

Exploring the intensive parenting practices of parents from low-income households and the
consequences for well-being

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Abstract

Background: Intensive parenting refers to a child-rearing approach focusing on a child's emotional, cognitive and psychological needs that is emotionally and financially demanding for parents. This approach to parenting has become normalised practice in Western countries and is often promoted through governmental policy and the media. Intensive parenting ideologies were initially grounded in middle-class values, however, recent evidence suggests all parents, regardless of class, now attempt to engage in intensive parenting to varying degrees. Although, this likely carries additional emotional burdens for parents who are socially and economically disadvantaged. Typically, a greater weight of intensive parenting expectations is also unevenly heaped upon mothers rather than fathers, therefore highlighting gender disparities which could have consequences for mothers' well-being. Intensive parenting is often associated with detrimental well-being outcomes for mothers but rarely explored from their perspective in detail.

Aim and Methodology: This research aims to explore the experiences of parents from lower-income households regarding the intensification of parenting and the associated affect upon their well-being analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews.

Findings: The findings emphasise how intensive parenting is a complicated, multi-faceted phenomenon involving social, cultural and structural influences that further reinforce parenting pressures with largely detrimental ramifications upon the well-being of parents from lower-income households. Moreover, the findings highlight how mothers' and fathers' experiences of intensive parenting pressures differ.

Conclusion: Given participants' accounts of their negative experiences of intensive parenting pressures and the impact upon well-being, recommendations are discussed. Including calls

for systemic understanding of structural pressures, changes to support services to offer strength-based approaches and peer-support, and social and cultural change surrounding parenting beliefs which reinforce parenting pressures.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Chapter Overview

This chapter aims to introduce the thesis in a narrative sense, starting with an outline of background literature relevant to the intensification of parenting and its reported impact on parental well-being.

Background

Intensive Parenting

The term ‘intensive mothering’ was originally coined by Sharon Hays (1996) to describe an approach to child-rearing that is typically focused on the needs of the child, while being emotionally and financially intensive for the mother. Intensive parenting focuses on the child’s physical, emotional, cognitive, and psychological needs. Consequently, parents are increasingly devoting more time, money and energy to their children (Faircloth, 2014, 2020). This approach to parenting is widely promoted through the media as the ideal parenting style (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). Therefore, intensive parenting has become a popular practice in Western countries, such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia (Lee, 2023).

Consequently, the actions of a parent have become a determining factor on a child’s future health and success, perhaps to the detriment of parents (Lee et al., 2014). Possible reasons for the intensification of parenting over the last half-century may be due to the view that children are more vulnerable and exposed to risks, which could impact their physical and emotional development (Faircloth, 2014, 2020). Interestingly, this view of risk posits that society as a whole, poses risks to children, making them vulnerable, as opposed to distinguished risk factors such as poverty, poorer education or higher crime rates (Lee et al., 2014). Therefore, a ‘risk-consciousness’ influence on parenting reflects the possible unknown outcomes of the future, which creates uncertainty, and this holds power over what constitutes

‘good parenting’ (Lee et al., 2014). The shift in the role of parenting, which is believed to be deterministic for producing optimal child outcomes, has been further emphasised by policymakers, parenting experts and the media (Faircloth, 2014, 2020). Therefore, this poses structural pressures for parents to engage in intensive parenting practices.

Brain science literature also supports the notion that parenting has implications for infants’ brains, which not only impacts the child but also wider society (Macvarish, 2014). For example, research suggests that early caregiving experiences are associated with the development of children’s hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis functioning in relation to stress regulation. Research by Kuo et al. (2019) examined infant-mother attachment in relation to infant cortisol reactivity. The results showed that infants with a secure attachment to their mother had lower cortisol levels than infants with a secure attachment to their father (Kue et al., 2019). Bernard & Dozier (2010) found that infants with disorganised attachment styles exhibited altered stress reactivity during a Strange Situation Task, suggesting that infants show different cortisol responses influenced by their attachment to parents. Therefore, early caregiving experiences perhaps influence children’s developing stress systems, which could have implications for emotional development later in life. Additionally, childhood adversity has also been associated with negative impacts on children’s neurodevelopment, including heightened amygdala activation to threat (McLaughlin et al., 2019). However, claims that parenting directly determines children’s brain development have been criticised as overstating the evidence and the extent to which normal variation in parenting on infant brain development is less clearly established (Farber et al., 2022).

Parenting Guidance and Policy

Parenting practices have since become a public and political matter in which play, discipline, and feeding are morally and politically scrutinised (Faircloth, 2014). In the early

1990s, child-rearing advice emphasised the influence parents have on children's cognitive development, namely the more that parents engaged in stimulating brain activities such as talking, reading, and singing the greater the development of their child's intellectual functioning (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). Child-rearing literature further emphasises the potential for negative consequences for a child's future if parents do not engage in such activities (Romagnolo & Wall, 2012). The idea that parenting is too important a task to remain at the behest of parents, thus needing structural intervention, essentially disempowers parents (Faircloth, 2014). Consequently, the harsh messaging through child-rearing advice and policy further imposes responsibility on parents to engage in intensive parenting ideologies.

Parenting policy has been shown to predominantly target lower-income parents (Lee et al., 2014). Policy suggests that social disadvantages such as poverty, poorer education, crime, ill health and inequality are parental as opposed to more structural issues (Lee et al., 2014). Parenting policy assumes the view that improvements to parenting practices could influence future social issues, justifying an emphasis on early intervention policies (Lee et al., 2014). In 2003, the UK launched Sure Start Centres to support parents and children with a focus on the child achievement gap seen in children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Bouchal & Norris, 2014). Programmes such as Sure Start Centres and other early intervention programmes were tasked with targeting smoking behaviour, increasing breastfeeding adherence, promoting healthy eating (Lee et al., 2014) and emphasising the importance of a parent's role in engaging in structured activities to enhance their child's cognitive development (Ford et al., 2009), which further reinforces ideas in line with intensive parenting. Ford et al. (2009) placed responsibility on a mother's maternal scaffolding ability, which they claimed was the driving force for a child's subsequent development of executive functioning. This highlights how mothers are expected to take a

central role in their child's future functioning. The Parenting Early Intervention Programme (PEIP) is a government-funded programme which aims to improve parent outcomes and consequently reduce children's behavioural difficulties (Lindsay et al., 2011). PEIP focus on the implementation of parenting skills, therefore, perhaps insinuating parents are to blame for childhood outcomes and further emphasising the fundamental role of parents in their child's future functioning.

In more recent years, there has been a rise in self-declared 'parenting-experts', which defines individuals who promote themselves as experts based on their own parenting journey; however, what constitutes their title as 'expert' is unclear (Lee et al., 2014). Self-acclaimed 'parenting experts' have become popular figures through media sources by sharing opinions on parenting practices (Lee et al., 2014). Therefore, the promotion of intensive parenting practices has increased and non-evidenced based advice has become a marketable trend.

Neoliberalism and Intensive Parenting

Originally, classical liberalism was a term used to describe human independence and an emphasis on restricted government involvement (Freeden, 2015). Neoliberalism is an extension of liberalism, which prioritises free markets, less government intervention and an emphasis on individual responsibility for economic outcomes (Harvey, 2007). Neoliberalism places emphasis on competitive labour market involvement rather than considerations of well-being (Freeden, 2015). Whilst neoliberalism has often been defined in political and economic terms, parenting literature argues it has also impacted adult-child relationships (Rosen & Faircloth, 2020). Liberalism emphasises less state involvement (Freeden, 2015), whereas parenting practices in line with neoliberal assumptions have become increasingly governed through expert advice and parenting guidance, which places responsibility upon the

individual parent (Rosen & Faircloth, 2020). This creates a tension in which there is less state intervention due to a larger emphasis on individual responsibility, however, parenting has become influenced by other forms of government intervention, such as policy, parenting programmes and public health concerns (Rosen & Faircloth, 2020).

A neoliberal view of parenting also suggests that parents are individually responsible for children's developmental outcomes, however, structural restraints such as income, employment, and social support are present (Lee et al., 2023), which further disadvantage the parent. Consequently, family relationships previously viewed as private are now viewed as a public concern, and this is particularly impactful for working-class mothers who are positioned as influencing poorer outcomes for their children (Gillies, 2008). Under the neoliberal parenting gaze, 'good parenting' is shaped by the ability to provide children with the necessary skills to become responsible citizens, which typically favours the middle-class. From this perspective, social disadvantage is a result of individual self-management as opposed to structural inequalities (Gillies, 2008).

The neoliberalisation of parenting has been argued to influence 'austerity parenting' in which parents attempt to navigate parenting pressures with limited financial resources and increased external governance (De Benedictis, 2012), placing further responsibility upon the individual parent. This is particularly impactful for lower-income mothers who are pressured to navigate their role as the primary care giver, attempt to work flexibly and counteract the traditional gendered role of men as the main breadwinner (De Benedictis, 2012). Therefore, the neoliberalisation of parenting may be especially detrimental to lower-income mothers. De Benedictis (2012) highlights how parents are blamed and demonised in the media when they are unable to meet 'good parenting' ideals, which consequently reinforces neoliberalist views of parenting that promote individual responsibility as opposed to structural changes. This is further supported by Dermott and Pomati (2016), who argued that associations between

lower-income and ‘poorer’ parenting are ideologically driven as opposed to empirically based. The neoliberal backdrop to contemporary parenting will be used to make sense of the study’s findings throughout.

Psychological Perspectives on Intensive Parenting

Although the intensification of parenting has frequently been conceptualised as a sociocultural phenomenon shaped by policy, neoliberal ideals, and classed expectations, psychological theory offers an additional understanding of the intensification of parenting and the potential impacts on well-being. Attachment theory argues the importance of the early caregiver-child relationship and the consequences for children’s emotional and social development (Bowlby, 1969). Bowlby (1969) proposed that attachment is an organised behavioural system in which children seek proximity to caregivers, particularly in times of distress, to gain emotional security and protection. Moreover, Bowlby (1969) argues that repeated interactions with caregivers influence a child’s internal working models, which are expectations about relationships. Children who have developed secure attachments hold expectations that their caregiver is a secure base that they can use to explore the world and return to the safe base in case of emotional distress (Cassidy et al., 2013). Therefore, children begin to understand the caregiver’s responsiveness and reliability, which could shape the development of children’s emotional and relational functioning (Bowlby, 1969). Parenting discourse and policy frequently draw upon attachment-informed ideas (Cassidy et al., 2013), such as positioning parents as fundamental to childhood developmental outcomes. However, specific ‘attachment’ parenting styles do not necessarily lead to better ‘attachment’ in relation to the mother-infant relationship (Faircloth, 2014). Therefore, the expert gaze over attachment ideals has intensified under neoliberal parenting cultures and, consequently, parenting pressures have increased.

Building on Bowlby's (1969) theory of attachment, Ainsworth et al. (1978) conceptualised 'sensitive' caregiving as a mother's ability to be alert, to interpret, and to respond to their child's signals accurately and promptly. Ainsworth et al. (1979) found that the attachment security of the child was associated with caregiver sensitivity. Importantly, the ability to be a sensitive caregiver is characterised as being responsive (Ainsworth et al. 1979) as opposed to continuous parental involvement. Perhaps contemporary parenting discourse is influenced by attachment theory in that parents should be responsive to their child's needs to enhance developmental outcomes, however, intensive parenting ideals further extend these expectations to include intensive parental involvement both financially and emotionally (Hays, 1996). Parenting is framed as less about meeting the basic needs of the child, and focus is placed on the constant management of the child's emotional and developmental needs. Consequently, parenting has become an intensified, continuous task of responsiveness for parents.

Winnicott's (2014) idea of the 'good enough mother' describes a mother who actively adapts to the child's needs and holds a manner of devotion as opposed to intellectual enlightenment. From this view, good enough mothering is perhaps founded upon commitment to the child and a mother's instincts which encompass attuned caregiving, rather than following expert advice or parenting rules. Moreover, Winnicott (2018) argues that initially, infants are entirely dependent upon the caregiver, therefore, the caregiver must adapt to the infant's needs by establishing what the need is and responding accordingly. Although Winnicott (2018) emphasised that the caregiver should not sustain these adaptations forever, instead, as the infant grows, the caregiver becomes naturally less responsive, which enables the child to tolerate and manage their own frustration. Winnicott's (2018) idea of the 'good enough mother' perhaps provides an alternative to contemporary parenting ideals which emphasise optimisation of children's development through constant emotional and

educational investment (Hays, 1996), instead, healthy child development may be influenced by caregiving that is responsive. This view of parenting could alleviate the pressure of intensive parenting ideals. Although Winnicott (2018) poses a challenge to perfectionistic expectations of parenting, contemporary parenting ideals continue to reinforce intensive parenting expectations. Therefore, parents remain exposed to pressures from policy, public health and social media messaging that emphasise ‘good parenting’ amounts to continuous investment (Hays, 1996). Therefore, the idea of the ‘good enough mother’ is perhaps overshadowed by intensive parenting expectations.

Despite known tensions and critiques of attachment theory, it continues to be influential to contemporary parenting ideals. Faircloth (2014) argues that ‘poor’ attachment is perhaps viewed as a risk factor for children’s development and consequently for the rest of society. Therefore, contemporary parenting ideals are influenced by ‘attachment’ theory and thus, encourage mothers’ engagement in intensive parenting styles. However, contemporary parenting styles have been shown to create tension amongst women who are deemed to be parenting correctly or incorrectly based on adherence to intensive parenting norms, consequently, there is less community support and child-rearing advice, which could pose further risks to society (Faircloth, 2014).

The Implications of Social Inequalities and Intensive Parenting

The intensive parenting literature is largely grounded in studies of middle-class mothers. Lareau (2002) researched class differences in parenting and identified that middle-class parents engaged in “concerted cultivation”, which refers to parents who deliberately seek to stimulate their child’s cognitive and social development. Whereas, working-class parents emphasised providing food, shelter and comfort whilst navigating the challenges they faced associated with class inequalities (Lareau, 2002). Lareau’s (2002) findings highlight

that intensive parenting ideology is perhaps grounded in middle-class privilege, therefore, suggesting that intensive parenting poses disadvantages to working-class parents.

More recently, research highlights that intensive parenting norms have become culturally prominent in both middle- and working-class families. Lee (2023) conducted a qualitative study involving both middle- and working-class parents. They found that all parents, regardless of class, devoted the maximum amount of time and money possible to their children. However, Lee (2023) highlighted a disparity between classes in that working-class parents were disadvantaged in juggling demands to meet intensive parenting ideals, therefore, further supporting arguments put forth by Lareau (2002). Faircloth (2014) further emphasises that intensive parenting practices promote a specific skill-set involving expertise on child development, whilst also having necessary financial resources to engage in parenting-specific consumerism aimed at child development (i.e. baby monitors).

Given the disparities between middle- and working-class parents, it has been highlighted that mothers from working-class backgrounds are typically targeted for education programme interventions aimed at improving their parenting due to the belief that they are at higher risk for their children's development (Pitt, 2002; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). Research by Romagnoli and Wall (2012) found that intensive parenting was defined by middle-class mothers as the ideal motherhood, whereas for working-class mothers, adhering to intensive parenting was essential for the high-stakes consequences if they failed to do so, such as losing custody of children. Due to lower-income mothers being perceived as a high-risk group to children's development, lower-income mothers in this study felt forced to adhere to intensive parenting practices for fear of state intervention (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). This research is influential to the intensive parenting literature as it further highlights the idea that although intensive parenting is adopted across classes, practical disparities exist between

middle-class and lower-income mothers, thus, motivations to engage in intensive parenting practices may differ between classes.

More recently, the literature regarding intensive parenting has explored gender disparities. The concept of ‘mother-blame’ is a predominant theme in the literature, suggesting that mothers are responsible for social issues as a result of their parenting ability (Lee et al., 2014). The intensive parenting literature has been predominantly focused on mothers due to assumptions about primary caregiving, despite the increases in women’s participation in the workforce and fathers’ involvement in providing care (Budds, 2021). Research suggests that women, more so than men, are likely to endorse intensive parenting beliefs and do so in a more thorough fashion (Schiffrin et al., 2014). Therefore, women may be at a heightened risk of internalising intensive mothering ideologies. Some research argues that men are less likely than women to internalise intensive parenting ideologies due to their resources of masculinity that emphasise competition and autonomy. As such, men are perhaps more able to shield themselves from some of the difficulties that are typically faced by women (Shirani et al., 2012).

Given that in the present period, women now work longer hours than in previous years (i.e. since the 1960s), it may be expected that a woman’s role in motherhood would be less likely to accommodate intensive parenting, however, research shows that even with the increase in women’s participation in work, this has not led to a subsequent decrease in time devoted to parenting from 1960 to 2010 (Gauthier et al., 2004). Furthermore, with the rise in dual-earner households, it has generally also been shown that fathers are spending more time with their children compared to previous generations. However, there is a clear disparity in the type of parenting practiced by mothers and fathers. Not only do mothers typically spend more time with their children than fathers (Craig et al., 2014), but mothers often engage in activities which relate to the physical care of the child, whilst fathers typically spend more

time engaging in play and other leisure activities (Craig et al., 2014). This further confirms the assumption that mothers are the primary caregiver even when contributing to the family income.

The Impacts of the Intensification of Parenting on Well-being

Despite the consensus that women may be at a disadvantage in meeting the unrealistic expectations of intensive mothering ideals due to gender, class, increased participation in the workforce and the likelihood of internalising intensive mothering beliefs, women continue to strive towards this style of parenting often at the expense of their own needs (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Faircloth, 2020). Stress, anxiety, and guilt are associated with perceptions of failing to meet unrealistic expectations of intensive mothering ideologies. Interestingly, this relationship occurred regardless of whether women upheld intensive mothering beliefs (Henderson et al., 2016). Not only does this research highlight the psychological effects on mothers' well-being due to intensive parenting norms, but it also shows how it can affect all mothers regardless of their parenting beliefs. Perhaps the unrealistic expectations placed upon mothers as a consequence of intensive parenting ideology are inescapable.

Moreover, mothers appeared to internalise intensive parenting by adopting beliefs such as 'parenting should be challenging'; this internalisation of intensive parenting ideals was associated with higher levels of stress and depression (Rizzo et al., 2013). Importantly, the authors of this research suggest that mothers continue to engage in intensive parenting, despite the negative effects, due to the belief that it makes them the ideal mother (Rizzo et al., 2013). Recent research drastically highlights how intensive mothering ideals were a contributing factor for mothers who died by suicide (Townsend, 2024). Therefore,

emphasising how expectations in line with intensive parenting could have devastating consequences for some mothers.

Intensive Parenting Impacts on Child Outcomes

There is an abundance of research dedicated to the involvement of parents and the consequent impact on children's development (Schiffrin et al., & 2015). Namely, intensive parenting has been shown to offer potential benefits to children, such as increased physical activity and healthier dietary choices (Schoeppe & Trost, 2015). However, the impacts of intensive parenting on children's psychological health are less clear. Research on the psychological effects of intensive parenting for children shows that although initially there is a positive association with children's psychological well-being, it may lead to children feeling more anxious, depressed and less competent in adolescence (Yerkes et al., 2021). Schiffrin et al. (2015) found no association between participation in cognitive and motor activities and increased happiness or skill level for children. Milkie et al. (2015) found that in childhood, the amount of time mothers spent with their children was not associated with consequent child outcomes including, emotional and academic outcomes. Therefore, whilst engaging in intensive parenting may support a child's physical health outcomes, it may not lead to positive psychological health outcomes in the future.

Summary

The literature presented highlights how the intensification of parenting may have occurred due to the view that children are vulnerable to risks that could impact physical and emotional development. This view has been largely adopted by parenting policy and the media, which places responsibility upon parents and creates structural pressure to engage in such practices. The literature also highlights social inequalities and gender disparities, which

further disadvantages parents from meeting the demands of intensive parenting.

Consequently, research suggests that structural pressures, social inequalities and gender disparities have implications for mothers' well-being. The following chapter aims to further explore the literature related to the intensification of parenting and its impact on parental well-being.

Chapter Two: Systematic Literature Review

Chapter Overview

This chapter presents a systematic literature review of studies exploring intensive parenting and mothers' well-being. Discussed is the analysis of findings and identification of gaps in the present research. The chapter concludes with the current study's aim and research questions, as informed by the systematic literature review.

Introduction

A systematic review of the literature was conducted to identify current knowledge relating to the intensification of parenting and the impact on parental well-being. Given that the majority of previous research on intensive parenting is in regard to mothers, this systematic literature review aims to explore mothers' experiences of blame and guilt as a result of the intensification of parenting.

A qualitative systematic literature review (SLR) is a widely used method for evaluating and integrating findings from multiple studies related to a specific research question and includes an assessment of the quality of research such as bias and replicability (Pati & Lorusso, 2018). A qualitative SLR was chosen for its ability to synthesise findings across different contexts and to identify gaps in the literature (Tong et al., 2012). A meta-ethnography is also a suitable method for qualitative synthesis, however, a distinctive feature of meta-ethnography is its aim to generate new evidence and theory (France et al., 2019). Therefore, a qualitative SLR was chosen.

Method

Design

A qualitative design was adopted for this review to allow an in-depth exploration of individuals' lived experiences of blame and guilt in relation to intensive parenting ideologies. Qualitative studies typically explore subjective experiences and interpret meanings as opposed to quantitative research. Moreover, a qualitative design for this SLR will allow for a synthesis of qualitative research by interpreting data that holds its original meaning (Porritt et al., 2024).

This systematic review was conducted using thematic synthesis following the steps laid out by Thomas and Harden (2008). Thematic synthesis is a method of identifying key concepts from qualitative studies and translating them into one another (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Thematic synthesis was chosen for its utility in producing implications that are policy and practice ready and its epistemological stance of critical realism, which posits that reality is mediated by a person's own perceptions and beliefs (Barnett-Paige & Thomas, 2009). This is important for the present review, as it acknowledges that the included findings are shaped by participants' subjective experiences whilst also allowing for the interpretation of meaning across studies. The process of thematic synthesis involves line-by-line coding of data to develop further analytical themes (Thomas & Harden, 2008), thus enabling new interpretative insights which align well with a critical realist stance, which posits that data are interpretations of one's realities whilst also identifying patterns in the data by the researcher (Lawani, 2021). Therefore, thematic synthesis using a critical realist perspective enabled the interpretation of data across qualitative studies, whilst preserving both the contextualised and theory aspects of the original data.

Search Strategy

The SPIDER tool was used to assist in the development of the research question and the search strategy (Cooke et al., 2012) and can be found in Table 1. A systematic search was

conducted using EBSCOhost on the 29th of April 2025 and included the following databases: APA Psycarticles, APAPsychinfo, APAPsychtests, CINAHL, and Medline Ultimate. A list of search terms is shown in Table 2. The search terms chosen were associated with ‘intensive parenting’, therefore, the term ‘gentle parenting’ was excluded from the search as this is typically associated with parenting styles that emphasise empathy and responsiveness (Biscontini, 2024), which may not reflect the parenting pressures associated with ‘intensive parenting’. The search found twenty-five articles. No duplicates were found in EndNote or found manually. After the application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, eleven papers were included in the review. The full search strategy PRISMA diagram can be found in Figure 1.

Table 1

SPIDER tool (Cooke et al., 2012).

<u>Criteria</u>	<u>Definition</u>
<i>Sample</i>	Mothers who engage in intensive parenting
<i>Phenomena of Interest</i>	The experience of blame or guilt
<i>Design</i>	Interviews
<i>Evaluation</i>	Experiences, attitudes and views
<i>Research</i>	Qualitative

Table 2*Search Strategy Used in EBSCOHost*

	Search Term	Field
	Parent* or mother* or m?m	Title and Abstract
AND	"Intensive parenting" or "intensive mothering" or "good parent" or "overparenting" or "helicopter parenting"	
AND	Blame or shame or guilt or self-blame or "mother blame" or "maternal guilt" or "maternal shame"	
AND	Qualitative research or qualitative study or qualitative methods or interview	

Inclusion Criteria

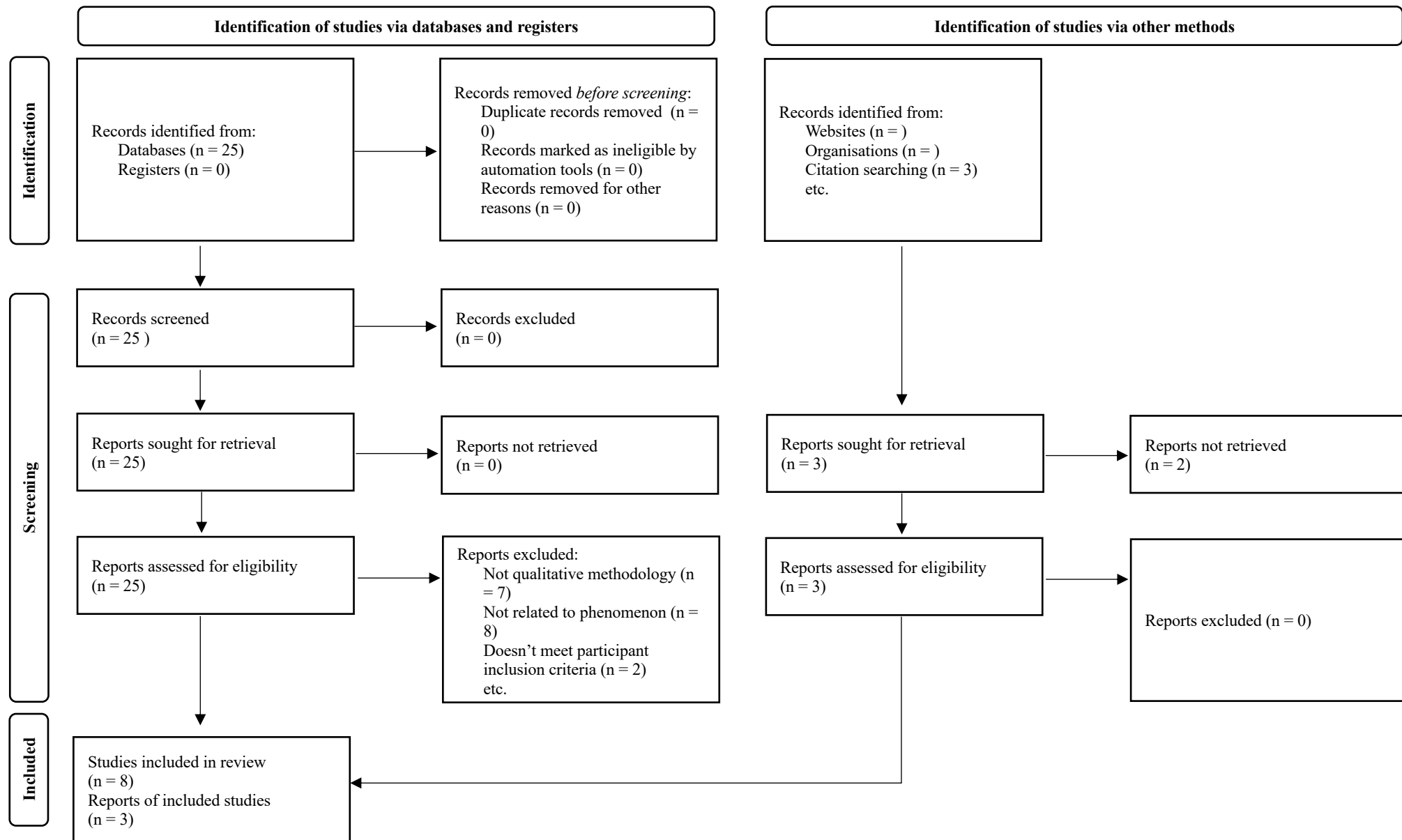
Studies were included if they met the following criteria: 1) studies investigated the phenomena of mother blame, shame, or guilt in the context of intensive parenting ideologies, 2) studies included mothers, 3) studies were written in English, and 4) studies had a qualitative methodology including semi-structured interviews.

