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# **Youths' Perspectives on 'Getting on Track – Family Group Conference (FGC)' (*Olim LaDerech – KEDEM Program*)**

Master's Thesis

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## Abstract

The 'Getting on Track – Family Group Conference (FGC)<sup>12</sup>' project is a pilot program in Israel aimed at helping families with at-risk youth where concerns have been raised. The program was begun in 2018 and has run pilots in five welfare departments in the center and south of Israel. It is based on the underlying principles of FGCs for child welfare: the autonomy of each family member, the empowerment of families and children to make decisions about their own lives, the responsibility of the extended family and community to be active in children's wellbeing, and positive and affirmative language. The program is used as a decision-making model and as an alternative to the committee for the evaluation, treatment, and planning of at-risk youth<sup>3</sup>.

The model consists of three main stages: The first is the pre-conference stage, in which the family meets with the social worker and the conference coordinator and works to enlist the people close to them and whom they trust as family supporters. The second stage is the Family Group Conference in which the family, professionals, and the family supporters gather to address the various concerns and strengths in regard to the family. The family and family supporters then build the family plan, which includes a detailed action plan to alleviate the concerns and promote the protective factors in the youths' lives. The third stage is implementation of the family plan, in which the family and family supporters are responsible for implementation with the help of the social workers and the allotted budget.

The purpose of this study is to examine the unique perspectives and experiences of the children and adolescents who participated in the program, specifically regarding the conference and implementation stages of the model. The research questions are: 1) How do the youths<sup>4</sup> who participated in the program view the concerns and protective factors in their lives? 2) What are the experiences of the youth who participated in the program throughout the conference and implementation stages? 3) In this study, how did the youths experience the program in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?

This research is conducted by NEVET Greenhouse of Context-Informed Research and Training at the Paul Baerwald School of Social Work and Social Welfare at the Hebrew

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<sup>1</sup> Getting on Track – FGC is translated from Hebrew עולים לדרך – קדי"ם

<sup>2</sup> In this thesis, the acronym FGC will be used to refer to the program and refers to all three stages of the program: pre-conference, conference, and implementation

<sup>3</sup> In Hebrew: ועדות תכנון, טיפול והערכה

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this thesis, the term youth will be used interchangeably with children and adolescents

University of Jerusalem. It is part of a broader mixed-method study which aims to study the model's effectiveness among at-risk youth and their families and shape the program as it is implemented in more welfare departments around Israel.

This study was conducted using qualitative methods and is based on 18 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with youths between the ages of 10 and 18. The interviews were then analyzed and coded using thematic analysis. The findings in relation to the research questions were as follows:

Family and familial bonds were a main theme for almost all the participants both in relation to concerns and protective factors. They shared their concerns regarding problematic family dynamics and issues of miscommunication, the fear of being removed from their homes, and problematic personal behavior. They also addressed concerns over the program coming to an end and age-appropriate concerns. The protective factors they emphasized were family, the importance of emotional protection from the important people in their lives, themselves as protectors, and in one case, social services.

As for the youths' experiences regarding their participation in the conference stage of the program, they emphasized the importance of understanding the process so as not to feel left out of important decisions or regarded as passive participants. They highlighted the importance of hearing their positive attributes in the strengths circle and how that praise allowed them to be more open minded during their concerns circle. They also stressed the importance of family dynamics, as the most difficult parts of the conference, as described by the participants, were the fights and miscommunications between family members.

In regard to their experiences surrounding their participation in the implementation stage of the program, a third of the participants shared the positive changes they felt in their homes since participating in the program and the strengthening of protective factors in their lives. However, some of the youths also addressed the feeling that their voices were left unheard in the implementation stage, and that they had to fight for what they asked for or that it wasn't implemented into the family plan at all.

Finally, the effects of the context of COVID-19 on the program were mostly in relation to the implementation stage of the program. Some of the youths addressed the negative effects of COVID-19, such as the accentuation of problematic family dynamics during lockdowns and the inability to follow through with programming that was decided upon within the family plan.

### III

Nevertheless, some of the youths shared that time spent in lockdown with their families was an unexpected gift that led to strong family bonds.

The discussion section addresses the youths' definitions of concerns and protective factors and how they differ and/or align with standard and universal definitions. Additionally, it raises the question as to whether or not youths should always have the right to participate, even when it can possibly lead to more harm than good and when the field can't be receptive to their participation. Lastly, it addresses levels of youth participation in relation to the findings of the study.

The study concludes by addressing its limitations and its contributions to the theoretical knowledge on the subject in the field of child participation and FGCs and at-risk youth in Israel. It further addresses its implications for policy and practice when implementing the program, including the importance of involving children in the preconference stage, strengthening family bonds, and creating support systems, as well as recommendations for future research.

## **Introduction**

This study is part of a large-scale, mixed-methods study that aims to examine the perceptions and experiences of the participants of ‘Getting on Track - FGC’s pilot program in order to understand whether the program is effective in reducing risk among youth and providing appropriate programming for them. The program is based on the Family Group Conferencing (FGC) model for child welfare and is used as an alternative decision-making model in situations where concerns have been raised about children and their families. In 2018, the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Social Services joined together with JDC Israel Ashalim and the Mosaica Center for Conflict Resolution to bring the model to Israel under the name ‘Getting on Track - FGC’ as an alternative to the committee for the evaluation, treatment, and planning of at-risk youth. It has since run pilots in five welfare departments in the center and south of Israel. The model is based on the belief that children and their families have the right, responsibility, and ability to make decisions about their lives. This model allows and encourages families to take active responsibility in their own lives by building their family plan with the help of supporters and community members.

This research is conducted by NEVET Greenhouse of Context-Informed Research and Training at the Paul Baerwald School of Social Work and Social Welfare at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This study was conducted using qualitative methods and focused on the perspectives and unique voices of the youths who took part in the study with an emphasis on their experiences in the conference and implementation stages.

This study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was accompanied by lockdowns and various other challenges, and affected the youths, their families, their daily routines, and social services and the programming they provide, and such is considered an important context in this study.

This study begins with a literature review addressing key concepts and theories that form the basis of the program alongside the practices of the model. The methodology will then be presented, including the study’s population, data collection tools, data analyzation, and the ethical dilemmas that arose throughout the study. This research will then address the findings by grouping them into four key themes: 1) the youths’ perspectives on the concerns and protective factors in their lives; 2) the youths’ experiences in the conference stage of the program; 3) the



youths' experiences in the implementation stage; and 4) the effects of COVID-19 on the program.

The key aspects of these findings will be examined in the discussion section of this study, focusing on the youths' perceptions of concerns and protective factors versus standard definitions; the question of a child's right to be involved in the issues that concern them; and the youths' levels of participation in the program. Lastly, the limitations and challenges of this study will be addressed, as well as the study's contributions, implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

This study contributes to the existing theoretical knowledge on the treatment of youth about whom concerns have been raised, as well as the practice for professionals in the field of at-risk youth. Additionally, this study has the ability to influence the future application and implementation of the model in Israel as it expands to other cities and jurisdictions.

## **Literature Review**

This literature review will address the various theories and concepts behind FGC in general, and specifically ‘Getting on Track’, Israel’s FGC model. As the focus of this thesis is the children’s experiences, the literature review will focus primarily on child’s rights, participation, and the theories that involve them. The literature review will open with the theories on which the values of FGC are based: the new sociology of childhood and the context informed perspective. It will then address the current state of children’s partnership and participation in research and the status of at-risk youth in Israel. Lastly, the framework upon which this study is built, FGCs in general and ‘Getting on Track’ in particular, will be explored with an emphasis on the children’s experiences.

### **The New Sociology of Childhood**

FGCs in general and ‘Getting on Track’ in particular view all family members as important participants in the process and program. Therefore, children’s rights are focused on and great effort is made to uphold them. Children’s rights are a relatively new concept. A significant change occurred in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when childhood came to be viewed as a vulnerable period in life, with children being seen as passive, weak and vulnerable. They were viewed as “human-becomings” as opposed to human beings, with full access to rights and freedom (Verhellen, 2015). This status was ultimately challenged, resulting in The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the most widely ratified human rights treaty. It embodies and outlines children’s rights, including rights to life, development, freedom from violence, the right to express their views on matters concerning them (including in legal proceedings), and the right to a sufficient standard of living. The four guiding principles are that the CRC is non-discriminatory and based on equality, it has in mind the best interests of the child, all children have the right to survival and development, and have the right to participation and inclusion in matters that affect them (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). In the most recent convention, the CRC continued to promote their commitment to enhancing child welfare, and introduced the EU Child Guarantee in July 2021 in which children’s rights are promoted and their access to resources and rights are protected (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2021).

As mentioned above, the CRC came on the heels of the movement in which children’s place in society and status as human beings was reconsidered, and it has become a standard-

setting tool. The New Sociology of Childhood suggests an additional theory, that children should be seen as “being” rather than “becoming”. Children should not be seen solely as future citizens, but as competent human beings with their own rights in the here and now (Prout, 2011).

Therefore, they are not passive recipients but capable members of society with the ability to influence and affect their surroundings.

While in the “old” sociology of childhood children were not taken seriously and were effectively silenced allowing adults to speak for them, the New Sociology of Childhood advocates for direct interaction with children. This approach emphasizes children’s agency and their role as social actors, viewing them as capable beings with important voices (Matthews, 2007).

### **Context-Informed Perspective**

The context-informed perspective aims to take a broad look at the various contexts that affect and shape a person (Roer-Strier, 2016). These can include culture, race, class, gender, nationality, religion and more. People are not isolated and are therefore constantly influenced by various contexts that are always evolving and are often dependent on time and place. These various contexts help influence a person and can have an impact in framing numerous life circumstances. This approach acknowledges the complexity, hybridity and dynamics of power and change that influence people and families as well as the various systems that influence their lives. In adapting this viewpoint, various cultures are no longer perceived as static and uniform (Roer-Strier & Nadan, 2020).

Additionally, the way the various contexts intertwine can greatly influence and shape a person’s life experiences. Intersectionality is a theoretical framework for understanding how these various contexts (e.g., class, gender, race) impact the individual as well as the various systems of bias on the macro level (e.g., classism, racism, sexism). Therefore, this framework suggests that it is not enough to focus on each context separately, as they are often experienced together (Nadan, Spilsbury & Korbin, 2015).

Social work in a context-informed perspective therefore demands a subjective approach, as opposed to a universal one, in which the individual and family are seen as experts in their own lives. The clinician is there to learn from them through positive and encouraging interactions, while steering clear of pathological discourse and remaining empathetic and open minded about

creating change (Roer-Strier, 2016). This encourages professionals to view the individual and family from a strengths-based perspective.

According to the context-informed perspective, it is important to unpack how context and intersectionality play a role in risk assessment for children (Roer-Strier & Nadan, 2020b). As mentioned above, social workers often use Western and universal parameters when assessing risk, which do not account for cultural nuances. This can often result in a situation being perceived as dangerous for children by professionals, while among certain cultures they are simply a normative component of child rearing practices. Therefore, the context-informed approach strives to address the different perceptions of various population groups and cultures when it comes to raising children and assessing risk (Nadan & Roer-Strier, 2020b). In studies conducted in Israel, it was found that various contexts such as religion and spirituality, racism and exclusion, and political conflict and violence are all important contexts when addressing risk and protection among Israeli children (Nadan & Roer-Strier, 2020a). For example, among the Ultra-Orthodox, early independence is seen as admirable and desirable, and children are often sent to roam the neighborhood or run errands at a young age, while among professionals, the lack of parental supervision in these communities is viewed as a source of concern (Keesing et al., 2020). An additional example is among the Russian immigrant community, in which physical punishment is seen as an educational tool as opposed to a risk factor, a view which is opposed by most social workers unfamiliar with the culture (Ulitsa et al., 2020).

Additionally, in their article on context-informed perspectives of child risk and protection, Nadan and Roer-Strier (2020a) suggest that not only are risk and protection influenced by context, but that definitions of risk and protection are neither universal nor binary. This can place social workers in a challenging position. On the one hand, they must assess risk according to the culture, as well as various other contexts such as race, gender, etc., of their clients as opposed to the universal tools they are accustomed to using. On the other, they need to exercise their professional judgement and not dismiss risk due simply to cultural misunderstandings (Nadan & Korbin, 2015). A context-informed approach for understanding child risk will therefore aim to identify relevant contexts in the construction of risk for children by seeking to understand the perspectives of parents, children, and child protection professionals (Roer-Strier & Nadan, 2020). Understanding the influence of context can help to form a more positive collaborative relationship.

## **To Participate, Participation, and Partnership with Children**

There are many ways to understand collaborative relationships. One is that collaborative relationships can refer to either the invitation to participate, participation, or partnership (Shemer, 2019).

*To participate* is when those on the higher end of the hierarchical ladder invite those on the lower end to take part in the processes that involve them. Service recipients are invited by those in higher hierarchical positions (e.g., professionals, spiritual leaders, community leaders, etc.) to take part in processes that involve them. They are asked to be a part of the entire process; however, the process is led by those higher up in the hierarchy (Churchman et al., 2017).

*Participation*, the other end of the spectrum, is when people in lower hierarchical positions (e.g., service recipients, people living in poverty, children, etc.) initiate a relationship with those in higher hierarchical positions in order to influence and create change in their own lives (Churchman & Sadan, 2003; Shemer, 2019).

*Partnership* refers to relationships featuring strong and greater collaboration, reciprocation, and equality. This happens when professionals and service recipients work closely together to develop appropriate practices and solutions. While the impetus to create a partnership generally begins on one side (led either by the lower or higher hierarchical positions), partnerships grow into something more dynamic, mutually reinforcing a circular relationship (Shemer & Schmid, 2007). While partnerships do not ignore the hierarchies and often incorporate elements of both the invitation to participate and participation, nonetheless, both partners are seen as equal contributors to the collaboration process (Timor-Shelvin & Krumer-Nevo, 2016).

Thought has been given as to how to promote participation and partnership with children. Hart (1992) was one of the first to create a model for children's participation, "The Ladder of Children's Participation", with the aim of promoting children's participation in adult-led projects, programs, and activities. He distinguished eight possible types of child participation in practice and grouped them into three degrees. The lowest degree is nonparticipation, which includes *manipulation*, in which adults use young people to support causes that they pretend are inspired by young people, *decoration* in which children take part in helping a cause but in fact they have no understanding of the issues, and *tokenism* in which children are asked to share how they feel about certain issues but in actuality have little to no choice as to how or if they

participate. The intermediate stage of participation includes *assigned but informed*, in which adults decide upon the ideas but the children volunteer for a specific role and understand their involvement, *consulted and informed*, in which the children are consulted in a project that is designed and run by adults but the children's opinions are taken seriously, and *adult-initiated (shared decisions with young people)* which occurs when adults have the initial idea but the decision-making is shared with the children. The highest degree of participation includes *child initiated and directed*, in which the initial idea is brought forwards by the children and adults are involved but do not take charge, and *child initiated (shared decisions with adults)*, in which the children have the ideas and create the projects, but the decision-making is shared with the adults. His model was meant to be used as a framework for professionals to rethink and promote the way they work with young people by promoting children's participation in the processes that affect them.

Shier (2001) further expanded on Hart's model, suggesting that when used together with Hart's model, it promotes children's "Pathways to Participation" and is a practical tool for planning and assessment of child participation in research. He uses a "pathway" to help adults recognize various strategies to promote a developmental progression of child participation by asking whether children are included and seen as active participants throughout stages and levels of programming with children. He proposed five stages of child participation: 1) children are listened to; 2) children are supported in expressing their views; 3) children's views are taken into account; 4) children are involved in the decision-making process; and 5) children share responsibility and power for decision-making. Various frameworks have been developed on the heels of these models, ranging in levels of child participation, with the goal of listening to children and taking their views seriously.

While much attention has been given over the last few years to partnership and practices, the gap between the theory and practice is noticeable. It is especially wide in the field of child protection and wellbeing as often the interventions by professionals within the family unit are seen as overbearing and even as a deprivation of parent's rights over their children (Shemer, 2019). This raises the question as to how service recipients are involved in the collaboration process. Partnership can refer to an ongoing collaborative effort throughout the entire process, as well as for just a few select parts of the process, and raises the question as to whether both parents and children are partners when it comes to collaborating in matters regarding risk for

children (Timor-Shelvin & Krumer-Nevo, 2016). When promoting partnership within the framework of child wellbeing, the challenge becomes moving from a more methodical and systematic approach to partnership, in which social workers promote the family to participate in goals set by professionals, over to a more democratic approach, in which parents, children, and social workers equally share the responsibility of collaboration and goal setting (Roose et al., 2013).

In Israel specifically, there are challenges in implementing child participation in areas of child wellbeing. The Social Services Department's unreasonable caseload leaves social workers unequipped to give preference to hearing their unique experience. Additionally, the lack of established protocol, time, and communication skills among professionals working with children and families has been proven to be an additional obstacle (Mazursky & Ben-Arieh, 2020). Moreover, in a study conducted by Kosher and Ben-Arieh (2020), they found that social workers in Israel tend to prioritize protection over participation when a child's wellbeing and safety is at stake. They also found that social workers find it difficult to relinquish their authority to decide what is best for the child and are therefore more likely to promote children's participation in areas unrelated to their own work. Therefore, it is prudent to find ways to include children's voices in practice and in research, despite the challenges.

### **Children's Participation in Research**

Children's voices have been excluded from past research in studies about them; their abilities are often underestimated because they are not expressed in ways that are familiar to adults (Lansdown, 2009). With children's perspectives and active participation being encouraged, the benefit of hearing children's voices through research has begun to gain recognition as a viable approach to not only preventative studies, but developmental research as well (Wong, Zimmerman, & Parker, 2010). With this shift comes new obstacles; involving children in research and promoting their participation comes with its own set of challenges and a need for models that are suited to their ages and capabilities.

More recently, additional methodologies have been developed to truly listen to children's unique contributions and include them in research. Questionnaires are often used, specifically with older children and young adults, as a tool to understand their unique viewpoints. This method can be problematic with young children, as they often don't communicate in the same "language" as adults. Observation is a tool used by qualitative researchers, as it gives importance

to the context in which events and actions occur. Structured play with props can also help researchers understand the unique opinions of the children they are researching. Interviews are among the most widely used method of gathering information from children, however it is important to adapt them accordingly. When working with children, researchers will often choose to research children in focus groups, as they are often less intimidating for children and can diffuse the power dynamics. An additional popular technique used with children is a multi-sensory approach; researchers can use photographs, visual and audio equipment, art-based projects such as drawings, and other multi-sensory activities to gain insight into children's worlds (Clark, 2005).

Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al. (2019) studied qualitative research methods with young children and found that open-ended questions produced the richest responses, and encouragements by the researcher (e.g., approval, compliments, agreeing, nodding) resulted in the least number of silences. They also suggested starting the interview by telling the child that there are no right or wrong answers, and to repeat this position throughout the interview to encourage child participation. Additionally, they found that the use of "why" questions combined with encouragement inspired the children to give the broadest explanations.

While many methodologies have been developed and adapted in order to promote children's participation in research, it is important to address the challenges that arise in research with children. Children are considered a unique and vulnerable population. Unlike adults, children are unable to make decisions regarding participation with the same legal and intellectual capacity as adults, and therefore the legal authority concerning their participation lies in the hands of their parents or guardians (McGregor et al., 2016).

Generally, children are asked to give assent, in which the child decides whether or not they are interested in participating, while the parent/guardian provides consent regarding their child's participation. When keeping in mind the child's right to be involved in research that affects them, this can prove to be an obstacle to research (McGregor et al., 2016). As mentioned above, children often don't "fit" into the adult world of research and understanding the various nuances and staying transparent can prove difficult for the researcher. Adults can often have trouble communicating and relating to the children participating in their research.

Additionally, Hart's ladder was a significant resource in promoting children's participation, however it is often used a practical tool instead of a theoretical framework for



research with children (Malone & Hartung, 2010). Moreover, it is crucial for social workers to be aware of power-dynamics and how they can negatively affect the child's assent, the parent's consent, and the answers provided by the child participating in research (McGregor et al., 2016).

Alongside the obstacles, there are many benefits to children participating in research about themselves (Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al., 2019). When children are included in research, they uphold their rights as service users and citizens, which ultimately impacts the quality of services they receive. Additionally, their participation often improves the accuracy and relevance in decisions made about them, especially when decisions are made with them. They often feel more committed to the plans developed as a result of their participation, feel valued when their voices are heard, and feel a stronger sense of overall wellbeing (Woodman et al., 2018).

### **At Risk Youth in Israel**

There are many definitions of risk for youth. In Israel, The Schmid Committee (2006) was established in order to better understand the status and proper treatment of at-risk youth, and defined children at risk as “children and adolescents who live in situations that endanger them in their family and environment, and as a result of their inability to realize their rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child in the following areas: physical existence, health and development; family affiliation; learning and life and acquiring skills; welfare and emotional health; belonging and social participation and protection against others and their own dangerous behaviors” (Schmid, 2006, p. 67). This definition is based on the outcomes of the CRC and is widely accepted in the literature and among policymakers. The committee also found that most of the services provided for children at risk were universal and not tailored to diverse population groups. This is problematic, as the Israeli population is extremely diverse.

The Social Services Department is the biggest provider of child protection services in Israel. In 2020, the Israel National Council for the Child reported that there was a 10% increase in the number of children who were regarded as at risk in Israel (14%), with 43 social service departments reporting a 25% increase in their jurisdictions (Israel National Council for the Child, 2020).

Regarding children at risk there are many jobs a social worker must uphold when there is a concern that a child is at risk: working with families to enhance their wellbeing and carrying out child protection responsibilities, including the treatment of child maltreatment, neglect, and abuse (Bar-On, 2012). Part of their job is initiating and participating in the committees for the

evaluation, treatment, and planning of at-risk youth (טיפול והערכה), in which the aim is to assess the parents' ability to raise their child in a safe and healthy environment (Alfandari, 2016). While social services often provide critical help and service providers foster positive relationships with their social workers, people can be mistrustful of social services and often perceive their interventions as harmful and destructive (Gladstone et al., 2012). In addition to social services, Israel is the home to many NGOs who also provide services for at work youth.

In Israel, many people are wary and suspicious of the consequences of their relationships with social services, such as the possibility of children being removed from their home or feeling like they are not active in the decision-making processes in their own lives (Alfarandi, 2016). Therefore, this study will examine the FGC model as an alternative method for addressing families about whom concerns have been expressed.

### **The COVID-19 Pandemic and its Effect on Families and At-Risk Youth**

In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 (the coronavirus) to be a worldwide pandemic and is still considered as such to date (World Health Organization, 2020). The pandemic is not only considered a global public health crisis, but the beginning of a major mental health crisis (United Nations, 2020). The pandemic has caused both negative and positive repercussions, with its full ramifications still unknown, as the pandemic is still active. The various implications that have stemmed from the pandemic are large and outlined in this review are the ones related to this study.

In addition to the health threat the disease poses, the psycho-social threat that has stemmed from the pandemic has been great. The pandemic has caused job loss, leading to high unemployment rates, and has created a sense of financial instability, with an additional strain on families who already come from a low socio-economic status (Brock & Laifer, 2020).

