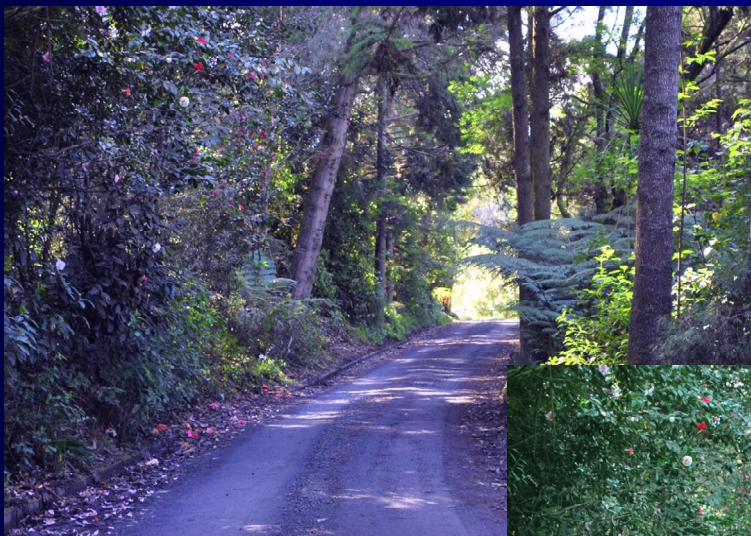




**MASSEY UNIVERSITY**  
**SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY**

# **A Different Kind of Family:**

## **Retrospective Accounts of Growing up at Centrepont and Implications for Adulthood**



**Report prepared by Kerry Gibson, Mandy Morgan, Cheryl Woolley  
and Tracey Powis**

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The report has been prepared by the authors and the views expressed in the report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the New Zealand Community Growth Trust.

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### **A Note on Terminology:**

There are a number of different but related organisations and entities which are referred to throughout this report. This may create some confusion for readers who are unfamiliar with the history of Centrepont. As a starting point it may be helpful to know that there are three main entities relevant to this research. The first entity is the Centrepont community whose assets were held in a Trust during the years of its existence. The second entity is the New Zealand Community Growth Trust (NZCGT) which was formed after Centrepont closed and which continues to hold and manage the assets of the former Centrepont community. This was the agency that commissioned this research. The third entity is the Public Trust, an organisation which administers the NZCGT under guidance of its advisory committee.

More specific details on terminology are noted below:

- Throughout this report we use **‘Centrepont’** and **‘the community’** interchangeably.
- We refer specifically to **‘Centrepont Community Growth Trust’**, **CCG Trust**, or the **Community Trust** when referring to the formal committee of the community, as legitimated through the original 1977 Deed.
- The relationship between the community and the Community Trust is complex. The 1996 Report of Inquiry into the Trust, commissioned by the Attorney General, summarised the relationship between the Trust and community as follows: “In practice the community and the Trust are closely interwoven. At law they and the Trust are separate entities” (p20). In this report, any reference to the Community Trust, the community, or their relationship will be contextualised such that the relevance of those relationships can be appreciated.
- We use **‘New Zealand Communities Growth Trust’** or **NZCG Trust** when referring to the current Trust pertaining to Centrepont, or the deed thereof, reformulated in 2000.<sup>1</sup>
- When we use **‘the Public Trust’**, **‘The Trust’** or **‘The Trustee’** we are referring to the administrators appointed to manage the affairs of CCG Trust (subsequently, the NZCG Trust) in 1997.
- We use the term ‘intentional community’ to describe Centrepont but occasionally draw from related literature that also refers to ‘cults’ or ‘new religious movements’.

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<sup>1</sup> New Zealand Law Report 325 [2000].



## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 The Report and the Project in Context**

Centrepont was what Sargisson and Sargent (2004) call an ‘intentional community’: a residential community of people drawn together through shared principles and choosing to live in a communal lifestyle and environment. Under the auspices of a charitable Trust, the founders of Centrepont defined the community’s principles as spiritual and therapeutic, with a specific objective being the promulgation of the teachings of the first designated spiritual leader, Herbert Thomas (‘Bert’) Potter.

The residential base of the community was built on a sprawling block of land in Albany, on the North Shore of Auckland. At the time, Albany was primarily comprised of farmland and native bush, and the community site reflected this – with ample grounds for farming and the development of various businesses, tracts of bush and a fresh water stream. Centrepont occupied the site (albeit not without opposition) for over 20 years. At its peak, it was home to approximately 300 people (Sargisson & Sargent, 2004), and generated significant wealth through a number of community businesses including extensive therapeutic services available to the public. It is estimated that over the course of its lifetime, the community had been home, second home, or temporary residence to between 200-300 children.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s a number of raids were carried out on the community, culminating in the arrest of several senior community members under allegations of drug offences and sexual offences. Bert Potter and several senior members of the CCG Trust were among those arrested, and later convicted.

On March 29, 2000 the former CCG Trust was terminated by a Court decision, following a series of investigations into these offences and allegations of financial mismanagement. The Trust was substantially restructured, renamed the NZCG Trust, and placed under the administrative control of public trustees. The reformed Trust was charged with a number of responsibilities in the administration of assets, including supporting members of the now

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<sup>2</sup> Personal communication from the NZCGT.

dissolved community, including children (many of whom had now entered, or were nearing, adulthood).

This report represents the culmination of a research project undertaken independently by Massey University at the request of the New Zealand Communities Growth Trust. The project was commissioned to provide the NZCG Trust with a better understanding of the experiences of children at Centrepont, and the influence of these experiences in their lives upon leaving the community. The Trust is seeking to make more informed decisions about the well-being of the adult children of Centrepont that are based on research.

In 2007, when this project was initially tendered, it appeared that whilst some of the adult children were managing well, others were experiencing a range of personal and social difficulties, as evident from applications to the Trust for support and other, anecdotal, sources. The Trust sought to obtain an understanding of adult children's experiences of growing up at Centrepont and of life following their departure from the community that was respectful of their diverse points of view. The Trust's aims for the research were clearly predicated on an understanding of participants' experiences of a specific facet of their childhoods – life at the Centrepont community. There was also an explicit recognition that for some adult children at least, discussing their experiences would be potentially distressing and researchers would need to provide strong assurances of safety, confidentiality and follow-up care if needed. The aims and objectives of the research therefore place particular ethical and methodological concerns at the centre of research design: that each aspect of the research be designed and undertaken with the safety and well-being of participants as a priority, and that the research methodology be sensitive to context and therefore able to situate findings in relation to accounts that participants provide of their experiences of Centrepont.

We begin this report with a brief introduction to the Centrepont community as the immediate social context in which participant accounts are to be situated as a background for readers who are unfamiliar with the community's history. We also include some commentary on the social and historical context surrounding the community.

## 1.2 Centrepoint

Centrepoint had its genesis in therapeutic ideas. Within the broader social context of therapeutic work in Aotearoa/New Zealand, prior to Centrepoint's inception, predominantly individualised approaches were being edged towards the increasing use of therapeutic groups. Group approaches involved workshops that were often modelled on Encounter Groups, a mode of therapeutic work that had already been popularised through the Esalen Institute in California. Along with other social innovations of the 1960s and 1970s, Encounter Groups promised social transformation (Back, 1988), and valued open interpersonal expressiveness and responsiveness.

It was in the context of such groups that the founding members of what would eventually become the residential community of Centrepoint, formed personal and professional associations. Pivotal in drawing them together was Bert Potter, a former salesman who later spent time at Esalen and other overseas centres. According to his own testimony, Potter became increasingly dissatisfied with some of the conventions of Encounter Groups and was encouraging practices that were more challenging. He began offering his own group-therapeutic workshops, at times in collaboration with other peers who would later be involved with Centrepoint. These early offerings later developed into more formally organised/marketed workshops through the Shoreline Trust<sup>3</sup>, facilitated from Potter's home in Campbell's Bay. The house in Campbell's Bay arguably became the first residential 'hub' of the later Centrepoint community (Oakes, 1986) with a small number of permanent residents and regular visitors.

In 1975, Potter and a number of his contemporaries moved into a house in Gillies Avenue in Epsom. Oakes (1986) describes a core group residing at the house, within which the later community of Centrepoint was conceived. At the same time, the Shoreline Trust began to wind down and in 1977, following the first shared home-birth within the group, a decision was made to purchase land and set up a residential community more formally. In this way an intentional community that was able to accommodate greater numbers was established.

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<sup>3</sup> Bert Potter and Keith McKenzie had been running Encounter Groups prior to this, the first one being held at McKenzie's house. However these groups were not under the auspices of a Trust.

The name ‘Centrepont’ was chosen and the original deed for Centrepont Community Growth Trust was drawn up, with 10 signatories.<sup>4</sup>

The Trust was defined as charitable in its purpose, although a number of its listed objectives were educational and with particular reference to the teachings of its first (and ultimately, only) nominated ‘Spiritual Leader’, Bert Potter. Through the pooled resources of some of its members<sup>5</sup>, the CCG<sup>6</sup> Trust purchased a 30-acre property, with a small farmhouse on the site, in bush land near Albany. The application for planning consent, lodged with Takapuna City Council, is dated January 1978. The first ‘residents’ also moved into the existing house in January 1978, a few days prior to the relocation of a second building, to be added as an annexe to the farmhouse already on-site (Oakes, 1986).

### **1.2.1 Establishing Centrepont**

The Centrepont property grew from humble beginnings, exemplified by the use of car crates as additional dwellings to the original farmhouse, to a sophisticated and well-resourced complex. The layout and design reflected community values and the fully communal lifestyle in which they were to be realised. Intimacy and vulnerability were valued in interpersonal relationships, and the physical arrangement of living situations in the early period of the community maximised both. Buildings were styled on ‘longhouses’ with a number of mattresses spaced brief distances apart, and open frontage onto shared decks. Communal dwellings included open showers and toilets (Sargisson & Sargent, 2004; Levitas & Sargisson, 2003; Oakes, 1986) and this openness was consistent with a concern for ‘stripping’ away the inhibitions and social rules associated with ‘norms’ that required rebuilding in the new community.<sup>7</sup> Values and social norms around emotional expression, the body, sexuality, and child rearing were also a site of community reconstruction.

Personal growth was understood as a crucial dimension of community reconstruction, and it included surrendering the ‘practical’ baggage of individual worldly possessions: specifically surrendering belongings to communal use. The concept of ownership was linked to

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<sup>4</sup> New Zealand Law Report 673 [1985].

<sup>5</sup> According to court proceedings, the transfer of assets to the Trust was “not an initial requirement of the Trust Deed and the rules” New Zealand Law Report 325, [2000] p328.

<sup>6</sup> New Zealand Law Report 325 [2000].

<sup>7</sup> The process of ‘stripping away’ social values, or ‘breaking down’ social norms and ‘rebuilding’ the person are also common in the ideologies of Humanist and Encounter Group movements.

possessive ways of relating interpersonally that life at Centrepont (and Potter's teachings) was intended to change (Oakes, 1986; Levitas & Sargisson, 2003). Levitas and Sargisson (2003) describe Centrepont as having, "as one of its central aims the re-creation of self-other relations" (p. 22), to which end it employed several, at the time, innovative and apparently therapeutic techniques alongside the communalistic principles that inspired the physical environment of the community.

The transformation of interpersonal relationships can also be contextualised within the social context of Encounter Groups which posit the transformation of interpersonal relationships to hold the promise for wider social change. For some members, the attraction of the community was directly connected to a sense of social disaffection and spiritual malaise in the broader community (Oakes, 1986). While the community was diverse in many ways, the majority of residents represented Pākehā, educated and middle-class professional backgrounds. They were intentionally challenging the social values that were associated with their social status in New Zealand society.

The early years of Centrepont appear characterised by numerous legal disputes regarding building approvals, residential permits, and the tax status of the community<sup>8</sup> (Oakes, 1986) as well as a mix of social opposition and support (Oakes, 1986). During this time they nevertheless managed to develop the beginnings of what would later become a series of thriving economic ventures (some more successful than others). As well as the income generated by community members who worked outside the community, there were several community businesses and the therapeutic training and personal-growth workshops offered to the wider community.

From late 1983 to mid 1985, a period of roughly 18 months, the community's growing identity and economic security were disrupted by a protracted legal dispute with Takapuna Council around residential permits for the community. At the height of this dispute, community members moved off the property at Albany and lived in a series of temporary accommodations around Auckland including overnight stays in malls, a series of factories, several nights on a marae, and longer periods split between private houses and buses. It appears that people continued to visit the property during this time, and that much standard

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<sup>8</sup> New Zealand Law Report 325 [2000].

business continued. The impact and implications of the disruption to living arrangements on the community and its members is unclear.

### **1.2.2 Personal Growth and Change**

Centrepont was predicated on the transformation of interpersonal relations – thus relational processes and dynamics appear to have occupied a key place in community functioning and daily life and led to specific practices that were focused on encouraging personal and interpersonal change. Business meetings unfolded over lengthy periods of time in which airing personal opinions, grievances and reflecting on process was encouraged and weekend and week-long workshops were not uncommon; sometimes as with the intensive Encounter Group experience these group processes involved minimal sleep, or relatively protracted isolation from others in the community. The value placed on interpersonal change encouraged individual challenges and problems to be widely disclosed and resolved through practices like ‘homework tasks’ that were assigned to individuals publicly. The boundaries between ‘therapy’ sessions and daily community life were blurred. ‘Openness’ around events and relationships normatively regarded as private was also encouraged; sexual expression was to be ‘freed’ and celebrations of marriages, birthdays and births were communal.

Freedom and autonomy for younger people appear to have been valued in child-rearing, and encouraged in practice, with children purportedly being treated as adults and encouraged in independence from a young age. There are other examples of intentional communities that foster social participation and equal rights for children among those that were established as sites of social and interpersonal change (c.f. Maxey, 2004). At Centrepont, teenage and child groups, led by several therapists, were held separately from the adult meetings, yet allowed younger community members to participate in the same kinds of therapeutic encounters that adults were entitled to experience. Freedom in sexual expression and sexual exploration were encouraged for children, as they were for adults, and, consistent with the “fully communalistic” (Sargisson & Sargent, 2004) lifestyle and physical arrangements of the community, adult sexual relationships were not hidden from children.

Whilst communalistic in principle and everyday living, Centrepont also appears to have been very hierarchical in its structure (Sargisson & Sargent, 2004). There is little

disagreement that Potter, as Spiritual Leader, held significant influence over the direction and focus of the community (Oakes, 1986; Sargisson & Sargent, 2004). Formally, his position was always separate to the Trust – on which he never served as member – just as the Trust and Community were two separate entities in law. But in practice, this was not so, and the extent of Potter’s actual influence over affairs of the Trust is likely under-represented in official documentation. Potter’s status as Spiritual Leader was manifest, for example, in the discretion he exercised over community membership (Oakes, 1986).<sup>9</sup>

Sargisson (2004) suggests that the intentional objectives of the community as a spiritual and therapeutic centre warrants its hierarchical organisation and Potter’s leadership was significant to the success that it achieved – financially and in its therapeutic influence. In this context, exercising discretion over community membership is fitting for the promulgation of its leader’s teachings. The privileges of Potter’s leadership position were also evident in the way in which he was singularly protected from the collective scrutiny of the membership. Sargisson and Sargent (2004) have pointed out that the emotional and sexual openness of life at Centrepont subjected the lives of most members of the community to the scrutiny of others. At some point Potter had removed himself from the communal living arrangement, and established his own residence further up one of the hills above the primary residential site. Oakes (1986) suggests this move was necessary to reduce the extent to which the community demanded his energy and time. When considered in relation to the fully communal living environment that was implicated in Centrepont’s interpersonal philosophies, the move also located Potter in a position of relative inscrutability.

Previous literature on Centrepont has identified its paradoxical potential for both fulfilling and damaging personal experiences within the context of these therapeutic interventions to create open relations. One study reports that previous members of the community recall “both the overwhelming sense of love and warmth and belonging that Centrepont gave to them and also the pain and loss when favour was withdrawn. This came in both material and emotional forms of abuse. Questioning the leader might result in the disappearance of one’s toothbrush, for instance, or the sudden unavailability of tampons...Others spoke of the pain of receiving coldness where once they had received love” (Sargisson & Sargent,

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<sup>9</sup> Also noted in the Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Centrepont, 1996.

2004, p22). Whilst Potter's position as Spiritual Leader is significant, the existence and significance of other power relations within the community should also not be underestimated. Sargisson (2004) emphasises that "power lay in the hands of the powerful, be they adults or the group's leaders" (p331). In either case, children are not counted among the powerful. The way in which therapeutic techniques were used to transform their interpersonal relationships depended crucially on the decisions and actions of adults in the community. This dependence took place within complex relationships between adults who exercised diverse forms of power within the community.

### **1.2.3 Individual Criminal Cases**

From 1989 – 1992 a number of serious criminal charges were brought against members of the community by police. Potter was arrested and imprisoned for drug offences in 1990, and then convicted of sexual offences against children in 1992 (Sargisson & Sargent, 2004). Six other men from the community were convicted and sentenced to various terms of imprisonment for the sexual abuse of minors. No convictions were recorded against two women who were also initially arrested and charged, including charges of sexual abuse. The age of the children involved in these cases of child sexual abuse ranged from 3-15 years at the time of offence, for those where reporting was available. In 2000 convictions and prison sentences for drug offending, perjury and sexual offending against children were recorded for 13 members of Centrepont.<sup>10</sup> Not all cases tried were openly reported and later cases still in process or recently opened, have not been recorded, so the number convicted at the time of this study is uncertain.

Many of the community members accused and imprisoned held positions of seniority at Centrepont, including Trust members and therapists. On their release from prison, Centrepont was still their home, and many returned to the community. Nonetheless, the arrests of community leaders marked the beginning of significant modification of social practices at Centrepont. Many members left during these years and those that remained did so within a context of considerable changes in the community and in the management and coordination of, and by, the Trust.

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<sup>10</sup> New Zealand Law Reports, 2000.



### 1.2.4 Community Change and Closure

Following increased internal disputes over the operations and management of the Trust, which intensified after the criminal convictions, the authority of the Court was invoked, in 1996, in a supervisory capacity over the CCG Trust.<sup>11</sup> The subsequent Report of Inquiry<sup>12</sup>, commissioned by the Attorney General, included recommendations for the appointment of a Public Trustee to the Trust, which occurred in 1997. Between 1998 and 2000, the original Trust Deed was reformulated in a process which included the explicit removal of any spiritual objectives. This was a move that had considerable support – albeit not unequivocal – from a number of previous members of the community.

In February 2000, the Court decided upon a settlement to those families who still supported Potter and lived on the Centrepont site, on the condition that they were to leave the community.<sup>13</sup> According to that report strong opposition by a number of community members, residents and former residents to Potter and his supporters continuing to reside at the community preceded the settlement. The Court records indicate that financial settlement was also made in response to the acknowledged, especially economic, difficulties that the persons concerned would face in transitioning to living independent of the community. There is evidence of significant continuing support for Potter and some of the more senior members of Centrepont and the report notes the lack of understanding at a broader social level of the transition from living within to living outside the community.

By the time of the settlement Centrepont was different in its communal organisation from the time before the arrests. It also looked very different, physically, to the earlier years. Many of the communal living areas were subdivided into smaller, more private dwellings, and doors placed on showers and toilets (Sargisson & Sargent, 2004). As Centrepont was being formally wound down, a new group sought to establish themselves upon the site under a different name, Anahata, and with clearly different intended living arrangements. The new intentional community comprised of some existing Centrepont members and newer members unaffiliated with the earlier community. When Centrepont was formally closed by the Courts Anahata was granted tenancy on the site. The overlap between

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<sup>11</sup> New Zealand Law Report 325 [2000].

<sup>12</sup> Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Centrepont, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> New Zealand Law Report 325 [2000].

Centrepoint and Anahata in terms of membership is mentioned briefly in Sargisson and Sargent's (2004) discussion of both communities. At the time of this research, the resident community had changed again – and is now known as Kahikatea.

As well as Centrepoint's therapeutic and social practices, the transformations of the community over time and in relation to legal intervention brought different conditions to bear on the experiences of children. Depending on when, and how, they were involved with the community their experiences of interpersonal relationships with adults were likely diverse if similarly vulnerable.

We have placed an emphasis in designing the research, in being able to locate participants' individual life narratives in relation to the changing face of Centrepoint and to include in this the development of subsequent communities; in doing so we acknowledge the focus of previous literature on the earlier years of Centrepoint relative to the community in its later years, and after the dissolution of the CCG Trust.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Methodological Rationale

The core objective of this research is to facilitate understandings of the experiences of adult children from the Centrepoin community, when they lived in the community and after leaving. The New Zealand Communities Growth Trust commissioned this research so that they could better understand the needs of the adult children, and how they could be met. Specifically, we aim to:

- (a) Describe patterns of any advantages and/or difficulties the adult children have experienced, or are now experiencing;
- (b) Identify and assess needs for rehabilitation;
- (c) Identify other areas of most need in priority order, including participants' suggestions for strategies to meet these needs;
- (d) Identify ways that health professionals and others could assist children who are part of or who have exited from a spiritual or intentional community;
- (e) Develop any recommendations that can be identified as assisting NZCG Trust in the short, medium and long term.

These aims inform the design of the project. We have chosen qualitative research that is embedded within an epistemological tradition that treats knowledge as *understanding* so that this overarching objective is at the heart of our research strategies. The aims require that we attend to the *specificity* of adult children's experiences and simultaneously take account of *commonalities and differences* that produce similar and variable needs for support in adulthood. Throughout our consultation and decision making about conducting this research we were mindful of that the demise of Centrepoin was precipitated by a legal intervention into the community that resulted in adult convictions for drug offences and child sexual abuse. How adult children of Centrepoin understood the events leading to, and following, the arrests of adults in the community was crucial to our study, yet those events were already subject to widespread community, media and academic scrutiny. In this context, building relationships of trust with participants is essential to meeting the objective and aims of the research since we rely on the adult children to inform us of their understandings, needs and aspirations.

## **2.2 Safety, Respect and Diversity**

In practice and as priorities in this research, we regard safety and respect as intertwined and the foundation for researcher-participant trust. We use ‘safety’ to refer to conditions of physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual well-being. In the context of encountering experiences of abuse, safety includes taking account of the potential for re-traumatisation. Researchers have noted the relationship between re-traumatisation and inappropriate or insensitive witnessing of trauma across a variety of contexts including the disclosure of childhood abuse (Disch, 2001). Re-traumatisation has also been linked to being in physical proximity to a place, person or event associated with the original trauma (Herman & Harvey, 1997). The design of this project follows a research tradition that treats these concerns as ethical responsibilities for research (Disch, 2001).

Given changes in social and interpersonal relationships at Centrepoint over time and differences in children’s involvement in life at Centrepoint, we anticipated diversity among the accounts of those taking part in the research. At the very least, not everyone would understand what happened at Centrepoint in the same way. We were aware that we needed to be able to listen for diversity and also recognise when participants might use strategies of minimising in interpreting their experiences. Minimisation has been identified in studies of sexual violence against women and refers to downplaying the severity or impact of particular events. Minimising strategies are often used as a means of coping with experiences of violence or re-telling ‘near misses’ (Kelly, 1988; Kelly & Radford, 1996). Respect for diverse coping strategies also needed to be built into our research to prioritise adult children’s perspectives on their experience and allow us to build relationships of trust with research participants.

The specific methodology we have used, the Voice-Centred Relational Method, is theoretically informed by standpoint epistemology which treats knowledge of the phenomena of interest (in this case, growing up at Centrepoint) as contingent upon the experiences of each research participant (Riger, 1992). From this perspective, one’s social situation and personal history influence the sense or the understanding that can be made of lived experience and hence what can be known of a phenomena (Harding, 2002). This allows both for particular perspectives, and for diverse understandings, depending on different standpoints.

In standpoint epistemologies some perspectives are explicitly more valuable than others for the purposes of research (Riger, 1992). The voices of those who are closest to the experience of interest lend integrity to findings that are generated. So, for example, we would expect adult members of Centrepont, counsellors who have worked with adult children of Centrepont, and friends or relatives of Centrepont children to have experiences and insights of value to understanding adult children's experiences. But in this case it is the perspectives of the adult children themselves that need to be central to the research. To gather evidence in our research we have therefore used strategies that involve listening to those who lived at Centrepont when they were children. We also anticipate that some participant accounts will involve sensitive issues that we know are difficult to talk about and will need to be open to insights or questions we may have been unable to imagine or ask at the outset of the project. Standpoint theories have a long social tradition of being adopted in contexts where people have been marginalised or their knowledge ignored (Harding, 2002), so the research techniques used on a standpoint approach focus on openness, sensitivity and honouring the voices of participants.

Since the strength of standpoint methodologies comes from their capacity to generate understandings that are embedded in participants' experiences they call for an interpretive approach to analysis (Fairclough, 2007; Mauthner & Doucet, 1998; Brown et al., 1988). Whilst we recognise that there are different techniques for standpoint research, for this project we chose Voice-Centred Relational Method (Gilligan et al., 1990; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Brown & Gilligan, 1993; Gilligan et al., 2003).

## **2.3 The Voice-Centred Relational Method**

The Voice-Centred Relational Method (the VCRM) is based in clinical psychological interviewing and analytical traditions, and in traditions of literary enquiry (Mikel Brown & Roger, 1998). It emerged from researchers' experiences of longitudinal, developmental research and in response to demands for more context-sensitive means of managing qualitative data (Gilligan et al., 1990; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg & Bertsch, 2003). The method assumes that development occurs in relation to others, and that individual's experience of themselves is inextricable from their social relationships (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003; Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, Bertsch, 2003). Whilst we

recognise that there are other ways of making sense of participants' experiences, a relational approach fits with the objectives of this project: to trace implications of early social and developmental experiences and draw implications about contemporary patterns of social advantage/disadvantage.

The VCRM's emphasis upon relationships serves to differentiate this approach from many other qualitative methodologies that are concerned with representing participants' voices. Specifically, it addresses the issue of how to place participants' standpoints at the heart of the research and make sense of their experiences, *from a different social position*. None of us are adult children of Centrepont, nor are we associated in any way with people who lived at Centrepont: indeed three of us are immigrants to New Zealand and relatively unfamiliar with the community's history before embarking on this project. As outsiders we needed an approach that would ensure that our very different experiences of growing up, and intentional communities, would not become barriers to hearing how participants made sense of their experience. VCRM requires a reflexive component that attends to the way in which understandings are generated within the research-relationship. The knowledge that is produced through voice-centred relational methods depends on the qualities of the relationships between participants and researchers; between those who voice their experience and those who have responsibility for hearing and interpreting the participants' voices.

In a relational approach participants' accounts are collected in person, usually in a semi-structured or conversational interview that is recorded. Transcripts are made from the recorded interviews and used as data for analysis. Integral to the VCRM is the employment of 'Listening Guides' for reading participant accounts (Brown et al., 1988; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; 1993). A Listening Guide is less a fixed framework than "a pathway into relationship" (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p22). It is designed to ensure that researchers do not overlook aspects of participants' accounts because they are more orientated to their own perspective than to the participants. It forms a systematic and sensitive way of facilitating a researcher in reading participant narratives on their own terms, by attending to events and relationships that are meaningful in participants' accounts of their experience. It emphasises the relationship between the listening researcher and the speaking participant and acknowledges that the analysis is a result of the interaction between them. The Guide employs at least four comprehensive and specific readings of each transcript, according to

criteria that are specific to the research objectives (Balan, 2005; Mauthner & Doucet, 1998).

In the context of this project we undertook the following readings:

- 1) For the story, or plots, told by participants because these provided us with insights into the significance of particular events in the participants' life experiences;
- 2) For the narrator, or sense of 'self' spoken about through the stories because this provided us with information about the way in which participants understood who they were in relation to the events that they were describing;
- 3) For vulnerabilities so that we could identify participants' understandings of how their childhood experiences were connected to their adult needs and;
- 4) For resilience so that we could better understand how participants' had met their needs and the relationships and conditions that had facilitated strength.

The first two transcript readings were designed to listen closely to the participants' accounts of their childhoods and how their sense of themselves connected to their perspectives on Centrepont, its demise and their adult lives. The third and fourth readings directed our attention to the ways in which participants experienced adversity and the conditions under which some were able to thrive beyond their transition from the community into adulthood. Focusing on vulnerability and resilience also enabled the research team's clinical expertise to be fully engaged in the foci of the third and fourth guides without overriding the participants' perspectives. Further information on the use of the guides is provided below, in the section on our analysis.

## **2.4 Data Generation**

### **2.4.1 Sampling and Recruitment**

Our sampling and recruitment protocols were developed to be consistent with the ethical considerations prioritised by the research and the methodology chosen in keeping with the Trust's overall objective of prioritising the experiences of adult children. Probability sampling was not necessary for our qualitative project since we were not aiming to conduct statistical analysis that required estimates of sampling error. Nonetheless, given our interest in the diversity of adult children's experiences, we sought to be as inclusive as possible by

ensuring that all adult children known to the Trust were invited to participate in the research and therefore had the opportunity to contribute.

The Trust advised that there were somewhere between 200 and 300 children who spent at least some part of their childhood as residents at the Centrepoin community. In consultation with the Trust's Advisory Board and Massey University Ethics Committee (Approval #07/59) we developed participation criteria and a recruitment protocol. Volunteers could participate in the research if they were 18 or over and had been living in the Centrepoin Community when they were under 18 and in the care of their parents. Recruitment involved the three steps:

1. The NZCGT notified all those registered on their database that the research was taking place and invited those interested in participating to contact the research team for further information (See Appendix A). We decided against directly contacting potential participants ourselves because it would involve us accessing the NZCGT database without the consent of those whose personal information was held on the database. We were also concerned that 'cold calling' from the research team to solicit participation may have been distressing or coercive in some cases. Protection of privacy and care to avoid distress were paramount considerations.
2. The research team received expressions of interest in the research and sent out information sheets so that potential volunteers could consider all the demands and known potential consequences of taking part in the research (See Appendix B). We avoided proactive recruitment so that we could ensure as far as possible that potential participants would not feel pressured into volunteering for the research. Information sheets provided us with the opportunity to fully inform volunteers of the research aims and procedures and leave them as much time as they needed to decide whether to take part.
3. Access interviews were conducted by phone with those who replied to the information sheet confirming that they were willing to take part in an interview. Access interviews confirmed eligibility and completed a safety screen. The safety screen checked for factors such as distress and availability of support as well as any other considerations that might be relevant to conducting an interview. If volunteers were willing, eligible and safe to participate an appropriate time and place for an



interview was set up.<sup>14</sup> Sometimes, people were not contactable by phone or preferred another medium of communication such as email. Where this was the case, the same access protocol as used in the phone call was adapted to another medium.

Within two months of the Trust sending out information about the research we had distributed 26 information sheets to those who had expressed interest in participating and recruitment processes had been concluded for five participants. Feedback we received during the early phases of recruitment suggested that some volunteers did not realise that they needed to contact the researchers again after receiving information sheets if they wanted to take part. They were waiting for us to initiate access interviews.

After discussions with the Trust and the Massey University Human Ethics Committee we revised our ethics protocol to allow us to contact volunteers who had received information sheets and clarify the recruitment process. We then wrote to those interested explaining the situation, encouraging them to contact us if they wanted to take part and letting them know we would not approach them again.

In total, 29 volunteers were recruited to participate in interviews over a period of six months. At this time there was a noticeable decline in expressions of interest in the research and over the subsequent seven months, while interviews were completed and transcribed, they declined to zero. Over this time around 60% of initial expressions of interest resulted in recruitment to the research, and somewhere between 10 and 15% of the population of adult children agreed to take part. In consultation with the Trust no action was taken to generate any further expressions of interest in the research.

#### **2.4.2 The Interviews**

We conducted 30 conversational interviews with 29 participants.<sup>15</sup> Conversational interviews were chosen to allow us to gather data which is rich in detail and includes information that is unanticipated and of critical relevance. The aim of conversational

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<sup>14</sup> The safety of participants was further protected through supervision provided to the interviewer from one of the clinical psychologists on the research team who monitored any concerns raised by the initial safety check as well as any concerns that arose during the interview itself.

<sup>15</sup> A significant amount of data from one interview was lost due to the failure of recording equipment. The participant undertook a second interview at a later date. Data from both interviews was included in our analysis.

interviews is to ensure that it is not only the researcher's agenda that is met by the interview process, and that participants have the opportunity to raise issues or talk of events that are significant to them. If a formal interview protocol is used participants are less likely to openly discuss their experiences and more likely to depend on the researcher for direction. In such circumstances the opportunity to learn about experiences that we have not already thought to include in an interview schedule is lost. So each interview began with a broad invitation to tell us their story of what it was like to grow up in the Centrepoin Community – starting wherever they would like to begin. A schedule of detailed prompts was available for the interviewer to use if participants preferred being prompted or some areas relevant to the research aims and objectives were not spontaneously covered during the conversation (See Appendix C). Prompts were not used for the second purpose in practice, because all participants volunteered information that directly addressed the aims of the research at some stage during their interview.

Venues and times for face to face interviews were negotiated during access interviews to suit participants. Most interviews took place in private consulting rooms at the Massey University Psychology Centre in Albany while others took place in private rooms at community centres, offices, or participants' homes. A few interviews were conducted by phone because participants were overseas. Before interviews commenced all participants signed consent forms (See Appendix D). Participants were able to have a support person present at the interview if they wished – an option that only two participants chose. Support people who were involved with interviews did not contribute directly to the interview and no support people had experience of Centrepoin themselves. None of the participants interviewed by phone elected to have a support person present.

The researchers themselves conducted the interviews and had both qualitative research experience and counselling training as a minimum requirement to ensure that participants' emotional needs could be taken into account during and after interviews. Each interview was closed carefully, and participants were able to access subsequent support in relation to issues that were raised in the interview. Arrangements for follow-up support were made so that participants could be referred to appropriate services funded by the NZCGT without the Trust being told who had taken part in the research. Some participants accessed available follow-up services which were provided by clinicians outside of the research institution.

Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 4 hours, with an average duration of 2 hours. All interviews were audio recorded for subsequent transcription with participants' consent. Participants often chose to stay in touch with their interviewer after the interview, and all participants were contacted subsequently for the purpose of reviewing and editing the transcript of their interview.

In drawing recruitment to a close we took account of the considerable lengths to which volunteers had gone to participate in this research project. Even where the financial cost of getting to an interview was relatively insignificant, there were costs of time, energy, and emotional commitment clearly implicated in initiating contact with the researchers, remaining in contact to receive information, completing access procedures, negotiate timing and safety and follow-up, as well as considerable commitment of the interviews themselves. We noticed the ready willingness of participants to openly share their experiences with us across the full complement of interviews, irrespective of the length of time their interviews took or how they were conducted. We notice this again in the richness and complexity of the resulting transcripts, which together comprise over 1000 pages of typed transcript.

### **2.4.3 Transcription**

All interviews were transcribed verbatim as quickly as possible after the interview. Protecting participants' privacy was a primary consideration in transcription. Transcribers were briefed on privacy, confidentiality and editing requirements for the presentation of evidence in documents resulting from the research. They signed confidentiality agreements (See Appendix E) and received audio data on compact discs in person. Raw data was not transmitted electronically among members of the research team. In the transcription process obviously identifying information such as personal and place names were usually replaced with more generic terms (e.g. 'friend' or 'sister' or 'town'). The only exception was in the case of accounts of community leadership in which case references to specific leaders, such as 'Bert' or 'Bert Potter', were transcribed. Transcripts were assigned a numerical code and a pseudonym. After transcription all sound files were returned to the research team and copies of transcripts were deleted from transcribers' computers. The research team always used pseudonyms or numerical codes when discussing the transcripts or interviews.

All transcripts were proof-read by one of the researchers for verification with the audio-recording. After proofing they were returned to participants for reviewing unless they had specifically requested not to see the transcript of their interview. Among those who did review their transcripts, a number of participants returned them without changing anything, some choosing not to read it at all; others made brief amendments; some censored parts of their transcript; some shared it with others – counsellors or family members; some preferred not to retain a copy for their own use. Most participants released their transcripts for us to use as textual evidence of our analysis and signed a transcript release consent form (See Appendix F) even if they did not review their interview transcripts. There were six transcripts that were not released for use in reporting<sup>16</sup>. These have been included in our analysis but no extracts from these documents appear in this report.

When transcripts had been finalised all sound files were destroyed, as were obsolete copies or electronic files of the transcribed data. Edited transcripts were used for analysis.

## **2.5 Analysis**

VCRM analytic strategies proceed through a number of close readings of the transcript text, involving more than one researcher and usually including interviewers. Listening guides are used to identify patterns of similarities and differences within the data, both between participants and within individual transcripts. They ensure that diversity is heard by guiding the analysts' attention to events and relationships that are meaningful to participants and relevant to the research objectives.

In our analysis preliminary readings were conducted by all members of the research team including the interviewers. Listening guides were developed to attend to the kinds of events that were significant to participants (plots), the sense of self that unfolded from the way participants' spoke of themselves and their relationships (narrator), participants' vulnerabilities (needs) and resilience (strength). These four guides were connected to the

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<sup>16</sup> Six participants did not return the transcript release form that accompanied their transcript. After an initial effort to make contact by phone did not result in a reply it was assumed that the participant did not want their transcript quoted directly in the research. In one of the cases a transcript release form was received after the report was completed and could not be included. We do not know the reason why other participants did not chose to give permission for the release of transcript but suspect that, in some cases, this may have been an accidental oversight while in other cases it may have been because re-engaging with the material of the transcript was anxiety provoking or there were concerns about being identified

research objectives through development of a set of research questions which each reading aimed to address;

- How do participants remember their childhoods at Centrepont? What sort of experiences and relationships do people remember as significant?
- How do participants understand their experiences at Centrepont to have influenced their lives since leaving the community?
- How do they understand factors outside their Centrepont experiences to have influenced the impact Centrepont has had on their lives?
- What precipitates people approaching the Trust? How is this relationship experienced? How have experiences with the Trust impacted on people's lives and well-being?

Readings proceeded in stages. In the first stage the story and narrator guides were used to identify the types of stories told and the storytelling voices used to tell them. Notations were made to connect similar stories and voices across transcripts and within them. In the second stage, readings were conducted by a senior clinical psychologist to identify vulnerabilities and resilience in a similar fashion. These initial readings were done largely by one of the researchers but were elaborated and discussed within the research team – a process which further helped to elucidate the diversity of meanings available within and between transcripts. This formed the basis of the third stage of the analysis when the ideas generated by the various readings of the transcripts were thematically analysed.

A manual thematic analysis was used to organise the complexity and richness of participants' accounts because it allows for fragments of meaning to be relevant to more than one theme depending on its context. Initial themes were generated out of the four readings that guided the initial analysis. This allowed themes to be selected that incorporated elements of the story and the story teller and also those that related specifically to either resilience or vulnerability, or in some cases both. Text fragments were then systematically coded into relevant themes. For example, the fragment;

*we were old enough and ugly enough to fend for ourselves...we were tough*

was coded into two sub-themes: ‘relationships with other children at Centrepont’ and ‘sexual abuse’.

Codes were compared across transcripts to develop further themes and sub-themes. Evidence of our interpretations, in the form of quoted extracts, was transferred from transcripts to theme files. As a developing theme became heavier with evidence, researchers were able to focus attention on sections of transcripts with this theme in mind, not only to look for further evidence, but also for counter-evidence, gaps and silences on the matter. When Brown and Gilligan (1992) refer to this level of analysis they encourage both ‘responsive’ and ‘resisting’ listening so that the multi-vocal and layered character of participant accounts and the relationships between different voices employed by individual participants can be heard.

In the third phase of analysis evidence of themes was also carefully considered in relation to context and the way in which evidential fragments were meaningfully similar to or different from each other. For example, the statement above, coded in three different sub-themes was contextually similar to;

*we were quite self-sufficient*

in that both fragments concerned self-sufficiency as meaning maturity and confidence. It was also contextually different from;

*we kind of fended for ourselves quite a bit*

which is semantically similar, but occurred in the context of a story about bullying by other adults, so meaningfully referred to vulnerability and neglect.

Including these kinds of overlaps in thematic analyses allowed us to show how the meaning of various conditions, events and relationships at Centrepont diverged both within and among participants’ accounts.

As the evidence for particular themes and sub-themes built up we were also able to determine points of saturation in the data. In the context of qualitative research saturation

refers to the point at which no new or novel information is being generated from interviews, and no new or novel interpretations are emerging from close readings of the transcripts. In general the more complex and detailed the data, the more likely it is that saturation will be reached with a smaller group of participants who have had similar experiences (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). While we were aware that our sample of less than 20% of adult children of Centrepont may have excluded participants with specific interpretations of their experience in common, especially those who were not prepared to recall their childhood for the purposes of the research, our thematic analysis confirmed that the themes we did identify were saturated. The observance of saturation generally pre-empts decisions to cease interviewing and finalise analyses.

In the following sections we report our thematic analysis using the research questions to organise themes and sub-themes into relevant sections. Our thematic interpretations are illustrated with evidence from the transcripts that were released for us to use in the report. Although some evidence could have been used to illustrate more than one theme or sub-theme we have drawn on participant transcripts as widely as possible and avoided repetition if alternative evidence was available. All released transcripts were used to provide evidential quotes, with a range of 4-54 extracts used; a mean of 25, median of 22 and a mode of 36. Identifying features of the interviews were removed during transcription, but we were aware that confidentiality could be breached if particular episodes or manners of speaking were able to be connected with an individual participant because we had given each transcript a unique identifier. To minimise this possibility evidential quotes were checked to ensure that they did not contain characteristic turns of phrase or enough detail of specific events or relationships for participants to be recognised. In the interests of protecting our participants' identities, we also made the decision to remove the participant identifiers throughout the final version of the report so it is impossible to trace a particular transcript across all themes. One copy of the report containing uniquely identified transcripts will be securely stored and destroyed with the full transcripts after five years. In addition to this precaution, we changed specific labels to general terms to further protect the identity of participants. For example 'Mother' might be changed to 'Parent' or 'Brother' to 'Sibling'. On the whole, examples were also only selected where there was more than one

with a similar theme in order to decrease the likelihood a particular participant could be identified.<sup>17</sup>

In a further attempt to protect our participants we have chosen not to provide a demographic breakdown of our sample as is usual in research. We were concerned that precise information on the gender and age of our participants might also increase the risk of their identification.

Following the sections reporting our analysis we return to the aims and objectives of the research to discuss how they are informed by the research findings.

## **2.6 Structure of the report**

This report is divided into five sections. The first and second section have already provided background information relevant to the study and details of the research methodology used. The third section of the report documents the experiences of growing up at Centrepont as described by our participants. The fourth section deals with the aftermath of Centrepont and its impacts on the adults lives of participants. The final section summarises key findings and offers some recommendations arising from the research.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> We would advise readers to be cautious in any belief that they can identify a participant as the steps we have taken to protect identities may lead to incorrect assumptions.

<sup>18</sup> This research is presented in two separate reports. This report focuses on the former children's experiences at Centrepont and the consequences of this for their adult lives. It also makes recommendations for health professionals and general recommendations for the NZCGT on how they can assist with any rehabilitation needs. More detailed evidence, findings and suggestions for NZCGT policies and processes in relation to the former children of Centrepont are contained in a second report which remains confidential to the NZCGT.



### **3. THE EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN AT CENTREPOINT**

#### **3.1 Who participated in the research and why?**

We had initially been concerned that a request to participate in this study might only attract a particular sub-group of the population of former Centrepoint children, but were pleased to find that there was considerable diversity amongst those who came forward. Within our sample there were adult children who had been at Centrepoint at different stages of its evolution. They included representatives of both the ‘younger group’ now in their twenties and those who had been there closer to the inception of the community and were now in their forties, as well as a range of those who had lived at Centrepoint somewhere between these two time periods. Some participants had been born at Centrepoint and some had spent a large portion of their lives there. Some had moved between Centrepoint and a parental home outside of the community, and some had spent a relatively short amount of time at the community. We were confident that we had recruited participants who were able to speak to the diversity of experiences we expected among those who had lived at Centrepoint during different times, for different reasons, and for different durations. We had somewhat fewer men than woman amongst our participants, but enough to provide us with a sense of experiences that might be different for each gender.

Participants gave a variety of reasons for coming forward to talk about their experiences. Their reasons for doing so seemed to fall into at least three categories: speaking out about their difficulties growing up in the community; speaking out about their positive memories of the community and sharing their experiences because of the opportunity that the research provided to do so.

One group of participants understood the research as an opportunity to speak about their difficult experiences at Centrepoint and their subsequent struggles. They were taking this opportunity so that their difficulties and struggles would be known and better understood. They were not necessarily doing so for themselves, but in the hope that others in their situation might receive help. A participant explained how she prepared herself for the interview by reflecting on the ‘holes’ that she experienced in the way that adult children had been taken into account in the aftermath of Centrepoint:

*I've been really focused for a long time on the gaps – not for myself personally but the gaps that our whole group has so I would be able to talk to, talk to it, hopefully in a useful way.*

Another participant clarified her hope that the research would inform the NZCGT in understanding the unique experiences and needs of the children who had grown up in the community:

*I really hope that it does help the Trust understand who they're, who they're dealing with...and what they're dealing with. And, I think that's what's sort of difficult about the whole situation, too, is for us it's so personal, and for the Trust, it's so not. Not that they know us all individually, you know, and they don't know where we've come from.*

Another group of largely younger participants, spoke of wanting to redress some of the misinformation they felt had been propagated in the media and elsewhere about Centrepont. These participants were seeking to balance what they saw as a very negative public perception of the community with their more positive experiences. One participant explained:

*I guess those are the things that I feel like it's really important to tell because I think it would be very easy with this research to get carried away with the abuse and the drugs and all the stuff that did happen, amidst a lot of positive things that some of us have gone away with.*

A third group of participants saw the research as an opportunity to find out more about whether others had had experiences different or similar to their own. They were curious and hoping that the research findings would be able to tell them more about how growing up at Centrepont had affected all the children that had lived there. For example:

*It'll be very interesting to see what the findings are because how much of it has affected the kids coming out. Because I know a lot were severely damaged and it would be interesting to see how everyone is now.*

Despite their different interests in volunteering for the research, all participants shared a desire to 'tell their story' and to have their distinctive and personal experiences taken into account. One participant explained her sense that they had not had an opportunity to tell their stories before and that there was something potentially "healing" in the research process:

*I think no-one has ever asked us. There's never been like a forum like this where we can actually say how it was. And I'm interested. I want everyone... I want everyone*

*to have a voice and I'm interested in other people's stories and I think this is... important research. And it's also I think, quite healing as well and I hope that lots of people will get involved in it, yeah. And I hope that it does have some kind of implications that will better our lives in some way.*

This same participant went on to describe how telling her story for this research felt enormously significant for her:

*It kind of does feel like a bit of acknowledgement of what happened because [crying] it's not in a counselling forum. It's not a 'Let's talk about your problem' and how upset they make you, or you know, and it's not in a, like a reveal to friends. It's just like this is actually what happened and it's going to be put down for the record. It's, because, like, throughout those court case years and everything, it was just, it was huge, it was very tumultuous, it was very, you sometimes sort of just go, 'How did that happen? How did our experiences kind of got lost in this?' It was just so intense and pretty overwhelming and, yeah. So it feels pretty good that someone's actually interested in hearing those stories – that those experiences haven't just been swept under the carpet. Yeah. And then I just really hope...my hope is that, and my dream is, that it would be used for our benefits.*

From these accounts we found clear evidence of diverse reasons for adult children volunteering to participate in the research. While we are confident that the sample of participants does represent multiple perspectives on growing up at Centrepont, it is also possible that there was at least one group of adult children who did not come forward to take part in the research. While we were conducting the research we heard from a number of participants about friends and family members who had apparently been very damaged by their experiences at Centrepont, and who, as a result, tended to avoid all contact with the community and, by association, the NZGT. This raises the possibility that some of those worst affected by their experiences chose not to participate in this research.

### **3.2 Different experiences of Centrepont**

In most research it is important to search for common themes from which general conclusions can be drawn. For this research, though, one of our earliest challenges was to accurately represent the *variety* of experiences our participants had had at Centrepont. It became obvious to us in our analysis of the data that we would not be able to define a common 'Centrepont experience' for all our participants. Instead our initial assumption that we were dealing with sometimes very different experiences and interpretations of experience amongst our participating group was affirmed by our analysis of the data.

Besides the normal variation you would expect amongst any group of research participants, there were a number of additional factors that would account for some of the marked divergences we found. Firstly, from both participants' accounts and the existing literature on Centrepont, it was evident that the community underwent considerable evolution in its identity and practices over the more than 20 years of its existence. Participants' accounts provided clear indications of major changes within Centrepont. Many spoke about their own 'generation', recognising it was different to those that came before or after. Some felt they had been there at a particularly difficult time:

*So my generation, the kids that did it the hardest there – they get nothing, no support, no back-pay, no nothing. We've done it all, you know....You know, and we were the ones that, oh, you know. I mean, we did it the hardest actually, we suffered the most abuse. We were there for the longest, at the worst time. You know?*

In contrast, younger participants seemed to be aware that the community had changed significantly in their time there:

*We were like that last generation...who were just budding into our maturity when it all fell over. So we never quite got into the rest of the you know the, some of them did, a couple of them did that I know of but most of the us got left alone at that age group because we were too young anyway.*

Some participants were explicit in acknowledging that they were not there when things were 'bad':

*It saddens me that there was a number of people that did have bad experiences there and, you know, I'm not blind to the fact that a lot of people, I think mostly before my generation because of the fact that Bert did go to prison after that. Things did change quite rapidly after that.*

We cannot ascribe fundamentally distinct periods to the transformations in the community but we have found it helpful to differentiate between at least three different periods in the life of the community as they are represented through the voices of our participants. The first period stretched from the origins of Centrepont at its Gillies Avenue premises and covered the first several years at the Albany property. In this initial phase open communication and sexual practices appeared to have dominated the life of the community with the aim of challenging the social boundaries that divided people. This openness towards sex, according to most of our participants who were involved with Centrepont during this time, seemed to extend to include children and underage adolescents as both observers and participants in sexual practices.

The second major transformation seemed to have occurred with the introduction of drugs into the community, as an aid to self-discovery and according to some of our participants, as a way of enhancing sexual experiences. From our participants' perspective experimentation with drugs became a priority for the community. Some participants who were children during this period reported being less active in experimental sexual practices and talked more about being left to fend for themselves. Some of those in this group seem to have been largely (but again, not exclusively) involved in teen sex rather than adult-child sex. Many of them also became involved in both community sanctioned and unsanctioned drug use during their adolescence. During this period there was, however, a group of children who were drawn more substantially into the drug enhanced sexual activity of the adults.

The last phase of the community involved a transformation subsequent to the disruption of Centrepont by police raids and the arrests of key community members. According to our participants this period seems to have been marked by intensified conflict between factions in the community, intervention by Children and Young Persons Services (CYPS, as it was then called)<sup>19</sup> and the threatened dissolution of the community. For this group it was largely the disruption of the community, the conflict within it and the threatened loss of their home that was challenging for them. Both sexual activity and drug use seemed markedly less evident in the accounts of these participants.

Through our analysis we also became aware that the community of Centrepont made some distinctions between the different age groups of children that were likely to be connected to different kinds of experiences for children of varying ages. We have very little direct information about the experiences of very young children for the obvious reason that our participants are unable to remember these years. From many accounts though it does appear that pre-teen children seemed, on the whole, to have considerable freedom from adult surveillance. Some spoke about participation in 'Child Groups' but this did not seem to feature prominently in most participants' accounts. As the children grew older they were expected to join the 'Teenage Groups' where they had specific kinds of experiences that were developmentally targeted at personal freedom, exploration and self-awareness within the overarching ideology of the community. Older teenagers would have been drawn more

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<sup>19</sup> This agency is now known as Child, Youth and Family Services (CYFS).

fully into the adult life of the community. There are inconsistent accounts of age requirements for different kinds of activities so they were evidently not fixed or rule-bound. Still, some suggested age limits for full sexual involvement and drug use operating at least during some periods of the community's history emerged from the data. Given these age defined practices we would expect considerable differences in the experiences of a child who entered the community at 13 and one who, for example, was there from the age of 5 to 10 years.

One participant pointed out activities were not just differently allocated for different age groups, but also the kind of coping strategies they had at their disposal to manage the experience were also age dependent. He described how he felt that arriving there as an 8 year old gave him some advantages over those who had been there when they were younger:

*Yeah and maybe being that age, I had gathered enough [knowledge of the outside world], I've always thought, sort of maybe gathering enough outside knowledge to be able to sort of deal with it inside as opposed to someone who arrived maybe as a four year old or a three year old or was born there and that's all they knew.*

Together with these clear accounts of different experiences reported by our participants, there were a range of other factors that played a part in creating a unique experience for each of them. Some described how their inclination to trust without question made them particularly vulnerable to abusive situations while others seemed to be aware that their feistiness had served as a protection – or sometimes a provocation – in relation to the adults of the community. One participant described how his 'shyness' with older women allowed him to blushing reject their sexual advances with impunity while another participant spoke about how some of the girls maintained poor personal hygiene to discourage sexual interest.

In addition to these idiosyncratic differences in personality, interactional style and coping strategies there were also a wide variety of other issues that combined to produce different Centrepont experiences. Some children seemed to have protective and concerned parents while others had limited parental involvement at the community. Some had a parent outside of the community and so faced the challenges and opportunities associated with moving between 'two worlds'. Some participants did well at school or in other activities and gained an important sense of efficacy from these experiences, while others had clearly struggled

with learning. Some of the participants had had experiences of abuse or family difficulties prior to coming to Centrepont and others had been sent there specifically because they were displaying rebellious or challenging behaviour. All of these factors are implicated in the type of experiences a particular child has and the way that he or she might negotiate his or her journey through Centrepont. Perhaps the best analogy here is that of a family where siblings may inhabit the same household but recall, and indeed have, quite different experiences within it.

Lastly, we were struck by the way in which each individual participant themselves described a wide range of experiences, and fluctuating evaluations about whether their childhood experiences had been problematic or helpful for them in their later lives. While some tended towards a view of Centrepont being *either* a largely negative or positive influence in their lives, many were careful to tell us that they recognised both good and bad experiences arising from their childhood at the community and believed that they had taken both strengths and vulnerabilities into their adult lives as a result. This is perhaps a reflection of the variety of encounters – events and relationships – offered by the community as well as the changing experiences that evolved over residences that mostly spanned several years – if not more. Given this, it is extremely unlikely that we could even identify a unitary experience for each individual participant, let alone for the group as a whole.

Many of our participants reflected their awareness that there were contemporary factions and divisions amongst the adult Centrepont children – largely between those who wanted to protect the reputation of the community and those that wanted to expose its abuses. They talked about how they felt the need to align themselves with one faction or another. As researchers, we felt it was important to maintain our neutrality and to resist the temptation to ‘take a side’. Overall, our strongest sense was that our research needed to respect the diversity in the data and to create a space in which different peoples’ stories could be told and affirmed. One of our participants provided an eloquent argument for accepting that a variety of ‘truths’ may exist in relation to Centrepont:

*Because I think one of the ways in which there was a bit of, a sort of ‘divide and conquer’ mentality at Centrepont that I think made people often very wary of speaking their truth, even though that was sort of theoretically one of the really important things about the thing was about honesty. And that’s a real shame and so*

*I do like the idea of people having opportunities to say what they need to say and to not keep following that pattern of pulling people apart and putting people in categories and 'who's on whose side' and all that sort of stuff, I just sort of see that's a really unhealthy thing for us to be keeping on reinforcing [this].*

But while we have tried to recognise and respect each of the participants' unique experiences, it has been possible to draw out some areas of some commonality and develop some general conclusions from our data. It is important though that the reader recognises that experiences we describe in this report represent the array of possibilities described by our participants rather than the experience of all of them.

