

Understanding the development of child-to-parent violence through the interplay between the 'parent-child relationship' and the 'family-environment relationship'



**INTERNATIONAL FJC CONFERENCE
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Interactie - Academie



Understanding child to parent violence

through the interplay between the 'parent-child relationship' and the 'family-environment relationship'



Interactie-Academie, Antwerp

- *Institute with more than 50 years of experience in systemic theory & practice*
- *Local, national & international*

Domains

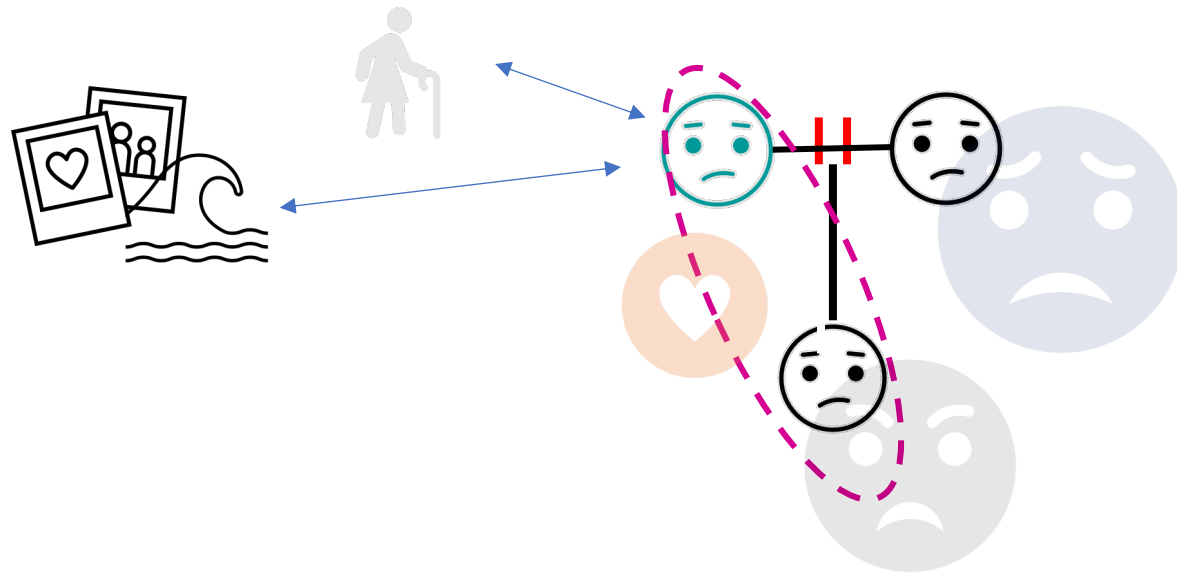
- Trauma & violence
 - Parenthood & family concerns
 - Relationships & partnership concerns
 - Children & their development
 - Psychological & societal difficulties
 - People, work & organisations
-
- ✓ Training, supervision and implementation (in house and agency based)
 - ✓ Therapeutic practice, mediation, supervision, counseling
 - ✓ Conceptual development & research
 - ✓ Public engagement



Understanding child to parent violence

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Meet **JENNY**, the mother of **DAVE**



The 1000 dollar question:
"Why does this happen?"

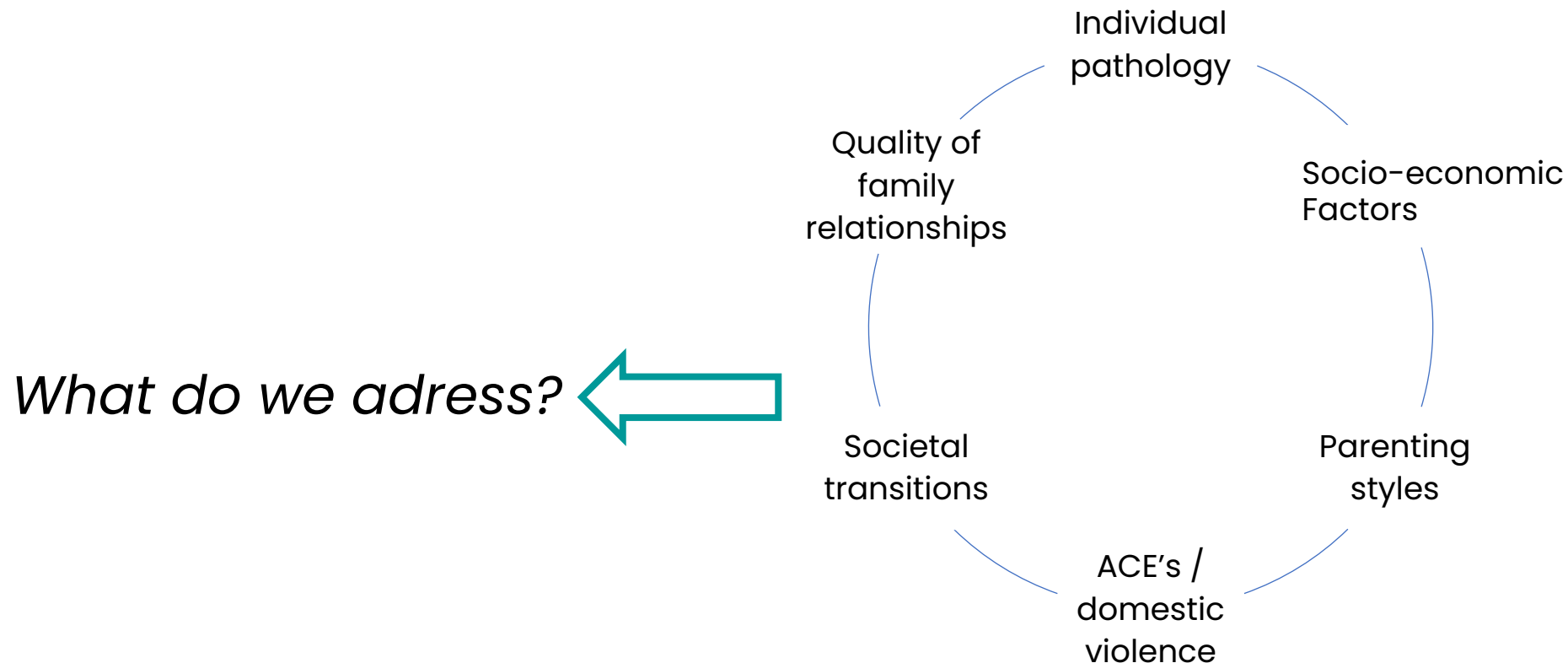


Understanding child to parent violence

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Constituting child-to-parent violence: Lessons from England and Wales (Holt & Lewis, 2021)

→ Depending on key background factors: major differences towards interventions





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A pattern of behaviour, instigated by a child or young person, which involves using verbal, financial, physical and/or emotional means to practise power and exert control over a parent. The power that is practised is, to some extent, intentional, and the control that is exerted over a parent is achieved through fear, such that a parent unhealthily adapts his/her own behaviour to accommodate the child.

