

The most important and hardest job

IFFD support to the Parenting Month established by UNICEF

1 June 2021



IFFD will participate in the Parenting Month with different initiatives, following the communication and advocacy toolkit produced by UNICEF and consistent with our mission and practices, as long as the members of our Federation decide to join.

We establish in this paper the background information for it, as well as a set of practical suggestions for it.

Better parents and societies

As the advocacy toolkit states,

Evidence suggests that when parents are given the opportunity to learn about attachment, play-based learning, stress reduction, gender roles and socialization, and problem-solving, they are more likely to form positive and healthy relationships with their children, and provide the ultimate care children need to thrive and flourish. That's why investing in parenting programmes and services to support parent's mental health is good for young children, families, businesses and economies. Not only does it pay off in healthier, better-educated children and sustainable growth, it contributes to more resilient, prosperous, and fair societies.

Two years ago, UNICEF established June as the Parenting Month for over their 144 Country Offices and National Committees across all regions and their partners. It is a unique opportunity to scale up support for parents and caregivers to give their children the best start in life.

Building on the strong foundation of the experience, the topic for this year is "to support parents' and caregivers' mental health, especially for the most vulnerable families." One of the key messages for this action considers being a parent as "the most important and hardest job in the world."

As a consolidated partner of UNICEF and presently co-chair of their NGO Committee, IFFD is glad to join in this endeavor and contribute to its actions.

*International Relations Department,
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The parenting 'vaccine' *

Measures to mitigate COVID-19 have brought their own severe and negative aftershocks. Global lockdowns and closures of schools and protective services have shone light on the vulnerability of children. Challenges of parenting under the strain of the epidemic are near-universal, and most harsh parenting is not malicious, but triggered by stress, poverty and mental health distress. In the extreme, the situation of fragile families affected by violence and neglect has worsened, abusers have had increased impunity and victims have been cut off from supportive teachers, social workers and friends. The looming economic fallout and uncertainty is adding yet more pressure onto such family settings, with lifetime and intergenerational consequences for the children affected. But there is a cost-effective and scalable response.

From infancy, children experience the absence of protective and nurturing primary caregivers as a serious threat. Neglect or violence chronically activates the stress response system. This toxic stress fundamentally alters neuroendocrine, neurotransmitter systems and pro-inflammatory cytokines, with lasting negative consequences on emotional, intellectual and physical development.

What we need is a 'vaccine' against neglect and abuse in the lives of children. And recent research shows that a cost-effective preventative service does exist. Just as with a COVID-19 vaccine, this builds on decades of previous research. Evidence-based parenting programmes support families with the common challenges of raising children while respecting parents' capacity to solve problems. They also provide effective strategies for improving relationships, reducing conflict, managing family finances and relieving parenting stress. In the past two years, randomised controlled trials have shown that families accessing parenting programmes have reductions in violence, mental health problems, alcohol use and extreme poverty. There is good evidence of effectiveness across high-, middle- and low-income countries. Although parenting support cannot provide herd immunity against childhood trauma, it is the best option we know for preventing this serious threat to public health. The return on investment for government budgets and societal wellbeing would be substantive.

* By Benjamin Perks (UNICEF and Jubilee Centre, University of Birmingham) and Lucie D. Cluver (Department of Social Policy and Intervention, University of Oxford, and Department of Psychiatry and Mental Health, University of Cape Town) - Nature, 17 August 2020.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-0932-8>.

That's why UNICEF and partners are calling on governments, businesses, communities, and the public to act now:

- *Governments to invest in scaling up parenting programmes and services to support parent and caregiver mental health across all sectors including health, child protection, education, and social protection.*
- *Businesses to invest in policies and programmes for their own employees, invest in services in the community they serve and use the power of their voice as industry leaders to drive change.*
- *Community leaders to establish local programmes and services within community groups.*
- *Public and parents to add their voice to demand support and engage with [unicef.org/parenting](https://www.unicef.org/parenting) for information and guidance.*

The effects of the pandemic

COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of nurturing care and parenting in fulfilling the rights of every child. Children can only thrive and flourish when they feel safe and protected, when family, caregiver and community connections are stable, and when their basic needs are met. The role of the parent or caregiver in childhood is a determinant of physical and mental health, learning and other wellbeing outcomes throughout the life cycle.

Nurturing care and playful parenting are major protective factors for lifelong mental health and well-being. The pandemic has reversed much recent progress for children and will leave lasting consequences. As we reimagine a child-centered recovery, the importance of policy and investment commitments to support optimum parenting has never been more evident and this is why it is a central call to action in our new global advocacy priority on child and adolescent mental health.

