



**BECOMING
PARENTS**



Resource Guide for Trainers

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Content

Basic philosophy and the approaches	3
Methodologies	4
Storytelling	4
Defining storytelling	4
Storytelling as an educational tool	4
Drama.....	6
Symbolwork.....	8
Symbols and human mind.....	8
Symbols in counselling and training	10
Practical Implications of Symbolwork	11
The scenario of a complex symbolwork session:.....	11
Techniques and Exercises	13
Storytelling Exercises	13
The Thread of Story - The Thread of Life	13
Mapping the Journey of Parenthood	15
The Story Behind My Name.....	16
Drama Exercises.....	18
Intense moments of parenthood - Freeze-frames with thought tracking	18
When parents disagree - Pair scene, presentation and discussion	19
Levels of hurtful and encouraging behaviour - Gesture game	20
Symbolwork Exercises.....	20
Introduction with Symbols	20
Nature Mandala	21
My energies - Glass and Water	22
My treasure box	23
Basic Clearing.....	24
Inner Images.....	26
Exercises for groups related to the topics of the guide for parents	27
Task Prioritization.....	27
Establishing Boundaries between work and family life	28
Exploring Maternal Empowerment	29
Exploring Perspectives on Work-Life Balance vs. Work-Life Harmony.....	31
Parent Types Exercise.....	31
Brainstorming on Problems Encountered in The Parent Types Exercise	33
Good Enough Parent.....	33
Self-Reflection and Goal Setting	34
Self-Care Action Plan	35
Practical links and books	35
In English.....	35
In German.....	37
In Hungarian	37
In Greek	38
Source of images.....	38
Basic clearing printable chart.....	38

Basic philosophy and the approaches

The idea for the Becoming Parents project came from a series of civil conversations between parents in different European countries who, in many ways, face similar difficulties. We found that although we have different parenting patterns, strategies and overall circumstances and even our children are of different ages - we have something in common. Parenthood is certainly one of the most defining parts of our lives, directly shaping every other aspect of it. It can give us wings once we become comfortable with it, allowing us to choose the right framework on which we can run the family.

However, if we misjudge our own strengths, energies and personality and place unrealistic expectations on ourselves for the sake of our children, parenting can mean a heavy burden. In recent years, young people have become more and more hesitant about having children at all:

“In 2022, 3.88 million babies were born in the European Union, a slight decrease from 4.09 million in 2021. The number of children born in the EU has been declining since 2008, when 4.68 million children were born.” (Eurostat)

Long studies have been written on the reasons for the declining birthrate in Europe, but it is beyond the scope of this guide to discuss them. However, our own non-representative research suggests that certain issues related to parenthood are of strong concern and negative influence on today's 20-35 year olds. Some of these issues stem from our own bad patterns as children, but most are related to negative events in the world around us. Many people think that it is harder to see a positive future today than it was a few decades ago, when in fact it has never been easier to see a beautiful future throughout history. Our aim is to help young parents and parents-to-be find their own answers to these pressing questions, while supporting them in their efforts to become stronger parents.

Parenting is definitely a helper role. For years, for decades, it is our job to help another person - our child - physically, mentally, spiritually and financially and to give them as much support as possible. In the early years, we - in the strictest sense of the word - do things for them they are not yet mature enough for, teaching them about the important notions of the world while constantly looking to set a good example. Let's face it, this is a challenging, difficult task. To cope with this, we must first face ourselves, our fears and desires, clarify our insecurities and find answers to uncomfortable and stressful questions. Just as in an emergency plane, we must first put on our own oxygen mask, and only then can we care for others and help those in need.

In preparing the materials for the Becoming Parents project, we have drawn primarily on positive psychology as a basis for our thinking. In many ways, this new field of psychology is still in its infancy, but Fredrickson's (1998, 2001) research has shown that “positive emotions can be associated with evolutionary benefits in the same way as negative emotions. In other words, positive emotions are not merely signifiers, but active builders of personal resources and through them, of physical and mental well-being.” It is important to emphasize that the positive adjective in this context does not mean excessive, unrealistic optimism, but rather a stable emotional balance, which includes the management of negative emotions. We also have a guide named “Be yourself! Compass for parenting”, which can also be useful for professionals.

And when we are parents, we carry a lot of emotional baggage. It feels like we are on a rollercoaster of worry, anger, happiness, despair and countless other emotions that arise from one moment to the next - it is an emotionally demanding challenge. For young parents, finding support is paramount. That's why the Becoming Parents project aims to shift the focus from the child to the young parents, addressing their difficulties, building their self-awareness and developing their skills. We believe that by helping the parents we help the whole family, benefitting all of society. A more balanced parent will be more successful in the parenting role, which in turn will result in balanced children. It will be easier for family members to really connect with each other, leading to a more effectively functioning family.

In this guide, we put together a toolkit that can enrich the toolbox of professionals working with young parents. We included exercises from three areas: storytelling, drama and symbol work. After a brief general description of the methodology, we provide specific exercises

that can be used in groups or individually. Our learning aim is to develop certain soft skills in young parents, such as self-awareness, emotional intelligence, consciousness and resilience.

It is a vital premise of our games that they do not require psychiatric or psychological training or the involvement of a professional with expertise in these areas. Participants requiring such assistance should note that these exercises are not a substitute for therapy or trauma processing. If the practitioner leading the exercises or the person doing the exercises is confronted with deeply rooted problems beyond the management of everyday situations, they should seek appropriate psychological or therapeutic help.

Methodologies

Storytelling

We are surrounded by stories. Stories are in our memories, in our family history, our street, city or country. Stories come up when we meet friends, colleagues, neighbors ... They deal with daily life, happiness, grief, anger, fears and hopes. Stories help us to connect with others and to gain trust in each other.

Stories, or more broadly narrative is known to be a fundamental structure of human meaning- making and personal development. J.P. Sartre in 'La Nausea' writes: "Man is always a teller of stories, he lives surrounded by his own stories and those of others, he sees all that happens to him through these stories and he tries to live his life as if he is telling it." By understanding our own experiences as stories among others peoples' stories, we gain the chance to look at our lives from a different perspective.

Content, language and performance turn stories into genuine products of the culture they are based in. Storytelling can help young people to regain a link with their own heritage and identity, using stories as carriers of cultural and historical knowledge can contribute to communication and integration by building bridges between people.

This unit introduces trainers and social workers working with young parents to storytelling as an educational method. It explains the basic principles and how storytelling is part of the creation of our identity, but also presents the different types of applied storytelling, their purposes and how to apply them without having to be a professional storyteller.

Defining storytelling

Storytelling is an ancient art with strong bonds with literature, popular and folk culture, and with heritage. We focus on oral storytelling because of its social dimension. The following definition by Heidi Dahlsveen and Luis Correia explains:

"Oral storytelling is a non-mediated way to tell a story, which implies the co-presence of teller and listener. Oral storytelling only exists while the story is being told and it is unrepeatable. [...] Oral storytelling is about what happens between people while they are sharing the story. [...] It stresses the experience of the event, where we are and with whom. From the tellers it requires the sensibility to find the right moment, to choose the story and know how to tell it. From the listener it demands the ability to listen or to participate in the terms the context proposes, to relate to others, tellers and other listeners [...].

The narrator is the person who tells the story. It is not necessarily a storyteller as we imagine: anyone able to share an experience can tell a story. In this way, oral storytelling demands from those who narrate a certain level of exposition, the ability to share his/her own imagery and points of view. For those who are listening to it, it implies the acceptance of the other, willingness to engage in different ideas and understandings of a shared reality. The fact that the teller and the listener are present and that they acknowledge each other as persons who are sharing experiences is one of the greatest added-values oral storytelling can offer in terms of social interaction. Oral storytelling is fundamentally about human relations".

Storytelling as an educational tool

The power of storytelling as an educational tool and for community building is widely recognised. Many aspects of storytelling are close to our daily life, to the way we think and

(try to) understand the world. Trainers often see the benefits of the ‘technical competences’ (speaking, communication skills) tackled through storytelling, but sometimes underestimate the social effects and the effect of the alternative thinking styles promoted through storytelling. It is very important to bring this into focus as well. The connecting power of storytelling makes it a valuable tool and form of communication in all areas of life which reasons its universal applicability.

- Storytelling develops visualisation and creativity.
- It allows students to strengthen their communication and social skills.
- It enhances self-esteem.
- It establishes a special bond between teller and listener, improving the sense of community.
- It improves literacy skills;
- It strengthens comprehension;
- It improves vocabulary, imagination, and logical thinking;
- It builds critical thinking skills as listeners compare different versions of tales or the responses of numerous characters to similar situations;
- It improves empathy with others and with others’ cultures.
- It improves group dynamics, social skills and reasoning;

No matter what stories are told, it is possible to recognise pedagogical, personal and social benefits from the storytelling practice in education, be it formal, nonformal or informal. On the one hand, it helps to create a motivating learning environment and develops important skills. But it also contributes to the students’ personal and cultural self-awareness, being a way for them to express their thoughts, ideas, their identity. Finally, it helps to form confident individuals who are able to make themselves understood, but who also understand and respect the importance of difference, and are willing and able to communicate across cultures.

“We have a profound need to tell and hear stories. It is how we share experience, understand each other, and create community. Every conversation is full of personal anecdote; every effort to explain shared customs and values needs a tale; every bit of wisdom is best expressed by a story. The very way our minds think is the essence of storytelling. So to master powerful and effective communication, to engage people and ensure they remember facts, or to break down barriers of isolation within or between groups, telling stories in some form is essential.”

For more on the reasons why stories are told, including an introduction to the benefits for meaning, memory and healing, explore the “Call of Story” website’s “Why Tell Stories” pages at <http://www.callofstory.org/en/storytelling/whytell.asp> from which this quote was taken.

