith & Fong 2004; Allin, Wathen & MacMillan 2005). Lack of agreement remains on many aspects of neglect: in particular the nature and definition of child neglect, aetiology and risk factors, along with how to report, assess, prevent and respond to neglect (Smith & Fong 2004; North Eastern Health Board & Horwath 2005; Watson 2005).

2.1.1 Definitional Issues

Despite many years of research, there is still no clear, uniform, comparable, reliable, and unambiguous conceptualisation of neglect (Zuravin 2001; Smith & Fong 2004; Dubowitz, Newton, Litrownik, Lewis, Briggs, Thompson, English, Lee & Feerick 2005a). Some argue that lack of understanding of neglect is partly due to its overlapping and complex relationship with other forms of child maltreatment (Farmer & Owen 1995). Neglect commonly coexists with other forms of child maltreatment, in particular emotional abuse (Farmer & Owen 1995; Erickson & Egeland 1996; Black & Dubowitz 1999; North Eastern Health Board & Horwath 2005), and exposure to domestic violence (Kantor & Little 2003).

Furthermore, definitional understanding differs across culture and time. The ways in which children are regarded, notions of childhood, child development, and child neglect, as well as what is considered normative childrearing, vary greatly. This is problematic in terms of understanding child neglect because, to date, most of the research relating to neglect has been conducted within Western liberal-democratic political contexts, and most of that within the social contexts of United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK). This complexity regarding the construct of neglect inhibits efforts to understand the distinct nature
and consequences of child neglect, to make fiscally sensible decisions with respect to research and policy, and to develop interventions that successfully reduce both its prevalence and impact (Zuravin 2001; Smith & Fong 2004; Dubowitz, Pitts, Litrownik, Cox, Runyan & Black 2005b).

Despite these difficulties, theorists and researchers have distinguished neglect as a distinct type of child maltreatment (Daro 1988; Howing, Wodarski, Gaudin & Kurtz 1989). Furthermore, even though some argue that neglect is the core feature of all child maltreatment (Erickson & Egeland 1996), it is generally accepted that neglect remains one of the four types of child maltreatment and sits alongside physical abuse, sexual abuse and emotional abuse (Wolock & Horowitz 1984; Daro 1988; Tomison 1995; Jamrozik & Sweeney 1996).

Whilst multiple definitions for neglect have been suggested (Tzeng, Jackson & Karlson 1991; Erickson & Egeland 1996; Zuravin 2001), it is generally understood that child neglect is the result of omissions (rather than commissions) in care by the child’s primary caregivers, usually their parents (Dubowitz et al. 2005b). Child neglect can be classified along a continuum of potential harm to actual harm as a result of these omissions (Zuravin 2001; Dubowitz et al. 2005b). Zuravin (2001) has produced one of the most comprehensive analyses of the key issues relevant to defining child neglect.

According to this analysis, the boundaries of child neglect are complicated by variable, socially constructed or not well defined issues of “failure to protect and failure to provide, severity, chronicity, age of the child, harm/threatened harm, as well as locus of responsibility and intentionality” (Zuravin 2001: 52). These findings have implications for ensuring that interventions with families where child neglect is an issue are specific to the particular neglect issues and factors (Daro 1988; Howing et al. 1989; Gaudin 1993b; Berry, Charlson & Dawson 2003).

Building on past conceptualisations, researchers currently grappling with definitional issues are incorporating the complexities that have been raised and are beginning to argue that, given the multiple factors involved, a more appropriate way to think about child neglect is to develop different definitions for specific purposes (Morton 2001; Zuravin 2001). The crux of this argument is that most definitions of child neglect are general and vague, thus not accounting for its sometimes subtle nature (Zuravin 1999; Dubowitz, Pitts & Black 2004). Subtypes of child neglect range from seventeen (Sedlak & Broadhurst 1996) to four (Dubowitz, Pitts & Black 2004). Most commonly, child neglect has been categorised in terms of psychological, physical, educational, supervisory, and medical neglect.

In New South Wales, the jurisdiction in which this study is located, child neglect is defined by the State as “the continued failure by a parent or caregiver to provide a child with the basic
things needed for his or her proper growth and development, such as food, clothing, shelter, medical and dental care and adequate supervision” (NSW Department of Community Services 2006). Furthermore, the Government agency with statutory duties related to child abuse and neglect has a number of reporting criteria for classification of neglect. For example, child neglect is regarded as present where children are left unattended in cars, children and young people are abandoned, or children are considered to have inadequate clothing, nutrition, shelter, or supervision for their age. Inadequate supervision includes homelessness and neglect is also considered where there is non-organic failure to thrive, or necessary medical treatment is not accessed for a child by caregivers (NSW Department of Community Services 2007).

While these criteria provide useful guidance, difficulties remain with understanding and definition of key terms such as “inadequate” and the duration of activities such as abandonment. The vagueness associated with these increases the uncertainty involved when being called upon to assess incidents of child neglect, and to decide on how to allocate resources in a child welfare system under great pressure by a high number of referrals of suspected child maltreatment.

2.1.2 Historical Perspectives
The history of the child neglect field in Australia is synonymous with that of changing conceptualisations of childhood and child maltreatment. More generally, it cuts across social policy, public intervention into the private domain of the family, and the evolution of social work with families.

Australian governments began to legislate for child welfare in the late nineteenth century. Groups of people, who became known as the “child savers” and were predominantly from the middle classes, engaged in mostly voluntary work with such children (Jamrozik & Sweeney 1996). Early mention of the role of relationships in the context of work with neglecting families is noted regarding the Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. As cited in Scott and Swain, (2002: 40), “the inspector was expected to be a “friendly advisor and helper” to the young mother as well as an authority figure to the foster mother”.

A highly moralistic description of the parents of neglected children in the nineteenth century evolved. By the mid twentieth century, terms such as “bone lazy”, “drunkard” “subnormal”, and “being of weak character”, began to be replaced with psychological terms relating to parent personality, mental illness, and the notion of alcohol addiction (Mason, Noble-Spruell & Mason 1993; Scott & Swain 2002). The focus of intervention shifted to parent psychopathology rather than parent moral failure or the social context of maltreated children (Jamrozik & Sweeney 1996). By the 1970’s interest in poverty and the alleviation of poverty
(Jamrozik & Sweeney 1996) led to a renewed focus on the social conditions commonly associated with child neglect.

2.1.3 Prevalence and Incidence
In Australia there is very little statistical evidence on the prevalence of child neglect, that is, the extent of the problem in the wider community (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009b). There is, however, a large amount of data on the incidence of child neglect, that is, the number of reported cases in Australia (Bromfield & Higgins 2005; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009b). However, comparisons on the incidence of child neglect are problematic, due to different terminology and different reporting requirements and service systems across States and Territories (Bromfield & Higgins 2005; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009b). For example, in some jurisdictions children who are deemed to be “at risk of child neglect” will be classified as having been neglected, whilst in other jurisdictions criteria are more stringent (Bromfield & Higgins 2005). Furthermore, some have argued that it is now common for issues that would have once been considered child neglect to be characterised as emotional abuse (Mason 1994; NSW Department of Community Services 2006). Even between English speaking countries with fairly similar legal systems, comparisons are unreliable.

Despite this lack of consistency, it is clear that child neglect remains one of the most commonly occurring forms of child maltreatment brought to the attention of child welfare systems in English speaking countries. It remains the most often occurring form of child maltreatment initiating child protection investigation in the USA (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS) 2005, cited in Carter & Myers 2007), with 61% of reported children experiencing neglect (USDHHS 2005, cited in Carter & Myers 2007). Child neglect is also the most common reason for a report of child maltreatment in the UK (Tanner & Turney 2003; Daniel & Taylor 2006) and in Canada, where it features as the principal reason for investigation in approximately 40% of cases (Trocme, Tourigny, MacLaurin & Fallon 2003; Allin, Wathen & MacMillan 2005). Recent Australian figures of substantiated child protection reports has placed child neglect as the second most substantiated form of child maltreatment. However, it is difficult to measure because where more than one type of child maltreatment is present, the criterion by which to categorise depends on workers deciding which type caused most harm to the child or young person (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2010). During 2007-2008 child neglect was reported to occur in 28% of substantiations, following emotional abuse, which was reported to occur 39% of the time (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009b). This stayed fairly consistent in 2008-2009 across Australia in total, however the figures varied significantly between separate State and
Territory jurisdictions (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2010). For example, during 2008-2009, substantiated cases of child neglect varied from 8.1% (Victoria) to 41.2% (Western Australia) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2010). In NSW, child neglect was deemed to cause the most harm to the child or young person in over 29.5% of substantiated child protection reports (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2010).

Child neglect has also been described as the fastest growing type of child maltreatment in the USA, UK and Canada (Grayson 2001; Berry, Charlson & Dawson 2003; Horwath 2005; North Eastern Health Board & Horwath 2005). The number of substantiated notifications of child neglect grew slightly across Australia between 2005 and 2009, accounting for between 25% and 31% of the total number of substantiated notifications of child maltreatment (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009a). Although the way in which each jurisdiction defines, and consequently substantiates, child neglect varies (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009a), it is beyond argument that child neglect is a significant social issue in Australia.

2.1.4 Causal and Contributory Factors

Most contemporary researchers acknowledge the interplay of contributory factors in the neglected child’s immediate and extended family, community and social context. These include parent, family, community and social characteristics and are briefly analysed in the following discussion.

2.1.4.1 Parent Characteristics

Parent characteristics, albeit most often of mothers, have been a major focus in the child neglect literature (Polansky, Chalmers, Buttenwieser & Williams 1981; Corby 1993; Swift 1995; Wilson & Horner 2005). These include mental health and other related issues, such as: parent stress (Polansky et al. 1981; Pianta, Egeland & Erickson 1989; Minty & Pattinson 1994); anxiety (Cash & Wilke 2003); poor self esteem (Christensen, Brayden, Dietrich, McLaughlin & Sherrod 1994; Cowen 1999; Crittenden & Dubowitz 1999); and depression (Polansky et al. 1981; Zuravin & DiBlasio 1992; Gaudin, Polansky, Kilpatrick & Shilton 1993; Cowen 1999; Dore & Lee 1999). Others have argued that the sense of demoralisation and hopelessness associated with depression manifests as, amongst other things, child neglect and poor relational skills (Winefield & Barlow 1995; Wilson, Kuebli & Hughes 2005).

Other common parent characteristics include reduced intellectual capabilities, which may lead to rigidity in parenting approach (Erickson & Egeland 1996; Connell-Carrick 2003) and parent substance abuse (Coohey 1998; Dunn, Tarter, Mezzich, Vanyukov, Kirisci & Kirillova 2002; Trocme et al. 2003).
2.1.4.2 Family Characteristics
Key risk factors relating to child neglect with respect to the family environment are poor family functioning, physical environment and physical health, along with family relationships involving much conflict. The presence of child neglect has been noted particularly in families marked by chaos, conflict, stress and crisis (Polansky et al. 1981; Pianta, Egeland & Erickson 1989; Gaudin et al. 1993; Stone 1998; Cowen 1999; DePanfilis & Zuravin 2002).

Relationships in such families are marked by a history of negative communications, conflict, and lack of warmth and empathy (Coohey 1995; Gaudin, Polansky, Kilpatrick & Shilton 1996), difficulties being responsive within relationships (Wilson, Kuebli & Hughes 2005) and stress (Berry, Charlson & Dawson 2003).

2.1.4.3 Community Characteristics
Some researchers have explored the relationship between child neglect and both a neglecting family’s support in the social realm and also its ability to form beneficial social relationships. Associated with this is the presence of isolated and small (uni-dimensional) parent social networks (Polansky et al. 1981; Zuravin 1989; Gaudin et al. 1993; DePanfilis 1996; Kotch, Browne, Dufort & Winsor 1999; DePanfilis & Zuravin 2002), which are often based only within the extended family (Berry, Charlson & Dawson 2003). In more recent years this has begun to have been developed into a theory of social support in relation to child neglect.

The direction of causal relationships is complex, in terms of the degree to which child neglect is caused by lack of social support or results in social isolation, or both. Despite this, evidence for social isolation and support as contributing factors for child neglect is now recognised (DePanfilis 1996). Many researchers have noted that neglecting families perceive that they are socially isolated (Polansky, Ammons & Gaudin 1985; DePanfilis 1996), they lack social support (Polansky et al. 1981; Gaudin et al. 1993; DePanfilis 1996), they feel lonely and have fewer people to approach for assistance and support with personal and family issues and with parenting (Jones & McNeely 1980; Polansky et al. 1981; Polansky, Ammons & Gaudin 1985; Thompson 1995; Garbarino & Collins 1999).

In studying “social embeddedness”, Beeman (1997) found that although neglecting and non-neglecting groups engaged in reciprocal relationships, had significant others they could ask for assistance and had similar numbers of relationships with kin and non-kin, the neglecting mothers perceived their networks to be less supportive than the non-neglecting mothers. Others report associated factors that relate to social support, such as neglectful families being known to offend potential sources of support (Crittenden 1985), viewing professionals offering help with suspicion (DiLeonardi 1993) or neighbours indicating that they distance themselves from neglecting families (Gaudin & Polansky 1986).
2.1.4.4 Social Characteristics
On a wider social level, poverty has been found to be a major risk factor for child neglect (Jones & McCurdy 1992; Bath & Haapala 1993; Gaudin et al. 1993; Drake & Zuravin 1998; Cowen 1999; Dubowitz & Lamb 1999; Carter & Myers 2007). However, some argue there may be methodological and cultural issues with this research (Tanner & Turney 2003). The relationship between poverty and child neglect is also complex, particularly with respect to different sub-types of child neglect (Gaudin 1993b; Drake & Pandey 1996).

Furthermore, given that the majority of poor families do not experience child neglect (Dubowitz & Lamb 1999; McSherry 2004; Carter & Myers 2007), most researchers agree that poverty influences child neglect in so far as it exacerbates other factors relating to neglect (DiLeonardi 1993), but not necessarily as a direct cause. Finally, Dubowitz (1999) has argued that isolation and lack of social support increase the stress associated with poverty.

2.1.5 Effects of Child Neglect on Children
As with research on child neglect generally, research on the specific effects of child neglect on children is limited (Crouch & Milner 1993; Knutson, DeGarmo & Reid 2004; Watson 2005), and is overshadowed by research on the effects of child physical and sexual abuse (Wolock & Horowitz 1984). Furthermore, the research which has been published consists of small sample sizes and few outcome measures (Hildyard & Wolfe 2002).

Despite these difficulties, it is believed that child neglect is likely to be the type of child maltreatment most damaging to children’s health and wellbeing (Crouch & Milner 1993; Rutter & Sroufe 2000; Sameroff 2000; Perry 2002) and is an early predictor of later negative outcomes (Egeland 1991; Hildyard & Wolfe 2002), although details on the longer term impact on adults are scant (Hildyard & Wolfe 2002; Colman & Widom 2004).

Child neglect affects children’s emotional and psychological, physical, cognitive and intellectual, and social and behavioural development (Crouch & Milner 1993; Smith & Fong 2004). At the most extreme end of the spectrum, neglect is reported as one of the main factors in child deaths. Carter and Myers (2007) have stated that, in the US, 41% of child maltreatment related deaths were infants less than 1 year old and that 38% of all child maltreatment fatalities were connected to neglect. There is no Australian data on the proportion of child maltreatment related deaths which are associated with neglect. Poor emotional and psychological development in neglected children is characterised by passivity, helplessness and low self esteem (Egeland, Sroufe & Erikson 1983; Egeland, Yates, Appleyard & van Dulmen 2002) and manifests later in life as anxiety, depression and, in some cases, self mutilation and suicidal ideation (Watson 2005).
With respect to physical effects, neglected children have been found to have poor physical development and appearance (Dubowitz & Black 1996; Erickson & Egeland 1996) and recurring health issues, including poor gross and fine motor development as well as visual and auditory impairments (Perry 2002). These physical and sensory deficits have been linked to children being malnourished and experiencing “failure to thrive syndrome” (Drotar, Willis, Holden & Rosenberg 1992; Block & Krebs 2005).

Poor cognitive and intellectual development, leading to impairments in educational advancement, including poor language development and academic achievement, has been linked to children’s experiences of neglect (Wodarski, Kurtz, Gaudin & Howing 1990; Kendall-Tackett & Eckenrode 1996). It has also been noted that such children are often unwilling to engage in educational activities, and when they do, lack persistence and confidence (Hoffman-Plotkin & Twentyman 1984; Wodarski et al. 1990; Kendall-Tackett & Eckenrode 1996). Neurobiological research into the effects of child neglect is limited (Perry 2002; Teicher, Dumont, Ito, Vaituzis, Giedd & Andersen 2004). One recent study has raised the need for continuing research in this area with respect to child neglect as distinct from other types of child maltreatment (Teicher et al. 2004). While there are a number of limitations to the study by Teicher et al. (2004), related to its retrospective nature and sample size, the researchers found that child neglect was associated with a 15% - 18% reduction in the “corpus callosum” region of the brain, the area that connects the left and right hemispheres and allows for communication between them, with this effect greater for boys than girls (Teicher et al. 2004).

A final area of impairment in children’s health and wellbeing linked to child neglect is in the area of social and behavioural development. Studies on children under the age of 18 months have found that those neglected display anxious attachments and have high levels of dependency (Erickson & Egeland 1996). Perry (2002) makes links between attachment difficulties and poor brain development. Child neglect has been found to manifest as social isolation, poor social and interpersonal relationship skills and aggressive and non compliant behaviour (Hoffman-Plotkin & Twentyman 1984; Perry 2002; Colman & Widom 2004). It has also been linked to incarceration for aggressive crimes for both adolescents (Weatherburn & Lind 1997) and adults (Maxfield & Widom 1996).
2.1.6 Interventions
Child neglect has been a contested domain in relation to structural and individualist explanations, as well as the dominance of different professions. Some see treatment of child neglect as “belonging” to the medical and mental health professions (Wolock & Horowitz 1984; Tzeng, Jackson & Karlson 1991; Swift 1995; Tanner & Turney 2003). Attempts to understand the nature of child neglect constitute a small fraction of the neglect literature (Corby 1993; Swift 1995). Most of the literature focuses on the manifestation of neglect and on professional strategies to deal with it, rather than attempting to understand the phenomenon.

Child neglect is a persistent problem that lasts longer than other forms of child abuse and is usually recurrent, being more difficult to eradicate (Polansky et al. 1981; Daro 1988; Stone 1998; Berry, Charlson & Dawson 2003; Tanner & Turney 2003; Wilson & Horner 2005). It is often chronic, and characterised by cumulative patterns of neglectful behaviour which make intervention difficult (Stone 1998; Morton 2001; Hildyard & Wolfe 2002; Tanner & Turney 2003; Wilson & Horner 2005). Compared with what is known about other types of child maltreatment, relatively little is known about which interventions reduce neglect and improve outcomes for neglected children and their families (Smith & Fong 2004). Furthermore, despite disappointing intervention success rates being reported (Daro 1988), services with varying, and often inconsequential results continue to be funded (Smith & Fong 2004).

As previously noted, there is widespread agreement that neglect is not homogeneous. Due to the complex nature of the issues it requires a multidisciplinary, long term, flexible, holistic and often intensive approach to intervention (Dubowitz et al. 2005b; Wilson, Kuebli & Hughes 2005). Interventions are best tailored specifically to the family’s needs (Wolfe 1993; DePanfilis 1996) and delivered in a structured way following comprehensive assessment and subsequent goal setting (Daro 1988; Leventhal 1996; DePanfilis 1999; DePanfilis, Lane, Girvin & Strieder 2004).

It is deemed better if services are provided early on before issues become too problematic (Lally 1984; Garbarino & Collins 1999; Tanner & Turney 2003), in collaboration with the family (Gaudin 1993b; DePanfilis et al. 2004) and offered on an intensive basis (Berry 1992; Tanner & Turney 2003), until the risk factors are reduced, protective factors increased and the family establishes their own support networks. Morton (2001) argues that this should not be done so intensely that families feel overwhelmed. Working with neglecting families requires worker confidence and competence in juggling many issues, as well as extensive knowledge of a range of strategies and resources that will assist in the amelioration of the neglect and
underlying issues, and being able to access these resources for families (Daro 1996; DePanfilis 1996; Gaudin 2001).

A number of researchers argue that behavioural techniques can be successful because they enable the worker and client to partialise the complex needs and issues into more manageable tasks and allow practice and reinforcement in real time, thus increasing the chance of ongoing behavioural change when professional support withdraws (Howing et al. 1989; Gershater-Molko, Lutzker & Sherman 2002). There is also growing evidence to suggest that providing interventions in the family home results in some level of treatment success for families where the neglect is not considered chronic (Lally 1984; DiLeonardi 1993; Gaudin 1993b; DePanfilis 1996; Prochaska & DiClemente 2003). However, this evidence is contested elsewhere (Elkan, Blair & Robinson 2000; MacMillan, Thomas, Jamieson, Walsh, Boyle, Shannon & Gafni 2005).

Some have maintained that dealing with structural issues, that is, the underlying socio-economic conditions and situational stress that keep people in a disadvantaged situation, need to be addressed as well as parent behaviour (Lally 1984; Wolock & Horowitz 1984; Nelson, Saunders & Landsman 1993; Garbarino & Collins 1999). This includes interventions that improve the family’s social and support networks (Lally 1984; Gaudin et al. 1993; DePanfilis 1999, 2001; Berry, Charlson & Dawson 2003; DePanfilis et al. 2004; Roditti 2005); provide respite (Berry, Charlson & Dawson 2003) or quality child care (Hobbs, Hanks & Wynne 1993; Gaudin et al. 1996; Berry, Charlson & Dawson 2003); and reduce poverty or provide concrete services (Swift 1995; Gaudin et al. 1996; Berry, Charlson & Dawson 2003).

With respect to focusing on neglecting families’ social relationships, this can be achieved through helping families practise developing collaborative relationships with different community groups and services (DePanfilis 1996, 2001; DePanfilis et al. 2004) and using professionally facilitated group work to bring people together (DiLeonardi 1993; DePanfilis 1996).

2.2 A Model for Family Support Services

Family support services were developed to fill a support gap for families who cannot access normal informal support, such as kin, neighbourhood and friendship networks (Wolcott 1989; Zigler & Black 1989). Modern day family support services stem from social movements which formalised social welfare provision. They have evolved to include ideas from diverse disciplines, such as social work, feminism, psychology and sociology. Some have their source in charitable and religious foundations (Wolcott 1989; Tomison 2002) as well as in the women’s movement (NSW Family Services Inc. 2009) and, in the USA, in community-based “settlement” or neighbourhood house movements (Wolcott 1989; Scannell Thomas 1994). In
countries such as USA and Australia, family support services were developed during the 1960’s and 1970’s because of a belief that established social welfare services were unable to meet rising family needs, particularly in light of increasing levels of poverty (Wolcott 1989; Zigler & Black 1989; Scannell Thomas 1994). In Australia, they were specifically designed to “complement existing family welfare structures” and provide “a stimulus to innovative thinking” (Office of Child Care 1984). One well known USA government initiative, the Head Start program, was developed during this era and has been described as the archetype to the family support paradigm (Wolcott 1989; Scannell Thomas 1994). Like many USA family support models, the NSW-based services involved in this study developed as “grass roots” organisations (Zigler & Black 1989; Scannell Thomas 1994).

The services involved in the current study began by adopting the philosophies, principles and eclectic nature of this movement. Like Head Start, they share “a commitment to enhancing the quality of life for children and families and to promoting physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development, as well as positive attitudes toward self, family, and society (Zigler & Berman 1983: 902). Also like Head Start, they deliver multiple programs to meet those aims (Wolcott 1989). The most common programs, which were delivered by all of the services involved in the study, are home visiting, information and referral, playgroups, parenting groups, centre-based support and counselling (NSW Family Services Inc. 2009).

Home visiting is a term for a suite of approaches to delivering support services to families, the common element being that they occur outside formal organisational settings often within the family home (Wasik 1993; Weiss 1993; Sweet & Appelbaum 2004; Gomby 2007). The basics of modern-day home visiting have not varied extensively from the approaches utilised by the “friendly visiting” movement throughout the UK from the turn of the Nineteenth century (Weiss 1993). Through this approach preventative service are provided in highly personalised, informal and non hierarchical ways (Weiss 1993; Sweet & Appelbaum 2004). A well established relationship is considered important in the provision of successful home visiting services (Wasik 1993; Weiss 1993; Gomby 2007).

The services involved in the study have a commitment to working according to five basic premises and nine principles (Appendix A), issues which have been identified as contributing to the success and uniqueness of family support services (Zigler & Black 1989). These ideas are also common to the philosophy and principles underpinning the wider family support service approach, and have been adopted and adapted from a list of philosophical assumptions that have emerged under the family support umbrella (Manalo 2008). They have been articulated by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Family Resource Coalition (Manalo 2008) and in Australia by NSW Family Services Inc as including
notions of universal support, social support, an ecological approach, strengths-based practice, empowerment and prevention (NSW Family Services Inc. 2009) and are briefly outlined as follows.

Universal support refers to a belief that all families may require support and that it should be offered regardless of factors such as income, cultural background or gender (Weissbourd & Kagan 1989; Wolcott 1989; Zigler & Black 1989; Tilbury 2005; NSW Family Services Inc. 2009). It involves offering generic rather than specialist services and making them available to all (Wolcott 1989; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2001; Tilbury 2005). There is also the understanding that families may need continuity of assistance for the whole of life (Zigler & Berman 1983).

Social support refers to meeting the instrumental and expressive needs of families that may have developed through factors which have displaced or separated them from previous social support mechanisms, such as kith and kin relationships (Zigler & Black 1989; Scannell Thomas 1994). Services aim to strengthen networks for families by linking them to community supports already in existence (Wolcott 1989; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2001; NSW Family Services Inc. 2009). Importantly, some services have grown out of the community support networks themselves, and utilise such networks greatly in their practice (Zigler & Black 1989; NSW Family Services Inc. 2009).

An ecological approach refers to ideas adopted from Urie Bronfenbrenner (1994) that individuals are interdependent and that families operate within a complex social system which impacts upon children’s development (Weissbourd & Kagan 1989; Zigler & Black 1989; Scannell Thomas 1994). Strengths-based practice refers to focusing on family strengths, their capacities and capabilities, rather than their deficits. The latter was more strongly emphasised in children and family support services prior to the 1960’s (Zigler & Berman 1983; Weissbourd & Kagan 1989; Wolcott 1989; Zigler & Black 1989; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2001).

Family support services aim at family independence and ultimately empowerment (Zigler & Black 1989; NSW Family Services Inc. 2009) with a view to improving the wellbeing of children. This requires participating with the family to teach them how to achieve goals rather than doing things for them (Weissbourd & Kagan 1989; Wolcott 1989; Bullen & Robinson 1994). One additional premise raised in the literature is the preventive nature of family support (Weissbourd & Kagan 1989; Zigler & Black 1989; Tilbury 2005). Although the services in the present study do not explicitly draw attention to the preventive nature of their work in the principles and premise statements, it was an original commitment of such services (Wolcott 1989) and remains so (NSW Family Services Inc. 2009).
The parents, workers and supervisors involved in this study are part of this 30-year tradition of family-based services NSW. The model on which these services operate has remained consistent since the 1970’s, and although they hold common principles and have a common ethos, the services operate independently of one another in terms of their governance and daily practices. While their managers do meet regularly as dictated by local circumstances, they do not develop organisational policies together or transfer staff to one another’s services. They work on the principle that they must meet the needs of their communities, and so policies need to be highly responsive to the issues that emerge in their communities. In particular they retain a framework of strengths-based, community-embedded, empowerment practice that includes centre-based work, home visiting and connections to the broader community.

2.3 *The Importance of a Regional Perspective*

This study was conducted in a regional area of NSW with participants drawn from four family support services. There is consensus that social and welfare work in rural and remote contexts is distinguishable from such work in urban contexts (Pugh 2003; Saltman, Gumpert, Allen-Kelly & Zubrzycki 2004). Rural practice is an important focus area. In June 2004, 36% of the Australian population lived outside the capital cities (ABS 2005). Significantly higher proportions (69%) of Indigenous people live in rural, and in particular remote, areas of Australia than non-Indigenous people (ABS 2002; Chenoweth 2004). Indigenous Australians make up approximately 2.4% of the Australian population (ABS 2006) and Indigenous children are greatly over-represented in child protection systems (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009a).

It is argued that rural and remote settings require practice techniques that are unique to the context, rather than simply being extensions of similar work in urban settings (Cheers 1992; Saltman et al. 2004). Broadly, these involve “the challenges of providing accessible, ethical and competent practice in…multi-layered networks” (Green 2003: 210). Specific to relationship-based practice, some have argued that issues confronting child welfare workers and their supervisors, issues such as those related to professional boundaries, emotional distance and expectations, exist in greater concentration than in urban contexts where similar work occurs (Green 2003; Green & Gregory 2004).

To address some of these gaps, the services chosen for the study were located in communities with a mix of urban and semi-rural characteristics. The exact location cannot be named for confidentiality reasons, as divulging this would potentially identify the workers, supervisors and families involved in the study. The region has a high concentration of families with characteristics common to neglecting families - that is, social isolation, poverty, high
unemployment, a significant Indigenous population and high numbers of people with a
disability (Vinson 1999). The region also has a vibrant network of family support services
which espouse the premises and principles of family work described earlier.

2.4 Conclusion
It is clear that child neglect is a long lasting, recurrent and concerning social issue in Australia
and elsewhere, and that factors related to its nature hinder efforts to intervene. Of particular
concern are the difficulties that have been raised regarding engaging and working with
neglecting parents. The main parent factors associated with child neglect include parent
depression and a sense of hopelessness and helplessness, histories of difficult, discordant and
unresponsive relationships, and social isolation and limited social support. Such families are
difficult to engage in services and have high attrition rates. When workers are assigned to
such families, they have to contend with their own feelings of helplessness and hopelessness,
due to the complex nature of the families’ needs. There is some evidence that
multidimensional services, such as family support services and home visiting services, have
some success intervening with these families.

This study addresses some of the current gaps in knowledge regarding the role and nature of
relationships between parents and family workers in family support practice. It explores the
nature of relationships that develop as part of neglect-focused interventions in family work in
a rural context in Australia. It does not focus specifically on parenting, child well-being and
neglect, or service outcomes, but on the way in which parents and family workers worked
together.

The available research currently provides very little guidance to practitioners on how to
develop and maintain relationships with families where child neglect is an issue. This study
was conceived to contribute to the knowledge base for their practice.
Chapter Three  Review of the Literature on Parent-Worker Relationships

There are five distinct areas of research and thought that bear on relationships as they are being explored in this study, each with its own extensive and/or developing body of work. These areas are child neglect intervention, child protection intervention, family-based practice (particularly in a home visiting environment), the psychological/therapeutic literature and the broader practice literature that sits on the periphery of working with families where child neglect is an issue. The latter includes literature on working in a rural context, and professional issues such as supervision, professional development and ethical practice. Figure 1 is a simplified representation of the five areas. It illustrates the degree of overlap which exists between some of these bodies of knowledge.

![Diagram of relevant bodies of literature]

**Figure 1: Representation of relevant bodies of literature**

This chapter has been divided into two sections, each analysing the existing literature linked to the research questions. Section One provides a brief overview of the literature of relationships in practice, including the fields of child neglect, child protection, family-based practice and the psychological/therapeutic literature more generally. This is followed by examination of the empirical literature regarding working relationships in a rural context, and in relation to supervision, professional education and ethical considerations.
3.1  **Section One: Relationships in Practice**

Much of the research examining the relationship has been in the area of psychotherapy and therapy services. However, it is important to consider that some working contexts are more complex and multifaceted than others. This includes clients being legally required to attend services, or being under strong external pressures, such as the fear of one’s child being removed if one does not accept a service. Given this, the following discussion will concentrate on the literature on the relationship in child neglect and child protection-related interventions and in family-based practice contexts, since much of the NSW-based casework with families where child neglect is an issue occurs within that context.

### 3.1.1 Relationships in Child Neglect-related Interventions

As outlined earlier, effective engagement and development of relationships with neglecting families is regarded as central to effective intervention but very challenging. Child neglect is often chronic and characterised by cumulative patterns of neglectful behaviour which makes intervention difficult (Stone 1998; Morton 2001; Hildyard & Wolfe 2002; Tanner & Turney 2003; Wilson & Horner 2005).

Families where neglect is an issue have been found to be among the most difficult to engage and retain in child welfare services (Berry, Charlson & Dawson 2003; Smith & Fong 2004). Daro (1988) showed that 40% of neglecting families drop out of treatment, rates that are significantly higher than for other types of child maltreatment. Practitioners who work with families where neglect is an issue also report higher feelings of apathy, hopelessness, helplessness and experience higher rates of burnout compared with child welfare practitioners who do not work with such families (Smith & Fong 2004; North Eastern Health Board & Horwath 2005; Watson 2005). The following discussion highlights such distinctions.

### 3.1.1.1 Conceptual Exploration of the Relationship in Child Neglect-related Interventions

Published empirical reports examining relationships with respect to child neglect interventions are very few. While there are a number of publications that explore and make inferences about issues relating to relationships with neglecting families, they are mainly conceptual (Gaudin 1993a; Kenemore 1993; DePanfilis 1999, 2001; Berry, Charlson & Dawson 2003; DePanfilis et al. 2004). These mostly utilise practice experience with neglecting families and the psychological/therapeutic literature on working relationships.

The principal conceptual contribution examining both child neglect and the relationship is by Dore and Alexander (1996). This work draws on psychotherapeutic research to argue that the “helping alliance”, or relationship, is crucial to effective engagement and intervention with
maltreating families. It highlights some key issues with respect to relationships when working with neglecting families and these are considered below.

One, the relationship is considered important to improve retention and treatment success, reduce family stress and to improve the worker’s perception of the client (Berry, Charlson & Dawson 2003). Furthermore, it is a useful tool to model relationship and conflict resolution skills (DePanfilis 1999; DePanfilis et al. 2004). Some have also argued that it is important to have a “confidant”, because this helps reduce client resistance and hopelessness (Gaudin 1993a), and because it helps clients utilise and experience a range of community and social supports (DePanfilis 1996, 2001; Berry, Charlson & Dawson 2003).

Two, successful interventions with families where neglect is an issue have been found to be characterised by a nurturing-type approach (Gaudin 1993a; DePanfilis 1999). This resonates with other findings that effective interventions occur when workers and parents develop working partnerships based on empathy and mutual trust (Stevenson 1998; Berry, Charlson & Dawson 2003; Sullivan 2000, cited in Watson 2005). Gaudin (1993a: 71) has even adopted the psychodynamically-derived concept of the worker “parent[ing] the parent”.

Three, it has been noted that authenticity is an extremely important characteristic of good relationships (Petras, Massat & Essex 2002; DePanfilis et al. 2004). Achieving this involves empathy, although not excessively as, according to Kenemore (1993), it is important to keep some objective distance. Respect (Petras, Massat & Essex 2002; DePanfilis et al. 2004) and hope (Petras, Massat & Essex 2002) are also seen as key dimensions, as are mutuality and reciprocity (Kenemore 1993; Petras, Massat & Essex 2002; DePanfilis et al. 2004). Kenemore (1993) argues that this enables workers to share information about how the systems they are associated with function, which is helpful with partnerships and collaboration (Petras, Massat & Essex 2002).

Four, workers assist by active listening (DePanfilis et al. 2004) and by flexible, creative and multifunctional efforts tailored to the client’s situation (DePanfilis 1999; Petras, Massat & Essex 2002; DePanfilis et al. 2004). Lastly, it is also important to accurately assess client needs and respond in an individually tailored and timely way (Kenemore 1993; Petras, Massat & Essex 2002; DePanfilis et al. 2004).

Some have conceptualised the phases of relationships with parents where child neglect is an issue. In relation to the beginning phase, it has been noted that it is important to calm clients’ anxiety by being clear about worker and client roles and expectations. This includes ethical boundaries, agency policy and legal requirements that might affect them (Kenemore 1993;
DePanfilis et al. 2004). At the close of contact it is important to remember the relationship and what has occurred, celebrate accomplishments, explore meanings and say goodbye, mindful of grief and loss issues, and being flexible in response to the client’s needs and the way they express their feelings (DePanfilis et al. 2004).

For chronic neglect, workers need to be persistent and should expect and be prepared to work consistently with families long term (Howing et al. 1989; Gaudin 1993a; Stevenson 1998; Stone 1998; Thoburn, Wilding & Watson 2000; DePanfilis et al. 2004). This might mean for up to eighteen months if required (Daro 1988). Some have advocated providing follow up to families where child neglect is an issue, which could allow for what Stone (1998: 94) recognizes as an “ebb and flow” of risk and protective factors for families, or could avoid what others call a “revolving door” situation, where families repeatedly return year after year because they may have not been ready for service closure (Thoburn, Wilding & Watson 2000).

Client barriers to effective relationships include previous negative experiences of relationships (DePanfilis 2001; Berry, Charlson & Dawson 2003; Girvin, DePanfilis & Daining 2007); resistance (DePanfilis 1999) and difficulties in developing and sustaining relationships (DePanfilis 2001). DePanfilis (2004) has also noted that clients need space and time to put the effort into the relationship due to their often chaotic, overwhelming and complex circumstances and needs, and the many other services with which they are frequently involved.

Worker barriers include feelings of guilt and shame about reporting child protection issues, referring clients to other services in ways that breach confidentiality, feeling sympathy for clients’ circumstances and not wanting to be judgemental (Horwath 2007). Structural barriers for workers include time pressures to get families “fixed” quickly (Petras, Massat & Essex 2002; Tanner & Turney 2003), and supervision that does not adequately support the worker through the difficult task of maintaining a relationship with chronically neglecting families and the associated issues previously identified (Kenemore 1993; Stone 1998; Tanner & Turney 2003). Tanner & Turney (2003) also raise the issue of attitudes to “creating dependency”, arguing that rather than conceptualising dependency as poor practice, it can be a useful therapeutic tool when managed well, offering role modelling of an important aspect of attachment and relationship skills within a safe context.
3.1.1.2 Empirical Exploration of the Relationship in Child Welfare Interventions

There are very few published empirical studies specifically focused on perspectives of the relationship in child welfare work. However, three studies (Drake 1994; Ribner & Knei-Paz 2002; de Boer & Coady 2003) emerge as most salient. Although they have not focused on the relationship in child neglect-related interventions specifically, they have explored perspectives on the relationship in statutory child protection work. Similar to this study, Drake (1994) and de Boer and Coady (2003) provide the perspective of both parents and workers, where Ribner (2002) provides the parents’ perspectives only. All three report findings of small scale, in-depth qualitative research, with de Boer and Coady (2003) exploring relationships in the most depth. Furthermore, all three address what is considered a “good” relationship. Drake (1994) reported commonalities between the perspectives of workers and parents in their studies and de Boer and Coady (2003) also found that there are some aspects of the relationship in statutory contexts of practice that may be different to relationships in therapeutic fields not bounded by involuntary and statutory conditions.

In line with the wider research, these three studies found that positive relationships were essential to good child welfare practice and positive outcomes for families. The importance of the relationships for filling parental needs for social support and nurturing was reported (Ribner & Knei-Paz 2002; de Boer & Coady 2003), and De Boer and Coady (2003) also found that there are some aspects of the relationship in statutory contexts of practice that may be different to relationships in therapeutic fields not bounded by involuntary and statutory conditions.

Whilst Drake (1994) provided some analysis of important issues during the development phase, he and Ribner (2002) provided an analysis of the relationship more generally rather than focusing on specific phases. De Boer and Coady (2003), studying relationships between Canadian child protection workers and parents, categorised the relationship according to three phases involving distinctive characteristics. They concentrate on the early and ending phases more than the middle, and also highlight a number of key themes which were present throughout the relationship.
For de Boer and Coady (2003) the early phase involved the workers becoming allies with the client’s position in relation to other professionals, empathising with the client’s situation, reinforcing strengths, listening, and having a non-judgemental and supportive attitude to help the client acknowledge and address their issues, which included suspending judgment. Drake (1994) concurred in relation to the importance of workers presenting as empathic and being seen as an asset for the parents, and coming with a non-judgemental attitude, specifically arguing that effective workers did not judge parents based on others’ opinions of the parents, and were open to the parents’ perspectives.

Furthermore, the early phase involved workers anticipating success and having hope but also expecting resistance from the client, such as guardedness, fear, mistrust, and expectation they will judge the client, which also might arise from the client having negative previous relationships (de Boer & Coady 2003). The implication is that the worker must not take such lapses personally but rather persevere and be patient, not putting pressure on the client, but rather collaborating and negotiating with the client, thereby giving them some sense of control (de Boer & Coady 2003). Drake (1994) touched on these ideas too, noting that it was important that workers identify with the parents and remain calm in the face of parent anxiety and anger, particularly during the relationship development phase.

Only the de Boer and Coady (2003) study touched on the ending phase, noting that it was important to elicit feedback from clients about the worker’s approach, take time to close the relationship, including review, share feelings and plan for future whilst providing follow up once the relationship ceased, which the authors described as “booster shots” (de Boer & Coady 2003).

The findings of these three studies highlighted a number of key characteristics of the relationships, although Drake (1994) noted that these were not exhaustive. Issues of power and equality emerged in each study. This involved playing down any sense of being an “expert” (Ribner & Knei-Paz 2002) and trying to present as an equal collaborator in the process (Drake 1994; Ribner & Knei-Paz 2002). De Boer and Coady (2003) argued that the workers practised “mindful and judicious use of power”. This meant that the workers recognised power imbalances in the relationship, due to the statutory child protection worker role but did not allow this to dictate interactions. Similarly, Drake (1994) identified that it was important that workers not impose their position and values on parents. Furthermore, according to Ribner (2002), home visits helped workers be seen as more equal to the parent as the intervention was being carried out in a place more likely considered the parent’s power base.
De Boer and Coady (2003) also reported that power imbalances reduced clients’ willingness and openness but could be reduced through supportive and receptive worker attributes, along with workers openly acknowledging power issues through good communication about roles and expectations. It was considered important that workers provide clear and continual positive feedback and communication, including active listening, being assertive and pitching communication to the parent’s level of understanding (Drake 1994; de Boer & Coady 2003). This included trying to hear and understand the parent’s perspective on the issues (Drake 1994) and being clear about the parent’s role in the intervention (Drake 1994; Ribner & Knei-Paz 2002).

De Boer and Coady (2003) found that the workers involved in the study connected on a person-to-person level, which they described as a humanistic way of working. Ribner (2002: 385) conceptualised this in terms describing workers’ emotionally connected way of working in terms of the workers being perceived by the parents as caring and flexible “people” rather than “representative of heartless and faceless institutions”. Drake (1994) also identified that the workers had an appreciation of the way in which child welfare systems dehumanise people. Both Drake (1994) and Ribner (2002) reported how the workers were perceived not to be professionally distant from the parents.

For de Boer and Coady (2003), humanistic practice is expressed by both parties recognising their similar life experiences, sharing about themselves, being “real” or authentic, and having mutual care where both client and worker felt care and empathy for the other. This type of approach involved an informal way of working, including adapting communication to fit the parent’s approach, dressing similarly to the parent, being flexible with appointment times and adopting a broader focus to families’ needs than merely child protection issues (Drake 1994; Ribner & Knei-Paz 2002; de Boer & Coady 2003), yet still keeping a strong professional clinical and therapeutic focus (de Boer & Coady 2003).

As Ribner (2002) had found, de Boer and Coady (2003) noted that the workers in these relationships challenged traditional notions of professional boundaries. This involved workers being innovative, undertaking the “extras” that helped build the relationship and showing “humanness”, for example attending to clients out of strict working hours and appointment times despite this possibly being seen to be outside agency expectations and mandates (Drake 1994; Ribner & Knei-Paz 2002; de Boer & Coady 2003). It was beneficial when supervisors supported such worker approaches (de Boer & Coady 2003) although supervision was not a focus of these three studies.
A number of authors have identified a “friend-like” dimension to the relationships (Drake 1994; Ribner & Knei-Paz 2002). For Ribner (2002) this even included parents expressing feelings of love for workers. Drake (1994) argued that it involved workers having an ability to develop genuinely warm relationships with parents, as opposed to neutral relationships or merely “non-hostile” relationships. Similarly, de Boer and Coady (2003) noted that what they termed “mutual liking” involved recognising similarities between parents and workers in factors such as background and values. Both worker and clients were perceived by the other to be more likeable if they were seen as similar, although it was considered still important to attempt to build a genuine relationship if a sense of similarity does not exist.

Other key themes included mutual and consistent respect, honesty, and trust (Drake 1994; Ribner & Knei-Paz 2002; de Boer & Coady 2003). De Boer and Coady (2003) made a link between high respect and high honesty and argued that honesty is necessary in order to know what the problems really are so there is more chance of knowing upon what one should focus. It was also considered important that the worker was trustworthy, the authors noting that it was common for clients to distrust, that trust took time to develop, and was tested, and that what the worker said and did needed to be validated (de Boer & Coady 2003). Being trustworthy was also related to worker hope, persistence and the creation of a communicative environment that was ongoing throughout the relationship (de Boer & Coady 2003).

Other general themes included workers having a positive attitude towards clients (Drake 1994; de Boer & Coady 2003), considering the relevance of the social context to clients’ successes and problems (de Boer & Coady 2003) and having flexible and realistic expectations about what clients can and cannot do (de Boer & Coady 2003). Considering contextual factors included factoring in difficulties and anxieties parents may have with statutory child protection involvement and intrusiveness (Drake 1994), while flexibility included contacting parents when they have not made contact themselves for a while (Ribner & Knei-Paz 2002) and being open minded rather than rigid and judgemental (Drake 1994).

With respect to the workers more personally, de Boer and Coady (2003), found that the workers in their study had good intuition, social skills and self esteem. With this in mind, they noted that it is important to try to employ people with these characteristics as well as focusing on developing these attributes, and all of the other factors mentioned, through ongoing training (de Boer & Coady 2003).

The wider body of literature on relationships in the human services is also a useful source of knowledge and may have implications in relation to child neglect practice, as has also been suggested with respect to home visiting services (Sharp, Ispa, Thornburg & Lane 2003;
The following section provides an overview of the broader literature on relationships in the human services.

### 3.1.2 Relationships in Family-based Practice

The lack of clear findings on fairly standard types of work contexts in individual therapy, let alone more complex settings such as child welfare settings highlights the need for significantly more exploration of how different client and therapist contexts and circumstances influence the relationship and outcomes for clients. Researchers in the field of family-based practice and home visiting have begun to develop a very useful body of practice-based knowledge specific to developing relationships in early intervention and prevention services. Since this is the primary context of work in Australia with families where child neglect is an issue (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2001), this literature provides valuable insights.

Recently there has been renewed interest in home visiting throughout Western child welfare systems, in particular delivered by nurses and “paraprofessionals”. It is gaining acceptance as a way to support vulnerable parents, especially at the time of the birth of a child. Understanding the benefits of home visiting is problematic due to the sparse and fragmented research, most of which is not based on rigorous research methods (Watson & Tully 2008).

Whilst parent-focused interventions have been found not to be as effective for improving child outcomes as child-focused ones, they have been found to have some degree of effectiveness for the parents they are targeting (Shonkoff & Phillips 2000). Despite this, it has been argued that family engagement is a critical component of home visiting programs and is related to program efficacy (Wasik 1993; Weiss 1993; Gomby 2007; Gray 2009). Some have specifically noted that the informal nature of home visiting helps build the relationship (Riley, Brady, Goldberg, Jacobs & Easterbrooks 2008; Gray 2009).

However this dimension has not been extensively and closely examined (Watson & Tully 2008). This is problematic because, in a comprehensive review of the literature, Watson (2008) found that a number of studies have shown that the most vulnerable families are the hardest to engage and retain in home visiting services. In particular, Gomby (1999) found that parents using home visiting programs have high attrition rates, between 20% and 40%, and Duggan et al (2007) found that approximately 50% of parents leave the service after the first year and 60% after the second.

Issues include difficulties building trust and helping vulnerable parents work towards changing their life circumstances and patterns and improve their parenting (Herrenkohl &
Herrenkohl 2007). Watson (2008) argues that more detail is required on the details of the process of engagement and on what qualities such as “trust” and “respect” involve.

The past ten years have seen gradually increasing interest in the process of helping and engagement in family support services, in particular home visiting services. Although most of this research has focused on the process generally, a few studies have focused specifically on the relationship. In concurrence with the wider field of research on the relationship, these studies, all but one of which use qualitative methods, also argue that the relationship is a central factor to successful engagement and positive outcomes for families (Maluccio 1979b; Hebbeler & Gerlach-Downie 2002; Daro, McCurdy, Nelson, Falconnier & Winje 2005; Heaman, Chalmers, Woodgate & Brown 2007; Altman 2008; Gray 2009). Of the following research, the studies by Altman (2008), Daro (2005) and Riley (2008) used mixed methods, while the study by Chapman (2003) used quantitative methods only.

Whilst the majority of these studies were conducted in the US or Canada, two were conducted in NSW in the same types of family support services involved in the current study, although one was in a home visiting program staffed by non-tertiary trained volunteers. The study most relevant to the present study is the seminal work by Maluccio (1979b) which closely examined the perceptions of a small sample of parents and worker dyads from a family service much like those engaged in this study. While the focus of the Maluccio (1979b) study was engagement processes generally, the relationship was closely scrutinised. In drawing the results of this research together, the following has been found regarding participants’ perspectives of important factors involved in the relationship in both centre based and home visiting family-based practice.

There is some evidence that the relationship evolves in phases, and that it involves various factors which are viewed as unique to the different phases (Maluccio 1979b; Heaman et al. 2007). However, since most of this collection of studies has not drawn such distinctions, the following examination of the literature will be governed by the relationship characteristics considered important, drawing attention to phase differences as they have been raised. The most commonly reported characteristics of relationships in this type of work include workers being authentic, appropriately supportive and responsive to clients’ needs, engaging in participatory or collaborative practice, and the presence of some sense of similarity between the relationship participants. The qualitative research draws attention to these characteristics more than the quantitative studies.

Being authentic, or “real”, involves taking a more informal and humanistic approach to working with clients (Maluccio 1979b; Daro et al. 2005; Altman 2008). All of the studies
featuring this finding used qualitative methods, two of which were a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. This was also described as relating to clients as one person to another person. In some studies, it even involved being “friend-like” in their dealings with clients (Hebbeler & Gerlach-Downie 2002; Paris & Dubus 2005; Heaman et al. 2007). Sanders (2007) touched on these ideas regarding the ending phase by arguing that there may be an appropriate place for a more ongoing type of relationship between clients and the organisation. It was noted in one particular study that relationships where workers kept more professional distance were not valued as highly by clients (Kirkpatrick, Barlow, Stewart-Brown & Davis 2007). This is despite concerns elsewhere that it is important to maintain appropriate boundaries (Heaman et al. 2007). Interestingly, the study by Brookes (2006) noted that while some parents liked the more informal style, others preferred a more distant worker approach.

The key to being responsive and supportive was that what workers had to be appropriate to the parents’ identified needs (Chapman et al. 2003; Heaman et al. 2007). Maluccio (1979b) also raised this as a factor unique to the building phase, but added that it is also important during the middle phase, where workers need to be mindful that identified needs change and widen as parents open up more. Providing an appropriate response involved workers listening carefully to what parents said their needs were (Taggart, Short & Barclay 2000; Kirkpatrick et al. 2007; Zeira 2007) and also providing both emotional and practical support (Taggart, Short & Barclay 2000).

A collaborative relationship was considered important (Daro et al. 2005; Heaman et al. 2007; Kirkpatrick et al. 2007; Zeira 2007). For most of these writers, this involved workers being non-directive, and taking a partnership approach where together they contracted goals for meeting the clients’ needs (Maluccio 1979b; Heaman et al. 2007; Kirkpatrick et al. 2007; Sanders, Munford & Maden 2007). In one study this also included workers occasionally becoming a collaborator, or ally, with parents in their relationships with statutory child protection agency staff (Altman 2008).

The notion of workers and clients sharing some similarities and considering themselves alike in some way was also raised as an important factor in successful relationships, because the clients felt more confident the worker could understand and relate to them (Maluccio 1979b; Daro et al. 2005). Some even advocate deliberately matching them as much as possible (Brookes et al. 2006). Similarities could include life experiences, ways of interacting or personality (Maluccio 1979b; Brookes et al. 2006), having similar values (Heaman et al. 2007) or age, gender or marital status (Maluccio 1979b). A number of studies also noted that
clients had reported responding better to workers who were parents themselves (Maluccio 1979b; Taggart, Short & Barclay 2000; Paris & Dubus 2005; Riley et al. 2008). Factors such as similarity of cultural backgrounds have not been found to impede the relationship in some studies (Chapman et al. 2003; Riley et al. 2008), and being from different socio economic backgrounds has been identified as a barrier in others (Maluccio 1979b; Fernandez & Healy 2007).

Other factors that have been found important for successful relationships include mutual honesty and openness (Fernandez & Healy 2007; Altman 2008). According to Maluccio (1979b), these are particularly important factors during the building phase. Successful relationships have also been found to involve mutual respect (Maluccio 1979b; Heaman et al. 2007; Altman 2008; Riley et al. 2008) along with workers being non-judgemental and able to see different viewpoints (Maluccio 1979b; Fernandez & Healy 2007; Kirkpatrick et al. 2007; Zeira 2007; Altman 2008); empathic and caring (Maluccio 1979b; Paris & Dubus 2005; Fernandez & Healy 2007; Altman 2008); and knowledgeable and competent (Maluccio 1979b; Kirkpatrick et al. 2007; Altman 2008). In addition, successful workers have been found to be reliable and available, which involves them being trusted to follow up on tasks they said they would (Paris & Dubus 2005; Brookes et al. 2006; Fernandez & Healy 2007; Altman 2008).

Another factor raised in a number of studies involves workers empowering clients to solve their own problems rather than provide the answers for the client (Hebbeler & Gerlach-Downie 2002; Paris & Dubus 2005; Heaman et al. 2007; Kirkpatrick et al. 2007; Zeira 2007). However, in contrast, participants in Maluccio’s (1979b) study noted that they looked to the worker as the expert. Whilst this has changed in the more recent studies, participants do note that they want workers to provide their opinion but not impose it. Finally, clear and negotiated communication about roles, responsibilities, purposes and expectations (Maluccio 1979b; Brookes et al. 2006; Heaman et al. 2007), and providing positive reinforcement (Hebbeler & Gerlach-Downie 2002; Paris & Dubus 2005; Kirkpatrick et al. 2007) were also identified as important factors for successful relationships.

Parent trust was found to be a central factor to build the relationship (Maluccio 1979b; Heaman et al. 2007; Zeira 2007; Gray 2009), and to sustain the relationship during the middle phase (Maluccio 1979b). Trust was linked to parents feeling safe and comfortable (Taggart, Short & Barclay 2000; Chapman et al. 2003; Paris & Dubus 2005; Fernandez & Healy 2007) and is also an important part of the building an emotional connection early (Maluccio 1979b).
A few studies explored client resistance in the initial phase (Brookes et al. 2006; Kirkpatrick et al. 2007) and this has been found to relate to previous poor experiences of relationships (Brookes et al. 2006). It can also occur during the ending phase where the client resists disconnecting from the worker (Maluccio 1979b).

A number of other factors have been raised that are external to but have an impact on the relationship. One of these includes the level of support the client’s extended family provides which can help the relationship (Chapman et al. 2003; Brookes et al. 2006), although Chapman et al. (2003) noted that where the worker views the family as unsupportive, their involvement can be seen to be negative for the relationship. A second factor relates to organisational matters, including the culture and systems in place, which Maluccio (1979b) identified as an understudied area about the relationship. It could be argued that this remains the same thirty years later. Maluccio (1979b) mentioned that administration staff play an important role in the building phase. Furthermore, client experience of the referral and intake processes have been found to impact on the relationship (Maluccio 1979b; Heaman et al. 2007) and, according to Heaman (2007) can put the client off where initial contact consists of rigorous and intrusive information gathering in the initial session. The organisation-focused research which does now exist suggests that that worker attitudes to their work and ability to build relationships with the types of qualities mentioned above, are better in organisations with “higher levels of job satisfaction, fairness, role clarity, cooperation, and personalisation, and lower levels of role overload, conflict, and emotional exhaustion” (Glisson & Hemmelgarn 1998: 416).

In many ways, family-based practice notions of relationships join with ideas being explored through statutory child protection perspectives to challenge traditional psychotherapeutic and social work understandings of relationships. This is particularly so regarding questioning the ways in which highly personalised ways of working with clients is considered unethical or unprofessional (Ribner & Knei-Paz 2002; Maidment 2006). Similar to some authors in the child protection-related literature, Gray (2009) draws on the notion of “emotional labour” to understand this way of working and also identifies a “befriending” element to these types of relationships. The following section explores the psychotherapy and therapy literature in relation to the relationship.

3.1.3 Relationships in Psychological and Therapeutic Services

It has been claimed that the relationship is the most empirically researched concept in psychotherapy (Castonguay, Constantino & Grosse Holtforth 2006; Crits-Christoph, Connolly Gibbons & Hearon 2006) and in social work (Priebe & McCabe 2006), albeit to a
much lesser extent in the latter. It has intrigued social workers and clinicians, researchers and theorists for over 100 years. This dates back to the early social casework literature of Mary Richmond (Richmond 1899) in the late-nineteenth century. It was later reconceptualised by psychoanalytically influenced therapists and social workers in the early-twentieth century (Robinson 1930), and then by proponents of non-directive and humanistic strains of psychology such as Elizabeth Zetzel, Carl Rogers and Ralph Greenson (Marziali & Alexander 1991; Horvath & Luborsky 1993; Crits-Christoph & Connolly 1999). Vigorous debate has occurred since this time with respect to many aspects of the relationship, and the literature on the relationship between clients and workers represents a range of perspectives. This section of the chapter will outline key findings from twenty-one literature reviews of research relevant to working relationships.

Most research on the relationship has focused on the association between the relationship and client change, rather than on the nature and elements of the relationship (de Boer & Coady 2003). Coady (1993: 294) argues that this is because the empirical scales designed to measure the relationship measure characteristics of the relationship in a way that “do not primarily reflect the antecedent qualities or unilateral contributions of either worker or client”. Furthermore, most of the research is quantitative (de Boer & Coady 2003), thus limiting researchers’ ability to explore the subjective nature of the relationship, and is restricted to testing hypotheses about what is observable. Consequently, little is known about the essence of the relationship. Another related issue, as noted by Korfmacher and Marchi (2002, cited in Korfmacher, Green, Spellmann & Thornburg 2007), is that participants rate their experiences of the relationship more positively in quantitative self reporting measures than they do when responding to open interviews, which adds support to the argument for continued examination of the phenomena using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

It must also be noted, however, that the research findings and conceptualisation of the relationship in the area of psychotherapy and therapy services has not been developed with sensitivity to the kinds of mitigating circumstances that are present in families where child neglect is an issue. For example, where families where neglect is an issue may be attending interventions involuntarily and with child removal, or threat of child removal, as a motivating factor, this is usually not so with participants in the psychological/therapeutic literature on working relationships. Consequently these research findings need to be considered cautiously, with the possibility that the relationship in more complex situations will be different from relationships in more clinically focused environments.
Terms such as *therapeutic relationship*, *therapeutic alliance*, *working alliance* and *helping alliance* are used throughout psychotherapy, including behavioural, cognitive, systemic, dynamic and eclectic approaches (Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003; Meier, Barrowclough & Donnall 2005). These terms similarly describe what is known as, for example, the *working relationship*, the *helping relationship*, the *parent-worker relationship* and the *worker-client relationship*, in various approaches influenced by psychological and sociological theory, in the fields of social work and community development (Proctor 1982; Coady 1993; Maidment 2006). Furthermore, the various terms are used interchangeably to describe the same basic construct in work with individuals, couples, families and groups, and with adults, children, young people and families across a range of generalist and specialist service sectors.

