PARENTING AND PRACTICAL WISDOM: MORAL DECISION-MAKING IN
DISCIPLINARY PRACTICE

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Abstract

Aristotle (2004) stated every art, activity, and science aims at some good outcome. In parenting, this manifests as a desire for one’s children to be good people and to grow into mature, responsible adults. Discipline has the potential to be either harmful or helpful, often requiring thoughtful consideration of multiple factors before determining an appropriate response.

According to virtue theory, practical wisdom (phronesis) is a chain of reasoning by which people determine how best to act (Fowers, 2005). The present study examined parental responses to child misbehaviour. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four parents recruited from the community, wherein they described how they handled specific instances of child misbehaviour. Thematic analysis – as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) – was used to analyze the collected data. Five themes consistent with existing literature on eudaimonic psychological theory and phronetic reasoning were identified (Moral Perception, Deliberation, Reasoned Choice, Learning from Upbringing, and Parental Duty). The immediate concern of future research is to conduct further interviews to reach theoretical saturation. However, these findings give cause for optimism regarding future research on practical wisdom in parental practice and could potentially generate multiple avenues for future investigation. At present, the themes identified in the present study are glimpses of the relevancy practical wisdom and eudaimonic theory may have in understanding the flourishing family unit.

Keywords: practical wisdom, parenting, discipline, Aristotle
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Parenting and Practical Wisdom: Moral Decision-Making in Disciplinary Practice

Parenting is an undertaking that carries tremendous responsibility. When children misbehave, parents must sometimes strategically implement disciplinary practices to help enforce or reinforce moral lessons. Research has shown that, depending on how and when parents utilize disciplinary practices, they lay the foundation for better (or worse) developmental and behavioural outcomes for their children (e.g., Augustine & Stifter, 2015; Breen, Daniels, & Tomlinson, 2015; Carroll & Hamilton, 2016; Grusec, Danyiluk, Hil, & O’Neill, 2017). Thus, both disciplinary and non-disciplinary approaches are parents’ moral teaching tools and must be used wisely. The present study was exploratory in nature, seeking to understand the experiences and underlying reasoning processes of parents in general.

According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1995), good qualitative research makes the inquirer’s position explicit for the reader. Heeding their advice, we openly acknowledge the theory underlying this project is informed by neo-Aristotelian thought. Virtue ethics is a philosophical tradition driven by the belief that there is an optimal mode of living (i.e., *eudaimonia*/flourishing) for human beings predicated on virtuous living, the pursuit of noble goals, and personal growth (Fowers, Richardson, & Slife, 2017; Huta & Waterman, 2014). Aristotle (2004) viewed moral virtues as intermediate states of thought, emotion, and behaviour, defining them as unique human excellences that enable people to flourish. He saw practical wisdom as the chain of reasoning that allows people to properly translate virtue into action, especially when the right thing to do is unclear (Fowers, 2003; MacIntyre, 1981; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006).

Striving to be a good parent is indisputably a noble endeavor and raising good children surely a praiseworthy end. However, to overlook the role practical wisdom plays in parental
practice is to neglect a vital dimension of good parenting. To our knowledge, no research to date has explicitly explored practical wisdom in the experiences of parents. Therefore, this study sought to fill this gap and examine parental decision-making in relation to how they addressed child misbehaviour through a qualitative lens.

**Background**

**Parenting Inescapably a Moral Topic**

Parents are a fundamental moral guidepost for children and have significant influence on their development, behaviour, and moral reasoning (Bandura & McDonald, 1963; Hinnant et al., 2013; Kohlberg, 1981; Piaget, 1932; Simons & Conger, 2007). Robust moral values build a foundation for social development in childhood and buffer against delinquent behaviour in adolescence (Miller, Eisenberg, Fabes, & Shell, 1996; Thomas, 2011). As such, parenting appears to be an inherently moral activity entailing tremendous responsibility. However, most psychological theories describe human behaviour as a function of personality rather than of character, and human motivation as driven by instrumental concerns or a hedonic calculus, inhibiting the discipline’s ability to explore questions of value and meaning in life (Fowers, 2005; Schwartz & Wrzesniewski, 2016).

Fowers (2005) observes that, although psychology is a discipline set on a moral foundation, the discipline masquerades behind a “paper-thin veil … [of] terms that appear to be morally neutral” (p. 21). To Fowers’ point, language such as optimal, sub-optimal, and effective pervade psychological research on parenting (e.g., Giakoumaki et al., 2013; Joussemet, Ma, & Koestner, 2014). Such terms implicitly convey that certain child-developmental outcomes are more valuable than others (e.g., prosocial vs. antisocial behaviour) yet lack a clear moral structure grounding them. Kohlberg (1981) argued that adults’ influence on child behaviour
cannot be meaningfully discussed using value-neutral language. Whether intended or not, valuations of what is good and worthwhile are deeply embedded in psychological theory, research, and practice (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Fowers, 2015; Sugarman, 2007). Thus, embracing value-laden language is not only appropriate, but necessary, to truly understand the flourishing family unit in psychology.

Raising children well is fundamentally dependant on the day-to-day judgement of the parent (Loudová & Lašek, 2015). Furthermore, disciplining one’s children is no simple matter and parents must do so thoughtfully and skillfully for moral lessons to take hold in socially constructive ways (Peterson, 2018). The present study argues that teaching children moral lessons can sometimes be a complicated affair and demands practical wisdom to do so effectively. Aristotle wrote sparingly about parenting in both his Politics (2013) and Nichomachean Ethics (2004), but the wisdom of his writing on virtue is still invaluable for parents today. To earnestly discuss virtue theory’s applications for parents, a strong case must first be made for how parenting itself fits within a eudaimonic framework. To meet this challenge, it must be clearly articulated how parenting fits within virtue ethics’ hierarchy of goods.

**Instrumental versus Constitutive Goods**

Instrumental goods value a person’s actions strictly by the outcomes they obtain (Fowers, 2012). For example, people may work as stock brokers in the pursuit of wealth. They could do this honourably, managing their clients’ money with their best interests at heart. However, these hypothetical brokers could also pursue wealth by embezzling from their clients. Both methods result in the broker acquiring wealth, the outcome independent of whether it was done ethically.
Because the acquisition of wealth is not inherently virtue-driven, it is rendered an instrumental, secondary good.

Constitutive goods, on the other hand, are best achieved by embodying values that constitute those goods (Fowers, 2005, 2012). For example, a judge in a court of law should embody virtues such as justice, wisdom, and courage to rightly interpret and enforce the law. If a judge was devoid of these qualities, they would be considered corrupt and unjust. This is not to say the accompanying paycheck (an instrumental good) might not incentivize one to sit as a judge, or that a judge can sit on the bench without putting these virtues into practice (e.g., always passing sentences of maximum or minimum severity). However, the moral requirements for proper judgement in the court of law (wisdom, courage, and justice) are inseparable from the activity itself, rendering a judge’s duty to interpret and enforce the law a constitutive good.

Constitutive goods have primacy over instrumental goods because they align with the best aspects of our humanity: our social and rational nature (Fowers, 2005). This is not to say that instrumental goods are inherently evil. In fact, Aristotle (2004) believed that access to instrumental resources (e.g., wealth) help people pursue constitutive goods more effectively. What this hierarchy illustrates is that instrumental goods, though valuable, have no inherent moral value and are thus subordinate to constitutive goods (Fowers, 2012). When people harmonize their pursuits according to this hierarchical structure of goods, their lives take on meaning that transcends instrumental pursuits and gives life an integrated sense of purpose (see Fowers, 2005 for further reading).

**Raising children well is a constitutive good.** It is vital for parents to teach their children good moral behaviour and to raise them into well-socialized citizens (Loudová & Lašek, 2015; Peterson, 2018). There are many ways to raise children poorly, but to raise them well requires
much from parents on a moral level. This is abundantly clear in Seay, Freisteinson, and McFarlane’s (2014) definition of positive parenting: “Positive parenting is the continual relationship of a parent(s) and a child or children that includes caring, teaching, leading, communicating, and providing for the needs of the child consistently and unconditionally” (p. 207). Aristotle (2004) also felt parents had a responsibility to embody virtue and guide their children toward good habits of character. Thus, child-rearing is an activity best pursued in morally excellent ways, solidifying its status as a constitutive good.

Phronesis Deconstructed: The Component Parts of Practical Wisdom

Virtuous action is impossible without practical wisdom because the latter provides “[t]he capacity to recognize the essentials of what one encounters and [how] to respond well and fittingly to those circumstances” (Fowers, 2005, p. 52). Drawing inspiration from a variety of sources (Fowers, 2003, 2005; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2011), the component parts of Aristotle’s (2004) practical wisdom have been reframed here as a person’s ability to appropriately answer three distinct questions and appropriately translate them into action:

1) What is at stake or most important in this situation (Moral Perception)?

