Parental Experiences of a Parent-assisted Social Skills Intervention for Adolescents with

Autism Spectrum Disorder

by

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Abstract

The *Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills* (*PEERS*) is a parent-assisted social skills program for teens with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). In the *PEERS* program, the parents play a vital role in supporting and coaching their teen's skill development. The purpose of this study was to explore parental experiences of participating in the *PEERS* program. Three families (four parents) were invited to share their experiences through interviews and their stories were crafted into three individual case studies. The following common themes emerged across the case studies: (a) appreciations and challenges of parent sessions (b) *PEERS* is different from other programs, (c) mechanics of skill development and maintenance, and (d) social triumphs from being part of *PEERS*. Collective suggestions for how to deliver *PEERS* in the future and clinical implications were discussed, along with the discussion on program delivery of social skills interventions for individuals with ASD for researchers and practitioners were presented.

Preface

This Master's thesis is an original work by the principle research investigator, Clarissa Gee Yun Ee. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name "Exploring Parental Experiences of the Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relationship Skills (PEERS) for Teenagers with Autism", No. Pro00037969, April 16th 2013.

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Parental Experiences of a Parent-assisted Social Skills Intervention for Adolescents with

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Chapter 1: Introduction

Context of Researcher

This research exercise was conducted with an intention to learn about how parents

experienced their participation in a parent-assisted social skills intervention group for teens

with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) called the *Program for the Education and*

Enrichment of Relational Skills (*PEERS;* Laugeson & Frankel, 2010). I had the pleasure of

being part of *PEERS* as both a research assistant, as well as, a parent coach. I then became

interested in exploring what it was like for parents to be part of *PEERS*, and how they

experienced their teens' participation of the program. Before diving into the purpose and

overview of this study, it is important for me to highlight my *forestructure* (Ellis, 1998) and

background that contributed to the lens I used to approach the research process.

Since middle school, I began volunteering at various communities that served

individuals with disabilities. My first encounter with individuals with ASD was at an

orphanage in Hong Kong, China. I quickly realized my lack of knowledge on the topic of

individuals with special needs, and specifically those with ASD. From then on, I have been

interested in learning more about individuals with ASD because of their unique

developmental challenges. Throughout my undergraduate studies, I continued to serve

individuals with ASD in various capacities including summer camps, special educational

classrooms etc. One of the reasons I pursued further graduate training was to learn how to

better serve the population of ASD. Through the graduate training in the School and Clinical

Child Psychology program at the University of Alberta, I gained both research and clinical

knowledge in psycho-educational assessment, individual/group counselling, child development, autism intervention, and interpretive inquiry. I also had the privilege to work with Dr. Veronica Smith who was both a scholar and clinical expert in the field of ASD and related research. Dr. Veronica Smith then introduced me to collaborate with her student who was conducting a quantitative study examining the effectiveness of *PEERS*. As a result, I had the pleasure of being a *PEERS* parent coach. Soon after, I was invited to be the principle investigator to explore how parents experienced the program. This project was not only fitting to fulfill my desire to learn more about the population of ASD, but was also a great opportunity for me to step outside of my comfort zone to engage in qualitative research. Reflecting back, I realized it was very fitting for me to engage in this research project, because I had already established rapport with the parents, and I was also physically in the room with them to experience *PEERS*. Furthermore, I participated in another round of *PEERS* with a new group of families as a teen coach, with the aim to have a glimpse of how the teen sessions were delivered.

Statement of Problem

A recently published parent-assisted social intervention, *PEERS* (Laugeson & Frankel, 2010), demonstrated promising outcomes in enhancing social skills for teens with ASD (Frankel et al., 2010; Laugeson, Frankel, Gantman, Dillon, & Mogil, 2012; Laugeson, Frankel, Mogil, & Dillon, 2009). The parental component is a key feature of the program because the developers believe that when parents are more informed about the areas of improvement and growth potential, they can better support their teens' development after the program (Frankel & Myatt, 2003). Past research for this program focused mainly on examining quantitatively the

effectiveness of the program in relations to improved social skills of participants (e.g., Frankel et al., 2010; Laugeson et al., 2009), and little is known about parental experience of the program.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative study aims to explore parental experiences of those who participated in the *PEERS* program. Through interviewing parents, I hope to have a better understanding of the meaning and significance of how parents experienced *PEERS*.

Why explore parental experiences qualitatively? Unlike quantitative research, when researching qualitatively the emphasis was placed on socially constructed experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). In this study, the research process was focused on gaining insights on the thoughts, feelings, and meaning behind parents' actions (Ellis, 2006). In doing so, the hope was to gain a richer understanding of parental experience of *PEERS*, so practitioners could be more helpful when delivering social skills programs.

Research Questions

Given the research problem and purpose of the study, I interviewed three families (four parents) who participated in the *PEERS* program with the aim of addressing the following research questions: (a) how did the parents experience their participation in the *PEERS* program? (b) how did the parents experience their children's participation in the *PEERS* program? and (c) how did the parents experience the impact of the *PEERS* program?

Thesis Overview

The current chapter provides the context of the research as well as the purpose statement of problem, and research questions of the study. Chapter 2 presents a review of literature relevant to the research topic addressing both insights and gaps. In chapter 3, the

methodology and methods section, presents how the data was interpreted and collected. Chapter 4 showcases case studies of the three families who were interviewed about their experiences of *PEERS* along with critical summaries of the cases. The subsequent integration chapter 5 serves to elaborate on important emerging key themes drawn across the three case studies, specifically answering the research questions along with discussion. Finally, chapter 6 provides closing remarks on future directions and implications for clinical practice, conclusions and limitations, as well as concluding with a final reflection of the research process.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Focusing on the topic of parental experience of a parent-assisted social skills intervention for teens with ASD, the following literature review serves to provide relevant research and studies to orient readers to the research problem and the need for qualitative research on the research topic.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

A core feature of ASD is impairment in social communication and social interaction (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Accordingly, individuals with ASD may have difficulties reciprocating social-emotional interaction, including inability to maintain a two-way conversation, difficulty in initiating or responding to social interactions (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). They may also struggle with comprehending and using nonverbal communication cues (e.g., eye contact, body language, facial expression) essential for social interaction (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). As a result of these difficulties, their ability to develop, maintain, and understand social relationship becomes challenged (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Individuals with ASD often encounter social interaction challenges due to abnormal social development, atypical restricted interested not shared by their peers without ASD, and impairment in information processing disabling them to understand social cues (Barry, Klinger, Lee, Palardy, Gilmore, & Bodin, 2003).

Social Challenges in Adolescents with ASD

For individuals with ASD, the consequences of social interaction challenges are evident at an early age. For example, as early as 12 months, infants with ASD may demonstrate little or no social initiations, rarely share emotions, and may display the lack of

imitation of social interaction behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). As they enter into adolescence, their social interaction impairment magnifies because they become more aware of their social difficulties when interacting with their peers without ASD (Tantam, 2000; Tse, Strulovitch, Tagalakis, Meng, & Fombonne, 2007). Contrast to individuals without ASD, the life-long trajectory for person with ASD will differ given the challenges inherent to the disorder, and such social challenges do not usually improve due to maturation or development (Laugeson & Park, 2014). A study conducted by Bauminger, Shulman, and Agam (2003) revealed that individuals with high functioning ASD spend half the time in social interaction than their peers without ASD. As a consequence, individuals with ASD frequently struggle to form and/or maintain age-appropriate peer relationships, and hence may experience rejection and isolation from the community (Tse et al., 2007). Another study by Müller, Schuler, Burton, and Yates (2003) interviewed adults with ASD and revealed several social interaction related challenges in the workplace (e.g., difficulties reading non-verbal cues, feeling of isolation or alienation, failure to understand social requirement of job).

Social challenges faced by individuals with ASD continue throughout their life time as a constant stressor (Tantam, 2000), and as a result, impacting areas including academics, vocational, and social relationships (Hillier, Fish, Cloppert, & Beversdorf, 2007; LeBlanc, Riley, & Goldsmith, 2008). Those with limited social understanding and skills, including teens with ASD, are at risk for victimization (e.g., teasing or physical bullying) which may lead to frustration and poor self-esteem (Tantam, 2000). LeBlanc et al. (2008) suggested that repeated exposure to victimization or bullying may link to high risks of depression and suicidal ideation compared to adolescents who are not involved with bullying. Given the

persistent social and communication challenges individuals with ASD experience, it is critical that intervention programs target at enhancing social interaction skills, in order to better support youth with ASD to integrate and function within society. On a more positive note, although adolescents with ASD experience social challenges, they have the ability to understand and learn social rules (Hillier et al., 2007), and may benefit from explicit teaching of social rules and socially acceptable behavior (Frankel et al., 2010; Hillier et al., 2007).

Parent-assisted Social Skills Intervention Programs for Adolescent with ASD

Current research studies examining parent-assisted social skills intervention programs for adolescent with ASD mostly focused on investigating how effective the programs were in promoting social skill development and generalization, and none explored parental experiences in great depth (e.g., McMahon, Vasari, & Solomon, 2013; Mitchel, Regehr, Reaume, and Feldman, 2010; Weiss, Viecili, Sloman, & Lunsky, 2013; White et al., 2013). While researchers acknowledged the importance of parental involvement (e.g., Weiss et al, 2013) for social skills training *for teens*, no studies have inquired parental experiences beyond satisfaction questionnaires (e.g., Mitchel et al, 2010).

The *PEERS* program. The *PEERS* program was a 14-weeks social skills development program for teens (age range from 13-17) with ASD and their parents (Laugeson & Frankel, 2010). In each session, teens were instructed about social skills and were given homework to practice these skills in their natural environment. Parents participated in concurrent sessions and were taught how to help their teens in making and maintaining friendships by guiding and providing feedback during the weekly socialization tasks (Laugeson et al., 2009). Some of the targeted skills of the *PEERS* program included

conversation skills, joining and exiting conversation, developing friendships, good sportsmanship, good host behaviors, handling teasing, bullying, and arguments.

Program therapeutic approach and theory of change. *PEERS* is largely informed by a previously developed program, *Children's Friendship Training* (Frankel & Myatt, 2003), in which the content was derived from research on socially successful children's experience of friendship (process-oriented perspective of social competence, socially valid behaviors) as well as clinical outcome of clinical populations (Laugeson & Frankel, 2010). Laugeson and Frankel (2010) highlighted that the *PEERS* program targets at skill development instead of correction of existing social errors made by adolescents. Key elements of the *PEERS* program includes Socratic methods of questions, modelling, role playing (Laugeson & Frankel, 2010), didactic lessons, cognitive strategies, behavioural rehearsal, homework, and performance feedback (Laugeson & Park, 2014). Laugeson and Frankel (2010), describes the main therapeutic orientation as behavioral, in which the program content is concrete steps followed by participants along with weekly homework (i.e., practice skill learned from session). While Laugeson and Park (2014) identified the therapeutic approach as cognitive-behavioral therapy (e.g., cognitive strategies, homework assignment etc.), the theory of change situates in the applied behavior analysis framework where change occurs through reinforcement, practice, and structure. The key behavioral components of the program include point log system (individual/group/good sportsmanship), behavioral rehearsal during session, emphasis on the importance of structure and concrete rules (Laugeson & Frankel, 2010).

Research studies examining the efficacy of PEERS. Results of an initial study of the efficacy of this program demonstrated significant improvements in the teens' knowledge of

social skills, increased get-together, and changes in social skills as reported by parents (Laugeson et al., 2009). Laugeson and Park (2014) noted that the effectiveness of the *PEERS* method has been demonstrated repeatedly through multiple research studies as discussed in the following. Similar to previous findings, Laugeson, Frankel, Gantman, Dillon, and Mogil (2012) also reported improved social skills knowledge, overall social skills, reduced ASD symptoms, and more frequent peer interaction as a result of the *PEERS* program. Likewise, Schohl, Van Hecke, Carson, Dolan, Karst, and Stevens (2014) revealed improved social skills knowledge, more frequent get-together, reduced anxiety, and ASD symptoms for teens who participated in the program. Furthermore, Mandelberg, Frankel, Cunningham, Gorospe, and Laugeson (2014) examined the durability of maintained learned skills from the *PEERS* program 1-5 years post-treatment and found that participants maintained gains in overall social skills, social functioning, social skills knowledge, social responsiveness, as well as increased peer interaction (e.g., get-togethers). A randomized controlled trial of a Korean version of the *PEERS* (Yoo et al., 2014) demonstrated improvements in areas of social skills knowledge, interpersonal relationship skills, as well as reduced anxiety/depressive and ASD symptoms. In addition to the latter peer-reviewed studies, a graduate student from the University of Alberta also examined the efficacy of *PEERS* that was implemented in the community setting. Archuk (2013)'s findings revealed that teens with ASD that participated in *PEERS* made significant gains in their social skills, reduced their social anxiety and symptoms ASD, maintained improvements in social skills knowledge, and reduced social anxiety and symptoms of ASD at a three months follow-up. However, Archuk noted that unlike the results from the developers' research, teens from this study did not increase get-togethers at the post or follow-up.

Taken collectively, most research studies on parent-assisted programs for teens with ASD focused on demonstrating the effectiveness of programs instead of exploring parental experiences. Congruent with Weiss et al. (2013), further qualitative exploration is needed to explore closely the therapeutic process of such programs.

Qualitative Studies Examining Parental Experience of Parent-assisted Intervention in ASD

After examining research studies on the topic of parent-assisted intervention for teens with ASD, it was clear that little qualitative work has been dedicated to programs like *PEERS*. Therefore, I expanded the literature review to focus on examining qualitative studies that specifically explored parental experiences of parent-assisted or parent-mediated intervention programs for younger children with ASD. In doing so, I hope to examine methods other researchers used to capture parental experience and discuss insights that are pertinent to the current study.

Sofronoff, Attwood, Hinton, and Levin (2007) examined a cognitive behavioral intervention for anger management in children with Asperger Syndrome. In this study, parental perceptions were captured through questionnaires examining possible improvements in their child, as well as whether or not parents benefited from the program. Findings emerged into four themes (a) parents learned strategies from therapist and other parents, (b) parents were comfortable to share their stories and felt validated, (c) parents gained new realizations of their parenting management, and (d) parents used content learned from the program to communicate with their children. It is noteworthy that Sofronoff et al. (2007) attributed the significant gains of children to parental involvement in the therapeutic process, as well as parental reinforcement of learned skills in the home.

Schertz and Odom (2007) examined a parent-mediated program to enhance joint attention in toddlers with ASD. In this study, parental perception of their child's progress in the program was captured through daily notes and weekly dialogues with the researcher. Five themes emerged: (a) parents' adherence of the intervention plan facilitated change in child, (b) child's improvement in social-communication lessened aggression, (c) children were motivated by physical activity to interact, (d) simplified facial presentation aid child's focus, and (e) turn-taking activities promoted better joint attention than toys.

Patterson and Smith (2011) investigated parental experience of a parent-mediated communication intervention program for children with ASD through semi-structured interviews and a focus group. Two research questions were raised: (a) how do parents describe the challenges and benefits of participating in the program? and (b) how do parents describe the experience of working with the concepts and strategies presented in the program? (Patterson & Smith, 2010). The researchers examined across multiple case studies and the following common themes emerged: (a) the program was a good start yet needed clearer expectations, (b) parents' need for emotional and informational support, (c) families' need for further individual support, (d) change in child was dependent on the "child factors" (p.337), (e) the program was an avenue for parents-to-parent support, and (f) unique circumstances of each family need to be considered (Patterson & Smith, 2011). As suggested by the authors, the collective experiences of these parents reminded practitioners to be sensitive and understanding of unique needs and circumstances of each family.

Overall, the three studies reviewed demonstrated different ways (e.g., focus groups, interviews, questionnaires) to capture parental experiences. Although results of these studies are not meant for generalizing to families of children with ASD, these findings encourage

others to consider the insights gleaned from the salient experiences of parents. For example, these studies demonstrated that according to parents, not only did the children experience improvements through the therapeutic process, the parents also expressed gaining knowledge, support and insight through their involvement in the programs. Parents also shed light on insights on program delivery and therapeutic factors that practitioners may have been overlooked. Therefore, qualitative explorations of parent experiences highlight the need for further examination of programs like *PEERS* through capturing rich and in-depth parental experiences.

Need for Qualitative Exploration on Parental Experience

It is evident that the current literature lacks qualitative exploration of parental experiences of parent-assisted intervention programs for adolescent with ASD. As illustrated in the latter quantitative and qualitative literature review, although some studies have examined parental experience of parent-mediated interventions, to my knowledge, no studies have focused on parental experiences of parent-assisted programs *for teens* with ASD. Bölte (2014) suggests that the limited qualitative research in the ASD literature may be due to a number of factors including few trained qualitative researchers and a perceived lack of demand of qualitative work because qualitative studies are seen as an illegitimate forms of scientific research. While quantitative research seeks to test hypothesis and aim to generalize findings to a larger sample, qualitative research offers guidance to generate new hypothesis as well as deepens the breadth and depth of understanding of an experience or process of human actions (Bölte, 2014).

Gaining insight on parental experience and perspective is especially important for parent-assisted intervention programs. As mentioned in the discussed studies, parents play a

vital role in learning and implementing strategies with their children and will continue to be their life-long mentors. In programs such as the *PEERS*, parents of teens participated concurrently in a separate session, and their instructions and support for their teen's friendship development is paramount (Frankel & Myatt, 2003). Previous research on parents has primarily focused on gaining information of parent satisfaction of program or of parent perception of how their children improved in regards to their social skills. While these reports are important, understanding parents' experience of the program and the parents' experience of their child in the program are equally valuable. Parental experience may provide insight in regards to reasons for failure in generalizing learned skills, how the intervention worked or did not work for their child etc. Through gaining a better understanding of parental experiences and perspectives, both practitioners and families would benefit from improving future intervention practices. In conclusion to this section, the identified gap in the literature has motivated the current study to focus on exploring parental experience of the *PEERS* program.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

This chapter serves to discuss both the methodology (how data was interpreted and handled) and methods (how data was collected) of my research process. This study was conducted as a qualitative interpretive inquiry, using pre-interview activities and semi-structured interviews to gather research data, then crafted into multiple case studies. My interpretation process was informed by the philosophy of hermeneutics, while situated in the constructivist paradigm, which will be further discussed along with relevant ideas that guided my analysis and interpretation process.

Methodology

Interpretive inquiry. The purpose of an interpretive inquiry is to gain a "more informed and sophisticated" (p. 114) understanding in comparison to what the researcher had previously assumed (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). While scientific quantitative researchers may strive to replicate previously examined variables (Smith 1992) or test a hypothesis (Merriam, 1998), an interpretive inquiry strives to advance and expand the understanding of ourselves and of others (Smith, 1992). Essentially, interpretive inquirers are "interpreters of the interpretations people give to their own actions and actions of others" (Smith, 1992, p. 102). As John Smith (1992) explains: "interpretivists see research as an eminently practical and moral activity that share much in common with, other forms of inquiry, such as those practiced by journalists, novelists, painters, poets, and ordinary people in their day-to-day lives" (p. 100). The interpretations of an interpretive inquiry focus on the meaning behind "human expressions" (p. 102), which includes both "human action" (p. 102) (i.e., pre-occupations, intentions, motivations of expression) and "social action" (p. 102) (i.e., social context) (Smith, 1992).

The constructivist paradigm. The worldview or fundamental belief system guiding the research process is identified as the paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In other words, a paradigm guides how the researcher approaches their research. The ontology ("form and nature of reality" [p.108]) of the constructivist paradigm implies that there is no one objective reality, in which ideas are relative. The epistemology (relationship between the researcher and the researched) and methodology (way to obtain knowledge) of this study are situated in the assumption in which knowledge emerges from "transactional" (p. 109), "subjectivist" (p. 111), "dialectical" (p. 109), and "hermeneutical" (p. 111) interactions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Assumptions of paradigm. Before discussing further about how the constructivist paradigm guides my research process, it is also important to explain what it is not. Unlike scientific experimental studies, interpretive inquiry does not focus on realism and objectivity (Smith, 1992). In fact, interpretivists are nonrealists who acknowledge the existence of reality but hold the view that it is impossible to perfectly describe such reality (Smith, 1992). In contrast, antirealists believe that "nothing exists outside of us or of our minds" (Smith, 1992, p. 101). The difference is that nonrealists acknowledge the existence of reality as well as recognize that the description and interpretation of reality would not necessarily resemble the actual reality (Smith, 1992). As Merriam (1998) puts it, in interpretive research, "multiple realities are constructed socially by individuals" (p. 4).

The constructivist paradigm values and tolerates multiple competing constructions that comes from different perspectives, while accommodates room for continuous reconstruction (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). When conducting interpretation from a constructivist point of view, I utilized my initial understanding to enter into the interpretation process then

moving into a more "informed" (p. 112) reconstruction of new understanding (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). However, the approach to interpretation is not "anything goes" (Smith, 1992, p. 102), rather, claims must be substantiated with examples and careful judgments" (Smith, 1992, p. 102).

Criteria of paradigm. Guba and Lincoln (1994) highlighted two sets of criteria for conducting constructivist research: trustworthiness and authenticity. However, the former criteria were criticized as being a weaker form of quantitative evaluative criteria and they were seen as overlapping criteria from another paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In response to the criticized evaluative criteria, alternative ways that are more coherent with the paradigm, which employ postmodern sensibilities are used to evaluate the goodness of the findings. These include "verisimilitude" (the quality of resembling the actuality of the experience/person),"personal responsibility," "an ethic of caring," "multivoiced texts," "conversing with participates" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 5) etc.

Qualitative researcher as bricoleur. When conducting this research activity, I have adopted the stance of a *bricoleur*, one who utilizes various perspectives, methods to understand and explore how parents experience the *PEERS* program (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Through using multiple methods, it is a way to deepen my understanding of an account instead of for validation purposes (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Congruent to the constructivist paradigm, a bricoleur recognizes the interactive research process that is influenced by my personal background (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). In doing so, a *bricolage* is produced as a complex, reflexive product of my understanding and is to "provide solutions to a problem" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 2).

Conducting interpretive inquiry with principles of hermeneutics. When discussing about interpretive inquiry, it is important to begin addressing key ideas of hermeneutics, as hermeneutics is the source that guides the interpretive inquiry process. The following will elaborate on the key hermeneutic philosophy of Schleiermacher that guided my research process (a) interpretation as a creative activity, (b) part-whole and micro-macro relationships, (b) role of language and history (Smith, 1991, 2002, as cited in Ellis, 2006, p. 115). Gadamer (1989) propose that meaning and knowledge are constructed not found, and knowledge is seen as the product of human activity (as cited in Ellis, 2006).

Interpretation as a creativity activity. When conducting an interpretive inquiry, the goal of the interpretation is to learn about the motivation and meaning behind the participants' expressions (Ellis, 2006). In order to accomplish the latter, I was committed to learn about the parents as a whole person and the complexity of their experiences, followed by attempting to discern the meaning and significance of their expressions holistically (Ellis, 1998, 2006). Contrasting using a classification approach to search for meaning through reducing experiences to fewer variables, hermeneutics treats interpretation as a creative activity while working holistically (Ellis, 1998) to construct meaning and form narratives through everything I perceived (Ellis, 2006).

Part-whole and micro-marco relationships. One of the key fundamental concepts of hermeneutics is to pay close attention to the part-whole and micro-macro relationship when interpreting parents' experiences (Ellis, 2006). As Ellis (2006) highlights, "to understand the whole, one must understand the parts; to understand a part, one must understand its role in relationship to the other parts and to the whole" (p.116). When discussing hermeneutic ideas, it is helpful to discuss the metaphor of the "hermeneutic circle" (Smith, 1991, p. 190). The

"hermeneutic circle" is used to illustrate the process of the back and forth movement between the parts and whole in a circular manner, and serves to recognize links between micro and macro relationships (Ellis, 2006). In doing so, in my interpretation, I sought to work holistically and first understand parents as a whole person (who they are and how they experience the world), because such information helped deepen my understanding of how they experience the program.

