CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	YMCA - Parents and Kids Together Programme (PAKT): exploring the potential for informal support among parents
Authors	Yeriskina, Tatyana
Publication date	2017-09-29
Original Citation	Yeriskina, T. (2017) YMCA - Parents and Kids Together Programme (PAKT): exploring the potential for informal support among parents. Cork: Community-Academic Research Links, University College Cork.
Type of publication	Report
Link to publisher's version	https://www.ucc.ie/en/scishop/rr/
Rights	©2017, Tatyana Yeriskina.
Download date	2026-11-07 01:27:22
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/9005



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

YMCA- Parents and Kids Together Programme (PAKT): Exploring the Potential for Informal Support Among Parents.

Tatyana Yeriskina

CARL Research Project

in collaboration with

YMCA-PAKT

CARL
COMMUNITY - ACADEMIC
RESEARCH LINKS
University College Cork, Ireland

Name of student(s):	Tatyana Yeriskina
Name of civil society organisation/community group:	YMCA- PAKT
Name of community group liaison person:	Chriszine Backhouse
Academic supervisor(s):	Dr. Deirdre Horgan
Name and year of course:	Masters in Social Science, in Social Policy 2016/2017
Date completed:	29th September 2017

Abstract

This research is a Community-Academic Research Links (CARL) project carried out on behalf of YMCA-Parents and Kids Together (PAKT) programme. This research aims to explore the potential informal support structures developed between parents through their participation in the programme. This thesis examines the potential for informal support among parents in PAKT through qualitative methodology comprising of focus groups with parents and semi-structured interviews with programme coordinators,

A literature review was carried out to examine the policy context of family support services in Ireland and to explore other available research in the field of family support. What emerges from the literature is that family support programmes aimed at parents have a positive social support impact. Benefits such as reduction of isolation, expansion of social capital and social networking were evident throughout the literature.

This research provided evidence of support structures developed by parents through PAKT since joining the programme. It emerged from this research that positive relationships, advice seeking and giving, shared experiences and willingness to support each other at times of stress and difficulty, as well as practical supports are some of the key supports experienced by parents involved in PAKT. This research recognises the potential of family support programmes to develop support among its participants in every-day life outside programme hours as an offshoot of involvement.

Family support programmes seem to have the potential to develop positive environments which facilitate the development and extension of long-term informal support structures among parents.

Community Academic Research Links-CARL

What is Community-Academic Research Links?

Community Academic Research Links (CARL) is a service provided by research institutes for the Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in their region which can be grass roots groups, single issue temporary groups, but also well-structured organisations. Research for the CSOs is carried out free of financial cost as much as possible.

CARL seeks to:

- provide civil society with knowledge and skills through research and education;
- provide their services on an affordable basis;
- promote and support public access to and influence on science and technology;
- create equitable and supportive partnerships with civil society organisations;
- enhance understanding among policymakers and education and research institutions of the research and education needs of civil society, and

enhance the transferrable skills and knowledge of students, community representatives and researchers (www.livingknowledge.org).

What is a CSO?

We define CSOs as groups who are non-governmental, non-profit, not representing commercial interests, and/or pursuing a common purpose in the public interest. These groups include: trade unions, NGOs, professional associations, charities, grass-roots organisations, organisations that involve citizens in local and municipal life, churches and religious committees, and so on.

Why is this report on the web?

The research agreement between the CSO, student and CARL/University states that the results of the study must be made public. We are committed to the public and free dissemination of research results.

How do I reference this report?

Author (year) Project Title, [online], School of Applied Social Studies, Community-Academic Research Links/University College Cork, Available from: http://www.ucc.ie/en/scishop/completed/ [Accessed on: date].

How can I find out more about the Community-Academic Research Links and the Living Knowledge Network?

The UCC CARL website has further information on the background and operation of the Community-Academic Research Links at University College Cork, Ireland. http://carl.ucc.ie

CARL is part of an international network of Science Shops. You can read more about this vibrant community and its activities on this website: http://www.scienceshops.org

Disclaimer

Notwithstanding the contributions by the University and its staff, the University gives no warranty as to the accuracy of the project report or the suitability of any material contained in it for either general or specific purposes. It will be for the Client Group, or users, to ensure that any outcome from the project meets safety and other requirements. The Client Group agrees not to hold the University responsible in respect of any use of the project results. Notwithstanding this disclaimer, it is a matter of record that many student projects have been completed to a very high standard and to the satisfaction of the Client Group.

Table of Contents

Contents

ABSTRACT.....II

COMMUNITY ACADEMIC RESEARCH LINKS-CARL III

DECLARATION..... IX

INTRODUCTION.....1

RESEARCH TITLE: YMCA- PARENTS AND KIDS TOGETHER PROGRAMME (PAKT): EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL FOR INFORMAL SUPPORT AMONG PARENTS.....1

BACKGROUND – YMCA/ PAKT PROGRAMME:.....1

RESEARCH RATIONALE: 2

RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES: 3

RESEARCH QUESTIONS: 3

METHODOLOGY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS: 4

CHAPTER OUTLINES: 5

LITERATURE REVIEW 7

INTRODUCTION......7

POLICY CONTEXT OF FAMILY SUPPORT. 7

LEVELS OF FAMILY SUPPORT. 11

FAMILY SUPPORT RESEARCH. 16

CONCLUSION. 19

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH....20

INTRODUCTION....20

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE....20

RESEARCH DESIGN....21

SAMPLE....21

SIZE AND CHARACTERISTICS: 21

RECRUITMENT: 22

QUALITATIVE METHODS FOCUS GROUPS:....23

QUALITATIVE METHODS SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS:....24

DATA ANALYSIS: 25

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS....26

TIMETABLE FOR RESEARCH.....28

CONCLUSION: 29

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS (FOCUS GROUPS) 29

INTRODUCTION.....29

THEME 1: EMOTIONAL SUPPORT....31

SUB-THEME 1: OPENING UP. 32

SUB-THEME 2: FEELING VALUED....34

SUB-THEME 3: LETTING OFF-STEAM. 35

THEME 2: POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS. 37

SUB-THEME 1: SOCIAL CONTACT. 38

Sub-theme 2: Friendship. 39

Sub-theme 3: Positive Space. 40

Theme 3: Practical Support and Advice. 41

Sub-theme 1: Advice. 42

Sub-theme 2: Practical Support. 44

Conclusion. 46

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS (SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS) 47

Introduction. 47

Theme 1: Positive Relationships. 49

Sub-theme 1: Bonding. 49

Sub-theme 2: Social contact. 51

Sub-theme 3: Friendship. 52

Theme 2: Emotional Support 54

Sub-theme 1: Feeling Valued. 55

Sub-theme 2: Opening Up. 56

Sub-theme 3: Difficult life circumstances. 57

Theme 3: Advice/ Shared Experiences 58

Sub-theme 1: Parenting 59

Sub-theme 2: School. 60

Theme 4: Practical Support 62

Sub-theme 1: Support from PAKT. 62

Sub-theme 2: Daily support. 64

CONCLUSION. 65

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS 66

INTRODUCTION. 66

SOCIAL CAPITAL 66

POSITIVE, SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS 68

COPING SKILLS 69

DISCUSSION 71

CONCLUSION 72

CONCLUSION 73

INTRODUCTION. 73

SUMMARY OF THESIS. 73

KEY FINDINGS. 74

REFLECTION 76

CONCLUSION 77

BIBLIOGRAPHY I

APPENDIX. 1 VIII

APPENDIX 2 X

APPENDIX 3 XI

APPENDIX 4 XII

APPENDIX 5 XIV

Declaration

I hereby declare that the thesis presented here is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, entirely my own original work except where otherwise indicated. I certify that this thesis has not been submitted, either in part or whole, for a Degree at this or any other University. I am aware of the University's regulations concerning plagiarism. I further declare that any use of the works of any other author is referenced and attributed to that author accordingly.

Signed:

29th September 2017

Introduction

This chapter provides a background to the chosen research topic. It briefly discusses the PAKT programme, identifying the focus of this unique family support programme incorporating children and parents in organised activities. PAKT's aims of encouraging development of positive parent-child relationships as well as parental community involvement are identified in this chapter. This is followed by a rationale for carrying out research in conjunction with the Community Academic Research Links (CARL) initiative at University College Cork (UCC). The aims, objectives and research questions will also be outlined. This chapter introduces the reader to the methodology used to gather data and briefly discusses ethical considerations. This chapter will conclude with a chapter outline providing a brief overview of the chapters to follow.

Research Title:

YMCA- Parents and Kids Together Programme (PAKT): Exploring the potential for informal support among parents

Background – YMCA/ PAKT programme:

PAKT is a community based family support programme which was established in 1998 in the Republic of Ireland and currently has programmes operating in four areas of Cork and four areas of Dublin. PAKT mostly operates on levels one and two of the Hardiker model, focusing on a universal approach to family support (Hardiker, 1991; YMCA, 2017). However, more recently a change in parental needs has been identified through a 9.9% increase in PAKT's work operating on levels three and four of the Hardiker model (YMCA, 2017; YMCA, 2016).

Unlike other support programmes, PAKT involves both children and parents in an intervention which looks to develop children's social competence, participation, physical well-being, spirituality and relationships with parents (YMCA, 2013). Circle time is used to encourage children's social interaction and their social competence. Encouraging participation occurs through an organisation of a group project such as a "rubbish clean-up day" (YMCA, 2013). Children take part in cooking activities which are used to develop physical skills and well-being. Spirituality is developed by children taking part in discussions about important life events. PAKT aims to develop parent-child relationships which have a foundation of "warmth and boundary setting" (YMCA, 2013:8). This is characterised by the

various organised group and one-to-one activities, for example, parents and children visiting an outdoor activity centre together, or family meetings with PAKT staff. Other typical activities for parents and children include barbeques and annual Christmas parties which aim to increase social capital and community involvement (YMCA, 2013).

Drop in mornings allow parents to socialise with each other and discuss parenting advice and experiences. PAKT also offers parenting classes through the Parents Plus programme which aims to enhance parenting skills and develop positive relationships between parents and children. On average four parents attend drop in mornings and parent training classes in each centre (Backhouse, 2017). Parents Plus, an Irish training programme, provide training for those working in the area to facilitate delivery of the programme. The aims of the programme are developing positive relationships within families, advancing communication among family members and enabling them to overcome difficulties (Parents Plus, 2016). Parents Plus was introduced into PAKT two years ago as staff took part in an introductory conference, and were then trained in the programme (Backhouse, 2017).

Research Rationale:

This research was conducted as part of the Masters in Social Policy (MScocSc) in conjunction with the UCC CARL initiative. CARL encourages non-profit, voluntary and community organisations to submit research proposals which they cannot conduct themselves for reasons such as lack of feasibility, resources or research skills (UCC, 2013). It provides an opportunity for students of UCC to apply to CARL requesting the perusal of a suggested research project on behalf of the organisation (UCC, 2013). YMCA-PAKT put forward a research topic focusing on support among parents. This was submitted to CARL who advertised it on their UCC web-page under *available projects* allowing students to express their desire in its perusal. Resulting from a successful application a one-to-one meeting was organised with the CARL coordinator discussing the process of the project. This was followed by a meeting involving the researcher, UCC research supervisor, YMCA programme development officer and the CARL coordinator. During this meeting, it was decided that the research would explore the potential of informal support among parents in the PAKT programme. Working in partnership with an organisation which provides support for families and children was a significant incentive as it meant having an opportunity to

carry out evidence-based research which may potentially benefit the family support programme.

While family support in Ireland has seen an increased policy focus, children's outcomes are predominantly at the centre of the literature (DCYA, 2011; DCYA, 2014). This is at the expense of process and support required by parents. This research project created an opportunity to gather data on a limitedly represented topic in the field of family support. Prior to the fieldwork, a literature review was carried out which produced information regarding the many difficult situations families find themselves in today. These are often characterised by material difficulties such as poverty and the housing crisis. However, issues can also be deeply hidden like ill-mental health and bullying. It was demonstrated in the literature review that an increase in social capital can act as a stress buffer (Shoji, et al., 2014). This research brought attention to the social reality of parental participation in a support programme with other parents and benefits gained from it. Focusing on informal support this research explored benefits such as emotional supports, positive relationships and practical support and advice.

Research Aims and Objectives:

The overall aim of this research is to explore the potential for informal support among parents in a family support programme. This research aims to examine parental experiences of PAKT focusing closely on the informal support aspect of parental interactions. The objective is to examine the interactions that take place between parents when participating in PAKT. This will encourage an exploration into the type of contact parents have with each other when they attend weekly meetings or organised events and whether this transfers to their everyday lives. This research will also examine the potential benefits social interactions can have on the availability of support for parents from other programme participants. Finally, the research aims to explore the views of programme coordinators participating in PAKT on the availability and development of informal supports between parents.

Research Questions:

1. What are parent's overall experiences of the PAKT programme?
2. Has PAKT contributed to informal support among participating parents?
3. Is there evidence of growth in social capital through parental participation in PAKT?
4. What are the views of programme coordinators on informal support among participating parents?

Methodology and Ethical Considerations:

A literature review and interviews were carried out for the purpose of this research project. In carrying out the literature review it became apparent that there is a dearth of research on family support, especially relating to parental informal support. The following are the key data sources which were used for the literature review:

- Academic Search Complete
- EBSCO database
- JSTOR
- Web of Science

Key sources proved to be research on family support presented by Ghate and Hazel (2002) and Gardner (2003) and research carried out by Shoji et al (2014) and McDonald et al (2006) on a family support programme in the US.

This was a small scale qualitative research project which used focus groups and semi-structured individual interviews to gather data. Access to participants was elicited through CARL which organised the initial meeting with the YMCA programme development officer. This enabled access to PAKT programme coordinators across Cork and Dublin settings who recruited parents for the research. Three focus groups were carried out in Cork and one in Dublin. Each focus group was followed by a semi-structured face-to-face interview with the coordinator of that PAKT programme.

Thematic analysis was used to gather themes from transcribed data of both the focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Through a process of coding, key themes were identified and subdivided based on the quantity of counts, i.e. how many times a certain topic was mentioned in the interview. Themes and sub-themes were organised in order of count priority as this demonstrated the strongest themes emerging from the transcribed data. Data was interrogated against literature and research in the field of family support. Key findings reaffirmed research and added new potential knowledge to the area.

Ethical considerations were adhered to by fully disclosing the nature of the research to all participants using an information sheet (appendix 1) and consent forms (appendix 2) which

were signed at the beginning of each focus group and interview. Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the research allowing them to exit the project at any time if they felt any discomfort. Interviews were carried out in the location of each PAKT programme, allowing participants to feel secure in their surroundings. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymising data at source and ensuring no identifying information such as names and locations were used in the transcripts of raw data except for naming the programme- PAKT. Research information has been securely stored on an encrypted laptop which can only be accessed by the researcher and made available to the research supervisor and appropriate PAKT staff.

Chapter Outlines:

Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter introduces the research being carried out by providing a background on the YMCA-PAKT programme and provides a rationale for the research, highlighting the unique partnership with the programme through the UCC CARL initiative. The aims and objectives of the research have been identified and the methodology briefly outlined.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter will examine national policy development in family support documenting the move from laissez-faire to a more interventionist focus. Levels of family support will be discussed using the Hardiker model and the Bronfenbrenner ecological systems model. Key literature will be reviewed exploring national and international research in the field of family support focusing on informal supports among parents.

Chapter Three: Methodological Approach

This chapter explores the theoretical underpinnings of the research. It focuses on the design of the study outlining the chosen methodology used to collect data for the research. It provides a justification for the methods used, exploring the benefits and challenges of using such an approach. The chapter concludes by addressing key ethical considerations of this research.

Chapter four and five: Analysis of Findings

This chapter thematically analyses data gathered from the parent focus groups and the individual interviews with programme co-ordinators in four PAKT settings. Chapters are divided into themes and sub-themes which are organised in terms of count priority.

Chapter six: Discussion of Findings

This chapter will examine findings obtained through the thematic analysis with reference to literature in the field of family support. It will identify similarities and differences between findings of this research and other research in the field. This chapter is sub-divided into three sections which discuss the possibilities offered to parents by PAKT: social capital, positive relationships and coping skills. Benefits of conducting small-scale research in conjunction with CARL will also be addressed in this chapter.

Chapter seven: Conclusion

This chapter provides a summary of the overall thesis in accordance with research questions. It outlines key findings of informal support, transfer of support to parents' daily lives, positive relationships, emotional support, practical support, coping skills and social capital. Through a reflective piece this chapter will situate the research carried out in the field of family work and will discuss potential future research.

Literature Review

"The experience of family living

is the single greatest influence on an individual's life"

COMMISSION ON THE FAMILY, 1996, P.13

Introduction.

Parents play an important role in children's development as well as their life outcomes, therefore supporting families is essential (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014). The definition of families varies. Currently the Irish constitution sees family defined by marriage (Government of Ireland, 1937). In reality family goes beyond marriage, it is made up of people who are not necessarily of blood relation or bound by legal ties (Family Support Agency, 2013; Fahey and Field, 2008). Devaney (2011), argues that in fact defining family needs to go beyond the 'who' and move towards the 'where' and 'how', in other words the dominant care setting of a child and how they are being cared for. Rearing children and maintaining a stable and happy family is not an easy road, it has many twists and turns which are not always expected or accounted for. Families come up against many difficulties throughout their life such as: the current housing crisis, poverty, high childcare costs, ill mental-health and bullying. Having family support in place can guide people towards potential coping strategies.

Policy Context of Family Support.

Historically, the government of Ireland took quite a laissez-faire approach when it came to family support. There was very limited support from the state apart from financial benefits aimed at disadvantaged families. Beginning in 1944, families received payments to aid the child rearing process, known today as child benefit (Daly and Clavero, 2003). This payment was initially paid for the third child and any consecutive children, in a way this was a measure to control poverty seeing as the bigger families were more likely to be living in disadvantage (Daly and Clavero, 2003). In the early 60's this payment was extended to the first child in the family, at this stage the payment was subject to the number of children per family (Daly and Clavero, 2003). In 1984 the family income supplement was introduced, which was once again targeted at families living in deprivation (Government of Ireland,

1984). The lack of state involvement in provision of services was influenced by the principle of subsidiarity which led to the significant role of the Catholic church in Ireland until the late 60's (Riordan, 2001). According to the principle of subsidiarity the individual and the community should be the first to act, avoiding intervention from the state (Riordan, 2001). This resulted in the large dependency on the voluntary sector and religious services for provision of services. The negative outcomes of the services provided by the Catholic church have been highly documented by Rafferty and O'Sullivan (2011), The Ferns Report- Murphy, Buckley and Joyce (2005) as well as many other investigations into clerical abuse in Ireland. These are still ongoing following the recent revelations of the mother and baby home in Tuam, Galway (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2017, a).

Since the early 90's the dominant policy focus of family support has been on children who are deemed to be at risk and in need of protection. Child welfare issues were mainly brought into light by the Kilkenny incest case in 1993 which documented a daughter being physically and sexually abused by her father for a period of thirteen years (Killkelly, 2012). This case had created a state of alarm in Ireland as it was revealed that the family was known to professionals who failed to remove the child from a life-threatening situation (Killkelly, 2012). The Kilkenny incest case had set in motion the reformation of child protection policy in Ireland. Following the investigation, the Child Care Act 1991 was quickly implemented and placed an onus of responsibility on the Health Boards (now the HSE) of ensuring that children are appropriately cared for and their welfare is not at risk (Government of Ireland, 1991). It was also acknowledged that the Health Boards were responsible for providing appropriate services for families within their communities (Pinkerton, et al., 2004).

A major step towards improving family support services came with the *Commission on the Family, Strengthening Families for Life* report in 1998 (Commission on The Family, 1998). This report slightly stepped away from the dominant child protection focus and instead emphasized the need to support parents with any child rearing difficulties (Killkelly, 2014). The recommendations of the report were considered and the government committed to opening 100 family centres all over Ireland (McKeown, et al., 2001). In the same year as the Commission on The Family, Ireland launched the Springboard initiative, consisting of fifteen projects. Springboard projects were intended to be a universal form of family support which also worked closely with disadvantaged families (McKeown, et al., 2001). The need for expansion of family support services was further acknowledged by the *National Children's*

Strategy- Our Children Their Lives which committed to the expansion of family support services, such as family resource centres (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2000). On their review of the *National Children's Strategy* The Children's Rights Alliance (2011) acknowledged the government's achievement in this regard as there were over 100 centres established all over Ireland. Unfortunately funding for family resource centres has seen a drop of 17% since 2011 (Dáil Éireann Debate 2015). The lack of funding creates challenges for new centres to be established, which is quite worrying considering that since 2011 the Irish population has increased by almost 170,000 (CSO, 2016 a). Lack of funding also impacts on already established centres as it increases the allocated time devoted to fundraising and decreases time spent with families who are utilising the services. Nonetheless, the discourse of supporting families became more evident throughout the Irish policy context. *The Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children* outlined the importance of early intervention in the form of family support services (Department of Health and Children, 2011). *Children First* recognised that the positive environment of early intervention family support services may prevent child-welfare issues occurring (Department of Health and Children, 2011). *Children First* was amended decade later. Once again, the HSE was held responsible for both identifying children who were not being appropriately cared for and ensuring that family support services are available throughout the country (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011). Social support is recognised as a vital part of all families. It is an area that is thoroughly examined when TUSLA are carrying out assessments on a child who they fear is not receiving adequate care and whose welfare may be at risk (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011).

