

**A Qualitative Study of the Tweens Positive Psychology Family Intervention for Children  
with Depression- or Anxiety Related Symptomatology**

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# A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE TWEENS INTERVENTION

## ÅBO AKADEMI UNIVERSITY – FACULTY OF ARTS, PSYCHOLOGY AND THEOLOGY

<b>Subject:</b> Psychology	
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<p><b>Abstract:</b> Positive psychology is the scientific study of human thoughts, feelings and behaviour that focuses on building the good instead of treating illness. Several intervention models have been formed with this aim, and this study utilizes qualitative in-depth analysis to explore one such intervention model – the Tweens intervention. Tweens has been formed for children in late childhood and early teens, aged 11–14, who suffer from symptoms of depressiveness, anxiety or stress. A defining feature of this intervention is that it includes the families of the afflicted children in the intervention, and this is the first study examining a positive psychology family intervention for this particular target group.</p> <p>Being a pilot-study with the purpose of mapping out the experiences of meaningfulness that the participants made from Tweens, a Constructive Grounded Theory method was chosen for the data collection and analysis. In Grounded Theory, the researcher begins the research process without pre-formulated research questions or hypotheses, only with a central theme of inquiry that she seeks to understand, and then let the informants provide the problem description. By intensive interviewing, this study sought to find what, if any, meaning the participants ascribed to Tweens and what, if any, practical meaning they took away from it into their daily lives. This qualitative approach then seeks to explore the mechanisms behind the positive change that is seen in the majority of quantitative positive psychology intervention research, or alternatively to explore what factors according to the participants make the intervention not very meaningful or effective, if that is their experience.</p> <p>The results show that the experienced meaningfulness of Tweens can be divided into three main categories. These were 1.) A sense of belonging or togetherness, of not being alone with their problems. 2.) The tools being taught in Tweens helping them with their problems or in their parenting. And 3.) An increased mindsight, so that they could choose their actions consciously. These results are discussed in the light of the Broaden-and-build theory. When both parent and child have shared knowledge and shared vocabulary for talking about their well-being, upward spirals where they support each other and experience positive emotion together occur. All children did not experience the intervention as meaningful to the same degree, and variations in depressiveness, problematic life circumstances and possible flaws in the intervention are discussed as possible reasons for this.</p>	
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<b>Handledare:</b> Katarina Alanko	<b>Handledare:</b> Åse Fagerlund
<p><b>Abstrakt:</b> Positiv psykologi är det vetenskapliga studiet av människans tankar, känslor och beteende som fokuserar på att bygga styrkorna och det goda i livet i stället för att lindra och bota sjukdom. Med detta som mål har många interventionsmodeller bildats, och den här studien syftar till att göra en kvalitativ djupanalys av en sådan interventionsmodell – Tweens. Tweens är utformad för barn och unga i åldern 11–14 år som lider av depressivitet, ångest eller stress. Tweens-modellen särskiljer sig eftersom den involverar barnens familjer i behandlingen, och den här studien är den första i sitt slag som undersöker en positiv psykologi familjeintervention för just den här målgruppen.</p> <p>Då detta är en pilotstudie som ämnar med djupintervju kartlägga deltagarnas upplevelser av interventionens meningsfullhet, har konstruktivistisk Grounded Theory valts som metod för datainsamling och analys. Med en Grounded Theory-metod har man inga på förhand specificerade forskningsfrågor, utan ett visst tema eller företeelse man vill undersöka, och låter sedan informanterna stå för problembeskrivningen. Den företeelse som undersöks i denna studie är upplevelser av Tweens-interventionen med särskilt fokus på meningsfullhet och vad deltagarna tagit med sig till sin vardag. I studien deltog 10 familjer som tagit del av interventionen antingen hösten 2018 eller våren 2019.</p> <p>Studiens resultat visar att deltagarna erfor Tweens som meningsfullt av orsaker som kunde grupperas i tre huvudsakliga kategorier. Dessa var 1.) En känsla av tillhörighet i gruppen och av att inte vara ensamma med sina problem. 2.) De verktyg som lärdes ut inom Tweens hjälpte dem på något sätt med deras problematik eller föräldraskap. 3.) En ökad medvetenhet om sig sina egna och andras personligheter och typiska beteendemönster, samt en förmåga att stanna upp före de agerade. Dessa resultat diskuteras i ljuset av den inom positiv psykologi etablerade Broaden-and-build modellen (sv. Bredda och bygga). Genom att både barnen och föräldrarna nu har den här kunskapen och den gemensamma vokabulären för att prata om sitt mående så kan det uppstå positiva spiraler där de stöder varandra och upplever positiva känslor tillsammans. Alla barn upplevde inte interventionen meningsfull i samma grad, och variationer i depressivitet, närvaro av problematiska livssituationer och möjliga brister i interventionen diskuteras som orsaker till detta.</p>	
<b>Nyckelord:</b> Positiv psykologi, familjeintervention, kvalitativ forskning, depressivitet, ångest, barn, unga	
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## **Introduction**

Positive psychology is the scientific approach to studying human feelings, thoughts and behaviour, that focuses on building the good in life instead of solely treating illness, and on strengths instead of weaknesses (Peterson, 2008). A focus on strengths and positive emotion utilizes the strive for wellness within each individual and takes a different route to healing than that of an illness-focused approach. A focus on strengths, positive emotions and other positive psychology themes such as gratitude, resilience, hope and social engagement, are directly linked to mental health and one's tendency to set long-term goals that helps one grow (Marques et al., 2011; Hutchinson & Pretelt, 2010) and are shown from a psychiatric standpoint to be associated with health benefits, such as greater longevity (Jeste et al., 2015).

In addition to these prospects, integrating strengths in interventions has been shown to improve outcomes (Turner et al., 2021; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009; Boiler et al., 2013; Quinlan et al., 2012; Donaldson et al., 2014; Ghielen et al., 2018). Studies propose that the positive results might be partially due to strengths-focused approaches enhancing rapport between the patient and the one administering the treatment (Cox 2006; Tedeschi and Kilmer, 2005) or that it primes positive expectations of treatment outcomes (McCammon, 2012).

Furthermore, positive emotions can break the negative spiral of prolonged negative affect when experiencing hardship, which might otherwise lead to or worsen depression (Hutchinson & Pretelt, 2010). This has been elaborated on by Fredrickson (2001) in the Broaden-and-build theory, stating a correlation between positive emotions and social resources, so that an increase in one increases the other, creating positive upward spirals. Thus, repeated emphasis on even minor events of positive affect cumulate to enhance positive interaction and growth (Conoley, 2015).

Although this promising evidence for positive psychology and positive psychology interventions is starting to add up, little is known about the mechanisms underlying the desired change in well-being from a participant perspective. The aim of this study will be to examine the effects of one such positive psychology intervention model qualitatively, to have a closer look at what the participants perceive to be the meaningful components of the intervention, what their personal take-away from the intervention is and what the downsides or problems with the intervention were from their points of view.

The Tweens intervention by the Folkhälsan research team, which is the intervention subject for this study, involves the families of the children in the treatment process. Since the

beginning, one aim for positive psychology has been to promote flourishing families, as stated by the founders Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000). Despite this articulated aim for the field, most intervention studies have examined interventions targeted at the individual and evaluating individual growth (Waters, 2020). By widening the perspective from focusing solely on the individual to integrating the relational system around the individual in the intervention efforts, one could widen the aim to also fostering relational change over time (Doty et al., 2017). This is especially relevant in the treatment of children and adolescents, whose well-being in large extent is affected by the family system around them.

### **Positive Psychology Interventions for Children**

As of today, a several intervention programs have been formed with a positive psychology aim. The methods and exercises used in these are often called Positive Psychology Interventions, or PPI's. Looking at all PPI's, one way of grouping them would be in interventions targeting the general population and interventions for a specific group, e.g., people with a clinical diagnosis or in risk of developing mental health issues. Both have the same positive psychology aim, of increasing well-being, life satisfaction and resilience, although decrease in symptoms often being used as an outcome measure of intervention effectiveness for PPI's targeted at clinical groups (Waters, 2020).

Most research of positive psychology interventions has been conducted on adults, with encouraging results for increasing well-being and reducing depressive symptoms (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). An increasing number of recent studies have also started to focus on PPI's for children (Turner & Mueller, 2021). For children, most PPI's that have been studied are school-based interventions, targeting all children. Studies from different cultural contexts show promising results for teaching positive psychology at school to promote well-being (Seligman et al., 2009; Adler, 2017; O'Connor et al., 2017; Boniwell et al., 2015; Ruini et al., 2006, Fagerlund et al., 2021; Laakso et al., 2020).

One such intervention program is the Flourishing Students intervention by the Folkhälsan research team (Fagerlund, et al., 2021; Laakso et al., 2020). The Flourishing Students program and other previous research by the team were used when forming the child group intervention layout of Tweens, the intervention subject of this study. The program was adapted to fit the needs and possibilities of working with a clinical group in a small group format. The Flourishing Students program incorporated many of the elements of the Personal Well-being Lessons, studied in Boniwell et al. (2015) and described in lesson-for-lesson detail



in Boniwell and Ryan (2012). The Personal Well-Being Lessons encompass many areas of positive psychology, such as hope and forgiveness, but the main focus areas of these lessons are positive emotions/experiences and positive relationships. These concepts are taught mainly through hands-on exercises, such as role-plays. In the study of Boniwell et al. (2015) they found that participating in their intervention protected against the decline in satisfaction with self and friendships, decline in positive affect and increase in negative affect that normally occurs in early puberty. How this intervention model and Flourishing Students were applied for this study will be described further below and in the method chapter.

### ***Positive Psychology Interventions for Children with Anxiety or Depression***

Extended research addressing both typically developing children and clinical groups, e.g., children with mental health difficulties, is needed and has been requested by the positive psychology community (Weems, 2009). Moving from school-based interventions for all school children to specific clinical groups of children, there is a smaller amount of PPI studies. As the focus of this study is children with depression- or anxiety related symptomatology, a review of existent studies is in order.

The studies found target adolescents living in a youth care centre because of depression or anxiety (Teodorczuk et al., 2018), adolescent girls showing mild to moderate depressive or anxious symptoms (Jabbari et al., 2015), children showing symptoms of decreased mood with the aim of preventing depression (Kwok et al., 2016), adolescents experiencing a dip in subjective well-being (Tomyn et al., 2015), children rating sub-optimal life-satisfaction (Suldo et al., 2014) and Latina/o adolescents with the aim to prevent depression (Cavazos Vela et al., 2019). Most of these have shown promising results for decreasing depression (Jabbari et al., 2016; Kwok et al., 2016; Cavazos Vela et al., 2019), decreasing anxiety (Jabbari et al., 2016), decreasing stress (Jabbari et al., 2016), increasing life satisfaction (Jabbari et al., 2015; Kwok et al., 2016; Tomyn et al., 2015; Suldo, 2014; Cavazos Vela et al., 2019) or increasing resilience and positive recovery attitudes (Cavazos Vela et al., 2019). However, there are also reasons for cautions interpretation, as follow-up data show that the positive effect might subside over time (Suldo et al., 2014).

In Teodorczuk's et al. (2018) study of adolescents living in a youth care centre there were no significant differences in well-being between the intervention group and matched control group at post-intervention. There was also no significant decline in anxiety or depression in the intervention group between the pre- and post-intervention measurement

points. The authors discuss various reasons for these unexpected results. One factor that they present is whether this might have been the case because these adolescents did not have as much support, reassurance and encouragement as other adolescents living at home with their families, which has been indicated as an important factor by previous research (Allen & Vacca, 2010). In cases like this, an in-depth qualitative investigation of the participants own experiences could have provided answers as to which aspects of the intervention they found meaningful and which they did not, which could have given a more nuanced view of and provided more information to explain the non-significant results. The researcher did include their qualitative observations in the discussion, and report that they did observe improvement in communication, confidence, self-esteem, positive affect and future-focused optimism in some of the participants. The difference between the quantitative measures and the qualitative observations is interesting. The authors conclude that their quantitative study was not able to pick up the subtleties in behavioural and attitudinal change, nor gather information about specific benefits and drawback of specific activities in the intervention, and thus argue for the utility of doing more qualitative PPI research, as it may yield important information in this area.

