RESILIENCE IN CHILDREN EXPERIENCING VOLUNTARY PARENTAL ABSENCE

By

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Magister Artium

in the

Faculty of Health Sciences at the

Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University

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December 2009
DECLARATION

I, Gudveig Kana, hereby declare that this submission is my own work, and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for any other Degree or Diploma of the University or other institutes of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement has been made in the text.

_________________________________

_________________________________

Date
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge and express my appreciation to the following people who have contributed to the successful completion of this study:

- To my loving husband and daughter for so patiently allowing me to work when necessary. You inspire me to work and study, you believe in my potential, and it keeps me going! To my family back in Norway; thank you for your support in so many ways, and for letting me go so far out of the nest.
- Veonna Goliath: You have been a great supervisor! Thank you for supporting me and guiding me. You have continually encouraged me throughout my studies, and my interest in Clinical Social Work is largely thanks to you!
- My co-supervisor; Dr Blanche Pretorius, thank you for your contribution to this study. Thank you for believing in me and pushing my potential.
- To my participants: You are the most important part of this research. Your lives reflect struggling and disappointment, but you don’t give up! Your understanding of this world is truly amazing; the way that you make sense of your environment is so special. Thank you for opening up and telling me about your lives.
- Thank you to the school; to the principal, HOD, teachers and others involved, for your time and willingness to participate in this study. Thank you for allowing me to make use of your learners.
- Mariana Lourens: Thank you for your time spent being my independent coder.
- To my friend and editor, Ingrid Ahlfeldt. You inspire me to be constantly passionate in my studies and work, to be the hands and feet for God.
- To Kate Goldstone; thank you for your hard work as an editor!
- To my Lord for giving me strength and courage throughout this process. I thank you that throughout my studies I have had your constant grace over me. Show me how to love as you have loved me; break my heart for what breaks yours.
ABSTRACT

The South African White Paper for Social Welfare (1997:58) acknowledges the importance to children of living in a secure and nurturing family. Nevertheless, many families are unable to fulfil their parenting roles as a result of the increasing pressures in society. One of these pressures concerns the employment of parents. There is an increasing tendency for people to relocate to bigger cities where there are more job opportunities. This then results in many children being left in the care of grandparents or other relatives while the biological parents pursue job opportunities in other cities. The aim of this study was to enhance an understanding of children’s experiences of these voluntary parental absences and the factors that contribute to their resilience during this process. A qualitative, explorative, descriptive and contextual design was employed and seven primary school children (10-12 years) from Port Elizabeth participated in semi-structured interviews including drawings. Trustworthiness was ensured and data analysis was conducted by using Tesch’s model (in Creswell, 1998). Four themes were derived from the study: Children’s perception of a family, where the participants defined family according to characteristics of (amongst others) care and love; Children’s experiences of living with a substitute family, where there was a process of detachment from biological parents, attachment to the substitute family and present experiences in the new family; Resilience in children, where the participants revealed their ways of coping; and, lastly, Suggestions from the participants on how other children in the same situation could cope.

Key words: resilience, attachment, voluntary parental absence, substitute family care, family
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER 1: OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH STUDY</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2. Background</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3. Problem statement</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4. Research objectives</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5. Concept clarification</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6. Paradigmatic perspective</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6.1 Attachment</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6.2 Resilience</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7. Research design and methods</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7.1. Research design</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7.2. Research methods</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8. Trustworthiness</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.9. Ethical considerations</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.10. Chapter division</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.11. Chapter summary</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Introduction</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Research goal and objectives</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Research design and methodology</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.1 Research design</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.1.1 Qualitative research</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.1.2 Explorative design</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.1.3 Descriptive design</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.1.4 Contextual design</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.2 Research methodology</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.2.1 Researcher’s background</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 3: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND LITERATURE CONTROL

3.1. Introduction

3.2 Biographical description of the sample

3.3 THEME 1: Children’s perceptions of what a family is

3.3.1 Structure of the family

3.3.2 A family provides care

3.3.2.1 A family provides physical care

3.3.2.2 Emotional care creates safety

3.3.2.3 A family provides financial care

3.3.3 A family demonstrates and communicates love

3.3.3.1 A family is available

3.3.3.2 A family creates and shows trust

3.3.4 A family provides guidance

3.3.4.1 A family prepares the child for purpose in life

3.3.4.2 A family teaches values
3.3.4.3 A family provides discipline as a form of guidance

3.3.5 The family facilitates access to education
  3.3.5.1 Family’s choice of school based on perceived quality of education

3.4 THEME 2: Children’s experience of living with a substitute family
  3.4.1 Experiences of the early days in the substitute family
    3.4.1.1 Experiences of detachment from biological parents
    3.4.1.2 Feelings associated with the move
  3.4.2 Adjustment within the substitute family
    3.4.2.1 Assistance from the substitute family
    3.4.2.2 Participants found it difficult adjusting
  3.4.3 Present experiences of the substitute family
    3.4.3.1 Experience of being settled
    3.4.3.2 The children miss their biological family, and are not so settled
    3.4.3.3 Substitute parents allow contact with biological family
    3.4.3.4 Experience of peers

3.5 THEME 3: Factors enhancing resilience in children
  3.5.1 Feeling a part of the substitute family enhances resilience
  3.5.2 Finding meaning in the situation enhances resilience
    3.5.2.1 Religion, spirituality and church
  3.5.3 Knowledge that the biological parents love the child enhances resilience
  3.5.4 Maintaining contact with biological parent enhances resilience
  3.5.5 The ability to cry and mourn enhances resilience
  3.5.6 People and activities that distract the child from longing enhance resilience
  3.5.7 Focusing on the present enhances resilience
  3.5.8 Support network and connectedness as resilience factors
    3.5.8.1 Substitute family as support
    3.5.8.2 External family as support
    3.5.8.3 Friends as support

3.6 THEME 4: Suggestions from participants

3.7 Chapter Conclusion
CHAPTER 4: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Introduction 88
4.2 Summary of research design and methodology 88
  4.2.1 Sampling 89
  4.2.2 Data collection 89
  4.2.3 Data analysis 89
4.2.4 Ensuring trustworthiness 90
4.3 Summary of the research findings 90
  4.3.1 THEME 1: Children’s perception of what a family is 90
  4.3.2 THEME 2: Children’s experiences of living with a substitute family 91
  4.3.3 THEME 3: Factors enhancing resilience in children 93
  4.3.4 THEME 4: Suggestions from the participants 95
4.4 Conclusions 95
4.5 Limitations of the study 96
4.6 Recommendations 96
  4.6.1 Recommendations for practice 96
    4.6.1.1 Recommendations for schools and educators 97
    4.6.1.2 Recommendations for Social Workers and other practitioners 97
  4.6.2 Recommendations for policy and awareness 98
  4.6.3 Recommendations for further research 98
4.7 Concluding remarks 99

Reference list 101
Addenda 113
  Addendum A: Questions for semi-structured interviews 114
  Addenda B-J: Letters 115
  Addendum K: The participants’ drawings of their families 132
LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1: Measures used to ensure trustworthiness  
Table 3.1: List of themes and subthemes  
Table 3.2: Biographical description of the participants
“Children are special people......Children are seen as an outward celebration of life, as the next generation and as the future of mankind”

(Greig, Taylor & MacKay, 2007:5)

1.1. Introduction

Children are indeed special people. We as adults often take them for granted, expecting them to know what we know, understand what we understand, and cope in the same ways as we cope. Children learn from us; however they also learn from their own experiences, and the sense that they make of those experiences is worth studying.

The children in this study have expressed, in their own words, their understanding and experience of living away from their parents on account of voluntary parental absence. Their experience of living with a substitute family, detaching from their biological parents and their ways of coping all show some aspects of their resilience as children.

1.2. Background

The South African White Paper of Social Welfare (1997:58) acknowledges the importance of children living in a secure and nurturing family. Nevertheless, it continues, that within South Africa there are many families that are unable to fulfil their parenting roles as a result of the increasing pressures in society. Economic factors, such as the inflation of the Rand and the unemployment rate, cause many parents to make the decision to leave their children in the care of others and seek employment elsewhere. Although the South African unemployment rate declined to 23% in 2007 as opposed to 25.5% in the previous year (Statistics South Africa, 2007), the Eastern Cape reflects a slightly higher unemployment rate of 25% (South African Government Information, 2007). This presents an optimistic view of other
cities being more prosperous, and becomes an influential factor when people seek employment. Other societal demands such as those posed by relationship problems and possible stigma in regard to single parenting can also hamper parents in fulfilling their parenting roles, and this may serve as justification for their decision to leave their children and their city.

The concept of the family has evolved over time, and its definition continues to change. Seemingly, it includes more and more diverse family structures. The former “normal” family structure, of two parents and their immediate biological offspring, commonly known as the “nuclear family” (Scupin & DeCorse, 2004:334), is today a rather more unusual phenomenon (Anderson, 2008). In defining the family, Carter and McGoldrick (1988:69) acknowledge that every family differs in its view of what constitutes a family. Walsh (1998:15) highlights the importance of not idealizing the nuclear family as the only healthy family. In fact, in 1998, the nuclear family was shown to constitute only 3% of American households (Walsh, 1998:28).

Many children grow up in single-parent families, step families, foster families, or with their grandparents. South Africa has a long history of children not living with their parents, due to poverty, migrant labour, educational opportunities, or cultural practice (Budlender, 2005). In South Africa AIDS orphans often face the fate of never growing up in a nuclear family. Many grandparents take care of their grandchildren in order to avoid the statutory care of these orphans (Sands & Goldberg-Glen, 2000:97). Some children even experience living with many different caregivers throughout their childhood (Budlender, 2005). According to Children’s Count published by the Children’s Institute (2005), 22% of children in South Africa lived without both parents in 2005. In the Eastern Cape over 30% of the children were living without either parent.

The phenomenon of biological parents leaving the home town where the child is being raised, for the preference of finding work in another town or city, is found to be one of the reasons for such a vast number of children living away from their parents. Children are either placed with their extended family members, such as grandparents, or are left to fend for themselves, as in child-headed households (Nesengani, 2006). Employment of the parent, most often the mother, forces the
parent to seek alternative care for their child at least during the day (Pungello & Kurtz-Costes, 2000:245). A decision to physically separate on a long term basis can be an especially difficult one. Carter and McGoldrick (1988:75) state that the fact that children are reared without their mother as their primary caregiver has been a norm in many societies. Migrant labour has been a major reason for family divisions. South Africa’s history of apartheid encouraged unskilled labourers from the rural areas to seek employment in bigger cities (Hughes, Hoyo & Puoane, 2006:434). This, together with new legislation, seems to have given rise to the present situation of professionals and skilled labourers pursuing work in other parts of the country (Wamala, 2001:111). The last-mentioned author states that it is mostly women and black skilled workers who are now in the forefront of migrant labourers. Furthermore, Wamala (2001:112) discusses the fact that an issue of loyalty between work and family creates a challenge for these workers, due to the long distances involved.

Grandparents have throughout history played an important role in child rearing (Gattai & Musatti, 1999:35). Studies have been conducted into the experiences of the grandparents in these situations. Sands and Goldberg-Glen (2000) investigated the stress factors of grandparents caring for their grandchildren. Bullock (2005) explored the grandfather’s experiences of care giving, and found that a feeling of powerlessness was common amongst these men. Glass and Huneycutt (2002:159) studied the difficulties of parenting grandchildren. As part of these difficulties, it was found that these grandparents often live in poorer households than the average, and they experience role confusion when becoming parents again. However, they found that amidst the difficulties, the grandparents had positive experiences too, such as a gratifying parenting job, resolved isolation, renewed purpose and excitement in life. In addition, they compared foster care with non-family members and family care, finding that family care offers significantly more comfort after the trauma of parental separation (Glass and Huneycutt (2002:159).

From the research reviewed above it becomes evident that many studies have been done on the impact grandchildren have on their grandparents when they are the primary caregivers. On the other hand, however, little research has been done on the children’s experiences of the same phenomenon. This study is therefore significant within this context, in that it focuses on the children’s very own
experiences. The children in this particular study are not necessarily living with their grandparents, but may be with other extended family members.

This study looks at the experiences of children whose biological parents are voluntarily absent due to occupational commitments in another town. If the child experiences this as abrupt, they are likely to develop a sense of loss and detachment. However, a definition of family can be diverse (Trost, 1990:441), and detachment from a caregiver has been shown to bring forth resilience, as found in a divorce study done by Hogan, Halpenny and Green (2002). This resilience is what helps the children go through childhood from strength to strength.

Article 12.1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) emphasises the rights of children to express their view of what concerns them. In South Africa this is implemented through section 6.0 of the National Youth Policy (National Youth Commission, 1997). Children’s experiences can only fully be understood through their own voices, and therefore this study has explored and described the factors of resilience through the meanings that children attach to their own situation.

1.3. Problem statement
The concept of the family (as well as the definition of a family) is constantly changing as society evolves. The idea of a family being constructed of parents and their children is not the norm. There are several instances where parents leave their children in other people’s care, in order to pursue employment or work promotion opportunities in other cities. These alternative caregivers are frequently grandparents or other extended family members. This parent-child separation has the potential of producing numerous behavioural, scholastic and relationship difficulties in children. However, it also has the potential of eliciting coping strategies on the part of the children, which strategies are in part also determined by the children’s experience of the voluntary parental absence and the alternative caregivers’ care. It is these aspects that this study has sought to explore.
1.4. Research objectives
The goal of the research was to enhance an understanding of children’s experiences of voluntary parental absence and the factors that contribute to their resilience during this process.

The objectives were as follows:
1. To explore and describe how children experience living without their parents owing to voluntary parental absence.
2. To explore and describe the factors that enhance the resilience in children who live with extended family members owing to voluntary parental absence.

1.5. Concept clarification
Family: The controversy surrounding the definition of a family was mentioned in Section 1.2. The definition of a family in this research study was taken to be what the participants themselves constructed, and Theme 1 in Chapter Three explores this widely. For the purposes of this study a family is considered to include the child, his/her biological parents, the alternative caregivers of the child, and anyone else the participant liked to include.

Alternative caregiver: Any extended family member who is the primary caregiver of the child at the time of this research. The caregiver would be a part of the substitute family in whose care the parent(s) left the child.

Attachment: The Oxford Compact Thesaurus (2005) explains attachment as a bond, closeness, devotion and loyalty. This research focuses directly on the bond between child and biological parents, and child and the alternative caregiver. See the discussion in Section 1.6.1 for further clarification of the concept.

Voluntary parental absence: for the purposes of this study the term is regarded as relating to the parents who are physically absent from their children on account of a personal decision to leave the child in the care of others in order to pursue employment in another town or city in South Africa.
Resilience: The ability to bounce back from a bad or difficult situation (Joseph, 1994:25). See Section 1.6.2 for further clarification.

Substitute family care: Care given to a child by a family member outside the immediate family of biological parents and siblings.

1.6. Paradigmatic perspective
Within the theoretical framework of this research, two main aspects will be explored, namely attachment and resilience. This study has taken the stance of a salutogenic rather than a pathological approach (Smith, 2006:22) to children’s experiences of voluntary parental absence.

1.6.1. Attachment
The attachment between mother and child is commonly associated with positive emotional, physical and psychological well-being in the child (Morris & Maisto, 2002:411). John Bowlby developed the attachment theory, which suggests that a child should experience a “warm, intimate and continuous relationship with his mother in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment” (Bowlby, 1953:13). This theory realized the powerful influence the child’s parents have on the child’s future development (Bowlby, 1988:120) and shows the importance of a parent-child relationship from the beginning of the child’s life. Attachment is vital in contributing towards the child’s capacity to form relationships, the development of trust and security, as well as the development of a sense of self and self-esteem (Booth & Koller, 1998:311). Attachment relationships are long lasting. Barnett and Vondra (1999:6) state that one attachment relationship cannot be replaced by another. Inconsistent availability of a parental figure can result in insecure attachment (Booth & Koller, 1998:312). This was termed “maternal deprivation” by Bowlby (1953:14).

Bowlby’s maternal deprivation hypothesis included two degrees of deprivation. If the child who is deprived of the mother is being looked after by someone known to him or her and whom he/she has already learned to trust, this gives the child satisfaction to the degree of calling the phenomenon “partial deprivation”, as opposed to “complete deprivation” (Bowlby, 1953:14). The latter degree of deprivation implies
that the child has not had the opportunity to form an attachment to any other caregiver by the time of maternal separation. The World Health Organisation (WHO) states that “[t]here is no evidence that biological mothers are more capable of caring for young children, apart from their role in breastfeeding, than fathers or other people who have a stable presence and are emotionally committed to the well-being of the child” (WHO, 2004:6). Grandparents might provide the empathic care needed, and may have been the primary care-giver from birth, although the parent is present.

Nevertheless, partial deprivation causes negative feelings, such as “anxiety, excessive need for love, powerful feelings of revenge, and arising from these: guilt and depression” (Bowlby, 1953:14). The findings of a review on caregiver-child interactions by the WHO coincide with those of the previous author, in that “interrupted child-caregiver interactions are found to increase anxiety, depressive disorders and behaviour problems” (WHO, 2004:39).

These intra-personal problems caused by detachment may be manifested through interpersonal and social difficulties. McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter and McWhirter (2004:39) assert that variable family patterns can enrich people’s lives, yet can also produce alienation, and rootlessness. The aforementioned authors (McWhirter et al., 2004:49) confirm a strong connection between parental inconsistency or an unstable home and youths’ antisocial behaviour and lack of social responsibility. Metzger’s (2008:132) study on resilience in kinship care reveals that children who have weakened attachment to their mothers, owing to little contact, lack confidence in themselves.

This research study focused on children between the ages of ten to twelve. As regards their developmental stage, Erik Erikson proposes that they are in the stage of industry versus inferiority, moving towards the next stage of identity versus role confusion (Santrock, 2004:395). Industry versus inferiority indicates the mastery of being a social being within society. At this stage peers and teachers play a big role for the children, together with their parents, as support systems. Their parents’ approval and positive modelling are vital in order to prepare for the teenage years, as well as to cope with the demands of their environment. When the child masters the cultural expectations, he will gain a sense of industriousness, a feeling of
completeness and satisfaction (Salkind, 1985:114). In order to attain these skills, the child needs good support systems in the home and at school. According to Piaget (Morris & Maisto, 2002:403), the participants were between the concrete operational and formal operational stage of cognitive development. During the concrete operational stage, children develop a greater sense of thought, and can understand someone else’s point of view. The formal operational stage sees the development of abstract thinking.

1.6.2. Resilience
The above review of attachment theory highlights the strong link between behaviour and psychological well-being in childhood, as well as self-image later in life. The question thus arises: What then makes children who are deprived of this important aspect of life able to cope with or move on effectively in life? Walsh (1998:3) considers that a shift in perspective from viewing distressed families as damaged to seeing them as challenged, and affirming their potential for repair and growth, is needed when looking at their resilience. Resilience is defined as the ability to bounce back from a bad or difficult situation (Joseph, 1994:25).

Fraser, Kirby and Smokowski (2004:13) discuss children’s reactions to adversity, where positive adaptations happen contrary to negative environments. The authors relate this to the concept of resilience. Joseph (1994:28) argues that resilience keeps a person functioning when confronted with life’s challenges. Four main pointers are identified in a resilient child. The resilient child takes a pro-active approach to problem-solving; the child is able to construe experiences in positive and constructive ways; the child is good natured, and easy to deal with; lastly, the child will develop a sense of coherence (Joseph, 1994:28). According to Antonovsky in Hawley and DeHaan (1996:286), a sense of coherence is dependent on the individual’s ability to feel confident that the outcome of a situation will turn out favourably. There are three components to a sense of coherence, namely comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness (Hawley & DeHaan, 1996:286).

One of the individual resilient factors is a social support network (Hawley & DeHaan, 1996:288). An individual is more likely to be resilient when brought up in a family that
portrays resilient characteristics. In fact, Metzger (2008:133) found that individuals living in kinship foster homes show stronger resilience factors than those living in non-kin foster families, linking this to the stable caretaking of the kin home.