(Holt, 2015)

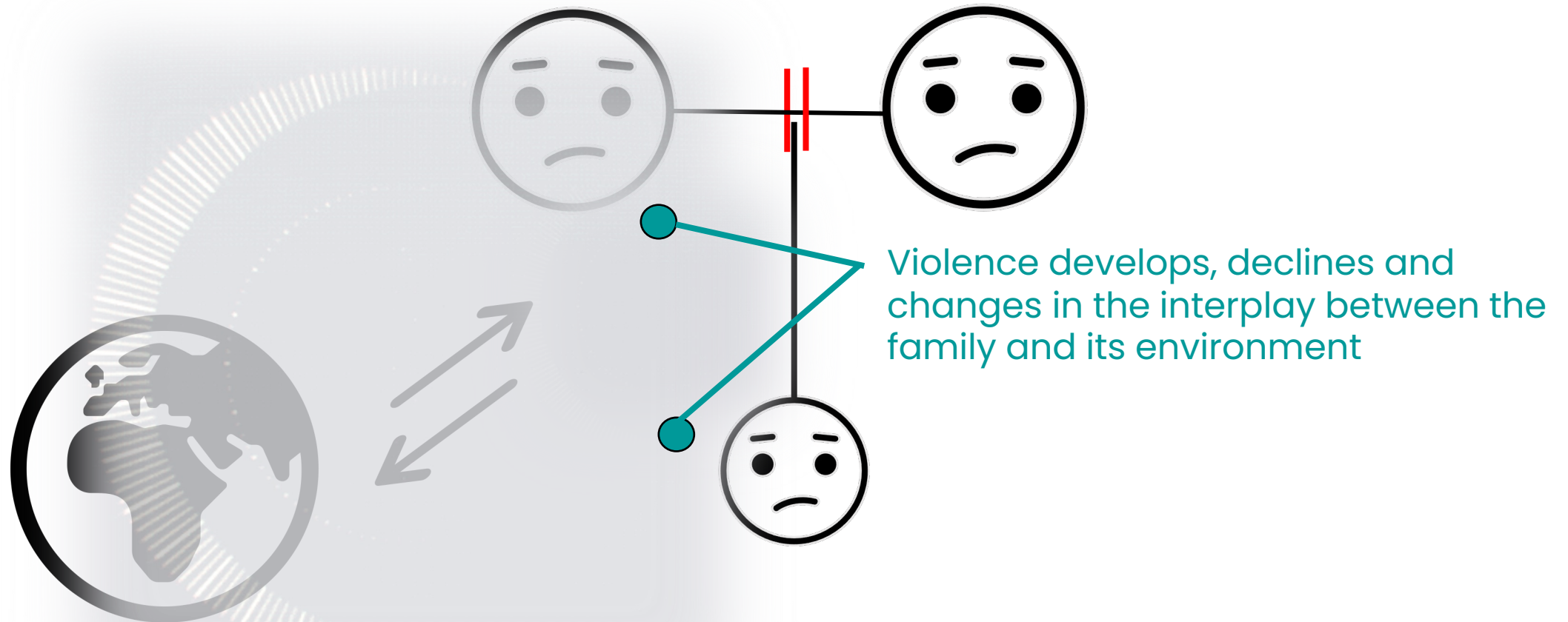
From a systemic perspective, interaction patterns containing violence are understood and co-constructed, within a **broad social context**. This implies that family violence develops within **an ecologic structure** or through the **interplay between the dynamics in the relationship 'parent – child' and the dynamics in the relationship 'family – outside world'**



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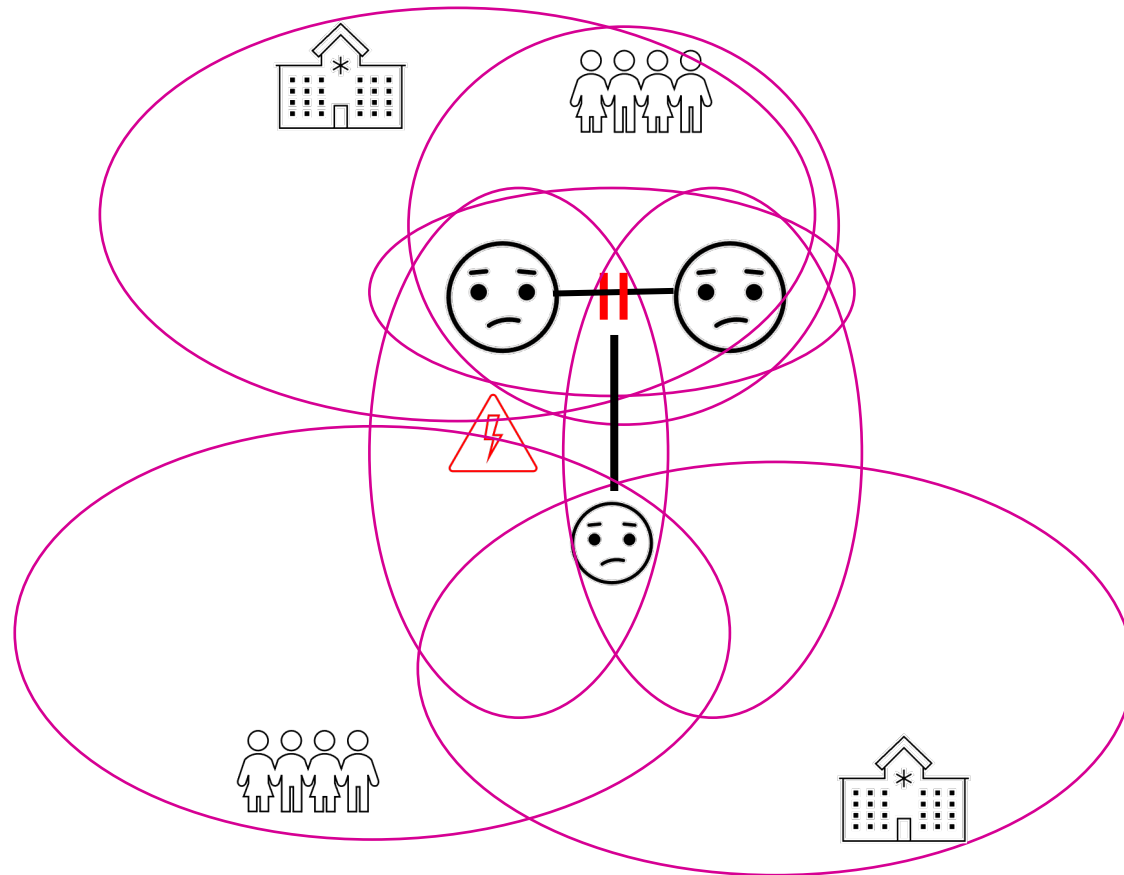
Child to parent violence as a social construct





Understanding child to parent violence

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1. Interactions between parents
2. Interaction between parents and children
3. Interactions between parents and their informal / social environment
4. Interactions between parents and their formal / professional environment
5. Interactions between children and their informal / social environment
6. Interactions between children and their formal / professional environment

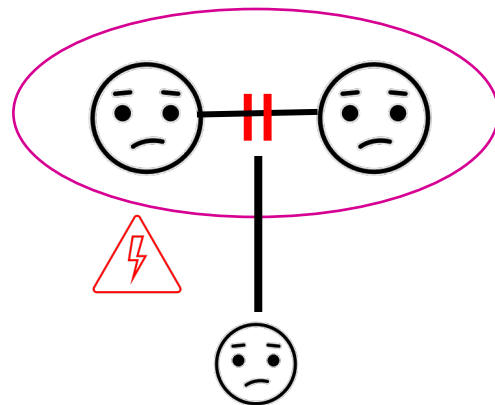


How does this translate to what keeps happening between Jenny and Dave?



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1. Interactions between parents

I don't have much contact with Michael. I try to help him occasionally, usually with practical matters, or something he asks me about a payment related to Dave. But he often doesn't pay, his situation is financially difficult since he stopped working. Michael has been going through **severe depressive episodes** for years.

