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## SUSTAINING FAMILY ROUTINES AFTER TRANSITIONING INTO PARENTHOOD: COUPLES' PERCEPTIONS OF ASSISTING FACTORS

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of this qualitative study was to explore what assists couples in sustaining family routines after the transition to parenthood. Participants were recruited from two day-care centres in Cape Town, South Africa. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 couples, mostly from low-income households, who had gone through this transition between one and four years previously. Grounded theory analysis revealed one major theme, Factors that decrease task and temporal complexity, with seven subthemes: Support from the wider family network; Couple cooperation and tag-teaming; Planning and pre-empting future problems; Adhering to schedules; Facilitative characteristics and skills of individual family members; Parents' sense of commitment and responsibility towards family members; and idiosyncratic accommodations. Results underscore the need for professionals to help parents gain support from relatives; strengthen partner teamwork; foster schedule consistency; improve skills such as planning; foster their caretaker self-concepts; and facilitate context-specific problem-solving.*

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### Keywords:

resilience, transition to parenthood, family routines, assisting factors, adaptation

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## INTRODUCTION

Evidence from the last 50 years of research shows that the transition to parenthood is accompanied by strain in various family-life domains, usually associated with a moderate decline in family functioning and an elevated risk for distress (Cowan and Cowan, 2012; Glade, Bean and Vira, 2005). Failure to recover can have long-term negative implications for the development of both children and adults (Cowan and Cowan, 2012).

Family routines are also vulnerable during this life stage. Before the child's arrival, couples are focused on meeting personal needs and enjoy greater flexibility in terms of the how, what, when and where of daily activities. With a child in the house, the daily schedule is transformed into a more formal, prearranged set of tasks centred on the child's needs and rhythms (Goldenberg and Goldenberg, 2013). In terms of role division, the transition tends to be associated with a shift from egalitarian to traditional (Cowan and Cowan, 2012). In effect, there is upheaval in the family's previous set of routines, which necessitates the couple to renegotiate and re-establish functional daily schedules (Goldenberg and Goldenberg, 2013).

Despite these challenges, some parents do manage to cope and thrive during this life transition. These resilient families withstand systemic disruption and ensure the continued maturation of all family members. In the previous four decades, studies have increasingly focused on resilience and have tried to identify and understand the myriad of factors that promote well-being within families (Walsh, 2012; Bhana and Bachoo, 2011; Benzies and Mychasiuk, 2009). Some of the resilience-promoting resources and competencies that have been identified are family belief systems, family communication patterns, and family organisation patterns (see Walsh, 2012). Although life transitions can disrupt family routines, the paradox is that a stable set of routines is also one family resource clearly linked to successful functioning during periods of strain.

Several possible reasons exist for the link between routines and family resilience. Firstly, healthy family routines are essential for optimal child development, as they are ecocultural pathways that invoke Vygotsky's zone of proximal engagement. During routines, children's intellectual capacities are stimulated by adult caregivers through coaching and apprenticeship. Children then gain new, context-specific skills and values that supersede current levels of maturation (Weisner, 2002). Secondly, routines provide frequent and consistent opportunities for communication, bonding and support, which function as emotional anchors during periods of crisis (Walters, 2009). Thirdly, routines are said to reduce chaos and instability by organising family life and providing family members with a predictable rhythm (Fiese, Tomcho, Douglas, Josephs, Poltrock and Baker, 2002). Fourthly, proponents of ecological-cultural niche theory (from here on referred to as ecocultural theory) believe that each family constructs a unique set of routines, with context-specific features, which help them adapt to their material and social context (Weisner, Matheson, Coots, and Bernheimer, 2005). Within ecocultural theory, sustainable routines are essential and defined as having four features. They are (1) fitted to the local ecology and available family resources; (2) meaningful and reflect family goals and values; (3) balance the competing needs of family members; and (4) stable and predictable (Weisner et al., 2005).

