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## Reflective Parenting, Psychological Needs, and Parental Interpretation of Children's Negative Emotions

Julia Pappas  
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# Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

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Julia Pappas

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

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2026

Abstract

Reflective Parenting, Psychological Needs, and Parental Interpretation of

Children's Negative Emotions

by

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CAGS, UMass Boston, 2008

MEd, UMass Boston, 2007

BS, University of Ioannina, 2004

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Developmental Psychology

Walden University

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## Abstract

Parents' ability to understand and respond effectively to children's negative emotions plays a critical role in children's emotional development and regulation. However, it remains unclear whether parents interpret negative emotions as potential signals of underlying psychological needs. Based in the conceptual framework of parental reflective functioning and basic psychological needs theory, and grounded in interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, the purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine how parents interpret children's negative emotions and how their meaning-making processes relate to basic psychological needs. Semistructured interviews were conducted with parents of children between ages 3 and 9 years old ( $N = 14$ ) and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis, involving hybrid inductive-deductive coding and theme development. Seven themes were identified indicating that parents consistently treated emotions as meaningful disclosures of the child's lived experience, varied in the depth and accuracy of their interpretations, inferred underlying psychological needs both within and beyond basic psychological needs, and achieved effective emotion regulation when their interpretations accurately identified those needs. These findings may contribute to development of parent education programs, clinical practice, and caregiver training that aim at strengthening responsive and developmentally supportive co-regulation during children's negative emotions.

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## Dedication

They experience a sense of a core self and other...All of these forms of being-with are active constructions. They will grow and become elaborated in the course of development, a process that results in the progressive socializing of experience.

— Daniel N. Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*

Child development does not happen in isolation. It takes shape in the context of daily experiences and ongoing meaning-making. This research is dedicated to the parents who stay present in moments they may not fully understand, who try to listen, to see, and to hold. To those who make space for meaning even when the signals are confusing or the messages unclear, coming through imperfectly as they may in the child's tears or frustration. To the parents who embrace the mystery of what unfolds within little humans trying to process big feelings. To all of you who engage in the often unseen yet undeniably consequential labor of emotional scaffolding, may your courage, patience, and commitment be acknowledged for the incredible significance this work holds for humanity. May the present study honor the quiet power of those experiences and the meaning you are helping to structure for yourself and your child, one interaction at a time. Your attunement and gestures of care help unfold the world in which the child's Being is disclosed.

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I am also grateful to Dr. Drake Spaeth for the inspiration to reclaim the existential and phenomenological sensibilities that have long shaped my way of understanding human experience and its unfolding across the lifespan. Thank you, sir!

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

One of the core functions of parenting includes supporting a child's emotional development. How parents respond to their children's emotions shapes not only moment-to-moment regulation (also known as coregulation), but also the long-term development of emotional competence and psychological adjustment of their child (Baker, 2018; Cooke et al., 2019; Costa et al., 2019). Yet, managing young children's emotions is a well-documented stressor for caregivers (Sisterhen & Wy, 2023; Yan et al., 2021). Given the significance of parents' influence on a child's emotion regulation outcomes, there is an ongoing need to better understand factors contributing to parents' capacity to help the child resolve emotional distress and provide the necessary scaffolding for emotion regulation, especially during a developmentally critical period of early childhood.

This study explored how parents reflect on their children's emotions during such moments, and whether these reflections reveal an intuitive awareness of the child's basic psychological needs. This perspective was grounded in basic psychological needs theory (BPNT) and was examined through the lens of parental reflective functioning (PRF), the parent's ability to consider and respond to the child's internal emotional and mental states. Supportive parenting that meets a child's basic psychological needs has been found to contribute to optimal outcomes across several developmental domains, as well as the child's overall wellbeing (Ryan et al., 2022). While existing literature has explored both PRF and BPNT as distinct bodies of work (e.g., for PRF see Camoirano, 2017;

Charpentier Mora et al, 2022; Huynh et al., 2024; Schultheis et al., 2019; Slade & Slead, 2024 and for BPNT see Inguglia et al., 2018; Ju et al., 2024; Sadoughi, 2024; Slobodin et al., 2020; van der Kaap-Deeder, 2021), limited research has inquired about how these two frameworks intersect in the context of parent-child emotional interactions. This study aimed to address that gap by investigating how parents interpret their children's emotions and behavior during moments of dysregulation and how those interpretations align with or implicitly reflect basic psychological needs.

This chapter begins with the background section that offers a brief overview of relevant research on emotion regulation in children, PRF, and BPNT. Next, in the problem statement section, the research gap and its importance is discussed, followed by the study's purpose and research questions. Conceptual framework lays the foundation for the study and defines its focus, while the nature of the study describes the chosen methodology. This chapter concludes with definitions of terms, discussion of assumptions, scope and delimitation, as well as the significance and the limitations of the study.

## **Background**

Emotion regulation plays an important role in child development and serves as a strong predictor of the child's overall functioning and long-term adjustment (Baker, 2018). It is a foundational aspect of a child's ability to control their behavior and navigate their environment, which includes social, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions (Gross, 2014; Schore, 2016). Parents play a critical role in their children's overall development and especially when it comes to emotional development, as they shape the

child's ability to perceive, comprehend, and handle emotions. How well the child is able to manage their emotions is, to a large extent, dependent on how caregivers model and explicitly teach emotion regulation skills (Rolo et al., 2024), especially through their reactions to the child during emotionally charged moments (Alvarez et al., 2022).

This process, referred to as emotion socialization, is strongly facilitated by the parents' ability to understand and regulate not only the child's emotions but their own emotions as well (Kunl et al., 2024), which in turn predicts their capacity to support emotion regulation in their child (Senehi & Brophy-Herb, 2020). In other words, a parent's level of self-awareness (e.g., reflectiveness), as well as their level of child-awareness (e.g., sensitivity and responsiveness), influence their capacity to respond in attuned manner to the child's needs during moments of emotional dysregulation.

Emotional dysregulation in children can happen for various reasons, often stemming from tensions between what is desired and the actual outcome. In addition to this interconnection between motivational drives and either their fulfillment or obstruction, there may also be a conflict of priorities between several motivations (Ryan & Deci, 2017, 2000), which can be difficult for a child to resolve due to the nature of the development and thus lead to emotional tension. For example, temper tantrums can be understood as a conflictual state between wanting parents' approval and connection, while also wanting to be independent and do things one's own way (Sisterhen & Wy, 2023). Such conflicts reflect fundamental psychological needs for autonomy and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan, 2023), demonstrating why parental reflective

functioning, aided by an awareness of the child's basic psychological needs, plays an important role in helping the child navigate and resolve emotional distress.

### **Problem Statement**

Emotion socialization is an important task of parenting, the ease of which depends on many factors, including how well-equipped parents feel to handle their children's emotions and the approach they use to do so (Peet et al., 2025). Effective emotion socialization and emotion regulation require complex parenting skills of sensitivity, responsiveness, flexibility, and adjustment to the child's emotional cues. Many parents find these tasks challenging (Li et al., 2025), and even skilled caregivers may not always be consistent in their approach (Roskam et al., 2023). A recent poll of a national sample of parents showed that less than a third of parents felt confident helping their child with strong emotions, while more than half of them expressed concern that they may be setting a poor example of how to manage anger and frustration (C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health, 2024). Some parents find that managing their children's emotions is particularly stressful when children experience significant emotional or behavioral difficulties (Mikolajczak et al., 2023). Furthermore, the sheer volume of parent training programs points at the importance of not only supporting parents who find child regulation to be a challenge, but also to offer them a variety of options when it comes to tools and strategies.

Current literature offers limited understanding in regards to how parents interpret and respond to their children's emotions in ways that support psychological need fulfillment. Despite decades of research on parental emotion socialization and child

emotional development, relatively little is known about the interpretive lens parents use to make meaning of their children's emotions. While numerous studies have focused on internalizing or externalizing symptoms of poor emotion regulation in children (e.g., crying, yelling, aggression, withdrawal; e.g., Byrd et al., 2023; Camisasca et al., 2022; Cao et al., 2023; Ersan 2020; Gennis et al., 2022; Hirsch et al, 2022; Perhamus & Ostrov, 2021; Ugarte et al., 2021; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2021) and on regulation strategies employed by parents and caregivers in response to child's emotions (e.g., soothing, distraction, scaffolding, coaching) (e.g., Edler & Valentino, 2024; Hong et al., 2022; King et al., 2025; Lobo et al., 2021; Obeldobel et al., 2023; Peet et al., 2025; Reaume & Thomassin, 2024; Riemens et al., 2023; Shao et al., 2023; Ștefan & Dănilă, 2025), few have examined whether parents interpret moments of emotional distress as potential indicators of underlying psychological needs.

When it comes to interpreting a child's behavior, existing literature has explored PRF as a key cognitive and emotional process that supports coregulation and secure attachment (Camoirano, 2017; Stuhmann et al., 2022). Additionally, BPNT has been used to explain the emotional and behavioral outcomes associated with autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). However, these two frameworks have been explored in isolation, as there appear to be no studies with a specific focus to the integration of PRF and BPNT to examine how parents reflect on and respond to their children's emotional expressions in ways that may implicitly reference basic psychological needs.

Understanding this intersection holds significant social value. If parents intuitively respond to their children's psychological needs during emotionally disruptive moments (even though they may do so without formal language or terms that reflect BPNT directly), this could inform how we design parenting interventions, support programs, and educational materials. Making the connection between BPNT and PRF may give parents a new set of tools by helping them translate intuitive responses into intentional reflective practices, thus offering a clearer framework for understanding what a child may need in emotionally charged situations.

In light of growing interest in supportive parenting, emotion regulation, and parent-child coregulation dynamics, the opportunity to ask these questions is both timely and essential. Without research that connects parental meaning-making to the motivational foundations of emotion, our understanding of caregiving processes remains incomplete. Addressing this gap may help illuminate how parents naturally use (or inadvertently miss) opportunities to meet their children's basic psychological needs during everyday occurrence of emotion regulation. By investigating how reflective meaning-making functions in the practical context of meeting the child's needs, this study aims to contribute to both developmental science and applied interventions for parent and child wellbeing.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore, through in-depth interviews, how parents reflect on their children's emotional experiences during emotionally charged interactions, and whether those reflections implicitly relate to the satisfaction or

frustration of basic psychological needs as defined by BPNT. Grounded in an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, the study used Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022a) in hybrid form, combining both inductive and deductive elements. Informed by the PRF framework, the analysis combined inductive exploration of how parents naturally describe and reflect on their children's emotions with a deductive lens informed by BPNT, to explore how parents make sense of emotional expressions, including whether these are interpreted as signals of unmet psychological needs. While BPNT provided a theoretical lens for part of the analysis, the approach remained open to novel, nuanced, and unanticipated themes that naturally emerge from the data.

### **Research Questions**

This basic qualitative study was guided by two research questions (RQ) that reflect its dual objective, which is to explore how parents make sense of their children's emotional expressions and to examine how these reflections may relate to children's underlying psychological needs.

RQ1: How do parents reflect on and interpret their children's emotional expressions during emotionally charged interactions, and what meanings do they assign to those emotions?

RQ2: In what ways do parents' reflections and meanings assigned to their children's emotions implicitly align with the concepts of basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as described in BPNT?

### **Conceptual Framework for the Study**

This study was informed by two complementary frameworks: the concept of PRF and BPNT. PRF refers to a parent's capacity to reflect on and interpret the mental and emotional states of their child (Slade, 2005). It has been linked to sensitive parenting, secure attachment, and children's emotion regulation. It provides a conceptual lens through which to examine how a parent perceives, makes meaning of, and responds to their child's emotional expressions based on their capacity to tune into their child's motivations, needs, and thoughts.

BPNT is a subtheory of self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan, 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2017, 2000). This theory proposes that three psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) drive human behavior and are essential for motivation, emotional wellbeing, and self-regulation. BPNT has primarily been applied to assess how parenting behaviors support or hinder the satisfaction of these needs in children, but it has not been examined in connection with how parents interpret emotional expressions in terms of those needs. BPNT explains how wellbeing and emotional functioning are supported when these universal psychological needs are satisfied. In the parenting context, these needs may underlie children's emotional expressions, making BPNT a useful framework for understanding the emotional signals that emerge in parent-child interactions.

These two frameworks, when viewed together, offer a new way to understand parenting as both a reflective process (via PRF) and a motivational context (via BPNT). In other words, PRF guides the exploration of the interpretive process parents engage in,

while BPNT allows to examine deductively whether parents' responses align with underlying psychological needs. This study drew on both frameworks in order to explore whether and how parents make implicit meaning of their children's emotions in ways that reflect basic psychological needs, even if they do not use theoretical terminology. A detailed discussion of each framework and their integration is presented in Chapter 2.

### **Nature of the Study**

This study employed a qualitative methodology, guided by a basic qualitative research design. It is situated within an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm which assumes that reality is co-constructed through subjective interpretation and social context (see Creswell & Poth, 2018; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Unlike quantitative methodologies that investigate relations between predetermined variables, qualitative methods are better suited for exploring meaning within relatively uncharted or complex domains by allowing for a nuanced capture of data reflective of individuals' subjective experiences (Patton, 2015). Furthermore, given the nature of the inquiry and the intent to discover meaning embedded in parents' own perceptions, qualitative methodology was an appropriate fit for this study. In other words, the goal was to explore how parents make meaning of their children's emotions and how this interpretive process informs their responses and actions while supporting their children's emotional regulation.

This study was guided by the understanding that meaning is co-constructed through the interaction between participants' narratives and my interpretive lens. The study also drew on a critical realism orientation, grounded in the perspective that reality exists independent of individual's perceptions of it, yet we access that reality through

subjective personal lens and constructed interpretations (Bukowska, 2021; Pretorius, 2024). In other words, while acknowledging the subjectivity of parent's interpretation of emotion regulation and associated needs in their children, it is also appropriate to recognize the universality of psychological needs as proposed by BPNT. This understanding allowed me to seek to explore how these needs are expressed and interpreted within individual parent-child contexts. While BPNT posits that basic psychological needs are universal, this study inquired about the ways that parents construct meaning around those needs and the child's emotional expressions.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

*Autonomy:* The psychological need to experience self-direction and personal endorsement in one's actions (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In children, autonomy is supported through practices that honor the child's perspective and facilitate independent problem-solving.

*Basic psychological needs theory (BPNT):* A subtheory of SDT that posits three universal needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) as essential for psychological growth, motivation, and wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In parenting research, these needs are considered in terms of how caregivers support or hinder their children's emotional development and regulation.

*Competence:* The need to feel effective in interactions with the environment, particularly in achieving desired outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Parents foster competence by providing structure, encouragement, and opportunities for mastery.

*Coregulation:* A relational process in which caregivers support a child's ability to regulate emotions by providing external regulation through soothing, guidance, and emotional presence (Morris et al., 2007). Coregulation plays a critical role in early emotional development.

*Emotion regulation:* The processes through which individuals influence their emotional experiences, including how they recognize, manage, and express emotions (Gross, 1998). In this study, emotion regulation is considered as both an outcome of caregiving and a component of parental self-awareness.

*Parental reflective functioning (PRF):* The capacity of a parent to recognize, reflect on, and respond to their child's behavior in terms of underlying mental and emotional states (Slade, 2005). PRF includes dimensions such as interest in the child's mental world, certainty about mental states, and the ability to avoid distorted or overly simplistic interpretations (Luyten et al., 2017b).

*Relatedness:* The need to feel emotionally connected and securely bonded with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Relatedness is nurtured through emotional warmth, availability, and mutual responsiveness in the parent-child relationship.

### **Assumptions**

This study was based on several key assumptions. First, it was assumed that participants would be able to reflect on and articulate their experiences with emotion regulation of their children in meaningful ways. Second, it was assumed that parents' narratives would contain implicit or explicit indicators of meaning-making processes

related to their children's emotional expressions. Third, it was assumed that participants' accounts would be authentic representations of their personal experiences, even though those accounts may be shaped by memory, social norms, or language limitations. These assumptions were necessary in order to explore the reflective processes and interpretations at the heart of the study's research questions.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

This study focused on how parents reflect on their children's emotional expressions during moments of emotional distress that prompt parents to attend and intervene, and whether these reflections reveal implicit consideration of the child's psychological needs, as defined by BPNT. The scope was intentionally narrowed to parents' meaning-making rather than observable parenting behaviors or children's outcomes. This focus was chosen to explore the internal reflective and interpretive processes that shape parenting responses, which is an area that remains underexplored in existing literature.

The study was further delimited to parents of verbal children within a specific developmental window of preschool up to middle childhood (approximately ages 2 to 10), as these years are critical for the development of emotion regulation and parent-child coregulation patterns. Since this study sought to explore how parents interpret and make meaning of their children's emotional expressions and experiences, it is important that participating parents have children who are verbally communicative. For the purposes of this study, this term refers not merely to a child's capacity for spoken language, but rather to their active use of verbal communication in day-to-day interactions with their parents.

This includes children who attempt to express their thoughts, wants, and experiences through words, such that parents routinely engage with their children's verbal expressions, actively seeking and responding to their child's input. Such bidirectional flow of communication helps capture how parents interpret and respond to both the explicit and implicit meaning of their children's experiences, including emotional ones.

It must be noted that only adult parents and primary caregivers were included in the sample. More specifically, in order to maintain consistency with the study's developmental scope and ethical criteria, all participants must have been at least 19 years old at the time of their child's birth (i.e., the parent has reached legal adulthood by the time of conception). This requirement was necessary in order to exclude participants who became parents while still minors, given that adolescent parenthood represents its own distinct developmental context outside the scope of this study. Furthermore, for the purposes of this study, the term primary caregiver refers to the parent who is most consistently responsible for the child's daily emotional, physical, and relational needs. This operationalization includes the parent who spends the most time with the child across contexts (e.g., home, school transitions, routines), and who is primarily involved in providing comfort, guidance, and support during emotionally charged moments. It does not require that the parent be the sole caregiver but rather that they perceive themselves as holding a central and ongoing role in the child's daily experience, which includes emotion socialization and regulation.

The study does not seek to generalize findings to all caregivers or developmental stages, but rather to develop a nuanced understanding of how reflective and motivational

processes intersect in real-life parenting experiences. Additionally, while the study drew on both PRF and BPNT, it did not include other parenting theories (e.g., attachment theory, emotion socialization theory), even if they may conceptually overlap. This boundary allowed for focused attention to the intersection between parental reflective functioning and basic psychological needs. The qualitative nature of the study means that findings may not be statistically generalizable, but they may be transferable to similar parenting contexts. Detailed, contextualized descriptions support interested readers in determining the relevance of the findings to their own settings.

### **Limitations**

As a qualitative study based on in-depth interviews, this research was subject to several limitations related to design and methodology. First, the study relied on self-reported reflections, which may have been influenced by social desirability bias, selective memory, difficulties articulating internal experiences, and so on. While participants were encouraged to speak openly, it is possible that some aspects of their reflective or emotional processes may have remained unspoken or remained below their level of awareness. Second, the study involved a small sample of parents, limiting the generalizability of findings to broader populations. However, the aim was not to produce generalizable claims, but to explore patterns of meaning-making that may inform theory and future research. The richness and depth of discussions should allow for transferability, supported through thick description and detailed contextualization. Third, the interpretive nature of the research introduced the potential for researcher bias during data analysis. To mitigate this, reflexive journaling, keeping memos, audit trails, and peer

consultation were used throughout the coding and theme development process. These strategies helped improve dependability and maintained awareness of my assumptions. Finally, the study was focused on the frameworks of PRF and BPNT and did not incorporate other potentially relevant theoretical models or conceptual frameworks. This decision was made in order to maintain conceptual clarity, but it also necessarily narrowed the scope of interpretation. Future research may benefit from integrating additional perspectives, such as attachment or cultural parenting frameworks, to build on the findings of this study.

### **Significance**

From the scholarly perspective, this study contributes to the existing literature by addressing a research gap at the intersection of parenting, emotion regulation, and the role of basic psychological needs. While both PRF and BPNT have been widely explored in child development research (e.g., Fox et al., 2023; Gagné et al., 2021; Ju et al., 2024; Slade, 2023; Slobodin et al., 2020; Trepiak et al., 2025; van der Kaap-Deeder, 2021), there appear to be no studies to date that have examined how these frameworks might overlap and facilitate emotion regulation. Specifically, this study explored whether and how parents, in their everyday reflective processes, intuitively respond to children's emotional expressions as signals of unmet or fulfilled psychological needs. By integrating these two theoretical perspectives, the study offers a new lens on how meaning-making and motivation interact in the caregiving relationship.

In terms of practical implications, supporting caregivers' understanding of children's psychological needs can promote healthier parent-child relationships, greater

emotional attunement, and stronger foundations for long-term psychological wellbeing. The findings may inform the development of interventions and support programs for parents, specifically aimed at strengthening their skills of effectively regulating their own and their children's emotions. From that perspective, recognizing how BPNT applies to emotion regulation in parenting can be instrumental in facilitating positive social change. Insights into the psychological needs that this theoretical foundation provides can guide practitioners to focus more intentionally on designing interventions that not only support children or educate parents about the child's emotions in general, but that also enhance parents' understanding of the concepts of basic psychological needs in addition to strengthening their capacity to recognize these needs in their child. Explicit understanding of the connection between basic psychological needs as motivators for behavior and emotional expression, can enhance parental sense of competence and increase responsiveness, ultimately benefiting the child's emotional development.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided a detailed overview of the study and the focus of the inquiry, which is to explore how parents reflect and interpret their children's emotional expressions, and whether this meaning-making implicitly aligns with the satisfaction or frustration of basic psychological needs. The chapter outlined the background and significance of this topic, noted the gap in the existing literature, and presented the study's purpose and research questions. While PRF and BPNT were briefly introduced in this chapter as the conceptual and theoretical framework for this study, the next chapter provides a detailed review of concepts and terms related to PRF and BPNT, as well as the

overview of relevant literature. It begins with an overview of the literature search strategy and unfolds into a discussion of research on emotion regulation, PRF, BPNT, and their interconnection. In other words, the goal of Chapter 2 is to provide meaningful context for the present study and to highlight the specific gap that it aims to address, thus setting the stage for Chapter 3, which focuses on the specifics of chosen methodology.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

Supporting children's emotional development is widely recognized as one of the most vital functions of parenting. The way in which parents respond to their children's emotions plays a key role in shaping not only the child's emotional competence, but also their long-term psychological adjustment (Baker, 2018; De Raeymaecker & Dhar, 2022; Edler & Valentino, 2024). Consequently, understanding how parents support their children's emotional development has long been a topic of inquiry in developmental psychology. While substantial research has examined emotion coregulation (e.g., Facci et al., 2024, Ricker et al., 2024; Yan et al., 2021), parental reflective functioning (PRF) (e.g., Camoirano, 2017; Charpentier Mora et al, 2022; Egmoose et al., 2024; Huynh et al., 2024; Schultheis et al., 2019; Slade & Slead, 2024), and basic psychological needs theory (BPNT) (e.g., Inguglia et al., 2018; Ju et al., 2024; Sadoughi, 2024; Slobodin et al., 2020; van der Kaap-Deeder, 2021), these bodies of literature have largely evolved in parallel, with limited integration. This chapter reviews each of these domains and highlights the absence of integrative work connecting PRF and BPNT within the context of the dynamic of parent-child coregulation. By synthesizing existing research, I aim to establish the need for a study that investigates how parents perceive and respond to their children's psychological needs, even when they do not use formal theoretical language consistent with BPNT. This perspective is similar to an understanding that parents may engage in reflective processes aligned with PRF without being aware they are doing it or labeling it as such.

Despite research on both reflective parenting and psychological needs, limited attention has been given to how parents interpret their children's emotional expressions in ways that reflect an awareness of basic psychological needs. This lack of integration constrains the field's ability to explain how emotional regulation is supported in real-life parent-child interactions. In particular, prior literature has not explored how parents reflect on their children's inner experiences in ways that may align with the motivational constructs defined by BPNT. This gap becomes especially visible when we attend to how parents describe their caregiving experiences in their own words, which is something that top-down theoretical models may overlook. Drawing on qualitative thematic analysis of in-depth interviews, this study explored how parents intuitively reflect on and respond to their children's emotions and needs, even when they do not articulate them using formal psychological terms. This chapter presents relevant literature across these domains with the goal of establishing the conceptual foundation for this inquiry.

A growing body of research has examined parent-child dynamics through various theoretical lenses, with particular attention to emotion regulation, PRF, and BPNT. This literature review will show how each framework offers a distinct yet compatible contribution to our understanding of how parent-child interactions shape emotional development, even though they have rarely been discussed together. The chapter begins with an outline of the literature search strategy, followed by a review of research on emotion regulation and coregulation in early childhood, emphasizing the parent's role in supporting the child's emotional development. The review then shifts to parental meaning-making and emotional attunement, highlighting how parents interpret children's

emotional expressions and how such interpretations shape caregiving behavior. Next, the concept of PRF is explored, with attention to its role in interpreting children's internal states and supporting secure attachment via caregiver's capacity to make sense of their child's internal emotional and mental states. This discussion is followed by a section that introduces BPNT, a motivational theory that explains emotional wellbeing and self-regulation through the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. BPNT can serve as a framework for understanding how unmet needs may manifest as emotional distress. Finally, the chapter identifies a gap in the literature: although PRF and BPNT both offer insight into children's emotional regulation, they have not been integrated to examine how parents interpret emotions as signals of underlying psychological needs. This gap formed the basis for the present study.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

To explore available literature, a multistep literature search process was performed using a set of search terms reflective of this study's investigative aims. Specifically, combinations of the following keywords were employed: *emotion regulation in children, emotion regulation, parent-child coregulation (and/or coregulation), child emotional distress, parent emotion responsiveness, parent emotion awareness, theory-of-mind in emotion regulation, basic psychological needs, basic psychological needs theory (BPNT), parental mentalizing (and/or mentalising), and parental reflective functioning (PRF)*. The databases searched included EBSCOhost, APA PsycINFO, ProQuest, Taylor and Francis Online, PubMed, and ScienceDirect.

Furthermore, with the exception of seminal works and highly cited foundational texts, all searches were limited to literature published in peer-reviewed journals within the last decade. Only English-language publications were considered for review.

The initial search process generated a substantial volume of results for terms related to PRF as well as for BPNT within parenting contexts. To specifically explore literature at the intersection of PRF and BPNT, additional searches were conducted using Boolean operators and combining terms as follows: “*parental reflective functioning*” AND “*basic psychological needs theory*,” “PRF” AND “BPNT,” as well as “*parental reflective functioning*” AND “*basic psychological needs*” (excluding “theory”). These targeted searches produced no relevant results. Based on this outcome, the search was further expanded by broadening the BPNT term to include *self-determination theory* (SDT), given that SDT is a broader framework that contains BPNT along with other subtheories. With this in mind, an additional search was conducted using the following combinations: “PRF” AND “SDT,” “*parental reflective functioning*” AND “*self-determination theory*,” as well as mixed combinations of spelled-out and abbreviated terms. Given that this expanded approach also yielded no relevant studies, the next and final step of the search process consisted of expanding the timeframe to include any potentially available literature from the last three decades (reflective of BPNT, SDT, and PRF literature publication trends). Similarly, this search also yielded no relevant results.

Unlike these targeted searches, the most productive ones focused instead on the broader relationships among BPNT, SDT, parenting, and emotion regulation. For example, searches combining “*basic psychological needs*” AND “*parenting*” returned

several hundred relevant papers, as did combinations such as “*basic psychological needs*” AND “*emotion regulation*,” and “*self-determination theory*” AND “*parenting*” or “*self-determination theory*” AND “*emotion regulation*.” However, searches combining basic psychological needs or SDT, simultaneously with both emotion regulation and parenting, yielded no direct results. This literature search process suggests a lack of studies not only at the intersection of BPNT and PRF specifically, but also at the intersection of BPNT and emotion regulation within the context of parenting dynamics.

## **Theoretical Foundation**

### **Basic Psychological Needs Theory**

BPNT is a subtheory within the SDT framework developed by Ryan and Deci (2000, 2017). BPNT posits that all individuals possess three innate psychological needs (referred to as basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness) that are essential for optimal psychological functioning and emotional wellbeing. The satisfaction of basic psychological needs leads to vitality, engagement, and resilience, whereas the frustration of these needs (i.e., when they are undermined or unmet) is associated with emotional dysregulation, maladaptive behavior, and decreased sense of wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). BPNT provides a motivational interpretation of why people seek certain emotional experiences and behavioral outcomes. In this study, BPNT served as the theoretical foundation for exploring how parents interpret their children’s emotional expressions, particularly whether these interpretations reflect an implicit understanding of children’s underlying psychological needs.

Basic psychological needs are viewed as culturally universal and developmentally persistent (Ryan, 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017), pointing at their relevance across the lifespan and various life contexts. Each need is conceptually distinct but interconnected. Autonomy refers to the experience of volition and ability to act in accordance with one's will, interests, values, or sense of self. Competence describes the need to feel effective, capable, and able to master skills and overcome challenges. Relatedness refers to the need to feel emotionally connected to others, to be understood, and to have a sense of belonging. When individuals feel controlled, ineffective, or ignored, need frustration becomes apparent (Deci & Vansteenkiste, 2004). Emotional dysregulation and psychological distress are theorized to emerge from need frustration, rather than from a mere lack of satisfaction (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020).

BPNT provides a motivational framework that helps explain why individuals naturally seek certain emotional experiences or engage in specific behaviors. In the context of emotional development, BPNT's motivational lens provides insight into how the satisfaction or frustration of needs may shape emotional expressions, regulation patterns, and interpersonal behavior. Because psychological needs are considered fundamental to human functioning, BPNT is a valuable theory for interpreting affective dynamics in social contexts, including those involving close relationships and interactions between parents and children.

In the context of this study, BPNT provided the theoretical foundation for examining how children's emotional expressions may reflect underlying psychological needs. The theory supports the assumption that such expressions are not arbitrary but are

motivated by the child's innate drive for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. While this study did not directly measure children's need satisfaction or frustration, BPNT was used as a deductive interpretive framework to assess whether and how parents' reflections and responses to their children's emotional signals align with these basic psychological needs. A discussion of the ways in which BPNT has been applied in empirical studies of parenting and emotion regulation is provided in the Literature Review section of this chapter.

### **Parental Reflective Functioning**

PRF refers to the parent's capacity to reflect on and interpret their child's inner world, which includes understanding their emotions, needs, motives, and behavior, and, consequently, respond to their child's behavior as an expression of underlying emotional and mental states (Slade, 2005). The construct of PRF is rooted in the psychoanalytic concept of mentalization which was first introduced by Fonagy as an important component of emotional regulation (Fonagy et al., 1991) and was also explored as a factor in facilitating the formation of a particular attachment style between parents and their children (Burkhart et al., 2017; Fonagy et al., 2002; Pazzagli et al., 2022). PRF reflects a parent's ability to have a grasp of the child's mind and perspective, and is a form of metacognition, which allows the parent to consider what their child may be feeling, needing, or intending in a given moment. This reflective stance allows parents to move beyond surface-level behavior and engage with the child's inner world, particularly during emotionally charged moments.

High reflective functioning is associated with emotionally attuned caregiving (Huynh et al., 2024; Luyten et al, 2017a), as it facilitates the recognition of distress as meaningful rather than disruptive, and invites empathic, contingent responses (i.e., responsive attunement) that promote child regulation and sense of security. Conceptually, PRF represents more than a set of behaviors and encompasses a way of perceiving the child, seeing them as a psychological subject with internal experiences that may not be immediately visible (Schoore, 2016). This orientation is particularly important during moments of heightened emotion, where the parent's interpretation of the child's affective signals shapes not only the immediate response, but also the broader emotional atmosphere of the relationship. In this manner, PRF enables a form of parental meaning-making that is dynamic and context-sensitive, which allows the parent to reflect in real time on what the child might be feeling and why. By staying curious, tolerating ambiguity, and resisting reactive interpretations, parents who are high in reflective functioning are more likely to engage in supportive emotion coregulation rather than focusing solely on behavior control (Camoirano, 2017). This approach allows the parent to scaffold emotional understanding over time, which contributes to positive social-emotional development.

In this study, PRF served as the primary interpretive lens through which parental narratives will be analyzed. Rather than measuring PRF as a construct or evaluating parents' capacity in quantifiable terms, which has been done successfully in numerous publications with the help of PRF questionnaire (Huynh et al., 2024), this study used PRF conceptually to explore how parents reflect on their children's emotional experiences and

articulate the meaning behind those experiences. Specifically, it examined how parents make sense of their children's emotionally charged moments, what explanations or assumptions they explore, and how these reflections may guide their responses in an effort to help the child regulate emotionally. Braun and Clarke's (2022b) reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in these reflections, with PRF providing the theoretical anchor for understanding the reflective quality, depth, and direction of the parents' interpretive processes.

Although PRF offers a compelling framework for understanding how parents reflect on their children's inner world, it does not explicitly address what parents believe their children's emotions are signaling at the level of basic psychological needs. That is, PRF captures the reflective process (i.e., attention, interpretation, attunement) and to some extent the assumed content of that reflection (i.e., the underlying mental states and desires that may drive the child's emotional expression) but it does not speak to which psychological needs may underlie that expression. The framework leaves unspecified whether the parent perceives the child's distress as, for instance, a need for autonomy, a longing for connection, or a desire for mastery. For example, a tantrum might be recognized as distress, but whether that distress is interpreted as a need for autonomy, connection, competence, or something else remains theoretically unspecified. This limitation invites the integration of a complementary framework with BPNT to enrich the understanding of parental meaning-making by offering a structured account of what emotional expressions might be about. In this way, PRF and BPNT provide two distinct but complementary lenses: PRF describes the process of parental reflection, while BPNT

offers a model of the motivational needs that may be at stake in those reflections. Together, they allow for a more nuanced exploration of how parents understand and respond to children's emotional expressions, not only in terms of regulatory skill but also in terms of underlying meaning. A review of the empirical literature on PRF and its relevance to parenting and emotion regulation is presented in the next section.

### **Literature Review of Key Concepts**

This section reviews current literature related to the key concepts in this study: emotion regulation in childhood, PRF, and BPNT. While extensive research has been conducted on each of these constructs individually, they have not yet been meaningfully connected in the context of parenting and coregulation. This review synthesizes existing empirical and theoretical work, identifies areas of conceptual overlap, and highlights a gap in the literature that this study addresses, which is the lack of research examining how parents' reflective meaning-making may implicitly or explicitly involve attention to their children's psychological needs. The literature reviewed here supports the rationale for the study's conceptual framework and helps to contextualize the research questions that guide this inquiry.

### **Emotion Regulation in Parenting**

Emotion regulation refers to the ability to monitor, manage, and respond to emotional experiences in a flexible and adaptive manner (Gross, 2014). This capacity plays a foundational role in psychological development, influencing children's behavioral adjustment, social competence, and mental health (Schore, 2016). In early childhood, emotion regulation is not yet an independent skill but rather an emerging process that is

shaped, modeled, and scaffolded within caregiving relationships (Thompson, 1994). Through everyday interactions, caregivers provide critical regulatory support, thus co-modulating the child's emotional intensity, helping them name and make sense of their feelings, and responding in ways that promote both safety and autonomy (Morris et al., 2007; Rolo et al., 2024).

The concept of coregulation has received growing empirical support as a core mechanism through which caregivers influence emotional development. Coregulation involves the parent's ability to remain emotionally regulated themselves while offering support, containment, and guidance to the child during moments of emotional arousal. Supportive responses, such as soothing, validation, and meaning-making, are positively associated with children's capacity to self-regulate and have been linked to reduced anxiety, better impulse control, and greater emotion understanding (Stone et al., 2019; Zitzmann et al., 2024). In contrast, emotionally unsupportive practices, such as criticism, minimization, or withdrawal, can undermine the child's developing regulatory system, increasing the risk of internalizing and externalizing problems (Davies et al., 2022; Nieto-Retuerto et al., 2024).

It is important to note that co-regulation is not a one-way process. Research has emphasized its bidirectional nature, with both the child's temperament and the caregiver's internal resources shaping regulatory outcomes (Cenușă & Turliuc, 2023; Obeldobel et al., 2023; Paley & Hajal, 2022). For example, children with heightened emotional reactivity may require more nuanced or sustained coregulation, placing greater demands on the caregiver's own emotion regulation capacities. Parents must not only

respond sensitively to the child's signals, but also regulate their own stress, remain attuned, and reflect on what the child's emotional expressions might signify.

Despite this growing recognition, much of the literature on coregulation focuses on observable behaviors or the external effectiveness of parenting practices. Less is known about the internal processes through which caregivers interpret and respond to a child who is emotionally distressed. As several recent studies have suggested, the quality of coregulation may hinge not only on what parents do but also on how they make sense of what they are seeing and feeling (Holodynski & Kärtner, 2023; Menashe-Grinberg et al., 2022). These meaning-making processes may be rooted in parental beliefs, emotional awareness, and reflective capacities, and are especially critical during moments of child distress, when automatic or dysregulated reactions can derail otherwise supportive intentions.

Understanding these interpretive processes is essential for capturing a more complete understanding of emotion regulation as a relational, cognitively mediated, and developmentally dynamic process. This recognition sets the stage for deeper inquiry into the psychological capacities that support reflective caregiving. The following sections explore two theoretical frameworks, PRF and BPNT, that illuminate distinct but complementary aspects of how parents support emotional development: one through reflective meaning-making and the other through the recognition and fulfillment of basic psychological needs.

## **Parental Reflective Functioning and Emotion Regulation**

PRF has emerged as a central well-defined construct in parenting research, particularly in studies of emotional development and regulation. PRF, a core function of metacognitive processes known as mentalizing, refers to a caregiver's capacity to understand and respond to a child's behavior in terms of the child's underlying mental and emotional states (Slade, 2005). This reflective capacity allows the parent to move beyond the immediacy of observable behavior and engage with the child's internal experience, which is especially critical in emotionally charged or dysregulated moments. PRF is rooted in the broader concept of mentalization (Fonagy et al., 2002; Fonagy & Allison, 2012), which highlights the importance of recognizing that behavior is driven by thoughts, feelings, intentions, and needs. Within parent-child relationships, this reflective stance is associated with increased sensitivity, emotional availability, secure attachment, and social competence (Camoirano, 2017; Gagné et al., 2021; Huynh et al., 2024; Kungl et al., 2024).

Empirical research has consistently shown that higher PRF contributes to a range of positive parenting outcomes. Reflective parents are more capable of soothing their child during moments of distress (Schultheis et al., 2019), while unsupportive caregiver responses have been found to hinder emotional regulation and emotional adjustment of children (Kalland et al., 2023; Rolo et al., 2024). Parents with high PRF tend to interpret their children's behavior with greater empathy and curiosity, which supports coregulation during emotionally intense moments (Luyten et al., 2017a). They are more likely to validate their children's emotional experience, respond to their emotions and behavior

with flexibility, and engage in effective coregulation (Stuhrmann et al., 2022). Álvarez et al. (2022) found that maternal mentalization during key developmental transitions predicted more adaptive emotion regulation in children. Similarly, Egmoose et al. (2024) reported that higher PRF in both mothers and fathers was associated with more secure adult attachment and positive parenting behaviors. These findings align with earlier work by Slade et al. (2005), who demonstrated that reflective parenting contributes to the development of emotional competence and relational security in children. Fortunately, developing reflective capacities is an ongoing process, and as caregivers refine their reflective skills and capacities, they can improve how they respond to their children's developmental needs (Jin et al., 2023). The ongoing nature of this process makes it possible to improve PRF and parenting outcomes with interventions and parent training (Kalland et al., 2023).

PRF has also been shown to soften the impact of parental stressors on parenting quality, serving as a protective factor in several contexts (Stuhrmann et al., 2022) such as, for example, parenting stress associated with prematurity (Dollberg et al., 2022). Such evidence validates the understanding that parental reflective capacity plays a regulatory role in emotionally demanding caregiving moments, and strengthening this reflective capacity through targeted interventions can support parents in navigating these moments with more confidence (Menashe-Grinberg et al., 2022). Research that examines how PRF is shaped by the parent's own emotional functioning is substantial and continues to grow. Parents who struggle with emotional awareness or rely on maladaptive emotion regulation strategies, such as suppression or detachment, tend to report lower levels of

reflective functioning, especially in terms of curiosity and certainty about their children's mental states (Bennett et al., 2023; Khoshroo & Seyed Mousavi, 2022; Schultheis et al., 2019). Insecure adult attachment patterns have also been linked to decreased PRF and reduced sensitivity towards child behavior (Kungl et al., 2024). These findings suggest that reflective functioning is not only a parenting skill, but also a capacity that emerges in the context of the parent's own regulatory processes and emotional resources. The caregiver's ability to manage their emotional state during a child's distress appears to be a necessary condition for effective reflection.

Despite this growing body of research, several limitations remain. Much of the literature has focused on parents of infants or toddlers, with relatively fewer studies examining PRF in everyday parenting contexts with older children (Camoirano, 2017). Moreover, while PRF effectively captures how parents engage in reflective processes (e.g., their stance, tone, or level of attunement), there is limited discussion that examines what parents believe their children's emotions are about. That is, the theory and its operationalization tend to focus on the quality of reflection, rather than the content (i.e., the underlying need, motive, or psychological meaning that the parent assigns to the child's emotion). As Menashe-Grinberg et al. (2022) and Kungl et al. (2024) have noted, PRF emphasizes process over interpretation. This emphasis leaves open an important empirical and conceptual question: How do parents make sense of their children's emotions as signals of psychological need? Addressing this question may require the integration of complementary theoretical frameworks, such as BPNT, which can account

for the motivational dimension of emotional meaning-making driven by basic psychological needs.

### **BPNT in Parenting and Emotion Regulation**

BPNT, a subtheory within the larger framework of SDT, offers a motivational account of human wellbeing, self-regulation, and adaptive functioning across the lifespan (Ryan, 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017). BPNT posits that, in order to thrive, all individuals require the fulfillment of three universal psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These needs are considered innate, culturally universal, and developmentally persistent. Their satisfaction promotes vitality, resilience, and psychological health, while chronic need frustration is associated with dysfunction, such as emotional dysregulation, disengagement, and maladaptive behaviors (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2024). In the ever-evolving sphere of parenting research, BPNT has provided a useful framework for understanding how different caregivers' behaviors either support or hinder the satisfaction of children's psychological needs and consequently how it may be impacting psychological wellbeing in children.