Studies were excluded if they met the following criteria: 1) studies which did not relate to the phenomenon of intensive parenting ideologies and mother blame, shame or guilt, 2) studies which did not include mothers, 3) papers were not written in English, 4) Studies which were dissertations, and 5) studies which used a quantitative methodology. The decision to exclude dissertations from this analysis was made due to pragmatism and feasibility to ensure a thorough systematic analysis of each study; therefore, the decision was made to prioritise peer-reviewed articles to tighten methodological rigor.

Quality Assessment of Papers

The assessment of qualitative papers is deemed essential to the review process (Noyes et al., 2018). The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) tool (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2018) was chosen for the quality assessment of papers in this review. Each paper was assessed for the use of clear aims for the research, its rigor related to participant sampling, data collection methods, and its appropriateness of data analysis (Noyes et al., 2018). The papers were then given a score out of 10, which determined the order of analysis. Papers were analysed starting with the highest score to the lowest (see Appendix A). Dembosky et al. (2023), Jackson et al. (2024) and Williamson et al. (2023) received the highest quality assessment scores according to the CASP tool, whereas Clarke (2012) received the lowest score (see Table 3).

Figure 1
PRISMA diagram



Study Characteristics

Study characteristics were extracted and organised in a table to assist with data analysis. An overview of the study characteristics can be found in Table 3.

Data analysis

Following Thomas and Harden's (2008) procedure, stage one of the analysis involved line-by-line coding of the results and discussion sections of each paper to enable translation of concepts across studies. Stage two involved grouping codes together to organise the data into descriptive themes. This involved highlighting similarities and differences between codes and grouping codes into a hierarchical structure to support the development of analytical themes. Stage three involved going beyond the description of the findings to the synthesis of data by applying descriptive themes to the review question and generating analytical themes that moved beyond the original findings (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

Results

Thematic synthesis resulted in ten descriptive themes of author interpretations which described the mothers' experiences of the intensification of parenting. These themes were then developed into the three analytical themes of *Navigating the cultural ideals of motherhood*; *Idealised motherhood, at what cost?*; and *Reclaiming the self beyond motherhood*. Discussed below are the ten descriptive themes which embody these analytical themes. Figure 2 shows a thematic map of the descriptive themes and the analytical themes.

Table 3*Study Characteristics of Included Papers*

Author	Year	Title	Country	Aim	Sample size and characteristics	Design	CASP tool rating
Blum	2007	Mother-blame in the Prozac nation: Raising kids with invisible disabilities	U.S.A	To examine how mothers raising children with invisible disabilities refine feminist theories in relation to mother blame	45 mothers with children who were diagnosed with invisible disabilities. Income was widely distributed. Majority of women were white, 10 were non-white and 4 were biracial	Qualitative design	7
Clarke	2012	Surplus suffering, mothers don't know best: Denial of mothers' reality when parenting a child with mental health issues	Canada	To examine retrospective accounts of mothers whose children had been diagnosed with a mental health issue	16 mothers of children with a mental health diagnosis. Participants were middle- to lower-class	Qualitative design	6
Dembosky, Heckert, Boser & Migyanka	2023	Shouldering the burden: Intensive mothering and autism.	U.S.A	To examine the extent to which intensive mothering is associated to the perspectives and roles of mothers of young adults with autism	19 mothers of adult children with autism. 17 were white and 2 were African American. Majority were middle-class and 6 were lower-class	Qualitative design using Grounded Theory analysis	10

Eaton et al.	2016	Failing to meet the good parent ideal: Self-stigma in parents of children with mental health disorders	Australia	To examine parents' lived experience of self-stigma	11 mothers with children with emotional or behavioural disorders. Wide range of income.	Qualitative design using thematic analysis	8
Halsa	2018	Trapped between madness and motherhood: Mothering alone	Norway	To investigate the subjective meaning of being a mother with a mental health diagnosis	14 mothers with a mental health diagnosis	Qualitative design	9
Jackson et al.	2024	'Some Days Are Not a Good Day to Be a Mum': Exploring Lived Experiences of Guilt and Shame in the Early Postpartum Period.	UK	To investigate the lived experiences of guilt and shame in the post-partum period	20 mothers who had given birth in previous 16 weeks. 35% were white British, 15% white European, 10% British Pakistani, 5% white and Mixed Caribbean	Qualitative design with inductive thematic analysis	10
Romagnoli & Wall	2012	'I know I'm a good mom': Young, low-income mothers' experiences with risk perception, intensive parenting ideology and parenting education programmes.	Canada	To investigate the experience of low-income, young mothers in regards to intensive parenting and educational programmes on child cognitive development	10 white, low-income mothers	Qualitative design with grounded theory analysis	8

Singh	2004	Doing their jobs: mothering with Ritalin in a culture of mother-blame	UK	To examine the problem of blame in relation to ADHD diagnosis from the perspective of mothers with boys with a diagnosis of ADHD	34 parents	Qualitative design with grounded theory analysis	7
Wall	2010	Mothers' experiences with intensive parenting and brain development discourse.	Canada	To explore mothers' experience of brain development advice and the implications on the cultural understandings of motherhood	14 mothers, mostly middle- to upper-class	Qualitative design with grounded theory	8
Whitley & Kirmayer	2008	Perceived stigmatisation of young mothers: An exploratory study of psychological and social experience	Canada	To investigate the psychosocial experience of mothers from different ages and ethnic backgrounds	33 Anglophone Euro-Canadians and Anglophone Afro-Caribbean mothers	Qualitative design and grounded theory analysis	8
Williamson et al.	2023	Mothering Ideology: A Qualitative Exploration of Mothers' Perceptions of Navigating Motherhood Pressures and Partner Relationships.	Australia	To explore pressures in motherhood and the impact on partner relationships	19 mothers with a range of household income	Qualitative design with thematic analysis	10

Living under scrutiny: mothers' awareness of 'good mother' ideologies

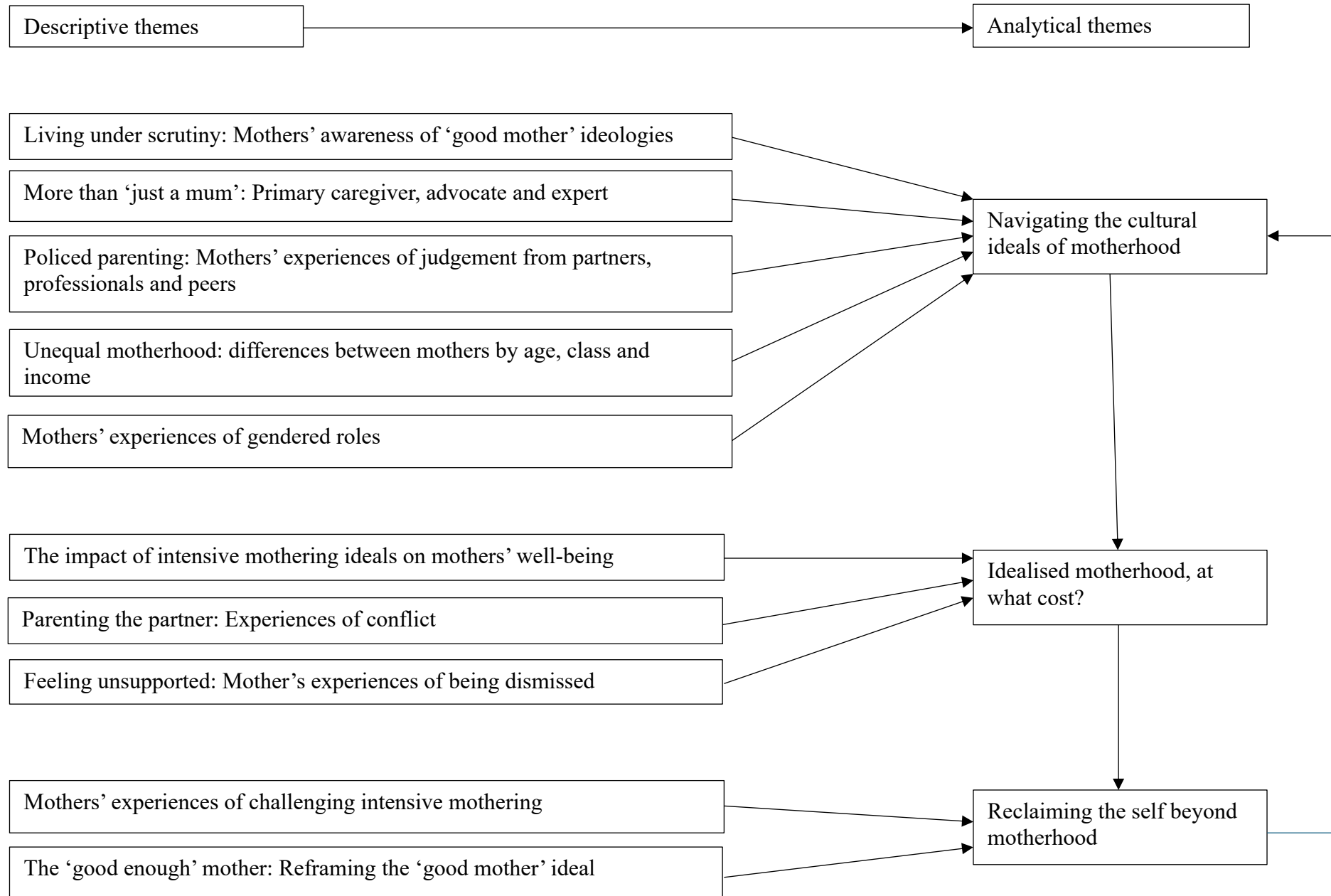
Some authors suggested that women's views of a 'good mother' are characterised by protection, time-intensive labour, and doing what's best for the child (Clarke, 2012; Eaton et al., 2016; Halsa, 2018; Jackson et al., 2024; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Singh, 2004). Williamson et al. (2023) further interpreted how the 'good mother' ideal was depicted as a dichotomous construct:

Around half of the participants expressed a dichotomous view of motherhood in which mothers are represented as either good or bad, depending on whether they meet the expectations of motherhood. (Williamson et al., 2023, p. 105)

Women recognised that by being a mother, they were automatically expected to abide by the 'good mother' ideal and this was something that was influenced by many factors such as the mother's upbringing and the influence of culture and society (Eaton et al., 2016; Halsa, 2018; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Wall, 2010; Williamson et al., 2023). Consequently, women are positioned as responsible for engaging in intensive mothering (Blum, 2007; Clarke, 2012; Halsa, 2018; Singh, 2004; Wall, 2010). One author emphasised how the social construct of the 'maternal instinct' further positions mothers as responsible:

Tina dramatically illustrates the extent to which the good mother ideology supports a particular notion of what is often called maternal instinct: the willingness to give one's own life for that of a child. (Singh, 2004, p. 1198)

Figure 2
Thematic map



Holding mothers responsible for intensive parenting was argued to lead to ‘surplus suffering’ for mothers:

In a sense mothers experience surplus suffering, that is, suffering not only because of the difficulties they see their child(ren) experiencing, but also because they are held accountable by many of the systems and people surrounding them. (Clarke, 2012, p. 363)

Some authors noted that child outcomes (i.e. behaviour, developmental milestones) were used predominantly as a measure of adherence to good mothering ideologies (Clarke, 2012; Dembosky et al., 2023; Eaton et al., 2016; Singh, 2004; Wall, 2010).

Highlighting the notion that the problem with the child(ren) is really a problem of the mom. (Clarke, 2012, p. 361)

The use of child outcomes as a form of measurement was also used by healthcare professionals, family members and other mothers to determine how well a mother was adhering to intensive mothering ideology (Blum, 2007; Clarke, 2012).

Wall (2010) argued that holding mothers as solely responsible for their child’s outcomes creates an increased risk of failure for mothers and children:

It places responsibility for poor outcomes squarely on mothers’ shoulders, and to the degree that ‘risks’ cannot be managed regardless of mothering behaviour, it sets mothers and children up for failure. (p. 258)

Some authors highlighted how mothers continued to struggle to meet the expectations of intensive mothering whilst also resenting and essentially resisting the expectations at the same time (Dembosky et al., 2023; Jackson et al., 2024; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). Eaton et al. (2016) further suggested that the intensive mothering ideal was, therefore, both socially expected and personally desired despite mothers' struggles to meet the ideal.

Some authors argued that mothers who felt they were not meeting the unrealistic cultural expectations of intensive mothering experienced feelings of inadequacy and self-blame (Dembosky et al., 2023; Singh, 2004).

Mothers' anxious reactions grow in part out of a constellation of social and cultural factors that support the good mother ideology and reinforce mothers' feelings of self-blame and guilt (Singh, 2004, p. 1199)

Mothers who do not conform to intensive mothering beliefs are at risk of being positioned as 'bad mothers' (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Williamson et al., 2023)

This demonstrates the impact of the good mother ideology (that if mothers are not perfect at mothering, they are doing a bad job), conflicting with the idea of the supermom (the mum who can do it all), thus reinforcing the pressure women feel. (Williamson et al., 2023, p. 108)

Some authors noted potential flaws of the intensive mothering ideology. Wall (2010) argued that the expectations of intensive parenting are ultimately conflicting, especially if mothers have more than one child:

Much of the advice that surrounds intensive parenting is built on the premise that parents can give children ample, undivided, one-on-one attention. This is a flawed assumption of the demands of caring for multiple children are considered. (Wall, 2010, p. 257)

Furthermore, another flawed assumption of intensive mothering ideology is that children are inherently vulnerable:

In operating within the social understandings of good motherhood characteristic of neo-liberal rationality, came to accept the possibility of, and responsibility for, of shaping children and controlling child outcomes to a fine degree. This involved an implicit acceptance of the cultural understandings of children as passive and cognitively vulnerable. (Wall, 2010, p. 257)

One author noted that mothers were expected to cope with the unrealistic expectations associated with intensive parenting whilst also appearing to be doing a good job at meeting such expectations (Clarke, 2012). Some authors also argued that mothers can never ‘get it right’ and this had negative effects to mothers’ well-being (Jackson et al., 2024; Wall, 2010; Williamson et al., 2023).

Mothers can never know for sure if they have done enough, or if more effort on their part would result in greater brain potential for their children ... the uncertainty that surrounds this ... contributed to pressure, anxiety and guilt. (Wall, 2010, p. 258)

Some authors noted how mothers appeared to question the assumptions and expectations of intensive parenting ideologies. For example, some mothers valued their child's emotional well-being over brain development outcomes (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Wall, 2010). Moreover, some mothers questioned how intensive mothering could impact their child (Dembosky et al., 2023; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Wall, 2010).

More than 'just a mum': Primary caregiver, advocate and expert

Mothers in these studies acknowledged the multi-faceted role of motherhood, which encompassed caregiving, protecting, advocating and becoming an expert on their child's needs (Blum, 2007; Clarke, 2012; Dembosky et al., 2023; Eaton et al., 2016; Halsal, 2018; Jackson et al., 2024; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Singh, 2004; Wall, 2010; Whitely & Kirmayer, 2008; Williamson et al., 2023). Dembosky et al. (2023) highlighted how a mother's role as protector, advocate and case manager was in line with intensive mothering ideology:

The time and effort that the mothers put into these role of protector, advocate, and care manager reflects the ideology of intensive mothering. (p. 821)

Some authors emphasised that whilst mothers took on many roles in line with intensive parenting, some mothers' role as a career woman was also important for their self-identity and a sense of achievement outside of parenting (Williamson et al., 2023). However, this caused added pressure for mothers who were expected to manage time restraints when managing both work commitments and parenting expectations (Wall, 2010). As well as the expectations to be a 'good mother' and to hold a career, women were also expected to maintain the household alongside their other roles (Blum, 2007; Halsal, 2018; Jackson et al.,

2024; Wall, 2010; Williamson et al., 2023) and a failure to manage all these tasks impacted mothers' well-being:

Mothers experienced guilt when they were unable to carry out household and childcare tasks (Jackson et al., 2024, p. 3027)

Mothers largely assumed the role of primary caregiver, which was considered a cultural and societal assumption of the 'good mothering' ideology (Dembosky et al., 2023; Eaton et al., 2016; Halsa, 2018; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Singh, 2004; Wall, 2010; Williamson et al., 2023).

Their role as primary caregiver was contextualised positively, or something they maintained through excluding the father from parenting decisions. The added cognitive load of keeping track of tasks was a particular point of frustration. (Williamson et al., 2023, p. 110)

Ultimately, mothers felt that they knew their children best and this was a source of motivation to remain the expert within the context of parenting and advocating in medical and educational settings (Blum, 2007; Clarke, 2012; Dembosky et al., 2023; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Singh, 2004; Williamson et al., 2023).

All authors argued that mothers internalised the multi-faceted roles of motherhood as a result of the expectations placed upon them by culture and society (Blum, 2007; Clarke, 2012; Dembosky et al., 2023; Eaton et al., 2016; Halsa, 2018; Jackson et al., 2024; Romagnoli & Wall; Singh, 2004; Wall, 2010; Whitely & Kirmayer, 2008; Williamson et al., 2023). This further developed into self-expectations for some mothers:

By advocating for and protecting their child, mothers felt that they were meeting not only sociocultural expectations of being a ‘good parent’ but also their own expectations. (Eaton et al., 2016, p. 3120)

Policed parenting: Mothers’ experiences of judgement from partners, professionals and peers

All mothers in these studies were subjected to external criticism by others (Blum, 2007; Clarke, 2012; Dembosky et al., 2023; Eaton et al., 2016; Jackson et al., 2024; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Singh, 2004; Wall, 2010; Whitley & Kirmayer, 2008; Williamson et al., 2023). Some mothers experienced criticism from relatives (Blum, 2007; Clarke, 2012), partners (Clarke, 2012), strangers in the community (Eaton et al., 2016; Jackson et al., 2024; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Whitley & Kirmayer, 2008), and even professionals such as doctors and teachers (Blum, 2007; Clarke, 2012; Williamson et al., 2023).

Mothers’ experience of judgement and criticism from other mothers was argued to reinforce the surveillance of mothers and adherence to intensive parenting:

Every individual is both a subject exercising the disciplinary gaze, and an object of the gaze. (Singh, 2004, p. 1201)

Eaton et al. (2016) argued that stigma experienced by mothers was interpreted as not meeting the responsibilities of a ‘good parent’:

External stigma could be experienced as either an impediment to, and/or an accusation, of not fulfilling the responsibilities of the good parent role, thus implying that the mother was not providing adequately to her child. (p. 3115)

Some authors further highlighted how mothers' internalised stigma, judgement and criticisms from others formed an identity as a 'bad mother' (Eaton et al., 2016; Halsa, 2018; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Whitley & Kirmayer, 2008; Williamson et al., 2023).

Women perceive they are criticised for every aspect of their motherhood by outsiders, which leads to internalised guilt and changed parenting behaviours, and reinforces the idea that if a woman is not a good mother, she is a bad mother. (Williamson et al., 2023, p. 107)

Whitley & Kirmayer (2008) and Williamson et al. (2023) argued that being criticised by others led to internalised guilt for mothers. Eaton et al. (2016) further added to this by highlighting how criticism from others is interpreted as not meeting the responsibilities of a 'good mother'. Some authors argued that experiencing criticism and judgment from others can be a barrier to support seeking and facilitate social isolation for some mothers (Halsa, 2018; Jackson et al., 2024).

Those interviewed were hesitant to confide in others about parenting challenges due to fears of being judged as an incompetent mother. This was uniquely linked with shame and avoidance of potentially triggering situations. (Jackson et al., 2024, p. 3031)

Halsa (2018) further argued that this was due to mothers' awareness of stigma and stereotypes relating to mental health and the pressure to meet intensive parenting ideals, which was associated with shame and a drive to hide emotional distress from others.

Jackson et al. (2024) argued that social media increased facilitation of comparison to other mothers, which was associated with feelings of guilt and shame.

Unequal motherhood: Differences between mothers by age, class and income

Most mothers shared experiences of the intensification of parenting; however, these experiences were sometimes further impacted by differences in age, class and income (Blum, 2007; Clarke, 2012; Eaton et al., 2016; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Wall, 2010; Whitley & Kirmayer, 2008). Williamson et al. (2023) highlighted some cultural differences between mothers which could add to or negate pressures relating to intensive mothering expectations. Namely, for Afro-Caribbean mothers, child-rearing was highly valued compared to Euro-Canadian mothers, and this was noted as a protective factor. Additionally, older Euro-Canadian mothers did not experience stigma in relation to being a mother and Williamson et al. (2023) suggested this was due to higher incomes and older age, which is associated with higher financial and psychological independence. In contrast, Euro-Canadian younger mothers experienced feelings of guilt, shame and internal conflict associated with being 'young' mothers, whereas young Afro-Caribbean mothers did not. The authors argued that being part of the Afro-Caribbean sub-culture was a protective factor for stigma associated with young mothers.

Some authors emphasised how first-time mothers particularly doubted their identity as a 'good mother' due to a lack of experience with parenting and not knowing what to expect (Clarke, 2012; Wall, 2010). This resulted in a fear of being perceived as a bad mother (Williamson et al., 2023).

Romagnoli & Wall (2012) highlighted how low-income mothers are required to work ‘harder’ in order to engage in intensive parenting practices due to their resources and time constraints. Moreover, low-income mothers were positioned as being ‘risky’ mothers; consequently, this meant that engaging in intensive mothering was compulsory for low-income mothers due to the high stakes of losing custody of their child:

Status as young and low income was inseparable from their experience with intensive mothering ... regulation of their motherhood via compulsory intensive mothering as well as the stereotypes they encountered were a direct consequence of their youth and poverty ... the focus on child cognitive development represented one more way for society to evaluate and scrutinise their parenting. (p. 286)

Young, low-income parents were faced with added pressures such as committing to education, trying to survive economically and abiding by intensive mothering (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). Whilst most mothers experienced forms of scrutiny and social surveillance, this was argued to be particularly prevalent for young, low-income mothers, as they were considered a ‘social risk’ (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Whitely & Kirmayer, 2008).

Intensive mothering was argued to have different meanings for mothers from different classes (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). For middle-class mothers, intensive mothering defines the ‘good mother’, whereas for lower-class mothers, it is defined as absolute motherhood due to the risk of losing their child (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012).

Mothers’ experiences of gendered roles

Mothers noted that their experiences of the intensification of parenting differed greatly compared to their partners (Blum, 2007; Dembosky et al., 2023; Halsa, 2018; Singh,

2004; Wall, 2010; Williamson et al., 2023). Mothers who were married or in relationships reported that their partner was the main breadwinner, however, some mothers also worked full-time or part-time whilst remaining as the primary caregiver for their child, which reinforced traditional gender roles (Dembosky et al., 2023; Singh, 2004; Williamson et al., 2023). Wall (2010) highlighted that mothers with children are increasingly entering and remaining in the workforce, which has important implications for gender equality.

Whilst mothers experienced changes to their self-identity, fathers' self-identity was considered to remain the same, and they were often praised for child-rearing tasks, which was a cause of frustration for mothers (Williamson et al., 2023). Some authors noted that these differences in the experience of intensive parenting pressures led to a lack of understanding in partner relationships and women taking on more responsibility (Wall, 2010). Even when partners did contribute to parenting tasks, authors noted that mothers were still pressured to engage in intensive parenting, which reinforces that intensive parenting is a mother's responsibility:

While many mothers reported that fathers took on parenting duties ... it appeared to be mothers who felt most of the weight of the added responsibilities associated with the brain development advice. (Wall, 2010, p. 260).

One author noted that internalisation of intensive mothering, in which mothers are considered the primary care-giver led to some mothers excluding their partner from child-rearing decisions:

Maternal gatekeeping refers to maternal beliefs and behaviours that may support (gate-opening) or limit (gate-closing) the father's involvement in child-rearing and interactions with their child. (Williamson et al., 2023, p. 110)

Thus, reinforcing traditional gender roles as fathers are relinquished from parental responsibility (Williamson et al., 2023).

The impact of intensive mothering ideals on mothers' well-being

All studies highlighted different ways that attempting to meet the expectations of the 'good mother' ideal can impact mothers' well-being (Blum, 2007; Clarke, 2012; Dembosky et al., 2023; Eaton et al., 2016; Halsa, 2018; Jackson et al., 2024; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Singh, 2004; Wall, 2010; Whitley & Kirmayer, 2008; Williamson et al., 2023). Singh (2004) argued that mothers essentially agree to a mothering role, however, the accompanying pressures and a societal culture of mother-blame result in a burden for mothers. Some authors further highlighted that when mothers failed to meet unrealistic expectations of intensive mothering, they felt a sense of inadequacy (Dembosky et al., 2023; Eaton et al., 2016; Halsa, 2018; Jackson et al., 2024; Williamson et al., 2023) and internalisation as a 'failure' for mothers who cannot meet unrealistic expectations (Eaton et al., 2016; Singh, 2004; Wall, 2010).

Singh (2004) highlighted a dichotomous belief that if mothers did not deem themselves as a 'good mother', then they were an 'inadequate mother':

The good mother was an idealised portrait of mothers and mothering characterised by qualities such as understanding, protection, closeness ... the inadequate mother was

characterised by lack of sufficient care, positive emotions, knowledge, insight and action. (p. 1196)

Some authors emphasised that mothers who strive to meet intensive mothering ideals experienced guilt, self-doubt and exhaustion for over-exerting themselves (Eaton et al., 2016; Jackson et al., 2024; Singh, 2004; Wall, 2010; Williamson et al., 2023).

Eaton et al. (2016) highlighted that mothers who did feel that they were achieving the ‘good mother’ ideal still experienced self-doubt when they endured stigma from others:

Stigma could act as a jolting reminder of self-doubt even when a mother felt she was achieving the ‘good parent’ ideal. (p. 3117)

Consequently, this led to mothers experiencing other negative emotions such as guilt and sadness (Eaton et al., 2016).

Jackson et al. (2024) highlighted that a failure to normalise the difficulties relating to intensive parenting practices further reinforced guilt as mothers believed that they were deviating from good mothering practices, which lead to further emotional distress and emphasising that mothers could not get it right.

Alongside societal surveillance, authors noted that most mothers experienced self-blame for not meeting unrealistic expectations and for their child’s outcomes (Clarke, 2012; Dembosky et al., 2023; Eaton et al., 2016; Halsu, 2018; Jackson et al., 2024; Singh, 2004).

Self-blame may stem from mothers feelings of inadequacy in meeting the high cultural demands of intensive mothering ideology. (Dembosky et al., 2023, p. 822)

For some mothers, self-blame further reinforced feelings of loneliness and social isolation (Halsa, 2018).

Social media was highlighted as facilitating and reinforcing competition between mothers and consumerist parenting beliefs, which elicited shame and guilt for mothers (Jackson et al., 2024).

Mothers reported that to be able to engage in intensive mothering practices, they often were required to put their child's needs before their own (Eaton et al., 2016; Dembosky et al., 2023; Halsa, 2018; Williamson et al., 2023).

Doing what was 'right' involved a resolute need to protect the child from harm and this meant putting the child's needs before one's own (Eaton et al., 2016, p. 3118)

Therefore, some authors emphasised how mothers were expected to sacrifice in other areas of their lives in order to meet intensive parenting expectations (Williamson et al., 2023). This led to relationship conflict (Williamson et al., 2023), deprioritising their own well-being (Eaton et al., 2016), career sacrifices, and sacrifices to self-care including, sleep and relaxation time (Wall, 2010).

