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SEEKING A BALANCE:

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES AS MOTHERS OF YOUNG
ADOLESCENTS

by

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B.S.N., The University of British Columbia, 1971

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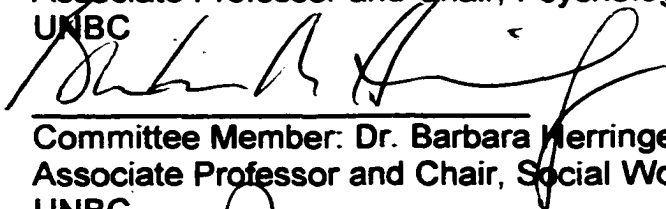
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ABSTRACT

Seven women in a northwestern British Columbia community were interviewed in this hermeneutic phenomenological study, to explore the question, "What is it like for women to be mothers of young adolescents?". Two themes emerged from the interviews: "holding on and letting go", and "redefining who 'Mom' is". The women describe ways in which they continue to "hold on" both to their children, and to the mothering role as they perceive it, while at the same time discovering new aspects of themselves, their roles, and their sons or daughters. Most previous studies of mothers of adolescents have focussed on the effects of maternal characteristics or behaviour on the adolescents, leaving a gap in the literature with regard to women's everyday experience. The words of the women in this study have implications for women's health, community development, and further research in this field.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dedicated to my mother, Evelyn Horton, whose love of words and interest in people have inspired me all my life.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

"I've learnt the most by being a mother...". These are the words of Gail, one of the participants in this study, and they reflect ideas that have become a thesis. Being a mother, a common enough experience for women, is not only a socially constructed role, but also a personal identity, strongly linked to one's relationships within the family, the community, and the larger society. Although motherhood is often thought of in terms of guiding and teaching children, it is equally, as Gail points out, a continual learning process. As children approach and enter early adolescence, the learning curve may take a sharp upward turn. This thesis will explore the experiences of women at this point in motherhood.

In this study, seven women in a small town in northwestern British Columbia describe their experiences as first-time mothers of young adolescents. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, I have taped, transcribed, and interpreted their words, and discovered two major themes, "Holding on and letting go" and "Redefining who 'Mom' is". The women describe seeking a balance between their ongoing wishes to protect, guide, and nurture their children, and the need to allow the young adolescents to expand their boundaries and become more independent. They note that their roles are changing, and that this means a re-evaluation of various aspects of their lives, for example, how they spend their time, and what being a mother means to them. The women's descriptions will be discussed in more detail in chapters Four and Five.

Roots of this Study

This study was conceived at a time when several divergent but related experiences were affecting my life: I was the mother of two young adolescents, I had been working with children, youth, and families in a community mental health setting, and I was co-facilitating parenting programs. In each of these spheres I was confronted with women—including myself—who sensed that they were in a period of transition, who were perplexed by changes in their children, and who were no longer certain what their role was in their families. I noticed conflicts between mothers and children that sometimes, from the outside, appeared avoidable, but that exacted an emotional toll on the mothers, seemingly out of proportion to the issue. For a few families, the conflicts escalated into violence. I became curious. What is it really like for women to be mothers of young adolescents? Graduate courses in women's health and in qualitative methodologies helped to bring the concept to birth as a proposal; the lengthy process of finding participants, interviewing them, and then transcribing their words comprised the infancy of the study. Reading, reflecting, writing, and re-writing followed, until the thesis grew into an awkward adolescent with what seemed to be a will of its own. I was faced with a dialectic similar to that of the women I had interviewed: wanting to "hold on" until the thesis was "perfect", yet knowing I would have to "let go" of some ideas, some references, and some sentences, in order to allow the thesis to be presented and to stand on its own. This document is the outcome of that struggle.

Significance of this Study to Community Health

The importance of this study to community health is twofold. First, it allows us to hear the voices of women who are mothers, speaking about their mothering. Viewing the world from the perspective of women is still relatively novel in health and social sciences writing (Hays, 1996; Phoenix, Woollett, and Lloyd, 1991; Smith, 1987). Yet without this view of the world we are denied affirmation of our own realities as women, and continue to base our conclusions predominantly on the realities of male scholars.

The second element of this study that makes it significant for community health is the content of the descriptions given by the women about their experiences. Most studies, past and current, of mothers and adolescents, have used an outsider's perspective and focussed primarily on the adolescents. The women's words reveal many aspects of their relationships with their children that deserve further study.

Overview of the Thesis

Chapter Two will present a review of the literature on motherhood, including historical, sociological, and philosophical sources, and then of both quantitative and qualitative research on mothers (or parents) and adolescents. In Chapter Three I discuss the methodology, and the details of carrying out the study. The essence of the thesis is to be found in Chapters Four and Five, where I present the themes derived from the texts of the interviews, and my reflections on and

interpretations of, the women's words. Finally, in Chapter Six, I extend this reflection by relating it to the literature, and by drawing some ideas from the study for further research and implications for community health.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Being a mother of adolescent children in North American culture is an experience embedded in cultural constructions of motherhood and of adolescence. It takes place within the social context of family and community, and has meaning for an individual woman within the context of her life-world: her memories of the past, her current circumstances, and her expectations for each day. On beginning to review the literature, I was struck by the absence of writing on this topic from women's, or even parents', perspectives. Most studies, until very recently, focussed exclusively on the adolescent, and if they did address the mother, it was to measure how certain of her behaviours or characteristics would affect her adolescent offspring. In attempting to understand the mother-adolescent relationship, researchers have paid less attention to the "mother" half of that relationship, leaving a significant gap in the literature. I found this in itself interesting, and was curious about how mothers have come to be almost invisible, yet are so often idealized by media and popular culture. I began by exploring the history of motherhood and the mothering role in Western society, before looking at present-day analyses and critiques. These inevitably led to consideration of women in general, and also to gender issues within marriage and family. Finally, after interviewing the women and reflecting on their words I returned to the literature on mother/parent-adolescent relationships which had originally sparked my interest because of its almost exclusive concentration on adolescents. This study attempts to address this gap in the research literature by focussing on

mothers' experiences and the meanings of those experiences within the context of their lives.

Historical Roots of "Mother"

The past has an impact on the present, and our current constructions of "mother" are deeply rooted in history. Examining the history of motherhood in Western society helps to show how the role has been socially constructed and how contradictions within the role have developed and persisted through the centuries.

Atkinson (1991) discusses the influences of the Medieval Church on societal attitudes toward women in general and mothers in particular. Women were seen as a source of evil, unless they were consecrated to the Church, and thus to chastity. The only other route to salvation was through being a mother of sons who were highly respected. Atkinson notes that monasteries housed much of the educated male population at the time and were the source of most writing about women, children, and motherhood. Within their walls a new ideology of "spiritual motherhood" was being constructed. Based on the life of the Virgin Mary, it emphasized virtue and the protection of children. This ideology, according to Atkinson, also widened the Christianity-inspired dichotomy between body and soul and created two distinct views of motherhood: revered, pure, virginal motherhood as exemplified by Mary, and physical, human, sexually-generated motherhood of

"real" women. Being a mother was evidence of not being a virgin, so the conflict was implicit for every mother.

The concept of mother-love as a weakness and a distraction from more worthy pursuits is discussed by Shahar (1990) in relation to women who abandoned their children in search of their true vocation within the Church. Mother-love was also considered detrimental to the proper development of boys after the age of weaning (Shahar, 1990). This opinion apparently was still held a few hundred years later, for in his writing on education, John Locke (1995/1693) referred to fathers (and occasionally "parents"), but not mothers. In the next century, Rousseau (1964/1762), who is often credited with major changes in attitude toward children and childrearing, also saw fathers, not mothers, as being the appropriate teachers for their sons. Not only were mothers inappropriate for this function but, he wrote, " Would you have everyone return to his [sic] duties, begin with mothers...This is the source from which degeneracy has gradually spread till the whole moral order is broken..." (73). Mothers could not competently educate their sons, but were to blame not only for their sons' shortcomings, but also for "degeneracy" in society as a whole. Beekman (1977) sees Rousseau's most lasting contribution to motherhood as "his notion that the professional is the person best equipped to tell a mother how to raise her child" (53). Ehrenreich and English (1978) trace the gradual erosion throughout the nineteenth century of women's/mothers' credibility and confidence in favour of "experts", who were almost always male, to oversee pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing. Despite the rise of the "expert", the idea of "maternal instinct" has persisted to the present

time. Badinter (1980/1976) confronts the "myth" of maternal instinct, arguing that childrearing practices developed not because of innate motherly intuition but as responses to specific living conditions.

Allen's (1991) examination of motherhood in Germany from the mid-nineteenth century to the outbreak of World War I reveals another aspect of mothering. Women in the middle and upper classes began to see motherhood as a social and moral force which could effect social change. This movement appeared in other parts of Europe and in North America as well. The target was usually lower-class children and families, and the aim was to improve social conditions and thereby, implicitly, to maintain social order (Hays, 1994). In Prussia, mothers and female teachers embraced the kindergarten movement. This proved to be a threat to the government, which tried, sometimes violently, to repress kindergartens (Allen, 83). Despite the activism of some women at this time, male dominance in families continued; using the mothering role to gain access to the public sphere was one of the only ways for women to express themselves outside the home. Pollock (1987) uses first-person accounts by parents between 1600 and 1900, noting that mothers saw themselves as responsible for raising "good" citizens who will be, as one mother wrote, "...either an instrument of good to the world, or a pest in the lap of society" (180). This sense of responsibility combined with a relative lack of political power persisted well into the twentieth century.

"Scientific motherhood" (Apple, 1987; Beekman, 1977; Ehrenreich and English, 1978; Hays, 1996) became, late in the nineteenth and on into the

twentieth centuries, a means both of validating mothering as a "real" activity, and of making it yet more dependent on expert advice. A 1940 publication for Canadian "parents" (Ottawa, 10th ed.) on the first year of life begins each chapter with "Dear Madam". It covers every detail of infant care for each month and makes clear the assumption that the mother is responsible for all of it. Almost as an after-thought, the father is mentioned: "To the father we would say that he should remember that he too is a factor in the baby's life...His interest in the baby's care...will encourage its mother in the difficult task of mastering *all the responsibilities* of the early months..." (Letter no. 3, p.2). (Emphasis added.) There has been a long history of mothers being held responsible for the total well-being of children and families, yet being devalued within the larger society, particularly as children grow out of early childhood.

Ideologies and Constructions of Motherhood

Motherhood as the subject of critical thought appears to be a rather recent development in academia. The resurgence of feminism in the early 1970's may have been a catalyst for increasing attention to the mother role. In addition, non-quantitative methodologies based on human experience have evolved in the social sciences within the past several decades. Writers who questioned the scientific, positivist tradition (e.g. Kuhn, 1962) and who offered new ways of doing social research (e.g. Glaser and Strauss, 1967) paved the way for academic studies of everyday life.

The concept of the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Smith, 1987) provides a tool for the critique of roles and institutions, which

may be invisible because they are taken-for-granted, or taken-for-granted because they are too much a part of everyday life to be visible. A body of literature using this tool as a basis for examining the mother role has accumulated and continues to grow.

Hays (1996) defines "intensive motherhood" as an ideology which originated around the time of Rousseau, when a paradigm shift was occurring from "original sin" to innate innocence. Mothers came to be held responsible for the outcomes of their children, where previously any character defects, etc., could be blamed on original sin. Mother-blaming, Hays notes, has continued to the present time. It has often obscured the social and economic determinants of criminal or "anti-social" behaviour, as well as the symptomatology of some mental illnesses. Despite this yoke of responsibility, women have not generally, until the latter half of the twentieth century, been welcome to have decision-making roles outside the home. Hays calls this a "cultural contradiction" of motherhood.

Badinter (1980/1976) examines the alienation of fathers from childrearing as the outcome of complex historical, social, and economic factors, and expresses the view that both fathers and mothers are oppressed by the "myth" of motherhood. Thurer (1994) writes that mothers are expected to aspire to an impossible ideal, but one which is constantly changing, and that whatever a mother does is presumed likely to damage her child. She notes the pervasiveness of the motherhood "myth" in our society which has made this expectation inexplicit. An overview of research topics relating to mothers and adolescents during the 1990's hints at the survival of the taken-for-granted ideal of

motherhood. For example, Armistead, Wierson, and Forehand (1990) published an article entitled, "Adolescents and maternal employment: Is it harmful for a young adolescent to have an employed mother?". Paulson (1996) also examines maternal employment, in relation to adolescent achievement. Foshee and Hollinger (1996) study the effects of maternal "religiosity" on adolescent behaviours including alcohol use. Silverberg, Marczak, and Gondoli (1996) found an association between single mothers' depressive symptoms and adolescent daughters' "views of their academic future". The intent of these studies appears to be to establish predictors of risk and resilience among adolescents. The implication, however, is that mothers, specifically, are potentially hazardous to their children's development.

Rossiter (1988) notes that "In becoming a mother I also became a Woman", pointing out the deep-seated connection between motherhood and women's self-definition in our society. "Woman" and "Mother" are inter-related social constructions. Rossiter interviewed three women extensively about their experiences as first-time mothers. The data were then analyzed and organized into categories in order to clarify the women's accounts of their experiences. Rossiter emphasizes the importance of the attachment between mother and child, but points out that this attachment leads to lower status for mothers. For example, in parenting couples it is usually the mother who must rearrange her working life, and who is expected to put her child's needs ahead of her own. Like Hays, Rossiter points out the invisibility of these forms of oppression due to their everyday quality, and links them to larger, socioeconomic realities. The seemingly

egalitarian concept of "parenting", while "appearing genderless...obscures the fact that the work implied by proper parenting is virtually all done by women" (Swift, 1995, p. 177). Dally (1982) begins with the assertion that motherhood is in crisis in our society and discusses some of the historical, social, and psychological factors that maintain the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in the role. Kaplan (1992) uses a case study method with twelve mothers of preschool children. In this exploratory study, the researcher seeks to understand the meanings women give to motherhood. Kaplan advocates further qualitative research in the area, and expresses the hope that questions of women's views of motherhood will receive further academic attention. Boulton (1983) interviewed a sample of 50 women in London, England, using a "non-schedule standardized interview". The sample included two groups, one middle-class and the other working-class, and the focus was on the experience of being mothers. Boulton found no statistically significant differences between the classes in terms of "quality of experience" as mothers—both positive and negative—and suggests that the mothering role itself carries responsibilities and obligations that transcend class differences. The aforementioned studies all deal with the experiences of mothers of infants and preschool children; I did not discover any that focus on mothers of older children or adolescents.

Daly and Reddy (1991) address the invisibility of mothers in academic and even fictional writing, noting that "few fictional or theoretical works *begin* with the mother in her own right, from her own perspective, and those that do seldom hold fast to a maternal perspective..." (3). A woman's point of view as a mother, in

other words, is usually not the dominant theme of such work. Coll, Surrey, and Weingarten (1998) continue in this direction, expressing the concern that mothers' voices are still not being heard, and their diverse contexts and strengths are not being acknowledged. Within this collection of mothering stories, Weingarten (1998) describes the "sidelining" of mothers of adolescents. She ascribes this to the devaluing of mothers, especially after their children's infancy, and observes that in media portrayals of adolescents, mothers are rarely present.

DeMeis and Perkins (1996) studied the phenomenon of "Supermoms"—women who work full-time while raising children—and found that employed mothers perform the same range of tasks as homemaker mothers, though in fewer hours. The researchers feel this workload "may reflect the concentrated efforts of the employed mothers to fulfill their role as a mother". The effects of such concentrated effort are examined by Ross and Van Willigen (1996), who found in their study of men and women, with and without children, that whether employed or not, mothers have twice the level of anger of fathers. Walters (1993) relates women's mental health problems to gender roles and other social factors, in a study of 356 Ontario women. The women were questioned about stress, anxiety, and depression in relation to a range of common problems, for example, "child's health", "combining work and parenting", and "worries about money". Walters cautions against the "normalization" of mental health problems such as stress, anxiety, and depression in women, who are "supposed to be able to cope" (400). Yet, according to Gager (1998), married women who are employed full-time do not identify as unfair an unequal distribution of house- and family-work. Gager

interviewed both partners in dual-earner couples in regard to perceptions of fairness. The reasons given by the female interviewees for their acceptance of apparent inequality included the statements that the women derived self-esteem from such work, that they did some tasks to avoid conflict with their husbands to make life "run more smoothly", and that they considered themselves to be more efficient than their husbands. As DeVault (1991) found, sometimes women will find it less stressful to do everything themselves, rather than negotiating or "nagging" for the sharing of work. Daly (1996) examined the meaning of time and of "family time" for fathers, concluding that fathers and mothers differ in their experience of and approach to, time.

Hartrick (1996, 1997), using elements of interpretive phenomenology and feminist inquiry, interviewed seven women, who were also mothers, individually and in a focus group to explore their experiences of defining self. The women described a non-linear process of defining self both in relation to and apart from, their roles as mothers, and a sense of empowerment that evolved from that process. The concept of a distinctive "standpoint" for women (Smith, 1990, 1999) recognizes the value and importance of locating a woman within her own life as distinct from the "textually mediated discourse" (1999, p. 45) of sociology. Oakley (1993) links women's everyday lives with their health and notes the "notable lack of research that locates the concerns of women's health within the material and social context of their ordinary lives" (p. 340).

Mothers and Adolescents

Just as we hold assumptions about mothers and take the mothering role for granted, so there are many current societal assumptions about adolescents. One has only to listen to the dire warnings given to parents of young children: "Just wait till he's a teenager!" or "She's going to be a real handful when she's in her teens", to realize that there are expectations for problems and conflicts between teens and parents. Many studies have examined parent-adolescent relationships, conflict, and communication, some focussing specifically on mothers and teens. The majority of these studies are quantitative and deal with limited aspects of being a mother of adolescents, leaving the everyday experience largely untouched.