Basic psychological needs are not abstract constructs within the parenting space, since they are detectable and visible in concrete interactions between caregivers and children and shape the overall emotional tone of the relationship. For example, the child's need for autonomy can be witnessed in their expression of volition and self-direction. Consequently, autonomy-supportive parenting behaviors include offering meaningful choices, validating the child's perspective, minimizing control, and allowing appropriate independence. Research has shown that such practices are linked to higher levels of

intrinsic motivation, emotional adjustment, and self-regulation in children (Costa et al., 2019). In contrast, controlling or overly directive parenting styles may frustrate the child's need for autonomy, leading to emotional distress or oppositional behavior (Davies et al., 2022; Fiore et al., 2024).

Similarly, the child's need for competence can be observed in their desire to feel effective and capable in their actions and interactions with others and the world. Parents attend to this need by providing scaffolding, constructive feedback, and appropriate challenges that match the child's developmental level. When parents consistently support a child's efforts, through direct guidance, intentional scaffolding, and structured encouragement, they help build a foundation for task persistence, confidence, resilience and self-efficacy, all of which contribute to the child's sense of wellbeing (Gershy et al., 2023). Conversely, environments that are overly critical, chaotic, or lacking in guidance may undermine the child's sense of competence, increasing vulnerability to anxiety or withdrawal (Fox et al., 2023; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020).

Lastly, the child's need for relatedness reveals itself in their desire for emotional closeness, to be understood and accepted, and to have a secure sense of connection with others, starting with their caregivers. Parenting behaviors that satisfy the need for relatedness include warmth, availability, emotional responsiveness, and shared emotional experience (Schoore, 2016). These interactions provide children with a secure base from which to explore, and they help regulate affect during moments of distress (Cooke et al., 2019). BPNT-based research has linked the satisfaction of the need for relatedness to increased empathy, secure attachment, lower emotional reactivity, higher responsiveness

to parental guidance, and more adaptive emotion regulation strategies in children (Abidin et al., 2022; Arden et al., 2023; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020).

Recent research has also shown that BPNT applies not only to children's needs, but to parents' needs as well. When caregivers experience psychological need satisfaction (e.g., feeling competent, autonomous, and emotionally connected in their caregiving role), they are more likely to respond with flexibility, attunement, and emotional availability towards their child (Arden et al., 2023). These findings extend BPNT beyond child outcomes to suggest a bidirectional dynamic where parent and child psychological needs mutually influence caregiving behaviors and emotional regulation within the dyad (Obeldobel et al., 2023). The child's need satisfaction supports their wellbeing, but parents' own need fulfillment may shape how consistently they can engage in need-supportive caregiving practices (van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2019). Importantly, need satisfaction is closely tied to emotion regulation, not only in children but in caregivers as well. Studies have demonstrated that when children's psychological needs are met, they are more likely to develop emotional flexibility, self-awareness, and resilience (Fang et al., 2021). At the same time, chronic need frustration of caregivers has been associated with maladaptive emotion regulation patterns, including emotional withdrawal, permissiveness and avoidance, or impulsivity and overcontrol (Abidin et al., 2022; Fox et al., 2023; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020).

While the motivational implications of need satisfaction for behavior and emotion are well-documented, much of the parenting literature remains focused on observable caregiver behaviors (e.g., parenting style) rather than the cognitive or interpretive

processes that shape those behaviors. For example, BPNT-based studies often examine whether caregivers are autonomy-supportive or controlling (e.g., Costa et al., 2019; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010) but rarely explore how caregivers arrive at their moment-to-moment interpretations of children's emotional expressions. In other words, whereas BPNT offers a compelling model of what children may need, little is known about how parents come to recognize or understand those needs in real time. Studies that have explored parental need satisfaction often do not examine how a parent interprets their child's distress. Although researchers have outlined behaviors that support each of the three needs, the internal interpretive process that guides how parents perceive and assign meaning to their children's emotions remains largely unexamined. Do they detect a threat to the child's competence, a plea for connection, an assertion of autonomy, or something else? This creates an opportunity for theoretical integration. A more comprehensive account of parent-child emotional dynamics would include both the motivational structure of psychological needs and the reflective processes through which those needs are identified, interpreted, and addressed. In the following section, the potential for theoretical integration between BPNT and PRF is further explored.

### **Theoretical Integration and Literature Gap**

Both PRF and BPNT have been widely studied within the context of parenting and emotion regulation, and both offer valuable insights into the emotional development of children. Even though they both emphasize emotion regulation, attunement, and relational understanding, they have largely evolved as separate bodies of literature. PRF focuses on capacities that help parents interpret their children's behavior in terms of

internal mental states (emotions, thoughts, desires, and intentions) and provides a powerful lens on parental attunement and coregulation. However, it does not explicitly address the deeper motivational basis behind those states. In contrast, BPNT explains how the satisfaction or frustration of basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) underpins human emotional and behavioral responses, yet it does not explore how caregivers come to recognize or respond to those needs in moment-to-moment interactions. BPNT offers a model of what people need in order to experience psychological wellbeing and shows how the frustration or satisfaction of these needs shapes emotional and behavioral outcomes. Within parenting research, in particular, BPNT has provided insight into how caregiver behaviors support or thwart these needs in children. Yet it has rarely examined how parents recognize or interpret these needs in the moment of interaction. The literature has emphasized observed parenting styles and environmental climate (e.g., autonomy-supportive or controlling), rather than the parent's internal interpretive process.

To put it concisely, PRF tells us how parents reflect, while BPNT tells us what needs might be at stake, but no study was found that explores how parents reflect on needs more specifically. Despite highly compatible constructs, the two frameworks evolved separately from each other. Bridging this conceptual disconnect can enrich the understanding of how emotional regulation is supported in practice. BPNT identifies what needs matter, but leaves room for understanding whether, when, and how parents recognize them. How do parents reflect on their children's emotional experiences in ways that align (implicitly or explicitly) with the principles of BPNT? That is, how do parents

make sense of emotional expressions as indicators of underlying psychological needs, even if they do not use need-based language? Do they interpret a tantrum as an assertion of autonomy? Do they recognize sadness as a bid for connection? Do they view frustration as a sign of challenged competence? While PRF can illuminate the reflective stance parents bring to these moments, it does not provide a framework for interpreting what meaning is assigned to the child's experience.

If parents naturally recognize and respond to their children's psychological needs during emotional episodes (without using the formal language of BPNT) then that insight could inform how we educate, support, and empower parents. Exploring this potential connection requires a qualitative approach that listens closely to how parents reflect on emotionally charged moments and what meanings they assign to those experiences. This study addressed this gap by exploring how parents reflect on and make sense of their children's emotional expressions in ways that intuitively reflect the principles of BPNT, even when they do not name them as such.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

This chapter reviewed the scholarly literature on two central frameworks: PRF and BPNT, as well as their relevance to parenting, emotional development, and child emotion regulation. PRF highlights the interpretive and relational processes by which parents understand and respond to their children's internal states, while BPNT offers a motivational lens, identifying three basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) as essential to emotional wellbeing and regulation. Each of these frameworks has generated valuable bodies of research independently. PRF has been

shown to predict sensitive parenting and secure attachment (e.g., Egmore et al., 2024; Miller et al., 2019; Slade 2023; Suchman et al., 2016; Trepik et al., 2025), while BPNT has been widely used to examine how parenting behaviors support or hinder children's development (e.g., McCurdy et al., 2020; Neubauer et al., 2021, Su-Russell et al., 2024; van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2019).

However, no known studies have integrated these two perspectives to examine how parents make meaning of children's emotions in ways that implicitly reflect an understanding of basic psychological needs. While we know how parents reflect (PRF), and we know what children need to thrive (BPNT), we do not yet know whether (or how) parents' reflective interpretations align with those needs. The interaction between interpretive process and motivational content remains largely unexplored. Searches of literature were conducted across EBSCOhost, APA PsycINFO, ProQuest, Taylor and Francis Online, PubMed, and ScienceDirect, using combinations of keywords including "parental reflective functioning," "basic psychological needs," "mentalization," and "emotion regulation." A review of available literature revealed a lack of studies that connect the parent's reflective capacity with their recognition or interpretation of children's needs as defined by BPNT. This study addressed that gap by exploring parents' reflective narratives during emotionally charged experiences of their children.

Moreover, the language parents use and the way they make sense of and respond to their children's needs in everyday contexts may not match either theoretical vocabulary precisely. For this reason, the present study adopted a qualitative, meaning-centered approach with thematic analysis, and sought to understand how caregivers

interpret emotional expressions and whether those interpretations reveal implicit attention to the child's basic psychological needs. In doing so, the study attempts a conceptual bridge that offers new insight into the emotional and motivational dynamics present in coregulation and parenting. The next chapter outlines the research design, methodology, and analytic approach used to conduct this inquiry.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

This qualitative study was designed to explore how parents reflect on and respond to situations in which their child is emotionally distressed. Specifically, I investigated how parents interpret their children's emotions and what they perceive their child to need in those moments. The goal of this research was to understand whether and in what way parents' reflections reveal an intuitive awareness of the child's basic psychological needs, as defined by basic psychological needs theory (BPNT). The study was grounded in the concept of parental reflective functioning (PRF), which refers to the parent's capacity to understand and respond to the internal mental and emotional states of their child.

By using a basic qualitative approach, this study aimed to capture the depth and nuance of how parents make meaning of emotionally sensitive moments, from the perspective of attending to the child's emotional experiences. Semistructured interviews allowed participants to describe how they understand and interpret what is happening when their child is upset, overwhelmed, or struggling emotionally. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns of meaning in how parents perceive their children's needs, including needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This research contributes to the existing literature by addressing a gap identified in Chapter 2, which is the opportunity to integrate PRF and BPNT in the context of parenting and emotion coregulation. This conceptual integration enriches our understanding of real-time parental meaning-making when their child is emotionally distressed. Insights into how parents reflect on their children's emotional needs and whether those reflections align with the

psychological needs proposed by BPNT, may inform more effective support for parents navigating emotionally intense interactions.

This chapter outlines the methodological design of the study, including the role of the researcher, philosophical commitments that inform the interpretive stance, rationale for the chosen design, participant selection criteria, recruitment strategy, and instrumentation. The data collection and analysis procedures are described, along with strategies for establishing trustworthiness and addressing ethical considerations.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

This study employed a qualitative methodology with basic qualitative research design, grounded in the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm and informed by a critical realist ontology. From this perspective, meaning is understood as interpretively constructed through their social interactions and lived experiences, while the phenomena to which these meanings refer are understood as real, though not always directly observable. A basic qualitative approach is considered appropriate when the aim is to understand how individuals interpret and make sense of specific events, behaviors, or relationships (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach aligned closely with the research questions, which aimed to explore how parents interpret their children's emotions and needs during moments of emotional dysregulation. The focus of the study was on meaning-making, as expressed in language, thought processes, and responses. Given that emotion regulation in children is a complex unique dynamic between parent and child, it is influenced by individual variables that may not be easily captured through quantitative methods, data were collected through semistructured in-depth individual interviews. This

approach is particularly helpful when exploring sensitive topics, such as emotions and parenting, and seeking deep insight and reflections (Opdenakker, 2006; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Although quantitative methods hold an undeniable value in research on parenting, such an approach would not be appropriate given the nature of the questions asked in this particular study. Whereas quantitative methods test and analyze relationships between known variables, set hypotheses and allow for predictions, a qualitative study seeks to explore an area of interest in an open-ended manner, looking for nuance within a particular context of participants' meaning-making (Gresswell & Creswell, 2018). Given the grounding of this study in an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, a qualitative design was a better fit in contrast to quantitative methods that tend to align with a postpositivist worldview due to the nature of built-in assumptions (e.g., objective truth, measurable reality, etc.). Furthermore, since quantitative methods seek to produce generalizable results for a population of interest, they rely on representative samples of that population. This objective is contradictory to the aims of this study where the goal was to focus on one experience at a time in order to understand the meaning-making in the context of subjective, rather than objective, reality of parents faced with emotional dysregulation of their child. In other words, instead of asking, what is true for most people, in this exploration the question was -- what is true for one?

When it comes to other qualitative designs, although several were considered, they were ultimately rejected due to conceptual misalignment with the aims of the current inquiry. For example, a phenomenological approach could help explore the essence of the

parents' lived experience during emotion coregulation with their children, while a grounded theory approach could support the development of a new theoretical model about parents' interpretive processes during coregulation. However, neither of these and other alternative designs were suited to address the focused aims of this study, which was to explore how parents make meaning of their children's emotions, using the existing framework of BPNT as a conceptual anchor.

To analyze the data, this study employed reflexive thematic analysis (TA), as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022b, 2022c). Reflexive TA is well-suited to studies that aim to identify patterned meaning across participant narratives and provides flexibility to explore both theoretically informed categories (e.g., basic psychological needs theory, parental reflective functioning) and emergent patterns that arise from the data. This study adopted a hybrid approach to coding, combining both inductive codes generated through open-ended responses and deductive codes based on theoretical constructs. TA supports this type of dual orientation, offering an analytic structure while also allowing space for the richness of participants' reflections to emerge naturally. This design was consistent with the goal of understanding how parents perceive their role in supporting their children's emotional development and how their reflective processes might align with or point toward underlying psychological needs.

The study was guided by two research questions (RQ) that align with the aims of exploring how parents make sense of their children's emotional expressions, while also examining how these reflections may relate to children's underlying psychological needs.

RQ1: How do parents reflect on and interpret their children's emotional expressions during emotionally charged interactions, and what meanings do they assign to those emotions?

RQ2: In what ways do parents' reflections and meanings assigned to their children's emotions implicitly align with the concepts of basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as described in BPNT?

### **Role of the Researcher**

As the sole researcher, I was responsible for all phases of the study, including research design, participant recruitment, data collection, analysis, and interpretation, and remained the central point of contact throughout the study. My positionality is that of an outsider-insider. As a psychologist, I bring over 15 years of professional experience in the fields of child development, emotional regulation, and parent education. While this background provided valuable insight into the dynamics under study, it also carried the potential for pre-existing assumptions or interpretive bias. To make sure researcher subjectivity was intentional rather than accidental and aides data analysis in terms of offering a meaningful interpretive-constructivist lens (Braun & Clarke, 2022b), I adopted a reflexive stance throughout the research process. Reflexivity was maintained through memo-writing, journaling, and consultation with committee members to ensure that personal experiences and theoretical orientations enhanced rather than overshadowed participants' voices.

My role was to listen deeply, interpret carefully, and remain grounded in the participants' language and logic. During the data collection process, I followed the

principles of Rubin and Rubin's (2012) responsive interviewing model, which suggests building rapport through respectful and flexible engagement that resembles a conversational style. Furthermore, this approach emphasizes trust as a critical element in a temporary partnership between the researcher and the participant, such that it allows for meaningful engagement and depth of exploration (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). With this in mind, I sought to create a safe and open environment with a nonjudgmental stance and an empathetic tone while also showing genuine interest in what the participants had to say. I remained sensitive to their experience during the interview and paid attention to both verbal and non-verbal cues. The responsive interviewing model allowed me to adjust the flow of questions as was necessary in order to ensure participants feel a level of comfort conducive to interviews of this kind, which solicited uninhibited and nuanced accounts of personal experience, such as the ones related to parenting and emotion regulation of children.

In approaching this study from a position of curiosity and respect, I sought to understand how parents reflect on their children's emotional needs in their own terms and the way that they make meaning that is uniquely theirs. Although I am well-versed in frameworks such as BPNT and PRF, I intentionally bracketed these frameworks during initial data collection in order to prioritize participants' own meaning-making using their own language. Theoretical interpretation occurred primarily during the data analysis phase, in alignment with the hybrid coding strategy of reflexive TA, as outlined below in the Data Analysis section of this chapter.

Furthermore, it must be mentioned that traditional member-checking procedures that involve engaging participants in the process of validating data interpretation made by the researcher was not used in this study (see section on Trustworthiness for further discussion on ensuring rigor). Such approach did not align conceptually with the study's interpretivist-constructivist paradigm and the use of reflexive TA methodology, which hands the interpretive responsibility to the researcher and expects intentional subjective engagement with the data through reflexive analysis using researcher's stated subjective interpretive lens (Braun & Clarke, 2022b). However, every attempt was made to engage with the participants thoughtfully and attentively, to ensure accurate capture and understanding of participants' experiences. This can be done through clarifying questions, follow-up prompting for elaboration, and occasional paraphrasing, all of which are part of a responsive style of interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). As the researcher, I was also responsible for the ethical recruitment of participants, ensuring that participants went through the consent process, as well as for the ethical and accurate data capture and analysis, followed by authentic data presentation once analysis was complete. I made certain to follow the protocol as outlined in order to ensure confirmability, trustworthiness, transferability, and credibility of this study.

### **Philosophical Commitments**

Consistent with the ethos of researcher reflexivity, this section serves as an opportunity to acknowledge and articulate my philosophical commitments. Although the study is methodologically grounded in reflexive TA (see Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022b) and is situated within an interpretivist–constructivist paradigm with critical realist

ontology, my interpretive stance is also informed by long-standing engagement with hermeneutic phenomenology. These philosophical commitments form part of the conceptual background that shapes my interpretive stance and how I attend to meaning in parental narratives. This section also reflects a humanistic commitment to remembering that, within a field often oriented toward aggregates and averages, human experience extends beyond what is immediately observable or measurable. While objectivity remains an essential aim of scientific activity, there are many ways of achieving rigor, and it is important to acknowledge that all inquiry is necessarily approached through subjective standpoints of the inquirers (Braun & Clarke, 2022b; Lavery, 2003; Martin et al., 2015; Schmidt, 2015). In this sense, understanding lived and situated human phenomena requires paying attention not only to what is visible, but also to the subjective experience of making sense of the world one lives in.

Researchers that choose interpretivist-constructivist paradigms are urged to make visible their beliefs about the nature of reality and articulate the assumptions they work from (van der Walt, 2020). Intentionally and reflexively integrating these aspects of researcher subjectivity contributes to scientific rigor in a qualitative domain of research (Braun & Clarke, 2019a, 2024b; Patton, 2015). Consistent with these recommendations and with the goal of clearly differentiating this study from positivist forms of inquiry, this section will serve the purpose of articulating the ontological assumptions and philosophical positions that inform this study, as well as their conceptual alignment with the chosen methodology and study design, even though they are not directly utilized in this study methodologically or as analytic procedures.

Philosophical concepts can be especially helpful during interpretation of results when used in ontologically situated inquiry (e.g., critical realism, as is the case of this study) since they can provide a helpful frame of intelligibility and assist researchers in meaning discovery (Crowther & Thomson, 2020; Neubauer et al., 2021; Yanchar, 2024). In this study, hermeneutic phenomenology provided such conceptual scaffolding. Hermeneutic phenomenology is philosophically aligned with interpretivist-constructivist paradigms in its emphasis on the subjective and intersubjective elements of lived experience (Dahlberg, 2008; Idachaba, 2022; Lincoln et al., 2018; Peck & Mummery, 2023; Suddick et al., 2020; Zhang, 2023). Since both share the same foundational commitments to meaning and interpretation, they work well together and add epistemological depth to this qualitative study. Although the study design is not phenomenological in method, hermeneutic phenomenology offers a foundation for understanding meaning-making as an interpretive process (Gadamer, 1960/2004). From this perspective, reality is not accessed directly but made sense of through subjective accounts of lived experiences. Aligned with Gadamer's notion of understanding as dialogical and evolving and consistent with Heidegger's (1927/1962) view that understanding is not a detached cognitive act but a fundamental way of being-in-the-world (i.e., a reflection of one's situatedness in their context), this study approaches parental meaning-making as a relationally co-constructed process that unfolds in the context of parent-child dynamics. The analytic process itself also assumes that an additional layer of meaning arises through the researcher's interpretive engagement with participants' accounts. This orientation supports the reflexive logic of reflexive TA

(Braun & Clarke, 2022a, 2022b, 2024b), which recognizes the researcher as an active meaning-maker rather than a neutral listener and observer.

All of the positions articulated thus far, are also consistent with the study's critical realist orientation. As Sayer (2000) notes, social and psychological phenomena are "intrinsically meaningful" and because meaning "has to be understood, it cannot be measured or counted" (p. 17), which is to say that social inquiry necessarily contains a hermeneutic element (Danermark et al., 2002; Sayer, 2000). Furthermore, critical realism informs this study by providing a conceptual framework in which psychological phenomena are understood to have underlying structures or "generative mechanisms" (Bhaskar, 1975/2008) that shape experiences and behaviors. In the context of parent-child co-regulation dynamics, this means that children's emotional expressions are understood as manifestations of deeper motivational and developmental processes (e.g., psychological needs). As shown on Figure 1, from the critical realist perspective, reality is understood as layers across three ontological domains: the empirical, the actual, and the real (Bhaskar, 1975/2008). The *empirical* domain refers to what is directly experienced or observed while the *actual* includes events and interactions that occur whether or not they are perceived. The *real* domain concerns the underlying mechanisms and structures that prompt the observable phenomena (Bhaskar, 1975/2008; Sayer, 2000).

This framework has been widely adapted in qualitative inquiry to support analyses that attend to both the lived experience and the deeper processes that shape it (Fletcher, 2017; Luongo, 2021). Figure 2 shows a conceptual adaptation of Bhaskar's three-layer model to the context of parent-child emotional interactions, illustrating how

observable emotional expressions (empirical layer) may be shaped by interactional processes (actual layer) and by underlying developmental or motivational structures (real layer), even though these deeper mechanisms are not directly accessible (Sayer, 2000). Critical realism offers a unique interpretive lens for this study because it maintains that living beings possess inherent tendencies toward the realization of their developmental potentials, and that disruptions in these tendencies give rise to observable phenomena (Collier, 1999).

### Figure 1

#### *Bhaskar's Ontological Domains*

	<i>Domain of Real</i>	<i>Domain of Actual</i>	<i>Domain of Empirical</i>
<i>Mechanisms</i>	✓		
<i>Events</i>	✓	✓	
<i>Experiences</i>	✓	✓	✓

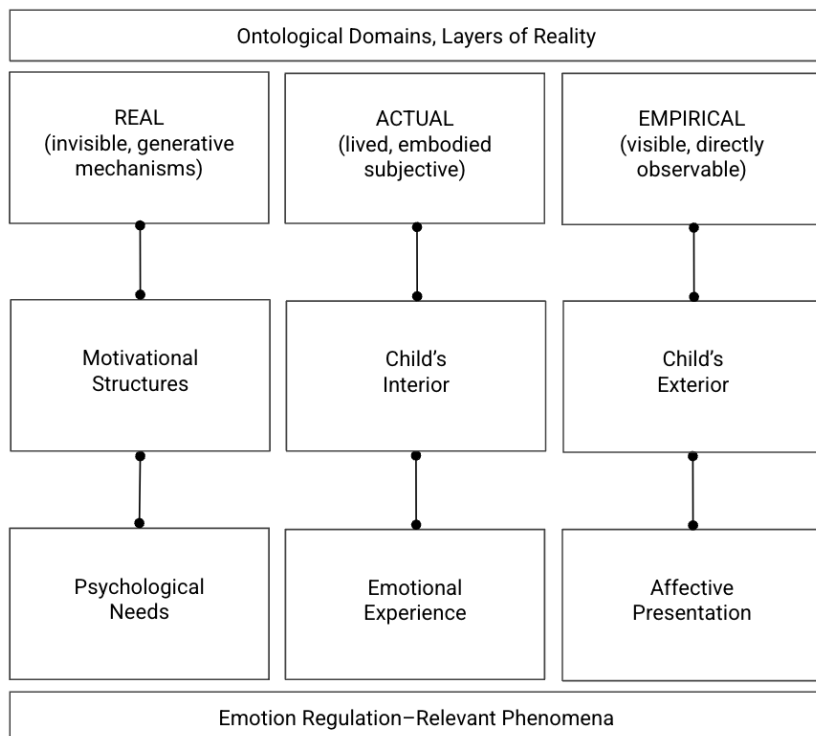
*Note.* Reproduced for scholarly purposes from *A Realist Theory of Science* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., p. 2, Table 0.1), by R. Bhaskar, 2008, Routledge. Copyright 2008 by Routledge.

With respect to a child's emotional expression, visible negative affect can be understood as signaling about a disruption in the child's movement toward developmental coherence. As Hartwig (2007) notes, Bhaskar's ontology grants "logical, epistemological, and ontological priority of the possible and implicit over the actual and explicit" (p.147), a view grounded in Bhaskar's distinctions between the real and the actual (Bhaskar, 1975/2008). Applied to emotion, this perspective supports the distinction between emotion expression, as something that the parent sees, and the underlying mental

state of the child that reflects an interruption in what the child is trying to achieve or experience.

**Figure 2**

*Critical Realist Ontology Adapted to Parent—Child Emotion Regulation Context*



*Note.* In line with a critical realist ontology, psychological needs are treated as underlying generative conditions (real layer) that give rise to children's lived emotional experiences (actual layer), which may or may not be fully visible externally. They become accessible to parents through affective expressions and behaviors (empirical layer) and serve as the primary basis for parental interpretation and emotion regulation.

In this study, the child's interior was understood phenomenologically (i.e., how the emotion is lived and felt from the child's perspective), whereas psychological needs,

consistent with BPNT, were treated as real motivational structures that organize behavior and shape experience. While emotions belong to the child's interior as lived phenomena, the parent understands their presence through the child's visible affect. One of the central philosophical commitments informing this study is the recognition that parent-child emotion regulation constitutes a complex relational process with emergent properties that cannot be fully captured through reductionist approaches. Though reductionist models have contributed valuable insights by isolating individual variables and observable behaviors, they are limited in their ability to account for relational phenomena that arise dynamically within relational space and through ongoing reciprocal interaction. As Sayer (2000) notes, "Reductionist explanations which ignore emergent properties are therefore inadequate" (p. 13), directly referencing Bhaskar's (1975/2008) critical realist account of emergence as essential for understanding relational phenomena ontologically. Therefore, excluding emergent properties from empirical studies would amount to settling for a less than adequate explanation of relational processes.

In the context of parent-child emotion regulation, processes such as meaning-making and co-regulation coherence emerge through interpretive engagement over time. A critical realist ontology, therefore, provides a framework for acknowledging this ontological depth as it allows one to distinguish between observable events (e.g., emotion expression) and the relational mechanisms through which regulation becomes possible (e.g., attunement, reflective functioning, etc.). This commitment aligns with the study's focus on the interpretation of hidden phenomena (i.e., child's psychological needs) using visible aspects of experience (i.e., child's affective state) as access points.

Furthermore, the choice to forego data saturation and frequency counts in the analytic process (as is discussed in the next section) is not only methodologically intentional in interpretivist-constructivist paradigms (Braun & Clarke, 2022b) but is also strongly aligned with the principles of critical realist ontology as well as hermeneutic phenomenology in that numerical prevalence does not determine interpretive value. Furthermore, this choice supports the sentiment of authenticity criteria that is expressed through fair representation of participants' voices (Crowther & Thomson, 2020; Lincoln et al., 2018). Fair representation guards against unintentional marginalization of less frequent but conceptually significant voices, which strengthens the ethical and humanistic grounding of this study. This means that even perspectives expressed by one or few participants contribute meaningfully to the understanding of the phenomenon as a whole. In the spirit of Dr. Seuss, one might say, "A voice is a voice, no matter how small" numerically speaking.

To clarify this stance, a simple analogy might be helpful. If ten children were asked how they feel about being on a playground, eight might describe it as enjoyable because of the slide or the swings, one might report feeling bored due to the absence of a sandbox, and another might describe the space as lonely without friends. Frequency counts implicitly assume that repetition signals importance and that each instance carries equivalent epistemic weight. From a purely quantitative perspective, this playground survey might be summarized as an "80% positive" experience. Within an interpretivist framework, however, such a summary obscures what is most analytically important, which is the subjective experience of each respondent. The analytic task in interpretive

inquiry is to identify all relevant dimensions of the experience disclosed in the data, not how often a particular account appears, an approach that is also consistent with a critical realist orientation. As Sayer (2000) argues, “What causes something to happen has nothing to do with the number of times we have observed it happening,” since explanation depends instead on identifying the causal mechanisms involved and the conditions under which they are activated (p. 14). From this perspective, analytic value lies in what the account discloses about the experience (even if expressed by one participant), not how often such disclosure occurs.

Taken together, these philosophical commitments clarify how psychological needs, child’s emotional experience, and parental meaning-making are explored in this study. In line with Slaney’s (2015) description of methodological pragmatism, this study draws selectively from critical realism, interpretivist–constructivism, and hermeneutic phenomenology where each contributes explanatory value, while maintaining clear boundaries between philosophical orientation and analytic procedure (p. 344). The next section of this chapter specifies the methodological design and analytic procedures employed, which were informed by these commitments.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

Participants for this study were parents of verbal children 10 years old or under, who were also the primary caregivers responsible for emotional caregiving in the child’s day-to-day experience. Parents had to be at least 21 years old, although the minimum qualifying age varied depending on the child’s age. As mentioned previously in the Scope

and Delimitations section, this study was delimited to participants who were 19 years or older at the time of their child's birth, so that only parents who had reached legal adulthood by that time were included in the study given that adolescent pregnancies and parenthood are outside the scope of this study. This requirement meant that the actual age of participants had to align with the following formula: child's age (at least 2 years old) + 19 = participant's minimum qualifying age.

A purposive sampling strategy was used for recruitment. Purposive sampling is a form of nonprobability sampling commonly used in small-scale qualitative studies that seek nuanced perspectives and depth of insight from a specific group of people who are perceived to be best suited to respond to researcher's questions (Babbie, 2014; Patton, 2015). Since the goal is not to generalize findings to a larger population, but to gather rich, detailed accounts of how parents perceive and interpret their children's emotional needs, purposive sampling was a good fit for recruiting participants who were willing and able to reflect on how they approach situations when their child is overwhelmed, upset, or otherwise showing that they are experiencing negative emotion.

The anticipated nonpredetermined sample size for this study was 8 to 12 participants, consistent with the patterns seen in in-depth qualitative inquiries (see Guest et al., 2006; Vasileiou et al., 2018), although the final sample was expected to be subject to change in order to remain faithful to the study's aims (see Guest et al., 2020; Malterud et al., 2016; Sim et al., 2018). With that in mind, instead of being guided by the principle of data saturation (i.e., the point at which no new patterns or themes are noted), it is recommended that the sample size in studies employing reflexive TA is determined based

on its *information power* (Braun & Clarke, 2019b, 2022b; Malterud et al., 2016; Sim et al., 2018). The principle of information power stipulates that the more meaningful, relevant, nuanced, and rich are the data, the fewer participants may be needed for the study (Malterud et al., 2016). Furthermore, the concept of information power was adopted over the traditional notion of saturation due to its alignment with this study's interpretivist–constructivist orientation and, more specifically, with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis as articulated by Braun and Clarke. As they emphasized across several publications (Braun & Clarke, 2019b, 2021, 2022b), the goal of small scale qualitative studies with similar aims is not representativeness of the sample, nor is it to achieve researcher confidence in presumed data completeness (i.e., that no new information can be gathered from additional interviews, an idea that Braun and Clarke associate with a positivist perspective), but rather to gather data that have the ability to hold enough meaningful information to be interpretable, a stance that is more in alignment with reflexive interpretive work embedded in reflexive TA. Therefore, the assessment of data quality, its information power, and the eventual determination of sample size was ongoing throughout the process of data collection.

To best meet the aims of this study, the inclusion criteria for participants were as follows: (a) must be the parent or legal guardian of at least one 10-year-old verbal child or younger, (b) must be the primary caregiver (defined as spending the most time with the child and being the primary emotional responder), (c) must be able and willing to discuss emotionally charged moments, (d) must be able to participate in a 60–90 minute interview and be a fluent speaker of English, (e) must be willing to provide informed

consent and have the interview audio-recorded, and (f) must have been at least 19 years old at the time of their child's birth (i.e., minimum parental age is equal to the age of the child plus 19).

### **Instrumentation**

Data were collected through semistructured interviews, which were well-suited to qualitative research designs grounded in an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm (see Patton, 2015). This approach allows participants to share their experiences using their own language while the researcher has the ability to vary prompts in order to explore emerging meanings (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This means that, even though most of the questions are pre-determined, the specific wording of the prompts could be adjusted in order to facilitate the conversation. Likewise, the order of the questions could vary if needed (e.g., a question could be skipped altogether and/or revisited later as a means of accommodating difficulty with recalling a particular situation). The interview guide (located in Appendix A) has been designed to draw out participants' reflections and meaning-making in a way that honors their own understanding and interpretation, and without an imposition of specialized professional terminology. The interview process began with general rapport-building questions before moving into the main section of the interview. Furthermore, consistent with the spirit of responsive interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), the interview guide was held as flexible and iterative throughout the study to accommodate insights gained during earlier interviews. Any meaningful adjustments to the guide were to be documented as part of reflexivity, to ensure integrity of reporting and trustworthiness of the study.

The interview guide was designed with a dual purpose in mind. On the one hand, it is to allow parents to articulate their own meaning-making processes in their own words, while on the other, it is to provide space for content that may reflect dimensions central to BPNT (i.e., autonomy, competence, and relatedness). In other words, interview questions were specifically designed to align with the research aims of this study (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). For example, prompts such as “Tell me about a time your child was angry” and “What was going through your mind at that moment?” were designed to invite parents to reflect and describe specific moments when the child was emotionally dysregulated, which aligns with the first research question (i.e., “How do parents reflect on and interpret their children’s emotional expressions during emotionally charged interactions, and what meanings do they assign to those emotions?”). Follow-up prompts like “What do you think your child might have been needing at that moment?” and “How did you decide what to do?” were designed to encourage parents to reflect on their interpretive processes and taps into needs-sensitive awareness, which supported the exploration of the second research question (i.e., “In what ways do parents’ reflections and meanings assigned to their children’s emotions implicitly align with the concepts of basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as described in BPNT?”).

The interview process was conceptualized as having three phases. The first phase was rapport building, with the opening questions meant to conjure up an image of the child in the parent’s mind and set the stage for the rest of the conversation. At this stage the parents were asked to describe their child as a person and share what they most enjoy

about them. The second phase was guided by the type of emotional experience the child may present with (anger, sadness, worry, etc.) and was intended to explore parent's perceptions of those moments (how they experienced, interpreted, and responded to the child in those moments of distress). These questions aimed at eliciting a range of stories and situations recalled, so as to gather rich contextual information about the way a parent may interpret and respond to their child across the spectrum of negative emotions. The third and final phase was guided by the concepts central to BPNT. Although questions in this part of the interview were centered around the themes of autonomy, relatedness, and competence (which are the three basic psychological needs stipulated in BPNT), the actual language in which these concepts were explored was parent-friendly and flexible. In other words, it was not required that parents named or understood these conceptual and theoretical constructs. In this way, formal terminology was not present during the interview or recruitment, and did not interfere with the process (e.g., creating unnecessary confusion). In that sense, BPNT functioned as a sensitizing tool for the researcher alone (Gillespie & Cornish, 2014).

This three-phase pacing of the interview and its conceptual frame made it possible to attend to expressions of underlying psychological needs as they have emerged organically in participants' reflections and narratives. Questions were intentionally open-ended yet conceptually targeted and aligned with the study's framework. They invited parents to reflect on the interpretive process at the heart of PRF (i.e., how they understand the internal experience behind the child's emotions and behavior) and aimed to draw out reflections on how this understanding tends to guide their own actions within the emotion

coregulation dynamic. This approach remained aligned with a hybrid inductive-deductive angle to reflexive TA, where the role of theory is not to predetermine what will be found, but to assist the researcher in noticing and making sense of what is present within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022b).

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

Data collection began following approval by the institutional review board (IRB) and proceeded using a flexible, iterative approach that was consistent with qualitative research that utilizes reflexive TA methodology. Participants were to be recruited using flyers posted at the local libraries, schools, pediatrician offices, and daycare centers, and were invited to contact me, the researcher, directly (see Appendix B for details). Additional flyers were to be posted in expanded geographic locations, should there have been a need to extend the reach in search of additional participants. Prospective participants who emailed me were emailed detailed information about the study, along with the informed consent form. If interested in participating, they were asked to respond to that email to indicate consent, as directed in the informed consent document. Upon receipt of consent, a one-on-one interview was scheduled at a mutually convenient time. All interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom in audio-only mode, and an audio recording was generated.

Prior to beginning each interview, the consent process was reviewed verbally, and any new or remaining questions pertaining to the study were answered. Participants were informed of confidentiality, reminded that they may pause at any time, are permitted to skip a question altogether, and even decide to withdraw from the interview at any

moment and for any reason. Once it was confirmed that the participant was engaging in the interview voluntarily and gave permission for audio recording, the interview guide was followed.

Each interview was expected to take between 60 and 90 minutes, a timeframe believed to be sufficient to achieve the kind of pacing and flow that is conducive to reflective recollection, pauses, and thoughtful, personally meaningful responses from the parents. The recordings were transcribed verbatim for analysis and were accompanied by handwritten notes reflective of immediate impressions with the goal of capturing contextual details. These notes informed the ongoing reflexive engagement with the data as is encouraged to be done throughout the process of reflective TA (Braun & Clarke, 2022b). As data collection progressed, the interview guide was revised to reflect new insights or adjust to patterns emerging in participant narratives. A reflexive journal was used to keep track of any changes and remain transparent in terms of the logic behind these adjustments.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Data were analyzed using reflexive TA, following the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022b). This approach is well-suited to studies grounded in the constructivist paradigm of interpretivism, where the aim is to explore how individuals make sense of their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022b). Reflexive TA allows for the identification of patterns of meaning across participant narratives and provides flexibility in how theory is integrated. Therefore, it is aligned with this study, which is framed by BPNT and PRF but remains open to emergent, participant-driven insights. The

study adopted a hybrid coding approach, using both deductive and inductive strategies. Deductive coding was guided by key constructs from BPNT (e.g., autonomy, competence, relatedness) while inductive codes were developed directly from the data to capture unique language, perspectives, and meaning-making that may not align directly with existing theoretical categories. The analytic process followed six phases as articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022b):

*Familiarization:* Reading and re-reading transcripts to become immersed in the data and generate initial impressions.

*Generating initial codes:* Coding data segments of interest using a combination of deductive (theory-informed) and inductive (data-driven) codes.

*Searching for themes:* Grouping related codes into potential themes that reflect patterns of meaning across the dataset.

*Reviewing themes:* Refining themes to ensure coherence, consistency, and accurate representation of the data.

*Defining and naming themes:* Articulating the essence of each theme and identifying sub-themes where appropriate.

*Producing the report:* Writing up the analysis with illustrative quotes, linking findings back to the research questions and conceptual framework.

Throughout the analysis, reflexive memos were used to track evolving insights and analytic decisions. NVivo, Delve, or a similar qualitative data analysis tool were considered as potentially useful in organizing codes and themes in a digital manner. However, given the hands-on nature of the qualitative analytic process, it was also

expected that data would be engaged with manually and that transcribed interviews would be hand-coded, a process that would utilize a variety of analog tools (e.g., index cards, sticky notes, etc.). Altogether, it was expected that as part of data analysis a variety of physical and digital files would be created (free of identifying participant information, in keeping with confidentiality standards) as means of documenting the interpretive process across all steps, from raw data to codes to developing themes. Final themes were presented using a combination of rich narrative descriptions and theoretical interpretation, with connections to BPNT and PRF discussed where relevant. This structure allowed the findings to remain grounded in participants' authentic recollections while also drawing out deeper conceptual insight into how parents make meaning of and interpret their children's emotionally charged moments.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness of a qualitative study is ensured through methodologically informed alignment with qualitative study aims, which are distinct from quantitative norms and standards (Anney, 2014; Patton, 2015). This section addresses aspects of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability in the context of this study. Furthermore, given the particular methodological choice of this study (reflexive TA), intentional and explicit engagement in reflexivity throughout the process of data collection, analysis, and reporting was used as a means of demonstrating trustworthiness (see Braun & Clarke, 2024a, 2024b; Finlay, 2002; Varpio et al., 2017). In other words, rigor was maintained through reflexivity and transparency, striving for analytical and logical coherence of data analysis and interpretation.

**Credibility**

With regards to the study's credibility, given my interpretivist-constructivist positioning, data richness and information power were the central focus of data collection and analysis (see Varpio et al., 2017). Instead of engaging others in the data validation process (e.g., member checking, peer checking, etc.), it is recommended that researchers working within interpretivist-constructivist paradigms intentionally embrace, acknowledge, and even lean into their subjectivity (Braun & Clarke, 2019a, 2024b; Patton, 2015). The explicit and intentional nature of documentation, as well as the reporting, of the reflexive processes that took place during data collection and analysis further served the credibility objective (see Shenton, 2004). Additionally, to ensure ethical integrity and procedural transparency, consent forms served as means of documenting voluntary and informed participation.

**Dependability**

In the context of qualitative design that engages reflexive analysis of themes, dependability can be understood in terms of engaging in a reliable process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). With this in mind and given the interpretive nature of the reflexive TA's methodology, I ensured that the process of data analysis was thoroughly documented in an orderly fashion (through memo keeping, audit trails, etc.), and that the findings were consistent not only with the data collected but also with the reflexive nature of the analytic process itself (see Braun & Clarke, 2022b, 2022c). Furthermore, establishing rapport with participants ensured that they shared meaningful experiences freely and at

the level of depth that felt accessible to them, all of which contributed to the quality of acquired data (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

### **Confirmability**

In a traditional sense, to ensure confirmability of the study, there needs to be a process for guarding against biases. In the context of interpretivist-constructivist paradigms, however, where researcher subjectivity and perspective are integral to the process, Patton (2015) suggested leaning into the *authenticity* of analysis and reporting as a means of establishing trustworthiness. Engaging with the data reflexively in a way that seeks to speak genuinely and authentically to the information observed in the data, while also documenting these analytical processes along the way, helps ensure this aspect of trustworthiness (Braun & Clarke, 2022b; Patton, 2015). As mentioned previously, given that the analytic and interpretive process in reflexive TA is shaped by the researcher's theoretical and conceptual lens, traditional member-checking was not epistemologically aligned with the aims of this study. Instead of striving for neutrality, researchers who utilize reflexive TA are encouraged to lean into transparency, both in regard to the steps of data analysis as well as their subjective lens (Braun & Clarke, 2022b).

