

Parenting Self-Expansion: Parenthood as a Transformative and Rewarding Journey

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Abstract

Parenthood is a transformative and fulfilling journey, yet research often emphasizes its hardships over its potential for growth. We introduce parenting self-expansion—novel experiences with one's child that broaden and are incorporated into a parent's sense of self. In Study 1, first-time parents ($N = 430$) completed four surveys across their postpartum year. Reflexive thematic analysis revealed six themes of self-expansion: child curiosity/development, familial love, parenting challenges, personal growth, broadened priorities, and renewed worldviews. Growth curve analyses showed that self-expansion was linked to more positive trajectories of personal and relational well-being longitudinally. In Study 2, results from a 10-day daily diary ($N = 378$) indicated that parenting self-expansion was associated with greater personal and relational well-being in both positive and negative contexts. Results held when accounting for parental fatigue, child-care difficulty, and child temperament. Collectively, we find that, amid the joy and hardship, parenting self-expansion is a transformative pathway through which parenting may be rewarding.

Keywords

close relationships, well-being, transition to parenthood, parenting, self-expansion

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Parenting Self-Expansion: Parenthood as a Transformative and Rewarding Journey

The birth of a child marks the beginning of a profoundly transformative journey, reshaping identity, relationships, and daily life in enduring ways (Cast, 2004; Lévesque et al., 2020; Nelson et al., 2014). This transition brings heightened vulnerability for parents' mental and physical health (Saxbe et al., 2018), including disrupted sleep (Medina et al., 2009) and declines in marital quality (Bogdan et al., 2022; Twenge et al., 2003), with even the former U.S. Surgeon General issuing a public health advisory highlighting the urgent need to better support parents' well-being (Murthy, 2024). However, amid these hardships, many parents describe parenthood as central to their identity (Horowitz & Minkin, 2023) and experience greater positive affect and purpose (Chee et al., 2025; Hudde & Jacob, 2025; Nelson et al., 2013). Thus, it is essential to understand not only the challenges of parenthood but also the unique parenting experiences that may be linked to psychological rewards. In the current work, we introduce one such experience: *parenting self-expansion*, defined as novel experiences with one's child that broaden and are incorporated into a parent's sense of self and view of the world. In the current work, we mapped parenting self-expansion across mixed methods to uncover how it emerges across

varied parenting experiences and how it may be linked to personal and relational well-being.

Parenting as a Self-Expanding Journey

Self-expansion theory posits that people are fundamentally motivated to grow by incorporating new perspectives, identities, and experiences to broaden their sense of self (Aron et al., 2022). Close relationships are a primary context for such growth. For example, romantic partners self-expand by integrating aspects of one another into the self and engaging in shared activities (Girme et al., 2014; Harasymchuk et al., 2021). Relational self-expansion enhances individual and romantic relationship well-being (McIntyre et al., 2023; Muise et al., 2019; Sheets, 2014), yet research has largely overlooked self-expansion in another domain: that between parents and their children.

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Indeed, parenthood entails transformation, novelty, and changing worldviews. For example, parents forge new social roles and identities (Cast, 2004; Nelson et al., 2014), even taking precedence over existing ones (Lévesque et al., 2020) and becoming central aspects of parents' senses of self (Horowitz & Minkin, 2023). In addition, parenthood broadens perspectives, with parents experiencing more empathy toward others (Plank et al., 2021). Finally, although there are inevitable challenges of caregiving, this adversity can foster expansion and growth (Graham & Harf, 2015). Together, these shifts in identities, perspectives, and challenges suggest that parenthood may be a uniquely powerful context for self-expansion.

Parenting Self-Expansion and Its Accompanying Rewards

Self-expansion in parenthood may be linked to greater personal and relational well-being. First, parenthood is often a highly valued life goal, central to many adults' identities and closely tied to well-being (Piotrowski, 2023; Saxbe et al., 2018; Wickrama et al., 1995). Expanding one's sense of self as a parent may then be a source of joy, meaning, and fulfillment (Baumeister, 1991; Hudde & Jacob, 2025; Newport & Wilke, 2013). Thus, consistent with research showing that self-expansion promotes well-being in romantic relationships (Aron et al., 2022; McIntyre et al., 2023), parenting self-expansion may similarly be linked to personal well-being within the relational contexts of the family.

Parenting self-expansion may also be associated with strengthened romantic relationships. We draw on family systems theory (M. J. Cox & Paley, 1997), which posits that relationships within families are interconnected and can influence one another. We also draw on interparental positivity spillover theory (Don et al., 2024), which extends this idea, suggesting that positive experiences in one relationship can enrich others. According to these theories, self-expansion experienced with one's child may go on to strengthen the relationship between parents. For example, during self-expanding experiences, parents may feel greater romantic relationship satisfaction or commitment when their partner helps capitalize on these experiences (Gable & Reis, 2010; Tavares et al., 2025) or shares in their feelings of pride and joy (Don et al., 2022). Moreover, these benefits may then extend to romantic partners, given the interconnectedness of familial relationships. Thus, we hypothesized that parenting self-expansion would be associated with greater personal and relational well-being and explored whether these benefits extended to one's partner.

Current Work

In the current work, we investigated *parenting self-expansion*—novel experiences parents have with their child that broaden and are incorporated into their sense of self. In Study 1, we used reflexive thematic analysis to identify

experiences that first-time parents found self-expanding. Following this sample longitudinally, we also examined whether parenting self-expansion would be linked to more positive trajectories of personal and relational well-being across their first year. In Study 2, we conducted a 10-day daily diary to examine whether parenting self-expansion was associated with personal and relational well-being naturalistically and in both positive and negative caregiving contexts.

We also controlled for other factors that may influence parenting self-expansion and well-being, including parental fatigue (Study 1), childcare difficulty (both studies), and child temperament (both studies). For example, lower fatigue may buffer declines in well-being (Loutzenhiser et al., 2015). Similarly, parents with a child that they perceive to be easier to care for, or have an easier temperament, may also experience greater well-being (Laukkanen et al., 2014). Finally, we examined whether one parent's self-expansion was associated with greater well-being for their partner in both studies.