With the possible exception of proponents of recent ideas on electronic therapeutic interventions, the development of a relationship between client and worker has been regarded as one of the core features of work in the human and social services (Clemence et al. 2005), and that relationships are a “necessary (but probably not sufficient) component of all forms of effective psychotherapy” (Bachelor & Horvath 1999: 161) and social work (Flaskas 2004).

On the basis of a meta-analysis of the research on factors associated with positive outcomes in psychotherapeutic interventions, Lambert (1992) identified four principal therapeutic factors influencing positive client outcomes: characteristics of the relationship (accounting for 30% of the positive outcome); expectancy of positive change/hope and specific intervention techniques (each accounting for 15% of positive outcome); and factors external to the intervention, such as the client’s personality and social support (accounting for 40% of the positive outcome). It is now believed that the relationship is common to all theories (Martin, Garske & Davis 2000) in both adult (Horvath 2000; Martin, Garske & Davis 2000; Friedlander, Escudero & Heatherington 2006) and child (Shirk & Karver 2003) therapy, and that theoretical orientation or technique does not generally distinguish some treatments from others with respect to client change (Horvath & Symonds 1991; Marziali & Alexander 1991; McCabe & Priebe 2004; Meier, Barrowclough & Donnall 2005; Principe, Marci, Glick & Ablon 2006).

Despite the apparent agreement that the relationship is an important factor in the change process, there is much disagreement about its nature. Confusion stems mainly from overlapping and inconsistent use of the terms *relationship* and *alliance* to represent both an overarching concept, that is, the general relational context between the client and worker, and also a technical component which works alongside other technical components to form the
therapeutic context (Gaston 1990; Martin, Garske & Davis 2000; Horvath 2006; Priebe & McCabe 2006).

Although there is lack of clarity with respect to definition of the relationship, most researchers and theorists use the pan-theoretical definition of the relationship articulated by Bordin (Horvath & Symonds 1991; Marziali & Alexander 1991; Martin, Garske & Davis 2000; Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003; Crips-Christoph, Connolly Gibbons & Hearon 2006; Friedlander, Escudero & Heatherington 2006). Bordin (1979) defined the effective relationship as including “three features: an agreement on goals, an assignment of task or a series of tasks, and the development of bonds.” According to Gaston (1990), the *therapeutic alliance*, when distinguished from the *working alliance*, seems to relate to the emotional dimension of the relationship, whilst the *working alliance* is more concerned with the technical aspects of the intervention. Drawing the definitions from different psychotherapeutic traditions together, Gaston (1990: 145) suggests that the relationship is a multidimensional construct consisting of four relatively independent [but] complementary and compatible elements: (a) the therapeutic alliance, or patient’s affective relationship to the therapist; (b) the working alliance, or patient’s capacity to work purposefully in therapy; (c) the therapist’s empathic understanding and involvement; and (d) the patient-therapist agreement on the goals and tasks of treatment.

There is continuing debate as to whether the relationship facilitates an environment where change occurs or actually influences it (Horvath 2000, 2006). Some argue that positive client perception of the relationship is a function of positive outcome rather than the opposite. However, others argue that there is increasing evidence that the relationship does have a curative aspect and that it is closely related to the client’s satisfaction with the intervention (Horvath & Luborsky 1993; Horvath 2006). It has also been claimed that the relationship may act like a model for acknowledging and addressing past negative relational and attachment issues (Bachelor & Horvath 1999), learning about and practising alternate relational rules and skills (Bachelor & Horvath 1999), and promoting hope and optimism with respect to developing future relationships. Furthermore, there is evidence that the relationship supports the client’s engagement and retention in therapy (Horvath & Luborsky 1993; Meier, Barrowclough & Donnall 2005) across a range of therapies and client groups (Littell, Alexander & Reynolds 2001; Meier, Barrowclough & Donnall 2005). This is particularly important in a field where high rates of clients dropping out of treatment early is a factor, as is the case in child neglect work.
There is also evidence that those involved in the relationship have dissimilar perceptions of it (Bachelor & Horvath 1999; Horvath 2000; McCabe & Priebe 2004), although this is contested (de Boer & Coady 2003). These differing perceptions impact upon how they respond to the other person along with the treatment or intervention (Bachelor & Horvath 1999). It has also been found that a client’s perception of worker empathy, affirmation and understanding is more predictive of positive client change than their perception of what the worker does (Marziali & Alexander 1991; Horvath & Luborsky 1993).

It has been argued that an effective relationship requires a set of systems and that these change due to the relationship’s dynamic and developmental nature (Gelso 2005). Others argue that the relationship is local and unique, influenced by the techniques used and perhaps the individuals involved and the context within which it occurs (Bachelor & Horvath 1999; Hatcher & Barens 2006). Debate continues around whether or not the relationship is something unconscious that is brought to light through working with the therapist and that is involved in the change process, or whether it is an important entity in and of itself, that is, “real” and directly influential on client change (Martin, Garske & Davis 2000). Secondly, there is still no agreement about whether it is the relationship or the transference that influences the process of change (Martin, Garske & Davis 2000), where transference involves “projecting onto the analyst qualities gleaned from past relationships” (Horvath 2000: 164). Despite this, multiple and varied ideas have been proposed as influential components of the relationship. Those which relate to the study questions will be explored below.

There is some research on the early, middle and late phases in the relationship, which have found, for example, that the quality of the relationship at the early phase is a useful predictor of the effectiveness of the therapy (Horvath & Luborsky 1993; Bachelor & Horvath 1999; Horvath 2006). It has also been argued that each phase has a different association with client change and requires different supportive elements (Horvath & Luborsky 1993). It has been argued that a strong, trusting and positive relationship characterised by open communication needs to be established early (Horvath & Luborsky 1993; Bachelor & Horvath 1999; Horvath 2005; Meier, Barrowclough & Donmall 2005; Green 2006; Principe et al. 2006). It has also been argued that there are “rupture-repair” cycles throughout the duration of the relationship where the strength and quality of the relationship changes as a result of the client’s growth/change process (Horvath & Luborsky 1993; Horvath 2000), but that the foundations of the relationship do not change substantially for the duration of treatment (Horvath 2000; Green 2006). However, until recently very little research has been conducted over the entire course of the relationship, and what has been done has used similar clinical populations.
(Martin, Garske & Davis 2000), so there is still a large unexplained variability (Meier, Barrowclough & Donmall 2005).

Links between the relationship and outcome have inspired some researchers and theorists to explore the factors that assist and hinder the development and maintenance of effective relationships (Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003; Horvath 2005). However, this has been hampered by the lack of research to date (Meier, Barrowclough & Donmall 2005) and by inconclusive results (Horvath 2000). Clients and workers are generally considered separately and the literature seems to suggest that they each contribute in different ways (Bachelor & Horvath 1999). Some have argued that more is known about the contribution of workers than clients (Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003; Friedlander, Escudero & Heatherington 2006) and that little is known about the perceptions of clients on what is occurring in the relationship during treatment (Friedlander, Escudero & Heatherington 2006). While it appears that some research has been conducted with respect to activities of workers during therapy, it has not been well integrated into other findings about the factors influencing the relationship (Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003).

It is believed that the relationship consists of interrelated conscious and unconscious ways of understanding and communicating that occur prior to and during the intervention. Furthermore, relationships are developed and maintained within a wider context that consequently exerts an influence over the relationship, and that must be negotiated by the relationship participants, both independently and collaboratively (Coady 1993; Littell, Alexander & Reynolds 2001). The elements of the relationship that have been highlighted in the research are summarised in the following table.

| Internal to the relationship - unconscious | Transference and counter transference (Horvath & Symonds 1991; Horvath & Luborsky 1993; Bachelor & Horvath 1999; Trevithick 2003; Flaskas 2004) Participants’ feelings, reflections and understanding about themselves (Horvath & Luborsky 1993; Waddington 2002; Trevithick 2003; Flaskas 2004; McCabe & Priebe 2004; Horvath 2006). Attachment style, where participants with secure attachment styles are better placed to develop stronger relationship more quickly than others (Bachelor & Horvath 1999; Meier, Barrowclough & Donmall 2005) The degree of distress experienced by the client (Bachelor & Horvath 1999; Horvath 2000), although Principe (2006) argues that the findings... |
with respect to this are inconsistent.

| Internal to the relationship - conscious | Motivation to work together (Horvath & Luborsky 1993; Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003), which is mostly described as the client being motivated to work with worker (Waddington 2002; Meier, Barrowclough & Donmall 2005; Friedlander, Escudero & Heatherington 2006) and the client being motivated, or ready, to change (Meier, Barrowclough & Donmall 2005; Principe et al. 2006).

Mutuality and reciprocity (Coady 1993; Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003; Friedlander, Escudero & Heatherington 2006; Sterlin 2006), which includes that it is mutually beneficial, and includes reciprocal respect and liking/friendliness (Bachelor & Horvath 1999; Waddington 2002; Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003; Friedlander, Escudero & Heatherington 2006; Sterlin 2006). Some have noted that the worker displays feelings such as warmth and friendliness towards the client, but not vice versa, although the client is noted to refrain from displaying hostility towards the worker (Horvath & Luborsky 1993; Shirk & Karver 2003; McCabe & Priebe 2004; Meier, Barrowclough & Donmall 2005). An exception to this is that of Trevithick (2003) who argues that both worker and client must feel open and not defensive or self-protecting.

Hope and expectation appears to be considered generated by workers and felt by clients rather than workers (Horvath & Luborsky 1993; Littell, Alexander & Reynolds 2001; Waddington 2002; Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003).

Collaboration, cooperation, contracting and striving for a shared purpose (Horvath & Symonds 1991; Horvath & Luborsky 1993; Bachelor & Horvath 1999; Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003; Friedlander, Escudero & Heatherington 2006; Green 2006; Horvath 2006). Some authors argue that this is important for all participants but it is the worker who drives this (Horvath & Luborsky 1993; Littell, Alexander & Reynolds 2001; Waddington 2002). A collaborative environment requires the development of rapport along with active engagement and involvement, although this is often described in terms of what the client needs and what is the worker’s role to provide and support (Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003). |
Confidence that the person with whom they are working is competent and experienced (Friedlander, Escudero & Heatherington 2006). Again, this is sometimes felt by the client towards the worker and is not always expressed as mutual (Bachelor & Horvath 1999; Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003).

Workers displaying interest, curiosity and alertness. However the worker is often described as needing to be such with respect to the client rather than vice versa (Bachelor & Horvath 1999; Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003).

A sense of trust (Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003; Trevithick 2003). For Trevithick (2003), this is mutual, yet for others, the client must be able to trust others (Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003) and the worker must be trustworthy (Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003), able to trust the client (Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003) and able to instil a sense of trust (Friedlander, Escudero & Heatherington 2006).

Techniques such as active listening, interpretation and reflection (Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003; Flaskas 2004).

Flexible and relaxed, yet emotionally predictable and safe, working environment (Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003; Friedlander, Escudero & Heatherington 2006; Priebe & McCabe 2006). Some argue that the onus is on the worker to provide such an environment (Flaskas 2004; Friedlander, Escudero & Heatherington 2006) and to initiate resolution of difficulties and problems that arise in the relationship (Horvath & Symonds 1991; Waddington 2002; McCabe & Priebe 2004).

Matching clients and workers to maximize opportunities for client change. Tentative findings to suggest that length of treatment, worker age, education or cultural background, marital status or employment/socioeconomic status do not significantly influence the relationship between the quality of the relationship and client change (Bachelor & Horvath 1999; Meier, Barrowclough & Donmall 2005). However, there have been mixed findings with respect to the influence of similarities in age, gender and cultural background on the relationship (Bachelor &
There have also been findings that having more contacts with the client is influential (McCabe & Priebe 2004). Horvath and Luborsky (1994) argue that it is more important to think in terms of complementarity rather than matching clients and workers, where this luxury exists.

Previous relationship experiences affect future attempts to build relationships (Horvath & Luborsky 1993; Horvath 2000; Meier, Barrowclough & Donmall 2005).

A few argue that the physical environment of the place of work, along with the client’s interaction with general office staff, is an influential factor in the first impressions that clients have of workers (Green 2006). Very little appears to be known with respect to the influence of the work environment on the relationship for the worker, although information about the influence of professional support on the relationship, while still limited, is gaining more attention.

Supervision is an important outside influence on the relationship (Marziali & Alexander 1991; Priebe & McCabe 2006). Key ideas include using supervision to monitor the relationship and discussing working difficulties (Bachelor & Horvath 1999; Waddington 2002; Horvath 2005) and helping the worker develop interpersonal skills (Coady 1993) along with other skills and characteristics previously cited as important for the development and maintenance of effective relationships.

The degree of training a worker has received (Horvath 2005; Priebe & McCabe 2006) is seen to be a factor. Although training on developing relationships has not been as successful as expected, some have noted that relationship training for workers assists professionals to manage their relationship better than those receiving less training (Horvath 2000).

Government policy decisions impacting, mostly, on the professional context and through direct interference (Friedlander, Escudero & Heatherington 2006).

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Table 1: Key elements in the relationship as found in the psychological/therapeutic literature
3.2 Section Two: Relationships in the Broader Professional Context

Finally, it is important to explore what is known about the way in which both a rural location and other issues regarding the professional context influence relationships. For example, supervisors may both impact and provide a perspective on the relationship. Another key facet of the professional context involves the professional development of workers. Furthermore, it is important to consider ethical aspects of working with families. The following section will outline the literature on rural-based practice, supervision, professional education and training and ethical issues pertaining to the relationship.

3.2.1 Relationships in a Rural Context

It would appear from the literature that no research has been conducted specifically concentrating on the relationship developed when working with families where child neglect is an issue in rural and remote contexts in Australia or elsewhere. Furthermore, research is sparse regarding developing professional relationships in rural and remote areas (Gregory 2005) and regarding how workers and clients, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, develop relationships (Lynn, Thorpe, Miles, with Cutts, Butcher & Ford 1998). Despite this, there is a growing body of research undertaken in rural and remote contexts, a healthy proportion of which is from an Australian context. The research on social/welfare work in rural and remote contexts is not problem or service specific and relies mainly on the experience of workers. Key themes raised in the general relationship literature that have also been addressed in research on social and welfare practice in rural and remote contexts include the following.

Some authors reflecting generally on working in rural settings describe the way in which workers provide a less professionally distant (Green, Gregory & Mason 2006) or more personalised and informal (Martinez-Brawley 1986; Ginsberg 1998) approach. Lynn et al (1998), have articulated a rural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander construction of the relationship. They describe the relationship in terms of “deprofessionalism”.

In a deprofessional approach, friendship, yarning, recognition of your common humanity with the client, sharing of stories, sharing of self, including spirituality and humour, are recognised and valued techniques. A relationship characterised in this form works with power and equality in a more complex way than the present approaches within social and welfare work (Lynn et al. 1998: 79).

Paradoxically, working in a rural and remote context is seen both to simplify and complicate the development and maintenance of relationships. Issues noted in the literature relate mainly to what are termed “boundary issues”, and include the development of dual and multiple stranded relationships, confidentiality, worker self-disclosure and trust. An additional issue
relates to worker support and supervision. Few of the following factors operate discretely and it is likely that what influences one usually influences others to greater or lesser degrees.

3.2.1.1 Professional and Personal Roles

Virtually all of the literature on the practical aspects of social and welfare work in a rural and remote context addresses the issue of dual and multiple stranded relationships. Dual and multiple stranded relationships refer to relationships with service users that occur outside of the professional sphere. They include having social, professional, and/or financial relationships with service users additional to the work-related relationship (Campbell & Gordon 2003).

Such relationships occur more frequently in rural and remote settings because of the dense social networks (Green, Gregory & Mason 2006), increased visibility (Green, Gregory & Mason 2003; Pugh 2003; Chenoweth 2004; Daley & Doughty 2006), fewer social networks (Green & Gregory 2004), and usually the long term nature of relationships in rural and remote settings (Campbell & Gordon 2003). Expectations about a higher level of personal involvement and sharing personal information with community members and groups have also been identified as characteristics of rural communities (Campbell & Gordon 2003; Green 2003; Green, Gregory & Mason 2006). The potential for such personal/professional conflicts creates stress for workers, and current research provides little guidance for managing this (Green 2003; Pugh 2007). It must also be noted that similar issues can arise in dense communities that are not rural or remote, but occur due to other factors that set a smaller group of people apart from the “mainstream” society, such as smaller groups of people sharing a similar cultural or religious background.

Traditionally, the development of dual and multiple stranded relationships has been viewed in a negative light (Zur 2006). It is argued that the development of dual relationships is difficult, and at worst, unethical (Daley & Doughty 2006; Zur 2006). An alternative opinion is that this is an urban-centric view (Zur 2006; Pugh 2007) and that the heterogeneous nature of social and welfare work in rural and remote communities has increased professionals’ proficiency at adaptation and through the need to become generalists, practise in a multidimensional way (Martinez-Brawley 1986).

Pugh (2007) argues that rural contexts can actually have a “humanising effect” on relationships. Green et al (2006: 450) argue that it might be more useful to conceptualise relationships in rural contexts as “a stretchy piece of elastic” or a continuum between the “professional objective expert” and the “helpful friend” rather than the dichotomy of
professional and non professional that is often presented”, and that practitioners be allowed to choose where they are on the continuum as they respond to the unique situations they face with clients and professionals alike. This includes challenging, rethinking and stretching professional ethics, values and rules about professional boundaries as they relate to the development and maintenance of the relationship.

Reflecting on this, Green et al (2006) concede that while the greater level of informality in more personal relationship than in professionally distant ones can be difficult, there are also inherent contradictions and unrecognised power issues in being expected to maintain professional distance and a persona of “the expert” (Green, Gregory & Mason 2006), while at the same time wanting to, and being expected to be an integral and sincere member of the community (Green 2003; Green, Gregory & Mason 2006; Pugh 2007).

Positive outcomes of dual and multiple stranded relationships can include enhanced ability to establish rapport quickly (Green & Gregory 2004) and not being considered rude or culturally insensitive (Daley & Doughty 2006). Ideas on increasing the chance of dual and multiple stranded relationships having positive outcomes includes recognising potential conflicts of interest before they occur (Green & Gregory 2004), discussing these and other boundary issues with service users and agreeing to what will occur when the situation arises (Green 2003; Munn & Munn 2003; Pugh 2007), and maintaining the boundaries and previously agreed plans (Campbell & Gordon 2003; Pugh 2007). In addition, the establishment of work-based protocols that are explained to service users (Green, Gregory & Mason 2003) can help to normalise such relationships as a likely occurrence and provide some guidance (Green, Gregory & Mason 2003).

3.2.1.2 Difficulties in a Rural Setting

Other negative outcomes and stressors on relationships can arise out of safety and privacy issues (Green & Lonne 2005; Daley & Doughty; Pugh 2007), issues relating to confidentiality (Green 2003), feelings of isolation from support and conflict with employers (Green & Gregory 2004). All of these factors increase risk of worker stress and burnout (Munn & Munn 2003), leading to reduced capacity to develop and maintain relationships.

Safety for self and family has been found to be of concern for workers in emotionally charged sectors, including child and family welfare (Green, Gregory & Mason 2003). These concerns can adversely affect relationships, where workers avoid contact with clients and reduce the expression of their personal side, thus coming across as more professionally distant (Green, Gregory & Mason 2003). While this creates stress for workers (Green & Gregory 2004),
developing clear relationship boundaries and organisational policies may help ameliorate such concerns (Green, Gregory & Mason 2003).

Maintaining confidentiality is important for the development and maintenance of relationships (Daley & Doughty 2006; Green, Gregory & Mason 2006). Relationships can be at least hindered, or at worst seriously damaged or extinguished, where confidentiality is breached. Similar to the development of dual and multiple relationships, factors related to confidentiality and self-disclosure are complicated by a rural and remote context, and what is considered private in urban contexts might not be such in rural and remote (Martinez-Brawley 1986; Green 2003; Green, Gregory & Mason 2006; Pugh 2007). Again, the dense and generally long-term nature of social relationships in such communities is a factor, as is the reduced anonymity that comes with living and working in the same community (Green 2003; Pugh 2007). Information told to someone in confidence has a way of finding its way into the community in rural settings (Green, Gregory & Mason 2003).

In addition, it is not uncommon for a worker to know more about the client than they have been told by the client, and vice versa, which can put pressure on the building of trust between the worker and service user (Green & Gregory 2004). According to Munn and Munn (2003), workers are part of “the gossip system” but they cannot afford to be over-involved with it. Gumbert and Saltman (2000, cited in Saltman et al. 2004) found that almost all of the research participants use information they receive from community members in their work. Workers have to be particularly mindful of who else is aware that they are meeting with a service user and with whom they share information (Green & Lonne 2005; Pugh 2007). This includes supervision or the administrative functions of the organisation (Green 2003). This can be particularly problematic when one of the mores of their community is involvement and open communication of sensitive material with other workers and community members (Green 2003; Pugh 2007), many of whom live in the same community as the service user. Some workers use collusion with service users to maintain confidentiality (Munn & Munn 2003; Pugh 2007), for example engaging with service users to invent stories to account for circumstances, events or behaviour, for example, if they encounter each other in a social situation.

Some argue that the building and maintenance of trust is perhaps more difficult and gradual in rural and remote communities than in urban settings. In addition to the reasons outlined above, some have argued that this includes a general rural community distrust of people, policies and ideas that are not considered “local” (Campbell & Gordon 2003; Green & Gregory 2004). This relates to another paradox impacting on the relationship, which is that
becoming accepted as trustworthy in smaller communities requires becoming involved and embedded in the community, and this usually requires the development of dual and multiple relationships.

An issue that has been raised which also influences the relationship is that of isolation. In a practical sense, the relationship is affected by greater distances between service users and worker, resulting in fewer opportunities to build and maintain relationships (Chenoweth 2004). In a professional sense isolation reduces access of workers to supervision, guidance, counselling and support (Munn & Munn 2003; Green & Gregory 2004; Lonne & Cheers 2004). It can also escalate differences of opinion between staff and management with respect to professional values and practice (Green & Gregory 2004; Lonne & Cheers 2004), in particular managing dual and multiple relationships.

3.2.2 Relationships and other Practice Considerations

3.2.2.1 Supervision

Little in-depth empirical investigation has been done on the role of supervision specifically regarding the relationship in child welfare contexts (de Boer & Coady 2003) although it is considered an important outside influence in the general literature (Marziali & Alexander 1991; Priebe & McCabe 2006). Despite this it has been found to support workers, so potentially the relationship (Taggart, Short & Barclay 2000; Daro et al. 2005; Heaman et al. 2007). Kadushin (1991: 23) has provided the following classic differentiation of the administrative, educational, and supportive dimensions of social work supervision.

[A] social work supervisor is an agency administrative-staff member to whom authority is delegated to direct, coordinate, enhance, and evaluate the on-the-job performance of the supervisees for whose work he or she is held accountable. In implementing this responsibility, the supervisor performs administrative, educational, and supportive functions in interaction with the supervisee in the context of a positive relationship. The supervisor’s ultimate objective is to deliver to agency clients the best possible service, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in accordance with agency policies and procedures. Supervisors do not directly offer service to the client, but they do indirectly affect the level of service offered through their impact on the direct service supervisees.

Supervisors are required to ensure the provision of an efficient and effective service for people accessing the organisation (Kadushin 1991). They do not usually perform practice tasks, although two of the supervisors in this study do. According to Kadushin (1991: 23), a supervisor’s role involves improving workers’ capacity to do their job effectively and autonomously, including helping workers develop professionally, expand their knowledge
and skills. It also involves maintaining a work environment that facilitates workers to feel good about doing the job and liking the job. This includes ensuring a stable work environment, good practice standards, fluid organisational systems and internal synchronization between practice and organisational and social policies. With respect to these broader functions, they span the space between workers and management, partly present with both but never wholly part of either (Kadushin 1991).

While they do not normally include an “executive” administrative function (Kadushin 1991), the supervisors involved in this study do. This includes awareness of and action with respect to planning programs, organisational policies, community engagement activities and government polices and legislation, encompassing local, state and federal jurisdictions. Digression from Kadushin’s (1991) idealised supervisor may be due in part to the small size of the organisations involved in the study. It may also be because of the long tradition of community development and historical foundations in the settlement movement of family services. These have been noted to involve less hierarchical relationships between supervisors and workers (Kadushin 1991).

Supervision that supports workers through the difficult task of maintaining a relationship with chronically neglecting families seems particularly important (Kenemore 1993; Stone 1998; Tanner & Turney 2003). This was considered an understudied area thirty years ago (Maluccio 1979b) and still holds today. Supervision fulfils an important function with respect to supporting and monitoring staff as they develop and maintain the relationship (Bachelor & Horvath 1999; Gibbs; Waddington 2002; de Boer & Coady 2003; Horvath 2005; de Boer & Coady 2007; Staudt 2007). This is especially so given it has been found that unmanageable levels of worker stress reduce the motivation of workers to develop and maintain positive relationships (Armstrong 1979; Azar 2000). Supervision can include supporting the worker to work outside official professional boundaries where appropriate (de Boer & Coady 2003). It should emphasise developing the worker’s self-awareness (Coady 1993) and emotional and reflective capacity along with their skills with respect to relating to clients, meeting clients’ needs (Coady 1993; Gibbs 2001; de Boer & Coady 2007).

In child neglect research, structural barriers affecting on workers include time pressures to get families “fixed” quickly (Petras, Massat & Essex 2002; Tanner & Turney 2003). Flexible work environments have been found to be particularly supportive of workers as they attempt to develop and maintain relationships. This includes work environments that encourage worker autonomy and spontaneity (de Boer & Coady 2003, 2007) and ensure adequate length of time is allocated for workers to develop and maintain quality relationships that meet the
needs of service users and are characterised by good communication (de Boer & Coady 2003; Clemence et al. 2005). It also involves making resources available to meet service users’ needs (Waddington 2002; de Boer & Coady 2003), which includes deciding how many contacts are required by a client at any given stage rather than the organisation’s needs (McCabe & Priebe 2004).

Supervisors should raise their own awareness of the attributes of workers reputed to develop and maintain good relationships and seek to recruit staff with similar characteristics (de Boer & Coady 2003; Staudt 2007). This includes having well trained and experienced staff who can act as mentors and motivators to reduce feeling isolated (Gibbs 2001; de Boer & Coady 2007).

While supervision in rural contexts has received little research, and has not specifically focused on the role of supervisors with respect to relationships, it has been raised as important for ameliorating the impact of the issues raised above (Gibbs 2001; Green 2003; Munn & Munn 2003; Green & Gregory 2004; Lonne &Cheers 2004). The research is relevant for relationships as it relates mainly to reducing worker burnout and high turnover.

Lack of support in the workplace has been found to lead to high staff turnover, whilst social, emotional and financial support from employers has been found to assist workers to stay in rural agencies (Gibbs 2001; Lonne & Cheers 2004). Gibbs (2001) found that workers felt unsupported when supervisors did not accept or act on their concerns about the high levels of stress and anxiety they were experiencing and did not encourage critical reflection on work practice. She argues that positive reinforcement about the value and success of their work was of particular importance for these rural workers (Gibbs 2001).

Some research found that workers are not so concerned about receiving administrative supervision as they are receiving supportive supervision (Gibbs 2001; Green & Gregory 2004; Lonne & Cheers 2004). It was argued that this was perhaps due to having to adapt and be more independent because of the scarcity of professionals available to provide supportive supervision (Ginsberg 1998; Green & Gregory 2004; Lonne & Cheers 2004). Lonne and Cheers (2004) found that poor administrative supervision increased worker stress and exhaustion. This was found to be the case particularly where supervisors were based within fifty kilometres of workers, perhaps again due to conflicts between feeling autonomous and yet closely scrutinised by management.

Research has also found that rural workers utilise other means of support where supervision is lacking or unfulfilling, such as through other networks both within and outside of their
community (Munn & Munn 2003; Chenoweth 2004), although, as previously noted, confidentiality can be an issue within one’s community.

Issues hindering trust and openness in the worker-supervisor relationship include concerns about confidentiality due to the embeddedness of both of them in the community (Green 2003). Supervisors have also been found to experience pressure to balance the needs of workers with the demands of higher levels of agency management and to cope with the lack of support in their role and the lack of recognition of its importance (Gibbs 2001).

More research has been called for into the nature and processes of these types of personalised relationships in rural settings (Green 2003; Green & Gregory 2004; Green, Gregory & Mason 2006; Pugh 2007). This includes how workers manage them and how supervisors support workers to do this.

3.2.2.2 Professional Development
Evidence on the benefits of education and training with respect to effective relationships is mixed. Horvath (2000) noted that relationship training for workers assists professionals to manage their relationship better than those receiving less training. Areas of training that have been found to be useful for workers include: information about the relationship generally; in order to develop greater appreciation of the importance of this dimension of practice; how to develop an empathic and supportive attitude towards service users; how to use a natural relational style and skills; and skills required for the development and maintenance of good relationships (de Boer & Coady 2003).

3.2.2.3 Ethical Considerations
Research on ethical aspects of relationships is disjointed and sparse. Adherence to professional codes of ethics without critical appraisal is generally the case (Husband 1995; Maidment 2006). One clear exception is Maidment (2006), who provides a thoughtful and thorough exploration of the notion of ethical practice within professional relationships in the human services. She questions the way in which closeness and distance in relationships is currently conceptualised. In so doing she critically analyses current understanding of the ethics of relationships and pressure to maintain professional distance if one is to be considered an ethical practitioner. Maidment (2006) argues that current understandings of ethics and codes of ethical practice that have been developed may better serve the needs of professionals than clients in increasingly litigious and outcomes-based professional environments.
Maidment (2006) utilises some of the empirical research on relationships that has provided evidence of ethical ways of working that places emotional and spiritual connections between clients and workers ahead of strict compliance to keeping professional distances, as dictated by professional codes of behaviour and norms. In particular she argues for professional practice that values expressions of genuine love for clients, appropriate and non-sexual physical touch and reciprocal exchange of self, life stories and spiritual aspects of one’s life in client/worker interactions. By “spiritual”, Maidment (2006) means the philosophical, or ontological and ethical, aspect of one’s life that express one’s fundamental humanness. Bringing relational aspects back into the conceptualisation of good professional practice, rather than its current focus almost exclusively on tasks, goals and outcomes, is the essence of work in the human services, according to Maidment (2006).

3.3 Conclusion
Chapter Two has discussed how child neglect is an important child protection concern in Australia and internationally. Research suggests that neglecting parents struggle with a variety of complex issues that manifest in poor social skills, difficulties in relationships, social isolation and lack, or perceived lack, of social support. There is evidence that neglecting parents have higher drop out rates than families with other child maltreatment issues, and that workers have difficulties engaging neglecting parents, and often express a sense of hopelessness and helplessness in these relationships.

As shown in Chapter Three, although family support services are one of the core mechanisms through which services are provided to families where neglect is an issue, this is an under researched area. Only a small number of studies have been conducted since Maluccio’s (1979b) seminal work on engagement and the relationship in family-based practice. Whilst the relationship as a concept has been well examined, most of the research has been conducted with voluntary clients in non-statutory circumstances. Furthermore, whilst there is limited research specifically on developing the relationship in rural contexts, there is a growing literature on the relational issues, difficulties and differences in rural contexts. Social and welfare workers in rural and remote communities may be at the forefront of redefining the relationship, having to “stretch the professional elastic”, daily in order to deliver a service. Further research into the relationship as it is developed and maintained in rural and remote communities might therefore be profitable.
Chapter Three also discussed how approaches that have been noted to achieve success with neglecting families (that is, approaches with nurturing and parenting characteristics) challenge established ethical frameworks for social work practice. Whilst evidence exists that workers and clients involved in neglect-related interventions struggle to connect, very little research has explored the nature of these relationships. Nor has the role of supervisors in relationships with this client population been extensively examined. Furthermore, while a few studies have noted that organisational factors, including the way in which workers receive support, is important, this has not been examined in relation to child neglect, an area in which service provider morale and optimism is likely to be especially important.

Important aspects of the nature and processes of the relationship in child neglect related interventions remain unclear. There is a very limited literature in relation to the specific focus of this study, which is working relationships in child neglect-related family-based practice interventions in a rural setting. More evidence is therefore required about how some workers develop successful relationships and work towards reducing the impact of child neglect in families despite the difficulties. It is important to focus specifically on neglect, given the research that indicates it comes with relationship challenges that may be different from families with other forms of child maltreatment. It is important also to conduct such research in a rural context, since the limited research on the relationship in child and family support services indicates the importance of a humanistic approach, and the rural literature provides a comprehensive exploration and critique of issues relating to professional boundaries.

This study is designed to address some of these gaps by exploring how parents and family workers experience the relationship and the associated factors, including their perception of the purpose, value and meaning of this relationship. In addition, this study included an exploration of how supervisors perceived the relationship and factors affecting it.
Chapter Four  Research Methodology and Methods

The purpose of this chapter is to address the philosophical and methodological interests informing the study, along with outlining assumptions, the research design and ethical considerations. The process of unpacking and clarifying one’s ontological viewpoints, epistemological stance, theoretical perspectives, methodology and methods can assist in comprehending what is being said, the context of one’s arguments and beliefs, and the grounds for the philosophy and logic behind the research (Rickman 1967; Crotty 1998; Neuman 2000). To that end, the chapter will describe a hermeneutical philosophical orientation and its influence on the methodology and methods. These ideas influenced the approach to this study and analysis of how the participants perceived their experience of the parent-worker relationship and factors affecting it. The importance for such an approach in examining the relationship became clear after a comprehensive review of the literature highlighted the need for a way to complement the pre-existing and mostly descriptive and conceptual knowledge.

Specifically, the study utilised methods that facilitated dialogue and researcher reflexivity across a number of perspectives of people involved in eight relationship dyads. The methods included unstructured in-depth interviews and case studies for data collection, and thematic and narrative analysis methods. Ethical considerations included duty of care, voluntary informed consent, the retrospective nature of the study, financial recompense, privacy and confidentiality, and the establishment of trustworthiness. Ethical considerations regarding participant privacy and confidentiality also influenced decisions to conduct thematic analysis of the data.

4.1  Hermeneutics and Interpretivism

This research was conducted from an interpretivist tradition influenced by hermeneutic philosophy (Crotty 1998). Hermeneutics is premised on a belief that being human fundamentally involves needing to understand, or make meaning out of one’s life in order to raise one’s self awareness. In research, the importance of philosophical orientation becomes important when justifying the methodology and methods chosen because particular understandings of knowledge, belief and truth will frame the way in which theorisation of the topic is undertaken (Rickman 1967; Crotty 1998). It is also useful for ensuring that the research design is consistent with the focus of the research question, in this case a focus on individuals’ perceptions of their experiences of particular types of family work relationships.
Philosophers and social theorists have long debated the most appropriate ways of researching social phenomena (Crotty 1998; Kögler & Stueber 2000). This debate is complex, with roots deep in philosophical debates about theories of the mind (Kögler & Stueber 2000). Whilst examining the depths of this debate is outside the scope of this study, the crux of the issue for those who wish to establish a methodology for researching and conceptualising the human and social sciences originates from the argument that what sets human beings apart from objects of research in all other fields is that they are “self interpreting beings whose interpretation, in part, constitutes their being” (Harrist & Gelfand 2005: 226). This was a concern of the researcher who assumed that the perspectives of parents, workers and supervisors in relation to their experiences of a working relationship would yield valuable insights for further development of knowledge with respect to neglect-related family work interventions.

Interpretive social scientists argue that since human beings are situated in the world, they are in a subjective position relative to the world and to attempts to understand it (Bohman 2000; Kögler & Stueber 2000). Research methodology that treats them as objects and/or generalises what they think cannot get to their unique interpretations of the world or fully comprehend the issues at stake (Bohman 2000; Kögler & Stueber 2000). This arises from an ontological assumption that human action is purposeful and that all people are “concretely valuable being[s]” who are “self interpreting agent[s]” (Kögler 2005: 248), situated in and influencing the social, historical and cultural context (Audi 1995; Ritzer 1996; Kögler & Stueber 2000; Harrist & Gelfand 2005). In line with this, the study was founded on the assumption that those who accepted the invitation to be involved in the research had a worthwhile story to tell, that their perspective was valuable and that they could articulate their position with respect to a particular working relationship.

The goal of interpretive social science is to understand and explain how people experience life, including what motivates them and how they understand and make meaning of this (Audi 1995; Klein & White 1996; Ritzer 1996; Crotty 1998; Neuman 2000; Harrist & Gelfand 2005; Kögler 2005). People can meet these needs through an increasing knowledge of the lived experiences of others, as they interpret and attempt to make sense of those experiences, and as they communicate their changed understandings of them (Agger 1991; Huspek 1991; Horn 1998; Mill, Allen & Morrow 2001; Kincheloe & McLaren 2003). An assumption operating here is that it takes place within social, cultural and historical contexts. The researcher also assumed that an important contextual factor in working with families where
child neglect is a concern is a solid and connected working relationship between workers and parents.

Furthermore, it was important to set the relationships within their broader context; which is why particular attention was paid in Chapter Two to describe the broader child neglect, family support service and rural contexts involved in the study. Given this, when designing this study it was important to capture the specific context within which the relationships were located. Although the agencies' confidentiality principles prevented the researcher having access to case files or asking families about their history it was possible to glean some contextual information through the interviews, which is described in Chapter Five. Regarding research design however, the following provides the sample selection context.

4.2 Sample Selection

The services participating in this study were members of NSW Family Services Inc (FamS), the Peak body for family support services in NSW. This eligibility criterion was established because, in order to become a member, services need to endorse certain principles of practice (Appendix A). The assumption was that this could increase consistency throughout the study in relation to underlying values and principles of practice.

There were two phases to sample selection. Before recruiting staff and parent participants, the researcher had to secure service approval. This was achieved by presenting information about the research to the management committee and coordinator/manager of the family service. This presentation was based on the information provided in the Staff Information Sheet (Appendix C). Consent was sought via completion of an Agency Authorisation Form (Appendix C). Once the agency subscribed to the research, the researcher made a similar presentation to the family workers employed at the agency. This was a group session where the researcher provided a summary of the planned research and invited staff to become involved. Those attending received a Staff Information Sheet (Appendix C) and a Consent Form (Appendix C). They were requested to complete and return the form if they wished to be involved. There was no obligation for them to become involved. Parent research participants were formally notified of the study through their former family worker who had subscribed to the study, informing eligible parent-clients about the study at the time of intervention closure or following closure.

To be eligible for participation, the working relationship had to have recently ceased and had to have involved some kind of child neglect-related issue, as defined by the family service. The parent participant had to have been a client of the family worker research participant, and
the family work had to have been conducted in a family service in NSW which, at the time of the research, was a member of FamS. Potential participants were not eligible for the study if they were under 18 years of age, had impaired capacity for informed consent, such as a serious mental illness/intellectual disability, or limited grasp of the English language. They also could not be currently engaged in the working relationship with the family worker with whom they had developed the working relationship under examination.

Potential participants were informed that, if they were involved in the research, they would engage with the researcher in one-on-one conversational interviews (duration between one and two hours) where they would be invited to “tell the story” of their working relationship.

Potential participants were also informed that since the focus of the research was the working relationship, the research would involve the three most significant stakeholders in the working relationship (that is the client, family worker and the worker’s supervisor), but that they would each be interviewed separately and not informed of the details of any of the other two participants’ interviews.

Workers who had subscribed to the study were asked to inform potential parent participants that the service was involved in a study through the University of South Australia and Southern Cross University into how parents and family workers work together, and that the researcher would value the parent’s input about their experience of the working relationship in which they have just been involved. The worker was instructed to give the parent an envelope containing an Information Sheet for parents (Appendix C), Participant Expression of Interest Form (Appendix C), Parent Consent Form (Appendix C), and stamped envelope with a return address to the researcher via the University of South Australia. If asked, the worker could answer that they were involved in the study but that any other questions needed to be directed to the researcher, whose details were available in the envelope. The Participant Expression of Interest Form (Appendix C) indicated the opportunity for the former parent-client to become further informed about the research and their interest to become involved or not. It included instructions for the parent to provide some identifying and contact information, information relevant to eligibility and to note their level of interest, and with instructions to place the form in the sealable envelope (which they either deposited in the sealed box left at the service, handed to the family worker or the agency administration officer, or posted to the researcher). The Participant Expression of Interest Form informed the parent that answering “yes” at that point did not mean they were committed to the research, but merely that they would be contacted and provided with further information and given the
opportunity to subscribe to or decline the invitation to become a research participant. This approach was taken to maintain privacy and maximise voluntary informed consent.

A total of twenty five people were recruited to the study, which amounted to eight cases. Two cases (two parents and two workers) were excluded after the interviews revealed the parenting concerns did not relate to child neglect. The eight remaining cases involved eight family workers who were employees of one of the family support services which subscribed to the study, nine former clients (parents) of the family workers involved in the study, and the four primary supervisors of the family workers. Three supervisors were responsible for more than one family worker involved in the study.

Figure 2: Configuration of the relationship dyads/cases, including exclusion of two where child neglect could not be established

After ethics approval was secured in mid-April 2007, the researcher completed five recruitment sessions at local family support services. By the beginning of July 2007, four family worker participants had signed up for the research (but one worker subsequently resigned from their position and did not proceed). The researcher completed nine interviews by the end of August (three family workers, three supervisors and three parents), but received no further participants until after the principal research supervisor for the study and the researcher spoke at a Family Services conference (October 2007) in an attempt to readvertise the research and facilitate recruitment. By November 2007, further participants began to sign up, and by the end of April 2008, all interviews were complete (thirty in total). This process
took longer than anticipated because none of the workers who subscribed to the study were close to completing eligible working relationships at the time they signed up to be involved.

4.3 Research Methods
Interpretive social science, specifically hermeneutics, provides a way of examining the dynamics of these relationships. It enables in-depth exploration and interpretation of the participants’ perspectives of how they experienced and understood the working relationship. The interpretive researcher attempts to uncover and describe the actor’s interpretation of influences on their life (Crotty 1998; Neuman 2000). They try to interpret what intentional motivating factors and symbolic systems mean for individuals, even if they and others may interpret such factors differently (Audi 1995; Ritzer 1996; Neuman 2000). This involves asking questions of a subjective nature, as these help build understanding of what people believe to be true and hold to be relevant, how people define their actions and experience the social context, and how they create and share meaning (Neuman 2000).

4.3.1 Dialogue and Relationships
As already noted, an underlying assumption, and one held by the researcher, is that individuals are unique human beings and are free agents whose experiences are valid (Kögler 2005). This, according to Kögler (2005), creates a common ground for engaging in dialogue and consequently, in interpretation. In this study it is proposed that a central element of both the relationship between parent and worker, and between the researcher and research participant is “dialogue”. Consequently, when framing this study it was deemed important to ensure that salience was given to individual and unique interpretations of those actively involved in working relationships. This was achieved through taking a narrative approach to data collection, in particular using unstructured in-depth interviews which were structured as a “conversation” between the interviewees and researcher.

The key to reflexivity and interpretation, and consequently self understanding, is mutual and reciprocal dialogue (Bohman 2000; Kögler & Stueber 2000; Hendrickson 2004; Kögler 2005). People engaged in dialogue are present with each other in real time, and they expect each other to respond (Hammond, Anderson & Cissna 2003). Dialogue is a way to communicate understanding (Kincheloe & McLaren 2003), challenge disempowering and oppressive mechanisms (Huspek 1991; Hammond, Anderson & Cissna 2003; Kincheloe & McLaren 2003), and build consensus and community (Agger 1991; Huspek 1991; Agger 1998; Horn 1998). Dialogue leads to personal and social transformation and action (Thompson 1981; Hammond, Anderson & Cissna 2003). Whilst people have a capacity to
hold incoherence or ambiguity, they also seek to make order or meaning. A continuous state of incoherence (because coherence while attainable is only temporary) drives people to dialogue with others who are different and differently situated (Hammond, Anderson & Cissna 2003).

Dialogue involves openness with respect to developing self understanding and not having predetermined outcomes or definitions (Kögler 1999; Hammond, Anderson & Cissna 2003). This leaves us open to other ways of thinking where we see how the person with whom we are in dialogue has been impacted and objectified and how they have suffered (Kögler 1999; Hammond, Anderson & Cissna 2003). Dialogue requires that participants offer themselves and their perspectives genuinely and authentically (that is “the actual place of their existence”) and not from behind constructed roles that separate them from each other or themselves, (Hammond, Anderson & Cissna 2003). It requires that the participants acknowledge, indeed “invite” differences between each other as they attempt to connect and understand one another. Once this occurs it is possible to work together to create a platform for new ideas to emerge, change self understanding and influence different ways by which power operates (Kögler 1999; Hammond, Anderson & Cissna 2003).

A relationship with others enables mutual dialogue and opportunities to keep hearing others’ interpretations, which we can then incorporate into our understanding of self (Bohman 2000; Hammond, Anderson & Cissna 2003: 133). Dialogue is a shared event through which one learns to understand the language and symbolic identity of the other, and how the other understands his or herself in the context within which they are both situated (Kögler & Stueber 2000). People in dialogue are part of social history and are set together in time and place. As such, they are connected and responsible to each other, and so cannot claim an objective, separate or expert status (Hammond, Anderson & Cissna 2003). Interacting with others is supposed to help individuals uncover the meanings of symbolic expressions or acts (Kögler 2005) and represent themselves within the new understandings (Kögler 1999; Kögler & Stueber 2000) when they hear and think about the other’s different perspective (Thompson 1981; Kincheloe & McLaren 2003). Dialogue requires that people make themselves vulnerable to each another, as they acknowledge and create opportunities to experience the other’s difference and to change their own viewpoints (Hammond, Anderson & Cissna 2003: 133).

4.3.1.1 Case Study Methods
Case study research methods (Ruckdeschel, Earnshaw & Firrek 1994; Yin & Campbell 2003; Stark & Torrance 2004; Flyvbjerg 2006) were an obvious choice for addressing the research
questions. Each working relationship could be examined concurrently as a case comprised of a number of people from different perspectives. Case study methods provide in-depth access to, and rich descriptions of, participants’ perceptions and experiences of the relationship being studied (Ruckdeschel, Earnshaw & Firrek 1994; Yin & Campbell 2003; Stark & Torrance 2004; Flyvbjerg 2006). This put the researcher in an active position with respect to the context of the participants’ reality of the relationships being explored (Ruckdeschel, Earnshaw & Firrek 1994; Flyvbjerg 2006). This enabled the researcher to understand “the lived experience” and perspectives of the participants in a way that other research methods could not (Ruckdeschel, Earnshaw & Firrek 1994; Yin & Campbell 2003; Stark & Torrance 2004; Flyvbjerg 2006). It provided simultaneous access to a number of “experts” in regard to the relationship, and so assisted the development of sophisticated understanding of it (Ruckdeschel, Earnshaw & Firrek 1994). Having a variety of perspectives also tests the researcher’s understanding (Flyvbjerg 2006), as in this study. Furthermore, case study methods assist examination of relationships which can not easily be separated from their context (Yin & Campbell 2003) and are more often than not hidden from public view (Flyvbjerg 2006). Case study methods also provide examples of policy in action (Stark & Torrance 2004) and access to the least and to the most powerful social actors involved in the phenomenon under investigation (Ruckdeschel, Earnshaw & Firrek 1994).

4.3.1.2 In-depth Interviews
Methods that enable dialogue and narrative accounts of experience are appropriate means by which to elicit information about lived experience where it is difficult or impossible to obtain the same depth of information through other means (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander 1995; Taylor & Bogdan 1998). Consequently, collection of qualitative data on the working relationship in this study was through one-off informal, conversational in-depth interviews (Minichiello et al. 1995). In-depth interviews attempt to elicit the participants’ understanding of their experience in a way that enables the researcher to test their understanding of the participants’ meaning simultaneously (Minichiello et al. 1995), hence the conversation or dialogical nature. The interviews were comprised of unstructured and open-ended prompt questions to begin the interview, and probing and clarification questions arising out of participant responses throughout the interview. They were conducted with each of the parents, workers and supervisors individually, with the exception of one parent couple (who were interviewed conjointly), and as soon as possible after completion of the intervention (that is, after recent completion of the working relationship and involvement with the service).
At the beginning of the interview the researcher informed the participant that she would like to have a conversation with the participant about the “story” of their working relationship and that a set of prompts were available should the participant require them. The researcher attempted to build rapport and empathy, and position each participant as an expert with respect to knowledge and understanding about their lived experience of the working relationship. This occurred by informing them that there are many people throughout New South Wales involved in similar kinds of working relationships, but not much is known about people’s experiences of these.

A very broad parameter was set around the “story”. This was in order to capture the development of the working relationship in a wide chronology. These phases were based on the literature on the working relationship as outlined in Chapter Three. A focus sheet with prompts was handed to the participant (Appendix D). Prior to commencing the interview the researcher read through this sheet and reminded the participants that she would like to have a conversation about the story of the working relationship and that the questions on the sheet were to help prompt memory only and did not have to be used. This approach arose out of conversations with family service supervisors when developing the research. They stated that in their experiences of family work practice, a completely unstructured approach paralyses many people, as they are not used to such freedom in conversation. However, they said that people respond well to a broadly configured yet still focused approach. Since this approach was similar to the way family work is conducted, and so already a familiar approach to the participants, it seemed an appropriate way to demystify the research process and hopefully bring participants closer to the researcher’s objective. The idea that there are phases was the only aspect predetermined as an experience of the relationship.

This approach required a very active role as interviewer, and involved constantly seeking clarification of the participant’s meaning throughout each interview (Minichiello et al. 1995; Taylor & Bogdan 1998), such as asking participants to explain what they meant, or tentatively reframing what they said to give them a chance to check that the researcher had correctly understood their meaning. Interview times were flexible, allowing plenty of time and scope for the participants to tell their story in their words and time.

4.3.1.3 Data Recording
All participants were asked to consent to audio recordings of interviews being obtained on a digital MP3 voice recorder. While this may have aroused some concerns for the participants, recording the interviews has been noted to enhance accuracy of the data, as transcripts can be made of exactly what was spoken rather than relying on the researcher taking notes and
analyses being done of the filtered narrative (Minichiello et al. 1995; Taylor & Bogdan 1998). It has also been said to enable researchers to concentrate on forming a relationship with the participant during the interview, to listen intently to the story and to clarify what the participant is saying and what they mean by this (Minichiello et al. 1995). Ethical considerations related to data recording are addressed below.

4.3.1.4 Transcribing

There are a number of ways to organise qualitative data. Transcription is one (Stark & Torrance 2004; Bird 2005). While it may appear to be fairly straightforward, it does involve interpretation (Bird 2005). It must also be acknowledged that the material being transcribed was recorded at a particular point in time and through the subjective experience of the research participant (Bird 2005). Appreciating this helps the researcher to realise that the data being transcribed is contextualised and should be interpreted as such (Bird 2005). It is also important to consider that while emphases and silence have meaning, these are different for different individuals (Bird 2005). Furthermore, meaning is particularly difficult to capture in a two-dimensional “re-presentation” of an event about a lived experience, which is what transcription essentially is (Bird 2005: 227).

With this in mind, and to enhance the accuracy of the data as much as possible, all of the interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher and checked for accuracy. Only information that clearly strayed from family work practice and that was also deemed by the researcher not to be relevant to the working relationship was excluded. Where this decision was required, the researcher checked with the interviewee during the interview to clarify how what they had just spoken about was related to the working relationship. Great care was taken to punctuate the transcript as accurately as possible and, for example, to include pauses and use italics when the participant emphasised words and used “thinking” words (for example, “um”, “you know”). Since it is difficult to rely on the meaning of emphases, the researcher sought clarification from the interviewee with respect to what they meant. Interviewee and interviewer emphases were included in the transcript as a way to highlight the point being made.

Each participant was asked to check their transcript for accuracy. Providing participants with the transcripts is in line with ethical family work practice (NSW Family Services Inc. 2005) and it was emailed as an encrypted file, with a follow up phone call to share the password. Where email facilities were not available, the transcript was mailed to the participant with identifying information removed and this was explained to the participant.
4.3.2 Interpretation

Within hermeneutics the notion of understanding, including raised self awareness, comes through interpretation and is a continuous process (Bohman 2000; Kögler & Stueber 2000; Kögler 2005). Interpretation is where we recognise our contextual “situatedness”, or identity and role, and self understanding in relation to the other, but we do not impose this on the other (Kögler & Stueber 2000; Hammond, Anderson & Cissna 2003). Rather, we use our understanding as a starting point to understand the other’s perspective (Kögler & Stueber 2000). Interpretation allows the researcher to analyse and try to make sense of the contextual background assumptions of the other’s perspective, which appear strange to us since we are not situated in that perspective (Kögler 1999; Bohman 2000; Kögler & Stueber 2000; Kögler 2005). Interpretive research involves localised analysis that is practically grounded in the social context and perception of the actor (Klein & White 1996; Ritzer 1996; Neuman 2000).

Kögler argues that it is also important for the interpreter to recognise that they are differently situated from the other, that is, in their own pre-understanding, and consequently take their own beliefs, assumptions and circumstances into account in the process of interpretation (Kögler & Stueber 2000; Kögler 2005). “Perspective taking” is the process during interpretation where an individual focuses on the subject matter and their self-understanding, in order to get to their perspective to make sense of the environment in which they are situated (Kögler & Stueber 2000; Kögler 2005). It is crucial for understanding how the other sees and interprets the symbolic and cultural attitudes, or norms, of their situation (Bohman 2000; Kögler & Stueber 2000). Bohman (2000) calls the other person’s perspective the “second person perspective”. He argues that it is an important dimension because the first person, in trying to interpret themselves, interprets what the other [the second person] interprets about them, and includes this in their interpretation of themselves (Bohman 2000). Self understanding now becomes the “symbolically mediated conversation in which ‘I’ as the thinking self relate to ‘me’ as the object of my reflection” (Kögler & Stueber 2000: 210). However, one must reflect upon and be open to the new perspective about oneself as well as the other’s perspective (Kögler & Stueber 2000).

Interpretive analysis allows the researcher to unearth the meanings given to the working relationship by those involved, and to gather this information in a way that captured its complexity, depth, contradictions and nuances (Ruckdeschel, Earnshaw & Firrek 1994; Kincheloe & McLaren 2003; Stark & Torrance 2004). Ezzy (2002) argues that there are no hard and fast rules about how to undertake such analysis. With this in mind, the researcher used analytic induction, influenced by the work of Denzin (1978), to disaggregate the data.
collected on the working relationship following thematic and chronological lines. The inductive nature of thematic analysis allowed the meanings given to the relationship by those involved to be unearthed, and to gather this information in a way that captured the complexity, depth, contradictions and nuance present (Ruckdeschel, Earnshaw & Firrek 1994; Stark & Torrance 2004; Braun & Clarke 2006).

The relationships were analysed independently of one another and the actions and attributes of participants layered across working relationships to discover similarities and differences between them. The data were coded according to each participant’s voice (that is, from the perspective of a family worker, parent participant or the worker’s supervisor) and by working relationships (in order to compare between working relationships). As outlined earlier, for privacy reasons, great care was taken not to present each case in a holistic and thus potentially identifiable manner.

Analysis involved using a combination of both manual techniques and computer software, specifically QSR NVivo 8 (NVivo). To explore the multiple perspectives on the relationships in detail required a way to manage, organise and retrieve vast amounts of raw data, to discover patterns across the relationships and to build a picture of the nature of such relationships. Computer data analysis and management software, specifically NVivo, enabled this (Richards 2002; Bazeley 2007). According to Richards (2002), NVivo supports detailed examination, analysis and reanalysis of vast amounts of raw qualitative data. This was particularly necessary in this study as over 400 pages of transcript data were obtained. NVivo was useful because it allowed the researcher to establish ideas and patterns, analyse, reanalyse and challenge them, link them in multiple ways, describe them and their connections carefully and report the findings accurately and rigorously (Richards 2002; Bazeley 2007).

Furthermore, because the software made it easy and quick to retrieve the analysis, raw data and the multiple connections, it facilitated examining and testing divergent perspectives, patterns and theories (Crowley, Harre & Tagg 2002; Bazeley 2007). However, whilst computer software made it possible to do this more quickly than manual techniques, combining both traditional means with computerised enriched the analysis, as noted by Richards (2002). In particular, combining both helped to ensure the researcher thought more carefully about the data and analysis, where software has been noted to have an unintended consequence of making analysis and coding mechanistic and less thoughtful, thus distancing the researcher from the raw data (Bazeley 2007). As described below, Phase One utilised manual analysis techniques whilst Phase Two utilised a combination of both computerised and manual techniques.
Phase 1, used for case studies 1-3, involved the researcher:

- Reading transcript to become familiar with the interview content.
- Re-reading the transcript and highlighting the key words that described parent, worker and supervisor “actions” and “attributes”. These words concretely described the experiences of the participants, which is what the research questions related to.
- Scrutinising the highlighted parts with the research questions and the question, “What is this about?” in mind.
- Grouping the highlighted key words according to actions and attributes. These became subthemes under the themes “action” and “attribute”. There were 32 “action” themes for both parents and workers, 28 “attribute” themes for the parents and 29 “attribute” themes for the workers. Where key words involved different words to describe similar actions and attributes, they were grouped together using the one that appeared the most obvious subtheme as the first in the list relating to this subtheme. These may have been a word used most often or a word that provided a common or clear description of the action or attribute. These became the starting point for generating a more standardised thematic analysis across the eight relationships. A list of other key words was also developed. These recorded who was speaking, who was being spoken about, the phase of relationship, where the relationship took place, other contextual issues, and the purpose, value and meaning of the working relationship.
- Using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to organise the action and attribute subthemes by the participant voice and phase of the relationship themes (Appendix E). This was used to establish a sense of the numbers of people who experienced the action and attribute subthemes. It helped build a picture of how common the subthemes were to the participants’ experiences of the relationship and was used for closer examination of the subthemes. Disconfirming evidence in particular stood out clearly.

Phase 2, used for all case studies, involved the researcher:

- Coding the data in an NVivo “project” according the themes and subthemes, that is: actions and attributes; phase of the relationship (beginning/building, established or ending/ongoing); “voice” that was speaking (parent, worker or supervisor); who was being spoken about (parent, worker, supervisor, someone in the parent’s personal context/family, someone from the family service, or someone from an organisation external to the family service); child neglect; and the rural context. Most sections had links to multiple themes and subthemes.
- Developing summaries for each case study by ordering the themes and subthemes for each working relationship (an example for one case is found at Appendix F). This included recording line numbers and, at times, direct quotes from the transcript.
- Using the summaries to develop a short account of the researcher’s construction of the “storyline” of the working relationship for each person (Taylor & Bogdan 1998: 151) (an example for one case is found at Appendix G). This was done in order develop a broad view of each case as a whole, and in so doing develop a broader sense of similarities and differences between the relationships.