Drama



“Role” is not only a theatrical concept, but also a social psychological one. While in theatre a role is “a mirror of the interactions of everyday life” (György Csepeli), in social psychology it is a behaviour related to the performance of a specific activity; a general pattern of behaviour.

The social scientist Erving Goffman developed the so-called dramaturgical model - according to which, we all play different roles in everyday life in order to be seen by others as we would like to be seen. We use props and role symbols in our everyday “acting”: we dress, speak, and behave according to our roles. We try to shape our immediate environment accordingly.

Social psychologists distinguish three types of roles. Some of them are given, and we are born into them (e.g. male/female). Some of them are imposed (e.g. occupational and family roles) and some are played spontaneously, in concrete situations of short duration (e.g. travelling together).

We have to learn new roles and there is relatively little guidance for this difficult task. We mostly follow patterns to meet the role expectations. The child learns and practices these roles mainly through imitation and “as if” play.

“As if” play (also known as symbolic, role or fantasy play) is the main play activity of preschool children. The child gradually learns how to replace a real situation with an imaginary one. They imitate what they see in their environment, plays other people's roles pretending to be different. They use objects which, in their game, often do not have their original function. A broom can easily become a rifle or a sword with the help of a child's imagination, but they can also pretend to sweep without the use of an instrument. The child themselves create the conventions of play, for which adult society provides the model. These games can be very complex in terms of content. The “as if” game may reflect the child's desires (e.g. a sick relative is cured) or fears and anxieties (e.g. someone dies in the game). Conflicts and moral problems may be revealed during play (e.g. in cowboy and Indian games), and at other times adult behaviour may be practised (e.g. in a daddy-mommy game). Sometimes a game can contain all these elements at the same Time in times of war for example, children are constantly playing warriors.

These “as if” games reflect the reality and social conditions experienced by the child. Their knowledge of human relations is incorporated into their roles, with the positive and negative aspects of the role. This has an impact on behaviour outside the play, meaning these symbolic games have a huge character-shaping effect.

This openness, this innate talent for role-playing - it doesn't go away with childhood. It is dormant in all of us, offering a huge learning opportunity. The ability to role-play with childlike wonder does not disappear - it is still alive and can be further developed in adulthood. We can use our imagination to take on different characters, live out imaginary situations and improvise dialogue. We can build strategies and tactics that we can try out in play, preparing ourselves for the real challenges of life. Through well-directed role-playing, we are able to model real-life situations. In a safe environment - a 'flask' - we can experiment with recognising patterns in difficult situations, while finding and trying out effective solutions. In addition, role-playing is always a social action which gives us a great opportunity to share experiences and find solutions together. The more people participate, the more experiences we can discuss together and our toolbox of solutions will be all the more colourful. Moreover, we don't just talk, we play and defend the role without any real stakes and try out different ways of doing things in practice. This can be very useful in practically any situation in life.

Parenting is studied from a young age. We observe our parents spontaneously and note what they do. In our preschool years, we play games in which we practise how we will behave after becoming parents. Later on, during pregnancy we imagine what it will be like when the baby is born. Many people also consciously prepare for parenthood by consuming content that helps them build the parent role. Drama is a very good method for this conscious role building. Dramatic activity can be a tool for understanding different behavioural patterns and resolving conflicts.

The most important tool in dramatic methodology is role-playing, where we pretend to be someone else, somewhere else. We enjoy the protection of the role even though in applied theatre and drama education the participant is actually working on their own burning issue(s). However, it remains unclear to fellow actors, the drama leader or an outside observer how much the role affects them personally. The common agreement is about the roles which are discussed, the participants think and work together to solve an imaginary situation. There is no expectation of any kind of disclosure of one's own real experiences or real-life personal relationships.

In drama work, role-playing usually involves acting out a scene in pairs, small groups or as a whole group. It is important that role-playing is not primarily for the audience but for rehearsal - to try out different situations and reactions from which the people who are acting will benefit most. It is secondary that this is mostly done in front of spectators, but an essential element of the work is that spectators are also part of the collective reflection. They are also participants in the training, they are also present as prospective or practising parents. While watching their peers play they are also working on their own parenting. In the next scene they will be the actors and the previous actors will follow the next scene from

the audience. This means that it is not the acting talent that is important - we are not expecting Oscar-winning performances. It is the situation, the attempt to solve a problem or conflict that is important. We can try out tools to find a solution under laboratory conditions. We can experience what it is like to put different ingredients in a test tube in given proportions - does the experiment work?

In addition to role-playing, we can use a variety of tools such as role-building using symbols, drawing, making lists, writing diary entries or letters, taking snapshots of the characters at a particular moment or speaking the characters' thoughts. The point is to offer the participants really important, problematic and tense situations. Tension and conflict are essential for drama work. Of course, there is nothing to be done about peaceful, happy, idyllic situations - they just need to be experienced and enjoyed.

What is certain, however, is that storytelling is the basis of all dramatic work and drama as a genre is based on stories. We create a coherent story with its own internal logic in which conflicts clash and attempts to resolve them occur. The participants in the drama work can identify with the hero or reject his actions, principles and values. They can draw general conclusions from the individual story created and formulate lessons for their own lives. This requires telling a story through drama that can be relevant to the participants. As we are planning a training for parents and parents-to-be, it is useful to prepare a training on topics that might be of interest to them. So bring in stories from family life - anything from the problems of bringing up children through the trials and tribulations of a relationship to intergenerational difficulties - but be careful not to let participants bring in serious personal problems one by one beyond a certain limit. A dramatic work should not be a place for venting psychological trauma.

Drama pedagogy is often confused with psychodrama. The essential difference between them is that the exercises listed here do not advocate the presentation of personal experiences, but present events invented by the participants in a play in which the participants are under the protection of the role throughout. They do not have to share any of their personal experiences with the group, it is their choice how much they want to include it in the session. Putting themselves in the shoes of a character separate from themselves helps to develop empathy and social awareness. Participants can experience several aspects of a conflict, thus gaining a detailed and deep understanding of the problem without being distracted from the world of the game they have created together or having to be vulnerable in front of the group in "real life". In the game, it is common to find parallels with one's own experiences, drawing inspiration from one's own story but the participant can decide the extent of this themselves and does not need to share it with the group.

Symbolwork

Symbols and human mind

Symbols, with their profound capacity to convey complex ideas and emotions, have been recognized as an essential component in both therapeutic and training contexts. As Umberto Eco aptly stated, "The world is a forest of signs and they need to be interpreted." This notion underscores the fundamental principle that symbols provide an additional language for those who struggle to express themselves through conventional means. They function as interpreters, transmitting information that may be difficult or impossible to articulate.

The meaning of a symbol is inherently subjective, shaped by individual experiences and emotions. Consequently, a single symbol can embody multiple meanings and evoke a range of feelings. This dynamic interplay between meanings and emotions is crucial in understanding the effectiveness of symbols in therapy and training. Symbols do not possess identical meanings for everyone; their significance is personalized and context-dependent.

The importance of symbols was already described as early as 1912 by Carl Gustav Jung. For Jung, symbols are essential tools for expressing and understanding the unconscious mind, serving as bridges between the conscious and unconscious realms. Jung posited that symbols are more than mere signs; they are dynamic, living images that arise from the collective unconscious—a reservoir of shared human experiences and archetypes.

Archetypes are innate, universal prototypes for ideas and may include themes such as the Hero, the Mother, and the Shadow. These archetypal symbols manifest in dreams, myths, art, and religious rituals, providing insights into the deepest layers of the psyche.

Symbols, according to Jung, facilitate the process of individuation, which is the journey toward psychological wholeness. Individuation involves integrating the various aspects of the self, including the conscious and unconscious elements, to achieve a balanced and harmonious personality. Through symbols, individuals can access and assimilate unconscious content, fostering personal growth and self-awareness.

Jung also distinguished between personal symbols and collective symbols. Personal symbols emerge from an individual's unique experiences and personal unconscious, while collective symbols, or archetypes, are shared across cultures and time periods. These collective symbols often appear in myths, religious narratives, and cultural rituals, reflecting common human experiences and concerns.

Furthermore, Jung emphasized the transformative power of symbols in therapy. By analyzing symbols in dreams and active imagination, individuals can gain insights into their unconscious conflicts, desires, and potentials. This symbolic work can lead to healing and transformation, as individuals integrate previously unconscious aspects of themselves into their conscious awareness.

In her seminal work written in "Philosophy in a New Key - A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art," Susanne K. Langer, philosopher, also emphasizes the importance of symbols in human cognition and communication. According to Langer, the human mind constructs reality through a framework of symbols. Our perception and comprehension of the world are mediated by these symbolic interpretations, meaning that symbols shape our reality and cognitive processes. This symbolic framework is essential for expressing and understanding complex thoughts, emotions, and cultural phenomena.

Symbols have long-time been used as conveyers of healing. Sandner, a prominent Jungian analyst, in his work on Navajo rituals, explores how the Navajo people use symbols in their healing ceremonies and daily practices to convey deep psychological and spiritual meanings. Sanders defines symbols, as "something that can convey a concept. It can be a word, a mathematical formula, an act, a gesture, a ritual, a dream, a work of art, everything that can transport a concept of linguistic-rational, imaginative-intuitive or emotional-evaluative nature." Sandner highlights the role of symbols as vital tools for communication within the Navajo culture. These symbols, whether they are in the form of images, gestures, or rituals, serve as a bridge between the conscious and unconscious mind. They facilitate a connection with the spiritual realm and enable individuals to access and integrate deeper layers of their psyche.

Central to Sandner's study is the idea that symbols in Navajo rituals act as conduits for healing and transformation. Through intricate sand paintings, chants, and other ceremonial practices, the Navajo invoke symbolic representations that help to restore harmony and balance. These symbols are not static; their meanings are dynamic and can vary depending on the context and the individual's personal experiences. Sandner also discusses the concept of "symbolic healing," where the act of engaging with symbols in a ritualistic manner can lead to psychological healing. The symbols used in Navajo rituals are deeply rooted in their mythology and cosmology, providing a rich tapestry of meaning that resonates with the participants on multiple levels.