### **3.3 Reasons for being at Centrepont**

Participants offered us a variety of reasons for how they came to be at Centrepont. Several of those we interviewed had been born at Centrepont, others had come as young children with their parents, while yet others had arrived as teenagers either sent by a parent or of their own volition.

Being born into the community carried considerable symbolic meaning for those whose birthplace was Centrepont. One described how being born there created a particular historical link to the community. For her it was important:

*to be able to say 'I was born over there in the [room].' I mean I still, you know people go back and I you know go back and people ask me about you know, my history with the community.*

This group of participants spoke about the significance of the birth process at the community including the ritual of burying the placenta under a 'birth tree'. A number of participants who had been born at Centrepont felt that this gave them a very special relationship with the community's land.

But the experience seems to have been rather different for those who had come to the community as younger children. Most of these participants told of being brought there, despite their reluctance, by a parent. Several participants spoke about how their parent's decision to move into the community had come unexpectedly and without consultation. This participant's account was fairly typical:



*So [my mother] felt like she wanted to move there and so she just announced one day – I think we'd only been out to visit a few times – and she announced that we were moving there so it was quite, already it had my back up but being like [a young child], there wasn't much we could do about it.*

Several of the participants who had been moved to Centrepont by their parents described feeling angry and distressed initially. One man told us how, as a very young child, he remembered protesting ineffectually to his mother about going to the community. Another participant recollected sitting outside and refusing to go in for several hours after they arrived at Centrepont for the first time.

On occasions, parents anticipated their children's resistance to the community. One woman rather told us how she was initially tricked into going to Centrepont by her father and her subsequent fear at being there:

*Because when I was really young Dad said to me 'We're going to get an ice cream' and then he drove me up there, so he didn't even tell me the truth from the start. And then the next time we went up there, I tried to run away, because I just didn't like the feel of the place and the look of the place and it was just too different. And the way my father had talked about it, I knew what went on up there. So I just, was scared of going there for that reason too.*

Yet another participant described how the process of being taken to live at Centrepont against her wishes was part of a greater sense of powerlessness that stayed with her during her time there:

*I think it really shows me now how kids will take stuff and go with it but they don't have a voice to say, I didn't have a voice to say 'I don't like this, I don't want to be here.' I didn't even really have that voice about whether I wanted to be with my Dad or my Mum. I didn't have the feet to, and the, you know, I couldn't really voice that. I didn't have the cognitive skills to think that through and articulate it So I went with it, like everyone else really.*

Most of the participants were able to provide an account of their parent's decision to live at Centrepont. Some understood that their parents were linked to the community by their shared commitment to its values and ideas. A portion of these parents were apparently professional people who were active in contributing to the ethos of the developing community. These people were described as being idealists by their children, committed to the vision of living communally and in a way that was different from the unhealthy restrictions they felt operated in the broader society.

But in addition to this obvious reason for their presence at the community, participants also suggested a range of social, economic and interpersonal experiences that may have led their parents to want to try living in an 'intentional community' like Centrepont.

It was notable that most of the participants in this research had parents who had been separated prior to coming to the community. A number of participants specifically link this with their parent's choice to move to Centrepont, but for different reasons. For example, one participant described how, following divorce, his father had seemed to be looking for 'something new' in his life. Another reported that his newly single parent had simply been trying to find somewhere to stay after he left the family home and followed a friend's suggestion to move to Centrepont.

One often repeated theme amongst the participants' accounts was their understanding that their parents had come to Centrepont because they were having difficulty managing their lives outside the community. For some this was the difficulty of parenting alone. One participant, for example, described how her mother was unhappy and was struggling to cope with several children close together in age. She thinks that her mother's life on her own with her and her siblings must have been "lonely, sort of unsatisfying and unfulfilled."

Quite a few participants also understood their parents to be psychologically vulnerable and drawn to the community for support. One participant, although young at the time of his arrival, speculated that his mother was probably having a 'breakdown' and may well have not 'survived' without the support Centrepont provided. Several others acknowledged that their parents subsequently identified mental health problems may well have been worse without the structure of the community for them to rely on.

For others, the support the community offered was financial. One participant told us that her mother often pointed out to her how Centrepont had given her access to resources that she would never have been able to provide for her daughter as a single parent. Others commented on the apparent 'abundance' of the community in providing food, accommodation and a large swimming pool. Several participants commented on the relative luxury that this represented for them when they first arrived at the community, at least implying that they had previously experienced relative financial hardship.

So, from the perspective of many of our participants, Centrepont offered support to parents struggling to survive outside of it. As one participant put it:

*It was a haven for people with split families, and solo mums and people whose marriages were on the rocks; it was a haven for people to come [to].*

While participants attributed some of the impetus to come to Centrepont to their parents themselves, some also accounted for their parents' decisions by referring to active persuasion having played a part. One participant who had been abused at Centrepont said her mother had later told her how strongly she had been persuaded to come to the community in the interests of her children's well-being and her own:

*Mum's told me that when she first moved in, you know, they were really, really encouraging her to, was a big, a big push, that she would be much better off living there with me. Because there was a lot of struggle with her and because they split up, Mum and Dad, when I was nine so I was pretty hard t... pretty rebellious and didn't want to listen to her and they convinced her it would be much better to come there, that there would be other people to help her support me. But it wasn't really like that at all in the end.*

On a more disturbing note, a few participants reported that their parent had been actively involved the sexual abuse of children prior to coming to the community. This raises the possibility that there were some parents who decided to go to Centrepont because of the opportunities provided for paedophile activity. Seen through the lens of later abuse one participant explained why she thought her mother had insisted she leave her father's house to join her at the community:

*The Centrepont community just hounded and hounded Mum to get us to go there. Really – just because Bert just wanted to have sex with us. And so, yeah, so basically, yeah, so he got us, got Mum to come and get us, and so, you know. [He] didn't let up until we'd moved in.*

Within our group of participants, those who came to Centrepont as teenagers seemed to have had a rather different trajectory of entry into the community from those who were born there, or came when they were younger. Most of this group reported being sent to join a parent already living at Centrepont after they experienced some difficulty at school or at the home of their other parent. Many described themselves as being somewhat rebellious and 'in trouble' prior to coming to the community. For at least one, a parent had been 'counselled' to bring them to Centrepont and for others they were sent by a parent outside who was unable to manage their behaviour. Sometimes, from these participants' points of

view, being sent to Centrepoint was used as a punishment for misbehaviour. One described how his mother used to threaten to send him back to the community after he had left it for a period of time:

*Mum used to threaten 'I'll send you off to Centrepoint'. If I was naughty, it was like 'I'll send you off to Centrepoint'.*

Others amongst this group of participants had dropped out of school or were temporarily homeless as they moved between living arrangements with other family or friends. For them Centrepoint was a refuge, intended perhaps initially to be temporary. One participant, who was teenager when she first started spending time at Centrepoint, described it like this:

*Now the reason I went, I guess, was because I used to use Mum's to go home, grab food, have a shower you know in between [laughs], I don't know, 'exploits' or whatever. I was a bit of a ragamuffin, and yeah that security was gone so I don't know why I went there but I did.*

Some of these teenage children were reluctant to come to the community and leave their existing friendship groups behind, while for others Centrepoint seemed to represent an exciting new opportunity to live a more 'adult' life. As one participant put it:

*I was sick of the teachers treating me like a kid and I was misbehaving and things. So, so there I had the, you know, instantly I was sort of like, treated like an adult.*

Another explained how the freedom she had experienced during school holidays at Centrepoint provided a compelling reason for her to make the choice to live there permanently:

*Oh I just wanted to get out of [my school] and I just really, I used to have lots of fun at Centrepoint and I just needed the freedom at that stage.*

The experiences of children who had a family base outside were a little different again. Some would visit on weekends or holidays while others moved between longer periods of living with one parent outside of Centrepoint and one within. These participants describe a mixture of 'push and pull' factors drawing them back into the Centrepoint community. On the 'pull' side there was the excitement, the friendships, the sometimes illicit activity provided at Centrepoint while the 'push' factors were provided by on-going difficulties with familial relationships or at school. One described her decision to return to the community as follows:

*My [family members] were writing to me and talking to me on the phone about the drugs – they'd just started it and I was away. And I had a miserable time with my [parent] so I came back.*

For this participant, some personal choice in moving 'back' to the community is evident. But some of our participants wanted to make it quite clear that they were 'just kids' and had never been actively involved in a choice about living at Centrepoint. Concern that their lack of choice be recognised was expressed amongst many of our participants: among some of those who felt that they had generally had a positive experience of the community, those who had been born there, and those who had came later.

There were a variety of reasons participants provided as to why parents – and in some cases the children themselves – decided to come to Centrepoint. Participants reported that the community offered hope or help with social, psychological or economic problems. This is not surprising given that Centrepoint's goals as an 'intentional community' were personal and interpersonal growth and transformation. The adult children we interviewed understood that Centrepoint provided a kind of refuge to parents or teens who were struggling in one way or another with their lives outside. Children also ended up living at the community because of the idealism that drew their parents there. Some participants were, of course, born at the community and thus may have felt a connection with the community, independent of the parent's reasons for being there.

### **3.4 Relationships with parents at Centrepoint**

Almost all of our participants who had come to Centrepoint during their childhood rather than being born there described some change in their relationship with their parent once they were living in the community. Most felt that there was a noticeable shift to a less engaged relationship with their parents once they were living within the community. One participant explained that they went from having a parent walk them to school or make their lunch to a situation in which they had little "one-on-one time" with their parent.

Several of those who were younger when they went to Centrepoint spoke of how they had initially felt rather alone and unprotected in this strange new environment:

*I do remember feeling like a bit of a lost soul, you know, like you kind of, we went there and the adults were committed to their mission which was sort of a therapeutic*

*endeavour or whatever you want to call it. Like it was so alternative that that's what they were doing, that the kids kind of were left to fend for themselves a lot, you know.*

This participant was one of many who attributed their parent's absence to their involvement in personal growth experiences within the community.

One participant described, in a matter of fact way, how the children learnt to take on more responsibility for themselves in the absence of their parents:

*But basic things like, like that people might make your bed for you, or somebody might make your lunch or, you know, it's just like just stuff that happens in normal families and I'm not saying that that's any better or worse but when you add it with... I mean we really were quite neglected as kids. I don't really remember parents really watching us: nobody put me to bed, nobody made my bed. I got myself dressed in the morning. I fought for my clothes.*

Younger children were generally housed together with their parents and other families in the 'long houses' for much of Centrepoin't's history. Some parents apparently did put their children to bed and read them bed-time stories but one participant described how she had no memories of her mother being around when she went to sleep at night:

*I don't know who changed my sheets or, and I don't know who tucked me in at night. I think it was just you went to bed. Yeah. Which sounds terrible. I mean if I think of my own kids and looking at it now but I mean, you just did it.*

Another participant explained how, although she had enjoyed the freedom at the time, she could see in retrospect that the absence of parental supervision sometimes resulted in a lack of safety for the children:

*You know, there was no family unit. It was just... it was a bit of a mess. I remember Mum saying that I [went missing] about 11 o'clock at night once when my [sibling] was supposed to be looking after me and so I think – even though to me that's ideal – it definitely wasn't a good place for my Mum to raise kids.*

One man we interviewed, who had been quite young when he arrived at the community, explained that the lack of parental attention meant that younger children were sometimes vulnerable to bullying:

*[Our] Mums were pretty preoccupied with their personal growth in the community so there wasn't a lot of parental support and we kind of fended for ourselves quite a bit and ended up getting picked on – by the larger families, but the ones who had brothers and sisters and dads and you know it was by the larger families.*

The relative absence of parental supervision also meant that the children not only had to cope alone with conflicts amongst themselves but also with other adults in the community:

*A lot of the time your parents aren't there to protect you. You know, they're off doing their own thing and you can have run-ins with adults.*

One participant told a story she had heard from someone else about a group of young children who had taken some food and run away for several days. Their parents, apparently, never noticed their absence.

Nonetheless, a number of participants assured us that they were always well fed and there were adults that were available to provide help if needed. But in spite of this most described how, when they were younger, they had missed a kind of practical closeness that was connected with regular day-to-day interactions with their parents.

Things were a bit different for the teenagers who, on the whole, seemed to welcome the separation from their parents at the time, although in retrospect this was not always the case. The teenagers mostly lived separately in their own accommodation and there was little direct contact between them and their parents on a daily basis. One participant described how 'easy' it was for a teenager to avoid contact with their parents for long periods of time:

*They had teenage meetings every Sunday, which um, was pretty good and we had set dinner times and all that sort of stuff, so it was quite, it was quite easy not to have parental guidance if you didn't want it. We had to have homework time, and those sorts of things, so as long as you were fitting within the structure, you didn't have to ...need to... liaise or see your direct parent.*

In the words of another:

*It was like being in a holiday camp in that you never saw your parent, I hardly ever saw my Mum. There seemed to be no rules or discipline.*

This participant went on to describe how it took several years for her mother to register that she was not eating properly as she never had dinner with her. Without anyone to monitor her eating she became ill before her poor eating habits were recognised. Another participant explained how at the age of 11 she had been able to ensure that she had virtually no contact with her mother at the community for a number of months after a conflict had developed

between them. Another, who had been at Centrepont as a teenager, spoke of how she had gone off to attend a music festival for three days and, as far as she knew, wasn't missed.

One woman described her frustration at the limited opportunities to talk directly to her parents about issues that concerned her. Ironically the only place she felt she could get to do this was in a psychotherapy context:

*The kids just, go to school, come home, and, and you know, it's not even, they're even encouraged, the children, not to have time with the parents. You know, if you've got a problem, you see someone else. If you – you know – you don't go to your parents. Only if you yell and scream at them for, for some therapeutic reason because they weren't there for you in the past. Or something. So it's quite bizarre.*

In this account we interpret the reference to the 'bizarre' practices of parent-child interaction at Centrepont as clearly signalling the participant's view of her frustration as emerging from absence of the ordinary social expectations of parent-child relationships and the replacement of these with therapeutic alternatives.

From the children's points of view, the unusual parent-child interactions at Centrepont sometimes led to strong emotional responses towards their parents. One participant spoke angrily about how she felt that the belief system at Centrepont interacted with her mother's naturally disinterested and selfish parenting to create what she described as 'neglect'. She told us how the community had generally discouraged children's dependence on their parents and had disapproved of what they understood as pandering to a child's 'neediness'. She believed that this gave her mother license to neglect her parental responsibilities.

Others attributed more benign motivations for their parents' lack of involvement in their lives and evidenced considerable compassion for their parents' needs and circumstances. Several of our participants recognised that their parent had some kind of mental health problem which interfered with their capacity to parent effectively. This moving account from one of our participants shows his awareness of his mother's emotional frailty:

*I probably thought a bit more about how unavailable Mum was for me. Like Mum really moved in there – sounds like she really moved in there in a real state herself and spent probably the first few years fixing herself up. Getting herself emotionally stable enough to even be a Mum. I used to say, 'Mum don't be so guilty about raising us – we're alright'. Whereas now I'm probably a little more 'Ay you were actually pretty vacant'. I don't hate her in any way for that but I'm just a bit more*



*realistic that she was actually not, not even that she shouldn't give herself any grief about it but just that that was the fact. That she probably was, she was very unavailable.*

The beliefs about independence and collective responsibility in the community, the distracting influence of the personal development process and parents own personality characteristics resulted in a situation where children had much less direct parental involvement in their upbringing than is usual in a nuclear family. Many of the participants in this research, including those who had apparently enjoyed their independence at the time, retrospectively expressed some bitterness or sorrow about their lack of contact with their parent at Centrepont. One spoke regretfully about how he could never recapture the lost opportunities for a closer relationship with his mother during his childhood:

*There's a sadness around that sort of, you know, sort of having that time taken away.*

Another participant spoke about the transformation she experienced in her relationship with her mother after they left the community and lived alone. She had always been close to her mother but with the opportunity to spend time alone with her she became aware of the limits of their interaction at Centrepont:

*Yeah, and it was such a difference to suddenly have our Mum to ourselves...but it was definitely a big difference just living with her. You know, when you walk into a dining room filled with hundreds of people for dinner and your friends are at this table and there's family over at that table, sometimes you do sit with family but there's your family sitting with a bunch of other people. You know, it's sort of like having guests every single night or something, I guess, in terms of the communication that you get to actually have with your own family over the dinner table or something like that. There's definitely always other people around.*

While regret was quite common amongst our participants, others emphasised that although they could see problems with this kind of parenting, they felt they had developed a strength and maturity through it that they might not have achieved in a conventional nuclear family:

*I think you... you mature quickly because you've got so many different personalities you have to deal with. And if you do something someone doesn't like and your family half the time aren't around because it's such a big place, you've got to some extent, to fend for yourself.*

While relatively uninvolved parenting seemed to be described as a fairly consistent feature of Centrepont by most participants, it is important to recognise that there were a few exceptions. In spite of the practical and ideological processes in the community that served

to distance children and their parents, a few of those we interviewed described or implied a warm and emotionally close relationship with a parent. Several spoke about seeking comfort from a parent in times of distress while others described how they felt that they had managed Centrepont largely because they felt their parent's support behind them. It did seem though, that in spite of loving connections between some participants and their parents, most relationships were characterised by a relative lack of direct involvement between parent and child that for many of our participants was felt as a form of neglect.

In spite of the practically distant relationships between children and their 'direct' parents, the community itself seemed to give 'parenting' in general and the value of children, a high priority in their belief system. This notion is perhaps most clearly exemplified in the Centrepont belief, as told to us by our participants, that those who have grown up there are 'children of the community'. This belief that the community itself was the 'parent' of its children may have been part of what diluted biological parent's direct accountability to their children for practical care. In compensation, this ideology also seemed to accord a specific and permanent status of a child in relation to Centrepont which was consistent with that of a child in relation to their biological parents. In other words, once a child of Centrepont, always a child of Centrepont. This would entitle a child to the care and financial support of the community and theoretically, allow them the right to return 'home' whenever they needed to, just as you might with a parent. One participant described how an adult defended her right to stay at the community at one point when this was in question:

*Because he kind of saw it as I did, that I was a child of that community; and that community was always designed for the children.*

The combination of a distant relationship with their own parents and the creation of Centrepont itself as the overarching 'parent' may explain why a number of those we interviewed felt so attached to what they clearly saw as their home – often even in spite of difficulties they may have experienced there. One young woman described her strong sense of Centrepont as her home:

*I do find it quite hard going back now. And quite, you know, and quite resentful as well, because of these people that are in my home. I still see it as my home.*

As another participant put it, Centrepont was just like "a bigger family". In the absence of more support from their own parents in the community, the sense of family that Centrepont

community provided was very important for some participants. We noticed this particularly among the accounts of our younger participants who had sometimes been born at the community and had not necessarily had an opportunity to build their own nuclear families since Centrepont had closed. The sense of Centrepont as their lost home goes some way towards explaining these participants' often fervent defence of the community during their interviews.

### **3.5 Relationships with adults at Centrepont**

As in many other areas of experience, participants' accounts of their relationships with adults tended to vary widely. Not surprisingly, those who felt they had been generally badly treated by the community spoke of difficult relationships with adults who they saw as either abusive or unsupportive. Those who emphasised good experiences tended to describe more positive feelings about the adults at Centrepont.

Centrepont's resistance to the parenting roles socially expected of nuclear families meant that parenting functions were to some extent shared by all adults at the community. Sometimes non-nuclear parenting seemed to be a formally recognised arrangement in which, for example, a child would be assigned a particular adult as a surrogate parent if, for some reason, they no longer had a parent at the community:

*I was completely on my own and my stand-in Mum was this woman called [name] and she was a friend of Mum's that Mum had made come and live at the community as well.*

According to one of our participants this arrangement also applied if you had only one parent at the community:

*At the community you, they liked you to have two parents. So if only one of your parents was there you had to kind of adopt or choose someone else to be your other parent so you've kind of got two people you know who you can do homework with, connect with, or whatever because it was such a big place and you could go for a week without seeing your parent.*

The community responsibility for parenting also allowed for other adults to step in when a parent was struggling to cope:

*Some parents that weren't that capable, and or depressed, there was a you know, a woman that was quite depressed, and then the whole community would come in and help out. So that was quite a good thing too, because they didn't lose out.*

As well as these formal arrangements many of our participants reported spontaneously developing some kind of parent-child relationship with one or more adults at the community. Several explicitly used terms like 'father figure' or 'mother figure' or even 'godmother' to describe their special relationships with some adults. Some noted specifically that they used these relationships as role models for their own parenting, where their biological parents were either not available or were less suitable role models. One participant explained how, in the absence of a good male role model in his own family, he carefully identified and sought out men he thought could provide this:

*[Names] were probably the two adults that I thought, two guys that I thought – the only two guys where I would have said, 'Fuck, it'd be awesome if they were my Dads'. Most of the guys I saw in the community who had fathers had pretty dysfunctional relationships with their fathers. I didn't know my Dad. Never did – no idea. But actually I've got an idea now, but we'll see. But I saw just arguments, I saw dramas, it didn't seem sort of very nurturing it seemed pretty harsh whereas these two guys were just there for their kids, you know. I thought, 'You guys are onto it' you know? I was a bit jealous – I was a bit jealous of my mates...who had [Name] for a dad. I thought 'fuck you guys are lucky'...It was just what I was missing so it's just what I noticed. Yeah.*

Another, woman participant, explained similarly that she owed a lot to the adults at Centrepont who had taken her 'under their wing'. She is clear that they made up for what her mother was unable to provide for her:

*They cared for me and very supportive so yeah, in a sense I did get things from other people that I may not have got if I were in a house with my Mum who was miserable.*

Other participants described less intense but still supportive relationships with the network of adults at the community. One described how there always seemed to be an adult available when help was needed:

*I mean there was always adults around who you could ask for help with homework, I mean adults came and checked that you were in your room and doing what you needed to do with homework and if you were all right, so there was always from that point of view, there was always a variety of people that could help.*

Several participants described how they became used to dealing with relationships with adults who were not their parents:

*Like I was really comfortable around adults because we grew up with them and now I find that I'm quite comfortable around adults more than I am around people my own age sometimes just because we grew up with so many.*

Another explained how she learned to adapt her behaviour to manage the variety of adult personalities around her:

*I mean, there's so many adults there that it's, you get along with some of them. There's other ones – you learn. This person's a bit of a grumpy person. Don't bother them in the mornings. I mean, in the same way you would if you lived with family or something. You learn people's characteristics.*

Being exposed to a range of adults, and having the opportunity to experience a variety of relationships with them was sometimes understood as having advantages over the more usual experiences of children in nuclear families. As one participant said:

*It basically gave you the opportunity to be an adult and be involved with adults and not just adults that are your parents. So I remember actually, hearing that the teachers, the primary school teachers were commenting on these kids that were going through from Centrepont, saying at the teacher-parent interviews, saying 'These kids have the most amazing people skills we've ever come across. These children from Centrepont stand out, different from the rest. You know, they know how to speak to an adult and get, you know, maybe get what they want, or have a completely adult conversation.' Yeah. And that always stuck out to me.*

However, in spite of these cross-over relationships between adults and children, a number of our participants referenced some distance between the adult and child groups at the community. One participant acknowledged this directly:

*Because it was almost as if there were two communities there, you know, there was...the teenagers, and all the kids. And then there was the adults. And we had totally different lives, you know. And I think we had totally different experiences of the community.*

Most participants spent relatively less time talking about their experiences with adults and presented their strongest alliance to the 'child' or 'teen' groups at the community. Some talked about the adults as if they were a clearly separate group:

*I think that the adults were doing their own thing...and they were all involved in their own discoveries, breaking the rules and all those kinds of things and they didn't really have a lot of time for kids because they were kind of regressing...So children had a lot of freedom but they didn't have a lot of supervision or care.*

One described how the distance between adults and children had increased with the adults' new interest in drug experimentation when it became more commonly practiced in the community:

*Adults just became sort of preoccupied with their little things that they were up to. We basically got left alone. We weren't really hassled after that.*

The children, however, seem to have remained keen observers of other adult behaviour. In addition to their observation of adult sexual behaviour and drug use (discussed in later sections), they also spoke about how they saw and experienced adult interpersonal behaviour. Centrepont's emphasis on honest and open emotional expression often resulted in fights and arguments between adults in the public areas of the community. One participant described her first impression of the community:

*There was a culture of being open, and expressing your feelings and, and the like, so I remember I don't know who they were now, I mean I'd recognise them but I don't know the names, one person going up and yelling something at this other person just in the middle of everywhere, like a whole lot of people type thing.*

Some of the tensions between adults seemed to centre around the issue of open relationships. One participant compared the relative calm in teenage relationships to those of the adults and said:

*I mean, that's my biggest impression of the adults' relationships was their just, insane amount of drama involved in them, you know.*

Some seemed to keep their sense of distance as they observed adult 'dramas' unfold around them. One described how she watched major divisions develop within the Centrepont community towards the end of its existence. She explains how she remained relatively uninvolved in the conflicts that resulted:

*Because the children never we never, you know we never had any say in the matter, you know. We were just kids. And you'd see fall-outs with your friend's parents and your parents. But to the most I don't think we let it affect us.*

By this account her lack of participation and voice in the community provided some protection from the adult's conflicts because she felt uninvolved. But later this same participant went on to describe how she, like several others, had found these arguments between adults disturbing.

*Fighting is one thing that really, really scares me now because, you know, you would see fights sometimes at the community which were quite, um, when you're young was quite hard, because they're all to an extent your family and really hard to see two people fighting and not really understand that you know, that they've got their issues, but you know they're all your family. So I hate fighting now, like it really upsets me.*

In this case the participants' sense of belonging to the community as a family explained her distress at the 'fighting'. Participants were sharply aware of the factions and hierarchies that governed adults' relationships with one another. Almost all our participants recognised that it was the leader, Bert Potter, who had wielded the most power at Centrepont, not just over them but also over their parents and other adults in the community. They recognised that: "basically everyone just did what Bert said". One young woman described how Bert had chastised her while her father looked on. She had been disappointed that he had not intervened to protect her but also understood that he must "really believe in Bert".

Another participant gave us a fairly comprehensive description of how she saw the relative power of different groups in the community as a series of circles moving outwards from Bert, who was clearly at the centre of the adult relationships. Those with the greatest social distance from him also had the least power, privilege and influence:

*You've got Bert and his quite close ring, of powerful people in the community,...he had a circle of people around him...like his minions or whoever, like the people who he's closest to or had the most power or whatever; and then you had a looser circle than that of his favourites and whatever and then you kind of had more, just people who were more dysfunctional or whatever, not so powerful or whatever, and then you had people, visitors, and people who just liked the community living. But the closer you got to Bert the more you had a say in the working of things and the more cream you got I guess, like the more cream you creamed off the top I suppose: attention, love, sex and probably financially as well.*

Some participants noticed where their own parents fitted into this hierarchy. Some expressed obvious pride at their parent's status while others seemed painfully aware of their parent's low ranking in the community.

Those participants who experienced mistreatment at Centrepont talked about the adult group largely in terms of their control, manipulation and potential for abuse. One describes how she saw the control she was subjected to at Centrepont coming from a powerful sub-group of adults that were close to the leader:

*I mean my Mum was pretty much out of it. I knew she was there, but it wasn't her telling me um, you know, to conform, to stop talking, it was um, people like [Name], it all came from Bert, [Name] or whatever her name was, it was all those women.... They were our mentors, they were our Sunday night therapy leaders, and you know, that how we, that's how they sort of made us toe the line, really.*

For this group of participants, the adults at Centrepont were to be at worst avoided as a potential source of danger or at best seen as unhelpful.

Some of our participants spoke about how they saw adults giving up their own responsibility under Bert Potter's power:

*Where it all got wrong is he got more power, too powerful; there were so many people that were so, so in, I don't know if the word's in love with him, but what he was teaching and doing with people's lives that I think a lot of people let stuff happen to their children.*

For these participants the adults appear passive in relation to the events that children experienced: stuff just happened to their children. But other participants clearly held the adults at Centrepont collectively responsible for abuses they experienced there. Several participants, now all adults themselves, looked back on the behaviour of the adults at Centrepont with anger and amazement. One asked:

*And why do people let that happen? That's what's of interest to me, does that make sense? Why do people do this? How do they get away with doing it? Why do people close down the way that they think? What's really fascinating to me is how reasonable human beings, adults, can suddenly alter their thinking in a way that allows them to normalise abhorrent behaviour. That's fascinating to me. Why are people more comfortable doing nothing when they know something so terribly wrong, than get uncomfortable stopping it?*

One participant told us angrily that she felt that the adults at Centrepont did not understand or take responsibility for their actions there:

*They don't get it. They just don't get it. And these adults still don't get it. They don't get it. They've been so brainwashed.*

Another participant described her sense of disappointment at how the adults at Centrepont had let her down at a time when she needed adult guidance:

*Also you're a teenager, so you've gone through some pretty horrendous developmental processes where you need guidance and you've suddenly had all these people who are messed up in the head telling you how to live, which was*



*completely wrong. But you trusted it. Because you were even though you knew it was a commune and it was wrong and everything that was happening was wrong, you, your whole belief system was as a teenager is to trust an adult.*

But yet another participant tempered her disillusionment with the adults at Centrepont with this statement:

*You imagine living with four hundred people that are all thinking this is so great and slowly introducing more and more. I think it just gradually got out of hand to a point where people didn't see any more what was normal compared to what they were doing...And when everybody around you is doing the same thing it is amazing what can seem normal and I think if all of that hadn't led up to where we were, I don't think people would have flirted with those boundaries as much and, you know, there would have been a bit more understanding of what was and wasn't right and I think a lot of people that were there, they thought they were doing the right thing. They really believed they were helping their children grow up in a way...*

While it is obvious from this analysis that there was considerable variation in the way our participants experienced adults at Centrepont there is perhaps one general conclusion that might be drawn here. The structure of the community meant that its children had opportunities for an unusual degree of exposure to a variety of adults and adult behaviour. This would have been likely to have been maximised in a situation where there were some degrees of social distance between children and their biological parents. This resulted in children being subjected to the vagaries of a range of adult relationships. Where these relationships were helpful and supportive participants recall clear benefits. However, it also meant that children growing up at Centrepont had little protection against adults or adult situations which were challenging or harmful for them.

### **3.6 Relationships with peers at Centrepont**

It almost seemed natural that the corollary of relatively less contact with parents and other adults was the priority ascribed to the relationships amongst the children at the community. The role of the peer group featured strongly in almost all our participants' accounts about their growing up at Centrepont.

By far the majority of our participants reported experiencing very close relationships with their peer group at Centrepont. For some their strongest initial impression of the community related to their awareness of warm connections between the children. One

participant talked about her first memory of being at Centrepont; attending another child's birthday party and being immediately struck by the closeness between the children:

*You know, there was a real sense of family, that these kids weren't only just friends, these kids were bonded, you know. There was more to the relationship that they had... These kids were siblings, just from different blood you know, all their lives together, these children: these kids were born there and they had grown up there and they, you know, they were just as much brothers and sisters as any nuclear family would be.*

Another explained how these relationships were as close as siblings and in some ways better:

*I mean living there was definitely... it created a lot of very close friends because growing up with someone, it's almost like they're a brother or sister but they're not quite so you don't ... I don't know. I guess I have a bit more respect, not respect but you know, you can fight a lot more with brothers and sisters. It's almost like you have that brother and sister bond without having to have all the squabbles and things like that which is good.*

Several participants talked about there being a 'tribe' of children and one explained how easy it was to find her place in this after her arrival:

*So it was an easier transition by a ready-made tribe, and that, you know, there was probably about eight or ten other people sort of around my age. So starting school I had all of these people you know walking down the drive to get the bus with me and showing me what to do and telling me about the school. And I had people to hang out with, and I was doing pretty much the same subjects as some people. So I had people that I lived with that I was also going to school with.*

For several of our participants this sense of connection with their peers has persisted:

*So I think that's one bond that we will always have. Um when you see them with the other children, you, you've all grown up so similar, and you've got, you can't share that with anyone else that you went to school with or anything. That we've got: that strong bond.*

From our participants' accounts it was evident that there was not so much one 'child tribe' to which all children and teenagers belonged. Instead there were several groups that were formed largely along age lines. The 'tribes' that some spoke about would have most likely been made up separately of younger children, older children, young teenagers or older teenagers.

For many of the younger children, there was the delight of there always being “somebody to do something with”. Several described their enjoyment of having almost constant access to playmates:

*So there were lots of like fun times. Like when I was a kid it was really fun – we’d have like spy clubs and stay up late at night and run around so that was like the good part of it um...and also everyone was really close.*

*I think as a child it was just a dream to be able to run off and play with your friends and do whatever you want; it was a really, really fun time.*

Obviously the number of teenagers at the community fluctuated during its history but one described how when he was at Centrepont there were probably about 40 young people between the ages of 13 and 19. Another participant who was there during the later period, in which the community was in the process of being dismantled, said she was with only a small group of teenagers, but even then they were a close group and relied on one another for support.

According to our participants, the teenagers lived alone in an annexe area where there was the opportunity for time away from the adults:

*And as teenagers we were allowed to socialise and have parties and have friends home for weekends and stuff but to drink had to do it down in the little annexe, in our rooms you know kind of go away from people. So we were separate to the adults if you chose to be, um, and because the whole annexe was all teenagers, which I don’t know, it was kind of quite close to the bush, so you could go and be rebellious and smoke cigarettes, and you know, a lot of them grew pot.*

A number of our participants talked about how they enjoyed this automatic access to a comfortable teenage world of social gatherings, music, smoking and drinking. Centrepont was, for a time, a popular party venue that would attract other teens from around the North Shore. When friends from outside visited, one participant described how even they seemed to be drawn into the ‘tribe’:

*It was almost like Centrepont created that bond, once they were involved with us at Centrepont, then they became almost lifelong friends.*

But some of the participants provided alternative explanations for the closeness that sometimes developed between the children or teens at Centrepont. One suggested that the

bonds developed partly as a necessary way of offering one another support under challenging circumstances. As she put it:

*I felt that there was a certain amount of solidarity amongst my friends that was strengthened by the fact that we were struggling with abuse at the same time and that we were in an environment that in some ways was unsafe for us – that that actually helped to kind of pull us together in a way.*

Another participant conjured up a rather more sinister image by talking about the “Lord of the flies” children, using the novel by William Golding in which a group of children ran wild without the control of adults and eventually turned, violently, on one of their own as a metaphor for peer relationships at Centrepont.

Although most of our participants emphasised unity within the child groups, a few had clearly had quite different experiences. Some spoke about how they had been victim to some kind of bullying in the child groups. One described predominantly feeling like an “outcast” during his childhood. He described how he was picked on by other children so badly that he ended up avoiding them when he could and being in conflict with them if he couldn’t. Another participant also described what she called “a lot of bullying” that she attributed to being young and the fact that she was relatively new to the community:

*But the kids kind of had to fend for themselves around that time because we were new we, I felt, and I suppose my age, I felt like I was picked on a lot.*

While there were sometimes physical fights between the boys, the girls tended to employ more subtle forms of social ostracism. One described how she found her age group quite factionalised:

*it was kind of the stuff that you went through at school with your little cliques groups except it was, you were in closer quarters.*

As this participant points out, while this kind of bullying or ostracism may be no different to what you would find at any school, it was distinguished by the fact that these children were mainly living with one another on an on-going basis and there was often little adult mediation. One participant described relationships at Centrepont as a “social pressure cooker”. His comment refers to all relationships at Centrepont rather than just those between the children, but might easily apply here too:

*This is all the time, continuous – 24 hours a day pressure cooker...It was all the time, it was 24/7. It was absolute pressure cooker. Whereas everybody else would go back to the safe-haven of their home – ‘whew that was a big day at the office, man I fucking, some guy yelled at me’ – this was happening 24/7...It was your whole life, all the time.*

For a small number of participants the experience of bullying or social isolation was more than a transient dynamic in the child group. Amongst the participants who described being severely abused there seemed to have been an almost continuous experience of social isolation. As one participant explained, this may have been because they became preoccupied with trying to guard themselves against harm.

*It was like no-one, it was really we, very much like looking after ourselves. Protecting ourselves, I felt. It wasn't, like we weren't unified, it wasn't a unity. It wasn't like we, we were looking after each other, we were just like looking out for ourselves, because you know, you had to protect yourself all the time.*

Because of the age defined nature of most of the social groups, sibling relationships did not on the whole seem to feature strongly in the day-to-day lives of our participants. In many cases siblings appeared to have inhabited quite different social circles and our participants were not entirely sure about how their experiences might have differed from their own.

In a few instances though, an older sibling had taken on the role of supporting, and sometimes even parenting younger siblings. This may have been partly because parents were less available to the younger children and an older brother or sister stepped into the breach. One participant spoke about two younger sisters as ‘daughters’, explaining that he saw himself clearly as a primary parent to them. Another woman described reluctantly taking on this role in relation to her much younger sister because she felt that her mother was unable to parent effectively.

Another participant described how she had been protected and supported by an older sibling, until she left Centrepont:

*And my [sibling], I think around that time. [Sibling] used to be quite supportive of me because [sibling] knew that I was going through the worst of it because of being that much older...[Sibling] was the one, like looking after me all the time, so [sibling] used to be like the Mum, because my Mum wasn't very good at being a Mum anyway.*

Some of the older children were also, it seemed, involved in taking care of younger children that weren't their siblings. One described how this had helped her and her friends to feel more confident about their ability to manage children:

*You grow up seeing children being born, you know, we're little kids and we're looking after other little kids you know, because you know, it was quite easy.*

For the majority of our participants, their relationships with the other children at Centrepont appeared to be their strongest point of reference during their childhood. While their parents were engaged in self-exploration and experimentation, they appeared to have relied heavily on one another for support and companionship. With on-going contact and little parental supervision these peer relationships had the potential to impact significantly on the lives of our participants as they grew up. For most of our participants these relationships were primarily experienced as positive, both warm and lasting, but a few experienced some difficulties with bullying and ostracism. While it may be that challenging circumstances at the community served to draw the child group closer together for support, it may have been difficult for those most affected by abuse to make use of this resource and, as a result, their experience of abuse was compounded by social isolation.

### **3.7 Rules and discipline at Centrepont**

Most of our participants emphasised the lack of formal 'rules' at Centrepont and the freedom that this provided for both children and teenagers:

*I just remember you know it was just a place where me and my friends were able to basically do whatever we wanted.*

Most spoke about how they enjoyed the independence this allowed:

*[It] was a fabulous childhood, I was free. I didn't have to do anything.*

One participant nostalgically recalled how she and her group of friends would just wander down to Albany Village to buy chips in the evening if they chose to without telling anyone where they were going. This kind of independence was enormously attractive to teenagers:

*Just having the freedom to take those adventures and if you weren't there, you felt like you were missing out on a lot of – we had a lot of kids [who] used to run away from home and end up there because that's where they wanted to be.*

The general ethos of the community also seemed to work against individual parents trying to enforce some discipline with their children. One participant explained how her parent had been advised by the community to allow her freedom. She described how when she had first come to live permanently at Centrepont as a young teenager her parent had tried to establish some ground rules for her. But she explained firmly that this wasn't appropriate in the community. She explained:

*'[Parent], I'm just going to do it my way.' I was so matter of fact. '[Parent], I'm going to do it my way. I'm not going to have a bedtime. I'll go to bed when I need to go to bed and if it doesn't work let's review it.' [Parent] said 'okay' and it was fine and that's how we left it.*

Although a number of our participants remembered their freedom at Centrepont with wistful appreciation, others felt that although they might have enjoyed it then, they could see problems with the absence of discipline. One spoke about how she felt it wasn't safe to give so much freedom to children.

*I mean I don't agree with that that's a good way to raise a family and I don't, like, if I was a parent I definitely wouldn't want my children in that situation. I mean there's just too much worry I think about your young children being off being able to run off by themselves do whatever they want without any, any parental supervision, or any – there was just, there were no rules, there was no safety. So as a parent I don't think I would like my children in that situation even though it was fun.*

Another participant, who spoke from her experience as a teenager, acknowledged that it provided opportunities for young people to get into trouble:

*So there wasn't much in the way of discipline or boundaries or curfews or that kind of stuff. So if you wanted to go off the rails you could go off the rails quite easily. There were people who would take you there and back.*

Not all participants recalled being brought safely back from their experiences 'off the rails'. Several participants implied that they had lost their way with the lack of boundaries for their behaviour at a time when they needed them:

*...and I just don't feel like I really got that because of the period I spent there was almost like, were probably like, the teenage years I went off the rails instead of being in a family unit and having discipline, and values exploration if you will, that kind of thing. It was kind of like we got left to run wild a little bit.*

Several participants spoke about how they became ‘rebels’ at Centrepont, deliberately flouting the authority of the community. For some this attitude ensured a degree of acceptance in particular teenage sub-groups within the community. One participant described how she decided to be a part of a rebellious group. As she put it:

*I'll be naughtier and do more, do worse things than anyone else and that's kind of how I suppose I fitted in, in some ways.*

Another participant who had also seen herself as a rebel explained that her behaviour had been a way of trying to assert her own identity as separate from the community and that this had been important for her. In a sense, rebelliousness offered the opportunity for separation from the community and in some cases participants spoke of it as leading to their leaving the community.

There were participants who felt that the lack of formal rules in the community had provided the opportunity to develop their own self-discipline and responsibility. One spoke about how she felt that it was often those who had experienced the most restrictions on their freedom growing up that tended to overreact to later freedom. She felt that Centrepont provided an ideal opportunity for young people to experience freedom in a generally safe environment:

*Just the freedom aye, just that independence to be your own person and that's what a lot of people don't get and I think that's why people grow up a little bit haywire once they do get out there and suddenly they're free and they do crazy stuff like what a lot of teenagers are doing: racing cars and, you know, killing themselves. There's so much suicide in New Zealand and probably those kids didn't get independence, you know.*

Another of our participants saw her rebellious behaviour as being channelled more appropriately within the safety of the Centrepont community:

*It gave me the ability to get on with the things that normal 15 year olds do. Like, get School C and your driver's licence and all that, but at the same time give me the freedom to to...feel like the rebellion's still there. So I guess that was a, almost a safe way to rebel. Or to continue to rebelling without having significant cons, having consequences that wouldn't involve the police.*

In spite of the overwhelming consensus amongst our participants that Centrepont allowed an unusual degree of freedom to its children and adolescents, a number spoke about how there were still some routines and expectations that were designed to facilitate appropriate



behaviour at the community. There were, for example, specific homework times and chores that people were expected to contribute to. One participant described feeling the absence of adult supervision in some areas but knowing that there was a basic schedule they were expected to follow:

*You were, oh, well I remember feeling a bit left out a bit, a bit unsupported I guess in some ways. In other ways I was very supported. Homework time was seven o'clock, there were routines, Saturday morning was a working bee. Stuff that kids do well with; Saturday morning sport; Friday night a big list went up for the working bee. You knew you had a dishes night once a week.*

One participant told us that in the community's hey day there would have been 300-400 people there helping with a working bee on a Saturday and the children and teenagers would have been expected to join in. Only a sporting fixture counted as a reasonable excuse to absent yourself:

*And ...ah... we also, every Saturday morning was a working bee, which was, everyone go and do clean the windows, go and do the toilets you know and all of that sort of stuff. Do the grounds, and all the gardens, and all that sort of thing. And it was really great, worked really well and everyone got stuck in and had a really good time.*

In spite of the relative lack of rules for children, there was evidence that serious misdemeanours were punished by the community. One man spoke about how, in the early days of the community, he had been given a month long punishment task after an incident of misbehaviour. This kind of experience was not, however, reported by participants who were at Centrepoint during later periods so it was possibly less prevalent in the later years of the community.

A very small number of participants spoke about how they had experienced aggressive discipline in response to misbehaviour. One described how he had been 'disciplined' by one of the community elders:

*He came around the corner with like, this big bit of wood, like a bit of dowel or a cane or something and thrashed this kid in front of me and then thrashed me with this bit of stick and the thing like, broke across my back, or the back of my legs or something and I always sort of felt let down, you know, by my parents. I thought that they should, I thought they should have been there to prevent that sort of thing.*

But in spite of a few reported incidents of corporal punishment and the establishment of basic routines there did seem on the whole to be rather fewer restrictions on children and

teenagers than might be found in a more usual family situation. Nonetheless, many of our participants described alternative ways that children and teenagers were made to ‘tow the line’ or ‘conform’. These tactics ranged from open meetings and communal decision making to individual ‘feedback’ on undesirable behaviour.

Open meetings, for example, would be held to determine decisions related to a teenager’s schooling. Several participants spoke about how it was decided whether or not they would be allowed to continue their college education. They were apparently required to place their school report on the public notice board for general scrutiny before a communal meeting to discuss it. During the meeting all community members would be invited to offer an opinion on whether they felt that Centrepont should continue to support a particular teenager to finish their schooling. Some of our participants whose further schooling had not been supported spoke angrily about how they felt the community meeting had been used as an opportunity for people to voice their own personal issues about them rather than as part of a reasonable decision making process:

*What the problem was you had to ask the whole community. You had to come to a meeting and ask 260 adults if they would support you at school. Now the problem with that of course is that all the emotional baggage comes out, doesn’t it? You’re sitting there asking a simple question: ‘Can I please go back to school next year, will you support my school fees?’ And suddenly you get 260 people! One will put their hand up: ‘Well I haven’t seen you doing much work around the place the last six months and I don’t really support you going back’ and someone else puts their hand up: ‘Yeah I just think you’re a little shit and I don’t’ – know what I mean? So you’d just get this kind of random feedback. A lot of it was more ‘clearing and sharing’ than actual you know good reasons why not to go back to school. So I thought that was pretty harsh, emotionally, at that age for a kid to get pounded with all these reasons why they shouldn’t go back to school. And I think, at 16 years old you should just bloody go back to school.*

Similar meetings also seem to have been held in response to serious misbehaviour, such as when a community member had been caught stealing food or money from Centrepont or bringing in disruptive visitors. One described how she had felt especially uncomfortable about her mother ‘copping flak’ in an open meeting for her daughter’s rebellious behaviour at the community.

Our participants described how certain kinds of behaviour were also discouraged through the ‘feedback’ practices that were used at Centrepont both in and outside of formal therapy groups. ‘Feedback’ was a process in which any member of the community could approach

you and tell you what they thought of your behaviour – and you would have to listen to them. One participant explained how she had experienced this as a powerful form of behaviour control:

*There was thing called 'feedback' where someone was allowed to walk up to you and they were allowed to say exactly what they wanted – anything that they wanted. You weren't allowed to reply – you had to be quiet, be silent, and just hear what they were saying; it was about hearing what, hearing what other people said and if you then wanted to respond you had to do it at a later point.*

Another participant explained how they might be given feedback by an adult at any time and she felt this was just a way that the adults could justify venting their anger at the teenagers. Most of the participants who spoke about 'feedback' seemed to view it as judgemental rather than helpful. As one put it, it was just a way of "putting people down".

The generally accepted process of giving 'feedback' seemed to reach a pinnacle in what was sometimes called 'hierarchies': a practice in which people were ranked as valuable in relation to each other on the basis of others' judgements of their behaviour. We heard about this practice from quite a number of our participants on whom it had had a considerable impact. Several described how it worked:

*You know, you'd get all the kids would be in the lounge in a line, and all the adults would be in the lounge, and you'd take turns and they'd come and put you in the hierarchy determined by your behaviour, or whatever, you or what they thought of you or you know, all of that sort of thing.*

*But they had a meeting, they were doing these things round about that time called 'hierarchies' where you'd, say it was a teenage hierarchy you'd stand there and you'd be one-to-twenty and you'd get moved up, physically moved up and down the line by people saying 'I'm going to move you down three spaces because you were really mean to my daughter the other day and you called her a name' and blah blah blah. It was horrible! And you got moved up and down because of what people thought of you.*

'Hierarchies' was described by many as being shaming and humiliating both for themselves and also for others.

The same participant quoted above spoke about her impression that while behaviour wasn't necessarily strongly regulated by rules she described practices that she identified as 'mind-control':

*So it wasn't like a normal childhood at all because there weren't as many restrictions and discipline...but on the other side of the coin there was lots of unpleasant stuff about the whole, we called them the 'thought police' and they'd say: 'What's really going on?' and you'd say: 'Oh I don't know' and they'd say: 'Well if you did know, what would it be?' They'd really try and get in there, get into your head. All the time. And it wasn't just in the meetings and in the groups, it was all the time.*

Other participants also spoke about how they experienced more subtle forms of control through manipulation and quite a number spoke about experiencing a strong pressure to conform to the ideals and values of the community:

*Because it was easier to fit in than to, and go along with it, than to buck the system...because basically if you did that, then Bert would come down on you, the whole community would abuse you and pull you into line so well, you know, or threaten you with – I got threatened with being sent to Borstal if I didn't conform to the idealistic, their ideologies whatever was going on there.*

For others this pressure was more subtle, but still experienced as compelling. One young woman described how she went from being a rebel at first to becoming more compliant in response to the communal affirmation she received for 'good' behaviour:

*The more I conformed to what they wanted me to be the more praise I got. And I guess that was the first time I kind of got good attention my whole life.*

On the surface it would seem that Centrepont had relatively few restrictions on the behaviour of children and adolescents beyond an expectation of involvement in basic chores, including homework. For some participants this absence of rules provided a highly valued experience of freedom, for others it may have provided less structure than they needed. In spite of the apparent freedom for the children of Centrepont, though, some participants reflected on a variety of social, emotional and psychological strategies that were used to control their behaviour. These included strategies like community decision making, constant and often public 'feedback' on their behaviour or inquisition that were effective through collective pressure and social shaming.

### **3.8 Recreation/Activities for children at Centrepont**

It appeared from several of our participants that, at some points in the history of Centrepont, there had been considerable efforts made to keep the children entertained and

active. Several spoke about a programme of day trips which ran for children during the school holidays:

*We always had a school holiday programme which was set up which was basically a way of keeping us all entertained during the holidays. There would always be a morning and an afternoon activity and those sorts of activities would range from someone supervising us all doing some baking – you’d choose what to bake and you know, everyone, and there would be two or three parents who would volunteer to do that; we had like a bonfire day sometimes where we would all build bonfires and cook marshmallows on the fires or something like that; going to the movies or the hot pools or something like that.*

*Yeah. We would go on things like snow trips. Every school holidays there was a programme set up for the kids. It was very organised. Yeah. There was a bus trip somewhere different every day of the school holidays. In the prime - I mean that all fizzled out when the whole separation thing happened because a lot of the assets, the bus got sold, stuff like that, but we used to go on snow trips and all sorts of cool things.*

In the main, though, the recreational activities our participants described had been initiated by the children themselves. Often left to their own devices, they seem to have played mostly with one another, delighting in the child friendly property which included the swimming pool, trampolines, a playground, streams and acres of bush. Many recalled nostalgic memories of playing in this environment, described by several as being like a continuous ‘holiday camp’:

*Well they had a massive pool so we’d go and spend hours in the pool. We had a really, we used to play, like, mermaid games and Barbie games and Baywatch games.*

*I remember, like, a lot of good times, a lot of just playing round with my friends, the other kids. You know, we did, we thought we were like, the luckiest kids in the world, you know, to have that kind of freedom. It was pretty amazing. We could, like go romping round in the bush or go play tennis, if we wanted to go to the pools it would be like just do whatever you wanted whenever you wanted and it felt like we lived in this mansion.*

*Oh, playing in the sandpits and...yeah, making tree huts and riding down the river when it rained in the winter – on tyres.*

Another participant captured a child’s perspective on the delights of having the perpetual ‘sleepovers’ the communal living arrangements easily allowed:

*You’d have sleepovers but it would be every day, you know, you’d go, you know, sleep over at someone else.*

In this kind of environment it seemed that there was ample opportunity for practical jokes and other mischief, as described by a number of participants.

Teenagers at Centrepont were free to develop their own forms of recreation. At one point they had a band at the community and would 'hang out' late at night listening to them.

Centrepont teenagers were often joined by others from outside of the community:

*So I guess we were always as a group quite sociable with other people not from the, the community, Um I probably individually was the least likely. And we used to because they had a band, and they used to throw parties, and half the North Shore would turn up and you know, it was... yeah. [laughs] Pretty crazy, yeah.*

Some participants who were teenagers at Centrepont described how they adjusted their activities to suit their own interests and preoccupations. Some pursued fairly typical teenage interests:

*So I'd either be wagging down at the bush having a smoke with a mate or wagging at friends' places that had computers like myself. They were kind of the two things that I'd do.*

*Yeah. So we were always running round sneaking, smoking cigarettes, you know, like in people's huts and bedrooms. That was more of a cheap thrill than anything else. Yeah.*

One participant captured her sense of the fun the community offered to young people with perhaps some irony:

*It was great. As a teenager – I mean if it wasn't for the abuse, it was so cool. It was kind of like having this constant summer holiday really. You'd go out there and have this weekend together with a bunch of mates, with so much freedom that most of our friends outside didn't have.*

Some of the recreational activities of the community seemed to cut across the different age groups to include children, teenagers and adults. A number of our participants wistfully recalled winter evenings spent in front of the big communal fireplace:

*[I remember] the big fires in the lounge, and everyone sitting around talking, and music playing, and um, you know, winter was always very cosy there.*

*It was just a nice sort of so, so at, at um winter time there'd be all these cushions around the open fireplace, and we'd sit round cuddling and, and different people would arrive in from going out, you know coming in from work or, or ah, from a*

*movie, or you know, just coming past from their bedroom or something. And so you'd sit around the fire cuddling and a conversation would change constantly as the people came through.*

In summer the community would gather to play games together and one participant described how he enjoyed the experience of being able to choose to be a part of communal life or, less frequently in his case, to be alone:

*All summer there'd be a volleyball net out and off the dining area and we'd just sort of, you know, people would come and go and you'd just be playing volleyball after dinner, and, and before dinner and or there'd be tennis games or soccer games, or there'd be ping pong. So there'd be, yeah, there, there's just constantly people around and so you could choose what you felt like, if you felt like being on your own you'd could be up in your room.*

Some described how even ordinary activities like chores could become fun when they were done communally.

*[It was] amazing, it was we'd all get our dishes slot, on the, once a week, and we used to have teams, and we used to have competitions, who could do the dishes the quickest. And shit like that. And we'd have like be in the big dining room and everything like that...Yeah, yeah, and freeing up all that and you'd have turns at doing all the different jobs, like sweeping the floors and doing the tables, and chairs. And doing the dishes...It was really nice, yeah. It was very fun, yeah.*

While almost all those participants who spoke about the recreational aspects of Centrepont spoke positively about their experience, we noted, significantly, that those participants who described predominantly negative experiences at Centrepont tended not to comment on these aspects of the community at all. One participant who had a very difficult time at Centrepont, however, gave us some insights into the way that she felt subtly pressured to participate in communal activities in spite of her anger and resentment at her treatment there. She described how when she got angry with the elders of the community she could say to herself:

*Well 'fuck you, fucking cunt.' But that only lasted so long. You've still got to go to sleep, you've still got to make ...you've still got to survive dinner, you've still got to live in the place, got to find somewhere to sit: is it going to be in the lounge? Is it going to be in your tiny little hovel bedroom?*

While not all participants spoke about the recreational life of the community, those who did offered a wistfully positive set of memories about an environment that in many ways

seemed to offer an ideal playground for children and teens. This may, however, have had limited import for those whose traumatic experiences forced their attention elsewhere.

