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FOSTERING PARENTAL AWARENESS THROUGH REFLECTIVE DIALOGUE

The aim of this study was to explore how Reflective Dialogue Parent Education Design (RDPED) supports parents in their parenting role. RDPED is an approach intended to promote parent development and strengthen parent-child interaction. Data was collected from seven parents who participated in a parent education course in Iceland using RDPED, with interviews and written reflections. Thematic analysis suggested enhanced parental self-awareness, including more self-efficacy, where parents recognized both what they were doing well and what they wanted to do differently. Parents also reported enhanced parental awareness of the child's perspective, describing a better understanding of their child's behavior, feelings, autonomy, and goals when establishing limits. These findings suggest that RDPED may provide a promising approach to supporting parents. The findings offer a valuable contribution to research in the field of parent education with potential practical relevance for those working with parents, ultimately supporting them in their parenting journey.

Keywords: parent education, reflective dialogue, self-awareness, perspective-taking, parent-child interaction

INTRODUCTION

Parenting is “one of the most powerful jobs on earth” and, for many, their “most significant leadership experience” (Kegan, 1994, p. 78). Similarly, Pally (2017) emphasized that the parent-child relationship is “the most valuable tool in [the] parenting toolbox” (p. 1). Parental Reflective Functioning (PRF) refers to parents’ ability to interpret their children’s behavior in terms of underlying mental states and serves as a protective factor for secure attachment and positive developmental outcomes (Ordway et al., 2015; Slade, 2005). Parent education programs increasingly aim to strengthen this capacity, moving beyond the transmission of practical skills to approaches that foster reflection and mentalization (Huynh et al., 2024; Stuhmann et al., 2022).

Another developmental lens on parents’ ability to view their child and themselves as psychological beings is parental awareness, understood as a cognitive-developmental

progression. Newberger's (1980) theory of Parental Awareness (PA) presents a model of how parents' thinking about children, themselves, and the parent-child relationship can evolve from self-focused to reflective and systemic. PA rests on the premise that parents' broader conceptions of themselves and their role influence both their parenting and their capacity to mentalize. These parental conceptions are influenced by experience, shape perspectives, and encompass beliefs, feelings, intentions, and expectations (Siegel & Hartzell, 2014). Greater PA thus serves as a conceptual framework guiding complex decision making that considers the internal experience of children and parents, alongside circumstantial and developmental needs.

Reflective functioning, therefore, may be understood as a skill nested within the broader framework of parental conceptions. Newberger's (1980, 1987) theory of PA provided an early cognitive-developmental model for understanding how parents interpret and respond to their children's needs, while later work on PRF (Fonagy et al., 2002; Slade, 2005) elaborated this capacity within attachment and mentalization frameworks. Newberger's theory has remained relevant in parent therapy (Cohen, 2004) to improve interactions and motivate change, and in social work practice (Ljubetić & Reić Ercegovac, 2020) to promote adolescent well-being and positive parent-child relationships. Together, PA and PRF highlight that effective parent education must nurture more than skills; it must also cultivate parents' reflective growth and their capacity to understand their children and determine how to respond within the complex context of the moment (McDermott, 2018). Parent education programs not only improve child outcomes but are also valued by parents for fostering their own growth, in confidence, self-understanding, and reflective capacity, underscoring the importance of designing interventions that explicitly support parental development (Butler et al., 2020).

Reflective Dialogue Parent Education Design (RDPED) offers a systematic method for fostering parents' awareness and reflective growth through guided dialogue. RDPED was developed in the 1990s in the United States, as an approach to parent education that integrates facilitated reflective dialogue in group-based learning with the goal of promoting parent development and strengthening parent-child interaction. Thomas (1996) found that engaging in reflection and dialogue with other parents cultivates self-awareness and perspective-taking, while also supporting greater parental sensitivity and responsiveness. The approach emphasizes a collaborative environment where parents can share experiences, explore perspectives, and deepen their understanding of themselves and their children (Thomas et al., 2005). Early studies of RDPED reported promising outcomes, including a link between PA and parental behavior (Thomas, 1996) and the importance of teaching for transfer of learning (Thomas et al., 1992).

Despite initial promise, little empirical work has been published in the past three decades, leaving its contemporary relevance underexplored. RDPED is introduced to graduate students in the University of Iceland's Parent Education Program (Háskóli Íslands, n.d.) and through professional training courses (Menntavísindastofnun, n.d.). This growing professional interest called for renewed research on RDPED.

This study responds to that need by revitalizing scholarship on RDPED and extending its examination into a new cultural setting. The aim is to explore Icelandic parents'

experiences with RDPED in parent education through the following research question: How does RDPED support parents in their parenting role? This research is, to our knowledge, the first study on RDPED outside the USA.