2) How might I address the important aspects of this situation (Deliberation)?

3) What should I do and how should I do it (Reasoned Choice)?

It is difficult to discuss practical wisdom without understanding Aristotle’s (2004) doctrine of the mean. Aristotle proposed that moral virtues are the excellences that enable human beings to flourish, pursue their goals in excellent ways. Virtue is a median point on a continuum between vices of excess and deficiency. For example, courage is a median point between recklessness and cowardice, an appropriate disposition when experiencing fear. However, virtue is not a fixed point on this continuum and often has a closer relationship to one vice over
another. For instance, expressions of recklessness and courage can sometimes be hard to tell apart, the difference being dependant on many things (reasons for action, one’s emotional state, did the agent act intentionally, under what conditions did they act).

Aristotle (2004) strongly believed that the right thing to do was fundamentally context-dependent. Practical wisdom, or phronesis, is the intellectual process by which one determines how best to act and identifies where virtue lies on this continuum in a given context (Fowers, 2003; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006). Sometimes it is best to stand and fight, but best to retreat in others. Brutal honesty is not always a good idea, but sometimes transparency is necessary to deepen our relationships. A court judge should at times pass harsh sentences but be merciful in others. Aristotle believed moral rules were valuable but limited in their prescriptive power because no situation is the exact same as another. It takes time, experience, and practice to develop a discerning mind in moral matters, but practical wisdom is ultimately vital to flourishing in one’s daily lives and activities (Fowers, 2005).

**Phronesis and the difficulty of discipline.** Although Aristotle’s (2004) virtue theory has not been explicitly incorporated into literature on parenting, there is an undeniable pattern indicating that virtue theory has great relevance for developmental psychology. An empirical foundation has already been laid to argue how Aristotle’s eudaimonic philosophy underscores psychology’s current knowledge of good parenting. Discipline is difficult for parents to implement because multiple variables can influence their decision-making (Peterson, 2018), supporting practical wisdom’s relevance for raising children well. Below is an outline of parental considerations at the time of misbehaviour. It is proposed that the component parts of practical wisdom (Fowers, 2003, 2005; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2011) manifest themselves in parental
decision-making when parents (consciously or unconsciously) work through the following questions when children misbehave:

1) Does my child’s behaviour warrant my intervention (Moral Perception)?

2) What disciplinary or non-disciplinary approaches might teach my child relevant moral lesson(s) (Deliberation)?

3) Which approach will most effectively teach my child these moral lessons (Reasoned Choice)?

**Integrating Parenting Styles with Eudaimonic Theory**

In Baumrind’s (1966, 1971) classical work, she originally identified three parenting styles termed the authoritarian, permissive, and authoritative styles. Maccoby & Martin (1983) later contributed a fourth to this typology called the uninvolved/neglectful parenting style. We theorize that the common response patterns of each style are indicative of how parents answer the above questions and thus their cultivation of practical wisdom. In fact, these parenting styles provide a convenient analogy to Aristotle’s (2004) doctrine of the mean in terms of parental warmth, control, and their typical disciplinary approaches. In this analogy, each parenting style represents a respective location on the continuum between excess and deficiency.

**The authoritarian style.** Authoritarian parents are characterized by low warmth and very high levels of control over their children (Baumrind, 1966; Sommer, 2010). They are more likely to utilize physical punishment and engage in extreme behavioural and psychological control over their children, ensuring obedience to imposed expectations (Baumrind, 1966; Friedson, 2016; Grogan-Kaylor & Otis, 2007; Newman et al., 2015). In western middle-class samples, physical punishment is strongly correlated with poor developmental outcomes, such as low self-esteem,
internalizing and externalizing problems, and reduced prosocial behaviour (Breen, Daniels, & Tomlinson, 2015; Durrant & Ensom, 2012; Graham & Weems, 2015; Pinquart, 2017).

**The permissive style.** Permissive parents are characterized by high warmth and low levels of control over their children (Baumrind, 1966; Sommer, 2010). They tend to not regulate the behaviour of their children and either avoid using discipline or are inconsistent in its use, rarely interfering in their children’s decision-making (Baumrind, 1971; Sommer, 2010). Permissive parenting is associated with outcomes such as alcohol and substance abuse, adolescent delinquent behaviour, and higher rates of aggressive and risk behaviours (Baumrind, 1968; Clark, Yang, McLernon, & Fuemmler, 2015; Hoeve et al, 2009; Jinnah & Stoneman, 2016).

**The uninvolved/neglectful style.** Maccoby and Martin (1983) added a fourth relational style to Baumrind’s original typology called the uninvolved/neglectful style. Such parents are characterized as being detached and disinterested in the affairs of their children, rarely discipline their children, and score lower than every other style on dimensions of parental warmth and control (Adalbjarnardottir & Hafsteinnson, 2001; Hoskins, 2014; Klein & Ballantine, 2001). This relational style is negatively correlated with positive adolescent development (Kiadarbandsari, Madon, Hamsan, & Mehdinezhad, 2016) and positively correlated with increased rates of relational aggression in children, as well as delinquency in both adolescence and early adulthood (Hoeve, et al., 2011; Kawabata et al., 2011).

**The authoritative style.** Authoritative parents are characterized by high warmth and moderate to high levels of control (Sommer, 2010), and utilize what is generally regarded as the optimal style of parenting. Such parents take a rational, issue-oriented approach when addressing misbehaviour with their child (Baumrind, 1966) and do not use physical punishment as a primary
punitive response (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Instead, they explain the situation in an age-appropriate manner, then respond in a way that is appropriately sensitive to their child’s feelings (Baumrind, 1966; Klein & Ballantine, 2001). Nonpunitive, inductive disciplinary approaches and moderate levels of parental control are associated with better developmental and relational outcomes for children (Augustine & Stifter, 2015; Choe, Olson, & Sameroff, 2013; Harris-McKoy, 2016), and such disciplinary approaches have been shown to positively correlate with the authoritative parenting style (Carroll & Hamilton, 2016). More significantly, the authoritative style is associated with better outcomes for children across racial and cultural groups (Pinquart & Kauser, 2018).

An analogy to virtue. The connection between Aristotle’s (2004) doctrine of the mean and this parenting style typology (Baumrind, 1966, 1971; Maccoby & Martin, 1983) can be framed in terms of the psychological and behavioural control each type of parent exerts over their children. Authoritarian parents exert too much control over their child, while permissive and uninvolved parents do not control their children enough. These styles represent the vices of excess and deficiency respectively. The authoritative parent, on the other hand, represents the mean: a balance between tyranny and deference among parents. This type of parent seems to find an appropriate balance between too much and too little control, showing flexibility in the face of changing circumstances and challenges when children misbehave (Klein & Ballantine, 2001).

This analogy is also reflected in how each style balances warmth and authority, both of which are important to raising children well (Harris-McKoy, 2016). Authoritarian parents do not temper their demands with warmth and responsiveness well, permissive parents do not offset their responsiveness with enough authority, and uninvolved/neglectful parents disregard these things altogether (e.g., Hoskins, 2014; Sommer, 2010). This balance is difficult to achieve
because parents need to know (a) when to affirm, (b) when to give advice, as well as (c) when and how to correct behaviour without undermining the relationship with their child (Peterson, 2018). Once again, this is a balance the authoritative parent generally strikes quite well (Klein & Ballantine, 2001; Sommer, 2010), mirroring the Aristotelian (2004) notion of virtue as a mean between extremes.

**The Importance of Practically Wise Parenting**

The above research is clear about three general truisms of disciplining children: (a) discipline must be proportionate to the child’s misdeed, (b) parents must be cognizant of situational factors when implementing discipline, and (c) parents must be considerate of traits influencing the child’s behaviour (e.g., temperament). Furthermore, children fare better when parents operate at an intermediate point between tyranny and negligence, smothering and being unreceptive. While these guidelines are valuable for directing parents towards the best child-rearing practices, specific circumstances can render their applications ambiguous and open to interpretation.

Aristotle (2004) recognized the value of rules and guidelines, but was also aware of their limitations, stating, “[the application of general rules to] particular problems admits of no precision … [We] are compelled at every step to think out for [ourselves] what the circumstances demand.” (p. 33). While western society generally finds Aristotle’s omission of prescriptive rules difficult to grasp (MacIntyre, 1981), there is no doubt raising children is an intricate affair that cannot be fully discussed in a rule-driven format. Thus, practical wisdom is indispensable to raising children well because virtue is only valuable insofar as it is applied fittingly to one’s circumstances (Fowers, 2005; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006). It is because of this that the decision-
making processes of parents when dealing with child misbehaviour is of great interest and was investigated in the present study.