Family resilience has been divided into two categories by McCubbin, McCubbin, Thompson, Han and Allen (1997). Firstly, there are family protective factors, which “shape the family’s ability to endure in the face of risk factors”, also seen as elasticity. Secondly, we find family recovery factors, which show the ability of a family to bounce back from a family crisis, also called buoyancy. Family coherence is also seen as an aspect of resilience, relating to family well-being, indicating that the families which are able to reframe problems as resolvable have a stronger sense of coherence (Hawley & DeHaan, 1996:287). In addition, resilient families are seen as “those with a high degree of flexibility and bonding” (Walsh, 1996:286). Hawley and DeHaan (1996:291) suggest that families are an important risk and protective factor for resilient individuals.

Walsh (1998:30) suggests that when looking at families and their resilience, family processes matter more than family form for effective functioning, in other words that it is more important to look at how the family deals with their unique situation rather than who is a part of the family.

Within a South African context, Smith (2006:164) found that in Xhosa families there are factors of resilience, in that they work together, through “trying and good times”. Family plays a significant role in a person’s life, and the connection between the members of a family becomes the solution to many of their problems. Social support, including extended family care, appears to be a great resilience factor amongst families (Kiel, Carson & Dykes, 2007:336).

As we can see in the above discussion, resilience is a personal or familial coping mechanism that is developed when faced with difficulties. Detachment can be one such difficulty, and the relationship between attachment and resilience could therefore be described by saying that detachment gives rise to resilience in individuals and families. For the purposes of the study, the focus has been on those
individual resilience factors which facilitate the children’s adjustment to their parents’ voluntary absence.

1.7. Research design and methods
The research design and methods will be briefly outlined in this section of the study. A more detailed discussion will be presented in Chapter Two of this study.

1.7.1. Research design
A research design is referred to as a “group of small, worked out formulas from which prospective researchers can select or develop one (or more) that may be suitable for their specific research goal” (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delport, 2005:268). This study has employed a qualitative, explorative, descriptive and contextual design, and has facilitated research into children’s experiences of and resilience during voluntary parental absence.

Qualitative research
The qualitative research approach allows us to “understand social life, and the meaning that people attach to everyday life” (De Vos et al., 2005:74). According to Davies (2007:10), qualitative methods involve an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world, where the researcher will attempt to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them, and in their natural environment. By using this methodology, I as the researcher explored the experiences of the children whose parents were voluntarily absent.

Explorative design
An exploratory design is used to explore relatively unknown areas in order to gain new insight and understanding (De Vos et al., 2005:106). A gap in research was identified relating to children’s experiences of and resilience during parental absence. I as the researcher was curious (De Vos et al., 2005:95) about the children’s experiences of this specific topic, and wanted to gain a greater understanding of the topic being studied. Combining the lack of research on the topic, as well as my curiosity, I selected the exploratory design.
Descriptive design
The descriptive nature of the design enables a researcher to obtain complete and accurate information about the phenomenon being studied. Babbie (2005:91) explains that the researcher observes and then describes what was observed. In this study, the participants described their experiences, and with the use of their remarks, this report provides a descriptive discussion of their experiences.

Contextual design
A contextual design involves situating the object of the study or the phenomenon under investigation within its immediate setting (Creswell, 1998:62). The participants were interviewed in their natural environment, in the setting of their school in Port Elizabeth. The participants were also easily accessible to the researcher. The context, in which the participants live and go to school, is considered as part of their life story (Kvale, 1996:44).

1.7.2. Research methods
Data collection was done through semi-structured interviews including drawings of the participants’ families. At the beginning of each interview I asked the participant to draw his/her family as a warm up exercise but also serving the purpose of entering into the child’s understanding of the family. The participant was asked to explain the drawing, and based on this, the interview continued. The primary value of the drawings was the meaning that the children themselves attached to their drawing and this report reflects this meaning. A pilot study served as a trial-run for the methods and research questions.

Once all the interviews had been conducted, data analysis was effected using Tesch’s (in Creswell, 1994:155) eight-point model of analysis. The services of an independent coder were used during this phase of the research.

1.8. Trustworthiness
Guba’s model in Krefting (1990) was used to ensure trustworthiness of the research. Guba identified four criteria for trustworthiness namely: truth-value, applicability, consistency and neutrality. Truth-value was ensured by using strategies of credibility;
applicability by using strategies of transferability; consistency by using strategies of dependability and neutrality by using strategies of conformability. These strategies will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two of this study.

1.9. Ethical considerations
The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) emphasises the importance of enabling children to express their opinion on matters concerning themselves. It is however important to pay attention to ethical considerations when conducting research with children.

Power differentiation
I guarded against modelling any power differentiation between myself and the participants, as this could obstruct the data gathering process. Informal language was applied, and my first name was used instead of the more authoritative surname used for teachers.

Assent and consent forms
As the children were minors, informed consent needed to be signed by their parents or legal guardians. A written assent form in child-friendly language was given to the children, and it was explained to them verbally, together with a letter of information.

Avoidance of harm
The participants were not exposed to any physical harm connected to this study, but I was aware that emotional harm could occur in the form of a traumatic experience being brought to the surface. For some of the participants, this study was the first opportunity they ever had to express their thoughts about this part of their life. During the interviews the participants were encouraged to talk, yet they were made aware of their choice to discontinue. After the interview some time was spent debriefing, and I was ready to refer them to appropriate counselling services should the need arise.
Anonymity and confidentiality
Teachers involved in the selection process of the participants were expected to maintain full confidentiality about the participants’ identifying details. I also handled any private information confidentially throughout the research process.

1.10. Chapter division
The division of chapters in this study is as follows:
Chapter 1: Overview of the Research Study
Chapter 2: Research Methodology
Chapter 3: Research Findings and Literature Review
Chapter 4: Recommendations, Limitations and Conclusions

1.11. Chapter summary
This chapter has given the reader an overview of the research presented. The background to the study and the problem formulation have been presented here, as well as a pragmatic perspective on the theories linked to the study. The research design and methodology were introduced and will be discussed in depth in the following chapter.
2.1. Introduction
Chapter One gave an overview of the study. This overview included the background to the study, as well as the problem statement, goals and objectives. The concepts of resilience and attachment were clarified and supported by literature, as the theoretical framework of the study. Chapter One also gave a brief description of the research design and methodology, which will be discussed in further detail in this chapter.

2.2. Research goal and objectives
This research had the following goal and objectives:

Goal:
The goal of the research was to enhance an understanding of children’s experiences of voluntary parental absence and the factors that contribute to their resilience during this process.

The objectives were as follows:
To explore and describe how children experience living without their parents owing to voluntary parental absence.
To explore and describe the factors that enhance the resilience in children who live with extended family members owing to voluntary parental absence.

2.3. Research design and methodology
The following section describes the research approach, with the accompanying methodological considerations taken into account during the study.
2.3.1. Research design
A research design is referred to as a “group of small, worked out formulas from which prospective researchers can select or develop one (or more) that may be suitable for their specific research goal” (De Vos et al., 2005:268). This study employed a qualitative, explorative, descriptive and contextual research design, and thus facilitated research into children’s experiences of and resilience during voluntary parental absence.

2.3.1.1. Qualitative research
The qualitative research approach aims to “provide an in-depth description and understanding of the human experience” (Lichtman, 2010:12). Its primary process is to assess and describe the perceptions that individuals hold regarding a specific phenomenon (Cozby, 1997:78). In other words, it focuses on a world in which “the experiences and perspectives of individuals are socially constructed” (Greig, Taylor & MacKay, 2007:136). According to Davies (2007:10), qualitative methods involve an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world, where the researcher will attempt to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

The qualitative research approach was adopted in this research for the following reasons:

- The two research questions of the study were: “How do children experience the voluntary absence of their parents?” and “What are the factors that enable children’s resilience during voluntary parental absence?”
  From the nature of these questions, a qualitative approach appeared to be most relevant. As a researcher I aimed to seek natural experiences as data for the study, not statistical data.

- Little, or no, research had been done previously on children’s experiences of voluntary parental absence, and these needed to be explored.

- As a researcher I wanted to make use of one-to-one interviews in order to gather in-depth information.

- The research focused on the experiences of the participants, within their natural settings. Each interview was conducted at the child’s school, where the participant felt a sense of belonging, while I was “the outsider”.
• The participants formulated their own meaning to their lives, and their very own natural language was used in order to reach an understanding of the topic.
• A personal, in-depth relationship with the participants was of importance in order to elicit the information. To achieve this I used a warm-up exercise (which was to ask the child to draw his or her family).
• The use of drawings and interviews with children served as a great source of qualitative data. The report is enriched by quotations of the children’s own words (Greig et al., 2007:138).

2.3.1.2. Explorative design
An exploratory design is frequently used to explore relatively unknown areas in order to gain new insight and understanding (De Vos et al., 2005:106). A gap in research was identified related to children’s experiences of and resilience during parental absence. Three purposes were identified for doing an exploratory study (Babbie, 2005:89):
1. To satisfy the researcher’s curiosity and desire for better understanding,
2. To test the feasibility of undertaking a more extensive study,
3. To develop methods to be employed in any subsequent study.

I was curious about the children’s experiences of this specific topic, and wanted to gain a greater understanding of it. The advantage of this design is that one is able to gain much insight, which is of particular relevance to this investigation as it is an under-researched area of study. It also provided rich data which can possibly pave the way for applied research to be carried out at a later stage.

2.3.1.3. Descriptive design
The descriptive nature of the design was intended to enable the researcher to obtain complete and accurate information about the phenomenon being studied. Babbie (2005:91) explains that the researcher observes and then describes what was observed. This study described rather than introduced or influenced predetermined variables. Quotations from the participants’ interviews have been included in the findings, as well as drawings elicited from the interviews, so that a rich description
may be provided to enable the readers to gain insight into the participants’ experiences.

### 2.3.1.4. Contextual design

A contextual design involves situating the object of the study or the phenomenon of a study within its immediate setting (Creswell, 1998:62). The participants were interviewed at their school which is considered a part of their natural environment where they feel comfortable. Furthermore since the meaning of the interviews is related to this context, I chose the school environment as it is essentially part of the participant’s life story (Kvale, 1996:44). A description of the school context follows.

The participants all went to the same school, a public, former model C school in Port Elizabeth with about 650 learners from grade R to grade 7. It was learnt through informal sources at the school that about 50% of these learners live without their biological parents for many different reasons. Some are orphans or have been placed in foster care, some were placed with their grandparents from a young age having been born out of wedlock, and some live with extended family members owing to voluntary parental absence. The children at the school come from various racial groups and socio-economic backgrounds. The children are therefore exposed to various family set-ups and family dynamics through their fellow school learners.

### 2.3.2. Research methodology

The research methodology sought to gain more knowledge of the specific topic. This supports the definition of Babbie (2005:6) that “epistemology is the science of knowing, methodology might be called the science of finding out”.

The “science of finding out” applicable to this story is presented here and it includes the following:

- Researcher’s background,
- the sampling procedure, including population and sampling,
- data collection methods, including communication techniques,
- the interviewing process, including the pilot interview, access to research site and the interview, as well as field notes, and
- data analysis.
2.3.2.1. Researcher’s background

The researcher, the “I” in this report, is Gudveig Kartveit Kana. I am a social worker with a passion for my work. I was born and grew up in Norway, with my family who all in some way or another modelled ways of enhancing the well-being of others. I met my husband in Durban; he is a Xhosa man with Zulu roots. We married according to traditional customs, both in Norway and in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. Being a foster parent to a girl of 10 years old, I have had the privilege of catching a glimpse of some children’s stories, their family set ups and their ways of coping. Many of my foster daughter’s friends do not live with their biological parents. Some live with grandparents, some with aunts and some with a single parent. Some of these friends were living with a substitute family owing to voluntary parental absence. One of the participants was my daughter’s special friend, a shy girl who seemed to have very low self-confidence. When she spoke about her mom she showed uncertainty and sadness. This participant was interviewed by my supervisor, Veonna Goliath, to ensure neutrality and confidentiality. The observations I made of all these children gave rise to this research. My curiosity regarding their lives was based on my experiences, as their experience was so unlike my nuclear family set-up as a child, yet in many ways had become a part of me through my foster daughter and her friends.

I am still intrigued by the coping mechanisms that these children manage to discover and employ. Their ways of making meaning of their life story amazes me. I wish to share with the reader the journey I embarked on in my quest to understand the meaning these children give to living without their biological parents and the factors that enhance their coping as a result of this experience.

2.3.2.2. Population

The population in a research study is the group of people whom one wants to draw conclusions from (Babbie, 2005:112). Similarly, Seaberg (1988) as cited in De Vos et al. (2005:193) defines population as “the total set from which the individuals or units of the study are chosen”. The population of the research was made up of children who had experienced voluntary parental absence owing to their biological parent working in another town or city in South Africa. The children all lived in the Nelson...
Mandela Metropole with extended family members, and were attending a school in Port Elizabeth.

2.3.2.3. Sampling
A non-probability purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants in the study, from the population. The participants were chosen as they “possess characteristics, roles, opinions, knowledge, ideas or experiences” (Gibson & Brown, 2009: 56) that were particularly relevant to this research study. Neuman (2006:222) further explains that participants are included on the basis of characteristics such as specific knowledge or experience related to the study. Advantages of this technique include the researcher being able to select unique cases that are especially informative (Neuman, 2006:222). In this research study children from different cultural backgrounds were eligible to participate. However, the participants that were selected by the school on the basis of the given criteria were all from one specific cultural background, namely African Xhosa children.

One school in the central area of Port Elizabeth was chosen to draw the sample, as this school has a multi-cultural aspect, and children from various socio-economic areas attend the school. As a researcher I therefore did not limit the sample by using the particular school. Seven participants were interviewed for this study.

The following were the selection criteria for the participants:
- English speaking boy or girl, between the ages of 10 and 12 years old. The participant had to be attending grade four to six at the selected primary school in the central area of Port Elizabeth. This age group was chosen as they are in the transition stage between childhood and adolescence (Piaget's stages of Cognitive Development theory cited in Morris and Maisto, 2002:403). They are now starting to think in abstract terms, and can therefore reason more. Their language is also more fluent than that of younger children, especially in the case of those who speak English as their second or even third language. This age group was also able to differentiate more between storytelling and real life situations than those younger than them. Their stories, during this life stage, have become “more complete” (Engel, 2005:203). Eriksson’s stage of industry versus inferiority agrees
with this, as it focuses on the greater mastery of society (Salkind, 1985:114), which demands more abstract thought.

- Either one or both parents had chosen to place the child in alternative care. The present primary caregiver was either the grandparent of the child, or a close family relative, such as an aunt or uncle. Furthermore, the child had lived in this caregiver’s home for at least six months.

- The parent of the child had made a voluntary decision to leave in order to seek employment in another part of the country. The contact between the parent and the child did not exceed more than one visit a month.

Seven children were interviewed, five of them female and two male. They were between the ages of ten and twelve years old. All the participants lived with grandparents, an aunt, or both as their substitute family.

**2.3.2.4. Data collection method**

The collection of data was done through interviews. Gillham (2000:2) pointed out that the aim of research interviews is “to obtain information and understanding of issues relevant to the general aims and specific questions of a research question”. Kvale (1996:1) describes the qualitative research interview as an attempt “to understand the world from the subjects’ point of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples’ experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanation”.

Data was collected using one-to-one semi-structured interviews, as described by Gibson and Brown (2009: 88), and was complemented with the use of drawings (Westcott & Littleton, 2005:147). De Vos et al. (2005:296) assert that the semi-structured interviewing method is used when the researcher aims to gain a detailed picture of the participants’ belief about the researched topic. The purpose of the study was to gain insight into the children’s experiences of their lives, where they are seen as the expert. The child’s own story of his/her life was valued, and before the interview commenced the participants were reminded of the expertise they have in their own life.
The use of drawings in the research was used firstly as a warm up exercise in order to facilitate rapport between participants and the researcher. A drawing pad was taken to each interview, and the participant was given one A4 sheet. There was a range of types of crayons to choose from, as well as colours. The child was asked to draw his or her family as he or she saw it. Some of the children were uncomfortable with the research setting where they were required to interact with an unfamiliar adult. The drawing exercise helped to relieve the tension and served to establish trust and openness, in the same way as Schroder (2005:15) does in initial therapy session with clients, where she uses art as a way of initiating a safe, trusting environment. Drawing skills were not highlighted at all, and the child could choose to stop whenever he or she wanted. Secondly, by the use of drawings, as a researcher I had a point of departure regarding the child’s perception of the concept of family (Greig et al., 2007:93). Images, here in the form of drawings, can provide a means to move beyond the verbal information in the interview, and can “provide a richer access to the people” (Gibson & Brown, 2009:81) being studied. This, according to Westcott and Littleton (2005:148), impacts on the “joint meaning making”, to ensure that the researcher and the participant have a similar understanding of a concept. Landgarten (1981:3) mentions that art can be used for “revealing unconscious material” whereby the researcher and child might both gain a greater understanding of the child’s experiences.

The primary value of the drawings was the meaning that the children themselves attached to their drawing. The following areas were explored to elicit the meaning that the child attached to the drawing: The positioning of the family members, the use of colours and a more general question, namely “Can you please tell me about your family from this drawing?”

Once the drawing had been made and discussed, the second part of the interview began. A small, pocket-sized audio recorder was used for the interviews. The semi-structured interview is defined by Kvale (1996:5) as “an interview whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena”. In order to gain this description the following questions were used in the interview to guide the researcher and participants:
• What is a family to you?
• What is important in a family?
• What is it like to live away from your mom or dad?
• What helps you when you miss your mom or dad?
  o Who helps you?
  o How does school help you, or the family you stay with?
  o What helps you within yourself?
• If you could change anything in your family what would that be?
• If you were to give children in your situation advice, what would that be?

The questions served as a base for the interview while, in addition, I made use of other skills discussed under communication techniques.

2.3.2.5. Communication techniques

To be a skilful research interviewer one needs to have effective communication skills. An interview is described as “literally an *inter view*, an inter change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest” (Kvale, 2005:2). Without conversation there is no interview. Kvale (2005:6) explains that an interview is a conversation with structure and a purpose.

The main techniques used in the research will be presented below:

• *Minimal verbal responses* - this is a way of showing the participant that the researcher is listening. Short verbal responses such as “mmmm, yes” give the participant encouragement to continue talking, together with nodding the head and leaning towards the participant.

• *Probing* - is a way of deepening the response to a question, which will increase the richness of the data. In this research questions were used such as: Can you tell me more about how that felt? Is there anything else you would like to say about that?

• *Clarifying* - is getting the participant to explain something that is unclear. This puts the participant in control, giving them the feeling that “they are telling you and helping you to understand” (Gillham, 2000:47). Examples of clarifying
questions that were used are: I don’t understand that. Can you explain to me a bit more? What do you mean when you say....?

- Reflective summary - is to give back what the participant has just said, in his or her words. Statements such as: “So you are saying that you were unhappy about that”, were used to reflect back to the participant. Reflection serves two purposes (Gillham, 2000:51);
  o To summarize the overt content which focuses the participant on the main theme of what was said, and encourages further exploration.
  o To indicate an awareness of the emotional state behind what has been said.

A summary serves to highlight key points as well as reach a sense of achievement during the interview.

In addition to these communication techniques used in research interviews, certain procedures were specifically important to follow when questioning children.

- Westcott and Littleton (2005:151) suggest that open-ended questions are vital for longer responses. Children are often reluctant to speak to unfamiliar adults, and it was found that open-ended questioning was one way of eliciting a story.
- Repeating questions should be avoided as with children this often elicits a change in response, as they are worried that their previous answer was wrong. Therefore, when clarifying during an interview the researcher needs to be aware of how the questions are structured.
- Interruptions from the researcher should be avoided, in order for the child to feel validated.
- Children’s language or terminology should not be taken for granted, and should therefore be clarified as this has an impact on the data gathered.

There were some participants who were not ready to talk openly about their experiences and although I made provision for countering this (through drawings and short pauses in the interview) this had to be accepted. Another limitation was that of the power differences between the child and I as the interviewer. As discussed
earlier, this was openly verbalized before the interview, so as to lessen the customary power difference between a child and an adult.

2.3.2.6. Pilot interview
Conducting a pilot study is “a dress rehearsal of the real thing” (Gillham, 2000:54). A pilot study was conducted in order to ensure the correct application of the interview questions. One of the participants was interviewed for the pilot study. During this pilot interview the following realisations emerged:

- That the drawing exercise was an effective tool for warming up, and it put the participant at ease and gave her confidence.
- The interview questions were effective, as they were understood by the participant and allowed for much narrative.
- The venue allocated for the initial interview was not conducive to developing trust as it was a room used by teachers and they interrupted the interview several times. After the pilot interview, arrangements were made for the after-care room to be available for future interviews.
- Employment of communication skills was effective, yet I still had to ensure more use of probing, and therefore noted this for the following interviews.
- The participant enjoyed the interview, and expressed appreciation for the interview and for the researcher raising the topic of voluntary parental absence.

