

People before parents

Why the world needs a person-first approach towards parents and caregivers

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As the father of a 5-year-old, and a person living with mental illness, I often feel utterly incompetent at parenting. Barring fleeting moments of harmony, my days are a jumble of cluelessness, frustration and shame that I am doing such a lousy job – so much that I've put "[fumbling father](#)" on my business card.

I would have concluded that I am a uniquely untalented parent, except many other parents I know from disparate parts of the world share my despair. I suspect that parents feeling incompetent is the norm today. A confident parent is a fantastical creature, like a unicorn.

How did we get here?

Turns out, early hints of the modern parent's undoing surfaced some half a century ago, when a subtle linguistic shift took hold over popular culture: the noun "parent" started being used more and more as a verb.

I had no idea about this little piece of history and its far-reaching implications until I [interviewed Andrew Bomback](#) for this journal (page 12). The verb-ification of the word meant "parent" was now something to do and not someone to be, he explained. Being a

parent had degenerated from a life-altering physical, emotional and spiritual journey to a task, a chore – a project if you will.

It wasn't a coincidence that this shift was playing out at a time when women, including mothers, were entering the workforce in increasing numbers. Society was wagging its finger at them: Don't forget that your primary role is to raise kids. If you want to pursue a career and have it all, well then you must put the same amount of effort into parenting as you would into your job.

Parents in this new world faced a double dilemma. On the one hand, the demands of the workplace left them with less and less free time. And on the other hand, with the rise of nuclear families, they had to contend with disappearing family and social support. Exhausted and lonely, they became ready targets for a burgeoning parenting industry – guidebooks, workshops, and other mousetraps – that hawked the secret to being successful parents. The ground was laid for parenting to be touted as a "skill" that anybody could master, provided they had purchasing power. Missing family and friends? You could always get a monthly subscription to your favourite parenting influencer!

It's this glossy, Instagram-friendly version of parenting that we see plastered all around us today. As photographer and filmmaker Karni Arieli [shares in an interview](#) with us (page 18):

"All those images of women juggling apple pies and their kids, while wearing white linen, looking cute, going out for date night with your partner, and being really thin a month after birth, they all need to come with a disclaimer: 'This is fiction!'"

In this narrative, parents and other caregivers aren't humans with their own (warts-and-all) personhoods. We are all cogs in our culture's quest for efficient child rearing. The defining irony of contemporary parenting culture is that in spite of the barrage of parenting advice – and often because of the pressure to match the unrealistic standards it propagates – parents are drowning in stress and [burnout](#). Many suffer in silence because the price of being seen as a less-than-perfect parent or caregiver is crushing guilt and shame.

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The hardest hit are parents and caregivers from marginalised and disadvantaged communities, who cannot buy their way out of problems. In another interview for this journal (page 36), economist [Fabrizio Zilibotti](#) told me how worsening economic inequality has opened up an alarming parenting gap – the difference between the amount of time parents need to spend with their children to support their development, and the time they are actually able to after labouring to put food on the table.

As this gap grows bigger, children from poorer families lose out on vital parental nurturing. As they

grow up, they fall behind and are denied the chance to climb out of poverty – which in turn deepens economic inequality. It's a vicious cycle.

People before parents

The urgent need to reimagine support for caregivers is at the heart of this annual edition of *Early Childhood Matters*. In the following pages, you will find stories that centre the wellbeing of parents and caregivers – from Kenya to Brazil, from India to Ethiopia and from New Zealand to the Netherlands – and not just because it's important for the wellbeing of children. Our unapologetic belief is that parents and caregivers must be supported as humans first.

This isn't as straightforward as it may sound. The humanity of parents and caregivers has been so completely swallowed by their role as custodians of children that to demand separate space for it is almost too radical. The change we seek cannot be accomplished overnight. For starters, we need to recast caregiving as not just one individual's responsibility but a community undertaking, as it has always been through the long arc of human evolution before a large section of humanity – notably, western, educated, industrialised, rich, and democratic or WEIRD societies – lost their way.

Humans lived as hunter-gatherers for more than 95% of our history, anthropologist Nikhil Chaudhary writes in [his piece](#), co-authored with child and adolescent psychiatrist Annie Swanepoel (page 88). During his time working among the BaYaka hunter-gatherer community in Congo, Chaudhary saw up close how Akaya, the mother of an 8-month-old boy, leaned on as many as 16 community members or “allomothers” who tended to half of the infant's care. When Akaya fell sick, she was able to spend her days resting and focusing entirely on her recovery – an unthinkable luxury for lonely mothers in urban, individualistic societies, who are predictably vulnerable to disabling mental distress.