The most important move in family support services only happened in recent years. The Child and Family Agency Act 2013, specified that a group combining the Family Support Agency as well as the National Educational Welfare Board was to be established which would take on the role of implementing the Act (Government of Ireland, 2013). This resulted in an important milestone for family support in Ireland, as of 1st of January 2014 TUSLA was established which now focuses on the following areas: child protection and welfare, alternative care, family and community support, educational welfare services and, domestic, sexual and gender based violence. In the same year as establishment of TUSLA, *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: The national policy framework for children and young people* (BOBF) was published which focused on several areas regarding family support. The first of

the six transformation goals in BOBF recognises that family is an integral part of a child's life and influences their health and development, therefore it places responsibility on the government to develop services for families which create a positive environment for their children (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014). As a result, the government recognised that for support to be most effective it must begin prior to childbirth and continue through to adolescence (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014). Subsequent to the first transformation goal the government committed to developing "a high-level policy statement on Parenting and Family Support to guide the provision of universal evidence-informed parenting supports." (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014: 28). This was achieved a year later with the publication of *High Level Policy Statement on Supporting Parents and Families,* with a main goal of expanding and strengthening "Parenting and Family Support as an effective prevention and early intervention measure to promote best possible outcomes for children" (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015:2). It is intended that services will be available for parents within proximity and without long waiting lists (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015). Unfortunately, at the end of 2015 there were still over 6,000 child protection cases which were not allocated a social worker (Tusla, 2015). The developed high-level policy statement emphasises the importance for TUSLA to expand "preventative family support services" (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015: 21) and to encourage interagency communication creating links between services attended by families and children, making referrals a smooth journey (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015).

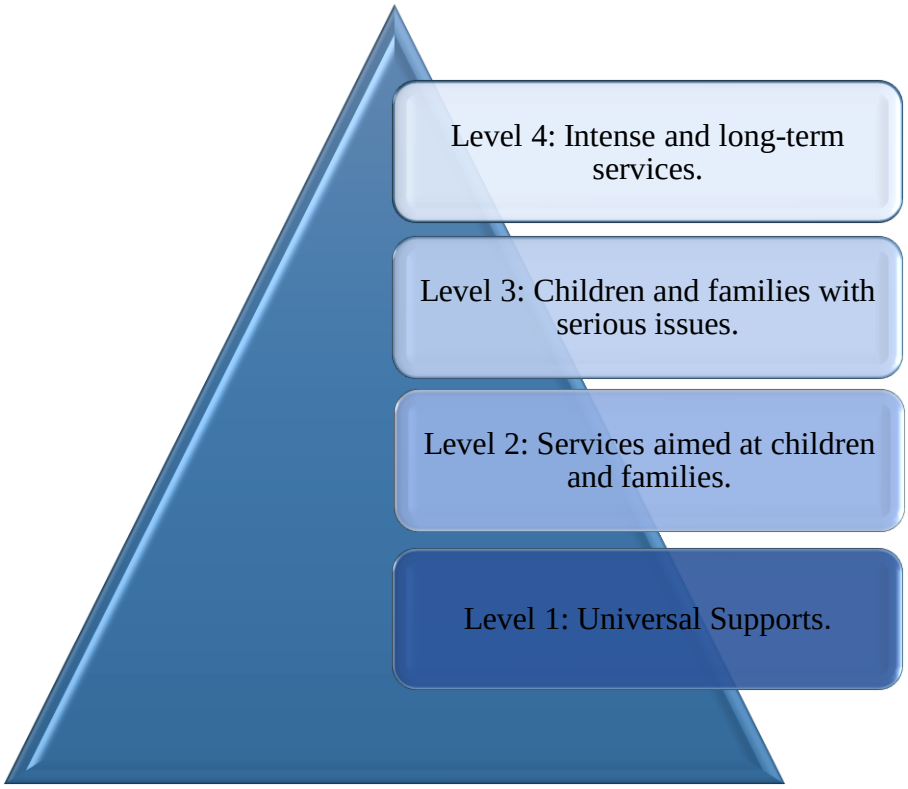
'Earlier intervention and prevention' is the second transformational goal of BOBF which indirectly focuses on family support (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014: 8). Through this transformational goal, the government acknowledges the importance of early intervention services so that families have a positive experience with their children (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014). Early intervention can take the form of universal services within a community, such as attending prenatal classes or parent and baby groups (Barlow and McMillan 2010). These types of services are not primarily directed at families going through adversity, however they indirectly assist families on creating a positive environment for their children. It is recognised that effective high quality early years' care and education services are a form of early intervention family support service. The budget of 2010 saw an investment in early years care and education with an introduction of a

universal free preschool year for children between the ages three years and three months to four years and six months (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2009). The budget of 2016 committed to further investment by introducing a second free preschool year for children up to the age of five years and six months (Early Childhood Ireland, 2015). Subsequently, the 2017 budget saw an introduction of the *Single Affordable Childcare Scheme* which will provide childcare subsidies based on family's income for children ages six months to fifteen years (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2017, b). Through continued investment in the early years the government also acknowledged that youth work must be supported as it is another important universal tool of support (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014).

Levels of Family Support.

Definitions of family support can be problematic. While there is no universal definition, McKeown (2000:2) effectively defined family support as an "umbrella term covering a wide range of interventions which vary along a number of dimensions". Therefore, it covers an extensive list of services which depend on the people it is targeting as well as those providing the service or intervention. This can be further broken down into levels of intensity using the Hardiker, et al. (1991) model (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 Hardiker, et al. (1991)



Owens (2010) provides the following description of the Hardiker model. The universal support level refers to services which are available to the public, these can be early years' care and education services, public schools, youth cafes and recreational services such as the G.A.A. At level two services become targeted at families who have specific needs; following assessment families and children can be referred to services which are deemed beneficial. These services and referrals can come from various perspectives, for example the early start education programme. Early start takes place over a one-year period prior to a child beginning their primary school education and is intended to support children who otherwise would not do well in school (Department of Education and Skill, 2014). Parents and Kids Together (PAKT) finds itself on levels 1 and 2 focusing on a more universal approach to family support (YMCA, 2013). However, 2017 saw an increase in work carried out by PAKT on levels three and four (YMCA, 2016; YMCA, 2017). Owens (2010) describes Level three as targeting more serious issues, for example child's health and welfare concerns. It is difficult to identify specific services as there is usually a combination involved such as social work and counselling. Level four involves long-term intense services. These are often characterised by breakdowns within families and children being cared for by the state. Similarly, to level three there are a lot of services involved at this level as it would be

impossible for the needed support to evolve from one single intervention or service (Owens, 2010). Families go through many difficult situations varying in intensity, all of which are worthy of receiving support to guide them towards stability and contentment. Findings from a longitudinal study carried out in the USA and Britain acknowledged a correlation between stability within families and well-being (Blackflower and Oswald, 2004). Therefore, identifying the significance of early intervention.

Fundamental development takes place during the early years of a child's life which impacts greatly on the outcomes of adolescent and indeed, adult life (Holt, et al., 2012). Newman, et al. (1997) found that personalities and characteristics recorded in three-year olds were later observed in their adult life, therefore reinstating the importance of getting it right in the early years. However, parenting in the early years is rewarding yet complex and challenging. Parents are faced with many financial difficulties for example the current housing crisis low, paid maternity leave, poor access to affordable childcare and poverty. Currently in Ireland the standard rate of maternity benefit is €235 over a period of twenty-six weeks (Citizen Information, 2017). This is relatively low considering the various costs involved in rearing a child. With regards to paternity leave, section two of the Paternity leave and Benefit Act states that "a relevant parent in relation to a child shall be entitled to two weeks" (Government of Ireland, 2016: 10). While this positive progress is welcome, two weeks does not allow for essential bonding time between parent and child. Another big issue that new parents face is childcare costs. While the free pre-school years have eased the level of expenditure, according to Early Childhood Ireland (2016) the average cost of full time day-care per child is €175.57. Considering that the latest figures of the 2011 census show that 41% of families in Ireland had more than one child (CSO, 2011), it means the average cost is being doubled.

A particularly difficult time for families can occur as the teenage years approach. It can be a confusing time for young people, not only are their bodies beginning to change through puberty but at the same time they are also experiencing emotional and social development (Roeser, et al., 2000; Levin, 2015). When these transitions are not handled well they can have severely negative impacts such as ill-mental health issues. Recently ill-mental health and more particularly youth suicide has been a serious issue in Ireland. EUROSTAT (2016) released statistics which showed Ireland to have the sixth highest number of youth suicides in the European Union. While the EU average is 2.96 per 10,000, Ireland has a much higher

figure of 7.6 (EUROSTAT, 2016). This is a time when social support can have significant benefits for families. Along with ill-mental health, bullying and in particularly cyber bullying has become a serious issue for families today. In a European survey carried out by O'Neill, et al. (2011) it was found that 23% of nine to sixteen year olds in Ireland reported to have been bullied (online or offline), once again placing Ireland above the European average of 19%. Similarly, O'Neill, et al. (2011) found that in Ireland younger children between the ages of nine and ten were more like to experience any form of bullying, with a figure of 28% reported to have been previously bullied, yet again this is higher than the EU average of 17%. With the development of various social network sites not all parents may be familiar with children's online activity and need to be supported in finding coping strategies. If parents were to attend family support services they could develop social capital and create potential coping strategies. Farrell and Barnes (1993) pointed out that there is a positive relationship between higher levels of support and communication within the family. Quite often young people with ill-mental health issues are the ones who not only fail to avail of support from those around them, but consequently push their families further away (Thompson and Ontani, 2000). Therefore, it is essential for families to avail of external social support services. Thompson and Ontani (2000) argue that social support can have a double impact on stress, firstly through avoiding its occurrence in the first place and secondly through 'stress-buffering', consequently benefiting the overall well-being of families.

Currently Ireland has a significant housing crisis with a lack of affordable housing and social housing. In the last week of 2016 it was recorded that there were 1,205 families residing in emergency accommodations (Department of Housing, Planning, Community & Local Government 2016), meaning spending Christmas in conditions that may be crammed and not child friendly. However, even the families who do have adequate housing are living in hardship and are experiencing poverty and social exclusion. According to the CSO (2017) figures developed through a survey on income and living conditions 16.9% of the population were at risk of poverty in 2015 and 8.7% were already living in consistent poverty, this shows the negative outcomes of austerity and the economic recession of 2008. In their report on economic inequality in Ireland, Hearn and McMahon, (2016) found that in 2014 there were 11.2% of children living in consistent poverty, an increase of almost 50% since 2008, once again highlighting the severity of the economic crisis. Similar findings can be seen in EUROSTAT (2017) figures, which show that 27.8% of the Irish population under the age of

sixteen are at risk of poverty and social exclusion. According to Hearn and McMahon (2016: 44) the rate of poverty in 2014 was highest in single parent households, "Over a fifth (22.1%) of lone parent families are in consistent poverty while almost a third (32%) are in relative poverty. The deprivation rate for lone parent households increased from 35.6% in 2007 to 58.7% currently". Perhaps this can also be connected to low income rates, with the current hourly rate being 20% less than the hourly rate needed to have a decent standard of living (Hearn and McMahon, 2016). Family support can be beneficial for families who are experiencing poverty and social exclusion, May-Cahal et al. (2002) suggests that since the Springboard initiative focuses on families living in disadvantage, it can facilitate the development of coping strategies. On evaluation of Springboard, McKeown, et al. (2001) acknowledged that there were small, but important changes made with regards to child poverty, after over a year of participation in the Springboard programme it was found that the likelihood of children coming to school hungry and without food reduced. Social support can benefit families who are marginalised or excluded from the rest of society by providing that not only financial aid services but also encourage expansion of social capital as well as facilitating the development of fundamental skills (Thompson and Ontani, 2000).

Coleman's (1994: 302) states that social capital is "defined by its function. It is not a single entity, but a variety of different entities having two characteristics in common…like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that would not be attainable in its absence". Portes (1998) recognised that social capital is motivated in four different ways. Firstly, people encounter values and beliefs in a group which they begin to see as their own (value introjection). Secondly, Portes (1998) saw group belongingness as a motivation (bounded solidarity). Thirdly, through *enforceable trust* people must adhere to certain group rules and values (Portes, 1998). Lastly, through *reciprocity* there is the idea that a favour will be returned (Portes, 1998). Coleman (1988) recognised that being rich in social capital opens new opportunities. In his writing on social capital Putnam (1993;2000), like Coleman saw social interaction as a vital tool for social capital development. Putnam (2000) found that in the American society people have become so busy that they no longer had time to socialise in the community, leading to isolation. To avoid this sense of loneliness it is essential that people become aware of supports around them and use these appropriately throughout their daily lives. This involves families going beyond the people in their immediate environment and exploring social interactions on a broader level.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (Fig. 2) can be closely linked to social capital as it recognises that there are interactions between the individual and those in the surrounding environment. The ecological systems model recognises that individuals do not exist in a vacuum, it shows how individuals are influenced by everything that happens around them (Devaney et al., 2013). The ecological systems model demonstrates the importance of going beyond the microsystem and exploring benefits and opportunities of social support provided by the other systems.

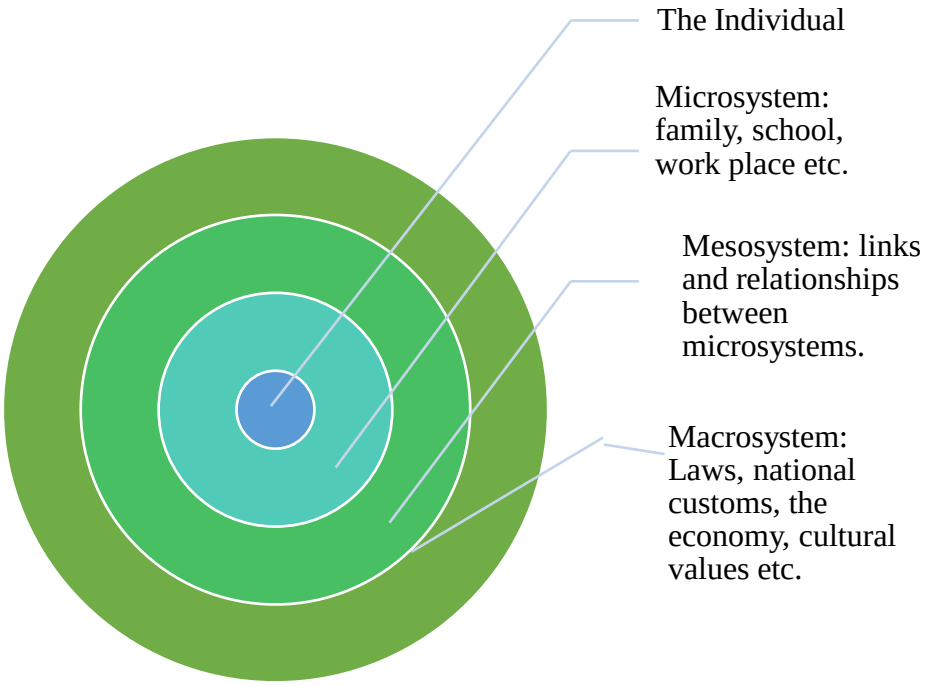


Fig. 2 Bronfenbrenner's ecological model

Family Support Research.

Social support can be further sub-divided into: formal and informal support. Formal support often comes from professional bodies including statutory and voluntary organisations working in partnership or alone, who provide targeted or universal interventions (O'Doherty, 2007; Devaney, et al., 2013). An example of formal support is bereavement counselling for children such as 'Rainbows', or a family being referred to a social worker. Quite often, but not always it involves paid employees or professionals delivering a service. Both national and international research places significance on positive relationships developed between

programme staff and its participants (Dolan and Holt, 2002; Moran and Ghate, 2005, Devaney, 2011). Volunteers have been preferred in research due to increased intimidation felt by programme participants when working with professional staff such as social workers (Dolan and Holt, 2002). Positive relationships between staff and programme participants can be achieved by ensuring parents are treated on the same level as professional staff, eliminating hierarchies (Moran and Ghate, 2005).

Informal support is the opposite to this as it refers to the networks surrounding a person. It can include one's family members, the community, neighbours and friends (O'Doherty, 2007; Devaney, et al., 2013). Seeking support from family or friends may be the initial step of early intervention for families who are going through difficult times (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015). In a representative study carried out by McKeown (2003) on 1,500 households' positive relationships within families were demonstrated as the main component of well-being. Interestingly McKeown (2003) found that the processes within families such as conflict resolution that held the most significance in terms of well-being. It is natural that prior to taking the formal service route, the first step taken by families in coping with difficulties is to seek support from a friend or family member (Devaney, 2011). In studies carried out by Ghate and Hazel (2002) and Gardner (2003) participants favoured informal support over formal support. Gardner (2003) found that there was a correlation between informal support and vulnerability, the lower the informal support the more likely parents were to find themselves in difficult situations and vice versa.

However, seeking support from family and friends may not always be possible as it can create complications and discomfort. Gardner (2003) demonstrated that families can be the source of stress for parents, making it difficult to turn to them in a difficult time. Ghate and Hazel (2002) carried out a longitudinal study in Britain of parents living in deprived areas with children under the age of seventeen. Ghate and Hazel (2002) found that parents were critical of seeking support from members of their families. Parents were conscious of burdening families with their issues while also fearing the idea of relatives prying into their difficult circumstances. Similar results were recorded by Harman (2013) who carried out research with lone white mothers of mixed parentage children in Britain and Wells et al. (1986) who focused on single mothers in rural Washington. In their results both studies recognised the importance of informal support outside of the immediate family. One parent discussed her experience of having family members be judgemental and therefore found it

easier to talk to a person who was in a similar situation, even if was someone she barely knew (Harman, 2013). Going through difficult circumstances can create a sense of loneliness as well as social exclusion however. However, family support programmes can facilitate the potential development of informal support. It can create an environment where parents can develop their social capital by bonding over mutual understanding for one another's circumstances (Shoji et al., 2014; Ghate and Hazel, 2002; McDonald et al., 2006; Moran et al., 2004). A family support programme in Denmark for expecting parents recognises the importance of facilitating the development of social networking opportunities for first time parents (Trillingsgaard et al., 2015).

While there is a lack of Irish research on informal support within family support programmes, studies were carried out by Shoji et al. (2014) and McDonald et al. (2006) in the USA with the Family and Schools Together Programme (FAST). At the beginning of each FAST session parents are encouraged to engage with each other while their children take part in other activities. This allows parents to develop their social capital by getting to know others and discovering commonalities, while creating potential informal support (McDonald, et al. 2006). In a randomised control trial carried out by McDonald, et al. (2006), outcomes of the FAST programme were investigated by having one group of parents who attended the FAST programme and another group who did not. The overall aim of the research was to focus on the academic outcomes and temperament of children from low income urban areas. However, an interesting finding was recorded around development of social support. The research demonstrated that parents became more involved and socially active as they created friendships and supports within the group (McDonald, et al. 2006). Similar results were replicated in another research also carried out on the FAST programme by Shoji, et al. (2014). This research focused on the emergence of social capital in low income Latino families in 52 schools across Phoenix, Arizona and Texas who participated in the FAST programme. Under an hour of each session is allocated to just parents, which incorporate a "buddy session" and a large group discussion solely controlled by parents (Shoji, et al. 2014). The results demonstrate that social capital emerged in several ways. Parents reported feeling sincerely listened to by others, reciprocity evident within parental communication and lastly, conversations were developed through discoveries of commonalities and shared life experiences (Shoji, et al. 2014). Shoji, et al (2014) found the developed social capital began to impact parent lives outside the FAST programme. One parent described the positive

relationship she had built with another parent she met through FAST. During a difficult time of juggling life with a new born, this parent could use the social capital she had developed and lean on another parent for support (Shoji, et al. 2014).

Informal support is not only an outcome of family support but it is also an incentive which encourages parents to join the programme (Harman, et al., 2013). Harman, et al. (2013) found that single mothers were happy to hear of groups in their area as they wanted to meet other single parents with similar circumstances. Parents found support groups to be a relaxed space where unlike formal support services, issues could be discussed at ease (Harman, et al., 2013). In a large scale, longitudinal study, Ghate and Hazel (2002) found that parents from disadvantaged areas face difficult issues at all levels of the ecological model, therefore family support is essential in providing parents with coping strategies. Parents favoured supports that were less formal and rigid as it provided a space to discuss difficult situations at ease (Ghate and Hazel, 2002). An interesting benefit of support services was demonstrated by Canvin, et al. (2009), who carried out research on resilience among disadvantaged families in Britain. The authors found that once parents became immersed in a service, their positive attitude and knowledge was passed onto others, not only within the service but throughout the community (Canvin, et a., 2009). As a result, an opportunity Therefore, showing how given an opportunity of developing social capital can lead to development of informal support within the community.

Conclusion.

Family support in Ireland has been made unintentionally complicated through lack of clear definition. The issue lies within the perceptions people hold about family support, perhaps there is stigma attached with seeking advice or help. In the modern, material world of social media perfection people fear showing flaws as there are apparent picture perfect ideals to live by and anything outside of these are not ‘normal’. Family support has a long history of being a service that takes children out of homes as their safety and welfare are seen to be at risk. Considering the numerous publicised child welfare cases in Ireland this is not surprising. However, the current policy framework has expanded its focus beyond child protection and welfare, acknowledging the importance of a wide range of family support services including early intervention and parental support (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014). The new focus on the area of family support through policy development and establishment

of TUSLA have brought a positive view of family support for the public, acknowledging the importance of providing families with appropriate services which can be used at any time. This shows that family support really is a large umbrella covering endless amounts of services which are useful to all. Parenting is not easy and receiving support is essential. The first and most important step is ensuring these support systems are available for families as it encourages parents to go beyond their microsystem in expanding their social capital and developing informal supports.

Methodological Approach

Introduction

This chapter will discuss the various steps undertaken in investigating the potential for informal support among parents in a family support programme. The first part of this chapter will outline the theoretical underpinnings of the chosen methodological approach. It will then discuss the qualitative methods of focus groups and semi-structured interviews undertaken for the purpose of data collection. Ethical considerations will also be addressed underlining the challenges of qualitative methods of data collection. Lastly this chapter will present the stages of the research process through a thesis research timetable.

