

The Wellbeing
Issue



Van Leer
FOUNDATION

Early Childhood Matters

What does wellbeing
mean for parents and
other caregivers?

2023



Van Leer
FOUNDATION

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Birth of a parent

Michael Feigelson

Chief Executive Officer

Van Leer Foundation

**"How old are you?" he asked his daughter.
"Twu," she answered, still learning to form the
sounds of human language.**

"And me," he asked. "How old am I?"

"Twu," she replied. "Yuu twu!"

**Before I had a child, a friend shared this story. It
made me giggle.**

Just a few years into the world, the little girl did not yet grasp the idea that her father had a life before her. The story portrayed the curious, often funny process babies and toddlers go through as they develop a sense of who they are in relation to other people.

Having since become a father, I reflect on this story differently. As Lucy Jones puts it in her article for this journal, it reminds me that when a baby is born, a parent is also born.

Over the last 50 years scientists have learned a lot about early childhood. Amid the growing body of research, I have always found the neuroscience particularly compelling. During the early years of a child's life, the brain makes one million new neural connections every second. I love talking to people about this fact and showing them images of babies' neural networks, which look like celestial bodies. I see their sense of wonder when they hear this information for the first time. I think science has helped us understand why our earliest experiences shape so much of the people we become. It has given us a powerful window into how the early years are written into our bodies.

These insights have made their way into the cultural zeitgeist. Parents now obsess about how interactions with their children today can shape their futures. We have become fixated on how we shape *them*. This has generated new thinking and interest about what babies and toddlers need to thrive. It has stimulated an immense body of popular literature on the topic of parenting and – in some countries – led to important changes in healthcare and education.

But all of this has not changed our understanding of parenthood in the same way. We have not put the same level of scientific and cultural energy into asking the question: how do *they* shape *us*?

**"What if we looked at early
parenthood in a similar way to
how we have come to look at
early childhood?"**

Alongside the growing enthusiasm for early childhood have come new pressures and expectations of parents. This has taken place during a period in which women have joined the formal labour market and many of us have moved to cities, living further from our extended families. It may be the busiest time in human history to be a parent and it is arguably the first time our species has attempted to raise children in a team of just two people. The work parents do has changed, but the job description has not been updated. The story of parenthood needs retelling.

Introduction

→ Michael and his daughter Mila

To be fair, we have developed policies and institutions to step in and provide some of the help for which we used to depend on kin, but – with the exception of a small number of countries – neither the government nor the market has been able to fill the gap. This is beginning to change, but far too slowly. This is why we decided to devote this and the next issue of *Early Childhood Matters* to an exploration of the wellbeing of parents and other caregivers.

What if we looked at early parenthood in a similar way to how we have come to look at early childhood? A period of five years in which every dimension of our identity undergoes a metamorphosis. Our brains and bodies soften and reorganise. We learn and adapt with exceptional speed. Our web of social relationships transforms. We experience feelings for which we need new words that we struggle to pronounce. Our days and nights are in equal part awe and exhaustion.

What if we agreed that when a baby is born, a parent is also born? How would it help us reimagine what parents need? How might it change how we care for them?



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People before parents

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

Tanmoy Goswami

Creator, [Sanity by Tanmoy](#), an independent mental health storytelling platform

The Nilgiris, India

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.

“The ground was laid for parenting to be touted as a “skill” that anybody could master.”

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).

“Our unapologetic belief is that parents and caregivers must be supported as humans first.”

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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Why caregiver wellbeing is critical

Insights from real experiences of parents today

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interview with Andrew Bomback

*Author of Long Days, Short Years:
A Cultural History of Modern Parenting*



**“How parenting
became a verb”**

Andrew Bomback is a nephrologist, Associate Professor of Medicine at Columbia University Irving Medical Center, and the father of three kids aged 11, 8 and 5. He is the author of *Long Days, Short Years: A Cultural History of Modern Parenting*. In an interview with Tanmoy Goswami, Bomback talks about the cultural pressure to be perfect parents, how parenting has changed since the pandemic, and a “revolutionary” roadmap for parents to normalise help seeking and prioritise their wellbeing.

When did “parent” become a verb and what bearing did this have on the wellbeing of parents?

The use of “parent” as a verb began as far back as the 1950s. But the real uptick in that usage, at least in the USA, begins in the 1970s. It parallels pretty neatly the movement of women into the workplace. When the word “parent” becomes a verb, it’s essentially saying: “If you’re going to go into the workplace and adopt a new role in life, you need to put the same amount of effort into parenting as you would into your career.” It repositions parenting as a skill you can master if you put enough work into it. Now, if you’re a parent, you know it’s impossible to master parenting. But for multiple reasons this idea took hold ...

Yeah, and many of these reasons were market-driven ...

Indeed. Since more parents were working and spending less time at home, there was this new-found pressure that you needed to use your time more efficiently. Entire businesses were created off the promise that they’d help you parent better. Now that women were working, they also had extra money that they could use to buy these products and services. There’s also a cultural expectation that began in the ’70s that if you’re going to try to have it all as a mom with a career, you need to work at it, it’s not going to come naturally. We just completely sucked out any free time for parents because of these expectations.

Let’s explore the title of your book – the conventional narrative that parenting entails long days but short years. What do you make of this narrative?

I’ve heard the expression “long days and short years” so much that I was shocked when I learned

it was a relatively recent thing – the podcaster and writer Gretchen Rubin first used it less than 10 years ago. To me it feels like a double-edged sword, as if society will make some concessions and say, “Yeah, we realise being a parent now is much harder than it used to be. But at the same time, you’re a bad person and you are failing as a parent if you don’t appreciate the experience.” I think that’s also a very modern phenomenon – that you’re expected to sort of grin and bear it, and that way you can get through it faster than you think. Like it’s a chore.

“We just completely sucked out any free time for parents because of these expectations.”

The days are particularly long for parents who struggle with economic precarity.

I was just thinking about this yesterday as I dropped my children off at their summer camp. I remember thinking that it’s a real privilege that I am able to drop them off at 8.30 and start my job at 9 o’clock, rather than having the kind of job where I’d need to start at 7 or 7.30. The parenting advice industry that tells you how to cope with these long days is also geared towards people with privilege. You don’t see too many books that address single parents who are struggling to pay their rent, do you?

It doesn’t help when social media influencers project the idea that parenting is fun and effortless.

As far as social media goes, perhaps the best thing to do is to get off it. But I do feel that things are changing. Before the pandemic, there was a lot more of the high-gloss, fake version of parenting from influencers. It was all about successes: “Look how great we’re doing! Look at our amazing vacation pics! Look at our great birthday party! Look how happy my children are! Look how perfect this day was!” Now I see more authentic emotions. If somebody has a birthday party, they’re saying, “We’re so grateful we could do this with our family.” Parents are more open about their difficulties. They’re saying, “We are all struggling, let me share a few ideas that have helped me.”