Wall (2010) made a distinction between 'stressed, tired time' vs. 'non-rushed, quality family time' and this was often a worry for mothers. However, mothers who sacrificed their working hours to make more time typically used this time to catch up on housework responsibilities.

Some authors noted a tension between engaging in intensive mothering practices and a desire to focus on oneself (Dembosky et al., 2023; Jackson et al., 2024; Wall, 2010; Williamson et al., 2023). This led to consequences for well-being such as feelings of guilt due

to the belief that they were neglecting their parenting responsibilities (Jackson et al., 2024; Wall, 2010).

Mothers felt guilty for neglecting self-care but equally felt guilty when prioritising themselves ... due to beliefs held that the mother was neglecting her parenting duties in putting herself first, embodying the mothering myth (Jackson et al., 2024, p. 3025)

Mothers who felt deprioritised by their support systems and professionals or internalised beliefs that they were failing as mothers experienced resentment towards their child (Jackson et al., 2024; Singh, 2004). Singh (2004) emphasised a complicated relationship for mothers and their children when resentment was present:

Hatred of one's child goes against every ideal of the good mother. It was confusing to mothers to know simultaneously the life-giving instinct inherent in the good mother ideology and their own hatred of their sons. (p. 1199)

Some authors noted that mothers' self-identities were often changed as they were required to juggle conflicting identities as a mother, career woman, partner and who they were as an individual (Williamson et al., 2023)

The pressures experienced by mothers to be a 'good mum' and the realities of raising a child often conflicted with mothers' other identities and ... whether they were a good partner. (Williamson et al., 2023, p. 109)

The integration of different identities led to constant re-evaluation and a sense of loss for their previous identity (Williamson et al., 2023).

The impact of being judged by others, feeling deprioritised, and experiences of shame were argued to result in social isolation and avoidance (Eaton et al., 2016; Halsa, 2018; Jackson et al., 2024; Singh, 2004). Jackson et al. (2024) argued that social isolation could exacerbate mental health difficulties:

Shame was linked with avoidance of triggering scenarios and self-isolation ... this perpetuated mental health difficulties because participants felt the need to give the impression that they were coping better than they were, for fear of judgement.
(Jackson et al., 2024, p. 3028)

Parenting the partner: Experiences of conflict

Mothers' attempts to achieve the 'good mother' ideal often led to conflict in relationships with their partners (Blum, 2007; Clarke, 2012; Jackson et al., 2024; Singh, 2004; Wall, 2010; Williamson et al., 2023). Some fathers did not agree with their partner's parenting style (Blum, 2007; Clarke, 2012; Singh, 2004). Therefore, some mothers felt completely dismissed by their partners when they raised concerns about their child or when they expressed feeling overwhelmed by the endless task of mothering (Clarke, 2012; Singh, 2004).

Some authors highlighted how mothers extended their role to teach their partners how to parent, and this was argued to further reinforce that women are the expert parent (Wall, 2010; Williamson et al., 2023). One author argued that although mothers may parent their partner with the intention of reducing the cognitive load of being the primary carer, it actually increased their cognitive demand:

Some participants made sense of this by parenting or micromanaging their partner which seemed to add to the participants' cognitive load (Williamson et al., 2023, p. 110)

Some authors noted that gendered roles in intensive parenting were a source of conflict for some parents (Clarke, 2012; Williamson et al., 2023) .

The sense of frustration our participants felt towards their partners was due to factors that could be directly controlled or addressed in the relationship such as the partner's behaviours (e.g. partner prioritising personal interests/hobbies over parenting responsibilities), an uneven allocation of domestic and child-rearing task, and a lack of communication or inconsistent actions following parenting discussions.
(Williamson et al., 2023, p. 112)

Consequently, this conflict in partner relationships often led to experiences of resentment toward the partner (Williamson et al., 2023). This resentment was a result of the gender disparity between mothers and fathers, that mothers must sacrifice their self-identity to be a mother, and wanting their partner to experience the difficulties of their mothering role (Williamson et al., 2023).

Feeling unsupported: Mothers' experiences of being dismissed

Mothers experienced feeling unsupported by professionals such as doctors and teachers who often dismissed their concerns or blamed them for their child's behaviour (Blum, 2007; Clarke, 2012; Dembosky et al., 2023; Jackson et al., 2024; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Williamson et al., 2023). Some authors noted a contradiction between mother blame

and being dismissed by professionals, which had negative impacts for mothers (Clarke, 2012; Jackson et al., 2024; Williamson et al., 2023).

The mothers' reality of problems with their children was denied first by neighbours, families, friends, and then by medical ... professionals ... this contradiction between holding the mothers responsible (and to blame) and refusing to believe there was anything wrong led to a marital breakdown. (Clarke, 2012, p. 358)

Feeling dismissed was noted to influence experiences of guilt and shame:

Feeling deprioritised by one's healthcare team and social support network also exacerbated guilt and shame. (Jackson et al., 2024, p. 3030)

Some authors noted that feeling stigmatised was a barrier to reaching out for support for some mothers (Halsa, 2018; Whitley & Kirmayer, 2008).

Mothers' experiences of challenging intensive mothering

Mothers in these studies identified some experiences that helped protect them from internalising intensive mothering ideals. Some authors highlighted ways in which mothers resisted intensive parenting ideologies by wanting to spend time on themselves (Dembosky et al., 2023) and questioning the advice in line with intensive parenting (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). Romagnoli & Wall (2012) argued that a resistance to intensive parenting ideology helped to negate the social pressures and subsequent impacts on well-being:

The fact that these mothers complied with parenting class requirements, yet also resisted the ideology that informed them, speaks to the ways in which they negotiated social pressure and their own resistance. As such they did not feel guilty about their inability to be intensive mothers. (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012, p. 286)

Similarly, mothers who resisted the negative judgements from others prevented them from internalising this as being a ‘bad mother’ (Dembosky et al., 2023).

Williamson et al. (2023) highlighted that when fathers helped to challenge the gendered assumptions of intensive mothering, this resulted in positive impacts on relationships and mothers’ well-being:

Fathers who could anticipate the mothers’ needs or were more involved in childrearing and household tasks were described in terms of more positive dynamics. For some of these women, this was described explicitly as not being aligned with traditional gender roles. (p. 111)

Some authors noted the protective nature that mothers held when they believed that ‘good mothering’ advice is opinion and not fact (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Wall, 2010; Williamson et al., 2023).

Resistance included scepticism about the truth of some aspects of child cognitive development advice, and in some cases, outright questioning of its efficacy and necessity. (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012, p. 282)

Some authors noted that re-framing and re-defining ‘good mother’ expectations, making time for self-care and focusing on parenting success had a positive impact on mothers’ well-being (Jackson et al., 2024; Williamson et al., 2023). Moreover, mothers who held a secure identity as a ‘good mother’ had the ability to not internalise expectations, and this further negated any guilt for not meeting unrealistic expectations:

So while mothers noted pressure as a result of social expectations, none of them reported internalising expectations or feeling guilty as a result of not fitting society’s construction of the ideal mother ... they were confident in their mothering practices. It was their own self-perceptions that they relied upon to define their motherhood status. (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012, p. 285)

Some authors noted how mothers highly valued validation from others including, friends, family and professionals (Eaton et al., 2016; Halsal, 2018; Wall, 2010). Whilst Williamson et al. (2023) highlighted the importance of a supportive partner who helped to challenge intensive parenting ideals for mothers and their relationships.

Eaton et al. (2016) highlighted that experiences where mothers did not feel stigmatised facilitated feelings of support and empathy:

Although these experiences were few and surprising when they did occur, the mothers described feeling validated as a person and a parent. (p. 3116)

Jackson et al. (2024) highlighted that normalisation of the difficulties mothers faced when attempting to abide by intensive mothering expectations can reduce the impacts on mothers’ well-being:

Sharing one's experiences with other new mothers normalised and validated one's difficulties and alleviated moral distress (Jackson et al., 2024, p. 3028)

The 'good enough' mother: Reframing the 'good mother' ideal

Although authors highlighted strong cultural and societal influences on what constitutes a 'good mother', many participants defined their own expectations and definitions of a 'good mother', which helped mothers to negate the impacts on their well-being (Eaton et al., 2016; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). A mother's ability to reframe the 'good mother' ideal was determined by their children getting older, developing beliefs that they are a good parent and being secure in their identity as a good parent (Eaton et al., 2016).

The negative influence this had on them appeared to wane in response to mothers believing that despite repeated experiences of stigma and lingering self-doubt that they were meeting their own standards of the 'good parent' ideal (Eaton et al., 2016, p. 3118)

Some authors noted that mothers who held beliefs that they were doing the best they could for their child helped to reframe the good mother ideal and prevent internalisation of intensive mothering practices (Eaton et al., 2016; Jackson et al., 2024; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012).

Discussion

This thematic synthesis aimed to explore mothers' experiences of the intensification of parenting in relation to blame and guilt. Thematic synthesis revealed 10 descriptive

themes, which were further developed into three analytical themes: *Navigating the cultural ideals of motherhood*, *Idealised motherhood, at what cost?*, and *Reclaiming the self beyond motherhood*.

Navigating the cultural ideal of motherhood

This theme illustrates how intensive parenting ideologies create difficulties for mothers, particularly when attempting to navigate the societal and cultural expectations associated with intensive parenting. The literature emphasised how mothers are held personally responsible for abiding by ‘good mother’ ideologies regardless of their resources. Neoliberalism values self-sufficiency, independence and personal responsibility by arguing that individuals should support themselves through labour market participation (De Benedictis, 2012; Lavee, 2016). Research argues that mothering ideals have been reshaped by neoliberalism as mothers are seen as responsible for their child’s future outcomes and successes regardless of any structural constraints, and thus, sets a standard for ‘good mothering’ (Lavee, 2016). Moreover, mothers are seen as catalysts for creating high-functioning future citizens and workers for the community (Pötzsch, 2025). Additionally, mothers who diverge from raising children in line with neoliberal motives are branded as ‘bad’ mothers (Pötzsch, 2025). This review adds to the literature to highlight the impact of neoliberalism upon parenting and how the reshaping of intensive mothering ideologies in line with neoliberalism does not give room to the structural difficulties faced by some mothers.

Authors highlighted ways in which mothers were placed under surveillance to abide by intensive parenting norms, such as the measurement of child outcomes and judgment received from others. The assumption that parenting can influence optimal child outcomes is in line with intensive parenting (Faircloth, 2020), which further reinforces parental responsibility to engage in such practices. This has important implications for mothers who

feel they are not optimising their child's developmental outcomes or failing to meet the unrealistic expectations of intensive parenting, as they are at risk of being positioned as a 'bad mother' by society. Spoiled Identity theory posits that when a discrepancy is noted between a virtual and actual social identity, a stigma is formed, which results in the individual being discounted by society (Goffman, 2009). This is relevant to the present synthesis of literature, which highlights how mothers who are deemed as deviating from intensive parenting norms (i.e. poor child outcomes or failing to meet expectations) are often discounted as mothers and positioned as 'bad'. As noted in this synthesis, mothers are then at risk of internalising such judgements and increased self-surveillance due to a fear of being stigmatised, which can have impacts on their well-being.

The literature review emphasises that whilst it appears all mothers are attempting to navigate the cultural ideals of 'good mothering', they do not do so from the same social position. The intersections of race and class (especially income) suggest that some mothers may not have access to the same privileges, consequently, how a mother cares for their child will be different depending on resources (Arendell, 2000). Mothers from minoritised or disadvantaged backgrounds are often depicted in the literature as deviant from the intensive standard of motherhood (Arendell, 2000). Therefore, how mothers interpret and manage the cultural ideals of motherhood is not on an equal footing. This further supports Lareau's (2000) idea of 'concerted cultivation' in that middle-class mothers are perhaps more equipped to engage in intensive parenting styles for cognitive development as they are likely to have more resources compared to mothers from lower-income backgrounds.

This theme also illustrates how the intensification of parenting reinforces traditional gender roles, despite the shift in women's participation in the workforce. This review highlights how women are still expected to carry out the role of primary caregiver whilst maintaining the household and working either part-time or full-time. The idea that

motherhood is gendered is well-established in feminist theory. Feminist theory proposes that the definition of motherhood is a socially constructed practice influencing how mothers care for their children. Consequently, motherhood was assumed to be the primary self-identity for women (Arendell, 2000). Mothers perhaps feel obligated to engage in intensive mothering ideologies to uphold cultural expectations, however, this then further reinforces the belief that mothers must sacrifice their needs for their child, which is at the core of intensive mothering. Mothers continue to take on traditional gender-based roles, which may lead to negative well-being consequences.

Feminist research further highlights that mothers who work whilst being the primary caregiver often experience more positive well-being at work and more negative affect at home, whereas husbands typically experience the opposite. This is said to be because men do not feel the responsibility of the housework and caring for children, therefore, they can engage in more leisure time compared to mothers (Arendell, 2000). This review supports the notion that women felt less able to engage in their own leisure activities or self-care due to their other responsibilities such as maintaining the house, as well as the added guilt if they attempted to engage in such activities. This review goes beyond the literature to highlight the negative impacts this can have on women's overall well-being.

Neoliberal expectations attached to motherhood also reinforce gender roles. Neoliberal values frame a woman's identity as being made up of her role as a mother and wife, whilst also participating in the labour force (Pötzsch, 2025). This review supports the literature in that women feel expected to strive for both success in their careers and be the 'ideal' mother, which has consequences to well-being.

Idealised motherhood, at what cost?

This theme encapsulated the sacrifices and consequential negative impact on well-being as a result of attempting to meet intensive mothering ideals. Authors in this review noted that mothers experienced blame from friends, family, other mothers and wider society, which negatively affected their well-being. Similarly to the neoliberalist standards of motherhood, this places individual blame upon the mother as opposed to the unrealistic standards of intensive parenting. Therefore, it appears that wider society also individualises a mother's 'failure' to meet expectations, which further reinforces mother-blame and negatively impacts the well-being of mothers. This review suggests that mother-blame is perhaps used as a reinforcer for mothers to engage in intensive parenting practices in order to reduce the risk of further blame, therefore suggesting that mother-blame has a coercive nature. This has implications for mothers' well-being as pressures to parent 'perfectly' have been associated with higher risk of stress and burnout (Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018).

The authors further highlighted how mother-blame from others was internalised as self-blame. Given that neoliberal motherhood holds mothers individually accountable for children's future outcomes (Lavee, 2016), this places blame on the mother as opposed to any structural inequalities faced or wider system forces such as governmental policy. Therefore, perhaps women are more likely to internalise self-blame due to the neoliberal standards of motherhood.

Mothers in this review experienced guilt when they were positioned as not meeting the unrealistic expectations of intensive mothering, appeared to be deviating from intensive parenting norms, and when the difficulties faced by mothers were not normalised by others. There are perhaps several functions of experiencing guilt in these situations. Firstly, guilt can act as a motivator to continue engaging in intensive parenting practices. Previous research highlights how mothers who endorsed intensive parenting beliefs were associated with higher experiences of guilt (Kim & Ker, 2024), therefore, perhaps mothers continue to engage with

intensive parenting to prevent further guilt. Moreover, guilt is perhaps used as a measure of meeting the ideal self-identity as a ‘good mother’. Mothers who believe that they are not living in line with their ideal mother identity have been associated with higher levels of guilt and shame (Liss et al., 2013). Self-discrepancy in identity and the associated guilt could create an emotional burden for mothers.

Authors highlighted that the societal and cultural demands and unrealistic expectations were not normalised amongst mothers, therefore, mothers were often socially isolated due to fear of being judged or perceived as deviating from the norm. This further supports a neoliberalist view of parenting in which responsibility is placed within the individual parent (De Benedictis, 2012). The lack of normalisation and peer support from mothers positions parenting difficulties as personal inefficiency as opposed to the structural pressures placed upon mothers. The emotional suppression further isolates mothers, as they are not able to engage in relational support. This further reinforces a mothers need to try harder to meet the unrealistic expectations of motherhood, which has been associated with higher levels of guilt (Kim & Kerr, 2024) and a risk of parental burnout (Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018).

The gendered burden of care placed upon mothers who are also expected to maintain the house and go to work emphasises the sacrifices women make to meet ‘good mothering’ ideals. Feminist critiques of mothering acknowledge the gendered disparities of parenting between mothers and fathers (Hays, 1996). Mothers in this review evidence that these unrealistic expectations have had negative impacts on their well-being. Recent research into the gendered division of household labour found that women spent significantly more time engaged in cognitive labour, which was also associated with negative consequences on psychological well-being (Aviv et al., 2025). This has important implications for gender

disparities in parenting which could lead to negative psychological effects on mothers' well-being.

The intensification of parenting not only holds unrealistic expectations of mothers, but it also reshapes the dynamics of parent relationships. The Social Role theory posits that women are expected to be the primary caregivers, whilst men adopt the role of 'breadwinner' (Helou & Ayoub, 2025). Mothers in this review attempted to meet the idealised motherhood by being available both physically and emotionally to their child as the primary caregiver, therefore, romantic partnerships were sacrificed and often led to conflict and relational strain

Reclaiming the self beyond motherhood

This theme highlights how some mothers in this review attempted to move beyond the ideals of intensive parenting by rejecting the unrealistic expectations of motherhood and reframing intensive mothering by giving it a more balanced definition, which does not strive for perfection and instead encompasses 'good enough'. Poststructuralist feminism challenges the traditional ideals created through discourse. From this perspective, gender roles are seen as socially constructed as opposed to having a fixed meaning (Maclaran & Stevens, 2019). Therefore, mothers attempt to challenge the intensive parenting discourse to reshape their realities. Mothers who attempted to reclaim the aspects of their self-identities which were lost to intensive mothering ideals appeared to be protected from the internalisations of the 'good mother' which resulted in more positive well-being. This supports a post-structural feminist perspective as mothers resist the dominant discourse relating to motherhood.

This review has highlighted how mothers internalised intensive mothering ideals shaped their identities as either a 'good mother' or a 'bad mother'. Narrative identity theory suggests that people build a narrative identity that evolves from their life experiences of the past and their hopes for the future (McAdams, 2011). Some mothers in this review are perhaps re-authoring their narrative identities, which were based on the prominent cultural

scripts of the ‘good mother’, which led to guilt and sacrifice, to a more balanced view of motherhood. This new narrative perhaps allows for a more sustainable and attainable standard of mothering that encourages positive well-being.

Critique of Systematic Literature Review

A strength of this review is the use of thematic synthesis, which ensured methodological transparency and rigour. A clear search strategy was discussed to enhance replicability and highlight the systematic nature of the review. The use of thematic synthesis allows for the production of new interpretative insights as opposed to just the description of the current research. Moreover, thematic synthesis enabled a synthesis of findings across multiple studies, which resulted in the identification of patterns and gaps in the current literature which is useful for future research and the development of the current study.

Another strength of the literature review was the inclusion of qualitative studies, which provided rich and meaningful accounts of participants’ experiences. The interpretation of findings produced several themes that were identified across studies, highlighting that the impacts of the intensification of parenting were a common experience across settings, rather than unique to individual included studies.

A potential weakness of systematic literature reviews is that synthesis is based on the quality and diversity of the current literature. The majority of the studies in this review are based in Western countries (i.e. UK, USA and Australia), which perhaps limits findings to reflect the social norms of Western countries. Research argues that samples based on Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) samples are biased compared to the rest of the general population (Henrich et al., 2010), which has implications for generalisability.

Another limitation is perhaps the variation of the participants' context. The included studies explored experiences from mothers with children with neurodevelopmental or mental health needs, mothers with mental health diagnoses and community-based samples of mothers with experiences of intensive parenting practice. Therefore, the interpretation of themes should be interpreted as reflecting common patterns across varied contexts as opposed to unique sample experiences. The diversity of participants' contexts can also provide strength to the literature review, as the aim of qualitative synthesis is to integrate findings across different contexts to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Thomas & Harden, 2008), this review enabled exploration across a broad range of experiences.

A further limitation across the literature is the difficulty with the operationalisation of intensive parenting. Although the included studies examined the same phenomenon, there is a lack of consensus and measurement of what constitutes intensive parenting. Consistent with wider literature, intensive parenting is conceptualised as a set of parenting beliefs (Hay, 1996), therefore, the included studies appeared to explore overlapping but also perhaps distinct experiences. Future qualitative research could be strengthened with more conceptual clarity in relation to intensive parenting.

Gaps in the Literature

This review highlighted gaps in the literature regarding the experiences of blame and guilt associated with 'intensive parenting' ideologies. The majority of the current literature is founded in sociological research as opposed to psychological research, therefore, many of the current studies explain what the issues of intensive parenting ideologies are, whereas research grounded in psychology could perhaps explore the cognitive and emotional processes and the impact this has on individuals in relation to intensive parenting ideologies.

The majority of the research has focused on White, middle-class mothers (Budds, 2021). Therefore, there is a gap in the literature for research involving a broader representation of mothers who engage in intensive parenting practices, such as women from lower-income backgrounds. There is also a gap in the literature for the involvement of fathers, therefore, it is still unclear to what extent this phenomenon affects fathers.

Researcher Positioning

My interest in this topic was initially influenced by my experiences of being parented in a lower-income household. I was aware to some extent of the pressures my parents faced at the time. Although I am not a parent currently, my experiences growing up contributed to my awareness of the financial constraints and challenges that can influence family life. Since then, I have witnessed other family members become parents and attempt to face increasing expectations and the intensification of parenting. Additionally, since pursuing a career in Clinical Psychology, I became interested in understanding how the intensification of parenting could impact upon well-being. Professionally, I have worked with children, parents and families, which provided insight into the challenges faced within increasingly complex social and economic circumstances.

Prior to undertaking this research, I was aware of dominant narratives which often promote intensive forms of parenting as both achievable and desirable, particularly discourse shared on social media. I was curious about what extent these expectations impact parents from different social backgrounds. Therefore, this thesis was an attempt to understand how the intensification of parenting is experienced for parents who are simultaneously negotiating social and financial disadvantage. With this in mind, I recognise that I held certain assumptions regarding the potential impact of the intensification of parenting on well-being for parents from lower-income backgrounds. I anticipated that parents would experience

negative consequences to their wellbeing as a result of increasingly demanding expectations placed on them. It is important to acknowledge these assumptions when undertaking this research to remain open and curious about participants' accounts of their experiences and perspectives.

I also acknowledge that I am not a parent, therefore, I do not share the lived experience of parenting with participants and this may influence and shape my understanding of their experiences. However, throughout the research process, I engaged in reflexive practice, which enabled me to remain curious about how my own personal experiences and professional background may influence the research.

Research Aims and Questions

Thematic synthesis of the relevant literature revealed that mothers who attempt to meet the unrealistic expectations of intensive parenting may experience negative impacts on their well-being. The majority of the literature is founded on sociological research as opposed to psychological research. Moreover, there are gaps in the literature relating to parents from lower-income backgrounds and the involvement of fathers in research. Therefore, this research aims to explore lower-income parents' experiences of the intensification of parenting and the effects on well-being. Two sub-questions were developed and explored:

1. How are parents in the UK from lower-income backgrounds impacted by the intensification of parenting?
2. What are the impacts of the intensification of parenting on parental well-being?

Chapter 3: Method

Chapter Overview

This chapter outlines the method used to explore how parents in the UK experience the intensification of parenting and the impact on their well-being. Discussed is the epistemological position, justification for the chosen research design, the recruitment procedure, participant sample, details of the data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations. The chapter concludes with a critical appraisal of the current study and an account of self-reflexivity.

Epistemological Position

Research is typically underpinned by the research paradigm in which the researcher is influenced by their views of the world, thus, affecting ontology, epistemology and methodology (Pretorius, 2024). Ontology is concerned with the investigation of existence and reality (Craig, 1998). Epistemology explores the nature of knowledge (Cohen et al., 2018). Methodology refers to the design and methods used in a research study (Crotty, 1998). It is argued that assumptions relating to ontology and epistemology influence methodological considerations in research (Cohen et al., 2018). Thus, as a researcher, it is essential to acknowledge the research paradigm and how these assumptions influence the methodology.

This study adopted a social constructionist perspective developed by Berger and Luckmann in their book titled 'The Social Construction of Reality' (1966) in which they argued that reality is socially constructed and knowledge is created through social interaction and language. Reality is therefore interpreted subjectively by each individual (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The purpose of research with a social constructionist perspective is typically to describe, understand and interpret the phenomena (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

This is appropriate for the aim of this study, which is to explore the experiences of lower-income parents in relation to the intensification of parenting and the impacts on well-being. A fundamental principle of social constructionism is that our perception of the world is influenced by its representation through language (Burr & Dick, 2017). From this perspective, what is perceived as the intensification of parenting is a result of a shared language between parents. Furthermore, social constructionism concerns everyday interactions in the real world by people and consequently, how they use language to construct their realities (Andrews, 2012). This is helpful in understanding the intensification of parenting for parents, as parenting ideals can be socially produced by interactions between parents, professionals and the media. Additionally, the language used in such interactions also produces a set of standards in relation to parenting, as opposed to a natural phenomenon. Therefore, the researcher of this study holds an epistemological stance which suggests that concepts are constructed and created within the social world through language (Andrew, 2012). Given that social constructionism recognises that knowledge is not objectively discovered, rather it is co-structured through social interaction, thus the researcher is not viewed as a neutral observer and is an active participant in the research process. Therefore, the researchers prior assumptions and positioning as discussed in Chapter 2, may inevitably shape the interpretation of knowledge and the participants' experiences. However, in line with a social constructionist approach, these assumptions are not deemed as biases that can be removed, instead, the researcher utilised a reflexive approach to consider how the assumptions might influence the research process.

In line with a social constructionist perspective, participants' accounts were understood as interpretations of their experiences that are co-constructed through their interactions, context, lived-experiences and interactions with myself, as the researcher as opposed to objective representations of reality. Consequently, throughout the research

process, the researcher adopted an interpretative role and acknowledged that the findings were co-constructed through the interaction between participants and the researcher. Therefore, the knowledge resulting from the present study should be understood as contextually situated and reflective of the participants' meaning-making of their experiences, as opposed to universal truths.

Other epistemological positions were considered, and unlike a social constructionist view, a positivist epistemology argues that knowledge is objective and measurable, therefore, exists independently from human interpretation and is favourable for quantitative methodologies (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). These assumptions are not as aligned with the present study's aim, which are to explore how parents make sense of their experiences of the intensification of parenting. A critical realist epistemology acknowledges that reality is multilayered and knowledge is viewed as subjective. Critical realists also argue that observations are theory-laden (Cohen et al., 2018). The current study did not seek to identify the underlying causal mechanism, instead, the study is interested in understanding how parents construct meaning through their experiences of the intensification of parenting. For such purposes, a social constructionist perspective was deemed appropriate for this study.

It is important to note that the systematic literature review in Chapter 2 is underpinned by a critical realist perspective that informs thematic synthesis, whereas the epistemological position in this study is informed by a social constructionist perspective. This is a reflection of the differing aims of the systematic literature review and the current research. The systematic literature review aimed to identify patterns that occur within the existing literature, whereas this study places emphasis on the individual and subjective meaning-making of the phenomena by participants.

Design

This study employed a qualitative design. Qualitative research places emphasis on how individuals interpret their social world (Phillips, 2023), as such, qualitative research aims to understand the meaning that is constructed by people by exploring how they make sense of their social world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This is particularly relevant for the study of the intensification of parenting, as this would allow exploration of parents' understanding and experiences of parenting. This design is appropriate for this research as it enables deeper insight into parents' experiences of intensive parenting, which will consequently provide a better understanding of how intensive parenting affects parents' well-being. A qualitative design is also appropriate to conduct in line with a social constructionist perspective as qualitative research aims to generate knowledge from interpreting socio-culturally constructed meanings of a person's experience (Phillips, 2023). Moreover, social constructionism argues that social reality is constructed, therefore, it is not ontologically objective, thus, a qualitative design is appropriate for data that is ontologically subjective (Sagvaag & da Silva, 2021). Additionally, qualitative data allows for the exploration of attitudes towards a particular phenomenon which may generate further research questions that would be valuable to this research topic. Furthermore, my professional experience as a Trainee Clinical Psychologist and my personal experience of growing up in a lower-income household influenced an interest in understanding how parents make sense of their experiences in relation to the intensification of parenting rather than measuring predefined variables. Therefore, this aligned well with a qualitative design.

