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Making women's shelters more conducive to family life: professionals' exploration of the benefits of nature

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ABSTRACT

For families who live in women's shelters, provision of salubrious activities supports their recovery and resilience. In many fields, natural environments are known to provide such benefits. Using an action research design, this study explored professionals' perspective on the benefits of nature for family life in women's shelters. Four researchers and 46 care professionals collaborated for six months on this exploration by forming a Community of Practice (CoP). Thematic analysis of transcripts of CoP meetings and case descriptions showed five themes: nature (1) offers a place for family leisure time, (2) supports social connectedness, (3) supports psychological well-being, (4) offers metaphoric experiences, and (5) supports parenting. The first four themes are in line with insights on the benefits of nature for people in general. Professionals' explanations of the fifth theme suggest that nature supports parenting by providing relatedness between parent and child, parental feelings of competence, and autonomy in parenting.

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Introduction

When families fall victim to human trafficking, forced prostitution, domestic violence, or honor threats, they may seek shelter in a women's shelter.¹ Women's shelters provide them with a temporary place to live and help with rebuilding their lives (WAVE 2019). Although these families are protected against physical and emotional threats that they endured at home, various stressors to family life can be indicated. Having been exposed to violence creates physical, mental and social problems in both adults and children (Noble-Carr, Moore, and McArthur 2020; Oram et al. 2012) and the prevalence of anxiety, depression and psychological trauma amongst women and children who live in shelters is high (Fernández-González et al. 2018; Helfrich, Fujiura, and Rutkowski-Kmitta 2008; Ware et al. 2001). Experiences with violence can be disruptive to family life, because it can limit parents in their wellbeing and parenting ability, and lead to behavioral difficulties in children (Spiller et al. 2012; Van Ee, Kleber, and Jongmans 2016; Peled and Dekel 2010).

These problems may be compounded by the corollaries of moving into a shelter. Families lose contact with school, work and their social setting, and face uncertain prospects because the sheltered home is temporary. Living in a shelter requires families to adapt to shelter rules and routines, which are perceived to be impractical for family life (Glenn and Goodman 2015) or even disempowering

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when they conflict with parents' own parenting style (Anthony, Vincent, and Shin 2018). Women's shelters are often situated in densely built apartments that provide families with a confined space as their primary living context (Wolf et al. 2006), which women consider in need of improvement (Asmoredjo, Beijersbergen, and Wolf 2017). The use of resources outside the shelter, such as visits to friends and family, playing in the neighborhood or going to a public park is limited because families may experience continuing threats from aggressors and because of the psychological and psychiatric problems that restrict the families' mobility. Family life in shelters presents, therefore, a number of challenges. An important question regards the ways in which women's shelters can be made more conducive to family life.

Living environments that support family life

One promising way to make women's shelters more conducive to family life is by providing physical places that support activities that promote health and are generally favorable to mind and/ or body. The demands of life may have drained on the resources of families, adding to the importance of salutary places to unwind and recover. According to Hartig and Staats (2004) salutary places are places that contribute to renewing 'the physical, psychological and/or social resources and capabilities that are diminished in the ongoing efforts to meet adaptive demands' (273). Restoration can be found in places that, for example, allow time away from obligations and demands and places that support positive exchange such as having fun or appreciating beauty (von Lindern, Lymeus, and Hartig 2017).

For supporting families in shelters, provision of restorative moments alone may not be sufficient. The demands on life also require families to adapt to new circumstances. Finding new ways of being together, making new family routines, discovering new friends, gaining insights and learning skills are examples of educational needs of families in shelters. In line with thinkers like Langeveld (1983) and Malaguzzi (Cagliari et al. 2016), places can have such educational value by facilitating or constraining certain sets of behaviors. A place with educational value teaches people how to live well where they live and helps identify and change ways of thinking that are harmful to the self or others (Gruenewald 2003). Knowing that places can have a restorative and educational value gives importance to recognizing and validating such places so that professionals can use them in their work with families.