Theoretical foundations of parent-child interaction

Parenting is a foundational aspect of early interpersonal experience. The quality of parent-child interaction significantly influences children's social, emotional, and cognitive development and well-being (Aðalbjarnardóttir, 2019; Baumrind, 1971). Parents who demonstrate sensitivity and responsiveness through reciprocal interactions are better able to support their children's healthy development (Grolnick et al., 2019). As emphasized by Wagner et al. (2025), emotional reciprocity plays a key role in fostering adjustment, social competence, and emotional well-being.

A supportive, sensitive, and caring environment signals acceptance to children while promoting their autonomy and self-regulation (Joussemet & Mageau, 2023). By encouraging problem-solving, parents foster motivation for challenging tasks and support the development of executive functioning skills such as persistence and self-regulation (Grolnick et al., 2019). Such environments also nurture empathy perspective-taking, and attachment security, contributing to children's well-being across developmental stages (Aðalbjarnardóttir, 2019; Ainsworth et al., 1978/2015).

While much attention has focused on how parents should interact with their children to best support development and well-being (McDermott, 2018), it is equally important to consider the internal capacities parents need to understand, engage, and respond effectively (Blum & Ribner, 2022). Fonagy et al. (2002) argue that sensitive, responsive parenting involves attunement to the child's subjective experience and developmentally appropriate dialogue that reflects and expands on the child's mental, emotional and motivational states. Autonomy-supportive parenting, in turn, requires continuous executive functions like cognitive flexibility, inhibitory control, and goal-directed problem-solving (Zelazo et al., 2018).

Parents' capacity to reflect on their own and their child's internal experiences is a key determinant of their quality of interaction, caregiving, and attachment (Ordway et al., 2015; Stuhmann et al., 2022). Considerations of internal experiences, such as emotions, perceptions, and intentions, are described in the literature as mentalizing (Fonagy et al., 2002), parental reflective functioning (Slade, 2005), or mindsight (Siegel, 2001). These conceptualizations emphasize parents' ability to hold their own and their child's internal states in mind and to contemplate them when interpreting and responding to their child's behavior (Stuhmann et al., 2022).

Parental attunement requires self-regulation, self-awareness, perspective-taking, and cognitive flexibility (Siegel & Drulis, 2023). Central to these skills is self-efficacy, belief in one's ability to learn, solve problems, and take effective action, which shapes motivation, persistence, and agency (Schunk, 2014). Parental self-efficacy, defined by Jones and Prinz (2005) as parents' belief in their ability to carry out parenting tasks, functions as a regulatory mechanism influencing parenting behaviors, persistence, and children's developmental outcomes. Higher levels are associated with more sensitive, responsive

parenting, while lower levels are linked to less supportive parenting practices (Albanese et al., 2019; Glatz et al., 2024).

Parental reflective functioning, self-regulation, and self-efficacy are complex intrapersonal skills that vary across individuals and are challenging to sustain even under ideal circumstances (Fonagy et al., 2002; Glatz et al., 2024). Parenting, however, occurs under stressful conditions that test even the most focused parent (Crnic & Coburn, 2019). It can be an overwhelming responsibility, shaped by emotional, relational, societal, and environmental influences (Fang et al., 2024; Rusu et al., 2025). Parents must remain regulated while managing their children's dysregulation and balancing their own and their child's needs, emotions, and goals. In Iceland, parents frequently navigate multiple life stressors alongside societal pressures (Hjálmsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2019) to meet idealized standards of parenting (Auðardóttir & Rúðólfsdóttir, 2021), which significantly shape their experience. Professionals working with children and families also observe these stressors (Helgadóttir & Ingudóttir, 2021; Valgeirsdóttir et al., 2022). Parents bring personal histories, including generational trauma, which influence not only how they see themselves and live their lives but also how they see their child and the parent-child relationship (Belsky et al., 2020; Jensen et al., 2021). Together, these factors create conditions that undermine the self-regulation and executive functioning required for sensitive, responsive and autonomy-supportive parenting (Crandall et al., 2015).

Parenting stress is linked to insensitivity, unresponsiveness, and intrusion, which negatively affect children's development and behavior (Ward & Lee, 2020). When parents become dysregulated, executive functioning may be impaired, leading them to respond reactively, drawing on prior experiences, expectations, or habits, rather than attuning to the present circumstance or applying new knowledge about child development or parenting techniques (Zelazo et al., 2018).

Developmental perspectives on parent learning

Given the complexity of contemporary family life, effective parenting requires more than information about child development or behavior management. Parent education must also strengthen parents' capacity to think, reflect, and adapt in stressful and changing circumstances (McDermott, 2018). Over the past two decades, parent education has increasingly emphasized self-reflection and perspective-taking as ways to enhance parents' ability to read children's cues, understand their needs, and respond sensitively (Huynh et al., 2024).

