

Positive parenting in South Africa

Why supporting families is key to development and violence prevention

Chandré Gould and Catherine L Ward

Key points

- 1** Parenting has a direct impact on children's behaviour, which affects their ability to realise their potential.
- 2** Parents face multiple challenges and stressors.
- 3** Harsh, inconsistent parenting, exposure to violence in the home and community and corporal punishment increase the risk that children will grow up to use violence, or to be the victims of violence themselves.
- 4** Supporting parents is critical to national development.
- 5** Evidence-based programmes, which have been shown to be effective in South Africa, must be implemented at scale to give effect to the National Development Plan, the Children's Act and DSD's Strategic Plan for Prevention and Early Intervention (2013 – 2017).
- 6** Dialogue is needed between governmental stakeholders, including the Departments of Social Development and Health, and civil society to develop plans to make evidence-based programmes available to parents nationally.

Summary

Preventing and reducing violence by supporting parents is critical to national development. This policy brief explains how positive parenting relates to violence prevention and national development, and why the national implementation of evidence-based programmes to support positive parenting is both necessary and achievable.

THERE IS A STRONG BODY OF national and international evidence we can draw on to help us understand what causes violence,¹ as well as a growing body of South African evidence on what works to prevent it.² Government has identified the need to intervene early to prevent violence and the Department of Social Development has a strong legal and policy framework around which to grow preventative interventions.

Preventing the kinds of violence children experience, and grow up to repeat, requires us as a society to start thinking about how best we can support parents.

In this policy brief we outline challenges parents face; the legal and policy framework that mandates interventions to support parents and to sustain the children when we see there are problems; present findings of research that shows the link between parenting and children's behaviour; and recommend a way forward.

Putting in place good, strong interventions based on the best available evidence is vital to national growth and development. This is because children who grow up in warm and attentive families have a much better chance of completing school and developing the required working skills thereafter. An investment in supporting parents may take time to show returns, but the cost benefits as far as health and criminal justice are concerned make this a wise, long-term investment.

The challenges parents face

Parenting does not happen in a vacuum and South African parents face a range of challenges. Poverty constitutes a particular risk for parenting.³ Not only does a lack

of financial resources affect the ability of parents to provide nutrition, health care and education, it makes parenting itself much more difficult. In addition, more than 50% of children in South Africa grow up in households where caregivers parent without the support of the other parent.⁴

Parents struggling with poverty are more likely to suffer from depression and depressed parents are more likely to use harsh punishment and to be inconsistent in their responses to their children's behaviour.⁵ Mothers in this situation are less likely to be affectionate towards their children, and more likely to use corporal punishment.⁶ They are also likely to leave them unsupervised (in other words to monitor them less.

This type of harsh, inconsistent parenting that features a lack of warmth and supervision, increases the likelihood of children abusing drugs or alcohol, engaging in risky sex and becoming involved in crime.⁷ Parents living in poverty are also less likely to have the social support that assists better-off parents with their parenting.⁸ This makes it particularly essential to put into place evidence-based programmes that support parents.

What is the legal and policy mandate?

Interventions to support and develop positive parenting are mandated by Chapter 8 of the Children's Amendment Act (Act No. 41 of 2007), which deals with prevention and early intervention. Section 144 focuses on developing the capacity of parents to act in the best interests of their children by:

- strengthening positive relationships within families,
- improving the care-giving capacity of parents, and
- using non-violent forms of discipline.

This provides the legal basis for the provision of parenting programmes to address these needs.

The South African Integrated Programme of Action on Violence Against Women and Children (2013–2018)⁹ seeks 'to provide support to strengthen and capacitate families especially in relation to parenting responsibilities; to decrease the vulnerability of children to abuse, neglect and exploitation,' and very specifically 'to develop, strengthen and roll-out positive parenting courses.'

The Department of Social Development's Draft National Strategic Plan for Prevention and Early Intervention (2013–2017)¹⁰ identifies early intervention as being focused or 'indicated' intervention that targets high-risk individuals or families identified as having symptoms of social problems, e.g. a child who is frequently absent from school, or whose caregiver is often intoxicated.¹¹ This strategy is intended to provide the basis for the transformation of the department's services to children so as to significantly increase prevention and early intervention services, and thus reduce the number of cases requiring statutory intervention. It accepts the need to engage in evidence-based planning.