### **Transferability**

Transferability of this study's findings can be understood in terms of their potential contextual usefulness (Braun & Clarke, 2022b). Given the often gradual nature of discovery in qualitative studies, it is not de facto expected that complete and transferable knowledge would be obtained from a single study, but rather that the inquiry is sufficiently documented and explored in a way that reflects a certain new

understanding of reality in a specific context (Shenton, 2004). Therefore, my goal was to engage with the data meaningfully, in order to provide the kind of richness and depth of analysis that would allow for that determination. Documentation of analytic decisions through reflexive memos and notes on theme development assisted in conveying whether the information contained in the outcomes of this study could be relevant to future readers and thus assist them in judging the study's applicability within their particular context.

### **Ethical Procedures**

This study followed all ethical standards stipulated for research that involves human participants. It was conducted in full compliance with the ethical standards of the IRB at Walden University. Prior to any recruitment and data collection efforts, IRB approval was secured, and the approval number (08-26-25-1205064) was displayed on the informed consent form. All prospective participants were provided with a detailed informed consent form, which outlined the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, the voluntary nature of participation throughout the process (including voluntary withdrawal), as well as the measures put in place to protect participant identities and to ensure confidentiality of data. Interested participants were asked to email back with a consenting statement as articulated in the consent form.

Informed consent was once again revisited and confirmed verbally before the actual data collection process began during the interview, to ensure that participants engaged voluntarily and understood their right to stop the interview at any time for any reason, without consequence to them. All interviews were recorded with explicit

permission and these records, along with interview transcripts, were stored securely on a password protected device and in alignment with IRB policies pertaining to data protection. Participants' identifying information was removed from the data in order to be analyzed and reported anonymously. Following a 5-year period upon completion of the study, all identifiable information across physical artifacts and digital data in researcher's possession (e.g., consent forms, audio recordings) will be destroyed (i.e., deleted from all storage devices, shredded, and disposed of as is appropriate).

Although many parents routinely engage in discussions about behavior and emotion management of their children, it was understood that discussing these topics in the context of a study may have the potential to cause emotional discomfort during the interview. Therefore, participants were reminded that they have full agency over which experiences they decide to share and in what manner, and that they can skip the ones they are not comfortable discussing. Should any participant become notably distressed or request a break, the interview was to be paused or terminated, in accordance with that participant's preference.

### **Summary**

This chapter offered a detailed look at the design of the study, from the big picture view of the study's philosophical positioning to the essential logistics of conducting interviews and collecting data. A detailed discussion was offered to explain the alignment between the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm and researcher's philosophical positioning with the basic qualitative study design that used reflexive TA as the chosen methodology for data analysis. Following the discussion of the role of the researcher as

the sole and primary investigator, additional details were offered in regard to participant selection and recruitment, interview style and instrumentation design, as well as the process for data analysis. The chapter concluded with issues of trustworthiness and ethical considerations, to ensure that the study aligned with the standards of research integrity.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore how parents interpret their children's emotional expressions and how these interpretations implicitly align with the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as conceptualized in basic psychological needs theory (BPNT). This chapter presents the results of data analysis from semi-structured interviews that were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2022b) reflexive thematic analysis (TA). The study was guided by the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: How do parents reflect on and interpret their children's emotional expressions during emotionally charged interactions, and what meanings do they assign to those emotions?

RQ2: In what ways do parents' reflections and meanings assigned to their children's emotions implicitly align with the concepts of basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as described in BPNT?

Data analysis followed a hybrid method and was conducted in two analytic phases. The first phase addressed RQ1 and followed an inductive approach to understand how parents make meaning of their children's negative emotions (e.g., anger, sadness, fear). The second phase used a deductive approach guided by BPNT to address RQ2 and to examine how parents' interpretations of their children's emotional experience reflected the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The chapter begins with an overview of the setting, participant demographics, and data collection procedures. The

analytic process is summarized to articulate how the study's inductive and deductive phases were carried out. Evidence of trustworthiness is provided to show how credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were supported in this study. The chapter concludes with a presentation of the seven final themes and associated subthemes that address the study's two research questions.

### **Setting**

The interviews took place at the time chosen by participants via scheduling software and were conducted remotely via a secure web conferencing platform (Zoom). All interviews were carried out in audio-only format in an effort to secure confidentiality and ensure privacy of the participants. Within the Zoom account features, the name and video settings were disabled for each participant to avoid an accidental video feed or unintentional name disclosure. Each participant was assigned a 6-digit random number to mask their identity during audio-transcription, which was done automatically via Zoom software. Three participants needed to reschedule their interview, which was accommodated and moved to a time convenient for them through a follow-up rescheduling link. Some participants initially forgot about their appointment but, likewise, rescheduled for a different time.

Although the exact location of each participant is unknown, it appeared that they were comfortable in their chosen environments, which came across as quiet and nondisruptive, without noise or other interruptions. Minor interruptions occurred in one interview, where the parent had to pause briefly to attend to their child, but these did not affect the interview quality or completeness. Two participants had variable quality of

internet connection which, although resulted in minor inconveniences such as having to restate what was previously said, did not otherwise impact the quality of the rapport or the interview itself. No other environmental factors were noted that would limit the participants' capacity to respond thoughtfully and meaningfully. All participants came across as willing and eager to share, were able to engage in the interview process without constraints and were willing to reflect on and discuss their children's emotional experiences as well as their own meaning-making about that. Overall, the setting was consistent across participants in terms of the quality of engagement and was aligned with the procedures described in Chapter 3.

### **Demographics**

Fourteen parents located throughout the United States participated in the study. This U.S. based sample included both mothers and fathers, and all participants were fluent English speakers as was evident during the interviews. Although participants' exact ages were not known since detailed demographic data were not collected, they acknowledged to be at least 19 years older than their oldest child and identified as the primary caregivers of their children, meeting the study's qualifying criteria. Although the study was open to parents of children ages 2 to 10, in this sample the age range was between 3 and 9 years old, balanced between 8 boys and 6 girls. Many parents self-reported having more than one child of different ages, thus reflecting a range of everyday parenting contexts in which parents find themselves having to mediate and respond to children's experiences of emotions.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection took place over approximately 6 weeks, following IRB approval. Recruitment began with flyer distribution within community settings, consistent with the original plan. The initial response to the flyers was limited and after the first 3 weeks, only two eligible participants had enrolled. To ensure adequate and timely enrollment for the estimated number of participants (8-12) needed to achieve sufficient information power, a modification request was submitted to the IRB to add Prolific as a supplemental venue for recruitment efforts. Recruitment through Prolific was initiated after the IRB authorization for this modification was received and resulted in nine additional participants. Parallel to the recruitment efforts that extended to include Prolific, three more participants came through the earlier recruitment approach, via flyer posting. This resulted in a total accumulated sample size of 14 participants, five of whom responded to the flyer and nine recruited via Prolific, at which point recruitment was terminated.

Whether recruited via flyers or through the Prolific platform, all participants completed the same informed consent procedures and participated in the same interview process. Each parent completed one semi-structured interview which lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and followed the interview guide outlined in Appendix A. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant's consent and transcribed verbatim using integrated Zoom transcription feature. No deviations occurred from the interview protocol described in Chapter 3.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out manually, in a recursive and iterative manner. Rather than following the notion of data saturation, sample size ( $N = 14$ ) was determined based on the principle of information power, as is consistent with the interpretivist–constructivist orientation of the study and the use of reflexive TA (see Braun & Clarke, 2019b, 2022b). Information power emphasizes quality and the richness of data, as well as its specificity over numerical adequacy, such that fewer participants may be sufficient when the data are dense and meaningfully aligned with the study aims (Malterud et al., 2016). Accordingly, the adequacy of the sample was evaluated iteratively throughout data collection in relation to the depth and interpretive value of the material rather than the absence of new themes. The reflexive TA process was followed in six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022b), as described in Chapter 3, and guided by the example offered by Trainor and Bundon (2020). The resulting thematic output is located in Appendix C. The process included two additional phases which aligned analytically with the study’s research questions. The inductive analytic phase was guided by RQ1 and the deductive analytic phase was conducted to address RQ2.

### Inductive Analytic Phase

The first analytic phase involved inductive, data-driven coding to examine how parents interpreted their children’s emotional expressions in moments of distress. Transcripts were read repeatedly to ensure immersion, and initial codes were generated to capture both semantic as well as latent meanings. Initially, codes were loosely organized categorically, until a more clear picture of patterned meanings began to emerge and

allowed for a more focused coding approach. Patterns of meaning detected across participant accounts guided decisions regarding the clustering of codes that continued to evolve from surface-level topical organization into interpretive meaning-capturing subthemes. Subthemes were eventually refined into four overarching themes that captured the interpretive logic of parental meaning-making, as well as instances of variability in how meaning-making occurred. Throughout the process, reflexive journaling and analytic memo-ing was used to document decisions made about codes and themes in a way that reflected the evolving understanding of conceptual patterns.

### **Deductive Analytic Phase**

The second analytic phase involved a deductive coding framework and was conceptually guided by BPNT. The deductive codes allowed me to note whether and how parental interpretations aligned with the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These codes were then organized into three additional themes that were intended to capture how psychological needs were recognized, expressed, and addressed through the parents' meaning-making process. The deductive phase applied to the dataset was based on definitions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness of BPNT while remaining open to the emergent nuances in how psychological needs were perceived and responded to by parents. As with the inductive phase, here too, theme development was iterative and reflexive. Analytic memos, tentative thematic mapping, and recursive movement between data and analysis ensured that the final themes adequately captured shared patterns of meaning across the dataset, in a way that accounted for and conceptually integrated discrepancies and instances of

variability in participant responses. The final seven themes that were derived from this hybrid indicative-deductive analysis are presented in the Results section and reflect the patterned meaning across all participants and the interpretive logic developed through reflexive engagement with the data. Examples of codes are available in Appendix C.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

Credibility was supported during data collection as well as during data analysis phases. In regard to the former, member checking was used during the interviews in order to accurately capture what participants intended to communicate. Clarifying questions and summative restatements were used on a regular basis as a means of obtaining participants' feedback in terms of accuracy of what was understood, which allowed them to confirm, correct, add to, or elaborate on their statements. Furthermore, interview transcription was produced verbatim and checked for accuracy by cross referencing with the audio recordings. Raw transcripts were preserved in their original form and modified only to remove unintentional revealing of personal and potentially identifiable information (e.g., names, locations, job references, etc.) in an effort to protect participants' anonymity and confidentiality. Consistent with this ethical consideration, direct quotations presented in the Results section have been minimally edited when necessary in order to reduce identifiable linguistic markers, such as distinctive dialectical features, while preserving the semantic integrity of what was stated. This adjustment to participant language was minimal and appropriate given the study's methodological framework. In other words, considering that the analytic focus centers on the features of

the participants' meaning-making process and their interpretive reasoning, rather than on the linguistic form or the discourse structure itself that rely on linguistic purity, these minor adjustments did not affect the integrity of the data of the analytic process. Furthermore, consistency in data collection procedures across individuals, regardless of recruitment pathway, further contributes to the credibility of this study.

When it comes to credibility standards during the data analysis stage, they were ensured by prolonged and immersive engagement with the dataset through multiple readings of each transcript, ongoing reflection on the meaning of the patterns noted, iterative coding, and restructuring of themes to ensure they accurately reflect patterns of meaning relevant to the research questions of this study. Additionally, reflexive memos documented interpretive decisions and helped track how analytic insights developed over time. Each theme is accompanied by descriptions and detailed analytic accounts as to the pattern of meaning captured and the logic behind it. Each theme is further supported by a range of verbatim quotations, which allow to ground interpretive claims in the data and illustrate the breadth of perspectives represented in this sample of participants. To enhance transparency and demonstrate the depth of engagement with the dataset, (see Appendix D) provides an overview of how exemplar quotations were distributed across participants. Although reflexive TA does not aim for numerical balance or to make claims based in frequency counts (as discussed in Chapter 3 under Philosophical Commitments), it is nevertheless important to show that the themes were grounded in a wide range of perspectives and were not disproportionately illustrated using quotations from only a subset of participants. As Appendix D indicates, all participants contributed

meaningfully to the analytic narrative, and exemplar excerpts were selected in a manner that reflects the diversity and richness of the dataset, which strengthens the trustworthiness and rigor of this analysis.

### **Dependability**

Dependability was ensured by maintaining consistent procedures across the entire study, including identical eligibility criteria, informed consent processes, and interview protocols for all participants. Close procedural and analytical documentation was maintained to track the unfolding of the analytic process, including iterations in coding, steps in theme development and theme refinement, as well as decisions made in pursuit of analytic clarity. This record serves to provide a transparent account of how the study progressed, which allows the logic of the analytic process to be followed by other researchers.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability was supported by maintaining reflexive journals and memos throughout data collection and analysis. These notes documented my assumptions, reactions, reflections, analytic insights, influences on interpretation, etc. and allowed me to remain aware of how my perspectives interacted with the data. In reflexive TA, interpretation is an expected and necessary component of the analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021, 2022b). Therefore, instead of aiming at elimination of interpretation, I used reflexivity to ensure that interpretive insights remained anchored in participants' accounts rather than external preconceptions. Final themes were developed through iterative comparison of codes and cross-checking analytic insights against the full dataset.

Interpretations were further supported by applicable scholarly literature, while remaining grounded in participant accounts. Representative quotations are included in the Results section to demonstrate how thematic claims reflect participants' perspectives and experiences rather than my own expectations as a researcher.

### **Reflexivity**

As a researcher working within an interpretivist–constructivist paradigm informed by a critical realist ontology, I recognize that my engagement with the data is inherently interpretive. Furthermore, coming from philosophical traditions of hermeneutic phenomenology, I approached the interviews with the understanding that parents' accounts reflect their subjective meaning-making about the emotions of their children. Yet, I also acknowledge that these meaning-making efforts are oriented toward something real, which is the underlying experiences, psychological needs, environmental factors, and relational dynamics that shape the child's inner life and their emotional expression. From a critical realist standpoint, though these situational structures are not directly observable, they can nonetheless be partially accessed through parents' interpretations and spoken accounts of their meaning-making process. This position is further supported by hermeneutic phenomenology that holds every act of understanding as an interpretive one, and in that sense, the parent's meaning-making is the means through which the child's inner world becomes intelligible. The meaning about the child's experience is thus co-constructed within the space of that interpretive encounter and reflects a perspective rather than a documentation of an objective "fact" about what is true for the child. Within reflexive thematic analysis, my own interpretive engagement

with parental meaning-making is a methodological resource for grasping and deepening that understanding. This study, therefore, entails a double hermeneutic where parents describe and interpret their children's emotions, and I describe (Chapter 4) and interpret (Chapter 5) parents' interpretations.

As previously mentioned, reflexive memos helped me remain aware of these epistemological and philosophical commitments, which informed my sensitivity to certain patterns in the data and helped track personal reactions. Instead of attempting to bracket or remove this interpretive lens, reflexivity allowed me to monitor how it shaped the analytic process and to ensure, as previously noted, that my interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts rather than in unexamined presuppositions. My analytic stance assumes that emotions and parental responses are embedded in lived contexts that carry significance and that participants' accounts offer interpretive access to these meanings. Accordingly, the purpose of this chapter is to present these patterns of meaning-making as they appear in the dataset and to describe how parents interpret their children's emotion, how they revise their understanding, and how they respond to their children based on their interpretations. The deeper theoretical and philosophical implications of these interpretations, including how they relate to psychological needs, reflective functioning, and the nature of meaning-making in the context of emotion regulation, are discussed in Chapter 5. Within this chapter, data analysis remains in the service of accurately representing the patterns evident in the dataset, consistent with the methodological commitments of reflexive TA.

## **Transferability**

Transferability was supported by providing a detailed description of the study context, including the interview setting, the use of Zoom for data collection, and of the reflective nature of the conversations. The sample consisted of 14 primary caregivers of children ages 3 to 9, all of whom discussed specific instances of emotional tension involving their child. Description of these parent–child emotional contexts, along with variation in how parents interpreted and made meaning of their children’s emotions, should offer readers sufficient detail for situated determination as to whether the findings may be relevant to other parents of young children or to similar developmental and caregiving environments.

## **Results**

As previously stated in the Data Analysis section, the analysis was executed manually and followed a hybrid method, which consisted of two phases, inductive and deductive. Across both phases, a total of 7 themes and 17 subthemes were developed and grouped conceptually to reflect alignment with these two analytic phases. Themes 1 through 4 were developed during the inductive process with the goal of answering RQ1, reflecting parents’ understanding and meaning-making about children’s emotional expressions. Themes 5 through 7 were developed deductively in response to RQ2, reflecting how parental meaning-making relates to concepts of basic psychological needs of BPNT. Table 1 shows themes and subthemes developed during the inductive phase of analysis, while Table 2 provides a list of themes and subthemes developed deductively.

**Table 1***Inductive Analytic Phase, Themes and Subthemes*

Theme	Subtheme
Theme 1: Meaning-making about child's emotions is active and intentional	1.1 Negative emotion is a meaningful signal, an invitation to pay attention
	1.2 Interpretive inquiry into the source of emotion
Theme 2: Interpretation of causality guides action in response to emotion	2.1 When understood as signal for co-regulation, parent offers support and validation
	2.2 When understood as signal for needs, parent takes action to meet them
	2.3 When understood as signal for missing regulation skills, parent coaches, redirects, or withdraws
Theme 3: Iterative adjustment towards resolution, interpretive revision and feedback loops	3.1 Child's affect serves as feedback loop for parental interpretive effort
	3.2 Successful resolution depends on accurate interpretation of cause
Theme 4: Reflective capacity influences the depth of meaning-making	4.1 Seeing from the inside and responding to the child's inner world
	4.2 Seeing from the outside and responding to the child's external presentation

**Table 2***Deductive Analytic Phase, Themes and Subthemes*

Theme	Subtheme
Theme 5: Meaning-making as need recognition, interpreting emotions as signals for psychological needs	5.1 Need for autonomy, expressed in emotion as reaction to constraint or want of control
	5.2 Need for competence, expressed in emotion as reaction to challenge or failure
	5.3 Need for relatedness, expressed in emotion as signal for connection and safety
Theme 6: Emotion regulation as a need-fulfilment process, when meeting psychological needs regulates emotions	6.1 Parent regulates child's emotions by supporting autonomy
	6.2 Parent regulates child's emotions by facilitating competence
	6.3 Parent regulates child's emotions by restoring relatedness
Theme 7: Meaning-making beyond the language and scope of basic psychological needs theory	7.1 Parents refer to basic psychological needs in their own language
	7.2 Parents register psychological needs outside the scope of the basic psychological needs theory

What follows is the presentation of findings, which is organized thematically rather than by analytic phase, progressing sequentially from Theme 1 through Theme 7. This layout structure allows for greater focus on the patterns of meaning within parents' accounts, instead of highlighting the procedural logic from which they were derived.

**Theme 1: Meaning-Making About Child's Emotions Is Active and Intentional**

The first theme reflects a foundational pattern evident across the dataset, which is the view that the child's negative emotions are not only meaningful but also signal something worth paying attention to and responding to. This orientation towards the child positioned emotional expression as a communicative phenomenon. Although there was variability in parents' described capacity to understand the reason why a child was feeling a particular way, they nonetheless intentionally engaged in some form of interpretive causal reasoning in an effort to reduce or resolve their children's emotional discomfort. In other words, emotion was perceived by parents as a meaningful expression that revealed something important about the child's experience and, therefore, required thoughtful engagement on their part. Parents spoke of slowing down, observing, paying attention, listening, and trying to figure out what is happening from the child's perspective, all of which demonstrates an interpretive stance where emotion serves as an entry point into the child's lived experience.

***Subtheme 1.1: Negative Emotion Is a Meaningful Signal, an Invitation to Pay******Attention***

Across participants in this study, children's negative emotions were understood as signals that carry significance. Anger, sadness, worry, or frustration were not described as random or automatic, or as problem behaviors, but were seen as meaningful forms of communication that called for attention and attunement towards the child's unique signals, be it verbal or nonverbal. As one parent put it,

Every kid's different, so you just kind of have to watch for early signs, either of distress or of further uncertainty, or that he feels very unsure about a situation . . . For him, I could just tell his face gets kind of tense, his body language, he just starts getting rigid words, whatever might come out, you know, I just see that emotions are rising, and those are signals to slow things down . . . Kind of like a weather forecast, early clouds before the storm. (P5)

Here is how another parent articulated the communicative capacity of emotions to highlight something important in the larger context of lived experience:

When I think about a kid's emotions . . . I don't know where that comes from, without getting too woo-woo, but in a rounded way, I would say, the big connection I see is that emotions are kind of the fruit of a larger environment, and not just, oh, I'm happy or sad, but how I navigate them, and how often I react in one way, right? Maybe my larger environment has set me up that when something happens, I don't feel I have the luxury of brushing it off. Like, I have to react strongly, or something. (P2)

Knowing the child on a personal level and as an individual is an important condition for understanding the meaning behind their emotions and what they may need, as this parent articulated:

If you pay attention to your child, and their needs, it tells you everything you need to know . . . If you pay attention to who they are, as they grow up, and you know what's normal for them, as an individual, then you know how to support them when they're not having a good day. Frustrated, sad, anything . . . If you want to

help them, you have to make sure that their needs are met, in all different ways.

(P13)

Some parents hinted at the privileged nature of this communication, in a sense that what is being communicated through the child's emotions may not be as easily understood by others who are not familiar with the child. As one parent stated, "I don't know if other people always can tell [what the child is feeling], but for sure I can" (P1), because as another one explained, it takes knowing how to "read" the child in order to understand their unique emotional signature:

Kids' emotions could tell what [is the issue ] but you have to read the emotions well for that. If it's somebody who is not familiar with [him], who is not around him so much, like, for example, grandma, she could interpret his emotions in a different way, and it could spark, make the situation worse instead of de-escalating. (P5)

***Subtheme 1.2: Interpretive Inquiry into the Source of Emotion***

Parents consistently portrayed trying to understand what their children's emotional expression signified about their experience as an active and intentional process. That, even when one knows the child on an intimate level, it does not preclude an effortful inquiry into the nature of a particular negative emotion and the reasons behind it. Even though a child's negative emotions are also displayed through behaviors, at times quite undesirable ones, parents consistently make an effort to look beyond the surface of behavioral disruption. Whether the child articulates the cause behind emotion explicitly, parents do inquire and try to understand what is beneath their non-verbal

signals. Although parents have empathy for the child's emotional experience and want to alleviate emotional distress, most of them demonstrate that it takes mental effort to construct an accurate understanding of the child's perspective. This meaning-making process involves asking questions, observing, gathering contextual cues, considering past patterns, and intentionally reflecting on what the child might be experiencing internally. However, in order for this inquiry to be effective in revealing of the true cause for the child's distress, it does require a calm and patient demeanor from the adult, as this parent put it:

I try to make sure that I keep a clear head, because sometimes when my daughter is very angry, she gets very, very loud, and so the natural thing for me as a parent is to be like, stop yelling! And I mean, quickly, I'll realize this isn't actually doing anything. So really, the goal is to find out, to help her, to say, okay, what exactly is making you yell? What exactly is making you upset? And really just helping her try to roll that out of her so she's able to understand what it is . . . That's my primary strategy is, like, okay, let's ask questions. (P4)

Here the parent describes engaging in deliberate interpretive work and actively looking for a causal connection behind the child's anger. She explicitly shifts from reacting to behavior ("stop yelling!") towards trying to understand the meaning behind the emotion that prompted that behavior ("what exactly is making you upset?"). The parent describes an intentional pivot from a strategy of behavior suppression, which she knows is ineffective, to a strategy of inquiry which in her eyes is more productive in getting to the answers about the internal cause. This allows for the deeper meaning to be brought out to

the surface and be made visible, as the parent attempts to see what the child sees. The metaphor she uses (“roll that out of her”) captures the essence of this inquiry, which unfolds through questions that seek to access her child’s mental state and become part of the emotion regulation process.

Actively engaging the child in the meaning-making process and requesting their own insights about the situation has been described by many participants as a helpful approach. It is used in conjunction with other sources of information, such as contextual cues and broader patterns. This not only helps parents gain a more precise understanding but it also provides them with tools of inquiry in cases where the child is not communicating explicitly about what bothers them. For example,

I'd say about 50% of the time, he'll just speak up and use his words to say, like I'm sad, or I'm hurt, or I'm angry. And the other times when he's not using those words, it's pretty easy to tell, because he'll just shut down. Like, he'll leave the room, or just shut down and just, you know, be immobile. Easy to see when something's a problem in that sense. And then if you prompt him, he usually will use his words and tell about the issue. (P6)

Here is how another parent echoed a similar approach:

We'll try to figure out, like, what was he doing before, and if we said anything to trigger . . . he gets triggered easily, like, if I tell him no to certain things . . . He doesn't talk about what bothers him. It's mainly we try to get him to talk about what bothers him . . . It's kind of hard to get him to express his emotions. Because once he starts, he'll be, like, doing a little stuttering with it, and then I guess he

gets overstimulated and overwhelmed with it, where he can't express it, and he'd just be like, forget it. (P10)

Despite these intentional reflective efforts, parents sometimes encounter moments in which the cues are too few or too ambiguous. In these contexts, attempts at interpretation, though effortful and intentional, reveal their limits in that they do not produce a clear understanding of what is causing negative emotions. Thus, the child's internal experience remains opaque and the parent cannot see what the child is feeling. In those instances, the parent cannot infer even indirectly what might be causing the emotion. And when parents struggle to infer the child's mental state, their private experience remains a puzzle:

She was acting pretty strange, like, seeing new people . . . I won't say she was scared, but she, I felt that she was very nervous interacting with new people . . .

There were so many people around trying to talk to her, and she wasn't responding at all . . . She does interact with new people. It's not like she's afraid of them, or she keeps her to herself, but yeah that was a bit strange for me. I was seeing her, and I was looking . . . I was also busy with the guests and everything, but I was looking, and I was realizing that, why is she behaving like that? . . . I don't know to be honest. (P14)

This example highlights that interpretive effort includes both successful and unresolved attempts to understand what an emotion signals. Here the parent expresses a genuine confusion over the child's emotional and behavioral presentation. Although he reads the behavior as qualitatively different from the child's typical baseline, there is a great difficulty accessing insight as to what that change might reveal about the child's

experience in that moment. At the same time, the parent's struggle to grasp the reason for the child's emotions is not due to lack of inquiry, but rather due to facing the limits of it. It is evident from his thinking process that he actively attempts to grasp the nature of the child's experience by drawing on contextual cues and prior baseline knowledge of his daughter, believing that there must be some reason behind what he sees even though that reason is not accessible to him. Moments like these are important because they demonstrate not only the kind of curiosity, patience, and hypothesis-testing that the meaning-making process requires but also reveal that intuitive parental understanding may fluctuate and be context dependent.

Despite these breaks in the interpretive process, parents report to continue trying, continue to reflect, to observe, and to keep getting to know their children through such moments where children may show something about themselves, something yet to be understood. This commitment to inquiry into the child's inner experience has been expressed not only as a key component to emotion regulation, but also as a meaningful opportunity to develop a strong connection and relational bonds, as expressed by this parent:

It's a work in progress. It's every day is a new day, every day we face challenges . . . it works in that moment more than another moment . . . and when you have those moments, I'm like, wow, I feel really proud of me, and then sometimes I really feel really proud of him, and then sometimes I'm like, wow, I feel really proud of both of us. We really bond in that moment . . . I feel really grateful for

his ability to communicate and talk through things, and he's still so young, so I hope that I can continue to have that strong relationship. (P12)

## **Theme 2: Interpretation of Causality Guides Action in Response to Emotion**

When parents try to interpret their children's negative emotions, they do so with an ultimate goal of resolving tension and to regulate emotion. Across cases, parents' interpretive understanding as to the possible or probable meaning behind the child's negative emotion informed the actions they took in an effort to resolve it. As demonstrated in the previous section, the parents' causal reasoning is not automatic and follows a process of reasoning that aims to capture situational and contextual cues as to the "why" behind the child's emotion. Therefore, their actions followed a purposeful logic that aligned with that interpretation which, as will be demonstrated in Theme 3, may be tentative and may require revision.

However, once they identified, or believed they had identified, the cause of negative emotion, parent's responses followed specific patterns of action, which are captured across three subthemes to show how parents may attempt to soothe the child (Subtheme 2.1), engage in mentalizing about underlying psychological needs (Subtheme 2.2), attempt to redirect the child or coach them through the emotion (Subtheme 2.3). It must be noted that the type of response chosen does not reflect a default resolution tactic a parent may choose over others on a consistent basis but rather reflects a situational choice from an array of options. Most parents seemed to consider various ways of responding depending on the givens of the context in each scenario.

***Subtheme 2.1: When Understood as Signal for Co-Regulation, Parent Offers Support and Validation***

Across accounts, when parents perceived negative emotion as a sign of general dysregulation, the source of which was either not well understood (e.g., due to unclear contextual cues, limitations of interpretive effort, etc.) or could not be mitigated (e.g., due to fatigue, non-negotiable boundaries, events outside parental control, etc.), they engaged in co-regulation by offering supportive, soothing, calming, or reassuring presence. At times this was expressed through physical proximity with the child and at other times it was accompanied by validating and reassuring words of comfort. This unhurried supportive presence occasionally resulted in additional insight, as is discussed in more detail in Subtheme 3.1, but even when it did not, the initial co-regulatory understanding of the situation's demand achieved its aims of soothing or calming the child.

In the example below, the parent interprets the child's sadness as a moment that requires a soothing presence and proceeds with a response strategy that is centered around warmth, proximity, calm, and reassurance. A child's negative affect was not perceived as a cue to solve a problem, teach a skill, to distract, or to redirect. Instead, the parent reads it as a request for comfort:

When we were leaving the park, she was sad, and she was crying. She didn't want to leave yet. She wasn't, like, mad about that. I could tell she was sad, had some tears and wanted a lot of cuddles and hugs, to comfort her . . . Mostly just giving her a hug and holding her close for a few minutes is what helps her feel better, and then she'll stop crying, and she'll just relax more . . . I was just telling her,

like, it's okay, we'll come back, you know, next time. I was just kind of, like, patting her back, rubbing her back, and just telling her, you know, it's okay . . . I guess not being done playing, wanting to play more, and just sad that the playtime is over, and that you're going home. (P7)

Even though in this scenario the child was not articulating verbally the cause of emotional distress, the parent was able to infer the child's mental state based on contextual cues and baseline knowledge of the child. Given the parent's interpretation of emotion as a signal that the child's affective state is based in trying to reconcile the inevitability of transition, her actions align with that insight and center around soothing and closeness. The parent provides a form of validating response that offers both verbal and nonverbal affirmation as means of restoring the child's sense of wellbeing and to ease the sense of disappointment. She sees the child's emotional response to the situation as reasonable, expected, and transitory, and is pausing the transition in an effort to support the child's ability to regulate.

As previously mentioned, it so happens that meaning-making can be incomplete, when mentalizing and interpretation do not always lead to meaningful insights about the cause of a child's negative emotion. In such cases, parents may prioritize calming the child over clarifying the cause, because co-regulation itself can be an effective and sufficient response. Here is how this parent explained it:

He's not gonna listen to me talking when he's in a rage. So, I'll just go grab his hand, and rub the palm of his hand, and he'll calm down from there. Or I'll just grab him, or whatever, and I'll hug him . . . And he'll calm down from there. (P10)

Here the parent's actions are driven by her awareness of the intensity of the child's emotion. Instead of trying to gather additional information to make sense of the causal connection between trigger and emotion, the parent chooses to lean into a co-regulation strategy of calm physical presence, offering touch and hugs. Although the parent's intent to talk to the child is clear, her primary goal at that moment is to soothe the nervous system, rather than help him practice a specific regulation strategy or try to meet a specific underlying need, like autonomy or competence. There is no attempt at this particular moment to problem-solve the cause or to teach a regulation skill. The parent's focus here is purely on bringing down emotional tension before deciding what to do next. When tensions are not as high, parents may offer verbal support in addition to a soothing physical presence. Here is how a parent navigates emotion regulation of a child who misses a friend:

Even though she knows [she] will be back soon, she doesn't realize tomorrow's pretty quick, distressing to her . . . [I was] trying to explain, I know you're sad, I know you want your friend right now, but you have to get some rest, and your friend has to get some rest, so that you have energy to play together tomorrow. And then just try to maybe cuddle and watch a movie . . . I think in her mind, tomorrow could be forever. Yeah, I don't really know how to explain it to her any other way. But I'll just try to comfort her, take her mind off of it for now. (P9)

The parent perceives distress as developmentally inevitable in this situation, not something the child must learn to manage better, nor is it understood as the outcome of something that can be resolved through problem-solving. Understanding the child's

mental state as reasonable but distressing (“in her mind, tomorrow could be forever”), the parent responds by supporting the child through the emotional discomfort. She acknowledges the child’s experience and validates the feelings, in addition to offering the child a cognitive frame to make sense of her experience as something she can process and overcome (“get some rest, so that you have energy to play together tomorrow”). Even though the parent also employs the strategy of distraction (“watch a movie,” “take her mind off of it for now”), this is secondary to her primary response of soothing and validation.

***Subtheme 2.2: When Understood as Signal for Needs, Parent Takes Action to Meet Them***

Across the dataset, when parents inferred an unmet psychological need (e.g., independence, competence, connection, etc.) as the source of negative emotion, they took actions that aimed to meet the underlying need and to restore the child’s emotional balance and the sense of wellbeing. Their strategies included adjusting expectations, offering choice, modifying the environment, staying flexible and responsive to the child, adjusting their own priorities, and so on. As demonstrated through the examples that follow, depending on the circumstances and the particular nuances of each situation, sometimes the child’s underlying needs become immediately apparent, while at other times they get revealed after deep reflection. For example, here is how a parent described ongoing efforts at meaning-making through reflection about the child’s inner experience and how she was trying to deduce the cause of her anger. Once the child’s mental state and perspective was understood, it resulted in parent adjusting her approach:

I'm used to calling her baby, baby girl, and she does not like that. She gets mad at the word baby is what I've established. I think she looks at it more as though I'm calling her a baby . . . There was a situation where one of the people we met commented, it was a nice thing, but she didn't take it as nice. The word baby came out, and she was angry . . . Her face changed from her happy, smiling face to, it kind of drops, and ugh, I guess her body gets more tense. She'd walk away, or she'll yell and say, I'm not a baby . . . I've done a lot of thinking on this, because I started learning it's probably the number one thing that upsets her, and I have a habit of doing it, not in, you know, not intentionally. So it was hard for me to learn to catch myself and try to respect what she's saying. Because at first, I tried to explain to her over and over, and then I woke up one day and it's like. I got the answer. It's like, she is telling you what bothers her. And it's that word baby, and apparently, it's serious in her eyes . . . So I think to her, you know, she's in that stage where she is grown up, and she is smart, and she's a big girl. I think in my eyes, she thinks we're calling her a little baby, like not capable of doing stuff. (P9)

As demonstrated in this example, the parent reaches beyond the surface level of interpretation, which allows her to understand the child's underlying need for competence and to be perceived as "capable of doing stuff." This is an example of how parental reflective processes can evolve over time, prompted by what felt like a deeper unresolved nature of this tension. The parent describes the iterative nature of meaning-making, which is guided by attunement to the child's emotional signals (something that is explored in more detail in Theme 3) and which resulted in a revised understanding of the causal

connection between the child's experience and the negative emotion it led to. This new insight allowed the parent to see the experience with the child's eyes as something diminishing or misrepresenting her perceived maturity and capabilities ("she is smart" and "a big girl"). Once this need for being recognized as competent and capable becomes clear, the parent adjusts her approach accordingly, even if it means changing some of her own habitual patterns in how she addresses her child.

Contrary to the previous example where understanding of underlying needs comes after days of ongoing reflection, the example that follows illustrates a more immediate grasp of the cause for emotional tension:

We were getting our shoes on. She's very independent and puts her shoes on herself, and my dad picked up her shoe to try and make the process move a little bit more quickly, and that was very, very frustrating for her . . . instantly kind of bursting into tears, throwing her other shoe, and then, you know, not being able to put her shoes on. And it took a little bit of time . . . I gave her some space . . . she came over to me and said, I was upset. I wanted to do it. I didn't want Grandpa to do it. And I said, oh, you know, Grandpa was trying to be helpful, he didn't know, are you ready to go put on your shoes? And she was, she did [it by herself] . . . you know, the control and the independence of completing a skill that she feels proud of, and she wants to do it. Like, I can do this. (P1)

In this example, the parent demonstrates awareness of a presence of several psychological needs, such as autonomy ("the control and the independence") and competence ("completing a skill that she feels proud of") and responds to the child in a

layered way, both through purely regulational means (“give her some space”) and by meeting the child’s needs. The parent does so by restoring the opportunity to complete the task that the child felt strongly was hers to own because it is “a skill she feels proud of.” And while this parent does not coach the child through the emotion itself, she does offer contextual information (“grandpa didn’t know”) to help the child make sense of what happened between her and the grandparent, thus also repairing a potential conflict between the child and a significant other.

The following is another example where parental reasoning moves beyond general co-regulation strategies toward specific need fulfillment as the mechanism of emotion resolution. The parent interprets emotion and behavior as signals for underlying need for connection and flexibly responds with physical closeness and proximity, while balancing other responsibilities, such as finishing household tasks. The long hug that followed and spending time together, not only achieve regulatory aims but meet the child’s underlying needs more deeply:

She'll really, like, randomly want affection from me. Usually after school, she wants affection from me. Which can be kind of difficult, because I have to do after-school things, like get dinner ready, stuff like that. She'll come and grab onto my leg. And I'm trying to walk around the kitchen, and she's just clung onto my leg . . . I think because she's been at school all day, and at school, she's not getting that individual attention. Also, just probably missed me throughout the day. So once we finally get home together, she's really wanting that extra affection . . . I just kept doing what I was doing, with her on my leg, but I was trying to, I just

told her, you know, give me one minute, I'm almost done, and then I'll sit with you. So I just finished what I was doing, and then once I was done, like, putting the dishes away, I gave her attention. I gave her a hug, a hug for, like, a few minutes . . . Just spoke to her, like, how's school, I missed you, love you, just reassured her in that way. Like, I see that you want this affection, not trying to ignore you, but I was doing something in that moment, so now that I'm done, I can give you the affection that you want. (P7)

In this example, the parent does not explicitly articulate “relatedness” as a psychological need, yet her interpretive logic and behavioral choices clearly reflect this implicit recognition. She reads the child’s signals as a need for closeness and emotional reconnection between people who are meaningful to each other. When her child clings to her leg after school, the parent does not treat this as clinginess or misbehavior, but interprets it instead as communication about the child’s underlying desire for relational warmth and closeness. She reasons that the child has been away from individual attention all day and away from people who matter (“probably missed me”) and who make her feel loved and cared for. This interpretation helps the parent attribute the child’s emotional state to a specific unmet need, rather than simply explaining it in terms of physical fatigue or behavioral disruption. Furthermore, the parent's action in response to the child’s mental state aligns with her meaning-making in that she aims to fulfill the need she perceived to be present beneath the surface. She maintains proximity to the child, offers temporary reassurance, signals her upcoming availability, and then follows through by extending connection time and providing much desired warmth and affection.

***Subtheme 2.3: When Understood as Signal for Missing Regulation Skills, Parent Coaches, Redirects, or Withdraws***

This subtheme highlights the third pattern reflected in how parents interpreted and responded to a child's negative emotion and it is centered around their understanding of the child's developmental limits. In other words, sometimes parents perceive negative affect as arising from the child's development limits to either understand why things are the way they are or as arising from developmental limitations of their capacity to regulate the intensity of emotions. This interpretive stance prompts parents to adopt a coaching strategy, where they attempt to teach self-regulation skills or coach the child through the behavior. At other times, parents are guided by acceptance that children will have emotional ups and downs and will eventually develop emotion regulation skills as they mature. Parents who adopted this interpretive logic either chose a distraction strategy by redirecting the child's attention to something else or chose to withdraw from interaction altogether based on their understanding that the child will eventually calm down or reorient on their own, if given enough space and time to do so. For example, here is how the parent's interpretive frame was informed by developmental constraints in this instance:

He really wanted his sister to make [a paper airplane]. His sister was cleaning her little bunny rabbit's cage, and he got really frustrated because he wanted her to do it. We had to explain to him that she learned how to do it for me, and I learned how to do it for my father. And I was like, well, why can't you ask me? I'm your father, I could show you how to make the paper airplane, and he started with his

snappiness and getting angry and everything, because he wanted his way.

Eventually he gave in to the logic that she learned from me, and I learned from my father, so you can learn from me, because I'm your father . . . And he kind of lost his cool a little bit, but he was able to reason without getting too worked up, because sometimes you can get a little worked up, if you want something. And he didn't get his way. Typically, if you reason in the right way, in a way that's logical to his brain, he'll accept it. Sometimes he won't accept it . . . We kind of try to talk to him and reason with him, and we take a really neutral tone, and, you know, sometimes we'll go up to him and kind of, like, kneel down on his level, and kind of, like, you know, look at him eye to eye, and kind of try to reason with him.