Natural environments to support family life in shelters

Natural environments provide possibilities for interacting with living elements like plants and animals and with non-living elements like fresh air, sunshine, water, and soil. Such environments are known to provide satisfaction of a diverse set of restorative and educational needs of both children and adults (for reviews, see Gill 2014; Russell et al. 2013). Regular park visits with the family can lower the stress of parents (Razani et al. 2018) and being in a natural environment leads to more, longer and more responsive conversations between parents and children compared to being in an indoor environment (Cameron-Faulkner, Melville, and Gattis 2018). Qualitative studies underscore a potential link between nature and family interactions (Ashbullby et al. 2013; Baklien, Ytterhus, and Bongaardt 2016; Izenstark et al. 2016) when families report that their activities in nature provide quality time for the family with moments to have fun, to bond and interact, and to strengthen the feeling of family cohesion.

Only few studies report on the impact of nature on family life, but research in individual wellbeing may give insights as well. Nature can offer enjoyable ways of spending free time by supporting leisure activities for adults (Godbey et al. 2005) and an interesting play setting for children (Norðdahl and Einarsdóttir 2015) with rich opportunities for diverse play (Dowdell, Gray, and Malone 2011; Lester & Maudsley 2007). Possibilities for leisure time can be viewed as an essential component of family life, because leisure time supports improved family functioning (Zabriskie and McCormick 2001), family resilience (Hutchinson, Afifi, and Krause 2007), and satisfaction with family life (Agate et al. 2009).

Furthermore, nature can offer a meeting place for people that supports social connections between adults (Weinstein et al. 2015) and feelings of social support for children (Van Dijk-Wesselius et al. 2018). Social connectedness can be an important factor in the support of families in shelters, because a community can bring support when families struggle and thus function as a buffer for the impact of risk factors on family life (McConnell, Breitreuz, and Savage 2011; Prelow et al. 2010; Serrano-Villar, Huang, and Calzada 2017; Taylor et al. 2015).

Nature is also known to support psychological wellbeing. Firstly, nature supports restoration of cognitive resources in adults and children, such as attention and working memory (Berman, Jonides, and Kaplan 2008; Schutte, Torquati, and Beattie 2017; Ulset et al. 2017) and creative thinking (Atchley, Strayer, and Atchley 2012; van Rompay and Jol 2016). Secondly, nature supports adults and children in recovering from stress and in experiencing positive feelings and emotions (Chawla et al. 2014; Kertes et al. 2017; Mitchell et al. 2015). Thirdly, nature is described as a place that people go to for spirituality and personal guidance, as they have done at various times in history and in various places in the world (Marcus and Barnes 1999), to this day when the spiritual power of nature is used in therapy settings (Corazon, Schilhab, and Stigsdotter 2011; Berger 2008). Psychological wellbeing is not only desirable to the individuals within a family but is described as a key factor in family functioning, positively contributing to parenting behavior (Taraban and Shaw 2018) and to a balanced family life (Olson 2000).

Providing possibilities to perceive or interact with nature in shelter gardens may make shelter services more conducive to family life, however, research does not yet provide conclusive insight. Firstly, the vast majority of studies focus on investigating the effect of nature on individuals rather than families (Chawla 2015). Empirical findings on the impact of nature on individuals may not be generalizable to families, since reported effects on individual wellbeing do not implicate effects on the quality of family life. Research with a specific focus on family life is needed. Secondly, not all nature interventions are applicable in the context of shelters (e.g. for people who need protection, walks in a forest may not be possible) and the restorative impact of nature activities may be unique for this specific group of people (e.g. for people who experience fear, being away from standard routines may not be restorative). To know if nature can be used to improve shelter services, research in the context of shelters is needed. More specifically, the insight of shelter professionals is needed. Shelter professionals are reflective professionals whose work it is to evaluate the impact of their professional actions on the basis of signals from the family in relation to the goals they have with their shelter care work. To know if the introduction of nature in shelters can make shelter services more conducive to family life, their professional perspective is of value. In our study we explore the benefits of nature for family life in women's shelters by conducting action research with shelter care professionals who introduce nature in their daily family supportive work. The research question is: What are professionals' perspectives on the benefits of nature for family life in women's shelters?