Much of this work is grounded in research on parental cognition, the internal processes through which parents make sense of themselves, their children, and their relationships. Holden and Smith (2019) note that studying parental cognition reveals both the mental demands of parenting and how parents' thoughts shape behavior, child outcomes, and well-being. Several frameworks have been developed to conceptualize and assess this cognitive dimension.

One major line of research, Parental Reflective Functioning (PRF), examines parents' capacity to interpret behavior in terms of underlying mental states, thoughts, feelings, desires, and intentions (Slade, 2005; Stuhmann et al., 2022). Higher PRF is

linked to greater sensitivity and reduced distress (Borelli et al., 2023) and is grounded in attachment and mentalization theory (Ainsworth et al., 1978/2015; Fonagy et al., 2002). Mind-Mindedness (Lee et al., 2025) similarly captures how readily parents comment on or acknowledge their child's mental states but emphasizes observable behavior rather than internal reasoning.

A less frequently cited but conceptually rich framework is Newberger's (1980) levels of Parental Awareness (PA), derived from constructive-developmental theory. Drawing on Piaget (1965), Kohlberg (1969), and Selman (1980), PA outlines developmental progressions in how parents reason about themselves, their child, and their relationship. Perspectives range from egoistic, where the child is understood primarily through the parent's needs; conventional, where parents rely on social norms and external expectations; individualistic, where the child is recognized as a separate person with unique needs; and analytic, where parent and child are viewed as interdependent systems (Newberger, 1980). Unlike PRF or Mind-Mindedness, which capture momentary skill or commentary, PA reflects qualitative shifts in meaning-making. Growth can occur from any starting point and is shaped by experience and reflection, making PA a valuable framework for working with parents as developing adult learners (McDermott, 2018).

By reintroducing a developmental lens to complement skill-based models, PA contributes to current understandings of parental cognition by emphasizing how parents' reasoning structures evolve. This perspective highlights that supporting parents involves not only enhancing reflective capacity but also creating educational contexts that foster deeper transformations in how parents construct meaning to guide decision-making.

Reflective and transformative parent education

Building on the movement toward reflective parent education, programs such as Circle of Security (Hawkins et al., 2025), Minding the Baby (Slade et al., 2005), and Dialogical Family Guidance (Cavonius-Rintahaka et al., 2024), aim to help parents look beyond surface behaviors to consider children's internal experiences and needs. These interventions conceptualize learning primarily as a process of developing new insights, emotional capacities, and caregiving skills within an existing cognitive framework.

The Reflective Dialogue Parent Education Design (RDPED), was conceived as an educational model for transformative learning and conceptual change (Thomas, 1996). Thomas et al. (1992) designed a parent education approach applying principles of high-road transfer of learning (Perkins & Salomon, 1992) to support parents in navigating an increasingly complex world. RDPED views parent education as a context for cultivating the reorganization of parents' conceptual frameworks. Learning involves reconstructing ways of reasoning about children's behavior and relationships so understanding can be generalized and applied flexibly across diverse situations and developmental stages.

This approach draws on conceptual change theory (Strike & Posner, 1985) and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). Parents encounter cognitive and emotional dissonance, dissatisfaction with existing conceptions, and are indirectly guided toward broader, more flexible understandings. The learning design operationalizes these theories through methods such as:

- **Contrasted video cases:** Two scenarios of the same situation showing different interaction styles without labeling them as “right” or “wrong,” encouraging curiosity and comparison.
- **Facilitated reflective dialogue:** Guided conversations that scaffold examination of assumptions and support reconstruction of meaning.
- **Hourglass questioning:** A sequence of open-ended questions moving from description to abstraction and back to application, fostering metacognitive awareness.

These elements make reflection both a relational experience and a mechanism for conceptual and transformative learning. RDPED encourages parents to move beyond insight or empathy toward fundamentally altering how they reason about parenting, which Perkins and Salomon (1992) describe as high-road transfer, the mindful abstraction of principles that guide flexible adaptation. Within the contemporary landscape, RDPED thus stands out as a model of teaching for transformation, bridging adult learning and parent education to reshape parents’ conceptual frameworks and foster the reflective, adaptive reasoning needed for today’s complex family life.