In addition to the acute stress associated with poverty and job status, the pandemic has contributed to chronic stress, which in turn often spills over into the family system and parenting behaviors (Giannotti et al., 2021). Different studies have shown that the pandemic has negatively affected the psychological wellbeing of youth, with the most common presentation of symptoms being anxiety, depression, and sleep and appetite disturbances (Imran et al., 2020). Among adolescents specifically, being confined to their homes led to anxiety, loneliness, sadness, sleep problems, physical pain, and behavioral issues inside the home, such as starting arguments with other family members (Orgilés et al., 2020). Additionally, for some youth, home is at times

isolating and dangerous, and the pandemic has caused a lack of resources available to at-risk youth who are especially vulnerable during lockdowns and isolation (Wong et al., 2020). In order to combat the virus, many countries declared lockdowns and practiced social distancing; in the most extreme stages of the lockdown, families were often quarantined together with educational institutions and workplaces shut down. Studies have found that for some families, being forced to stay indoors with limited opportunity for external socialization was a cause for stress and interpersonal conflicts within the family (Calvano et al., 2021; Imran et al., 2020). However, research showed that for some, spending time together and doing activities as a family helped families reconnect and decreased stress levels throughout the pandemic (Giannotti et al., 2021).

The pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns have caused more referrals to social services, especially among vulnerable populations such as youth, and has led to the need for developing more flexible practices in order to continue outreach with youth. This included facilitating more outreach practices remotely and empowering communities to step in where the pandemic has made it difficult for organizations (Wilke et al., 2020). The practice of FGC had to adapt throughout the pandemic, the support people often received had to change, for example, no home visits were permitted during lockdowns. FGC programs were committed to keeping families' and children's rights at the center of practice and decision-making. Therefore, by adapting to a more hybrid method, and utilizing video conferencing, the program was still able to move forward in many countries (Mitchell & Ali, 2020).

### **‘Getting on Track - Family Group Conferencing’ Program (עוֹלָיִם לְדֶרֶךְ – קִדּוּם)**

The Family Group Conferencing Model (FGC) for child welfare is a model created to help families deal with various concerns that may arise regarding children's wellbeing and situations regarding risk for children in a manner consistent with their culture and lifestyle. FGC was created in the 1980's in New Zealand to address the widespread concern regarding the Maori children in response to the criticism the Maori raised, claiming that the methodologies used to address family and child concerns were based on white norms and were not culturally sensitive (Sundell et al., 2001). As a result, the government passed a legislative bill “Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act”, introducing the FGC as a decision-making tool regarding children. On the heels of FGC's success, tens of countries have adapted this model

(Connolly, 2006). In recent years the model has expanded beyond child-centered discourse and now includes mental health, divorce, and juvenile justice proceedings (Meijer et al., 2019).

In the introduction to the book "The Quiet Revolution", by Clarijs and Malmberg (2012) set the stage for the importance of FGC by suggesting that the concept of a welfare state needs to be replaced by a "participation state" in which people address and resolve the issues in their own lives. They discuss the fundamental transition from "state power" to "people power", and the importance of returning responsibility to citizens and allowing them to take responsibility and ownership over their problems and practical solutions. It is clear that with this shift comes a need for a different approach, a "quiet revolution". An important model of people power they share in their book is that of FGC, which they use as an example of what people power has the ability to achieve.

While FGC's may differ between countries and jurisdictions, the underlying principles remain the same. The model focuses on "widening the circle" to those who care about the children and are committed to protecting them and their family members. Additionally, the focus is kept on the child as opposed to on the adults, and the concerns are highlighted, not the person. This means that while an FGC might deal with the aftermath of harmful behavior or a person's choices, the focus remains on the concerns themselves. Everyone involved is responsible for creating the solution-based plan to address the concerns, and in this the child and family are given autonomy and the focus of the FGC is on the family's strengths and capabilities. Thus, the family is empowered to create change for themselves. All of these principles are carried out in a culturally sensitive way (Adams & Chandler, 2002). In essence, FGCs offer the opportunity for families to join together with their support systems (whether that be extended family or the community) to develop and implement solutions that address their unique strengths and challenges.

### ***The Roles in FGC***

*Coordinator* - One it has become clear that the need for a FGC is present, a coordinator is appointed to oversee and facilitate. The coordinator is an unaffiliated and neutral person who is neither a family member nor a social service employee; they receive special training in order to fulfill their role. The coordinator does not know the family, or their history beforehand, and can therefore remain neutral and focus on the tasks related to the FGC as opposed to the family's psycho-social situation (Natland & Malmberg-Heimonen, 2014). Ideally, the coordinator should

share the race and culture of the family. The coordinator reaches out to the family and helps its members identify community support people they would like to invite to participate in the conference (Sundell et al., 2001). Throughout the entire process, the coordinator meets with the participants several times, encourages their participation, and ensures that their voices are heard. They are also responsible for the practicalities of each meeting, such as time and place, food, and making sure the right people are invited (Natland & Malmberg-Heimonen, 2014).

*Supporters* - As mentioned above, the importance of supporters in FGCs is critical. They can be grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, neighbors, spiritual leaders, teachers and more. They participate in the conference and provide emotional support as well as concrete solutions. The support the family receives allows them to feel legitimized and empathized with, as well as receive support from people they trust (Olson, 2009).

*Social Worker* - The role of the social worker in FGC is important and varied. The social worker refers the family to FGC, highlights both the families' strengths and the concerns they have about the family, works closely with the coordinator throughout the process, approves the family's plan, and makes sure the plan is carried out to the best of its ability (Edwards, 2018). Ravelli (2012) highlights the importance of social workers' competence to the FGC process. Firstly, social workers have the ability to adopt a not-knowing attitude, as they understand reality is a construct of peoples' unique situations. They acknowledge that often people's problems are derived from their life situations, and they know how to talk to people without the need to convince them, but with the ability to create dialog. Moreover, they can tolerate and make decisions in situations of uncertainty and can handle the tension of working within both the system and the individual's world. Lastly, they have the unique skill to empower their clients and activate necessary social networks.

*Family Companion (מלווה)* - In Israel, the role of a family companion has been introduced. The nature of this role is still being researched and defined. A companion is appointed to help the family carry out the plan decided upon at the conference and to help mediate between them and other relevant professionals (e.g., by helping the family exercise their rights). Appointing a family companion is up to the family's discretion, with the aim that they will be from the same culture as the family, and thus can help bridge the gap between culture and language, as well as help gain the family's trust (Shemer et al., 2020).

*Advocate* - An additional role when working with children is the role of an advocate. Often children's voices are neglected, therefore initial research on FGCs in the UK suggested that children be provided an advocate in order to ensure the child's voice is heard (Dalrymple, 2002). Typically, the child will be given autonomy regarding the conference; if they wish to attend and in what capacity, and how they wish to express their views (Holland & O'Neill, 2011). Additionally, there has been thought given to whether children should be present throughout the entire conference, and how best to support their presence. The role of an advocate can allow the child's views and wishes to be heard (Kirby & Laws, 2009). Additionally, the advocate can help the other adults in the FGC acknowledge the child's integral role within the family network, and the importance that they be involved in the decision-making process. They can also help balance power-dynamics by helping the child express themselves (Dalrymple, 2002). While the decision to involve the role of the advocate might seem counterintuitive to the values of the FGC, ensuring that a child's voice is heard, as well as shedding light on the possible imbalance of power, is just as crucial in some cases (Holland & O'Neill, 2011). This role does not currently exist in Israel.

### ***The Stages of FGC***

As mentioned above, once the social worker refers the family to FGC, the process begins. FGC takes place in three main stages:

*A. The pre-conference stage:* Once the family has agreed to participate in the FGC, the coordinator meets with the family as well as with the social workers and other working professionals. The family, including the children, choose who will act as their supporters throughout the process, and the supporters are then invited to take part of the program as well. The coordinator explains the model and values of the FGC, gathers an understanding of the family's, social workers' and supporters' concerns regarding the family, and explains the possible solutions that are available to the family. The coordinator also explains the conference process and the role of the supports within it (Karen et al., 2014).

*B. The family conference:* The conference is led by the coordinator, is generally a few hours long, and is conducted in a neutral setting, generally chosen by the family. It shouldn't feel too formal and should feel as comfortable as possible for the family. The conference takes place in three phases:

1) *Information sharing*. The coordinator explains the philosophy of the FGC and ensures the family understands the reason for convening the FGC; finding solutions for various concerns regarding their children. The coordinator then begins the “strengths circle” in which the participants are invited to share the various family members’ strengths, positive characteristics, and positive coping skills. Attention is then given to the reason the family was referred to the program, sharing the various concerns that have arisen about the children in the family. The participants are invited to ask questions and raise their own concerns. The family is then presented with the various skills, programs, and interventions that can help the children and address the concerns that were just discussed. At the end of this phase, everyone but the family and family supporters leave the room (Shemer et al., 2020).

2) *Private Deliberation/Private Family Time*. This phase allows the family to deliberate in private. The family has the opportunity to develop solution-based plans (in Israel termed the “family plan”), who is responsible for each solution and the appropriate timeline (Edwards, 2018).

3) *Agreement/Plan Presented and Agreed*. The coordinator and professionals return to the conference with the goal of reaching an agreement on the plan developed by the family. The coordinator makes sure that everyone involved understands all aspects of the plan and receives the social worker’s agreement. The FGC is summarized, and the transcript is given to all involved (Connolly, 2006). In Israel specifically, there is a budget allotted to the family to help them financially carry out their family plan. The family is responsible for working within the budget to achieve and carry out their family plan, which can include the role of the family companion and various programming for the family in general and the children in particular (Shemer et al., 2020).

*C. Implementation*: Ensuring the family plan is carried out, and assisting the family in carrying it out, is essential to the success of the FGC (Karen et al., 2014). With the help of the social worker and family companion, the family is responsible for following the family plan they created during the conference, and each person who participated in the conference is responsible for carrying out their own unique role. As mentioned above, in Israel the family can choose to be accompanied by a family companion who helps the family reach their goals and can help them navigate and advocate for themselves when necessary. There is a timeframe for carrying out the

family plan, and meetings between the family and social worker are set, often for every other month, in order to check on the program's effectiveness (Shemer et al., 2020).

### *Children and FGC*

FGCs empower family members to be involved in the decisions that shape their own lives. The main purpose of using the method of FGC when it comes to child wellbeing is for the family to take an active part in creating the solution-based plan to help their children (Johansen, 2020). This includes the children in the family, and FGCs strive to promote their participation in a myriad of ways, one example being the use of the role of the advocate, as mentioned above.

Studies that have examined children's participation in FGCs have found that children experience FGCs differently than adults. Most studies show that while they might be physically present, they feel their voices aren't heard and they aren't active partners in the decision-making process (Edwards et al., 2020; Merkel-Holguin et al., 2020).

However, while data collected from various studies shows that children's participation in FGCs is generally higher than in other types of family meetings, there is still uneven identification as to who is present at the meetings and to what extent (Merkel-Holguin et al., 2020). While the few studies conducted on children's participation in FGCs point to the fact that children over the age of ten are often more involved, many studies don't address the role the children play in their FGC, this leaving their level of involvement and understating unclear (Falck, 2006; Skaale Havnen & Christiansen, 2014). One study found that children involved in FGCs are often given more practical roles at their conference (e.g., what food they would like or if they want an advocate) while parents are more involved in the decision-making (Beecher et al., 2000). Additionally, in their study on children's participation in FGCs, Connolly and Mason (2014) found that while often children are asked for their point of view, their wishes are not always taken into account, thus emphasizing the difference not only in being listened to and participating, but in the planning stage and the FGC itself. Additionally, in a study conducted by Kennan et al. (2018) they found that children who participated in meetings regarding them felt bored, embarrassed, anxious, or exposed.

Often children's participation in their FGC is related to their maturity and level of development. While there is a great effort made to promote the role of the child in FGCs, the adults present, such as the parents and professionals, often perceive children as less capable of contributing to the discussion (Merkel-Holguin et al., 2020). Additionally, concerns have been



expressed regarding children participating in FGCs in situations where adults who have harmed or abused them are also present, or when sensitive and difficult issues are being discussed (Connolly & Mason, 2014).

In the latest Annual Meeting of the EU FGC Network (2021), the importance of children having a support person with them throughout the process was emphasized in order to promote their autonomy and participation. However, in the latest research from FGCs in Norway, while the family agency and the importance of the role of each family member was emphasized, it was found that in some cases, youth participation has moved into the extreme. There were cases in which youth had too much autonomy, to the extent that they excluded their parents from the process.

The literature regarding youth's experiences in FGCs is limited, and often specific to country, region, or case study. Therefore, this study will focus on the youths' experiences throughout their participation in the 'Getting on Track – Family Group Conference' program in order to bring forward the unique voices of the Israeli youth participants and understand their perceptions regarding their participation in the various stages of FGC, particularly the conference and implementation stages.

### **The Research Questions**

In qualitative research, the research questions guide the researcher throughout the study while allowing for flexibility and freedom to research the phenomena in depth. In this study, the answers to the research questions will be obtained directly from the descriptions of the participants (Shkedi, 2003). As this study aims to examine the perceptions and experiences of the children and adolescents who took part in 'Getting on Track – FGC' pilot program, the research questions are:

1. How do the youths who participated in the program view the concerns and protective factors in their lives?
2. What are the experiences of the youths who participated in 'Getting on Track – FGC' pilot program throughout the conference and implementation stages?
3. In this study how did the youths experience the program in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?

## **Methodology**

### **Research Methods**

This research is written as part of a broader study through the NEVET Greenhouse research group on the ‘Getting on Track – FGC’ pilot program. This study focuses on the youths’ unique and subjective perspectives regarding their experiences with the program.

This study is based on a qualitative approach, centered on the assumption that peoples’ experiences and reality are context based, and are consequently subjective. Therefore, the researcher seeks to explore the individual’s personal experiences and the unique construction of their worldviews, in which the meaning participants’ give to their various contexts shape the research (Shkedi, 2003). This approach dictates that the researcher is the main research tool (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

This study used a context-informed approach, in which it is important to give meaning to context to any given phenomena in order to understand the reasoning and meaning behind it (Roer-Strier, 2016). This is important as this approach believes that our social reality is a construct of interpretations that are influenced by personal narratives and constructs, such as race, class, or nationality (Kassan & Kromer-Navo, 2010). A qualitative approach is appropriate with often excluded populations, such as children in this case, as magnifying their unique voice can reduce their exclusion (Shelsky & Alpert, 2007).

### **Sampling and Participants**

The study participants are 18 children and adolescents between the ages of 10-18 who took part in the ‘Getting on Track – FGC’ pilot program (Appendix 1). The participants are youths about whom concerns have arisen regarding their safety and wellbeing, and whose families have challenging relationships with social services. As this study is qualitative, the researcher took great care to interview participants who were able to provide as much thick description and rich and in-depth information as possible. Therefore, the sampling method used in this study is purposive sampling, in which the participants were selected by meeting specific criteria; in this case, age and participation in ‘Getting on Track – FGC’s pilot program, specifically those in the implementation stage in the three months-year and a half following the conference (Patton, 2002).

In order to conduct research with minors, researchers must interact with gatekeepers; individuals who are able to give their consent to the child’s participation (Aaltonen & Kivijärvi,

2019). Therefore, when involving children and adolescents in research, it is important to secure their parent/guardian's consent to their participation (McGregor et al., 2016). The researcher first reached out to the parents in an attempt to secure their consent for their child's participation. However, the parents, charged with protecting their children from harm, can often feel uncomfortable with their child's participation, thus preventing them from participating in research (Gross-Manos et al., 2021). Such was the case in this study, as over 20 sets of parents who were approached regarding their children's participation did not consent. After much struggle and effort to reach participants, 15 sets of parents who were contacted ultimately consented to their children's participation.

The researcher also reached out to the family companions to ask for their help in finding consenting participants. An additional form of gatekeepers, practical gatekeepers, are professionals who work with the desired research population who are also responsible for allowing the population they work with to participate in research (Aaltonen & Kivijärvi, 2019). In this study, two of the social workers working with the families proved to be additional gatekeepers, as they expressed concerns about their clients' ability to participate and the ability to keep their anonymity preserved and initially did not consent to help find additional participants.

The participants in this study are ten females and eight males, with at least one participant from each social service department in which the pilot program took place. While great effort was put into trying to ensure an equal representation of male and female participants, as well as equal representation from all five social service departments who took part in the pilot program, due to the difficulty in finding participants this was not possible. Additionally, while younger children's voices are also important for research, the age range chosen for this study was 10-18.

### **Data Collection**

The data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The aim of the interview was to understand the person's unique experiences and the meaning they give them. Interviews are the most widely used research tools when working with children and adolescents. However, it is important to adapt them accordingly and to use language and methodologies that are age appropriate (Clark, 2005). When interviewing adolescents in particular, open-ended questions that allow them to feel they can contribute fully are key (Gibson et al., 2018).

As this study was conducted as part of a research group, the methodologies have been developed by trial and error as well as many round-robin brainstorming sessions with the research group members. The interviews began with basic introductions, an explanation about the research, and the child signing a consent form. The child/adolescents were given the option to be interviewed alone or to have someone with them throughout the process, either for the entire interview or just the beginning (e.g., a parent, coordinator, supporter, or guide), however almost all of the participants chose to be interviewed alone, with the exception of one participant whose father was present throughout the interview.

The interview questions were based on the research guide and adapted according to age (Appendix 3&4). As a result of the restrictions due to COVID-19, most of the interviews were conducted on the phone or via zoom, with a third of the interviews taking place face to face. This at times proved to be challenging as the participants sometimes took a while to become comfortable over zoom or the phone and found it difficult to share their experiences. The connection was sometimes bad, and there weren't always conditions that allowed the participants privacy if using a parent's electronic device. A little over a third of the interviews were carried out by other members of the research group, however the interviewers followed the same research guide and there was ongoing communication between members regarding data analysis.

Establishing rapport when interviewing children is key, and great effort was made to allow the participants to take the lead in the interview and to keep them engaged throughout the entire interview (Spratling et al., 2012). This demanded flexibility on the part of the researcher but allowed for the collection of rich data and the ability to discuss interesting elements the participants themselves brought to the interview.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then translated from Hebrew to English. As language has an important role in qualitative research, great care was taken to represent the context in which the words were spoken while taking great care to leave any interpretation out of the translation (Goitem, 2020). Additionally, in order to minimize loss of meaning when translating, the interviews were translated again by a professional translator (Temple & Young, 2004).

In addition, the researcher kept a field diary in which she wrote down her impressions immediately after each interview, including any observations, feelings, and thoughts which may

have arisen. The family plans were also used to help understand the youth's experiences and perspectives.

### **Data Analysis**

The data was analyzed using an inductive and thematic approach. The recorded interviews were transcribed and then thematically analyzed. Using this method, the researcher analyzed the data and identified patterns within the findings. The data analysis was based on the method of disassembling and reassembling the data, which involved rereading the interviews, identifying various themes that arose from the data, coding the data into units of meaning, and searching for connections between the various units (Cresswell & Poth, 2016).

Therefore, the researcher organized and coded the interviews, found connections between the various topics, and grouped them into major and sub-major themes in order to answer the proposed research questions. This process was carried out with the awareness of the choices made by the researcher and with the knowledge that the data analysis process is ongoing throughout the entire research process (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Shkedi, 2003). This form of analysis is suitable for research in which participants share experiences and their personal reality, as it allows for a certain flexibility from an epistemological point of view (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was based on the words and descriptions used by the participants which reflected their feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and knowledge (Shkedi, 2003).

### **Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1994) suggest the term "trustworthiness" to evaluate the credibility of qualitative research. They posit that "trustworthiness" is important to evaluating the study's worth. Preserving the credibility of this study was done in several different ways. Firstly, all data and documents, such as interviews and initial analyses, were preserved in order to consult with colleagues regarding the findings (Shkedi, 2003). This allowed the researcher to analyze the data together with additional researchers: her advisor, her research group peers, and her colleagues in her data analysis course at the university. The researcher also met with an additional research group peer to analyze and compare each of their findings, any discrepancies were discussed and if necessary, changed or eliminated. Additionally, the study includes thick descriptions and quotes taken directly from the interviews with the participants (Shkedi, 2003). Moreover, as mentioned above, the researcher kept a reflective field diary to

document her attitude, feelings, perceptions, and interpretations regarding the interviews with the aim of maintaining a conscious internal dialogue regarding the research.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Research with children and adolescents raises ethical considerations, especially when the research topic is one of a sensitive manner, in this case, their participation in decisions about their own lives and the various concerns that have arisen about their wellbeing. Therefore, after the participants and their parents were asked to sign the informed consent form (Appendix 4), the researcher explained to the participants that they were not obligated to participate in the study and could stop their participation or not answer certain questions at any time for any reason. The interviews were conducted with the desire to respect the participants and their unique points of view and with the intent of maintaining their sense of autonomy (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Shkedi, 2003; Kutrovátz, 2017). As many of the interviews were conducted on Zoom, a platform in which participants must give personal information in order to enter the Zoom meeting (e.g., email address, IP address, full name, etc.), only voice recordings were saved (and not video), and the recordings were deleted following transcription.

The researcher was mindful of the fact that the interview was more than just a means for gathering information, but a meeting between two people, and paid close attention to remain aware of the power-dynamics that come into play between researcher and participant in general, and adults and children in particular (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al., 2019;). All materials for this study were stored in a password protected folder, identifying materials (e.g., recordings) were deleted following transcription, and any identifying information was changed, including names, some of which the participants chose for themselves.

### **The Researcher**

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the main research tool for gathering knowledge and analyzing the data by studying how various contexts are understood by those who experience them. Therefore, the relationship between the researcher and participant is entirely subjective (Shkedi, 2003). In order to understand the researcher's position in relation to the subject of this study and in relation to the participants themselves, a brief description is given below:

The researcher in this study is a modern-orthodox single woman, living in Jerusalem and studying for her master's degree in clinical social work at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

As part of her master's degree, she was trained in qualitative research methods. Born in the United States, she made *Aliyah* with her family as a teenager. She used to work as a social worker in social services with at-risk youth, which allowed her to delve into and understand some of their experiences. She currently works as a pediatric social worker at Hadassah Hospital. Through her work she meets with children and adolescents daily, of various backgrounds and races, who are often in crisis both personally and in a family context. Additionally, she often meets with parents who are dealing with personal, emotional, and medical crises. Her work has allowed her to develop the language necessary to work with children and adolescents, and sometimes poses questions to her as to her place as a clinical worker with children versus a researcher. Her experience with children in the field has led to her passion and motivation to research and bring forward the unique voices of children. These various experiences working with adolescents may help the researcher understand the participants' unique voices, however, she is technically an "outsider".

### **Findings**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and perspectives of the children and adolescents who took part in 'Getting on Track – FGC's pilot program, focusing specifically on their experiences surrounding the conference and implementation stages. The research questions asked were: 1) How do the youths' who participated in the program view the concerns and protective factors in their lives? 2) What are the experiences of the youths who participated in 'Getting on Track – FGC's pilot program throughout the conference and implementation stages? 3) In this study how did the youths experience the program in the context of COVID-19?