There's also greater recognition that placing your entire focus on your child's wellbeing without any on yourself is a recipe for disaster.

You talk about the pushback against intensive or helicopter parenting in favour of giving kids more freedom.

Again, this philosophy is really geared towards middle- and upper-class parents. If lower-income parents practise hands-off parenting, they could be accused of neglect – even though they need their kids to be more independent because they don't have the resources and support that higher-income parents have.

“There's also greater recognition that placing your entire focus on your child's wellbeing without any on yourself is a recipe for disaster.”

You say fathers have found reading your book particularly cathartic. Why do you think that is?

I think they're talking about some of the discussions I have about parental frustration and rage. Moms feel anger too, of course. But I think there's a specific fear that some fathers have about where they might end up if their anger boils over, and they don't have enough spaces to talk about it. Unlike for my parents' generation, spanking children is out of the equation. When I rage as a parent, I know that if I were to spank my child, I'd feel extremely awful and guilty. I don't think people in my parents' generation always did this kind of post hoc analysis. We're much more critical of ourselves now.

As the father of a 5-year-old, I wonder whether early childhood is particularly fraught for parents, and if things get easier as the child grows older.

I do think there's something to the fact that people who are outside the active parenting years tend to be happier. Around the age of 50 or 60, people are at their happiest because they finally reach a state of acceptance. They no longer feel like they have to constantly prove themselves. The freedom to finally live the life they've missed can feel very relieving.

Do you have a roadmap for parenting that normalises help seeking and prioritises the wellbeing of parents?

I like what Angela Garbes says in her book *Essential Labor*. She uses the word “mothering” – a vision of raising children as a social and collective responsibility that includes people of all genders as well as non-parents – instead of parenting. Mothering, when seen this way, isn't a task for just one person. What you really need is to build up a circle of five to ten adults who love your child and who you can trust to be part of this child rearing. Garbes talks about how she lets some of her neighbours discipline her kids and pick them up from school. And she does the same for the neighbours' kids. So they have a symbiotic relationship. You could build the same understanding with grandparents or babysitters. Ultimately, the more reliable and safe and trustworthy help you can get, the more likely you are to succeed as a parent. And I think that is a potentially revolutionary way to view parenting.

🔗 Find this article online at earlychildhoodmatters.online/2023-3

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Becoming a parent changes our brains

Embracing “matrescence” can reshape how we care for caregivers

Lucy Jones

Author, *Matrescence*
Hampshire, UK

When I first became a mother, I was ashamed by how bewildering and discombobulating I found it. Like around 17% of new mothers across the world (Wang et al., 2021), I was diagnosed with post-natal depression. Then, about nine months into motherhood, I discovered a word that I found utterly transformative. The word was “matrescence”.

Matrescence simply means the process of becoming a mother. It’s pronounced like the word “adolescence” – and the meaning is similar, too. For, apart from adolescence, there is no other time in a person’s life course which entails such dramatic physical, psychological and social change.

I came to believe that this word, coined by the late anthropologist Dana Raphael in the 1970s, has powerful and radical potential to transform the way we as a society consider maternal health and the needs of babies and children in their earliest years. The concept of matrescence influenced my thinking so much that I wrote a book about it – called, well, *Matrescence* (2023).

Motherhood can be overwhelming

I was overjoyed to be pregnant, and elated when our daughter was born, but I was also bowled over by how different I felt. I had thought that pregnancy was a one-time, transient, purely physical event, and that I would return to myself when she was born. I had

thought I would mother intensely for nine months of maternity leave and then go back to work as normal.

I had expected parenthood to be tiring and challenging, of course, but I was overwhelmed by how difficult it often felt to meet my baby’s needs while also meeting some semblance of my own basic needs. No wonder the likelihood of depressive episodes doubles during this period, compared with other times in a woman’s life (Wang et al., 2021).

I live in England, where the institution of motherhood is intensive and mostly isolated and 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.

“I was overwhelmed by how difficult it often felt to meet my baby’s needs while also meeting some semblance of my own basic needs.”

When I first read about matrescence, my shoulders dropped for the first time in months. I finally realised that there wasn’t anything wrong with me: I was going through a major life transition. I learned



that mothers in matrescence experience a whole spectrum of emotions – joy, yes, but also worry, guilt, grief, frustration, fear and anger.

I had internalised the idea that I must “enjoy every minute” of my new mothering life. But while I was deeply grateful for my daughter, the social and cultural norms around me seemed to flatten the emotional and existential experience. Any expression of discomfort was seen as a failure. This sense of failure is widespread, I learned through my research. It leads to shame, which leads to silence, which can lead to isolation, which can lead to ill health and reduced wellbeing.

Caregiving changes your brain

In the process of writing my book, I got an opportunity to explore how other societies honour motherhood with rites and rituals that centre care for the mother. In the immediate post-natal period, these can include nutrient-rich meals, special drinks,

massages and herbal baths. Such traditions chime with the new science of motherhood, which reminds us of what more individualistic societies have forgotten – that new mothers as well as their babies are vulnerable and need support.

In a [landmark study](#) published in *Nature* in 2016, researchers led by neuroscientists Elseline Hoekzema and Erika Barba-Müller provided evidence for the first time that pregnancy renders pronounced, consistent changes in brain structure. Indeed, early research is also showing that caregiver brains experience significant plasticity even without the experience of pregnancy. Hands-on caring shapes brain circuitry and causes other biological changes.

The changes the brain undergoes during pregnancy have been underestimated, Hoekzema told me, “as hormones and their impact often are, and thought of as something akin to an extreme menstrual period, while this is of course on a completely different scale.” I had no idea before my own matrescence

that my brain would literally change shape. Nor that the plasticity of the brain in this period, through pregnancy particularly, can make the brain more vulnerable.

“The changes the brain undergoes during pregnancy have been underestimated.”

The more attention we pay to the physiological, endocrine and neural changes wrought by pregnancy, early parenthood, and caregiving in general, the more we will understand how these processes can trigger psychological distress and even mental illness and how we can improve postpartum care.

Rediscovering our interconnectedness

Many women I interviewed for my research felt isolated and even abandoned by society in early motherhood, which affected their mental health. Since publishing the book, I have received hundreds

of messages from women blindsided by early motherhood but relieved by the idea of matrescence. Readers have called it “life-changing”, “intensely healing” and “validating”. One wrote that it has “transformed my motherhood third time round and for the better”. Another, who had severe post-natal depression, said that “everything felt like it clicked for me mentally reading it”.

This concept can give us the language and understanding to have honest conversations that could have an enormous impact on the health and wellbeing of mothers, parents, and their infants. While it is critical to spread awareness of the emerging science, there is also room to go beyond the empirical and recover a sense of ritual or ceremony – to hold and acknowledge the woman in her transition, recognising our interdependence and interconnectedness.