### ***Family-targeted Positive Psychology Interventions***

Looking specifically at interventions for children with depression or anxiety that involves their families, nothing comes up in the databases searched. When one then broadens the scope to all PPI's involving the families, more interventions have been formed and researched for children in some sort of difficulty than for typically developing children without major life difficulties (Waters, 2020). The existing studies are very heterogeneous, both in terms of intervention layout and in terms of which difficulty has been targeted. There are studies on families in poverty or in other forms of deprivation (Meija et al., 2012; Ho et al. 2016a), families in therapy (Conoley, 2015) and for families with children with specific challenges, such as being on the autism spectrum (Benn et al., 2015; Hwang et al., 2015; Ferraioli & Harris, 2013), suffering from Type 1 diabetes (Kichler & Kaugars, 2015) or having behavioural problems (Sanders et al., 2014). These studies show promising results for the effectiveness of positive psychology family interventions.

The most common method used in family interventions is a focus on working with character strengths. A recent study of children in public mental health care who received intensive in-home treatment showed effectiveness for successful discharge after taking part in a strengths-focused treatment (Turner & Mueller, 2021). The intervention layout used in

Conoley (2015) was also a strengths-based design called Positive Family Therapy. Other family interventions not targeting a clinical group of children span different positive psychology concepts such as goal setting, meaning and family identity (Waters, 2020), gratitude, flow, joy, savoring, health and active listening (Ho et al., 2016a; Ho et al., 2016b) and resilience (Doty, 2017). The results from these different variations of family interventions showed increases in subjective well-being (Waters, 2020; Ho et al., 2016a; Ho et al., 2016b), enhanced positive family interaction (Ho et al., 2016a; Ho et al., 2016b), improved parenting behaviours and increased parenting confidence (Doty, 2017). No qualitative studies of family PPI's were found, although both Teodorczuk et al. (2018) and Ho et al. (2016a) speak to their necessity.

### **The purpose and goals of Tweens**

Addressing the discovery of the necessity to study qualitative factors by quantitative researchers such as Teodorczuk et al. (2018) and Ho et al. (2016a) and heeding the call of Weems (2009) for more diverse studies of interventions for children, adolescents and their families to foster an understanding of resilience and the mechanisms for developing it, this study takes an exploratory qualitative approach. This study aims to be an in-depth study of a family PPI model for children and adolescents (aged 11–14) experiencing psychological difficulties such as anxiety, depressiveness or stress. It includes their parents in the treatment, letting both child and parent learn about and do exercises of character strengths, noticing the good, positive communication, resiliency skills and mindfulness, but in separate child- and parent groups. Between sessions the families get to integrate their new knowledge in their home environment by doing shared practical homework exercises.

To enable the collection and analysis of data in an inductive way that lets the participants' own voices be heard, this study uses a Grounded Theory approach without pre-determined research questions or variables that it strives to measure. The aim of this present study is to let the participants formulate and express their thoughts about the intervention, and through their words find out what meaning, if any, could be ascribed to this type of intervention catered to this group. The focus is the process of meaning-making, with the aim of finding out exactly what the effective components of the intervention were, and in what ways this has been meaningful to the participants' lives outside of the intervention. Doing research in different cultural contexts is important for the emerging understanding of PPI's (Weems, 2009; Marques et al., 2011), and this study can contribute with data from a cultural context seldomly studied, namely the Swedish speaking minority population in Finland.

## Method

### Grounded theory

Grounded Theory (GT) is a systematic method for collecting and analysing qualitative data. It was founded within the field of sociology in the 1960's by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (Charmaz, 2014, p. 5). Grounded Theory is a “from the ground-up” method; allowing for discovery of new theory from data, through grounding the research in actual human experiences. (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 1–2; Charmaz, 2014, p. 6).

In addition to its inductive and theory-constructing stance, GT is also characterized by certain systematic methodological strategies (Charmaz, 2014, p. 5). The GT researcher builds understanding of the topic through a process of simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2014, p. 15). What emerges in the data collection informs the direction in which further exploration needs to go. Thus, one aims to collect more data for deepening and broadening the understanding of what emerges from the material until one reaches the point when more data no longer contributes anything new to the understanding (Charmaz, 2014, p. 192). In GT, one also aims to make analytic sense of the material, not just to put it forth in descriptive terms, which differs from several other qualitative stances (Charmaz, 2015, p. 66–67).

In GT, the researcher regularly has no fixed research questions at the onset, but a guiding interest or topic of inquiry, and then lets the participants provide the problem description through what they bring forth during the interviews (Charmaz, 2015, p. 59-60). Therefore, the literature review is done after the independent analysis is finished, for not until then can a GT researcher know where her research will lead her and what existing literature relate to her findings (Charmaz, 2015, p. 54).

The GT research process consists of a series of systematic yet flexible procedures, as GT offers practical research guidelines as well as an epistemological framework (Charmaz, 2015, p. 54). The GT procedures include intensive interviewing, interviews shaping after the participants stories and more targeted interview material being gathered as the research deepens (Charmaz, 2014, p. 85). The analysis of the data follows steps of constructing analytic codes and categories, which one refines and develops using a method of constant comparison (Charmaz, 2015, p. 66). A characteristic feature of GT is using memo-writing to explore and elaborate one's understanding of the categories, and the final report of the results being put together using the memos (Charmaz, 2015, p. 75).

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Since their founding GT together, Glaser and Strauss have taken the development of GT in different directions (Charmaz, 2014, p. 11). The key features described thus far remain in both branches, but while Glaser has stayed grounded in positivism, stressing the importance of unbiased observation of an objective reality of which we can acquire knowledge of, Strauss has taken the method in the direction of symbolic interactionism, focusing on how humans interpret the social realities around them. This perspective stresses human reflection and meaning making for all social processes they are involved in, which in turn influences their choices and actions. (Charmaz, 2015, p. 55-56).

Strauss' version of GT and symbolic interactionism focuses on how people construct meanings and what motivates their actions in everyday life. It emphasises that people confer meaning on the actions they take, and thus action and meaning each influence the other. It focuses on processes and gives a voice to the respondents own reasoning around the processes they take part in, rather than studying social constructions and stability. (Charmaz, 2015, p. 58).

### ***Constructivist Grounded Theory***

A further development of Strauss' version of GT has been made by Charmaz, who has taken GT in the direction of constructivism (Charmaz, 2000, p. 510). In constructivism, one assumes relativism of multiple social realities and recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge by the observer and the observed (Charmaz et al., 2018 p. 416–417). With a Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) approach, one acknowledges the researcher's role as a co-constructor of the data with the participants. The results that CGT produces are then just that; constructions, not accurate or undisputable renderings of the social worlds studied (Charmaz, 2014, p. 14; Charmaz, 2000, p. 523). Within CGT one recognizes that the researcher's theoretical proclivities and interaction with the informants shape the collection, content and analysis of the data. A thorough scrutiny of one's own preconceptions and other factors that influence interpretations is thus needed by the researcher and is a part of the analysis itself. (Charmaz, 2015, p. 56–57).

A constructivist grounded theory research model was chosen for this study, with the aim of evaluating the Tweens intervention model based on the participants' own words, experiences and feelings about it. Letting the participants own descriptions be the starting point and lead the way for the analysis was important, as the Tweens intervention was a pilot study of a new model of positive psychology group treatment for children that had not been

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carried out or analysed in this format before. CGT allowing for an interpretive and analytic approach was also of importance, to do justice to the deeply personal, nuanced and multi-layered experiences of both the adults and children who partook.

The focus of the study is analysing the process of how participants make meaning of taking part in the intervention, to further understand how it can be meaningful in their lives as a whole and how it can influence their actions. The ultimate purpose is then to evaluate if this time limited intervention can be of use to parents and children with problems related to anxiety or low mood. As one in constructivist GT tries to tap into assumptions and implicit meanings, rather than obtain information about events and causality as an objectivist would, it is a suitable method for the aims of this study (Silverman, 2011, p. 74).

The choice of CGT was also supported by the fact that it is well suited for studying both individual processes and interpersonal relations, both relevant in this study (Charmaz, 2015, p. 59). Charmaz (2014, p. 10) writes that since the start, GT has been used to study social psychological processes within a social setting. It allows for analysis of different aspects that might have influenced their concepts of Tweens, such as individual symptomatology, group compositions and parent-child interactions. A basic principle in all GT stemming back to Glaser (2007) is also seeing everything as data, which fits well with a mixed method approach (Johnson, McGowan & Turner, 2012). In Tweens, quantitative and observational data was also collected to inform the qualitative interview data. However, the quantitative data was not analyzed in this study, as it was deemed to be beyond the resources and scope of this master's thesis.

As I conducted this study, I was consciously aware of my constructivist stance. As a researcher, I was much involved in the processes that the participants took part of in Tweens. I personally had an active part in all the different phases of planning, conducting, interviewing and analysing the intervention. GT also gives you the opportunity to go back and collect more data as your understanding develops, which suited the purposes of trying to understand how the conceptions and meaning making around Tweens developed before, during and after the intervention and being able to dig deeper into emerging topics.

The aim of this study is to construct a conceptual analysis of this specific experience, not to construct formal theory. As the intent of GT from the onset has been to generate theory, this study deviates somewhat from the GT model, but as Charmaz (2015, p. 81) points out this is today also a possible and valid way of using GT. To do a proper theoretical sampling (i.e.,

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keep finding new informants to inform the growing analysis until saturation is reached) was not possible in this setting either, as the number of possible informants was limited to the participants of the two pilot study intervention groups.

### **The Tweens Intervention**

#### ***Intervention procedure***

The intervention layout for the child groups was developed with the Flourishing Students program and other previous research of the Folkhälsan research team in positive psychology as a starting point (Fagerlund et al., 2021; Laakso et al., 2020). The program for the parent groups was developed with a starting point in the previous intervention Flourishing Families, which in its turn was based on the program Mindfulness Based Strength Program (MBSP). The material and exercises were adapted to fit within the format and time available for Tweens. Tweens was advertised for 11–14-year-olds suffering from anxiety, low moods, worrying, stress or loneliness and to their parents through school psychologists and care facilities treating children. The participants were Swedish-speaking or bilingual families from the Helsinki-area in southern Finland. When signing up the research assistant held phone interviews with the parents, checking that the intervention was seemed to be appropriate for their needs and informing them of the intervention layout and research aim. A participant description with symptomatology included will be found in the beginning of the results chapter.

Tweens was planned and carried out as an eight-part course consisting of weekly two-hour sessions. Both parents and children took part in the intervention simultaneously, but in separate groups. The child group and parent group content and exercises mirrored each other, and each week there was common homework exercises that they implemented at home during the week. The intervention content spanned many common positive psychology topics, such as character strengths, positive emotions, positive interaction, resiliency, mindset and mindfulness. The content distribution over the sessions is briefly described in the table below.

Session nr.	Session content
Week 1	<b>Introduction</b> – group forming exercises, introduction to Tweens and to well-being research. VIA character strengths exercise.
Week 2	<b>Strengths</b> – seeing the good in oneself and in one’s child and savoring these strengths. Strengths 360 degrees exercise.
Week 3	<b>Positive emotions</b> – which are they and when do we experience them. Gratitude and What went well exercises.
Week 4	<b>Positive interaction</b> – how do we make ourselves and others feel? – balancing strengths use, the bucket analogy. Bucket exercise.

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Week 5	<b>Managing difficulty</b> – mindfulness, facing difficult emotions in your child and assertive communication.
Week 6	<b>Resiliency</b> – Red and green thoughts, active constructive responding and the helping hand exercises.
Week 7	<b>Values, mindset and goal-setting</b> – where am I heading and what do I think is possible for me and my child.
Week 8	<b>Termination and evaluation</b> – family strength tree and celebrating and evaluating the journey and the lessons learned.

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*Table 1: Intervention content and content distribution over sessions.*

The intervention was held twice, once in the autumn of 2018 and once in the spring of 2019. Five families took part in the autumn intervention and eight in the spring. In most cases one of the parents attended, but in a couple of cases both parents participated. The child groups were led by two leaders while the parent group had two leaders for the autumn intervention and one in the spring group. The leaders had different educational backgrounds within health care and had extra training in positive psychology methods before the intervention. The intervention was designed to allow much time for discussion and exercises, as well as teaching the participants positive psychology concepts. Each session was begun with a healthy snack, as the groups were held after school.