Theoretical perspective

This research took an interpretive stance to understand the social experiences of parents in a parent and child family support programme - PAKT. Interpretivism sees people as complex beings who are not shaped by society. There is no one fixed reality, people do not enter a fixed world but instead create their own meaning (Hammond and Wellington, 2013; Bryman, 2012). Interpretivism is closely linked to the social constructivism epistemology which recognises that people construct their own meanings through interactions with their environment (Gray, 2004). Informed by the idea that the reality people live in is socially constructed, this research took a qualitative approach using focus groups and semi-structured interviews to explore parental informal support structures. While using quantitative methods may provide generalization and an exact number of parents who developed informal support

it would not provide the richer in depth understanding of parental experiences. Also, qualitative methodology of focus groups with parents and semi-structured interviews with programme coordinators demonstrates a dual perspective on a family support programmes contribution to development of informal support.

Research Design

Sample

Since the research question was focused on examining the development of informal support through a family support programme (PAKT), it was important to access an interviewee population appropriate to the research questions – namely parent participants in the PAKT programmes operated by the YMCA. While randomised selection was not possible given the small numbers involved, this research attempted to give an insight into the research question by recruiting parents of various backgrounds living in four different areas as well as programme coordinators from each of the PAKT settings. This research dealt with four out of the seven PAKT programmes in the Republic of Ireland.

Size and Characteristics:

The participant sample included parents and programme coordinators from three Cork settings (Cork Urban, Cork East and Cork Rural) and one in Dublin. Overall nineteen parent participants and four programme coordinators were interviewed for this research. As seen in appendix 4, the participation rate of parents in PAKT is between two months and fifteen years. Each programme differed in the length of time parents have been part of the PAKT programme. The Dublin has participating parents with an average of ten years of participation. Cork East had the second longest period of participation with one to nine years, this was followed by Cork Rural with four to five years. Parents in Cork Urban were relatively new in comparison to the other programmes as they were there between two months to one year. The length of participation does not correlate with programme establishment as Cork Urban was established first followed by Cork East, Dublin and Cork Rural. There were also differences in the age groups of parents attending PAKT, the most common age group was thirty to thirty-nine (either parents), followed by forty to forty-nine and over fifty (four parents in each age group). Lastly there were two parents who were in their twenties. There was one male participant which represents the gender profile of parents in PAKT as it is predominantly female participants. The dominant female representation in

family support is evident across research in the field as mothers appear to be more attracted to such programmes while also being the targeted group (Moran et al., 2004; Shoji et al.,2014; Ghate and Hazel, 2002).

Recruitment:

The initial access to participants was granted by undertaking this study through the UCC Community Academic Research Links (CARL) project programme. CARL facilitates community, voluntary and non-profit organisations, such as the YMCA to put forward research ideas that can be undertaken by UCC students. Unique access to PAKT co-ordinators and participant parents was developed through a partnership between CARL in UCC, the researcher and the YMCA programme development officer. Carrying out a research project in conjunction with CARL simplified the recruitment of participants as they were made available through an organised relationship with the YMCA.

The recruitment process comprised of an initial face-to-face meeting with the YMCA programme development officer and programme coordinators from each setting, with Dublin joining in via Skype. Meeting people in charge of the PAKT programmes was essential not only because they were the participants in the research project but also because they may have been potential gatekeepers. According to Bryman (2012) gate-keepers often produce barriers for researchers by limiting access to participants or delegating the research. However, there was no evidence of gate-keeping in this research, instead programme coordinators were involved in a consultative and advisory capacity as they approached all parents with a view of securing their participation in focus groups. Programme coordinators advised on how to best approach discussions and questions with parents. It was recognised that parents would find it difficult to separate themselves from their children in discussing their own experiences. Therefore, programme coordinators advised to begin the focus group by encouraging conversations around children and parenting to ease parents in. Programme coordinators informed all parents of the research project during their coffee mornings. An information sheet (Appendix 1) was used by PAKT staff to explain the research and encourage parental participation. This resulted in all parents having an equal opportunity to participate in the research project. Following this, through e-mail correspondence, programme coordinators agreed to take part in semi-structured interviews to give a broad view on parental support within PAKT.

Qualitative Methods Focus Groups:

Average length- forty minutes

The first step in the qualitative methodology was conducting focus groups with parents across four PAKT settings living in different areas and of different social and economic backgrounds: Cork East, Cork Urban, Cork Rural and Dublin. This was followed by semi-structured interviews with programme coordinators in each of these settings. At the beginning of each focus group and interview participants were given an information sheet to keep and a consent form to sign. Parents were also asked to complete a short survey (Appendix 3) which provided a profile for the researcher. Using focus groups, this research explored parental experiences of PAKT with specific reference to interactions with other parents.

Several differences have emerged between the four settings. As Appendix 4 shows there is a stark difference between Dublin and the other three Cork settings in the length of time parents have spent in PAKT. In Dublin, parents have been members of PAKT between one to fifteen years, in Cork East the time ranged from one to nine years, in Cork Rural it was four to five years, while Cork Urban had the shortest average length of participation at two months to 1 year. The length of time parents are in PAKT may indicate the level of familiarity participants have with each other. This was reflected in the Dublin focus group where the parents who had been in PAKT for several years often controlled discussions as they reminisced on the various activities organised by PAKT down through the years. The Dublin focus group was comprised of participants from two different PAKT centres. Two parents who came from one PAKT programme were participants for a shorter period (one year and five years) in contrast to four parents who had been in another PAKT programme together for over thirteen years. This seemed to impact on their contributions to the focus group with the two parents involved for shorter periods giving quite limited responses.

Morgan (1997) states that using focus groups allows the researcher to become aware of the various experiences and opinions regarding the chosen research topic. It encourages group discussion on a particular point made by a participant (Morgan, 1997). Prior to the focus group a list of proposed questions was generated with the research supervisor around the topic of PAKT and informal support (appendix 5). These questions were to form a schedule which would not be strictly followed, but instead act as a guideline to encourage discussion. Ensuring that research participants are given enough time to discuss their social experiences

reverts back to the interpretivist theoretical perspective. It recognises that the social reality of everyone's lives is constantly changing and experiences will vary among people (Rubin and Rubin, 1995).

Since YMCA professionals may hold preconceptions regarding desired outcomes it was essential that the research was carried out in confidence with PAKT parents where professionals could not influence the research conducted. As a result, during the first meeting it was agreed that programme coordinators would not be involved in the process of collecting raw data within the focus group and neither would they be present during the focus group discussions with parents. As a result, programme coordinators left the focus group once all parents were introduced. Thus, encouraging parents to give their own views, as opposed to views that may be deemed correct by professionals.

Carrying out the focus groups proved to be both insightful and challenging. Throughout the group discussions it was at times difficult to hold control over interactions as conversations often shifted off topic. It was particularly challenging to recognise the relevant times to alter the topic of discussion without interfering with rich data collection (Morgan, 1997). However, carrying out focus groups was also beneficial and insightful as a variety of opinions were recorded in a short period of time. Conversations developed effortlessly within the focus group as parents were in the company of people they knew and were eager to be part of discussions.

Qualitative Methods Semi-Structured Interviews:

Average length- fifteen minutes.

The second step of data collection were individual semi-structured interviews with programme coordinators in four settings. Using semi-structured interviews allowed for predetermined questions to be developed around parental informal support in PAKT (appendix5. It also allowed for flexibility in the discussion and gave participants space to discuss experiences (Edwards and Holland, 2013). The flexible nature of semi-structured interviews gave programme coordinators space to discuss the reality of PAKT parent's social worlds. In the semi-structured interviews, it was important to allow for time where the interviewee could discuss their experiences with parents even if it meant allowing them to go off on a tangent (Bryman, 2012). Flexibility in semi-structured interviews contributes to rich

data collection by bringing the researchers' attention to areas which would have not been covered otherwise (Edwards and Holland, 2013; Bearsworth and Keli 1992, cited in Bryman, 2012). This was evident in the interviews with programme coordinators. During a discussion around specific times parents received support from one another, the programme coordinator of Cork East brought up a topic of parental contact outside PAKT through social media. Other topics such as practical support, positive relationships and emotional support also emerged throughout the interviews. These reflected the range of supports existing between PAKT parents, and between parents and staff. Allowing PAKT staff to give their views on parental experiences demonstrated the broad range social contacts and supports that takes place.

Using semi-structured interviews proved to be a positive experience as it allowed for a conversation to naturally unfold with the programme coordinators. While there were pre-determined questions developed for the four interviews, these were quite general and encouraged flexibility in the discussion for example, *What kind of changes do you think have happened in parent's social life as a result of their involvement in PAKT?* Using questions as a guide in the interview allowed the researcher freedom to change the order of questions and to omit or add questions to suit the natural flow of the conversation. At the beginning of the first interview it was challenging to allow freedom of conversation as there was an underlying fear of not gathering enough data. However, as the interview unfolded it became evident that rich data can emerge while still allowing the interviewee to lead the topic of discussion.

Data Analysis:

Analysis of the recorded data followed a thematic analysis approach, Braun and Clarke (2006) explain this approach to be the identification of patterns and similarities within the gathered data. Thematic analysis is at a latent level, where the researcher goes into a deeper level of analysis looking at the concepts and assumptions underpinning the data and going beyond simple instruction (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This type of analysis allowed for a deeper understanding of parental experiences of social support structures. A theme does not necessarily have to be tied to repetition among the interviews; instead it could be data that appears less frequently but is more significant to the broader research question or it could even be language utilised by participants (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Ryan and Bernard, 2003). This was evident in the thematic analysis of interviews with programme coordinators. Even

though the topics of practical support and advice/shared experienced were both relatively small in comparison to the other themes, because of the significant nature of support they represented it was deemed important to include them as separate themes.

The first step of thematic analysis that took place was coding; data collected from each interview was carefully transcribed and coded. Codes were categorised in terms of similarities which developed a theme. Themes were represented by counts which demonstrated the amount of times a topic was discussed. Following this, themes were organised in terms of count priority - this demonstrates the strongest emerging themes from interviews and focus groups. The timeline for thematic analysis can be seen in the last section of this chapter: Timetable for Completion. Thematic analysis involved becoming very familiar with raw data. For this purpose, the researcher undertook all the transcribing. This meant listening back to the voice recordings over and over. Once this was completed transcripts were read numerous times to ensure each part was coded appropriately. While this was time consuming it was also effective as on several occasions new important information which was missed during the initial stage of familiarisation with the data emerged. Due to the nature of the topic there was cross-overs between themes and certain topics potentially covered more than one theme. To avoid repetition, codes had to be rearranged between themes several times to ensure that each theme had the most appropriate representation of data from the transcripts.

Ethical Considerations

Signed informed consent forms were received from each participant prior to beginning focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The informed consent form was produced in line with the model provided by the UCC Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC). Informed consent along with an information sheet provided participants with an understanding of the overall research being carried, its aims and objectives. Deception was eliminated as a detailed account of the research was available for all participants. The voluntary aspect of the study was explained outlining the option of participation rejection if participants were unhappy with any part of the research project (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). The informed consent form outlined aspects of confidentiality, explaining that no identifying information, apart from naming the programme would be used in the thesis. Anonymity was another important ethical consideration of this research. According to Creswell (1998) it can be challenging to ensure

anonymity of participants as qualitative data is recorded using several methods. In this research audio recording was used followed by transcribing, audio recorded data had a lot of identifying information presented by participants. To avoid confidentiality breaches, focus group participants were allocated numbers during the transcription process. Apart from participant names other information such as specific locations which would identify the settings location emerged in the focus groups and interviews. During transcribing these were not used, instead a brief background was presented i.e. leisure centre. Audio recordings were transmitted onto an encrypted laptop where they are only accessible by the researcher. In line with the University's Code of Research Conduct (2016), data will be securely held for a minimum period of 10 years after completion of the research project.

While this research was not envisaged as being of a delicate nature, it was acknowledged that it is difficult to know what some people may deem a sensitive topic. Thus, it was important that participants always had the right to privacy. Bryman (2012) states that some participants may find questions invasive and refuse to answer. Going back to informed consent, participants were assured of the voluntary nature of participation and this was reiterated throughout each interview and focus groups, allowing for interviewees to opt out of questions if they experienced discomfort. As well as confidentiality and informed consent there was also ethical considerations of safety. This was addressed by ensuring interviews took place in a location where both the interviewee and interviewer were content and comfortable (Arksey and Knight,1999), in this case the venue for their weekly coffee mornings. Even though this research involved four different locations, interviews were carried out according to the participant's programme location this meant traveling to each location and conducting interviews and focus groups on site. This reinforced a sense of security for participants as they were in a familiar location with people they knew in close proximity. Arksey and Knight (1999) acknowledge that the quality of data may reflect the quality of relationships between participants and the researcher. Therefore, the aspect of safety was developed through a positive relationship which developed a sense of trust. It was important to build rapport from the initial stages of interview regardless of the time frame allocated to interviews (Arksey and Knight, 1999). Conducting interviews on site also provided a sense of security for the researcher as it was a location with other professionals including programme co-ordinators who were familiarised with the research following the initial meeting.

Timetable for research.

October 2016	Submit CARL student application UCC supervisor assigned for research
November 2016	Meeting with CARL co-ordinator- discuss the research topic and procedure of carrying out a CARL project.
December 2016	Meeting with CARL co-ordinator, YMCA programme development officer and UCC supervisor- discussion of research
January	Development of research proposal: Initial scoping of the literature and methodology research.
February	Submit research proposal
March	Application to Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC), UCC for review Meeting with YMCA programme development officer and programme coordinators from Cork Urban, Cork East, Cork Rural and Dublin (via Skype). The purpose of this meeting was to introduce the research to programme coordinators and receive feedback regarding recruitment and proposed questions.
April	Ethical approval received from SREC, UCC Submit Literature Review Begin fieldwork interviews: Cork Urban Focus Group and Interview Begin transcription of focus group and interview.
May	Cork Rural Focus Group and Interview Cork East Focus Group and Interview Dublin Focus Group and Interview Transcription
June	Transcription completed Thematic Analysis: initial analysis and coding of data from focus groups and interviews.
July	Thematic Analysis: interrogation of available research in the field of family support against findings of the present research.

August	Write up of findings chapter Write-up of Methodology chapter
September	Writing - Introduction and Conclusion
October	Submit Thesis

Conclusion:

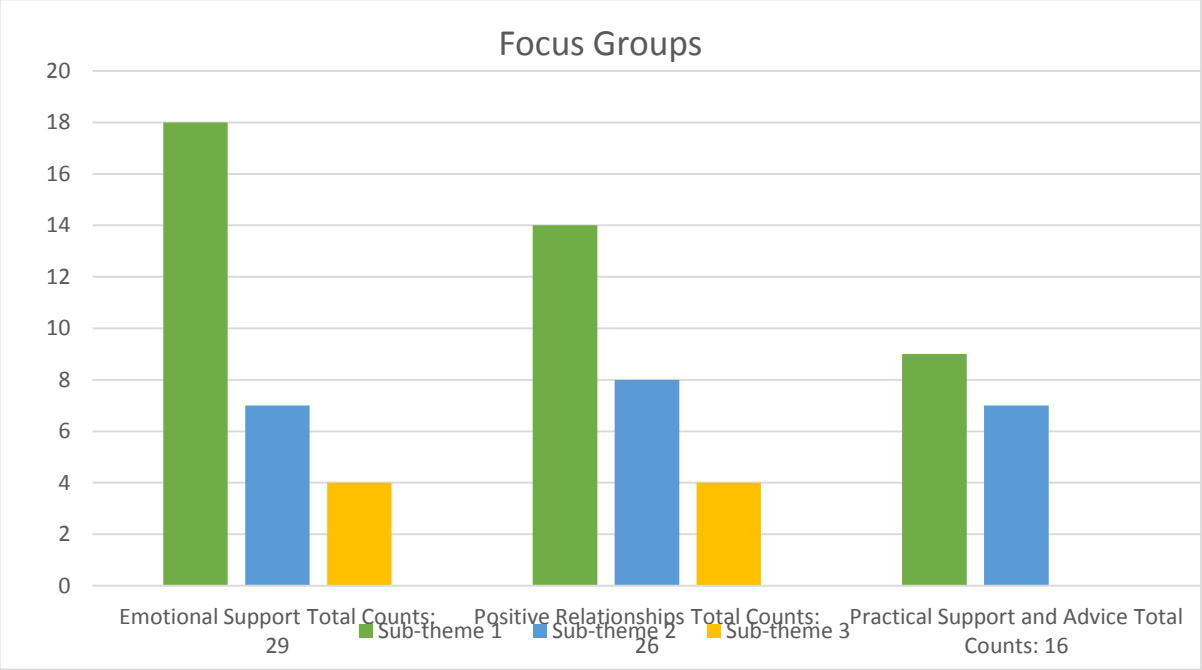
This chapter gave an insight into the theoretical perspective and epistemology which informed the qualitative methods used to gather data. The research design was outlined demonstrating the participant sample and its characteristics. This was followed by a discussion on recruitment of participants, identifying the various steps taken such as a meeting with programme coordinators. This chapter provides an insight into the qualitative methods used and the steps taken during the thematic analysis of transcribed data. This chapter concludes with the research time-tabled identifying the necessary steps taken.

Analysis of Findings (Focus Groups)

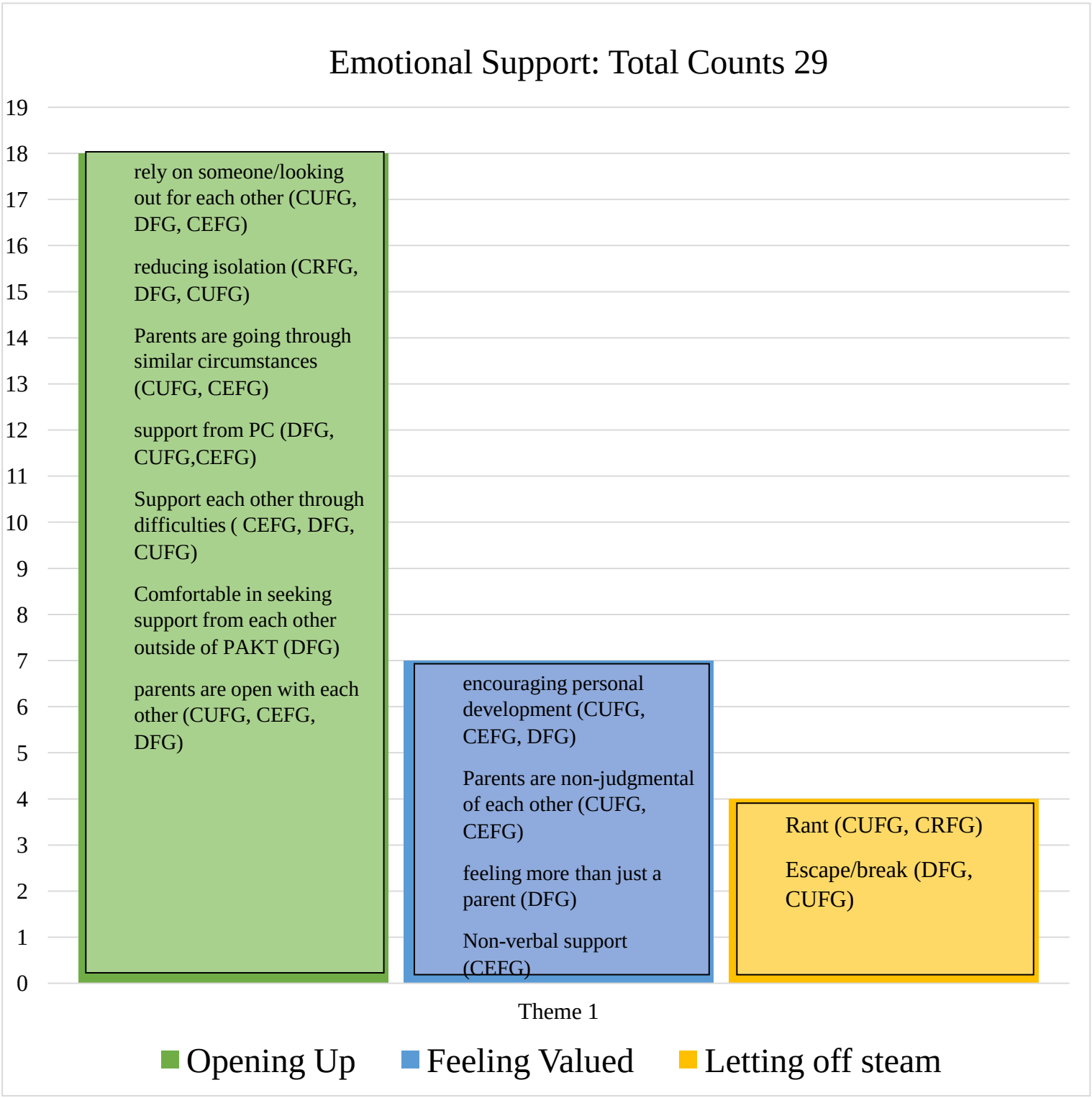
Introduction.

Thematic analysis was carried out on the transcripts of four focus groups: Dublin, Cork Urban, Cork Rural and Cork East. Three themes emerged from the analysis: emotional support, positive relationships and practical support and advice. This chapter is organised in terms of theme priority based on counts. Counts represent the amount of times a topic had been discussed throughout the transcripts. Accordingly, emotional support with 29 counts will be discussed first followed by positive relationships with 26 counts and, practical support and advice with 16 counts. Each theme is further divided into sub-themes which discuss related topics in more detail. Sub-themes are also organised in terms of count quantity, those with more counts are prioritised and discussed first. The wide-ranging nature of family support yields an overlap between some themes as the same topic may represent different types of support. For example, reducing isolation discussed in emotional support is referred to again when discussing the development of new friendships in the theme of positive relationships.

Another difference between the four settings emerged in the Cork Rural focus group. While Cork East, Cork Urban and Dublin were interactive groups which had a lot of parent led discussion, the Cork Rural focus group was significantly less interactive and parents were more limited in their responses. However, Cork Rural with 3 participants was the smallest group which may have added to their minimal interaction. Conducting research with small sample size focus groups can create challenges. Morgan (1997) recognised the flow of discussion in small focus groups is dependent upon the group dynamic. If there is a participant who is apprehensive towards interacting it can potentially demotivate the others in the group (Morgan, 1997).