Since my friends and I discovered the concept of matrescence, it has given us a framework to look after each other, to look out for other new mothers in our community, and to begin to unlearn self-reliance to a degree: to accept, offer and ask for help. As a society we need to remember that it is not only a baby who is born during childbirth – a mother is born, too, and she also needs to be cared for.

➤ Find this article online at earlychildhoodmatters.online/2023-4

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interview with Karni Arieli

Founder of Eye Mama Project



**“Little details that build
a bigger story of what it
means to be a mama”**

The Eye Mama Project is a platform for photographs taken by mothers that tell the real story of what life is like through the mama gaze. It is the brainchild of Karni Arieli, a photographer, filmmaker, curator, and mother of two kids aged 9 and 17. In an interview with Charlotte Davidi, she explains why she started the project and how it evolved into a book, *Eye Mama: Poetic Truths of Home and Motherhood*.

How did the Eye Mama Project begin?

I'm a mother and an artist, so I follow a lot of women artists on social media. During Covid-19 lockdowns, when we were all in our homes, I was seeing all these women document what was happening in their homes. These images felt like portals into their lives: the baby's crying, and the food's on the floor, and I'm struggling. This is the beauty, this is the pain, and this is how I live.

Seeing these day-to-day images and stories in parallel to my lockdown experience, I felt this great connection and empathy – like a web of connection to thousands of women worldwide, who are mothering and doing art. I saw myself in them, which made me feel less alone. And I was like, why isn't anyone collecting this?

So, I set up the Eye Mama platform, to collect what I call the "Mama Gaze" – self-portraits by mamas of the real world as told by them, looking introspectively into their own families and homes.

What do you think is missing in our current stories and representation of motherhood?

A great many women are struggling to meet the unmeetable representations of motherhood: the all-consumed, all-giving, boobs-and-flesh-and-selfless mother. 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!"

If you don't see enough depictions of reality, you think you're the only person in the world struggling with those voices: "I'm a failure. I do this badly." And that leads to really bad places. So, the more we see images of motherhood that aren't of a "perfect"

mama cuddling her happy baby, the better off we'll all be. And that's all to do with society empowering us and nothing to do with us as failures.

Why do mothers need to tell and share more stories about care? Can it help change how undervalued care work is?

When I started the Eye Mama project, it wasn't a political or empowering movement. It was me saying: "I love these images. I want to see more visual stories out there. I want to see dark and light." But yes, we need things that point out that we're putting in the same amount of hours, if not more, as any paid worker does but we're not receiving the societal credit, or being paid, or even being given paid leave from our other jobs.

Why tell the story? Because if social media are today's cave walls and we are the cave people painting on the walls, the storytellers and the cave people need to be mamas as well, carers as well, leaving their stories in the media, books, and popular culture.

"If you don't see enough depictions of reality, you think you're the only person in the world struggling."

Why is it so hard for mamas to tell their own stories?

The beginning of motherhood is like a rollercoaster: you can't get off and you're just holding tight. So, you're not going to say: "What I need is to empower myself and I shall write a story or make a book." No, you don't have the distance and perspective, you're only going to reflect years later. And by then you might be too tired and too removed from the experience to even bother.

So, we really need other women, and other people who care about care, to tell stories that empower the other carers. Or give them a platform to do so. If my kid wasn't already 5 in lockdown, I wouldn't have been able to do any of this and that's the honest truth.

The Eye Mama platform has created a community of photographer mamas – what stories do they tell?

The beauty of it is that all the stories are the same on one level, but also there's absolutely no singular experience of motherhood. Each mama is telling us about her life and her experience through her

particular lens. Some are very close up because the kid is sitting on your head. Some are further away because you've found a moment of observational time. Some zoom into detail, a nappy on the floor, or the light on the wall, the toys, or yourself within the chaos.



↑ **Playing with the Shadows, Brazil**

Photo: Paula Brandão

This is a picture by an eye mama from Brazil. You don't know if the child is female or male, you don't know if it's light or dark, you don't know if they're dancing or falling, playing or crying. There's movement. There's liveliness, but there's also a bit of scariness and the unknown because it's behind the curtain. Most importantly, it's visual pleasure. It's saying, "Come in, have a look." It's an opening into a world, so go in, have a look, and hopefully something in these stories touches you.

"There's liveliness, but there's also a bit of scariness and the unknown because it's behind the curtain."

→ *Long Days, Short Weeks*
(Self-portrait), Hungary
Photo: Luca Marko

“Nearly all the mamas are
saying, *I exist. I’m here.*
To me, that is so powerful.”

↘ *Divided Body*, Indonesia
Photo: Shindy Lestari

↓ *Finished Chapter*, USA
Photo: Bri McDaniel



“Then there are the
portraits saying the
opposite, *I don’t
exist.*”

→ **Hidden Mother: Eileen, USA**
Photo: Megan Jacobs





“There are the dualities, the dark and light; nothing meaningful is one thing.”

← **My Four, Barbados**
Photo: Aniya Emtage Legnaro



“Then there are the funny ones.”

↑ **Uta and Dad (Bathtime Tales), Japan**
Photo: Vika Množina Hashimoto



↑ *Bump as Canvas, USA*
Photo: Jamie Diamond

“The playful
ones.”

↓ **Mutant, Estonia**
Photo: Cloe Jancis



“The ones that say motherhood
without saying motherhood.”





“The ones that embody me as a photographer and a mama.”

← **Self-portrait, UK**
Photo: Imogen Freeland

“The joyfulness and the exhaustion.”

↓ **Entrelazadas, Colombia**
Photo: Paola Lizarazo Peña



“The fantasy and beauty
in everyday details.”

↓ **Vortex, Brazil**
Photo: Andressa Rangel

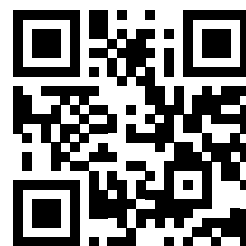




↑ *Look Mum! I Made Some Tiger Soup!*, Greece
Photo: Chrissa Vogiatzi

“The beauty of it all is the little details that build a bigger story of what it means to be a mama. It’s the feeling of motherhood. The realities of care unfiltered. There are plenty of parallels but each one is distinctive. Like *Tiger Soup*. We’ve all been there.”

➤ Find this article online at earlychildhoodmatters.online/2023-5



Note

More about the Eye Mama project and details of Karni Arieli’s book *Eye Mama: Poetic Truths of Home and Motherhood* (2023) can be found at: <https://eyemamaproject.com>

Parenting through despair with hope for our climate future

When facing climate anxiety, caregivers need to put on their own mental health oxygen mask first

Harriet Shugarman

Inaugural Co-Chair, Advisory Council

Our Kids' Climate

New York, USA

Anya Kamenetz

Author and Climate Communications Consultant

Climate Mental Health Network

New York, USA

Over the summer of 2023, extreme weather, including torrential rain and subsequent flooding events, record heat waves, smoke and wildfires, pummelled communities around the world. Commenting on the fact that July 2023 was the hottest month ever recorded globally, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres declared: “The era of global warming has ended” and “the era of global boiling has arrived”.