### ***Data Collection***

The data collection was done in several steps and continuously during the intervention to collect information of the participants' meaning making process. In the beginning of the intervention, participants filled in forms containing questions of their expectations from and hopes for Tweens as well as their own reasons for applying. The purpose of this form was to see what possible meaning they ascribed to Tweens prior to beginning. After the intervention was finished all participants that wished to do so took part in family interviews. All participants of the autumn group took part in the interviews and five out of the spring-group participating families. All in all, ten interviews were conducted.

The interviews were designed to elicit meaning. In Charmaz (2015, s. 64) she discusses different layers when studying meaning. The first is the stated explanation for the action, in this case, why they attended Tweens, which was collected through the forms. The other layers of meaning she describes are unstated assumptions, intentions for engaging, the effects on others and the consequences for further individual action and interpersonal relations. Data of these was collected in the interviews, e.g., their attitudes in the beginning, the effects Tweens had on them and their parent-child interplay, and what their takeaway was from Tweens. The interviews followed the participants lead in the direction they took to go



deeper with whatever they found to be meaningful with the experience. Whenever the interviews came to a halt, the interviewer proceeded by bringing up parts of Tweens not yet mentioned for discussion.

### *Data analysis*

The interviews were transcribed, partially by the researcher and partially by an outside party. Before delving into the analysis, reflection about my own influence on the upcoming analysis was appropriate. This included analysing and scrutinizing my knowledge and areas of expertise, my investment and interest in the study and possible impacts I could have on the participants in the interview situation. This will be accounted for in the strengths and limitations section of this thesis. After this initial reflection, the interviews were read through several times to establish familiarity with the content. A first conceptualisation of different themes was drawn out to chart out the scope of the material, as the interview material was extensive. Subsequently, a more thorough read with line-by-line coding commenced. Line-by-line coding means to name each line of the transcribed data with a code (Charmaz, 2015, p. 68). The codes are written in active form, describing the processes taking place or what the participants are doing (Charmaz, 2015, p. 67). I wrote active codes in the margins of the transcripts for everything the participants said that was informative for the study.

While working through the transcripts, common themes started occurring. As I encountered these, I started comparing and synthesizing these codes through memo-writing. In GT, memo-writing is an important tool to analyse the implicit meanings of statements. This will deepen the understanding and raise the abstractness level of the emerging analysis, as one in GT strives to link the concrete data to abstract ideas and general processes already from the beginning (Charmaz, 2015, p. 66–67). The first memos were written early on, to understand what was emerging in the data and allow for comparison between codes. In GT, one makes comparisons at every level of analytic work to establish analytic distinctions (Charmaz, 2015, p. 66). The first written memos were written comparing different statements from the same participants to understand the deeper meaning and comparing similarities and differences of the statements of a parent and her child. As the analysis deepened, the memos also linked together statements from different interviews, comparing similarities and differences between parent and parent, child and child. Understanding of the child's symptomatology, observation and quantitative data was woven in to understand the different outlooks of the families and participants.

As the initial line-by-line coding was completed, a more focused coding took over. When engaging in focused coding one strives to synthesize and explain larger segments of data. Focused coding builds the body and form for the emerging analyses, as categories of codes emerge. (Charmaz, 2015, p. 70). The codes were categorised by a process of colour-coding of the memos for similar meanings and experiences. The initial codes were then looked at again with new eyes, comparing the codes with the emerging categories, as is prescribed by the constant comparative method. Categories were formed, tried out, compared and adjusted for making analytic sense and staying true to the participants original statements. To do this, the memos were elaborated and rethought, and new memos were written containing the synthesised understanding of all the material. These most refined memos, taking all codes and categories and their internal connections and distinctions into account, were the basis for the final analytical report. The final categories will be presented in the results chapter and a discussion of the strengths and limitations of the analysis process will be found in the discussion chapter.

### **Ethical considerations**

The research plan was sent in for ethical reviewing and approved by the Ethics Review board for the Humanities and Social Behavioral Sciences at the University of Helsinki. The research team has taken ethical principles prescribed by Silverman (2013, p. 162) in consideration through meeting the requirements of information, informed consent, confidentiality, and restrictions for use of data. The participants were informed in beforehand of the research purpose of the intervention and that being interviewed and filling out rating scales was included but not compulsory for participation. They were also informed of their right to terminate the intervention at any time. After being informed, all participants consented to the intervention terms.

All personal information collected throughout the research process was stored securely and kept confidential. In the final report, all participants names were substituted for pseudonyms and their genders were obscured through randomly assigning genders for the pseudonyms. The collected material has and will only be used for the research they have been informed of, which is in accordance with the ethical guidelines for use of material (Silverman, 2013, p. 162). As the collected information is of personal character, utmost sensitivity and respect was kept in mind during interviews and in writing up the report.

**Results**

The participants have found meaning in Tweens in both similar and differing ways. When taking a closer look at their statements, three main themes come forth. The first theme is a sense of belonging, a feeling of togetherness with the others in the group and openness to each other. The second theme is related to the tools having been taught, and how these have helped the participants develop a broadened appreciation, hope and compassion. The third theme that emerges is an increase in present moment awareness and self-understanding, which has helped participants to pause and choose their action or reaction more deliberately. This kind of awareness could be described by the term *mindsight*, coined by Daniel Siegel (2010), which will be described later. The three themes are outlined in the table below.

Theme/Higher-order construct	Mediator	Category/Theme
Belonging	Openness	Togetherness (Children)
		Peer Support (Parents)
		Joint action (Families)
Tools		New vocabulary
		Seeing strengths
		Appreciation
		Hope
		Compassion
Mindsight		Health awareness
		Awareness of self and others
		Pausing and self-observation
		Choosing action
		Breaking patterns

*Table 2: The three main categories of meaning from Tweens according to the participants.*

The experience of participating in Tweens was deeply personal. The reasons for signing up for Tweens, interacting with and belonging to the group, and the meaningfulness of Tweens were different for the families and individual participants. Tweens also met these needs differently, affecting how meaningful the experience of participating became.

Participants have been given pseudonyms. Parents have been given surnames while the children are given first name pseudonyms, with the purpose of being easily distinguishable as either parent or child. The genders of the pseudonyms have been randomly assigned so that every other participant have been assigned a male and every other a female

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pseudonym. This does not correspond with the actual gender distribution and is done deliberately with the purpose of furthering the anonymity of the participants. The true distribution was that 7 out of 10 of the children were girls, and 10 out of 11 parents were mothers.

Group	Parents	Children	Child's main difficulties
Autumn/spring			
Autumn	Mr. Smith	Isak	Overwhelming, rapidly fluctuating emotions
	Mrs. Anderson	Jessica	Low-moods, destructive speech, stress-related acting out in school
	Mr. Stone	Fred	Depressiveness, being bullied
	Mrs. Jones	Lisa	Sadness, loneliness, helplessness
	Mr. Williams	Charlie	Emotional outbursts when stressed
Spring	Mrs. Taylor	Sophie	Stress and anxiety related to school performance
	Mr. Evans	Benny	Depressiveness, self-destructive speech, performance anxiety
	Mrs. Brown	Anna	Low self-esteem
	Mrs. Walker	Michaela	Stress and sleep-related problems, low moods
	Mr. Thompson	Timmy	Low self-esteem, loneliness
	Mrs. Thompson		

*Table 3: Pseudonyms of the participants with genders randomly assigned.*

### **Belonging**

A central theme as to why the participants found Tweens meaningful is that it gave them a sense of belonging or togetherness. This is the most frequently mentioned aspect of meaning. They describe a surprising openness, leading to a sense of belonging within the child- and parent groups, and also of a sense of joint action and togetherness within the family dyads or trios doing Tweens together. However, about one third of children did not feel belonging. Some of them say that there was not much talking nor bonding between the children and that there could have been a stronger sense of togetherness had there been more fun and activity. Others talk about the uneven age- or gender distributions as factors that affected their sense of belonging, due to the level of the material being too difficult or too easy, or wishing there had been other peers of the same gender in their group.

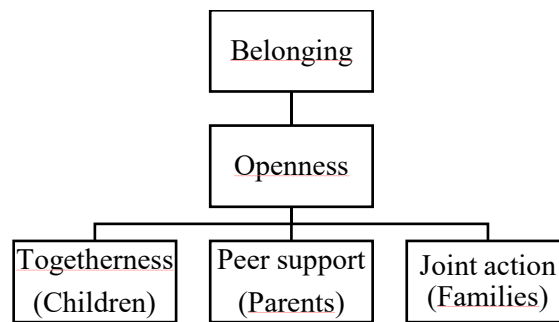


Figure 1: Sub-categories of the belonging-theme.

### **Openness**

When the participants talk about belonging many also use the word openness. Openness was something especially Lisa, Charlie and Mr. Williams expressed they were hoping for beforehand, and something that they and several others perceived as a big part of what made Tweens impactful. Several parents, such as Mrs. Brown, Mr. Smith, Mrs. Taylor and Mr. Thompson express amazement for how deeply they were able to share about personal subjects and how fast the sense of safety was formed in the parent group. Mrs. Brown puts it like this:

I thought, how strange, it can't be that total strangers just start sharing things on this depth. But everybody opened up already on the first session. It was astonishing. (...) Amazingly fine therapy.

Mr. Smith thinks along the same lines:

It was hard to imagine beforehand that there would be this kind of atmosphere and that it would work this quickly with people you don't know that well. (...) In any case there was this feeling that 'Alright, I want to return here.'

When participants dare to open up and be vulnerable it reduces the feeling of shame, isolation or being different than others which in turn creates a sense of belonging, togetherness and trust. This could be an explanation for the therapeutic effect Mrs. Brown described above as being one of the most important functions of Tweens for her.

The participants give varying reasons as to how Tweens helped them open up with one another. Out of the parents, Mrs. Taylor, Mr. Thompson and Mrs. Brown talk about the good leadership. Mr. Smith stresses the fact that the group consisted of people that were strangers before Tweens started, thus feeling able to express himself freely. Mr. Williams talks about openness as a skill that one needs to practice, and that Tweens promoted just that. Among the children Michaela and Timmy mention the fact that the group was small. Having

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things in common and having similar reasons to be there were also important factors to facilitate openness and belonging. Michaela puts it this way:

I think it was easier when it was quite a small group. And then that everybody had pretty similar problems, or yeah, like the same things that we came here for. (...) Many had sleeping difficulties and like, a little bit of anxiety, perhaps? (...) It was pretty similar everything you heard when they got to talk (about it).

She seems to have found it meaningful to be able to talk to other children her age about mental health topics. There are not many forums for children this age to do that, and Tweens provided this. Anna also reasons along similar lines, that it was interesting to hear what others' lives look like, since she does not know that many people. One could interpret this as meaning that Tweens gave her more reference points and widened her perspective for other people's struggles.

Lisa shares that her hopes for Tweens was to become more open. School is a difficult place for her, where she feels invisible most of the time. Being asked about her friends in school she responds, "What friends?" and her mom says that she is mostly quiet all day there. In Lisa's description of Tweens, a sense of her having felt safe and relaxed comes forth. One of the first things she comments about Tweens is that "we have laughed" and that it has been fun because they have been telling jokes. The relative freedom in the Tweens environment compared to school, such as being able to go and get snacks when they wanted and having breaks when they could draw on the blackboard are things she mentions as factors that made Tweens a different, more positive experience. Mom suggests that Tweens might have given her daughter some more energy, but that it might also be due to having less tests in school lately.

### ***Togetherness within the child groups***

The approximately two thirds of the children who did feel a sense of belonging report it as an important factor as to why Tweens was meaningful to them. When Charlie was asked whether he had felt any emotion more often due to Tweens he replied "togetherness." He states togetherness in the context of a feeling. It is not the physical proximity but the inner experience that he refers to. Anna says that "maybe it was that everybody listened to each other" when asked about what the best part of Tweens was according to her. Listening, telling your story and feeling heard are factors that create a sense of belonging.

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Being together physically in a group is not enough to produce this sense of togetherness, as becomes evident when the descriptions of a couple of children clearly show that they have not felt the same way. Timmy says he did not share much about himself, nor did he feel that there was much spontaneous sharing from the other children. He describes it more like they were just answering the leaders' questions, and that might also be the reason that he did not find the others' sharing helpful to him.