Consideration of Alternative Methodologies

The current study chose a qualitative methodology and Reflexive Thematic Analysis for data analysis purposes, however, alternative methodologies were considered. Grounded theory is a systematic method used to construct a theory from within the data and typically

holds a pragmatist or constructivist epistemology (Charmaz, 2014). As such, this was not a favourable method as the research does not aim to develop a theory from the dataset. Additionally, the research aims are more commensurate with a social constructionist epistemology as opposed to a pragmatist or constructivist approach.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is an approach which attempts to understand how people experience and make sense of their world (Braun & Clark, 2021). A key difference between Reflexive Thematic Analysis and IPA is that IPA not only develops themes across participants, but also retains a focus on each participant's unique experience throughout (Braun & Clark, 2021). Although IPA would have been a suitable approach to the current study, the researcher is interested in writing a thesis indicative of parents' experiences across the data, as opposed to reproducing individual experiences. Additionally, Reflexive Thematic Analysis is recommended over IPA when the study aims to better understand experiences within wider socio-cultural contexts (Braun & Clark, 2021).

Participants

Criteria

Participants were invited to take part if they met the following inclusion criteria: they are a parent currently living in the UK and identify as being from a lower-income household. According to the UK Government (GOV.UK, 2023) classification, a household is considered low-income if they live on less than 60% of the median income which, is approximately £30,316 (as of 2023). Therefore, a household is considered low-income if they live on £18,198 or less a year. Participants were asked to disclose their household income by confirming that they live on £18,198 a year or less. Participants who met this criteria were invited to participate in the study.

Recruitment

Braun and Clark (2021) argue that data collection is situated and subjective, therefore, they do not recommend a specific sampling number for Reflective Thematic Analysis. However, there are broad recommendations for doctoral projects which suggest a sample size of 6-15 (Terry et al., 2017). Therefore, this project aimed to recruit a maximum of 15 participants and emphasise depth of data as opposed to a larger sample size.

The sampling method used for this study was purposive sampling which aims to select participants most suited to the research and is particularly appropriate for qualitative studies due to the relatively small sample size, therefore, purposive sampling can support the depth of understanding (Campbell et al., 2020). Snowball sampling was also utilized in which participants recruit other participants with similar characteristics suited to the study (Naderifar et al., 2017). The researcher liaised with two charities in the East of England that aim to support parents from lower-income backgrounds. The researcher also asked consenting participants if they had a partner who would be interested in taking part. A research poster was shared via social media websites such as Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. A copy of the research poster is shown in Appendix B.

Participant Demographics

15 participants took part in the study, 10 were female and 5 male. 8 participants identified as White British, 2 participants identified as Black American, 4 participants identified as Black African and 1 participant identified as Black English. Full participant demographic information can be found in Table 4.

Table 4*Participant Demographics*

Demographic	Category	n	%
Age (years)	24 – 29	4	26.7
	30 – 35	7	46.67
	36+	4	26.7
Gender	Male	5	33.33
	Female	10	66.67
Ethnicity	White British	8	53.33
	Black British	1	6.67
	Black African	4	26.7
	Black American	2	13.33
Age of Children	0 – 1	7	
	2 – 3	6	
	4 – 5	4	
	6 – 7	4	
	8+	8	
Location	Essex	7	46.67
	London	3	20
	Manchester	1	6.67
	Scotland	1	6.67
	Portsmouth	1	6.67
	Wales	2	13.33
	Married	8	53.33

Marital status	Partnership	3	20
	Single	4	26.7

Data Collection

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as a suitable data collection method. Semi-structured interviews are widely used in healthcare research and are the most used data collection method for qualitative designs (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Semi-structured interviews involve a dialogue between a participant and a researcher which is informed by a pre-developed interview guide and often includes follow-up questions (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). A semi-structured interview aims to be flexible, thus encouraging new questions to be explored in response to the participant, whereas, a structured interview which consists of a limited set of questions, would not account for flexibility (Mashuri, 2022).

This is a suitable data collection method for the present study as semi-structured interviews allow for a deeper exploration of thoughts, feelings and beliefs about a topic (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019), in this case, the intensification of parenting and the impact on well-being, and this aligned with the researchers' positioning and interest in understanding parents' experiences of the intensification of parenting. The researcher's professional role as a Trainee Clinical Psychologist influenced the assumptions that exploring the impact of this phenomenon on parents' well-being may also be a sensitive topic; therefore, 1-to-1 semi-structured interviews would ensure sensitivity for participants. Moreover, semi-structured interviews are not bound by a philosophical foundation (McIntosh & Morse, 2015), therefore, they can be applied to this study from a social constructionist perspective as a tool to assist with understanding the participants' meaning and experience in relation to the intensification

of parenting and the impact on well-being. A further advantage of semi-structured interviews is that they can be conducted in different ways including, face-to-face, online or via telephone which increases accessibility to participants (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). This is particularly useful for the current study which, aims to recruit parents who may be under time pressure due to caring and work responsibilities, and online interviews help to negate any travel costs.

Alternative qualitative data collection methods were explored, including focus groups and questionnaires. Focus groups aim to facilitate discussion on a particular research topic for a group of participants (Gill et al., 2008). Although this method would be suitable for the current study as it could allow exploration of parents experiences and beliefs in relation to the intensification of parenting, the researcher felt that given the sensitive nature of the topic, the discussion of well-being, and the existing knowledge highlighting shame and judgement for parents, a focus group may inhibit individual experiences due to fear of judgement from others. Questionnaires typically consist of a set of questions which participants are required to answer and can be distributed on paper or online which, further allows for a large size (Adams & Cox, 2008). For the purpose of the current study, it was determined that a maximum sample size of 15 would be sufficient, therefore, a larger sample from questionnaire data was not necessary.

Interview Schedule

For semi-structured interviews, an interview schedule is developed in advance to provide an element of structure and focus to the interview (Naz et al., 2022). The interview schedule is a list of questions pertaining to the main topic of the research and ensures that data collection is comparable between participants (Naz et al., 2022). The development of the interview schedule for this study was in line with Kallio's et al. (2016) five stage framework.

Firstly, the researcher evaluated the appropriateness of using semi-structured interviews as the chosen data collection method. Next, an adequate understanding of the literature was gained to inform the interview schedule. The third phase involved the development of a preliminary semi-structured interview guide which is grounded in previous literature. Stage four suggests pilot testing the interview schedule to ensure relevance, the present study did not pilot test the interview schedule due to difficulties with initially recruiting to the project. Moreover, semi-structured interviews are an iterative process, thus, there is scope for the interview schedule to evolve as recruitment of participants progresses (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The final stage involved presenting the development process of the interview schedule in the research paper (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview schedule contained questions relating to the intensification of parenting and the possible impacts to parental well-being. Importantly, questions were structured in a way to help the participant feel at ease. The interview schedule included topics relating to parents' experiences of being parented, how intensive parenting expectations impact well-being, and how expectations differ for mothers compared to fathers. These main topics allow scope for follow-up questions based on participants' answers. A copy of the interview schedule can be found in Appendix C.

Procedure

At the recruitment stage, the researcher attended groups facilitated by two charities in the East of England and approached participants who attended the group. Each interested participant was presented with a participant information sheet detailing the purpose of the study, the participant's right to withdraw, information on what will happen if the participant chooses to be involved in the study, any risks involved, possible benefits, the anonymity of data, limits of confidentiality, ethical approval, and the researcher's contact details. If participants were happy with the information, they were then asked to sign a consent form

which states that participants voluntarily agree to take part in the study, and that information collected for the study will be used for the purpose of research. Participants who expressed interest via social media platforms contacted the researcher and were sent electronic copies of the participant information sheet and consent form. Interested participants then signed and returned the consent form electronically. The signed consent forms were saved to the University of Essex encrypted drive.

Participants were invited to attend an online interview with the researcher. Interviews took place between 9th September 2025 and 15th December 2025. Interview length ranged from 24 to 90 minutes. Participants were interviewed individually, not as a couple, to allow participants to freely express their thoughts on the phenomena. Interviews were conducted, recorded and transcribed verbatim via Microsoft Teams. The researcher then checked each transcript alongside interview recordings to ensure accuracy and any discrepancies were amended. Video recordings were deleted once transcription was completed and the transcribed interviews were saved to the encrypted drive that only the lead researcher has access to. An anonymised excerpt from a participant's transcript can be found in Appendix D.

At the start of each interview, participants were reminded of confidentiality and their right to withdraw. Consent was also obtained to record the interview. At the end of each interview, participants were offered space to debrief and thanked for taking part. Participants also had the opportunity to ask any questions related to the interview or the study and were oriented to the researcher's contact details on the participant information sheet for use if needed.

After the completion of the interviews, each transcript was given a participant ID to ensure the anonymity of participants. The content of the transcripts were also anonymized (i.e. names of children, places of residence).

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Data will be analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). RTA is appropriate for the current study as it enables the exploration of participants' views, opinions, meanings and experiences (Braun & Clark, 2021). This is appropriate for the research aim of exploring parents' experiences of the intensification of parenting and the impact on well-being. A benefit of Reflexive Thematic Analysis is its flexibility and its compatibility with different epistemological approaches (Braun & Clark, 2006). Social constructionism argues that experiences and meaning are socially produced and RTA from this perspective is concerned with how experiences are affected by language within society (Braun & Clark, 2006). RTA emphasises the researcher's influence as the subjective storyteller and researcher reflexivity is fundamental to the data analysis (Braun & Clark, 2021). According to Braun & Clark (2021), reflexivity should include reflecting often on personal assumptions, expectations and choices during the research process.

Braun and Clark (2006) suggest that researchers conducting RTA should make decisions regarding the epistemological position and data analysis in the initial research stages. The researcher of this study holds a social constructionist position which believes that the social world and knowledge are constructed through language in society. Therefore, participants' experiences will be made sense of from this theoretical position. Themes will be determined from the data set using an inductive, data-driven approach as opposed to a deductive, theory-driven approach (Braun & Clark, 2006; 2021). This approach to the data typically means that themes are not determined by the researcher's own interest in the topic, however, the researcher acknowledges that they cannot entirely separate themselves from their own theoretical and epistemological positions (Braun & Clark, 2006). Additionally, the level at which themes will be identified will be at a latent level which seeks to go beyond the descriptive content of the data set to further analyse the underlying ideologies (Braun &

Clark, 2006). Data analysis at the latent level will require interpretative work to develop themes within a socio-cultural context as opposed to individual psychologies of participants (Braun & Clark, 2006; 2021). As such, coding reliability approaches were not chosen as they typically establish themes early in the data analysis and are often based on previous theory as opposed to an inductive, data-driven approach applied in RTA (Byrne, 2022).

Strengths and Weaknesses of Reflexive Thematic Analysis

An initial strength offered by RTA is its flexibility and variation in approaches. RTA can be used to analyse data in an inductive or deductive way. Data analysis can explore meaning at a semantic or latent level. Additionally, RTA is not tied to a particular epistemology, thus, analysis can encompass a realist, essentialist, relativist or constructionist approach (Braun & Clark, 2021). Therefore, RTA is suitable for different types of research which means it is an accessible method. However, the accessibility and flexibility of the method has been criticised for lacking design coherence as researchers may fail to state how they assessed whether a qualitative design fits with the aim of the study, the underlying epistemological assumptions and the chosen analysis method (Braun & Clark, 2022). Therefore, if research is lacking in design coherence, there is a risk of TA approaches being applied inconsistently. Braun & Clark (2022) acknowledge these critiques and have published guidance on design coherence (Braun & Clark, 2022), as well as guidelines for carrying out RTA (Braun & Clark, 2021).

Another strength of RTA is the recognition and importance of the researcher's reflexive and subjective role in the research (Braun & Clark, 2021). In qualitative research, researcher reflexivity has evolved to accept the researcher as fundamental in actively influencing and interpreting data, therefore, the subjectivity of the researcher can be utilised rather than trying to eradicate it (Finlay, 2002). Researcher reflexivity is seen as a tool to

form more interpretations and deeper insights into participants' experiences (Finlay, 2002). Moreover, reflexivity can be used as a tool for rigor in qualitative research by acknowledging individual beliefs, values, biases and prior knowledge, thus, researcher reflexivity increases credibility of results (Berger, 2015; Peddle, 2022). Despite the increased acknowledgment of researcher reflexivity, this has also been criticized for its potential risks of researcher bias. A researcher's position or familiarity with the research participants can lead to a blur of boundaries as researchers may assume participants beliefs or participants may presume the researchers knowledge. There may also be a risk of the researcher imposing their own beliefs and values onto the research or participants (Berger, 2015).

Data Analysis

Braun and Clark (2006) recommend a six phase process to RTA. In summary, RTA begins when the researcher starts to look for patterns of meaning within the data and finishes when the researcher provides a final written report of the meanings found within the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). However, these six phases of analysis are not linear, and often the researcher continuously moves back and forth between phases and this process is developed over time (Braun & Clark, 2006). Data analysis of this research followed Braun & Clark's six-phases of RTA and steps were re-visited as necessary. The six phases are outlined below with a description of how the researcher applied RTA to the present study.

Phase One

The researcher familiarises themselves with the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). Braun and Clark (2006) recommend the use of active reading by searching for meanings and patterns and this should be carried out at least once before coding begins. At this stage, the researcher immersed themselves in the data by listening to the audio recordings to check

validity of the transcripts, repeatedly reading each transcript, and began to take written notes of any ideas which would be useful for coding the dataset. After each interview, a reflective journal was developed (see Appendix E) to ensure researcher reflexivity on initial interpretations of the data.

Phase Two

The researcher begins generating initial codes (Braun & Clark, 2006). Braun and Clark (2006) describe a code as a part of the data that appears to be interesting to the researcher. The codes in this research were data-driven meaning they were formed from the data as opposed to being influenced by theory. Codes were initially semantic, emphasising explicit findings in the data, as analysis progressed, codes were predominantly latent, which enabled interpretation of underlying meanings. For the purpose of this research, the entire data set was coded line-by-line. Data was coded using the software NVivo. The researcher systematically worked through the dataset and as per Braun and Clark's (2006) recommendations, gave each transcript equal attention. A non-linear approach was used to ensure that early coded transcripts were checked for newer developed codes.

Phase Three

The researcher begins searching for themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). Braun and Clark (2006) suggest analysing codes by considering how each code may combine to form an overarching theme. At this stage, the researcher exported all codes via an Excel spreadsheet and grouped similar codes together to begin identifying potential latent themes.

Phase Four

The researcher reviews the themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). Braun and Clark (2006) suggest a two-stage process for this phase. The first involves reviewing themes at the level of the coded data extracts. The researcher read all the extracts that were grouped under each theme and decided whether they formed a coherent pattern related to that theme. When this was achieved, the researcher moved on to phase two which involved the researcher deciding the validity of a theme in regard to the data set as a whole (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Here, the researcher grouped similar themes together to form main themes and subthemes. The researcher then identified whether each theme accurately represented the data as a whole by re-reading the dataset. At this stage, coding is further refined until a set of themes is chosen that fits with the data set. The researcher stopped this phase when this was achieved and when further refinements of the coding did not add anything substantial to the data analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Phase Five

Defining and naming themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). Braun and Clark (2006) suggest that at this stage, the researcher should further refine themes and analyse the data within them. This involved determining the essence of what each theme depicts and then determining which parts of the data each theme captures (Braun & Clark, 2006). The researcher developed a thematic map to assist with visualisation and refinement of themes. The researcher determined if each theme and subthemes shared a connection and highlighted underlying patterns within the data. An example of the thematic map can be found in Appendix F.

Phase Six

The researcher then moved on to phase six which involved producing the written report (Braun & Clark, 2006). This written report highlights the interpretation of findings from participants in relation to the current research aims and questions.

Braun & Clark's (2006) 15-point checklist of criteria for good thematic analysis was applied throughout each phase (see Appendix G).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained via the University of Essex ethics committee and approved on 26th July 2024. The project protocol number is ETH2526-0014 and a copy of the ethical approval form can be found in Appendix H.

Informed Consent

All participants were provided with a participant information sheet (see Appendix I) and a consent form (see Appendix J). The information sheet detailed the purpose of the study and the aim, an outline of the study procedure, the potential risks and benefits of taking part, information about data collection, confidentiality, participants' right to withdraw and contact information for the lead researcher in case of any concerns. If participants were satisfied with the information given, they were asked to sign the consent form. Some participants completed the consent form digitally and returned it to the lead researcher via email, other participants signed a paper copy of the consent form which was returned to the lead researcher in person. At the start of the interview, participants were asked verbally for consent to record and transcribe the interview.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

The British Psychological Society (BPS) posits that participants' identifiable data must remain confidential throughout the research process and on publication of completed research unless there is a suggestion of significant risk to the participant or others (BPS, 2021). Anonymity and confidentiality was presented in the participant information sheet, participants were also reminded of the researchers responsibility to uphold anonymity and the limits to confidentiality at the interview with an opportunity to ask questions. All personal data was anonymised and each participant was assigned a research ID. All anonymised personal data was stored in an encrypted University of Essex drive which only the lead researcher has access to. Interview recordings were deleted once transcription was completed. Any identifiable data disclosed in the interview transcripts was redacted or anonymised and transcripts were also stored in the encrypted drive.

Right to Withdraw

Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time through the participant information sheet and at the start of the interview. Participants were free to withdraw at any time without reason and provided with details on who to contact should they wish to withdraw from the study.

Potential Risk of Harm

Given the emotive nature of the topic discussed, it was anticipated that the interview and discussion relating to parenting pressures and the impact on well-being could elicit an emotional response. Additionally, participants were asked to disclose their income status which could potentially illicit feelings of shame due to the negative stigma related to socio-economic status. A thorough risk assessment was conducted (see Appendix K) and controls were put in place such as building rapport with participants, structuring interviews so that

questions are asked sensitively, and giving participants the opportunity to discuss any questions with the researcher which will help mitigate risk and ensure the well-being of participants. During the interview, participants were reminded that they had a right to not answer questions and could stop the interview at any time. At the end of the interview, participants were offered space for a debrief to allow for discussion of any questions or difficulties that might have arisen. The researcher's role as a Trainee Clinical Psychologist enabled utilization of clinical skill such as empathic and active listening, having a non-judgmental tone and offering validation of experiences. These skills further help to mitigate any potential feelings of shame or emotional distress. Furthermore, clinical experience as a Trainee helps with the identification of any risks to participants or to others if they were disclosed.

Critical Appraisal and Self-Reflexivity

Critical Appraisal of the Current Study

The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) tool (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2018) was used to critically appraise the current study and evaluate its methodological rigor. A summary of the critical appraisal can be found in Table 5.

Table 5

A Critical Appraisal of the Current Study using CASP (2018) tool for Qualitative Studies

Qualitative Appraisal Criteria	Rating	Evidence for Meeting Criteria
1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	Yes	The aim and research questions are stated in Chapter Two and highlighted that the aim of the study is to explore lower-income parents' experiences of the intensification of parenting and the effects on well-being.

2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate	Yes	A qualitative methodology is appropriate for this study as it allows for deeper insight into individuals meaning and experiences. This is appropriate for the exploration of parents experiences of the intensification of parenting and subsequent impact to well-being.
3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	Yes	A qualitative design is appropriate for developing a better understanding of how the intensification of parenting affects parents well-being. RTA was chosen as the data analysis method to aid in the exploration of participants meanings and experiences. Alternate methodologies were considered such as IPA and Grounded Theory but were not favourable over RTA for the current study.
4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research	Yes	The study employed purposive and snowball sampling methods. These methods are deemed appropriate for studies with smaller sample sizes and for the recruitment of participants with similar characteristics that are suited to the study (i.e. lower-income parents).
5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	Yes	Data was collected using online semi-structured interviews. This is a widely used data collection method in healthcare research. Semi-structured interviews allow for deeper exploration of participants experiences. The use of online interviews increased accessibility for parents across the UK and helped with time restrictions and minimises costs for participants.
6. Has the relationship between the researcher and participants been adequately considered?	Yes	The researcher examined their role as researcher and any potential bias at different stages in the research process. In Chapter Three the researcher considers their reflexivity. The researcher developed a reflective journal to explore choices and influences at each stage of the research process.
7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration	Yes	Ethical considerations have been made throughout the research process and discussed in Chapter Three. Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality and risk. The study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee.
8. Was the data analysis	Yes	An in-depth description of the data analysis process in detailed in Chapter Three. The RTA process details how themes were

sufficiently rigorous		developed from the dataset. A reflective journal was utilised to examine the researchers role and potential bias in the data analysis.
9. Is there a clear statement of findings?	Yes	A clear statement of findings is explicitly noted in Chapter Four. A discussion of the findings in relation to the research aims and questions is noted in Chapter Five.
10. How valuable is the research?	Yes	The present study adds to the literature by highlighting how parents from lower-income backgrounds experience the intensification of parenting and the impact to well-being. This has important clinical implications for necessary well-being support for parents. Moreover, the study provides important policy implications in relation to parenting guidance and advice. This study also highlights how fathers experience the intensification of parenting and invites future research to explore this further.

Self-Reflexivity

As previously discussed in this chapter, researcher reflexivity is an important tool for deepening insights into participant experiences (Finlay, 2002) and ensures rigour (Berger, 2015). Reflexivity often involves recognising individual beliefs, values, potential biases and prior knowledge that can influence research (Berger, 2015). The researcher recognises that their positionality informed the methodological decisions made in the study, including the choice of a qualitative design, the use of semi-structured interviews and the chosen data analysis method of RTA. Therefore, throughout the research process, I utilised a reflexive journal (see Appendix E). The journal was a useful tool for reflecting on the assumptions, expectations and choices in the research process, whilst also used as a tool for self-questioning of values and positions (Braun & Clark, 2021). I reflected on my self-identity in relation to social privilege and disadvantage and what this means for my positioning as a researcher and my relationship to participants. As a White, young, employed, female, Trainee Clinical Psychologist, I may hold beliefs and social positions that shape how I experience the

phenomena in the study and how participants may view me. My personal experiences of being parented in a lower-income background and having close family who are current parents may shape how I view the intensification of parenting. As such, it was important to recognise when these assumptions were present during the interviews and data analysis and how I can recognise what is a personal assumption and what is the participants' experience. I also recognize that I am not a parent currently and although I can empathise with participants' experiences, I may not know what it feels like to be in their position. My experience as a Trainee Clinical Psychologist has provided me with many therapeutic skills to understand and offer empathy for clients which I believe are useful skills for interpreting participants' experiences in the current study.

During interviews with mothers, there were times where, although I am not a parent currently, my positioning as a woman offered a sense of trust and camaraderie for the experiences that mothers had which may differ from those of fathers. Similarly, I noted emotive feelings when during interviews with fathers who expressed beliefs in line with traditional gender roles, which go against my own beliefs. The use of the reflective journal helped me to analyse where these emotions were founded (i.e. from my positioning as a woman, and from my personal experiences of witnessing mothers experience the burden of gendered parenting) and was an expressive outlet.

Chapter Four: Findings

Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the study's findings from the RTA of 15 participant interviews. The description of themes is accompanied by verbatim participant quotes to further illustrate the development of findings and themes.

Findings

The results of the RTA highlighted a single overarching theme, which encapsulated three main themes, one distinct main theme, and 11 sub-themes (see Table 6, Appendix F). The findings of the present study emphasise how parents from lower-income households experience social, cultural, and structural pressures in relation to the intensification of parenting and the consequential negative impact to well-being. Notably, connections between socio-economic status and intensive parenting were not immediately transparent in participants' articulations of experience. This may suggest that the intensification of parenting has become increasingly widespread within neoliberal social contexts and, therefore, perhaps the experience of intensive parenting has become increasingly comparable regardless of socio-economic differences between working- and middle-class households. However, further research may adopt a more directly comparative approach to further develop understanding any differences brought about by socio-economic status. Along these lines, it is also feasible that the wellbeing element of the current study may have identified that, at a time when the economic aspects of social mobility are constrained by a cost-of-living crisis, parents living in less privileged circumstances have developed a more refined and limited yet achievable conceptualisation of wellbeing that diverts attention away from the relative lack of current economic resource and future prosperity they can offer to their children.

Table 6*Table of themes*

Overarching Theme	Main Themes	Subthemes
"You're just a mum, you're not a person anymore": Intensive Parenting Influences Self-Identity and Negative Well-being	Parenting Under Normative Pressure	The Emotional Burden of Unrealistic Parenting Expectations Feeling Less Than: The Impact of Comparison and Judgement
	The Institutionalisation of Intensive Parenting	Normalised Neoliberal Parenting Ideals Increase Pressures for Lower-Income Parents Governing Parenting Through Schools Parenting Advice Leads to Uncertainty When Support Feels Like Surveillance
	Caught Between Conflicting Parenting Norms	The Cultural Tensions in Parenting A Generational Divide: When Advice No Longer Aligns Gendered Assumptions in Parenting
	Attempting to Cope: The Need for Structural Change	Why Support Matters for Parents Moving Beyond Individual Change

Overarching theme: “You’re just a mum, you’re not a person anymore”: Intensive Parenting Influences Self-Identity and Negative Well-being

This overarching theme encapsulated how the social, cultural and structural pressures placed upon parents continues to reinforce intensive parenting and the consequential impacts on parental well-being, particularly for parents from lower-income households. This overarching theme includes three themes: *‘Parenting Under Normative Pressure’*, *‘The Institutionalisation of Intensive Parenting’*, and *‘Caught Between Conflicting Parenting Norms’*.

Parenting Under Normative Pressure

This theme emphasised the social and normative expectations that are placed upon parents in line with intensive parenting ideologies and the impact these had on well-being for parents from lower-income households. The subtheme '*The Emotional Burden of Unrealistic Parenting Expectations*' highlights how parents managed the intense pressures and expectations of parenting and the impact on their well-being. The subtheme '*Feeling Less Than: The Impact of Comparison and Judgement*' explored how social comparison reinforced intensive parenting whilst also negatively impacting parental well-being.

Subtheme: The Emotional Burden of Unrealistic Parenting Expectations

All participants were aware of the expectations placed upon parents in line with intensive parenting ideologies. Mothers accounts emphasised expectations such as being the primary caregiver for children whilst being in employment and taking on majority of the domestic work at home.

“You have to work a lot just to be able to survive, to support your children ... you also need to be around to pick up your children from school ... to be able to run a household ... spend quality time with your children ... make sure your children are eating healthy ... you’ve just got to try and work it out on your own and get on with it” (Mother 8)

These expectations appeared to be similar for single fathers, whereas married fathers believed their parenting role was purely to support financially:

“My own role is for me to check everything is okay for them, to provide food, clothing and to pay bill for them” (Father 7)

Parents felt pressured to conform to these expectations by external forces such as the government, policy, recommended parenting advice and other parents. Pressure to conform was also experienced internally as some mothers described self-expectations that they placed upon themselves which were also in line with intensive parenting. Parents who felt they were not meeting the unrealistic expectations of intensive parenting experienced negative consequences to their well-being. Some mothers internalised their ‘failure’ to meet the idealisation of intensive parenting as being a ‘bad mum’:

*“You feel like a bad mum, you feel like you’re letting your child down in some way”
(Mother 11)*

Mothers experienced emotions such as regret, guilt and sadness if they felt they were not meeting the expectations of intensive parenting, this caused some mothers to have experiences in line with depression such as sleeping all day and not leaving the house, which led to social isolation and further impacted on well-being. Some fathers noted that striving to meet expectations caused physical impacts such as high blood pressure and difficulty sleeping.