In response to New York City's June 2023 unprecedented clean air emergency – brought on by record wildfires in Canada – [comedy writer Bess Kalb](#) posted a message that went viral:

“My eldest boy (3) won't wear a mask to protect himself against smoke inhalation because it makes him scared that ‘the virus’ is back and I want to be like ‘Well, son, we live in hell,’ but instead I said ‘We are so lucky to have ways to protect our bodies from unhealthy air!’”

All around the world, parents of young children frequently face the dilemma that Kalb describes – balancing their own distress at climate-related

crises, from wildfires to floods to heat waves, with the need to manage their children's feelings.

“This summer was downright frightening ... We are used to the heat but over two weeks of temperatures at 40 °C and a couple of days at 41 and 42 was not normal. The heat index or ‘feeling temperature’ was above 50 most days and the wet bulb temperature crossed safe levels once. My anxiety about my child's future has nothing to do with school scores, college admissions etc. ... I only worry about climate change. The anxiety is like a dull headache that never goes away.”
Nina Subramani, Chennai, India

There is increasing conversation about and research on the mental health implications of climate change for youth and young children. But its very real and widespread impact on parents is often overlooked. In 2022, for example, one US survey of parents found that [over 70% are concerned](#) about climate change's impact on their children (Jackson et al., 2022).

Facing up to the reality of climate change as a parent can ignite a range of complex feelings. Realising that

the responsibility to create a safe and sustainable home for your child sits on you can be daunting at the best of times. And when that “home” also means the planet we live on, it can be overwhelming. The anxiety of climate change impacts greatly affects parents today, and already far too many families around the world have lost their homes, livelihoods, and security to the growing number of climate catastrophes.

Climate anxiety is growing among parents and prospective parents

The concept of climate anxiety began to be addressed in peer-reviewed literature around the mid-2010s. It is seen as closely connected with more general, threat-related emotions such as fear and worry (Pikhala, 2022a). Some use the term to refer narrowly to anxiety. Others speak of a range of emotions such as outrage, grief, dread, guilt, shock, trauma, and a feeling referred to as solastalgia – a loss of the sense of security provided by the place you call home (Pikhala, 2022b).

At first, studies looked at how climate scientists were dealing with their emotions. This led to the creation of organisations such as the Climate Psychology Alliance and support networks for people to wrestle with climate emotions, called “climate circles”. Climate scientists began to

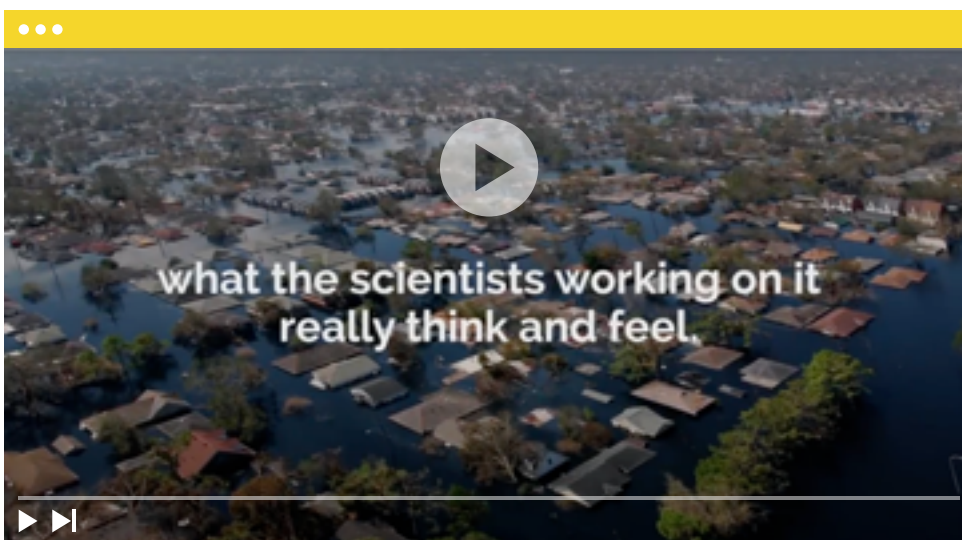
speak out in their identity as parents, and parents formed climate-focused advocacy groups such as ClimateMama, Moms Clean Air Force (MCAF), and Mothers Out Front in the USA – all between 2009 and 2013; Parents for Future (Global) and Mothers Rise Up (UK) founded in 2019; and Warrior Moms (India) founded in 2020.

“Facing up to the reality of climate change as a parent can ignite a range of complex feelings.”

The foregrounding of mothers in this movement is characteristic of most parent affinity groups, like parent-teacher associations. It’s also the case that women are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change and to climate anxiety, in part because of their economic position and in part because of the social pressure to be the primary caregiver (Clayton et al., 2023).

In the early days of climate feelings-related research and organising, there was little direct focus on the psychological impacts of the climate

Video: More Than Scientists



↑ Scan the QR code to watch a video from More than Scientists, which shares their personal views and feelings about climate change.

crisis on parents. This began to change in 2020 with the publication of co-author Harriet Shugarman's book, *How to Talk to Your Kids about Climate Change: Turning Angst into Action*. In the same year, a paper in *The Lancet* linked eco-grief to parenting (Cunsola et al., 2020). MCAF's website now includes a [fact sheet](#) for parents on climate change and mental health (Moms Clean Air Force, 2022).

Despite this recent progress, however, parental eco-grief remains significantly under-addressed.

"It seems like there is so much to be done, with limited time and resources, which often leads me to feel burnt out, exhausted, and overwhelmed. I know I can't stop, and I won't stop. So, I continue to strive to take care of my own physical and mental health, as well as my family and team members, so that we can keep moving forward, even running faster, to ensure the impact we make is more significant."

Yasmina Hasni, Indonesia

Five ways to process climate feelings as a parent

The cliché of "put on your own oxygen mask first" applies to this situation. Without self-work to address our own climate-related feelings, we are unlikely to effectively respond to our children's emotional needs. Indeed, ignoring the subject seems to be a common response. US-based [research](#) found that while 82%

of respondents believe we must give children the knowledge and skills to build a sustainable world, only 49% of parents said they had talked to their children about it (Kamenetz, 2022).

How can parents go about dealing with their own climate-related feelings? We suggest five approaches:

1 Break the silence

Engage your existing networks and other parents in conversations about climate change. Chances are that someone you already know and care about is grappling with climate feelings too and is willing to talk about them with you. Finding out you're not alone will likely make you feel better. Alternatively, use existing spaces such as [Climate Cafés](#) and [The Good Grief Network](#), which has a 10-step peer-to-peer programme.