I know he can't help it much, but it also means that, as a parent, **I can't rely on him**. I used to talk more with him about Dave's upbringing, but he doesn't pay much attention to it. **It just faded away.**



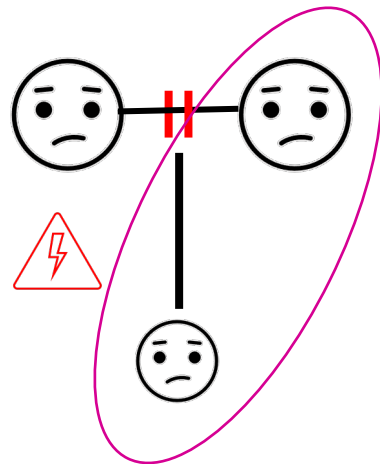
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2. Interactions between parents and children

Michael and Dave see each other only on special occasions and maybe once a year at a family gathering on that side. I don't think Dave has many memories of his dad without severe depressive periods, as that started about 2 years after his birth. Dave talks randomly about his dad, not in a negative way or anything, he just barely does it.

Dave has tried to spend more time with his father before, but his dad would say to him, "That's not possible, son. Daddy feels very sick." And yes, a child takes that into account. Dave has been used to this for a long time now.





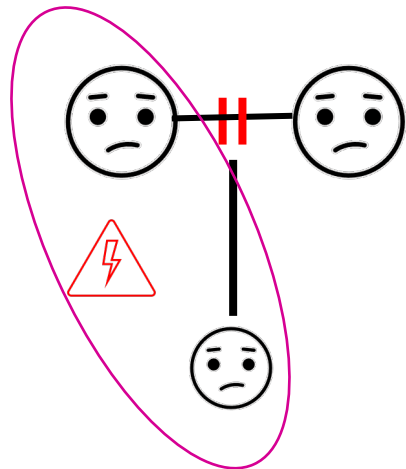
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2. Interactions between parents and children

Dave was an incredibly difficult toddler. He was very active, with unpredictable anger outbursts, He could really lose it. I often went to the toilet so I could sit there crying for just a few minutes. That period is in contrast to elementary school, because really: we were truly inseparable back then. And now we're back to square one, or maybe even worse than that.

I avoid him. When we talk, I try to talk about what he wants to talk about. We like to have small, relaxed moments. It's fun to laugh together, but it also feels super strange. Sometimes I think we ourselves are a TV show, because most of the time, I feel like covering myself under my bed sheets and just stay there for the whole week. I cried again on the toilet recently.





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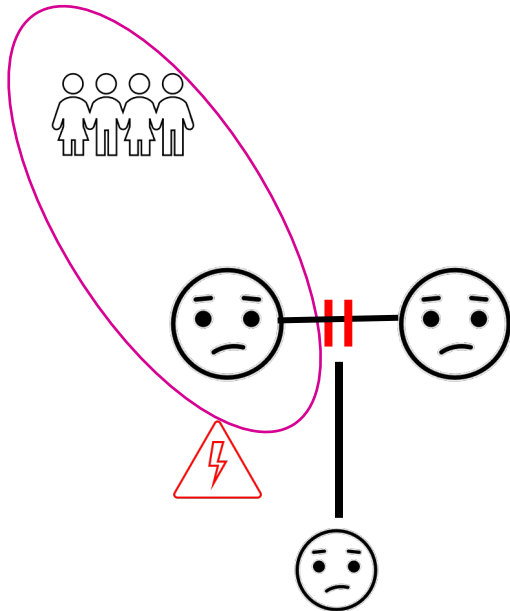
3. Interactions between parents and their informal / social environment

At work I sometimes talk about my son, but not much and not on a deep level. It would be weird, *it doesn't fit with the position between me and the staff I'm leading, if you understand what I mean.*

My friends know Dave was hard to handle when he was little, but we almost all have children in that age category and *we often end up in a random conversation about adolescents and the challenges with today's youth.*

I have a brother, but he has a child with a very severe disability. My parents are *very busy with that.* I once told my father that Dave can sometimes get very angry and that he had cursed at me and wouldn't give my wallet back and eventually pushed me to the wall. My father asked me about the allowance arrangement and said Dave is not having an easy time. *That shocked me.*

On Michael's side, it's a small family. I had a very nice mother-in-law that I really got along with, but yeah, *you lose her when you break up.*

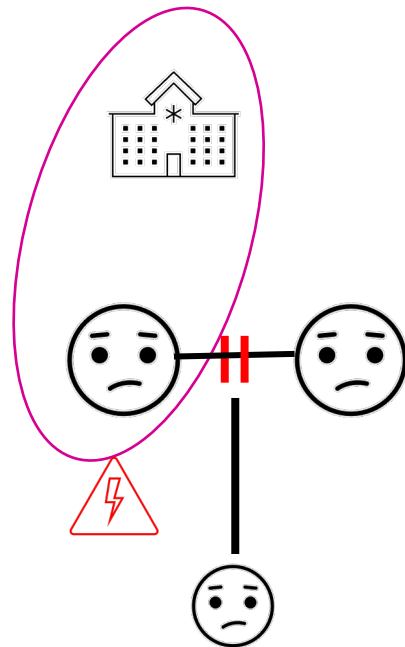




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4. Interactions between parents and their formal / professional environment



Through my work, I have approached people a few times. I was given an address for a very good psychology practice where they can have amazing conversations with children, apparently. *I called them, but they said my son really had to have a "request for help"*. I thought, I'll never be able to get that. Then the lady said, "Yes, ma'am, sometimes it has to get worse before it gets better." *It has gotten much worse, that's for sure. They never asked me how I was doing*, let alone what they might be able to do for me. But then again, *I didn't even think of that question.*

I once received a letter in the mail informing me who my neighborhood police officer is and that he is now directly approachable through a mobil phone number. It said you can call if things aren't going well at home. I wrote down that number somewhere and have looked at it a few times. *But I mean, what if they do something to him?*



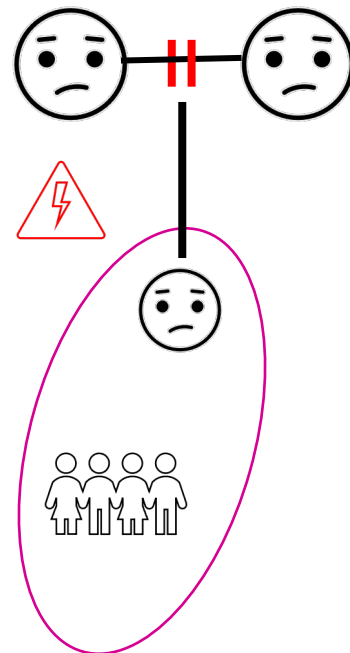
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5. Interactions between children and their informal / social environment

Dave has doubled a school year twice, friends his age are scattered, he seems popular now, but I saw two kids here at home once and they're obviously still children. *I don't know if Neel really has the opportunity for much connectedness, he's kind of stuck between ages.*

Neel is in the boy scouts. That's going well, he's *very popular* there. When we're around people, family or very occasionally with friends, Neel actually *behaves well* and people really find him funny. And he is! Or he can be.



