

Universal parenting support to prevent abuse and neglect: A policy call for national governments

Evidence-based parenting programmes and interventions are a scalable and cost-effective way to support parents and caregivers and prevent abuse, neglect and adversity in childhood. They contribute to good mental health and well-being for children and their caregivers, and reduce risk-taking behaviours throughout the life course. Once initial start-up costs have been covered, the cost of delivering parenting interventions per family is roughly comparable to the cost of a routine childhood vaccination programme.¹

Parenting is a wide and multi-faceted policy issue upon which many aspects of the social, emotional and physical development of children are dependent. This note describes how a minimum package of well-evidenced parenting support can significantly prevent abuse and neglect of children. Furthermore, it recommends a universal approach or primary prevention through a basic package of interventions to every parent or caregiver.

What are parenting interventions?

- Parenting interventions can be defined as a set of activities or services aimed at improving how parents approach and execute their role as parents, specifically their parenting knowledge, attitudes, skills, behaviours and practices.² Interventions can be integrated into existing services or delivered as a separate programme.
- Core content of effective parenting interventions to prevent abuse and neglect includes a grounding in social learning theory and attachment principles, and a focus on strengthening parenting skills and sensitivity by providing practical instruction on positive-parent child interaction, use of positive encouragement, play, techniques for non-violent discipline, problem-solving, social and emotional coaching, and developmentally responsive supervision.³
- Parenting interventions need to be supported by family-friendly policies that provide caregivers with the care, time and resources to provide quality childcare.

Why supporting parents and caregivers is key

- Providing support for parenting and nurturing caregiving at the population level acts as an accelerator for preventing neglect and abuse and their costly and lifelong impacts on mental and physical health across the life course. Positive parenting can also buffer the effects of community violence and other negative influences.
- Globally, around 1 billion children and adolescents aged 2 to 17 years experience physical, emotional or sexual violence every year⁴ and 3 in 4 young children aged 2 to 4 years experience violent discipline on a regular basis.⁵ Children with developmental delays or disabilities are at particular risk of parental abuse and neglect.
- Experience of abuse and neglect in childhood is linked with the development of a wide range of mental and physical health problems.⁶ Between 15 and 23 per cent of children live with a parent who has a mental disorder,¹¹ which may present a risk for healthy parent-child relationships if parents do not receive appropriate and timely support.

¹UNICEF 2018 [unicef.org/sites/default/files/2019-01/UNICEF_Immunization_Roadmap_2018.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2019-01/UNICEF_Immunization_Roadmap_2018.pdf) p13

²Daly, M., R. Bray, Z. Bruckhauf, J. Byrne, A. Margaria, N. Pecnik, and M. Samms-Vaughan (2015). Family and Parenting Support: Policy and Provision in a Global Context, Innocenti Insight, UNICEF Office of Research, Florence

³UNICEF 2020 [unicef.org/media/77866/file/Parenting-Guidance-Note.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/media/77866/file/Parenting-Guidance-Note.pdf)

⁴Hillis S, Mercy J, Amobi A, et al., 2016, Global Prevalence of Past-year Violence Against Children: A Systematic Review and Minimum Estimates. *Pediatrics*. 2016;137(3):e20154079

⁵UNICEF: A Familiar Face 2017 [unicef.org/publications/files/Violence_in_the_lives_of_children_and_adolescents.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/publications/files/Violence_in_the_lives_of_children_and_adolescents.pdf) p7

⁶United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children. Hidden scars: how violence harms the mental health of children. New York, 2020

- Total annual costs attributable to abuse, neglect and other adverse childhood experiences, were estimated at US\$581 billion in Europe and US\$748 billion in North America.⁷ The annual economic burden of child abuse and neglect in the East Asia and the Pacific region amounts to some US\$200 billion, or around 1.88 per cent of the region's GDP.⁸

The evidence behind parenting interventions

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Costs and return on investment