Steinberg (1990) addresses the positive functions of parent-adolescent conflict in terms of adolescent development, e.g. it may serve the evolutionary purpose of ensuring that adolescents move out of the family circle in order to seek intimate relationships and eventually reproduce. Paikoff and Brooks-Gunn (1991), in a review of research on parent-adolescent relationships, ask the question, "Do parent-child relationships change during puberty?" They conclude that relationships do change, but that there are many factors operating to determine how much and in what ways. They refer to "changes in parental self-definitions" following children's puberty, which may result from changes in the son or daughter, the meaning of that change to the parent, or the parent's own life course issues. Paikoff and Brooks-Gunn recommend further research on the impact of puberty on the family as a whole, within a broader social and cultural context. A

similar but more specific question from Galambos and Almeida (1992) is whether or not parent-adolescent conflict increases in early adolescence. Using a checklist and a 5-point scale from "very calm" to "very angry", they obtained information from 112 young Canadian adolescents and their parents. Their findings were that reports of conflict did not increase appreciably, except on the topic of money. They found that the gender of parent or of child was not a significant factor in the level of conflict within their sample. This challenges conventional thought, and other studies, about early adolescence as being conflictual as a matter of course.

Puberty is a sexual transition period, marked by hormonal changes. One study examined hormone levels in relation to aggressive behaviour in family interactions (Inoff-Germain, Arnold, Nottelmann, Susman, Cutler, and Chrousos, 1988). The researchers used a combination of biological measures—hormone blood levels—and videotaped family interactions, in which parent-child triads and dyads met in both unstructured and prescribed discussion situations. Although the results were inconclusive, there seemed to be a positive association in girls between hormone levels and expressions of anger with their parents. Graber and Brooks-Gunn (1996) looked at reproductive transitions including menarche, first sexual activity, and pregnancy in girls, and menopause in their mothers. They found evidence from longitudinal and other studies that each of these transitions is potentially a time for vulnerability to stress for both mother and daughter.

Several other studies deal with the differing perceptions of adolescents and parents. Some writers refer to these differences as "divergent realities" (Larson

and Richards, 1994; Welsh and Galliher, 1998). Smetana (1988) investigated conceptions of parental authority by interviewing 102 early and late adolescents and their parents, presenting hypothetical situations for them to categorize according to various measures. The aim was to determine how parents and adolescents at different ages view the exercising of parental authority: in what situations is it legitimate, what is it contingent upon, and when or to what extent can an adolescent's behaviour be justified? The findings were that significant differences did exist between parents' and children's perceptions and could be a source of conflict. In addition, mothers' responses, unlike fathers' or children's, indicated that "personal" and "multifaceted" (complex) issues would legitimately fall under maternal authority, an observation that Smetana suggests may reflect mothers' role as "family rule makers" (333). Bulcroft, Carmody, and Bulcroft (1998) studied 1,692 Anglo- and African-American families with respect to control and "independence-giving", noting that concepts of control and supervision are ethnocentrically biased. The findings were that although family structure had some influence on parents' efforts to control their 12 to 18-year-old children, the effect was less than expected.

Another "divergent reality" addressed in the literature is parent-adolescent communication (Beaumont, 1996; Beaumont and Cheyne, 1998; Jackson, Bijstra, Oostra, and Bosma, 1998). Differences in perception and in communication style could account for some of the "conflict" so commonly described in families with adolescents. For example, Beaumont and Cheyne (1998) studied speech patterns in mother-daughter and daughter-friend conversations. They found that

mothers' and adolescent daughters' speech patterns differed significantly, with daughters' speech patterns being marked by rapidity and frequent interruptions. In mother-daughter conversations this might be interpreted as rudeness by the standards of adult conversational courtesy, and perhaps be seen by adults as evidence of a power struggle. Jackson et al. (1998) in a study of Dutch 13- and 15-year-olds, found through a questionnaire that in general the adolescents experienced more open and less "problematic" communication with their mothers than with their fathers. This was more pronounced among the younger than the older age group. In her study of sixty-five mother-adolescent daughter pairs in two countries, Apter (1990) notes that opposition between adolescents and parents has come to be seen as normal and expected in our society, and that this theory or attitude "highlights problems, enlarges them, and then presents them as normal" (107). Apter found that mothers in her study were more distressed than fathers by conflict with their daughters, and that such conflict adversely affected their self-esteem (109-113).

Silverberg (1996) examines and discusses parental midlife development, adolescent development, and adolescent-parent relationships as they inter-relate to gender, role orientation, and socioeconomic status. Silverberg notes that the "transition to adolescence may be associated with temporary disruptions in parental sense of self or life satisfaction" (217) due to changes in and challenges to, the parenting role. Further, mothers may be particularly vulnerable to these challenges. Silverberg asks a similar question to the one posed in this thesis: "How do mothers, in particular, perceive themselves and their life situations as

their youngsters move through the pubertal cycle?" (219). The study found that maternal well-being was more likely to be adversely affected by parent-child conflict than was paternal well-being, but that there were also moderating effects, for both fathers and mothers, from higher socioeconomic status, job satisfaction, and the pursuit of interests outside the family. Raviv, Maddy-Weitzmann, and Raviv (1992) examined "help-seeking" intentions and behaviours of 119 mothers and 68 fathers of adolescents in Israel. Raviv et al note that parents frequently identify this period as the most difficult part of childrearing, often finding that they cannot apply their own childhood experiences to parenting their adolescents.

In Jesek's (1997) study of the phenomenology of "launching" a child, the 14 women who were interviewed described having a child leave home as not so much an event as a process, that begins in early adolescence when children begin to "push away". The end of their active mothering roles was seen by some as being like breaking a branch from a tree, even though it also marked the beginning of a time to develop other interests.

Within popular literature, the number of books, brochures, and periodicals directed at parents of adolescents appear to have increased in recent years. Most address parenting concerns but pay little attention to "parent" issues, such as the impact of the onset of puberty on mothers or fathers. For example, a collection of essays entitled Mothering Teens: Understanding the Adolescent Years (Kaufman, 1997), contains surprisingly little about mothers, mainly referring to "parents". It does, however, discuss some interesting issues such as racism, and includes a first-hand account of mothering aboriginal adolescents. Another

recent book aimed specifically at mothers of teenage daughters (Cohen-Sandler and Silver, 1999) does devote a chapter to "being a mother". In this chapter the authors discuss a number of aspects of the experience, including, for example, the impact of pubertal changes on the family, the social expectations of the mothering role, and the "emotional fallout" (20) of conflict. Caron (1994) addresses similar issues for mothers of sons, noting the under-recognized and devalued importance of the mother-son relationship.

In addition to the academic and popular literature relating to mothers and adolescents, I have referred to a few works of fiction in order to enrich and illuminate the phenomenological research and the experience of being a mother of young adolescents.

Summing Up

A review of the literature reveals a growing body of research around and critical analysis of, the role of "mother" in our society. This literature spans several disciplines, including sociology, psychology, philosophy, women's and gender studies, and social history, suggesting that "mothering" is a complex concept, rich in meaning and still mysterious despite its fundamentally "ordinary" qualities.

Both quantitative and qualitative studies abound in the field of parent-adolescent and mother-adolescent relationships. As a parent, community health nurse, and parent group facilitator I am aware of heightened parental anxiety around the time of early adolescence; contemporary research may reflect this anxiety and consequent need to increase understanding of this transition period.

A notable gap in the literature is the near-absence of studies conducted from mothers' standpoints. Although many studies have been done of maternal characteristics and their effects on adolescents, these tend not to take into account the everyday experiences of the women or the wider contexts of their lives. It is this gap that my thesis will begin to address.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Ways of knowing vary according to one's world-view; choosing a way of researching depends upon the kind of question being asked and the kind of knowledge being sought. Before discussing the methodology used in this study it would be useful to address the fundamental differences among three major "perspectives of knowing" in the Western academic world. As identified by the German philosopher Habermas (cited in Aoki and Harrison, 1977), these are "technical", "situational", and "critically reflective".

Technical Perspectives of Knowing

A "technical", "scientific", or "positivist" perspective of knowing has been, and continues to be, a dominant paradigm of inquiry in our society (Maguire, 1987, chap. 2). It is characterized by neutrality, detachment, and objectification. The researcher stands apart from the research, his or her own views and values theoretically not involved in the study. Whatever is being studied becomes an "object" to be observed, making data available for analysis. It is an "outside" approach, relying on observation, measurement, and experimentation. Quantitative methodologies are essential to this perspective of knowing.

Situational Perspectives of Knowing

A situational perspective invites multiple approaches to examine the same

problem. Within the social sciences, situational perspectives may vary from almost technical to those favouring an "inside" approach—viewing the world, and consciousness of the world, from inside the person having the experience (Wagner, 1983, p. 11). Using such an "inside" approach, those within the situation are actively involved, as opposed to being "objects" of inquiry. This perspective is compatible with qualitative methodologies in which the researcher's experiences and identity are also acknowledged as part of the research.

Critically Reflective Perspectives of Knowing

Research from a critically reflective perspective has as its aim social or political change. Although all perspectives have an underlying ideology that guide or motivate them, for this perspective the ideology must be made overt and conscious. There is an emphasis on action, and on active participation of both the researcher and the researched. Maguire (1987) refers to "alternative paradigm research" to include those approaches which require that "knowledge must be put to use for emancipatory purposes" (27). Such methodologies as participatory action research, feminist research, and critical ethnography, seek not only increased knowledge and understanding, but also empowerment of specific groups (Marshall and Rossman, 1995, p. 3).

To ask the question, "What is it like to be a mother of a young adolescent?" is to seek understanding of the experience and of its meaning to the women who are living that experience. It is an exploratory question, requiring an open-ended approach that will allow the researcher flexibility. It also requires a thoughtful

approach that can go beneath the surface of the "facts" presented. In deciding which methodology would be most suitable for this question, I pondered not only the question itself, but also my own perspectives of knowing. I eliminated a technical perspective immediately as unsuitable to the kind of question I was asking. I decided, after much thought, to explore my question through the philosophical and methodological lenses of hermeneutic phenomenology, because of its openness to exploration from the "inside" of people's experiences.

In this chapter I will discuss my choice of hermeneutic phenomenology for the exploratory journey of this study.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

The approach used in this study is hermeneutic phenomenology. "Hermeneutic" refers to the process of interpretation; "phenomenology" is a philosophical approach which studies consciousness and direct experiences or "the things themselves" (Van Manen, 1990). Hermeneutic phenomenology, then, is both interpretive and descriptive in nature. I chose this approach because it seemed to fit not only my research question, but also my personality and philosophy of life. However, I soon discovered that phenomenology is not easily defined or conceptualized. It cannot be "made easy" in a step-by-step manual, because there are many different philosophical schools within its sphere. The work of Edmund Husserl in the early twentieth century is generally seen as the beginning of modern phenomenology (Wagner, 1983, p. 10); contemporary and later works by Schutz (1964), Heidegger (Howard, 1982), and Merleau-Ponty

(1968), to name only a few, added different perspectives and layers of understanding. The approach used in this study is not limited to the philosophy of any one phenomenologist. However, I have found the works of Van Manen (1987, 1990) and Wagner (1983), both helpful in increasing my understanding of phenomenology and in finding a direction to take within a rather confusing sea of often opposing currents of thought.

In Wagner's words, "Phenomenology is understood by doing it" (1983, p.8). It is the study of lived experience, and of the essences of experiences, which Van Manen (1984) states has been adequately described in research when "the description reawakens or shows us the lived meaning or significance of the experience in a fuller or deeper manner" (p. 38). This suggests the nature of the experience of "doing" phenomenological research: it involves listening, reading, writing, and reflecting, in a repeated spiral of gradually increasing understanding. It requires what Van Manen calls "the attentive practice of thoughtfulness" (38). As well, it is a "poetizing activity" (39):

> Phenomenological research is unlike other research in that the link with the results cannot be broken...without loss of all reality to the results. And that is why, when you listen to a presentation of a phenomenological nature, you will listen in vain for the punchline, the latest information, or the big news. As in poetry, it is inappropriate to ask for a conclusion or a summary of a phenomenological study. To summarize a poem in order to present the result would destroy the result because the poem itself is the result. The poem is the thing. (39)

"Poetry" is an attempt to capture lived experience through imaginative or thoughtful description; "poeisis", its Greek root, means "making" (Hoy, 1978, p. 75). A phenomenological study, like poetry, is a creative endeavour which

continues to "make" itself after the actual writing, as it is read and reflected upon by others.

The "result" of the study is the text generated from the interviews, or the interpretations made of that text, or the interplay between the two. Van Manen seems to be supporting the last definition, which recognizes that the text itself and the interpretation, if done thoughtfully and remaining faithful to the text, are inseparable. The inappropriateness of "conclusions" and "summaries" in phenomenological work does not preclude the finding of important insights into what we all may share in terms of common experience. Such insights can then serve as seeds for changes in public policy or in professional practices.

Phenomenology, like other qualitative methodologies, involves exploration. It is an "inside approach", one that seeks access to the outer world from the inside, rather than the other way around (Wagner, 1983). This, along with other peculiarities discussed above, makes it different from most other approaches, many of which are based on the researcher observing the "subjects" from the outside (thus turning the "subject" into an "object"), and coming to conclusions based on his or her observations. Phenomenology's inner focus is not a denial of outer realities (Wagner, 19). However, the research begins in the "life-world" (a Husserlian term) of the person being listened to. It seeks to understand experience before it becomes part of that person's intellectual history, i.e. before it has been analyzed and incorporated into one's "common sense". Put another way, its aim is to understand the "primary and fundamental meaning" of an action or event for an individual (Schutz, 1971, p.11). To Van Manen (1990),

hermeneutic phenomenological research "reintegrates part and whole...encourages a certain attentive awareness to the details...makes us thoughtfully aware of the consequential in the inconsequential, the significant in the taken-for-granted" (p. 8).   This early capturing of experience was described by Husserl as the "original, pre-reflective, pre-theoretical attitude" (cited in Van Manen, 1990). The difference between this and later understanding of experience is expressed articulately by Margaret Atwood's character, Grace Marks, in <u>Alias Grace</u> (1996). Grace has been convicted of a double murder in which she may or may not have participated.

> When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else. (p. 298).

Grace observes that the telling of an experience, even to oneself, alters the perception of that experience and turns it into a "story". Her images of "pure" or pre-reflective experience are sensory: darkness, blindness, roaring, shattering, splintering, whirling, crushing, sweeping over the rapids. They take place against a background of confusion and powerlessness, qualities which are named only in retrospect. Grace's understanding of experience parallels that of Van Manen (1990), who states that the aim of phenomenology is "to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence—in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflective re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful" (36).

I have attempted to achieve such a "reflective appropriation of something meaningful" through the careful reading and interpretation of the words spoken to me by the seven participants in this study. At the same time, I have had to guard against taking things for granted in my reading; for example, when a woman makes a comment about her children arguing, I cannot assume that her experience of this is the same as mine, although the temptation and inclination to do so may be great (Psathas and Waksler, 1973, p. 160). Instead, I must look closely at the words she uses to describe the incident, and the way in which she speaks while describing it, in order to interpret the meaning it has for her. Finally, it is only by reflecting that interpretation back to her that I can know whether or not I have understood her; whether or not this is what it is "really" like (Van Manen, 1990, p. 42).

The Research Question

Phenomenological research starts with a question. My initial question was, "What is it like for women to be mothers of young adolescents?" At first, I wondered if this question was "important" enough for a research project, and was reluctant to discuss it with others. After all, being a mother to adolescents is an extremely common experience for women, and therefore, would the nature of the experience not be obvious, at least to those women who had gone through it? Furthermore, all adults have been adolescents, and so should have enough knowledge from their own memories to describe the experiences of their mothers. Or should they? On further reflection and reading, I realized that my sense of

unworthiness around the question was the result not of the question's unimportance, but of the relative absence of research relating to women's ordinary, everyday experiences (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986; Coll, Surrey, and Weingarten, 1998; Gilligan, 1982; Hays, 1996; Phoenix, Woollett, and Lloyd, 1991; Smith, 1990). The reasons for this absence are multifaceted and beyond the scope of this thesis.

In my preliminary reading about phenomenological research, I was encouraged by statements of the value of the ordinary (Levesque-Lopman, 1988; Zaner, 1973). As Zaner puts it, "The commonplace is the least common of affairs". We take for granted the social structures that surround us daily, assuming they are predetermined and unchangeable, but if we look closely at them, we find their "commonness" evaporates, and they are no longer predictable or uninteresting. Re-searching—searching over again—a very "ordinary" human experience, that of being a mother to a young adolescent, illustrates this.

Finding meanings in, or making sense of, our realities, is something we all do more or less unconsciously. Doing so establishes what is "typical" in our daily relations, in order to avoid a constant sense of chaos (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 103). This ongoing search is described below through another fictional character, Larry Weller, in Carol Shield's novel, Larry's Party (1997):

> Larry listens. This is how he's learning about the world, exactly as everyone else does—from sideways comments over a lemon meringue pie, sudden bursts of comprehension or weird parallels that come curling out of the radio, out of a movie, off the pages of a newspaper, out of a joke—and his baffled self stands back and says: so this is how it works. (p. 58).

Larry is using his lived experience to make connections among the everyday phenomena of ordinary life. His self is "baffled" and looking for explanations, and he interprets his reality from the fragments of information that come his way. Like Larry, and "everyone else", I have used listening as a major research method. And, Larry-fashion, I have grounded my research in the everyday world of pies and jokes and newspapers, trying to understand the meanings of those things in human lives. In asking the question, "What is it like for women to be mothers of young adolescents?" I am asking about such real, everyday phenomena, as distinct from psychological theories of adolescent development or sociological frameworks of roles and relationships. Because of the nature of this question, I have chosen a methodology and philosophical framework that will address it appropriately.