*“The biggest things for me were sort of just the anxiety kind of feeling, feeling the need to be chained to the house, trying to perfect like eating and sleeping schedules”
(Mother 14)*

The intensity of expectations placed upon parents meant that mothers sacrificed their own needs for their children. This included sacrificing self-care, eating, and exercising which has further negative impacts to well-being.

“Sometimes I don’t have time to eat dinner myself so I either eat at 9pm when everything is done and the kids are in bed or I don’t eat at all and when I do eat, it’s usually just toast” (Mother 8)

If mothers did find time for themselves, this was often used to attend to household responsibilities or was overshadowed by worrying about their child. These accounts highlight how alone time has changed for parents and how the demands placed upon parents are so great that mothers are not able to take a break from parenting responsibilities. This has important implications for well-being as parents can experience burnout.

“I can’t even go out and if I left my baby with someone, I would be overthinking the whole time. I won’t even enjoy the event” (Mother 9)

Parents attempted to manage the pressures placed upon them and the impact on their well-being by acknowledging that they were doing the best they could for their child and looking towards the future which suggested demands would reduce as their children were older.

“I try not to let it sort of bring me down too much ... I know I’m doing the best, the best I can” (Mother 14)

This perhaps offered self-validation which could alleviate feelings of guilt when parents feel they are not living up to the expectations of intensive parenting. However, this also places parents in a position of forced acceptance of the demands placed upon them as opposed to challenging expectations of intensive parenting, therefore, continuing to reinforce parenting ideals.

The expectations placed upon parents and the impact on well-being has become so severe that mothers questioned whether they would have more children in the future or whether they would recommend parenting to others.

*“I think people are afraid to talk about it because they don’t want to put someone off”
(Mother 12)*

The pressure to be able to meet these expectations were further exacerbated for lower-income parents who had less resources to engage in intensive parenting, this appeared to cause guilt for many parents when they felt unable to provide financially for their children. Consequently, parents often sacrificed things that would typically boost well-being such as family days out, holidays, media subscriptions and food related treats.

Parents from lower-income households appeared to re-frame the meaning of a ‘good parent’ to one that was in line with their financial resources. Parents expressed the importance of meeting a child’s basic needs such as food, shelter and love, and quality time was centred around free activities.

“Just slowing down and spending time with them ... actually all that really matters is just making sure they’re happy and well look after, cared for” (Mother 8)

This re-framing could reduce the need for social comparison against parents from higher-income households and thus, reducing the pressure placed on lower-income families to abide by intensive parenting ideologies. However, this further positions lower-income parents as disadvantaged to engage in intensive parenting ideals if they chose to do so.

This sub-theme encapsulated how the intensive and unrealistic expectations placed pressure upon lower-income parents which consequently had a negative impact on their well-being.

Subtheme: Feeling Less Than: The Impact of Comparison and Judgement

Participants accounts highlighted that parents compared themselves to other parents. The function of social comparison appeared to be a measure of conformity to intensive parenting practices and had consequential impacts on well-being. Some participants compared their child's development, behaviour, level of discipline, and developed milestones with other parents.

"I thought she was broken, I thought like there must be something wrong with my child because she's not doing what everyone else's babies are doing" (Mother 13)

Mothers who felt they were not performing intensive parenting practices as well as other mothers experienced shame, guilt and frustration. Mothers also placed blame upon themselves and sometimes their child.

Comparison to others was sometimes so strong that parents attempted to change their parenting to align with other parents. This highlights how social comparison can be used as a tool for conformity to intensive parenting ideals and impacts an individual's identity as a

parent. Moreover, this experience of self-doubt had negative implications for parental well-being.

“You start, you know, second-guessing yourself, you start trying, I’ve done it before, you start changing the techniques ... and that doesn’t work, so you’re sitting there going, what have I done that’s made it not work” (Mother 10)

Some mothers accounts reflected a sense of competition between other mothers, this related to who had the best material items for their child, the best social media presence, a sense of proving to other mothers that they are the best, and who had the best behaved children. This sense of competition further reinforces ‘good parenting’ ideals and was a cause of stress for mothers.

Some mothers felt that competition was used as a coping strategy for mothers to be reassured that they are doing better than others, therefore, emphasising that they are a ‘good mother’:

*“To almost make it feel as though, ‘oh I’m maybe doing better than that person’”
(Mother 8)*

Competition between mothers further reinforces intensive parenting practices and ‘good parenting’ ideals as parents continue to compete against each other, therefore, continuing to have negative impacts on well-being.

Parents experienced shame when they compared their financial circumstances to other parents and their capacity to buy material items marketed for parenting (i.e. pushchairs, toys aimed at children’s development). Parents measured their ability to be a ‘good parent’ based

on spending money on items that align with intensive parenting. This influence on identity as a parent and feelings of shame negatively impacted well-being. Moreover, financial inequality appeared to be experienced as an individual difficulty as opposed to a structural issue such as the cost of living crisis.

“When you see someone’s pushchair, because I think it’s like the equivalent of men and cars, like you know what they’re earning based on their pushchair” (Mother 11)

The comparison to others appeared to be exasperated by the use of social media. Parents noted that social media facilitated constant comparison of other peoples’ lifestyles which often depicted financial freedom and unrealistic parenting. Given the rise in social media platforms and the popularity of parenting discussions online, this has increased access for comparison to other parents. An increase in social comparison and access online further increases the risk of negative impacts on well-being.

“I go through phases with social media, ... I can get very engrossed in it and it then starts affecting my kind of day-to-day life because I start thinking like that my almost like my life and the way I’m doing it is wrong which then makes you feel rubbish ... that’s why I feel so depressed about it all and ... I take a break off of it and focus back on the real world that I live in” (Mother 14)

Social media was a common outlet for parenting advice and guidance, this felt overwhelming to most parents due to the wide spread nature of advice and the limited availability of evidence.

“Instagram unfortunately has played a big role in my learning and I’m not sure that’s necessarily a good thing because I think sometimes there’s too much information on there with quite contradictory opinion, I’m never quite sure what’s for the best”

(Mother 11)

This caused self-doubt for mothers in relation to their ability as a parent when they were unable to navigate through the overwhelming amount of parenting guidance. Therefore, adding further layers of stress and uncertainty which has negative impacts on well-being.

Some mothers attempted to manage the impacts of social media on their well-being by removing themselves. This highlights that protecting well-being is a mothers responsibility, as opposed to reducing the pressures presented through social media.

Participants experiences of judgement appeared to be another measure of how much they were adhering to intensive parenting ideologies. Judgement typically came from other parents, family members, partners and strangers in public. Some parents felt judged on their ability to manage their children’s behaviour whilst out in public and consequently felt shame and embarrassment. Fathers also noted feeling stressed by their children’s behaviour, however, they expressed minimal experiences of judgement from others in relation to their parenting.

Some mothers experienced judgement for being stay-at-home mothers, whereas, working mothers felt judgement for taking time off work to be with their children. This emphasised a double-bind in which mothers were subjected to judgement regardless of their employment. Mothers who stayed at home were viewed as not contributing to society, whereas, mothers who took time off work were judged as not being committed to their career. Mothers parenting performances are often positioned as inadequate further emphasising the impossibility of achieving ‘good parenting’ ideals.

Similarly to the function of comparison, mothers questioned whether judging other mothers was a means to remain socially included in ‘good parenting’ ideals. The need to be socially included with other mums further reinforces intensive parenting ideologies and consequently causes implications for well-being as mothers continue to strive to be included. Moreover, participants felt that mothers who were perhaps struggling with internalising intensive parenting ideologies were more likely to make judgements regarding others as a way to manage these feelings. This breakdown of support between mothers further impacts on well-being.

“It all comes from wanting to be included ... when other mum’s talk to me, I’m like, oh yeah like I’m one of the mums” (Mother 1)

Some mothers’ experiences of judgement were also internalised to become self-judgements which ultimately functioned as a self-measure of good parenting ideals. Mothers experienced self-judgement when they felt they were not meeting expectations placed upon them, when they deviated from parenting guidance (i.e. not being able to breastfeed due to pain), and when they attempted to implement parenting advice for their children (i.e. engaging in activities for child development) in which their children did not engage. Self-judgement placed further pressure on mothers as they felt compelled to conform to intensive parenting ideologies and consequently impacted their well-being.

Mothers in this study from lower-income households reflected on their experiences of judgement in relation to their financial context which they felt others used as a measure of their parenting ability.

*“There’s some people like ‘oh yeah you your mum’s this or you don’t have these shoes’
... am I going to be looked at that I’m not providing enough? ... it’s making me
anxious thinking about it” (Mother 1)*

Mother 2 shared how they experienced judgement from others for opting to buy supermarket branded baby food as opposed to the named brand which led to internalised feelings as a bad mum:

*“She made me feel like a s*** mum for using the cheaper version” (Mother 2)*

Experiences of judgement in relation to financial contexts was a cause of anxiety for mothers as they feared others would position them as unable to parent adequately if they could not financially engage in intensive parenting ideals. This further places lower-income parents as responsible for the socio-economic disadvantages in relation to intensive parenting and adds further pressure which may not be experienced by those from higher-income households.

Some mothers were so fearful of being judged by others that it led to social isolation and feelings of being not good enough, which further impacts negatively on well-being:

*“It’s mainly what stops me doing stuff, is ... judging and bitchiness of other people
and like no matter what you do, it’s not good enough for some people” (Mother 2)*

Social comparison and judgement often led parents from lower-income backgrounds to make financial sacrifices in order to conform to intensive parenting practices. Parents accounts highlighted how social comparison influenced consumerism which adds extra

financial pressure. Current trends in media and marketing, often aimed at children and exacerbated through social media, was a particular cause of stress for parents from lower-income backgrounds. Parents felt pressured by their children or the comparison to others to buy the latest trending items at the expense of themselves. Parents who were unable to provide were impacted by guilt and shame:

“It’s like ... ‘I need a phone’, why? ‘because all my friends have one’ ... the guilt comes on to us then ... our kids are being left out ... but then you open a whole can of worms that way and you’re struggling” (Mother 10)

Mothers in this study also voiced how consumerism and marketing trends in relation to parenting were typically directed at mothers. Perhaps causing an added layer of stress for mothers who feel obligated to buy marketed products for their children.

“Just that expectation change ... of what is expected, whether it be the adverts or on TV or the way things are branded ... even kind of the groups that you go to, it’s always mum” (Mother 13)

Parents who were unable to buy the latest gadget marketed for children’s development were further reminded of their resources as a lower-income household. Some mothers reflected on how interactions with others (i.e. social comparison, judgement, and language) forms a perception of what constitutes a lower-income household and therefore, positions those who are attempting to meet the unrealistic ideals of parenting as deviant from the norm due to not having the resources available.

“I didn’t know anything different ... until I went to school with other people ... like ‘you haven’t got the nicest handbag’ ... that impacted me mentally because I was like oh ok, and that’s when things started to change” (Mother 1)

Most fathers shared that they hadn’t experienced judgment from other people in relation to their parenting, therefore, suggesting that the expectations in relation to intensive parenting are aimed at mothers rather than fathers. This is particularly, important in relation to parental well-being as the impacts for mothers may be more severe.

The Institutionalisation of Intensive Parenting

This theme encapsulates the institutional and structural pressures experienced by parents and how these are scrutinised to ensure conformity to intensive parenting practices. This theme also highlights how these pressures impact on parental well-being. The subtheme *‘Normalised Neoliberal Parenting Ideals Increase Pressures for Lower-Income Parents’* explores how intensive parenting ideologies are in line with a neoliberalist view. The subtheme *‘Governing Parenting Through Schools’* emphasises the institutional pressures parents faced from school. The subtheme *‘Parenting Advice Leads to Uncertainty’* emphasises the increase in parenting advice and how parents attempt to navigate the implementation of suggested parenting guidance. The subtheme *‘When Support Feels Like Surveillance’* emphasises how professionals reinforce intensive parenting and the impacts on parents well-being.

Subtheme: Normalised Neoliberal Parenting Ideals Increase Pressures for Lower-Income Parents

Parents accounts reflected how parenting expectations align with a neoliberalist view which suggests parents should aim for optimising children's outcomes and cognitive development. Mothers described feeling individually responsible for their child's development which was a driving force to attend parenting groups and to conduct their own research. This was particularly impactful for parents from lower-income backgrounds as they often attempted to engage their child in paid activities aimed at children's development despite being financially restricted.

*"I've just paid like it's ... sort of like this sensory sort of class because *child* is very like sensory ... and I paid like £61 for six lessons ... just stuck it on my credit card"*
(Mother 2)

Some parents noted a constant need to adapt their parenting style in line with new research, guidance and when comparing themselves to others, this self-monitoring and adapting is in line with a neoliberalist approach. This often lead to a heightened sense of anxiety and overwhelm when mothers were fearful that they were making the wrong choices for their children in relation to their parenting.

Some parents exhibited beliefs in line with neoliberalism and this appeared to be influenced by their experience of being from a lower-income household. Parents who experienced financial hardship expressed a wish for their child to gain skills in order to be financially successful in the future. This caused added pressure for parents from lower-income households to work harder to ensure their child gained the necessary skills to enter the workforce and have a successful future.

“You need to work hard in order to provide for you child ... he has more or higher possibility of getting jobs ... to reach their milestone, which is trying to unveil their potentials in life ... get a better job for their futures” (Father 7)

This added pressure further caused parents stress and anxiety which negatively impacts well-being.

Some fathers believed that it was a parent’s responsibility to ensure that their child was developing and gaining skills for success which is in line with a neoliberalist approach to parenting and situates responsibility within the individual parent.

“Parents with higher expectations ... set up a very clear standard and boundaries to help children to develop in terms of discipline and responsibilities ... preparing them for future success” (Father 4)

This further reinforces the pressure parents face in regards to children’s development.

This subtheme also highlighted the structural pressures and expectations parents faced in relation to the workforce. Parents’ accounts reflected how the current economy and government influenced a need for both parents in a household to work in order to survive. Mothers expressed frustration as they felt forced to return to work and they noted the impacts this could have on their child’s attachment.

“The most messed up thing about it, is the fact that the government are going to give me money to give to a nursery for them to look after my child instead of just giving the money to me so I can look after my child at home” (Mother 11)

Some participants noted how parents who were entitled to receive financial benefits felt a level of shame. This has important implications for parents from lower-income households as shame has negative impacts on well-being.

Subtheme: Governing Parenting Through Schools

Parents' accounts highlighted how pressures from school reinforced intensive parenting ideals. Parents noted that schools often monitored parents' ability to manage their child's behaviour and to get them to school on time. This monitoring was experienced as blame and highlighted a limited consideration for the wider context. Parents reported feelings of frustration and that this added pressure was a cause of stress.

"There's so much pressure ... they don't realise that actually getting them in on time ... there are so many variables ... that actually it's not always possible and then we're getting punished for it" (Mother 10)

Mothers' experiences highlighted how institutional norms further reinforced gendered assumptions of parenting as schools typically called mothers first when there was a problem with their child. This further adds pressure to mothers as the primary caregiver and sets an expectation that mothers must always be available for their child over other expected commitments such as work.

"My partner is at work and he doesn't get a phone call, not anything. My phone goes every 5 minutes, its either the school" (Mother 10)

Parents from lower-income households felt particular pressure from institutional expectations when they were required to donate to school activities such as themed days, non-school uniform days and other events. Although these requests were often framed as optional, parents felt increased pressure to ensure that their child was not left out of such activities due to financial restraints, consequently, parents often made sacrifices to ensure these expectations were met.

“We’ve got ‘shine bright day’, ‘wear green day’ ... bring in some money for this day, don’t forget to bring that back tomorrow, there’s a lot of pressure from school”

(Mother 8)

Parents’ accounts highlighted institutional expectations such as attendance, being on time, good behaviour, and completion of homework. These perhaps align with a neoliberalist view of parenting. Participants experienced pressure from schools to ensure that these expectations were met therefore, situating responsibility within the parent as opposed to the wider institution. A neoliberalist approach to parenting intensifies the pressures placed upon parents, particularly those from lower-income households who find it difficult to financially meet these expectations, consequently parents experience stress, anxiety and fatigue.

“Stop sending the children home with so much to do, they’re at school 5 days a week They still come home with a massive list of things that need to be done, we have enough to do, we don’t need extra put on us” (Mother 8)

Parents’ accounts also suggested that the educational system was in line with a neoliberalist approach as they felt their child was being shaped for the future workforce.

Some parents reported that schools sponsored their child in many activities to help them to develop their skills which would be useful for their future.

“5 is a really big milestone but that’s when they send you to school ... I think they do it to mess with us ... so that then they create the worker bees ... and you get stuck in that cycle of realise ‘oh we just go to work do this and that’s because that’s what people do” (Mother 1)

Some fathers were hopeful that their children would obtain a good education in order to have a successful future and to become functional members of society which was in line with neoliberalist view.

“At school as well, because these children need to be trained in a decent way that they may benefit the society” (Father 7)

Subtheme: Parenting Advice Leads to Uncertainty

Mothers noted an increase in access to parenting guidance on the internet and social media which they felt was both positive and negative. Increased access to information was a depiction of the expanding knowledge base for children’s development and mothers felt compelled to follow due to the positive impacts suggested for children. Easier access to information online was deemed helpful in some instances when mothers felt more mentally equipped to receive it, however, the amount of guidance available was deemed overwhelming for most mothers.

“It’s a double-edged sword to be honest. I think having the information out there when you are seeking it helps but ... you have all these gurus who know the next best thing, you get swamped ... you can’t find the way through it” (Mother 10)

Mothers found it difficult to navigate contradictory advice and to differentiate which advice was grounded in research and policy and which advice was a façade for social media. This led to feelings of overwhelm and anxiety as mothers often felt lost about how and when to implement the vast amount of advice.

Some mothers experienced self-doubt in relation to their parenting when they attempted to implement advice that wasn’t suited to their child. This led to mothers blaming themselves as they held a belief that they must be implementing the advice wrong as opposed to the advice blanketing children as one-size-fits all.

“You look online for things like the NHS but then ... those guidance’s don’t work for your child and then ... you feel like a criminal if you go against it” (Mother 11)

Some mothers were so overwhelmed by the guidance and the pressure to implement it that they were forced to remove themselves from social media. This further positions parents as responsible to protect themselves from conflicting parenting guidance and unrealistic depictions of parenting on social media as opposed to the implementation of structural changes that could influence what guidance is shared online.

Mothers who attended mother-and-baby groups felt this was a further source of informal advice and guidance from other mothers and group facilitators. These spaces were often viewed as ways to share experiences, learn new strategies, get support, and to normalise the parenting experience and often deemed helpful for mothers well-being.

“More recently started going to a couple of other playgroups and a walking group ... since having all the other mums around has had a massive impact on my mental health like in a really good way” (Mother 14)

However, mothers also reflected how these spaces facilitated informal policing of intensive parenting ideals through social comparison and judgement. Mothers who felt judged at parenting groups often didn't return, leading to social isolation and a reduced access to peers which had impacts for their well-being.

Subtheme: When Support Feels Like Surveillance

Parents' accounts reflected how healthcare professionals such as GPs and health visitors reinforced intensive parenting ideologies through judgement and evaluation of parents which influenced their conformity to intensive parenting.

“It was like, ‘you don't know what you're doing’ ... everything I do you're watching” (Mother 12)

Some mothers were judged on their ability to continue breastfeeding despite it being a painful physical experience. This led to feelings of shame and internalised incompetence as a mother.

“I was struggling with feeding ... the midwives ... were quite like ‘but is it actually painful?’ ... but I feel like they were just ‘oh here we go again, like just another woman finding it uncomfortable and it's an inconvenience” (Mother 11)

Mother 13's account further emphasised the impact that healthcare professionals had on mothers which led to internalised incompetence:

"I used to go home from there every time and cry because I think I'm doing something wrong and ... the health visitor kind of made me feel like I was doing something wrong" (Mother 13)

Some mothers felt so anxious about being judged by healthcare professionals that they found it difficult to attend appointments which had consequences for both themselves and their child's health as diagnoses were missed. This further minimised experiences of mothers who were dismissed by healthcare professionals and created a sense of not feeling listened to. Furthermore, mothers who received a diagnosis of a health issue after being dismissed were more distrustful of healthcare professionals and the lack of support received had negative impacts for their well-being.

"It turns out I had a retained placenta so like if he hadn't have taken that seriously and actually listened when I was saying like feeding for me is horrendous" (Mother 11)

Mothers described feeling blamed by healthcare professionals and they often did not acknowledge the wider context for parents which led to frustration and mothers not feeling validated.

*“They can say, ‘do you do this, that, this that’ and if you do, ‘oh that’s why then’.
Three’s never really any bigger picture. It must be something we’re doing or the
child’s doing’ (Mother 8)*

Caught Between Conflicting Parenting Norms

This theme emphasised the complexity of influences such as culture, generational differences and gender on parenting and the tension faced by parents to navigate between differing beliefs and the consequences on well-being. The subtheme *‘The Cultural Tensions in Parenting’* explores how parents navigate between cultural beliefs and policy in the UK. The subtheme *‘A Generational Divide: When Advice No Longer Aligns’* highlights intergenerational conflict on parenting and a shift in parenting norms. The subtheme *‘Carrying the Load: Gendered Assumptions in Parenting’* explores parents experiences of gender inequalities in parenting.

Subtheme: The Cultural Tensions In Parenting

Participants from African backgrounds who had moved to the UK shared how they were navigating cultural differences and influences in relation to parenting. Some parents noted the differences in parenting styles, namely, parents who were parented in African cultures typically experienced a more disciplinary style which often involved physical punishments for children, whereas, policy in the UK restricts the use of physical punishments.

*“I was brought up in South Africa and if I try to compare the way I was brought up
and the way I’m bringing up my kids, it is totally different for us. Any slight mistake,
your parent would punish you by maybe beating you with slippers and all that, but for*

us on this other side, if a baby does a mistake, you, you'd rather employ a dialogue than a physical fighting" (Mother 9)

Mother 9 highlighted how parents who were parented outside of the UK are perhaps navigating a tension between parenting practices in line with their cultural background and policy expectations present in the UK. Consequently, some parents reported uncertainty about the effect this would have on their children's behaviour. This tension which required parents to situate themselves away from their cultural backgrounds created a sense of anxiety and guilt for some parents.

Some parents shared how they felt it was important to abide by the norms of the country they currently resided in:

"It's a popular saying back in Africa, that said if you go to Rome, you have to behave like a Roman ... so definitely you have to adapt by the nature and culture of the UK"
(Father 3)

Therefore, parents who may have different cultural beliefs to the policy implemented in the UK are required to adjust and adapt to the practices in the UK. Consequently, some parents felt judged and pressured by their family members who came to visit them in the UK as they expressed concerns that they were not parenting alongside their own cultural norms. This placed added pressure for parents from differing cultural backgrounds which can impact on well-being.

This subtheme highlights how parenting is shaped by factors relating to culture and policy which can create a sense of conflict in parental identity. This has important implications for well-being as parents attempt to navigate through this mismatch of

influences, essentially creating an added pressure for parents from cultural backgrounds different from the UK.

Subtheme: A Generational Divide: When Advice No Longer Aligns

Some participants noted generational differences which influenced current parenting practices. Some parents accounts highlighted differences in types of parenting styles compared to previous generations of parents. In particular, participants reported that older generations used a more authoritative and disciplinary style which often included physical punishment. These experiences of being parented and the current policy in the UK perhaps led to a shift in a more gentler approach to parenting.

“I never wanted to hit and if I ever got to that point where I was getting so angry that that could become an issue I would then take myself away” (Mother 10)

Most parents noted a shift in the amount of parenting advice and the wider access to information that was perhaps not as present in previous generations of parents. This appeared to cause tension between generations of parents as new mothers felt less able to take advice and guidance from their mothers as they felt research had progressed.

“I think perhaps there’s more information and knowledge that we have the newer generation, which it can be used as a positive but also a negative. So we look to the older generation but we also know ... there’s new knowledge” (Mother 12)

The increase in the intensification of expectations appeared to cause resentment towards older generations of parents as current parents expressed frustration at present parenting pressures.

“It’s ridiculous, I just generally don’t understand how we’ve gotten to this point where we’re expected to do so much as pare[nt] as women, but now we get no thanks and we get no village life, you know, they always said it took a village to create a family ... we’re doing it all on our own” (Mother 10)

Moreover, a lack of understanding from older generations of parents appeared to cause a rupture in providing support for current parents:

“My mum will say, ‘oh well, you know I had to do it all on my own’ ... the older generation, they did it all on their own, they didn’t get any help” (Mother 12)

Mothers described how older generations lack of understanding of the intensification of parenting meant that the current generation of parents’ experiences were minimised and often dismissed. A lack of support and understanding from older generations of parents can further impact parental well-being and create a sense of aloneness for parents struggling to meet the expectations of intensive parenting ideals.

Mothers’ accounts reflected how stigma regarding mental health is still present amongst older generations of parents and how this can invalidate the experiences of current parents:

“I think there’s still like that stigma around ... mental health ... because when I first told my dad that I’m under [mental health] teams ... he was like, it’s just ‘baby blues’ like it’s fine, it’s normal” (Mother 12)

The re-framing of the negative well-being impacts for current parents minimises these difficult experiences. Furthermore, it places the issues within the individuals as a lack of resilience as opposed to the need for social and structural change. This has implications for seeking support from older generations of parents and can further impact on well-being.

Subtheme: Carrying the Load: Gendered Assumptions in Parenting

Some fathers reported gendered beliefs in relation to parenting. Fathers noted that a mother’s role was to care for the children and take on majority of the domestic responsibilities, whilst a father’s role was associated with disciplining behaviour and providing financially, despite both parents working.

“Parenting issue only be regarding to a mother because mother is somebody that did a lot of parenting because she gives almost 95% of the dedication in taking care of kids ... I will always say parenting should be considered as mother” (Father 7)

These beliefs are in line with the wider societal norms regarding parenting, therefore, parents engagement in this way of parenting rather than challenging norms further reinforces traditional parenting roles which has consequential impact to mothers’ well-being.

Participants acknowledged a shift in gendered expectations around the increase in women’s involvement in paid work whilst emphasising a mismatch between parenting norms which placed women as the primary caregiver. Consequently, mothers are expected to

contribute to the work force whilst also meeting majority of the expectations of intensive parenting. Instead of a redistribution of caregiving responsibilities in line with employment, mothers attempted to manage the demands of their career alongside being the primary caregiver.

“Women go to work, they run the house and they do all the running around for the children” (Mother 1)

This amplification of roles meant mothers were repeatedly battling with limited time constraints which added to their emotional distress. Women experienced fatigue, overwhelm and stress that was not described by fathers. Moreover, things that typically aim to boost emotional well-being such as self-care was often ignored to meet demands.

Father 3 emphasised how the stress from work and providing financially for their family meant that they had less parenting responsibility:

“Due to the stress from work and also fatigue, I have to go and have complete rest”
(Father 3)

Work-related stress appeared to be a justification for a reduction in parenting responsibility for men but not for women. Moreover, mothers are implicitly given more parenting responsibility as a result. This imbalance increased the emotional and physical burden of parenting for women who continuously balance the demands of work-stress whilst caring for children and maintaining the household. Meeting these demands continuously impacts on well-being as stress and overwhelm perhaps lead to an inescapable burnout, whereas, fathers have more ability to de-stress.