Key roles of language and history in hermeneutics. Aside from paying attention to the part-whole relationships when interpreting, the relationship between language and history is also important (Ellis, 2006), because it plays key roles in meaning making and human understanding (Ellis, 1998). Language has roots in history and tradition, and it may reflect time and location (Ellis, 2006). Therefore, I was paid close attention to parents' use of language, while avoided assuming shared meaning for words that are key to the research questions (Ellis, 2006). For example, two parents wrote a list of words to describe their experiences of the *PEERS* program. During the interview, I invited the parents to elaborate further what each words mean to them, in order to have a deeper understanding of how these words reveal unique meanings.

Key metaphors in hermeneutics. The following section discusses key metaphors in hermeneutics to further elaborate the concepts of spiral and loops, forestructure, forward/backward arc, and fusion of horizons that were used in the research process.

The spiral. The *spiral* with series of loops is a metaphor that describes the development of the interpretive inquiry process (Ellis, 1998). Each loop in the spiral symbolizes activities such as data collection and interpretation or reinterpretation of data with a different question to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Ellis, 1998). I

entered each loop with a different question bringing the obtained knowledge from the previous loop into the next loop to reframe and arrive at a better understanding the parents' experiences (Ellis, 1998). For example, when I learned that a parent valued harmony in relationships, I entered into the loop again paying attention to how he experienced the program in relations how the role of harmony tied into his experience participating with others.

   The forward and backward arc. When discussing the forward and backward arc, it is important to first discuss the idea of a *forestructure*. Ellis (1998) defines a forestructure as the "current product of one's autobiography (beliefs, values, interests, interpretive frameworks) and one's relationship to the question or problem (pre-understandings and concerned engagement)" (p. 27). Instead of denying the pre-existing understanding and experiences of the researcher, these pre-understandings contribute to the beginning of the interpretive work (Ellis, 1998). Recall, at the start of this report, a discussion of the context of the researcher was discussed to reveal my forestructure. As I dived into the research process with my forestructure entering the first step in sense-making, such an act of projection was symbolized as the forward arc (Packer & Addison, 1989; Ellis, 1998). The backward arc on the other hand, resembled the process of evaluating the initial interpretation I made. This process involved conscious reflection, as well as paying close attention to stories and views parents shared. During the evaluation, I also examined closely to notice what was absent, and re-examined data for contradictions, confirmation etc. (Ellis, 1998). As I immersed myself in the data through each loop, I encountered surprises, which are called *uncovering* in hermeneutic terms (Ellis, 1998). These uncoverings served to help me have a better understanding of the research topic and provide direction of potential reframing

questions (Ellis, 1998). In my process, I had to re-think my impressions of some parents and

their experiences, which in turn, prompted me to ask follow-up questions at a second

interview to clarify my misconceptions.

Fusion of horizons. Fusion of horizons is a poetic metaphor that illustrates how two

parties coming from different perspectives or horizon arrive at shared new common

understanding (Smith, 1991). Horizons are essentially one's forestructure, pre-

understandings that are used to make sense of the world (Smith, 1991). In my process, I see

the research process as how parents and I are initially at opposite end of a bridge and as we

engaged in dialectical interaction during the interviews, we move closer to each other in

meeting in the middle of the bridge.

What is qualitative case study research? I have chosen to use a case study research

design to showcase my interpretation of parental experiences. The following discusses the

purpose, value, strength and weakness, risks, and the interpretive emphasis of case studies.

Purpose and value. The purpose of a case study is "to arrive at a comprehensive

understanding of the groups under study" (Beck, 1968, p. 233; as cited in Merriam, 1998). It

is about discovering, exploring and "gaining an in-depth understanding of the situation and

meaning for those involved" (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). Case studies differ from other types of

research designs because such design is a holistic description that analyzes each case as a

"single unit or bounded system" (Smith, 1978; as cited in Merriam, 1998, p. 19). When

determining whether or not it is fitting to use a case study design, I reflected upon the

following questions raised by Merriam (1998): how finite would the data collection be? and

are there limited people that would be involved in the interview? In response to these

questions, the parents in the *PEERS* program indeed would considered to be part of a

bounded system, as the group functioned as a unit and an entity with boundaries and only a limited number of individuals could be interviewed (Merriam, 1998).

The value of case studies lies in the process of discovering the experiences in a context, in hopes to shed light or make an impact on practices, policies, and future research (Merriam, 1998). According to Merriam (1998), there are three characteristics of a case study, (a) particularistic (case is focused on particular program or situation), (b) descriptive (case is a rich product), and (c) heuristic (case advances the understanding of an experience/phenomenon being studied).

Strengths and weakness. The strengths of case studies hinge on the research problem and guiding questions, and how effectively they are addressed (Merriam, 1998). Case studies provide avenues for complex experiences that involve various factors in a specific context to be explored and understood in their significance (Merriam, 1998). Such process also offers a "generative" (p.51) and "fruitful" (p.56) impact of such interpretation (Jardine, 1998). Insights and meaning gleaned from rich and holistic accounts may potentially evolve into hypotheses that contribute to future research (Merriam, 1998). Such strengths are of particular interest in the educational field because the product of examining a program or intervention process has potential to influence or improve practices (Merriam, 1998). As such, the merits of crafting case studies have led me into choosing such design to explore and understand parental experiences of the *PEERS* program.

Although case studies offer valuable insight, the nature of such design may be demanding in both time and financial resources (Merriam, 1998). Merriam (1998) suggests that sometimes the product of a case study may be too lengthy or detailed for readers like educator or policy makers. Therefore, in the current study, critical summary of each case and

common themes were highlighted. Lastly, although the purpose of cases studies does not intend to produce research in terms of reliability and generalizability, some may criticize case studies for lacking the latter qualities (Merriam, 1998).

Risks. When conducting case studies, due to the in-depth and comprehensive nature of the design, there is a risk for parents' identification to be exposed. Hence, altered information was used to protect their privacy. There is also a risk of misrepresenting the researched (Merriam, 1998). For my study, I have been committed to address the latter issue through having a follow-up interview, asking clarification questions, gathering multiple quotes to substantiate claims about parents' experiences.

Interpretive emphasis of case study. When crafting case studies, I aimed to collect all that is available to analyze the interpretation about the experience, in order to craft them into interpretive cases that are rich and thick (Merriam, 1998). Peshkin (1993) noted that "interpretation not only engenders new concepts but also elaborates existing ones." (p. 26). As a result, the outcome of interpretation can also clarify and expand existing understanding the complexity of a phenomenon (Peshkin, 1993). In this study, one of my main interpretive goals was to draw upon the part-whole relationship and to make sense such relationships along with parents' undergirding motivations, pre-occupations and values creating the claims about their experiences.

Role of the researcher. As a researcher that plays a role of a subjective inquirer, as I change, the data also changes (Boostrom, 1994). As Merriam (1998) puts it, during the research process, I was the "primary instrument for data collection and analysis" (p. 7). Instead of collecting information through non-human instruments (e.g., questionnaires or computer), the data was "mediated through this human instrument" (Merriam, 1998, p. 7).

Throughout the research process, I strived to possess a heightened sense of intuition when interacting with different people, sensitive matters, settings, and crafting out interpretations (Merriam, 1998). Although I hoped to be helpful, I needed to maintain an attitude of openness, humility and interest to learn (Ellis, 1998). Keeping in mind ideas of hermeneutics, I also paid attention to the language used and avoid assuming shared meaning for common constructs (e.g., community, relationship), while inviting parents to tell their stories (Ellis, 2006). The qualitative research process is ever so complex and emergent in its nature, as a result, it was a personal growing experience learning how to handle ambiguity of the non-linear and unstructured research journey (Merriam, 1998).

The interview process.

How does the interview work? The interview process was not simply asking and responding a list of questions (Ellis, 2006). Instead, the purpose of interview questions served to situate myself on the topic of interest and learn about parents' thoughts and experiences (Ellis, 2006). During the interviews, genuine invitations were extended to convey sincere interest to have human connections through dialogues (Weber, 1986). In this study, open-ended questions were used to invite parents to share salient experiences, and to demonstrate a posture of respect towards their use of language, metaphors and analogies (Ellis, 2006).

Pre-interview activity. In relations to principles of hermeneutics and the significance of understanding whole part relationship, inviting participants to participant in pre-interview activity (PIA) was one way for me to gain a better understanding of the participants in a holistic way (Ellis, 2006). The PIA served to encourage recall of experience through inviting parents to use another modality (drawings/diagram) to facilitate their reflections (Ellis, 2006). As Ellis (2006) pointed out, PIA: (a) allows parents to use the visual presentation to

express emotions and perspectives, (b) serves as a reference or starting point for stories, (c) acts as concrete medium to foster shared meaning for language in relations to hermeneutics, and (d) demonstrates interest in the parents while adding quality to the participant-research relationship to build rapport.

Risks and challenges of interviews. The interview experience may develop trust and rapport, but it may also turn into an act of betrayal or even abuse (Weber, 1986). It is important to recognize the paradoxical nature of the interview process being a confidential yet public, and private yet social activity. One may wonder: "why would participants want to participate in an interview given all these risks?" It is possible that the nature of an interview, allows both parties to gain valuable insight and even self-understanding, while offering knowledge to the world (Weber, 1986). In my interview process, in general the process went smoothly, especially, I had previously established relationships with the parents when participating in the group intervention. However, one challenged faced was handling emotional topics that emerged, as well as following the movement of the parents' expression when they decide to extensively focus on certain topics instead of drafted interview questions.

Analysis and interpretation of case study. In order to understand the significance behind participants' salient experiences, I paid attention to the part-whole relationship especially during analysis and interpretation (Ellis, 2009). In brief, analysis and interpretation involved arranging stories/views into narrative form of case studies, and followed by analyses of common themes and pattern across the cases (Ellis, 2009). The following will elaborate on the analysis and interpretation process.

The narrative approach. As Ellis (2006) highlights, it is through stories, research participants shows us glimpses of how they make sense and experience their experiences. Learning about what is important and meaningful to people generally allows one to make sense of what they say about the research of interest (Ellis, 2009). From the interview process to the interpretation, I paid close attention to the stories (i.e., description of what happened, example of something happening) told by parents and sought to discern the undergirding values, motivations, pre-occupations that came along with such stories. In brief, the analysis and interpretation process involved pulling stories together into groups of topics and crafted into a coherent story (i.e., narrative analysis) that described how each parents experienced the program. After crafting multiple case studies, common themes, patterns, key dynamics were examined across the cases (i.e., analysis of narrative).

Narrative analysis and analysis of narrative. Narrative analysis describes the process of pulling together parents' data and crafting into a coherent story or case (Polkinghorne, 1995). To further elaborate on the process, I gathered salient stories, comments, metaphors, analogies from all transcripts (Ellis, 2009), and constructed a plot that served as an account to address the posed research questions, in which the final product was presented as a holistic case study (Polkinghorne, 1995). In contrast to narrative analysis, analysis of narrative serves to find common themes among collected data (Polkinghorne, 1995). This approach is a second step to the analysis process, in which common themes, patterns, key dynamics are discovered across the three case studies of this study (Polkinghorne, 1995).

The interpretive account. The process of crafting the interpretive accounts was a very involved and reflective process. Throughout the process, I kept reflective notes about my new understandings of parents' experiences, as well as insight gained conducting the

research in order to be aware new learnings and potential limitations I experienced (Ellis,

1998). Furthermore, when constructing claims about the parents' experiences, it was

especially helpful to keep in mind the importance of substantiating with evidence (e.g.,

quotes), so the readers from another perspective can come to appreciate how and what I saw

(Ellis, 1998). Furthermore, during my interpretation process, both Dr. Veronica Smith and

Dr. Julia Ellis, provided insights to help me deepen my interpretation which helped prompted

me to re-think some of my assumptions and interpretation.

Evaluation of an interpretive account. It is not my main concern to stress the

validation of the interpretive account as suggested by Packer and Addison (1989), as that

implies the existence of an interpretation-free reference point (as cited in Ellis, 1998). Rather

I am more concerned with "whether the interpretive account can be clarified or made more

comprehensive and comprehensible" (Ellis, 1998, p. 29). Packer and Addison (1989)

outlined four methods to evaluate interpretive accounts: (a) coherence of the internal

character, (b) external evidence in supporting the account, (c) obtaining consensus among

groups, (d) evaluating the account's relation to the future (as cited in Ellis,

1998). Furthermore, it is important to focus on asking the question: "did the interpretive

account serve to advance the understanding of the motivated concern?" (Ellis, 1998), while

focusing on whether or not the research has offered a "more informed and sophisticated"

reconstruction of parental experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 114).

Methods

Research site. Parent interviews took place at the University of Alberta (Clinical

Service Counselling room, Graduate Student Office), and two follow-up interviews were

conducted via the telephone. These sites were selected because individual rooms provided a quiet and private setting for interviews to take place.

Participants. Six families who completed in the *PEERS* program at the Centre for Autism, Edmonton, Alberta in year 2012 were invited to participate in the present study; three families (total of four parents) agreed to share their experiences. Families who declined to participate cited the following reasons: busy schedule, death of family or other personal reasons. Note that spouses of parents who did not attend the *PEERS* program training session were not invited to participate, because they did not go through the training process at the Centre for Autism Services Alberta.

Parent interviews. All parents participated in two individual interviews (i.e., initial and follow-up interview). Two audio recording devices (Olympus WS-802 digital voice recorder) were used along with note taking to capture the interviews. Audio recordings were transcribed in verbatim by a professional transcriptionist (6 in-person interviews) and researcher (2 phone interviews). In attempt to ensure that parents were comfortable with recording the interviews with an audio device, they signed the consent forms agreeing to be recorded and additional verbal consent was received at the onset of the interview. Furthermore, the researcher explained intentions and purpose of the interview (i.e., explore parental experience), and how some questions may help parents reflect and remember their experience participating in the *PEERS* program. Parents were also reminded that not all questions may work, and they have the freedom to decline answering any of the questions.

Pre-interview activity. Parents were given a list of pre-interview activities (PIAs), a list of visual representation questions, a week prior to the interview, and they were invited to

create two visual representations. PIAs served to facilitate parents to recall salient experiences and to illustrate significant personal experience or ideas (Ellis, 2006). The PIAs in this study were drawn from the list of sample PIAs from Ellis (2006), "*Researching Children's Experience Hermeneutically and Holistically*." I offered the parents two groups of PIAs (please refer to Appendix A for a complete list of PIAs), which included, (a) "get-to-know-you" (e.g., draw two pictures show what things were like for you before and after something important happened), and (b) *PEERS* related (e.g., make two drawings to show a "good day" and "bad day" when participating in the *PEERS* program) options. When discussing the PIAs during the interview, I focused on inviting parents to share about their experience creating the PIAs, while keeping in mind the importance of using descriptive language instead of interpretive language (Ellis, 2006). For example, for one of the parent's PIAs, I prompted with: "I see that you drew different shapes in this image, could you tell me more about them?" All parents except one parent participated in the PIAs, and some parents brought the PIAs with them during the interview and one parent preferred completing the PIAs at the on-set of the interview. The parent who declined to participate in the PIAs noted that he is a "pragmatic" individual, and preferred to discuss his experience verbally instead.

Interview questions. In the first interview, open-ended questions (refer to Appendix B for a complete list of interview questions) were presented to the parents in order to invite parents to share their stories and experiences. Parents were presented with three groups of questions, (a) question about the participant in general (e.g., In the world of nature or in the world of things or in the world of people, what is that surprises you the most, or that you find the most fascinating), (b) question about how parents experience their son/daughter (e.g., As _____ has gotten older, would you say he (or she) has changed a lot or stayed the

same?), and (c) questions about the participant's experiences at the *PEERS* program (e.g., What were some things you looked forward to or hoped for when enrolling your son/daughter in the *PEERS* program?). Note that questions designed to learn about the participant were adapted from Ellis (2006) and through Dr. Julia Ellis' advice. After collecting data in the initial interview, new understandings and questions were generated from reviewing the interview transcripts. After generating follow-up questions on my own, the first rounds of interview transcripts were also examined along with Dr. Veronica Smith to assist me in generating relevant questions. For the second round of follow-up interviews, the aim was to invite parents to further elaborate and clarify with stories and comments to help inform the meaning and significance of their experiences.

Procedure.

Analysis and interpretation. Multiple case studies were crafted based on a general framework proposed by Ellis (2009) and informed by hermeneutical principles (i.e., whole-part relationship, attention to context, history and language). Each case began with a narrative portrait offering a holistic introduction of the parent, and a brief introduction of the site where the program took place (i.e., Centre for Autism, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada), then followed by examples of research interest experience. As suggested by Ellis (2009), a case study was crafted for each of the three families separately (narrative analysis), then patterns and themes were examined across all three cases (analysis of narrative). The following are steps of the analysis and interpretation process (Ellis, 2009):

1. Highlighted preliminary key ideas while proof reading all initial transcripts to ensure transcripts were verbatim of the audio readings.

2. Generated new interview questions for the follow-up interview.

3. Highlighted key ideas and proof read follow-up transcripts.

4. Identified key topics along with comments, stories, meaning, motivation, and significance of the key ideas in an analysis chart organized in columns.

5. Crafted the case studies based on the transcripts and the analysis charts of the interview data (narrative analysis).

6. Revised case studies and re-read the transcript (narrative analysis).

7. Crafted critical summaries to capture the uniqueness of each case study.

8. Analyzed across all case studies to examine for common themes, patterns, key dynamics to develop an integrative chapter (analysis of narrative) along with discussions and clinical implications.

Ethics. Informed consent was in place for all parents who participated in the interviews, in which all participants signed written consent forms prior to the interview process. At the onset of each interviews, researcher ensured that the parent was comfortable and willing to participate. Parents were informed about the purpose of the study, basic information about the interview process, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality and its limitations, and also their right to withdraw from the study etc. It is important to note that informed consent was an on-going process, in which special considerations and flexibility were in place to suit the context of each family. For example, although parents may have initially agreed to participate in the PIAs, they had the freedom to decline their participation.

This qualitative study included some risks, especially when parents were invited to recall their experience raising their child and also participating in *PEERS*. During the interview, researcher provided parents with a copy of the questions as a guide, and also to promote transparency of the interview process. In the event, where the parents appeared

uncomfortable in answering any of the questions, they were reminded of the option to decline responding or withdraw from the study completely. For example, during one of the interviews, a parent became emotional when recalling her son's experience, and she was given the option to discontinue the interview. However, she expressed the interest to continue after I checked-in with her. As the researcher of this study, I accepted and maintained the responsibility to act in the parents' interest and to respect their dignity, while being sensitive to ethical related issues emerged from the research process.

Chapter 4: Case Studies

The following are three case studies capturing the experiences of three families who participated in the *PEERS* program. Family 1 includes both Bob and Allison's experiences of participating with their son, Ben. Family 2 includes Chad's experience in the program along with his two children, Calvin and Catherine. Family 3 includes Denise's experience, as well as her perception of her son Danny's experience.

Case Study #1: Bob & Allison

Bob and Allison (Family 1) are parents of Ben. Both parents participated in the parent sessions of the *PEERS* at the Centre of Autism, Edmonton, Alberta. Allison attended most of the sessions (11 sessions), and Bob attended when Allison was unable (3 sessions). Bob and Allison participated in the initial and follow-up interviews examining their experiences of the *PEERS* program at the University of Alberta, Education Clinic. Although their experiences are written up as one case study, each parent was interviewed separately for all the interviews.

During the interviews, Bob was very willing to share about his experience. Bob mentioned at the beginning of the session that he had "a lot of good answers" as he had been reflecting on his experience in the *PEERS* program. Bob brought two drawings to the interview that he had created as a result of the pre-interview activities (PIA) that I had sent him (refer to Appendix C, Figure C1 and Figure C2 to view the drawings). For this getting-to-know- you PIA, two pictures depicted what things were like for him before and after something important happened. The picture was an illustration of a person sailing in a boat on the ocean in stormy (before) and calm (after) seas, and Bob noted that such image was on his mind for a "long time." The following is an excerpt on how Bob described his drawings:

Your compass is scrambled, you don't know where to go. And there's the storm

clouds are all mysterious. Then once you figure out which direction you're going to

go, the storm clouds of course retreat, and sun comes out. And it's smooth sailing.

And in a lot of things that happen in life, important things that happen in life, there

was decisions that were made before.

Bob described these images as "two pictures showing decision making" where "everything,

anything that ever happens as being, a decision making process."

For the second drawing, Bob was invited to illustrate through a few options (e.g., use

20 words, draw a good and bad day at *PEERS*) to show his experience participating in

PEERS. Bob created an image depicting what a good and bad day would look like for him

when participating in the *PEERS* program. Bob described that the two images contrast what

it means to have a "constructive" and good day at *PEERS* versus a bad day in which the

focus was no longer to help the kids, but instead was focused on "doing other things,

fighting, arguing, having snit fits." Bob described this drawing as a "pivotal one" that

captured his experience participating in the parent sessions.

As for Allison, she met with me by taking time off from her lunch hour. She appeared

comfortable during the interview, and very willing to share information about her son and

willing to explore her salient experiences of the program through stories and constructive

feedback. Allison completed two PIAs prior to the interview (refer to Appendix C, Figure C3

and Figure C4 for a copy). She first shared with me 20 words that described her experience at

the *PEERS* program. She said that she wrote the list from words that first came into her

mind, and let me know that the first 15 words were easy to come up with. She divided the

words into two groups by "gut feelings" but did not have a label for the grouping. The first group of words included: long-in-the-tooth, thoughtful, optimistic, hopeful, wondering, limited, corny, uncomfortable, shy, and second group of words were: needful, critical, subjective, time committed, interested, safe, paced, short, bored, spacey, and rare. Allison pointed out that the words; "optimistic" and "hopeful" stood out to her the most. For the second PIA (getting-to-know-you PIA), Allison drew a picture of activities she liked to do. Allison noted that exercising made her "thoughtful and happy" and it was a part of her self-care routine where she could "debrief" her day. The picture included abstract shapes that she described as her thoughts throughout the day, and a stick figure of herself depicting how exercise was one way she used to manage and process such thoughts. Both Bob and Allison expressed how they were not artistic and neither were "good drawer(s)," so I assured them both that the PIAs were not about the artistic abilities but served as a way for them to recall and experience their experiences.

About Bob. Bob appeared to me as a deep thinker who consistently reflected upon his life, and naturally used vivid images and metaphors to illustrate important experiences and ideas. He described his life as a journey sailing across the big blue, in which he broke through the waves and made decisions with the support of his family. Bob also spoke of the challenges it came with self-reflection and growth in life. Bob expressed that he valued harmony among various aspects of his life. Bob also highly valued empowering individuals with special needs and integrating them into the society while maximizing their potentials, and shed light on how he viewed individuals with ASD learn differently.

Life is a decision making process. Bob saw his life as a decision making process in which the captain (himself) is in control of the journey. He depicted his life journey of

decision making using the pre-interview activity and also revealed the importance of having a foundation of support. He described his drawing as such:

> Life has been like a boat on a stormy sea…Your compass is scrambled, you don't know where to go… the storm clouds are all mysterious. Then once you figure out which direction you're going to go, the storm clouds of course retreat, and sun comes out. And it's smooth sailing. And in a lot of things that happen in life, important things that happen in life…the bigger and stronger your boat is, the bigger and stronger your foundation. And usually your foundation's made up of people …and support …and that helps …to support you in those stormy seas. If you have nobody… you're clinging to a piece of wood, you don't have any way in which to navigate….that's the reason why I choose a boat… As the image, because you control where it goes…in life everything is decisions, decisions, decisions.