The fix for this “evolutionary mismatch” is enabling reliable human connections as the BaYaka continue to practise, not more “how to” manuals for parenting.

Elsewhere in this edition (page 15), Lucy Jones gives us [language](#) to honour these connections: Matrescence, a word originally coined by anthropologist Dana Raphael in the 1970s to capture the process of becoming a mother. Jones was elated at the birth of her child, but she was also overwhelmed by how difficult and bewildering she found motherhood to be. Echoing Chaudhary’s thesis, she writes that the institution of motherhood in the west is:

“nothing like the collective caregiving networks within which we evolved. I see new mothers around me suffering from loneliness, burnout and chronic stress – perhaps reflecting how we prize ideals of self-reliance and self-sufficiency, in a culture that puts financial interests before cooperation and people’s wellbeing.”

Jones argues that new mothers need a framework to begin to unlearn this absolute emphasis on self-reliance: to accept, offer and ask for help.

Restoring the agency of caregivers in a volatile world

Even as we celebrate human connection, we can’t wish away the reality that it is increasingly under attack in our world. As I write this, mindless, violent conflict is tearing apart families and taking an unspeakable toll on children in vast swathes of the world. Deepening poverty, especially in pockets of the developing world, presages a civic and public health disaster. And finally, the brutal effects of climate change are threatening to destroy the way of life of entire communities. Individual parents on the frontlines of these interlocking crises can feel profoundly disempowered.

When we began work on this edition in early 2023, we wanted to foreground the broad idea of caregiver wellbeing as the first step. Our next edition will continue on this theme as we explore further these complex, planetary-scale challenges with rigour, and,

crucially, with the solutions orientation that readers expect from *Early Childhood Matters*.

Today I urge you to [discover the work](#) of the nonprofit War Child, which is restoring agency to caregivers caught in conflict zones (page 82). War Child’s psychosocial wellbeing intervention for caregivers has received moving testimonials from participants, due in no small part to its decision to treat caregivers not as passive participants but as co-creators of the programme.

In Uganda and Zambia, the social enterprise [StrongMinds](#) has treated depression in nearly 400,000 people, the majority of whom are women, often mothers or grandmothers, struggling with the overload of juggling household, financial and childcare responsibilities (page 59). And in Kenya, [Kidogo](#) is solving for the absence of affordable and high-quality childcare in low-income neighbourhoods while generating dignified livelihood opportunities for women by creating a cadre of “Mamapreneurs” (page 72).

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Leaders across the world are doing their bit. [Adanech Abiebie](#), Mayor of Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, has thrown her might behind a plan to make the city the best in Africa to raise a child and to be a mother (page 56). [Dr Bharati Pravin Pawar](#), India’s Minister of State for Health and Family Welfare, writes about the country’s investment in reproductive, maternal, neonatal, child, and adolescent health (page 52). In Bogotá, [Diana Rodríguez Franco](#), former Secretary for Women’s Affairs in the city government, is overseeing the unique Care Blocks project that has already served over 400,000 women (page 66). And in the northeastern Brazilian state of Pernambuco, Governor [Raquel Lyra](#) plans to take on chronic poverty and poor health outcomes among women and young children through a conditional cash-transfer programme for women in poverty who have

children up to 6 years old, which also offers them professional and school qualification (page 39). Lyra writes in her article:

“It is our duty, as the people’s representatives, to guarantee citizenship and dignity even to those who do not yet have a voice to speak for themselves.”

The same spirit of restoring agency shines through in the [piece on parenting through the climate crisis](#) by Harriet Shugarman and Anya Kamenetz (page 30). They outline how parents across the world are organising themselves in the fight against climate change, and offer five powerful steps they can adopt to counter the anxiety triggered by catastrophic headlines.

Here’s one tip that the fumbling father in me loves:

“Explore [radical hope](#). [Believe in the possibility of] a future good in the face of turmoil and collapse, even though we might be unable to picture what this ‘good’ might look like right now. ... As parents, we have engaged in the ultimate act of radical hope by bringing new life into the world, which we expect to continue on after us. How do we do our best to make good on that commitment?”

On behalf of the *Early Childhood Matters* team, I hope these stories help you find some answers to that question.

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