2.3.2.7. Access to research site and the interview
The principal of the identified school was approached through a meeting and an information letter. He was asked to identify potential participants and contact parents for permission to disclose their details to me. Once the parents had agreed to give their information, they were contacted and sent a consent form covering permission to involve their child in the research. The participants were invited to an information session, where I went through the assent form and the procedure of the interview verbally, and gave them a written version to sign. During the interview I made use of a small tape recorder and there was also a drawing pad with extra paper in case this was needed. The participants could use
several mediums such as pencil crayons, kokis, “gems” and pastel crayons. A pencil sharpener was also added to the stationery.

The pilot interview served to test the equipment and the child’s comfort with the small user-friendly audio recorder. The venue used was chosen so that the participants could feel comfortable and at ease. The school which the participants attended was chosen as the venue and, after the pilot interview, an aftercare class room was used for the interviews. This classroom was available during the time of the interviews, and it was nicely secluded from other classrooms and other learners. The teachers indicated a preferred time for the interviews to take place, which was discussed with the participants.

After the interview a debriefing period took place, according to the individual participant’s needs. This would take between 5 and 15 minutes. The discussion and debriefing concerned sensitive topics that had arisen during the interview, and also everyday topics which would bring the participant back to a positive stance.

2.3.2.8. Field notes

After each interview, impressions of the interview process were captured in the form of field notes. According to De Vos et al. (2005:298), field notes assist researchers to remember and explore the process of the interview in a reflective manner. This was especially important when capturing the drawing techniques of the child, as well as the structure of the drawing. I used observational notes as well as personal notes to capture the impressions of the interview. The observational notes serve as an objective observation of the interview through watching and listening. It was important to capture the drawing exercise, in terms of the drawing style and the sequence in which characters and other objects were drawn. The participant’s change in responsiveness was also noted. The personal notes were a subjective journal of the researcher whose own thoughts, reflections and feelings were noted, and in this way an attempt was made to gain a better understanding of the participant’s experiences.
2.3.2.9. Data analysis

While the drawings done by the participants provided a rich description of the topic, it was decided not to analyse these pictures. The drawings are incorporated in Chapter Three where the children’s interpretations are described. The drawings are also attached as appendices. Data analysis was used with the transcribed interviews. The analysis was guided by the framework suggested by Tesch (in Creswell, 1994:155). Based on Tesch’s model, the data analysis was carried out as follows:

1. The researcher read through the transcripts carefully, and wrote down ideas.
2. One interview was chosen, and was read through thoroughly. The researcher wrote down thoughts regarding themes.
3. Step 2 was replicated with a few different interviews, and a list of topics emerged. Similar topics were clustered together. Topics were divided into major topics, unique topics and leftovers (themes, subthemes and categories).
4. In the data, topics were abbreviated as codes, and written next to the appropriate segments of the text. Some new categories and codes emerged.
5. The researcher had to find the most descriptive wording for the topics, made into categories. Groups were made to reduce the total list of categories.
6. A final decision was made on the abbreviations for each category. These codes were alphabetized.
7. The data belonging to each category were assembled in one form and preliminary analysis was performed.
8. As a final look through the data, existing data were re-coded when necessary.

An independent coder was used during data analysis. Between steps seven and eight, the information was discussed by the researcher and the independent coder. The findings based on the analysis were compared more with theory as opposed to previous research, as the topic of resilience is an under-researched topic.

2.4. Ensuring trustworthiness

As the rigour of the research study needed to be determined, it was necessary to employ verification steps to ensure trustworthiness. In the application of Guba’s
model (1981) as cited in Krefting (1990) four criteria were used to evaluate the trustworthiness of the research.

- **Credibility** refers to the truth-value of the research. Marshall and Rossmann (1995) as cited in De Vos et al. (2005:345) ask the following questions:
  - How credible are the particular findings of the study?
  - By what criteria can we judge them?

  Credibility is attained “from the discovery of human experiences as they are lived and perceived by informants” (Krefting, 1990:215). The strategies of peer examination and interviewing techniques were used. Using internal consistency in the interviews, that is, “when there is a logical rationale about the same topic in the same interview or observation” (Krefting, 1990:220), ensured truth-value in the interviewing technique.

- **Transferability** reflects whether the research findings can “fit into contexts outside the study situation determined by the degree of similarity” (Krefting, 1990:216). The question asked here by Marshall and Rossmann (1995) in De Vos et al. (2005:345) is the following:
  - How transferable and applicable are these findings to another setting or group of people?

  Transferability was ensured through the use of a nominated sample and a dense description.

- **Dependability** refers to whether the findings in the research could be replicated with the same subjects owing to their consistency. Marshall and Rossmann (1995) in De Vos et al. (2005:345) ask the question:
  - How can we be reasonably sure that the findings would be replicated if the study were conducted with the same participants in the same context?

  A dense description of methodology and peer examination served as dependability measures.
- **Confirmability** is a criterion of neutrality in qualitative research. Neutrality is the freedom from bias within the research. Marshall and Rossmann (1995) in De Vos et al. (2005:345) ask the following question regarding confirmability:
  
  o How can we be sure that the findings are reflective of the subjects and the inquiry itself, rather than a creation of the researcher’s biases or prejudices?

Evaluation was removed from the characteristics of the researcher, and is placed only on the information obtained itself (De Vos et al., 2005:347). A confirmability audit through an independent coder and triangulation of data-collection methods were used in this study. Furthermore, my research supervisor interviewed the single participant who was known to me.

The following table reflects the measures put in place in the research in order to ensure trustworthiness, as adapted from Krefting (1990:217):

Table 2.1: Measures used to ensure trustworthiness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion to ensure trustworthiness</th>
<th>Qualitative criterion</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Actions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Truth Value</td>
<td>Credibility</td>
<td>Peer examination</td>
<td>The supervisors of the study provided guidance as experienced qualitative researchers. The researcher and an independent coder reached consensus regarding themes from the data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicability</td>
<td>Transferability</td>
<td>Nominated sample</td>
<td>The researcher proposed clear sampling criteria (see section</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.3.2.2). Dense description

Information is provided of the sample group and the setting in which the research was conducted. The researcher used verbatim quotations from the participants in the research report and explanations of their drawings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consistency</th>
<th>Dependability</th>
<th>Dependability</th>
<th>During the process of research a clear description of methods of data gathering, analysis and interpretation was provided.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peer examination</td>
<td>The supervisor and co-supervisor of the study continually checked “the research plan and implementation” (Krefting, 1990:221).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neutrality</th>
<th>Confirmability</th>
<th>Confirmability Audit</th>
<th>The services of an independent coder were employed during data analysis.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Triangulation of data-collection methods</td>
<td>The use of drawings as well as questions during the interview served as triangulation of data sources. Included also are field notes from the researcher in which personal and observational notes were made after each interview.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.5. Ethical considerations

“Always treat persons as ends to themselves rather than as means to an end” Gregory (2003:46).

important, as they are the experts on their own lives. Research done with children is therefore of significance when seeking to understand children’s issues. In addition, it is important to pay attention to ethical considerations when researching children.

2.5.1. Power differentiation
The issue of power differentiation is probably the main consideration in research with children (Hill, 2005:63). Children are customarily made to see adults as authority figures, and many find it difficult to speak openly about their problems, or feel obliged to answer even when they are not comfortable. In this research it was important to make sure that the children were not pressurized in any way. I adopted an interpersonal style with the aim to reduce the children’s desire to please (Hill, 2005:63). I introduced myself by my the first name, as opposed to the more teacher-like surname title. Before the interview commenced the participant was told that he/she was the expert in his or her own life, and that the interview aimed to understand this life better. Informal, child-friendly language was used, and whenever the child showed discomfort in answering a question, this was recognised and I gauged whether the child would prefer to move on.

2.5.2. Assent and consent forms
"One idea above all others dominates talk about the ethics of research involving (live) human beings: fully informed voluntary consent" (Gregory, 2003:35).
Article 1 of the declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association 1996 in Smith 1999:174) states that “In the case of legal incompetence, informed consent should be obtained from the legal guardian in accordance with national legislation […] Whenever the minor child is in fact able to give informed consent, the minor’s consent must be obtained in addition to the consent of the minor guardian.” UNICEF (2002) as cited in Greig et al. (2007:174) reflects this when it is said that parental consent is not enough to cover the rights of the child. A child’s assent should also be obtained.

South Africa’s Children’s Act No 38 of 2005 defines a child as a person under 18 years of age. Children in this research study were therefore asked to give informed assent, after their parents’ informed consent. This did not only inform the participants, but also enhanced their sense of control (Hill, 2005:68). In order to
make the participation fully voluntary, it was made clear that the potential participant was not being forced by anyone to take part in the research. The researcher also did not disclose any incentives before the interviews, nor during the interviews so as not to entice other learners to also want to participate. Only after all the interviews had been conducted did all the participants receive a small gift of appreciation. There was therefore no pressure put on the participants to sign the assent form.

As the children were minors, informed consent needed to be given by their parents or legal guardians. This proved not to be difficult, even though the topic had been expected to be a sensitive one for the parents. Parents were given a letter from the school requesting permission to disclose identifying details to the researcher. Upon a favourable response to that letter, I contacted the parents to ensure that the child fitted the selection criteria, and the parents were informed about the study. The consent form was then sent to the parents and, once the parents’ consent form had been returned to the researcher, contact with the child could be made. A written assent form in child-friendly language together with a letter of information was given to the children and explained to them verbally (see addendum I). Voluntary participation was highlighted, as well as the option to withdraw at any time. Participants were given an opportunity to ask questions before signing the assent form. The participants seemed to gain a feeling of importance once asked to sign a document, which aided the interviewing process.

The methods of data gathering were discussed with the children. As mentioned, tape recorders were used depending on the participant’s consent. Each participant had an opportunity to speak casually into the tape recorder, and listen to their own voice recorded (Hill, 2005:72). This served as a way of ensuring power to the participant, but it also became an excellent warm-up exercise.

The voluntary informed consent and assent is a fundamental part of the research process. Gregory (2003:41) highlights this by stating that “invoking the importance of consent on the part of those affected by our actions brings in its wake the invoking of such key morally-significant notions as autonomy, self-determination, privacy, the right to privacy, respect for persons, treating individuals as ends in themselves rather than means, trust as an integral feature of human intercourse and so on”.
2.5.3. Avoidance of harm

One way of ensuring avoidance of harm is to inform the participants thoroughly about the potential impact of the study (De Vos et al., 2005: 58). The participants were not exposed to any physical harm connected to this study, but the researcher was aware that emotional harm could occur (Hill, 2005:73), in the form of a traumatic experience being brought to the surface. For some of the participants, this study was the first opportunity they ever had to express their thoughts about this part of their life. Hill (2005:74) points out that, if a child becomes upset, the researcher can offer immediate comfort, but should refrain from offering long-term counselling. Roberts-Holmes’ (2005:62) suggests that if there is possible serious harm to the participant one can ask the child either to stop, or give permission to share the information when the child expresses the possible harm. Parents were made aware of legal limitations to confidentiality, as these limitations could possibly impact their child. During the interviews the participants were encouraged to talk, yet made aware of their choice to discontinue. After the interview we spent some time debriefing, and I was ready to refer them to appropriate counselling services if the need arose. Most of the participants seemed happy to be able to express themselves in the interview.

2.5.4. Anonymity and confidentiality

When children disclose their own lived experiences, they seek to gain trust from the researcher. This needs to be followed up by anonymity during the research process. Teachers involved in the selection process of the participants were expected to keep full confidentiality about the participants’ identifying details. The researcher also handled any private information confidentially. This was ensured through not naming or identifying the participants, their families nor their school in any written documents of the findings. Gregory (2003:53) states that not only is confidentiality not to reveal information that has been revealed in confidence, but also to ensure that data are not handled carelessly or accidentally by others.

The recordings of the interviews will be destroyed at the end of the academic process to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. This was explained to the participants, in order for them to be aware of the importance of privacy and to ensure that they were not misled or confused regarding this (Cozby, 2004:38).
The choice of interviewing at the school ensured that the children were in a comfortable setting, with which they are more familiar than the researcher. The option to be interviewed at an alternative venue was made available to the participants, but none of them chose this.

2.6. Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the research design and methodology in detail. The research goals and objectives were stated at the beginning of the chapter. A description of the chosen research design followed, explaining the qualitative, descriptive, exploratory and contextual design. The research methodology included sampling procedures, data collection through interviews and drawings, and data analysis using Tesch’s model of analysis. Trustworthiness was proved through Guba’s model, and ethical considerations focused on the protection of the participants and their identity.

The following chapter will look at the findings of the research and literature control.
3.1. Introduction

In Chapter Two the research methodology and design of the study were reviewed. The results obtained from the data gathered are presented and discussed in this chapter, together with the literature control. The goal of the research was to enhance an understanding of children’s experiences of voluntary parental absence and the factors that promote their resilience during this process.

The biographical details of the participants are presented in the first section of this chapter to provide the reader with a brief contextual description of the children who participated in the study. Thereafter, the results are discussed in terms of the identified themes and their supporting sub-themes. These are backed up by quotations by the participants where applicable, and verified against the existing body of knowledge. The quotations are taken verbatim from the participants’ narratives which accounts for some incorrect grammar in certain instances.

The findings are divided into three themes: the child’s perception of what a family is, the child’s experiences of living in a substitute family, and factors enhancing resilience. The overview of themes is presented in a table below.

Table 3.1: List of themes and subthemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>THEME 1: Children’s perceptions of what a family is</td>
<td>Structure of the family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A family provides care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A family demonstrates and communicates love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A family provides guidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THEMES</td>
<td>Subtopics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>THEME 2: Children’s experience of living with a substitute family</strong></td>
<td>Experiences of the early days in the substitute family</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Adjustment within the substitute family</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Present experiences of the substitute family</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>THEME 3: Factors enhancing resilience in children</strong></td>
<td>Feeling a part of the substitute family enhances resilience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Making meaning of situation enhances resilience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knowledge that the biological parents love the child enhances resilience</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maintaining contact with biological parent enhances resilience</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The ability to cry and mourn enhances resilience</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>People and activities that distract the child from longing enhance resilience</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focusing on the present enhances resilience</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support network and connectedness as resilience factors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2. **Biographical description of the sample**

The ages of the seven children who participated in this study ranged between 10 and 12 years old. All of them were African and Xhosa speaking. The table below (Table 3.2) shows their sex, age, school grade and the persons who constitute their substitute family.
Table 3.2: Biographical description of the participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Live with</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Aunt, grandparents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Grandmother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Aunt and cousins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Grandmother and aunt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Grandmother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Grandparents, aunt and cousins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Aunt, uncle and cousins</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All the participants live within the Nelson Mandela Metropole, in various socio-economic areas. The participants attend the same Primary School in Central, Port Elizabeth. As shown in the table, participants A, B and C were 10 years old at the time of the interview, D and E were 11 years old and F and G were 12 years old. The participants all showed an understanding that their parents were absent owing to employment in another city in South Africa.

3.3. THEME 1: Children’s perceptions of what a family is

The participants in this study were asked to make a drawing of their family. After they completed the drawing, the participants were asked to describe their drawing. This was followed by the question, “What is a family to you?” The participants’ responses to these questions depicted their description of the family as a structural unit (i.e., who constitutes the family), as well as a functional unit (i.e., what are the characteristics and functions of the family members). These responses are presented as five subthemes which are listed below and then discussed in more detail under their respective subheadings:
- Structure of the family
- Family provides care
- A family demonstrates and communicates love
- A family provides guidance
- A family facilitates access to education

Below are quotations by two of the participants which depict their definition of what a family is:

Participant C: “Friends you play with and family you stay with.”

Participant E: “A family must give love to the people and care about them.”

These descriptions clearly reflect the participants’ own experiences, and represent their unique stories.

3.3.1. Structure of the family

The children were all asked to make a drawing of their family at the beginning of the interview. Four different mediums were given to choose from: pencil crayons, gem crayons, kokis and oil pastels. A pencil and a sharpener were also provided. The children were each given one A4 drawing sheet. After the drawing was done, we explored the drawing by posing the following exploratory question: “Can you tell me about your picture?”

The drawings varied in terms of content and use of mediums. Some of the participants spent more time on the drawing, while others rushed it. Some of the participants used all mediums, while some used only a pencil. The drawings revealed the participants’ understanding of their place in the family, and their view of the family structure.

When asked to explain the drawing, they all introduced the members of their family. Some of them then realized that specific members had been left out, for example participant C exclaimed: “I forgot!” Participant B gave the following explanation for not including her brothers: “There was no space for them”. Her explanation for
excluding herself was as follows: “I don’t need to be there. They must be there.” Three participants excluded themselves from their drawings of the family.

There was no clear pattern of whom to include, and whom to exclude. Except for one participant all the participants included their biological mother. Siblings or cousins were also included in all the pictures. At least one caregiver in their home was included, being either an aunt or grandmother. External family members, such as aunts and uncles were also included in some of the pictures, even if they did not physically live with the substitute family.

During the interview the participant would describe his or her relationship with the various members included in the picture. Participant F’s drawing included every grandparent, aunt, uncle and cousin in her extended family, as well as her mother. During the interview she referred back to the picture and said, “I have a piece of each one’s personality...I’m good at sports, good at maths, that’s my mother. Swimming is my uncle. My granddad is creativity. My aunty is cooking.” She continued like this until she had been through the twelve family members she had drawn. She did not draw herself, and upon being asked where she would have placed herself, she said “I would have placed myself first! Cos I’m the one who keeps the family together.”

Some of the participants included their cousins with whom they were living at the time. These cousins seemed to be carrying out the roles of siblings. This perspective was expressed by participant G as follows: “This is my cousin but ..., I say she is my sister, because we have the same surname and we live in the same house, and this is my other cousin, but I also say she is my sister”.

The strong sense of self demonstrated by the same participant who thought of herself as “the one who keeps the family together” was further supported by her adaptability to her alternative family structure. She did not appear to struggle with staying away from her mother at all. On the other hand, the participant who did not include herself in the picture as she did not “need to be there”, showed ambivalent feelings of being away from her mom, happy to be away from her mom, but wishing she could be together with her and her father, saying: “then we could be a family”.

One participant (E) drew herself at the end, saying: “My family comes first. My granny and uncle taught me that....I love my family”.

Some of the participants placed their drawing of the family in a particular context, such as a nature scene. One of the participants (A) explained that “We are in a park. In the park there are flowers. We play soccer or cricket”. During the interview he recalled a memory of his mother taking him to the park.

The drawings showed a sense of connectedness between the participants and their family. Each drawing depicted a different family hierarchical system showing the impression each participant had of authority structures within the family. This also reflected where they see themselves in their family. The drawings also elicited memories from their past that they wish could be reality now. In addition to this, there seemed to be some confusion as to who belongs to their family. It was difficult for the participants to choose whom to include, and as mentioned, they sometimes forgot important members, or reconstructed their drawing when probed about who was not included in the drawing. Walsh (1998:84) indicates that “crisis events usually require a family to reorganize”. Changing roles in the substitute family might have challenged the participants’ views regarding who their family really consists of.

A child’s drawing can often give a glimpse of the child’s life and personality. The emotional state of the child can often be revealed through a drawing (Rubin, 1984:51). In this research, only the meaning elicited from the children is attached to the drawing, in conjunction with what Greig et al. (2007:95) highlight by saying that “it is important to operate in an open, exploratory manner with children and their drawing”. This means that no other interpretations or analyses were given to the drawings other than the child’s own narrative.

The definition of a family has been widely discussed amongst various professions and has been reformulated over many centuries. Early anthropologists defined family according to kinship, “a system which is transmitted with the blood” (Morgan, 1871 in Schneider, 2004:257). More recently anthropologists include household tasks and roles in defining family as a “social group of two or more people related by blood, marriage, or adoption who live or reside together for an extended period, sharing economic resources and caring for their young” (Scupin & DeCorse, 2004:334).
Sociologist Emile Durkheim defined family as a social institution; “a moral, not simply a biological association”, where each member has rights and duties (Lamanna, 2002:44). Furthermore, the sociological perspective focuses on kinship (related by blood, marriage or adoption) and household (those sharing a dwelling) when defining family (Steel & Kidd, 2001:11).

