



POLICY BRIEF

Community mobilisation to support positive parenting

Insights and lessons

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Programmes that support parents and equip them to parent non-violently are key to the long-term prevention of interpersonal violence. This policy brief shares lessons from a project in a rural township in South Africa's Western Cape province. The project delivered evidence-based positive parenting programmes in combination with a social activation process to support parenting through community leadership.

Key findings

- ▶ Action research and participatory processes delivered through a local organisation allowed community members to clarify their common values and aspirations related to positive parenting. These processes complemented the implementation of four parenting programmes at household level and stimulated community-led activities that supported change.
- ▶ Building on a vision for the future, community members drew on their collective energy, creativity and a sense of community ownership to conceptualise and carry out contextually relevant, appropriate and cost-effective activities that supported positive parenting. These activities included communication, fund-raising and events that provided opportunities for parents and children to learn from each other.
- ▶ Impetus was sustained through a partnership approach between community members and a local non-governmental organisation, with support that included ongoing dialogue–reflection–action processes and administrative assistance. This contributed to community cohesion and strengthened social networks around parenting.
- ▶ Together, the parenting programmes and a social activation process worked synergistically to strengthen the attitudes and values related to positive parenting. The result was warmer and more positive parenting behaviours, a decrease in corporal punishment, and better child outcomes in the Touwsrante community.

Recommendations

- ▶ Non-governmental organisations or government departments delivering positive parenting programmes in communities should consider engaging and working closely with community members of different ages who are respected and viewed as leadership figures. They should conceptualise and conduct complementary activities that support caring relationships.
- ▶ Action research and participatory engagement processes should routinely be followed to link the implementation of household-based parenting programmes with community-led, contextually relevant, appropriate and cost-effective activities that support positive parenting. Such a multi-component combination approach strengthens the community's commitment to positive parenting.
- ▶ Community members should be engaged, listened to, and have a say in how parenting programmes are implemented. They should determine contextually relevant activities to support positive parenting. This process may require on-going support from a community-based organisation to sustain momentum.

Can parenting change in a whole community?

Although parenting programmes reach individual households, they seldom penetrate entire communities. Communication interventions, on the other hand, may have broader reach and contribute to increased awareness, but are unlikely to transform parenting.¹ Together, however, they may reach more parents and contribute to changes in parenting at community level.²

A whole community approach

The project was initiated in 2016 in Touwsrante, an impoverished rural township in the Western Cape Province. Comprising 762 households and about 5 000 inhabitants, the community is home to people who work on farms or in nearby towns, as well as labour migrants and people who are unemployed.

A door-to-door survey in 2013 found that one in five parents experienced high levels of parenting stress and two-thirds reported using harsh discipline methods such as beating, spanking and slapping. Around one in seven children between the ages of 6 and 18 experienced anxiety, depression and/or behavioural problems.³

Support to parents and children in the township is provided by the Seven Passes Initiative (SPI).⁴ SPI is a local non-governmental organisation that helps families by providing after-school programmes, including meals and learning support for children.

The project was conducted by the SPI with the University of Cape Town (UCT) and the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) as research partners. It aimed to increase positive parenting by combining the delivery of four evidence-based Parenting for Lifelong Health (PLH) programmes⁵ with a community-wide social activation process. These were implemented by a team of parenting facilitators at SPI, which also facilitated the research processes.

Intervention outcomes

A community-wide household survey was conducted in three waves to assess the intervention: one prior to the intervention; a second 18 months after the intervention was initiated; and a third 18 months later. Ethical approval for the study was provided by the Research Ethics Committee, Faculty of Humanities, UCT.

The survey was complemented by qualitative data gathered through the initial action research engagement,

in conjunction with participatory meetings and small group discussions approximately every six months to understand implementation and refine ongoing activities.

At the end of the implementation period a review meeting was held with community members to explore their perceptions of change brought about by the social activation component.

Selected survey findings

The household survey included an assessment of parenting using the Alabama Parenting Questionnaire⁶ for children aged six to 18 years and the Parenting Young Children Scale⁷ for children aged 18 months to five years. The Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL) for children aged 6–18 and the pre-school CBCL (for children aged 1½ – 5) were used to assess children's behavioural problems.⁸

Caregivers who attended parenting programmes sought and received social support from other caregivers

Other measures included parent mental health (General Health Questionnaire),⁹ experiences of intimate partner violence (using the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale), and parenting stress (Parenting Stress Index – Short Form).¹⁰ In addition, female caregivers responded to questions about their social network relevant to parenting. The second and third waves included assessment of social activation activities.