Study 1: Parenting Self-Expansion Among First-Time Parents

We first examined parenting self-expansion when it may be most pronounced: during the transition to parenthood. This transition offers a valuable context for studying self-expansion, as parents face rapid identity shifts, challenges, and declines in marital quality (Saxbe et al., 2018; Twenge et al., 2003). Using a mixed-methods approach, we conducted a reflexive thematic analysis to identify themes of parenting self-expansion. Then, we conducted growth curve models to examine whether parenting self-expansion was linked to more positive trajectories of personal and relational well-being across this transition. Finally, we addressed alternative explanations and explored partner effects.

Method

Participants and Procedures. Data were collected in Canada between May 2016 and April 2018. First-time mothers and their partners completed surveys at six time points: 20 and 32 weeks in pregnancy and 3, 6, 9, and 12 months postpartum. We focused on the four postpartum time points that had our key measures. Sample size was determined with power analyses for a separate project, using effect sizes from prior research (Lawrence et al., 2007; Rosen et al., 2016). Overall, 430 participants completed a total of 1,502 surveys; 77% of participants completed all four time points. Missing rates for each time point were 6.1% at T1, 7% at T2, 10% at T3, and 12.4% at T4, suggesting that attrition gradually increased over the course of the study. Regardless, we found no systematic differences between participants who completed all four surveys versus those

Table 1. Demographic Information for Studies 1 and 2.

Sample characteristic	Study 1	Study 2
Initial <i>N</i>	504 parents, 252 couples	430 parents, 215 couples
Final <i>N</i>	430 parents, 215 couples	378 parents, 189 couples
Parent age	<i>M</i> = 30.71 years, <i>SD</i> = 4.07, range = 19.82–48.49	<i>M</i> = 35 years, <i>SD</i> = 5.42, range = 20–52 years
Parent gender	51.40% woman, 48.37% man, 0.23% identified as another gender	50% woman, 49.29% man, 0.71% identified as another gender
Parent ethnicity	80.47% White, 7.91% Asian, 1.40% Black, 10.22% identified as another ethnicity	45.12% White, 4.42% Asian, 44.65% Black, 5.81% identified as another ethnicity
Relationship length	<i>M</i> = 6.64 years, <i>SD</i> = 3.59, range = 6 months–16 years	<i>M</i> = 10.20 years, <i>SD</i> = 5.34, range = 2–25 years
Child age	—	<i>M</i> = 4.84 years, <i>SD</i> = 2.63, range = 2 months–9 years
Child gender	—	47.51% female, 52.49% male;
Number of children	—	<i>M</i> = 1.81, <i>SD</i> = 0.84, range = 1–6

Note. Final *N* indicates participants who remained in the study (both studies) and passed all attention checks (Study 1). Child demographics were not reported in Study 1, as indicated by dashes, because participants were recruited before the child was born. Parents in Study 1 completed surveys when their child was 3, 6, 9, and 12 months old across the four timepoints, respectively.

Table 2. Study 1 Measures.

Construct	Scale	α ; <i>M</i> ; <i>SD</i>	Example items
Parenting self-expansion	1 (<i>not very much</i>) to 7 (<i>very much</i>)	$\alpha = .91$; <i>M</i> = 6.42 (0.83)	“How much does being with your child result in you having new experiences?” “Do you feel a greater awareness of things because of your child?” “How much does being with your child expand your sense of the kind of person you are?” “How much does your child provide you with a source of excitement?” “How much do you feel you gained a larger perspective of things because of your child?”
Satisfaction with life	1 (<i>strongly disagree</i>) to 7 (<i>strongly agree</i>)	$\alpha = .88$; <i>M</i> = 5.56 (0.96)	“In most ways my life is close to my ideal.” “I am satisfied with my life.”
Depression	Varying scale labels from 0 to 3	$\alpha = .83$; <i>M</i> = 0.66 (0.45)	“I have been so unhappy that I have been crying.” “I have felt sad or miserable.”
Relationship satisfaction with partner	1 (<i>not at all</i>) to 7 (<i>extremely</i>)	$\alpha = .96$; <i>M</i> = 5.91 (1.03)	“How satisfied are you with your relationship?” “How happy are you with your relationship?”
Relationship commitment with partner	1 (<i>not at all</i>) to 7 (<i>extremely</i>)	$\alpha = .92$; <i>M</i> = 6.71 (0.65)	“How committed are you to your relationship?” “How devoted are you to your relationship?”
Care difficulty	1 (<i>very easy</i>) to 7 (<i>very difficult</i>)	<i>R</i> = .65; <i>M</i> = 2.68 (1.30)	“In general, how easy versus difficult is it for you to care for your child?” “In general, how easy versus difficult is it for you to soothe your child?”
Parental Fatigue	1 (<i>extreme fatigue</i>) to 7 (<i>high energy</i>)	<i>M</i> = 4.41 (1.15)	“Please indicate your average energy level on a typical day over the past 4 weeks.”

Note. Full items for parenting self-expansion are listed. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

who did not on key variables (i.e., parenting self-expansion, satisfaction with life, depression, relationship satisfaction, and relationship commitment; all *ps* > .339). Demographic information is shown in Table 1.

Measures. All measures were assessed at each time point and averaged into composites, unless otherwise indicated. Parents were asked to reflect on the last 4 weeks when

answering each question. Information regarding our key measures is reported in Table 2. Parenting self-expansion was assessed with six items (Lewandowski & Aron, 2002). Immediately after answering these self-expansion questions, participants provided an open-ended response to the following question:

Thinking about your responses to the questions above, can you think of something specific that you did with your child

that resulted in you feeling a sense of excitement, a greater awareness of things around you, an expansion of your sense of self, and/or an increased knowledge of yourself and the world around you?