Trost (1990:432) includes basic, dyadic units in a definition of family, such as the spousal unit and parent-child unit, yet acknowledges that a definition of a family can create confusion, as it is difficult to stipulate. Furthermore the author suggests that five members in a household, defined by others as a family, could give five different definitions to the concept of family (Trost, 1990:441).

Piaget (1928) as cited in Gilby and Pederson (1982:111) discussed three stages through which a child of 7-13 years forms a definition of a family. Their definition changes from “all people living with the child”, to “limiting to the biological relationships”, and finally to a more generalized view to include “all biological relatives”. As portrayed by the participants, and supported by theory, it is not possible to give a clear definition of family. Walsh (1998:54) urges that when working with families during adversity one should explore their concept of “family”, in order to gain a greater understanding of their situation from their perspective. Levin and Trost (1992:351) state that researchers cannot determine whether children understand the concept of family, as there is no specific definition. Furthermore, the same authors make the following assertion:

“There is a risk that family is looked upon as a static and normative phenomenon and concept. Instead, our conceptualization of family should be a source for understanding and empathy.”

This subtheme conceptualizes the children’s perspectives regarding the structure of a family, in order to understand their view of resilience and coping.

3.3.2. A family provides care

One of the descriptions which distinguished the definition of a family from non-family was the prevalent aspect of care portrayed in the participants’ stories. Every participant mentioned care in their description of what a family is. The children were
all dependent on care by other family members, as most children are. Participants described family care as follows:

Participant D: “A family is people who love you and care for you. Who supports you in everything that you do and who loves you and who will never let you down.”

Participant B: “...love and kindness and help after one another...”

Ross (1995:27) supports the view of the participants and emphasises the importance of the care given to dependants by family or kinship. Two of the identified areas under role functioning in the McMasters Model of Family Functioning, speak of provision of resources and nurturance and support, as part of provision of care (Epstein, Bishop, Miller & Keitner, 1993:147).

This subtheme has been further divided into three categories, namely: physical, emotional and financial care. These aspects of care were perceived by the participants as necessary components in a family.

3.3.2.1. A family provides physical care

The participants viewed physical care as a very important part of family care. The participants all saw residing with family members as a way of taking care of one another’s physical needs. Maybe this is the most apparent aspect of care, and was therefore easily identified by the participants. Physical wellbeing is also included under physical care. The following participants’ quotations show the importance of physical care:

Participant C: “A family is people that care about you and love you and family is....people that you live with.”

Participant A: “....people who care, people who lives with you and guards you....”

The latter participant defined how his family takes care of their members;

Participant A: “Make sure everyone is at home. By checking that Granny and Grandpa and the children are at home.”
Physical care encompasses protection in terms of shelter, health care, food, and security. Access to these aspects of care is mainly found within the family (Ross, 1995:27). Through their study with several children, mostly from nuclear families, Gilby and Pederson (1982:117) learnt that kindergarten children classified family as living together or having contact. Furthermore, the authors state that as age increases, the children are more aware of blood relations, and love being a defining attribute, is minimized. This is in contrast with the participants in this study, as their ages were 10-12, and they rather defined family through loving and caring qualities. When examining their family structure, the absence of their closest relations might have given rise to this idea. Physical care can often be seen as being associated with the home in which the family lives. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, as described by Van Wagner (2009), postulates that social needs cannot be attained before physiological needs and safety needs are satisfied. The children in this study show how they have experienced significant changes regarding their most basic need for shelter. Once this has been dealt with and accepted, they can move on to a place of belonging and a sense of community (Van Wagner, 2009). The love within this substitute family is therefore based on physical care. Looking at the differences between the participants, those who indicated physical care as part of the definition of a family are the youngest participants. They are still functioning in the Concrete Operational stage of reasoning (Morris & Maisto, 2002:402), during which children accept different dimensions, yet their abstract thinking in terms of roles is still developing. Family and household have sometimes been used interchangeably (Trost, 1990:432), which highlights the emphasis put on the physical home when defining the family.

3.3.2.2. Emotional care creates safety

Emotional care emerged as important for children in this study. Affection, kindness, acceptance and being available were characteristics the participants assigned to their families. These characteristics were expressed as follows:

Participant B: "A family is people that takes care of you and be kind to one another and share everything."

Participant C: "....they kiss me...."
Participant B: “To take care of one another and to like one another, and don’t make a fool of one another.”

Some of the participants experienced that the substitute family was available during difficult times. There would be support and guidance to help them get through these situations. The participants expressed themselves as follows:

Participant G: “There’s some things you need to go through, actually bad, but your family will be there for you. Through those bad things. Yah, I think that’s what a family is for.”

Participant F: “They stick with you through thick and thin. They help you through bad days and good days, but when its good days it’s like YEAH!”

Affectionate responses and involvement are seen by Epstein et al. (1993:150) as part of healthy family functioning. Welfare emotions and emergency emotions both show the involvement of family affective responses. Welfare emotions are the constant care given in the family whilst emergency emotions, such as anger, anxiety and sadness are those feelings more evident during difficult times in the family (Epstein et al., 1993:150). Both aspects of affective responses were evident in the participants’ expressions.

Viljoen (1994:61) mentions that emotional warmth and closeness are dimensions of parenthood. Warmth and closeness included “love and acceptance, nurturing, caregiving, support, encouragement, prompting and assistance in the case of a personal problem”. These aspects, such as love and nurturance were expressed by the participants, as seen in the quotations above.

3.3.2.3. A family provides financial care

Many of the participants emphasised the financial care component of the family. Material goods seemed to take preference over emotional care for some of the children, as discussed below (Section 3.4.3.2). I am curious as to this was due to a perceived lack of emotional care brought on by the absence of their primary emotional caregiver. The children were very much aware of the financial sacrifices
that were made by the substitute family in caring for them. One participant expressed the sacrifices made by her grandmother as follows:

Participant F: “He gives up the money for shopping until I get the money to go to school every day. She buys clothes for me.”

The following quotations demonstrate the participants’ definition of a family in relation to the aspect of financial care:

Participant G: “They have to look after you and make sure that you get the education, you get food.”

Participant C: “....they like to give you money sometimes when it’s your birthday....”

Participant E: “She [the granny] buys me Christmas presents and buys me stationery. And pays my school fees.”

Berns (2007:89) lists economic support as a basic family function. This function of a family is also highlighted by Patterson (2002:353), who sees economic support as a way of providing basic needs and other resources to enhance human development. Economic support is one of several ways of “strengthening the capacity of families in contemporary society” (Patterson, 2002:352). A family, as seen by the participants, provides financial resources for basic needs as well as luxuries. In this regard I observed a variation between the different age groups, where the younger participants (here cited as participants E and C) appreciated the luxuries given by their families, while the older participants, F and G, realized the sacrifices their families made by providing money for education and clothing. I wonder whether there is a link between this view and the children’s reasoning for parental absence as discussed later in Section 3.5.3 where the children rationalize that the parent had to leave them in favour of a job in order to pay for their education. This suggests their awareness that education is an expense for the family, both biological and substitute. This awareness could be prompted by the adults around them, creating a sense of worth conditioned upon education.
3.3.3. A family demonstrates and communicates love

It seemed as if there was almost a progressive development in terms of characteristics of care, indicating that once there is a family that provides care, one is able to give and receive love. The participants’ responses led me to deduce that the participants feel the foundation of family love is to have their physical, emotional and financial needs met. They are subsequently able to acknowledge their experience of love as being an important component in the definition of family. Although love can be explained and expressed in many ways, the participants were direct about what a family offers:

Participant C: “....caring and loving....”

Participant A: “....that you all love one another....”

Participant F: “...a family is people that you really love....”

The following participant seemed to attach a condition to her love within the family:

Participant E: “They love me because I make jokes. I make them laugh.”

“Affective communication patterns are the means to show love and support between members and are central to accomplishment of the nurturing function,” (Patterson, 2002b:242). The feeling of being loved is closely linked to family identity. Feeling a part of the family is a foundation for a healthy family, “although the definition of the family is fluid and diverse” (Walsh, 1998:51). Two functions of a family, listed by Belgrave and Allison (2010:111), are the instrumental and the expressive. Instrumental functions constitute providing for physical and material needs, whilst expressive functions focus on emotional support and nurturance. The participants saw both these functions as part of the definition of a family, as discussed under Section 3.3.2.1 and above.

Communicating and demonstrating love are operationalised further in terms of the family being available and creating trust. These are discussed below.
3.3.3.1. A family is available

Participants valued and appreciated the fact that their family was available when needed. It was clear that they regarded this as a way of demonstrating love in a practical way, for example: time was set aside by the family of some of the participants to express themselves and to be listened to.

Participant G: “My family is quite an advising family. We sit down and talk. My auntie and her husband are always there for me.”

Participant E: “She asks me how, when she comes back from work she asks me how it is.”

Being available as a family is an important component of care. Levine and Pittinsky (1997) as cited in Morrell and Ritcher (2006:58) posed the view of the “availability hypothesis”. This proposition makes a positive correlation between the time available to the parent and their availability to their child. A challenge many families are faced with nowadays is the juggling of family life and work. Being available for the family is not as easy as in previous times (Piotrkowski & Hughes, 1993:195). Taking time for the family often needs to be arranged and planned. In this sense the participants seemed to understand the importance and value of their family being available for them.

3.3.3.2. A family creates and shows trust

Trust was another aspect of love that the participants identified as important in a family. Participants expressed the view that a family teaches how to trust, and also shows trust in practical ways. This clearly enhanced their sense of security. This is what the participants explained as their experience of trust:

Participant B: “My family is something that….I don’t really keep quiet, I tell them everything….I trust everyone. Because if I tell my mother or my granny and my granny won’t go next door and talk; my child my child that and that and that.”

Participant F: “I think it is important to tell the truth in a family. Cos if you gonna lie it’s gonna have a bad relationship with one of the members, and the more you lie the
more you’re gonna have a bad relationship. And soon the family won’t like you. But your family will forgive you sometimes.”

Participant B: “My granny told me if you pick up something or win something you must bring it back.”

In order to generate a feeling of permanence the aspects of loyalty, accountability and mutual commitment are vital. Walsh (1998:52) explains that trust is an important aspect of family resilience. It is easier to stay together when one has faith in one another. Further, Walsh (1998:53) says that during difficult times a family whose members can trust one another will be better off. As the participants have all been through adversities, trust might be the anchor that provides them with a sense of safety.

3.3.4. A family provides guidance

The opportunity to express their love and to have it reciprocated provided the participants with feelings of safety and security within their substitute family. Another way of receiving love seemed to be through receiving guidance from their family. The participants reported a feeling of being cared for and a sense of belonging when guidance was given. This task of providing guidance seemed to be assigned to parents as well as to substitute family members.

One of the participants would give the following advice to children in the same situation:

Participant G: “I’d say they are not alone. There are someone there to care for them and someone to look after them. Like a parent, they have guidance. All the people to care for them.”

Guidance is seen as a shared responsibility between parents or caregivers. Resilience theory includes the importance of strong leadership within a family, providing “nurturance, protection and guidance of children” (Walsh, 1998:91).

From this subtheme three categories emerged: preparing the child for purpose in life, teaching values, and discipline as a form of guidance. An interesting observation was that the older participants articulated receiving guidance through being
encouraged to have a purpose in life and respecting values, while the younger children reportedly regarded discipline as a way of receiving guidance. This is in line with Piaget’s concepts of development (Santrock, 2004:222).

3.3.4.1. A family prepares the child for purpose in life

As part of the guidance provided by the family, the participants saw the importance of being prepared for life. There was a sense of a bigger purpose in life, for which preparation and guidance are required. A sense of reverence for this purpose was expressed:

Participant G: “I think the parents’ duties is to make sure that the child doesn’t fall under sin or things like that (.....) [M]y family are people who look after me, like, make me ready, because I believe that when we are here on earth, God has a purpose for me. And my family is making me ready for that purpose.”

Families are seen as institutions that teach their faith to their children. The need for religious training is accepted by both parents and children (Walsh, 1999:11), and a purpose in life is strongly linked to such religious practices. Guiding children towards discovering their purpose in life is therefore commonly seen as a part of the family’s role. Children as young as those participating in this research were aware of the importance of religious practices, and their role as learners of such practices. Viljoen (1994:47) reflects that South Africans recognise the importance of teaching religious practices within a family, and through this, values are transmitted to the younger generation. The quotation cited here was given by the oldest of the participants of 12 years. Her abstract thinking is shown to be well developed, compared with the younger ones. This is in line with her developmental stage, namely the Formal Operational stage (Santrock, 2004:221).

3.3.4.2. A family teaches values

Another way of being guided by the family was the learning of values to live by. The participants mentioned respect and honesty as well as right and wrong behaviour for life, as general values taught by their families. The children identified these values as important for a family. The teaching of values was seen as a normal feature of the
family, in order for members to live as productive citizens. The following is an example of an important value highlighted by one of the participants:

Participant G: “My auntie always tells me if we don’t learn respect when we are young it’s gonna be difficult for you to learn when we are old.”

The participants also expressed the need for togetherness as a family, being happy and loyal to each other, which is evident in the following excerpts:

Participant F: “I think it’s important to tell the truth in a family.....Your family will forgive you sometimes.”

Participant G: “I think it’s important for a family to like lead a child to a right path to the truth and not to things that are made up.”

A basic family function, according to Berns (2007:89), is to teach society’s values, beliefs and attitudes. Viljoen (1994:19) indicates that a family teaches both general values, for example respect, morality and love, and specific value systems pertaining to marriage and family life. Family values and beliefs constitute one of the constructs that affect the development of a child (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000:553), through a greater sense of belonging. Again, we see that the older participants highlighted values as a part of guidance, which was not mentioned by the younger ones. The Formal Operational stage which these 12 year olds are in shows a significant change in their view of values (Santrock, 2004:222). Concepts such as values are now understood in abstract thinking, and there are “shades of gray”, which leaves values to be a decision; not merely right or wrong.

3.3.4.3. A family provides discipline as a form of guidance

The abovementioned aspects of guidance suggest that the teaching of values and having a purpose in life are elements of the family’s function. A more concrete action was that of discipline which some participants mentioned as a measure of guidance used by the family. None of the participants said that they were negatively or harmfully disciplined. The participants seemed to accept the authority the substitute parents had regarding discipline. This is what one participant said:
Participant E: “My family is very strict when I do something wrong....They do have the right to shout at you when you do something wrong.”

Another participant seemed to have heard from others how discipline can be:

Participant G: “When you don’t live with your parents some people are harsh.”

Viljoen (1994:72) found that children and youth were dissatisfied with the way discipline was carried out in the family. This author states that the youngsters felt it unfair treatment that discipline and communication did not take place together and that parents had full authority over the children concerning discipline. Looking at the age of the abovementioned participant accepting the discipline, it can be confirmed that the younger ones see guidance as more tangible as opposed to the more abstract thinking presented by the older participants. The older participant, who had heard from others about discipline, put it in a more negative light. Discipline may be seen as a more concrete action towards corrective behaviour. It can therefore be said that it is easier for the younger children to accept such guidance.

3.3.5. The family facilitates access to education

The children mentioned education as an important aspect of their lives. School is where they spend most of their day, and their comments suggest that they are cognisant and appreciative of their families’ efforts to help them access education. School fees had to be paid, home work needed to be done, and transport money was required. All these were ways in which their families assisted them in gaining access to education. The participants were acutely aware of how the family provided for them in this way, showing that they did not take it for granted. However, considering their age, I would speculate that the children are reminded by the adults in their lives to be grateful for what they consider privileges. Below are a few of the participants’ verbatim responses pertaining to this matter:

Participant A: “They help me with school work. Sign my diary. And give me money to come to school.”

Participant E: “....she [Granny] helps me with homework....”

Participant B: “...she [Granny] is the one who gives me money to go to school....”
One participant explained that her biological parent had to secure a good earning position in another city so that she could provide the child with a quality education.

Participant G: “I know my mother went to Johannesburg ‘cos she could work and she could provide for me....So she could pay my school fees and that.”

One of the basic family functions is that of educating the children. This is done through socialization, at home and at a school institution (Berns, 2007:89). The family has considerable authority as to which school to place the child in as well as their well-being during their school career.

3.3.5.1. Family’s choice of school based on perceived quality of education

The participants showed awareness of the educational system. Some of their attitudes seemed to be biased towards what the parents had said, and there was much comparison between schools in townships and schools in town. Through personal experience or stories they had been told, they made up their minds about the quality of education. Tuition fees at their school cost around R5000 per year. Again, they showed appreciation for their parent’s choice regarding which school to send them to. These are the views expressed regarding quality of education:

Participant G: “Just because their parents can’t afford schools that my mother can afford [...] they have to go to those schools. Their education is not quite the same. Because here we’ve got educated teachers....They [cousins] didn’t get the education I get. Their school was there at the township. They wouldn’t understand the way I go to school. What we do at school.”

Participant D: “It would be different in the location [township], ‘cause my gran says in the location they give you hiding instead of detention. They don’t give you the proper education.”

These comments could explain why some of the participants were willing to accept that the absence of their parents was in fact a sacrifice in favour of them receiving a “quality education”.
The quality of education in the South African context has become a matter of ongoing debate (compare Doherty, 2008; Michaelowa, 2007; Sandy, 1990). Quality education on a primary level significantly influences the number of entries to tertiary level (Michaelowa, 2007:216). Choice of schools is mostly made by parents, and often determined by the quality of educational services at the school (Sandy, 1990:31). It is noteworthy that the children express awareness of the differences in quality of education, even between family members. This helps them appreciate their families more.

Each participant had his/her own perception of what a family is. Based on the drawings and the interviews I was able to gain insight into their thoughts. This first theme has discussed their perceptions of family and made it possible to conceptualize their particular experiences.

3.4. THEME 2: Children’s experience of living with a substitute family

The participants described their experience of living in a substitute family. What they shared reflected the ambivalence in thought, feelings and behaviour experienced by all the participants as they tried to adjust to the sometimes loosely structured arrangement concerning their parents’ voluntary absence. This theme is structured around the seemingly developmental process the children experienced as they moved into, lived with and settled down in their new substitute family. This process started when they had to detach themselves from their biological parents during the move. They then had to adjust themselves to living with the substitute family in the early days, and subsequently settle down within the substitute family.

The participants gave the impression that there could be mixed feelings about missing the biological parents. The children described their feelings of ambivalence in different ways, as evident from the quotations below:

Participant F: “If I live here [with substitute family] I sometimes miss my mom, but when I live there [with mom] I sometimes miss my family.”
Participant D: “It’s not nice; it’s nice, but not so nice. You miss your mom and dad.”

Many of the participants expressed that it feels as though they are living with their own family and they appeared to be satisfied with the stability which the substitute family provided, such as the following participant:

Participant G: “....I treat them as my own family....”

However some of the participants did report negative feelings relating to living with the substitute family.

Participant B: “....it was hurting but not much now....”

Some of the participants felt the need to please the substitute parent during the adjustment phase which suggests that their sense of belonging might be contingent upon certain conditions. This was confirmed by Berns (2007:99) who reported on research with grandparents and this author notes that one of the challenges of being raised by a grandparent is to develop a sense of belonging and stability. I can only imagine that when one has two different homes, or families, it is difficult to know where one really belongs. This view is further supported by Trost (1990:432) who stated that “[t]he identity of the individual is for many of us, if not dependent, at least strongly connected to the self-perception of family membership”.

The conceptualization of family membership has however changed over the years, in accordance with the change in family structure in society. The reader is also referred to Chapter One of this report where the relevance of the nuclear family as the primary family unit is disputed as the exception rather than the norm. However what remains constant is the need for children to develop a sense of belonging in order to develop self-identity (Trost, 1990:432).

As mentioned earlier, participant narratives regarding the experience of living with a substitute family seemed to suggest a three-stage process:

1. The early days: the transition of moving to the new family, including experiences of detachment from biological parents, and feelings regarding this.
2. Adjustment to the new family: the ‘loss of parents’ affected this stage, yet the participants found great support from the new substitute family.
3. The present experiences: this depended on the level of coping through the previous challenge and included a longing for the biological parents, yet also being settled in the “new” family.