Recruiting

Anticipating an overabundance of volunteers to be interviewed, I decided to limit the study to women whose first children were young adolescents. My reason for this was that they would be experiencing being a mother of a young adolescent for the first time and would not be comparing the experience to a previous one. I also chose to interview women who were raising a child or children with another adult, as I felt that a woman parenting alone would have different issues that deserved their own study. Whether because of these restrictions or not, finding women who were willing to be interviewed proved to be more difficult that I had expected. I posted notices at various sites around town where women would see

them. Some examples were the Women's Centre, the Recreation Centre, the Bowling Alley, a few coffee shops and restaurants, some workplaces, and the local Friendship Society, who also faxed the information to the band offices of two nearby reserves. I put advertisements in the local paper, and talked to people casually about the project. Aside from one response to the newspaper advertisement, which ultimately did not result in an interview, informal talking and word-of-mouth were the only effective means of recruiting women for this study. One woman invited her sister to participate, and others their friends or co-workers; another woman volunteered immediately herself on hearing the research question. Given that many of the women who were interviewed expressed a need for others to talk to about the issues of mothering young teens, it is interesting that so few responded to the invitation. Possible reasons are lack of time or energy, or concern about the types of questions that might be asked. Perhaps some women had a reaction similar to my own, initially, that there wasn't anything new or "important" to say, especially if there were no "problems".

The Interviews

Traditional interviewing practice involves an active "interviewer", who remains emotionally distant and does not reveal personal feelings or values, and a relatively passive "interviewee" (Oakley, 1990). In contrast to this model, to "interview" or "see each other" is to share perspectives and participate together in research or exploration (Kvale, 1996). Nevertheless, issues of power and exploitation must be considered from the outset (Dzurec, L. & Coleman, P., 1997;

Finch, 1993). I was aware that some of the women felt somewhat nervous and even intimidated at first, at the thought of "being interviewed"; I was equally aware that I was, in effect, using them for my own purposes. I tried, however, to put the women at ease, to reassure them that the interviews would remain confidential, and to explain how their participation could potentially help other women.

Four of the interviews took place in my home, one in the interviewee's home, one at my workplace, and one at the workplace of the interviewee. The site was decided by mutual agreement, to accommodate everyone's schedule. For each interview I used a small tape recorder with a lapel microphone. The recorder sat between us on the table or desk, and the other woman wore the microphone.

I had a general outline of the questions I wanted to ask, but it was not a questionnaire or a strictly followed set of questions. Instead I kept in mind the central question, "What is it like for women to be mothers of young adolescents?" and tried to facilitate full descriptions of this experience. Benner (1994) acknowledges that this may entail asking "obvious" questions, but adds that "those who ask the most obvious questions get the best descriptions, and often the participant's answers are not what the researcher would have anticipated" (110). Although I had experience with open-ended questions and active listening, I sometimes found these interviews difficult. There was to some extent a sense of urgency: the tape was rolling, the woman had made special arrangements in her busy day to fit in this interview, I needed her words for my research, and I usually had a long list of other demands on my time and concentration. I was aware of my own voice as I asked questions or responded to something a woman said. I

worried that she would think the interview was a waste of her time, or that I, the interviewer, was at best incompetent. If a woman was not spontaneously talkative, I found myself racing ahead with questions, sometimes missing cues that would probably have led to other areas of her experience, or forgetting to ask those "obvious" questions.

Despite these difficulties, all seven women graciously donated their time and their thoughts about being mothers of young teens. Following each interview I listened to the tape, and then began the painstaking process of transcribing it. Although many researchers hire others to do this, I found it was valuable for me to do it myself. Listening to an unclear phrase over and over until its words became apparent gave me a familiarity with the text that would not have occurred otherwise. In addition, I was able to note the modulations of the voice, the changes in pace, tone, and volume that accompanied certain statements or words. By the end of a transcription I felt that I knew the text well, and felt a bond with the woman who had produced it.

Interpretation

I am using the word "interpretation" here instead of "analysis" intentionally. "Analysis" is a scientific term bearing the connotation of subject-as-object. In this study I have made interpretations of the words (text) of seven women who are mothers of young adolescents. The work of interpretation is visualized in hermeneutic phenomenology as the hermeneutic "circle" or "spiral" (Howard, 1982). It is a continuous, back-and-forth dialogue between the "parts" and the "whole". In this study, the dialogue—a dialectic within the hermeneutics—is

between the words of the individual women, and the research question, "What is it like for women to be mothers of young adolescents?" There is a third element in this work: the experiences, assumptions, and biases of the researcher, which must constantly be brought to awareness and either set aside or included in the face-to-face dialogue. It is not possible for a hermeneutic interpretation to be completely "objective", nor would that be a desirable goal. To claim objectivity would be to ignore shared realities between the researcher and the participants.

There are many realities that I share with the women in this study. We have all been mothers of young adolescents, though our experiences are all different in some ways; we all live in the same community; we are all middle-class, married, educated women within a similar age range. However, in engaging in dialogue with their words and my question, I referred to their words—their intimate experiences as mothers of their particular children—as the authoritative source for interpretation, and tried as far as possible to keep my own internal conversation separate from this source. Nonetheless, I was always aware that the research was taking place within the context of my own realities as a mother, a wife, a Public Health Nurse, a parent support group facilitator, a graduate student, and a community member.

The women's, or anyone's, words, while at first glance merely prosaic and "commonsensical", often hold depths of meaning on closer examination and reflection. People choose words and metaphors to express feelings about experiences, and these expressions are often extremely eloquent. In daily encounters with people, I frequently notice with interest the ways in which they

use words, as, for example, a young woman who described her newly-toddling son as "very walkative", or a bereaved mother who pictured herself as "torn apart". Because the English language does not have words to represent every conceivable experience or emotion, speakers may change words, or use words with other literal definitions to express their own meanings in relation to their lived experiences.

In trying to understand the words of the women in this study, I first read the entire text of each interview several times, and then chose specific phrases or paragraphs to explore in greater depth. Usually those excerpts were ones that began with "I", or in some other way indicated that they were about the woman herself, her experiences and her feelings about those experiences. I looked at the phrases and the words they contained, reflecting on the literal meanings of the words, and sometimes their etymological origins, and how these might relate to the experience of being a mother to young adolescents. For example, one woman spoke of her life as taking place in "little snippets here and there". [See Appendix IV for a fuller excerpt from this interview.] This phrase initially brought to my mind an image of pieces of paper lying at random on the floor. I referred to the dictionary, which defined "snippet" as: a small piece cut off; a scrap or fragment of information, knowledge, etc.; a short extract from a book, newspaper, etc. I looked at the phrase in the context of the interview, and saw that the woman had used it in connection with brief conversations she had with her daughters while driving them to and from lessons and practices. The "snippets" were small bits of information, or moments of contact, that felt unsatisfactory to her because they

were so brief and incomplete. At the same time, she perceived her task to be one of connecting the snippets to create a measure of coherence in the life of the family.

From many such key phrases selected from each interview, common themes began to emerge. For example, other women spoke of being the one person in the family who knew what everyone else was doing, of being a "central figure". This thought was repeated often enough that it appeared to be an aspect of the subtheme of "sustaining the family group". I named this particular aspect with the words of one of the women: "keeping the group together". At this point writing became the method of interpretation. Through writing and re-writing, I was able to reflect on the words of the women, the literal meanings of those words, their relationship to the research question and to each other, and my own reactions to the words. The purpose of this repetitive and intensive work was to gain an understanding of the lived experience of being a mother of a young adolescent. In Van Manen's (1984) words, "Writing...is a deeply reflexive activity that involves the totality of our physical and mental being. To write means to write myself, not in a narcissistic but in a deep, collective sense. To write phenomenologically is the untiring effort to author a sensitive grasp of being itself..." (p. 68). I read a number of other phenomenological studies in order to discover how others had approached the writing (Jesek, 1997; Leary, M., Springer, C., Negel, L., Ansell, E., & Evans, K., 1998; Leipert, 1994; MacLeod, 1990; Morley, 1998).

Benner (1994) cautions that "the struggle [to understand the text] must not end in making the practical world more rational, coherent, or consistent than it really is" (115). This could have happened if I had held pre-acquired "knowledge" about what the experience of being a mother of a young adolescent is "supposed" to be like for a woman. I tried to avoid this by waiting until after most of the writing was done before starting to read extensively in the fields of parent-adolescent relationships, adolescent development, and maternal development, and instead relied exclusively on the interviews for my interpretation. As I wrote and then read what I had written, new insights would occur to me, and new connections appeared among what had been said by different women about the same thing, or by the same woman about different things. In hermeneutic phenomenological research there is no clear point of termination (Leonard, 1994, p. 57), but when eventually there were fewer of these revelations, Chapters Four and Five arrived at their present form.

Valuation

In order to "valuate"—as distinct from "evaluation" which may imply a numerical assessment—my interpretations, it was necessary to return to the women who had been interviewed and ask for their reactions to my writing. I gave a draft copy of Chapter Four (which later became Four and Five) to six of the seven women and asked them to critique it in relation to their own experiences. Did it accurately reflect what they had tried to tell me? Did it impose meanings that were simply not true for them? Did it miss important aspects of the

experience? Their responses were that it was accurate, that the words of the other women struck a chord of recognition with them, and that they found it interesting to read. One woman, who had been one of the first to be interviewed, commented that she wished she had said more about her experiences, after reading what other women had said. This reflected my own tendency in the beginning to try to follow a set of questions instead of picking up on conversational cues and keeping the overall question always in mind.

Re-view: A second look

I have chosen hermeneutic phenomenology as the research methodology for this study because the question, "What is it like to be the mother of a young adolescent?" can best be addressed by an "inside" approach. In seeking to understand this experience, as opposed to observing and analyzing it in a detached way, I have taken as my ultimate authority the words the women used to describe their experiences. Their response to my interpretation was, essentially, "Yes, that is what it is like for me to be the mother of a young adolescent".

Hermeneutic phenomenology is the study and interpretation of consciousness and direct experience. The research does not proceed in a straight line but rather in a circle or spiral of increasing understanding. Listening, reading, reflecting, and writing occur together and separately, many times over, always moving back and forth between the parts—the words of each woman—and the whole—the research question. Likewise, it does not end in a tidy set of conclusions. Nevertheless, phenomenological research, by exploring the

meanings of lived experiences, can provide important insights into those experiences and thus potentially guide professional and public policies.

In the next two chapters, I will present the outcomes of my research, i.e. the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the text of the interviews, and my reflections on and analyses of them. Throughout these chapters, the hermeneutic phenomenological approach is apparent in the interplay between the women's words and my discussion of them.

CHAPTER FOUR:

HOLDING THINGS TOGETHER AND LETTING GO:

EXPERIENCES IN THE EVERYDAY LIVES OF MOTHERS

As mentioned earlier in this document, I have identified two main themes in the text of the interviews with women who are mothers of young adolescents. The first, "Holding on and letting go" will be presented in this chapter, and the second, "Redefining who 'Mom' is", in the next. Throughout these chapters there will be an interplay of the text and my interpretations of the text: the two are inseparable from one another.

Before beginning this process, I will introduce the reader to the women whose words form the basis of this thesis, and to the community in which they live and raise their children. Following these introductions, I will discuss, briefly, the two themes, and then proceed with presentation and interpretation of the first.

The Women

Between September 1998 and February 1999 I interviewed seven women in a small city in northwestern British Columbia. Each of these seven women was the mother of at least one adolescent, her first (oldest) child. The adolescents ranged in age from 12.5 years to 16 years. All the women were married to and living with the fathers of their children, all had at least a high school education, and all but one were employed outside the home at the time of the interview. Two of the women were the sole wage-earners in their families at that time. I have

changed their names and some details of their lives (specific occupations, etc.) for the sake of confidentiality.

Many of the women expressed surprise at being asked about this experience, because they had not thought of it as a topic of study, but several of them welcomed the chance to talk about this time in their lives, from their own points of view.

Alice is the mother of two girls, aged 16 and 13. She works full-time at a community social services agency and also does volunteer work. At the time of the interview her husband was unemployed. Alice expressed interest in being interviewed as soon as she heard about the project, and proved to be a very articulate and thoughtful interviewee. She has found mothering to be quite challenging, although also rewarding, from the beginning, when she had difficulty conceiving and required numerous tests and surgery. This process led her to expect herself to be an exemplary mother, one who did not lose her temper or run short of patience, because, she told herself, "I have been given a special gift". Now, sixteen years later, she recognizes that, as a mother, she holds herself responsible for many if not most aspects of her children's lives.

Jasmine has two sons, aged 15 and 11. Jasmine is a full-time receptionist and secretary in a government office. She was born in Asia and raised there to the age of 18, when she married and came to Canada. Both her children were born here. She finds that there are many differences between Canada and the country of her birth in terms of the role of mother and the expected behaviour of children. Jasmine is devoutly religious and has tried to instil her spiritual values in

her sons. For the most part she feels she has succeeded but observes that Canadian culture has had influences on her sons and to some extent on her own approach to mothering them. Jasmine finds working full time and being a mother entails many responsibilities and is sometimes very stressful. At the time of the interview her husband was unemployed.

Gail has a daughter and a son, aged 13 and 10 years respectively. At the time of the interview she was not working outside the home. Gail views motherhood as both a gift and a challenge. She says that she has enjoyed watching the children grow and change, and finds it exciting to witness each new step towards independence. "Letting go", she admits, is the hardest part, and during the interview she indicated that she has a strong sense of responsibility in encouraging and preparing her children for adulthood.

Cathy is the mother of two boys, 15 and 13. The elder boy was adopted at birth. Cathy works part-time in education. She says that she has always enjoyed motherhood, and finds every stage, including the current one, to be interesting. For Cathy, the boys "come first", and she tries to be available for them as much as possible. She notices that they are beginning to separate somewhat from her, and finds this a somewhat "odd" feeling, but accepts it as "natural...a stage they go through".

Brenda, a secretary, has a daughter, aged 16, and a son, aged 13. Brenda's sister told her about the study and encouraged her to participate. Brenda and her husband had gone through a very difficult time with their daughter the year before I spoke with her, and that was the main focus of the interview.

The girl had become rebellious and non-communicative when she entered Junior High School and made some new friends. She stopped attending school regularly and was defiant with her parents. Eventually she took an overdose of medication, from which, fortunately, she recovered. It became apparent during the interview that this experience had been quite traumatic for Brenda, causing her to feel alone and not in control of the situation. She took on the responsibility of trying to rebuild the relationship with her daughter, and also of attending to the reactions of her husband and son. Apparently she was successful in this, as at the time of the interview the family was intact and Brenda was expressing very positive feelings about her life.

Fran has one daughter, 12 and a half years old. Fran works full-time in a supervisory position. She was very interested in participating in the study because, she explained, this is a topic she has been thinking about a lot as her daughter approaches the teenage years and begins to ask for more independence and less "family time". Fran has been looking for guidance in parenting older children for several years. She does not want to be "over-protective", yet wants her daughter to be safe, and feels a strong sense of responsibility in this aspect of mothering.

Elaine has four sons, aged 14, 13, 10, and 8. She works part-time as a health care professional. Elaine is skilled at organizing and co-ordinating the time and activities of the whole family, all of whom are involved in many sports and other interests. The presence of extended family in town helps Elaine and her husband in many ways. However, with four children and a demanding job Elaine

usually has little time to sit down and talk about herself; she commented at the end of the interview that she had enjoyed the experience.

The Community

The town in which these women live and raise their children is situated in northwestern British Columbia. The population is approximately 12,000, with another 8,000 in a neighbouring community across the river. Mountains and wilderness surround the town. Bears and moose regularly appear in residential areas at certain times of the year. The weather is a popular topic of conversation because it is often damp and cool in summer, or wet and cold in winter, but generally changeable and unpredictable. The weather also affects accessibility to and from other parts of the province: planes may be delayed or cancelled in bad weather, and roads may be closed during winter storms. There are the usual amenities found in towns of this size: indoor pool, arena, bowling alley, movie theatre, library, shopping mall, restaurants, etc., and a few others, such as a community college, a fine arts theatre, and a ski hill. First Nations culture is an important influence on the community. The main industry is logging, which has declined over the past few years, resulting in high levels of unemployment and in families moving out of the area to find work. Most of the adolescent children of the women in the study attend the same junior high school, although they had previously been in different elementary schools.

The Themes

The interviews with these seven women provided a great deal of information about their day-to-day lives as mothers of young adolescents. Through reading and re-reading their words, I found two consistent themes. The first, "holding on and letting go", supports three sub-themes: protecting, "getting a good base in", and sustaining the family group. The second theme, "'Mother' roles and women's realities: Redefining who 'Mom' is" expresses the simultaneous convergence of and dichotomy between the role and the person, and what that means in everyday life to women who are mothers of young adolescents. Within this theme I have identified three sub-themes: living through the changes, breaking the silence, and growing apart.

This chapter will address the first major theme, of "holding on and letting go".