### **3.9 Therapy and the culture of personal growth at Centrepont**

As Centrepont was developed as a ‘therapeutic community’ it is not surprising that many of our participants spoke about their awareness or involvement in various forms of therapy and personal growth experiences.

It seemed from our interviews that in the initial stages of the development of the community, only adults participated directly in therapeutic processes. One participant who recalled the earliest days of Centrepont, when it was still located at its Gillies Avenue site, assumed he probably just “ran around” with other children while the adults did their “personal growth thing”. Most of our participants who had been involved from these early days spoke about how their parents had visited the community initially to attend the therapy groups it offered. When they accompanied their parents, they generally played with the other children there. Some believed that their parents had been attending groups aimed at helping them with their relationships and one told us that Bert Potter had been considered an expert on therapy with couples who were dealing with divorce. Another participant spoke about how she remembered first visiting Centrepont at the Albany site while her mother attended on the weekend. A few of our participants had parents who were counsellors, psychotherapists or psychologists who had presumably come to the community specifically to develop its therapeutic potential.

But while the children were initially just observers of adult involvement in therapy, they seemed to have quickly become drawn more substantially into various forms of therapeutic activity. The community integrated a personal growth ethos into its everyday functioning, and it seems that most of our participants were aware of, and part of, these practices at some points during their time at Centrepont. Our participants spoke about specific groups for teenagers, for children, for families and for couples as well as those for adults.

One of our participants who seemed to have good background knowledge of the philosophy of the community explained how the belief system had drawn from the ‘Encounter



Movement' in the United States and had then been developed organically amongst the leadership of the community:

*So people like [Names] went overseas and did training workshops with some of the 'known' sort of people: Fritz Perls and whole lot of things like that, and there were a number of institutes that were working that were influential. And then they'd go and do those, they'd come back, they'd kind of do therapy with each other and they'd build skills and you know all that sort of thing. So yeah psychotherapists sort of trained themselves really which understandably isn't...[laughs]...it creates potential for problems and then yeah. They were experimenting a lot at Centrepont with trying out a lot of stuff particularly around group work, working in groups and dynamics and how to create change and all that sort of stuff, all that personal development – what's the word – self-actualisation sort of stuff.*

While other participants may have been less aware of the philosophical background that informed the community's practices, several were able to provide us with clear descriptions of how they understood its basic ideology:

*There was definitely a culture and a way of thinking and kind of it was all under the umbrella of spirituality and doing something different, this different approach to living and, as a kid, while you're just going along and doing your thing you also soak that up. While there were things that I disagreed with right from a very young girl, thank God, there were other things that just seeped in like 'people aren't really happy in society' and 'people particularly in relationships aren't happy because how could they be', you know? 'They're not communicating, they're monogamous'. I mean they must be really unhappy and they are and that's why they come to places like this to find their loving and' – and aspects of that perhaps are true because people found a way to communicate and be close to people and actually be real.*

A number of our participants spoke about how they felt that the basic ideas on which Centrepont was founded were good ones – but many felt that the purity of these beliefs had been lost along the way. Our participants described a communal ideology that was based on honest and direct communication and the breaking down of societal values that prevented people from being open with one another:

*You know, and letting down barriers, and talk, talking and being communicative without being angry, and you know, using non-violent communication. And so, I do think that those, the founding principles from that point of view are, have been valuable.*

There seemed to be a belief within the community that dropping the fear and boundaries that 'artificially' divided people from one another would allow people to get in touch with their 'loving' side. One participant who had experienced sexual abuse offered her somewhat

jaded opinion on how the challenges to inter-personal boundaries created an atmosphere in which all kinds of closeness including physical contact was prized:

*It was kind of more of his whole thing about 'getting in touch with your loving', lowering the boundaries that exist between other people. And it fucking lowered the boundaries alright.... You know there was already this Centrepont thing of, this whole intimacy thing which was that people needed – they got you quite physically dependent – that people needed a certain amount of physical intimacy and touching.... It's like, you had to, in the Saturday meetings you had to, they were always calling you into the meetings and you had to cuddle with, I don't know, I don't know the word 'had to', [but] you just felt you had to, you just felt like there was an expectation.*

There were a number of strategies that had been used to further the therapeutic aims of the community. Most of our participants emphasised their experiences in the psychotherapy groups that appeared to form the backbone of the Centrepont ethos.

One participant spoke about the children's groups at length. He recalled that the 'kids groups' would be split into two groups, one for boys and one for girls although there were also some adults present. These groups had included what he called normal 'soul searching' exercises as well as exercises particularly targeted at the children's sexuality. He had found these experiences very confronting and recalled one embarrassing occasion on which he had been made to participate in an exercise apparently intended to make children feel more comfortable about their own bodies:

*I remember, you know, sort of stripping down and sort of standing in the mirror and doing something about your...your body [laughs]. Look I guess you kind of laughed at the time as well and sort of made light of it. You know, if I look back now, I think, sort of highly inappropriate really. I don't really understand why a ten year old would sort of need to do something like that.*

He also recalled how these groups, might have included massage exercises and discussions about masturbation and, if it were a 'boys' group' they would probably have brought a woman in and "she probably would have been naked or something like that".

Our interviews suggested that specific groups for teenagers may have been developed before those for younger children. One participant told us that the cut-off age for entry into the teenage therapy group had been 13 – but that she had been allowed in early because she was sexually active. Another participant told us that there was usually only one of these groups a year for teenagers. They would last for a weekend, during which the teens would

not be allowed out of the group area. Unlike the children's group, the teenage group, would apparently include both boys and girls together and would target issues like relationships, sexuality and 'feedback' aimed at resolving conflicts or addressing personal development.

One participant explained her understanding of the therapy groups as a place where people could tell you what they thought of you quite openly. Although this was supposedly "a safe environment" she felt that this was still very challenging for teenagers to be confronted in this way:

*But it's, that's quite full on for a 15 year old to...to deal with, when you think you've, when you're really just going through a normal rebellion stage, you know? The hormones are raging and the world's just, you know everything, because at 15, you know, you know absolutely everything there is to know.*

This participant also explained how she dealt with what she clearly experienced as an unwelcome pressure to discuss her 'issues'. She described herself as having learned to 'play the game' and go along with what was required. She reported her observation that "some teenagers, well really got into it, and were like: 'We're really upset because...' or whatever." But she remained sceptical: "I was like 'shut up and get on with it'".

Several participants spoke about how they had found these groups emotionally confronting. One participant explained how he as a teenager had been shy and had been daunted at the demand to participate in psycho-drama exercises. Although he also felt the groups were valuable he became nervous at each event:

*But I was always anxious about going into those things and it was always, always came out feeling like a survivor, you know, at the other end. But also, you know, also quite good. I would sort of have a nervous good time as well.*

But he felt that in spite of his anxiety about groups, they may have helped him to feel more comfortable with people. He believes that as a shy and timid child he might have had less confidence if he had grown up alone in "a little house".

Others participants seemed to have found this kind of emotional confrontation more destructive. One explained how she had felt that she was an unpopular member of the community and that the groups provided the opportunity for others to attack and undermine her; an experience which she felt left her with little confidence in herself. She felt that this

process was intentionally designed to break people down so that they could be rebuilt into what Centrepont ‘wanted them to be’.

Several participants described how they had been encouraged to engage in sexually challenging behaviour as part of the teen group. One man described exercises which were particularly targeted to address sexual relationships:

*There was an exercise at one point, you know: pick your first choice, you know, person for the evening. But even if there wasn't anything like that, there was always some sort of mix and match sort of thing going on sort of anyhow. I remember they did a teenage boys – I think they did a teenage girls one as well – so it was just separate and they basically asked who your first and second sort of picks and then, you know, and so then we all sort of ended up in this room and then basically in came a matching number of women and they went [click, click, click, click] and paired us all off and that was, and that was, I think that might have just been an evening. I'm not sure – an evening or a night.*

But while this participant had been able to find some value in these kinds of experiences, another described how he had felt traumatised about being made to expose his body during a teen group. He described an exercise similar to that which had been described by another participant as taking place within a child group. In his case this took place with “56 teenagers” of both sexes watching:

*And it was stand naked in front of a mirror in front of all your mates. At fucking [my age]. And say 10 good things you liked about your body. So in a room this size, with no windows, big fucking double mirror on that wall and you strip off and you stand in front of the mirror and you look at yourself and you take the time to say 10 things that you like about yourself.*

He described how a couple of the girls “broke down in tears”. He didn’t want to do it, largely because he was embarrassed and unconfident about his body, but felt pressured:

*When I stood up to do it I felt pressured I felt that kind of thing of ‘come on, everyone’s doing it! Fuck, are they?’ It was pretty hard yakka. I still remember it to this day and felt it was a bit over the top.*

When he tried to resist the adults told him that this would help him get over his self-dislike:

*No, no, we know what it’s about and this is going to break you through that you know ‘this is going to help you; we’re trying to get you past this part of not liking yourself’.*

Although he felt sorrier for the girls who he thought might have felt more exposed during this exercise he clearly still felt angry about what had happened:

*Yeah at that age – just into puberty. It's all just happening. Yeah it was pretty scary. Pretty scary. So – and I don't, I can't look back and see how that helped me at all!*

Some participants described observing and taking part in explicitly sexual exercises. One spoke about how they watched people masturbate and masturbating in front of others and being told that if they didn't take part they would land up “fucked human beings like their parents”. Another spoke about how she had become “bizarrely” desensitised to sexual behaviour in a group setting:

*You'd be in group therapy and they would always turn around to sex and how you please people and then the next minute a couple of the group leaders would be doing a demonstration of how you pleasure each other.*

Some of our participants also talked about being involved in ‘family groups’ although it wasn't altogether clear what the purpose of these were. Some of these groups apparently lasted for seven days and one participant described how they weren't allowed to leave the room during this time. Group participants were expected to use the bucket in the corner as a toilet and food was bought in for them. This participant cried as she told us how she had experienced the structure of these groups, the isolation and the sleep deprivation as a kind of torture.

One participant also explained that she believed that so-called ‘therapeutic insights’ obtained through cathartic group processes were also used to instil compliance in people. Bert would apparently tell people they would get depressed or get cancer because of ‘emotional blocks’ if they did not take part in some group activity. This participant believed that Bert would use his knowledge of people's insecurities to get them to comply.

Some of our participants also mentioned individual counselling occurring at Centrepont and certainly it appeared that there were counsellors working there. This did not however feature strongly in any of our participants' accounts of their experiences at the community, although one person mentioned, in passing, that it was common for counsellors to be having sex with their clients at the community. It was, however, not clear whether they were referring to individual or group counsellors in this instance.

In addition to therapy groups and counselling, some of our participants also described how community members were also assigned particular ‘tasks’ to assist their personal development. Several participants spoke about how people might be given therapeutic tasks to help them push through their fears. Another explained how she believed that these tasks were used specifically to undermine and ‘destabilise’ people. This participant, who, as a pre-teen, had herself been given the task of sleeping with a senior member of the community every day for a week, offered her perspective on how this fitted in with the therapeutic aims of the community:

*He would give you a task and the task was structured to basically the whole thing worked on destabilising your instinct. So separating your instinct from your brain and landing you in a place of chaos where you were not really able to make choices and certainly not to trust your instinct.*

It is worth noting that participants, who represented the ‘younger generation’ of Centrepont, seemed to comment less on therapy groups as a significant part of their experience. One slightly older participant told us that during his time at the community the teenagers had protested against the ‘confrontational’ nature of some of the therapeutic practices and it may be that the combination of this and the imprisonment of some of the leaders of the community, including Bert Potter, resulted in a change to some of the practices described above during the later years of Centrepont.

According to our participants the therapeutic aims of Centrepont were an important part of their experiences – and particularly those experiences that took place in specifically designed ‘group therapy’. While therapeutic activities seemed to be directed towards developing emotional honesty and openness between people, in practice they seemed to prioritise open sexual exploration. Our interviews suggested that while several of our participants felt that they could see the value in the therapeutic ethos of Centrepont, most found specific therapeutic activities, at the very least, anxiety provoking and, in some instances, very distressing.

### **3.10 Bodies and sexuality at Centrepont**

Centrepont’s emphasis on emotional and physical closeness appeared to have fostered a culture of openness around both nudity and sexuality. The physical arrangements at Centrepont were apparently designed to allow for this. We were told by our participants

about communal sleep arrangements which resulted in adults and children from different families sleeping together. With one exception, none of the toilets at Centrepoint had doors. Showering was also a communal affair and was, according to one of our participants, an important opportunity for 'bonding' with other community members. Together with this, open acceptance of bodily functions and nudity, free sexual expression and exploration was actively encouraged.

Several participants spoke about what they understood to be the philosophies of Centrepoint in relation to sex and sexuality. One of our participants passed on an explanation she had been given for the community's resistance to what they saw as an unhealthy attitude to sex in general society:

*And I think the simple way [Name] explained it to me was that society is how, how they always view it, is so closed off when it comes to sex, in the sense of there's affairs, there's rape, there's husbands visiting prostitutes that he said, they always saw it as sex had been turned into this dirty, taboo, type of thing. And society had turned it that way. And so one of the main aspects of Centrepoint is that they wanted to that, to be completely normal, completely open, you know.*

Another participant offered an empathic explanation of how her parents' generation may have chosen to base Centrepoint around these kinds of beliefs:

*There, was a bunch of people that didn't learn about sex until they were in their twenties, you know. They thought that children were grown on trees or things like that and maybe had a few really bad life experiences because of those sorts of things and thought that they were giving their children, you know, and I mean here I'm talking about having sex in front of children and things and I think that's where my Mum sort of thought maybe that's not a bad thing, that sex is natural.*

In addition to encouraging a more open attitude to sex in general, the community also discouraged monogamy as one of the unnecessary social restrictions on sexuality. As one participant explained it:

*You know, and of course the whole idea of the place originally, well, not the whole concept of it, but a big part of it was this whole 'no monogamy', so everyone would of course was sleeping with everyone that they wanted to, which was you know, fair enough, if they were, if they wanted to do, you know?*

One man we interviewed who had tried to maintain a monogamous relationship with his partner during his late teens and early twenties talked about how this action was frowned on in the community. He would be asked:

*What are you, what are you hiding from that you've got to be in a monogamous relationship?*

This participant, who remained angry about the pressure to have open relationships, saw this as part of Centrepont's strategy to keep community members in a state of emotional vulnerability so that they could "learn more about themselves".

Our participants described how sexual relationships were not only non-monogamous but also occurred frequently and without concern for privacy. One participant described how assignations might be made over breakfast or during the tea break. When the bell rang to stop work people would rush off to have a 'quickie' and then get back to their jobs. The living arrangements made it likely that sex could be easily observed by anyone passing by and we were told that it was common for children to see and hear sexual encounters on a daily basis.

For a few participants who had been born at Centrepont the experience of adult nudity did not seem to be a major issue. One described how she had experienced this as a child:

*You know, if there was someone sunbathing naked on the deck or something we would just giggle about it and say 'oh my God look at them, let's run away' [laughs]. We sort of knew sometimes that it was a little bit un-normal, you know, that other children didn't experience things the way we did but you know at the same time it's never been something that I've had in my mind as something that has really scarred me for life or anything.*

But most of our participants who had come to the community during the course of their childhood spoke about their surprise at being initially exposed to the casual nudity and open sex at Centrepont. One man described his first day at the community:

*When I was 11 years old and I first, I got introduced to this woman [Name] there. And she had no top on, and she's got huge breasts, and I just couldn't believe it, it was like trying to look at her face, and all I wanted to do was go...[laughs]. And so that was my first vivid memory of the place, and that would have been like, the first couple of hours there.*

But while he represented this as an amusing anecdote, another female participant described, what was for her, a more disturbing encounter on an early visit to Centrepont. She remembers going into a room to look for her parent and finding instead a group of naked people:



*I don't know how naked they were but I just remember a sea of naked people and trying to find my [parent] and just being absolutely freaked. Trying to find my [parent] and my [parent] being half naked, kind of draped on someone and just feeling kind of sick and just totally shocked, and not knowing what was going on.*

Most of our participants who hadn't spent all their childhood at Centrepont described how they were horrified by their initial exposure to nudity and sex as well as to the arrangements for open showering and toileting. Several of our participants spoke about how they continued to struggle with aspects of this arrangement and sometimes tried to find creative ways of ensuring their privacy. One woman spoke about how she and some teenage friends would try and shower early in the morning before anyone was awake so that they could avoid giving the men in the community an opportunity to "perve" at them. Others spoke about how they had struggled to use a toilet in public and waited to use the only toilet with a door.

A number of our participants reported having been uncomfortable with the open observation of sex between adults:

*The stuff I didn't like is that you did...when you were a kid you saw people having sex and there was you know you saw people just walking around naked and I really don't like that. That's something I really wish I could take out of my life because once you see something it's in your mind and you can't get rid of it. Like you'd walk past a room and they'd be people having sex like a metre away from you and it's really gross.*

But for this participant and others who stayed at Centrepont over a long period, they soon began to experience these things as 'normal':

*I'm not saying that's what I would choose now in my life but it was kind of normalised.*

Another explained how she later challenged her familiarity with this kind of behaviour:

*It was normal but you get to an age and you sort of think: 'Well that was a bit weird'. I definitely don't see anything positive in having, seeing people having sex, and even my Mum says now, you know, she can see it. It's a bit of a weird thing but living there and only having that, you do get a bit sort of used to it. It wasn't strange until, even just visiting there on the weekends, that sort of thing didn't seem like a weird thing until I was completely cut-off from the place.*

It sounded like some of our participants had been exposed to more than just couple sex between adults but also some more extreme sexual behaviour. One young man described how when he was 11 or 12 years old he saw the adults of the community engaged in some communal sexual experience in the 'glade':

*[We were] watching them and, and what we, what was, what we found was about a hundred people, all naked, and all eating off their tits you know, fucking. All just getting into each other and stuff like that.*

It also appeared from our participants that at some stages of Centrepoin't's existence there was an active encouragement of child sexuality. One participant described how she remembered Bert Potter addressing the community:

*Bert, at a meeting talking openly about 'if a child is asking for sexual contact' or whatever, or 'if someone doesn't say 'no' to sexual contact, then sexual contact is okay; it's okay to sexualise your children from quite a young age and this is how you do it' you know, and he'd show this technique that was blowing [mimics act] where you'd blow on their sexual parts, on their vagina or clitoris or whatever, to stimulate sexual activity.*

Although the majority of our participants did not describe themselves as having been sexually abused, a significant proportion (13 out of the 23 who had spent time at Centrepoin't as teenagers) spontaneously disclosed their own experiences of 'voluntary' teenage under-age sex. While our participants seemed much more divided on the question of whether young children were sexually molested, most agreed that it was common for young people to have sex for the first time somewhere between the ages of 11 and 13.

*I think children definitely had sex a lot younger. Growing up in the community. Because you're around it so much that you're kind of a lot more familiar, and I guess you're thinking about it more and you're um, it's in your face more. And yeah, I guess you'd, you could be interested when you're younger because you know, it's something that adults are doing and you're not, and you kind of want to know more. So, so we're all, I guess most people were reasonably young, and a lot of my friends were around 11 when they lost their virginity.*

This participant was clear that this was the norm during the period she lived at the community and spoke about how she had been relieved when she lost her own virginity:

*It was kind of like, you just kind of felt out of place because you hadn't finally done it yet so you could join in the conversations because everyone, you know, you'd seen stuff and you'd talked about it but you'd never actually done it.*

One participant was vehement that none of the girls that he knew had ever been coerced into sexual activity although he recognised that in many instances this would have been against the law:

*I can say for a fact that from my experience, none of the girls were ever actually forced into actual rape. It was all just statutory rape. Because there, there was the way of living, was that was just normal. You know, when you grew up, and, and you matured, you had the choice to go and um, um sleep with whoever you wanted.*

In contrast to this, another male participant reflected back on the early age at which girls became active at Centrepont and how this had felt perfectly acceptable at the time. But now he looked back and acknowledged that “some of those girls were probably introduced to sex far too early, and they were overly sexualised”. He went on to say that he believed it was probably the adults who were pushing them into it.

One young woman we interviewed outlined how she quickly developed her sexual experience at Centrepont. She explained how she had got her period early, at the age of 9. By 12 she had her first dose of vaginal ‘thrush’ and her teenage friends had had to explain to her what it was. By 13 she had lost her virginity and was starting to enjoy sex. By the time she was 14 she was ‘dating’ an older man with children of his own.

Other female participants spoke about feeling pressured into having sex even when they didn’t want to, although they told us that they did not define this as ‘abuse’. One, for example, spoke about how she had been approached to have sex with an older teenager and initially said no because she hadn’t wanted to. Later that night she had to accept his offer:

*I remember one time actually going, being asked to spend the night with an older guy, a teenager and I said no. But then come time to go to bed, you know, I didn’t know where to go to bed and I didn’t know how to find Mum because there were so many long houses and I didn’t know where she was and I ended up sleeping with him.*

A male participant also provided an interesting account of his journey to sexual maturity. He lost his virginity at 13 with an older woman he described as being “one of the girls’ mums” who had been in her late thirties. He remembered being pleased and excited afterwards. This same participant said that he did not believe that he had ever been coerced into having sex although there had been times when he had thought: “Not the best decision”. He explained that you would just go up and ask someone: “Do you want to spend

the night?” This was often arranged earlier in the day and sometimes he felt “sort of obliged to go through with it”. There were occasions when he found himself thinking:

*How do I get out of here? [laughs] Is it morning yet? But nothing nasty or.... Just not having enough confidence to change my mind half way through or something.*

Although he did not feel he had been forced to have sex at the time, he did acknowledge in retrospect that the general beliefs about sexuality may have exerted a pressure on his behaviour:

*I guess if everybody says one thing, then you've kind of been coerced without sort of knowing, I guess. So there were definitely belief structures that, you know, I guess were kind of drilled into you which, which you may not have felt that you were being coerced. In fact you might have even started preaching yourself.*

Another participant also described how, as a teenage boy, he had been frequently ‘propositioned’ by older women. Unlike the previous participant, he seemed to have found a way of refusing offers that he did not welcome:

*And I'm just a teenager you know, eating my lunch and all these fucking adults are going, then some woman comes up to me: 'Are you available?' 'Ah no, I'm right, mate'. It was all a bit weird still for a kid, for a teenager even.*

He went on to elaborate how this kind of overture by an older woman to a boy was seen as perfectly normal in the community:

*I mean it was kind of – you weren't expected to but it was the done thing, absolutely. That's what would happen. You'd ask if you wanted. No-one ever said 'you have to have sex' but you were asked continuously. If someone liked you and wanted something with you, they would ask you – straight up: 'Hey I think you're pretty hot, I think you're attractive, would you like to spend a bit of time with me'. That's how straight-up they were. Everyone you know, well most people anyway.*

It seemed that these sexual arrangements were sanctioned by their parents and other adults within and sometimes outside the community. One of our participants told us how she had excitedly told her father that she had lost her virginity. Another phoned his parent outside of the community as a teenager to tell her that he had a girlfriend nearly 20 years older than he was. One participant offered her opinion that many of the parents at the community were supportive of these practices:

*Lots of other people were doing it but the mums of the children were aware, and supportive of it. And I'm not speaking for everyone, but that seems to me to be the*

*majority of what I've been told. What happened is that you know, they wanted to follow his teachings and they thought that was okay for older men to do sexual stuff with their children because they wanted their children to be brought up thinking that was okay.*

While some of our participants clearly felt uncomfortable with their sexual experiences at Centrepont this was often in retrospect as they recognised that they had been influenced into believing it was 'normal' at the time. Some participants, however, remained clear in their view that their exposure to sexuality had been healthy and largely beneficial for them.

Overall it was clear that open sex and sexuality were a significant part of the Centrepont experience. Children who grew up there would have commonly witnessed sexual behaviour and were likely also to have participated in this at a younger age than is usual. It seems that these open attitudes to sexuality were strongly normalised within the community and it was once they had left, that some of our participants recognised that they had been influenced by the ideology of Centrepont and coerced into its practices.

### **3.11 Sexual abuse at Centrepont**

The Centrepont community normalised open attitudes to sexual behaviour, valued exploration and non-monogamous relationships, practiced nudity and used therapeutic techniques to break down social inhibitions and boundaries related to sexual identity and behaviour. While the underage sex described by half our participants would legally constitute sexual abuse it was not always identified as abuse by participants because they understood it to be consensual and normal. But around a third of our sample specifically identified themselves as having experienced sexual abuse during their time at Centrepont. Since convictions for childhood sexual abuse were pivotal in the closure of Centrepont, the issue was significant for all participants. Those who did not identify sexual abuse as their own experience, talked of witnessing others' abuse, or addressed misconceptions about sexual abuse in their experiences at Centrepont.

Some participants told us about experiences of abuse that were clearly identified, some about sanctions imposed for reporting abuse or instances of sexual coercion that were hard to categorise. They also told us about social status and interpersonal rewards for exploring

sexuality and engaging in sexual practices as freely as possible. Resisting Centrepoin't's accepted and normalised sexual practices resulted in shame and silencing.

Among those who did identify experiences of sexual abuse, some were as young as nine when the abuse began. One participant explained how the abuse she experienced lasted over an extended period:

*And I was sexually abused there from [pause] from the age of about, I think I was probably about nine, it started, and although I was over the legal age it didn't stop until I left, when I was 20-odd or whatever. And yeah that just – it went on. It was terrible when I was really young, it was just, it was chronic. Multiple statutory rapes or whatever they call them, by Bert and lots of other men, and some women.*

Another wept as she told us how she participated in sex sessions with Bert and his wife at the age of 11:

*I'd piss in a bucket beforehand 'cause he'd give me a blow job for so long I'd usually piss myself [cries]...until I felt like I was going to be sick and I didn't go back.*

And yet another told of her first experience of penetrative sex being promoted by adults when she was around 12 years of age.

*But after that he did groom me for sex, not with him but it was almost like he, me not even being 12, and him, or not even being 13 and him saying: 'Now who would you like to take your flower away?'*

Among those participants who did identify their own experiences as abusive, we heard accounts of boys involved in full intercourse at six or seven years of age, adult men in sexual relationships with teenage girls, and abuse that continued for many years.

Some participants did not identify their own experiences as abusive though they recalled witnessing abuse of other children. They told us of boys who were abused by biological family members as well as other men and women in the community. They spoke of men who came regularly into the babies' nappy changing area to play sexually with the infants. They also talked about girls they had been friends with, or family members who had been abused. Some talked of perpetrating abuse themselves. From the perspective of some participants, sexual abuse was widespread at Centrepoin't. For others, though, the way in

which sexual activity was valued and normalised at Centrepont led them to doubt the incidents they witnessed or experienced were abusive at the time.

*I thought it was, you know, for my growth but I guess it was for other, for men's pleasure. I didn't think so at the time. And I felt like, because it was the only thing that I was being asked to do, um, you know, I wanted to be the best at it or I, I just, um [pause] I thought I was some kind of sex Goddess [laughs] for quite a while there.*

Others spoke of knowing that abuse was being normalised at Centrepont, and recognising that the process of normalisation was hard to withstand:

*I knew in myself that I would never go, be brainwashed into it. But you are, you can't help it because the majority rules, it's a really difficult thing to do – to sort of go against the flow, you know, just swim against the river because you know, you know, eventually you're going to crack.*

Some understood their experiences to be uncomfortable, though they recognised much of their sexual activity as ordinary within the community. Children were encouraged to be sexually curious and permitted to initiate sexual activities:

*That was when I was 12 was, my friends organised an orgy, and put a note on, on the notice boards saying you know, wanted, people to come to our orgy, and it was all it was all to, to deflower all of us. And, and you know, at 12 and 13 and stuff, and and I was all, like we were, I was part of initiating it. And but I found that, like only a couple turned up and this woman, about 18, and so we'd watch the couple have sex... And that was actually quite you know, it, it was just like we were curious, so we, so we found out how it was all done, and she said, oh, you do this, and you do that, it was like I think she used to be a schoolteacher or something. [laughter] And so it was quite bizarre but and then, but then I sort of had, had sex with this woman, and I wasn't ready at all really.*

Coercion and discomfort arose in a variety of sexualised settings. One participant spoke about being 'watched' by Bert and other adults when she and other family members had been made to participate in one of the body exploration exercises described earlier. Another talked of her discomfort when men would interrupt homework time to get the girls to have sex with them. Yet another told us of the discomfort of almost continuous sexual overtures that the boys experienced from older women. These participants witnessed and experienced the normalised sexual activity at Centrepont as disturbing, and while some of them clearly identified it as abusive others were not always so confident and it remained unnamed;

*And, and and this older man sucked my willie, you know, I and I sort of thought oh, gosh, that's not quite – 'cause I hadn't got hard or anything, and, and so I, I that whole sort of thing was just like whoa, it's all a bit...*

We noticed a gender difference in the way our participants identified sexual abuse:

Relatively few of the men who took part identified their experiences explicitly as abuse although in some cases the sexual activity was unwelcome and distasteful to them.

Nonetheless, some of our women participants spoke about having friends or brothers who had been badly sexually abused. On the basis of events our participants witnessed or described, sexual abuse against boys at Centrepont was identified but abused men were either less likely than women to participate in the research or less likely to disclose identified abuse.

The normalisation of child and intergenerational sexual activity at Centrepont was recognised by many participants and it reproduced gendered adult norms for sexual activity. Generally, men told us that they “fended off” the sexual advances of women relatively easily and there were only a few instances of sexual abuse of boys by men noted by our participants. One explained that while the older women’s advances were sometimes annoying, they did not feel particularly coercive. He recognised that young girls in the community had a more difficult time dealing with the aggressive sexual demands of the men. For most of the women the sexual advances of older men were more difficult to manage. One participant described her experience of being approached by older men during ‘homework time’ at the community:

*Then adults would turn up, I suppose, who, trying to ask for a cuddle, that would be their way of trying to get you off to have sex, you know to go into a room. But I just can't remember much, I just remember it being, because you lived in fear all the time, because you didn't know if Bert was going to want to see you, or you know, and you're always getting something wrong with you, because if you had that many men demanding you all the time: because of course they want to get into the teenagers more than probably the older women because it's just, you know, every man's dream sort of thing.*

Among those who did identify sexual abuse of children at Centrepont, there were some who didn't remember recognising it as abuse at the time. For them, identifying abuse was only possible in retrospect and in respect of the law.

*So for those kids to come out and, and then think about 'shit that was actually, it was probably abuse.' Because now it's classed as but there, where we were it*



*wasn't so it's um, mm... You know, but I, you know, but I do still respect the law, and I, I it found that, you know that it was wrong, and I respect that. And um, but I also still have in the back of my head that at the time it was actually okay, because that's just how life was. You know, it's like you grow up where you grow up and that's how your life was. And you didn't think any different of it, did you? If someone came along 10 years later and said 'Oh, you know, that was wrong'. You'd go, 'Oh, well, was it really? You know? You know what I mean?*

Some seemed to have weighed the evidence explicitly and decided on balance that their experiences were not abusive:

*But I saw a lot of inappropriate behaviour do you know what I mean? And so it sort of becomes, where do you, you know, where do you draw the line in sexual abuse? ...I mean if somebody asked me outright if I'd been sexually abused, I would say no.*

But 'drawing the line' was difficult for some of our participants who had been left wondering whether they had been abused during their infancy and childhood at Centrepont and were not able to remember this.

*Um, you know, I don't know, to be honest, I don't know if anything really happened to me. If it did, I don't really care any more. I, I don't remember it. Um some people have made some comments about things they saw.*

One spoke poignantly about how she had asked her parents whether they thought she had been sexually abused:

*When I eventually did ask if something had happened, they said 'no' and then I was like, 'well is that just 'cause you're telling me that, or is that just 'cause like'...' 'Oh, no, no, no, nothing ever happened'. Ah, I don't really know any more. Because I did have the dreams. But...dreams are dreams, aren't they?*

Not being certain about whether they had experienced abuse that they were unable to remember left some participants feeling uncomfortable while others professed that they no longer cared to know the truth.

Among those who knew that sexual abuse had occurred at Centrepont, some understood these experiences as similar to those in some nuclear families;

*If you took the actual sick kind of stuff that went on in the community, if you call it that, and you took a cross-section of society in all these houses out here, I tell you there's probably weirder stuff going on in those closed doors.*

One woman talked about being brought to Centrepont so that she would be sexually available to other men, having been abused by her father before joining the community. In both her nuclear family and the community she had been victimised by adult relatives. Some participants understood that Centrepont's practices breached sexual boundaries that were in place within other homes and families New Zealand but noted the 'normalisation' of this behaviour which made it difficult for former members of Centrepont to acknowledge that it was inappropriate.

Participants who had identified having been sexually abused, described ways in which the normalisation process at Centrepont left them feeling confused, hurt and guilty about sexual activity with adults.

*I kind of felt really confused I suppose, and really hurt. Actually I felt really hurt and really betrayed, but then I also felt really guilty because I went with him and – you know, so your mind's just going in overdrive you know 'Oh my God...I went with him, I must have been leading him along; he must have thought that I thought that, you know, blah blah blah'.*

Others remembered feeling sickened by sexual predators and clear that they did not want to participate in the sexual activity that was so highly valued within Centrepont's sexualised culture;

*It was horrible. And he gave me such horrible feelings that I would, you know, I'd voice them, you know, push him away and tell him to fuck off....and I think early on I realised that I didn't want to be one of the good girls, because things happened to the good girls.*

Participants frequently referred to expectations of sexual activity at Centrepont and it was evident that there were some social benefits to being sexually active at a young age. Some of the girls who were being abused were particularly idealised in the community as being "in touch with their loving". One participant described how she and others had been called on to admire those girls who took part in sexual experimentation and were given the message that those who were not a part of these arrangements were less valuable to the community. Another argued that some girls not only consented to sex but demanded sexual attention from adults. In this context, she spoke about how the children and their parents "played a big part in it";

*I think they were around 10, 12...And, and numerous people have said to me that, that they were very sexually active and not that it's right to be, for an adult, to be*

*having sex with a 10 or 12 year old, but they would walk around demanding it, and if they didn't get it, they would have big tantrums and stuff like that.*

But another participant recognised how the teenage victims of sexual abuse were unfairly blamed for apparently 'willingly' engaging in sexual encounters with adults. She spoke of how there was a lack of recognition amongst some former Centrepont residents about the way in which young girls were manipulated into sexualised roles:

*...and doesn't it occur to you that it was weird that 14 year old girls were trying to have sex with men? And you know trying to get that message across to some of the people ...and them just not getting it.*

Social status rewards for children who were active sexually and social expectations of sexual activity among children and with adults, exercised strong normalising sanctions within the community. Even so, some participants we spoke to were aware of sexual abuse at the time and resisted being involved.

*Because the good kids didn't, yeah, they were treated in a different way but it wasn't in a way I wanted to be treated.*

*I knew that it wasn't right for men to be looking at you and making sexual remarks and I just never had a bar of it. I just knew. No. And it wasn't, it's not something that ever, yeah I just knew, I just knew that part wasn't right.*

A number of participants recalled various strategies they used to actively resist uncomfortable or coerced sexual activity within the community and the sanctions they experienced in response. One explained how after challenging Bert's lewd suggestions to a teenage girl her mother had chastised her afterwards for shaming her.

A couple of participants spoke about how they negotiated somewhat protective relationships with older teens. One explained how at 14 she chose to have a relationship with a 19 year old man to try and avoid being used by Bert and others:

*And in a way that relationship protected me from that because I was with him and he was my friend and we did adventure stuff and went camping and in that sense it was very protective.*

Another told us that she believed she had been protected from the worst abuses, partly because of her family's position in the community and the fact that she also spent time away from it:

*That I had a little bit of distance because of being [parent's] daughter, people were a little more careful of me. I was a lot safer than a lot of my peers were who were around them all the time and they were a lot more accessible than I was.*

Protective relationships were not always possible to establish or maintain for children in the community. One participant described how she had managed to resist Bert's sexual advances herself but used to feel "sick" watching her sibling engage in sexual acts with him. She learnt later that her sibling and others were blackmailed into their sexual behaviour by Bert's threats that they would not be able to see their families.

*It wasn't until years later that I found out that um, they had been [pause, sighs] emotionally blackmailed. Like my [sibling]. [pause] I think he said: 'You won't see your siblings if you don't do as you're told'. Like [my sibling would] come home from [somewhere] and he'd threaten [sibling] like that so that if [sibling] didn't do something, yeah, [sibling] wouldn't be able to see us.*

The perspective that other adults at the community were either unconcerned by, or sanctioned, the abuse of children, was supported by several other participants. Some also suggested that not only the parents but also the counsellors and group leaders seemed to support the sexual abuse of children at Centrepont. One participant explained how the teenage group facilitators would help to procure girls for Bert's sexual amusement. Further evidence of the lack of support of some adults was provided by participants who remembered identifying and disclosing abuse to someone inside or outside of the community at the time and being psychologically abused as a consequence. We heard of children who had tried to tell school counsellors or their general practitioner about the abuse they were experiencing and had been simply reported to the elders at Centrepont where the allegations were either challenged or normalised.

Yet some participants were described as being well supported by adults when they identified and disclosed abuse. In one case a participant talked about recognising something 'was wrong' after more than 12 months of sexual abuse by an elderly man;

*I didn't really understand and but there was definitely there was just it just suddenly hit me it was wrong and so I told my mum and that was when I was about nine so it didn't really...and I think I didn't have anything to do with the place after that.*

Her parents reacted instantly to inform the police and the participant was removed from danger. This woman's experience of abuse was clearly not sanctioned by her parents in the way that others had described.

We identified a pattern of generational differences in our participants' accounts of their experiences as abuse or witnessing abuse. One of the younger participants offered her explanation why she and others of her 'generation' had not been subjected to the same abuse as the girls who had been there earlier:

*Because we were old enough and ugly enough to fend for ourselves. Like, we had we had some bloody attitudes on us, you know, we were tough. And if – the main thing [was that] by the time we were at least 10 is that if any guy tried to do anything to us, well, we would very clearly know if we wanted to do it or not.*

Even so, those who arrived later in Centrepoin't's history and didn't experience or witness sexual abuse were still affected by the earlier sexual practices of the community. One spoke about how she had felt upset when information about the abuse of some girls with whom she had shared a room was revealed in court – and they hadn't told her.

*Like we arrived after all the big sexual abuse happened. And it had been swept under so deeply that even the girls that it had happened to had buried it, suppressed it, so that when all the court cases came out years later about the sexual abuse that was – they were our friends. Yet they'd never been close enough even at slumber parties and you know, talking till six in the morning and having video nights and getting really close – as close as sisters – they'd never felt close enough to tell about that stuff. It'd been so gruesome for them, of course they hadn't wanted to but feeling, not so much let down but just not trusted enough to be told about stuff.*

This account highlights the way in which the earlier experiences of abuse were silenced in the later years of Centrepoin't's existence.

Participants who identified their experiences as abusive, either at the time or later, also talked to us about consequences that they had lived with subsequently. Some spoke of prescribed contraceptive medication before menarche, sustained vaginal injuries that continued to cause discomfort well into adulthood, and repeated incidents of contracting sexually transmitted infections that were treated as routine. One participant understood that suffering the medical consequences of sexual abuse was evidence that the adults around her did not care about her;

*Like, they didn't give a crap, you know, that you were suffering all that time. It was part of the abuse, up there, was just not to be seen, or wait till you were so sick that you know, 'Ooh', you know and so much in pain.*

Psychological and interpersonal consequences were also significant. In one case, a 'family group' session where Bert made one sibling "do things" to another – while other family members looked on, created an irreparable rift between two of the family members:

*We try. Um. We've talked about it – I've tried to I've had years of therapy, I've tried to talk about stuff um, apologise. But it's almost like that stuff happened so young and was so mixed in with so much other stuff and was so traumatic that um, I don't know, I don't know how you go back, really.*

Participants also told us about losing their 'self will' and becoming like slaves, or feeling overwhelmed and out of their depth, or even learning to 'vacate' themselves;

*And then he launched into this couple of hours of full-on sexual, you know breaking down my boundaries, trying to get me in touch with my real sexuality, the woman inside me or whatever. And I just remember like this one – I call it a shot, or a scene [laughing]...and I'm just wanting to be anywhere out there but where I was. And I guess I just kind of, I kind of vacated – I kind of vacated at that point because he was just so ugly and fat and disgusting and I just didn't want to be there.*

The portion of participants who talked about being abused themselves, told of significant abuses. This included a range of experiences such as carefully organised sex sessions with an adult or adults, coercion to engage in sex with multiple adult partners or abuse in the context of betrayal in a single trusted relationship with an adult. Sexual abuse also seemed to have taken the form of voyeurism and procurement. In some cases it seemed that sexual abuse was compounded by the lack of help and support from adults both outside and inside of the community. In the context of normalising child sexual activity, the community sanctioned the identification or disclosure of sexual abuse. While those who lived outside the community might also have experienced and witnessed child sexual abuse, the unique experiences of the children of Centrepont are embedded in the normalising and sanctioning practices of the community.

While only one of the men taking part described his experiences as sexual abuse, others had clearly found the sexual demands of adults overwhelming at times. Their lower reporting of sexual abuse may have been related to less forceful sexual approaches by women than by men that were easier to resist. It may also have related to gender expectations that do not sanction men's disclosure of hurt, discomfort or disinterest in any hetero-sexual experience

and valorise the pursuit of sexual pleasure. This same valorisation of hetero-sexual experience may also result in shame around the disclosure of homosexual abuse.

Even amongst those who did not believe they had been sexually abused, most participants remembered being aware of the need to protect themselves from sexual abuse and employed a variety of strategies to do this. Some positioned themselves as rebels, some acted ‘tough’ while others seem to have been grateful to have been protected by factors independent of their actions. Some, however, succumbed to the pressure of the community which seemed to reward children who made themselves available for the sexual pleasure of adult others.

The situation was different for those who stood outside the abuse, who had either been there at a time when abuse was no longer prevalent in the community or perhaps had simply not been involved. Others, however, struggled to make sense of how some people could have been abused at the community when they had either not known of these events or had experienced them as normal. We noticed that a few of our participants used minimising strategies when talking about the significance or extent of the abuse that they were aware of at Centrepoint. Perhaps most disturbing were the experiences of a small group of participants spoke about how they had to live their lives without knowing whether or not they had been sexually abused at Centrepoint.

### **3.12 Drug and alcohol use at Centrepoint**

There was some considerable variation in the Centrepoint Community’s attitude to cigarettes, alcohol and drug use over the period of its existence. Several participants spoke about a time where alcohol and cigarettes had been completely banned from the community. One participant, for example, spoke about a ‘crack down’ on teenage drug and alcohol use during one phase and some participants who were resident towards the later years of the community seemed to have encountered very little drug use at all. In spite of this, our interviews provided evidence that during some phases there was significant drug use integrated into the practices of the community as well as phases where drugs and alcohol were easily available to adolescents at Centrepoint.

Within the variation in the community’s values and practices around drugs and alcohol over time, significant drug and alcohol use was reported by just under half our participants when

they recalled their time at the community. For a number, drug use was a central part of their everyday experience.

Several participants explained how drugs had fitted with the overarching philosophy of Centrepont. They had been considered a part of encouraging openness between people. As one participant put it, Ecstasy<sup>20</sup> use was about “lowering the boundaries”. Another participant explained how this fitted well with the personal development ethos of Centrepont:

*They would, the adults wanted, well no, Bert wanted you to take it and go inside yourself and think about yourself and interpersonal sort of stuff, intra-personal stuff, that's what he was getting at.*

According to our participants, marijuana was ‘rife’ at the Community. One spoke of it being freely available, along with alcohol for anyone who wanted it:

*And some of the kids became hard-core stoners with the hard-core stoners and some went off and drank more with the drinkers, um, and I don't know if any of the adults ever really owned that they might have got us all pretty heavily into weed. They were growing it; we'd find stashes in the bush.*

But many of our participants spoke more extensively about more highly classified drugs at Centrepont.<sup>21</sup> One participant explained how she had gone on from using marijuana to experimenting with other drugs, in particular Ecstasy.

*Pot was normal. I mean I still to this day think of smoking every day as relatively normal. You know, to me it's not um, yeah, it's not out of the ordinary, and of course my, I think, we had such an openness, and willingness to explore, and of course you, like the edict they made at the community was in the best quality ‘E’, and so we did experiment with it, and it did, lead us on to experimenting with more, you know.*

Several participants spoke about how Centrepont encouraged open experimentation with the properties of different drugs. Initially it was the adults who were involved in using drugs to explicitly try out their therapeutic properties. This kind of experimentation soon caught on amongst the teenagers:

*They were kind of like – the community was a place for adventure, you know, internally and externally, so there were adults doing all sorts of stuff you know. I*

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<sup>20</sup> Ecstasy or ‘E’ is the street name for Methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA).

<sup>21</sup> In the 1970s in New Zealand MDMA was not listed as a controlled substance and was promoted in some quarters as assisting psychotherapy. By the 1990s MDMA was listed as a Class B drug.



*saw them drying mushrooms using the Whole Earth catalogue to go through and find out what toadstools you could break down to get trips off and trying to eat tablespoons of nutmeg in the kitchen, that's supposed to make you really high. But, so people were experimenting with all this stuff and when they did they would actually give you their feedback on it: 'That was, this was, these were the effects I got' you know – there'd be a note on the board the next day: 'Tried nutmeg: don't do this' you know? [laughs]. So in one way it was kind of like, at least it wasn't just experimental – they had some kind of focus, you know.' ...So everyone got some sort of knowledge base on what you were taking as well rather than just going 'yeah take this, this is party stuff!' It wasn't so much – I mean the community definitely didn't have that party attitude it was just the teenagers who wanted to use it for the fun. But the adults were all more about using it to do therapy or what-have-you.*

The philosophically motivated preoccupation with drug experiments led to the community accessing high quality drugs. One participant who was involved with drug use and supply for a long time as an adult, spoke nostalgically of his time at Centrepont. He said he had had “Ecstasy, Acid<sup>22</sup> and Speed<sup>23</sup> abuses” in his “past life” but never had such good Ecstasy as at Centrepont during his teenage years:

*It was such good quality that I've never encountered anything else, like, it was just felt so amazing, it was a love, lovely, just peaceful and...*

His comment on Ecstasy was echoed by others who spoke about the community having been able to manufacture something close to “pure MDMA”.

One participant gave a detailed account of a rather surreal and rather frightening first experience of using Ecstasy at the community:

*Bert started to experiment with Ecstasy um and I remember the first Ecstasy trip I took. They used to put notices on the notice board that said 'please don't eat anything after 12 o'clock for the morning's excursion, or journey' – I can't remember exactly what they said. And then, we were all so excited, you know, we'd have to not eat and then, um, and then my first trip we all took together in a field. There was just hundreds of people, all the adults – 80 or whatever – and however many children I don't remember what the cut-off age was, maybe 12 or something. And they just walked around with these plates of pills and water-bottles and we all took Ecstasy. And I remember, it was just the most horrendous – I mean I'd taken drugs. I'd totally taken drugs, like I'd smoke pot, my friends and I had taken car sickness pills – you'd take five and you'd have this hallucinogenic, wildest ride. But this was something else...a smorgasbord of people getting it on, people abusing people. Um, the teenage girls were absolute firecrackers, like just screaming and running and dancing – you know they were just, their energy accentuated. Phenomenally loud and phenomenally frightening, the kind of attention they were*

<sup>22</sup> The full name of this drug is Lysergic Acid Diethylamid or LSD.

<sup>23</sup> Speed is the colloquial term for Amphetamines.

*getting from the older men. I think I took myself away quite quickly and found a river.*

There were other drugs available too. One participant described how he had moved from using marijuana at the age of about 13 to Ecstasy and Acid a little later. Finally he wanted to try Ketamine and he explained how the community enabled this:

*So I sort of booked out one of these little counselling rooms, about half the size of this [shows interview room] and made myself a little bed and one of the nurses came in and gave me a shot and you'd just, you go completely out of your body and sort of just, I don't know, you can still, you still have a thought process but not really as a human. I was kind of like a worm or something. But you were out there and then, it was kind of like a wormy sort of roller coaster and you'd zoom around and then I think as it started to wear off you'd sort of come back into the room and you'd sort of zhht, back into your body and you'd whoosht, off out again.*

He went on to explain that after the measured dose was administered from a 'clean needle', you would just be left alone to have your experience. He believed that it was possible to also try a mixture of Acid, Ecstasy and Ketamine at the community but he had not done so.

While a number of those we interviewed seemed to have enjoyed their drug use, others spoke about being compelled to use them. One spoke angrily about how she and others had been "fed...fistfuls of drugs". Another participant described how she had been forced into taking Ecstasy at a teenage group:

*Yeah. They forced it on me. Forced it. There was [a few] of us left at the end. You know, everybody else had taken it, had their little pill, had their drug and they were all stoned. You could see the effects were taking hold on them and I was just freaking out.... I remember [one woman], pushing me with her foot, her and Bert standing over me, 'Come on, just take it', you know. 'You're going to be fine.'*

Several participants suggested that the drugs had been introduced quite specifically to enhance sexual experience. As one explained:

*It was like they had made it so that it was all about the sex and not really about the trip....I don't know, but it could have just been the way that they designed the experience because they never let you just take it and go off on your own; they actually did it in a controlled setting where they had access to your heads so I don't know whether they made it all about the sex or whether they had actually adjusted the chemicals to be all about it.*

Some spoke about how some of their sexual abuse occurred under the influence of drugs raising the possibility that they were used to induce compliance. One of the men taking part

spoke about how the boys had been aware that they would find it somewhat harder than the girls to gain access to drugs, because they were “lower down in the pecking order”. He believed that girls received priority in relation to drugs because of the sexual motives of the heterosexual men.

While some of the drug use in the community was sanctioned, and even compelled, by adults at times, there was also substantial alcohol and drug use that had no adult sanction. Several participants explained how easy it was for teenagers to get access to any substance they wanted. One recalled how someone was always around to buy them alcohol from about the age of 13 and that there were other drugs that could be reasonably easily obtained:

*You know and there was always marijuana around, and cigarettes, and you know, and then, and then of course there was the harder drugs which were a bit harder to come by, but if you knew the right people you could get your hands on whatever you wanted, you know.*

Another man described how he had developed a problem with alcohol by the age of 16. He was grateful when the community instituted a temporary ban on alcohol at Centrepont and took advantage of this to gain control of his drinking:

*They said ‘look we want to say to everyone – this means adults – don’t support them by buying it for them, don’t, let’s just completely wipe it for a bit’. So had this complete six months. And that’s when I stopped, I went ‘sweet this is the perfect opportunity, there’s going to be no-one around me doing it, to plug me into it’, and I just sort of stopped.*

But such opportunities to step back from alcohol and other drug use was relatively rarely reported. For most of our participants the effortless access to drugs together with considerable freedom from parental supervision created an ideal opportunity to drink or get high. As one put it:

*We were very hedonistic teenagers. We had... the group had... this kind of run of this huge property. We had massive swimming pools, we had dope and alcohol on tap, because you could always find an adult to buy it for you...and everyone was growing it. The kids kind of knew where to go to get magic mushrooms, or acid, or I don’t, I don’t, I never really I just said yes, I didn’t ask questions or find out any more. You know so we had this huge property and no parental constraints really as long as we were being seen to be doing the right things.*

Drugs were also be used to subvert adult authority and break the rules of sanctioned drug use. One participant spoke about how he had discovered where the drugs were kept and stolen some while another spoke about how he and his friends learnt to play the system:

*So we had to kind of play his game to an extent, like we'd go up and say 'Oh Bert any chance we could have a pill?' and he'd go 'Oh come back tomorrow at midday'. You'd come back and he'd go 'here you go but I want you to do this by yourself'. You go 'yeah thanks, okay, thanks' and cruise off – 'got it guys – go and get yours now!'*

For other participants drugs were not so much a part of their recreation at Centrepoint, but an escape from it. One of the women we interviewed spoke about how she had tried to lose herself in drugs with friends outside of Centrepoint as a way of managing the abuse she suffered there. Another spoke about how she had deliberately gone drinking, against the wishes of the community, as a way of demonstrating her anger at them.

For some participants drugs provided a bit of recreational fun on weekends, but for others using became more of a lifestyle. While one participant had enjoyed her drug use at Centrepoint, she spoke sadly about what she felt she had lost through it:

*If I could go back and stay drug free at least from 13 to 20, I so would, in a flash you know.*

This participant hinted at the difficult path that drug use at Centrepoint had started for her and others:

*It was available, we all tried it, we did, you know. Um some of us didn't like it, some of us liked it, you know, some of us went through hard times getting off it, you know, I know a lot of... I wasn't the only one.*

Another spoke about how she felt manipulated into drug use and sex too early, poignantly adding that she wished she could go back and have the innocence she felt she had lost:

*When we were groomed, yeah. Yep. So it kind of wrecked it! [laughs]. Even the drug-taking, you know, as a teenager or whatever, it kind of wrecked the whole experimenting as well. It, I had to, I was groomed into having sex far too early and, and, and drugs. Kinda wrecked it.*

Some participants seemed to have successfully sidestepped drug use completely, even during periods when it was widely practiced. One man had little interest in drugs and did not appear to have been unduly pressured to take them. Another woman spoke about how

determined she had needed to be to resist the pressure to take drugs. This participant went on to speak sceptically about how she felt that Bert had used drugs to extend his power in the community:

*He [Bert] got more on a power trip and into drugs and then it 'went very strange from then on...He made a lot of mistakes in terms of abusing people's rights. Giving them drugs. Hoping to manipulate them, hoping to give them drugs and be able to have sex with them. It took me a long time to actually see that for what it was.*

Another participant agreed that it was when the community started to get into Ecstasy that they became “unstuck”. It seemed that there were divisions between Bert and supporters who were active in apparently manufacturing and providing drugs and others who did not agree with these practices. Several spoke about how there had been both secrecy and concern about the drug manufacturing on the premises:

*All the drug stuff: the purchasing of drugs; the secreting away of money in funds that weren't publicly known and weren't known to the Trust; potential contact with drug dealers and gangs; the potential production of drugs? I've never had that absolutely proved but it does appear from various people I've talked to and stuff that drugs were actually being produced on the property at some stage. And again people were just kind of told to mind their own business and things.*

Some of our participants suggested that their parents had made the decision to leave in response to widespread promotion of drug misuse.

For those who were at Centrepont during its later years, drug use was associated with the distant past. One participant protested indignantly that the general public didn't seem to understand that their generation had not been involved in drug use:

*The drugs were never ever given to the children or put on the children. That's one thing that's never ever happened.*

As with the issue of sexual abuse, participants who had not been exposed substantially to drugs had difficulty in coming to terms with public reports of what had happened to 'previous generations' of children. One spoke about how he never saw anything like the drug taking the media had described while he was there. He believed that this must have been blown out of proportion and something that happened to a small minority had then treated as though it had happened to all.