Who will benefit from supporting parents

When parents fulfill their task adequately, the whole society benefits from it and not only them and their children. Thus this call will be:

- good for children by protecting children's rights, accelerating change across life outcomes and preventing neglect and abuse;
- good for parents by building and supporting parents' confidence, improving parent's mental well-being and health, and reducing parental stress;

- good for businesses, as reducing stress and absenteeism level or workers increases productivity;
- and good for societies, as increasing resilience, prosperity and fairness ensure sustainable development.

How to reach all sectors

Our proposal for Family Enrichment Centers includes:

- integrating the topic of mental health in all family enrichment activities;
- promoting this action through websites and social media;
- promoting family celebrations at home in a playful and joyful atmosphere;
- disseminating mental health accelerators (exercise, activities outdoors, diet, sleep, etc.);
- collecting testimonies, quotes and pictures that can be useful for other families around the world.

Also, they can involve parents who are business leaders or policymakers, by arranging personal meetings or raise-awareness events.

Suggested actions

Here are some ideas on how IFFD members can engage parents and supporters on their local channels:

- promote family enrichment courses in their environment;
- consolidate commitment between parents;
- promote playful interactions with children;
- disseminate healthy practices;
- advocate for parental leave and child cash benefits;
- advocate for better working conditions for parents;
- recognize mothers' "miracles" during the pandemic;
- recognize fathers' sharing in-home care and work during the pandemic;
- show how to overcome covid-19 effects in the family;
- engage with [unicef.org/parenting](https://www.unicef.org/parenting).

Reimagining parenting support *

Family is the first line of protection, love and support for children and the most important influence in a child's life. Children can only thrive when they feel safe and protected when family, caregiver and community connections are stable from the moment they are born.

Through the first few years of life, a child's brain develops at a never again repeated speed of more than one million new neural connections every second. This period offers a critical window of opportunity to shape the child's ability to learn, grow, develop and form healthy relationships and contribute to society. Every hug, every nutritious meal and every game played. All of this helps boost baby's brain development, affecting their ability to learn and grow throughout their lives.

Parents are the main providers of this nurturing care from early childhood through adolescence and beyond. But parenting is not an easy job, and the covid-19 pandemic has parents and caregivers carrying even heavier social and emotional responsibilities affecting their own well-being. The situation is worse still for families living with poverty, violence, abuse and neglect in the home and those living in humanitarian and fragile settings.

As we reimagine the future for every child, we also need to reimagine how we support parents and caregivers in their number one job, nurturing and caring for their children. Because when parents have access to parenting support programs, they gain new skills and strategies to support their own well-being and mental health as well as their child's. When parents get paid parental leave and breastfeeding support, their children benefit. And when parents have access to child benefits, adequate wages and affordable, accessible, quality child care, they get the resources and services needed to give their children the best start in life.

So, UNICEF is calling on governments and businesses to invest in scaling up parenting programs and family friendly policies to build more resilient, prosperous and fair societies. On this day of families, let us reimagine parenting support so the children have the loving, playful, nurturing, safe and supportive relationships they need to thrive as they begin their lives.

* Message of Ms. Henrietta Fore, Executive Director of UNICEF, for the IFFD Celebration of the International of Families, 2021.
Available at: <https://youtu.be/yfz1P6UqhCM>.



An online event to celebrate the International Day of Families was organized on 14th May, with the participation of 30 IFFD representatives from around the world and the Executive Director of UNICEF. It was attended by hundreds of policymakers, diplomats, civil society representatives and families from 59 countries. Full recording and information are available at: <https://bit.ly/3fuOJWq>.

Why we need universal access to parenting programmes and support *

- Supporting parenting is an issue of protecting children’s rights to grow up in a protective and nurturing family environment and contributes to the country’s human capital development, resilience, prosperity, and security.
- Evidence-based parenting programmes, that equip parents to engage in playful and responsive interactions with their child, are a proven accelerator to drive change across multiple child life outcomes – including the child’s future long-term mental and physical health, development, learning and earning potential.
- Providing support for parenting and nurturing caregiving at the population level – especially in the first years of life – can act as an accelerator for preventing neglect and abuse and their costly and lifelong impacts on mental and physical health across the life course.
- Parenting programmes can help to support and build parent’s confidence, improve their own mental well-being and reduce parental stress. They also help to empower parents to engage in playful and responsive interactions.
- Having adopted the Convention of the Rights of the Child, countries have signed up to help parents by providing services to support them raise children, especially working parents.
- COVID-19 has exposed huge gaps in accessing services to support mental health and psychosocial well-being and development. Some research showing that women are more likely to suffer from mental health consequences than men.
- Even before the pandemic, it was estimated that globally between 15–23 percent of children live with a parent who has a mental health condition.

* UNICEF, Communication & Advocacy Activation Toolkit for Partners, Parenting Month 2021.