Holding on and letting go

Early adolescence is a time of transition in most cultures; it marks the progression from childhood to young adulthood. In many cultures there is a ritual through which the boy or girl must pass to acknowledge, for the youth, the family, and the community, the significance of this transition (Harris, 1983, p. 202), for example, the Jewish Bar and Bat Mitzvah. In the mainstream culture of this community, however, no such clear and commonly recognized ritual exists. There is a shared understanding that parents are to begin more and more to "let go" of their offspring at this age, but no guidelines as to exactly when and how much to let go. The women in this study describe three ways in which they continue to

"hold on" to their children, yet allow for growing autonomy. Their descriptions reveal that they see themselves as needing to provide protection, to "get a good base in" of values and knowledge to their young adolescents, and to try to keep the family together despite internal and external pressures. Several of them say that they have a sense of isolation, sometimes even from their spouses, in these endeavours because they feel responsible as mothers in a way they believe the fathers do not, and because of what they perceive as a general lack of support from society. Thus, these women describe the experience of being mothers to young adolescents as one of seeking a balance between holding on to and letting go of, their children and their own mothering role in relation to those children.

A large part of the dilemma for the women in holding on and letting go of their children is related to their continuing concern for protecting those children, balanced against the adolescents' need to become more independent.

Subtheme: Protecting

"Protection"—*pro tegere*, to cover—is perhaps one of the fundamental aspects of the mothering role, from the moment that a woman becomes a mother. When we "pro-tect", it is usually "from" or "against" something or someone. In the early years, the threats against children may seem endless, and the children extremely vulnerable. Mothers in these years are sometimes characterized, and may identify themselves, as like the archetypal mother bear defending her cubs. As children grow through childhood and enter adolescence, their needs for protection change. Instead of needing to be shielded from dangers, they must gradually learn how to cope with them, and eventually to protect the next

generation in the same way they themselves were protected. The protective role of mothers, too, changes as children grow. According to the women in this study, however, protection is still a major part of their relationship with their children, if often a problematic part. They describe new concerns about their children's well-being and safety, and new barriers to providing protection. There is a fine balance, they find, between protecting and being "overprotective". There is also a fine line between protecting and being perceived as "controlling". They speak of trying to address these concerns by "drawing lines"--setting new boundaries to accommodate their changing concerns.

Gender issues with husbands surface at this time for several of the women, leading not only to conflicts, but also to the women taking an active role in intervening between fathers and children. These issues arise from the men having different approaches than the women to communication, discipline, and risk-taking. The women say that they intervene both to prevent emotional harm to the children and to preserve the father-child relationships. They see these interventions as part of their role as protectors of their young adolescents.

At the same time the women are drawing lines and intervening in father-child conflicts, they are consciously "letting go" of some control. The process of letting go is difficult for most of them, because it involves changes in the relationship between mothers and children, and requires mothers to give up some of their accustomed role to the children themselves.

These two aspects of the subtheme "Protecting": Drawing lines/Releasing Control, and Intervening, follow below.

Drawing lines/Releasing control

Setting boundaries as a means of protecting young adolescents from the new hazards that confront them is something that most of the women mention. While boundary-setting is a form of control, these women saw the need for control as fundamentally a need to protect, and that is the aspect of the experience that I have chosen to explore. Some find it difficult to define those boundaries, or to find guidance in doing so. Even the word "boundaries" is ambiguous. Boundaries can be walls, nearly impenetrable and unscalable such as the wall that prompted Robert Frost to write, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall/ That sends the frozen ground-swell under it". Wall-like boundaries can be a form of over-protection, and they can lead to rebellion and subversion, like the "frozen ground-swell" finding its own way past the wall. Boundaries can also be less forbidding, in the form of lines, both visual and psychological. Guidelines, goal lines, tree lines, time lines, bottom lines: it appears that in our culture at the end of the twentieth century, "lines" are everywhere.

Not surprisingly then, most of the women in this study are seeking "lines" to help them in their commitment to protect their emerging adolescents without being too restrictive.

> Fran: I go back and forth a lot, I think about this a lot, thinking...I need to step back I need to give her a little more responsibility *but* I want her to be safe and I want her to do things that are not going to harm her, of course ...and where is that line? I don't know...And that's where, the people out there, the friends that I talk to, their lines are *so* much different...

This mother feels she must "draw lines" around her child, to create a "safe" zone for her. Alternatively, her "lines" could be interpreted as surrounding herself, requiring her to "step back", or go "back and forth" between protectively "holding on" and hesitantly releasing protective control. I have chosen the former interpretation: if there is a space around her daughter bounded by "lines", the mother believes, the young girl will be protected insofar as she can be. The lines are invisible: they might be rules about coming and going, bedtimes, mealtimes, homework, etc., and there are few clues as to where to place them. Furthermore, they are arbitrary: everyone she talks to has different lines, and different opinions about how closely they should surround the child. In order to make decisions about these lines, or boundaries, Fran is in motion mentally, going "back and forth" in a kind of dance with herself, to see where the line should be placed. She has her own ideas about this, but is insecure about implementing them because she notes how different her friends' lines are. Do their differing boundaries imply that hers are wrong, or that theirs are? Fran finds little help in the parenting literature, or from the usual sources of parenting information in the community.

> Fran: ...up to the age of about six or seven I felt in control, or, I felt like I had a real good grasp on how things were developing [...] then after that though it started feeling like I didn't really know where things were going any more. [...] I didn't know any more what to expect and I looked for literature out in the community and I didn't find very much [...]
>
> Interviewer: There's so much written about the preschool ages...
>
> Fran: That's right! And after a certain age it kind of *stops*, there's a little bit but it's very general...
>
> ...there seems to be support out there for [...] really basic parenting or, for real problems, if there is something that is really a strong issue there is assistance out there but for somebody like me [...] there doesn't seem to be anything out there right now.

Fran is looking outward for guidance in finding ways to protect her almost-teenage daughter, but so far has not found it. Her earlier confidence when her daughter was a small child was in part due to the availability of a great deal of information on child development, parenting, and so on; this confidence has been shaken somewhat by the relative absence of such information for parents of teens.

Some of the other women note that when their children entered school, and again when they started junior secondary school, there was a sense of "losing" them to that system, and sometimes to their peer group, accompanied by a loss of power to protect them.

> Alice: ...when I went to the school I had this overwhelming sense of I was giving her away. She was going in here, they were in control [...] I really felt quite powerless with the school system...

> Brenda:...she got in with the wrong group of kids and we found that it was really hard to deal with [...] you could keep her away from them while she was at home, but we had no control when she was at school...

In "giving away" their children to the school, Alice and Brenda feel they lost control of some of the line-drawing that is part of their mothering experience. New lines would be drawn by the school and, perhaps more significantly, by other adolescents. Brenda's daughter "got in" with the "wrong" group of kids: She was behind enemy lines in a sense, lines that crossed familiar (and family) boundaries, and held her apart from her parents and brother. A feeling of powerlessness ensued for her parents.

Despite these obstacles, the women in this study have made decisions about specific boundaries, such as curfews, for example. They are not always confident about their decisions, and sometimes they are surprised when their perception of the strictness or lenience of the boundaries is significantly different from that of their children.

> Alice: Sometimes I'm too flexible I think, but on the other hand I think, huh! I dunno, like, I dunno! I don't know where that line is...and, she's telling me that I am—and I know that from her friends—she thinks I'm really strict, and I think I'm really loose and I worry that I don't make those boundaries.

For this mother and daughter there is a marked discrepancy between their respective perceptions of "looseness" and "strictness". The mother worries about the flexibility of the lines around her child—could they be stretched too far? — while the child struggles against them and complains of their restrictiveness to her friends. It is a practical dilemma, and one that, in general, the women tackle alone, whether or not their partners are involved in childrearing.

> Fran: I feel like I'm kind of tapping in the dark and making up my own rules. My husband is there, and he's supportive, but he's not really one to make up the rules or, yknow, to reflect with? It's just not his personality in a lot of ways, so it's kind of, I feel like it's up to me and I feel like I don't really know what I'm doing.

The presence of a husband she describes as "supportive" does not change this mother's role of limit-setter and protector, or her perception of that role. She feels that she, almost alone, is responsible for at least this aspect of parenting their daughter, despite the fact that she does not feel prepared for it. Apparently

her husband feels even less comfortable than she does in this role. Fran, and some of the other mothers, therefore, are trying to rely on different clues than they have previously known or needed, like a blind person "tapping in the dark", who proceeds through the city streets without benefit of signposts, maps, or traffic lights. Fran feels compelled to make up new rules despite the fact that she considers herself unprepared and unqualified.

When the fathers do involve themselves in this process, their approach seems to reflect different world-views which could be in conflict with mothers' world-views. For example, some of the fathers see physical danger as a challenge to be overcome while the mothers see it as a threat to be avoided.

> Fran: ...we went on holidays and she loved to be in the ocean with him because he wasn't as worried. He would let her *do* things, right? Things that I feel like, well, they're a little bit too much. And, he's not that worried about that, so she really enjoys doing things with him more. [laugh] Except for I try to pull her back a little bit and [...] that's just something that I have to come to terms with, you know...it's fear basically, I know it... I just don't know what she's ready for...Sometimes—what she's capable of? [...] there's these big waves and she's jumping around in it and I know she's not a strong swimmer—but she can swim! And my husband just thinks, she'll be *fine*. Let her go, yknow. And *I* think, well there are strong undercurrents and yknow she could easily drown right there! So I see all the things that *could* happen, and he sees the things that she's capable of, basically.
>
> ...I feel like, what *if*, what *if* something did happen, it would be *my* responsibility, like *I'm* the one that could have prevented it, kind of thing... Which might, is ludicrous, I know that, but still, that's the way I *feel*.

Fran is constantly on the alert for the hidden dangers which could face her child. Where the father sees only the waves and his daughter's abilities, the mother sees in her mind the "undercurrents" waiting to pull the girl beneath the surface. Whether these are literal undercurrents, or metaphors for the murky but powerful unseen threats of daily life—drugs, sexual exploitation, etc., Fran feels that if she can anticipate them she is somehow responsible for preventing them. Her husband's insistence on ignoring the dangers, and her daughter's enjoyment of the risk are, in a sense, barriers against her struggle to protect. Perhaps because their child is a girl, Fran is especially alert to her vulnerability as a young female in a society that is frequently hostile to females, while her husband remains somewhat oblivious to this reality.

While some of the women are concerned about their boundaries being too flexible or lenient to provide enough protection to their teens, others fear that too-strict boundaries could drive their children away emotionally, or perhaps even physically. Referring to her own youth is not always helpful, especially if the woman has been raised in another country with a culture markedly different from that of mainstream North America.

> Jasmine: ...I think it's very tough on me because I was grown up in [Asia] and the way I was brought up was totally different from the way kids are being brought up in this country. Like our [family] was very disciplined and, we had strict parents, and there were quite strict rules in the house too. And if I tried to—if I tried to implement those rules in *my* life with *my* kids in *this* country it would be really tough. I can't expect the same as [...] what *my* parents got from *us* would be the same as what I would get from *my* kids? [...] it's quite challenging for me.
>
> ...if we tried to be more strict, then I think once the kids are at a certain age they might just run away and do whatever they want...

Fran: [Being over-protective] of course harbors the danger that she'll totally rebel some time and [...] do something *really* wild and crazy...

In Jasmine's eyes, Canadian society calls into question her strict, well-disciplined, Asian upbringing, and "challenges" her to modify it for her own children. In Canada, she believes, the childrearing philosophy of her parents is misunderstood and not valued, either by society in general or by the children who are the products of that society. Although retrospectively she sees value in it herself, she cannot reconcile or make it compatible with the realities of her sons' present-day life in Canada. This forces her to find her way alone through the mothering of her adolescent sons. At the same time, she feels under pressure from her sons themselves, thinking that too much strictness might one day cause them to rebel, a fear that is shared by Fran.

The women in the study have found various means of balancing their need to protect and nurture their children against their children's need to move out of their motherly boundaries. Gradually increasing a child's privileges and responsibilities is another way in which the mothers deal with the conflicts of letting go.

Elaine: It kind of happens as the child grows older and takes an interest in certain things or asks to do things, and there's the discussion, do we allow it or don't we allow it, well yes that would be reasonable for a 14-year-old to do, or a 15-year-old, and lots of times you're not totally comfortable with him doing it, but you, I don't know, I think you have to sort of try and realize that they have to, you know in a few years they're going to be out of the house, they have to start those decisions somewhere...

In this family both parents, or the parents and the child, come to decisions about increasing privileges at the child's pace. It is not always "comfortable", but Elaine sees it as part of the childrearing process: a way of preparing the child in advance to make his own decisions. Releasing control does not happen in a straight line, however, and some of the mothers describe making judgments about helping or not helping their adolescents, based on the situation.

> Alice: [Daughter] needed to be up at 6. Usually she's pretty good about getting herself up. When she *asks* me, then I do make a point, because she's generally fairly independent so if she asks me it's sort of an exception to the rule...

> Jasmine:...I used to spend a lot of time with the older one for his studies, but [...] since Grade Nine I don't give any attention to his studies, I just go and talk to the teachers when the report comes, but I tell him my expectations...

Alice makes an "exception to the rule" of not being her daughter's alarm clock if her daughter asks to be woken up, because her daughter is usually able to do this for herself. Jasmine has distanced herself from her son's schoolwork, giving him responsibility for the daily assignments, but still maintaining "expectations" and communicating with his teachers. Both these women, and several of the others describe a flexibility within this process of releasing control that allows them to increase responsibilities and privileges according to the age and personality of the adolescent.

Several of the women have spoken of their sense of responsibility for drawing lines and deciding when and how much to release protective control. Perhaps it is this feeling of responsibility that leads to some conflict when a spouse tries to participate in this, but has a different approach to doing so.

Intervening : "I asked him to just let me deal with things for now..."

Some of the women find themselves trying to protect their young adolescent children from the reactions of the fathers to certain behaviours, and also interpreting the fathers' reactions for the children in order to protect the father-child relationship. They feel that their husbands' communication styles with the young teens is sometimes abrasive or insensitive, and could lead to exaggerated conflict and unhappiness without the mothers' interventions. They see themselves as intermediaries, peacemakers or buffers in these situations. The following short excerpt from the novel Luna (1988) by Canadian author Sharon Butala, illustrates the way in which such buffering can occur in an everyday context:

> "Did you study?" Kent turned abruptly to look at Mark, his voice suddenly harsh. Mark nodded again without looking at his father. He reached for Selena's homemade raspberry jam.
> "I said I quizzed him last night," Selena said, keeping her voice neutral.
> "He'll do all right." Kent grunted, then sipped his coffee. (p. 31)

Kent addresses his son directly, but Selena intervenes before Mark can answer. By keeping her voice "neutral" Selena is able to avoid an escalation of anger on the part of her husband and a defensive reaction from her son. Rather than defending Mark, she uses the first person, "*I* said *I* quizzed him", thereby deflecting the attention onto herself.

Several of the women I interviewed describe similar interactions in their own families. When Brenda's daughter had skipped school and was refusing to come home, Brenda also put herself between father and child:

> Brenda:...she said, but I can't go home Dad's so mad and I said yeah he's mad because he loves you [...] This seemed to be a big issue with her, dealing with her Dad...

Recognizing that this was a "big issue" for her daughter, Brenda arranges for her daughter to be out of the house when Brenda's husband comes home, and to be away for the weekend to allow him some cooling-off time. While doing this, however, she interprets the father's reaction for her daughter: "He's mad because he loves you", thus in a way being an advocate for her husband while playing a similar role for her daughter.

> Brenda: I asked him to just let me deal with things for now, I said, I know you're angry, but just leave it for now and let's try to work things out I said obviously she really has a problem here, whether it is hormones or whatever, we really need to get this sorted out...

In this situation Brenda, like the fictional Selena in the earlier scenario, recognizes that her husband's anger would probably intensify the problems. When she speaks to him she emphasizes that there *is* a problem, suggests a possible cause ("hormones or whatever"), and tells him that they "really need to get this sorted out". By giving a physical etiology to the problem she is able to neutralize it somewhat, removing the focus of responsibility both from the girl and from themselves and thus taking some of the emotional sting out of the situation.

Other mothers describe similar scenarios, where they step in between their husbands and their children to protect the children emotionally, while recognizing that in doing so they might be undermining the father's credibility.

> Alice: ...if he said in a mad way, he raised his voice and said, You guys get those dishes done—I would be right in there [...] wanting to protect them from that, and yet *I* might be there yelling at them to do the dishes, right?

> ...now I do try to do some of the things I learned in parenting classes, just acknowledging their feelings so if they're really upset [...] I just say, you must be really hurt by that but Dad loves you and, I guess maybe I try to explain it away sometimes too, that he just has a different way of saying things, but [...] I always lean to them. I know if there was a choice [short laugh] I'll be going over the edge for them, and he would have to be standing on the cliff!

For this woman, and for some of the others, the possibility of harm coming to her children can sometimes outweigh concern for her husband. She sees herself "going over the edge" of the cliff if need be, to save them, leaving her husband behind. She notes that he has a "different" way of saying things to them, a way that she is uncomfortable with, so uncomfortable that she feels she must explain it to them, and relay the message—apparently unstated by him—that "Dad loves you", in order to mitigate its effects on them. Paradoxically, she admits to "yelling" at her daughters herself at times, but finds when she witnesses him doing the same she reacts defensively for them. She feels that this reaction is unfair to her husband in a way, yet justified because of how her daughters respond differently:

> Alice: ...when he says things that are sharp to them, if I said that to them, huh! That would just roll off their backs, right? When Dad says that to them, they're in tears...

"Sharp" words from Alice apparently are less painful to her daughters than the same words from their father, a phenomenon that helps to shed light on Alice's dilemma and her continued need to protect the girls from his anger. Some of the other women also describe this kind of protectiveness. Elaine tries to address it by teaching her husband new communication skills:

> Elaine:....[I'm] trying to get his father to not wait for an incident, but to encourage going off by himself with [13-year-old] and doing things

and talking about things, hopefully so they'll just understand each other better...

Like the other women quoted above, Elaine is concerned with improving the relationship between father and child as well as with preventing anger and hurt. She observes and encourages both husband and son with the hope of achieving this.