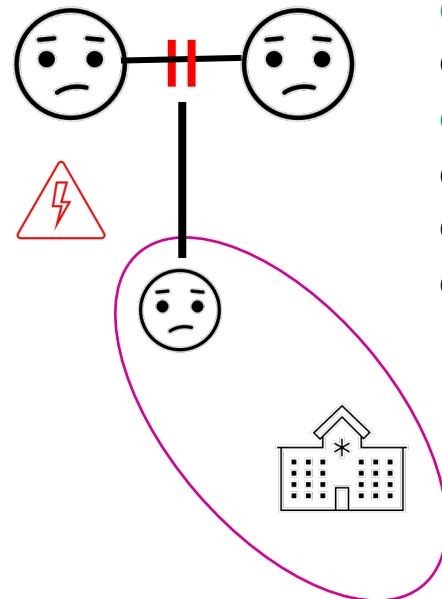


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6. Interactions between children and their formal / professional environment

Dave has always refused help, **he said he wasn't crazy and didn't need anybody**. I've tried several times, for example; when he had to double again, because that was **clearly difficult for him**, he appears to be much sharper and more intelligent than he actually is. But to no avail... I can't remember any adults in 'official roles' that he ever connected to.





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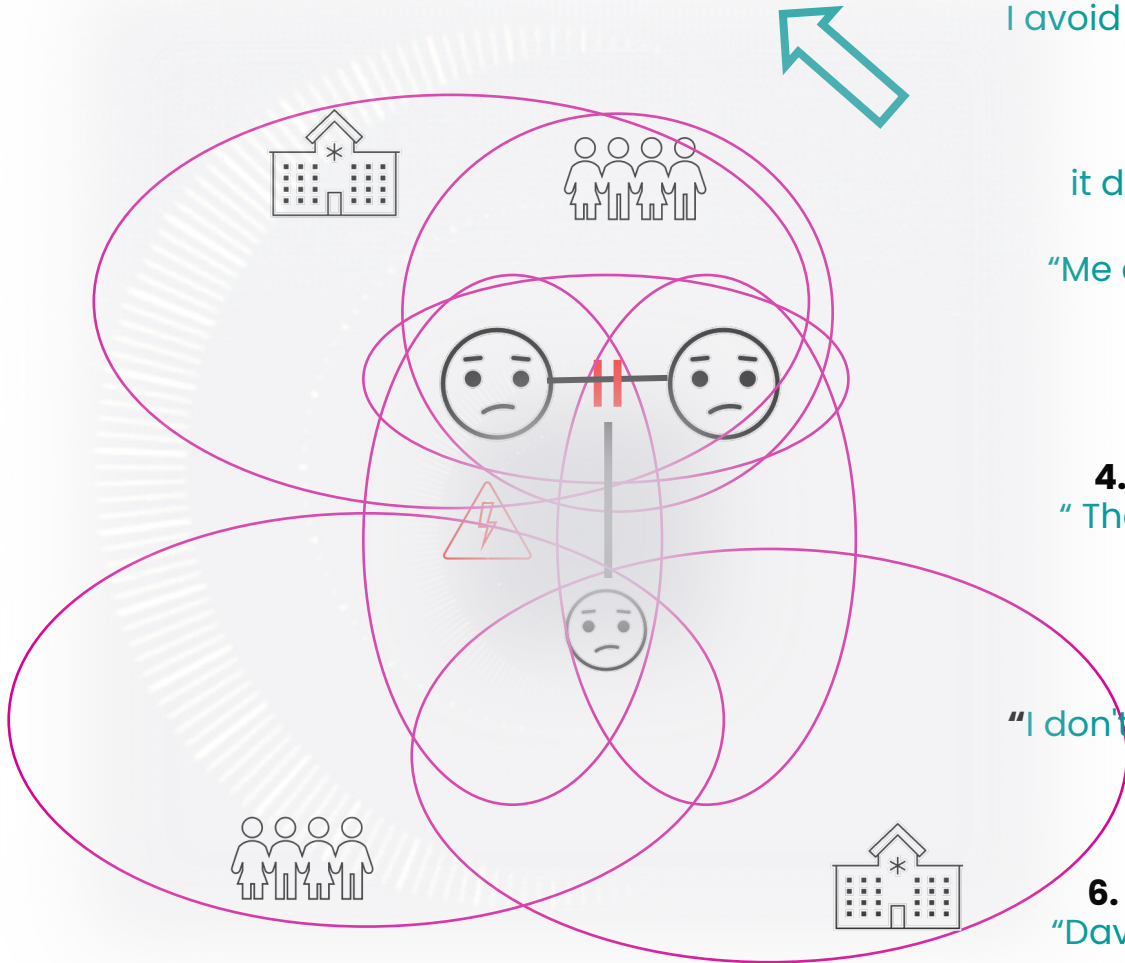


From a mono-causal to an ecologic approach

- We might never know why exactly this violence started, but we know it is real and it causes great harm, both on an individual level and within the context of meaningful relationships
- We understand that, in order for violent behavior to continue, many 'actors' play a role in isolating parents and their children and placing them in a pathologizing and polarized position
- We understand that family dynamics develop within the conditions of a broad and social habitat, rather than dividing families between those that are 'healthy' and those that are 'dysfunctional'
- We can provide active support from multiple angles, through multiple disciplines, with multiple ideas, in multiple ways

Let's not avoid to look at the complexity. let's use it!

What could you do that helps change this ecology?



1. Interactions between parents

"I can't rely on him"

2. Interaction between parents and children

"I don't think Dave has many memories of his dad without severe depressive periods"

"Dave has tried to spend more time with his father before"

I avoid Dave. When we talk, I try to talk about what he wants to talk about. We like to have small, relaxed moments"

3. Interactions between parents and their informal / social environment

it doesn't fit with the position between me and the staff I'm leading to talk about what's happening. I feel ashamed.

"Me and my friends end up in a random conversation about adolescents and the challenges with today's youth."

"My dad's response about Dave not having an easy time shocked me"

"I miss the contact I had with my mother-in-law"

4. Interactions between parents and their formal / professional environment

"The psychologist told me Dave really needs to formulate his own need for help"

"I didn't even consider think about what a service could do for me"

"I'm afraid about how the local police would respond"

5. Interactions between children and their informal / social environment

"I don't know if Neel really has the opportunity for much connectedness, he's kind of stuck between ages."

"He's very popular and well behaved among family and friends"

6. Interactions between children and their formal / professional environment

"Dave has always refused professional help. He says he is not crazy and does not need anybody"



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Preconditions for support:

- We need a way of working that combines the micro-relational with the macro-relational
- We need a way of working that provide us with a broad, curious and always unique view that helps to untangle this situation
- We need to normalize the possibilities of violence emerging within family relationships. Parents who experience child to parent violence should be facilitated to assess and improve their wellbeing through the interactions with their surroundings (this is how we all keep our heads above the water)
- We need to steer away from simple narratives, such as 'root causes', or perpetrator -victim isolation / polarization



Luckily, this is why we are here ...



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As we are multi-involved, can be multi-supportive?

- **What if?**

- Jenny would expect kindness, understanding and engagement when she contacted school, social services or other professionals?
- Jenny felt actively supported in resisting Dave's behaviour, while being able to continue to take care for him, as this is equally as important to her as a life free from harm?
- Jenny felt like she had more people surrounding her, providing her with safety, the ability to live a diverse life, developing diverse roles and relationships?
- Jenny could sit around the table with some of the members of her family of origin and they could better understand how, despite everyone's good intentions, they lost sight of each other?
- Dave felt better in his own skin, developed some ideas on future plans he'd like to take on, got acquainted with some new people he liked to spend more time with?