Four main themes arose from the thematic analysis: *the first theme* addresses the participants' perspectives on the concerns that brought them to the program, the concerns that remain, and protective factors for the youths. *The second theme* focuses on the way the children and adolescents experienced the conference stage of the program, which included their perceptions regarding participation, understanding, being heard, the support of the attendees, the stages of the conference, and the difficulties that arose throughout this stage. *The third theme* explores their experiences from the implementation stage, including changes they feel at home since participating in their FGC, the necessary motivation to bring about change, the support systems that were built, the effect of the parents' experiences on their child, the resources and

tools they feel they received from the program, the challenges of this stage, and their practical suggestions for improving the program. *The fourth theme* addresses the various ways the program was impacted by COVID-19, both in the conference stage and in the implementation stage, both negatively and positively.

### **Theme One: Perspectives on Concerns and Protective Factors**

FGCs take place in three stages: the pre-conference stage, the conference stage, and the implementation stage. During the conference stage, alongside emphasizing the family's strengths and creating a family plan, concerns regarding the family are presented by the family, family supporters, and professionals. This theme will present the various concerns that the children and adolescents experienced both before and throughout the program. This chapter will explore those concerns in two different aspects: the first, the concerns they experienced prior to their participation in FGC, whether on a personal or familial level, and the second, concerns that they currently experience throughout the implementation stage. Additionally, this chapter will address the way children and adolescents perceive the factors in their lives that protect them.

#### ***1.1 Concerns in the Pre-Conference Stage***

The first part of the conference stage addresses the concerns that have arisen regarding the family. Both the family, family supporters and professionals are given the opportunity to state their concerns, and often the preparation for the conference focuses on helping the family understand the various concerns in order to be able to address them at the conference. The goal is to help the family create family plans for the various concerns that are voiced at the conference. The youths who participated in the program expressed four main concerns they had going into the program: difficulties in reliving past concerns, familial concerns, concerns that had to do with personal autonomy, and concerns on a personal level.

##### ***1.1.1 The Pain of Reliving Past Concerns***

While some of the participants were willing, and sometimes eager, to share the concerns they felt prior to their participation in FGC, others found that reliving their past was too difficult and preferred to focus on the present. For example, Daniella was unwilling to discuss the reasons that caused her concern, saying:

It's something that was in my past, I'm already a different person and I prefer to not really remember what those reasons were. (Daniella, 18)



As she found it difficult to revisit the person she used to be, her desire to keep the past behind her seems to point to the fact that remembering her past is too painful. Similarly, Nili also shared that she found remembering her past to be not only difficult, but unnecessary, stating:

I don't really want to get into it. Because we moved past it and now everything is good...I really don't want to talk about it because we're past it and we forgot about it already, and my family is okay. And everything is okay. (Nili, 14)

Nili placed emphasis on her family's current situation, and her viewpoint that reliving the past is not something she is interested in. In her eyes, the fact that her family was in a better place made speaking about the past stressful, as was evident throughout her entire interview.

While it was difficult for a few of the participants to relive past stressors, over a third of the participants were eager to share their strengths, specifically following interview questions about concerns. Throughout the interviews with the participants, they took the time to show off various things they were proud of, such as their bedrooms, school projects they worked hard on, or art projects they had completed. It seems that it was important to them to show their perceived strengths, especially when discussing difficulties.

### *1.1.2 Concerns on a Familial Level*

Many of the participants expressed their concerns over what they perceived as problematic family dynamics, such as fights or issues of miscommunication at home. Ben voiced his worries regarding his family's communication:

We fight a lot in my family and don't know how to speak to each other in a normal way. We don't know how to come to an agreement or do something together. (Ben, 16)

Ben expressed his concern over the fights that his family engages in frequently, which in his eyes means his family isn't "normal". It seems that his family dynamics prevent him from feeling close to his family, as their lack of communication makes it difficult for them to spend time together.

As close to half of participants spoke of what they perceived as problematic family dynamics, they addressed the skepticism they had that the program would even work with their family, as they saw their families as "at-risk" or "broken". The skepticism some of the participants shared seems to have been a real concern; the concerns that for them, the program would not be successful. Shani shared this sentiment expressing her disbelief that her family was equipped to handle the challenges they would face with their participation and her worries about the effectiveness of the program:

I didn't believe...I had a hard time believing it would work...I had a hard time believing that we could be in the same room and speak like human beings without it turning into a fight or something. (Shani, 18)

Shani emphasized the unease she felt regarding her family's ability to sit down and discuss their concerns together, which is an integral part of the program. She emphasized the fights they had, and the concerns she had regarding the effectiveness of a program based on communication when her family's communication was problematic and a cause for concern in her eyes. Her sentiments emphasize her deep understanding that the model is built on communication as well as the inner conflict other participants shared with her; the fear that a model built on communication would not work while their family was in such a high conflict situation.

Like Shani, Mor shared her understanding that her family was considered at-risk and the concern that her family wasn't like other families, or as Ben previously expressed: "not normal", and the subsequent disappointment that caused her:

My whole family understands that we're at risk, and I really love my family, and we're like, I really love my dad. Because my dad is divorced, and it's not so fun for me because my friends all have their dads and it's a little sad that my parents aren't like that, and yeah, that's disappointing for me. (Mor, 11)

Mor explained that her parents' divorce was a major concern for her, as in her eyes it caused her to not only feel disappointed that her family was different from those of her friends, but that it led to her family being considered at-risk. Her sorrow surrounding her father's absence at home, as well as her deep love for him and the feeling that her family situation made her different from her friends, was evident when speaking to her. When asked further about it, it became clear that Mor's understanding is that a family that is no longer "whole" is a cause for concern.

### ***1.1.3 Concerns Regarding Home Removal***

Similarly, like the other participants who expressed the concern of the family unit being "broken", some participants shed light on an additional concern; that being sent away from their families was a possibility as a result of their participation in FGC. When Uri was asked about his concerns prior to his participation in the program, he addressed his fear of not being in control of the decisions made about him and expressed his fear of being sent away from his family to a *pnimiya* [boarding school for at-risk youth]:

That they'll tell me I'd have to go to a *pnimiya*. But in the end they sent me to a special education school. So then I was worried that I wouldn't have any friends at my new school. (Uri, 14)

This quote exemplifies the fear Uri felt when preparing for the conference, and the desire to stay home with his family. To Uri his participation in the program was a cause for concern as it might have led to the possibility of being sent away. Similarly, when asked about her concerns prior to her participation in the program, Esther also shared her concerns of being sent away against her will, stating "I told them [social services] that I didn't want to go to a *pnimiya*". It would seem that for many of the participants, the fear that their participation in FGC might lead to their removal from their home was prevalent and dominating.

Moshe, who participated in FGC once the decision was made for him to return home after previously having been removed from his home, was asked about his biggest concern prior to participating in the program. Moshe shared that he was concerned with "what's going to happen when I come home". It would seem that for Moshe, his desire to return home was so great, that the fear it might not work out was a very serious concern when entering the program. He further elaborated in his interview that his time in the *pnimiya* was a negative experience for him and that coming home felt important and right.

#### ***1.1.4 Concerns Regarding Personal Behaviors***

Shir also spoke about her fear of being sent to a *pnimiya*, however she attributed her concern to her own behavior and the personal issues she was struggling with at the time:

I don't know how to explain the way the house was run. Or about the kids [her siblings] in the sense that they didn't go to school or anything...and in terms of school, I wasn't getting on in school, I had problems with the teachers, I barely learned, and I didn't want to stay there. On the one hand I didn't have a school to go to, on the other hand I wasn't willing to go to a *pnimiya*. (Shir, 15)

Shir not only spoke about what she saw as a problematic family dynamic, but of her own behavior as a cause for concern. According to her, the possibility of being sent away was so alarming that she wasn't even able to discuss it, even though at the time she knew her behavior was problematic. Similarly, Daniella, also highlighted behavior as a cause for concern:

When I was 14 and I would drink [alcohol] like I don't know what, I'm telling you straight. I had a time that for a few good months I would drink every day. I would come home only to sleep. To shower, sleep, and eat, and then again to drink and I would drink a lot. I'm being honest with you. I had moments like that. But there was a reason for it, and the reason was painful. (Daniella, 18)

Daniella not only expressed her opinion that her behavior was a cause for concern but explained that her behavior did not come out of nowhere, and the reasons that led her to behave in that way were painful. Therefore, for Daniella, in order to alleviate concerns, she had to promote changes in her own behavior.

While a third of the participants were able to point to what they perceived to be concerns prior to their participation in FGC, different concerns became prominent throughout their involvement in the program as explored in the next subtheme.

## **1.2 Current Concerns**

Throughout the implementation stage, the family plan is carried out by the family and monitored by the professionals. Therefore, different or additional concerns can arise among the children and adolescents in FGC. The concerns that arose from the participants were split among three main categories: concerns regarding family dynamics, concerns over the program coming to an end, and concerns that are age appropriate and not necessarily program based.

### **1.2.1 Concerns over Familial Relationships**

Another concern that arose when speaking with the participants was the apprehension they felt regarding their family relationships and dynamics, be it with parents or siblings. They described the importance they place on good relationships with their family members, and the stress it caused them when that type of a dynamic is lacking in their home. Mor, who spoke about her concerns prior to the program regarding her knowledge that her family was considered at risk and her disappointment surrounding her parents' divorce, discussed her current concerns about her family dissolving even further. When asked about her current concerns, she expressed her fear over being removed from her home and her close connection with her mother which would be subsequently interrupted:

That they're going to take me to a *pnimiya*. I really don't want that. Because I love my family, and I don't like that there would just be friends there, because, I don't know. I really love my family. If I don't see my mom for even one day I get really sad. Even if I sleep over at a friend's house, I call my mom 50 times. (Mor, 11)

Similar to her concerns prior to her participation in FGC, Mor stressed the importance of her family staying together, and the closeness and love she feels towards her parents, especially her mother. As her father already doesn't live at home, the thought of being further separated from her other parent is distressing for her, and she emphasized the close relationship she has with her mother, a lack of which would be a major cause for concern to her. It was clear from language

she used in the interview, emphasizing words like love and closeness, that her distress regarding her fear of being removed from home was amplified by her participation in FGC.

Other participants also spoke of the importance of close relationships with their family members, and how a lack of them can be a cause for concern. Yair, a 16-year-old participant, shared his concerns about his relationships with his siblings:

My sister is messed up, but if I fight with her it won't last long, I'll speak to her the next day. But it's not like that with my brother, how much can you forgive? He asks for forgiveness but then creates the same problems again and again. He used to do it a lot, he does it less now...now it's different, he asks for forgiveness more, but he isn't right in the head, he makes the same mistakes.

Throughout his interview, Yair spoke again and again about his brother, who he sees as a cause for a lot of the problems in their home. While Yair did speak about the improvements at home, his concerns are still on his mind. In his eyes, his brother's problematic behavior is not only unforgivable, but a cause for concern for the entire family.

### ***1.2.2 Concerns over the Program Ending***

When speaking with the participants, some of them pointed out the changes they felt in their lives since participating in the program and the concerns they felt over the program possibly coming to an end. Maayan discussed the importance she feels as to her involvement in the PERACH program [a volunteer-based program for at-risk or low-income youth]. Her participation in the program was decided upon as a result of the concerns expressed at her family conference, and she expressed her fear over the program coming to an end:

I'm really worried what's going to happen when I won't be with Sarah [PERACH volunteer] anymore because we're already in the middle of the year. (Maayan, 10)

Maayan addressed this concern over and over throughout her interview, even when not explicitly asked about her concerns. It would seem that she is very concerned as to how her life will look once her involvement in FGC is over, as she sees the direct benefits of her involvement. Similarly, Nili, a 14-year-old participant, shared that her current concerns had to do with her family's financial situation. When asked directly about her current concerns, she said: "our financial situation, because it's not good". Nili understood and expressed her gratitude that her family's participation in FGC came with a budget, however, the thoughts of it ending are a cause for concern.

### *1.2.3 Age-Appropriate Concerns*

While many of the participants addressed concerns based directly on their involvement in the program, some of the participants expressed natural age-appropriate concerns that have to do with life stages, such as moving schools or moving out.

For example, when asked to discuss what he currently is concerned about, Uri didn't share any concerns about the program but rather about his school and his friends. More specifically, he shared his concerns regarding his friendships once transferring schools, sharing that: "Now my only concern is that my friends suddenly won't be friends with me anymore, and I'll lose them." Uri's concern regarding keeping his friends is one that plagues many adolescents his age, especially after transferring to a different school, which in Uri's case was a part of the family plan created at the conference. While his concerns may be based on a decision implemented as a result of his FGC, the concern itself is age appropriate and plagues many children when transferring schools. Similarly, Daniella, who expressed concerns regarding her self-destructive behavior prior to her participation in the program, expressed her current concerns about moving out of her home for the first time at the age of eighteen:

It's not the same concerns, but different concerns. Like now I have my apartment hanging over my head and bills, things that I didn't really know before. (Daniella, 18)

Daniella described the change she experienced in her concerns before and after her participation in FGC. While her current concerns regarding her move out of her mother's home is a normative concern most people have when moving away from home for the first time, she also attributed the shift in her concerns to having to face new experiences that were previously foreign to her.

Alongside the concerns experienced by the participants, they also highlighted protective factors, as referred to in the next subtheme.

### *1.3 What Protects Children?*

Protective factors are conditions or attributes that help individuals and families deal with stressful events in a more effective manner and can alleviate or even eliminate risk (Walker et al., 2011). The way the participants view protection in their lives was split mainly among four prominent categories: family, emotional protection, oneself, and social services.

### ***1.3.1 Family as a Protective Factor***

When asked outright what protects children, more than half of the participants stated that family protects children by being there for them and protecting them both physically and emotionally, specifically their parents. Daniella spoke of the importance of having someone to rely on, and how for her, that is her family:

At the end of the day, every kid needs someone who will really understand him and allow him to come and sit and speak to them... for me, it's myself and my family, that's what protects me. Like my family is my source of strength where I collect from to protect myself...because at the end of the day you have one family. And at the end of the day, when you get home and it's been a bad day and your friends stab you in the back with a knife, who do you turn to? Your family. At the end of the day you always go back to your family. Family is very very very very important. It's your people, your blood.

Daniella also emphasized the importance of family as a protective factor, while inadvertently addressing friends as a concern. She emphasized that family is always there for you and the one thing you can count on even when others have let you down. In her eyes, it is not enough to just have that someone to turn to but for that person to be blood related to her, as friends can let you down or betray you. Additionally, she expressed the need to feel heard and understood, and combating her loneliness is a source of protection for her.

In his interview, Moshe (14 years old), who was raised by his father, also emphasized the importance of family as a protector. When Moshe was asked who protects children, he said "dad", and when asked who protects him, he elaborated "my dad". The participants who shared that their family acts as a protective factor for them emphasized again and again how important it is for children to be with their parents.

### ***1.3.2 Emotional Protection***

An additional source of protection the participants addressed was the emotional protection they felt in their lives. Like Daniella, some of the other participants also shared their belief that emotional protection, both from within the family and outside of it, is an important protective factor in children's lives. For example, when Maayan was asked what protects children, she stated that what she believes protects children most is:

Attention, good education [...] when they're sad to calm them down so they feel safe and when they're scared to tell them everything is okay, and nothing is happening, and nothing happened. (Maayan, 10)

She elaborated on the idea that parents protect their children and stressed the importance of receiving attention and education to feel protected. It seems that Maayan places emphasis on

having someone to turn to and feeling heard and comforted as a source of protection, and that feeling safe is key to feeling protected. Similarly, when asked about what protects children, Yair, a 16-year-old participant of the program, also spoke of the importance of emotional protection:

Interviewer: What protects children?

Yair: To build up a good personality, to not get dragged into drugs and cigarettes. Famous people that kids love should make videos for kids because kids love them and will listen to them.

Interviewer: Who protects you?

Yair: No one, I protect myself.

Interviewer: Do you think there is anyone in your family who protects you?

Yair: Everyone is at different ends of the world. My dad has no idea what's going on with me and I don't think he wants to know, my mom is home.

Interviewer: Do you think your mom can protect you?

Yair: My mom has protected me my whole life, but if someone comes and hits you in the street, she isn't a man so she can't help.

Unlike other participants who emphasized the importance of the protection of family, when first asked, Yair shared that he felt that the only one protecting him was himself. While he shared that his mom is a protector for him, his lack of a relationship with his father means that he is missing a major protective factor in his life. From his perspective, his mother being a woman means that she is physically unable to protect him. In his eyes, the importance of having protection from both parents is unparalleled, and the lack of it means he is lacking protection in certain areas of his life, leaving him to be his own protector.

It would seem that for some of the participants, having divorced parents, is in essence, a lack of protection, both physical and emotional. While the participants spoke about their family within the boundaries of emotional protection, in this subtheme they elaborated not only on the basic protection they feel that being part of a family gives them, but the strength in the emotional bonds they feel keeps them protected in a less obvious way.

### ***1.3.3 Myself as Protector***

Like Yair, two of the other participants shared that they, too, saw themselves as their own protectors. This protection was often described as caring over other family members, taking on responsibilities at home, and being a source of protection for themselves and others when they lack the resources to find protection elsewhere. When asked what protects children, Aliza, a 16-year-old girl and the second oldest in her family, shared that she protects her siblings and makes sure they are taken care of:



Me and my parents...I protect them [my siblings] and do things for them. Every Tuesday I wake up and take my sister to therapy, I shop for them, I take my sisters and my brothers to their friends' parties. If my parents go out, they know I'm here and they can rely on me.

Aliza spoke not about conventional protection, but that she feels that the sacrifices she makes for her siblings and the responsibility she takes for them are protective factors in their lives. She takes pride in knowing that her parents can rely on her, and that her siblings have someone to rely on. Aliza's ability to act as protector by preserving the family's schedule and a sense of normalcy is important to her.

It would seem that to some of the participants, responsibility is a protective factor in their lives, and that their ability to protect others is protective for themselves.

#### ***1.3.4 Social Services as a Protective Factor***

Only one of the participants did not mention parents or family in the context of protection. When asked what protects children, Esther, a 15-year-old adolescent shared that from her perspective what protects at-risk children is "social services". Esther's opinion that social services protect children points to the tension she feels with her family, as she feels she cannot rely on them to protect her, and therefore learned to look elsewhere for protection. She added that while she does rely on social services to protect at-risk youth, when it comes to her own protection, she feels that she is the only one who looks out for herself, as no one else can be trusted. So, while Esther believes that social services is a protective factor for some, for herself, she is her own protector.

In summary, this theme examines the perceptions of the youths who participated in FGC regarding their concerns prior to the program, their current concerns, and what they view as protective factors in the lives of children. When willing to discuss it, most of the participants' concerns prior to the program had to do with familial and behavioral issues as well as the fear of being removed from their home. They shared concerns regarding the ability to work on difficult dynamics and the fear that their families were too "broken" for the program to work.

Their current concerns had more to do with relationships, the ending of the program and age-appropriate concerns. Additionally, the participants spoke of family, emotional factors, themselves, and social services as protective factors in their lives. Even when discussing protective factors, the participants shared inadvertent concerns, mostly surrounding the lack of

family, thus strengthening the belief that family is an important protective factor in most aspects of protection.

The underlying element of this theme was family and familial bonds. In each subtheme, be it concerns or protective factors, the participants spoke of the importance and meaning they attach to their family and the consequences that arise when those bonds are frayed or broken.

The family plan created in the conference stage of the program addresses the families concerns and protective factors. The next theme will discuss the children and adolescents' perceptions on the conference stage of the program.

### **Theme Two: Experiences Surrounding the Conference Stage**

This theme will explore the youths' experiences and perceptions regarding their participation in the conference stage of 'Getting on Track – FGC'. The model of FGC strives to create a comfortable setting for the conference stage, making sure the family feels secure while promoting open communication and a willingness and commitment to create a family plan. The participants at the conference are the family, the professionals (i.e., social workers, the coordinator, the newly appointed family companion, teachers, guidance counselors, etc.), and the family supporters. Children are usually involved in their own conference; however, their participation varies when it comes to the duration of their time at the conference, their level of understanding, and their experiences in general, as their participation is usually decided upon by the adults participating in the program, (i.e., the coordinator, the parents, the social worker)

Through their unique and individual perspectives on their own conferences, the youths spoke about their understanding, participation, the various voices they felt were heard during the conference, and the support they felt they received and how this all helped or hindered their ability to feel like active participants. Additionally, they described their experiences regarding the strengths and concerns circles, and the difficulties they experienced during the conference stage of the program.

#### ***2.1 The Importance of Understanding One's Own FGC***

Only a third of the participants addressed their understanding of the conference stage. However, Esther shared that she was prepped for the conference by her coordinator and social worker so that she came to the conference with an understanding of what was going to happen:

They [the coordinator and social worker] explained it a few times until I understood...that they want to come and help my family...like right now my family is all separate, so like

they'll bring everyone back home and everything will be unified, and they'll also help my parents. (Esther, 15)

Esther explained that she was provided with multiple explanations until she understood the purpose of the FGC, which allowed her to understand that the program was put in place to help her family, and therefore increased her understanding of the conference stage. Similarly, Ben was one of the only other participants who was able to explain why he and his family became involved in FGC:

We fought a lot and because we didn't know how to successfully speak to one another, social services came to us [about FGC]. (Ben, 16)

He understood that his family dynamics brought them to the program, and the goal was to decrease the amount of fighting and increase positive communication.

Unlike Ben and Esther, most participants stated that they didn't understand what was going on during the conference. Mor (11-years-old) shared that she had a hard time understanding what was happening: "I didn't understand a word of it. But they spoke about how to help, and I don't know, like, it was, yeah, it was a little hard to understand everything." While she shared that she didn't understand everything, she was able to understand that the program was there to help.

Similarly, Shir (15-years-old) explained her perception of the conference: "I understood that they were going to help my parents and my whole family, but I didn't really understand what was happening". However, unlike Mor and Shir, Ariel (15-years-old) stated: "I didn't really understand what was happening and why we really even needed it.". From his perspective, not only did Ariel not understand what was happening during the conference, he didn't understand the need for it or the aim of the program. It would seem that age was not a factor for what was understood throughout the conference, as participants of all ages shared their lack of understanding regarding this stage.

It is important to note that not only did many of the participants not understand what was happening throughout the conference, but when asked about the conference or FGC as a whole, over half of the participants didn't understand the question or the terminology used in FGC. For example, while Ben was able to elaborate on why his family got involved with the program, when first asked to share his experience in FGC, he answered "what is that?"; or when Nehorai was asked if he remembered the name of the program, he said that he did not. Additionally, close to a third of the participants stated that they could not remember what FGC was and needed to be reminded by asking questions about "the big meeting". Many of the participants needed an

explanation as to what the program was and a reminder of the terminology before they were able to address their experiences. It is important to note that for most of the participants, over half a year had passed between their conference and their interview.

While some of the participants felt they understood what the program was and what was happening in their family conference, others didn't. What the participants understood from both the program and the conference is just as important as their perceived participation, which will be explored in the following subtheme.