(P3)

As seen in this example, the parent interprets the emotion as difficulty with impulse control, flexibility, and limited capacity for logical reasoning. Guided by this meaning-making frame, the parent responds by scaffolding emotional regulation through cognitive strategies that match the child's conceptual level of maturity ("if you reason in the right way, in a way that's logical to his brain"). Although the frustration is understood as developmentally expected for a child who has difficulty tolerating not getting his way ("sometimes you can get a little worked up, if you want something"), the regulation strategy is primarily cognitive and behavioral in nature, where the parent adopts a coaching approach and is guiding the child step by step towards acceptance of a different perspective and learning how to handle frustration. While doing so in a calm, child-friendly, matter-of-fact manner ("take a really neutral tone" and "kneel down on his

level”), the parent’s main orientation is towards accommodating developmental gaps. In other words, the parent attempts to strengthen the child’s regulatory capacity by providing the child with an alternative reasoning frame and by scaffolding towards flexible thinking. In other words, emotion is perceived as a moment that requires cognitive reframing rather than co-regulation (discussed in Subtheme 2.1) or psychological need fulfillment (discussed in Subtheme 2.2).

Here is another example of how parents may interpret the child’s anger and resistance through a developmental lens, even if they do not adopt an explicit coaching stance. In this case, the attribution of cause to developmental cognitive differences around perception of time, schedule demands, and competing priorities guides the parent’s choice to respond to the child with behavioral guidance and redirection, while maintaining the structure of transition from home to school:

He was angry because he wanted me to read to him from his favorite book . . . but because school was happening, we couldn't quite finish . . . so we had to stop before the end of the chapter, and he got mad about that, because he wanted to finish the chapter, and 6-year-olds don't understand time, like, the pictures of it. So then he just made a mad face, and just started looking at the book himself, and wasn't listening when I asked him to put on his shoes . . . He made his frustration and anger clear, but eventually he did comply and we didn't have to threaten him or anything, because if he hadn't, eventually I'd be like, well, then we can't read the book when you get home, kind of thing, but luckily we didn't get to that point. And also, his brother was out the door, so I think that's what helped, helped him

move on from that a little bit . . . He was grumpy during the compliance, and then that sort of compounded, because he was angry that his brother was out the door sooner and riding on his scooter sooner. From his perspective, he doesn't understand school starts at a certain time, and he understands time, obviously, but he doesn't understand the practical implication of that, so again, it's frustrating. It's like I still want to do this, we'll get to school when we get to school, like, he's frustrated that we're not prioritizing the same thing he is. (P6)

The parent recognizes her child's frustration over having to stop reading before the end of a chapter. At the same time, the child's emotional reaction is understood primarily as a function of developmental limitations in understanding time and transitions ("6-year-olds don't understand time"), rather than arising from desire for completion and a want of control. Guided by this interpretive framing, the parent orients towards maintaining boundaries around the transition itself and coaches the child towards compliance (e.g., prompting him to put on shoes, preparing to use future contingencies if needed).

Eventual compliance is achieved through unexpected distraction and compounding pressure ("he was angry that his brother was out the door sooner and riding on his scooter sooner"), which serves as a competing motivation and overrides the initial frustration related to the unfinished book. The parent's empathic understanding of the child's experience remains largely meta-reflective rather than something intuited or implemented in the moment. This example illustrates parental response choice in contexts where negative emotion is attributed to immature emotion regulation capacities or developmental constraints (e.g., grasping concept of time). The parent's reasoning leads

to behavior-focused strategies aimed at helping the child move through the required transition, even as she articulates retrospective insight into the child's emotional perspective. Below is another variation of a developmental take from a parent who adopts a strategy of reasoning and logic when responding to the child's negative emotion, even though that logic and reasoning may not be accessible to the child:

We decided to take her to the toy store and we bought a bunch of toys, but there was another toy which she liked a lot. And she already had 2-3 toys, which were [similar]. I didn't agree that every demand should be fulfilled for a child. So she was pretty mad, she was crying in the toy store. And when we came back [home], she wasn't talking to me, and when she was seeing me, she was just going to her mother, her grandmother, but she was not at all happy with me. So it took time to convince her that it's okay. I mean, you had 3 toys, why did you need a fourth one? I mean, it wasn't a big deal, but my opinion was that you can't, I mean, if I listen to her now, I have to listen to her every time. me. Even if we went with the mind of 2 toys, I got 3, so the fourth one doesn't make sense. (P14)

As demonstrated in this example, parents can interpret negative emotion as a sign of difficulty tolerating limits and managing frustration, in addition to lacking reasoning capacity to assess the logic of their preferences. Guided by this interpretive frame, parents may choose to respond by coaching, redirecting, or holding boundaries. Here, the parent is further supported in this choice of strategy by affirming core parenting principles around limit setting and behavior management. It is clear that the parent sees emotion as a meaningful signal about the child's experience, establishes a causal

connection between an unmet desire and the child's frustration, and understands that the child's distress is triggered by wanting an additional toy and by not wanting to hear "no." However, rather than perceiving this desire as something that must be acknowledged or validated, the parent interprets it as an opportunity to uphold consistent limits and guide the child through disappointment by coaching emotion through logic ("it took time to convince her, you had three toys, why you need a fourth one?"). The parent is set on maintaining the boundary, reiterating the rationale, and allowing the child time to settle emotionally. This approach reflects a pattern of parental response grounded in the interpretive frame that the child is learning to manage disappointment and will develop frustration tolerance over time through eventual emotional recovery.

### **Theme 3: Iterative Adjustment Towards Resolution, Interpretive Revision and Feedback Loops**

This theme captures the iterative nature of meaning-making when parents seek to establish a causal connection between the child's inner experience and their outward emotional expression. Parents described this unfolding in a series of interpretive steps informed by the child's response to their initial emotion regulation attempts. What may have seemed initially as the answer to resolving emotional distress, was frequently adjusted based on the parent's revised understanding of the child's experience and perspective, making emotion regulation a dynamic process. Parents described assessing the usefulness of their actions based on whether it shifted the child's emotional presentation and based on these cues continued to stay open to new insights. This illustrated a feedback loop in which parents' sensitivity to the child's inner shifts allowed

them to better understand the true reason behind negative emotion, which in turn guided their understanding on how to adjust their regulation strategy.

The iterative nature of these interactions demonstrates a parent's interpretive openness and an understanding that the child's mental state can be accessed gradually so long as, in pursuit of eventual emotional resolution, the parent's mental frame remains free of premature closure. In other words, this pattern cannot occur when the parent withdraws early and stops engaging or perceives emotions and the accompanying behavior as something the child should handle independently. In essence, this theme captures a pattern of ongoing reflective engagement that assists the parent in resolving emotional distress based on iterative adjustment of their initial interpretation. It is not intended to capture a particular type of parenting approach or style, but rather to demonstrate the state of mind the parent is in and their capacity to remain engaged and reflective, a capacity that can itself fluctuate depending on a variety of contextual and situational factors.

***Subtheme 3.1: Child's Affect Serves as Feedback Loop for Parental Interpretive Effort***

This subtheme captures the moment-to-moment process by which parents relied on the child's shifting emotional cues to gauge whether their initial interpretation was accurate or required revision. Rather than reflecting the broader meaning-making process described in earlier themes, this subtheme specifically highlights how parents used observable signals and cues from their child as information about whether their regulatory approach was working as intended, or whether it was revealing something previously not understood about the child's mental state. The "feedback loop" effect,

where the parent openly integrates and revises their understanding about the child's experience based on the child's cues, stood out as an important feature of effective meaning-making. For example, here is how the parent from an earlier scenario articulated adjusting her approach based on the child's affective feedback:

If it's me, and I catch myself, or her body language will let me know real fast that I called her baby. I will tell her I'm sorry, I usually try to get down to her level, and... Mama's really trying to not call you that. I know you don't like it. And she'll forgive me and help me to remember when I slip off that that's not okay.

(P9)

Here is how another parent described the moment she knew, gauging by the changes in her child's affect, that her approach of talking about a school incident that worried her child, was helpful:

What really helped him was the reassurance. You could see his confidence, you know, like he didn't look as nervous [anymore]. He's got a lot of body language. If you pay attention, you can see it. He looked more confident. (P13)

This quote captures the moment where the child's shifting affective state provides real-time feedback about whether the parent's interpretation is on track. In this case, the parent was able to confirm that the interpretive stance (i.e., that processing school incidents and offering reassurance was what the child needed) was appropriate.

Furthermore, this parent signals active attunement with the child's nonverbal language in order to read him and the outcomes of her interpretation more effectively. In the next example, the parent's entire strategy is dynamic. As she gauges how bad the meltdown is,

she assesses whether the “rewind” option is still available. She then adjusts her next move based on how the child reacts:

She usually brushes her teeth first, and then I brush her teeth, and we were in a little bit of a rush, and so, the routine is that she usually grabs her own toothbrush and her own toothpaste, and I grabbed it for her. That was, that was an instant 0 to 60, you know, NO! She lost it. There was nothing I could have done about that one. And then she's crying and screaming and just very, very upset. . . For her, it was the control of the routine that we have, that I've established for her . . . [and this was] incredible injustice. I sighed, a very big sigh at first, but I just kind of stood there for a minute to see how much of a meltdown this was going to be, because sometimes it can be quick, and then I can kind of, I could put things back in place, and she could redo it, like, as if we hit a rewind button. But that was not the case in this instance . . . You know, the whole reason I took it was to make things go quicker, but then it actually, it was self-sabotage. She ran into her bedroom and was, like, raging in her bedroom. And so I went into her bedroom, and I sat on the floor, and I waited. And usually, she will come to me, like, for a hug. And so that is what she did. (P1)

In this episode, the parent continuously monitors the child's affect to determine whether her initial interpretation of the cause is accurate and whether she needs to revise her approach. The parent's grasp of the causal structure (the child's control of the routine, an established order in the turn-taking, incredible injustice) is flexible and demonstrates effective use of the feedback loop. It informs the parent's understanding of the child's

mental state, minute by minute, which allows her to access options and to modify regulation strategies accordingly. For example, when the child's reaction escalates rapidly ("0 to 60...she lost it"), the parent pauses to assess "how much of a meltdown this was going to be," indicating that she uses the intensity and trajectory of the child's emotional response as feedback for determining the next step. Her observation that sometimes the child can "redo it ... as if we hit a rewind button" reflects an awareness of multiple possible regulatory options. When this option is no longer available, she adjusts her pacing, and instead of seeking efficiency she is slowing down to the child's rhythm. This example demonstrates how careful attention to the child's affective cues can serve as real-time data that guide parent's moment-to-moment meaning-making.

***Subtheme 3.2: Successful Resolution Depends on Accurate Interpretation of Cause***

While in Subtheme 3.1 the focus was on how parents monitor and respond to affective feedback, Subtheme 3.2 reflects the endpoint of that interpretive work. When parents grasp the causal connection, they arrive at a more complete understanding of how to effectively resolve distress. Although the child's emotional equilibrium can be at times restored without that clarity, as seen in Subtheme 2.1, having this clarity is an important factor in achieving full resolution that has an enduring quality because it meaningfully corresponds to the child's actual psychological experience. As was noted across participants' accounts, emotional resolution did not occur simply because parents tried multiple strategies randomly. It occurred when their revised interpretation matched the child's mental frame and addressed the actual concern, need, desire, or internal conflict.

In this subtheme, therefore, the emphasis is on how parents recognize that the efficacy of any regulatory action is contingent on the accuracy of their meaning-making. When interpretations missed the mark, the child's distress persisted, but when they aligned with the child's inner experience, that tension subsided. Although parents did not explicitly articulate a sense of reward or gratification when their interpretive work was on-point, their descriptions implied the meaningfulness of such moments, suggesting that parental meaning-making is not only functionally useful in resolving emotional tension, but is also experientially affirming of the parents' meaning-making effort. Recall, for example, the feeling of pride and relief articulated by P9 when she and her child are able to reach an understanding: "I'm like, wow, I feel really proud of me, and really proud of him, and then sometimes I'm like, wow, I feel really proud of both of us." Below are more detailed accounts of how parents may arrive at a successful resolution, while having the awareness that they "got it right" this time. Here is an example where the parent initially misunderstands or underestimates the cause of the child's emotional state, but then gets it right (demonstrated sequentially in phases):

We live in a complex, and there's a lot of kids around. He'd come back from playing with one of his friends, and he was all sad, and I said, why are you sad? He's like, I don't have any cool stuff. I said, what are you talking about? You have so much cool stuff. I said, listen, and he goes, but that's all at Dad's, so my friends don't believe me. I don't have any cool stuff here. (P8)

At first, the parent begins with an initial causal interpretation that the child is simply overlooking the possessions he has and responds with a cognitive strategy by offering a

perceptual correction (“you have so much cool stuff”). The child’s immediate clarification serves as feedback loop, which keeps the parents’ interpretive frame open as she continues to explore how to address what really bothers the child:

I said, well, like, you have your tablet. He's like, yeah, that's not cool stuff, like, they have iPads, I have a tablet . . . so we kind of talked through, what would be something that you would feel like would be a cool thing that you could have here, but that is also doable . . . we don't have as much space . . . He's like, I don't have any video game sets. I said, what if we got you something smaller that you could have here? . . . I don't know what it's gonna be, but if you, if that's what you need. (P8)

This segment shows the parent actively testing and revising interpretive hypotheses, moving from a material explanation to recognizing the underlying issue of peer comparison and her child’s sense of social standing and belonging. Her willingness to negotiate solutions indicates that she has shifted from a literal reading (“cool stuff”) to a deeper understanding of the child’s need (i.e., to be perceived as a “cool” kid). This marks the transition towards aligning solutions with that recovered meaning. Here is how the closure unfolds from there:

And I said, listen, I understand, I was never a 9-year-old boy. Video games don't matter to me at all, they never did, so it doesn't occur to me as something that would be important, but if that's, and he's like: but mom, I'm a boy, and I'm a kid, and I'm like, okay, I understand. That is different than what I grew up with, so that's fair. We will figure this out, we'll find something that works for our space,

and financially, and that you feel like it's something you can take to your friends, and like be cool . . . I heard, he knew I heard him and acknowledged, okay, this is a legitimate, to you, this is a real legitimate concern, and I will find a way to address it. (P8)

Here the parent arrives at the accurate cause and once she recognizes a developmentally salient need for peer acceptance and social identity, her regulatory strategy becomes effective. She validates his concern and collaborates on a feasible solution. This scenario illustrates how emotional resolution depends on the parent successfully accessing the child's subjective experience rather than relying solely on adult logic.

Similarly to the unfolding of the previous example, the scenario that follows also demonstrates how both patterns in Theme 3 (subthemes 3.1 and 3.2) work together and that the interpretive adjustment becomes possible through the feedback loop, which eventually reveals the true nature of distress. Achieving accuracy in the causal interpretation is what ultimately helps find a fitting solution and what restores emotional balance. Here is how the parent describes the process (demonstrated sequentially in phases):

She has been experiencing a lot of anxiety about bathing alone, because we moved to a new place . . . and so here, she's so scared that I'm gonna be downstairs, and she's upstairs by herself. One day, we were watching this silly [kids] movie . . . kind of had some scary things. . . And so we went upstairs, and I was like, okay, you're gonna get your bath and stuff, and I was in the next room. . . and she just melted down, just was so scared. She just got louder, and louder, and

was crying . . . I was like, what's wrong? . . . She's like, I don't know, I'm just shaky, I'm just shaky. We got to talking, I said, was it maybe the movie? . . . I think it put her in an anxious frame of mind. (P4)

Here, the parent begins with an initial hypothesis derived from contextual and situational cues most readily available to her that movie is the cause of her child's distress. The child's escalating emotional dysregulation provides feedback that the initial interpretation may be insufficient, which prompts the parent to remain open and to continue asking questions. Because of that, she is able to avoid premature closure and revise her understanding:

I went downstairs to get some clothes and come right back up, and that's when she was like, you're not here, you're not here, and she's like, I gotta get out of the shower . . . I gotta get out of here... Then we got to talking again, and it went on and on, and I figured out . . . you're scared I'm gonna be downstairs. (P4)

Even though the child herself could not articulate the cause ("I don't know, I'm just shaky"), the parent noticed that the panic intensified the moment she physically left the upstairs area. This emotional feedback eventually allows the parent to arrive at the true cause, which is fear of being physically separated, which is not related to the initial interpretation (i.e., movie). Having identified an accurate cause, a resolution to emotional tension becomes possible:

And so now she does much better, because I try to just make sure I stay close by. I let her know if I'm in the other room, hey, I'm right here. . .that has helped her a lot to come to grips with why, because she didn't know why she was that upset. I

didn't know at the time that it was bothering her that much, you know? So we just kind of, through asking questions and talking. . . And so she liked that. She liked feeling that we had that connection. (P4)

Based on a now accurate understanding of the child's need for proximity and reassurance, the parent modifies her regulation strategy by staying nearby and verbally signaling her presence. This successfully reduces the child's distress, an outcome that demonstrates how an accurate interpretation is the key to achieving emotional resolution. Furthermore, the ongoing dialogue and joined meaning-making allowed the child to gain an understanding of her own experience as well, which is a meaning-making accomplishment in its own right.

#### **Theme 4: Reflective Capacity Influences the Depth of Meaning-Making**

This theme captures another pattern in regard to parental meaning-making evident across participant accounts, and it has to do with the depth and the level of insight into the child's mental state that parents demonstrated when discussing children's negative emotions. Parents' capacity to grasp the nature of their child's inner experience during upsetting moments varied from surface level description of what was observable directly from external behavior and non-verbal signals to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the child's perspective. In other words, parents' reflective capacity and their ability to mentalize about the child's inner state influenced the degree to which they were able to access that state and the child's inner world in order to help them make sense of the child's experience from the child's eyes. In situations where parents demonstrated higher reflective depth, they tended to see emotions as a window into their

child's inner world and as meaningful signals about how children themselves were making sense of the world around them, what was and was not working for them, and why. It is as if they were able to see the child from the inside. On the other hand, when parents demonstrated lesser reflective capacity, their understanding was anchored in behavioral observations and the meaning-making relied largely on contextual or observable factors. It is as if they were only able to see the child from the outside, while the deeper layers of the child's experience remained unclear or inaccessible.

Moments that reflected a more sustained engagement with the child's emotional perspective tended to overlap with the iterative processes described in Theme 3, whereas poor engagement or an early withdrawal from attempts to gain a deeper perspective tended to interrupt that sequence. Both of these variations in reflective capacity are demonstrated in Subtheme 4.1 and Subtheme 4.2 respectively. It is important to note, however, that differences in reflective depth were present not only across cases, but within cases as well, which is to say that these differences do not separate parents into categories of mentalizing styles. It is not the case that some parents always demonstrate a higher degree of mentalizing than others. Many parents showed variability in their reflective capacity in relation to various scenarios they discussed. In other words, the same parents engaged deeply with the child's internal experience in some situations, while also having difficulty doing that in other situations, and the same parents demonstrated nuanced meaning-making as well as surface level understanding. Therefore, what this pattern suggests, given that the same parent could show greater or lesser mentalizing in their ability to construct a causal connection between the child's

inner experience and the negative emotional reaction, is that this variability was contextual and depended on several factors, including the nature of the episode recalled. Accordingly, these two subthemes should be viewed as representative of the differences in how parents approach specific moments of regulation and interpretation, rather than as fixed categories of parental mental traits.

***Subtheme 4.1: Seeing From the Inside and Responding to the Child's Inner World***

As previously stated, this subtheme captures moments when parents showed greater capacity for mentalizing and were able to gain a more nuanced understanding of the causal connection between the child's situational experience of the world around them and the emotional reaction to it. Parents showed curiosity about their children's subjective experience and actively tried to understand how the child's thoughts and intentions were connected to what the child was feeling. In moments of greater demonstrated mentalizing, parents moved beyond descriptions of behavior ("yelling" "demanding" or "throwing things") and spoke about the child's interior ("from his perspective" and "in her mind") and not only attempting to see things from the child's perspective but also finding that having that perspective helped make sense of things. Consequently, this capacity to access the child's inner experience and see their inner world as they do was demonstrated to be crucial for emotion regulation. As has been shown in Theme 3, making sense of things, as well as helping the child make sense of things, made the emotion regulation process more effective. Here is how this parent demonstrates mentalizing and expresses awareness of the many layers of the child's internal experience and what may be behind emotional tension:

She was trying to fold this blanket in a particular way, because she was trying to make this little bed for one of her stuffed animals. And she wanted to do it, and did not want help, but she was getting super, super frustrated. But every time I asked her if she wanted help, she was like, no, no, no, and then it got to the point where . . . she just got herself so worked up about how she couldn't do it herself that she just didn't even want to talk about it, or be approached . . . On some level it feels like failure, if someone comes in and helps her . . . She was not able to do it on her own, and she feels pride in being able to do things independently . . . Got frustrated enough that she finally let me help her. But, like, she had to come and ask me, he didn't want me asking her . . . She eventually came and said, Mom, can you please help me fold the blanket? But it had to come from her, which is the common theme with her. She had to finally decide that she was gonna seek out help, and didn't want me coming in and offering help, so . . . on her terms. (P11)

Here the parent articulates the child's internal state and adopts her perspective ("in her little head"). From that perspective she can understand the sense of pride and the conflict between the child's desire for mastery and the actual inability to achieve that vision. In this situation, the parent demonstrates higher capacity to mentalize, which allows her access to the child's subjective experience of perceived failure and the tension between that and wanting to do things independently ("she feels pride in being able to do things independently"). The parent recognizes that the sense of pride her child wants to achieve by accomplishing the task independently is momentarily greater than the desire for help, which helps her see why the child would persevere through failure while simultaneously

experiencing intensification of anger and frustration. The parent is also able to connect the present moment to previous instances (“it had to come from her, which is the common theme with her”) and she steps away to let the child gain control over the decision-making process. Ultimately, the parent’s meaning-making proves to be accurate as the child later seeks help voluntarily when she decides it is time for assistance and when the need for mastery outweighs the need for autonomy. This outcome validates the parent’s understanding of the child’s internal working model and confirms her choice of regulation strategy as an appropriate match. Below is an example of a similar tension between wanting a sense of mastery and needing assistance, and how that tension is grasped through reflective capacity that a parent demonstrates in this case:

She has this little spray bottle. And she was trying to screw the top back on. She had refilled it, was trying to screw the top back on, but it was actually really annoying, because it's a kid's toy, but the cap of the bottle that the spray feature is attached to, they move independently of one another, so she was turning the top piece, but it wasn't tightening. And so I said, would you like some help? She said no. I can see the frustration building. So, I know from experience, if I just intervene, that's not going to go well. So, I say, can I show you? And she says, no. And then I try to explain, you have to put your hands on this part, and I'm trying to point to the part, and she is like, don't touch it! And so you know, then I'm stepping back, and I'm like, okay, I'm not gonna touch it . . . And she finally, actually, to her credit, after some frustration, put it [down] and was like I need your help. And then I was able to show her, and then she could do it the next time

. . . it's not like she was saying she was proud of herself, but she had a little smile on her face. (P1)

In this scenario, the parent demonstrates a high degree of mentalizing and is able to understand the child's aims and what is important to her, which is to have agency over her environment. As with the previous example, she knows that if she were to insist on helping, "that's not going to go well" as has been learned from previous experience. Guided by her capacity to reflect and infer about the child's shifting inner state, the parent is dynamically responding by monitoring the child's frustration and assessing her willingness to receive help. Understanding that the repeated rejection of support signals a meaningful pursuit of mastery, the parent decides to pull back, while continuing to monitor the situation and staying available. This is because she is also realizing that the child may eventually request assistance ("I can see the frustration building"). Because of this ongoing attunement with this child's competing needs, one for independence and another for mastery, the parent is able to choose a regulation strategy that helps her child achieve both and resolves emotional tension. What on the surface could be perceived as uncooperative behavior or defiance is instead seen as a meaningful and reasonable manifestation of the child's subjective experience.

A high level of reflective capacity allows the parent to acknowledge the child's internal conflict and protect a developing sense of competence by carefully moving in between leaning in and pulling back. Mentalizing allows the parent to view the child as an independent agent and, in respect of that autonomy, she intentionally manages her own exertion of control over the child and the situation. The following example also

demonstrates how the depth of this parent's understanding of her child's internal state allows her to choose effective regulation strategies that support his emotional balance:

He gets real sad when he doesn't have any more noodles in the house. Yeah, he gets real sad about that. I'd be like, you got a certain amount in here, and he was like, well, I need some more, and if he's down to his last pack, he'll get real sad about it . . . I believe it is a comfort thing for him. . . as soon as he gets out of school, it's like an afternoon snack for him before dinnertime . . . I be like, you want me to fix you something, since you ain't got no more, until I buy some more, and he'll be okay with that . . . he's not too worried, because he will get on the Walmart app and see if they have them in stock, he will go search . . . he'll be like, it's in stock, Mommy . . . If it wasn't in stock, I think he'd be worried. Like, when is it gonna be back in stock? When are they gonna have it? He'd be having a lot of questions . . . I'll be like, hey, if it's not in stock, I'll just go look at another store. If they don't have it, then we're gonna have to wait until they stock back up in the store. We can't make the store have it. So he'll be like... Okay. I'll explain it to him. Even if we gotta go in the store and I have to show him, like, you see, it's not in stock. Sometimes he wants to see for himself. (P10)

Here too, the parent is demonstrating a degree of reflective functioning that allows her to go beyond the surface behavior and look at things through the child's eyes. From the child's perspective, she can tell that the noodles are not just a preference, but something deeper than that, a meaningful and soothing routine after school. The parent is able to trace the logic of the child's feelings through the different stages of this scenario,

interpreting how this experience makes sense for the child (“it is a comfort thing for him”), anticipating what is likely to make him feel one way or another, and what would ease his concerns (“see if they have them in stock”). The parent repeatedly articulates what the child is valuing, expecting, fearing, and thinking, and shows respect for his point of view instead of dismissing it as something childish or silly. She interprets his emotions as a meaningful reaction to change, and traces how a loss of a comforting routine creates sadness, while the threat of a potential delay in restoring this routine becomes the cause for worry. The parent’s capacity to fully engage with the child’s perspective allows her to work with his point of view in ways that address his needs (“I buy some more”), while supporting him through the process in ways that ease his concerns, either by providing explanations or by letting him “see for himself.”

***Subtheme 4.2: Seeing From the Outside and Responding to the Child’s External Presentation***

Across cases and scenarios, parents also demonstrated occasions of lower capacity to perceive their children’s inner world and struggled to understand their subjective experience of those moments. In these occurrences of lesser parental mentalizing, the interpretation and meaning-making remained at the surface level of visible behavior, the motives and struggles behind which were obscure. This external frame of reference oriented parents towards interpretation of emotion and behavior as manifestations of interpersonal conflict, rather than an intrapersonal challenge of managing environmental demands that obstructed the child’s own drives, wishes, and objectives. As mentioned at the outset of Theme 4 introduction, this subtheme is not a

reflection of parenting types, but rather a testament to a fluctuating and context-dependent nature of reflective functioning and parent's capacity to reach deeper into the child's subjective experience. The same parents, in other contexts and situations, demonstrated higher capacity to infer about the child's mental states, in which cases their approach of the child followed a pattern consistent with the one demonstrated in Subtheme 4.1. Therefore, examples that follow do not intend to demonstrate nor to invite judgements about the overall quality of parenting, but rather they serve as examples that capture moments of parental difficulty mentalizing. Here is one such example, where the parent had difficulty exploring the underlying reason for the child's emotions, focusing primarily on behavior and its management:

He likes to go outside and collect his praying mantis pets, and play with them . . . I don't want any more of those pets in the house, so I told him, three is enough, so, you know, if you want one more, let's just let one go . . . so he's got mad because I didn't let him bring another praying mantis in. So, yeah, and he was tense, he was getting angry at me for that . . . basically, we settled on keeping the two female praying mantises, because he wanted those were his favorite, and we brought a new, younger little praying mantis in instead of the older male, but it took a little while of talking in between and calming him down. So, yeah we had to negotiate some, but after that, after he settled down, because when he's in a high emotion state, you can't negotiate anything. He mostly wanted to get what he wants, of course. So, by me trying to build, kind of, that bridge to him, to his understanding that basically we cannot have any more of those things in the house and such, to

kind of, reach his understanding there. And [when] he was all emotion, he didn't understand, but once he calmed down, we reached the consensus. (P5)

In this example of lower mentalizing, the parent demonstrates limited insight into the child's emotion, even though she successfully manages the conflict and achieves emotion resolution. Meaning-making and interpretation in this example stay at the surface level of “he wants what he wants,” which directs the parent’s efforts at managing behavioral resistance and holding limits around what is permitted in the house. While the parent is clear about her point of view and the reason for her expectations, there is limited demonstration of meaning-making from the child’s point of view. The parent attempts to reconcile interpersonal differences by getting the child to see her perspective (“we cannot have any more of those things”) and, when that was achieved and the child understood and accepted the limits, a consensus was reached.

The parent demonstrates difficulty accessing a full perspective on the child’s inner world, his deeper motivations, the reason for disappointment, and why it was difficult for him to accept limits. The child’s frustration tolerance and ultimate capacity to accept a compromise are understood in behavioral terms as an outcome made possible through logic and negotiation. Although the parent describes an effort to build a bridge between his perspective and the child’s, this bridge functions primarily as a means for bringing the child toward the parent’s viewpoint. The focus of this connection is not on understanding the child’s internal experience but on directing him to accept the limit. Even though the meltdown was successfully managed, the child’s inner experience was not fully understood. Offering the child a choice about which mantis to keep is a warm

gesture of sharing control, yet it does not involve engagement with the deeper emotional meaning of the situation (e.g., difficulty letting go of a cherished pet, the emotional burden of having to choose a favorite, etc.). In the next example, the parent also demonstrates basic causal reasoning between adult's limit setting and the child's frustration, but without a more nuanced grasp as to why hearing "no" is hard for the child:

She was upset because she wanted to have another granola bar, and I didn't want her to eat all of them, because they're expensive, and she also didn't need that many . . . She kept trying. Like, she tried to get on a chair herself and get the granola bar. She was really upset about it, she was kind of not screaming, but, you know, raising her voice at me. She was saying that she wants it, she's like, I want, I want . . . She is very determined . . . I told her no. Nope. All done, and she got off of the chair, but she was just still upset about it and still trying to get into the cabinet. Very determined. She did not want to take no for an answer at all. I was like, no, no more, no more. And eventually she understood. Well, I know she understood the whole time, but eventually she gave in. (P7)

In this situation, the parent's meaning-making is predominantly oriented toward the child's external signals and visible behavior rather than the inner motivation and the emotional experience associated with it. The child's protests and persistence at attempting to access the granola bar are described as signs of determination ("very determined," "did not want to take no for an answer"), but the parent does not extend these observations into an interpretation of the child's internal state and what might be

driving the behavior beyond a simple desire for a treat. The emphasis remains on surface-level actions (“climbing on the chair,” “still trying to get into the cabinet”) and on the parent’s reasoning and behavioral response (“they're expensive” and “I told her no, nope, all done”), rather than on the child’s subjective experience of frustration. The parent treats the child’s emotional escalation as a matter of behavioral dysregulation rather than emotional communication. The child’s ongoing negative affect is taken as a signal to further enforce boundaries and limits, without gaining additional insight into what the child might be wanting, expecting, understanding, and rejecting about their experience of the situation. This example shows a pattern consistent with lower mentalizing where the parent interprets and responds to outward presentation without inferring the child’s mental state and their inner world, which results in a narrower perception that drives behaviorally anchored regulation strategies. The example below illustrates a similar read on the situation as a struggle against limits, which comes from a lower reflective depth and sets a dynamic of power struggles, frustrating for both the parent and the child:

He's not ready to end his day, he doesn't want to. He doesn't want to stop doing the task that he's doing. We go to bed at the same time pretty much every night. And yet, every night, he's frustrated. The same sort of thing happens, like, he doesn't want to brush his teeth . . . he's like a snail! Like a snail! Coming up the stairs like a sloth, I don't even know. It's crazy. And it's just to get to me. It's just to get to me, because he knows that this is, like, he's frustrated, and his emotions show, well, maybe it's not even frustration, it's just, like “I'm gonna do what I wanna do! I'm not gonna do what you want me to do. Like, why? No.” Definitely

defiance. If [my husband] is handling him, then he just sits it out. He doesn't do a lot of yapping. And I just have to yap, and I have to, like, okay, let's do this, let's do that, and again, I'm just, talking to him, like, this is what we have to do right now . . . It's so confusing to me. I don't know how to really help him through this.

(P12)

The parent explicitly voices confusion about the dynamic and her meaning-making reflects limited access to her child's internal experience. Although she identifies the child's outward behavior ("snail," "sloth") and notes the repetitive pattern of resistance to bedtime routines, she is unclear about what the child is feeling and thinking, and what the ultimate motivations behind these behaviors may be. The parent's interpretations are anchored in observable actions and her own emotional experience of the situation, which leads to the conclusion that the child is defiant ("It's just to get to me"). Her own frustration with the situation makes it difficult to understand the child's emotions, besides reading his behavior as an intentional interpersonal conflict, a power struggle. This interpretive orientation makes it difficult for the parent to lean into the intrapersonal aspect of the challenge associated with this transition (e.g., interruption of high-interest activities, wanting control over his choices), which she does have some access to ("he's not ready to end his day," "he doesn't want to stop doing the task that he's doing") but is unable to utilize for regulational aims.

This particular example demonstrates a repeated attempt at making sense of the situation by a parent who demonstrates depth in mentalizing qualities in other situations, but experiences limited capacity to access them in the context of this moment. The

parent's reflective frame shifts between her own experience and that of the child's, but because her own state is overwhelming to her, she does not linger long enough in the child's mental space, which inhibits the parent's capacity to explore it.

### **Theme 5: Meaning-Making as Need Recognition, Interpreting Emotions as Signals for Psychological Needs**

As demonstrated in Themes 1 through 4, in their meaning-making of children's negative emotions parents often inferred a deeper causal connection between the child's outward presentation and the underlying reason behind it. They consistently inferred that a negative emotion was signaling something meaningful about what the child was seeking and needing in a particular situation, and that not being able to access or receive that became the cause for distress and frustration. Even though parents did not use formal terminology around psychological needs, they were, nonetheless, able to infer that the child was seeking independence, control, reassurance, support, or connection. Anchored in concepts of BPNT, the deductive phase of analysis was used to detect specific patterns in parental meaning-making that are reflective of psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are mapped across Subthemes 5.1, 5.2, and 5.3 respectively.

Examples that follow illustrate the ways in which parents intuit and detect the presence of these needs as motivational drives behind their children's behavior and how serve as causal cues behind negative emotions. This need-based meaning-making logic allowed parents to utilize emotional signals as meaningful points of orientation within the child's experience and to deduce how best to address their needs, with an additional layer

of understanding that addressing need-based causes of emotion would have a regulatory effect on that emotion. This latter point in regards to the regulatory effects of identifying and meeting the child's psychological needs is explored in more detail in Theme 6, while the focus of this theme is primarily on need detection and seeing presence of an unmet need as the cause for emotional distress.

It is important to note that, given the complexity of everyday life and the dynamic nature of our situated experience, psychological needs in real life rarely appear as discrete and neatly aligned with particular scenarios. In other words, the same situation can illuminate motivations and frustrations related to need for autonomy, competence, and/or relatedness. From this perspective, it is natural and expected that the intertwined simultaneous occurrence of needs may be visible in parents' accounts of their child's experiences, even though the focus of each subtheme is to highlight only one dimension of psychological needs at a time. In the spirit of preserving the integrity of parental narratives, no attempts were made to strip away these overlaps and to isolate meaning through a superimposed filter as to make it fit a singular need category precisely. Instead, the psychological need in focus is highlighted and discussed given its fit, whereas the co-appearing psychological need is acknowledged only briefly.

***Subtheme 5.1: Need for Autonomy, Expressed in Emotion as Reaction to Constraint or Want of Control***

Across the dataset, parents often recognized frustration or resistance as expressions of volition and desire for autonomy, closely aligned with and reflective of BPNT formal conceptualization of the autonomy-need construct. From this meaning-

making frame, negative emotions were understood as a signal that the child was seeking more agency or control than was available to them within a particular situation. Grounded in parents' reflective capacity as the ability to access the child's mental state, emotions were seen as signals for wanting more independence or say, to have agency and be given opportunities to make choices.

The excerpt below demonstrates how a parent reconstructs need-based meaning and infers the role of autonomy, conceived of as seeking independence, and how the child reacted to its constraint through emotion and behavior:

She fell, hurt her knee pretty bad, it was bleeding, I mean, she wasn't dying, but it wasn't just a scrape, either. It was pretty serious, and you could tell it hurt. And I freaked out to try to help her, and then I guess she kinda tensed up and didn't, almost like she was afraid somebody was looking, I guess? I can't really figure it out. And then didn't want me to talk about it, and if I did, it made her more upset . . . Usually she would be okay with you talking with her about it, and comforting her, and let's look at this, let's make it feel better, would work, but in this situation, it didn't seem like she wanted that . . . Maybe it was because we were outside and there were people there, maybe it's part of the, I'm not a baby, and mamma worries too much. That it might get annoying to her, so maybe she doesn't want Mama to be so protective . . . maybe she's getting older . . . I pretty much had to just let it go, because it was making it worse. (P9)

In this scenario, the parent interprets the child's refusal to accept comfort and assistance as a desire to handle things independently. The parent's iterative testing of several causal

hypotheses, as well as her overall interpretation (“maybe she doesn’t want Mama to be so protective,” “maybe she's getting older”), aligns with autonomy-based meaning-making. The parent observes that her usual approach of soothing and comforting was not that effective. She notes that repeated attempts to re-engage the child and to offer assistance were counterproductive (“made her more upset”). The parent’s capacity to take on the child’s perspective allowed her to see the misalignment between her well-intended actions with the child’s mental state and self-perception (“I’m not a baby). The parent realizes that the child’s discomfort in response to her ongoing involvement (“tensed up,” “didn’t want me to talk about it”) signals a strong desire to regulate her own emotions, especially in a public setting, and that not being able to do so due to parental involvement feels intrusive. This realization led the parent to revise her eventual regulation strategy (“I pretty much had to just let it go”) and to allow space for independence. It is worth noting that even though the parent does not label the underlying need as autonomy, her language and reasoning intuitively capture the psychological dynamic involved in the need for autonomy.

Furthermore, it is worth acknowledging that psychological need for competence is also present in this scenario as a secondary layer of influence in the dynamic, even though it is not the desire for competence that leads to emotional tension. On the contrary, the parent’s interpretation indicates that the child perceives herself as competent to handle the situation. As seen in other scenarios across subthemes (e.g., P1 in Subtheme 2.2, P11 in Subtheme 4.1) it is the child’s belief they have mastery of something (competence) that leads them to claim the space of independence around its execution

(autonomy). Therefore, this scenario illustrated a complex dynamic of primary need for autonomy, colored by a strong sense of competence. Below is another example where the parent grasps the connection between unmet desire for autonomy and a resulting meltdown:

He really wants batteries to power one of his toys . . . I'll have to remind him that the batteries have to be charged, but he doesn't want to hear it. Like, he'll lose his cool... And he'll get pretty upset about it, because he doesn't want them to have to be charged. He wants them to already be charged. And so if I try to reason with him about it, or if I try to place them on the charger, he'll get really upset, and sometimes he'll smack the little charger out of the socket. You know, he'll get pretty mad . . . He wants it right there. He wants it right then . . . Typically, I give him some space to kind of, you know, cool off. I try to counsel him, but sometimes he gets inconsolable, because he just doesn't want to hear it . . . and if someone tries to console him, he . . . gets kind of snappy, and gets him kind of, like, moody. And he can become very upset. So sometimes he can be inconsolable if he really wants something. He can't have it right away, you know? ... He'll, like, have a fit for a while. 10, 15, 20, 30 minutes, he'll be having a fit. Eventually, he'll cool off enough to where he'll find a logical solution to it, such as getting the batteries from a working toy. (P3)

The parent in this example describes a child who wants the batteries immediately and cannot tolerate waiting or having the world impose a delay (“He wants it right there. He wants it right then.”). The child escalates when, in addition to this disappointment of

things not going the expected way, adults attempt to take control (“smacks the charger out of the socket”) and becomes inconsolable when forced to accept the natural consequence of having to wait when forgetting to charge the batteries. The meltdown that follows is an expression of rejection of those limits. The parent’s causal language and interpretive frame reveal that he recognizes the child’s distress as a reaction to natural limits (“batteries have to be charged”), as well as a consequently blocked desire to use the toys when the child wants to. Consistent with this causal logic of understanding the child’s mental state, the parent also notes that the adult’s solutions are not appreciated (“he just doesn’t want to hear it,” “if someone tries to console him, he . . . gets kind of snappy”) unless there is a tangible answer (“getting the batteries from a working toy”) to the child’s original aim, which is to play with a particular toy. This is another example which demonstrates that even though the parent is not using BPNT terminology, he interprets the child’s emotional and behavioral reaction through an autonomy-sensitive lens.

***Subtheme 5.2: Need for Competence, Expressed in Emotion as Reaction to Challenge or Failure***

Across accounts, parents’ descriptions of a child’s negative affect frequently aligned with competence-related themes. They described arousal of negative emotions in contexts that interfered with the child’s sense of mastery, such as task difficulty or perceived failure. These are reflective of psychological need for competence, consistent with BPNT formal conceptualization of the construct. From this meaning-making frame, negative emotions were understood as reactions to environments where the challenges

presented to them were above their ability or skill level, a sign of wanting greater capacity to overcome them and to succeed. Grounded in reflective meaning-making as the means of access to the child's mental state, parents viewed emotional reactions in these situations as signals for wanting more opportunity to practice, access to guidance and practical assistance, as well as reassurance that they can meet the challenge. As the example below demonstrates, the parent engages in explicit causal meaning-making and identifies competence-based reasons when interpreting the child's sadness about not doing well in sports:

He gets sad . . . he feels like he's not included . . . They play football at recess.