*The Resiliency Model of Family Stress, Adjustment and Adaptation* (from here on the Family Resiliency model) (McCubbin and McCubbin, 1996) provides a sixth possible reason for the link between family routines and family resilience. McCubbin and McCubbin

(1996) postulate that, when a family faces a significant life stressor, routines play a key role in the process of *adjustment* (helping to *resist* systemic change and to keep some form of continuity in daily life) and *adaptation* (helping to *recover* stability and harmony within the system by introducing new functional ways of operating). The Family Resiliency model's proposition is supported by a number of context-specific studies that show an association between family routines and family functioning during different types of crisis periods (Greeff and Du Toit, 2009; Greeff and Wentworth, 2009; Walters, 2009; Black and Lobo, 2008).

Although the Family Resiliency model lists routines as an important protective and recovery resource, McCubbin and McCubbin (1996) do not elaborate on what families must do to sustain routines successfully. It is also unclear how families from specific geographical and cultural contexts ensure the sustainability of their routines. Finally, Howe (2002:438) recognises the paucity of information on how family routines “form, stabilise, or reorganise” during periods of transition and that research addressing this gap “can help us identify new risk and protective factors that can be targeted in the next generation of family-focused prevention trials”. Taking all of these issues into consideration, the aim of this study was to uncover what assists couples to sustain their daily routines after becoming parents. Thus, the research question we aimed to explore was: *What factors do couples believe assist their family in sustaining their family routines after the transition to parenthood?*

## METHOD

Using a qualitative design, data collection took place with 10 couples via semi-structured interviews. Grounded theory techniques (Charmaz, 2008) were employed to analyse the data. Because this study focuses on the transition to parenthood, it aims to understand how families manage some form of change and process during a specific phase of their lives. Grounded theory methodology is well suited for research where change and process is a central theme (Charmaz, 2008).

### Sampling

Participants were recruited from two day-care centres, located in a suburb of Cape Town, South Africa, using convenience and snowball sampling. Interested parents gave their contact details to the principal investigator. The inclusion criteria were: (1) both the biological mother and biological father had to live with their child (but were not required to be married); (2) the couple's oldest child had to be between one and four years of age, since family stability is usually regained after four years (Olson and Gorall, 2003); (3) the participants' first language had to be either English or Afrikaans; and (4) to achieve sample homogeneity, couples were selected from only one racial group. In the Western Cape province, the majority (48,8%) of people consider themselves to be coloured, as opposed to black (32,9%), Indian or Asian (1,1%), white (15,7%) and other (1,6%) (Statistics South Africa, 2014). The reason for restricting the sample to coloured families is that routines are highly sensitive to family context (i.e. culture, community conditions, history and socio-economic status). Data saturation was reached after interviewing 10 couples (Saumure and Given, 2008).

## Participants

The families' home language were either Afrikaans ( $n = 3$ ), English ( $n = 4$ ) or both ( $n = 3$ ). Husbands' mean age was 33.1 years (ranged from 27 to 41) and their wives' 28.8 years (ranged from 21 to 35). The mean age of firstborns was 3.6 years (ranged from 2 to 4). One couple had three children, two couples had two children, and seven couples had one child. Eight fathers had obtained a high school certificate, while the other two had a tertiary diploma. Six mothers had obtained a high school certificate, three had obtained a tertiary diploma, and one had a degree. Most parents worked, with only one husband and two wives unemployed. Nine out of the ten participating families fell in the lowest three household income categories (less than R20 000 per month), out of a total of six categories devised by the Bureau of Market Research (Masemola, Van Aardt and Coetzee, 2010). At the time of the interviews, five of the ten couples lived with extended family (usually the parents of one of the participating partners).

## Procedure

After interested parents were contacted telephonically and given information on the study, a face-to-face meeting was scheduled. During the meeting, parents gave written consent and completed a biographical questionnaire. The semi-structured interview subsequently took place in parents' language of choice. Participants received a gift voucher and a small story book for the child as a token of appreciation.