Theme 1: Emotional Support



As already mentioned above, themes have been organised in order of priority based on the number of counts. As a result, emotional support was the strongest emerging theme with 29 counts. The theme has been further divided into 3 sub-themes of opening up (18 counts),

feeling valued (7) and letting off steam (4). Overall the theme explores parents' ability to discuss their lives within PAKT both with parents, and programme coordinators. Difference between settings became apparent under the theme of Emotional Support. While it emerged strongly as a feature of the Cork, Urban, Cork East and Dublin programmes it was less evident in Cork Rural, where practical support dominated discussion.

Sub-theme 1: Opening Up.

The strongest emerging sub-theme, with 18 counts is opening Up. The focus groups with parents demonstrated strong companionship among parents within PAKT programmes. It appears that parents have developed a support network among themselves which encourages open discussion about their personal lives. The transcripts demonstrated that opening up was widespread in the Cork Urban, Cork East and Dublin settings. However, the only occasion where the sub-theme of opening up was demonstrated within Cork Rural was in the discussion of reducing isolation. A father in Cork Rural discussed being relatively new to the community, while this has the potential of increasing isolation and loneliness, it was acknowledged that PAKT created an opportunity to meet other parents living in the area. In Dublin, Cork Urban and Cork East the transcripts also demonstrated parents no longer feeling isolated since joining PAKT, there is mutual awareness that other parents are experiencing issues and difficulties. As pointed out by a parent in Dublin "we all have stories yea, and you don't feel as alone". Parents in Cork Urban held similar views, "I think you realise that were all in the same boat"/ "everyone has problems, everyone has their ups and downs, bad days' good days you know". Parents from Dublin, Cork East and Cork Urban demonstrate awareness of shared circumstances which contributed to reducing isolation and loneliness.

The beginning of the Cork Urban focus group found parents describing challenging behaviour in relation to their children: "behaviour was a big issue at home, everywhere like/ he was kind of, I dunno, he was acting out and things like that". Throughout the focus group it became apparent that parents were experiencing similar daily struggles such as rearing children with special needs and coping with bullying in school. In Cork East, children exhibiting shyness appeared to be at the centre of parents' concerns. As parents discussed their circumstances it became evident that they were quite open with each other. In both Cork Urban and Cork East parents felt secure in talking about their issues and difficulties "I think like people are comfortable enough that if they have something to say they'd say it and you

would get the support if you need it". Being open with one another appeared to create a support network among parents. For example, the youngest member of the Dublin focus group stated that "we'd (parents) all kind of help each other if there was anything there you know".

A strong sense of interdependency emerged as parents discussed various times they received or provided support. In Cork East, a parent discussed experiencing self-consciousness related to her hip which hindered physical movement. It was acknowledged that events such as going swimming with the other PAKT families created a sense of anxiety and fear "I was like oh god, what now if I fall will I hold everyone up". However, as another parent pointed out, support can be non-verbal and out of plain sight, "the support then was nobody took any notice if it".

Support emerged unexpectedly within the Cork Urban focus group as a mother discussed her difficult circumstances coping of with her isolated and bullied son who was "struggling with emotional regulation". The other members of the focus group were quick to empathise with the upset parent giving her views and opinions on the issue, encouraging the distressed mother to look at options of privately run services. In Dublin, parents being open with each other and sharing their problems was demonstrated as the norm since parents are "used to being around each other". Support between PAKT parents at times of difficult life situations continued outside the programme. In Dublin, a parent explained how she was called several times at night by another PAKT parent to help with her young daughter who "was on the internet and she was talking to older kids, men stuff like… making arrangements to meet him". With the help of her daughter who is also a PAKT parent they discussed the dangerous consequences with the young girl and created a parent block on the laptop.

Among the three settings of Dublin, Cork Urban and Cork East the experience of being open with programme coordinators and receiving support from them emerged strongly. In each setting, parents acknowledged the high level of support they receive from PAKT staff. For example, in Cork Urban a parent who was struggling with challenging behaviour recognised that the support she received "over the past year really has made a huge difference to our family, even at school it's a lot easier to handle and even at home". In Dublin, it was recognised that support from PAKT staff is provided "no matter what". For example, "you (parents) maybe in a bad humour and she'd (programme coordinator) say sit down relax I'll

go up and take (child) you know". Another Dublin parent acknowledged the support she received from PAKT as she went through bereavement of her nephew who committed suicide. Alternatively, it emerged in Cork East that support from programme coordinators is equated with being "treated the same". Therefore, demonstrating the non-judgemental nature of the service and the attitude of staff who appeared to be more like friends as oppose to programme staff. This was demonstrated in Cork East as parents described enjoying their time together with programme coordinators in a leisure centre. Similarly, in Dublin a parent expressed her appreciation towards PAKT programme coordinators who are caring towards any difficulties parents experience, "they're always there. If any of your kids ever end up in hospital they were always there they'd go in and they'd see them and all that".

Sub-theme 2: Feeling Valued

Feeling Valued, with 7 counts is the second sub-theme under Emotional Support. While it contains significantly less counts it was deemed to be important to include as a separate sub-theme as it covers a range of topics which have been highlighted throughout 3 out of the 4 settings. Cork Rural does not represent any counts under this sub-theme. Feeling Valued covers topics of encouraging personal development, self-value, and the non-judgemental nature of parental interactions.

Personal development was demonstrated in Cork Urban, Cork East and Dublin. A young mother in Dublin discussed how her PAKT journey has encouraged a different outlook on life in choosing a new career path. She explained that since joining PAKT she has a newfound desire to work with children which has been supported by PAKT staff in pursuing this, "I want to work with kids now from being in PAKT…I've gone back to college with the help of (programme coordinators) I've gone back to study to get me degree to work with kids". While in the Dublin focus group personal development contributed to the realisation of aspiration, in Cork Urban it increased self-esteem. One of the mother's recognised that being in PAKT has made her "stronger" and "look at things and kind of approach things in a different way". In Cork East, there was a similar sense of the development of self-esteem for shy parents. One mother explained her fear and anxiety of being in groups which she overcame by interacting and becoming familiar with other parents during various family activities, such as a trip to the Christmas Pantomime. Similarly, another parent in Cork East

recognised that being with the other parents during the outings gave her "confidence talking to people".

In Dublin, it was demonstrated that spending time in PAKT had encouraged parents to value themselves as individuals and not just as parents. A mother pointed out that spending time with others in PAKT "gives you a bit more than just having kids and raising them". It was recognised that activities for parents are conveniently planned during school times which allows parents to have interactions with each other which do not involve looking after their children.

Feeling Valued can be further explored through the non-judgemental nature of parental interactions. It was recognised in Cork Urban and Cork East that in PAKT parents do not judge each other, and instead it is "a positive place to go to" where there are "no sort of preconditions". Parents do not feel the need to hide themselves or their issues as "everybody's here on the same ticket". In Cork East one of the parents recognised that since getting to know the other parents and understanding their positive non-judgemental nature it encourages "confidence to do stuff you wouldn't have done before". Prior to going to spa day with the other parents a mother explained that her physical impairment created a sense of fear as she was worried that others would be looking at her. However, she explained that it was quite the opposite as there was no judgement from the other parents, they "took no notice", allowing her to overcome fear and anxiety and enjoy a relaxing day with other mothers.

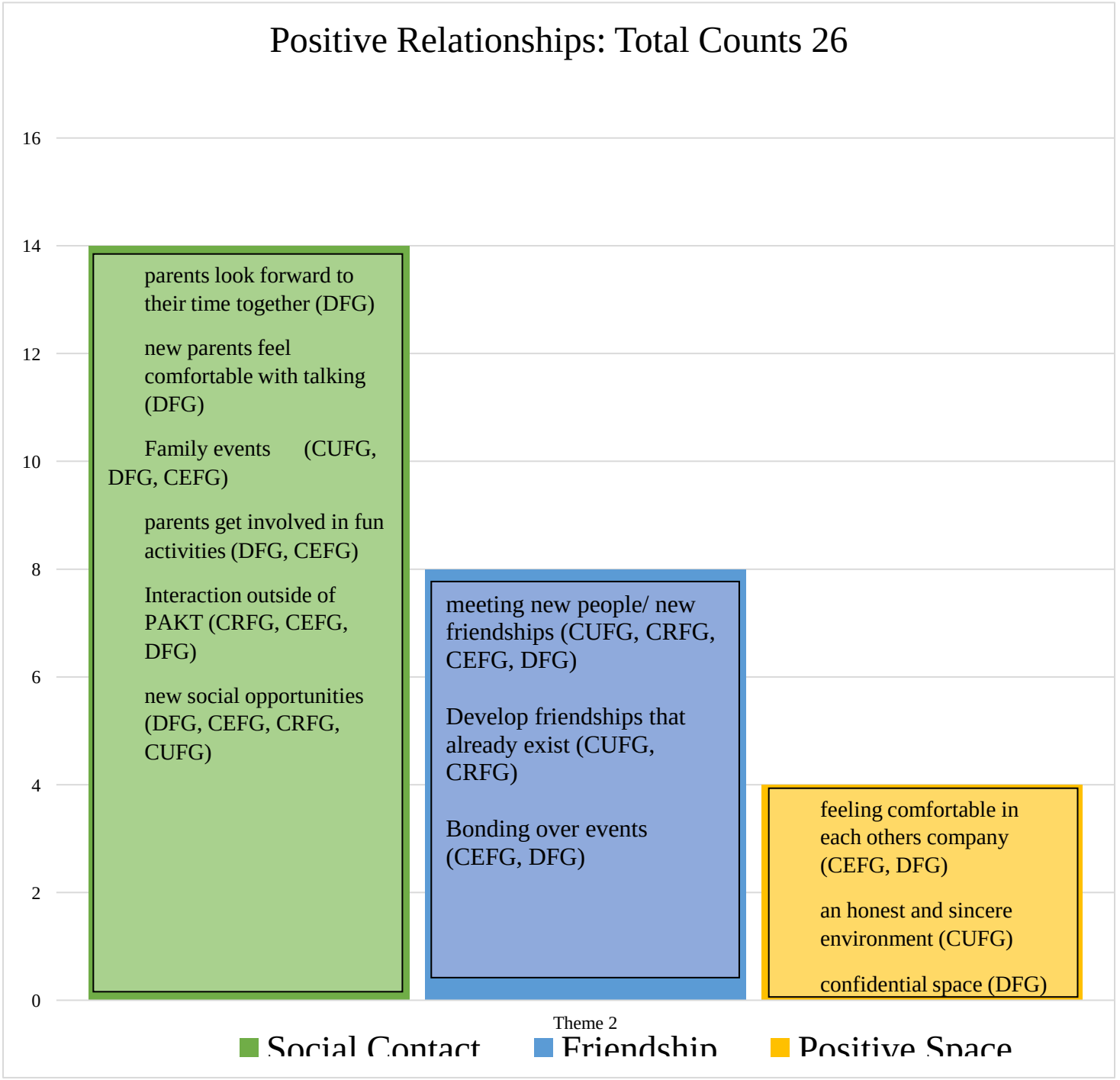
Sub-theme 3: letting off-steam.

Letting off-steam with 4 counts is the last sub-theme. As with the last sub-theme it does not cover all four settings, however it does include Cork Rural. Once again this is a relatively small sub-theme and covered a minor portion of the transcripts, but the information provided by parents gave a good indication of the type of interactions parents have.

In Dublin, it emerged that the time parents spent together was a "distraction", it was a time of escape for parents where one could forget about daily issues and struggles. Alternatively, Cork Urban and Cork Rural demonstrated PAKT as being a place where parents could release their frustration. In Cork Urban, it was acknowledged that parents use their time together such as the coffee mornings for "moaning and complaining". An interesting point emerged from Cork Urban which demonstrated that having a rant together encouraged parents to "face

the next day". In other words, parents have an opportunity to get things off their chest and avoid bottling up their emotions. Similarly, in Cork Rural, the father in the group explained that there have been occasions when parents who are experiencing difficulties needed a "wall screamer". During these times parents turned to each other to "sound off" and discuss their circumstances. The ability to turn to each other when experiencing problems gives a clear indication of the level of support parents have as they are attentive and create opportunities of eliminating frustration.

Theme 2: Positive Relationships.



Like the previous theme it is sub-divided into three sub-themes social contact (14), friendship (8) and positive space (4) which are organised in terms of count quantity. Overall the theme focuses on varied levels of interactions between parents and their views on the environment

the interactions take place in. Four settings are represented in two out of three sub-themes, indicating that, depending on the area, parents may have different experiences of the programme.

Sub-theme 1: Social Contact.

Social contact, with 14 counts is the strongest emerging sub-theme and is a reoccurring topic in all four settings. There was a common viewpoint among parents in all settings that PAKT is a positive socialising space. It emerged in Dublin that new parents felt comfortable in joining in on the other parent's conversations who were quick to include new members in their discussions. It emerged that PAKT is not only an outlet for children, but it is also a social outlet for parents. This was demonstrated by a Dublin mother who recognised that "we (parents) might not see each other from one end of the week to another, but if I had an issue I look forward to coming over here on a Tuesday to sit down and have a talk". In Cork Rural it was recognised that since joining parents have developed their social life as they have met up for a "cup of coffee" outside of PAKT. Likewise, a Dublin mother praised the weekly coffee morning as it now plays a central role in her social life "it's my part of my socialisation, on a Tuesday coming over for a few hours". It was also demonstrated that the social activities developed by PAKT staff have encouraged interactions while also creating a social outlet. In Cork East parents spoke of various social opportunities they have received since joining PAKT. For example, a parent who "would have never thought of going to a Pantomime" expressed her gratitude in being able to go the last nine Christmases. In Dublin, there was extensive discussion on the various social outings parents attended, for example, going to an outdoor adventure park, mother and daughter camping trip, shopping trips at Christmas as well as regular trips to IKEA and Penneys. On the other hand, in Cork Urban a mother demonstrated that social opportunities can also take the shape of a well treasured one hour break every week.

Family events appear to be the main source of social contact between parents. A Dublin mother expressed the pleasure of being able to have an inexpensive outing with her children "there are always subsidised and they'll always be booked and there's a bus". Parents outlined various family events such as "barbeque out in the car park" and an annual Christmas party in the centre. Similarly, in Cork East parents discussed spending time together during a trip to a leisure centre where they had the opportunity to socialise while

their children enjoyed fun activities. It emerged that attendance at family events with their children encouraged parental participation. For example, while in Dublin parents joined in skipping and hula hooping, and in Cork East parents played mini golf and went go karting with their children at an activity centre.

Social contact between parents appears to go beyond the PAKT settings as parents have demonstrated that their interactions take place outside of the programme times. In Cork Rural two parents mentioned spending time together at Halloween and while their children attended a disco in the local community. It was recognised by parents in Dublin and in Cork East that interactions outside of PAKT happen unintentionally. Since parents live in the same community they meet each other "out and about" and would always stop to talk. In Dublin, it was recognised that children play a significant part in parental interaction outside of PAKT. Having children of similar age creates a perfect opportunity for parents to organise play dates. Two parents who live close by acknowledged that since their children attend the same school it encourages them to meet up and spend time together. On the other hand, it was recognised by a mother that the older age of their children limits their ability to spend time together, since play dates are no longer an option.

Consequently, a sense of positive social interactions strongly emerged from the transcripts of all four settings. This gives a clear indication of the benefits PAKT has for parents who receive an opportunity of expanding their social capital and increase their interactions with other parents in the community.

Sub-theme 2: Friendship.

Friendships, with 8 counts is the second sub-theme under emotional support. There is equal representation of all four settings under this sub-theme which gives a good indication of the level of positive relationships present in each programme. However, it must be noted that due to the nature of the topic of emotional support there is an overlap between sub-themes. For example, the discussion of reducing isolation above and the development of new friendships which will be discussed now cover similar topics discussed by parents.

PAKT strongly emerged as a prime location for parents to meet new people living in the area. As previously mentioned a father in Cork Rural discussed being new to the community and feeling like a "blow in". Since rural communities are often tight knit the father expressed

his belief that many generations after him will continue to feel the same. Nonetheless, PAKT was praised for developing social connections as an opportunity emerged to meet new people and become familiar with other parents living in the area. In Cork Urban and Cork East parents also demonstrated how being in PAKT created opportunities for long-term friendships. It was pointed out that parents meet new people whom they "stay friends with" and "make connections that we (parents) didn't have". This was similarly reflected in Dublin as it emerged that parents who are now close friends met through PAKT. The close bond between two mothers was evident throughout the focus group as they reminisced on the many outings they had over the years together while being in PAKT. As mentioned at the beginning the Dublin focus group comprised of two centres in Dublin. The focus group allowed parents to meet new people from their community as a mother expressed her surprise of seeing a parent who lives near her "That girl (Parent 4) is around the corner from me and I didn't even know, but I've never seen her sitting here do you know what I mean, but if there was an issue I would say "oh Jesus, that happened" or whatever, I suppose now like". Apart from creating new friendships and connections it was acknowledged in Cork Urban and Cork Rural that PAKT develops parent's friendships that have existed prior to programme involvement. In Cork Urban, it was recognised that since joining PAKT parents who had been friends before "share a lot" since joining PAKT.

Sub-theme 3: Positive Space.

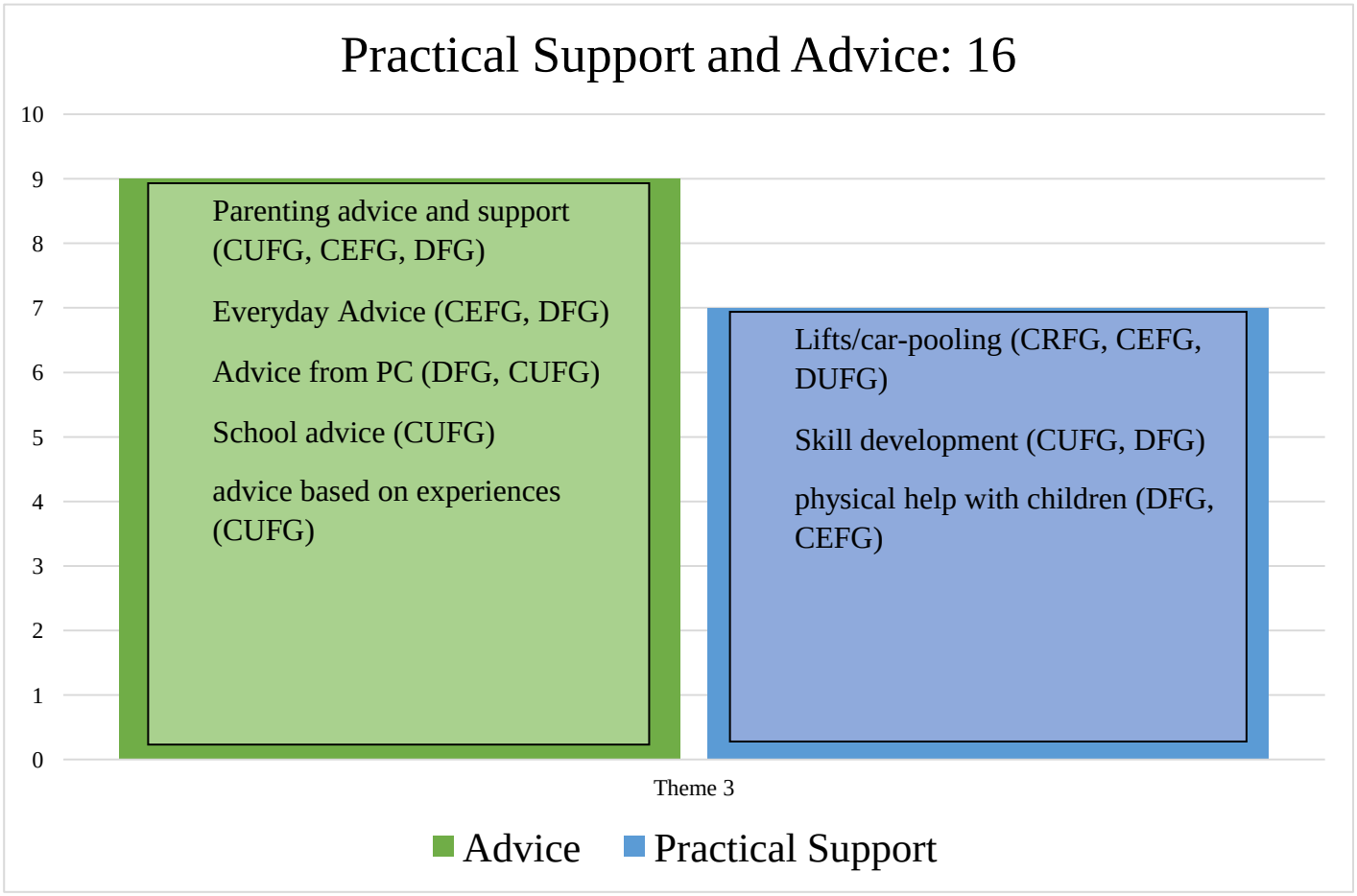
Positive Space emerged as a relatively small sub-theme with 4 counts. It is an interesting sub-theme as it provided a background on the type of environment developed by parents. It contributes to the overall theme of Positive Relationships as it demonstrates the positive atmosphere within PAKT. This was particularly evident in Cork Urban, Cork East and Dublin as each setting contributed to the topic by discussing their experiences while in PAKT.

It emerged in Dublin and Cork East that parents make each other feel welcome which allows them to feel comfortable in each other's company. In Dublin, new and old members described a welcoming atmosphere, one mother who had been in PAKT for a long time pointed out that "when you're in PAKT for so long you don't be afraid because you have the comfort. You always feel welcome, you don't really feel like awkward about talking". Similarly, a mother who has been in PAKT for a year found that when "people start talking"

it eases interactions. However, throughout the Dublin focus groups older members often took control over interactions preventing newer members joining in the discussion. Perhaps there was a sense of intimidation unintentionally created by long-term parents? In Cork East, parents found themselves relaxed in the company of other PAKT parents. They felt that not only does PAKT encourage participation but it also encouraged a mother to move out of her comfort zone and go through new experiences "I'd never experienced and I'd never have done it (spa) only that I knew who they were and I was like yea I'm grand with that crowd, you know. So that's a good thing to do".