Another participant was more sceptical about categorical denials of drug use by children in the community, suggesting that it was so normalised within the community that it was difficult to recognise it as harmful. In her account she retold a conversation she had with another adult child from Centrepont who felt that she had not suffered the abuse that this participant had:

*And it was very interesting, [this young woman] said to me 'But, you know, well, we didn't have an experience like you did' and I said 'Well what about the drugs thing?' And she laughed, as she had no idea what she was saying. I don't think they get the context of really how horrific it was, and she said 'Oh yeah we were forced to drink 'raspberry juice' ha ha ha'. They were given like raspberry cordial that had Acid in it and forced to drink them but this was after I left.*

This account alluded to the possibility that young children were given drugs in some kind of fruit or vegetable juice, an allusion made by several participants, although none had experienced this directly themselves.

Overall it seemed that there was no one experience with drugs was typical of Centrepont. Nonetheless, for a period at least, there was significant drug use integrated into Centrepont practices around open communication and sexual expression and it was normalised. While some children had their experiences of drugs under the 'guidance' of adults in the community, others used the freedom and ready access to drugs at Centrepont to facilitate fun and recreational drug use during their teens. When drugs were being extensively used at Centrepont it seemed that this was a source of division and, at least according to some of our participants, marked the beginning of the decline of the community. The younger group of participants did not report exposure to drugs in the same way as others who lived at Centrepont.

### **3.13 Access to money and resources at Centrepont**

Centrepont's communal ideology was expressed through the management and distribution of financial assets and resources as well as lifestyle and living arrangements. From the accounts of several participants we learned that there were several tiers of community membership each with different financial obligations. We identified categories of non-resident supporters and clients for various goods and services. Participants also told us of the expectation for adults who opted to become residential members of Centrepont to cede

all their assets to the ownership of the community. The situation was somewhat different for people who were residential visitors. These people did not contribute their assets but could pay rent to stay at the community. The ‘children of Centrepont’ seemed to fall into a somewhat different category: They were seen as ‘belonging’ to the community regardless of the status of their parents within it.

Our participants explained that the adults of the community worked largely at Centrepont itself. They mentioned a range of work areas that might have been available including the nursery, craft work and the butchery amongst others. It also appeared that the workshops and therapy groups brought in money, with non-permanent visitors paying to attend, for example, on a weekend. A smaller number of adults seemed to have maintained employment outside the businesses of Centrepont but they were still expected to contribute their earnings to the community.

A number of our participants explained how their parents had handed over the profits from the sale of property or other family sources to the community in return for full membership. As one put it:

*My Dad put all of his inheritance into the community...And my parents worked there, non-stop while they were there. My, my mum was a [occupation], and all of the money that she earned, she also worked in the [work area within Centrepont] for several years, um, she would also have been earning a wage but she never got one.*

In return for effectively handing over their assets or earnings community members had the right to have such basic needs as accommodation, food, education or health needs provided by the community. The problem, however, came when they left the community and all of these assets were lost to them:

*The biggest, the biggest thing is a lot of families left with nothing. When you went there, you gave everything you had. You gave all your money. You gave all your belongings go into the community and then be looked after. But then when you chose to leave, you left with the clothes you were wearing, pretty much.*

For some participants this idea of sharing resources within a community was a reflection of a worthy ethos:

*There was something special there. So, it was really exciting. It wasn't just one or two, there was three hundred people there in its peak so I think to have that many*

*people that have given their all up, they have given all their clothes into one pot, all their money into one pot, that is pretty amazing.*

But most of our participants, whose parents ended up losing their assets with the closure of the community, had a somewhat more jaded perspective on this arrangement. They felt that where their parents had contributed their assets initially they had lost both capital and the products of their labour over the period they lived at the community. As one explained, his father had lost the opportunity to work outside the community or to get qualifications that would help him with later employment. One cried as she spoke about how she had watched her mother lose all her assets through Centrepont:

*Signing over all her money. Sold her house, gave it all to them and now I look after her gear while she lives in somebody else's house.*

Many of our participants spoke about how they believed their parents had worked exceptionally hard for Centrepont. Several, however, reflected that the hard work was done by only a small proportion of the adults and others made minimum contributions:

*Well – I mean there is, in terms of working, there was a big bunch of adults that were just plain lazy and it's always seemed to me, even as a young child, that there was a small portion of the adults that ran the place as such, in terms of getting it done. Not 'talking about it running the place', but actually brought in money, worked the nursery, worked the – all of that sort of thing, and then there were [a number] who did nothing but lie around all day, kind of thing.*

On the whole though it seemed that the Centrepont community took care of their members and visitors regardless of how well they contributed to the community. One participant explained how this experience of being looked after financially by the community had been very attractive to his mother:

*But I can remember mum, clear as a bell, she was saying to me when I was about 16, 'You know what I love about this place? The best thing? You don't have to worry about money. You don't have to worry about any bills – I haven't paid a bill in 10 years'.*

Several participants reflected that they did not think that Centrepont provided good adult role models for how to work and earn income in the outside world:

*We didn't have those role models that normal, most people, have in terms of working and making money, and providing for households, and all of that sort of thing.*



While all of our participants were retrospectively aware of the financial consequences of their parents' involvement at Centrepoint, they were understandably less conscious of the broader financial workings of the community and more aware of their own resource needs while growing up. Not surprisingly, our interviews indicate that children at Centrepoint were most concerned about access to pocket money, food, clothes, and to some extent education.

The built environment of Centrepoint was described by many participants as being wonderful. Most spoke proudly of the land and its buildings that had been erected over time and with the hard work of community members. While the buildings were well structured, however, it seems that beds were in short supply as the numbers at the community increased rapidly and for a time, at least, it seemed that there may have been some bed sharing. The comfortable use of the facilities was also disrupted during the period in which the community was forced to seek temporary shelter in buses, malls and maraes in response to North Shore City Council demands that they reduce the numbers at the community site in Albany.

Although some of our participants clearly spoke about having limited access to money for their own use as children, it was not entirely clear whether the little that they received was for paid for work at the community or some kind of pocket money. Certainly some children spoke about 'earning' money through their involvement in work at Centrepoint. In general though, it appeared that this money was minimal and, according to our participants, probably less than that their peers outside of Centrepoint had available to them. As one participant explained:

*There was just no, no concept of money. None. It was so far behind the times. I think kids at my school were getting about \$10 a week pocket money at the time just on average. You know, most kids would be getting probably \$2 or \$2.50 or something like that; you know.*

Another confirmed that there was little money available to children:

*We didn't have as much disposable income available to us I suppose because of that because our parents worked for the community and the community then funded what our parents needed. So even our parents were getting a weekly pocket money allowance. So there was less opportunity to do things like just go to the movies whenever you wanted to.*

Clearly though, for some participants money could be made from working at the community and one participant gained a strong work ethic and understanding of money from her time there, working in different businesses at Centrepont and earning pocket money that way.

Unlike money, food and other basic requirements such as toiletries seemed to have been relatively freely available to children at the community. Besides meals being provided, there was simple fare available for hungry children at any time. There was a free bus to take the children to school and resources were also available for recreation. A number of participants spoke about their enjoyment of having their basic requirements taken care of in this way:

*It was a fabulous childhood, I was free. I didn't have to do anything. I could just turn up and eat whenever I wanted to well, it, there was always food in the big fridge.*

*Everything was provided. There was never – there was always an abundance of food in the cupboards. There was always 30 tennis balls: you could go and smack tennis balls over the fence and lose them and there'd be a bucket of them waiting for you. You do that in a family home and they'd be smacking your ass 'cause there's only four tennis balls in the bloody box and they cost \$20 a thing...the only money we ever had was used to treat yourself, enjoy yourself.*

Clothes were generally shared and several participants spoke about the 'comclothes' or 'oldcom' that were available for everyday use and 'goodcom' that included better clothes for outings and so on. One told us of a time that recalled the vagaries of clothes choice at Centrepont:

*And every morning, I'd, I'd get, you'd go down and you'd get 'com clothes', which is communal clothes...And, and big baskets and things, and I put this, I quite fancied this one shirt, with this muscly guy on it, and it had something French on the bottom of it and I went to this gym, and this guy said, you know that's a gay shirt it was, some gay sort of bar or something that I'd...I went: 'Oh, really', wearing my communal clothes. I just said look, I just got up and got the shirt out of communal clothes. But as a 15 year old, it's like 'Ooh, really?'*

As another participant elaborated on the way that children accessed clothing during his time at the community:

*If you needed clothes they would kind of organise them for you – you didn't go out and choose your own clothes unless you were really lucky and there was a clothing budget...once you got to about 14 each kid got allocated a certain amount. You had to go and pick the clothing you liked, find out how much it was, come back and ask for it, ask for the money, go and get it, bring back the receipt. So you had sort of a couple of flash bits of clothing for yourself and everything else was pretty much*

*shared. It was definitely first up best dressed. No joke. Yep. Or go in there the night before when all the clothes were going out the drier and store some, stash some for the morning – you just got sneaky, you know. But I mean then you know as being a large community like that you'd go and buy yourself a nice shirt or something it would vanish in your wash you know. You'd be looking around and two weeks later someone else would be wearing it.*

For some participants this process of adjusting to communal ownership was at first difficult. One described one of his early experiences at Centrepont and how he quickly came to understand that he would have to give up personal possessions to the collective:

*When I came to the community I had all these Lego sets: they used to make Lego sets that were like packages, like an ambulance Lego set that you'd build an ambulance out of and a helicopter – I had them all separately set out, you know, I was quite meticulous and these kids just decided 'hey, we're in a community, you know, what's yours is mine what's mine is yours' and they just came into my room and grabbed it all and took it out and poured it into this big bucket of Lego like millions of bits of Lego – no way would you ever find those whole units ever again.*

While a number of participants seem to have felt reasonably comfortable with the easy access to resources and the communality of this, there were several who seemed to have chafed against their experience of deprivation.

One young woman explained how it was sometimes difficult to balance the collective ethos of the community against the values of the outside world. She offered an example:

*And we had a fleet of cars that everyone had to share and you had to book the car when you needed to go somewhere so things were just not quite as – you know you couldn't just take the things, like just jump in your car to pop down to the shop for granted as you can when it's your car and you live in your own household. So those sorts of things – it was never so much I suppose it was more just embarrassment because you knew that so many people didn't understand or knew nothing about it.*

Other participants also seemed aware of their deprivation at the community in contrast to those they knew outside of it. One spoke about how she became aware that they always looked more 'scruffy' than other children at school and how she felt about the children who had bought packets of chips in their lunchboxes, since all her food was home baked.

*We probably, because obviously we came from a community we didn't have the nicest clothes or the best school lunches the other kids would come with the nice little packets of chips and that sort of stuff, Centrepont wasn't about all the extravagant material things in life so there was sometimes a bit of jealousy there with other children.*

Another participant spoke about how he had enviously opened the fridges at his friends' houses and longed for the luxuries of taste he didn't have at Centrepont. He went on to describe living at Centrepont as a "hand to mouth" existence and gave this as his eventual reason for leaving as a young adult:

*Oh, yeah, it was meetings about whether we should have cheese for lunch, because it was you know, so expensive and I, that used to get to me that the last couple of years I just, because I was just working for food really, I considered it was just food and lodgings really, that, and, and they'd just skimp on the, the most basic stuff.*

For some the collective and cautious allocation of resources at Centrepont was itself a painful process. One described how she used to struggle to have to ask for extra underclothes at Centrepont and would sneak into the storeroom at night to take some so that she wouldn't have to give a public account of why she needed new underpants. Another young woman described how she had had to beg for a new mattress and was refused even though one was available. Yet another explained how she had been frustrated when her request to study a subject she was passionate about was refused.

For some, their dissatisfaction was heightened by what they perceived as inequities in the allocation of resources at Centrepont. One participant explained how she had struggled to get shoes because the woman in charge of clothing didn't approve of her:

*She was in charge of goodcom which was the adult members' clothing, good clothing. You had oldcom which was every day clothes and then goodcom which you could go and borrow stuff or they would go and borrow stuff to wear out or whatever and I had a pair of shoes one time [for a particular purpose]. That didn't last very long and I come home from one day, from school, the shoes had gone from my room. I knew she had taken them but, you know, things like that. You know, if they didn't feel like you deserved it then they took it back or you didn't get it. You weren't good enough.*

Other participants also supported this idea that resources were allocated depending on where they were in the social hierarchy of the community.

One participant speculated that some of the greediness she noticed in the children around food might be attributed to emotional rather than physical motives. Speaking about how she and others would congregate in the kitchen after school to eat, she suggested that they may have been looking, not just for food, but for some kind of comfort:

*I think when children you know, are feeling deprived of emotional needs and the security that they need is just found in food, you know, and it's just like that replaces it. It's your comfort thing. So we'd come home from school and stuff ourselves silly.*

Perhaps it is not surprising that in an atmosphere where some children were feeling materially and emotionally deprived, some stole from the community. Of those who mentioned stealing as adolescents, one gave some insight into her motivations for her pilfering:

*I used to do a lot on my own at Centrepont. Stay up really late and steal things. It was the only way I knew how to get what I wanted. In an area that was a locker room type thing where people had a little container, the adults, it was like their little personal cubby hole, I remember one night going and inspecting many of them. Seeing what little treasures I could find. I used to go down to the business rooms and steal the leather and stuff to make bracelets. It was the only way to get something, was to go and take it, even if it wasn't yours.*

For some of those who talked about stealing, their target was food, supplies or drugs. For others money was involved. It seems that several children were involved in an elaborate fraud that involved getting false signatures on work slips which were then used to claim pay from the community. Apparently, this scam was uncovered and those involved were punished by the community.

In summary, Centrepont financial organisation included asset and earning contributions from adults being given in exchange for the needs of adults and their children being met by the community. The children were not required to contribute financially but they did seem to have had rights that were similar to those of adult residents. While for some the community lifestyle at Centrepont felt like a carefree existence in which they would be cared for collectively. But others felt deprived in comparison to peers at school and sometimes other children of the community. Some were frustrated by what they saw as the inequitable processes resource allocation. We identified evidence of material and emotional deprivation within the accounts of participants, in spite of Centrepont providing effectively for their most basic material needs. We were also struck by the number of participants who spoke about stealing from the community; an activity that supports other evidence of deprivation and frustration since it was intended to meet unmet needs and/or subvert adult authority.

### 3.14 Relationships with people and organisations outside of Centrepont

Because Centrepont functioned as a largely self-sustaining community with its own ideology there were strong implications for how the ‘outside world’ appeared to those who lived there. While communal practices at Centrepont created a degree of separation between those inside and outside of Centrepont, there were a number of ways in which our participants recognised interactions with the broader society as being part of their Centrepont experience. For almost all of those we interviewed school provided the environment for their primary interactions with the world outside Centrepont. They were also aware of the attitudes of the broader community towards Centrepont through media representations that predominated at the time.

According to a number of our participants, Centrepont was founded on assuming that there were shortcomings within broader society. It was set up specifically to do things ‘differently’. Most of our participants recognised that Centrepont had stood for a set of values that weren’t necessarily accepted or acceptable in mainstream New Zealand. Some participants remained committed to ideals of the community and some still supported particular values such as disdain for individualism and prioritised interest in the ‘common good’.

We spoke with participants who recognised that establishing Centrepont as ‘different’ from the outside world had led to some suspicion and belittlement of those who were not a part of it. Particularly heightened awareness of the differences between Centrepont and the outside world was noticeable among those who had close relationships both within and outside Centrepont. One woman described it like this:

*So I always had this outside. It was called ‘the outside’. Yeah. That was the terminology in the community and ‘outside’ was kind of talked about in the way that, you know, it was sort of, not as enlightened. You know, being outside was kind of like boring, normality; most people outside aren’t happy really.*

Another explained how growing up with a set of negative beliefs about society affected her in the long term:

*Centrepont does make you judge like they made you judge people on the outside...and they pigeon-holed them, and they basically said: ‘Well this is, they’re so screwed up because of this and this and this and this is how they think’. And I*

*have lived with that for years and years of believing that, probably not consciously but on a sub-conscious level, I'm being dictated by that, from back early on, because that's when you're shaped, eh, when you're teenagers and children.*

Yet another described how she was left feeling mistrustful of the outside world:

*[I was given] such a, a negative view of people, and in terms of because there was a real 'us and them' um, tape that was played there. In terms of 'we're so great, you know, we're living this great life, we've chosen to step out of society, society sucks', you know... There was a sort of myth that everybody outside was fucked, basically, they were completely miserable and unhappy, they didn't live good lives, you know, it was this huge big fear right from a small child built up, about the outside world. And it was just complete manipulation of the truth.*

Some explained, angrily, how negative beliefs about others were used to support the hierarchy of the Centrepont organisation:

*So everyone outside the front gate was fucked. Visitors were partially fucked 'cause they weren't members. Members were more fucked than therapists. The leader was the all-seeing and we believed he could read our minds.*

Inasmuch as the children of Centrepont were enclosed by negative views of 'outsiders', they were also exposed to hostility towards the community in their primary domain of interaction – school. All Centrepont children of school-going age attended local area schools and many participants reported difficult experiences of negative attitudes and teasing from peers at school.

One participant spoke of discovering that they were 'not normal' when going to primary school. While she didn't experience discrimination from teachers she felt that the other children looked down on the Centrepont children. Another said:

*Other kids would sort of say stuff and we were always the 'bummy' kids at school who never had shoes and turned up with lice and dirty clothes. Because we didn't... it was completely communal... so we didn't have our own clothes or anything like that. Yeah. So yeah, there was a definite feeling of being different.*

Our participants provided a plethora of stories about teasing and taunting at school. For some it was just the odd comment like: 'Oh, whose undies are you wearing today?' or shouts like 'commy kids' or 'com kids'. For others there were more pointedly sexual and personal taunts. One described this:

*I remember one kid came up to me just after mum was thinking of becoming a member and saying 'is your Mum gonna fuck Bert?' I said 'noooo. Fuck off! She isn't going to fuck Bert!' and then running to Mum. [the other child shouting] 'Yes she is, yes she is' and running to Mum: 'you're not going to fuck Bert are you?'*

Several of our participants described how rumours had blighted their school experience:

*One of the girls at school spread around a rumour that I'd come from Centrepont and that it was a place where poor people lived and children got raped there and you know, horrible things like that. And I was one of the popular girls at school and there was horrible rumours being spread about me and I was worried that everyone was going to hate me.*

Another explained how embarrassed she was when it was rumoured that the Centrepont girls weren't wearing any underwear and a number of them were called in to discuss it with teachers.

From our participants' school stories it was evident that the broader community were well aware of Centrepont, its central characters and some of its beliefs. Our participants' experiences of being teased seemed, unsurprisingly, to intensify during periods in which there were police raids on the community and associated media attention.

As awareness of Centrepont spread through the children were not only exposed to teasing from children, but also felt the disapproval of the adults in the wider community, in particular the parents of their school peers. Some spoke about how, while they were allowed to go to their friends' houses, their friends were not allowed to visit them at Centrepont.

*The kids' parents sort of treated you like you were not, you know, you were a bad child and that wasn't nice.*

For some this was distressing though in retrospect several understand and forgave this reaction:

*But I mean, at the same time, I can understand it. If I was a parent and all I had heard about a place was what was on the news, I probably would do everything I could to stop my children from going. Looking back on it, it's understandable. I can't really, I wouldn't want to judge in that sense.*

*I imagine if I had children I'd be pretty sceptical letting my kids go to a place like that after what you read, as well. So a lot of children weren't allowed there. A lot of people weren't allowed there. But um, normally once parents had come and checked the place out for themselves, they were fine and they were completely at ease. But*



*when all they're hearing about is raids going on, and drugs being found, and abuse happening and pornographic material, you know, it was pretty hard to get your friends to come over.*

Social relationships at school were affected despite several participants' attempts to hide or minimise their association with Centrepont. This was difficult as catching the Centrepont bus clearly identified their association and even less daily commonalities, like the effects of the over-chlorinated pool on their hair:

*So there was always a sort of, there was probably a fair amount of embarrassment or apprehension at times to talk to other people about it, if that makes sense? I know the school bus [laughing] was always a funny thing. Everybody knew our school bus, that it was the Centrepont school bus and so especially as we got older, like towards intermediate school – I mean when we were at high school we didn't go on the same bus, we caught the local school bus – but getting to intermediate age and going to catch the school bus and sort of trying to get on as quickly as possible so that no-one would see that you were on the bus, because people would go: 'Oh you're a Centrepont kid because you're on the bus'. And I mean I never experienced it so much having dark hair but I know that there was often – 'cause we had a swimming pool and there was a large amount of children who often would have green hair from the chlorine and kids would get teased about that and those sorts of things. I mean that would happen in a lot of places but for some reason its because we spent so much time in the pool I guess [laughs].*

While some participants explained how they tried to fit in with peers at school, for most, the prejudice they experienced at school reinforced their reliance on one another.

*I pretty much always had someone from Centrepont at the same school as me which was good because we were sort of able to draw support from each other and you know the few girls who I did grow up with there you know they sort of shared the same experiences so if they were teased at school you know we would be able to talk about it and be able to sort of...*

*We were so mature, and we were so tough, that, we didn't, you know, we didn't really get teased a lot. Or, and there were such a big group of us, you kind of always had that support.*

One explained how the separation of Centrepont children at school was reciprocal:

*Because the thing is, once they knew you were from there, the majority of them kept away from you anyway. You know, they weren't keen to be friends with you, like the community kids stuck together a lot.*

Another participant explained how protection was not the only reason for the social separation of the Centrepont group from other children at school: It was hard for them to relate to others whose experiences were so different to their own. One explained it like this:

*The CP or Centrepont kids hung out together predominantly because I guess there was, they were different, we were different...I mean people who have lived on maybe kibbutzes or, and other communities would probably have more of a feel, but to your average teenager, you know, living in a white, middle class suburban Long Bay or East Coast Bays, they just, they just don't understand the concept of it.*

Some participants spoke about the fact that there were things that they could discuss openly at Centrepont, like sex or relationships that they recognised as not being appropriate to discuss with people outside of the community. One participant who described herself as being in a sexual relationship with an older man while she was at school elaborated the points of difference as she saw them:

*I'd been exposed to so much, and these were girls still talking about getting first periods, and first kisses with boys, and you know it was a totally different world to me, you know.*

While they experienced prejudice and stigma as 'Centrepont children', and recognised that their experiences were very different from many of their school peers, social separation was also linked to the emotional closeness they already experienced with their Centrepont friends. The strong social bonds formed at Centrepont often made outside friends unnecessary. Several participants spoke about how they had never felt the need to make friends out of the community:

*Because you always had your best friends living with you, and you had this big group of people to play with. When we were at school, we never really put any effort, we didn't really go to your friends places after school and stay the night and hang, hang out with them on the weekends.*

Another participant explained that she had found it easier to socialise with Centrepont children and speculated that this was because she hadn't developed the necessary social skills to extend beyond this group:

*I always found it really hard to make friendships with the people outside the commune. I'm not even sure why that was. I'm not sure that we were socialised in quite the same way maybe, that other kids are socialised, like we were just born surrounded by people so there wasn't really a teaching situation of 'Oh you're making friends with so and so and you guys should go play together!' I don't know. Just maybe, maybe that's wrong, I don't know.*

Although most participants spoke about social distance from their peers at school, there were a few who reported having had good friendships with non-Centrepont children and

for some this was an important source of support. One described how she attached herself to the family of a school friend:

*I ended up spending a lot of the time there because I think I was just craving that family unit, craving the 10 o'clock bedtime and craving the 'come home from school do your homework and make dinner'.*

Others seemed to have deliberately sought out friends outside the community as an expression of their disillusionment with it. One explained how she had always felt like an outsider at Centrepont and was relieved to find people she felt were more similar to her at school:

*We were very similar in feeling sort of on the outside of things so we were drawn together really close, we had a really good close relationship and we looked after each other, you know, really supported each other.*

A couple of participants described a particular relationship with a teacher as a source of support for them. Some also reported that school, more generally, served as a kind of sanctuary from Centrepont:

*I think school was kind of a protective factor for me. Yeah. I mean that's what I just, all the way through just kept at and seemed to do well at and that was, I see now that was probably one of my saving graces. I just kept on with that.*

While most of our participants maintained their strongest alliances among the Centrepont group throughout their childhood, Centrepont sometimes attracted outsider adolescents as a place to meet and socialise. One participant described having experienced her school peers as being envious of the freedom that she had at Centrepont.

*You know, it used to be great having so much freedom there because you did whatever you want. Our friends at school thought it was great and they all loved my Mum. They all thought I had the best Mum in the world. I didn't but they did because she basically let me do what I want, let me do whatever I want, most of the time.*

The regular parties held there were popular with North Shore teenagers and some told us how teenage 'drifters' would find their way there and be taken in.

*Boys from broken homes and stuff like that, you know, latched on to us as a group, you know, um and felt welcomed at the community, and of course, we all, there was room for them.*

While visitors were allowed at Centrepont it seems there was some discouragement of people having stronger loyalties outside the community than inside. Having boyfriends outside of the community, for example, did not seem to have been encouraged. One detailed a telling event that, for her, outlined the tension that existed between inside and outside the community. She described how some teenage friends from outside had stolen an item from the Centrepont supplies and, as she confronted them about it, recognised that her loyalty must ultimately lie with Centrepont:

*They had crossed the line with the community and they had – because I was now sided with the community they had crossed the line with me. And then it was just strange after that because it was almost as though there was no going back.*

From most of our interviews it was evident that the connection between Centrepont and the outside world was not always a comfortable or seamless one for the children who lived there. Some of our participants reported that they were aware as children about how the broader society regarded Centrepont. Experiences of stigma beyond the everyday interactions at school were detailed with one participant acknowledging that even the local shopkeepers seemed to look down on the Centrepont children. She explained how the group's 'scruffiness' would draw negative attention and people would suspect them of shoplifting. Most were also aware of the media attention that had been given to Centrepont. In some cases this had continued after our participants had left the community, but for others it occurred extensively during the period they were there. This coverage focused largely on the alleged sexual abuse, drug use and police raids. Some of our participants felt that this had given the general public a distorted perception of the community and were especially sensitive to negativity it produced.

In summary, it seemed that the attitude of Centrepont to the broader society and the prejudice of the society towards them, helped to create a situation in which there was an often uncomfortable tension between 'inside' and 'outside' of Centrepont. The victimisation of Centrepont children at school reinforced their dependence on one another and increased their suspicion of the outside world. While there were certainly some participants who felt connected to friends or institutions outside of Centrepont, this was relatively rare. Additionally the negative media representation of Centrepont reinforced the social separation of the children within the community and isolated them from potential connections and support in the outside world.

### 3.15 Experience of law and other outside agencies at Centrepoint

Early in its history Centrepoint was involved with legal disputes with the North Shore City Council around residential permits for the community. As we noted in our introduction, Centrepoint had encountered legal disputes about building permits and taxation from its earliest establishment as a community. In the late 1980s and early 1990s though there was a significant change in the kind of legal clashes that Centrepoint encountered: Civil law was no longer the primary site of dispute and a series of police raids on the community for child pornography and drugs resulted in criminal charges and the imprisonment of key community members. Our participants experienced these events as children and provided their perspective on Centrepoint's clashes with the law during our interviews.

A number of our participants reported having been at Centrepoint during one or more of the police raids. One woman reflected on how the raids were relatively normalised during her time at the community:

*You know, it was quite normal to be woken up, you know, with police knocking on the door, you know, and having the raids. To an extent it was kind of exciting, because we didn't have to go to school for the day, you know. When you grow up that way, everything's normal, you know, you don't question any of it because you've, you've grown up with it.*

Another participant gave this rather matter-of-fact account of the way in which raids typically unfolded at the community:

*I can't remember how many I was present for – I do remember that they always used to come really, really early so you were often woken up and everybody had to get out of bed and we just had to all go down to the kitchen area and you just weren't allowed to leave until they had done what they were doing and then we'd be allowed to go on with our day and so we'd all have to get down there and then after that all have to get ready to go to school and then go to school and get to school at morning tea time and so, but, of course the school would have been alerted during the morning – someone would have called the school to say 'look, this is happening, we can't – the kids can't be there until such and such a time' and so there was never that much of an issue.*

Despite the sense in which police raids were normalised or 'typical' for some participants, others recalled them as more dramatically atypical of their everyday life in the community. One offered this more vivid and detailed account of her experience:

*We all thought it was a drug raid at first, at the time, because it was a dawn raid. Three helicopters, there was like 42 police and investigators all-together, dogs, cameras everywhere, media lined up at the gate. Every gate there was media. The helicopter had a spotlight. You know, it was like movies, very dramatic. And it was at five am. And you stepped out of your room. My memory of it was this shining light coming in my window. 'What the hell was that?' I woke up, it was still dark. You could hear this thud, thud, thud, thud. I was thinking, 'oh my God, what's going on?' I don't know. Opened my door to the blinding helicopter light, shining right at me. I'm looking at it going 'this has to be a dream.' ...I looked down and there's these investigators walking up and down with clipboards. I was just like 'what?!' and I shut my door. I was naked because I had been in bed and I thought, 'what the – I don't get it, I really don't' and I went out and then someone was at my door and he was like, 'Okay, what room is this? What number room? What's your name? And get dressed and get down to the kitchen.' ... Walked down and there's just people everywhere, just, they were just trashing the place, just trashing it. Absolutely, like pulling everything out of cupboards and just dumping it on the floor in piles. So disrespectful. Walking round with these big cameras on their shoulders. We were just so blown away and I got down to the lounge, dining room area and all the parents were just sort of sitting down together, murmuring, you know and I got to my Dad and I was like 'Dad, what is this?' You know, 'What the hell is going on?' And he's like 'I'm pretty sure it's a drug raid and no-one's going anywhere'. Basically they just did a whole lockdown on the place. There was, like 90 people living there at the time and it went on all day.*

While a few participants described the raids as being 'unpleasant' for most they had been a source of excitement. Where they experienced anxiety at the police presence, it focused on the possibility that their own drug stashes might be discovered by the police. While one described how he threw his marijuana out of the window another rushed off to warn a friend:

*I was just thinking, 'shit' and being teenagers being teenagers I started thinking 'oh my God, what have I got in my room', you know? I was 15, 16, you know. 'Oh shit, what have I got? What have I got?' And then I started thinking 'oh my God, my friend's got some dope' and I ran into his room and I was like 'Have you stashed everything you've got?' 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, it's all out'.*

One participant recalled how he had been inadvertently involved in secreting drugs on the property while the police were there when he was a teenager. He had been attending to a task on the property when he saw flashing lights and police cars. Then he was told by an adult member of the community to pick up a 44 gallon of 'tetra' and take it by tractor to a barn across the road. It was only later that he found out this was one of the chemicals used to manufacture Ecstasy on the property.

But for most of our participants, the police raids did not seem to be taken seriously as a threat. Some described how they had challenged the police when they were being questioned or asked to leave their rooms. The girls objected to police being there while they dressed. One man reported that when the police asked him where his mother was he jibed that he didn't know whose bed she was sleeping in that night. Another described how, after waiting in the kitchen/dining room area as the police had requested, the teenagers began to get restless and decided to defy their orders:

*They're saying 'Don't leave, don't leave' and we're just like, 'No, piss off. We're not sitting in this room all day' and we got up and trolleyed down to the gate. This helicopter, news helicopter, followed us all the way down to the gate. And we're just like [gesturing upwards] 'Fuck off!' you know, [laughing] like being little rascals and we got down to the gate and there were, honestly, like 15 media cars parked behind each other. All the media standing along the gate so it was like media car, police car, media car, police car, almost all the way from the gate, you know, like five hundred metres back to the road ... We just like, 'What the hell?' So we just sort of rascalled around, ran around, and they managed to get us on the news doing that and yeah, I can't remember what ended up happening. We missed a day of school and then, you know, it was all back in the media. Over nothing, nothing! Just, you know...*

At the time of the raids, most of our participants seemed not to have reflected a great deal on the reasons for the police presence. When they did think about it they may have been somewhat confused as one participant's account suggested:

*I had an idea of what was going on the whole time but it wasn't like I knew everything. I mean the police raid happened and I sort of... 'cause we had a couple of police raids when I was younger, and I sort of knew what was, I mean I knew that a police raid was happening but I was more worried about my Dad had um.....um...you know like pirated DVDs or pirated videos: I was worried he would go to jail for pirating videos and things! I wasn't so aware that there was, you know, the whole drug thing happening and, you know, that was more what the cops were searching for were the drugs and things like that.*

Other participants were aware that the raids had something to do with 'drugs' or with 'child pornography' but explained that they had felt rather distant from these issues themselves:

*At the same time I think there was a lot of stuff that we, we probably didn't necessarily know who was involved all the time and the charges. Not because it was hidden from us or anything but just because we were so, well to me I, I just, 'cause I felt so removed from it because I didn't have any personal experience of what was going on that any of it was to do with.*

For some the raids seemed to be based on laughable claims by the police:

*It was a little bit like a joke I think. You know, ‘Silly police – what are they raiding us for? We’re not nothing – what are we? They think we’re this big scary cult you know [laughs] we’re like ‘What? Honestly!’*

Others suggested that the raids had been set up to intimidate the community and even claimed that false evidence had been planted to incriminate them. One participant also mentioned that when the police had first started investigating they were told to “lie to them”

While the police presence did not seem to have been taken particularly seriously by most of our participants, several noted that the raids marked the beginning of the community’s decline. As one put it, for the adults it was the “last straw – they didn’t want their kids to grow up having those kinds of memories”. It was at this time that a number of families began to leave Centrepont.

For those whose parents were arrested the raids had an even more painful aspect. Several of our participants had had parents who had been charged and some who had been jailed for offences at Centrepont. Imprisonment was not uncommon for adults at the community, according to at least one of our participants:

*I guess in a sense it was easier, because you just knew that other people in the community had been to jail. It seemed like the kind of thing that happened: every male went to jail at one point or another, to an extent.*

In spite of the perception that criminal charges against adults were relatively normalised within the Centrepont community several of our participants hinted at their considerable distress at the loss of their parent in this way, despite being cared for by a remaining parent or another family at the community. Several spoke about how much they missed a parent and how months in prison could feel through a child’s eyes to be “years and years”. Another spoke very sadly about the fear he had experienced during his parent’s imprisonment and how this had haunted him through his childhood and adult life.

For participants who had experienced a parent’s imprisonment, their difficulties were generally exacerbated by the challenge of reconciling their parents’ alleged crimes with their role in their own lives. Several indicated awareness that their parents had been arrested for crimes related to sexual abuse and/or drugs. Mostly they were vague on the details of



their parents' charges during our interviews, perhaps reflecting their unwillingness to acknowledge them specifically or in detail.

One of our participants who had subsequently come to acknowledge her parent's involvement in sexual abuse spoke about how he had initially reacted on finding out about this:

*I remember being told that [a parent] was going to go to prison and I remember being just adamant that it wasn't going to happen; that there was no way that society could do that. You know, that they could actually take my [parent] away. No – that was not going to happen...I was so naïve and wanted to write these letters to the people who had accused my [parent], well, that [my parent] abused and I wanted to say like 'How could you do this?' 'How can you take my [parent] away?'*

Another of the few participants who spoke in detail about a parent's crimes offered a rather uncertain and uncomfortable account of what had led to the imprisonment:

*And I think the, the things that they were put into prison for – the [people] who went to prison at around that time – had sort of happened quite a lot longer ago, for example the girls who had the issues had grown up and so there'd been a bit of a gap in time between. Yeah I think [my parent] said many years ago. I don't know if that's a true figure or not but [my parent] says 'I'm being, I was put into jail for stuff that happened many years ago'. So maybe then the girls were younger and [my parent] was put into jail for child molestation. Other [people] went to jail, one I think went for rape; one went for molestation and production of Ecstasy. I don't know there was a few different things they all went for but I mean, yeah, they were all reasonably serious, serious things they went there for...It was strange but it wasn't, like it wasn't like it wasn't talked about. I knew, I think I was younger and never really questioned it...yeah it wasn't normal just...[someone] said [my parent's] in prison and that's what [my parent's] there for' and I was like 'okay'. I didn't question, I didn't question a lot of it.*

Those who had had to confront the possibility of their parents' conviction for crimes had clearly engaged in some later soul-searching. One participant explained how she had found herself having to think about what her father had done after he was imprisoned, despite still being quite young herself:

*And there was some sort of family issues once we'd moved out, you know, where sort of I questioned a lot of things about his past and it made it quite difficult you know, like I sort of had to deal with, I don't know, like I had to deal with issues that you wouldn't expect someone of my age to deal with: I think I was only young when I heard about some stories that made me really upset and I lost contact with my dad for a whole year and dealt with a lot of that.*

Others found a way to manage their experience by drawing attention to the normalising of intergenerational sexual behaviour, making comparisons among adults to minimise their parents' culpability or denying their parents guilt altogether. One provided this explanation of her parent's involvement in abuse:

*You know that was what it was, probably, probably a task ...people were probably asked to ...and it was a weird world. I mean you went along with things because that was what you were there for...It was frustrating. A lot of people got away with stuff [who] were actually quite dangerous and a lot of people got done who were really not a problem. It was a shame.*

Another participant acknowledged that his parent had been charged with abusing children at Centrepont but questioned the significance of the charges given that they had subsequently been dropped:

*And, and initially [my parent] was charged for abusing kids at Centrepont but had left Centrepont at the time, and all the charges got dropped, so I don't know maybe it was some minor things or something, because surely they wouldn't have dropped them if it was some full-on thing?*

But not all participants attempted to defend their parents from responsibility for crimes committed at Centrepont. One participant challenged her parent's claims of not being involved in some of the crimes at the community:

*[My parent] always wished [he/she] hadn't done it, but [he/she] did. And as far as I'm concerned, if you're willing to lie for these people and...you were obviously involved in it. You weren't just impassively looking on. That's my theory anyway.*

Some prominent members of the community were jailed during the period in which the community was still active, and our participants reported attempts from the community to provide them with support both during their trials and their periods of imprisonment. Several of our participants acknowledged that the community had helped arrange transport for them to visit a relative in prison while others spoke about being allowed to attend the trials of community members.

Not surprisingly, the imprisonment of community members and claims of sexual abuse brought welfare services in the form of CYPS to Centrepont. Some of our participants spoke about how they had experienced official welfare involvement at Centrepont. For some it was not seen as supportive, but rather as a threat to their continued presence at their community and their relative security with their parents:

*I just remember thinking ‘you guys are fricking crazy’, because we’re such happy intelligent kids, who have absolutely nothing wrong happening to us. You take us away from our families ...*

We heard about children being frightened of being questioned about sexual abuse by welfare workers. One participant described how she was instructed by her parents to ‘run away’ briefly from the community to escape the possibility of being removed by CYPS. She voiced anger at what she saw as the faulty assumptions of the welfare organisation and their intrusion into the life of the community:

*[What] I found most frustrating when CYPS got involved is, these women just seemed to have set in their mind that we were these damaged, abused children, and they had to all take us away now – and you know, we were about [age] at this time, a lot of the kids, a lot were younger, but my group were around [age], and I just remember finding it so frustrating when I’d speak to them, and say to them ‘look we’re fine, none of that is happening any more’, that is, you know, ‘that’s so far gone’, and I don’t know, they just seemed to have it set in their mind oh that ‘these are children from Centrepont and we need to save them all’.*

For children who were already feeling under threat from the arrest of their parents and sensing the disintegration of the Centrepont community, the concern from the welfare services was often felt to be a further threat to their security.

On the whole our participants did not report any significant distress around the police raids on Centrepont, which seemed to have been treated as a minor drama or adventure for most. On the other hand, while imprisonment of adults was relatively normalised within the community it seemed to have caused some considerable distress to children whose parents were charged – and especially to those whose parents were subsequently imprisoned. While only a few of our participants spoke about the role of the social welfare services, it did seem that this largely compounded their distress by creating further insecurity about their position in the community at a time when they were already feeling less safe within it.

Participants also spoke about some of the dynamics that surrounded those Centrepont children who reported abuse or other crimes themselves. While some of these events occurred during the time the community still operated, they also made up part of the post-Centrepont experiences and are therefore discussed in the next section of the report.

### 3.16 Leaving Centrepont

Among our participants there were as many different reasons for leaving Centrepont as there were experiences of living there. Some had come reluctantly with a parent and also left this way. Some chose to leave as they grew older while others left when they were younger. Some left immediately and permanently while for others leaving was a more gradual process. Some were delighted to escape their experiences of abuse and others were bereft at losing their home. One of our participants whose family left abruptly and without warning regretted that she had not had a chance to say goodbye properly to her friends.

While generalisations about motives for leaving Centrepont are impossible given the diversity of adult children's experiences, we did identify a pattern of some families leaving as a consequence of ideological differences with Centrepont's development. One of our participants explained that there were often times when people wanted to leave when something 'contradicted their morals' but they would be coaxed back into the fold.

Ideology was also implicated when some of our participants spoke about how Bert's imprisonment resulted in a loss of direction in the community. One described how the community began to follow his ideas in an overly rigid way which engendered some resistance:

*After Bert left the whole place began to change – people were trying to follow his 'word' like it was the bible: People weren't all following Bert Potter and what he, what, even, I think they were dragging up some things it was almost like following the bible or something, they were trying to follow him word for word, what he said, and what he did and even he was a bit shocked I think at some of the things that people were trying to keep going to, to keep the place.*

Another suggested that his absence had gradually weakened the ideology of the community and there was less pressure to accept his ideas. It also seemed that there may have been more ideological confusion when Bert returned from prison and appeared less committed to his own beliefs:

*It was, the whole place was changing while I was there, and in the end, yeah, they were still sort of hanging out for when Bert gets home, and when he got home, he was this changed man, and he didn't want to have anything to do with sex, or...women or anything. Yeah.*

Some of our participants spoke about the community's use of drugs being the turning point for their parents in making the decision to leave:

*Well that was when sort of drugs busts were going on, yeah. I think people were starting to leave. Numbers were sort of going down. A lot of people were leaving. Probably not the best of times. I kind of think things, you know, once the drugs sort of started, I think things started spiralling out of control really and people, you know, who had sort of reasonable minds, you know, judgement and decisions were probably not the best.*

Other families seem to have been triggered into leaving by the police raids. It wasn't always clear whether decisions to leave at this point were due to the raids having highlighted an incompatibility between personal values and the practices of the community or whether it was simply due to the fear of a family member being charged with some offence. One participant, for example, explained how it was a mixture of these and other reasons that prompted her family to leave:

*That was one of the reasons, I think we left, because [my parent committed an offence], and the whole community wasn't a good atmosphere by that point anyway but, yeah, [my parent] was scared that [he/she] was going to get court-martialled, I don't know – court martial is an army thing, isn't it? – [he/she] was going to get charged with something, and [he/she] was also starting to lose interest. I mean God was saying, I mean Bert was saying he was God and that sort of crap, and [other parent] was losing [his/her] rose coloured glasses, some of the abuse going on.*

A number of participants seemed to suggest a gradual process in which the Centrepont community started 'breaking down' and a period where there was a 'general exodus' of families who had become disillusioned with some of the Centrepont practices. One described how he saw the community membership dwindle over the time he lived there:

*Initially there were beds right beside each other because they were cram-packed there was no room in between because there was hardly any room and as people started to leave and it, it got down to from 350 when I first, when I arrived there to about 150 [later].*

By the time one of our participants was living there, there were only a small group of teenagers left.

It seemed that the community also became more factionalised towards the end of its life. One participant explained her experience of living there as the community divided around their support for or opposition to Bert and his teachings:

*[There were] people that completely disagreed with him and what he did, and people that still followed his original teachings, without all the bad stuff that happened.*

This participant left after she found the tension between these factions had made life unbearable for her at Centrepont:

*I wasn't really welcome there, because the people that were then living there were all new people that had come in...And I was this daughter from Centrepont who a lot of them, they didn't appreciate you being there that had been from the past....So in a sense that left things quite bad, because I was only young and I kind of really wanted everything to stay how it used to be, and I kind of stuck in until it was pretty horrible.*

It seems that the disintegration of Centrepont was hastened by a decision to offer a one-off settlement of \$50,000 per person to families who supported Bert Potter in return for their leaving the community. This strategy was proposed by the Trust as a way of trying to remove those who were responsible for the worst abuses from the community. Families who opted for the agreement signed away their rights to any other community assets and agreed to leave, allowing the community to develop a new identity in the new name of Anahata. This strategy resulted in the exodus of a number of families who associated themselves strongly with Bert Potter and his teachings.

According to many of our participants, the settlement became the focus of some considerable resentment for those who did not support Bert Potter and were forced to leave the community with little or nothing in the way of financial resources. Some clearly felt they had been punished for opposing some of the worst excesses of the community, leaving with considerable anger and resentment:

*I could just not believe that these people that signed up to be Bert-supporters got paid out all this money...I think that was generally the feeling. You know, it was pretty gut wrenching to have – especially coming from my mother, who had always said everything we needed would be provided in terms of things like that, and all of a sudden it's fallen apart.*

*I remember being extremely angry that the people who had to leave Centrepont got compensation um even the ones who had to go to prison and the – us who came out*

*of it, had to get out of the community we got nothing basically so that was pretty irritating.*

One participant expressed the injustice inherent in this decision in a nutshell:

*Yeah, and that was the only way they could get them off the land. But then see what happened was they got all the money, the bad guys got all the money.*

We also heard accounts of families that had considered “signing the paper” to get the payout but did not want to align themselves with the past abuses of the community and made a moral decision not to take the money offered:

*We got asked basically do you want to take sides and be part of this. And we and we made the choice. Not to... not to do it. And, and people could say, ‘oh, well, you’re an idiot, you’re a fool’. But, but I think that they are actually the fools really at the end of the day because you know. I mean it is only money, and, and I think the whole of society would do well to learn a big lesson from that. You know. That that’s basically what ruins a lot of people and their and their hearts and their lives, is, is their, their greed and their desire for money.*

While the families of some of our participants left the community in response to shifts in the ideology and practices of Centrepont, others seem to have had more personal reasons. Just as many entered the community on the back of parental separations and other personal crises, so some left Centrepont for similar reasons. Some participants explained how their parents had separated at the community and one or other partner leaving Centrepont finalised the process. One participant described how his father had challenged his mother’s custody of the children at Centrepont and came to take them away.

Some of our participants had chosen to leave by themselves as either older teenagers or young adults. One of our participants explained his perception that the community accepted young people leaving as they would in any family home:

*I don’t think, you know, there was never anything, you know, ‘You need to stay here’ you know, ‘and have children’ or anything silly like that. It was always – I think they always sort of had sort of children’s interests in heart, you know.*

A few of our participants described their leave-taking as a relatively smooth and comfortable process. Some left to attend university or to travel and didn’t return. Others simply felt they had got what they came for and were ready to move on. One described how his position on open relationships had changed during the time he was at Centrepont and once he was committed to his partner he asked himself:

*Why am I living here? You know, we've got our nice, I've got my family now', that's why I went to Centrepont the last time was to get a family and...thought yeah, that I've got what I want now.*

But for several of our participants the decision to leave was borne out of anger or fear. For some of those who had been sexually abused their leaving was framed as an escape from danger. One described how she had made the decision to leave at the age of 16:

*At that stage I left Centrepont just before I became legal to have sex that's the only way.... I was at the end of 4<sup>th</sup> form and just about to become legal...and what's significant about that is that it meant that I was – I really felt that at that point I was going to be considered fair game in terms of sexual predators at Centrepont.*

Others who had been sexually abused also described how they had quite literally fled from the community as soon as they were legally able.

A number of participants reported leaving in anger over clashes with the authority of the community. One explained how he had left after he had been frustrated by the community's refusal to support his further education. Others reportedly walked out in anger after being confronted about some misbehaviour at the community. For a few some kind of traumatic experience prompted their leaving – in one case the discovery that a family member had been sexually abused.

But amongst our participants there were also those who had left slowly and reluctantly and, in some cases, had not really left at all. One participant explained how she had continued to visit Centrepont for many years although she only lived there for a part of her childhood. She said she still goes back to the land every couple of years to walk around and have a look. A small number spoke about having lived at the community into their adult years, while others had returned there to seek refuge with a new baby or after the break-up of a relationship. In many ways it seemed that, for this group, Centrepont remained their family home to which they could return when they needed to. One participant explained his return to the community after a period of being away like this:

*That's when I sort of really felt like I wanted a family again, and Centrepont was the first place I went to. I sort of, after visiting Mum, it was like I wanted to go back to Centrepont and that's when I lived there for gosh, five years.*



Among the diverse experiences of leaving Centrepont either permanently, or for a time, a small number of participants described dramatic and difficult leave-takings that implied some reluctance on the part of the community to let its members go. Some spoke about being removed by an indignant parent or leaving suddenly or secretly to evade the possibility of being detained or persuaded to stay by other community members. One described how an earlier attempt to run away had been thwarted but that she had finally managed to go when she was a teenager:

*And I tried to get away before when I was grounded there, and someone came...stopped me as I was jumping over all the paddocks with all my stuff. And he made me...come back to the community....Yeah. But most of the time, I think after a certain age, because I think you're allowed to leave after a certain, kids, you don't need the consent of parent at 16 or something as well. I think. They knew they had no legal sort of um, you know, hold over me. So maybe that's why I felt I could leave a bit more easily then.*

We also heard about people wanting to leave being locked in a room without food or water and left to contemplate their decision.

Although stories like this were treated sceptically by some participants, we certainly gained a sense that those who left the community prematurely were made to feel as if they were letting others down, so that there was, at least, emotional pressure exerted on those who considered leaving. One explained her response to another family's leaving like this:

*That was, that was I guess pretty horrible, you know because everyone's suffering and everyone's in this together, and they decide to just bail and leave everyone else to deal with it.*

Several participants spoke about experiencing disapproval from the community about their decision to leave. One spoke about how another child had voiced her censure when her family decided to leave:

*I mean she constantly said things like that we weren't going to make it and that we were going to be back in a couple of months. Just horrible things.*

The potential for negative reactions from the community together with limited financial resources seems to have made it difficult for people to freely choose to leave the community. Many participants spoke about financial assets as a significant deterrent to leaving:

*The biggest, the biggest thing is a lot of families left with nothing. When you went there, you gave everything you had, you gave all your money, you gave all your belongings go into the community and then be looked after – but then when you chose to leave, you left with the clothes you were wearing, pretty much.*

For children this meant leaving behind valued possessions. One participant recalled not the absence of money but the loss of her playthings as significant:

*But everything – our trampoline, we weren't even able to take it when we left, they had it. You could only take the clothes on your back and things in your drawers.*

Some participants spoke about having been allowed a small amount of money, perhaps \$250, to take with them when they left. Some had been more assertive in asking the community to allow them to take a necessary requirement with them. One who had been successful in his request noted that this was a deviation from the standard practices of the community, reinforcing the view that people were allowed to take very little with them when they left.

Once again it was largely the younger group of participants who seem to have generally experienced less difficulty within the community, who reported less hardship in the process of their leaving. Their accounts suggested that they had not been prevented or dissuaded from leaving Centrepont. They seem to have had reasonable support to help them move and possibly even some help in setting up their living arrangements outside of the community, as might be expected for children leaving home in the wider community. But it was this group, who had largely been born there, who seemed to experience the most distress at having left the community which they called their home.

A number of the younger group of participants explicitly voiced their sadness at 'leaving home'. Most they left reluctantly or with the intention of returning at some point. One described how she stopped eating properly when her father told her they were going to have to leave the community. She refused at first to leave with the rest of her family, explaining: "I kind of didn't want to accept that the place was over". She went on to talk about how she felt at this time.

*Even though I was back with my family, it, I can't even think about how hard it must have been for them, because you know, I was only a kid and I really struggled. Um. And that was just a lot of crying, and just getting your head over that this is how life*

*is, and to move on and accept it's over. So I think when we were young, we never really thought it would end.*

Another participant explained how she had left to take up a holiday job, expecting to return to the community when she finished. When she got back though, her father had left and it no longer felt like home:

*I didn't quite realise that that was going to happen and I wasn't quite ready for my nest to disappear.*

But for a few participants leave-taking was the start of a hopeful new period in their life. One explained that she was excited at the thought of living in a "normal house" and seeing what a "normal life would be like".

For others the leaving was associated with a feeling of loss and disillusionment with the ideals of the community and so they left sadly and with disappointment at the way they felt the community was betraying their own values.

*It was about the people, and helping each other, you know, and loving, you know. And that's why I think my father, I know for sure that's why my father, and our family, didn't get involved in taking sides like that, because we're not that sort of people. We believed in the way of the love, you know?*

In summary, it is difficult to categorise the many reasons that people had for leaving Centrepont. For a number of families though it seems as though their departure was linked to their disillusionment with the practices and ideology of the community or as a result of changes to family relationships. Some of the teenagers who chose to leave left abruptly and in anger and fear. The younger group, however, seemed to leave more reluctantly and tended to maintain their bonds with the community. It seems that at some points, community pressure and financial hardship made it difficult for some people to leave Centrepont. Ironically, the one-off payment to those who supported Bert Potter probably made it easiest for this group to leave but resulted in a lasting sense of injustice for some of the other adult children. Participants described a variety of emotional responses to their leaving from relief and excitement to sadness and bitterness, providing us with a sense of the on-going diversity of their perspectives on their childhoods within the community.

## 4. EXPERIENCES AFTER LEAVING CENTREPOINT

### 4.1 The immediate transition to the ‘outside’

The experiences that participants had during their leaving also influenced their transition from Centrepoint into the outside world. Our participants spoke about the variety of practical, emotional and relational challenges they faced setting up their new lives outside Centrepoint.

For most of our participants, the financial cost of moving away from the community dominated their accounts. Most families had experienced difficulty in shifting from an environment in which basic resources were provided to one in which they were dependent on their own, mostly very limited, resources. One explained how she believed her family to have left with \$100 and two changes of clothes. They were allowed to take a couple of items of basic furniture and were given pots and pans by friends. Others spoke about how their families had relied on donations from charities or churches in order to survive.

From some of our participants’ accounts it was evident that this period of financial difficulty was more than just temporary. Several recognised how their parents had struggled to find employment. One, for example, acknowledged that her father had not worked in the ‘outside world’ for many years and was seriously disadvantaged in the job market. Another spoke about how her father’s involvement in the court cases around Centrepoint prevented him from pursuing his career. Yet another mentioned that it was several years before her father found a job in his specialisation.

One captured the sense of injustice and practical difficulty the move from Centrepoint had entailed for her mother:

*All the other families, even though they may have left earlier, all got sort of 50 grand a piece you know: even their children who, you know. And I grew up in Centrepoint and I...you know like my whole childhood was there, I sort of, you know, and my mum left with absolutely nothing. She had to go on the DPB and then get a job and she had to start a career at...I think like 44 years old and that wasn’t easy for her.*

But while most acknowledged financial hardship as challenging for their parents, one participant who had been keen to leave Centrepont suggested that starting again with nothing had offered her and her mother a refreshing new start:

*We went to the Salvation Army and got everything – pots and pans, I mean I’ve still got stuff from that day. A bread board and certain things. But yeah, we had to start again, on the bones of our ass we had to start again. But there was something in that that was, that was good – not taking too much. Starting again. Something in that was, that felt good.*

But it wasn’t only the new financial circumstances which presented a challenge to most of our participants on leaving Centrepont. One man captured his experience of the strangeness of re-entering society as being like “coming from the moon...and landing on the earth again”. The strangeness manifested in diverse ways: Some spoke about how they struggled to deal with the experience of living in a small home after the sprawling property at Centrepont. For one participant it was the insularity of a small family group that felt strange:

*So but what I found difficult when we lived in a small house was that we’ve got our family, and, and the family unit and there just wasn’t enough people around, really.*

Another described how she had become so used to the formal rules of communal living that she had been unsure about whether she could enter the kitchen in her new home or could help herself to an apple. She added that having toilets with doors had also felt strange to her.