Satisfaction with life was assessed with five items (Diener et al., 1985). Depression was assessed with nine items, answered on a 0 to 3 scale that had varying labels as reflected in the published scale (J. L. Cox et al., 1987). We reverse-scored and summed items to create a composite. Relationship satisfaction and commitment were assessed with three items each (Fletcher et al., 2000). Parental fatigue was assessed with one item. Care difficulty was assessed with two items (Le & Impett, 2015).

Qualitative Results

Using parents' open-ended responses, we conducted a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) to examine how and in what experiences new parents self-expand. RTA emphasizes the researcher's interpretive role in generating themes that are conceptually distinct yet interrelated (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun et al., 2022). Our goal was to identify the self-expanding experiences of first-time parents and examine how they shape parents' perspectives. Because themes are not discrete categories but rather meaning-based patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2019), we do not report frequencies or reliabilities as recommended by contemporary accounts of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, 2021b). We analyzed 1,104 open-ended responses, with parents providing up to four responses at 3, 6, 9, and 12 months postpartum. Following an initial reading of all responses, the first

author inductively coded all responses and generated a parsimonious set of themes, which were reviewed and refined with a co-author. Our analytic process is available on OSF (https://osf.io/rnmjd/overview?view_only=d8a4abe82fcd482480d7925dcadd0e).

What Does Parenting Self-Expansion Look Like for First-Time Parents? We generated six themes of parenting self-expansion. We first present each theme individually in Table 3 with descriptions and key examples. We then discuss how these themes interconnect to holistically showcase the self-expanding experiences of new parents.

The Interwoven Experiences of Parenting Self-Expansion. Although our six themes were conceptually distinct, parents often described how these experiences interwove. For example, witnessing a child's development (Theme 1) introduced new concerns about safety, such as when their child could reach new objects when learning to stand (Theme 3). However, navigating and overcoming these challenges fostered confidence, self-efficacy, and personal growth (Theme 4), highlighting how self-expansion can emerge even from the hardships of parenting. Several themes also connected to parents' broadened priorities and purpose (Theme 5). Observing a child's curiosity/development (Theme 1) reminded parents of how central they were to their child, instilling a sense of responsibility and meaning. Parents also described how profound love for their child and partner (Theme 2) gave them a newfound understanding of what truly mattered. Finally, themes connected to parents' new perceptions of the world (Theme 6). For example, parents

Table 3. Themes of Parenting Self-Expansion for First-Time Parents.

Theme	Description	Examples
Theme 1: Child curiosity, discovery, and development	Parents observe or vicariously experience their child's curiosity and discovery when they learn about the world and exhibit developmental growth, often leading to feeling awe and wonder with their child in these moments.	"Playing with her on the floor everyday and seeing how much she learns and grows daily does this for me. She's constantly learning new things and I see the growth daily." "Helping him take steps around the living room and imagining through his eyes." "Watching him figure out concepts that are obvious to me as an adult is very exciting to me . . . makes me appreciate how hard my baby is working and how important I am to his growth."
Theme 2: Familial love	Parents experience profound feelings of love toward their child or spouse, often accompanied by intense pride, joy, or excitement with their child.	"My favourite thing in the world is watching her play with her father. I've finally figured out what it means to love him more than I did because he loves her." "Experiencing the true love that I have for baby . . . Seeing him look at me and smile is unbelievable." "Feeling unconditional love for the first-time." "I just have never felt so much love. Brings me to tears. It is what life is all about."

(continued)

Table 3 (continued)

Theme	Description	Examples
Theme 3: Child-related challenges	Parents must adapt and take on new challenges to care for and protect their child.	"She started crawling so we had to baby proof the house. I became much more aware of the things around us that she could get at and make sure they aren't dangerous." "Breastfeeding. Breastfeeding was a challenge for both of us for a couple of different reasons and really tested my sense of self and self-worth." "Sleep has been the biggest struggle and yet it has also been a great learning experience. I have learned to let go of what I can't control, to enjoy just being present to comfort him instead of worrying about why he's not sleeping." "The challenges with a young infant has made me a lot more understanding towards families with young children. I especially find myself able to connect with new moms on a much deeper level." "She bit me while nursing and that gave me an awareness that mothers all over the world deal with a lot of shit and they're amazing!!"
Theme 4: Personal growth	Parents exhibit personal growth through gaining self-confidence, self-efficacy, independence, and new parenting-related identities (e.g., being a father, mother, teacher, etc.).	"I feel more empowered than before to be a woman now that I have a baby." "The first-time I took my child out alone with no issues, I felt extremely capable of doing anything." "I feel more confident than I thought as a mother, I feel I know most of the time what I want for my child and how to go about it." "The other day, I took my son out to lunch with me, just the two of us, after walking around my office. It really cemented to me 'being a father' and I didn't feel anxious about watching him for several hours."
Theme 5: Broadened priorities and purpose	Parents reorient their priorities and purpose, often shifting toward family and striving to live in the moment to capture the present experiences before they ultimately slip away.	"Only now am I considering ways to spend more time at home/less time working. Up until now, I have been laser focused on my career." "Someone told me that having a child was 'special.' I didn't understand what they meant until my daughter was born. She is certainly my number one priority and the first-time I would honestly put someone else's needs in front of mine." "Through simply spending time with her and her mother I have learned that I would sacrifice everything for someone else . . . I need to plug in to the present and enjoy the world around me more." "My child makes me appreciate time more than ever in my life. Every second of everyday counts. She develops constantly. She has new skills every day. These seconds, hours and days will never come back again. I never felt so precious about time." "When I realized that he was completely dependent on us for survival, the idea that we are now so central to another being's life, it all came together over time until I took a look at the idea, it's just been very profound impact on my own sense of self purpose."