Table 2: Details of study data analysis
4.3.3 Reflexivity

Central to achieving understanding is that while the interpreters interact with one another, they are continuously reflexive (Horn 1998; Kögler & Stueber 2000; Kincheloe & McLaren 2003). Reflexivity is an internal dialogue with oneself where one makes explicit, critically examines and consequently transforms one’s assumptions, interests and social practices (Spratt & Houston 1999; Kögler & Stueber 2000). Kögler (2000) further argues that reflexivity assists us to accept or reject what the interpretations we have about others may mean for them in a practical sense. Analysis involves a continual reflexive process of building understanding by moving from the whole to parts and back to whole. It involves continually checking and rechecking what was interpreted in the data against the pre-existing framework, information from the literature, new information from the data and raised awareness of the relationship (Ezzy 2002; Kincheloe & McLaren 2003).

An issue raised in qualitative research regarding researcher influence on the data is that of the researcher’s status as insider, outsider or, as argued by Dwyer and Buckle (Dwyer & Buckle), occupant of both of these positions simultaneously. In this study the researcher occupied “the space between” (Dwyer & Buckle 2009: 60), being in the unusual position of knowing very little about the phenomenon under examination but having some level of trust already established.

Being an insider to the research refers to researchers who are considered members of the group or culture involved in the study. As an insider, the researcher shares dimensions of the phenomenon under examination with the participants, such as language, identity, experiences and status of legitimacy (Dwyer & Buckle 2009). Sharing such dimensions is said to assist the participants’ feelings of similarity with the researcher, consequently facilitating rapid trust building and openness (Dwyer & Buckle 2009). This enhances the richness of the data. However, insider status can also enhance bias and misinterpretation where the researcher assumes meaning based on their experiences and perceptions of the phenomenon (Dwyer & Buckle 2009). Being an outsider is the position held when the researcher is not familiar with or considered a participant in the culture or experiences under examination (Dwyer & Buckle 2009). Whilst it may enhance researcher objectivity and reduce the influence of prior assumptions or personal perspective, thus making the researcher more open to interpreting the participants’ perspectives, it may mean the researcher is accepted less readily by the participants (Dwyer & Buckle 2009). Consequences of this include the participants being guarded in their responses where they may feel the researcher may not understand or be a reliable ally and interpreter of their perspective (Dwyer & Buckle 2009).
However, as a relative outsider to the experience of working relationships in family work, the researcher might be best described as an “honorary insider” (Scott 2002: 927) in relation to many of the study participants. The researcher was an outsider due to never having been a family worker and thus unaware of the detailed processes involved in building and maintaining relationships, and not having developed a sophisticated grasp of the language the participants used to describe their experiences. At the same time the researcher was a relative insider to the workers and supervisors through previous employment as Policy Officer at FamS, including supporting supervisors to negotiate some social policy processes. Through this process the supervisors and some of the workers became familiar with the researcher, assuming an understanding and appreciation of their work. Furthermore it is likely that from the parents’ perspective, the researcher had been endorsed by the workers, being the initial intermediaries in the recruitment. Whilst these strengthened a perception that the researcher was trustworthy, the researcher was learning about the nature and “language” of relationships during the process of analysis.

Having worked in the family work field meant that the researcher came with preconceived ideas relating to the social and political context of the type of family work involved in the study, as it was during this time that the researcher’s interest in the research questions began to be developed. Regarding the analysis, the researcher’s primary supervisor provided a reliability check for each transcript, after which each case was discussed with respect to the independently obtained themes derived from the transcript. This helped avoid possible “cherry-picking” of concepts similar to my preconceptions (Scott 2002: 929).

Understanding about the relationship was developed by weaving new understandings with what had been understood previously while bearing in mind that what was unknown, not interpreted and not understood needed to be woven into the developing framework of understanding (Ezzy 2002; Kincheloe & McLaren 2003). As new working relationships were analysed and ideas were expressed differently to the others, some subthemes in the NVivo project were merged as being more related to each other than previously assessed. Through this inductive process the researcher began to see patterns across all working relationships relating to complex meta-themes. These were organised and structured manually and developed into the study findings presented in Chapter Five. It also involved being cognisant of the type of language used as well as being aware of the possible meaning being expressed by emphasis and silence.
4.4 Ethical Considerations

Within hermeneutic philosophy, recognition of the ontological similarity between people creates a need for an ethical response, that others’ understanding about themselves must be taken seriously (Kögler 2005). Given the vulnerability of the client population involved in the study ethical considerations were of critical importance. Consequently, several ethical considerations formed part of the preliminary development of the research (Appendix B). These framed how the research was conducted and what kinds of questions were asked and of whom.

4.4.1 Duty of Care

One ethical consideration was ensuring the research was relevant and not harmful to those involved (Macdonald & Macdonald 1995; UnitingCare Burnside 2002). This included developing research which was envisaged to benefit those involved, either directly through its process of sharing their account in a context of respect and/or recompense for their involvement, or indirectly through potentially contributing to improving professional practice (UnitingCare Burnside 2002).

Researchers have a duty of care to protect participants from harm and to ensure that research benefits others in similar circumstances to the research participants (Macdonald & Macdonald 1995; UnitingCare Burnside 2002). In addition, power dynamics that exist between the parents and researcher may influence a parent’s involvement and responses (Macdonald & Macdonald 1995; UnitingCare Burnside 2002). This is particularly so if the researcher is perceived by the parent to be connected to the worker and service, and that this may influence their future involvement with the service. There are also ethical considerations involved when considering paying participants for their time and “expertise” whilst ensuring the financial incentive offered does not induce a feeling that participation is no longer voluntary (UnitingCare Burnside 2002). Finally, ethical issues also concern how researchers interpret and disseminate findings, as interpretation can potentially influence significant numbers of people receiving services (Macdonald & Macdonald 1995; Clegg 2004). It was hoped that by assuring the participants that the research was to be conducted ethically and that they were safe as participants in the process, they would trust the researcher enough to share their stories honestly and openly.

Parents for whom concerns have been raised with respect to child abuse or neglect are among the most vulnerable clients in the human services. In addition, the research was to be conducted in an area with a high Indigenous population, a group which carried additional vulnerability in respect to the legacy of the Stolen Generation (forced removal of children of
mixed Indigenous and European descent) and the effects of colonisation. It was therefore possible that some research participants would be Indigenous, so advice was sought from the managers of four agencies in order to understand the community context of the clients involved. This was to enhance sensitive engagement with those families during the research process.

Given the research questions, and an understanding that this study relates to highly sensitive areas of people’s lives and that delving into such areas may be considered intrusive (Macdonald & Macdonald 1995), the focus for interviews was not on why the parent came to be referred to the service. Furthermore, since mandatory reporting of suspected child abuse and neglect is a University of South Australia research requirement, there arose a potential for a conflicted position if the researcher became aware of risks to children. Since the researcher has a duty of care to children, but was keen to minimize the risks of participating in the research for the parents, the research was designed to focus on the way in which parents and family workers related to each other rather than on the children and child protection matters. This also meant conducting data collection outside the family home and not in the presence of children, which enabled parents to focus on the interview without distraction and interruption as well.

It was also foreseen that involvement in the interviews might cause some participants, especially parents, to experience distress. Consequently, interviews were structured in such a way as to minimize distress or discomfort, for example, during the interview the researcher was sensitive to indications that the participant was experiencing stress or distress and asked the participant what they would like to do (take a break, cease, or another option identified by the participant). The researcher also contacted all participants by telephone no more than three working days after completion of the interview to enquire after their wellbeing. Finally, the researcher established an agreement with the participating family service to offer supplementary assistance and intervention if interviews proved to be distressing or additional needs rose during the interviews.

### 4.4.2 Voluntary Informed Consent

To obtain informed consent, the researcher informed agency management and potential research participants that the research was being conducted to understand better the way in which family workers and clients work together during interventions regarding parenting concerns. Prior to and during involvement, participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary and that there was no obligation to remain involved in the research if they changed their mind after giving consent. In addition, potential participants were informed that
the research was independent of the agency, and that agreement to subscribe or withdraw would not affect current or future involvement with the family service in any way.

At the beginning of the interview, participants were informed that they could cease the interview at any time and that it was important for them to feel comfortable the entire time. Due to the sensitive nature of information that might arise during the interview, and concerns that informed consent could not be given in a situation like this until after the information had been expressed, participants were given a further opportunity to withdraw from the research, both at the commencement of, and after the interview. No participants exercised this option.

4.4.3 Retrospective
Research participants were only interviewed after the completion of the service to the family. This retrospective approach was taken to minimise disruption to the intervention and potential harm to either the parent or worker as a result of exploring aspects of their relationship. This approach was also taken because, during informal conversations with family workers in the course of my employment as Policy Officer with FamS, it emerged that clients do not usually acknowledge that child neglect is an issue until well after the working relationship has been established and strengthened. It was envisaged that taking a retrospective approach to the research minimised the extent to which client participants might feel obligated to subscribe to the research, and to which participants might feel stigmatised by an invitation to participate in the study.

4.4.4 Financial Recompense
Parent participants were offered remuneration of $A40 to assist with expenses to attend the interview, such as travel and child care. This was intended to both affirm the significance of the parents’ involvement and to show respect for them putting time and energy into sharing their experiences. This also reinforced the notion that they had knowledge and insights about the relationship to share and that this could help to develop and improve family work practice. Professional participants were not remunerated because the interviews took place during paid work hours.

Some parents were hesitant and initially refused to take the payment, especially when they thought it was an expense the researcher carried. They accepted it once they understood that it was part of the project of the University and to go towards paying for expenses incurred as part of their involvement. None of the professionals raised concerns about offering remuneration. When they heard that it was to minimize costs parents’ incurred, some noted
that they felt this was reasonable and that they respected and valued the parents’ perspectives
equal enough to feel they should not be out of pocket for sharing their experiences.

Whilst it is difficult to determine, there was no evidence to suggest that the payment was an
inducement to participate or that it influenced the parents’ responses or engagement in the
research. In contrast, some explicitly stated their motivation for engaging in the research was
they saw it as a chance to inform people about the value of their worker and the service they
had received.

4.4.5 Privacy and Confidentiality

Confidentiality in research is complicated by a rural context. This is due in part to the culture
of sharing information, the dense nature of social networks and the relatively small numbers
of potential research participants. These challenges were present in this study. A number of
measures were taken to uphold participants’ privacy and confidentiality during the process of
recruitment of participants, the research process itself, and how findings were written and to
be disseminated.

Care was taken during data collection to organise interview times with participants directly
and conduct interviews in private locations. Whilst the three participants (parents, workers
and supervisors) involved had consented, and the worker’s supervisor knew which parents
and workers were involved from the agency, no one other than the researcher and individual
participants were aware of the information they shared with the researcher. The researcher’s
supervisors had access to the de-identified transcripts for the purposes of assisting analysis
and research trustworthiness.

As stated earlier, interviews were recorded on an MP3 recorder. Participants were given the
opportunity to switch the recorder off at any time during the interview. These recordings were
deleted once they had been transcribed. Transcribed interviews were coded (de-identified) to
ensure anonymity and kept in a security coded file on the researcher’s office computer for the
duration of the study. After this they were saved to CD-Rom, deleted from the computer and
stored according to the University of South Australia (School of Psychology, Social Work
and Social Policy) research data storage policy. Where paper copies existed, they were stored
for the duration of the research in a locked filing cabinet at the Centre for Children and
Young People, Southern Cross University, and shredded on completion of the study. Since all
but one supervisor was involved in multiple working relationships, each supervisor was given
a different pseudonym for each case in order to reduce identifiability.
When writing up and disseminating research findings, the balance between providing a high level of case detail and maintaining privacy and confidentiality was a delicate one. Consequently, the actual region where the study took place has not been revealed. This is because the small number of family workers in the region increases the likelihood they could be identified.

One way to protect participants’ privacy and confidentiality, while at the same time accurately representing the rich data generated, was to draw out themes across a number of case studies rather than explore each case as an entity in and of itself. When presenting the findings, direct quotations were only used where it was not possible to identify the interviewee or the person being spoken about. The participants were also given pseudonyms and data relating to the other two participants in each triad of parent, worker and supervisor, were not linked. Thus in presenting the results, whilst participants may remember what they said, they could not be aware of what the other two parties in their triad said about the relationship in which they were involved.

4.5 Limitations of the Research Design

There are several limitations arising from the study sample and methods. These include: its small size; a likelihood of a self-selection bias toward positive relationships; the gender and ethnic homogeneity of interviewees; and the fact that it is dependent on the recall of interviewees. Details of these limitations and weaknesses are outlined below.

4.5.1 Size and Generalisability

Whilst a small sample allowed very in-depth and detailed analysis, it is a significant limitation of this study constraining generalisability. The time available to collect data reduced the opportunity to engage more family workers and families. Moreover, fewer than expected relationships were close to being completed, or had recently been completed, during the time allocated to data collection. As a result there was no opportunity to sample randomly from this pool, as had been intended, and all those eligible and agreeing to participate in the study were recruited.

However, whilst the sample was small, it came from four of the six eligible family support services in the region, and the eight workers comprised approximately half of the eligible family workers in these agencies. The four family support services were autonomous agencies, independent of one another with respect to governance, and they were all located in quite different communities from each other. Thus, the small size of the sample is less
problematic than had it been based on one service and enabled a variety of contextual factors to be examined. This study therefore needs to be seen as exploratory, and the findings as tentative and requiring further research. Nevertheless, the findings offer useful insights and may contribute to the developing body of knowledge about the nature of these types of relationships. It sits alongside a growing body of qualitative work that explores the relationship in greater detail than has been done previously, supplementing the qualitative literature and complementing the quantitative literature.

4.5.2 Potential Bias
Another limitation of the sample is that it is likely to be biased toward parents who have had positive relationships with their workers. Many parent participants described their reason for being willing to be involved in the study as enabling them to show their appreciation for the family worker and family service. It is obviously harder to recruit those who may have had negative experiences into such a study. However, some interviewees did report negative periods in the relationship such as initial difficulties. Moreover, participating parents were in a position to compare these generally positive relationships with other relationships they had experienced, so providing some insight into what the participants perceived hinders as well as helps relationships.

A strength of engaging willing participants in the research was that they felt generally positive towards the research topic and were enthusiastic to talk at length. This included being honest about times when they perceived the relationship was experiencing difficulties. It is unlikely that it would have been possible to recruit the parents who participated in the study unless the researcher had been “endorsed” as trustworthy by the workers they trusted. This perception was later reinforced when analysing the ongoing dimension of the relationship, where participants who have experienced a generally positive relationship, trust and feel positive towards other representatives of that family service if they perceive them to share similar attributes to the family worker.

4.5.3 Ethnic and Gender homogeneity
The sample included one parent from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island background and one from a New Zealand Maori background. The remainder of the participants were of Anglo-Celtic. The sample was overwhelmingly female with only two male workers and one father participating. Consequently, the insights generated into relationships may be both culturally and gender bound.
4.5.4 Retrospective
This research was retrospective and so dependent on recall. While participants were interviewed as soon as possible after the intervention had ceased, in some instances this still involved interviewees being asked to remember events which had occurred at least eighteen months previously. One relationship had begun four years prior to the date of the interview. It is therefore possible that interviewees’ recall may not have always been accurate.

Furthermore, due to the highly naturalistic, or conversational, style of the interviews, participants may not have repeated aspects of the relationship which they may have experienced throughout the entire relationship. For example, they may have omitted information about their experiences of the ending phase if they had raised it previously so assumed that it had been duly noted as an experience.

4.6 Conclusion
This chapter has outlined the philosophical and practical foundations for the study, including ethical issues and rationale for the research design adopted, and an outline of the assumptions underpinning the study. The steps taken to address the research questions and the ethical issues posed by the study have been described. This enabled a rigorous exploration of the relationships under examination in a way that reduced the risks to participants and maintained their privacy and confidentiality, whilst bringing out the nuances involved in the relationships.

In hermeneutic terms this research was concerned with exploring and describing how individuals in specific roles in family work interventions related to one another as they attempted to “reshape themselves” and “remake the world” (Smith 1999) within a context of rules and systems.

The family worker and parent were included since they were directly involved in developing the parent-worker relationship. The practitioner’s supervisor was included since they could influence the worker’s practice by way of expectations and through mediating external pressures from funding agencies regarding throughput of work, intervention outcomes and whether work was conducted within certain norms relating to professional boundaries. Supervisors also provided an additional perspective on the parent-worker relationship. The researcher was an outsider to these experiences, rules and systems, and so required the insights of those in the relationships to describe such working relationships accurately and meaningfully. Furthermore, it was hoped that comparing three different perspectives on the experiences of the same relationship would ensure richer and more consistent and reliable
information than could be attained studying these relationships out of context and from one perspective alone (Ruckdeschel, Earnshaw & Firrek 1994; Stark & Torrance 2004).
Chapter Five    The Study Findings

Parent 9: You’ve gotta connect with somebody. And then you go to counselling. And you sit down and talk. And you build a relationship with the counsellor. And all of a sudden you feel more comfortable and you start talking about your subjects. And the more you offload the better you feel. And the more confident you feel with this person and more willing to open up to them. And before you know it you start working on the problems that you have got. And the options become available to you. But until the options become available to you, you’re not going to accept anything unless you’ve got a relationship with them. If you don’t trust the people entirely yeah, they can suggest you go out and put a lotto ticket in. Here’s the winning numbers. You go out and put the lotto ticket in. You just think, “You are telling me what to do.” Until that relationship’s there, until you are willing to trust the people, there’s not much use in trying to work towards your goals because you’re not going to.

The insights of this parent provide a synopsis of the dynamics of the eight relationships under examination. While this chapter will explore these themes in much greater detail, this parent identifies that there are phases to the development of the relationship, and that a personal connection between parent and “counsellor” must come before professional work can proceed. Furthermore, this parent identifies that the parent is both an active participant in the relationship as well as the focus of the work. The parent must feel comfortable and then be willing to engage and build trust with the worker before they can open up, accept what the worker has to offer and work towards dealing with their “problems” and meeting their “goals”.

The focus of these relationships is on the parents’ “problems” which, according to this parent, cannot proceed until a relationship built on trust occurs. More specifically, if “you don’t trust the people entirely”, as this parent puts it, then it is unlikely they will want to work with the worker. As will be outlined, the study findings suggest that trust in its entirety comes about in these relationships when workers share some of their “person” with the parents and do not simply maintain a professional distance. What this parent’s insights do not highlight is a full appreciation of the steps and skill required to balance the personal with the professional in order to build a relationship and work towards parent change and growth.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore in-depth how nine parents, eight family workers and four supervisors, commenting on eight relationships, experienced the evolution of the relationship between parent and worker. Each relationship is represented by a parent, family worker and supervisor. However, in the case of one relationship, both parents in one family
provided their perceptions. This chapter will explore in detail these participants’ reported perceptions of the factors affecting the relationship in which they were involved, including their perception of the purpose, value and meaning of their relationship. Since this study is an interpretation of their stories, the analysis involves the voices of the participants. Direct quotations will be used to illustrate themes, with discussion of the ideas taking place around the quotes. Given that there was a diversity of ways in which participants spoke about similar ideas, the quotations used are illustrative of other quotes on the topic, unless stated otherwise.

As stated earlier, the participants involved in the same cases have been de-linked from each other and pseudonyms have been used. Parents “8” and “9” in the quoted sections represent the voices of the two parents in the couple family participating in the study.

Development of these relationships, and the themes that emerged, did not occur in a linear fashion. Furthermore, the themes that emerged are interrelated both with one another and across the entire relationship “ecology”, like a kind of Gordian knot. While it is somewhat artificial to partialise, for the purposes of analysis it was necessary to differentiate between the themes even though they are interwoven. Organising the ideas in phases, as has been selected, is consistent with the way in which the participants were asked to “tell the story of their relationship”, as outlined in Chapter Four.

The three participant-voices from the eight relationships will begin with the parent leading the description followed by the worker and then the supervisor, as the voice of the supervisor provides more external perspective on the relationship. Given that the supervisors sit outside the dyads, but are part of the context, they were more limited than the parents and family workers in their ability to comment on key attributes of the relationships. The supervisors knew less about the experiences and characteristics of the parents than the workers.

Furthermore, there were only four supervisors commenting on the eight relationships, and one supervisor was not employed at the service during either the building or established phase of the relationship. One supervisor commented on three relationships and, apart from the supervisor already mentioned, the others each commented on two relationships.
All of the participants were living in a rural area of NSW with a mix of urban and semi-rural communities. All of the communities where the services operated were over 100 kilometres from the State’s capital city and contained fewer than 50 000 inhabitants, thus meeting the definition of “rural” (Cheers 1992; Green & Gregory 2004; Lonne & Cheers 2004). Nine parents were involved across eight relationships, with one case involving a mother and father. One parent identified as being from an Aboriginal background, with six of the remainder being Australian-born of Anglo-Celtic backgrounds. One of the parents, of Anglo-Celtic background, had emigrated from the UK within the past ten years.

Child neglect concerns were common for all cases, although not necessarily officially substantiated. All of the families involved in the study experienced multiple combinations of the risk factors relating to child neglect explored in the literature. Accompanying issues which are believed to adversely impair parenting included family violence, homelessness, drug and alcohol misuse, mental health issues, intellectual disability and a parental history of being in State care. All of the parents reported receiving government financial support as their primary income; however by the end of the time of intervention, five reported beginning casual employment.

The Department of Community Services (DoCS) was known to be involved with six of the families during the relationship. One of the other parents reported no concern about DoCS involvement, while the primary motivation for the remaining parent attending the service was reported to be fear of DoCS involvement. Six parents were also said to be struggling with mental health issues. Five families were reported to be in unstable housing at times throughout the relationship, including two with extended periods of homelessness. Five parents were also said to be struggling with substance misuse. Four parents were single.

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**Figure 3: Configuration of the relationship dyads/cases**

| Supervisor → Worker → 2 parents | 1 relationship dyad |
| Supervisor → Worker → 1 parent | 2 relationship dyads |
| Supervisor → Worker → 1 parent | 2 relationship dyads |
| Supervisor → Worker → 1 parent | 3 relationship dyads |

8 cases
parents and they, in addition to another two families, reported limited, and at times hostile and unsupportive extended family and social networks. Four were also said to be struggling with domestic violence. Two parents had been in State care as children and one of these, along with two other families, had experienced having their children removed into State care during the time of the relationship. Finally, one parent was described as having an intellectual disability.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk factors</th>
<th>Number of cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government benefits as primary income</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DoCS involvement</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health issues</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostile/unsupportive social networks</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unstable housing/homelessness</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance misuse</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic violence</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent status</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child removal</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood history of State care</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual disability</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No DoCS involvement but fear of the same</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Risk factors experienced by parents

Six of the workers were female and two male. All of the supervisors were female. None of the professionals were from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island backgrounds, although two had lived in remote Aboriginal communities in the past. The workers ranged in family work experience from two to over thirty years. Three of the four supervisors reported being family workers themselves previously, with their length of family work experience ranging from three to twelve years. The remaining supervisor reported over twenty years experience in both service provision and management of community-based early childhood centres, along with approximately two years managing family support services.

All of the workers and supervisors were tertiary trained. Qualifications included sociology, child and family health, social science, nursing, social work, community welfare, early childhood studies and counselling. The workers and supervisors had professional experience across a diverse range of areas. Professional experience across workers and supervisors included: the disability field (3), including one who had cared for a child with a disability; family violence (2); early childhood health (2); early childhood education (2); nursing/midwifery (2); mental health (1); generalist counselling (1) and youth work (1). Some
reported having worked across more than one of these fields. Furthermore, two workers spoke of how their experience of working in the business sector assisted their family work and another two reported the influence of being parents themselves.

This chapter is divided into four sections. Section One explores the building phase of the relationship. This includes the reported perceptions of the participants’ experiences as the relationship was built. As will be outlined, the parents were not always willing in the initial stages of the relationship, nor was it always an easy process to engage them. This section describes how the parents, through the workers’ actions and attributes such as genuine care, perseverance and collaborative practice, built trust. As will also be explored trust opened up opportunities to work on those life challenges that had contributed to the parents needing the service.

Section Two explores the established phase of the relationship. Trust continued during the established phase to be an important dimension, as did collaboratively working on the parents’ life challenges. During this phase parent empowerment became the primary focus. As with Section One, this section explores key worker actions and attributes present during this phase.

Section Three explores the ending phase of the relationship. It outlines a process of celebrating the achievements of goals the parents had made, assisting them to build on these achievements and be equipped to maintain their progress without the worker’s structured assistance, and formally closing the casework aspect of the relationship. An important aspect of this phase involves the ongoing nature of the relationship.

Section Four explores some themes which pervade and are the crux of the relationship. Some key, and some might say contentious themes, encircled these relationships more broadly. These got to the “heart” of the purpose, value and meaning of these relationships more so than the phase-related themes, which can be better described as the practical aspects of the relationships. These broader themes, related to balancing interactions at a personal and human level within relationships that existed for a professional purpose, are explored separately from the phases.
5.1 Section One: The Building Relationship

5.1.1 “The dance of getting to know you”: The Building Phase

Family worker 2: I mean, we’re doing the whole dance. The dance of getting to know you.

All of the participants described a number of influences external to, but influencing the way the relationships developed. Two parents articulated a belief that parent vulnerability is embedded in a social context, or “society’s rules” as one parent put it. All of the workers and supervisors agreed with such influences on parents’ vulnerability. This included previous experiences of both professional and non-professional relationships.

Supervisor 7: The woman’s own life story and her own history and her own background, you know, that sort of shapes who she is…in terms of then her capacity to sort of think about her own life and maybe make things better, or keep things the same or whatever. So certainly that’s an influence. And for this woman, just in terms of her own family support, if you like, there wasn’t much there. And she had been struggling for a while with life.

Four parents described how part of this was long experience of being disbelieved, not respected and told what was “wrong” with them without any accompanying sense of hope that life could be better.

Parent 9: And quite often with people, the reason why people have gone off the rails as bad as what they have is because throughout their life they haven’t had that [respect]. They didn’t get that respect as children or through teenage years. Or they have been abused severely or something. Some trauma throughout their life has made them not care about society and society’s rules.

Four workers intimated how cultural values and social power imbalances affected their responses. Two explicitly mentioned being guided by social justice principles, while another two implied this through describing what influenced their decision making. They spoke about how their personal and professional values and ethics motivated them to build a relationship and work towards improving parents’ life circumstances.

Family worker 2: I have great values and core beliefs about Aboriginals and how they’ve been dealt. Um, I believe they should be getting a better deal from the community. So all that gets triggered. So, you know, I don’t get on the bandwagon per se, but I get on to, “This is the cause.” It was that she needs all my attention. All my effort. As much as I can do in a supportive way. And it sort of grows.
5.1.2 “Grasping at straws”: Parents’ Feeling of Desperation

Parents who commented specifically on this issues indicated that whilst they recognised that they deserved better for their lives, and were motivated to achieve this, they felt overwhelmed, uncertain and nervous about achieving the change. None of the parents came to the relationship easily and they commonly used words like “desperate” and “defeated” to describe how they felt before commencing work with the worker.

Parent 3: I was probably pretty desperate by then. Because, it’s like, the other service had given me a lot of things that were wrong with Matthew…but then, there wasn’t actually any quick fix or any solution…It wasn’t a very good spot. And probably, I was grasping at straws. It was like, where? Where is this person? It’s like, I don’t know what to do now. Where am I supposed to go now?

Only two workers (and no supervisors) reported that the parents had some level of confidence. Whilst one worker noted that a parent “had strength about her”, she, and other professionals, also reported a perception that the parents generally lacked confidence and were negatively affected by poor self esteem.

Feeling unable to meet their own needs and be the kind of parent they wanted to be motivated parents to either seek or accept support. Seven parents reported feeling this way, including how it helped to shift them from feeling unwilling to feeling willing to work with the family worker. This also included the one parent who was not involved with and did not report fear of becoming involved with DoCS. A common influence for these parents was recognition that they needed assistance from an outside source, as their own personal and existing professional support systems were inadequate. This was usually because they felt people were not listening or were unable to respond adequately to their needs. All of these parents had complex needs beyond parenting which negatively impacted on their ability to parent to a community standard. Disability and mental health issues, in particular post natal depression, homelessness, domestic violence, and drug and alcohol use impaired parents’ ability to provide for their children and build relationships.

Five parents reported feeling confident about ceasing contact with the worker if it was not meeting their expectations. However, three of these also described feelings and behaviour that did not support this attitude. They, and four others, acknowledged feeling powerless regarding resolving their personal difficulties. One example which sums up this kind of idea is as follows,
Parent 5: I still needed the support. I still needed the help. I wasn't, um, I wasn't able to um, sort of stand on my own two feet. Like, sort of, like a child learning to walk all over again it was um, I definitely needed the help. All of my counselling had stopped. I'd been doing groups but I still needed somebody to sort of help me, um, help me keep going… I had nothing [no kinship support]… So when she came along she was really good at helping me. She would just sit there and talk with me. And it was the only, was the only thing I had. If, if Odette wasn't there, there was no one, sort of thing. So it was, I became very dependent on her.

However, she stated later,

In the back of my head I always knew that at any point I could pull out. If I didn’t feel that I could go on with it, I knew I could pull out… And that was (pause) they were the reasons why I went into it. It was, I knew I had the control. That non-judgement, I could pull out if I wanted to. So I could pull out of DoCS if I wanted to. I could pull out of having therapy with Naomi if I wanted to. And I could pullout of seeing Odette if I wanted to… It’s the first thing that you’re told. Because it’s part of the rules, you know.

5.1.3 “I’ve had really bad experiences with counsellors”: Impacts of Previous Experiences

All of the parents described previous positive and negative experiences with human services workers from government and non-government agencies alike. Two parents and one worker commented that previous positive experiences of relationships with workers assisted the attitude with which the parent approached working with the worker. Five parents described how the associated anger or fear of poor experiences impacted negatively on their early relationship with the worker. These parents described how fear of child removal, distrust, guardedness, and concern about confidentiality became a barrier to trusting the family worker. The following provides two examples of this.

Parent 6: Before I met Vince I was having a lot of trouble with the Department of Community Services… I was, sort of wary, with the Department of Community Services and um, just how much anger I had inside with the Department and how things were then.

Parent 7: The whole counselling side of it was very daunting for me. I’ve had really bad experiences with counsellors…I admitted defeat. And that’s how I would describe it. Okay, I will go get help. I had previously done that and counsellors were not understanding. Were very cold. I would describe it. Turned me off a lot of counsellors. So coming in I was very, you know, “Is this one gonna work?” I was really reserved that they weren’t gonna be able to help me. Weren’t going to understand where I was coming from. So, I wasn't really up for
it. But in order to keep my children…I had to, sort of, do something.

Conversely, one parent who had experienced both positive and negative relationships previously, argued that she was focused on the degree to which the worker made her feel comfortable rather than the previous very negative experiences with child and family service workers.

Five of the workers reported awareness of parents’ previous negative experiences of relationships and how this increased the parents’ stress and lessened their ability to trust workers. Some described parents’ encounters with workers from other organisations which had left the parents feeling suspicious and feeling that they had not been listened to. They also described parents saying they felt angry, hurt and distrustful as well as tired, burdened and unmotivated when faced with the prospect of having to develop another relationship. One parent expressed this the following way.

Family worker 3: She was concerned that DoCS were going to get involved. So she actually rang DoCS herself to try and get some information. Reported on what had happened. Out of fear that instead of them coming to her…So she then rang us…And once she started talking, she was still very um, guarded about what she was going to disclose…She was still not really sure of what we were, as far as our relationship. “Were we DoCS? What was gonna happen then?”

While this increased the apprehension for some workers, most used it to their advantage to build the relationship. For example, five workers reported convincing the parents that their role was quite different to that of statutory workers. This included distancing themselves from the statutory elements of the child welfare system and educating the parent about system processes, such as the voluntary nature of family work, for example;

Family worker 8: I’ve had that even with the couples and, met the couples and found out hey, their kids have just been taken off them. I would be angry, you know. It’s about okay, so, yeah, this is really bad but, “What do we need to do to get your kids back? What do we need to do to get DoCS out of your life?”

One worker also discussed how a positive relationship with government workers, characterised by open and positive communication about family willingness, lessened her anxiety, thus assisting the building relationship with the parent.

One supervisor (reporting on two cases) noted that the parents came with some level of anxiety that hindered the relationship. Each time, the anxiety was associated with the parents’ experiences of the statutory child protection system. The supervisor also noted that, prior to trust being established, one parent would initiate contact with the worker only when she
wanted. She found this problematic as the relationship could not be established in a consistent manner, thus making it difficult to commence setting goals and working towards change. Another worker reinforced this, speaking about the parent avoiding contact, or “hiding”, during the relationship building stage.

5.1.4 “Take that road, or there ain’t nothing else”: Parents’ Ambivalence

Parent 3: I didn’t have anywhere else to go. It was either take that road, or there ain’t nothing else there…It felt like I was in the dark. And I was this little light. But there’s no, I couldn’t see anywhere else to go. And then there’s the light over here. And it gave me somewhere to go. So that at least I had a direction, you know, whether it was going to fix everything or not…It was like my last link. It was a real (pause), I want this person to come. I want to do this.

Five parents described feeling some degree of ambivalence about engaging with the worker at the beginning. Feelings of unwillingness outweighed willingness, although some willingness was present. These parents were willing enough to give the worker a chance to prove why the parent would want to engage, but not willing enough to lose some sense of agency over the interaction.

There were various reasons why unwilling parents felt they had no choice. In many cases unwillingness came from parents’ apprehension, doubt that it would make a difference, suspicion, and anger brought about by feeling forced to attend. One of the supervisors associated this idea of ambivalence about engaging, with “readiness” to change. Overall, unwillingness was interpreted as stemming from fear and distrust.

Seven parents described feeling under some kind of pressure to engage. Most common were feelings of extreme desperation or fears related to statutory child protection intervention, both currently and in the future. Two parents attended only because Children’s Court Orders stipulated they must. Apprehension came from unfamiliarity with the family service and worker, and not knowing what to expect. Two parents were concerned about being judged by the worker, and three about possibly having negative experiences similar to previous encounters with services. Another two parents spoke of feeling demotivated when faced with the prospect of having to build a new relationship, due to the number of workers they had had in the past, for example,

Parent 5: My reservations were, now you’ve got to remember that this was the third person coming into my life…Um, [I was] very worried because I had had Cynthia. And then Cynthia was only there for, you know, sort of, ex, why and zed. And then I had Naomi, [who] had her own individual personal circumstances that meant that she had to leave. So I had to then start another trust relationship with someone completely new.
All of the workers reported perceiving the parents as apprehensive during this phase of the relationship. Three workers reported perceiving the parents as unwilling and guarded when discussing their issues. Two workers reported examples where parents even avoided contact altogether, or made contact randomly and intermittently. An example of this includes,

Family worker 6: They might attend a couple of appointments regularly and we’d talk about these things. Then they wouldn't come to the next one. And there would be a lot of to-ing and fro-ing. It might take um, another two months before we actually got an appointment established… Sometimes they would forget appointments. At times, actually, they wouldn’t answer the door. And I knew that someone was in there. And I presumed, now, and even then, that it was possibly Catherine. And I even saw the curtain move. And I might have heard the telly on. And I thought, “What’s going on here?”

Another worker interpreted the unwillingness as the parent working to her “agenda” rather than being open and responsive to suggestions being made regarding issues about which the parents came to the service. Interestingly, two of the “willing” parents were perceived to have a similar trait, as they came with a clear idea of what they wanted to work with the family worker to change. One worker explained these ideas in the following way,

Family worker 3: It probably comes down to, um, maybe the agendas of clients. Why they come in the first place. Even though I felt like she was very much covering herself with this feeling with DoCS, once that fear was alleviated and she knew that we weren’t DoCS, and things like that, that agenda was gone.

Five of the workers described feeling willing, but apprehensive, at the beginning of the relationship. Apprehension mostly occurred prior to meeting the parent and because of what others had said about the parent and their needs. For example, on observing the parent in public prior to meeting her, one reported how she built an assumption about how the parent might respond to working with her. While this did not affect the worker’s willingness, as she suspended judgement until meeting the parent, the assumption did raise her apprehension about working with the parent. For six workers, apprehension also stemmed from doubting their ability to help the parent meet their needs or being concerned that the parent would not be willing to engage or work on the identified issues. These ideas were summed up by one worker, as follows,

Family worker 6: It sounded like they have a lot of issues. And I wondered, initially, it would be a bit much to work with. You sort of tend to get a feeling of, “Oooo. How’s this gonna go?” Um, “This is gonna take a lot of work on my part.” Um, “Am I able to support this family appropriately? Do I have the skills?” I suppose. All that, those sort of questions tended to go around in my mind…And the case worker actually phoned me…She
was very positive about the family. She said, “They’re trying to work hard together. They’ve had a lot of hard times over the years.”…The way that this family were presented to me was in a much more positive light. So I was more willing to work with them after I had received that information from DoCS.

None of the workers said that they felt apprehensive about their ability to build a relationship with the parent. However all of these workers reportedly perceived, similarly to that of the example above, that their anxiety was reduced once they realised the parents were willing to engage and were receptive to what the worker was saying.

5.1.5 “Testing the waters”: Parents’ Assessing Worker Qualities

Building the relationship was a process. All parents reported that they progressed from unwillingness to willingness as they got to the point of connection, the lynchpin of which was trust. It seems to have involved testing the character of the worker to decide whether or not they were trustworthy, and if the parent felt comfortable with the worker. This assessment process was difficult for the parents to articulate, however, one parent reported it this way,

Parent 2: I guess I was doubting to even come here or not because of all the bad results from the last one. It was, “Was I going to go through it again? Was I going to get the help that I want?” It was a matter of getting it into my head that it was alright to try to go and see someone… “Was she going to be the right person to work with? Was she going to be understanding? Listen to the things that I wanted to talk to her about?” She ended up being the right person to talk to…I knew it was the right thing about her when she started to push to get help for housing. I knew she was the right person when she helped me get on the right medication. Yep, you don’t see family support workers kind of out there rushing around trying to get help for a person they’ve just met. Lorraine actually went out of her way and was running around and she was helping me with a few things.

For some, this process was instant and occurred during the first meeting whereas, for others, it developed as they got to know the worker. For example,

Parent 3: When she turned up it was like, even though I didn’t really have a great idea of what she could actually do for me, it was just that (pause) she came. To my house…This person actually bothered to come to my house. I felt really at ease, like, the way that she did it…I remember having a cup of coffee with her. And Imogen had a cigarette. And I thought, “You’re a normal person. Good, good, good.”

Parent 6: Every time I’d come here I’d ring and he was always, sort of, it was just that happy tone on the phone. Or if I’d come, “How ya goin George? And how’s your day been?” “Oh, good mate.” And then, and then we would just sit down and talk about things. He wasn’t a person who, who would judge you, or anything like that. And, I’m trying to think (8 sec pause), I
guess it was just his personality, yeah. Easy, easy, um, easy to talk to.

Five of the parents described how they assessed, or “tested”, what they thought of the worker in order to decide whether or not to engage, particularly during the initial meeting or group work, but also throughout the building phase of the relationship. This required getting to know the worker but at the same time not revealing too much about themselves until they decided the worker was “right”, as described by Parent 2. Other parents articulated similar ideas as follows,

Parent 5: It is up to me. It’s about, if I’m going to confide in somebody, I have to judge who I’m confiding in. And that is, um, gut instinct feeling. It is purely on instinct feeling…Um, there isn’t a list. With instinct there isn’t a list. You kind of, I’m a pretty open person. I do tend to talk a lot quite openly with people. Um, but say if, you know, if you just feel that you know things that they’re saying or advice that they’re giving isn’t quite working for you and, you know, maybe they’re on a different page. Or you know if you find yourself constantly having to explain things to them. Or, you know, getting frustrated because you’re constantly explaining things to them, that could, you know, that’s a negative experience. And you’ve got to reassess whether this person is right for you.

Parent 6: Probably after the first month I sort of told him a lot of my problems and the issues with the Department of Community Services. And, um, [I was trying to work out if he was] just somebody who I could confide in and I know it wouldn’t get repeated anywhere else.

All of the parents reported that workers sitting with them and listening to them talk about their needs, helped them decide. Knowing a worker was “right” was also promoted through discovering some similarity with the worker, for example a common experience of parenting, both being smokers, or having had similar interests or hobbies. These factors were reported as being important by more parents than was the matter of workers doing something practical or concrete for them. The latter was reported by only two parents.

Five workers and two supervisors (reporting on two cases) also reported perceiving that parents were assessing the worker prior to trust being built. One worker expressed this as follows,

Family worker 3: I think there was some testing from her. Um, she was testing the waters to see me personally, to see if I would judge her. Because sometimes, like, from one session to the next, like, she would often repeat the same conversation. But then there’d be just a little bit extra detail. And I felt that was a test.
5.1.6 “It’s about trust”: Building Trust

Parent 7: Look I think that the relationship’s really important in regards to it all because if you don’t trust someone, if you don’t have the respect there, between both client and counsellor, then there’s really no point in having counselling. Because, I mean, people can come in here and discuss whatever and it can just be just that. But I think that the fact that Martha and I can relate to each other’s lives to some degree. And the fact that we can both sit here and laugh about certain things, even if it’s something crappy,…I know we can both feel comfortable enough with each other just to laugh about it...Really, to me it is (pause), to me it’s about trust.

Parents’ willingness and trust for the family worker were closely related. One parent described feeling willing to work with the worker from the outset. This parent, who had been involved with the family service previously, reported that she had already established trust. Indeed, willingness to engage openly and honestly was specifically described by all but one of the parents as linked to trusting the worker. The parent who did not report a link between the relationship and trust took a long time to engage with the worker, approximately six months and, according to both the worker and supervisor, did not make herself available to the worker until trust was built. Instead, she engaged in what was described as “hiding” behaviour. Despite this, when she did trust, after the family worker assisted with a very significant event, she showed willingness by responding to the family worker and even seeking out support from both the family worker and other staff.

Four parents reported coming to the relationship with some degree of confidence about what they wanted to achieve from working with the worker. The other two reported that they wanted to be supported and guided through the change process. Whilst they reported that their confidence in themselves was low, their willingness was strong due to positive experiences of previous relationships.

All of the parents described how building trust involved identifying with the worker as part of the earliest phase of the relationship. Parent identification with the worker seemed to mark a turning point in the building relationship. It reportedly influenced the degree to which parents trusted, opened up, and were attentive and responsive to the worker regarding their needs and making life changes. Three parents also conceded that their willingness and openness improved after meeting the worker, especially once the worker had met some of their needs or they identified with the worker in some way.

Parent 7: When she finally confided in me that something had happened in her life that was very similar to mine, that’s when I let my guard down. I could see that someone (pause) had come from the same level of understanding as to what I was possibly feeling at the time…The fact that somebody can understand the
hurt that I could be feeling at that certain time. The questions. The confusion that I felt about myself. Guilt (pause) I had going on in my own self. Of having someone go, I have also experienced this (pause). It really opened my eyes that I wasn't the only one going through it. Because for a long time I thought, “Well I’m the only one. Nobody is going to understand what I’m feeling.”

A significant dimension of what the parents reported was that workers related to them differently from previous experiences of professionals. They talked about the workers being “real” and relating to them as human beings, and seeing them as human beings rather than distantly and as mere and dehumanised clients. Due to the centrality of this idea to the relationship across phases, this notion of participants identifying with each other will be explored in greater depth in Section Four of this chapter.

Trust was perceived as very important in the building relationship by all of the workers. It was also clear that they agreed that willingness developed as trust developed, as explained by one worker,

Family worker 7: I think, well, the openness and honesty. Which is understandable because people’s lives are their own. And they don’t know what you’re going to do with that. And disclosing that so. And um, but it does improve it. Like you don’t need to know everything, but there’s certain things, that the more information is better. Um, when they realise that and respect that, and accept that you are not going to do anything bad with that, and the trust is there. And that information flows freely, you’re able to do much more with that. And, um, I think that does improve the relationship because you can accomplish more.

Five of the workers perceived that the parent came to the relationship willing to work with the worker. Some perceived an already established trust due to prior experience with the service or worker, or trusting someone who had previously worked with the worker. One worker had two prior links with the family. One was through the service run groups and the other personal, which she described as follows,

Family worker 5: She had trust in our service, because she knew Vera. And she knew me, because she knew Vera. Peter went to school with one of my sons. So they really trusted me. They did really trust, you know, they had that trust in our service.

Links such as these may be more common in smaller communities with denser social networks, such as a rural one in this instance.

Feeling comfortable, in particular during the initial encounter, was an important experience of all parents during the building phase of the relationship, partly because it helped increase the level of willingness and trust. All but one of the parents reported that this was an important
element of how they felt during the initial meeting. The other parent expressed feeling comfortable during her first encounter with the service but did not talk specifically about the worker. One parent described how her previous experience with the service, and with the worker during group work, helped her feel comfortable during the initial meeting.

Parent 8: Oh, just with, just her, just the way like she was. And how she reacted to the situation that was going on with me and everything. She was um, quite understanding of the whole thing. And she was, I suppose just the way she, um, talked to me and stuff. And I thought she was gonna be a real, sort of, like judgemental and everything. But she ended, like it was, when I was in there I was quite comfortable talking to her and she wasn’t judgemental or anything.

Seven of the workers talked about how they knew the relationship was building, or the parent had made an initial connection, when they felt the parent becoming more comfortable with them. Most obvious, they reported, was that the parent became more confident and opened up more about their issues, whereas previously they talked only about unsubstantial matters, and that they were more attentive and responsive to what the worker was saying. Five workers reported a sense that an emotional connection was part of trust being built and manifested as a change in openness in the parent. While these workers also reported that doing something practical to meet a need early on was important, focusing on building an emotional connection seems to be considered more important in this study than focusing on meeting an immediate need during the first few encounters. Instead of moving to setting goals early in the life of the relationship, they reported how they took time to build trust and clarify what needed to be done. As some workers expressed it,

Family worker 5: You’ve got to go in. You’ve got to be very natural. You’ve got to be not pushy. You’ve got to be very respectful of them. And I find, like I say, “You’ve got DoCS on your back. What do we need to do to get them off your back?”…Everyone is different so you’ve got to get a sense of what’s going to work with that person. How am I going to, how am I going to work with this person? Build that trusting relationship. Because, it’s that first meeting with the family. It’s that important to build that trust. First impressions last. So, if you can go in there, and that first impression, and you come across as you are not judging them and you’re there to work with them, to achieve whatever the goal is that they need to achieve.

Family worker 2: Because she felt the trust and the safety angle, I suppose. Um, that it’s okay to come back here. But we can also, not only, um, experience the emotion together, but we can also try and come up with some practical, some solutions to, strategies, options. Nut it out.

Family worker 3: I disclosed that I had also lost a child. And that was the breaking point for Emily… Before that I sensed
there was still a lot of guard. She was still not really sure of what we were, as far as our relationship. Were we DoCS? What was gonna happen then? She just ranted. She would talk non-stop for like an hour and a half, two hours. But it would only be surface stuff. She wouldn’t go into greater detail…So it wasn’t like we were getting to any sort of substance. And it was difficult for me to pinpoint what the main issues were to move onto and to, sort of delve into. Because there was just so much.

Two of the supervisors present during this phase, in reference to three cases, also reported that it was important that the parents felt safe and comfortable.

Other important worker actions and attributes which were raised by participants during discussion of this phase and which related to trust building included the workers’ attentiveness and willingness to help, empathy, non-judgemental attitude, respectfulness, patience and flexibility, collaborative approach, and confidence in their dealings with the parent. These actions and attributes will now be explored in greater detail.

5.1.7 Worker Actions and Attributes

5.1.7.1 “Listen…and…willing to help”: Attentive and Responsive Workers

Parent 2: I knew if she was going to listen to what I had to say, and she was willing to help, I knew Lorraine was the right person to come to and try to get her to help me even more with things…Um, when she started to tell me how she got people to help me get out of that house, I thought, “That’s a good sign. Maybe I should stick with Lorraine and see how we go.” And step by step, she helped me move on.

All of the parents reported similar experiences to the parents of the workers being active listeners and willing to help. As raised earlier, this was a very important issue for parents when deciding whether or not to engage. It involved workers being attentive and responsive to parents’ needs and being interested in more than just the professional issues. This meant having a wide focus of topics for conversations and being prepared to follow the parent’s interests even though it might not seem related to the family work focus. Three parents described how they felt workers from other organisations were not similarly helpful because they could not be flexible and go outside the exclusive focus in agencies. One parent explained this in the following way.

Parent 5: [The other organisation were more interested in] the protection of myself and the children. So they were very helpful with stuff like that around that. [They had a narrow focus on] just protecting the children. And that’s it. That’s as far as they could go. While emotionally I was still, as I call it, a basket case…It wasn’t so much that they thought that I was okay as a mum. The needs for the children to be protected had been met…When Odette came into my life, and why it was so good for me was, she was helping me face how I was feeling and
what was going through me. Which (pause) there was no place to do that anywhere else. I could face how I was feeling without having to work on my anger issues or work on my control issues or work on my um, self-esteem issues or work on my um, parenting issues. I didn’t have to worry about all that. I could just talk. That’s not to say you wouldn’t be given direction in moving on from that, [but it was done] in an informal way that that stuff was actually being brought to the surface...It was always acknowledged that we would not talk about stuff I didn’t want to. It was always very safe.

According to all of the parents, being attentive and responsive occurred from the first meeting and remained important throughout the entire relationship. It involved providing solutions to parents’ concrete and emotional needs, but not in such a way that they felt disempowered. This required gaining parents’ perspective on needs, tailoring responses to those expressed needs, and acknowledging parents’ ideas and their roles in meeting the needs, for example,

Parent 3: It was just (pause) easy. Made me feel that, (pause) not that she’s going to fix everything. But that at least I had someone there that I could say all this stuff to. That, you know, that there was someone there that I could talk to. You know, because at the first part I wasn’t that interested in who do I need to help me fix all this. It was more, I am just spinning to live here. I need someone to stick a spanner in to stop me.

Six workers talked about how they focused on the positives and strengths that the parent had, during this phase, as a way of encouraging them and helping them not be overwhelmed by the challenges. For four workers this included conveying hope and the expectation that life will be better for the parent.

All of the supervisors involved in this phase commented on how attentive and responsive the workers were to the parents’ needs in the building relationship. Workers were reported to approach the parent, and meet their needs, with variable degrees of gentleness depending on the parent’s level of wariness. The three supervisors also commented that workers from four cases provided concrete or practical assistance, but also emotional support as part of this. An example of this approach is,

Supervisor 5: I think that initially, and like I said before, she really came from a place of “Let’s just hear your story.” There is no direction to it. It’s just sitting. And being. And really, that’s our catchphrase. You know, just go and be...But I think that because Odette comes from that place of honesty and is actually able to say, this is what we got. This is what, you know, DoCS is saying. And not making DoCS the big bad wolf. But, by actually putting it on the table and saying this is what is documented in a file over there. Let’s just be really clear about what they’re saying. I think that um, that allows them to then talk about, talk about the stuff that’s been said but then allows
Odette in her very centred quiet way to then listen to her experience of what’s being said.

5.1.7.2 “The empathy. Literally the empathy”: Empathic Workers

Parent 5: The empathy. Literally the empathy. And knowing that the empathy is genuine...She definitely gave the impression that she understood what I was saying and how it felt, of how I was saying it felt. That’s not to say that she was empathising in the way of like, “Oh, yes. I know how you feel. I’ve been through it myself.” Um, but she could understand how it was affecting me. Not necessarily from her own experience.

Two parents and two workers mentioned the word “empathy” during the discussion about the relationship. However, six parents, all of the workers and all of the supervisors described workers behaving in empathic ways. For all of the workers who described an empathic response, there was some level of identifying with the parent’s situation which sparked their empathy. Empathy was also described in terms of a perception that the worker understood what the parent was experiencing to some degree. It involved descriptions of workers showing care and giving the impression that they cared about the parent. Six parents, all of the workers and three supervisors (reporting on four cases) perceived that the workers made an empathic response to the parent early in the relationship. One also talked about the gentleness with which the worker worked with the parent and how they were responding to being aware of the parent’s vulnerability. In some cases, empathy included a perception the worker had similar life experiences regarding the issue. While this was not necessary, five of the workers did identify directly with the parent’s experience.

Since empathy is closely linked with being able to identify with another, and because it is not phase-specific, the notion of empathy will be explored in greater depth in Section Four of this chapter. In short, key reported aspects of empathy involved the worker being calm, caring, gentle and non-judgemental. All of the workers talked about trying to understand how the parents felt about their life circumstances. This empathic position influenced the workers differently. Two talked about being more flexible and patient with their parents while others talked about responding by trying to work out what made the parent feel comfortable and safe. Another two talked about how their empathy enabled them to identify with the parent’s values and with the experience of being treated unjustly, as distinct from needing to have had the same experience as the parent.

5.1.7.3 “They’re not going to judge you”: Non-judgemental Workers

Family worker 8: Because you’re talking about a woman who’s, um, she has got postnatal depression. Is that wrong? You know. Does that make her an unfit mother because she is struggling? And she was separating from her partner at the
time. I mean there were lots of things that were really unclear to me. And I’m thinking, you know, there’s a lot of grief going on in this woman’s life without me sticking more judgment in. And I think that those are the kind of things that, looking at it holistically, what’s really going on?

According to five parents, all but one of the workers, and to the three involved supervisors (in reference to five cases), a non-judgemental approach by the worker was a major contributor to building parents’ trust. The remaining supervisor who did not mention this was not employed at the service during the relationship building phase.

A non-judgemental approach was raised as one of the key tests by which parents assessed the worker. These parents also expressed how it was rare to be treated this way within their personal support network. They believed it allowed them an open space to speak about themselves and their concerns and one expressed this idea the following way.

Parent 5: I remember talking, telling somebody about the family support workers, and I described it as, you have the same person come in to your life on a regular basis where you can sit down and you can tell them everything. And, they’re not going to judge you. They’re not going to criticize you. Um, you know, you don’t have to ask for forgiveness. You don’t have to do, um, make, do any penance. You don’t have to, you know, they’re just there to hear you just let it all out…But just, sort of, be able to sit down and go you know, I just couldn’t cope last week. And, you know rather than go, “Oh, you know, why not? What was wrong? What was going through your mind?” Without probing like that. Just listening to you. Just, you know, just someone acknowledging um, and empathising with you, with your life and how hard it must be. Which would reduce you to tears, you know, because you would be facing how you were feeling.

According to the supervisors, workers tried to approach the parents with no preconceived assumptions about the parent, and critically assess what others have said about the family in light of what the parents say about themselves and their situation.

5.1.7.4 “Be respectful of them”: Respectful Workers

Underpinning all that involved empathy was a perception of worker respect for the parents. This was reported by six parents. Parents experienced respect in different ways. For example, for one it involved together negotiating a time which suited both parent and worker where, for another, it involved the worker listening, informing the parent she was coming to visit and not being “bossy”.

Parent 1: Well we did have another lady come round, Faith. I didn’t like her coz she was bossy. Which Fiona’s not. Because Faith kept at us to do things which Fiona didn’t. [Fiona] just asked us what we wanted to do then. Yeah. But this Faith, she just kept at ya…[Fiona] was the opposite. She just rang us up
and asked us and that…Yeah, you could talk to Fiona. You can’t talk to Faith. She don’t listen.

A third parent experienced the worker showing respect by allowing her to dictate the amount of contact they had.

Six workers reported the importance of respecting the parent in the building phase. This involved worker attitudes and behaviour including not being “pushy”, that is, being patient and allowing the parent time and space to think and act in their own time. It also involved accepting difference and being non-judgemental regarding parents’ actions, feelings and opinions, asking the parent how he or she feels about the process, acknowledging strengths and capabilities and treating them as “equal”. One worker described it this way.

Family worker 7: I think the main thing is to, um, to listen to them. To be respectful of them. To get a bit of an understanding of where they are coming from and where they want to go and work out where you’re going to be able to support them in that. But I think the first couple of meetings…[what] we have is more just chatting. Just hearing what they’ve got to say about themselves. What’s important to them. How they feel about different issues and, yeah, just build up that, that rapport to begin with. It’s really important. So you’ve actually got, got that sense of trust and the sense that, that you’ve actually, they’ve been heard, and that you’re actually, um, yeah, respectful and really wanting to support them in what they thinks important.

Two of the three supervisors involved in this phase (and referring to four cases) also reported worker respect as a primary factor in the building relationship. This included adapting the approach to meet the parents’ way of understanding, being non-judgemental and trusting, providing opportunities for the parent to direct the flow of conversation, and asking the parent how they feel about the process.

5.1.7.5 “Planting the seed”: Patient and Flexible Workers

Family worker 3: Um, patience. I felt like, like I think I said before, she just needed time. Um, I think there would be sessions where I felt like I didn’t achieve anything. Um, but planting the seed which probably wouldn’t be cultivated for a long time. Um, so, but I felt like that’s what needed to happen. Um, there in the beginning I think it went for about a couple of months where I basically just took the line that, every time I tried to, you know, work on strategies or “Let’s look at other ways of doing things.” I was just completely blocked. So I just got to the point where I thought, “Okay. I’m just going to let her talk.”…I think that to build that trust I think you needed that time. You need flexibility. You need to be able to adapt to the client’s needs.
Worker patience and flexibility were reported to be important by four parents early in the relationship, and helped form a strong foundation. It was also important that workers made themselves available to the parent as needs arose.

All of the relationships took different lengths of time to build. Two of the parents deemed to be slow to engage took four to six months to trust. While only two workers stated a time taken to build the relationship, the five involved in relationships that did not form really quickly commented on the need to be patient and flexible and to take the time to enable the parent develop trust and overcome unwillingness. They said that this needed to occur before they could begin to focus on meeting the parent’s needs and begin challenging them to focus on their needs themselves.

Workers reported acceptance that parents needed time or other considerations that involved time early in the relationship, for example, talking broadly about many life issues prior to the parent being able to focus on the issues for which the parent was referred.

All of the supervisors involved in the building phase (regarding four cases) reported accepting that patience and flexibility were especially important factors early on. This idea was described by one supervisor in the following way.

Supervisor 5: I think that um, that the relationship needs some time to develop without putting in a time constraint of, “You’ve got six sessions. Fix this person. Move them on.” I think that there needs to be time given for that. And that (pause) depending on where that person’s sitting in their experience with the service, and service network, and how much they have been bashed around and pushed from pillar to post, um, it really depends on how much time needs to be put into building that relationship. For some people that if they have only just had a knock back from Centrelink, they can jump back and pick up and engage really quickly. Other people who have been banged down and disappointed and all over the place trying to get support (pause), it’s much much harder.

Other supervisors’ reports of this included how workers accommodated parents by being available and taking time to get to know the parents, pitching the communication at a level the parent could understand, talking about a diverse range of things and persevering as the relationship was building.