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**Stafid, domeinverantwoordelijke
'ouderschap & gezinskwesties'
Systeemtheoretisch psychotherapeut**



Interactie - Academie

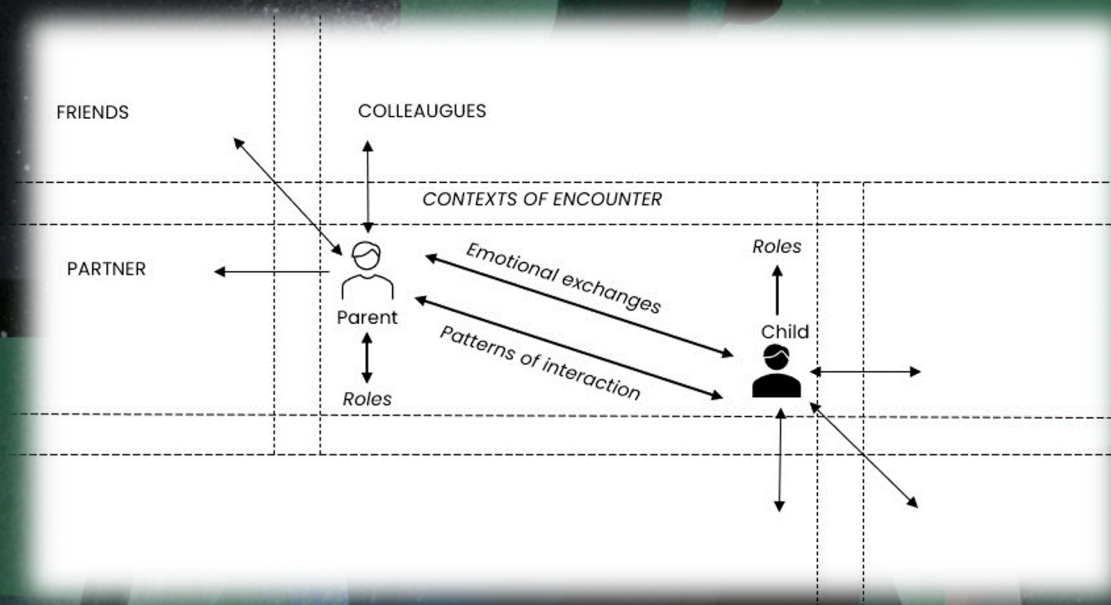
Providing support for parents

Living with highly isolated, care avoiding young adults

Everyday life in coresidence between parents and young adults

A mother asks her young adult son to set the table, because that is usually something the son does. She is tired after a long working day. The young adult nods, picks up the plates and asks Mother—because she usually cooks—what's for dinner tonight. He did the shopping himself. He does that every Saturday with his father. There is not much talking along the way, they enjoy listening to old rock music together.

At dinner, father is angry with his son because he has not yet paid his contribution to the house rent. Father had discussed this with a friend earlier in the week and is convinced that clear agreements promote coexistence. The son responds apologetically and somewhat embarrassed. He says he will fix it this week. Later in the evening the atmosphere is much more relaxed. Father is in a good mood and gives his wife a hug, which is teasingly answered by son with a raised eyebrow and a roll of the eyes."



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Aline and Karl have an only son named Milan, who is 25 years old. Milan still lives with them and has not had any day activity for six years. The parents think he is very anxious and depressed, but they can't form a clear picture and don't know how to help their son. There is only sporadic contact between them. Milan mainly lives in his room and only leaves it to get some food from the fridge in the evening. The parents say he exhausts himself with sports in the basement at night. Karl tells that his son has an ashen skin and is extremely thin.

Sometimes Aline cautiously expresses her concern ("Let's seek help for you, son..."), but Milan responds very angry and screams at his mother ("You don't understand anything! Leave me alone").

Karl has almost no contact with Milan. He says he doesn't know how to approach him anymore. "It's only some mumbling and confused talk. I don't understand that boy anymore."

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Shared characteristics

- **A history of complex difficulties, critical life events and disappointments**
- **A chronic lack of social daily activity,**
- **Known or suspected psychiatric problems, behavioral issues, addiction difficulties,**
- **Inflexible and coercive patterns of interaction, including (a history of) domestic violence.**
- **A sense of hopelessness, advanced or even severe social isolation**
- **Refusal of help, inadequate collaboration with healthcare providers**
- **Parents with young adult children living at home (approximately aged 17-35).**

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When she hears Milan at night, Aline lies in her bed, listening for hours. She broods and goes through all sorts of memories about the hurdles Milan has encountered. She wonders what she should have done differently and what signals she missed. The little notebook on her bedside table is full of little scribblings.

Occasionally she gets up again at night and quickly mops the floor in Milan's room with a , while he is busy in the basement. She sees bottles and pills that she suspects to be hormones and nutritional supplements. The fridge is stocked with prepared meals and fresh fruit, but Milan only wants raw meat and salad greens. These groceries are always on Karl's shopping list, who puts them in his shopping cart with great discomfort.

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→ Parental position

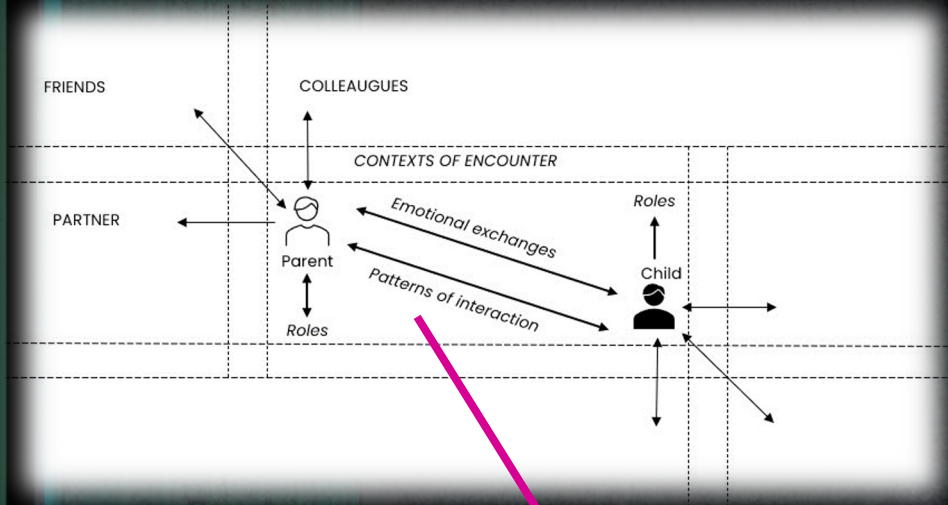
Powerless, perplexed, insecure, indecisive

Spellbound by their child

Extremely caring and protective role that dominates:

- Other roles in parenting
- Roles beyond parenthood

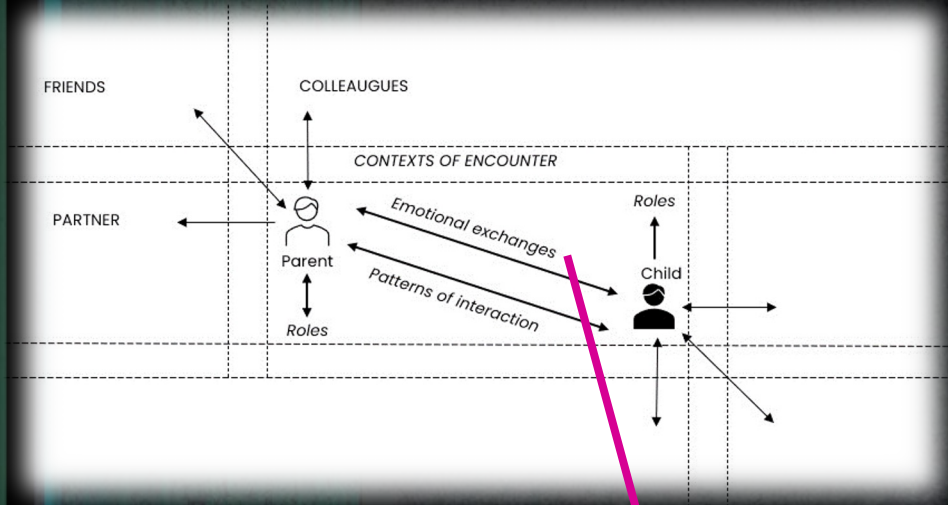
Existential ambition: to somehow (but how?) improve the damaged well-being of their child and to cause no additional harm



Repetitiveness

For example, with regard to **interaction patterns**: there is an increasing repetition of the same patterns of interaction and communication.