Method

Context

This study was conducted in Dutch shelters that provide temporary homes for families who experienced forced prostitution, honor assault, or abuse. The Dutch nationwide trade association for shelters initiated a project called 'Safe Future' to improve the living quality of families in shelters. As part of this project all 20 locations for women's shelters in the Netherlands were invited to participate in this research and use nature in their care practice. Four shelters applied and received the funding for greening (varying from 28.000 to 60.000 euro/approx. 31.000 to 66.000 US dollar). One shelter was not included in this study because professionals scarcely used nature. The three participating shelters introduced nature into their shelter services.

The first shelter (S1) provided care for men and women and their families after domestic abuse. The location had 4 houses for 24-hour care, each for two to three families, and ambulatory 8-hour day care for families after they have moved out of the shelter. On average, families stayed one year in

their care. The shelter was located in a rural area. This shelter created a children's farm with goats, rabbits and chickens on their private property.

The second shelter (S2) provided care for teenaged mothers, victims of forced prostitution, women who experienced honor related threats, and women with multiple problems. The location had 40 places for intensive 24-hour care. Duration of stay for families varied depending on the complexity of the problem, from 12 weeks to several years. The area was suburban. This shelter used a natural playground with grass, sand and swinging, sliding, and climbing elements on their own property, as well as a meadow and a small forest adjacent to the shelter.

The third shelter (S3) provided care for families with complex problems and/or multiple problems (addiction, mental disabilities, violence, psychiatric problems). The location had 18 places for intensive 24-hour care and 90 places for ambulatory care. On average, families stayed one year in their care. The shelter was located in an urban area. This shelter used its courtyard with grass, trees and a small neglected vegetable garden, as well as a park near the shelter with grass, water, benches and walking paths.

Local police and shelter security scanned the natural places for safety and adjustments were made where necessary such as higher fences to prevent people from looking into the gardens, fixed times during the day when only shelter families were allowed in the outdoor areas, wearable alarms for shelter families, and extra police presence in the public outdoor areas.

Design

The aim to explore professionals' perspectives of the benefits of nature for family life was borne out of researchers' hypothesis that such benefits may be possible but without any preconception about professionals' understanding and expectations. The researchers did presume that professionals can and do reflect on the potential benefits of nature and that such reflection supports their exploration and their development in the understanding of these benefits. Therefore, action research (Reason and Bradbury 2008) was chosen as the appropriate method of research.

To allow such exploration and development in understanding, Communities of Practice (CoPs) were formed (Wenger, Trayner, and De Laat 2011), which are learning partnerships among colleagues who interact regularly with the intention to use each other as a learning resource. In our design, care professionals and researchers with diverse professional backgrounds collaborated in CoPs with the intention to develop their understanding of the benefits of nature by attempting to realize these benefits in practice and constructing knowledge on that practice in a dynamic interaction between academic colleagues and colleagues from practice (Schuiling and Vermaak 2017). A systematic structure was developed in which this diversity in subjective perspectives could be expressed, questioned, and recalibrated, aiming for an intersubjective understanding.

Participants

Each shelter delegated a group of care professionals who worked with families, who had an interest in exploring the benefits of nature for family life, and who agreed to participate in the research. In total, 46 care professionals and four researchers participated in three CoPs. For details, see [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Members of the communities of practice (CoP).