The discussion that follows will elucidate the three subthemes as related to the participants’ experience of moving to and living with the substitute family.

3.4.1. Experiences of the early days in the substitute family

The first experience of living with the substitute family began differently for each child, as the move from the biological family to the substitute family was abrupt for some, while others were born into this family, as the mother was living with them. Their early days are characterised by the mother moving away from the city, and the child moving to or being left with the substitute family. It is understandable that for some this could cause more anxiety and difficulties than for others. Bowlby (1953:14) explains that if the child, deprived by the mother, is being looked after by someone known and trusted by him or her, the child will only experience “partial deprivation”. The reality of maternal absence being 'normal' also assisted the child in having an indifferent experience of being deprived of the mother. One participant said:

Participant G: “I’m used to it [living away from mom and dad]. Since I started in the school I have not been living with my mother.”

For some of the participants, the physical absence of the parent resulted in the feeling of absence of love and care. This harsh reality created by the parent or perceived by the child, separated them from each other, and therefore the child did not miss this parent so much:

Participant E: “....my mother left me....My mother doesn’t like me very much.....”

As a young infant each child needs a carer, someone to whom he or she will become attached. Bowlby’s (1953:13) definition of a relationship between mother and child was that of a “warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with [one’s] mother in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment”. In order for the child to continue forming other close relationships, this relationship is vital. In addition to this, Booth and Koller (1998:311) state that this first mother-child relationship will also contribute towards the development of a sense of self and self-esteem. Strous (2007:233) agrees with
this view when exploring perceived rejection by parents during cases of divorce, where this experience can lead to low self-esteem and insecurity in children.

For those children whose experience of the move was more negative, I found that they employed the defence mechanism of rationalisation, whether it was based on fact or fantasy. One example of this is a mother’s promotion away from town:

Participant G: “She was promoted to Umthatha. So then I lived with my guardian.”

Piaget’s stages of development explain that children in the participants’ age group are developing a greater sense of thought. This could possibly account for the participants’ search for reasons for actions (Morris & Maisto, 2002:403).

As well as expressing experiences of detachment, the children also expressed ambivalent feelings regarding the move. This will be discussed in the ensuing section as experiences of detachment from the biological parents and feelings attached to the move.

3.4.1.1. Experiences of detachment from biological parents

All the participants encountered detachment from their biological parents when the latter left them with alternative caregivers. For some, this happened early in their life, which seemed to lead to maternal deprivation hardly being prevalent in their memory, and a new attachment figure was easily created. The other participants who were older when the biological parents departed presented with mixed feelings regarding the experience. For those who easily created a new attachment figure, their present family situation seemed to be considered as normal as it had been that way for a longer time. Participants recalled their move to their substitute family as follows:

Participant D: “When I was young. When I was maybe a few years old. Maybe when I was like one or two years old. Then she moved.”

Participant A: “....I think when I was younger....”

Participant E: “My mother left me when I was eight months and then she went to Pretoria.”
Another participant recalled disappointment with the level of care and supervision received from the biological mother. It seemed, as a result, the separation from the mother was dealt with more easily. This participant experienced detachment only two years before the research interview:

Participant B: “Every time she goes out in the morning she doesn’t come back at the time she says she will come back. She only comes back in the evening....it was hurting but not much now....”

Further, this participant explained how it was when the mother left their house to work:

Participant B: “After she left when I came back [from school] I was alone, she was not there.”

As previously mentioned, if the attachment to another primary caregiver had developed while the biological mother was still there, the transition was easier:

Participant F: “When I was born I was born in Jo’burg. And my granny says I came here a week after, so then I lived with my granny and my mother and my whole family.”

Some of the participants felt that they did not miss their parent, as they had never had an opportunity to build a close relationship with them. Their physical distance created an emotional distance and detachment. This seemed to make it easier for them in the experience of the separation. Participants depicted it as follows:

Participant E: “....I don’t know her very much....”

Participant G: “I don’t like live with my dad....so I don’t know quite how he is like now. I don’t feel bad living without my dad. The reason why I can’t tell you much about my dad is because I don’t know much about him.”

Participant D: “My dad, he travels a lot so I don’t know where he is now but mostly he is in Cape Town. He travels around and my mom and dad were never married.”

Inconsistency in their relationship with their biological parents also impacted the children’s experience of detachment, as the following participant explained:
Participant B: “My mother only comes on Fridays and sometimes she doesn’t come again. And she comes and goes.”

Children who are young when separation occurs seem to not remember it as well, and although it impacts them (Hogan et al., 2002), it does not appear to have such a negative impact. Whiting and Lee (2003:292) found that children who had grown up in a foster family from a very young age, did not have a mother-child relationship with their biological mother, and therefore found it difficult to relate to them. WHO (2004:6) states that other people who have a stable presence and are emotionally committed to the well-being of the child, can do just as well as the mother in the care-giving of the child.

Walker (1996) as cited in Kroll (2002:112) explains that 100 000 children lose contact with a parent every year, the absent parent often being the father. This statistic highlights the extent of the problem under investigation. The consequence of this can be insecure attachment (Booth & Koller, 1998:312).

Booth and Koller’s view is supported by Woodward, Fergusson and Belsky (2000:163) who state that:

“Parent-child relations that are warm, responsive and stable, foster the development of secure parental attachments, whereas parenting that is rejecting or inconsistently responsive and available gives rise to insecure parental attachment manifested by child avoidance or ambivalence toward the parent”.

Furthermore, Hogan et al. (2002) state that when children perceived that the parents lacked commitment of contact, their relationship became strained.

The experience of detachment from the biological parents was dependent on the level of attachment that had already developed with the biological parents as well as with the substitute family. Similarly in this study, prior attachment or detachment was a great factor in determining how the children experienced the early days of being separated from their parents and the move to living with the substitute family. It is worth noting that the age differential between the biological mother and the substitute parent was fairly high. Participants who were closer to entering
adolescence seemed to experience the need to identify with a younger carer than a grandparent. This also seemed to impact the experience of detachment from their biological mother, possibly making it more difficult.

### 3.4.1.2. Feelings associated with the move

Although most of the participants did not recall much of the actual move to the substitute family, some remember negative feelings attached to the move. The transition brought to the fore somewhat frightening feelings. The participants who spoke of these negative feelings were older. There were nevertheless ambivalent feelings expressed regarding the absence of the mother:

Participant B: “I was lonely and I was scared at first … [later in the interview:] *To me it doesn’t really hurt, cos it’s normal.*”

Hogan et al. (2002) report that children whose parents had left them suddenly and without much explanation seemed to be more distressed and confused than those children who were prepared and had a clearer understanding. Morris and Maisto (2002:257) suggest that people tend not to remember anything that happened before the age of two. Most of the participants were beyond this age, probably even older at the time of parental separation, this explaining why they were able to recall and connect the experience to specific feelings.

### 3.4.2. Adjustment within the substitute family

After the early days of moving to the substitute family and detaching from parents, the children were met with the challenge of adjusting to the new family and its environment. This entailed adjusting to a new family structure and creating attachment bonds with the new family members. The children had gone through a process of detaching themselves from their most intimate other person, their mother, which for some was associated with the loss of trust, love and belonging. The children did not explicitly assert their challenges in this regard, although their narratives alluded to feelings of being unsettled. The participants reflected on the support they received from the substitute family as one of the factors that facilitated this adjustment process.
For one participant this was described as the grandmother taking over the role of a mother:

Participant D: “....I normally call my granny my mom, 'cos I live with her....”

The participants in the research viewed the support and assistance given by their substitute family as a way of adjusting to their new environment. Hildebrand (2005:98) confirms that this demonstration of understanding and care will enhance the child’s sense of identity and belonging. The two categories that follow reflect the participants’ experience of assistance received from the substitute family, as well as aspects which made it difficult to adjust.

3.4.2.1. Assistance from the substitute family

The children acknowledged the support that the substitute family offered. This support, offered in various ways, helped create a new sense of belonging for the children. The feeling of being cared for and accepted was demonstrated through this participant, talking of her grandmother:

Participant B: “....she’s kind...she’s looking after me....”

Another participant’s uncle supported her by being helpful:

Participant G: “....he’s quite helpful to me with a lot of things....”

On the basis of the support and care given by the substitute family, the participants felt that they were understood. Some of the participants showed a sense of contentment based on this understanding. One of the participants expressed her gratitude for her uncle, and expressed that she was aware of differential treatment experienced by others in the same situation as her. She seemed relieved to know that her family is caring:

Participant G: “He understands children, and...he’s not like other people who are harsh. Like when you don’t live with your parents some people are harsh. ....He has another personality. He’s quite sweet.”

Play is an important part of childhood. Interaction with the substitute family through play elicited feelings of happiness for the participants. It seemed as if there was a
sense of being accepted when the caregivers could make time for them by playing with them. This seemed to make them feel validated.

Participant E: “...we have fun together, we play cards and we talk....”

Participant F: “...we have fun and we play.....”

As part of adjusting to the new environment of the substitute family, the participants acknowledged the provision of financial and instrumental resources as a way of being accepted into the family. They were aware that the substitute family sacrificed their finances for the benefit of the child, and it was clear that this made the adjustment process easier. It seemed as if the children considered this as a demonstration of care. The following participant shared about his uncle who was living in the township, whom he had included in his drawing:

Participant E: “He spoils me very much. He takes me to McDonalds, Steers, sometimes when he has money.”

Other participants described their granny as the financial provider:

Participant E: “My Granny. She found a school for me, she bought me stationery. She bought me lots of toys.”

Participant A: “She [Granny] is the one who gives me the money to come to school...and iron my uniform.”

In order for children to adjust to change, they need a quality relationship with a close caregiver. Carew (2005:39) encourages parent-child relationships in times of change: “It is particularly important for parents to respond with warmth, sensitivity and consistency to their children’s emotional needs during times of change. A child’s adjustment depends upon the quality of the relationship with the parent; a securely attached child is better able to adjust to change”. As mentioned in this research, the participants substituted their parents with other caregivers, and therefore responded positively to the security and support provided by their caregivers.

Hildebrand (2005:98) found that children who had experienced a loss of parents found great comfort in substitute families. These families would talk to the child and
understand their grievances. The need to be understood as a child is important for their self-confidence. It also gives a sense of security and importance.

In her study on stepfamilies, Pill (1990:191) found that a sense of family identity was elicited through emotional support and the family caring for each other. The participants in this study showed similarities to this, and there was a sense of belonging to their substitute family because of the support and care given to them.

McBride, Schoppe and Rane (2002:999) indicated that an important part of parental involvement includes interaction with the child, through play. As previously reported the participants articulated the view that the caregiver-child relationship is strengthened through play. The daily activities of a family create a sense of family identity, and, as Pill (1990:191) found regarding stepfamilies, having fun in their own unique way is one aspect of creating a sense of unity. In a substitute family this is just as important, as the family bond is not already there, and it requires an effort from the family members to create and sustain such a bond.

The Mc Masters Model for effective family functioning states that the provision of resources including financial resources is essential to fulfil family functions (Walsh, 1993:147). The participants’ sense of belonging to their new family was affirmed by this financial support.

3.4.2.2. Participants found it difficult adjusting

The substitute family’s assistance in facilitating the children’s positive adjustment to their new environment was influenced by those factors that compromised their adjustment. These factors will now be discussed.

The mourning of maternal deprivation was sometimes not shared with anyone. The children did not want to upset their substitute family by openly grieving for the absent biological parent. One participant here explained how she would stop crying after her parents left:

Participant D: “When my mom [granny] comes in I usually stop ... I stop because I don’t want to upset her.”
Some children seemed to rather want to please the parents, biological as well as substitute, and thereby rather kept quiet and hid their tears. One participant explained that he does not talk about his difficult experiences regarding parental voluntary absence:

Participant C: “....we don't really speak about it. They don't really know if I'm fine....”

Another participant indicated the need to keep going for the sake of her biological parents:

Participant G: “They should be strong ‘cos their parents are trying to do the best for them... ‘Cos when their parents come back then they should make their parents proud.”

The participants in this study suggested repression of feelings with the motive of pleasing their parents, and keeping the peace. This is consistent with Hildebrand (2005:75) where it was found that grieving children did not like showing their grief to others. According to her findings, crying was avoided, as it was seen as “embarrassing, exhausting, uncontrollable, and a sign of weakness”.

Goldman (2009) indicates that children often want to appear “normal” in front of others. They do not want to create much attention regarding the loss or mourning. This is a way of coping for some, while for others it becomes a way of hiding their tears, and rather mourning alone. Brandell (1998:2) expressed that children who have lost a parent may be afraid to talk to the surviving parent because they don’t want to upset him or her, and the child will thereby “take care of” that parent by burying their feelings deep inside. The repression of feelings could later result in denial of feelings, as they are not allowed to express themselves towards their family.

This stage of adjustment within the substitute family is seen as a stage characterised by ambivalence. Even though assistance and support were acknowledged by the participants, their way of dealing with this stage was to cope alone rather than using the support. The challenge seemed to be more of an emotional nature, where dealing with the loss of parents had not been attended to.
3.4.3. Present experiences of the substitute family

Having moved from the early days of transition between families, through the adjustment to the new families, the children were then, at the time of the interview, in a family system that had become their own family. The participants expressed that they were getting used to this family, and adjusting was thus not such a challenge any longer. Nevertheless, they were presented with difficulties - that of missing their past, including their parents.

To a certain extent the participants explicitly said that they did not miss their parents. It seemed as if the length of stay with their substitute family played a role, as well as the relationship between the mother and child:

Participant F: “I don’t really miss my mom. It’s almost like she is the same as my family. And since I’ve never met my dad I don’t really miss him.”

One participant, whose biological mother and stepfather had just had a baby boy, seemed to separate herself by calling him a stepbrother. It is clear that she has restructured her primary family as being the substitute family:

Participant D: “....she [mother] lives with my stepbrother and stepdad....”

The research by Hogan et al. (2002) elucidates the view that the relationship between the parent and child strongly determines the effects of parental separation. Owusu and Howitt (1997, in Kroll 2002:113) argue that lack of contact with parents encourages idealisation and fantasies of reunion, while depriving the child of addressing the reality of the loss. It could be that some of these participants’ statements are a part of this fantasy in order to explain the absence, as this becomes the children’s way of dealing with the parental voluntary absence. This sub-theme expresses the feelings of ambivalence; of being settled, yet not so settled in the substitute family. One factor that seemed to help with the transition was that of contact with the biological parent, while the issues regarding peers gave rise to unsettled feelings.
3.4.3.1. Experience of being settled

Determined by time and ability to settle, the children expressed that their experiences of living with the substitute family were “normal”. Their substitute family had in many ways become their own family, to the degree that they assigned family members to the roles not fulfilled by the biological parents. In many instances this was an uncle who was designated as father, as the participants did not know their biological father. In other instances, the main caregiver, the granny or aunty, received the title of “mom”.

The following participants explained about their uncles:

Participant G: “He’s really been like treating me as my own father. But when I talk to people I say they are my parents, but they’re not my biological parents. But he’s a fun uncle to have.”

Participant F: “My uncle is like my father. Cos I’ve never met my father. He’s the only man in P.E.”

It seems that as the participants could find social fathers in their close community, they could also find others to take the role of a mother or siblings:

Participant D: “I normally call my granny my mom ‘cos I live with her, and I don’t live with my mom.”

Participant G: “This is my cousin, but I say she is my sister, because we have the same surname and we live in the same house.”

Participant B: “....my granny is like my mother....”

Participant D: “....I also call her my sister ‘cos she’s too young to be called aunt....”

Assigning another person a specific role might sound like a challenge. Nevertheless the participants seemed quite comfortable with these role changes, and it helped them to normalize their situation. One participant explained how she and her uncle had discussed this role attribution:
Participant F: “When we got here, he told me that he loves me and I can call him everything I want, so I said; How about dad? And he said that’s, that’s very good!”

A parent’s ability to adapt to new roles in times of crisis will influence the family outcome (Carew, 2005:39). This can possibly also be said to apply to external family members, like the aforementioned uncle. The participants also viewed themselves as having multiple parents, as the following quotation states:

Participant D: “...my gran. She is the one who lives with me and takes care of me whilst my other parents are in Durban.”

Another participant perceived herself as having many moms:

Participant F: “It’s normal. It’s like I’ve got different moms. Cos also...my mom phones me at night and makes jokes, like call your mom “mom-aunt”.”

Webster (1976, in Ross, 1995:30) suggests that “a child belongs to all who are his relatives”. In this way, children also get a sense of belonging within the external family, especially living with them. In the book “Baba”, Morrell and Richter (2006:1) explain that “[f]atherhood is a social role” that goes beyond biology. Richter and Smith (2006:158) elaborate on this, as their research showed that every child in their study identified someone as their father, even though their biological father was absent. Furthermore, the latter authors highlight that although the children feel the loss of their father, they adapt to the situation “and appear to be happy with the men who have become their father” (Richter & Smith, 2006:159). As a researcher I have experienced that this could have a cultural context, where the Xhosa culture accepts children as belonging to the community. There is often a close bond between the extended families, as a collectivistic community.

It seems as if the participants adjusted to the new family life by assigning other people to the roles of their parents. Just as the “social fathers” (Morell & Richter (2006:1) accept their assigned role in the literature described above, the substitute family seemed to accept the role of parents in this research. This enabled the children to settle, and they were thereby able to describe their situations as normal.
3.4.3.2. The children miss their biological family, and are not so settled

In the midst of feeling settled, having managed to normalize their situation, there were still emotions that would bring them back to their biological parents. The participants were not always explicitly open about their feelings of longing for their parents, yet one could still sense it. Some were more explicit, with an undertone of ambivalence, as discussed under Section 3.4:

Participant A: “...sometimes (...) I want to go back to my mom....”

Participant G: “There are some times that I do miss her...I don’t regularly miss my mom. Ehh...Sometimes I do”.

Participant C: “It’s not really fine [living without mother]. Because I often lived with my mom in Cape Town, and my dad lives just down there.”

Children in foster care show similar experiences of missing and longing for their parents, and as Whiting and Lee (2003:293) highlight, these feelings are often strongest towards the biological mother, regardless of a history of a negative relationship with the mother.

The more explicit expressions above showed that the participants were open about missing their parents. Some were more covert in their expression of these feelings, and focused on longing for more material goods, provided by the parent. Some of the participants expressed that they miss their parents, with the focus on material factors bringing them together. The participants were aware that their substitute family did not have as much money as their parents. This therefore became a factor of longing for “a better world”, where one can get anything one asks for. This raises the question as to whether this was a way for the participants to cope with their loss, that is by resorting to fantasies rather than reality as discussed earlier (Section 3.4.3), or if this was a way for their parents to substitute emotional needs with material goods.

The following participant expressed her admiration towards her parent, yet she also revealed that her mother owes a lot of money:
Participant F: “Sometimes I miss my mother ‘cos she is the one who makes me eat out a lot. And I miss eating out......Whatever you need you can just ask her....She doesn’t mind doing any favours......Every time I phone my mother, everything I need I just tell my mother. And then she will give it to me...oh! My mother owes them [grandparents] a lot of money!”

Lacking the emotional attachment with their parents, this almost seems as though it is a way of coping with the deprivation or sense of loss experienced. Carew (2006:39) explains that affective involvement is necessary and that family members need to be attuned to a member’s feelings. Previous research studies suggest that divorced parents spoil their child to make up for time or feelings of guilt (compare Lehman, 2009, Lutz, 1998 & Gardner, 1970:89). The enticing connotative “Disneyland Daddy” and “Moneybag Mama” (Lutz, 1998) express this behaviour as parents wanting to make up to their children by spending money and giving them what they want materially, instead of emotionally. Gardner (1970:89) explains to children of divorced families that “during the week the mother has to do all the things that aren’t fun, and that on weekends the father gets to do most of the fun things”. This pattern can be seen as similar to the participants in this research, as the biological parent normally sees the child during holidays, which are more fun, and the child therefore forms the wrong impression of the role of the mother or father in comparison to that of the substitute parent(s).

3.4.3.3. Substitute parents allow contact with biological family

Keeping in touch with the biological family seemed to be very important to the participants. When the substitute families assist in keeping contact, there seems to be a deeper connection and acceptance from the participants. The following quotations give examples of how the substitute families not only allow but also provide ways of contact with the biological families.