Symbols in counselling and training

In therapy and training, symbols act as an intermediary language, offering a means to communicate thoughts and feelings that are otherwise inaccessible. They enable individuals to express concepts that are deeply personal and often difficult to verbalize. Symbols are invaluable in situations where verbal communication is limited. They offer a way to bypass conventional communication barriers, facilitating deeper understanding and quicker resolutions. This is particularly beneficial in therapeutic settings, where clients may struggle to articulate their experiences or emotions.

One of the early and still existing applications of symbols in therapy is the Sandplay Therapy (in Hungary it was translated as “Világjáték”). It was developed by Dora M. Kalff, a Swiss Jungian analyst, who expanded on Jung’s ideas to develop sandplay therapy. Kalff was inspired by Margaret Lowenfeld’s World Technique, which involved using a sandbox and miniatures for children’s therapy. Kalff adapted this technique within a Jungian framework, emphasizing the symbolic and expressive nature of the sandplay process. Kalff believed that sandplay provides a “free and protected space” where individuals can express their inner world through symbolic play. This non-verbal method allows the unconscious to surface, facilitating the process of individuation. The creation of sand scenes serves as a mirror to the psyche, revealing hidden aspects of the self and promoting integration.

Sandplay therapy involves a simple yet profound process. Clients use a sandbox and a variety of miniatures—representing people, animals, objects, and natural elements—to create scenes. The therapist provides a safe, non-judgmental space, allowing the client to explore their inner world freely. This process typically unfolds in stages, as preparation, creation, observation and reflection.

Another way of working with symbols is the approach of Wilfried Schneider, which is called symbolwork (or in German original “symbolarbeit”). Wilfrid Schneider, a pioneer in the field

of psychological symbol work, has described in his book “When Words Are Missing - Symbols as Interpreters”, that symbols are very helpful to deal with emotions. “Symbols are able to recall the perceived uniqueness of certain moments for the actors involved (and not only for them) - as a present feeling and not as knowledge of it.” The use of symbols helps to activate the emotional memory. At the same time, memories can be dosed down because it remains the client’s choice whether and how much they talk about them. Apart from that, looking at the pictures laid down by the client, helps them to recognise that positive and negative events alternate and are both a part of everyone’s life. The physical object used in the intervention thus symbolises this event, and this memory. Every object chosen by the client and placed on their composition (for example, in the basic clearing) is at the same time emotionally charged and thus becomes in this way a symbol. The connection between thinking, acting and emotions is achieved. In Schneider’s approach, symbols therefore does not have delegated meanings, as in Jungian ways of symbol-use, and that also makes this approach more usable than the sand play-way in workshops.

In this context (workshops), symbols can be used to accelerate learning and problem-solving processes. Participants often find that using symbols helps them “get to the point quickly,” avoiding emotional overwhelm and fostering immediate engagement. This approach emphasizes practical and committed use of skills and strengths, integrating problem understanding and goal setting into the process, making symbolwork a group-based coaching approach.

The materials and interventions of symbolwork are designed for versatility and accessibility. They are suitable for a wide range of settings, including anamnesis, diagnosis, therapeutic intervention, supervision, team support, coaching, consultancy, training, and prevention. The hands-on nature of these materials makes them effective tools for individuals of all ages, enhancing their practical applicability.

Practical Implications of Symbolwork

One of the key advantages of working with symbols is, that it is able to engage participants in a meaningful way from the very beginning. By utilizing symbols, individuals can quickly open up and share about themselves, identify and experience their strengths and skills, which are all essential for effective therapy and training. This early engagement prevents emotional overstrain and fosters a supportive environment where personal insights can flourish. Symbols also serve as a bridge to autonomy, enabling individuals to act independently and confidently. This aspect of symbolwork is crucial for facilitating long-term change and personal growth. The interventions and creative media developed through practical work are designed to be grasped—both literally and metaphorically—by participants, making them powerful tools for transformation.

The process involves selecting items that resonate with personal stories or emotions. These items become symbols that help individuals navigate their thoughts and feelings, providing a tangible means to address ambiguity and complexity. As Wilfried Schneider describes in his working paper “Grundlagen für die Arbeit mit Symbolen” (Fundamentals of Symbol Work), the choice of items is central to the methodology, allowing for a quick and profound understanding of issues. Some of the symbolwork interventions are actually based on this very step only in different contexts. Within this project we are mainly using some of these interventions, described later in detail.

However Schneider has developed a more comprehensive process as well for complex interventions, one, that had resemblance for both the sandplay approach as well as the Balint group approach used in therapy and supervision. This complex process is made up of strictly followed consecutive steps, which makes up a quick (20-30 minutes) intervention, where also the group of peers are included.

The scenario of a complex symbolwork session:

Formulating the Question

At the beginning of symbolwork counselling session, we always ask the client to summarize the story they would like to work with and find a question, for which they are looking for an answer. Usually they first go into a longer discussion, but through the counselling dialogue, the counsellor has to help the client to come up with a precise question.

Setting up the Symbol Scene

Within about 10-15 minutes time and without spectators, a client(s) create/build the Basic Clearing or the Inner Images Scenarios (other scenarios of symbolwork method are not included in this project) on her own.

When they have finished, everyone sits down around the client and their model.

Symbolwork counseling 5 steps:

STEP 1 - Presentation

The client: They present the heading/ topic of their presentation. They talk about what they have displayed. The client always states which symbol they are talking about. (e.g. "this hand stands for...")

The group (if the group is too big, 3 persons will be selected): Everyone listens carefully to what is being told. They are aware of the client's presence. While the client is speaking, the group observes their gestures, mimicry, posture, breathing, the pitch of their voice. Do they show emotions, do they touch a symbol, which one?

STEP 2 - Factual questions

The Group: The group (or the 3 selected persons) asks factual questions. These questions only refer to the symbols, to "what is visible". No "why"- or "how come"-questions are asked. This is not about interpretation but understanding only.

The client: answers to the factual questions.

STEP 3 - Perception

The Group: The group addresses the client directly. They describe everything they have perceived and everything they have observed while they were told the story. If someone detects emotions, they should be able to explain how they were perceived. (Mimicry, gestures, pitches of the voice etc.)

The client: listens attentively.

STEP 4 - Interpretation

The Group: The group talks about the client. They are thinking aloud, asking questions like "what is the problem?", "What should be different?", "What would she want to solve, understand, do?", "Where could be difficulties? Where not? "

The client: listens attentively and does not respond for now.

STEP 5 - Agreement on actions

When the group has finished "thinking aloud", the client talks about her thoughts regarding the considerations of the group.

- What is true? What is not? Where are insecurities? Are there doubts?
- What do they like to hear? What does she not like to hear?
- What is especially important from the things said? Where would she like to begin?

Next steps and closure

After Step 5, the counsellor helps the client to formulate the next steps of action after the coaching session. What exactly will they do after?

It can also help, if the client asks someone from the group as a "supervisor", to reach out to them (the client) in an agreed time, whether the client made the step discussed.

When there is a clear agreement, the counsellor is closing the session.

Techniques and Exercises

Storytelling Exercises

“The red thread is bound
to the spindle around
give it a kick and let it spin
so that the story can begin”

In many languages there is a direct link between the word and the thread. Stories are “woven” or “knitted” and the storyteller is “the weaver of words”.

The Thread of Story - The Thread of Life

Time

30-45 minutes

Tools

Strong colored woolen bundles, duct tape, scissors, chairs and table, ladder, corks, pen and paper of different sizes (no bigger than A4).

Preparation

Storytelling is a social activity. Thus the social dimension of a group that is to be involved in storytelling activities is crucial. Trust and confidence are essential conditions for people to open up to others, to dare to tell in front of others. It is obvious that enough emphasis should be put on team building at the beginning. The atmosphere in the group is the more or less fertile soil on which the subsequent steps will take place and from where the competences related to storytelling start to unfold.

Description

1. Each member of the group chooses a colored thread, scissors and tape.
2. They are asked to reflect on their life from their birth till the present day. This is a lonely and silent time that lasts 5 minutes
3. They begin by attaching the beginning of their thread to the floor, the wall, the ceiling, a chair, a table. They should demonstrate by this act if they considered that their birth was a low or a high point. Low and high are individually and personally translated and could refer to a psychological, historical, medical, financial high or low. The leader/ trainer should be very careful not to guide, insinuate, suggest or encourage a specific interpretation and should discourage any communication between participants that could produce active and passive roles. Everyone should be able to be totally responsible for their choices.
4. The participants should continue rising or lowering the thread and attaching it with tape every time it changes direction. They can't go lower than the floor but they can use the ladder in order to rise till the ceiling.
5. The leader could suggest putting a tape on the significant moments of their lives e.g. going to school, falling in love, having a child, graduating, finding or losing a job. Normally such points would be the beginning of a participants' journey, stops and stays, dangers and help.
6. After 30 minutes the whole room should be criss crossed by threads. 5 minutes before the end participants should be warned that time ends soon. If some persons need 5 more minutes they should be offered.
7. After the end all members of the group should contemplate their work. They can comment and ask questions in public or in private. Everyone is free to answer or decline answering.
8. The facilitator should ask the permission to photograph the every and each thread
9. Explaining the evolution of the thread ideally would help to structure a contemplative storytelling process. Then each member should be asked if they want to tell the story of their thread, omitting any points they want to protect with “you can see that here is a high/low point but I don't want to discuss this”
10. Finally every member should ideally be offered the opportunity to discuss privately with an analyst any issues raised by the activity.

11. The session according to the tension or relaxation built can be closed by a small myth on the thread or the labyrinth offered by the leader/ storyteller.