Position	N CoP members	CoP1 in shelter 1	Cop 2 in shelter 2	CoP3 in shelter 3
Social worker	34	13	7	14
Social worker student trainee	7	5	–	2
Psychologist	2	–	2	–
Shelter manager	3	1	1	1
Researcher (researchers participated in more than one CoP)	4	3	3	2

Procedure

Care professionals introduced nature into their work with families. Nature activities were personalized, based on the professionals' knowledge of the family and responsive to the family's possibilities and needs. The Results paragraph gives examples of the family moments in nature.

Each member of the CoP, being both care professionals and researchers, worked from October 2016 until April 2017 on exploring the benefits of nature for families in shelters by using nature in shelter work, interviewing and observing families, observing other members' practices, reflecting on practice and studying literature. All members of the CoP shared their acquired insights and questions during three CoP-meetings which took place bi-monthly. The insights generated possibilities for changes in strategies and practices, which were subsequently implemented and evaluated to allow continuous investigation. Each CoP was set up in a cycle of reflection, inspiration and action (Figure 1) allowing the CoPs to continuously build on acquired insights and to progress in the understanding of the potential benefits of nature for families in shelters. By facilitating a simultaneous and inter-linked development of research and practice, we aimed for a process of progressive insight (Hovinga 2007).

CoP-meetings started with a moment of written reflection and shared reflective conversation based on the questions: 'What activities (to gain insight in the benefits of nature for families in shelters) did you do in the past period? What insight(s) did you get? From whom or what did you get these insights? Why is that insight valuable to you?'. The CoP subsequently shared a moment of inspiration by sharing knowledge, experiences and theoretical constructs. Examples of inspirational activities were sharing preliminary insights from data analysis, reading literature together, undertaking nature activities, or sharing written case descriptions in which professionals described their examples of practice. Case descriptions were based on the questions: 'What was your goal with these family members? You chose to use nature: with what intention did you use nature? What did you observe in this woman/man/child?'. CoP-meetings ended with a moment of written action planning. Action planning was based on the questions: 'What did you do or hear today, that you can use in your work (in exploring the benefits of nature for families)? What is your action plan for the coming period?'.

Data collection

The CoP-meetings were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data consisted of transcripts of 18 hours of CoP-meetings, along with the written action plans, case descriptions and reflections that professionals brought to or made during the CoP-meetings.

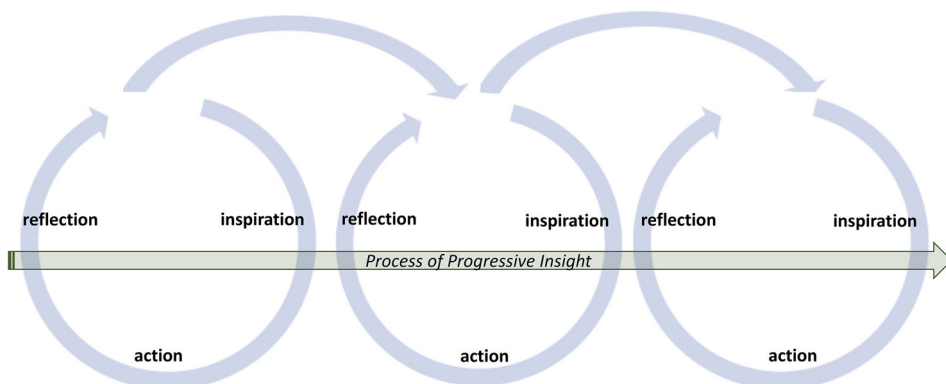


Figure 1. The cyclical process of gaining progressive insight through collaborative working.

Data analyses

The data were analysed via thematic analysis (Braun et al. 2019). Aiming to explore the professionals' perspectives required an open working position from the researchers. Such insight could not be obtained when researchers worked from an a priori stipulated theoretical, academic, or philosophical view of the reality of professionals. Inductive analyses were conducted to openly explore professionals' perspectives. Two researchers extracted quotations on the perceived benefits of nature from the dataset and read each quotation carefully both as a single quote and as a quote in the context of the whole dataset to capture the topics discussed. Semantic codes were generated and combined where possible to produce coherent subthemes, which were grouped under higher-order master themes. We used a reflexive dialogue with the data, guided by the research question, in which every interpretation is valid for as long as it is not contradicted by the data itself.