Participant A: “....my aunt. She lets me phone or give me photos....”

Participant D: “....normally I ask my gran if I can use the phone to phone her....”

Participant A: “Sometimes when they go there to fetch something by my mom they also go with me.”
It has been found that children who have less contact with non-residential parents in the situation of parental separation show more distressed feelings than those who maintain regular contact (Hogan, Halpenny & Greene 2002). This research confirms the sense of security derived from keeping in touch with the parent. This aspect will be discussed further in Section 3.5.5 as a factor enhancing resilience.

3.4.3.4. Experience of peers

The participants also focused on their peers when discussing their experience of living in a substitute family. One of the participants expressed how he misses his friends that he had when he lived with his mother in another town.

Participant C: “Normally there I go to friends. Here I don’t have friends, just those at school.”

Children have a tendency to want to be like others. The children in this research felt different from the other children who were living with their mother and father. There was a sense of longing for the family setup of their peers; perhaps they were even envious of their peers’ families.

Participant D: “....you watch other people saying that they have moms and dads while your parents live far away from you.”

Participant G: “Sometimes it’s not that nice knowing that you don’t live with your mother, and you don’t have quite the family that other children have.”

When a child is moved from his/her surroundings it is not only the intimate family bond that is affected but also the bonds with friends. Children at this particular developmental stage have a strong need for peers (Salkind, 1985:114), and it is hard for them to suddenly make new friendships. Furman and Buhrmester (1985:1019) found that children at this age see their mother and friends as equally satisfying in terms of intimacy. Friends were seen as the ones having highest companionship value in terms of relationships. This confirms the difficulty of being separated from their friends. Moving house or geographical area for a child can be both positive and negative. The child might be excited about the move, yet leaving friends can be difficult (Oesterreich, 2002).
Peer pressure at this life stage is a reality that is difficult for some children to handle. Hogan et al. (2002) found that children with separated parents felt different to other children. Perhaps one reason for looking up to other’s families, is the traditional idea of the perfect family including both parents and children, as mentioned by Kelly and Emery (2003:352). This sense of being different, maybe even alienated, can be difficult for children to cope with. The challenge of industry versus inferiority might not be accomplished positively due to this separation (Morris & Maisto, 2002:414).

Having gone through the stages that ultimately lead to the present experiences of the substitute family, the children have experienced a range of emotions, of being settled, yet not fully so. Many factors have been identified from both the participant narratives and the literature control: their age at the time of maternal separation, the age of their caregiver and the level of care given, to mention only a few such factors. Longing, detachment and feeling lonely on the one side, yet gaining support and assistance on the other, the participants are left confused or ambivalent. This confusion led them to a need to redefine family, as well as finding coping mechanisms that would enable them to move on. Theme 1 explored the manner in which participants redefine family, as the participants viewed it. The following theme will explore aspects of resilience evident in the narratives of participants.

3.5. THEME 3: Factors enhancing resilience in children

The third theme in this research emerged from questions regarding how the children are coping, and what makes them “okay” with their situation. Resilience is normally linked to positive coping mechanisms, which will strengthen the child both in the short and long term. I could not help but be curious about how the children would respond to a direct question as to whether they consider themselves to be resilient or not. If the word “resilient” was explained to them, according to theory, some would struggle to identify themselves with being resilient. Others would agree that they are resilient, according to what theory says. In Theme 2 we saw that children were still longing for their parents and struggling to settle down with their new family. They showed vulnerability to the adversities they had encountered through their young lives. The participant who seemed most vulnerable was participant D, and she would
probably not fit into the theoretical concept of resilience. Participant D explained that having a reward in the form of something edible would help her cope with the longing for her mother:

“.....I would think I must stop crying now ‘cause I can have a chocolate....”

In saying such things, all the children showed unique mechanisms for coping with their adversity, and these are what this theme seeks to uncover. I was interested in their experiences and their way of coping, as opposed to whether they fitted into a definition. It has already been discussed that their definitions of a family are vastly different to the expected definition, as explored in Theme 1. This present theme therefore covers their short and long term adaptation, or resilience, as they explained it.

Resilience can be defined as the capacity to rebound from adversity, strengthened and more resourceful (Walsh, 1999:37). Similarly, Luthar et al. (2000:543) define resilience as a “dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity”. See Chapter One for further discussion on resilience. The subthemes that emerged under resilience factors are the following:

- Feeling a part of the substitute family enhances resilience
- Finding meaning in the situation enhances resilience
- Knowledge that the biological parents love the child enhances resilience
- Maintaining contact with biological parents enhances resilience
- The ability to cry and mourn enhances resilience
- People and activities that distract the child from longing enhance resilience
- Focusing on the present enhances resilience
- Support network and connectedness are prominent resilience factors

Some of the subthemes include information already discussed in the previous two themes, as those themes also looked at factors promoting adjustment. Quotations that pertain to the previous themes have been used for those particular themes and have therefore not always been repeated in this theme, even though they may have been relevant.
3.5.1. Feeling a part of the substitute family enhances resilience

In Section 3.4, the children described their experiences of living in a substitute family. Much of their experience was expressed as being positive. They conveyed the feeling of being important, and of belonging to a family who cares for them:

Participant G: “I wouldn’t like to leave my aunt and my uncle because they are quite my family now. I’m used to them.”

Participant F: “If I live here I miss my mom, but when I live there I sometimes miss my family.”

In these quotations it is evident that there were feelings of divided loyalty owing to the care they received from the substitute family. It was clear that the participants had thought about how it would be to leave their substitute family one day.

For the participants having people close to them was a positive way of coping with the difficulties. Patterson (2002b:243) explains the importance of a family identity against family stressors. Further, the author describes family cohesiveness as a resilience factor (Patterson, 2002b:240). Cohesiveness is the sense of belonging, an emotional connectedness. Walsh (1998:51) explains that genuine caring in a family is more important than parenting skills. Connectedness manifests in a sense of competence and self-worth that need to be nurtured and reinforced in order to overcome adversity (Walsh, 1998:85). This will be discussed further in Section 3.5.8.

Caring and a sense of belonging seem to go hand in hand for the participants in order for them to feel supported.

Relationships between family members are seen as a great support, as expressed by Greeff and Loubster (2008:293). The authors indicate that Xhosa speaking families see extended family as a great strength along with commitment. Families rejoice and suffer together, as part of a collective responsibility.

3.5.2. Finding meaning in the situation enhances resilience

In their narratives participants showed the need to find a reason for their parents leaving them in the care of others. Perhaps this gave them a sense of peace through
rationalizing their experience. Changing the way of thinking about a situation might have made their difficulties easier to cope with. Some of them expressed this by rationalizing the need for employment of the parent in another city, while others used their faith to rationalize the absence. Understanding their situation in their own unique ways seemed to help participants make sense of their situation, as evident in the following quotations:

Participant B: “For me it doesn’t really hurt ‘cos it’s normal, and I know everything. It’s cool.”

Participant G: “She went to Jo’burg so that she could pay my school fees. So I understand why she moved.”

The former participant thought there were expectations to be met before the mother could live with her, that of having to get a husband first:

Participant G: “She is quite looking for a husband so that she might be able to look after me.”

Families construct meanings about “a specific stressful situation, their identity as a family and their view of the world” (Patterson, 2002b:243). Stressful events only become negative when the family connotes events as such. Family resilience is fostered by shared beliefs that help members make meaning of crisis situations; facilitate a positive, hopeful outlook; and provide transcendent or spiritual values and purpose (Walsh, 2002:132).

By the participants giving reasons for the absent parent, they set conditions to be reunited again. It seems rather irrational to most of us, but the belief that the mother must first find a husband could be rooted in cultural norms, which allowed the participant to make sense of her experiences and adversity (Patterson, 2002b:243). According to Walsh (2002:132), making meaning of a situation like this creates a sense of coherence. Antonovsky’s three components that make up a sense of coherence are comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness (Hawley & DeHaan, 1996:286). Part of the participants’ meaning-making was that of attaching it to religion and spirituality. This aspect will be discussed in the following subtheme.
3.5.2.1 Religion, spirituality and church

The current study showed that religion and spirituality held great importance for the participants in terms of coping. Rituals, such as church services and prayer were expressed as generating feelings of hope and joy. Awareness of the presence of God also brought about a feeling of comfort, giving the participants confidence that they were loved by someone. This enhanced a sense of belonging. Spirituality seemed to offer comfort and a way of rationalising the situations the participants were faced with. This is what they said:

Participant G: “To me my mother is a bridge. She just gave me here.... God has a purpose for me. My family is making me ready for this purpose.”

Participant F: “....It's fun praising God....”

Participant D: “My gran usually says I must trust in God and pray...it makes me feel better.”

Participant G: “I know that God is there for me (...)I know I can trust God.”

Participant G commented in response to a question about what others may do if they feel there is no one that cares for them:

Participant G: “I would say they should keep strong because God is there for them.”

Religion and spirituality have been recognized as important aspects of healing and support during times of distress (Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999:5). Spirituality offers comfort and meaning beyond comprehension in the face of adversity (Walsh, 1998:71). Faith, therefore, becomes a way of rationalizing the difficulties. Greeff and Loubster (2008:293) suggest that there is a relationship between the value of family and whether family is viewed as a gift from God. Spirituality is an essential feature of family life, and it promotes the adaptation of family members (Greeff & Loubster, 2008:289).

Walsh (2002:132) presents three key processes in family resilience, which are family belief systems, organizational processes and communication processes. The belief system relates to the manner in which families attach meaning to hardship, the
effects of a positive outlook on life, transcendence and spirituality. People have a need to find a greater meaning in life, which is often met through spiritual faith. Potwana, Goliath and Jansen (2008:45) found that in divorced families spirituality played a significant role in handling a family crisis.

“Spiritual or religious resources, through faith practices such as meditation or prayer and religious or congregational affiliation, have empirical support for their healing power” (Walsh, 2002:132). Prayer can originate in the family, be centred in the home (Walsh, 1999:17) and be learned from one generation to the other. Greeff and Loubster (2002:295) found in their research, that “the frequency of prayer increases in proportion to participants increasingly experiencing their life circumstances as unfavourable”.

Greeff and Loubster (2002:295) found that “the experience of difficult times in the past”, where God’s presence was experienced every time, provides reassurance that there will be an awareness of His presence also in future times of crisis. This also creates trust in God.

As discussed in Theme 2, some of the participants seemed to struggle with their identity and sense of belonging, while others were comfortable with their place in their family. Loewenthal (1995) as cited in Greeff and Loubster (2008:290) believes that religion can serve as a protective factor, as a result of the sense of belonging that arises from spiritual affiliation. The participants’ quotations above show that they gained a greater sense of belonging through their religious practices at home.

3.5.3. Knowledge that the biological parents love the child enhances resilience

The children gained confidence and strength through the support from their substitute family. Finding meaning in the situation also appeared to help them. What was also important was how their biological parents treated them. The participants experienced a sense of being accepted and loved, as also discussed in Section 3.4.3.2.

Participant G: “Because I know my mom wouldn’t just go for something and leave me behind. She went to Jo’burg just because she wanted a job so that she could pay for my school fees. So I understand why she moved.”
One of the participants felt that the family thought highly of her, boosting her own self-esteem:

Participant F: “...everyone loves me in my family. I’m like their favourite daughter....“

One aspect of self-worth for a child is the knowledge of being loved. Parental involvement is one way of showing love to the child. McBride et al. (2002:999) highlight three factors of parental involvement, namely interaction (on a one-to-one basis), accessibility (physically and psychologically available) and responsibility (responsibility for the welfare and care of the child). Some of these aspects are not possible for the parents of the children in this research, such as physical availability. What stood out from the participants was that the parents showed responsibility for the child’s well-being by gaining employment in a different area which would be beneficial for the child.

Self-esteem is identified as a sign of resilience in grieving children (Barnar, Morland & Nagy, 1999:57). Concepts of the self are products of relationships (Walsh, 1998:51). Participant F, mentioned above, expressed a feeling of importance in her family, showing how this feeling of being loved is important for enhancing self-esteem.

3.5.4. Maintaining contact with biological parents enhances resilience

Although the participants did not live with their biological parents, an important part of coping was to keep in touch with an absent parent, as shown in Section 3.4.3.3. Knowing that the parent is “just a phone call away”, or that they would see them during the holidays proved to keep them going. Being aware that the parent loves them gave them a sense of reassurance and enabled them to settle in their substitute family. Attachment, as explained in Chapter One, is not only determined by physical proximity, but also included the child’s sense of emotional closeness (Thompson, 2002:117). This explains the need for continual contact with the parent.

Every participant explained that they saw their mother or father during the year, mostly during holidays. They would either go to their parents or receive visits from them. This was reported to have a positive effect on their relationship and on the children’s coping:
Participant D: “I just think to myself when they are gone that I will go and visit them again or they will come and see me.”

Participant F: “I’m used to travelling….I only see her in June and December. I’m used to it.”

Hogan et al. (2002) found that most children of divorced parents continued having a close relationship with their non-resident parent. This, the authors found, was important for the children as those who did not have close contact with their parents showed more distress about the divorce. Commitment can be defined by physical availability, an important aspect for children (McBride et al., 2002:999). This builds their relationship and strengthens the bonds between the parent and the child.

Another way of keeping in touch with their parents was by means of phoning. This is more available than physical contact and it keeps the bond effective, even though they are far apart. This is what the participants explained:

Participant G: “We always keep in touch. We phone each other….when I come from school there about 7 we phone her.”

Participant D: “...they phone me like maybe once a week....”

When children have restricted access to spending time with their parents, telephonic contact proves to be a great relief. In this way, parents can still be a part of their children’s lives in an “indirect supervising mechanism” (Piotrkowski & Hughes, 1993:197). Research shows that contact with noncustodial parents in cases of divorce impacts children positively (Amato, 2000:1280; Hipke, Wolchik, Sandler & Braver, 2002:121). Telephonic contact can therefore be a positive experience for children living far from their parents. Nevertheless, contact with the parent was not always possible for the participants. A way of coping in this case was to remember the good times of being together with the parent. Memories were shown to be important to the child, and photographs became a means of bringing back those memories:

Participant A: “Photos. And all the things that I’ve been doing with my mother. I have a family photo of me, my mother, my father and my brother....And the whole family
(…) Sometimes I think about things that I was doing as a baby with my mother. Going to the park and going to my first birthday party. And when I first saw my father.”

Participant F: “….I used to have photos of him [father] but now they’re lost….”

Several authors suggest the use of memories as a positive way of dealing with grief. A memory box and the use of photos are examples of this. Eldridge (1999:80) explains how the use of memories can assist adopted children to deal with their grief. Brandell (1998:11) mentions the use of memories when dealing with grief in a school. When the participants held on to good memories, it helped them to confirm the absent person’s existence and their continuing importance to them.

Part of maintaining contact with the parent is also a hope that one day they will live with the parent. During the interview the participants were asked what they would like to change in their family. Although throughout the interview, some had said it was fine living without their parents, many of them expressed their hope of one day living as a happy family, with their biological parents. Many of the participants had a vision of living with their parents in the future; some such hopes were more realistic and possible than others. A common thread was that such hope brought them closer to their parents.

The one participant’s drawing elicited my curiosity regarding all the people smiling in the picture. The participant expressed himself as follows:

Participant A: “I’m smiling because I know that next year me and my brother are going to stay with my mother next year.”

As mentioned earlier in Section 3.4.1, some of the participants had an unrealistic view of their future, a hope that probably could not be attained, while others were sure that the hope would materialise:

Participant E: “…if she came back she could build a house and we could live with her and my granny could live with us. And my father. Then we could make a family. I don’t know my father. I only know his name and surname.”
Participant B: “I would like to see my older grannies that are died. And they would live and be rich...and my mother and father would be there.”

Hope is an emotion that encompasses “finding meaning in a situation, perceiving a possible solution, envisioning a future goal and participating in that goal” (Lynch, 1965, in Post-White, 1998:281). Hope is a positive motivator for connectedness with the absent parent. It can also be said to be a “vision alternative to the present order of things” (Perry & Rolland, 1999:274).

The quality of the relationship between the child and parent is a determining factor of wanting to stay together. Some of the unrealistic hopes are discussed by Owusu and Howitt (1997) as cited in Kroll (2002:113):

“[T]he severance of contact between a child and his /her natural parents encourages idealisation of the parent and fantasies of reunion, thus depriving the child of the opportunity to address the reality of the loss and its causes”.

3.5.5. The ability to cry and mourn enhances resilience

Mourning can be difficult for children, as it evokes uncomfortable feelings. In the subtheme above, one can sense the participants’ longing and grief over the loss of their parental relationship. The children in this study showed uneasiness about mourning, and wanted it to be quickly over and done with. Nevertheless, they saw the need for it, as it was a way of coping with the negative feelings of longing. This is what participants expressed:

Participant A: “....sometimes I cry.....”

Participant D: “I just cry and then I get it over and done with it.... Always maybe when they’d leave after maybe five minutes I would start crying.”

A participant expressed her need to sit quietly at times, to mourn the loss of the parental closeness:

Participant F: “....I just sit and I think and sit quiet....”
Gardner (1970:35) encourages children who go through a difficult time after divorce to cry, as “you feel a little better about things”. Several authors have studied children and grieving, and conclude that it is normal to cry during a loss or mourning (Goldman, 2009: McEntire, 2003 & Gardner, 1970). The relationship between the parent and the child also has an impact on the ability to mourn the loss. Kubler-Ross, as cited in Ward (1993:33) explains that the most important thing is to speak about feelings regarding the loss, allowing the child to work through both rational and irrational feelings.

During a divorce, children mourn the loss of a parent. Thompson (2002:116) expresses the view that “children have to cope with the loss of a loved parent whose presence could be taken for granted, and who is now somewhere else”.

3.5.6. People and activities that distract the child from longing enhance resilience

Children in this study found it helpful to engage in activities that take their minds off longing for their family. Friends, media and school provided ways of coping for the participants. Distraction seemed to assist the children, just as well as facing the adversity, as the following participant said:

Participant D: “I just think of something else.....Maybe when there’s something nice in the fridge. Like a chocolate in the fridge and I would think I must stop crying now cause I can have a chocolate.”

Friends were seen as assisting in taking the participants’ minds away from longing, and rather focusing on play:

Participant: E “They [friends] make me forget about my mother. They make me not talk about my mother.”

Participant F: “Everyone. They get my mind off everything. We have fun and we play. So sometimes I forget about my mom cos I’m busy having fun.”

Participant D: “There are friends there [in church]. I don’t normally share my secrets with them, I just play with them. I don’t normally think about it.”
The participants explained that the media, especially TV, became an active mind-distracting activity. The children indicated that after-school hours were used for TV viewing. Their minds wandered in other directions, and there was no need to think of reality for that little while.

Participant F: “When I come home I start watching cartoons. Cartoons really help cos we all like it.”

When starting this study, I expected that school would play a positive role in the coping of the participants. Teachers and fellow learners were expected to be of support to those dealing with adversities. One could even go as far as expecting them to find surrogate families in the form of their teachers and fellow learners. Similar to this is the research carried out by Black (2006) which found that teachers played a vital role in the lives of some of the foster care children at schools, in terms of their emotional well-being. However, it was found that the school was rather a source of distraction from the loss. None of the participants expressed the view that the school was in any way supportive in terms of their family situation:

Participant C: “The school don’t actually help me. I don’t talk about it so they don’t know.”

As mentioned, the participants expressed their opinion that school takes their minds off their difficulties and in this way creates a platform to excel:

Participant F: “I need to think of my work, so I can’t think of anything else. I concentrate on my work so I can get good marks, which I do.”

Positive thoughts about the present proved to be a source of help. Imagination also had a positive effect, similar to that of distraction. This is what participant F said:

Participant F: “I like to imagine. Like if I was a pop star...” [Replying to the question “what helps you?”:] “Maybe it’s my imagination.”

It seemed as if the most difficult time for the participants was directly after leaving the parents, during holidays and visits. The participants coped in different ways with this situation. One participant highlighted her conviction that keeping herself busy was
helping her, and she was almost proud that she had managed to shift her thoughts while on the plane straight after the farewell from her mother:

Participant F: “On the plane I meet a new person, then I’ll be busy talking instead of thinking about my mom. Then when my uncle picks me up he will ask about my holiday, and by the time I get to my family again my cousins will be ready to annoy me again.”