2 Start with gratitude

Research has shown that [practising gratitude](#) for the gifts of the natural world we enjoy every day can be a powerful driver of sustainable actions (Serazin and Emmons, 2021). As parents, we could also practise gratitude for the love we hold for our children and our desire to protect them, which in turn connects us to our wellspring of compassion for all life and concern for the future. [The Work That Reconnects](#) offers free online courses, webinars, and in-person workshops in a four-step programme that starts with gratitude as a basis for expressing pain for the world and cultivating active hope.



"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."

3 Connect with a community

Growing global networks of climate-concerned parents, such as [Our Kids' Climate](#) and [Parents For Future](#), help parents unite and cross-pollinate. Parents draw on their moral authority and their grounding in a community to be effective activists. They also hold important stakeholder roles as members of school communities. Parents are visible as activists on the frontlines, working in schools and on curricula, and on issues such as infrastructure adaptation and food security. They can help find ways to build and foster communities to withstand – and also to find ways to let go – as the evolving climate crisis dictates.

4 Explore “radical hope”

A concept often credited to philosopher [Jonathan Lear](#), radical hope involves anticipating 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 (Van Broekhoven, n.d.). This philosophy can help us reflect deeply about how we can and will continue as a species, even when we must say goodbye to familiar places and cultures as they are irreversibly altered or even disappeared by climate change. 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?

“Acknowledging and moving through our own climate grief is step zero in helping children.”



5 Practise “radical joy”

Parenting requires a level of comfort with big emotions, from tears, to tantrums, to laughter. We teach our children to regulate, not to hide from or be overwhelmed by emotions. This includes joy and, in our world, joy needs a place more than ever. Radical joy, as coined by Trebbe Johnson, is a practice of sanctifying “wounded” spaces with collective ceremony, vigil, and apology. For example, rather than avoid talking about someone who has died, you go to the funeral and sing. We do these things to “expose our hearts to difficult feelings of loss and guilt”, and to find a new sense of love and acceptance.

Parenting in the climate crisis means talking about the crisis with children, managing emotions, and taking action as a family. Bringing feelings out in the open is essential in order to create family plans to address the crisis. Acknowledging and moving through our own climate grief is step zero in helping children build their own resilience and tools to contribute to change.

🔗 Find this article online at earlychildhoodmatters.online/2023-6

**Parents
from Our
Kids’ Climate
network share
what gives
them hope
right now**

“

Sally Giblin, Australia

“It’s so important that we retain hope. And rather than tell ourselves a story of despair and hopelessness and doom – we tell ourselves a story of optimism and solutions and people rising up for change. Problems can grow exponentially. But so can solutions. The three biggest things that give me hope?

- 1 Surrounding myself with positive climate content – stories of solutions and change
- 2 Recognising the strength of human spirit to overcome adversity – which humans have done time and time again through history
- 3 Finding my climate agency – my own unique way to take positive, meaningful climate action.”

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Dora Napolitano, Mexico

“Since Zurciendo el planeta [which started as a virtual embroidery workshop with an ecological focus during the pandemic] became a collective I have felt so much more hope, so much more involvement, not because I was necessarily doing more myself, but because it was directly reaching more people. Before the collective, I still felt like we (my family) were a drop in the ocean. Having a strong group of like-minded women, even spread so far around the world, is really amazing. We always have someone to consult when we hear bad news, we help each other see the good news, we give each other strength to create good news stories in each of our distant communities.”

Rayana Burgos, Brazil

“It gives me hope to know that I can be a game changer in the world, even if it’s on a micro level. On a personal level, seeing that my family has started to understand the climate impact of their actions is important. Furthermore, what gives me hope is knowing that I managed to combine profession, lifestyle and religion in the same line of environmental defence. I’ve been learning to listen to stories about resilience and each person in their own way teaches me not to give up. What gives me hope is knowing that there are so many other people who, despite being afraid, still haven’t given up. And because of them I won’t give up either.”

”

interview with Fabrizio Zilibotti

Co-author of Love, Money & Parenting:
How Economics Explains the Way We Raise Our Kids



**“Growing inequality
is worsening the
parenting gap”**

The idea of the “parenting gap” – whereby parents from lower economic strata are often unable to spend enough time with their children – is neglected in conversations around parenting. Fabrizio Zilibotti, co-author of the book *Love, Money & Parenting: How Economics Explains the Way We Raise Our Kids* (2019), talks about the crucial influence of economic inequality on parenting decisions, in an interview with Tanmoy Goswami.

What is the “parenting gap”, and how is it related to economic inequality?

This is the central question in our book. Across the world, there are societies where getting into the “best” schools or making the “right” choices or not getting “distracted” is very important for the future success of children. All this requires the intensive involvement of parents. But when parents struggle economically – especially in societies with high inequality and poor socioeconomic safety nets – they are unable to invest this kind of time and attention in their children. This creates what we call the parenting gap.

Is the parenting gap increasing or decreasing?

Generally speaking, the number of hours parents spend with their children has increased significantly in the past four or five decades. But this gain has been much greater for richer families. If you compared wealthier parents with those from a lower socioeconomic status in the 1960s or 1970s, the difference in the amount of time they spent in direct contact with their children was quite small. With growing inequality, that difference has increased. This disparity in parental involvement means children from poorer families have a lower chance of doing well and climbing the social ladder as they grow up, which in turn worsens economic inequality. It’s a vicious cycle.

Is the parenting gap only present in poorer economies?

No, you can see the parenting gap even within advanced economies. For instance, in recent years, more educated parents in the USA have spent nearly two hours more per week with their children than their less educated counterparts.

When is the impact of the parenting gap most crucial?

The evidence shows that the older children get, the harder it is for parents to influence change. Of course, it’s not as if parents can’t do anything for older children. Wealthier parents can pay more for tuition or music and sports lessons, for instance. In adolescence, the importance of peer-to-peer relations increases, and one obvious way parents can influence that is by their choice of neighbourhood.

“When parents struggle economically – especially in societies with high inequality and poor socioeconomic safety nets – they are unable to invest this kind of time and attention in their children.”

How does economic inequality intersect with parental stress and wellbeing?

In multiple ways. As some people get disproportionately wealthier, they drive up the demand for as well as the cost of education and self-improvement – from tuition fees to childcare costs to fees for music or sports lessons – making them unaffordable for poorer families. Poorer parents often must work multiple jobs to make ends meet, which leaves them both time-poor and stressed. Richer parents can pay for support such as housecleaning, which both improves their wellbeing and allows them more time to tend to their children. We also see that, in many countries, single parenthood is much more common among lower-income populations. This adds a different layer of stress.

Your book makes the case that differences in parenting styles, which are typically explained as a function of “culture”, in fact have much to do with economic inequality.