To control the quality of the data, the interpretations, the consistency in meaning making and the intersubjectivity, researchers used several strategies (Hadi and José Closs 2016), (1) prolonged engagement: researchers committed themselves to the shelter practice for a period of six months in order to be able to understand the data within the relevant context; (2) replication: researchers used three CoPs to be able to compare findings; (3) triangulation: researchers collected multiple types of data, that is audio recorded CoP-meetings, written action plans, written case descriptions and written reflections; (4) reflexivity and academic literature: researchers divided their roles during the process of analysis, with two researchers working on primary analyses, one researcher stimulating reflexivity by questioning motives, views and biases as the potential basis for decisions in the process of analysis, and one researcher questioning the relation between the findings and theoretical frameworks and published empirical findings; (5) peer debriefing: researchers were supported by a counselling committee formed by fellow researchers from three different universities; (6) thick description: researchers presented draft results to CoP-members to validate. The results were presented and discussed at an academic conference as well as a conference for practice to check the recognizability.

Results

The study was aimed to explore professionals' perspectives on the benefits of nature for family life in shelters. Five central benefits emerged from analysis of the data and will be more fully described in arbitrary order: (1) Nature offers a place for family leisure time; (2) Nature supports social connectedness; (3) Nature supports psychological wellbeing; (4) Nature offers metaphoric experiences; (5) Nature supports parenting. We chose to use cases to illustrate the central themes found in the data. To ensure participants' privacy we created pseudonyms.

Nature offers a place for family leisure time

Nature came forward from the analyses as a place that facilitated family leisure time by allowing families to spend their free time together in an enjoyable way.

Yasmin works with teenaged mothers who are the victim of forced prostitution. Today, she takes Nina and Nina's one-year-old daughter to the forest. Yasmin described: 'Nina had never been to a forest before. She couldn't believe her eyes; she could let her daughter walk by herself, because there are no cars. She just didn't know what that was. It was a beautiful, tranquil moment. So super tranquil. And so super cute: the daughter was walking with a leaf in her hand all the time. They really loved it and wanted to go again sometime soon. Being outdoors was ... well ... just really nice'. (S2)

In Yasmin's case description, nature facilitated family leisure time by simply allowing this family to have a nice family moment. Other CoP-members have described nature as a place that facilitates enjoyable family leisure time as well. Families for instance used nature for family dinner time, for having a family picnic, for play moments or to go for a walk together. One of the CoP-members

described an enjoyable family moment: 'A picnic. Sandwiches to go. Children playing. The opportunity to enjoy time together'. Another CoP-member explained that these simple moments of family leisure are not always possible without having their own garden: 'I think it is a huge advantage for those families who are not allowed outdoors or cannot go outdoors, to be able to still go outdoors. Is that weird, to say that? That they can go outdoors, while staying on the shelter premises'. Another CoP-member adds: 'Also for the mothers of young toddlers. They can just go run and play. Right? And the child has plenty of room for playing'.

Nature supports social connectedness

Places in nature were described to support social connectedness with people outside the family. Nature was described as a meeting point, like a garden bench where parents sat together to watch their children play, or a lookout post in the back of the garden where teenagers met in the evening. Situations in nature were described to elicit social interaction.

David, a case worker, describes how important the children's farm is for social connectedness. 'This morning the fence wire was broken. And one of our clients² saw it, came up with a solution and fixed the wire. And this afternoon, we needed someone to watch over the fireplace while the fire was burning out. And Martin and that boy, Hank, just said: "sure!" That is just wonderful. The spontaneity. The collaboration'.

Karen adds: 'And remember when that rabbit got ill? The women came to us and said they had a bad feeling about that rabbit and someone needed to look after it. And when I told them in the morning that the rabbit had passed away, they were really caring for each other and asked me to tell the other clients before they got in, because otherwise it would be too upsetting. Just that interaction. The care for each other'.