And so, I think, that's just really hard, because he doesn't feel athletic as the other kids, he doesn't feel like he's gonna be wanted on the team, are they gonna want me to participate in this? Are they gonna want me to play? So there's, like, feelings of self-doubt and social isolation. Like, this is something that I like to do, and now that I'm not performing in the way that I should perform, or people expect me to perform, or I expect myself to perform. Because of these things that happened [missed a lot of touches], there's gonna be a certain consequence . . . I'm not gonna get picked as much for these teams . . . He plays again the next day, and he does okay, and he realizes, like, okay, I can't play football the same way every day. I'm going to have good days, and I'm going to have bad days. (P12)

This example demonstrates the need-based meaning-making in the parent's interpretation, specifically as relates to the child's sense of sport competence. Through the capacity to mentalize about the child's experience, the parent articulates the causal

logic from the child's perspective that poor performance will lead to social judgment, which will lead to peer rejection, which makes him worried and sad. The parent makes the connection between the child's feelings of self-doubt to the quality of his performance, which from the child's perspective is multilayered ("I'm not performing in the way that I should perform" "expect myself to perform") and is compounded by perceived judgement from others ("people expect me to perform").

The parent also connects the child's positive affect and an increased sense of wellbeing to the moments when he plays well, which affords him an opportunity to correct his self-assessment and have a more balanced sense of competence, the one that comes from an overall take across several days ("I'm going to have good days, and I'm going to have bad days") as opposed to being based on a single performance ("I can't play football the same way every day"). This example demonstrates how the parent is interpreting the child's emotional experience as reflective of the psychological need to feel a sense of competence and mastery, and her interpretation of negative emotion is aligned with BPNT's conception of a thwarted competence. Here is another scenario that serves as an example of competence-based frustration, as demonstrated in a parent's interpretation of the child's negative emotion:

He does get frustrated, and then he'll... then it's like, I'm stupid, I'm awful, I can't do anything . . . It could be if he's trying to assemble something, like, we got . . . a model of a plane, but it's, like, sheet, and you, like, punch it out and assemble it. And I said to him in the store, it says, like, 14 plus, this is gonna be really hard. Nope, I want it, it's fine, I can do it. I said, but it's gonna be, it's not meant for a 9-

year-old. He's like, you just think I can't do anything. I said, no, I said, you're a really smart, talented kid your age, but this is meant for . . . a high school kid. No, I want it, I can do it, this is what I want . . . so he dives into trying to put it together and it's just frustrating all around. The pieces aren't coming apart the way they're supposed to, it's metal, so it's sharp, it's hard, so then he feels stupid, and dumb, and can't do anything . . . he will kind of, like, not throw the thing, literally, but just kind of leave it alone, storm off. (P8)

In this example, the parent interprets the child's emotional expression in the context of psychological need for competence, as she retells an incident with a challenge that was significantly above the child's capacity and the child's awareness of his capacity ("I want it, it's fine, I can do it"). Even when the parent's assessment of the child's skill level is accurate, the need to feel capable of successfully handling a challenge, makes the child override his mother's guidance ("you just think I can't do anything"). The parent describes that, once confronted with the true difficulty of the task, the child quickly moves towards a strongly negative global self-appraisal ("he feels stupid, and dumb, and can't do anything"), which makes him feel even worse about himself. Even though, similar to other examples, the parent's language is free of BPNT terms and she does not mention the need for competence explicitly, the expressed logic of her meaning-making represents a clear interpretation of emotion in terms of threat to competence. The parent's narrative shows that she implicitly recognizes that the emotional reaction is tied to the mismatch between the child's developmental skill level and the task's demands.

***Subtheme 5.3: Need for Relatedness, Expressed in Emotion as Signal for Connection and Safety***

Parents described situations where the child's negative emotion was reflecting their need for individual attention, sense of connection, sense of interpersonal comfort, and relational security. They interpreted a child's clinginess or sadness as cues for seeking additional closeness and reassurance, and their descriptions of the underlying psychological dynamic was consistent with BPNT conceptualization of basic psychological need for relatedness. As with other subthemes, this need-based interpretation was a consistent pattern present across interviews. Although, similar with previous examples in Theme 5, parents did not use theoretical language to refer to the need for relatedness, their accounts clearly demonstrate their attunement to the presence of this need in their child and their ability to see its manifestation in the child's emotions and behavior. Here is how this parent describes her understanding that the child was seeking relational closeness and not just a playmate:

She wanted to play dolls . . . I was just like, oh, I'm so tired, but I was like, go bring those dolls, let's do it. And so we did . . . There's a lot of instances like that where she just wants to do something with me, and not really with her sister, it just wants one-on-one time . . . It has to be creative play. It's what she really, really wants the most. That makes her really happy. She'll get a little sad [if we can't play]. She usually finds something else to do. However, she'll keep bringing it up until I do it. You know, it's gonna be like, well, you know, you said that we're gonna play . . . She doesn't throw tantrums or anything like that. She just

kind of knows, okay . . . I'm gonna go draw some pictures, and then she'll draw these pictures for me. She'd be like, I love you, Mommy, and then I'm like, okay, you got me now, you really want my attention. (P4)

The parent in this example demonstrates a recognition of the child's need for the kind of attention only the parent can provide, which is connected to a deeper sense of closeness and relational comfort, connection, presence, and relational closeness ("just wants one-on-one time"). She articulates that the desire to play together specifically concerns the parent whom the child seeks out even though she has a sibling to play with ("wants to do something with me"). The parent identifies the specific context for individual attention ("it has to be creative play") in which the child enjoys the relational quality the most. She specific emotional resonance when these relational opportunities are present ("makes her really happy") versus when they are not available ("she'll get a little sad").

Although the child is adequately regulating her emotions while waiting for the next opportunity for shared imaginative space, the parent takes notice of repeated signals that the need is actively present ("she'll draw these pictures for me," "I love you, Mommy") and requires acknowledgement ("I'm like, okay, you got me now"). The psychological need for relatedness, although not explicitly stated, is nonetheless the lens through which the parent interprets her child's experience and is the medium that helps her understand her child's interior, with its emotions and motivations. Here is another illustrative example where the parent interprets the child's behavior in relational terms. She sees the child's insistence on squeezing herself between the parent and sibling as a signal of a deeper need for connection:

Her and her brother kind of fight for my attention, and they both want me at the same time, and sometimes that's not possible. So, recently I was trying to put them to bed and, you know, I'll lay down with them, but her brother wanted to be next to me, and she wanted to be next to me at the same time. And so she started trying to squeeze herself in between us so that she could get next to me, and, like, then she started cuddling with me, and they kind of just started going back and forth with, like who's going to be [next to] me . . . Eventually, I just went in the middle of them so that they could both be next to me, but it's like, she wants me to hold her, which is not possible for me to comfortably do . . . Maybe it's a little bit of jealousy [for] her brother, she's the oldest, so she was here first, and I know she loves her brother, but I think sometimes she does get a little bit, like, wanting to be the only one getting the affection from me. So, could have been some jealousy. Also, her just wanting to fall asleep, and that's the most comforting way for her to fall asleep, is if I have my arm around her. (P7)

In this example, the parent places emphasis on what the behavior signals about the child's inner world and experience. From that point of view, the parent is able to infer that the child is seeking proximity and closeness (“she wanted to be next to me” “cuddling with me”) and, instead of managing behavior (“trying to squeeze herself in between”), she attempts to accommodate the child's needs (“went in the middle of them so that they could both be next to me”). The parent acknowledges the presence of jealousy in the relational dynamic between the child and her brother, but it is interpreted in a more nuanced way than simply a behavioral manifestation of sibling rivalry. The parent sees

beyond this surface appearance and holds a deeper understanding of the child's need to feel connected to the primary attachment figure not because of competition or aggression ("she loves her brother") but because of a need to feel secure in her relation to the parent ("she's the oldest, so she was here first"), especially when the parent's attention is shared with someone else ("they both want me at the same time"). The child's primary motivation is understood by the parent as an attempt at securing a sense of comfort as opposed to as a wish to dominate the sibling, which signals the parent's attunement to the child's need for relatedness even if the formal BPNT term was not referenced.

**Theme 6: Emotion Regulation as a Need-Fulfillment Process, Meeting Psychological Needs Regulates Emotions**

In Theme 6 the analytic focus shifts from how parents interpret and respond to their children's negative emotions to what happens when they respond to those interpretations by meeting the underlying psychological needs they identify. Although this broader pattern was mentioned throughout previous themes more generally and in relation to other aspects, this section specifically examines the BPNT triad of basic psychological needs (i.e., autonomy, competence, and relatedness). As shown in Theme 5, there was a consistent pattern of parents attributing their children's distress to moments when the child could not have a sense of autonomy, experience competence, or feel connected. In those instances, parents consistently responded to children in ways that acknowledged and accommodated those needs and utilized this approach as the mechanism of alleviating distress and resolving negative emotion.

In other words, by focusing their regulational efforts on the inferred psychological need and addressing it directly, parents simultaneously achieved emotional regulation in the child. This resolution aspect of responding to the child's underlying psychological need deserves to be highlighted as a particularly meaningful and effective pattern of parental response to negative emotion and, in this theme in particular, it is highlighted specifically in the context of basic psychological needs as articulated in BPNT.

Accordingly, Theme 6 is organized through the lens BPNT into three subthemes that illustrate how parental actions oriented towards supporting the child's autonomy (Subtheme 6.1), facilitating their competence (Subtheme 6.2), and restoring relatedness (Subtheme 6.3) result in a relief of emotional tension and regulates behavior.

***Subtheme 6.1: Parent Regulates Child's Emotions by Supporting Autonomy***

As mentioned above, this subtheme demonstrates how parents respond in ways that meet the child's psychological need for autonomy, and how that response regulates negative emotion. Embedded in this response pattern is the parent's awareness that such need is not only actively present at the moment of negative emotional arousal but that it is also constrained, which is what causes negative emotion. Examples below, therefore, demonstrate this dual causal connection: (a) compromised sense of autonomy leads to negative emotion and (b) supporting autonomy restores emotional balance.

Across cases, parents described situations in which a child's frustration de-escalated only after the parent restored a sense of personal agency, while working within the delineated parameters and limitations of the situation (i.e., specific parental limits). For example, here is how a parent explained that the child became increasingly upset

when told she could not wear stained clothes to church and how the parent worked out the solution:

To church on Sunday, she wanted to wear gym shorts and this t-shirt that has stains all over it. I said, no, honey . . . this is not appropriate. This is like a backyard play-in-the-mud outfit. You can't wear that. She gave me a hard time for a while about it, no, I don't want to. I gave her options. No, no, no, no. Finally, I said, you have to wear something that doesn't have stains on it . . . find a nice pair of shorts or a skirt, and then finally, she's like, fine, I will go do it. And so she went upstairs, and she found something on her own that she wanted to wear that also fit the criteria . . . She very much wants that autonomy of “I chose it! You didn't choose it for me, I chose it” . . . I said, you know, for certain things, like school or church, I have to approve what you're wearing, because there's clothing for different places we go. But she's still, like, she couldn't let me pick the outfit out. It had to be, like, she had some agency in picking it out . . . But it took us a little while, because she did come back with some options, and I said, no, and then she finally . . . picked something [appropriate] and that she liked and reflected her and her style . . . her fashion is very important to her. (P11)

As is shown in this example, the child's escalating refusals (“she gave me a hard time for a while about it, no, I don't want to”) serve as affective feedback to the parent that her initial interpretation (“she wants the stained shirt”) was incomplete. Even the parents' follow-up strategy (“I gave her options”) was not successful (“No, no, no, no.”). The parent's mentalizing and ongoing reflective engagement with the child's inner state

enables her to refine meaning-making and tune into the underlying psychological need, which is to have autonomy in selecting clothing that would reflect not only agency of choice (“You didn't choose it for me, I chose it”) but also give the child the opportunity for self-expression (“her fashion is very important to her”). As is demonstrated in this scenario, it is only when the parent perceives a need-based frustration and responds to the child’s emotional and behavioral cues in a need-aligned manner that the tension resolves. Notably in this situation, though not always the case across other participants, the parent explicitly articulates autonomy-based interpretation of the child’s motivations (“very much wants that *autonomy*” and “some *agency* in picking it out,” emphasis added).

Parents also detect thwarted autonomy as it manifests when the child’s rightful space is infringed upon. Even though the parents may not articulate it as such in explicit BPNT terms, their interpretation and regulation strategy clearly reflect this need-based awareness and meaning-making logic. Restoring the child’s sense of autonomy when autonomy frustration is present results in restored emotional regulation and the child’s sense of wellbeing. Here is how this dynamic unfolds in this parent’s account:

He got very, he gets very upset, he's with his brother all the time, so, they'll be taking turns, like, goofing around or something, and he'll say something, like, oh, like, I see a giant poop. And then his brother will be like, I see, you know, a giant something else gross. You know, they'll go back and forth, and then if he, lots of times, his brother will take too long to talk or start talking over him again, and he'll get really upset because he's, like, you know, talking over him, and he's like, no, this is my time. Like, I'm the one talking, I'm holding the floor right now, and

he'll get really upset, and he'll start yelling at him to give him his chance to talk, and sometimes he'll get frustrated and start crying . . . If I'm there, I'll say, you know, that's right, we don't talk over each other, let's let your brother finish his thought, and then it'll be your turn. And I try to enforce that, and then that usually works. As long as he does then get a chance to speak, then usually all is well again. (P6)

As demonstrated in this example, the parent makes the connection between emotional dysregulation to the child's sense of constraint and intrusion into his rightful space within a relational dynamic. Seeing the situation with the child's eyes, the parent indicates clear awareness that the child's frustration comes from an obstruction of his turn to speak ("this is my time," "I'm the one talking," "I'm holding the floor right now"). The parent interprets self-referential language in the child's protest ("*my time*," "*I'm the one*," "*I'm holding the floor*," emphasis added) as an unmistakable cue that the frustration has to do with the child's volition and agency. Furthermore, the parent interprets the escalation in tension ("he'll start yelling" and "sometimes he'll get frustrated and start crying") as a signal that the child is having difficulty restoring his agency independently, which adds an additional layer of autonomy frustration. Directly addressing the underlying psychological need, she chooses to step in by responding in a way that acknowledges ("that's right, we don't talk over each other") and restores the child's sense of autonomy by protecting the child's conversational space ("let your brother finish his thought"). When the child's sense of autonomy is restored, emotional distress resolves and "all is

well again,” a resolution that demonstrates the effect of need-based emotion regulation approach.

***Subtheme 6.2: Parent Regulates Child’s Emotions by Facilitating Competence***

This subtheme demonstrates how parents respond in ways that meet the child’s psychological need for competence, and how that response regulates the child’s negative emotion. Similar to the previous subtheme, embedded in this response pattern is the parent’s awareness that such need is not only actively present but is also constrained, which causes negative emotion. Therefore, examples below demonstrate a dual causal connection: (a) a child’s compromised sense of competence leads to negative emotion and (b) facilitating competence restores the child’s emotional balance. Here is how a parent responds to the child’s distress which she interprets as originating from difficulty mastering a skill:

We were doing hundreds. We were rounding up by the hundreds. I'm like, you gotta do this to this number, you gotta round it by the hundred. And when he finally caught on to what I was doing, he was like, oh, I get it, I get it! I'm like, I bet you do get it, because it's easy. [Earlier] he was just feeling like he could not do it at all. And it took us, he had, like, three sheets. It took us on the second sheet for him to finally get it. I'm like, I had to write the numbers on the board with him . . . I had to explain to him. But he was feeling so overwhelmed, so over it. He was like, I'm not doing this. I'm like, you gonna do this. But he got it eventually.

(P10)

In this example, the parent interprets the child's initial refusal to do school work as stemming from task difficulty ("feeling like he could not do it at all"), which was leading to emotional tension ("he was feeling so overwhelmed"). To resolve the child's distress the parent matched her approach to the underlying cause for frustration, which was thwarted competence. By directly supporting the child in mastering the skill he was struggling with ("I had to write the numbers on the board with him"), the parent achieves restoration of emotional balance. She connects the child's restored sense of confidence ("Oh, I get it, I get it!"), which is a reflection of a satisfied need for competence, to her strategy of supporting him in developing the necessary level of mastery. Although the parent does not make direct reference to skill mastery and does not use formal terminology, her meaning-making is competence-need aligned and, along with her chosen regulation strategy, reflect the child's mental space in a way that restores his wellbeing. Here is another example of skill scaffolding that resolves frustration and restores the child's sense of confidence, but unfolds over a period of several days:

He really was struggling with baseball . . . He was really trying to recreate that major league swing. But in trying to create that. Oh my gosh, he was, like . . . it was horrible. He was striking out every at-bat, every game. He was, like, wanting to quit baseball. I was telling him what to do, he didn't want to listen to me. We tried going to batting cages. He hated the batting cages, like, I enlisted my dad and brother, like, they were trying to tell him things, they were making it worse . . . there were tears, and just, I don't want to do this . . . So what I ended up doing was taking a ball that's . . . bigger than a softball, but, like, a bouncy ball . . . we

just started being silly with it [parent describes playful ways she used to demonstrate how to track the ball and to swing at it] . . .in doing that, it became funny to him. Was clearly illustrated, like, oh yeah, because it was so exaggerated. We're all the way up here, we're all the way down here, you know? I'm telling you, The next game that he went to, he just started hitting dingers, and hitting doubles and triples on the first pitch the rest of the season. Like, he just needed it to click, but it took I don't know, maybe 10 days . . . to wrap his mind around, like, this is doable. (P2)

The parent demonstrates not only need-attunement and awareness that the child's distress can be resolved by addressing the need for competence directly, she also demonstrates persistence in searching for the right kind of strategy that would be aligned with her child. The parent recounts several need-attuned strategies, all oriented towards scaffolding mastery and building competence ("telling him what to do," "tried going to batting cages," enlisting knowledgeable family members, etc.). Even though none of these were effective, this was due to mismatch with the child's learning style and comfort level, rather than due to the parent's misattribution of the causal connection itself (i.e., what his distress was communicating about the underlying need). When reflecting on the process of trying to find the right approach to be able to meet the needs of her son, the parent elaborated on her understanding of what the child's own inner experience was like, which is what eventually resulted in finding the right fit:

It was a struggle, right? . . . Like, embarrassment and shame . . . I could see it in him, because that's also something he's not used to. He's not used to striking out . .

. when the adults were trying to, like, intercede and find a way to teach him, but it wasn't helpful . . . for that period of games, it was maybe, like, 3, 4, 5 games or something, he didn't want anybody to come see his games. I think what he needed was, like, he wanted it to be not acknowledged, right? Or, you know, like, privacy, but also not, like, he didn't want me to go into it with him in private, either. He wanted so badly, I think, for it to just be, not acknowledged, or . . . grilled and hammered about it, and forced to practice . . . none of that was enjoyable for him . . . whereas, like, hitting a rubber ball with a toy bat in the upstairs of your house . . . that lowered the stakes . . . He went from being like, I'm fine to quit baseball, to being like I love baseball. (P2)

This reflection demonstrates the parent's awareness of the social cost of failure as was experienced by her child ("embarrassment and shame"), in addition to the emotional weight of something the child has not experienced before ("he's not used to striking out"), which made the situation that much more sensitive for him ("he didn't want anybody to come see his games"). This awareness cued the parent in on a different approach, something that would feel less serious ("not hammered on") and be done away from scrutiny ("he wanted it to be not acknowledged"), and so she arrived at a playful approach that worked ("he went from being like, I'm fine to quit baseball, to being like I love baseball"). Taken together, this sequence of events from detecting competence frustration to providing supportive scaffolding, and from achievement of mastery to eventual emotional resolution, is the arc that demonstrates how satisfying psychological

needs in general (Theme 6), and competence need in particular (Subtheme 6.2), regulates negative emotions.

***Subtheme 6.3: Parent Regulates Child's Emotions by Restoring Relatedness***

Consistent with the structure and logic of the previous two subthemes, this subtheme examines the third and final basic psychological need of BPNT in the context of parental emotion regulation efforts, which is the need for relatedness. Examples discussed in this section demonstrate how parents respond to children who experience negative emotion in ways that meet the child's psychological need for relatedness and, in doing so, achieve emotion regulation. Similar to the previous two subthemes, embedded in this response pattern is the parent's awareness that such need is not only actively present at the moment of negative emotional arousal but that it is also constrained, which causes negative emotion. Therefore, examples below once again demonstrate a dual causal connection: (a) unfulfilled need for relatedness leads to negative emotion and (b) restoring relatedness brings balance to the child's emotional state. Here is how the need for relatedness becomes evident to this parent through her perception of the child's emotional distress and the actions she takes to accommodate it in order to restore emotional balance:

His grandma didn't let him to . . . cut some garlic or something like that, you know, she just said, I have to do it, you know, you don't participate and whatever. He was really, like, it's his thing, he really likes to help a lot around the kitchen . . . He was really upset about it, saying I hate grandma, I said, oh my god, okay. I see where it's all going . . . His emotions are very on his face, he can't hide

anything, you know? He was already kind of, like, some tears there . . . He feels like he's excluded for something, so we needed to reassure him that he can still participate in this activity after he calms down . . . he just needed to be reassured [by] us that he's not isolated from that . . . I offered him something else to do [in] the kitchen. (P5)

In this example, the parent interprets the tears and angry statements as a signal of relational conflict and, more specifically, feeling shut out from an activity that usually provides the child with a sense of connection with the family and feeling like he contributes. The parent takes action to restore what was lost by reconnecting with the child and reassuring him that he is indeed included and his help is appreciated (“he really likes to help a lot around the kitchen”). She follows that up by inviting the child to an alternative space and offering him an activity that serves the same purpose, which is to help out in the kitchen as a member of the family. The parent’s meaning-making narrative centers around relatedness rather than other potential interpretations of the scenario (e.g., task mastery, sense of control, etc.), as she specifically notes her understanding of the child's experience as that of being excluded (“he feels like he's excluded,” “he just needed to be reassured”).

Both the parent’s interpretation of the cause for emotional distress and her choice of regulation strategy are based in need for relatedness and align with the child’s inner experience, which in turn helps restore some sense of balance. Relatedness need satisfaction is often person-dependent and may not carry the same regulatory effect, unless the child experiences the caregiver as the right fit for that moment’s need

satisfaction. As the parent elaborated further, even though the child was okay with the compromise, he still felt excluded by the grandmother (“Really, he really wanted to be there [with the grandma], but still, you know, I offered him something else, so it was an exchange.”). A similar sentiment is demonstrated in the example below in that, even though the child had already received caring and attention from her grandfather, full emotional release did not occur until she was comforted by her mother. Here is how the parent relays that unfolding:

She was playing with her grandpa outside, and she had tripped and fallen, and she was okay, my dad was trying to comfort her . . . she wasn't crying when she tripped and fell, but you could tell she was upset. She had the little lip clipper. And then as soon as she saw me, she started to cry, and then ran over to me. I asked her if she was okay. I said, oh my gosh, that was a tumble, you know? How are you feeling? And she, with her big feelings, she just started to cry louder. So then I just stopped asking her questions, I rubbed her back, I said, it seems like you're okay. Do you want to show me what hurts? And eventually, you know, with just some more, like, back rubbing, and just, like, little cuddles, she was okay . . . I think just that little love, you know? Just the comfort and the safety that comes with your mom. (P1)

The parent registers the child’s emotions (“she wasn’t crying . . . but you could tell she was upset”) and the presence of another caring adult to comfort the child. However, when the child’s emotions intensified (“as soon as she saw me, she started to cry”) the parents realized that the need for comfort had not been fully fulfilled and welcomed the child into

her arms for additional reassurance. What may appear at first as an emotional escalation once in the mother's arms ("she just started to cry louder") is a signal of a secure emotional container where the child feels validated ("my gosh, that was a tumble," "how are you feeling?"), relaxed, and safe enough to cry instead of holding back tears. The parent modifies her approach ("I just stopped asking her questions") to lean even more into providing the soothing qualities of the intimate relational space ("some more back rubbing and little cuddles"), which effectively meets the child's needs and resolves emotional tension. The parent shows awareness of the precise alignment between the child's needs and the regulation strategy that resulted in the ultimate relief.

### **Theme 7: Meaning-Making Beyond the Language and Scope of Basic Psychological Needs Theory**

As demonstrated in Themes 5 and 6, parents frequently interpret children's emotional expression through the lens of psychological needs, even though they do so intuitively and without formal terms or BPNT language. Theme 7 provides an opportunity to highlight this pattern and to demonstrate more intentionally the kind of language parents do use when referring to psychological needs. More specifically this pattern is divided into two categories, which allow to show the language parents used when referring to autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs (a pattern that is presented in Subtheme 7.1), as well as how they spoke about psychological needs outside of formal BPNT constructs (as shown in Subtheme 7.2).

It is important to clarify that the purpose of Theme 7 is not to judge the accuracy of parents' terminology or to assess how precisely their language maps onto BPNT

constructs, but rather to showcase the various ways in which parents reveal their intuitive understanding of the child's inner experience during moments of emotional tension. Therefore, the distinction between Subthemes 7.1 and 7.2 is not a claim about the real taxonomy of psychological needs. No attempt was being made to determine whether a given psychological need truly belongs within or outside BPNT's definitions of autonomy, competence, relatedness. Although that debate is theoretically interesting, it is not the focus of this analysis. Rather, the aim is to examine how parents speak about needs when making sense of their children's emotions.

From that angle, Subtheme 7.1 captures instances where the language parents naturally used aligned unambiguously with the BPNT triad. In contrast to that, Subtheme 7.2 functions as an intentionally broad category that captures all other references to needs that do not clearly align with BPNT. These may include needs for predictability, solitude, creative expression, spiritual comfort, or sense-making. Whether only partially resonant with BPNT categories or being representative of qualitatively different forms of psychological essentials for wellbeing, at the empirical level they nonetheless support parent's meaning-making about the child's inner experience. It is with this understanding of their interpretive value and importance that these patterns are captured within Subtheme 7.2.

Lastly, it also must be noted that the analytic rationale for this theme dictates a different presentation structure. Given that what matters most in this section is parents' own linguistic patterning and conceptual categories that illustrate parents' intuitive nature of making-meaning around psychological needs and given that the focus is no longer on

the demonstrated patterns of mentalizing sequences (as was shown in Themes 1–6), these segments were analyzed through short linguistic markers across cases. Therefore, evidence is presented via an anchor quote that functions as the exemplifying case for the subtheme, followed by a cross-case synthesis demonstrating pattern consistency across the dataset.

***Subtheme 7.1: Parents Refer to Basic Psychological Needs in Their Own Language***

Across the dataset, parents referred to autonomy, competence, and relatedness in their own words and used everyday vernacular to express their understanding of the child’s interior. Subtheme 7.1 shows how parents’ linguistic signals demonstrate their implicit recognition of these basic psychological processes. As mentioned earlier, conceptual precision is not the aim of this segment of analysis. Instead, emphasis is placed on capturing how parents perceive and refer to the mechanisms they believe play a role in their children’s distress and wellbeing. Likewise, it is important to note that this subtheme does not represent an exhaustive catalog of all the ways parents in this dataset referred to BPNT needs. The purpose is to provide several key examples that capture some of these recurring patterns. The following example sets the stage by illustrating how parents may speak about the child’s needs for competence in their own words:

He decided that he wanted to play violin. So, we got him all the stuff . . . Him and his sister, they're so excited about it, and . . . they broke it. Day one, broke . . .

And he's, like, very anxious . . . I was very much just like, accidents happen, we'll figure it out, like, this is okay. You know, you're trying to understand the instrument, you were so excited, there were two of you. And his anxiety, like, was

increasing, like, I can't play, I'm not gonna play, I'll get in trouble . . . What am I gonna say? What am I gonna do? . . . I've tried to, like, normalize it. I'm like, . . . you don't have to feel like you're not gonna get to do the thing you want to do because you made a mistake, and that's truly what it was. Like, if you guys were, like, throwing it, right? Like, that'd be a little bit different, but, like, you were so excited, and he eventually . . . he eventually calmed down . . . [dad] was able to fix it, it wasn't a big deal at all. His anxiety slowly dissipated . . . he seemed like he was feeling better when he went to bed, but it was that initial, like, oh my gosh, I did this, this very bad thing . . . Like, he has these negative feelings about himself. That I'm just like, dude, it's fine. (P12)

As seen in this example, the parent repeatedly interprets the child's anxiety that aligns with BPNT's need for competence, but does so in her own natural phrasing:

- accidents happen
- we'll figure it out
- you're trying to understand the instrument
- get to do the thing you want to do
- you made a mistake, and that's truly what it was
- I did this, this very bad thing
- negative feelings about himself

Furthermore, the parent's language is aligned with her response to the child ("you don't have to feel like you won't get to do the thing you want because you made a mistake") and reflects an intuitive effort to restore the child's sense of effectiveness and counter his

negative self-evaluation. The parent connects the child's distress to his belief that breaking the violin represents a failure or inadequacy ("I can't play," "I always lose things," "I did this very bad thing"), which reveals an implicit concern with capability and effectiveness as a general personal trait. The parent's response indicates an intentional move towards restoring the sense of confidence and belief in one's capacity and potential, which further aligns with her meaning-making. She normalizes mistakes and emphasizes that the child remains capable ("so many people break their instruments," "you can still do the thing you want"), which eases the child's anxiety. Having the instrument repaired contributes at a practical level to his restored sense of opportunity to prove himself.

**Competence.** Similarly to the example above, there are many instances within the dataset where the parent's choice of words reflects an intuitive, nontechnical reference to BPNT's need for competence. For example, when a parent says "as he continued working at it, the confidence came from his own effort" (P13) it is effectively describing restoration of the sense of competence, which demonstrates an implicit understanding that confidence and emotional regulation emerge through successful effort and perceived effectiveness with a challenging task. The parent locates emotional improvement not in parental intervention but in the child's experience of self-generated mastery. Phrases such as "she has a vision in her head about how something should be . . . come out how she wants" (P11), "she was just so proud of herself, just so happy and confident" (P4), "he tries to fix some of his toys . . . why isn't this working" (P3), "it was too hard for her" (P1), and so on, reveal spontaneous ways in which parents used competence lens to

inform their interpretive frame. Taken together, these crosscase patterns show that parents consistently make sense of children's emotional experiences through competence-based interpretative lens, even when describing very different behavioral and situational contexts. Their everyday language reveals an implicit but coherent grasp of competence as a psychological need dynamic that helps them understand the reason for frustration in these contexts.

**Autonomy.** As was consistently evident across cases, parents interpreted children's emotional episodes as reflecting a desire to do things their own way, have options to choose from, to have a say, to assert themselves, and to resist others' will and imposition. Although parents sometimes used the term "autonomy" (as seen in P8's "more *autonomy* and more things that he can do now on his own" and P11's "she very much wants that *autonomy* of, I chose it"), they most often reached for more accessible terms. For example, P3 repeatedly linked his son's meltdowns to wanting things "right then," "a certain way," or "in a particular order," which the parent interpreted as a natural desire for agency and control. Additionally, here is how P7 spoke about autonomy frustration: "just really wanting something and not being able to get it was frustrating for her." P10 described her child insisting on doing things his way or by himself, which the parent relay in words such as "I was like, I'll do it for you. He was like, but *I wanna do it*" and "sometimes he wants to *see for himself*" (emphasis added). At other times, parents articulate the presence of autonomy-based need in the child's frustration around not having access to a preferred activity, such as "I don't know why you won't let me do this right now!" (P4). In addition to that, P6 notes autonomy presence when the child resists

guidance on how to ride his scooter and reflects it in the following language: “He just *won't listen*. He's like, *no*, this is how *I learned* to do it, this is how it works, *I'm not doing it* any other way.” Parents may also use words like “stubborn” when referring to the child’s expression of will and self-assertion when rejecting limits, as P14 puts it: “She sometimes becomes stubborn . . . why am I being told no?” These intuitive descriptions demonstrate a shared understanding parents hold about children’s need for autonomy and this understanding supports their meaning-making process in contexts where children experience constrained will or loss of agency.

**Relatedness.** Parents referred to relatedness through an intuitive language of closeness, connection, individual attention, emotional presence, and reassurance. As P9 summarized it, it is “the connection, the bond that we have... a feeling... when you care for someone.” Parents described moments when children are seeking direct physical contact, as captured by P7 (“felt protected... she feels pretty safe with me”) and P1 (“a little safe space and a little reassurance”), as well as reassuring proximity, as P11 noted about her child who, overtaken by resistance before her karate class, “decided that it just felt better to sit next to mom.” Other parents echoed this sentiment and emphasized the child’s desire for shared presence and wanting to be together, as P14 noted about his child, “she wants me to sit with her and watch the show together,” and P4 similarly observed her child’s occasional selectivity, “she just wants to do something with me, and not really with her sister.” Parents also noted that their reliable presence and availability serve as reassuring markers for problem solving and emotion regulation for their children. For example, P5 noted that her son “would be just immediately getting my

attention, because dealing with his emotions on his own is the worst thing for him,” a pattern echoed by P8, who said, “I’m right there. He needs to know that I’m close and accessible,” and when P13 described the reassuring effect of “him knowing he has the support, that I’m ... there to help him if he needs it.”

Several parents noted that the trusting and caring effects of the relational dynamic is a precondition for communication about needs and worries. P4 stated that children “need your undivided attention... to help them express what’s bothering them” and P14 explained that when there is “an emotional connection ... they can communicate clearly.” Others highlighted the restorative power of parental enjoyment and appreciation, such as when P12 reflected, “He’s getting a lot of one-on-one time. I’m also telling him all the time how much I really enjoy spending time with him.” Importantly, moments of relational misattunement were experienced as disruptions to these relational dynamics of comfort and trust, as P2’s account demonstrates: “I would joke, [but] he would take the joke seriously and tell me... I’m mean, or I’m rude, or I don’t understand.” These accounts reveal that parents routinely interpret their children’s emotional expressions through a relational vocabulary of safety, closeness, attention, enjoyment, accessibility, as is consistent with BPNT’s concept of basic psychological need for relatedness.

***Subtheme 7.2: Parents Register Psychological Needs Outside the Scope of the Basic Psychological Needs Theory***

In addition to referring to BPNT categories of psychological needs, parents also identified causal connections between their child’s mental state and emotional expression that fall outside the BPNT triad, such as needs for positive appraisal, predictability,

solitude, sense-making, creative expression, curiosity and exploration, as well as spiritual reassurance. As stated earlier, subtheme 7.2 does not aim to provide an exhaustive inventory of all the additional psychological needs referenced across this dataset, nor to propose a new taxonomy for psychological needs. Instead, it captures the pattern of this making-making and demonstrates it in a few examples, with the goals of highlighting the breadth and flexibility of the intuitive inferential framework within which parents understand their children’s emotional experiences. These excerpts illustrate how parents make sense of emotions through categories that are developmentally meaningful for children, even when they are not formally captured within the BPNT framework of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Below is one such example:

If she's riding a bike outside in the garden, she wants me to look at her, she'll go around in circles, and she wants me to look at her. . . She feels good, she's happy that “someone is paying attention to me” and she's, whatever she's doing, she starts enjoying it, she becomes pretty happy . . . She wants to look important . . . When you're looking at her and she's doing any activity, then she's very happy, like, she smiles, you know... if she's circling around in the garden on a bike, she'll take one round, and then “Did you look? Did you look?” Then she'll take another round . . . Yeah, she wants attention. I won't say she's an attention seeker, because she [only] does that with me or my wife. (P14)

Although this example represents elements of relatedness as expressed in the child’s sense of connection with the ones she seeks attention from, it goes beyond relatedness and highlights a nuance that this parent refers to as “wanting to look important” and be

acknowledged (“someone is paying attention to me”), as something occurring in the context of a particular activity or task that the child feels a sense of mastery and pride about. The parent also clarifies that this is not “seeking attention” for attention’s sake (“I won't say she's an attention seeker”) but a form of seeking appraisal and wanting to be witnessed by safe and trusted individuals (“she [only] does that with me or my wife”). When this type of attention is provided, it validates the child’s experience and increases her sense of satisfaction with the task even more (“she starts enjoying it, she becomes pretty happy”). Whereas on the surface this may appear as manifestation of competence-need, what the child seems to be seeking goes beyond that, because it is not just the internal state of accomplishing something and being proud of one’s capabilities, but seeking out a similar appraisal from others. As seen in this example, the parent’s meaning-making is centered around that intuitive awareness: it’s not just “Yay, I can do this!” but “Mommy, Daddy! Look what I can do!”

**Positive Appraisal.** As shown in the example above, other parents in the dataset also intuit this need consistently across their children’s experiences. They view this need as nuancedly different from relatedness or competence, even though it may occur in those contexts. When positive appraisal is not available, uncertain, or threatened, parents discuss these situations and the emotional texture surrounding them in the following ways: "She was a little bit self-conscious, she didn't want to walk in by herself and have her [classmates] look at her" (P11), “There was a feeling of embarrassment, and also, maybe disappointment, because she thought this was a cool idea, and that they would like

it” (P1), or “Am I gonna be in trouble? Is this going to be considered a failure? ... He thought I would be disappointed” (P2).

**Predictability and Routine.** Across accounts, parents described their children’s strong preference and desire for consistency, predictable routines, sense of stability, clear expectations, and a sense of order. This was understood as something that helps children to orient themselves in their environment and to know what to expect. As P14 noted about his daughter, “She is used to it, me leaving early in the morning and coming back in the evening, so she gets very excited when I come back.” P10’s description of an after-school routine of having noodles is another such example (“it is a comfort thing for him ... as soon as he gets out of school”).

As parents noted, these predictable ebbs and flows of the day create the kind of conditions that children crave and may even be preferred over other settings, as P11 pointed out, “She loves to be cozy, she loves to be comfy, she loves being at home, and she’s really content at home ... she also is very social too, which is funny.” Parents also observed how children became distressed when routines were changed or disrupted, as noted by P1 during the toothbrushing incident from Subtheme 3.1: “The routine is that she usually grabs her own toothbrush and her own toothpaste, and I grabbed it for her. That was, that was an instant 0 to 60, you know, NO! She lost it.” Likewise, as noted by P4 around school transitions, children may resist changes, until they become part of a new routine: “It was really difficult getting everyone into a routine ... she was not having it ... just, I don’t want to ... why do I have to do this?”

**Sense-Making.** Across multiple cases, parents described situations in which their children became distressed, fearful, or unsettled when encountering something unfamiliar or ambiguous, something that needed to be explained and understood in order to be mentally organized into a coherent inner experience of the outer world. Parents were aware of this pattern in new settings, confusing rules, sudden changes, unclear events in their lives, or lingering questions. For example, to ease emotional tension, P7 needed to elaborate on the expectations (“not understanding why she couldn't play with it . . . so I tried to make sense of it for her”), while P2 understood that a new experience of going to the emergency care and getting blood drawn had to come with additional information (“I could just see . . . tears well up in his eyes . . . he needed help understanding what drawing blood is . . . he needed just that actual information”). P1 also discussed offering more clarity and context to what was previously discussed in order to help her daughter process an earlier socially uncomfortable situation (“I explained again in more detail . . . to see if she was understanding what I was saying . . . she needed to process it a little bit more in depth than how we were able to process it [earlier]”).

In some cases, parents noted that the sense-making was achieved through spiritual guidance, which provided comfort and emotional relief. For example, P3 relied on family's spiritual meaning-making framework to explain to his son the death of his beloved pet and how that relieved sadness: “The cat's spirit soul went on to a better body . . . the cat body wasn't useful or fitting to it anymore . . . he has this perspective, the spiritual perspective that helps.” Overall, in the context of this psychological state of the sense-making necessity, parents consistently described that what helped their children

most was access to information, clear explanations, conversations that answered the child's questions, and all other sense-making opportunities, which at times were recursive and unfolded over a period of several days and recurring events.

**Need to Care.** This psychological signal can be more generally understood as empathy, concern, and a sense of responsibility towards a meaningful other and was mentioned by parents in contexts involving close relationships, but also in relation to nature and animals. For example, here is how P6 describes an older child's care and concern for his younger brother:

He was worried about his younger brother ... that he's not making his own friends, and next year he'll be going to a different school from his younger brother, so his younger brother won't be able to just rely on him to play with and bring him along places.

Additionally, P9 described her daughter's offering support the best way she could when the parent was sick: "She'd never seen me that sick .... she got to be the big girl and help her mom ... her asking me, Mommy, are you okay? She was sweet ... cuddled with me." Animals and pets have also been the objects of care and concern, as noted by P3 ("the neighbors had some cats ... was concern with their well-being, with some of the little baby cats") and P4 ("our parakeet ... was really sick for a couple of weeks ... she wanted to hold him, you know, she wanted to be there ... gave him medicine ... she just was just very caregiving about him").

As shown in this subtheme, parents orient themselves towards the child's inner world in dynamic ways, that echo not only the formal constructs of the BPNT triad of

basic psychological needs but also extend beyond it. This understanding is shaped by the parents' knowledge of the child and their own intuitive frameworks of meaning-making that help them grasp the essence of the child's inner experience and how to respond to it.

### **Summary**

The aim of this qualitative study was to answer two research questions. Namely, how do parents reflect on and interpret their children's emotional expressions during emotionally charged interactions, and what meanings do they assign to those emotions? And secondly, in what ways do parents' reflections and meanings assigned to their children's emotions implicitly align with the concepts of basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as described in BPNT? To achieve these investigative aims, data from 14 interviews were analyzed manually following Braun and Clarke's (2022b) reflexive TA approach in two stages, inductive and deductive. This hybrid approach to data analysis resulted in a total of seven themes.

More specifically, the findings presented in this chapter demonstrate that the parents' meaning-making process about negative emotions of their children is dynamic and intentional (Theme 1), that they respond to negative emotions with a strategy that aligns with their interpretive logic (Theme 2), and that parents integrate the child's emotional cues to revise their initial interpretation if necessary in order to achieve regulatory aims (Theme 3). It was also observed that parents' reflective capacity influences the depth of their meaning-making and the degree to which they are able to access the child's mental states (Theme 4). As was noted, this variability was present both across and within cases, which suggests that reflective functioning may be

dependent on situational and contextual factors of a given situation rather than be solely dependent on individual differences between participants. In addition to the outcomes obtained inductively, the deductive stage of analysis revealed that across cases parents' meaning-making consistently aligned with the BPNT framework of basic psychological needs. Not only did parents intuitively and, at times, explicitly interpret the child's emotional signals as stemming from needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Theme 5), but they also regulated emotions by taking action to meet these underlying needs (Theme 6). Furthermore, parents' meaning-making most often unfolded in a non-technical language and at times extended beyond the scope of BPNT triad of needs, as parents inferred about other intuitively meaningful motivations behind their children's emotions (Theme 7).