5.1.7.6 “This is about us working towards getting what you want”: Collaboration

Five parents reported that the workers began the relationship collaboratively. This involved the worker asking what the parent wanted and listening to the response. It also involved the worker suggesting ideas about options, but not telling parents what to do, as well as supporting their decisions.
Collaboration was reported by these parents to be characterised by open and honest communication and negotiation, particularly about the parents’ needs, what the worker could offer and the relationship parameters. It also involved the parent feeling some sense of choice and power regarding the process. This was apparently made possible by the worker’s flexible and accommodating approach regarding what they were prepared to do and how involved they were prepared to be, depending to some extent on what the parent said they wanted. For one parent it also included the worker not exerting power over her.

Parent 3: She came across as a powerful woman but she wasn’t going to put any of that on me. Like, she wasn’t power trippin. It’s like, she didn’t come across like she knew everything and was going to fix everything, and I knew nothing. It was that, (pause), more of a question, “Can I help you?” not, “You need to do this.” It was like, “What can I do to help you?”

Six workers and the three supervisors involved during this stage (regarding five cases) spoke about how much of the collaborative element of the building relationship involved the worker being clear that she or he was available to work with the parent to identify and achieve the goals that they wanted. For most of these workers, being clear required being assertive about their role and setting boundaries about the way they work, from the beginning of the relationship. One worker gave, for example, the following account of what he did “to make a join” with a parent.

Family worker 8: I give myself about 15 minutes to make a join so that we can actually start working. We can start with, okay, what is it that we need to bring here… I’ve found that if clients just come in and complain and complain and complain and complain then, how does that help them move on? Like, if I set a precedent right from the start, this is about us working towards getting what you want, then it’s not about what I want or I’m not sitting here getting paid, you know, just for listening to your story. It’s not productive.

Interestingly, this is a very different approach from the slower approach to building trust mentioned at 5.1.7.4 and 5.1.7.5 and it is about building initial rapport quickly from which to then begin to build trust, which this worker also agreed can take varying time.

The supervisors also reported that being collaborative included being honest about what others had said about the parent in various reports and making sure the relationship, and any response, was focused on the parent, and not on those reports. One supervisor also talked about being collaborative in order to dispel any sense of power imbalance the parent might have.

Supervisor 5: I think that he just has the ability to be really mindful of his power. In the way that he will say things. Everything is about choice. It’s not about, I think that you need
to sort this out or else DoCS will take the kids. You know. It’s about, what is it that you think you need right now. You know, it’s more on that strengths based um, discussion. More on that strengths-based framework. And I think that that really makes a difference because people will actually experience it as being really genuine and really, “Oh. This is okay. This is safe.”

5.1.7.7 “I knew that she knew her stuff”: Competent and Confident Workers

Parent 3: Um, I felt that she was competent. And, that sort of gave me confidence because, it’s like, I knew I knew nothing but I knew that she knew her stuff.

Four parents reported perceiving the worker as confident or competent. They described the workers as resourceful, knowledgeable about a range of areas of professional expertise and life in general, able to respond to the parent’s changing needs and able to connect with people from a variety of backgrounds.

One worker, and the three supervisors involved in this phase (reporting on four cases) also talked about how the workers came to the relationship with a level of confidence that helped build the relationship and shaped how they connected to and worked with the parent. Confident workers were seen to be experienced professionals who were assertive about their professional role in the relationship. This theme was also noted as important during the established phase of the relationship. Personal confidence was seen to co-occur with extensive life experience. One supervisor also linked personal confidence to the degree to which workers could be real, honest and genuine with the parent. Professional confidence consisted of the worker being professionally experienced, and having appropriate resources and connections to draw on and to assist them link to the parents. One supervisor, speaking about two families, noted that they perceived workers to be less confident, apprehensive, stressed and under pressure when the worker perceived the parent was unwilling to engage with them.

5.1.8 “I had laid my heart out on the line”: Parents Open Up about Deeper Issues

Trust for the workers had strong practical implications. Four parents described becoming more attentive and responsive to what the worker was saying once trust was built. Two parents noted that they felt a sense of hope and optimism early on in the relationship that their life circumstances would now improve. The parents specifically noted that although they talked a lot to the worker early on in the relationship, it was only about surface level personal matters and issues of immediate need, remaining guarded about what they revealed of themselves. Opening up was a gradual process and most of the parents, including those willing from the outset, noted that they did not open up about deep issues until trust was established with the worker. This was reported more during discussion of the established relationship, for example,
Parent 6: We would just sit down and talk about things and um, he wasn’t a person who, who would judge you. Or anything like that. And, um, I’m trying to think, um, I guess it was just his personality…Vince would just sit there and laugh. It’s like, I know what you mean, George. I don’t mind a drink every now and again.” And I said, yeah, it’s just that frustrating that I just wanna sit there and get blind. “But you know that you can’t do that George because you’ve got the kids.” I said, “Yeah. I know.” We’d just sit there and have a laugh and talk about stuff like that…Yeah it’s just because I had laid my heart out on the line where I was just totally just talking about the kids. And what I felt from the Department. Because I just hated them so much. And, because I couldn’t see my kids. And um, then, because he was always just a person I could just come and talk to.

5.1.9  “I like coming here because people are nice”: The Family Service Environment

Parent 1: I like coming here because people are nice. Like, they all talk to us. Gives someone else to talk to if we need it, if you’ve got problems and stuff…They just give us advice and, yeah, I talk to all of them. Have a coffee and just sit down and talk and stuff.

Four parents commented on the positive impact that other family service workers, including administration staff, had on the building stages of the relationship. These parents perceived the culture of the family service to be friendly and welcoming as well as relaxed, supportive and quickly responsive to their needs. This introduction to the service reduced the nervousness they said they were feeling regarding meeting and working with the worker.

Three workers raised the importance of a flexible work environment to help build trust at the parent’s pace. One expressed it this way,

Family worker 1: What supports the relationship was the fact that I don’t have a time limit…I don’t have to push anyone. And they drive it. And I was able to sit with Ursula and just let her unload, you know, build a relationship just letting her talk and you know, talk her story through. All the anger and frustration and resentment. So there was no me thinking, “I have to really make something happen here.”…It can be, it can be long-term work. Some people may be ready to have awareness about things. But others, it’s slow steps.

In one case this included the parent not being moved to an alternate program within the agency when it became apparent that their needs were different to the worker’s program specifications. The service put the needs of the parent, and the relationship, before agreements with funders about what certain programs were supposed to provide.

Three supervisors (speaking about three cases) talked about other elements of the family service culture which helped the building relationship. This included a culture which values
informality, honesty, respect and empowerment practices and where strengths are celebrated. It also included a high presence and involvement by supervisors, for example,

Supervisor 8: Like people when they come in, if a worker is not here, Donna, whoever, will go, “How are you going? Would you like a cup of tea? They won’t be long.” And so they are sort of, like, I pretty much know all of the families…I know who they are. I know their names, so at least I can say “G’day Liz.”, or whoever it is.

Two workers talked about supervisor involvement in the building relationship, but it was quite minimal. One worker spoke about utilising the support offered by her supervisor to debrief on her experience of feeling overwhelmed while building the relationship. One other spoke about how the supervisor’s inflexibility regarding program parameters made it difficult for her to build the relationship in the parent’s time.

Alternately, two supervisors (reporting on five cases) described their direct involvement in the building relationship. Another supervisor was not employed at the service during this period. These two supervisors had very clear ideas on what the building relationship should involve. While one was more flexible than the others, these ideas affected the way they both supervised the worker during the building relationship. One of the supervisors described how her previous experience as a worker helped her support the worker through the frustrations associated with a slow and difficult building phase.

Apart from the supervisor who was not employed at the time of the building relationship, the supervisors reported making themselves available to the worker to initiate contact and support as they required. The three supervisors spoke about how they were directly involved in matching and allocating the clients and workers, except in one case where the worker was allocated on the basis of resourcing constraints. They also raised the matter of how workers are involved in discussions about allocation of parents and that the supervisor has the final say, sometimes having to allocate against workers’ wishes due to extraneous factors within the service, but also in response to external child welfare sector and legal considerations. One talked about how, in considering legal and safety factors, she determined that the relationship would take place at the service centre rather than in the family home. The supervisors discussed how, when allocating cases, they weigh up worker skills and experience with parent needs, along with service resources and the needs of others involved in the service. One talked about how being able to do this well involves being very familiar with the worker’s personality, skills and style. This supervisor also talked about how she sometimes uses the matching and allocation process to challenge and stretch the workers at her service beyond their “comfort zone”.

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Supervisor 5: I think that sometimes, um, workers get clients that they both need…I guess that here we have a pretty um, directive allocation process. I’ll decide who this client fits with…And it’s not about [the worker’s] level of experience or their level of acknowledgement, but about their ability to connect…I think that I’m drawing on, um, knowing the workers really well. It doesn’t mean that they always get the cases that they deal really really well with…I think that sometimes in your work with family support workers, you pick up a learning curve or a learning need…One of my roles is to stretch them.

While the supervisors did not have much direct influence on the building relationship outside the allocation process, if the relationship was not developing the way they thought it should, they did intervene. One supervisor, for example, intervened when she felt the building relationship did not have appropriate structure and was negatively affecting others in the centre. The three supervisors involved in this phase described having influence over the extent to which workers were allowed to persevere with building a relationship when it might be a difficult process. They described a policy which limits the length of time workers could attempt to build the relationship. In two services, and without realising the other called it such, it was reported as the “three strikes” policy.

Supervisor 7: This family was sort of hard to engage…And we sort of give them the three strikes. Three in a row. Like, if the worker’s got an appointment and if there’s a no-show or, not if there’s a legitimate reason…but if people are just not there three times in a row. And the worker tries to phone and follow up with that so that after three times we just leave them with the message, contact us and we’ll start from there again.

This informal organisation system was based on the principle of voluntarism to which the services adhere and a respect for the parent to choose how the process unfolds for them. For all, this policy is not final as there is also a policy of maintaining an “open door” which the parents can access when ready and willing to address their issues. The “open door” policy will be discussed in Section Three of this chapter.

Group work programs emerged across all three groups of participants as an important way for parents to become familiar with the worker and service in a potentially less threatening situation than individual work. Four parents commented on their involvement in groups and the subsequent ways the developing relationship was assisted. One parent, for example, noted that she already trusted the worker in part due to having met them previously through group work. Two other parents noted that this had helped them feel familiar with the family service and its processes, and another two said that they came to realise they needed individual assistance through what they had learned during group activities.
Group work was specifically proposed as a key factor in the development of one relationship that had previously been slow to get started and was intermittent, where the parent stated that attending the group provided an opportunity to get a sense of the worker from a safe distance. This parent described the way in which their trust and respect grew as she watched the way the worker conducted herself, as it “gave [her] the opportunity to see the sort of person that she was”. She was clear that the relationship subsequently developed quickly and became very strong. The worker spoke about the important role that the parenting group she facilitated had in assisting the parents develop trust, and consequently smoothed their path to building the relationship with her.

Family worker 1: I was facilitating the parenting program…I think it built up a lot of trust. They started to, to feel comfortable in coming. But more than that, I think they started, their confidence in themselves really grew…That she could come to something and sit in a room full of people and be accepted and um, feel comfortable in that process…And I remember running into them down town. Probably about a week after the parenting program. And I saw them coming towards me. And they just looked so happy to see me. So I thought, wow, you know, they’re comfortable now. You know, they’ve made that connection. And they’re happy to keep that connection.

The “dance of getting to know you” followed a similar path for all of these relationships. Most of the relationships began with the parents feeling ambivalence. This was reported to have developed for all into trust. Development of trust occurred at varying speeds. It was characterised by all of the parents feeling some kind of connection which resulted in them opening up and starting to work on the issues which had been negatively affecting their lives and parenting. Prior to trust being built, the relationships involved parents assessing if they could trust the workers. Proving trustworthiness involved workers being attentive and responsive, empathic, non-judgemental, respectful, patient, flexible, collaborative and confident.

As discussed throughout this section, and in concurrence with the parent quotation at the introduction of the chapter, once trust was established, parents felt more willing to open up about the issues of deeper concern to them. It could be argued that building trust marked a move from the developing to the established relationship. This is not so neat in reality, and there is more likely a period of “greyness” where the characteristics more common to the building phase merge with those more common to the established phase. For the purposes of analysis and interpretations in this study, however, a clearer distinction has been drawn.

The section also explored elements in the service environment, including group work programs and supervisors, which facilitated the building relationship. It must also be noted
that a number of the characteristics described as present during the building phase continued into the established, and indeed, beyond. The next section will explore the established phase of the relationship in further detail. It will detail the participants’ reported perceptions of these eight relationships once trust was established. This includes the way in which the parent and worker collaborated to meet the parents’ needs.

5.2 Section Two: The Established Relationship

5.2.1 “Working together toward a common goal to make sure that we advance ourselves”: The Established Phase

Parent 9: The relationship was just the idea of…working together toward a common goal. And Jane made herself very clear after the relationship was somewhat set up that she would like to see progress. From her point of view…and for her to be able to generate the time which we required, she would like to see goals met…She would put the effort in to make sure she’d see us, as well as we’d put the effort in to make sure that we advance ourselves.

The thrust of the established relationship was parent development or, in the words of the parent just quoted, “to make sure that we advance ourselves”. It was also reported that by this phase parents were more willing to work with the family workers and had developed a deeper trust and respect than previously. All of the parents and family workers and five of the supervisors reported that by the time the relationship was established, the parents had become willing to work with the family worker on their personal issues which got in the way of nurturing their children.

Trusting the family worker was raised as an important characteristic of this phase by six parents, four workers and four supervisors in relation to seven of the cases. Five parents, two workers and two supervisors reported that parents’ respect for the family worker continued to build during the established phase of the relationship.

5.2.2 Parent Actions and Attributes

5.2.2.1 “They were prepared to really bring about lasting change in their lives”: Parent Development

All of the workers noted that it was not until trust was built that they could start working on problems with the parents and begin to challenge them to question themselves and change their behaviour. Parent change, or development, an idea which was also expressed as “progress”, “learning”, “moving on” and “growing” was reported as important by seven parents and workers, and two supervisors in relation to three cases. Two parents reported that during this phase they had experienced such change. This number grew to six by the ending phase.
Family worker 4: I think because they really had reached the decision to do something. You know, in those stages of change models, where people might think about it, and that’s good, you know the door is open and they get information and they know the support’s there but they are not really prepared to make those changes. I think by that stage they had reached this point where they were prepared to, to really bring about, you know, lasting change in their lives.

Four parents, four family workers and two supervisors (speaking about three cases) reported how a significant, but not exclusive, focus for the work was improving parenting skills. Although this was clearly a primary focus for the professionals, dealing with these issues was incorporated holistically into the case work, which was promoted more in terms of its focus on issues in the parents’ lives which negatively affected their parenting.

5.2.2.2 “It made you feel you’d want to do something”: Parents’ Willingness

Willingness was manifested in parents acting in ways different from that reported during the building phase. This included opening up about deeper issues than they had previously, initiating contact with the worker rather than waiting for the worker to come to them, being more attentive to the worker’s suggestions, in particular challenges, and working collaboratively with the worker where previously there was a tendency to let the worker be more directive. One parent talked about parents’ willingness in terms of being “ready”.

Parent 9: You can sit back and say, “Yeah. Whatever. You’ve got a lot of families. Go see those families. See if I care.” And those people that are going to take that line obviously, as they say, are not ready to accept the help. You’ve gotta be ready to accept the help. If you’re going to take that attitude then of course you’re not willing to accept the help. And nobody can help you to be able to accept it.

There were two instances when parents were described as unwilling at times throughout the established phase. Both involved the parents withdrawing from the family worker both emotionally and physically during the relationship. For one, this involved not responding to the family worker’s attempts to make contact, being inconsistent about meeting at arranged times and not opening up about previously negotiated casework goals throughout the entire relationship, while for the other the withdrawal was only for a short period.

The behaviour of the parents described as unwilling contrasted with the reported behaviour of three parents who described never feeling a period in which they did not connect with the family worker. It also contrasted with one parent who reported that she always responded to family worker contact despite not feeling like she wanted to or feeling challenged when she did.
5.2.2.3  “Talk about the true subjects that are close to your heart”: Parents’ Open Up about Deeper Issues

Six parents and workers and two supervisors reported that, during this phase, the parents went into greater depth about the issues concerning them than they had when the relationship was building. This was described as “opening up”. Four parents and four workers specifically linked parents’ trust for the worker to opening up about deeper issues. In one case both the supervisor and parent reported that the parent controls how she responds to workers and is clear that she does not open up to workers unless she feels they are genuinely empathic or interested. Furthermore, one parent and one worker reported that opening up more, assisted in setting casework goals. The parent expressed it this way,

Parent 9: It’s very hard for somebody to identify what you need for help if you can’t express yourself. If you aren’t actually, not comfortable enough to be able to talk about the true subjects that are close to your heart then they might as well not be talking to you. They’re gonna be fiddling with things that aren’t the real problem.

Interestingly, two parents who reported opening up to the worker more during this phase also reported that they still avoided talking sometimes. Two family workers reported similar experiences regarding two other cases. The sentiment expressed by all four was that although the parent made some inroads into discussing their problems they did not feel ready at that time to begin resolving some issues despite the established relationship.

5.2.2.4  “She was able to seek that out”: Parents’ Initiate Contact with Worker

Another difference between this phase of the relationship and the building phase, and noted by seven parents, four family workers and three supervisors (concerning five cases), was that the parent began to initiate contact with the worker. In four cases, this was reported to include other staff from the service when the family worker was unavailable. These contacts would occur outside previously arranged appointment times and could include phone calls and “dropping in” to the service, for example,

Supervisor 7: She would come here, almost in a state of desperation, if you like, and not necessarily at an agreed time. So it might just be a drop in. So there was certainly, for her, a need for support and that she was able to seek that out. Just contrast, you know, from the initial contact, where she was like, “Who are you?”, you know, that sort of stuff. So, that is, so as I said before, that trust had developed...But there would be times when she would be here, she would have to have a cup of tea, and someone (pause). To sit down for five minutes. She just, you know, she just needed space to be...She got to the point where she felt safe. She trusted.

One parent, two of the workers and two supervisors (referring to three cases) talked about how they felt the parents were showing more assertiveness. They said this indicated both
personal change and growth and that they felt safe in the relationship, as they were deciding when they needed support and seeking this out themselves. One supervisor indicated discomfort about this as she felt the worker was not directing the contact, thus not furthering the casework goals in an ordered way. She was also concerned that one of the parents was visiting the centre too frequently. Whilst she empathised with this in terms of understanding the parent’s complex needs and social isolation, she was concerned that it indicated the parent’s dependency and put undue pressure on the worker and other staff, thus adversely affecting the kind of service other clients were receiving.

One parent, four workers and two supervisors (reporting on two cases) reported an experience of parents not initiating contact or initiating contact intermittently. Sometimes this reflected parental empowerment, for example,

Supervisor 3: She didn’t come in regularly unless there was a crisis or if “Court” was happening or something. And then he would give additional support because she would be asking for more. And he very much allowed her to determine what happened, and how much intervention, and how much support was there. It was very much in her court.

This was understood regarding two of the parents. It occurred in response to the parents having extended their support network, so seeking elsewhere much of the support previously met by the worker. The other three workers were only aware of the intermittent nature of the contact rather than reasons why. All of these workers waited for the parent to initiate contact when they needed but two, upon hearing the parent was beginning to fall back into crisis, initiated contact. One felt her relationship was such that she could just ask the parent how she was and encourage her to seek support if she needed while the other offered the parent tickets to an event as a way of making contact in an effort to avoid the parent thinking she was being monitored.

At other times it was related to parents not feeling ready or willing to involve the worker. Such an example, provided below, was given by one worker. This was the same parent who had previously been described by the worker as not opening up readily.

Family worker 6: I think she was became, over time, more open. Less guarded. There were still times that she was guarded but, as time went on, and I mean months, she was very open to sharing things.

5.2.2.5 “We really need to show her that we’re gonna do stuff as well”: Parent Attentiveness and Responsiveness to Worker Suggestions

Parent 9: It made you feel at a stage where you’d want to do something because this lady is extremely busy. She’s putting in a lot of hard work and we don’t want to waste her time with how much she’s work she’s got to do…If this lady is come over
here then we really need to show her that we’re gonna do stuff as well.

All but one parent, all of the workers, and two of the supervisors (speaking about five cases reported) that the parents were more attentive and responsive to family worker suggestions and challenges during this phase than previously.

There were two exceptions to this. One parent was reported as being inconsistent in her responsiveness to the worker. Whilst the supervisor reported that this did not impact on the relationship as far as she could tell, the worker noted that it increased her level of frustration with the parent and made it harder for her to be motivated to engage. This worker also felt that the supervisor did not understand why she went to great lengths to try to re-engage the parent, and said she did not feel supported by the supervisor at that time. The worker reported that she stopped seeking support from the supervisor, sometimes seeking it from colleagues instead, and that this enhanced her feeling burdened by the casework. However, she also argued that when the parent eventually did respond to her ideas she felt encouraged about her approach.

5.2.2.6 “I could talk to them about anything”: Parents’ Trust

Trust for the worker and family service was an important dimension of the established relationship. One worker even raised the idea of trust as the main difference between the relationship the parent had with her, and the relationship she had with a worker from another organisation.

Family worker 5: They felt very, very, what’s the word, cheated, manipulated. They didn’t trust her at all. And they still don’t to this day. So that was just the difference between [the family worker and a worker from another organisation]. They didn’t trust her… [where] I could talk to them about anything.

One supervisor, when referring to two separate cases, said that once trust was established during the building phase it stayed constant throughout. This included one parent who took well over six months to build trust and for whom the journey to trust involved much testing of the worker.

As found in the building phase of the relationship, trust during this phase was closely tied to parents’ willingness and the extent to which parents opened up to reveal their issues in depth, as reported by three of the parents. Two parents reported showing trust by referring friends to the service.

As an example of this, one worker reported the following on the extent to which she felt she could interact with the parent.
Family worker 3: Where there is a definite guard I feel like I then become guarded as to how I am asking for the information. Um, so then we both end up on tenterhooks. Whereas when it’s coming freely, you know, you can say it really casually. And they’re not intimidated by it.

This idea was corroborated by a worker from another case who reported that the parent did not feel the same kind of trust in her dealings with workers from other organisations as she did with her family worker. She spoke of how her trust for the worker helped her reduce the self protective barriers she usually erected with other workers to “cover everything up”, thus reducing their ability to “read” her, and subsequently establish what is required to help the parent meet her needs.

5.2.2.7 “I found that quite surprising, and I was really happy with the responses”: Parents’ Respect

Respect continued to build during the life of the relationship. For one parent who took a long time to trust and who continued to test the worker, respect reportedly developed as the family worker connected with her child.

Parent 2: She come around the following day. I was pretty belted up [as a result of domestic violence]. I couldn’t cope with me kids. Me children wouldn’t come near me because my oldest little one was too scared of the way I looked. Lorraine was there and had a talk to my oldest boy…But it was the way she said it, the way she got Keiran to listen to her…Basically, when she had a little talk to him and he just snapped out of it and started approaching me and coming up to me. And I’m thinking, okay well, because he wouldn’t listen to me and Lorraine just sat down with him and told him what was going on….It improved [our relationship] even more…knowing that she could connect with my son… I found that quite surprising, and I was really happy with the responses.

This was a particularly difficult relationship for the worker and parent, where the parent took a long time to build the relationship and the worker often felt overwhelmed. This was a situation on which another parent had also reported regarding the building phase of the relationship.

As was reported regarding the building phase of the relationship, two parents reported that their developing respect for the worker during the established phase came from appreciation of the depth and breadth of knowledge the worker had about a range of topics beyond parenting and child protection issues. According to one of these parents, by discussing life and current issues more broadly the worker continued to present a more human side to their professional capacity.
Parent 9: You listen to Jane. Listen to the way she talks. You listen to such a wide range of ideas. You can almost see she has dug herself up from a very big hole from a very young age. She has been quite with it from a very young age and got herself trained and put herself through uni…I don’t know, just something there just tells me that she’s, yeah, when she was younger she lived quite a life.

Two other parents reported respect for the worker developing out of the commitment and involvement the worker showed in both the family and also the wider community. For both parents this resulted in an increase in their commitment to the casework goals.

In contrast, one family worker talked about a short period when she felt the parent lost respect for her because he felt she had not supported them as much as she should. Despite the worker feeling they were angry with her, the parent spoke about feeling annoyed and overwhelmed but was realistic about the worker not being able to do everything to meet their needs. The parent added that he and his partner recognised that they needed to help themselves and seek out other supports in addition to the family worker.

5.2.2.8 "It was always very safe": Parents’ Feel Emotionally Safe and Listened To

All of the parents and six of the workers reported that parents felt safe and supported during the established phase of the relationship. This was also noted by three supervisors (in relation to five cases).

Parents reported experiencing the established phase of the relationship as “safe” and “empowering”, and expressed feeling “at home” and less stressed. This involved feeling that the family worker was attentive and responsive to their emotional and practical needs, as well as being flexible, available, reliable, persistent, patient, respectful and non-judgemental. Feeling safe was also reported as important for one parent to “try out” solutions to her problems in a supported environment. Another parent reported that similarities between her values and that of the worker and other family service staff helped her feel safe.

Four parents described how feeling safe and motivated also enabled them to trust and open up to other family service staff. Three parents, one worker and two supervisors (speaking about three cases) reported how the friendly, relaxed, caring and responsive staff at the family service, including administration, other client focused staff and supervisors, helped them feel safe and motivated them to work with the family worker.

The workers and supervisors reporting on this also commented on the important role the supervisor played in encouraging, supporting and ensuring this type of environment and culture. One parent expressed this the following way,
Parent 5: To know that they are here is a nice feeling because this is a nice environment to come into. Um, even so far as recognising the receptionist. Um and the friendliness. Like, there’s no, there’s no attitude. There is no. Like you can phone up, you know, customer service at the bank and you’ll get attitude the minute they answer the phone. You phone up here and it’s a friendly voice. And it’s someone who’s got a positive nice attitude, you know. Even if it’s just a girl who has just filled in and has no idea what she is doing. Or even if it’s the girl you are dropping the child off to. You know, a few people that I’ve met through here in those situations, I’ve seen outside of the centre and I’ve spoken to them. And the worst thing about it is I don’t remember their names. And I get really embarrassed because they remember me. And like we stand there and we can talk for ages. As if we’re friends and we didn’t meet through the centre. It’s a really (pause) it is, it’s like a community.

Alternatively, one parent and one supervisor reported that the parents were not involved with other family service staff, and that this did not appear to hinder the relationship in these cases.

5.2.3 Worker Actions and Attributes

5.2.3.1 “It's like having a spare parent in a sense”: Attentive and Responsive workers

All of the participants reported that the family workers were attentive and responsive to the families’ identified needs during this phase of the relationship. This involved being assertive, identifying and meeting emotional and concrete, or practical needs, and, as mentioned in five cases, developing a relationship with the parents’ children. Five parents, three workers and one supervisor (talking about two cases) reported on the workers’ assertive communication skills throughout this phase of the relationship. This included the workers listening to and being genuinely interested in the parent and explaining their expectations about the process, as well as what was happening and going to happen throughout. For two parents this helped their relationship with the worker because it was in contrast to their reported dealings with staff from other organisations. Another parent also noted that this approach helped them feel listened to and calm.

The relationship enabled the provision of two types of support: emotional and practical. A well established relationship assisted workers to know exactly where to focus the support, in particular emotional support, because until trust was established and the relationship strong, parents did not share the issues about which they needed more intense support.

Providing for emotional needs, which was raised by all participants, involved talking with, calming, being a confidant, “holding” and “containing”. Emotional support was described typically as occurring in a calm, informal friend-like manner. When issues were identified that were particularly difficult for the parent to focus on, the worker provided emotional
support so the parent could proceed, responding to the parent with care in ways previously described. This was so in a couple of cases even after those times when the relationship seems to have been breached in some way. It also included attending meetings with parents, but supporting them to advocate for themselves rather than advocating for them.

Provision of practical support was varied, and included focusing on any need the parent had which they or the worker thought had some bearing on their ability to provide for their children. Rather than focusing exclusively on parenting skills, support ranged from assisting with basic needs such as housing, transport, support letters, referrals to other organisations and information and financial assistance. Sometimes assistance was given for things that might be considered less essential, such as helping parents’ access entertainment and recreational activities yet which are important if families are to share pleasurable experiences. One parent described the practical parenting assistance the worker provided, and how much it assisted her, as follows,

Parent 3: You know, like, she’ll deal with him. Which gives me five seconds to get it together. And she’ll listen to him. The same deal. You know, he’ll even say, Imogen listens. And she doesn’t necessarily take anybody’s side. You know, she’ll put it back to him…And she doesn’t negate how he feels…and with Matthew as well, it’s like, he does it. It’s like having a spare parent in a sense.

5.2.3.2 “I didn't have to make an appointment”: Flexible and Available Workers

Parent 8: I didn’t have to make an appointment. Like, to go. I lived 30 kilometres out of town so if I couldn’t get in to town to make an appointment or whatever, or the appointment time she did have was after the bus went home or whatever, then I could just ring her up and talk to her at, um family support. Which was quite helpful and stuff. Cos otherwise I would have you know, um, been hitchhiking or something.

In order to be attentive and responsive, workers were reported to be flexible in their dealings with the parents, including accommodating parents by putting aside their own work roles and needs, described by one worker as “stepping outside that description or brief”. When speaking about this phase of the relationship, six parents, six workers and one supervisor (referring to three cases) reported this happening. The flexibility also included being attentive and responsive to parents’ needs which were not specifically related to parenting issues.

One supervisor expressed concern about this type of sentiment, in particular when the worker went outside what she felt was the “program parameters”. However, the same supervisor reported supporting and encouraging other workers to meet another parent’s needs more broadly and generally, which was valued by parents and assisted them to develop respect for
the worker. Being flexible also involved adapting how they communicated in a way parents could understand.

Family worker 3: I just think it’s how we relate together. Um, I think *speech* comes into it. Um, in, I talk similar to her. Um, like *not* talking with a plum in my mouth, or you know. And I, I would mirror her speech, I guess, is what I would say. But, you know, I am *me*. And, so um, that has to be comfortable for me as well. Um, like I probably feel a lot more comfortable with *her* than say, a different type of client. But I didn’t have to adjust that much with her…just in terms of the way, the way we’re talking…And I think age comes into it as well. Like um, I’m *older* than Emily but there’s not a huge (pause) and even the way we dress and look, you wouldn’t think there’s a huge thing. That if I am working with an older person, I’m more respectful. So I probably wouldn’t say something like that to them. Um, yeah, so I adapt in that way.

The only times when flexible practice was reported as hindering the relationship was when the family’s needs were so complex and overwhelming, and access to other resources so inadequate, that the workers felt pressure to meet all of the parents’ needs and consequently began to be overburdened by the intensity of the relationship. This type of situation was reported by three workers and one supervisor.

The family service culture helped worker flexibility, especially in terms of creating a sense that appointment times were not always necessary and that parents could “drop in” to see the worker if they felt they needed to. This informal and friendly work environment and culture was reported to assist these parents to initiate contact and obtain support.

Supervisor 8: I think this service, this centre as a *whole*, for them, was an okay place to come. And sometimes, they would trot in, all of them. The mum, dad, the whole lot of them. You know, come in here and have a chat. And I would have a chat. Whoever was here would have a chat, you know, just to see how things were going.

According to five parents, two workers and two supervisors regarding four cases, this also created a safe and comfortable place for parents in the community. This supervisor expressed this in the following way,

Supervisor 2: And she felt really at home coming into the service. And she would come in and she would make a cup of coffee and (pause). It’s what Emily does *here*. She will come in. *She* will put the jug on. She will ask *you* if *you* want a cup of coffee. She doesn’t ever go into the *staff* area. But there’s the other kitchen off the group room. And there are a few clients like Emily who *totally* feel at home doing that. *You* know, and they come in and this (pause) is almost like their stomping ground. Just as much as it is ours.
Another supervisor stated,

Supervisor 7: There would be times when she would be here, she would have to have a cup of tea…and someone to sit down for five minutes. She just, you know, she just needed space to be.

An often reported element of this phase of the relationship, which was also reported in the building phase, although by fewer participants in each group, was that family workers regularly made themselves available to the parent. This was reported by all of the parents, six workers and two supervisors regarding two cases. Being available seems to have reinforced the feeling for four of the parents that they were in control of the process, as it supported their sense of empowerment both to seek support and do it when they were ready. In addition, being able to visit the parents at home was reported as an important part of the relationship by four parents and one supervisor. Alternatively, two other parents valued not having home visits. All six parents spoke of how the flexibility to negotiate where they met helped them feel they were a part of the process of decision making.

The type of approach just described was made possible by a family service culture which allowed for flexibility regarding how and when the service could be delivered. Being flexible and available helped the family workers to be able to respond quickly to parents’ needs and requests. One worker and two supervisors from independent services reported on how their family support services attempted to be flexible enough with how the work is delivered to be available to parents as they need, within reason. This type of arrangement was reported as important for one parent in particular in that it provided for the parent’s need for a space away from the family home.

These supervisors also spoke of how the service was able to be more flexible with length of time allocated for the casework, as long as the focus stays on meeting parents’ needs and there is some positive movement by parents to change. Having unspecified limits on duration of the casework helped, because it made it possible to deal with issues at the parent’s pace rather than the worker trying to force change due to limited relationship timeframes. Additionally, while not explicitly mentioning the family service culture, one parent talked about the value of being able to see the worker weekly for a time, and a worker talked about being able to “juggle [her] load”.

While some supervisors reported supporting this approach, two reported struggles with it. This was tied to a more general underlying question reported by supervisors relating to the tension between deciding what is best for the parent and what is best for the service, for example.
Supervisor 7: Because one of the things I really do try to say, this is what we do. This is what we don’t do. So, workers know that. So what doesn’t happen to programs and workers is that we get dumped with all these really inappropriate referrals from every other organisation in town. So we’re really clear that this is what we do and this is how we do it. And we’re really clear about what we don’t do. But then you get a family, when we’re really clear about what we do and what we don’t do, so what we do is what we don’t do. And especially the best thing for the family. So it’s, it’s sort of a dilemma.

These supervisors said that while it takes time to build a good relationship, and that parent change often takes time, they were cognisant of other pressures related to staffing considerations, resourcing and policy matters. These supervisors reported that as long as the focus of the relationship remained on parent change then time factors were secondary.

5.2.3.3 “It takes a long time before you see the big results”: Reliable, Patient and Persistent Workers

Family worker 4: Change is not going to, it takes, I mean people got to where they are over a long time. They’re not going to move out of that. It’s very gradual. And even, you know, it takes a long time before you see the big results. But all the time you are seeing there is, you know, seeing little steps.

Six parents, two workers and two supervisors (referring to three cases) described worker reliability as dimensions of this phase. Five parents reported experiencing workers doing as they said they would despite difficulties that arose, either through factors arising from the parent or externally.

Four parents and workers and two supervisors (speaking about two cases) reported that the workers were patient in their dealings with the parent during this phase. Patience included taking “slow” or “little steps” or “taking time”. The reported intention was to reduce pressure on parents which may have stopped them focusing on their issues and goals. It also involved “mov[ing] at a pace which is very much negotiated with the client”, even if this meant having to argue with staff from other organisations who were unhappy about the perceived slow pace of the parent’s progression.

Similarly, four parents, three workers and two supervisors (speaking about two cases) specifically reported on the worker’s persistence with supporting parents to reach their goals during this phase. One parent and one supervisor noted that persistence was influenced by the established relationship, specifically rapport, trust, empathy and desire to assist the parent reach their goals.
5.2.3.4 “I come from a position of respecting people”: Respectful Workers

Family worker 7: I try to make, I think, I always try and, like, look at those positive strengths in people and I come from a position of respecting people really. Um, and I guess that’s, you know, it’s a better understanding and a better, um, just coming from that level of respect.

Six parents, three workers and one supervisor in relation to two cases reported family worker respect for parents during this phase. Workers were reported to show respect though the ways in which they communicated and collaborated with parents. This included listening to the parent, informing the parent when they will visit, returning calls and responding to messages quickly, respecting the parent’s choices, valuing difference, being non-judgemental and not forcing their opinion or values on the parent. It also included treating the parent like a “person” and not a “number”. One worker noted that one of the most fundamental ways in which he showed respect for the parent was to learn about the parent from the parent and not through others’ perspectives. Three workers and one supervisor noted that it was also a sign of respect to accommodate the parent’s way of communicating, such as adjusting the type of language used to ensure the parent could understand, and being flexible about swearing.

5.2.3.5 “She is never folded arms. She is never pointing fingers”: Non-judgemental Workers

All but one parent, three workers and one supervisor spoke about experiencing the worker as non-judgemental, or “open minded” during this phase of the relationship. This manifested as workers validating, normalising and accepting rather than condemning actions, circumstances or experiences that parents were not proud of. It also involved workers listening carefully, allowing space for parents to explore options and not “jump[ing] to conclusions”, along with not taking on parents’ responses, such as anger, lack of motivation, swearing and avoidance behaviour, personally. It also involved open and engaging body language.

Parent 9: You know always open handed. Like her body language is always open handed. She is never folded arms. She is never pointing fingers. She’s always got her hands open upwards not downwards on the table, you know. If you want to go into body language sort of thing. She’s um puts herself as very non-hostile or non, again non-judgemental.

5.2.3.6 “She is a lot happier and she’s actually a lot better”: Positive and Hopeful Workers

Parent 1: Fiona [the family worker] is more funnier and, just the way they speak and everything. DoCS speak different to what they do. Cos they’re more, they don’t seem like they’re happy. Yes, they look like they’re grumpy all the time. Because [Fiona’s] funny, she, and she is a lot happier and she’s actually a lot better. Well, just the look on her face. But DoCS just seem like they’re serious.
Four parents, five workers and two supervisors (referring to two cases) talked about the workers’ positive and humorous demeanour during this phase of the relationship. Two parents noted that this helped improve their mood at times and made them more likely to listen to and try what the worker suggested, especially when challenge was delivered with humour.

Five workers also reported that they felt hopeful and expectant about the potential for change in the parent’s life and that this assisted their positive approach. This involved taking a positive attitude, for example,

Family worker 4: I guess looking at, well, things that we can work on to change. And not dwelling on things that can’t change.

However, five workers reported experiencing feelings such as helplessness, hopelessness, anger or frustration in the face of feeling ignored either by the parent or workers from other organisations, which subsequently drained them and hindered their work or the parent’s progression. One worker described this as follows,

Family worker 5: It made me feel this is pretty hopeless. [DoCS have] made up their minds that they are going to lift [remove] these kids…Mary still believes that she can appeal this and go back to Court and get them back. So, I feel a little bit of guilt there that I should be saying to her, Mary, there is no way in the world that you will be able to appeal, and get the kids back. But you can’t tell her that. It is the hope.

Two supervisors also talked about this in relation to four cases, as did one parent. These participants noted how such experiences made it difficult to stay positive during the process.

5.2.3.7 “When I achieved something he said he was happy for me”: Worker Positive Reinforcement

Parent 4: When I achieved something he said he was happy for me. And that was, it really was, supportive. Encouraging. Um, motivating. It was good. Somebody cared.

Six parents, seven workers and three supervisors (speaking about four cases) reported the use of positive reinforcement and celebrating achievements by family workers during this phase.

As expressed by one of the workers,

Family worker 2: I just kept saying, “You can do it. You are doing it. It’s a credit to yourself.” And you could see that, that, she wouldn’t say, “Oh, thanks. Gee. I feel a lot better.” then, but you could see that that was the thing she needed to take home and know that someone said, “What you’re doing is a credit to yourself. Because you’re getting somewhere with how you are. How you are growing. How your confidence is growing.” …And I said, “It’s gonna be a long hard process.” I kept being honest saying, “This won’t happen overnight. This is
gonna, this is gonna take a coupla years.” I said, “The system works slow.”

Parents witnessed their family worker’s excitement about parents’ change. Workers used “stories of success” to motivate the parents, and themselves, to further change. It was noted that such actions improved parents’ confidence in themselves, including feeling confident contacting other professionals for support, and motivated them to continue working for change.

Three supervisors, each from independent family support services, reported that a family service focus on acknowledging, encouraging and documenting parents’ strengths and change was a common experience.

5.2.3.8 "She’s really comfortable in her skin": Worker Confidence

Supervisor 4: The thing that Odette [the family worker] is really able to do is separate out the stuff in relation to um, how people perceive her, in her working role or her personal life and, what she perceives of herself…and I think that’s more about her being really comfortable in her skin. You know, she’s really comfortable in her skin. And she spends a lot of time reflecting. She’s very much a mediator. And I think that allows her to, you know, that’s their experience of her but, “This is who I am.” You know. “This is who I am.”

All but one parent, five workers and three supervisors (referring to four cases) reported that an important element of this phase was the depth of experience and self confidence, both professional and personal, with which the workers approached the parent. It was important for these parents that the workers could talk about a wide range of life issues and interests and were not afraid to go beyond child protection and parenting issues.

Two workers reported that feeling confident and trusting their “professional instincts” was related to feeling positive about themselves as family workers, and that this increased their confidence to deal with the sometimes overwhelming array of issues that the parents brought with them to the relationship. One worker noted that feeling confident in her skills and in the relationship meant that she did not feel threatened by the parent, which was something reported to her by the parent as an experience of other professionals. Two workers and two supervisors reported that workers showed confidence through being prepared to be self-reflective and to keep learning and growing personally and professionally.

However, four workers reported feeling some period during their time of working with the parent which led them to doubt their professional capacity somewhat. As previously noted, three workers felt some sense of helplessness and hopelessness regarding the situation. One worker reported doubts relating to her perceived lack of experience with the multitude and complexity of issues for which the parent required her assistance, along with a perception that
she was relatively unsupported by her supervisor and that the parent was relatively unsupported by staff from other organisations. She talked about how she was “winging it a bit” and felt much more confident when the parent’s needs became more clearly related to her area of expertise.

Family worker 6: I often felt, you know, like I was winging it a bit. Whereas once it got to this stage I had information to give them again. I could work with her as a professional. Work on her self-esteem look at...it was more concrete. I knew what I needed to do.

Three supervisors agreed that workers doubted their professional capacity at times. One stated that a male worker was afraid of the potential for litigation in relation to allegations of misconduct if he and the female parent met at the parent’s home alone, and that he responded to this by meeting the parent in the office unless others were home during an arranged visit.

All of the supervisors and four workers reported that the supervisors had a clear and important role to support workers. This involved being genuinely interested, respectful, trusting and non-judgemental in interactions with the workers and, in turn, building their confidence. The crux of being able to support the workers, which was reported by all supervisors as important but not always occurring, was that they were very involved and active supervisors and that they developed some level of relationship with the parents and workers at their services, for example,

Supervisor 1: I think that I’m a really hands-on supervisor. And so I do feel like I do need to know, you know, families inside out.

Support included listening, providing both a “sounding board” and also alternative perspectives to the work and to issues arising, creating a safe environment for workers to open up, being available for workers to access them for support, and teaching coping strategies as well as more concrete strategies to support families. Three supervisors (reporting on four cases) spoke about how they were more able to support the workers because they were experienced family workers themselves, and so could identify with the struggles the parents and workers faced. A worker and two supervisors (referring to four cases) also suggested that one way of supporting the worker was through advocating for the case with staff from other organisations, particularly at management level.

Some participants reported feeling concerned that they might be perceived to be “stepping outside professional boundaries” regarding the way in which they related to the parent. This idea, which was raised by six parents, seven workers and two supervisors (in relation to four cases) created dilemmas for the workers and supervisors and became a central theme in the
relationships. Consequently it will be discussed in further detail in the final section of the chapter.

5.2.4 “She tried to help me get more control”: Empowerment

Parent 3: She tried to help me get more control. It wasn’t that I felt powerless. It was more that I felt empowered. Then the more we went along, the more I felt like that. It was like I felt, then I probably felt more of an equal. You know, it probably took me a while to feel that I was an equal. And building that back up, that’s an awesome job…It’s like she doesn’t, she doesn’t have to be right. She doesn’t have to win. All she is there to do is pass on her opinion. And it’s not something that I have to take. It’s like, it’s a gift.

Seven parents, eight workers and three supervisors regarding four cases spoke about empowerment. Empowerment was reported as family workers facilitating a supportive “space” for the parents to talk about their issues and hear themselves do the problem solving. As evidenced by this parent’s quote, it involved the worker “building that [idea] back up” in the parent. Two workers described this type of idea as follows,

Family worker 5: They were so simple and didn’t, kind of, think of things like that. I was um, guiding them. Not so much modelling. But guiding them. This is what you need to be doing and that was what the whole relationship was. This is what you need to be doing. This is what they want you to do. That’s what they want you to do. Reminding all the time… It’s what they need to do to beat the system.

Family worker 4: I can see that they’re thinking these things through and they’re making the decisions at their pace. And then they’ll get back to me and say, “Oh, this is what we’re thinking about now. How can you support?” So they’re in control. They are making the decisions.

This involved collaboration where the family workers respected the parents as “people [who] have their own answers” and they did not tell parents what to do. Instead, they engaged in their own dialogue with the parents to ascertain their ideas on what their needs were and how these might be met. One supervisor explicitly linked this to power and not imposing the worker’s power on the parent, but rather providing opportunities for the parent to evoke her strengths and power. Interestingly, she also linked feeling empowered with feeling safe.

Supervisor 5: And I think that he just has the ability to be really mindful of his power. In the way that he will say things. Everything is about choice. It’s not about, “I think that you need to sort this out or else DoCS will take the kids.” You know. It’s about, “What is it that you think you need right now?” It’s more on that strengths-based discussion. More on that strengths-based framework. And I think that that really makes a difference because people will actually experience it as
being really genuine and really, “Oh. This is okay. This is safe. This is safe.”

5.2.4.1 "It’s advocacy without creating dependency": Worker Advocacy

Supervisor 4: Oh, really really strong advocacy skills. And will really take it from where they’re at. You know, I think that’s advocacy without, what’s the word? It’s advocacy without creating dependency, you know. I think that they’re both aware it’s about that balance between being a fierce advocate and being a voice and standing beside but doubling that voice really.

All of the supervisors (reporting on six cases) spoke about the advocacy role the family worker had during this phase of the relationship. Three parents and five workers made similar comments. Advocacy involved assisting the parents meet their needs when the parents’ felt they could not do it themselves or were not achieving the desired results, but not before the worker challenged and supported them to at least try. They felt able to do this because of the way in which their perspective on the parent had developed through the relationship. In all cases it appeared that the degree to which the worker stepped in decreased in line with the improving parent knowledge and skill level, for example,

Family worker 7: She felt they’re not listening to her and she’s the mother. And I said, well, that’s not okay. You need to speak up for yourself. So, would you like me to come along to these meetings? So I started doing that. And, not wanting to take over from Margaret, but just to give her that little bit of support and encouragement to actually go in there and say, like, telling her, yes, what you’re feeling is really valid. What you’re saying is valid. You need to be able to stand up and say that. She said that in a group with a whole lot of experts she wasn’t happy to do that on her own. So I would go along to the meetings with her…and just sit there. And originally she, initially, she expected, I think, that I would go in and speak up for her but, nuh, I’m not going to do that. I’ll be just sitting back. You’ve already told me what you want. Now you need to tell them. And she did. And I watched her grow through that process. Each time we went to meetings she had a bit more to say.

The above includes one case where the supervisor and, according to the worker, an employee from an external organisation, considered that the level of advocacy bordered more on “rescuing” the client. Despite this it is clear that the parent was able to advocate for herself, because she did so with the family worker, even though she may not have done this with others with whom she did not feel so comfortable.

Advocacy was reported as occurring between worker and supervisor (three cases) and between worker and staff from other organisations (seven cases), for example,
Supervisor 4: I think one of the things with Odette is that Odette will move at a pace which is negotiated. Very much negotiated with the client. Which sometimes, um, doesn’t always fit - especially if there’s been a DoCS report and as a DoCS worker involved - doesn’t fit their timeline. But Odette is really really clear. This is the client’s process. This is the client’s journey. It goes at the pace that the client needs it. And, you know, will say really clearly to DoCS, too bad.

Another worker reported that acting outside of the program parameters added stress to the relationship with her supervisor. Two parents and two other workers reported that successful interagency advocacy occurred when good relationships existed between the family worker and staff from the other organisation. They said that when good relationships did not exist, advocacy was less successful. The way in which workers perceived parents to be unfairly and harshly treated and manipulated by workers from other organisations, who were also perceived not to be fulfilling their professional role, or in one case “breach[ing] protocols”, was raised as a motivator by two workers. They said this strengthened both the relationship and also their resolve to advocate for the parent.

The notion of not “rescuing” parents was also discussed in the context of empowerment by one parent, three workers and two supervisors from independent services, for example,

Supervisor 2: She was quite desperate, um, around issues around her son. And maybe that desperation impacted, maybe she also wanted answers as opposed to um, here’s some skills that maybe you need to put into place. You know, that rescue thing.

The essence of this idea relates to helping parents hear and trust themselves and consequently come up with solutions themselves rather than do this for them. In some instances it was considered disempowering, whereas in others it was described as a tool to work towards parent empowerment. When discussing one case, a supervisor reported times throughout the casework when the family worker did more for the parent than the supervisor thought was appropriate within the roles and principles of family work. She described the worker as trying too hard to engage and help the family when the family was not responsive to attempts to engage them. While the supervisor understood and empathised with why the worker acted this way, she was concerned that it was not empowering the parent to learn to assist themselves once the finite resources of the family service were no longer available to them. However, the same supervisor later argued that taking the lead for the family during times of crisis is appropriate, as long as the focus returns to empowerment and supporting the parents to solve their own problems either within the scope of their ability or once the crisis passed. It was deemed acceptable or tolerable where it enabled parents to move past times where they felt overwhelmed, and so might sustain further damage to their confidence.
Two participants from each group (parents, workers and supervisors) reported that another technique used by family workers was to refer parents to other organisations. One worker reported using this specifically when she felt the parent becoming too dependent on her alone for support. Three workers noted that they referred when they felt the casework, and meeting the parent’s goals, was starting to move outside their areas of professional expertise. Also, one of the supervisors talked of how the worker was careful about how many services to which she refers parents, in order not to overwhelm the parents further. Again, this was reported by two parents, five workers and three supervisors (discussing four cases) as being possible due to good relationships with staff from other organisations.

5.2.5 “They’ve been a bit of a team um, against the world”: Collaboration

Family worker 7: As Margaret developed the confidence and realised that she had these strengths and she could do it, um, then it was more just not client-worker, just somebody to actually support her along the way.

The crux of working towards such parent development was that the family workers worked collaboratively with the parents to support and encourage them to develop a sense of confidence, autonomy and agency over their life circumstances and life direction. All but one parent and family worker and two supervisors (reflecting on three cases) reported that the process between parent and worker was collaborative. Although the others did not mention this, they did not report non-collaborative relationships. Collaboration was reported to include ongoing negotiation throughout the relationship about the process where the parent had some degree of authority over the casework process and focus, as expressed by one worker,

Family worker 1: I would say, “I’m not the expert. This is about you being in control and I’m just here as your support person.”

Four participants, one parent, two workers and one supervisor talked about this idea in terms of power being shared. Another parent and worker talked about parent and worker working with or alongside each other. The idea of parents “driving” or “in control of” the process was reported by one parent, three workers and one supervisor (in relation to two cases). This involved practical actions such as together negotiating when workers would visit, and acknowledging, encouraging and supporting the parent to focus on what they wanted to and coming up with their own ideas about solutions. Feeling involved in leading the direction of the conversation helped parents because they could raise personal issues when ready in a “natural way”. Another parent reported that the collaborative approach made it feel like “she was just having a chat”, also making it feel safe, comfortable and natural.

It was also a reported experience of two workers and supervisors (speaking about three cases) that the relationship created a supportive allegiance between parent and worker against what
was perceived as being a mostly hostile wider world, an idea expressed well by one supervisor in the following way,

Supervisor 3: I think just the systems that have been in place that they’ve had to battle through, I think, that has probably made their relationship better in some ways because they’ve been a bit of a team um, against the world. But that can also impact it in a negative aspect that um, she would become quite depressed and frustrated and find the whole thing quite futile because of what was happening. And it would take lot of energy for him to build her back up and say, you know. “No. Don’t give up.”

5.2.5.1 “They will accept a friendly challenge”: Worker Challenge

Family worker 4: I think that they would feel quite threatened if someone was to really pressure them. And say you know you haven’t attended the last three appointments. I don’t know whether like, you kind of, they will accept a friendly challenge that’s sort of a little bit joking and a little bit gentle. But I think that if anyone came in heavy with them they could back off.

It is important to note that collaboration did not involve ultimate parent control over the process, remembering that the purpose of the relationship reported by seven parents and workers, and two supervisors (in relation to three cases), was to work towards parent change and growth. Six parents and family workers respectively, along with two supervisors talking about three cases, reported that workers used techniques that challenged parents to work towards personal change, or, in the words of the parent at the beginning of the chapter, “advance ourselves”.

This included reminding parents of, and holding them accountable to, the goals and steps that had been negotiated as well believing in and relying on themselves. One parent and three workers reported that this was done “gently” or as a “friendly challenge”, an important aspect of which was that it occurred within a supportive relationship. This also involved using humour and enticements, such as free passes to recreational outings, for example,

Family worker 4: And it is a timing thing. It’s about their pace but it is also recognizing… if I leave it at their pace, they might think that they can’t come back. So, it’s kind of those little reminder things. Things like what I can do too. Sometimes there’s things come up like circus tickets. So I mightn’t have heard from them for four or five months but I can ring up and say, hey, listen we’ve got these circus tickets. So it’s like letting them know from time to time that I haven’t forgotten them.

Three workers talked about challenging parents when they were concerned about the parent “stepping outside professional boundaries” with what they were asking them to do. As the relationship strengthened, workers felt more comfortable challenging and such challenges led to parent change. This did not occur during the building phase of the relationship, where, as
previously noted, workers reported concerns that the relationship might be undermined, and so did not challenge. One worker expressed it this way,

Family worker 1: After we’ve got a quite a bit of relationship built then I would use humour or challenge her a bit harder…I remember, down the track too, that I would use that humour again too…So in the early days I would be aware of it and I would be trying to contain. Bringing it back. And containing or focus on something or asking her outright…It was much more freer. And real.

This notion of challenge is also linked to the principle of empowerment. This was highlighted by one supervisor who was concerned that the worker did not challenge the parent enough, and so was not empowering the parent to learn to meet her own needs. Interestingly, the worker agreed to some extent. She felt that she was more able to challenge the parent to focus on the casework goals and professional norms when she felt that the relationship was not under threat. Her concerns were that the relationship was keeping the parent engaged with the service, and if there was a breach she felt the parent would be at risk of leaving the supportive environment of the relationship and service, thus not receiving assistance with her problems.

Related to collaboration and empowerment were reports of family workers teaching and sharing knowledge with parents during this phase. This was reported by all but one parent, five workers and one supervisor. It involved teaching parents how bureaucratic and legal systems work and about parenting and personal growth strategies. Three parents and one worker noted that this provided options, and enabled parents to look forward to having to rely less on others once they were no longer working with the worker.

5.2.5.2 “She shakes them up in a little shaker and pours it out on the table”: Set Goals and Plan

Five parents, six workers and two supervisors (speaking about two cases) reported that a characteristic of this phase of the relationship, which was different from the building phase, was that parents and workers planned what they would work on. This involved negotiating a set of structured goals to focus on with the parent, which related to what the parent thought they need to concentrate on. These goals were described as realistic and achievable with realistic timeframes. A very important dimension of this was that parents felt supported to achieve these goals rather than left to their own means, for example,

Parent 9: And she takes our problems. She shakes them up in a little shaker and pours it out on the table and says, “Let’s have a look at the mess that’s left behind.” And picks through it and identifies key points…And at that stage we had multitude of problems. Huge amount of problems. But she’d only ever focused on a couple of things. She wouldn’t overwhelm us with a huge array of different options to try to choose from.
5.2.6 “Shared care”: Parent and Worker Empathy

Supervisor 2: I think within this service, well with some of the clients, there is a certainly shared care between client and worker. I would say Emily really cares about Martha. I think she cares enormously about what happens to Martha. Um, very concerned for Martha’s welfare. That doesn’t mean that she knows what’s going on in Martha’s life in all its details. But she knows little bits….That’s a two-way thing…And Emily bought Martha a charm (pause) that was connected to the baby she’d lost. Like it was a charm for that baby. And, she brought it here and left it here. And she said, “I don’t know when Martha will be back at work but here is a present for her just so that she knows I’ve thinking about her.”…It was certainly a caring from Emily. It was certainly um, an act of friendship. An act of respect. An act of (pause) humanity and care and I can understand…She checked to see if it was okay to do it. If it was alright to leave it here. And to make sure it didn’t get lost. She didn’t try and hide it. I mean, Martha lives in town. Emily lives in town. It’s not gonna take a scientist to work out where she lives. I mean, God she probably knows where she lives. Um, but she didn’t take that step and so she didn’t invade her personal life.

All of the parents, six workers and all of the supervisors in relation to all of the cases reported that mutual empathy was an important dimension of this phase of the relationship. Where some parents, workers and supervisors used the term “empathy”, others used a variety of terms for what can be described as empathy. This included describing a perception that the other person had a “shared care” or “level of understanding”, could “imagine”, “felt for” or “felt happy for” the other. It was a very clear finding that the ability to “stand in the shoes” of the other was important. This not only involved the worker feeling empathic towards the parent but also, as reported by three parents, a worker and supervisor respectively, some parents developing empathy for the family worker. Four parents reported how the empathy they felt towards the family worker helped them understand and accept that the worker could not focus exclusively on their needs but had either their own issues that came up or other clients to work with. Two parents reported feeling empathy for other parents who they identified as being in a similar situation to their own. As expressed above, three supervisors (speaking about four cases) agreed.

One family worker and two other supervisors (commenting on three separate cases) reported how two parents showed care and appreciation by doing and making things for the service. This also included completing handyman tasks and, in the case of one parent, fundraising and advocating for the service.

Supervisor 8: He would say to me, “Oh, we love Fiona. She’s fantastic. She’s, you know, helping us.” And the spin-off with that was that they would come in here for playgroup and
Hewasavely clever bloke. He could build anything and fix anything...He was in here and he liked us and he wanted to thank us. And so he’d fix things...and I know for him that was very much about (pause) that was his appreciation.

5.2.7 “They seemed to go from crisis to crisis”: Vulnerability and Dependency Remains

Family worker 6: They were a family that very much went, like so many families so often, they seemed to go from crisis to crisis...there were so many different issues coming at different times.

Despite the reported parent change and growth in confidence, all but one of the family workers and supervisors reported that the parents were still very vulnerable. Parents’ personal family support, as distinct from professional support was described as improving for only two of the eight families during this phase.

Despite the support, the breadth and complexity of the parents’ needs remained a constant issue throughout this phase of the relationship. Parents were described as being overwhelmed, unmotivated and “downtrodden” and “worn out by the system”. Furthermore, it was reported that new critical life episodes arose for six of the eight families of the families during this time, and this included one of the parents with improved family support. The family workers had to provide the bulk of support for these families because the parents did not know where to seek assistance themselves. New needs arose, related to issues such as statutory child protection intervention, physical and mental health crises, sexual and physical violence and relationship breakdown. One other parent who had improved personal family support, along with one whose life circumstances had stabilised significantly, did not report such episodes.