David continues: 'I think it is a good thing that we are all involved with each other. That we have more than only living: the collective experience'. (S1)

In this case nature invited people to work together, interact, and act in the common interest. Interactions in nature were described as less tense and conflictive than interactions in the indoor setting of the shelter. One of the CoP-members tried to describe how nature in shelters helps to support positive interactions, perhaps by simply providing more living space: 'It clashes, at this moment very much. Children feel a bit ... the room is too small. They want to release their energy. You see: all of them indoors leads to a lot of conflict and agitation'. He continues: 'I think they are less in each other's pockets when they are outdoors. And that makes them more relaxed and better in playing together. Less conflict. With a large outdoor play area ... It goes easier. Yes'.

Nature supports psychological wellbeing

Nature is described to support psychological wellbeing of children and adults. CoP-members described nature as a place that offers the possibility for psychological wellbeing by providing an escape from negative emotions, and by supporting creative thinking and problem-solving.

Ann, a family worker, describes the case of Ewa and her son Kevin. 'Ewa collected Kevin from school one day and took him with her to the shelter, sudden and unprepared, to which he responded by becoming quiet and withdrawn. For Ewa, the flight from her home was emotional and she tried to stay strong for her son. I decided to take them into the kitchen that overlooks the garden where two goats, a chicken and a few rabbits live. I did that on purpose, because the goats are very nosy and as soon as someone steps into the kitchen, they jump up the window frame and stick their faces against the windows'.

In a confusing moment like an intake, the goats can help focus on the here-and-now, Ann says. The animals come to Ewa and Kevin, bite their clothes and look for food, which gives little room for rumination. 'And I don't have to do anything', Ann adds, 'the relaxation just comes from the animal'. (S1)

In the example of Ewa and Kevin, nature is described as a place that offers the possibility for psychological wellbeing by providing an escape from negative emotions. Ann explains: 'It is really funny because whenever you are there, there is a goat staring at you in a very merry mood. Their silly, sheepish way of looking, their self-absorbed behavior, the pig-headedness and clumsy actions

bring laughter and distracts from worries and stress'. Other CoP-members have also described nature as a place to escape from negative emotions and stressors, in examples of nature providing possibilities for physical activities to lose adrenaline after trauma-counselling, nature providing tactile experiences for people feeling apathetic, or nature providing a feeling of mindfulness for people feeling stressed. In addition, nature is described to support creative thinking and problem-solving. One of the CoP-members described a case of a mother whose thoughts had focused on the possible causes and consequences of her situation rather than on its solutions: 'I have said before to clients, if things are overwhelming, or they feel in need and the walls are closing in on them, then I say: "Just go out for a walk. Make sure that you ..." how shall I put it? "... that you broaden your view"'. Another CoP-member added: 'Just getting out once a day to break up the day, that is super. Getting your concentration back. New energy. Get a fresh approach, imaginative, rich in fantasy'.

Nature offers metaphoric experiences

Nature was used in therapy settings specifically for its ability to offer experiences that are metaphoric to events in life.

Adiva is Sonia's therapist. Sonia has been indoors for weeks. Adiva fears Sonia will become apathetic and consults the psychiatrist who is in turn worried about her depressive feelings and her ability to take care of her child. They feel that being outdoors will do her good and Adiva decides to use the therapy meeting for walking. 'Now she has to put on her coat, leave her living space, literally step out and that is a metaphorical step she takes. We get into action, we go somewhere. A sort of a feeling of: now we get into action', Adiva describes. During the walk, Adiva notices something else too. It seems to be helping to walk beside Sonia instead of sitting opposite to her during therapy. 'You don't have to look each other in the eyes constantly. That is often, in a conversation with a teenager, quite ... Just walking side by side to each other and having the same view. (...) There is a different dynamic, when you literally walk side by side to each other. Then you look in the same direction as the client. You can put yourself in the client's position when you literally move with them'.