RDPED integrates Parental Awareness (Newberger, 1980) and Parent–Child Interaction Quality (Thomas, 1996) as central frameworks for instructional design and outcome evaluation. The Parent–Child Interaction framework distinguishes between patterns that encourage children’s development, such as sensitivity, responsiveness, reciprocity, and support, and those that constrain it, including insensitivity, unresponsiveness, intrusiveness, and domination (Ainsworth et al., 1978/2015; McGovern, 1990). Early research found that RDPED’s structured use of reflective dialogue, contrasting video cases, and self-directed learning helps parents recognize how their perspectives shape interpretations of their child’s behavior and refine their understanding of their child’s needs, practices, and relationships (Thomas, 1996). Although systematic research remains limited, RDPED has gained interest among parent education professionals in the United States (Cline, 2023) and Iceland, underscoring its potential to promote conceptual growth alongside high-quality parent-child interaction. Its focus on deep features of interaction quality, rather than specific strategies, allows for contemporary adaptation and continuous evolution responsive to parents’ needs and challenges.

METHOD

To explore how RDPED supports parents in their parenting, data were collected with semi-structured interviews and written reflections from seven parents who participated in a course using RDPED.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Braun & Clarke 2013). A flyer advertising the course and the study, targeting parents of children aged 0–5 years, was posted online on the following social media sites, Facebook and Instagram. Of the 16 parents who initially enrolled, seven (six mothers and one father) attended all three sessions and were included in the final sample. To ensure anonymity, all participants were given female pseudonyms, as only one male took part: Birta, Elva, Sara, Lovisa,

Karen, Hanna and Alda. Participants were 24–34 years old, each had one or two children between 19 months and five years, and all had at least one child under four. Education levels ranged from secondary school completion to a master’s degree.

The study took place within a parent education course in Reykjavík, Iceland, where participants attended weekly two-hour sessions over three weeks. The course was facilitated by parent educators and graduate students trained in RDPED. Each session engaged participants in RDPED methods, including facilitated discussions with contrasting video cases of parents and children interacting using a specifically designed format of open-ended questions to support reflective dialogue. Participants also completed structured written reflections in a course booklet, collected at the end of the course, to further personalize learning and serve as data for the study.

Data were collected in two ways. 1) In each class, the participants answered in writing two open-ended reflective questions, one at the beginning and one at the end, in a course booklet, which was collected at the end of the course. 2) Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams three to five weeks after the course. The interviews lasted 40–100 minutes, were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The first author, a native Icelandic speaker with a degree in English, conducted the interviews in Icelandic and translated selected quotes into English.

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Written reflections and interview transcripts were first coded separately to capture the distinct temporal perspectives they offered, immediate reactions during the course and more reflective accounts several weeks later. In a subsequent stage, codes and themes from both datasets were compared and integrated, highlighting consistencies as well as shifts in participants’ perspectives over time.

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee for Public Higher Education Institutions. All procedures followed Act No. 90/2018 on Data Protection and the Processing of Personal Data. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. To ensure anonymity, all identifying information was altered, and gendered pronouns referring to children were replaced with the singular, gender-neutral “they”.

The second author discloses a potential conflict of interest as the manager of RDPED, but was not involved in course implementation, data collection, or analysis. The first and third authors, who had no financial or professional stake in RDPED, maintained full control over the research design, analysis, and interpretation of findings. Although both had received RDPED training, they were not involved in the facilitation of the parent education course evaluated in this study. The course was designed and delivered by three practitioners who completed RDPED training as part of their professional preparation in parent education. Their role was limited to course delivery and they were not involved in the research process. These measures safeguarded research integrity and minimized conflicts of interest.

FINDINGS

The findings of the study illuminate how RDPED supports parents in their parenting. Two themes were identified: 1) Enhanced parental self-awareness, and 2) Enhanced parental awareness of the child's perspective.

Enhanced parental self-awareness

The data indicated how participation in RDPED facilitated parents' enhanced self-awareness, enabling them to reflect more clearly on what they were doing well and what they wanted to do differently. As one of the parents recounted: "I noticed how I started [during the course] to reflect on myself ... and ... think about how I want to do more of this or less of that or better regarding something else" (Karen). Aligned with that is the theme: Enhanced parental self-awareness, which includes two subthemes: a) Parents described more self-efficacy and awareness of what they were doing well, and b) Parents described more awareness of what they wanted to do differently.

Parents described more self-efficacy and awareness of what they were doing well

The data suggests that engaging in RDPED during the course supported parents in becoming more aware of what they were doing well. One parent realized that she was "not controlling" when interacting with her child, "especially during playtime ... they get to let their own imagination take the lead and they can challenge themselves as they wish, I'm happy with that" (Karen). One parent, Sara, realized that she was "patient" and "good at reading [her] child", as in understanding their needs. Another parent considered herself to be "good at talking" to her child to help them understand better what is going to happen or what to expect in a certain situation:

I'm always talking to them about how things are, what we are doing [and] I explain the situation [to them so it will be] easier for them to know what to expect and hopefully understand the limits that I'm setting (Hanna).