To protect or shield a young adolescent from harm is seen by all the women as one of the most important parts of their mothering at this time. While they each have their own concepts of how this should be done, and their own obstacles to deal with, there are some experiences that, in various ways, all or most of them describe. Searching for guidelines, especially in "drawing lines", is one: feeling insecure and unprepared for dealing with this stage of their children's lives is common. Another commonly described experience is tied to the fact that these women are each parenting with a partner, yet have strong feelings of responsibility as mothers that sometimes lead to conflict and the need to intervene or be mediators between their husbands and their children. Both gender differences and role expectations play a part in this aspect of mothering young adolescents.

Embedded within the ongoing tasks of trying to protect young adolescents is the realization that the mothers must gradually let go of their control. This may be difficult because letting go inevitably weakens the mothers' power to protect their children.

Protection of young adolescents, according to the women in the study, is of ongoing importance to mothers but is a complicated matter for them. They describe a need to set limits, or "draw lines", for their children's conduct. However, there is uncertainty, lack of societal guidance, sometimes a sense of powerlessness, isolation, and conflicts between cultures and between genders.

The fact that these women are married may increase the complexity of the situation because, although they describe their husbands as supportive and caring, some of the women say they play an intermediary, at times protective role between fathers and children. They describe intervening when they feel the fathers will over-react and perhaps worsen the situation.

Despite the value the women place on protection, they are concerned not to be "overprotective", and are conscious of the gradual, inexorable process of "letting go". As part of this process, they describe ways in which they try to prepare the adolescents to make their own decisions by imparting what feels like a final "good base" of values and information. It is a form of long-term protection, but also a way of transferring control to the young adolescents themselves, and at the same time giving up a little more of their own role.

Subtheme:"Getting a Good Base In"

While transmitting values is an ongoing process, "getting a good base in" has more of a sense of urgency. There is the realization that time is running out for the mother's influence to be effective, and therefore it seems important to ensure that the child has absorbed not only values, but also essential pieces of knowledge and awareness to keep her or him safe in the wider world.

> Gail: I keep thinking to myself, she's thirteen, I still have a little bit of hold on her, and a little bit of--I guess I would have to be honest and say "power" --into what she does and does not do and I realize pretty soon that will start slipping away a bit more each year. And so, I hope I get a really good base in there for her until she's definitely thinking on her own and choosing on her own.

Anticipating a gradual loss of control over what her daughter does and does not do, Gail hopes to protect her in advance, to guide her future choices, before Gail's power to do this "slips away". Like Fran, she is thinking of the "undercurrents". For now she still has hold of her daughter but she knows this hold will become slippery and impossible to maintain.

When, as for Jasmine, there are cultural differences, the pressures of the new culture threaten to erode the secure "base" the mother is attempting to build.

> Jasmine:...my son was telling me that he was going for prom, for grade 10, and he told me that there's a girl he's going to go with, and [...] because this was something I never expected, it was a shock to me [...] it seems that's the normal thing or maybe on the other hand he was bit scared to tell me? [...] These things, when they come to me for the first time they really give me shock. But, then I have to get used to it...

A "shock" happens when there is a disparity between one's beliefs and the reality of the situation. A mother may believe that her son has absorbed her values regarding dating, until he confronts her with his own decisions. She does not

change her values, but she is forced to "get used to" the fact that her son is living in a different context than the one in which she grew up, and that perhaps the best way to protect him is to acknowledge this. It is a "letting go" not only of the young boy, but also a little of what she had always considered "normal".

The women in this study each speak of "talking" with their children. They often see themselves as more likely to initiate conversations than their spouses are, and to discuss more abstract issues. They consider open communication to be important in order to transmit their own values to the children. This in turn is related to the need to protect the young boys and girls by "getting a good base in" so that they will be able to make responsible decisions in the future. There are some difficulties with this: The young adolescents do not always want to talk, or listen; busy schedules mean few opportunities for in-depth discussions; and cross-cultural influences sometimes interfere with communication. Yet the women see talking as an important part of their lives with their children.

I will now discuss in more depth "Spending time talking" and "Negotiating power struggles" as facets of the subtheme, "Getting a good base in".

Spending time talking

Time is a valuable commodity which must be "spent" wisely. Whether or not mothers feel they have more time to spend than fathers do, they say they do spend more of that time engaged in conversation with their children than do fathers.

> Jasmine:...in my family it's me who give more talking. And then my sons start talking—takes time! [...] Then I start talking, I have to give my

> own examples too, and then I have to give other people's example too, so that they can understand and realize how [...] my life, is much much better, I am settled, I have a job, I have got a good family and everything is fine, and then I tell my kids that that's because I have worked very hard for this. And because, what you sow is what you get, isn't it...

Jasmine speaks about "taking" time from her own schedule to talk about things that are important to her, so important that she wants to give them to her sons for their future use: the values of hard work and purposefulness in life. She is "sowing" the ideas in the hope that they will grow into responsible actions both now and later. She wants to help her sons to "realize" or make real, the values of her culture. Bringing things without physical substance into the conversation makes them "real", in a sense.

> Elaine: I tend to be the one who spends more time talking to boys about feelings, talking to boys about the more non-tangible things in life than [husband] does. I'm probably the initiator, trying to make sure that I *know* what the boys are feeling or thinking.

Elaine finds that a mother might have to be the "initiator" of conversations with adolescents, especially when the topic is something abstract or "non-tangible". Listening is as much a part of these discussions as talking; through listening one can begin to gain an understanding of the adolescent's daily experience, and thus to "know" what he is thinking or feeling, insofar as this is possible.

Although talking and listening are valuable ways to impart values and information and thereby "get a good base in" for the future, barriers to communication sometimes occur at this time in the form of strained relationships. Power struggles may erupt, as some women describe. Despite this, they persevere.

Negotiating power struggles: Working on relationships

Communicating with young adolescents, especially as a mother, can be challenging. The child is striving for more autonomy while the mother is trying to maintain some of her accustomed control. This essential conflict of interests may create an invisible "fence" between mother and child which, like Frost's "wall" can invite resistance from both sides. Protection and transmission of values may become issues on one side of the fence—the mother's or the parents' side—and independence at any cost may be the issue on the other side. The erection of the fence may occur insidiously, or it may seem to be a sudden development.

> Alice: I'm not sure when the shift happened but I know there was a shift, it sort of happens more and more that suddenly I wasn't to kiss her and I certainly wasn't to hug her and there was less time when she wanted me to be around [...] and that sort of got progressively more dramatic as she's moved into her teen years, and, when she was in grade Ten things were really, I really felt like I'd lost, I'd lost her? She didn't speak to me, if she did speak to me she was rude, we had some issues around communicating, she didn't want to tell me what she was doing or where she was going, there was a lot of that kind of stuff, so I think emotionally I was quite hurt by this whole process...

Talking or not talking is a choice that is entirely under one's own control. For an adolescent this can be, intentionally or not, a powerful tool—or weapon—in the struggle for autonomy. For this mother, used to a close relationship with her child, and committed to protecting and communicating with that child, this development seems like a loss, not only of the relationship, but of the child herself. The child is no longer allowing the mother input into her daily activities, but is taking control of them herself. The mother perceives a loss of her own power, and

is feeling hurt by her daughter's apparent rudeness. Thinking back to her own

adolescent conflicts with her own mother may help her understand what is

happening, but does not necessarily assuage the pain.

> Alice: I get triggered really easily by the things [daughter] says. She says things and I get angry, and when I look at it I know it's because I'm hurt. Or I feel disrespected, mostly hurt, though. When she snaps at me, or she says things and I think, huh! She just thinks I'm stupid—which is exactly how I felt about my Mom, but when it's happening to you, I have a really hard time separating that emotionally and saying, It's just a phase she's going through, she doesn't really mean this, so it's really hard not to, buy into it? And so we do a lot of power struggling kinds of things.
>
> It's [sigh] very, it's very difficult with [daughter] at times, because I'm emotionally fragile to her tongue and I know where it's coming from intellectually but...

Alice relates her current experience to her own adolescence, remembering

negative feelings she had about her mother. Rather than making it easier for her

to accept and understand her daughter's behaviour, however, this connection only

underscores the hurt, which in turn leads to anger. "Knowing" how she had once

felt about her own mother cannot be separated from "feeling" the hurt of her

daughter feeling that way about her. Both mother and daughter engage in "power

struggles", as other mothers in the study do with their adolescents, to varying

degrees. Not keeping rooms clean, taking on "too many" activities, insisting on

more peer activities and less "family time": These are all examples the women

give that to varying degrees lead to power struggles with their young teens.

"Power" originally meant "to be able" in Latin. The mothers want to "be

able" to protect their beloved children from who-knows-what dangers as they

begin to venture further and further from the family; the sons and daughters seek

to "be able" to do what adolescents in our society are supposed to do, in whatever way they identify that. Sometimes their choices are shocking to the adults in their lives. Brenda, for example, saw her daughter apparently rejecting the family in order to fit in with her friends. For her the power struggle became more of an internal conflict than direct combat with her daughter.

> Brenda: I was just stressed out, I was trying to keep up my job and you were just basically numb. It was really stressful. The tension was always high, really strong, my husband and I were just arguing all the time...

Brenda is "numb" with tension, like someone who has been shocked by electricity. There is high tension in the air between herself and her husband, and stress within herself. It seems there is a great deal of "power", but of an unleashed, destructive nature, like a lightning storm, which leaves Brenda feeling out of control. Tension between spouses due to adolescents' behaviour is mentioned by several of the women. This tension may become more or less constant and lead to attempts by both parents to take control. Sometimes there is disagreement on the way in which one parent handled a situation, or on the values that are being communicated. Sometimes there is a perception that one parent is not supportive of the other's attempts to guide the child. In either case this atmosphere of conflict adds to the overall stress of the women who were interviewed.

> Fran: My husband does take an interest in his daughter, but he's very--I don't know how you can say that—he doesn't really put any rules down. I guess [if] there is rules to put down or things to be talked about it's usually him coming to me saying, I think we really should, yknow, look at this or do this, or, and then, *I* will be the one who will go to *her* and say, Listen. This is what needs to happen, kind of thing, you know? Like he just *doesn't go* and do that himself and I *wish* he could take more—like I feel like I'm the bad person sometimes...

> Alice: I sometimes [...] have issues with him so we have these long discussions about why I'm not going to go by his rules or make those kids go by his rules cuz he makes rules too sort of arbitrary, like now nobody can have cereal that night because somebody left the box out, right—well who's there to enforce it? Me. I'm not going to enforce that rule, I don't believe in those kinds of rules, right?

Fran feels alone in making rules; her husband may tell her some action is necessary, but leave it to her to decide what that action would be. Fran feels like "the bad person". She is caught, in a sense, between her husband and her daughter. Alice, too, is caught between, expected to enforce rules that do not reflect her own values but at the same time trying to nurture the father-child relationship. These are similar situations to those described earlier when mothers are "mediators" or "buffers" between father and child. However, in these cases the women feel they are being placed in a disciplinary role by their husbands, one that puts them in an uncomfortable, perhaps antagonistic, position in relation to their children. Transmitting their own values, or values they share with their partners, becomes at these times awkward, because they are cast as enforcers of rules they do not necessarily agree with. Power struggles, therefore, sometimes take place between mother and father as well as between mother and adolescent.

Mothers trying to "get a good base in" face many challenges: Lack of time, power struggles, and spousal conflicts over rules or discipline are a few. Despite the knowledge that they have been transmitting values both overtly and by example since their children's birth, they feel under renewed pressure to build

such a base before the mid-teen years arrive. Their need to provide this final foundation is firmly tied to their need to "hold on" while "letting go".

Being a mother to a young adolescent takes place within the context of a family for each of these women. "Letting go" of the child but still "holding on" to the family as a nurturing unit is a balancing act some of the women describe eloquently.

Subtheme: Sustaining the family group

All the women describe part of their experience as mothers in terms of keeping the family together, not only physically, but also emotionally or spiritually. They try to keep harmony among all the members of the family, to know what is happening for each person, and to co-ordinate everyone's activities to allow for "family time". Some see themselves as "central" to the family. As the central figures, they try to keep the family "together" by establishing rituals such as mealtimes and "family times", and keeping track of everyone's comings and goings. They see themselves as responsible for the "smooth" running of day-to-day life: co-ordinating and organizing activities and making sure that necessary tasks are done. All, in one manner or another, identify "being there" for their children as an essential part of their lives at this time. As with protecting and communicating, however, the adolescent children do not necessarily value, at least overtly, the availability of their mothers, or their organizing of family time. Sometimes the women feel they are being led through the "letting go" process by their children before they themselves are ready. One way in which they address

this is by trying to keep the family group "together" despite the outside pressures that pull its members away.

The following discussions will focus on "Keeping the group together", "Keeping life running smoothly", and "Being there" as ways in which the women described their experiences of the subtheme "Sustaining the family group".

Keeping the group together

"Keeping the group together" describes the women's efforts to maintain close family relationships in the face of complex individual schedules and external pressures on adolescents to spend more time away from the family. For the women in the study this is a challenge, and yet it is something they value and invest energy in trying to achieve. To keep the family group "together", they need to know everyone's schedule and organize their own time around the rest of the family's.

> Elaine: I'm the one person that kind of has contact with what *everybody* is doing, including what [husband] is doing and just sort of tries to keep the group together...
>
> ...it's tight sometimes, but we still all try and have meals together, so we usually manage to schedule that in and around things[...] And *that* takes a mother's organization!

Mealtime is often mentioned as one of the few times when the family would all be together. Elaine's remark that arranging family mealtimes "takes a mother's organization" reflects her sense of the importance of this daily ritual—an importance which she feels might not be recognized in her family by someone other than herself. The comment also acknowledges the amount of skill and effort

that goes into such organization, when each family member has different activities at specific times.

> Gail: ...everything revolves around a lot more—supper doesn't just happen necessarily at suppertime like it did before, now we're a half hour early or a half hour late to accommodate somebody's sports practice or music practice or band practice...

The increase in after-school activities which, for these women's children, seems to have occurred in late childhood, means a busier lifestyle, and more difficulty in finding time together. In Gail's family, "suppertime" has apparently been a regular, taken-for-granted time at the end of the day, but is now more flexible or irregular in terms of its timing. Like everything else, suppertime is "revolving around a lot more": the centre around which the family's life revolves has become larger as everyone has become busier. To "keep the group together" requires one person at the centre to provide a balance for the constant movement on the periphery. Even so, time can become fragmented, and time with even individual members of the family might be difficult to find.

> Alice: ...it feels like our lives are in little snippets here and there yknow? It's quite disjointed.

Alice describes having conversations with her daughters while driving them to or from lessons, or briefly between other commitments. Each family member is busy with her or his own schedule and it seems to her that their time together is "disjointed": incoherent, disconnected, dislocated, like "snippets". The image of "snippets" seems to imply incompleteness; perhaps tantalizing bits of news, yet unsatisfying because they don't tell the whole story. You never learn the ending, or you hear the punchline without knowing the rest of the joke. The snippets are

"here" and "there", at random, cluttering up the living space but nevertheless serving as reminders of the lives that are lived there. The "snippets" are a form of communication among the family members, "disjointed" though they may be. Alice uses these snippets as her way of "keeping the group together"—she is the one constant connecting the snippets to each other, and creating a coherence which would not otherwise exist for the family members. Other mothers also see themselves as connectors:

> Elaine:...the mother holds things together in the house. She's kind of a
> central figure...

Elaine, along with several of the other women, sees herself in the midst of the family, aware from her central position of everything that goes on within. From that vantage point she is also able to "hold things together" because she is connected to each person in the family.

Several of the women are finding that "family time"—apart from meals—is becoming more difficult to arrange, and sometimes is resisted by their adolescent children. They still value this time, however, and continue to plan for it.

> Fran: ...in my heart I *feel* that we need to still make time as a family
> together. [...] I can see that she is at that age now when she needs
> more elbow room and more freedom [...] *Some of the children that I
> see certainly have a lot of elbow room and a lot of freedom and not a
> lot of family time and that's way out of proportion somehow I don't
> feel that's something that we want for our* family.

Although this mother *sees* intellectually that her daughter is growing apart from the family, emotionally she *feels* that it is still important to "make" family time. Family time is not something that necessarily happens naturally in her family any longer; it has to be "made" or arranged consciously. Fran contrasts "family time" with

"elbow room", something she feels is too abundant for adolescents in some other families. Elbows can be used aggressively, to push other people out of the way, or to block others' passage. Perhaps too much elbow room could lead to the family being pushed aside entirely. Fran, and several of the other women, express the view that "making time as a family together" will help the family to remain intact and emotionally bonded. Closely related to keeping the group together is the job of keeping everyone's lives "running smoothly", something many of the women describe trying to do. In striving for this they are providing sustenance for the family by making it a source of calm and stability in the midst of what often seems like chaos.

Keeping life running smoothly

"Keeping life running smoothly" is mentioned by some of the women as a major way in which they try to sustain the family unit. In general this means organizing time, but also sometimes, in order to save time and avoid arguments, doing things that the children could have done for themselves.

> Elaine: I tend to like to do things myself rather than leave them for someone else, so that increases the burden on you but, part of it is to decrease the anxiety levels. Actually, [husband] would probably do it if asked, but I know he would do it differently than I do...
>
> ...I *tried* the children-make-their-own-lunch routine, and it was *way* too much work.