The research

In 2012 and 2013 the Institute for Security Studies and the University of Cape Town partnered¹² with a community-based organisation in a small disadvantaged community in the Western Cape. An audit was conducted of all households in the community, followed by two waves of a survey of all households in which there were children

When we speak about **positive parenting**, we mean warm, consistent parenting where parents have good relationships with their children, use non-violent forms of discipline, and exercise supervision over their children as appropriate to their developmental stage.

When we speak about **family**, we mean all types of families, including single parent families, extended families, foster families, families in which the parents share the same gender, and families in which the members may not be biologically related.

When we use the term **'parent'** we mean anyone who plays a primary care giving role in a child's life.

between the ages of 6 and 18. The surveys were conducted six months apart.¹³ To supplement the quantitative data focus group discussions were held with parents after the survey to discuss their experience of the study and their experience and perception of factors that affect parents' stress.

The community of 563 households is located in a farming district roughly 30km from a large town.

The survey found that spanking and slapping, parenting stress, and parental mental health are significantly associated with both children's depression and anxiety as well as aggression. In addition, intimate partner violence in the home was associated with children's aggression and violence. This was the case irrespective of the gender of the child or whether the parent also parented positively. It was also the case whether parents were single or parented as couples; whether they drank alcohol, were involved in their children's lives, or were poor.

In short, we found that children who were subject to corporal punishment, whose parents were stressed and who suffered from any mental health problems (such as depression) were more likely than other children to be anxious and depressed, or act violently and aggressively.

The study also found that more than half of the parents living in the community wanted help with their parenting, and felt that they would benefit from home visits or a course on positive parenting (54,1% of parents said they would like a home visit from someone who could help them with the challenges of parenting, and 37,3% said they would like a course).

The connection between national development and positive parenting

The National Development Plan 2030 (NDP) has the broad aim of reducing poverty and inequality in South Africa. It lists 19 milestones that will enable South Africa to achieve that goal. These include:

- An increase in employment
- An increase in per capita income
- An increase in the share of national income of the poorest 40% of the population
- An increase in the quality of education; and
- Ensuring that all people live safely

What does parenting have to do with each of these elements of the NDP? Education, employment and income are intimately related – educated young people are more likely to be employed, and more likely to be employed in better-paying jobs. Parenting lays the groundwork for this when it results

good attachment, cognitive stimulation and when parents and children are able to communicate effectively.

In the next section of this policy brief we show how healthy relationships between children and parents; cognitive stimulation; parental involvement in school; and violence in the home, are related to child behaviour and development.

Healthy relationships

Through a mechanism psychologists call 'attachment',¹⁴ parents set the tone for their children's later relationships and begin to help them to manage their emotions and behaviour (a capacity psychologists call 'self-regulation').¹⁵ Both of these are crucial for education (and hence for employment and income), and also for helping children to curb aggressive impulses that could lead to violence.¹⁶

Children who were subject to corporal punishment, and whose parents were stressed or suffered from mental health problems, were more likely to be anxious and depressed

Infants who have warm, consistent relationships with adults who respond appropriately to their needs will develop secure attachments to those adults. This achieves two things. It sets a pattern for future relationships since children learn that people can generally be trusted, and it provides them with a measure for future relationships. It also gives them a sense of security that is essential for healthy development. When infants and their parents have a good attachment, children have a base for identifying their own and other people's emotions, which in turn is necessary for regulating those emotions and so controlling emotions such as anger. It also helps them to establish good relationships with their peers, which are important for intellectual development and for learning social skills; children with good social skills are more likely to do better at school. Parents who form healthy bonds with their infants are also more likely to be attentive to their needs, supervise them appropriately and experience the pleasure of parenting.

Infants need to learn to regulate their emotions and their behaviour. Most children are aggressive and demanding at age two, but over time most learn to ask politely for what they need, to take turns and to manage emotions such as anger.¹⁷ Children who do not learn these skills are likely to go on to develop behavioural problems.