Gendered norms were also present in the workplace. Participants accounts reflected how mothers were expected to leave work to attend to their children if they were ill or outside of term times and to reduce their working hours when returning to work after maternity leave to accommodate childcare. This further positions mothers as the primary caregiver and highlights that fathers receive a level of flexibility in their parenting responsibilities. Working mothers endured stress and guilt as a result of managing the demands from work and being the primary caregiver.

Mothers were positioned as being not as serious about their career once they had children and described a loss of self-identity when they became mothers and reduced their involvement in work during maternity leave. This change in self-identity and pressure from work has negative implications for well-being.

“I’ve kind of lost a part of myself as well ... I had opinions and I had ... a say on things ... now my whole day revolves around sleep, food and shopping ... I’ve been working for like 20 years nearly and it is a big ... mind shift” (Mother 13)

Some fathers’ expressed beliefs that woman are biologically more equipped to be maternal which further reinforces the expectations placed upon mothers and leaves little room for challenging gendered norms. Similarly, some parenting advice positioned to be ‘gold standard’ such as breastfeeding is the sole responsibility of the mother. Therefore women are expected to endure exhaustion, hormone changes and mental health changes as a result of biologically being responsible for breastfeeding.

“It’s mental, especially when you have the hormone crash around sort of 8, 9, 10 weeks, it’s like you’re living on in an outside body, especially if you’ve not have like sort of any mental health problems before” (Mother 12)

This has implications for parental well-being as mothers are positioned as pre-disposed to manage the care of children, this creates an unequal distribution of parenting responsibilities which causes stress for mothers.

Participants accounts highlighted that mothers and fathers were held to different standards in relation to their ability as a parent. Fathers were often praised, whilst mothers’ efforts were taken for granted due to the expectations placed upon mothers. This disparity in recognition amongst mothers and fathers furthers highlighted the gendered assumptions regarding parenting.

“they [fathers] are praised all the time about how amazing they are that they’re taking their kids out and they’re spending time at the weekend for them. I’ve got to do that anyway, I’ve got to pick them up ... where’s my thanks?” (Mother 10)

The praise of fathers’ ability to carry out routine caregiving responsibilities perhaps solidifies lower expectations for fathers, whereas, mothers are expected to work harder to strive for praise and recognition. This reinforces the narrative that it is impossible for mothers to be ‘good enough’. Consequently, mothers expressed frustration towards fathers and the ongoing social pattern of unequal gender assumptions for parenting.

“If a man looks after his baby, or should we say babysits? It’s a well done ... it’s not parenting, it’s more babysitting. If a man does help out with the children, people think they’re amazing because it’s not expected of them” (Mother 8)

Mother 14’s account of being the primary care giver whilst juggling other demands placed upon mothers impacted their self-identity:

“I didn’t exist, like I’m just, I’m just mum, you know, I’m just here to look after her, look after my family, look after the house, like I’m not really a person with a personality” (Mother 14)

In some circumstances, mothers shared that differences in the expectations placed upon mothers compared to fathers and subsequent differences in parenting styles impacted relationships:

“This is why I don’t have a partner because ... I was doing it all for nothing ... it shouldn’t be all on the female just because ... you provide all the money and then the woman stays at home” (Mother 1)

The gender disparities in parents roles also meant that mothers were required to teach their partner how to parent, this added further demands for women and led to feeling unsupported.

“My partner didn’t know how to put sterilizer on ... didn’t know what teats did what because he didn’t, he didn’t learn” (Mother 10)

Parents' experiences highlighted gendered expectations regarding sacrifices made when becoming a parent. Mothers sacrificed their bodies during pregnancy, exercise, sleep, social life, self-care and personal time. Whereas, fathers reported that their self-identities remained largely intact and their sacrifices related to leisure time and socialising involving alcohol. This gendered inequality had implications for the well-being of mothers who felt a loss of self-identity, fatigue and loneliness.

“He has time to himself [husband], I’m like, you get to go to the toilet ... but I normally do that with a human sat on my legs... there’s some days I just don’t eat because it’s just not worked out that way” (Mother 13)

Some mothers interviewed with their child present and often needed to attend to them throughout. In Mother 2’s case, the child’s father was also present in the house but did not attempt to care for the child to allow Mother 2 to partake in the interview:

*“*talking to child* ‘stop right, I’ll get your dad come get you then’ ... *talking to child’s father* ‘can you come get her ...’ *no response*” (Mother 2)*

Attempting to Cope: The Need for Structural Change

This theme extends beyond the themes encapsulated within the overarching theme and highlighted parents experiences of support and the impact on their well-being. The subtheme ‘*Why Support Matters for Parents*’ emphasised the implications of not having access to support and the impacts of receiving support. The subtheme ‘*Moving Beyond*

Individual Change’ explored parents understanding of the necessary changes they felt were needed to reduce the pressures placed upon them.

Subtheme: Why Support Matters for Parents

Mothers’ accounts reflected how they attempted to support themselves by working on their own mental health and building resilience to manage the ongoing pressures of intensive parenting. This positions mothers’ as responsible to manage their well-being as opposed to changes to social and institutional expectations.

“I’m just trying to stay more resilient and rather than judging myself and worrying, like thinking that there’s there is always a positive to everything anyway” (Mother 1)

Whilst other mothers attempted to mitigate the emotional strain by ignoring the impacts on their well-being completely in order to care for their child:

“I just carried on ... when you become a mum, you have this tiny little human who is entirely dependent on me ... I haven’t got much choice ... I can’t let my anxiety or ... low mood get the better of me ... I’ve still got to parent” (Mother 14)

Most parents’ accounts attempted to mitigate the burden of intensive parenting pressures by reframing their sacrifices and emotional distress as worthwhile due to their children. This attempt at reframing the difficulties experienced helps parents to continue parenting despite the ongoing demands and pressure. However, reframing the burden of intensive parenting also normalises the structural pressures and sacrifices required to engage

in this type of parenting practice, therefore, reinforcing intensive parenting norms and increasing the risk of negative impacts on well-being.

“It’s a positive sacrifice though, because you have a child that’s the best thing you can ever have, so you have to just tell yourself that sometimes” (Mother 12)

Mothers’ accounts highlighted a lack of support from other mothers. Mothers emphasised a shift in society in which there appeared to be a lack of community which was experienced by previous generations of parents.

“It used to be you had your village. You know, my mum had three really close friends that she used to bounce ideas off with” (Mother 10)

A lack of community was reinforced through judgement from other mothers and a lack of praise for mothers. A lack of community meant mothers faced the pressures of intensive parenting alone which had negative impacts on well-being.

“There’s just no, there’s no empathy, everyone’s very individual now, everyone’s very selfish” (Mother 10)

Some mothers who did find community with other mothers noted the positive impacts this had on their well-being. Mothers who could confide in other mothers who shared similar experiences found emotional support and validation. These community relationships appeared vital in reducing the pressures placed upon mothers.

“It was really handy to go to friends ‘like I’m just so tired’. They’re like ‘it does get better’ ... it’s kind of nice to be able to say to other people, it does get a bit easier I promise” P13

Some mothers emphasised the importance of supporting other parents from lower-income households by donating children’s clothes and toys as opposed to selling them online. This form of community support appeared to be emotionally meaningful for mothers who understood the difficulties faced by lower-income parents.

*“Anything of *child* that don’t fit her anymore ... I’ll just give it away to someone that needs help for free ... especially with kids stuff ... because it’s so pricey” (Mother 2)*

Mothers’ accounts highlighted the importance of sharing the hardships of parenting with other mothers, this appeared to provide reassurance and validation of difficult experiences which had a positive impact on well-being.

“Talking to other people that are in it ... who you know, will be honest ... that was the key thing for me” (Mother 13)

Mothers who did not have access to a community of other mothers or understood the true nature of parenting emphasised how this made their experience of parenting harder.

“I think because people don’t talk about it, it becomes more of a shock and more of an abnormality, but the more I spoke about it, which is quite hard to do, the more normal it came, not just for myself but to hear other people’s stories” (Mother 12)

Some mothers reflected on how the de-mystification of motherhood helped to relieve the unrealistic pressures placed upon parents.

“Especially on social media, because all the mums on there are perfect on the outside, it makes you feel like you should look like that ... we need the reality, like real mum life, not this picture perfect mum life” (Mother 11)

Some mothers who received professional mental health support noted how this was fundamental to their well-being and expressed that it was essential to receive the support as early as possible.

“I’ve been very fortunate that I’ve had professional intervention from very early on ... has obviously really helped ... feel like myself again” (Mother 12)

Some mothers’ accounts highlighted that there were difficulties for mothers to receive support from professionals, namely long waitlists or being dismissed about the severity of their situation. This led to feelings of invalidation and further contributed to emotional distress. A lack of professional support further places the responsibility within an individual to support their own well-being which has been influenced by the social and institutional pressures discussed. Additionally, mothers from lower-income households are disadvantaged from seeking support outside of NHS services due to costs.

“They did diagnose me with postnatal anxiety and did signpost me for therapy ... but nothing ever transpired of it and I’ve kind of I’ve got over it on my own” (Mother 14)

Mothers who felt unsupported by professionals appeared to turn to the internet for help and advice. Mother 12 shared how they attempted to use AI to receive support. This experience highlights the difficulties mothers face to receive support and the attempts they make to access support.

“I ended up using a lot of ChatGPT and I set it all up so that I gave it instructions so that it sounded more like a human ... its sort of talking back as if it were like a friend” (Mother 14)

Participants’ accounts emphasised the ongoing stigma that mothers face in relation to their well-being after having a child. The power of language regarding mental health was a detrimental factor in help-seeking for mothers. This has important implications for well-being as fear of stigma could be a contributing factor to not seeking necessary support.

“When people say mental health ... perinatal team or like midwife it’s more friendlier, especially for someone like me that is foreign to so when mentioned mental health or crisis time I was like God forbid ... terminology is a very important factor” (Mother 12)

Participants’ accounts reflected the importance of having a supportive partner and this was influential at mitigating impacts on their well-being. Fathers who took on a near equal

split of parenting responsibilities and helped their partner to navigate parenting advice had positive implications for mothers' well-being.

“My hubby is he’s the more level headed out of the two of us, so he could be more of ‘look we’re going to sort it out...’ ... but in my head I was kind of everything was a disaster” (Mother 13)

Fathers in this study also noted the importance of confiding in their partner to help alleviate the stress they experienced in relation to parenting.

Subtheme: Moving Beyond Individual Change

Some mothers identified a need for changes to be made to the professional mental health support offered to parents. This included increased accessibility to services and a wider spread of information for mothers regarding what support is available.

“It’s not publicly, it’s not that well known I don’t think about what kind of support there is” (Mother 14)

Some mothers suggested a new platform or helpline which could provide advice and support immediately which would be evidence based, provide easier access to support and remove barriers to seeking care. Mothers' accounts for change highlight how the issues discussed in relation to the intensification of parenting are largely structural and impact negatively on well-being for parents from lower-income households. The need for change further highlights the severity of the pressures experienced by parents and how participants

feel that changes to structural pressures would alleviate the demands for parents and consequently have a positive impact on well-being.

Some mothers felt that education for fathers on parenting and a change in marketing to include fathers would be influential to shift gendered norms. More equal parenting responsibility could have implications for mothers who experience the burden of demands of intensive parenting.

“There needs to be more for dad’s, there needs to be more out there to kind of get dads on board with kind of ... what is expected” (Mother 13)

Majority of parents expressed a strong need for changes to be made financially such as increasing wages in line with the cost of living and providing extra financial support for parents from lower-income households.

“There’s so many things the government could do to help the less privileged families, low income families” (Father 6)

Mothers also suggested a change to the workforce to allow mothers to reduce their working hours to meet the demands of intensive parenting.

“There could be something in place extra support for mums so they don’t feel that they need to be working so much” (Mother 8)

This further highlights the difficulties working mothers have when navigating the pressures of intensive parenting with the demands of working. This is particularly important for parents from lower-income households who are often engaged in longer working hours.

Some parents' accounts emphasised a need for change in relation to intensive parenting practices for those from lower-income backgrounds. Some mothers felt that groups and activities aimed at children's development should be reduced in cost or support offered for lower-income parents to help facilitate their participants in such practices.

“If everything wasn't so expensive ... say for instance swimming ... say if there was like vouchers ... where we go it's like you have to pay £80 a month” (Mother 2)

Parents from lower-income backgrounds often make financial sacrifices in order to engage in intensive parenting practices which further impacts well-being. Therefore, structural changes to allow parents from lower-income backgrounds to engage in recommended intensive parenting practices would ease the financial burden.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Chapter Overview

This final chapter discusses in detail the key findings of the study and how these address the study's aim and research questions. The key findings will be discussed in the context of the current theoretical knowledge and literature. The strengths and limitations are discussed, along with plans for dissemination and implications for future research. The chapter concludes with final reflections on the project.

Research Question and Aims

This research aimed to investigate experiences of lower-income parents in relation to the intensification of parenting and its impacts on well-being. Two sub-questions were developed and explored:

1. How are parents in the UK from lower-income backgrounds impacted by the intensification of parenting?
2. What are the impacts of the intensification of parenting on parental well-being?

Interpretation of Findings

The interpretation of findings is discussed by theme in relation to the research questions and made sense of in the context of the existing literature. The reflexive thematic analysis identified a single overarching theme *“You’re just a mum, you’re not a person anymore”*: *Intensive Parenting Influences Self-Identity and Negative Well-being*, which encapsulated three constituent themes of *‘Parenting Under Normative Pressure’*, *‘The Institutionalisation of Intensive Parenting’*, and *‘Caught Between Conflicting Parenting*

Norms', concluding with the distinct final main theme of '*Attempting to Cope: The Need for Structural Change*'.

Overarching Theme: “You’re just a mum, you’re not a person anymore”: Intensive Parenting Influences Self-Identity and Negative Well-being

This theme encapsulated how parents from lower-income households experience social, cultural and structural pressures on parenting, which led to negative impacts on their well-being, such as emotional distress and forced identity changes. This overarching theme underpins each of the following three main themes and emphasises the complexities parents face when they attempt to navigate intensive parenting expectations at the expense of their well-being.

Parenting Under Normative Pressure

This theme highlights how lower-income parents experience the social and normative expectations of intensive parenting, which have consequential impacts on well-being. It further emphasises how social and normative expectations are socially reproduced through mechanisms such as comparison and judgement from others, which reinforces inequalities and further impacts well-being. This theme is in line with previous literature, which emphasises how mothers are expected to abide by intensive parenting ideals as influenced by society (Eaton et al., 2016; Halsu, 2018; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Wall, 2010; Williamson et al., 2023). This theme adds to the literature by addressing how these expectations are experienced by lower-income mothers and fathers. Previous theory regarding social inequalities emphasises the idea of ‘concerted cultivation’, which suggests middle-class parents are more able to engage in intensive parenting norms (Lareau, 2002). The present study extends this claim by highlighting how, despite social inequalities, lower-income

parents also engage in intensive parenting practices which have negative consequences for well-being, including added pressures perhaps not experienced by those from higher-income backgrounds. Therefore, alongside its implications for parental wellbeing, the findings also contribute to broader sociological debates regarding social reproduction. Participants in the present study experienced feeling responsible for meeting contemporary expectations of parenting ideals despite socio-economic challenges. Thus, intensive parenting norms are not simply individual parenting preferences, but are a cultural expectation that requires investment of money, time and emotional resource at the social disadvantage of parents from lower-income backgrounds. Consequently, engagement in intensive parenting norms could influence the reproduction of success for families with higher economic advantage whilst increasing the burden for parents with limited economic resources. Thus, social inequalities are reproduced through individual differences in resources and unequal abilities to engage in the cultural expectations of intensive parenting practices.

The subtheme '*The Emotional Burden of Unrealistic Expectations*' highlights how intensive parenting pressures impact well-being for lower-income parents. Mothers in the present study felt burdened by the pressures of intensive parenting, and this is in line with previous research, which posits that mothers feel they have no choice but to attempt to adhere to the unrealistic expectations placed upon them (Dembosky et al., 2023; Halsa, 2018; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). Previous research also highlights how this is particularly burdensome for lower-income mothers who are disadvantaged by costs and time restraints (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). This study builds on existing literature by emphasising how both mothers and fathers from lower-income households felt compelled to meet unrealistic expectations of parenting, whilst being positioned as immediately disadvantaged from meeting expectations due to the cost of engaging in such practices.

Despite the apparent socio-economic disadvantages, parents in this study appeared to accept the expectations placed upon them by acknowledging that they were doing the best they could within their financial restraints. Moreover, parents also made attempts to re-frame the meaning of a ‘good parent’. Previous research highlights how mothers attempted to re-frame ‘good mother’ ideals to be more realistic to their context (Eaton et al., 2016; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Wall, 2010; Jackson et al., 2024). These findings extend the literature to highlight how mothers and fathers from lower-income households attempt to manage the unrealistic expectations placed upon parents. This aligns with system justification theory, which essentially helps parents feel satisfied with their context despite the structural and social pressures (Verniers et al., 2022), enabling them to continue engaging in burdensome parenting practices, despite the impact to their well-being, further reinforcing intensive parenting practices. From a psychological perspective, acceptance and re-framing of expectations perhaps serves as a function of self-validation for parents, however, the continuation of engaging with expectations continues to reinforce intensive parenting ideals as opposed to challenging them. Moreover, participants’ resistance to the unrealistic ideals of motherhood were in line with Winnicott’s (2018) idea of the ‘good enough mother’ in which participants argued that meeting their child’s basic needs to the best of their ability was the foundation of good mothering. Therefore, parents in this study further argue an alternative to contemporary parenting ideals which encompass responsive caregiving rather than constant emotional and educational investment that is fundamental to intensive parenting (Hays, 1996).

This subtheme also emphasises how lower-income parents who felt they were not meeting the social and normative expectations of intensive parenting endured negative consequences to their well-being. Namely, mothers experienced internalised feelings of failure and adopted an identity as a ‘bad mum’ (Eaton et al., 2016; Jackson et al., 2024;

Singh, 2004; Wall, 2010; Whitely & Kirmayer, 2008). A theory used to explain this experience is the self-discrepancy theory, which suggests that mothers internalise intensive parenting norms, which leads to a discrepancy between their actual sense of self and their ideal self (i.e. who they think they should be as a mother, often determined by society), which is associated with feelings of guilt (Liss et al., 2013). Mothers in the current study experienced emotional distress such as guilt, anxiety, regret and sadness. Mothers' experiences of guilt are well established in previous research (Clarke, 2012; Eaton et al., 2016; Halsa, 2018; Jackson et al., 2024; Singh, 2004; Wall, 2010; Whitely & Kirmayer, 2008; Williamson et al., 2023). This has important clinical implications as experiences of guilt are associated with symptoms of depression and suicidal ideation (Kim et al., 2011; Sheehy et al., 2019), which positions women at a higher risk.

The current study highlights that fathers do not express the same emotional distress as mothers. Fathers report stress in relation to practical elements of child-rearing, such as child discipline, but not as a result of social and normative expectations related to intensive parenting. This supports the literature that intensive parenting is predominantly encountered by mothers (Hays, 1996). Fathers also reported more physical impacts of stress, such as high blood pressure and difficulty sleeping. Previous research highlights that mothers experience higher anxiety, depression and perceived parental responsibility compared to fathers who experience elevated blood pressure (Foody et al., 2015). The present study extends previous research to highlight how fathers from lower-income backgrounds perhaps experience parenting stress more somatically compared to mothers. Therefore, fathers may be less forthcoming with the emotional impacts of parenting compared to mothers, as emotional distress is experienced differently. This has important clinical implications for the management of stress for fathers, which should emphasise the impact on physical health and recognise that fathers may be less likely to verbalise the emotional impacts of distress.

The subtheme '*Feeling Less Than: The Impact of Comparison and Judgement*'

emphasises how parents experience social comparison and judgement from others which is in line with previous research (Blum, 2007; Clarke, 2012; Dembosky et al., 2023; Eaton et al., 2016; Jackson et al., 2024; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Singh, 2004; Wall, 2010; Whitley & Kirmayer, 2008; Williamson et al., 2023). Freud (2014) introduced the idea of the 'ego ideal' which is influenced by self-criticism and criticism from others to form what an individual considers the person they should be. This self-evaluation is further emphasised in social comparison theory, which posits that individuals use comparison to others as a form of self-evaluation (Festinger, 1957). Mothers in this study compare themselves to other parents in relation to intensive parenting norms to develop an identity of who they 'should be' as mothers. This emphasises how social comparison and judgement are powerful tools for reinforcing and policing intensive parenting expectations amongst parents. The present study extends the literature by highlighting how comparison to others leads to mothers evaluating themselves as not performing as well as other mothers, which influences experiences of guilt, shame, frustration, and self-blame, which are associated with a higher risk of symptoms of depression (Kim et al., 2011).

Some mothers' experiences were further exasperated by self-judgement, which was influenced by their perceived ability to meet self-imposed expectations, which added an additional layer of pressure and was hidden from public scrutiny. Previous research supports the notion that mothers who self-judged their ability to meet intensive parenting expectations experienced self-blame (Blum, 2007; Clarke, 2012; Dembosky et al., 2023; Eaton et al., 2016; Halsal, 2018; Jackson et al., 2024; Singh, 2004; Wall, 2010; Whitley & Kirmayer, 2008; Williamson et al., 2023). Self-monitoring and feeling individually responsible for meeting parenting expectations aligns with a neoliberalist view of parenting (De Benedictis, 2012). Consequently, neoliberalist views of parenting expose mothers to self-blame. Experiences of

self-blame have important implications for well-being as self-blame is associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression (Jannati et al., 2020).

This subtheme highlights how fear of judgment and social comparison led to mothers being socially isolated, and this aligns with previous literature (Eaton et al., 2016; Halsa, 2018; Jackson et al., 2024; Whitley & Kirmayer, 2008). Social isolation has been associated with higher risks of anxiety, depression and self-harm for mothers (Bedaso et al., 2021). From a psychological perspective, mothers in this study attempt to manage fears of judgment and social comparison by isolating themselves socially, which can provide temporary relief as a form of symptom-focused coping; however, in the long-term, social isolation can have further negative impacts on well-being.

A notable result of social comparison for mothers in this study was competition between other mothers, and this appeared to have different functions. Firstly, competition reinforces intensive parenting expectations as mothers compete to be the best at ‘intensive parenting’, which is consistent with earlier findings (Wagstaff et al., 2024). Secondly, competition between mothers can act as self-validation, as mothers who feel that they are performing better than other mothers feel reassured that they are meeting ‘good parenting’ ideals. This is in line with self-validation theory, which emphasises how perceived validity of particular thoughts increases the likelihood that these will be relied upon for judgment and consequent behaviour (Briñol & Petty, 2022). When applied to the current study, self-validation of thoughts related to competition between mothers can influence confidence in parenting abilities, thus, mothers continue to engage in intensive parenting practices. However, this has potential detrimental impacts on well-being as mothers felt stressed when competing with others. Competition also positions mothers against each other rather than supporting each other, which creates a sense of individuality between mothers and becomes a

barrier to peer social support, posing further risks of social isolation and negative impacts to well-being (Bedaso et al., 2021).

Mothers in this study highlight how social media has not only increased opportunities for social comparison but has also been used as a mechanism for parenting guidance and research. Research emphasises how ‘good parenting’ is constructed in social media (Toader, 2023) and how social media platforms such as Instagram facilitate social comparison for mothers (Wagstaff et al., 2024). Furthermore, Instagram facilitates the opportunity for the commercialisation of mothering; therefore, individuals create idealised content, resulting in mothers making upward comparisons (Wagstaff et al., 2024), further reinforcing unrealistic parenting norms. Mothers in the present study experienced negative impacts on their well-being as a result of social comparison via social media, including anxiety, self-doubt, and feeling overwhelmed. This aligns with previous research, which highlights an association between social comparison via social media and a negative effect on maternal well-being (Wagstaff et al., 2024). This study extends the literature to highlight the complicated relationship with social media use, as although mothers recognised the negative impacts on their well-being, they also found social media to be a positive outlet for connecting with other mothers and to seek parenting advice. This relationship appeared to be mediated by how capable mothers felt when receiving idealised content.

Recent research highlights a decrease in the global fertility rate, which is influenced by parents’ comparison to other parents, as this facilitates increased time and expenses invested in children in an attempt to increase optimal outcomes, however, this results in a decrease in fertility as resources are spent (Mahler et al, 2025). Whilst the present study did not investigate fertility or decisions regarding family size, the findings emphasised how some mothers’ experiences of comparison in relation to intensive parenting norms and their effect on well-being were so severe that they questioned whether they would have more children in

the future. Therefore, not only do intensive parenting practices limit parents' ability to invest in more children, but negative mental health impacts may also further deter parents from having more children. The experiences described by participants in this study provided qualitative insight into how intensive parenting expectations appeared to be unachievable in the face of financial resources, consequently, lower-income parents experience shame, guilt and inadequacy as parents. These findings are in line with emerging demographic research that suggests intensive parenting norms may impact family formation due to financial restraints and the ability to be child-centred when enlarging families (Ruckdeschel, 2024). Intensive parenting norms may influence whether people feel adequately prepared to become parents even before they enter parenthood, therefore, intensive parenting norms may contribute to several cultural mechanisms that influence decreasing fertility.

This subtheme is in line with previous literature which emphasises how parents experience comparison and how mothers experienced judgement, which appears to be universal to all mothers regardless of socio-economic status (Blum, 2007; Clarke, 2012; Dembosky et al., 2023; Eaton et al., 2016; Jackson et al., 2024; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Singh, 2004; Wall, 2010; Whitley & Kirmayer, 2008; Williamson et al., 2023). The present study extends the literature by highlighting how lower-income parents also experience judgment related to their financial context, and this, in turn, becomes a further measure of their parental ability. Namely, lower-income parents who were unable to meet intensive parenting expectations due to financial restraints were judged, and also positions lower-income parents as responsible for not meeting expectations, rather than the perspective that such difficulties arise as a result of the structural and social conditions in which parenting takes place. Positioning lower-income parents as individually responsible for overcoming financial restraints to engage in intensive parenting is in line with neoliberalist views, which place responsibility on the individual's 'freedom' to act (De Benedictis, 2012). This has

important implications for well-being as parents from lower-income households experience added social and structural pressures to conform to intensive parenting regardless of the financial costs which leads to further stress that may not be experienced by parents with greater financial resources.

This subtheme also emphasises how social influence and marketing trends place further pressures on lower-income parents. Research highlights that advertising largely directed towards children has increased in recent years, consequently intensifying pressures for lower-income households (Piachaud, 2008). The current study extends these findings to highlight how this added pressure has negative well-being consequences for parents from lower-income households, as they experienced guilt when they did not have the financial capacity to keep up with current trends and sufficiently engage in consumerism. This has important clinical implications as experiences of guilt are associated with symptoms of depression and suicidal ideation (Kim et al., 2011; Sheehy et al., 2019).

Fathers in this study noted that they did not experience judgment from others in relation to their parenting and did not engage in competition with other parents, further reinforcing that intensive parenting norms are aimed at mothers rather than fathers (Hays, 1996). This study suggests that men are less evaluated in relation to their ability to abide by intensive parenting norms compared to mothers. Moreover, evolutionary theory suggests that competition for males typically activates a fight-or-flight response and subsequent displays of physical aggression to combat male competitors, whereas, for women the risk of engaging in direct conflict would be costly for their bodies, therefore, they are more likely to engage in competition with other females in the form of social status (Wagstaff et al., 2024). This has important clinical implications as mothers may be more at risk of experiencing emotional distress in relation to intensive parenting norms, which are reproduced through judgment and

social comparison. Additionally, fathers' experiences of stress may be minimised if their experiences of stress materialise as physical symptoms as opposed to emotional distress.