(continued)

Table 3 (continued)

Theme	Description	Examples
Theme 6: Renewed perceptions of the world	Parents see other people and the world in an entirely new and more positive light, gaining a greater appreciation of the mundane and feeling more empathy and optimism toward others.	"The parenthood thing changes your perception of other people in the world, other people's babies are all of a sudden a lot more interesting. You feel more empathy towards people because you realize that they, too, were children and/or parents, at some point. I can no longer watch true crime shows." "I'm more inclined to notice the little, everyday things when I'm with my daughter because I like to talk to her about our surroundings . . . sights and sounds at the grocery store—items on the shelves, music we hear . . . the colors of the trees and flowers and the sounds of birds or kids playing." "Just in general how excited she is about small things, it helps to reframe problems and put them into perspective. Sometimes a purple ball really is the most amazing thing in the world!" "It's absolutely amazing to me that every single person ever has been born and that someone took care of them, sat up all night with them, and that good parents and bad parents all have made it through this. I feel so much more connected to others and appreciative of small things that I've always taken for granted because I feel like we're all connected." "Nothing specific, but everyday, I think about times when my wife and I take the baby out on the stroller, and new neighbours and folks in the community stop and say hi and comment on how cute the baby is . . . This is vastly different than when I was single and even after we were just married. It's a different sense of belonging that one gets only when you become a parent."

gained greater awareness and appreciation of the little things from perspective-taking in their child's learning and curiosity (Theme 1). In addition, parents experienced heightened empathy and camaraderie with other parents, realizing they likely encountered similar hardships (Theme 3). Together, these distinct, yet interconnected, themes illustrate how parenting self-expansion emerges to promote new perspectives, empathy, love, and growth during the first year of parenthood.

Quantitative Results

We next tested whether parenting self-expansion was linked to parents' personal and relational well-being. Our preregistered hypotheses, analytic plan (https://osf.io/hjqab/overview?view_only=244f0f52fa5e4e5caaf3564c38873722), and R scripts (https://osf.io/rnmjd/overview?view_only=00f9ac753eb6493f884c1e2dd2b1eae4) are available on OSF. Although we originally preregistered lagged analyses, we conducted growth curve models to capitalize on the longitudinal design and postpartum sample to instead capture

trajectories across the first year of parenthood. Growth curve modeling does not permit causal inferences and cannot rule out reverse causality (Rohrer, 2018; Rohrer et al., 2022). For example, it could be that parents who have greater well-being experience more self-expansion, as they may be more likely to broaden and build their experience of parenthood (Fredrickson, 2013). However, with only four assessments spaced 3 months apart, growth curve models provide a more appropriate approach for examining longitudinal associations than lagged analyses, which may be underpowered to reliably estimate these effects. Furthermore, as prior research has established declines in relationship well-being during the transition to parenthood (Doss & Rhoades, 2017; Lawrence et al., 2008), this analysis allowed us to test whether parenting self-expansion would be linked to buffered declines. Our decision to report growth curve models was made post hoc, and thus these findings should be interpreted as exploratory. Regardless, our preregistered hypotheses remained functionally the same: that parenting self-expansion would be associated with greater well-being across parents' first year. Results of

our preregistered lagged analyses are reported in the Supplement in Table S1.

We estimated multilevel growth curve models (Kenny et al., 2006) using *lme4* (Bates et al., 2018) and *lmerTest* (Kuznetsova et al., 2017) packages in R (R Core Team, 2026).¹ We conducted two-level cross-classified models, nesting individuals within couples and crossing couples with timepoints. Thus, this model accounted for interdependence between individuals and couples (i.e., partners within a couple having more similar reports than other individuals) and between couples and timepoints (i.e., partners' responses being more similar during respective timepoints). All models included random intercepts (i.e., to allow participants and couples to vary in their baseline well-being) and random slopes for time (i.e., to allow participants to vary in their trajectories of well-being) and parenting self-expansion (i.e., to allow participants to vary in the strength of the association between parenting self-expansion and well-being). If a model failed to converge, we tested constrained models in which we set the correlation between random slopes and intercepts to zero. The intercept was set to the first timepoint (3 months postpartum) such that slopes captured changes in well-being between 3 and 12 months postpartum at 3-month intervals. Linear effects of time were modeled, as adding quadratic terms did not improve model fit.

We deconstructed parenting self-expansion into its within- and between-person components, including both in our models. Within-person variation (i.e., when parents experienced greater parenting self-expansion relative to their own average) was captured by person-mean centering across each participant's timepoints. Between-person differences (i.e., when parents experienced greater average parenting self-expansion relative to others) were modeled using each participant's aggregated parenting self-expansion scores across all timepoints, grand-mean centered on the sample mean. Models were estimated with restricted maximum likelihood estimation. We first estimated unconditional growth curve models to examine overall change in personal and relational well-being over time. Then, we estimated conditional models. We tested whether between-person parenting self-expansion was associated with trajectories (i.e., rates of change) of personal and relational well-being. We also tested within- and between-person associations between parenting self-expansion and personal and relational well-being.

Does Parenting Self-Expansion Shape Parents' Personal and Relational Well-Being? Unconditional growth curve models showed that parents' satisfaction with life ($b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.01$, $p = .475$) remained stable, and parents' depression ($b = -0.33$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < .001$), relationship satisfaction ($b = -0.06$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .002$), and relationship commitment ($b = -0.04$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < .001$) declined. Thus, these results suggest that parents had unchanging

trajectories of satisfaction with life and healthier trajectories of depression. However, parents had declining trajectories of relationship well-being.

In addition, we tested whether parenting self-expansion was linked to within- and between-person rewards. Results are available in Table 4. At times when parents felt higher-than-usual parenting self-expansion, they reported greater satisfaction with life, relationship satisfaction, and relationship commitment and lower depression. In addition, parents with higher average parenting self-expansion, relative to others, reported greater satisfaction with life on average but no difference in other outcomes. Thus, we found robust within-person links and some between-person links of parenting self-expansion predicting personal and relational well-being.

We last tested conditional growth curve models. Results are reported in Table 4 and Figure 1. Parents who were higher in average parenting self-expansion relative to others showed greater increases in satisfaction with life, steeper declines in depression, and less steep declines in both relationship satisfaction and commitment. Together, these results suggest that parents with higher, relative to lower, average parenting self-expansion had more positive trajectories of personal and relational well-being over the transition to parenthood.