That’s right. “Culture” can be a bit of a black box. My co-author Matthias Doepke and I have had exposure to very diverse parenting styles – in Italy, Spain, the UK, the USA, Sweden and China. There are

striking differences among how parents behave not just *between* these countries but also *within* them. In each of these countries, some parents practise hands-off and permissive parenting, whereas others practise authoritarian parenting. Now, if we assume that most parents love their children and want them to be happy and successful, what explains this difference? It cannot be explained by “culture” alone – there is a strong correlation between parenting styles and families’ economic backgrounds. Psychologists have said for a long time that authoritarian parenting is more common in low-income families [Straus and Stewart, 1999]. In the book, we share data showing that in the UK, for instance, the proportion of parents who value “obedience” in their children – a defining feature of authoritarian parenting – is much higher in the lower economic classes than in the upper classes.

What is the solution to the parenting gap?

Stronger institutions and more informed policies. For instance, research by Nobel laureate James Heckman and others shows that programmes aimed at disadvantaged families – such as subsidised high-quality childcare, in-home support for parents, and high-quality preschool education for kids – during early childhood have a strong and long-term positive impact on children’s non-cognitive skills.

These children become more motivated to learn, less likely to engage in crime, and generally more likely to think about the consequences of their choices.

“There is a strong correlation between parenting styles and families’ economic backgrounds.”

Other policies could be macroeconomic, such as progressive taxation and income redistribution. Most of these policies aren’t as expensive as you might expect – in fact, Heckman’s research shows they can pay for themselves many times over [Heckman, 2023]. Subsidised daycare reduces the burden of other welfare policies and increases labour participation and tax revenue. Reduced crime means lower spending on prisons. And the long-term benefit of social cohesion is difficult to quantify but could be substantial. Such policies can reverse the vicious cycle that many families are trapped in by reducing economic inequality, which in turn helps reduce caregiver stress and closes the parenting gap.

➤ Find this article online at earlychildhoodmatters.online/2023-7

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Supporting women is essential for early childhood policies

First steps on a journey to transform health and wellbeing in Pernambuco

Raquel Lyra

*Governor of the State of Pernambuco
Brazil*

Early childhood provides a good guide for designing policy in government. It sits at the intersection of a range of services from education to health, social assistance and public infrastructure. As the Mayor of Caruaru from 2017 to 2022, a municipality in the state of Pernambuco in north-eastern Brazil, I used the national Early Childhood Legal Framework – passed in 2016 – as a starting point to develop intersectoral municipal policies (Government of Brazil, 2016).

These policies recognised that supporting children also means supporting their caregivers – and the main caregivers are usually women. Caregiving responsibilities bring women pressure and stress, adding to the inequality they already face. We passed a law in Caruaru, for example, to guarantee assistance to pregnant women before and after childbirth (Municipality of Caruaru, 2017). We built a new maternity hospital and 16 early childhood education centres, tripling the number of children served and enabling more mothers to access training that leads to a professional qualification.

We also partnered with the Van Leer Foundation's Urban95 programme to improve the collection and sharing of data across education, health and social assistance that allowed us to identify women in

need of support. In 2020, the Abrinq Foundation recognised these and other achievements by awarding the municipality its Friend of Childhood Seal (Fundação Abrinq, no date).

“Moving from municipal- to state-level governance brings challenges beyond simply needing to serve a larger population.”

But is it possible to emulate this policy platform on a wider scale? In the 2022 state elections, I was elected Governor of Pernambuco. Vice-Governor Priscila Krause and I became the first all-female state-level administration in the history of Brazil. But we quickly found that moving from municipal- to state-level governance brings challenges beyond simply needing to serve a larger population. It is also about managing differences in contexts across the region, in which many people live in conditions that heighten their levels of vulnerability.



Photo: Miva Filho

Challenges at state level to support a good start for all children

Our ambition is to ensure complete and integrated care for every child from Pernambuco, considering child development in all its different dimensions, involving children, caregivers and the environments in which they interact. We aim to deliver interventions and services that strengthen the ability of mothers in vulnerable circumstances to provide their children

with adequate nutrition, stimuli, love, and protection against stress and violence.

We knew we needed to begin this process by better understanding the experiences of children and women in the state. Many of the statistics are discouraging. Poverty increased more in 2021 in Pernambuco than in any other Brazilian state, climbing by over 8 percentage points in just a year



“This shortfall in daycare facilities contributes to perpetuating the high poverty rates.”

children aged 3 years and younger are in nurseries or daycare facilities, the lowest percentage among states in Brazil's Northeast Region (National Council of Justice, 2019).

As access to high-quality childcare has been shown to increase women's participation in the labour market (OECD Development Centre, 2014), we believe this shortfall in daycare facilities contributes to perpetuating the high poverty rates. In Pernambuco, women are the demographic group most likely to live in poverty – at a rate of 52.3% in 2021 – followed by children from birth to age 9 (FGV Social, 2022). The gender disparity is reflected across Brazil, where 19.3% of female-headed households experienced severe food insecurity in 2022, compared to 11.9% of male-headed households (Rede PENSSAM, 2022).

– which meant over 800,000 more people falling back into poverty (FGV Social, 2022). Only 32.6% of pregnant women in Pernambuco had at least seven medical check-ups during pregnancy, as the Ministry of Health recommends. The state's child mortality rate is high – 12.42 per 1,000 live births in Pernambuco in 2021 (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2021) – and we know that 70% of those deaths were avoidable. Only 17.7% of

The journey ahead for the early years in Pernambuco

Within these statistics lie many and varied human stories, so our First State Plan for Early Childhood starts with listening – to civil society, municipal governments, women and children. We envision this plan will include intersectoral actions, from the prenatal stage to a child's support network. It will identify bottlenecks and implement solutions, from building maternity units to creating 60,000 new

openings in daycare facilities across the state, and improving the quality of early childhood education in partnership with municipalities. As of November of 2023, we've submitted for approval a law project for the "Mothers of Pernambuco", a conditional cash-transfer programme for women in poverty who have children up to 6 years old, which also offers them professional and school qualifications.

These are only the first steps on the journey. 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. Supporting children to thrive starts with ensuring the health and wellbeing of women in Pernambuco, so they have the capacity to provide their children with a safer and more nurturing environment.

➤ Find this article online at earlychildhoodmatters.online/2023-8

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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

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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.