Elaine finds that she prefers to do things herself: "I tend to be a person that likes their life to flow relatively smoothly. If I organize it then I'm guaranteed that it will." Life in Elaine's metaphor is a river, flowing smoothly without too many areas of

"white water" to navigate. Elaine keeps an eye on the river for such hazards and finds ways to avoid them when they do arise. In this way she keeps her family afloat and on an even keel as they continue their journey together. She trusts her own navigational skills, knowing that her husband could and would help, but that he would have a different way of going about it, one with which she might not feel entirely comfortable. She also knows she could delegate some tasks, such as making lunches, to her sons, but through experience finds that it is easier and less stressful to do it herself. Some of the other women, too, note that they avoid delegating too many chores to their children, partly to minimize conflict areas, but also because they remember their own mothers doing "everything".

> Fran: ...my daughter has not very many chores [...] I don't know if we've been lax about it or just never felt like enforcing it very much [...] I grew up with my mother doing everything, she was a stay-at-home mother and I never had a lot of chores...

> Elaine:...my boys don't *do* enough within the household. And they could look after themselves better, and Mother could do *less*, if I would demand more of it? And I think that's probably a throwback to my own mother, doing everything for us...

Fran and Elaine speak of assigning chores to their adolescents in terms of "demanding" and "enforcing", words that they do not use throughout most of their interviews. Nor are these words compatible with the notion of "things running smoothly", except perhaps in a military environment. Life is smoother, they feel, if they follow the example of their mothers and do most or all of the daily work at home, even though they also work outside the home. Perhaps it is easier to do everything than to "enforce" or "demand" a more equitable system.[1]

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[1] See DeVault, M. (1991) Feeding the family: The social organization of caring as gendered work. (p. 162). Chicago: University of Chicago Press for further discussion of this idea.

Other women describe their roles in keeping things running smoothly in terms of mediating between siblings. Sometimes this is similar to the interventions between father and child, with the aim of protecting one child from a sibling's hurtful words or actions. At other times it is done in order to improve the general atmosphere in the family.

> Brenda:...I try to make sure that before any of us say goodbye that we're on speaking terms again...

> Alice: ...it feels a lot of times that I get caught up in that role. I don't want them to fight. Right? I want them to get along. But, I make it worse sometimes because I interfere! But it's hard to sit, for me, on the outside and hear the two of them fighting with one another. I just want it to stop.

For both of these women, "getting along" smoothly is an important aspect of family life. They both take on the responsibility of trying to achieve this, at the risk of sometimes "making it worse" through what the adolescents perceive as interference. Whether by stopping the fighting, or by ensuring that everyone is on "speaking terms" before they separate for the day, these women try to keep things running smoothly by promoting family relationships. This in turn makes it possible for the family members to see themselves as part of an identifiable unit. The women also see their very presence as extremely important to the adolescents, and to the family as a whole.

Being There

"Being there" can be a passive condition: *being* there; simply existing. "Being" can be, instead, the present participle in a more active grammatical

expression, such as "being helpful", "being angry", "being busy". Being *"there"* locates "being" in relation to someone or something. For these mothers, "being there" means having an active presence in the lives of their children.

> Cathy: ...there's a lot of independence from them which is really good, but I still feel I have to sort of oversee everything? I like to be there for them when they come home from school or shortly after...

Cathy does not mention any specific thing she does for her sons after school; she just wants to "be" there, or, more likely, to be "there", where they are. By being where they are, she can "oversee" or supervise them, but also be available to them for anything they might need. Not to be there, on the other hand, could be harmful, several of the women feel.

> Gail: ...these [other] kids are getting into troubles and whatnot, and it comes from there is nobody caring whether or not they come in before midnight or not. There's nobody *there* if they come home.

Being "there" and "caring" are closely tied in this description of some students at Gail's daughter's school. This relationship poses a dilemma, however, for those of the women whose work responsibilities keep them away from their children in the after-school hours. They cannot be "there", but not due to any lack of "caring"; yet the taken-for-granted cultural message to mothers is that they *should* be there, if they care. Equally taken-for-granted, perhaps, is the corresponding message to fathers, that they cannot be "there" *because* they care, i.e. they are supporting their families financially. Such conflicting messages lead to feelings of guilt and much effort in trying to replace the mother's presence with an acceptable alternative.

> Fran: ...till last year she went to a friend's place right in the neighbourhood of the school and this year she said she wanted to go home and [be]

on her own for that hour and that was a little step in the independence direction for me because I wasn't too comfortable at first but it seems to be working fine. We do have a lady across the street though, who I talked to and she said if anything ever came up she could go there, so, that's in place and that made me feel a little bit better.

Although Fran's daughter is becoming more independent by going home alone after school, Fran calls it "a little step in the independence direction" for herself. She is accustomed to being away from her daughter after school, but knowing the girl is with someone else's mother. Now, in allowing her child to care for herself, she must let go of another part of her mothering role, i.e. "being there" indirectly through pre-arranged alternatives. To make herself "feel better", however, she has put in place an emergency plan with a neighbour.

Some of the women cite specific actions as evidence of "being there" for their young adolescents. They identify rules and active encouragement as the two major ways in which this occurs. "Rules", as discussed earlier with "boundaries" and "lines", may differ extensively from one family to the next, and may lead to conflict in various ways. Nevertheless, some of the women feel strongly that the presence of rules demonstrates that the parents are "there" for the children.

> Jasmine:...the way I have done in my family is that there should be set time. I don't like kids going out, roaming with their friends, at late nights. When I was young my parents never allowed me to go out after sunset, and that's why [...] in normal life I would not let my kids to be out for late evenings.

> Gail: I see it as being very important as a mother to get to know her friends, and her interests and whatnot, and try and make room for the changes. We've always just stood our ground with, "We have rules because we care. And, you may not like them, and they may not suit you but, that's where they're coming from and we just try to do our best but there will be rules".

Jasmine feels it is important for her to know where her children are, or more specifically, to know they are *not* "roaming" with their friends after dark. She values having her sons at home in the evenings, where she can be there for them. Having a rule about when to come home is the way she tries to achieve this. For Jasmine, and for Gail, the existence of rules in the family is an important part of "being there". The establishment of rules, to Gail, is not only necessary for the smooth running of the home, but also demonstrates to children that there are adults in control whose job it is to protect the children, to help them develop a "base" for future conduct, and to keep the family "together" as a functioning unit. Another dimension to rule-making for Gail is to know the child and her friends well and to "make room" for the changes that are sure to come by anticipating them, adapting the rules as time passes.

The women describe many instances in which they actively encourage their sons and daughters in activities valued by the family, as another way of "being there" for them. They attend sports activities, concerts and plays in which their children are involved, as well as driving them to and from practices. Brenda's whole family went to a rock music festival in another city with her fifteen-year-old daughter. In addition to encouraging them by their physical presence, some of the women describe specific instances in which they have supported their children in doing something challenging. Gail, for example, feels it is very important for her daughter to try things even if she does not succeed.

> Gail: ...she really really wanted to try for basketball again this year, was *positive* she would get cut from the team because of size. And I truly encouraged her to go out and try out anyhow. And she wavered back and forth but in the end, I mean I *strongly* encouraged her, I

said I really thought that it was something she should try, if she got cut or not, it was the fact that she didn't want to wonder the rest of her life whether or not she *would* have been cut....that's how a lot of us get scared and miss out on a lot of fun and I missed out on a lot of fun because I was always too scared to go the first day. So I try to help her find the confidence to get there the first time.

In this description, Gail is "there" for her daughter in two ways. First, she uses her relationship with the girl to encourage her to try something that could end in failure. Without Gail's presence and active encouragement, it seems likely that the daughter would have given up, believing she could not succeed. Secondly, Gail brings memories of her own youth to the situation to add to her understanding of the daughter's experience. In a sense, Gail-as-a-young-person is "there" for her daughter, to say, "I missed out on a lot of fun because I was always too scared".

To "be there" for one's young adolescents is vital to these women. Actually being physically present is not always possible, but they try to ensure that some other adult is available in their absence. They try to have rules to guide their children, and they spend time encouraging the children by showing an interest in their activities, assisting them to get to practices, games, etc., and supporting them in trying new things. In these ways they define the family group and sustain it as, largely, a place of nurturance.

These women, in addition to working outside the home, see themselves as the primary organizers of everyone's individual schedules and of family routines. They feel a need for family time and try to fit that into their organizational plans as well. By taking on a co-ordinating role they expect to reach the outcome of keeping the family group "together" in whatever ways possible as their children

grow up and become more independent. The women try to facilitate this group cohesion by "keeping things running smoothly": promoting harmonious relationships within the family, and making sure the necessary daily work is done, even if it means doing it themselves. Finally, they value "being there" for each of their children, not only physically and emotionally but also by means of a framework of rules and of active encouragement for their children's interests and activities.

"Letting go" is the other half of protecting, transmitting values, and sustaining the family, just as light and dark, day and night, life and death are distinct, yet inextricable from each other. "Letting go" of one's children is frequently cited in parenting manuals, pamphlets, etc., as one of the basic developmental tasks of parents, which becomes most important during adolescence (British Columbia Council for the Family, 1995). To "let go" can be an active, purposeful process, a releasing or setting free; it can also be an expression of relinquishment and loss of control. For mothers in particular, for whom protection of their offspring has been a major concern for so many years, letting go at this stage of adolescence may be difficult. The lack of general agreement around boundaries as discussed earlier, and the sense of isolation felt by some women, contribute to this difficulty. In addition, it is still important to them to continue to transmit their values to their children, and to provide nurturing and intimacy through the family. The women describe their needs and attempts to ease the process of "letting go" somewhat, first by "getting a good base in" while

there still seems to be time. Second, they attempt to release their control gradually by increasing privileges and responsibilities as the child grows older.

Summing Up

"Holding on and letting go" become the two competing sides of the mothering coin as children become adolescents. The women in the study, at this point in their children's lives, continue to "hold on" to them by protecting them in various ways from both present and future threats, by talking and listening in order to ensure that family and cultural values are passed on to the children, and by attempting to sustain the family as a unit. Simultaneously they are "letting go". The adolescents themselves become more involved in their own activities, negotiate or initiate power struggles for looser boundaries, and spend more time with peers outside the home. The mothers seek guidance from parenting literature and resources, friends, spouses, and memories of their own adolescence, in order to set boundaries that will protect, but not be too restrictive. They experience hurt and anger at times, yet remember themselves as young teens reacting in much the same way to their own mothers. They try to prepare their children for a more independent future by reinforcing the foundation of values they have been building since birth. Finally, although they still wish to have "family time" with their children they acknowledge the difficulties in scheduling that time and sometimes modify it to something more realistic: mealtimes once a day, or "snippets" of time in the car on the way to practices, for example.

"Letting go" of and "holding on" to one's children is, for most of these women, a different experience from that of their husbands. They describe the

fathers as having less need to protect, and in general as being less involved in the setting or enforcement of boundaries. This discrepancy in involvement stems at least partly from the women's interventions when the men do get involved: the women feel the need to "protect" the children from the men's anger, tone of voice, or harsh words, which they see as potentially or actually hurtful to the children. Similarly, the women describe themselves as having more of the responsibility than the men for the day-to-day running of the household, including co-ordination of activities, organization of time, overseeing (or doing) of daily chores, and being available for the young adolescents in a number of ways. They perceive themselves as responsible for these tasks for a variety of reasons: these responsibilities are part of a mother's role; they feel they are more competent or efficient at such tasks than are the men; their own mothers did the same; and they like to feel in control of things. As their children grow into adolescence and seek more autonomy and more time away from the family, the women find that their familiar identity as "Mom" is changing in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. They are faced with the need to redefine themselves as mothers and perhaps to rediscover the women behind the role.

CHAPTER FIVE:

REDEFINING WHO "MOM" IS: MOTHER ROLES AND WOMEN'S

REALITIES

The second theme, "redefining who 'Mom' is", deals with discrepancies between the role of mother and the person who plays that role. The role is changing as the needs of children change, forcing the women to wonder, if not "Who am I?" then "Who is 'Mom' now?" Although I have used the words "women" and "mothers" interchangeably throughout this thesis, the "women" in the study describe their roles as "mothers" in ways that separate the role from the person. The phrase, "X's mother", for example, identifies her by the existence of her child, but "Alice" and "Brenda" are people first, who may or may not have children. "X's mother" is expected, in this community and in our culture, to "be" a certain way: to protect her child, to "be there" for him, to teach him accepted values, and to let go of him gracefully. The "mother" role, although blending with the expected, accepted "women" roles in our society, may become dominant in a woman's life for the years that her child is in need of protection and nurturing. The arrival of the child's adolescence challenges that role, giving both the demand and the opportunity for a woman to re-examine her place in the family and in the community.

Some of the women compare their own youth to their children's experiences, and recall their relationships to their own mothers at that time. Most find this a time of "ups" and "downs", and point out, along with the challenges, the

many positive aspects of this stage of mothering. Where there are, or have been, serious difficulties with a child, the women acknowledge experiencing severe stress.

Like their adolescent children, these women are in a transition period. They are experiencing changes in their role, coinciding with changes in their relationships with their children. Within the broad theme "Redefining who 'Mom' is", I have identified three sub-themes: Living through the changes, Breaking the silence, and Growing apart. Each of these requires, or allows, a woman to ponder her role in the family and motherhood in the context of the rest of her life.

Subtheme: Living through the changes: "It's a real roller coaster ride"

Brenda's daughter, at 14, "got in with the wrong group of kids". She began skipping school and became defiant and non-communicative. Eventually she took an overdose of prescription anti-depressants, medication that Brenda did not know about. Brenda feels she lost control, not only of her daughter's behaviour, but also of any "rights" she had as a parent. It seems to her that physicians and social agencies were making decisions about her daughter without any inclusion of the parents. Looking back at this troubled time, Brenda sees a striking contrast to the present. She comments:

> ...it was bizarre, it was like this, she was possessed for this short term, yknow? And now she's the sweetest kid, and things are just great. [laugh] So it's a real roller coaster ride.

Brenda calls this incomprehensible change "bizarre", a word with a history of strange contrasts itself. It comes from the Basque term for "beard", and originally,

in French, meant "handsome", or "brave". Today in English it is defined as "strange in appearance or effect; eccentric; grotesque". Perhaps the etymology relates more closely to adolescence than is immediately obvious. The growth of a beard on a young boy's face may, to him, be an attempt to emulate the "handsome" and "brave" men of his society, but at first it is sparse and may look rather peculiar, even, perhaps, "grotesque". Similarly, Brenda's daughter was trying out some new behaviours shared by her peers; she apparently admired them and wanted to do as they did, but to Brenda and her husband, these behaviours still seem unfamiliar and strange.

Brenda feels that her daughter was "possessed"; the passive voice suggests that the control resided outside the girl and that she was not making her own decisions during that time. One interpretation of "being possessed" is the Judeo-Christian, Biblical notion of possession by demons or the devil. Thus there is a sinister undertone to the expression: What unknown, unseen force of evil was possessing her?

Now that the crisis is over, Brenda reflects on it with a laugh, describing it as a "roller coaster ride". To visualize a roller coaster ride is to imagine what it was like for her. First the long, slow climb to the top, a short pause, and then suddenly a downward hurtling, with no power to stop, or get off, or prevent the little car from going off the edge of the narrow track. The only option is to trust the machinery and the person who is running it, and to look ahead to the next pause when things will slow down and not seem so terrifying. Even when the ride is over, the vertigo and the memory of vulnerability remain.

Most of the other women have also experienced some sense of strangeness and loss of control, albeit less dramatically than Brenda, as their children have grown to adolescence. Alice describes her experience of seeing her daughter brought home by the police as "the end of the world in some ways". Everything that had been comfortable and familiar was suddenly gone, leaving Alice "in some ways" to find a new "world" where she could be in control once again.

Some of the women describe a sense of aloneness with these changes, as mothers, or parents in general, become less vocal about their experiences with their children at this age. They find, though, that in breaking this self-imposed silence, they can gain support from other women and come to see their children's—and their own—realities in other ways.

Subtheme: Breaking the silence: "...nobody talks about it..."

Silence and isolation from other mothers or other parents of young teens is an issue for several of the women. It seems that talking with others about one's children, often a source of information and support in earlier years, is a relative rarity for the women at this stage. This may be especially true if there are problems, even though these "problems" are actually shared by many parents. One mother, whose intoxicated daughter was brought home by the police, felt very alone until she began to speak with other parents.

> Alice: ...I thought it was the end of the world in some ways, right? And, lots of that stuff happens to other people in town, and nobody talks

about it. Right? And so it was really useful to talk to people who [...] could say to me Yeah, that their kids had done stuff, or if their kids hadn't they knew of kids that had done stuff so that, I didn't feel so isolated so I think it's important to share those pieces not to keep it just in the family?

And that having connections now [...] having, building those little networks is really important so that if my kid is out and I'm not sure what the scoop is, or something happens, I can talk to those other parents and I think it's important to talk to them. Like the one night when they were supposed to be someplace and they weren't there, it was sorta neat how there was a little bit of a circle of parents, that the one parent, she phoned me, and I could phone another parent and tried to figure out where things were at [...] That connection with other parents is critical I think.

Mothers in particular may experience guilt when their children become involved in behaviour such as drinking; as mothers they are often held responsible, or feel they are, and so may not discuss it openly with others. This was Alice's experience, but this situation, which started out like "the end of the world", was the starting point for a network of parents, all of whom were concerned for the safety of their adolescent daughters and sons. Making connections among previously isolated parents creates a kind of safety net for the teens while giving the parents support for one another. A "net" or a "network" contains as many openings as lines or threads, making it a kind of boundary, but one which is flexible.