> ***Growth from self-reflection.*** One of the most difficult things Bob did was to self-reflect and "see where and how things have gone wrong." He used the following vivid analogy to illustrate the challenging experience of self-reflection, growth, and fostering change within to become a stronger and better person.

> Like a blacksmith takes a piece of steel out of a forge and tries to make a stronger better steel. You get stuck into the forge, you get blazing hot, you get taken out and you get hammered. And then you, from that, you have to create something stronger, more ductile, more strength – stronger, you know basically... If you harden the steel too much, of course… It shatters. .. And that's how much of – of what I feel on a

continual basis... in the end, the person that makes the difference, the one that makes the change is yourself. And it's very hard to do that without falling apart.

Harmony in all aspects of life. Bob valued harmony in all aspects of his life. He especially valued harmony in relationships, and recognized the challenges that came along with it. Here he spoke about the importance of harmony.

Harmony. I like to seek harmony in all things. I'm not as good at it as I wish I was...So I try to seek harmony, just smooth mission. Let's get from point A to point B, and let's not have any drama on the way there… unfortunately that's the ideal, not the reality.... maintain harmony...Relationships... And it all leads back to the original one, maintain harmony… sometimes you can lose your way, that's when you have to get reformulated and get back onto the bandwagon again… and hopefully you haven't done such damage as to completely destroy it…. it's tricky, relationships – I'd rather juggle live hand grenades… than mess with relationships.

Empowering individuals with disabilities. Bob had a strong stance about individuals with disabilities' place in the society. "I've always seen people with disabilities as the greatest untapped potential in the human race." He continued elaborating on the importance of respecting the dignity of individuals with disabilities. The idea of integrating individuals with disabilities into the society to maximize their potentials without making "so many accommodations" was important to Bob. Bob was "not a big fan" of jobs created for individuals with ASD, because he disagreed with the idea of having a "minder" to supervisor them to do a job that one person can accomplish. Bob suggested that one way to better serve individuals with disabilities was to be "better understand how to help them, so that they can

help themselves." Bob also believed that with early intervention and continuous training, most individuals with ASD could become high functioning and independent. After attending a symposium on the topic of jobs opportunities for individuals with ASD, Bob had a few reflections:

> We are not using them properly, we are not giving them the sense of accomplishment and self-worth that every human has a natural to…The entire focus [of the symposium] seemed to be this: people with autism are hopeless. …jobs were created with manufacturers and with businesses, but part of the job that was created was, that a lot of them had helpers. …But the person with autism never really improved, they never really came to their full potential…literally create industries and jobs for people with autism because they believed that they could not support themselves…I don't like the way that we're walling them off, all people with autism and different disabilities, into these little nooks and crannies, we've found different rocks to put them under…So we don't see them, they don't influence our society. Joe has his job, Joe's job is doing what Joe is capable of. Jack watches Joe, together they do a job that Jack could do in his sleep.

Bob then connected his stance on supporting individual with disabilities to parenting. Specially, Bob noted that most parents do not want to admit that they are not sure what to do with their children, so they make it up as they go along. He raised the importance of changing the method of "making it up as you go" to raise children, and stressed the need to have more concrete guidance. According to Bob, parents should "truly understand what these disabilities are, and what they really mean… understands their child in the greatest possible detail or else we're just going to keep finding rocks to put our kids under and pretend that

they don't exist." Bob then further elaborated on the idea of parenting responsibilities and the importance of empowering their children using a rather existential quote:

> Everybody has to understand, within a short span of years you will be deceased, and your children will be on their own… they will not have you to rely on, and that is what most people do not understand about being human, is we're all going to die. The only thing we're going to leave behind is our kids, and if we can't teach them enough in that short period of time, in order for them to continue and carry on, we're leaving behind a mess of barely functional wrecked individuals. And the responsibility is our own, because they never asked to be born, and so we have a responsibility as parents and as society as whole, to make them as strong and as independent as possible. And we're failing at it.

Individuals with ASD learn differently. Bob proposed that individuals with ASD learn differently (i.e., rote learning and logical reasoning). He viewed that individuals with ASD learns social skills like "learning a new language." Furthermore, Bob saw brains of individuals with ASD as almost like a software or computer that can be programmable and "if you can program enough social inter-reaction skills...they will continue on with that." Bob then shared about population of ASD as being programmable and how they learn through logic, then elaborated on the learning mechanism of positive reinforcement.

> They have a brain, they can be programmed… if you can program enough social inter-reaction skills, and you can program enough language skills, they will continue on with that. And if they find it beneficial, they do not have to be reminded all the time. You know, they say well this works for me, I have friends, I have

companionship, I have a good social life, I will continue on with this. Their minds are somewhat very much more logical than ours, they don't think the same way as the great mass of the human race do...once they learn something, they learn it well ... and that they don't forget it because it's a tool that works for them…A reinforcement of what they have learned from their parents…I would always play 200 questions with him, and that would reinforce what he was learning. Then I would say okay, yeah that is something that's very positive and then I would give him all the reasons why it was positive.

Bob's son, Ben. While Bob recognized Ben's social challenges associated with ASD, he experienced his son as a regular teenager who held a regular summer job. Bob was also sometimes surprised by Ben's detailed knowledge on complex systems, and how he applied such knowledge to solve problems.

Teen with ASD with a regular summer job. From when Ben was first diagnosed with ASD to now, Ben had become a more independent young man who worked very hard to overcome challenges as a result of his disability. Bob noted that Ben had been "nothing short of phenomenal" and Bob had "not observed any regression." According to Bob, despite minimal support other than family support, Ben had been progressing steadily in a "linear fashion towards his goals." At the same time, according Bob, Ben's ASD had been a "spotty thing", where he could be "brilliantly understanding and then thick as a brick in the very same moment." Overall, to Bob, Ben seemed to be functioning "on an average teenager level" and Bob "can't see that he's [Ben] having any real difficulties." Ben had made quite a few friends at school, and he had been "muddling through" using logical analytical thinking

to arrive at a solution when encountering social interaction challenges. Here Bob used an analogy to describe Ben's potential and progress through the years of support and hard work.

> So in my mind, the way I see it is, oh yeah he was a diamond in the rough, he's getting very polished now. Everybody that's ever worked with him has applied a little bit more polish, cut a little bit more facet in the diamond, made it glow a little bit more brighter.

Bob also mentioned that Ben already established concrete aspirations and dreams: "get a career, earn lots of money, get a house, fill it full of nice comfort items that he feels is good...And then pursue a relationship." Bob noted that he was continuously surprised by Ben's ability to "keep it all together" with "zero support." Consider how much Bob valued supporting individuals with disabilities to reach their full potential, Bob spoke about how pleased and proud of Ben he was for holding a regular job in a "real world" setting. Bob noted that he felt confident for Ben to complete his work with minimal supervision. Here, Bob spoke of the contrast of his son's prospect from when he was first diagnosed to how he was able to hold a normal summer job.

> His clinical assessment from when he was four years old was such that, they couldn't even imagine that he would even be partially functional. It was the darkest, we thought well that's not our child, well let's just see where we can go…many years later, here he is. Nine to fiving it. On one of the more physically hard jobs and more demanding jobs that our society's got… not a made-job, a real job… any of the clients, he's just another guy with a lawnmower. There's nothing special about him. He's not running around in circles, he's not chasing butterflies…He's just working…

I don't have that fear that I'm going to get a phone call or a text message, saying that you know, something terrible happened, he'd wandered off. And that's where my level of confidence is with him... there's a lot of people out there that wouldn't trust anybody with disabilities anywhere near a power tool, but he's mastered these things.

Ben's detailed knowledge about specific topics. Bob was sometimes surprised by the detailed knowledge Ben possessed. Bob was also impressed with Ben's analysis process and detailed knowledge of the workings of complex systems. Bob was also surprised how he applied such knowledge to solve household problems. He elaborated with a story of how Ben helped his relative investigate a household problem.

There was a party at my sister's house. And she had made the comment to one of my brother's, his uncle, that their water bill was astronomical. And my brother had decided to investigate and Ben had tagged along with him. Ben immediately recognized all the components that were in there, and he pointed out exactly the defects, and then he explained what would be as a quick cure for this. All of this in absolute detail, as if he had been doing this for years. And he could quote this part number, that fixture, who it was made by and oh yeah, they always have problems. And he naturally figured out...I was absolutely surprised…. Because he'd never given any indication… That he had actually absorbed that level of knowledge… Was very, very surprising, because it – it's detailed knowledge. I mean anybody can say oh well the little flapper thingy is stuck and it's leaking.

Ben's experience of *PEERS*. Bob shared about how he perceived Ben's participation in *PEERS* by highlighting Ben's social interaction in the teen sessions, as well as the gainful lessons his son learned from being in the program.

Social interaction in PEERS.

Ben's preference towards coaches. Bob mentioned Ben would have missed out on the "social inter-reaction," and connecting with the coaches. Bob saw the coaches' role as helping the teens to become "as socially appropriate and socially aware as possible." Bob explained in the following how Ben connected betters with the leaders in the group because of the possibility of having mutual communication and understanding.

> Ben had a better time with the instructors than he had with the kids… spends all his time with the aides… Because he could talk back to them....He could understand them better, they could understand him…there are things that the experts in the *PEERS* program can teach him and point out, and help him with that, you know, as parents we would have a difficult time with.

Ben's observations of other participants. According to Bob, Ben could be "very critical sometimes," particularly when Ben noticed others displaying socially inappropriate behaviors. Bob said that Ben appeared to be very aware of himself and others, especially because his own experience with ASD. The following Bob talked about Ben's observation of his peers in the program.

> So the *PEERS* Program while it was very, very good, had the one disadvantage is that with the people and the clients in the *PEERS* Program, when behaviours became quite apparent that they were displaying behaviours there's no checks and the balances. So

you could tell either they were taking advantage of the situation to just run amok, or they had no concept of consequences of actions, which is what we as a normal person would think of…He would talk about meltdowns. He would talk about vocal outbursts. He would talk about strange hands gestures, he would talk about how some people were a little bit too touchy feely, boundaries that they didn't know about. And yet, they just didn't seem to realize there was consequences to this, vast consequences. I think the only behaviours [Ben] allows himself to exhibit are the occasional "driftiness" and lack of focus, because everybody gets tired and everybody gets fuzzy headed. And that's as much as what he's allowing himself to have, in order to keep control of his other behaviours…He's very good at observing what other people are doing. If he sees somebody, what he considers from the regular normal world doing something weird and bizarre, and he looks at them and says, how could they possibly not realize what they're doing. So from his point of view with his disability, he's very much of a judge and a jury.

Lessons learned from PEERS. Although Bob expressed a few downfalls of the program, he expressed that there was "no such thing as totally ineffective," and felt that the effective part of the program was Ben gaining insights in social interactions. Bob noted that Ben learned some good lessons at *PEERS* to enhance his social skills and viewed the program as a means to fill in the blanks in an "uncompromising way." In other words, the *PEERS* program established reasonable expectation for the teens (e.g., eye contact), without making too many "accommodations" (e.g., touching the teen on their face to reinforce eye contact).

According to Bob, during the *PEERS* program, Ben had the opportunity to refine the following skills: eye contact, turn-taking, and paying attention to subtle social hints. Bob noticed improvements particularly in Ben's conversational skills, but realized that it is an on-going learning journey for Ben. Bob found that when Ben practiced his skills in real world setting, greater improvements were observed. No doubt, Ben gained much from the *PEERS* program, especially in his social communicational skills, however, Bob found it difficult to attribute his change to solely the program because of the lack of concrete evidence to show improvements. Here, Bob spoke about Ben's gains from the *PEERS* program, but also brought up how it was hard for him to pinpoint exactly how much growth Ben has gone through as a result of the program.

It's obvious that he's learned some really good lessons in the *PEERS* Program, really, really, really, really good lessons that I was not aware of how to teach... But I couldn't put it down on a piece of paper.... I've never said that the *PEERS* Program was not influential, I just do not have enough information to give it a number... He is using all of the skills that he's learned in *PEERS* group and at home, and various other places. He's got a much better non-verbal communication. He's gotten much better when he is in the conversation of his timing, of his visual focus where he's supposed to be. And he's got a much better about staying on topical topics that everybody can understand, not drifting off into whatever interesting thing that he is supremely interested in, and then perseverating about it. …now he's start[ing] to understand the needs and wants of other people, not necessarily always his own. Which has been a big stumbling block, it's all about me, me, me, me, when nobody really counts.

Bob felt that after participating in the *PEERS* program, "he [Ben] paid attention and he's much more aware now of his limitations and what he has to do in order to overcome those limitations." Bob noted that Ben learned some skills he was able to "translate" to his daily life situations and becoming more aware of his challenges in order to overcome them. Bob shared a story about how the *PEERS* program has helped Ben maintain friendships at school. Despite Ben's "very low demands for friendship" and "he does not feel excruciatingly alone," "there are skills that he learned in the *PEERS* program that he has taken in and he use now." Here, Bob shared about how Ben used some of the skills learned from *PEERS* to apply to social settings in school.

> In grade 11 because of the *PEERS* Program … He managed to maintain the few friends that he does have that he's had for all of these years, and also gather a few more into his corner… So he carried on conversations with them and they became good waiting friends, and that was something that he did all on his own.

Furthermore, moving forward, Bob elaborated on insights on how changes should be supported on an on-going basis through the following analogy to explain the importance of the need to support continuously refine skills that are challenging.

> If you learn how to juggle and then the minute you get back and your job is driving a bus, you forget how to juggle, you're continually going back to relearn the same set of skills again that are not impressing on you.

Bob's Experience of *PEERS*. When Bob shared about his experience participating in the *PEERS* program, he talked about both how he himself experienced the program, as well as, how he experienced the program in general.

Bob's family's experience of the program. Bob's hope for Ben was for him to "develop, and grow and become an independent person" and *PEERS* was part of this journey of growth. Bob saw *PEERS* as a way to "fill in the blanks that the social organization of family will make accommodations for… in an uncompromising way." The most rewarding part about Bob's experience participating in program was "that somebody actually gave a hoot about the kids to do something like this. They didn't just sweep them under the rug, and disappear them someplace." The following, Bob spoke about how his attendance impacted his involvement in the program, and what it was like for him to participate in the parental sessions.

Parental attendance impacted involvement. One of the most challenging parts of the program for Bob was his lack of available time to participate in the weekly parent group sessions and facilitate his son's homework (e.g., practice play-dates) from *PEERS*. While Bob desired to be more involved in the program, he was only able to attend a few sessions due to his work schedule. Bob described his experience at *PEERS* as "dodgy, it's very dodgy when you're only showing up every third week." Here Bob spoke of how he recognized that his experience would have changed if he was able to participate more, which demonstrated the importance of being able to participate in the parental sessions on a more regular basis in order to better accomplish goals set out by the program.

> [If attended more sessions], it would allow me to participate more in the real concrete things that we're being involved in, what the program wants to achieve. What the aides want as follow through, and what the child needs as follow through…Four weeks later you show up again, doesn't work very well.

Challenges and appreciations of participating with other parents. While Bob appreciated some parents' insights, he mostly experienced others in disappointment. When asked about his experience participating with others parents, Bob repeatedly responded only with: "I liked the tea and coffee and sandwiches." He "neither agreed nor disagreed" with others, as he said, "there's nothing I can do about other people, they are who they are, they do what they do." Bob said it was "nice to just actually sit down and not think too much." Bob felt his experience in the parental session as a "not proactive participation," and that many were merely sitting around with other parents, expressing how "disheartened and sad about the fact that their children seem to be stuck in the mud and not going anywhere." Bob described that most of the parental sessions he attended became "crying into a pity pot" session. At the same time, he did appreciate those who understood their children and he correlated with such understanding to their child's improvements in skills. Bob noted: "some were very bright, very insightful, they knew their kids, they knew what was going on. You could tell that, because their children were successful, they were starting to show a lot of success."

Bob's overall experience of the program. Bob described his overall experience participating in the *PEERS* program through talking about what it was like for him on a good and bad day. He also discussed the role of parental support in relations to changes in the teens, as well as noted suggestions for how to deliver PEERS differently in the future.

Good day and bad day. Through drawings, Bob illustrated what a good day and bad day at *PEERS* looked like to him. Bob saw a good day as being constructive and focused on how to help the teens in the program to change. Here, Bob spoke of what a good day at *PEERS* meant.

I saw it as that you should always be focused, primarily on what is going to be done, or what is going to help with the kids… a way in which you could brainstorm…Find their strengths and weaknesses, and then the absolute priority, our children are going to have to live in our society…What do we have to do, where do we have to go to get the guidance for that…90 percent is the constructiveness.

On the other hand, a bad day to Bob was when discussion became irrelevant and unhelpful in helping the teens. One of Bob's biggest disappointments of the *PEERS* program was that some parents were more focused on other things instead of constructive discussion about how to help their children. Bob thought it would be more helpful to discuss about "triumphs" while recognizing challenges and seek out effective ways to handle difficulties. He was there to seek guidance and "get insight into" the teens. Bob elaborated on his frustration and disappointment of his experiences at the *PEERS* of losing focus on the teens.

The biggest disappointment in the *PEERS* group was not with the children, it was with their parents… I felt that the reason why the program wasn't as successful as it could have been is that the parents were, in a lot of cases, really not helping. ...We're sitting there doing other things, fighting, arguing, having snit fits….Playing political games, which struck me as very, very peculiar, trying to one up the other people down there, and oh my car's bigger than your car… And I didn't like that…we lost the focus of the whole *PEERS* program.

Parental role in supporting changes. Bob attributed parental involvement and support as a key element for positive outcomes for social skills development. He was disappointed that some parents did not support their child to the level that would foster bigger changes. A

child's support system is crucial, especially when supporting maintenance of learned skills from an intervention program. Bob described his overall experience of *PEERS* as: "if I had to say it in a nutshell…is the unrealistic expectations of the parents vs. what was happening with the kids." Bob suggested that in some cases, a child may improve from going through an intervention program but regress at the end due to the lack of support in the home. Bob often noticed constructive development during the teens intervention session, however, when they are back with their parents, they seemed to "slip back" into their regular mode and "their set pattern of behavior that they had found acceptable to their parents." Here Bob talks about how the real work actually happens at home after the program ends, and the fact that a child's learning and growth is beyond just in the intervention context but development and progress is highly linked to family support and home dynamics.

> The biggest disappointment in the *PEERS* group was not with the children, it was
> with their parents… I felt that the reason why the program wasn't as successful as it
> could have been, is that the parents were, in a lot of cases, really not helping…
> Progressive changes of behaviour and outlook, in the participants, seemed to be not
> supported, at the family level. Because there should have been progress, noticeable
> over the time of the program…. I felt like a lot of the parents didn't really know what
> the program was there to achieve…The real key behind the collapse situation…is
> what kind of home supports they have… The father … just drinks himself into
> submission. The mother just cranks up the volume of her voice till she's screaming
> her head off… They're at the socially appropriate *PEERS* Program, they look
> perfectly fine, supportive …But when they go home, is when most of any good work

could be undone. We've tried to maintain as great (of) a stability as possible with our

child. We have been as proactive as possible to maintain a steady positive outlook.

Bob reminded other parents to be realistic and prepare to support their children and most

importantly "never give up hope... never give up...as children, as children, they never got a

vote … To whether or not they can be in this world."

Doing PEERS differently. Bob suggested that there was much work to be done in

terms of developing and understanding interventions for children with ASD. He saw the

process of gathering research information as "vital" for informing future practices. There

seemed to be a greater need for programs to support individuals with ASD, as currently,

better tools are in place to detect more frequent cases of ASD. "We're starting to realize that

a lot of them have been swept under the rug, families hide them. Society hides them or else

they just fall off the map." As Bob shared about his experience participating in the *PEERS*

program, he also suggested how *PEERS* can be implemented differently in relations to

various aspects of the design and components.

Need for clear goals. Other than the purpose of the program being a research project,

to Bob, the most difficult and unclear part of the program was its goals and direction of

where the program proceeded. Bob gathered that the program's goal was about "teaching

teens how to build friendships with their peers" and specifically "peers with disabilities."

Bob felt like "a lot of parents didn't really know what the program was there to achieve,"

because "it wasn't really achieved by having play dates with cousins…and make

accommodations for you." Instead "the real thing should have been, like how you interact

with strangers and people that you don't know," and basically not have too many

accommodations. Bob suggested that through providing parents with a clear picture of the goals would help parents how to achieve targeted behaviors. Furthermore, Bob had the impression that the *PEERS* was for teens with ASD to learn how to socialize with other peers with disabilities, as he noted "peers they were talking about, predominantly, were peers with disabilities."

Need for concrete outcome. Bob recognized the benefits of *PEERS* on his son's social interaction in various daily situations (e.g., home, school), but it was difficult for Bob to exactly pinpoint how much improvements took place. Bob was really seeking for concrete and clear data that would indicate his son's progress. The following captured how Bob determined his son's outcome from the *PEERS* Program.

> We didn't see any particular results from the *PEERS* program, that you could pick up and say, well your child at the start of this program…I just do not have enough information to give it a number. I like to put things in numbers, you know, how long it's going to take to do this, that, the other thing... I would like to know...pie charts, graphs…He is using all of the skills that he's learned in *PEERS* group and at home, and various other places… All I have is a gut feeling, it worked.

Bob then provided specific suggestions as to what he meant by wanting concrete indicators.

> Take a chart with a whole bunch of colours on it, start at red, go all the way to green. Where is your child on that, on a yearly basis? Are you going from the red to the green, or are you kind of stuck somewhere purple or something? That's what you got to look for, it's very simple. You will always know if you are really aware of your

child, and your child's ability and what your child is like, you will always be aware of the positive aspects of it.

Expanding the PEERS program. Bob suggested expanding the program in its length, as well as the possibility of offering the program to younger children. Bob felt that one of the limitations of the *PEERS* program was its time-based structure (i.e., occurred only weekly), because he believed that "more time equals better abilities...you'll burn the memory pathways and burn the responses into your mind." Bob felt that the time the teens got to practice the learned skills were "just enough," and more time would benefit their progress. Furthermore, Bob then tied in the notion of the limited intervention duration to his disappointment in the government's "short sightedness" by providing limited budget to support individuals with special needs. Bob suggested the idea of investing more efforts and resource earlier on for long-term benefits. It is the idea of "if you spend $100.00 per day at this time, you will probably save yourself, in the future, $1000.00 per day." By the same token, he raised the importance of early intervention, and would like to see the *PEERS* expand to earlier age group (preschool/kindergarten). He spoke about the idea tweaking the trajectory of a child's behavior at a young age in creating huge changes when they become teenagers. The following, Bob talked about the potential of expanding the program to benefit a broader population, especially the younger children.

I look at the *PEERS* Program as being a pretty good shot, it just needs now to be expanded in different direction and at different levels, because *PEERS* can actually work for preschoolers and grade schoolers. … the *PEERS* Program shows what is really in a way effective with teenagers, let's see if this thing works with the younger kids…The program can be more advanced… be more broad in basis, would target

different age groups, different things that they need to do. And I can bet right now, if

a child at nine years old, has autism, is more socially appropriate at nine, by the time

they're 19 they would be brilliant.

Expanding additional social interaction topics. Bob valued preparing individuals with

disabilities to transition into the real world and reach their full potentials. He pointed out that

PEERS could have expanded the topic that would address employment related issues. It is

critical to Bob that efforts were made to try and help children with ASD to achieve their

highest growth potential, because the "real world…it's a different story" and "it's tough out

there." The following, Bob addressed the significance and long-term implications of

including relevant topics that would benefit the teens in their future career.