- Parenting interventions to prevent abuse and neglect are low cost and easily scalable. Countries like the Philippines, South Africa and the United Republic of Tanzania¹³ have already scaled up non-commercial programmes nationally, for costs similar to those of a standard childhood vaccination programme.¹⁴
- Delivery costs for a package of early years home visiting can cost as little as US\$22 per family, depending on context, salaries, scale and participant incentives,¹⁵ with mobile-assisted boosters in childhood and adolescence costing around US\$8¹⁶ each. It is likely delivery costs would go down significantly after initial set-up costs and once countries reach scale.
- The return on investment for government budgets and societal well-being and other developmental outcomes across the life course is substantial, with research suggesting that every dollar spent on early childhood interventions delivers a 13 per cent per annum return on investment, through better education, economic, health and social outcomes.¹⁷ It is also estimated that a 10 per cent reduction in adverse childhood experiences (abuse, neglect and dysfunctional parenting) prevalence in Europe and North America could equate to annual savings of 3 million disability-adjusted life years or US\$105 billion.¹⁸

⁷pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31492648/

⁸Fang, X., Fry, D.A., Brown, D.S., Mercy, J.A., Dunne, M.P., Butchart, A.R., Corso, P.S., Maynzyuk, K., Dzhygyr, Y., Chen, Y., McCoy, A., & Swales, D.M. (2015). The burden of child maltreatment in the East Asia and Pacific region, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 42, 146-162.

⁹Ward, C. L. et al. *J. Child Psychol. Psychiatry* 61, 503–512 (2020)

¹⁰Cluver, L. et al. *BMJ Glob. Health* 3, e000539 (2018)

¹¹Puffer, E. S., Annan, J., Sim, A. L., Salhi, C. & Betancourt, T. S. *PLoS ONE* 12, e0172611 (2017)

¹²Innocenti Research Brief 2017-10

¹³who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/parenting-for-lifelong-health

¹⁴UNICEF 2018 [unicef.org/sites/default/files/2019-01/UNICEF_Immunization_Roadmap_2018.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2019-01/UNICEF_Immunization_Roadmap_2018.pdf) p13

¹⁵INSPIRE Handbook 2018, who.int/publications/i/item/inspire-handbook-action-for-implementing-the-seven-strategies-for-ending-violence-against-children

¹⁶cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/community/orphanhood-report.pdf

¹⁷heckmanequation.org/resource/invest-in-early-childhood-development-reduce-deficits-strengthen-the-economy/

¹⁸pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31492648/

An 'essential package' for governments to implement and scale

The early years offer one of the greatest entry points for promoting healthy attachment and parent-child relationships. Similar to vaccines against common childhood illnesses like polio and diphtheria, parenting interventions can be delivered in infancy, as part of existing services with boosters to provide further protection through childhood and adolescence. These interventions help parents develop knowledge and skills for effective communication with their children; for greater confidence in applying positive disciplinary strategies; and for managing their own mental health and well-being. Based on the currently available evidence, we recommend that an essential package to achieve universal quality parenting interventions comprise:

- A minimum of five to seven in-person sessions delivered at home or through centre-based interventions, engaging with all parents and caregivers of children under age 5.
- Reflecting the evolving needs and capacities of children and caregivers, follow-up 'booster' sessions to help parents and children navigate key developmental stages (e.g., middle childhood and adolescence). Booster sessions can be delivered digitally in group settings or in a hybrid of in-person and digital support.

All caregivers (and their children) should benefit from this kind of parenting support, but not all caregivers require the same level or intensity of intervention, and needs may fluctuate and evolve over time. This should be seen as a minimum and scalable package that governments should incorporate within a comprehensive, culturally and context-specific approach to parenting, including by building community systems to enable peer-to-peer support, engagement of male caregivers and more targeted interventions for caregivers of children with developmental delays and disabilities.

Adopting a minimum package of parenting interventions at the population level carries the potential to dramatically reduce incidence of neglect and abuse and the life course costs in terms of associated social, health and mental health outcomes.