Several participants also spoke about how they struggled to negotiate new roles and relationships. One offered this vivid description of how he had had to adjust his ‘Centrepont behaviour’ to the demands of a formal work relationship with his boss:

*All of a sudden I had this boss, and, and it was quite odd. Because he, he was quite, he’s a real kiwi joker, and and, and quite hard and did, wanted us to work as hard as we could for as little money as possible. And I had a few quite sort...I didn’t quite know how to relate to him without sort of opening out and sort of, you know? There’s a few times I think I cried in front of him and it was quite odd. You know, that, but it was just the way I related and and I couldn’t quite get into this: ‘This is my job’ and ‘This is your boss’. And you know, cause at Centrepont that was one thing I quite like was that there were no bosses really.*

A number of our participants also spoke about their emotional response to leaving Centrepont. A few seemed to have enjoyed their transition back into the ‘outside world’. For one, this was particularly so because she was able to spend more time with her mother.

Another participant was pleased to be able to flee the emotional intensity of Centrepoint and enjoy a more stable and structured environment:

*And I said I wanted to go to a [names school] because I knew that the world was just too frightening for me at that point and I needed structure. I knew that [school] would be really, well there were lots of layers to the uniform; there was an assembly at the beginning of each morning and it went right through to the seniors and I could just get in line and make some order of my life.*

Yet another explained that his anger with Centrepoint left him feeling that he wanted nothing to do with it as he just got on and dealt with the immediate demands of finding a job and a place to stay:

*I did sort of go 'fuck you' to the place, you know. 'You're not supporting me, I'm not supporting you' you know. I kind of estranged myself.*

For others there was simply the relief of escaping the abuse that they had been subjected to. One explained that it didn't matter to her where she was "as long as [she] wasn't there".

But for several of our participants, adjustment to the outside world seems to have been tinged with sadness or disappointment. One participant spoke about how her transition out of Centrepoint had been marked by her distress at leaving:

*I was um suffering from depression for a very long time. Right from pretty much when we left, I'd throw huge tantrums, and frenzy. I think there was a lot of anger, still about leaving, and you know, how everything had been, as far as I was concerned, you know, everything had been good while we were there, and now we were in [place], and everything was bad.*

Others spoke about how their parents carried some bitterness into their new lives for the way their experiment in communal living had failed. One explained how her mother had felt about the loss of her dream:

*She was, I think she was very upset that she'd been forced to leave as well. Because for so long it had been her life, and her everything, and to realise that it was all, all fake, she, and she was very depressed for many years after that.*

A few participants spoke about how it was difficult to adjust to being alone. One talked about how, even while things had been difficult at times at Centrepoint, this had been diluted by the fact that many of these experiences were shared with others. She talked about how she felt she had "lost [her] family".

It seemed that it was both financial circumstances as well as some attachment to a communal style of living that led to a number of our participants choosing to still live in communal arrangements outside of Centrepont. A few of our participants also spoke about having deliberately moved to smaller “eccentric” villages or communities in search of a more communal atmosphere. Many spoke about how, when their families left the community, they shared a home with one or several of the other Centrepont families. One explained how her choice to continue to live in communal arrangements made it easier to adapt when she left Centrepont:

*So to an extent it made the transition easier.... So that that did make it easier. And then I came back to [place] and um, I went flatting with quite a few people, so I made sure I found a flat that had quite a few people in it, just to make it easier.*

But even ordinary flatting still required some adjustment from a more formal communal arrangement at one participant explained:

*I definitely like I wasn't used to, it was, I was, because at the community we had such a – because there were so many people – and they had quite a structured way of everyone having to do their chores. You know, like you had your night that you were on dishes with a team of people and stuff like that. Whereas going into this household where it was just, you just do it when, you know, there was no set structure to it. So I think to begin with I probably didn't do as much as what my share was but then we ended up talking about it, the family I was living with and I did start to do more. But it wasn't something that I just did naturally because I was used to a really structured routine where 'this is your night to do dishes and you don't have to do anything on the other nights' sort of thing.*

But this participant went on to clarify that she didn't really think that her adjustment was particularly unusual “because everyone's had a different sort of experience of coming from their different families and what their routines are”.

Several of our participants who left with their families as young teenagers opted not to move back into conventional nuclear family living. In several cases young teenagers appeared to have been allowed to live away from their parents, either in a flatting or boarding situation. One participant questioned in retrospect what her mother might have been thinking to allow her 14 year old daughter to live independently. It appeared though that with Centrepont having weakened the nuclear family bonds and established the

independence of the children, it was difficult for either the older children or their parents to return to a more conventional family arrangement.

For those who left Centrepoint as older adolescents or adults, transition experiences were again different from those who left with their families. There seemed to be those whose experience mimicked that of their parents insofar as their primary concerns were with money and employment. It was hard for those who had had a particularly difficult time at Centrepoint to manage their lives outside and they sometimes fell into equally chaotic arrangements once they left the community. A few participants spoke about how they got into “bad stuff” including prostitution in order to survive and others spoke of losing themselves in a world of drugs and alcohol:

*It was great to get out. You had even more freedom. Then we found out the ladies we lived with smoked pot and they drunk and so it was just party really. And that's what life was for the next few years.*

At least some of this group implied that they were trying to block out their experiences at Centrepoint and find a way of surviving after their abuse at the community.

Most, but not all, of our participants seem to have experienced some difficulty in making the adjustment from Centrepoint to the outside world. In some cases this was due to financial and practical issues and for others these difficulties were compounded by the loss of their home and community. But for some being away from Centrepoint was a relief. A number of our participants seemed to have been very aware of the differences between inside and outside of the community and tried to adapt to the changes they perceived in the external world or seek compromises in other forms of communal or unorthodox living arrangements. In contrast, those who had less family support and may have been most significantly hurt by their experiences at Centrepoint seemed to fall into rather unsatisfactory and sometimes chaotic modes of survival.

#### **4.2 Family relationships after Centrepoint**

Many of our participants spoke about how Centrepoint had impacted on their family members and relationships within their families. A number described difficulties that could be variously attributed to pre-existing vulnerabilities in family relationships, the communal



ideology that weakened nuclear family connections, and/or their particular traumatic experiences that occurred at Centrepont.

Many of our participants had come into Centrepont with divorced or separated parents and there were also a number of parental separations that occurred during and after their families' time at Centrepont. Some marital relationships were already in difficulty when families entered Centrepont and for some the injunctions around open relationships put pressure on existing relationships. Amongst our group of 29 research participants, only five came from nuclear families that had remained intact during and after Centrepont.

In addition to a high divorce/separation rate amongst their parents, a number of our participants also described other schisms and conflicts within their families in the aftermath of Centrepont. Some were left with unresolved anger towards a mother or father while others appeared to have become estranged from one or more siblings. Several belonged to reconstituted families where there were also difficulties in relating to a step-parent or step-siblings.

A few of our participants spoke about having experienced a general sense of disconnection in their families in the aftermath of Centrepont. This may have been partly because of the unusual family relationships fostered at Centrepont:

*I still feel like we are still trying to reconnect our family like I feel like our family, we don't have what normal families have – and even normal families don't have them either it's an idealised thing – but we absolutely don't have that coming together, that family home thing. There's so many different recovery things going on that you might have your own home but you don't have that wider sense of home I suppose.*

One participant described how her sense of detachment from adults began at Centrepont and then spilt over into her relationships with family members for many years after she had left:

*I think I was pretty detached, and I didn't really care, had no respect for any of them. They didn't respect me, I didn't respect them.*

A couple of participants spoke about how they had managed to reconnect with their families after some time:

*Until I came back in 2008 I was a lot more estranged from my family. I'd probably only ring my family once every three months, you know. There'd be a text or a phone call of 'hey I miss you' or something. But I wasn't that close to them, like I was just out there living my life...So yeah for a lot of years I was just off there living my crazy life.*

One participant explained how important it was for her when she was finally able to feel closer to her family members after a period in which there was little contact between them:

*I've got [relatives] and for a very long time I was so disconnected from them. And it has really been only in the last probably like seven years that I've really connected with them, and you know, have started to form better relationships with them. And that's been hugely destructive for me, because I haven't had... I mean, it's been fabulous reconnecting with them, but the loss of that support and that connection with your [relatives], because they're, they're that, in the way that we you know, our society works, they're your natural benchmarks. They're, they're the ones that feed back to you, you know. They're the ones that support you. That's the sort of that feedback, that family relationship is such an important part of development. And when you're disconnected from that, um, for me, being disconnected for that, has made my development as an adult harder as well, because I haven't really been close to good people.*

A number of participants also spoke about conflict between family members in the aftermath of Centrepont. Some spoke about their disappointment with what they saw as their parent's failings while some mentioned other conflicts with siblings. While not all of these family divisions and difficulties were related to having been at Centrepont, a number of our participants alluded to the ways in which they felt their experiences at the community might have contributed to tensions in their families.

Several participants spoke about how revelations of child abuse had created problems in their families. One participant explained how her awareness of her father's abuse of another child damaged their relationship:

*Yeah, so I wrote a letter to him saying that I just didn't really want to have anything, and I was sort of not really feeling like safe with him, either, you know. It was like, yeah, I just didn't feel safe with him and I said that I wanted him to get help and I wanted him to acknowledge it and I wanted him to come to me and tell me that he had had some huge realisation. Anyway, that didn't happen. A couple of years later, after not sort of speaking to him I just hadn't really been able to live with the fact because despite everything that has happened, he like loved me, unconditionally and I just couldn't really cope with the fact that my lack of contact with him would hurt him so I started making contact with him again and our relationship now is strictly just small, social visits every six months or something.*

Another participant explained how the possibility of her one family member's sexual abuse by another had similarly affected her and other family members:

*There was dealing with that within my family. And that sort of tore...tore our family apart a little bit, you know. Like me and [my family member] would fight about it, me and my [parent] would fight about it, and I sort of, well I was [age] and dealing with the fact that I was unsure and one was unsure and one said it never happened and there was a lot of confusion going on there.*

One participant tearfully explained how he had tried to encourage his family to reconcile after a claim of abuse between family members:

*I was still trying to get my family together, too...Not together, like, my [parent] still hasn't seen my [other parent] for like 20 years or something. But at least now [my parent's] open to the idea of, but um, of seeing [the other parent]. But at that point I was still trying to get my [siblings] to see my [parent], and you know try to sort of build, well, I went away travelling and sort of coming back, I wanted to fix it all. You know, fix the family and get it so that at least they'd be able to talk to each other.*

This same participant went on to explain how he had tried, after leaving Centrepont, to find some peace in his relationship with his father:

*I went to see my Dad and to see what he is like now and, didn't see this angry sort of suppressed sort of sex abuser that I sort of built him up to be and just saw him as this sort of, he's got [other children] that absolutely adore him. And that he obviously, I don't think he abused you know, I haven't asked him, but [his children] still wants to see him and [they are] adult, so you know, he must have stopped.*

For some participants their relationship with their parents was tinged with anger because of their inability to protect them from abuse at Centrepont. One gave voice to her resentment at what she had clearly experienced as her parents' betrayal:

*And to take that on as a child and to know that nobody thought it was wrong is just horrendous, eh. It's just, it's so heavy, I can't believe it. In fact I still wake up in the morning sometimes with this total anger at my mother. For allowing me to go up there, and to pushing me up there, knowing what it was about. And just anger at all the people up there, and my father, everyone, I just you know you can't help but hate them for what happened to you.*

For others guilt and discomfort seemed to be the stronger emotion. One woman explained how she felt that her family relationships had somehow been contaminated by Centrepont. As she put it: "I just look at my Mum and see Centrepont." At the same time, this

participant went on to explain how, in spite of her disquiet, she felt empathy for both her mother and father's distress:

*You have to keep reminding Mum, not to operate out of guilt. You know, because at some point you have to let it go. And you have to try and just get on with your life. But it's you know, it's hugely devastating for her, too, to realise what had happened....You know it's about you, and you sort of um, it's also hard not to feel guilty that they're going through this because of, of you. It's, it's very hard to sort all of that stuff out.*

Her father had been equally troubled:

*Which I think was really sad for him. He, you know, like it was hugely devastating for him, to find out what had happened to his daughters.*

For some of our participants, concerns with sexual abuse seemed to have extended into their current family relationships. Two of our male participants described situations in which a family member had raised concerns about their inappropriate touching of a child. In both cases the participants vehemently denied the allegation but a degree of anxiety around these kinds of issues was still haunting their family relationships. One participant expressed his indignation at a concern about possible abuse raised by the child of a family member:

*That, you know 'How could I? How could I have' with knowing what damage it can do to, to a girl, to do anything like that. Because I've seen all the hurt at Centrepont so how could I, it's like I'd be the safest person in the world to [engage in an activity] with. Because you know, there's no way I'd ever cross that boundary.*

One of our participants also disclosed that he had been sexually abused by a family member after leaving Centrepont and spoke about how this had impacted on his family relationships.

Some of our participants' family relationships had been affected, not so much by sexual abuse allegations, but by the experience of a parent's imprisonment. For a few of those we interviewed imprisonment left a lasting legacy of insecurity in their family relationships. One spoke about how he always expected her family members to quite suddenly and unexpectedly be taken away from him:

*I'm always afraid that someone in my family will go to prison or something like that.*

For some of our participants it wasn't clear they saw the Centrepont community as the root of their family difficulties. Several spoke about a parent's personality characteristics as

being ‘difficult’ prior to their experience at Centrepont. Some, however, suggested that these difficulties may have been exacerbated by the stresses of the community. One participant implied that some of her parent’s pre-existing weaknesses may have been worsened by the difficult experiences she had at Centrepont:

*[He/she] always felt like [he/she has] not been a proper [parent] and has been, let us down and stuff. ...You know, it’s a lot noticeably closer. But I don’t know if that had anything to do with the community, I think it was more that I didn’t have anything in common with my [parent]. And [he/she] was kind of, kind of an unusual person sometimes....So. Yeah, I’d, I think [my parent] would speak very differently of the community than I would, [he/she] got a really hard time.*

Other participants spoke about how they saw Centrepont as giving their parents licence to express some of their worst characteristics, for example selfishness or abusiveness.

One participant captured some of the difficulty she and others might have had in making sense of the extent to which Centrepont could be held responsible for their parents’ problems and how much were a product of difficulties they already had:

*Who knows, because they were influenced by Centrepont as well, so if you took Centrepont away from them, you had two parents that couldn’t stand each other that divorced when I was young. [One of my parents] went with an alcoholic, that didn’t last, anyway. So who knows? Who knows how it would have gone?*

Many participants conveyed some understanding of their parents’ decisions, however mistaken these may have been. Several implied that they had forgiven their parents. One participant explained how she had felt more able to forgive her parent after she had received an apology for what had happened to her:

*And [parent] apologised for some of the stuff that happened which has been helpful to me. [He/she] has acknowledged that [he/she] wasn’t there for me and also told me about how it was for [him/her]. Which, you know, so I kind of know that [parent] didn’t deliberately set out to neglect me or put me in a bad situation; so that’s helpful for me I suppose. To just carry on.*

We were also told about participants’ family members who had experienced significant emotional problems after they left Centrepont. They reported varying experiences of their parents’ emotional distress, some of life-threatening seriousness. Again it is not clear to what extent this was a product of the Centrepont experience itself or was a function of the vulnerability of those the community had attracted in the first place. In the latter case, one of our participants spoke about her mother’s mental health problems and suggested that

Centrepoint had, in fact, done a great deal to help and support her family in dealing with this.

A number of our participants expressed considerable concern for family members who they felt may have found things more difficult at Centrepoint than they themselves did. Some worried about their parents' psychological state while others focused largely on their financial difficulties, which they attributed to Centrepoint. One emphasised his concern for his parents like this:

*You know, being there. And nothing would make me more happy than, even if I get nothing, that Dad and Mum got paid out.*

Some of our participants speculated about the more difficult experiences siblings had had or their relative vulnerability. One participant spoke about how her siblings continued to experience a range of psychological problems as a result of their abuse at Centrepoint:

*I think my, both of my [siblings] copped the worst of what was going on at Centrepoint because they were older than me...and I think Centrepoint has affected their lives a lot more than it affected mine. My one [sibling] is still, angry about things that happened back then. Very, very angry. Keeps talking about going to the police and all these things, but I think, I think it might be a bit late, by now. Anything like that...And then my other [sibling], I didn't find out about that until a couple of years ago. [This sibling] went back and saw Centrepoint and it brought back a whole lot of memories. And [he/she] was in a bad way for a few months.*

She recognised the impact of this on her and the rest of her family:

*Yeah, well, I think we were a bit very close family. Anything that any others went through always, always went through the rest of the family.*

Another participant spoke sadly about how the suffering of her family as a result of Centrepoint seemed endless:

*Yes. Of course. And then I feel like it's sort of...like sort of plagues my family a bit. ...Most of [my siblings] were sort of into drugs and drinking and that kind of thing, which I don't like. And I feel like if we hadn't grown up in Centrepoint maybe we wouldn't have been involved in all that and it just feels like it never ends...this stuff...living there.*

This same participant went on to try and make sense of how it was that she had emerged relatively unscathed while her siblings had suffered more than she. She spoke about how

her closeness of her mother might have helped her and how perhaps her brother's independence left him more vulnerable.

Yet in spite of what sounded like serious difficulties in several of our participants' experiences of their families there were also a number who seem to have forged and maintained good relationships with at least some of their family members.

*We share everything. I have a really great relationship with them, like I share everything that's gone on in my life with them and they've been through it all with me and they've seen me have fights with [others in the family] and get upset with [them] and its just been really good because I've always been able to lean on them for support.*

This participant went on to credit her strength to both her good relationships with her family and her experiences at Centrepont:

*I'm a very strong person and I do credit a lot of that to, mostly my family, but also to growing up in Centrepont and to having such strong family bonds because I wouldn't have been so confident or been so strong willed or anything without the background and without the experiences that I've had and the friends and support and everything.*

Yet another spoke poignantly about how she admired her father and often drew from her memories of him to guide her in her life in spite of the fact that he had been investigated on a sexual abuse charge.

Another spoke about how he and his parent had actually become closer since they had been to jail:

*We've always been really, really, really close. Um [he/she] loves me to death, and um, I don't, I don't know if um, [him/her] being in jail made us closer.*

Still others seemed to have built on the supportive relationships they established with siblings while they were at Centrepont to create a strong family network for themselves. Some remained protective of younger siblings while others drew support from older ones.

Interestingly, only a few our participants said they could speak openly with their family members about experiences at Centrepont and most seemed to express some reluctance to do this. Some simply said the subject was seldom mentioned:

*Don't know why, it just never came up. Never asked. I don't know how much involvement they had. I don't think they had as much as I did.*

None of our participants elaborated on why they had not spoken more about Centrepont to those family members who had shared community experiences with them. Their comments on their silence expressed discomfort at the thought of sharing information around this with family members:

*We've become really, really close; and we have different experiences of Centrepont. I have, you know, more years experience than her that I went through and I sometimes don't know how much does she know about what I experienced at Centrepont compared to what she experienced...And sometimes I don't know with her, we haven't talked about it a lot; there's been things I've held back on with her about...*

One told us that she thought her sibling had had more difficult experiences than she had had but she didn't know exactly what had happened for this family member at Centrepont:

*[He/she's] made comments to me sometimes, like: 'Oh, you don't know what happened to me' or something like that I don't know if something went on that I don't know about...I don't know, maybe [he/she] saw worse things than I did or something. I don't know.*

Those who had been able to talk about Centrepont to their families seemed to value this openness strongly. One explained that it was good that there were some people she could be herself with and not have to pretend that things were okay when they were not.

For some participants the longing for a lost family seemed to be a theme in their interviews. One participant spoke about how she wishes she might have grown up in a 'normal' family and how she felt she lacked the sense of family that others have:

*I think the biggest thing is...feeling that I don't have a family, or, and feeling sort of...um...lonely or yeah...can feel quite lonely. 'Cause none of my friends understand... you know they all have their own family and it sort of feels like if they didn't have a family, we could be each others' family. But they've got their family, so it's just me...um...I think that's the biggest thing of not having a family.*

Another participant spoke about how hard it had been for her to have missed out on the things she might have learned in a family:

*I've had to learn to learn values and things that I think you would expect to learn in a family environment. ...So I guess the last few years have been about it what it means for me to be, you know, growing, to be growing up and learning those things.*



She went on to talk about the importance of having family connections but also conveyed the difficulty of doing this in *her* family:

*Well you start with, you start with your family and your environment and do what you can I suppose. Yeah but it's just how to start. How to begin. I mean I would love to repair my relationship with [my family members] but I have no idea how to go about doing that. No idea...*

One acknowledged wistfully that she wished she had had the family she never experienced at Centrepont:

*I'd say on the whole I wish I hadn't lived there because I'd really like a normal family life with a mum and dad.*

For some though, Centrepont remains the primary family and the connection with this community is what is important for them:

*It's really good because I think it will always be a family even though that now Centrepont is dissolved, we'll always, it will always be special. Yeah. I just feel, I feel quite bummed out that I feel a bit ripped off that I never went there earlier, to be quite honest. I wished I had been more involved and I really want to bring up my kids there. I knew when I lived there that that's where I want to be with my children. The best place for children. Crazy as that might sound, you know.*

Overall, a number of our participants reported experiencing disconnection or conflict in their families of origin. Some of this was attributed by them to Centrepont where family relationships tended to be distanced within the communal practices at Centrepont. Some of our participants had been left with feelings of anger, disappointment or discomfort in relation to particular experiences at Centrepont, most notably sexual abuse. Some acknowledged that family members may have had difficulties before they came to Centrepont and this experience had simply exacerbated existing problems. Many of our participants also carried on-going concerns about the effects of Centrepont on members of their family and their family relationships. We heard evidence that most of our participants felt uncomfortable talking about their experiences at Centrepont with other family members. There were, however, a few participants who maintained good, close relationships with family members that had reliably supported them in the aftermath of the community.

### 4.3 Intimate relationships and friendships after Centrepont

Given that Centrepont ideology and practice aimed at transforming the nature of relationships, it is hardly surprising that most of our research participants spoke at length about how they saw their experiences at the community impacting on their current relationships.

Nearly half of our participants described having significant problems in their intimate relationships and friendships since leaving Centrepont. Of those participants who had experienced difficulties in their relationships, there was a proportion who spoke about problems in allowing closeness to others and some who suggested that they tended to be involved in tumultuous or abusive relationships. Although difficulty in relationships was a strong theme for many of our participants, there were some who felt equally strongly that Centrepont had given them both the social skills and the friendship networks they now relied on.

A number of participants expressed their belief that those who had grown up at Centrepont struggled to develop and maintain good relationships outside of it. This participant offered what she saw as her own incapacity by way of example:

*You know, I can't keep a relationship at all. I can't have a decent relationship, a lasting one...*

Another expressed her belief that her relationship status had been materially influenced by her growing up at Centrepont.

*So I don't know. But I'm now in my [age-range] and I'm still not married and I don't have kids and I feel that probably wouldn't be the case if Centrepont hadn't been a part of my life.*

A number of our participants described having had difficulties in sustaining closeness in their relationships and interpreted this as a problem with trusting other people:

*The intimacy problem I have? You know, like I can get in a relationship but I just so can't handle the work in a relationship, I can't bear the intimacy because it's... I don't tend to trust.*

She elaborated on the struggle she had in maintaining closeness with others and how this had impacted negatively on her ability to keep long term relationships:

*It's all temporary, everything's temporary. So you don't build long term friendships with people.*

Another explained how difficult it seemed for her to be able to hold onto a relationship in the person's absence:

*Like I can relate to somebody when they're in front of me but when they're not, they're not: it's like I'm not still in the relationship.*

Participants also offered a variety of explanations other than mistrust for their difficulties in sustaining relationships. One spoke about how she thought that this was due to general 'insecurity' arising out of her experience of Centrepont while another speculated that it might be her fear of being judged by others. Yet another mentioned that relationships were harder to sustain with people who did not share a common background with you. A fourth explained that he had simply learnt to enjoy being alone.

One woman elaborated on how she had come to understand her difficulty in establishing relationships with others as a consequence of the ideology she learned at Centrepont. She spoke about how she had spent a great many years mistrusting people because of what she called the 'indoctrination' of Centrepont. But as she began to realise that society wasn't the negative influence she had been taught to believe she had begun, for the first time, to establish good adult relationships:

*And then you know, society isn't fucked. Lots of incredibly, ah, wonderful, talented people, who I meet every day, and courageous people, and I actually really now enjoy my interactions with people.*

She explained the period of isolation she felt she had to go through in order to disconnect herself from her Centrepont beliefs before she could begin to form more healthy relationships:

*Yeah, it has been incredibly um, alone, you know, there has been a lot of aloneness about my time since then. Which has been my choice, I haven't stayed connected. I've felt a huge need to get disconnected in order to, oh, in order to get a different perspective.*

Some of our participants focused less on difficulties in sustaining close relationships and more on the destructive patterns that they believed they enacted, particularly within intimate relationships. One described her belief that the children of Centrepont tended to attract problematic relationships. She hypothesised that this was a function of their poor sense of self-worth and confidence. She wondered whether this was also a product of having spent so little time with their parents while they were growing up.

A few of our participants seem to have ended up in abusive partnerships in their adulthood. Several spoke about how they struggled to assert their own identity or needs against those of their partner. One explained about how she felt 'comfortable' with the familiar powerless she had felt in an abusive relationship:

*I met my husband who I think was probably the most...aah, most – a personality most similar to Bert Potter that I could have met...And it was the most violent ... not just in a physical way but in a mental way, relationship that I probably could've placed myself in. And was the most comfortable relationship for me to be in. [I was] used to that.*

Several other participants spoke about how they found themselves responding to relationships or potential relationships with men as though they were perpetrators of abuse:

*I'm living with the consequences of that, it's affected my sex life, and my relationship, because I keep seeing them as the perpetrator.*

One woman described her typical reaction like this:

*Every time I get close to a guy, I just freak out and back away. Back away slowly.*

Another described how she had recently found herself lashing out physically her partner. This was an action which prompted her to seek psychological help for herself.

A number of others seemed to have experienced some quite emotionally turbulent times in their relationships, many of which had broken down in the process. A few had very recently come out of difficult relationships or marriages and were still feeling the rawness of their distress in their interviews with us:

*The most intense relationship – the most pain I've ever felt, the most emotional pain. I've never felt anything like it, it felt really crushing. I didn't even realise you could feel that much pain to be honest. The pain of thinking that you have someone that*

*loves you that you have kids with and thinking it's going to work and then finding out that it's not. Yeah.*

Several participants spoke about how they had experienced intense jealousy in their relationships while one described how she became distressed if her boyfriend had to leave her alone at home, linking this to the loneliness she felt since leaving Centrepont.

For a number of our participants it seemed that their relationship difficulties focused quite specifically around sexual issues. Several spoke about how they felt that the beliefs at Centrepont had led them to place too much emphasis on sexual relationships at the expense of developing intimacy in relationships:

*Well I think it's definitely had an effect, massively had an effect on my sexual relationships. Like leaving Centrepont all my relationships after there for such a long time were only ever sexual. And didn't last very long. Like I'd get to a place and I suppose it would be the next level, intimacy-wise and I wouldn't want to proceed. So there weren't any long-term relationships for years and years and years. Until this one.*

Another male participant spoke about how he was slowly learning from his partner that love was more than just sex. He attributed his difficulties in this area to his early exposure to open sex and casual relationships at Centrepont. He also speculated that his mother's unavailability may have led him to rely on sex as an expression of comfort.

Another female participant described similar influences on her own reliance on sex as a form of connection with people:

*I think having not had a good relationship with my Dad and then being introduced to sex at such an early age, I thought that was how you got close to guys, you just gave yourself. And that's what I did. Before, you know: sex first, get to know them later.*

This same participant explained how she had become confused between her need for affirmation from others and for sex:

*See I didn't, if someone showed me that attention it didn't matter who they were, I don't think, at that time. Even if it was a friend's boyfriend: he showed he wanted me.*

Most of those who raised these kinds of concerns seemed to believe that these difficulties were attributable to the beliefs and practices they had learnt at Centrepont. One participant

elaborated on how she saw her overly casual approach to sex as originating from the culture at the community with this example:

*If I was in a relationship with someone and I was using another person for sexual gratification or whatever. But I never really saw it that way, I think sexually my ideas of it were all over the place because of living at Centrepont, where people would be married and just go off with someone else because that's what they did. And so again that goes back to the crazy ideas that I thought the world was about I suppose.*

Some other women seem to have experienced a different set of sexual problems in their relationships. A few spoke about how they struggled to establish sexual relationships with their partners:

*And looking back I think most of my, definitely I'd probably have to say all of my relationships ended because of either my sexual frigidity on some level or my communication or, it's stuff that has been me, not them.*

As with most areas of our investigation, however, there were some participants who did not describe any relationship difficulties. Amongst those we interviewed there were at least 12 of our participants who seemed to feel that they currently had good and reasonably stable relationships. In some cases, however, these participants had also acknowledged the view that relationships could be challenging for those who had grown up at Centrepont.

Some felt that they had managed to form good relationships because they had been able to overcome the difficulties they had encountered at Centrepont. Others, however, felt that their present good relationships could be directly attributed to what they had learnt at Centrepont. One participant spoke about the openness both in sexuality and in communication had benefited her relationship with her current partner. In the context of talking about the relationships he had had with older woman at Centrepont, one of our male participants spoke about how this had been valuable for him in his later relationships:

*Yeah, that whole, learning how to relate and and learning how to love someone.*

As with intimate relationships, participants seemed also to express a similar array of opinions about their current friendships. According to a number of our participants, establishing and maintaining friendships had not always been easy. Some participants spoke about dynamics similar to those that affected their school friendships while they were still at Centrepont. They suggested that they had come to rely on the built-in friendship base of

Centrepoint and had less need to venture beyond this. This still applied especially to those who were in close contact with their friendship networks from the community:

*Because I have been less, I kind of didn't have to build those relationships at the community because they were kind of there, that now when I meet people you know, I'm nice to people, and you know, but I'm not so good at carrying on the friendship to um have something kind of long term.*

For some though this early reliance on Centrepoint friendships meant that they had not developed the social skills necessary to form and sustain new friendships:

*I didn't have the social skills to, to really deal with normal people. 'Outside people' – they were always bit scary to me.*

Several participants, however, described the same sense of mistrust that they sometimes felt in relation to intimate relationships. One participant described how she responded with caution when meeting new people:

*I kind of, I watch people a lot more and check them out before, and start talking to them, you know, the third or fourth time I meet them rather than being straight in there, I'm a lot more reserved. And I think that's partly because you meet some pretty fucked up people at the community. And um, I don't know if it's you're less trusting or not. I'm not sure.*

Another elaborated on how, as with intimate relationships, she struggled to trust people sufficiently to develop close friendships:

*It seems, I only tend to have surface relationships with people, like friendships with people. It never gets to a depth where I have to have a huge amount of intimacy and it's almost like it gets to a place where it could be really good and it could be even deeper and I self-sabotage it. Somehow I do something to piss them off or to push them away rather than stepping into another level of a really deep friendship. And I think that, that's what I used to do with boyfriends as well – I'd do something to stuff it up before I had to take that next step. So I don't have a huge amount of friends.*

While some participants seem to have been cautious about involving themselves in relationships, others talked about how they had been unable to protect themselves effectively from controlling or abusive relationships. One participant described how she struggled to hold onto her sense of herself in relationships:

*I didn't have a self, sense of self, really, I became whatever anyone wanted me to be.*

Another participant offered this graphic description of how she felt that her experience as a 'victim' at Centrepont marked her out as vulnerable to others' manipulations:

*That was that's dangerous because people see your vulnerability, they see that you're not happy or you've got low self-esteem and they prey on it, so we easily got caught up in the wrong side of life, because you know, people already knew the damage had been done, you could just get that from just talking to us or just looking, the way we dressed the way we acted, our insecurities. It was just so easy you can do anything to people like that, because they don't, they go 'Oh, well I must have deserved it' or 'I must have asked for it', you know, 'to get that response' or you know. You don't feel good about yourself, so you let things happen to you. There's people like that everywhere. That's not just that come out of Centrepont.*

Several participants seem to have turned back towards their friendships from Centrepont to try and find some sense of connection. One participant spoke about how important it was for her to have at least some friends from Centrepont to talk to and understand what she had been through:

*Like we all get together and go 'Oh remember that, and remember that' but not really the bad stuff. It's really good with my friends. So, but it's really nice when we see each other once a year and we talk about the good stuff and we talk about the hard stuff a bit as well. It's really good. It's really just having someone you can be completely honest with who completely understands where you're coming from. If I talk to my best friend now she you know she'll always give a really cliché answer or whatever which is of course not her fault but it's still not nice to talk to her really...No-one really understands. But I also feel like if I ever feel like people think I'm this really stuck up person who's really had a spoilt life I always feel like 'Hey, you've no idea what I've been through'.*

For others though it is not so much the content of the communications with friends that is important, but the familiar style. One participant spoke about how she valued her Centrepont friends with whom she can be honest and straightforward in a way she cannot be with others:

*If I ever feel funny about something, I think I've offended them I can go ring them and say 'Hey, did I offend you?' or they'll ring me and say 'I didn't like that.' And it doesn't have to be a drawn out thing, you know.*

Another participant spoke about how she had initially been as honest with new friends as she had been when she was at Centrepont. She was quickly given the message that this was inappropriate when they "would run a million miles" in response. Similarly, one man spoke about how alienated he felt when a group of 'kiwi blokes' got together. He would find himself the only man interested in talking about 'feelings' or 'relationships'.



For some participants their difficulties in intimate relationships seemed to have left them feeling somewhat lonely and isolated. One described how she had to get used to being alone for the first time:

*I just didn't have anyone that I could share and I was really not used to that. I had always had close friends or someone there that I could talk to and it was strange to come home after a night out with a bunch of friends and be sad by myself.*

For some though the feeling of loneliness was less transient. Several spoke about what sounds like a deep sense of disconnection that left them longing for the community they had had at Centrepont:

*Um, one thing I do really struggle with is, I get lonely really easily. Which I think is a direct part of growing up at the community.*

While some of our participants were reluctant to engage with people they had known at Centrepont because of their mixed or negative feelings about the community, others seemed to find themselves drawn back to the friendships they had made there. A number of our participants, particularly in the 'younger generation' spoke about how they remained friends with those they had known at Centrepont. A few seemed to maintain very regular contact while others, however intermittent the contact, retained a strong sense of connection:

*I don't think we'd have such a strong relationship if we hadn't grown up together and I mean eight years when we only see each other once maybe twice a year maximum and we're still best of friends and whenever we see each other we share all kinds of things and they're sort of like. I almost think of them as like half-sisters.*

But unlike those who believed that Centrepont had made them unusually cautious or reserved in their friendships, a smaller group of our participants felt that their relationships with people at Centrepont had, in fact, given them confidence to manage social situations in the world outside the community. One participant described herself in this way:

*I'm very mature, and a lot of people always, kind of want, kind of ask what I've done in my past, or why, or you know. [I] never really said anything. I've, um, and I think a lot of the children are like that, you know. None of us were ever shy because we grew up with so many different people.*

Another expressed his gratitude for Centrepont having given him "heaps of good skills, heaps of good friends out of it – lifelong friends which I still have now".

But even for those participants who had retained connection or reconnected with their old friends from Centrepont, there was often still a sense of longing for the community they felt they had lost in their accounts:

*I kind of hope that I can one day find a place that I feel settled and happy, you know, without that underlying drive to be in a community overriding my life, because that's quite a strong thing in me and I feel a little bit incomplete a lot of the time. You know, like something missing.*

One participant spoke about how this longing was triggered most strongly during the winter months which reminded her of the time she would have spent being surrounded by friends at community:

*And it, and it still seems to happen every winter. I still seem to get a really big downer and I get, you know, really upset for a couple of weeks. And really lonely, and, and then I and really lonely, and, and then I kind of, I don't know, it seems to go away, I kind of get over it I guess. But it, that's definitely when I start thinking about the community the most.*

In spite of the differences in their experiences in relationships and some of their acknowledged difficulties in this area, almost all our participants had left Centrepont with a strong awareness of the significance of relationships in their lives. One summarised what she felt was the most important lesson she had taken from Centrepont:

*I suppose the main things I would say is to, the most important thing, is maintaining good friendships and relationships with people you can talk to and that you can trust...*

In summary it seems that a number of our participants described having difficulties in both their intimate sexual relationships and their friendships. While less than half had been able to establish good intimate relationships as adults, others struggled to form lasting or healthy relationships. They attributed these difficulties to problems with trust, abusive dynamics and sexual problems which they, in many cases, related back to their childhood experiences at Centrepont. Some had also experienced difficulties in friendships. These difficulties related again to lack of trust in some cases but also to problems in, or lack of motivation for, negotiating the demands of external friendships with others. Some participants' accounts convey a sense of loneliness that was partly assuaged by connections with other Centrepont friends and expressed in a longing for their lost sense of community.

#### 4.4 Health and psychological well-being after Centrepont

Following their traumatic experiences of sexual abuse, manipulation and drugs, many of our participants reported having experienced later psychological difficulties. About one third of our participants spoke about having had difficulties with drugs or alcohol since leaving Centrepont while two thirds acknowledged some, more or less serious, psychological problems. There were, of course, also a smaller group who reported no particular difficulties with substance use or mental health issues and seemed to be very happy with the overall quality of their lives. There was generally less attention devoted to health issues in our participants' interviews, but a few spoke about difficulties in this area and their accounts are included here.

Some participants seemed well educated about psychological symptoms and had, over the years received professional assistance in identifying the nature of their problems. Others had recognised their psychological difficulties themselves. In some cases participants reported phenomena that the researchers recognised as signs of psychological distress. It would be important to note though that for some, these difficulties were described as being historical rather than current.

One of the most common sets of psychological problems described by our participants related to the experience of sexual abuse. A number described post-traumatic symptomatology which they clearly linked to their experiences at Centrepont. One described how she had worked with other sexual abuse survivors but had only slowly come to recognise her own post traumatic symptoms:

*And then I had this weird traumatic sexual thing come up from PTSD which I hadn't ever actually acknowledged. And this was a guy that – we'd had a significant period of relationship before we started having sex. So it was a real relationship, we cared about each other, we were great mates and all the rest of it. And then as soon as the sex came along it just went horrible. Just really nasty and pear shaped and neither of us had any idea what the hell was going on because I was having this traumatic experience where my whole body was in pain, like all my skin felt like it had been abraded. I couldn't stand him touching me and I didn't know what the hell was going on. And didn't even know who to talk to at that point...I still didn't see what had happened to me as abuse, still didn't see, and even when I was having these weird responses to relationships, didn't associate that. Seems bizarre looking back at it that I could have been so oblivious and keep all those things separate. Just kind*

*of go 'Oh that's true and that's true and that's true' and I won't look at the implications of how those things don't fit together.*

Another young woman described a similar process of realisation, which in her case came through a flood of memories she had previously blocked out:

*I completely blocked out my own abuse, completely blocked it out. And it was round about that time that, like I remember actually being in the bath, shower and just, it just, smacking me in the head, like a memory just coming back like that [smacks forehead] so fast, so that time was when everything just kind of came out. Yeah. And, yeah, I think that's been, that's been pretty much up there as one of the most traumatic times of my life, when everything felt pretty, just ripped apart and like, everything that I knew felt like it had been this lie.*

Yet another participant had been formally diagnosed with PTSD and provided this graphic account of how she experienced the psychological difficulties associated with this:

*It's like you want to you know, rescue anything that's left of yourself and pull yourself out of there and pick up the pieces but the damage is huge, eh, it's just yeah. And I'm surprised, you know, we didn't all come out with severe mental illness, like a schizophrenia thing or something like that. Because you know when I got diagnosed with... [I thought] Oh my, God, I'm going into the [psychiatric hospital]. Because I thought that would happen because we were just so screwed up, all of us, and I was so scared, and they didn't.... They said that I was emotionally disturbed at the time, and had post traumatic stress disorder but I just felt like I was insane I thought I was, I'd gone completely nuts. I was so confused, and so messed up. And it's daunting, and it is easier to escape, to drink, because to know when you're sober, the reality of it, what happened to you is, it's so scary, because you just go 'Oh my gosh, all this happened it was allowed to happen!'*

She went on to explain how her life had been dominated by fear and need to escape.

*As a child it was just 'bolt mode'. You know – the door opened, I'd be out if I could've been. So it's kind of weird to be this age and recognising what I was like as a child. I was just out to lunch the whole time...Yeah, and even now like if I'm stressed, like this week, it's just been so hard – I've been having heaps of panic attacks. When I'm in a good space, they're less, but when I'm not in a good space they are – they happen all the time. So for me just this week has been so hard...Yeah. Yeah. So that – it was just, things like not sleeping and stuff like that. Well partly I've got full-on, but I also know it's to do with this [interview]. Yeah, I just can't handle it. I mean even now I live with an element of fear that I will bump into someone from Centrepont. And I won't come to this part of the country – I'll go to [place] but I'll go that way and go and see [family member]. But I'm just fearful all the time. I'm fearful that I will meet someone from the past because I just panic, I just can't deal with it. And it's happened before.*

And how she lived with the expectation that something terrible would happen to her again:

*Because you see when you've got these post traumatic stress disorder symptoms, you don't tend to think of the future. Because you think everything is going to end tomorrow, sort of thing, know what I mean. It's it, kind of a doom and gloom thing, it's like 'Oh, what future', you know. 'What, what are we', I mean, I don't like to think past a certain time anyway because I'm scared that I'll start getting overwhelmed by it or daunted by it...trying to think, oh, you know, where am I going to be, am I going to be, is anything awful going to happen to me, or whatever.*

A number of other participants described experiences which fit with the recognised symptoms of trauma responses. These included phenomena such as intrusive memories and associated feelings of panic as described by this participant:

*Yeah it's...confusion...it's just like panic, and fear and just memories like you know memories trigger panic attacks and all that sort of stuff. Like even now I'm kind of, you know, I sort of don't want to think about what it was actually like there. It's really hard for me to think about what it was like there. My mind actually avoids it.*

Others described other typical trauma symptoms such as 'detachment' and 'dissociation'. The latter generally shows itself subjectively as a sense of having lost connection with reality or patchy memories as described by this participant:

*I assume because of the sexual abuse I went through – that I have a lot of problems with dissociation so I have a lot of memory blanks from my childhood especially around my times at Centrepont...[and later in the interview] I've got those kind of fuzzy memories and that 'cause I've got – I know there are things that I saw there and I can't actually remember them.*

One participant spoke about how it felt sometimes that the psychological suffering would never end for her:

*I just think, man, is this ever going to end? And if it doesn't? You know, I can understand why people would suicide, because, or want to, because if you think your life is never going to get better, or it won't be able to change. You could see and you think, I'm at this age now and it hasn't.... How could it possibly change in 20 years' time? I've still got the memories there, you know. I can't get rid of them, I can't help but have dreams, you know, about this stuff. But I don't have bad dreams anyway now. Seems I think, part of the healing process is as you start to feel better you know, that you don't have bad dreams as much, but you still will have them, you know? And they're just reminders of you know, stuff.*

For some participants traumatic memories had emerged more gradually over time:

*Occasionally stuff comes up – memories and you have to make sense of it. Yeah, I think, stuff just comes up: stuff just comes up. And it blows you away. [Things] that you'd forgotten, you hadn't thought about it for so many years that you forgot it had even happened and then something triggers something and you have to process it...And you know, things come up, stuff comes up that, my memories now are not all the memories I left the place with – stuff has come up that I'd forgotten about. So who knows, that's the thing – who knows in your lifetime what you've actually locked away because of the way memories are.*

One participant reflected on being able to move past some of these difficulties, yet knew others who still struggled with on-going psychological trauma that impacted on their ability to live their lives:

*But there are, a certain few people that I stay connected with, and when, or I hear via... and they are just so, disconnected, and you know, so they might be still doing heaps of drugs, or selling drugs, or, you know, living in a sort of a hermit existence. Or you know, going from one relationship to the next, and you know, and not really being able to have a normal life. Disconnected. And it's really sad. It's a waste of a life.*

We heard about a range of other psychological problems amongst our participants. One participant described how she had developed a phobia about death after her experience of sexual abuse:

*And after that I kind of...I started to have really, really bad fears of death and dead people and um yeah anything surrounding it you know and so that was very, very difficult very difficult period of time.*

Another participant had suffered from what had been formally diagnosed as anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder and received treatment for this while another reported having had eating problems. These difficulties were clearly linked by the participants to particular circumstances at Centrepoint.

There were a number of other participants who seemed to have experienced psychological problems that arose some time after they left Centrepoint. A number of participants described themselves as having been depressed or chronically anxious. One, for example, spoke about how she felt she had been anxious her “whole life” while another described how he had reacted to the break-up of a recent relationship:

*I reckon I was clinically depressed, I didn't get diagnosed or anything. Never been on anti-depressants or anything – I didn't want to go on those, I thought I'd get myself out of it...I was in a pretty bad place.*

One woman spoke about her long history with serious depression that had included a period of hospitalisation. She explained how she still had to monitor herself and adjust her behaviour to make sure she didn't succumb again.

At least two other participants spoke about what appeared to have been psychotic episodes in which they had required hospitalisation and anti-psychotic medication. In both cases the participants were not currently working. As one explained:

*I can't work, because I'm mentally unstable. I get stressed out and I have anxiety attacks.*

This participant went on to describe some of the delusional beliefs he had entertained while he was psychotic. Perhaps significantly these beliefs had seemed to focus on protecting children from potential abusers.

Some of our participants also described sexual difficulty including 'sex addiction' and other sexual behaviours they attributed to their experience at Centrepoin. One described how she kept this side of herself hidden from others:

*I slip away from my everyday life and dabble in all sorts of other stuff and a lot of that's been sexual in my life so through various relationships being quite, dabbling in S and M and fetish circles and swinging and, oh and prostitution – like phases of experimentation with myself.*

While this kind of behaviour is not necessarily reflective of psychological difficulties, it seemed to be seen as such by at least some of our participants and is an issue commonly identified by survivors of sexual abuse.

A few men talked of anxieties about being seen as perpetrators of sexual abuse. They described carefully monitoring their own behaviour around children and seemed concerned about how they might be perceived by others.

Some of those who had psychological difficulties also described having problems with substance abuse and there were a smaller number that seemed to have drug problems without reporting other psychological difficulties. Several of our participants identified as

alcoholics while others had developed what appeared to be fairly significant drug addictions. For some drug and alcohol use connected with trauma:

*And so at that point, I started using drugs, I started drinking a lot, because, smoking cigarettes, and just, absolutely going off the rails. You know. And, and that's the sort of cost to my health. That, because here I was, trying to say 'I'm going crazy here', you know. 'My life isn't working', you know, 'I've been sexually abused'.*

Quite a number of participants described long-term involvement with drugs and alcohol that may have begun at Centrepont but extended well beyond this time:

*I basically started binge drinking, smoking cigarettes, doing every drug I could, magic mushrooms, anything I could get my hands on I went through that stage until I finally burnt myself out on the 'P' about five years ago.*

Another participant described how her difficulties with drugs were not unusual for those who had come from Centrepont although she pointed out that others had weaned themselves away from these dangers much earlier than she had been able to:

*Like they all are pretty open when it comes to drugs, but they're all sensible about it, too...and especially as they've got older, you know like, um none of them are totally anti, obviously, but it's also not a single one of the friends that I'm still close to from the community does P for example, and I have. It's like we all sort of, and most of us tried it, because it's in our nature, and you know.*

One participant offered her account of how she had travelled from addiction through to recovery:

*I drank quite heavily and I started to get into taking drugs there as well – speed and Ecstasy. Discovered Ecstasy again which was quite bizarre because everyone was taking it as a dance-rave drug whereas I'd only ever known it as a kind of therapeutic sex drug so it took me a long time to learn to behave differently while taking drugs in public....Until my alcoholism got to a point...and I drank myself to oblivion, um, phenomenal amounts of alcohol in quite a, you know, over a short space of time. And you know [some time] ago I was in my kitchen trying to figure out how to throw myself on a knife so it would go through my heart...I knew I needed to get help – if I wanted to live. But I did, I wanted to for my kids and I knew that there was life beyond all of that, I guess I felt and I don't know why I picked up the phone and called AA. I didn't know I was an alcoholic [laughs] which is really crazy looking back 'cause my drinking was always out of control but I didn't know that was the problem.*

Besides the obvious lifestyle problems associated with alcohol or heavy drug use, some participants described other associated difficulties. One explained how her drug use



frequently left her tormented by her thoughts as she found herself using her drug experience to ‘over-analyse’ things as she had been encouraged to do at Centrepont:

*A couple of years before that I'd gotten to quite the same kind of place with Ecstasy, I was taking it so much, but I got to a place where, instead of – when I was coming down – instead of being around all my friends I'd leave them and go home...So I actually had all this room to stew in my head and so I had, I started having real trouble with the come down and I almost put myself into the thought-police situation of coming down – when I was coming down at Centrepont – of just completely processing every single thing that was happening and over-analysing everything and getting so wound up in my head that I'd chew the inside of my mouth out and just being too awake and too much was going on in my head...It was almost like I was programmed to be processing the way I was processing and it just did my head in.*

Others spoke about how drugs or alcohol had impacted on their work or relationships. One participant spoke sadly about how she had had to face the impact that her alcoholism had had on her life:

*It actually is affecting everything, it's affecting my work. I can't keep a job down. You know, I can't keep a relationship at all. I can't have a decent relationship, a lasting one. And my relationship with my son has been affected and minimised because I haven't had good quality time with him all these years. Yeah. So I had to just be, just really take a good hard look at it, and just really be real about it.*

A few participants spoke about how they had ‘fried their brains’ during their years of drug use and feared serious consequences for their cognitive abilities. One described how his drug use had affected his memory:

*And I'm I find that a lot of my long term memories have actually stayed, It's just that my short term memories get quite bad sometimes.*

This participant also spoke about his reduced ability to think:

*I don't know how much brain damage I've suffered from all of that. I mean I know now I struggle with a lot of things and just, I've seen stuff on TV about the effects of alcohol abuse on teenagers and how much it actually damages the brain...Oh, just gaps in your mind. I don't know. I've never, I mean I had a full time job when I was nineteen and that was the last time I've worked full time.*

A fairly high proportion of our participants seem to have received some kind of help with their psychological difficulties. For some this was an experience that provided them with some relief and new insight into their difficulties:

*Oh, there's just been times where I've just completely hit rock bottom and just been a mess so the counsellors have been just lifesavers, literally. Think it's just been a real, I think like most of it, the really positive parts have just been like the sort of empowering thing and to show me that I'm not damaged and I'm actually okay and that those experiences don't have to have power over me now, that I can, that person, yes, all that happened but what I do with my life right now is completely in my hands.*

One participant who had spent some time trying to find a good counsellor acknowledged that when she did so, the experience had been very helpful for her:

*[I found a] really, really, really good counsellor I have. I've been going to her for about three years now, and that's been really great. Yeah. No she's really good. She's a very good counsellor. She's a very ah, great person. And I just really enjoy, ah, just the whole process going through, you know, that I've been going through with her, it's been hugely um, helpful. Because, it's such an isolating place to be, to have such a burden, you know? Because it's such an unknown really, the whole culture, you know thing. That it's really helpful to have someone who's really um, effective in that way. Because what worries me is I was so dysfunctional as a, as a person, you know. So many things that weren't working and you know, unless you actively sort that stuff out, you're just going to pass it on.*

Others, however, had had less success in seeking help and spoke of difficulties with trusting therapists and counsellors. This reflected their more general difficulties trusting others or related specifically to associations with the so-called 'therapeutic' experiences they had had at Centrepont. One offered us some idea of how she had struggled internally before she finally accepted she needed professional help:

*For ages, going to counselling was a 'no way', but it was a point of losing my life...It was go to counselling or lose my life. I was in a really bad way.*

Another participant who had not received any significant help with her psychological problems ascribed her aversion to counselling to her experiences at Centrepont. She analysed her own response like this:

*I saw someone last year, locally here. I went to one session. I didn't go back. I don't know why. I wanted to but, I was open to doing it; I don't know why I didn't. It's a big move to make; it can be a pretty big step. I think a lot of the counselling they made you do at Centrepont, I was wondering about that, whether that's a reason why I haven't because it was forced on us so much, therapy the counselling.*

Yet another participant was even more direct about her mistrust of counselling. Given the way that she experienced counselling being used at Centrepont she found herself understandably suspicious of the intentions of these professionals. As she put it:

*If I see a counsellor out there, what sort of rubbish are they going to try and fill my head with. And can I trust that they're actually doing good for me and not making me worse?*

One participant explained that some of her peers still saw the psychotherapy community as being in some way connected to Centrepont as some therapists who worked there were still working professionally and others had completed their training after leaving Centrepont. This, according to her, created a general suspicion of therapy:

*That's the problem unfortunately is that a lot of us were abused in therapeutic environments so therapy in itself is dangerous.*

Several participants also raised concerns about what they saw as ignorance amongst counsellors and psychotherapists about what it meant to live in a community that some described as a 'cult':

*I know that talking to some of the others, the fact that if they went to a counsellor or therapist they wouldn't really understand that whole thing about Centrepont and the cultic kind of stuff and things – it did make them often quite wary of going to counselling it's like 'Oh God do I want to tell this story?. Like my brother I know, is quite 'I don't want to tell the story to someone who doesn't know what I'm talking about and have them ask stupid questions and get it wrong'. I don't think I could tolerate that. I want someone that I can just talk about my stuff and they get it.*

This participant went on to explain that in general Centrepont children were very knowledgeable about psychotherapy and were not prepared to accept anything but the best in the way of professional counselling:

*And of course most of us grew up surrounded by therapists and therapeutic processes so we're pretty clued up on it. And that's a bit of a – yeah, it gets in the way a bit sometimes. It sounds really arrogant....[We] can get a bit intolerant.*

While they focused largely on their own psychological experiences some of our participants speculated about the experiences of others who had been at Centrepont. Many reported that they knew people who they believed were experiencing psychological difficulties. A few suspected that some of their Centrepont peers were 'in denial' about the effects that their experiences had had on them. One gave the example of a Centrepont acquaintance he felt minimised his psychological struggles:

*[There is] one person who is just a real mess. He insists nothing bad happened but his life is dysfunctional. His drug habit started at Centrepont. His relationships*

*always break down, he can't communicate well and he just says there's nothing wrong. 'Nothing wrong with me, I'm fine'.*

Another put this kind of denial in perspective recognising that for some people the awareness of what they had experienced might be triggered at different points in their lives, particularly when they faced new challenges:

*But you know, stuff still happens because I think people move away and they go along in their life and everything's fine, or as fine as they can do it, and a lot of people turn to alcohol and drugs because they are the big suppressants and they can escape. And then they have kids and stuff starts coming up for them. I suppose that's just how it'll keep, you know, it'll keep happening because people will get into new relationships and new things will come up for them, and they'll have more kids and they'll live their lives and things that come up for them in their lives will bring other stuff up about Centrepont. It'll just be a constant thing.*

While general health issues did not feature as dominantly in our research interviews as psychological problems, some participants did talk about their health needs and sometimes related them to experiences at Centrepont. For example, one spoke about needing reconstructive surgery on her vagina which had been torn when she was raped at Centrepont. Others alluded to more general health problems as well as dental problems which they associated with their drug use. One spoke about having contracted Hepatitis C, which she believes she developed through drug use while she was still at Centrepont. Another spoke about her concern over the effects of having been put on the contraceptive pill when she was very young and what this might mean for her health. A few participants also mentioned a specific health problem or injury that was not obviously related to their life at Centrepont.