Learning to regulate emotions starts with parenting.¹⁸ Parents who help toddlers to name their emotions are teaching them to recognise their internal states, which is the first step towards managing emotions. Parents who establish consistent household routines and who use non-violent approaches to discipline, such as praising behaviour that is appropriate and ignoring behaviour that is not, help children to manage their own behaviour and to find appropriate ways to get what they need and want. This is very difficult for parents who are depressed, anxious or struggling to survive.

Cognitive stimulation

Children whose parents provide appropriate stimulation in the early years are more likely to be ready for school and to learn more easily. An early child development programme in Jamaica supported parents of malnourished children to provide stimulation that assisted them to develop cognitively as well as socially. Malnourished children are highly likely to have compromised brain functioning.¹⁹

When the children who had been part of the cognitive stimulation programme were assessed 20 years later, when they were 22 years old, it was found that they had higher IQs than their counterparts who had not received this type of stimulation, and had done better at school (their marks were better and they had gone further in their education).²⁰ More than that, they were earning 25% more than other malnourished children who had not been part of the programme.²¹ Effectively, they had caught up with their counterparts.²²

This suggests that stimulation provided by parents in the early years may compensate for the effects of malnutrition and improve educational achievement

Though more studies are needed, this does suggest that stimulation provided by parents in the early years may compensate for the effects of malnutrition, improve educational achievement and lead to better and better-paid employment.

What about safety? The same Jamaican study showed that 20 years after they received the intervention, the children who received stimulation were less likely to be involved in fights and less likely to have been involved in serious violent incidents.²³ This may be for several reasons: they were able to find work when they left school; they may have been better able to regulate their emotions; they may have enjoyed school more, and children who are attached to school are less likely to be involved in delinquency, including violence.

Parental involvement in schooling

Once children are in school, their parents' involvement by ensuring that homework is done, attending parent-teacher meetings and participating in school activities with their children, shows their children that education is important and supports them to do well at school. Children whose parents are involved in their schooling tend to do better at school and have the feeling that education is important. Doing better at school and believing in its value, which is often referred to as 'attachment to school',



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means that children are more likely to seek tertiary education and so to find better employment. Schools should make every effort to engage and support parents in their part of the work of education.

Safe homes

Violence in homes, either where violence is used as a means of discipline or where there is violence between adults, creates several problems. In the first instance, children who are exposed to violence are more likely to be anxious and depressed, and will struggle to concentrate at school. Second, they are more likely to be aggressive with adults in general, with their peers and even in their own intimate relationships as they grow older; they will have learned that violence is a mechanism for resolving problems.²⁵

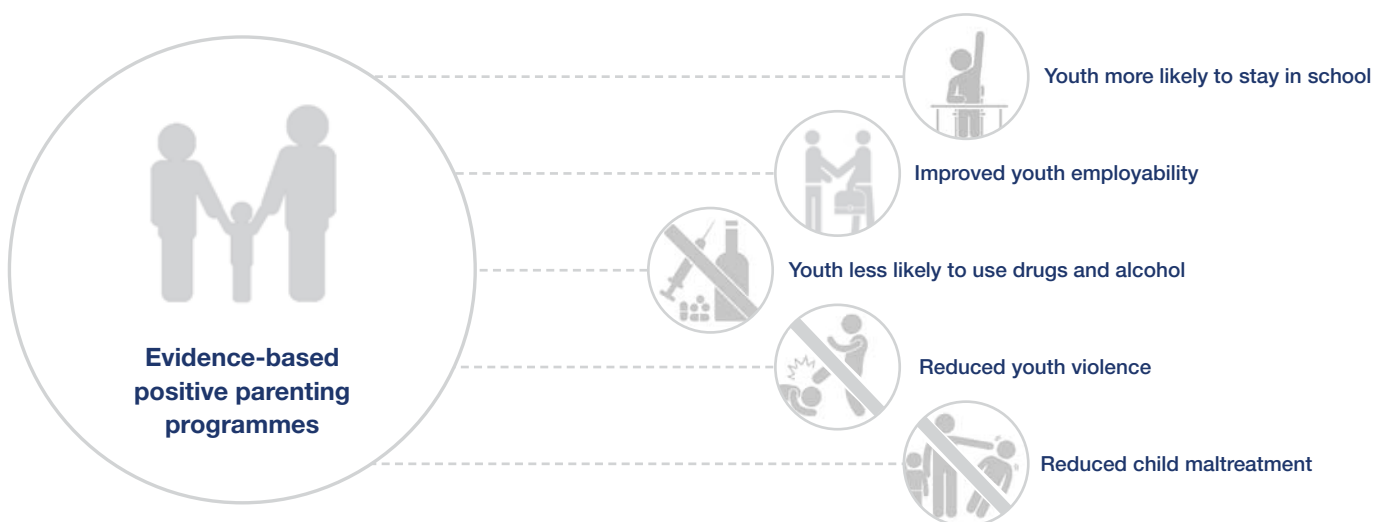
Ultimately, children who are parented positively are:

- More likely to form good adult relationships
- More likely to succeed at school
- More likely to find good, stable employment
- Less likely to suffer anxiety and depression
- Less likely to abuse substances
- Less likely to engage in risky sexual practices, and
- Less likely to be involved in crime and violence

Positive parenting, the parenting that can lead to good child outcomes, is thus parenting that allows for secure attachment, manages children's behaviour, teaches them self-regulation and provides cognitive stimulation.

What can be done?

Fortunately, there are parenting programmes that have been shown to be effective for improving parenting, reducing child maltreatment, and improving children's cognitive and behavioural outcomes.²⁶ There is also evidence that positive parenting can buffer the effects of poverty on children.²⁷ In addition, parenting programmes that are effective in high-income contexts have been shown to be equally effective with the most disadvantaged families.²⁸



Clearly, to achieve the outcomes of the NDP will require investment in parenting programmes that have been shown to improve parenting and child outcomes, as well as in the related supporting infrastructure. Other countries provide examples in this regard. Both Norway²⁹ and Wales,³⁰ for instance, have made parenting programmes widely available to parents whose children have behavioural problems. The introduction of such programmes does need an investment in a body that is capable of ensuring that those running the programmes are trained to run them in the way they were designed to be run, and to monitor and evaluate the programmes.

This is entirely feasible. Currently, two parenting programmes have been developed in South Africa, tested through randomised controlled trials and been found effective. The Thula Sana home visiting programme helps mothers to develop strong, healthy bonds with their infants,³¹ while a book-sharing programme that teaches mothers to share picture books with their infants has recently been found to be effective in stimulating cognitive development.³² In addition, a number of other parenting programmes for children and teenagers are currently being tested in South Africa and elsewhere on the continent.

A clear strategy and adequate resources will have to be provided. Inter-departmental collaboration and strong partnerships between civil society and government would also be required

Developing an implementation plan to take parenting programmes in South Africa to the scale needed will require collaboration between the academics and researchers who have developed the programmes, provincial and national departments, and the non-governmental organisations that will deliver them. A clear strategy and adequate resources will have to be provided. It will also require inter-departmental collaboration and strong partnerships between civil society and government. The departments of Health, Basic Education, Social Development, Housing, Justice and Corrections all have a role to play.

Planning greater intervention requires consideration to be given to a range of factors, including where these services should be offered, how to reach and target those most in need of support, what programme(s) should be offered, how to ensure that the programmes are delivered in the way they were designed to be delivered, how to ensure on-going monitoring and evaluation, and how to obtain the feedback of data into programmes to improve services. It also requires us to plan very carefully so that we can make use of existing programmes and capacity, and find synergies between these programmes and existing outcomes identified by departments.

Since a strong policy framework is already in place to escalate the introduction of parenting programmes that have been shown to be effective, we recommend that the next step should be a dialogue between civil society and the departments of Health and Social Development to discuss the opportunities and challenges for taking such programmes to scale, and to develop specific timeframes to ensure that South Africa starts supporting parents in the interest of national development as quickly as possible.



A BOOK-SHARING PROGRAMME THAT TEACHES MOTHERS TO SHARE PICTURE BOOKS WITH THEIR INFANTS IS EFFECTIVE IN STIMULATING COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Notes

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About the ISS

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