Practical advice for the trainers

- This activity provides material and structure for an analytical follow up (either in group or in the analytical couple).
- Represent personal history in space.
- Find continuity and meaning in life events.
- Represent life's "ups and downs" and define one's appraising / defining the emotional reaction to major events.
- Pin down "turning points" in life's course.
- Define the points and boundaries of the "unsaid/ non- dit" and experiencing it as a space of intimacy and liberty rather than a dark point of avoidance and pain.
- Unify the personal course of a life and define points of distancing from the bodily and psychic sensations.

- Fight victimization. Aids the participant to perceive his/her life not from the point of view of a victim but of an actor of choices and actions.
- Being presented as a group game it can add fun to a process of reflection of the past avoiding ruminations of the past.
- Restructure personal history and thus encourage the construction of a new (better adapted hopefully) social or even personal IDENTITY.

Mapping the Journey of Parenthood

Objective

This exercise is designed to guide participants in reflecting on their life journey as parents, including their past experiences, current roles, and aspirations for the future. Through artistic expression, participants will visually represent the significant moments and milestones in their lives.

- Promoting deeper self-awareness and self-reflection among participants.
- Gaining insights into how each parent's unique experiences shape their perspectives.
- Creating a visual narrative of each participant's parenting journey.

Time

120 minutes

Tools

Paper, pencils, colours.

Preparation

Ensure each participant has ample space to work on their visual representation. Prepare any needed prompts and keep examples or inspirational quotes on hand, if helpful.

Description

1. Introduction
 - Give each participant a large sheet of paper.
 - Ask them to draw a winding pathway across the page. At the midpoint of the pathway, ask them to draw a circle. Label the left side of the path as "The parental Journey So Far" and the right side as "The Journey Ahead."
2. Reflecting on the Past (30 minutes)
 - Background Reflection: Invite participants to consider their origins, including children, family, cultural background, language, and community. They may draw or write elements that represent these influences.
 - Companions on the Journey: Ask them to reflect on those who have been part of their journey as parents—family, children, close friends, mentors, even pets.
 - Favorite Places & Milestones: Encourage participants to mark favorite places or locations on the path where they have created meaningful memories. Then, identify two key milestones they've achieved in their parenting journey so far and illustrate or note these.
 - Challenges Overcome: Participants draw a mountain and a river to symbolize two challenges they've faced and overcome. They should consider how they managed to navigate these obstacles.
 - The Parenting Survival Kit: At the top of the page, participants create a "survival kit," listing the people, values, or strengths that have supported them during difficult times.
3. Envisioning the Future (30 minutes)
 - Hopes & Dreams: Ask participants to write down their hopes and dreams for the future, whether for themselves, their children, or loved ones, and place these toward the end of the pathway.
 - Future Destinations: Encourage them to note any places, goals, or experiences they hope to encounter on their parental journey.

- Future Milestones: Reflecting on their past achievements, participants mark three future milestones they hope to accomplish on their parental journey.
 - Anticipated Obstacles: Have participants draw another mountain, symbolizing a challenge they anticipate facing. They should consider strategies for overcoming it.
 - Songs for the Journey: Ask participants to select one or two songs they'd like to carry forward in their journey. They can draw symbols or lyrics along the pathway to reflect what these songs mean to them.
4. Reflecting on the Complete Journey (30 minutes)
- Reflection Time: Give participants time to look over their parental journey and absorb what they have created.
 - Cherished Memories as Stars: Ask them to add stars along their pathway to represent joyful memories they had as parents and want to carry forward.
 - Naming the Journey: Encourage participants to give a name to their pathway that symbolizes what this journey of parenthood means to them.
 - Life Lessons: Ask participants to consider the life lessons they've learned. Would they like to share a meaningful insight with others?
5. Sharing the Journey (30 minutes)
- Gallery Walk: Allow participants time to walk around and view each other's journeys.
 - Story Sharing Circle: Gather participants in a circle and invite volunteers to share aspects of their journeys.
 - Group Reflection: Conclude with a group discussion. Encourage participants to reflect on how it felt to tell their story, the challenges of identifying key moments, and any new discoveries or forgotten memories they uncovered. Possible prompts include: What was it like to share your story with the group? How did hearing others' stories impact you? What insights have you gained about yourself or others?

Practical advice for the trainers

- Create a welcoming and supportive environment.
- Allow participants space and time to think without pressure.
- Be attentive to any emotional responses, as reflection on personal journeys can be moving.

The Story Behind My Name

Objective

This exercise encourages participants to reflect on and share the personal stories and meanings behind their names. It provides an opportunity for parents to explore identity and self-connection in a supportive environment.

Time

45 minutes (adjust depending on group size)

Preparation

- Flipchart, flipchart markers, papers, colored pens.
- Optional soft background music during the writing time.

Description

In this exercise, participants are invited to share the story behind their name, including its origins, meanings, and any personal reflections. This can be a powerful activity to explore themes of identity and belonging.

1. Introduction

Begin by introducing the topic and explaining the significance of exploring one's name as a window into personal history and identity.

2. Reflection and Writing (10 minutes)

Ask participants to think about the following prompts and write their responses on a flipchart or sheet of paper. Each participant should consider:

- Who chose your name, and why?
- What does your name mean, and does this meaning hold significance for you?
- Has your name changed over time (e.g., through nicknames, marriage, or personal choice)?
- Do you like your name? Why or why not?
- How do different people in your life—parents, your children, family members, friends—refer to you?
- How do family members, such as your children, partner, or relatives, address you? Do your children use a special version of your name?
- Have any parts of your name, such as a nickname or title, changed since becoming a parent? (For example, being called “Mom” or “Dad,” or any nickname that holds special meaning within your family.)
- Have you ever changed your name, or have you wanted to?

3. Sharing Stories (15 minutes)

Invite participants to share their responses with the group. Encourage active listening.

4. Name-Based Reflection Exercise (10 minutes)

Each participant writes their name vertically on a sheet of paper, assigning a word, characteristic, or interest to each letter that represents them. For example, if their name is “Michel,” they could write:

M – Mindful: Staying present and attentive to my children’s emotional and developmental needs.

I – Inspirational: Encouraging my children to explore their passions and dream big.

C – Compassionate: Showing empathy and understanding, creating a safe and loving space for my family.

H – Honest: Modeling honesty and integrity, teaching my children the importance of truth.

E – Encouraging: Supporting my children in all their endeavors and cheering on their achievements.

L – Loyal: Being steadfast and reliable, showing my children they can always count on me.

Encourage parents to think of qualities, values, or unique traits they bring to their parenting role.

5. Closing and Group Reflection (10 minutes)

End the activity with a supportive group discussion, inviting participants to reflect on their experience as parents. Suggested questions to guide this reflection:

- What did you discover about yourself as a parent during this exercise?
- Did reflecting on your name reveal any qualities or values you bring to your parenting role that you hadn’t considered before?
- Has this reflection helped you see any new connections between your name, your family’s history, and your journey as a parent?
- What aspects of your name or identity do you hope to pass down to your children?
- Are there specific values, stories, or traditions associated with your name that you’d like to share with your children?

Encourage participants to share openly, and end with a reminder that understanding our identities as parents can strengthen our family connections and our self-awareness.

Practical Advice for Trainers

- Create a warm and inviting space that encourages openness.
- Be mindful that discussing names can bring up sensitive emotions, particularly around family history or identity.

- Keep the atmosphere relaxed, and encourage participants to only share what they feel comfortable with.

Drama Exercises

Intense moments of parenthood - Freeze-frames with thought tracking

Objective

The aim of the game is to list events that typically put the parent in a difficult situation. We capture the most important moment of these situations for the participant (this is the snapshot) and then the participant is confronted with the most important feeling that the problem raised conveys most intensely to him/her. They can reflect on parenting situations, experience and identify emotions, even complex or ambivalent ones. Importantly, humour can also be used, which can help to defuse tension in many situations, but it should be used with caution in real life situations, as irony or sarcasm can prevent a deeper confrontation with the problem and the management of real emotions. If sarcasm or irony comes up strongly in the exercise, initiate a conversation about it.

Time

10 minutes

Preparation

We need an empty space large enough to comfortably accommodate the participants.

Description

1. Let's stand in a circle. Recall a difficult parenting situation in as much detail as possible. For example: "You're a parent with a reputation for violent reactions. Your six-month-old is constantly yelling. You've tried everything, but nothing works. The moment you've been in the middle of a three-hour roar."
2. Give a few seconds of preparation time, then on a given signal, have each participant assume the posture appropriate to the situation. Facial expressions are also important. Try to communicate how the actor feels through the pose. Hold this posture.
3. The trainer should ask the actors in turn what they are thinking at that moment. Have the participants answer in the first person singular (e.g. "I'm terribly worried about what might be wrong with...")
4. On the same cue on which you froze the moment, unfreeze the still images.
5. We can move on to the next topic, e.g. "You have just started feeding him. You've been dreading it, you don't really like cooking or washing up. So far, the child has eaten the beetroot, but now he or she first slams the spoon into the plate (the beetroot soup gets a bit churned up), then spits the beetroot in the mouth onto the wall and throws the plate against the wall with a well-directed gesture. Everything floats in the beetroot."
6. After a few seconds of preparation, have participants make their own still picture and then continue the process as above.
7. Repeat at will as time and the enthusiasm of the participants allow.
8. At the end of the game, discuss with the participants how it felt to watch someone react differently and to see an unexpected reaction. During the game, were there any reactions you noticed that you thought should be followed or avoided? Why?

Practical advice for the trainers

When taking a still picture, it is helpful for participants to count down from 5 and then clap when they reach zero or signal with a small percussion instrument to take a snapshot. Ask them to hold the posture and only release when they hear the same signal again.

When asking for thoughts from each participant, it is best to go around behind their backs and touch their shoulders one by one, asking the participants to say the thought. If you feel uncomfortable touching, use a small instrument to touch the shoulders of the participants.