Michaela's thoughts embrace both the views of Anna and Timmy and sheds light on why they might have perceived the same situation so differently. She thinks that it has been important for her to be able to talk about herself freely and in her own words. In her opinion everybody has listened well to each other and they have been getting support. But she also says that they did not really talk to each other if it was not included in the task. A genuine relationship between the children where they opened up about their problems and gave each other comments or advice does not seem to have developed, at least that seems to be so for the spring group children. Anna and Michaela still think the sharing and listening that was done within the exercises was meaningful to them, while others such as Timmy did not seem to be able to utilise this in the same way.

For some children, this perceived lack of authentic connection might have been more disappointing because one of their hopes for Tweens was to find friendship. Sophie and Lisa talk about wishing to find new friends in Tweens but feeling disappointed in that regard. Sophie was disappointed that most others were younger than her and that is why she did not really feel she connected deeply with anyone. Lisa expresses uncertainty about whether Tweens really made any long-term difference to her since the course ended and she seems uncertain whether she could really call the other children her friends or not. She seems doubtful whether they will keep in touch. This goes to show that despite facilitating friendships not being a preliminary aim from the scientists' point of view, it still can be for the children.

Lisa, and Isak as well, talk about appreciating the freedom and flexibility that was part of the intervention layout. In Lisa's case it might have been especially important because at school she feels that there are constant demands on her that she cannot meet, which are the main reasons for her feelings of despair and hopelessness. Tweens for her was an undemanding contrast where she could express herself more. According to her mother Mrs. Jones it was very tangible how this contrast affected Lisa's emotions:

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But in the beginning, after the first session and also a bit after the second, she became sad in a way, or... I don't remember exactly, but she didn't go to school the next day. (...) I think that the contrast between this course and being in school was so big that it became heavy to go to school. Because it was so much fun here.

In fact, all children in the autumn group seemed to enjoy the breaks, drawing together on the blackboard and laughing a lot. This was a time for bonding that made Tweens an enjoyable experience for them. Charlie had been quite sceptical about going to Tweens beforehand his father told us, but that scepticism was all wiped away after the first session. Charlie himself explained it by having been to other groups like this before, but then they were always split up with separate grown-ups. He was glad that here he could talk and laugh with other children. Isak expressed thoughts along the same lines when he said:

It was nice because we could also hang out and then it didn't have to feel like... Or you felt that you're not alone.

The children of the spring group talk less about having fun together than the autumn group children. Benny feels that Tweens was boring and unnecessary. On being asked about how it could have been different he says:

I don't know really, but at least something happier, and it was also rather quiet there. (...) Can't one do something that makes one happy in another way than talking about exactly what the problem is? One might always have problems?

His thoughts express the view that the atmosphere was too heavy, and the subjects being discussed too problem focused. Timmy's dad Mr. Thompson reflect upon that the group cohesion did not seem to have been that strong in his son's group, and that perhaps more group building games and more activity overall would have helped the children open up to each other and enjoy Tweens more. Mrs. Anderson also takes up more physical activity as a possible area for improvement.

What exactly contributed to the differences in experience between autumn- and spring groups is difficult to pinpoint. But since the layout of the course was the same the most probable cause was the group composition. What many participants of the spring group point out is that the age distribution was quite large and that the children were on different levels of maturity, in contrast to the autumn group where the maturity level among the children was rather even. Charlie in the autumn group also felt that he had much in common with the other children, so besides maturity they might also have been more similar in interests. Another



factor is that the leadership also changed from autumn to spring group. In the spring group there were also more inconsistency in the leadership as one leader quit half-way through.

*Peer support within the parent groups*

All parents express appreciation for the atmosphere and support they got from Tweens. Many parents also talk extensively about the value of peer support for their parenting that they got out of Tweens. Mrs. Anderson found the peer support valuable because she got to discuss problematic parenting situations with other parents who also had older children and thus experience of teenagers. She describes getting the feeling of not being alone in it, which also Mr. Thompson described:

What I thought was especially good was this group. The sense of belonging in the group and to be able to share experiences. The support from the group, the peer support so to speak, was the best. (...) From our discussions it became clear that there are many who are in the same boat.

Mrs. Taylor feel that the leader of the parent group was very skilled at creating a sense of safety and openness within the parent group that enabled them to trust each other and share. Mrs. Brown repeatedly point out how therapeutic this process was to her:

We opened up to each other in pairs and talked about what problems we had and how we viewed things. (...) It was astonishingly beautiful to get to open up like that. Astonishingly nice therapy.

A big portion of the session time was allocated to talking about what had happened recently in their lives and to peer support. This was much appreciated by some, but others pointed out that it took too large a portion of the time allocated for Tweens. Mrs Jones said she found it interesting to hear the other parents' thoughts. Mrs. Thompson also appreciated the peer support rounds:

It was good that the sessions went largely on the group's terms. We got the time we needed for the discussion, so that was good.

Mr. Evans and Mrs. Walker on the other hand felt that the group therapeutic element could take up too much time in relation to the content and the tools being taught. Mr. Evans says that rounds when they talked about how everyone had been doing since last time could drag on too long:

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Sometimes I really thought that I would rather go through her material, she really had much good material and wise thoughts, but then it ended up with 'I'll e-mail you the material so you can read it at home' (because we didn't have enough time).

### *Joint action within the families*

A characteristic aspect of Tweens is that it focuses on both parents and children simultaneously. Mrs. Walker talks about appreciating the concept of being in different groups but learning about the same themes as her daughter. The intervention thus targets the children's problems from two angles, both directly treating the children and helping the parents help their children better.

A togetherness experience that is frequently brought up is parent and child time spent together. For Benny time together with his dad was the only meaning he willingly admitted that Tweens had for him, since they used to do fun things, such as go get ice cream afterwards. Some parents, such as Mrs. Anderson and Mrs. Taylor, have taken to heart from Tweens to look for opportunities to spend more time with their child but also to be receptive of and respectful of when the child signals wanting time alone. Mrs. Taylor puts it like this:

It has been rewarding also this little second we have had together in the car on our way here. One should take, or we discussed together, if we should continue having a day after school that would be ours (...) And I'm perhaps reflecting more on the family as a whole, how I can place the pieces of the puzzle and also separate them a bit. That all siblings don't have to be in the same place all the time.

Mrs. Anderson, Mr. Williams, Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Taylor found Tweens meaningful for being a joint action with their child for the child's well-being. Mr. Williams puts it like this:

I think Tweens is about to, with your child, reflect on how we can feel good, and feel better together. (...) I think Tweens is about being together. Yes, and also being together with the other adults and listen to them.

The sense of joint action has been strong when it has been the child's initiative to come to the course, such as in the case of Anna and Mrs. Brown, or when the child has been surprisingly eager to come to the course compared to the expectations of the parent. Sharing the enthusiasm and having a child that has wanted to come has brought the parents joy and made it feel meaningful to them.

**Tools**

A large amount of what is described as meaningful with Tweens by the participants is concerning the tools that were taught and what changes these brought to the qualities of mind of the participants. This chapter will be structured around these qualities of mind, presenting the tools that led to these changes as expressed by the participants. These qualities of mind are a new vocabulary, seeing strengths, appreciation, hope, compassion and health awareness.

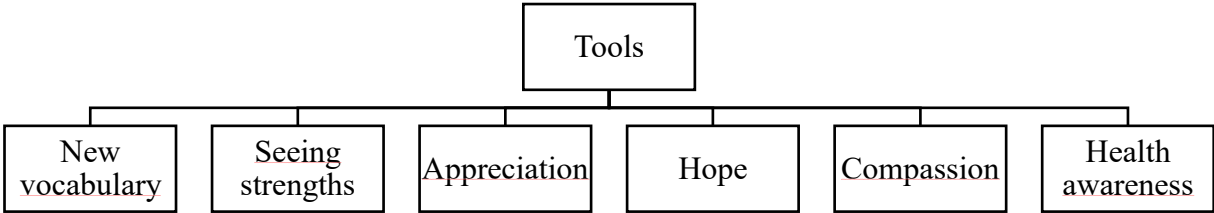


Figure 2: Sub-categories of the tools-theme.

A goal of Tweens was to provide the participants with actionable tools that the families could use in their everyday life to promote mental well-being in their children. Concrete tools to make everyday life a bit simpler and exciting was what brought Mr. and Mrs. Thompson to Tweens with their son. They feel Tweens lived up to their hopes in this area and believe these tools will have positive long-term effects on their son. Mrs. Taylor also focuses on the tools and thinks that young people can be very susceptible to new ways of being and thinking, and that these concrete exercises therefore can be very useful for young people such as her daughter Sophie.

The concepts of strengths, mindfulness, resilience and so forth were all new for some participants, while they were familiar concepts to others. Mrs. Brown was one of the parents for whom much of it was new and eye-opening, and she was really surprised at the quality and variety of the Tweens content. For the parents Mr. Smith, Mrs. Taylor, Mr. Thompson and Mrs. Thompson some of the concepts were familiar and they say that Tweens in many ways worked as a reminder to use this knowledge more often. Tweens seems to have confirmed their view on how to be and what to do with their children to promote mental health. Mrs. Taylor’s daughter puts it like this:

Well, it was these things that I’ve heard from you (mom) before, but it was as you said a reminder to do them, that one has to remember to put it to practice. So it (Tweens) was a little reminder.

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And Mr. Smith like this:

I would say that Tweens has been a reminder of thing you already knew really, but is good to be reminded to do what you know are the right things. Like taking action on problems, being happy for your colleagues or not putting yourself down but seeing that you are enough. To just keep going like we have.

### *New vocabulary*

With the tools the participants have also gained the associated new vocabulary. Having a language for mental well-being and talking more about it shapes the culture at home. The family culture is formed from what they do regularly, from the family habits. The bucket exercise seems to have started a habit where appreciation and pride are normal things to express toward one another in some families. The bucket analogy is a tool for explaining that when we support or delight someone else, we also feel supported or delighted ourselves (buckets being filled) and conversely, when we hurt someone else, we ourselves also suffer (buckets being emptied). Mr. Williams talks about the bucket concept being useful for being easy to understand:

I think one has (...) gotten like concepts. One has gotten this new terminology for it, filling one's buckets, emptying one's buckets. It's really easy for everyone to understand what it is about. I think I have thought along these lines before, but now I have a shared language with my child.

What this vocabulary does is to put into words the appreciation and care that is already there. It makes it explicit and shared, and thus strengthened. The vocabulary of resilience (red and green thoughts) is a useful way to talk about dark and happy thoughts, while the bucket being filled or emptied serves as a way of communicating emotional state. Many seem to have taken this vocabulary to heart because its concrete and easy to understand. Michaela expresses how this helps her understand her own thoughts and feelings, which can otherwise seem fleeting and abstract. Talking about what goes on in her head as red and green thoughts makes it a more neutral, externalized subject. Now a red thought is something that she has, the problem is not her being a negative person. Lisa also uses the vocabulary with red and green thoughts to express herself when saying "I have red thoughts. (...) My green thoughts are impossible to get a hold of." to describe her inner life during the interview.

The concept and language regarding the DESC-model (Boniwell & Ryan, 2012) is also discussed in some families. Mrs. Walker talks about the accessibility of this vocabulary

as a supporting function for parenting when teaching her children resilience skills and self-knowledge. She says that she tried using the DESC-model when explaining something that happened at home. This structured model gave her guidelines for how to communicate a chain of events. Many children, such as Timmy, Benny and Isak found the DESC-model to be too complicated or unpractical to use in conflict situations. It seems to have too many steps and be difficult to remember, especially when upset or angry. From the children's standpoint it is consequently not ascribed as much meaning as the strengths-, bucket- or three good things exercises.

### *Seeing strengths*

Several participants talk about becoming more aware and appreciative of their own, as well as of other people's good sides from working with the strengths-topic. Mr. Williams and Sophie express becoming aware of new strengths in themselves with a sense of pride. When Mr. Williams got humour as a strength his first thought was "what kind of strength is that?" but later he realized that he actually uses humour very often and that he appreciates having this strength. Sophie felt strongly that appreciation of beauty and excellence was one of her strengths:

Appreciation of beauty and excellence was a strength that I had never heard of before. My aunt gave me that one too, and she didn't know what strengths I had gotten (from the VIA character survey). (...) I see the beauty in things people do, not just beautiful things and such, but when somebody does something concrete.