Some participants grew up expecting their health needs to be taken care of at Centrepont:

*When the parents joined the community there was a thing that the children's education and sort of medical stuff would be taken care of.*

As well as the high number of participants who reported some form of psychological or health difficulty in their lives and the apparent seriousness of some of these problems, we also spoke with participants who accounted themselves as emerging healthy from Centrepont and leading full and satisfying lives. Around a third of our participants did not describe experiences of significant psychological or health problems. One explained how she resented the assumption people made about the high rate of psychological problems

amongst children from Centrepont. But her last sentence perhaps reflects her awareness that the resented assumption is based on events she tries to put out of her mind:

*Because you get this kind of perception that, I remember when I lived there, everyone thought, you know, assumed we were these damaged, depressed, abused children...Because the majority of the time, you know, we were bloody happy kids. It was a, it was a wicked way to grow up. Ah, you know, and you saw some, there were, you know, there were bad things that happened, but I dunno, maybe I've tried to forget a lot of that... and you know, remember the good stuff. Um. Yeah.*

Several participants spoke with pride and hopefulness about their lives and had no apparent or identified mental or general health issues.

*I think the majority of us, me, speaking for myself, we're happy and we're confident, and we're lucky that we grew up and experienced bits of life that you probably wouldn't do, get to experience until a lot older. I'm sure it's saved me in some dangerous situations and made me smarter and you know.*

While some of these participants recognised that other Centrepont children had suffered as a result of their experiences there they were clear that they had emerged unscathed:

*My main thing is that I wanted to get across is that some of us are actually okay.*

The majority of our participants described having fairly significant psychological difficulties and a smaller proportion also had substance abuse problems. There were a range of areas of psychological difficulty including fairly severe post traumatic reactions and experiences of psychosis. In some cases these seemed to have been linked directly to experiences at Centrepont, while in others their lives in the community may have simply added an additional source of psychological vulnerability. A number of our participants described having quite serious problems with drug and alcohol addiction through their lives. While most had sought some kind of help for their difficulties, others had been hampered by their difficulty in trusting and concerns about the competence of therapists to understand or work with their problems. General health problems were discussed less frequently but some participants did report health problems they understood to be linked directly or indirectly to their experiences at Centrepont. Some also raised the fact that they had expected Centrepont to continue to take care of their health needs as this had been the arrangement for them when they were part of the community. Again, there was a slightly smaller group of participants who seem to have emerged from the Centrepont experience unscathed and in some cases, even flourishing.

#### 4.5 Study and work after Centrepont

In relation to study and work as adults, our participants' accounts were identifiable as two groups; those that told of pursuing their career aspirations and those that talked about relatively erratic and interrupted work histories. Some were evidently able to draw on the work ethos that was available as a model at Centrepont. In other cases, career aspirations were derailed by on-going psychological difficulties, substance abuse or relationship problems.

Not surprisingly, there were as many different career paths amongst our participants as there were people. In spite of these differences, there did seem, however, to be a substantial number of participants, again about a third of the group, who reported similar sorts of problems in getting their studies or employment on track. One participant tried to explain what she understood as the problem for this group, who had generally also experienced problems with sexual abuse or drug use at Centrepont:

*[They've] been, trying to function the best they can as – you know, there's girls out there still working as prostitutes, drug addicts, there's people with a lot of compulsive behaviour because of course they've developed addictions to have to, you know, try and deal with their, you know. There's people out there with horrendous, horrendous consequences from what happened there who aren't really getting those addressed...The Trust is like 'Why can't these people', you know 'why can't they just get off their asses and get a job'. Well if you are so demoralised and so diminished, have no sense of self, you're not going to be able to – where do you start?*

Our participants provided a number of possible reasons for their difficulties. One woman who had been abused at Centrepont gave this account of her struggle to get her life together after leaving the community:

*Around, that was probably around my early twenties when I sort of started to really realise the cost that I paid, and I was devastated. I was just absolutely, I just felt so incredibly ripped off, you know, they'd, they'd just taken so much from me. And um, it just left me feeling incredibly desolate. And like that's sort of like a time in your life when, you should be launching into life, you know, getting your career and all that sort of stuff happening. And I was just like literally dead in the water for about 10 years. I couldn't. I managed some jobs, but it was just, a very, very intense thing to have to go through, to realise just how you, you, your childhood, your innocence taken, hadn't been supported, just absolutely nothing left. I just felt absolutely stolen from.*

Other participants spoke about how they had got lost in a variety of unsatisfying and potentially dangerous jobs as they tried to make sense of what had happened to them at Centrepont. One participant, for example, spoke about how she had dropped out of her chosen career after she had a 'breakdown' and started working as a prostitute. Others also acknowledged finding work in this area. One participant described how she felt lost in the cycle between drug addiction and prostitution as she tried to forget about what she had experienced at Centrepont:

*Because everyone would have deep shame. So many people would have deep shame about what they experienced. The only way to make that go away is usually by some exaggerated behaviour whether that be as a workaholic or drinking or drugging or God knows what. That's my take on it, anyway! [laughs]...Well you know I went along I desperately, I'd go along, you know, earning a phenomenal amount when I was working as a hooker, and, but I had no respect for money when I earned it, you know, and I'd snort it up my nose as quickly as I earned it. And it's so hilarious how you can afford to buy drugs but you wouldn't pay your rent or pay your children's school fees. Oh God, I don't know. There's no priority, it was all back to front.*

Another participant spoke about how, when he was younger, he had become involved in criminal activity. He attributed his decision to involve himself in this as a reaction to the hopelessness he felt after leaving Centrepont and seeing those who had worked so hard there left without anything to show for it:

*It's just like, you know. Shattered their lives...Yep. Um, basically I went for a life of crime. 'Ah, fuck it', you know. 'No-one gives a shit'. I was really down and depressed. I thought 'fuck it', you know. 'Who cares?' You know.*

Another participant described how she felt that her difficulties in relationships also affected her ability to hold down a job. As she put it:

*And I wonder about my relationships with people at work though too, because if Centrepont's affected the way I relate to people in jobs too, because you know, it's one thing saying 'get a job', but then you've gotta also have to get along with those people in your jobs.*

In her case she found herself often at loggerheads with her employers as she identified with those she perceived to have been badly treated. She recognised that this tendency was a product of the suspicion she had developed about 'authority' at Centrepont:

*Yeah, always get into a conflict with a team leader or a head of department, not usually another employee. See, so that authority thing is big. So if I work anywhere*

*for a government department or something like that, I have to be so careful. 'Cause I will get into a fight over nothing. Something I've manifested in my head!*

This participant, who saw herself as being systematically abused at Centrepont, expressed her cautious hope for the future like this:

*Well, I do hope to eventually be able to, to trust and that... you know long term relationships, then a long term job. Maybe even something, do something myself and have to take risks, and you know, I want to you know, be able to change in the way that um, yeah... not be afraid, and, and sort of, yeah.*

For others too it seemed that lack of confidence had played a role in their poor work history. Some spoke about leaving the community with their self-esteem in tatters and that this had impacted on their ability to find their way in life. One participant reflected on how she still felt directionless in her life and what she felt was lacking:

*Maybe some direction, some confidence, some positivity, some assertiveness. Maybe, being able to be more clear about your path, I mean, making the right decisions, not getting all um, messed up, confused, and you know, just maybe empowering people and just making, well, might help me to be more sure of what I want to do.*

While none of our participants spoke about having been derailed in their careers by young mother or fatherhood, there were certainly some amongst the group we interviewed who had children relatively early. One participant who had made the decision to pursue her career rather than have children, expressed the view that there were a number of young mothers amongst the former children of Centrepont who had experienced career and relationship losses:

*I've chosen to not have children. Um, mainly because I've, I've seen that they're all, you know, everyone from the community... They are incredible mums, better than anyone I know. They're they've had children young, but they're really mature, they've been through a lot in life, um, amazing kids. But I've seen how much they've lost you know. A lot of, they aren't with their partners any more, and you know, money's tight, you know, so they've, I see that side of it.*

Yet a number of our participants reported monumental and courageous efforts to extract themselves from the destructive or directionless lifestyles. One spoke about how she had finally managed to “get off the game” and get what she called a “9 to 5 job”, while another had overcome her addictions and completed a professional qualification within which she now worked.



For some, however, their attempts to make changes were dogged by further challenges and difficulties resulting in a somewhat chaotic route to their present career situation. One participant described a pathway that was probably fairly typical of several others. She had done reasonably well at school in spite of using 'weed' regularly. Later she tried to continue her studies but found she couldn't sustain this. Instead she retreated to her drug use and developed a 'P' addiction. She explained how drugs seemed to represent a way out of the demands of her life, acknowledging that this had been part of what she and others had learnt at Centrepont:

*Oh, I had a part time job: full time parent, part time job, part time study. And yeah, it was, I burnt myself out, and I think that was partly also why I turned to drugs and stuff to, you know, because...it was my escape from the daily grind.*

She spoke sadly about how she felt that this and her earlier drug use had impacted on her ability to learn:

*Oh and also with studying and stuff. I always thought I'd be smarter if I hadn't fried so many brain cells...You know, I often lament...and almost cried thinking about all the damage I've done. Of course, when you're that age, you don't know.*

This participant told us proudly that she had finally managed to get herself 'clean' and found a good job. She added, however, that ill health had forced her to take some considerable time off, during which period she had had to rely on ACC support. She acknowledged that she still had considerable anxiety about her ability to continue to support herself and her child.

One man described his work pathway as similarly marked by challenges and hurdles. After a period of travel in which he tended to move from job to job because of his propensity to get into fights, he finally settled down in a creative industry, which he felt was a good fit for his unconventional style. Having first got into drugs at Centrepont he soon found himself involved in the drug lifestyle associated with this industry:

*So a lot of my life was drug-reliant. A lot of it. I was importing and selling 'E' at the same time. For your records [laughs] though nothing to do with the community! It was just, you know circles that you'd fall into.*

He finally left the industry he had worked in to create some distance between himself and the temptation of using drugs with his friends there. After his relationship broke up, however, he experienced a depression which lasted for some months. He spent a period of

time living alone and not able to work, but he feels he has now been able to get his life on track:

*I've gone from calling myself unemployed to calling myself an entrepreneur: I do stuff. Like I get up in the morning, I've got to make \$200 today it's just simple. I've got to make at least that. Which changes the way I relate to people. I now have friends who are judges. I now have friends who own construction companies. I have people who are doing the same kind of thing – they're getting on every day and they're making something happen.*

One participant spoke about how a long and troubled route led to her present happiness in her career:

*So I'm learning about resilience and patience and my, and my [work in the arts] is, is.... I'm just bloody lucky to have found something that stabilises me, and really is giving me an opportunity to experience the wonderfulness of me.*

Her choice of career in the arts seemed not uncommon amongst our group of participants – and particularly those who had experienced some difficulties at Centrepont.

Although there were a group of participants who had clearly struggled along the way to finding their career, there were, a slightly higher number of participants who seemed to have established themselves early and apparently successfully in their studies or careers. But for most of this group though it seemed that the path hadn't always been completely smooth and they had had to draw extensively on their intellectual skills and determination to move forward.

One participant, for example, spoke proudly about how she had managed to find a good job that she loved. She had had no opportunity for tertiary study and had left school early without completing her education. Nonetheless, she had been able to catch up on her education via correspondence and had obtained the qualifications she needed in record time. She attributed her success to what she had learnt at Centrepont:

*I have been working ever since. And um, yeah, I love working. I started just starting a new job and probably I'm the youngest one there, and most people have [specific] qualifications. I haven't done anything. So I you know, I attribute stuff like that to the community...Yeah, because I'm, I'm not scared to take on, I'll go for the biggest challenge. I never set my sights low. You know. And that stuff they always taught you at community is to be who you are to not be scared of anything, and to challenge people to take things on.... And yeah, I wouldn't be where I was if it wasn't for the community really.*

There were a number of other participants who also acknowledged the maturity and social skills they had learnt at Centrepont as being a key ingredient in their work success. Many demonstrated an unusual degree of responsibility and competence in their working lives. One participant described her own pathway which was in stark contrast to the chaotic and troubled pathways of some other participants:

*No, I didn't. I got a job and worked in a [specific industry] company and sort of – God I had a great employer who actually helped me to work and go to uni so I worked full time and then I kind of came up the ladder there and then I worked part time and went to uni. Just financed my studies. Did my undergraduate degree and then after that was when I got married and had children and then I went back part time. Just chipped away at it and I always liked it I guess, that's why, yeah. But it's been a very strong point in terms of moving forward and being where I want to be...I think just, a sort of interest in, you know, just appreciating learning and wanting to learn and probably self-efficacy, you know like I really do believe if you want to learn something you can and I teach my children that: you just have to choose whereas I think perhaps if I hadn't been able to get through and do well I might not believe that. And just practical reasons, you know as well like financial, and having a future and having goals and working towards something and being fulfilled as well, yeah.*

For a small number of largely younger participants career paths had been smoother than many in the 'older generation'. Several spoke about how they had moved relatively easily from school, to university or training and then managed to find jobs they enjoyed and that suited them. One participant spoke enthusiastically about how he loved his job and had been pleased to find something that stimulated and excited him.

A number of our younger participants were also focused on travel or engaged in thinking about future university study, as is commonly expected of this age group. Some seemed particularly proud of having been able to take charge of their lives and become self-supporting, often at a young age. One spoke about how she had been able to find herself in her career:

*My career is basically a big part of my identity...and I think because my degree gave me a real sense of who I am, confidence, individualism. I became somebody with something to fall back on. On my own. Knowing that my mum was in a hippy commune, and Dad – whew, whatever, like you know – did not have any support. So I guess I feel like I can stand on my own two feet because of it.*

Another spoke about how, although she had been abused, she had been able to take charge of her life and make it what she wanted it to be:

*I decided I want more empowerment in my life. I want more. There's no reason why I can't have what other normal people have, whatever, so it was like 'Yep.' I went and got a degree and then, and then like that was excellent, that was awesome and completely changed my life. I'm not doing anything with it like specifically yet, but it definitely was just one more step in empowering me and then now, now for me it's working on my own business, getting that up and running so I'm financially independent and have the things in my life that I want, the freedom in my life that I want, all those sorts of things.*

In summary, it seemed that our participants differed considerably in terms of the extent to which they had been able to establish and pursue clear career goals for themselves. The pathway for many who had been traumatised or became involved in drugs at Centrepont, tended to be chaotic and troubled. Some of these participants managed to find their way through to some satisfactory lifestyle while others were still rather lost and uncertain about their futures. A somewhat larger proportion of our participants, predominantly amongst the younger group, seemed to be successfully pursuing clearer goals or established in their careers.

#### **4.6 Managing financially after Centrepont**

Money management and financial arrangements also proved difficult for a number of our participants. Some had struggled to manage without the support they might have expected from their parents, who were left with little after Centrepont, while others had difficulties as a result of their own erratic work histories. Many of our participants also spoke about how they hadn't learnt the skills they needed to manage their finances effectively at Centrepont.

Certainly a number of our participants described experiencing significant financial difficulties over the years since leaving Centrepont and only precariously survived. Several spoke about relying on Government benefits, loans or other agency support while they were unable to earn enough to support themselves. Some had on-going worries about their ability to support themselves or their children, while others were concerned about future responsibilities for supporting their elderly parents or siblings who were unable to cope. Several told of the significance of being plagued by worries about money:

*You know, and I do have a real, real concern and that stresses me out. It's one of the biggest things that gives me anxiety and panic attacks is what am I going to do for money?*

*[Financial problems are the] biggest thing that can bring me down.*

A few who had been able to earn income through working had struggled to hold onto what they had. One explained that he had continually run into debt even with a fairly good income:

*I got myself into, like not care about the debt so it just gets turned over to Baycorp and becomes a bigger debt and a bigger drama. I've just done that so many times it's not funny. My credit history would be just shocking.*

In making sense of their financial difficulties, participants alluded to the way in which their parents had left Centrepont with almost no money or assets. A few of our participants spoke about how they felt they had lost their “inheritance”:

*You know, and plus that is our inheritance. You know that place, is, was created with either from money from our grandparents or whatever, you know, a lot of it, like in my particular reason, in my particular case, that was my inheritance is stuck in that, in that, you know. That's where our money [was].*

Several participants explained that this meant that their parents had been unable to give them a hand in setting them up early in their adulthood. Some who, it seemed, had come from originally affluent families, spoke about how their parents had been unable to assist them in attending university or putting down a deposit on a house. They expressed a sense of injustice about this situation:

*I mean my parents, not that I care or not that I rely on them financially, you know, when they die they will have nothing to leave us, you know. They don't have a home, they don't have any kind of assets – like other families have their whole life to build up for. My parents won't have anything to leave us. So it's sort of, you know, when they left the community you almost would expect that they get something back like I mean the amount of land that's there and the amount of time and energy that they put into making the community what it is now.*

Participants felt an injustice at losing their parents' assets from their family that had considerable material consequences for their lives. They compared their situation to that of friends outside of Centrepont who commonly received help from their parents:

*So you know, as I said a lot of, a lot of us, you know, when we call on help from our parents, you don't have that same support. You know, buying a house is a really big*

*thing to me, but also a big concern, because I'm saving, I'm saving most of my money. But I know a lot of, a lot of friends, not from the community, have gone to their families and their families have given, have helped give them money for a deposit, so that you don't have to borrow that much and that. And a lot of us won't have that benefit, because a lot of our families don't have that type of money.*

In addition to the lack of financial support from their families, participants also attributed Centrepoint's financial arrangements with their difficulty in managing their money. Several spoke about how they felt that they had not been taught to value or work with money at Centrepoint and explained that the community had not allowed them access to the normal financial workings of a household:

*[The reason] that I didn't know how to budget was because we had no idea! I mean, when you're buying 58 loaves of bread a day 'budgets, smudgets', you know? When your electricity bill is \$11,000 a month, you know, um, you don't learn budgeting like that.*

Another participant explained that his experience at Centrepoint had taught him that his basic needs would be taken care of and that money was just an optional extra:

*So I never learned any of that sort of stuff. I never learned how to budget. Never got taught how to.... Money was basically a small little snippet that you got once in a while to spend for a luxury item that's all it was ever for. The only reason you ever needed money was for a luxury item that wasn't already provided totally for you.*

One participant recognised that their experience of and attitudes towards money were unusual but felt they needed to be understood in the context of the way that Centrepoint operated:

*It's hard for people to understand the way we that we are now. We didn't have those role models that normal, most people have, in terms of working and making money, and providing for households, and all of that sort of thing.*

Another elaborated on how she had never had an opportunity to observe many of the financial arrangements that might be typical of a family:

*There's been so much role playing missing, like simple things like no-one had savings accounts, parents didn't earn money, no-one owned a car, no-one paid a mortgage. You know basic stuff that when you come out...So you leave these communities with nothing; there's nothing set up to then fill in the gaps.*

As one participant put it bluntly, explaining how, without basic information about how household finances worked “you have to work it out for yourself and sometimes you make a balls of it”.

The lack of role models for individual financial decision making and the way in which Centrepont had seemed to effortlessly meet the children’s basic material needs led to confidence that they would always be taken care of financially. One captured her sense of disillusionment around the realisation that this wasn’t so:

*Yeah. I think partly growing up at the community. My Mum was a big one for always saying, ‘We live in the community because is, um, everything will be paid for, for you: you’ll be able to go to university you’ll be able to do all of these things that I won’t be able to provide for you if we lived in a small house’.... And of course once I got to university, they weren’t paying people to go to university any more, you know, and of course by the time I was at university the community had collapsed, and so all of that security that I thought I had growing up wasn’t actually there at all.*

Several participants spoke about feeling bitterness towards the ‘unfairness’ of their financial circumstances. One spoke about how she felt she had been “stolen from”. In her case the sense of being defrauded financially was compounded by her sense that she had also been robbed of her ‘childhood’ in broader terms. For a number of other participants their sense of injustice was exacerbated by their understanding that some people had received money from Centrepont from the settlement with the Bert Potter group or through other forms of compensation when they had not:

*I think it’s more the fact that the people who came out of Centrepont the amount of compensation that they got – I know friends who got obscene amounts of money [and] I think the offenders who had to leave Centrepont because it was closing down got paid out. I can’t...I’m not too sure about the specifics but it was a very decent chunk of money. Whereas, you know, people like me who managed to get out of the place even though affected for quite some time they didn’t really.*

While most of our participants who struggled with money tended to attribute their problems in this area directly to Centrepont’s beliefs and practices in relation to money, others described their money problems as a more indirect legacy of Centrepont. Several mentioned that whatever money they had was spent on supplying their drug habits, while one or two had fallen into financial difficulties while experiencing physical or psychological problems. One participant, for example, wondered how she was going to be able to repay

her loans after she had had a 'breakdown' and another spoke sadly about how he only "got into a mess with money" when he was psychologically unwell.

But as with other areas we investigated in this research, there were a group of participants who seemed to have avoided financial difficulties and expressed no concerns with their ability to manage money. This group felt that growing up at Centrepont left them with a sense of being strong and independent and they built on this to accept responsibility for their own finances in their adult lives. A couple of participants spoke proudly about their financial independence:

*I'm pretty independent. I do fine on my own without needing much help.*

*I don't think, I don't think I overly struggled. Yeah. I've always sort of enjoyed my own, sort of financial independence.*

Some participants talked of healthy aspirations to be able to support their families while others had been able to save money and were achieving their financial goals:

*We've been financially, well we sort of lived in a [amount of money] a week house in [place] for [a number of] years and saved up enough money to, to buy this little bach that's down there. So we sort of started from nothing, and we sort of worked quite hard, and...Yeah, and so now yeah, it was, so like we didn't need any financial help.*

A few participants had been lucky to have financial supports they could rely on outside their own earning efforts, including family assistance or inheritances. They also reported themselves to be managing well in this area of their lives.

Several participants seemed to draw on the Centrepont ideology in trying to make sense of the significance of money in their lives. One participant who had experienced considerable financial stress found comfort with this thought:

*I mean it is only money, and, and I think the whole of society would do well to learn a big lesson from that. You know. That that's basically what ruins a lot of people and their and their hearts and their lives, is, is their, their greed and their desire for money.*

Others recognised that while Centrepont had left some of them with significant financial difficulties the experience they had had at the community was worth the financial losses they had suffered as a result:



*Most people couldn't even comprehend how strong people have to be and those people, they're still financially screwed even today. But I think the lessons they learned from it, I think none of them would go back and reverse it. None of them, not anyone I've spoken to. There's all those people that lost a lot of money, the lessons they got from being at Centrepont were a lot stronger than what the money was worth.*

Participants varied considerably in their experiences of financial difficulty in their lives. Some who struggled with money attributed this to the loss of their family's assets and the lack of opportunity to learn basic financial management skills at Centrepont. After having many of their needs taken care of for them at Centrepont some struggled to take responsibility for their own financial arrangements. Some struggled to hold onto money because of addiction or illness. Others reported becoming self-supporting and capable of managing their money effectively despite earlier financial challenges. While most participants recognised that financial challenges had been one of the more significant legacies of Centrepont, a few were still comforted by the scepticism that the community had had in relation to the value of individual wealth.

#### **4.7 Perception of and participation in court cases**

With the number of police investigations, charges and court cases that occurred in relation to Centrepont over a period of years both during the community's existence and after, it is hardly surprising that nearly half of our participants spoke about having had a family member involved in some kind of legal proceeding related to Centrepont – either as a victim or perpetrator of abuse. On the other hand, very few of our participants appeared to have had any direct involvement with court cases themselves. In fact, while nearly a third of our participants acknowledged having been sexually abused, very few spoke about having had a case taken to court.

The few participants, who had been involved in the court cases around sexual abuse attested to the considerable courage and determination required to do so. We heard about how some were motivated to seek prosecution for the perpetrators by their concerns for the well-being of others as well as themselves.

It seemed from our interviews that a number of former Centrepoint children had initially come forward to join the group who planned to take their cases to court. In the end though, there was only a small group who felt able to go through the early court cases. There were, however, later legal processes in which others were involved. One participant described some of the pressure she had been under to withdraw her evidence in a sexual abuse case:

*I had kids from Centrepoint trying to stop me, I had academics trying to stop me, I had doctors trying to stop me...*

She went on to explain how she was encouraged to “vent [her] feelings” to those responsible for her abuse, rather than pursuing a legal case. In our interviews with participants we also heard stories of people being offered money to coerce silence about their abuse.

Other participants spoke about how they were aware of the pressure and hostility from Centrepoint against those that were participating in the court cases. One offered her interpretation of the way that people were manipulated into ‘taking responsibility’ for their own abuse:

*There was a bit of a thing around at Centrepoint which was about making the people who’d pressed charges ‘bad’. There was a bit of kind of conspiracy kind of you know, paranoia and things, about you know: There are people who’ve left, there are people outside, there are people who have moved on that haven’t dealt with their own stuff and rather than them dealing with their own problems, they’re blaming it on us’. And Centrepoint had a bit of a philosophy around self-responsibility which was on one level was perfectly fine – which was ‘notice your own responses to things, deal with your own responses to things, don’t tell other people they’re bad because they’ve hurt you, look at how you’ve responded to how they’ve behaved’, which on one level is a very helpful thing, to look at how you’ve contributed to things you find distressing. But it was used very effectively to shut people down who were badly treated so if someone was mistreated at Centrepoint, adult or otherwise, if they were objecting to someone who was more popular or more powerful than them. Basically they would just be told to take more responsibility for their responses like ‘Well if you think they treated you badly, rather than blaming them why don’t you deal with your own stuff?’*

In addition to having to challenge this powerful ideological deterrent to making a complaint of abuse, there was some anxiety about having to confront perpetrators in court. One participant gave some insight into this when describing the process of accompanying a friend to court:

*I remember coming up for the court case because I was friends with [Name] and I remember coming up and oh yeah, fuck I remember that, Jesus Christ! I hadn't seen anyone for years and I came up and I was in the court room and I was just sitting, you know, I wasn't talking or anything but I was just sitting on the side, on [my friend's] side. [The men who were accused of abuse] they were just staring at me in horror from the other side of the room – just staring at me in just, absolute horror like 'How fucking dare you betray, how fucking dare you sit over there, how fucking dare you!' And I was just horrified because you know I hadn't... I hadn't seen them for so many years. But it was almost like their expectation of me was that I was on their side 'cause of what my behaviour – 'cause of where, you know.... And the evils I got – I'd never experienced anything like it. Just the fucking evils! It was extraordinary. That was the last time I saw them.*

This participant went on to say that she admired the few people who had taken responsibility for bringing the issues to court, when others weren't able to manage it. She attributed the relatively low number of abuse complaints to fears of challenging the adults of the community as well as their own traumatised state:

*I think it was resting upon a few people to do the work as well because most people were in shock or trauma. People were just in trauma and had so much of their own personal stuff to deal with that a lot of people just couldn't face any of it, and certainly couldn't face those people in court. And I admire the people who did because that took incredible courage and strength at the time.*

The possibility that some former Centrepont children were unable to participate in the court cases because of psychological trauma was borne out in several of our interviews where those reporting some of the most severe abuse among our participants had not found their way to bring their abusers to the attention of the courts. Various participants' accounts were marked by experiencing the disorganisation that is often seen in the aftermath of trauma and difficulties accessing the support networks that were developing between the former children of Centrepont who were involved in laying charges.

One participant spoke about how it would be difficult for her to lay a charge against anyone for her abuse because of the potential impact on other friends and family members who were connected to those who had abused her. She was concerned about the hurt that this would cause them.

Yet another participant suggested that it was the legal process – specifically the practice of 'plea bargaining' – that led her to decide not to pursue her case in court. This woman felt disillusioned and hopeless about the possibility of finding justice after discovering that

those she had accused could plea bargain for evidence against others and would not have to stand trial themselves. She provided a detailed description of how she experienced her attempt to seek justice through the courts:

*Yeah, I never did it. Now, this is the reason that I never did it. Now, now I'm remembering why. [The police] went to [a relative] and he got off. They went to some other people who I'd found were very bad it felt like I'd been raped by one of these guys and he got off. Before he even went to court! I was going, 'Well what's going on?' And they said, 'Oh, they're plea bargaining to get Bert more time, you know, in prison'. I said 'Well that these guys are just as bloody bad you know. Why are these guys getting off who were actually as bad, just because they were being brainwashed by Bert – they were full grown adult men that were perpetrators as well'....And they said 'Oh, yeah, yeah but we need as much, oh these guys can be witnesses, it's just like any crime, right, you know this guy's going to give evidence, or give a statement about Bert that will be more damning you know, or damaging to put him behind bars longer sort of thing'. Well that, to me, wasn't fair, that wasn't justice, because I thought 'well this guy was really, really bad, compared to Bert'. I think I slept with Bert once, but this guy was always at me all the time. He was just trying to get into me every five minutes, I was sick and he was trying to get into me then, and I was like, 'Oh, my God, you know, and you're going to let this guy off?' And he was probably the worst person that I ever came across at Centrepont...That's just not justice to me'.*

She went on to explain how the plea bargaining had left her with the sense that her particular experience of abuse would not be acknowledged or dealt with through a legal process:

*'You're doing a collective thing against Bert. But you're not actually looking at the individual cases here and they all have their own merits'. To me that was an important part.*

Finally she recounted how this experience had left her with the belief that she could not expect any justice for what she had experienced at Centrepont, likening her experience to the highly publicised case of Louise Nicholas which had seen her claim of being raped by policemen dismissed in court:

*I just felt like it wasn't gonna be very effective anyway. And, and plus [name] had got off as well. When the police went to speak to him. So that was like a double whammy. It was like, 'Well, he's got off too, so where does that leave me? I'm still a victim that's not gained anything by it'. And that's the same that goes with the woman that took the police to court and all the police getting off and all the rest of it. I wouldn't want to go through that because I'd be shattered and devastated if I got to the end of court case and found that these people got off, you know?...*

*Anyway, I don't know, I just felt like I don't want to go through that to know that he can get away with it...Because I, I already felt like a victim; I just didn't want to feel worse. To go through that process and then come out again, like drained and tired of it all and exhausted and still not being believed.*

She ended this account by saying that she had just decided to focus on trying to get on with her life and leave her Centrepont experiences behind. She acknowledged though that there were times when she still felt she wanted some kind of 'revenge' for what happened to her.

For those who saw justice being done through the legal process there seemed to be some psychological relief. One participant, who saw Bert in jail, albeit not as a result of her own testimony, recalls her response like this:

*And he was just this little old man in prison. All the charisma and the power – everything had just gone. Just gone. He was this little old guy in prison. I was just like 'Whoah! What am I doing here? This is totally weird'. I don't know what I expected, I just went because that's what everyone was doing. Out of respect for him or something.... It was really strange. I was like 'What am I doing here?' I just wanted to get out on the road and hitch as far away as possible. It was really weird. Because he didn't have any hold – there was no powers, there was nothing holding me there apart from my own will. And I was like, 'God, I can just go. I can do whatever I like. That's it, it's over'.*

For others, not closely involved with the court cases, there were a variety responses to the legal intervention. Some of our participants spoke little about this aspect of Centrepont experiences and it may be that it did not have particular significance for them or occurred when they were too young to register its import. Other participants seem to have been aware of the legal developments and acknowledged that they had 'followed' these. In some cases there was a degree of measured support for those who had laid charges and some admitted horror at what had unfolded through the legal proceedings. One participant, who did not experience his life at Centrepont as abusive, acknowledged that it was important for those who were abused to have some of their experiences recognised. He explained how he had heard about some former Centrepont children being called into a meeting at Centrepont where their abuse claims were denied:

*I wasn't there but they went back to a meeting to try and get some recognition for the pain that they were feeling and they got sort of pushed away, and 'Oh, no this can't have happened.' And I think that's more abusive than the actual act, it's trying to trying to sort of face it and say 'Oh, shit yes, I did do it' and, and 'I'm sorry that it hurt and you know, hurt you later on' or, or you know, yeah.*

In other instances though, our participants expressed their discomfort with the impact of the court cases on the perception of Centrepont and also sometimes on their own families. One described how painful it was for her to see her father leave with his professional reputation in tatters after he appeared in court.

*It was very shitty for him and it wasn't really fair that was how things worked out. ...He made mistakes but he was a good man.*

Another participant who had not had been involved in the court cases herself, commented on how they created difficulties for those whose relatives were involved:

*I think for anyone with the same last name of someone that was charged, I think it's a bit of a sore subject.*

One participant explained how conflicting loyalties resonated within the former group of Centrepont children and sometimes made it difficult for them to meet to discuss shared concerns around the court cases:

*Certain people had parents who had been charged other people had parents who hadn't and some had had parents who were considered not good people and others had parents who were mostly pretty clean and for us to kind of all mix together was kind of like...What do you do with that?*

A couple of our participants had been approached to give evidence in various sexual abuse cases linked to Centrepont. In one instance our participant had said she would be available to do this, but the case still hadn't come to court. In another instance, one of our participants explained that he had been unable to give evidence in court because of competing loyalties with the victim and perpetrator.

According to our participants the court cases were not simply an historical fact to be processed at leisure. A number talked about on-going investigations and the possibility that there might be future court cases as a result. One participant spoke about having been involved in supporting a friend through a court case just a couple of years ago and another spoke about knowing someone who was going through some kind of court proceeding at the time the research interviews were being conducted.

Some participants spoke about having friends or relatives who still wanted to lay charges related to their abuse at Centrepont. A few were supportive of more people coming forward

in this way, while for others there was a sense in which this, in the words of one, “stirs it all up”. One participant spoke about how she lived in fear that charges might be brought against her parents and this left her feeling that the trauma of Centrepont “just never ends”.

In summary, there were relatively few of our participants who had been involved in taking abuse cases to court. From the point of view of some participants, court cases required considerable courage in the face of disapproval from the Centrepont community, the prospect of facing their accusers in court and the emotional consequences of conflicting loyalties. By some accounts there were people who had been too traumatised to be able to participate in legal processes. Plea bargaining ensured that a few key figures went to jail for their abuses, and suggested to some participants that they would not see legal justice for their experiences of abuse. On the whole there was a strong sense amongst those who had been abused that justice had not really been done through the courts. The court cases also seem to have left discomfort and tension among former Centrepont children, with some being more strongly associated with the accused and others with the victims. The court cases did not feature significantly in some of our participants’ accounts and there may be a group for whom they were largely irrelevant. Our participants suggested that there were some on-going or future court cases possible and while some seemed supportive of this, others were afraid of the challenges and difficulties that might be stirred up for them and their families.

#### **4.8 The next generation**

Just under half of our participants have children. Becoming parents themselves provided a new set of issues and concerns for them. For some, having children forced them to re-evaluate some of their young childhood experiences at Centrepont. Others expressed concerns about how their experiences might come to impact on their parenting and on their own children. For a number of our participants, their relationship with their child provided impetus to improve or take charge of their own lives. A few participants also felt that they drew from good experiences at Centrepont to help them with their parenting.

Participants spoke about having children as a ‘turning point’ for them in evaluating what had happened to them at Centrepont. Observing their children, at various ages, brought home the significance of their experiences at Centrepont when they were of a similar age.

One participant re-imagined himself as a child, adjusting to the strangeness of Centrepont through his young child's eyes:

*Yeah. And I think, you know, when, my [child's] age so if I sort of think of that sort of maturity and things that [he/she] understands now, you know, I think it's quite a lot to sort of soak in, going from an ordinary house to sort of be chucked into a community. I'm sure there would have been sort of excitement and lots of kids, you know. I think, you know, there was also sort of a sense of being quite alone as well, you know...It's a pretty young age to sort of just be chucked into the mix, even though it might be exciting or whatever. I think it's hard to kind of jump back there, you know. I guess you have stories around it or whatever but if I think of my kids and the attention that they need sort of now and their age, I think it would be [difficult].*

Several participants also spoke about imagining their children in similar situations and registering just *how young* they were when they had particular experiences. One described how he now thought about the age at which he and others had first had sex at Centrepont:

*Looking back, it's like, [my child's age]! You know, it's like, geez, I couldn't imagine, younger than [my child] and and yeah, just like all the kids, all the girls from [my child's] classroom or something, it's just quite bizarre that...*

Another participant spoke about how she had enjoyed her freedom at the time, although now motherhood had made her see things in a different way:

*Makes you so much more aware of it. How I was as a teenager and how I really don't want my kids to be like that.*

It appeared that for some, having a child also sensitised them to the significance of some of the abuses that took place at Centrepont. One participant described how she became distressed after a friend spoke about infant sexual abuse at Centrepont while she was changing her own baby's nappy:

*And it might have even been her seeing her fanny, but she was so desensitised by her experiences there that she just talked about stuff that had happened to her when she was little. About getting abused, and her mother not doing anything, being in the same room, and I was just horrified. I couldn't sleep and every time I changed her nappy, I just couldn't, it was hideous – for ages as well. Just like, it took me so long to get it out of my mind and I was petrified, that, not so much that I would do something to her because it wasn't like that, but it was, just that she was so desensitised that she could talk to a new mother about that, as well? About being fiddled with and I don't know, it just got me. So raw and for ages I couldn't – I'd wake up in the night and think about it.*



Several participants also spoke about how they had consciously tried to give their children the protection and care they did not always feel that they had received from their parents at Centrepont. One participant who had been beaten by an adult while at Centrepont, talked about how he was careful not to smack his own children. Others were concerned to provide their children with the attention that they did not receive. One spoke about his sadness at not having his parents more involved in his life and how he wanted to be able to give that experience to his children. Another participant spoke about how she didn't want her daughter to have to go looking for male affection the way she had had to because her own father couldn't provide for her. Participants also spoke about how they hoped to offer their children the day-to-day involvement they felt they hadn't received, including a parent's help with homework or someone to watch them play sport at school.

One participant explained how he consciously monitored his behaviour to ensure that he was more available to his child than his parent had been to him:

*I had my first child. That's a huge emotional thing to happen for anyone. Suddenly you control – suddenly you're in charge of another life and all that sort of stuff going on. Suddenly I started to feel like I had to have a bit more to lose in life, maybe a bit more to live for as well.... I probably thought a bit more about how unavailable Mum was for me... Um I guess on some levels it's been quite important because it's given me the, it's given me a gauge on how distant I can be from my [child] before it becomes an issue.*

A number of participants also focused specifically on how they would protect their children from the sorts of sexual experiences they had been exposed to as children. One alluded to an abusive incident that occurred at Centrepont when she spoke about how she, as a parent, would have been deeply suspicious of an 'old man' trying to befriend her child and inviting her over to 'play' at his house.

Another participant, who acknowledged that she had tried to take the best out of Centrepont, could see quite clearly in retrospect that she would not be happy with her children experiencing a childhood like hers:

*As an adult I am more able to say, 'Now well I wouldn't want that for my kids'. I wouldn't want my kids exposed to such kind of sexual stuff early. I don't think they need to be naked in front of lots of other people. Not that I think that harmed me. I don't think it harmed me and that's where I think the misconceptions can come in. But sexual boundaries and men looking at young girls and saying things to them, I don't think that's okay.*

Yet another participant spoke about how she wouldn't consider it acceptable for her young child to see people having sex:

*I mean I've actively not had relationships that have involved my [child] at all. The idea of my [child] seeing me have sex is, you know...[He/she] is way too young for that kind of thing. You know. And – nakedness I could handle. I still can. The open showers were a part of life, you know, but when it came to actually seeing people being intimate, and um, that's you know, that's inappropriate. It just is.*

A few of our participants spoke about how their own unresolved problems from Centrepont had impacted on their parenting in spite of their best intentions for this not to happen. While several raised concerns about their current parenting, in most cases they seem to talk about problems they had experienced with parenting in the past.

One participant acknowledged how her substance abuse problem had impacted on her relationship with her child. She recognised her emotional unavailability as a parent but, in her interview, expressed the hope that she had not 'damaged' her child too severely:

*I suppose, and [he/she] hasn't had adverse stuff from me that's, that's really damaged [him/her] majorly. I think the drinking did make me ignore [my child] a lot, which I shouldn't have done, but I wasn't screaming and abusing [him/her] and, and that but then I wasn't giving much emotion.*

She also talked of concern that her own traumatised ways of thinking might have impacted on her child:

*[You] want to fix the damage not only to yourself but to your child as well. Because you know that there they have actually, they must be 'cause they're like a sponge they absorb everything you say. They're being affected by the way you were influenced, too, so [my child] is going to have some thinking that's like mine, that's not right.*

While other participants did not specifically acknowledge the impact of their substance abuse or psychological difficulties on their children, several described an erratic family life in which their children were clearly involved. A couple of participants spoke about children not living with them at various stages when their lives were particularly difficult and others described involvement in custody disputes.

Several participants raised general concerns about the impact that unresolved trauma might have on the 'next generation'. As one put it:

*So many things that weren't working and you know, unless you actively sort that stuff out, you're just going to pass it on. I'm lucky I'm not having children, that's kind of a huge relief, I'm not, but there's a lot of people out there with kids and I just sort of it worries me, you know. It worries me that people haven't got the right help, haven't got the right support, and you know, they are still quite affected by the whole, um experience. And then it just, you know, transfers on to their kids. And their kids.*

This same participant voiced her fear that former Centrepont children might find themselves re-producing some of the abuses they had experienced:

*You know, it's just kind of this inter-generational nightmare really, on some level, and that's such a legacy to pass on. And I do know that some people are abusers. You know? Which is that, that that's way suddenly... So, you know, that's just one of two ways, you either go or you don't, and some people turn up to become be a predator. And I, I you know, that's just a horrendous thing to pass on to someone.*

One woman spoke explicitly about how she felt her child had been adversely affected by the difficulties in her relationships and her own inability to escape her Centrepont experience:

*The cost the cost of mental and physical health to my [child] has been massive. Really massive...I just I just really feel [he/she] has been ripped off big time in terms of, I mean you know [he/she] had a mother who's been trying to, I'm a battler: I've been in battles since [he/she] was born basically, and at times...And [he/she] just doesn't feel like I've been there for [him/her] and I have been. It's just that is my biggest tragedy.*

Having children often precipitated participants addressing the problems they were experiencing in early adulthood. One participant told us that it was the fear of losing her child that had led her to acknowledge and deal with her substance abuse:

*But I also had to get clean, and I had to do it for [my child] and I had known that for a long time, and I had actually made personal attempts and that sort of thing. And I sort of knew that unless I did something, [my child] was likely to be taken away from me, you know.*

Another participant was swayed by the thought that she needed to be a good role model for her children:

*I look at my kids and what I'm teaching them by not doing anything, by not being a positive role model. I think having a [child] really changed it for me. I don't know why. It's something, I don't want to see [them] go down the same road that I did I guess. Give [them] a good role model that I didn't have.*

One woman who had talked of having little sense of justice around her experience of abuse at Centrepont drew on her role as a parent to provide some sense of meaning for herself:

*Yeah. So all you can do is get on with your life and try and fix your life. And you know, I don't go around forgiving perpetrators and wanting to confront them and shoot them and whatever. You know, I don't have those, I mean sure, you've thought about it, probably, but I don't have that need to do that now, I just think my whole need now is to be there for [my daughter] and make her, you know, make sure that I'm a good parent and I'm enjoying my life now that I've lost the enjoyment of so many years.*

Some participants felt that their parenting models at Centrepont were inadequate. While only a few of these mentioned this inadequacy in relation to their own children, more spoke about how they felt their parents had been inadequate and implied they would not want to replicate these mistakes in their own parenting. One of the few participants who openly acknowledged inadequacies in her own parenting spoke about how she had learned her behaviour at Centrepont:

*They encouraged you to yell. If you had a problem with someone, you went up and you yelled in their face. I yell at the kids now. I hate it. But that's what you were encouraged to do: If you had a problem you yelled about it.*

For others, particularly men who spoke with us, there seemed to be heavy self-monitoring in case of inadvertently replicating the abuse behaviour modelled at Centrepont. One participant, for example, explained how he struggled to feel comfortable playing with children in the park with the shadow of Centrepont abuses in the background:

*I'd be playing, like, like at the park with lots of girls and stuff, and, and even though, there's always that niggling feeling in the back of my head. You know, I've oh, just sort of you know that horrible thought that, you know, you don't want to pat their bum, or sort of you know, just in case it's misconstrued and but still feeling like I can have fun and play and yeah, without feeling like I'm like [them] or something.*

While none of our participants specifically described a fear of sexually abusing their children, one explicitly talked of the boundaries he would need to establish to interact 'appropriately' with his daughter as she developed:

*[I spend time] cuddling her, making her know that physical attention's okay...Can't remember. I was trying to get at something there. Yeah it was something about contact maybe. That there's just not much of it, or it's not acceptable, I don't know – I mean I'm sure there's going to be a time where it's not acceptable. But at her age, it's sweet.*

In contrast to these fears and concerns, participants also talked with us about how they had been able to draw valuable experiences on child-rearing from the community:

*I try to model to some extent my relationship with my [child] about what I saw of [these men]. How they treated me and how I saw them treating their kids... 'Cause I really didn't have anything to go on, as far as being a dad is, so all I can do is go for – I definitely want my kid to know who I am and that her dad loves [him/her], and will support [him/her]. And then just taken what I've seen from the good relationships that I've seen.*

This participant spoke about modelling his parenting on the men at Centrepont. He explained that the community allowed considerable scope for fathers to be involved with their children and in spite of the abuse that had taken place there had also been good fathering role models:

*'Cause, I saw a lot of real, yeah, just very nurturing fathers, good fathers that spent lots of time with their kids.*

Another participant explained that he felt he had come away from Centrepont with an ability to 'play', something he used to good effect in his relationships with his own and other children:

*And I can just play with them and even at 14, they can, you know. I'm just one of the kids. So. I yeah, maybe that's what Centrepont's given me, too, is that I feel like I can get into that playing really easily.*

Another participant commented on how she believed that many of the younger Centrepont women had gone on to become "amazing parents", largely because of their experiences in relationships at the community.

Among participants who had not yet had children, there were different views on becoming parents. Some participants looked forward to having children in the future though in some cases this sharpened their longing for the Centrepont community where they had grown up. One spoke of her lost hope that she might give her own children the childhood she had had, while also indirectly acknowledging her awareness of the abuses that took place there:

*I wished I had been more involved and I really want to bring up my kids there. I knew when I lived there that that's where I want to be with my children. [It's] the best place for children. As crazy as that might sound, you know.*

Some participants, however, talked about having given up hope of having children, in most cases because their lives had been too chaotic and disrupted by substance abuse or psychological problems to allow them to parent responsibly. One man offered this poignant expression of his lost ‘dream’:

*I used to have this great dream that I wanted to have a grow up and meet a girl around my own age, and have a family and kids and settle down and, and I feel I’ve missed out on that because of what’s happened.*

Another participant spoke with some bitterness about a similar sense of loss which she attributed to her difficulty in forming relationships with people:

*And just normal successes, and normal ways of relating to people. And in lots of ways, um, you know, that’s a huge part of my life that I missed out on – that integral form, you know, get married, have kids, whatever. That never happened for me because of that, because of that sort of indoctrination, really.*

Participants described how having children themselves had forced them to reflect differently on their Centrepoint experience. In some cases, they had become newly aware of the significance of some of their childhood experiences. Some spoke about how they wanted to give their own children different experiences of growing up and, in particular, wanted to protect them from sexual abuse or premature exposure to sex. A few participants raised concerns about the impact of their traumatic experiences and psychological responses on the ‘next generation’. Some bemoaned the lack of clear and helpful parenting models on which they could draw in relation to their own children. There were, however, also divergent views with some participants reporting good opportunities to learn about parenting at Centrepoint and being able to use these in their adult nuclear families. Some participants highly valued their childhood in the community and seemed sad that they would not be able to provide their children with the kind of experiences they had had at Centrepoint. Other participants were sad that they had missed out on the opportunity to create their own families because of difficulties they had experienced as a result of Centrepoint.

#### **4.9 Shifting realities in the aftermath of Centrepoint**

A number of participants talked with us about their gradual process of realising the ways in which their perception of the world may have been influenced or distorted by the ideologies

at Centrepoint. A few felt quite vehemently that they had been ‘brainwashed’ and spoke about Centrepoint having operated as a cult. Others spoke about challenges they had experienced in holding on to their own ‘reality’ at Centrepoint in the face of competing views from other community members, the media or the general public.

Several participants described how they felt their view of the world had been skewed by the ideas they were exposed to at Centrepoint using words like ‘manipulation’, ‘indoctrination’ or ‘propaganda’ to describe this. One participant explained how she had only become aware of how profoundly she had been influenced by Centrepoint some time after she had left the community:

*But it wasn't until, probably, that I had kids, that I realised the extent of the brainwashing – that's all I can call it because, um, I think when you grow up there you learn stuff or you, you have experiences that you just take as face value and you think that's how everybody's lived and it's not until you get out into the real world and you start having relationships and dialogues with other people that you think, 'Oh my God, this is not what everybody else does'. I had just thought it was how everybody lived and isn't how it actually was. So I think that's the most, that's the thing that's screwed me up is just having to adjust the way I live my life, again, instead of just learning the right way.*

Another participant described how she had found the mental manipulation she experienced at Centrepoint even more difficult to deal with than the sexual abuse she experienced there:

*Yeah I mean if a physical act is a physical act and you physically recover but it's just that absolute mind-warping shit that went on there that is, was, has been just so hard to deal with. ...And it sort of wasn't until my late 20s that I, well early 20s I started to question it once I left – I found some good friends. But it wasn't until my 30s that I really realised how much of a mind-warp it was, and how disruptive it had been in terms of my processes and my life.*

Several participants spoke about becoming particularly aware of the dangers of being ‘manipulated’ and wary of all authority after leaving Centrepoint. One described how she still found herself confused about what view of the world was correct and suspicious about whether other people might be trying to influence her because of her Centrepoint experience:

*You think that there's a motive, you think they're, they're actually thinking something different to what they're actually saying to you. So you're very wary of people. So you come out with this real messy brain, because you know, you're getting all confused, like 'Did they mean this?'. It's, it's this hyper-vigilance as well. So you, you get all confused because you've been, you know, and maybe it happens*

*with families too: there, there's manipulation thing where you're too told to think a certain way, and then you come out and you go 'Well I don't have to think like that now'. But unfortunately, it's in there, it's entrenched. Because it's been, you know, you've had it the whole time you were there.*

Most of the participants who spoke about experiencing some kind of deliberate manipulation at Centrepont also talked about the community having operated as a 'cult'. Some participants seem to take the 'cultic' nature of Centrepont for granted in their interviews, while others addressed this more explicitly as did this participant in talking about her wariness of anything approximating a 'cult':

*I don't know. I mean I was very wary of any kind of community situation or cult situation or anyone who you know – I see as being another Bert Potter. It's just I think I'm more aware of how damaging those situations can be than what I would be otherwise.*

A few participants also suggested that some former members of Centrepont remained 'indoctrinated' and unable to recognise this in themselves.

While not all participants spoke about deliberate manipulation occurring at Centrepont, some described a slow process of realisation that what they had been taught to believe at Centrepont wasn't necessarily so. One participant spoke about her growing awareness of the way in which she had been taught to view the world at Centrepont:

*I knew some things were wrong and I didn't agree with them but it was the things I didn't question that were kind of in there, about relationships and people being happy and all that and I guess it just took me time, it just took me time to figure out that it could be different.*

Some also spoke about realising that Centrepont had not been the ideal place they had imagined while they were growing up there. One participant voiced her ambivalence as a difference between her earlier and later views of her upbringing at Centrepont:

*When I was younger I would've said, 'Oh, I'm really glad I lived there', but now I'd say 'I wished I'd had a normal family'...as we sort of lose touch with it. Now, if I go back now I don't think I'd know anyone...maybe one or two people, but that's it. But you still feel, like when you go back, you feel very fond of it yeah.*

Another woman explained how she had spent some time after leaving Centrepont, telling others what a "great" place it was. She now believed that this was a denial of what she had really experienced there:



*I was so in denial myself. I was so brainwashed. [I was] proud of the community for years and years and years and years. And it wasn't until quite recently that I've actually had to get really honest about what actually happened.*

This participant ascribed her initial “denial” of what she had experienced at Centrepont to the “mind control” she felt that community exerted over her:

*It must just be that subtle mind control or whatever it is. That you just [assume] the rest of the world are wrong and they wouldn't understand so you can't tell them the truth.*

Other participants described what sounded like difficulties in holding on to their own opinion and recollections of Centrepont. They described how they sometimes struggled to hold onto the validity of their own perception of Centrepont when other people clearly saw things differently. One participant explained how she tried to deal with the way her friends saw Centrepont much more positively than she did:

*There's always been a difficult thing, even with those friends now, is that, and a lot of the kids that grew up there, is that they still really, really love the place and that is their sense of belonging is still there and mine isn't and I find it really hard to see a lot positive there so. Yeah. It's a part of my life that I often just wish I could just forget and erase. And there's so much trauma attached to it for me and there's not for them so it can be quite hard for us to see eye to eye on that.*

Several other participants spoke about how they vacillated between their own good memories and their knowledge about some of the problematic events that occurred there.

*Which is something you can't really get away from. Even though my memories were fine it's just knowing what actually happened there it's difficult. It's really sad. Yeah, especially because I know friends who, you know, went through a lot of stuff there and it just wasn't healthy. It's just really sad. I mean it was such a beautiful place and I made so many good friendships and just to have this all this negativity come out of it as well, it's really sad. But...I think because of all the media coverage and stuff as well I think it's hard to, it's impossible to remove any memory of Centrepont which is problematic.*

This participant later went on to speak about the difficulty of holding on to her positive memories in the face of the overwhelmingly negative views of Centrepont held by the general public:

*And I mean as I said I completely understand the view of the public and it was a horrible place in many ways - but a lot of us did have great experiences and we had a lot of fun. But it's kind of like I feel that it doesn't matter almost, you know, the fact that*

*we had fun – it's like 'So what?' you know, 'It was a horrible place it deserves to be shut down and everyone who did anything wrong deserved to be prosecuted'. I understand that but I think it's fine for us to have that memory with my friends of what happened.*

Another participant expressed a similar awareness that others' views of Centrepont were different to her own. She spoke about how she did not want to talk about her experiences in case it spoiled her friends' good memories of their childhood at the community.