Parents in Cork Urban recognised PAKT as being genuine place where there is "a great honesty and sincerity". This came from a mother of a boy with autism who saw herself as being "needy" and "emotionally drained". It emerged that while initially she joined PAKT to avail of a social outlet for her son it has now become an emotional and social outlet for her. It was recognised that the other parents in PAKT create a genuine and positive environment where "you can say stuff and you get an honest sincere view back". Apart from parents feeling welcome in PAKT it was also recognised as being a confidential space. In Dublin, it was demonstrated that parents did not feel insecure about sharing personal issues and discussing their lives as they were certain "they'd (parents) keep it to themselves". Therefore, parents create an atmosphere that encourages belongingness and openness, motivating parents to interact and take part in discussions.

Theme 3: Practical Support and Advice.



Everyday Life, with 17 counts is the last theme to emerge from the transcripts of all four settings. The theme is divided into two sub-themes Advice (9) and Practical Support (8) which are prioritised in terms of count quantity. This theme focuses on the daily support parents provide for each other through advice giving and hands on support which occurs both within and outside of PAKT.

Sub-theme 1: Advice.

The sub-theme of Advice comes first in order of priority with a total of 9 counts. Children appear to be the primary reason for advice seeking and giving within three PAKT settings,

Cork Urban, Cork East and Dublin. However, this was not the case in Cork Rural, where practical support in the form of lifts and car-pooling dominated discussion. This will be discussed in detail under sub-theme two. This sub-theme examines advice around school and general parenting.

It emerged that parents in PAKT are comfortable in turning to each other for advice. A Cork East parent recognised that advice is part of daily interactions, it often takes the shape of inquiring about items of clothing and other child related topics. It was acknowledged by the parent that having these conversations "leads to a lot of stuff really". Therefore, while it may be a conversation starter for parent's, other topics may arise as the conversation unfolds. In Dublin, parents similarly acknowledged being able to seek advice from other PAKT members. It emerged that if a parent came up against an issue they would not hesitate in turning to each other, "if you have a problem you could talk to one of them about it and they can give you a bit of advice or whatever, you know what I mean".

As previously discussed in the theme of Emotional Support, unexpected support arose within the Cork Urban focus group during a mother's discussion about difficulties of bullying and emotional regulation. School advice emerged as the main source of support from other parents, who suggested transferring schools to the distressed mother. Parents encouraged the possibility of attending a nearby school with a specially designed programme "I heard from a few other parents that had children with issues or whatever, they did get transferred to (school name) for the sake of the programme that they have in place. You know the special needs programmes and different things they have in place comparing to (school name)". During this discussion, the importance of shared experiences emerged within the transcript. It became apparent that a mother who had also experienced difficulties with her son had felt at a loss until she contacted Marian House[1] who were "a great support" in assessing her son. Praising the support received from Marian House it was suggested to that the struggling mother contact them for support.

[1] Marian House provides services for school aged children on the Autistic Spectrum Disorder. Under the Brothers of Charity intervention and assessment services are provided by multidisciplinary teams. These are made up of speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, social workers, psychologists and home support workers.

Parenting advice emerges as a strong point of parental interactions. A new to the programme mother in Cork Urban discussed her struggle of having a child with autism. She joined PAKT based on recommendations from other parents in the programme "like it was two ladies (NAMES) that told me about PAKT so I then joined". This demonstrates that PAKT is part of interactions within the community. Parents use the knowledge and support they receive to encourage other parents to join the programme. In Cork East, PAKT was demonstrated as a tool for joined parenting decisions. It was discussed by two mothers how joining PAKT had encouraged them to provide their children with more freedom by allowing them to walk to PAKT with no parental supervision "We decided between us that they're old enough and mature enough to let them walk". The parents had the opportunity of giving their children "a huge boost of confidence" while making a parenting decision together.

Programme coordinators also emerged as a source of advice for parents. The transcripts demonstrate that the positive bond parents have developed through their time in PAKT encouraged them to seek advice from programme coordinators. In Cork Urban, a mother who is experiencing her child being bullied had expressed her appreciation of being able to turn to the programme coordinator to discuss her difficulties "my main support is just through, even just having a conversation with (programme coordinator)". Another Cork Urban parent praised support received from programme coordinator when her son's friends parent had died due to cancer. Likewise, in Dublin a mother was appreciative of programme coordinator encouraging her to go to her son's school to enquire about her son's Leaving Certificate registration as she was worried that he would not be able to sit exams.

The various example of verbal and physical support among parents in PAKT provide a good indication of the strong bond parents have developed since joining PAKT. The transcripts demonstrate that parents are keen to support each other during times of difficulty as well happier times, contributing to interdependence among programme participants.

Sub-theme 2: Practical Support.

The second sub-theme under everyday life is practical support with 7 counts. Practical support was evident in all four settings as parents discussed the hand-on support among PAKT participants. Mostly, this was characterised by car-pooling and help with children. Parents also discussed receiving practical support from PAKT staff.

Physical help and care with children was demonstrated by parents in Cork East and Dublin. It emerged in the outlined two settings that parents were aware of each other's situation and were quick to help during times of need. In Dublin, it was acknowledged that children don't always listen to their parents which calls for intervention from someone else. As a result, a PAKT mother discussed having to "deal" with another parent's children who exhibited challenging behaviour when parents went on trips together. In Cork East, a mother expressed her concern of being the cause of her daughter's isolation as she was incapable of taking part in certain physical activities such as go karting. However, another PAKT parent was quick to help the concerned mother and offered to take part in the physically demanding activities. Another instance of practical support emerged in Cork East during a birthday party where a PAKT mother was "overwhelmed by so many kids". Recognising the need for support, another PAKT parent stepped in and provided needed assistance with "arts and crafts" which "helped (parent) then concentrate on her daughter's day rather than looking after others".

Another type of practical support which emerged from the transcript was one of organising lifts and car-pooling. Parents in Cork Urban, Cork East and Cork Rural discussed the various occasions which have arranging car lifts. For example, while praising the support received from the other parents in PAKT a Cork Urban mother recognised that if she "need(ed) someone to collect one of the boys and I know that they (PAKT parents) would do it for me". Similarly, in Cork East it was demonstrated that car-pooling is quite a regular occurrence within PAKT as parents would travel to and from the programme together. In Cork Rural it emerged that parents have a "system going" where they have organised for children to be collected from school and brought to PAKT and then dropped home. The father in the school recognised that it is beneficial as it allows parents to take care of responsibilities they may have.

In Dublin, it was acknowledged that programme coordinators also provide support for parents in the form of lifts. When parents are unable to make their way to PAKT the programme coordinator is quick to assist by collecting them. Support from programme coordinators also takes the form of developing skills needed in everyday life, for example in Dublin "we've (parents) also had cooking mornings on a Friday" which is done in accordance with the Parents Plus programme. In terms of skill development Cork Rural PAKT has contributed to a mother recognising her skills and having a fresh view on her abilities. She explained: "I

would be drawing with the kids and some of the girls just loved it so much they got me thinking like there's more opportunities for me to be in like that kind of a role".

Conclusion.

The thematic analysis of the four focus group transcripts has demonstrated the high level of support present among parents in PAKT. While informal support was identified in all four settings, different types appear to be more prominent depending on the setting. The strongest emerging theme was that of emotional support - parents being there for each other. This may range from support during difficult life circumstances to having someone to talk to. The second theme of positive relationships has demonstrated the level of bonding which occurred between PAKT parents since joining the programme. Overall PAKT emerged as a positive environment where new social connections can be made and already existing friendships developed further. Meeting new people living in the community encouraged the development of friendships and in turn reducing isolation. This chapter demonstrated parental willingness to turn to each other for help and their readiness to support each other at times of need. PAKT was recognised by parents as an environment which encouraged advice seeking between parents and from programme coordinators.

The implications of the different length of parental participation in the different centres, which were identified in the Methodology chapter, were clearly visible in the thematic analysis. The lack of discussion regarding emotional support in Cork Rural strongly emerged within this chapter. While it was extensively covered in Cork Urban, Cork East and Dublin where support appeared to be on a deeper level, Cork Rural was instead dominated by the more practical nature of support. Therefore, parents in the other three settings discussed their tendency to rely on each other and be open while providing and receiving support during difficult times. The length of time parents spend in a family support programme also raises questions about their ability to move on. According to Gilligan (2000) family support seeks to enable families' social supports, strengths and coping capacities. Since parents have established connections and are showing capacity for obtaining support outside of PAKT, why are they remaining within the programme?

Analysis of Findings (Semi-Structured Interviews)

Introduction.

Arising from the thematic analysis of the one to one interview transcripts this chapter presents four emerging themes: positive relationships, emotional support, practical support and, advice/shared experiences. The chapter is organised in terms of theme priority based on the number of counts. Counts are based on the number of times a topic arose between the four interviews (fig. 1). Therefore, positive relationships with 32 counts was the strongest emerging theme followed by, emotional support 28 counts, advice/shared Experiences 13 counts and practical support 13 counts (Appendix 4). Sub-themes were organised in the same manner. The nature of the topic of Family Support has resulted in unavoidable overlapping between themes. For example, as will be discussed below coffee mornings are a central point of social contact for parents therefore while it a positive environment for bonding it is also a welcoming place for new parents. The analysis of transcript provided a distinction between the centres. It became evident that the programme coordinator of Cork Rural has been running the programme for a shorter period than the other three settings. This may add to the lack of information around some sub-themes such as opening up. Some centres have parents who have been in the programme for long time and would hence be more familiar with staff. In Dublin parents have been in PAKT between 1-15 years, as oppose to Cork Urban where 1 year was the longest period a parent has been in the programme.

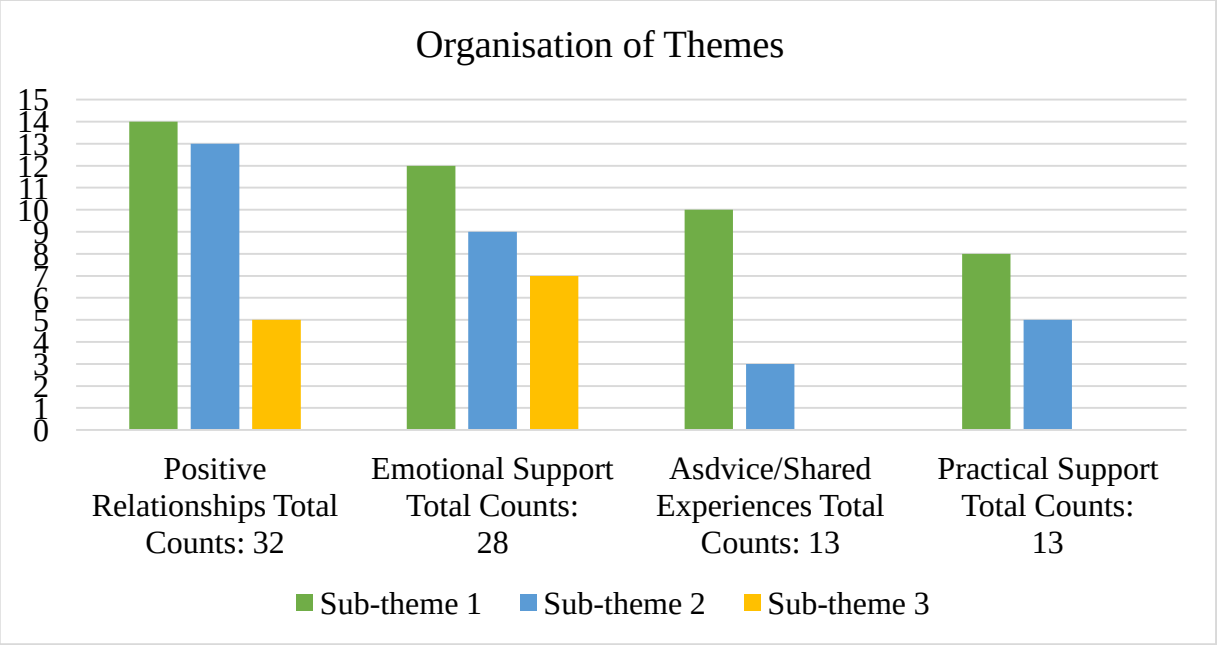
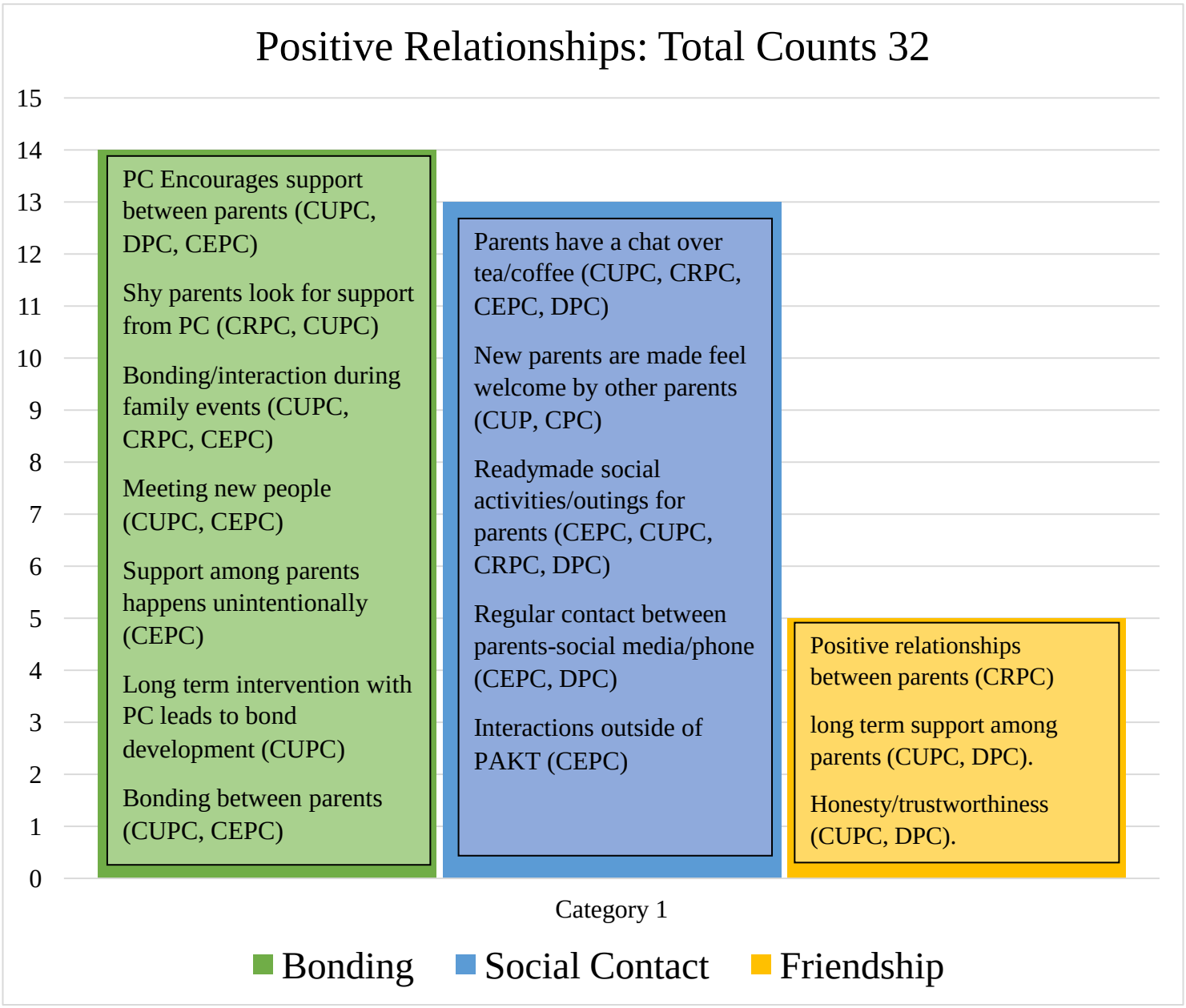

Organisation of Themes
15
14
13
12
11
10
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
0
Positive Relationships Total Counts: 32
Emotional Support Total Counts: 28
Asdvice/Shared Experiences Total Counts: 13
Practical Support Total Counts: 13
Sub-theme 1
Sub-theme 2
Sub-theme 3

Fig.1



[Theme 1: Positive Relationships.]

Sub-theme 1: Bonding.

As per the diagram above, Positive Relationships was the strongest emerging theme. Overall this theme provides an overview of PAKT's positive environment which has been developed by both programme coordinators and parents. This is reflected within the sub-themes of bonding, social contact and friendship. Since bonding has a total count of 14 it has been prioritised over social contact (13 counts) and friendship (5 counts).

The sub-theme of bonding was the strongest emerging sub-theme not only for the broader theme of positive relationships but also in terms of the other themes as it has the largest count of 14. Nonetheless, there were several differences among the four settings in relation to bonding. While it was widespread within the three Cork settings, it was less apparent within Dublin. A deeper sense of positive relationships was strongly evident within the Dublin transcript which went beyond people getting to know each other and instead appeared on the platform of friendship.

All three Cork settings referred to new parents joining PAKT and interacting with other members. In Cork Rural, the programme co-ordinator pointed out that when new parents join PAKT, "family events" are a good time for bonding, "like what I see is that they actually have a lovely fun time together". Similarly, in Cork East and Cork Urban the programme coordinators acknowledged that events within PAKT are a good method of meeting new people and encouraging the potential for bonding. It was recognised in Cork East that since joining PAKT parents are interacting more with each other which in turn contributes to the new "increasing bond". It was acknowledged in Dublin that support between parents is of significance importance to PAKT. Connections between parents are highly encouraged as the programme coordinator was fearful of parent feeling "lost" during times when lack of funding would restrict the operation of the programme. In Cork Urban, encouraging support and connections between parents was "really one of the primary parts of it (PAKT)". Similarly, in Cork East it was recognised that encouraging connections between parents is "natural" during events. However, the programme coordinator acknowledged that it cannot be forced and instead happens "organically", with time parents become familiar with each other. This was demonstrated in Cork Urban as the programme coordinator discussed a mother's journey of joining PAKT for the benefit of her son. However, parallel to a positive environment for her son it also created an opportunity to meet other parents living in the same area. Since family events are based around children it becomes a natural space for bonding between parents. It was noted in Cork Urban that during such events "you'll just find them sitting in a corner chatting, and that's great"

On the other hand, in Cork Rural the programme coordinator recognised that there are parents in PAKT who would be quite shy and "who would not be as open, like have difficulties in social settings in general". If the parents desire support, PAKT staff would provide it for them. The language used by programme coordinators of Cork Urban, Cork East and Dublin

indicates the long length of time they have spent within PAKT. Thus, it demonstrates familiarity and building of relationships between programme coordinators and parents. As the programme coordinator from Cork Urban explained "it's not just six months' intervention, or a six-week intervention, you're building relationships with them".

Sub-theme 2: Social contact.

Social contact, with 13 counts was a reoccurring topic in all four settings. There was a common development within the transcripts which identified PAKT as a social outlet that gives parents an opportunity to develop positive encounters with other parents.

Having a chat over tea or coffee was a common method of social interaction among parents in the Cork settings. While activities and various outings were mentioned in all the interviews, it was interesting to note that social contact among parents did not necessarily involve any costs and instead simply relied on an accessible communal setting. In fact, the programme facilitator in the Cork Urban centre discussed the struggle of trying to organise activities that would suit all parents "so we've tried a lot of things from Zumba classes (laugh) to Yoga classes, and for a long-time thing were just weren't… it wasn't working.". It was suggested that because parents live too close to each other there is a fear of oversharing "with parents that they're living on top of". However, the parents that did take part overcame this barrier and became more comfortable in each other's company. Interestingly the programme coordinator pointed out that instead of trying to increase support by constantly involving parents in activities she needed to step away and let parents do it themselves over a cup of coffee or tea. In Cork Rural the programme facilitator pointed out that during family events parents can be found sitting and interacting together over tea. When parents are conversing over tea or coffee it creates a positive and welcoming social environment for newcomers "they're (older members) really good at making the other parents then feel comfortable and relaxed, and you can sit here and listen or you can participate, you just do whatever feels comfortable for you".

Nonetheless, each setting emphasised that PAKT hold many events/activities for parents. For example, in Cork East and in Dublin the programme coordinators explained that activities are ready-made for parents and all parents had to do was "turn up". The other benefit of these events is that they are quite often free or else have a small charge, for example Cork East parents receive reduced Pantomime tickets every Christmas. Having a readymade social

activity or outing for parents allows them to socialise with each other without stress. For example, in Cork Rural, PAKT held a relaxing evening for parents allowing them to interact with others during a pamper session. Similarly, Cork Urban held a mixture of social evenings for parents such a gathering at a local bar and an "arts and crafts evening here (PAKT centre) with relaxation music".

While in Dublin social contact among parents connected to PAKT was mostly discussed in terms of difficult life situations the programme coordinator pointed out that parent's interactions go beyond the PAKT setting and become part of the parent's daily life. It was noted that parents "make special connections" and exchange contact details, allowing them to keep in contact at any time. This also appears to be the norm in Cork East where parents have regular chats on social media as well as over the phone. It was demonstrated in Cork East that some parents transferred the social connections they made within PAKT to that of other common interests "I know one parent said to me recently 'oh I now know so and so, and I wouldn't have known her at all before PAKT' and now they go to a crochet group together but again they didn't know each other before PAKT". Thus, being part of PAKT allowed parents to broaden their social life outside of the programme.

Sub-theme 3: Friendship.