## Interview

During the development of the semi-structured interview schedule, the *Ecocultural Family Interview* (Weisner, Bernheimer and Coots, 1997) was used as a point of departure and modified to fit this study. Parents were asked to describe a typical workday and weekend in a time-ordered sequence. From here, a list of weekly routines was generated for the family, and each specific routine was explored in terms of the following typical features: what happens; who is involved; why is the routine important; what is taught to children; what challenges are experienced; what coping strategies and resources are employed; what changes have occurred after having children.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was granted by Stellenbosch University's Research Ethics Committee (Humanities). All necessary precautions were taken to uphold the rights of the participants.

## Data analysis

Grounded theory analytic procedures were employed to generate themes. Data collection and analysis happened simultaneously. Line-by-line open coding and micro-analytic techniques were used (Charmaz, 2008; Corbin and Strauss, 2008). In the ensuing focused coding phase, the most significant and exact codes were identified and the dataset was re-examined using these codes. Interrelated, focused codes were grouped into subthemes, then given definitions and explored analytically through memo writing (Charmaz, 2008).

Trustworthiness was achieved by treating participants with respect and engaging them in informal conversation prior to interviews. During data analysis, attention was paid to potential rival conclusions and instances that contradicted findings (Shenton, 2004). To ensure that themes and conclusions drawn from the research were an accurate account of participants' experiences, three families were presented with a brief synopsis of the results (Shenton, 2004). All of them were satisfied with the accuracy of the themes. For readability purposes, Afrikaans quotations were translated into English. All excerpts from interviews are italicised. Words that were emphasised by participants, are underlined>.

## RESULTS

The overarching theme that emerged was *factors that decrease task and temporal complexity*. Every routine requires certain operational tasks that need to be performed within that routine. For example, a bath-time routine requires that a parent prepares a bath, undresses children, gets them into the water, allows some time to wash and play, dries them off and gets them dressed. An essential part of a routine is its temporal structure because routines are usually performed and completed at the same time each day (e.g. dinner usually starts at 6 pm and ends at 7 pm). A routine's operational tasks must be performed within its set temporal limit so that the next routine in the daily schedule can commence. *Factors that decrease task and temporal complexity* comprise extra- and intra-familial influences that help to sustain routines, because they either increase available time, decrease timetable variations, assist families in executing needed tasks on time, or decrease the number and difficulty level of routine tasks.

Seven subthemes were identified, each one exemplifying this overarching theme, because each helps to either decrease task complexity, temporal complexity or both. The seven subthemes are: *Support from the wider family network*; *Couple cooperation and tag-teaming*; *Planning and pre-empting future problems*; *Adhering to schedules*; *Facilitative characteristics and skills of individual family members*; *Parents' sense of commitment and responsibility towards family members*; and *Idiosyncratic accommodations*. These subthemes are subsequently defined, described and discussed.

### **Subtheme one: Involvement of extended family and family of origin**

There was one factor outside the nuclear family that helped to decrease temporal and task complexity, namely *the involvement of the couple's extended family and family of origin* (such as the couple's parents, sisters, brothers, aunts and uncles). All ten families relied heavily on the wider family network to accomplish daily tasks. Examples of support were often related to family members stepping in when something unexpected happened to derail the couple's regular schedule (e.g. when parents overslept, had a crisis at work, or suddenly fell ill). However, support was not only available during a crisis. Family had a substantial presence during typical day-to-day activities such as cooking, cleaning and childcare. All of these factors meant that the parents had more time and could implement their routines with greater temporal regularity.