Mr. Williams talks about how he has more understanding for what he perceives as negative behaviour in his son when he now sees that this is the flipside of a strength that he normally cherishes in Charlie. He thus expresses an understanding of strengths over- and under use:

Charlie can be rather (...) impulsive and a lot can happen very quickly and then it's easy to end up in a negative bucket emptying. (...) Easily as a parent you feel like 'enough now!' and 'stop!'. It's the tempo that is so fast... yeah, but instead I could take a step back and see that it can also be a positive thing that you are really enthusiastic, social, eager to participate and interested. (...) I always think a coin has two sides, it's really the same trait but it is how we use that trait that matters. All traits are rather neutral, it is how we are able to apply them that matters.

Hearing what strengths others see in oneself was the most valuable part of the strengths-topic for some, such as Benny. Benny first said he thought it meaningless to pick

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out strengths for himself. About the exercise with his own strength-hand, he said “One had to draw something that in reality doesn’t matter, just a picture of your strengths.”

The concern that brought the family to Tweens was Benny’s negative self-image and self-destructive thoughts. He does not see that finding strengths in himself and using positive affirmations concerns him because it feels unauthentic. He says he does not come up with anything positive to say about himself, that he hates doing it and that he would feel egoistic if he did. Although he had difficulty seeing the good in himself, he agrees with his dad that it was nice to receive strengths from others. He remembers well what strengths others saw in him and talks happily about their family strength tree, for which he came up with his own strengths and expressed pride in his family being a bit special. Despite his insistence that Tweens did not give him anything he seems to have been able to take something with him from the strength exercises that made him feel good.

The strengths 360° exercise also stood out in the memories of a couple other families for being eye-opening. Mrs. Taylor expresses an experience of getting her strengths confirmed when her close relations picked the same strengths for her as the VIA character test did. Her daughter Sophie found it difficult to ask others for her strengths but agrees that hearing many people talk about seeing the same strength in her made her believe it might be true. Anna was able to take the strengths 360° exercise to heart and enjoyed asking her friends for her strengths. Her mother fills in that this is something you very rarely ask people about and she appreciates that it broadened their perspectives to include seeing the good sides in themselves.

Timmy did not find the strength topic helpful to him and strengths 360° was left undone. His dad shows how they have put the family strength tree on display at home to be reminded of the positivity, and reasons that in the long term these things might seem more meaningful to his son. The family strength tree is brought up by a couple of families as one of the more memorable exercises. They have it on display in Sophie’s home also, and her mother Mrs. Taylor talk with pride about her daughter presenting the strength tree confidently in front of the whole group when oral presentations has been anxiety-provoking for her in the past. The time spent together in Tweens seems to have let mom see growth in Sophie in the areas that have been difficult for her.

Strengths do not always come forth or get noticed in school. Since the content taught in the grade Lisa is in matches her poorly in interests and difficulty level, and she also has

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trouble connecting with her classmates, she expresses herself and her personality very little at school. Her image of herself in group settings with peers is based mostly on the school experience and is thus rather negative. When talking of the strengths 360° exercise and the strengths her relatives saw in her she blows it off with them not knowing what she is like in school. Her mother Mrs. Jones hopes that Tweens has given Lisa some perspective and distance to the school experience, and let her daughter see that there can be other group settings where she can be comfortable and her strengths can come forth.

### *Appreciation*

Many participants bring up appreciation of the positive things in life. Mrs. Taylor describes having taken appreciation and gratitude to heart, seeing how positivity is contagious and makes one see even more good things when one gets into the habit of it. Mrs. Walker and her daughter Michaela stress the importance of making the What went well-exercise a habit. This gave them a practical experience of the power of positivity, and thus made them believe in it. Forming a new habit was the goal for Mr. Stone and Mr. Evans when focusing on being consistent with doing the What went well-exercise instead of trying to incorporate all tools with their children. They express that being consistent has not been easy since their children struggle with low moods and negative self-image, but that they believe in the power of bringing in appreciation of what has been good to counterbalance the negative bias. As Mr. Stone said, “Even if it’s been a shitty day, we don’t let it go until we have found three good things.”

When the What went well-exercise focused on appreciation for good things in one’s life, the bucket-exercise focuses on expressing appreciation of others. For Isak, this came naturally, and he readily found things to write to others. His father, Mr. Smith, is impressed by this proclivity in his son and expresses pride of him. In the interviews, a couple other parents, such as Mrs. Taylor and Mr. Williams, also express pride in their children’s development during the course. Parent and child being together in Tweens has given them an opportunity to watch their children grow through the course, which has led them to feel proud and appreciative of their children’s unique strengths and personality.

For some, the effect of appreciation seems to be short-lived and in need of consistent expression to be effective. Benny critiques the bucket exercise for giving only a short-lived joy, but not really being helpful in the long run. He describes being excited seeing that he has gotten a drop (positive note from someone), but directly upon reading it his mood goes back

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to the way it was before. Mrs. Jones talk about seeing an increase in spontaneous kindness in herself and her daughter, but that the effect wore off with time:

When the course had just started, I thought that we had become a little friendlier to one another. Now the effect has worn of a bit perhaps.

The theme of appreciation comes up very strongly in the reminiscence of Charlie and his dad Mr. Williams, reflecting on one night when they gave each other strengths within the family:

What I think worked best was when we got the strengths cards and we sat and gave each other cards that night. (...) And I remember that this evening became really lovely, because of the strength cards, everyone became a bit like ‘O really, you feel that way about me?’. And one felt very like, moved. There was a bit of a holy feeling about it.

Becoming aware of what the other family members thought about them seems to have led to feeling appreciated and seen, and the moment itself made them experience a strong feeling of unity and love that had a sacred feeling over it.

### *Hope*

In many interviews one can discern a dynamic mindset having been developed in the minds of the participants. They express agency and hope in being able to affect their lives with their thinking and behaviour. Mr. Evans’s experience of being able to break his habitual thought patterns is an example of this. His thoughts will be described in the breaking patterns section of the awareness-chapter.

Other participants, both parents and children, display a more dynamic mindset. Mr. Williams shows a dynamic mindset talking about hopefulness, saying that it is something one can improve by practice, like how one can affect one’s resilience. He wishes he was a more hopeful parent since the strength was rather low on the VIA character survey, and says that it had climbed a bit higher in the list when he took it a second time at the end of Tweens.

Isak is showing a dynamic mindset when he talks about welcoming challenging situations in his life:

In a way, I’m hoping for a situation where I can become angry or sad because then, if I handle it well, I’ll be proud of myself and I’ll learn something for next time.

He has used to put himself in emotionally charged situations when stepping in to defend others. He sees now that he does not always have to make a big deal out of everything



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and can thus avoid becoming sad. But as is evident in the quote he also has a different way of relating to his emotions, seeing challenging emotions as an area of growth and development and not just as burdensome.

Michaela ascribes a sense of hope or comfort to having tools now. She says that it can be difficult to use them in the heat of the moment, but that when she can it can lead to positive change:

In some situations, it doesn't really work to think 'Okay, I'm going to use this technique now', or it's difficult to use it. But it is also good to know that when you can use it the situation can develop into something better.

Her mom Mrs. Walker talk about the utility of understanding resilience (red and green thoughts) and how our lives are shaped by what we think:

It is important what you think and how you think, it becomes somewhat of how you do things and how you feel and then it goes on from there.

She talks about appreciating the research-based information and learning how thoughts, emotions and actions are connected. She later gives an example and displays a dynamic mindset talking about how she has overcome one of her weaknesses.

Awareness of positive and negative thoughts does not equal ability to alter one's way of thinking, and sometimes it is necessary to realize that the issue stems from the surroundings rather than from inside oneself. Lisa expresses her lack of support in school by saying "if there were more green things", meaning that she can only change her own mindset so much.

### ***Compassion for self and others***

Among the parent, Mrs. Brown, Mr. Smith and Mrs. Taylor talk about self-compassion. Mrs. Brown brings forth increased self-compassion as an important change she got out of Tweens. She appreciated the leader of the parent group ending the sessions with "Hey, remember to be kind to yourselves!" To her, Tweens conveyed that she is enough, which was important for her and her daughter Anna, having been in environments with much criticism for a long time. The topic of being enough comes forth in another way when Mr. Smith talks about Tweens. He thinks that Tweens was well aligned with his parenting values, and that this has given him a sense of ease that he can just keep going as he has and that this is good enough.

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As we discuss having high ambitions and demands on oneself in relation to feeling enough Mrs. Taylor says:

That I think Tweens has given me a lot of, that trying is good enough. You don't have to get perfect marks at everything.

Her daughter Sophie embraces this partially, but still has fears that her performance in school will not be good enough. She fills in that she has learned, not perhaps from Tweens but overall, that she does not need to score perfectly in every subject, but still puts stress on herself to score very well in subjects she cares about.

Mr. Williams also talks of the subject of achievements, wanting to convey compassion to his son Charlie, that he is just as worthy of love at his worst moments as at his best. If a test at school goes poorly because of Charlie's tendency to get "locked" in pressured situations they do not make a big deal of it. Talking of how they have conflicts at home when Charlie gets stressed and panicky in time-pressured situations Mr. Williams says:

But it might have been just this that I got out of the letter, that one also, and especially in one's worst moments, shouldn't feel that one is bad as a person.

The letter he speaks of was a personal letter that the group leaders in the child group wrote to each child. Talking of Charlie's letter Mr. Williams says:

It was phrased like, 'you're okay even when you are angry and sad and pissed off.' And I felt a bit like 'Shit.', I should remember this too as a parent. It can be pretty devastating for both of us (when we argue) but that I maybe should understand the adult responsibility, how the child feels really bad in these moments.

With this Mr. Williams is expressing a determination to convey compassion to his son, letting him know that he sees him and loves him even when he behaves badly. Another parent, Mrs. Anderson, also talks about finding more acceptance and compassion towards her daughter, Jessica, as she is in this stage of development. Jessica's mood steers her, and she can become difficult when she is down and then everything she says becomes very negative. But instead of Mrs. Anderson getting distressed and frustrated herself, she is now able to pause and take a breath, avoiding the outburst she would normally have. She expresses an increased understanding in her child's emotions and their legitimacy.

For Mrs. Brown, the mindfulness exercises were especially meaningful moments. She speaks with awe about the mindfulness exercises as a concrete tool that increased self-

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compassion. They awakened strong emotional reactions in her and in others as well from what she observed. One particular exercise that focused on loving kindness toward her child and then herself seemed to have left her deeply shaken and brought out sadness in her, perhaps from not being used to be loving, but critical, to herself:

There was this one time when everybody got rather quiet and a bit low, and the next day I was really irritated at work by all the people and noises. (...) One was to wish a family member all the best. You pictured this family member, doing something together and then you start wishing her the absolute best. Suddenly it turns so that one wishes the same for oneself. And when it comes with the same effect, that energy... when one is not used to it...

Mrs. Walker feels that Tweens is important as the mere existence of a course like this is an act of compassion, acknowledging that we all need help sometimes. She feels that Tweens is meaningful on a bigger scale because it fills a gap in our mental health care system as a preventive form of help. She feels that society has become harsh and achievement focused, and when one no longer is able to keep up with the tempo there is little help to receive, and the queues are long. She feels that the message being sent with a course like this is that someone sees her and other struggling families, and that it conveys a kinder, softer view on humanity.

### ***Health awareness***

The health awareness that the Firstbeat measurements brought was mentioned as greatly appreciated by four of the families. Gaining insight in the quality of one's recovery was valuable for the parents both to appreciate the need for taking breaks for themselves and to see the recovery and activity patterns of their children. The insights and following actions that were taken range from getting a higher quality mattress for the child because the measurements confirmed poor sleep quality that the child had been complaining about, to that even a little bit of alcohol makes the amount of deep, restorative sleep almost non-existent and joy over seeing that the child gets enough of both recovery and activity.