## ***2.2 Levels of Participation at the FGC***

'Getting on Track' in particular, and FGC in general, place great importance on the participation of each and every family member, including the children in the family. While that remains true for the conference stage of the program, levels of participation felt by the participants was varied: one third of participants felt they had little to no participation at their FGC, one third felt they were given the space to be active participants, while one third chose not to share about their experiences surrounding their perceived participation at their FGC.

### ***2.2.1 Lack of Participation at the Conference***

A third of the participants disclosed that they didn't feel that they were active participants in their own FGCs. Some described physical absences while others discussed their inability to contribute. Maayan shared her experiences from the conference, stating that she didn't really feel that she took part in the program as she wasn't physically present at her conference:

I wasn't really part of that FGC thing [...] we went out and played. We ate a bit, and then played. And then ate a bit more, and then played. More food and sweets, and then we played. (Maayan, 10)

Preparing food for the conference is an important part of preparing the setting in which the conference takes place. Maayan spoke of her memory of the food that they had at the conference but that she didn't remain in the conference while it was happening, rather she and her siblings spent the time of the conference outside while the adults made the family plan. Similarly, Shir also spoke of going outside during the conference, sharing that: "I'm pretty sure I left in the middle [of the conference]." Dani also shared that he felt intimidated at the conference, and that he opted to leave before it was over, saying:

I wanted to leave...if you were there, you'd run away...there were like 804 people [staring] at you. I left an hour before the end. (Dani, 15)

It would seem that for Dani, his FGC was intimidating, and in his eyes while there were not really hundreds of people at his FGC, the forum of the conference and the fact that so many people were present left him feeling anxious and unwilling to participate. Moreover, when later asked about whether or not he shared his wishes at his FGC, Dani went on to say, “I didn’t speak”. Similarly, Sivan explained that she “didn’t really speak”, and therefore wasn’t able to express her opinions at her family’s conference. Mor also spoke of her inability to share during her family’s conference, not from lack of opportunity, but rather because of the embarrassment she felt:

Everyone that was there had to hear things about the family. And people said things I didn’t agree with. But I didn’t want to say anything because I was embarrassed. (Mor, 11)

While it’s not that Mor necessarily didn’t have the opportunity to disagree with what was said at her FGC, the embarrassment she felt at the forum of her conference held her back from disagreeing or contributing. She elaborated further and explained that she wished to have participated even less than she did, as hearing the concerns about her family was difficult for her:

Mor: Yeah, they shouldn’t involve my brother and me. It wasn’t so fun.

Interviewer: What do you mean they shouldn’t involve you?

Mor: It’s not so nice for me to hear conversations about my family, that if they talk about my family, like I really like talking with my family, but when they talk about my family, I really don’t like it.

Interviewer: What don’t you like about it?

Mor: That they talk about me, lots of things. It’s hard for me to hear it.

Interviewer: What happened to you when you heard it?

Mor: It’s not fun for me. I start to get angry and that’s not fun.

Mor explained that while she enjoys talking with her family, hearing other peoples’ opinions of her family made her angry, and ultimately created a negative experience for her, which also made it difficult for her to be an active participant in her FGC. In her eyes, she and her brother were too young to be involved in the conference, and the assumption that she would want to take part was actually more harmful than helpful.

### ***2.2.2 Active Participation at the Conference***

An additional third of the participants did feel that they had more of an opportunity to share at their FGCs. For example, when asked about his FGC, Ariel said:

Interviewer: Did you take part in the conference?

Ariel: In general, not really. They just asked me who was coming. They said...my teachers from school...but in the end she didn’t come.

Interviewer: Okay... how did you feel, maybe you remember, did you say what was important to you, what you would want?

Ariel: Yes. I said what was important to me, I said that I'm interested in basketball, that's what interests me, that's my hobby. (Ariel, 15)

Ariel was given the opportunity to share what was important to him, in his case basketball, and was ultimately glad he shared as an after-school basketball program was added to his family plan. Ariel was not only physically present at his conference, but was given a voice and a platform, making him an active participant. Similarly, Michal shared that everyone in her family had the opportunity to speak at their family conference: "Everyone spoke...[about] what we wanted to change and what we wanted to preserve." Michal emphasized that not only did she share her personal opinions, but that what was shared was what she and her family wanted to change and preserve together. Esther also shared that she not only had the opportunity to speak, but was prepped prior to the conference as to her level of involvement:

Of course, they let me [speak] and told me 'you have the right'... I told them that I wanted a private after school program. (Esther, 15)

Esther was able to share what she wanted for herself at the conference and felt heard and supported by the adults present. Moshe also shared that he was given the space to participate and was heard at his FGC, sharing that: "they really listened to me and supported me and implemented the things that were said". Not only did Moshe emphasize that he was heard and supported, but in retrospect, felt he was influential over the decisions made that stemmed from his FGC, thus making him an active participant.

Nili also shared that she had the opportunity to speak at her FGC, and felt heard by her family companion: "There's Nadia [the family companion] who listened to me. She really helped us. She heard me." It seems that for Nili having someone at the FGC interested in what she had to say helped her feel she had the space to share and be heard. Similarly, Daniella, shared that she also felt most heard by her family companion:

Interviewer: Did you feel heard [at the conference]?

Daniella: I would say yes.

Interviewer: Who do you feel heard you most?

Daniella: I'll tell you, it was Nadia [the family companion]. (Daniella, 18)

Like Nili, Daniella also described her experience as an active participant at her FGC, and felt she was given space to contribute. It would seem that for some of the participants, having someone other than a social worker and family member there at the conference allowed them to

feel heard, thus promoting their participation. The main common factor for the participants who felt active in their conference was not merely being present, but being invited to take part, share their opinions and desires, and feeling they had influence over decisions that were made about them.

### ***2.3 The Strengths Circle***

The first stage of the conference consists of information sharing in two circles: the strengths circle and the concerns circle. In the strengths circle, the professionals present, and the family supporters bring to light the family's unique strengths, highlighting the strengths of each family member. Most of the participants who chose to disclose their experiences in their own strengths circle remembered it as a positive experience. Esther shared the strengths that she remembers hearing about herself at her conference, and how hearing her strengths said aloud by others was so important to her that she wrote them down and kept them so that she can look back on them even today:

They told me that I was sensitive, you know what, I have it written down. Esther's strengths, we called them strengths. They said that I have a good heart, a golden heart, that I express myself well, I'm friendly, modest, beloved, polite, and very smart even when I'm angry. I have a good head on my shoulder, I know how to receive help from others, talented – I bake, I'm mature... (Esther, 15)

She was excited to share what was said about her and remembered the strengths circle as a positive and uplifting experience. Similarly, Shani also spoke about her positive experience with her strengths circle:

And suddenly everyone is telling you how much you, like...all these good qualities and things you didn't expect, and your teacher sometimes says a good word about you here and there and your uncles and aunts here and there, but when it's that intense, and everyone goes one after the other, your guidance counselor, and teacher, and mom, and siblings, and aunts and uncles, and grandma and everyone is saying good things about you, and to know that there are people who love you, and appreciate you, you can't take that for granted. I felt incredibly lucky. (Shani, 18)

Shani emphasized the importance of hearing your good qualities said aloud, especially as in her eyes the things said were unexpected and important to her. In her eyes, hearing her strengths from all of the important people in her life wasn't something to be taken for granted, but rather appreciated and celebrated, and she remembered each person who was complementary towards her. She further elaborated:

When we recognized our strengths, we realized that the concerns were...if in the past we didn't know what the solution was, today we know that...it was clear from when we

brought up the concerns what the solution was, in that moment, like a flash. After we already had all of our strengths, we understood that the concerns were fixable.

However, while most participants who spoke about their family's strength circle viewed it as a positive experience, the forum in which it takes place can be intimidating for some. Maayan (10-years-old) shared that she was uncomfortable during her strengths circle, saying that: "I get embarrassed when people talk about me and look at me or give me compliments in front of everyone...in front of everyone I feel like a baby". Maayan's unique perspective emphasizes that not everyone feels comfortable in the setting of the FGC with that many adults around, even if it's in the context of hearing a compliment. Similarly, when asked about his experience with his strengths circle, Moshe shared:

Moshe: Of course it was easier to hear the good things, bad things are harder to hear, but both of those things are hard! They're talking about you, and your life, and your dad in front of social workers and all those people! It's so judgmental! And it was uncomfortable.

Interviewer: Even when they said good things you felt that way?

Moshe: Yes, it's a little weird. (Moshe, 14).

It would seem that for Moshe, much like Maayan, the forum in which the strengths circle takes place causes discomfort and unease, to the extent where Moshe found it difficult to separate between his strengths circle and concerns circle.

#### ***2.4 The Concerns Circle***

As mentioned in the previous subtheme, following the strengths circle, the next stage of information sharing in the conference is the concerns circle. During the concerns circle, the coordinator presents the concerns that have arisen from the various participants regarding the family. Half of the participants shared that they were present for their concerns circle, while a third remembered leaving during that part of the conference, while very few participants did not remember their concerns circle at all. A third of the participants were able to share their experiences from their concerns circle, both positive and negative, while most participants chose not to share about their concerns circle or did not take part in that stage of their FGC. Most of the participants who addressed this theme shared the difficulties they encountered with what felt like ruminating over the concerns with the family members they were not getting along with at the time.

Shir spoke about her frustrations with the concerns circle, and how it felt like a pointless practice:



They didn't look for answers, they just spoke about the problems... I didn't have a problem with it [the concerns circle], because it was things that were actually happening. But I would have expected them not to just speak about the problems, but about the future, how to move forward from there. (Shir, 15)

In her opinion, the concerns circle, while true, was disappointing as she felt in her words that it was superfluous, and that she expected the conference to be more solution based. It is important to acknowledge that earlier Shir stated that she didn't participate in the full conference, as she left in the middle, and therefore wasn't part of her family's private deliberation stage where they formed the family plan.

Daniella also shared her experience from her concerns circle, highlighting the difficult emotions that arose when hearing the concerns that were brought up about her:

If I sit you down in front of people you're in a fight with, and a really big fight, like your family, and you're in a really big fight with them and you just sit down, like I sit you down in front of them, and they're all across from you. And you're alone there and everyone in your life is in this one circle and everyone is attacking you and saying 'you, you, you, you, you, it's like this, and like this, and like this'...listen, I'll tell you one thing, it wasn't only hard. Just how everything has cons, there are also pros. The pros are that I sat there and I spoke and I was there in front of them and I showed them I could do it. There are pros and cons to everything. (Daniella, 18)

Daniella emphasized the challenge of sitting and hearing the concerns that were expressed, especially as at the time her family wasn't communicating well which led her to feel attacked by the other people at the conference. However, while Daniella expressed the feeling that while she felt attacked and how difficult it was for her, she was also able to see the positive aspects of the concerns circle, and how she felt stronger for having participated in it. Similarly, Michal also shared how it was difficult for her but also helpful in that the concerns shared helped her family understand how to improve and learn in order to create a better experience at home:

Yeah, it's not nice to hear and it's pretty embarrassing, but that's the point here, to bring up everything, and to put everything on the table and improve from it... We've improved, we learned from that conversation we had [at the conference] who we are and what everyone at home thinks of us, our parents and siblings. Um...and it helped us understand as a family what to do and what not to do. It gave us a little more awareness. It really helped. (Michal, 17)

### ***2.5 The Difficulties During the Conference Stage***

While over half of the participants found the conference to be a positive experience, a third of them highlighted the difficulties they experienced, particularly surrounding the focus on what

they perceived as concerns and the need to come up with solutions while the family dynamics are problematic at that time.

When asked about her experience at her family conference as whole, Shir said:

It was irrelevant...it was like treading water. They spoke about the same things we had already understood the entire time and didn't try and find any solutions. (Shir, 15)

In her eyes, the conference was a difficult experience, as she felt it was very problem-focused and didn't help find solutions for her or her family. Daniella also shared the difficulties she experienced at her family's conference highlighting the fights they had as an obstacle to their conference:

And it [the conference] was when things were complicated, there were fights, at that time I was fighting with everyone there, my whole family except for my grandma and my stepdad. My sister and I were in a fight, my mom, we didn't really get along....and think that you gather a family that's in a big fight and they don't even want to see each other, and everyone is upset and angry, and the stress that this is your family and that's what they're like...and there was a huge amount of stress there. And it was really hard and we fought and I had to go outside and breathe some fresh air, and there were fights, so many fights...and there was crying and to be part of that was really really really difficult. (Daniella, 18)

For Daniella, the fact that the conference took place while her family was going through a difficult time and not getting along was a challenge for her. She repeated the words "fight" and "stress" emphasizing the tension that was palpably felt between her family members. In her eyes, putting everyone in the same room when tensions were so high was cause for stress and made the process incredibly difficult. Similarly, Michal also highlighted the importance of having more private conversations leading up to the conference in order to prepare the family. When asked what she would change about the program, Michal answered:

What would I change? I'd have more private conversations at the beginning as opposed to group ones, at least in the beginning. Because in a group conversation, when there is a lot of anger, they [FGC] should have first calmed us down and taught us how to speak to each other, what to do, how to behave, how to calm down, and then the group conversations would have helped. Otherwise, it's just not helpful. (Michal, 17)

Michal's experience was that the conference was likely to have been more helpful had her family been more prepared for the group conversation that was going to take place. She felt that had each family member had the opportunity to share what was on their mind in a private setting, and then receive the tools to deal with the frustration and anger they were experiencing, the group conversation would have been a lot more effective.

This theme brought to light the experiences and perceptions of the conference from youths who took part in FGC. Alongside the positive experiences that most were able to shed light on, some also described a more challenging experience from their family conference, while about half felt less involved and had less of an understanding regarding this stage. It would seem from their descriptions that when the participants felt that in addition to having a physical space in the conference that their voices were heard and their opinions taken seriously, even throughout the more challenging parts of the conference, they had a more positive experience overall. The following stage of the program, the implementation stage, which relies heavily on the family plan formulated in the conference, will be explored in the next theme.

### **Theme Three: Experiences Surrounding the Implementation Stage**

Throughout the interviews with the participants, one of the most prominent subjects discussed were their experiences regarding the implementation stage of the program. The implementation stage is responsible for carrying out the family plan which is created by the family together with their supporters and professionals during the conference stage. Ensuring the family plan is implemented and carried out is essential to the success of the program.

This theme will discuss the various components the participants regarded as important throughout this stage. They addressed the changes they feel at home since participating in the program, the motivation that helped create that change, as well as the various support systems, including both natural and program-based support systems, crucial to the program's success. Additionally, they spoke of the resources and tools they feel the program has provided them with, and the challenges they experienced throughout the implementation stage. Finally, the participants shared practical suggestions they feel could benefit the effectiveness of the program.

#### ***3.1 Changes Felt at Home Throughout the Implementation Stage***

The families who participated in the pilot program all had one thing in common; various concerns regarding the children and adolescents in the family, and the desire to create a more conducive environment for promoting their children's wellbeing by empowering the family to access their strengths and autonomy. One of the goals of the program was to help foster a more positive home environment. The findings suggest that one of the most significant effects of the pilot program was within the family itself and the various changes the participants felt within their home throughout the implementation stage. Participants addressed feeling a more normative

home environment, due to both personal and interpersonal changes, emphasizing personal relationships growing closer or changes in their outlook on their home.

### ***3.1.1 Creating a “Normal” Environment***

One of the changes the participants emphasized was the feeling that through their work in the program they were able to create a more positive home environment. When asked about the positive things she experienced as a result of her participation in FGC, Aliza shared “that we succeeded in changing the atmosphere at home”. Similarly, Shani explained about the powerful change that her family went through in order to create a more “normal” family environment:

We still have ways to go, but our day-to-day doesn’t even resemble what we were like in the beginning, not at all. Now we behave much more like normal people than we did before. And the anger and annoyances really faded away... It’s good. It’s good to see that there are professionals that help families like mine. (Shani, 18)

Shani described what was to her an extremely meaningful process, an ongoing process in which there isn’t an ending. She also spoke about the day-to-day changes she sees at home and discussed the process her family went through together to create a new familial identity. She now compares her family to societal norms that she sees as acceptable, which in her eyes means less anger and conflict in her day-to-day life.

### ***3.1.2 Interpersonal Changes***

While creating a normative home environment was the focus for many of the participants, a few of them emphasized the need to work on family dynamics and interpersonal growth in order to create a cohesive home environment. Much like Shani in the previous subtheme, Ben also shared the changes he felt in his family, but emphasized a change in communication, sharing that “now we do things together without yelling at each other, we speak and let everyone else say their opinions and say what’s bothering them and how we can fix it together”. In Ben’s eyes, similar to Shani, the ability to get things done without fighting and being open with one another is an indication of a positive home environment.

Mor addressed the changes her family went through together, highlighting the interpersonal changes they went through by emphasizing the closeness her family now experiences by spending more time together:

Me and my brother are closer now because...yeah. We had an end of the year party in our *moadonit* [after school program] and my mom was close to me and everyone came. And it was so much more fun, and someone from school came, and more people came.

My grandpa also came, and we're closer as a family. All the events that my brother and I had, so everyone came now that we're all closer. (Mor, 11)

The changes that her family went through, for example in strengthening the children's connections with those surrounding them by attending the *moadonit* end-of-year event, contributed to Mor's personal wellbeing and happiness. For Mor, having her family show up for her was critical to creating closer relationships, thereby, fostering a more positive home environment.

### ***3.1.3 Personal Changes***

Expanding on the idea of interpersonal relationships, Michal addressed the change in the atmosphere at home, emphasizing that changing her personal mindset was critical in doing so:

At the beginning I fought with them [my family] a lot, why they don't just tidy up the house. And now I've started being more open and I just do it myself, I prefer to just do it alone and not have any fighting. That's something that improved the environment at home. (Michal, 17)

Michal placed emphasis on internal changes she made which then radiated outward to create interpersonal improvement in her home. By looking inwards and fostering personal change, her internal changes created change outwardly for the entire family. From her subjective point of view, it seems that a family environment without fighting is considered a measure of success. She therefore chose to take responsibility for the environment at home by making a personal change in which she has a more open and independent approach to dealing with her family as a way of avoiding conflict. Michal opted to engage in an internal dialogue with herself instead of creating that dialogue with other family members in order to preserve that environment.

### ***3.1.4 Unidentifiable Changes***

However, three of the participants were unable to articulate what caused change or were unable to see a change at all. For example, Nili, who also spoke about familial changes that took place at home, shared that while her family is more cohesive now, she didn't feel any personal changes following her family's involvement in the program. In her own words:

We do more as a family now, we go see my grandpa and grandma and my aunts and uncles. We do all sorts of things as a family now. But in my personal life, nothing really changed. I used to not see my friends as much and now I see them a lot. And that's it. (Nili, 14)

Nili emphasized the gap between the positive changes her family went through in their participation in the program, for example spending more time together, versus her personal life

in which she doesn't feel much change has taken place regardless of participating in the program. While she stated that she didn't feel much change in her personal life, Nili did mention seeing her friends more often than before, much like she spends more time with her family now, suggesting that positive change has occurred in many of her interpersonal relationships.

Out of all the participants who chose to address this question, only one shared that he didn't feel any change in his home environment. When asked about his current feelings regarding his situation at home, Dani answered "I don't like to be home because...look at the situation. I don't like being home at all. I ran away from home a bunch of times. I don't like my house". It is however important to note that Dani was interviewed only four months into the implementation stage.

This subtheme emphasizes the various changes participants felt in their homes during the implementation stage of the program, be it ongoing change as well as episodic change, internal dialogue, and restructuring familial identity. The subtheme highlighted not only the changes in the home environment, in which there were less annoyances and anger, but in some instances, the ability to create personal change in order to promote the positive changes at home. As mentioned in the first theme, the participants highlighted the importance of family as a protective factor in their lives. It would seem that by creating a better environment at home, as well as a more cohesive family dynamic, they are thereby strengthening the protective factors in their lives.

### ***3.2 Motivation for Change***

When addressing the question of the change they felt happened in their homes, three of the older participants addressed the need for self-motivation in order to create that change. They addressed the need to find personal reasons to stick with the program and push forward to create a better home environment and more positive family dynamics. Each of the participants shared what they felt their personal reasons for finding motivation were and how that helped them implement and stick with the program.

Shani shared the importance of sticking with the program and finding her own motivation:

It all depends on us, because if we decide to give up on ourselves, to go back to being angry, to not work on ourselves and say what do we need this for and to give up on ourselves, so then it's like, if we're not there for ourselves, who's going to be there for us? Who's going to help us if we don't help ourselves? It has to come from us. It has nothing to do with the professionals, it doesn't matter how much they want to help, if someone doesn't want to help themselves you can't help them. (Shani, 18)

Shani emphasized the importance of not only her own motivation, but of each of her family members working on themselves and not giving up. She emphasized that if they weren't self-motivated, no amount of professional work would help, as people who are unmotivated to create change will ultimately fail at doing so. Her sister Michal also spoke of the importance of motivation and shared that her experiences in the conference stage gave her motivation to stick to the family plan carried out in the implementation stage:

When we each spoke about each other, it's basically hearing about your own shortcomings, and it makes you want to improve, and to fix it, you feel... not embarrassed, but sort of guilty. You get shown all of the bad parts of yourself, so, what, you're just going to keep being bad? You get what I'm saying? The fact that it was right in front of our eyes, that's something that really helped me personally, I know how to be honest with myself, which is something that gives me more self-awareness and understating of what to improve in myself and what to preserve. (Michal, 17)

While Shani described more of a need for each family member to work together to create change, Michal described an inner process in which self-reflection is of great importance. For Michal, it seems that having what she perceives as her shortcomings put front and center, made her motivated to create change for herself. She described an inner process in which she values self-honesty and self-awareness, which motivates her towards self-improvement. Similarly, Daniella also spoke of an inner change:

It [FGC] gave us guidance, FGC guided us onto the right path...Firstly, my thought process changed...I'm more, you can say, I don't know, maybe I just grew up and my thought process changed. But my thought process changed. Now I work, and I'm studying...like I never in my life thought I would be doing the things I'm doing. Like today...like there were decisions in my life I never thought I would make. (Daniella, 18)

Daniella addressed the fact that while FGC was there to guide her to the right path, what was ultimately most important was the inner change in her thought process, allowing her opportunities that she didn't feel she had before. The few participants who spoke to this subtheme made it clear that in their eyes motivation to create change in their families and themselves was a critical factor for the success of the implementation stage. Additionally, it would seem that age plays a factor in recognizing motivation, as this subtheme was addressed solely by the older participants.

### ***3.3 Building Support Systems***

Many of the participants who addressed the changes they felt at home spoke of the relationships they had built and fostered as a positive factor in their lives. These relationships

acted as support systems for the youths and allowed them to feel cared for, loved, and supported throughout the implementation stage. These support systems can be split into two prominent categories: natural support systems and program-based support systems.