Find interesting situations that seem real. Give a detailed description of the situation so that the players can better identify with the problem. Identify one or two personality traits of the parent to be played to avoid psychodrama.

When parents disagree - Pair scene, presentation and discussion

Objective

First, we aim to identify conflict situations that can cause problems between parents in raising children. Each couple works on a different situation, so there will be several difficulties, depending on the number of people in the group. During the scene-setting, we will look at one possible solution, but it is important to discuss other possible ways of dealing with the problem afterwards.

By creating a scene in a laboratory setting we can explore conflicts, emotions, arguments, questions and answers. The solutions generated here can help participants understand and deal with real life situations.

Time

30 minutes

Tools

Flip chart, tips.

Description

1. Form groups of 2-3 people.
2. Each group should come up with a conflict situation in which a dispute arises between parents in the process of raising a child. Agree on the characters of the parents you will play and what will happen in the scene. Agree on how your scene will start and how it will end. Share roles and then rehearse the scene.
3. For the same situation, come up with two other ways in which the conflict could end. Act them also.
4. Present the performance to the others.
5. After each scene, formulate and write on the flipchart what the conflict was and what solutions the group came up with. This will be a collection of ways of dealing with conflict.
6. Finally, add to your list what other solutions you have for dealing with conflicts.



Practical advice for the trainers

Make sure that the participants do meaningful work, so that they bring important and difficult to resolve conflict situations. However, do not let the work turn into mindless punditry. The trainer should go around, listen a little to the groups' discussions and encourage them to start playing as soon as possible. Role-playing will push the participants towards practical behaviour, so that a solution-oriented approach can prevail.

When listing other possible solutions, it is not worth analysing every situation at length. Spend only as much time at the blackboard as necessary to see that there are usually several possible ways of resolving conflict situations.

Levels of hurtful and encouraging behaviour - Gesture game

Objective

Our aim is to give participants the opportunity to encounter, without extremes and without judgement, everyday situations that could be unintentional or without harm, but could be hurtful to a child, thus preventing these events. We will examine the signs and manifestations of destructive verbal and non-verbal communication and then replace them with constructive-encouraging alternatives.

Time

15 minutes

Description

The participants stand in a circle. One after the other, they will present different degrees of hurtful behaviour and communication in descending order. One volunteer participant will play the most destructive parent, and each subsequent participant will play a lower level of destructive communication. After the last actor has performed the smallest degree (whether it is a piercing stare, a sarcastic joke or just a passive-aggressive sigh), we will present another series, this time from smallest to largest - of encouraging, constructive and supportive parenting. After the play, we'll discuss what we've seen and experienced.

Practical advice for the trainers

This is not a game about domestic violence and child abuse, so it is important to make sure that the stages do not depict physical violence, life-threatening threats or other serious traumatic incidents. The aim of the game is to understand and recognise impatient, one-sided or even angry communication, which is used unconsciously in everyday life. During the discussion, also try not to blame the parents if they are familiar with something from the first series - treat with understanding and empathy those who want to improve, even if they sometimes make mistakes.

Symbolwork Exercises

Introduction with Symbols

Objective

This intervention is used to get to know a group and/or enables participants to grow together. The group members practice talking about themselves and connect to preferences and experiences of others.

Time

15-30 minutes depending on group size.

Tools

Symbol box (around 150-200 symbols).

Preparation

Create a symbol box. It is important that there are enough symbols so that after each person has chosen two, there are still some in the middle. The symbols are placed on the floor in the middle of the room. A fabric (scarf, textile) or paper can also be spread out as a base.

Description

The participants are instructed to choose two symbols each: one symbol for something that can represent them, or something about them, and another for how they feel about being / becoming a parent. The participants are given enough time to choose.

As a next step, everyone in the circle tells what their two symbols mean and shows their symbols to the group. All symbols from all participants should be placed at the fabric or paper again, as they represent all ideas from the whole group. Finally, a picture from the symbols can be taken and printed as a “group poster”.

Afterwards, all remaining symbols on the floor should be cleaned up again.

Practical advice for the trainers

This intervention can be used as an introduction round or even as an evaluation round with different questions. By choosing the symbols and reflecting on one’s own preferences, a moment of calm comes into the group. During the following presentation, each of the group members has his or her say and there is equality.

Nature Mandala

Objective

The mandala can create togetherness and a feeling of creation.

Time

20 minutes

Tools

- paper (white or color) - group work: 1mx1m, single work: 40cmx40cm
- flowers, petals, leaves, stones, grasses
- rice, lentils, beans, coffee, etc.
- cotton wool, sand, etc.
- optionally also music in the background

Preparation

The available materials are placed on a table or on the floor in small bags, bowls or plates, one by one, to invite use. It is also possible to allow time for the participants to go out to a natural surrounding and collect their own “art tools”. If so, that time is added to the timing.



Description

The base (white or coloured paper) is placed on the bottom. The centre (possibly flower) can be prepared. The participants are invited to create their own picture. If possible, do not speak during creating.

After the laying work has been completed, the image is viewed together. After a moment of rest, associations can be mentioned, but it can also be used as a closing moment without feedback.

After the intervention, the mandalas can be “transformed”, i.e. returned to a suitable place in nature or burned.

Practical advice for the trainers

The Mandala (Sanskrit, n., मण्डल, German “Kreis” or “holger Kreis”) is a figural diagram that has a magical or religious meaning in Hinduism and Buddhism in cult practice. A mandala is usually square or circular and always oriented to a center.

Mandala comes in a variety of shapes, colours and motifs and yet they all have one thing in common: they all lead to the centre or away from the centre.

Carl Gustav Jung uses mandalas as a psychological expression for the totality of the self.

My energies - Glass and Water

Objective

With water and glasses - with materials that are available in every office - clients can quickly visualise topics and facts and, in a second step, take action and try out changes.

Working with glasses and water allows quick access to different realities and makes them clear. Impulses for change can simply be tried out and further strategies developed. This intervention can be used both in working with individual clients and in groups, teams or families; sessions can also be repeated.

Time

30 minutes

Tools

For 1 person: (more for several persons):

- at least 3 glasses per person
- watering can (jug) filled with water
- plates or saucers
- pipette (or syringe)
- cotton
- sponge
- straw
- notepad and pen or symbols for marking glasses

Preparation

All materials should be available in front / close to the trainer.

Description

(Based on a text by Stefan Henke)

These steps can be used variably and also adapted. Thinkable steps are:

1. What's the subject, the question, the problem?

The topic we discuss is the energies / work-life-parenthood balances and how the client or the group see it. We introduce the topic (the parental guide can be a good starting point), and then we either invite one person (a client), or the whole group to participate.

2. Visualization with water and glasses:

a) Selection and naming of glasses

The trainer asks the client or the group to visualize their situation with the help of glasses and water. To distribute 100 % of your own energy (1 full glass of water) to different areas of life. You can choose two or more glasses, such as work, private life, or other areas.

b) Pouring and presentation

The client and/or the participants pour water with the watering can into the glasses: they have one full glass water, which is their full energy (and time), and they have to share among the different areas of life as present.

c) Observations and satisfaction

The client and/or the participants are asked what they see in the picture and whether they are satisfied with it.

- What should be different? What would it be like?

In case we talk with future parents, we can directly ask about:

- How will it change with becoming a parent? Add a glass for parenthood!

There are many possibilities to continue, for example a change of perspective by taking a new place or exchanging a place with another family member.

The following questions are conceivable:

- What must happen for the contents of the glass to change (it gets better/worse)?
- What do you have to say about what you've done so far? What would be the advantage if you didn't change anything?
- How does the filling amount of your glass change when you take another person's point of view?

One advantage of this tool, besides the visualization, is the easy possibility to get involved and to try out changes, i.e. to get the client to pour water over it as quickly as possible.

In order to facilitate the transfer of the solution into everyday life and also the creation of an action plan, it can be helpful to tell the client exactly what concrete meaning the water has or what steps the client has to take in order to achieve the desired solution.

Variations for using the tool with groups:

- One-person counselling: having only one client, the others observe.
- Small group discussions: after a one-person counselling, groups of three (or four) are formed, having somebody at the client role, somebody in the counsellor role and one or more observers.
- Plenary level: after presenting the task, all participants do their glass work parallelly, and there's a panel discussion.

Practical advice for the trainers

In individual cases, it can be very important for the participant to have various casting vessels or tools available and to be able to precisely dose the amount of water.

Pipettes of different sizes (syringe):

- When a glass is almost full, the pipette can be used to fill the glass drop by drop or to remove water from the glass (or one of the glasses) drop by drop.
- With the pipette, the glass can visibly overflow drop by drop (this is the reason for using the working documents).
- This is also possible with a straw, a sponge or a cotton ball.
- The sponge and the cotton ball can absorb larger amounts of water.

My treasure box

Objective

To develop a box of resources that can be used upon difficult situations as a parent

Time

30+20+20 minutes

Tools

- a cartoon material, which can be cut and turned into boxes, or boxes themselves, such as empty shoeboxes
- creative materials (coloured pencils, crayons, paints, pieces of designed papers / scraps, scissors, glue)
- pieces of papers and pens to write
- give-away symbols (which the participants can keep)

Preparation

Either we collect boxes, which can be turned into treasure boxes, or we should already prepare the cartoons with the template for a box.

Description

This exercise has three distinct phases, that shall be included in different times of a workshop.

1. The creation of the treasure box: this is an artistic activity. Participants are invited to create or to decorate a box for themselves, which will be their treasure box, where they will collect their resources during the training course (and also later, during their parenthood). This activity needs around 30 minutes, but it can take longer.
2. Collection of resources: Future parents are invited to think about all material, emotional, intellectual, and personal support that they have (inside themselves as well as around them) to become (to act as) parents. It should be written down on pieces of papers, or participants can be invited to look for symbols representing this. This process can go through the whole training event, so people can add more and more resources for the treasure box.
3. Evaluation / screening of our treasure box: at the end of the workshop, participants are invited to open up their collection, and look through it. We also instruct them to do it regularly at home, too, to have this case as a real source for strength.