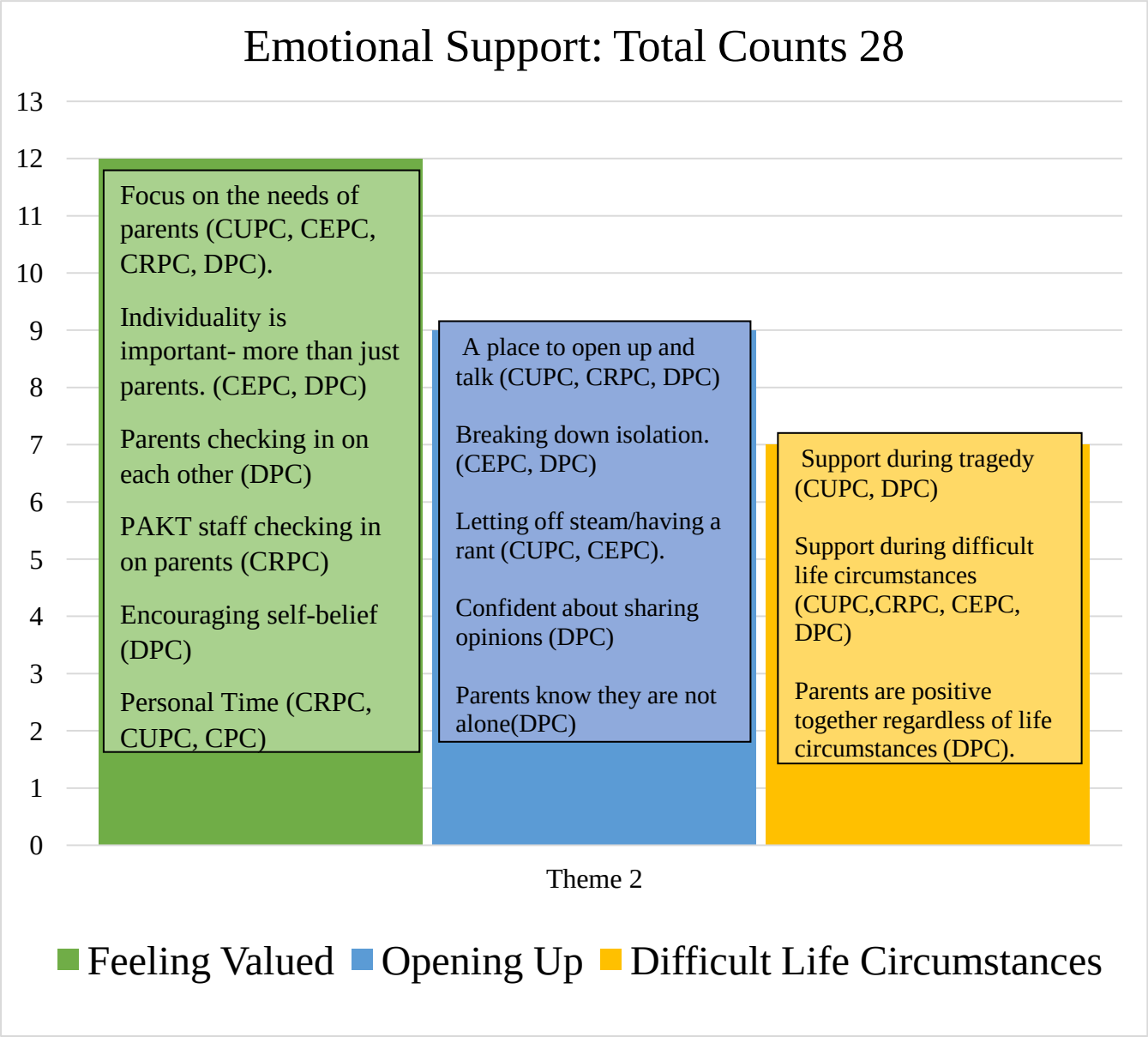
The small sub-theme of friendship small with 5 counts was predominantly evident within Dublin. The programme coordinator recognised that throughout the long-time parents have been in PAKT they experienced "the good times and the bad" together. This demonstrates the likelihood of parents creating strong friendship ties.

Friendships were a complicated topic in the Cork East programme. Throughout the interview it was mentioned that because PAKT is located within a small tightknit community a lot of connection already exist between parents which may not necessarily be known to staff at the beginning. The programme coordinator in Cork East pointed out that she "recently found that someone is someone else's aunt, you know. I never knew it so there is always that element of interrelationship - knowing people. So, likely people know each other even before they come to PAKT". Consequently, apart from the previous example of parents joining a crochet group together this programme facilitator failed to identify other connections which have been developed solely within PAKT. In Cork Rural, the programme coordinator also pointed out that some parents would already be connected in their lives outside of PAKT. The topic of

friendship also appeared to raise some personal questions and views for this programme coordinator as she saw friendships as a very complicated term “I think, I suppose for me the word friendship has so many layers, like I really feel that they have a really positive relationship. I might not necessarily call it friendship”.

On the other hand, Cork Urban and Dublin recognised friendship as an important element of PAKT. In particular a strong sense of genuine friendships strongly emerged within the Dublin transcript. It was recognised that relationships between parents are built on trust and “sheer love for each other”. Friendships were further developed as it became clear that parents have long-term positive relationships which vary from parents enjoying their time together and having a “giggle at each other” to adverse circumstances, which will be discussed in more detail throughout the theme of emotional support. Interestingly, in Cork Urban it was noted that because parents live in an area of disadvantage with many barriers, they find themselves reluctant to trust others. However, the programme coordinator acknowledged that the parents who do take part in activities and training move beyond these barriers, “the parents that participated in that, I suppose they created that confidential space, the bond, the trust”. The programme coordinator explained that trust and honesty have become a significant component of friendships developed by parents in PAKT. More importantly, she added that these friendships have “led to support beyond PAKT and beyond (her)”.

Theme 2: Emotional Support



Emotional support, with 28 counts has been placed second in terms of theme priority. Taking the same method of organisation as mentioned at the beginning the theme has been further divided into three sub-themes which have been prioritised in terms of count quantity. This has placed the sub-theme of feeling valued at number one with 12 counts, followed by opening up with 9 counts and concluding with difficult life circumstances which had a total of 7 counts.

Sub-theme 1: Feeling Valued.

Feeling valued (12 counts) emerged strongly among all four settings. This was a sub-theme that demonstrated the strength of support between programme coordinators and parents, and between parents themselves.

All four settings expressed how much the needs of parents were highly valued by PAKT staff. When discussing the various activities or courses that are held in PAKT for parents, Cork Urban pointed out that parents are at the centre of that decision-making process, "we do trainings, we ask them what they want to do, like career guidance or bullying, different workshops". Similarly, in Cork East and Dublin it was acknowledged that parents are always listened to and the events are organised based on their ideas. However, in Cork Rural it was noted that it is not always plain and simple and while parents are encouraged to give their opinions it does not always pan out accordingly. When activities are organised for parents it provides an opportunity for personal time as quite often activities are focused entirely on parents alone. For example, the Cork Urban arts and crafts evening mentioned earlier on, and parents going out for a Chinese meal in Cork East. Similarly, in Cork Rural "we (PAKT) had two parents, that was mostly last year, who joined the coffee morning just for themselves". Therefore, parents are encouraged to focus on themselves and enjoy time with other parents

In PAKT parents are always valued as people and not just parents. Thus, even though the programme is initially joined for the benefit of their children parents are seen equally as important. For example, in Cork East it was acknowledged that "when a parent comes in we welcome them as much as we would welcome their child and you'll see over time that we break down barriers and see that we value them as a person, you know they're not just the parent any more". In Dublin, this was explained on a deeper level, the programme coordinator focuses on the future of parents and their aspirations looking at parent's "hopes and dreams" for when their children grow up. As a result, parental self-belief is being encouraged throughout the PAKT journey.

It was recognised in Cork Rural that if the PAKT staff are aware of any issues parents are going through they will use times such as coffee mornings when parents are dropping their kids off as a method of "checking in". Similarly, the programme coordinator also acknowledged that parents do the same among each other, they will have a chat when they meet and ask about each other's well-being. Once again in Dublin, checking in with each

other was taking to a deeper level. The programme coordinator recalled a time where a child was taken into care and a PAKT parent took the time to visit the distressed mother on regular basis while PAKT was not operating.

Sub-theme 2: Opening Up.

Opening up, with 9 counts is the last theme under emotional support. In the four transcripts PAKT emerged as a positive place for parents to be open about their life situations with other programme participants and PAKT staff

It emerged from Cork Rural that "it is a really long process for them (parents) to be able to see anything for themselves". At the same time, the programme coordinator has mentioned that she is relatively new to the programme. Perhaps this demonstrates that events which encourage openness between parents could have occurred in the past. Nonetheless, based on the lack of evidence it is difficult to make such assumptions. In Dublin, the programme coordinator recognised that PAKT is "kind of built on relationship it's all built on trust, and then basically once that is there then they (parent) will come and open up if they got issues". This was quite similar to Cork Urban, the programme coordinator described coffee mornings as a place where parents could "empty the box" parents felt safe to let things off their chest as well as just having a "rant" in each other's company. In Cork East, the programme coordinator found that parents turned to PAKT staff if they needed to discuss an issue or "let off some steam". In terms of opening up and discussing issues with PAKT staff the programme coordinator explained the strong emphasis PAKT places on empowering parents to be confident in discussing their opinions.

Another point that emerged strongly in three the settings was the potential for PAKT to reduce isolation for parents. In Dublin, PAKT allowed parents to feel involved, instead of isolated and detached from the community they lived in, it allowed them to "feel included, they (parents) feel they can actually get involved in something in the community". In Cork East, it was noted that due to the tightknit nature of the community, new to the area families may find themselves isolated and alone. The programme coordinator acknowledged that PAKT may be a way of allowing parents coping with isolation to break down that barrier and meet other people living in their community. When asked how PAKT can influence parents personally, the programme coordinator of Cork East explained that for certain parents it is understanding that "they are not alone, knowing there is someone there who cares". Likewise,

Cork Urban pointed out that when parents connect to the PAKT programme they no longer feel alone and isolated in their circumstances, instead there is a "sense of relief" when they meet another parent who is going through similar circumstance.

Sub-theme 3: Difficult life circumstances.

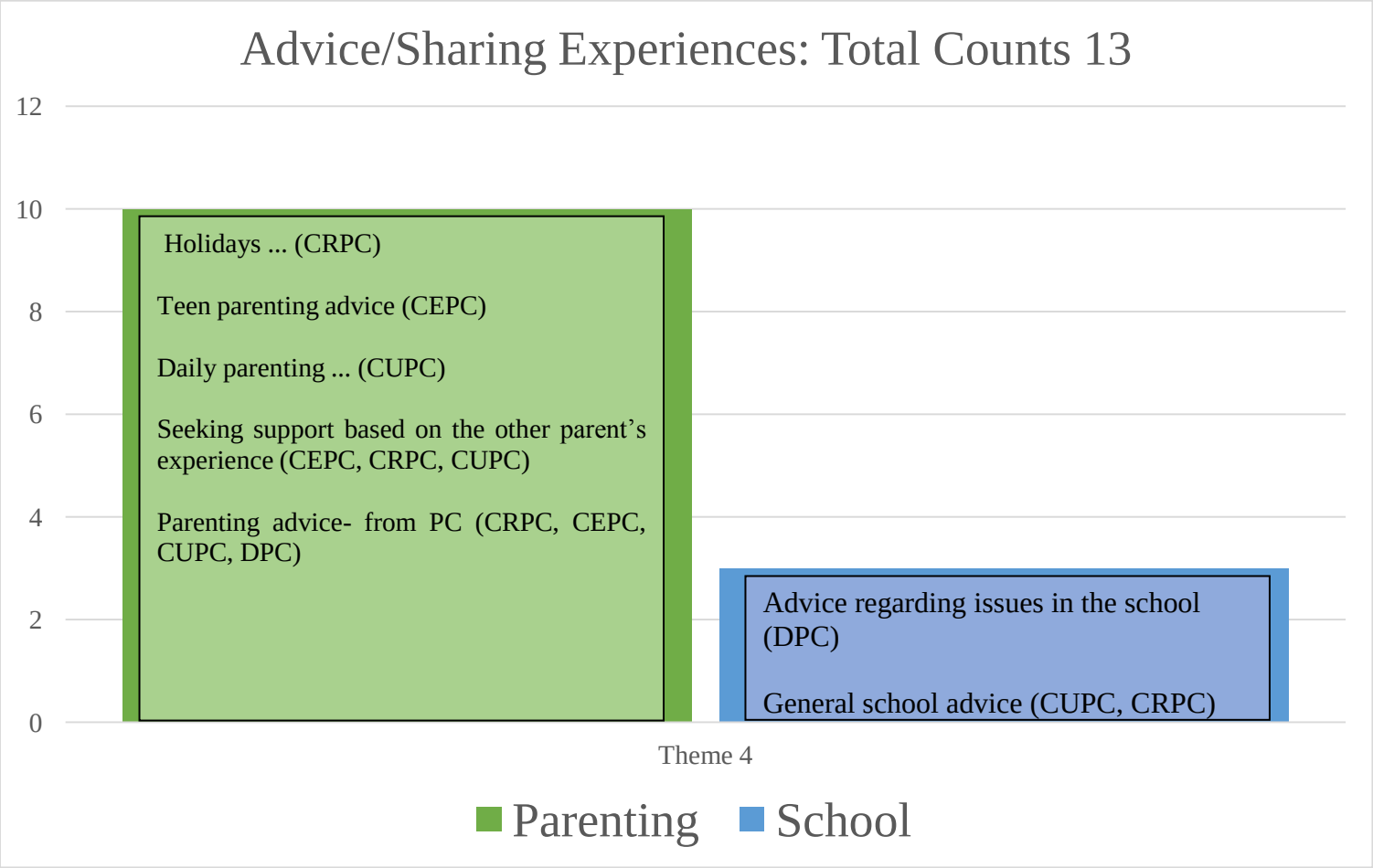
In terms of count priority difficult life circumstances has been placed last with 7 counts. Unlike the other three settings Cork Rural failed to provide any evidence of parental support during adverse life circumstances. This sub-theme focuses closely on circumstances described by programme coordinators in Cork Urban, Cork East and Dublin, taking a closer look how difficult life circumstances encouraged informal support.

In the other three settings, each programme coordinator cited specific issues parents had been experiencing and how this had been supported by other parents in PAKT. It was recognised in Cork East that some parents may be experiencing mental health issues at various levels, some obvious and others more hidden. For parents battling mental-health issues PAKT can become an outlet, a way of "getting out" and interacting with other people. In Cork Urban, it was similarly referred to as an escape for a parent who had been experiencing difficulties while rearing a son with autism. Joining PAKT had created an opportunity not only for her son's difficulties to be addressed, but it also developed a networking opportunity for herself in a non-judgemental setting "she has met other parents, because it's so nice to have contact with other parents". Another instance which describes how PAKT parents demonstrate support for each other during challenging times was explained in the Dublin interview. The programme coordinator spoke of a grandmother whose grandchild had been taken into care at Christmas time with no access available. Another parent who lived nearby, and was connected to the PAKT programme, provided ongoing support for the family during this difficult time. It allowed the grandmother to have someone there for her which may not have been possible if had not met in PAKT.

Support had also occurred between parents during times of great tragedy. This was mentioned in two of the settings and the nature of the support offered in such instances gave a clear indication as to how much PAKT can benefit parents. In both Cork Urban and Dublin, the programme coordinators described tragic events such as the loss of a child. The support which occurred between parents during this time was touching and gave a clear view of the type of connections created between parents within a family support service such as PAKT.

In Cork Urban, it was pointed out that because parents had already bonded through PAKT “it wasn’t just strangers jumping in” and it encouraged the grieving parent to accept this support. Similarly, in Dublin the programme coordinator praised the support given by parents during the extremely difficult time another parent had experienced when she lost her son to suicide. The support occurred on a large scale, “the whole PAKT community just rallied around this woman and her family and you know she was (pause) you know an outpouring of love and support that was really physical it was amazing”. The programme coordinator explained how this tragic event has a created a form of long term support among all parents and staff, “I suppose we just were there for the family on an ongoing basis, we still are, we always remember the date and so we are very conscious of where she is at, at that time and you know we’ll always rally around at that time”.

Theme 3: Advice/ Shared Experiences



Advice/Shared Experiences with 13 counts is the second last theme to emerge from the transcripts of one to one interviews with programme coordinators. This these is divided into two sub-themes Parenting (10 counts) and School (3 counts). Overall this theme focuses on parental daily lives and advice seeking which emerges as a result of their participation. It was evident in the transcripts that parents turned to each for guidance while also depending on PAKT staff for information.

Sub-theme 1: Parenting.

Parenting, with 10 counts is the strongest emergent sub-theme under advice/shared experiences. The most common topic under this sub-theme, with 4 counts was parents seeking parenting advice from programme coordinators. However, based on the nature of the PAKT programme this was to be expected. Since the programme offers parenting courses such as Parents Plus it is only natural that seeking advice from programme coordinators

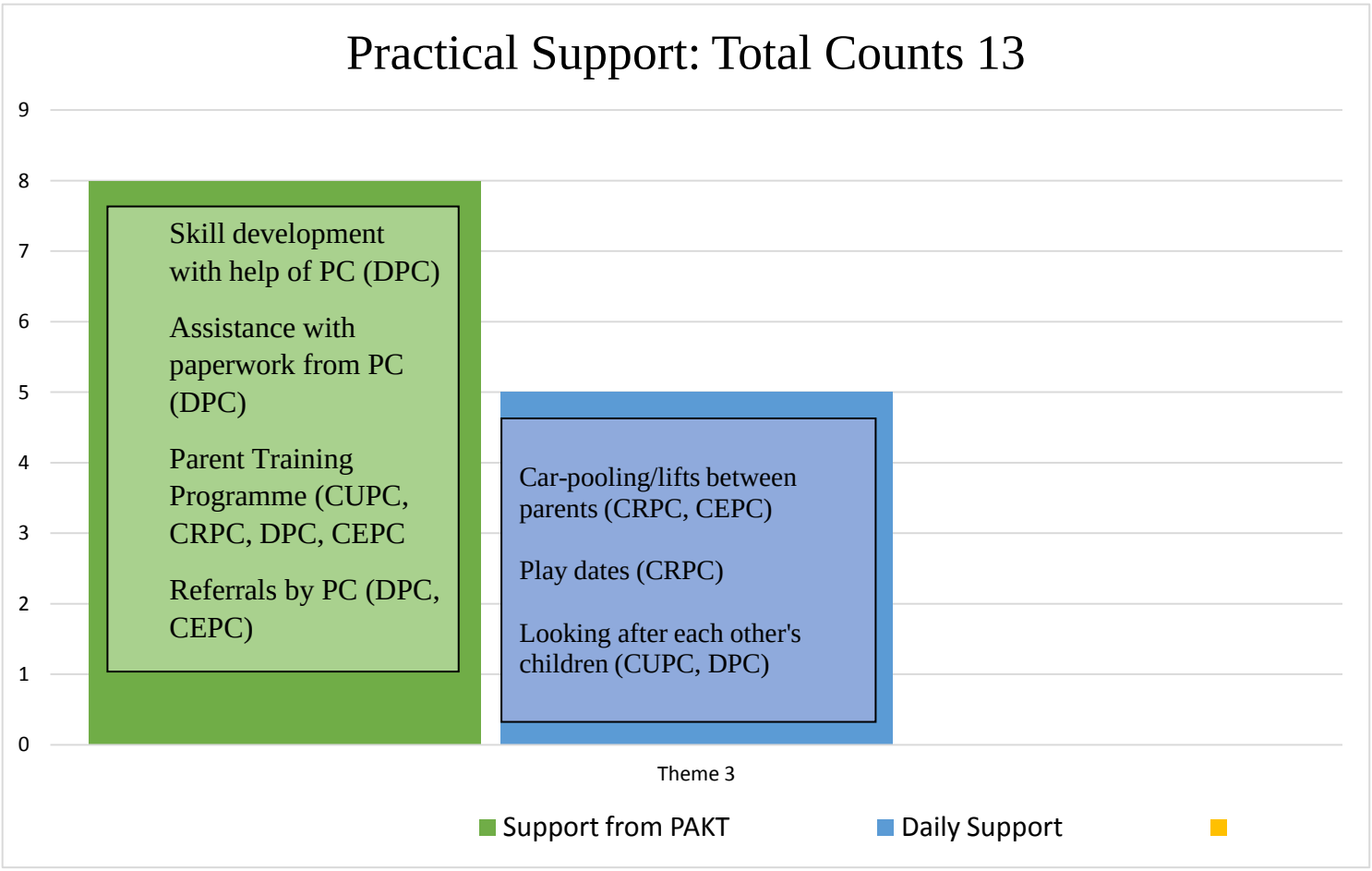
would follow on from this. In Cork Urban, it was acknowledged how rewarding it was when parents turned to PAKT staff for advice "I'm always chuffed when things like that happen [parents contact the programme coordinator when they are at loss and don't know the best action to make] and that gives me a good indication, that indicator that this is a place that they can come to if they need it". At the same time, it was noted that if staff could not provide accurate advice then they would give parents an alternative source which may be more helpful.

Seeking parenting advice was not evident in the interview with the Dublin programme coordinator. However, the other three settings shared several different angles on the topic. For example, in Cork Rural it was recognised that quite often advice would be based on what was currently happening in parent's lives. As a result, because the interview took place relatively close to summer holidays the main source of discussions and advice among parents was "around travel". Parents turned to each other for information regarding summer vacations. On the other hand, in Cork East the programme coordinator recalled a time when a parent who was having issues with her teenager asked another parent for advice as this parent had experienced similar issues with her child and would "know what it's like". The point of seeking advice based on shared experiences was also reiterated in Cork Urban and Cork Rural, in both settings it was recognised that parents would quite often turn to each other for advice if they know parents went through similar experiences, for example, homework difficulties. It was evident in Cork Urban that parents turn to each other for daily parenting advice for example children's sleeping patterns. However, parents do not necessarily have to be seeking advice for parents to share what they have went through, in Cork Rural it was recognised that sharing experiences happens naturally among parents.

