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GROUP PROGRAMMES FOR PARENTING EDUCATION: EVIDENCE FROM THE SOBAMBISANA INITIATIVE





GROUP PROGRAMMES FOR PARENTING EDUCATION: EVIDENCE FROM THE SOBAMBISANA INITIATIVE

Ilifa Labantwana is a national Early Childhood Development Programme in South Africa. Ilifa Labantwana is concerned with the design and testing of scalable integrated and affordable ECD models which can be taken forward to ensure that all children in South Africa have access to the services they need to develop to their full potential. It is within this context that Ilifa funded five organisations to test what they believed would be workable models in the context in which they were working. What emerged was a community of practice known as the Sobambisana (Help each other) Initiative.

The Sobambisana Initiative was carried out over a four year period and tracked by a robust research process focusing on monitoring and evaluation the models being implemented. Based on this research, a series of five learning briefs has been published, this is the sixth in the series. It focuses specifically on what emerged from the research about the role and impact of parents/caregivers on the growth and development of their young children.

Why is parenting education important?

In early childhood, the main influences on the child are the primary caregiver and home environment. Whatever the specific cultural child-care practices are, healthy physical and psychological development of a child requires nurturing and consistent care by responsive caregivers. Inadequate, disrupted and negligent care has negative consequences for the child's survival, health and development.

Many factors influence the quality of caregiver-child relationship and the ability to support a child's development, including:

- Caregiver health and mental wellbeing, particularly in cases of depression and stress;
- Caregiver education levels and access to information about young children's health and development;

- Caregiver cultural goals for children's development and their understanding of the contribution they can make to children's developing abilities may not be well aligned with the requirements of the schooling system;
- Household income and resources and the structure of the household, which influences the capacity of adults and their availability and time to care for young children;
- Domestic violence, child maltreatment and substance and alcohol abuse; and
- Support available to the caregiver and family.

Parenting education aims to improve the knowledge and responsiveness of the key adults with whom the young child interacts and who shape the child's early experiences.





The content of parenting education programmes varies widely, depending on who provides the service and the immediate needs of the target audience. Among other possibilities it may focus on:

- Ensuring service access, including social grants;
- Nutrition;
- Key health messages (e.g. the community component of the integrated management of childhood illnesses [IMCI]);
- Positive discipline;
- Promoting affectionate care and bonding/attachment; and
- Providing stimulation and readiness for school;

All of these fall within the service package of the National Integrated Plan for ECD.

Many programmes touch on a range of these areas, others on only some of them.

It is essential that programmes are specific about their targets and intended outcomes.

Types of programme delivery

Parenting education may be delivered in various ways including through the media, through home visiting programmes, group workshops and in combination programmes for children and primary caregivers.

Where the focus is on sharing information, such as how to access services, or information on health and nutrition, an approach focusing on the parent has been shown to be very effective.

International evidence indicates that where the aim is to improve children's readiness for school (cognition, language, readiness to learn) working jointly with the parent and the child is most effective. The programme must be designed in such a manner that activities are aligned to the capabilities required for school.

In this brief, we focus on the Sobambisana findings on delivery of parenting education through group workshops. This is a very common approach when the aim is to reach a number of people in a cost-efficient manner.

The Sobambisana parenting workshop interventions

Two partners, Khululeka and Ntataise, delivered parent-education workshops. The content and format of the two groups was very different. CECD planned to deliver a parent-workshop programme, but during the piloting

phase, it found that there was a lack of interest, with relatively few parents completing the ten sessions. It was therefore discontinued.

Ntataise Parent-Support Programme (PSP)

PSP targets the parents of children enrolled in preschools. Children do not participate in the programme, but are the intended beneficiaries of the education in early childhood received by their parents. Trained preschool supervisors provide ten, two-hour workshops. The aim is to improve the early childhood knowledge of participating parents/caregivers.

Workshops are based on the Abecedarian programme developed in the United States. They consist of a time for listening and sharing personal issues, presentations on early development and a learning game activity. Parents learn to appreciate the value of play, to be more responsive to their children's interests and needs, to understand the importance of stimulation for brain development and learn games to play with their children at home without toys or special equipment.

In the listening and sharing group, parents discuss their feelings and attitudes about the role teachers play in their children's educational progress, participate in "life load" exercises designed to encourage exploration of the major challenges in their lives (and how this might affect their children), as well as the support that may be available to assist them (including support from group members). This aspect of PSP provides a form of psychosocial support.

The goal is for participants to be able to provide improved developmental environments for their children, thereby adding value to the early learning opportunities provided by the preschool and also extending the benefit to their other children.