Key findings of the survey were as follows:

- By wave 2, around half of the respondents (47%) knew of the social activation group; this increased to 53% by wave 3.
- By wave 2, 18% of respondents had attended a social activation event, increasing to 22% by wave 3.
- By wave 2, 20% had signed the positive parenting manifesto and 17% had a *Samewerking* sticker on their homes.
- By wave 2, 35% had seen the mural and 26% knew of the songs about positive parenting.
- Among female caregivers, parenting programme attendees were more likely to reach out to other caregivers to speak about parenting, and both sought and received social support from other caregivers.

- Corporal punishment declined over time.
- Based on the Child Behaviour Checklist, behavioural problems among children in the younger age group decreased by 33% from baseline to wave 3. For the children in the older age group, there was a decrease of 21% from baseline to wave 3.
- Reported parenting stress and parent mental health symptoms declined over time. There was also a slight decrease in intimate partner violence.

Parenting stress and parent mental health symptoms declined over time and there was a slight decrease in intimate partner violence

Qualitative review

A workshop at the end of the project period assessed the social activation process. Participants included members of the social activation steering committee, parenting facilitators, SPI staff and community members reached by activities.

The following observations were made:

- **Validation of positive parenting concepts:** Displaying the logo on the front doors of their homes indicated household support: 'It shows that the family in that house agrees with the activities and change.' Such endorsement motivated role-modelling: '[It] motivates one's behaviour. People know that you are connected to *Samewerking* (working together). You can't walk around in the street with a beer in your hand. The sticker shows that you are setting an example.' Display of the logo also led to a sense of optimism for the future: 'If you walk through the community and see the stickers you get a sense of hope.'
- **Improved sense of community wellbeing and commitment to child safety:** Activities such as community clean-ups and park repairs helped to build pride in the community: 'It made us feel better to stay in the community', and 'It reduces stress ... Now children are aware that if they eat they have to keep their papers.' There was also an understanding that the wellbeing of children was being prioritised: 'They hold the children up – children must be safe – your child is my child.'
- **Opportunities for parents and children to bond by attending events:** Many of the activities included opportunities for close interaction between parents and children that had not existed previously: 'As parents, we learned to spend time with our children', and 'The games brought parent and child together. Sometimes the father is one place, the mother another and the child another. But this gathering allowed for games to be played together.'
- **Improved engagement between families:** Such interactions helped people to get to know each other better: 'People meet you and speak



A SURVEY IN THREE WAVES ASSESSED THE PROJECT

to you and they can see you have a good heart.’ Dialogue on parenting between families was also stimulated: ‘Parents learned to visit other people’s houses and to learn [about positive parenting].’

- **Collaboration for change:** An overarching perception was that the activities had strengthened bonds between people: ‘It brings out the value of unity’, as well as demonstrating that ordinary community members could collaborate to bring about change: ‘It shows the community that they can work together to build a better community.’

How did the social activation process unfold?

A participatory action research (Action Media)¹¹ workshop was held with 15 parents and caregivers at the outset of the project. This four-day process included large and small group discussions, community mapping, role plays, visualisation activities, testimonies and games.

These activities allowed for in-depth exploration of diverse aspects of parenting in Touwsrante¹² and led to the identification of common attitudes and values related to positive parenting. These were translated into a slogan, songs, a manifesto and a logo. The group also identified initial activities that had potential to support positive parenting in their community.

Unemployment, illicit drugs, public drinking and a lack of recreational facilities negatively impacted the safety of adults and children

Action media findings: context

Participants identified the following factors that negatively affected families in the community.

- **Community and social environment:** Unemployment, use of illicit drugs, public drinking and a lack of recreational facilities for families and children negatively impacted the safety of adults and children. Families did not work together to address these concerns.
- **Unsupportive social environment:** It was felt that people in the community were not inclined to change their circumstances, even if there were a few positive aspects to build on: ‘We have a tendency to complain. Nothing is enough for us.’ People did not interact with each other as families and this contributed to a lack of reflection on community concerns: ‘It is uncommon for us to visit each other’s houses [to share our burdens].’
- **Harsh and inconsistent parenting:** Participants identified verbal and physical abuse and neglect of children by parents and caregivers. It was also believed that administering corporal punishment to children was unlawful (even though, at the time, it was still legal in homes). Despite this, instances of parents’ hitting and slapping children were considered to be common.

BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS
AMONG YOUNGER
CHILDREN DECREASED BY

33%

Action media findings: perspectives on positive parenting

Participants explored the concept of positive parenting and highlighted the following considerations:

- **Positive motherhood and fatherhood:** These included loving your child; keeping your child safe; having sympathy/empathy for your child; praising your child; being patient with your child; listening to your child so that you can resolve problems; sharing in your child's life; maintaining family communication; and being wise and dependable. Positive motherhood included being a 'survivor' by making do with little money and still 'put[ting] a meal on the table'. Positive fatherhood included following an exemplary lifestyle in view of one's children and being 'there for your family at all times'.
- **Positive and negative traits among children:** Positive traits included neatness, obedience, respect, achievement in school and participation in extramural activities. Negative traits included lack of open communication with a parent, not listening or not being respectful towards a parent, being selfish, not fulfilling one's duties at home, and avoiding school. Concern was expressed about children's exposure to bullying and to physical and sexual abuse by adults.

Parenting manifesto



We believe...

- In change in Touwsranten
- In positive parenting
- That our children are our first priority and that we must always encourage them
- That we should praise our children for good behaviour
- That we must always show love to our children
- That we must be an example in Touwsranten
- That respect is earned between all - between adults and children, between children and adults, between boys and girls, between men and women, between young and old, between rich and poor, and between different cultures
- That people in our community care for others and that the community must be involved with all projects
- That change takes courage and perseverance and we will not give up, even if it is difficult

SIGNATURE

DATE

53%

OF HOUSEHOLDS KNEW
OF THE SOCIAL
ACTIVATION GROUP

- **Commitment to promoting positive parenting:** Participants expressed a keen interest in changing the situation of parents and children in their community. Trust, collaboration (*samewerking*) and honesty were highlighted as key ingredients for change. These values formed the basis for community members to stand together (*saamstaan*) and to focus on the idea that ‘my child is your child’.

From ideas to action

Participants committed themselves to improving their parenting and family and peer relationships, based on the identified values. Communication resources to support this process were consolidated as follows:

- The manifesto was printed in three languages on an A4-sized card and included the finalised logo and slogan.
- T-shirts were printed with the logo and additional slogans, including ‘I am a positive dad’ (*Ek is ’n positiewe pappa*), ‘I am a positive mom’ (*Ek is ’n positiewe mamma*), ‘We stand together for positive parenting’ (*Ons staan saam vir positiewe ouerskap*), and a variation of the latter – ‘Teenagers stand together for positive parenting’.
- A music soundtrack was developed to be played along with the songs, which were recorded and shared on the radio and social media.

Positive motherhood included being a ‘survivor’ by making do with little money and still ‘put[ting] a meal on the table’

At the same time a steering committee was established that comprised some participants from the initial workshop and other community members. The committee shared its vision with local stakeholders, wore the branded T-shirts, shared the parenting songs, promoted the parenting programmes, and participated in community clean-ups.

While these actions were seen to be relevant, it was felt that over the initial three months they had not achieved sufficient traction in the community.

A ‘social activation’ workshop to develop a further action plan followed with 30 participants, including members of the initial steering committee and others in the community who were seen as leaders. This workshop was an opportunity to move ahead with strengthened commitment and leadership.

The steering committee was expanded and undertook to meet monthly with support from the SPI, including the involvement of the resident parenting facilitators.

Activities of the committee and volunteers included:

- **Sharing a vision for change with stakeholders:** This included engaging with the local municipal coordinator, clinic staff, religious leaders, South African Police Service, school principals and teachers.



PARTICIPANTS WERE KEEN TO IMPROVE THE SITUATION OF PARENTS AND CHILDREN

- **Community clean-ups:** Volunteers conducted street-by-street clean-ups. Children and residents encountered during this process were invited to join in and encouraged to keep the areas around their homes litter-free.
- **Door-to-door visits:** Volunteers visited residents and shared ideas about positive parenting. This included encouraging parents to sign up for the parenting programmes. Copies of the manifesto were provided that could be signed and displayed within the home. Residents were encouraged to show their support for parenting values and change processes by affixing stickers with the logo to their front doors.
- **Fund raising:** Funds were raised by selling tickets for 'high tea' and 'braai and slaai' (barbeque and salad) events. Funding proposals for donations and events were channelled through the SPI.
- **Repair to children's play park equipment:** This involved fund-raising and the donation of materials by a group of men who then undertook the repairs, with support from the local municipality. A launch event was held to celebrate the completion of the repairs.
- **Support for older adults:** Volunteers took linen, blankets and other household goods to elderly people and spring-cleaned the homes of the elderly and disabled. One volunteer engaged with residents in her street to raise funds through a raffle to buy food hampers, paint houses and provide other assistance.