Participants showed a variety of reactions to others' different views on Centrepont. In some cases they seemed a little cautious about stating their own perceptions of Centrepont, as though their view might in some ways be inaccurate. These participants tended to preface their claims with caveats such as 'I'm a bit hazy on the details' or 'I can't be sure'. One participant explicitly said that she sometimes felt confused when talking about Centrepont as there were so many different views that she found herself becoming less certain of her own opinion. Although she knew what had happened to her and others there she explained that she sometimes felt that she was 'making it up'. In other cases participants seemed to tread a fine line between asserting their own recollections while also acknowledging that others had had very different experiences there:

*Um, you know, the place for me has so much good history but for a lot of people it's such bad history, that I guess it depends who you speak to.*

Another participant seemed to shift between asserting her good experiences and recognising the validity of more negative evaluations of Centrepont:

*It was just, perhaps being independent young at Centrepont helped me with that and I think what I've managed to bring forward from it too, is that I know who I am and I know what I've been through. I'm not going to judge other people too quickly by what they may or may not have experienced and what that means about who they are...because people are very quick to judge about Centrepont...I'm not saying that people out there [are making up their negative perceptions]. There's been bad outcomes of it: there has and I feel really sad about that and I feel sad for the women who feel like their lives are really negatively affected. I kind of also see...yeah, yeah.*

One participant had clearly managed to differentiate between her experience of Centrepont as good and others who saw things differently:

*I don't know exactly what happened but I think there's a large number of us who didn't experience some of that and there's a lot of good stuff that came out of there*

*so to me I feel kind of – I don't want to take away from anyone else's experience if that is what happened to them that, you know, if they feel that bad stuff happened to them, that's fine, but I don't want that to colour what anyone else thinks about what my experience was.*

Instead of becoming doubtful or cautious about their own perceptions and evaluations, other participants responded to the challenge of alternative views by becoming more strident in defending their perceptions against what they saw as the inaccuracy of other views. The media representations of Centrepont were particularly distressing for some participants who remembered good experiences there and still felt a strong loyalty to the community. One participant explained how she protected her own view of Centrepont against the possibility of dissenting opinions:

*Yeah, just because I can't be bothered dealing with the shit that people spin about the place. And they only see the bad stuff, they think of it as a big, everyone thinks it's a cult, and a place where you know, people actually say, 'Were you, did you get raped?' and stuff. And it's like, you know, people are kind of so far from the reality of it and people kind of just don't ever say 'Oh, wow', you know, 'What was, what was that like, can you tell me?' They say, 'Ooh, that dirty place, where everyone um has sex and ran around naked, and stuff' you know and that's what you get.*

But while they expressed their own opinions strongly in their research interviews, these participants also explained how they had 'given up' trying to defend Centrepont in more public environments:

*And I just can't be bothered with that shit. I had enough of that when I was younger. So, um, but people that genuinely want to know I'm happy to, I think it's good to talk about it...It's hard to know what they're thinking. You know people kind of nod, and 'oh, yeah', but, it's hard to know once people have something set in their mind, it's hard to get people out of their mind, because it's true that there was drugs, and it's true that there was abuse, and you can't lie about it. I guess you try and talk about the good stuff as well.*

Some participants spoke angrily of their view that media representations of Centrepont were to blame for the prejudice around the community and the sense of futility that they experienced as a consequence:

*There are a huge amount of prejudices and assumptions, and people have their own reference points, based on assumptions and what they hear in the paper and the media. And at the end of the day, people will you know. The media's got a lot to answer for, but you just, in some ways, there's just no point in going and having that conversation.*

This analysis describes the difficulty that some participants seemed to have in making sense of their ‘reality’ at Centrepont among the various points of view held on the community. Some participants clearly believed they had been subjected to concerted manipulation and described the similarities between the way that Centrepont operated and the kinds of ‘brainwashing’ that is generally thought to occur in the context of a cult. Most of these participants only recognised the extent of the manipulation they had been subjected to, some time after leaving the community. Other participants clearly did not categorise Centrepont as a cult, but still seemed to experience some shifts in their thinking and re-evaluations of their experience after leaving the community. Participants also described or evidenced some of the difficulties they experienced in holding onto their own perceptions and evaluations of Centrepont in the face of competing views. Some responded to this with a degree of uncertainty while others compensated by strongly asserting their positive evaluations of the community as correct and blaming alternative perceptions on prejudice or inaccurate representations of Centrepont conveyed in the media.

#### **4.10 Relationship with Centrepont**

Although Centrepont was effectively closed in 2000, its lasting notoriety and occasional publicity around it ensured that our participants continued to negotiate their relationship with the community in their present lives. There seemed to be at least two different stances in the relation to Centrepont expressed by the participant group; those who wanted to distance themselves as far as possible from the community as a result of their unhappy experiences there and those who longed for what was, for them, their lost family home. In spite of this fundamental difference most participants conveyed their awareness of the ongoing challenges they faced in managing and representing their relationship with Centrepont.

Amongst those who emphasised primarily negative experiences in their accounts of growing up at Centrepont, there was an understandable tendency to avoid drawing attention to their association with the community. Several participants spoke about their discomfort about having to reveal where they grew up. One participant, for example, spoke about how she felt that disclosing her association with Centrepont would force to her identify with a past she would like to leave behind:

*I hate that there's a big part of my life that I kind of like, have to reveal, like there's this 'big reveal' or something where I have to, disclose this information about myself because I don't, it's so not me anymore. It's not part of me that I don't really even want to talk about it but, yeah, when people ask you about your upbringing and stuff, it's just, you kind of, you have to, so.*

Another participant spoke about how even the sight of a newspaper article on Centrepont was enough to make her feel anxious:

*And it's in the paper 'cause the land's being sold but you still feel, like your heart races when you see 'Centrepont going to be sold' or whatever, and there's a photo of Bert in the paper and you just feel like 'Oh...leave me alone'...*

Even amongst participants who spoke about valuing their Centrepont experience some seemed to experience discomfort around their relationship with Centrepont. One participant explained how she was aware of the potential for prejudice against people from Centrepont:

*Whether it's a skeleton in the closet, that you kind of... secretly afraid people might find out and then would judge you. Because it is harsh to be judged on something that is not something that you choose, or you know. Like I guess the colour of your skin. It's the same, like, could be the same.*

It seems that some participants had learnt from past experience that talking about the community likely led them to face others' prejudgements. One spoke about how she had learnt to keep quiet about her link with Centrepont for her own "safety":

*I would talk about it and then I would feel like 'Whoah!' you know and I think for some people it is too much or they're not able to put it in context and then you run the risk of feeling like you're being judged or it's not understood or 'Should I have talked about that' and 'Oh my God, that's so weird' and 'What were they thinking' and just, yeah, the aftermath wasn't really worth it so I'd sort of leave it.*

Fearing judgement from others was sometimes exacerbated by others' lack of understanding of Centrepont. One explained how she had had unsatisfactory responses from friends when she tried to:

*Yeah, no, I mean I do sort of but I don't like talking about it with them because they don't understand, so whatever response they give is kind of disappointing [laughs], you know, when you don't know what to say to someone. It's fine – how should they know what to say?*

Some participants described strategising about how and when they would reveal their Centrepont experience to people that they met. One participant spoke, for example, about how she preferred to let people get to know her before she told them about her past:

*But I think it's really important to me to have that reputation and sense of who I am without having....ah build that up before I actually tell them.*

Even in intimate relationships, she waited years before revealing her association with Centrepont. This left her feeling somewhat uncomfortable about not being able to be open with her partners:

*Um, I guess I'd have to feel really, really close to somebody to tell them about it. Um. It's not something...I probably have told all of my previous boyfriends to date, but only after probably two years...You know, like um yeah, so, I, I guess there's an element of hiding something, or not being completely truthful.*

Another participant explained how she had opted to be 'honest' about her background because it was difficult to hide indefinitely and she feels she can counter-act any negative assumptions by her own evident merits:

*I've always been quite open about it. I think there's people that try and hide it and it's... I don't know, it's not really worth trying to hide it because I think when you, I don't know, if somebody finds out that you've got this past that you've been all secretive about it makes it seem a lot worse. I'm working with a bunch of people...but I've told them that I grew up at Centrepont. I've told them the bad things that happened there and people are interested. So long as I do my job well and I'm not some weird, weird person or something like that, they're not going to go: 'Oh!' So. Yeah. I just think it's better to be honest about it. Yeah.*

For some participants the demands involved in monitoring and negotiating the way they dealt with their relationship with Centrepont felt relentless and tiring. One participant spoke in her interview about how she was contemplating a new relationship and knew she would have to face revealing her association with Centrepont yet again:

*It's very hard to sort of be free of all that history that, continuing to be secretive about my past even 25 years after it's really been over. I don't really know what to do with that. And I'm looking at starting a new relationship with someone now and just thinking 'Oh God, do I tell him the story, how much does he need to know, how much of a problem is it going to continue to be in the way I relate emotionally and sexually'. And I know I'm never going to be free of it but it would be nice to think it would stop being problematic and it's not really looking like that's ever going to be the case.*

Other participants simply opted to avoid the subject but were left wondering whether people knew and what they thought about it. One speculated on whether her friend's parents knew about her link to Centrepont, but implied she would rather not find out:

*I don't know if their parents know or not, it's kind of funny. 'Cause these girls – I've got a group of girlfriends I've known for years now um and so I think they must've told their parents but I don't really know so it's kind of funny.*

Other participants spoke of uncomfortable social encounters when people spoke in a derogatory way about Centrepont without knowing of their involvement there. In each of these examples, the participant had chosen not to reveal their link to the community. This participant gave this description of her response when some vague acquaintances started a disapproving conversation about the Centrepont community:

*I didn't know them, I couldn't exactly say to these random people who I'd never met 'Hey! Go away. That's where I grew up. That's my memories you know', like all of that, I couldn't exactly say that.*

For several participants, their inability to claim their own histories appeared to have left them with the sense that others did not know who they 'really were'.

A smaller number of participants refused to be covert about their association with Centrepont. They claimed their right to be 'proud' of where they had grown up:

*Most of the people that I know, that came out of Centrepont around the time that I did, are so proud of it.*

One participant spoke about how she had originally felt unsure about claiming her association with Centrepont but received some encouragement from a friend to be less ashamed of where she had come from:

*For me I had always sort of more tried to leave it behind me and never speak about it anymore and it was almost like something I wouldn't discuss with my friends, you know. But she sort of helped me to see that where I come from is not anything to be ashamed of and it's just part of who I am. Yyou know like I have that background and...and seeing her being able too explain it to her friends and to feel comfortable – it made me a lot more open to saying 'Yeah that's where I'm from and this is who I am and I'm still a good person and I'm still smart and I'm still all these things and I'm not ashamed from where I came', you know.*

Another participant explained that he had never wanted to disavow his connection to Centrepont, while recognising that others didn't always feel the same way:

*Yeah, I, I even, oh, like there was a girl who lived on Centrepont...but yeah, she was, I yeah, she just didn't want to, got the feeling she didn't want to talk about, that, that was the only thing I had in common with her so I just wanted to talk about Centrepont and it was like she didn't want to, she didn't want to be known to come from there. There was I've sort of never felt like I had to hide it especially when we left Centrepont and came here, I always felt like I, I'd you know, could tell people. I did want to, it was such an important part of, of my experience, I did want to, to tell people pretty early on that that's where I came from and it was a good discussion point because a lot of, it was very fresh in the media and things after we'd left.*

Other participants seemed aware of the negative judgements of others about Centrepont but were able to dismiss them as being unrelated to their own experience. One participant spoke about how she felt able to be open about her experience at Centrepont because her experiences had not been problematic for her, but at the same time she recognised that this was not the case for others:

*Yep. I mean I'm quite open about talking about it now but I used to avoid the conversation because, with new people that I didn't know, because – and I know a lot of people that still do avoid talking about it because it gives them a bad... especially if their parents are involved in any charges,...I think it's a bit of a sore subject. But for me, I wasn't related to any of that, you know, and I wasn't abused so I think that, for me, it means that I think about it in quite, more of a light-hearted way. Yeah. It's not such a heavy discussion for me.*

A few participants spoke about having had a more positive response to their attempts to talk about Centrepont with people they knew. One described how she would challenge people on their misperceptions about the community:

*Generally when I've said something most people have been 'Oh, okay, sorry I didn't realise'. I don't know if it's changed their opinion or not or anything like that but I feel like I've been listened to most of the time, people are quite willing to hear that there are other versions of the stories other than what goes into the media... Normally with the times where I haven't said anything in those situations it's just been because either they're people who I don't care what they think so I'm not really that involved in what their opinion is because it doesn't effect me in any way or people who I just don't really feel all that comfortable with and don't feel like getting into talking about that with. But most of the time you know if I do say something most people are pretty responsive to it.*

A small number of participants remained less concerned about whether or not they discussed their association with Centrepont, perceiving it as largely irrelevant to their current lives. One participant who left the community when she was still quite young spoke



about how she hadn't mentioned her association to Centrepont simply because it hadn't been particularly important:

*It's never, it's never really come up. I think because I lived outside of Centrepont I also had a life that had nothing to do with Centrepont.*

But this participant also acknowledged that it was easier to talk about her upbringing with people who understood what it was about. Like a number of others, she explained that they could really only be open with others who, like themselves, grew up at the community:

*I mean it's amazing to have that relationship with someone who knows exactly what you've been through. You know if you say 'Centrepont' to everyone else there's this sort of stigma surrounding the whole place.*

A number of participants talked about how they had sought out or maintained contact with other former Centrepont residents. One participant expressed how she valued her on-going sense of connection to the community:

*I look back on it and I think, you know, I wouldn't trade the experience I had growing up there for anything. You know, the friends that I've got now, it's quite amazing. When you don't see someone for a number of years and just that association of 'I grew up with you' or 'I knew you from there', makes it so easy to talk to that person. Yeah. It's quite a strange sort of bond that you have. Even adults that I don't really remember that well, they'll see me and 'Oh [Name's] daughter'. You know it's sort of like seeing an old relative or something that you don't really remember but you've got this thing in common that, yeah, I really like it anyway.*

Several other participants spoke about taking nostalgic visits to the community. One described how she had continued to visit Centrepont land after she had left and retained her sense of connection with it:

*Um I like going back there just, um – I love the property. It's an amazing property and I really, while I feel like I've had my experience of living in community and I personally don't want to go back and live in community I quite appreciate that there may be still some kind of use for the property in that sense. I quite enjoy going back and seeing, you know, there's not really that many there anymore who I know but for years there were quite a few and so just going back and seeing old people.*

One participant described her longing for the attachment she had had to Centrepont and how it continued to influence her:

*I kind of hope that I can one day find a place that I feel settled and happy, you know, without that underlying drive to be in a community overriding my life, because that's*

*quite a strong thing in me and I feel a little bit incomplete a lot of the time, you know, like something missing.*

But while some participants described how they deliberately sought contact with reminders of Centrepont, others seemed equally determined to avoid anything that brought back memories of their experience of the community. One participant described how she had left the vicinity of Centrepont to try and get away from triggers that would remind her of the community. Since her return she had found this more difficult to achieve:

*Ever since I came back here with I feel like my past is in the present: it's like I am being held back, because I came back to the place that makes me feel horrible so when I'm over there, I'm away from it all in a new environment and no constant reminders or triggers out there as much. When I'm [in another place], I just feel like I, I'm just like everybody else, you know. Nobody knows any different, and for some reason that helped.*

Another participant described the distress she felt when she accidentally encountered someone she had known at Centrepont:

*I sort of bump into people over the years and it's this strange experience when you bump into somebody. Because you just get this rush of all the connections you had with them in the past, at the community and I always feel incredibly anxious. Like, yeah, I just [feel] complete anxiety, often, when I bang into somebody by accident. Like 'What do they know? What did I do? What happened' just like a, almost like a guilt – guilt and fear mixed in together. And shame all mixed together.*

Participants clearly continue to negotiate their relationship with Centrepont even after the closure of the community. Most told us of difficulties managing disclosure of their association with the community to others outside. In some cases they had anticipated and also been subjected to negative judgements based on media representations or assumptions about the community. As a result, some tended to keep relatively quiet about their links to Centrepont. In some cases though, participants had opted to be open about their relationship with Centrepont and express their pride about growing up there. There was a similar divergence in the views of our participants between those who wanted to retain their connections to the community and those who did not want to be reminded of their experiences there.

#### 4.11 Strategies for coping after Centrepont

The analysis of interview transcripts showed that participants did not simply react to their circumstances but actively tried to find ways of coping with their lives in the aftermath of Centrepont. There were a wide range of strategies that were represented within our participants' accounts and different approaches to negotiating challenges were reported for different times.

Some participants had chosen to focus on the good experiences they were able to take from Centrepont and use to build their lives. Several participants, for example, attributed their maturity, confidence and strength to what they had learnt at Centrepont:

*It made me who I am today and I don't think I would be...I definitely think for my age I'm very mature and I have a lot of life experience, you know, I know a lot about the world and I've lived in a community and I've lived in a regular home and I think it's sort of just opened up my perception to, you know, some other aspects of life and it's definitely I mean.... Yeah it's definitely made me who I am. A lot of it's made me a lot stronger.*

*I think it's probably made me a more confident person...I put it down to the community as well a lot – we were all, there was a large number of children, everybody was so confident and you just, and we also had the opportunity to communicate with a large, a really large group of people all from different age ranges and things like that so we had a lot more of a diverse experience in developing those sorts of communication and interpersonal type skills and stuff.*

For a number of participants, their tendency to focus on the positive structured their interviews in which they provided less detail on acknowledged difficulties and highlighted those aspects that had been helpful for them. Some participants overtly acknowledged this as a way of dealing retrospectively with what they had experienced at Centrepont:

*I've been more staunch in the past about not focusing on the negative and taking the positives and, it's part of my identity, you know, I lived there that whole time I grew up so it was so much a part of my experience and in order to keep myself afloat, well of course there were good things and there were, so yeah.*

*You know, you try and pick out the good bits and do away with the bits that you didn't like.*

Another participant spoke about how she deliberately chose not to find out more about anything negative that may have happened to her at the community:

*You know, I personally don't see the point in dredging up shit like that. My life's fine, and I'm happy, and you know. What you don't know won't hurt you, and I don't, I just, you know, I'm happy to hold on to all the good stuff that happened in that place. And there was a hell of a lot of it. Than try and find more out, more information about the abuse, and things like that.*

While some participants acknowledged the ways in which they had 'filtered' the good from the bad experiences at Centrepont, others refused to countenance any negative views of the community. One participant invoked this representation of the community in advocating its positivity:

*Oh, I just remind myself that it's quite unrealistic in this day and age, in this country, to expect to get back to that, a place of happiness like that. You know, it's never going to happen again in New Zealand probably and I just try and remember that I'm pretty lucky anyway, for what I've got. I was lucky to have experienced it. I feel like a really lucky, lucky person to have been involved with it and I suppose that's how I cope with it. I just cherish what I had and hope that maybe one day I'll be, I'll find something like that again, but I do accept that it was a once-off.*

One the other hand, some spoke about how they recognised the problematic aspects of Centrepont yet remained adamant that they did not want to be cast as 'victims'. They experienced these representations of themselves as disempowering and offensive.

*People have talked too much, not necessarily for me, but talked for other people. All they can say is 'I feel hurt'. They can't say 'I feel hurt' [pointing to self], they can't say that someone else was abused. All they can say what happened for them...I'm not one of them. I don't want to be, I definitely want to be kept as far away from the victims as possible 'cause I'm not prepared to spend my life as a victim and I think there are people who are far worse off than a lot of us that came from the community.*

Even some participants who had acknowledged being abused at Centrepont preferred not to identify themselves as 'victims':

*I have actually worked through a lot of that so for me the stuff about the abuse at Centrepont in most ways it doesn't affect me much now. It's not like I carry that around as a significant part of who I am in the world, or feel like I'm a victim in the world. I actually feel like in the world I'm a very strong competent person and successful and able to help other people and lots to give and all the rest of it. You know – I can do that.*

One participant explained how she had made the journey from feeling like a 'victim' to making her own identity independent of this:

*It's like, it's like anything, it's like you – you're someone who's just suffering and then you realise you've been sexually abused and then you're a sexual abuse survivor and that becomes part of your identity. And you know 'sexual abuse survivor' you can carry that fucking burden around with you forever [laughs] um and then you become someone who lets go of becoming a sexual abuse survivor and just become someone in the world.*

Some participants avoided discussing 'victimhood' altogether and seemed instead to represent themselves as 'tough' survivors who had come out of Centrepont with the ability to handle any adverse circumstances. A number spoke about how they saw themselves as mature and capable, while one man explained that he had developed his ability to physically defend himself to a fine art.

We spoke with those who had dealt with the life after leaving Centrepont by fighting against what the injustices they saw and experienced against them or others from the community. One participant, for example, spoke about how she had chosen to make a stand against the abuses she and others had experienced at Centrepont. She spoke about how it was her anger that enabled her to survive and gave her the energy to address the problems that needed to be dealt with:

*I know that. I know my anger got me through – I was so angry...and my anger was really useful.*

This participant went on to acknowledge that she had run out of energy to fight and recognised that at times, her fiercely determined way of coping had got in the way of other aspects of her life. On the whole though she seemed to feel that this style of coping had served a useful purpose along the way:

*But it's no longer useful...[laughs] and I'm not going to fight anymore. I'm over fighting. I can't fight.*

While other participants did not specifically mention anger, a number spoke about how they had been able to rally themselves around various causes relating to Centrepont including such issues as saving the land or helping bring cases to court.

Several participants acknowledged that while they had spent time feeling very angry about what they had experienced at Centrepont, they felt they needed to find a way get on with living their lives. One participant described the complexity involved in letting her anger go:

*You know, people will never forgive Bert for what happened. There comes a point where you have to let go of stuff, you have to forgive on some level let go so you don't carry it around anymore, so it doesn't eat you up, but that doesn't mean to say that it will ever be right, that things will ever be right or back to where they were because the damage is done.*

At times it seemed that participants had found a way to leave their negative experiences around Centrepont to one side and to focus on developing their lives, using whatever resources they had at their disposal. One participant exemplified this in the personal determination that she expressed through her interview and her obvious pride in what she had been able to achieve in spite of the challenges she felt Centrepont had posed:

*I may not have had the biggest opportunities in my life and I may have had these really huge hurdles but, and I may not have all the success that I want in my life right yet, but I think I've done some pretty big things to get there. Yeah.*

We also heard from participants who were invested heavily in appearing 'normal' in the aftermath of Centrepont and there were a number of interviews that were littered with references to 'normality' as a desired state. One participant spoke about how she had quite consciously made her life appear as normal as possible once she had left Centrepont yet was surprised to find how successful she had been in the process:

*So there's a big group of us and we do things, hang out together at the weekends. It's quite fun meeting all these different people. Like these boys who went to private school from quite wealthy families and it's funny to think I hang out with them [laughs]. I think, another thing, like my friends said to me about a year ago, two years ago, 'Oh yeah, you're really conservative' and it gave me this huge shock, like, 'Me? Conservative?' 'cause you know...I think, it's because I grew up in that far out background. [I want to] be normal I went really normal and, yeah, so it was a really big shock for me to hear that. It was funny.*

Another participant spoke about how she tried to make sure that no reminders from her Centrepont life intruded into her "respectable" adult identity:

*I still keep my normal life going fine and I'm always pretty wary about checking how much that intrudes into my life....But I actually I don't want to sacrifice anything of this other stuff. This is important to me I've worked really hard to get where I am. It really matters to me how I appear in the world – I'm a very proud person about being respectable and respected.*

Participants described having had difficulty in dealing with the legacy of Centrepont and found themselves seeking ways of retreating from memories and current experiences they

felt unable to confront. One participant described how she had learned to cope in this way while she was still at Centrepont:

*Anything that makes you feel threatened...and my whole thing is to withdraw and shut down and keep away, but I need to change that, I need to get confident and confront it, and, and maybe even allow myself to be angry back, because I never got that opportunity. I mean some people are different – I guess some people fight back. Some of the teenagers were very loud and very good at arguing but I was the opposite, I was, because I think of what happened between me and my father, I'd shut down right from when I was a four year old and I don't think I'd ever come out of there, I'm like the hermit crab, you know you sort of attack that and it's in its shell and it doesn't come out for months? Well I feel like that all the time. And yet everyone tells me oh, no, you've got to go out there and stand up for yourself and be confident but you can't do something like that just being told. I know – yes, it makes sense, but, when you've had years of behaving a certain way or responding a certain way, it, you can't change it overnight, eh?*

This participant also spoke about how she had sought to 'escape' from her life through her substance abuse.

Other participants seemed to have sought out supports outside of themselves to assist them with their coping. Some described periods of reliance on family, welfare agencies or friends that helped them to manage their lives after Centrepont.

For some participants the only way to survive Centrepont seemed to be to try and cut it out of their lives and start again. One participant used the imagery of the 'baptism' to explain how she felt the need to re-invent herself as someone who hadn't been damaged by Centrepont:

*I think I've got to get rid of all my things in my past. I felt like burning everything one day. I just felt like just putting a big bonfire in the garden and just throwing everything in there. I just wanted to get rid of it all, because it's like just trying to change and have a clean slate, be a new person. Just like when people um go to church and get baptised or whatever.*

Participants used a range of different strategies to help them cope in the aftermath of Centrepont. One evident coping strategy was to focus primarily on the positive aspects of Centrepont and to try and minimise or ignore more negative elements of their experience there. A number of participants resisted the label of 'victim' in relation to their Centrepont experience and chose to see themselves as having learnt important survival skills at the community. Other participants acknowledged their abuse at Centrepont and used their anger about what had happened to them as a source of energy to enable them to address

problems in their lives. Some participants set up as 'normal' a life as possible for themselves in an attempt to distance themselves from their Centrepont experience. Others described how they coped by retreating from challenges and in some cases, participants seemed to have relied on various organisations and individuals for support. For some participants it seemed that the only way of 'surviving' was to cut Centrepont out of their lives and start again.



## **5. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The starting point for any general discussion of the findings of this report must be that there was considerable variation in the accounts of our participants. Their experiences, interpretations and circumstances were different and complex. Nonetheless, there are some key understandings that emerge from patterns identified in the data that inform our assessment of the needs of former Centrepont children.

### **5.1 Negotiating different pathways at Centrepont**

Individual participants in this research study had quite different experiences during their childhood at Centrepont and, with this, quite different consequences for their present lives. How they negotiated the experience of living at Centrepont and their lives afterwards depended on the possibilities that presented themselves to a particular person and the resources they had available to help them negotiate their way through their experiences.

While it is not possible to categorise the multiplicity of experiences of the adult children of Centrepont, it may be helpful to think of two possible pathways operating at either end of a continuum. On the one hand Centrepont was capable of providing participants with a range of extremely adverse circumstances and experiences which, for some, led to very significant problems for them in their later lives. For the purposes of this analysis we have called this the ‘harm’ pathway. On the other hand, some participants given access to more positive experiences from Centrepont and, as a result, were able to lead full and effective lives. We have called this the ‘support’ pathway. Of course, most participants did not fall easily into either the ‘harm’ or ‘support’ pathway but had elements of each evident in their narratives.

In order to provide an illustration of how each of these pathways might work we have constructed fictional narratives drawing from a variety of the accounts represented in this study.

The 'harm' pathway is exemplified in the following constructed narrative:

**The 'harm' pathway: Anna**

Anna's parents divorced when she was five years old and her father had little contact with her. She lived with her mother and a younger brother. Her mother had financial problems. She also struggled with depression and sought help at the therapy workshops at Centrepont. Anna's first recollections of Centrepont were of playing freely in the grounds with other children. Her mother moved the family to the community permanently when Anna was eight years old. She had not wanted to go there at the time as she had good friends at her local primary school. Later she discovered that her mother had been strongly persuaded to move to Centrepont and to bring her children with her.

Anna initially felt quite alone at the community as her mother seemed to be involved in her own 'personal growth' and was less available to her. She spent time with the other children during the day. She enjoyed playing with them but was also bullied a bit by some of the older children. She missed having her mother put her to bed at night.

By the time Anna was 11 years old she was feeling more comfortable at the community and had got used to having less contact with her mother. She spent most of her time with other children her age. She had learnt to rely on her friends at Centrepont for companionship at the community and for support at school where sometimes she was upset by the teasing of other children.

Anna was uncomfortable at times with the adults at Centrepont. She didn't like the way they yelled at each other and she was frightened of some who seemed particularly angry, but there were a few that she trusted. When she was about 11 she was persuaded by one of her adult 'friends' to 'lose her virginity' with him. She felt excited and special that she had been chosen by him. She was soon having sex with a number of the adult members of the community. As a lot of the other girls were also having sexual relationships with adults, this did not feel particularly strange to her although she learnt not to talk about it at school as she knew that other children wouldn't understand.

When Anna was old enough to take part in the teenage groups she was introduced to more sexual experimentation including group sexual experiences. She began to feel that she was out of her comfort zone but continued to make herself sexually available as she knew that her status at Centrepont would be negatively impacted if she withdrew from this. At one point she became uncertain about what she was involved in and spoke to her guidance counsellor at her school about what was happening. The counsellor phoned Centrepont to voice her concerns and Anna ended up being confronted for her disloyalty to the community during a public meeting. Anna got the message that she could not seek help outside the community. She made renewed efforts to participate in the life of Centrepont.

When Anna was 14, drugs were beginning to be introduced at Centrepont. She was excited to try 'E' and was first given this under controlled conditions in the teenage group. She enjoyed this experience immensely. Later, though she felt uncomfortable using drugs in sexual groups with 'Bert' who she found physically repulsive. On the whole though, drugs seemed to offer Anna some comfort and she began to deliberately seek out opportunities to use 'E' and marijuana regularly outside of sanctioned Centrepont activities. Anna began to do less well at school and finally dropped out without completing her School C.

Anna's mother left the community when she was 16 years old. Apparently she was getting concerned about the extent of the drug use there. Anna didn't want to leave at first, but agreed to go with her mother. She missed the Centrepont community and often went back there for weekends. She wasn't very happy living in a small house with her mother and didn't get on with her mother's new partner, who she had met at Centrepont. It didn't take long before Anna moved out of her mother's house. She flatted for a time with some other teenagers who had been at Centrepont. Drugs were a part of their lifestyle at the time and Anna began to get heavily into 'P'. She found that the drugs helped her to cope. The few times she tried to get off them she had panic attacks and flashbacks to uncomfortable sexual experiences she had had at Centrepont.

Anna fell pregnant at 18 and made a concerted effort to get herself off the drugs. She managed for a while and even started a university bridging course when her daughter was very young. But she found being clean hard to sustain and she drifted back into the world of users and dealers. She worked as a prostitute for a while.

After her mother died when Anna was 25, she started to re-evaluate her life. She became concerned about how her drug addiction might be impacting on both her and her daughter's lives and began to attend a support group for substance abusers. As she came off the drugs, she felt she was able to address other issues in her life and it was during this period that she began to think more about what had happened to her at Centrepont. She realised that without the drugs to numb her she felt very anxious, mistrustful of others and very muddled about what was right and what was wrong. She tended to keep to herself and no longer had contact with former friends from Centrepont.

After an emotional crisis she decided to seek counselling and help and reported that she was still receiving help. She now felt that what had happened to her was 'abuse' but also found herself feeling very guilty about her own part in things. She felt responsible for ruining her own life with drugs. She spoke wistfully about wanting a proper job for the first time and perhaps to find a partner, but she did not seem very hopeful that she could achieve this.

The 'support' pathway can be illustrated with the following constructed narrative:

### **The 'support' pathway: Richard**

Richard was born in the lounge at Centrepont and was very proud that he had been. He felt that this gave him a special link to the property. His mother and father had met at Centrepont and although they practiced an open relationship with one another, still saw themselves as a couple. Richard wasn't very close to his father who could be a bit aggressive. But he loved his mother and although they didn't always spend much time together, he felt that she cared about him. Although he wished sometimes that he could have more time with his mother, his closeness to the other children and adults at Centrepont gave him the feeling that he was part of a bigger family.

Richard loved the Centrepont property. He enjoyed the freedom and beauty of the grounds and spent hours swimming and adventuring in the bush in summer. In winter he enjoyed the cosiness of sitting around the fire and cuddling with others. For him it felt just like a

permanent holiday camp. He enjoyed the continuous sense of activity that Centrepont provided and the sense of belonging he got from being part of a 'working bee' or taking his turn to help with the chores.

Richard developed good relationships with a number of the adult men at Centrepont who he felt represented values he admired. He spent time with them learning a trade. He also felt he learnt how to be a 'man' from these relationships. When his father was arrested and charged with sexual abuse, he was not very concerned as he was not that close to him and did not feel involved.

Richard attended the local school and seemed to get on alright with the other children there. He was closer to the Centrepont children so he had little need for friends outside the community. Richard did not do particularly well at school. He was pleased to have the opportunity to be involved in practical work at Centrepont and was quite hard-working. He felt that the adults at the community respected him for this.

Richard lost his virginity at 12 and had a few rather uncomfortable sexual experiences in the teenagers' group. He found the teenage groups a bit anxiety provoking at times, but believed that this experience was very useful for him. He thinks he would have been shy and uncommunicative if he hadn't had the opportunity to learn how to speak openly to others and express his needs.

Although he felt in retrospect that children were probably introduced to sex too early at Centrepont, on the whole he had enjoyed the freedom around sexuality. He developed a close relationship with an older woman and felt that he learnt how to communicate and love properly in this relationship.

Richard tried drugs while he was at the community but this was not something that really interested him. He was more interested in the outdoors and would spend time with some of the other adult men, working the land or fixing equipment.

He left the community when he was 21 but still felt very connected to it. He has managed to build a good career doing work that he enjoys and feels that he learnt the skills he uses now at Centrepont. He values the way that Centrepont taught him to be direct and honest with people and to be 'in touch' with his own feelings.

He is in a long term relationship with his girlfriend who was not at Centrepont. They have two children and he feels he is a good father to them. He still has close friends amongst other former Centrepont residents and he enjoys getting together with them from time to time to reminisce about the community. He regrets that his children won't be able to grow up at Centrepont as he feels it gave him the best possible childhood. Occasionally he drives out to the old property and visits his birth tree. He feels sad about the disrepair into which the property has fallen.

He feels proud of having grown up in the community but is still a bit careful about who he talks to about this as he knows that the general public have a very negative view of the community. He sometimes feels resentful about this and blames the media for misrepresenting Centrepont.

Both of these constructed narratives represent legitimate, albeit quite different, experiences of those who spent their childhood at Centrepont.

## **5.2 Patterns of advantages or difficulties at Centrepont**

The experiences of children at Centrepont sometimes put them at risk for difficulties, and sometimes assisted their healthy development. This section summarises the main findings from the analysis which inform this understanding.

### **Reasons for being at Centrepont**

While there were a variety of reasons why participants and their families might have come to Centrepont originally, it may have offered a degree of refuge for those experiencing difficulty in managing outside of it. Whether it was financial or psychological difficulty in a parent or behaviour problems in a child, our research suggests that a number of Centrepont residents may have come to the community in a state of some vulnerability. Early research on New Religious Movements suggested that vulnerability is a common feature of those who come to communes like Centrepont (Singer, 1995), although later research challenged the idea that those who choose to do so must necessarily be mentally ill (Anthony & Robbins, 2004). There is, however, some more recent research which supports the idea that there may be some psychological susceptibility in such groups (Buxant et al., 2007). While for some parents and children, the community may have provided a level of support they could not have found elsewhere, for others their or their parents' vulnerability meant that they were particularly at risk for manipulation and abuse.

While Oakes' (1986) account of Centrepont acknowledges vulnerability as factor for some in coming to the community, he also notes that some of the adults were drawn to Centrepont through their idealism. This was also noted by our participants who understood that their parents were hoping to find an alternative and healthier way of living and conducting their relationships with others. The founding principles of Centrepont such as its emphasis on personal growth would have been consistent with the utopian ideals of other therapeutic communities operating around the same time in the United States and elsewhere (Firestone & Catlett, 1987). Such groups were open to supporting those who were more psychologically vulnerable as a dimension of their idealism and one of the intentions of the community. From the perspective of the adult children we spoke with, some adults were

more vulnerable, and some more idealistic. There were also some who the former children of Centrepont understood as intentional sexual predators who sought out residence at the community because of its practices of normalising intergenerational sex.

Children who were born at Centrepont felt a strong connection to the property. These children also tended, on the whole, to feel more positive about having grown up at the community. Their development was unaffected by any transition from outside to residence within the community, and as well as not needing to adjust to the community they had little basis for comparing ‘inside and outside’ experiences until they were old enough to have internalised the community’s expectations of what was ‘normal’. These were generally the younger participants amongst our group.

### **Relationships with parents at Centrepont**

Once children arrived at Centrepont, they were introduced to a different set of social relationships to those that they experienced ‘outside’. The community’s emphasis on communal parenting weakened the practical dependence of children on their parents and their parents’ accountability to them. Shared parenting of the type practiced at Kibbutzim has not been found to be detrimental to children’s development, with the notable exception of separating children in communal sleep arrangements (Aviezer et al., 1994). Yet Centrepont differed from typical Kibbutzim in that many of the adults were heavily committed to and engaged in their own personal growth. From the point of view of many of the children, this left them feeling neglected, regardless of the ways the community met their basic needs. Ideologically, a hands-off approach to child-rearing, this was justified by the representation of children as being ‘like adults’ in many ways and the children’s relative independence from adults which effectively re-framed their developmental needs as ‘neediness’.

On a practical level, this left children with inadequate protection against the vicissitudes of Centrepont life and some of its dangers. While their basic needs were taken care of, the absence of individual parental attention left some Centrepont children at risk for a range of later difficulties including, for younger children, problems with attachment (Bowlby, 1969, 1973; Cook et al., 2005; van der Kolk, 2007). The absence of parental supervision and protection can also put children at particular risk for abuse by adults (Fleming et al., 1997). The disruption of practical responsibility of parents for their children in community settings

like Centrepont may also make child abuse more likely to occur there (Whitsett & Kent, 2003). Children who have been neglected may also be too ready to make themselves available for inappropriate relationships with adults. But while some children have responded with increased need for adult attention, for some, this relative absence of parental support fostered a precocious capacity to function independently of adults.

The weakening of the bond between children and their nuclear parents led to some children being unusually dependent on other available 'supports'. A pattern, like this, of undermining the parent-child bond and re-framing the community as the 'family' is a common strategy used in cults to promote compliance (Whitsett & Kent, 2003). At Centrepont, the community itself was set up to be the over-arching 'parent' for all of its residents and it is likely that children would have responded to this with an increased need for belonging to the community. This likely explains the intense loyalty that some of our participants felt towards Centrepont. Unable to rely on the support a parent would normally offer within a healthy nuclear family situation, the former children of Centrepont could not easily relinquish their compensatory attachment to the community. This provided the basis for a strong sense of connection to Centrepont and, for some, created difficulties in severing their dependence on it.

### **Relationships with adults at Centrepont**

The communal arrangements at Centrepont, together with the relative lack of practical involvement with parents, meant that children were exposed to a broad range of adult behaviour. Some aspects of this behaviour including witnessing angry adult conflict have potentially adverse effects for children (McDonald et al., 2007). But in some cases contact with a range of adults seems to have been beneficial; where a child was, for example, able to utilise good adult role models in the community to assist with their own development. This seemed particularly important for some men whose relationships with their biological fathers failed to provide them with appropriate and positive masculine role models. These kind of adult models are recognised to be helpful in the development, for example, of parenting skills (Nicholson et al., 2008). Literature on children growing up in kibbutzim supports the idea that exposure to an extended social network such as was available at Centrepont may have some advantages for children (Aviezer et al., 1994).

In general, however, the relationships between children and adults at Centrepont meant that children also faced the possibility of unsafe contact with disturbing or dangerous adult behaviour. The positioning of all adults as ‘parents’ would have increased the likelihood of children’s compliance to, even inappropriate, requests from adults.

### **Relationships with peers at Centrepont**

Peer relationships at Centrepont emerged as one of the very significant influences on children’s reported experiences there. While peer relationships provide an important point of reference for any child’s development (Stroufe et al., 2005), the relationships at Centrepont seemed to have developed a particular intensity. Peer relationships were used to compensate for the relative absence of adult supervision. They were fostered by the intimate living arrangements and potential for 24 hour contact. Similarly close peer relationships are known to have occurred in the context of kibbutzim (Sharabany & Wiseman, 1993). This feature of Centrepont life was likely to have been a protective factor for many children in dealing with other adverse experiences and also has considerable pro-social benefits for children’s development (Stroufe et al., 2005). Nonetheless, peer relationships also have created a degree of social pressure which would have increased compliance with the beliefs and practices of Centrepont.

The relative freedom that children had from adult supervision allowed peer groups some degree of autonomy. This offered a protective distance from some more destructive aspects of adult behaviour, but it also allowed instances of peer bullying to go unmediated. Less commonly, traumatised children may have disengaged from their peer group and were unable to access this potential source of support. Shapiro and Levendosky (1999) discuss how childhood trauma including sexual abuse can instigate social support seeking amongst some but can also produce social withdrawal in those who have already internalised a working model of relationships as unhelpful.

### **Rules and discipline at Centrepont**

This research suggests that children were given an unusual amount of freedom at Centrepont in comparison with most nuclear family-based living arrangements. Whitsett and Kent (2003) note that parents in cult-like communities often give up responsibility for providing discipline for their children, effectively becoming ‘middle management’ and allowing the community to set the parameters for acceptable behaviour in their children.



The relative lack of obvious discipline and boundaries created a sense of independence amongst the children who lived at the community and there is some research that suggests that overly restrictive parenting does impact negatively on some aspects of children's development, particularly in relatively safe environments (Dearing, 2004). But while some children were able to benefit from the freedom Centrepoint allowed, others suffered from the lack of clear boundaries recognised to be important in children's and teenagers' development (Baumrind, 1971; Jones et al., 2000).

The idea that children at Centrepoint grew up free from restrictions may, however, be somewhat misleading as there were, in fact, powerful mechanisms of control that operated through processes like individual and group feedback. This resulted in a situation in which children had few practical restraints on their behaviour but nonetheless may have been subject to psychological controls through practices that were specific within the community. Research has suggested that shared beliefs can operate to ensure subtle but effective control in these kinds of communities (Holden & Schrock, 2007). Thus while the children at Centrepoint almost certainly had more practical freedom than their peers in nuclear families, they may have been less capable of developing other aspects of psychological independence necessary for the formation of a strong adult identity.

### **Recreation/Activities for Children at Centrepoint**

The child-friendly facilities and activities of the community were deeply appealing for children. It was this aspect that seemed to have helped to create many of the positive memories that some of our participants recalled of Centrepoint. The sheer range of recreational opportunities afforded by Centrepoint provided well for children's physical and social development and the freedom to play may have fostered the development of creativity (Russ et al., 1999). But while the opportunity to explore and play freely on the property and for communal recreation have the potential to be an ideal environment in which a child might safely explore, the obvious child-appeal of Centrepoint may have also helped to cloak some of the abuses that took place there.

### **Therapy and the culture of personal growth at Centrepoint**

The therapeutic activities at Centrepoint were designed to facilitate the transformation of relationships between people with the aim of achieving a degree of openness uncommon in

the broader society (Oakes, 1986). These activities in combination with the open living arrangements created a situation in which inter-personal boundaries were shifted from individualism and towards communality. Children growing up at Centrepont would have experienced a range of challenges to their interpersonal boundaries on both physical and psychological levels. Open showers, toilets and sleeping arrangements would have discouraged awareness of personal space or rights to privacy. The therapeutic groups would have likewise given the message that all aspects of the self can and should be shared. While it is well recognised that a lack of honest communication between people can be harmful for psychological development, an absence of boundaries can be equally unsafe for a child's developing sense of self (Crosson-Tower, 2005). Where this is combined with a hierarchical arrangement of power, as some of the children recalled at Centrepont, it may be particularly difficult for children to negotiate a clear and independent identity. The intensity and the confronting nature of therapeutic experiences may also have been emotionally destabilising for young people in the absence of adequate adult support or containment (Fried, 1972; Yalom & Lieberman, 1992).

Therapeutic groups have obvious benefit well recognised in the psychological literature (Cox et al., 2008; Scott & Lorenc, 2007; Waldman et al., 2007). They create good opportunities for the development of social support and for the normalisation of experiences as well as assisting the development of valuable skills such as emotional expression and communication (Cox et al., 2008). Nonetheless Holden and Schrock (2007) have spoken about how communities, such as Centrepont, can use 'therapeutic' ideas to maintain compliance. This includes reframing of community problems as 'psychological' and placing the responsibility onto individuals to resolve these within themselves. This strategy serves to create a situation in which dissent against the practices or beliefs of the community can be effectively closed down. Ironically then, while Centrepont prided itself on openness, it may have been difficult for young people to express views counter to the prevailing ideological system.

### **Bodies and sexuality at Centrepont**

The practices around bodies and sexuality at Centrepont were ostensibly designed to create a healthy openness towards sex and to respect the rights of children as sexual beings (Sargisson & Sargent, 2004). This helped to create a situation in which nakedness and sex practices were normalised and sexual inhibition denigrated. It is not surprising then that

children commonly engaged in sexual interaction from very early in their childhood, in comparison to New Zealand society more broadly at the time. The powerful messages of normalisation around sex helped to create an atmosphere in which sexual abuse could not be easily identified by community members. Children would have been further seduced into these kinds of activities by the obvious status associated with open sexuality within the community. Beliefs about sexuality at Centrepont not only brought underage children into sexual relationships, thereby supporting sexual exploitation and abuse, but also further undermined the maintenance of individual boundaries, including those relating to the physical body.

### **Sexual abuse at Centrepont**

There were many kinds of sexual abuse that occurred for children at Centrepont. The ideologies of 'healthy' sexual expression appeared to have been used to facilitate the sexual use of children across a range of ages and situations. These same ideologies also masked community members' recognition of abuse. This resulted in a situation in which the systematic abuse of children was allowed to occur without adult intervention to prevent it. The abuse of children most often occurred against a background of grooming, manipulation and a degree of social approbation. All of these are common strategies used by incest perpetrators to facilitate children's abuse within the family (Crosson-Tower, 2005). It is also not unusual, in these situations, for children to present (however inaccurately) as willing participants to the abuse (Cloitre et al., 2006; Crosson-Tower, 2005; Rodrigues-Srednicki & Twaite, 2006).

Although very significant abuse certainly occurred for some children at Centrepont, others seemed to have evaded sexually abusive experiences. In general those children who spent time at the community during its latter years, may have had less exposure to abuse. Gender also seemed to play some part in mediating children's experience of abuse. This may be because women are, for the most part, less aggressive sexual predators (Burroughs, 2004). It may also, however, be that discourses around male enjoyment of sexuality may impede the recognition of the extent of sexual abuse of boys by women and shame around heterosexual abuse may decrease the likelihood of exposure of this (Priebe & Svedin, 2008).

While sexual abuse would have been a significant factor for those children who were subject to it, it is also important to recognise that abuse often occurs against a matrix of

disadvantage. Mullen et al. (1993) note that an unwillingness or inability in the parents of abused children to provide the care and protection necessary not only leads to an increased likelihood of sexual abuse, but also increases the likelihood of the detrimental effects of this experience.

### **Drug and alcohol use at Centrepoint**

Children were allowed and actively encouraged to use illegal drugs at Centrepoint. While this seems to have been prevalent only during the middle years of the community's existence, it had a significant impact on those children who were there during this period. The opportunity to participate in drug experimentation would have been very attractive, particularly amongst teenagers, a group in which this often occurs, to some extent, without adult encouragement (Schneider, 2008). Where children are traumatised by experiences such as sexual abuse or emotionally destabilised for other reasons, the potential for experimentation to become abuse is high (Moran et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2005). Drug use at Centrepoint also interacted with sexual experimentation to create further opportunities for sexual abuse. Research has indicated that living in areas with more alcohol and drug activity increases the level of child maltreatment within the community (Freisthler et al., 2005).

### **Access to money and resources at Centrepoint**

The emphasis on communal relationships at Centrepoint was also mirrored in the resource arrangements at the community. The sharing of resources which was a fundamental aspect of the Centrepoint belief system underlined the importance of community above individual needs (Oakes, 1986). This again would have worked against the exercise of individual autonomy. It also created a practical situation in which residents were financially dependent on the community. Financial dependence made it difficult for some families to leave. Children at Centrepoint did not seem to have been materially deprived in terms of any basic requirements, but their lack of individual control over access to resources fostered their dependence on the whims of the community and its leaders. The relative absence of luxuries seems also to have resonated with emotional neglect to result in a situation in which some children felt deprived. The stealing that a number of children seemed to engage in is known to be associated with the absence of adequate parental supervision and emotional neglect (Arata et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2005).

### **Relationships with people and organisations outside of Centrepont**

Unlike some intentional communities there were no formal restrictions on contact with the external world at Centrepont. Children attended school outside the community and both teenagers and adults seem to have visited at Centrepont. Nonetheless, the relationship between Centrepont and the external world was constrained by prejudice on both sides. The negative evaluations of Centrepont by individuals and the media in the 'outside' world were matched by the negative views held by Centrepont about the unhealthy nature of normative social beliefs and conventions. Centrepont children faced this most directly in the form of prejudice from their classmates at school and their parents. One notable exception was the way in which teenagers from the broader community reportedly attended social gatherings at Centrepont. This, however, may have simply served to draw young people into the Centrepont community, rather than allowing for more reciprocal integration.

Lack of integration with the outside world had the effect of keeping the children reliant on their peers at Centrepont in many cases. At times it also served to limit access to external sources of support or to beliefs that were inconsistent with those of the community. On the whole, the effect of mutual prejudice helped to create a degree of isolation for the children of the community. This isolation, in turn, may have increased children's vulnerability to abuse and exploitation as well as inhibited their access to support outside of the community.

### **Experience of law and other outside agencies at Centrepont**

The imprisonment of some adults at Centrepont impacted quite directly on those children related to them. While imprisonment itself was relatively normalised at the community, the extended loss of a parent through imprisonment is known to be a significant source of psychological distress for children in more nuclear family relationships (Travis, 2005). This may be particularly difficult when an investigation, charge or imprisonment was related to the sexual abuse of children. While the police raids themselves did not seem to be a particular source of distress for the children at Centrepont, it is likely that they helped to create a sense of beleaguerment within the community which is described in Oakes's (1986) insider's account of Centrepont's development. But ironically this external hostility would have also served to strengthen the bonds between Centrepont residents. External opposition or persecution has been acknowledged to have the effect of mobilising and strengthening the belief system of communities (Harper, 1982). In some cases this would have a

cumulative effect on feeling alienated from potential supports in the ‘outside’ world and increasingly dependent on Centrepont itself.

Ironically, while CYFS involvement was intended to operate in children’s interests, it became a source of further distress and insecurity for the children, forcing them to cling even more strongly to the only security they felt they had which was the community they knew. Resistance to external ‘help’ has been known to also occur amongst children subjected to abuse whose very vulnerability makes them want to hold onto the familiarity of the family, however dysfunctional this may be (Crosson-Tower, 2005).

### **Leaving Centrepont**

Given the many reasons for children’s dependence on Centrepont it is hardly surprising that they were often reluctant to leave. Lack of independent financial means and some caution about the outside world may have increased the reliance on the community.

Nonetheless, children, with or without their families did make the decision to move out. For some leaving Centrepont mimicked the usual departure of a young adult from the parental home, with the expectation that they might return when needed, or needing to. In some cases, leaving was more difficult, and experienced with the force of being wrenched from a childhood family and home. Literature on the process of leaving intentional communities suggests that the process of giving up a strong investment in a community may, in itself, be a significant source of distress (Lewis, 1987). Even for those who left willingly with anger or fear as the prime motivator, there were still difficulties to face in the adjustment to the ‘outside’.

### **5.3 Patterns of advantages or difficulties after leaving Centrepont**

#### **The immediate transition to the ‘outside’**

While there would be differences in the process of adjusting to the ‘outside’ world depending on the age of the child at the time they left Centrepont or their level of contact previously, the transition process did raise a number of immediate challenges for those leaving Centrepont. Initial problems were practical and financial as most left the community with few or no financial resources. A second set of difficulties related to the emotional loss of the community. Given the levels of dependence that had been fostered within Centrepont this would have represented a significant challenge for those children

and their families who were forced to leave Centrepont abruptly. But even for those who left willingly, there were difficulties establishing a clear sense of identity outside of the community and in negotiating new ways of interacting in the outside world. Research into intentional communities suggests that it may be difficult for former community members to make these adjustments to the external world and this may apply particularly to children who have grown up within an intentional community (Aronoff et al., 2000).

It is also not unusual for children leaving home to re-create aspects of their families of origin in their independent living circumstances (Crosson-Tower, 2005; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2004; Larson et al., 1998; Myers, 1999). In the case of Centrepont, this was evident in the gravitation of some children and families towards communal living and also towards lifestyles dominated by drugs or sex that some pursued subsequently.

### **Family relationships after Centrepont**

Experiences at Centrepont at least challenged, and in some cases undermined nuclear family relationships. Disconnection and conflict reported within some families after leaving Centrepont is not dissimilar from the dynamics common in families where sexual abuse is disclosed (Crosson-Tower, 2005; Morrison, 2006). The literature notes a variety of common responses by family members varying from anger and disappointment to divided loyalties. The weakening of parent and child bonds at Centrepont may have also had longer term impacts on the closeness of family relationships. In some cases though, the challenges of the Centrepont experience and its aftermath may have resulted in increased closeness for family members who relied on one another for support. But even this support was not an entirely comfortable one, as it seemed that experiences at Centrepont generated areas of 'silence' within families: children could not easily ask questions about their parents involvement in abuse, parents may have been reluctant to acknowledge guilt, and siblings protected one another from knowledge about their experiences. Again, this is similar to literature describing post-incest relationships in families (Crosson-Tower, 2005; Morrison, 2006).

### **Intimate relationships and friendships after Centrepont**

Other relationships were also sometimes difficult in the aftermath of Centrepont. While ongoing relationships with other Centrepont residents were largely supportive for a number of our participants, there were strong suggestions that those who had grown up at the

community had some difficulties in relating to ‘outsiders’. Lack of trust in relationships is common amongst sexual abuse survivors (Mullen et al., 1994; Underwood et al., 2007). Abusive relationships in childhood also predispose to the replication of these in adult relationships (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2004; Möhler et al., Wekerle et al., 2009). In addition to these psychological impediments to relationships, some former Centrepont children experienced difficulties in overcoming their learned prejudices against outsiders. They tend to be wary of manipulation or the misuse of authority which serves a protective function for some. The unusual nature of their upbringing, relative to the norm, also sets them apart from others who they feel are unable to comprehend what they have experienced.

On the other hand, it is possible that those who grew up at Centrepont had some social advantages in being exposed to a greater range relationships and interactions than is usual. These interactions at Centrepont would have also been likely to have required greater assertiveness and ability to communicate effectively with adults. These skills are recognised as one of the positive outcomes of a large extended family (Segrin & Flora, 2005) and they continue to benefit some of those who grew up at Centrepont.

### **Health and psychological difficulties after Centrepont**

While we recognise that some adult children emerged from Centrepont without any psychological difficulties and some were resilient in the face of adverse conditions during their development this section focuses on the problems that we identified for those whose harmful childhood experiences brought significant psychological problems in adulthood.