### **Mindsight**

One of the most pervasive themes as to why Tweens has been impactful is a newfound sense of awareness. Increased awareness is brought up in some way or another in all but one of the interviews. The kind of awareness that the participants describe coincides with the term and concept of mindsight, described by Daniel Siegel (2010). Mindsight means the ability to see one's own mind, to be able to see the minds of others in order to understand or intelligently guess what the other might be thinking or feeling, and to integrate what one sees

in order to choose a course of action (Siegel, 2010). The participants talk about mindfulness in the context of being able to mentally pause and be aware of what is happening in the moment. They also talk about mindfulness in the context of a general shift in their quality of mind, such as gaining new insight and knowledge of themselves and others. Many stress the importance of being able to choose how one acts and thus break their typical patterns of behaviour as important components for awareness. Through the practical experience of acting differently the knowledge they have learned from Tweens becomes personal, and thus becomes awareness. The experiences of meaning around awareness group within these themes:

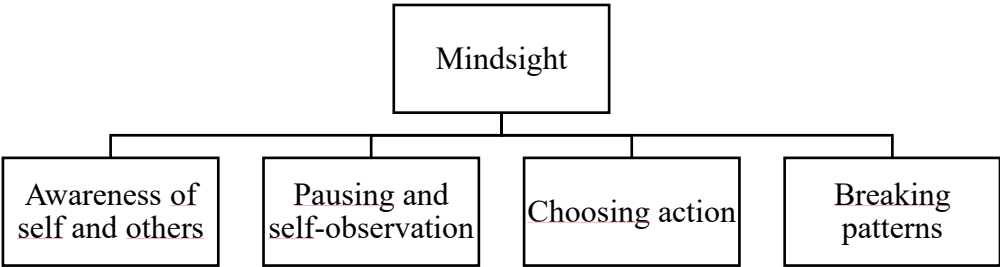


Figure 3: Sub-categories of the awareness-theme

***Awareness of self and others***

Awareness seems to come easier when you have a language for communicating about thoughts and feelings. The topics of resilience with the red and green thoughts and the buckets being filled and emptied seems to have provided useful vocabulary for this. Several participants put emphasis on the fact that this vocabulary is now something the parent and child share and are able to use at home talking about mental well-being. Michaela and her mom Mrs. Walker say this has also led them to talk about mental well-being more often.

Charlie and his dad Mr. Williams discuss how this new, shared vocabulary is connected to the increase in mindfulness for them. The terminology around the buckets has made how they impact others’ feelings more concrete in their minds. They draw the connection that to notice when someone’s bucket has been emptied, they first need to stop and be mindful. Then they can choose their course of action in order to fill that person’s bucket. Learning about resilience has also made some participants, such as Mr. Evans, Michaela and Mrs. Brown, aware of their typical thought patterns, and with this awareness now believing themselves to be able to affect the course of their thoughts somewhat.

Many talk of insights of their own personality through the strengths-exercises, and thus seeing where their resources for resilience lies, but also their areas for growth. Charlie

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and Mr. Williams talk about how no personality traits are good or bad in themselves, and of the need for awareness in how one applies them to further good relationships with others. For some children it was very difficult to see strengths in themselves, and in being able to hear from others that they in fact have strengths made them see themselves in a more balanced way, counteracting the negative bias.

Some parents talk about increased awareness of their parenting behaviours and how they would like to act as parents. Examples of this is to not take out frustration on their children, be more hopeful and optimistic in their parenting role, spend more quality time with their children and listen to their children's wishes and needs more.

### ***Pausing and self-observation***

Out of the parents, Mrs. Brown, Mr. Williams, Mrs. Anderson, Mr. Evans and Mrs. Taylor talk about pausing in the heat of the moment for reflection and self-observation. Mrs. Brown talks about the importance of the mindfulness-exercises in this regard. Mr. Williams and Mrs. Anderson talk about pausing as becoming aware, and then not wanting to take out their frustration on their children. Mr. Williams describes this using the bucket terminology, saying that one needs to be aware in order to not empty others' buckets in pressured situations:

What's odd about filling and emptying buckets is that, to fill somebody's bucket you have to be more aware. Emptying buckets just happens by itself. (...) One just rushes on with the bucket-emptying, in a way, when one is stressed out.

Being able to pause and observe oneself is not an easy thing to do. Still, a couple of children spontaneously bring up this as something they have learned and are using to their benefit and well-being. Isak, Timmy, Sophie and Charlie talk of this topic. Charlie says that he thinks that he stops to think more often since Tweens. Timmy feels that he can benefit from learning about resilience since it this knowledge makes it easier to understand what is going on in one's head and that in turn makes it easier to calm oneself down. Becoming better at calming himself down was the reason Timmy brings up for coming to Tweens, and he says that Tweens has helped him with this.

### ***Choosing action***

Several participants express that with more mindsight a series of other possibilities has been available to them. This awareness has created a pause in their minds, where they themselves can come in and have a conscious say in what happens next. Such as in the case of

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Isak. He describes himself becoming less reactive and how that has prevented a negative situation from growing into a bigger and more emotionally taxing experience than it had to be. What he describes here is a possibility of choice, which is a theme that several participants have experienced as a subsequent benefit of the increase in awareness the perceive Tweens having helped them with:

I've noticed that sometimes when I've become sad or angry but not acted on it, then nothing big has happened. So I've, yeah like, kept a low profile, or something. (...) This feels good. Or if something happens, like, I don't make a big deal out of it, but I still get sad of course.

Charlie and his dad, Mr. Williams, discuss character strengths and how learning about them has made them more aware of their personalities. But they do not view this in a deterministic way, as in "I am this way, so I can't do anything about it". On the contrary, they see the awareness they have of their own selves as an enabling factor for choice, deciding how to apply one's personality to different situations. Not as an excuse, but a way of better understanding oneself so one can choose one's action.

Sophie talks about pausing and observing herself. She becomes aware of her emotions and bodily activation, which in her case are mostly fear and nervousness. But with practice she has been able to choose to act against her feelings and expose herself to the distressing event anyhow since it is important for her. This experience she has had reflects both her increase in self-awareness, and also how she has developed a dynamic mindset, seeing how practice makes her more self-assured and more skilful at handling difficult situations.

### ***Breaking patterns***

One of the parents, Mr. Evans, talks about the increased awareness leading to him being able to observe his own emotional patterns and break them. He talks about how he previously has been in a loop of recognizing something from the past in a challenging situation and automatically thinking that this time will be the same, and thus repeating the pattern. Now with the awareness of resilience and how they can create thought spirals, he has been able to recognize his red thoughts and believe that it is possible that this time will not end the same. What he expresses is a less deterministic view and instead a more hopeful one. He embraces that positive thinking will not hurt, but also has found that Tweens has helped him face the worst-case scenario and find a feeling of acceptance for that possible outcome as well.

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A few other parents also point out the insight about the connection between pausing and becoming aware of the moment with being able to break negative thought spirals. Mrs. Brown expresses in strong words how revolutionary it has been for her to have breathing exercises to calm herself down before continuing, so she can have a choice and not just have everything run its usual course. Thus, the mindfulness exercises seem to have been an important component for her in developing awareness. Mr. Williams talks about this theme in terms of increased reflection of how he handles his emotions and wanting to set a good example for his child in this area by being able to pause and not let his stress get the best of him.

### **Discussion**

The aim of this study was to examine the mechanisms behind relational and individual growth, through looking at the participants' conceptions of what made the Tweens intervention meaningful to them. By a qualitative approach with intensive interviewing and in-depth analysis with a constructive grounded theory method, three main categories of why Tweens was meaningful emerged. These findings can inform the existing promising quantitative data of positive psychology intervention effectiveness, showing results e.g., for increasing subjective well-being and decreasing depression, by telling us something of the mechanisms behind that change.

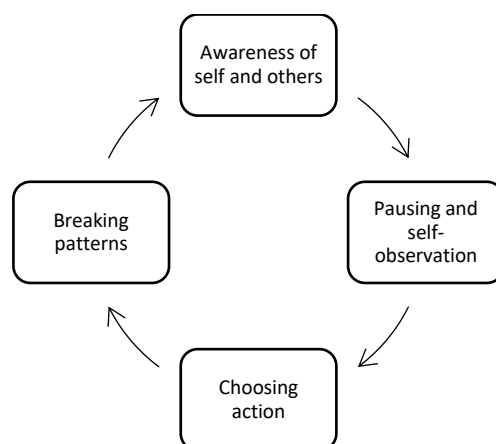
The three main categories of meaning found in this study were, firstly, a sense of belonging and togetherness, which was formed within the child- and parent groups. This group therapeutic effect was described as daring to open up, finding peer support and a feeling of being less alone with one's problems. The participants also highlighted a strengthened sense of joint action and more positive communication within the families toward a shared goal. Secondly, the tools that they learned helped them develop in a more appreciative, hopeful and compassionate direction, affecting their parenting choices and the parent-child interaction in positive ways. Thirdly, a sense of increased awareness of one's personality and behavioural patterns, and also an increased proclivity to pause and make aware choices in the moment instead of being reactive. These experiences fit well with the description of the term *mindsight*, coined by Siegel (2010). Having *mindsight* means developing a focused attention that allows us to see the internal workings of our own minds, which enables us to not be swept away and act with habitual, autopilot responses, but choose how to respond and thus have more freedom and power to steer our own lives (Siegel, 2010). An important point to make is that all participants did not describe meaning within all of these

categories, and there were also children who had difficulty finding any meaning at all with Tweens – for reasons that will later be discussed.

### **Relational growth through upward spirals**

What do we talk of when we say that family interventions promote relational growth? Or put in another way, what characterizes these flourishing families that Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) encourages the field to promote? Relational growth is to help the whole family increase their positive, constructive relational behaviour and their resilience. The hope is that this will lead to flourishing families, who reach their full potential of relational growth and experience well-being as families.

Resilience stems from being able to come back from adversity, from being able to break negative spirals and set the situation back on a constructive track. To break negative spirals, one must first become aware enough to recognize when one is being reactive in a negative way, thus being in a chain of actions and reactions that spirals downwards. Put in another way, one needs to have mindsight. Many participants in this study describe a process when they become more aware of their negative behaviour and some are aware enough to turn it around into an upward spiral. This is perhaps the most important finding of this study. When looking at the mindsight categories of the results chapter, one could link them together in a cyclical process. This is a good description of what happens when we break negative spirals and instead engage in upward spiralling behaviour:



*Figure 4: The cyclic relationship of the awareness-theme categories*

### ***Upward spirals in children***

The figure above depicts a self-sustaining loop, where a positive change in any of these boxes serve to further progress in the other boxes as well. As an example of this from the child groups, Isak describes that after being more aware of his behavioural patterns



through Tweens, he has learned to mentally pause when he gets sad or angry. He continues that when he has paused, he can choose to act in a different way than he usually would have, and thus not make his feelings grow out of proportion to the situation. When he chooses to act in a different way and gets a different result, he also learns something about his own part in what happens and of his own ability to affect his situation. In this way, awareness of self and others is connected to awareness in the critical moment (pausing and observation), both furthering the other through a positive feedback loop made possible by choosing to act differently and thus breaking the previous behaviour pattern.

This depicts an upward spiral of one child, but what makes upward spirals happen are an interplay between social resources and positive emotions, according to Broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001). In accordance with this theory, we can assume that much of what enabled Isak's upward spiral was the support he gained from his relations, such as the support from the Tweens group and from his father. Isak reports that this led to positive emotions of relief and pride, and even states that he is now looking forward to more challenging situations like this one, so that he can overcome himself again and feel pride. This seems to be a good example of the Broaden-and-build theory upward spiral in practice, and thus one could, perhaps with caution, state that these factors of mindsight might be underlying building blocks that upward spirals consist of. These findings also go well with the general theory behind CBT and ACT therapies, where training to self-observe as to learn to make proactive choices that are aligned with one's values, which then strengthens one's sense of personal agency, are key elements for improvement.

### *Upward spirals in parents*

The peer support within the parent groups functioned as a social resource for them, and created positive emotions of feeling heard, accepted and not alone. This could in some cases start an upward spiral of increased energy for their parenting that spilled over in a positive manner to their children at home. Several parents talk of decreasing their nagging or being able to pause and breathe before becoming frustrated at their children, thus inhibiting what would before have become a negative spiral. Becoming more aware of their behaviour patterns was one of the mechanisms behind this change, which was then enhanced in their day-to-day life through being able to catch oneself in the moment and pause. One participant described having achieved this through the mindfulness exercises in Tweens.

*Upward spirals in families*

Increased positive communication within families is another example of upward spiralling brought up as a consequence of Tweens. Through both parents and children learning about the same concepts and obtaining a shared language to express their mental states, many families were able to create upward spirals where they talk of how they are feeling more often and thus experience more emotional support. Examples of this is that some families feel that they managed to make a habit out of expressing appreciation to one another, and other families talk about reflecting more as a family on how they can sow the seeds for more positive emotions to feel good together.