This research was theoretically-driven and centered around this study’s research question, which was, “What is the reasoning processes underlying parents’ strategies when handling child misbehaviour and teaching moral lessons?” Four themes were presumed a priori to reflect parents’ phronetic reasoning when handling child misbehaviour: (a) consideration of specific features relating to the child, situation, and misbehaviour, (b) consideration of different disciplinary or non-disciplinary approaches, (c) demonstrating a clear understanding of why they deemed the chosen course of action appropriate, and (d) parents’ confidence in how well they handled the situation. These presumptions were made based on how they aligned with current theoretical literature on practical wisdom, as well as extraneous literature exploring the value of an Aristotelian eudaimonic paradigm in psychology (e.g., Fowers, 2005, 2012; Fowers, Richardson & Slife, 2017).

**Method**

**Participant Recruitment**

While interviewing eight to twelve participants is recommended to reach theoretical saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006), only four participants were recruited due to time constraints. All four participants were gathered from Facebook promotions. Participants were entered into a draw for a $50 gift card to The Keg Restaurant and Bar as an incentive for participating in the current research.

Inclusion criteria for participants was that they have two or more children and a minimum four-year age gap between their eldest and youngest child. These criteria were selected because learning from personal experience helps cultivate wisdom (Bluck & Gluck, 2004; Gluck, Bluck,
Baron, & McAdams, 2005; Weststrate & Gluck, 2017) and the age differential between children was arbitrarily chosen because temporal spacing between siblings allows parents to see the outcomes of their parenting approaches. It is thus presumed that parents who raised more than one child have had more experiences to learn from, likely guiding their approach when parenting subsequent children. However, wise and virtuous people are considered exceptional individuals (Fowers, 2005; Staudinger, 1999), meaning that having lots of experience may not equate to being wise or virtuous. Thus, variation in the prevalence of themes potentially relating to phronetic reasoning was expected between interviews.

**Participant Characteristics**

Two Caucasian males ($n = 2, 50\%$) and two Caucasian females ($n = 2, 50\%$) participated in this study ($n = 4, 100\%$). All interviews were conducted individually and parents were asked to describe their children’s defining traits and characteristics at the beginning of the interview. The information participants provided ranged from diagnosed mental illnesses, physical ailments, personality traits, character traits, moral sensibilities, hobbies, school aptitude, and emotional temperament (see Appendix A).

**Data Collection**

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Regina Research Ethics Board on January 30th, 2018 (see Appendix B). Semi-structured in-person interviews were conducted by the researcher with each participant individually. Contact information for the researcher was provided in the Facebook promotion for this project (see Appendix C). Doing so allowed participants to directly contact the researcher to express their interest to volunteer for the present research. Interview times and locations were coordinated individually based on participant preference. Once interviews were scheduled and confirmed, participants were sent an electronic
copy of the official consent form for preliminary review and were also provided a physical copy to sign upon meeting the researcher (See Appendix D). All four interviews were conducted at an office at the University of Regina and took between 30-45 minutes to complete. Each interview was audio recorded for later transcription.

The conversation between the researcher and participant focused on how the latter chose to handle a past instance (or instances) of misbehaviour with their child. Open-ended questions were used to facilitate conversation, although participants were occasionally prompted to supplement their narratives with additional details, as needed. Questions were grouped in two categories: (a) background information and (b) examining phronetic reasoning (for complete list of questions, see Appendix E).

**Question group one: Background information.** This preliminary group of questions were designed to establish some degree of comfortability and familiarity between the participant and researcher. Questions were open-ended and separated into two classes: (a) basic introductions and (b) defining characteristics of their children.

**Question group two: Examining phronetic reasoning.** Participants were asked to recount a specific situation or situations in which their children misbehaved. Questions were again separated into three classes, each examining various components of practical reasoning: (a) moral perception, (b) deliberation, and (c) moral will and skill. The first class of questions, which focused on moral perception, involved the researcher asking the participant to provide a general description of the misbehaviour. The second class of questions – which focused on the deliberation, moral will, and moral skill components of practical wisdom – involved participants describing their own responses to the situation. The third class of questions focused on both moral will and moral skill, and participants were asked to detail any follow-up conversations
with the child regarding the misbehaviours and how well they thought the child internalized the moral lesson(s).

**Data Management and Analysis**

Interviews were recorded on a digital audio recorder and were conducted in office spaces that optimized recording quality. Following completion of the interviews, they were transcribed into a Microsoft Word document and printed for subsequent analysis. All transcripts were reviewed, and errors were corrected where necessary. There are multiple approaches to conducting thematic analysis. For this project, data was analyzed within a eudaimonic theoretical perspective as guided by Braun and Clarke (2006). The authors detail a six-step guide to thematic analysis, which will be described in detail below. Such an approach is driven by the analyst, requires familiarity with the relevant literature, and sets the structure for how information is analyzed.

**Phase one: Familiarity and transcription.** Braun and Clarke’s (2006) first step of thematic analysis is for the researcher to familiarize themselves with the data. They state that whether the data was collected directly by the researcher or received second-hand, the analyzer must thoroughly read or listen to the data (if in audio-recorded form) until they gain an intimate familiarity with its content and depth. While reading the transcribed data, the analyzer begins to search for and make preliminary notes of deeper meaning and patterns within, reading the entire dataset at least once. The second step is to transcribe the data if it is not already in a written format (e.g., interviews), which for this study was done manually. The authors note that transcribing manually takes time but further familiarizes oneself with the data at hand. This phase is highly interpretive, as pauses in speech or punctuation choices in the written report can
change the meaning of what was said. Ultimately, it is up to the researcher to have the familiarity necessary to interpret the data effectively during the transcription process.

**Phases two and three: Initial codes and searching for themes.** The third step is producing initial codes from the data, which are the sub-units comprising the major themes in a qualitative dataset. Because this study was theory-driven, codes were generated around this study’s research question, which was to see how prevalent the components of practical reasoning were in parents’ responses to child misbehaviour. Coding was done manually rather than via software programming, so extensive notes were made on each physical transcript and codes were highlighted according to a colour-coded system.

Themes are then generated once the codes are organized and represent a broader level of analysis. In this study, the data was analyzed to see if codes characteristic of moral perception, deliberation, and reasoned choice were present in the data. However, additional themes were also generated from the codes identified within the data. Codes were organized into themes via a table first, then organized in a map-like format. In this stage, Braun and Clarke (2006) state that the researcher is looking for how themes and codes relate to each other, generating both themes and sub-themes from the data.

**Phases four, five, and six.** The fourth step involves further review of the transcribed dataset to see if the themes cohere in a meaningful manner and are clearly distinct from one another. If the themes are not distinguishable or coherent, they may need to be rejected. If a theme is rejected, the analyzer must begin a process of re-coding the data to ensure nothing is omitted or improperly included. The fifth step is to thoroughly identify what is truly important about each theme to use that information to construct a coherent narrative about the data. The sixth and final objective is to produce a written report for publication or submission. It is
important to provide clear and specific examples (e.g., quotes) from the data to illustrate meaning and essence of various themes.

**Level of analysis.** Themes were identified at the latent level, examining underlying depth within the responses of the participants. The authors describe this simply as, “identify[ing] the features that give [the data] its form and meaning” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 13). Most qualitative research searching for latent themes operates under a constructionist epistemological paradigm; however, this study operated under an essentialist/realist paradigm, generating meaning from participants’ speech at an individual level rather than examining larger factors influencing their perspectives (e.g., cultural upbringing, socio-economic status).

**Results**

**Major Themes**

Multiple themes relating to the component parts of practical wisdom recurred throughout the data. These themes were categorized within the component parts that they related most heavily to: Moral Perception, Deliberation, and Reasoned Choice. Two additional themes were also identified within the data. The fourth theme, titled “Learning from Upbringing,” was identified within participants’ reflections on how their parents raised them and their subsequent divergences from those approaches. The fifth theme was titled “Parental Duty” and revolved around the emphasis parents placed on the responsibility to raise their children well. The data contained within this theme was considered important because the parents’ statements indicated they understood parenting itself as a constitutive good. It is important to note that the latter two themes did not emerge when discussing the practical reasoning process of handling misbehaviour. Rather, they emerged during the course of more general conversation and
pertained to the development of their parental approach and their internal representations about the value of parenting itself.