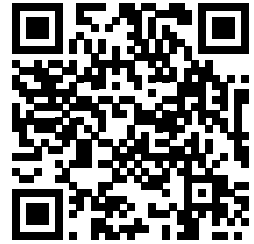
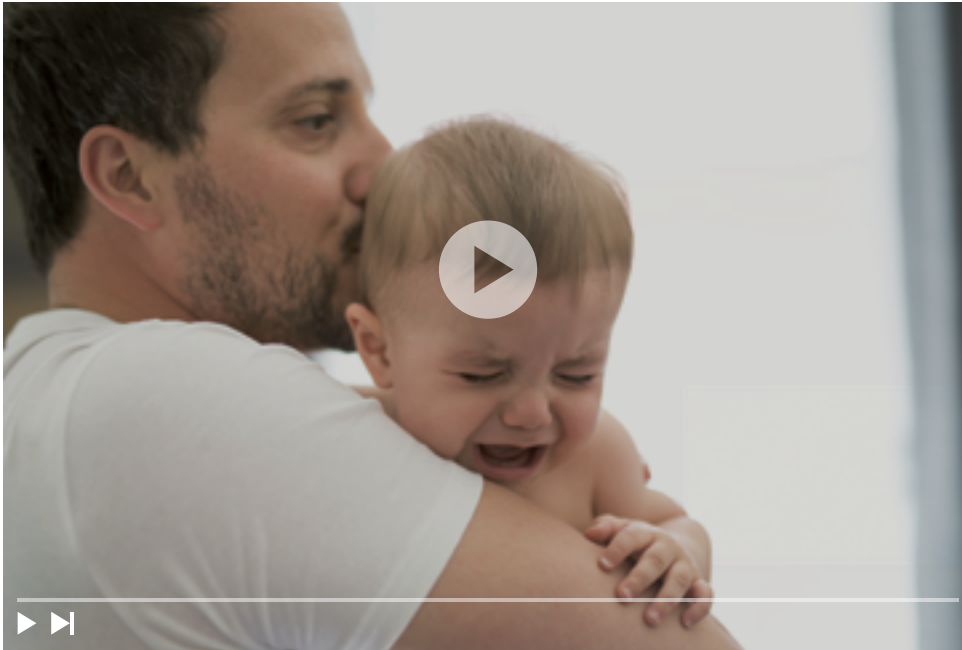
In 2017, 22 Health Funds – organisations that invest in research and healthcare innovation, and provide information and advice about various diseases – decided to invest in the Gezonde Generatie (Healthy Generation) programme. The aim was to ensure the mental, physical and social health of current and 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.

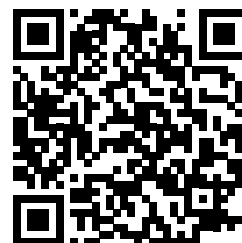
"You can't do it alone as a parent; it takes a village to raise a child. Many parents are unaware of trauma that they may pass on unknowingly. You should not stand next to a parent with a pointing finger, but full of wonder as the coaching and supporting party. If the informal network is not sufficient,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

interview with Juanes

Musician



**“Being a father means
opening your soul”**

The Colombian singer-songwriter Juanes, winner of 28 Grammy and Latin Grammy awards, became a father in 2003 when he and his wife, Karen Cecilia Martínez, welcomed Luna into the world, followed by Paloma (2005) and Dante (2009). For him, fatherhood is “the greatest gift in life” and he explains that it marked a new chapter for him. Since then, his discography has featured songs written for his children, like *Para tu amor*, which was composed when his daughter Luna was 2 weeks old, or *Tu guardián*, “a song that helps them get to sleep and protects them from monsters”.

In this father-to-father conversation with Michael Feigelson, CEO of the Van Leer Foundation, the artist reflects on how having children changed everything, how he takes care of himself so that he can take care of others, the role of music and art in raising children, and the importance of communication and being emotionally open to being a better husband and father.

The moment when I learned I was going to be a father is a special memory for me. Do you remember when Cecilia told you that you were going to be a father?

I’ve never told anyone this, but a few days before, in Los Angeles, a friend of mine sent me a message that said something like “I dreamed about you last night, and you had a daughter with little golden curls.” When we got to Bogotá, Cecilia missed her period, so she had an exam and indeed she was pregnant. I called my friend and asked her “Hey! Are you a witch or something?” (*laughter*).

We had always wanted to have children. I was very excited and nervous, typical for someone starting a new chapter of their life. I wasn’t scared. Actually, it was something I wanted from the bottom of my heart.

And the pregnancy? For us, it wasn’t quite what we had bargained for. The first three months were especially difficult. How was this process for you?

We were living in Bogotá when we started this new chapter, and at the time I was travelling too much. Not being able to be with Cecilia made me feel powerless, but at the same time we were very young and could handle it. When Cecilia was four



↑ Juanes and his two daughters

or five months pregnant, she came to Miami, and things were harder there because we didn’t have any friends or family, and when I travelled, she stayed alone. But we always dreamed of that new future, that new experience, and we accepted the challenge.

Then, the day arrived, and you met Luna for the first time. Can you describe that moment?

How did you feel?

Her birth was a time of great joy, but it was also a very tense moment because when one of my sisters gave birth three decades ago, there was a severe complication, and she fell into a coma for 27 years. I felt the same anxiety as I did then.

Afterwards, we forgot everything we prepared for, everything we rehearsed for the birth. When she was born, I counted her fingers, looked at her eyes, her lips, her nose, her mouth. There was so much joy in that room. The doctor, the nurse, and Cecilia and I were there and then, the next moment, somebody else was with us. We were so happy.

What did you learn from the experience of the first few days after Luna's birth that you could apply with Paloma and Dante? What was different?

I was too nervous with Luna. I didn't let anybody hold her. I was paranoid about everything. I woke up at midnight to make sure she was breathing well. I think that we were a little bit more relaxed with Paloma and Dante.

Mothers and fathers are always so committed to our children that sometimes we forget to take care of ourselves, of each other. How do you care for your wellbeing and that of Cecilia so that you can be parents?

Cecilia and I had a lot in common, and we still both like to play sports and stay healthy. But it's also important to talk a lot, to communicate. I think that dreaming together and seeing ourselves together in the future is important.

How do you use music in your role as a father to transmit that energy to your children as they grow up?

I think that art is very important in the cognitive development of any human being, especially during formative years. Art changed my childhood, and I was acutely aware of this when Luna, Paloma and Dante were born. I think that music, and everything that is playful, including textures, colours and scents, are critical.

I'm terrible at singing, but I discovered that, by singing the Hebrew chants from my bar mitzvah to my daughter, chants that I thought I had forgotten, she fell asleep. Lots of people feel uncomfortable singing because they don't sing well. What tip could you give to new dads who don't sing well on how to use music with their babies?

I think music is like air. Anyone can and should breathe it. It doesn't matter if you're not a professional singer. You don't have to be Pavarotti to sing to your baby. Your son or daughter connects with the vibration of your voice even before birth. Tuning isn't important. What's important is singing with love. They discover their voice, their tongue, their lips. They discover the sounds they can make and then they make words.

"I think music is like air. Anyone can and should breathe it. It doesn't matter if you're not a professional singer."

I know that, with Dante, there was a moment when you made the decision to take a break from work. How did that process go?

When Dante was born in 2009, I couldn't handle the pain I felt and his crying when I left home. It was devastating because the same thing happened with Luna and Paloma. At that time, I realised that I had lost a lot of time without making a space where I could look after myself.

It was pretty strange at that moment. They thought I was crazy. Why would I want to stop earning so much money and abandon a very successful streak? But I made the right decision. I only took a break of four or five months, but that was what I needed. I needed to be at home with them. Today we have a great relationship. We are really connected, and I think that this is thanks to the fact that I made that decision.