**Factors negatively affecting perceived meaningfulness**

Some children had difficulty seeing why Tweens was meaningful to them. Either they saw only a marginal usefulness, were unsure of any actual long-term effects or flat out denied any benefits (even though this child later described some benefits from certain exercises). This difficulty to see meaning correlated with the symptomatology of these children, so that children suffering more depressive symptoms found less meaning in the intervention. One way of understanding this is through the underlying mechanisms of depression. As one of the major symptoms of depression is a diminished sense of interest or pleasure, and another is a sense of worthlessness, it follows that these children had a more difficult time finding a sense of meaning and expressing this in the interviews, as a consequence of depressiveness.

This prompts the question of whether the intervention could have been helpful to them despite their not being able to see or express it, or whether this type of intervention was not what these children needed to help them with their well-being at this point in time. From the accounts of Fred and Lisa, who were among the more depressed children, one could discern a longing for their school situations to change. Fred and his dad, Mr. Stone, felt that the important changes should be made at the school, where the problem lies. When Fred describes the meaning of Tweens for him, it is mostly as a positive alternative experience that helped him take his mind off school for a brief moment:

Tweens has been... you have something to look forward to after a long school day. You haven't had to go straight home and do homework but been able to have a short break and think about something else.

Tweens being a different and better social experience than being at school is important, as it gives hope that the current situation at school is not all that there is to

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experience from social contexts. But despite having a better time at Tweens than at school, they did not really feel at the present moment that Tweens was able to meet all their needs, since things would still be the same at school. This is an important point, that positive psychology interventions only can do so much, if problematic situations are not tended to and resolved. It might be difficult to see any meaningfulness or improvement in one's well-being if one does not feel that it is within one's power to change one's situation, despite having learned constructive tools for communication and problem solving. When talking of children, the adults around them need to take responsibility to prevent and intervene in e.g., bullying or loneliness.

A couple of the children experiencing little meaning from Tweens did suggest improvements that could have made it more meaningful from their perspective. Among the children who participated in the spring intervention, some complain that group cohesiveness was not strong enough, and that there was not very much spontaneous sharing or shared positive emotion among the children. Timmy says that they mostly just answered the leaders' questions, but did not really bond with each other. Benny feels that it was too boring and the atmosphere too heavy. On being asked about how it could have been different he says:

I don't know really, but at least something happier, and it was also rather quiet there. (...) Can't one do something that makes one happy in another way than talking about exactly what the problem is? One might always have problems?

Here he states the problem poignantly by requesting what one assumes should have been delivered by a positive psychology intervention. It seems from Benny's comment that the leadership in the spring group did not fully succeed with the positive psychology goals of focusing on strengths instead of having a problem-focused mindset, nor of eliciting positive emotions, even though positive emotions was one of the subjects being taught and talked about. This is important feedback for future development of child PPI's; the intervention must embody positive psychology as well as teach it.

### **Strengths and limitations of the study**

The aim of this study was to examine meaningfulness from a participant standpoint. Constructive Grounded Theory allows for interpretation, which I argue is necessary to get to the core of a personal, internal, implicit and multi-faceted process like meaning making. On a descriptive level, it would not have been possible to chart out the processes involved for e.g., the mindsight category to emerge. The focus in CGT of naming with active codes what comes

forth in the data and on constructing conceptual categories allowed for finding these processes and presenting them in an explanatory way.

### ***Were the participants voices heard?***

A goal for this study was to let the participant's own voices be heard, and thus this inductive approach with no preformulated hypotheses was optimal. This is the original purpose of the qualitative field, which GT as a method remains true to, when some other qualitative practices have moved perhaps too far into the quantitative research realm and acquired hypothesis testing as their purpose (Silverman, 2011, p. 67). To support this inductive aim, the purpose of the interviews was to be personal and guided by the participants themselves. The interviews were conducted as intense interviews that had a specific purpose that was to be answered; what, if anything, did the participants find meaningful about Tweens and what did this meaning making process look like. Other than that, the interviews were open and did not follow a structured format.

To further inductiveness, the literature review was delayed until the end of the research process. The topic of whether to conduct the literature review in the beginning or the end has been discussed within the GT community today and arguments for both approaches have been voiced (Charmaz et.al., 2018, p. 419). The choice in this study was, as is the traditional custom in GT, to conduct it after the data collection and analysis were completed. The strengths of this approach are that it tries to minimize the risk that the researcher sees what she expects to see and deductively applies the expected constructs and categories on the participants experiences. On the contrary, if the literature review had been conducted in the beginning, it might have informed the analysis in a positive way, letting the researcher see connections that now went by unobserved. This might also have entailed a greater touch with the field of positive psychology intervention research.

### ***Was saturation able to be reached, within the limits of this sample?***

To reach saturation means that the researcher keeps gathering more data until the new data collected provides no further development of the categories of her study (Charmaz, 2014, p. 213). Theoretical sampling, i.e., collecting more data until saturation is reached, might in practice mean finding new participants to inform the study, to collect other sorts of data or to collect deeper, more focused data from the participants already interviewed.

Evaluating saturation is not an easy task, especially not for a novice researcher. In this present study, sampling was limited to the participants of the pilot study. As collecting data

from a bigger sample was not possible, we made the most out of what we had by collecting various data (interviews, written question forms, rating scales and observation). The quantitative data consisting of the rating scales was not analysed in this study, as the data from the interviews and written forms was more than enough to give the researcher a massive workload. The quantitative data was looked at and informed the understanding of the participants' worlds without formal, structured analysis being undertaken, as was the observational data. Thus, more could have been done, but then again, GT in its proper extensive form is rarely suited for student papers as it is too large and resource demanding a process to be carried out to perfection within this setting.

But did the categories feel saturated, within the scope of what was realistic to do for this study? I would say that the data definitively converged towards these categories, and that the more interviews that were conducted the more it was clear that these were the three main categories (belonging, tools and mindsight) the participants brought forth. The things the participants said started to sound more and more familiar the more interviews were conducted, and so they shared many of the same views. And even if they talked about the same categories, they could have conflicting views about them, and that the categories were able to contain a range of variation within them is a sign of saturation (Charmaz, 2014, p. 213). But more could definitively have been done, especially through collecting more interview data from the same participants as the codes and categories started unfolding, and thus better explaining the relationships between the categories and obtaining more confirmation and in depth understanding within them (Charmaz, 2014, p. 213).

### ***Could this count as formal theory?***

The aim of GT is to construct middle-range theory (Charmaz, 2008). Was this possible within the scope of this study? This depends on how you define theory. Most reasonably one would claim that it does not – the sample size is too small and theoretical saturation cannot be guaranteed. As this is a pilot study, what it can provide for the research community is a conceptual analysis of how these participants made meaning of their experience of Tweens, which is an altogether suitable use of CGT according to the founder Charmaz (2015, p. 81). These results can be meaningful as pointers as to what processes were involved for these participants, and that could possibly be the same for other participants taking part in a similar intervention. This study unfolds what external and internal processes were involved when representants from this target group takes part of an intervention of this layout, and as far as that can be described as middle-range theory, this research manages to

provide this small puzzle piece for the bigger picture of positive psychology intervention research.

***How well was this study carried out according to the GT criteria?***

Grounded Theorists seldom embrace the standard validity and reliability criteria of quantitative research, but have their own quality criteria of what constitutes a good GT. Charmaz (2014, p. 15) outline these criteria for the research being a proper CGT:

- 1) Conduct data collection and analysis simultaneously in an iterative process
- 2) Analyze actions and processes rather than themes and structure
- 3) Use comparative methods
- 4) Draw on data (e.g. narratives and descriptions) in service of developing new conceptual categories
- 5) Develop inductive abstract analytic categories through systematic data analysis
- 6) Emphasize theory construction rather than description or application of current theories
- 7) Engage in theoretical sampling
- 8) Search for variation in the studied categories or process
- 9) Pursue developing a category rather than covering a specific empirical topic.

Charmaz (2014, p. 15) states that researchers claiming GT meet a variety of these criteria, and that if one engages in at least number 1–5 it can be regarded as a GT study. In this study, one can with confidence claim that criteria 2,3,4,5 and 9 were met. The possibilities and limitations to meeting criteria 1, 6, 7 and 8 have been discussed above.

Another set of GT criteria is the original quality criteria stated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) in the first formulation of GT. These criteria are fit, relevance, workability and modifiability. Fit means whether the concepts fit and properly express the data and if constant comparisons have been made to ensure they do so. I would claim that this is a strength of this study, having made sure that the whole analysis is made up by constant comparisons and put much thought to finding the right wording to express the concepts. Silverman (2013, p. 179–180) emphasize that the constant comparison method is an approach that strengthens validity and reliability in qualitative research overall. The fact that it is implicit in the GT method makes GT a rigorous practise when it comes to making sure that one analyses every piece of data properly.

Relevance means whether the conceptual construction or theory is relevant to the field, excites the reader and captures the main concerns of the participants. Whether it excites

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the reader and to what extent is perhaps better judged by an outside party, but I would definitively state that it is valuable research at least to the Finland Swedish community, who is the population that our organisation hopes to help with these interventions now that the effects have been evaluated.

Workability means whether the theory works so that it can identify the main processes and the variation within these processes for the participants, and whether the core categories are the smallest common denominators to describe the processes. This has of course always been the aim of the researcher, but to what degree it is successfully achieved is again difficult to say. One way to evaluate this would have been to have another researcher redo the categorization of the codes, to see how strongly the same processes would have been observed by another researcher. This was not done in this study and is a weakness.

The last of Glaser's criteria is modifiability. Modifiability means whether the theory is flexible enough to be modified when new data is collected, and whether it can be adapted to also fit this data. In GT, the theory should adapt to the data and not the other way around. In this study, the categories were modified about 3–4 times as a growing understanding was formed during the data analysis process. A flexible approach was maintained, rethinking and evaluating how the data could be best understood and presented hierarchically and how the categories could best represent the data.

### ***My preconceptions as researcher and possible influences on this study***

I reflected on my preconceptions before the intervention began, to be sure I was aware of them so not to be unconsciously led on by some notion that I could have easily detected through self-scrutiny. Of course, one can never guarantee that one has managed to take that close a look at oneself as to discover all one's biases and preconceptions, as the unconscious often remains just that, but the following is an account of my best efforts.

Since positive psychology is an area of interest of mine, and something I believe to at least possibly, if not more strongly than that, be beneficiary, I anticipated the target group to report experiences that were at least to some degree positive. As I was also involved in the research team, not only an independent party, this further predisposed me to a bias of wanting results encouraging results for this pilot study. With all this in mind, I tried my very best to put this aside and allow for critical viewpoints to be treated with equal weight during the interviews and in the analysis. A critique to my ability to do this can and should be voiced in considering interview questions to some children. As many children had difficulty answering

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open-ended questions and remained quiet or shrugged, the following questions had to be more leading and were sometimes phrased biasedly positively, so that I asked about what they thought to be good about Tweens before asking what was not so useful or bad.

As to my educational background and specific theoretical proclivities, my knowledge of and personal interest in mindfulness probably had an influence on the concepts in the mindsight category. Another researcher with a different background might have used different wording or interpreted the processes the participants described in a different way.

A factor that cannot be ignored is that I was known to, and knew, half of the families when it came to the post-intervention interviews, but not the other half of them. The plan was for me to be one of the group leaders of the child groups in both autumn and spring, but for personal reasons I was unable to do so in the spring group. Thus, half of them had interacted with me during the whole intervention prior to being interviewed, and the other half had not ever seen me before. This influenced how I conducted the interviews, as I could refer to things we did together to the autumn group children, but of the spring group children I asked question that had more of an air of “Tell me all about it, as I was not there.” I was also more aware of the intricacies of their family problems and children’s symptomatology for the autumn group, as I had interacted with them several times over a period of time, even if I collected some information about the spring group participants before the interviews from the group leaders.

The fact that some were familiar with me could be both beneficiary and detrimental to their ability to speak boldly and truthfully. More familiarity probably made at least the children more at ease being interviewed by me. On the other hand, the fact that I was not one of the leaders for the spring group children might have prompted them to talk more about what Tweens was like for them, as I was not there and could have seen it all for myself. In an afterlook, I would say that there was an equal distribution of more and less talkative, open, positive and negative children in both groups, and that child symptomatology and personality influenced this more than whether they knew me or not.