Partner Effects of Parenting Self-Expansion. We next explored whether one parent's self-expansion was linked to their partner's personal and relational well-being. Guided by the actor-partner interdependence model (Cook & Kenny, 2005), we estimated conditional growth curve models including both actor and partner parenting self-expansion. We did not find any consistent patterns of partner effects; full results are available in the Supplement in Table S2.

Accounting for Alternative Explanations. We last tested whether the effects of parenting self-expansion could be explained by care difficulty and parental fatigue. Full results are available in the Supplement in Table S3. We re-estimated conditional growth curve models including between-person components of care difficulty and parental fatigue as simultaneous predictors. Results indicated that the interactions between parenting self-expansion and parents' trajectories of well-being remained significant when controlling for care difficulty and fatigue (all $ps < .020$), suggesting that these potential benefits of parenting self-expansion cannot be fully explained by these alternative factors.

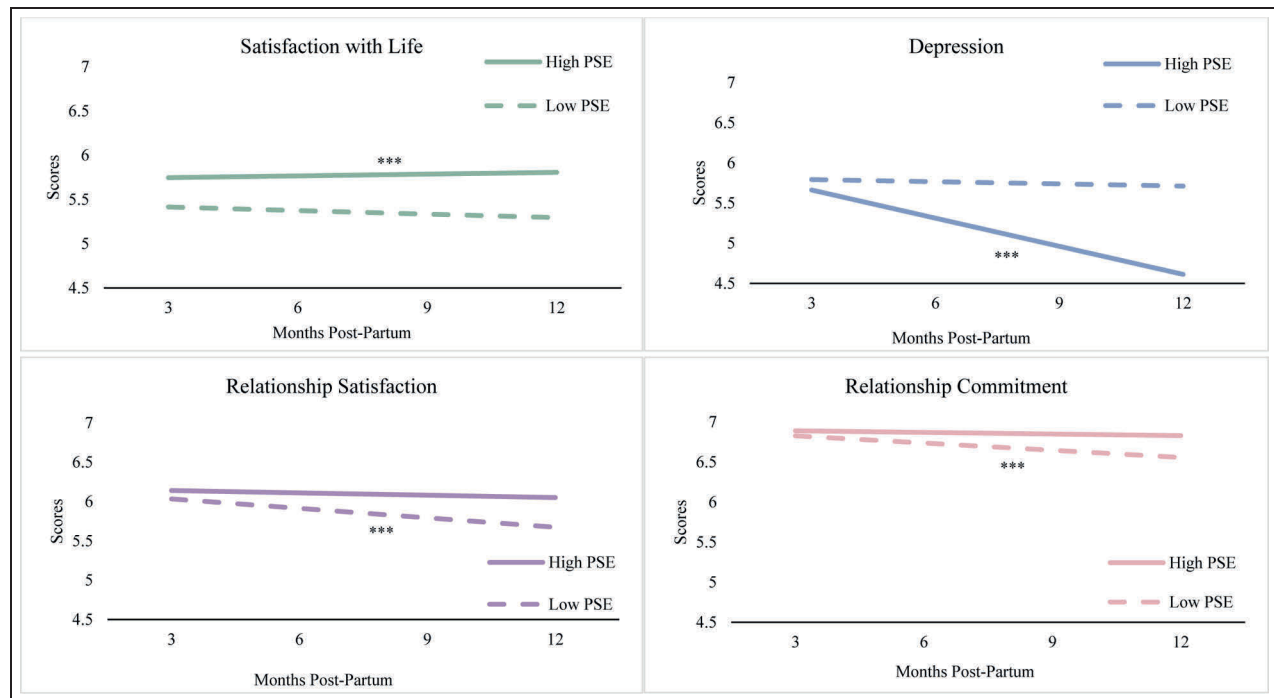
Study 2: Daily Parenting Self-Expansion Among Parents of Young Children

In Study 2, we examined whether parenting self-expansion was linked to benefits beyond the first year and across parents' daily lives. Given calls to examine familial well-being more holistically (Hudde & Jacob, 2025; Waters, 2020), we

Table 4. Trajectories of Well-Being and Relationship Quality Over Time.

Model	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i> (<i>df</i>)	95% CI	
					Lower	Upper
Satisfaction with life						
Intercept	5.58	0.05	<.001	105.43 (418)	5.47	5.68
PSE (between)	0.24	0.07	<.001	3.39 (847)	0.10	0.38
PSE (within)	0.17	0.04	<.001	4.44 (204)	0.09	0.24
Timepoint	−0.01	0.01	.637	−0.47 (757)	−0.03	0.02
Timepoint × PSE (between)	0.04	0.02	.023	2.27 (840)	0.01	0.08
Depression						
Intercept	5.74	0.24	<.001	23.88 (561)	5.27	6.22
PSE (between)	−0.12	0.34	.717	−0.36 (938)	−0.79	0.5
PSE (within)	−1.35	0.19	<.001	−7.19 (119)	−1.73	−0.98
Timepoint	−0.19	0.07	.005	−2.80 (848)	−0.33	−0.06
Timepoint × PSE (between)	−0.23	0.10	.027	−2.22 (885)	−0.43	−0.03
Relationship satisfaction						
Intercept	6.09	0.06	<.001	97.81 (352)	5.97	6.21
PSE (between)	0.08	0.08	.348	0.94 (438)	−0.08	0.23
PSE (within)	0.15	0.04	<.001	4.26 (1,284)	0.08	0.22
Timepoint	−0.07	0.02	<.001	−4.33 (461)	−0.10	−0.04
Timepoint × PSE (between)	0.07	0.02	.007	2.71 (456)	0.02	0.11
Relationship commitment						
Intercept	6.86	0.04	<.001	180.80 (644)	6.78	6.93
PSE (between)	0.05	0.05	.342	0.95 (1,372)	−0.05	0.15
PSE (within)	0.13	0.02	<.001	5.48 (1,287)	0.09	0.18
Timepoint	−0.06	0.01	<.001	−5.54 (1,287)	−0.08	−0.03
Timepoint × PSE (between)	0.05	0.02	.002	3.17 (1,287)	0.02	0.08

Notes. PSE = parenting self-expansion. All models examine linear effects of time. Relationship satisfaction and commitment were measured toward one's romantic partner. Maximal models were specified for models examining relationship satisfaction and commitment. Constrained models were specified for models examining satisfaction with life and depression.

