

Title: Preventing child abuse globally through research-driven parenting programmes

Synopsis

Researchers from the University of Oxford have prevented 81,000 cases of severe child abuse after co-creating evidence-based parenting programmes which were so effective, content was replicated in 24 countries and 22 languages. Among the results was a 28% fall in abusive parenting of young children, and a 45% drop in physical and emotional abuse of teenagers. In response, the World Health Organisation (WHO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) included the programmes in their global policies and websites, and content was endorsed by USAID, CDC and the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children.

Background

In 2011, social scientists from the Department of Social Policy and Intervention (DSPI) began working with the World Health Organisation (WHO), UNICEF and the South African Government, identifying a major unmet need for evidence-based, free of charge parenting programmes for children living in poverty and stress – key risks for potential violence.

Researchers joined forces with the Universities of Cape Town, Bangor and Stellenbosch founded the Parenting for Lifelong Health initiative (PLH) to create, develop, and rigorously test parenting programmes aimed at supporting family relationships, providing alternatives to violence, and helping to protect children inside and outside the home.

Led by Professor Frances Gardner, Professor Lucie Cluver, and Dr Jamie Lachman, and with Global South and North partners Professor Cathy Ward, Professor Mark Tomlinson and Professor Judy Hutchings, social scientists carried out intensive stakeholder engagement, reviewed and analysed existing research, devised practical parenting workshops with local communities, and created content for the new programmes. The team worked with local NGOs to train 3,000 local people to deliver content, and ran randomized controlled trials – piloting the programmes with different age groups to include feedback from end user groups:

Success by Numbers:

- **Young Children, aged 2-9** – In South Africa, the programmes led to a 39% increase in positive parenting, a 28% reduction in abusive parenting, and an 11% fall in child behaviour problems. Use of non-violent discipline strategies increased one year after the programme
- **Teens, aged 10-19** – The programmes resulted in a 45% drop in physical and emotional abuse, a 23% improvement in parental supervision, 51% lower caregiver depression, 46% less endorsement of corporal punishment, 28% lower parenting stress, 26% less caregiver alcohol use and 76% less adolescent alcohol use. Food security and household savings improved. Cost-effectiveness was GBP6 saving for each GBP1 invested, calculated on the single outcome of severe abuse cases averted



According to the Chief of Child Protection, UNICEF, the programmes “*represent an extremely valuable public good for organizations and governments looking to support families.*”

Continuous improvement

At the same time, the research team, led by Professor Frances Gardner, systematically analysed other existing parenting programmes to identify which core components were most effective among different children, families, and contexts.

Social scientists published 10 robust reviews, with clear guidance on best practice for policy makers. This set the scene for the adoption of evidence-based parenting programmes in new countries, and continues to inform policymaking, the scale-up of parenting programmes globally, and continual development of the PLH project.

Spreading impact

With robust evidence in place, Parenting for Lifelong Health programmes have been expanded to 29 countries, with 300,000 families accessing programmes in places including Botswana, Cameroon, Cote d’Ivoire, Czech Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Haiti, India, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Malaysia, Moldova, Montenegro, Namibia, Nigeria, North Macedonia, Philippines, Romania, South Africa, South Sudan, Tanzania, Thailand, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

In addition, researchers responded to the COVID crisis by converting PLH programme content into accessible tip sheets, radio scripts and social media formats, which were translated by volunteers into 114 languages, reaching more than 136 million people.