Practical advice for the trainers

What can the contents of the treasure chests be? Resources are inner riches of personal talents and inclinations. Resources are power sources that can be deliberately “tapped”. Resources can be: beautiful memories, interests, humor, creativity, talents, self-care, and much more. People need resources to cope with everyday problems and even more so to deal with crisis situations. These are thus a key to stabilising interventions.

Practical: photo, letter, souvenirs, cubes, small gifts, symbols for own strengths, objects from nature, figures and so on.

It can also be used as a “first aid kit” during crises, filled with telephone numbers, strengthening symbols and positive memories.

Basic Clearing

Objective

The Basic Clearing Intervention actually has two goals:

- It offers the (future) parents the opportunity to clearly define a goal they want to achieve and to work out steps to achieve it and/or to describe an adverse situation, that should be changed and to analyze own capabilities to improve and to cope with.
- It gives counsellor the opportunity to find out whether the clients are able to achieve this goal on their own or whether they need additional support from outside (e.g. in the form of therapy, etc.).

Time

30-45 minutes

Tools

- symbol box with several symbols

- textile (fabric) to provide a basis for the representation and 7 circles or rectangles with the areas to be covered written on them OR a flipchart with the drawing of the basic clearing
- 6-6-6 little long rectangles representing thin ice (transparent stick, ie. transparent plastic), thick ice (white plastic or cartoon), and solid ground (wood)

Preparation

In case we use flipchart, we have to prepare the work pad according to the Exercise description.

Description

There are two ways of working with Basic Clearing.

A. COMPLEX INTERVENTION

This is a standard complex intervention, with the steps described in the methodological chapter of this guide.

1. At the beginning of the intervention we help the client to formulate a goal regarding their parental role: How do I want to see myself as a parent? Or it can also be a goal regarding a related problematic situation.
2. Next we are inviting them to create an image on the Basic Clearing work pad, choosing one or more symbols to each areas. The work pad is structured like an atom, with a GOAL at the centre and relevant aspects of the parental life surrounding it:
 - Financial background (including living arrangement)
 - Support network
 - Co-parent relationship
 - Knowledge and skills on parenthood
 - Health
 - Feelings about parenthood (fears and hopes)
 - Other



3. Evaluate the situation in each area

In a next step, the client is invited to think through how much the different areas are supporting their goals as a parent. The are invited to lay pathways between the goal and the six areas. These pathways have three different strengths (meanings): either solid ground, thick or thin ice.

- Solid ground: I feel very stable and safe here.
- Thick Ice: I feel somewhat stable and safe but I feel a little wobbly.
- Thin Ice: I am very shaky and the ice could break at any moment.

4. After the image is being made by the client, the client chooses two peers to participate in the coaching intervention as described previously. The intervention takes the 5 steps, and closes with an agreement of the next actions to be taken by the client.

B. SIMPLIFIED INTERVENTION FOR LARGER GROUPS

When we have a larger group, and would like to give them the opportunity to work with the intervention, we can also work in parallel groups:

1. Formulate small groups of 3-5 people
2. Provide symbols enough for all participants
3. You give out small workpads for all participants about the Basic Clearing
4. All individuals work alone for about 7 minutes to think through, and select symbols on the workpads
5. Then they are going to share one by one in the small groups with the following steps:
 - Sharing / describing the symbols
 - Clarification questions
 - Other group members discussion (presenter only listens)
 - Presenter reflection

(All small groups are given about 10 minutes per participant for sharing and discussing.)

6. After small group discussions, there is feedback circle of the experience and feelings of the participants.

Practical advice for the trainers

It can also be done with consecutive interactions with both parents. In that case it can be step to assess the differences in how the partners see their situation, as well as support the parents to act as supportive roles for each other.

Inner Images

Objective

To help the clients understand their complex feelings around parenthood.

Time

45 minutes

Tools

- different types of materials in little bags: stones, golden stones, cotton wool, barb wire pieces, sand, feather, cat litter
- an about A3 size of white plain paper

Preparation

Either we collect boxes, which can be turned into treasure boxes, or we should already prepare the cartoons with the template for a box.

Description

This is a standard complex intervention, with the steps described in the methodological chapter of this guide. At the beginning of the intervention we help the client to formulate a question regarding their parental role. Next we are inviting them to create an image of the different materials, which may represent the following (the client are free to give different meaning to the symbols):

- Stones represent hard feelings, difficulties, problems.
- Golden stones represent valuable, cherished things.
- Feathers represent light feelings.
- Barb wires represent very difficult problems and feelings.
- Cotton wool represents the unknown, the foggy feelings.
- Sand is something, which flows out in between our fingers.
- While cat litter represents “shit”.

After the image is being made by the client, the client chooses two peers to participate in the coaching intervention as described previously. The intervention takes the 5 steps, and closes with an agreement of the next actions to be taken by the client.

Practical advice for the trainers

Inner images are visions and ideas of how the world is made up and how to find your way around it. They are created by the fact that we all have experiences during our lifetime, and these experiences are anchored in the mind. Synapses are connected to them. We call these “inner representations” and then we use such inner images to navigate our way in life. The development of these images with the help of the relevant materials enables them to be revealed and supports the young people in visualizing their own inner images. This assists the individual to perceive and process these images and strengthens their empowerment and enhances their ability to act.

Exercises for groups related to the topics of the guide for parents

When working with young parents, it is also worth looking at the Becoming Parents project's guide for them. In that publication we address young parents on important issues that challenge them. These can be discussed together, but below we also offer exercises that can be done in groups. Most of these include elements of storytelling, drama or symbol work, but offer a methodologically more colorful toolkit than in the previous section of the toolkit.

Task Prioritization

Objective

To enhance participants' ability to prioritize tasks effectively, both at work and home, in order to optimize time management and productivity.

Time

30-45

Tools

Papers, pens, flip chart.

Description

1. Provide participants with a list of tasks comprising both work-related and personal responsibilities. Ensure the tasks vary in urgency and importance. Example Tasks:
 - Complete a report due by the end of the day due in a week.
 - Attend a parent-teacher meeting scheduled for tomorrow.
 - Respond to urgent emails from clients.
 - Pick up groceries for dinner tonight.
 - Prepare presentation slides for a meeting next week.
 - Visit my sick mother in the hospital
 - Go to the yoga class
 - Take my child to the dentist
 - Go out for dinner with my husband
 - Go to my drawing class
 - Help your child with homework.
 - Pay bills before the due date.
2. Ask participants to categorize each task based on its level of urgency and importance. They can use a matrix or a simple list format to organize the tasks. Example Categories:
 - Urgent and Important
 - Important but Not Urgent
 - Urgent but Not Important
 - Not Urgent and Not Important

3. Once participants have categorized the tasks, instruct them to prioritize each category. They should decide which tasks need immediate attention, which can be deferred, and which can be delegated or eliminated.
4. Encourage participants to reflect on their prioritization decisions and consider factors such as deadlines, impact on work or family, and available resources.
5. Discuss the outcomes as a group. Allow participants to share their prioritization

Establishing Boundaries between work and family life

Objective

To empower young parents to set clear boundaries between work and family life and practice mindful communication with their loved ones, fostering stronger relationships and work-life balance.

Time

30-45 minutes

Tools

Paper, pens, flip chart.

Description

1. Begin by discussing the importance of setting boundaries and practicing mindful communication in maintaining harmony between work and family life. Emphasize that clear boundaries and open communication are essential for creating a supportive and nurturing environment for both parents and children.
2. Present the real-life examples provided, illustrating how families have implemented boundary-setting strategies and mindful communication practices in their daily lives to prioritize quality time together and maintain work-life balance.
3. Divide participants into small groups or pairs and provide them with scenarios related to boundary-setting and communication challenges commonly faced by young parents. Encourage them to brainstorm and discuss potential solutions based on the strategies discussed. Example Scenarios:
 - Scenario 1: A parent struggles to disconnect from work emails and calls during family time, leading to frustration and tension with their spouse and children.
 - Scenario 2: A parent finds it challenging to communicate their need for uninterrupted work time to their partner, resulting in frequent interruptions and difficulty concentrating.
 - Scenario 3: A parent feels overwhelmed by conflicting demands from work and family and is unsure how to establish boundaries without feeling guilty or neglecting either responsibility.
4. After discussing the scenarios, reconvene as a larger group and invite each group to share their insights and proposed solutions. Facilitate a discussion on the effectiveness of different boundary-setting techniques and communication strategies in addressing the challenges presented.
5. Provide participants with practical tips and tools for setting boundaries and practicing mindful communication in their own lives. This may include:
 - Establishing designated “unplugged” periods or technology-free zones during family time.
 - Creating a dedicated workspace at home and setting specific work hours to minimize distractions.
 - Implementing regular family meetings to discuss schedules, expectations, and concerns openly.
 - Setting realistic expectations with employers and colleagues regarding availability and response times outside of work hours.
 - Utilizing communication tools such as active listening, empathy, and assertiveness to express needs and boundaries effectively.
6. Encourage participants to create a personalized plan for implementing boundary-setting and mindful communication practices in their own families. They can identify

specific boundaries they wish to establish, communication techniques they want to incorporate, and potential challenges they anticipate.

7. Follow up with participants periodically to assess their progress and offer additional support and guidance as needed. Encourage them to celebrate successes and share any lessons learned with the group.

This exercise empowers young parents to proactively set boundaries and communicate effectively with their families, promoting a healthier and more balanced approach to managing work and family responsibilities. By practicing boundary-setting and mindful communication, parents can create a supportive and nurturing environment that fosters mutual respect, understanding, and harmony.