When it comes to the parents, some might have been less likely to be critical when knowing me, as not wanting to criticise a known intervention organizer straight to her face. I do think that this issue was smaller than might be anticipated though, as some of the autumn group parents did express criticism to me despite this fact. On the other hand, familiarity



might instead have made it easier to express criticism, the effect could have influenced in either way.

### **Implications**

This was a pilot study, showing promising results for the meaningfulness of the Tweens intervention from a participant viewpoint. The purpose Folkhälsan had when forming Tweens and having its effectiveness studied was to have the Tweens curriculum taught to suitable professionals and practiced as a treatment model for children and adolescents with mild to moderate symptoms of depression or anxiety. I suggest that this should be carried out, as it could be a good complement to the Finnish public mental health care treatments available for youth. One of the participants brings up that this fills a gap in our mental health care system as a preventive form of help. There are not many forums where children are encouraged to open up about mental health topics together, and this is needed to increase normalisation and give symptom relief. It is very valuable that this is a forum where not just achievement-oriented academic strengths are acknowledged, but other strengths as well. It is also valuable for letting strengths have their place without immediately being followed by a discussion of weaknesses or improvement areas, which a participating child-parent dyad expressed had been the practice at school, which unfortunately might be an ingrained habit in Finnish mentality.

I propose that the intervention could be applied by psychologists working in family counselling, as they are the most natural choice when working with families already. Another suitable pathway to the families would be for school psychologists to provide the interventions as a form of student mental health care. More data needs to be collected to confirm or add to the results of this study, which could be done in unity with the application of the model. For this to be possible, the next step would be to educate future group leaders in positive psychology and the Tweens curriculum. Afterwards, data should be collected from the participants. Whether there would be larger benefits of qualitative or quantitative research to build on the evidence from this study could be argued for in both directions. On the one hand, a larger qualitative sample would be important to validate the categories and reach theoretical saturation. On the other hand, complementary quantitative data would shed light on these findings, e.g., confirming whether higher depressiveness indeed was a factor that influenced perceived meaningfulness. Longitudinal data would also provide valuable understanding of how these positive effects endure over time, as some previous intervention studies suggest that they did not (Suldo et al., 2014).

### **Suggestions for further research**

As quantitative data of participants depressiveness, anxiety, positive and negative affect and family well-being was collected by Folkhälsan from the pilot study, I suggest that these data would be analysed and compared to these qualitative data. Within the scope of this master's thesis it was, unfortunately, not possible to include the quantitative data in the final analysis, but if the findings in this thesis are later published, I suggest that the researcher compare and analyze them in the light of the quantitative data as well.

The weaknesses of this intervention inform of areas of improvement for future PPI research and application. One weakness was that the age span in one of the child groups was too large. 11- and 14-year-olds can be at rather different levels of maturity, and such we recommend more age homogeneity within the groups than we used in this study. Another suggestion that can be made based on these results is that not all the same topics have to be taught in both child- and parent groups, as there were some topics such as the DESC-model that were found meaningful by adults but perhaps too difficult to grasp for the children. More emphasis could be put on having fun and strengthening group cohesion with children, as the feeling of belonging and togetherness is one of the most meaningful factors and something the children missed when they perceived it lacking.

For future research, I would suggest further looking into the connection between the mindsight cycle of becoming more aware, being able to pause, choosing one's action and breaking behavioural patterns found in this study and the upward spirals of the Broaden-and-build theory. Does awareness of one's self and of others play a key role in being able to be a social resource for others or in being able to generate positive emotions for oneself and others? A network analysis of how these factors are linked to each other or using mindsight as a mediator could be useful to shed light on this matter. But then again, this might be difficult to prove quantitatively, as mindsight is a broad and not very easily measured construct. This is also the strength of the qualitative stance, shedding light on personal and large phenomena such as meaning and mindsight, that are not easily conceptualized or measured.

### **Summary in Swedish – Svensk sammanfattning**

#### **Inledning**

Pionjärerna inom positiv psykologi, Seligman och Csikszentmihalyi (2000), efterfrågade redan i sin introduktionsartikel till det nya forskningsfältet att forskningen skulle inriktas bl.a. på att utveckla och undersöka interventioner som skulle stöda familjer i att

blomstra. Trots detta uttalade syfte har forskningen inom positiv psykologi hittills främst inriktat sig på individer och individuellt välmående (Waters, 2020). Genom att vidga perspektivet från ett individfokus till att fokusera på det relationella systemet runt individen kan man förutom att stöda individuella utvecklingsfaktorer också skapa en grogrund också för relationella förändringar som förstärker behandlingens effekt på lång sikt (Doty m.fl., 2017). Detta skulle vara särskilt viktigt vid behandling av barn och ungdomar då de är mera påverkade av familjesystemet runt dem.

Tidigare forskning har gjorts av positiv psykologi interventioner för barn med ångest eller depression (Teodorczuk m.fl, 2018; Jabbari m.fl., 2015; Tomyn m.fl., 2015), men i dessa har familjen inte involverats i behandlingen. Den forskning av familjeinterventioner som gjorts för att stöda barns välmående och utveckling har gjorts på barn i andra svårigheter, som t.ex. barn med diabetes typ 1 (Kirchler & Kaugars, 2015) , barn med beteendestörningar (Sanders m.fl., 2014) eller barn som befinner sig på autismspektret (Benn m.fl., 2015). Tidigare forskning som undersöker specifikt barn med depressiva symptom eller ångestsymptom som behandlats med en familjeinriktad intervention saknas alltså, eller framkommer åtminstone inte i min litteratursökning.

### **Metod**

Den här studien avser fylla ett tomrum i interventionsforskningen inom positiv psykologi genom att utforma och evaluera en interventionsmodell som involverar familjen och riktar sig till unga med depressions- eller ångestproblematik. Eftersom detta är en pilotstudie som strävar till att vara utforskande och låta deltagarnas röster bli hörda användes metoden Grounded Theory (GT) med kvalitativ djupintervju som främsta datainsamlingsmetod. Inom GT har forskaren sällan på förhand bestämda forskningsfrågor som hon försöker svara på, utan låter respondenterna själva stå för problemformuleringen genom att beskriva sin egen upplevelse (Charmaz, 2015, s. 59–60). Speciellt med GT är också att forskaren både samlar in och analyserar data genom en process som går fram och tillbaka mellan de båda, eftersom hon vet vad hon behöver samla in djupare data om först när hon analyserat det inledande materialet (Charmaz, 2014, s. 15).

Familjeinterventionen i denna studie baserar sig på upplägget i forskargruppen vid Folkhälsans tidigare studier Flourishing Students och Flourishing Families (sv. blomstrande studerande och blomstrande familjer). I interventionen ingick teman som styrkor, positiva känslor, interaktionsfärdigheter och resiliens och den utfördes som ett åttaveckors program

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med träffar en gång i veckan. Målgruppen var barn och unga i åldern 11–14 år som kämpade med symptom på ångest, depressivitet eller stress och deras föräldrar. Interventionen hölls i två upplagor och sammanlagt deltog 13 familjer, varav 10 ställde upp på intervju efter slutförd intervention. Resultatet i denna studie baserar sig på dessa 10 familjers utsagor. Datat samlades in genom familjeintervjuer som hölls i två omgångar.

### **Resultat**

Studiens resultat visar att deltagarna ansåg interventionen vara meningsfull av tre huvudsakliga orsaker. Det första och mest förekommande var att interventionen gav en känsla av tillhörighet och gemenskap som var viktig för deras förmåga och ork att handskas med sina svårigheter. Föräldrarna berättar med förvåning om hur snabbt det skapades en öppen atmosfär och att kamratstödet betydde mycket för dem. Även barnen beskriver en känsla av gemenskap, men deras svar varierar mera, så att alla inte upplevde samma naturliga samhörighet.

Det andra temat som framkom om varför deltagarna upplevt interventionen meningsfull var för de redskap och synsätt den förmedlade. Dessa kunde sedan delas in i underkategorier, vilka var en ny, delad vokabulär med sitt barn, en utökad förmåga att märka det som är bra, en utökad förmåga till uppskattning, en utökad förmåga till medkänsla och hälsomedvetenhet.

Det tredje temat var en utökad medvetenhet om sig själv, vilket kunde sammanfattas i begreppet *mindsight* (Siegel, 2020) Detta tog sig i uttryck t.ex. i en förbättrad förmåga att stanna upp och analysera sig själv före man reagerar. Detta ledde till att de kunde bryta sina invanda negativa mönster, och välja att agera på ett mer konstruktivt sätt.

### **Diskussion**

Studiens resultat tyder på att denna familjeinterventionsmodell upplevs meningsfull av både barnen och föräldrarna för att hjälpa barn med ångest eller depressionsproblematik. Familjerna tog med sig såväl en känsla av att ha blivit hörda, praktiska verktyg och kunskaper samt en ökad förståelse för sig själva. Resultaten beskriver uppåtgående spiraler av relationell tillväxt som sker hos både barnen, föräldrarna och inom familjen till följd av deras ökade medvetenhet och förståelse för sig själva och andra samt förmågan att stanna upp före de agerar. Resultaten tyder också på att de familjer vars barn inte led av lika grav depressivitet hade lättare att se nyttan av interventionen. Detta kan vara en följd av att depression karaktäriseras just av en nedsättning i upplevd meningsfullhet, och att de mer deprimerade

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deltagarna därför rapporterade en lägre grad av meningsfullhet. För att dessa barn ska kunna tillgodose sig de redskap och de tankesätt som kursen förmedlade vore det viktigt att de bakgrundsfaktorer som orsakar nedstämdheten åtgärdas först, vilka var utanförskap, familjerelationsproblematik eller problematik i skolmiljön.

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## Appendix

### PRESSMEDDELANDE

En kvalitativ studie av Tweens – en positiv psykologi familjeintervention för barn med depressions- eller ångestrelaterad problematik

Pro gradu-avhandling i psykologi

Fakulteten för humaniora, psykologi och teologi

I en pro-gradu-avhandling i psykologi vid Åbo Akademi har Jennifer Söderlund gjort en kvalitativ studie av Folkhälsans positiv psykologi-intervention Tweens. Studien undersökte på vilket sätt deltagarna i Tweens upplevde att interventionen var meningsfull för just dem. I studien framkom att deltagarna fann känslan av tillhörighet och att inte vara ensam med sina problem som en av de mest meningsfulla aspekterna. Många i föräldragrupperna var förvånade över hur lätt det var att öppna upp för varandra och kände starkt kamratstöd. En annan meningsfull aspekt som flera familjer rapporterade var att verktygen de lärde sig var användbara i vardagen. Med hjälp av övningarna och den medföljande vokabulären fick de ett gemensamt sätt att prata om mental hälsa och kunde utveckla sin förmåga till uppskattning, hoppfullhet och medkänsla. Det sista temat som framkom i resultaten var en ökad medvetenhet om sig själva och en förmåga att stanna upp i stunden och välja sin reaktion. Detta kunde orsaka positiva förändringar i familjen, så att man kunde vända negativa mönster till en mer positiv riktning. Alla barn som deltog i interventionen upplevde inte den som särskilt meningsfull, och det berodde troligen på att dessa barn hade svåra livsomständigheter som borde åtgärdas först eller att de led av depressivitet i en högre grad.

Under de senaste åren har positiv psykologi blivit ett aktivt forskningsområde inom psykologin. Positiv psykologi är det vetenskapliga studiet av att främja välbefinnande. Inom positiv psykologi fokuserar man på att stärka det som är gott i människan i stället för att lindra sjukdom. Folkhälsans intervention Tweens riktar sig till barn och unga i åldern 11–14 år som lider av depressiva-, ångestrelaterade eller stressrelaterade symptom. Olika interventionsmodeller inom positiv psykologi har utvecklats för olika målgrupper världen över. Det som är särskiljer Folkhälsans intervention är att den involverar barnens föräldrar i interventionen. Interventionen

## A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE TWEENS INTERVENTION

var sådan att positiv psykologi lärdes ut en gång i veckan under åtta veckor, samtidigt men i en skild föräldragrupp och en skild barngrupp.

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