**Figure 1.** Estimated trajectories of personal and relational well-being over time for high and low parenting self-expansion.

Note. High PSE was calculated at +1 standard deviation from the mean. Low PSE was calculated at −1 standard deviation from the mean. For each respective outcome, slopes for high versus low PSE were significantly different from one another. PSE = parenting self-expansion.

broadened our outcomes to include meaning, psychological richness (i.e., having new and diverse life experiences; Oishi et al., 2020), and parent–child relationship quality. In addition, although our primary hypotheses concerned self-expansion in positive events, parents also described feeling self-expansion from parenting *challenges* in our RTA. For example, the hardships of parenthood helped some parents have a new understanding of other parents' struggles, shifting their perspectives on others in general. Thus, as preregistered, we explored whether self-expansion in negative parenting events was still associated with benefits. Last, we explored whether the effects of parenting self-expansion held when accounting for alternative explanations and whether they extended to the partner.

Method

Participants and Procedures. Study 2 was a 10-day daily diary study of parents in the United States recruited through Research Match and Facebook advertisements. Eligibility, verified via a Zoom call, required that both parents have a child between 6 months and 9 years old. If a parent had more than one child within our designated age range, they completed the study thinking about the child that had the most recent birthday to avoid selection biases (Brummelman et al., 2015). We began data collection in April 2025. We aimed to recruit 300 participants based on available resources, aiming to exceed standard power recommendations for multilevel modeling (Maas & Hox, 2005) and other studies examining well-being in within-person designs (Le & Impett, 2016; Muise et al., 2019; Nelson-Coffey & Coffey, 2024). We continued data collection through July 2025 to recruit as many parents as possible. Participants first completed a baseline survey, followed by up to 10 daily surveys. Diaries were sent at 5:00 pm each evening and expired at 2:00 am the next day. Participants who missed any diary surveys were offered up to two additional diaries after the normal diary period to maximize the number of surveys parents completed. Our final sample included 378 parents (189 couples); 82% of parents completed all 10 diaries, with an average completion rate of 9.22 diaries ($SD = 2.34$) and a total of 3,484 diaries completed across the study. Demographic information can be found in Table 1. Our hypotheses and analytic plan were preregistered on OSF (https://osf.io/jhc7y/overview?view_only=5b8e9dc32e654cc4ab6407cdd8315239).

Measures. Information regarding our key measures is reported in Table 5. Each day, parents described one positive (i.e., “the most enjoyable or rewarding event you had with your child today”) and one negative (i.e., “the most unpleasant or challenging event you had with your child today”) child-related event. Parenting self-expansion was assessed after each event with four items (Lewandowski & Aron, 2002). Relationship quality with one's child was

assessed with one item after each event (Le & Impett, 2016). All other dependent variables were assessed in the context of parents' days in general. Satisfaction with life (Diener et al., 1985), meaning in life (Ashton-James et al., 2013), negative affect (Le & Impett, 2016), relationship satisfaction (Le & Impett, 2016), and relationship commitment (Fletcher et al., 2000) were each assessed with single items. Psychological richness was assessed with two items (Oishi et al., 2019).

Results

We analyzed data using multilevel modeling with the *lme4* (Bates et al., 2018) and *lmerTest* (Kuznetsova et al., 2017) packages in R. We conducted two-level cross-classified models, in which we nested individuals within couples and crossed couples with days. Our primary analyses examined whether parenting self-expansion during positive events was associated with daily outcomes.² Daily parenting self-expansion scores were deconstructed into within- and between-person components. Within-person variation was captured by person-mean centering each participant's daily scores, and between-person differences were modeled using self-expansion scores aggregated across days, grand-mean centered on the sample mean. Both components were included simultaneously in each model. All models included random intercepts for participants and couples and random slopes of within-person parenting self-expansion for participants. Finally, we estimated the same set of primary models to explore whether parenting self-expansion in negative events was linked to outcomes.

Parenting Self-Expansion in Daily Positive Events. We first tested our hypotheses that deviations from parents' own average levels (within-person) and differences between parents' average levels (between-person) of self-expansion during positive daily events predicted greater personal and relational well-being. Full results are reported in Table 6. On days when parents experienced higher-than-usual parenting self-expansion, they reported higher personal and relational well-being across all outcomes. In addition, parents who experienced greater parenting self-expansion on average, relative to others, also reported higher personal and relational well-being across all outcomes. Overall, parenting self-expansion in positive events was linked to daily rewards for parents personally and with their partner and child.

Parenting Self-Expansion in Daily Negative Events. We next explored whether self-expansion during daily negative events was linked to personal and relational well-being. On days when parents experienced higher-than-usual parenting self-expansion, they reported higher satisfaction with life, meaning in life, psychological richness, and parent–child relationship quality but no difference in negative affect,

Table 5. Study 2 Measures.