**Moral perception.** Moral perception is recognizing the need for action, distinguishing what is essential from what is peripheral, and having a clear reading on what the situation requires (Fowers, 2005; Fowers, Richardson, & Slife, 2017; Sherman, 1989). This was theorized to be crucial for parents to properly deal with child misbehaviour. During the interviews, each parent described themselves as being aware of facets unique to situations they encountered, acknowledging that no single approach best suited every circumstance or every child. This theme was further broken down into the three following sub-themes: understanding one’s child, context/trait interactions, and spousal support.

**Understanding one’s child.** Each parent outlined the importance of understanding who their children were as individuals, manifesting in how they communicated with and tailored their disciplinary responses to their children. Knowing one’s children well, open lines of communication, and actively guiding the child’s moral reasoning are crucial to facilitating positive developmental outcomes (Hinnant et al., 2013; Klein & Ballatine, 2001). Thus, the ability to factor in children’s defining traits (consciously or unconsciously) helps parents ensure they handle their child’s misbehaviour in the best way possible and is essential to teaching moral lessons effectively. Thus, the participants’ use of this understanding to guide their interactions with their children was categorized as a sub-theme of moral perception. Participant 2, a mother of four children, described this very thoroughly, stating:

- Participant 2: “… to recognize their differences [was important]. Like, each of them would maybe respond in a different way, or needed a different way of talking, or maybe more emotional support… [our first child] being a more sensitive kid, and maybe more
logical, talking to him at his level might have been enough. Whereas [our second child], who responds to feeling and touching, maybe you have to respond to him more physically. You know, just having a hand on him, or just the way we would talk.”

At the outset of each interview, participants were asked to detail the traits that defined their children the most. This was done to determine to what extent these things were considered in their responses to subsequent questions about misbehaviour. This information did come up within their descriptions of how they generally handled misbehaviour with their children, and each parent openly stated the need to tailor discipline to the individual child:

- Participant 1: “I had to try and develop a varied relationship with them. So the way that we would treat [our fourth child] versus the way that we would treat [our first, second, and third children] would be because… [our fourth child] is more emotionally sensitive… [in order to] have maximum impact in our children’s lives I needed to understand who they were… [and] cross over into their world, into their language, into their thinking.”

- Participant 2: “… the oldest… was [an] introvert, quiet, but very steady and sturdy. Very sensitive kid, could pick up on people’s feelings… very loving heart… my second boy… very much an introvert… a good friend… very sensitive of inner feelings… [My third child] also an introvert, but similar to [our oldest child] in how he thinks. More of a black and white kind of guy… very independent… responsible… a strong sense for justice. [My fourth child] a very free spirit, an extrovert… very fun-loving and encouraging… no reservation to be herself, wears her heart on her sleeve… [she also] kind of likes to experiment with things to see how far she can push the envelope.”
● Participant 3: [My first child] probably suffered with ADHD in retrospect… going through elementary school [he was in] the signature ‘slow class’… he does still have a short fuse… he would go for two weeks without opening his backpack if you let him… stuff would just take him out of any work ethic.”

● Participant 4: “Four kids. Same parents. So different. And parenting each one of them is completely different… because what works with one doesn’t work on the other…”

Context/trait interactions. Understanding how children’s character and personality traits interface with situations and how situational factors influence children’s behaviour are crucial considerations that parents must consider prior to responding. Participant 3 detailed the need to adjust his parental approach based on the nature of his relationship with his step-son. He indicated that his parental interactions were complicated due to his role as a step-parent. Because this child had so many similarities with his oldest biological son, he instinctively wanted to give him the same tough love that had worked for his own son. However, being the boy’s step-father meant he had to drastically change his approach:

● Participant 3: “But I got to be very careful in my relationship with him… the message can’t come from [his mother] all the time… But, it almost can’t come from me because I am his step-dad… so it’s been the hardest thing for me is raising him.”

Participant 3 recognized he could not simply slip into the father-figure role as this child’s step-parent. Herein he described a difficult balance act where there are boundaries that he must operate within as the step-father and that there were factors in place that complicated the situation on multiple levels. His step-child struggled with an ADHD diagnosis and had a pre-existing attachment with his biological father. Because of these two things in particular, the rules of interaction were not always clear for this individual, sometimes making parenting this child
very complicated. Ambiguous situations such as this one are where practical wisdom is most relevant (Fowers, 2003) and this parent’s ability to recognize the need for adjusted action (i.e., moral perception) is the crucial first step to responding properly on a case-by-case basis.

When talking about his biological son, participant 3 also described a situation where his child had been arrested for drinking in public as a minor. This parent’s recognition of his child’s personality type and as his own family history of alcoholism were crucial factors motivating him to act as swiftly as he did:

- Participant 3: “I think if [my daughter] had done the same thing, given the kid she was, there was no way she would have gotten as severe a penalty… but [my son], the kid he was and the way that he made decisions and… just sort of the path that I was worried about him going… [my approach] seemed like the right decision… alcoholism ran in my family, and my wife’s family… I was hoping… to stop it right there and make him know that was not acceptable. …”

*Spousal support.* This sub-theme was identified most prominently in the interviews with participant 1 and 2 (who were married to each other). These individuals emphasized how important raising their children in a coordinated and collaborative effort was for them. While participant 2 was a stay-at-home mother for the early years of their children’s development, participant 1 described himself as being cognizant of situations when he needed to step in to give her a hand:

- Participant 1: “I was there to try and reinforce those things, or because she had been busy for a week, you know, day after day after day, you know um, it was good timing for me to step in in some of those situations… we just took, you know, the job really seriously, of our kids. Um, you know, we definitely took it very very seriously”
Participant 2: “Support with your spouse is very important. Having strength to parent… because sometimes you don’t feel like it, so you draw strength from your spouse. I can’t imagine doing it all by myself, because there were days when I am sure I would have lost it… It was a lot of sacrifice and a lot of energy… you got to make sure that yourself is in check, to make sure that you have that energy to give to your kids.”

Both participants 1 and 2 described parenting as an activity that demanded great sacrifice on their part. This was most clearly illustrated when they discussed their choice to have participant 2 be a stay-at-home mother. Their cohesion on this matter resulted in the wife staying home to invest in the children’s early years, which came with its own challenges:

- Participant 1: “… we both felt it was very important for [my wife] to be a full-time mom… so we sacrificed what would have been… a good income… for sixteen years… so right from the get-go of having children, you know, we tried to recognize ‘what was the most important thing we could do?’, and the number one thing by far was making the tough decision of being a full-time mom.”

- Participant 2: “[We] didn’t have kids without having a bit of a plan as to what we wanted to do. And I personally wanted to stay home with them so that I could get to know them and raise them in a way that we felt was good.”

This couple’s decision is interesting because it reflects the value of having a spouse who has similar views regarding what is good or best. They recognized the same essential facets of the situation or dilemma at hand and responded cooperatively. Both these individuals felt raising their children was of paramount importance and made this decision accordingly. Although this synchronicity may not always be the case, couples who both express a coherent family parenting style (the authoritative style in particular) are associated with better developmental outcomes for
children (Simons & Conger, 2007; Teubert & Pinquart, 2012). If the analogy to virtue of the parenting styles discussed earlier holds to be true, then it is possible that one variable underlying this synchronicity is a shared understanding of aims worth pursuing between spouses.

**Deliberation.** Once the need for action is recognized and the important facets of a situation perceived, the challenge then becomes discerning which responses best suit the circumstances and will bring about the best possible outcomes (Fowers, 2003, 2005). This step builds upon the recognition of situational, contextual, and moral dimensions of the problem identified in the previous stage of practical reasoning.

Both participants 1 and 2 described themselves as often taking an interactive approach with their children during this stage of practical reasoning. When their children would misbehave, either parent (depending on who was handling the situation) would offer their children various options for consequences to choose from:

- Participant 2: “… often we’d give them a choice. You know, either you do this or here are the consequences of it… these are some of your options. Which one do you think is fair?”

Allowing the child to have limited participation in this deliberative process seems to be an inventive way to help the child recognize and internalize the fact that misbehaviour must have consequences. Participants 1 and 2 both described a situation where they had their eldest son (who was very young at the time) participate in that process. Participant 1 in particular noted that allowing his son to participate in choosing the discipline resulted in little to no negative effect on the child:

- Participant 2: “… we gave [our son] a choice: choose to have a spank or not have McDonalds. He really suffered [deciding] over that one (laughs)… and we’d go up to
his room, “Have you decided yet?... It was so hard for him [to decide], but he said, ‘Okay, I’ll have the spank’… that’s the only time I remember spanking the kids, but it was definitely a tough decision for him.”