While Amato (2000:1281) asserts that active coping skills are shown to help children adjust quicker to adversities such as divorce, Hogan et al. (2002) are of the view that children with separated parents value distraction as a way of coping with difficulties. The latter coping strategy was more evident in the current research. The following excerpt from the movie *Akeelah and the Bee* (2007) expresses the use of this diversion:

“When I was a little girl my daddy died. I used to cry all the time. But then I found something that helped (...) I spelled, over and over again, and I’d feel better. Maybe when you think of her you can try spelling. It might help”.

Samera and Stolberg (1993) as cited in Amato (2000:1281) found that support from peers assisted in the adjustment of children from divorced families. It seemed as if the support from the participants’ peers was mainly in taking their minds off the difficulties by rather having fun. There were, however, expressions of support from their friends in other ways, as will be discussed in section 3.5.8.3.

While the media and their impact on children have been widely discussed (refer to Roberts & Foehr, 2008:11; Fondacaro & Fasig, 2006:364), no specific reference was found on how the media are used as a way of distracting from reality, although one can imagine how they can be useful for this purpose.

Positive illusions, as Walsh (1998:65) terms them, sustain hope during a crisis, in order for the persons involved to carry on with their lives to the best of their ability.

Hogan et al. (2002) found that many children of separated families had to adjust to new environments which proved to be a difficulty. Those who stayed at the same school expressed relief and stability. School was shown to be an indirect help, as a
source of distraction. Some of the participants mentioned that they worked hard to get good marks. Walsh (1998:64) states that it is found that resilient children with high self-esteem “perceive success as largely due to their own efforts, achievements and possess a sense of personal control over what happens in their lives”.

3.5.7. Focusing on the present enhances resilience

Many of the participants expressed relief at living in the here-and-now. There seemed to be a learned idea of thinking about the moment, instead of worrying or thinking about the past or future. This could be a coping mechanism to help them avoid negative thoughts as well as being grateful for what they have.

Participant F: “....I only think about now, the moment, now.....”

The participants were asked to give advice to children in the same situation. Some participants gave the advice to live in the moment, as the following participant explained expressively:

Participant F: “I would tell them to rather think about the moment that they are having instead of thinking of something else. Cos the moment they have can actually be a nice moment.”

Participant G: “I'd say they should be grateful that there are someone out there who cares for them.”

Participant D: “You must stop thinking about her. You must just calm down and know that everything will be fine.”

The ability to focus on the here and now is a skill which is often undervalued. This is similar to Higgins' finding (1994), cited in Walsh (1998:67), where resilient adults took charge of what they were able to change, while accepting what could not be changed.

3.5.8. Support network and connectedness as resilience factors

The children were very well aware that they did not live alone and that they needed the support of others. As already mentioned in Section 3.5.6, the diversion provided by friends and school was helpful, but the participants also proved that there were
people around the children who were there for them in difficult times. The substitute family as discussed at length under Theme 2 showed great support, as well as external family members. The perception created by the participants was that family members showed a little extra care for these children. Friends proved not only to divert them from difficulties, but also provided support by showing care.

Family cohesiveness, including separateness and connectedness, explains a family’s need to be together and support each other during adversities. Patterson (2002:241) found in his research that families reported that increased cohesiveness strengthened the family. Cohesion is defined by Olson (1993) as cited in Walsh (1998:84) as “the emotional bonding of family members with one another”. There is a need to balance closeness and commitment against separateness and differences.

3.5.8.1 Substitute family as support

The support from the substitute family is extensively discussed in Theme 2. The participants expressed gratitude for the care given by their substitute family. These are the people they interact with on a daily basis, often those that are the closest to the child. The participants shared about the support given by the substitute family in many ways:

Participant G: “He’s really been like treating my as my own father. But when I talk to people I say they are my parents, but they’re not my biological parents. But he’s a fun uncle to have.”

Participant E: “...we have fun together, we play cards and we talk....”

Participant G: “...he’s quite helpful to me with a lot of things....”

Individual growth and development is to an extent dependent on a well-functioning family providing an environment of security, trust and nurturance for support (Walsh, 1998:85). Every family member plays a part in easing family burdens or providing comfort. The participants reflected this through their descriptions of their experiences.
3.5.8.2. External family as support

The external family played a role in the support network for the participants. There was not as much talk about them as the substitute family, but they expressed some appreciation for the help they offered:

Participant B: “I go to Overbaakens when my family needs to go somewhere. My brother, sisters and my auntie and uncle [stay there].”

Participant E: “He [uncle] spoils me very much. He takes me to McDonalds, Steers, sometimes when he has money.”

Extended kin can assist a family with practical assistance and connection. Kinship resources can provide great support and resilience (Walsh, 1998:99). The concept of “multiple mothering and fathering” shared by “grandmothers and grandfathers, aunts, uncles, cousins” (Walsh, 1993:371) indicates the need for extended family members to be involved in child rearing. These support systems can provide aid and strength, and one cannot ignore these ties.

3.5.8.3. Friends as support

Section 3.5.4.1 described how friends could be a source of distraction from negative experiences. Friends helped by taking the participants’ minds away from their absent parents through play and fun. However, another aspect of the participants’ friends was the support they gained from their friends. Support, through being able to share a secret and generally having a feeling of being cared for, was expressed as follows:

Participant D: “There’s a friend here at school. Normally I would share a secret with a friend.”

Participant C: “[I]t’s people that you play with and go out with. Friends are also - they also care about you.”

Just as the extended family can provide support, so too can the community. Walsh (1998:99) discusses how important it is, during a crisis, to have community support which fosters individual and family well-being. For children, friends play an important
role in constituting their community. Hogan et al. (2002) also found that friends play a supporting role for the children of separated parents.

The support gained from all the role players in a child’s life reflects the African proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child” (Walsh, 1998:100). The possibility of being nurtured and mentored is greater in a thick network of relations.

3.6. THEME 4: Suggestions from participants

The last question put to the participants was what advice they would give to other children in the same situation as themselves. They gave a description of what children in their own age group would probably think and based their answers on their experiences many of which have already been discussed and analysed above. Many of the subthemes above look at their ways of coping, which also became their suggestions for other children. This shows their contentment with their own resilience and highlights what was already said in Section 3.5 to the effect that the children themselves found their own ways of coping. Again, many of these suggestions would not be printed in a theoretical book, but through experience these participants saw them as their best advice.

The participants appear to be concluding this study themselves, highlighting their very own advice and suggestions for further intervention. I have included each participant’s advice as I found all equally important, reflecting the developmental stages of the children, their lives and their experiences.

Participant A: “I would tell them to always phone. If they say no they can always look at pictures. If they had photos they could remember all the fun they had.”

Participant B: “I would tell them just to let it go and I would also ask “don’t you have a step mother?” And then they could stay with their step mother. I would tell them to let it go and live a happy life and maybe they’re living with your granny and I would say that just imagine your granny was your mother. Or your granddad was your father.”

Participant C: “I would tell them they would be fine with it and visit their parents.”
Participant D: “That things will be fine and you can see as things go on.”

Participant E: “It would, if they want to stay in touch with their parents they could call, there’s this programme on TV called “Khumbula eKhaya”. They should call Khumbula eKhaya then the man is gonna make them meet their parents.”

Participant F: “I would tell them to rather think about the moment that they are having.... And they will see their mother when they’re gonna see them..... I would also tell them that they have so many people around them that love them. So they should take notice... they should rather accept what they have than wish more...but then its better to live with your granny cos she will tell you jokes and stuff.”

Participant G: “I’d first say that they should be strong and not give up. And children that don’t live with their parents- I’d say they should be grateful that there are someone who are there to care for them. They should be strong cos their parents are trying to do the best for them. Maybe in the place where their parents live there are not quite good schools......I’d say they are not alone. There are someone there to care for them, and someone to look after them. Like a parent. They have guidance. All the people to care for them. I would say that they should keep strong because God is there for them. Cos when their parents come back they should make their parents proud.... They should keep strong and know that their parents still love them.”

The advice that the participants gave was expressed in their own unique ways. Greig et al. (2007:4) discuss the contention that “children are very special people...Children are seen as an outward celebration of life, as the next generation and as the future of mankind.” Most of the suggestions above had already been tried out by the participants. As we see, a recurrent factor was to be appreciative of what one already has.

3.7. Chapter Conclusion

Chapter Three has presented the findings of this research study, and the findings have been verified against the existing body of knowledge. The findings were presented in terms of the four themes, with their supporting subthemes and categories. The themes that emerged were: the perception of a family, the
experience of living in a substitute family, factors enhancing resilience and participants’ advice to other children in the same situation.

During this research, the participants expressed the conviction that they had managed to find ways of coping, which they saw as constructive. Therefore one can say that they were resilient in their adversities, finding ways of living through their difficulties. In the discussion of the findings, quotations have been added to support the findings. A literature control has enabled the researcher to compare and contrast the findings.
4.1. Introduction

The first two chapters in this research report provided an introduction to the topic of children experiencing voluntary parental absence and a description of the research methodology used in the actualization of this study. Chapter One provided an overview of the literature available on attachment theory and resilience in children. This chapter also provided an introduction to the research methodology. Chapter Two gave a broader description of the research design and methodology. Chapter Three discussed the findings emerging from the research. Four themes were derived from the findings: children’s perception of a family, children’s experiences of living in a substitute family, resilience in children experiencing voluntary parental absence and suggestions from the participants for other children in the same situation.

The purpose of this final chapter is to provide a summary of the research methodology and the main findings, to highlight limitations to the study, to draw conclusions and make recommendations based on the conclusions that can inform practice and further study.

4.2. Summary of research design and methodology

The goal of the research was to enhance an understanding of children’s experiences of voluntary parental absence and the factors that contribute to their resilience during this process. There were two objectives in reaching this goal:

To explore and describe how children experience living without their parents owing to voluntary parental absence; and

To explore and describe the factors that enhance the resilience in children who live with extended family members owing to voluntary parental absence.
The study employed a qualitative, explorative, descriptive and contextual design, to attain the goal.

4.2.1. Sampling
A non-probability purposive sampling technique was used to select participants for the study. The purposive sampling was used on the basis of the characteristics of experience related to the study. One school in Port Elizabeth was chosen as the site for the study. The school has a rich multi-cultural aspect, and children from various socio-economic areas attend the school.

Purposive sampling was used to elicit English speaking boys and girls between the ages 10 and 12 years. Further criteria were: that the children were not living with their parents, but had been with an extended family member for at least 6 months to 3 years; and that the parents of the children had made a voluntary decision to leave in order to seek employment in another part of the country.

4.2.2. Data collection
Data were collected during one-to-one semi-structured interviews. Open-ended questions were prepared and asked in order to gain more in-depth responses. In the research drawings were used as a warm up exercise in order to facilitate rapport between participants and myself as the researcher. Each child was asked to draw his or her family. Secondly, the drawings were used as a starting point as to how the child perceived the concept of family.

A tape recorder was used in all interviews with the consent of each child. This was discussed before the interview with the participant, together with a test-run of chatting with the tape recorder on, and listening to it, so that the children could familiarize themselves with the device.

4.2.3. Data analysis
Data analysis was effected by using the model proposed by Tesch (in Creswell, 1998:155). A consensus discussion was held between me as the researcher and an independent coder to compare results of themes derived from the interviews. From the discussion four themes were decided upon.
4.2.4. Ensuring trustworthiness

As a researcher I utilized the model of Guba (1981) as cited in Krefting (1990), to ensure trustworthiness of the research. Four criteria were used: Credibility to ensure truth-value of the data, transferability for application outside the study, dependability for possible replication of the study, and finally confirmability to ensure neutrality of the data.

4.3. Summary of the research findings

As mentioned before, four themes emerged in the research. A summary of these themes and subthemes is presented below.

4.3.1. THEME 1: Children’s perception of what a family is

The concept of family in the eyes of the participants was an interesting one. Instead of using specific roles and kinship lines, the participants explained the concept by using characteristics which a family portrays. Four subthemes emerged to support participants’ perceptions:

- **Structure of the family**
  
The children’s drawings elicited an explanation of the structure of the family. The choice of whom to include and whom not to include showed interesting distinctions. Some of the participants did not include themselves in the picture while others started with themselves. Some of the drawings showed every member of the extended family, even those living far away. Every participant included some of the nuclear family members, and some from their substitute family.

- **A family provides care**

  All the participants explained that a family should provide care. Physical care was explained in terms of providing shelter, food and making sure that everyone is healthy. Emotional care was expressed by the participants as affectionate responses, and by being available for the child. This also created a strong sense of security. Financial care was also important for the children, as they were very much aware that their families provided school fees, clothes and toys as a way of caring.
Provision of resources and nurturance and support, as listed by Epstein, Bishop, Miller and Keitner (1993:147) are seen as part of provision of care.

- **A family demonstrates and communicates love**

The participants experienced love as an important aspect of a family. This created a sense of belonging. When the family was available to the child it demonstrated love. The participants also asserted that a family creates and shows trust.

- **A family provides guidance**

The participants had certain expectations of the family to guide them through their childhood. Resilience theory emphasises the importance of providing “nurturance, protection and guidance” to children (Walsh, 1998:91). The family’s guidance was seen as preparing the participants for a purpose in life. The family was expected to teach values as well as discipline the child.

- **The family facilitates access to education**

Education was seen as a need by the participants. They were aware that school fees had to be paid, school uniforms had to be clean, and lunches and transport money had to be provided. These aspects of education were seen as a family function; the family provided access to all these. Quality of education was not taken for granted. Many of the participants were grateful for the school they had been sent to by their family, as it provided quality education.

4.3.2. THEME 2: Children’s experiences of living with a substitute family

Living in a substitute family was an experience all the participants talked about. Children experienced ambivalent feelings regarding living with their extended family. The experiences of living with the substitute family reflected a process starting at the separation from the biological parents, adjusting to the new family, and finally settling into the substitute family.
• **Experiences of the early days in the substitute family**

The early days with the substitute family were experienced very differently by the participants. The experience varied according to age at separation and also how well they knew their substitute family. The participants had to deal with detachment from their mother. The outcome of the detachment appeared to be dependent on the relationship with their mothers. The participants also recalled mixed feelings regarding the early days.

• **Adjustment within the substitute family**

This stage brought its own challenges. The participants in the research saw the support and assistance provided by their substitute family as a way of adjusting to their new environment. They showed appreciation for the support given. In other instances they felt lonely and described the experience of mourning alone, with little support. This paradox caused the participants to feel disloyal towards their families, as they grieved about the separation, yet felt supported by the substitute families. Divorce studies show that children are able to adapt and find their ways of coping, yet the challenge of disloyalty to some parental figure, also found in this study, is often present (Hogan et al., 2002 and Thompson, 2002:116).

• **Present experiences of the substitute family**

The substitute family had now become their very own family system. The participants demonstrated that they were settled in their families, seeing the family as their normal family. This was done through for instance calling their caregivers “mom” or “dad”. On the other hand, the participants expressed, often indirectly, that they still missed their biological parents. This would sometimes be expressed through fantasies of “the perfect mother”, giving them whatever they asked for. By the substitute family allowing contact with the biological parents, the feelings of loss were reduced. Individual resilience factors, as presented by Walsh (2002), show that children based in families with strong resilience will be able to cope better. This was reflected in this study. The experience of peers also had an influence on the process of settling down with the substitute family. Peers would often talk about their “normal family life” which would make the participants feel different.
4.3.3. THEME 3: Factors enhancing resilience in children

Questions were asked during the interviews to determine the ways in which the children cope and their ability to bounce back from the voluntary parental absence as adversative experiences. Theory describes specific factors enabling resilience. The participants expressed their ways of managing the situation; but these were not always in line with theory.

The following aspects were expressed in this research study as factors contributing to enhanced resilience:

- **Feeling a part of the substitute family enhances resilience**

Knowing and experiencing that the substitute family wanted the best for the participant brought about positive coping. Parallel to this is Greeff and Loubster’s (2008:293) study indicating that family support is valuable in adversities. This support would make the participants feel important and create a sense of belonging.

- **Finding meaning in the situation enhances resilience**

Some of the participants attempted to rationalize their experience. They saw the absence of the parent as meaningful, in that they believed that the parent surely wanted the best for the child. This also meant that the parent needed to be away in order to provide for the child. Faith and spirituality played an important role for some of the participants, gaining a sense of belonging from a higher power and a sense of security during rituals. Religion and spirituality have been recognized as important aspects of healing and support during times of distress (Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999:5). Similarly, Walsh (1998:71) found that spirituality offers comfort and meaning beyond comprehension in the face of adversity.

- **Knowledge that the biological parent loves the child enhances resilience**

Despite the long distances between parents and children, the participants felt that the parents loved them. There was a sense of security knowing that the parent wanted the best for the participant, even by choosing to work in another city.
• Maintaining contact with biological parent enhances resilience

The participants saw it as very important to maintain contact with their biological parent. This was done through physical contact by visiting each other and more regularly through regular telephonic contact. The participants also asserted that recalling memories of the good times with their parents was a positive way of maintaining contact. Many of the participants expressed the hope of one day living with the parents, in a loving, happy family.

• The ability to cry and mourn enhances resilience

The participants showed uneasiness about mourning their loss, yet expressed their need for it. Some of the participants explained that they cry, although often alone. Kubler-Ross, as cited in Ward (1993:33) highlights the importance for children of speaking about these mourning processes.

• People and activities that distract the child from longing enhance resilience

The children explained that distractions helped them to deal with their longing for their parents. School, friends and media (especially television viewing) all assisted them to direct their focus to other things, and therefore move the focus away from their situation. Amato (2000:1281) mentions the impact peers have on children, as was also found in this study. The participants employed distraction as one way to find strength, in a way similar to Hogan et al.’s (2002) findings. Positive thoughts and imagination also created a way of redirecting focus.

• Focusing on the present enhances resilience

Many of the participants expressed relief at living in the here-and-now. There seemed to be a learned idea of thinking about the moment, instead of worrying or thinking about the past or future. Friends and cousins helped them by playing with them.
• **Support network and connectedness as resilience factors**

The participants explained that they needed people around them for good and bad days. Their support network consisted of the substitute family, extended family members and friends who showed care through support, play, a listening ear and practical needs.

**4.3.4. THEME 4: Suggestions from the participants**

The participants offered advice that could be passed on to other children in the same situation as themselves. Much of this was similar to the points that have already been discussed under resilience factors. Showing appreciation for what you have, remembering the past, and living in the moment are messages that recurred in their responses.

**4.4. Conclusions**

In concluding this research it is imperative to revisit the goal of the study. The goal of the research was to enhance an understanding of children’s experiences of voluntary parental absence and factors that enhance their resilience during this process. Through the use of interviews guided by open-ended questions and a drawing, the participants were able to express themselves freely.

Many of the participants revealed that they had never spoken to anyone about their experiences before, and the interview was their first time of exploring feelings and talking about their life. This opportunity was a challenge to some, yet greatly appreciated and needed. They felt that they were being heard and accepted.

The children reflected having benefited from the support they had received, be it from their biological and substitute family, friends, or school. Their resilience was enhanced when there was a feeling of being supported.

There has not been another study like this one, and the findings prove the need to continue work with the target population. This study raised issues which have not
previously received concerted attention, which can be highly valuable for future research and intervention.

4.5. Limitations of the study

One school was used to derive the sample. Although this particular school had a multi-cultural and wide socio-economic range, I acknowledge that this limited sample could cause certain limitations to the study. A wider geographical sample could increase the truth value of the data. The interviews were all conducted in English, which could have been a limitation as regards expression as the participants’ home language is isiXhosa. Only one interview was conducted with each of the participants. A second interview could have deepened the process, and a richer collection of data could have been be derived. Children need some time to gain trust, which further reinforces the suggestion that a second interview could have been beneficial. The question regarding advice for other children was placed at the end of the interview. This question could possibly have obtained richer information if there had been a follow-up interview to give the participants more time to reflect on the question.

The dearth of literature in this area meant that the limited existing theory and literature had to be used. This could also have impacted on the background to the study and basic assumptions as well as the findings.

4.6. Recommendations

Based on the findings above, specific recommendations for further intervention and research are presented, regarding the topic of this research. This section is divided into three parts: recommendations for practice, for policy making and awareness and for further study.

4.6.1. Recommendations for practice

Arising from the above conclusions the recommendations have been categorised in terms of specific categories of professionals who interact with children. First, recommendations are made for educators, taking cognisance of the fact that they are the ones in contact, often on a daily basis, with children who are in similar life
circumstances to the participants in this study. The second set of recommendations is addressed to Social Workers and other practitioners to inform their possible intervention.