Some of the parents reported having doubts, before the course, about their "ability to be a good parent" (Elva). They associated this with the modern fast-paced society we live in, "with everything we need to do" (Lovisa), and the flow of information and opinions on parenting, which they found "overwhelming ... I sometimes feel like I'm doing something wrong" (Elva). They shared that they wished for more "time" (Hanna) with their child, and they could feel how stress "affects [their] patience and interaction with [their] child" (Elva). However, their reflections during the course helped them realize that they were on the right path in their parenting, and they began to reframe their self-perceptions. They said: "I think I'm alright as a parent" (Lovisa) and "I think I'm doing this [parenting] pretty well" (Hanna). One parent, Elva, realized that she is "not as bad a parent" as she sometimes fears and that she does in fact "know a lot [about how to be a good parent]". She explained how she felt like the course:

... reinforced what [she] was already thinking about [and it gave her more confidence and trust in her own abilities as a mother]: I have more confidence in what I'm doing ... I'm really doing something that isn't completely crazy ... I clearly have a [good] way I've started to follow.

Alda, another parent, said: “I’m more confident in ... where I’m going, because I was already reflecting on some of it before but not nearly as much. I’m on the right track by exploring this and that and changing what I can change”.

Parents described more awareness of what they wanted to do differently

The data also suggests that RDPED engagement during the course supported the parents in becoming more aware of what they wanted to change and do better or differently in their parenting. The parents said after the course that they wanted to “do better [as parents]” (Hanna) and that they realized “that something needs to change” (Lovisa). Alda was especially aware before the course, of how her own “very strict” upbringing has affected her as a mother. She shared that she wanted to become more aware of what is built into her frame of reference so she can notice it and “try to change it and do differently” with her own child. After the course she talked about how reflecting on herself during the course increased her self-awareness as a parent and that now she is better able to notice the things she wants to change.

One pattern of behavior the parents described wanting to change and do differently was how controlling they were when interacting with their child. Alda is a good example of that, as during the course, she realized how controlling she was, how she wanted to change, and managed to do it. When playing with her child she tended to control the play and show her child the “correct” way to play, by saying: “No, you’re supposed to put the blocks there”. She shared how this realization made her feel uncomfortable but after thoughtfully reflecting on her experience she was able to gain a new perspective: “Yes I do this, but I shouldn’t be doing it”. During the following week, she “tried to be careful not to show [her] child how to play ‘correctly’ and let them play like they wanted to play instead”. She shared a moment she had with her child where they were playing together and building a tower out of blocks for small balls to run through. Her child started putting the blocks where the balls were supposed to go, and she shared that she “almost stopped” her child to correct them, but she stopped herself instead and thought: “Just let them put the blocks there, what’s going to happen? [The blocks] will get stuck and then they’ll just realize that”. Alda shared that it occurred to her during the course how she has also been “too controlling” in other ways: “ ... everything has to be by my schedule”. She shared that her thinking has changed after the course, and she has learned how important it is to step back and “let your child be themselves ... and figure things out”. She added:

I’m their mom and it’s my job to manage this and that’ but that has now changed somehow and [I understand that] I don’t necessarily have to control everything [and] if they want to play with a spoon then they can play with a spoon, even though it’s not a toy [and] put on the black socks [instead of] the red socks.

Another matter the parents reported wanting to approach differently was how they respond to their child. During the course, the parents became more aware of how their actions and the way they respond affect their children in various ways. They said they wanted “to have more patience” with their child (Lovisa), reduce “conflict” between themselves and their child (Alda), and that they wanted “to be calmer” (Lovisa). They

also wanted to be better at “noticing [their] child’s cues about what they want or need” (Birta), at figuring out how to respond accordingly so they can be “better at meeting [their] child’s needs” (Elva), and better at “distinguishing between needs and wants” (Birta). Karen is a good example of a parent that became more aware of how her responses influenced her child, what she wanted to do differently and how she managed to change it. She became more aware of how her mental state can affect her patience and her ability to be responsive and meet her child’s needs properly: “Sometimes, I’m just so tired in the evenings ... I can feel that I’m not meeting them the way I want to”. She shared, during the course, that her toddler was “going through a challenging period” that “tests [her] patience even more” and that she decided to be more careful of how she responds to her child, especially when she’s tired or not feeling up to dealing with challenging situations:

I’m going to take a moment to think before I start talking because you don’t always have to give an answer right away ... you’re allowed to process [and] even if you’re not feeling up to it, you can try to breathe through it.... Over the past week, I have been trying to remind myself that things can’t always go smoothly and that I can’t always be at my best ... [and] to take a moment to breathe.