Sub-theme 2: School.

School, with 3 counts is a relatively small sub-theme, however because it was discussed in Dublin, Cork Urban and Cork Rural it was deemed important to include as a separate sub-theme. Programme coordinators of these three settings recognised that school was a frequently discussed topic among parents. This is not surprising considering that the children attending PAKT are of primary and secondary school age, therefore it appears to be the most appropriate setting for conversations relating to education to arise.

In Dublin, the programme coordinator explained that advice can vary from simply having a discussion to preparing a parent for having a conversation with the principal by engaging in role play. However, in Cork Urban and Cork Rural it was parents who were the source of advice and information for each other when it came to discussions around school. In Cork Rural it was mentioned several times "that parents ask advice from each other even around school or bits and pieces". As previously mentioned advice often revolves around current events for parents, resulting in school being at the centre of parental discussions. Similarly, in Cork Urban it was noted that parents seek advice from each other on topics such as school subjects, the programme coordinator gave examples such as "'I don't know how to get him to do maths, or should they drop Irish or should they...?' there's lots of different things, 'what subjects do they drop for 2nd year?'". Considering how stressful secondary school can be, seeking advice from parents who have already experienced it can give parents not only valuable advice but also reassurance.



Theme 4: Practical Support

Practical Support, like the previous theme has a total of 13 counts placing it joined last in terms of priority. With counts from all four settings the theme is subdivided into Support from PAKT with 8 counts and Daily Support with 5 counts. Overall Practical Support focuses on the more hands-on support provided both by PAKT staff and other parents in the programme. This varies from parents organising play dates to attending courses organised by programme coordinators.

Sub-theme 1: Support from PAKT.

Support from PAKT (8 counts) focuses on the practical support parents have received from PAKT staff while in the programme. Four settings are represented under this sub-theme giving a clear indication of the dedication PAKT staff in supporting all programme participants. Parenting courses have been organised in all settings which provide parents with

information advice relating to relevant topics. The other types of practical support provided by programme coordinators include recommendation of other services and assistance with paperwork difficulties.

Throughout the interviews it became apparent that support between programme coordinators and parents exists on various levels, but particularly in terms of practical support. Firstly, training programmes appeared to be a significant form of support provided by PAKT for parents. While all four settings mentioned parenting courses (such as a course on bullying in Cork East), Cork Urban and Dublin specifically discussed Parents Plus. In Cork Urban, the benefits of the Parent Plus training programme were praised by the PAKT programme co-ordinator. When asked how parental support has been encouraged by staff the programme coordinator found that "'Parents Plus- the parenting programme, definitely worked and a lot of the same parents came back a few years later and we did the teenage version of it". It was also mentioned that the parents who had participated in the Parent Plus programme had created a trusting bond with each other. In Dublin, Parent Plus was used in a slightly different way, whereby the programme coordinators introduced a cooking skills element in the middle of it which gave parents an opportunity to learn some valuable skills. During this training programme, the different topics which were discussed were outlined by the co-ordinator, "we look at listening, we look at sibling rivalry we look at how to deal with special needs children within the family unit. We look at support, we look at you know benefits of play time". Thus, parents received an opportunity to practice the practical and fun skill of baking while also gaining knowledge about other important parenting skills.

Apart from training programmes, parents also learn skills through various activities and events held by PAKT. For example, in Dublin it was recognised that because parents help with organising events in the area they are learning to be responsible as it "gives them accountability that they have to be there on the day you know, so it gives them that, that they have to follow through, they have to see the thing right through". At the same time by being part of an organisational team parents are learning valuable skills related to team-work.

In Cork East and in Dublin it was recognised that PAKT cannot always help parents which leads to referrals made to different organisations which may have the tools to facilitate a parent's issue. For example, going back to the example above in Cork East of a mother with a son who has autism the programme coordinator of the centre noted that to facilitate the son's

integration, PAKT worked with "SHINE[2] and different organisations". Similarly, in Dublin it was acknowledged that it is not always in PAKT's ability to help parents, therefore they "interlink with different organisations that can help".

Lastly, support from the programme coordinator can take the shape of physical support, this was particularly clear in Dublin where it was explained that support occurs at different levels. The programme coordinator explained that it can vary between small issues such as form filling to more severe issues such as accompanying them to "court" and "counselling regarding homelessness".

Sub-theme 2: Daily support.

Daily support among parents was a common topic throughout each interview. It was evident throughout the transcript that children were the primary source of daily support between parents.

In Cork Rural and Cork East, when discussing how parental support can occur unintentionally, Cork East noted that when parents become familiar with one another they offer each other "lifts". This was also reflected in Cork Rural as it was recognised that giving lifts was "quite regular in all our (PAKT) groups". Thus, it was not support put in place by PAKT but instead occurred naturally between parents themselves. This type of practical support also appeared to occur in relation to children. For example, in Cork Rural it was recognised that when parents whose children attended the same school met through PAKT this often led to car-pooling to and from PAKT. It emerged in Dublin that once parents became familiar with each other and developed "bonds" they looked to each other when needing help with child minding. Other types of daily support between parents also appeared to be based around children. The programme coordinator of Cork Rural spoke about parents organising "play dates" on their way home from PAKT. This demonstrates two very important findings, firstly the level of support that can occur once children are involved, and

[2] SHINE is a Cork Irish Progressive Association for Autism voluntary organisation. SHINE provide services for children of preschool age which focus on areas of the child's development. Alternatively, services are provided for mainstream school where both the child and teacher are supported in developing an appropriate environment which facilitates the child's learning and development.

secondly, that parents who did not know each other before PAKT and are living in the same communities begin to interact outside of the programme. This was also reflected in Cork Urban. While car-pooling and giving lifts did not directly come up throughout the interview, the programme coordinator did recognise the daily support which occurred during a particular case of a bereavement. She found that parents were quick to support the grieving mother and discusses with each other how they were going to help "they were just on the phone 'whose collecting who, where are we going' emm... 'how will we get up there, will we make them dinner'".

Conclusion.

Largely, the thematic analysis of interviews has demonstrated parent's ability and willingness to turn to other PAKT parents for support. This encourages a development of informal support which parent can depend on. When PAKT is recognised as a safe environment it encourages parents to see it as an emotional release where they can have a "rant" and get things off their chest. As a result, through the open nature of interactions among parents a sense of group belongingness appears to emerge as parents recognise that they are not alone.

PAKT has been demonstrated as a positive environment where parents can develop social networks which encourage bonds and friendship development. In Ireland, and specifically in Cork communities are relatively small and there is a high chance that people know each other. As a result, it emerged that parents find it challenging to be open about difficulties and issues with parents that live in their community. However, according to the programme coordinators through participation in various organised events and courses such as Parents Plus parents were more likely to let their guard down and have positive interactions with other programme participants. This resulted in the reduction of isolation as parents met new people and made new meaningful connections with other parents which often transferred to their everyday lives.

It was evident that some parents began to interact outside the programme times by joining other local groups or simply exchanging contact details. Programme coordinators appeared to play a very significant role in the development of informal support among parents as they encourage interactions through various organised events. Parents are acknowledged by programme co-ordinators as unique people and not simply parents, and their well-being is highly valued by PAKT staff. While it was acknowledged in the introduction that there is a

significant difference in the length of time parents and programme staff have been in PAKT, informal support among parents appears to be present at some level in all four settings.

Discussion of Findings

Introduction.

This chapter will interrogate available research in the field of family support against findings of the present research allowing for identification of similarities and differences. Informal support developed through a family support programme appears to be limited in the field of family support research. Furthermore, research studies focused on the outcomes of children as opposed to parents. Available research differs significantly in its size to the present research. It is generally large scale and longitudinal in nature (Gardner, 2003; Ghate and Hazel, 2002; McDonald et al., 2006; Trillingsgaard, et al., 2015). While such methods provide a lot of data, it is often missing the richer personal and emotional components which can be derived from smaller research studies. The present study had 23 participants, 4 of whom were programme coordinators of a YMCA family support programme- PATKT. Having a small participant size made it possible to focus on personal experiences, providing an opportunity to record rich data using semi structured interviews and focus groups. Since much of family support programmes, including PAKT are NGO's there is a lack of research in the area. This is often characterised by difficulties with feasibility and resources. However, the Community Academic Research Links (CARL) programme in UCC contributed hugely to this research by linking the researcher with an NGO's requiring research. In this case CARL developed a partnership between the YMCA programme development officer who suggested the research topic. In partnership with CARL and YMCA a research project was organised which addressed a gap in knowledge related to parental informal support obtained through PAKT. The process of participant recruitment was eased through CARL as parents and staff who were part of PAKT were targeted for the research. Programme coordinators recruited parents and organised appropriate times and venues to carry out focus groups.

Social Capital

Throughout the literature there appears to be a strong connection between social capital and family support programmes. Trust, honesty and shared beliefs are all factors which encourage the development of social interactions by allowing people to feel welcome and part of the group, which in turn facilitates the development of social capital. For Coleman (1988), like

other types of capital possessing social capital facilitates people in reaching desired outcomes which otherwise would not be possible. Other types of capital such as economic capital due to their tangibility may appear to be more productive. However, social capital is developed when trust, honesty and shared beliefs are present which contributes to levels of accomplishment within a group (Coleman, 1988).

The current study demonstrated a growth in social capital through parental participation in PAKT which provides opportunities to develop a social network with other parents living in the area. According to Portes (1998) there are four types of motivational factors which drive social capital. First there is *value introjection* which refers to people inheriting values and beliefs from the group. People begin to replicate these beliefs and values recognising them as their own. In PAKT people being treated equally was a strong value recognised by programme staff. This value was also recognised in the parents focus groups who acknowledged that once joined to the programme people become understanding of each other and do not judge situation people come from. Secondly, Portes (1998) described *bounded solidarity* as another source of motivation, this refers to people feeling like they belong in the group. In PAKT group identification strongly emerged throughout the data, it was clear that because parents had gone through similar experiences and are facing similar issues they developed a sense of group belongingness. The third motivational factor is *enforceable trust*, this refers to the obligation to adhere to values within a group which builds group confidence (Portes, 1998). Unlike *value introjection* there is a requirement to follow values and beliefs of the group. In PAKT this source of motivation is developed through a confidentiality policy within the programme. This encourages trust among participants as privacy is respected by all and conversations which happen within PAKT cannot be discussed outside the programme. The last source outlined by Portes (1998) refers to *reciprocity*, in other words the idea of exchange and repayment within a group which may be characterised by a variety of actions. Ghate and Hazel (2002) identified reciprocity with negative support. Participants of their longitudinal study recognised the notion that if one was to seek support they would be obliged to return it, therefore putting a negative outlook on informal support. However, research with PAKT showed the positive side of reciprocity as parents acknowledged feeling secure and confident relying on each for practical favours such as child minding and repaying the favour when needed but perhaps through a different method such.

Positive, Supportive Relationships

Development of positive relationships is evident in the field of family support, throughout the research social networking was recognised as being a significant part of support programmes. Gardner (2003) found that the main source of support for parents came from friends, and that through joining family support programmes parents became exposed to various networking opportunities with other parents which encouraged the development of positive relationships. Harman et al. (2013) and Riordan (2001) recognised that the networking opportunity within family support programmes can often be one of the motivating factors behind parents joining groups. Harman et al. (2013) recognised that parents are eager to meet others who have had similar experiences and are coping with similar issues. The present research confirms these findings, it is understood that while the primary focus of parents joining PAKT is around access to activities for children, this was accompanied by the desire to meet other families in area and get to know people in the community. One of main benefits of informal support among PAKT parents was recognised as the reduction of isolation. Prior to parents joining PAKT the programme, parents may experience loneliness and misunderstanding. However, meeting other parents contributes to the emerging feeling of not being alone and recognising that there are other parents who are equally struggling. Meeting other people in PAKT appears to contribute to development of bonds and friendships between parents which encourages advice seeking, for example, around school subjects and exams. Similar findings were recorded by Harman et al. (2013), participants of this study were eager to join a support group where they could meet other single mothers. The findings of research with PAKT demonstrated that parents admire turning to each other at times of need as some parents may have had similar experiences to their own in the past. This reaffirms findings of other research in the area which demonstrates parental desire to seek support from friends as oppose to family members Findings of a longitudinal study on NSPCC services in the UK demonstrated that friends are the top choice of support among parents (Gardner, 2003). Similarly, Harman (2013); Gladow and Ray (1986) and Ghate and Hazel (2002) recorded findings of parents preferring to seek support outside of their immediate family. Strong bonds and friendships developed through PAKT encourage parents to turn to each at times of need.

Studies such as that of the FAST programme (Family And Schools Together) in the US (Shoji et al, 2014; McDonald et al, 2006) outline findings of positive relationships between parents. However, there is limited research in the field of family support regarding positive

relationships between programme staff and participants. Dolan and Holt (2002) found that programme participants felt intimidated by professionals, therefore restricting the development of positive relationships. In fact, programme participants felt more at ease with volunteers whom they felt were more invested and did not create a hierarchy. The current study demonstrated opposing findings as positive relationships between PAKT staff and parents were a significant element or PAKT interactions. Data shows that in line with providing professional support programme coordinators have also developed friendships with parents through the various organised outings and events attended as a group, for example shopping trips. Throughout the field of family support, programme coordinators have a constricted representation of being professional staff carrying out interventions for parental difficulties such as school issues (Ferrara, 2015; Shoji et al, 2014; McDonald et al, 2016). However, while PAKT staff did support parents on a professional level through various interventions such as parenting courses, it was recognised that much of the support received was also of informal nature. It was acknowledged by parents that programme coordinators supported parents at different times of their lives. In Dublin programme coordinators identified strong support which emerged when a PAKT parent lost a son to suicide several years ago. Ongoing support emerged from this tragic time as the programme coordinators checked in with the parent on regular basis and kept track of significant dates. Support from programme coordinators was also recognised as occurring outside programme operating hours. For example, visiting PAKT parents' children in hospital.

Coping Skills

Literature on family support demonstrates the ability for programmes to develop coping mechanisms for parents experiencing difficulties in their life. As pointed out by Thompson and Otani (2000) parents who are experiencing difficulties look to social support available as a coping mechanism for breakdown of stress levels. Since seeking support from immediate family is not always an option, parents may need to turn to other sources outside of their immediate environment (Gladow and Ray, 1986; Harman, 2013; Gardner 2003; Ghate and Hazel, 2002). The present research demonstrates parental ability to seek support from other parents in a family support group. Informal support among PAKT parents emerged strongly within the present study as recorded data provides evidence of parents turning to programme members for guidance, support and advice in various aspects of their lives, some of which included coping with extreme difficulties such as death of a child and children being taken

into care. Moran, Ghate and Merwe (2004), and Harman (2013) found that group parent support programmes can be beneficial for parents as they are relieved to meet others experiencing similar difficulties, or worse. It was found that this contributes to parenting confidence as it emerged that others in the group were in similar positions. Similar findings were recorded in the PAKT research as parents expressed relief at getting to know other parents who experienced similar difficulties such as bullying and rearing children with special needs. The emotional support received from other parents in the PAKT programme contributed to parental ability of dealing with stressful situations as they would turn to each other outside the programme if they were experiencing issues or difficulties, for example dealing with a young daughter exhibiting challenging behaviour related to social media exposure or difficulties in line with children's school experiences.

Coping skills are an essential mechanism for all families, as discussed in the literature review there are numerous difficulties which may arise for families such as poverty, homelessness, ill-mental health and bullying. Since increased social capital can contribute to parental coping abilities it must be encouraged from the onset of a family support programme. This has been reflected both in research by Trillinsgaard, et al. (2015) and by the present study. In research with expecting couples who were part of a group family support programme one of the objectives of the programme was to increase parents access to informal supports among parents (Trillinsgaard et al, 2015). Similarly, through attendance of regular coffee mornings in PAKT parents are encouraged to develop social connections as soon as they join the programme. Findings demonstrate that PAKT programme coordinators are eager to establish informal support among parents which can be utilised when the programme is not operating i.e. summer and Christmas. Moran et al. (2004) acknowledged that while available research provides findings of kinship within family support programmes, little is known about whether this is equally evident between parents when outside such programmes. The research carried out with PAKT parents and staff fills this gap as it provides evidence of parents using the support network they have developed through their participation in PAKT in their lives outside of the programme. It emerged that practical support between parents has become part of their daily lives as parents help each other out by car-pooling and providing assistance at children's birthday parties. Similarly, emotional support was evident among parents outside PAKT as parents helped each other out at times of need while also meeting for a coffee to check in with each other.

Discussion

The informal support that emerged from this research contributes to the field of family support research by demonstrating the many levels of support achieved by parents when becoming members of a family support programme. Unlike a lot of other research which deals with intervention style programmes specifically aimed at elements of parents lives, for example rearing children with special needs (Law et al, 2001) or of youth offenders (Ghate and Ramella, 2002), PAKT is universal and included no preconditions for parents in joining the programme. Most of the PAKT parents acknowledged coping with difficulties such as children being bullied in school, having children with special needs, bereavement and living in disadvantage. However, other parents saw PAKT as a social outlet for themselves and their children. It was noted in the research that parents who are relatively new to the area would join PAKT and use it as a means of getting to know other parents living in the area. Therefore, it encourages families to make connections in their community as new social opportunities become available to them through a family support programme. This provides unique data for the field of family support as is establishes that programmes can be beneficial to many parents who might not have specific difficulties or issues that need to be addressed through an intervention. Similarly, it recognised that joining a family support programme can reduce isolation for parents who may feel alone.

Through family support programmes, parents can develop informal support structures which are beneficial to their daily lives. While parents may not necessarily join such programmes for social opportunities, research in the field as well as the present research have identified that it becomes a treasured outcome. The research with PAKT reaffirms many findings which have been recorded by other international studies. Similarly, to Harman (2013), Gardner (2003) and Riordan (2001) PAKT- the family support programme creates an opportunity for parents to establish meaningful connections based on shared experiences. Family support programmes have been demonstrated as a positive environment which encourages a growth in social capital. This research has demonstrated the development of trusting and honest relationships between parents and PAKT which encourage a sense of group belongingness. Coleman (1988) and Portes (1998) have both acknowledged that these are main components needed for people to develop social capital. Reiterating research in the field of family support, this study found that PAKT is a place for people to feel comfortable in discussing personal issues and difficulties as shared experiences often characterises interactions.

This research also contributed to the field of family support research in several other ways. This study was carried out in conjunction with the Community-Academic Research Links (CARL) initiative in UCC which provided unique access to programme coordinators and parent participants across four PAKT programmes. The CARL partnership contributed to recording rich data in this small-scale study as all parents were given equal opportunity to take part in the research with the help of programme-coordinators who informed all parents in their PAKT programmes of study being conducted. Conducting a small-scale study allowed for meaningful discussions to be recorded both in the focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Having a small focus group participant sample contributed to gaining rich data as there was enough time to have discussions with all parents while also providing an opportunity to further develop points made by parents. It also fills the gap of researching the transfer of support developed in a programme to parent's daily lives (Moran, et al. 2004). It was acknowledged in this research that parents turn to each other for help and guidance outside PAKT's operating hours. Thus, contributing to informal support outside family support.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an analysis of the findings in the research carried out against other research and literature in the field of family support. PAKT seems to offer several possibilities for parents who are part of the programme. Firstly, through various social networking opportunities PAKT encourages the growth of parental social capital. Secondly, parents encounter positive relationships which encourage parents to seek support at times of need. This reaffirms research in the area which demonstrates parental desire to seek help outside their immediate family. Positive relationships are also evident between PAKT staff and parents as parents turn to programme coordinators during times of need and spend time together as a group during organised activities. Findings of other research on this topic is relatively limited, where it is present relationships between staff and participants are characterised by intimidation and hierarchy. Lastly, PAKT offers parents the ability to develop coping skills which contribute to their ability of dealing with stressful situations. This chapter has demonstrated how this research both reaffirms findings and provides rich data which contributes to the field.

Conclusion

Introduction.

This chapter will provide a summary of the thesis in accordance with proposed research questions. Key findings of the research conducted will be outlined. This chapter will conclude with a reflective piece which will situate the research in the field of family support and discuss possible issues for further exploration.

Summary of Thesis.

The overall aim of this research was to explore the potential for informal support among parents in a family support programme. This research aimed to examine parental experiences focusing on the informal support in their interactions. The objective was to examine the interactions that take place between parents when participating in PAKT. This research examined the benefits social interactions had on development of parental support in PAKT. The research explored the availability of informal support among parents by examining views of parents and programme coordinators.

Through the aims and objectives, the following research questions were developed:

1. What are parent's overall experiences of the PAKT programme?
2. Has PAKT contributed to informal support among participating parents?
3. Is there evidence of growth in social capital through parental participation in PAKT?
4. What are the views of programme coordinators on informal supports availability among participating parents?

These questions were addressed by means of a literature review and small-scale qualitative fieldwork interviews. The literature review explored a move away from a laissez faire approach to a more interventionist approach in national policy. The literature review demonstrated the dominant focus of outcomes for children in current national family support policy (DCYA, 2011; DCYA, 2014). Recommendations on improvement of family support services are characterised by creating positive environments for children and eliminating potential child welfare concerns (DCYA, 2011; DCYA, 2014). This is often at the expense of a focus on process and the supports required by parents.

There is a dearth of research in the field of family support. Referencing available research, the literature review explored informal support among participants of family support programmes internationally (Harman, 2013; Gardner, 2002; Ghate and Hazel, 2002). Key findings in available research evidenced increased social capital through networking (Trillingsgaard et al., 2015), bonding and friendship opportunities, and reduction of isolation within their local area experienced by parents (Shoji et al., 2014; Ghate and Hazel, 2002; McDonald et al., 2006; Moran et al., 2004).