The experiences during the walk turn out to be useful as metaphors to use in therapy. As an example, when Sonia talks about spring and the new green leaves, Adiva uses this to start the conversation about the growing potential of nature and the growing potential of Sonia as a mother. (S3)

In this example, Adiva described nature as a place that provided metaphors to real life events, such as taking steps, experiencing partnership, or growth. Other CoP-members described this metaphoric value as well in examples of spring that brings hope, open skies that resemble clearness of mind, or chattering birds that sound like gossiping friends. In some of these metaphors, the link to real life events is made explicit and used as input for conversation, like one of the CoP-members describes: 'I was with this boy at the farm observing the rabbits. "When a rabbit acts like this, it means he is scared", I said. "Are you like that sometimes?"'. In other examples, the link to real life events is implicit, like in the example given by one of the CoP-members: 'The goats bite your clothes and whether you like it or not they come very close. So, well. That's about setting your boundaries. Deciding to leave. Learning to take initiative. And that teaches you to do it with people too'.

Nature supports parenting

The final benefit that emerged from the data is that nature supported parenting.

Mark, the father of Tim and Paul, comes to visit. Evelyn is their social worker and describes that a visit can be uneasy to both father and children, because meeting in a reception room with a social worker present is an unnatural way of spending time together. 'Father first came into the reception room but that lasted only 10 minutes, because the children wanted to go outdoors, you could tell. Well, then we sat down here and just enjoyed. Children picking flowers and everything, playing football, going on the slide'. Evelyn explains that for this father and his children, being outdoors is what they like doing and is how they are used to spend time together. 'That is what they used to do as well, when they all lived at home. They went to the children's farm with their father every week. So that was nice to see. A habit they could continue here'. To them, it is their familiar way of being parent-and-child. The possibility to use the garden allowed them to spend time together in their own way. Evelyn's colleague explains how such moment supports positive contact between the father and his children: 'It is something else to be jumping on the trampoline together or to be sitting at the table drinking tea. The contact is less forced, more casual, just being outdoors'. (S1).

In Mark's example, the natural environment gave him and his children freedom to undertake things they like doing and to interact in ways they deem fitting. It provided him as a father with autonomy. In other examples, nature is described as a place that supports moments of relatedness between parent and child. One of the CoP-members described a moment with a mother who finds it difficult to connect with her daughter and does not want to hold her or look at her. 'This mother took a picture of her child while being outdoors. It makes her consciously see her child, and that is something that is often lost. It is endearing for me to see. And how is that for the mother herself? That must be a thousand times stronger, I think'. Nature is also described to support moments of experienced competence in parenting. As an example of experienced competence in nature, a CoP-member described that a young mother took her crying baby for a walk around the courtyard and experienced that the walk calmed the baby down. 'The mother experienced that the child can find calmness and that she can facilitate that in her child'.

In addition, moments in nature offered care professionals insight in the need for parenting support that parents have. With nature being unpredictable and providing risks like getting out of sight, hurting yourself, or getting dirty and wet and cold, it required different parenting skills from being indoors. In nature, professionals saw parents limiting the children in their freedom in play or giving children little restrictions. 'For us, it is a good moment for observation: how do they cope as parents?'.

Discussion

According to professionals working with families in women's shelters, the use of nature in women's shelters affords families with leisure time, social connectedness, wellbeing, metaphoric experiences, and it supports parenting practices. The found affordances on leisure time, social connectedness, wellbeing and metaphoric experiences concur with evidence for effects of nature in other domains of life, such as schools and living environments for reviews, see Gill (2014); Russell et al. (2013). Although the themes were distinguished for analytic purposes, these can be intertwined (Hartig et al. 2014; Markevych et al. 2017) with leisure time spent in nature as a possible precondition for experiencing nature's benefits, and with the social connectedness experienced in nature as a pathway to psychological wellbeing.