4.6.1.1. **Recommendations for schools and educators**

Many of the participants expressed negative experiences and feelings towards the school’s lack of intervention regarding their experiences. It is assumed that it is not only the particular participating school that has children who are experiencing voluntary parental absence. Based on this assumption, recommendations are set out as follows:

- Schools should take a proactive stance towards the different types of families represented by their learners, in allowing the learners to express their thoughts and feelings within a safe and accepting class-room environment.
- Educators and schools should become aware of each particular child’s home situation. A positive experience recounted by the participants was the one-on-one interaction between educator and learner, showing the need for and benefit of this kind of contact at school. Through this, support can be given informally and formally.

4.6.1.2. **Recommendations for Social Workers and other practitioners**

The following are recommendations for Social Workers and other practitioners:

- A range of accessible support programmes should be offered to address the varied and changing needs of all family members, during the time of separation from and absence of parents. Support groups at schools should be run collaboratively with guidance teachers.
- Education and support should be offered to caregivers by Social Workers regarding the children’s changing experiences, difficulties emanating from these experiences and ways of dealing with such challenges.
- Churches, NGOs and the Department of Social Development could be involved in education and support groups for children and caregivers in alternative families.
4.6.2. Recommendations for policy and awareness

On a policy and legislative level the following points are recommended:

- That the use of the concept ‘family’ in any public document is inclusive of any form of family rather than the populist notion of the traditional nuclear family only.
- Current literature on the conceptualisation of family lacks alternative definitions. Information from the current study illustrates that there needs to be more awareness and acceptance of alternative families in society.
- Family policy regarding support for families experiencing parental absence could be coordinated with local service planning and delivery. This would encourage the wider society to accept the new alternative families that are emerging. The new Children’s Act has made provision for these alternative families, including kinship care; however, there is still a need for clearer acceptance and coordination.
- Family policy should encourage continuity and stability in family relationships, should promote an ethos of lifelong parental responsibility and facilitate long-term contact and involvement between children and non-resident parents.

4.6.3. Recommendations for further research

The lack of South African literature on this topic highlights the need for further research. Future research regarding voluntary parental absence is recommended in the following areas:

- This study could be replicated using a larger and more representative sample from different schools and cities to generalize to a broader population of families who experience voluntary parental absence.
- Exploratory research could be done in the area of the self-esteem of children experiencing voluntary parental absence, their specific needs, experiences of discipline in the family and the parents’ experience of their absence.
- A comparative study would be valuable in order to further explore the role of socio-economic factors.
• Action research on resilience in children, involving the children at a more active level, could add value to the topic.
• The resilience factors that the children arrived at through their way of coping, as well as from the suggestions given, could be researched further to assess the effectiveness of these coping mechanisms.
• Further research on alternative family types could assist in eliminating the stigma of not being “normal”, for those individuals not living in a nuclear family.

4.7. Concluding remarks
This research has noted the importance of resilience and attachment during child development. Voluntary parental absence creates specific challenges for children in terms of attachment and creating new relationships. This study has shown that, whilst the common cliché that “children are resilient” might have some merit, it is also incumbent on educators, social workers and civil society organisations to recognise that children experiencing voluntary parental absence would benefit from support in order to enhance resilience as suggested by the children in this research.

I wish to end with a quotation from our former President, Nelson Mandela, stating the importance of putting our children first, as a nation as well as individuals:

"There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children."

Nelson Mandela, 1995
REFERENCE LIST

Akeelah and the Bee. 2007. LionsGate Films Production.


ADDENDA
Addendum A

Questions for semi-structured interviews:

- Can you please draw a picture of your family as you see your family?
- Can you tell me about your family from the drawing?
- What is a family for you?
- What is important in a family?
- What is it like to live away from your mom or dad?
- What helps you when you miss your mom or dad?
  - Who helps you?
  - How does school help you, or the family you stay with?
  - What helps you within yourself?
- If you could change anything in your family what would that be?
- What suggestions would you give to other children in the same situation?

Examples of probing questions to elicit child’s meaning of a drawing:

- Can you tell me about your picture?
- Can you explain the colours you have used? What made you choose the particular colours you used?
- What is the reason for (a particular family member) to be next to/ away from another person?
Addendum B

Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University

Chairperson of the Research Ethics Committee (Human) NMMU

Tel.: +27 (0)41 504-2710 Fax: +27 (0)41 504-2770

Ref: N 01/11/03/07 [H08-HEA-SDP-003/Approval]

Contact person: Mrs U Spies

13 October 2008

Ms V Goliath
NMMU
Faculty of Health Sciences
Department of Social Development Professions

Dear Ms Goliath

RESILIENCE IN CHILDREN EXPERIENCING VOLUNTARY PARENTAL ABSENCE

Your above-entitled application for ethics approval served at the September 2008 ordinary meeting of the Research Ethics Committee (Human).

We take pleasure in informing you that the application was approved by the Committee.

The Ethics clearance reference number is H08-HEA-SDP-003, and is valid for three years. Please inform the REC-H, via your faculty representative, if any changes (particularly in the methodology) occur during this time. An annual affirmation to the effect that the protocols in use are still those for which approval was granted, will be required from you. You will be reminded timeously of this responsibility, and will receive the necessary documentation well in advance of any deadline.

We wish you well with the project. Please inform your co-investigators of the outcome, and convey our best wishes.

Yours sincerely

Dr PED Winter
Chairperson: Research Ethics Committee (Human)

cc: Department of Research Capacity Development
Faculty Officer, Faculty of Health Sciences
Department of Education
Ethel Valentine Building
Sutton Road
Sidwell
Att: Mrs Mbopa

Dear Madam

Permission to access a school to conduct research

I am Gudveig Kana and I am doing a Masters Degree in Clinical Social Work at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. I have to conduct a research project. The title of the research I would like to conduct is:

Exploring resilience in children experiencing voluntary parental absence.

The aim of the study is to explore and describe factors that enable resilience in children living with their grandparents or other alternative caregivers in light of the experience of voluntary parental absenteeism.

I hereby request access to School to conduct interviews with children between grade 4-7.

The study will take place according to the ethical guidelines and policy of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. The information is provided so that you can understand the process that will be followed.

- Participants will each be required to take part in a face-to-face interview with the researcher for approximately one hour. The interview will contain a drawing exercise and questions from the researcher, in order to elicit the child’s understanding of a family, and its resilience factors due to parental absence. With the principals’ permission, interviews will be held on the school premises in the least inconvenient time. In cases where the participant requests so, an alternative venue and time can be arranged.
• A tape recorder will be used to record the sessions and the participants’ permission will be sought for this. Recordings will be accessed only for the purpose for this study, and these will be discarded once the study is complete.
• For legal and ethical reasons, participating children will need written consent from their parents in order to participate in the study. In order to ensure voluntary participation, the children will also give written assent, and any implications of the study will be explained to them prior to the interview.
• The participants and their parents’ identities, as well as the schools identity will be strictly confidential.
• Participants will have the right to terminate or withdraw from the study at any time. Participants will not be exposed to any risk, such as unfair treatment or injuries, and due to the sensitive nature of the research, referral resources will be made available to all participants should this become necessary.

If you have any further queries, please do not hesitate to contact me on 072 566 0887 or my supervisor Veonna Goliath, no 041 -5042197.

Thanking you,

Mrs Gudveig Kana
Researcher
072 566 0887
gudveighk@hotmail.com

Mrs V. Goliath
Supervisor at NMMU
(041) 5042197
veonna.goliath@nmmu.ac.za

Dr Pretorius
Co- supervisor
Programme Coordinator, Social Development Professions
(041) 5042630
blanche.pretorius@nmmu.ac.za
Addendum D

Mrs G. Kana
Researcher
NMMU
(Fax: 041 5042574)

Dear Mrs Kana

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT
SCHOOL: PORT ELIZABETH

I refer to your undated letter and received on 20 October 2008.

Permission is hereby granted for you to conduct your research on the following conditions:

1. your research must be conducted on a voluntary basis;
2. all ethical issues relating to research must be honoured;
3. your research is subject to the internal rules of the school, including its curricular programme and its code of conduct and must not interfere in the day-to-day routine of the school.

Kindly present a copy of this letter to the principal as proof of permission.

I wish you good luck in your research.

Yours faithfully

[Signature]

L.M.T. MBOPA
ACTING DISTRICT DIRECTOR: PORT ELIZABETH

20 October 2008
Addendum E

Permission to conduct research

I am Gudveig Kana and I am doing a Masters Degree in Clinical Social Work at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. It is required that students conduct a research project. The title of the research I would like to conduct is: **Exploring resilience in children experiencing voluntary parental absence.** The aim of the study is to explore and describe factors that enable resilience in children living with their grandparents or other alternative caregivers in light of the experience of voluntary parental absenteeism.

The study will take place according to the ethical guidelines and policy of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. The information is provided so that you can understand the process that will be followed.

- Participants will each be required to take part in a face-to-face interview with the researcher, approximately one hour. The interview will contain a drawing exercise and questions from the researcher, in order to elicit the child’s understanding of a family, and its resilience factors due to parental absence. With your permission, interviews will be held on the school premises in the least inconvenient time. In cases where the participant requests so, an alternative venue and time can be arranged.
- A tape recorder will be used to record the sessions and the participants’ permission will be sought for this. Recordings will be accessed only for the purpose for this study, and these will be discarded once the study is complete.
- For legal and ethical reasons, participating children will need written consent from their parents in order to participate in the study. In order to ensure voluntary
participation, the children will also give written assent, and any implications of
the study will be explained to them prior to the interview.

- The participants and their parents’ identities, as well as the schools identity will
be strictly confidential. I also ask that you will handle all correspondence with the
participants with utmost confidentiality.
- Participants will have the right to terminate or withdraw from the study at any
time. Participants will not be exposed to any risk, such as unfair treatment or
injuries, and due to the sensitive nature of the research, referral resources will be
made available to all participants should this become necessary.

I would request that as the principal at your school, that you identify an initial group
of ten (10) children from your school who conform to the description of the criteria
below:

- An English-speaking boy or girl of 9-12 years of age, attending grade four to
seven.
- The child should preferably be the only child of the biological mother and father,
where either one or both parents have custody of the child.
If it is difficult to find children without siblings, a child with siblings could also
partake in the study. His/her present primary care giver must be the grandparent
of the child, or a close family relative, and he/she must have lived under the
relative’s care continually for a minimum period of 6 months.
- The parent of the child must have made a voluntary decision to leave in order to
seek employment in another part of the country. The contact between the parent
and the child should not exceed more than once a month visit.

Once the possible participants are identified, you are requested to contact the
children’s parents (legal guardian) to ask for permission for you to reveal their
personal details to me in order for me to contact them. I will then obtain the
necessary consent from them.

The findings of the study, including recommendations, will be provided to your school
to use as a resource for any further intervention.
Since this is a student research project, I regret that there is no remuneration attached to the project. If you have any further queries, please do not hesitate to contact me on 072 566 0887.

Thanking you greatly for your participation as a school.

Yours faithfully,

Mrs Gudveig Kartveit Kana
Researcher
072 566 0887
gudveighk@hotmail.com

Mrs Veonna Goliath
Supervisor
(041) 504 2197
veonna.goliath@nmmu.ac.za

Dr Pretorius
Co-supervisor
Programme Coordinator, Social Development Professions
(041) 504 2630
blanche.pretorius@nmmu.ac.za
CONSENT FORM

Title of research: Exploring resilience in children experiencing voluntary parental absence.

Your signature below indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information provided in the accompanying letter entitled “Permission to conduct research” regarding your school’s participation in this research study and that you are willing to allow the participation of your pupils. Should you decide to withdraw your school’s participation at a later date, you will be free to do so by letting the researcher know. If you have any further questions about the study, please contact the researcher and I will address them as soon as possible.

I AM WILLING TO ALLOW MY SCHOOL TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH STUDY AS INDICATED IN THE ACCOMPANYING LETTER.

Name: 

Signature: 

Date: 29/11/20
Addendum G

Dear Sir/ Madam

Permission to conduct research with your child

My name is Gudveig Kana I am a qualified social worker and presently studying towards my Masters Degree in Clinical Social Work at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU). In order to obtain this qualification, it is necessary for me to conduct a research project. I have chosen to do a research project titled: *Exploring resilience in children experiencing voluntary parental absence.*

The aim of the study is to enhance an understanding of children’s experience of and resilience during voluntary parental absence. A study of the literature shows that the parents are the main figures in a child’s life. Parental absence can therefore cause a negative effect on the child. Nevertheless, it is shown that children often show great ways of coping with the challenge of being away from their parent. I want to explore what helps them through this, and what gives them strength to be able to live away from their biological parent.

This might be a sensitive topic for you and your family, but I hope this research will enhance the understanding of the topic, as well as find ways of dealing with it, both for the children and their caregivers.

The study will take place according to the ethical guidelines and policy of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.

Your child’s teacher has identified your child as a possible participant, on condition that you are prepared to give your consent.

The following procedure will be followed:

- You as the parent will also be asked to sign a consent form to state that you have been adequately informed of the nature of your participation, and that you are willing to participate according to this information. Should you wish to
give permission for your child’s participation, you are asked to fill in the written consent form attached to this letter, and hand it to your child’s school, or post it in the stamped envelope attached. Once consent is obtained from you, written and verbal assent from your child will be requested. It is important to note that this is fully voluntary, and if you or your child does not wish to participate, you or he/she can at any time choose not to sign or to withdraw from the interview at any point.

- Your child will take part in a private one-to-one interview with me, for approximately one hour. The interview will be conducted in English and will contain a drawing exercise and questions from the researcher, in order to elicit the child’s understanding of a family, and the child’s resilience factors due to parental absence. A copy of the questions is attached with this letter. Interviews will be held on the school premises at the least inconvenient time. This time will be negotiated with your child’s teacher to ensure that it does not interfere with their learning activities. The researcher will as much as possible avoid transport problems for the participants. In cases where you or the child requests so, an alternative venue and time can be arranged.

- With your permission, a tape recorder will be used to record the interview, and once the information has been used for the research process, the tape will be destroyed.

- Your identity, as well as your child’s and that of the school will not be published in any written document throughout the research. Every identifying detail will be treated as confidential.

- The child will not be exposed to any risk or harm. In cases where the child might be upset by the interview and researcher finds that the child might need counselling, referral resources will be given to the caregiver. If the child reveals anything that is harmful for him/her or others, the researcher will have to discuss it with the care giver for further intervention.

- The child will not be liable for any costs involved.

The results of the study will be made available to the school as a resource.
I would greatly appreciate your child’s participation in the research, and I am thankful for your time in considering this request.
If you have any further queries, please do not hesitate to contact me on 072 566 0887 or my research supervisor as indicated below.

Queries with regard to your rights as parent of a research subject can be directed to the Research Ethics Committee (Human) at the University. You can call the Director: Research Capacity Development, at 041-504 2538

Alternatively, you could also write to: The Chairperson of the Research, Technology and Innovation Committee, PO Box 77000, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Port Elizabeth, 6031.

Thank you,

Mrs Gudveig Kana
Researcher
072 566 0887
gudveighk@hotmail.com

Mrs V. Goliath
Supervisor at NMMU
(041) 5042197
veonna.goliath@nmmu.ac.za

Dr. Blanche Pretorius
Co-Supervisor
(041) 5042630
Blanche.pretorius@nmmu.ac.za
CONSENT FORM

Title of the research: Exploring resilience in children experiencing voluntary parental absence.

Primary investigator: Gudveig Kana
Supervisors: V. Goliath & B. Pretorius
Address: P.O. Box 77000
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University
Port Elizabeth, 6031
Contact tel. No: 041 504 2353

Declaration by parent / caregiver of participant

I, _____________________________ (your name), hereby confirm that Gudveig Kana invited my child to participate in the above-mentioned research for the purpose of fulfilling her Masters degree at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.

The aim of this study is to enhance understanding of children's experiences of voluntary parental absence and factors that they resilience during this process. The information will be used to add to the body of knowledge in the Social Work Profession.

I understand that my child will take part in a once-off one-to-one interview. There are not any risk identified in taking part of this study, but should there be any identified at a later stage, my child will be referred to the appropriate resource. My child, nor my
identity will not be revealed in any discussion, description or publication by the researcher.
Participation in this study will not result in any additional cost to myself nor my child. A report of the findings will be provided to my child’s school.

Voluntary participation
My consent to my child’s participation is voluntary  [ ] Yes  [ ] No

No pressure is put on me to give consent, and I understand that I may withdraw at any stage without being penalised.

I hereby voluntarily give consent for my child to participate in the above-mentioned research.

Signed at place: ___________________________ date ___________________________

Signature ____________________________

Signature of witness ____________________________
Name of witness ____________________________
Dear .....................

Information to participants

I am a qualified social worker and am currently studying towards my Masters Degree in Social Work at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU). As part of my studies, I need to do a research project. Research is about learning more about a topic that people do not know much about so that, as social workers, we learn more and can use what we have learnt.

My research project is called:
Exploring resilience in children experiencing voluntary parental absence.

This means that I want to learn more about children who do not live with their parents, since their parents choose to work in another town, and the child lives with relatives. I want to look at how the children cope, and what makes them strong while they live without their parents.

I want to talk to children so that I can learn more what they say about this topic, and since they are the ones experiencing this, they are experts on the topic.

I have chosen to interview a few children from your school, and I would like you to be one of those children. Your parent/caregiver has already given permission for you to participate, if you would like to, but it is important that you decide for yourself whether you would like to talk to me about this topic or not.

If you wish to participate, this is what will happen:

- You will have to sign a form to say that you want to be a part of the research.
  This is your choice; no one will be let down if you do not want to participate. If you do wish to participate, after you have signed the form, I will make a time to meet with you at school.
• During the interview, you will be asked to do a drawing and answer questions about your family. You choose what you want to tell, and what you do not want to tell.

• We will use a tape recorder, which means that your answers will be taped if you agree. This is so that I can remember everything that you say. You can listen to the tape if you wish to. I will make sure that no one else will be allowed to listen to the tape, and we can use a nickname if you would like to so nobody can identify you.

• Your details, as well as those of your parents, and your school will be kept private. This means that your name will not be mentioned anywhere in the report. The form you will be asked to fill in will contain your details for me to be able to contact you to schedule an interview appointment, but will not be used anywhere else.

• You have the right to say that you do not want to participate, as well as to stop the interview any time you wish. If you want to end your participation at any time, this would be accepted and nothing more will be expected from you, and I will not be angry.

I thank you for your time, and ask that you sign the assent form, if you wish to participate.

If you have any questions during the process, please call me on 0725660887.

Thank you,

Gudveig Kartveit Kana  
Researcher  
0725660887

Veonna Goliath  
Supervisor  
041 5042197

Dr. B Pretorius  
Co-Supervisor  
(041) 5042630
ASSENT FORM

Name of the research: Exploring resilience in children experiencing voluntary parental absence.

Researcher: Gudveig Kana
Supervisors: V. Goliath & B. Pretorius
Address: P.O. Box 77000
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University
Port Elizabeth, 6031
Contact tel. No: 041 504 2353

Declaration by participant

I, __________________________ (your name), agree that Gudveig Kana invited me to participate in this research that she is studying.

The reason for this study is to understand more about children who do not live with their parents, since their parents choose to work in another town, and the child lives with relatives. It will look at how the children cope, and what makes them strong while they live without their parents.

I understand that I will take part in one interview where only the researcher and I will be there. I do not know of any risks, but if the researcher realizes that I need help with something, she will help me find someone I can talk to about it.

No one will need to know who I am, and my name will not be told or written down anywhere in the research. The school’s name will also not be written down anywhere.
During the interview there will be a tape recorder, and only the researcher and I will
listen to it.
I will not have to pay for anything.
A report of the findings will be provided to my school.

**Voluntary participation**
I agree to participate

Yes ☐ No ☐

No one has pressured me to participate and I can stop whenever I want to.
I now voluntarily give assent to participate in the above-mentioned research.

Signed at place: ___________________________ date __________________

Signature______________________________

Signature of witness_______________________

Name of witness_________________________
Addendum K

Participant A
Participant B
Participant C

Daddy  Aunt  me  cousin  cousin  Real Mom
Participant G