### *3.3.1 Natural Support Systems*

During the conference stage, family and friends are asked to come be family supporters, allowing the family to receive support from people they already know and trust, as well as help guide the family throughout the implementation stage. Many of the participants spoke of the importance of family, many of whom acted as family supporters in the conference stage, when creating support systems and in feeling loved and cared for. Shani spoke of the ongoing connection she shares with those who were at her family conference as family supporters:

By us it's my aunt...grandma...and also our neighbor of ten years who is an active part of our family. And they are always always always there for us, checking in, how it's going, everyone had their own job...and all of the supporters were supporters in every meaning of the word. (Shani, 18)

In Shani's experience, her extended family, who in her words were very active supporters of her and her family, play an important role in her life. Not only are they there for her, but they each have a job in which they support her and make her feel loved and are always there for her no matter the circumstances. Similarly, Uri also shared the positive experience he had from his family supporters at the conference and the ongoing connection they now share:

Everything about it was good...especially that everyone is here supporting me...my dad, my mom, my family, my friends sometimes...and I see my uncles and aunts more now. (Uri, 14)

Uri, much like Shani, shared the significance not only of immediate family, but of extended family as well. He places importance on the fact that he sees his extended family more often as a result of them acting as family supporters, and the good feelings it gives him that everyone is there to support him. Nehorai also shared that since his family conference, he is closer to his grandfather:

Nehorai: I speak with my grandpa now, more than with my uncles.

Interviewer: And your grandpa calls you?

Nehorai: And I also call him. (Nehorai, 12)

When also asked questions about familial relationships since the conference, Liron answered "my relationship with my mom changed, she had a problem and she's working on it. My relationship with her is a little better". It seems that Liron understands how his mother has



worked on herself since their family conference, and how much better their relationship is for it. It would appear that the participants place great importance on positive family relationships, and that their participation in FGC often fostered closer relationships with the people they feel they can count on.

When there was a perceived lack of family support, participants also addressed that, sharing that the relationships they wished they were able to have with their families also impacted them greatly. Daniella shared her lack of relationship with her mother and the sadness it brings her:

It's sad for me that my mom didn't have a mother-daughter relationship with me where I can come and tell her things. It's sad. And it's painful that I didn't have that...but there's nothing to do and that's life, that's how I was raised and that's my family, you don't choose your family. (Daniella, 18)

Daniella shared her pain over her relationship with her mother and her feelings that her mother was not someone from whom she receives support. This is difficult for her, and in her eyes while there is nothing to do about it, she carries that pain with her and feels the lack of that relationship in her life. When asked about his family supporters, Yair also spoke of a lack of family supporters in his life:

My mom's cousin, we're in touch but not like we used to be. They moved to a different community, I'm in touch with her sons, we used to spend weekends together, but they stopped coming, they fought once about something...they don't come anymore. I eat a lot at my grandmother's house. My mother's brothers' family, we're in touch with them, but they don't really help. (Yair, 16)

Yair emphasized that while he might be in touch with some of his family members, he doesn't necessarily view them as a support system and can't rely on them for help. This is important to note, as often participants would turn to non-family members for support when their families were not available to be that person for them.

### ***3.3.2 Program-Based Support Systems***

While many of the participants spoke of family as their support systems, nearly half of participants addressed the support systems they felt were built as a result of the program: primarily their relationships with their family companion and their relationship with their social worker. They spoke of the importance of feeling that they have someone to lean on who cares for them, as well as the concrete help they received.

Three of the participants emphasized the importance of the role of the family companion throughout the implementation stage. When describing her relationship with her family companion, Daniella shared:

Nadia who was my family companion and she helped me out with a lot, a lot, a lot, a lot, a lot of things, not just in the project [FGC] itself but in general she helped me a lot...I'm really really grateful to her. Yeah, she really helped me as much as she could and I'm grateful...Listen, that time was very hard because there was a lot going on around me and there was no one to help, and Nadia was just more...it wasn't that wanted to help me as someone from the project or something, she just tried to help me as a friend...and it was good because a lot of people who work with teenagers don't pay attention to that...I'll tell you one thing, without Nadia, I don't know where I would be right now, I'm honestly telling you. (Daniella, 18)

Daniella highlighted her special relationship with her family companion, and how that relationship got her through a very hard time. It's clear from her effusive praise of her family companion that she feels heard and understood by her and could count on her to always be there for her. Not only is she incredibly grateful for Nadia's guidance, but truly believes she has had a positive impact on her journey in FGC. Similarly, when asked to describe her relationship with her family companion, Shani expressed:

She's [the family companion] the most amazing woman I've ever met in my life. If everyone were like her this world would simply be a better place. She was always always there for me. (Shani, 18)

Shani was also enthusiastic in her praise for her family companion, emphasizing that she looks up to her as a person and cherishes their relationship. Shani's sister Michal also shared her close relationship with her family companion, emphasizing that "I've had lots of phone calls with her", implying that not only is her family companion there for her but makes an active effort to make Michal feel cared for by keeping a close relationship with her.

Even when the participants felt that they themselves didn't have a close relationship with their family companion, they were able to see the importance of the family companion's role in their family. For example, when asked what was helpful to them as a family, Sivan shared "I know that the family companion always helps them [my parents]". It seems that therefore even if the youths participating in the program don't have direct contact with their family companion, their role is still regarded as important.

In addition to the family companion, the other role participants addressed when asked about support was that of the social worker. Ben shared his close relationship with his social worker and how she is always there to help him:

Sari [social worker] and I are in touch, she always helps me when I ask for something, for example if I have a fight with my mom, I call her and explain what happened and she tries to help. She listens a lot. (Ben, 16)

In his experience, Ben's social worker is always there to help when he needs something. He places emphasis on the fact that he feels heard by her, which makes him feel close to her and like she can help him. Similarly, Ariel spoke of the importance of having a social worker who you feel cares about you, as he shared his experience with two different social workers, and how his relationship with each was very different:

At social services I had Irit [previous social worker], and then she went on vacation, and I didn't really understand what happened, and they switched my social worker to Dana [current social worker]. After Dana, she started to take care of things like Irit. But with Irit it was mostly text messages and questions, and Dana was more...I don't know, it seemed like she was really interested and she really...she really tried to help. (Ariel, 15)

Ariel emphasized the importance of feeling like his social worker was interested in him and his wellbeing, and therefore really trying to help him. For him, when he felt like his social worker was only going through the motions, he had a hard time connecting to her or feeling that she was a source of support for him. Once he felt that his new social worker was invested in him, he was able to see her as a source of support.

In addition to emotional support, Nili spoke of the financial support her social worker was able to give her through social services, and how that helped her immensely:

I have my social worker that helps me with lots of things. Like when I said I didn't have clothes, because our financial situation wasn't so good and my parents couldn't buy me any, my social worker got me coupons and she would give me 600 shekels and she helped me, especially since I couldn't work because of my age. (Nili, 14)

It seems that Nili feels that she can rely on her social worker not just because she is there for her emotionally, but that she was able to help her with concrete needs that her family was unable to help her with at the time. This helped her feel close to her social worker and feel like she helps her with what she needs at any given moment.

When asked about support systems in general, whether natural or program-based, only one participant shared that he felt no change since his family conference:

Interviewer: Who supports you now? After the conference?

Dani: I don't know, no one. (Dani, 15)

### ***3.4 Parental Wellbeing Impacting the Child's Wellbeing***

One of the main subthemes that arose when speaking to the youths about the experiences surrounding the implementation theme was the impact their parents' wellbeing had on their wellbeing as well as the changes they felt in their homes. Based on the family plan created at their FGC, some of the participants' parents began therapy, which seems to have had a direct impact on their children. When asked about the benefits of taking part in FGC, Ben shared:

Through the program [FGC] my mom went to see a psychologist and it helped her, I think, and she started talking in a better way, in a more comfortable way, and was more understanding of problems and hardships. (Ben, 16)

Ben emphasized that once his mother started to receive help herself, she was able to be more understanding of Ben and his needs, therefore creating a more positive environment for him at home. Shani also shared that once her mother started to see a psychologist, they started to see a real change at home:

The meetings my mom would go to, so she would calm down, like it really helped her overcome her annoyances and anger and outbursts and all these other things that made it hard for us at home. She took it upon herself to change [...]and they helped us and they gave us treatment but also money, those are the things that made her feel content with herself and then she was more relaxed. That was what was really missing in our home, mom feeling relaxed. You can say that this program really saved us. (Shani, 18)

From Shani's perspective, her mother's anger and outbursts took a toll on her home, making their home environment challenging. She emphasized that in order to truly create change at home, her mother needed to receive help, which in turn led to a positive outcome for the entire family. She now sees that her family is in a much better place than they were previously and believes that their participation in the program was crucial in saving her family from their previous situation. Shani not only addressed the emotional support her mom received, but the concrete support, such as the money, which in turn led to her mother feeling more relaxed which allowed her to create a better home environment for her family. Mor was also able to point out the financial help her mother received, sharing "that they gave her [mom] money, and that really helps. We were in a worse situation financially, and now we have more money. And that helps me". Mor was perceptive enough to understand that in her mother receiving financial help, she, Mor, was also able to directly benefit from the program.

It would seem that many of the participants were able to see and understand that in their parents receiving help, be it emotional or financial, they themselves were directly impacted by that help. To best sum up this subtheme, when asked who FGC helped most in his family, Ariel shared:

Ariel: It helped everyone. They [FGC] found my parents a psychologist. She helped them solve a few things. To understand themselves.

Interviewer: Yes. I think that's good help. Who do you think it [the program] helped most?

Ariel: My mom. She became calmer. (Ariel, 15)

While Ariel emphasized that it was his mother who needed the most help, he was able to understand and explain that the program was able to help every member in his family by helping his mother become calmer.

Age seems to play a role in this subtheme, as the older participants were able to point to the emotional help their parents received as a direct contributor to the atmosphere at home and thereby their own wellbeing. The younger participants focused more on the concrete help their parents received and focused less on the emotional changes that led to a shift in the atmosphere at home.

### ***3.5 Resources Received from the Program***

As part of building the family plan, the family is invited and encouraged to suggest various concrete help or resources they feel they need in order to succeed. While the program comes with a budget to help implement the various resources, the decision as to what is needed is made by the family and then approved by the social worker. Most of the older participants were aware of the implementation of a budget, while the younger participants were aware that they were allotted more opportunities for various programming or items that weren't available to them in the past. While talking to the participants, it became clear that for the youths in the program, the budget was mainly used in two ways: a budget for programming and activities, and a budget for concrete purchases.

#### ***3.5.1 Budget for Programming***

In building the family plan, many families included programming for their children in their budget, such as for after school programs or various after school activities. In her family conference, Maayan was placed in the PERACH program, a program for at-risk or low-income

youth to help them with their studies. Throughout her interview, she emphasized the importance she places on the program, and how it's been a positive addition to her life:

And I really really love to be with Sarah, from *PERACH* [volunteer program], and I love to go to the parent-child center... but I love Sarah best. It's more fun since that started. (Maayan, 10)

From speaking with her, it is easy to understand that Maayan feels that the programming she takes part in since joining FGC is not only a positive experience, but a fun one. It would seem she has more joy and positive experiences in her life as a result of the programming she now takes part in. Moreover, it would seem that her relationship with Sarah causes her to feel seen and heard, thus amplifying her positive feelings surrounding the program. Similarly, Nili spoke about her time in the *Bayit Ham* (an after-school program for at-risk teenagers), and reflected positively on her participation:

There's also the *bayit ham* that I was in, and they paid for us to do all these trips. We would go to the pool and the movies and other things. Sort of like the show Big Brother. We would go on trips. Once we went sailing at the marina. (Nili, 14)

Nili spoke about the fun she had with the *bayit ham*, and the excitement she felt at participating in activities she hadn't previously experienced. Like many of the other participants, she feels that her involvement in FGC created opportunities for her that she may not have had were it not for her involvement in the program. Yair also pointed out that his involvement in the program allowed him opportunities he previously hadn't received, such as "my soccer class...and also the connection to the municipality, we went on a trip through the municipality, and we never had things like that before [FGC]". It seems that for Yair, the soccer program he was able to attend brings him joy, and is an outlet just as important as any trip. Similarly, Nehorai shared that the budget he received to do his carpentry program was beneficial in many ways:

It [the carpentry program] helps me calm down...and it's really fun. Because I love...it calms me down. If I'm upset, so it calms me down. Instead of hitting and stuff...so this calms me down. (Nehorai, 12)

Nehorai not only has fun doing carpentry but understands that it helps keep him calm. In his eyes, his participation in the program is important as it gives him a positive outlet for his energy, and therefore prevents him from losing control and exercising negative behavior at home. Ariel also spoke about the budget he received to take basketball lessons, sharing that "[FGC] helped...they gave me money for my hobby, for what I love. They gave me a basketball coach.

That really helped”. He emphasized that giving him the opportunity to pursue a hobby he loves was helpful not only in that he enjoyed it, but in that he was able to view the program as a positive asset in his life. In her interview, Michal also touched on the budget she received from FGC, and how beneficial the budget was to her:

The budget, that allowed me to do the course, I only paid a little bit of the cost, let’s say they paid about two-thirds, and I paid the remaining third with my own money, but it gave me a boost. Because if it weren’t for them, I don’t believe I would have done the course. You understand that with corona I can’t work. And now this is my work, what I do from home. (Michal, 17)

Michal not only believes that the budget she received to do her course (as part of the family plan created in the conference, Michal was given a budget to study sewing) was important for her peace of mind, but that it also gave her stability in an uncertain time.

### ***3.5.2 Budget for Concrete Purchases***

In addition to the budget for after school-activities and courses, some of the participants spoke about the concrete purchases they were able to make due to FGC’s budget. Differing from the families who chose to implement the budget for after-school activities, the application of the budget for purchasing concrete items allowed the youths to feel they received items that their families were unable to provide them with prior to their participation in the program. Liron shared that “[FGC] helped. It gave us money. I used that money to buy a cellphone”. Similarly, when asked about the help she received from FGC, Daniella shared that being able to move out at 18 and start her life as a young adult would have been difficult if not for her involvement in the program:

And the FGC project really helped me...they helped me with my apartment, and they helped me buy a washing machine and things that I really needed, for like, my house. Important things. (Daniella, 18)

Her ability to start her independence with a cushion helped Daniella start her transition into young adulthood with much less stress and allowed her to feel that she was taken care of.

### ***3.6 The Challenges in Implementing the Family Plan***

While most of the participants had a lot of positive things to say about the program, there were also various challenges that they felt arose throughout the implementation stage. The challenges can be split into two prominent categories: difficulties surrounding the implementation of resources from the program, and the challenge in working on family dynamics.

### 3.6.1 Challenges Implementing Resources

From speaking with the participants who chose to address the difficulties they experienced, it became clear that one main criticism of the program is the feeling that it wasn't carried out to its full extent. For example, Yair shared that while he did get help from the program, he felt he was promised things that never came to fruition:

There should be a budget and they should actually carry out the plans they decided on, it should be more serious...you have to fight to get it...there should be a big budget and they should carry out what they said they would. What's the budget even for? Clothes, stupid things...I asked for three things, I only received one. (Yair, 16)

In his eyes, while he is able to be grateful for what he did receive, he was disappointed to feel that he had to fight to get what he asked for and that he was let down when he only received some of what he asked for. Without an explanation as to why, he only received some of his requests, Yair was left feeling hurt and let down by the program. Similarly, when asked if she saw room for improvement, Shir shared that she felt that once her family moved into the implementation stage, there was less follow-up and guidance:

The program was fine, I think it needs to be run more intensely. It was a little unstable. It wasn't really one hundred percent. In my opinion the program doesn't help. Most of the time I wasn't at home, I wasn't here when someone would come and would try and change things. From what I saw, it didn't do anything. I don't know what to say...I know the social worker would come do home visits, but it wasn't relevant because if someone was coming over, we would tidy up. (Shir, 15)

It's easy to understand from her quote that Shir felt that her family could have benefited from more intense guidance, and that with the program run the way it was, she didn't feel that her family gained much from it at the end of the day or that anything really changed at home. Additionally, she felt that had her family received more intense help, they wouldn't be able to put on a front and behave as if everything was getting better, as they did during the social worker's home visits. Esther also shared her feelings that things didn't change much at home after participating in the program:

Everything stayed the same. I know what it's like, you talk about everything and after that it's all over...I don't know, and they [social services] have to know everything about me, report about me, enough, it's annoying. I was in the *bayit ham*, and you know what? They reported everything to social services. (Esther, 16)

She shared her frustrations that while at the conference there was a lot of talk as to how the program would help her and her family, at the end of the day she feels nothing has changed. Moreover, she shared her frustrations that even the family plans that did come into fruition, such



as her participation in the *bayit ham*, were ultimately disappointing to her, as she felt her trust was betrayed by those she thought she could trust, for example the counselors she worked with. It would seem from her interview that the original separation between FGC and social services (by having the pre-conference stage go through the coordinator who is unaffiliated with social services) made it all the more confusing to her once the responsibility for carrying out the implementation stage came back to social services.

### ***3.6.2 Challenges within Family Dynamics***

An additional challenge the participants shared were the meetings they attended as a family post-conference. For many of the families, some of the concerns that arose were regarding their ability to communicate without fighting and to foster a more positive family dynamic. For Michal's family, this meant beginning to attend family therapy at the parent-child center. Michal shared that she had a hard time with these meetings, as she felt they weren't helpful:

I didn't connect to that all. I hated those meetings, not because they couldn't improve things, I just don't see how anything came out of them...I don't think that they...I don't know, I didn't like that whole environment so I chose not to participate, I believed in us that as a family we could fix what was happening here, without their help. Because they could somehow help, but not in a significant way that meant we should all go to those meetings. (Michal, 17)

Michal shared her belief that those meetings wouldn't help her family, as she didn't feel she saw positive results from attending them. Therefore, not only did she not see the benefits but chose not to participate in them at all. Like Michal, Maayan also started going to a parent-child center with her family as a part of their family plan. She also shared that she found it difficult to be an active participant in those meetings:

You speak about your feelings. That's the most annoying part...that I have to give all of the background about how I feel and that's the most annoying because I'm used to keeping it all inside. (Maayan, 10)

Maayan explained that while she did ultimately participate in the meetings, she felt uncomfortable attending them. As she is used to keeping her feelings to herself as part of the family dynamic she has grown used to, being asked to change the way she communicated proved difficult for her and took some getting used to. In summation, the participants shared that some of their biggest challenges were surrounding communication, either by being asked to change the way they communicate or feeling unheard and not receiving enough support.

### ***3.7 Practical Suggestions from the Participants for Smoother Implementation***

As a result of some of the challenges the participants felt were prominent in the implementation stage, over half of them wanted to give constructive feedback on how to improve the program and make it more individual to their own needs.

In the previous subtheme, Shir spoke about the lack of support she felt throughout the implementation stage. When asked how she thought the program could improve, she suggested real time guidance and support:

I think that in our case it would have been beneficial if a representative from FGC would have come and instructed them [her family] on how to behave in real time and came to improve things and then that might have changed things [...] I would want the help to be focused on running the house...I don't know, it's worth being more involved in the family's life and not just the parents. (Shir, 15)

Shir's suggestion that there be more "hand-holding" throughout the program emphasizes the importance she places on feeling that her family is incapable of creating that change alone and needs the extra help from representatives of the program. In her eyes, had there been more focus on helping her family carry out concrete change in their home, the program would have been more successful. Additionally, she felt that the program was too focused on giving her parents the help they needed and not focused enough on helping each of the family members.

Yair also shared his advice for improving the program, suggesting that FGC should "listen to what they (the participants) have to say, and mainly just help them with what they need. They listened to me, but sometimes they just talked and talked and nothing came out of it. But some good things did come out of it [FGC]". While Yair recognizes that good things did come of the program, he also feels that there were situations in which there was a lot of talk and not a lot of action. This fits with the challenges he presented in the previous subtheme in which he shared he felt that he wasn't always listened to and had to fight to get what he wanted from the program.

Aliza shared her similar frustrations at not feeling heard, and shared that it would be beneficial "to arrange more meetings between the kids, including organizing those meetings for kids so that way everyone has a chance to say what they want to say". It seems that Aliza felt that as a non-adult participant, she didn't have as much of a voice as the adults did, and therefore feels that it would be beneficial to give the child and adolescent participants the opportunity to voice their opinions in a less overwhelming forum. Daniella also spoke of feeling not heard by adults and suggested bringing in former participants to help current participants feel understood:

My advice, teenagers understand teenagers, okay? [...] I think that if you had more young people at the project [FGC] it would help you...you need more young people that were in those situations [...] for example, if they would recommend that I come and work for minimum wage, and that I should go and talk and sit and speak to someone [...] and it will also help all of those people who are 18, 19, 20 that can't find a job, because it will be like a job. And you [FGC] can pay minimum wage...if this gets to the people higher up, and you decide to organize it, I would be happy to be part of the project. (Daniella, 18)

Daniella expressed her reluctance to share her feelings with adults as she feels misunderstood by them, thus proposing a challenge to receiving help. In order to circumvent that challenge, Daniella believes that it would be a good idea to have “graduates” of FGC act as guides for the next cohort. As “aging out” of social services can often cause a relapse in negative behavior and there is a lack of resources in general for those over the age of 18, this suggestion made Daniella, who herself just turned 18, excited to feel she was a part of the solution rather than the problem.

This theme shed light on the experiences of the youths who participated in the implementation stage. As the time spent in this stage varied between the participants, so did their subjective experiences. Most of the participants, regardless of their time in the implementation stage, were able to point to changes they felt they were experiencing at home as a result of their participation in FGC. They were able to place emphasis on the things they felt necessary to create such change, be it motivation, support systems, their parents’ wellbeing, or resources they were provided with as a result of their participation in the program. Additionally, some of the participants shared the challenges they faced in this stage as well as the practical suggestions they had for improving its efficiency.

#### **Theme Four: The Effects of COVID-19 on the Program**

FGC was brought to Israel in 2018 and the first conferences to take place began in 2019. In early 2020, COVID-19 came to Israel, leaving the country in a series of lockdowns in order to slow the spread of the virus. The pandemic affected social services as many offices had to restrict visitors and much of the work began to take place virtually. Additionally, the virus in waves, caused repeated lockdowns and much uncertainty among professionals and service receivers. This theme will explore if and how the pandemic affected the program in both the conference and implementation stage, as perceived by the youth who participated in this study.

#### ***4.1 Effects on the Conference Stage***

Most of the participants did not speak to the effects of the pandemic on the conference and shared that their conferences took place in person despite the pandemic. It would seem that great effort was made on the part of the program to prevent having to have the conferences virtually, even if in some cases it meant postponing the conference. In general, the conferences during the time of the pandemic were hybrid; the family, social worker and coordinator were in the same room, while other professionals and family supporters joined over zoom.

One participant spoke about her experience with her hybrid conference. When asked how she felt about her conference, Mor shared her difficulty understanding what was going on:

I remember we spoke on Zoom, and we talked about how to improve things at home, how to improve the situation at home, and like, I, there were some words I didn't understand, but, I did like the big meeting, but I didn't like that it was on Zoom. On zoom I can't really see all the people, so... (Mor, 11)

It's clear from Mor's quote that while her conference was not a negative experience for her, Zoom made it more difficult for her. As the conference can be an overwhelming forum as it is, especially for young children, Mor's inability to see everyone who was taking part in the conference added to her discomfort. Furthermore, when asked if she felt heard at her conference, Mor answered "um, no...I didn't want to say anything because I was embarrassed". It seems that the virtual forum of the conference made Mor less likely to participate and advocate for herself.