Community engagement and leadership, along with parenting programmes and activities that allow parent-children interactions, can change parenting

The social activation initiative was made more visible by painting a mural with the logo and positive parenting slogans on a wall near the community entrance. Committee members and volunteers wore branded T-shirts during activities and at other times, and the positive parenting songs were shared and sung wherever possible. Parents who completed the parenting programmes also received T-shirts.

In addition, the group's achievements were recognised via interviews on the local radio station, Eden FM.

A number of events that brought parents and children together were held, with positive feedback leading to some being repeated. These included:

- **National commemorative days:** Youth Day and Women's Day presented opportunities to raise awareness, with activities such as games and sports, and having local leaders, stakeholders and volunteers talk about positive parenting.
- **Mr and Ms Touwsranten:** This concept aimed to raise awareness and provide an outlet for youth and young adults in the community. Emphasis



ACHIEVEMENTS WERE
SHARED VIA LOCAL RADIO

was placed on young people serving as ambassadors for Touwsrante.

- **Family fun days, movie nights and games nights:** At the games nights, parent and child teams played together. Modest entry fees were charged, and snacks and meals were provided.

The parenting programmes and social activation process strengthened attitudes on positive parenting

Ongoing reflection

Biannual action research meetings were held with community members to reflect on progress and to identify and resolve challenges.

While members of the Social Activation Committee were motivated by successful activities, there were times when enthusiasm waned. From time to time misunderstandings led to conflict among group members that were not always adequately resolved.

The strong focus on community events was seen as a strength of the initiative. However, in some instances community dynamics frustrated progress. For example, residents around the parks complained that noise levels had increased, and equipment continued to be damaged through improper use. People under the influence of alcohol sometimes intruded on events.

Although the formal project rounded off in 2019, the committee resolved to continue its activities through ongoing meetings, fund-raising and association with the SPI.

Conclusions

This demonstration project shows that community engagement, participation and leadership, along with parenting programmes and community-based activities that allow parents and children to interact, can help to change parenting across a community.

Ways of communicating about positive parenting values emerged organically through the Action Media research process. These provided a foundation for conducting and legitimating activities that supported positive parenting as well as contributing to family,

parent and child wellbeing. This helped to create an understanding that residents themselves can enact change processes.

The parenting programmes provided resources and skills to support positive parenting at household level, while the community-led activities helped to improve parent-child sharing and bonding by bringing families, parents and children together in novel ways.

The activities that were identified and enacted by the steering committee were organically derived, based on the aims outlined in the manifesto. They were designed to have a good fit with the socioeconomic and cultural context of Touwsrante, as well as being financially and logistically feasible.

Together, the parenting programmes and social activation process worked synergistically to strengthen attitudes and values related to positive parenting. The result was warmer and more positive parenting behaviours, a decrease in corporal punishment, and better child outcomes in the Touwsrante community.

Notes

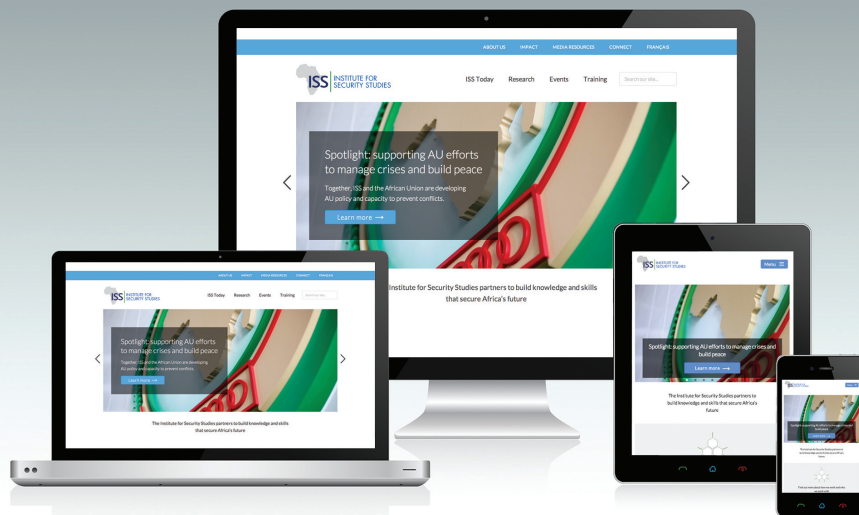
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This policy brief is funded by the World Childhood Foundation. The ISS is also grateful for support from the members of the ISS Partnership Forum: the Hanns Seidel Foundation, the European Union, the Open Society Foundations and the governments of Canada, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the USA.

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