When you've got a bunch of teenage kids who are probably looking at getting gainful

employment in the near future...the work world is extremely unforgiving...most of

your kids coming out to the real world, where the real jobs are will be chewed up and

spit out, in an instant...we're telling them this, we're helping them with this, we're

giving them social inter-reactions. But they won't even be able to hold a 7-11 job…

then where are they going to go… Live at home?... Live at a group home?... And I

feel we're doing a disservice to the kids.

Adding a peer-mediated component. Bob pointed out that having an inclusive

intervention setting is crucial for teens with ASD to learn from teens without ASD. It is the

idea of incorporating a peer-mediated component into the PEERs program, so teens with

ASD can learn from others who are more skilled in the social settings. Here Bob talked about

instead of learning from peers with disabilities like in the *PEERS* program, the teens should learn from those who are "successful."

> If you truly want to make it successful it has to be inclusive, the peers that people with disabilities should be looking at are those that are considered successful, normal, average people. The chatty little girl that has 99 friends…and still manages to do her homework and stuff like that. Or the robust young lad that jumps around and is busy, and has four good friends that they can go camping with and won't get into fistfight… that kind of socially appropriate peer is the ultimate goal.

Autism intervention research. Bobs saw his participation in the interview research process as vital and important, as there was a need to gain a better understanding ways individuals with ASD can be better supported to reach their potentials. To Bob, *PEERS* was a "work in progress" and hence the goals remained unclear, because "they [developers/researchers of program] still don't know what they're ultimate goals are." Bob recognized that he was part of a pilot process, in which "it's all guess work" and "feeling around in the dark." Bob pointed out one of the issue he had with research on individuals with disabilities was that "we all lump them into the same basket," and failed to understand how each individual may respond differently because of their unique needs despite their label. Bob was optimistic that in five years that the *PEERS* program would be more "polished" after more research data gathering. Here he spoke of the importance of gaining a deeper understanding of intervention programs like the *PEERS* to better tap into the potentials of individuals with ASD.

I would describe the *PEERS* Program as having the most massive potential possible for people with autism. But it needs to be more properly researched and it needs to be more expansive in nature…So I see the program, the data that you're gathering… as being vital. We need as much as this as possible. My total belief is we're just looking at the tip of the iceberg. For centuries our society has hidden them underneath rocks, or put them in rooms, or just pretended that they weren't there… we can't do that anymore.

About Allison. Allison was thoughtful in her speech and carried a sense of optimism when sharing her stories. While Allison explicitly expressed that she valued her private time and space, she was willing to share about her personal and *PEERS* related experience. Allison's sharing revealed how family and her children were a big part of her life.

Family and privacy. Allison believed that "everybody has a different value" and people valued what was important to them, and such values led to their actions. Allison highly valued her privacy and time in solitude. She also valued her family, and especially carried a deep sense of care and responsibility for children. Here, she spoke about what she valued.

I value my family, very important …And then I value also my privacy, though, and my time alone. I enjoy that, but I also enjoy being um, going out and doing different things…. So yeah. But I, my family is very important to me….If I have to pick one thing I wouldn't have to worry about anymore, it would be that I won't have to worry about my um, what – what would happen to my kids if ever anything happens to me. If I wouldn't have to worry about that, I'd be golden.

Exercise as self-care routine. Allison used one of the PIAs to illustrate how important physical activity was to her. Through different shapes and colors, she expressed how much she enjoyed engaging in physical activity, because it made her "thoughtful" and "happy." Allison elaborated on the drawing by explaining that physical activities allowed her to rest better, and gave her "a chance to debrief" her day and "think about everything". She valued exercise because it helped with stress and sleep management, and it was incorporated into her self-care routine.

Allison's son, Ben. Allison shared about how she experienced Ben, as her son, and recounted stories of him growing up, his approach to solve problems and his staying power. She also shared stories about Ben's perceptiveness and social awareness.

Ben growing up. Allison reflected back to when Ben was first diagnosed with ASD while acknowledging the efforts he put into his growth. Here she shared about what she enjoyed about Ben, and how he has changed and stayed the same over the years.

> There are some parts of him that have actually stayed the same. So he's always been pretty easy going kid… I really like that about him…He has changed a lot in that um, when he first got his diagnosis um, it was very limiting, and it limit and it stated that he wouldn't get past a certain grade or age level. And so the fact that he is as far as he is, in his um, he's changed a whole lot and he's worked very, very, very hard to get to where he is. And yeah, but the thing that stayed the same about him is that he's always been pretty easy going kid.

Ben's approach to solve problems. Allison spoke of how Ben typically solved problems on his own, and "tests his environment." Sometimes his curiosity and ability to

examine an object of interest could surprise others. Allison would love for Ben to take some more time to process his steps instead of impulsively exploring the problem. Here Allison gave an example of an incident where his ability to take apart a system surprised her friend.

> One thing that sticks in my mind is that um, we went to BC this one time and we stayed at a friend's place and they have a pool. An underground um, underground sprinkler system. And he was really quite young, at this time, and I said to him, you are not allowed to go anywhere near the sprinkler system. Cause I had already known that he could take it apart. And my friend said: "Oh God, it's a complicated system, there's no way he could take it apart. Just let him run," and I said "No, no, no, don't let him run, he'll take apart the sprinkler system." They're like oh God no, let him run. In less than 30 seconds he took apart that sprinkler system, and then they're like "Oh my God, he – I don't know how he did it, it takes forever." So he could in an instant figure something out sometimes, and take it apart.

Ben's staying power. Ben also surprised Allison with his staying power, because Ben would persevere through even when the task was very challenging. Allison was pleased with Ben's determination toward pursuing his goals on his own, as well as the independence he demonstrated in completing assigned tasks. Here Allison gave an example about Ben's staying power.

> Last year he tried doing a landscaping job, and he did miserably at it… recently um, he tried the same job again…he's got varying things that he wants to try, but he wants to ultimately own his own greenhouse…he managed to hang on and do the job for the whole time without any intervention. … He did it on his own, he did it very well, he

did everything he was supposed to do. And at the same time, he watched dog, and took care of the house. So it was a big task for him by himself, and he managed to do it, and stay, stuck with it. So that's staying power.

Ben's perceptiveness and social awareness. As Ben's mother, Allison was well aware of Ben's nature and his intentions. While Ben may have appeared as very sensitive and caring to others, Allison saw Ben as being more perceptive. Allison revealed that at times, Ben's real intentions were in fact "self-fish." She further elaborated with two examples:

> A baby is crying and …he'll do everything possible … in order to make that… child comfortable. And people think…wow he's so kind and he's so caring, and …he'll turn to me and he said: "Yeah. I needed to just shut that kid up."….Another time that he was in um, elementary, the teacher came to me after, cause they were so proud of him…and they were just amazed that he gave up this sucker to this little girl. …he said: "Oh for the love – she just wouldn't shut up. She kept crying…it was easier for me to just give her my sucker." …So he comes across as being sensitive…I know (laugh) that he's typically, he's doing it because he – it benefits him in some way.

Ben's experience of *PEERS*. As Allison recounted on Ben's experience of the program, she shared about Ben's change in attitude, skills he learned, as well as the matter of skills maintenance and regression.

Ben's change in attitude towards PEERS. At the start of the *PEERS* program, Ben did not seem interested in participating in the *PEERS* program. Here Allison talked about how Ben's change in attitude as suggested by Allison was due to his anticipation of learning and applying skills taught in *PEERS*.

He would actually remind me that it was *PEERS* group and that he was going, and he'd actually be ahead of me when getting to the car...when it first started… it was like I would be ahead of him and he'd be like 10 paces behind…[do you know what changed that?]... Probably because it was actually, it was learning something and then applying it... you could actually see a result from what he – so you learned something, you practiced it, and then you actually had to try it out and do it.

Learned skills from PEERS. The main skill Ben gained from the *PEERS* program was conversational skills. Allison noted that Ben was able to apply to the latter skills in the school setting for developing friendships. While Allison acknowledges that maturity was one factor for Ben's growth, she also attributed his enhanced skills to *PEERS*. Allison felt that even her younger son without ASD would benefit from practicing basic phone conversational skills. Here Allison recounted an incident where Ben attempted to use some of the learned skills from *PEERS* to development a friendship.

It wasn't just maturity, cause I mean maturity is a factor, but you have to have information …He used the skills to maintain, to help him. He had a girl he really liked, a lot. And he used some of the skills in order to get her phone number and then start to call her. It was that maintaining part that he needed to work on in the *PEERS* group… Absolutely, there was definitely an improvement...he used the skills, he did use the skills... so that was it was effective....When he answers the phone, he doesn't start talking…. he actually says hello, and he'll listen, …ends the conversation with goodbye… unlike his younger brother, who hasn't got autism, you actually feel like you're being listened to, cause he's reiterating what you saying. And he, he's making those sounds like he's listening, and he's listening intently. Where his younger

brother who again, doesn't have autism, and is your – he is your typical teen, makes you feel like you're not being listened to.

Skills maintenance and regression. Allison felt that the program was effective in a sense that she noticed Ben using skills learned from *PEERS*. However, Allison also observed that Ben had reverted back to the way he was before, and "he really doesn't care to" continue on the skills once he had done it. Ben's socially appropriate behaviors appeared to be externally driven rather than internally motivated. Here Allison revealed that Ben chose not to carry on with the skills after demonstrating to others that he had the ability to master certain social skills.

There are times that he can actually be just, he uses everything he learned in the *PEERS* program, when he talks to someone. And someone says wow, wow, they're amazed. And then, he has enough and he's just done...I've seen him, goes back to the way that he was before...He remembers everything, he can practice this, he can do the two way conversation and everything. And amazes people, and then he just gets tired....Yeah he really doesn't care to (laugh)....He uses them, but he doesn't continue it… I've appeased my mother, okay I'm done...he's just doing it to pander to their good will, and to mine… he gets the compliment and then he figures oh yeah, I'm good. It almost seems as if once Ben knew that he was able to master some of these social interaction skills and even got positive feedback, he felt that he already has it down, and does not need to continue applying these skills….there was definitely an improvement for [Ben]…he used the skills, he did use the skills….He faltered, and which is expected, but he used the skills, nonetheless. So in that way it was effective.

Allison's experience of *PEERS*. Allison shared about her attitude and views towards the *PEERS* program through a list of words describing her experiences. She mentioned about how it was like for her to participate in the parent sessions, as well as a research participant, and compared her experience at the program to other programs she had previously attended. Allison also shared her insight on how the program could be delivered differently.

Allison's overall impressions of PEERS. Allison listed 20 words to describe her experience participating in the *PEERS* program. Out of the list of 20 words, the words "optimistic" and "hopeful" stood out to her the most. Prior to attending the *PEERS* program, Allison mentioned that she did not have too many preconceived notions about the program because she did not know much about the *PEERS*. She described *PEERS* as "critical" and "needful" because the program was very important. Allison also used the word "rare" to describe *PEERS*, as she was glad that the *PEERS* program existed because there were limited amount of programming available for the family. Allison hoped that through participating in the *PEERS* program, Ben would improve his skills relating to his peers, and develop "positive relationships". The most rewarding part of the *PEERS* program was seeing Ben engaged and "actually using the skills he had developed." Allison also thought "It was a safe environment for the kids" to learn and grow. Allison elaborated on how she felt about the program: "I think it's a good program, I do. I absolutely think, and it was a good – it was a great opportunity. I really, I thought it was a good, well put together."

Participating in the parent sessions. During the parental session Allison noted that she was "spacey," "a little bored," and "distracted." For Allison, sometimes the sessions felt too lengthy and "drawn out." She noted how it was unclear to her at the onset of the program how much time she actually needed to commit during the parental session. Here, Allison

talked about the importance of parental sessions, despite it may not had been the most enjoyable part of her experience.

> The parent involved I think was very important. I may not have liked it, but it was good…Absolutely. It, I think it's actual necessary for people like myself that don't enjoy it. (laugh)... It wasn't really too clear how much of it was, at the beginning… I really …disliked the parent participation, only again, [be]cause I selfishly guard my time.

Allison noted that her experience participating with other parents were "okay," and pointed out that it had "nothing to do with the people" and "just that it's the end of the day." In fact, Allison appreciated participating with parents, as she explained: "I don't get a chance to be around a lot of parents with kids, that are high functioning, and they're at the same level. So that was neat to see." Allison further explained that participating in parental session meant she had to put off items on her regular daily routine (e.g., prepare dinner, children's homework completion). Furthermore, she also preferred to focus on talking about the teens instead of discussing about other personal matters. Here Allison, talks about her experience participating in the parental session.

> I really like my time, I probably have said that ten times, and you probably marked it on there.(laugh) I've said that ten times. And it was really difficult at the end of my day right, when I was use it to get the kids homework done, get the dinner um, do all the things that I need to do....I know that you needed to share your day and there's nothing wrong with it, except I don't need to hear it. If I want us to go do what we need to do, share about our kids and then move on….for me, I don't need to share my

day with you, and I don't want to hear about yours…I just thought, oh God, please,... just kill me….And it was only because some days, I would have a really tough day, and on those days I didn't get a chance to go and do – do my exercise. I didn't get a chance to do something so my brain would be thinking about other things ….then when someone would go into detail about their whole life… could absolutely sense that, but that's not what I was there for...I believe that we should have been actually, as parent, how can we support our children in getting these skills… It's very difficult when someone shares a bit of their personal life, and you don't understand the context that …I just don't think that I was in a place to offer that, because first of all, I had my own things in my head, and I'm not skilled at kind of doing that….I think that they needed more support. And I just didn't think that, that [*PEERS*/parent session] was the avenue or an arena for it… I think it started out sometimes, the conversation is how can we support the – our children, and then sometimes, not all the time, it went to other areas…But if the actual program is geared at helping our children to improve these skills, then basically that's what I think we should stick to. That's our agenda, that's what we need to do, that's what we need to move on, because I think then it gets lost a little bit.

In relations to the conversation among parents, Allison found that sometimes parents' feedback were "corny" and "they were giving a positive spin... seemed like it came right out of a textbook." Here Allison gave an example of one of the incidents where parents were discussing rather or not it was appropriate to answer "fine" to when someone asked how you were doing.

The thing that kind of stuck in my head – was when we talked about – the word

"fine." And I thought, are we serious, are we actually going to go into the word

"fine," and we spent a great deal of time ruminating about the word fine… Yeah.

Yeah. We need, and then we need to share about – and I thought wow, and then some

of the responses were textbook and I thought, wow this is a little corny.

Research aspect of her participation. Allison mentioned that she continued to place

Ben in research opportunities that were similar to the *PEERS* program because all these

experiences accumulate their merits and benefits in his growth. Allison participated in

research projects almost yearly and noted that the fact that it was a research project did not

affect her participation. However, Allison felt strongly against the idea of filming the

parental sessions for research purposes, and preferred being recorded (audio) instead. It was

the concern of her privacy potentially being exposed through the media. Here, she expressed

that her participation was affected by the filming component, and stated how she noticed

other parents avoided being filmed too.

The filming, I really hated that. I thought that was the worst possible thing was the

filming. I totally forgot that, I – probably cause I tried to block it out. Why do you

need to film it. I just thought there's no need to film…I think I would have been more

open and flexible, had it been recorded vs. filmed…Did you not notice how the

parents avoided sitting in front of the camera? …Everyone, everybody was brushed

against the first seats that were furthest away from the camera….It really, it's – it puts

a stifle onto, into the group… most of the research…we don't get filmed … You

don't want anything emblazoned… as the internet makes us very aware that

everybody and anybody can be watched, and viewed. You don't want…the idea that
…your image is going to be emblazoned in some YouTube video, down the line.

PEERS versus other programs. Allison noted that she wanted the *PEERS* program
"to be different from other programs," and she felt it was distinctive from other program in
various ways. First of all, *PEERS* actually included participants who were functioning at
similar level as Ben, because "typically when he went into certain programs, sometimes the
kids – the functional level tended to be a little bit lower." Allison also liked how *PEERS*
program actually stuck to what it has set out to do, even when there are "a lot more detail,"
and the parents were more involved as compare to other programs. Furthermore, Allison
appreciated the homework component where the teens were given opportunities to practice
learned skills, and it was different from other programs because the teens were able to
practice both in the therapeutic setting and the natural environment. Here, Allison spoke
about her experience in *PEERS* in contrast to other programs.

> [*PEERS* was different from other programs because] it was actually most of the kids
> within his, my son's same function – functioning level. And then, also that it – it did
> have that parent portion, which was kind of interesting. And they got a chance to
> practice the skills... So first in the classroom and then outside of it, so those were a
> couple of things that were actually different…I expected it to be like a lot of other
> research or programming that um, we had actually been in, where it seems the
> intention is wonderful…starts off very … dedicated, .. but in the end I don't know
> whether it's because of the parent involvement, or lack of involvement, or the
> individuals, or whatever it is, it just doesn't meet what I would, my perception of
> programming is based on my experiences with putting my other son in programming

… I never expected it to actually stick to exactly what it – these are what we're going

to follow, this is what we're going to do, this is what our expectation is … So it's

actually begun from the beginning to the end, so that way it's different.

Doing PEERS differently. Through sharing her experiences participating in the

PEERS program, Allison shared her insights and views on how the *PEERS* program could be

delivered differently in terms of the content, program duration, and post-program follow-up.

Expanding content information of PEERS. While the program came at a "perfect"

time for Ben, Allison would like to see an "updated version" for teens before entering

adulthood with additional topics (e.g., work place social interaction and appropriate "sexual

based conversation"). Furthermore, Allison felt that Ben would have benefited from more

information on how to maintain friendships. For Ben, he was able to master the calling

portion of connecting with a friend, but had difficulty discerning the frequency of follow-up

phone calls. The missing piece for Ben was learning how to maintain a newly developed

relationship. Allison noted that Ben "took that excitement and went a little too far" and did

not want Allison's guidance. Allison felt the program was lacking more "in-depth"

information about how to maintain newly established friendships. Here she shared the story

of what happened to Ben's attempt to establish a friendship.

> He developed a relationship with a girl that he really liked, a lot. And she ended up
>
> giving him her phone number. This time he didn't want me to help him plan he was
>
> going to do it all on his own…And then he ended up phoning her and doing
>
> absolutely stupidness. And then when he realized that he had done that, he ended the
>
> friendship, he didn't continue it because of his own embarrassment….he phoned – in

six times in, in about an hour… he sent her, probably about 10-12 texts with emoticons attached to them… on top of that, five messages with his voice on it… So akin to kind of stalking like… It was all done within two minute.

Program duration and follow-up. The program did not fit her expectation in which she felt that it was "limiting" in its timeframe to accomplish what was set out to be done. She would have liked to spend more time practicing on more challenging skills, and it would have been more beneficial to master a skill before moving onto another one. The word "limited" was one of the key words on her PIA that described her experience at *PEERS*. Here Allison talked about how one of *PEERS*'s limitation was how it was delivered in a strict timeline.

It was limited in – that it is just a um, research…It was limited in that there's only so much that can actually be done, and there was a timeline that actually went along with it…there was no time to flex within that timeline, so that makes it actually very limiting…there's only so many places you could go, and so much you could do. So that sense, that was the limiting factor… I really didn't have an – any expectation. I just realized that at the very end that was my conclusion that I found it very limiting.… There are some government programs that basically, it actually gauges how the individual is progressing, based on that they give them an additional two months, right, but there has to be a justification to why you give them the additional two months…I would just add um, two – two more sessions or whatever it is. Cause you don't want to also be crippling and make the situation where the individuals become dependent, and reliant, cause that can – that can actually be just as wrong

Case Study #2: Chad

Chad and Candice (family 2) were parents of Calvin and Catherine, who both participated in the parent sessions of the *PEERS* program at the Centre for Autism, Edmonton, Alberta. Both Chad and Candice were invited to participate in the follow-up research interviews, however, only Chad participated. Chad was an active advocate for his children with ASD, and he also had a strong passion to drive big changes both in the school system and society. In *PEERS*, Chad often had a lot to offer, including personal experiences, insights, and suggestions when brainstorming how to better support the teens. Chad was very comfortable with expressing his ideas and often shared rich stories, metaphors, and analogies. Chad was first interviewed at the University of Alberta, Education Clinic. Chad was very eager to share his experience and took the time to participate in the interview despite his busy schedule. In relations to the PIAs, Chad noted that he was a "pragmatic" person and such activity was not very realistic and practical for parents who had busy lives like him. As a result, he did not complete the PIAs. Therefore, I invited him to verbally generate a list of words that he felt would describe himself, and explored each of the words closely as part of the semi-structure interview process. Furthermore, Chad had a lot on his mind to share, and he responded better to opening up a space for him to share instead of following the open-ended pre-designed questions. As a result, the interview did not cover specific questions about how Chad experienced his children and hence, such a section was not included in Chad's case study. A follow-up phone interview was conduct to address some of the questions arose from the initial interview.

About Chad. Chad described himself as a pragmatic person who was also a giver as well as an intense and committed leader. The notion of advocating changes threaded through his self-description of being methodical, tactical, strategic, and creative.

Chad as pragmatic person. The first word Chad used to describe himself was "pragmatic," and he linked such notion to the importance of taking action, because "results speak volumes." Here Chad talked about what it meant to be a pragmatic person.

> [A] pragmatic person is a person that's able to sort of suspend their disbelief for a moment... realize that they never will have all the answers…, because otherwise we got a whole lot of academic knowledge…My favourite sayings I've coined, is less know and more now. Get the K out…it's not about how much you know, it's what you're doing now.

Chad as a giver. Chad saw himself as living in a "world of instant gratification," in which people were not prepared to invest efforts in order to see results. Chad shared about his paradigm of how there were two types of people: givers and takers. He then described himself as a giver and highlighted the importance of making sacrifices and putting in initial effort to work towards something greater. He spoke of the inability to give impaired one's ability to collaborate with others as a team. Here Chad talked about what it meant to be a giver while linking to the idea of making sacrifices.

> It's the airplane taking off the runway… 80% of the fuel's used on the takeoff…then you're cruising along….If you're not that naturally inclined to giving, you're going to feel very despondent and dissatisfied, disillusioned with the world, you're going to start doubting people and questioning their intentions and their motives. And now,

you're no longer building collaborations and getting teams together…so it almost

then needs to be if you want to do great things, you have to make great sacrifices.

Chad as an intense, committed, and focused leader. Chad saw himself as an intense,

committed, and focused leader who strived to influence others to rally together towards a

common goal. The only way to achieve great things was to bring together varied perspectives

and to build bridges among the team, which he called "reality bridges." He elaborated with

an example: "you can have two people on opposite sides of the wall, and they could be

arguing forever about whether that wall is convex or concave." He also spoke of himself as

being "intense." To Chad, intensity was a paradoxical concept, in which one would have to

be both "patient and burning [with] passion" at the same time. Chad's intensity possessed

elements of commitment and perseverance. He explained intensity with this example.

> The three year old wanting the lollipop is intense, and they're committed, and they're
>
> focused, and they're determined and they're going to win, and they always do….And
>
> if it's not today then it's tomorrow, it's the next day, sooner or later you know, that's,
>
> they've tapped into that power…They're not concerned about all their failures,
>
> they're so focused on what it is that they're … looking to accomplish. I think we lose
>
> that as we age.

Chad also described himself as having "focus," which he elaborated as having a "certain

critical level of intensity" to eliminate distractions in order for change to happen. Here, Chad

expanded on what being focused meant to him.

> Water boils at 212 Fahrenheit not 211… focus is the ability …to get yourself in
>
> alignment and get yourself up to that threshold to say, if I want water to boil, I have to

be committed to 212, or there's no point really starting at all…that's what focus is, the ability to take everything and channel it down and eliminate the distractions.