#### ***4.2 Effects on the Implementation Stage***

When the participants addressed the effects of COVID-19 on the implementation stage, there were mixed opinions regarding how the pandemic affected them and their families. There were some participants who felt it was incredibly harmful, while others actually found that the consequences of the pandemic, for example the lockdowns, led to a closeness they hadn't felt with their family before.

##### ***4.2.1 The Negative Effects of COVID-19***

As a result of the lockdowns that took place throughout the country, the ability to carry out some of the programming decided upon as part of the family plan was hindered. When asked how she was doing during her interview, Shani mentioned the stress COVID-19 has caused her and how it deeply affected plans that were decided upon as part of the family plan, such as receiving her driver's license:

I didn't manage to get my license...there were a lot of lockdowns...and I went into quarantine, and then I got sick, and then I went to my pre-army program, and I wasn't home because the program is in Yaffo, I wasn't really home...you could say I slipped through the cracks. (Shani, 18)

Shani emphasized the effect COVID-19 had not just on her personally, by getting sick and going into quarantine, but also in terms of the implementation of the program. Her feeling of “slipping through the cracks” due to the pandemic is frustrating and seems like a setback to her life, keeping her stuck in one place as opposed to moving forward as she had hoped. Shani wasn't the only one to feel the negative effects of the pandemic. When asked about the implementation stage, Ariel mentioned his frustrations with the lockdowns, explaining “if there wasn't a lockdown, my basketball lessons would have continued. But because of the lockdown, it's not possible to continue my lessons”. As basketball lessons were what Ariel asked for during his family conference, having the opportunity taken away, as a result of the pandemic, was disappointing to him and affected his quality of life.

Other participants shared the difficulty in feeling that things were taken away from them as a result of the pandemic. When asked about his feelings towards the pandemic and its effects on his life, Liron mentioned the void that not being able to see his social worker has caused him, as their meetings were important to him, sharing “I haven't met with her [the social worker] during corona...there's nowhere to go now. You can't go to anything, there's nowhere to go, everything is closed”.

In addition to programming being cut or postponed due to lockdowns and the virus, the pandemic caused families to have to spend more time together in close quarters. This proved very difficult for some, as their family dynamics and difficulty in communication was part of what led to their participation in FGC. When asked about her experience with COVID-19, Daniella shared how it deeply affected her family in a negative way. She described how being stuck in the house with her family, especially her mother, proved to be very difficult, and while they lived side by side for a long time, they didn't communicate at all, and how the situation almost caused her parents to divorce:

Like most of the time I would just sit around[...]My mom, dad, me, my younger brother, a dog, a cat...it was like one big mad house and like I can't really be with my mom in the same place for a long period of time. We start fighting about nothing. Most of corona we weren't speaking [...]and because of corona lots of couples, like, broke up [...] a lot of couples got divorced. My family, my parents were about to get divorced too. And it's

hard. It was hard for all of us. But okay, we got through it. We moved forward. (Daniella, 18)

For Daniella, while she can ultimately say that her family is now okay, the tension and anxiety she experienced from being stuck in her home with her family was incredibly difficult. As Daniella was unable to find work due to the pandemic, she was also unable to remove herself from the situation, even for a short amount of time, and ultimately moved out of her home as soon as she turned 18.

The pandemic had a negative effect on the whole country, and greatly affected the pilot program, and as such the youths who took part. It is difficult to ascertain whether or not the youths would have perceived the program differently had programming not been cancelled, had social service departments not been closed down, and had they been able to spend a proportionate amount of time both inside and outside of their homes.

#### ***4.2.2 The Positive Effects of COVID-19***

Despite the challenges the participants addressed, the time spent with family in lockdown wasn't a negative experience for all the participants. Approximately a third of them remembered the time they spent together fondly, spoke of becoming closer with their families, and reminisced about doing things as a family that they previously didn't have the opportunity to do. When asked about her experience with the pandemic, Nili shared the opportunity they had to connect through the pandemic:

The corona really connected us as a family. My family got much closer during corona because we were all home and we were laughing and talking and singing songs and sharing with each other, we connected. And we've always had a good connection, but there are ups and downs. Every family has times that are hard for them, and we had a time where it wasn't good. But we got back to ourselves. And now we're okay. (Nili, 14)

In her eyes, the time they spent together was an opportunity to reconnect as a family and allowed her family to transition from a situation in which they were less connected and spent less time together into a situation in which they are happier and more bonded. It would seem that to Nili, laughing and sharing is what makes her family connected and okay. Similarly, Aliza shared the opportunity she and her family had to spend more time together due to the lockdown:

Aliza: We spoke a lot during the first lockdown, we played together.

Interviewer: It wasn't like that before?

Aliza: No, it wasn't like that before, and during corona we spent time together, we spoke and played together. (Aliza, 16)

Not only did Aliza and her family have the opportunity to spend time together, but for Aliza this was something new, as before COVID-19 she and her family didn't spend as much time together. The opportunity to spend more time together contributed to Aliza's personal wellbeing. Mor also shared that being home during the pandemic led to a shift in their family dynamic, saying "it made us closer. Because we were at home more, my mom talked to us more, she shared with me more things. And now we're closer". The time they spent together allowed Mor to bond with her mother in a different way, creating a closeness between them that wasn't previously there.

In addition to creating a closeness and connection, when asked about how she experienced the pandemic, Shir shared how her mother began to function better at home as a result of the lockdowns:

Up until then [corona] my mom didn't really care, now she has no choice, she isn't working and she's with everyone here [at home]. I can tell you that she still doesn't really care, but she is at home more. And sometimes she'll sweep or wash the floor which is something. (Shir, 15)

While Shir did not speak of a connection or bond as a result of the pandemic, she did share how the fact that her mother was home more often made her step into the more traditional role of a mother, thus relieving some of Shir's responsibilities at home and allowing her to have more piece of mind.

While it's clear that the pandemic had an effect on all of the participants, not all of their experiences were negative. In the conference stage, there was an effort made to have the conference take place in person for most of the participants. In the implementation stage, while many participants shared the pain they experienced due to the pandemic, whether it was programming being cut or difficult family dynamics, others were able to express their gratitude over the subsequent closeness the pandemic caused within their family. However, it is clear that the pandemic deeply affected the ability to carry out the implementation stage as expected from the conference. Many of the participants shared programming that was cut due to the virus, and how the pandemic negatively affected their quality of life at home.

In summation, the analysis of the data brought forward four main themes within the youths' unique perceptions and perspectives as to their experiences in FGC. The themes highlighted how youths perceive concerns and protective factors in their lives, both prior to and following their participation and experiences in their own FGC and the implementation stage, and lastly the

effects of COVID-19 on the program. The discussion will focus on the various findings that arose in this research in relation to the existing literature in the field.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions and experiences of the youths who participated in 'Getting on Track – FGC's pilot program. The study focused more specifically on their experiences throughout the conference and implementation stages and their perceptions regarding concerns and protective factors in their lives. The summary of the main findings that relate to each of the research questions are as follows:

Regarding the concerns and protective factors in their lives, family and familial bonds were a main theme for almost all the participants. When addressing concerns in the pre-conference stage, the youths focused on the concerns they had regarding what they perceived as problematic family dynamics and issues of miscommunication, disclosing the fear of being removed from their homes and separated from their families. They shared the way they feel their personal behaviors affected their familial situation and the difficulty in having to remember what they went through prior to their participation in the program. They also expressed the concerns they have once they became involved in the program and expanded to include the program coming to an end and concerns surrounding their age or stage in life. It would seem that for most of the participants, being a part of the program has a positive impact on their wellbeing and family and home situation. The protective factors they emphasized as important in alleviating concerns were family and the bond and protection that brings, emotional protection from the important people in their lives, themselves as protectors regarding family dynamics and caring for other family members, and in one case, social services, as she felt none of the other protective factors were available to her. The findings suggest that for most of the participants, family is both a source of concern and protection which directly influences the youth's wellbeing.

The findings regarding the youth's participation in the conference stage of the program emphasized the importance of being able to understand the process, and how without that understanding, they often felt left out of important decisions and that their participation was more passive than active. When able to take part, the participants highlighted the importance of hearing their positive attributes in the strengths circle, and how that praise has remained with them and allowed them to be more openminded when taking part in their concerns circle. The main theme that emerged was that often participants appreciated and understood the importance



of the program when they were included as active participants in the process. This finding highlights the importance placed on family dynamics, as the most difficult parts of the conference as described by the participants were the fights and miscommunications stemming from what they perceived as problematic familial relationships.

When addressing their participation in the implementation stage of the program, the participants shared the changes they felt in their homes since participating in the program, many of them describing closer family bonds, less fighting at home, and more quality time spent together. By emphasizing the strengthening of protective factors in their lives, such as their own motivation, relationships with family members and professionals, and their parents receiving proper help, the participants described a more positive home situation after their participation in the program. However, alongside the positive changes, some of the youths nonetheless felt that their voices were left unheard during the implementation stage, and that they needed to fight for what they asked for or that it wasn't implemented into the family plan at all.

The findings surrounding the effects of COVID-19 on the program were mostly regarding the implementation stage of the program. Some of the youths addressed the negative effects of COVID-19, such as the feeling of slipping through the cracks as the country shut down around them. They spoke of programs they had been waiting to take part in since their conference being cancelled and how the challenging family dynamics they previously spoke about were heightened during the lockdown as they were all stuck together. Alongside the difficulties, some of the youths shared that the time spent in lockdown with their families was an unexpected gift that led to strong family bonds and the ability to spend time together in ways they hadn't previously.

The findings raise important topics for discussion, which relate to the research questions, and will be presented in this chapter by focusing on three main issues: 1) how the youths in the study perceive concerns and protective factors in their lives versus standard and universal definitions of concerns and protective factors for children; 2) do children's always have the right to participate in the issues that concern and involve them; and 3) youths' levels of participation in the program. These issues will be examined in relation to the literature regarding child risk and protection as well as youths' experiences in FGCs around the world.

### **Perceptions of Concerns/Risks and Protective Factors**

One of the main themes that arose from the findings were how the youths in the study perceive the concerns and protective factors in their lives. FGCs place emphasis on the terminology used and place emphasis on using expressions and terms that embody the values of FGCs. For example, the use of the word “concerns” over “risks” is intentional, as there is no connotation of blame or problems, rather concerns which can be addressed and worked out by both the family and professionals (Shemer et al., 2020).

Since the main reason for entering the pilot program was concerns regarding children’s wellbeing within their current family situation, it is important to understand how the participants perceived the concerns in their lives while taking part in the program. While most studies on the effectiveness of FGCs with children are often inconsistent and therefore not definitive, the positive results of participating in FGCs are prevalent and that children’s sense of protection and overall wellbeing are improved with their participation (Shemer et al., 2020).

Often when studying risk<sup>5</sup> and protection among children, the definitions for each are seen as universal and binary (Nadan & Roer-Strier, 2020a). However, this study finds that the underlying factor in both concerns and protective factors among the youths are tied to family. While the concerns and protective factors that plague the youths are varied, and are susceptible to change, they are often connected to their families and themselves. The importance they placed on their personal relationships, be it with family members or service providers, was prevalent throughout the research. One of the ways the literature addresses risk and protection is rooted in the context-informed perspective, according to which various contexts shape a person’s experiences, including the way they perceive risk and protection (Roer-Strier, & Nadan, 2020b). The findings of this study point to various contexts that may have shaped the way the participants viewed risk and protection in their own lives. In this study, the most prevalent contexts were family, socioeconomic status, and the COVID-19 pandemic, both regarding concerns and protective factors.

As mentioned above, one of the main contexts associated with risk that the participants in this study addressed was family. Some of the participants spoke about the family dynamics they viewed as distressing, such as constant fighting. They expressed that the constant fighting at

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<sup>5</sup> As FGCs emphasize the use of the word “concerns” over “risks”, the two terms will be used interchangeably throughout this section.

home was a source of concern for them and colored the way they viewed the program's ability to work with their family. This aligns with the literature that suggests that chronic family conflict in which family members argue on a frequent basis can cause permanent damage to children who grow up in such an environment as well as developmental issues and problematic behavior in adolescence (Al Ubaidi, 2017; Streit et al., 2021). Additionally, youths experiencing sibling conflict often report lower mental health than youths who have positive relationships with their siblings (Tucker & Finkelhor, 2017). The concerns regarding family and family dynamics were extremely prevalent among the participants. Whether they addressed their concerns over sibling dynamics or problematic personal behaviors stemming from what they suggested to be a difficult home environment, the participants who spoke to this concern stressed the anxiety and desire they felt to have the program work for their family.

Another cause for concern voiced in this study is seeing divorce or single parenthood as a risk factor in their lives. Studies about divorce have shown that the experiences of children whose parents have divorced differ from those who grow up in a two-parent household (Härkönen, 2014). While married parents who have high conflict situations inside the home is not necessarily a more positive situation, often parental separation changes youths' lives in various ways, and is often rooted in conflict and estrangement, all of which can lead to lower psychological wellbeing and behavioral problems (Härkönen et al., 2017). The participants from single parent homes who spoke to this theme shared how they feel different from their friends who grew up with both parents at home and how having only one parent at home can be a cause for a feeling of less protection, both physical and emotional, which in their minds is a factor for concern.

A main concern brought up by the participants was home removal. Many of the participants spoke of their fears of being removed from their home, and how such a concern shaped the way they viewed their participation in the program. The literature shows that some of the factors most associated with home removal are chronic poverty, low parental education level, parental psychopathology, and parental substance abuse (Milani et al., 2020). A chief reason for this is the lack of resources available to help families alleviate concerns and promote protective factors in their communities (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2021). In this study, many of the participants come from families of low socio-economic status. Some of the youth spoke about the lack of resources they felt they had available to them and their families

before participating in the program, and the feeling that the addition of resources to their lives promoted the protective factors in their lives. In addition, the participants also spoke of their home environment being influenced and shaped by what they saw as problematic parenting practices, either by absentee parenting or parents experiencing their own difficulties which directly impacted the children. For example, one participant shared that her parents were often absent and a lot of the responsibilities at home fell on her shoulders while others shared that their parents receiving help in various areas of their personal lives deeply impacted their own lives and living situations for the better. It is clear, both when having discussed concerns and protective factors, that family plays an enormous role on the way children view those factors in their lives.

Another cause for concern was the way COVID-19 impacted the world and the program. Studies have shown that isolation was a cause for stress and interpersonal conflicts among family members (Calvano et al., 2021). That was the case in this study as well; a third of the participants in this study spoke about the difficulty being in lockdown with their family members during such a tumultuous time. They spoke of an increase in the fighting at home and the stress it caused them. Additionally, many resources for at risk youth were forced to close down during the pandemic (Wong et al., 2020). This was true in Israel as well, and some of the participants in this study spoke to the feeling of “slipping through the cracks”. However, for some, spending time as a family during the lockdowns helped them reconnect (Giannotti et al., 2021). This was the case in this study as well, with a third of the participants sharing the gift they received by reconnecting with their families. For some, the opportunity to reconnect enhanced the protective factors in their lives.

Protective factors in children’s lives can be found at the individual, familial and community levels (Luthar et al., 2015). Over half of the participants in this study perceived their families as being a protective factor for them. The literature suggests that a main predictor of resilience and protective factors among children are a strong family environment and positive family experiences (Daniels & Bryan, 2021; Powell et al., 2021). The participants in this study described the importance of not only having the physical protection of their family members, but of knowing that they have someone to rely on who meets their emotional needs. Therefore, the thought of being removed from what they see as their anchor is terrifying. This is important as the literature indicates that even children and adolescents who experience difficult experiences in

their childhood still present with resilience if they had a cohesive and strong family environment (Daniels & Bryan, 2021).

An additional protective factor brought forward in this study was the participants seeing themselves as a protective factor in their lives. Studies have shown that the ability to self-regulate is a protective factor among youths, with goal setting among adolescents to be a protective factor (Dias & Cadime, 2017; Sattler & Font, 2018). One of the participants shared in detail how she sees herself as a protector for herself and her siblings, as she takes on some of the family responsibilities and sets them as goals to achieve, such as taking her younger siblings wherever they need to go. A few of the other adolescents also addressed the importance of setting goals, both personal goals and familial goals, and how those goals keep them focused on moving forward for the better, thus acting as a protective factor in their lives.

However, youths perceiving themselves as their own protector would raise the question as to how youths come to rely on themselves as protective factors as opposed to looking for protection from the adults in their lives. There have been studies that have found a connection between adverse childhood experiences, within them neglect, self-resilience, and efficacy (Cui et al., 2020; Masten & Barns, 2018). While it is admirable that the youths in this study have found ways to promote resilience and goal setting, it can also be seen as a concern that they are unable to rely on those who should be deemed the trustworthy and safe adults in their lives, for example their parents, extended family, and various community members.

For youths who don't have strong familial or individual protective factors, it is often the role of social services to step in and make difficult decisions regarding their wellbeing (Milani et al., 2020). In this study, one participant expressed that she felt that she had to rely on the protection of social services, as she didn't feel she had herself or her family to rely on. However, as only one participant shared that she viewed social services as a protective factor, it begs the question as to why more children don't view them as a protective factor in their lives.

While risk and protective factors are studied widely, children's perceptions of these factors are often excluded. This damaging gap creates a lack of awareness that can blind social service workers to risk-causing and risk-protecting factors, especially among youths belonging to minority groups (Ben-Arieh, 2005; Mazursky & Ben-Arieh, 2020). Additionally, in other studies conducted within the FGC research group, it was found that the parents who participated in the study also felt that there was a gap between what they perceived as concerns versus what their

social worker perceived as concerns, leading to misunderstandings and mistrust (Cohen, 2021; Omer, 2021).

Generally, when it comes to child protection, risk is usually defined by social workers using western and universal parameters. Nadan and Roer-Strier (2020a) point to three myths that are often perpetrated when assessing risk and protection among youths. The first, that risk is an absolute that exists in the world and therefore professionals must address it in order to keep children safe. However, their findings show that risk and protection are social constructs influenced by various contexts, and therefore creating tools and programs to help professionals assess risk can be problematic, as it neglects to take various contexts into account. This was demonstrated in the findings of this study, as the participants, some from similar backgrounds, had widely varied definitions of risks, concerns, and protective factors in their lives. Therefore, to assess the concerns in their lives based on predetermined parameters without giving them a voice could lead to problematic solutions for addressing their concerns. FGC addresses this in the preparation for the conference by having the coordinator help the family understand the concerns brought forward as well as voice their own and continues throughout the conference in which everyone present is encouraged to voice their personal opinions during the concerns circle. Therefore, the family plan created at the conference is an important step in beginning to address concerns and protective factors in young people's lives. The second myth Nadan & Roer-Strier (2020a) address is that definitions of risk are universal. As demonstrated above, not allowing for culture or any other context to have a role in the definition of risk is highly problematic. The perceptions of participants in this study were varied and highly influenced by various cultures, age, gender, and socio-economic status. To assume that each participant would give a definition of risk that aligns with the definition in most western cultures without allowing room for differences and nuances would be doing them a disservice. Lastly, Nadan and Roer-Strier (2020a) decompose the myth that risk and protection are distinct and binary. The findings align with this assessment as for many of the participants, family was seen as both a concern and a protective factor. Therefore, when assessing risk and protection among children, it is important to make room for the various contexts and the unique voices involved.

FGC strives to make room for all the different perspectives of those involved in the pilot program. The focus on cooperation and listening from the first stage in which the coordinator helps the family prepare for their conference, in the conference stage during the concerns circle

in which everyone is encouraged to be heard, and throughout the stage of implementation in which the family is in constant contact with their social worker, the family and social worker learn to work together in a way that benefits the family and helps alleviate their concerns and promote the protective factors in their lives. Studies have shown that families who have participated in FGC programs have a better relationship with social services in relation to families who have not (Harris et al., 2018; Havenen & Christansen, 2014). Additionally, when implementing the family plan, great emphasis is placed in what each family member asked for, in Israel specifically with the budget to help achieve the desires of each family member (Shemer et al., 2020).

### **How Should Children be Involved in the Issues that Affect Them?**

In recent years, questions regarding youths' rights to participation have been widely researched. Article 12 of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) highlights the importance of children's participation and emphasizes that children have the right to express their views in all processes that affect them (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). There has been a significant rise in social commitment to children's rights to participation, specifically following the ratification of the CRC, signed by Israel in July 1990 and ratified in October 1991. In the most recent UN committee on the rights of the child, the committee emphasized their commitment to promoting child welfare and participation, most specifically with the adoption of the EU Child Guarantee in July 2021, which strives to ensure that children have equal access to resources and that their rights are protected and promoted. However, certain gaps and limitations were also acknowledged at the CRC, such as a lack of ways to support impoverished families and children and a lack of "poverty-aware" guidelines, maintaining family bonds in situations where children have to be separated from their parents, and a lack of transparency when it comes to available information for children and parents (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2021). This further highlights that child participation can often be challenging as the definition differs among both children and adults. There are many questions that are raised when discussing how children should be involved in the issues that concern them, including participation versus protection, age, culture, and organizational constraints. Additionally, it is important to find balance as to how to promote participation in ways that empower and give autonomy to those involved, while trying to avoid traumatic and harmful experience (Shemer et al., 2021).

Involving children in issues about them, whether in research or practice, can often be challenging as there is a question of how much weight to put on child participation versus on child protection (Kosher, 2018). One obstacle to children's participation in issues that involve them is the perception of protection they receive from those around them. As children are reliant on their parents for guidance and protection, children's participation is often guided and decided upon by their parents (Herbots & Put, 2015). This was highlighted by the findings of this study. Many of the participants wanted to share their experiences in the program, and when given the opportunity, were excited to elaborate on how they viewed their own participation throughout the program. However, more than half of the parents approached about participation in this study did not consent to their children's participation, often stating that they were worried that the content of the study would upset their children, or that they didn't feel it was appropriate for their children to discuss "adult" matters. Additionally, in a study conducted by Kosher (2018), she found that child participation was least promoted in areas of risk and danger. As the participants of this study are families about whom various concerns had been relayed to and by professionals, as well as the family themselves, the reluctance to have children participate fits with the current literature on the subject that suggest that while child participation is often lauded as an important goal, its implementation is often found lacking (McMellon & Tisdall, 2020; Riddell & Tisdall, 2021).

Children's participation can often be dictated by the family or child's social worker (Balsells et al., 2017; Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020). For example, in conducting this study, I reached out to four social workers; two of them were hesitant to promote their clients' participation stating that they felt that it might not be beneficial to the youths they worked with to participate in the study, as it might hurt their right to privacy and that the youths might not be equipped emotionally to handle participating in such a personal study. Social workers are less likely to promote children's participation in the welfare context as opposed to personal and social contexts and are often reluctant to give their support for participation if they feel that a child's protection may be compromised (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020). As the children involved in this study are all recognized by the welfare system, some of the social workers were reluctant to promote their participation and had lots of questions as to how their identity and participation could possibly cause problems when it comes to their protection. This raises the question as to



what the rights to children's participation include, especially when pertaining to harmful content in the context of child protection.