Khululeka Infant and Toddler (I&T) support programme

The I&T programme targets parents/caregivers of children aged one to six years who do not receive any form of ECD service. Caregivers attend sixteen weekly group sessions lasting two to three hours, accompanied by their children. Sessions are conducted within a playgroup setting, hosted at a venue agreed upon by the participants. Children have the opportunity to play with equipment, but no formal programme is provided.

Theory sessions are complemented by practical workshops in which parents make improvised equipment designed to promote early learning informed by the HighScope preschool model, or items of use in the home.





The programme is expected to make a difference to child-development outcomes because, through both theory and practical sessions, caregivers gain knowledge that will enable them to facilitate the early development of their children.

Evaluation questions for parenting workshop interventions:

1. Did the parent-education workshops improve the capacity of caregivers to provide safe, hygienic and stimulating environments for children who are not in formal ECD?
2. What were the perceived benefits of participation and the barriers to successful implementation of parent-education programmes?

Findings

1. Reach:

- Group parenting programmes were not particularly effective either at attracting parents or sustaining their attendance. Between 40 and 66 percent of sessions were attended. Attendance was affected by the context in which the programme was delivered. Reasons for poor attendance included work or subsistence opportunities becoming available, distance from the home to the venue and the perceived irrelevance of the workshops when compared with other daily tasks.

2: Child and caregiver outcomes:

Child and caregiver outcome data is available only for Khululeka.

- Child cognitive and language development improved over the course of the intervention (the effects of age were controlled).
- Where children and caregivers attended more frequently, greater gains were made.
- The ability of caregivers to cope improved significantly, indicating that the support provided made a difference to their wellbeing.
- Caregivers were more accepting of and responsive to their children and provided improved academic and language stimulation.
- Most children were already connected to grants and services, but well over half of the referrals for grants were resolved by the end of the evaluation period.

Lessons from the evaluation of parenting education workshops

1. Attendance was a challenge:

- Many caregivers who were offered a parenting programme did not use the opportunity. The key reasons were that issues of subsistence took priority or that parents did not feel that they needed assistance with parenting.



Workshops require participants to get to a venue at a regular time for a group meeting. This may not be suitable for caregivers who live at a distance, are sickly, or have many pressing household responsibilities. They also do not attract caregivers who are not coping well, or who feel shy or burdened;

- Incentives to attend may facilitate take up in some cases. Food offered at meetings, food parcels and food gardens were important in encouraging participation. Other incentives were the making of items and toys to take home and the social support and fun of group sessions;
- Parenting-education programmes must sustain sufficient attendance to be worth offering.

2. The role of programme implementers:

- Where preschool supervisors were asked to deliver a parenting education programme in addition to their normal duties and without an incentive such as a stipend or certificate, it was not successful;

- It is essential that programme implementers are appropriately trained, motivated and receive regular support.

In conclusion, while providing parenting education in groups is a way of reaching many primary caregivers at one time and also of providing the social support of a group, the Sobambisana experience was that the approach was most suitable for primary caregivers who had time to attend and were relatively less vulnerable or burdened with other responsibilities. The project also found that attendance was irregular, which meant that many caregivers might have received insufficient programme content to enable them to implement their learning with their children at home.