Further, Chad saw himself as a committed person, and clarified the distinction between involvement and commitment. While many people were involved or committed for a short while, Chad spoke of the importance of being completely committed and how there was no room for partial commitment even when there were "road blocks" during the process of achieving a goal. He used the following analogy to explain the difference between commitment versus involvement.

The easiest way of figuring out the difference is… your breakfast…So you have bacon and eggs, the hen was involved, the pig was committed…it's a mindset…It's like that four minute mile idea, right. It was humanly impossible to run the four minute mile, …as soon as Roger Banister broke the four minute mile, the next year there were a whole crowd of people that followed in behind him, right. so that's what being committed…is he just broke through that barrier and all of a sudden that groundswell of support came behind him.

Chad as a methodical, tactical, and strategic person. Chad saw himself as "methodical," in that he was always fascinated by systems and the process of how things work together and how different parts are interrelated. He liked to approach matters through looking at the "big picture" and having a step-by-step process planned out before taking action. Chad also spoke of himself as being "tactical." As a tactical person, he valued seemingly small insignificant battles that could accumulate to have huge future implications.

Such a mentality was crucial in order to the "position of making changes to the way we do society." Here he spoke about the importance of taking little steps to create big changes.

> If you're tactical in your approach, in approaching your day so that you can get from the day not just through the day, then days after days, after day, and years after years, start building up and then all of a sudden…people start looking and they start drawing inspiration from that... they look at the – the finished product, and they don't realize that it is literally that apple a day kind of idea…Just accumulating together and if you could take that personal battle, and put it together on a team you play… now all of a sudden you've got a movement…you actually have the ability to change things.

Chad also described himself as strategic, which he defined as "working smarter" and being able to learn from errors in order to reach a goal. Chad talked about the idea of how a "mistake is an error you've made twice." Therefore, it was important for Chad to learn from errors and get back onto the right track. Chad elaborated what it meant to be strategic with an analogy of driving.

> This is the strategic part of me…I have to rush to the error, rush almost to failure, because that's the fastest way for me to find out … where I need to make the course corrections….it's better to know now, right before you get 600 kilometers down the road, that you've gone the wrong way… so that's being strategic to me. …Someone hopefully, has gone ahead – gone ahead and put a sign out for you….Calgary is that way, or Edmonton is that way…and you've got to be attentive to the sign posts along the way.

Chad as a creative advocate. Chad saw himself as a "creative" person who has "the ability to, first of all see things that no one can see." To Chad, being creative was also about trying different possibilities to achieve your intended goal. He recognized his habit of using analogies to express his ideas and elaborated on the point about being creative with the following.

> It's like having a vault, right, and then you have a combination and maybe you even have all the right numbers, but they're in the wrong order. And so you're trying, you're trying, you're trying, you try every combination you possibly can. First of all you have to try and figure out of all the number, which are the right ones. And then how do you assemble them in such a way that they actually work together, right, and if you just have one number out of sequence, or you're one number off, it's not going to work. And you can be banging your head against that vault door, it's not going to open. Once you get the numbers right, everything falls into place and it's just like magic, it's click, click, click, click, and you know the hammer drops and the door opens.

Another quality of Chad that helped him to make changes was being "communicative." As Chad explained, being communicative meant taking ideas and transferring them such that others can comprehend them. Chad felt that being communicative was essential to individuals who desired to "make changes to the way we do society." He then expanded on the idea of being creative to the concept of advocacy for his children. Chad was very keen on gathering collective support to make change happen, as he talked about here.

For example, towards advocacy… My child needs this service, the government's not giving it to me, let's get our torches and pitchforks, let's go get [th]em… okay that's one way but I don't know if that's really the best way … you have to go back and you have to actually look at the process and realize that it's a process that is the result here…it's the process of how did we come together, and how did we work together, and what did we learn together…what mistakes or errors did I make along the way, that I can help you not make in the future.

Calvin and Catherine's experience of *PEERS*. Both Chad's son (Calvin) and daughter (Catherine) participated in the *PEERS* program. According to Chad, the *PEERS* program was a place for Calvin to refine his skills, and for Catherine to fill in gaps and improve her social skills. Chad spoke of the gains each of his children experienced as a result of *PEERS*. Chad also shared stories of successes and disappointments post-program.

Calvin's experience of PEERS. Through the *PEERS* program, Calvin experienced gains that helped him to refine his social skills. Chad also spoke about the challenge of skills maintenance and highlighted the importance of continuous efforts to work on refining learned skills.

Gains from PEERS. One of the intentions of joining the *PEERS* was to help Calvin refine his existing skills and increase his confidence interacting with co-workers and customers. Chad described his son's participation in the program as "planting the flowers," where the therapeutic process would hopefully help Calvin grow in his skills. At the onset of the *PEERS*, Chad experienced Calvin as "unconsciously incompetent," meaning he was unaware of his challenges in social interaction. As he progressed through *PEERS*, Calvin

moved through the "incompetence phase." Chad currently viewed Calvin as "consciously competent," however, their goal would be for Calvin to reach to a state of "unconscious competence." Despite Calvin still tensed up in unfamiliar social situations, he gained more confidence, which benefited his workplace social interactions. Specifically, Calvin became less "robotic" and more "relaxed and confident" when interacting with strangers. Calvin gained confidence in approaching his coworkers and was able to use learned conversational skills to interact with customers. Chad highlighted that Calvin won an award that was voted by his co-workers, and Chad felt that such success was a result of the combination of parental guidance and the training at *PEERS*. Here Chad recounted a real life comparison of another teen who was in a similar situation as Calvin.

> My son won the Employee of the Year Award, because of *PEERS* …without the skill development that came through *PEERS*, I don't think it would have translated into him winning the employee of the year… we prepared [Calvin] for the idea that you can't be rigid...then we added *PEERS* on and *PEERS* allowed him to be better refined when he was thrown into that role ...A perfect case in point is a kid that had the same level of functioning as my son, doing exactly the same job at a different – different store, got fired from that job, because someone would come up to him and say where's the Shake and Bake, and he'd respond back with some vulgarities, right and tell them to get their own Shake and Bake, he was busy...as I know now [he] is sitting at home, in mom's basement playing video games.

Skill maintenance and regression. Calvin has "dropped off" some of the skills (e.g., phoning skills) gained from *PEERS*. According to Chad, during the program Calvin phoned other people because he viewed the practice as homework and pushed Calvin to go beyond

his comfort zone. Chad attributed the lack of maintenance of learned skills due to Calvin "slid[ing] back to where he was comfortable." It was not surprising that Calvin had challenges maintaining some of the learned skills, as Chad described the *PEERS* as just another "hot bath therapy" where training occurred in an "artificial environment." Hence, Chad emphasized the importance of integrating the *PEERS* curriculum into the society. Here Chad talked about *PEERS* as a "hot bath therapy" and an artificial setting that is not an ideal set-up for skill maintenance.

> We're sort of the, you know, taking the kids out of this artificial environment that we've created and dropping them back in the real world, and I think the – the ability to, for them to continue on, on their own, at school, on the playground…it's just another program that sort of, well the hot bath therapy where you just, you know, as soon as you get out, you know, get out of the water, it's, you start getting cold right away, type of thing.

Chad suggested that rather than seeing skills building as a short term process, it was a process of change that required one to "reinforce [learned skills] until [they] become a new way of thinking." Here Chad gave an analogy of learning a foreign language and social skills.

> It's kind of like he's learned a little bit of French, right, enough to sort of get by. So he can sort of, you know, find out where the washroom is...Now they're not going to sit down and talk about the big war and peace of something like that, right, in French, but he's got a rudimentary operating sort of basis to be able to interact a little...if he

starts getting stressed out or if he's not sure of what he should be doing, or what he

should be asking, instantly we see [him] revert back.

Catherine's experience of PEERS. Chad shared how his daughter's attitude towards

the program changed because Chad and his wife told Catherine to be mentor instead of a

participant. In doing so, Chad witnessed how much Catherine gained from *PEERS* and used

her skills to development new friendships.

Participating as a mentor. Chad described his daughter's experience at *PEERS* as

exceeding their expectations "because within the course of that program, [Catherine] went

from soup to nuts." At the beginning of the program, Catherine felt "absolutely devastated"

because she did not feel she needed the intervention program because she "wasn't in that

group" and "wasn't like all these other kids." Chad as a creative person then eased Catherine

into the program by giving her an unofficial role of being a mentor to other teens in the

program. Chad found that Catherine indeed learned "incidentally along the way" as a mentor

to others, as he elaborated in the following.

> We had worked her into a, like a mentoring role…you're there to help you know, the
>
> other participants and we actually, identified specific names and stuff… her identity
>
> of herself moved from participant to actually mentor...she started getting value and
>
> getting...a lot of gratification from helping...she started to realize that holy smokes
>
> this is actually making me feel good, because I'm making them feel good.

New relationships established in school. Chad attributed his daughter's social

success at school in forming new relationships to the *PEERS* program. Not only did she

refine her skills, she also grew into a "leadership and mentorship role." Here, Chad shared

the story of how his daughter befriended other students at school despite of others'
communication challenges.

> I don't think this is coincidence whatsoever, my daughter befriended a couple of deaf
> girls at her school, who she noticed were always – they're twins, right. And they
> were always eating their lunch, just the two of them, because of course no one else
> knows how to talk to them. And so she went over and befriended them and low and
> behold, she's now proficient in sign language.

Chad's experience of *PEERS*. Chad saw *PEERS* as a means to contribute to the
small changes that would lead to big changes, as well as a translator and bridge that helped
individuals who face social challenges to connect with others. Chad also shared about what it
was like for him to participate with other parents, elaborated on the research aspect of the
process along with his intention in participating in the program.

Small changes, big differences. Chad believed in the long term impact of small
changes. Chad pointed out that parents often had an expectation that social skills programs
serve to "fix" everything that was wrong with their child, and their child would become a
"social butterfly." Rather, he recommended parents to be aware of challenges and maintain a
level of acceptance for gradual transformation. The key was that Chad did not overlook the
smallest gains in his children's development. Chad saw how the *PEERS* could bring about
the small changes that would have huge long term trajectory changes, as he elaborated with
the following.

If we could just make a one degree change….In terms of my son's level of skill…

that won't look like much right now, but holy smokes, when you go one degree off

course, right, you don't land in Madrid, Spain, you land in Moscow, kind of thing.

Furthermore, Chad pointed out that in fact his family had been implementing skills taught in

the *PEERS* program along the way of raising their children, and elaborated on how the

program was almost like a confirmation of their parenting practices.

We were doing in *PEERS*, we have been doing all the way along. We just didn't

know it and we didn't have the academics around it, we didn't have the ability to sort

of, you know, define it and refine it, and communicate it and say, how can we do this

in, not just in California, how can we do this in Edmonton.

PEERS as a bridge and a translator. Chad expressed that "the *PEERS* is by far the

strongest and most comprehensive socializing program" he experienced, "because it is

intentionally targeted at social, developing social skills." Chad noted that the closest

socialization program would be the Cubs Scout program. Chad felt that Cubs built social

skills through recreation (e.g., playing games,) while *PEERS* built social skills through skill

development. Chad saw *PEERS* as a means to help children with ASD translate meanings

behind certain social situations, so that they could better integrate into social settings. Chad's

analogy of *PEERS* was a "translator." He began explaining that an individual with autism is

like a "stranger in a strange land" who did not know the customs, norms, and hence

encountered challenges in social situations. Children with ASD "don't necessarily pick that

up incidentally what other kids pick up." Therefore, *PEERS* acted as a translator to help

children better connect with this foreign world, stressing the idea of "how do we actually

sculpt the child without squashing their spirit." Here Chad talked about the analogy of
PEERS as a translator.

> The *PEERS* program is kind of like having a translator…Like I can go into it for a
> foreign country and I don't necessarily have to learn the language … we're installing
> social consciousness and awareness, and expectations of how we are to behave.

Chad also saw that the *PEERS* program has the capacity to become a "universal translator"
such that the program could expand and serve beyond children with ASD. Here Chad
expanded on the idea of seeing *PEERS* as connecting children of diverse backgrounds and
abilities.

> *PEERS* I think is that bridge that can get kids that are stuck on that side of the gap,
> right, over so that they can be, you know, joining up with their friends…The *PEERS*
> program has the ability to say hold on a second, you're going the wrong way, this is
> not working, you're not connecting, these people are bullying you… It has the
> capacity to be universal, it has the capacity to be uniting people from all walks of life,
> all cultures, all languages.

> ***Participating with other parents.*** Chad "thoroughly enjoyed" participating with other
parents because he was "absolutely committed" to find insight. However, Chad noted, "I can
honestly tell you it was one of the most challenging group experiences, I've participated in."
There were a wide range of "personalities" and commitment levels, presenting opportunity
for people at extremes of the "paradigm" to become frustrated at each other. Chad mentioned
that it was hard for him to listen to some parents share because they "didn't even do their
homework." At the same time, others' lack of commitment motivated him to work harder.

Chad described his biggest task in the group was "state management" of the diverse group dynamic, but it should have been focused on skills development. It can become challenging when other parents are distracted (e.g., picking up phone calls) when Chad was talking about his son because he felt like his son was being "disrespected." He also mentioned about how some parents would go off on a "different tangent." Chad felt as if he needed to facilitate the group dynamic and it required "tenuous" efforts to re-direct the discussion back on track. At the same time, Chad felt that "synergy" within the group was missing. Due to the tight schedule of the curriculum limited parents' ability to connect, Chad suggested having informal meetings before each session for parents to chat and get to know each other better.

The real work comes after PEERS ended. Chad highlighted that the "real work actually came after" the program ended, and recognized at an early stage that one of the limitation of *PEERS* was the short-term duration. Chad gave a realistic perspective that change in individuals was not a quick process, but instead an on-going process. Chad noted that he viewed *PEERS* as a short term basic training program "that was going to have a limited impact," because "the real work actually came after." From Chad's point of view, despite Calvin had social skill competence, unfamiliar settings were challenging for him as he became "stressed out" and "tensed." Hence, support at home was crucial for change to carry on. Here he spoke of challenges that his son faced and how as a parent, Chad actively supported his son in practicing essential social skills.

> Something as simple as ordering a sub at… Subway, he's thinking all the things that
> he's got to ask, right. And then so he's not engaging with the person…he's locked up
> and you can just see he's Mr. Roboto in the Subway. Right, so I'm going to go broke
> buying Subway sandwiches, I bet, but you know, we, I keep throwing him in that

every week, you know, you got to keep trying, keep trying, keep trying… can't

expect that to happen for any of us in ten weeks, you know. We just don't change that

fast….Just because the *PEERS* program ended doesn't mean that the other curriculum

ends, in fact it doesn't.

Participating in a research project. Chad's perception of the program's goal was

that, because the program was part of a research project, it was intended to provide evidence

of its efficacy. Furthermore, Chad saw that because the program was research based, the

curriculum had a sense of "critical intensity," as Chad said the program was "very tight in

terms of, this is what needs to be done, in the order it needs to be done, and a very sort of

controlled." Despite perceiving his participation was part of a pilot research project, Chad

still decided to place his kids in the program for skills refinement. Here, Chad spoke of his

understanding of the purpose of the program's goal.

> I think the goal of the program, quite frankly, was to prove that it worked… because
>
> it was a research related…. It was ground breaking…it's not anything that I'd ever
>
> known that had been done before…And so you have to have the test pilots, you
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> know, the jump in and strap in and hope that they survive the flights, to prove that
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> you can fly that fast, or that high, or with that vehicle… when I understood that it was
>
> a research project, then it was a pilot project, that was – that was a basis of my
>
> decision to have my kids participate…And by the way they're going to get better at
>
> social skills.

Research informed practice. Chad saw the urgency and importance of researching

programs like *PEERS* because of the demands of families who were desperately in need for

intervention and support. The key was to better understand the "most effective mechanisms" and the role of curriculum embedded delivery, the role of parents etc. Chad saw the current research project as how "it's going to come in building blocks, and it's going to look like a patchwork quilt." Chad's "whole philosophy is let's go and prove what's possible, right, at the front line." Chad was open about his intention of participating in the current research interview and saw his participation as a means to contribute to the research and policy change process. In fact, he was already in conversations with government leadership about inclusive education and had future presentations lined up to present his views about changes in the school system. Here he spoke of his intention of bringing research findings to policy makers to make a change.

> Let's get that information up to the people responsible for policy making… They're going to feed on academics, they're going to feed on best practices, evidence base and all the rest of that stuff. And that's how they're going to implement it… because the bureaucrats are not going to implement anything that they can't proof… put it into policy makers hands, then maybe we could actually change the way we do business here…if you can demystify how it is that we created this – this moment in time and this result, and you know, even if it's just on the narrow perspective of *PEERS*. It's all pieces to that puzzle… I think it's only fair to – to you know, let you know that it is fully my intention, I would love to be able to run this right up the flagpole and see how high we can make it.

Doing PEERS differently. Chad proposed a different way to view socialization intervention and suggested that social skills enhancement was an on-going process. Chad was also a firm believer of introducing the program content of the *PEERS* and integrating it into

the various training settings to proactively enhance the social interaction skills of all children at an early age. Furthermore, Chad would like to see the program be delivered differently in relation to its pace, implementation setting, social interaction guidelines, follow-up etc.

Universal, peer-mediated, early intervention. Chad projected the ultimate goal of the *PEERS* program as equipping all children with the same "basic operating software." As he put it:

> This is potential being squandered, and shame on us, you know, for allowing even one kid to fall through the cracks, let alone one in 88 kids right now are diagnosed in autism….figure a way to deliver this to universally...make sure that we do it for everyone.

It would be applicable to all children regardless of their ability and how good their social skills are. Chad brought up the idea of not just the "RRRs", but adding a fourth R, the relationship component, into the school system. Chad pointed out that "we're preparing our kids for a world that no longer exist, and they are totally ill equipped for the world, the reality of the world." Chad used the following example to illustrate the importance of equipping all children to act appropriately in social situations and also revealed his concerns for his children's well-being on the playground.

> Years of IBI therapy could be destroyed in the next 15 minutes, it's called recess… I would bring my kids home at lunch time…So I, I could get by with 15 minutes … I would actually take the dog for a walk around the playground in those 15 minutes. And I'd observe and see where [Calvin] was, and what he was doing and how he's interacting with his peers and stuff like that. Right. But there was no way I was going

to leave him there for a full hour, right, basically unsupervised and you know, left to his own devices. Because I knew that it was just not, he wasn't equipped to deal with …that and neither were his peers… The real power of *PEERS* is what happens if we can take that program put it in the classroom, all kids benefit, they start learning from one another. Every time two people come together, somebody's learning something… if we're going to create a program that's going to work, and let's not fool ourselves, we have to have kids that are, you know, well above their weight class

Furthermore, children who did not have particular social challenges would benefit from being part of the *PEERS* program while modelling for and teaching other children allowing them to refine their own skills. Chad also felt that his son participated "ten years late" and felt strongly about starting earlier (i.e., starting at age four). Furthermore, a peer-mediated component was also a solution to the "mass customization model," in which one would be "dealing with the masses, but we're working individually." He further elaborated on the value of early intervention and the peer-mediated component with the following.

The key is to start early, and to be present and vigilant…because it doesn't work if we had a pedestrian approach to things… Maybe can have kids in the early education program, they have community kids in the classroom … cause if all you're looking at are other kids with disabilities, right, you're not going to develop, you know, beyond that level...Regardless of their capacity...regardless of what deficiency they might have….I think it's beneficial for all people…the peer influences their friend and helps them, sort of fill in those gaps, but at the same time, by teaching others they become more proficient in their own understanding….It's that old adage that a person who benefits the most is the teacher, not the student… Because now they're refining their

knowledge, and they're applying it in ways that they'd never even comprehended it could be applied.

Proactive embedded model. Chad hoped to see the *PEERS* program being incorporated into Scouts, swimming lessons, and most importantly, in the schools because Chad felt the program was "basic training." In doing so, children could learn social skills in their natural environment, as Chad pointed out that school is the "hub of the community." Here he talked about the idea of embedding social skills development into the school curriculum, as social interaction would be the glue that binds social beings together in the society.

> We embed that [*PEERS*] into curriculum, and we teach the kids right from day one, this is how we're going to work and play well together…We're so focused on how our kids are doing in school, we're not focused on how well are they doing at school… Right now a lot of the bullying stuff that they're talking about… it's still that reactive model of let's go and correct this behaviour that's wrong… Let's just accept that the behaviour is there and it always has been, and probably always will be….let's try not to fix the problem, let's redefine the problem, because that's where our solution is... but if we don't get the social skills piece right… we're going to have an educated kid sitting at home playing video games… If we don't understand that the tie that binds everything together is our ability to work and play well with each other, the community of the future exists now on the playgrounds.

PEERS was an artificial construct. Chad saw *PEERS* as an "artificial construct" in relations to the restrictions of interaction within the group and also how the program was

delivered in isolation of a families' day-to-day life. Chad expressed that his and other parents' frustration of the design of the *PEERS* program was that parents were discouraged to connect with other participants outside of the setting of the program. Chad preferred having the opportunity to further interact and connect with other parents on a deeper level during the intervention program. Parents did not share "enough history together," and he described the program as "sanitized." Chad saw *PEERS* as an "artificial construct" and restrictive, such that parameters were in place to control external variables, which may alter the intended purpose and mechanism of the program. Chad perceived the reason why the *PEERS* program was delivered in isolation and screening criteria was because the program was still in the "beta testing" phase as a concept to be proven effective. One of his main concerns of the *PEERS* program was that it was running outside of the children's natural social setting, at the same time "it's better to have imperfect action than perfect inaction." Chad suggested that the benefit of connecting with other families (e.g., weekend get-together, informal pre-session gathering) was to allow teens to practice and generalize their learned skills when families get together in forming a network that would support each other. Here he talked about the how much he valued delivering the program in a more natural setting.

> This [*PEERS*] is an artificial construct, right, that's happening out there in isolation to people's lives… I found that personally to be a very strong impediment to being able to – to generalize it beyond the peers program…. I understood the rationale behind it. But I – I hated every step of it…You don't want parents sort of going in and corrupting all you data type of thing, right? Everyone's taking their free time and their spare time to be there, and they're all coming in for different reasons, with different levels of needs and different experiences. If we don't have that time to sort

of you know, socialize, that through, then that's going to manifest its way into people taking, you know, going off on a tangent and we saw a lot of that happening...If we had, as parents, the opportunity to come together right, and to get to know each other, and our children and our kids to get to know each other… come over to my house one weekend, right, and we can practice this stuff… I think that that's absolutely critical, in everything that we do normally as parents, needs to be understood as part of the *PEERS* program….And I thought it was absolutely bizarre that we weren't allowed to talk to each other, right. We weren't able to – allowed to communicate with each other, we weren't able to talk about each other's kids with each other...the future for *PEERS* is what happens when you take those learning sand pair it up with socialization piece...into natural networks.

Need for process component. Chad felt that the curriculum was "too tight" and suggested that the program to be stretched out over a longer period of time (e.g., 26 weeks) allowing participants to master a skill before moving onto the next. The value of stretching out the program and giving participants more time was so that they can immerse themselves in the learning so that the skills would become part of them. Chad felt that many parents were "caught up" in doing and reporting on the homework each session and that they did not have a chance to reflect on the outcome. Chad felt that the sessions "were all difficult and they were all very unclear." The reason for the latter comment was because Chad suggested the need to provide parents with the overall "big picture" at the start and also to provide enough time to work through each targeted skill. Here Chad spoke of the importance of giving participants enough room to process and reflect on the learnings from the program.

