

It's time to sing an *Ode to Parents*

Recognising how important and challenging it is to be a caregiver goes a long way

Eleanne Plaizier

Project Leader, 1e1000 dagen

Samenwerkende Gezondheidsfondsen
Amersfoort, Netherlands

To kick-start our mission to build the healthiest generation in the Netherlands, we began by talking to parents through focus groups and formative research. This exercise helped us realise that we needed to show more appreciation and support for parents in everything they already do for their children. We developed the Ode to Parents campaign to recognise the major effect parents have on a person's life. Our message was simple: parenting is beautiful and difficult, and you don't have to do it alone.

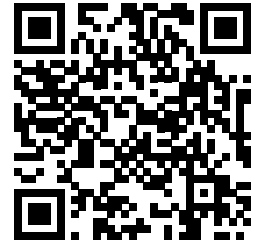
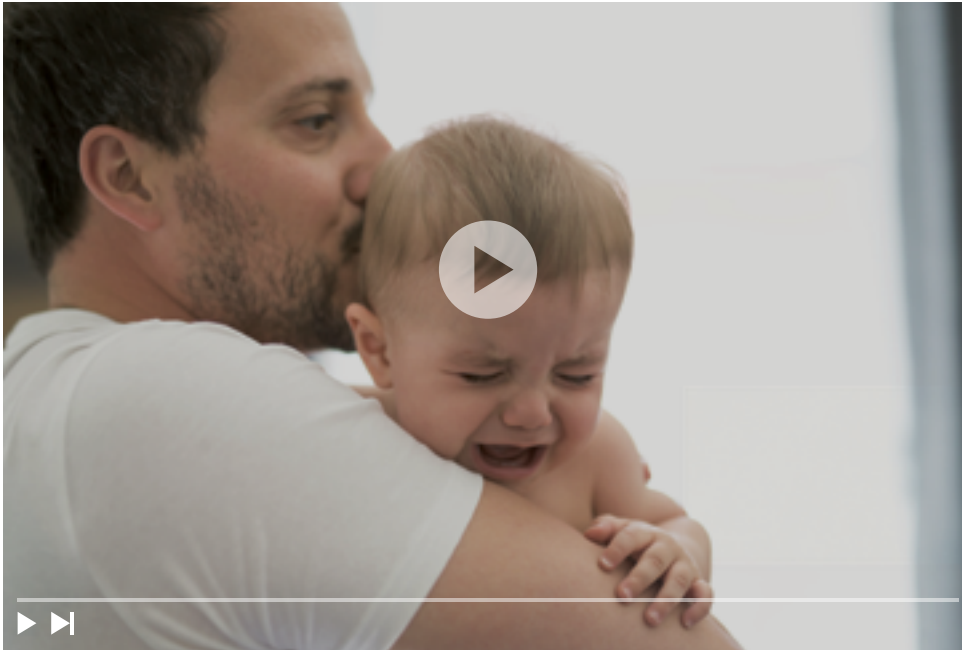
In 2017, 22 Health Funds – organisations that invest in research and healthcare innovation, and provide information and advice about various diseases – decided to invest in the *Gezonde Generatie* (Healthy Generation) programme. The aim was to ensure the mental, physical and social health of current and future generations. This requires taking concrete actions during the first 1,000 days of a child's life – a unique window of opportunity to get children off to a solid start.

“Parents also experienced stress from feeling that they needed to be able to do everything alone.”

We realised that we needed to work alongside the most important people in each child's life: their parents. But we also learned, from research conducted by Influencing for Health (Amsterdam UMC) in 2021, that 91% of parents find parenthood tough. In the study, parents indicated that they did not always have enough money, time or energy. They said they struggled with the pressure to work more, in order to be able to provide for their children. On top of all this, they also experienced stress from feeling that they needed to be able to do everything alone.

“Parenting is hard work. I think parents should get more credit for that. In modern society, women are forced to work to keep their heads above water. Men are often sidelined after conception. Women must work as if they have no children and mother as if they have no work. They are expected to be an engaged parent, while in many cases they are exhausted by worry and sleep deprivation.”

Eefke Postma (32 years old, with three children aged 7, 10 and 12), multidisciplinary expert advisor within the *Kansrijke Start* programme team and member of the *Kansrijke Start* mirror group



↑ Scan the QR code to watch the official launch video for the Ode to Parents campaign

We wanted to offer tips to parents on what to do to support the healthy development of their children. But we understood that we first needed to tell them that everything they were already doing was important and appreciated. We created an *Ode to Parents*, to recognise their hard work, love and sacrifice. It helped reinforce the message that they were already doing a great job and, most importantly, that they shouldn't feel that they needed to do everything alone. It's okay to ask for help. Parents' own needs and wellbeing are also important.

"You can't do it alone as a parent; it takes a village to raise a child. Many parents are unaware of trauma that they may pass on unknowingly. You should not stand next to a parent with a pointing finger, but full of wonder as the coaching and supporting party. If the informal network is not sufficient, a professional friend must be flown in, who approaches the parent with compassion and not with pity."
Eefke Postma

To reach as many parents as possible with this message, we ran a video and messaging campaign via television, cinema and social media, and in places where many young parents gather, such as the children's healthcare centres and public transportation. In total, we reached more than 5 million people with the campaign.

"I loved the Ode to Parents campaign. Much more needs to be done to empower parents and make sure they feel seen and heard. When I began to speak openly with other mothers about my struggles and honestly share what was happening to me, I found a connection that I had missed for a long time. In my own way, I try to create awareness among professionals and policymakers about various issues, such as prejudice. That's why the campaign touched me so much. It supports me in my mission to normalise parenting and the associated uncertainties."
Eefke Postma



↑ Scan the QR code to watch the 2022 video from the Ode to Parents campaign

In 2022, we continued the campaign with a new call to action to the people around parents. This time the message was to pay more attention to parents. With a small gesture you can make a big difference. We enlisted the help of influencers to spread this message. We reached many people, starting a conversation in society about asking for and giving support to parents.

“Government support is a key factor in determining the extent to which parents can take care of their children.”

“In addition to being a parent, you are also just a human being and an expert in your own life. The responsibility for a healthy, safe and promising start for children in the Netherlands should not be placed with the individual. It is a collective responsibility. It would be nice if society, including the government, were more supportive of parents.”

Eefke Postma

Government support is a key factor in determining the extent to which parents can take care of their children – being able to buy healthy food, spending time with them, managing financial stress. Only together can we move towards a healthy generation.

➤ Find this article online at earlychildhoodmatters.online/2023-9