The outcome of these new critical life episodes, as reported by six of the parents, four workers and two supervisors (about four cases), was that all but one parent were said to depend and rely greatly on the workers during this phase of the working relationship. The supervisor involved in the relationship described it this way.

Supervisor 8: There was just this real sense of this family actually needed this support and there was no one else that was going to advocate for this family. You know, we were trying to bring in other services...the bottom line was this family were pretty much doing it by themselves.

Whilst the extent of need was reported as continuing to emerge as the relationship strengthened, it is interesting to note that it was not described with nearly as much intensity by participants during the beginning and ending phases of the relationship.

While the focus of the established relationship was parent change and growth, this phase was characterised by much more. This included the parents being willing to work with the family worker, trusting and respecting the family worker and feeling both emotionally safe with the
family worker and appreciative of their involvement in the parent’s life. Family workers worked collaboratively with parents to empower them and facilitate an informal but professional space for parents to hear themselves talk through their problems, learn to trust themselves and practise solving problems in a supported environment. Part of empowerment also involved the family worker gradually reducing support as the parent increased in their confidence. It also became apparent that the service environment, including the supervisor and the flexibility allowed, shaped the relationship. The following section will explore the ending phase of the relationship.

5.3 **Section Three: Ending Phase of the Relationship**

5.3.1 “We don’t stay in people's lives forever and they don’t want us in their life forever…but…it wouldn’t surprise me if this woman is back here”

5.3.1.1 “She started to see herself in a different light”: Parent Personal Growth and Development

Family worker 8: She started seeing herself as being capable. So, and the problem was starting to look a lot different…We’ve explored lots of things from the past which we believe had been dealt with and cleared. She started to see herself in a different light.

When beginning to discuss the final stages of the relationship, participants described parents as having resolved some of the issues they had at the beginning of the relationship, and as becoming less vulnerable, more confident and requiring less support than previously.

Six of the parents acknowledged that they had made great personal development gains since being involved in the relationship, for example,

Parent 4: Towards the end it was like wow, I seem to have so much together now. When you compare that to a couple of years ago, it’s a huge difference…My life situation was getting better and happier and more secure. I was feeling more confident in myself.

Whilst the interviews were not designed to elicit data on outcomes for the children or changes in parent behaviour, seven of the family workers and four supervisors (referring to five cases) gave a similar picture of improvement. One parent was described as having improved self esteem and two as being more in control of their life circumstances. This meant being not “stuck around the patterns” from their past, and more actively creating life the way they wanted it to be. Another parent was described as more able to accept support from the family worker than previously. Another worker and a supervisor described this idea as follows,

Family worker 3: I think she knows she can achieve more. So her confidence has built. Um, and the things that she needs to talk about have changed. Um, well, no, though they haven’t changed. But the emphasis she puts on them have changed.
Because she’s got other things in her life. And she’s also shifted to a place where, “Okay, this stuff can happen around me. That’s okay because I know it’s happening. I’m not hiding from it any more.” I’m not out there telling the world. But I know it’s happening and I’m acknowledging it within myself.

Supervisor 5: [When they first started working together] I was thinking this is gonna be a slog. This is gonna be a long walk. And when I saw her walking here with her beautiful baby (pause) just looking, you know, so full of confidence, I thought, Far out! She is either in love, she has won Lotto, or she has worked on some really big things and come out the other end.

Five of the parents spoke of appreciating what the relationship had contributed to their life generally. In reporting this, they acknowledged the improvements they felt they had made in their life circumstances overall, which positively influenced their parenting. They acknowledged how their support networks and access to necessary resources had improved since having worked with the family worker, and that these were things which they could not access or had not wanted to access previously, but of which they were appreciative now. This new position helped the parents feel more confident and empowered, as expressed by another parent,

Parent 2: If it wasn’t for her, I wouldn’t be here today. Basically, I’m just glad that I met her because I was so down because I got in my head that I was not capable of doing anything and I kept telling myself stuff like that. Basically, I’d just been told things like, you know you’re not this, and you’re not so bad at doing this, you know. I guess that’s what I needed to hear, you know. Make you feel a lot better. I can stand up and say, I am strong. I can do this without anyone else.

In three cases, as reported by the parents in two instances and the supervisor in one other, the parent had gained so much confidence that they were now referring others to the family service.

One worker and one supervisor (speaking about two cases) linked decisions about case closure to improvements in child wellbeing. In connection with this, one supervisor associated decisions about closing structured contact with improvements in parenting skills. Four workers specifically related closing contact with general overall improvements in the parents’ lives, and in management of their issues, which positively improved their parenting.

5.3.1.2 “She’s got all the tools. She can do this”: Casework Ending
One parent, seven family workers and all of the supervisors explicitly stated that there must be formal closure to the casework. This idea stemmed from understanding that the relationship is a professional relationship for a professional purpose, that is, to meet the parents’ identified needs through casework. In this instance, each family service involved in
the study was represented by the supervisors. This idea was expressed in a typical way by one supervisor in the following way.

    Supervisor 6: Family work is very much about, this is the sort of things we do in terms of (pause) you’ve got that referral you do these types of things. When things are going beautifully, or they’re okay, we’ll close the case.

Three parents, a family worker and a supervisor reported being very clear about the relationship between ending the casework and their professional expectations of parent change and development. According to these participants, the family workers discerned that the parent no longer needed the service by the extent to which they had reached the previously negotiated case plan goals, and that they challenged the parent about this. One family worker talked about how once they considered the parent had the “tools”, that is strategies and supports to continue on their own, they began to talk to the parent about closing.

    Family worker 1: I was saying, giving her the messages that she did actually, that she was coping quite well and solving things and it was time…She wasn’t getting so overwhelmed with things. She was able to sort things through. That it was time that we, that we stopped… She’s got all the tools. She can do this.

What is evident here is one of the fundamental principles of family work, that of empowerment. One of the parents, two of the family workers and one supervisor used the word “empower” to describe their experience of the final phase of the relationship. Five family workers reported how part of this process was to challenge the parent to think about and work towards greater autonomy. Empowerment involved family workers focusing on life without the relationship, helping the parents work towards autonomy and setting the parents up with strategies to succeed. It also included providing positive reinforcement and celebrating the achievements of the parent regarding the case goals that had been addressed, and referring and introducing the parent to other family service programs and external services as appropriate during this time. As expressed by one supervisor,

    Supervisor 1: And that, Jane as the family worker really works on, you know, that strengths-based model. Which really encourages families to become independent. And, um, is really stretching and challenging them to. Actually, whilst, um. She assists and supports at the initial stages, of whatever their vulnerabilities are, whatever their supportive needs and connecting them with other services, it’s also about encouraging them to be strong advocates for themselves.

In a manner consistent with the kind of empowerment practice that underpins this type of family work, as noted by participants, closure was carried out by family workers and parents
negotiating the needs of both parties. The workers were characterised by parents as being supportive, positive, respectful and collaborative and as communicating openly throughout the process. This involved workers clearly communicating what they had in mind regarding how the process would unfold, their rationale for why the relationship must come to an end formally, and a vision for the parents’ future life without the relationship.

Two parents, four family workers and three supervisors from separate agencies also reported how the family worker acknowledged and celebrated the parent’s growth and personal development during the time of the casework.

Supervisor 5: There was a lot of discussion around celebration and life after the relationship. And I think that that was really significant. It was like a, like a little warning thing, you know. We need to think about this. It’s not gonna go on forever…He usually gives about three or four sessions beforehand. Just to drop it in. Just starts to talk about, you know. “So when, you know, when we’re no longer meeting, how will you actually use it and”, you know. So start to tie it in.

5.3.2 “It’s a weaning off process”: Gradual Casework Closure

Despite the reported casework closures being as unique as the casework had been, a common feature for five cases was a “weaning” or “easing” off, rather than an abrupt ending. One worker used a metaphor of weaning a baby off breast milk and on to being bottle fed, when describing this process of moving from high level of support to pulling away slowly and encouraging the parent to do more than previously to meet her goals independently of the worker.

Family worker 8: It’s a weaning off process. Yeah. And exactly how she was doing with the baby. Introducing “bottles”, you know, she was introducing her own “bottles” by doing more stuff.

A number of reasons were given for why the workers took this approach. Six of the family workers, along with six of the parents and two supervisors (reporting on two cases) reported that the family worker was supportive of the parent during the closing phase. This involved continuing to be attentive to, and meet the parent’s emotional and concrete needs. According to three parents and four family workers, family workers still “checked in” with parents to see how they were going, but it was done in the spirit of the parent being in control of whether or not they required assistance. The rationale for this was to assist with the transition from workers being formally and easily accessible and responsive, to being no longer as available to meet the parent’s need. It also was consistent with the empathic and caring way in which these workers operated, as it recognised the relationship as being a time of genuine deep
connection with the family worker, and that abrupt change to this pattern was deemed to be potentially detrimental to the parent and to the progress made up to that point.

“Weaning off” involved the family worker beginning to initiate contact less often with the parent but still attending to their needs as deemed necessary. Where the parent was unwilling to cease working with the worker, as reported in two cases, the family worker nurtured them through the process, reducing the number, frequency and time between contacts gradually or “gently”. This included accommodating the parent’s willingness or unwillingness to disengage and responding in the way the parent had communicated they needed. The supervisor involved in this case noted that the family worker understood and was responsive to difficulties that the parent was experiencing regarding disengaging. Another worker deemed that she was unable to meet the more complex needs of the parent so referred her to another service. To make this process easier, she attended a handover meeting with the parent and stayed involved with the parent, but with decreasing involvement over the following few months.

Seven relationships closed over a period of a few months, with more contact by workers at the beginning of the phase turning into longer periods between phone calls by the end. After a few months the family workers made a final contact to clarify that the parent was happy for the case to be formally closed. Furthermore, all of the family workers invited the parent to initiate contact if they felt they needed to in the future. This is a matter which will be explored in more detail in the following section.

The closing period for one case was quite short. In this case, the supervisor reported that the parent and worker had both come to the point of deciding that the goals had been met, independently of each other but at a similar time. The process was similar to that of “weaning off” described above but the timeframe shorter. This parent was described as being quite confident to continue meeting her needs without the family worker’s ongoing support. The parent described the process this way,

Parent 4: He actually approached (pause) I was getting to the point where, okay, I’m here now. I’m feeling better. What am I going to get out of this one? And he obviously picked that up. And he made the suggestion that we wind down. And left it open to sort of leave me on the books for a couple of months and then we’d basically wind down.

One case involved the family worker continuing to initiate contact with the family and help with issues as they arose, even though the original issues had been resolved. Her rationale, described below, was that it was still part of her job to support the family even though the children had been removed. This was particularly the case with this family, as changes to the family dynamics were so abrupt.
Family worker 5: We came out of Court. Quarter past three. DoCS said, “We’ll be round to get the kids at four.” And Peter said, “They don’t get home from school till a quarter to four. Can we have a little time to say goodbye?” So they gave them until 4.30…Well, that part of the relationship, um, finished. The child protection (pause) well, we had nothing to work on any more, as far as that. The kids were gone. But, I continued working on with them. Guiding them in Centrelink…Just as an easing out type of thing and to finish off. That’s part of the job too. It’s not just there for parenting.

The worker continued to have ongoing contact. Even though the focus of the original referral had been taken away, the relationship took the form of a rolling, or ongoing, relationship where new case plans were negotiated as new referrals to other agencies were made.

Only one case was described as being closed in a two-step process. The family worker and supervisor reported that the parent was perceived to have undergone change, but had not necessarily completed what had been agreed upon as the casework goals. They reported that the parent became difficult to engage and kept the worker at a distance, as she did during the building phase of the relationship. The supervisor interpreted this as meaning that the parent was not ready to deal with the deeper issues related to her parenting, but rather was only willing to accept support for her crisis needs. Because the case plan was considered still operational, the “three-strikes” policy, described earlier, was utilised. This meant that the family worker was instructed to leave it up to the parent to seek support when she was ready. After a few months the worker made contact with the parent and spoke about closing the casework. The parent talked about her experience of the ending phase as not being negotiated with the worker. She experienced being told the casework was due to finish and responded with hurt and anger, emotions confirmed by the worker. However, this parent also talked about how she had reflected on her situation and acknowledged that although she had made gains, she remained vulnerable enough to feel that she required ongoing support from the family worker. She reported that, upon realising this, she advocated for herself and engaged the family worker in discussion about her feelings regarding the proposed ending of the relationship. The worker reported that she realised she had upset the parent with the insensitive way she had closed the contact, and so sought out the parent to end the casework with more care and explanation.

Family worker 6: And I think she was genuinely … maybe a little bit hurt, or you know. She went…I felt like she went back into herself a little bit, and that but… I realised that I hadn’t handled it very well and I said, “Look, can I come and see you?”…And we talked.
This parent then reported feeling empowered when it became clear that the family worker was prepared to listen to her view and accommodate them by re-engaging and opening up the opportunity for an ongoing relationship, as the parent deemed she needed. The parent was later able to describe her experience of the ending phase of the relationship in the same way as others did.

Finally, two family workers reported that strong connections with workers from other agencies assisted the ending phase of the relationship when the parents were referred for more specialist assistance. However, while in one case the parent responded to this by using the new service and ceasing contact with the family worker, in the other case the parent continued to seek the family worker out for support in what was described as a friend-like way.

5.3.3 “Don’t want to disengage. What the hell is that about?”: Resistance to Casework Closure

Two supervisors commenting on four cases reported that they were prepared to challenge the family worker if the casework was not being formally ended in what they considered an appropriate timeframe, as occurred in four of these relationships. This idea was expressed by one as follows,

Supervisor 4: Don’t want to disengage. What the hell is that about?...Some of the family support workers make such strong relationships it is really difficult to disengage. Really really difficult to disengage. But you know, then I need to be the, okay. “I hear that. I hear you are emotionally attached to that. I hear what your heart is saying. You know, I understand that.”, you know, but “Take a step backwards and let’s just look at it in the wider context. Okay. So here you are with your, you know, six or seven clients…Olivia’s over here, she’s got 22 and none on a wait list. Bob is over here. He’s got 25. He’s got nine on a wait list. Okay, so, what would you like me to tell your team?”

These were described differently from the other relationships also described as strong relationships, where the parents and family worker were closely connected and had worked through very complex issues. The supervisors were satisfied that, once challenged, the family workers closed the case appropriately, except in one case where the supervisor remained unclear as to whether or not the case had been formally closed. As expressed in the comment above, workers were reminded of the need for family support services to operate within fairly substantial resource constraints.
"She is that type of family support worker that you want to keep around forever, keep using her as much as you can": Ongoing Need

Parent 2: She was the only person that helped so why should I let go now? I think I’ll just hang on for as long as I can and see if she will help me with the few things...She is that type of family support worker that you want to keep around forever. Keep using her as much as you can.

The same six parents who reported significant improvement in their personal resources and circumstances also reported that they still felt vulnerable regarding meeting some of their current and as yet unmet needs. Two family workers and two supervisors (speaking about two cases) reported in a similar fashion, for example,

Supervisor 1: I think that um, that all of us need those supports over time. And I think that those ongoing relationships are the best and the strongest because there’s background information that you have, and you’ve seen them, you know, in stages. And you’ve also seen them grow as people.

The six parents experienced this with the relationship continuing in an unstructured and intermittent way. Although the family worker was not supporting the parent to the same extent as before, the parent was still receiving some support. One parent likened this to "leaving home", feeling she was sent into the world to meet her own needs but with a supportive link that would continue into the future and that they could draw on for ongoing support if they deemed they needed it.

Parent 5: When Odette left, when I decided to leave, I said to Odette, “Odette I feel like I’m leaving home.” And she said that was a lovely way of putting it. But I did. And I still do, like I mean, I still, I miss her and there are times that I really do think I need her but, I mean, I’m trying to do it all by myself now and, so you know, take my own life in some direction...Life has gone on. The children have grown older. Very different stage. Like, my priorities have changed. I’m healing. I’m learning. Everything has changed. Whereas when you have that support (pause) Like I wish the thing with Odette could go on forever. That’s a huge hope here from me. That it goes on forever... Why? Because I’m always going to need her. I am always going to need that support. I am always going to need someone to, sort of, um, help me with the children.

A further two parents talked about needing an ongoing "safety net” and that the knowledge that this was there, whether they sought the family worker out again or not, was enough to reassure them and help them remain stable. These six parents reported feeling that simply knowing that the potential is there for them to return to the worker for support was enough to support them in their endeavours to work through their life challenges themselves. Five parents spoke about feeling reassured to know that they were free to initiate contact with the service.
5.3.4 “It feels unfinished. We just have this connection”: Ongoing Relationship

It is clear that there were differences of opinion about whether casework and the relationship were the same thing or should be thought about differently. Although seven family workers and all of the supervisors (about all cases) equated the end of casework with the end of the relationship, two parents, two workers and two supervisors (speaking about two cases) also reported struggling with this idea.

Family worker 5: It feels unfinished. We just have this connection. That every now and then, there’ll be something that they need…I’ve got clients that have been in and out of this service for as long as I’ve been here. 15 years. They come in and they’re out. In and they’re out.

Supervisor 7: We don’t stay in people’s lives forever and they don’t want us in their life forever. And this woman’s sort of going okay. Probably would never be perfect parenting or perfect home life, but it’s okay, you know...So that’s what I meant that they don’t need to be still working together. But, there’s still, you know, it wouldn’t surprise me if this woman is back here.

The two parents reported resisting formal closure of the intervention when they interpreted it to mean ending the relationship. They reported interpreting the close of casework with potential loss of support and, for one parent, a friendship. Six parents reported feeling that they will continue to receive support from the family worker, and seven reported that their family worker supported and accommodated this desire for client initiated contact after the formal casework was closed. They appeared to be comforted when they realised that the end of the formal casework need not equate with ending the relationship with the family worker.

An important factor in this, according to six parents, four workers and a supervisor, was family worker willingness to be attentive to the parents’ need and to be supportive in an ongoing way, despite their obviously large caseloads or the way this was different from how other services operated, for example,

Parent 3: I don’t know what’s really changed a lot, to be honest. It’s like, it’s hard to say because if I still need to find out something I come and ask these guys. But it’s like, I don’t necessarily need, need to be on the books I guess. She’s got other clients and things that probably need it more than I do, but I still know I can come back. I’m sort of off the books, but still on. I’m still a friend, you know…They’re still here, you know, if I want to come and talk….And, I know Imogen would still call around my place, if I asked her. Or, you know, she comes around just for a visit.
5.3.4.1 “I think there’s a real deep trust that we develop with the clients”: Trust

Seven parents and one family worker identified trust as central to the relationship during the final phase. Two participants expressed this idea the following way,

Parent 5: When the relief worker invited me to come in here I didn’t want to come. Um, but that was also to do with the fact that I didn’t want to start this whole conversation over with somebody else. It wasn’t a case that someone could just walk into my life and pick up for two weeks while someone was off sick. Um, I don’t, my personal feeling is you can’t do that. This is, um, a relationship definitely based on trust that is built over time.

Family worker 8: So I think there’s a real deep trust that we develop with the clients. And they know that we go back there with the problem. “We know we can trust you.” But then there’s more trusting of their own skills and abilities the second time round.

It gave parents hope that they would get a response if they sought help from the family worker, or indeed anyone from the family service, in the future. According to two parents, it was also reassuring that seeking help again would not be as difficult, because trust was already established with the family worker, for example,

Parent 4: And there’s some background there as well so we don’t have to rehash. If I ever need him again there would be a good story in between.

When speaking about the experience of trust regarding the way in which one family continues to initiate contact with and seek support from the family worker, one parent and the supervisor in that case spoke about the idea that trust was never lost, and said that this was why they continue to return to the family worker. One parent was hopeful that the family worker would respond if they initiated contact again, and another trusted and appreciated the family worker so much that she referred her son to the worker for counselling.

5.3.4.2 Professionalism

Most of the family workers and supervisors struggled more with the notion of remaining available for the parents after the casework has been closed than did the parents as it was closely tied to notions of professionalism. Two family workers and two supervisors (reporting on three cases) also commented along these lines.

Supervisor 4: There were periods within that relationship where I thought as a supervisor that maybe it was time to disengage …Life was going on okay…They’d done a whole lot of stuff. A whole lot of stuff. Then there was a bit of, um a lull. And in that lull, I was advocating to disengage. Um, and Odette and I had quite a heated debate about that. Um, I think that, you know, even though, um, you know, even though sometimes it’s difficult for clients to come back into the system… holding
them open on the books is a bit of a double edged sword. You know, they’ve got a lull period. Everything is going fine at the moment. So are we keeping the file open because it will make it easier for them to re-engage? Are we keeping it easier because we know they’ll come back? What are the values that sit underneath that? Um, so I had quite a few, um, quite heated debates with Odette around that. Because, I mean, the place where I come from is that where there is a lull and the work has been done, you know, that the client feels able to do right now. It’s a process of disengagement. If you need to come back, come back.

Others explained this in terms of being in the situation where the workers listen to people “who have never really been listened to before”. This, they argued, creates an unrealistic expectation about the relationship, and takes the focus away from the professional reasons why the family worker is being so attentive. These participants talked about making sure they kept the perspective firmly about it being a professional relationship even though there might be friendship-like qualities within it. One supervisor was also clear that the family workers were not interested in or need to know updates about how the parent was progressing. Another did not see it to be the family worker’s role to provide friendship-like support in an ongoing way, but rather to identify the parenting needs and meet them and leave the parent equipped better to meet her needs and access supports herself.

One family worker, quoted below, also described feeling that the parent was becoming too dependent on her, and so referred the parent to other services and tried to lessen contact herself. This was also partly because she felt the parent was now in a position to help herself more, but was resisting this. She reported that she felt concerned that the relationship had come to be perceived like a friendship for the parent. Although she struggled with this, she still engaged with the parent in a way which the parent reported as being no different from when the parent initiated contact with the service.

Family worker 7: I am always really conscious of that sense of dependency and, I will try and refer people on or, or, back off a bit if I feel that is happening…I’ve just kept pulled back. And it’s more, she’ll still bounce stuff off me but it’s like, well, I think she knows. She’s got the confidence now. She’s actually okay, and she can do stuff…So now, she’ll drop in and have a cup of coffee. But it’s, yeah, we don’t actually have a relationship. She said, a funny thing, she said to me the other day, she said … “You’ll have to call in and do some cooking with Matthew.” “But I don’t work with you any more.” I didn’t say that to her but, yeah. So she’s still sort of maybe there’s a sense they were still actually happening.
5.3.4.3  “There was an empathy there”: Empathy

Parent 4: There was a certain level of understanding. I’m not just a piece of paper. There was an empathy there.

Another important dimension of this phase, as reported regarding this struggle, was worker empathy. This continued a theme of empathy that was present throughout the entire relationship and will be explored in greater detail in the following section of the chapter. During the ending phase empathy was raised by five of the parents, six family workers and three supervisors (referring to three cases). One parent reported experiencing the family workers as caring, especially those who kept contacting the parents after the casework was formally closed. One way in which empathy was experienced was that family workers encouraged parents to initiate contact again with them, or with anyone from the family service, if the need arose.

5.3.4.4  “I wasn’t left high and dry”: Workers Available for Ongoing Support

Family worker 1: I always say to them, “You can always ring me up if you need to check in. And we,” you know, “We can always have time on the phone. And then if things, you need more support with that down the track, you always can come back into the family centre. We’re always going to be here.” So that, that gives them, yeah, to know that they’re not out there on their own. If things get a bit tough they can pick the phone up. And some do. Every now and again.

Four parents described how the family worker made themselves available after the casework was formally closed. This included encouraging the parent to make contact by dropping in to the service or ringing. Five family workers agreed that remaining available to meet parents’ needs when they initiated contact was an important part of supporting the parents. The parents were mainly concerned that they were still vulnerable and needed support despite the gains they had made.

Parents spoke of acknowledging their ongoing vulnerability and need within the context of their progress. They valued and responded to such offers from the family workers.

Parent 4: Um, I wasn’t left high and dry. The support was still there if I needed it. It was really reassuring. I’ve got his phone number somewhere.

The outcome of this, despite these struggles over professionalism, was that although the formalised casework aspect of these relationships ended, all of the relationships were conceptualised as offering an enduring support for the parents which they could utilise to meet their changing needs. Some parents likened this to a ”safety net”, for example,
Parent 3: A lot of my mates have seen where I’ve been and seen where I’ve come from and seen where I am. And I attribute, you know, of course I’ve done that as well my part. But out of all the organisations this place, out of DoCS, DADHC [Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care], mental health workers, all of them, this place has always been there. And, it’s like being a tightrope walker, and it’s like, you know there’s a net. It doesn’t matter how many times you can do it and get away with it, you know that they’re there. You know that if you fall, that they are there. And that’s, it’s really important to me being a single mum, that I’ve got that for me.

To accommodate this, and partly influenced by the empathy and trust that had developed between the parent and family worker, the family support services facilitated a practice whereby parents could return to seek support if they felt they needed to.

Family worker 1: Apart from not seeing each other physically I think the relationship still exists. Definitely. In fact she gave me big hugs when she saw me. One to start with and then gave me a hug to leave. But the relationship’s still there. It’s just that we don’t, I don’t support her physically, if you like, or emotionally in …in a structured kind of way.

This “open door policy” was encouraged by the supervisors and was consistent with family work principles of supporting families’ needs in collaborative and empowering ways. Even parents who did not make use of this policy appreciated it, as they felt empowered by the reassurance of the potential for support.

There was reported agreement amongst some parents and workers that although the parents had become more confident, this did not necessarily mark the end of their need for future support. Five parents, six family workers and three supervisors (referring to four cases) reported that parents “dropped in” to see the family worker after the casework was formally closed. One family worker talked about the idea of parents initiating contact in an ongoing way as a way of receiving a “tune up”, or ongoing maintenance, to keep moving forward with their life and prevent a recurrence of issues they had originally come for. This worker felt quite comfortable with this idea and identified with it personally.

Family worker 8: I call it a tune up. Cars need tunes ups. I need tune ups myself, you know…and we’re here.

Reported reasons from the parents for initiating contact ranged from seeking support for new issues that arose, providing updates about how they were going, seeking support for issues that friends had and seeking refuge in a place they knew was safe. One parent had not made a special effort to initiate contact but went to see the family worker when she was at the service for a parenting program, and thanked her for her help. As previously noted, one supervisor reported that although parents dropped in to provide updates, the family workers did not need to know this.
Four parents reported empathy for the worker by recognising that the relationship was a professional relationship, and understanding that the family worker was busy with other clients and that formalised casework with them must close.

Parent 5: And sometimes you just want to ring for a chat. But then them being a family support worker you know that they’re out seeing other people. That’s my personal thing. I do worry about things. Oh, but she’s got other people to see.

This was brought about by a family service culture of welcoming all comers through an “open door policy”. This type of policy was referred to by four family workers and three supervisors, and it was reported across each of the four study sites. It is based on the notion that people’s life circumstances, and consequently their resources to deal with them, change and that personal growth is usually a gradual process that occurs over time.

Supervisor 5: It’s really about their readiness… What we have to acknowledge is that sometimes people, families, have no forum where they can say, “My life sucks.” and be heard. And sometimes that’s all they need. They just need to be able to say, “My life sucks. It’s shit. This is what’s happening.”…And sometimes it’s enough. They don’t need anything else. They can go off on their merry way and then they came back a year later and they, “Blah blah blah blah.” That’s all they needed…And it is part of a journey. And it is part of people’s own self discovery that with anything when people first say, “I want to change.” Or, “I want something to be different.” They’re hoping that it’ll be a miraculous, painless thing that occurs. And as they actually move through their journey and are challenged…it can become, a very painful place to be…I think that the relationship is about being able to identify and know when a person is not ready to go there. And acknowledge that some people will jump out because they’re not ready. The timing is not right for them to go to that place…That stuff needs to be dealt with. And then, we’ll still do some stuff but when that stuff is completed then we can actually move to a different place.

While five parents expressed a preference to have the same workers, with three reporting they would see only their previous worker, two were prepared to speak to other workers at the service. Three parents reported trusting that the type of experience they had with the family worker would be similar with another worker from the service because of shared qualities between family service staff. This came about through having experienced the informal approach of other staff at various times throughout the relationship. Nevertheless, two of these parents did report feeling it would be easier to work with the same family worker as there was already history and trust built.

Analysis of the ending phase of the story of these relationships suggests that the relationship is different from the casework service and that although casework may close, the emotional
connection between the parent and family worker which is developed through the relationship
is ongoing. These findings suggest that parents and family workers experienced that while the
intervention was formally closed, the potential was there for the relationship to remain open.

Family worker 4: But in a lot of ways too I see the relationship
as now as much more they see it more as a resource that they
can tap into if they think, oh Jane might know that. We can
ring.

5.4 Section Four: Personal versus Professional Dimensions of the Relationship

5.4.1 “Kind of like having a friend. Kind of like having a mother. Kind of like having a
confidant. Kind of like having a counsellor. Kind of like having someone to teach
you how to be a parent as well”: Being Real in Role

Parent 5: I could talk about everything. I could talk about my
break up. I could talk about my ex-partner. I could talk about
courts. I could talk about everything. It was a support system I
didn’t have…Kind of like having a friend. Kind of like having a
mother. Kind of like having a confidant. Kind of like having a
counsellor. Kind of like having someone to teach you how to be
a parent as well.

An overwhelming theme emerging from the participants’ stories about the relationships
related to the delicate balance between a professional and a personal dimension central to
these eight relationships.

Whilst it was unanimous that the relationships existed for professional purposes, all of the
participants also described a personal dimension to the relationship that was friend-like in
nature. As previously described, being seen to be “real”, authentically relating to the parent as
person to person, and sharing something in common, was reported as helpful to building the
relationship. It also apparently helped the parent to build trust with the worker and open up
about the underlying issues impairing their parenting. Again, workers being seen as authentic
and genuine in their emotional responses to the parents was reported as an important factor in
the parents believing the worker really cared about them. This seems to have continued to
assist the relationship during its established phase. It influenced the extent to which the
parents responded to the worker’s suggestions and challenges, and began believing in and
relying on themselves. However, as outlined above, the deeply personal connection was
reported to create some difficulties for workers when disengaging. Workers reported that they
had to deal with breaking an authentic emotional connection with someone they had come to
genuinely care for, and whom they knew cared for them, and who they believed would
continue to experience times of vulnerability without ongoing support. This created an
interesting dilemma for their practice and required great skill and discretion to maintain the
professional/personal balance and mitigate potential for misunderstanding.
This section will explore the friend-like and professional aspects to these relationships, how they emerged along with participants’ perceptions of them, and also the subsequent dilemmas emerging and the skilful ways in which they were managed in order to maintain professionalism.

5.4.1.1 “What do you think I am? A robot.”: Being Real

Family worker 2: I bumped into her in a pub, and she goes, “This is me fuckin counsellor! What are you fuckin doing here?” I said (laughing), “I’ve gotta drink too! What do you think I am? A robot!” So yeah. It’s the human qualities for us.

The key element of a personal dimension to the relationship was discussed by most parents and workers in terms of workers displaying their humanness and fundamental sameness as the parent. This idea was also described by five parents, seven workers and one supervisor (referring to two cases) in terms such as being “real” or “genuine”, being seen as “a real person” or “just another human being”. These respondents also talked about a personal connection or some kind of similarity they shared with the worker.

Displaying one’s humanness was reported in connection with the workers presenting with a friendly and welcoming manner. This was reported by seven parents, five workers and one supervisor (referring to two relationships). One parent, four workers and the supervisor (referring to one case), spontaneously used the word “real” during their interview. Parents spoke about it being an important equaliser and helping them connect as they had some insight into the worker.

Parent 3: She just came across real. She just came across as the person you wished was living next door to you. It’s like, there was no airs or graces. It’s like, this is me and that’s you and I can meet you on the same level. I’m not above you. I don’t have all the answers but I might have some things that can help…She is who she is, and she doesn’t change. It’s like, you know, whether it’s a good day or a bad day, Imogen’s always Imogen and that, to me, is real. It’s like, I can’t cope very well with people who, you see them all the time and they’re always good. They’re always good. And you’re thinking, you’re lying to me. You can’t always be good. You know, it’s like a little bit of realness goes a very long way.

Family worker 4: They seem to have a capacity to build really good strong relationships with some workers. Not all workers. Like, they have, um, just a more formal relationship with some workers. But other workers, they seem to just really build something that goes, you know, it’s more informal than that formalised sense. And they seemed to really value that. And I don’t know, I tend to think it’s with workers that come across probably to them as being a bit real.
This was a difficult concept for participants to define, and so it was described in terms of various aspects of worker behaviour and how the parents felt about this. Seven parents reported that workers showed this by coming across as sincere, genuinely interested and empathic, like them, honest, not coming across as “infallible” and, human and friend-like.

Parent 3: It was nice for somebody to actually go, “[My son, Matthew, is] beautiful. He is really nice.” And, “You’ve got a lovely house here.” And, “You do a good job.”, you know, and, “Look at your plants.”, and stuff. It was nice to have somebody actually not go straight into all the paperwork and to have that more human contact…It made me feel a lot more that she wasn’t better than me. She was on the same level as me…I suppose it is, in a sense it’s like, not to appear infallible. It’s like, you’ve got chinks in your own armour…It’s a bit like rolling your own cigarette and having your own cigarette. It’s like, you’re a real person. You’re actually a real person. You’re not just somebody who’s read it all in a book. Got it all out of a book and now is gonna tell me what’s wrong with me. It’s, it’s more human.

Parent 9: Well who are you going to get? And what are they going to do?...Um, if they’re gonna pull out number 4567, you know. Take me into the room. They are gonna charge me $200 for an hour’s visit. And they’re gonna put 4567 back in the box and they’re going to go on to 4653. Um, and it just doesn’t mean anything to them. It doesn’t mean anything to me. And it’s completely empty. Where Jane she doesn’t put a cross the idea that you are a number. She, you know what I mean, you’re a person. You’ve got a name. You’ve got an identity. You’ve got a life. Um, and she never loses sight of that.

Being “real” was also exemplified as being treated as a human being by a human being. All of the workers talked about how they fundamentally shared an equal status as humans with the parents. This involved relating to the parent person to person, rather than as an expert with supposed special and exclusive access to knowledge.

Family worker 8: I think that’s often where the connection is. That people want another human being to treat them like a human being. Regardless of what the problem is or regardless of the background or anything else. It’s, yeah, it’s just another human being.

Acknowledging that the parents were fundamentally the same human make-up as themselves changed how the family workers felt they could respond. All of the family workers talked about how much they cared about the parent they were working with, and about what happened to them. In some cases this was said to extend to other family service staff as well. According to the workers, this type of behaviour involved acting with sincerity, honesty, informality, familiarity and being “natural”, genuinely interested and empathic. The supervisors described worker behaviour as genuine, authentic, empathic and honest.
A key way in which a person’s “realness” was experienced was for those involved in the relationship to identify with each other in some way, for example,

Family worker 2: See, you create this rapport that, see if you don’t, I don’t know, that’s, that’s, this is very (pause). This is a secret (laugh). If you don’t feel like you like them, or you don’t feel like their narrative is hitting a chord with you, wherever my values and core beliefs are, it’s not healthy.

All of the parents and workers reported some occasion at some stage during the relationship when they drew on similar or mutual experiences to help them find some point of similar connection with the other. While this occurred for most during the building phase, it continued throughout the relationship. All of the parents reported liking the worker. All but one intimated this when speaking about the building phase. The other one, who was reported to have engaged with the worker intermittently throughout, did not state this until discussing the ending phase. This parent took a particularly long time to connect with the worker and establish trust. Similarly, all of the workers reported liking or feeling affection for the parents at some point in the relationship. For two parents and two supervisors (speaking about two cases), but no workers, this was even described in terms of a type of “love”.

Supervisor 4: I think that one of the downsides of being so, um, genuine as family support workers, is that people come to love you. And want you in their space. And want to be your friend. And get great joy out of seeing you once a fortnight…And I think that that’s a reflection of our society. Which is a really sad thing to say but I think that it is. People are really isolated. People are lonely. Um, people struggle to connect, you know, when they’re moving into community or moving out. There’s so much movement. Um, and I think that that’s really really difficult. And, that family support worker may be the only constant. The only constant in their life. And I think that that’s, you know, that’s difficult. I think that that becomes a burden, you know. It almost becomes a burden for family support. If I disengage from this client they’ll have no one.

Points of connection included mutual interests or experiences, such as the parent whose partner had known the worker’s children at school, or the worker who acknowledged own her experience of inadequate parenting at times. It also included some sense of connection with the worker when the worker connected with their child, as reported by four parents.

All of the workers and parents reported feeling more willing and relaxed about working together and finding the relationship easier to maintain and progress, where there were shared understandings, experiences and interests. Identifying with the worker marked a turning point for the degree to which parents connected with, and subsequently trusted and opened up to, workers. The following sums up this very clearly.
Parent 6: Um, I could be sitting in the pub having a drink and he’ll come in and play the pokies and we’ll just sit there and talk. Yeah, so his personality I can relate to.

Parent 5: I really liked her…She was just a really nice person. Just really, you know, I was very comfortable…What made it that? Um, to be honest I think if that were someone, if it had been someone else that I wasn’t that comfortable with…I probably wouldn’t have stayed with it so long. Um, and probably still had that problem. I really don’t, I really, in my experience I don’t think, throughout all of this and all the different people that I’ve had counselling me, um, supporting me as such, it is all to do with um, how people (pause) how people click. Literally emotionally click.

While two workers disclosed quite personal experiences to assist this connection, other workers assisted the connection by different means, such as physical appearance being similar to the parent’s, the way they interacted with the parent being more like the parent’s natural way of interacting, and their depth of knowledge about a wide range of topics of interest to the parent. This was appreciated by some of the parents and reported in the following ways.

Parent 4: He’s done a fair bit. He knows a lot of things. Um, I have a tendency to be a bit of a fringe dweller and I was aware of some of the things that he was talking about and so I thought, okay, you know what you’re talking about.

Parent 9: You just look at Jane you can, sort of, get a picture that she is someone who’s lived a life as well. Just from, just her visual appearance.

Some workers reported finding this easier than others, particularly where they felt closer to the parent in areas such as personality, values and socioeconomic status or background.

Family worker 7: I think probably Margaret was the first client that I actually sat down and had a cigarette with because she said, “Do you mind if I smoke?” And I said, “No. Not at all. As long as you loan me one. I’ll pay you back next time I see you.” And the thing she said to me was, “Oh. My dad says you never expect to get anything back. I’m giving this to you. It’s your smoke.” So, yeah, we clicked really well.

Although worker self disclosure was not necessary to help the developing relationship, when used appropriately in the work context it had remarkably positive consequences for the relationship and parent.

Family worker 3: Well, that’s where my disclosure came in. I felt like I needed to shift her. Um, and so I just disclosed to her that I had recently lost a baby as well. I gave her no details…She knew nothing about the condition. What had happened. I didn’t go into the process or anything like that. But the fact that I disclosed that, her response was, “Oh. So you know.” And I felt like she (pause). It was an instant rapport. Because she found that I was on the same level. Even though
our situations were different. She didn’t know what my situation was, and I did say to her my situation was different. Um, but I think she felt like all of a sudden she could talk about that baby and everything around his death. Um, she could be honest to a degree…I was still a person who experienced stuff as well. And that’s all that she needed.

Workers reported perceiving that parents responded to feeling a sense of sameness with the worker, and picked up on aspects in the worker that they shared because they realised that this helped build the relationship.

Family worker 5: So, you had to go in there and you had to be at their level. And you had to sit in amongst, on the old car seats, you know. And they’d be smoking and puffing away. So okay, you’d have a cigarette with them. So that you were one of them. Um, so that you didn’t sit there like, go in there in your nice, kind of, dressed up, better than you kind of attitude. You had to go in there, and you had to talk their language. You had to be them to, to be comfortable. And that was comfortable for me to do…Everyone is different so you’ve got to get a sense of what’s going to work with that person. How am I going to, how am I going to work with this person? Build that trusting relationship? Because, it’s that first meeting with the family, it’s that important to build that trust…You’ve got to go in there and be one of them, and not, not, mmm, you can’t judge them.

One supervisor described it as a “weird…intertwining of lives” which came about as parents responded to their perception of the worker as “real” and friend-like, thus showing the parents that the workers were credible and could be trusted because they were like them and had experienced life difficulties themselves. When the parents perceived and experienced the genuine responses by the family worker, they reciprocated. When the parents felt the family worker trusted them enough to share something about their personal life, they trusted the worker.

As noted in Section Two on the established relationship, being informal and presenting like the parent, assisted workers become like a friend, “just someone to actually support her along the way”. It seemed that parents could concentrate on improving their life circumstances with someone like them beside them, and so were able to access information and services they could not access on their own, and not concentrate on the differences between them and the professional. According to one supervisor, it also helped workers find the profession less difficult to work within.

Supervisor 4: The majority of the work that you do with family support work is difficult, complex, sad, tragic. A whole lot of issues around, you know, grief and loss. A whole lot of stuff around um, falling through the cracks. About not being heard. About not being valued. About being a potentially really dangerous difficult volatile situation. And I think that for um,
for family support workers to have the opportunity to work with
a love client actually helps to redeem your faith in mankind…
And I think that that really provides a glimmer of hope.

5.4.1.2 “She's probably one of my best mates”: Being Friend-like

Coming across as real and treating the parents as “human beings” was characteristic of well
connected relationships which appear to share many of the features of friendships. Indeed, in
the process of describing the relationship two parents spontaneously called the worker a
“friend” or “mate”, and four others said their relationship with the worker was “like a friend”.

Parent 3: It's like, yes I do drink coffee. Yes I do have a
cigarette. Yes, I’m human, like you. And, I’m no better and no
worse, but I might have some information that can help you.
And then, when you actually get to know the person, it's like,
double bonus! You know, double bonus…because she’s
probably one of my best mates.

In describing the important characteristics that set their worker apart from other professionals,
the six parents reported the ways in which they felt the worker was available to them in the
same way a friend is, and even more so at times. They commented that the relationship was
informal and companionable like their friend relationships. These parents also noted that they
could talk to their family worker in the same way they do with their friends. They felt the
worker was a good support and confidant, was genuinely interested in them and empathic.

Parent 2: Um, I know it’s going to sound silly, but there was no
one there when, she was the only person who drove me…when
I needed to have an abortion. And I guess that made it strong
because she’s a family support worker and she sat there and
waited for me to go into the operation and come back out. And
that was, like, three hours. And she sat there for three hours and
waited for me to come out and, you know, what family support
worker is going to drive all the way from here…and back again
just to do one thing for a few hours. I guess there’s a bond there
and she makes me feel comfortable and supported. A friend,
like, a family support worker like Lorraine can actually do that.

Five workers and three supervisors (referring to four cases) also spoke about the notion of
friend-like elements to the relationship. In describing their relationship, the workers described
an informality and care which went along with a supportive role. Descriptions such as how
they would “sit around and chat” understated how they intentionally used informality to
create an atmosphere where the parent could relax into the relationship and concentrate on
their needs, rather than the worker or the relationship. Two workers also reported how they
were genuinely interested in what the parent had to say, kept the parent’s confidence and
learned from the parent. Four workers noted that they did not expect to get anything from the
parents, but two reported that they appreciated it when parents did show support for and
encouraged them.
One parent and three workers reported thinking it could have been possible to have developed a friendship with the other person if the relationship had occurred outside the work context. However, they all said that the professional context put a stop to this.

Parent 7: I think we get along really well. Um, yet it’s only counsellor/patient thing. I think outside of this (pause). Different circumstances, I reckon Martha and I would probably get along really well.

Family worker 2: It was like an old mateship too. Because she’d come in and we’d nearly be taking up conversations from the last time, you know. And that’s how easy it was for me. I didn’t have to write down, oh, issue, issue, issue, to bring these up again…I mean, I couldn’t say I’m good friends with her. But, you know, it’s weird, in the outside world if it hadn’t been this relationship we would have been real good mates. So, but, there’s limits to that too because of your professionalism. And they pick that up too. So sometimes that can be actually a, not a comfort, but it’s, you know, they’re happy with that too. That you’re not going to be too pally either.

All of the workers and supervisors who mentioned this idea were adamant that while there might be friend-like elements to the relationship, these working relationships were not friendships in a personal sense. They also reported feeling uneasy about what the friendship-like aspect meant regarding breaching professional norms.

Family worker 5: As soon as they introduce you as their friend you get shivers up your backbone, and you, well, it’s a professional relationship.

Only two parents reported sharing such concerns. The primary issue for the workers and supervisors was that the relationship should not stray from its professional purpose.

Supervisor 6: There was centre boundaries around (pause) when you’re here and this is going on, this is what needs to happen…But also the personal boundaries of, you know, like, I’m your worker. I’m your family worker and we’ll make some arrangements about when we meet. Rather than it just becomes a, whenever you drop in. And it’s almost like (pause) I’m not your friend. And I’m, this isn’t your home. So, some boundaries needed to be sort of, reinforced there…And for workers, it’s things like, you don’t, there’s no socializing. There’s no seeing people. There’s no going to their kids’ birthday parties even though they invite you all the time. There’s no giving them your phone number, you know, there’s none of that sort of stuff. “I’m not your friend.”, you know. “And I’m not gonna be in your life forever. You don’t want me in your life forever. Trust me. This is how it is.” So, you know, so really clear about that.

Those who spoke about this issue reported that close relationships were acceptable only as long as the reasons and focus remained professional.
The tension between being informal and presenting in ways that likened the relationship to a friendship, and being formal and keeping some professional distance, did not appear to put obvious pressure on any of the connections that had been established between the parents and workers.

However, it was reported that pressure was brought to bear on a few of the worker-supervisor relationships and on workers personally. Being perceived to act or wish to act contrary to professional expectations evoked challenge from the supervisor. This created tension between the workers and supervisors involved. While the supervisors displayed empathy when dealing with the workers in these situations, they also informed the workers of the other pressures on other staff in the service and other parents on the waiting list. Being reminded of the professional context of the relationship in this way seems to have evoked a pragmatic response from the workers, who were able to refocus on the task at hand, put the emotional aspects of the situation aside and act according to professional norms.

Finally, despite the similarities, the relationships were clearly identified as different from friendships. All of the parents who likened the relationship to a friend relationship noted that another important aspect which set it apart was that the worker was completely attentive to them and did not expect any support or attention back from the parent regarding the worker’s issues. This was important because it reduced the complexity of the interaction, and meant parents did not need to provide support and could concentrate completely on their needs being met. One parent expressed this in the following way.

Parent 5: It’s different than with friends. Because with friends you have a short space of time, because you both have children, well in my situation all my friends have children. Short space of time to get through what you’ve got to say before children interrupt. It was uninterrupted freedom to sit there. And you knew you had two hours in which to talk and, sort of, get it all out. And air it…It’s different with a friend because with a friend you say your stuff. She says hers…Do you know why it’s not as complex. It just dawned on me. Because I’m not sitting there listening to Odette’s problems. That’s a lot of it. She is just listening to mine. And I don’t have to deal with hers.

5.4.1.3 “Just trying to keep that into perspective and…”: Dilemmas that Emerge

Supervisor 8: When you see that going on and you feel quite helpless as worker, you think, how does the family feel? How helpless must they feel? So it was sort of this, sort of, you know, flow on of emotions, if you like. And I guess, I mean, Fiona is a pretty experienced family worker. She’s been around for a while. There was sadness with this family because of what was going on. And, sort of, just trying to keep that into perspective. And keep it as a professional, you know, relationship in terms of the family and this family, yeah. It was
a really unique experience, this family, because of all the bits. And it kind of kept moving from what the supports were, which meant what those emotions were attached to, that too.

Understandably, these complex multi-layered relationships characterised by such deep emotional and “real” connections were not without their challenges. Another supervisor described it as follows.

Supervisor 7: I think that this worker hung in there really when she probably shouldn’t have in terms of her program. But that was about the needs of this family and this mother. And the need being that, which I said before, there is already some rapport here and there is some trust here and there is a whole lot more you need and there’s a whole lot more support we have to, sort of, work through. She’s hanging in there for that reason. But it would be just detrimental to that woman, not to their relationship, because it would have been over, but detrimental to that woman to make her start dealing with that whole process again. So she hung in there for that…Yes, we have a lot of care. But we need to keep into perspective about this is who we are. Of course. Because we’re human. And you feel. And you get attached.

Six parents described how they experienced these relationships differently from many other professional relationships in which they had been involved. However, two parents reported experiences of similarly deeply connected, trusting open and informal relationships that they had previously experienced. For the six parents, this included feeling more emotionally connected, confiding in the family worker more deeply than with other workers and expecting or asking of the worker things they did not expect or ask of other professionals. This was expressed by one parent in terms of feel safe and connected as friends.

Parent 3: I suppose I’ve got the safety, and it gives me that, that I can let go in a sense. Because I know if it came to the crunch, whether it was two o’clock in the morning on a Sunday, I could still ring and she would be there. And that’s like, that’s all I really expect in a friendship.

As evidence of the complexity with which the workers had to deal, six parents reported how the emotional connection and trust they felt for their worker intensified the depth they shared issues affecting their lives, and how well they responded to worker probing and challenge. In the case of four parents who described a high level of care for their worker, it also meant they worried about the worker’s wellbeing. Three workers, and three supervisors (referring to six cases), talked about the differences between these relationships and others, by commenting that the workers did more for the parent than they would normally do as family workers. In response to the high level of need experienced by the parents, most of whom did not have anyone else they connected to at this fundamental level of respect and trust, all of the workers reported becoming attached and experiencing many of the emotions the parents felt. Seven
workers were reported to respond to the parent in ways that could be considered to be “stretching” professional boundaries.

By coming “from a place of heart, not a place of head”, family workers were sometimes torn between what they perceived the profession dictated they do, and what their conscience urged them to do dealing with another human being. This could be as simple as driving a parent home, or as complex as suspending judgement and action on some parents’ indiscretions in favour of waiting and seeing if the parent changed. Although uncomfortable about acting this way, those workers were nonetheless clear about the purpose of their decision being underpinned by a focus on meeting the parent’s identified needs. The two workers who described such occasions reported that they acted out of concern that the relationship would be undermined if they were to adhere strictly to what was considered correct professional behaviour. They said they gave the relationship primacy, although not at the expense of child safety, and supported and monitored the parent closely. This is not to suggest that the worker allowed increased risk to the parent or children. These workers, and the two supervisors supporting them, reported that despite the closeness, the primary principle driving the workers was that of child welfare, and that they used their discretion about what they knew of the parent and the situation, and the relationship, to teach the parent alternative ways of behaving. The following provides an example of this rare type of circumstance.

Family worker 6: Before she went to Court I went to her house and she was quite (pause) drunk, the day before. And I knew that was anxiety, however, she had, um, Vernon with her and he was sick. And I could see he was quite soiled, so I prompted her to change him. And she was rather, you know, under the influence of alcohol. And, you know, she even noticed. She sort of cleaned him up and it was all very matter of fact. And she was more anxious - and I knew that - about a court appearance the next day. And when she changed him I said, “Oh, you notice that the soiling actually did go through to his clothing as well.” “Oh! God. I’ll have to change him.” And I started thinking, “Do I need to notify on this?” And I said, “Look. I’m going to tell you this now. I know that you’ve been drinking. And I know you’re stressed about tomorrow and facing him in Court. But if this occurs on a regular basis I will have to do a notification.” “I’ll be alright Lorraine.”, you know, “I’ll be fine. It’s just that, you know, I’ve got this pressure.” I said, “Okay. Alright.” So I just let that go. And I thought if I do see something again I will notify in the future.

Supervisor 6: Because she was so overwhelmed with everything going on, the result is that you’ve got a little kid that you actually need to attend to. And so, while some of that stuff went on, you know, through all the madness of all the crisis and every other issue going on, it was always about, “What’s happening for your kids?” And that would pull her back. That
was something that she would, like when you would say something about, “And what about your kids?”, for her it was, even though she was struggling with so much, for her that was almost, “Mmm.” Like, a point that she would come back to. That, you would sort of get her attention around.

These kinds of situations were reported to create more difficulties for workers during the building phase of the relationship. They talked about being concerned that adhering strictly to professional norms would create some of the barriers to the building relationship described previously, as there was a danger it placed workers in what was perceived to be a distant and unempathic “expert” role. Four workers described such situations as much less of an issue during later phases of the relationship, and said that they dealt with them through humour and “gentle” challenge. These workers, and one supervisor, were clear however, that challenging parents was not possible until the relationship was established, as the parents would respond negatively rather than proactively in relation to the issues raised.

Family worker 1: I used to have to challenge her sometimes. But how I do it is in a way, I guess, they don’t end up feeling judged. I have the relationship built first. And the trust there. And hold them in a safe and secure place. So after that, and we’ve got a quite a bit of relationship built, then I would use humour or challenge her a bit harder.

Supervisor 5: I also think that there was more of a, more challenges, I guess, that were made around, “Okay, so do you think that that is keeping you here? How do we actually leave this here?” Whereas initially there’d be lots of stuff about listening, holding, containing, and all that sort of stuff. And then there was a switch to, “Okay. So what do you need to take with you? And what do you need to leave behind?” So I think that there were more challenges made.

Perhaps the biggest difficulty relating to such personal connections with the parents was that workers were left vulnerable to being “worn down” by the pressure associated with responding to the parents at such a close emotional level. This difficulty was raised by most of the workers and supervisors.

This problem included being aware of issues, which only came about through a close relationship. Seven workers, and two supervisors (referring to five cases), talked about how the close emotional connection, and associated empathy and affection the workers felt for the parent and their circumstances, resulted in having similar feelings to the parent. This included feeling excited about parent change, overwhelmed by the complexity of issues, frustrated at limited access to helpful resources, a sense of injustice when they felt the parent was treated unjustly, and deep concern at disengaging because of a perception that the parent would be left unsupported.
This was made even more difficult for two workers who reported feeling that their supervisor did not fully appreciate the link between well connected relationships and more flexible professional norms, and who expected them to be more distant from the parents while at the same time encouraging and facilitating a family service culture that valued informal interactions. Whilst one worker noted that she could discuss these issues with colleagues, the other said she “carried it” and it affected her out of work time. Despite this, she persisted with her approach as she saw gradual improvements in the parent regarding the goals they had set.

5.4.1.4 “…keep it as a professional relationship”: Being in Role and Using Professional Judgement
It is clear that grappling with these dilemmas required great skill and sensitivity. Underpinning the nuanced and sophisticated way in which the family workers and supervisors managed such issues was a fundamental acknowledgement that these were professional relationships comprised of participants with roles, and negotiated through the workers’ and supervisors’ advanced professional judgment. They managed this by removing the “façade of being a worker” and so standing before the parent as a person, but as one who was encircled by professional boundaries where the participants had distinct “roles”.

Family worker 1: I don’t hide behind a façade of being a worker. I mean I will share my own little stories. Or, I will share, you know, even the impact of, like, the sort of parent I was and how I wasn’t. I guess there’s a few little tools I might use too. That I wasn’t such a good parent and, you know, I only repeated the pattern that I learnt. And still at some stage down the track, and you know. So I would talk from my own experience of not only for me as a child, how that hurt me, the damage I can see in my low self-esteem and all that. But the, what I did and how I saw it damage my child. But it took me to grow a little bit to understand that. That’s part of being real. And um, it’s like gently challenging them. Doing it in a way that they can hear without them feeling like I’m criticizing, you know.

A primary principle underpinning the relationships, and which was raised by all of the participants regarding all cases, was that this was a relationship focused on the professional goals of meeting parents’ needs and change and growth. This principle was the starting point for the roles of the respective participants. The general idea was that each participant had a role to play in achieving the outcomes relating to the goals of parent growth and child protection and well-being. If roles were not being fulfilled, then questions were asked of the participants and expectations made clear, indicating that there was no point continuing working together until this became the focus. Four parents reported clearly that if the personal and professional aspects of the relationship were not in balance, and the focus did not remain
on the parents’ goals, the relationship was not the type of relationship that they felt it should be.

Parent 3: As much as I love them dearly as friends, they’ve got a job, you know. And they do it so well. And I know how bad things can get. And I know how much people can need people. It’s like, you know, got to make that appropriate space.

All of the workers and supervisors regarding all cases agreed with the following.

Supervisor 2: We have had clients who really have got no boundary between them and the worker’s role. And keep stepping over it. Keep, you know, we have lots of it incidences were clients invite staff to go to personal functions. And we don’t go to personal stuff. Um, but their awareness, or their acceptance of that, they become very offended. And they can’t seem to, aren’t as comfortable accepting their role, or, the role of client. Which it is the role. If you are coming to the service you are not a worker. You are here as a client. And so that’s always a bit of a power (pause) and it is a power struggle. It’s power over who’s doing what. You know, it’s my job to do this. And it’s, you know, you can be as open or as closed as you wanna be. That’s not something that he as a worker can determine. But we can assist you on working on your issues.

From the parents’ perspective, workers fulfilled their role by maintaining the parents’ confidentiality, and by not disclosing so much that the focus went from the parent onto the worker, but keeping the focus on the parent, which sometimes could include putting personal issues aside. Six parents said that in many ways their relationship was better than a friendship, because there were “rules” about confidentiality, and they found their worker was non-judgemental and knowledgeable about how to meet their needs. One parent expressed this as follows,

Parent 7: You know my friends can boost my spirits too. And they are there. Don’t get me wrong. I have some really great friends. But sometimes what they don’t understand is they are half the problem. So I can’t exactly go up to one of them and say blah… Well, Martha’s not them. They cause a lot of anxiety in my life. They have lot of depression problems going on and anxiety problems and kid problems. So, there’s only so much I can deal with myself. And being able to come and release that to Martha, that’s (pause). You know, Martha isn't overly different to my friends. But she has confidential reasons, so she can’t go and repeat what I’ve said unless she is subpoenaed. So that’s a big difference I guess. That that confidentiality is there.

As already mentioned, the personal aspects of the relationship were a key to engaging with the parents, and they influenced participants’ responses to one another. But also, by the very nature of the work being focused on meeting people’s human needs, they were inseparable from the professional dimensions. The professional relationship would not have occurred
without some connection at a human level. To do successfully required skilful professional judgment to balance friend-like characteristics with professional roles.

Six workers described what they did to bring the more personal features of the relationship into the foreground and ahead of the professional dimensions. Three workers described how in some cases it was more difficult to find some point of similarity with the parent for the parent to identify with, so they skilfully presented themselves in a way they perceived the parent would respond. While sometimes having to portray themselves in a certain way was further from their “natural” or “real” selves than at others, at all times it was important to present their humanness authentically, that is, to be real in the professional role and to feel comfortable with what they were doing.

Family worker 5: And sometimes you feel as if you are being manipulative. But you’re not. You’re just trying to find a way to best work with that person…But I think the connection was just that, it’s hard to say, that I was real. I was a real person. I wasn’t just someone from an agency. I was, um real…Um, just because I could come down to their level. And, um, talk at their level with their friends who, um, I’m not being classist here but, you know, I had come from a little bit of a higher socioeconomic level than that and …I could talk to them about anything.

Four reported how they cared about and felt affection for the parents but were guided by norms about professional conduct. In seeing the parents as human beings first and clients second, they held the parents in close emotional proximity while being bounded by professional relationship norms. In addition, the ideas about the relationship being friend-like were expressed by all of the parents in the context of a strongly held belief that the relationship existed for professional purposes.