Moreover, the parents described wanting to be better at setting effective limits and boundaries for their children. They realized during the course “how important it is to set clear limits” for their child (Hanna), and that they need to be “more self-consistent” when setting limits (Elva) and “clearer about the limits” they are setting (Sara) so their child can have “a better sense of security” (Elva). Elva is an example of a parent that shifted her way of setting limits after having reflected on her approach during the course. She realized that her own “insecurity and inability to set boundaries with other people” affects her as a parent and her ability to set effective limits and boundaries for her child. She shared that she found her young toddler’s “assertiveness” and “insistence” to be difficult to handle and she felt like she was “too soft” with them. She wanted to be better at following through with her limits, “to do this in a gentle way” but also “be firm and set the limit” and not back out or give in. After the course, she said she has been “trying to be more consistent” and “trying to get into the habit of talking through things” with her child and explain to them what is going to happen. She shared an example of an interaction with her child when they want to go outside and play but don’t want to get dressed. Before, she used to ask her child to get dressed and wait for them to come to her and comply with her request on their own. After the course she shared:

... now I sort of ... stop them gently and I say ‘now we are going to do this, and you are going to sit here with me ... and we are going to put your coat on, and then we can go [to the playground]’

The data suggests that the parents became more aware of what they were doing well as well as what they wanted to change and do differently after reflecting on themselves as parents during the course. Some of them even reported that they had managed to adapt their parenting in line with what they wanted to change, as seen in the examples of Alda, Karen and Elva.

Enhanced parental awareness of the child's perspective

The data suggests that engaging in RDPED throughout the course facilitated enhanced parental awareness of their child's perspective. A central element of RDPED is reflecting on children's emotions (feelings) and intentions (goals) during parent-child interactions, and this ongoing practice appeared to help parents better understand what their child is feeling, attempting to do, or hoping to achieve. This was indicated by the way parents described their child's behavior in terms of underlying feelings and intentions.

It is important to note that before the course, the parents differently described their ability to see things from their child's perspective. Thinking reflectively about their child's perspective seemed to be easy for some of the parents, who said they were used to this kind of thinking before participating in the course. They said they could "easily see things from their child's perspective" (Sara) and they often think about "how [their child] experiences the world" (Elva). Karen said that she always thinks about what her child is "hoping to achieve" and if that doesn't work out for them, she can "easily understand that ... [it] really sucks ... for them". Others were not as used to thinking reflectively about their child's perspective before the course and they said they often found it "difficult" (Alda) to see things from their child's perspective. In the beginning of the course, Lovisa described her two young children as "disobedient" and said:

Sometimes I just don't understand ... what they want from me.... I understand that they are upset but I don't understand the [emotional] reaction, I think it's a bit intense.

Despite initial differences in reflective thinking, engaging in perspective-taking throughout the course appeared to expand this ability and enhance all parents' understanding of their child.

Parents reported becoming more aware of their child's feelings and emotions during the course. Karen, who described herself as a "deeply reflective" parent, said that even though she has always been "incredibly aware" of all moments with her young toddler and "trying to understand their feelings" she became even more aware of these during the course, and she found it helpful to be reminded of how important it is to be aware of her child's feelings and emotions. Other parents, who were not as experienced in reflecting on their child's feelings and emotions, shared that since the course, they were better able "to think about how [their child] is feeling ... [and] what might be causing those feelings" (Hanna). They said that they understood better:

... how difficult it can really be for [their] children to go through their emotions and everything that comes with them (Hanna) [and that their children's inability to control their emotions is often the reason for difficult behavior].

The parents said that reflecting on why their child is behaving in a certain way has helped them "think about things on a deeper level" (Alda) than before and to "think more about what's behind it" (Birta) when their children have difficulty controlling their emotions and "throw a fit" (Sara). They shared how they had started noticing more, after the course, how their children were expressing themselves and what they were trying to tell them rather than seeing their behavior as manipulative or as a mere "tantrum" (Alda). Lovisa

shared a moment, during the course, that happened at a store where her son “went crazy” and she could not calm him down. After reflecting on that moment during the course, she said she realized that she had taken a straw from his hands, which he didn’t like, and a different perspective from her own helped her understand that “he was probably tired and overstimulated” which had triggered the emotional outburst. She said she had realized that she needs to “try and understand better how [her child] is feeling and get on the same wavelength as them so the interaction can be more successful and enjoyable”. She wanted to be more sensitive to her young toddler’s feelings during an emotional outburst and more able to show them understanding regarding those feelings. Alda also shared a story about a meltdown her child had after a long day at daycare:

They kept screaming non-stop [and before the course] I would have thought it was just some temper tantrum ... but I started trying to figure it out ... the reason for their meltdown ... instead of telling them to just stop screaming.