As Alice points out, "...lots of that stuff happens to other people in town, and nobody talks about it". This refusal or failure to discuss certain adolescent behaviours increases the sense of isolation felt by parents in general, and mothers in particular. Antidotes to this isolation sometimes come serendipitously, while a woman is pursuing other interests:

Elaine:....it's not very often that parents of *teenage* kids all meet together. [...] I participate in a book club. [...] It's thrown together about a dozen other women most of them professionals, and about half to three-quarters of them have already raised families, or are raising, families, a lot with similarly aged children [...] and *that's* been really interesting. [...] So it was kind of like looking at things from a whole bunch of different angles and obviously most of these [...] women are working while they're doing this so it puts you in a similar situation?

While a group of mothers might not get together for the sole purpose of discussing mothering and their adolescents, when they meet for some other purpose, the topic comes up. In such a context, it is no longer necessary to be silent. For Elaine, the presence of women who have already gone through the process is like having a kind of visual aid, which allows her to "[look] at things from a whole bunch of different angles". Viewing something from different angles gives new perspectives and allows a person to see the same thing in a "new light".

As the women learn to live with the changes in the adolescents, and try to break the silence around those changes, they are also aware that they and their children are gradually (or sometimes quite abruptly) growing apart. Since being a mother, for them, has up to this point entailed being close to their children, this development is perhaps the major catalyst for redefining themselves in terms of their mothering role.

Subtheme: Growing apart: "...there's a lot of 'oh my's' at this stage of letting go"

_The shocks mothers receive from their children are not always unpleasant; in fact when speaking of unexpected events, the women actually describe more that are positive than negative. Gail calls these experiences "oh my's": when a child

surprises a mother by doing something that shows his or her growing maturity and capabilities.

> Brenda:...she joined the Student Council, she got up in front of the whole school and gave this presentation [...] I just would never have been able to do anything like that and so it's kind of neat, I feel like I'm almost a part of that...

> Alice: ...when I see her in the [school] play I think, My God she's such a competent young woman you know—this is wonderful!

In a sense these moments are epiphanies—revelations—for the mothers, who at these times learn a little more about their children and about themselves. Some of the women see these positive "shocks" as simply a continuation of what has been happening throughout the mothering experience:

> Gail: For me, to be a mother in general is probably one of the biggest gifts I've ever received. And I am *sure*, I've learnt the *most* by being a mother. [...] Maybe for the first time in your life you have to really look at your thoughts and beliefs and actions in a totally different way than any other time in your life...

> Alice: ...I didn't realize how much you learn about yourself when you become a mother. You learn about your strengths and your challenges and the pieces that are missing from your own life or the pieces that are there...

These women view motherhood as a process of learning and growing not only for their children, but, equally, for themselves. They have found that they have discovered a great deal about themselves in the process of mothering children. With the onset of their children's adolescence, they are required to revise this learning as they struggle with new challenges in protecting, imparting a basis of values, and sustaining the family unit. They are beginning to have more freedom in some ways, although there is sometimes a sense of loss with "letting go" of the

close, mothering relationship with the child. While this letting-go process is expected and anticipated from birth, it still comes as somewhat of a surprise, after years of dependence on the part of the child, and personal caring by the mother.

> Cathy: ...maybe when your children are young [...] the whole conversation is your children, you're comparing the things that they do and this and that, but as they get older it's more the parents talking together and the children are away. They sort of don't consume the conversation or take up the whole time...
>
> I think about their education, their safety, their future, things like that, I don't know. It's good with them, I think it would be empty without them. I can't imagine it without them.

When children are very young they consume not only mothers' milk, time, and energy, but even conversations among adults. As they grow older and gradually "away", their consumption changes. Not "consuming" the conversation any more could be seen as symbolic of no longer consuming their mothers' time and energy to the extent they once did. Yet, as Cathy follows this progression into the future she sees that there will be a cost ahead, when her sons are gone and, she imagines, life will seem "empty". Such emptiness is unthinkable to her at this time.

The women in the study are all facing this increasing "emptiness" in one sense, despite their busy lives: less time is needed for the actual "care" of their children, and this is time that often becomes filled with other kinds of work. It seems to be more difficult to find time for enjoyable activities of their own, or to have time with their partners. Some of the women do take exercise classes, go for walks by themselves, or go fishing with their husbands. There is often an "oh my-ness" to the discovery that they can actually do these things more easily now

than in the past. They sometimes still feel, however, that they must balance these pursuits against the needs of the children.

> Cathy: I think I'll do something probably twice a week like exercise or something just to get out myself. You know it's a lot easier right now at the ages they're at, you don't need a sitter if they're left alone, so that's fine. I guess sometimes I wish I could do more but I feel they come first, they're important too.

Cathy recognizes her own need to "get out", apart from going to work. Nevertheless she feels her sons' needs "come first", ahead of her own, at least for now. There is always the underlying realization that this time is fleeting. As Elaine comments, "...it's almost all time-consuming while the children are at this stage. There isn't a lot of time for oneself". Mothering young adolescents is a temporary situation, a "stage", which makes it, perhaps, easier to accept the lack of much time for oneself.

For the women in this study, being a mother of young adolescents means being in a period of transition, a time of change during which they must redefine their roles and see themselves differently. The all-nurturing, ever-present mother gives way to a person with a less definite place in the relationship with her children. Our society has in the past provided, and to some extent still gives young women clear expectations for the course of their lives up to *attaining* motherhood; beyond that the path is somewhat foggy, as described by a character in the following excerpt from a short story by Alice Munro:

> It seemed to [Kath] that life went on, after you finished school, as a series of further examinations to be passed. The first one was getting married [...] Then you thought about having the first baby [...] Then down the road somewhere was the second baby. After that the progression got dimmer

and it was hard to be sure just when you had arrived at wherever it was you
were going.   Munro, A. (1998). Jakarta. In <u>The love of a good woman.</u>
(p. 83).

The women in the study, having raised children to adolescence, now reflect the
same uncertainty as "Kath" about their "progress" and their "destination" in terms
of their mothering roles. They are caught between "holding on" to and "letting go"
of children. At the same time they are beginning to find the daily realities of their
life-worlds changing, in ways which do not always fit with the "mother" role as they
have so far known it. They describe emotional highs and lows as they deal with
changes in their children and in their own lives. Despite the intensity of the
relationships and interactions with their children at this time, they note that there
seems to be little opportunity or inclination to discuss this period of life with other
mothers, and they express a sense of isolation in this regard. As their children
show new strengths and emerging characteristics, the women take note, positively
or negatively, often with an "oh my!" reaction.

Summing Up

Within this small group of women, who have been mothers for twelve to
sixteen years, two major themes have emerged through the interviewing process.
The first is the fundamental struggle between "holding on" and "letting go" of
children as they grow to adulthood. The women express concern or worry about
their children's safety and futures, and try to extend protection to them through
"drawing lines", through interceding and intervening in conflicts between child and
father, and through gradually increasing privileges and responsibilities. They also
see this time as a final opportunity to pass down their values to their adolescent

children, and spend time trying to talk to them about things they view as important. Sometimes these attempts result in power struggles as mothers' need to communicate ideas clash with adolescents' drive for autonomy. At these times the women often feel a sense of loss and of powerlessness. Perhaps this feeling contributes to their emphasis on sustaining the family. They describe strengthening the group by defining and producing a sense of "togetherness" through regular mealtimes, group activities, and being the central, connecting figure to whom everyone can come for direction. They take responsibility for the daily, "smooth" running of the household, including the organization of time and co-ordination of activities. Finally, they want to "be there" for their children, both physically when possible, and emotionally. Yet at the same time they are conscious of the need to let go, to step back, to draw looser boundaries. They are concerned about being "over-protective"; they acknowledge hurt and loss at their adolescents' methods of distancing themselves (not allowing hugs or kisses, being "rude") and at the prospect of the adolescents eventually growing up and leaving home altogether.

The second theme, "Mother roles and women's realities: Redefining who 'Mom' is", relates closely to the first. The women identify themselves as "mothers", an identity that carries with it specific cultural meanings. However, as their children reach adolescence, these meanings have decreasing relevance to the realities of their everyday lives. For example, "mothers" are supposed to protect and have "control" over their children, but adolescents are moving away from the safety of maternal protection. They may become risk-takers, and/or they

may reject, if only temporarily, the comfort and familiarity of home in favour of the challenges offered by their peers. Mothers are expected to "be there" for their children, but at this age the children themselves may wish to be elsewhere, more and more frequently. The women in the study find that this paradox, between what is expected of them—or what they expect of themselves—and what they actually experience with their adolescents, can be painful, perplexing, and lonely. They are forced to redefine their mothering role—who 'Mom' is—but are not yet able to do so because in some ways they, like their young adolescents, are in a period of transition, experiencing frequent changes. There are compensations for these sometimes difficult times, however: the opportunity, occasionally, to do things for themselves without needing to organize child care, and the moments of pride as they see their offspring begin to mature and to display new abilities. This theme is also one of "holding on" and "letting go", but refers not to the child but to the mothering role as the women have known it. The women are searching for a new definition of "mother", one which will fit the realities of their daily experience.

CHAPTER SIX
ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS: THE HERMENEUTIC SPIRAL OF UNDERSTANDING WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES AS MOTHERS OF YOUNG ADOLESCENTS

As discussed in Chapter Three, there can be no "conclusions" in hermeneutic phenomenological research. The end of this thesis is the beginning of the reader's reflections on the writing contained within it. In this, the final chapter, I will draw together the themes from the text, some related material from the literature, and my reflections on both of these. I will then present some implications of this research study for community health, and some suggestions for further research.

Motherhood Discourse and the Women

The women in this study, while mothering young adolescents in a specific small town, within individual families, are mothering within a societal context that is much broader than community or family. Knowingly or not, they are affected by the prevailing discourse around motherhood in contemporary Western society. This discourse holds that becoming a mother is a goal in itself, and emphasizes what Hays (1996) calls "intensive mothering": being almost totally responsible for a child's well-being, development, and behaviour. As children grow, this construction of motherhood remains quite constant, despite the fact that children require decreasing amounts of direct care and supervision, and in fact are discouraged from being "mama's boys" or "tied to mother's apron-strings". Interestingly, being a "daddy's girl" carries a rather positive connotation, and there is no paternal equivalent to the apron-strings metaphor.

Several of the women in this study speak of being a "central figure" within the family, yet having some ambivalence about that role, for example, in providing protection but not wanting to be "overprotective". There is a well-worn American cliché that twins "Motherhood" with "apple pie". Apple pie is sweet, made from wholesome ingredients, symbolic of loving care—but unhealthy in large quantities. Mothers have been seen in similar, contradictory ways in Western society for centuries. For example, in the Middle Ages in Europe, the Virgin Mary was revered as the ideal mother for her purity, passivity, and silence, in contrast to real women. By the age of "scientific motherhood" in the late nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries, mothers had scientific validation for their role but were blamed for such conditions as autism and schizophrenia (McDonnell, 1991). The twentieth century, in the Western world, has seen major changes in the status of women, and to some extent also in the mothering role, but we continue to see mothers as the primary caretakers for their children, and as largely responsible for their health, development, and long-term outcome. This is reflected today in numerous academic studies, also referred to in Chapter Two, of the effects of maternal mental health (Garber and Little, 1999; Silverberg, Marczak, and Gondoli, 1996), employment (Armistead, Wierson, and Forehand, 1990; Paulson, 1996), and religiosity (Foshee and Hollinger, 1996) on various measures of child and adolescent well-being. Despite the widespread use of "parenting" as a verb in the last two decades, the activity it represents is gendered, and is female. Women are commonly described in terms of motherhood (Woollett, 1991): childless, "young" mother, "older" mother, "single" mother. It is more unusual for a man to

be similarly identified with fatherhood, unless, for example, he is a "single" father and therefore is doing both fathering and mothering. "Fathering", though, is more generally taken to mean the biological act of providing sperm for conception, so the single father's "fathering" would be taken for granted. "Mothering", on the other hand, refers to a whole kaleidoscope of nurturing functions and also implies a set of "feminine" virtues that would not necessarily be expected of a father: sensitivity (Woollett and Phoenix, 1991), self-sacrifice (Hays, 1994), and accepting of responsibility for the whole family's well-being (Phoenix and Woollett, 1991; Hays, 1994; DeMeis and Perkins, 1996). The seven women who I interviewed speak in terms of these qualities when they describe listening and talking to their children (Gail, Elaine, Jasmine) and mediating between fathers and children (Alice, Brenda); putting their children "first" (Cathy); and co-ordinating everyone's activities (Elaine) while trying to maintain "family times" (Fran).

Roles, according to Berger and Luckmann (1966) represent institutions. The mothering role represents the institution of the family, especially, in North America, the nuclear family. Moreover, "...roles make it possible for institutions to exist...as a real presence in the experience of living individuals" (75). In this sense, mothers "produce" family, and intimacy within the family (DeVault, 1991); without the mothering role (which as noted above *can* be played by fathers in certain circumstances, with some limitations understood), "family" would be a much looser, ill-defined construct.

Some of the women interviewed note that they look to *their* mothers as reference points, or role models, for their own mothering. Looking back just one

generation, these women remember their own mothers being at home full-time and doing "everything" for them. Jasmine, looking across both time and cultures, recalls what she sees as an ideal lifestyle of caring for home and children, unburdened with paid employment. These women are employed outside the home, yet they describe their attempts to replicate the kind of mothering their mothers did. The mother role as they experienced it in childhood represents the family and the experiences they wish for their own children.

Most of the women note some level of incongruity between their conscious experience and the mothering role they feel expected to play. Essentially that incongruity exists because mothers are "supposed" to produce intimacy in the form of a close, happy family, while adolescents are expected to separate from that family, to conflict with the other members, and to become independent. When women speak about their realities, they make available for examination the taken-for-grantedness of mothering.

Geographical and Social Contexts of the Women

It should be noted that this study took place in a small, resource-based community in northern British Columbia. Does this context affect attitudes towards women, gender roles, and motherhood? All of the women in the study described their husbands as being actively involved with their children, and there was no sense of particularly rigid roles within any of the families. However, they all perceived and described differences between their experiences of parenthood and those of their spouses, an observation which is consistent with current

literature on motherhood and gender roles (DeVault, 1991; Gager, 1998; Hays, 1996; Silverberg, 1996).

What are the effects of living in a small, northern community on being a mother of young adolescents? Three of the women have extended family members living in the same town; the others are separated from their extended families by significant distances. This limits the amount and quality of support available to them from parents or siblings.

Distances within the community are relatively short, so that adolescents can often walk to school or other activities; on the other hand, the bus service is not always convenient, and unpredictable weather and road conditions may make cycling impossible in winter, leaving walking or being driven (frequently by mothers) as the two major options.

Because it is a fairly small community, networks of people with similar interests develop easily. Alice describes a "circle" of parents that grew from a common concern about their adolescents; Elaine finds support from similarly educated women meeting to discuss literature; Fran is part of a singing group. All of these groups evolved from a core of interested people and grew through word-of-mouth. The small population and lack of a large range of other possibilities probably facilitate this kind of networking. Similarly, adolescents attend one of a very few high schools and often have known each other since primary school. There are recreational programs available for this age group, but choice is limited, especially for those who are not sports enthusiasts. Outdoor or house parties, depending on the weather, are common, as is drinking. This part of British

Columbia has a relatively high rate of alcohol consumption (Northwest AIMS for Health, 1989) and the patterns of this community, for both adults and teens, reflect that. Thus when the women speak of their need to protect their young adolescents, they have concerns based on an external reality over which they may feel somewhat powerless.

Some factors related to the resource-based economy of the community also have an effect on mothers of adolescents. The husbands of two of the women were unemployed at the time of the interviews, one was working shifts, and a fourth had been working out of town for long periods of time. All three of these situations are common in this town. They each present challenges to the mothers, for example, to increase their working hours to maintain sufficient family income, or to work part-time or not at all in order to be available to their children because the fathers are not. Fathers at home may take on "house-husband" roles and in this way ease the stress on the mothers at work; despite that, the women who were in this situation describe their responsibilities as "a really heavy load" (Alice) and "very, very hard" (Jasmine).

Reflections

For the seven women who participated in this study, this time of their life is posing new and unfamiliar challenges. They are balancing their efforts to "hold on" to their young adolescent children, by protecting them, trying to prepare them for adult life, and sustaining the family unit for them, with the need to let go of them. The women are also facing another, more existential challenge: the role of "mother", into which they have been socialized since early childhood, is no longer

appropriate for the realities of life with young adolescents. It is not necessary now to be all-nurturing and all-protective, as it still was only a few years before. When the role has ceased to fit the reality, the women are left with the question, "Who is 'Mom'?" They are living through changes in the children themselves, and this at times can seem like riding an emotional roller coaster. It can also be like the loss of almost everything "familiar"—a difficult adjustment for the centre of the "family". They describe this as a time of growing, not only for the teens, but for themselves as well. It is a "growing apart", however, that involves surprises and shocks, and the anticipation of grief as children begin to prepare to leave the family. The women are starting to redefine themselves vis-a-vis the mothering role, and perhaps begin to see themselves in other, non-mothering ways. The changes require them to seek a balance between the role and the new realities. At this point, however, they have not yet found new self-definitions. They, like their adolescent children, are in transition. To some extent their self-definitions will be shaped by the kinds of relationships that develop as their children grow into adulthood, by the distancing that does or does not occur between themselves and their individual children. For the women in this study, this is their first experience of being mothers of young adolescents; perhaps if interviewed the second, third, or fourth time they would define themselves more clearly in terms of their mother-of-adolescents roles.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

Because this is a phenomenological study, it has the advantage of being able to explore in depth the experiences of a few women at a specific time in their lives. Rather than relying on survey questions or semi-qualitative scales, which measure various aspects of an experience, this approach allows the women to describe their own experiences as completely as they wish. There is room during the interview for flexibility; for example, Brenda focussed on recent problems with her daughter which still reverberate for her although they have apparently been solved, while Alice spoke about the whole sweep of her mothering experience and how that ties in with her current experience. A questionnaire or survey could not have captured the richness of these conversations.