- Participant 1: “So we came up with some choices on punishments… [going] through the pros and cons about each of the punishments and which might be the best suited, and he participated in that. So he chose… a spanking. And I would say that wouldn’t have been my first go-to, uh, but that was the seriousness of what had happened. So he chose that, and uh and he certainly remembered that… I was a little bit uncomfortable giving the spank, but he was very comfortable in receiving it, because that was his best option. Because the other options were missing out on certain elements of life or certain elements of family. So whether that’s being grounded or missing a special meal… he chose his own deal.”

Participant 3 told a story in which he had very clearly gone through this deliberative process. His eldest child, who was 14 years old at the time, was caught by law enforcement drinking alcohol in public with his friends:

- Participant 3: “… things like, ‘Well, you can’t play hockey!’ Well, in a small town, you got nine kids, and that hurts the team more than it hurts him. Um, so okay you start looking at, ‘Okay, what are we going to do?’ We need to do something… I decided he needed to get as severe a penalty as I could give him, and just him. I didn’t want to hurt anyone else, but I wanted [my son] to know that what he did that day, the choice he made that day was the wrong choice.”

Participant 3 sought to find a consequence that would instill within his child the lessons that he felt were most pertinent to that situation without any collateral damage. While this is also
a recognition that it would be unjust to punish others for his son’s moral error, this factors heavily into this individual’s deliberative process and they crossed off possibilities that would result in such an outcome. This recognition eventually led to this individual’s chosen response, which is detailed in the following theme.

**Reasoned choice.** The final component of practical wisdom goes beyond just selecting from deliberated alternatives, but that via the previous components of phronetic reasoning we harmonize the transcendent aims one seeks with the present goals they desire to achieve (Fowers, 2005; Sherman, 1989). Intending to do the right thing (although valuable) is not nearly as valuable as doing the right thing, and thus acting upon a well-reasoned choice is the entire purpose of the practical reasoning process (Fowers, 2005). Each participant offered descriptions of this final stage of practical wisdom. Participant 1 provided a good example of how these facets of practical reasoning harmonize to produce a wise decision and skillful response. In a situation where his third son was angry at one of his siblings, participant 1 recognized the importance of understanding why his son felt the way he did. From this, this participant decided the best course of action was to guide his son through his feelings towards rational contemplation of why acting based on one’s emotions is not a good thing:

- Participant 1: “… in order to really get this right, I need to understand what is really going on here. ‘Well how does that make you feel when someone said [something] that way?... What is it in you that makes you want to punch them, and is that [the right thing to do]?... the issue is on the feeling, and do we walk by feelings… or what do we walk by? How do we understand that, you know, that’s wrong intellectually, but in our heart still feeling like you want to do it?’ So [we would] just try to navigate through those things.”
Participant 3 detailed an inventive approach as consequence for his son’s drinking behaviour with his friends:

- Participant 3: “… we had a driveway that came in a curve around… the snow followed the west wind… and would pile up along that curve… I made that [my son’s] job. He got a big shovel – big wide shovel – and he had to scrape this and keep this 150 yards clear… we made him keep it open until Christmas time.”

The approach of participant 3 satisfied his concerns that arose when deliberating about how best to handle this situation with his son. The response he chose (a) only affected his child and (b) was deemed proportionate to his son’s misdeed. This parent also had follow-up conversations with his son in the wake of the incident, contrasting the approach taken by the parents of another child involved in that incident to further solidify this lesson within his son. Additionally, participant 3 described how, from his perspective, the approach taken by these parents may have played a role in a tragic drunk driving accident:

- Participant 3: “… one of the boys [my son] was drinking with that day was spoiled rotten… never got in any trouble at all. I’m sure he didn’t. But he rolled a truck drunk and killed one of their best friends… so we had talked about the differences in our family and their family.”

Participant 3 described how his son still thanked him for how he handled this situation over a decade later as an adult. His son truly felt this occurrence was a pivotal moment in his life and expressed profound gratitude for how his father chose to handle that situation. This story serves as an example of the value an effectively reasoned choice can have in the life of a child, illustrating the relevance practical wisdom seems to have for raising children well.
Learning from upbringing. Each of the parents described that their general child-rearing approach was heavily influenced by how they were raised. Participants 1, 2, and 4 in particular all used how their parents raised them as a learning experience and adopted a completely opposite approach:

- Participant 1: “But what kind of drove my behaviour a little bit, in the early years was… I was going to be a better parent than my dad, and… developed a setting that would allow my kids to be better than me…”
- Participant 2: “My father was more of an authoritarian and you were just scared of him… my mom would just… get angry, and that hurt me because she was angry and there would be no discussion at all about where I was at or what I was feeling. So maybe that’s why I felt an [interactive approach to discipline] was needed.”
- Participant 4: “I would always say, ‘you can ask me anything… and it was never in a place of judgement, because that’s not how kids learn… [my upbringing] was very… you didn’t really have an opinion… it was more military kind of…”

Interestingly, the above excerpts indicate that these parents chose to diverge from the extreme forms of authority/permissiveness that their own parents chose to implement. The second and fourth participants grew up in households that were more authoritarian, and because of this, they chose to take a warmer, more interactive approach when engaging with their children.

Parental duty. This is perhaps the most fundamental theme identified within the present dataset. This theme details the value the participants gave child-rearing in their internal hierarchy of goods, indicating they conceptualized it as a constitutive good. The parents emphasized a deep conviction they felt to raise their children well and that this responsibility superseded all other
considerations when interacting with their children. This fits within the definitional parameters of what a constitutive good is (Fowers, 2012) and aligns with research describing goal hierarchies of individuals with a eudaimonic orientation to happiness (e.g., Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005).

Participant 1 described the impact he would have on his kids as something of transcendent value that would extend beyond his own life. He viewed raising his children well to be of the utmost importance and priority. The theme of responsibility, setting a good example, and doing what was best for one’s children was present in interviews with the other participants, as well:

- Participant 1: “… by far, the biggest dividend we could give the world was raising good kids… [The way] I have governed the last number of decades with my kids… would be just to say, ‘Based on how I was this week, what would my kids say about me at my funeral? What would they talk about at my funeral?’”
- Participant 3: “I told [my son], ‘Yeah, you’re probably right. I was very hard on you.’ But [there were] pressures of being a young dad and [not] screwing up this teenage pregnancy, and the responsibilities of doing the right thing going beyond that…”
- Participant 4: “… how they are going to react to something is how you react… because they learn from example… [if I had] freaked out or something, or swore… then that’s what would have been repeated…”

According to virtue theory, what people consider most important in a situation and their general behaviour is shaped by the goods that they consider most worth pursuing (Fowers, 2008), causing this theme to be of great interest and regarded as the most fundamental. All participants described raising their children well as something they felt a responsibility to do to the best of
their ability, which inevitably shaped their daily decisions pertaining to their children’s well-being and development. Because parents’ behaviour acts as a primary reference point for children’s conduct and moral reasoning (Bandura & McDonald, 1963), the practices parents adopt in pursuit of raising their children well are critical to its achievement. Thus, it is theorized that parents who conceptualize raising children well as a primary good (i.e., a constitutive good; Fowers, 2012) are more likely to consistently enact virtues contributive to raising their children well in ways that suit their circumstances.

Discussion

While a plethora of research has identified certain truisms of parenting that fall in accordance with virtue theory, limited literature exists discussing parenting explicitly from an Aristotelian eudaimonic framework. Because raising children well is a constitutive good, virtue and practical wisdom are critical to achieving that good. This study sought to simultaneously integrate Aristotelian ethics with research on parenting while providing an in-depth analysis of practical wisdom in parental practice. Four themes were presumed a priori to be associated with practical reasoning when handling child misbehaviour: (a) consideration of specific features relating to the child, situation, and misbehaviour, (b) consideration of different disciplinary or non-disciplinary approaches, (c) demonstrating a clear understanding of why they deemed the chosen course of action appropriate, and (d) the parent’s confidence in how well they handled the situation.

Following thematic analysis, all but the fourth presumption about practical wisdom’s relevance for parental practice were shown to be accurate, although parents’ confidence in their decision was not explicitly examined during the interviews. The experiences of these parents support the critical role practical wisdom plays in child-rearing and the identified themes were
consistent with theoretical literature on the structural components of phronetic reasoning (e.g., Fowers, 2005; Marshall & Thorburn, 2013; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006). Parents described the need to respond adaptively to circumstances surrounding misbehaviour and thoughtfully consider various courses of action as crucial to handling misbehaviour and raising their children overall.