Construct	Scale	α ; M (SD)	Example item(s)
Parenting self-expansion	1 (<i>not at all</i>) to 7 (<i>a lot</i>)	$\alpha_{w, pos} = .67$; $\alpha_{b, pos} = .96$; $M_{pos} = 4.91$ (1.47) $\alpha_{w, neg} = .69$; $\alpha_{b, neg} = .98$; $M_{neg} = 3.62$ (1.70)	How much did being with your child in this event . . . “ . . . result in you having a new experience?” “ . . . expand your sense of the kind of person you are?” “ . . . make you feel you gained a larger perspective on things?” “ . . . provide you with a source of excitement?”
Satisfaction with life	1 (<i>strongly disagree</i>) to 7 (<i>strongly agree</i>)	$M = 5.91$ (0.95)	“Today, I was satisfied with my life”
Meaning in life	1 (<i>strongly disagree</i>) to 7 (<i>strongly agree</i>)	$M = 5.85$ (0.98)	“Today, I felt a sense of meaning and purpose in my life”
Psychological richness	1 (<i>strongly disagree</i>) to 7 (<i>strongly agree</i>)	$\alpha_w = .63$; $\alpha_b = .93$ $M = 5.56$ (1.15)	“Today, my life was psychologically rich.” “Today, my life was filled with rich and intense experiences.”
Negative affect	1 (<i>strongly disagree</i>) to 7 (<i>strongly agree</i>)	$M = 2.44$ (1.38)	“Sad, depressed, down.”
Relationship satisfaction (partner)	1 (<i>not at all</i>) to 7 (<i>a lot</i>)	$M = 5.54$ (1.34)	“How satisfied did you feel with your relationship with your romantic partner today?”
Relationship conflict (partner)	1 (<i>not at all</i>) to 7 (<i>a lot</i>)	$M = 2.72$ (1.99)	“How much conflict did you experience in your relationship with your romantic partner today?”
Relationship commitment (partner)	1 (<i>not at all</i>) to 7 (<i>a lot</i>)	$M = 6.42$ (1.06)	“How committed were you to your romantic partner today?”
Relationship quality (child)	1 (<i>not at all</i>) to 7 (<i>a lot</i>)	$M_{pos} = 6.15$ (1.16); $M_{neg} = 4.45$ (1.60)	“How satisfied did you feel with your relationship with your child in this event?”
Care difficulty	1 (<i>very easy</i>) to 7 (<i>very difficult</i>)	$M_{pos} = 1.96$ (1.37)	“How easy versus difficult was your child in this event?”
Child temperament	1 (<i>extremely difficult</i>) to 7 (<i>extremely good</i>)	$M_{pos} = 6.07$ (1.08)	“How was your child’s temperament in this event?”

Note. Multilevel reliability coefficients were calculated for measures that included more than one item (Bonito et al., 2012). $\alpha_{w, pos}$ indicates the within-person multilevel alpha in positive events. $\alpha_{b, pos}$ indicates the between-person multilevel alpha in positive events. $\alpha_{w, neg}$ indicates the within-person multilevel alpha in negative events. $\alpha_{b, neg}$ indicates the between-person multilevel alpha in negative events. M_{pos} indicates the mean in positive events, and M_{neg} indicates the mean in negative events. Standard deviations are reported in parentheses.

Table 6. Within- and Between-Person Effects of Parenting Self-Expansion on Well-Being and Relationship Quality.

Model	Within-person					Between-person				
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i> (<i>df</i>)	95% CI	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i> (<i>df</i>)	95% CI
PSE in positive events										
Satisfaction with life	0.11	0.02	<.001	5.36 (284)	[0.07, 0.15]	0.23	0.03	<.001	8.80 (326)	[0.18, 0.29]
Meaning in life	0.12	0.02	<.001	5.93 (264)	[0.08, 0.16]	0.34	0.03	<.001	12.94 (284)	[0.29, 0.39]
Psychological richness	0.16	0.02	<.001	7.42 (277)	[0.12, 0.20]	0.46	0.03	<.001	15.78 (284)	[0.40, 0.52]
Negative affect	−0.11	0.03	<.001	−3.87 (232)	[−0.16, −0.05]	−0.18	0.04	<.001	−4.45 (347)	[−0.25, −0.10]
Rel Sat (partner)	0.08	0.02	<.001	3.76 (223)	[0.04, 0.12]	0.30	0.04	<.001	8.63 (366)	[0.23, 0.37]
Rel Com (partner)	0.07	0.02	<.001	4.13 (3,094)	[0.04, 0.13]	0.10	0.03	.005	2.84 (312)	[0.03, 0.16]
Rel Qual (child)	0.31	0.02	<.001	13.00 (273)	[0.26, 0.35]	0.24	0.03	<.001	8.76 (347)	[0.18, 0.29]
PSE in negative events										
Satisfaction with life	0.04	0.02	.043	2.04 (152)	[0.00, 0.07]	0.17	0.02	<.001	6.89 (247)	[0.12, 0.22]
Meaning in life	0.05	0.02	.012	2.53 (160)	[0.01, 0.09]	0.24	0.02	<.001	9.72 (220)	[0.19, 0.29]
Psychological richness	0.06	0.02	.001	3.33 (187)	[0.03, 0.10]	0.34	0.03	<.001	12.15 (226)	[0.29, 0.40]
Negative affect	−0.02	0.03	.600	−0.53 (198)	[−0.07, 0.04]	−0.13	0.04	<.001	−3.47 (272)	[−0.20, −0.05]
Rel Sat (partner)	0.04	0.02	.089	1.72 (289)	[−0.01, 0.09]	0.20	0.03	<.001	6.84 (364)	[0.15, 0.26]
Rel Com (partner)	0.03	0.02	.127	1.53 (225)	[−0.01, 0.06]	0.04	0.03	.189	1.32 (241)	[−0.02, 0.10]
Rel Qual (child)	0.50	0.03	<.001	17.82 (237)	[0.45, 0.56]	0.55	0.03	<.001	18.33 (246)	[0.49, 0.61]

Note. All models were specified with maximal models (i.e., random slopes and intercepts). PSE = Parenting Self-Expansion; Rel Sat = Relationship Satisfaction; Rel Com = Relationship Commitment; Rel Qual = Relationship Quality.

relationship satisfaction, or relationship commitment. Parents who experienced greater parenting self-expansion on average reported greater personal and relationship well-being across all outcomes, except relationship commitment. These results suggest that even in negative contexts, parenting self-expansion is linked to personal benefits and some benefits for the family.

Partner Effects of Daily Parenting Self-Expansion. We next explored whether one parent's self-expansion was linked to their partner's well-being. Full results are reported in the Supplement in Table S4. On days when parents reported higher-than-usual parenting self-expansion, their partners reported greater satisfaction with life ($b = 0.06$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .002$), meaning in life ($b = 0.03$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .042$), psychological richness ($b = 0.06$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < .001$), and lower negative affect ($b = -0.06$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .029$). We did not find a consistent pattern of effects at the between-person level. These results suggest that daily fluctuations in one parent's self-expansion may spill over and be linked to greater well-being for their partner.