This theme highlights how both mothers and fathers from lower-income households are impacted by the intensification of parenting and how this has consequences for well-being. Mothers and fathers appear to experience the social and normative pressures of intensive parenting differently in terms of judgment and social comparison. Furthermore, mothers may be positioned as being at a higher risk for negative impacts to well-being due to differing expectations.

The Institutionalisation of Intensive Parenting

This theme highlights the institutional and structural pressures experienced by parents and how these lead to scrutiny and consequential impacts on parental well-being. The subtheme '*Normalised Neoliberal Parenting Ideals Increase Pressures for Lower-Income Parents*' further emphasises how parenting is in line with neoliberalist views. Intensive parenting practices expect parents to maximise child development outcomes (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012), which would benefit their participation in the workforce. Parents felt individually responsible for ensuring these outcomes, which is in line with neoliberalist views and has been evidenced in previous research (De Benedictis, 2012; Lavee, 2016). This study extends current knowledge to highlight how parents from lower-income households are also held responsible for their child's outcomes despite structural inequalities such as socio-economic status. Therefore, parents from lower-income households are positioned as disadvantaged to meet the expectations of intensive parenting from a neoliberalist lens, as parents were unable to spend the same financial resources on their child's outcomes as parents from higher-income households. This results in negative impacts to well-being as

parents feel individually responsible and attempt to navigate the added structural inequality pressures by working more hours or sacrificing spending elsewhere.

Parents in this study report that the expectations placed upon them and the social influence of other parents is so great that they attempt to adapt their parenting approach, this highlights self-monitoring and individual responsibility, which is fundamental to a neoliberalist approach (Lavee, 2016). Previous research also emphasises how mothers engaged in self-monitoring to ensure their adherence to intensive parenting ideals (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Singh, 2004; Wall, 2010; Whitley & Kirmayer, 2008). Continuous self-monitoring can lead to feelings of self-criticism, which is associated with symptoms of depression (McIntyre et al., 2018). Therefore, parenting influenced by a neoliberalist lens has important implications for well-being, as lower-income parents may be at a higher risk of depression as a result of individual responsibility and self-monitoring of adherence to intensive parenting norms.

Parents in this study express a desire for their children to live a successful life, which was defined by job success and future income. This highlights that parents held beliefs in line with neoliberalist views that appeared to be influenced by their experiences of being from lower-income households. These beliefs further reinforce intensive parenting as parents attempt to maximise child outcomes to ensure their child's future (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). Holding parents responsible for children's development is prominent in policy discourse (Gillies, 2008). Furthermore, holding parents solely responsible for children's development and future outcomes positions parents as 'God-like' and increases pressure placed upon individual parents (Faircloth, 2014). Consequently, blame is placed upon parents and reinforces the notion that social disadvantages (i.e. poverty) are intergenerational as opposed to structural (Gillies, 2008). From a psychological perspective, this further places pressure, stress and anxiety for parents from lower-income backgrounds as they attempt to navigate

intensive parenting ideologies from a socially disadvantaged position in the hope for a successful future for their child. These findings further refute ideals that lower-income parents do not engage in intensive parenting practices and further challenge dominant parenting discourse (Dermott & Pomati, 2016).

The subtheme '*Governing Parenting Through Schools*' emphasises how schools reinforce intensive parenting ideals as they expect parents to engage in timely, costly and energy-absorbing tasks with children after school, which is in line with intensive parenting ideology (Faircloth, 2020). Previous research highlights how schools are essentially institutional sites that act as mediators between policy, the government and individuals. Moreover, school education systems and policies are driven by economic efficiencies (Oyarzún et al., 2022). This evidence is grounded in sociological literature, therefore, the current study extends the literature to highlight the impacts of a neoliberalist informed schooling system on parental well-being from a psychological perspective. This study highlights how schools operating through a neoliberalist lens intensifies the pressures placed upon parents as they are held individually responsible to uphold expectations and are constantly monitored by schools. This has consequences for well-being, such as stress, anxiety, fatigue and concerns regarding children's futures. In addition, parents in this study from lower-income households face added institutional pressures as schools encourage participation in theme days which require money. Lower-income parents are held responsible for navigating their socio-economic status and expected to engage in school activities regardless of their financial situation. This further supports the notion that a neoliberalist educational system reinforces social disadvantage for parents from lower-income backgrounds (Oyarzún et al., 2022). The current study emphasises how this has negative impacts for well-being, such as guilt, stress and a need to sacrifice in other areas to accommodate the extra costs.

The subtheme '*Parenting Advice Leads to Uncertainty*' emphasises how increased access to parenting advice on social media creates overwhelm for mothers who have difficulty navigating what advice is grounded in research and what advice is formulated for social media. The conflicting nature of parenting advice led to mothers doubting their parenting abilities and further impacted their well-being. Experiences of self-doubt for mothers have been established in previous literature (Blum, 2007; Clarke, 2012; Dembosky et al., 2023; Eaton et al., 2016; Jackson et al., 2024; Wall, 2010; Whitely & Kirmayer, 2008). The present study further identified that self-doubt was also experienced by mothers when parenting advice was not successful for their child. This perhaps positions mothers as responsible for successfully implementing parenting advice, rather than acknowledging that advice may not be suitable for everyone. This aligns with a neoliberal view of parenting, which emphasises individual parents as responsible for implementing parenting advice (De Benedictis, 2012), regardless of whether it is suitable for their child. Parental self-efficacy is a psychological theory encompassing a parent's belief in their ability to positively impact children's development (Albanese et al., 2019). A recent synthesis found that parental self-efficacy can affect parental mental health and children's development (Albanese et al., 2019). The present study aligns with previous literature to emphasise how structural parenting guidance with a neoliberalist lens appears not to be helpful, thus leading to self-doubt for mothers, which consequently impacts their sense of self-efficacy as a parent, which has further risks for parental mental health.

This subtheme also highlights how mothers attempt to mitigate the negative impacts on their well-being due to conflicting parenting guidance by removing themselves from social media. This further positions mothers as responsible for managing the impacts on their well-being as opposed to structural changes to social media that would control the advice being shared and further emphasises how parenting guidance is informed by neoliberalism

(De Benedictis, 2012). From a psychological perspective, removing oneself from social media may be successful at providing relief from intensive parenting pressures presented through social media in the short-term, however, in the long-term intensive parenting pressures remain through other socially produced means such as social judgment and comparison in public.

The subtheme '*When Support Feels Like Surveillance*' highlights how professionals reinforce intensive parenting ideologies through judgment and evaluation of parents. This aligns with previous research, which highlights how mothers feel dismissed by healthcare professionals (Blum, 2007; Clarke, 2012; Dembosky et al., 2023; Jackson et al., 2024; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Williamson et al., 2023). This study extends the literature to highlight how judgment and evaluation of mothers by healthcare professionals leads to anxiety, shame, social isolation, reduction in help-seeking behaviour, and internalised feelings of incompetence for mothers. Therefore, emphasising the dangers for mothers who feel their experiences are dismissed or minimised by professionals, as this could lead to a missed diagnosis and consequent mistrust of healthcare services. A lack of trust in healthcare services has been associated with delays in accessing support (Ewald et al., 2025).

Fathers in this study did not report experiences of being judged by healthcare professionals. This could suggest that experiences of surveillance may be gendered and have consequential implications for mothers. Previous research highlights how mothers are subjected to surveillance and disciplinary powers of healthcare professionals (Peckover, 2002). Given that mothers are more likely to experience healthcare interactions such as health visits and midwife appointments, fathers may be less likely to be observed by professionals, thus, are perhaps less likely to experience scrutiny and surveillance.

These findings highlight how parents from lower-income households are impacted by the intensification of parenting through institutionalised forces such as school, government

and neoliberalism. These findings further emphasise how this negatively impacts parents' well-being.

Caught Between Conflicting Parenting Norms

This theme emphasises the complexity of how culture, generational differences and gender influence parenting, creating a tension for parents between differing beliefs. The subtheme '*The Cultural Tensions in Parenting*' further highlights that parents from African backgrounds experience added pressure to navigate differing cultural beliefs related to parenting. Intensive parenting is largely argued to be a Western practice (Lee, 2023). The present study further emphasises that intensive parenting norms are culturally produced rather than a universal norm, as parents from African backgrounds adapted their parenting style to fit with norms present in the UK, suggesting that intensive parenting practices are not universal. Additionally, the present study extends previous literature to highlight an added pressure for parents from outside of the UK who are positioned to adapt and abide by UK policy, therefore changing their identity and perhaps acting outside of their cultural beliefs. This has detrimental consequences for well-being as parents felt uncertainty and anxiety when they were required to situate themselves within particular cultural values that may be disparate from their own.

The subtheme '*A Generational Divide: When Advice No Longer Aligns*' highlights how parenting expectations have intensified for current parents. As emphasised in previous literature, parents are increasingly spending more time, money and energy parenting children (Faircloth, 2020). This study further supports previous findings which emphasise the impact of the intensification of parenting and the expansion of expectations placed upon parents (Clarke, 2012; Eaton et al., 2016). This study extends the literature by emphasising that the intensification of parenting from previous generations was associated with feelings of

frustration for current parents. Therefore, generational comparison represents a challenge to intensive parenting norms as current parents question the intensification of parenting and perhaps recognise that changes lie within structural systems rather than the individual responsibility of parents, thus further challenging neoliberal views of parenting (De Benedictis, 2012).

This subtheme also emphasises a tension as older generations of parents are positioned as having a reduced understanding of current parenting norms, which led to the parents interviewed feeling dismissed and invalidated. Whilst older generations perhaps position current parents as lacking the resilience to manage the intensified expectations, which places responsibility on individual parents as opposed to being critical of intensifying expectations, which is in line with neoliberal views of parenting (De Benedictis, 2012). Moreover, research shows how perceived invalidation from others is associated with negative affect and increased stress (Zielinski et al., 2023). From a psychological perspective, this study highlights how tension with older generations of parents creates a sense of invalidation of current parents' experiences, which has important implications for well-being and a risk of increased negative affect and higher stress.

This subtheme also highlights how older generations of parents expressed stigma regarding the mental health experiences of current parents. Consequently, current parents' experiences were trivialised, and well-being was internalised as an individual problem. Previous research highlights that stigma can have negative effects on help-seeking behaviour (Clement et al., 2015). This study extends previous literature to highlight how intergenerational stigma perhaps interferes with help-seeking for parents who experience negative impacts of the intensification of parenting expectations on their well-being and can prevent relational support from older generations, which could also reinforce emotional coping as an individualised process.

The subtheme '*Carrying the Load: Gendered Assumptions in Parenting*' highlights how gendered assumptions in parenting are reinforced by current parenting practices and consequently negatively impact well-being for mothers. This is in line with previous research, which emphasises how the experiences of parenting differ for mothers and fathers (Blum, 2007; Dembosky et al., 2023; Halsa, 2018; Faircloth, 2021; Wall, 2010; Williamson et al., 2023). Some fathers in this study held gendered beliefs regarding parenting that align with wider societal norms and previous research (Singh, 2004). When parents engage in gendered norms rather than challenging them, it further reinforces traditional parenting roles and continues to have negative impacts on mothers' well-being.

Mothers in this study noted how fathers are often praised for engaging in parenting tasks, which mothers considered to be the basics of parenting. This aligns with previous research that highlights how fathers are not held to the same degree of parenting involvement as mothers (Halsa, 2018; Williamson et al., 2023). Therefore, mothers are positioned as never being 'good enough' and perceive themselves as failures. Mothers' internalisation of being a failure is supported by previous research (Clarke, 2012; Eaton et al., 2016; Singh, 2004). Cognitive theory posits that depression is activated through a triad of cognitive patterns, including a negative view of the self, the world and the future (Beck & Alford, 2009). Women who internalise the unattainable gendered assumptions of intensive parenting are at risk of having a negative view of themselves as mothers, which can lead to a sense of hopelessness, thus impacting their view of the world and their future, consequently putting mothers at risk of experiencing depression.

This subtheme highlights how mothers are consistently positioned as the primary caregivers by wider society, despite their participation in the workforce. This is in line with previous research, which emphasises how mothers attempt to navigate their role as primary caregiver whilst juggling the demands of employment (Blum, 2007; Dembosky et al., 2023;

Eaton et al., 2016; Halsa, 2018; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Wall, 2010). This study further highlights a mismatch between the expectations placed on mothers and the increased expectations to participate in the workforce. Mothers are positioned as being responsible for managing the demands alongside work, as opposed to a need for structural change to account for the mismatch in responsibility. This further emphasises a neoliberalist view of parenting, which promotes individual responsibility (De Benedictis, 2012). This study extends the literature to highlight how gendered assumptions in parenting impact mothers from lower-income households' well-being as they attempt to meet the demands of intensive parenting whilst navigating the time constraints of working full-time, which led to emotional distress, fatigue, guilt and burnout.

This subtheme further highlights how gendered assumptions of parenting are reinforced by the workplace, as mothers are expected to sacrifice their careers by cutting back working hours or to give up employment to be the primary caregiver. This aligns with previous research (Blum, 2007; Dembosky et al., 2023; Wall, 2010). This study further emphasises the 'motherhood penalty', which suggests that mothers typically earn less and work fewer hours which is also associated with job quality differences (Jones et al., 2023). Additionally, this study supports previous literature to highlight how gendered assumptions in the workplace create a 'double-bind' for mothers who feel unable to be the 'ideal mother' or the 'ideal career woman' due to incompatible expectations associated with both roles (Hays 1996). Work-family conflict is a psychological phenomenon highlighting the conflicting demands of work and family life, which is associated with negative impacts to well-being (Obrenovic et al., 2020).

Fathers in this study noted their role was predominately to provide financially and to discipline children's behaviour, and this aligns with previous research (Dembosky et al., 2023; Williamson et al., 2023). This study extends the literature by investigating fathers'

beliefs and experiences. Fathers reported that work-related stress was a legitimate reason to not partake in parenting, despite this creating an additional burden for mothers, as parenting continues to be disproportionate. Therefore, work-related stress appeared to be a viable excuse for men but not for women. Fathers who use work-related stress to disengage from parenting responsibility further impose demands on women, which reinforces gendered inequalities in parenting and places more stress upon mothers. Whilst fathers in this study perhaps represent more traditional fathering roles, recent research shows a shift in father-child relationships centred around emotional bonds (Day, 2025).

This subtheme also emphasises how gendered assumptions in parenting were associated with women's biological processes such as pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding. This further reinforces beliefs that women are more 'maternal' and are expected to be individually responsible for breastfeeding. This is in line with previous research, which highlights how biological essentialism is associated with traditional gender roles and division of parenting labour (Gaunt & Deutsch, 2024). This has important psychological implications as more pressure is placed upon mothers, which leads to increased risk of internalised beliefs of self-blame, which poses further risks to well-being.

To meet the unrealistic demands influenced by gendered assumptions, mothers often sacrificed self-care, socialising, spending money on themselves and experienced a change in self-identity, which is in line with previous research (Jackson et al., 2024; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Wall, 2010). Fathers did not attempt to make the same sacrifices and their self-identity remained largely the same. This is in line with previous research, which found that mothers' self-identity was impacted, whereas fathers' integration of identities was experienced as easier (Wall, 2010; Williamson et al., 2023). This study extends the literature to include fathers' perspectives on sacrificing as a result of parenting demands. Moreover, research highlights that self-care is associated with decreased stress and increased coping, which has

positive impacts to mental health (Riegel et al., 2024). Therefore, mothers who sacrifice to continue parenting may be at higher risk of negative well-being implications compared to fathers.

Although the present study did not examine the quality of couple relationships, participants' accounts highlighted that intensive parenting expectations and traditional gendered norms led to conflict and resentment in relationships. This is consistent with previous research which highlights that parenting stress is associated with lower levels of relationship quality (Williams & Parra, 2019). Therefore, intensive parenting norms may further contribute to a decline in relationship quality due to increasing expectations regarding emotional, financial, and child-centred involvement for parents, which could lead to fewer resources available for investment and maintaining partner relationships. Moreover, the findings of this study reflect how contemporary parenting norms hold gendered expectations of mothers as primary caregivers, alongside increasing expectations that fathers should be equally involved. Therefore, fathers are perhaps disadvantaged due to limited guidance and a lack of comparable cultural scripts detailing such expectations which potentially influence conflict in relationships.

Together, these findings highlight how parents from lower-income households are impacted by gendered assumptions in relation to the intensification of parenting. This has important implications for well-being, as mothers and fathers perhaps experience pressures differently. Moreover, mothers appear to be more at risk of negative impacts to well-being compared to fathers. However, the results of this study did not highlight nuances in regards to lower-income parents and culture or generational pressures. Future research could investigate differences between lower- and higher-income parents in relation to culture and generational pressures.

Attempting to Cope: The Need for Structural Change

This theme encapsulates how parents' experiences of receiving or not receiving support impacted their well-being and how parents' experiences of the intensification of parenting calls for structural change. The subtheme '*Why Support Matters For Parents*' highlights how mothers navigate the negative impacts to their well-being in the face of support and in the absence of support. The present study emphasises how parents attempt to manage the negative impacts on their well-being by acknowledging that having children is worth it or that they are doing the best they can. This aligns with previous research, which highlights how women attempt to re-frame 'good mothering' ideals which encompass more realistic expectations (Eaton et al., 2016; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Wall, 2010; Jackson et al., 2024). This appeared to protect mothers from internalising difficulties to meet traditional 'good mothering' ideals as individual failure. Poststructuralist feminist theory attempts to challenge traditional ideals created through discourse (Maclaran & Stevens, 2019), therefore, parents attempt to reshape intensive parenting discourse to fit their realities (i.e. in the context of both mothers and fathers and socio-economic background). This study extends the literature by highlighting that reframing intensive parenting ideals to fit with their current social and cultural context helps parents to continue parenting their child, however, it also normalises the structural pressures placed upon parents, further reinforcing the negative consequences for well-being, as parents and wider society accept the expectations rather than challenge them.

Mothers in this study noted how early access to professional mental health support was fundamental to their well-being. However, other mothers noted the difficulties with access to professional support services due to long waitlists and being dismissed by professionals when their problems were not deemed severe enough, which led to further emotional distress. Previous literature highlights how mothers who feel dismissed or

criticised by healthcare professionals are a barrier to receiving support (Blum, 2007; Clarke, 2012; Williamson et al., 2023). This study extends the literature by acknowledging that lower-income mothers are positioned as disadvantaged in seeking professional support outside of NHS services due to costs, therefore, mothers are forced to be responsible to manage their well-being in other ways instead of structural changes to the current healthcare system.

This study highlights how a lack of support leads to mothers attempting to support themselves by building ‘resilience’. Previous research highlights how parental stress can impact parental responsiveness, which consequently leads to negative child developmental outcomes, therefore, mothers attempt to be resilient by adapting their context, such as reducing effort in other areas of life (i.e. work) and normalising this new way of life to accommodate the stress of parenting (Childress et al., 2024). The current study aligns with previous literature as mothers made changes to their situations, such as reducing engagement in other areas of life outside of parenting (self-care, socialising, work etc.) to meet the demands of parenting. Additionally, this positions mothers as responsible for managing their well-being rather than a need for structural changes to the expectations placed upon them, which further aligns with neoliberalist views of parenting which suggest mothers are responsible for self-management (Wall, 2010).

Mothers also attempt to manage their well-being by ignoring the negative impacts, which allows them to continue caring for their child. Previous research highlights how avoidance of coping was associated with symptoms of depression for American mothers from middle-class backgrounds (Steege et al., 2013). This study extends previous literature to highlight that mothers from lower-income backgrounds use avoidance coping to manage the demands of intensive parenting, and this has negative impacts on well-being.

Mothers who felt supported by other mothers noted the positive impact this had on their well-being. Support encompasses community amongst parents, emotional support, validation and normalisation of the hardships of the intensification of parenting. Previous research also highlights that support and validation from family members had positive impacts for mothers (Dembosky et al., 2023; Eaton et al., 2016; Halsa, 2018; Jackson et al., 2024). Peer support interventions have been shown to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety for mothers (Shah et al., 2024). Moreover, peer support is seen as a successful alternative for mothers who have felt judged by healthcare professionals (Shah et al., 2024). The present study extends the literature to highlighted that mothers from lower-income households expressed peer support in the form of donations amongst parents (i.e. children's clothes), which was particularly valued in the context of their socio-economic situation.

Although research highlights the importance of peer support amongst mothers (Shah et al., 2024), this study emphasises that peer support is not always available. Mothers noted a lack of community amongst mothers, which was evidenced by judgment, competition and a lack of praise and recognition amongst mothers, which appeared to be barriers to peer support. Social comparison is a fundamental element in intensive parenting literature (Hays, 1996). The present study extends the literature by identifying a specific element of social comparison (i.e. competition between mothers) which socially reproduces intensive parenting norms. Consequently, mothers continue to feel alone, and pressures are not relieved due to the lack of peer support. An absence of peer support leads to an individual responsibility of managing the negative impacts to well-being, which reinforces neoliberalist views of parenting (De Benedictis, 2012).

Mothers valued support from their partners, which included emotional validation and sharing parenting responsibilities. This aligns with previous research, which shows that sharing responsibilities between parents helps to manage expectations (Williamson et al.,

2023). Parents who engage in equal parenting challenge intensive parenting norms and emphasise the benefits to well-being such as reduced parental burnout. Mothers who did not feel supported by their partner or who were single mothers expressed increased emotional distress due to the demands placed upon them. This leads to mothers attempting to manage their emotional distress in the face of demands by being individually responsible to build resilience, which aligns with previous research (Childress et al., 2024).

The subtheme *‘Moving Beyond Individual Change’* emphasises participants’ calls for change in areas such as well-being support for parents, education for fathers, financial changes, work-system changes, and support for lower-income parents to partake in intensive parenting. This highlights that change is beyond the individual parent and structural changes are needed. Moreover, this emphasises that participants’ experiences had such a negative impact that change is necessary. Mothers called for changes to well-being support that was more accessible, more relational amongst peers and encompassed normalisation of parenting. This emphasises a rejection of the neoliberalist notion that coping is an individual responsibility (De Benedictis, 2012) and instead responsibility should shift towards a structural change. Furthermore, a relational view of care aligns with feminist ethics of care, which holds relationality as the foreground of support (O’Riordan et al., 2023). Structural changes and relationally informed support could support mothers’ well-being by encompassing the wider context as opposed to the current model of individualised responsibility for the management of the negative impacts to well-being as a result of intensive parenting.

Mothers’ suggestions for education for fathers further highlights the gendered assumptions present in intensive parenting, in which mothers are positioned as the primary caregiver and is well established in previous research (Blum, 2007; Dembosky et al., 2023; Halsu, 2018; Wall, 2010; Williamson et al., 2023). Education for fathers could disrupt

normalised gendered assumptions to highlight how parenting can be learned and distributed as opposed to the current norms, emphasising that mothers are better suited and biologically essential as the primary caregiver.

Parents also called for financial changes such as support for low-income parents to engage in activities aimed at child development, increasing wages in line with the cost of living, and more financial support for low-income parents. Notably, fathers mostly called for changes to wages and increased financial support as opposed to other changes recognised by mothers. This highlights fathers' beliefs that economic pressures impact on well-being. Moreover, this is in line with gendered assumptions of parenting, which emphasise fathers as the financial provider. Therefore, financial support would allow intensive parenting practices to be more accessible for parents from lower-income backgrounds.

The findings also suggest that supporting parents' perhaps, requires support beyond individual interventions aimed at improving parenting practice. Therefore, policy should address the social inequalities experienced by lower-income parents, improving access to affordable childcare, secure housing, income support, and adaptive and flexible employment. This would enable changes to social inequalities that would allow parents to equally engage in socially and culturally produced parenting expectations, whilst eliminating barriers and reducing negative impacts to wellbeing.

Clinical Implications and Recommendations

The following clinical implications and recommendations are informed by participants' subjective accounts. Therefore, recommendations have been made on a tentative basis and are proposed for the purpose of consideration for future policy and support for parents. An important finding from the present study is how parents' experiences of distress are contextualised within the social, cultural and structural pressures of intensive parenting,

such as being from lower-income backgrounds, neoliberalist views of parenting and gendered assumptions. Parenting Culture Studies has highlighted how parenting discourse frequently position parents as responsible for managing children's development and wellbeing (Lee et al., 2014). This idea of parental determinism creates a tension in which clinical interventions perhaps inadvertently reproduce intensive parenting norms as difficulties are situated within the individual as opposed to wider contextual influences, thus positions parents as responsible for managing subsequent distress. However, psychological support could still be valuable, particularly clinical interventions aimed to support parents with emotional distress that acknowledge how distress is contextualised as opposed to within the individual parent. This is particularly relevant for mothers who appear to be at a higher risk of being subjected to the pressures of intensive parenting. In Clinical Psychology, systemic theorists argue that emotional distress is relational and influenced by problematic patterns within a system as opposed to situating a problem within the individual (Todd et al., 2025). Support services could adopt a systemic approach to help parents to identify problematic patterns in relation to intensive parenting (i.e. values based in middle-class, gender disparities), this would allow for the re-framing of individual responsibility towards acknowledging the structural difficulties, which could reduce blame. Similarly, a community psychology approach also provides a useful understanding of parental distress that is situated within wider social contexts as opposed to within the individual. Community psychology aims to ecologically understand individuals within their environments to facilitate social change for those with restricted resources (Jason et al, 2025). A community psychology approach to parenting pressures would not focus on correcting parental ability, instead interventions could consider how services, communities and wider society can support individuals and families.

The findings of this study highlighted how mothers lacked praise regarding their parenting, and there appeared to be a focus on what parents were 'not doing' in meeting

expectations as opposed to recognising and praising the positives of parenting. Video Interaction Guidance (VIG) is an intervention which involves recording parent and child interactions, which is assessed by a clinician and feedback is given to the parent. The clinician highlights perceived successful interactions between the parent and child as opposed to ‘problematic’ interactions (Whittaker, 2014). This strengths-based approach could enhance self-confidence and validate parents’ parenting abilities. Moreover, VIG is in line with a contextualised understanding of parenting distress as the focus is predominantly on relational strengths as opposed to individual parenting skill deficits (Whittaker, 2014). Therefore, VIG is perhaps another way to navigate the tensions between parenting culture studies and clinical interventions as parents’ strengths are utilised to emphasise existing skills, resources and connection as opposed to positioning parents in need of correction and responsible for improving their parenting practice.

This study highlighted that mothers and fathers experience emotional distress as a result of intensive parenting differently. Namely, mothers experienced guilt, internalised identities as a ‘bad mum’ and self-criticism, which can influence symptoms of anxiety and depression. Therefore, interventions for mothers should target these emotional processes. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommends Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) for symptoms of depression, which aims to target negative thoughts, beliefs and attitudes (NICE, 2022). Additionally, Compassion-Focused Therapy is an effective intervention that aims to decrease self-criticism (Vidal & Soldevilla, 2023), which could be beneficial for mothers. Whereas, fathers in this study reported stress and experienced emotional distress as a more physical experience compared to mothers. Therefore, interventions to target stress may be beneficial, such as physical activity (Rebar et al., 2015).

Another important finding from the present study is mothers' experiences of judgment and feeling dismissed by NHS healthcare professionals that had potential implications for help-seeking behaviour. Therefore, an important implication from the current study is the importance of psychological safety for parents. A recommendation would be for healthcare professionals to emphasise psychological safety and validation for parents, enabling them to utilise the support that is offered. Parents' experiences should also be understood within the wider context of parenting culture, which often positions parents as responsible for child outcomes (Hay, 1996; Lee et al., 2014). Parents' experiences of being dismissed could reinforce individualised responsibility and further position parents as accountable for managing these challenges. Providing parents with psychologically safe and validating professional support could challenge this view of individualised responsibility. This could help mothers to feel that management of the negative impacts on well-being resulting from intensive parenting pressures as relational as opposed to individual. Feeling supported by NHS professionals has important implications for parents from lower-income backgrounds who may be limited in receiving professional support elsewhere.