Parent 4: And don’t get too friendly. There’s a level of professionalism. One of the people who used to come out to the farm years ago she just got too personal. And she ended up talking to me about her and I knew everything about her…I mean Leo said a certain amount about himself. But obviously he knew when to stop. It was much much more about me than it was about him…I don’t know a whole lot about him, because he didn’t keep talking about himself. He knew when to be quiet. But he was still able to give enough personal information without being too personal. The similarity is that we, having a connection, made the connection stronger to know that…And he was able to relate to that directly by giving me his personal experience without getting in-depth with it.

The supervisors, along with some of the parents and workers who mentioned this, agreed that establishing “the rules” of the relationship, including setting the relationship apart from the
notion of friendship right from the beginning, helped. Two supervisors explained this as follows.

Supervisor 7: We’re really clear up front, who we are and what we do, and what our roles are. What we can’t do. But we also, we are also very clear up front too about our obligations under the Act, the Care and Protection Act that, as mandatory reporters, what we do. And what that means for the families that we work with.

Supervisor 2: It’s still that knowledge that we’ve got roles. That our job is to be here as the worker for them and it is our job to support them. And it’s, you know, we’ve got our job. And they have got their job, their role…Which are quite different.

These rules put boundaries around the relationship which helped it be safe when participants may have become caught up in friend-like characteristics.

Two supervisors (reporting on four cases) talked about how they utilised their own close relationship with the worker and their more objective perspective on the parent to challenge workers, and remind them that the work focus and parents needs were to have primacy. Both supervisors acknowledged that keeping what was considered an appropriate distance by professional standards was sometimes quite difficult for the workers. These supervisors reported that when workers felt both personal and professional confidence and awareness, they were better able to keep the relationship and parent’s expectations in perspective when they went beyond a certain professional range. Because workers were responding to need, which involved the kinds of close personal connections described, there was some uncertainty. This required experienced worker judgement about what was and was not appropriate. Two workers noted that they needed the supervisor’s more objective perspective at times to help them regain focus.

In reference to two cases, two supervisors reported that they were prepared to actively support workers by overruling them, if they thought this would achieve a focus on the parent but not breach the relationship.

Supervisor 6: Think about someone who’s never really been listened to. Or has only ever been put down or told whatever. Or treated like a piece of shit. And then you get someone who actually listens to you. And isn’t there to judge you. Or, kind of, tries and put supports around you so that you can manage things. Absolutely you’re gonna think they’re fantastic, aren’t you. Because no one’s ever treated you that way before. So the trick then is, yes, but can we keep it into perspective. And, that this is my job. This is not because we’re friends…And, at times, like, you get people (pause). You can really really like some of your clients. Really like. And think you are so cool. I would like to know you, you know. But, can’t do that.
Despite these challenges, workers developed a variety of strategies to keep the boundaries clear. This included not responding to out of hours requests from parents, although this strategy was not always followed. Two workers noted how they set what amounted to boundaries for the relationship early on, which they referred to throughout the interaction as required. Another worker reported how she referred the parent to other services; “pulling back” from the parent when she felt the focus had gone on to the relationship and not the parent’s needs. Involving other services meant that this worker could keep working with the parent but not be the sole professional the parent completely relied on.

Two workers also talked about how they lived out of the area where the families resided and so had less chance of meeting parents out of work hours. This was not the case for four of the workers, who lived in the same community where they worked. Three of these workers talked about how they respectfully and naturally engaged the parents upon meeting them if the parent initiated contact with them, but reminded the parent they would be happy to discuss work related matters at the office and invited the parent to make contact. None of these workers talked about pre-empting this situation by discussing with parents what to expect if they did meet. Only one of the workers talked about what happened during the first meeting after the chance contact. They drew on their well established and relaxed relationship to have a joke about it and move forward.

Two parents spoke about how the professional focus was very important to uphold, and how they did uphold it even when they knew that the family worker they cared about as a person was experiencing difficulty.

Parent 5: You can’t get personal. That’s the security of it…, made it, um, gave you that freedom… I could make assumptions on the case workers’ lives or paint a picture based on little bits of information. Like, you know, Naomi told me she had fostered a child. Um, and we would share that sort of like, you know, this is what children would do and, you know, we’d share the sort of experience around children. And then Naomi was pregnant. So I would share, you know, a pregnancy experience. And, sort of, like give her advice and that was nice. But that was on the obvious. That was on the obvious. It was obvious she was pregnant… But I don’t know anything about any of them. Really I don’t know anything about any of them.

Although no parents mentioned an awareness of the workers’ struggle explicitly, six parents mentioned a perception that the worker had genuine care for and interest in them and that they really meant something to the worker. All of the workers who spoke of this described how they still managed to maintain that boundary, achieving this through remembering that the parents’ needs were the focus and utilising the support of supervisors and other family workers.
That is not to say that the workers on other cases did not accept that parents might talk to them or ask for assistance incidentally, because this did happen, but it was more that they understood that arranged contact, in particular contact that could be interpreted as friend-like, should occur during designated work hours only. Interestingly, while none of the parents sought to contact the worker outside work time or imposed themselves on the worker as they would have done with friends, some explained that they felt that they could if they really needed. Five parents described how they felt that the family worker was available to them at any time during work hours, one even suggesting outside work hours. For these parents, the beauty of having a relationship that was so close, but encircled by professional boundaries, was that it acted like a “safety net”. Although only one parent explicitly linked this to the idea of being able to contact the worker outside work hours, four parents talked about how just the idea that someone with the kind of resources and knowledge available to them was connected as closely as a friend, was valuable. It sustained them as they continued attempting to find their way through their circumstances on their own, feeling safe and buffered by knowing that if they stumbled they had assistance at hand, without fear of abandonment and of being left alone to deal with the challenges that had arisen. One parent experienced these types of ideas in the following manner.

Parent 3: We don’t contact outside of work and stuff like that. But I also knew there somewhere along the line that if I needed her she was there. You know. Not that I have. But if I needed her to be there if, like I was saying with that safety net. It’s like it’s there. And once you know it’s there it just makes everything else 90% better. Because you can’t fall. This place, and Imogen, and Francis. You can't fall through the loop. Like, they are the loop. Every other part that you have to go from this organisation to this one. Or, you know, Matthew will change age and it will make it different. Or, you know, I will have a nervous breakdown and then you go to a different thing and Centrelink. It’s like, you get dumped by one or the other at some stage and it’s, like, I always caught the loop.

A common situation experienced by all of the workers, one that required skilful negotiation and discretion, was that of contact occurring, or being expected by parents, outside of work hours. This was particularly complicated if the reason for contact fell in a grey area of not being directly related to the case plan but related to the relationship nonetheless, such as being invited to attend important family events such as children’s birthdays or parents’ weddings. Whilst most of the workers were clear about this idea, and were comfortable about keeping the boundaries clear, a couple of workers struggled. These workers reported that although they agreed to interact with the parent out of work hours, or assist when they saw the parent incidentally, they felt uncomfortable about this as they felt they might be seen to be breaking professional norms.
Family worker 6: I was in my own car and was at this little shopping centre where they usually shop. And suddenly there was a knock on the glass and there’s Catherine or Dean, I can’t remember who it was. Might have been Catherine. “Lorraine. Can you give us a lift home? We’ve got all this shopping. Can you give us a lift home?” And I said, “It’s out of work hours. Look, I’m sorry. I can’t. That’s not what, you know, part of the deal. I’m sorry. And I’m not even going that way.” Just to help that a bit. I said, “I’m going a different direction.” “Oh okay.”…But there was other occasions that that they phoned up for different things and um, and I said, “Look, no, that’s not part of what I do.” So I had to yeah cur… and I started getting better at it as time went on. I think it was the relationship. I think I was concerned that it may impact on our relationship when I said no to them. Just saying no, I can’t do that. I think I was just concerned that they might get the shits or something and not want to engage with the service. But to my surprise that didn’t happen…I think I can see that initially I allowed myself to do things that, you know, in that sense to build the relationship, or whatever. And I didn’t feel I could always say no. I think, I, basically, I empathised with their situation a great deal…I think I could just empathise with their life circumstances and their day to day struggles and I thought, you know, maybe I could make it just a little easier on them.

While parents and workers tried to monitor this to a certain extent, it really came down to the supervisors to regulate the boundaries of the relationship. Although most supervisors commenting on this noted that while they prefer to see strict professional boundaries at work, they acknowledged that the genuine empathy and humanity in the relationship made it not so clear cut. They all discussed how they supported and encouraged the workers to be clear with the parents about their roles. However the professional perspective did not override the personal if the family’s needs would be better met by responding, even if it meant breaching professional norms.

5.4.1.5 “From a place of heart not a place of head”: Summary of Being Real in Role

Supervisor 4: It allowed Ursula to know that there was a connection. Not just a professional connection, but that she would be supported in the same sort of way, you know, from a place of, um, from a place of heart not a place of head.

The parents and workers being interviewed maintained close relationships that assisted the parents to challenge and overcome factors in their lives which were negatively impacting upon them, in particular on their parenting. They did this through establishing professional relationships characterised by personal connections where the humanness of each participant was acknowledged and valued.

One parent talked about how this type of relationship was like “grease” between ball bearings. She argued that whilst the work would have been done, the humanistic way of
working enhanced the experience of professional intervention. The crux of her argument was that it was not enough to just have a good working environment. It was that a “real” and “human” relationship provided a function much like grease between pieces of metal, that is, it made the professional intervention run more smoothly, not hurt as much as it might without “grease”, and be sustainable.

Parent 3: And it’s not that I wouldn’t function without it, but it’s a bit like, why would you keep running a ball round and round without any grease on it if it was going to work better with the grease on it?...It probably still would have all worked with somebody different, because it’s a good space and good information and good resources and stuff but, she was an actual really really nice person there. Yeah, not just doing a job.

The supervisor who commented on how these workers performed their role “from a place of heart not a place of head” captured only part of the complexity. It is clear through the depth of reflection these family workers brought to their interactions with these parents that they used both their head and heart. They faced the challenges of a deep empathic connection by maintaining a professional perspective on the reasons for the relationship. Importantly, this was made possible within a flexible working environment that allowed workers to work with the parents simultaneously from a place of heart and a place of head.

5.5 Conclusion

The data from this study points strongly to a series of empowering dynamics at work in the relationships. This was most evident through the parents gaining knowledge about how to meet their needs and how to do this in a supported way. The relationships provided both support and challenge as parents worked towards empowerment and to improve the well-being of their children.

Figure 4: Relationship pathway for parents (building phase to ending/ongoing phase)
Figure 4 provides a simplified summary of the evolution of these relationships, representing the way in which parent engagement and empowerment increased and their feeling of vulnerability decreased as the relationship progressed from beginning to casework ending. Although the figure does not capture the unique and natural nature of each case, it illustrates the essence of the process of engagement through to the ending and consolidation of the relationship across the cases. The figure also represents a merging from phase to phase as it would be unrealistic to portray these as firm delineations. It is also important to note that whilst the participants described the three phases in different ways, similarities across phases relating to worker actions and attributes were also evident.

The building phase was characterised by the parents not feeling connected to the workers. They described feeling a high level of vulnerability and, in many cases, having fears related to child removal into State care. They were aware of their limited ability to improve their life circumstances, yet desired to do so. The combination of these resulted in ambivalence which manifested in parents putting aside their fear and allowing the worker to prove why they could be trusted to help. It was found that parents tested the workers throughout this phase in order to build trust. The relationships are reported to have evolved, following varying timeframes, from parents’ distrust and ambivalence, to trust. Without a trusting relationship, it seems that the parents would not have let the workers know what was really of concern to them. Consequently, the workers could not have supported and challenged the parents to work towards meeting their own needs.

Once trust was established, and the relationship moved into the established phase, the parents were found to open up to workers about the issues that got to the heart of their vulnerability. The relationships as reported provided the forum where the parents opened up about their needs, thus enabling the workers to tailor the intervention to those needs. During this time, the parents and workers closely collaborated to build strategies the parents could implement to meet their needs. Most importantly, this phase was focused on building the parents’ belief that they could manage on their own.

This empowerment was developed further during the final, or ending/ongoing, phase of the relationship. At this point workers consolidated parents’ feelings of empowerment and practised strategies they could implement in the future without worker intervention. A very important aspect of this phase was that there was no ending to formal family work support in one sense. As the workers reduced the extent of intervention slowly, they encouraged and invited the parents to become involved with other workers and programs at the service. The final formal act was for the workers to invite the parents to assess the ability of the service to provide help in the future should they feel this was needed. This invitation alone was found to
support the parents, as it provided a sense of a “safety net” which the parents could call on if they needed it. Parents reported their preference was to try to meet their needs themselves, but felt reassured by the prospect of assistance if they required this.

Building the kind of relationship where this could occur was reported to require workers conveying their professionalism informally. It seems that it was not enough to relate to the parents from a professional distance. It was best if workers were “friend-like” in their dealings with the parents, making their approach to the parents as people just like the parents. Being able to achieve such a balance was not possible without flexibility and genuine collaboration between the parents and workers. These workers were dealing with the challenge of holding in tension the role of being representatives of professional knowledge and a formal organisation, along with that of presenting as “real” people.

The following chapter will discuss these findings in light of the broad literature on the relationship. It will draw on the interpretation thus far to identify possible implications for future practice, supervision, professional education and further research.
Chapter Six  Discussion and Conclusion

This study set out to explore the reported perceptions of the actions and attributes that a group of parents, workers and supervisors displayed, when building relationships focused on helping parents work towards improving their childrearing. It also explored the reported perceptions of these participants of the purpose, value and meaning of these relationships.

The purpose of this chapter is to identify how the findings of this study relate to previous research, to explore their implications and to provide concluding reflections. Section One provides an overview of how the findings relate to the extensive body of knowledge in the field. It concentrates on the findings regarding the participants’ experiences of the phases of the relationship, that is, the building, established and ending/ongoing phases. It also focuses on a number of themes that emerged across the entire relationship regarding the participants’ perspectives of key worker attributes and actions, empowerment and the work environment, including the supervisor’s role. Section Two explores possible implications of the findings for professional practice, management, education, policy and future research. It concludes the study with the researcher’s concluding reflections on the study, including its significance generally.

What stood out more strongly than in previous studies was the importance of the way workers negotiated the personal-professional dimension of the working relationship. This was common across the eight relationships studied. There was consensus by the parents, workers and supervisors that this dimension was of central importance to the development and maintenance of working relationships and to facilitating parent empowerment.

Through the development of trust, these relationships were reported to have created an environment conducive to the parents opening up and addressing issues in their lives which were having a negative impact, particularly on their parenting. Such relationships enabled parents to accept and act upon the challenges the workers put to them to act differently and create alternate parenting patterns. The key worker actions and attributes seen to facilitate good working relationships included attentiveness, responsiveness and support, respect, a non-judgemental approach, patience and flexibility, positiveness and hope, professional confidence and competence, along with being collaborative with parents and being “real in role”.

Furthermore, such relationships and ways of working were described as being supported by a professional organisational environment. In particular this occurred through an informal work environment which encouraged an ongoing dimension to the relationship, and which was
broadened to involve other staff at the service, rather than being exclusive to the parent and family worker.

6.1 Section One: Overview of the Findings in relation to Previous Research

6.1.1 The Relationship Phases
This study characterises the relationship as evolving in three phases: an early phase (building); a middle phase (established); and an ending phase (ending/ongoing). Whilst it is unrealistic to partialise these as absolutely distinct stages, because the relationship actually evolves more dynamically, for example, such as seasons in a year, this conceptualisation corroborates findings previously reported in the psychological/therapeutic, statutory child protection and family-based practice literature (Maluccio 1979a; de Boer & Coady 2003; Gelso 2005; Heaman et al. 2007).

Like these studies, this research found that some characteristics which operate across the relationship seem to be more apparent at some stages of its development than others. It supports Horvath and Luborsky (1993), who argued that the type of assistance parents require is different at the different phases. This conceptualisation also assisted in the analysis of the nature of the relationship, and in structuring the narratives for interviewees.

Whilst the findings support the view that the relationship is local and unique to the individuals involved (Bachelor & Horvath 1999; Hatcher & Gillaspy 2006), this study also found patterns which support Gelso (2005), who argued that the relationship requires that a set of systems evolves. Within the context in which this study was conducted, a similarity of patterns emerged, regardless of the diversity of the participants and the needs involved.

The findings also provide some support for the view that different participants in the relationship have different perceptions of it (Bachelor & Horvath 1999; Horvath 2000; McCabe & Priebe 2004). Nevertheless, this study, like that of Drake (1994), found that these differences were relatively minor.
6.1.1.1 Building the Relationship

These relationships took varying lengths of time to progress to the point of trust being developed. Even those that took months, and involved a “false start” where the parents ceased contact but returned some time later through service run groups, were characterised by trust and open communication. As noted at 5.1.4, most parents approached building the relationship with ambivalence and some unwillingness. All of the workers reported sensing unwillingness and apprehension. Although desperate and aware of the complexity of their needs and their lack of support to deal with these, parents reported some readiness and motivation to engage.

The findings of this study support those of others who have reported that clients’ resistance to building relationships can stem from previous negative experiences of relationships (de Boer & Coady 2003; Brookes et al. 2006), negative experiences of referral, and of intake information gathering (Maluccio 1979a; Heaman et al. 2007) or from distress (Bachelor & Horvath 1999; Horvath 2000). Nevertheless, like others, the study found that such clients can still be effectively engaged by respectful and skilled workers (de Boer & Coady 2003).

Furthermore, the findings of this study somewhat challenge others’ findings that relationships need to be established early (Horvath & Luborsky 1993; Bachelor & Horvath 1999; 2005; Meier, Barrowclough & Donmall 2005; Green 2006; Principe et al. 2006). The findings of this study also indicate that the parents were as interested in what the worker was like as they were in what the worker did. These perspectives expand previous findings that client perceptions of worker attributes such as empathy, affirmation and understanding, is more predictive of client change than perceptions of worker actions (Marziali & Alexander 1991; Horvath & Luborsky 1993). Rather than focus only on worker attributes, the findings of this study emphasise both actions and attributes as important.
Most parents reported that feeling motivated and comfortable was assisted by finding something similar to share with the worker, for example a common experience of parenting, both being smokers, or having had similar interests or hobbies (5.4.1). This provides further insight into findings of others who have reported that it is important for participants to be motivated to work together (Horvath & Luborsky 1993; Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003). However, some workers in this study also identified that they needed to feel motivated to work with the parent and that their strong emotional connection reinforced their motivation. For some workers, a powerful source of motivation was their identification and strong emotional connection which they developed with the parent. This is in contrast to the notion that motivation is primarily that of the parent to work with the worker (Gaston 1990; Waddington 2002; Meier, Barrowclough & Donmall 2005; Friedlander, Escudero & Heatherington 2006).

As with a number of other studies (Maluccio 1979a; Heaman et al. 2007; Zeira 2007), this research found that trust was central to the establishment of these relationships (5.1.6). Previous studies found trust was linked to parents’ reports of feeling safe and comfortable (Taggart, Short & Barclay 2000; Chapman et al. 2003; Paris & Dubus 2005; Fernandez & Healy 2007), and this was found to be important in this study, in particular during the building phase. In this study, trust facilitated parents’ feeling safe, and being able to open up about deeper issues. According to most of the parents, the process of building trust involved the parents testing the workers and withholding information related to deeper and more significant issues, until trust was established (5.1.5). Prior to this point, the parents discussed more obvious or publicly known issues, issues related to immediate and concrete needs they wanted met, or issues they thought might shock the worker. They used disclosing these types of issues to test the worker’s trustworthiness. Most workers and a couple of supervisors reported that parents used this strategy.

Some parents, workers and supervisors in this study reported that the trust issue can involve workers presenting as on the client’s “side” with respect to certain issues. This observation has also been made by others (de Boer & Coady 2003; Altman 2008).
6.1.1.2 The Established Relationship

The findings of this study clearly support the ideas explored by others (Horvath & Luborsky 1993; Meier, Barrowclough & Donmall 2005) that the relationship supports parents’ beginning and ongoing involvement in therapeutic work. It also supports opinions in the literature that the relationship is central to work in the human and social services (Bachelor & Horvath 1999; de Boer & Coady 2003; Flaskas 2004; Clemence et al. 2005).

Also in support of others (Maluccio 1979a; Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003; de Boer & Coady 2003; Trevithick 2003), this study found that trust remained a core feature throughout the established phase of all of these relationships. Achieving trust and feeling safe with the worker and situation was reported by most of the parents and all of the workers as marking the beginning the established phase (5.1.6, 5.1.7). It facilitated parent willingness to work with the worker on the types of issues that had negatively impacted on parenting. Parent trust and respect for the worker continued to build during this phase and motivate the parent.

Furthermore, in agreement with others (Drake 1994; Ribner & Knei-Paz 2002; Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003; de Boer & Coady 2003; Trevithick 2003; Fernandez 2007; Altman 2008), this study found that parents and workers alike want to feel that the other is trustworthy in order to open up more fully to discuss deeper issues. It found that the development of trust is a reciprocal process. Facilitating the parents’ honesty and openness about deeper issues was reported to be an extremely important outcome of the relationship (5.1.8, 5.2.2, 5.2.3).

Opening up about deeper issues was important for parents, as it helped uncover underlying issues negatively affecting parenting. It was not until the parents trusted the worker enough to engage in open and honest dialogue about their issues, that the parents could begin to change their circumstances, behaviour and way of thinking. Most workers reported that parents were also more responsive to worker challenge after trust had been established (5.2.2). An important factor in this was that workers were more willing to challenge parents during this
phase than previously. However, it was also reported as important that workers feel able to trust parents so as to feel comfortable in sharing their own personal information. This is similar to ideas reported in recent research (de Boer & Coady 2003; Friedlander, Escudero & Heatherington 2006).

Whilst building trust was a foreground theme for the building phase, and remained a key theme throughout the entire relationship, building parents’ empowerment became the foreground theme during the established relationship phase (5.2.2. 5.2.4). Empowerment developed into a key theme across the entire relationship, and will be addressed later in this chapter. It can be put briefly, however, that during this phase an important aspect involved workers balancing the matter of advocating for parents with that of supporting the parents to advocate for themselves (5.2.4). Also, evidence that the workers and supervisors were tolerant of some level of dependency at certain times supports the notion of Tanner & Turney (2003), that rather than conceptualising dependency as poor practice, it can be managed to be a useful therapeutic tool.

Although some relationships required less time than others, the process towards parental growth in self awareness and confidence, and consequent reduction in dependency and vulnerability, was not linear. Furthermore, as reported by workers and parents, most of the parents experienced new life stressors during the period of the relationship, with which they were unfamiliar and for which they relied on the worker for help (5.2.7). As new issues or difficult circumstances arose with which parents did not feel confident dealing, they tended to rely on the worker again, albeit to a lesser extent than previously. It is also important to note that this process sometimes involved parents returning to some of the types of behaviour they displayed prior to trust having been built, such as withholding information from the worker and avoiding worker contact.

The findings provide limited support to that of Horvath (1993), who argued that while the relationship may involve periods where participants have breakdown in communication, relationships can be restored. Nevertheless, he and others have found, similarly to this research, that the foundations of the relationship do not fundamentally change in such circumstances (Horvath 2000; Green 2006). Finally, this phase also involved a growing mutual empathy between parents and workers (5.2.6). This, along with other key worker attributes apparent across the phases, will be discussed later.
6.1.1.3 The Ending/Ongoing Relationship

The findings of this study illuminate important aspects about the ending phase of the relationship, which has remained a largely unexplored aspect of the relationship (Meier, Barrowclough & Donmall 2005). Primarily, a key finding of this study is that whilst casework, that is, individualised, structured contact between the parents and workers, must end, the relationship with the service continues to be available to the parent.

There was a perception that the case work, which is focusing on the issues, setting goals and working to achieve these goals, is different from the relationship, or the emotional connection between the parents and workers. Whilst this supports both Bordin’s (1979) and Gaston’s (1990) notion that the relationship is multidimensional and consists of a number of independent elements, one of which involves developing an emotional connection, the findings in this study distinguish the emotional dimensions of the relationship from the practical or work-focused dimensions.

Despite perceptions that contact must formally cease, there was confusion about the process among those interviewed (5.3). Whilst it was stated by a couple of supervisors that there are no strict guidelines about closing contact, common patterns emerged across the independent services being studied. An important factor in the timing of closure was whether parents seemed to be managing their life circumstances; whether those things which had previously negatively affected their parenting had lessened and whether they now had improved self esteem and feelings of empowerment (5.3.1).

Important aspects of closing contact were activities such as negotiating timing and parent readiness to close at that point, but doing this slowly and in a continued process of negotiating, checking impact and review, and planning for life without the relationship (5.3.2). These ideas were found to be important by (de Boer & Coady 2003) and by Thoburn
et al (2000) who argue that it is important to ensure that contact is not closed until families are ready for it, so as to avoid what is termed a “revolving door”, where parents repeatedly access services in a crisis for the same issues, and which appears to be regarded in a negative light. This appears to be regarded in a negative light in the literature.

Regarding ongoing contact, some parents and workers reported their perception that because parental need was ongoing, it was important to provide access to future support. Some workers talked about this notion, one calling it a “tune up” (5.3.4.4), with the idea that people need the availability of ongoing support to help them move forward. All services accommodated this by inviting and encouraging parents to initiate contact themselves as they required, after the case had been formally closed. This approach was further evidence of the empowerment principles at the centre of the work of these services.

The study findings bring to life the proposition that there should be an ongoing element to clients accessing services, as posited by Sanders (2007) and by de Boer and Coady (2003). The latter note that it is important to provide follow up (or “booster shots”) as required, after closure has occurred. The notion of “tune up” as expressed in this study is different from the idea of a “revolving door” (Thoburn, Wilding & Watson 2000), in that allowing for ongoing need is a preventative measure, and hopefully will reduce the “revolving door” dimension.

Children’s wellbeing and the improved parenting ability and activities associated with this, were of key interest for the workers and supervisors (5.3.1). It is interesting to note, then, that this matter was raised by only a couple of participants as a factor in deciding on case closure. Perhaps this is because the focus of the research interview was the relationship rather than the evaluation of parenting improvement. Or perhaps it is because it was so implicit in the family work principles of practice to which these workers adhered that they did not make it explicit.

More than half of the professionals reported child wellbeing and improved parenting to be a focus of the work, and this has obvious implications for case closure, even if it was not mentioned by more than a couple of workers and supervisors specifically in connection with it.

Maluccio (1979a) suggests that workers need to appreciate that there may be some resistance to closure of the case by parents, an idea this research has extended by finding also some worker resistance. Parents who were initially anxious about the end of contact were able to accept this, once they understood that the door remained open to them or that they could return (5.3.3). This was because they appreciated that the relationship was in a professional context, and equated it with their need for support. Whilst they understood that this would mean that things would now be different, many still considered their relationship with the worker in a more special light than their relationship with other staff. It is difficult to know if
the parents understood the professional dimension to the relationship on their own, or if it was because they had been influenced by the worker to understand it this way.

There were a number of informal approaches, or policies, that were part of the service and which supported the ongoing dimension to the relationship (5.3). This included “weaning the parents off” the relationship, which involved celebrating achievements, using positive reinforcement and referring parents to other agencies. It also involved occasionally contacting parents during this period for follow up and support. “Weaning off”, an idea discussed in relation to most of the relationships, involved contact becoming more intermittent, with workers informing parents that this would be the process and why. Most of the participants reported that the workers carried this out carefully and with support and empathy.

Given this, the study findings are in keeping with those who argue that it is important for workers to be reflective during this phase, providing time to say goodbye and collaboratively celebrate the relationship journey and accomplishments, as well as sensitively and flexibly explore meanings and possible grief issues (de Boer & Coady 2003; DePanfilis, Lane, Girvin & Strieder 2004). Most workers reported how “weaning off”, an idea reported during the ending/ongoing phase and discussed previously, was empowering, as it enabled them to provide opportunities for the parents to practise and test new skills and confidence (5.3.2). It was also important that workers informed parents about the process and rationale of ending formal contact and that the parents and workers negotiated this process.

In the end, the workers informed the parents they were closing the formal “case”, or intervention. However, all invited and encouraged the parents to contact the service again if they ever needed assistance. This became termed the “open door policy”, and it occurred across all of the services despite not being a formally espoused strategy of family work (5.3.4.4). Rather, it showed a shared ethos of ongoing support and represents the common tradition of these services. This informal “policy” involved workers encouraging parents to “drop in” when they wanted. It is important to note that it involved parents being invited to contact the service, rather than the worker exclusively. The finding in relation to parents returning to services conforms to that of other studies. For example, Stone (1998) argues for accommodating families’ return to the service and states that this requires adopting a realistic appreciation of the complexities of the risk and protective factors in the families’ lives.

Where the “policy” was implemented it took pressure off the family worker and the relationship, as parents were less likely to become dependent on one person. It was reported that most of the parents sought support from other staff of the service and did not rely solely on the worker with whom they had the primary relationship. Whilst most parents said that they preferred to work with the same worker in the future, they also said that this was not
necessary for them to connect with the service in the future (5.3.4). Reasons for this preference included not having to repeat their life history, and already having established a relationship with the worker, which made it easier and quicker to get to deeper issues. A few parents also communicated their connection with the service thorough volunteering their time to improve the physical and social environment of the service (5.1.9). This aspect of connectedness and reciprocity has received little previous attention in the literature.

Some parents reported that they hoped and trusted that the worker and service would carry through on providing a service in an ongoing fashion. The parents reported that they felt reassured about this. The already established trust made it easier to seek support from the family service in the future, as they had experienced, and consequently expected, other staff to share the same qualities as their worker (5.3.4). With this reassurance the parents felt empowered to try to meet their own needs before seeking assistance. In this way these relationships could be viewed as similar to other professional relationships, such as that of a general practitioner, where there are episodes of service but the relationship is there to be reactivated where needed. A completed episode of service with the family workers is not necessarily akin to ending contact with the worker and agency forever.

This makes sense if one considers that family support services and workers can be seen in part as providing a surrogate-type of extended family support to these parents, an idea raised by one parent who described the worker as a “spare parent” (5.2.3). It could be argued that to some degree these services do perform the function that would normally be performed by family and friend support networks. It is fairly common for children to return to their parents and families for support, even throughout adult life when circumstances become difficult. Doing this is usually not seen negatively, as some mark of failure by parents and families in not producing children who never rely on family support as adults. Rather it is seen as a role which supportive families perform and as a natural part of living in society where people return to seek support where they feel trust, an emotional connection, and have been supported previously.

This finding challenges the idea that parents’ returning to services for support is a sign that the service has not provided a successful intervention. It also could be argued that it shows the genuineness, depth and strength of these relationships, the trust that developed, and the positive regard for the staff and service generally.
6.1.2 Dimensions that are Present over the Course of the Relationship

6.1.2.1 Attentive/Responsive/Supportive

All participants, apart from the supervisor not involved in the building phase for one of the relationships studied, reported that all workers established themselves as attentive and responsive to, and supportive of, the parents very early in the development of the relationship (5.1.7.1, 5.2.3.1). This was in line with an idea raised by Maluccio (1979a) that this was important during the building phase. Most participants reported that this stayed constant throughout all phases of the relationship (5.3.2, 5.3.4). It consisted of active listening and responding to the issues and needs the parents identified, as well as providing practical and emotional support. In line with the views of previous research, it was suggested that being attentive, responsive and supportive involved techniques such as active listening, interpretation and reflection (Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003; de Boer & Coady 2003; Flaskas 2004), and that the relationship involved providing both practical and emotional support to the parents (Taggart, Short & Barclay 2000; Chapman et al. 2003; Heaman et al. 2007; Kirkpatrick et al. 2007; Zeira 2007), and social support (Ribner & Knei-Paz 2002; de Boer & Coady 2003).

Whilst these were very important aspects that helped build and maintain the relationship, as they helped keep lines of communication between the parents and workers clear and open, the key element reported by most parents and some workers was that workers were prepared to be attentive, responsive and supportive about issues much broader than the referral or presenting child protection issues. This is also what was found by de Boer and Coady (2003). Being able and flexible enough to cover many of the issues parents were interested in, helped the workers present as real people who were prepared to help.

Workers described waiting until the relationship and trust were established before feeling that they could set goals which were getting to the heart of the issues and needs of the parent. The participants who raised this suggested that it was not until this point that parents would open up and be honest about deeper issues. The building phase of the relationship was reported as primarily focused on both parties getting to know each other, becoming aware of the needs broadly, and workers meeting parents’ immediate emotional and concrete needs. Most workers reported that once trust was established, the focus shifted to setting and meeting goals. The established phase also consisted of goals being continually negotiated as parents met some, and as new issues and needs arose.

It was clear from some workers’ perceptions that it was equally important for parents to listen and be responsive, as it helped the workers feel respected and motivated, thus strengthening
the relationship. Previous research has concentrated more on worker behaviour rather than parent behaviour (Bachelor & Horvath 1999; Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003).

6.1.2.2 Respectful
Respect was seen as existing within open and trusting personalised relationships. In agreement with the statutory child protection and family-based practice literature on the relationship (Maluccio 1979a; Drake 1994; Ribner & Knei-Paz 2002; de Boer & Coady 2003; Heaman et al. 2007; Altman 2008), mutual respect between the participants was reported in this study. Worker respect for the parents was very strongly reported by most participants throughout the entire relationship (5.1.7.4, 5.2.3.4, 5.3.1). Whilst it was still present during the ending phase, it was reported less often than during the previous two phases, which may be in part a function of the chronological nature of the interview format, and the fact that participants had already made the point about the importance of respect.

In this study, “respectful behaviour” on the part of the worker included being patient and not “pushy” or “bossy”; allowing time and space for the parent to open up at their own pace; not being judgemental; accepting differences of opinion and not forcing their views on the parent. It also involved treating the parent as an equal collaborator in the process, so taking advice and information about the parent from the parent, and not giving precedence to others’ opinions of the parent. Above all, being respectful involved the worker treating the parent like a person and not a dehumanised client. Interestingly, where most participants reported perceptions of worker respect for parents, only a few explicitly talked about parents’ respect for workers. Despite this, it was obvious that most participants perceived that parents respected the workers. They expressed this through describing workers in ways which indicated that they held them in high esteem.

6.1.2.3 Non-judgemental
Another significant contributor to building trust was that workers were perceived as non-judgemental (5.1.7.3, 5.2.3.4), and that this attribute was present throughout the entire relationship. This study supports many in the statutory child protection and family-based practice literature who have reported on the importance of workers being non-judgemental and approaching the parents with an open mind, or suspending judgment (Maluccio 1979a; Drake 1994; de Boer & Coady 2003; Fernandez & Healy 2007; Kirkpatrick et al. 2007; Zeira 2007; Altman 2008). Whilst in this study it was mentioned by all participants at some point during the interviews, it was reported more often by workers during the building phase than by parents, and more often by parents during the established phase than by workers. It was mentioned by only one parent in relation to the ending phase of the relationship.
Non-judgemental workers were seen to have an open mind, and to be validating and normalising the parent, rather than condemning. Being non-judgemental allowed parents an open space to express themselves, an experience which they considered rare with respect to other professionals. This helped keep dialogue open about parents’ experiences of the process and of their journey towards development in self awareness and change in behaviour, and about challenges they were facing. It also helped parents explore a wider range of options than if the workers had closed dialogue through being judgemental.

6.1.2.4 Patient and Flexible

The relationships were reported to have required a great deal of worker patience and flexibility, particularly during the beginning and established phases (5.1.7.5, 5.2.3.2, 5.2.3.3). This was especially so during the trust building phase at the beginning, but also during times of perceived parental regression during both the established and ending phases. More workers reported awareness of this than parents and supervisors. Patience was required when parents lost confidence, felt overwhelmed by new challenges, and/or resisted change. This is consistent with the findings of other research, where workers are encouraged to be calm (Drake 1994), to persevere and be patient and not to take parents’ resistance personally, as this might put further pressure on the parent (de Boer & Coady 2003).

The findings clearly indicate that the worker holds some responsibility for providing a flexible and relaxed environment. Workers understood that being patient helped the parents feel more in control of the process of intervention and that without the worker being flexible with respect to time and availability, the parents were less likely to persevere themselves. This is in line with other researchers across the family-based practice, statutory child protection and psychological/therapeutic relationship literature who have highlighted the degree to which worker flexibility and availability is important in the relationship (de Boer & Coady 2003; Friedlander, Escudero & Heatherington 2006; Priebe & McCabe 2006). In agreement with some (Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003; Friedlander, Escudero & Heatherington 2006; Priebe & McCabe 2006), this study found that flexibility helped create a safe environment for the parents, and helped them feel more in control of the process, and consequently more empowered. Furthermore, worker flexibility also involved being asked to talk about a diverse range of issues and life experiences and interests, and being able to pitch communication at a level the parents could relate to and understand.

Flexibility also involved workers being available to the parents outside appointment times. This was very important, as it meant the parents could initiate contact with workers as they decided they needed help, in particular emotional and social support, as well as a safe place outside of the home. Whilst the workers were not always available, the nature of the
relationship with the service, and the flexible service environment, meant that others were available to meet some of the parents’ needs. This showed some flexibility amongst the parents, as they were not rigid about seeing their worker exclusively. These findings go further than previous studies in highlighting the very important role the staff and management at the service play in this flexibility, thereby supporting the relationship. Ideas pertaining to the organisation will be discussed in greater length later in the chapter

6.1.2.5  Positive and Hopeful
The findings reinforce what many others have previously noted about the benefit of worker hope and positive reinforcement (Horvath & Luborsky 1993; Drake 1994; Littell, Alexander & Reynolds 2001; Hebbeler & Gerlach-Downie 2002; Waddington 2002; Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003; de Boer & Coady 2003; Paris & Dubus 2005; Kirkpatrick et al. 2007). In this study, most workers reported how celebrating achievements, using positive reinforcement, expressing feelings of hope for the parents’ future and focusing on parents’ strengths throughout the relationship assisted parents’ motivation (5.1.7.1, 5.2.3.6, 5.3.1.2). However, the findings of this study go further by identifying the positive impact which parent hope and positive reinforcement have on the worker, and subsequently the relationship. Parents and workers alike reported how the positive, and at time humorous approach of the other helped motivate them and helped them feel positive about working together.

The findings also go further by pointing to the way in which parents’ feelings of hopelessness motivated workers differently depending on the source of the negativity. For example, where parents felt hopeless due to staff from other organisations erecting barriers to support, the workers were more likely to rally to support them. Alternatively, where parents expressed hopelessness due to the weight of their situation, the workers expressed they were more likely to feel burdened and helpless.

6.1.2.6  Confident and Competent
All but one parent, and most supervisors, raised the influence of worker confidence and competence on the relationship and on parents’ responsiveness and willingness to engage (5.1.7.7, 5.2.3.8). Whilst some reported this as happening during the building phase, it was perceived by more interviewees as important during the established phase. It was mentioned hardly at all regarding the ending phase. Workers spoke about this less often than supervisors and parents.

This study supports the psychological/therapeutic relationship literature which has noted the positive impact that parent perceptions of worker competence and depth of knowledge have on the relationship (Maluccio 1979a; Bachelor & Horvath 1999; Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003; Friedlander, Escudero & Heatherington 2006; Kirkpatrick et al. 2007; Altman 2008). It
also supports de Boer and Coady (2003), who found that worker confidence and competence was an element of good relationships. As far as parents were concerned, confident workers helped them feel safe and comfortable. Confident workers were reported to be assertive regarding their professional role in the relationship. They were also more ready to persevere in those instances when they perceived parents were unwilling, and more likely to challenge the parents to try to meet their needs themselves and stay focused on their goals, or to negotiate new ones as others were met. Confident workers reported being more able to exercise the professional discretion required when there was escalation of risk. This was not possible without a close connection and some level of understanding of how the parents might respond.

Confident workers were also apparently prepared and able to cover a wide range of issues and interests beyond parenting and child protection, as well as reflect on their practice and learn from colleagues and parents alike. These workers were also able, and prepared, to be open to what parents needed to raise, and be adaptive and flexible. This confidence was a significant contributor to both building and maintaining the relationships. This supports de Boer and Coady (2003), who found that worker confidence and competence included good intuition, sound skills and self esteem.

Some workers also reported lack of confidence, and feeling apprehensive and stressed. In addition, some workers reported a period during the relationship where they doubted their professional capacity a little. For a few, this was brought on by feeling helpless and hopeless in relation to helping the parent meet their many and complex needs, in a context in which they felt unsupported and not understood by the supervisor. Despite this, as reported in this study, they were able to prevent this impairing their relationship with the parents. Instead they spoke of how they put themselves under emotional and time pressure to try to meet the parents’ needs.

This shows the need for both good communication and support between workers and supervisors and also access to ongoing education and training for the types of issues raised by parents. Most workers reported awareness that they were not specialists in specific areas. They expressed understanding that they provide a service which allows parents an opportunity to open up about their needs and have some basic needs met, particularly for emotional and some practical support. They were clear that part of their role was to refer to other professionals in order to complete intervention which requires more specialist knowledge than they possess.

However, some workers and supervisors reported that parents asked them to act in relation to certain matters despite having been linked to other services which might deal with them.
These workers perceived that the parents felt more comfortable working with the worker, and trusted them more than they trusted the other professionals, and so approached the family worker for assistance. They argued that while this was indicative of a good relationship, it created extra pressure and some conflicts with professionals from other organisations. This scenario did not occur where parents reported feeling strong relationships with professionals from other organisations.

6.1.2.7 Collaborative
This study found that it is important for parents and workers alike to be actively involved in the activities of the intervention and in the relationship (5.1.7.6, 5.2.5, 5.3.1.2, 5.3.4.4). Collaboration was spoken about during the building and established phases, and to a much lesser extent in relation to the ending phase of the relationship. Also, it was something that parents and workers commented on much more than supervisors.

This study describes a collaborative, or “team”, approach to meeting the parents’ needs. Collaboration was seen to be possible because the workers presented the intervention as a relationship between two people; and not a between a child protection “expert” and a client who needed help to redress wrongs. What was also a factor was that the relationship was conducted in an informal way where parents felt like they were meeting with a “friend”. Furthermore, towards the end of the relationship there was an increased expectation that the parents would meet their needs more autonomously.

With this in mind, the findings of this study are consistent with an empowerment conceptualisation of collaboration described in the statutory child protection and family-based practice literature. This literature describes how participants who had similar characteristics to those involved in this study were engaged in what was referred to as partnerships rather than a “client” and “expert” positioning within the relationship (Maluccio 1979a; Drake 1994; Ribner & Knei-Paz 2002; de Boer & Coady 2003; Heaman et al. 2007; Kirkpatrick et al. 2007; Sanders, Munford & Maden 2007). Furthermore, the participants in this study described how the parents and workers shared responsibility for the goals being set and met. In contrast, some in the psychological/therapeutic literature describe collaboration in terms of what the parents present as needs, or deficits, and then describes how workers meet those needs (Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003; Friedlander, Escudero & Heatherington 2006).

Nevertheless, further research is required into the nature of collaboration in such relationships. For example, this study did not provide extensive exploration into when problems and breakdown in communication occurs, or into perceptions of these and how they were resolved. Consequently it has not been able to explore the salience of findings related to this matter, made by a number of researchers from the psychological/therapeutic relationship
literature, who argue that the responsibility falls to workers to resolve such issues (Horvath & Symonds 1991; Waddington 2002; McCabe & Priebe 2004).

6.1.2.8 Real in Role
The relationships studied were perceived to be friendship-like, where workers genuinely cared for the parent and family, and presented as “real”. The findings of this study support the importance of a mutual friend-like dimension to the relationship which is not to suggest that the relationship is a friendship per se. As noted in 5.4, most of the parents identified the relationships as “friend-like” and most of the workers and supervisors identified they had friendship-like qualities (5.4.1.2).

This idea is beginning to gain currency. Workers and parents mutually displaying a friendly manner has been reported by many in the psychological/therapeutic relationship literature as assisting the relationship (Bachelor & Horvath 1999; Waddington 2002; Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003; de Boer & Coady 2003; Trevithick 2003; Friedlander, Escudero & Heatherington 2006; Sterlin 2006). Some research in the psychological/therapeutic field has found that it is more important that workers direct such behaviour towards clients than vice versa (Horvath & Luborsky 1993; Shirk & Karver 2003; McCabe & Priebe 2004). However, closer to the findings of this study, a number of studies on child protection and family-based practice have reported on the notion of the relationship being “friend-like” (Drake 1994; Hebbeler & Gerlach-Downie 2002; Ribner & Knei-Paz 2002; Paris & Dubus 2005; Heaman et al. 2007), as opposed to the worker just being friendly in manner.

The friend-like nature of the relationships was especially related to the way in which the participants in the dyads expressed how they liked each other and found similarities and common interests. This helped the building phase of the relationship, and some parents reported that identifying with the worker in this way marked a turning point in the depth of their trust and openness. Furthermore, most parents reported that they had confided more deeply in these preferred workers than they had with others with whom they did not have such a deep connection, and that they had responded to their probing and challenge more than was the case with other workers.

The essential elements for the parents and workers alike involved the workers being supportive, genuinely caring and interested, informal and that they kept the parents’ confidence. Important differences raised by all of the parents when discussing this friend-like idea was that, unlike in friendships, the worker was completely attentive to them and did not expect any support or attention back. Also, the professional dimension was reported to keep the relationships “not as complex” as friendships because, unlike in friendship, the parents felt they did not need to reciprocate a supportive role (5.4.1.3).
Similar to findings in this study, others have reported also on the notion of parents and workers mutually liking one another, and that similarities in areas such as life experiences, socio economic background and values helped (Maluccio 1979a; de Boer & Coady 2003; Brookes et al. 2006; Fernandez & Healy 2007). In addition, this study supported previous findings that clients respond more favourably to workers whom they know have been parents (Maluccio 1979a; Taggart, Short & Barclay 2000; Paris & Dubus 2005; Riley et al. 2008).

Extending the friendship-like idea further, a couple of parents and supervisors, but no workers, even reported that this can sometimes extend to feelings of deep affection, or “love”. This idea has only rarely been previously reported (Ribner & Knei-Paz 2002). All parents reported interpreting this affection as closely linked to the notion that the workers were essentially like them in their humanness and not distant “expert” professionals. The term used when discussing such ideas was that workers came across as being “real”.

The notions of being “real”, presenting as equal and working in a humanistic way as described throughout this study are not unlike those expressed by some writers on the relationship in the statutory child protection and family-based practice literature. These have asserted that parents and workers connected emotionally and worked in ways that enhanced parents’ feeling of being human, instead of making them feel like mere, and dehumanised, clients (Maluccio 1979a; Drake 1994; Ribner & Knei-Paz 2002; de Boer & Coady 2003; Altman 2008). Whilst such personalised role issues within the parent-worker relationship have been discussed sporadically since at least the 1970’s, awareness of and discussion about this way of working seems to be gaining attention only in the past few years.

Being “real” was reported to mean that parents could identify with workers as human beings, that is, as fundamentally similar to the parents, and with similar experiences of life. In being “real”, workers brought their personal qualities into the foreground of the interaction. They tried to avoid being a “distant professional”. The workers were reported to maintain an authenticity that displayed their personal or human qualities. As one worker said, they “don’t hide behind a façade of being a worker” (5.4.1.4). Through this the parents became aware of life understanding, experiences and interests which they shared in common with the workers. This was perceived to mean that what workers drew on to meet parents’ needs involved real life experiences, and not just theoretical knowledge. This humanistic, or highly personalised, approach was perceived to enable workers o have a better understanding of what the parents needed, and to respond accordingly.

Whilst some have previously reported on the importance of being empathic and caring in order to build successful relationships (Maluccio 1979a; Paris & Dubus 2005; Fernandez & Healy 2007; Altman 2008), there was much more to this for the participants in this study,
where being empathic and caring was shown to be a part of being “real”. Experiencing this genuine care and empathy meant that parents felt cared for, and they responded to this. It helped build parents’ trust and helped them to open up. It enabled the parents to focus on what they shared with the worker, and not on what they did not. They were able to concentrate on the issues impacting on their life and parenting, and not on the relationship and trust issues regarding the worker and perceived differences.

Being able to develop such a relationship was sometimes burdensome on the workers, but it seemed to fill an important social support need for these parents. This is a universal need that most people meet through kith and kinship networks and not by a formal service. However, due to the deficits or lack of support in the family and friendship networks of these parents, this is a need that would otherwise remain unmet if not for formalised means such as family support services.

However, all of the parents, workers and supervisors were clear that the relationship occurred in a professional context (5.4.1.4), although it was happening in this friend-like way. All participants were very clear that these relationships were professional relationships explicitly for the purpose of professional work. Each participant enacted their role with the goals of parental growth and child protection. This was manifested by the parent understanding that the worker did not expect to get anything back from the parent, that the worker was completely attentive to the parent’s needs and did not expect the parent to be attentive to their needs. The parents reported that this was freeing, as they could concentrate on their needs without feeling guilty they were not giving back to another person. Furthermore, none of the parents exploited the negotiated and agreed expectation that the relationship was a business-hours relationship. Whilst they valued and were sustained by the idea that it felt like a friend-like relationship, and so they could call on the worker if they needed to do this, no parent in this study was reported as having made contact after business hours.

This personal way of relating was described by most of the workers and supervisors as emotionally tiring for the worker (5.4.1.4). This is because the workers opened themselves up to the parent, invested in the parent’s life and genuinely cared for the parent, but felt under continual pressure from professional norms to maintain distance. Being invested in and thus obligated to the parent meant that most workers experienced many of the emotional highs and lows the parent experienced. Furthermore, it was sometimes risky for the workers, as it required a level of trust that the parent would acknowledge the professional context. Most workers agreed that the depth of connection influenced them to do more for these parents than was thought normative for family workers.
Workers reported being torn between emotional (“heart”) responses to the parents and professional (“head”) responses to professional expectations. This created stress for the workers, as they felt they were behaving unprofessionally at times, and yet believed that without such a friend-like connection, they were less able to access the more fundamental issues for the parent. Some supervisors and workers reported that fears of losing professional focus and being too close to the parent, in a friend-like way, evoked challenge from the supervisors. Their worker-supervisor relationships were such that once the contextual issues relating to resource constraints and professional norms were aired and discussed, workers were willingly compliant.

However, professional boundaries also provided support for the workers. The roles defined by those boundaries were a continual reminder about the primary reasons for the relationship’s existence. They were clear in pointing out that the only way for such friend-like qualities to be acceptable was for parents and workers alike to be clear that these relationships were not friendships, and that they existed purely for professional purposes. Most workers reported how this helped them negotiate the ambiguity that characterised the professional involvement in private lives. The boundaries created the structure that provided for a smooth relationship.

However, given this professional dimension, characterised by already defined roles, it was not possible to perform the professional role to its fullest potential without being irrevocably connected to deeply personal and human interaction. Being able to be completely a professional in this context thus required being and remaining highly personal as a central feature of the relationship. Maintaining professional distance would stunt the building of a relationship between two fundamentally alike human beings where there was a deep personal dimension present. Relating as human beings facilitated the parent being honest with themselves about the issues which had brought them to the attention of child protection authorities, or were preventing them being the kind of parent they wanted to be. Only with such a personal connection was it possible for the parent to be fully challenged to think through their situation and challenge themselves to change their behaviour and patterns.

Gaston (1990: 145), when talking in general terms but within the psychological/therapeutic relationship literature, distinguishes the therapeutic part of the relationship as the “patient’s affective relationship” from “the therapist’s emphatic understanding and involvement”, implying that workers do not have an affective response to the clients. Whilst within the psychoanalytic tradition, worker emotional responses have been characterised merely as ‘counter transference’, this study has identified it to be a mutual emotional connection. It would perhaps be better conceptualised as an affective experience involving empathic
understanding and emotional involvement for both parties in order to highlight the humanness of the connection. The alternative notion, that it is merely something between a deferential client and an “expert” professional, is one which this study argues to be misleading and potentially harmful to the relationship.

The concept of a highly personalised approach to family-based practice could be said to have begun in the late nineteenth-century when volunteer family workers were instructed to engage in ethical and empathic “friendly visiting” (Richmond 1899). The present study contributes more detail about some aspects of working in a humanistic way than seems to have been done previously. Apart from a small but growing body of research in the past ten years, the bulk of empirical literature on the parent-worker relationship does not raise the notion that working in a deeply personal manner could be considered professional. However, this and similar ideas are raised extensively throughout the conceptual literature; in particular regarding relationship-based practice, strengths-based practice, practice wisdom, “use of self”, relationships as a place of holding and providing a secure base, and the notion of “emotional labour”. This study found that the experience of the participants in relation to this is an unquestionably strong dimension. Whilst some empirical studies are beginning to argue the same way, there remains a lack of agreement in the research about the relationship between the more informal and humanistic way of working and being “professional”.

Research with rurally-based participants from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island backgrounds has conceptualised this highly personalised way of working as “deprofessionalism” (Lynn et al. 1998). Although some have argued that strict professional boundaries reduce the risk of negative outcomes (Heaman et al. 2007) or unethical practice (Daley & Doughty 2006; Zur 2006), others have, in line with this study, found professional distance to work against the relationship (Kirkpatrick et al. 2007). This is reported particularly in rural-based research literature (Green, Gregory & Mason 2003, 2006). Also in line with others (Campbell & Gordon 2003; Brookes et al. 2006), the findings of this study indicate that there is a balance to be found between being professional and “deprofessional”. Furthermore, this study questions the notion that relationships characterised by personal closeness rather than professional distance, are unethical. It reinforces the arguments of others (Green, Gregory & Mason 2006; Maidment 2006), by revealing the perceptions and experiences of workers engaged in highly personalised practice who feel that their professionalism and ethics are being questioned, and who are consequently put under unnecessary stress when they practise in ways they believe to be the most effective for their clients. This study shows how these workers, the parents with whom they are engaged, and the relationship itself, are negatively affected when the workers act in a professionally distant
way. Thus it provides some practical insight into Maidment’s (2006) propositions that current understandings of ethics and codes of ethical practice may better serve the needs of professionals than clients and that it may be timely to rethink professional practice to value expressions of genuine, platonic love and affection in relationships between clients and workers.

Workers were also very mindful of, and sensitive to, potential power imbalances operating between themselves and the parents, and between the parents and the wider child welfare system and social context. With these in mind the workers actively worked to minimise issues of power and social status by their highly personalised approach.

The notion that the parents and workers are fundamentally equal also taps into the quintessentially Australian norm of egalitarianism (Ward 1965). The workers skilfully and sensitively used this to draw the parents into a professional relationship that became grounded in trust and focused on parental empowerment. This was not without cost, however. Some workers and supervisors reported that by removing such status barriers the workers were sometimes perceived by other professionals to be unprofessional. They gave the impression that family support workers have long struggled to gain the respect of other professionals for their professionalism. The level of discomfort such workers have been made to feel about their highly personalised approach was summed up by one worker involved in the study who said, “This is a secret”, whilst struggling to find the words to describe the authenticity involved (5.4.1.1).

This study has shown how such an approach is central to effective family-based practice with families where child neglect is an issue. Whilst similar ideas have been reported previously (Maluccio 1979a; Drake 1994; Lynn et al. 1998; Ribner & Knei-Paz 2002; de Boer & Coady 2003; Maidment 2006; Altman 2008), this study has provided a “thick” and detailed description of the craft involved in building, sustaining and “ending” personalised working relationships in a child welfare context. For these workers, in practice the personal is the professional, even if there is some apprehension in acknowledging this.

6.1.2.9 Empowerment Across the Relationship

As with some previous research with parents in similar circumstances to those involved in this study (Drake 1994; Lynn 2001; Ribner & Knei-Paz 2002; de Boer & Coady 2003), issues of power emerged in this study. It has been found and noted elsewhere (Lynn et al. 1998), that a relationship involving this type of approach to power calls for appreciation of a more complex understanding of power and equality than is apparent in prevailing approaches within social and welfare work. As previously mentioned, empowerment was a basic
principle of the services studied. Workers facilitating this was a matter fundamental to the relationships under study and to the parents’ development.

All participants talked about how the relationship involved empowerment or feeling some sense of power or control over the process at some stage during decisions about the ending phases (5.3.1), and that this was made possible through the workers’ collaborative and flexible approach. The findings of this study echo those of others which argue that the notion of equal standing in the relationship is related to deemphasising workers’ perceived “expert” status (Ribner & Knei-Paz 2002; de Boer & Coady 2003) and emphasising more equal status as collaborative in meeting the parents’ needs (Drake 1994; Ribner & Knei-Paz 2002; de Boer & Coady 2003). Throughout the study there was a very strong sense that this was a partnership, where parents were not forced to attend, and workers were there alongside the parent to support them to meet their needs. In addition, some workers and supervisors reported how the voluntary nature of the service, and clarifying this early on, supported a more equal standing for the parents.

Whilst, in reality, the parents were attending the service because of an imposed or threatened action of child protection intervention such as possible removal, these workers managed to avoid being linked to this activity because of the humanistic way of working, where they established themselves as like, and equal to, the parent. They reframed a negative social construct into a positive ideal towards which the parents could strive. A belief stated by a few participants was that most people wish to provide the best circumstances for their children. These workers were able to focus on this and build capacity, starting from this assumption. There was ongoing negotiation between parents and workers about the process and participants’ expectations. The parents had some degree of authority over the process, as long as the ultimate focus was the parent working towards meeting the goals that had been identified as negatively impacting on their parenting. With a result similar to that of others (de Boer & Coady 2003), the findings of this study are in strong agreement with the idea that the workers understood there was a power differential, yet actively and consciously negotiated its use in a considered way.

The key personal power characteristic of the latter two phases of the relationship for all of the parents was that of working towards personal growth which would enable them to improve their parenting (5.3.1). Feeling empowered was described as a time when the parents began to believe in themselves and experience themselves as capable of meeting their own needs, and of continuing the personal development work they had begun with the family worker. Once the relationship was established, most parents spoke of gaining confidence in themselves and competence over their circumstances. This involved collaborating with the family worker to
set and work towards certain goals deemed important for personal empowerment and developing parenting skills.

Parents indicated some sense of power in the relationship when they reported initiating contact with the family worker as they felt they needed, rather than waiting for the family worker to come to them. This was different to how they felt about themselves during the building phase, when although personal power underpinned the work from the professionals’ perspective, parents spoke more about feeling desperate and disempowered by their life circumstances and previous relationship experiences (5.1.2). During the beginning phase of the relationship, a few parents were perceived to expect the worker to meet their needs, and held a position in line with that of the findings of Maluccio (1979a), who found that the parents in his study esteemed workers as “expert”. However, by the latter two phases of the relationship, and in conjunction with the parents being perceived to have become more empowered, most parents were considered to agree with the workers that the workers were not experts in relation to the parents’ lives.

Dealing with power and acting in an empowering way involved collaboration. As has been found with participants with similar characteristics involved in the statutory child protection field (Drake 1994; de Boer & Coady 2003), the workers explicitly placed themselves alongside the parents regarding most power issues. Also in line with other research, (Drake 1994; Ribner & Knei-Paz 2002; de Boer & Coady 2003), workers achieved this through clear communication at a level parents could understand, concerning the participants’ roles and expectations. They also listened to the parents’ perspectives and meaning, and worked hard to understand them, focusing on parents’ strengths and successes and providing choices. These are further to ideas found in other studies (Drake 1994; de Boer & Coady 2003). It involved creating an environment where the parent’s solutions to their issues could emerge, supported by the worker providing reflection and support, but not telling the parent what to do (5.2.4).