In the case of Centrepont there were suggestions that participants suffered from a range of psychological problems. Although there has been considerable debate around the whether there are necessarily harmful psychological effects that can be attributed to intentional communities, research evidence suggests that this lifestyle may be associated with an increased likelihood of psychological disturbance on exiting the community, in comparison with normal populations (Aronoff, 2000).

In addition to this, there were a range of adverse circumstances that might account for some of our participants’ reported difficulties. The literature recognises a range of symptoms associated with sexual and other forms of abuse (Briere & Scott, 2006; Heflin & Deblinger,



2007), some of which were described by our participants. These include phenomena such as re-experiencing the trauma, avoidance and dissociation, and hyperarousal (Briere & Scott, 2006). These kinds of experiences are also known to disrupt the thinking and relational capacities of survivors, creating abuse schemas that often have on-going effects (Heflin & Deblinger, 2007; White, 2007).

There were also other psychological problems identified in our research and it is worth noting that post traumatic stress disorder may not be the only, or even the most likely response to sexual abuse. Adverse effects can include depression, anxiety and fear, self-destructive and suicidal behaviour, social isolation, sexual dysfunction, low self-esteem, substance abuse, eating disorders, and other symptoms of personality and psychiatric disorders (Callahan et al., 2003; Draper et al., 2007; Duncan et al., 2008; Fergusson et al., 2008; Haller & Miles, 2004; Holzer et al., 2008; Kaplow & Widom, 2007; Lemieux & Byers, 2008; McCrae et al., 2006).

Other triggers for psychological difficulties were also evident at Centrepont. Parental neglect is known to result in a range of lasting psychological problems, some of which seemed to have been reported in this study. While it is often assumed that the consequences of emotional maltreatment or neglect are not as severe as more obvious forms of maltreatment, they can have significant and enduring negative effects on a child's development and functioning, that can extend into adulthood (Egeland, 2009). A child's developmental stage when neglect occurs influences later functioning. In his review of the literature, Egeland (2009) has noted that infancy and toddlerhood appear to be critical periods for the development of long-term negative effects of emotional neglect. Neglect has also been found to predict higher rates of diagnoses of mental disorders such as anxiety, depression, and dissociation (Wright et al., 2009), and increased feelings of hopelessness, particularly for girls, and suicide proneness (Arata et al., 2007). The literature has indicated an association between child neglect and later substance use (Conroy et al., 2009). On the whole, when the experience of neglect occurs at a later age the negative consequences appear to be less severe (Egeland, 2009), so it is likely that some of the adult children of Centrepont were protected against the most serious effects of emotional neglect simply because of the ages at which they began residing in the Community. Nonetheless, adolescent neglect increases the likelihood of arrest, general offending, and violent crime in late adolescence (Smith et al. 2005). Arata et al. (2007) also found a self-reported history of

neglect to be predictive of delinquency. Their study also indicated increased substance use among adolescents who had experienced multiple forms of maltreatment.

The manipulation and emotional intensity of Centrepont may also have created a degree of vulnerability to later psychological disturbance. A unique impact of childhood emotional abuse on elevated post-traumatic symptoms in adolescence has been indicated (Wekerle et al., 2009).

The imprisonment of a parent is also known to have significant potential for long term psychological harm (Travis, 2005). Bocknek et al. (2009) discuss how this may represent a particularly distressing situation for a child who may be left without emotional support and facing the added burden of the stigma around their parent's crime. These authors note that children may experience problems with guilt, anger, sadness and disrupted or insecure patterns of attachment.

In addition to these stressors operating at Centrepont, it would also be important to recognise that children coming to Centrepont may have already been particularly susceptible either because of their parents' psychological vulnerability or experiences prior to Centrepont, such as parental divorce or separation (Afifi et. al., 2009), or their own school or behaviour problems (McCarty et al., 2008; Sansone & Sansone, 2008).

The interaction of psychological vulnerability with early exposure to drugs would have been very risky for some children. The use of illicit drugs during childhood and adolescence can have deleterious effects over and above those experienced by adult drug users. The importance of the developmental periods of puberty (Schneider, 2008) and adolescence (Andersen & Navalta, 2004) in psychoneurological, social, and psychological maturation as youth make the transition from childhood to adulthood, have been well discussed in the literature. Adolescents who use cannabis are more susceptible to experiencing mental health problems than adult-onset users: Cannabis use before the age of 15 years entails a greater risk for developing psychosis and schizophrenia outcomes (Schneider & Koch, 2003). Research has indicated that puberty/mid-adolescence is a highly vulnerable time frame for possible acute and residual effects of marijuana on cognitive processing (Schneider, 2008). Chronic use of MDMA (Ecstasy) is also known to have harmful effects on cognitive functioning (McCardle et al., 2004).

In some cases psychological problems would have been likely to lead to drug use. This is known to operate as a kind of ‘self medication’ for those who are suffering from psychological trauma. Emotional, physical and sexual abuse are related to increased levels of substance use (Moran et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2005).

Psychological problems were reported more frequently than difficulties with physical health amongst the children of Centrepont. Some physical health problems would be likely to be linked to long term drug use and there is the possibility that the long term use of the pill may have resulted in some harm to women who were required to take this from an unusually young age.

### **Study and work after Centrepont**

The knock-on effects of psychological problems and drug use resulted in some Centrepont children experiencing difficulty in completing or continuing their education and following clear career objectives. While not all of those who grew up at Centrepont would have experienced these kinds of difficulties, there are likely to be some challenges for them in engaging with the tasks of early adulthood. The different way that Centrepont functioned in relation to work would have meant a lack of adult role models capable of demonstrating the individual goal orientation required in the world outside of Centrepont. These role models are recognised to be important for children in being able to pro-actively plan and develop their career path (Flouri & Buchanan, 2002). Lack of modelling probably interacted with the strong beliefs against individualism, which may have further undermined people’s abilities to pursue clear career paths for themselves. This resulted in a situation where some of the adult children of Centrepont seemed to have taken longer than usual to establish themselves in these areas. However, some children did learn a good work ethic from the collective commitment to the tasks of providing for the community.

It is notable that those who had been able to manage their career development more quickly and successfully, were generally in the younger group of participants who may have been there when the community had responded positively to the exposure of sexual abuse and inappropriate drug use.

### **Managing financially after Centrepont**

Those who grew up at Centrepont also seemed to have faced particular challenges in learning to manage their own money and experienced stress around financial matters. Psychological problems and drug seemed to have played a part in derailing people's abilities to manage financially. In addition, limited access to resources and financial management skills at Centrepont may have exacerbated these difficulties. The most obvious disadvantage Centrepont children had, relative to other young adults of their class, was that they would have had little financial support from their parents who had mostly left the community without resources. Beyond this though, the former children had not had exposure to the mechanics of everyday financial management and adult role models in this area. Research suggests the value of children learning important lessons about money at the knees of their parents (Segrin & Flora, 2005). Centrepont had also quite deliberately fostered an atypical attitude towards money. The communality of resources would have been likely to make it difficult for residents to appreciate the value of money and envisage exercising control over its usage. In addition, Centrepont's ideologies and practices around resources may have created a degree of dependency and an expectation that financial matters would be dealt with by someone other than themselves.

In spite of these challenges it seems that some of those at Centrepont were able to develop their financial independence. This is a testament to the resourcefulness they learnt through their relative independence at Centrepont. It is likely that the general absence of adult guidance contributed to the unusual self-sufficiency that we saw amongst some of our younger participants.

### **Participation in court cases**

Although a relatively small number of the former children of Centrepont sought prosecution of those who had sexually abused them, others did not do so. Research recognises that sexual abuse is likely to be significantly under-reported to the criminal justice system (Fergusson et al., 2000; Rodrigues-Srednicki & Twaite, 2006). The reasons commonly given for this are that survivors are reluctant to relive their abuse in court; that they fear that they will not be believed; that they have conflicting loyalties and they fear facing their perpetrator in court (Fergusson et al., 2000; Morrison, 2006; Rodrigues-Srednicki & Twaite, 2006). Certainly those from Centrepont who did take this course of action attested to some of these challenges, which may have then deterred others from

coming forward. It is also likely that the process of plea bargaining which was involved in the Centrepont cases gave potential claimants the message that it was not worth pursuing their claims. Research into the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa has suggested that it is important for people who have been subject to abuse to have their *particular* stories told and acknowledged in order to be able to move on from a traumatic experience (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2002). Because of the relatively few who came forward to lay charges of sexual abuse after Centrepont, other former residents may feel that justice was not done in relation to the experiences that they or others had at the community.

While the lack of justice felt by some Centrepont children points to a need for further court action, on-going investigations are likely to be a source of considerable anxiety for some former children, particularly those whose parents may have perpetrated abuse.

### **The next generation**

The possible impact of the Centrepont experience on the ‘next generation’ was raised as a concern in this research. It is well recognised in research that psychological trauma can have inter-generational effects (Frazier et al., 2009; Segrin & Flora, 2005). There were fears that this may have impacted similarly on the children of those who grew up at Centrepont. Psychological problems and drug use in parents would be likely to have significant effects on parenting with associated impacts on children (Crosson-Tower, 2005). While the collective parenting that was practiced at Centrepont may have provided some role modelling for those who grew up at the community, these unorthodox arrangements have not always prepared Centrepont children as well for parenting in a nuclear family situation. Nonetheless, guided by a wish to avoid the mistakes of their parents, some of the former Centrepont children worked at improving their own parenting skills. This motivation is not uncommon for many children and in the case of Centrepont there were some advantages in having access to a range of parenting models. The spectre of abuse, however, still hangs over the families of some Centrepont children who seem to be unusually alert to this danger in relation to their children.

### **Shifting realities in the aftermath of Centrepont**

The adult lives of the former Centrepont children were challenged by the conflicts between the ideologies of the community and those generally accepted in ‘normal’ society. Some of these experienced their exposure to the beliefs of Centrepont as a form of ‘brainwashing’

similar to that known to occur in cults. Cults are defined by features such as their capacity to induce compliance and dependency as well as their use of manipulation and exploitation (Chambers et al., 1994). This is facilitated further by communal pressures that control compliance and belief through both positive and negative reinforcements. It is difficult to make any assertion about Centrepont being a cult, but for some former children, it certainly seemed to have features of this organisation. But even for those who doubted that Centrepont was a cult, there were difficulties in reorienting themselves to the norms of the broader society.

The process of realisation of the differences between what one may have believed in an ideological community and what one later discovers to be upheld as normal, often takes time to emerge (Walsh & Bor, 1996). Former children of Centrepont will likely have quite different perceptions of their experience at the community at different points in their lives, depending on the set of beliefs that dominate at the time. This creates the possibility that those who grew up at Centrepont not only had different experiences at the community but also perceived these experiences differently. This phenomenon, no doubt, adds to the dissention evident amongst Centrepont children about its worth or otherwise. But while, on the surface, former children of Centrepont may articulate a strong commitment to one position or another, it seems that for many there are enormous challenges in holding on to their own experience as legitimate or valid in the face of competing versions of reality.

### **Relationship with Centrepont**

Differences in the experiences of children at Centrepont in combination with differences in understandings about those experiences result in factionalised perspectives on the community. A portion of Centrepont children believe that the community was the site of their or others' abuse and manipulation, while others assert, just as vehemently, that it was an ideal place to grow up. But in spite of these positional differences, the former Centrepont children collectively face the stigmatising public perception of the community. The expectation that they will be judged and condemned for their involvement at Centrepont diminishes their opportunities to live life free of discrimination or to seek understanding or support when they experience difficulties. For those who had been abused at the community or had suffered psychological damage through neglect or a parent's imprisonment, these stigmatising perceptions of Centrepont would have served as a source of re-victimisation.

### **Strategies for coping after Centrepoint**

It is now well-recognised in the psychological literature that people are not only ‘subject’ to difficult experiences but also actively engage with, construct and sometimes even resist adverse experiences (Folkman & Park, 1997). There were a variety of coping strategies that Centrepoint children used to help them through their experiences at Centrepoint and afterwards. For some, coping involved minimising their negative experiences and optimising the benefits that they gained at the community. Others found comfort in challenging the authority of those who had hurt them, adaptively using their anger to spur them on to seek justice for themselves and others. Again, these kinds of coping strategies would increase the likelihood of factionalism within the group of former Centrepoint children. But it is important to recognise that people not only choose to tell their own life stories in a particular way but also sometimes *need* to tell them in this way to protect themselves from pain or discomfort (Vogel & Gshaider-Kassahun, 2009) or to assert their own resilience. Other coping strategies involved trying to appear ‘normal’, finding ways to retreat from notice or seeking support in protective relationships with individuals or organisations. There are no doubt many other coping strategies that might be employed, beyond those represented by the sample who participated in our research.

In spite of the variation in the coping strategies used to manage Centrepoint experiences, many who grew up there shared their resistance to the label of ‘victim’. This position is not dissimilar to that which drove the re-labelling of rape-survivors in the 1980s (McCarthy & McCarthy, 1989). There is a stigma associated with victimhood which positions people as ‘damaged goods’ and represents them as powerless. It is not surprising that the former Centrepoint children do not want to be perceived in this way.

### **5.4 Identification and assessment of needs of the former children of Centrepoint**

The needs of the former Centrepoint children can be identified by both their direct comments on areas of need as well as from problem areas that emerged from our analysis of their accounts. However, as we have made clear throughout this report, there is likely to be a considerable diversity of needs amongst those who grew up at Centrepoint. This suggests that it is unlikely that there is going to be a single rehabilitation programme that will suit the needs of all, or a single approach to addressing the needs of the Centrepoint children.

Instead the issues of rehabilitation will need to be addressed with a keen awareness that there is no 'one size fits all' solution.

#### **5.4.1 Needs for rehabilitation**

Rehabilitation is a broad concept that generally refers to returning someone to a state of health or functioning previously challenged by adversity or illness (Goldstein & Beers, 1998). In the case of Centrepont, rehabilitation would involve identifying and addressing areas of difficulty that prevent people from engaging fully and effectively in their adult lives.

##### **Psychological rehabilitation**

This research suggests that there are likely to be clear needs amongst at least some of the former children of Centrepont for psychological assistance to address a range of problems. Children growing up at Centrepont were exposed to events and experiences that were detrimental to their psychological development, and for some, this will have on-going effects. Psychological problems may include those related to post traumatic stress disorder, known to be associated with sexual abuse (Briere & Scott, 2006). This condition is, however, not the only likely response to experiences of sexual abuse at Centrepont. It is well recognised that abuse, particularly when it occurs over a lengthy period and is integrated into 'accepted' behaviour, may manifest in a wide range of psychological conditions. Importantly, traumatic experiences of this kind may also not always reveal itself in a diagnosable psychological disorder but can still impact significantly on people's abilities to establish healthy relationships with others or in problems in maintaining a strong and capable sense of self. The ability to manage and maintain personal boundaries may also be impacted by the experience of sexual abuse, which transgresses both physical and emotional limits (Harper, 2006).

While it is not clear that Centrepont was a cult, it may be that there were elements in common with cult practice and the literature in this area provides some indication of likely problems for the children. Conway and Siegelman (1995) in a survey of 400 former cult members found the most commonly reported symptoms to be depression, loneliness, anger, disorientation, humiliation and embarrassment, guilt, nightmares and self-destructive behaviour. Some of these symptoms were reported by our participants and might be



expected also amongst some of those former Centrepoint children who did not participate in this study.

While anecdotal evidence on Centrepoint has up to now, suggested that psychological distress may be limited to those who specifically experienced sexual abuse, this research suggests that there were many other sources of significant emotional harm for children at Centrepoint. This would have included exposure to experiences such as parental neglect, parental imprisonment, psychological manipulation, inappropriate psychotherapeutic encounters, witnessing abuse, corporal punishment, adult conflict, or peer bullying amongst other possibilities. As these experiences were widespread at Centrepoint, it would be difficult to classify a particular group of former children who might be more at risk than others. In some sense, all children growing up at Centrepoint may have faced an unusually high possibility of at least some adverse experiences at the community or outside and therefore may also have some associated psychological difficulties.

The fact that the adverse circumstances to which the former Centrepoint children were exposed would have persisted over a long period could, in some cases, have given rise to on-going psychological difficulties. For those with problems in these areas it may be that short term psychological or counselling intervention is not sufficient. Instead, on-going or repeated interventions may be necessary for those most affected by their experiences.

This research also suggested a pattern in which an awareness of psychological problems emerged gradually over time together with a growing realisation of the import of experiences at Centrepoint. This makes it possible that there may be former Centrepoint children who do not currently recognise experiences they have had as being inappropriate or abusive, but may do so in the future as life events activate awareness or trigger vulnerability. Psychological rehabilitation would need to continue to be available over a period of time to accommodate changes in the need status of some.

While recognising the potential for psychological rehabilitation needs amongst the children of Centrepoint, it would be as detrimental to ignore these as it would be to insist that all children who lived at Centrepoint must necessarily have been harmed. This research suggests that in spite of some of the adverse experiences to which children could be exposed at Centrepoint, it was possible to have evaded some of these experiences, or to

have experienced difficulties without considerable or lasting harm. Resilience is recognised as a factor in allowing children to manage and survive even very adverse circumstances without consequent impairment (DuMont et al. 2007; Collishaw et al., 2007). It would, in fact, be stigmatising to insist that all Centrepont children had suffered some kind of psychological damage.

By the same token, it would be equally unhelpful to allow the knowledge that some former Centrepont children survived their experience well, to cast doubt on the experiences of those who clearly suffered considerable harm as a result of their childhood at Centrepont. People in this category, may already have struggled to hold onto the validity of their experiences in the face of disapproval and doubt from inside and outside the community. It is therefore very important that this process is not perpetuated in their rehabilitation.

Counselling, psychotherapy and psychological services may be utilised in addressing this area of rehabilitation. It is important to note, however, that because some of the practices at Centrepont were labelled as ‘psychotherapy’ it is likely that some former residents may resist this aspect of their rehabilitation. Furthermore, given the misuse of psychotherapy and counselling at Centrepont, it would be essential to ensure that any practitioner undertaking rehabilitation work with former residents was registered with an appropriate body and practiced in terms of a clear and enforceable set of professional ethics.

### **Substance abuse rehabilitation**

While substance abuse may be seen as a sub-set of psychological problems in general, we have chosen to deal with it separately here to highlight its significance. Former Centrepont children may have a particular need for rehabilitation aimed at addressing substance abuse problems. The challenge with substance abuse as a factor in people’s lives is that it tends to create additional problems as it develops. While substance abuse often arises as a way of dealing with an adverse reality it soon begins to create its own difficulties in relationships, in employment, finances, health and sometimes even involvement in crime (Loxley et al., 2004; Pagliaro & Pagliaro, 1996). For this reason any rehabilitation programme would need to address substance abuse as a priority when working with any other issues, including other psychological problems.

As those who abuse substances often deny the extent of their problems (Ferrari et al., 2008; Stein & Rogers, 2008) or normalise these in the context of a particular sub-group (Duff, 2003; 2005), it is not always easy to provide the help required. It was notable that none of those who participated in this research acknowledged currently using hard drugs although they had done so in the past. This reinforces the idea that those currently engaged in heavy drug use may not come forward either to make their needs known or to seek help. Therefore, any attempt to reach this group would have to actively promote awareness of resources available rather than passively waiting for people to come forward to seek rehabilitation themselves.

Rehabilitation for substance abuse would be best provided by specialist agencies such as Alcoholics Anonymous and other services within the health sector such as the Community Alcohol and Drug Service or private rehabilitation providers. It may also be necessary to consider the need for specialised neuropsychological rehabilitation for those who are experiencing the lasting cognitive impact of early, extended and severe drug use.

### **Financial rehabilitation**

The former Centrepont children began their adult lives with a significant financial disadvantage entailed in loss of their family assets to the community and, in some cases, poor knowledge of financial management. They also may have unrealistic expectations of being cared for - a belief fostered by the hierarchical and communal practices of Centrepont.

Rehabilitation for the children of Centrepont would need to include some access to assistance with financial budgeting and planning. It is not sufficient in financial rehabilitation to simply provide access to financial support. Instead, the focus should be on the development of skills necessary to create and maintain financial security.

This research suggests that financial problems are a pressing need for participants and it is likely that many would come forward if this service were made available. Financial skill development could be provided by budgeting agencies or business or personal mentorship services.

### **Life skills rehabilitation**

While Centrepont exposed its children to a range of circumstances that assisted the development of life skills, not all of these matched well with the requirements of the environment outside of Centrepont. The focus on collectivity as opposed to individualism, is not in itself harmful, but may not have provided the former children with the ethos required for individual, goal oriented behaviour expected of adults in contemporary New Zealand society. Psychological or substance abuse difficulties will have added to some people's difficulties in managing and directing their own lives satisfactorily. Former Centrepont residents may benefit from a practically oriented form of life skills development which would provide them with missed opportunities to learn to take charge of their own lives.

Difficulties in managing the social restrictions and boundaries that are generally adhered to in the broader society may also be challenging for those from Centrepont. While there is no doubt that some former Centrepont children have very good social skills, some may require help in adapting these, for example, to the requirements of the workplace or in other more formal relationships. It may be especially useful to assist some in developing the skills necessary to effectively access the help that might be available to them.

Some participants expressed a specific need for 're-programming', a strategy historically used to help those who have left cults to adjust to the outside world. But given that most of the former children of Centrepont would have left it some time ago, this may be less relevant than it might have been had it been considered soon after the closure of the community. It may nonetheless be useful to offer some assistance to the former children of Centrepont in making sense of their changing views on reality in the context of a safe relationship that would allow these issues to be spoken about openly. This might be addressed within the broader ambit of 'life skills'.

This kind of mentorship might be provided in the context of a counselling or psychotherapy relationship or other service provider with relevant skills or qualifications.

### **Educational and occupational rehabilitation**

While some of the former Centrepont children were able to pursue educational and career aspirations this still appears to be a significant area for rehabilitation for others. Some of

those who grew up at Centrepont left school early, or struggled to find a career direction after leaving the community. Some have been able to develop a focus in later years. It would be useful to have available assistance to help with vocational choices.

Education was identified one of the priority needs suggested by this research. Further education was seen as a means to materially alter the circumstances of people's lives and allow them to emerge from the dead end in which some had found themselves. Scholarships for tertiary education were identified as an important need. In order for this to be seen as equitable, financial assistance for education needs to take account of existing student loans.

This area may also be addressed under the umbrella of life skills but may also require more specialised intervention from vocational assessment services and advisors. This area requires particular consideration given its importance for both personal satisfaction and financial independence.

#### **5.4.2 Other needs**

##### **Justice**

This research suggests the likelihood that some of the former Centrepont children who experienced some kind of abuse did not receive justice through the courts. It may be difficult for these people to move on with their lives without some sense that the abuse they had experienced had been acknowledged or that appropriate reparations have been made by those responsible. It may thus be important to facilitate and support opportunities for those involved to seek justice through legal channels or to explore other means of having their suffering publically acknowledged.<sup>24</sup> If people were encouraged to pursue these options, however, they might need considerable support to help them through the challenges involved in doing so.

The publicity around further court cases or public exposure may create further psychological trauma for those whose parents were involved in crimes against the children of Centrepont or those whose abuse experiences are triggered by hearing about others who have been abused. These two considerations would need to be held in mind in addressing

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<sup>24</sup> For some of those who participated in this project it is possible that the research itself served the purpose of a public acknowledgement of their experiences.

this issue and it may be that additional support would need to be provided for those not directly involved in the abuse claims.

### **Short-term financial assistance**

Although in the long term financial rehabilitation should be seen as the goal for the former children of Centrepont, short term financial assistance might also be needed in times of crisis or to deal with particularly debilitating circumstances such as illness. However, the potential for re-creating patterns of dependency through this reactive form of support needs to be considered. This is especially important for this group of beneficiaries, given the dependence that may have been fostered by some of the arrangements at Centrepont.

Given the widespread perception that the assets of the NZCGT constitute the ‘inheritance’ of the children, it may be possible to explore a more pro-active strategy for making this available to those who have been disadvantaged by the loss of their parents’ assets and earning potential.

### **Sundry goods**

The support of particular costs on requests, such as cars, beds, washing machines or weddings on a one-off basis was reported to have been part of the practices of the NZCGT in dealing with the needs of the former Centrepont children. While in some cases this was clearly helpful in furthering a particular career or life goal (for example, a laptop computer that might assist study), in other cases it did not appear to be clearly linked to development of an individual’s financial independence and security. Furthermore, there were instances where meeting the costs of a sundry item was perceived by participants as being a somewhat unsystematic and poorly planned use of the assets of the Trust.

### **Housing**

Access to permanent housing is likely to be a need for some former Centrepont children. While no-one we interviewed was homeless, a number seemed to be living in temporary or shared accommodation and some clearly lived a fairly transient lifestyle. This may reflect the difficulty the former Centrepont children have in setting themselves in permanent residence in the absence of any financial support from their parents. Some also clearly worried about their parents’ living arrangements.

## **Health**

This research suggested that the former Centrepont children may have some expectations that they would receive help with their health needs – even where these needs were not as a direct result of their Centrepont experience. They might anticipate that Centrepont would have taken care of these issues for them had it continued. There may be legitimate needs for health care linked to experiences at Centrepont such as vaginal injuries or drug-related health problems but it would seem that normal health needs could be accommodated within the health systems that are available to all New Zealanders.

## **Prioritising needs**

It is not possible to establish a clear prioritisation of needs as these are likely to be different for each individual. It may be useful, however, to conceptualise the range of possible needs along a continuum with more basic needs requiring to be met before advanced needs can be satisfied. Some of the former children of Centrepont who are functioning less well in its aftermath may need basic assistance with identifying and making sense of their own needs and the role of the Trust in relation to these. For those who are functioning slightly better, it is possible that they may be able to identify their own needs for psychological or financial help. For those former children who have either had effective rehabilitative support or who did not need this, they may need assistance in fulfilling their career potential or enhancing their financial security.

## **5.5 Recommendations for health professionals and others involved in assisting children from intentional communities**

Given the relative rarity and specificity of experiences such as those at Centrepont, it is hardly surprising that there is not a great deal of knowledge amongst local health and rehabilitation professionals about how best to work with those who have grown up in intentional communities. In the US where intentional communities flourished during the latter half of the twentieth century there is, however, a fairly substantial body of literature in this area on rehabilitating adult children (See Whitsett & Kent, 2003 and Langone & Eisenberg, 1994 for reviews of some of the literature).

It would be important for professionals involved in the rehabilitation needs of the former Centrepont children to be aware of the literature on the shared characteristics of intentional

communities and some of the known adjustment difficulties members may experience on re-entering society. However, it needs to be recognised that each community may have very different sets of beliefs and practices that would be likely to have different consequences for their former members. As Sargisson and Sargent (2004) note, generalisations about intentional communities must be made with care.

There are nonetheless some findings from both this research and the general psychological literature that may inform those who provide for the rehabilitation needs of the former Centrepont children. As a starting point for working in this area professionals may benefit from developing some relevant background knowledge in the following areas:

#### **5.5.1 Knowledge of the nature of intentional communities and the effects of exiting these**

Whitsett and Kent (2003) note that professionals are accustomed to recognising and responding to issues such as sexual abuse, even when these are not explicitly presented by their client. They point out that professionals may be much less used to identifying issues related to involvements in cults or intentional communities. They emphasise the need for further knowledge in these areas by those who might feasibly be involved in treatment.

Martin (1994) recognises a range of other problems that may need to be tackled in assisting people who have left an intentional community or cult. These are recognised to include such diverse aspects as mourning the loss of friends in the community, unrecognised dependency issues, conflict about whether they are victims or agents of their own experience, insecure identity and confusion over what went right or wrong at the community.

The current study supports these as significant problem areas, but also recognises that there may be considerable variation in people's experiences and needs.

#### **5.5.2 Knowledge of the impact of changing ideologies**

It may be valuable for health workers to be aware of the extent to which an intentional community with a strong ideological base may create difficulties in making sense of different realities including those of the intentional community and those accepted in the



broader society. While Centrepont cannot be formally classified as a cult on the basis of this research, those working with former Centrepont children may benefit from the advice of a number of authors, writing about the effects post-cult rehabilitation. They have suggested the importance of some form of psycho-education as a precursor to working with those who have left an ideological community environment (Pignotti, 2000; Goldberg, 1994). More recent research is sceptical of these confronting strategies and is also more careful of assigning the label of 'cult' to a community (Gallagher, 2007). Nonetheless, it may be helpful for health providers to be aware of the way in which Centrepont's ideologies influence former residents' beliefs about the community and themselves. It will also be useful to provide former community members with a safe space in which to explore and acknowledge any changing beliefs they may have (Walsh & Bor, 1996).

### **5.5.3 Knowledge of particular kinds of adverse experience associated with Centrepont**

Recognition of Centrepont's impact on former residents' belief systems is, however, only the starting point for dealing with some of its effects. From our own research we were able to identify the significance of childhood neglect, sexual abuse, drug use, psychological manipulation, imprisonment of parents and social stigma as being other important sources of likely psychological distress for former children of Centrepont.

Specific knowledge of sexual abuse and sexual coercion on children and young people and treatments for this may be helpful. There are some useful reviews and summaries of this literature available (McGregor, 2000; Rāraŋa Whatumanawa, 2008). These also make suggestions for appropriate forms of intervention that might be adapted to the specific needs of the individual.

Research on early exposure to drug use and the psychological and physical consequences of drug abuse will also be helpful for those who work with the rehabilitation needs of former Centrepont children. There are evidence based practices associated with these problems that health and rehabilitation professionals can draw on (Emmelkamp & Vedel, 2006).

The literature on child neglect and particularly that related to the treatment of attachment problems may also be helpful in addressing the relational patterns and difficulties of some of the children who grew up at Centrepont (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; Obegi & Berant,

2009). Those whose parents have been imprisoned may also benefit from aspects of this body of research and theory. There are some specific treatments recommended for attachment problems but it may be that these can be integrated alongside other foci of intervention.

Finally literature on the psychological effects of stigma may also be important in working with (Goffman, 1990). This is one of the less acknowledged aspects of the Centrepont experience but will provide valuable information on the psychological effects of long term exposure to negative social evaluations. Researchers have shown how popular perceptions of those who live in intentional communities can become very negative when these are described as ‘cults’. Perceptions become less negative when non-pejorative labels are used (Olson, 2000). There are specific interventions available for the stigma associated with child sexual abuse (Feiring et al., 2009) but little on the experience of being stigmatised as a result of association with an intentional community such as Centrepont. It may be that balanced information about how these communities operate will reduce prejudice against the children who lived there. It also needs to be recognised that the responsibility for adverse experiences encountered at Centrepont or other similar communities cannot rest with the children themselves.

#### **5.5.4 Note on likely variation of response**

While it would be important for health providers to be aware of the potential for the kinds of problems noted in the research literature and in this research, it would not be helpful to seek out a particular syndrome or set of effects as synonymous with this kind of experience. Given the wide array of responses amongst our participants to their Centrepont experience, it would be most helpful to keep an open mind regarding possible effects against a background of knowledge of the kinds of experiences and effects that may be likely. It would be important to tailor the intervention closely to the particular needs of the person presenting for psychological assistance.

#### **5.5.5 Challenges in relationships with health and rehabilitation professionals**

Because Centrepont specifically targeted relational change as one of its goals, these are likely to impact on the relationship between former members of the community and service

providers. This research highlights several relational patterns that may have relevance for health providers working with the former children of Centrepont. Once again it needs to be noted that not all former Centrepont children will manifest any or all of these relationship patterns.

### **Dependence**

The hierarchical structure of the community and the emphasis on communality, paired together with some degree of psychological manipulation aimed at compliance is likely to have fostered a degree of dependency amongst some former Centrepont residents. This may in turn lead to unrealistic expectations of the level of help that ought to be provided by health practitioners and an unhealthy dependence on them. Health providers would benefit from being alert to this possibility and encouraging former Centrepont residents to strengthen their sense of identity and to regain charge of their lives, against the background of a supportive relationship.

### **Mistrust of authority**

There are a variety of experiences that are likely to conspire to make former Centrepont residents somewhat mistrustful of seeking help from health providers. These include factors such as the abuse of authority at Centrepont, the mistrust of the ‘outside’ world and lack of response to previous help seeking attempts at Centrepont. This may lead some former Centrepont children to resist seeking help from health providers or to become suspicious of the motives of those who wish to help them. Given that Centrepont was a ‘therapeutic’ community, there is also likely to be a particular wariness of psychotherapeutic professionals. Dealing with this will require understanding and sensitivity from health providers.

### **Avoiding victimisation**

It is well recognised that those who have survived abuse, often go on to experience a kind of secondary victimisation unwittingly perpetrated by those who claim to help them. This can sometimes involve subjecting survivors to questioning or challenging or to treating them in other insensitive ways. But even amongst more aware health providers there may be a tendency to slip into treating survivors as though they might be ‘damaged’ in some way which makes them less capable of having opinions about their care or making their own choices. It would be important to recognise that even those who experienced some of the

most adverse circumstances at Centrepont were capable of showing considerable resilience in their lives afterwards (Masten & Garmezy, 1990). The challenge for health providers is to recognise the areas of vulnerability as well as strength in their clients and to work to avoid type-casting them simply as ‘victims’.

### **Managing boundaries**

Given the way in which Centrepont undermined individual and inter-personal boundaries, it is possible that some former residents may have difficulty in effectively maintaining their own boundaries and recognising those of others. The maintenance of clear professional boundaries are regarded as an ethical priority for all health providers (See, for example, the New Zealand Psychological Society Code of Ethics). It would be important for health providers to be aware of this difficulty and be vigilant to potential breaches.

### **Allowing for difference**

This research has pointed strongly to the recognition that Centrepont may have had very different consequences for different people who spent their childhood there. It would be important that health providers take their lead from their clients in ascertaining how they might have experienced Centrepont and avoid making pre-judgements about ‘typical’ responses. We would emphasise that this is not always an easy goal to achieve, even amongst professionals who have been taught reflective practice.

## **5.5.6 Forms of intervention**

Given the variety of experiences and responses to Centrepont amongst the participants of this study, it is not possible to recommend any single kind of intervention as better than another. Instead it would be helpful for health providers to work with a broad knowledge of the context of the intentional community, with the specificity of the person’s particular presentation in combination with knowledge of evidence based practices. In spite of this recommendation for flexibility, there are some general issues that may require consideration in developing interventions:

### **Individual versus group interventions**

Some very limited research has suggested that group interventions may be more useful than individual treatment for former residents of intentional communities (Durocher, 1999). In

general, group interventions assist with ‘normalising’ that may be helpful to address the reintegration experiences that make former community members feel ‘different’ from others around them. Group interventions also help to reduce the sense of isolation which is often a problem for those who have left an intentional community. Having said this, however, given that abuse and manipulation seemed to occur within the context of a ‘therapeutic group’ at Centrepont, this would need to be used with caution. Also, given the diversity of opinions on Centrepont held by its former residents, any group intervention is likely to result in tension and conflict. Thus, in spite of the recognised therapeutic advantages of groups, individual interventions may be experienced as safer by participants and have less potential to recreate the destructive dynamics of the Centrepont groups.

### **Individual versus family interventions**

Centrepont had the potential to impact adversely on family dynamics. This is a significant problem insofar as dysfunctional family relationships continue to reproduce experiences of anger, shame and guilt. Problematic family relationships may also decrease the availability of social support for former Centrepont residents. It has, however, been recognised that when sexual abuse has been a part of a family’s experience the level of family dysfunction and blaming may make family interactions potentially traumatic for the survivor (Ketring & Feinauer, 1999). In cases where issues such as abuse divide a family intractably, it may be more sensible to put the emphasis on developing an individual’s internal strengths and linking them into more adaptive support structures. Nonetheless, given that Centrepont also operated to some extent as a ‘family’ structure it is useful to understand interventions in this context even when they are targeted at individuals.

### **Long term versus short term interventions**

While those who experienced years of neglect, abuse and manipulation at Centrepont might be likely to require longer term interventions, it may be difficult for some to maintain on-going relationships with a health provider. Given difficulties in attachment and in trust, interventions will need to fit each individual’s tolerance for sustaining a relationship. In these cases it may be that some former children of Centrepont with more severe difficulties may benefit from the freedom to move in and out of treatment as necessary. This would create the opportunity for support when needed while decreasing the anxiety about reliance on a health provider and the potential for unhealthy dependence.

### **Practical versus therapeutic interventions**

Given that psychotherapy may still be felt to be ‘dangerous’ by some former Centrepoint children it may be helpful to assist them with more practical interventions aimed, for example, at addressing immediate goals and strategies for living. It is only possible for an individual to engage in more explorative or trauma focused therapies once they have developed a stronger sense of their own identity and their ability to cope.

## **5.6 Recommendations to the NZCGT**

This section reports on the recommendations to the NZCGT that were derived from broader analysis of the experiences and needs of the former children of Centrepoint and participants’ accounts of their interactions with the Trust (separately reported). While some former children of Centrepoint may either have little to do with the NZCGT or feel satisfied in their dealings with it, others may have significant expectations of the Trust that have not been met. This research also suggests that there is some confusion and misinformation about the role of the Trust in relation to the assets of Centrepoint and it is possible that there are some former children of Centrepoint that are not aware of its existence or role

### **5.6.1 Short term recommendations**

#### **Educate the Trust and the Advisory Committee of the NZCGT about the experiences and needs of the former children of Centrepoint**

This research would provide a useful starting point for those who are working with the former children of Centrepoint to gain an opportunity to better understand some of their difficulties. This may provide a basis for sound judgements on the development of the Trust’s role in the relation to this group and also increase the sensitivity with which they engage with them.

#### **Educate the former children of Centrepoint about the role of the Trust**

It would be helpful to develop a clear and easily understandable pamphlet that could explain to former Centrepoint children what the legal obligations of the Trust are in relation to the assets that once belonged to the community. This might include information about the fact that Centrepoint assets were effectively confiscated by the court, that they no longer belong

to former residents of Centrepont but can be utilised to assist them according to very specific court determined criteria.

### **Set up clear and transparent criteria for rehabilitation**

These criteria would need to clearly set out differences between hardship grounds for assistance and those linked to rehabilitation. Psychological, health, education, financial coaching and life skills would fall under the latter category. Shorter term financial assistance or purchase of goods may better be classified under the 'hardship' category. This has implications for the process by which these claims are made. The set of rehabilitation strategies would no longer require statements supporting financial hardship. Given the ubiquitous exposure to adverse experiences at Centrepont it may simply be necessary for people to provide evidence that they lived there in order to be entitled to some rehabilitation.

### **Emphasise development rather than reactive strategies**

In order to avoid reproducing patterns of dependency in relation to material well-being it would be valuable to shift the focus of assistance from 'crisis' requests for money or goods to strategies aimed at empowering the former children of Centrepont to take charge of their own lives. This would include focusing on building skill areas around financial and career management as well as providing education or counselling where needed. This does not preclude providing assistance for emergencies but rather recognising that these interventions need to be part of a clear plan for more sustainable benefits.

If money is to be made available to the former children of Centrepont, it may be useful to give this in the form of a lump sum that can be used by the person in a way which fits their needs. This may assist former Centrepont residents to develop their capacity to realise long term goals. It may for example, allow people to put down a small deposit on a home, to build up some assets that their own children might inherit or to start a business – all of which would be likely to increase their stability and sense of security.

### **Develop flexible processes for assessment of needs**

It may be helpful to move away from current forms of assessment which require proof of income or other intrusive assessments. Instead it may be useful to develop an interview based approach to assessment which allows those requesting help to talk about their areas of

difficulty and to get advice about how best to address these. A face-to-face interview would allow the possibility for a more ‘personalised’ approach to needs assessment which can also take into account the vast differences we observed in the needs and expectations amongst the former children of Centrepont. This might be done through a specific service sponsored by the Trust or contracted out to service providers who can conduct the assessment and provide a brief report to the Trust.

### **Respect and sensitivity in dealing with former children of Centrepont**

For those who have been neglected, abused, manipulated or stigmatised, it is inevitable that they will be especially sensitive to experiences that mimic the treatment they have had in the past. It is therefore particularly important that the Trust remain aware of the potential to unwittingly trigger some of these distressing experiences within the group of former Centrepont children. While it may not be possible to meet every expectation or hope of every individual, there is value in recognising that an untimely response may be perceived as indifference, a declined request might feel punishing, or restricted access to services may evoke fear of being controlled by others. A respectful relationship which recognises and validates the experiences of the former Centrepont children and the attempts they have made to manage their lives is essential for the Trust in working with this group. It would be helpful to pay particular attention to the way in which decisions are communicated both in terms of the tone of the interaction and the language used.

### **Managing differences amongst the former Centrepont children**

There are powerfully factionalising dynamics operating within the group of former Centrepont children. The differences in experience, differences in belief and diverse coping strategies all serve to emphasise differences in opinion. It is important for the Trust to remain as neutral as possible in dealing with different factions and recognising the rights of all. It is all too easy to be drawn into factionalism which demands that one group must be ‘right’ and another ‘wrong’. In the case of Centrepont, there may be many different but equally valid versions of reality which need to be accommodated.



### **5.6.2 Long term recommendations**

The NZCGT may play an important role in developing knowledge about the effects of intentional communities and the range of adverse experiences that some of the former children were exposed to there.

It would also be helpful if this information could be put in accessible forms that are able to be accessed by people who may be struggling with their re-integration after living in an intentional community or by those who are thinking of becoming involved in such a community.

The NZCGT may also usefully play a role in disseminating information to the broader New Zealand society about Centrepont specifically. The media coverage of Centrepont in the past has sometimes been unhelpfully sensationalist or factionalised in its representation of people's experiences. It will be useful to offer perspectives that reduce the stigmatisation faced by the former children of Centrepont and also increase empathy for their situation.

Dissemination of the current research may be used to assist those who wish to develop intentional communities, become members of one, or who are involved in assisting or working professionally with someone who has lived at an intentional community. During the years of Centrepont's existence there was alarming lack of action from health professionals and others who may well have known or suspected the abuse that occurred there. It is important that there was a broad knowledge of the potential for this kind of experiment in communal living to go badly wrong and for those on the outskirts to recognise the warning signs.

Finally, there is a growing body of knowledge about intentional communities and about the effects of the various other adverse experiences the former Centrepont children may have been exposed to. There may be information in this research which helps to develop both internationally and locally significant knowledge about these effects. Boeri (2002) notes that there is a particular lack of literature focusing on the everyday lives of people in communities such as cults or new religious movements. The broad dissemination of this research may assist in remedying this lack.

## **6. VALIDITY OF THE RESEARCH**

The difficulty of conducting reliable research in the area of intentional communities has been acknowledged by other researchers. There have been some significant criticisms of researchers who have been manipulated by former cult members who describe events in a favourable light because of their loyalties to the community (Whitsett & Kent, 2003).

Others research has suggested that former members of intentional communities may overstate the negative consequences of their experience in order to unfairly incriminate their leaders or exact revenge against their communities (Aronoff et al., 2000). This latter is less likely to apply to Centrepont where there was clear legal evidence that sexual abuse had indeed occurred.

But while it may not be possible to rule out the influence of these kinds of factors altogether, our methodology which relied on intimate, face-to-face contact and a lengthy unscripted dialogue with our participants is less likely to produce pre-determined responses than other research methods. Each participant's voice was heard, with care and listening guides which enabled us to identify minimisation strategies that some participants engaged so they were better able to cope with the impact of their experiences. We also sought saturation as the indicator of the project's validity, rather than relying, for example, on testimonial validity. Under these circumstances, the opportunity for particular participants to provide a selective account of their experiences is curtailed by our systematic attention to diversity within and across participant accounts.

The richness and diversity of the interview material used in this study attests to the thoughtfulness and honesty of our participants. Their detailed and nuanced accounts of their lives provided the opportunity to explore the multiplicity of experiences at Centrepont rather than resorting to over-simplification. The voices of those who participated in the research captured the complexity of growing up in the 'different family' that was Centrepont.

## APPENDIX A

Public Trust Auckland  
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7 March 2008

Dear

### New Zealand Communities Growth Trust (NZCGT) - Experiences of Adult Children of the Centrepont Community

The Public Trust has contracted an independent team of researchers from Massey University to conduct a study of the wellbeing of adult children of the Centrepont Community. The Trust considers it timely to conduct this research because anecdotal evidence and applications to the Trust for support indicate that some personal and social difficulties may be occurring at higher than normal levels for the general population.

The research project involves a qualitative study of participants' perspectives on their childhood and transition to adulthood. We are aiming to assess the needs of the adult children of Centrepont so that we can assist the New Zealand Community Growth Trust to meet these needs in the best way possible. The research has been designed to:

- (a) Describe patterns of any advantages and/or difficulties the adult children have experienced, or are now experiencing.
- (b) Assess any needs for rehabilitation if they are identified
- (c) Identify other areas of most need in priority order, including participants' suggestions for strategies to meet these needs.
- (d) Identify ways that health professionals and others could better assist children who are part of or who have exited from a spiritual or intentional community.
- (e) Develop any recommendations that can be identified as assisting NZCGT in the short, medium and long term.

Participants will be invited to take part in a conversational interview about their experiences of growing up within the Centrepont community and how their childhood experiences may

have affected their transition to adulthood and their current needs and concerns. Conversational interviews allow the collection of rich detailed data which allows patterns of similarity and differences among the participants to be identified. Interviews will be audio-taped and then transcribed. They will be conducted privately in a place that is convenient and safe for the participant. Safety and confidentiality for all participants is paramount in this research.

All data collected by the Massey interviewer will be confidential to the researchers. Neither Public Trust nor anyone else will have access to any individual's data and will not be able to identify people involved in the study.

Yours Faithfully

Selwyn Haworth  
Manager, Charitable Services

**NOTE:** If you find you are troubled in any way by receiving this information about the research project, please feel free to contact Kim Peacock ([kim.peacock@publictrust.co.nz](mailto:kim.peacock@publictrust.co.nz) or 09-9856824) or the writer at Public Trust to discuss your immediate needs.

**New Zealand Communities Growth Trust**

**Research communication direct with Massey**

*If you are interested in finding out more about this research, or you know someone else who might like to take part, please email Mandy Morgan at*

*[c.a.morgan@massey.ac.nz](mailto:c.a.morgan@massey.ac.nz) ..... and request an information sheet*

**OR**

*fill out the information below and return it in the enclosed freepost envelope:*

☐ I would like the researchers to send me more information about the research

**I can be contacted in the following way:**

Name

Address

Telephone

Email

**Please note:**

- Supplying the researchers with the above details does not in any way oblige you to participate in this research.
- If you wish to have the above address details updated with Public Trust, please place a tick in this box: ☐

## APPENDIX B

# ***Experiences of Adult Children of the Centrepoint Community***

## Information Sheet

Thank you for inquiring further about the research we are doing to give the New Zealand Community Growth Trust the opportunity to learn more about the experiences of adult children of the Centrepoint Community. The Trust has decided that it is time to have a systematic study of the experiences and needs of this group.

We would like to assure you at this stage that we are only giving you information about the research project and we will not contact you directly again unless you give us your permission to do so. If you decide to take part in this research, we will **not** tell anyone else of your decision. We will **not** tell the members of the Public Trust or NZCGT Advisory Board who is participating in this project.

Before deciding whether you wish to be involved in the research, please read this letter carefully to ensure you fully understand the nature of the research project and your rights should you choose to participate.

The team conducting this research is made up of Dr Mandy Morgan, Dr Kerry Gibson, Ms Cheryl Woolley and Ms Tracey Powis.

Please feel free to contact either Mandy or Tracey if you have any questions or concerns regarding the research.

Mandy Morgan, School of Psychology, Massey University, Palmerston North

Phone: 0800 627739 or (06) 356 9099 ext 2063

e-mail: [c.a.morgan@massey.ac.nz](mailto:c.a.morgan@massey.ac.nz)

Tracey Powis, School of Psychology, Massey University, Palmerston North

Phone: 0800 627739 or (06) 350 5799 ext 2052

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## What is this study about?

The Public Trust has decided that it is time to conduct this research because they would like to be able to make the best possible decisions about how to support adult children of Centrepont. To do this they need to know more about the way in which your childhood experiences have influenced your needs and concerns now. The Public Trust would also like to make sure that you have a chance to tell your story of growing up in the Centrepont Community if you want to. We are hoping to speak with at least 60 people, however the research will go ahead even if we do not find this many volunteers.

To participate in this research, you need to be 18 or over and to have been living in the Centrepont Community while you were under 18 and in the care of your parents.

### **What would you have to do?**

If you agree to participate you would need to be available for an interview to share your experiences of growing up at Centrepont and how they have affected your life as an adult. We expect the interview will last between one and three hours. If you would like to arrange a follow up interview so that you can take more time to tell your story, then that will be possible. We will have some open ended questions we'd like to ask, but we mainly concerned that you have an opportunity to tell us about your experiences of the Community and your life afterwards. Interviews will be conducted privately in a place that is convenient and safe for you. If you decide to take part in an interview you can discuss your needs for safety and privacy with one of us.

The interviews will be audio-taped by the interviewer if you agree. The audio tape will be transcribed word for word so that we can analyse the information that you give us. We will not use your real name or the names of any of your family in the transcripts so that it is harder for you to be identified. The transcriber will also sign a confidentiality agreement to protect your privacy. Audio-tapes will be destroyed after transcription. We will also send you a transcript of your interview so that you can check it and make any changes you would like to make. In the final report we will not use any identifying information. Transcripts will be stored in a secure location at Massey University for five years, and then they will be destroyed.

We will do everything we can to ensure that you can speak openly with us, in confidence. However, it is impossible for us to guarantee that no-one will find out that you took part in this research, so please take account of this before you decide to whether or not you would like to participate.

At the completion of the research everyone who takes part will be sent a summary of the research findings. The Public Trust will receive a full report of the project and may also decide that the research findings could be of value to other organisations or individuals. In this case the findings may also be presented in academic journals nationally and internationally.

### **What can you expect?**

If you choose to take part in the research, you have the right to:

- Decide whether you would prefer to be interviewed by a woman or a man
- Withdraw from the study up until 1 month after the interview;
- Decline to answer any particular question;

- Ask for the audio tape to be turned off at any time during the interview;
- Ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- Provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used;
- Be given a summary of the findings of the study once it has been completed.

### **How can we support you?**

We understand that some of the things you may want to discuss with an interviewer might be upsetting or bring to mind events that are unpleasant for you. The interviewer who will be talking with you will have counselling training to ensure that they can take your needs into account and provide you with support at the time. We are also able to provide follow up counselling after the interview if you think this would be useful to you later. The costs of any follow up counselling will be covered by the Public Trust even though they will not know that you took part in the research unless you tell them.

Thank you for reading this information sheet.

*This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 07/59. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Karl Pajo, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 04 801 5799 x 6929, email [humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz).*



## APPENDIX C

# ***Experiences of Adult Children of the Centrepont Community***

## Schedule for conversation Interviews

We propose to use conversational interviews to allow us to gather data which is rich in detail and includes information that is unanticipated and of critical relevance. The aim of conversational interviews is to ensure that it is not only the researcher's agenda that is met by the interview process, and that participants have the opportunity to raise issues or talk of events that are significant to them. If a formal interview protocol is used participants are less likely to openly discuss their experiences and more likely to depend on the researcher for direction. In such circumstances we lose the opportunity to learn about experiences that we have not already thought to include in an interview schedule. We would also like to note that conversational interviews are not designed to directly address the research questions but to provide the researchers with adequate qualitative data for analysis that does address those questions.

Conversational interviews begin with an open-ended invitation to the participant such as:

*Thank you for participating in this research. We are most interested in hearing your story of what it was like for you to grow up in the Centrepont Community – starting wherever you would like to begin.*

The interview may use a series of prompts to encourage the participant to elaborate further, and to ensure that areas of interest to the researcher are covered. Prompts are used in flexible ways depending on the details that the participant provides without prompting. Examples of prompts that may be used in relation to the participant's stories of their childhood are:

- Do you know how your family came to be at Centrepont?
- What are some of your earliest memories of living at Centrepont?
- What was it like living at Centrepont?
- What do you remember about your relationships with other children at Centrepont?

Subsequent to hearing about the participant's childhood experiences the interviewer will ask a starter question about the participant's experience of leaving the Centrepont Community.

*How was it for you to leave the Centrepont Community?*

Prompts related to this area of inquiry may include:

- How did you feel about leaving the Centrepont Community?
- Who did you leave with?

- Where did you go after that?
- Did you have anyone who supported you who wasn't a family member?
- What did you find most challenging about your transition to living outside the community?

The third area of interest in the research project concerns the influence of childhood experiences on the participant's transition to adulthood and current concerns/issues. This will be introduced with the following starter:

*How do you think that living at Centrepont affected your growing up?*

Prompts related to this area of inquiry may include:

- What aspects of your life at Centrepont do you think you've brought with you into adulthood?
- How was it for you to decide what you wanted most from your life as an adult?
  - Have you achieved any of the dreams that you had when you were younger?
  - Is there anything you would like to achieve that you don't think is possible for you?
  - Have you been involved in any adult education? How do you feel about your education attempts/achievements now?
- What concerns do you have about your future?
  - Do you have any particular worries about your finances?; your health?; your relationships with family?
- How has life changed for you more recently?

The final area of interest in the research project concerns feedback from participants to the NZCG Trust. This will be introduced with the following starter:

*What would you most like us to tell people at the Trust about your needs now?*

Prompts related to this area of inquiry may include:

- What advice would you give other women/men in a situation like yours?
- How do you think your contact with the Trust has affected your life?

At the end of the interview the interviewer will ask the participant if they have anything they would like to add and ensure that the interview is brought to a safe conclusion.

## APPENDIX D

# ***Experiences of Adult Children of the Centrepoint Community***

## Participant Consent Form - Interviews

### **This consent form will be held for a period of five (5) years**

I have read the Information Sheet for this study and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions about the research have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I also know that I am free to refuse to answer any questions, can withdraw any information I supply at any time, and can withdraw from the study at any time, up to 1 month after the interview.

I agree to provide information to the researcher on the understanding that it is confidential and that this information I supply will not be used for any purpose other than this research. I understand that the researchers will do all that they can to ensure my privacy but it is impossible for them to guarantee that no-one will find out that I took part in this research. I also agree to the researchers audio-taping the interview, and know that I have the right to ask for it to be turned off at any time during the interview. I am also aware that my tape will be destroyed after it has been transcribed.

I understand that the researchers may use brief direct quotations from the interview(s) in their reports of the study provided these do not identify me in any way.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

**Signature:**

**Date:**

**Full Name - printed**

APPENDIX E

*Experiences of Adult Children of the Centrepoint  
Community*

Transcriber's Confidentiality Agreement

I ..... (Full Name - printed) agree to  
transcribe the tapes provided to me.

I agree to keep confidential all the information provided to me.

I will not make any copies of the tapes or transcripts or keep any record of them, other than  
those required for the project.

Signature:

.....

Date:

.....

APPENDIX F

***Experiences of Adult Children of the  
Centrepont Community***

Authority for the release of tape transcripts

**This form will be held for a period of five (5) years**

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to read and amend the transcript of the interview conducted with me.

I agree that the edited transcript and extracts from this may be used by the researchers *Mandy Morgan, Kerry Gibson and Cheryl Woolley* in reports and publications arising from the research.

**Signature:**

**Date:**

**Full Name - printed**

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