Studies of mothering, conducted from the point of view of mothers, and particularly mothers of adolescents, are scarce in the literature. This study, while small and exploratory, supports the argument that there is in fact something to talk about: these women feel, at this stage of mothering, that they are rarely heard, even by each other. It is important that research begin to address the issues that women express about this stage of mothering and of their lives.

A study such as this cannot be generalized. From a hermeneutic phenomenological viewpoint, lack of generalizability is not the issue; seeking to understand the experience of the women is the reason for the research, and this particular type of research is the lens through which we seek this understanding. Of some concern, perhaps, is the fact that only a restricted group of women has been included. These women are all middle-class, married residents of the same

small northern town in British Columbia. One of the women is of non-European background, but there are no First Nations women among them, even though this is a significant minority of the population. Including their experiences obviously would have been invaluable; however, no First Nations woman responded to my request for volunteers to be interviewed. Possibly I did not persevere enough in actively promoting the study with this group.

All of the children of the women are healthy and "normal". Initially I believe I was blinded to the idea of any of them being disabled or ill and in fact might even have chosen not to interview a woman if that had been the case, in order to maintain the homogeneity of the group. From this vantage point, after the interviews, I see that the reason for this was probably the same underlying assumption which makes "mothering teens" an oxymoron in our society: children are "supposed" to become independent. Greenspan (1998) speaks of the marginalization of mothers of special-needs children, related to this same concept. In retrospect I feel that it would have been extremely enlightening to interview a woman experiencing motherhood in this way.

As with any study, this one is based on a number of assumptions, and its very existence arises from my own experiences. I have been a mother of young adolescents; my experience was the seed that germinated into this study. I found this period of my life challenging and therefore had some bias, perhaps, that it would be challenging for other women as well. This "bias" was probably helpful in my interactions with the women, however, as they were aware that I had "been there" and therefore had some pre-understanding of their life-worlds. I have taken

care in reading and re-reading the text (the women's words), always referring back to the text while interpreting, and taking a reflexive stance, i.e. examining my interpretations in light of my own experiences, assumptions, and biases. This back-and-forth process is the hermeneutic circle, or spiral, which constantly relates the parts (each woman's words) to the whole (the experience of being a mother to young adolescents).

Phenomenological interviewing is relatively unstructured, and requires alertness and sensitivity to the other person's words, intonations, and use of metaphor. In some of the interviews, especially some of the earliest, I had difficulty with this and as a result missed opportunities for learning more about the women's experiences.

The women themselves had positive reactions to the interpretations, commenting that they felt their realities were reflected in the writing.

Implications for Community Health

Although this was a small study, the experiences of these seven women do have implications for community health. There are several issues that raise further questions about how communities can support both young people and the adults who parent them, with resulting benefits for both. The first relates to information and support for parents (fathers need to be included where possible). Several of the women in the study describe a sense of isolation regarding their mothering at this stage. They seek information, suggestions, and emotional support through what can sometimes be a bewildering and difficult time. In their

community there are numerous parenting classes and support groups for parents of very young children, but none specifically for parents of adolescents. There are programs for youth, but unless they have the time and aptitude to be actively involved in this kind of work, the parents are rarely considered as part of the youth's world. Activities which include the whole family become rare as children grow through puberty, and this is generally accepted as "just the way things are". Such activities may, in fact, not be uniformly enjoyable for all members of the family (Larson and Gillman, 1997). Yet the cost of this segregation of the generations is high, not only for those adolescents whose risk-taking behaviour leads them into serious difficulty, but also for mothers of young adolescents, whose need to protect their children and create family intimacy does not disappear with the onset of puberty.

A second issue is more subtle and more difficult to address: community attitudes towards mothers and children. A truly "child-friendly" community would ensure that both parents, where present, could be equally involved in childcare, from birth onwards. Such details as having change tables in both male and female public washrooms, not discriminating against breast-feeding mothers in malls or restaurants, and scheduling activities at various times to allow for different work hours would be a beginning. Another area for improvement would be working conditions that support both parents, e.g. parental leaves, family illness provisions, on-site daycare, and pay equity. These suggestions are not new or original, but they promote the attitude that childrearing is everyone's responsibility, and that it is a valued endeavour. The fact that these things are still suggestions,

and not already in place for all parents and children, speaks to the extremely low priority childrearing has had to this point in our society. Hays (1994) identifies this lack of interest as hostility towards a pursuit which in some ways opposes the goals of the marketplace: competition, material gain, etc.

Some of the women mention the loss of control they felt when their children entered the school system. The establishment of "community schools" would allow parents to be more a part of the school, and the family to participate in activities there together. This continuum of inclusion and inclusiveness could, over time, result in a smoother transition into adolescence than seems to be the case now. Mothers might feel less personally responsible for their children's development and behaviour, young adolescents would feel nurtured by many people and thus have less need to "break away" so dramatically from that symbol of nurturance, "mother", and the community itself would be more supportive of teens and of mothers. In addition, such provisions for family participation in leisure activities might, at least in young adolescence, de-emphasize the differences between the worlds of the family and of peers.

Finally, it is important to hear people's stories. As Public Health Nurses we are accustomed to defining experiences according to Health Unit policies, for example, deciding on meeting a young mother that she "fits" a certain group of criteria and therefore is at a specific level of risk for parenting difficulties. Certainly this is an important way of ensuring that serious risk factors are not overlooked. However, each person has his or her own way of describing experiences, and if we are able to take the time to listen carefully, we may gain a much deeper

understanding of the meanings of these experiences to the individuals. In this way we are better able to approach difficult situations helpfully.

Applying this to mothers of young adolescents, perhaps women would find "letting go" less painful if there was more open communication about the experience. When Junior Secondary schools plan Parent Nights, they could offer an information session on what to expect, how to communicate, guidance issues, etc., and possibly the Parent Advisory Committees could organize discussion groups for mothers and fathers—together or separately—to allow parents to share their experiences, frustrations, and concerns. Confidentiality and cultural sensitivity would be essential for such groups.

Future Directions for Research

This study examines an experience common to many people, yet rarely considered from the point of view of those people. The descriptions given by the women of this time of transition show that it is a time of challenges, of uncertainty, and of isolation, through which they must find and maintain a balance between "holding on" and "letting go" of their children, and between being "Mom" and being themselves.

The study deals with women who are married, middle-class, and, except one, employed. They and their children are all able-bodied and generally healthy; all the children have succeeded in school and are at the same level as their age-mates. None of the children, or the women, has significant learning or mental health problems. Only one of the women has a non-European/North American

ethnic background, and she has lived in Canada all of her adult life. There are many other mothers of young adolescents whose voices are not heard here: First Nations women, immigrants and refugees, mothers of ill or disabled children, mothers who are themselves disabled or ill, single mothers, lesbian mothers: in short, women who are marginalized in various ways. Further research is needed in order to hear their voices and gain an understanding of what it is like for them to be mothers to young adolescents. Would their experiences be markedly different from those of the seven women in this study, or would they have some parallels, and some themes in common? An extension of this study to include some of these women is needed. In combination with such a continuation, in the same community, a larger, partly quantitative study could be done to determine the kinds of community resources and supports that women would find useful.

A common supposition about northern and rural Canadian communities is that they support more conservative, "traditional" attitudes toward many issues, including gender and family roles. The community in which this study was conducted may be unusual in that it is polarized politically and has a socially diverse population. Further research is necessary to determine whether or not men and women in northern, rural areas actually do have significantly different attitudes toward gender and roles than their southern, urban counterparts.

All of the women in this study are married; several of them speak of the role they play in mediating or intervening in conflicts between their husbands and their young adolescents. I have not found any literature that specifically discusses this

"peace-keeping" function, but hear it referred to anecdotally by other women as well as those included here. This observation merits further research.

At the beginning of my research I conducted a trial interview with a woman who is the mother of four, including, at the time, one young adolescent. I did not use the text of that interview, but will briefly summarize it here. This mother described her everyday life in terms of time and motion, in a way that was not echoed by any of the seven women whose interviews were included. Her conversation was peppered with action words such as "scooting", "blasting", and "racing", and sports images ("on the ball", "threw him for a loop"). Speaking rapidly, she described time in a number of ways: there was never enough, it was taken up in "chunks" with sports, band, and paper routes, her son was growing up too quickly, time was different somehow for adults than for adolescents, and it needed to be controlled for adolescents by parents (bedtimes and curfews). Although none of the other women emphasized time or described it as richly, this may have been because it is taken for granted as being in limited supply and being a constant factor in everyday life. Another potential focus for study, therefore, is time and its meaning for women at this point in their mothering.

Final Thoughts

This methodological approach, although necessarily limited in size and scope, allows for an in-depth look at seven women's experiences at a particular point in their lives as mothers. Hearing their voices has been exciting and enlightening. To look at everyday life under the lens of phenomenology is like

seeing a snowflake under a magnifying glass: fragile and fleeting, but infinitely more complex than it appears to the naked eye. Having seen it through the glass, the viewer is changed, and will never again think of "snow" in quite the same way. In this study, the concepts of "mothering" and "motherhood" have acquired new dimensions and depth through the thoughts and words of these seven women.

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APPENDIX I

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The following is an outline of the questions asked of the women in this study. I used these questions as a guide to the interview, rather than a script. I tried to keep the research question in mind throughout the conversation, i.e., "What is it like for you to be the mother of a young adolescent?" The questions I asked all or most of the women were:

What was it like for you to become a mother to _____?

What is it like now? Or, tell me about being a mother.

How has it changed?

Can you describe your day, for example, yesterday, from morning to night?

Are there some things that you find especially difficult? Things that are going especially well?

How would you describe a mother's role in the family?

If you could give advice to another woman with young adolescents, what would you say?

APPENDIX II

Excerpt from interview with "Alice", December 10, 1998

[Interviewer asked Alice to describe a day in her life]

A—Alice; Daughter 1—older girl (16); Daughter 2—younger girl (13)
[...] indicates some words have been left out

A: Yesterday was...Tuesday, so...[husband] is house-sitting for a couple of weeks so he's not home, right...so, um [laughs] [daughter 2] hadn't finished a project so, I had to get her up at 5 o'clock...to do this project, so...um, I set the alarm, got her up, she went on the computer, she did what she needed to do...um, I went back to bed...so um we got up late, we got up about 7:30...and so everybody's tired, right? So, um...of course, [daughter 1] goes...gets herself up, she's fairly independent that way, she's getting up late these days so she got up at 7:30 as well so then she's, she went in the bathroom, she's getting her shower, um...I wanted to have a shower yesterday, well then I have to wait for her to get out of there, so [daughter 2] has a really hard time getting up anyway so she's dawdling around downstairs getting her breakfast...she has a really hard time focussing so she gets stuff out and forgets to put it away so,,,I do use reminders and I just say, yknow the milk's on the counter, or whatever...but, it happens lots, right,so...so, the 3 of us are sort of up around the same time. [Daughter 1] finally gets out of the shower so, yknow here it is yknow 5 to 8 when I can get in there, so [laughs]...so, and then she goes to, of course she...likes to use the bathroom, so she...we have an upstairs bathroom and a downstairs bathroom? So, we keep the hairblower in the one downstairs and she's in there, she locks the...we're into locking the doors these days, we never locked bathroom doors before but now that we've reached teenagehood we lock the doors...so, her friend arrives, um, I have the car this week so I wanted to bring them in the car because it saves a little bit of money um, [daughter 1] is not going in the car because she's meeting this...boy...with her, like, the girlfriend came...to pick her up, they're meeting this guy on the bus. Fine. Like, Take the bus. [laughs] Whatever. So, [daughter 2] is sitting there, and by this time, she's sitting there, supposedly waiting for me...by the time I rush around and get ready, "have you got your lunch?" "Well no."...So then she does manage to get the lunch organized,.um, she grabs something like, uh, I'm not sure what she took, I think it was an apple...I've stopped fighting about the lunches stuff because they, I would insist they make the lunch and bring it to school then it would come home so now I just, they have to take something um, she took a salad the other day [laugh], brought it home after it sat in her pack all day. So then I dropped [daughter 2] off at the school and I came to work, and then yesterday, I have to be here at 8:30...and well we didn't leave the house until at least 25 after and I should have known, I wasn't thinking, the train...was there, so we sat, what, for 10 minutes with the train...cuz I'm not used to driving usually I walk to work and the kids take the bus but I'm driving this week cuz I need to get home after work? Well, I was late for work...yesterday by, well, not really late, but I feel late, like I should be here by 8:30 and I came at 20 to, so...then um...I was here, at work, and [...] I needed to do this piece of work so [co-worker] and I were

here till 6, [daughter 2] arrived about 5, so she hung around...and made a card and stuff while we finished doing that piece of work...

Interviewer: She usually comes?

A: She sometimes comes, depending on the day, she'll, she comes after school so it just depends on...what's happening, some days she's at the rink late but yesterday she came, she comes after school. And then, uh...and...and then she asked me to go out for supper and we don't go out to supper to...fast food places very much because we don't have the money? Anyway, she's rational, "There's just 2 of us!" "It's already 6 o'clock!", I have to pick [daughter 1] up, or I was thinking I had to pick her up, from the gym, so anyways, we went to McDonald's, and had McDonald's for supper...then I brought her home, and...she got in the tub cuz she was, was cold so she got in the tub, then [husband] phoned to say...that um at that place he was staying the dog needed to go out and he didn't realize he would have to be working a late Bingo as well...so there was a call from [daughter 1] saying...could I pick her up early, she had to be picked up at 8:30 not 9:30? So then I ran to the Bingo hall, first of all I phoned, then I phoned ___ to sort out skating stuff, then I ran to the Bingo hall, did the dog thing, went back to the Bingo hall, dropped the key off, go out to get [daughter 1], she's not ready then hang around at the gym...uh, we left there about...a quarter to 9, we get home 9 o'clock, [daughter 2] is still diddling around with her homework...so I helped her with the computer program [...] [Daughter 1] wants the computer, so she's upstairs, going at me because, or going at [daughter 2] because she wants on the computer, she's got homework to do...[Daughter 2] will be off by 9:30, she wasn't off by 9:30, because...but she's on the phone, like, did she care, right? But she cared as soon as she's off the phone, right. So at, 5 to 10 she's up there yelling, because she wants that computer and we're not off the computer yet...um, so...[daughter 2] went to bed at uh 10 o'clock, then [daughter 1] gets on the computer...and I've screwed up, it's the formatting that's the problem [...] so she got on the computer um I did some cleaning up in the house...[sigh]. She went on the computer I guess at quarter after 11 I thought, I'm waiting for the computer, I've got a piece of work that I need to do to complete [...] I need the computer. I was gonna work on the computer last night, right? Here it is quarter after 11, and what have I done? Run around and do nothing, right? So I got, I'm knitting a pair of socks, I sat down and I...knitted a pair of socks till...[daughter 1] went to bed which was midnight, then I went down and um...did a few things in the kitchen...[sigh] um...then I did, oh, then I had to format [daughter 2]'s thing because I'd screwed it up [...] By this time...I'm wired, but I'm really tired, so then I have a bath...Finally at 1:30 I thought, Go to bed, like—go! To bed, like, calm down and go to bed...And, there it is, yknow, then I'm thinking, oh I didn't do this and I didn't do that and...[daughter 1] needed to be up at 6, so...usually she's pretty good about getting herself up—when she asks me? Then I do uh make a point, cuz um...because she, she; s generally fairly independent and so if she asks me it's sort of an exception to the rule to get her up [...] So it wasn't an exciting day but it's long and...and, but there was a short time in the car where [daughter 1] and I had this little conversation about the school play and, then there was the argument we had, yknow about the computer stuff and...um...[daughter 2] and I had a, yknow when we...drive home we had a few minutes where she's telling me about the little, yknow she got a few gifts yesterday when she was at the Mall after school [...] but it feels like our

lives are in little snippets here and there yknow? It's quite disjointed. But that's probably not an unusual day. Pretty normal. Yeah, pretty abnormal but normal [laughs].

APPENDIX III

CONSENT FORM

I hereby give my consent to participate in the study, "Women as Mothers of Young Adolescents". I understand that the purpose of the study is to explore women's experiences with this stage of motherhood. Carol Harrison, a graduate student in Community Health at the University of Northern British Columbia, has explained the study to me.

I understand that the study will require one interview of approximately one hour in length. These interviews will be taped and then transcribed. I understand that I can refuse to answer any question at any time, or request that a tape or portion thereof may be erased, or the tape recorder turned off. I also understand that my name and other identifying information will not be put in writing at any point. The only person who will be listening to the tapes will be Carol and her supervisor. All tapes and transcripts will be kept in a secure place. They will be kept for a minimum of seven years, after which they will be destroyed. The research will be published in Carol's thesis and may be written up for publication or used for teaching purposes by Carol.

I understand that this study is being done in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a Master's degree, and that the findings will help to increase understanding of women's experiences and relationships with young adolescent children. In turn, this understanding will provide some insight into how communities can support families at this stage of life.

I am aware of the legal responsibility of every citizen to protect children at risk, so that if I should disclose that any child is being abused or neglected, or is at risk, both Carol and I will be obligated to take some action. This action will not be undertaken unilaterally by Carol without consultation with me.

I agree that Carol has explained the study thoroughly to me and that I may contact her at 635-3459, or her supervisor, Dr. Martha MacLeod (250) 960-6507, if I have further questions. I also understand that the study has been approved by the University of Northern British Columbia Ethics Approval Committee. If I have any questions about the ethical aspects of the study, I know I can contact Dr. Max Blouw, Associate Vice-President, Research, University of Northern British Columbia, (250) 960-2820.

Signed:_____

Date: _____

Witness: _____