



# Supporting a child starts with supporting a mother

By Rachel Rozentals-Thresher

**The First 1000 days Relationship Support Tool “Ibhayi Lengane” was developed by dlalanathi as an add-on to existing home visiting programmes with the purpose of enhancing the mother-child relationship during the first 1000 days. CEO RACHEL ROZENTALS-THRESHER shares lessons learnt through the process.**

“We do not believe in ourselves until someone reveals that deep inside us something is valuable, worth listening to, worthy of our trust, sacred to our touch. Once we believe in ourselves we can risk curiosity, wonder, spontaneous delight or any experience that reveals the human spirit,” says the poet e e cummings. Research and practice emphasises what e e cummings expresses so beautifully. We all come to know who we are through our experience of nurturing relationships with significant others. Nowhere is this more important than in the first 1000

days of a child’s life. At present in South Africa, young children and their mothers face a myriad of risks as a result of poverty, violence and disease, all of which present very challenging conditions for development over this crucial time.

A young woman, living in a rural community in KwaZulu Natal province, told us the story of the decisions and actions which changed the course of her life. She described her shame at falling pregnant in her last year of school, her uncertainty in her relationship with her boyfriend, and her fear for the future. The moment that had the most profound impact on her, however, was when she received her mother’s forgiveness and help

in supporting and caring for both herself and her baby.

There is overwhelming scientific evidence that the parent-child relationship, in particular responsive sensitive care in the early years of a child’s life, is critical to children’s development. The benefits of responsive caregiving are seen across the domains of childhood including in the development of secure attachments critical to healthy relationships later in life, and in attentional and language skills key to school achievement and economic productivity in the adult years.

Unplanned pregnancy, particularly when the mother is young and unemployed, often draws a lot of very negative attention, with the effect of isolating the mother at the very time both she and the baby need support the most.

## The first 1000 days

Ilifa is committed to developing and supporting programming which is responsive to the early development needs of children in these adverse conditions. Towards this goal, Ilifa is seeking to develop creative ways to strengthen existing partner and government programmes with strategic inputs that influence early child development and increase access to the Essential Package of services by all mothers and children – particularly those most vulnerable.

One of these inputs is the First 1000 Days Relationship Support Tool “Ibhayi Lengane” for home visitors, developed by dlalanathi, Ilifa’s parenting portfolio manager Lisa Cohen, and a number of consulting experts and practitioners in the field. The vision for the tool is for it to become a scalable “add-on”, complementing existing programmes with a specific focus on strengthening the quality of mother and child interaction over the first 1000 days of a child’s life.

This concept acknowledges that many programmes have been scientifically and sensitively

developed to effectively deliver either comprehensive and integrated interventions (such as maternal and child health, nutrition, parenting, play, and structural support through grants) or very specific interventions for mothers and children over the first 1000 days (such as child health, nutrition, or early child development through stimulation and play). Some early childhood programmes focus on the older child. Other organisations deliver support to households which include pregnant women, young mothers and their children, without any particular programme focus on the needs of these target groups.

Ilifa partners openly shared their home visitor programme materials to assist the team in scoping what exists and identifying key opportunities to strengthen existing programmes through an “add-on”. Given that many exemplar early child development programmes already exist, the conclusion of the team was that this could have significant impact on strengthening home visiting programming.

## Nurturing the mother

The tool has been developed with a central principle in mind: Care for the baby in the first 1000 days can only be achieved through nurturing relationships around mothers or primary caregivers and children.

## The First 1000 Days Relationship Support Tool contains:

- Relationship-based training for home visitors;
- A set of three structured home visits: one with the family and two with the mother and baby, over four phases (pregnancy, birth to six months, six to 12 months, and 12 to 24 months);
- Materials to guide facilitation and some leave-at-home materials for the mother to support sustaining the activities at home.

## The principles are as follows:

- The mother is the key to positive care and relationship for her baby.

- Helping the mother first and foremost is the path to supporting her baby’s development.
- Within a caring and supportive relationship, we explore the relationship between the mother and her baby.
- Activities give the knowledge, feeling and action appropriate to strengthen the mother’s relationship with her baby.

## The home visitor brings with her:

- **Attitude and approach:** A sensitive, caring view of the mother’s capacity to care.
- **Knowledge:** An understanding of the significance of a responsive relationship in the development of the baby.
- **Activity:** A set of activities to do in the home to build a relationship and connect with the mother.

A trained home visitor brings an empathic, sensitive and strength-based approach to build a relationship with the mother which, in turn, helps her prioritise her own health at this important time and plan to take a small strategic step towards actions which strengthen her self-care.

The home visitor also identifies relationship support and assists the mother in taking a small, strategic step towards attaining that support.

Finally, through her interaction with the home visitor, the mother begins to think about her own relationship with her baby and works towards strengthening that relationship.

The family-focused sessions have the dual aims of encouraging family in their nurturing relationship towards mom and supporting mom and her relationship with her baby; thereby addressing both the inner and outer circles of influence of the child’s early development.

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