Exploring Maternal Empowerment

Objective

To help participants recognize and harness the empowering aspects of motherhood, understand motherhood as a site of resistance and agency, and identify ways to advocate for their rights and needs. This exercise aims to shift the perspective from viewing motherhood solely as a source of oppression to appreciating its potential for personal and social transformation.

Time

60-90 minutes

Tools

- journals or notebooks
- pens or pencils
- large sheets of paper or whiteboards
- markers
- post-it notes
- a comfortable and safe space for discussion

Description

Begin by explaining the concept of maternal empowerment, drawing on Andrea O'Reilly's perspective that motherhood can be a site of resistance and agency.

1. Ask participants to spend 15 minutes journaling on the following prompts:
 - Describe a time when you felt empowered in your role as a mother. What actions did you take? How did it make you feel?
 - Reflect on a situation where you challenged an oppressive structure or advocated for your rights or needs as a mother. What was the outcome?
 - How do you balance the demands of motherhood with your personal aspirations and needs?
2. Sharing: After journaling, invite participants to share their reflections in pairs or small groups. Encourage them to listen actively and supportively.
3. Group discussion: Bring the participants together for a group discussion. Use the following questions to guide the conversation:
 - What common themes emerged in your reflections about empowerment in motherhood?
 - In what ways can mothers advocate for their rights and needs within their families, communities, and society?
4. Mapping Empowerment: On a large sheet of paper or whiteboard, create a visual map of the different ways motherhood can be empowering. Use markers to write down participants' ideas and experiences, connecting similar themes and concepts. This could include:
 - Personal empowerment (self-care, pursuing personal goals)
 - Community building (creating support networks, sharing resources)
 - Education and awareness (teaching children about equality, engaging in discussions about maternal rights)

5. **Identifying Opportunities for Empowerment:** Ask participants to think about specific actions they can take to harness the empowering aspects of motherhood. Provide post-it notes and ask them to write down one or two actionable steps they can take in the following areas:
 - Personal life (e.g., setting aside time for self-care, pursuing a hobby)
 - Family (e.g., initiating conversations about shared responsibilities, setting boundaries)
 - Community (e.g., joining a local mother’s group, participating in community activism)
 - Society (e.g., advocating for parental leave policies, supporting maternal health initiatives)
6. **Sharing and Commitment:** Have participants place their post-it notes on a designated wall or board. Invite them to share their commitments with the group, explaining why these actions are important to them and how they plan to implement them.
7. **Support and Accountability:** Encourage participants to pair up with a “support buddy” who will help them stay accountable to their commitments. They can check in with each other periodically to offer support and encouragement.
8. **Final Thoughts:** End the exercise with a final group reflection. Ask participants:
 - How do you feel after exploring the concept of maternal empowerment?
 - What insights have you gained about your own experiences and potential for empowerment?
 - How can we continue to support each other in this journey of maternal empowerment?
9. **Expression of Gratitude:** Encourage participants to express gratitude to the group for sharing their stories and supporting each other.

Follow-Up: Consider organizing periodic follow-up meetings or creating an online group where participants can continue to share their progress, challenges, and successes in their journey toward maternal empowerment.

Practical advice

This exercise aims to create a supportive space for mothers to reflect on and celebrate their strengths, identify opportunities for empowerment, and build a community of mutual support and advocacy.



Exploring Perspectives on Work-Life Balance vs. Work-Life Harmony

Objective

To encourage participants to reflect on their attitudes towards work and leisure time, and to explore the concepts of work-life balance and work-life harmony.

Time

30-45 minutes

Description

1. Begin by introducing the concepts of work-life balance and work-life harmony to the participants. Explain that while both aim to achieve a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction in both work and personal life, they differ in their approach to integrating work and leisure.
2. Divide participants into small groups and provide each group with a set of discussion questions related to work-life balance and work-life harmony. Encourage them to consider their own experiences and perspectives as they discuss the questions. Discussion Questions:
 - How do you define work-life balance? What does it mean to you personally?
 - Do you believe it is possible to achieve perfect work-life balance, where work and leisure time are completely separate? Why or why not?
 - How do you feel when you have to work during what should be leisure time? Do you experience guilt or anxiety?
 - Have you ever experienced work-life harmony? How did it feel? What factors contributed to it?
 - Do you think work-life harmony is a more achievable goal than work-life balance? Why or why not?
 - How do cultural norms and societal expectations influence our perceptions of work and leisure time?
 - Can blending work and leisure time be beneficial, or does it risk burnout and decreased productivity?
3. After discussing the questions within their groups, reconvene as a larger group and invite each group to share their insights and perspectives. Facilitate a discussion on the differences between work-life balance and work-life harmony, as well as the potential benefits and challenges of each approach.
4. Encourage participants to reflect on their own attitudes towards work and leisure time, as well as any changes they may want to make to achieve a better balance or harmony in their lives.
5. Conclude the exercise by summarizing the key takeaways and encouraging participants to consider how they can apply their insights to their own lives. Remind them that achieving a sense of balance or harmony is a personal journey, and it may require ongoing reflection and adjustment.

Parent Types Exercise

Objective

The aim of the game is to get to know different types of parents, based on the book by Hungarian family therapist Erika Stipkovits, Dr. The types of parents are introduced to young parents by putting them in the role of their children, helping them to understand and accept different perspectives. By learning about the parenting types, they can also understand their own parenting patterns, recognising any challenges and harmful patterns that may arise as they become parents. A child's perspective can also help them to be more understanding and patient with their own children.

Time

55 minutes

Tools

Flip chart, tips and a brief description of the types of parents:

Amber parent: A very willing, helpful parent who protects and pampers their child. A very kind and caring parent, who is a very supportive and loving parent. This way, the child is not faced with challenges, tasks, privacy, and is integrated and dependent on the parent, even when he/she is older. This often makes children inhibited and anxious.

Parenting Parent: Unconsciously reverses roles, expects child to parent, care, listen, lead chores. In this case, the child takes care of his siblings and parents, cooks, takes his siblings to school, and is burdened with the responsibility and emotional support that comes with the tasks. Parenting children later struggle with guilt, excessive sense of responsibility, compulsive caregiving, feeling accepted only if they subordinate their needs and care for others.

Over-demanding, Achievement-oriented Parent: Who see their child's happiness in their success and therefore have high expectations. He often sends his child to a lot of extra lessons, expects excellence and does everything in his power to achieve it, with the intention of seeing his child achieve as much as possible and thrive. The children of the idolater parent are submissive, achievement-oriented, anxious perfectionists with low self-confidence.

Martyr Parent: A parent with low self-esteem who gives up everything for his/her family and children, completely subordinating himself/herself to the needs of the children. This choice later manifests itself in passive-aggressive comments, complaining, emotional blackmail, where the parent assumes the role of victim and “sacrifices” for the sake of his/her family members. As the child is almost the only meaning in his life, he is strongly emotionally dependent on him. The child is left with a lot of guilt, feeling burdened, ungrateful and a bad person.

Glass-tip Parent: Distant, cold parent with whom it is difficult or rare to connect. The glass-tip parent may be physically absent (if he or she works long hours or away from home) or may be absent from home; his or her children may feel neglected, lonely, unlovable. This isolation is often caused by difficult times for parents, relationship problems, such as divorce. The children of the glass-head parent often misbehave, use anger and rule-breaking to try to get the love and attention they need.

The “Cool” Parent: Does not take on the role of parent, approaches his/her child as a friend or buddy. He or she wants to get close to the child by treating the child as an equal partner without guidance, rules and a hierarchy of parental responsibility. It does not provide a framework, does not teach, does not educate, so instead of both becoming adults, they can remain children; playing, eating crisps for dinner, not going to bed on time. The child doesn't learn what is responsible, what is a task, what is a system, often with attention deficit disorder, behavioural problems. Often, because of chaotic childhood experiences, they become too strict parents later on to prevent this.

Preparation

Print the description of the types of parents.

Description

1. During the game, we introduce different characters through the parent types.
2. Depending on the number of people, we will distribute a description of a parent type in teams or pairs.
3. The team reads through, discusses the type and together they come up with an everyday scene that adequately illustrates to the others the relationship between that type and their child. From the situation they have discussed, they create a theatre scene which they can then rehearse.
4. The scene is performed to the other participants and then the characteristics of the type are discussed together.
5. Choosing a parent type and a problem that the participants came up with in the previous game. In a joint brainstorming session, we will analyse the situation presented and collect constructive advice on how to prevent, manage and solve this problem. Meanwhile, the person running the session takes notes on the ideas expressed, creating a shared mind map.

Practical advice for the trainers

When giving out instructions in group work, remember to create imaginary situations and characters, thus preventing the possibility of provoking personal trauma or painful experiences and keeping the role safe. At the end of the scenes, it is usually helpful for the other participants (who are in the role of spectators) if the performing group reads out what is on the label they have been given; this way, all the information that has been previously collected is communicated to everyone in an interactive, detailed and authentic way.

Brainstorming on Problems Encountered in The Parent Types Exercise

Objective

During the game, we will guide the participants to possible ways of dealing with and solving the problems that were raised in the previous Exercise.

Time

15 minutes

Tools

Flip chart, tips, descriptions of the previous exercise.

Preparation

Play the previous exercise.

Description

Choosing a parent type and a problem that the participants came up with in the previous game. In a joint brainstorming session, we will analyse the situation presented and collect constructive advice on how to prevent, manage and solve this problem. Meanwhile, the person running the session takes notes on the ideas expressed, creating a shared mind map.

Good Enough Parent

Objective

It is very important for young parents to think about what kind of parents they want to be, what values they want to represent most, what principles are most important to them. It is also important to make them realize, that they should not be a perfect parent, it's enough to be good enough.