For example, one couple, from family ten (from here F10) who had to be at work very early, dropped their son off at their parents' house so that the older generation could take the child to crèche. This was an asset to the couple, as their work started much earlier than the crèche's opening hours and the complexity of their morning routine would have increased greatly without this arrangement. Some couples also organised lift clubs with

their adult siblings. Additionally, family assistance was useful when parents needed time for respite and marital connection (“couple-time” routines). One father (from F1) explained how his parents helped him and his wife to engage in couple-bonding routines on a Sunday afternoon:

*“[Our oldest child] goes around to my mother’s. Then we are alone again. Then we can rest a little bit again. [Wife interjects: It’s our time.] That is why I say, we are fortunate that our families stay close to us. So if [my son] becomes a bit of a handful I can quickly take him. Or my father will call: ‘Bring him so that he can come visit this side.’ Then we have time for ourselves again.”*

The involvement of family during regular day-to-day activities was especially pertinent for couples who deviated from the expected family life cycle pattern, described by McGoldrick and Shibusawa (2012). Seven couples lived in the home of their family of origin during the transition to parenthood. Five of these living arrangements also included other adult siblings. In these multi-generational households, support was readily available. One father (from F5), whose mother lived with them, commented:

*“I find it to be convenient at times, especially after work when [my wife and I] have to do something; or if there is a crisis, like we overslept or something [...] I know that my mom’s going to go to the crèche.”*

Another couple (from F8) explained that live-in grandparents contributed to schedule regularity because the older generation knew their son’s routines and would assist the new parents in reinforcing appropriate child behaviour when he tries to deviate from the schedule. Moreover, grandparents staying in the house helped supervise children. Being able to hand a child over to someone else frees up space for parents to accomplish other duties quickly.

The involvement of extended family was sometimes more substantial. In three cases, the child lived with an aunt for an extended period of time (more than a month). This was to enable parents to recuperate from a difficult pregnancy, or when a couple struggled to manage a satisfying routine because of various family obligations and needs. In essence, as the father from family one stated, family support is “key” to coping and maintaining daily schedules.

### **Subtheme two: Couple cooperation and tag-teaming**

All ten couples accomplished many of their routines by working together and making use of tag-teaming. The participants designed their daily schedules in such a way that, while one partner was occupied with a general domestic routine, the other would undertake a child-related routine, with the partners subsequently exchanging roles. This ensured the completion of tasks within stipulated temporal limits. Most couples had a well-planned tag-teaming schedule. Participants described this type of tag-teaming by labelling the designated times that each parent spent with their child as “our time”. Thus, when a parent and child engaged in “our time” or “our thing”, the other parent got a bit of “me time” during which to engage in something enjoyable on his or her own. One couple (from F1) explained: “We both understand each other on that point: this is your time, this is my time. Yes, so that plays a big role.” When asked how they managed to keep their evening routines going, one mother (from F5) described their tag-teaming sequence during bath

time: *“I will put them in the bath and wash them, dad dries them off and dresses them. We compromise in the evening. [...] It’s a give and take.”* The effectiveness and benefits of this tag-teaming duo are corroborated by other couples, who emphasised that it *“made the work lighter”* (from F7) and allowed them to finish mandatory activities quickly so that they could move on to more pleasurable family routines:

*“Assisting each other, basically helping each other, if you want to make it work you should help each other and also if we help each other, then the quicker the work can get done and then you can spend doing whatever you want.”*

In this way, cooperation and tag-teaming seem to reduce the temporal and task complexity of families’ sequence of routines.

### **Subtheme three: Planning ahead and pre-empting the future**

Several families stressed that planning ahead helped them to accomplish their routines: *“Yes, just good planning.”* (from F9). Nine couples spoke about a telephonic, email or text message checking-in routine during work hours so that partners could synchronise schedules, negotiate after-work duties and plan for upcoming family routines such as dinner and weekend outings.

Furthermore, several participants mentioned having a prepping routine, for instance on a Sunday evening before a busy week, or in the evening before a busy morning. One parent (from F8), for example, cooked the entire weeks’ meals on a Sunday to ensure she does not have to *“rush”* when she gets home from work on weekdays.