For example, most parents and supervisors in this present study described how the workers skilfully enacted the role of representing social norms about parenting, but not in way that forcefully imposed these ideas on the parent. The notion of a having a “secure base” from which to build was reported to be an important element for establishing and maintaining the relationship, and also for building up the ability of the parents.

Most parents reported that the type of collaboration they found empowering was that which they experienced when workers treated them as “people [who] have their own answers”. Underlying this was a belief that the parents were agents in their own life decisions. Most parents, workers and supervisors agreed that the workers resisted being considered “expert”, and used positive reinforcement and strengths-based principles to build the parents’ capacity.
Some also have proposed the idea that it helps when the relationship is established as a mutual learning environment, where workers learn from parents as much as parents do from workers (de Boer & Coady 2003). This was another idea reinforced by some participants in this study.

The findings of this study generally support the idea that home visiting enables a more equal power relationship (Ribner & Knei-Paz 2002). However, an additional finding from this study is that home visiting supports a perception of more equal power only if the parent wishes to receive the service in the family home. One parent argued clearly that she would not have felt listened to, and consequently would not have felt that she had choice or power, if all she could have received was a home visiting service. She was adamant that she did not wish the worker to come to her home. Perhaps this issue should be thought of more in terms of power sharing, relating more to being able to offer what the parent wants, rather than a fixed notion that parents feel more empowered in the family home than at a service office or community-based centre.

A very important element of empowerment involved not imposing power on the parent, but rather providing opportunities for the parent to evoke her or his strengths and power. This required trust that the parent could and would respond, but also often involved working in ways outside the normal patterns of working with clients in the child welfare field. It was enabled by the highly personalised way of working, where the worker presented as being like the parents in terms of a shared basic humanity. This approach levelled the perceived power imbalance, and parents responded to the person of the worker over and above their professional role. This is in line with similar ideas proposed elsewhere about working outside traditional ideas of professionalism (Lynn 2001; de Boer & Coady 2003; Green, Gregory & Mason 2006; Maidment 2006).

It is important to note that despite this being a collaborative approach, most parents and workers, and some supervisors, reported that workers still held the parents accountable, and challenged them to solve the identified problems (5.2.4). Empowerment was manifested by workers expecting the parents to attend to their own problems and thinking they were “somebody to actually support her along the way” rather than to do the work for the parents. This idea of empowering the parents to solve their own problems has been mentioned in the literature (Hebbeler & Gerlach-Downie 2002; Paris & Dubus 2005; Heaman et al. 2007; Kirkpatrick et al. 2007; Zeira 2007).

However, this study extended the notion of empowerment somewhat. Workers adapted the extent to which they let the parent try to deal with the issue, before stepping in and helping. For example, it was reported that in rare situations workers acted on behalf of the parent after
challenging and supporting the parent to try to deal with the issue themselves. Whilst some workers reported acting on behalf of the parent, or “doing for”, this action was not performed lightly. In these situations a couple of workers reported how some people, who were not as closely connected to the relationship as they were, raised concerns that the workers acted improperly. These people, including some supervisors and professionals from other organisations, reportedly argued that the workers were “rescuing” and disempowering the parent rather than empowering them to meet their own needs. Those closer to the relationship claimed better understanding of the difficulties involved. Empowerment practice in these instances involved finding a balance between empowering the parent to try, and consequently grow in confidence to push themselves further next time, and disempowering them, should they fail and lose confidence to try in the future. This was noted as particularly difficult where completing the task or solving the problem was outside of the parent’s capacity at the time.

There was an understanding on the part of the workers that empowerment approaches can be disempowering if an “empowerment at all costs” stance is taken. Whilst at times an “outsider” to the relationship may have interpreted what was occurring as dependency, disempowerment or “rescue”, it is important to note that what was occurring within the relationship was perceived differently by those actually involved. Knowing when to hold back and provide support or when to step in and “do for”, was possible only through continual negotiation between the parent and worker. Workers needed to remind the parent of their prior learning and successes, of professional expectations about parental change and growth in competence and confidence, and to reinforce and renegotiate the parent’s goals.

The key supportive element of this, as reported by some workers and supervisors, was that workers and supervisors could cope with some level of the worker being relied on, as long as they felt the parent was trying as hard as they could to meet their needs themselves. This involved clear, open, honest and regular communication between workers and parents, and workers and supervisors. It also involved trusting relationships, where the participants felt comfortable enough to communicate honestly and openly. It also required a fairly comprehensive understanding of the parent, so that the workers and supervisors knew when the parent regressed from relying on themselves to relying on the worker. Having both the parent-worker and the worker-supervisor relationship made it possible to communicate these changes, as the worker required supervisor support to be able to be flexible and work in the way described.

All but one parent and worker reported that parents had become more empowered by the end of the intervention (5.3.1). Parents reported empowerment as increased self-esteem and confidence, feeling more in control of their life circumstances and happier in themselves.
6.1.2.10 How the Service Environment, Including Supervisors, Affected the Relationship

Although there is very limited research on the connection between the work environment and the relationship (Green 2006), it has been noted as important for at least thirty years (Maluccio 1979a). The findings of this study generally support the findings of previous research, which have shown how the work environment can both hinder and assist the relationship. In line with the research, a number of similar issues emerged about what promotes positive relationships. The accounts of the participants in this study have provided rich insights into how and why these promote positive relationships. In addition, some new themes have emerged from these perceptions with respect to how the work environment impacts on the relationship.

There has been recent research suggesting that the service environment affects parents’ first impressions and that this can strengthen or weaken the relationship (Green 2006). In particular this includes experiences of the referral and intake processes (Maluccio 1979a; Heaman et al. 2007). The study demonstrated how a friendly and welcoming family service environment can evoke positive first impressions for parents, which can assist the building phase of the relationship. Genuine friendliness and acceptance was a part of the ethos of the services involved in this study. It is especially important that all service staff, including administration staff and management, display such behaviour. It helps to reduce the parents’ apprehension about engaging with the worker, and to increase their willingness, sense of trust and sense of feeling safe.

As found elsewhere (Maluccio 1979a), this study found that parents’ initial experiences of other service staff, such as administrative staff, helps build relationship. Most parents reported that family service staff other than the parent’s specific family worker engaged with them (5.1.9). This included administration staff, other professionals performing both family work and non-family work roles, and supervisors. These other staff were considered friendly, caring, honest and respectful, informal, focused on parents’ strengths, and trying to act in a ways that empowered the parents. Some parents reported that this type of approach by other staff at the family service helped the developing relationship with the worker. Having their needs met by a number of people, including the need for social support, was said to help the relationship, as parents felt listened to and received a quick response, and workers did not feel over-burdened by feeling they were the only source of support for the parents.

Furthermore, according to some, negative experiences of initial contact which consists of rigorous and intrusive information gathering can hinder the building relationship (Heaman et al. 2007). In line with such findings this study found that focusing on extensive data gathering during the first session can hinder building the relationship. As an expansion of previous
findings however, the study found that using “intake” as an opportunity to connect with the parent was considered a better approach to build the relationship. This was reported as being more respectful, equalising and empowering than starting the relationship with a series of intrusive questions and “paperwork” (5.4.1.1). Whilst some supervisors reported supporting this approach, two reported struggling with it. This was related to a more general underlying question reported by supervisors involving the tension between deciding what is best for the parent, and what is best for the service (for example the need to have an overview of the household and its potential risks such as domestic violence, in relation to worker safety).

Beyond the matter of initial impressions, a number of researchers within the psychological/therapeutic working arena have noted that a flexible and relaxed, yet emotionally predictable and safe working environment has been found to help with building strong relationships (Ackerman & Hilsenroth 2003; de Boer & Coady 2003; Friedlander, Escudero & Heatherington 2006; Priebe & McCabe 2006; de Boer & Coady 2007). A number of researchers have also noted that providing services in a flexible and holistic way is important in successful interventions with families where neglect is an issue (Dubowitz et al. 2005b; Wilson, Kuebli & Hughes 2005). Again, building on previous research, there were the perceptions of participants of this study that a flexible working environment, comprised of happy and supported staff and a reasonably relaxed approach to time factors, helped the relationship. This helped build trust with the worker and assisted working towards parental change, because it freed the relationship up to move at the parent’s pace.

Flexibility helps reduce time pressures to build relationships and push families through the service quickly, a factor which has been found to increase stress for workers (Petras, Massat & Essex 2002; de Boer & Coady 2003; Tanner & Turney 2003; Clemence et al. 2005).

Workers need reasonable and flexible expectations about how long it takes to develop and maintain quality relationships which meet the needs of the service users (de Boer & Coady 2003; Clemence et al. 2005). Structural barriers for workers in relation to child neglect include time pressures to get families “fixed” quickly (Petras, Massat & Essex 2002; Tanner & Turney 2003) and being under resourced to meet the families’ needs (Waddington 2002; de Boer & Coady 2003). Along these lines, flexible time limits for building relationships, trust and completing casework helped the relationships in this study (5.2.3.2). Having unspecified limits on the duration of the casework helped, because it made it possible for issues to be dealt with when the parent was obviously ready for it. In terms of how this impacted on a parent’s initial impressions of the worker, some parents noted that it was important that workers spent some time getting to know them personally, as it helped them feel like a person rather than a client with no identity or humanity.
A dimension supported to a limited degree in previous writings (de Boer & Coady 2003, 2007) was the way in which having the flexibility to offer a range of services in an autonomous and spontaneous manner assisted the relationship (5.1.5, 5.1.9). In this study, this included group work, and being able to choose between offering Centre-based services or services in the parent’s home, as noted by Riley (2008). Group work was found to be particularly supportive of the growing relationship, as it enabled parents to familiarise themselves with the service and worker, in a less intense and emotionally threatening environment than individual casework. Being able to offer both a home visiting and a centre-based service enabled the worker to tailor the service to the parents’ needs, thus helping the relationship. It also reduced pressure on the relationship building, where the parent was not ready to trust an individual worker in highly concentrated contact, and helped them build support networks and relationships with others.

In addition, some parents and supervisors reported how the parents grew to feel part of the service, and that the service became an important dimension in their lives (5.2.6). This manifested for some in feeling belonging and in deep commitment to the service. Some of the supervisors described this as parents developing a sense of ownership for the service. The parents’ sense of ownership and wanting to show appreciation by doing acts of service indicates a very different perception of the service environment than those of parents in a similar study by Ribner (2002: 385), who reported that the parents in their study experienced the service environment as “heartless and faceless institutions”. This dimension has been noted as an important factor in rural services, where it has been found that being seen as a local identifying organisation is important (Campbell & Gordon 2003; Green & Gregory 2004).

What is also interesting is that the services accepted and valued these acts of appreciation, care and reciprocity. This would not have been possible without the informal and flexible ethos and service environment. An interesting finding related to this, and one which does not seem to appear in the literature, is that a couple of parents with well established relationships sought to assist the service in some way. For them, the relationship involved some reciprocity. Some supervisors reported how the parents acted on this sense of ownership and appreciation for the impact of the service on their lives, and engaged in activities they perceived were helpful, such as fundraising or maintenance.

It has also been noted that supervision fulfils an important function with respect to supporting and monitoring staff as they develop and maintain the relationship (Bachelor & Horvath 1999; Gibbs 2001; Waddington 2002; de Boer & Coady 2003; Horvath 2005; de Boer & Coady 2007; Staudt 2007). In relation to child neglect specifically, some have reported that
worker stress is increased when workers do not feel adequately supported to maintain relationships in the particularly difficult and complex environment that child neglect produces (Kenemore 1993; Stone 1998; Tanner & Turney 2003). This study also supported previous findings that supervision which does not adequately support the worker through the difficult task of maintaining a relationship with chronically neglecting families, has been found to adversely affect the relationship (Kenemore 1993; Stone 1998; Tanner & Turney 2003). Other research has reported that unsupportive supervision, particularly supervision which is solely administrative, increases worker stress (Kenemore 1993; Stone 1998; Tanner & Turney 2003; Lonne & Cheers 2004), which in turn has been found to reduce workers’ motivation and capacity to develop and maintain relationships (Armstrong 1979; Azar 2000).

Furthermore, some writers of the psychological/therapeutic relationship literature have considered supervision an important outside influence (Marziali & Alexander 1991; Priebe & McCabe 2006). This was reiterated in this study, in that all of the supervisors noted that they performed an important role in matching parents and workers, along with supporting, monitoring, and stretching workers in their roles (5.1.9).

Although previous research acknowledges the supervisor’s role to support and encourage good relationships, and the importance of a work culture that also supports such relationships, there is limited guidance about how to achieve this (Taggart, Short & Barclay 2000; de Boer & Coady 2003; Daro 2005; Heaman et al. 2007). Since a few of the supervisors in this study held a similar belief, the findings of this study might contribute by providing some guidance. In effect, this study provided evidence that supervisors required as much discretion as the workers when dealing with the complexities of such working relationships. However, it must be noted that whilst a few of the parents were aware of the supervisor because of their own relationship with the supervisor, their knowledge of the supervisor’s role with respect to the relationship was limited. Consequently all of the findings are from the perspective of the supervisor and worker.

Along with the findings of others (Armstrong 1979; Glisson & Hemmelgarn 1998; Azar 2000; Taggart, Short & Barclay 2000; de Boer & Coady 2003; Heaman et al. 2007), this study found some evidence that supervisor support reduced worker stress and helped workers feel motivated to develop and maintain relationships. Support has also been associated with workers feeling more satisfied, being clearer about their roles and not overloaded by them, and more able to cooperate with others and act in more personalised ways (Coady 1993; Glisson & Hemmelgarn 1998; Gibbs 2001; de Boer & Coady 2007). The findings of this study support all of these, and indicate that these factors affect the relationship. Regarding support, supervisors in this study were mostly reported to be genuinely interested, respectful,
trusting, non-judgemental, listening, building family worker confidence and reflecting back. Supervisors were also found to draw on their own experience of family work. Most supervisors spoke about how they were more able to support the workers because they were experienced family workers themselves, more able to identify with the struggles the parents and workers faced, as well as draw upon their own experience.

Supervisors’ role in matching parents and workers emerged as a significant issue with respect to these relationships (5.1.9). Supporting evidence throughout the literature for matching clients and workers is limited and mixed. Findings from this study support a small number of research reports in the family-based practice and child protection literature that have found that having some similarities between the parent and worker helps the relationship. This includes factors such as similar socioeconomic background (Maluccio 1979a), values (de Boer & Coady 2003), life experiences, ways of interacting, personality, age, gender, marital status and having been parents themselves (Maluccio 1979a; Daro 2005). However, some of the psychological/therapeutic relationship literature has argued that factors such as worker age, education or cultural background, marital status or employment/socioeconomic status do not have a significant impact on the relationship (Bachelor & Horvath 1999; Meier, Barrowclough & Donmall 2005).

Despite such a diversity of views, some participants in this research were intently focused on the importance of similarities between parents and workers as supportive for the relationship. Perhaps this is because perceiving yourself to be similar to another, rather than different, accelerates empathy, where empathy involves “imaginatively putt[ing] ourselves into the other’s situation” (Kögler & Stueber 2000: vii).

When considering matching, the supervisors reported they had to consider not only service resources, including other staff and their needs, but also the ease or difficulty which workers may find in working with particular families. This is in keeping with Horvath and Luborsky (1993) who cite a number of authors who argue that complementarity rather than matching might support the relationship better than matching for similarities.

Previous research has also reported that supervisors influence the relationship through a human resources role involving employing the “right” staff, and challenging those who do not fit the service culture and type of work provided (Gibbs 2001; de Boer & Coady 2003). In this present study, some workers and supervisors noted that the supervisors had a very important role to assist the relationship by establishing and maintaining a culture and ethos in the service which enabled feelings of safety, informality, flexibility, personalised practice and professionalism (5.1.9).
Feeling unsupported was not widely reported by workers in this study. However, some reported that they felt unsupported when they perceived that the supervisor was not listening to them. The key issues related to this were that workers felt that supervisors did not appreciate, understand and act on their concerns. This supports Gibbs (2001) who reported that it is important that workers feel that supervisors appreciate, understand and act on their concerns. In addition, however, a couple of workers in this study did report seeking support and ideas from colleagues when they felt unsupported by the supervisor. This showed in a practical setting what has been said in the literature regarding the importance of workers being able to access more experienced colleagues in addition to supervisors (Gibbs 2001; de Boer & Coady 2003).

In one sense the supervisors’ role in this study included providing a standard for professional behaviour. Most supervisors described having direct influence over the extent to which workers were allowed to persevere with building a relationship when it might be a difficult process (5.1.9). It was reported that if the relationship was not developing the way supervisors thought it should be, then most supervisors challenged workers to operate differently. By providing more of a distant perspective they were able to challenge, and in a few situations overrule, a worker’s decision to keep a focus on children’s and parents’ needs (5.1.9, 5.2.3.8, 5.4.1). The supervisors were clear that such change must remain the focus, as the parents are just one factor in the service context, which includes other factors and pressures related to staffing, resourcing and government policy.

However, as was reported by some supervisors, even though they had final say, this was not forced on the workers from above. Instead they attempted to educate the workers about the contextual and normative issues the supervisor thought were involved. Furthermore, most supervisors also acknowledged the difficulties involved, particularly where creating personal connections blurred the boundaries between professional and personal relationships somewhat. Backing up findings by Green (2006), it was found that all of the supervisors were prepared to allow some “stretching [of] the [professional] elastic” as long as the focus of the relationship remained on meeting the parent’s needs in an empowering way. This also supports de Boer and Coady (2003), who found that supervision that helps the relationship can include supporting workers to work outside traditional professional boundaries where appropriate.

Finally, the supervisors in this study reported that fulfilling their roles would not have been possible had they not been active participants in the daily life of the service, with some kind of relationship with many parents using the service. They spoke about having to accommodate the needs of the service, parents and workers, along with challenging the
workers to develop professionally. They argued that this required good relationships and communication skills, along with careful reflection and discretion. This was possible through the close relationships they had developed with the workers, which led to their being very familiar with the workers’ personality, skills and style.

6.2 Section Two: Implications and Conclusion
This study provides insights into what works in relationships between parents and workers, although there are some limitations which reduce the way its findings can be generalized. Limitations include the small size of the study, a likelihood of bias toward positive relationships due to the use of self-selection, the gender and ethnic homogeneity of interviewees, and the fact that it is dependent on the recall of participants. However the study also has significant strengths, such as the distinctive inclusion of the supervisor to “triangulate” the relationship, the highly detailed nature of the content analysis, and the researcher’s position as an “honorary insider” which increased the willingness of the participants to engage openly.

Whilst the study involved a small number of participants (nine parents, eight family workers and four supervisors across eight cases), an obvious strength is the way this approach enhanced the degree to which it was possible to explore their narratives and gain understanding of how they experienced the relationship dyads in which they were involved. The small size of the sample enabled more detailed and rigorous analysis of the dynamics of these relationships than would otherwise have been possible. Where most of the existing studies describe the parameters of such relationships, this study explores in-depth each narrative, and analyses the minutiae of data emerging. Consequently the type of intense, fine grained investigation of perspectives of such relationships used in this study provides a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge regarding such relationships.

Furthermore, triangulating, or providing three perspectives on the same relationship dyad, is a distinctive contribution of this study, as most other published research has provided parent or worker perspectives independent of the other participant in the dyad, or in a few cases, the perspectives of only the parent and worker. It was hoped that by including supervisors and comparing three different experiences of the same parent-worker relationship, richer and more reliable information would emerge, and that the organisational context would be more clearly highlighted (Ruckdeschel, Earnshaw & Firrek 1994; Stark & Torrance 2004). This includes reducing the extent to which only positive aspects of the relationships were shared, and being able to cross-check recall about the relationships, thus decreasing the extent to which the retrospective nature of the research design was a limitation.
Furthermore, engaging willing participants in the research could be considered another strength to the study, in that they felt generally positive towards the research topic and were enthusiastic to talk at length. This included being honest about times when they perceived the relationship to be experiencing difficulties. It is unlikely that it would have been possible to recruit the parents who participated in the study unless the researcher had been “endorsed” as trustworthy by the workers they trusted. This perception was later reinforced when analysing the ongoing dimension of the relationship, where participants who have experienced a generally positive relationship, do trust and feel positive towards other representatives of that family service if they perceive them to share similar attributes to the family worker.

This study has explored, from the reports of the participants involved, their perceptions of the purpose, value and meaning of each relationship. To a significant degree what has been found supports previous qualitative and quantitative research regarding the relationship. New insights also emerge in this study and these can be expressed as propositions for practice, professional education, policy and future research.

**Proposition one:** Facilitating good relationships in family-based practice addressing issues of child neglect involves workers being able to help parents move from a position of distrust and ambivalence, to one of trust and acceptance of the need to address issues which impair parenting.

**Proposition two:** There appear to be specific worker actions and attributes which facilitate the formation of trust and which support the maintenance of good working relationships.

**Proposition three:** Given that parents report being more responsive to workers they perceive to be “real in role”, workers need to be equipped and supported to balance traditional “professional” norms of service delivery with highly individualised and “personalised” ways of relating to parents.

**Proposition four:** In view of the finding that good relationships in family-based practice endure beyond casework closure, organisations and funding bodies need to make provision for this.

**Proposition five:** Management, and in particular supervision, plays an important role in enhancing good relationships in family-based practice by providing a flexible and supportive work environment.

With further research, these propositions may be refined into principles of practice. The following section presents the possible implications of this study for practitioners, supervisors, and for professional education, policy and future research.

### 6.2.1 Practice

There were a number of worker attributes and actions identified which supported the parent-worker relationship. As was found when discussing the phases, it is difficult to discuss the implications of these distinct from one another, as they coexist in complex ways in creating the conditions which impact on the relationship.
The findings indicate that good relationships are perceived to be facilitated when workers perform their role in a way that is attentive, responsive and supportive, respectful, non-judgemental, patient and flexible, positive and hopeful. For these workers this included perceived professional competence and both personal and professional confidence. It also involves workers being collaborative and having the goal of empowering the parents. However, the most significant of worker actions and attributes found to facilitate good relationships was their highly personalised way of working. The following provides an outline of the implications for these actions and attributes for family-based practice.

Being an active listener and showing a readiness to respond to parents’ needs right from the beginning may help parents to form favourable initial impressions and to decide whether or not to engage. Furthermore, workers adopting an approach that assists, outside of child protection issues alone, may help the relationship. This includes being able to talk about a wide range of interests, as it may help the parent perceive the worker as a real person and more able to relate to them. It may also assist building the personal connection before focusing on professional goals, and this may increase the chance of accessing the underlying issues.

Helpful and respectful behaviour may involve workers communicating openly and transparently about what they are doing and why, as this can create a collaborative environment for the relationship. This includes negotiating the process, allowing the parent time to build trust and to open up, and to treat the parent as an agent over their own life decisions and processes. It may involve workers adapting how they relate to the parent in a way which is more personal, and which connects with the parent’s interests and level of understanding. Being non-judgemental may include providing opportunities for the parent to express themselves, and being creative without judging them or forcing opinions on them. It includes forming an opinion of the parent through a relationship with them, rather than through others’ understanding of the parent.

It is also important to remember that building the relationship and reaching goals takes time and flexibility. It may be necessary to anticipate that parents will feel unfamiliar with new issues and changes in their life circumstances, and that they may withdraw from the worker during these times. In this event, worker hope and positive reinforcement of the parents will help both parents and workers sustain the relationship. On the other hand, negative feeling or feeling overwhelmed may reduce the optimism of both parties. Support which enables the workers to see the positives and to feel in control of the case progression will benefit the relationship and keep both parents and workers motivated.
Being a confident professional includes having a thorough grasp of issues that arise for parents in the community. Continuing education is very important, and workers need time to keep learning, to keep being challenged and to build competence. One way to achieve this may include access to supervision that supports but also challenges workers to reflect on and build professional competencies. Another way may include engaging with other workers across the service, and also with external services, to develop understanding about a range of professional activities and approaches. Being confident and competent professionals seems to encompass personal confidence as well. This may involve workers becoming more self-aware; learning about and stretching their personal limits. It may also involve workers becoming more aware of the impact worker confidence and professional competence has on the relationship when perceived by the parents.

Being collaborative reportedly involves workers presenting as equal to the parent in certain ways and supporting the parent to achieve their goals. It involves acknowledging that this is the parent’s process, and negotiating the process together. This requires that workers adopt a collaborative attitude and be supported to work in collaborative ways. Improving the channels of communication to enhance accessibility has been found to help this, and also the practice of being informal when relating to the parent. This may involve following the parent’s lead, as it may help the parent feel comfortable, thus enabling them to be more responsive. Furthermore, given that some parents come to the relationship with ambivalence and distrust, and that they do not feel safe and able to open up about deeper issues or readily accept worker challenge until trust is built, one focus of the building relationship might be maximising trust in ways that might not fit with empowerment practice. Trust building was found to take time to achieve, with the early part involving some level of parental dependency on workers.

Finally, the workers may need to work in ways that better balance professionalism with a highly personal, or humanistic, way of working. This may involve relating to parents with some of the qualities common to friendships. This involves workers being natural and authentic with parents, and reducing professional boundaries by appropriately sharing something of themselves with the parent in a way that helps highlight similarities and common interests. However, it also means working in a way that clearly communicates the professional foundations to the relationship, and how the working relationship is different from friendship. This also involves being aware of potential power imbalances operating between workers and parents, and actively working to minimise such issues. Given the difficulties with this way of working as outlined in the study, it may require more being done to encourage and support workers to deliver their professionalism in highly personalised ways, a matter which will be further outlined below.
6.2.2 Management

6.2.2.1 The Work Environment

It is very important to ensure that parents’ first impressions of the service and the worker promotes their interest to engage, and reduces their level of anxiety. Parents reported a need to feel that the service environment was friendly and welcoming. While they included all staff in this, including service supervisors, it seems that administrative staff may be the face of the service in this matter.

Encouraging people to “drop in” was one key example of a welcoming and informal environment performed by these services. However, being able to do this well, and maintain it, requires resources. It is important for staff to have a presence at the service during business hours. It is also important to equip administration staff to greet parents and attend to them briefly if required, in order to help them feel comfortable prior to their being seen by another staff member who can meet their needs. One difficulty with this is that the family service is a workplace, and so space needs to be made available where parents can relax without staff and other parents being disrupted or confidentiality compromised.

It is also important to offer a range of services in a personalised, familiar, flexible and relaxed environment. This may include allowing for flexibility in the workplace so that parents can still access support if their worker is not available. Other workers may need to be supported to build some level of relationship with the parent, as this seems to reduce pressure on the relationship with the primary worker, and helps the parent feel comfortable with the service more generally. This also involves being able to offer home visiting or centre based work along with groups and drop in space. This means having flexibility in terms of time, where parents can access support as they need, inside business hours but outside appointment times. The services studied met this need through the “drop in” dimension. Workers need to be supported to be flexible and to fit in with the parent’s readiness to change, rather than be locked into fixed duration for service provision. This seems to reduce pressure on the building relationship and the process of parental change, as the parents and workers are more able to concentrate on the issues, instead of the length of time left. Another way the services supported and empowered parents was through providing scope for parents to contribute to the service in some way if they wanted to do so.

Parents found it helpful that they could maintain an emotional connection with the worker after their individualised casework time had ceased. In many cases this extended to include feeling supported by a relationship with the service as a whole, and not the worker exclusively. This could be considered a preventive measure in helping parents to maintain and continue to build capacity. Parents and workers resisted closure where they felt the parent
would be vulnerable without ongoing support. Reducing contact while simultaneously supporting the parent, required patience and time, in order to establish patterns the parent would be able to employ when they did not have the same level of worker support as what had been the case up to that point.

6.2.2.2 Supervision
Supervisors can support workers to act in ways that maximise trust building, and especially to relate to parents in the highly personalised ways described throughout this study. It may mean trusting that the workers know the parents well enough to balance dependency behaviour with empowerment principles. In addition, it may require encouraging and supporting a flexible and informal approach to gathering information about the parents’ needs and meeting those needs. It has been found, however, that when workers relate to parents in highly personalised ways, parents have heightened expectations that workers to whom they feel closely connected should exclusively provide support, and this increased pressure on workers. Supervisors may need to support workers in dealing with this. It may mean reminding and challenging workers to be clear and well informed about professional roles. It may also include being flexible and allowing space for workers to follow the parent’s lead with regard to building capacity. Furthermore, it may mean balancing the supervisor support function with a reflective one, where workers are provided more opportunities to reflect on the “use of self” in their professional practice. It is highly likely that this will not be possible without good worker-supervisor relationships.

Aspects of supervisors’ roles that support good relationships include well developed, trusting, honest and open relationship with workers. This involves engaging in regular and open communication with workers about the building phase, and meeting workers’ identified needs during this phase. Findings from this study indicate that it involves matching workers and parents as much as is practicable in the situation.

Furthermore, supervisors can maintain some level of relationship with parents, and this has been found to assist them to support workers. They can also provide opportunities for parents to initiate contact with the service for support. It involves maintaining a welcoming, informal and relaxed family service environment, along with encouraging an engagement wider than with the worker alone. This appears to provide support to the relationship as it reduces pressure on workers, and enables longer term ongoing support for families, given that services will have a more enduring presence in the community than individual workers. This may mean the service involving itself very much in community activities and promoting the service as a service for all in the community. In this way parents may become familiar with the service and staff before engaging on a one-to-one level.
Supervisors also have an important responsibility to ensure that the work environment encourages, supports and develops a personalised, empowering and collaborative environment. This may mean employing staff who fit the community and service culture, including staff who have some similarities with the people who attend the service, and with the client population whom the service is trying to reach. A special consideration may be the employment of staff skilled in the craft of highly personalised professional family work. It may also mean ensuring that workers receive basic training in the most prominent issues for which parents access support, and that they develop relationships with other professionals to whom they can refer parents. It also seems important to establish a work environment where workers can utilise the expertise of other professionals, both internal and from other organisations. It will require time to build and maintain relationships with other professionals, and a culture of open dialogue where professionals value each other and a personalised approach.

Supervisors need time to build and maintain such relationships and fulfil such roles. They need time and resources to encourage and maintain working environments which are friendly and welcoming, safe, trustworthy, flexible, informal, supportive and responsive. They need to be able to support staff in keeping flexible time limits for relationships. Finally, supervisors need time and access to appropriate training, to keep up to date with changing ideas on what supports or limits relationships between parents and workers.

6.2.2.3 Professional education

Professional education at both the qualifying and post-qualifying levels can support relationship-based practice by developing and delivering comprehensive, evidence-informed and experiential training materials around such issues. In light of the growing body of literature on positive effects of humanistic forms of professionalism, professional education can support the type of relationships described in the study by developing curricula which link education on professionalism, professional ethics and practice skills with the type of relationship-based practice described in this study and similar studies.

Developing such knowledge about the relationship may challenge professional educators regarding their role in preparing professionals for, and their matriculation into, family-based practice. When the sites of professional education and practice are institutionally separated as is the case in professions such as social work, there is clearly a need to bring experienced and exemplary practitioners into the classroom. Professional education for relationship-based practice may require increased focus on assisting students and workers to develop the attributes found to be important for building, sustaining and “ending” relationships. It may also require more attention to developing curricula that encourage students to reflect on the
likely challenges for them in such highly personalised practice. Both classroom and field based learning need to focus on the affective dimensions of practice for both worker and client.

It is important to note the comments of a few parents, workers and supervisors, that much of the humanistic forms of professionalism these workers and supervisors displayed seemed to be learned through practical experience and via close interaction with colleagues and supervisors. This suggests that professional education should support students and practitioners by collaborating closely with family-based services when developing curricula on the type of relationship-based practice described in the study.

Finally, there is the matter of other staff, such as administration and management, who provide the kind of working environment which supports the types of relationships being studied. They may benefit from inclusion in in-service education addressing these issues.

6.2.3 Policy

The parents in this study were clear that being able to “drop in” and have someone available to them both helped their relationship with the worker in individual work, and also reduced their dependency on the worker. For staff to be able to engage, and be available in the way described throughout this study, requires time and resources. This has implications for governments and other funding bodies, as the most costly resource is people.

One of the goals of the types of family support services involved in this study is to help parents develop the social support available to them. Although this was not tested, it did become apparent that the relationships facilitated ongoing social support for such parents. It is likely that families who are excluded from normal kith and kin networks which provide support throughout the lifespan, as is often the case with families where child neglect is an issue, will need to draw on such formal support in an ongoing fashion. This was found to be the case in this study, and the relationship was seen to play an important part in providing this support. However, these services did not receive financial support to do this in an ongoing fashion. Rather, they provided this because of a longstanding principle of encouraging and valuing ongoing contact and providing for families’ social support needs (Zigler & Black 1989). This created stress on the workers, supervisors and services as their professional ethos did not allow them to turn parents away easily whilst the resources were inadequate to enable them to extend the service.

Services addressing this need therefore require better resources to provide some type of ongoing service. These findings challenge traditional funding methods, which are focused more on short term, finite interventions than on potentially unlimited, albeit usually sporadic.
and less intense, ones. Current funding for family support services in NSW does not support the ongoing nature of the type of work described throughout this study. This is because current funding models are focused on working in a time limited way. This leads to incongruence in the way funding is applied to family support services while they adopt a more open ended approach to providing services to families, and work according to the principles outlined in this study. The way in which relationships have been found to be assisted by this more ongoing approach creates a challenge to governments and funding bodies to match funding approaches with best practice. Policy can support development of such relationship-based practice by being more flexible regarding duration of interventions, and by rethinking how service use and funding should be conceptualised. Finally, policy makers can affect the relationship through providing funding frameworks that enable the conditions for the relationship to flourish. Along with the ideas already raised, this may include funding in a way that provides greater security for organisations to offer longer term staff positions and so facilitate permanency, rather than casual employment of the workforce and high staff turnover. Studies of the long term cost effectiveness of different funding and service models will obviously be necessary to support such a shift.

6.2.4 Research

The limited research on which to draw indicates that this area is ripe for further research. This includes additional qualitative and quantitative research on the association between positive relationships and client retention, staff retention and outcomes for children.

This might include exploring relationships in similar family-based practice using the same methodology but investigating perceptions of poor relationships, or relationships that are considered difficult. Being able to compare perceptions of good relationships with difficult ones may bring into relief the most effective aspects of the relationships that assist building and maintaining good relationships. It may also include repeating the process with similar family-based practice in urban settings, with parents from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island backgrounds or non-Anglo-Celtic backgrounds, and with fathers, particularly with fathers working with male workers. How the emotional intimacy is managed in cross-gender relationships (female worker and father, male worker and mother) such that it does not increase the risk of sexualised relationships, especially in non-clinical settings such as the home, is an important consideration.

Researching relationships involving a number of settings, but where the research has been conducted in a similar way so that the findings are comparable to some extent, may provide additional insights about good relationship-based practice. Since highly personalised ways of working may be more natural for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island professionals (Lynn et
al. 1998), learning more about the nature of their ways of working might be a good place to focus initially to build knowledge. International cross-cultural research in this area could also be very fruitful.

These findings support the notion that the relationship develops in phases, and that these phases have unique characteristics. However, this study did not test the phases by their relationship to client change. Far more research is needed to explore the phases in greater depth, to gain greater understanding on how they influence parent change and outcomes for children.

An additional area for investigation is the role which managers and supervisors have in employing the type of staff who facilitate a conducive work environment. Whilst it is likely that worker-supervisor relationships will, as with parent-worker relationships, be characterised by elements including trust, openness and collaboration and non-judgemental and respectful attitudes, more research is required on the dimensions and dynamics of the worker-supervisor relationship. For example, what characterises good worker-supervisor relationships? And, how do they support improving parenting, parent empowerment and better outcomes for children? Moreover, what impact does working in this way have on services, and how does this affect their capacity to provide for the needs of the community?

A related research issue, and one of special interest to professional education, is the extent to which worker actions and attributes that are conducive to positive working relationships can actually be taught, given that they are so centrally dependent upon workers’ emotional capacities and core values. Increased knowledge of such issues is required in order to have a better understanding of the effectiveness of professional education at both the qualifying and post-qualifying levels.

Further research is also required into social support benefits flowing from the type of relationship and family-based practice explored in this study, and how it relates to producing improved outcomes for children where child neglect is an issue. This might include how often returning to the service occurs, along with why people do this, and what it achieves. It might also include the extent to which the main things detailed in this study are preventive, thus reducing intervention costs later when issues have become more complex and entrenched.

Furthermore, whilst it is paramount that a clear focus of these relationships is parent empowerment, further research is required into the association between improving parent empowerment and wellbeing and improving children’s wellbeing. Whilst this study has shown that parents with child neglect issues can engage in good relationships, and that these relationship did improve the parents’ perception of empowerment, it was beyond the scope of the study to evaluate improvements in relationships and empowerment with enhanced
parenting and outcomes for children. Does quality relationship-based practice that successfully engages parents improve children’s well being? If so, how? Likewise, does parent empowerment improve outcomes for children? How exactly does the humanistic way of working described in the study affect children’s wellbeing and does improved ongoing formal social support improve outcomes for children? And how do workers manage their relationships with both parents and their children?

Finally, whilst ideas relating to a more humanistic or highly personal ways of working have been raised in recent years, this remains a contentious aspect of the relationship, and there is still much that is not understood. Because of this, further debate and research on the relationship between these types of relationships and professionalism/professional ethics are required. This is especially so regarding its relationship to contemporary professionalism and professional ethics. For example, how does developing a friend-like relationship affect workers? Or, what kinds of pressures does working in such way put on relationships between workers and colleagues and supervisors? When might a friend-like approach to working relationships become unethical? Does a more humanistic way of working result in significantly better outcomes for parents and children, and at what cost?

6.3 Section Three: Concluding Reflections - The Personal as the Professional

This study has presented the perceptions of the relationships between the parents and family workers in very fine detail, based on in-depth narratives of those engaged in the relationship dyads. It has provided a triangulated perspective on eight relationship dyads, which is believed to be a unique examination of these types of relationships to date. This has included not only the perceptions of the parent and worker involved in the relationship, but also those of the supervisor, who was one step removed from the relationship. Most of the research explored in the literature review was conducted with voluntary clients in therapeutic rather than statutory situations. In contrast, this study sits alongside the few studies of the relationship where the participants did not voluntarily seek out the service, as they were subject to a statutory child protection framework involving child removal or fear of the same.

The findings of this study reinforce much of what the literature has canvassed previously regarding descriptions of the relationship. However, this study set out to pursue the gap in understanding in terms of depth rather than breadth. Where much of the previous research has explored dimensions of the relationship descriptively and at a certain level, this study has analysed the phenomenon in greater detail, and provided a more nuanced and layered understanding of such relationships than has been found in the existing literature. Although because of the small sample size, along with the rural and particularly Australian context, it is not possible to argue that the families in this study are representative of all families where
child neglect is an issue, the findings offer important insights for engaging with a client population which has been reported to be extremely challenging to engage and hold within a helping relationship.

This qualitative study has explored the practice wisdom and tacit knowledge of experienced family workers and supervisors and has tapped the lived experience of parents. Its findings highlight the dissonance between normative professional expectations of keeping distance between workers and parents and highly personalised working relationships. Some workers have found themselves carrying the burden of internal conflicts in relation to the dissonance between the normative of expectations, and the personalised way in which they were drawn to respond to the families’ needs.

This study affirms and refines family work practice wisdom which has evolved over many years. The type of guidance in working relationships provided by Mary Richmond and her contemporaries at the turn of the nineteenth century, which was essentially the origin of the professionalisation of family-based social casework, still rings true. This has been further developed and crafted through the tradition of family support services, including the community-based heritage of family support services in NSW. The notion that professional engagement requires a personal approach to be at the core of an effective working relationship deserves to be debated. We would do well to explore further the “secret” of “the personal as the professional”. The multi-dimensional nature of the relationship and the skilful craft for which it is the vehicle, is perhaps best expressed by the parent in this study who summed it up in these words:

Kind of like having a friend. Kind of like having a mother.
Kind of like having a confidant. Kind of like having a counsellor. Kind of like having someone to teach you how to be a parent as well.
References


UnitingCare Burnside (2002). *Research code of ethics*, UnitingCare Burnside, Sydney.


Appendices

Appendix A: NSW Family Services Inc. Premises and Principles

Statement of Premises

- Assuring the well being of families is a hallmark of a healthy society and requires universal access to support programs and services.

- Families have multiple forms, not necessarily biologically based. All families, regardless of race, composition, ethnic background or economic status, need and deserve a support system. Support can be provided through informal networks as well as services and programs. Family services should be accessible and available on a voluntary basis to all.

- Family well being is linked to adequate economic and social support

- The level of support needed will vary from family to family in response to their unique needs and circumstances. Poverty, social isolation, family background, illness and disability may make some families more vulnerable to stress. Services that support families should take need into account when making decisions about priority of resource allocation.

- Families exist as part of an ecological system

- An ecological approach recognises that child and family development is embedded within broader aspects of society. This includes local communities with cultural, ethnic and socio-economic characteristics as well as the values and policies of the larger society. This perspective assumes that families are influenced by interactions with people, programs and agencies as well as by values and policies. These interactions may help or hinder families’ ability to promote their members’ growth and development. Strategies to support families must take into account the context in which families operate.

- Enabling families to build on their own strengths and capacities promotes the healthy development of all members of the family.

- Family services should promote the development of competencies and capacities that enable families and their members to have control over important aspects of their lives and to related more effectively. By building on strengths, rather than treating deficits, projects assist families to deal with difficult life circumstances as well as to achieve their goals.

- The power of families to take action to improve the well being of their members is increased when they have access to information and resources.

- Family services should recognize that families are best able to exercise choices in enhancing their family environment when they have access to information and high quality services. Meaningful participations in projects and experiences in influencing policies can strengthen existing capabilities and promote the development of new competencies in families, including the ability to advocate on their own behalf.

(NSW Family Services Inc. 2005: 11)
**Principles**

- In family services, staff and families work together in relationships based on trust and respect.
- Family services enhance families' capacity to support the growth and development of all family members – adults, young people and children.
- Family services affirm and strengthen families' social, cultural, racial and linguistic identities and enhance their ability to function in a pluralist society.
- Family services are embedded in their communities and contribute to the community building process.
- Family services are flexible and continually responsive to emerging family and community issues.
- Principles of family services are modelled in all aspects of the project, including planning, service delivery, management and administration.
- All members of a family should be safe from violence.
- Children should be provided with safe quality alternatives if it is deemed they can never live with their birth family.
- There is recognition that families have multiple forms, not necessarily biologically based.

(NSW Family Services Inc. 2005: 5-6)
### Appendix B: Research Considerations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Retrospective (in-depth interviews)</th>
<th>Prospective (in-depth interviews)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individua l – r’ship (general)</td>
<td>Individua l – r’ship (specific)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group (separate) – r’ship (general)</td>
<td>Group (separate) – r’ship (specific)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pairs - (separate) – r’ship (general)</td>
<td>Pairs - (separate) – r’ship (specific)</td>
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<td>Individua l – r’ship (general)</td>
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<td>Group (separate) – r’ship (general)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pairs – r’ship (general)</td>
<td>Pairs – r’ship (specific)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Methodological

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential range of responses on relationship (+ &amp; -)</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Low – high$^2$</th>
<th>Low – high$^*$</th>
<th>Low – high$^*$</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Low – high$^*$</th>
<th>Low – high$^*$</th>
<th>Low – high$^*$</th>
<th>Low – high$^*$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generalisability</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential detail on meanings - all participants</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low – high$^*$</td>
<td>Low – high$^*$</td>
<td>Low – high$^*$</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low – high$^*$</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

$^2$ Depends on how much the participant can hide the identity of the subject, hide their identity, trust the subject/others in their group and/or how dominating others are

$^3$ Depends on how good the participant’s memory is and how long ago the intervention was that is being discussed
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Retrospective (in-depth interviews)</th>
<th>Prospective (in-depth interviews)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Potential for number of themes arising</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential for gaining insight into r’ships with only positive aspects</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential for gaining insight into r’ships experiencing some difficulty at the start but then resolved</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential for gaining insight into r’ships experiencing difficulty leading to premature close</td>
<td>Medium - High*</td>
<td>Low – High*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Will depend on researcher’s ability to convince participants the information will remain confidential and anonymous
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Retrospective (in-depth interviews)</th>
<th>Prospective (in-depth interviews)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Potential for analysis of 2 sides of the 1 relationship</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Ethical | Confidentiality maintained | High | High | Low | Low | Medium | Medium | High | High | Low | Low | Medium | Medium |
|         | Anonymity maintained       | High | High | Low | Low | Medium | Medium | High | High | Low | Low | Medium | Medium |
|         | Potential for influence to relationship (+ & -) | Low | Low | Low | Low | Low | Low | High | High | High | High | High | High |
|         | Potential for increase in child neglect | Low-high | Low-high | Low-high | Low-high | Low-high | Low-high | Low-high | Low-high | Low-high | Low-high | Low-high | Low-high |

4 Will try to minimise by organising to put additional supports in place for participant (external to the subject if necessary)

For prospective categories - examining the working relationship in detail could lead to breakdown in that relationship, so greater potential for increase in prospective than retrospective
Appendix C: Forms

Participation Information Sheet for Workers

University of South Australia - Australian Centre for Child Protection
Southern Cross University – Centre for Children and Young People

**Project Title:** Understanding the parent-worker relationship in family work

**Researcher:** Liz Reimer, PhD candidate, University of South Australia

**Ph:** 02 6622 6637 (mobile – 0400 360 354)

*What is the project about?*

My name is Liz Reimer. I am a PhD student living in Lismore. My interest in the way in which family workers and clients (parents) work together developed through speaking with family workers while working as the Policy Officer at NSW Family Services Inc. (FamS). I have pursued this interest by enrolling in a PhD at the University of South Australia. This study is receiving support from the Australian Centre for Child Protection (University of South Australia) and the Centre for Children and Young People (Southern Cross University).

*You are invited to take part in this study.*

The study is looking into how parents and family workers work together when the focus of the work is on supporting parents to develop the level of care and attention they give to their children.

There are many family workers and parents working together in this way across Australia but not much is known about how they work together - about what these kinds of working relationships involve and what supports and limits them. The aim of this study is to talk to a number of family workers and parents about their experiences of working together. Interviews will be conducted individually and the information provided will be kept confidential. It is hoped that the knowledge gained through analysing a number of working relationships might be useful for assisting other family workers and parents develop and sustain effective working relationships.

If you have recently finished working with a parent at the family service, with a focus on supporting them to care for their children, I would like to talk to you about what this was like.

*What will you have to do?*

If you choose to take part, and are selected, I will ring you to organise a time to meet. You will be required to be involved in one conversational interview that will take approximately 1 hour with time for breaks throughout.

The interview will be a conversation about your experience of working with the parent. You will be asked to tell the story of the working relationship and how it unfolded, from beginning
to end. This will include talking about things like what you did together, significant moments, how you felt about working with this person, and what working with them meant for you. The sorts of questions that I will ask are:

- How was it for you at the beginning?
- How did it unfold?
- What worked well?
- What might have been done differently, and how?
- What changed?
- How did it change?
- What did the working relationship mean for you?
- How was it for you when the service ended?

With your permission, the interviews will be recorded on a digital voice recorder and saved in a password protected folder on the researcher’s computer. If you do not wish to have your interview recorded, I will take notes during the interview and ask you to check them for accuracy.

I will ask you to talk about yourself and the parent you were working with. When I talk to the parent you were working with, they might talk about you. I will not divulge what you have told me to them or anyone else. When I write my report I will not put anything in it that can be used to guess who you are. If I need to include something that you have said I will not include it unless I have your permission as well as the permission of the parent you were working with, along with your supervisor.

Involvement in this research has been endorsed by your employer and permission has been granted for the interview to be conducted during work hours at the family service.

**What will happen to the information you provide?**

The information that you provide will be used to improve knowledge about working with families.

The interview will be conducted in a private place (such as in a counselling room at the family service) and the information that you tell the researcher will be kept confidential. The notes and transcriptions of the interviews and the report on the research will not include any information that might identify you.

The information from the interviews (which will not have any identifying information in it about you) will be kept in locked filing cabinets at the Centre for Children and Young People (Southern Cross University) during the study. After the study it will be stored securely at the
Australian Centre for Child Protection (University of South Australia). The information, including the digital records of interviews, will be stored in this secure way for 7 years, which is the standard practice for all research information.

All records containing personal information will remain confidential and no information which could lead to identification of any individual will be released.

A summary of the general research findings will be provided during a presentation at the family service after it has been analysed. All current staff and past and current families will be invited to attend this meeting.

**Your participation**
Your help in this is voluntary and this research is separate from the family service. If you do not want to be involved, or wish to withdraw from of the research at any stage, it will not affect your employment in any way.

I believe that there will be no problems arising for you from taking part in the study but will call you a couple of days after the interview to check your thoughts on the interview process and any concerns that you may have.

**Any questions?**
If you have any questions about the study please call me on 6622 6637 (or 0400 360 354) or my supervisor, Professor Dorothy Scott on 08 8302 4030.

This project has been approved by the University of South Australia’s Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any ethical concerns about the project or questions about your rights as a participant please contact the Executive Officer of this Committee, Tel: 08 8302 3118; Email: Vicki.allen@unisa.edu.au.
Agency Authorisation Form

The Management Committee/Board of …………………………………………… (name of service) supports this study in principle.

We are aware of what is required for involvement in the study and what is being asked of family workers, supervisor/coordinators and clients of the service.

Once approval from the University of South Australia Ethics Committee is granted, we provide consent for clients and staff involved with the service to be approached by the researcher and invited to subscribe to the study. In addition, we authorize that:

- staff will take part in their interview during work hours and that this will be added to their work plan rather than being an additional load to their work.
- interviews may be conducted at the family service where required
- posters providing brief information about the study be posted around the service.
- former clients who have participated in the study be offered supplementary assistance and intervention if they wish after their involvement in the study, as long as this complies with our core business, policies and service agreement with funders.

Signed …………………………………………………

Position …………………………………………………

Date …………………………………………………
Consent Form (Family Workers)

**Project title** - Understanding the parent-worker relationship in family work

Researcher’s name Liz Reimer

**Supervisor’s name** Professor Dorothy Scott (University of South Australia) and Associate Professor Anne Graham (Southern Cross University)

- I have read the Participant Information Sheet and the nature and purpose of the research project and my involvement has been explained to me. I understand and agree to take part.
- I understand that my personal results will remain confidential.
- I give my permission for the researcher to discuss me with other research participants under the following conditions – that this will only occur when they are talking about me in the context of the same working relationship that both they and I were involved in, and only if my interview results remain confidential.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the research project at any stage and that this will not affect my status now or in the future.
- I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, I will not be identified, unless I have been made aware of the context and provided specific consent.
- I understand that I will be audiotaped during the interview.
- I understand that the tape will be locked in a filing cabinet at the Centre for Children and Young People (Southern Cross University) during the study and that after the study it will be stored securely at the Australian Centre for Child Protection (University of South Australia) until 2015, at which time it will be destroyed. I also understand that only the researcher will have access to the taped information.
- I understand the statement in the information sheet concerning payment to me for taking part in the study.

**Name of participant** .......................................................... ..........................................................

**Signed** .......................................................... .................................................. **Date** ..................................................

I have provided information about the research to the research participant and believe that he/she understands what is involved.

**Researcher’s signature and date** .......................................................... ..........................................................
**Consent Form (Supervisors)**

| Project title - Understanding the parent-worker relationship in family work |
| Researcher’s name Liz Reimer |
| Supervisor’s name Professor Dorothy Scott (University of South Australia) and Associate Professor Anne Graham (Southern Cross University) |

- I have read the Participant Information Sheet and the nature and purpose of the research project and my involvement has been explained to me. I understand and agree to take part.
- I understand that my personal results will remain confidential.
- I give my permission for the researcher to discuss me with other research participants under the following conditions – that this will only occur when they are talking about me in the context of the same working relationship that both they and I were involved in, and only if my interview results remain confidential.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the research project at any stage and that this will not affect my status now or in the future.
- I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, I will not be identified, unless I have been made aware of the context and provided specific consent.
- I understand that I will be audio taped during the interview.
- I understand that the tape will be locked in a filing cabinet at the Centre for Children and Young People (Southern Cross University) during the study and that after the study it will be stored securely at the Australian Centre for Child Protection (University of South Australia) until 2015, at which time it will be destroyed. I also understand that only the researcher will have access to the taped information.

**Name of participant**………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

**Signed**……………………………………………………………..**Date**…………………………

I have provided information about the research to the research participant and believe that he/she understands what is involved.

**Researcher’s signature and date**…………………………………………………………………………………………
Information Sheet for Parents

University of South Australia - Australian Centre for Child Protection
Southern Cross University – Centre for Children and Young People

If you have just stopped working with a family worker, and you were working on how to care for your children, I would like to talk to you about what this was like.

**Project Title:** Understanding the parent-worker relationship in family work

**Researcher:** Liz Reimer, PhD candidate, University of South Australia

**Ph.** 02 6622 6637 (mobile - 0400 360 354)

**What is the project about?**

My name is Liz Reimer. I am a PhD student living in Lismore doing a study on how family workers and parents work with each other. I have often wondered what it is like for parents who go to family services and get help to care for their children. I would like to hear what parents have to say about what it was like for them to work with a family worker.

I would like to invite you to talk to me about what it was like for you.

There are lots of family workers and parents working like this in Australia but not much is known about how they work with each other, what helps them, what gets in the way and what they think of it. I would like to know what you think. To help pay for your costs for being in the study, such as travel and having someone look after your children while you are in the meeting, you will be offered $40.00. Your involvement is voluntary.

I am going to talk to other parents who, like you, have just stopped working with a family worker at a family service. I hope to talk to parents all over the Northern Rivers. I will also be talking to family workers and their supervisors about what they think.

If you want to talk to me I will also talk to your family worker and the person who was supervising them. I will talk to you on your own and not tell anyone what you said to me.

I will use what you tell me to help family workers learn more about working with families.

**What would you do if you wanted to talk to me?**

If you want to talk to me about what you think sign the form, put it in the envelope I have provided and send it back to me. I will ring you to make a time to meet and talk. Most of the time will be spent with you talking to me. It will be like telling me the story of the way you worked with the worker; from the beginning to the end. You might tell me things like what you did together, important moments, how you felt at different times and what it was like for
you to work with them. You will not be asked any questions about being a parent or about your children. The sorts of questions that I will ask are:

- How was it for you at the beginning?
- How did it unfold?
- What worked well?
- What might have been done differently, and how?
- What changed?
- How did it change?
- What did the working relationship mean for you?
- How was it for you when the service ended?

We will only meet one time. The meeting will take about 1 hour, unless you want to spend more time than this. We will have breaks any time you want during the meeting. If you don’t want to talk to me any more we will stop the meeting. We will have the meeting in a room that is private (You may want to choose somewhere such as a counselling room at the family service or local library meeting room).

I will ask you to talk about yourself and the family worker you were working with. When I talk to the family worker you were working with, and their supervisor, they might talk about you. I will not tell your family worker or anyone else what you told me. When I write my report I will not put anything in it that can be used to guess who you are. If I need to include something that you have said I will not include it unless I have your permission as well as the permission of the family worker you were working with, and their supervisor.

I would like to tape our meeting on a tape recorder but I will not do this unless you say it is okay. If you do not want me to use a tape recorder I will takes notes. When I have written out what you said I will show you a copy to make sure I have written what you meant.

**What will I do with what you tell me?**

I will keep the tape, notes and copies in a secure place for seven years. While I am still using them they will be locked in a filing cabinet at the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University. After I have finished the research they will be stored securely at the University of South Australia.

After I have looked at what you and the other parents, family workers and supervisors have told me I will run a meeting at the family service that summarises what everyone has told me.
The family service you were attending will invite everyone who is currently attending the service, and who used to attend the service to this meeting, including you.

**Your participation**
You do not have to talk to me. It is voluntary. Also, this is my independent study. It is not being done by the family service. If you do not want to talk to me, or wish to withdraw at any time, it will not affect the services you receive from the family service in the future in any way.

I will call you a couple of days after the meeting to see what you thought about it or if you want to talk about it. If you any have worries before I phone you, please call me on 6622 6637 or 0400 360 354, or my supervisor, Professor Dorothy Scott on (08) 8302 4030. If you feel you want to discuss concerns further I can put you in contact with someone to speak to.

**Any questions?**
If you have any questions about the study please call me on 6622 6637 (or 0400 360 354) or my supervisor, Professor Dorothy Scott on 08 8302 4030.

This project has been approved by the University of South Australia’s Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any ethical concerns about the project or questions about your rights as a participant please contact the Executive Officer of this Committee, Tel: 08 8302 3118; Email: Vicki.allen@unisa.edu.au.
**Parent Expression of Interest Form**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I have read the <em>Parent Information Sheet</em> and am interested in finding out more about the research.</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

If you ticked “**NO**”, thank you for your time. Please place the form in the envelope and put it in the box at the front desk before you leave.

If you ticked “**YES**” and would like to find out more, please fill out the information below so that Liz can contact you. When Liz contacts you she will tell you more about the study over the phone.

| Name: |  |
| Phone Number: |  |

Thank you very much for your interest. Liz looks forward to calling you in the next few weeks with further information about the research.

Please place this sheet of paper in the envelope and seal it. You can:

- give it to one of the family service staff
- put it in the box at the front desk
- put it in a mail box

All of the information on this piece of paper will remain private and confidential. It will only be used for the purposes of the study by Liz Reimer (PhD candidate, University of South Australia). Your decision will not affect your future involvement with the agency.
Consent Form (Parents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project title</th>
<th>- Understanding the parent-worker relationship in family work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Researcher’s name</td>
<td>Liz Reimer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor’s name</td>
<td>Professor Dorothy Scott (University of South Australia) and Associate Professor Anne Graham (Southern Cross University)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- I have read the Participant Information Sheet and the nature and purpose of the research project and my involvement has been explained to me. I understand and agree to take part.

- I understand that my personal results will remain confidential.
- I give my permission for the researcher to discuss me with other research participants under the following conditions – that this will only occur when they are talking about me in the context of the same working relationship that both they and I were involved in, and only if my interview results remain confidential.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the research project at any stage and that this will not affect my status now or in the future.
- I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, I will not be identified, unless I have been made aware of the context and provided specific consent.
- I understand that I will be audiotaped during the interview.
- I understand that the tape will be locked in a filing cabinet at the Centre for Children and Young People (Southern Cross University) during the study and that after the study it will be stored securely at the Australian Centre for Child Protection (University of South Australia) until 2015, at which time it will be destroyed. I also understand that only the researcher will have access to the taped information.

- I understand the statement in the information sheet concerning payment to me for taking part in the study.

Name of participant........................................................................................................................................

Signed......................................................................................................................................................Date.................................

I have provided information about the research to the research participant and believe that he/she understands what is involved.