It's the experiential part of it, and the ability to take that and sort of immerse yourself in that idea, long enough for you to sort of to be part of you… part of your thinking, part of your consciousness….we didn't have the time to sort of, you know, sort of experience it and let it settle in… didn't have the opportunity to actually understand how all the pieces fit together and why, you know what we were looking to accomplish…if we could sort of set the stage at the beginning, this is what we're going to do, this is you know, what our goals are. This is what we're looking for, right. Give people enough time to work their way through it, and assimilate it, and – and you know process it.

Chad raised the importance of focusing on the process element of the program, and to use open-ended questions to invite parents to reflect on the homework and learning process. In other words, instead of asking parents whether or not they completed the homework, leaders could ask about how the process of doing the homework went for the family, or how they felt to attempt the homework. Through understanding other parents' experiences, Chad believed it would benefit him to understand how his son's experience would fit in a "global" sense.

Viewing social skill intervention differently. To Chad, socialization intervention should be seen as "healthcare," in which one pay a regular visit to the "socialization coach," just as how one would receive a regular health check-up from a doctor. This approach suggested the merits of being proactive in monitoring one's socialization health. Here, Chad suggested viewing *PEERS* as an "attitude" and a "philosophy," instead of a weekly program.

The *PEERS* program absolutely, it needs to come through loud and clear that this isn't something that we just do. This is the way that we think. This is the way we do

society. This is the way we do business, and we need to shame people into get in with

the program...If you view it as an attitude and a philosophy, and a way of – of life,

right, that this is actually how we're going to build our society, right. Then there's no

beginning, there's no end...if you're viewing it as a program, as something that is

going to fix a problem, right, you're always going to be limited in terms of the

effectiveness of it.

Post-program follow-up support. Chad felt that a post-intervention debrief needed to

take place, including an "assessment" from a parental perspective (e.g., focus group) instead

of from a "data standpoint." Follow-up interviews would serve not only to gather parental

perspectives but also to empower parents to anticipate "challenges that [were] to come."

Chad also pointed out the difference between ineffective programs versus programs the

lacked follow-up: "that's a real danger, because then what happens is people associate sort of

that - that lack of follow through, with a lack of – of effectiveness with the program

itself…those two are totally different sort of observations." Chad elaborated on the

importance of follow-up after the program as a way to assess the families' progress and

experience of the program.

> We need to get sort of the pre and post sort of, you know, the assessments happening,
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> right. Not just, and I know that they were done from a data standpoint, right. But –
>
> but I'm talking about from a, like a parental sort of perception… empower the parents
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> so that they can continue to guide their kids, and remind their kids, you know, the
>
> skills because obviously, hopefully parents have a little bit more resources to draw
>
> from… any differences in perceptions and experiences of stuff have all filtered out
>
> and normalized… that would be a very powerful opportunity for you to go in and

with specific direction, be able to equip them, you know, but first of all gather their

information, firsthand, the way that you're doing now type of thing, like in the

moment.

Case Study #3: Denise

Denise (family 3) was the mother of Danny, and she participated in the *PEERS*

program on behalf of her family. Denise participated in an initial interview at the University

of Alberta, in a graduate student office, and also a follow-up phone interview to answer

newly raised questions. During the interviews, Denise was very willing to share her

experiences, but also noted that it was hard for her to recall all the details of the program

because it had been over a year since the program ended. When the topic of her son's future

came up, she got emotional because she was concerned about his future academic path.

Denise decided to complete the PIAs at the onset of the interview, and was willing to discuss

both with me. The first drawing she shared with me depicted her support system (see

Appendix C, Figure C5 for drawing). Denise used stick figures and different colors to

representation her relationships. Denise drew herself and her husband in the middle and used

lines and arrows to point to different groups of people in her support system. Her immediate

support system included her husband, children, relatives, and co-workers/old friends. The

second visual she shared with me was a list of 20 words used to describe her experience of

PEERS (see Appendix C, Figure C6 for list of visual). The list of words included: friendship,

support, group, conversation, homework, progress, reaching out, help, clubs, belonging,

stress, connection, initiation, reporting, turns, practice, parents, invitation, get together, rules.

She noted that after writing ten words, it became harder to come up with new words. After

showing me the list of words, Denise then described what each word meant to her or what she was trying to illustrate.

About Denise. Denise carried a gentle and warm presence. She was few in her words but she was willing to explore her experiences. Family, friendship and health were the most important to Denise. Denise's work involved handling clients in the justice system and she spoke of the challenges she faced in the workplace, particularly interacting with some of her clients. An important preoccupation and stressor on Denise's mind was her son's future academic plans.

Family, friendship and health. To Denise, family, health, friendship, and status were most important to most people, and for her it was "family, friendship, health." Denise used one of the drawings to illustrate her support system, which included several significant individuals in her life. The image included her family and friends. Denise used different color tones to demonstrate the closeness of the relationships. She explained the color choice as follow, "warm colors for closer connections, and then dark and the cooler colors for, because they're so far away...so the connection is warm, it's infrequent."

Working in the justice system. Denise shared that one of the most difficult thing she had to do was to deliver advice or unpleasant news to her clients because of the "hostile" responses and interactions. Here Denise shared a story about a challenging incident she experienced as a lawyer.

> The most difficult thing I've ever had to do. I think when I was a defense lawyer, I used to have to um, give people advice, sometimes they didn't like to hear it, and sometimes I remember having to go and tell someone in a maximum security

penitentiary that we had lost his appeal on a charge... He was looking at the rest of his

life in jail, and he started crying when I told him....or if somebody would ask me to do

something unethical and I'd have to say no, just in terms of the immediate hostile

reaction sometimes that would generate, that could be sometimes kind of scary with

some of the people I dealt with.

A current worry. Denise expressed her current worry as "my son…his future." Her

worry stemmed from the recently increased admission standards for the program Danny hope

to be admitted into. When Denise was talking about her top worry, she became emotional

and teary. She expressed such worry has been a stressful experience for her.

Denise's son, Danny. When Denise described Danny, she shared about how she is

continuously surprised by Danny's awareness of situations and surroundings as well as the

way he spontaneously internalizes new skills.

Danny's awareness. Denise described Danny as how he could sometimes be

"oblivious" and "not be thoughtful." Denise gave an example of how Danny may not hold

the door for the person behind and let the door slam, showing him being unaware of others

socially. On the other hand, Denise had been surprised by Danny's sense of awareness. This

story showed how Denise was surprised at Danny's ability to generate a story so his parents

would not become disappointed in him for his lack of social interaction.

I remember once he lied to me about having initiated an interaction. This was back in

junior high still, but about having initiated a, you know, having lunch with someone.

Cause we were trying to get him to have lunch with somebody. He really didn't want

to so – so one day um, I asked him, he said he – he had and he described it and what

happened and everything. And then I think it was a day later or something, he told me it wasn't true, he had made it up. And I'm like well why did you lie to me? Like there was no downside, there was no consequence or anything. It was just, he said I was afraid you would be disappointed.. I was really surprised that he cared about whether or not I would be disappointed, and that he tailored his behaviour to that.

Denise then went on sharing another story illustrating Danny's awareness and appreciation of other cities' aesthetics, and she was amazed at how he was able to make connections back to his home environment.

When we were in um, Italy and looking at stuff, he made comments several times, that surprised me that he – cause you know this is not his like aesthetics and admiring the beauty of things, it's not really his main interest in life. But, so we were a little nervous about how he would be. But he, he did, make comments when we were looking at art or architecture that surprised me sometimes…That showed appreciation for the art, for the architecture that he was actually…we were looking at something, I can't remember what, a famous statue or something or architecture out – outside on the street. And he was like how come Edmonton's not beautiful like this? But it surprised me because I don't think of him as really thinking about the beauty of the city. Like he seems so focused on practical things that it – it doesn't seem like he really cares about that at all.

Danny's spontaneous change. Denise found that with Danny, some skills required repeated reinforcements over a few years for him to spontaneously internalize them. Denise noted that it happened regularly for different skills, and gave a few examples:

When he was young seems like he was never going to respond to the direction "come here" and we just keep trying and trying to get him to do it and one day he just suddenly did it…Even showering every day which he does now. Like he used to fight to the nail against and it felt like that was never going to happen either…When we had IBI going on at home I know there were some skills where we were working on them for years and it felt like it was futile and all of a sudden he was just doing it…sitting with someone at lunch, he did for the first time at work this summer, something that we have been working on for several years.

Denise proposed that repetition could be one reason for his spontaneous change. Something that may only normally require us a few reminders, it may be 100 or up to 300 times before "some kind of synapse connection" occurred.

Danny's experience of *PEERS*. Denise described Danny's participation of the *PEERS* program as a gainful experience. Not only did Danny enjoy interacting with similar level functioning peers, he also benefited immensely from practicing learned skill though the homework component. The *PEERS* program really stretched Danny out of his comfort zone and allowed him to experience socialization opportunities that may not have been experience from elsewhere. No doubt, Denise witnessed Danny benefiting from *PEERS*, at the same time Danny continues battle with facing the fear of rejection where he would regress in his progress in socialization.

Participating with similar level peers. Danny particularly enjoyed interacting with peers who were functioning at a similar level on the autism spectrum. Denise mentioned that Danny missed having that "level of social connection," because in other group he

participated, his peers were "a lot lower functioning." According to Denise, when Danny was in other groups, he felt bad because he felt his parents saw him functioning at a lower level and "it made him feel less smart" or "less capable." Denise felt that when Danny became more confident when being surrounded by peers similar to his functioning.

     Post program ups and downs. Despite Denise encouraged Danny to continue implementing skills from *PEERS*, Danny noted that he had "slid back to his "original shape." According to Denise, Danny "felt like the *PEERS* program stretched him out into a different shape. And then when the program was over he's retreated back into his original shape." Denise felt that while Danny enjoyed social interactions, his fear of rejection hindered him from continuing on with the learned skills. Here she talked about Danny's fear.

> I mean it's like being really, really, really intensely shy, and – yes so I believe him when he says he's afraid of – of rejection and even if he tries to kind of give himself a little pep talk, it's still hard for him to do.

Even though there were disappointments after the program, Denise also shared some stories of triumphs in relations to Danny's socialization. Currently he had started his own club at school and six students had signed up to meet during lunch time once a week. Furthermore, during the summer, Danny had an internship at a University and Denise was very happy that he was able to find common interest with his work peers. He had also been eating lunch with his co-workers sometimes, and used learned skills such as initiating conversations and trading information in the work setting. Here she shared about Danny's internship in relations to his social interactions at work.

I was very happy, he's told me that some of the other interns really share his interest in Magic the Gathering, and he's been playing with them at lunch. Um, several times during the summer… so he's having social interactions.

It is important to keep in mind that, Denise expressed that it is hard to say whether or not his social skills interaction progress could be entirely attributed to the *PEERS* program because she was not observing him all the time, and there has been a gap from the end of program to the current interview.

Denise's experience of *PEERS*. Denise felt that the *PEERS* program was a good avenue for receiving helpful concrete information how to better support teens with social skill challenges. Denise's overall experience of the program appeared to be gainful, as she also noted how the information taught in the program was beneficial for herself and her daughter who both do not have ASD. Denise also compared the *PEERS* program with others intervention programs, in which the homework component was a major distinctive feature.

PEERS as helpful resource. Denise appreciated how the *PEERS* introduced "concrete advice" and how the social strategies (e.g., slipping into conversations) were broken down into smaller steps. Furthermore, Denise liked how Danny learned concrete information, and thought the content and strategies were "really good." Denise particularly valued information that taught the teens to find peers who shared common interest through school clubs, enter or exit conversations, and also organize get-togethers. The *PEERS* program was a "great resource" to learn important skills and continue to carry such skills in practice for the family. To Denise, the program was also a supportive group setting where her son could learn social skills, so Danny could "reach out" and "get help." Denise even noted:

"I think I learned things too, from (laugh) the curriculum. It was like, oh that would have been useful for me to attend this group, when I was young, too." In addition, Denise even thought her other children without ASD but was really shy would also benefit from the program. Furthermore, Denise shared about her experience participating with other parents, and noted "Oh I enjoyed having the opportunity to speak to other parents," because she found it helpful to hear what other parents were going through. Here, Denise shared about her impressions of the program and felt that the family could continue to work on building on skills Danny learned from the program.

> I was very happy with the things he was learning …I really liked the curriculum, like the actual content of the … advice was really good. I know it was um, like slipping into a group…I thought that was fantastic. I thought my daughters who were not autistic, but are really shy could have really benefitted from it too….I just thought well this is so good, you know, this is so useful and even – even if it takes him three years to build up the courage to start implementing it, like we have the materials.

> **PEERS versus other programs.** Denise felt that the *PEERS* was different from other programs in that the content was broken down into helpful strategies and the program included a practical homework component, instead of only having role-plays. Denise used the following vivid imagery to describe what homework component was like for her.

> It would be like um, learning how to paint a picture by being told verbally how to paint a picture. It would be similar to what he had done before, and learning to paint a picture by actually being given paintbrushes and paints, and being told to actually do the picture, was more like what the *PEERS* program was like.

The most rewarding part of her experience at *PEERS* was "watching him actually do the homework that I thought he would never be able to do. Like he actually phoned people up and talking to them and seeing him progress." The homework component allowed participants to practice learned skills and also discuss weekly to follow-up on how the homework went for the family. The homework "forced" Danny to practice skills he was learning (e.g., conversation invitation, two-way conversation, trading information), helped him "internalize skills" in a safe comfortable setting. Here Denise pointed out the benefits of homework and how such component set *PEERS* apart from other programs.

> I mean he kind of got homework before, but it didn't involve actually phoning people up, it was more like pretend practicing, as opposed to going out and actually having the interaction, and then having to report back. And having a bit of pressure to – to actually do it, before coming back the next week. That made a huge difference, that was unlike any of the other programs he's taken...What I really liked about *PEERS* was that with the homework, it really forced him to practice the – the things he was learning, instead of just telling him this is what you have to do. The practice I think helped – did help to internalize some of that, so that when he was in the setting where he was more comfortable, he was actually able to draw on that …. like initiating a conversation, and um, you know even just the two-way conversations. Like even starting with trading information, I think he found extremely helpful. And although superficially it was similar to things he had learned from other speech pathology groups, it seemed very different because of the homework….The practice component, I think it really changed the way he saw it.

Denise clearly noted that the homework component was beneficial, yet she reflected upon the challenges that came along with it. The most stressful part of the program for Denise was reporting on homework that has not been complete (e.g., get-together). Towards the end of the program, the teens had to arrange get-togethers and it was the most challenging homework for Danny, because of "how much it required." The initiation component was most difficult for Danny, as Denise viewed Danny as "intensely shy." Through such process, Denise noticed that she learned more about her son, and said "I think it helped me appreciate um, sort of what he was going through, in terms of approaching other kids."

Doing PEERS differently. While Denise appreciated the *PEERS* program in various ways, she had a few suggestions for the program to be delivered differently. Denise felt that more time was needed for the teens to master taught skills. She also suggested offering the program right before school starts, so the teens could start fresh with newly learned skills. Lastly Denise spoke of the idea of delivering socialization intervention in a refresher course to help individual refine their skills over the years.

Pace and post-program training. Denise felt that Danny could have benefited from mastering a skill before learning other skills. Here she spoke of how the program progressed too quickly after a few sessions.

> It did feel that way [moved too quickly] , maybe not first two or three weeks, but yea it did feel that way when there were some really major steps forward in terms of you know like having an actual get together something and yea that part felt more like the , it was progressing very quickly. And I don't think he was ready to move that quickly. And that's the same thing as making the course longer too I guess practicing

the intermediate steps for a longer period would help prepare him better for proceeding to the next step.

Denise suggested that Danny would benefit from having more time to practice "intermediate steps" to prepare him better before advancing to the next step. Through extending the program with additional sessions, it would slow down the pace for more chances to practice and progress. Denise suggested that it would be beneficial if the program extended to another ten weeks. It would also be ideal if he could keep practicing it in a group setting until he becomes more skilled. She would like to see the program extended leading up to the start of a new school year. In doing so, Danny would go into the school year with skills that are "fresh in his mind." She used the analogy of learning CPR to illustrate the importance of having a refresher intervention program to refine learned skills from the *PEERS*.

> Just like you take CPR or first aid, and then if you don't use it for a year , two years , you forget a lot and you don't feel comfortable using it necessarily...(be)cause you don't really remember what to do , but you have a refresher course once in a while it stays with you more.

Critical Summary

   Critical summary of Bob. Bob was a reflective person and he was eager to share his insights with others. He valued harmony in his life, especially in relationships. He also valued the dignity of people with special needs, and believed in empowering and supporting them to integrate into the society, while maximizing their potential and independence. Over the years, Bob witnessed tremendous growth in his son in contrast to when he was first diagnosed with ASD. Although Ben currently still struggled with some aspects of social

interaction, Bob mostly experienced his son as an "average teenager" who held a regular summer job. He saw Ben as a young man who was perceptive and observant, and acknowledged Ben's continuous efforts to improve his social interaction skills. Furthermore, Bob was impressed by Ben's knowledge and how he applied such knowledge to daily life situations. In term of his son's experience of *PEERS*, Bob felt that Ben learned some valuable lessons to enhance his social skills. Ben appreciated the in-group socialization and had a preference towards connecting with the coaches. Bob realized that although the program was helpful in helping Ben to refine some skills, much work was needed after the program to support his son's socialization development. Bob envisioned *PEERS* to be an avenue to empower his son to become more independent and skilled in the social context. Bob acknowledged that his own limited participation (i.e., attended 3 sessions) and involvement with his son's therapeutic process impacted his experience. Furthermore, one of Bob's biggest disappointments of his experience at the program was with other parents, because other parents tended to engage in conversations that were unhelpful to enhancing the teens' socialization skills. While Bob described "the *PEERS* Program as having the most massive potential possible for people with autism," Bob felt that more research and understanding was needed to refine and expand the program.

Critical summary of Allison. Allison was willing to share stories about her son and explore her experience of the program. Allison valued her family, and especially her children. Privacy and time in solitude was also very important to Allison. Exercise was a big part of Allison's self-care routine, as it helped her to reflect on her day and allowed her to manage her sleep and stress. Allison experienced her son, Ben, as a young man who had worked hard to overcome symptoms of ASD. Allison spoke about how she was impressed

with Ben's staying power and determination to reach his goals. Allison experienced Ben as a perceptive teen, while others may sometimes misunderstood his actions as being sensitive to others' needs. Allison felt that her son's participation in the program was gainful, because he learned some good skills (e.g., initiating and maintain conversations) and others have also noticed improvements in his socialization. While Ben initially seemed disinterested in the program, as he began to practice learned skills, he actually looked forward to participating in the program. Allison noted that after the program, Ben had applied some learned skills but soon after he decided not to continue with the skills after demonstrating to others he had the ability to socialize. In terms of Allison's personal experience of the program, she was hopeful and optimistic throughout the process. She felt that the program was unlike others she participated due to the parent-assisted component, as well as the inclusion of similar functioning level of teens with ASD. Although she found the parental session important, however, given how much she valued personal time, she felt the time commitment of the sessions was too much. Another aspect Allison voiced out strongly about was her dislike towards the filming component of the research process during *PEERS*. Overall, Allison felt the program was helpful, at the same time there were areas that could be delivered differently.

Critical summary of Chad. Chad offered a wealth of insights when he shared about himself and his experience participating in *PEERS*. Chad described himself as an intense, committed, and focused leader who was methodical, tactical, and strategic. Not only was Chad determined to advocate support for his children with ASD, he was also passionate to bring out changes in the school system and society to better serve individuals with ASD. One of Chad's intentions for participating in the research process (*PEERS* and follow-up

interview) was to contribute to the research process, so eventually the he could present the current research findings to the government policy makers to create changes. Although both children (Calvin and Catherine) experienced the program differently, they both benefited and faced challenges in their own unique ways. According to Chad, as a result of *PEERS*, Calvin gained more confidence and became more skillful in social situations, but maintaining such skills was still a challenge. For Catherine, the family had to reframe her role as a mentor of the *PEERS* group to help her appreciate her participation. At the end, Catherine in fact gained skills from the program and used it to establish new friendships at school. As for Chad's experience of the program, he felt that the parental component was one of the most challenging programs he had participated in, specifically in the aspect of managing the dynamic of group discussions and interacting with others who came from different perspectives and commitment levels. Overall, Chad saw *PEERS* as having great potential to enhance social skills for not just individuals with ASD but for all children. He felt strongly about taking the pro-active approach to equip all children with social skills both in schools and the community after refining the program (e.g., adding peer-mediated, early intervention delivery).

Critical summary of Denise. Denise carried a presence of gentleness and warmth at the interviews. She was open to share but noted that it was hard to recall her experiences as the program happened more than a year ago. Denise shared about how much she valued her family, friendship, and health the most. Denise displayed deep care towards her son, and one of her current worries was about Danny's future academic path. Denise also shared about how she was sometimes surprised by Danny's awareness of his surrounding and the way he learned spontaneously. The most rewarding part of her experience participating in *PEERS*

was to witness Danny's progress and to see him practice skills she had not imagined him doing. She noted that Danny particularly enjoyed interacting with similar level peers. One of the biggest challenges Danny faced was the overcoming the fear of rejection in the social setting, which held him back from using learned skills from the *PEERS*. Although Denise expressed disappointments post-program in relation to regression of learned skills, there were some triumphs in his socialization in the work environment and at school. As for Denise's experience of the group, she found the program helpful, and she highlighted how the homework component was a distinctive component of the program. Overall, she was pleased with her and Danny's experience of the program, and offered some suggestions (e.g., program duration, delivery time) for future implementations.

Chapter 5: Integration Chapter

Following chapter 4, where the three case studies were showcased, this chapter will examine across the three case studies for common themes, patterns, and key dynamics focused on answering the research questions: (a) how did the parents experience their participation in the *PEERS* program? (b) how did the parents experience their children's participation in the *PEERS* program? and (c) how did the parents experience the impact of the *PEERS* program? The process of how the themes emerged was as follow: first, I read through the three cases and wrote down prospective themes/patterns/key dynamics under each research questions. I then went through each case in detailed to note down important stories that would potentially emerge as a common theme. I went back and forth among and within cases to examine how highlighted stories may potentially thread into a theme. The process went on with continuous close examination of the cases and reading the stories and re-organizing. The process of finding themes was an exercise of trusting in the research process. The following four common themes emerged from the case studies: (a) appreciations and challenges of parent sessions (b) *PEERS* is different from other programs, (c) the mechanics of skill development and maintenance, and (d) social triumphs from being part of *PEERS*.

Theme #1: Appreciations and Challenges of Parent Sessions

This theme speaks largely to the question of: how did the parents experience their participation in the *PEERS* program? As parents shared about their experiences participating in the parental sessions, parents experienced both appreciations and challenges.

Appreciations of parent sessions. The overall consensus was that parents appreciated aspects of each other's presence and contribution. Bob (Family 1 Father)

appreciated those who had a good understanding of their children and knew how to support their children to reach their potentials. Bob recalled that "some were very bright, very insightful…You could tell that, because their children were successful, they were starting to show a lot of success." As for Allison (Family 1 Mother), she appreciated being around parents with teens who are higher functioning on the spectrum. As for Denise (Family 3 Mother), she particularly "enjoyed having the opportunity to speak to other parents," as it was helpful to hear what others are going through as well.

Discussion. For these families, being with other parents in a group setting had both merits and downfalls. On a positive note, parents appreciated having a sense of a common ground to share insights and support. The merits of being part of a group resembles what Yalom (2005) describes as the therapeutic factor of *universality*, in which parents were able to gain insights from others and felt that they were not alone in the process.