Studies on children's participation within social services have found that while practitioners are meant to have a key role in implementing the participation of children in decisions that involve them, children are often still viewed as passive participants (Toros, 2021; Zeijlmans et al., 2019). While this may be due to the desire to protect them from participating in difficult experiences, however this viewpoint leads to a reality in which children's voices are left out of important decisions that are made about them, as they are seen as weak or vulnerable, and therefore the desire to protect them overpowers the rights to their participation (Toros & Falch-Eriksen, 2021). In this study, a third of the participants felt they were merely passive participants and that often their suggestions or opinions were ignored. Some of the participants were invited to only parts of their conference and found themselves outside for some of the conference. This raises the question as to how much children should be exposed; are they meant to be active participants for the entire decision-making process, or are some things meant to be left to adults. Additionally, this also raises the question as to whether or not child participation should be promoted if not done with sufficient sensitivity. The participants in this study who expressed their views but felt they were neglected when building the family plan, were more disappointed than those that felt they didn't contribute at all.

Another consideration for children's participation is their age. The CRC specifically states that every child capable of forming their own views should have the right to express them in accordance with their age and maturity (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). A study conducted on children's involvement in decision-making and self-efficacy in research projects found that the older the child, the more likely the child is to take part in decision-making and be included as an active participant (Miller et al., 2017). This correlates with findings in this study that suggest that the older participants often had more of an understanding of what was going on, or the context in which their family participated in the program, and they often had a greater understanding of the wider picture, such as the help their parents received directly benefiting them. However, age was not always an obstacle for participation in that some of the younger participants perceived themselves as more active in their FGC than the older participants. Often, it is difficult to associate age with the ability to participate, as practitioners and researchers are aware that mental capabilities can differ even within the same age range (Woodman et al., 2018).

This raises the question as to whether the right to participate is ethical and intelligent in every situation, even among children with varying cognitive abilities.

Additionally, in a study conducted by Berrick et al. (2015) on children's involvement in decision-making, they found that child practitioners weighed the importance of child participation and their right to participate based on their age. However, the findings of this study suggest that the youths' capabilities were not necessarily based on their age. Youths in the current study ranged from 10-18, and while age did play a role for some of the participants, some of the younger participants felt that they were just as active as the older participants, while some of the older participants felt ill prepared for their FGC or unsure as to whether their suggestions were implemented and whether they had the right to participate. This is important, as when children are seen as more incapable the younger they are, the practitioners are drawn away from the viewpoint that children are experts in their own lives, and thus have a right to participate in the decisions that concern them (Toros & Falch-Eriksen, 2021).

As children's views and opinions are not meant to replace those of adults, but rather complete them, they should be heard regardless of the age of child (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020). This was emphasized within this study, as the youths who felt their opinions and viewpoints were implemented into building their family plan were often better able to see the positive impact of their participation in the program, as well as feel that their participation was integral to the success of the program as they are the experts on their own lives, thus leaving them more motivated and excited to help implement their family plan.

In addition to age, participatory practice can be tied to culture. Culture is a context that can play a role in participation (Nadan et al., 2019). Often, in hierarchical cultures, the parent-child relationship is built on respect and often patriarchal standards, and as such the participation of children in parental decisions is unfathomable. For example, parents from the ultra-Orthodox community who participated in the broader study of this research shared that the FGC model exposed their weaknesses and issues in front of their children, neighbors, family supporters, and professionals. This caused them to feel hurt and embarrassed, and even affected their willingness to participate in the program (Elkayam, 2019). However, one of the participants in the current study, who is of ultra-Orthodox background, shared that she felt not only prepared for her FGC, but that she was seen as an active participant by both her parents and the professionals. This dissonance further exemplifies the emphasis FGCs place on the participation of each family

member. However, it does beg the question as to whether a child's right to participation exceeds parents' rights to privacy and the preservation of a cultural way of life.

Another factor in failing to exercise a child's right to participate is organizational constraints on the part of the professionals, such as a busy workload or lack of time (Toros & Falch-Eriksen, 2021). FGCs recognize the organizational constraints and the need to often have an objective and neutral third-party player who can help the child exercise their right to participation throughout the process. This role is often filled by the coordinator prior to the conference, the family companion in the following stages, and in some countries, an advocate whose job is to advocate for the rights of the child (Holland & O'Neill, 2011; Natland & Malmberg-Heimonen, 2014; Shemer et al., 2020). The findings in this study highlight the importance of these roles when it comes to youth participation. One of the participants spoke about the preparation she received before the conference and how it empowered her to participate and share her ideas and desires, while other participants spoke of the bond they formed with their family companion and how they felt their voices were heard and empowered by them. However, as the role of an advocate does not exist in Israel, and often due to organizational constraints professionals do not receive proper training on participatory practice, there can therefore be a gap between their skills and their ability and patience to maintain participation in the long run (Shemer et al., 2021). When considering the gap between the desire to exercise children's rights and the lack of necessary training to do so, is it right to encourage the child's right to participate if it is not done with sufficient training and sensitivity?

While the importance of children's rights to participate in matters that involve them is heavily emphasized in both research and practice, there are many considerations that often precede or overrule their inherent right to participation (Toros & Falch-Eriksen, 2021). This was seen within the scope of this study as well. While FGCs promote the importance of child participation, and many of the youths' felt they were active participants, others spoke of the obstacles to their participation, and the obstacles in obtaining permission for their inclusion and participation were highlighted as well.

There are not always sufficient solutions that allow for children to participate in the way they have the right to. So long as those promoting participation are not prepared to address and deal with the outcomes of youths' requests, is it right to promote their participation, no matter the cost? The question as to whether children should participate in matters that involve them seems

relatively clear, but it does raise the question of whether participation is better under every circumstance, and what happens if the youths' participation is promoted in a harmful way, without the proper training to encourage it and tools to implement it.

### **Youths' Levels of Participation in FGCs**

One of the main research questions in this study is how youths perceive their participation throughout the pilot program, specifically in the conference and implementation stages. When building collaborative relationships, they can either be led by those on the higher end of the hierarchical ladder encouraging those on the lower end to participate, by those on the lower end leading to participation, or they can be built on collaboration, equality, and reciprocity to form a partnership (Shemer & Schmid, 2007). Often when promoting collaboration with children, professionals find it difficult to move over from participation to partnership (Roose et al., 2013). In this study, the experiences among the participants varied: a third felt they were encouraged to participate, a third felt their participation was encouraged in a limited way, and a third felt very removed from the processes that involved them. The question of youth's participation in FGCs is important; the youths who participate are regarded as partners in the decision-making process, and as such, the youths gain motivation to exercise their basic rights and create change in their lives (Shemer et al., 2020). Moreover, FGCs believe that each family member, including children, are experts on their own lives and should therefore lead the decision-making process (Edwards et al., 2020).

However, children's active participation in their FGC is not always promoted, as they are frequently seen as needing protection, meaning decisions regarding their participation are made by the adults (i.e., parents, social worker, coordinator, etc.) (Merkel-Holguin et al., 2020). This study validates this tension, as some of the participants in this study felt that their participation was promoted and encouraged and an effort to build a collaborative partnership was emphasized, while others felt that they were not given a voice in their FGC or decisions regarding their involvement were decided upon by adults. For example, less than half of the participants shared experiences of being prepped for the conference and being given a platform to speak, others remember sitting outside or leaving halfway through their conference, while another third did not remember or want to share about their conference at all.

These findings are consistent with the existing literature that tackles children's participation in the decisions that concern them. In a study conducted by Marmor et al (2017)

regarding social workers' perceptions of children's participation in committees for the evaluation, treatment, and planning of at-risk youth, they found that even though social workers value and understand the importance of children's participation, in reality children's voices are often unheard due to a lack of training, resources, and time. This can lead to situations in which participation is solely led by adults with little effort made to promote equal partnership and collaboration. Additionally, in a study researching whether children's voices were heard in these committees, it was found that despite a reform in place to promote children's participation, their voices were not heard (Alfarandi, 2016). This may explain some of the skepticism of some of the participants in this study as to the ability of the program to work, as well as their unwillingness to share in their family conference. As most of the participants have had previous experience with social services, their past experiences may have led them to believe that their participation was not valued in building the family plan. This emphasizes the importance of the underlying values of FGCs; the belief that children should be active decision-makers as the experts on their own lives, and therefore treated as such.

In order to promote their position as active decision-makers, the existing literature, as well as the findings of the current study, highlight over and over the importance of finding ways to promote youths' participation. One of the earliest and most popular models for child participation is the "Ladder of Children's Participation" (Hart, 1992). While Hart's model was developed for and focused on community development, he recognized eight levels of participation and grouped them into three degrees: the lowest being nonparticipation (manipulation, decoration, and tokenism), the intermediate stage of participation (assigned but informed, adult-initiated, and shared decisions with children) and the highest degree of participation (child-initiated and shared decisions with adults). Most of the participants in this study fell somewhere within the intermediate stage of participation. While FGCs are created and led by adults, the underlying belief is that the youths should be active participants and consulted throughout the entire process. However, while a third of the participants in this study felt they had some measure of influence over their experiences in their FGC, an additional third felt they were not given an understanding as to what was taking place at their FGC and were unsure whether the suggestions they put forward were ultimately implemented. Additionally, when asked how they felt the program could be improved, some stated that they felt they had to fight

for what they asked for, and their requests were not given equal importance to those of their parents.

Hart (1992) further believed that children's participation should be matched to each child's individual capabilities allowing for increases in participation with age. This distinction is important, as the findings suggest that age played a role in some of the levels of participation. For example, some of the older adolescents had a better understanding as to the contexts within which their FGC took place. Additionally, one of the younger participants, who took full part in her FGC, shared that she wished she had not been present for the entire conference, as it was difficult to hear her family spoken about in that forum. This raises the question as to how best to promote participation and partnership for children of all ages.

When promoting participation and partnership in FGCs, it is important to address more than just physical presence at the conference, as that alone does not imply active participation (Connolly & Masson, 2014). As presented in the findings, while some of the participants were physically present at their FGC, they felt too intimidated to speak or spent the whole time wishing they could leave as they didn't have an understanding as to what was happening. Many of the participants discussed that they felt intimidated by the amount of people at their conference, or that they simply felt uncomfortable sharing what they wanted to. In his report on children's perspectives on FGCs in Nordic countries, Heino (2009) suggests that it is important to understand how to properly engage children during their conference, for example, by talking directly to the child or making eye contact. The children in the study felt when they were being bypassed and that often led to their unwillingness to participate. Therefore, it is prudent to not rely solely on physical presence. While physical participation may seem like a discernable way to promote participation, if done halfheartedly, it can be a manipulative way to make the partnership seem like it exists without making the effort to create collaboration.

This, along with the existing literature, validates the viewpoint that facilitators of FGCs require specific skills to enable children to contribute productively to their FGCs. The difficult emotions that arise during the conference can be challenging and stressful for the youths who take part (Connolly & Masson, 2014). As such, often the role of an advocate or "support person" is appointed to help promote children's participation, prepare them for the conference, and make decisions regarding their participation (Merkel-Holguin et al., 2020). While this role does not exist in Israel and therefore within the scope of this study, the benefits of such a role could still

be understood within the participants' experiences. In the second theme of the findings, when addressing their experiences regarding their own participation in their conference, some of the participants spoke of the importance of the family companion role at the conference, as they felt heard by them. Additionally, in the third theme of this study, regarding the experiences surrounding the implementation stage, the participants emphasized the importance of building support systems to help them feel heard, understood, and supported throughout their participation in the program.

When seeking to understand how to promote their role in the conference, it is important to ask whether youths' presence at the conference promotes improved outcomes for them or their families. The literature suggests that it is probable that their participation is a factor in creating positive change as they feel more included and part of the process (Bell & Wilson, 2006). A Nordic report on children's perspectives on FGCs found that children who perceived themselves having an active role in creating change in their lives reported better home situations one year after their participation in the conference (Heino, 2009). The findings of this study are consistent with the literature, as highlighted by the third theme of this study addressing the participants' experiences in the implementation stage of FGC. Participants who perceived themselves as active in their FGC spoke of the positive changes they saw in their families as an outcome of their participation in the conference. For example, a third of the participants spoke of spending more time together with their families or understanding what they needed to change and preserve together as a family. This is consistent with the research that indicates that the model of FGC, in which they were able to work together with their families to create a family plan without the influence of social services, is often perceived as a positive experience (Bell & Wilson, 2006). Additionally, as children's perspectives often differ from those of their adult counterparts, their voices when creating a family plan are essential.

However, when assessing the way the current FGC program is run, as well as the results of the current study, the highest stage of Hart's ladder, where the children generate the ideas, seems to be unachievable within FGC's current structure. However, many of the participants had practical suggestions as to how to promote Hart's highest level of participation, such as creating meetings for each family member so that the younger participants feel less intimidated and feel more comfortable sharing their unique viewpoints or allowing the youth "graduates" of FGC to help create and implement future programming. The ideas that the youths came up with

themselves on how to better implement the program, if implemented properly, could help promote the highest degrees of participation on Hart's Ladder in which children create the ideas, which would lead to collaborative partnership as opposed to just participation. In that vein, Shier (2001) further expanded on Hart's model, suggesting that when used together with Hart's model, it promotes children's "Pathways to Participation" and includes five stages of child participation: 1) children are listened to; 2) children are supported in expressing their views; 3) children's views are taken into account; 4) children are involved in the decision-making process; and 5) children share responsibility and power for decision-making. The findings in this study suggest that over a third of the participants do feel that FGC promotes child participation, as they expressed that they felt heard, supported, and involved in the decision-making. However, the third and fifth stages of this model were sometimes absent in the findings, as the participants did not always feel that their views were considered (e.g., lack of understanding as to whether their ideas were implemented) and did not feel they shared the power for decision-making. While some of the youths did feel that their opinions and requests helped shape the formation of their family plan, others were not present during the entirety of the family's private deliberation, were too intimidated to voice their needs, or simply felt that even though they had the space to speak, once the family plan was formed their opinions were not considered.

To sum up, this discussion has focused on three key issues: how the participants in the program perceive the concerns and protective factors in their lives, how to properly exercise youths' right to be involved in the issues that concern them, and their levels of participation in FGCs. The findings of this study brought forward the unique voices of the youth participants and their experiences and perspectives regarding the stages of the program. They spoke of the importance of family both in relation to concerns and protection and how a lack of positive family bonds can be a cause for concern while strong family dynamics is a protective factor for them. Additionally, while it is generally under widespread agreement that youths should be involved in matters that concern them, this study raises questions as to how to properly exercise that right, whether or not that right should always be exercised no matter the circumstances, and the importance of proper training when helping a child exercise their right. Lastly, when they spoke of their experiences in their FGCs, they emphasized the importance of feeling like decision-makers and partners in the process, and how the distinction between participation and partnership can contribute to their motivation in the program.



### **Study Limitations**

This study has several limitations. Firstly, the study cohort is 18 youths who agreed, along with their parents, to participate. Therefore, the method of purposive sampling used in this study does not necessarily represent the experiences and perceptions of all the youths who participated in the program. A significant limiting factor was the difficulty of obtaining parental permission to interview the participants. This was prevalent from the very first stages of data collection, both from the parents who often refused to allow their child to be interviewed, and in a few cases by the social workers working with the families. Therefore, despite the desire to bring forward all the voices of the youths in FGCs in Israel, many of the youths who participated in the program did not have a chance to be interviewed and their voices are therefore excluded from this study.

Due to the difficulty in procuring the permission of the parents of the participants of the study, interviews were often postponed and therefore the study participants were interviewed throughout various stages within the implementation stage of the program which may have led to difficulty in remembering parts of their conference. In order to get as rich a picture as possible, the interviewer made great efforts to schedule interviews between the four-month to one-and-a-half-year mark so as to not be too far from the conference and yet within the implementation stage of the program.

Additionally, many of the parents only agreed to phone or video interviews, therefore many of the interviews did not take place face-to-face. This meant that in some interviews there was no way to see or interpret facial expressions, home environment, and family dynamics, and therefore no way to understand the participant's answer through the lens of their unique contexts. Moreover, the reality of this study being conducted during a global pandemic caused many interviews to be postponed as well, or moved to telephone or Zoom interviews, especially as much of the data was collected during country-wide lockdowns. The pandemic may have also influenced the participants' experiences of the program, as some conferences were conducted in a hybrid manner, programming was cancelled, and the participants had other stressors in their lives that pre-pandemic may not have existed.

An additional limitation of this study is that not all of the data was collected by the researcher as some of the interviews were conducted by other members of the research group. Therefore, it is possible that the interpretation given to some of the material gathered was not in the spirit of comments made during the interview. In order to overcome this limitation, the

researchers in the research group had ongoing conversations about the findings and compared their analysis to assure there were no discrepancies in the data. Additionally, when necessary, one-on-one meetings were conducted to analyze the findings and ensure that no misinterpretations could take place.

### **Contributions and Implications of this Study**

**Contributions to the body of theoretical knowledge:** This study adds to the existing knowledge on children's perspectives on risk and protection as well as children's perspectives on their participation in FGCs. This study found that youths perceive family as an important factor in both risk and protection, and the importance of strengthening family bonds and dynamics. Moreover, while children's participation has been studied in FGCs around the world, the program in Israel is fairly new, and there is little knowledge on how youth perceive the program and their participation. This study highlighted the importance they placed on partnership versus participation and feeling like equal decision-makers. Additionally, this research expands the knowledge on working with at-risk youth in Israel as well as deepens the knowledge on context-informed perspective and the implications of COVID-19 on youth in Israel.

**Contributions and implications for policy:** This study and its findings are likely to influence the program's implementation moving forward, as well as in the expansion of the program to other cities and in general on the processes of including children in decisions that regard them. The findings of this study align with the underlying belief that children should be involved in the decision-making processes, however they emphasized the importance of doing so in a way that benefits each specific child. They highlight the importance of proper training for social workers working with children on how to properly promote their ability to exercise their right to participate as well as proper training for FGC professionals working with children.

**Implications for practice:** Research has the ability to contribute to the professional and practical knowledge that guides professionals in the field working with the families in the program. The findings that emerged from this study, as well as the theoretical and practical knowledge in the field, yielded several recommendations for optimizing the model in Israel, among them:

*Proper preparation leading up to the conference* – The findings showed that many of the participants could not remember being prepped by professionals for the conference, and therefore did not understand why their family was in the program or how they could contribute to

creating and formulating the family plan. By receiving proper preparation prior to their conference, the youths would likely have more to contribute and feel that they are active participants in the decisions regarding their own lives.

*Addressing being removed from home* – It is important to recognize that this is a significant fear among the youths in the program and greatly affects their fears regarding their ability to participate in the program in an authentic way. In such instances, it is recommended to discuss this fear with the youths and encourage an open and honest discussion while providing proper support to the youths and their parents.

*Strengthening family bonds* – Throughout the study, the participants emphasized the importance of family and how family dynamics can contribute to both concerns and protective factors. By strengthening family dynamics to create a more cohesive home environment, the youths' wellbeing will improve, thus improving and expanding the protective factors in their lives.

*Creating support systems* – In addition to the importance of family, the participants in this study addressed the significance of support systems in their lives. Moreover, when there was a lack of adults on whom they could rely, it affected their perception of protective factors. It would be beneficial to help the youths in the program create their own support systems by engaging members of the community, as well as creating roles in the program that fit this description, to promote their sense of safety and wellbeing, as well as create for them a sense of support, love and trust.

*Promoting effective participation with youth* – The question of how much the youths felt they were active participants was a main focus of this study. It is recommended to find ways in which to promote their participation throughout the program, for example by individual meetings with the youths both prior to the conference and directly following it to understand their unique desires, training professionals on how to encourage their participation, and/or creating roles to help them participate in an active way in the decisions made about their lives.

*Implementing the role of a child advocate* – The role of an advocate does not exist in Israel. However, many of the participants shared the importance of the role the family advocate played for them, and how they felt heard when there was a neutral third-party person present. This suggests that introducing the role of the advocate would benefit the youths and help promote their participation in the conference. Moreover, the advocate is trained to help shed light

on the child's desires when they feel they cannot advocate for themselves. As many of the participants in this study felt intimidated by the forum of the conference, having an advocate present may allow their voices to be heard in situations where they feel they are unable to do so themselves.

*Involving "graduates" in future planning* - As suggested by one of the participants in this study, it might be beneficial to have past participants in the program mentor future participants. This would be doubly beneficial in that the incoming youths would be mentored by a group of peers they feel understand or relate to their unique situation, and it would allow the graduates of the program to help influence and shape the future of the program from a place of knowledge and understanding.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

As previously mentioned, this study is part of a larger-scale study which seeks to study the FGC model in Israel. The purpose of this study was to explore the youths' perceptions and experiences regarding the concerns and protective factors in their lives, as well as their experiences in the pilot program and the effects of COVID-19 on their experiences. In order to expand upon the knowledge gathered in this research, as well as address the various limitations and challenges, it would be prudent to study the following:

Firstly, it is recommended to conduct a follow-up study in order to examine whether some of the youths' concerns alleviate or change with more time in the program, as well without the context of country-wide lockdowns due to the pandemic.

Secondly, it would be advised to research children's perceptions on their participation according to age and gender, as it was not clear enough from the current study how much of a role each factor played in their participation. Moreover, as the age range for this study was 10-18, it would be advantageous to research younger children's perspectives as well.

Thirdly, the youths' perspectives on the preparation leading up to the conference is missing from this research, and therefore it is important to study it in order to understand how it may affect their understanding and participation in the following stages of the model.

Lastly, it is recommended to study the professionals who work in FGC's perceptions on children's concerns and protective factors, especially in the context of family.

**Final Thoughts**

Conducting this research has been both immensely difficult and rewarding. Finding my place as a researcher in a field where I already work as a practitioner has often felt like walking a tightrope between two vastly different, yet extremely connected, worlds. Too often during interviews, I found myself wanting to provide the youth with solutions or to justify their experiences with social workers, but instead I found myself learning to just listen and realizing how healing and powerful that can be. Not just for them, but for me as well.

I have immense respect for the work done by my colleagues in the welfare departments. In my previous job, I was a child protection worker, and while my voice was often heard very loudly in the committees for the at-risk youth and families with whom I worked, I was never comfortable with that “power”. Having the opportunity to hear from the youth in this study as a researcher, and as someone who believes in the positive change this research has the ability to create, has been an incredibly moving and healing experience.