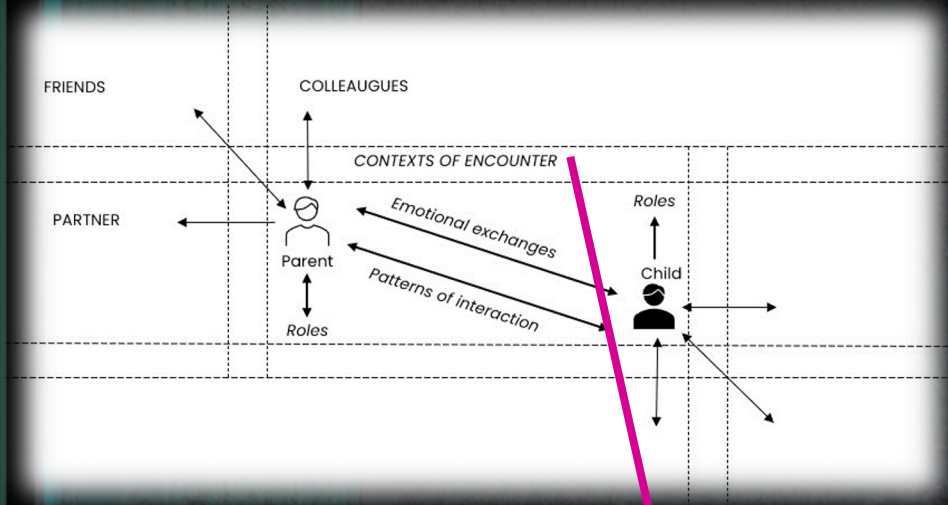
"When I ask Milan if I can do something for him, he remains silent and looks at me sternly," says Aline. "Then I know not to push further, and usually I just leave. That happens a lot, yes, it's really tiptoeing around him. Especially in the morning, we don't make noise because he's often only been asleep for a few hours."



Uniformity

For example, with regard to **emotional exchanges**: there is less and less variation between various exchanges of emotionality, such as enthusiasm, humor, seriousness, concern, wonder, sadness, etc. Certain emotions become **dominant or subordinate**.

"We do feel angry sometimes," Aline says, "but we keep it to ourselves. We're mostly very sad and concerned. We feel depressed. There's not a lot of humor. And there's not much coziness. Milan always seems grumpy. And sometimes very angry. But I never see him show himself in any other way"



Rigidity

For example, with regard to **contexts of encounter**: locations where people (no longer) are or (no longer) meet each other show themselves to be more rigid, immovable or strict.

"I think it's been more than a year now since I've been in Milan's room," says Karl. "Whether he's there or not, I don't go in. And he spends at least 20 out of 24 hours there. He has been doing this for years!"

Providing support for parents

Living with highly isolated, care avoiding young adults

The parent-child relationship becomes extremely inflexible



**Repetitive
Uniform
Rigid**



Providing support for parents

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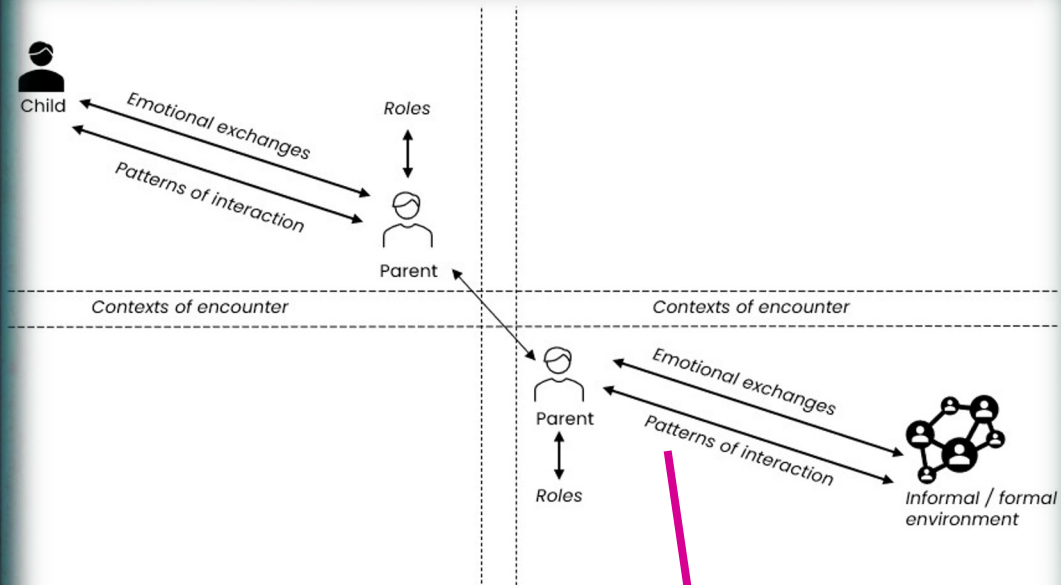
Parent ↔ environment

Informal: friends, family, neighbors, colleagues, ...

- *The subject of 'children' is a frequent topic during lunch breaks at work*
- *Karl takes his brother to a local soccer game.*

Formal: social workers, therapists, organizations, agencies, ...

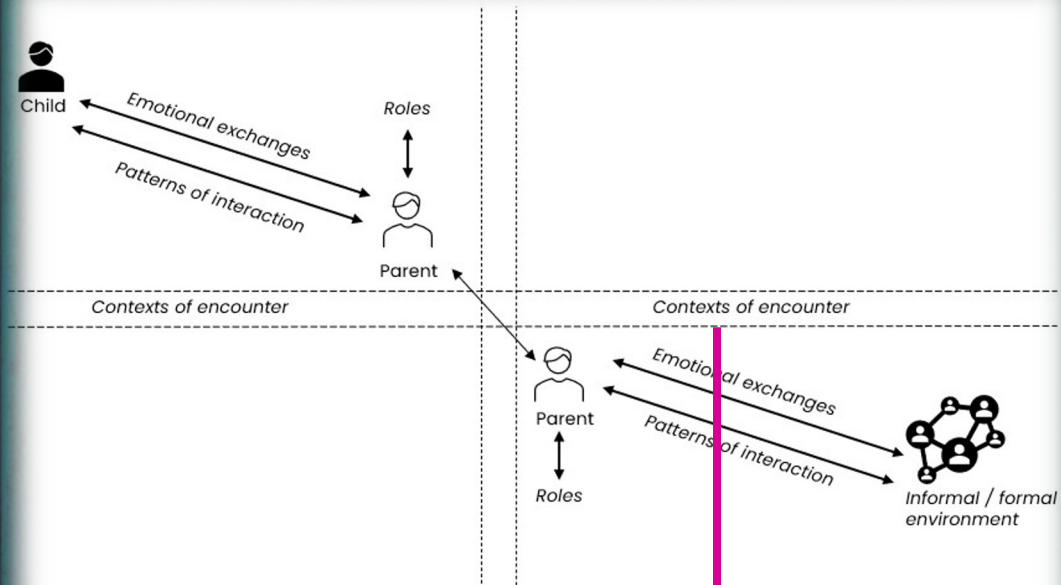
- *Aline tells me the story of a psychologist she contacted who specializes in young adults*
- *The position of parents in social care / mental health care:*
 - *Fragmentated questions, fragmentated offers*
 - *Who is the client?*
 - *Decentralization of parenthood (including by parents)*



Repetitiveness:

For example, regarding **interaction patterns**, there is increasing repetition of the same patterns of interaction and communication.