Timetables were also regarded as important. The father from family ten demonstrated his scheduling skills as follows:

*“You need to first see what time you would like to be done and then work yourself backwards. [...] So if I need to get [my wife] at 4:30 I must arrive [at work] at say, like the latest 7:30 because then you’re able to leave at 4:00 to pick [your wife] up at 4:30. So you can work it back to say, okay I’ll leave the house at 6:00. It takes me roughly an hour to get to work you know, so 7:00. (I shouldn’t aim for 7:30 I should aim for 7:00 to get there 7:30 eventually). And you work back and say right I must get up at 5:00.”*

What is noteworthy from the above excerpt is the fact that this father not only devised a well-structured timetable, but that he also allowed for additional time in case unexpected events occurred. More than one participant spoke about a temporal structure that allowed for this margin of error by working in an extra, “free” 15 to 30 minutes to ensure that routines could not be derailed by any unforeseen complications.

Furthermore, the sentiment of “expect the unexpected” was echoed by a mother (from F9) who felt that doing important tasks immediately was essential, as procrastinating only augmented challenges when unanticipated complications occurred. She thus planned for the unplannable:

*“No, this is the thing, my mother always said: ‘Do a thing while you can, you do not know what tomorrow holds for you’ and it is the same with your children. Do something now, you do not know what will happen in a little while. If you want something done now, do it and*

*finish it. In a little while your child might knock you or your child gets hurt, then you need to go to the hospital, then there are other factors, it is other things going wrong.”*

In essence, prepping and planning routines, well-devised time schedules and pre-empting future problems helped parents adhere to their routines.

#### **Subtheme four: Adhering to schedules**

Adhering to devised schedules and implementing routines consistently were important to participants. The mother from family one explained that, when they did not adhere to their set routines, they experienced behavioural difficulties with their child:

*“[If you do not stick to the routine] it throws everything out. So, um, to rather stick to a child routine is better than to throw it out completely. [...] So, the more we stick to the child’s routine, the better for the child actually, that is what we learned.”*

Another mother (from F2) explained the importance of familiarising her child with the morning routine from a young age: *“We are already in that routine. We do not actually struggle to get [my son] awake. [...] So he is so used to that routine, just because as a little one he was also in that routine.”*

There was a sense that adherence to the set of routines made child behaviours more habitual, but it also helped parents to accomplish tasks as if they were a reflex. There was no need to think about or discuss what activities were required. As the father from family nine stated: *“It’s automatic, you don’t ask.”* His wife responded that they were so used to their daily routines that *“it’s almost like you know what your duty is: you [indicating to self with hand] do this, and you [gesturing to husband] do that.”*

By adhering to schedules and routines, children and parents alike fall into a pattern and become familiar with this family rhythm. This reduces the complexity of routine tasks and temporal structures.

#### **Subtheme five: Facilitative characteristics and skills of individual family members**

In half of the participating families, the parents identified key individuals who made a significant contribution to sustaining family routines. These individuals were not always parents. The couple from family four, with two boys, identified their youngest as the key individual. This three-year old child took a proactive stance in sustaining regular routines. He was described by his parents as being the *“alarm clock”* in the home:

*“I think it would be [our youngest son]. [He] is so into the routine, it is built into him. He actually reminds you if you forget something. He will come and remind you when it’s time for this, it’s time for that, you need to do this. [...] We’ll slack and won’t have a lunch-lunch, but he, you can’t do that with him. He needs to sit down and eat. He needs to do this. He keeps us remembering that there is something like a routine.”*

Similarly, some partners were also described as very structured and organised, with a particular need to stick to schedules and plans, such as the father from family six:



*“Look for me it’s just the individual I am, you know and you can ask [my wife] I like things to run to a schedule. I like to determine the path. I don’t like things determining how my day goes.”*

The mother from family three also seemed very time-orientated and described a strict schedule that family members had to adhere to during the week. She connected this to her conscientious personality:

*“I’m a very prim and proper person. I have to get up a certain time. [...] I have a big obsession or something like that, but, if I have to get up at half past six, I get up at half past six.”*

In addition to conscientious individuals who were proficient in time management, parents were also helped to sustain routines by having the skills to successfully cook, clean and manage children. Two mothers were identified as masters in child discipline. However, these skills were not associated only with women. The father from family five seemed very skilled at accomplishing an array of tasks. He worked nightshifts as a paramedic and held down a second job as an army reservist on his off days. When he got home in the morning he first undertook childcare duties, and then took his wife to work, returned home to sleep, and finally completed the cooking and cleaning before his family arrived home in the afternoon. When asked how he managed this schedule, he said:

*“It’s not a problem because I, I grew up with my grandmother and there I helped raise some younger ones. It is not something new to me. I can do everything. I can cook. I can do everything.”*

Consequently, the present study found that competencies and characteristics of specific family members help to decrease task and temporal complexity, and thus assist in sustaining family routines.