Researcher’s signature and date.................................................................................................................
Appendix D: Interview Focus Sheet

University of South Australia - Australian Centre for Child Protection  
Southern Cross University – Centre for Children and Young People  
Project Title: Understanding the parent-worker relationship in family work

Researcher: Liz Reimer, PhD candidate, University of South Australia

Ph. 02 6622 6637 (mobile – 0400 360 354)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflections looking back</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What one word would sum up this working relationship?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What advice would you give to a:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>…family worker hoping to work with a family in a similar situation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…parent involved with a family worker in a similar situation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…Supervisor in a similar situation?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E: Codes Matrix

This Appendix contains the Excel spreadsheet developed for initial coding of the data. In some instances the numbers in the Findings chapter do not match up exactly with the numbers in the spreadsheet. This is because the spreadsheet represents a simple account of participants talking about the action and attribute subthemes during each phase. It was developed as a starting point to try to capture the broad “picture” of the patterns in the relationships. This served to provide a “signpost” to how the subthemes were perceived to be experienced. For example, through the use of colours and cases it was possible to see very easily how the voices differed across participant group (parent, worker and supervisor) and cases. It also assisted the researcher to follow developing hypotheses about “the relationship” as patterns were clear, especially in the cases of a few voices having not reported certain subthemes where all others had.

The spreadsheet provided a starting place for closer examination. Therefore, the numbers cannot be taken at face value. Closer examination revealed further detail about what was occurring behind the subtheme and what other subthemes were linked. For example, five parents said they felt confident to disengage from the family worker during the beginning phase. Upon closer examination, they were not saying that they felt confident in themselves, rather that they would quit attending if the worker acted in a way they felt was inappropriate, despite fully appreciating how desperate they were.

The spreadsheet was a data analysis tool that provided a simplified way to begin to build a picture of the patterns in the relationships. However, the detail needed to be unravelled. This was achieved through closer examination of the data after following the signpost. As the researcher’s understanding increased the spreadsheet became less useful as it could not express the level of detail required for sophisticated analysis.

The following provides a copy of the spreadsheets. Each phase has been presented separately, commencing with the beginning phase and followed by the established and ending/ongoing respectively. The findings are presented by cases and voices. The parents’ voices are represented by blue, the workers’ by red and the supervisors’ by green. The subthemes are organised by worker attributes, worker actions, parent attributes and finally, parent actions.
### Building relationship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Worker Attributes</th>
<th>CS1</th>
<th>CS2</th>
<th>CS3</th>
<th>CS4</th>
<th>CS5</th>
<th>CS6</th>
<th>CS7</th>
<th>CS8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appreciative</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apprehension/nervous/worried/anxious</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidant/sounding board</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confident/competent/empowered</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connected/close to/like</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Disagree with supervisor</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathic/care/acknowledgement</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustrated</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hurt/upset</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Interested/curious</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non judgemental/suspend judgement</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Not interested/not curious</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not respect</td>
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<td>Patient/took time</td>
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<td>Professionalism</td>
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<td>Real/genuine/human</td>
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<td>Relaxed/comfortable - feel supported/safe</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reliable/consistent/trustworthy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respectful</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trusting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unempathic</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Unprofessionalism (blurry professionalism)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Untrusting/suspicious/doubting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unwilling/closed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vulnerable/needly/unsupported</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Willing/open/committed</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*P* Positive, *F* Fair, *S* Strong
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Worker Actions</th>
<th>CS1</th>
<th>CS2</th>
<th>CS3</th>
<th>CS4</th>
<th>CS5</th>
<th>CS6</th>
<th>CS7</th>
<th>CS8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accommodate/flexible</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocate</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertive/clear</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assess/test (analyse, question)/reflect</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assume/have expectations</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attentive/responsive (to child)</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attentive/responsive (to parent)</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broaden support network</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrate/acknowledge achievements</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge</td>
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<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change/grow</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborate/negotiate /facilitate</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dishonest/manipulative (pretend/act)</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do for/encourage dependency ('rescue')</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empower ('not rescue')/client driven</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly/welcoming/inviting</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honest</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify with/alike in some way</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inattentive/unresponsive</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform/educate/teach</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiate contact/reach out/ utilise</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normalise</td>
<td>P</td>
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<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not assertive/clear</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not collaborate</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not reach out/not utilise (retract/pull back)</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not set goals/crisis driven</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open up/self disclose</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persevere/persist</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present/available</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set goals/plan</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support with concrete needs (practical)</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support with emotional needs (hold/contain)</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Attributes</td>
<td>CS1</td>
<td>CS2</td>
<td>CS3</td>
<td>CS4</td>
<td>CS5</td>
<td>CS6</td>
<td>CS7</td>
<td>CS8</td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Appreciative</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
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<tr>
<td>Apprehension/nervous/worried/anxious</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
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<tr>
<td>Confidant/sounding board</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confident/competent/empowered</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
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Established relationship

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## Ending/Ongoing relationship

### Worker Attributes

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<td>Collaborate/negotiate/facilitate</td>
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<td>Initiate contact/reach out/utilise</td>
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Appendix F: Example of Analysis Summaries

Early working relationship (building)

Parent perception

Family worker actions

- Accommodate / flexible (188-194)
- Attentive / responsive (to parent) - responded and organised meeting (103-107), asked parent what she wanted to do and get out of the meeting, set goals parent wanted to meet (188-194)
- Collaborate - negotiated parameters for their working relationship (108-188, 188-194)
- Friendly / welcoming (108-188)
- Identify with / alike in some way - Aligns with parent against shared foe "what to we need to do to get DoCS out of your life" (59-60) - not outsider or someone involved in the System (54-75)
- Open up / self disclose - Informed parent about what approaches going to take and some personal life experiences which were familiar to parent (108-188), talked about options/possibilities (188-194) - helped build working relationship

Parent actions

- Attentive / responsive (to self) – (108-188) – related to willing
- Attentive / responsive (to worker) – because family worker came to town (87-99), when family worker set up meeting (103-107), listened and tried what family worker suggested because of identifying with / similarities with family worker (108-188)
- Identify with / alike in some way (108-188) – found similarities in experiences and ‘values’ (560) – helped build working relationship - thinks important for family workers to have children if they are going to work with parents (613-620) - this is important for empathy
- Initiated contact for support (28-47, 103-107) – followed up herself
- Open up / self disclose - because of identifying with / similarities with family worker – and subsequent trust / respect (108-188)
- Positive reinforcement / highlight strengths – (108-188) – drew on previous experience of family worker’s accent to help build working relationship

Family worker attributes

- Confident / competent – across a range of life areas (not just child protection and/or parenting (108-188) – helped parent respect / willing
- Happy / positive person (108-188) – experienced introduction as good experience
- Patient / took time (188-194) – at parent’s pace
Parent attributes

- Appreciative (87 – 99) - that the service came to town because of difficulties associated with going to it in the regional centre (travel, petrol, time- including parenting related time issues)

- Confident / competent / empowered - (28-47, 108-188) – didn’t phase parent that she did not know anything about parent prior to meeting or meeting family worker preferred not knowing family worker as felt confident her professional experiences wouldn’t impose on her personal life (more confident about confidentiality being kept) (56- 75), herself but also due to family worker negotiating parameters of the working relationship with her (asking, opening up)

- Non judgemental – found accent difficult at first but determined that it not be a barrier to getting help (108-188)

- Professional distance - wants to keep professional distance – strong belief this is not a personal relationship (76-86)

- Respectful (108-188) – due to family worker’s competence and knowledge about a wide range of life experiences and similar life experiences / ‘values’ (560) to parent

- Tired / worn out / unmotivated (188- 194)

- Trust – identify with / alike in some way gave family worker credibility in parent’s eyes (she respected him and trusted him because what he was saying about these ‘fringe dweller’ things resonated with her experience of them – “I have a tendency to be a bit of a fringe dweller and I was aware of some of the things that he was talking about and so I thought, “Okay, you know what you're talking about”… There was a number of similarities. Things that I can associate with in short, which probably opened up some other avenues in the counselling field… L: so how did it help you respond to some of the ideas he was coming up with, knowing that you had these similarities. P: Oh, it was worth a try. Definitely.” (134-136...140-141...169-171)

- Unwilling (100 - 102) – about home visits

- Vulnerable / needy  - including desperate (28-47, 108-188)

- Willing (28-47) – self motivated, didn’t want to experience depression again, realised needed support and took responsibility for her life, didn’t let communication difficulties due to family worker’s accent hinder getting help (108-88)

Context

- broader child welfare service system - Given family service number by staff at another agency (103- 107)

- expectations / values / assumptions – (108-188) – parent has strong sense of what she values as important and expectations about how things should happen (feels family worker held similar values and expectations) – helped working relationship - it gave family worker credibility in her eyes (she respected him and trusted him
because what he was saying about these ‘fringe dweller’ things resonated with her experience of them (134-136, 140-141, 169-171)

- family service systems (103-107) - was directly allocated family worker
- family worker practice framework - focused on family dynamics and things outside of parent (family relationships and concrete parenting strategies about how to do this when it was difficult) was more acceptable to parent than a previous relationship that was very focussed on what was Wrong with parent (108-188)
- high level practice experience - realistic it would be hard work based on prior experience of having done this kind of thing before (108-188)
- Personal welfare factors (mental health/depression issues) (28-47) – were demotivating (87-99)
- rural setting - because parent doesn't know family worker she is confident of the personal / professional boundaries being kept and feels more confident about confidentiality being kept

**Family worker perception**

**Family worker actions**

- Accommodate / flexible - aware of changes in tone on the working relationship and confident in ability to perform in the moment (76-85, 182-213)
- Assertive / clear (148-173, 182-213) - got it out in open, very clear communicator, clearly communicates time is not an issue and that parent needs and meeting them is the issue (254-285) - think this helps working relationship build
- assess / test - had strong sense before meeting her that the way she had been portrayed in the referral was unfair (54-75), questioned what had been told about parent compared his judgement of his experience of her with other's reports and found disparity - observed parenting characteristics also and found these didn't match what had been told - found out why there might be such disparity (searched for reasons for the difference between others reported experience of parent and his own - didn't make assumptions and then jump to conclusions) (86-105, 137-147, 148-173), tests/assesses as part of being attentive (182-213), assesses / needs reassurance if on right track by paying attention to what parent saying (agreeing and attentive words and sounds - reciprocity) (285-321)
- Attentive / responsive - gets parent’s perspective (54-75, 86-105, 105-137, 137-147, 148-173, 182-213) - starts by asking what parent wants to get out of the meeting, tailors techniques to parent’s needs (174-181)
- Change and grow as professional - tailors techniques to parent’s needs (although used to not have this approach - when had new strategy used it all time - change and grow as professional) (174-181)
- collaborate / facilitate - in charge but not in control (76-85), allow 15 minutes to connect before getting down to business and being clear meeting for professional purpose to meet parent needs (105-137), all about parent choice (148-173), very mindful of power dynamics and his status of more power (seems to clearly portray
genuine sense that while he is the driver) So has ultimate control she is the navigator and he trusts her directions (that doesn't mean he doesn’t challenge sometimes though) - sees himself as guide (182- 213)

- Empower – right from first meeting focused on making parent "not dependent on me (148- 173)
- Positive reinforcement / focus on strengths - (86-105, 105- 137, 625- 634)
- Present (254-285)
- Support with emotional needs - fears re depression (105-137), in first meeting, taught a relaxation technique she can use (148- 173) – this was a strategy to help build trust

Parent actions

- Assertive / clear (86-105)
- assess / test - had heard some things about family worker- must have done some research (105-137)
- attentive / responsive – to baby’s needs so putting baby’s needs before own but also worried about own needs but not able to meet them (86-105, 105-137, 625- 634), to family worker (148- 173)
- honest - about feelings (real / genuine / human) (86-105)
- initiate contact - 105- 137
- Open up / self disclose (86-105)
- set goals / plan – parent was organised to be able to do what she does despite mental health issues (105- 137) – helped family worker

Family worker attributes

- confident / competent - make own opinion based on his perception and experience of parent - doesn't like to read other peoples notes be cause doesn't want his judgement clouded (Could act as barrier to what family worker thinks about parent as builds working relationship (10- 54, 86-105), aware of changes in tone on the working relationship and confident in ability to perform in the moment (76-85, 182- 213)
- Empathy - thinks about how he would feel if in similar situation to parent (54-75), takes time (254-285)
- non judgemental - "the truth is somewhere in the middle", read referral notes and found it judgemental - likes to make own opinion based on his perception and experience of parent (10- 54, 54-75), tries to take no preconceived ideas into the first meeting (non-judgemental), doesn't dwell on who the new client may be beforehand (76-85), tries to work out Why rather than just dismissing based on the obvious - "everybody's different...game of watch" (137-147)
- Patient/ take time - (small steps - tackling problems one at a time (manageable and because not So overwhelming can unpack more of the underlying problems) (76-85,
254-285), parent’s terms and at her pace (trusted the navigator) - keeps focus on the issues not the time which helps keep working relationship relaxed and at parent’s pace (helps with sense of control??) (254-285)

- Real / genuine / human - perceives that parent perceived him as just another human being (like them), not a worker with the associated power hierarchy that comes with that. It is a real relationship where people relate as humans (the idea from cs3 that parent had about family worker that she came across as thinking she was no better than parent) - you get this by being attentive (listening and reflective), genuine curiosity about what parent thinks about herself not what others think about her (parents terms- what parent wants to tell them) - trust and respect and non-judgemental are part of this - assumes parent is good at knowing when people are genuine or not

- Respectful (174-181, 182-213, 214-237, 625-634) - acknowledges parent’s feelings about the situation (54-75) and what is important (182-213), thought parent was courageous for her honesty from the beginning (86-105), respectful of parent when talking to other workers (especially if he knows they are judgemental and not respectful) - doesn't respect workers like that and is closed to them (guarded) (249-253)

- Trusting - terms and at her pace (trusted the navigator) (254-285)

- Willing – genuinely wants to know what is going on for parent (182-213)

Parent attributes

- apprehensive (148-173) – in first meeting only
- Real / genuine / human – honest about feelings (86-105)
- relaxed / comfortable (214-237)
- Vulnerable / needy (86-105) – overwhelmed / in chaos (105-137)
- willing (105-137)

Context

- broader context (child protection system) - often just report negative/information about people (54-75),
- broader context (social) - strong sense of what is right and wrong in terms of structural impacts on people's lives (10-54)
- family service systems - family service already involved but parent’s needs made her not appropriate for that program (2-10), uses supervision as place ‘to explore his practice with parent and any issues having (249-253)
- parent had some personal family support (105-137)
- practice framework – values non judgemental practice (10-54), separates peoples problems from them as people (10-54), being able to listen to parent’s story in an open/unclouded way important (10-54), holistic approach to what people are doing (looks behind for the rational reasons to the life circumstances) (54-75)
- prior experience of working relationship impacts building working relationship (238-249)

**Supervisor perception**

**Family worker actions**

- accommodate / flexible - accepted parent needed to bring baby (140-162), will talk about anything (207-232)
- assess / test - pinpoint the things that would make a difference (discerning) (165-194), himself - reflective and discerning about what needs help with (233-248)
- attentive/ responsive (165-194) - asks parent what she wants to do and expects her to tell him and wants parent to choose (207-232)
- broaden support network - refer to specialists if he doesn't know the answer, knows the system, is best person to talk to and is well connected (207-232)
- celebrates achievements - no matter how small (92-97), including noticed differences in the baby (140-162)
- Challenge (79-85)
- collaborative / facilitate - mindful of his power and genuine about sharing it - asks parent what she wants to do and expects her to tell him and wants parent to choose - believes this creates a safe space (207-232), refer to specialists if he doesn't know the answer (207-232)
- friendly / getting to know - no goals set initially (although in back of family worker mind as important) - building rapport most important element (connecting and getting to know / developing a relationship includes sharing like experiences and knowledge around the child) (140-162), will talk about anything (207-232)
- identify with / alike in some way - sharing like experiences and knowledge around the child (140-162)
- initiate contact - reflective and discerning about what needs help with (233-248)
- positive reinforcement / highlight strengths (92-97, 195-204, 207-232) – validate – this supported parent
- Support (concrete) - with things that would make a significant difference to the issue- take away the issue and anxiety simply - helped relationship build (meet concrete need simply) (165-194)
- Support (emotional) (79-85, 165-194) – hold client, by being genuinely collaborative

**Parent actions**

- assess / test – how family worker interacted with child 504-511
- attentive /responsive - to referral to family worker (2-23)
- initiated contact / reach out / utilise - because aware she needed help (54-59)
Family worker attributes

- apprehensive - about parent level of commitment due to the child protection reports (129-134)
- confident / competent - (79-85) – experienced, refer to specialists if he doesn't know the answer, knows the system, is best person to talk to and is well connected, humble - helped working relationship build (207-232, 233-248)
- connected (with child) - helped working relationship build (140-162)
- empathic (165-194, 195-204)
- non judgemental (195-204) - helped build working relationship
- patient / takes time – small steps (92-97), will talk about anything (207-232)
- Real / Genuine / human (79-85, 205-207)
- relaxed / comfortable – after met parent and had conversations because realised parent willing/committed to change/grow (135-139), with the child and child being there (140-162)
- respectful – in awe of mothers (195-204)
- Vulnerable / needy – male worker with female (and breastfeeding) parent (59-78)
- willing / open - reflective and discerning about what needs help with (233-248)

Parent attributes

- stressed / pressured – disorganised (165-194)
- vulnerable / needy – desperate (24-30, 54-59), sleep deprived, overwhelmed, depressed (92-97, 165-194) - not right for volunteer home visiting as needs too complex (2-23) – needed someone who would acknowledge strengths and achievements and celebrate these (92-97)
- willing - because desperate and aware of child protection consequence (duress) (2-23), committed (didn't leave after CP reports) (85-92, 92-97, 135-139)

Context

- Broader child welfare service system (legal) – child protection reports made to DoCS (child neglect) (2-23)
- Parent – personal factors – mental health (165-194)
- Family service system (other programs)
- Attentive / responsive (to broader child protection system) - reported child protection (child neglect) concerns to DoCS (2-23)
- collaborate / facilitate - ("negotiable" child protection report - possibly means negotiated because parent knew content) (2-23)
- unwilling - not right for volunteer home visiting as needs too complex (2-23)
- Family service system (supervisor)
• assess / test - usually some level of matching by supervisor between worker and client (not this time because no worker available) (24-30)
• attentive / responsive (to parent, family worker, family service and broader child protection system framework)
• broader child welfare system – occupational health and safety legislation (59-78), duty of care to parent (59-78)
• challenge (368-411) – family workers to learn change and grow - through very directive allocation process
• Collaborative / facilitate - sees the prior family work as extension of herself - initiated process where parent involved somewhat (2-23)
• commitment is important (85-92)
• connected (368-411) - to the staff – knows them really well
• empathic – towards parent (165-194)
• family worker (59-78, 85-92) – safety concerns for family worker (male worker with female (and breastfeeding) parent and potential of being accused of
• Important for parent to be ready to change and grow because without that working relationship wont work properly - also, some things need to be dealt with before other things can and need good communication and working relationship with parent before can get this 517-569
• important not to build dependency – so family service has 3 strikes policy with an open door (don't chase clients) - allow parents to judge own pace and decide to connect with service - "allow them to drive their own process" - fundamental element of this is respect (569-698)
• important to do child protection report respectfully, factual not emotional, honest, not blaming parent and being empathic -put in positive frame (this is a way to get support) - reason this way is to keep parent engaged with service as very vulnerable and crucial time (not engaged but significant child protection concerns and not with assigned worker yet) (31-54)
• matching is important (98-103, 368-411) - the important issues in matching are matching a worker who can meet parent needs for pace and respect and ability to connect with a client (I wonder if this means have to be able to respect or be respected?) - also have to be able to judge the needs – all based on what is in the intake and referral forms
• not collaborate - office based work (due to attentive to safety concerns for family worker and legislation) (59-78), very directive allocation process (368-411)
• parent (165-194) – (because had been so involved in supporting workers from other program (59-78)) - trying to negotiate the system to be able to assign a worker (31-54, 59-78), made sure parent clear and okay about male worker and no other people around (sensitive - safety) (59-78)
• positive reinforcement / highlights strengths – of family worker (165-194)
• present / available – if family worker wants her support (233-248)
• relaxed / comfortable - not concerned about conflict in working relationship (85-92)
• respect – family worker (acknowledge skill and achievement) (165-194)
• respect is important (569- 698) – helps with not building dependency
• supportive (concrete) – of family worker (233-248)
• supportive (emotional) – of family worker (233-248)
• thought parent would be closed (retract out of fear and anger) - supervisor surprised when parent very keen and responsive to referral to family worker – thinks think good communication and some level of sharing power helped parent feel more amenable (2-23)
• trusts – family worker (233-248)
• values / expectations / assumptions

Established working relationship

Parent perception

Family worker actions

• Accommodate / Flexible – set new goals throughout working relationship (194-250), gave parent space/ freedom to choose what she would do (194-250), would keep session short when parent unmotivated and respond with something he knew parent liked doing (370-442), tried new technique if parent didn't want that idea (638-652)
• Attentive / responsive – (56-75) to parent need for weekly contact, set new goals throughout working relationship and suggested lots of options and possibilities to parent (some of which included listening to parent’s story and finding out about things she had done in the past that she had been good at and interested in doing now and explored these with her (194-250), referred to things spoken about previously during conversations (that parent had forgotten that she had mentioned (252-262), skilled at reading people (262-297), to the causes behind the symptoms - it wasn't enough just to deal with the easy things that were problems on the surface but to try to address the things that led to those problems (“actually influencing the situation” 344) (298- 346), to parent’s lack of motivation – would ask how parent was (not assume) keep session short and respond with something he knew parent liked doing (370- 442, 451-463), learned about parent’s strengths this way (464- 482), would ask how parent was and not assume (370-442)
• Celebrate achievements – (56-75, 194-250, 499-533) – helped parent see progress in terms of things she wanted to achieve
• Challenge (298- 346, 464- 482) – stretch parent to change / grow, believe in her own strengths, parent to deal with and practise some of the things learned in family service course (499-533)
• Collaborative / facilitate - helps parent reach autonomy (56-75), gave parent space/ freedom to choose what she would do (194-250), working relationship built by the two people (collaborative and negotiated) (322-359)

• Empower / enable - helps parent reach autonomy (56-75, 262-297, 298-346), - gave parent space/ freedom to choose what she would do and opened up a realisation in parent that she could do anything she set her mind to and that she was entitled to try (built her sense that she could and was entitled to be part of the social world) (194-250), taught techniques so parent could do it without him (autonomy) (638-652)

• Inform / educate / teach / share knowledge – (56-75, 443-450, 638-652) clearly communicated what was going on (unlike other working relationship experiences parent had where she was not told) (298-346), taught techniques so parent could do it without him (autonomy) (638-652)

• Open up / self disclose - key thing re professional / empathy is self disclosure (but used in a way to give credibility re the work doing with parent, not just about anything - things to make the connection that feel have some similarities and give sense of credibility when talk from personal experience) (653-665)

• Positive reinforcement / highlight strengths (194-250, 464-482)

• Present (262-297) - space for parent to talk about hard things

• Set goals – small and achievable (56-75, 464-482), changed as parent’s needs changed (194-250, 464-482) - led to parent acting on a goal of going to uni

• Support with concrete needs (262-297, 443-450) - important to parent that family worker concentrated on family relationships whereas other counselling focused on parent personal problems (even though by the sounds of it family worker actually did too just in a different way) (534-546)

• Support with emotional needs (56-75, 194-250, 298-346, 534-546) - helped parent see progress in terms of things she wanted to achieve and supported/encouraged her to achieve them, gave space for parent to talk about hard things (262-297)

Parent actions

• Attentive / responsive (to self) – changing needs (194-250)

• Attentive / responsive (to family worker) – responded to the approach family worker took (gentle/sensitive/respectful) - it helped her feel comfortable to open up and stretch herself/change and grow (262-297, 464-482), despite not being motivated (370-442)

• Challenge herself (262-297) – when feeling unmotivated – and out of self respect and professional pride (370-442)

• Change and growth – has become more confident (194-250), more autonomous (200-204, 262-297) – eg. process of completing uni degree and applying for jobs, which she undertook as one of her goals. She attributes this to the support, encouragement and space/ freedom family worker ‘gave’ her to choose and the goal setting (464-482)

• Opened up (262-297, 464-482)
Family worker attributes

- Confidant / sounding board (194-250), would ask how parent was and not assume (370-442), provided a different perspective and feedback (464-482), reinforced what doing in course and gave parent chance to practise (499-533)

- Confident / competent (56-75) – suggested lots of options and possibilities to parent (some of which included finding out about things she had done in the past that she had been good at and interested and explored these with her - left it up to her to decide what she wanted (194-250), organised (298-246, 443-450), knowledgeable (443-450), what family worker saying consistent with what learning in family service course (499-533), helps family worker attain credibility (653-669)

- Empathic – gentle / sensitive (are these a new action inside empathic?), gave parent an option to not talk about difficult issues at some points (262-297), treating parent like a human being (298- 346), balanced being professional with being genuinely empathic and caring (showed this by being attentive, challenging, support with emotional needs – especially going beyond merely what the referral was for) (298-346, 638- 652, 653-665), would keep session short when parent unmotivated and respond with something he knew parent liked doing (370-442, 451-463)

- Frustration - sometimes because short session (370-442)

- Non judgemental – about parent’s lack of motivation (370-442)

- Patient / took time (262-297)

- Professionally distant - (298- 346, 638- 665) balanced being professional with being genuinely empathic and caring (showed this by being attentive, challenging support with emotional needs, explaining what doing and why, flexible, inform/educate, strive for parent’s autonomy, having life experience) - key thing re professional / empathy is self disclosure (but used in a way to give credibility re the work doing with parent, not just about anything - things to make the connection that feel have some similarities and give sense of credibility when talk from personal experience) (653-665) - to be professional you need to be credible (666-669)

- Real / genuine / human (348- 369 ) – family worker genuine empathy was the key driver of making a difference for the parent (also family worker appearing to get satisfaction out of his work and it not just being a job - I think this relates to genuine) - 367-369 - the important components of this were the family worker celebrating achievements with parent, caring and being genuine about this - parent experienced this as supportive, encouraging, motivating and felt that somebody cared

- Respectful - (194-250, 262-297) of parent’s choices, considerate, would keep session short when parent unmotivated and respond with something he knew parent liked doing (370-442), asked permission (638-652)

- Willing - gave parent space/ freedom to choose what she would do (194-250)
Parent attributes

- Appreciated – that family worker came to town - made her life easier in terms of money and time management (reciprocity) – helped her go when unmotivated (370-442)
- Confident / competent / empowered - (194-250) - had strong boundaries about him in her space (didn't want) (370-442), there was a feeling of equal power in the relationship where parent was reacting out of genuine empathy and respect for family worker (370-442)
- Empathic - helped her go when unmotivated (370-442) - there was a feeling of equal power In the relationship where parent was reacting out of genuine empathy and respect for family worker (370-442)
- Not connected (370-442)
- Not interested / unmotivated (370-442)
- Real / genuine / human – respond honestly (370-442)
- Relaxed / comfortable - not guarding every word (252-262), knew what to expect (298-346)
- Respectful - didn't want to let family worker down – helped her go when unmotivated (370-442)
- Surprised (252-262) at how attentive family worker was
- Tired / worn out - unmotivated (370-442, 451-463)
- vulnerable / Needy (370-442)
- Willing – knew she needed help and that this was good for her - helped her go when unmotivated (370-442)

Context

- Personal factors (mental health issues) – motivation problems (56-75)
- Broader child welfare service system - other counselling focused on parent personal problems (534-546)
- Family service system – seeing family worker once a week better than monthly because of parent motivation problems - being weekly made it possible to set small achievable goals and be accountable for them weekly (56-75), the courses at family service helped also - complimented work with family worker (499-533)
- Family worker previous experience - It aids his professionalism and credibility (666-669)
- Parent previous experience - drew on her experience of being treated as unmotivated/not interested (370-442)
- Values / expectation / assumptions – had high standards/values for herself which helped her keep being attentive/responsive to family worker despite not being motivated (370-442)
**Family worker perception**

**Family worker actions**

- **Challenge (parent)** (173-174) - at same time celebrating strengths, is challenging parent to change and grow - to follow through and keeping her accountable to what she said her goal was (handing the wheel over to her) - reminded her of times she controlled her own destiny (375-424), attentive to one goal parent wanted to achieve was particularly hard (so challenged and supported her about this - addressed the causes behind why this was such an issue) (485-546),

- **Assess / test (parent)** - checks in with parent that all is okay (322-359), questioning original referral given his experience of how parent interacted with child in office (359-374)

- **Assess / test (supervisor)** (635-698) – for a non judgemental attitude

- **Attentive / responsive** (322-359) - changing himself to understand parent not expecting parent to understand him (457-485), to how parent changed her demeanour when talked about things she loved doing (485-546), to one goal parent wanted to achieve was particularly hard (so challenged and supported her about this - addressed the causes behind why this was such an issue) (485-546),

- **Celebrate achievements** (375-424, 485-546) – this motivated parent

- **Challenge (other organisations)** (457-485) - the perspective of other workers didn't match up with family worker's perspective based on what he had experienced through his working relationship with

- **Change / growth** - prepared to explore and learn in supervision and not have to know all the answers (635-698), uses all three relationships (parent-worker relationship, family service supervisor-worker relationship, external supervisor-worker relationship) to grow as a person himself (635-698)

- **Collaborative / facilitate** - (322-359, 424-456) - changing himself to understand parent not expecting parent to understand him (457-485), gave space and opportunity for parent to put her ideas into working relationship (back to idea of navigator and family worker as driver trusting her to be navigator but because she showed she wanted to and took it seriously) (485-546)

- **Empower** (375-424) - gave parent the number for specialist counselling with the expectation she would act on it when she was ready - all about not about putting his values onto parent, changing himself to understand parent not expecting parent to understand him (457-485), gave space and opportunity for parent to put her ideas into working relationship (back to idea of navigator and family worker as driver trusting her to be navigator but because she showed she wanted to and took it seriously) (485-546)

- **Initiate contact / reach out / utilise** – uses family service supervision for gaining an objective perspective to help clarify things - uses supervision external to work for personal issues that come up in working relationship (635-698)
• Open up (635-698) to supervisor - prepared to open up in supervision because not prepared to ask something of parent that he is not prepared to do himself (make self vulnerable in supervision)

• Positive reinforcement / highlight strengths (322-359) - used her own stories of success and determination to challenge and help motivate parent to change and growth and set and meet her goals (375-424, 485-546), about how parent changed her demeanour when talked about things she loved doing (485-546)

• Present (322-359) – when empowering parent – didn’t leave her without support (375-424), gave space and opportunity for parent to put her ideas into working relationship (back to idea of navigator and family worker as driver trusting her to be navigator but because she showed she wanted to and took it seriously) (485-546)

• Set goals – together (322-359), challenged parent to be realistic and make them achievable (485-546)

• Smile / use humour (424 – 456)

• Support (with emotional needs) - attentive to one goal parent wanted to achieve was particularly hard (so challenged and supported her about this - addressed the causes behind why this was such an issue) (424 – 456, 485-546) - helped parent see the root causes of how she is feeling now and (375-424), supportive while parent undergoing counselling elsewhere (375-424),

Parent actions

• Attentive / responsive - gave feedback about having used techniques at home (322-359) - helped family worker know parent was interested,

• Open up - helps parent and family worker set a goal related to what parent wants and has identified as important (322-359), at about 3 months parent opened up more about life experiences - by putting into relationship like this it motivated family worker and enabled him to see a different perspective of parent to that of other workers (375-424, 457-485)

• Set goals (together) (322-359)

Family worker attributes

• Appreciative – of parent’s feedback - helped family worker know parent was interested and helped working relationship because parent putting something in (which important for family worker because more equal dynamics) - reciprocal (322-359)

• Confident / competent - used professional experience to communicate with parent and bring her story out (457-485), came up with strategies spontaneously (424 – 456), about his skills as family worker and uses all three relationships (parent-worker relationship, family service supervisor-worker relationship, external supervisor-worker relationship to grow as a person himself (635-698)

• Confidant / sounding board (322-359) – helped parent see different perspectives on her problem (424 – 456), and articulate her perspective on what others saw as problems (457-485)
• Hope (457-485) - saw hope when message from other family service workers gave was that there was no hope for parent - this came from seeing strengths and capabilities which family worker did not get to see until working relationship established (because it was not until then that parent revealed them)

• Non judgemental (322-359)

• Patient / take time (322-359) – “small steps”, tried to give parent sense of no pressure

• Respectful (375-424) – by taking empowerment approach

Parent attributes

• Confident / competent – showed determination and had goals (322-359, 375-424)

• Happy / positive person - when talked about things she loved doing (485-546)

• Willing - wanted to set goals (485-546), actively involved in the creativity - this helped working relationship (485-546)

Context

• Family service system (supervision)

• Attentive / responsive to family worker (635-698)

• Celebrate achievements (635-698)

• Challenge - keep family worker accountable and challenge him to keep focus on goals and parent growth / change - "keeps me on track" / honest (585-625, 635-698)

• Confidant / Sounding board - helped family worker reflect (635-698) – this was motivating for family worker

• Connected - has working relationship with supervisor (585-625)

• Inform / teach – supervision is a good place for learning (585-625)

• Non judgemental (635-698)

• Positive reinforcement / focus on strengths - supervisor affirms family worker’s practice (585-625)

• Respectful – creates safe space (635-698) - family worker responds by opening up and being honest

• Support (emotional) – supervisor supports, encourages and reassures (585-625, 635-698) - keeps family worker safe emotionally (so doesn’t burn out and is available to parent) because he is telling supervisor what is happening (585-625, 635-698)

• Trustworthy – creates safe space (635-698) – family worker responds by opening up and being honest

• Value of family worker / supervisor working relationship - gives family worker different perspective because makes it possible to put the issues facing out of own head (in same way this happens in family worker / parent working relationship) (585-625), keeps family worker safe emotionally (so doesn’t burn out and is
available to parent) - helps keep family worker / parent working relationship healthy by keeping family worker healthy emotionally and being non judgmental and attentive to family worker so family worker can open up and get support and use as sounding board (585-625, 635-698)

- Practice framework - talking about problem as something outside of herself (424-456)
- Values / expectation / assumptions – has certain expectations that parent will test him in working relationship in the same way he tests supervisor, believes that should have same expectations of himself in supervision that he has of parent in parent-worker relationship (635-698)

**Supervisor perception**

Family worker actions

- Accommodate / flexible – worked at parent’s pace (104-128) - (supervisor thinks helped parent feel in control and motivated)
- attentive / responsive – to parent’s changing needs - (My analogy – it felt like that at this point he started giving her the wheel (now navigator and driver) but kept supporting her (266-367)
- broaden support network - refer to specialists if he doesn't know the answer, knows the system, is best person to talk to and is well connected (207-232)
- Celebrate achievement (104-128), proud of parent (248-259), believing parent change and growth and acknowledging it by expecting her to and keeping her accountable to herself about it (266-367)
- challenge – more than before once parent started relying on herself more - changed to challenging to keep relying on self (266-367)
- Collaborative / facilitate (other organisations) - referred parent to specialist service (realistic about not being able to meet her specialist needs) (162-168)
- collaborative / facilitate (parent) - mindful of his power and genuine about sharing it - asks parent what she wants to do and expects her to tell him and wants parent to choose - believes this creates a safe space (207-232)
- identify with / alike in some way - re the experience they shared - “there was some sort of connection around that too. To understand, I guess the philosophical basis, that underpins it” (363-365)
- Positive reinforcement / focus on strengths (104-128)
- Supportive (emotional) (162-168 ) – focus on building personal capacity (meeting other needs he did have experience and expertise in and were appropriate to family work) when parent working with other organisation – also continued to support parent (albeit less intensively) as she started to rely on herself more (266-367)

Parent actions

- Assertive / clear – taking initiative more than previously (266-367)
• Attentive / responsive – to family worker going at her pace (104-128)
• Broadened support network (266-367)
• Change / growth (248-259) - becoming more confident, had energy and motivation to do it herself, was completing set goals and feeling more in control of her needs (266-367)
• Empowered (266-367) – relying on herself more - (Started studying) – this was a turning point in working relationship for family worker. (My analogy – it felt like that at this point he started giving her the wheel (now navigator and driver) but kept supporting her - process of getting needs met sped up and led to working relationship ending - parent had energy and motivation to do it herself, was completing set goals and feeling more in control of her needs. There was a noticeable change in working relationship dynamics (had less frequent contact, goals achieved more quickly, family worker challenging parent more than before – where prior to the family worker had been doing more supporting (holding/containing) and attentive / Responsive – where parent relying on family worker for this). When parent started to rely on herself family worker changed to challenging to keep relying on self. Parent was taking the initiative as well (and parent not leaning on family worker anymore) - parent much more confident and family worker believing this and acknowledging it by expecting her to and keeping her accountable to herself about it
• Initiated contact (162-168) – about deeper issues
• Open up (162-168) – about deeper issues once working relationship established, communicating her needs to family worker (266-367)
• Set goals – and achieved them more quickly than before (266-367)

Family worker attributes

• confident / competent (248-259) – experienced
• empathic – proud of parent (248-259)
• Patient / takes time – worked at parent’s pace and put no pressure on parent (104-128, 248-259) - (supervisor thinks helped parent feel in control and motivated)
• real / genuine / human - proud of parent (248-259)
• reliable / consistent (248-259)
• trust - for parent re relying on herself more than on him (266-367)

Parent attributes

• Confident / competent - becoming more confident , had energy and motivation to do it herself, was completing set goals and feeling more In control of her needs (266-367)
• Trust (162-168)
• Vulnerable / needy - needed to hear someone genuinely impressed (104-128)
• Willing - becoming more confident, had energy and motivation to do it herself, was completing set goals and feeling more in control of her needs (266-367)

Context

• Family service system (supervisor)
• connected to family worker – have developed a working relationship over time (260-266)
• present / available – if family worker wants her support (233-248)
• supportive (emotional) – of family worker (233-248)
• supportive (concrete) – of family worker (233-248)
• trusts – family worker (233-248), family worker’s judgement about if parent needs met or not (this has come over time) (260-266)

Ending/ongoing working relationship

Parent perception

Family worker actions

• Assertive – family worker initiated ending with a challenge relating to the goals having been met (547-557)
• Attentive / responsive - checked in with parent about if she was ready to end (it’s like family worker drove but left parent to navigate) (574-581), meets parent’s needs (557-573)
• Collaborative – refers her to other services/doesn’t try to help her all himself (557-573)
• Inform / educate / share knowledge - clearly communicated what was going on (547-557)
• Support (with emotional needs) - (547-557) – provided an ongoing lifeline for a few months rather than just cutting parent loose to support herself straight away (547-557) - checked in with parent about if she was ready to end (it’s like family worker drove but left parent to navigate) (574-581)

Parent actions

• Broadened support network - increased access to resources (information and contacts) that couldn’t obtain herself (4-20)
• Challenge – (547-557) had started thinking "what am I going to get out of this one?"
• Change / growth (482-499) - realised much more in control of her life circumstances than she has been over the past few years (and back to a place she has experienced before in terms of this feeling) (348-369)
• Identify with / similarities - feels that family worker has same values as her (reason she would be comfortable seeing family worker again) (557-573)
Family worker attributes

- Confident / competent – will get needs met and if family worker can’t then will access the people who can (557-573)
- Empathic - weaned parent off gradually – provided an ongoing lifeline for a few months rather than just cutting parent loose to support herself straight away (547-557)

Parent attributes

- Confident / competent (482-499) - would go to family worker in future if needs help (557-573) - realised much more in control of her life circumstances than She has been over the past few years (and back to a place she has experienced before in terms of this feeling) (348-369), strong sense of agency where she wouldn’t develop any future working relationship with someone she wasn’t happy about and would leave the service if the person she was working with she didn't like - has had experience like this in past and organisation didn’t listen so now would just leave rather than request another worker (594-612)
- Happy / positive person (482-499)
- Relaxed / comfortable (482-499) – reassured - had an ongoing lifeline for a few months rather than just being cut loose to support herself straight away (547-557), with respect to seeing family worker again in future as he already knows background information about her feels could pick up where left off (557-573)

Context

Family service systems

- aware there is a system element to the working relationship outside of her and family worker control (582-594)
- unsure if the system is designed in such a way she will get family worker again - would like to have the option (582-594)
- parent’s previous experience of working relationship - poor experiences of working relationships in past (and organisation didn’t listen) impacts future working relationships - so now would just leave rather than request another worker (594-612)
- values / expectations / assumptions – family worker has same ‘values’ (560) as her which is a factor in helping the working relationship

Family worker perception

Family worker actions

- assertive / clear - about what going to do / process and what need to do In future to access family worker again (741-754)
- attentive / responsive – referred parent to more specialist service (703 – 730, 791-814) – strong sense that working relationship has to be useful so if her cant help parent then she needs to be referred to someone who can, collaborative with other
organisations so know how to best support parent (703 – 730), parent had met most of her goals and in response to parent questions, changing needs and her starting to take the controls in the working relationship, family worker suggested winding back their contacts but it was a choice for parent (703 – 730, 731- 746, 781-791), to parent’s goals (791- 814)

- celebrate achievements (751-781) - "She started seeing herself as being capable" 711...she started to see herself in a different light 730) (703 – 730) – this helped to motivate parent
- challenge (731- 746, 741-754) - but out of respect and because close to equal relationship clear about reasons why (791- 814)
- collaborative / facilitate (with other organisations) (703 – 730) – so know how to best support parent,
- collaborative / facilitate (with parent) - genuine about sharing power (781-791)
- once get to monthly cuts ties in gentle way (asks parent’s opinion but driving the process) - leaves options open and invites parent to contact family worker if needs to - doesn’t make it final at this point (has stepped out of the car) (741-754)
- time between contacts getting longer but family worker in control of the process – family worker limits contact if feels parent not challenging herself to be autonomous and staying with her fears so is clinging to family worker unnecessarily (according to family worker) (my analogy - parent now in driver’s seat with family worker in passenger’s but has a brake pedal still which he uses judiciously) (731- 746)
- empower - focus on life without working relationship (751-781), genuine about sharing power (781-791)
- positive reinforcement / highlight strengths (703 – 730, 731- 746, 751-781)
- support (emotional needs) – while parent working with more specialist service (703 – 730), as new things arise that parent is worried about (731-746), invites parent to access family service again in future if needs to (741-754)

Parent actions

- challenge - parent had met most of her goals and was questioning if need to keep coming and was starting to take the controls in the working relationship (703 – 730, 731- 746, 781-791) - still some sense of power hierarchy though because it was like parent needed family worker permission to know when don't need to keep coming (even though voluntary still a sense of involuntary) (781-791)
- change and growth (751-781) - "She started seeing herself as being capable" 711...she started to see herself in a different light 730) (703 – 730)

Family worker attributes

- empathic (703 – 730, 731- 746)
- respectful (731- 746, 781-791, 791- 814-) - respects parent knows when time to move on
Parent attributes

• confident / competent - "She started seeing herself as being capable" 711...she started to see herself in a different light 730) (703 – 730) - still some sense of power hierarchy though because it was like parent needed family worker permission to know when don't need to keep coming (even though voluntary still a sense of involuntary) (781-791)

Context

• personal – parent also getting support from partner (703-730)
• values / expectations / assumptions – (791- 814) – strong sense that working relationship has to be useful so if her cant help parent then she needs to be referred to someone who can

Supervisor perception

Family worker actions

• assertive / clear – Communicated ending and life after working relationship (434-441) - “…and I think that just by introducing that, you know, life after this, you know, actually helps to give them a sense of vision. A sense of future. You know, ok, what is it that I'd need to do next time. How would I access supports if I need to access supports. But it just allows people to work through that process of disengagement. Rather than getting to a session and going, “Well. That's your six sessions. You've finished you know. And ask people then to disengage. (435-441)
• celebrate achievements (413-441)
• empowering - working towards autonomy - setting parent up with strategies to succeed (434-441)
• identify with / alike in some way - parent and family worker got to the position about ending at same time - shows "On same page" (434-441)

Parent actions

• identify with / alike in some way - parent and family worker got to the position about ending at same time - shows "On same page" (434-441)

Family worker attributes

• empathic — weaned off - deliberate strategy – empathic / sensitive (434-441)

Context

• Family service system (supervisor)
• Assess / test - drew on own professional experience to work out approximate time work should take (expectations) - this one exceeded expectations so supervisor did not have to put pressure on family worker about time - “You know, what I'd read initially and the story that I'd heard from the other workers and, you know, piecing it all together. And from my first conversations with Leo, I was thinking, “This is
gonna be a slog. This is gonna be a long walk”. And when I saw her walking here with her beautiful baby (pause) just looking, you know, so full of confidence, I thought, “Far out! She is either in love, she has won Lotto, or she has worked on some really big things and come out the other end”. You know, but she just looked great. She just looked great. I don't know why, you know, a year down the track, bang, you know, she's, she's, she is doing okay, and she's, you know, really moving ahead in her life. And that, even though that baby's not, um what's the word (pause) not coddled, not coddled and pampered and is allowed to get on the floor and eat dead flies and, you know, goes outside and sits in the mud, you know, that kid's happy. And that kid's loved. L: And safe now S: Yeah! Absolutely. Absolutely. I think that, you know, the um, it was a really good outcome/ A really really good outcome. Because it could have been really really different. Really really different” (458-474)

- Competent / confident - drew on own professional experience to work out approximate time work should take (expectations) (442-474)
- Patient / takes time - working relationship needs time to develop (442-474) – as long as working towards change in family (475- 501)
- Values / expectations / assumptions - improved child protection and lower risk as outcome (442-474)
- previous experience of other working relationship will impact how long it takes (parent’s) (475- 501)

**Purpose, value and meaning**

**Parent perception**

Purpose and meaning

- this working relationship was a place where parent gets her needs met (547-557, 622-631)
- parent wants to keep professional distance - sees this relationship is different to a Social / personal relationship (76- 86)
- characterised by push for parent to rely on herself and not on family worker (autonomy)
- important that the focus for the working relationship was about meeting parent’s goals (547-557)

Value

- Working relationship provided a different perspective and feedback (464-482)
- Parent would not have opened up about her story if she did not have the working relationship (194-250)
- Since having worked with family worker parent’s life situation is working well (in control of?), more secure, happier, confident (better than it has been over the past few years and back to a place she has experienced before in terms of this feeling). Parent attributes being at this place to family worker. Family worker’s genuine
empathy was the key driver of making a difference for the parent (also family worker appearing to get satisfaction out of his work and it not just being a job - I think this relates to genuine 367-369) (348-369, 482-499).

- Has broader support network - increased access to resources (information and contacts) that couldn’t obtain herself (4-20)
- Just being able to sit with someone and have an adult level conversation (social interaction) helped her feel better
- the working relationship was the motivator for parent (the important part of this was the way it involved having someone with her (very significant), supporting and encouraging her - interestingly it was all about her - the working relationship didn’t change when she started to push herself she did (188-194, 288-290) (Value = change and growth - autonomy)

**Family worker perception**

**Purpose and meaning**

- sense this is purposeful - being clear meeting for professional purpose to meet parent needs (105-137, 182-213, 791-814) - family worker always making sure clear reason to coming relates to it being useful for parent and focused on change and growth – family work is not the same as traditional therapy session - very clear it is about what parent wants to work on - acknowledging they know and want to - autonomy and respect ie. helping parent but that she needs to express what those are and that family worker genuinely wants to know (seems to clearly portray genuine sense that while he is the driver, so has ultimate control, she is the navigator and he trusts her directions (that doesn't mean he doesn’t challenge sometimes though (182-213)

- parent perceived family worker as just another human being (like them) (214-237), not a worker with the associated power hierarchy that comes with that - key aspect of the working relationship - 222-225 - it is a real relationship where people relate as humans (the idea from cs3 that parent had about family worker that she came across as thinking she was no better than parent

- 322-359 – working relationship established - working relationship is built by the two people (collaborative, reciprocal and negotiated)

- working relationship sits outside of family worker and parent and is created and developed by both for the purposes of meeting parent needs. It is a space where needs can be identified and met. It is respectful, healthy, helpful (and if not these things then need a discuss together to change things to make it this way), malleable (not fixed) and designed for a purpose. If it is not meeting that purpose it needs to be examined. Taking this type of approach means that any problems in the working relationship are kept separate from family worker and parent so less threatening to change (because it is separate it helps provide a distance for the family worker which is safe (in terms of not being emotionally impacted when parent leaves))

- creates space for parent to talk about things troubling her that she wants to change and for the family worker to acknowledge, encourage, offer a different perspective and ideas and free up the session to know and go at parent own pace - this working
relationship creates space for parent autonomy ("they're the ones doing the work") - like an internal counsellor for parent (567-584)

Value

- the perspective of other workers didn't match up with family worker’s perspective based on what he had experienced through his working relationship with parent - (interestingly at the beginning he was incredulous that the other workers said such scathing things based on little relationship with mother) (457-485)

- message the other workers gave was that there was no hope for parent - family worker saw hope - this came from seeing strengths and capabilities which he did not get to see until working relationship established (because it was not until then that parent revealed them) (457-485)

- the trust in the working relationship made it possible to be creative - parent was actively involved in the creativity - this helped - family worker gave space and opportunity to parent to put her ideas in (back to idea of navigator and family worker as driver trusting her to be navigator but because she showed she wanted to and took it seriously) - family worker attentive to what parent saying and affirming (485-546)

- used parent strengths to motivate her to achieve her goals - family worker only able to know about this stuff and be able to act this way because of the working relationship (485-546)

- autonomous parent - acknowledge and celebrate achievements, change and growth, competence, strengths (especially strength to move forward autonomously) - value of strong relationship is that it is possible to do this (and with credibility) because have been through so much together (751-781) - family worker attentive to parent communicating ready to move on - wouldn't have been attentive without good working relationship (781-791)

Supervisor perception

Purpose and meaning

- parent change and growth – started relying on herself more – significant turning point in working relationship for family worker - (my analogy – it felt like that at this point he started giving her the wheel (now navigator and driver) but kept supporting her) - process of getting needs met sped up and led to working relationship ending - parent had energy and motivation to do it herself, was completing set goals and feeling more in control of her needs. Family worker and parent had less frequent contact, goals were achieved more quickly, family worker challenged parent more than before (where prior to the family worker had been doing more supporting (holding/containing) and attentive / responsive – where parent relying on family worker for this). When parent started to rely on herself family worker changed to challenging to keep relying on self. Parent was taking the initiative as well (and parent not leaning on family worker anymore) - parent much more confident and family worker believing this and acknowledging it by expecting her to and keeping her accountable to herself about it (266-367)
• working relationship crucial to getting parent engaged and assisted (31-54). However, it is important for parent to be ready to change and grow because without that the working relationship won’t work properly (also, some things need to be dealt with before other things can) – Need good communication and working relationship with parent before can get this (517-569)

• parent was acknowledged, listened to, understood and acknowledged (family worker did this through working relationship) (347-360)

Value

• Parent became more confident through working relationship because of what family worker offered her because they had a working relationship - helped parent discover the self reliance and confidence she used to have (347-360)

• only factor at beginning was keeping the parent engaged with service (347-360)
Appendix G: Example of case “storyline” summary

Parent perception
Terri considered this working relationship to be a place where she could set goals, meet them and subsequently have her needs met. Although she appreciated the support the family worker gave with respect to this, there was a strong sense that the working relationship was characterised by an expectation by Terri to rely on herself and not Leo. Terri was very clear that this relationship was different to a social / personal relationship. Despite this, she appreciated some of the attributes and actions of Leo’s that were on a personal level, such as self disclosure, genuine interest, being real, treating her like a human being and being genuinely empathic. For example, Terri highlighted the importance of professional distance in the working relationship but it helped her connect with Leo when he opened up about some of his life experiences. Leo seemed able to balance the personal with the professional to Terri’s satisfaction. Related to this, it was also important that these experiences were like Terri’s, which might not have been particularly easy given that she had done and was interested in some quite esoteric things. It was a good coincidence that Leo had had some similar experiences of some of those as Terri used his knowledge of such things, and the extent to which it resonated with her experiences of similar things, at the beginning to test his credibility. Credibility was an important issue for Terri to help her build and maintain the working relationship as through this she was able to trust and have respect for Leo.

Leo’s genuine collaboration, characterized by asking her questions rather than assuming and negotiating working relationship parameters, foci and activities was also very important for Terri as it supported her expectation that she was relying on herself for change and growth. Furthermore, Leo’s genuine empathy was the key driver of change for Terri, as was her perception that he appeared to get genuine satisfaction from his work, and it not just being a job. It was also important that Leo celebrated Terri’s achievements with her, challenged her to push her personal boundaries and fears (as it showed he cared), went at her pace and was flexible in other ways, empowered and enabled her and shared his extensive professional knowledge with her. Terri experienced Leo as caring, supportive, encouraging, motivating and as a confidant where she could hear and test alternative perspectives on issues. Terri was also very self-motivated and realistic about how difficult the process of change would be, having experienced counselling and professional support previously and been a long time on
the journey of self improvement. A key motivator, and contributor to her willingness to work with Leo, was that she wanted to return to the feelings of confidence, competence and in control of her destiny that she had experienced previously. While Leo supported Terri with both emotional and concrete needs, Terri was fairly well connected and resourceful herself so concrete support was a lesser need once she started to believe this of herself and rely on herself. At this point Leo concentrated mainly on emotional support for Terri to continue to rely on herself.

**Family worker perception**

As far as Leo was concerned, the working relationship was a separate entity to Terri and himself which they created and developed together. The purpose of the working relationship was to identify and meet Terri’s needs (collaborative, reciprocal and negotiated). The working relationship itself needed to be respectful, healthy, helpful (and if not these things then need to discuss together to change things to make it this way), malleable (not fixed) and designed for a purpose. If it is not meeting that purpose it needs to be examined. Taking this type of approach means that any problems in the working relationship are kept separate from family worker and parent so less threatening to change (because it is separate it helps provide a distance for the family worker which is safe (in terms of not being emotionally impacted when parent leaves).

A key driver for Leo in this working relationship was the clash between his sense of social justice and fairness (and experience through the working relationship of Terri’s capabilities and strengths) and the apparent unjust and unfair attitude of other workers towards Terri. At the beginning he was incredulous that the other workers said such scathing things based on little relationship with mother. Leo saw hope where others did not. Developing trust between Terri and Leo was very important and is made it possible to be creative and throw ideas into the work Terri was actively involved in this (which helped Leo with respect to his experience of the working relationship). Leo experienced Terri as attentive and responsive to his ideas, suggestions and challenges. Leo was attentive to and used Terri’s strengths to motivate her to achieve her goals (he feels that he was only able achieve this because of the working relationship). Leo’s entire focus was for Terri to rely on herself. To achieve this he acknowledged and celebrated her achievements, change and growth, competence, strengths (especially strength to move forward autonomously). According to Leo, the value of strong
relationship is that it is possible to do this (and with credibility) because they have been through so much together.

Leo believes that this particular working relationship created space for Terri to talk about her needs and the goals she wants to meet to change and grow and to achieve autonomy. This was much bigger than just meeting her needs and although Leo began by concentrating on this concrete factor in Terri’s life, he focused on getting to the causes behind the symptoms that manifested as reduced parenting capacity. Through the working relationship Leo acknowledged, encouraged, offered a different perspective and ideas and freed up the session to know what Terri wanted to focus on and go at her pace. Leo perceives that Terri perceived him as just another human being (like them) and not a worker with the associated power hierarchy. This is a key aspect of the working relationship where even though it is a contrived relationship for professional, it is a real relationship where people relate equally on a human level.

**Supervisor perception**
The supervisor believes that the working relationship was crucial in Terri engaging in the service and being assisted. She even went so far as to say that it was only factor at beginning that was keeping Terri engaged with service. Although the supervisor expected parental change and growth as an outcome she accepted that this might take time and that it was okay for Leo to take time to establish the working relationship prior to beginning to set goals. Building rapport was an important element to developing the relationship (“meeting and um and developing a relationship” (145-146)) and included connecting around the child. The supervisor regards Leo as “mindful of his power…[where] everything is about choice” (208-210). She goes on to describe how the working relationship is collaborative. This involves Leo asking Terri what she wants to do and expecting an answer, meeting her immediate needs, focusing on her strengths, is prepared to talk about anything and referring Terri to specialists if he cannot meet her needs himself. The supervisor believes that this creates a “safe” space for Terri to open up. The key actions demonstrated by Leo in the working relationship included the way in which he “will celebrate everything, even if it is a spec” (92), “support people in a way which holds them (pause) but challenges them “(84), was “not trying to rush the process…[and] trying to get it fixed (256-257), has “very little judgments” (196) and is attentive / responsive to Terri’s changing needs.
The supervisor was “surprised” when Terri “grabbed” the offer to work with Leo “with both hands” as she thought Terri would be angry and suspicious due to having risk of harm reports being made prior to Leo coming on board. She thinks that the process of negotiating the report (thus giving Terri and sense of control of the process) was important and helped Terri feel more committed to working with Leo. According to the supervisor, Terri needed someone who would acknowledge strengths and achievements and celebrate these, which is exactly what Leo did. It also mattered that Leo was genuinely collaborative, mindful of and actively sharing his power. The supervisor saw having some “control in the process” (23) as very important for Terri, so it was a good match that Leo genuinely believed in giving power to the parent. It helped the working relationship that Terri was willing (“committed”) and realised how vulnerable and needy she was (desperate for assistance and realising the child protection implications if she did not attempt to change her parenting). This made her more attentive and responsive to Leo. Even though Terri was committed, a working relationship needed to be established and some things dealt with before Terri could change the things in her life that were holding her back.

A “turning point” came in the working relationship as Terri grew in confidence and was better able to “articulate what she needed” (268 – she went to the “painful place” as the supervisor termed it - 555) and achieve the priorities/ issues that she and Leo had identified. Terri became more confident through working relationship because of what Leo offered her because they had a working relationship. This helped Terri discover the self reliance and confidence she used to have. The supervisor perceives that from this point Terri could see the end of the tunnel (286), had more energy and motivation to achieve her goals herself and was feeling more in control of her needs. From this point Leo and Terri had less frequent contact, goals were achieved more quickly, Leo challenged Terri more than before (where prior to the family worker had been doing more supporting (holding/containing) and attentive / responsive (listening).

The supervisor played quite an active role in the building phase (mostly prior) of the working relationship but less so later on. She was quite involved with supporting a different worker who was involved with Terri prior to Leo being involved. At this time she also drew on her own professional experience to assess the approximate time the work should take. She talked about a “directive allocation process” where she matches clients with workers. When doing this she draws on a number of factors, including her experience as a family worker.
knowledge of the client though the intake process, “knowing the workers really well” and her perception of how well a worker can connect with a parent. The key elements in the ability to connect are that they respect the parent and can judge the pace the parent needs to go. The supervisor also uses this allocation process to fulfil another role she believes she has, which is to “stretch” the workers to become more skilled at family work.

The family service has a “three strikes” policy with respect to parent’s connecting to the service. This is related to an expectation that workers not build dependency in parents they are working with (that is, they don’t chase clients, but rather allow parents to judge their own pace and decide to connect with service and they “allow them to drive their own process”). The supervisor had to weigh up the needs of many when supporting the working relationship. This included the parent, family worker, family service and broader child protection system framework, in particular occupational health and safety legislation. She respects and trusts Leo and makes herself available to him to provide support as her requires.