The theme of moral perception was the densest in terms of its content, being constituted by three distinct sub-themes. Although this was not expected during the preparatory stages of this thesis, the emergence of multiple sub-themes illustrates how complex parenting can be due to the many considerations that go into generating an appropriate response to the behaviour of one’s child. Without recognition of these various facets, a parent is vulnerable to disproportionate, maladaptive disciplinary practices. This kind of perception is moral because the content of concern is itself morally-laden (Fowers, 2005). Misbehaviour is almost by definition a moral transgression of some sort and are thus situations where moral perception is crucially relevant.

The sub-themes classified under moral perception are reflective of general things parents described themselves as being cognizant of when their children misbehaved, the essential facets of the situations they encountered. The first sub-theme listed in this thesis, understanding one’s child, pertains to the parents’ cognizance of traits and sensibilities of their children when communicating with or disciplining them. Recognition of such things is vital to teaching moral lessons effectively (e.g., Hinnant et al., 2013; Klein & Ballantine, 2001), as a message misinterpreted or poorly received can establish poor habits of character. While knowing the kind of people that one’s children are is important to communicating effectively, it is not always enough on its own to lead to an appropriate response. There are other factors outside of the
child’s defining traits a parent must consider also, hence its classification as a sub-theme under moral perception in this study.

The second sub-theme of moral perception pertains to parents’ recognition of how their children’s personality traits interfaced with specific situations, being particularly prevalent in the interview conducted with participant 3. One example the participant offered of this was how his parental approach differed greatly between his step-son and biological son based on the nature of their relationship. Despite their similarities, he took a sterner, more active approach when parenting his biological son than his step-son. This was due to the complicated nature of his relationship with his step-son, and based on that, he took a more cautionary and calculated approach than he did with his biological son.

The sub-theme of context/trait interactions was also identified in participant 3’s discussion of an underage drinking incident involving his biological son. This parent stated that, had his eldest daughter done the same thing, his disciplinary approach would have been very different for a multitude of reasons. Participant 3 stated that due to his son’s addictive, thrill-seeking personality, combined with his family’s own history of alcoholism, the need to respond swiftly and decisively was of paramount concern. This participant stated that his son described the situation as being a critical moment in his life, repeatedly thanking him later in life for handling his misbehaviour the way he did.

The third sub-theme, spousal support, was identified while analyzing the interviews of the spouses, participants 1 and 2. These participants individually described the need to support each other and act cooperatively with one another when raising their children. While the wife (participant 2) was a stay-at-home mother, the husband (participant 1) stated he often recognized opportunities to assist her after she had spent a long day looking after their kids. Both parents
openly stated how much effort and time they invested into their children, so the husband’s ability to recognize when his wife was depleted of energy was said to be valuable; both for the well-being of their children and as a couple. The wife further corroborated this, stating that her husband’s support was vital to raising their children and was greatly appreciated.

The themes of deliberation and reasoned choice required no further sub-categorization because they themselves appeared to be dependent on the recognition of pertinent facets of the situations parents encountered. One effectively deliberates between courses of action when having all the facts, and an effectively reasoned choice can only be arrived at if the deliberative process was conducted well. While the parents did acknowledge that some situations required immediate response and had no time for further consideration, this is consistent with existing literature on practical wisdom (e.g., Fowers, 2005; Fowers, Richardson, & Slife, 2017). Ultimately, these two components of practical reasoning appeared to be fundamentally dependant on one’s ability to recognize the essentials of a situation.

In relation to the theme of deliberation, one noteworthy finding in the data was identified in the descriptions offered by participants 1 and 2 about the interactive disciplinary approach they often employed with their children. It is possible this approach helped their children gain a preliminary sense for how severe their misbehaviour was by considering the disciplinary options provided to them. While the parents themselves had to deliberate upon the options they would provide the child to choose from, it is feasible this gave their children a rudimentary understanding of their misbehaviours’ severity and discerning a just punishment. Research shows that when children engage in reflective thinking before they act, their moral reasoning improves at the postconventional level (Lopez & Lopez, 2006). It is possible that, by participant 1 and 2
allowing their children to choose their punishment and reflect on their moral transgression, they facilitated improvements in their moral judgement.

The fourth theme, learning from upbringing, was not anticipated prior to investigation yet came up in three of the four interviews conducted. Three of the participants described themselves as taking a different, often contrary approach to how their own parents raised them. Interestingly, the descriptions these participants offered of their parents’ approaches were consistent with traits typical of the authoritarian parenting style. Based on existing research, these individuals would be considered outliers, as aggressive and authoritarian parenting practices have high rates of intergenerational transfer (e.g., Bailey, Hill, Osterle, & Hawkins, 2009; Campbell & Gilmore, 2007; IJzendoorn, 1992; Lukek, 2015). Future interviews may balance out these observations, with future participants learning and implementing similar approaches their own parents did with them.

The fifth theme from these interviews was philosophically the most fundamental of all the themes identified in the present study. Each participant appeared to view parenting itself as a constitutive good, conceptualizing parenting well as something they were duty-bound to perform. However, this sense of duty was not to be confused with a grim adherence to external, imposed responsibilities. Rather, their descriptions reflected that they viewed raising their children well as something intrinsically desirable. Their ascription of transcendent value to this activity gave child-rearing an immense sense of responsibility and meaning, motivating them to parent as best they could for their children’s sake. Their language lends credence to the idea proposed in the literature review that raising children well is fundamentally inseparable from the activities that constitute it, thus giving it primary status in virtue ethics’ hierarchy of goods (see Fowers, 2012 for further reading).
To parent well, one must organize the responsibilities of parenting appropriately within their own internal hierarchy of what they consider most valuable. This statement articulates how parenting fits within virtue ethics’ hierarchy of goods (Fowers, 2012). The participants in this study described parenting as something that required personal sacrifice and subsequently devoted a large amount of energy towards their children. Upon deeper analysis, participants 1 and 2 made this the choice to have the mother be a stay-at-home-mom because they saw parenting as having intrinsic value that transcended a dual income. Upon deeper analysis, this clearly indicated that they prioritized raising their children (a constitutive good) over acquiring greater wealth (an instrumental good). These parents seem to place child-rearing as paramount to their own needs and desires, which suggests they implicitly considered raising their children to be a primary, constitutive good. Answers provided by participants also align with items on Peterson and colleagues’ (2005) *Orientation to Happiness Questionnaire*, suggesting these parents may have an eudaimonic orientation to happiness regarding the raising of their children.

When analyzing the data, the codes eventually organized into the themes of practical wisdom would sometimes overlap with one another, which could be the result of two things. First, this could be due to participants’ answers being delivered in hindsight, resulting in some codes blending together. It is possible that, if the practical reasoning process was recorded by each participant as they actively dealt with misbehaviour, the emergent codes would be more sequential in the raw data.

The second explanation for this overlap is that it reflects the interconnected nature of the component parts of practical wisdom. Sometimes recognizing what is morally important is sufficient to produce an immediate response (Fowers, Richardson, & Slife, 2017), which would explain the overlap between codes categorized under moral perception and reasoned choice
respectively. However, overlap between deliberation and the other two components of practical wisdom (moral perception and reasoned choice) further indicate how each step of the practical reasoning process is contingent upon the step that precedes it, such as moral perception first, deliberation second, and reasoned choice third.

Limitations

A difficult puzzle in examining the parent-child dynamic research is the bidirectional influence they have on each other (e.g., Bell, 1968; Strayer & Roberts, 2004). Due to the exploratory nature of this project, we approached this dynamic in terms of how parents influence their children’s behaviour. Theoretically speaking from an Aristotelian (2004) perspective, a practically wise parent would be (a) cognizant of how their child’s behaviour is affecting them and seek to guide and (b) manage their children’s behaviour in ways that produce the best outcomes. Furthermore, such a parent would certainly adjust their approach according the characteristics and traits of their children, which was a sub-theme of moral perception identified within the data. While a eudaimonic orientation demands much from parents, an inescapable truth of parental practice is that it demands personal responsibility and wisdom to raise children well.

A second limitation to this study was the decision to omit the usage of a standardized, quantitative virtue measurement. While Peterson and Seligman (2004) contributed a comprehensive virtue classification and measurement tool for psychology, there are conceptual, theoretical, and psychometric challenges that plague virtue assessment (see Fowers, 2014 for further reading). While practical wisdom is critical to virtuous action (Fowers, 2005; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006, 2011), a purely qualitative approach was adopted in our investigation to avoid larger questions surrounding virtue measurement and also due to time limitations.
A third limitation of this project is the small sample size. Qualitative research reaches theoretical saturation (the qualitative equivalent of statistical power) when it garners eight to twelve participants (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). This project fell short of that standard, gathering a total of four participants. Due to this, the conclusions drawn from this study are rendered exploratory. Future research is warranted to gather the required number of participants for theoretical saturation before valid conclusions can be drawn.