### **Subtheme six: Parents’ sense of commitment and responsibility towards family members**

Time seemed to be scarce for the participants, even though this resource has a fixed supply (always 24 hours in a day). However, after having children, a couple must suddenly find additional time to add extensive child-related routines to their already full schedule. This often forces parents to relinquish some personal time and leisure activities. Participants described big adjustments to their timetables, which emphasised this sudden restriction in choice, such as the mother from family three: *“I can’t just do what I want.”* However, these statements were often followed by an acknowledgement that, as parents, it was their responsibility to centre their lives and activities on the family. Furthermore, parents emphasised that relinquishing their own desires was not experienced as negative or problematic because of their dedication towards each other and family life.

Participants described egocentrism as the antithesis of good parenting, whereas responsibility and self-sacrifice were tantamount. Parents made comments such as *“you can’t consider yourself at this stage”* (from F1) and *“you need to think of your family”* (from F8). For example, the mother from family five emphasised that her husband had the option of socialising with friends in his free time. However, because he understood the importance of family time he usually declined these social invitations. She continued:

*“I think if you want to make it work it can work. Because like, for instance, today, um, [my husband] was off, and we get to spend it together. So it’s not like it can’t work. It can work if you want to make it work.”*

Note here that it was the desire to have a successful family life that motivated this couple to invest time in joint family routines. The mother from family four described the relentless child-centred existence she faced, but added the following discussion on selflessness and responsibility:

*“You can’t just sleep when you must. You can’t just come home, flop yourself on the bed and conk out anymore. You can’t do that anymore. You obviously need to see to [the children] first before you can look at yourself. [...] You are a parent. That is your responsibility. That comes first. And you don’t neglect one another.”*

The above excerpt shows that, when this mother focused on the greater good of family life and parenting, she was more willing to accept the incongruence she experienced between her needs and the needs of her children. The participants acknowledged that the change from childlessness to parenthood necessitated a change in focus and mind-set:

*“When you have children, you realise, you are not alone anymore, it isn’t about you anymore. You have a different sort of love that you want to pour out over your children, and to do different little things with them.” [F9]*

A parent’s sense of commitment and responsibility towards children and family life is thus a strong source of motivation and helps parents make personal sacrifices so that they can sustain their new set of family routines.

### **Subtheme seven: Idiosyncratic accommodations to routines**

Families took different and sometimes very creative action to adjust to their demanding new schedules. Although these were not similar in content, they all entailed changes in routines that helped families adapt to their unique set of circumstances. Thus, these changes point to the idiosyncratic process of sustaining a satisfying set of routines.

For instance, the mother from family ten kept her make-up and hair straightener at the office, and thus finished her grooming routine at work before her colleagues arrived. Rush-hour traffic required her to leave the home early, and thus she did this to compensate for the lack of time she had at home to get ready for work. The couple from family four decided to use a basic tooth-brushing routine to connect with their boys because they had very little time for family bonding in the morning. In terms of household tasks, the mother from family seven used a children’s television character (Barney the Purple Dinosaur), which has a “*clean-up song*”, to get her child involved in cleaning routines. This increased her child’s cooperation and sped up the process.

Parents also had different de-stressing routines. Although the parents usually felt that “*me time*” was a scarce resource, some did manage time for respite. For example, the father from family one got up at 5 o’clock, before everyone else woke up, so that he could relax and de-stress in the bath, whereas the mother from family two used her lunch break to walk around, window shop and relax by herself on workdays.