“There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children.” – Nelson Mandela

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Demographic Chart

	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Time in Program at Time of Interview</b>	<b>City</b>
<b>1</b>	Shani Israel	18	Female	4 months	2
<b>2</b>	Michal Israel	17	Female	4 months	2
<b>3</b>	Liron Israel	14	Male	6 months	2
<b>4</b>	Maayan Arbel	10	Female	1 year	3
<b>5</b>	Mor Mizrachi	11	Female	10 months	5
<b>6</b>	Sivan Batit	13	Female	1 year	2
<b>7</b>	Aliza Batit	16	Female	1.5 years	2
<b>8</b>	Uri Navon	11	Male	1 year	5
<b>9</b>	Nili Yardeni	14	Female	1.5 years	1
<b>10</b>	Ariel Simon	15	Male	6 months	1
<b>11</b>	Dani Yochanonov	15	Male	4 months	1
<b>12</b>	Shir Dvir	15	Female	8 months	3
<b>13</b>	Nehorai Buchbot	12	Male	10 months	3
<b>14</b>	Esther Mandel	15	Female	3 months	4
<b>15</b>	Daniella Friedman	18	Female	1.5 years	1
<b>16</b>	Ben Rosen	16	Male	1.5 years	1
<b>17</b>	Yair Kaufman	16	Male	1 year	3
<b>18</b>	Moshe Tavor	14	Male	8 months	1

## Appendix 2: Adapted Informed Consent Form for Adolescents

שלום,

אני נתניה. קיבלתי אישור מההורים שלך לדבר איתך קצת על ההשתתפות שלך בתכנית "קד"ם - עולים לדרך". אנחנו לומדים איך תכנית קד"ם (קבוצת דיון משפחתית) עובדת ואיך היא משפיעה על מי שמתתף בה. מאד חשוב לנו לשמוע את דעתך על מנת לעזור לנו להבין מה עובד טוב בתוכנית ומה אפשר עוד לשפר, כך שנוכל לעזור טוב יותר לעוד בני נוער וילדים.

חשוב לנו להבטיח לכל מי שמדבר איתנו שאנחנו שומרים על סודיות, כך שאף אחד לא ידע שדברים שאמרת קשורים אליך. כשאנחנו מספרים מה למדנו מהשאלות שלנו ונותנים דוגמאות אנחנו משתמשים בשמות בדויים (לא בשם האמיתי שלך) ואת/ה אפילו יכול לבחור את השם שנראה לך. אני מקליטה את מה שאת/ה אומר/ת כדי שלא אשכח, אבל ההקלטות הן רק כדי שאחר כך אקשיב להם שוב בשקט ובנחת ואחשוב לעומק על מה שאמרת. ככה אני לא צריכה בזמן השיחה שלנו לרשום את הכל.

בעת הצורך, נקיים את הראיון באמצעות תכנת זום (ZOOM). הריאיון יוקלט ויתומלל תוך השמטת כל פרט מזהה שלך בעת התמלול. יחד עם זאת חשוב לציין שלאחר השימוש בזום, אנו נדאג להשמיד את הפרטים שלך אחרי שנתמלל את המפגש בינינו. פרטים אלו לא יופיעו בשום מקום והניתוח של הנתונים לא יחשוף את זהותך. לפרטים נוספים את/ה מוזמנת להיכנס למדיניות הפרטיות של זום בקישור הבא <http://zoom.us/privacy>. אני ממליצה לך מאוד לדאוג לקיים את השיחה במקום מבודד כדי לשמור על הפרטיות שלך.

את/ה לא חייבת לענות על השאלות ויכולה להפסיק בכל רגע אם זה לא נוח לך. זה לא ישנה שום דבר לגבי ההשתתפות שלך בתוכנית. אני גם אשמח אם בסוף השיחה שלנו תגיד/י לי איך היה לך בשיחה.

אם יהיו לך שאלות או אם תרצה לקבל הסברים נוספים לגבי המחקר, או עזרה במשהו או יעוץ את/ה מוזמנת לשאול אותי ואני אענה או אפנה אותך לשותפים שלי.

כמו כן, במידה ותרגישי/י שבעקבות הראיון תרצה/י להתייעץ עם גורם מקצועי, ניתן לפנות לד"ר ארנה שמר, לפרופ' דורית רואר-סטריאר או לד"ר יסמין עבוד-חלבי בביה"ס לעבודה סוציאלית, האוניברסיטה העברית ירושלים. ד"ר ארנה שמר, האוניברסיטה העברית ירושלים, 054-4919723, [ornashemer4@gmail.com](mailto:ornashemer4@gmail.com), פרופ' דורית רואר-סטריאר, 054-8033569, [dorit.roer-strier@mail.huji.ac.il](mailto:dorit.roer-strier@mail.huji.ac.il), ד"ר יסמין עבוד-חלבי, 054-3117117, [netanya.mischel@mail.huji.ac.il](mailto:netanya.mischel@mail.huji.ac.il), 052-8987156, נתניה מישל, [jaboud@campus.haifa.ac.il](mailto:jaboud@campus.haifa.ac.il).

אם כן תסכימי/י להשתתף, תחתום/תחתמי בבקשה על הדף הזה שאומר שהסברתי לך מה אנחנו נעשה עכשיו, ואני גם חותמת שאני מבטיחה לשמור על סודיות.

אני \_\_\_\_\_ מסכימה/ה להשתתף בראיון.

חתימה \_\_\_\_\_ תאריך \_\_\_\_\_

טלפון \_\_\_\_\_  
דוא"ל \_\_\_\_\_

אני, נתניה מישל, מבטיחה לשמור על הסודיות שלך.

חתימה \_\_\_\_\_ תאריך \_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix 3: Adapted Informed Consent Form for Children

שלום,

אנו קבוצת חוקרים המתעניינים בדעתם של ילדים בגילכם. אנו מעוניינים ללמוד מכם מה ילדים חושבים על התכנית שהשתתפת בו כדי ליצור בבית חיים יותר נעימים ובטוחים, על המפגש הגדול בו התכנסו הרבה אנשים שאכפת להם ממך ומהמשפחה שלכם, ועל מה שקורה איתך מאז אותו מפגש – מה שנקרא תוכנית קד"ם. אתה מכיר את השם הזה? האם אתה/יודעת על מה אני מדברת?

במהלך המפגש שלנו אבקש ממך לצייר 2 ציורים ואז נשוחח עליהם. אם תרצה שרק נדבר בלי לצייר – זה כמובן אפשרי. אחר כך אשאל אותך עוד כמה שאלות. בשיחה שלנו אין תשובות נכונות או לא נכונות, אני פשוט רוצה לדעת מה דעתך ורגשותך. אתה/ה לא חייב לענות על שאלות שאתה/ה לא רוצה לענות עליהן.

אני מבקשת ממך להקליט את הראיון כדי שתהיה לי אפשרות לשמוע אחר כך בשקט את כל הדברים החשובים שתגיד. בסוף הפגישה, ארצה גם לקחת את הציורים כדי להסתכל עליהם עוד פעם. אני מבטיחה לך שאף אחד לא ידע מה אתה אמרת או ציירת כי אני לא אשתמש בשם שלך. אתה/ה יכול/ה עכשיו או בסוף המפגש שלנו אפילו להגיד לי איזה שם אחר היית רוצה שאני אכתוב ליד מה שתגיד.

אני מבקשת את הסכמתך להשתתפות במחקר. בקשתי גם מההורים שלך שיסכימו שתשתתפי/י המחקר.

אני \_\_\_\_\_ מסכימה/ה להשתתף בראיון.

חתימה \_\_\_\_\_ תאריך \_\_\_\_\_

תודה לך שעזרת לנו 😊

החוקרים מהאוניברסיטה העברית – ארנה, דורית, יסמין ונתניה.

## Appendix 4: Parental Informed Consent Form

שלום רב,

אנו מודים לך על שהסכמת להשתתף במחקרנו העוסק בהערכת תוכנית "קד"ם - עולים לדרך" הלומדת כיצד נתפס הליך קד"ם (קבוצת דיון משפחתית) ומה הן השלכותיו על הלוקחים בו חלק.

אנו חוקרים מהאוניברסיטה העברית, אשר לומדים כיצד ילדים תופסים וחווים את ההשתתפות שלהם בתוכנית קד"ם. אנחנו מעוניינים ללמוד כיצד נתפס, נחוה, ומתפרש בעיקר יישום התוכנית שהוצג בשלב ההיוודעות דרך עיניהם של ילדיכם. ישנו מחקר מועט אודות האופן בו תופסים ילדים סוגיות הנוגעות לחייהם. חשיבותו של המחקר בהבאת קולם של ילדים בסוגיה זו, הנידונה רבות ללא שמיעת דעתם.

המחקר ייערך באמצעות ראיון הכולל חלק של ציור ושיחה, וחלק מילולי של שאילת שאלות. בעת הצורך, במסגרת המחקר אערוך ראיון באמצעות תכנת זום (ZOOM). זמן הראיון הינו כחצי שעה עד שעה. הראיון יוקלט, ולאחר מכן יתמלל תוך השמטת כל פרט מזהה של הילד/ה והמשפחה. יחד עם זאת, חשוב לציין שלאחר השימוש בזום, אנו נדאג להשמיד את ההקלטה אחרי שנתמלל את הראיון. פרטים אלו לא יופיעו בשום מקום והניתוח של הנתונים לא יחשוף את זהות ילדיכם. לפרטים נוספים, מוזמנים להיכנס למדיניות הפרטיות של זום בקישור הבא: <http://zoom.us/privacy>.

קיימת הזכות להפסיק את השתתפות במחקר בכל שלב, ו/או להימנע ממתן תשובות לשאלות מסוימות, מכל סיבה שהיא. הדבר לא יפגע כלל בהליך השתתפות בקד"ם ובמענים שאתה זכאי להם. הזכות להפסיק את השתתפות תובהר לילדך בתחילת הראיון. כל הנתונים המזהים שלך ושל ילדך יישמרו חסויים, ללא שמם או שמך. שמתים יופיעו בטופס הזה בלבד, אשר ישמר אצלי בנפרד משאר הנתונים. כנזכר לעיל, פרטים מזהים יושמטו מתמלול הראיון, כך שהאנונימיות שלך ושל ילדך מובטחת. אנחנו מבקשים את הסכמתך להשתתפות בנך/בתך במחקר.

עם תחילת הראיון נבקש גם מבנך/בתך לחתום על הסכמתם להשתתף. השתתפות ילדך במחקר תתרום רבות להבנת המשמעות של תוכנית קד"ם עבור ילדים, ובכך תרחיב את הידע הקיים עבור אנשי המקצוע המתפתחים את התכנית. בחתימה על טופס זה אתה/מעיד/ה כי השתתפות בנך/בתך היא על בסיס התנדבותי ומרצונך החופשי, ועל בסיס רצונו/ה החופשי של בנך/בתך.

אני (שם מלא) \_\_\_\_\_

מסכימ/ה להשתתפות בני/בתי: \_\_\_\_\_ במחקר.

חתימה \_\_\_\_\_ תאריך \_\_\_\_\_

טלפון \_\_\_\_\_

דוא"ל \_\_\_\_\_

לפרטים נוספים ניתן לפנות לחוקרות האחראיות:

ד"ר ארנה שמר, האוניברסיטה העברית ירושלים, 054-4919723, [ornashemer4@gmail.com](mailto:ornashemer4@gmail.com)

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ד"ר יסמין עבוד-חלבי, 054-3117117, [jaboud@campus.haifa.ac.il](mailto:jaboud@campus.haifa.ac.il)

נתניה מישל, 052-8987156, [netanya.mischel@mail.huji.ac.il](mailto:netanya.mischel@mail.huji.ac.il)

בברכה,

ד"ר ארנה שמר, פרופ' דורית רואר-סטריאר, ד"ר יסמין עבוד חלבי ונתניה מישל

חממת המחקר נבט - בית הספר לעבודה סוציאלית, האוניברסיטה העברית

## Appendix 5: Interview Guide

### חלק 1 – הקדמה

שמי נתניה, ואני מתעניינת לשמוע על תפיסותיכם וחוויותכם בהשתתפות בתכנית קד"ם. אשמח אם תוכלי לעזור לי.

שם מלא של הילד \_\_\_\_\_

גיל \_\_\_\_\_

בת/בן \_\_\_\_\_

ישוב \_\_\_\_\_

משך הראיון \_\_\_\_\_

תאריך הראיון \_\_\_\_\_

מיקום הראיון \_\_\_\_\_

הראיון נעשה בנוכחות \_\_\_\_\_ / לבד

תאריך היועדות: \_\_\_\_\_

### חלק 2 – שאלות (שפת השאלות יתואם לפי גיל הילד/מתבגר)

#### שאלות לילדים עד גיל 12:

1. תספר לי קצת על עצמך (להרחיב לגבי מה אוהב לעשות, עם מי כייף לו להיות, מה החלום שלך).
2. אם מישהו היה מספר לי על הדברים הטובים בך, מה הם היו מספרים לי?
3. מה אתה יכול לספר לי על תכנית קד"ם/על התכנית שיש לך מאז שהייתם במפגש הגדול של ההיוועדות?
4. האם היו לך דאגות לקראת הפגישה הגדולה? והיום?
5. מה עזר?
6. מי עזר? למי את פונה כאתה/עצובה? וכשאתה/שמח/ה?
7. מה הפריע לך/לא עזר?
8. מה היית משנה בכל התהליך? ומה היית משאיר/ה?
9. מה מגן על ילדים? מי מגן עלייך?
10. מה עוד חשוב שאדע?

#### שאלות למתבגרים:

1. תספר לי קצת על עצמך (להרחיב לגבי מה אוהב לעשות, עם מי כייף לו להיות, מה חלום שלך).
2. אם מישהו היה מספר לי על הדברים הטובים בך, מה הם היו מספרים לי?
3. למה הגעת לתכנית עולים לדרך/קד"ם? מה היו הדאגות שלך אז? הן ממשיות גם היום?
4. האם הרגשת ששמעו אותך במהלך התכנית? מי הכי שמע? מי לא שמע?
5. בתוך כל התהליך שעברת - מה היו הדברים החיוביים?
6. מה היו הדברים שלדעתך היו פחות חיוביים?
7. תספר לי קצת על החיים שלך מאז התכנית. דברים שאתה עושה היום ולא עשית קודם, דברים שקוראים בכלל בחיים עכשיו שלא היו קודם.
8. כשקשה לך למי אתה פונה?
9. למי אתה מספר כשקורה לך משהו משמח או משהו מאכזב ועצוב?
10. אחרי שאתה כבר תקופה של כחצי שנה בתוך התהליך - לדעתך, מה היית מציע לשנות ומה להשאיר?
11. מה אתה עושה בימים אלו? גם במבט רטרוספקטיבי - לא רק על ימים אלה - אנו בוחנים את כל התקופה של הקורונה? עם מי אתה נמצא? איך מצב הרוח שלך? האם אתה מתקשר עם חברים?

12. מה יכול לעזור לך בתקופה זו? מה יכול לתת לך כוח?

13. מה מגן על ילדים? מה ומי מגן עליך?

14. מה עוד חשוב שאני אדע עליך ועל התכנית כדי שאוכל ללמוד איך לתכנן אותה כך שתהיה הכי טובה עבור ילדים ובני נוער?

### חלק 3 – סגירה

איך היה לך בשיחה שלנו?

האם יש משהו שחשוב לך לומר לפני שמסיימים?

אני רוצה להגיד תודה ששיתפת אותי. זה היה מלמד ומעניין.



## תקציר

תכנית 'עולים לדרך - קד"ם (קבוצת דיון משפחתית)' היא תכנית פיילוט בישראל המכוונת כדי לסייע למשפחות בהן ילדים ונוער במצבי סיכון אשר לגביהם עולות דאגות שונות בבית או במערכת הרווחה. התכנית החלה לפעול ב-2018 בחמש מחלקות לשירותים חברתיים במרכז ודרום הארץ. התכנית מבוססת על עקרונות מודל קד"ם לרווחת הילד: האוטונומיה של כל חבר במשפחה, העצמה של משפחות וילדים לקבל החלטות לגבי חייהם בעצמם, האחריות של המשפחה המורחבת והקהילה להיות פעילים סביב רווחת הילד ושימוש בשפה חיובית. התכנית משמשת כמודל לקבלת החלטות וכחלופה לוועדה לתכנון טיפול והחלטה.

המודל פועל על פי שלושה שלבים: הראשון הוא שלב ההכנה, כאשר המשפחה נפגשת עם העו"ס ועם איש צוות מטעם התכנית שנקרא "המתאם". יחדיו הם ממפים את האנשים המשמעותיים למשפחה וילדים, הנקראים בשפת התוכנית "התומכים". אלה יכולים להוות גורם תמיכה ולקחת חלק בתהליך לקראת קבוצת הדיון המשפחתית (ההיוועדות). השלב השני הוא שלב ההיוועדות. בשלב זה המשפחה, אנשי המקצוע והתומכים נפגשים כדי להעלות את הדאגות והכוחות של המשפחה ושל הפרטים בה. לאחר דיון ביחס לדאגותיהם של בני המשפחה לצד שיח המתייחס לכוחות, המשפחה והתומכים בונים את התכנית המשפחתית הכוללת פירוט של הסכמים ביחס לדרכי הפעולה שישפרו את המצב המשפחתי בדגש על מוגנותם של הילדים. השלב השלישי הוא שלב היישום. בשלב זה המשפחה אחראית על הוצאת התכנית המשפחתית לפועל בעזרת העובדים הסוציאליים והתקציב שהוקצה לטיפול במשפחה זו.

מטרת המחקר הנוכחי היא לבחון את התפיסות והחוויות של ילדים ומתבגרים אשר השתתפו בתכנית, תוך מתן דגש על שלב ההיוועדות ושלב היישום. שאלות המחקר הן: 1. כיצד הילדים ובני הנוער אשר השתתפו בתכנית תופסים את גורמי הסיכון והמוגנות בחייהם? 2. מה הן חוויותיהם של הילדים ובני הנוער אשר השתתפו בתכנית בשלבי ההיוועדות והיישום? 3. כיצד הילדים ובני הנוער במחקר זה חווים את התכנית בהקשר של מגיפת הקורונה?

מחקר זה בוצע במסגרת חממת המחקר נבט למחקר והכשרה מודעי-הקשר בבית הספר לעבודה סוציאלית ולרווחה חברתית ע"ש פול ברואלד באוניברסיטה העברית בירושלים. המחקר הוא חלק ממחקר אורך משולב שיטות ומעצב, אשר מטרתו היא ללמוד את מידת ההשפעה של תכנית 'עולים לדרך-קד"ם' על משפחות שילדיהם נתפסים כנתונים במצבי סיכון, ולהשפיע על עיצוב התכנית כאשר היא תורחב ותיושם במחלקות לשירותים חברתיים נוספות ברחבי ישראל.

מחקר זה נערך על פי שיטה איכותנית ומבוסס על 18 ראיונות עומק חצי-מובנים עם ילדים ובני נוער בין הגילאים 10-18. תמלולי הראיונות נותחו וקודדו תוך שימוש בשיטה התימתית. הממצאים ביחס לשאלות המחקר היו כדלהלן:

משפחה וקשרים משפחתיים היו תמה משמעותית אצל מרבית המרואיינים גם ביחס לגורמי מוגנות וגם ביחס לגורמי סיכון בחייהם. הם חשפו דאגות ביחס לדאימיקות בעייתיות במשפחתם ולנושאים הקשורים בקשיי תקשורת בקרב המשפחה, הפחד שיוציאו אותם מבתיהם והתנהגות סיכונית. בנוסף, עלו דאגות ביחס לסיומה של התכנית ודאגות תואמות-גיל. גורמי המוגנות שהודגשו על ידי המרואיינים היו המשפחה, החשיבות של ההגנה הרגשית שהם מקבלים מאנשים משמעותיים בחייהם, הם עצמם כדמויות מוגנות ובמקרה אחד – שירותי הרווחה.

באשר לחוויות המרואיינים ביחס להשתתפות שלהם בשלב ההיוועדות, הם הדגישו את החשיבות של ההבנה של התהליך, כך שלא יחושו כמשתתפים פאסיביים ומודרים מקבלת החלטות על חייהם. הם הבהירו את החשיבות של שמיעת התכונות החיוביות בסבב הכוחות וכיצד השבחים שקיבלו אפשרו להם להיות יותר פתוחים אל השיח בזמן סבב הדאגות. בנוסף, הם הדגישו את החשיבות של הדינאמיקה המשפחתית, כאשר החלקים הקשים ביותר בהיוועדות היו המריבות וקשיי התקשורת בין חברי המשפחה.

ביחס לחוויותיהם הנוגעות להשתתפותם בשלב יישום התכנית, שליש מהמרואיינים חלקו את השינוי החיובי שחשו בבתיהם מאז השתתפותם בתכנית וההתחזקות של גורמי המוגנות בחייהם. עם זאת, חלק מהם התייחסו גם לתחושות שקולותיהם לא נשמעו בשלב היישום, ושאלו לא נאבקו עבור הדברים אותם ביקשו לכלול בתכנית המשפחתית, הדברים לא היו באים לידי ביטוי בהבניית ויישום התכנית המשפחתית כלל.

לבסוף, באשר להקשר של מגיפת הקורונה על התכנית ניכרו השפעות בעיקר בשלב היישום. חלק מהמרואיינים התייחסו להשפעות השליליות של הקורונה. למשל, הבלטה של דינאמיקות משפחתיות בעייתיות במהלך הסגרים ואי-יישום של ההחלטות שהתקבלו במהלך הבניית התכנית המשפחתית. עם זאת, חלק מהמרואיינים תיארו את הזמן ששהו בסגר עם משפחותיהם כמעין מתנה לא צפויה שהובילה לחיזוק הקשרים המשפחתיים.

פרק הדיון מתייחס לתפיסותיהם של המרואיינים את גורמי הסיכון ומוגנות והאופן בו הן נבדלות או מתאימות להגדרות אוניברסליות. בנוסף, פרק הדיון מעלה את השאלה האם זכותם של ילדים ובני נוער להשתתף בתכנית תקפה בכל מצב, גם אם השתתפות זו עלולה להוביל לנזק רב יותר מתועלת עבורם, או אם השדה אינה ערוכה להכיל את בקשותיהם ומשאלותיהם. לבסוף, פרק זה דן ברמות השונות של השתתפות ילדים ובני נוער על פי ממצאי המחקר.

לבסוף, מסמך זה מתייחס למגבלות המחקר ותרומותיו לידע הקיים בשדה התיאורטי של שיתוף ילדים ונוער בתכניות קד"ם ולגבי ילדים ונוער בסיכון בישראל. בנוסף, מחקר זה עשוי לתרום לעיצוב מדיניות ופרקטיקה בעת הרחבת יישום תכנית 'עולים לדרך-קד"ם' בישראל באמצעות המסקנות המתייחסות לחשיבות שיתוף ילדים ובני נוער עוד בשלב ההכנה, כמו גם המסקנות לגבי חיזוק הקשרים המשפחתיים ויצירת מערכת תמיכה. בסיום מוצגות המלצות למחקר עתידי.



## קולות הילדים והמתבגרים: חוויות ותפיסות של השתתפותם

בתוכנית 'עולים לדרך – קד"ם (קבוצת דיון  
משפחתית)' לרווחת הילד

עבודת גמר לתואר מוסמך בעבודה סוציאלית

מגישה: נתניה מישל (327138509)

בהנחייתה של ד"ר ארנה שמר

דצמבר 2021