

# Learning lessons about positive parenting from a parent skills training programme

By Jamie M Lachman, Catherine L Ward, Inge M Wessels, Lucie D Cluver, Frances Gardner & Judy Hutchings

Child abuse and maltreatment are prevalent in South Africa; and the risks for children are compounded by societal factors such as high levels of poverty, HIV/AIDS, drug and alcohol abuse, and community and interpersonal violence.

Caregivers who are living with HIV/AIDS, who are caring for orphans, who have themselves been victims of child maltreatment or intimate partner violence, are particularly at risk of becoming perpetrators of child maltreatment, simply because of the stressors they face<sup>[1-3]</sup>.

Children who are abused in early childhood are more likely to develop patterns of behaviour that result in negative outcomes later in life<sup>4</sup>. These outcomes can include behavioural problems, poor educational performance, juvenile delinquency, substance abuse

problems, mental health problems, intimate partner violence, and the inter-generational transfer of abuse to one's own children<sup>[5-8]</sup>. Preventing child maltreatment, especially in high-risk contexts, is therefore an imperative for the wellbeing of South African children.

Parenting programmes that empower caregivers with skills for warm, positive parenting have been shown to be effective at reducing risk and allowing children to thrive<sup>[9,10]</sup>. However, while a number of effective child abuse prevention programmes for the early childhood stage are available in high-income countries<sup>[11-13]</sup>, very few have been rigorously evaluated in Sub-Saharan Africa<sup>[14,15]</sup>. Compounding the challenge is the fact that many of the programmes that have been shown to work in high-income countries are too costly to transport to low-resource settings, and may also present implementation challenges in different cultural contexts<sup>[16]</sup>.

## Sinovuyo Caring Families project: Addressing the evidence gap

The goal of the Sinovuyo project is to build an evidence base for a low-cost scalable parenting programme that prevents maltreatment and child conduct problems and meets the challenge of feasibility in low-income countries. Ilifa is supporting the development of the project as a collaboration with academic institutions (the Universities of Cape Town, Bangor and Oxford), local NGOs (Clowns Without Borders South Africa, ikamva Labantu and The Parent Centre), and international agencies (the World Health Organisation and UNICEF). In the long term, it may be possible that what is learned from testing the Sinovuyo Caring Families Project can help us integrate parenting support into ECD delivery systems.

Sinovuyo is a 12-week, group-based programme, designed specifically for delivery in low-resource

settings. Each session is delivered by community workers trained to model parenting techniques. These facilitators also conduct home visits to support parents who require extra coaching and to involve other caregivers in the programme. The programme also includes SMS text reminders to support participation and reinforce key parenting principles.

## Building a “Rondavel of Support”

The Sinovuyo Caring Families Project uses a model called “Building a Rondavel of Support for You and Your Child”, based on 50 years of research from around the world, which highlights the importance of establishing positive and nurturing relationships with children prior to using authoritative, limit-setting strategies<sup>[17]</sup>.

By improving the quality of parent-child relationships through the use of positive parenting techniques, children are less likely to misbehave, which in turn reduces parents' need to enforce limits and use disciplinary methods. At the same time, parents learn to regulate their own emotions and replace harsh and inconsistent parenting with non-violent and consistent discipline strategies<sup>[18]</sup>. Parents also learn simple, mindfulness-based, stress-reduction techniques to help them cope with stress arising from community violence, illness, poverty and the challenges of child rearing.

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## The Sinovuyo model

**Thatch roof:**  
Limit setting and discipline

**Mud walls:**  
Positive parenting

Problem solving

Sunshine of positive attention

Non violent discipline

Instruction giving and household rules

Using praise and rewards

Naming feelings and actions

Special time for you and your child

Establishing parent goals

**Building a Rondavel of Support<sup>©</sup> for you and your child**



The social learning approach upon which Sinovuyo is based, strengthens parents' and caregivers' ability to support and learn from each other. Group discussions and collective problem-solving help them to be accountable and practice new parenting skills. Group role-plays are also invaluable in helping parents to learn core principles.

### Piloting and testing

Two years ago, we piloted the programme with 68 families of children aged three to eight years, living in Khayelitsha, Cape

Town. Parents who participated were disadvantaged and lived in high-violence communities; yet they participated at high levels of interaction, engaged in the programme and found it culturally acceptable. Community workers implemented the programme with high fidelity to the design. Results indicated promising early signs that the programme improves positive parenting behaviour, thus warranting further testing.

From 2014-2016, the Sinovuyo programme is being evaluated in a large randomised control trial with

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268 families and has extended into Nyanga, Cape Town. Using parent-report and observational assessments, the Sinovuyo team is examining the programme’s impact on child behaviour problems and both harsh parenting and positive parenting. We are also evaluating the programme’s effect on parental mental health and the use of social support.

### Integration into ECD programmes

There is great potential for the Sinovuyo Caring Families programme to be integrated into a broader ECD service delivery system, such as the one currently being developed by government, in partnership with

Ilifa, in North West province. Many aspects of the programme’s approach and delivery would complement and strengthen home visiting programmes and early learning playgroups.