Challenges with discussion digression. Another common experience in the parental session was the challenge of others digressing from the intervention topic of the session. For Bob , he felt "disheartened and sad about the fact that their children seem to be stuck in the mud and not going anywhere," and how others were "crying into a pity pot." Bob felt that the program would have been more successful if the discussions were focused on how to help the teens. He remembered his experience as the following.

> We're sitting there doing other things, fighting, arguing, having snit fits.…Playing political games, which struck me as very, very peculiar, trying to one up the other people down there, and oh my car's bigger than your car… And I didn't like that…we lost the focus of the whole *PEERS* program

As for Allison (Family1 Mother), she felt that at times the dialogues in the parental session also trailed off to other topics and here she expressed it was important to stay on the topic of how to help the teens.

I think it started out sometimes, the conversation is how can we support the – our children, and then sometimes, not all the time, it went to other areas…But if the actual program is geared at helping our children to improve these skills, then basically that's what I think we should stick to.

For Chad (Family 3 Father), in regard to these digressions, "I can honestly tell you it was one of the most challenging group experiences, I've participated in." Similar to the other two parents, he felt that some parents would go off on a "different tangent," and he felt the responsibility to take up the role of a group facilitator and re-direct the conversations, and it was "tenuous" for him to do so.

Discussion. The cons for being part of a group intervention also means there is a risk of experiencing ineffective group facilitation as well as poor group cohesion (Yalom, 2005). This points to the importance of having well-trained group facilitators to lead the group (Yalom, 2005). As one of the leaders of the parent group, I must admit that I was not equipped to implement group facilitation skills (e.g., blocking, linking; Yalom, 2005). I was also not aware of how to manage group cohesion (i.e., relationships among parents) in order to foster a well-oiled group. Feedback from these parents reminds practitioners to not only pay attention to the content aspect, but also be aware of the process component even in a psycho-educational group.

Theme #2: *PEERS* is Different from other Programs

As parents shared about their experiences, they inevitably compared it with previous programs they have participated in. Two main sub-themes came about, in which parents felt that unlike other programs, *PEERS* actually included participants that functioned at a similar level on the autism spectrum. Also the homework component was different from other programs parents had experienced.

Appreciation of interacting with peers with "similar level". Compared to other programs, Allison felt that *PEERS* actually included participants that were similar functioning. She had previously experienced other programs that claim to have high functioning individuals with ASD but that ended up not being the case. She noted: "typically when he went into certain programs, sometimes the kids – the functional level tended to be a little bit lower." Similarly, for Denise, she shared that participants at other programs were usually "a lot lower functioning" than Danny, and that "it made him feel less smart." If Danny didn't participate in the *PEERS,* he would have missed the social connection with others that are functioning at a similar level, and Denise felt that interacting with similar peers were important to Danny's self-esteem.

Discussion. There was an appreciation from the parents that they and their teens that group members were similar. Again, going back to the idea of finding common ground with others seemed to be important to these families. This speaks to the importance of having sound screening criteria and procedures to ensure the group to run as effectively as possible. Corey, Corey, and Corey (2014) argue that one of the reasons for enforcing proper screening and selection procedures is to ensure that not only do members benefit but also others will not be harmed psychologically. Recall, one of the teens from the group previously

participated in program with others who were a lot "lower functioning" than he was and it made him feel bad about himself. I recall participating in another round of *PEERS* where the inclusion criteria were less strict and the teen group had a bigger difference in their level of functioning. I personally witnessed the challenges of having a heterogeneous group.

Homework unlike other programs. There was a consensus that the homework component was a helpful and distinctive component of the *PEERS* program. Allison appreciated the homework because "they[teens] got a chance to practice the skills... So first in the classroom and then outside of it." Similarly, Denise felt that the homework "forced" Danny to practice and "internalize" his skills, because it was not simply role-playing. The following quote is from Denise and it shows her appreciation of the homework component, while highlighting how it was different from other program.

> It [other program] was more like pretend practicing, as opposed to going out and actually having the interaction, and then having to report back. And having a bit of pressure to – to actually do it, before coming back the next week. That made a huge difference, that was unlike any of the other programs he's taken...What I really liked about *PEERS* was that with the homework, it really forced him to practice the – the things he was learning, instead of just telling him this is what you have to do. The practice I think helped – did help to internalize some of that, so that when he was in the setting where he was more comfortable, he was actually able to draw on that …. like initiating a conversation, and um, you know even just the two-way conversations. Like even starting with trading information, I think he found extremely helpful.

Discussion. In terms of the homework component, it is a key aspect of cognitive behavioral therapy (Laugeson & Park, 2014), where participants are given tasks to try it outside of the therapeutic setting and bring it back to the group for troubleshooting and celebrating. What the parents liked about the homework component was really the nature of pushing the teens out of their comfort zones, having the pressure to be accountable for presenting their homework in the next session, as well as having the opportunities to practice in a natural environment (e.g., school, home).

Theme # 3: Mechanics of Skills Development and Maintenance

The families discussed issues pertinent to skills development and maintenance and gave their input as to what went on for their teen during and after the program.

Parental support on skill development. Bob felt that family support was important for skills development and maintenance, and noted that "the real key behind the collapse situation…is what kind of home supports they have." Bob's family have tried to be proactive in supporting Ben's growth while maintaining a positive outlook. On a similar note, Chad highlighted how the "real work actually came after" the program ended. Chad gave a realistic perspective that change is not a spontaneous process, but instead an on-going one. Chad was proactive in utilizing the everyday opportunity to help his son be comfortable with social situations. Here he spoke about placing his son in situations where he would practice his social skills in real life situations.

I'm going to go broke buying Subway sandwiches, I bet, but you know, we, I keep throwing him in that every week, you know, you got to keep trying, keep trying, keep trying… can't expect that to happen for any of us in ten weeks, you know. We just

don't change that fast….Just because the *PEERS* program ended doesn't mean that
the other curriculum ends, in fact it doesn't.

Discussion. Congruent with Laugeson & Park (2014), not only was parental
involvement important for skill development during the program, parents also voiced that
they played a supporting role after the program ended. It is precisely what Chad described as
"the real work actually came after" the program ended. Recall when Chad was describing
this experience of the *PEERS*, he reminded parents not to expect a short-term program to fix
their child's long-term social challenges. As such, socialization skills development is an on-
going process that requires parental guidance and encouragement.

Teens becoming consciously competent socially. Both Bob and Chad noticed their
son becoming more aware of their social interactions after participating in the *PEERS*
program. Through the program, Ben became more aware of his limitations and used such
insights to help himself navigate the social world. Bob noted that, "he[Ben] paid attention
and he's much more aware now of his limitations and what he has to do in order to overcome
those limitations." As for Chad, prior to attending the *PEERS* Program, Calvin was
"unconsciously incompetent," such that he was unaware of his social challenges. After
Calvin had participated in the program, Chad felt that Calvin had progressed through the
"incompetence phase," and had currently arrived at the state of "consciously competent."
Through the program, Calvin also gained more confidence and became less "robotic" and
more "relaxed and confident" when interacting with strangers.

Discussion. According to the parents, the increased awareness expressed by these two
teenagers seemed to be one of the mechanisms that helped them to enhance the development

of their social skills. Interestingly, the notion of awareness is a common hallmark and mechanism of change among various therapeutic orientations and approaches of psychotherapy (e.g., psycho-analysis, Jungian, Gestalt, mindfulness) (Truscott, 2010). Awareness is also linked to the notion of self-reflection, in which the a person is looking inward to examine different components of the self, witness areas that need to be altered, and follow by appropriate actions to carry out the change (Truscott, 2010). What seemed to have occurred in these two young men's process was through a 14 week program, they have explicitly learned how to appropriately socialize and practiced strategies. In doing so, they gained awareness of both their potential and limitations, so they began to take ownership of how to address their challenges and become more socially appropriate.

Potential versus performance. There is a common agreement that the teens were able to learn and acquire skills taught in the *PEERS* program, but for unique reasons the teens did not carry on with some of the skills. Allison noticed that "there are times that he can just, he uses everything he learned in the *PEERS* program," but there are times where Ben's skills faltered. She noted: "He[Ben] faltered, and which is expected, but he used the skills, nonetheless." She explained it by the reason of how "he really doesn't care to" continue on the skills once he has done it. As for Chad, his son also "dropped off" some of the learned skills (e.g., phoning skills) gained from the program. Chad pointed out that Calvin phoned others during the program because it was practice homework. The idea of homework pushed Calvin to go outside of his comfort zone, but when the program was over, he "slid back to where he was comfortable." Chad further described *PEERS* as just another "hot bath therapy" and that the skills training happened in an "artificial environment." For Denise, Danny expressed that after the program, he slid back to his "original shape." Denise noted

that Danny "felt like the *PEERS* program stretched him out into a different shape. And then when the program was over he's retreated back into his original shape." Denise explained that Danny's regression was mainly due to his fear of rejection, and he also needed more practice.

       Discussion. It is clear from the parents' sharing that the teens had the potential to demonstrate appropriate socialization, as they were doing the socialization homework during the *PEERS* program. However, when they are not being pressured to get out of their comfort zone, they naturally slid back to their previous ways. This speaks to the key aspects of behavioral approach, in which demonstration of skills were mainly motivated by external reinforcements (e.g., point system, praise from coaches) (Laugeson & Park, 2014), and perhaps revealing the downfall of this approach. While the *PEERS* program may have addressed the skill acquisition aspect, the program may have yet to adequately addressed issues relating to social anxiety and fear of rejection in social contexts. Perhaps, it is equally important to stress the importance of ownership of one's socialization, so that the teens would be intrinsically motivated to continue using skills that they themselves find rewarding.

Theme # 4: Social Triumphs from Being Part of *PEERS*

       The final theme speaks to the positive impact of the *PEERS* program, and addresses the research question of: how did the parents experience the impact of the *PEERS* program? Although all three families noted skills regression in their children (except Catherine), all families told stories of gains and social triumphs from being part of the *PEERS* program. Both Bob and Allison felt that Ben had improved his conversational skills. Here Bob recounted:

He's [Ben] got a much better non-verbal communication. He's gotten much better when he is in the conversation of his timing, of his visual focus where he's supposed to be. And he's got a much better about staying on topical topics that everybody can understand, not drifting off into whatever interesting thing that he is supremely interested in, and then perseverating about it.

Also, accordingly to Bob he felt the program has helped Ben to solidify friendships at school. He noted:

In grade 11 because of the *PEERS* Program … He managed to maintain the few friends that he does have that he's had for all of these years, and also gather a few more into his corner… So he carried on conversations with them and they became good waiting friends.

As for Allison, she felt that Ben had used the newly learned conversational skills to establish a friendship, and she noticed improvements particularly in his phoning skills.

He used the skills to maintain, to help him. He had a girl he really liked, a lot. And he used some of the skills in order to get her phone number and then start to call her…Absolutely, there was definitely an improvement...he used the skills, he did use the skills... so that was it was effective....When he answers the phone, he doesn't start talking…. he actually says hello, and he'll listen.

For Chad's family, he shared social success stories for both of his children. Chad felt that Calvin benefited much from *PEERS* and the learned skills from the program have benefited him in the work place. Here Chad talked about his son's success at his work placement: "My son won the Employee of the Year Award, because of *PEERS* …without the

skill development that came through *PEERS*, I don't think it would have translated into him winning the employee of the year." As for his daughter, he also attributed his daughter's newly built friendships at school to the *PEERS* program. Chad told a story of how his daughter befriended students at her school.

> I don't think this is coincidence whatsoever, my daughter befriended a couple of deaf girls at her school, who she noticed were always – they're twins, right. And they were always eating their lunch, just the two of them, because of course no one else knows how to talk to them. And so she went over and befriended them and low and behold, she's now proficient in sign language.

As for Denise, she mentioned that Danny managed to interact with others through a common interest in the workplace and at school. Denise noted:

> I was very happy, he's told me that some of the other interns really share his interest in Magic the Gathering, and he's been playing with them at lunch. Um, several times during the summer… so he's having social interactions.

Discussion. Despite the disappointments of regression in some skills after the program, it is encouraging to witness the social triumphs each family experienced. While the families acknowledged the program have enhanced their children's social skills (e.g., conversational skills, phoning skills, friendship development), parents did express that their children's skill development were also influenced by other factors including family support, accumulated gains from previous interventions etc. Overall, the collective expressions of parents were that the *PEERS* program had a positive impact on their teens' social skill enhancement.

Summary of Common Themes

  The common themes discussed in this chapter revealed the collective experience of parents who participated in the *PEERS* program. Although each parent came from their unique background and experienced the program in their own way, they shared common stories that threaded into common themes. The first two themes (i.e., theme #1: appreciations and challenges of parent sessions, and theme #2: *PEERS* is different from other programs), addressed the research question of how parents experience their participation of the program. These two themes not only demonstrated how parents experienced both ups and downs of being in the parent group, but also provided insight on how distinctive *PEERS* was compared to other programs. Furthermore, the last two themes (i.e., theme #3: the mechanics of skill development and maintenance, and theme #4: social triumphs from being part of *PEERS*) provided some answers to the research questions of how parents experienced their teens' participation, as well as the impact of the program. In general, research on social skills interventions, is concerned with whether or not the program helped improved social skills, and theme #3 revealed some of the important mechanisms that facilitated change for these families. These mechanisms included the role of parental support in skill development and maintenance, the notion of how increased awareness of teens contributes to social skills enhancement, and the difference between skill potential (i.e., ability) and skill performance. As well, theme #3, addressed some potential reasons why the teens may have regressed in their skills. Lastly, theme #4 highlights what the teens have gained and how it has impacted their life beyond the therapeutic setting.

Chapter 6: Closing Remarks

Through exploring parental experiences of three families who participated in the *PEERS* program, rich narratives were crafted to showcase their unique and common experiences. The main findings of this study (i.e., four common themes; (a) appreciations and challenges of parent sessions, (b) *PEERS* is different from other programs, (c) mechanics of skill development and maintenance, and (d) social triumphs from being part of *PEERS*), have addressed the three research questions of: (a) how did the parents experience their participation in the *PEERS* program? (b) how did the parents experience their children's participation in the *PEERS* program? (c) how did the parents experience the impact of the *PEERS* program? As a result of this research process, I became more informed about the meaning and significance of the four parents' experience participating in *PEERS*.

Future Directions and Implications for Clinical Practice

Although the original intention of the research did not focus on how to deliver the program differently, I noticed all parents expressed suggestions as to how the *PEERS* could be refined. As a result, I decided to include a section on implications for clinical practices to briefly discuss common implementation suggestions raised by the families: (a) expand to additional topics, (b) add peer-mediated component, (c) extend program duration, (d) add follow-up sessions, (e) start earlier, (f) consider benefit of *PEERS* for individuals without ASD, and (g) continue to research and refine the *PEERS*. The latter seven suggestions are inspirations for future research to explore social skills training programs in multiple dimensions.

Expand to additional topics. Both Bob and Allison felt the need to expand topics of the current *PEERS* program. Bob saw the importance of teaching additional skills so that

teens can face challenges of the unforgiving "real world", and they would be able to survive

through the social aspect of employment. Here Bob talked about how it is important to

prepare the teens for employment in the social aspects.

> When you've got a bunch of teenage kids who are probably looking at getting gainful
>
> employment in the near future...the work world is extremely unforgiving...most of
>
> your kids coming out to the real world, where the real jobs are will be chewed up and
>
> spit out, in an instant...we're telling them this, we're helping them with this, we're
>
> giving them social inter-reactions. But they won't even be able to hold a 7-11 job…
>
> then where are they going to go… Live at home?... Live at a group home?... And I
>
> feel we're doing a disservice to the kids

Similar to Bob, Allison would like to see *PEERS* expanding the content topics to relevant

issues relating to transitioning into adulthood (e.g., work place social interaction and

appropriate "sexual based conversation").

Implications. Although the targeted skills taught in *PEERS* did not have a focus on

social interaction in the workplace, many skills (e.g., conversational skills, phoning skills)

could arguably be generalized in other settings like the work environment. However, it is

understandable that both Bob and Allison felt *PEERS* was lacking vocational specific topics

because their preoccupations and goals were to equip their son to integrate into the society,

and specifically in the workforce. It is important to highlight that the authors of *PEERS* also

intend to develop a young adult (i.e., age 18-23) version of the *PEERS* program (Gantman,

Kapp, Orenski, & Laugeson, 2012). Similar to the adolescent version, the young adult

program will target at social skills such as conversational skills and handling bullying, with

the only major distinctive topics dating and friendship networking strategies (Gantman et al., 2012). Interestingly, vocational skills were still not part of the intervention curriculum of the young adult version. Furthermore, aligned with what the Bob and Allison were suggesting, a recent meta-analysis of behavioural interventions for adolescents and adults with ASD (Roth, Gillis, & Reed, 2014) recommended that intervention programs should expand their targeted skills to address vocational issues, sexuality, daily independence living etc. Given the identified gap in the program, authors may want to consider expanding topics to cover workplace related social issues to better equip both teens and adults for future employment opportunities.

Add a peer-mediated component. Both Bob and Chad expressed the benefits of having a peer-mediated component in the program. Here, Bob noted that such a component could allow teens to be in inclusive situations and learn from teens without ASD.

> If you truly want to make it successful it has to be inclusive, the peers that people with disabilities should be looking at are those that are considered successful, normal, average people. The chatty little girl that has 99 friends…and still manages to do her homework and stuff like that. Or the robust young lad that jumps around and is busy, and has four good friends that they can go camping with and won't get into fistfight… that kind of socially appropriate peer is the ultimate goal.

As for Chad, the peer-mediated component had a twofold purpose. First, teens with ASD can learn from teens without ASD. Second of all, teens without ASD who will be trained to interact with individuals with special needs will also benefit in gaining better understanding of social interactions.

If all you're looking at are other kids with disabilities, right, you're not going to develop, you know, beyond that level…the peer influences their friend and helps them, sort of fill in those gaps, but at the same time, by teaching others they become more proficient in their own understanding…The real power of *PEERS* is what happens if we can take that program put it in the classroom, all kids benefit, they start learning from one another. Every time two people come together, somebody's learning something… if we're going to create a program that's going to work, and let's not fool ourselves, we have to have kids that are, you know, well above their weight class

Implications. These parents saw merits in having a peer-mediated component, so their children can model after those who are already skilled in socialization. In agreement with the parents, Schmidt and Stich (2012) highlighted the general consensus from the literature that the peer-mediated component appears to promote generalization of learned skills. While, past research studies have demonstrated the benefits of having a peer-mediated component for enhancing social competence of children, there are limited studies on the impact of peer-mediated interventions on social skills *for adolescents* with ASD (Schmidt & Stich, 2012). Consider the potential merits of adding a peer-mediated component in the program, further research is required to examine whether or not it is developmentally and clinically appropriate to incorporate this type of method into a social skills program for teens with ASD.

Extend program duration. Parents felt that the program's pace was too fast, and hence suggested extending the duration of the program to have sufficient time to work on learned skills. Allison felt that there could have been more time to work on the skills taught

in the program, and she felt it was because the program was part of a research project and there was a set timeline to follow, hence, making the program "very limiting." As for Bob, he felt that one of the limitation of the program was the time-based nature (i.e., occurred only weekly), as "more time equals better abilities...you'll burn the memory pathways and burn the responses into your mind." The *PEERS* program to Bob was a good program but it was too short to practice learned skills and lacked intensity. Bob felt that the time the teens got to practice learned skills were "just enough," and more time would benefit their progress. For Chad, similar to Allison, he felt that there was the pressure of time-constraint to go through all the material because it was a research project. The curriculum was "too tight," and would ideally be spread out over a longer period of time (e.g., 26 weeks) so the teens can master a skill before moving on. Chad's reasoning comes from his believe that the teens could have immersed in learned skills for a longer time so the skills would be part of them. As for Denise, she thought the program could have been extended for longer, because she felt the program was moving too quickly for Danny after a few weeks in. Similar to ideas expressed by Chad and Bob, she felt her son would benefit with more time to practice the "intermediate steps" before moving on to the next step.

   Implications. All four families felt the need to have more time to process and refine learned skills from *PEERS*. Some parents suggested spreading out the program, while others felt adding a few more individualized sessions would be enough. Compare to other programs mentioned in the literature review, *PEERS* place in the average amount of sessions (i.e., 14 sessions), and while some of the programs ranged from 10 to 19 sessions (Weiss et al., 2013; McMahon et al., 2013). In terms of the specific amount of extra time or sessions that would meet the families' needs remains an area that requires further investigation.

Add follow-up sessions. The latter suggestion of addressing the pace and duration of the program is linked to the idea of adding follow-up component. Allison felt that the program could have added a three month post-program follow-up, for the purpose of having reviewing her son's skills development progress. Allison suggested having a follow-up as both a group in general as well as individualized troubleshooting. Denise also felt it would be helpful to have follow-up session, for the purpose of practicing learned skills. Chad also felt a post-intervention follow-up was necessary, and specifically a debrief session (e.g., focus group). Chad saw the purpose of a parental follow-up follow was to explore parental experiences, as well as empower parents to continue to support their teens' growth to become better prepared for future challenges.

Implications. Based on suggestions of these parents, the idea of post-treatment follow-up appears to stem from the need for further support for the family on skills refinement and maintenance. However, from a research perspective, past research studies on post-program follow-up seemed to focus on the long-term efficacy of the program (e.g., Mandelberg et al., 2014). Recall, one of the parents (Chad) felt that "the goal of the program, quite frankly, was to prove that it worked" (Chad). While recognizing the importance of acknowledging the lasting effects of treatment outcome, the contrasted aim of follow-ups among researchers and families prompts the question of whether the aims of follow-up studies have unintentionally neglected the real needs of families.

Start earlier. The notion of early intervention was raised by both Bob and Chad. For Bob, starting "*PEERS*–like" social skills earlier and providing continuous training in these skills would enable most individuals with ASD to be highly functioning. Bob also spoke of the idea of investing efforts at an earlier age for long-term results. Here Bob explained:

If you spend $100.00 per day at this time, you will probably save yourself, in the future, $1000.00 per day.… And I can bet right now, if a child at nine years old, has autism, is more socially appropriate at nine, by the time they're 19 they would be brilliant.

For Chad, he felt that his son participated in the program "ten years late", and he would have liked the program to start at a much earlier age (e.g., age four). Chad was a strong believer of proactively implementing skill building at an earlier age: "The key is to start early, and to be present and vigilant…because it doesn't work if we had a pedestrian approach to things."

Implications. These parents saw the merits of early intervention as a form of long-term investment in social skills building. It is the idea of by intervening challenges at an earlier age, so that the child's long-term social development trajectory would be changed more drastically compared to intervening at a later age. The idea of early intervention is not foreign to the field of ASD intervention research, and in fact, pioneer of ABA therapy, O. Ivar Lovaas had been promoting the idea of early intervention for young children with ASD as early as in the 1970s (Smith & Eikeseth, 2011). As for the *PEERS* program, the authors have already created a preschoolers versions for children with ASD between age 4 to 6 years of age, however, to date, there have yet to be published studies investigating the benefits of the program.

Consider benefits of *PEERS* for individuals without ASD. Both Chad and Denise felt the content of *PEERS* was helpful for individuals beyond teens with ASD. Denise noted that she also learned from the *PEERS* curriculum and felt that it would have benefited her own social interaction if she was to attend at a younger age. She pointed out how the program

would be a good tool to equip teens without ASD as well her daughter without ASD. In the similar vein, Chad expands on how the *PEERS* program really is beneficial for all:

> The *PEERS* program has the ability to say hold on a second, you're going the wrong way, this is not working, you're not connecting, these people are bullying you… It has the capacity to be universal, it has the capacity to be uniting people from all walks of life, all cultures, all languages.