“*Couple-time*” was also seen as a routine that took a backseat after the addition of their child. However, the couple from family six decided to phone one other at work to ensure sustained communication and emotional intimacy. The mother explained: “*The only time we actually speak is if [my husband] takes me to work, or when we come home, or a bit in the evening. [...] But during the course of the day we try and find time, during my lunch hour, or his lunch hour, to actually just catch up.*” The couple from family three enjoyed using cooking time to reconnect and talk about the day’s events.

Accommodation also related to social contact. Although parents often experience a decrease in social contact after transitioning into parenthood, the couple from family four emphasised that having children helped them *increase* these social routines. They did this by socialising with other parents when their children had play dates. From the examples given above, one can see that these idiosyncratic accommodations simplified the task and temporal complexity of family routines.

## DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THERAPY

Adding children to the couple dyad, often disrupts the equilibrium of the family system and can increase the chance of family dissolution through divorce or partner separation (Cowan and Cowan, 2012). In order to foster family resilience and stability, it is important that parents implement a sustainable set of family routines. The research question we addressed in this study was: *What factors do couples believe assist their family in sustaining their family routines after the transition to parenthood?* One overarching theme was identified, namely *Factors that decrease the task and temporal complexity of routines*. Each daily routine has a number of operational tasks that need to be performed within set time limits. Any influence (be it action, attitude or resource) that simplifies the execution of operational tasks or the adherence to timetables supports the sustainability of family routines. Seven subthemes were identified that decrease task and temporal complexity, and these hold important considerations for professionals.

The first subtheme, *Involvement of extended family and family of origin*, emphasises that practitioners should recognise the extensive contribution the larger family network makes in reducing the complexity of the nuclear family’s daily schedules. It should be noted that the participating couples also assisted their parents and siblings, pointing to a mutually beneficial relationship. Using a qualitative design, Medved (2004) studied the practical actions parents take to establish a work-life balance and found *reciprocating* actions (behaviours engaged in by parents who exchange childcare services with family members on a routine basis) to be an important factor. Extensive reviews of family resilience processes (Walsh, 2012; Bhana and Bachoo, 2011; Black and Lobo, 2008; McCubbin and McCubbin, 1996), mention the association between social support and family adaptation when normative and unexpected life stressors occur. Research tends to call attention to the provision of practical, emotional and material assistance gained from social connections. However, this study highlights a very specific pathway in which extended family support buffers against the negative impact of a stressor, namely the sustaining of family routines. Practitioners should augment new parents’ ability to access this kind of familial support.

Subtheme two, *Couple cooperation and tag-teaming*, underscores that parental teamwork potentially enhances the sustainability of family routines. Findings on tag-teaming are supported by what Medved (2004) terms *alternating*. However, this subtheme needs further

examination. On the one hand, it is possible that effective tag-teaming sequences and high levels of couple cooperation are associated with more routinised households. However, there is an extensive body of evidence showing that domestic and childcare duties fall disproportionately on women (Cowan and Cowan, 2012). One limit of the current study's qualitative design is that interviews elicit participants' perceptions, but these perceptions may not always accurately reflect what happens in practice. Therefore this subtheme does not necessarily imply that roles are shared equitably between men and women, but merely that it is important for partners to feel supported. Furthermore, professionals must consider the effect of confounding variables, such as the quality of the marital relationship, partners' negotiation and problem-solving skills, and couple communication. It is conceivable that these variables will have an impact on how well a couple can work together and implement an effective tag-teaming sequence.

The third subtheme, *Planning ahead and pre-empting the future*, points to a number of practical strategies that professionals can suggest to less routinised parents. Firstly, parents' ability to design an appropriate daily timetable is important. When devising this timetable, parents should ensure that the time allocated to each daily activity is realistic, adequate and transparent. Secondly, it is important for the couple to have regular strategy sessions so that family tasks and activities are coordinated. These strategy sessions do not have to be formal and can happen during what Medved (2004) terms *checking-in routines*. This can be done even when parents are at work, by using technological advances such as email and text messaging. Thirdly, parents need to implement weekly or daily *prepping routines* (Medved, 2004) that are designed explicitly to simplify the task demands of forthcoming routines. And finally, professionals should encourage parents to be proactive with tasks so that they are better prepared when unforeseen obstacles arise.