Sinovuyo’s collaborative facilitation method empowers parents as the primary caregivers of children. It is client-led and supports parents’ ability to learn through experiential activities, while treating them with respect. As with all community-based ECD interventions, however, this approach requires training, mentorship and ongoing supervision, in order to be delivered effectively

to families living in such challenging circumstances.

Finally, it is important to recognise the communal aspects of parenting in a South African context. One mother from the Sinovuyo programme put it best: “a parent is a parent to all children”. By strengthening the home environment through strong social networks in the community, we can ensure that positive parenting and non-violent discipline becomes the new norm for families in South Africa, thus ensuring that all children are provided with the nurturance and loving support they need to thrive.

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# A facilitator's view of the Sinovuyo Caring Families Programme

By Andiswa Mgedle

**M**y name is Andiswa Mgedle and I was born in a rural area near Willowvale in the Eastern Cape. I lived with my mother and my

five siblings. My father was working in Cape Town, so we saw him during December holidays.

Growing up in a village, you were expected to respect an older person as if they were your mother or father. Once when I was just five years old, I was involved in a fight on the way home from school. A woman who was passing by just grabbed both of us, gave us a beating and told us not to do it again. I did not tell my mom, because I knew that she would hit me as well. If you did something wrong, you knew that you would get a beating, so you chose to keep quiet. But my mother loved us.

When I was six years old, we moved to Cape Town. The new environment seemed very noisy to me, the shacks were built very close to each other. We stayed with our father more often because our mother began selling clothes to help support the family. She would travel from the Eastern Cape to Durban and to Cape Town. We would only see her three times a year. I missed her.

I now live in Khayelitsha with my child, Olo, who is seven years old. I also live with my two older sisters and my younger brother and my three-year-old niece. Olo's father does not live with us, but he is involved in our lives and supports Olo fully.

This community is so different from where I grew up. People mind

their own business and children have lost respect for their elders. Lots of people are unemployed and they are living in shacks, often badly built ones. It is a stressful place to live and that stress makes it very difficult to be a parent. It can make one short tempered. There are also so many bad role models for our children – crime, alcohol, and drugs are part of our daily life, even in broad daylight.

Before working for Clowns Without Borders South Africa (CWBSA) as a Sinovuyo Caring Families programme facilitator, I was a housekeeper and I was also studying early childhood development. I would practice some of the things that I learned, like reading a book to Olo before bedtime, but if he did something wrong, I would give him a hiding. That's what I was used to from my own childhood.

One day when Olo was three years old, I was bathing him and went to fetch a big towel. When I came back, I noticed that he had spilled bath water on the mat and I became very angry. I hit him. Afterwards, I felt bad, but I didn't say "sorry". I just cuddled him.

Becoming a Sinovuyo facilitator has been a great experience for me. The training was very challenging, as we needed to learn new parenting skills and we had to learn how to teach others. In the beginning, I thought some of the skills, like the **5-Minute Cool Down**, or letting your child take the lead during playtime, wouldn't work. They seemed so different from what I was used to in our culture.

We don't consider that children have feelings and also need to be heard. We raise them the way we were raised. We expect them to behave in a certain

way and, if not, we hit them.

However, when I practised these skills myself, I saw that they worked. I also shared what I learned with Olo's father, and told him we need to work with each other. If I make a rule, that rule must apply to Olo even in his house. I'm happy to say that he is helping a lot and trying his best.

I couldn't wait to deliver the programme to other parents but I was also nervous. The thought of me telling parents who already had children older than I am how to manage their children's or grandchildren's behaviour? I worried they might think I was disrespectful. Thankfully, and to my surprise, they appreciated it.

Of course, we had challenges – parents would sometimes miss sessions because they were out drinking; others told us how their partners beat them every night. Some parents complained that their children lied, stole things, and even hit them back. Many asked us for quick fix solutions to their problems, but that is not how Sinovuyo works. The parents are the experts, even if they don't feel that way. We discuss problems as a group and work together to find solutions. As a facilitator, my job is to help parents identify techniques and to coach them as they practice new skills. We are the guides showing the way, but it is the parents' responsibility to do the work to change their parenting and their children's behaviour.

One day, we were doing a home visit with a participant who used to shout at her child all the time. Her neighbour told us that she didn't hear shouting



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anymore and wanted to come to the session so she could experience what our participant was learning.

Sinovuyo changes the lives of many families – the programme starts in the home and ends in the community. If we can reduce violence and improve relationships in the home, it will spread throughout the community. Our children will grow up learning that there are other ways to solve problems. They will

raise their children to do the same. And generation-by-generation, our neighbourhoods will become safer and happier places to live.

Looking back at my work with Sinovuyo, I have changed a lot. I make sure I spend lots of time with Olo. We are so close. He tells me almost everything. His behaviour has also changed. Now, when he does something wrong, he tells me – so different from when I was a child!

**Andiswa Mgedle** is a Clowns Without Borders South Africa ([www.cwbsa.org](http://www.cwbsa.org)) facilitator who delivered the Sinovuyo Caring Families programme during the Ilifa Labantwana-funded randomised control trial in Khayelitsha and Nyanga, Cape Town.