Mothers in the present study highlighted how peer support from other mothers, validation from others and a relational understanding of the difficulties resulting from intensive parenting pressures were fundamental to feeling supported. Therefore, peer support interventions that promote normalisation, validation and relational support for mothers could be a beneficial intervention to help mothers to manage the negative impacts to their well-being. Peer support approaches are in line with a community psychological perspective that aims to move away from individual-level interventions towards relational forms of support. Peer support could offer further resistance to the individualisation of parenting distress by offering spaces where parents can make sense of their experiences as a shared and socially contextual difficulty as opposed to an individualised issue. Moreover, given that mothers felt

dismissed by professionals, peer support interventions could help to remove barriers to professional support.

Participants in this study called for cultural, social and structural change whilst also acknowledging that they were unsure how this could be carried out. A shift in cultural norms relating to intensive parenting could re-frame idealised parenting to be better suited to an individual's context, therefore, reducing individualised responsibility, self-monitoring and acting in ways that negatively impact on well-being (i.e. lower-income parents sacrifice in other areas to accommodate intensive parenting practices). Calls for structural change could include improved accessibility to childcare, improvements to the family-work conflict, and adaptations for working parents. Social change could include a change in dynamics between parents by encouraging non-competitive ways of parenting, which could promote peer support. These changes could have a positive impact on the well-being of parents.

All participants in this study were aware of parenting policy and guidance in the UK. Parenting policy typically promotes individual parental responsibility, usually towards mothers, at improving child outcomes, particularly for parents from lower-income backgrounds (Bouchal & Norris, 2014; Ford et al., 2009), this reinforces guilt and self-monitoring for parents, which has implications for well-being. Policy and guidance should acknowledge the structural constraints for parents from lower-income backgrounds (i.e. time, financial resources and work commitments), which would help reduce individualised demands. Moreover, policy should integrate well-being support for parents, which would be a preventative measure for parental well-being. Given the important findings of gendered assumptions in parenting found in the present study, policy should address the disproportionate demands for women, which could reduce pressure for mothers.

Critical Evaluation of the Study

Contribution to the Field

The present study aligns with previous research and highlights how mothers' well-being is negatively impacted by social, cultural and structural pressures related to intensive parenting. This study extends previous research to highlight fathers' experiences of intensive parenting pressures and parents from lower-income households, whilst holding in mind a psychological perspective.

A key strength of this research is participants' calls for structural and social change, including changes to policy in relation to parenting guidance. However, a limitation is that policymaking typically prefers quantitative evidence to inform policy, as qualitative research is viewed as having less validity and a higher risk of misunderstanding compared to quantitative research (Natow, 2022).

Sample Characteristics

A key strength of this study is the inclusion of both mothers and fathers from lower-income backgrounds. The majority of previous research typically involves only mothers (Blum, 2007; Clarke, 2012; Dembosky et al., 2023; Eaton et al., 2016; Halsa, 2018; Jackson et al., 2024; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Wall, 2010; Whitley & Kirmayer, 2008; Williamson et al., 2023), therefore, fathers are often underrepresented in parenting research. This allowed exploration of shared parenting stressors (i.e. financial and time restraints, personal responsibility) whilst highlighting differences such as gendered assumptions in parenting and experiences of social comparison. The current sample consisted of 33% fathers and 67% mothers, suggesting that fathers may still be unrepresented. Furthermore, all fathers were Black African, which limits the perspectives of fathers from different ethnic backgrounds. Similarly, 20% of mothers were Black African, and the remaining mothers were White

British. Therefore, a limitation of this study sample may be the transferability of findings to fathers and mothers of different ethnic backgrounds.

Methodological Rigour and Design

A key strength of this study was the use of a qualitative design, which enabled an in-depth exploration of parents' experiences in relation to intensive parenting. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed participants to flexibly share their experiences whilst ensuring that important topics were covered. This helped to capture the complexities of parents' experiences, which may not be captured in a quantitative design. A limitation of using a qualitative design is that conducting interviews is a time-consuming process, which limits the overall sample size. Furthermore, although researcher reflexivity was acknowledged and discussed to aid the mitigation of research bias, the chance of research bias cannot be reduced entirely.

Another key strength of the study was holding interviews online, which increased accessibility for parents who were restricted on time. Interviews were offered outside of typical working hours to accommodate parents who had work commitments. Moreover, online interviews allowed for recruitment to be UK-wide as opposed to a small area and helped to mitigate any travel costs for a face-to-face interview. A limitation of the study was participant interest and some mothers who were approached via parenting groups voiced that they were too busy to attend due to childcare, however, this further emphasises the need for research in this area. Most mothers were recruited via parenting groups as opposed to interest from the recruitment poster via social media. There could be a number of reasons for this, one such reason could be the elicitation of shame in regard to having a lower-income. Future research could invite parents to help design the recruitment poster to negate feelings of shame for parents who might want to take part in the research.

Dissemination

This thesis has been conducted for the degree of Doctorate in Clinical Psychology and will be submitted to the University of Essex. This thesis will be accessible via the University of Essex Research Repository. This thesis will be disseminated to interested participants and to the charities that supported recruitment.

Upon completion, findings from this thesis will be submitted to peer-reviewed academic journals relevant to the topic area, such as *Parenting: Science and Practice* and the *Journal of Child and Family Studies*. I hope this thesis can inform policy related to parenting guidance to create a more contextualised view of parenting that moves away from individualisation and is accessible to all parents regardless of socio-economic background and has considerations for well-being support.

Invitations for Future Research

This study highlights how parents from lower-income backgrounds experience intensive parenting pressures and the impact on well-being. Although fathers were included in the present study, they were still underrepresented compared to women. Furthermore, fathers appeared to experience parenting pressures differently from mothers. Therefore, future research could explore fathers' experiences of parenting and how emotional distress is expressed. This would ensure that fathers' experiences are not dismissed or minimised because they differ from those of mothers and ensure that policy and clinical interventions meet the needs of fathers.

The present study's sample was largely White British and Black African backgrounds, future research could explore a more culturally representative sample for the UK, which would extend understandings on cultural context and how intensive parenting is a culturally

moral issue as opposed to a universal issue. Future research could help to dispute that intensive parenting is the ‘ideal’ and make room for parenting practices that are culturally inclusive and consequently less burdensome for parents.

Future research could further develop qualitative understandings of intensive parenting ideals in relation to socio-economic status by conducting life history interviews with middle-class parents who were raised in working-class families which would enable exploration of how parenting ideals evolve and perhaps contrast across socio-economic contexts.

Conclusion

This study explored lower-income parents’ experiences of the intensification of parenting and its impact to well-being. Previous literature on intensive parenting is typically grounded in sociological underpinnings. Therefore, this study attempts to explore the phenomenon from a psychological perspective by highlighting how well-being is impacted, the risks to well-being and subsequent support. Moreover, previous literature typically included mothers as opposed to fathers, therefore, this study highlights how fathers experience intensive parenting pressures and how these differ from the experiences of mothers. This has important clinical implications for well-being support for both mothers and fathers who may require a different focus for support. The findings further emphasise how intensive parenting is a complicated, multi-faceted phenomenon involving social, cultural and structural influences that further reinforce pressures and impact on parental well-being, particularly for parents from lower-income backgrounds who attempt to navigate the unrealistic pressures despite being positioned as socially disadvantaged. Parents’ experiences highlight a need for structural change to parenting practices to ease the negative impacts on well-being.

Final Reflections

I have found conducting this research to have been both professionally and personally meaningful. As a Trainee Clinical Psychologist working in the NHS, this has given me a profound understanding of the difficulties faced by parents from lower-income backgrounds today. My clinical training has allowed me to interpret participants' experiences through a psychological lens, which has highlighted the negative impacts on well-being which should not be dismissed. Moreover, as a person who is surrounded by friends and family who are current parents from lower-income backgrounds, this topic is something I am witness to in everyday life. As a female who hopes to be a parent in the future, this project has been an eye-opening experience and one I hope to encourage positive change.

At the beginning of this research journey, I anticipated that the intensification of parenting would influence negative impacts to parents wellbeing. Whilst this is evident in participants' experiences, the findings also highlight the ways in which parents actively negotiated, adapted and sometimes resisted dominant parenting expectations. This complexity challenged my initial assumption, which was a more straightforward understanding of the relationship between the intensification of parenting and the impact on well-being for parents from lower-income backgrounds.

I found the interview process emotive in many ways. Listening to parents' experiences and the impact on their well-being prompted empathy, even as a person without children. However, there were times when I experienced difficult emotions, namely during interviews with fathers who held beliefs in line with traditional gender roles, which prompted conflicting feelings as an individual and as a researcher. As a woman, I felt a sense of frustration at the reinforcement of gender roles, despite fathers recognising the difficulties of

parenting for both fathers and mothers. As a researcher, I attempted to separate from these personal feelings to acknowledge that this is evidence of why this research is needed.

Also, during the interview process, I was aware of underlying difference such as being a white, female with no children and the power dynamic of being the ‘researcher’. I think my training as a Clinical Psychologist enabled me to draw upon clinical skills that aided the interview process by building a relational rapport with participants based on empathy, despite any difference. I believe that this is further evidence of the relational importance when supporting parents’ well-being and moving away from an individualised view of parental responsibility.

Some mothers in the study had children present during the interview or had to take time away from the interview to attend to their child. Mothers often apologised for this and together we recognised how this live experience was further evidence of the findings discussed, such as mothers being the primary caregiver and being restricted with time.

When starting the data analysis, I felt overwhelmed by the vast amount of data as I felt a huge sense of pressure and a wish for the research to capture participants’ nuanced experiences. I am grateful to every parent who took the time away from the demands of parenting to share their stories.

As a Trainee Clinical Psychologist currently working in a Perinatal Mental Health Team, the themes that have arisen in this thesis are very much present in my work with mothers which further highlights the need for change. I hope to utilise what I have learnt from the participants in this study in my future clinical practice.

Overall, this project has been a deeply meaningful experience and has further highlighted ongoing social, structural and psychological experiences for parents which are having a detrimental impact on well-being for some parents. I hope this research adds

important psychological standings to the literature and can be used as part of successful change.

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Appendix A: CASP (2018) Quality Appraisal Criteria

	Quality Appraisal Criteria									
Paper	1. Was there a clear statement of aims of the research?	2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	6. Has the relationship between the researcher and participants been adequately considered?	7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	9. Is there a clear statement of findings?	10. How valuable was the research?
Blum (2007)	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Clarke (2012)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Dembosky et al. (2023)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Eaton et al. (2016)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Halsa (2018).	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Jackson et al. (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Romagnoli & Wall (2012)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Singh (2004)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes

Appendix B: Research Poster

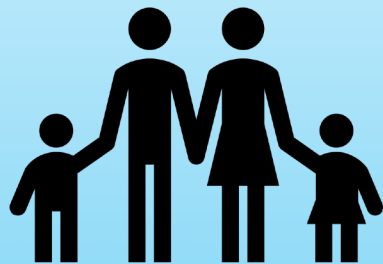


University
of Essex

Perceptions of the Intensification of Parenting and the Impact on Parental Wellbeing

Are you a parent living in the UK who identifies as being from a low-income household?

If the answer is yes, then we would like to invite you to take part in this study.



██████████
Trainee Clinical Psychologist
Email: ██████████
ERAMS reference: ETH2324-1362

Why take part?

- Previous research on the intensification of parenting largely focusses on middle-class parents
- Intensive parenting and popular ideas about 'good parenting' could be detrimental to parental wellbeing
- This study aims to investigate how popular ideas about 'good parenting' affects the wellbeing of parents from low-income backgrounds

What will taking part involve?

- An online or face-to-face interview lasting around an hour in which you will be asked to share your experiences parenting
- The interview will be anonymous
- The first 15 participants will receive an Amazon gift voucher (please note this is dependent on University funding and will be discussed at the interview)



Appendix C: Interview Schedule for Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviewee Name

Date of birth

Gender

Ethnicity

Locality

How many children and age

Marital status

Date

Confirmation of inclusion criteria: please confirm if your household live on less than £18,198 per year.

Introduction:

Purpose of interview – research shows that parenting has become more intensive and there are higher expectations and pressures on parents to be engaged in time intensive and financially expensive parenting for their children.

Confidentiality & ethical considerations – everything you say is confidential unless you say something that might suggest yourself or someone you know is at risk, then I would have to report it to the relevant people, right to withdraw, option to skip questions.

Interview questions and discussion topics:

1. Parents experiences of being parented growing up
 - When you were growing up, how would you describe your parents approach to parenting?
 - What are the changes in the expectations of parents over the generations?

- What has influenced your approach to parenting? (i.e. personal experiences, cultural influences, religion)

2. How managing expectations impacts well-being

- What do you think the expectations are for parents and where do expectations come from?
- If there's an age gap between children: Have these expectations changed over time?
- How would you describe what a 'good parent' means to you?
- How do you manage the demands of parenting with other demands like work, household, self-care?
- In what ways have you experienced comparing your parenting to others?
- Do you ever feel judged on your parenting? By whom?

Prompt: what have you felt judged on? (i.e. financial resources, parenting ability)

- Have you attended parenting/toddler groups? If yes, what was your experience like?
- What are your experiences with social media as a form of parenting advice?
- *Prompt: have you noticed any impacts to your well-being as a result?*
- How has parenting impacted your well-being?

Prompts: feelings of guilt, shame or anxiety?

- Has parenting changed your sense of self-identity? If so in what ways?
- What strategies have you used to cope? What helps you manage?
- What changes related to parenting do you think would be useful?

3. If applicable how does parenting differ amongst couples and what impact does this have

- Does your parenting style differ from your partners? (If applicable) or how did you establish your parenting style? (for parents without a partner)

- Do you think that the expectations are the same for mothers and fathers?

4. Concluding questions

- Is there anything else about parenting and well-being that you think is important that we haven't discussed yet?

Optional debrief

Appendix D: Excerpt from Interview Transcript

Researcher

Yeah, that's a really good point as well. I think a massive difference is there is a lot more access to information, like you said, either on the internet or maybe through social media. Do you think it's helpful that we have that now?

Participant

It's a double-edged sword to be honest. I think having the information out there when you are seeking it helps, but, obviously with Facebook and things, you get people see, you see the good of everything. You know, you have all these gurus who know the next best thing. You get swamped, you know, you can't find the way through it. I mean, like the kids are doing dojo points at the moment at school and I've had to sort of jump onto that. And I'm like, this is the new thing, is it? I thought it was timeouts 5 minutes ago and then it was pauses and then it was give them hugs. And now it's don't give them hugs, let them have a tantrum. It's ignore the behaviour and it can get very, very messy. And it gets really, really messy really quickly. So I think if you you know roughly, you've got to have that confidence I think as well. You've got to have that confidence on what you want as a parenting style and keep to it, you know the ones that rave about Montessori. Great, but that might not be suitable for my family. Having that confidence to say that's a great technique, but it doesn't work for us is probably the issue that most parents are facing because they just don't know what they're doing, you know, everyone's got the next best idea and you're just sort of jumping onto bandwagons and there's no consistency, so the kids are just playing up more.

Researcher

Yeah. How do you think you can, like, build or develop that confidence?

Participant

I think it's finding your own truth. It's knowing what you want as a parent and knowing what you, not what you're expecting from the kids, but what you're expecting from yourself. I never wanted to hit and if I ever got to that point where I was getting so angry that that could have become an issue I would then take myself away and apologise for it. And I knew I wanted transparency and openness.

Appendix E: Excerpts from Reflective Journal

9th September 2025 - Reflections after first interview

I just finished my first interview! Having been familiarising myself with literature published already, I wasn't shocked at the participants experiences but I definitely had a more emotive response in the moment. It was a very moving experience to explore with the participant their story and the real impact that parenting pressure is having.

As I think back to the interview now, I started the interview as 'researcher' but noticed other parts of my identity that was similar to the participant and being drawn to that (i.e. woman, age).

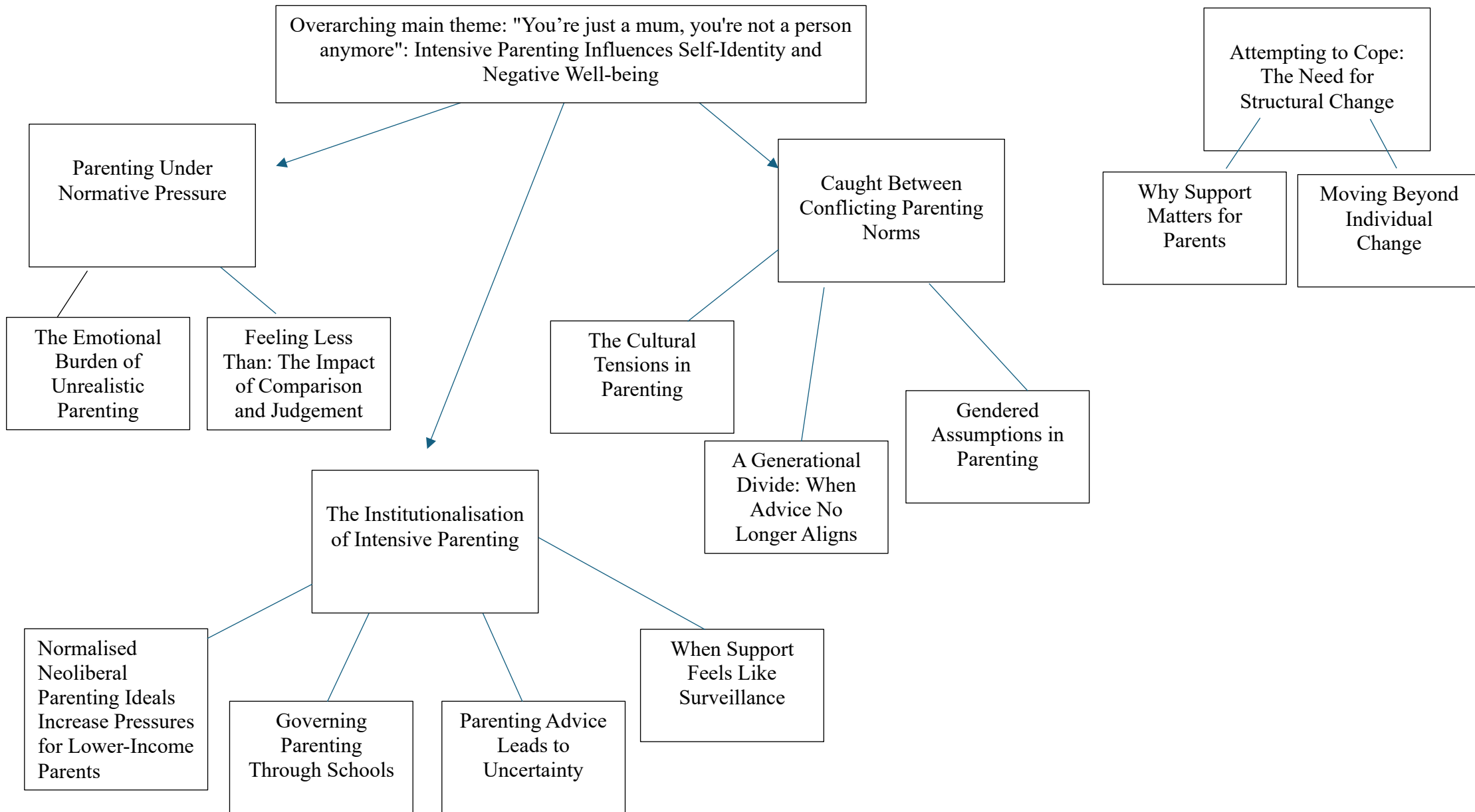
22nd September 2025 Reflections after an interview with a father

It's been really interesting hearing the perspectives of fathers. Father's experiences also highlight difficulties as a result of parenting pressures. During the interview I did experience some uncomfortable feelings, particularly when the participant acknowledged how difficult parenting pressures are for mother's and father's but also held beliefs in line with traditional gender roles (i.e. mothers as primary care giver and managing household). Taking some time to reflect, I think this speaks to parts of my self-identity such as being a woman. Reflecting in this journal helps to separate more personal experiences to be able to remain in my role as researcher.

21st October 2025 – Data coding

As I was coding some of the transcripts, I noticed that some of the mother's interviews were disrupted due to attending to their child and this was the case even when fathers were present in the house. I remember mothers' being apologetic about disrupting the interview and I wonder what apologising suggests to mothers. I guess mothers who feel they have to apologise for tending to their child further feeds into a mother's responsibility to manage every aspect of their lives. I felt sad that mothers felt the need to apologise.

Appendix F: Thematic Map



Appendix G: 15-Point Checklist of Criteria for Thematic Analysis

Reproduced from Braun & Clarke (2006)

Transcription:

1. The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against the tapes for 'accuracy'

Coding:

2. Each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process
3. Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach), but instead the coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive
4. All relevant extracts for all each theme have been collated
5. Themes have been checked against each other and back to the original data set
6. Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive

Analysis:

7. Data have been analysed – interpreted, made sense of – rather than just paraphrased or described
8. Analysis and data match each other – the extracts illustrate the analytic claims
9. Analysis tells a convincing and well-organised story about the data and topic
10. A good balance between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts is provided

Overall:

11. Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it a once-over-lightly

Written report:

12. The assumptions about, and specific approach to, thematic analysis are clearly explicated
13. There is a good fit between what you claim you do, and what you show you have done – i.e., described method and reported analysis are consistent
14. The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the epistemological position of the analysis
15. The researcher is positioned as active in the research process; themes do not just 'emerge'

Appendix H: Ethical Approval

University of Essex ERAMS

26/07/2024

[REDACTED]

Health and Social Care

University of Essex

Dear [REDACTED]

Ethics Committee Decision

Application: ETH2324-1362

I am pleased to inform you that the research proposal entitled "Perceptions of intensive parenting and parental mental health in low-income households" has been reviewed on behalf of the Ethics Sub Committee 1, and, based on the information provided, it has been awarded a favourable opinion.

The application was awarded a favourable opinion subject to the following **conditions**:

Extensions and Amendments:

If you propose to introduce an amendment to the research after approval or extend the duration of the study, an amendment should be submitted in ERAMS for further approval in advance of the expiry date listed in the ethics application form. Please note that it is not possible to make any amendments, including extending the duration of the study, once the expiry date has passed.

Covid-19:

Please note that the current Government guidelines in relation to Covid-19 must be adhered to and are subject to change and it is your responsibility to keep yourself

informed and bear in mind the possibility of change when planning your research. You will be kept informed if there are any changes in the University guidelines.

Yours sincerely,

A solid black rectangular box used to redact a signature.

Ethics ETH2324-1362:

Appendix I: Participant Information Sheet



Participant Information Sheet

Project title

Perceptions of intensive parenting and parental mental health in low-income households

My name is [REDACTED] and I am a Trainee Clinical Psychologist in the Department of Psychology at the University of Essex. I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?

There is an abundance of research into the effectiveness of different approaches to parenting, known as parenting ideologies. One type of parenting ideology is referred to as 'intensive parenting' and describes an approach to childrearing which focusses on the physical, emotional, psychological, and cognitive needs of a child. Intensive parenting is a common parenting style in the UK, however, it is considered to be time consuming and financially burdensome.

Previous research shows that intensive parenting is associated with some physical health benefits for children, however, the psychological impacts remain unclear. Moreover, intensive parenting ideologies can place unrealistic expectations upon parents which can be negative to parents' mental health.

In recent years there has been a decline in children's outdoor play. Research shows that this may be due to parents' increased fears regarding danger including more traffic, strangers, and antisocial behaviour such as drugs.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate how intensive parenting effects the mental health of parents and how parent's intensive parenting ideologies impact on children's play.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not you wish to take part in this research study. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to provide written consent. You are free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason. You can withdraw by contacting the lead

research ([REDACTED]) using the email provided at the bottom of this information sheet.

What will happen to me if I take part?

By taking part in this study, you will attend an online or face-to-face interview lasting around one hour in which you will be asked to share your experiences of parenting. The interview will be recorded and transcribed for analysis.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

We do not anticipate any risks by taking part in this study, however, to ensure the safety and well-being of participants, interview questions will be asked sensitively and participants will have the opportunity to discuss any concerns with the researcher.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

The outcomes of this research could inform future policy regarding parenting which is more inclusive to parents' well-being. Additionally, each participant will receive a £20 Amazon voucher for their participation in the study.

What information will be collected?

Data collected will remain anonymous.

Will my information be kept confidential?

Participants confidentiality will be safeguarded within legal limitations, this means that data will remain confidential unless a participant discloses information that suggests that they or others are at risk of harm. As the researcher, we have a duty of care to inform the appropriate authority.

Data will be stored on an encrypted University of Essex drive which only the lead researcher has access to. Data will be retained until 26th September 2026.

What should I do if I want to take part?

If you would like to take part in this study, you will be required to complete a consent form.

Who has reviewed the study?

This research has been reviewed by the University of Essex Ethics Committee.

Concerns and Complaints

If you have any concerns about any aspect of the study or you have a complaint, in the first instance please contact the principal investigator of the project, Demi Perkins, using the contact details below.

[REDACTED] (Lead Researcher)

Email: [REDACTED]

Appendix J: Participant Consent Form



Participant Consent Form

Please tick the appropriate boxes	Yes	No
1. Taking part in the study.		
I have read and understood the study information. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.	☐	☐
I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and I can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason.	☐	☐
I understand that taking part in the study involves partaking in an audio-recorded interview with the researcher. Audio recordings will be transcribed verbatim for analysis and then audio recordings will be erased.	☐	☐
2. Use of the information in the study.		
I understand that information I provide will be used for the purpose of this research study and will be used in the final written report. This study has the potential for publication which would allow sharing of the results found. Sharing the results of this study could inform future policy relating to parenting ideologies which could benefit both parents and children.	☐	☐
I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name or where I live, will not be shared beyond the study team.	☐	☐

Name of
participant

X

Signature

Date:

For more information please contact:

[REDACTED] (Lead Researcher)

Email: [REDACTED]

Appendix K: Risk Assessment

Risk assessment

Description of activity / area being assessed	Data collection – semi structured interview		Location	Online or face-to-face
Manager responsible	██████████	Signature & date	████████████████████	
Assessed by (name & role)	██████████ (researcher)	Signature & assessment date	████████████████████	

Hazard (H) hazardous event (HE) consequence (C)	Who might be harmed	Current controls	Current risk LxC=R	Additional controls needed to reduce risk	Residual risk LxC=R	Target Date	Date achieved
Risk of eliciting shame to participants	Participants	Researcher will take a sensitive approach to the interview	Fairly likely x minor = low	Build rapport with participants Ordering questions to ensure sensitivity Researchers role as a trainee clinical psychologist Giving participants the opportunity to	Unlikely x minor = low	When data collection commences	When data has been collected

Hazard (H) hazardous event (HE) consequence (C)	Who might be harmed	Current controls	Current risk LxC=R	Additional controls needed to reduce risk	Residual risk LxC=R	Target Date	Date achieved
				discuss issues with researcher			

Consequence	Catastrophic	Medium	High	Very High	Very high	Very High
	Major	Low	Medium	High	High	Very High
	Moderate	Very low	Low	Medium	Medium	High
	Minor	Very low	Low	Low	Medium	Medium
	Insignificant	Very low	Very low	Low	Low	Low
	R = LxC	Very unlikely	Unlikely	Fairly likely	Likely	Very likely
	Likelihood of hazardous event					