The good enough parent, as a term was introduced by Winnicott, a psychologist (see resources), and refers to the approach, that for a child to develop, a parent should not be perfect, in order to leave some space for personal development for the child.

It is instructive to compare these ideas with those of others - so that common points and principles can be identified. They can discuss these with each other and reinforce their shared values. The final element of the exercise is to take our thinking to the level of symbols, allowing us to articulate more layers of meaning and to go deeper.

Time

45 minutes

Tools

Paper and pens for each participant, flipchart and writing utensils.

Description

1. Starting with individual work. Each participant is given paper and stationery and time to think about their own parental strengths. Make a list of qualities: which qualities you think are most important for being a good enough parent.
2. Then form groups of 4-5 people. Each person reads out their list and makes a collective version of it. Only those qualities that all group members agree on and consider important should be on the common list. If someone does not have something on their own list but thinks it is important, write it down on the shared paper.



3. Each group should be given flipchart paper and drawing tools. Have the groups think about what it would take to achieve good enough parent on the shared list. Draw an island, and symbolize the different qualities of good enough parents with geographical and cartographic symbols (e.g. stream, river, town, lookout, swamp)
4. As a next step have them to draw (or fold from paper) small boats /ships, which are carrying resources for the good enough parent island. What resources (internal and external support) do we need for becoming good enough parents?
5. They should also draw ships, which are taking away resources from the island. What is removing our energies for being good enough parents (like personal issues, sickness, expectations, school etc.)?
6. Let the small groups present, and discuss the process as a whole group.

Self-Reflection and Goal Setting

Time

30-45 minutes

Tools

Papers, pens, flip chart.

Objective

To encourage parents-to-be to reflect on their personal identity and values, and to set goals for maintaining their individuality while navigating parenthood.

Description

Provide each participant with a journal or worksheet titled “Staying True to Myself as a Parent.”

1. Ask participants to take a few moments to reflect on their personal identity, values, hobbies, interests, and goals outside of parenthood.
2. Encourage participants to write down their reflections, including:
 - Their passions and interests before becoming parents.
 - Personal values and beliefs they want to uphold as parents.
 - Goals or activities they would like to continue or prioritize after becoming parents.

3. Invite participants to set specific, achievable goals for maintaining their individuality and self-care practices while raising children. Examples may include:
 - Scheduling regular “me time” for pursuing hobbies or self-care activities.
 - Establishing boundaries around personal time and space.
 - Communicating openly with their partner about their needs and preferences.
4. Allow time for participants to share their reflections and goals with the group, if comfortable.
5. Encourage participants to revisit their goals regularly and adjust them as needed throughout their parenting journey.

Self-Care Action Plan

Objective

To help parents develop a personalized self-care plan to prioritize their well-being amidst the demands of parenthood.

Time

30-45 minutes

Tools

Pens, paper, flip chart.

Description

Provide each participant with a self-care action plan worksheet or template.

1. Guide participants through the following steps:
 - Reflect on their current self-care practices and identify areas where they could improve or prioritize self-care.
 - List self-care activities that bring them joy, relaxation, and rejuvenation. Encourage a diverse range of activities, such as exercise, hobbies, socializing, and quiet time.
 - Set realistic and achievable self-care goals for the upcoming week or month. Encourage participants to be specific and include actionable steps.
 - Identify potential obstacles or challenges to practicing self-care and brainstorm strategies for overcoming them.
 - Schedule self-care activities into their weekly or monthly calendar, making them a non-negotiable part of their routine.
2. Encourage participants to commit to their self-care action plan and hold themselves accountable for prioritizing their well-being.
3. Facilitate a discussion where participants can share their self-care goals and strategies with the group, if comfortable.
4. Follow up with participants to provide support and encouragement as they implement their self-care action plans.

Practical advice for the trainers

These exercises provide practical strategies for parents to maintain their individuality and prioritize self-care while navigating the responsibilities of parenthood. By fostering self-reflection, goal-setting, and proactive self-care practices, parents can cultivate a healthy balance between their personal identity and their role as caregivers.

Practical links and books

In English

Some youtube links (cinema therapy: Licensed therapist Jonathan Decker and professional filmmaker Alan Seawright discuss mental health topics with movies, for example parenting with The Incredibles, Harry Potter (Weasleys) and Finding Nemo):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9ZaCuxCfJs>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bwL39hhofF4&t=703s>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_coxSEMfPpE&t=585s
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 Gary Chapman Love is a verb 2009 by Bethany House
 Dr. Janae B. Weinhold, Barry K. Weinhold Breaking Free of the Co-Dependency Trap 2008, New World Library
 Juul, Jesper Raising Competent Children: A New Way Of Developing Relationships With Children 2012 AuthorHouse UK
 Juul, Jesper Family Time 2012 AuthorHouse UK
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In Greek

Jerry J. Bigner - Clara Gerhardt Σχέσεις γονέα-παιδιού Εισαγωγή στη γονικότητα Εκδόσεις Πεδίο

Συγγραφέας: Σίγκελ Ντάνιελ Τζ., Πέυν Μπράυσον Τίνα Πειθαρχία χωρίς δράματα Εκδόσεις Πατάκης

MacKay Gary. Σχολείο για γονείς Για παιδιά νηπιακής και πρωτοσχολικής ηλικίας Εκδόσεις Θυμάρι

DISSING, SANDAHL IBEN Ευτυχισμένοι έφηβοι: Πώς οι Δανοί μεγαλώνουν ισορροπημένους, υγιείς κι ευτυχισμένους εφήβους Εκδόσεις Διόπτρα

Νικόλαος Σιδέρης Τα παιδιά δεν θέλουν ψυχολόγο. Γονείς θέλουν! Εκδόσεις Μεταίχμιο

BECKY KENNEDY Γίνε ο γονιός που θες Εκδόσεις Ψυχογίος

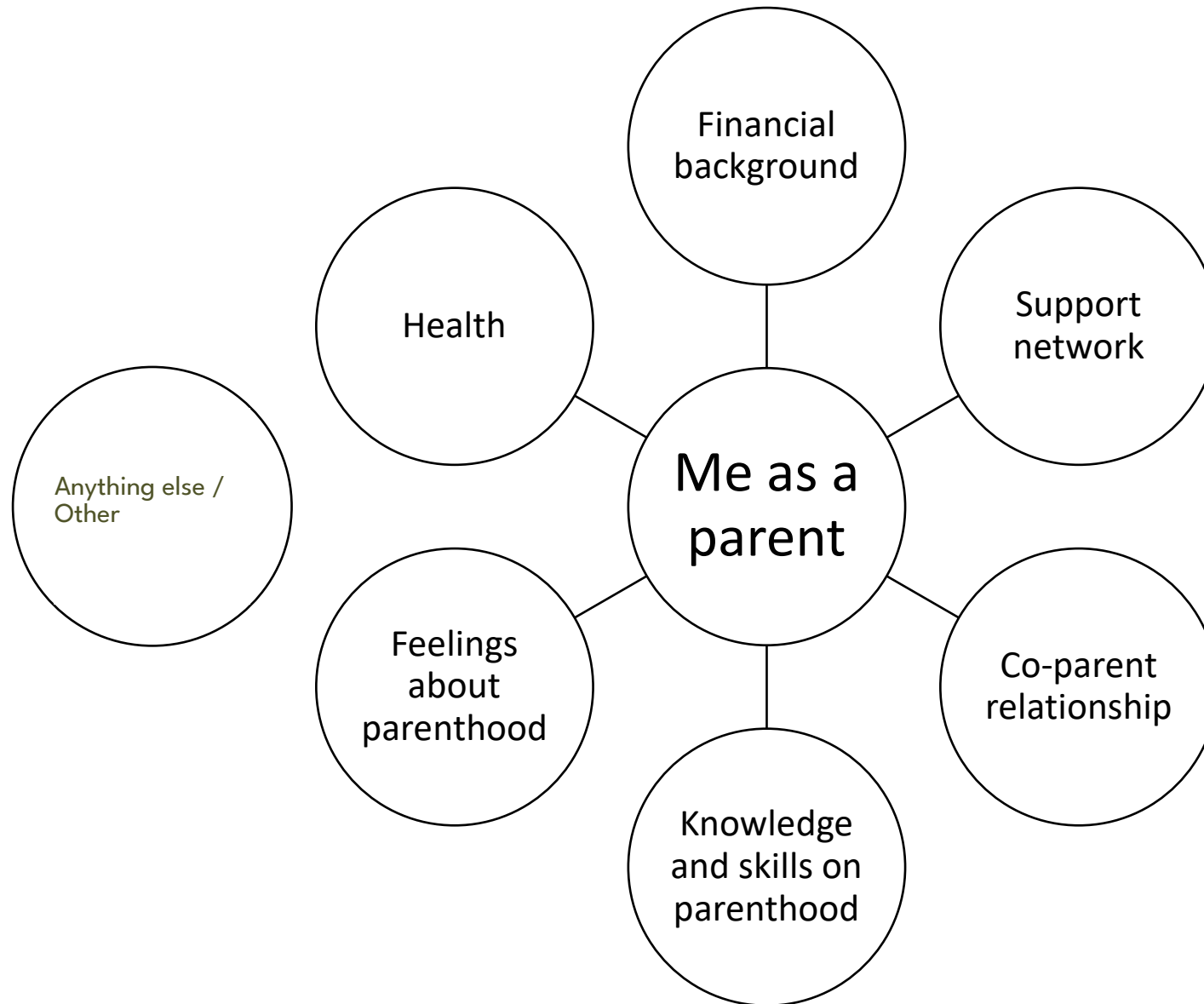
Kasey Edwards, Dr. Christopher Scanlon Μεγαλώνοντας Κορίτσια που Αγαπούν τον Εαυτό τους Εκδόσεις Διόπτρα

Source of images

The pictures were taken at the international training of the "Becoming Parents" project in September 2024.

Basic clearing printable chart

Find on the next page.





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