After reflecting on why her child was having a meltdown, she said she realized that her child was feeling “irritated because they’re teething”. She responded by putting a soothing gel on her child’s gums to help them feel better, which shows how she started to better understand her child’s feelings and was able to look beyond the behavior and respond in a sensitive way.

The parents also reported becoming more aware of their child’s intentions and growing sense of independence. Reflecting on their child’s intentions or goals during the course contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the child’s behavior and need for autonomy. It reminded them that their young toddlers simply “want to do everything themselves” (Birta), that they want to be “super independent” (Elva), and how important it is “to let them do things by themselves ... [and] have control over something” (Hanna). Since the course they have been trying to “find the balance by letting them control some things, but not everything” (Elva) and “letting them have their own opinions” (Hanna). One parent, Birta, shared an experience where reflecting on her toddler’s goal helped her make sense of the repeated “spoon hitting” during mealtime:

I think it helped a lot to think about what their goal is when they hit or try to grab the spoon. [I realized that] they just want to do it themselves instead of being fed by us. It looked like they were hitting the spoon [out of our hand] but really, they were just trying to grab it because they wanted to do it themselves.

As the parents reflected on their child’s perspective and behavior during the course, they described becoming more aware of how important it is to understand their child’s goals when establishing limits and boundaries. The parents talked about being “really aware of what [their child] wants ... now” (Elva) since the course. They said that “instead of only figuring out *what* [their child] wants ... they have been trying to understand *why* they want it” as well (Birta) and “observing *what* [their child] was doing and trying to understand *why* they were doing it” (Hanna). One parent, Birta, elaborated and said:

[By attempting to understand my child’s goal] it’s easier ... to set limits [because that way I can] try to understand what [my child] is thinking [and understand if my child’s] goal is to

play or ... throw this on the floor [and] explain [the limit to them and] figure out how to steer [their reaction] in the right direction [when they get upset].

Reflecting on their child's goal thus increased the parents' understanding of how a child's goal sometimes conflicts with the parents' goal. They said they found it "really challenging" (Alda) when their child has "a specific goal and [the parent has] a specific goal [that] just collide" (Elva) like "bumping heads" (Alda) and their child gets "furious" (Lovisa) and "screams and hits" (Alda). During and after the course, the parents started considering how they could "reconcile both goals" (Birta) and trying more to see things from their child's perspective instead of trying to "change" their perspective (Hanna) and give their children what they want while also setting limits and boundaries.

The findings indicate that despite initial differences in reflective thinking before the course, engagement with RDPED enabled parents to recognize the value of understanding their children's feelings and interpreting their goals when establishing limits and boundaries, contributing to a more responsive and autonomy-supportive approach.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how the Reflective Dialogue Parent Education Design (RDPED) supports parents in their role. Findings provide insight into parents' experience in a parent education course using RDPED, showing that participation enhanced parents' self-awareness and sense of self-efficacy, enabling them to recognize both what they were already doing well and what they wished to change. Some reported successfully adjusting their parenting in line with these intentions. Parents also described greater awareness of their child's internal experience, feelings, needs, and intentions. This awareness helped them interpret and respond to their child's behavior with more sensitivity, responsiveness, and autonomy support. These findings align with the aims and earlier outcomes of RDPED reported by Thomas (1996), suggesting that Parental Awareness (PA) and Parent-Child Interaction Quality are related, and that greater PA facilitates more sensitive, responsive, and autonomy-supportive interaction.

An intriguing finding was the emergence of enhanced parental self-efficacy. Parents noted recognition of what they were already doing well that aligned with the kind of parent they wanted to be. While prior research on RDPED has focused on measuring parental growth through changes in PA and Parent-Child Interaction Quality (Thomas, 1996), the current study suggests that self-efficacy may also be an important mechanism linking these constructs. To our knowledge, research has not specifically examined the relationship between self-efficacy and PA. However, studies increasingly connect parental self-efficacy, reflective functioning, and the quality of parent-child interaction (Albanese et al., 2019). Self-efficacy and higher levels of PA are also believed to foster greater flexibility and complex thinking (Newberger, 1987). In this study, for example, parents described reflecting on and navigating seemingly conflicting goals of themselves and their children. Given the limited sample size in this study, these findings are exploratory but suggest a relationship worthy of examination.