As a whole, the findings revealed a multilayered interpretive process in which parents attempt to understand and respond to their children's negative affect in ways that both meet their needs and support emotion regulation aims. In the next chapter, these empirical findings are interpreted in the context of relevant scholarly literature as well as the conceptual framework of the study. Chapter 5 will also provide a discussion of the study's limitations, offer recommendations for future research, as well as note several practical implications of these findings for positive social change.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how parents interpret children's negative emotions and whether their meaning-making implicitly includes an understanding of underlying psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as defined in basic psychological needs theory (BPNT), a subtheory of self-determination theory (SDT). Two research questions (RQs) guided the study. Firstly (RQ1), how do parents reflect on and interpret their children's emotional expressions during emotionally charged interactions, and what meanings do they assign to those emotions? And secondly (RQ2), in what ways do parents' reflections and meanings assigned to their children's emotions implicitly align with the concepts of basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as described in BPNT. In this chapter, the findings are interpreted in relation to these research questions as well as the conceptual framework. To organize this discussion, the interpretation of the findings is arranged into four interconnected sections.

The first section (Parental Interpretation of Children's Negative Emotions) addresses RQ1 and examines the interpretive stances and sense-making processes through which parents understand their children's negative emotions. I will demonstrate that these interpretations are contextually relevant and are based in situational and relational dynamics, consistent with research on mentalizing and parental reflective functioning (PRF). The second section (Psychological Needs as a Point of Reference in Parents' Meaning-Making) is oriented towards RQ2 by discussing how psychological

needs, both within and beyond BPNT constructs, functioned as implicit reference points in parental meaning-making as to the causes behind the child's negative emotion. In line with a critical realist view, psychological needs are treated as real motivational structures that give rise to emotional experiences and their observable expressions, whereas parents' understanding of those needs reflects interpretive constructions shaped by relational and contextual factors. Next, the discussion shifts to highlight the interpretive conditions that made attuned parental understanding possible. In this section (Interpretive Conditions), I discuss emotion as disclosure, variations in reflective depth, and the role of epistemic openness in enabling or constraining the parent's interpretive process. I conclude the interpretation of the finding with a section called Regulatory Effects of Interpretation, where I offer a conceptual integration that synthesizes insights across theoretical frameworks used in this study as a way to illuminate how parental sense-making supported emotion regulation outcomes.

Following this discussion of results, I review limitations of the study and make suggestions for future research, staying within the bounds and the scope of the findings. The chapter concludes with a section on implications where several points are considered from the perspective of positive impact and meaningful social change. Lastly, this chapter concludes with a brief overview of the key points from the study and a short reflection on its overall significance.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

Complimentary to PRF and BPNT, which are the two theoretical frameworks that guided the interpretation of results, additional conceptual tools emerged during the

interpretive phase. Since the research questions focus on the meaning-making processes of parents rather than on descriptions of children's behaviors and emotions, interpretation was necessary to uncover the underlying reasoning through which parents understood what was unfolding for their children emotionally and how to respond to them. As Braun and Clarke (2022b) note, interpretation of findings is iterative and is shaped by the researcher's deepening engagement with the phenomenon under study. Similarly, hermeneutic phenomenology acknowledges that new meaning becomes visible only through the interpretive encounter (Gadamer, 1960/2004; Heidegger, 1927/1962), which is consistent with an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm adopted in this study.

The analysis presented in Chapter 4 captured how parents oriented themselves toward their children's inner experiences, how they negotiated ambiguity and uncertainty, what regulation response they opted for, how they understood the causes of emotional distress, as well as what contributed to its resolution. These dynamics would remain invisible within a purely descriptive framework but they were able to come into view through an interpretive inquiry that acknowledges the meaning-bearing nature of life (Danermark et al., 2002; Lindberg et al., 2024). In other words, while my interpretive take on the results is grounded in the data, the additional conceptual extensions became possible through the conceptual interpretive lens of hermeneutic phenomenology and critical realist ontology. Since an exhaustive exploration of the broader conceptual arena surrounding hermeneutics of parental meaning-making and the phenomenology of emotional expression would not be possible to undertake in the space and time allotted to this project, I have intentionally constrained my focus to a handful of concepts that help

anchor this discussion of findings. The aim here is to make several interpretative points, necessarily limited in scope, with the understanding that these themes deserve a more extensive treatment in future work.

More specifically, consistent with my philosophical commitments, discussed in Chapter 3 and within the reflexivity section of Chapter 4, I draw on a small well-established set of concepts from Bhaskar's critical realism and Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology, both of which compliment BPNT and PRF psychological frameworks. Critical realism provides the ontological frame for distinguishing empirical events from the underlying generative mechanisms that shape them, and within the context of this study, these are mechanisms associated with psychological needs, parental interpretation, and epistemic stance. Furthermore, Heidegger's concepts of moods as disclosure of significance, understanding as intrinsically interpretive, and being-with as the relational ground of meaning, offer a way of articulating how meaning becomes intelligible within lived experience (i.e., why parents tend to encounter emotions as meaningful and respond to them interpretively). Additionally, Gadamer's concepts of fore-structures and shared horizon help point out meaning-making conditions in relational contexts. This set of concepts appeared to align naturally with the patterns of parental meaning-making evident in the dataset and, therefore, were utilized as additional philosophical resources to help deepen and refine the interpretation of the findings.

And finally, it must be noted that in this chapter quotations serve a different purpose than in Chapter 4. Rather than demonstrating empirical data tied to specific participants, as was done in the previous chapter, here quotations are used illustratively to

express synthesized patterns of meaning and to show the interpretive logic present across the dataset. As such, they are not attributed to individual participants but represent synthesized sentiments that reflect recurring meaning-making orientations evident across accounts. Likewise, when quotation marks are used to convey a child's perspective, they reflect mentalized reconstructions of lived meaning rather than reported speech. Since children were not participants in this study, these expressions are used to articulate the phenomenological logic of the parent–child dynamic visible in parental narratives, rather than to reproduce verbatim accounts. Furthermore, given natural variability in participants' expressive styles, this choice also reflects an ethical commitment to fair representation. By avoiding the repeated use of a small number of participants' accounts to bear the interpretive burden of illustrating complex patterns, they are protected from being called to serve as disproportionate representatives of the general patterns that are collectively present across the dataset.

### **Parental Interpretation of Children's Negative Emotions**

The first research question explored how parents make sense of their children's negative emotional expressions, and the findings of this study revealed that parents in this sample consistently approached children's emotions as meaningful and worthy of interpretive engagement. This aligns with longstanding developmental research positioning emotion not simply as a behavioral event but as a signal of internal experience requiring attuned relational support (Gross, 2014; Morris et al., 2007; Schore, 2016). As will be discussed, the present study extends this literature by showing that parents are not just reacting to emotional cues, but also actively engage in meaning-

making by constructing interpretations, revising those interpretations through affective feedback from the child and, guided by those interpretations, choose a regulatory strategy that aligns with their understanding of the cause for emotional distress.

Interpretation requires openness to the child's experience and, consistent with co-regulation literature (Nijssens et al., 2020; Rolo et al., 2024; Thompson, 1994), parents in this study treated children's negative emotions as signals that disclose something meaningful about the child's lived experience, something that required thoughtful attention and engagement from them. It reflects what Heidegger describes as the way that emotions disclose how the world matters to a person (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Children's negative emotions can, therefore, be understood as more than internal states: as manifestations of how they find themselves situated at a particular moment and as illuminations of what disrupts their ongoing engagement with the world. Parents described slowing down, observing, listening, and "trying to figure out what is going on" from their child's perspective and, rather than imposing predetermined explanations, they let the meaning behind the child's experience show itself. These parenting behaviors correspond closely to the attunement and presence described by Stone et al. (2019) and Zitzmann et al. (2024). Gadamer's account of interpretation clarifies why this attuned interpretive stance matters. As he says, understanding begins with "remain[ing] open to the meaning of the other person" (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 271). When caregivers approach a child's distress with openness rather than fixed assumptions, they are better able to hear "what the [child] is really saying" and adjust their understanding accordingly. This hermeneutic orientation underlies the intentional meaning-making visible across

parental narratives and aligns closely with the reflective position captured in PRF, suggesting that coregulation, beyond its behavioral and emotional outcomes, is also rooted in a shared process of disclosure and understanding. Invoking a critical realist perspective, Archer (2004) writes in *Being Human: The Problem of Agency* that “emotions are about something in the world” (p. 195), which reflects parental grasp of emotion as information about the child’s inner experience of the world around them. This mirrors PRF’s foundational premise that children's behavior is understood best by considering the mental and emotional states that underlie it (Fonagy et al., 2002; Luyten et al., 2017b; Malberg et al., 2023c). Even when parents, at one point or another, demonstrated lower reflective depth they still recognized that emotion “meant something” and that it required effortful understanding, which demonstrates that meaning-making is not limited to parents with high reflective functioning, but is rather a general orientation even though it may vary in depth and accuracy.

Central features of reflective functioning include curiosity, perspective-taking, tolerance for ambiguity, and the ability to differentiate between one’s own mental states and those of the child (Camoirano, 2017; Slade, 2005). As Luyten et al. (2017b) put it, “mentalizing refers to the capacity to think and feel about thinking and feeling, to look at oneself from the outside and at others from the inside” (p. 174). Parents in this study who demonstrated stronger reflective functioning tended to orient towards the child’s inner world by asking themselves: “What is she trying to do here?” or “What is overwhelming for him about this moment?” This mentalizing stance allowed them to move beyond surface-level behavioral descriptions toward interpretations in terms of motivational

functioning and deeper psychological needs. Developmental literature associates PRF with sensitive and adaptive responding (Camoirano, 2017; Huynh et al., 2024; Stuhmann et al., 2022) and the present findings demonstrate how that may occur in real-time interactions. Parents used what might be described as moment-to-moment interpretive reasoning, in which emotional and behavioral cues were combined with contextual knowledge into a tentative working hypothesis of causality. The regulatory action that followed was often explicitly anchored in that hypothesis (“If she’s frustrated because it isn’t working, then I need to...”). This supports the point made by Menashe-Grinberg et al. (2022) and Kungl et al. (2024) that PRF processes encompass more than stance and that they involve the content of interpretation.

As mentioned, parental reflective engagement with the child’s emotional expression aligns with hermeneutic views of understanding, which is conceived of as a dialogical and inferential process rather than an assumption of direct accessibility to the other (Gadamer, 1960/2004). Even when parents reported to be able to read the child’s emotion, the fullness of the child’s experience came into view from attuned inference about causality, a mentalizing process which is developmentally foundational for emotion regulation and emotion socialization of the child (Downey, 2001; Fonagy & Allison, 2012; Morris et al., 2021; Wingard, 2022). Yet reflective functioning and the quality of mentalizing are not always stable and can be sensitive to contextual stress (Edler et al., 2023; Fung et al., 2022; O’Neal et al., 2024; Verhagen et al., 2024). Consistent with existing research, parents showed reduced mentalizing in moments of fatigue, time pressure, heightened expectations, emotional load, etc. (Bennett et al., 2023; Khoshroo &

Seyed Mousavi, 2022), at which times causal inferences they made about the child's emotion were more limited, behavior-focused, or assumption-driven. This pattern in the data underscores that reflective functioning is a dynamic capacity, not a fixed trait. And while sometimes parents could access the perspective of the underlying mental states, intentions, and thoughts of the child spontaneously, at other times they focused on describing observable behaviors and what the child was doing while struggling to access “the why” behind it. As shown earlier in Theme 4, this difference in the interpretive stance and mentalizing capacity did not reflect a binary ability a parent either has or does not have, but rather appeared as a continuum of interpretive depth, which fluctuated depending on the context and the situational demands of the moment.

Notably, the quality of reflective functioning influenced whether parents were able to link the child's emotion to potential psychological needs, as demonstrated in Subthemes 3.2, 5.1 through 6.3, and 7.2. When parents more readily recognized the child's desire for autonomy, mastery, reassurance, or connection it tended to happen in those situations when they engaged in more sustained and reflective meaning-making with demonstrated interpretive depth, flexibility, and openness. However, as mentioned, reflective functioning does not guarantee interpretation accuracy. Parents' own mental state, or in Gadamer's terms, their fore-understandings (personal histories, assumptions, emotional activation, etc.) influenced how they interpreted children's expressions. Sometimes parents projected their own emotional experiences onto the child or rushed with solutions that did not quite fit the situation at that moment. This variability is consistent with prior research showing that PRF fluctuates across emotional intensities

and parental own states of mind (Cenușă & Turliuc, 2023; Edler et al., 2023; Luyten et al., 2017b).

Furthermore, the variability observed in reflective depth can also be understood phenomenologically. Heidegger (1927/1962) notes that our primary access to others is through their Being-in-the-world, which becomes intelligible only when we attune ourselves to the meanings that structure their experience. Parents who demonstrate higher reflective depth appear able to enter, however partially, into the child's experiential horizon, a process similar to what Gadamer (1960/2004) describes as the fusion of horizons, in which understanding expands through an encounter with another person's perspective. Lower reflective depth, by contrast, reflects an inability to move beyond surface-level appearances, leaving the child's lived experience partially concealed. These philosophical concepts help illuminate why differences in reflective depth produce divergent regulatory trajectories of varied effectiveness, and where the ability to "see from within" as opposed to from without affords access to the kind of understanding that is necessary for effective co-regulation. Coming to a situation with assumptions and being evaluative or judgmental of the child's expression (e.g., that a child "shouldn't be upset" or "should be more mature") also precludes access to the child's inner world. At other times, fore-structures can take the form of holding on too tightly to adult logic of understanding of what should or should not matter or explaining experience through cultural norms, unintentionally overshadowing the child's actual experience. In other words, when parents simply assumed, the imposed adult meaning obscured the child's

own disclosure, to use Heidegger's term, of how they orient towards the world and how they see the world orienting around them.

While overall consistent with PRF literature, in that parents varied in how deeply they were able to access the child's internal experience during episodes of negative emotion, the present findings extend it by showing that reflective capacity shapes what kind of interpretations are even possible. Meaning, parents who demonstrated higher reflective depth were not only able to consider the child's perspective more fully and consider motives and needs beyond immediate behavior, but they were also able to revise hypotheses when new information emerged and integrate contextual cues dynamically throughout regulation efforts. These moments could be described as seeing the child "from the inside," to borrow Luyten et al.'s (2017b) phrasing which captures the core mentalizing stance of imagining the child's internal world as real and legitimate, knowable and meaningful. In contrast, lower reflective depth produced interpretations anchored primarily in observable behavior, adult logic, or general developmental assumptions ("kids this age..." or "boys tend to..."), leaving the internal experience of the child partially or fully opaque. It is important to note that reflective depth is not marked by how well the parent described the situation or how accurate they were in detailing the observable behavior. In fact, as the data patterns showed, parents can accurately describe behaviors without accurately interpreting the mental state or the needs behind them. Furthermore, they can also effectively manage these behaviors while having minimal insight into the genuine motivations behind them, as was noted in several instances throughout the data (see, for example, Subtheme 2.3, where emotion is

understood as a signal for missing regulation skills). This variability in reflective depth, as described in Theme 4, is consistent with what Gadamer describes as the interpreter's struggle with fore-meanings. He warns that when individuals "fail to hear what the other person is really saying," they cannot integrate new meaning into their existing expectations (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 271). Several parents demonstrated this dynamic where initial assumptions about children's motives or feelings often proved insufficient, and parents who remained open and curious, rather than constrained by their own "accidental fore-meanings," were able to revise their interpretations during the interaction and improve their capacity to align with what was needed at the moment. This interpretive openness enabled the child's emotional meaning to become, as Gadamer says, "persistently audible," allowing deeper understanding to "break through what the interpreter imagines it to [be]" (p. 271). In other words, remaining open to revising their understanding allowed parents to access the child's experience while releasing whatever assumptions they may have had about it.

Interestingly, whether or not parents recognized the psychological need motivating the behavior and whether or not they were able to address it, children often took it upon themselves and continued to seek need satisfaction in ways they saw available to them. This is a significant functional marker, even if on the surface it may look like oppositional behavior or resistance to parental guidance and expectations. From a developmental perspective, such acts are significant in that they point at the child's natural tendency to be an active agent in their life and playing an active role in pursuing satisfactions of their needs (DeRobertis, 2017; Musholt, 2024; Sharp & Fonagy, 2008;

Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2023). This notable tendency is in alignment with BPNT and SDT position that basic psychological needs are organismic in nature, are intrinsically motivated, and will be pursued as a means of ensuring wellbeing and flourishing (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Ryan, 2023), which also aligns with the critical realist ontology of the real layer where the child's emotional expression is only the empirical trace of what is a deeper dispositional state that motivates action (Sayer, 2000). As Collier (1999) points out, "everything has a tendency towards the actualization of its own inherent potential" (p. 67) which is to say that organisms exhibit inherent tendencies towards particular forms of development and functioning, and one might reasonably anticipate that disruptions in these natural orientations would produce observable signals (such as negative emotion or behavior). In other words, the child cannot resist what is in their organismic nature to be and will pursue actions driven by these intrinsic forces (DeRobertis, 2024a; Welsh, 2013).

In this context, a child insisting on finishing a book before school may outwardly appear to be resisting transitions due to "not understanding time," yet in actuality the behavior served an autonomy-protective function: the child sought to maintain control over the flow and completion of a fun and meaningful activity, which was interrupted by conditions in the child's environment (i.e., having to go to school). Similarly, frustration over a sibling exiting the house first may be interpreted as competitiveness or irritability, while from the needs-oriented perspective the child's behavior more accurately reflects an underlying psychological need for competence as well as status within the sibling hierarchy. In moments such as these, the parent's narration did not reveal awareness of

the underlying need, yet the child's actions made the need apparent. The child redirected his own behavior (i.e., reading independently, accelerating his scooter to pass the sibling) in ways that restored internal balance, in spite of contributing to the external tension between his choices and environmental expectations. These examples highlight the distinction between what the parent perceives to be the case (reflective of the empirical layer, in critical realist terms) and what the child is actually working to achieve (i.e., actual layer of reality) driven by intrinsic forces of psychological needs (i.e., generative mechanism of the real layer). Consistent with BPNT's motivational position, psychological needs in this case were embedded in the child's behavioral and emotional logic even when not captured in the parent's explanatory logic. As was the case in this dataset, in some instances, even though parents acknowledged the child's emotions, they interpreted the cause of those emotions in terms of skill deficits, gender, or temperament, which illustrates an occasional conceptual gap between the parent's meaning-making frame and the child's experiential logic.

This is not to say that tuning into the child's underlying psychological needs will always change the parent's choice of regulatory strategy, or that they would adjust their actions in order to meet these needs immediately. However, their acknowledgement of the presence of these needs did contribute to the child's emotional regulation. This acknowledgement and validation serves an important psychological role of making children feel seen and understood (Asen & Fonagy, 2021; Frigoletto et al., 2022). Even when the parent chooses redirection or limit-setting, as was often the case within this dataset, the attunement that comes from recognizing the child's needs revealed a more

aligned co-regulation and faster resolution of tension. It also allows to recover accuracy in the interpretation, a pattern captured in Subtheme 3.1 (successful resolution depends on accurate interpretation of cause), which enhances parents' capacity to respond with meaning-sensitive guidance, even when setting limits, rather than purely behavior-focused management (e.g., "You really wanted to finish because it mattered to you," "You wanted to feel like you could do this yourself," "You wanted to be close because it felt overwhelming"). This is key for the child's wellbeing to whom acknowledgement of their deeper nature signaled that they are more than the sum of their outwardly expressions and behavior (Musholt, 2024; Sharp & Fonagy, 2008). This confirms previous research which indicated that co-regulation depends not only on what parents do but on how well they understand the child's emotional state (Holodynski & Kärtner, 2023; Morris et al., 2007). Furthermore, in the context of developmental literature that acknowledges co-regulation as bidirectional (Cenușă & Turliuc, 2023; Paley & Hajal, 2022), the present study clarifies that the bidirectionality is not only behavioral, it is also fundamentally interpretive. The child's response to a parent's regulatory attempt (relief, escalation, disengagement, etc.) becomes new data that the parent uses to update their working hypotheses. This mirrors descriptions in PRF literature of mentalizing as an iterative, curiosity-driven process that resists premature closure (Luyten et al., 2017b; Malberg et al., 2023c) and further suggests that successful co-regulation depends on the parent's ability to maintain interpretive openness long enough for meaning to emerge.

Reflective depth, therefore, appears to function as an interpretive scaffold that determines the accuracy of meaning-making, and as the present findings illustrate that

reflective capacity is contextual rather than trait-like and fluctuates across situations even within the same parent. Notably, reflective depth was a consistent co-occurring pattern with needs-oriented causal meaning-making and regulational aims, as is discussed in more detail in the Interpretive Conditions section of this chapter. Hermeneutic phenomenology highlights that understanding always unfolds within meaningful structures and, in this study, those structures were reflected in the psychological needs that parents invoked, explicitly or implicitly, to make sense of their children's distress. In this way, the interpretive processes discussed in this section sets the stage for examining how parents drew upon these needs-oriented mental frameworks when constructing causal meaning, which is the focus of the section below.

### **Psychological Needs as a Point of Reference in Parents' Meaning-Making**

The second research question examined whether and how parents' interpretations of children's negative emotions aligned with the three basic psychological needs articulated in BPNT. The findings indicated that parents frequently understood children's distress as reflecting something need-relevant, such as wanting independence, feeling incapable, or seeking relational closeness. This suggests that psychological needs functioned as an intuitive and meaningful orienting framework in their moment-to-moment meaning-making. Even though typically parents did not use formal BPNT terminology, their narratives often mirrored the conceptual structure of the BPNT triad of psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness), while also extending beyond it. In this section, the findings are situated within the BPNT literature and are

used to clarify how needs-oriented reasoning may be operating at the situational level of everyday emotion regulation demands of parenting life, as shown in the data.

BPNT proposes that autonomy, competence, and relatedness constitute universal psychological needs whose ongoing satisfaction supports well-being and adaptive functioning, whereas chronic need frustration is associated with ill-being and maladjustment (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017; Ryan, 2023; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2024). In parenting research, this framework has been applied primarily at the level of patterns of caregiving behavior, such as autonomy-supportive versus controlling practices, and broader environmental conditions that support or constrain need satisfaction in children (Bradshaw et al., 2025; Costa et al., 2019; Soenens et al., 2017; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020).

The present findings extend this research by showing how parents, in moment-to-moment episodes of distress, interpret children's negative emotions in ways that are conceptually compatible with BPNT's motivational core. When children became upset, parents frequently connected that emotion contextually to describe a child's distress as arising because the child wanted to do something their way (autonomy), felt like they couldn't do it right (competence), or just needed the parent to be there for them (relatedness). These interpretive statements resonate with BPNT-based descriptions of how children's needs manifest in everyday interactions. For example, prior research characterizes autonomy as children's striving for volition and self-direction in daily tasks (Costa et al., 2019). Competence was described as a desire to feel effective and capable of overcoming challenges (Gershby et al., 2023), and relatedness as the child's need for

warmth, acceptance, and emotional closeness (Arden et al., 2023; Cooke et al., 2019; Schore, 2016). Furthermore, Ryan and Deci (2017) define autonomy as the experience of volition and self-endorsement in action, noting that children express this need through their efforts to assert initiative, make choices, and act independently. Vansteenkiste et al. (2020) emphasized that competence emerges through children's desire to feel effective, to master challenges, and to receive optimal scaffolding that enables success. Relatedness, as described by Baumeister and Leary (1995) and elaborated in SDT (Ryan, 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017), is expressed through children's want of warmth, emotional attunement, co-presence, and secure connection with caregivers.

More recent BPNT and SDT-informed developmental work demonstrates that children's emotional reactivity often corresponds to moments when one or more of these needs are constrained (Fang et al., 2021; Grolnick & Learner, 2023; Joussemet & Mageau, 2023; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2023; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020), which aligns with the intuitive take parents demonstrated in interpreting causality in child's negative emotion. From a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, this intuitive parental recognition of need frustration reflects a basic mode of understanding as something grounded in lived experience. As Gadamer (1960/2004) articulates it, all understanding is shaped by fore-structures that make phenomena intelligible and whereas, as discussed in the previous section, sometimes fore-structures can obscure the child's interior experience, at other times they help illuminate it. In the context of need attunement, parents' implicit orientation toward psychological needs can be viewed as one such fore-structure. It served as a pre-reflective intuitive interpretive horizon through which the

child's expression became meaningful, which echoes Heidegger's (1927/1962) conceptualization of emotion as a disclosure of how the world matters to the person. Parents in this study consistently approached children's emotions as precisely these disclosures, where emotion was taken as a signal of what was at stake for the child in that moment. This pattern shows that psychological needs may serve as an intuitive organizing framework for parental meaning-making, even without explicit theoretical vocabulary of BPNT, and they used it on a situational basis where the child's emotions served as an indicator that a psychological need is momentarily constrained.

BPNT literature typically addresses the cumulative effects of need satisfaction and frustration on wellbeing over time (Ryan, 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2000) rather than making claims about psychological impact of each discrete episode of need obstruction or fulfillment. Patterns of need fulfillment are usually studied at macro levels across periods of days, weeks, or longer to show how the ongoing satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness supports psychological well-being and adaptive functioning, whereas chronic frustration of these needs is associated with distress, disengagement, and maladjustment (Ryan, 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Likewise, even though BPNT has been widely applied in parenting research, particularly in relation to autonomy support, scaffolding, controlling practices, and parental conditional regard (Cooke et al., 2019; Costa et al., 2019; Gershby et al., 2024; Grolnick & Learner, 2023; Murphy et al., 2023; Slemp et al., 2024), most studies that examine how caregiver behaviors promote or undermine these needs tend to focus on broader developmental contexts or measure emotional and behavioral outcomes across extended periods of time. Less is known about

how parents recognize specific need-relevant dynamics in real time, especially during negative emotional reactions of their children. And yet, as the present findings demonstrate, parents' practical reasoning about episodes of emotional distress often presupposes a similar motivational dynamic and its outcomes on a more immediate micro level of daily life, where they respond to signals of need frustration moment-by-moment. Therefore, the present findings extend this area of inquiry by showing that parents often treat negative emotion as a signal of something the child is needing, wanting, or striving for in the moment, as is consistent with BPNT motivational structure. Parents spoke of emotions as cues that "something wasn't working," that the child "wanted to do it independently," "needed to feel capable," "just needed mom close," and so on, which shows a tendency to interpreting negative emotions as reactions to the contextual disruptions to what the child was attempting to achieve, experience, secure, or maintain.

These intuitive interpretations consistently mapped onto the BPNT triad, even though parents did not use theoretical language to describe them. This suggests that BPNT's core insight (i.e., psychological needs represent fundamental conditions for human flourishing) appears to hold meaning not only at the macro level of long-term effects but at the micro-interactive level as well. This finding advances the literature by showing how the motivational logic of BPNT becomes operative in parents' everyday interpretive practices, even though BPNT does not formally describe thwarted needs in this way and the emotional signature of macro level impact looks different (e.g., chronic dysfunction or mood dysregulation) than the more spontaneous and short-lived manifestations, especially in children (e.g., spontaneous crying or momentary

withdrawal). This study, therefore, suggests that a situational application of BPNT's framework within the lived dynamics of parent–child interactions may be useful for understanding parental meaning-making and its connection to emotion regulation.

Furthermore, as the findings highlight, parents not only recognize need-relevant concerns behind the child's emotions, but use this understanding to guide their regulatory strategies. When parents inferred that a child's distress arose from thwarted autonomy, such as being overruled or not allowed to decide, they often responded by adjusting limits, offering more choice, or validating the child's perspective, in line with what BPNT identifies as autonomy-supportive practices (Costa et al., 2019; Grolnick & Learner, 2023; Mageau & Joussemet, 2023; van der Kaap-Deeder, 2021), as it manifests in the moment rather than as a general disposition or a parenting style. In situations where they understood the child's distress as stemming from competence-related struggles, they engaged in scaffolding, encouragement, and gradual increase of level of challenge, consistent with research linking competence support to persistence, confidence, and resilience (Gershby et al., 2024). In situations where parents interpreted distress as relatedness-based, they responded with warmth, proximity, emotional availability, and presence, echoing attachment-informed applications of BPNT that link relatedness satisfaction to secure base behavior and emotion regulation (Abidin et al., 2022; Arden et al., 2023; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cooke et al., 2019; Schore, 2016).

Furthermore, in BPNT research, need-supportive parenting behaviors are typically examined through quantitative associations. For example, autonomy support was found to be predictive of greater intrinsic motivation or better emotional adjustment over time

(Costa et al., 2019; Fang et al., 2021). The present study offers process-level detail about how these associations may operate within a shorter timeframe, situated contextually within isolated episodes of emotionally charged moments. Parents described what can be understood as a clear experiential logic, which is that once they understood what need was at stake, adjusting the interaction to support that need often led to visible decreases in distress. In other words, regulation occurred through need fulfillment as parents interpreted it, rather than through emotion soothing alone. This situational perspective complements and extends longitudinal BPNT findings that link need satisfaction to mental wellbeing, emotional flexibility, self-awareness, behavioral regulation, and resilience (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2023; Zhang et al., 2024). It suggests that, at the episode level, parents may be enacting a similar principle, albeit at a different scale. Particularly in moments where their level of attunement and mentalizing was high, they consistently treated negative emotion as a sign that something need-relevant was amiss for the child, and they regulated the child's emotions by addressing that underlying issue, not the emotion itself.

This does not imply that every emotional moment can or should be reduced to an algorithmic mapping of needs-oriented responses, but it does clarify how BPNT's motivational logic may get activated and become operational in parental meaning-making during moment-to-moment interactions. From the hermeneutic phenomenology lens, it is also clear why parental interpretations so seamlessly translated into specific regulatory strategies. For Heidegger (1927/1962), understanding is not contemplative but projective, which is to say that to understand a situation means to already see possibilities for action.

In other words, once parents interpreted a child's distress as connected to a frustrated need, such as autonomy or competence, the interpretation itself disclosed a set of meaningful responses. This parallels Gadamer's (1960/2004) insight that understanding always involves "application," meaning that interpretation is inseparable from concrete responsiveness within a situation. In this study, parents' interpretations opened a horizon of potential answers and possibilities for what would help the child regain emotional balance. Furthermore, the movement from recognition to response was swift, which further echoes Gadamer's point regarding insight (i.e., it gives direction and prompts action). Therefore, movement from understanding to action observed in parental accounts reflects a fundamental hermeneutic structure of meaning-making as being inherently practical. In other words, interpretations already contain within them a pathway toward regulation, and when it comes to needs-oriented interpretation in particular the regulatory pathway was, likewise, needs-oriented (as shown on Figure 3 in the next section).

While for theoretical and conceptual reasons, BPNT specifically distinguishes autonomy, competence, and relatedness analytically as separate manifestations of psychological motivations, parents' accounts showed that real-life situations frequently involved more than one psychological need at a time. This is a reality that Ryan and Deci (2017) also acknowledge as reflective of the understandable and inevitable complexity of competing motivations in raw natural settings, which echoes Gadamer's (1960/2004) argument that phenomena appear within webs of meaning rather than as distinguishable units. For instance, when the child reacted emotionally to a struggle with a task, parents sometimes interpreted the distress as coming from both a blow to the child's sense of

competence concurrent with a challenge to their autonomy (“she wants to do it by herself, but it’s too hard for her”). In separation-related distress, for example, parents often combined interpretations of relatedness (needing closeness) and predictability (wanting to know what will happen).

Understandably then, the natural complexity of daily experiences in parenting contexts complicates demarcation of psychological needs, given that few situations may be understood as straightforward episodes of solely autonomy-related or competence-related conflicts. Instead, the findings support a more interwoven understanding of how needs present themselves in everyday family life, with multiple competing psychological motivations presenting themselves at once. This reality is consistent with BPNT’s descriptions of psychological needs as mutually supportive components of a coherent motivational system rather than independent elements that function on their own (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Ryan & Vansteenkiste, 2023). From a hermeneutic perspective then, parents are attending to what stands out as salient in the moment, which to them is already intuitively coherent and thus requires no formal theoretical knowledge or technical vocabulary. Their interpretations and causal reasoning illustrates that psychological needs are experienced and perceived as overlapping experiential dimensions that require creative solutions when it comes to regulating and accommodating multiple needs at once. This balancing act aligns with the phenomenological reality of lived experience, as something that is not segmented into discrete motivational categories but appears as an integrated field of significance. Heidegger (1927/1962) describes human existence as “structured by care,” which is to say, that lived experience unfolds with a holistic space

where different areas of concern and significance may appear all at once and cannot always be teased apart into isolated variables. This helps articulate why parents frequently recognized autonomy, competence, and relational needs as not only co-occurring as part of the BPNT ecosystem of needs but also entangled with other psychological needs beyond the BPNT triad. Parents' occasional difficulty dis-entangling needs is, therefore, an accurate reflection of the complexity of lived emotional experience. Their interpretive accounts demonstrate a sensitivity to the layered structure of what matters in the child's world and, consistent with hermeneutic understanding, they embrace the richness and the ambiguity of that experience while trying to stay within the hermeneutic circle of interpreting and revising their understanding. The entangled complexity of competing psychological needs was not always the case, however, and at times it was easier to discern which need had the most weight, in which cases resolving the tension was more straightforward than at other times. Whatever may be the situation, parents demonstrated an intuitive use of psychological needs as a point of reference as their working hypothesis in situational need frustration.

Not only was the connection between negative emotional reaction and need frustration clear to parents, but so was the resolution, which they attributed to fulfilled needs. In other words, when parents discerned the presence of need frustration as causal to the child's negative emotion, they used this insight to guide their regulatory responses in order to meet those needs whenever possible. For example, when autonomy appeared blocked, they aimed to restore a sense of volition by offering choice or inviting the child into a shared decision-making. When competence appeared disrupted, they scaffolded the

child's efforts or broke tasks into manageable steps, and when relatedness felt compromised, they offered emotional presence, connection, or reassurance. This was a consistent pattern across the dataset and parents described these responses as directly contributing to the child's emotional relief, indicating their intuitive awareness that even on the micro level, need fulfillment serves as a regulatory mechanism that restores the child's sense of wellbeing.

These findings align with broader BPNT research showing that need-supportive environments are linked to greater emotional wellbeing (Martela, 2023; Martela & Ryan, 2023; Ryan & Vansteenkiste, 2023). Yet, once again, while BPNT typically examines these associations at the level of broader patterns and trajectories, the present study illustrates how need support operates as a moment-by-moment micro-scale approach to emotion regulation. Parents' reasoning reveals an implicit causal logic that if distress arises because a psychological need is hindered, then addressing that need should reduce the distress, and this is precisely what they conveyed. The data, therefore, provide empirical clarity to the idea that psychological need satisfaction is not only correlated with emotion regulation, but plays an important role in how emotion regulation is achieved in real-time.

In addition to autonomy, competence, and relatedness, parents also drew on a wider vocabulary of psychological needs when making sense of children's negative emotions. Parents used the same explanatory logic in the context of psychological needs they identified beyond BPNT triad as they did for the ones within it, with the same pattern of positive regulatory effects, as long as their interpretation was accurate and

matched the child's actual experience (as discussed in the previous section, Parental Interpretation of Children's Negative Emotion). Creating an exhaustive taxonomy of these additional insights into psychological needs is outside the scope of this study but suffice it to say that parents discerned various nuanced ways in which needs, wishes, and desires moved the child towards or against something and the emotional response it produced in them. For example, these included needs for predictability and routine, safety and reassurance, solitude and downtime, fun and play, creativity and self-expression, exploring and learning new things, as well as sense-making ("understanding what's going on"). Parents described distress arising when routines were disrupted unexpectedly, when the environment felt overwhelming, when children had insufficient personal space after overstimulating days, when they lacked information about what to expect, and so on.

Although these needs fall outside of scope of *basic* psychological needs, which BPNT defines as universal and inherent in all individuals, they are nonetheless psychological needs present in childhood and are supported by wider developmental literature as essential to child development and wellbeing. And while the debate surrounding the labels and categories of those additional needs is beyond the scope of this discussion, what is however important to point out is that these needs are understood in developmental literature as psychological necessities for the wellbeing and flourishing of children (Cong-Lem, 2023; DeRobertis, 2014a; Vygotsky, 1934/1978; Winnicott, 1971), and constitute, as DeRobertis (2017) put it, "dynamic, contextual-relational, and developmental aspects of psychological life" (p. 8).

While several recommendations have been made by scholars to include additional needs into BPNT's formal taxonomy, the authors are explicit in its criteria for what qualifies as a basic psychological need and what distinguishes it from other important psychological or contextual factors (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Ryan & Vansteenkiste, 2023). However, within the context of everyday parental meaning-making, especially as they navigate children's negative emotions, these additional categories function as interpretive anchors that help parents articulate what they believe matters to the child in the moment. These additional psychological needs, therefore, hold conceptual value for understanding how parents reason about emotions, even if they are not basic psychological needs in a strict theoretical sense. From an interpretivist-constructivist standpoint, the presence of multiple conceptions of needs beyond BPNT does not challenge the theory. What it does is it illustrates the richness of parental perspective-taking and interpretations. At the same time, it demonstrates BPNT's essential utility in that it may function as a sensitizing and orienting interpretive framework, especially when applied to moment-level parent-child emotion regulation, rather than a system of prescriptive and inflexible concepts. What does seem significant is that, regardless of whether the identified psychological need is universal in BPNT sense or is unique to a particular child's development, parents consistently used a needs-oriented regulatory pathway, which was effective in the context of three interpretive conditions, which are discussed in the next section.

## **Interpretive Conditions: Emotion as Disclosure, Reflective Depth, and Epistemic Trust**

Analytically, this section represents the point at which several previously identified data patterns converge to reveal something meaningful about parental interpretations and their regulatory outcomes. For ease of reference, when discussing these patterns, abbreviated labels will be used in place of full subtheme titles, as shown in Table 3. Across Themes 1 through 4, a set of interpretive conditions stood out as analytically useful for explaining when and how parents were able to construct accurate meaning about their children's emotional expressions. These conditions emerged inductively through repeated examination of participants' accounts and the patterns of meaning-making they revealed. More specifically, although Subthemes 1.1 (emotion as meaningful signal) and 1.2 (interpretive inquiry) demonstrated that parents consistently viewed negative emotion as meaningful and worthy of attention, these orientations alone were not sufficient for arriving at interpretations that accurately captured the child's underlying psychological needs. The findings suggest that a more specific interpretive pathway is present and plays a role in moving the parent from recognizing emotion as meaningful to grasping what specifically that emotion discloses about the child's inner experience in order to decide how to respond. In particular, the patterns captured in Subtheme 2.2 (needs-oriented regulation), Subtheme 3.2 (accuracy-dependent resolution), and Subtheme 4.1 (seeing from the inside, to use Luyten et al.'s [2017b] phrasing) coalesced around instances in which parents were able to interpret emotional distress as having deeper functional reasons.

**Table 3***Referenced Subthemes and Abbreviated Labels*

Subtheme	Abbreviated label
1.1 Negative emotion is a meaningful signal, an invitation to pay attention	Emotion as meaningful signal
1.2 Interpretive inquiry into the source of emotion	Interpretive inquiry
2.1 When understood as signal for co-regulation, parent offers support and validation	Emotion-focused regulation
2.2 When understood as signal for needs, parent takes action to meet them	Needs-oriented regulation
2.3 When understood as signal for missing regulation skills, parent coaches, redirects, or withdraws	Behavior-focused regulation
3.1 Child's affect serves as feedback loop for parental interpretive effort	Affective feedback loop
3.2 Successful resolution depends on accurate interpretation of cause	Accuracy-dependent resolution
4.1 Seeing from the inside and responding to the child's inner world	Seeing from the inside
4.2 Seeing from the outside and responding to the child's external presentation	Seeing from the outside

In this sense, accurate interpretation of psychological needs does not arise simply from attentiveness to emotion alone, but from a particular configuration of interpretive conditions that allow the parent to access the meaning revealed by the child's emotional experience. The data show that paying attention is only the starting point, and all the parents in this dataset not only shared this starting point (as shown in Theme 1), but also

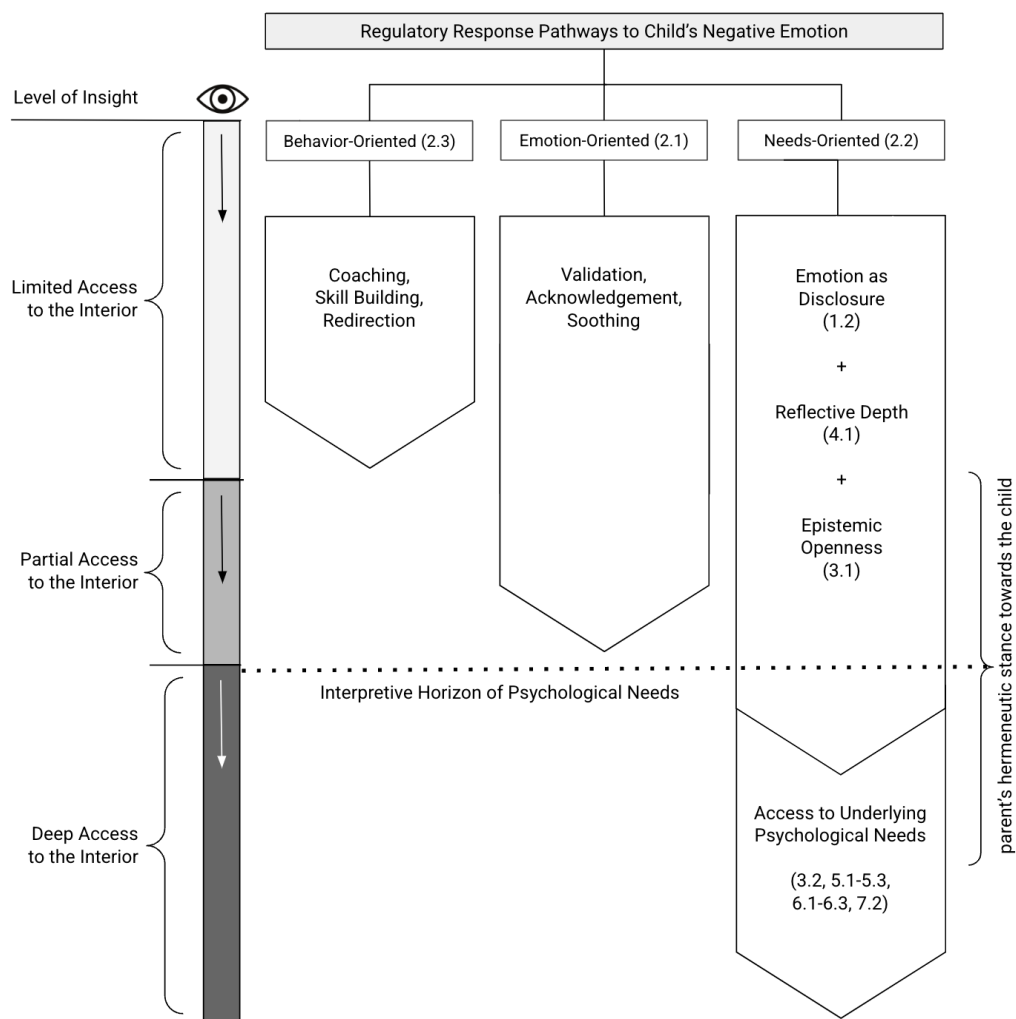
proceeded towards making an interpretive move that guided their response to the child (as shown in Theme 2), and this is where in some cases parents were able to access underlying psychological needs, and in some cases — were not. What differentiated needs-oriented interpretation (Subtheme 2.2, needs-oriented regulation) from other types (Subtheme 2.1, emotion-focused regulation, and Subtheme 2.3, behavior-focused regulation) is not whether parents saw emotion as meaningful, but whether they could achieve reflective depth and hermeneutic openness required in order to access what the emotion disclosed about the child's inner world. There were three conditions that consistently co-occurred in cases where parents accurately identified the underlying psychological need (both within and beyond BPNT triad).