Alternative Explanations. We last tested whether the effects of parenting self-expansion held when accounting for care difficulty and child temperament. We re-conducted our analyses, including within- and between-person components of care difficulty and child temperament as simultaneous controls. Full results are reported in the Supplement in Table S5. For positive events, all associations remained significant (all $ps < .017$), except the within-person association between parenting self-expansion and relationship satisfaction ($p = .117$). For negative events, all associations remained significant, except the within-person association between parenting self-expansion and satisfaction with life ($p = .094$). Overall, the links between parenting self-expansion and well-being remained largely robust when accounting for care difficulty and child temperament.

General Discussion

Parenthood is a transformative journey that fosters self-expansion, reshaping how people see themselves, their relationships, and the world around them. Across mixed methods, as well as longitudinal and daily diary designs, we introduced *parenting self-expansion*—the novel experiences parents have with their child that broaden and are incorporated into their senses of self. Our findings suggest that parenting self-expansion is a prominent experience of parenthood that is linked to personal (i.e., satisfaction with life, meaning in life, psychological richness, depression, and negative affect) and relational (i.e., romantic partner relationship satisfaction and commitment, as well as parent-child relationship quality) well-being. We found these rewards across the transition to parenthood, across parents' daily lives, and even during the challenges of

caregiving, demonstrating how self-expansion in this domain is holistically linked to rewards.

The current work extends self-expansion theory (Aron et al., 2022), highlighting how parenthood is a rich context for self-expansion. Using RTA, we generated six themes of parenting self-expansion: child curiosity/development, familial love, parenting challenges, personal growth, broadened priorities, and renewed worldviews. Collectively, these themes exemplify how parents' identities are transformed and reforged, spanning changes in perspective, growth, empathy, love, and more. Empirically, we found that parenting self-expansion was linked to personal and relational well-being. During the transition to parenthood, higher levels of parenting self-expansion were linked to buffered declines in romantic relationship satisfaction and commitment, as well as healthier trajectories of satisfaction and depression. In daily life, parenting self-expansion was linked to personal and relational rewards, including greater satisfaction with life, meaning, psychological richness, and relationship quality. Together, these findings suggest that parenting self-expansion may not only be a lifeline during the transition to parenthood but also rewarding throughout the early years of parenting.

Importantly, even during negative parenting experiences, self-expansion was associated with benefits. Indeed, using reflexive thematic analyses, we found that self-expansion sometimes arose through parenting hardships. For example, although parents often described having struggles with breastfeeding and sleep, these challenges were then opportunities for empathy and overcoming. Parents felt a sense of camaraderie with other parents who they realized went through similar struggles, and upon getting through these hardships, they felt a renewed sense of competence and self-assurance. Thus, although there is no shortage of obstacles parents may encounter, our findings suggest that these challenges are sources of self-expansion that can instill empathy, resilience, and competence.

Our findings also highlight the interconnected nature of familial relationships. Guided by family systems theory (M. J. Cox & Paley, 1997) and interparental positivity spillover theory (Don et al., 2024), we examined whether the experiences of self-expansion from parents to their child could enrich other relationships within the family. Qualitatively, we found that parents described how self-expanding experiences with their child deepened their love for their romantic partner. For example, parents noted how these experiences made them see their partners in a new light, accompanied by feelings of unconditional love. Quantitatively, parenting self-expansion was linked to greater satisfaction and commitment with one's partner and, in Study 2 only, had spillover effects that linked one parent's self-expansion to greater personal well-being for their partner. However, because these partner effects did not emerge in Study 1, this pattern suggests that parenting self-expansion may be linked to partner benefits most consistently in the shorter term (i.e., across parents' everyday lives), rather than the

longer term (i.e., across months during the transition to parenthood). Regardless, our work has important contributions to theory, highlighting how parenting self-expansion can enrich other relationships across the family.

Last, our findings have practical implications for families, suggesting that helping parents recognize and savor self-expanding moments may be one pathway to potentially supporting parental well-being. In addition, as parents typically experience steady declines in marital quality across the transition to parenthood (Bogdan et al., 2022), our work suggests that parenting self-expansion may act as a protective factor, being associated with buffered declines. Altogether, our findings highlight how self-expansion can arise across parents' everyday lives and may support parents' well-being and their relationships across the family.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are some limitations of the current work. First, our analyses are correlational and cannot establish causal direction. Experimental studies are needed to test whether enhancing parenting self-expansion directly confers benefits. Next, cross-cultural research outside of North America will be important to assess the generalizability of parenting self-expansion. For example, parents in Western, more individualistic cultures experience heightened stress and burnout in parenting, possibly due to greater societal pressure coupled with more personal career ambitions (Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018; Ren et al., 2024). Thus, parenting self-expansion and its accompanying benefits may similarly differ across cultures. Finally, an important future direction will be to examine other outcomes of parenting self-expansion, beyond parental well-being. For example, parents' self-expanding experiences may go on to support their child's health and development (Don et al., 2024). In addition, our reflexive thematic analyses suggest that parenting self-expansion may be linked to other rewards, such as greater parental awe, parenting competence, and social connection with others, all of which may help explain the links between self-expansion and well-being (Albanese et al., 2019; Chee et al., 2025; Sun et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Parenthood involves an abundance of joys, yet it is also a time rife with hardship. However, amid these highs and lows, parenthood serves as a vast source of novelty, growth, and self-expansion. Across longitudinal and daily diary studies, we found that parenting self-expansion was linked to greater personal and relational well-being for parents. Thus, the current work highlights how parents self-expand through identity transformation, broadened perspectives, and individual growth, all of which may affirm how parenthood, in spite of its tribulations, can be one of life's most meaningful and joyous journeys.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Our original preregistered lagged analyses used the *nlme* package (Pinheiro et al., 2017).
2. When including day as a covariate in our analyses, results were consistent, indicating that the effects of parenting self-expansion could not be explained by the passage of time across diary days.

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