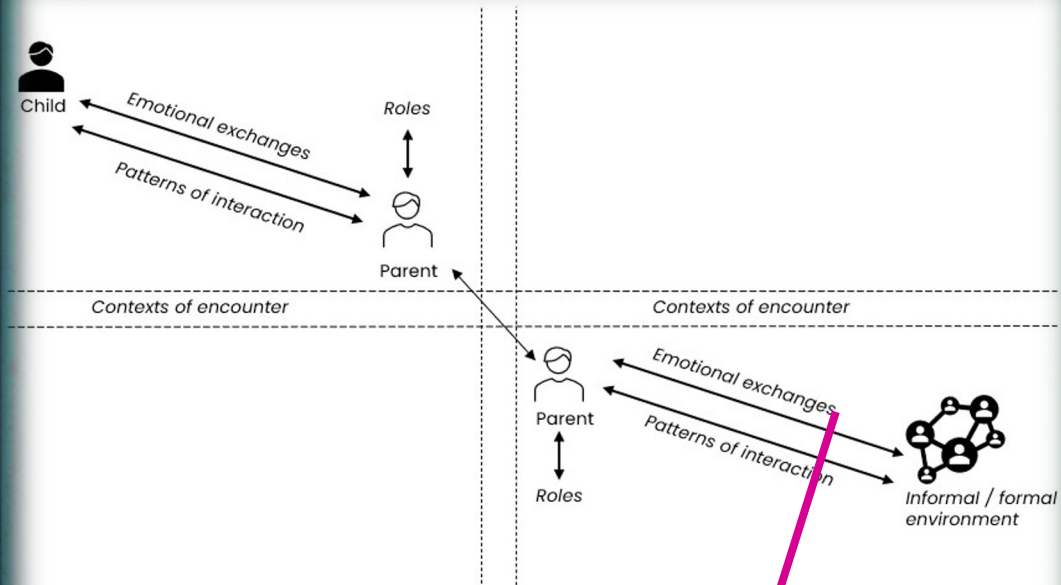
"I have made many attempts to plead with professionals in various contexts about the importance of help for Milan and the seriousness of the situation," says Aline. **"Every time I do that, I get the same answer: 'Yes, ma'am, I understand. But your son must also want help.' And then I leave again."**



Uniformity:

For example, with regard to **contexts of encounter**, there is less and less **variation** between different contexts in which supportive perspectives can be discussed. Certain contexts of encounter become dominant or subordinate.

"It's like it's either one problem or the other," says Karl. "But should we go to psychiatry? Or to the unemployment service? Or to addiction care? Or for family therapy?"



Rigidity:

For example, with regard to **emotional exchanges**, the emotions that are still visible or expressed are more rigid, immobile, or strict.

"My brother can only get angry," says Karl. "Milan is weak, and he thinks that of me too." "For me, it's the opposite," says Aline. "When I still talk about it with girlfriends, I only get very concerned and upset reactions. 'Wow, that sounds really difficult, Aline. Sit with that!,' they say. The atmosphere then drops to below freezing."

Providing support for parents

Living with highly isolated, care avoiding young adults



The parent–environment relationship becomes extremely inflexible as well

Interpersonal invariatioon = complete isolation

The repeated consolidation of **selective and inflexible role perceptions** in the lives of parents arises from the mutual influence between the dynamics of the parent-child relationship and the dynamics of the exchanges between parents and the informal and formal systems surrounding them. Both the parent-child relationship and the parent-environment relationship are characterized by **repetitiveness, uniformity, and rigidity**.



Providing support for parents

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LET'S MOVE BEYOND CIRCULAR REASONING

- Parents are responsible for the behaviour and the development of their children, because they are the parents and *that just makes them* responsible
- Parents are *lacking the skills* that provide their children to become less dependent / aggressive / isolated, so now they have to *use their skills* to make them participate functionally as healthy adults

→ It's these ideas in which parents become chronically trapped

Providing support for parents

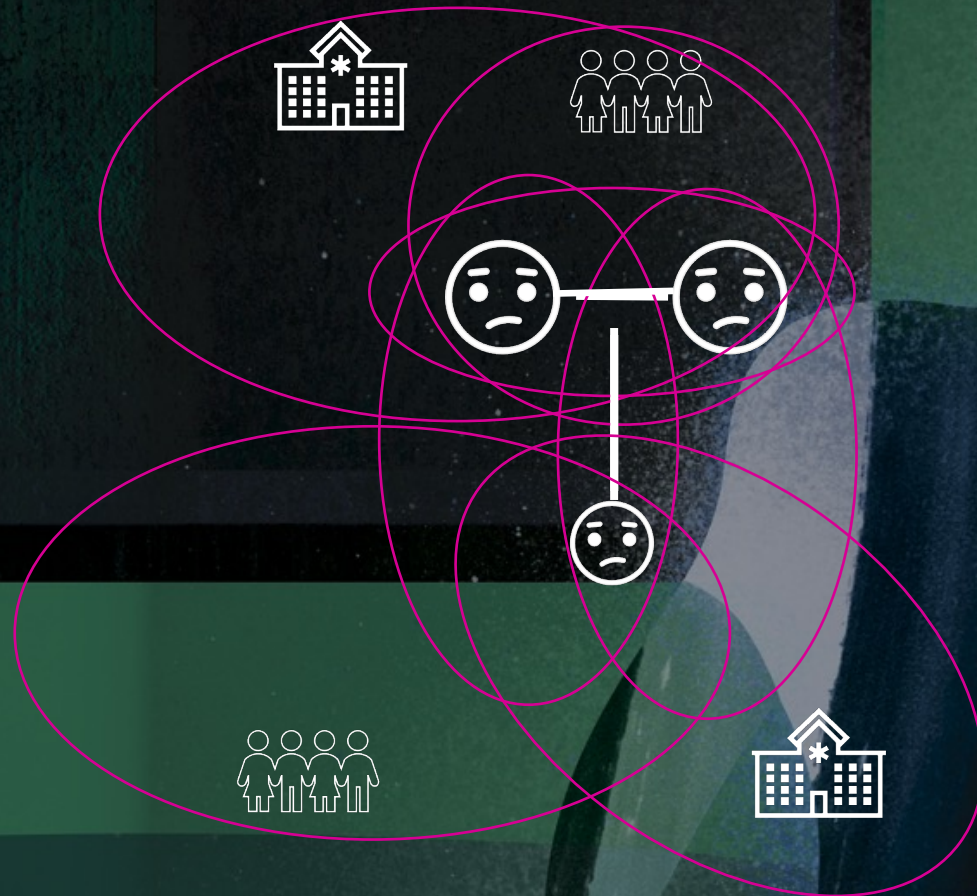
Living with highly isolated, care avoiding young adults

Out of the loophole!