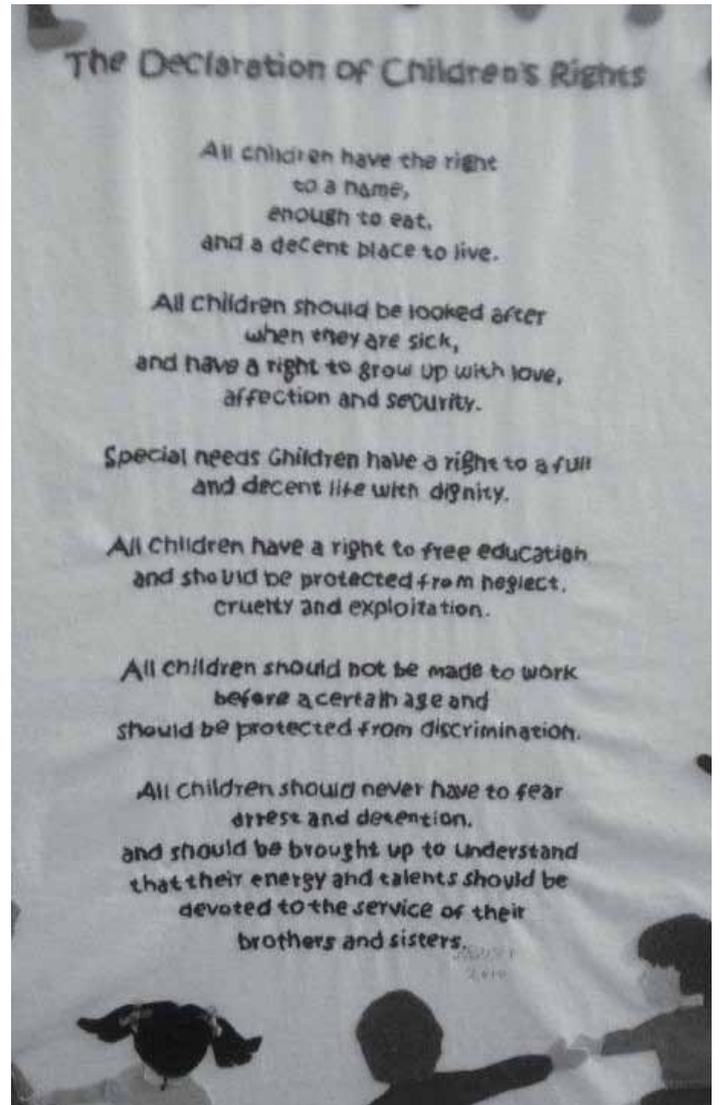
The Sobambisana Evaluation was conducted by Andy Dawes of the University of Cape Town Department of Psychology together with Linda Biersteker and Lynn Hendricks of the Early Learning Resource Unit.

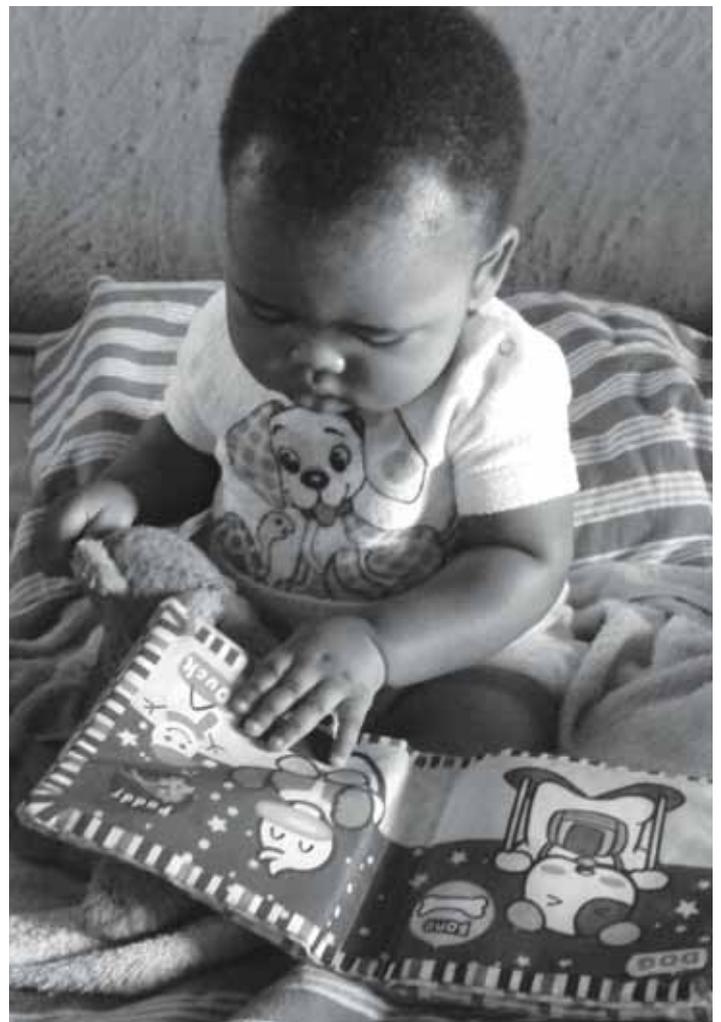
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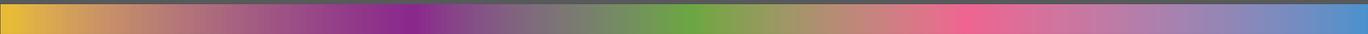
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Ilifa Labantwana is a multi-donor partnership which supports integrated early childhood development (ECD) in South Africa. The donor partners include the ELMA Foundation, the UBS Optimus Foundation and the DG Murray Trust. Ilifa Labantwana aims to increase access to, and improve the quality of integrated early childhood development services for children in under-served communities; and to support South African policy implementation of integrated ECD interventions in a sustainable manner.



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