A novel finding was that nature potentially supports parenting. The comments made in the Communities of Practice provide the basis for hypothesizing that nature supports parenting by providing relatedness between parent and child, parental feelings of competence, and autonomy in parenting. In the Self Determination Theory, relatedness, competence and autonomy are described as basic psychological needs that foster motivation and engagement (Ryan and Deci 2017). Arguing from this theoretical perspective, enhanced parental basic psychological needs leads to more motivated and engaged parenting. This finding is of particular importance, knowing that parents who bring their children up in women's shelters often encounter specific and unique risk factors that make parenting difficult, particularly linked to parents' autonomy and experienced competence in parenting (Anthony, Vincent, and Shin 2018; Bradley, McGowan, and Michelson 2018; Glenn and Goodman 2015; Peled and Dekel 2010). For parents who live in women's shelters, restoration of parental basic psychological needs might be needed even more than for any other parent. Future research should add to insight gleaned from lived experience and observations by testing the hypothesis that nature provides levers for intervening in basic psychological needs for parents in shelters.

There are several possible pathways to explain nature's potential impact on parenting. Firstly, nature's potential impact on parenting can be explained through nature's effect on social connectedness and psychological wellbeing, factors known to positively impact parenting (Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch, and Ungar 2005). Secondly, a possible pathway is through nature's effect on metaphoric experiences, since reflective moments are known to function as buffers between stress and parenting

behaviors (Fonagy, Gergely, and Jurist 2018; Slade 2005). Future research can include these as possible mediators.

Strengths and limitations

The three participating shelters had the intention to use nature in their daily practice, which may have led to a selection bias in shelter professionals with a basic positive attitude towards nature. No comparison contexts were studied, which makes it possible that benefits found in the context of nature can also be found in other contexts such as art therapy, cooking or sports activities. It is possible that the results are not only related to the natural aspects that were introduced, but to the larger living space and greater mobility that came with the implementation of nature.

In our study the integration of nature was initiated by the professionals. It is worthwhile to investigate how families feel about using nature as part of their care. It is possible that the observations of professionals did not coincide with the actual experiences of the families involved, especially in relation to adverse moments in nature. Professionals described adverse moments, such as the goats that came too close and bit, as valuable from a therapeutic point of view. Future research should gather data from families to get a closer insight in their experiences. Relevant implications for practice can be acquired by focusing not only on whether families value nature as part of their care, but also on the types of nature interactions that are considered supportive to family life.

The research approach facilitated a dynamic interaction between academic knowledge and field knowledge, with the intention to acknowledge and use both as a resource in the process of exploration. Researchers and professionals questioned and further developed preconceptions through exchanges about their daily practices. These exchanges were situation bound and based on subjective experiences. We aimed to progress from subjectivity to intersubjectivity by facilitating ‘an intersubjective critical debate in which everyone gets the chance to put their claims to the test’ (Boog et al. 2019, 17). We did so by using prolonged engagement, replication, triangulation, reflexivity, peer debriefing, and thick description. The results are a product of this process. The majority of the findings are in line with previous research, which gives validity to the findings and strengthens the one finding that is new and unexpected: the hypothesis that nature supports parenting. Other more controlled research designs are necessary to test the extent to which the insights are justifiable and intersubjective.

Overall conclusions

According to professionals in shelters, including nature in supporting families during their stay might benefit family life. Professionals’ explanations for those benefits could be summarized along basic psychological needs for agency and wellbeing for families under stress.

Notes

1. Note: Not all women’s shelters are women-only shelters. Women’s shelters can also provide care for male victims of abuse, or to the men who are part of the family system such as fathers of the children and (ex)-partners of women in shelter care.
2. A client is a person in shelter care.

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Data availability statement

Due to safety concerns for the families, the raw data of this study are not publicly accessible. For access to the dataset for verification, please contact the corresponding author.

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