This small-scale research used qualitative methodology comprising of parent focus groups and semi-structured face-to-face interviews with programme co-ordinators to gather data. Undertaking this research project in conjunction with CARL contributed to gaining rich data as unique access was gained to a family support programme, its participants and staff. CARL eased the process of participant recruitment by developing a partnership between the researcher and the programme development officer in the YMCA. As a result, the barriers that some researchers may face when searching for participants were eliminated. Focus groups were organised with the assistance of programme coordinators who informed PAKT parents of the research. These focus groups were followed by semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with programme coordinators in each centre. Following transcription of recorded focus groups and interview discussions, thematic analysis was undertaken whereby data was coded and organised into various themes - emotional support, positive relationships, practical support, shared experiences and advice. Each theme demonstrated the experiences of parents in PAKT in relation to how informal support is developed.

Key Findings.

This research took an in depth look into an area that has limited representation in the field of family support. Through small-scale research using focus groups and semi-structured interviews this research produced rich data regarding informal support among parents in a family support programme in Ireland.

The main finding of this research was that informal support among parents was generated by their participation in the PAKT programme. This was evident in all focus groups with parents and semi-structured interviews with programme coordinators. Informal support was demonstrated by all parents participating in PAKT. The level of support among parents ranged between daily support such as parenting advice to a deeper level of support such as

emotional support during a tragic event. This research identified not only parental ability to seek support from other PAKT parents, but also their desire to do so.

Positive relationships emerged as one of the key findings. New friendships between PAKT parents emerged from programme participations. Parental social interactions in PAKT led to development of strong bonds and friendships outside of the programme. However, this study added to the literature in the field by demonstrating the strengthening of friendships which had existed before PAKT by encouraging openness between parents. Literature in the field of family support indicates parental preference for seeking support outside the immediate family (Gladow and Ray, 1986; Ghate and Hazel, 2002; Gardner, 2003; Harman, 2013). This research exhibited the benefits parents found in being able to turn to members of the programme for support. Parents felt equal and were comfortable in being open about their difficulties with other parents. Data in relation to the positive relationships themes contributed to another area that is lacking in research i.e. positive relationships with family support programme staff. The present research identified staff-parent relationships as a unique element of PAKT. Unlike other research which saw relationships characterised by intimidation of parent participants by professionals (Dolan and Holt, 2002), parents and programme coordinators of PAKT shared positive views regarding their relationships. Spending time together during various group outings created opportunities to step away from formal support and facilitated bonding between staff and parents on a deeper level.

Emotional support among parents emerged as another key finding. Throughout research in the field of family support it was recognised that parents see family support programmes as a social setting where they can meet others in similar circumstances (Harman et al., 2013; Riordan 2001). PAKT participants acknowledged that being in the programme contributed to the reduction of loneliness and isolation by allowing them to meet other parents in the community with similar experiences. This research demonstrated that PAKT offered parents an escape from their daily life. It was described as a place where parents could have a rant and get things off their chest knowing that someone will always be there to listen. This research also demonstrated examples of practical support among PAKT parents, this was characterised by circulation of advice regarding shared experiences and information on school and daily parenting.

Filling a gap in research recognised by Moran et al (2014), another key finding of this research is the transfer of informal support from a family support programme, in this case PAKT, to the daily lives of parents. The themes of coping and practical support demonstrated that parents can depend on each other outside programme times. Informal support outside of PAKT varied from car lifts and child minding to emotional support during difficult times such as children being taken into care and bereavement. Therefore, the social connections parents establish during the more formal PAKT programme continued into their daily lives.

Reflection

This research examined the area of family support which has had an increased focus in national policy in the recent years. However, in carrying out a literature review it became evident that there is a dearth of research available in the field, both nationally and internationally. Some researchers may struggle to gain access to participants since research often takes up a lot of time which NGO's may not be able to provide. Through this unique access offered by CARL a small-scale study was carried out which recorded rich data in the field of family support. It allows for an exploration of parental experiences demonstrating the availability of informal support through participation in a family support programme. While it had a small participant sample it contributes to the field by providing a dual outlook from PAKT participants and programme coordinators who discussed informal support among parents. Nonetheless, if this research was to be developed further it could follow two different methods. Continuing using qualitative methodology in exploring parental experiences, it would be interesting to compare the findings of PAKT to that of another family support programme. This would encourage an interesting exploration of similarities and differences between programmes and would demonstrate the various interactions which increase informal support among parents. However, it would also be interesting to continue this research further by developing a more large-scale study using quantitative methodologies. Contacting numerous family support programmes in Ireland, and perhaps other countries may provide an insight into whether informal support is an aspect of family support in general, or whether it is limited to how certain programmes are run. This could be achieved using a questionnaire focusing on the area of informal support, examining areas such as bonding, group events and interactions outside the programme.

Conclusion

This small-scale research project provided rich data for the field of family support with through the CARL initiative in UCC. This research recorded evidence of informal support among parents who knew each other several months and those who knew each other over ten years. In both cases there were high levels of informal support characterised by positive relationships, emotional support, practical support and advice. However, parental long-term participation could potentially challenge the participant turnover in a family support programme. If parents do not move on once they have established supports and developed necessary skills could this obstruct new families joining the programme as places for new parents become limited?

This thesis establishes that informal support is a significant aspect of family support deriving from parental participation in PAKT. It impacts parent's daily lives in the form of positive relationships, emotional supports and practical support and advice.

Bibliography

Arksey, H. & Knight, P., 1999. *Interviewing For Social Scientists.* London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Backhouse, C, 2017. *Information about PAKT.* [e-mail].

Barlow, J. & McMillan, A. S., 2010. *Safeguarding Children from Emotional Maltreatment: What Works.* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Blanchflower, D. G. & Oswald, A. J., 2004. Well-being over time in Britain and the USA. *Journal of Public Economics* , Volume 88, p. 1359 – 1386.

Braun , V. & Clarke, V., 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* , 3(2), pp. 77-101.

Bryman, A., 2012. *Social Researh Methods.* 4th ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

Canvin, K., Marttila, A., Burstorm, B. & Whitehead, M., 2009. Tales of the unexpected? Hidden resilience in poor households in Britain.. *Social Science & Medicine,* Volume 69, pp. 238-245.

Central Statistics Office, 2011. *Censun 2011: Profile 5 Households and Families,* Dublin: CSO.

Central Statistics Office, 2012. *Profile 5: Household and Families,* Dublin: Stationery Office.

Central Statistics Office, 2017. *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC),* Dublin: SCO.

Children's Rights Alliance, 2011. *Ten Years On: Did the National Children's Strategy Deliver on its Promises?,* Dublin: Children's Rights Alliance.

Citizen Information, 2017. *Citizen Information: Maternity Benefit.* [Online]
Available at:
http://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/social_welfare/social_welfare_payments/social_welfare_payments_to_families_and_children/maternity_benefit.html
[Accessed 26th March 2017].

Clark, T., 2010. Gaining and Maintaining Access Exploring the Mechanisms that Support and Challenge the Relationship between Gatekeepers and Researchers. *Qualitative Social Work,* 10(4), pp. 485-502.

Coleman, J. S., 1988. Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital. *The American Journal of Sociology,* Volume 94, pp. 95-120.

Coleman, J. S., 1994. *Foundations of Social Theory.* Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Commission on The Family, 1998. *Report on the Commission on The Family: Final Report,* Dublin: Stationary Office.

Creswell, J. W., 1998. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions.* California: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Dail Eireann Debate, 2015. *Family Resource Centres.* [Online]
Available at:
http://oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie/debates%20authoring/debateswebpack.nsf/takes/dail2015102100007?opendocument
[Accessed 21 October 2016].

Daly, M. & Clavero, S., 2003. *Contemporary Family Policy in Ireland and Europe,* Dublin: Department of Social Welfare..

De Laine, M., 2000. *Fieldwork, participation and practice.* London: Sage.

Department od Children and Youth Affairs, 2009. *Press Release: Minister for Children and Youth Affairs Barry Andrews welcomes free pre-school year in early childhood care and education (ECCE.,* Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2000. *The National Children's Strategy: Our Children Their Lives,* Dublin: Stationary Office.

Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011. *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children,* Dublin: Givernment Publications.

Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014. *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The Nationals Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020,* Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015. *High Level Policy Statement on Supporting Parents and Families,* Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2017 (a). *Options Identified in Stage 1 by the Expert Group to provide Technical Assistance to Government in relation to the location of juvenile human remains interred on the site of the former Mother and Baby home in Tuam Co.Galway,* Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2017 (b). *Heads of Bill,* Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

Department of Education and Skill, 2014. *Focussed Policy Assessment Early Start Programme,* Dublin: Department of Education and Skill.

Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government, 2016. *Homelessness Report,* Dun: Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government.

Devaney, C., 2011. *Family Support as an Approach to Working with Children and Families in Ireland: An Explorative Study of Past and Present Perspectives among Pioneers and Practitioners,* Galway: National University of Ireland.

Devaney, C., Canavan, J. & Landy, F., 2013. *What Works in Family Support?,* Galway: Child and Family Agency.

Dolan, P. & Holt, S., 2002. What Families Want in Family Support: An Irish Case Study. *Child Care in Practice,* 8(4), pp. 239-250.

Early Childhood Ireland, 2016. *Briefing for Members: Early Years Education and Care in Budget 2016,* s.l.: Early Childhood Ireland.

Early Childhood Ireland, 2016. *Doing the Sums: The Real Costs of Providing Childcare,* Dublin: Ealt Childhood Ireland.

Edwards, R. & Holland, J., 2013. *What is Qualitative Interviewing?.* London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

EUROSTAT, 2016. [Online]
Available at:
http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&plugin=1&pcode=tsdph240&language=en
[Accessed 19 Januray 2017].

EUROSTAT, 2017. [Online]
Available at: http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do
[Accessed 27th March 2017].

Fahey, T. & Field, C. A., 2008. *Families in Ireland an analysis of patterns and trends,* Dublin: Stationary Office.

Family Support Agency, 2013. *Strategic Framework for Family Support within the Family and Community Services Resource Centre Programme,* Dublin: Family Support Agency .

Farrell, L. & Barnes, G., Journal of Marrige and Family. Family Systems and Social Support: A Test of Cohesion and Adaptability on the Functioning of Parents and Adolescents. Issue 55, pp. 119-132.

Ferrara, M. M., 2015. Parent Involvement Facilitators: Unlocking Social Capital Wealth. *School Community Journal.,* 25(1), pp. 29-52.

Gardner, R., 2003. *Supporting Families: Child Protection in the Community.* London: John Wiley & Sons.

Ghate, D. & Hazel, N., 2002. *Parenting in Poor Environments: Stress, Support and Coping.* London: Jessican Kingsley Publishers Ltd..

Ghate, D. & Ramella, M., 2002. *Positive Parenting The National Evaluation of the Youth Justice Board's Parenting Programme,* UK: Department for Education and Skills.

Gillen, A. et al., 2013. *Investing in Families: Supporting Parents to Improve Outcomes for Children.,* Dublin: TUSLA.

Gladow, W. N. & Ray, M. P., 1986. The Impact of Informal Support Systems on the Well-being of Low Income Single Parents. *Family Relations,* Issue 35, pp. 113-123.

Government of Ireland, 1937. *Constitution of Ireland,* Dublin: Stationary Office.

Government of Ireland, 1984. *Social Welfare Act,* Dublin: Stationary Office.

Government of Ireland, 1991. *Child Care Act,* Dublin: Stationary Office.

Government of Ireland, 2013. *The Child and Family Agency Act* , Dublin: Stationary Office.

Government of Ireland, 2016. *Paternity Leave and Benefit Act 2016,* Dublin: Stationary Office.

Hammond, M. & Wellington, J., 2013. *Research Methods: Key Concepts.* Oxon: Routledge.

Hardiker, P., Exton, K. & Barker, M., 1991. *Policies and Perspectives in Preventative Child Care.* Avebury: Aldershot.

Harman, V., 2013. Social capital and the informal support networks of lone white mothers of mixed parentage children. *Ethnic and Racial Studies,* 36(8), pp. 1323 - 1341.

Hearne, R. & McMahon, C., 2016. *Cherishing All Equally 2016: Economic Inequality in Ireland,* Dublin: TASC.

Holt, N. et al., 2012. *Psychology: The science of mind and behaviour.* Berkshire: McGraw Hill Education.

Law, M., King, S., Steward, D. & King, G., 2001. The perceived effects of parent-led support groups for parents of children with disabilities. *Physical & Occupational Therapy In Pediatrics.,* 21(2-3), pp. 29-48.

Levin, P., 2015. Ego States and Emotional Development in Adolescence. *Transactional Analysis Journal,* 45(3), pp. 228-237.

May-Cahal, M., Katz, I. & Cooper, L., 2003. Social Exclusion, Family Support and Evaluation. In: *Evaluating Family Support: Thinking Internationally, Thinking Critically.* London: Wiley, pp. 3-21.

McDonald, L. et al., 2006. After-School Multifamily Groups: A Randomized Controlled Trial Involving Low-Income, Urban, Latino Children. *Children and School,* 28(1), pp. 25-34.

McKeown, K., 2000. *A guide to what works in family support services for vulnerable families,* Dublin: Author.

McKeown, K., Haase, T. & Pratschke, J., 2001. *Springboard: through family support services,* Dublin: Kieran McKeown Limited.

Moran, P., Ghate, D. & van der Merwe, A., 2004. *What Works in Parenting Support? A Review of the International Evidence.,* s.l.: Department for Education and Skills.

Moran, P. & Ghate, D., 2005. The Effectiveness of Parenting Support. *Children and Society,* Volume 19, pp. 329-336.

Morgan, D. L., 1997. *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research.* 2nd ed. California: SAGE, Publications, Inc.

Murphy, F. D., Buckley, H. & Joyce, L., 2005. *The Ferns Report, presented by the Ferns Inquiry to the Minister for Health and Children,* Dublin: Government Publications.

Newman, D. L., Caspi, A., Moffitt, T. E. & Silva, P. A., 1997. Antecedents of Adult Interpersonal Functioning: Effects of Individual Differences in Age 3 Temperament.. *Developmental Psychology,* 33(2), pp. 206-217.

O'Neill, B., Grehan, S. & Ólafsson, K., 2011. *Risks and safety for children on the internet: the Ireland report. Initial findings from the EU Kids Online survey of 9-16 year olds and their parents.*. [Online]
Available at:
http://www.internetsafety.ie/website/ois/oisweb.nsf/0/0234B716E9BDC62580257831004336F0/$File/Full%20Report.pdf
[Accessed 27th March 2017].

Owens, S., 2010. *An introductory guide to the key terms and interagency initiatives in use in the Children's Services Committees in Ireland.,* Dublin: The Centre for Effective Services.

Parents Plus, 2016. *Parents Plus Empowering Professionals to Support Families.* Dublin: Parents Plus.

Pinkerton , J., Dolan , P. & Canavan, J., 2004. *Family Support in Ireland Definition & Strategic Intent: A Paper for the Department of Health and Children,* Galway: Child and Family Research and Policy Unit.

Portes, A., 1998. Social Capital: Its Origins and Applications in Modern Sociology.. *Annual Review of Sociology.*, Volume 24, pp. 1-24.

Putnam, R. D., 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.* New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks.

Raferty, M. & O'Sullivan, E., 2001. *Suffer the Little Children: The Inside Story of Ireland's Industrial Schools.* New York: Continuum Publishers.

Riordan, S., 2001. *Supporting Parenting: a study of parents' support needs,* Dublin: Centre for Social and Educational Research .

Roeser, R. W., Eccles, J. S. & Sameroff, A. J., 2000. School as a Context of Early Adolescents' Academic and Social-Emotional Development: A Summary of Research Findings. *The Elementary School journal,* 100(5).

Rubin, H. J. & Rubin, I. S., 1995. *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data.* California: SAGE Publications Ltd..

Ryan, G. W. & Bernard, H. R., 2003. Techniques to Identify Themes. *Field Methods,* Volume 15, pp. 85-109.

Shoji, M. N., Haskins, A. R., Rangel, D. E. & Sorensen, K. N., 2014. The emergence of social capital in low-income Latino elementary schools. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly,* Issue 29, pp. 601-613.

Thompson, R. A. & Ontai, L., 2000. *Striving to do well what comes naturally: Social support, developmental psychopathology, and social policy,* Lincoln: Faculty Publications, Department of Psychology.

Trillingsgaard, T., Maimburg, R. D. & Simonsen, M., 2015. The Family Startup Program: study protocol for a randomized controlled trial of a universal group-based parenting support program.. *BMC Public Health.,* 15(409), pp. 2-10.

TUSLA, 2015. *Annual Report,* Dublin: TUSLA.

University College Cork, 2016. *Code of Research Conduct,* Cork: University College Cork.

YMCA, 2013. *Parents and Kids Together: Manual of best practice,* s.l.: YMCA.

YMCA, 2016. *Parents and Kids Together Annual Report September 2015- June 2016,* Cork.

YMCA, 2017. *Parents and Kids Together Annual Report Septermber 2016- June 2017,* Cork.

Appendix. 1

INFORMATION SHEET



Purpose of the Study. This research is being carried out as part of the requirements for a Masters of Social Science in Social Policy at UCC. The study is concerned with parental experiences of the Parents and Kids Together programme in Ireland, with a focus on relationships and informal supports built among programme users.

What will the study involve? The study will involve a focus group discussion with several parents and the researcher. It is intended that the focus group will last no longer than 45 minutes. This will then be followed by short interviews with parents who wish to carry the discussion further. These interviews can take place at a different time and location to suit the participant

Why have you been asked to take part? You have been asked because your participation in PAKT makes for a suitable candidate to provide data for the outlined study.

Do you have to take part? No, participation is entirely voluntary. Prior to beginning the research each participant will asked to sign an informed consent form which shows their desire to take part in the research. Due to the voluntary nature of this study participants can withdraw at any time, even after the signing of the consent or ending participation after data collection has started.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential? Yes. I will ensure that no clues to your identity appear in the thesis. Any extracts from what you say that are quoted in the thesis will be entirely anonymous. Names and locations and any other identifying information will be completely excluded from this research.

What will happen to the information which you give? The data will be kept confidential for the duration of the study, available only to me and my research supervisor. It will be securely stored. Physical noted will be safely stored in a locked filing cabinet. Electronic data will be stored on an encrypted computer which only myself and relevant personnel in PAKT will have access to. Data will be securely held for a minimum period of ten years after the completion of a research project in like with the University's Code of Research Conduct (2016).

What will happen to the results? The results will be presented in the thesis. They will be seen by my supervisor, a second marker and the external examiner. The thesis may be read by future students on the masters programme at UCC. Some findings from the stud may be published in an academic journal. This research is carried out with CARL (Community Academic Research Links programme), and the research will be published on their UCC web page.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part? I don't envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part. It is possible that talking about your experience in this way may cause some distress.

What if there is a problem? At the end of the procedure, I will discuss with you how you found the experience.

Who has reviewed this study? Approval must be given by the Social Research Ethics Committee of UCC before studies like this can take place.

Any further queries? If you need any further information, you can contact me:

Tatyana (Tanya) Yeriskina

Contact details: e-mail: 113563483@umail.ucc.ie

UCC Supervisory: Dr. Deirdre Horgan, e-mail: D.horgan@ucc.ie

If you agree to take part in the study, please sign the consent form overleaf.

Appendix 2

CONSENT FORM



I _____ have read and understand the content of the Information Sheet.

I understand that I am participating voluntarily.

I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about and withdraw from the study at any time.

I understand that taking part means participating in a group interview and the opportunity to participate in a follow-up individual interview.

I give permission for sessions to be recorded.

I understand that I will remain anonymous and the PAKT programme which my child is attending will be referred to in very broad location terms.

I understand that the YMCA and PAKT and (the researcher) are in partnership through and that the information within the interviews is for research purposes.

I understand that my words may be quoted in articles, reports or other research forums but no personal details will be used.

Name of Participant: _____ Date:

Researcher Signature: _____ Date:

Appendix 3



SURVEY

1. Gender: Male ☐ **Female** ☐ **Other** ☐

2. Age: 21-29 ☐ **30-39** ☐ **40-49** ☐ **50+** ☐

3. How many children do you have?

_____

4. How many of your children are part of the PAKT programme?

_____

5. What age are your children who are part of the PAKT programme?

6. How long have you been involved in PAKT?

Appendix 4

Setting	**Gender**	**Age**	**Years in PAKT**
D	Female	50+	15 years
D	Female	50+	14 years
D	Female	50+	13 years
D	Female	30-39	1 year
D	Female	30-39	5 years
D	Female	20	13 years (joined as a child)
CU	Female	30-39	7 months
CU	Female	40-49	2 months
CU	Female	21-29	1 year
CU	Female	30-39	1 year
CU	Female	30-39	1 year
CU	Female		
CR	Male	40-49	4 years
CR	Female	40-49	Returned to PAKT 8 months ago
CR	Female	30-39	5 years
CE	Female	40-49	2 years
CE	Female	30-39	4 years
CE	Female	50+	1 year

CE	Female	30-39	9 years

Appendix 5

Interview Schedule (Focus Groups):

1. Would ye like to tell me why ye first joined PAKT?
2. PAKT has a great influence on children but how do ye think it affects ye as parents?
3. How do ye think being here in PAKT impacted ye as a person, and not a parent?
4. Can ye remember a time when you received support from a PAKT parent?
5. Can ye remember a time when ye were a source of support for a PAKT parent?
6. What changes have happened in your social life since joining PAKT?
7. Do ye think being here in PAKT and meeting other parents has given ye a chance to create supports with each other?

Interview Schedule (Semi-Structured Interviews with programme coordinators):

1. Why do parents generally join PAKT?
2. PAKT has a great influence on children but how do you think it impacts parents?
3. How do you think PAKT influences parents as people, taking away the parenting element?
4. Can you recall a time when parents gave or received support from one another?
5. What kind of changes have happened in parent's social life since thy joined PAKT?
6. What kind of social supports do you think parents have made through their PAKT experiences?
7. Have you tried to develop parent's social capital?