

# Supporting parenting is integral to the optimal development and wellbeing of children

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“Umntu ngumntu, ngabantu”—a person is a person through other people—is a familiar isiXhosa proverb emphasising our inherently social nature and capacity to thrive due to our interconnectedness, through relationships.

One of the most significant relationships is that between parent and child, particularly during the early years. Experiences during this period shape a child in profound ways and will determine how their lifelong development unfolds. The parent’s physical and psychological holding of an infant determines the ‘psychological viability’ of the child going forward.

Donald Winnicott, paediatrician and psychoanalyst, maintains that there is no such thing as a baby because what exists is a nursing couple—baby and mother *together*. This assertion underscores the centrality of the parent in shaping the person of the infant. The nature and quality of this relationship, or attachment, lays the foundation for how the child (and, later, adult) experiences themselves, the world, and others, and influences how they will engage in other relationships in their life. It also influences the child’s personality development and mental health as they grow older, which is why parents and parenting are essential for a child’s health and psychological wellbeing.

The first 1,000 days of a child’s life (the period from conception to their second birthday) is particularly important. During this period the brain develops rapidly, forming crucial neural connections that determine the child’s adaptability, learning capacity, physical health and psychological resilience. Quality of care during this time plays a crucial role in this brain development. This is consistent with observations by Mary Ainsworth in the 1960s, a pioneer in the field of attachment, that the quality of caregiving, characterised by parental sensitivity, plays an important determining role in the nature of an infant’s attachment. There is now overwhelming scientific evidence showing that the parent-child relationship during these early years is critical to a child’s development. Parents are, therefore, at the coalface, and their parenting practices are the tools used to mine the potential of future generations.

Sensitive responsiveness is a component of nurturing care that is paramount to ensuring that children thrive, and has been touted as key to realising the Sustainable Development Goals. Nurturing care protects children against the deleterious effects of adversity through lowering their stress levels and encouraging adaptive emotional coping. True nurturing care extends beyond simply providing clothing, food and shelter, to include the parent's capacity for emotional availability, warmth, and responsiveness to a child's emotional and psychological needs, which facilitates secure attachment relationships. Primary caregivers are the closest people to the child in the first 1,000 days and are therefore best placed to offer this nurturing and responsive care.

Parents, however, can only provide optimal nurturing care when they themselves are supported in their parenting role. Winnicott makes the point that "mothers who have it in them to provide good enough care can be enabled to do better by being cared for themselves in a way that acknowledges the essential nature of their task". Parents must themselves feel nurtured in order to be able to foster and maintain an environment that is responsive to the needs of the child. However, the realities of unemployment, poverty, domestic abuse and community violence, amongst others, are endemic in the South African context, elevating the negative impact of toxic stress on parents' abilities to parent optimally. In many instances, these social realities intersect with one another, in conjunction with poor support systems to impacting, negatively, a parent's ability to cope and to be present, which in turn affects their children.

This perhaps accounts for why children from lower socioeconomic settings have been found to have less secure attachments compared to children from middle-class backgrounds. It may also contribute to higher levels of stress and depression in mothers, affecting their capacity to be both sensitive and responsive. Infants are highly active and interactive, and learn about their environments, experientially, and in conjunction with a communication partner—the parent—provided they respond timeously, appropriately and empathically. Studies show, however, that younger infants with depressed mothers have deficits in their interactive behaviour and that in older infants there is an association between maternal depression and adverse cognitive and emotional outcomes. This is attributed largely to the impact of maternal

depression on the parent-child relationship stemming from disrupted parental responsiveness.

More subtle stressors such as parental non-responsiveness are often more insidious because they are not as easily seen as physical abuse, for example. This is why parents need support. Research tells us that social support for parents helps the child feel secure through facilitating parental sensitivity. Support can take the form of a stable partnership, extended family, reliable childcare, economic and financial stability, food security, access to social services, and mental healthcare. Although support is multifaceted, one example I would like to highlight is that of Early Childhood Development (ECD) sector—day cares, nursery schools, enrichment centres—in South Africa which play a vital role in supporting parents and children. This is acutely the case for parents in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities who experience more stress, different kinds of stress, as well as trauma compared to middle class families.

Formal and informal sector ECD centres provide opportunities for children to be stimulated and for early learning to foster optimal cognitive, emotional and social development in pre-school-going-age children. Furthermore, for many children who come from troubled homes, ECD centres can act as a safe haven in which trained ECD practitioners serve as consistent, safe and trustworthy adults to buffer against the stress of their home lives. ECD centres also provide a crucial childcare function allowing parents who are employed to engage meaningfully in the labour market. It allows those who are unemployed and seeking work the time and space to actively do so, secure in the knowledge that their child is being taken care of and appropriately stimulated. This, in combination with other forms of support for parents, can serve to scaffold parenting in ways that can facilitate child development and wellbeing through making space for sensitive and nurturing care.

This is particularly significant in the current lockdown environment which has ground many sectors, including ECD, to a halt. A report published in April 2020 on the plight of the South African ECD workforce since the national lockdown showed that 99% of the almost 4,000 survey respondents—all ECD operators—had no income as a consequence of parents' inability to pay fees due to the lockdown. As a result, 83% of ECD operators have been unable to pay full salaries to their staff, 96% reported an

inability to pay operating costs, and a staggering 68% were concerned that they would not be able to re-open their doors after the lockdown.

Aside from the obvious impact of this on ECD practitioners, many of whom are women and who themselves have families to support, the now-impaired ability of ECD centres to support parents and their parenting is particularly worrying. It is therefore incumbent on government to respond to the calls for relief funding for the ECD sector to promote its post-lockdown survival to ensure the continued support for parents and children that is necessary for optimal development.

Although parents are necessarily at the forefront of parenting, the responsibility for raising a child is shared more widely. The State must ensure that structures are in place to support parents to realise their parenting roles as fully as is necessary for the optimal development of their children. On a broader scale, investing in the youth is one important avenue through which to facilitate future economic prosperity, suggesting that the State has a stake in ensuring that each and every child reaches their full potential and thrives. However, investing in the youth necessarily involves investing in those who care for those youth because this care is the crucible within which the potential of young people is forged.