More specifically, these interpretive conditions were as follows: (a) parents perceived emotion as a disclosure of the child's lived inner experience of a particular situation rather than just an outward expression or behavior, (b) they engaged the child's experience with sufficient reflective depth to access the child's inner perspective, and (c) they adopted an open stance that treated the child's emotional expression as a credible source of information about what mattered to the child (even if it was not personally important to the parent). Where one or more of these conditions were absent, interpretation tended to remain at the level of observable behavior or emotional expression, limiting the parent's ability to identify and respond to the underlying psychological need. These three conditions, therefore, appear to function together as the enabling context for the needs-oriented interpretation specifically, which differs from other causal interpretations and regulation strategy choice (e.g., managing behavior,

soothing emotion etc.). Figure 3 illustrates this variation in parental interpretive pathways.

As summarized in Figure 3, behavior-focused regulation pathway operates at the level of the observable and visible (i.e., empirical layer, in critical realist terms), orienting parental response toward what the child is doing and is, therefore, both prompted by and is maintained by the limited access to the child's lived interiority. Emotion-oriented regulation operates at the level of affective response, acknowledging the child's distress while remaining partially disconnected from its motivational source and is, likewise, both prompted by and is sustained by partial access to the child's interiority. Lastly, needs-oriented regulation operates at the level of meaning and motivation, interpreting negative emotion as disclosure of need frustration and is, therefore, both prompted by and is sustained by deep access to the child's inner world.

It is important to emphasize that, though presented as discrete analytically, these regulatory pathways are not mutually exclusive in practice. As the data in this study show, needs-oriented regulation typically incorporates emotion validation and often results in behavioral regulation as a natural consequence of need satisfaction. Likewise, emotion-focused responses may involve elements of behavioral guidance or limit-setting. The analytic distinction drawn here does not imply that these modes operate in isolation, but rather that they reflect different orienting principles through which parents engage with the child's distress. It allows the interpretive logic organizing parental responses to be analyzed independently in cases where one mode predominates.

**Figure 3***Regulatory Pathways and Interpretive Conditions*

*Note.* Three regulatory pathways were noted in the data patterns, each with varying degrees of interpretive access to the child's underlying psychological needs. Three conditions appear to facilitate this insight: perceiving emotion as disclosure of the child's inner experience of the world, reflective depth, and epistemic openness. (Numbers in parentheses reference subthemes that speak to these data patterns specifically.)

This distinction is also analytically important for the specific reason that it makes visible how the different depths of interpretive access to the child's interior experience shape the outcomes of regulatory processes, even though these processes may overlap in lived interaction. Furthermore, as mentioned at the beginning of this section, it was important to highlight the co-occurrence of three distinct interpretive elements, within the needs-oriented pathway specifically, which appeared to support parental interpretive processes. I will refer to these three interrelated conditions as follows: (a) emotion as disclosure, (b) reflective depth, and (c) epistemic openness. *Emotion as disclosure* speaks to a parent's capacity to perceive emotion as revealing of the child's inner world. *Reflective depth* concerns the degree to which parents engage with that world and ways in which they attempt to access the child's subjective perspective. *Epistemic openness* speaks to the parent's willingness to treat the child's emotional expressions as offering credible and meaningful bits of information imparted by the child about their inner experience. Although the parent's epistemic stance (i.e., epistemic openness) is the primary focus of this section, the term *epistemic trust* is also relevant in this context as an established construct within developmental and mentalization literature (e.g., Fonagy & Allison, 2014; Fonagy et al., 2015) and will be discussed concurrently.

Even though I discuss each of these interpretive conditions separately in order to highlight their individual importance along the needs-oriented regulatory pathway, it must be noted that all three share features of each other, depend on each other's function, and together support the parent's capacity to arrive at their understanding of the child's emotion from the deeper layers of the inner experience. I will draw on Heidegger's

hermeneutic phenomenology to frame emotion as a disclosure of the child's being-in-the-world and integrate PRF and epistemic openness as hermeneutic movements to explain variations in reflective depth as well as parent's openness to the child's experiential knowledge. As mentioned in Chapter 4, these interpretive conditions appear in the data as dynamic and situational and, therefore, are not reflective of static parental traits. They arise in the moment of interaction and determine how meaning becomes available to the parent. This view aligns with the interpretivist understanding of meaning-making as contingent, relational, and co-constructed (Schwandt, 1994; Yanchar & Slife, 2017). The sections that follow examine each condition in turn and consider how they work together to create (or constrain) the possibility of understanding what the child's emotion is revealing about their psychological needs.

### *Emotion as Disclosure*

Within the context of emotion regulation the word disclosure can be understood either as an external expression (from one person to another) or as an internal one (within oneself), both of which are important in a general regulational sense, but only the latter will take up most of the focus in this discussion. The first and perhaps most immediate understanding is in relational terms, which is that emotion must be visible, quite literally, in order for the parent to be able to understand what the child is feeling (some parents, for example, have even asked their child to look at them to better read their face). This is where emotion serves as a signal that can be perceived externally. Understandably, parents cannot interpret what is not seen. Children's emotional expressions (e.g., crying, withdrawing, protesting, tensing, clinging, turning silent, etc.) function as those visible

signs that the parents respond to.

However, this way of conceptualizing an emotion risks generating assumptions about what is known and visible and may result in a premature closure of the interpretive process, as has been seen in the dataset (see Subtheme 4.2, seeing from the outside). There is a subtle but important difference between responding to the visible signs of distress vs. seeking a deeper understanding of the child's inner world (the internal disclosure). Emotion as disclosure can be understood in phenomenological terms as making visible what is meaningful (Archer, 2004; Ratcliffe, 2008) and not just meaningful from an observer's perspective but for the child who is having the experience. Grasping this deeper essence of disclosure can help maintain openness to a deeper inquiry, which is of particular importance to the needs-oriented regulatory pathway. Seen this way, emotional expressions open themselves up to meaning-making, a process through which parents orient themselves to what is significant in the child's experience. As seen consistently across participants who used a needs-oriented pathway as a regulatory strategy, parents described attempting to understand "what is going on underneath" rather than settling on what they were observing.

From the perspective of hermeneutic phenomenology, human experience is never given as raw data but is always disclosed through expressive, embodied, and relational patterns that reveal how the world matters to the person (Gadamer, 1960/2004; Heidegger, 1927/1962; Ratcliffe, 2008). Tracing this phenomenological understanding of emotion as a way of revealing (i.e., disclosing) how the world is experienced "from within" (Heidegger, 1927/1962; Ratcliffe, 2008), a parent can begin to see beyond the

visible. And so, for example, when the child is frustrated because the toy will not do what the child wants it to do, the emotion is no longer perceived as just an expression or simply as a manifestation of the child's developmental limitations. Instead, it is first and foremost understood as a reflection of the child's encounter with the world. And even more so, it is a reflection of how the world disclosed itself to the child at that moment: as being different from what the child expected (i.e., "the toy should work") and being *indifferent* to how the child felt about it, unchanging as it is in its hard facts (i.e., the toy is not going to work until it gets new batteries).

So yes, emotion communicates, and yes, parents do perceive it as an important information-rich signal. However, in order for the interpretation to work, emotion must be understood as a specific kind of message. Not just generally meaningful, but meaningful about a specific something, and in a specific way, a way that is meaningful to the child. Many parents mentioned "reading" their child, but in the context of what they actually achieved in terms of interpretive depth, it would be more accurate to say that they truly *understood* what they were reading. This meant going beyond the visible signs of negative emotion and deeper into the essence of what that emotion spoke about and, in doing so, engaging in an act of what might be called everyday hermeneutics in Heideggerian sense, something a human being does simply by being in the world and trying to disclose, to make meaning of it through unconcealment (Wrathall, 2010). Through this practical, often intuitive, form of interpretation parents looked beyond what was visible from the outside (to invoke Luyten et al.'s phrasing again) in order to discover what was unfolding within the child's interior (even though parents varied in

their level of confidence, degree of consistency, emotional tolerance, or interpretive skill).

The conceptualization of emotion as a disclosure of the child's lived situation is consistent with developmental accounts of early relational experience. For example, Stern's (1985) description of the child as embedded in "forms of being-with" that are actively constructed and elaborated through relational experience resonates with Heidegger's concept of Being-in-the-world and of attunement as a mode of disclosing meaning. This phenomenological take provides a conceptual scaffolding that parallels Stern's developmental observations, as well as the more recent developmental literature on attunement (Malberg et al., 2023c; Schore, 2016). When framed empirically and relationally, Heidegger's articulation of ontological structure allows one to take the concept of relational attunement even further and to consider it as an invitation to attune to the child's own attunement with the world. The interpretive dynamics observed in this study support this conceptual alignment in that parents' attunement to their children allowed them not just to tune-in and be present, but to tune into the deeper layers of the child's experience of the world, as the world appeared to the child at that moment. Emotion, in this sense, is a disclosure of finding-oneself-in-a-situation, which makes visible the concerns and the personal meanings structuring one's experience (Archer, 2004).

Something else is important to note about this orientation towards emotional expression of children which is that emotional and psychic life cannot be fully understood through positivistic or mechanistic models of the mind (Walsh, 2021).

Instead, consistent with critical realist position, emotional experience is best viewed as a mode of expression in which truth (i.e., reality) is revealed, even as aspects of that truth remain partly concealed (Archer, 2004). This line of thought supports the central finding of this study, which is that parents engage in an interpretive process and regulatory strategies that align with what children's negative emotions disclose about how they find themselves in the world. As several authors have noted (e.g., Mills, 2014; Shoshani et al., 2023), Heidegger's account of disclosedness offers an invaluable corrective to psychologically reductive models of the mind. For example, Mills argues that psychic expressions manifest truth through their disclosive character, aligning with Heidegger's view that Being is revealed in and through affective experience, which may be visible to others through emotion expression. As he says, truth in psychic life appears as "particularized psychic expressions" that emerge from an "unconscious ontology teleologically motivated to disclose itself" (Mills, 2014, p. 269). In other words, it is expected that the child's encounters with the world will reveal themselves through emotions. Additionally, Mills's emphasis on disclosure-with-hiddenness helps explain why parents may arrive at interpretations that are tentative or partial, yet still attuned enough to support the child's emotional regulation. The parent's reflective stance becomes a form of hermeneutic engagement, an attempt to grasp the meaning revealed in the child's emotional expression, while acknowledging that this meaning may not be fully visible.

Shoshani et al. (2023) are also among scholars who note that positivistic approaches treat individuals as subjects to be measured rather than as beings-in-the world

and beings-in-becoming whose emotional life reveals how they encounter the world around them. This perspective, though written in the context of therapeutic practice, aligns with the findings of the present study, in which parents consistently engaged with children's emotions as meaningful disclosures of what is true for the child (i.e., as signals about the child's interior reality). And in those cases, rather than perceived as behaviors to be managed (external orientation), emotions served as an opportunity to help the child adjust to the demands of the world, by focusing on the psychological needs activated in that interaction (i.e., the child vis-a-vis the world). In this context, Shoshani et al.'s critique resonates with contemporary gaps in the child development and emotion regulation literature, where emotions are frequently conceptualized in functional or behavioral terms rather than as expressions of interior life and meaning. The present study's findings suggest that some parents already respond to children's emotions in a way that aligns more closely with phenomenological and hermeneutic frame than with positivistic models and, most importantly, achieve emotion regulation when following that mode of meaning-making.

From hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, emotions disclose significance in that they reveal what the person can or cannot do, what they fear losing, what they strive toward, and where they feel constrained or supported (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Parents in this study responded to this reality intuitively, frequently interpreting children's distress as revealing what the child was trying to obtain or to secure (e.g., autonomy, competence, closeness, predictability, comfort, choice, etc.). In this sense, children's emotions disclose disruptions to their engagement with the world. A frustration

when facing limitations, a blocked path towards choice and autonomy, a withdrawal in the face of failure, or sadness from being misunderstood or ignored by others; all of these patterns invite parents to explore beyond the obvious behavioral horizon and look into the child's interior. Welsh's (2013) description of the child as a "natural phenomenologist," someone who encounters the world in a pre-conceptual, pre-reflective, embodied, and meaningful way, is also fitting here.

Children do not explain their experience with the world, but they do reveal it through their emotional reactions to it. In this way, emotion becomes the mode through which their Being-in-the-world is made visible to the parent. This framing clarifies why parents intuitively relied on psychological needs as interpretive horizons. Needs constitute what is at stake for the child and serve as meaningful coordinates that structure the child's navigation of the world. As was noted in the dataset, when that disclosure was received, regulational aims could be achieved without focusing on behavior management alone, which children tend to resist. Approaching emotion as disclosure provides the ontological ground for parental interpretation and opens the interpretive space within which reflective depth and epistemic openness can operate. These conditions are discussed next.

### ***Reflective Depth***

While treating emotion as disclosure establishes the ground for interpretation, reflective depth accounts for how parents move toward the child's subjective perspective, and for that reason it too appeared as a consistent pattern in needs-oriented meaning-making. Reflective depth represents a dimension of mentalizing quality that captures how

richly and flexibly parents articulate what the child might be perceiving, feeling, or striving for. This concept draws on PRF and mentalizing frameworks (Fonagy et al., 2002; Luyten et al., 2017b; Slade, 2005) but extends them by emphasizing the degree of immersion into the child's viewpoint as someone being-in-the-world (and, in Heideggerian sense, having to face all its possibilities and limitations) and the parent's capacity to "see from the inside." Throughout this chapter, I have returned to Luyten et al.'s (2017b) formulation of reflective functioning as the capacity "to think and feel about thinking and feeling" and as a capacity "to look at oneself from the outside and at others from the inside" (p. 175) because it captures so succinctly a core analytic distinction that organizes the present findings. Across the dataset, differences in parents' interpretive processes consistently mapped onto whether they approached the child primarily from the outside or were able to adopt the child's internal perspective. This inside–outside distinction proved central to differentiating variations in reflective depth, interpretive accuracy, and the capacity to identify underlying psychological needs. As such, this formulation also functioned as a conceptual anchor for the analysis.

If, as discussed in the previous section, emotion discloses meaning, then interpretation becomes the parent's way of peering into that disclosure. In hermeneutic phenomenology, understanding is always interpretive because we never encounter another's experience directly but only through the other's expressions that require both inference and openness (Gadamer, 1960/2004; Rosfort, 2019). So are the parent and child, who do not share identical experiential access but enter into a relational space where meaning must be revealed through co-construction. The findings show that

sometimes parents engaged in precisely this interpretive work. They asked themselves what the child was striving for, what felt overwhelming or upsetting, what mattered to the child in that moment, and so on. In doing so, they activated the core structure of reflective functioning, which is the capacity to view the situation from the child's perspective (Fonagy & Allison, 2012; Malberg et al., 2023).

When parents demonstrated higher reflective depth they engaged in interpretive reasoning that flexibly considered multiple possible meanings, allowed them to attend to contextual cues, and to acknowledge with humility some level of uncertainty in their read of the situation. Their descriptions frequently included qualifying phrases (e.g., "I think she was feeling..." and "Maybe he was trying to..."), which signal awareness of the interpretation's provisional nature (Luyten et al., 2017b). This attentiveness aligns with hermeneutic take on understanding as a process of revision and testing that is guided by fore-structures that must remain open to modification if genuine understanding is to be achieved (Gadamer, 1960/2004). In moments of high PRF and evident reflective depth, parents treated interpretations as hypotheses to be tested through interaction and by monitoring whether their regulatory response resonates with the child's shifting affective expression. By contrast, when parents demonstrated lower reflective depth they tended to rely on behavioral descriptions, adult logic, and global assumptions about what is justifiable as the cause for distress, rather than exploring the child's actual lived perspective. Their interpretations were more categorical and less contextually grounded, which often led to incongruence which some children responded to explicitly ("you don't get me"). This aligns with research showing that parental reflective functioning is

context-dependent and susceptible to environmental and attentional demands, stress, the emotional load of the situation, etc. (Edler et al., 2023; Edler & Valentino, 2024; Fung et al., 2022; Malberg et al., 2023a; O'Neal et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2025), as was discussed earlier in this chapter.

Importantly, reflective depth is not simply a cognitive skill but a relational mode of attunement (Asen & Fonagy, 2021; Fonagy et al., 1991; Luyten et al., 2017b). In this study it registered as the parents' willingness to linger with the child's affective state and to tolerate ambiguity, while allowing the time it took for the meaning to unfold rather than foreclosing their meaning-making prematurely. In this sense, reflective depth, as noted in the data, is consistent with developmental literature, particularly when seen as a developmental mechanism by which children learn that emotions have intelligible causes and that their internal experiences can be understood (Bakkenget & Våpenstad, 2023; Fonagy & Target, 1997; Fonagy et al., 2002; Fonagy et al., 2007; Musholt, 2024).

In the context of this discussion in particular, it is important to note that reflective depth in this dataset unfolded as something that was achieved through an active process of patiently but persistently engaging with the child's perspective; not as a passive stance of "waiting it out," which is a different regulation strategy noted within Subtheme 2.3 (behavior-focused regulation). Achieving the kind of reflective depth that provides access to the child's genuine experience has been demonstrated in this dataset to be an intentional and active process, even though it may have unfolded over time and included initial mis-reads of the situation. A parent may have started out with a behavioral take or an assuming stance in regard to the child's experience, only to realize something else was

beneath what they were observing. So long as the parent did not stop the inquiry prematurely and adjusted their interpretive frame based on the child's affective feedback, the hidden eventually came into view; got disclosed, hermeneutically speaking. Inquiry, as used here, is meant in a hermeneutic sense of ongoing reflective questioning of the parent's own assumptions, asking oneself about what is being noticed, and what else may be hidden from awareness. It is not meant as persistent questioning of the child. In support of this reflective stance, Gadamer cautions that understanding fails when the interpreter relies too heavily on their own assumptions and does not remain open to what the other is actually sharing (Gadamer, 1960/2004, 1976; McWhorter, 2021). It was within this sustained interpretive openness that parents were most likely to arrive at an insight in regard to the psychological needs underneath the child's distress.

It is important to note, however, that assumptions are not inherently unproductive and that the initial set of assumptions can prove itself to be correct. The point is not to bracket them out completely, but to hold them flexibly and tentatively, ready to discard when not meeting the child's horizon of meaning. In other words, parents' *fore-structures of understanding* (Heidegger, 1927/1962) may be informed by contextual knowledge, expectations, relational history with the child, and intuitive familiarity with them and, therefore, may be quite helpful in achieving insight into the child's experience. In these instances, fore-structures do not block access to insight; on the contrary, they make it attainable more quickly.

Yet, knowing the child is also not a guarantee of reflective depth. As demonstrated in some examples in Chapter 4, even the best of intentions at times failed.

Knowing the child (or believing one does) may itself be the reason for premature closure even in the most supportive of contexts, infused with warmth and empathy. As research has shown, emotional availability and warmth do not predetermine mentalizing capacity (Luyten et al., 2017b; Sharp & Fonagy, 2008). When parental responses originate from general familiarity with the child rather than context-specific insight into the child, as disclosed in a particular situation, then even the most caring gestures may fail to align with the child's actual inner state and the source of motivational tension in a particular context. Acting from this belief ("I know my child") too quickly, a parent risks facing a paradox where what is known overrides what is being disclosed in the moment, resulting in concealment-by-familiarity (George, 2022). However, as seen in the data, parents are able to recover reflective depth if they suspend habitual ways of seeing and to look with fresh eyes not only at the situation, but also at the child — not as a familiar other, but as someone having their own experience of the world. The flexible knowing-not-knowing and the reciprocal movement of co-constructing and re-constructing the meaning of the child's subjective experience is central to hermeneutics and Gadamer's concept of fusion of horizons. It explains why the underlying psychological needs became visible to parents only when the interpretive stance was receptive rather than assuming.

Another central interpretive distinction that emerged from the findings as playing an important role in parents' capacity to achieve reflective depth is the difference between *noticing* and *insight*. All parents in this dataset demonstrated the ability to recognize that the child was upset, frustrated, hurt, angry, or sad. In other words, they noticed and acknowledged the emotional expression as present and meaningful. This

noticing often led to sensitive validation (“I can see this is upsetting you”), which is valuable in its own right and is consistent with responsive parenting.

However, in some instances and for some parents, noticing did not evolve into insight. That is, into an interpretation of the reason why the emotion was present or what underlying psychological tension it signaled about. Insight involves identifying the perceived cause of the emotion which, as Chapter 4 demonstrated, often points toward a frustrated psychological need. This distinction matters because whereas noticing alleviates emotional distress through validation and may on its own conclude the regulation pathway (as noted in Subtheme 2.1, emotion-focused regulation, and represented in the emotion-oriented pathway on Figure 3), insight on the other hand addresses the source of distress at a deeper and more fulfilling level by restoring alignment between the child’s needs and the environment. PRF literature supports this distinction, pointing out that mentalizing is not merely about identifying emotions but is also making sense of them through causal, developmental, and relational reasoning (Asen & Fonagy, 2021; Fonagy et al., 2002). In other words, reflective functioning requires moving beyond affect recognition toward a causal inference about the other’s mental state (Fonagy et al., 2002; Luyten et al., 2017b), which is a shift from identifying what the child is feeling to understanding why they are feeling it. In this sense, identifying or labeling an observed emotional state is differentiated from the interpretive responses to that state, which may include attributing meaning, looking for cause, or detecting the associated mental state connected to that emotion (Malberg, 2023c; Musholt, 2024). In other words, noticing an emotion (“He was sad”) reflects a basic level of mental state

awareness, whereas insight (“He was sad because he felt left out”) requires an additional layer of causal reasoning and mental-state inference. This theoretical distinction is central to how PRF is assessed and has been consistently documented across multiple empirical studies (Luyten et al., 2017a; Slade & Slead, 2024).

Distinguishing between noticing a child’s emotion and generating insight into its underlying cause is also important ontologically speaking. As was shown on Figure 2 in Chapter 3, from a critical realist perspective, emotions are understood as manifestations of underlying generative mechanisms (in this case, psychological needs) that exist independently of how they are experienced, perceived, or labeled (Archer, 2004; Luongo, 2021; Walsh, 2021). In that sense, noticing corresponds with attending to the empirical layer of experience, in which emotional expressions are observed or acknowledged. Insight, on the other hand, reflects an interpretive move toward the real layer, in which the parent seeks to understand the causal structure giving rise to the emotion. Differentiating these layers is as essential as differentiating between meaning-making and observations of behavior. If parents’ interpretations of children’s emotions are attempts to infer underlying need states (as the data suggest), then insight reflects an effort to access deeper causal structures not directly observable. Noticing alone, therefore, remains at the empirical level, whereas insight reflects a movement towards grasping the mechanisms that generate the emotional expression. This aligns with Bhaskar’s claim that explanation requires a grasp of causal mechanisms beneath empirical events (Bhaskar, 1975/2008).

Most crucially, perhaps, the distinction between noticing and insight is important from a developmental perspective for the specific role that insight plays in the needs-

oriented regulatory pathway. As discussed earlier, noticing may lead to an empathetic acknowledgement of the child's emotion, which signals partial insight into the child's interior, and therefore not make the child feel truly seen yet or fully understood in their experience. Reflective depth allows access to the deeper layers of the child's inner state in a manner that can reveal the needs behind the child's emotions and behavior. Without reflective depth, the real layer (in critical realist terms) would remain obscure.

When a parent is able to grasp the motivational meaning of the emotion (i.e., what is it the child is striving for, missing, wanting, or unable to obtain in relation to the environment), it carries developmental significance because it enables parents not only to soothe distress in the moment, but also to support the child in restoring a sense of agency and coherence. By understanding the child, the parent can help the child understand themselves and, in doing so, support the child's developing capacity for self-awareness and self-regulation. Put another way: whereas noticing regulates the child's affect, insight helps regulate the child's orientation towards the world, in a phenomenological sense. These nuances were visible in parents accounts which revealed a compelling outcome of not only helping the child feel seen, but also helping them understand to some extent why they feel the way they do and what can be done about it, which was especially visible in contexts where parents were able to supply that kind of narrative scaffolding for the child.

As noted in established developmental literature by Stern (1988), Winnicott (1967), Fonagy et al. (2002), and others, the experience of being seen is a critical developmental condition because, through parental recognition and mirroring, the child's

sense of self begins to develop, self as a being who exists meaningfully in relation to others. This form of recognition anchors the child's emotional life as real and intelligible. Parental insight extends this process by situating the child's emotion within a broader horizon of meaning and connecting the child's felt experience to their psychological needs and the contextual limits around them (as well as, the possibilities they come with). In doing so, the parent scaffolds the child's emerging capacity to orient themselves within their own inner world as it relates and responds to the outer world. The child relies on this knowing-other-who-sees-them to help them see themselves and to understand their experience. And even though the child may be the one with direct access to their lived inner experience, they may not have that access conceptually, which is needed developmentally for integration and self-coherence. The need for conceptual scaffolding echoes Vygotsky's notions of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) and a more knowledgeable other (MKO; Vygotsky, 1934/1978), as applied in the context of the child's understanding of the inner world of the self, not only of the world around the self (Taubner & Sharp, 2024).

Many constructs central to contemporary psychotherapy, such as mentalizing and epistemic trust (discussed in the next section), were originally articulated through developmental literature and later employed in clinical contexts. Their reapplication to typical parent-child interactions can be understood as a natural reflection of their origins. To this point, Winnicott's observation in his *Mirror-Role of Mother* (Winnicott, 1971) that "psychotherapy is a complex derivative of the face that reflects what is there to be seen" (p. 117) underscores the developmental primacy and necessity of being seen for the

formation of the self. In early childhood, the caregiver's attuned recognition functions as a mirror through which the child comes to experience their inner states as real and worthy of attention (Schoore, 2016; Stern, 1988). This mirroring does not just soothe the child's affect but supports the emergence of a coherent sense of self by confirming that the child's subjective experience exists and can be known. Importantly, Winnicott's comparison of psychotherapeutic processes to early parent-child relationships also clarifies why concepts developed within psychotherapy are deeply relevant to typical child development and can be introduced and revisited in the context of typical parent-child dynamics.

From that point of view, of being seen in a nuanced intimate personal way, reflective depth carries additional importance within the needs-oriented regulatory pathway. And that is its unique capacity to assist the parent in reaching an understanding of psychological needs that are unique and personal to the child. So not only is the parent able to detect the presence of basic psychological needs that per BPNT are universally experienced in all individuals, but also — and perhaps most importantly — the parent is able to see what is unique to their child, the way that their child moves in the world and the way their child, unlike any other, comes to experience it and respond to it (Welsh, 2013). Therefore, grounded in the developmental importance of being seen in a nuanced and personally attuned way, reflective depth allows parents to detect not only universal motivation forces of needs for autonomy, competence, or relatedness, but also to generate child-specific understanding of how their child in particular encounters the world in a particular moment, what feels constraining or supportive to them and what meaning they

make of their experiences. In this way, a needs-oriented regulation pathway serves as means of attunement to their child's singular mode of being-in-the-world, to use Heidegger's notion of always being uniquely situated in one's experience.

In this sense, reflective depth that achieves a genuine "seeing from the inside" constitutes a form of *epistemic* depth. That is, it gains access to the child's experience as it is lived and understood by the child themselves. In this dataset, reflective depth (i.e., the process of inquiry) evolved into epistemic depth (i.e., the outcome of inquiry) only when accompanied by epistemic openness. Epistemic openness emerged as another necessary interpretive condition that enabled parents to access the child's inner experience at the level of underlying psychological needs. The next section explores this third and final quality demonstrated along the needs-oriented regulatory pathway.

### ***Epistemic Openness***

The nature of the parent-child dynamic revealed in the findings highlights a complementary stance of *epistemic openness*, a construct related to but different from *epistemic trust*. In the context of emotion regulation dynamics, epistemic openness can be understood as the parent's readiness to receive emotional information from the child without prematurely dismissing or overriding it. It serves as the relational foundation upon which epistemic trust (i.e., the child's capacity to see caregiver as credible and trustworthy) becomes possible and is essential for accurate interpretive engagement with the child's emotional experience (Fisher et al., 2023; Jaffrani et al., 2020; Taubner & Sharp, 2024). Across participant accounts, epistemic openness emerged as the third and final necessary condition for the kind of interpretations that successfully reached the level

of underlying psychological needs. Where epistemic openness was present, parents were able to sustain reflective inquiry long enough to access the child's interior perspective and, where it was absent, interpretive efforts tended to stay at the empirical level of understanding, to use critical realist terms, despite the parent's demonstrated empathy towards the child. In other words, epistemic openness in the context of this study refers to the parent's willingness to treat the child's emotional expressions as credible disclosures of the child's inner experience and to remain receptive to being informed by the child as the expert in their own inner knowing, especially when that experience challenges the parent's initial assumptions. If *being seen* (as discussed in the previous section) can be understood as the prerequisite to epistemic trust in the emotional and relational sense (i.e., as an attachment quality of trusting the caregiver), then to be able *to see* requires the parent to adopt a stance of epistemic openness. Although epistemic openness (parent's capacity) is the interpretive condition of interest in this section, given its dynamic relation to epistemic trust (child's capacity), both of these epistemic stances will be discussed here to some extent.

Epistemic trust is also understood as the child's general sense of confidence that he or she is important and meaningful to the caregiver and that the caregiver can, therefore, be trusted with knowledge about the world and that "what the caregiver is trying to convey is relevant and significant, and should be remembered" (Bateman & Fonagy, 2016, p. 24). The child's capacity for epistemic trust is, therefore, especially relevant when it comes to the caregiver's effort in helping the child understand themselves and being able to trust and integrate the caregiver's insights about them

(Dollberg & Hanetz-Gamliel, 2023; Luyten et al., 2024; Malberg et al., 2023b; Nieto-Retuerto et al., 2024). In this sense, the caregiver serves as Vygotsky's MKO, but in order for the child to extend epistemic trust to the parent, the experience of being seen and understood by them (as discussed in the previous section) is paramount. Therefore, in order for the child to have a sense of confidence that the parent can be trusted to provide knowledge about their inner world, it is not sufficient for the parent to see the child "from the outside" and to respond to the outward manifestation of emotion. As the findings indicate, this level of recognition alone does not reliably facilitate regulatory outcomes, nor does it create the conditions under which epistemic trust is activated.

Empathic recognition (e.g., "I see you are upset; it is okay to be upset.") signals awareness of emotional distress but does not yet convey understanding of its deeper meaning. For the child to feel "seen from the inside," parental validation must reach the level of meaning (e.g., "I see you are upset because [reason]" and/or "It makes sense why it would be upsetting for you, because [reason]"). In the language of PRF, external seeing aligns with lower mentalizing ("He is upset"), while internal seeing represents higher mentalizing ("She is upset because her intention was misunderstood"). The latter is far more likely to be experienced by the child as relevant and personally meaningful, the criteria that Bateman & Fonagy (2016) emphasize as prerequisites for epistemic trust. Furthermore, parental response to the child's affect can be understood as a reflection of perceptual attunement ("I see your signals"), whereas validation at the level of meaning can be understood as a reflection of deep attunement ("I see *you*"). The latter allows the child to experience their emotional state not only as acknowledged, but as understood,

thereby facilitating the child's development of trust in their parent's capacity to know them from the inside (Fonagy & Allison, 2023; Malberg et al., 2023b).

This level of interpretation allows the affective feedback loop (see Subtheme 3.1, affective feedback loop, and Subtheme 3.2, accuracy-dependent resolution) to inform the parent whether their understanding aligns with the child's experience and, when it does not, it invites continued hermeneutic openness and interpretive revision (Gadamer, 1976), which is grounded in the parent's stance of epistemic openness towards receiving the knowledge that the child has about their own experience even if unarticulated. In doing so parents are able to access the nuances of what Tomkins and Eatough (2013) call the "psychological center for human experience" (p. 8). In Heideggerian terms, it is the distinction between merely perceiving an emotional display and understanding the disclosure inherent in the emotion. For Heidegger (1927/1962), emotions disclose "how one finds oneself" in the world. They reveal the child's disrupted possibilities to achieve autonomy, competence, relatedness, and beyond. If the parent does not interpret the disclosure, the child remains alone with its significance. Therefore, empathy without interpretation mirrors the surface of the disclosure but does not engage its meaning. This interpretive move from surface to depth (or, in critical realist terms, from the empirical to the real) is essential for epistemic trust because epistemic trust concerns not just whether the parent can comfort the child, but whether the parent can be relied upon to be the MKO about emotional life and to provide accurate knowledge about the child's inner experience (i.e., "Can I trust you to help me understand myself?"). The child's sense of being truly seen depends on whether the parent can name the internal logic of the

emotion (rather than simply supplying emotional labels, such as sad, angry, or worried) in a way that resonates with the child's lived experience, which may not always neatly align with adult logic. Hence why, as was seen in the dataset, parents at times wondered why it took so long for the child to "understand simple things," invoking their own logic of making sense of the world though not the child's. When the parents could not suspend adult logic in an effort to align epistemically with the way the child was experiencing the world, regulation efforts were less successful. At most, the child may accept comfort but not the meaning the parent offered, and some children refused to be comforted altogether if the parent did not also understand their point of view. This demonstrates how meaning-making and interpretation, as well as epistemic trust and its counterpart of epistemic openness, serve as the foundation on which regulatory capacity develops.

Winnicott's articulation of the parent as the mirror and his articulation of the importance of "the face that reflects what is there to be seen" (1967, p. 158) predates a later formulation of the concept of epistemic trust, yet at the same time it captures its essence so eloquently. If the mirror is askew, it is not to be trusted with what it is reflecting. But when a caregiver accurately mirrors the child's emotional experience, the child not only feels recognized but also comes to treat the caregiver as a reliable source of understanding about their inner world, the MKO in Vygotskian sense of trusting the one who imparts knowledge. In other words, in developmental contexts, epistemic trust is not limited to the child's openness to learning about the external world, it also includes trust in the caregiver's capacity to reflect (i.e., interpret and give meaning to) the child's internal experience.

This developmental function of being seen and trusting the caregiver to reflect what is seen was echoed directly in parents' accounts within the present study. Several parents described moments of successful regulation in terms such as "he knew I got him," while others recounted breakdowns in regulation when the child's feedback let them know they missed the mark ("you just don't understand!"). These moments reflect more than emotional validation. They point to the child's assessment of whether the parent had accurately apprehended their inner experience. Consistent with Winnicott's account of mirroring, these moments suggest that regulation was most effective when the child experienced the parent as someone who could truly see and understand what was unfolding internally. In this sense, the child's response functioned as feedback on the accuracy of parental interpretation, reinforcing or undermining epistemic trust depending on whether the child felt genuinely received and understood. In some cases, parents slowed down to integrate the child's feedback (as shown in Subtheme 3.1, affective feedback loop), and in others did not include it into a new interpretation (e.g., Subtheme 2.3, behavior-focused regulation, and Subtheme 4.2, seeing from the outside).

Why this happens can be explained by the concept of *authority*, which is something that epistemic trust inevitably circles around. In the context of emotion regulation, the question becomes — who is the real knower? Traditionally, parent-child interactions have been structured around a strong epistemic asymmetry, where adults are assumed to possess greater knowledge and authority, while children are positioned as dependent on adult interpretations of both the external world and their own internal

states. This asymmetry is deeply embedded in cultural assumptions and everyday social practices of parenting.

The literature on epistemic authority (Fonagy & Allison, 2023; Liu, 2022; Marková, 2025) demonstrates that social interactions typically position the parent as the primary epistemic agent, even in domains where the child possesses first-person experiential access, such as their own internal states. The conflict that tends to arise in parent-child regulational dynamics expressive of this epistemic asymmetry can be explained from a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective which helps understand that asymmetric allocation of authority is philosophically ungrounded in the context of emotional experience due to the very nature of that experience. Heidegger's (1927/1962) account of true understanding begins with the premise that phenomena disclose themselves to the one who undergoes them and that one cannot have interpretive access to what has not first been given to them in-experience. A familiar joke about a child turning to a parent and asking, "Mommy, am I hungry?" helps illustrate this point. The joke works because it inverts the basic structure of lived experience, since hunger is something disclosed experientially only from a first-person perspective. Yet it also reveals something deeper about how we often treat children epistemically: as uncertain or opaque, even to themselves. Adopting the stance of hermeneutic phenomenology helps position the parent as epistemically open to learning about what the child intuitively knows and experiences phenomenologically (Welsh, 2013).

So what does it take to create conditions for epistemic openness? One such prerequisite is epistemic humility. When parents adopt a genuine stance of not-knowing

(Bateman & Fonagy, 2016; Zevalkink et al., 2012), they suspend the position of epistemic authority, which creates the conditions necessary for epistemic openness. That is, the openness to receive knowledge from the child about their inner experience.

Another prerequisite is to adopt a default stance of seeing the child as a legitimate source of information about what moves them internally (even when they themselves may lack the language or developmental capacity to articulate that experience fully) and extending trust onto them, to be informed by them, about them.

It also must be understood that the child themselves does not explicitly assume the position of epistemic authority and does not work hard at maintaining that status. In other words, a child is not engaged in an effort to present themselves as more credible or trustworthy in what they spontaneously share or show, nor do they possess the capacity to enhance their epistemicity through strategic language use, the way that adults may in shaping their epistemic authority by relying on linguistic proficiency and specific lexical choices (Lev-Ari, 2025; Tantucci et al., 2022). The very form of children's emotional and nonverbal expressions reflects their limited ability to articulate what may be *the trouble with things in the world*, as encountered, let alone to manage how their experience is being received or judged by others. For this reason, the child's negative emotional expression functions less as an epistemic performance and more as a direct disclosure of lived difficulty. It is, therefore, the parent's developmental task to extend the courtesy of epistemic reciprocity and, just as the child trusts the parent with the knowledge the parent provides about the external world, to be likewise willing to see the child as sharing something valuable and real about their inner world (especially in moments of emotional

distress when they most need that understanding and acknowledgement).

That stance of being willing to see the child as the MKO (a role typically assumed by the adult) constitutes epistemic openness in the context of the present study and, with respect to emotion regulation, emerged as the necessary condition for successful interpretive processes which made it possible to reach the level of underlying psychological needs. When the presumption of epistemic authority over their own inner life is not extended to the child, especially when they are struggling to articulate their experience, the child may encounter epistemic injustice in the form of invalidation or dismissal (Frigoletto et al., 2022; Jurist & Pizziferro, 2025; Li, 2025). And if the child is rendered epistemically illegitimate and is seen as an unreliable informant of their own inner world (Fricker, 2017; Liu, 2022; Markova, 2025), it can undermine regulatory efforts in the immediate interaction, because the child's emotional signals fail to be taken up as meaningful information (Frigoletto et al., 2022; Li et al., 2023). When occurring repeatedly and consistently, this dynamic may also carry long-term developmental consequences for interpersonal trust, self-understanding, and emotion regulation (Bate et al., 2024; Edler et al., 2023; Kumpasoğlu et al., 2025; Morris et al., 2021; Schwarzer et al., 2025).

Although the concept of epistemic injustice has been explored most extensively outside developmental psychology, its significance is readily recognizable, as adults are well aware of what it feels like to be dismissed as unreliable or illegitimate knowers of their own experience (Fricker, 2017; Sarma et al., 2025). Recently, however, there has been a surge of attention to this epistemic dynamic in developmental and

psychotherapeutic contexts as well (e.g., Fonagy & Allison, 2023; Jurist & Pizziferro, 2025; Luyten et al., 2024). This emerging literature highlights clear conceptual parallels between epistemic injustice in adult contexts and, by extension, what it may be like for children when their lived experience is not received as credible, particularly when their testimony is conveyed through emotional and behavioral expression rather than articulated through sophisticated language. From a developmental perspective, epistemic trust and epistemic injustice are relevant precisely because they point to the same underlying relational mechanisms that can either alleviate or worsen distress. When a child's lived experience is disregarded, the child also misses opportunities to gain epistemically valuable knowledge about themselves and the world, a knowledge that is typically scaffolded through relational interpretation and feedback (Fonagy et al., 2002; Schore, 2016; Vygotsky, 1934/1978). This loss of meaning-making opportunities to create a sense of inner coherence constitutes an additional, developmentally significant, form of epistemic injustice, which is — a loss of opportunity to learn about one's self and one's condition (Liu, 2022; Sarma et al., 2025).