A fourth limitation of this study pertains to overlap in content between the stories and information participants 1 and 2 provided (who were spouses). However, interviews with this couple were conducted immediately subsequent to each other on the same date, eliminating the possibility that they influenced each other’s responses between interviews, such as planning which stories or children they would discuss. Thus, any overlap in their interview content can be reasonably assumed to be purely coincidental and was central to identifying one of the major sub-themes identified in the present study.

The children of each participant had either grown into adults or were currently attending high school. As a result, many of the stories were removed from the present day by a significant temporal gap (i.e., telling a story from when their son/daughter was a young child or teenager). This could be either a strength or a weakness to this study. This could possibly be a strength because participants had the benefit of seeing the full picture of what their parenting efforts produced within their children. However, this could also be a limitation that skewed the responses the parents provided in the interviews because of the wide temporal distance between the event and their re-telling of that experience in the interview.

Strengths
The findings of this study give cause for optimism about the value of a eudaimonic paradigm for understanding best parenting practices. The themes identified within the data fit well within this framework, and even extended to individual good hierarchies (i.e., instrumental vs. constitutive goods). This research can hopefully spur further investigation into the benefits of a eudaimonic orientation towards life as vital to the flourishing of the family unit. In a more general sense, these findings support the notion that Aristotelian ethics offers an ideal way for psychology to conceptualize human flourishing and prompt future discussion and investigation about potential applications in other contexts.

Additionally, to our knowledge, this is the first qualitative research project to examine the decision-making of parents through an Aristotelian lens. This study made preliminary explorations of the suitability of a eudaimonic paradigm to understand excellent parental practice. Once future interviews are conducted and analyzed, we hope that this research will spur further inquiry into this dimension of human life from the perspective of Aristotelian virtue ethics (2004). We theorize that Aristotle’s ethics has tremendous practical value for parents, as well as conceptual value for psychology, to understand the flourishing family unit. By studying practical wisdom in isolation, our findings support our theory surrounding its necessity in child-rearing.

One of the greatest strengths of the present study is its boldness to use value-laden language in its theoretical exploration of parents’ moral decision-making. In the literature review, a strong case was made that raising children well is a constitutive good, as it is impossible to separate optimal child-rearing from the activities required to achieve it (i.e., good parenting). Thus, parenting well is dependant on enacting virtue properly in specific situations, which is the function of practical wisdom (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006). By examining parenting
within an Aristotelian (2004) moral framework, this project advocates for virtue theory as providing a stable moral grounding for psychological research on optimal parenting practices. Hopefully, future research along this stream of thought will provide further insights contributing to enriching current understanding of eudaimonia at the individual and familial levels.

**Future Directions and Implications**

The most proximal task following this project is to conduct additional interviews to reach theoretical saturation. Analysis of future interviews will make future directions from this research clearer and allow pursuit of future peer-review publication. The following ideas proposed were written as if theoretical saturation was achieved for the present thesis and should be read as if themes identified in the current data remained consistent in subsequent interviews.

Another possibility for research building upon these findings would be to conduct an exploratory sequential mixed method study. Such an approach uses the patterns identified from qualitative interviews to develop a corresponding quantitative measure (Creswell, 2014), which would aid in the development of a psychometric tool to assess parents' phronetic reasoning ability. Once a quantitative measure is developed and validated, two further directions for research could emerge. First, correlational studies could be conducted to assess relationships between practical wisdom and parenting style typologies (Baumrind, 1966, 1971; Maccoby & Martin, 1983), as well as specific kinds of disciplinary practices. Second, multivariate analyses could be conducted on parents’ practical reasoning, examining the variance contributed by extraneous variables such as cultural differences, socioeconomic status, education, intelligence, personality, parenting styles, religiosity, political orientation, and happiness orientations. Such a study would provide a clearer picture of factors that promote or inhibit the cultivation of
practical wisdom (or specific components of it) and produce further questions to examine in subsequent research.

The long-term goal of this study is that the information gathered contributes to increasing flourishing in the family unit. Flourishing (eudaimonia) is characterized by living virtuously, pursuing noble ends (i.e., constitutive goods) in morally excellent ways, and striving for personal growth (Aristotle, 2004; Fowers, 2005, 2012; Fowers, Richardson, & Slife, 2017). With so much of human behaviour and development influenced by the parent-child relationship (e.g., Bandura & McDonald, 1963; Harris-McKoy, 2016; Hinnant et al., 2013; Hoeve et al., 2009; Pinquart, 2017), to study practical wisdom in parental practice is to seek understanding of the flourishing family unit. Future research could lead to the development of a virtue-oriented parenting program to teach parenting skills from the theoretical foundation of virtue ethics. Such a program would emphasize the importance of character and practical wisdom to raise children into flourishing adults and provide guidance on methods well-suited for achieving this constitutive good.

An important finding in this study was the theme of parental duty, which pertained to participants’ description of the responsibility they felt to raise their children well. The language used by the participants indicated they conceptualized parenting itself as a constitutive good. They described that raising good children was of supreme importance and demanded great sacrifice and energy. As a result, they made these sacrifices willingly and contritely and ascribed a transcendent, intrinsic value to their daily activities as parents. Participants also described the outcomes their efforts would yield as transcending concerns of self-interest or one’s own life, or that the behaviour they modelled for their children as something to be watchful of lest their children learn bad habits from them.
Each statement pertaining to the theme of parental duty indicates that the parents interviewed in this study viewed raising their children well as a constitutive good. This finding has the potential for great applications to the development of a eudaimonic theory of parenting or integrating later stages of this project with existing research on life orientations in psychology (e.g., Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005). If one’s internal hierarchy of goods is foundational to the type of activities one engages in (Fowers, 2008) and parenting is itself a constitutive good, then it can be reasonably inferred that raising children well begins with ascribing it this kind of primacy in one’s life.

This research’s most significant contribution is its qualitative investigation of practical wisdom in the lives of parents. The present study gained important preliminary insights into the importance of phronetic reasoning for good parental practice. Parents described perceiving essential facets of situations as important: (a) from recognizing aspects of the situation, (b) how the traits of their children interface with situations, as well as (c) recognizing how and when to support one’s spouse in raising children well. Parents described both situations in which they had to respond immediately without deliberation and ones where they took time to consider disciplinary options before administering them. This is consistent with theoretical literature on practical wisdom, as there are times when the right thing to do is so clear that one is able to immediately respond to the situation at hand (e.g., Fowers, 2005; Fowers, Richardson, & Slife, 2017). Regarding the theme of reasoned choice, it was apparent that responding appropriately is contingent upon the previous stages of the practical reasoning process. Both the essential facets identified and the options deliberated upon contributed to the skillful response of the parent, whether their chosen response was disciplinary or non-disciplinary in nature.
The findings of this research indicate Aristotelian (2004) ethics has tremendous practical value for parents and theoretical value for psychology. For parents, this research showed how important character, viewing parenting as a constitutive good, and a discerning mind (i.e., practical wisdom) are for raising children well. Discussing parenting in value-laden terms makes existing research on parenting more accessible to parents while simultaneously resonating with their experiences when dealing with misbehaviour and teaching moral lessons. For psychologists, parenting research has long had an implicit, undefined ethic at its core. This study boldly discussed and examined parenting from a neo-Aristotelian perspective, arguing that virtue ethics is a viable moral framework to ground how good parenting is conceptualized in psychological theory. The significance of this cannot be understated and give cause to be optimistic about future research examining applications of eudaimonic theory in family life.
References


Appendix A

Child Characteristics

Participant 1:

- **Eldest**: strong and stable personality, very supportive of others, enjoyed math
- **Second Child**: very artistic, very different from eldest child in terms of their scholastic interests
- **Third Child**: reserved, has a quiet strength that not everyone sees, very sensitive to justice/injustice (sometimes at the expense of love or compassion)
- **Fourth Child**: very artistic, talented musically, fearless when it comes to performing in front of a crowd of people, confident, very focused and driven towards her goals

Participant 2:

- **Eldest**: tender and loving, introverted and quiet, very stable personality, gifted in mathematics, picks up well on emotions of others, loved animals.
- **Second Child**: very joyful child, also introverted (perhaps more so than his older brother), very friendly with others, sensitive to others feelings, loyal to relationships with others, creative, a good sense of humor
- **Third Child**: very similar to the eldest child in the way that he thinks, strong sensitivity to justice/injustice, very independent and responsible, emotionally sensitive, very loving towards others, loves animals
- **Fourth Child**: extroverted, fun-loving and lives in the moment, encouraging of others, authentically expresses herself, open with her emotions, creatively oriented, like to push the boundaries of any limitations

Participant 3:
- **Eldest:** Potentially had ADHD, struggled in school, more easily provoked into anger
- **Second Child:** Intelligent, slightly impulsive, didn’t feel challenged by school, very responsible and organized
- **Third Child:** Struggled to make friends, also good in school, very interested in fashion and art, slightly impulsive, shifts between positive and negative mood easily.
- **Fourth Child (Step-son):** Diagnosed with ADHD, often messy and forgetful, beginning to understand the value of being on his medications, athletic
- **Fifth Child:** organized, likes to have his environment clean, strong moral sensibilities of right and wrong, very empathetic and compassionate

**Participant 4:**
- **Eldest:** Very intelligent, independent but still open to parental advice and guidance, kind and compassionate
- **Second Child:** sensitive, kind and gentle towards others
- **Third Child:** Independent and not as reliant on parental guidance as the eldest child, strong-minded and strong-willed, but also kind and gentle, sometimes her compassion and gentleness towards others leads to others taking advantage of her
- **Fourth Child:** Physically ill child (which created a very intimate relationship between them), a warm uplifting personality

**Note:** Participants 1 and 2 were spouses. Their descriptions of their child’s defining traits and characteristics were listed separately because their respective descriptions add further clarity about the kinds of people their children are.
Appendix B

Research Ethics Board Certificate of Approval

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR</th>
<th>DEPARTMENT</th>
<th>REB#</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joshua Tippe</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>2017-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SUPERVISOR: Dr. Mary Hampton

TITLE: Parenting and Practical Wisdom: Moral Decision-Making in Disciplinary Practice

APPROVED ON: January 30, 2018

RENEWAL DATE: January 30, 2019

APPROVAL OF:
Application for Behavioural Research Ethics Review, Recruitment Email, Consent Form, Facebook Advertisement, Sample Interview Questions, Recruitment Poster, Parenting Styles one Dimensions Questionnaire (PSDQ)

Full Board Meeting

Delegated Review

The University of Regina Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above-named research project. The proposal was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds. The principal investigator has the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to this research project, and for ensuring that the authorized research is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the original protocol submitted for ethics review. This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above time period provided there is no change in experimental protocol, consent process or documents.

Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures should be reported to the Chair for Research Ethics Board consideration in advance of its implementation.

ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS
In order to receive annual renewal, a status report must be submitted to the REB Chair for Board consideration within one month of the current expiry date each year the study remains open, and upon study completion. Please refer to the following website for further instructions:
Appendix C

Facebook Advertisement

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED!!!!

Hello Facebook friends!

For those of you who do not know, this year I am currently working on my Honours Thesis for my undergraduate degree in psychology. My thesis is examining the moral dimensions of the parental decision-making process when dealing with child misbehaviour.

After spending the Fall semester planning, this Winter semester will consist of conducting my research, which means I need participants!!

Participants MUST be individuals who meet the following criteria:

- Have two or more children
- Have a minimum four-year age gap between their eldest and youngest child

The procedure of this project is fairly straightforward. It will consist of a brief 30-45-minute interview, and participation will earn you the chance to win a $50 gift card to The Keg Steakhouse and Bar.

If you are interested in participating, know anyone who might be interested in participating, or have any further questions about this project, please feel free to contact me at the email address below.

Email: parentingproject18@gmail.com

If you would like to help me out with this project but are unable to actively participate, please feel free to share this post with your friends!!
Appendix D
Form of Consent and Confidentiality

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY: The purpose of this study to further understand the decision-making process of parents when dealing with child misbehaviour, factors that influence parental decisions, as well as how parents approach teaching moral lessons to their children.

ROLE OF THE PARTICIPANTS: Participation involves a 30 to 45-minute interview conducted by Josh Tippe, a Bachelor of Arts Honours student from the University of Regina. Interviews will be digitally recorded pending informed consent and transcribed for analysis. Once this project is concluded, you will be given the option of reading the Final Honours Thesis.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS: If you are NOT a student at the University of Regina, you will be entered into a draw for a $50 gift card to the Keg. If you ARE a current student at the University of Regina, you will receive a one-percent credit to direct to a course of your choosing and ineligible for the $50 gift card to The Keg Restaurant and Bar.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORT: Participating in this study won’t expose you to greater risk than you would experience in the context of your day-to-day work. Should you feel emotional discomfort, the researcher will provide contact information to the following professional counselling services: U of R counselling services (for any participating University of Regina Students), Mental Health Regina, Family Services (free), Catholic Family Services, and Prairie Psychology. Upon request, participants may be given a list of general interview questions ahead of time so they will be prepared for the questions we will be asking.

CONFIDENTIALITY OF THE DATA: All information during the interviews will be kept confidential and your name will not be used in future publications unless permission has been given to do so. The audio recordings will be transferred to a USB and the USB will be securely locked in an office at the University of Regina. The recorded interview and transcripts will be securely locked in a cabinet. The audio recordings will be destroyed at the conclusion of the honours project (April 13, 2018). The information you give will be kept locked at the University of Regina and the interviews will be stored separately from this consent form. In addition, the project personnel (Dr. Mary Hampton, Melissa Wuerch, and Josh Tippe) are the only people who will have access to the original interview data.
Please note that if you disclose that a child is currently being abused or is at risk for being abused, we are required by law to report this to legal authorities.

WITHDRAWAL FROM THE STUDY: Your decision to participate in this research is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw your consent at any time. If you have any reservations at all about participating in this research process, please feel free to withdraw from the study. Furthermore, you are free to refrain from answering any questions.

OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS: If you have any questions regarding this research, the procedures and/or goals of this study, please feel free to ask before or during the interview. If you have any concerns or inquiries after the interview, please contact any of the research team members.

This project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Regina Research Ethics Board on February 2nd, 2018. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the committee at 306-585-4775 or research.ethics@uregina.ca.

RESEARCHERS:
Dr. Mary Hampton, Professor at the University of Regina and Luther College
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Email: Mary.Hampton@uregina.ca
Melissa Wuerch, Doctoral Graduate Student at the University of Regina
Ph: (519) 982-5877
Email: mwuerch11@gmail.com
Josh Tippe, Bachelor of Arts Honours Student at the University of Regina
Ph: (306) 529-3443
Email: parentingproject18@gmail.com

If you agree to participate in this interview, please place your name and signature in the appropriate spaces below.

I ____________________________ (print name) understand what the interview is about and that the signature below means that I agree to participate.

______________________________  _______________________
(Signature)       (Date)

______________________________  _______________________
(Signature of interviewer)     (Date)

I have received a copy of this consent form:

___ yes ___ no
I agree to release of transcripts:

___yes ___ no
Appendix E

Questions examined the facets of practical/phronetic reasoning in the participants responses (Moral Perception/Discernment, Deliberation, Reasoned Choice).

Questions Examined:

- Recognition of relevant moral implications (Why is this behaviour wrong?)
- Ability to come up with potential solutions to the moral problem
- How they addressed the situation
- What efforts were made to teach relevant moral lessons and why

Questions

- **Question Group #1: Background Information**
  - Disclosure of information between interviewer and interviewee
    - Participants will be specifically asked to provide some introductory information about their families (themselves and their children in particular).
    - Background
      - **Examples:**
        - Where did you grow up?
        - Where do you work?
      - Defining traits and characteristics of their children
      - Other supplementary information (child’s hobbies, behavioural tendencies, etc.)

- **Question Group #2: Examining Phronetic Reasoning**
Is there a time (or times) when either one of your children misbehaved that stands out as memorable to you?

- **Moral Perception**: Describe the situation.
  - What did your child do?
  - Where did this take place?
  - Why was it wrong or, (if applicable) why did you think your child did not do anything wrong?

- **Deliberation**: Describe their Response
  - How did you handle the situation?
  - Why did you choose this course of action?
  - Did you decide to implement discipline with your child? Why or why not?

- **Reasoned Choice**: Did you have any follow-up conversations with your child relating to this situation?
  - What were you were hoping to teach your child from this situation?
  - Do you think your child learned something valuable from this experience?

**Note**: Interviews were open-ended, and the above structure was loosely followed during each session. Responses varied from being general to specific but remained relevant to the present study.