- Parents are not exclusively and predominantly responsible for this impasse, but:
 - They have an absolute right to be and feel supported
 - They can be partners in providing leverage for change
- When we in our systems / ways of working can provide parents with the ability to be full full agents as clients → they can gradually step out of the impasse

Providing support for parents

Living with highly isolated, care avoiding young adults

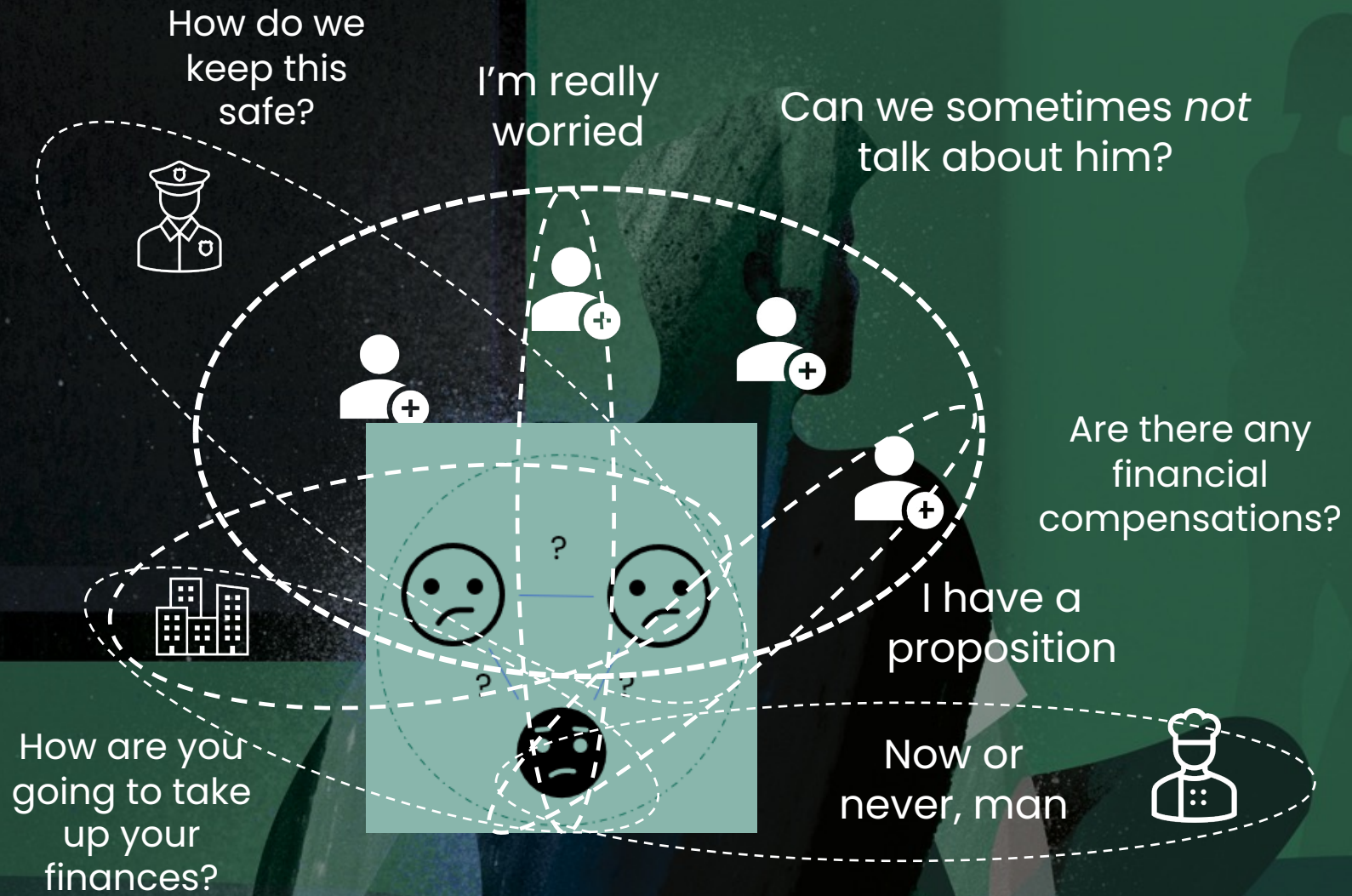


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From invariable to 'variable': What provides movement and change surrounding a central question:
- *What is a life worth living for this parent?*

NEW INITIATIVES AND DIALOGUES IN THE INFORMAL / FORMAL WORLD



NEW INITIATIVES AND DIALOGUES IN THE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

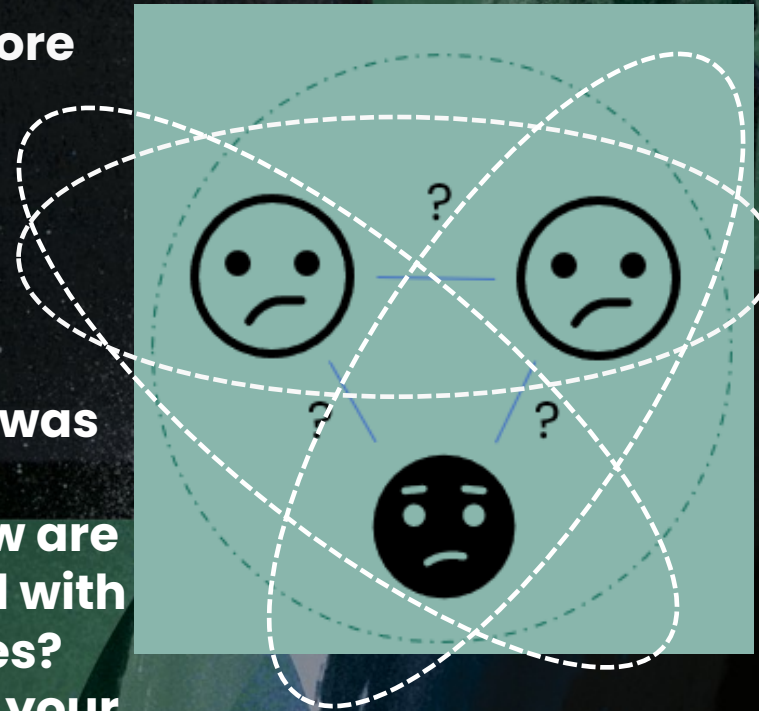
What do you say about going away for the weekend with some friends?

What can I do for you before you talk to him?

I'm curious: how was your day?

I need a plan: how are you going to deal with your own finances?

I am happy to be your dad



**I expect you to have something to do during the week
I'm going to clean this room.
This is my house, I want it to be tidy**

I can't sleep, I'm so sad about our situation.

THERE WILL BE NO BLITZ DISRUPTION / SUPPORT / CHANGE

How do we assess our situation?

Do we recognise this (social) impasse?

What do we want to achieve?

Wat seems to be important now?



What do we want it to be (more) like?

What type of interactions would be fitting?

How do we get to those ways of doing?

To what do we engage now?

With who will we do that?



What are the effects of what we do?

How does my child react?

How do others react?

What is now new or different to me?

How does this affect us as parents?





Dynamic
Flexible
Indefinite



Dynamic
Flexible
Indefinite



a life worth living