Thankfully, as captured by Schmidt (2015) with the term *modest nonconceptualism*, having a rich and meaningful experience does not depend on being able to grasp that experience conceptually or articulate it to others. Undeniably, despite the child's limited capacity to point explicitly at what matters about their negative experience of the world at a particular moment, the child does have an experience of it, a direct and personal one, and knows something about it that others may not. Their inner drive to flourish, as was discussed in the first section of this chapter (Parental

Interpretation of Children's Negative Emotions), can at times counteract parental misreadings of their drives and pursue what they feel matters to them independent of adult acknowledgement and validation, thereby not only satisfying their needs but also gaining more knowledge about themselves intuitively.

As Duncan (2021) puts it, experience generates knowledge because “experience has epistemic oomph” (p. 106), and it is only fair to perceive the child as the holder of that knowledge. Echoing this sentiment, in the dataset, many parents recognized that a child's emotional state is a genuine reflection of the child's need for connection and reassurance, desire for autonomy, or the sense of competence. This developmental sensitivity can be leaned on as a form of interpretive scaffolding analogous to Vygotsky's concepts of ZPD and MKO (Vygotsky, 1934/1978), wherein development is supported by a knowledgeable other before the child attains independent mastery of emotion meaning-making. In this context, the parent functions as that more knowledgeable other (MKO); not because they “know more” about the child's inner world than the child does, but because they possess the interpretive tools to help organize the child's emotional experience into meaning. Parental interpretation, then, is not just a cognitive act but a developmental one as well, as it gradually supports the child in their emerging capacity to articulate, understand, and eventually regulate their own emotional states (Joussemet & Grolnick, 2022). Seen from that perspective, emotional meaning-making becomes a shared developmental project of scaffolding through which the child's experience is gradually organized into intelligible forms.

## **Regulatory Effects of Interpretation: A Conceptual Integration of Psychological Needs and Emotion**

In this study, emotion is understood as a lived experience and was explored beyond the level of observable expression. With that in mind, terms “psychological needs” and “emotion” (instead of “emotion expression”) are chosen intentionally as conceptually comparable in scope and reflective of that inquiry. In other words, both refer to underlying psychological phenomena (i.e., internal states) and both operate at a similar level of abstraction (i.e., motivational and affective processes) with similar developmental and regulatory implications, which allows for their integration at similar levels of analysis, categorically speaking. Even though “emotion expression” may be the conventional developmental term for the behavioral cues through which emotion becomes visible, the findings of this study show that parents regulate not only what they see but also what they do not see and yet what becomes accessible to them through their understanding of the meaning in the child’s emotional experience.

The purpose of this section is to attempt a conceptual integration by synthesizing the findings into one account of how parental interpretation achieves a regulatory effect within parent–child emotion regulation dynamics. This conceptual integration allows to bring together established frameworks (PRF, BPNT, epistemic trust, hermeneutic phenomenology, and critical realism) to illuminate how interpretation serves a regulatory influence over children’s emotional experience as a whole, not only its visible manifestation. As has been discussed throughout this chapter, when taken together, the findings suggest that the needs-oriented meaning-making in particular may serve as a

reliable interpretive pathway for supporting children's emotion regulation. When parents organized their interpretations around the child's underlying psychological needs, whether autonomy, competence, relatedness, or additional context-specific psychological needs, they were more likely to generate explanations that resonated with the child's internal experience. This interpretive "fit" appeared to reduce distress and strengthen the sense that the parent understood what was truly at stake for the child. Because emotions often arise from need frustration, intuitively situating meaning-making within this motivational structure allowed parents to address the root of the child's distress rather than only its behavioral expression. In this way, needs-oriented interpretation appears to operate as a regulative parenting resource. It oriented parents toward the aspects of the situation most relevant to the child's well-being and supported regulatory outcomes more consistently than strategies that were based solely on behavior management or cognitive reframing (as discussed in Subtheme 2.3, behavior-focused regulation).

Within an interpretivist–constructivist paradigm, understanding is generated by situating empirical patterns within the conceptual lens that makes them intelligible (Braun & Clarke, 2022b). As Keestra and Dieleman (2025) point out, scientific inquiry adds value to the field by articulating coherent connections between already existing frameworks, which may be utilized concurrently to clarify how meaning emerges within lived experience. Aligned with this orientation, the conceptual integration offered here aims to make visible how conceptual and theoretical perspectives, when considered together, can shed light on the interpretive processes parents employ when making sense of children's negative emotions. Furthermore, consistent with interpretivist-constructivist

orientation, engaging in conceptual integration does not imply that the researcher highlights particular frameworks as more correct or more comprehensive than others. Instead, it serves as a form of acknowledgement that understanding develops through an organization and contextualization of concepts already present in the field in a way that adds a new perspective, not only to the frameworks but also to the phenomenon they are collectively utilized to describe (Danermark et al., 2002). Furthermore, by bringing existing ideas into new relational configurations, the researcher also articulates their own conceptual background and interpretive stance (Crowther & Thomson, 2020; van der Walt, 2020). From this perspective, integrating concepts from PRF, BPNT, epistemic trust, hermeneutic phenomenology, and critical realism is meant to accomplish just that, to clarify how interpretation regulates emotion by orienting parents toward the underlying motivational and experiential conditions that give rise to distress. Within a critical realist framework, these conditions can be understood as generative mechanisms that shape emotional experience without being directly observable at the level of behavior (Sayer, 2000) but that could be acted upon indirectly through interpretive engagement and the use of needs-oriented regulatory responses, as was demonstrated by the parents in this study.

Furthermore, this integration is useful for several interrelated conceptual reasons. To begin with, each framework used to interpret the findings captures an essential but partial aspect of parental meaning-making. For example, PRF describes how parents infer children's internal states but does not specify the motivational content of those states. BPNT, on the other hand, outlines the central role of psychological needs but does not

clarify how caregivers recognize or interpret need frustration in real time of engaging with the world moment-by-moment. And while epistemic trust provides a relational account of openness to interpersonal information, it has seldom been applied to how parents receive emotional signals from their children. And finally, while hermeneutic phenomenology offers context for understanding emotion as disclosure and frames interpretation as situated, its practical relevance to everyday parenting and emotion regulation of children has rarely been articulated. By bringing these perspectives together, this conceptual integration provides a coordinated view of how all of these processes jointly contribute to the parent's ability to understand, respond to, and co-regulate children's emotional experiences. The goal of this section, therefore, is to articulate a structured way of understanding how emotion, needs, interpretation, and epistemic openness function together as a meaning-making system within parent-child interactions, while at the same time illuminate the interpretive processes that naturally unfolded during the interpretation of these findings.

This synthesis is presented in Figure 4 to demonstrate how these frameworks, when considered together, shed light on the needs-oriented regulatory pathway through which parents discerned the psychological needs revealed through negative emotion and then responded in ways that regulated it. From a critical realist perspective, regulating emotion is not the same as managing its expression because emotion as a lived experience is understood as a stratified phenomenon (Walsh, 2021), which can be experienced at different levels of ontological depth (i.e., in critical realist terms, the domains of the real, the actual, and the empirical, as shown on Figures 1 and 2 in Chapter

3). Emotional expressions belong to the empirical layer of experience, the domain of observable behavioral cues through which an underlying emotional state becomes visible to the parent. Yet, as Archer (2004) argues, emotions themselves belong to a deeper ontological register and they are *about* something, referring to the child's position in the world and signaling shifts in what matters to them. Managing expression, therefore, modifies only the empirical manifestation of emotion, while leaving the underlying generative conditions (e.g., blocked autonomy, diminished competence, or threatened relatedness) unchanged. Regulating emotion holistically, by contrast, requires engaging with these deeper causal structures and involves interpreting what the emotion discloses. Identifying the need-relevant meaning it reveals and responding to it in ways that transform the actual generating conditions is what allows to resolve distress at the level of the child's interior, not only their outward expression. In this sense, ontologically speaking, regulation operates at the real and the actual layers of the emotional event, whereas managing expression operates only at the empirical layer. The findings of this study demonstrate that parents who interpret emotional signals as meaningful disclosures beyond the visible act on these deeper levels, leading to regulatory outcomes that are more coherent, stable, and developmentally productive than responses that aim solely at behavioral containment.

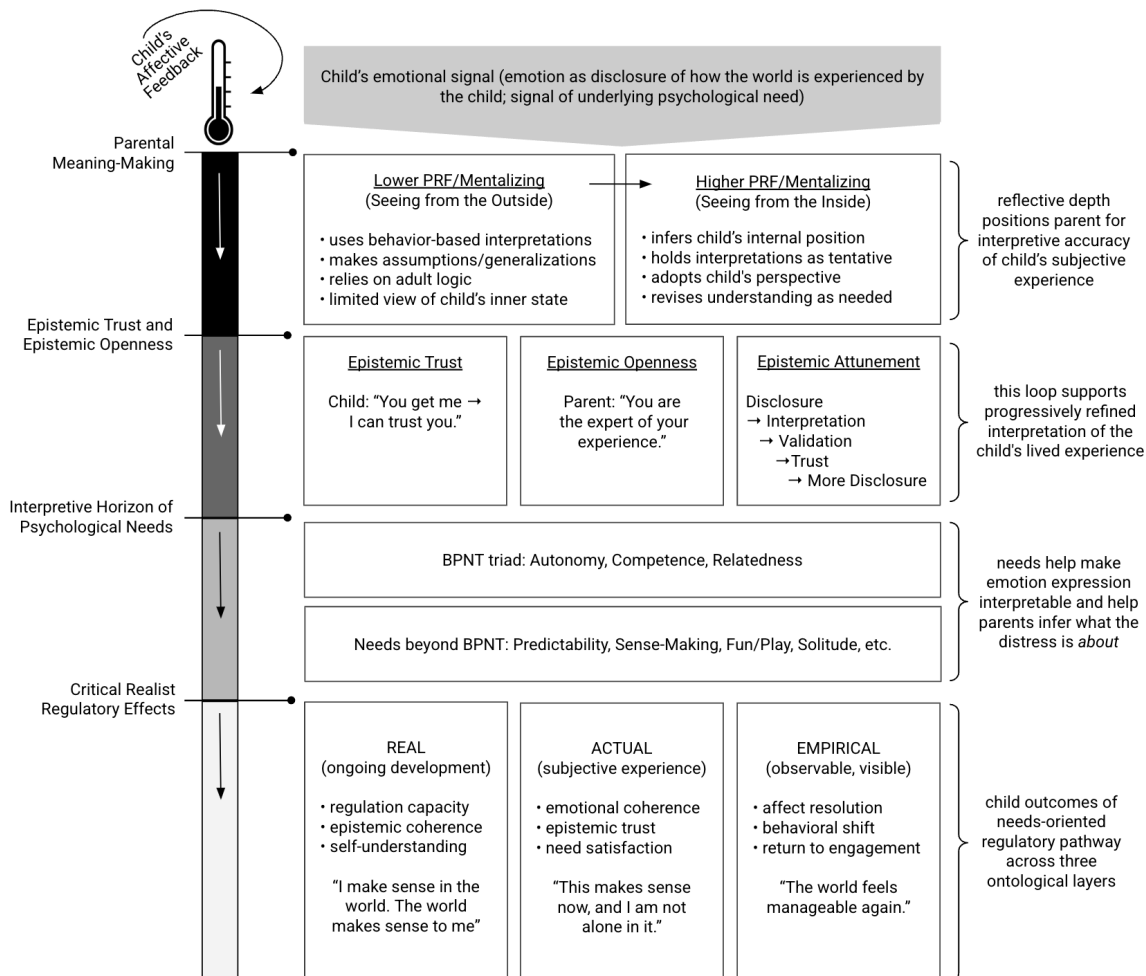
As demonstrated in Figure 4, the needs-oriented regulatory pathway begins with mentalizing. PRF offers the psychological mechanism that explains how parents engage in this interpretive process and conceptualizes the ability to understand behavior as expressive of mental states. The findings show that PRF is not simply a cognitive

inference but an interpretive attunement characterized by openness, curiosity, and epistemic trust. Many parents moved flexibly between noticing and insight, shifting from surface-level recognition to deeper inference about the child's subjective experience. This hermeneutic movement from expression to meaning facilitated shared understanding of the underlying tensions that gave rise to emotion. In this sense, PRF and epistemic openness help articulate the hermeneutic circle in everyday regulation demands of the child's emotional life, where parents begin with a partial understanding of the child's distress, test interpretations against the child's reactions, revise their understanding, and co-construct meaning through iterative engagement.

Additionally, BPNT assists this interpretive process by illuminating basic psychological needs that emotions may point toward. BPNT posits that all humans possess innate psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and that these needs shape motivation, behavior, emotion, and well-being. When children experience frustration or distress, these emotional expressions signal a misalignment between the environment and one or more of these needs. The findings of this study demonstrate that parents intuitively sense this connection, not only when it comes to the three basic psychological needs of BPNT, but also beyond it, detecting psychological needs that may be less universal but nonetheless significant in their child's motivational processes. Here too, parental meaning-making continues to be hermeneutic in nature as they attempt to interpret emotional expressions through an implicit understanding of what the child needs in order to feel capable, connected, balanced, and agentic.

**Figure 4**

*Regulatory Effects of Interpretation, Conceptual Integration*



*Note.* Conceptual representation of the study's empirical findings, conceptually integrated with PRF, BPNT, epistemic openness, hermeneutic phenomenology, and a critical realist perspective to illustrate the regulatory effects of needs-oriented parental interpretation, and related child outcomes across ontological layers (real, actual, and empirical).

As shown on Figure 4, the outcome of needs-oriented regulatory pathway, when considered from the critical realist perspective, maps across three ontological layers: the empirical (at the level of the observable), the actual (at the level of subjective experience), and the real (deeper layers of ongoing development). In other words, whereas the outcomes of regulatory efforts may be accessible to the parent through the visible shifts in the child's affect and behavior, there are also felt changes that are experienced subjectively by the child as a result of regulatory effects. Meaning, in addition to how the child looks "on the outside," there is also a shift in their world "on the inside," of which the child is experientially aware (implicitly and/or explicitly). At the same time, invisible to both the parent and the child, other deeper processes play out as a result of emotion regulation which cumulatively lead to developmental outcomes not immediately sensed or observed, such as the child's capacity to develop self-regulation skills, self-understanding, and a sense of agency in the world. The critical realist framework, therefore, is conceptually useful in capturing why accurate interpretation of psychological needs leads to a more effective co-regulation (i.e., the parent is responding at the correct causal level). Although parents' interpretations may occur at the empirical layer as the one accessible to them, the accuracy and effectiveness of that interpretation depend on whether they infer the real underlying cause from its expression.

This conceptual integration also clarifies why parents may interpret the same emotion or behavior differently, and why some interpretations help restore emotional balance while others unintentionally exacerbate distress. Finally, as captured in Figure 4, parenting can be understood as a fundamentally ontological practice, in which adults

respond not just to behaviors but to *the being* of the child with its needs, vulnerabilities, possibilities, and emerging agency. Parents interpret the child's emotional expressions as manifestations of what the child requires in order to remain internally coherent and be capable of flourishing into what they are meant to be. Through this interpretive labor, they contribute to the formation of the child's self-understanding: how emotions are processed, what meaning can be made from the inner experience, and how needs and motivations orient the child within and towards the world.

### **Limitations of the Study**

As is common in qualitative research, this study is constrained by several factors. Methodological and contextual limitations, therefore, must be acknowledged in order to situate the findings accurately and to help clarify the scope within which interpretations can be made. Firstly, the study utilized a small ( $N = 14$ ) purposive sample of parents recruited through online platforms, which may have resulted in a participant group with particular demographic or experiential characteristics. Parents who had volunteered to discuss their children's emotions may possess higher levels of interest or insight regarding emotional and relational processes than the general population. Although this context provided rich, nuanced data, the findings should not be assumed to be generalizable to all families or across cultural settings.

Secondly, limitations concerning the reliance on retrospective accounts of parenting interactions must be acknowledged. Parents reconstructed past episodes from memory, and their narratives were necessarily shaped by selective recall, their current understanding of a past situation, and both the emotional and the reflective distance from

the original event. This distinction aligns with the study's hermeneutic focus but should be taken into account when interpreting the findings because, even though retrospective narration can enrich meaning-making, it may also obscure spontaneous reactions and in-the-moment interpretations, which were not part of this study. In this context, the study's interpretivist-constructivist paradigm poses another limitation. While this orientation aligns closely with the study's aims, in positioning meaning-making as co-constructed between participant and researcher, it also means that the findings reflect interpretive judgments shaped by my theoretical commitments and engagement with the data. Although reflexive practices were used throughout data collection and analysis, no qualitative interpretation is neutral or theory-free.

### **Recommendations**

The findings of this study highlight several avenues for further inquiry that would deepen our understanding of how parents interpret children's emotions and how these interpretations relate to psychological needs. Future research can build on the interpretive, theoretical, and methodological contributions of the present study by incorporating additional perspectives, methods, and developmental contexts. For example, a natural extension of the present findings would be a phenomenological study that allows to explore parental meaning-making as a process, as opposed to its content, as was the angle of this study. Given that, in addition to the interpretations of the child's inner experiences, the analysis of parents' descriptions also revealed elements of the process itself of constructing those interpretations, it would be useful to explore the phenomenology aspect of arriving at the kind of interpretation that appeared to have a

positive regulatory effect on the child's negative emotion. A phenomenological approach would supplement our understanding of how parents know what they think they know about the child's emotion, and it would allow researchers to ask questions such as what experiential cues do parents rely on and how do they decide whether an interpretation "fits" the child's experience. Although some of these aspects were interpretively illuminated through analysis, the scope and structure of this study did not allow for the opportunity to pose those questions to the parents themselves. Furthermore, the variability in mentalizing capacity and reflective depth is an important area of exploration, especially given the findings that the same parents were more attuned with the child at some moments and less so in others.

### **Implications**

Several implications arise from this study's findings that have the potential to contribute to positive social change. The interpretive patterns identified in this study offer several practical implications for parents, caregivers, educators, and mental health practitioners, and are applicable across developmental contexts that support children's emotional development and regulation skills. Although the purpose of qualitative research is not to generate direct prescriptions, the findings suggest that parents' interpretive stance plays a significant role in the child's experience of emotion and, therefore, can be taken into consideration when designing programs and interventions. Given the applied relevance of the findings to everyday parenting contexts, a plain language summary is included in Appendix E with the goal of providing a nontechnical synthesis to interested audiences beyond academia.

To begin with, the findings of this study suggest that parents naturally employ intuitive hermeneutic processes with the help of which they tune into how their children encounter the world, especially when those encounters are upsetting or frustrating in one way or another. Theoretical models such as BPNT and PRF can support this process when used as tools that expand parental understanding and reaffirm some of the practices they already engage in intuitively. These tools can be helpful in enriching parental interpretive repertoire, especially in those contexts where parents feel challenged by the child's emotions and behavior. Conceptual grasp of psychological principles behind these outwardly expressions of distress can help parents understand emotion regulation with greater nuance while, at the same time, remaining anchored in their child's unique lived experience and honoring their individual needs.

When parents consistently approach children's emotional expressions as disclosures of need-relevant experiences, children gradually internalize a sense that their feelings are intelligible, valid, and worthy of attention. This experience supports the development of a coherent sense of agency. Children learn that their emotions provide actionable information about what matters to them and how to navigate their world when things feel frustrating or overwhelming. Therefore, meaning-rich emotion regulation becomes a source of knowledge about their needs and possibilities in regards to resources of meeting them. In contrast, when emotional disclosures are dismissed or overridden, misunderstood or inconsistently interpreted, children may learn to distrust their own experiential signals, which can undermine the development of self-understanding, agency, and epistemic trust in themselves and others. In this way, accurate parental

interpretation contributes directly to the child's developing sense of self and sense of agency.

Given this significance, the importance of helping parents view children's emotions not as behaviors to be managed but as signals that point toward underlying needs cannot be underestimated. While for some parents the hermeneutic stance of reading the child's emotions is intuitive, for others it may not be as accessible and may need to be taught or demonstrated. Yet, since parents in this study consistently approached emotions as meaningful, even when their interpretations were incomplete or not quite accurate, parenting interventions can specifically build on this intuitive orientation of wanting to alleviate the child's distress. Psychoeducation that demystifies emotion and presents it as specific and accessible information about the child's state of mind, can reframe the way parents see their role and capacity to understand the child and the causes beneath negative emotion. When parents understand that a child's negative emotions often signal about challenges to their autonomy, frustration with competence, or about perceived threat to relational security, they may become better equipped to respond sensitively and constructively, and know where to look for solutions (i.e., by restoring need satisfaction rather than purely focusing on managing behavior). This need-oriented framing moves beyond reactive behavior management toward a more coherent developmental approach that aligns with both PRF and BPNT and, therefore, can be integrated into parenting programs.

Consistent with previous research, the findings show that parental reflective functioning is not a stable trait, one either has or does not have, but rather a capacity

parents can develop and strengthen over time. Integrating phenomenologically and hermeneutically informed practice of curiosity and openness into parenting programs that already promote reflective capacities, such as mentalizing-based approaches, may be particularly beneficial in expanding a parent's own interpretive horizon and giving them new tools of inquiry. For example, in these programs more emphasis could be given to aspects of regulation such as adopting a stance of “not-knowing,” checking assumptions, considering multiple possible meanings for a child’s behavior, and resisting premature closure. As was evident in this study and is consistent with previous research, when parents are able to access higher levels of mentalizing, they are also able to access deeper layers of their child’s experience and, by extension, better understand the underlying needs. Learning more about the child’s psychological needs (both basic psychological needs as described by BPNT but also, beyond that, the needs that may be unique to their child), can help parents better understand what to look for when emotional tension rises and encourage them to not only to get to know their child but also to trust their own intuition. As was demonstrated in this study, parents described needs that extend beyond BPNT’s universal triad. They spoke of needs such as predictability, clarity, solitude, creative expression, exploring and learning new things, as well as comfort and safety, all of which reflect meaningful aspects of children’s lived experience.

Ultimately, it is of great developmental importance that parental actions aim at restoring alignment between the child’s needs and the environment. The findings show that when parents respond in ways attuned to psychological needs (e.g., autonomy, competence, relatedness, and beyond), children are better able to regulate their emotions

and return to productive activity. Parenting interventions may include direct teaching and demonstrations of how to support these needs in their children. For example, providing choices or opportunities for shared decision-making may relieve frustration around undermined agency, control, and autonomy, whereas assisting and scaffolding tasks or offering reassurance may address frustration related to competence-based distress, and so on. In this sense, effective co-regulation can evolve beyond simply comforting the child emotionally and focus on addressing the underlying motivational structure that gave rise to the emotional signals. Therefore, parenting interventions that help parents identify which need is implicated in a given emotional episode and which strategies to use to address it, may promote more attuned and child-centered responses.

These recommendations and implications extend beyond parenting contexts and are relevant not only to those who work with families, but also to those who work with children directly. Similar strategies, for example, can be employed by caregivers and educators who frequently face emotion regulation demands. Training educators to interpret emotions as manifestations of underlying psychological needs may support more responsive classroom environments and reduce reliance on behavioral management strategies that overlook subtle nuances to motivational meaning. Hermeneutic principles may be especially valuable in this context where epistemic asymmetry is more pronounced and, therefore, not only is premature closure more likely but children may also have fewer opportunities to correct misattributions and misreading of their internal states. Therefore, in educator training, more emphasis can be given on interpretive openness and feedback loops which aligns with ethical commitments to epistemic

humility and fairness. When caregivers (and by extension, other professionals) treat children's emotional expressions as credible disclosures rather than noise or misbehavior, they reduce the risk of epistemic injustice and invalidation. Supporting such epistemic practices contributes to social environments in which children are more likely to experience themselves as understood, respected, capable of making sense of their own experiences, and develop confidence as active agents in their engagement with the world.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to explore how parents interpret their children's negative emotions and whether their meaning-making implicitly references basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as defined in BPNT. The findings of this study revealed that parents do indeed recognize the presence of these needs when interpreting the causes behind the child's emotion and they do so mostly intuitively without formal BPNT language. Patterns in parental meaning-making visible in this study can be understood as a form of hermeneutic engagement with the child's underlying psychological needs, as parents attempted to look beyond what was available at the level of observable behavior and tune into what emotions signaled about the child's inner world. This interpretive stance is captured by PRF that conceptualizes the parent's capacity to perceive behavior as expressive of the child's mental and affective states.

The study's insights point toward a broader theoretical conceptualization, which is that emotion regulation in parenting can be understood as a hermeneutic practice oriented toward restoring coherence between the child's needs and their environment. Considered within the context of epistemic trust and epistemic openness, in particular, the

meaning-making stance helps clarify why parents may interpret the same negative emotion differently and why some interpretations achieve regulational aims while others miss the mark. From the critical realist perspective, meaning-making about emotions becomes a process of empirical inference about real motivational structures that are not directly observable but inferred through emotional expression and interaction. When considered together, PRF, BPNT, hermeneutics, and critical realism reveal emotion regulation in parenting as a uniquely layered process where, ontologically speaking, emotions arise from real, underlying needs that, phenomenologically speaking, appear as meaningful expressions of what is uniquely meaningful to the child's experience of the world.

The conceptual integration across frameworks helps clarify how parental interpretation functions as the organizing core of emotion regulation, since the parents' meaning-making directs their choice of regulation strategy. By situating the study's findings within several frameworks, it becomes possible to articulate how emotional disclosures, reflective depth, and epistemic openness operate in relation to one another. From a developmental perspective, the findings highlight the central role of interpretation in shaping how children come to understand their own emotional lives. When emotional expressions are met with reflective engagement rather than premature closure, children are offered more than momentary relief. They are offered a way of making sense of what they feel and what about it matters to them. They gain a sense that their feelings are intelligible and that their inner world is accessible to understanding. Over time, these interpretive exchanges support the child's internalization of meaning-making strategies

that underlie self-regulation and emotional coherence. In this sense, parental interpretation serves not only a regulatory function but also a formative one that contributes to the child's emerging capacity to navigate their inner world with understanding rather than frustration or confusion.

Of all the ways a parent can care, the most sacred is to pause long enough to wonder: What is my child feeling, and why? In that moment, care becomes an act of seeing and reflection. To think and feel about thinking and feeling is the parent's highest act of love. To be open enough to see and to help the child see what their emotions show, is a gesture towards coherence. Emotional meaning-making becomes a shared developmental project, where the parent is learning about the child and the child is learning about themselves.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

### Warm-up Questions

1. Tell me a little about your child. What are they like?
  - a) What do you most enjoy about them?
  - b) What makes them happy and at ease?

### Main Questions

2. Tell me about the way your child shows negative emotions.
  - a) What helps you know whether they are angry, sad, or worried?
  - b) What helps you understand what makes them feel that way?
3. How do you usually respond when your child is upset, angry, overwhelmed and is having a difficult time managing their emotions or behavior?
4. Tell me about a recent time when your child was angry (mad/furious).
  - a) What was going through your mind at that moment?
  - b) What may have been going on for them?
  - c) What did you sense your child needed at that moment?
  - d) How did you decide what to do?/What helped you decide how to respond?
5. Tell me about a recent time when your child was worried (anxious/afraid).
  - a) What were your thoughts about it at that moment?
  - b) What may have been going on for them?
  - c) What do you think your child might have been needing at that moment?
  - d) How did you decide what to do?/What helped you decide how to respond?
6. Tell me about a recent time when your child was sad (hurt/upset).

- a) What was going through your mind at that moment?
- b) What may have been going on for them?
- c) What did you sense your child needed at that moment?
- d) How did you decide what to do?/What helped you decide how to respond?

7. Tell me about those times when your child insists on doing things their own way or by themselves.

- a) What happens if they don't get their way?
- b) How do/did they show that in their emotions and behavior?
- c) How do/did you respond?

8. Tell me about those times when your child seems to want reassurance, comfort, or connection.

- a) How do/did they show that in their emotions and behavior?
- b) How do/did you respond?
- c) What happens if you are not available?

9. Tell me about those times when something is not working out for your child or they feel like they've failed or can't do something.

- d) How do/did they show that in their emotions and behavior?
- e) How do/did you respond?

10. People say that the "child's behavior and emotions try to tell us something."

What do you make of that?

## Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

**YOU KNOW YOUR CHILD BEST!**

Every parent develops a unique understanding of their child's emotions. You are invited to participate in a university-based research study that explores how parents make sense of these emotions, especially when the child is upset.

- Participation is voluntary and confidential
- One-time interview commitment
- Parents must be at least 21 years old
- Must be a primary caregiver of a child between 2 and 10 years old who uses verbal communication in daily interactions

The interview takes place virtually via Zoom in audio-only format, and is expected to last between 60 and 90 minutes. Interested in participating? Reach out to the principal investigator, Julia Pappas, M.Ed, CAGS, NCSP for details at [REDACTED].

## Appendix C: Reflexive Thematic Analysis Output

Theme	Subtheme	Sample Codes	Sample Quote
Inductive Analytic Phase (Themes 1-4)			
Theme 1: Meaning-making about child's emotions is active and intentional	1.1 Negative emotion is a meaningful signal, an invitation to pay attention	Differentiates emotions based on nonverbal cues Sees feelings as expressive signals for what the child can't say Believes child's emotions have a reason, whether adults perceive the reason or not Sees feelings as a human experience regardless of age	"I needed to get on his level and think. While this may not be a big deal to me, it's a big deal to him." (P13)
	1.2 Interpretive inquiry into the source of emotion	Makes connection between trigger and negative emotion Recognizes child's inner tension between perceived capacity or skill and the reality Sees causal connection between context and negative emotion Recognizes conflict of needs and expectations between self and child	"She can't do what the big kids can do... she gets sad because she feels left out." (P9)
Theme 2: Interpretation of causality guides action in response to emotion	2.1 When understood as signal for co-regulation, parent offers support and validation	Validates the child's feelings and experience Co-regulates emotion even if context/trigger is not clear Sees physical closeness as co-regulation/soothing strategy Slows down and adjusts to the child's pacing Notes primary caregiver preference for soothing/co-regulation Offers emotional space of comfort and safety	"I just see that emotions are rising, and those are signals to slow things down" (P5)

Theme	Subtheme	Sample Codes	Sample Quote
	2.2 When understood as signal for needs, parent takes action to meet them	<p>Offers alternatives/choices as means of restoring balance and child's engagement</p> <p>Recognizes child's need for predictability, control, and autonomy</p> <p>Recognizes need for control and independence</p> <p>Recognizes connection between independence and child feeling proud</p> <p>Recognizes conflict of needs and expectations between self and child (assisting vs autonomy and independence)</p> <p>Letting child do things independently when loss of control was seen as the initial trigger</p>	<p>"He needed reassurance that the medical stuff wasn't going to hurt... He needed actual information." (P2)</p>
	2.3 When understood as signal for missing regulation skills, parent coaches, redirects, or withdraws	<p>Teaches child appropriate physical expression of emotion</p> <p>Provides emotional scaffolding for regulation</p> <p>Tells child emotions are okay, but aggression is not</p> <p>Gives child strategies to self-regulate</p> <p>Gives child space to self-regulate and move on independently</p> <p>Distracts child away from source of frustration</p> <p>Decides to withdraw from engagement</p>	<p>"Typically I give him some space to cool off ... try to counsel but sometimes he gets inconsolable ... and snappy ..." (P3)</p>
Theme 3: Iterative adjustment towards resolution, interpretive revision and feedback loops	3.1 Child's affect serves as feedback loop for parental interpretive effort	<p>Notes that regulation efforts are not always successful</p> <p>Recognizes that emotions persist when the situation is not resolved for the child</p> <p>Recognizes that emotions persist when the child hasn't made sense of what happened</p> <p>Emotional escalation signals that efforts are ineffective</p> <p>Adjusts strategy based on emotional feedback (e.g., escalation)</p> <p>Looks to child for signals of resolution (verbal and non-verbal cues)</p> <p>Continues to problem-solve until child feels better</p> <p>Continues to co-regulate until child is ready to move on</p>	<p>"I [was] not reacting appropriately ... That, of course, made it worse. (P4)</p> <p>"If [I] interpret his emotions in a different way, it could spark, make situation worse instead of, de-escalating" (P5)</p>

Theme	Subtheme	Sample Codes	Sample Quote
	3.2 Successful resolution depends on accurate interpretation of cause	<p>Attributes regulation success to changes and accommodations</p> <p>Attributes success to regulation efforts</p> <p>Attributes success to removing trigger</p> <p>Sees resolution of the problem as the reason for de-escalation</p> <p>Attributes failure to resolve emotional tension to the wrong approach</p> <p>Connects tension diffusion to removing cause of frustration</p> <p>Attributes resolution to giving the child space to do it his/her way</p>	<p>“And when they figured out the problem with the game, and once it started back working, he was okay.” (P10)</p>
Theme 4: Reflective capacity influences the depth of meaning-making	4.1 Seeing from the inside and responding to the child’s inner world	<p>Maintains interpretive openness</p> <p>Engages in reflective meaning-making</p> <p>Curiosity-driven (to understand the child)</p> <p>Engages in emotion exploration</p> <p>Tests interpretations</p> <p>Integrates child’s perspective</p> <p>Behavior correction as the means, not the end (control creates space for understanding)</p>	<p>"If I had to... put myself in her shoes." (P7)</p> <p>"... in my mind, it would be ... but not in her mind" (P11)</p>
	4.2 Seeing from the outside and responding to the child’s external presentation	<p>Demonstrates interpretive certainty and closure</p> <p>Engages in reactive meaning-making</p> <p>Adopts “fixing” attitude (to manage the situation)</p> <p>Engages in emotion management (diffusion, redirection, suppression)</p> <p>Shows limited curiosity</p> <p>Uses shorthand explanations</p> <p>Engages in behavior management (micromanagement, compliance)</p> <p>Behavior correction as the goal (control replaces understanding)</p>	<p>“He just wanted to piss her off, because he’ll do little things like [that]” (P10)</p>

Theme	Subtheme	Sample Codes	Sample Quote
Deductive Analytic Phase (Themes 5-7)			
Theme 5: Meaning-making as need recognition, interpreting emotions as signals for psychological needs	5.1 Need for autonomy, expressed in emotion as reaction to constraint or want of control	Notes child's frustration with assistance (as interfering with independence) Connects child's frustration to loss of control or choice Rushing the child can lead to escalation Sees objection/defiance as assertion of autonomy Links frustration to compromised autonomy when adults "fix" or micromanage Notes irritation when adult interferes with child's activity or goals Recognizes that negotiation helps the child feel agency and shared control	"She just lost it... For her, it was the control of the routine that we have... established" (P1)
	5.2 Need for competence, expressed in emotion as reaction to challenge or failure	Interprets tears or anger as frustration with failure to achieve a goal Recognizes shame/embarrassment from performance shortfalls/fails Sees withdrawal as sign of loss of confidence Recognizes child's inner tension between perceived capacity and the reality Attributes feelings of discouragement to repeated setbacks Identifies frustration as signal for task difficulty Notes anxiety/worry when self-esteem is threatened Links lack of competence to fear of judgment	"it feels like failure, if someone comes in and helps her ... she feels pride in being able to do things independently" (P11)

Theme	Subtheme	Sample Codes	Sample Quote
	5.3 Need for relatedness, expressed in emotion as signal for connection and safety	<p>Recognizes child's need for reassurance, validation, acknowledgement</p> <p>Sees sadness as need for closeness</p> <p>Recognizes social exclusion as emotional trigger</p> <p>Connects anger to feeling misunderstood or unseen</p> <p>Links having good intentions misunderstood to disappointment</p> <p>Notes comfort-seeking behaviors when upset</p> <p>Sees belonging/connection as essential to emotional balance</p> <p>Notes perceived social judgement as anxiety provoking for the child</p>	<p>"when he's nervous... he'll be constantly reaching for me. That's how I know that he's... looking for that reassurance." (P6)</p>
Theme 6: Emotion regulation as a need-fulfilment process, when meeting psychological needs regulates emotions	6.1 Parent regulates child's emotions by supporting autonomy	<p>Offers meaningful choice to de-escalate conflict/relieve tension</p> <p>Gives back/releases control as means of emotion regulation</p> <p>Sees coming to a compromise as th reason for de-escalation</p> <p>Shifts from control to supporting guidance</p> <p>Respects child's pacing to resolve tension</p> <p>Recognizes emotional relief when choice is accepted</p> <p>Balances structure with flexibility and freedom</p> <p>Gives child space/time, allows for self-initiated attempts at task</p>	<p>"She wouldn't let me pick the outfit out. It had to be, like, she had some agency in picking it out. So, that's how that resolved." (P11)</p>
	6.2 Parent regulates child's emotions by facilitating competence	<p>Provides reassurance during a challenge</p> <p>Breaks task into manageable steps</p> <p>Offers reassurance to restore the feeling of efficacy</p> <p>Uses help/modeling to guide skill acquisition</p> <p>Provides scaffolding to balance support and independence</p> <p>Links success to persistence and support</p> <p>Validates difficulty while encouraging child to keep trying</p> <p>Links child feeling proud to task accomplishment</p>	<p>"He was just feeling like he could not do it at all...I had to [help him] eventually he got excited, he'd be like, oh, I get it now, I get it!" (P10)</p>

Theme	Subtheme	Sample Codes	Sample Quote
	6.3 Parent regulates child's emotions by restoring relatedness	<p>Uses closeness as co-regulation (hug, supportive presence)</p> <p>Offers an apology to repair relational tension</p> <p>Re-engages child after conflict through a shared activity</p> <p>Uses humor to restore connection</p> <p>Regulates emotion through validation and acknowledgement</p> <p>Recognizes release of tension after child feels seen/heard</p> <p>Describes eye contact, body softness, or closeness as emotional shift</p> <p>Links validation to emotional de-escalation</p> <p>Eases anxiety through conversation/explanation</p>	<p>"And eventually, with just some more, back rubbing, and just little cuddles, she was okay... Just the comfort and the safety that comes with your mom." (P1)</p>
Theme 7: Meaning-making beyond the language and scope of Basic Psychological Needs Theory	7.1 Parents refer to basic psychological needs in their own language	<p>Uses common phrases/terms for autonomy ("do it himself"), competence ("figured it out"), relatedness ("she wanted me there")</p> <p>Talks about child "being proud," "feeling safe," "being understood/heard"</p> <p>Describes success in terms of "confidence," "comfort," "trust," "feeling better," "moving on"</p>	<p>"He needed support in that moment, to know he wasn't alone." (P13)</p>
	7.2 Parents register psychological needs outside the scope of the Basic Psychological Needs Theory	<p>Mentions need for attention, praise, or recognition</p> <p>Concern/care for nature and animals</p> <p>Refers to need for fun, play, or enjoyment</p> <p>Identifies need for sense-making, meaning, understanding, or information</p> <p>Notes child's need for predictability, structure, or routine</p> <p>Refers to need to solitude and alone-time</p> <p>Notes child's need for reassurance of safety</p> <p>Recognizes need for creativity and self-expression</p>	<p>"It has to be creative play. It's what she really, really wants the most. That makes her really happy." (P4)</p>

## Appendix D: Distribution of Exemplar Quotations Across Participants

Subtheme	Participant Number													
	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	P13	P14
1.1		✓			✓								✓	
1.2				✓		✓				✓		✓		✓
2.1							✓		✓	✓				
2.2	✓						✓		✓					
2.3			✓			✓								✓
3.1	✓								✓				✓	
3.2				✓				✓						
4.1	✓									✓	✓			
4.2					✓		✓					✓		
5.1			✓						✓					
5.2								✓				✓		
5.3				✓			✓							
6.1						✓					✓			
6.2		✓								✓				
6.3	✓				✓									
7.1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7.2	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓

*Note.* This table displays the distribution of quoted excerpts used as illustrative examples in the analysis, not the frequency with which themes occurred in the dataset. Its purpose is to demonstrate inclusivity and balanced representation across participants. Each participant contributed multiple quotations across different subthemes, ensuring that interpretations were not derived from a small subset of voices.

### Appendix E: Plain Language Summary

Children may not have the language to express their inner world, so they reveal it in their emotions. Through tears, frustration, withdrawal, or sudden bursts of anger they let parents know when things are not working for them and the world is too much to deal with. These moments, while sometimes difficult for adults, are invitations to understand what is happening beneath the surface of a child's experience.

This study explored how parents make sense of those emotional expressions and what they believe their children are communicating through them. Fourteen parents of children between the ages of 3 and 9 participated in in-depth conversations about the emotional moments they navigate with their children. They described what they believe emotions mean, how they interpret them, and how they decide what their child needs in those moments. These conversations showed that even when there are behaviors to be managed, parents often try to look beyond the visible and understand the hidden layers of the child's experience.

The findings suggest that most parents intuitively treat emotions as messages rather than problems. Even without formal psychological language, parents tend to recognize that a child's emotions often point toward deeper needs: the need to feel connected to someone they trust, the need to feel capable when something feels hard, the need to feel a sense of autonomy, to have a choice, and many other expressions of their inner world. When parents interpreted emotions through this lens, their responses were more attuned and supportive towards the child. In moments of attunement parents become intuitive interpreters, able to read and feel into the child's emotional signals.

Overall, the findings suggest that children regulate emotions best when they feel deeply understood. Not just seen as upset, but understood *from the inside*, what is not working in their world, what feels out of balance for them personally. In showing how parents naturally listen beneath the surface of behavior, this research affirms a view of emotional life that is not reductionist or mechanistic but dynamic, relational, meaningful, and deeply rooted in our nature as human beings. These insights may help caregivers, educators, and practitioners recognize that supporting children's emotional worlds begins with this simple yet powerful act: listening for what the emotion is pointing to and responding to the needs it reveals.