Subtheme four, *Adhering to schedules*, likely indicates that, when a family habitually implements the same daily routine, children become programmed with an internal clock and thus are easier to regulate. Furthermore, partners will reflexively execute tasks without having to first debate and assign them. Thus, practitioners should note that, when families adhere to routines, it likely will improve their sustainability. However, the particular subtheme described here seems to reflect a form of circular logic: being more consistent when implementing family routines in effect helps the family to be more consistent when implementing family routines. This highlights some of the difficulty in determining any causal links between family routines and other positive family outcomes (Fiese et al., 2002) and demonstrates that, in most cases, causality is probably bi-directional.

We can infer from subtheme five, *Facilitative characteristics and skills of individual family members*, that some individuals have a range of competencies, attitudes or even personality traits that are conducive to a routinised environment. In particular, family members who are conscientious, organised and self-sufficient, with valuable childcare and domestic competencies, help to decrease the task and temporal complexity of family routines. Professionals could show families how to utilise the talents of these individuals. It might also be important to assist in improving the childcare and domestic skills of new parents who are not yet completely self-reliant.

Theme six, *Parents' sense of commitment and responsibility towards family members*, shows how parental attitudes potentially can assist in sustaining family routines, because even though the new childcare routines require parents to relinquish significant amounts of

personal time, they see this sacrifice as part of their new caretaker role. These sentiments were not surprising, because transitioning into parenthood requires a shift in self-concept to include this new caretaker role (Cowan and Cowan, 2012; McGoldrick and Shibusawa, 2012). If parents fail to assimilate this new role of guardian into their identity, they may refuse to undertake childcare responsibilities (McGoldrick and Shibusawa, 2012). On the other hand, making such a shift successfully fosters a greater sense of maturity, relational commitment and self-control (Cowan and Cowan, 2012). There thus seems to be a possible connection between a parent's identity as caretaker and his or her ability to prioritise joint family and childcare routines. Practitioners could assist struggling new parents to accept their new caretaker role and encourage them to focus on the greater good of family life and parenting. This may help parents to accept the incongruence they experience between their own needs and the needs of their children.

Subtheme seven, *Idiosyncratic accommodations to routines*, signifies that parents took divergent adaptive actions to cope with their own particular situations. The Ecocultural Model (Gallimore, Goldenberg and Weisner, 1993) underscores the uniqueness of family routines because a family's set of routines reflects (1) what cultural values the family chooses to assimilate into the family belief system, and (2) what ecological conditions they have to contend with (such as transport systems, economic climate, work environments and community crime levels). The idiosyncratic nature of accommodations described here highlights the need for practitioners to assess each family's unique cultural and ecological situation. Such tailored approaches will be more family friendly and increase programme longevity (Maul and Singer, 2009).

## LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study aimed to gain insight into context-specific, positive influences that sustain family routines after a significant life transitions. During individual and group interventions, professionals can explore and strengthen the capacity of new parents to sustain their routines by focusing on the themes highlighted here. However, caution must be taken due to the subjective nature of the qualitative interview data and analysis. Although steps were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the results, the generalisability of themes should be verified with follow-up research. The study's resulting themes were also drawn from a homogenous sample in a very particular cultural and ecological environment. As routines are tailored to suit specific milieus, the themes described here likely will not be an exhaustive list of positive influences for all families. Future research should replicate this study with families in other settings to identify additional, context-specific facilitating factors. Mothers and fathers could also be interviewed separately as they might provide different perspectives when interviewed unaccompanied by their partner. Professionals should also ensure that, when working with specific families, their appraisals of routine-related strengths are holistic and contextualised.

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