Implications. These parents are highlighting how they felt the content of *PEERS* has universal benefits, and even for individuals who may not be clinically identified as having social challenges. In agreement with these parents, I too felt that I have learned useful strategies and have gained social knowledge by being part of the coaching team and research process. These observations are not surprising, given the *PEERS* program was crafted based on the *Children's Friendship Training* designed for individuals with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (Frankel & Myatt, 2003). Further research would be beneficial to examine the impact of *PEERS* as an intervention for other clinical populations (e.g., Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder) that also struggles with social interactions, as well as in a form of proactive training for individuals without ASD.

Continue to research and refine the *PEERS*. Both Bob and Chad saw the need for further investigation to refine the *PEERS* program to better serve families. For Bob, he viewed his involvement in the current study as a way to help researchers have a better understanding of how to support individuals with ASD. Bob noted that *PEERS* was still a "work in progress," and that "[developers/researchers] still don't know what their ultimate goals are." Bob felt that his participation was part of a research pilot process, where "it's all

guess work" and "feeling around in the dark." Bob elaborated his view on the importance of research informed clinical practice:

> I would describe the *PEERS* Program as having the most massive potential possible for people with autism. But it needs to be more properly researched and it needs to be more expansive in nature…So I see the program, the data that you're gathering… as being vital. We need as much as this as possible. My total belief is we're just looking at the tip of the iceberg. For centuries our society has hidden them underneath rocks, or put them in rooms, or just pretended that they weren't there… we can't do that anymore.

For Chad, it is important for research to inform and to understand the "most effective mechanisms." He also foresaw the research as the following:

> It's going to come in building blocks, and it's going to look like a patchwork quilt …if you can demystify how it is that we created this – this moment in time and this result, and you know, even if it's just on the narrow perspective of *PEERS*. It's all pieces to that puzzle.

Implications. These two parents who participated in the *PEERS* program perceived their participation as being part of a program that was undergoing a pilot testing phase. On the contrary, at the time of their participation, the program was already an established program that claimed to be supported by evidence-based research findings (e.g., Laugeson et al., 2009). Furthermore, the original *PEERS* program had already been modified to include additional topics (e.g., online social interactions, strategies for dealing with rumours and gossips; Laugeson et al., 2012). Relating back to the current study, Bob and Chad's

expressed need for more research to refine the program further affirms the intentions and significance of the current study, which was to gain a more advanced understanding of how parents experienced *PEERS*.

Conclusions

In summary, through exploring parental experiences of the *PEERS* program, I have become more informed about the various motivations, preoccupations, hopes, and expectations that influenced their experiences. Parents were coming from a place of wanting the best for their children, and therefore was willing to sought out the opportunities to support their children's socialization development. Drawing upon the common themes emerged and the collective experience of parents have allowed me to have a better glimpse of the meaning and significance of how parents experience *PEERS*, as well as provided me with a more sophisticated understanding of how to conceptualize the workings *PEERS*. Despite the various challenges and disappointments experienced through and after the *PEERS* program, parents remained hopeful and positive in bringing forward what they have gained from the program to empower their children.

Limitations of the Study

One of the limitations is that the interviews were conducted over a year after the program occurred, in which some parents expressed challenges recalling their experience participating in the program, as a result, the PIAs were in place to help parents better re-live their experiences. Furthermore, due to the small number of participants, the design may be criticized for its generalizability and reliability (Merriam, 1998). However, it is important to highlight that this study did not aim to collect a large sample to fulfill the latter two criteria, instead, this study hoped to gain a deeper understanding of meaning and significance of

parental experience participating in a parent-assisted social skills program for teens with ASD.

Final Reflection on the Research Process

  This project has been the most challenging task I have undertaken, as it had stretched me in ways that I have never imagined. The mental visualization I had in my mind was an imagery of me slaying a dragon. I had so much fear, worry, uncertainty, and at times, I felt weak and wanted to give-up. Reflecting back, every step of the hardship was worthwhile. I have truly learned to trust in the process of being the research instrument, and have gained tremendous respect and appreciation towards researching qualitatively. Tracing back to my movement as a researcher throughout this research project, I have gone from a state of ambiguity to a stance of deep appreciation for the beauty of exploring meaning making of human expressions through stories.

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Appendix A

Pre-interview activity

Group 1: General Get-To-Know-You Questions:

1. Pick a meaningful activity or topic for you and make a timeline listing critical times or events when your experience of that activity or topic changed. Examples of money/children/travel/home/teaching/sports.

2. Draw two pictures showing what things were like for you before and after something important happened.

3. Draw a picture of an importance place and use key words to indicate the parts or what happens in each of the parts.

4. Use three colors to make an abstract diagram that expresses what a certain activity is like for you.

5. Show a schedule of your day, week, or year and use colours to indicate how time is spent.

6. Draw a diagram to show where your support or support system comes from.

Group 2: *PEERS* Related Questions

7. Make two drawings to show what things were like for you before, during and after the *PEERS* program (use speech bubbles or thought bubbles if you like).

8. Use three colours to make an abstract diagram to show what it felt like to go to the *PEERS* program.

9. Make a list of 20 important words that come to mind when you think about the *PEERS* program and then divide the words into two groups.

10. Make two drawings to show a "good day" and "not so good day" when participating in the *PEERS* program.

Appendix B

Open-ended interview questions

Group 1: Question about the participant in general

1. In the world of nature or in the world of things or in the world of people, what is it that

surprises you the most, or that you find the most fascinating?

2. What things would you say are most important in life to most people? ….What things

are most important in life to you?

3. What is the most difficult thing you've ever had to do, or is there something you've

done that was really hard to do but you really wanted to do it?

4. If you could pick one thing that you wouldn't have to worry about anymore, what

would it be? … What would be the next thing?

5. Is there something that you have always wanted to do but you haven't had the chance

yet? What stopped you, no time, or materials or resources?

6. Is there anyone (whether a real person or fictional character) you admire and would

like to be like?

Group 2: Question about how parents experience their son/daughter

1. As _____ has gotten older, would you say he (or she) has changed a lot or stayed

the same?

2. Would you say that _____ is a child who always has lots to say, lots of ideas,

questions, or suggestions? What are some of _____'s (interesting) aspirations, plans or

dreams?

3. What does _____ usually do when he gets stumped or blocked when he's working on something, trying to make something, get something, go somewhere?

4. Has _____ ever surprised you with his capabilities, or initiative, or staying power?

5. Sometimes children surprise us with their depth of understanding or how much they know about things. Does _____ ever make comments or ask questions that surprise you in that way?

6. Would you say that _____ has good analytic ability? Can you think of any examples of where you noticed it?

7. Would you say that _____ is particularly perceptive, or sensitive or thoughtful?

8. What kinds of things does _____ find easy to do or hard to do?

Group 3: Questions about the participant's experiences at the *PEERS* program

1.   What were some things you looked forward to or hoped for when enrolling your son/daughter in the *PEERS* program?

2.   What were some things you liked about having your son/daughter in the *PEERS* program?

3.   Can you think of any surprises you have experienced with the *PEERS* program son/daughter?

4.   Do you remember anything in the program that was difficult or unclear?

5.   Can you think of any disappointments you have experienced with the *PEERS* program?

6.   What kind of activity or information do you think your son/daughter would miss out on if the *PEERS* program cancelled?

7.   Was there a particular session that you really liked? Or disliked?

8.   What was the most challenging homework for you to complete with your son/daughter?

9.   What was it like for you to participate in the *PEERS* program with others parents?

10.   Has your experience in the *PEERS* program helped you notice or appreciate anything about your son/daughter?

11.   What kept you wanting to participate in the *PEERS* program?

12.   What was the most rewarding part about participating in the *PEERS* program?

13.   Can you think of any disappointments you have experienced after the *PEERS* program?

14.   Can you think of any special social moments or events for your son/daughter that happened after you completed the *PEERS* program?

15.   Can you think of any new realization(s) or changes of perspective you acquired after or because of completing the *PEERS* program?

16.   If you could change the program in any ways what kinds of things would you do to make
it better? What would you add or take away from the program?

17.   What would you say to a parent who was thinking about enrolling their son/daughter in the *PEERS* program?

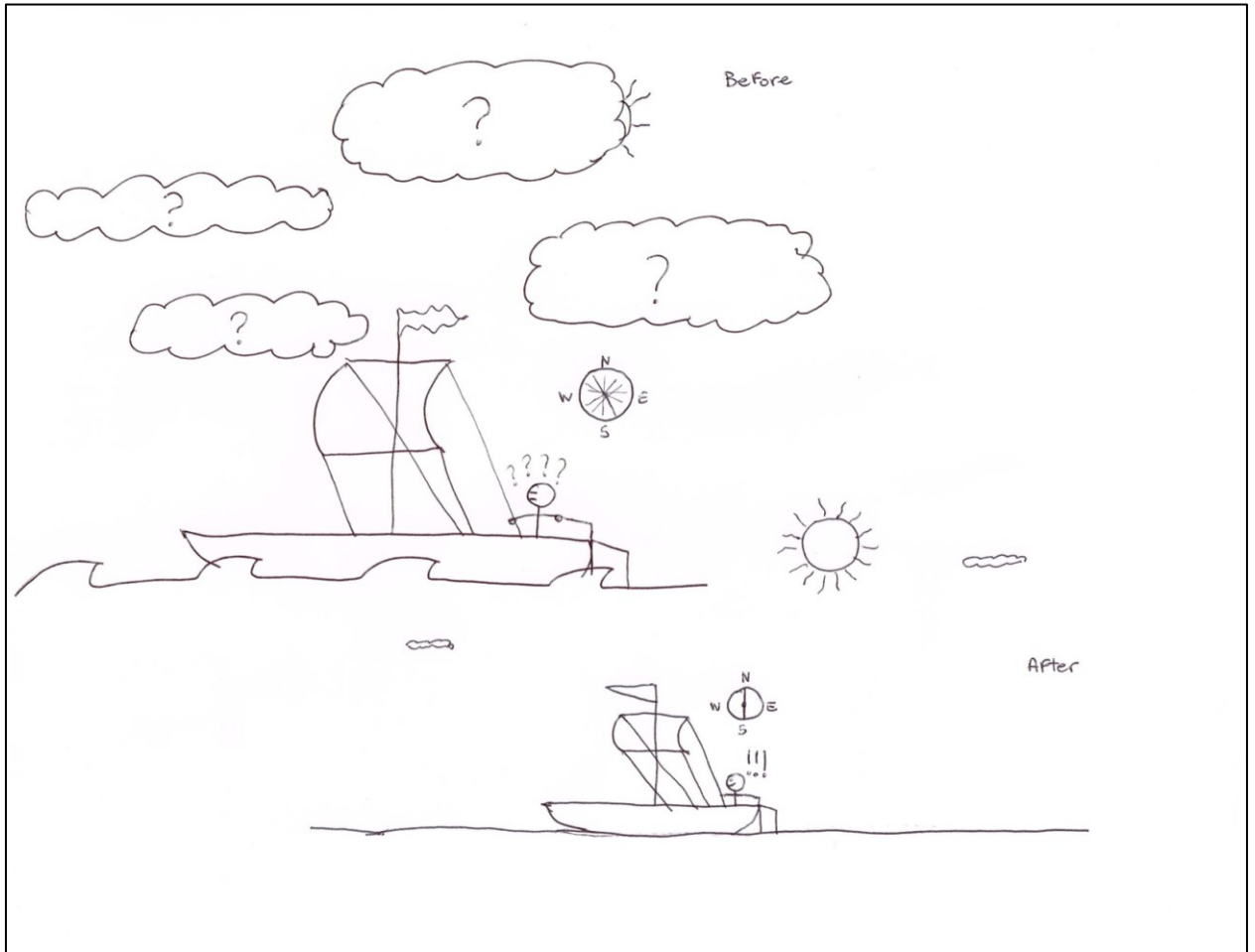**Appendix C**

PIA of family 1 and family 3

Figure C1. Family 1 Father's First PIA. This drawing illustrates how Bob shows what things were like for him before and after something important happened. This picture shows how life is like sailing in the ocean, in which many things involves decision making.
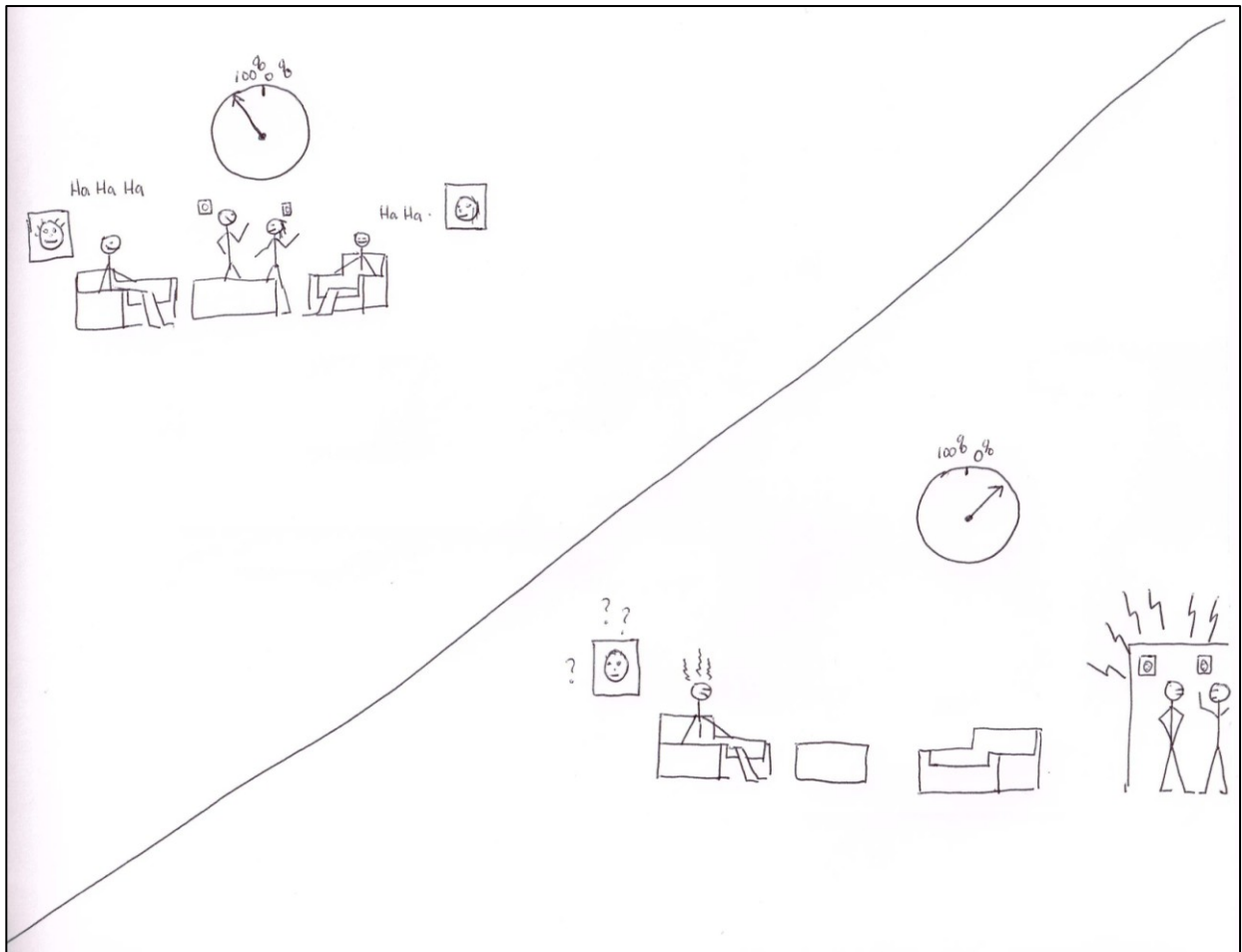
Figure C2. Family 1 Father's Second PIA. This drawing shows what a good and bad day was like for Bob at the *PEERS* program. The upper left corner drawing shows how parents are focused on discussing how to help the teens to improve their social skills, and the bottom right corner demonstrates how parents are discussing irrelevant topics to the program.
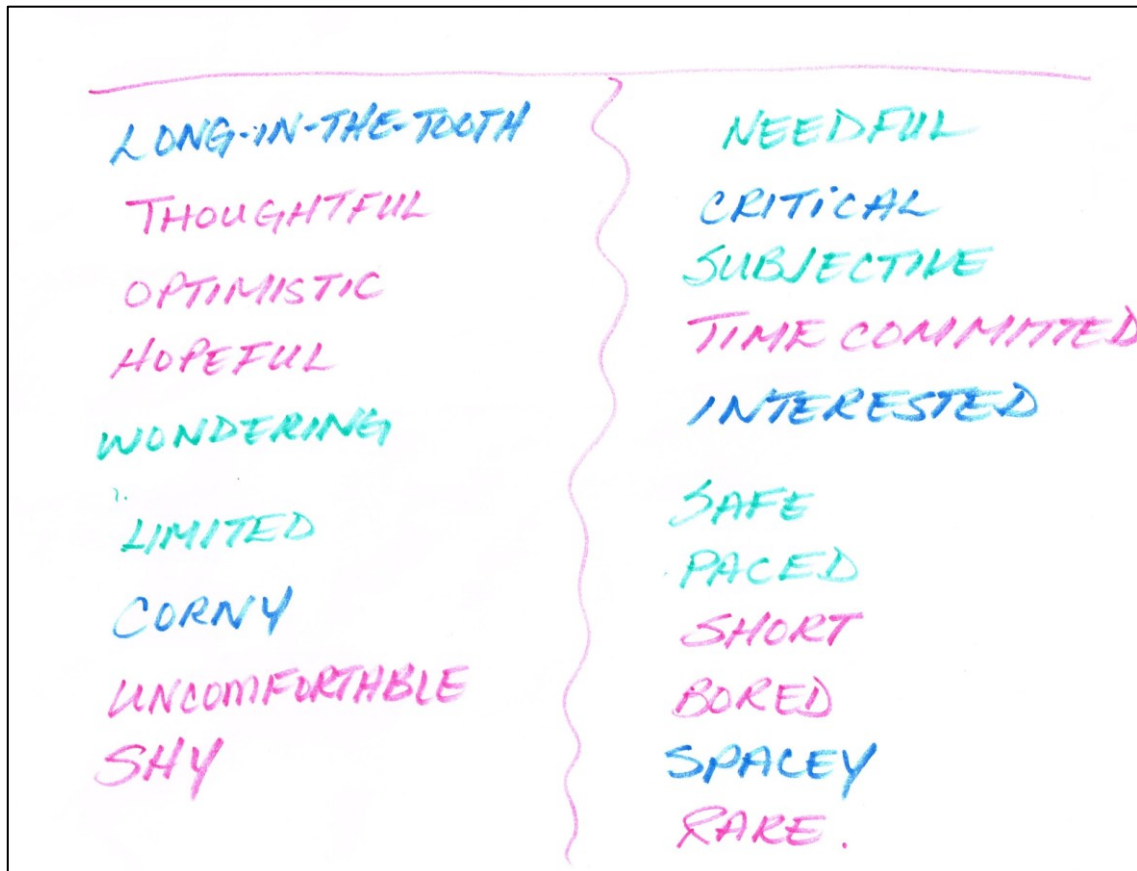
Figure C3. Family 1 Mother's First PIA. This is a list of words that Allison used to describe her experience participating in the *PEERS* program. She split them into two groups, but did not have categorical names for the groups.

Figure C4. Family 1 Mother's Second PIA. This drawing uses abstract shapes to show what exercise is like for Allison. She noted how the abstract shapes represents her thoughts of the day, and how exercise helps her manage her stress, thoughts, and sleep.
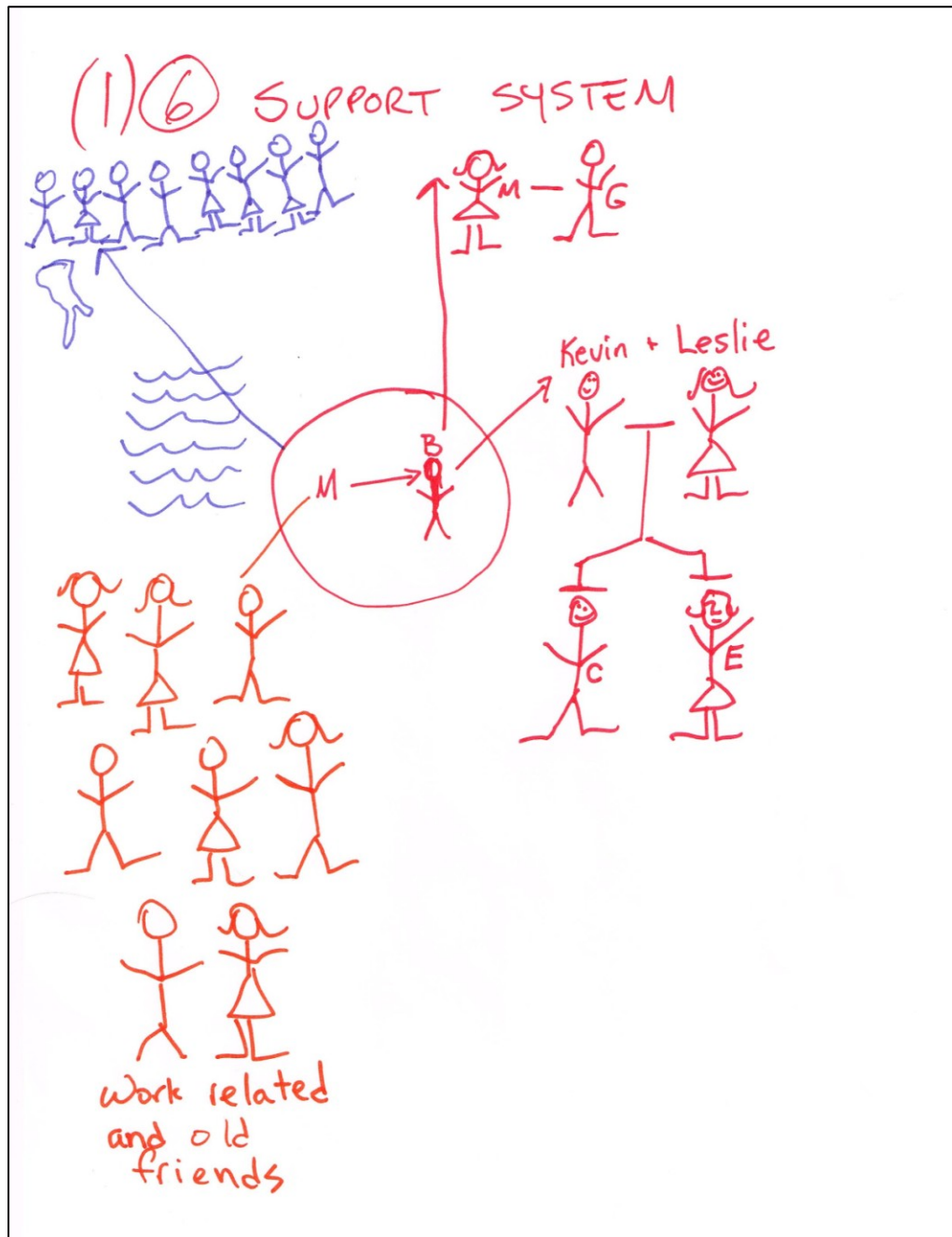
Figure C5. Family 3 Mother's First PIA. This drawing shows Denise's support system, in which she used stick figures to show who are involved. She also used arrows and colors to illustrate the closeness of her love ones.

Friendship
Support
Group
Conversation
Homework
Progress
Reaching out
Help
Clubs
Belonging
Stress
Connection
Initiate
Reporting
Turns
Practise
Parents
Invitation
Get together
Rules

Figure C6. Family 3 Mother's Second PIA. This is a list of words Denise used to describe her experience of the *PEERS* program.