The awareness of greater self-efficacy reported by parents holds implications, not only for RDPEd, but for all parent education and support. While parent education has traditionally emphasized providing new knowledge and skills, it has more recently shifted toward reflection, self-awareness, and empowerment (Huynh et al., 2024). This study showed that parents possessed capacities they had not previously recognized. Given the high levels of pressure and stress parents report today (Fang et al., 2024; Hjálmsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2019), these findings contribute to scholarship on parental well-being by showing how parents can be supported in recognizing and building on existing strengths and capacities. This provided a grounding for parents that opened them up to new perspectives where change could serve both themselves and their children. This was self-directed in nature, which aligns with what we know in working with parents as adult learners (McDermott, 2018; Mezirow, 1991).

The study's findings highlight the interplay between reflective functioning, parental awareness, and autonomy-supportive parenting. Parents' growing capacity to reflect on both their own and their child's goals aligns with reflective functioning frameworks (Stuhrmann et al., 2022) and facilitates more empathetic limit-setting and responsive guidance. Recognizing children's underlying motivations encouraged autonomy-supportive parenting and reinforced parental self-efficacy (Grolnick et al., 2019). Parents' ability to move from observing behavior to interpreting underlying feelings and intentions reflects the cognitive flexibility required for autonomy-supportive parenting and represents an internalization of reflective skills (Zelazo et al., 2018) thus identifying with higher levels of PA (Newberger, 1980). These shifts support healthy parent-child interaction and are likely to contribute to long-term positive developmental outcomes for children, including emotional self-regulation and executive functioning (Joussemet & Mageu, 2023).

The findings also suggest that fostering parental awareness and reflective functioning can interrupt unhelpful intergenerational patterns and enhance relational capacities (Fonagy et al., 2002; Jensen, et al., 2021). Parents' efforts to move away from controlling behaviors and toward greater autonomy support suggest a deeper understanding of their child's intentions and needs, facilitating autonomy-supportive interactions linked to secure attachment and social-emotional development (Ainsworth et al., 1978/2015; Slade, 2005). Parents' reflections resulted in becoming more attuned to the effects of inconsistent limits on children's stress and insecurity, underscoring the developmental importance of predictability, emotional safety and responsive structure in parent-child relationships (Baumrind, 1971; Wagner et al., 2025). These shifts illustrate how parents can apply reflective insights to adjust behaviors in ways that promote both child well-being and positive parent-child relationships.

Self-efficacy, self-awareness, and perspective-taking were all supported through participation in RDPEd. Research has become increasingly clear about how essential these components are for strong, healthy relationships in parenting, and beyond (Siegel & Drulis, 2023). Parents also vary widely in the kinds of experiences that support and distort the development of such skills. These capacities are challenged within the complex role of attuned, autonomy-supportive parenting (Grolnick et al., 2019; Joussemet & Mageu, 2023).

This underscores the importance of focusing on parents' perspectives about themselves and their children's experiences and behavior. RDPED provides a structured, yet parent-directed, space for transformative learning. Through reflective dialogue, contrasted video cases, and self-directed inquiry, parents are guided to explore their own perspectives while constructing new understandings of their children's needs and behavior (Cline, 2023; Thomas et al., 2005). The approach cultivates reflective capacities by balancing facilitation with learner autonomy where facilitators scaffold reflection without prescribing solutions, allowing parents to lead their own meaning-making and take ownership of their learning. This supports high-road transfer of learning, as parents integrate prior experiences with new insights, creating flexible and generalizable strategies for future parenting situations (Perkins & Salomon, 1992). By emphasizing PA and PRF, parent education may also prepare parents to be more open and receptive to new knowledge and skills relevant to themselves and their unique child (Holden & Smith, 2019; Slade, 2005).

Several strengths and limitations should be acknowledged. A notable strength is the study's pioneering focus on RDPED, the first investigation in decades and the first outside the USA. The course in this study comprised only three sessions, but nevertheless yielded meaningful reflections and growth as parents began to reflect more deeply on their parenting and became increasingly aware of their own perspectives. While short interventions can provide valuable insights and initial momentum, future research should examine whether longer-term or repeated formats support more enduring transformation. Although the sample size was only seven parents, one father and six mothers, the qualitative design enabled in-depth exploration of their experience and yielded valuable insights into parents' perspectives. The gender imbalance reflects broader trends in parent education and underscores the importance of including a more diverse parent population in future research. Although this study did not systematically evaluate Newberger's levels of Parental Awareness, future research should further explore how PA can be fostered in practice and translated into meaningful changes in parenting and family relationships.

Overall, this study shows that RDPED fosters parent development through enhanced self-awareness, reflective functioning, and self-efficacy, supporting more sensitive, responsive, and autonomy-supportive parent-child interaction. These findings extend the limited empirical literature on RDPED and affirm its relevance in contemporary parent education. They also offer insights for parent education programs, professional training, and family support policy on how best to support parents in their role.

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