← Paloma, Juanes, Dante, Cecilia, Luna



Why do you think that it is so hard for us to make that type of decision as fathers?

We are educated in a society where you always need to be producing, but our children and our relationship with them is what we need to care about. I was very anxious at that time because it could have been the end of my career, but today, in retrospect, I feel happy because I made a decision that was consistent with who I am.

“Vulnerability makes you strong.”

In our work, I’ve seen that, especially for fathers, and men in general, it’s difficult to open up emotionally. Why do you think this happens?

I think that, maybe for the same reason why society demands that we produce more and more, we have also had a macho society in which men can’t cry, can’t show any type of “weakness”. But I think vulnerability makes you strong. Talking with your best friends or people you confide in about your problems at home or with your children can be the healthiest thing you can do.

I understand that you often sing to your mother. It seems like a really great way to care for her, to repay her for the care she gave you during childhood. How did this tradition start? What do you usually sing to her?

Growing up there was always singing in my house, especially when we spent time together in the living room. I think that my mother is really connected to that time. When I sing those songs to her, I think she remembers. Whenever I go home, she asks me to sing to her. In my house we listened to a lot of music from all over, but mostly Latin American music. She really likes when I sing a song to her called *Sapo Cancionero*, interpreted by Los Chalchaleros.



↑ Juanes with his mother and daughter

Note

In 2006, Juanes started the foundation Mi Sangre, which is dedicated to a culture of peace in Colombia. Mi Sangre develops life, leadership and social entrepreneurship skills in children and young adults. By guiding the new generation, Mi Sangre helps prepare future mothers and fathers in Colombia.

↗ Find this article online at earlychildhoodmatters.online/2023-10





Reimagining support for parents and caregivers

Policies and programmes that make a life-changing difference

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How India is shaping the future by investing in caregiver wellbeing

Benefits abound when governments prioritise parents and caregivers

Dr Bharati Pravin Pawar

Minister of State for Health and Family Welfare

Government of India

Children are like wet clay: whatever touches them makes an impression. The early phases of a child's life are a particularly sensitive time, leaving a lasting impact that reaches far beyond childhood. Especially critical are the child's first 1,000 days, the period from conception to 2 years of age, when the brain develops most rapidly. The basic blueprint of the brain is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth and is influenced by a pregnant woman's health, her stress levels, her nutrition and the intrauterine environment.

Caregivers – predominantly mothers, but also fathers, grandparents and other family members – provide the love and nurturing care that are essential for a child's physical, cognitive and emotional development. Yet many of the immense responsibilities that caregivers shoulder often go unrecognised and undervalued.

The health and wellbeing of caregivers is a critical influence on the health of our children and, by extension, the health and wellbeing of our nation. By investing in caregiver wellbeing, we can transform

India's socioeconomic future. And, notwithstanding the challenges that come with being a vast and diverse country, we are making significant strides in this direction.

“By investing in caregiver wellbeing, we can transform India's socioeconomic future.”

Ambitious programmes on maternal and child health in India

Acknowledging the challenges and prioritising the wellbeing of caregivers are key components of early childhood development. If a pregnant woman or a new mother suffers from anaemia, for example, it can interfere with her ability to care for herself and her child, and harm the child's nutrition.

In recent years, the Government of India under the determined leadership of Hon. Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi ji has launched a number of major programmes to invest in caregivers:



Photo: Jignesh C. Panchal

- We recognise the need to start even before conception. The *POSHAN Abhiyaan*, introduced by Hon. Prime Minister Narendra Modi ji in 2018, focuses on nourishment not only for young children, lactating mothers and pregnant women, but for all women of reproductive age.
- All pregnant women in India are entitled to comprehensive, high-quality antenatal care free of charge, through the ambitious *Pradhan Mantri Surakshit Matritva Abhiyan* programme, which has reached over 40 million women so far.
- The *Surakshit Matritva Aashwasan* programme aims to end preventable maternal and newborn deaths through over 25,000 delivery points for healthcare services across the country.
- To encourage women to make use of healthcare services, a cash incentive scheme called *Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana* makes payments of INR 5,000 (around USD 60) to first-time mothers in three instalments: when they register their pregnancy with a health provider; when they have an antenatal checkup; and when they register their child's birth and have their first round of vaccinations.
- The *Janani Suraksha Yojana*, a conditional cash transfer scheme, provides a further incentive for women to give birth in a healthcare institution rather than at home. Such cash payments also help compensate mothers for their lost wages and cover incidental expenses, enabling them to take more rest and afford better nutrition before and after childbirth.
- Complementing all of these programmes is *Ayushman Bharat*, the government's flagship "healthcare for all" scheme, which is creating a network of centres to deliver primary healthcare services to all, including maternal and child health services. The programme offers an insurance cover of INR 500,000 (around USD 6,000) per year per family.
- For women in employment, the Maternity Benefit Amendment Act 2017 provides maternity leave of up to 26 weeks. Workplaces with more than 50 employees must also provide creche facilities and allow mothers to visit their infant in the creche at least four times during the working day.

India's commitment under Hon. Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi ji's passionate inclination to support caregivers – from antenatal care to financial incentives for institutional births, to support for new working mothers – is visible in the holistic life-cycle approach of various programmes, policies and services.

“We could potentially generate an economic impact worth over a billion dollars.”

Paalan 1000: Using technology to help caregivers

With a change in family structures towards nuclear families, caregivers miss the tips and guidance that were easily available in joint families. In August 2022, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare under the dynamic guidance of Hon. Minister Dr Mansukh Mandaviya ji launched the Paalan 1000 parenting app and nationwide campaign, which addresses stress management for caregivers and supports them in providing responsive and loving care.

Paalan 1000 is based around six core themes: maximise love; talk and engage; explore through movement and play; read and discuss stories; mother's engagement with the child while breastfeeding; and managing stress and staying calm. We also published a booklet, *Journey of the First 1000 Days*, in Hindi and English (Government of India Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2018).



← Scan the QR code to download the Paalan 1000 App

Shaping India's future with families at the heart

Caregiver wellbeing needs to be an integral part of investments in early childhood development – one of the most cost-efficient and powerful strategies to achieve physical, cognitive, linguistic, sensory, social and emotional development of the child. It is also an economic imperative. Research by Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman estimates that a range of early childhood interventions generates around USD 7 to USD 10 in societal benefits for every dollar invested (Heckman, 2012). For programmes aimed at the most disadvantaged children, the return on investment can be as high as 17% (International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2017). Assuming a USD 10 return on every additional dollar invested in each of these children, we could potentially generate an economic impact worth over a billion dollars.

We have the right policies in place, as well as decisive programmes to accelerate improvements in maternal and child health. With early childhood development and caregiver wellbeing a national priority, we are poised to fulfil our ambition that all our families survive and thrive.

➤ Find this article online at earlychildhoodmatters.online/2023-11



↑ Dr Bharati Pravin Pawar speaking at the Paalan 1000 launch event in India, August 2022

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interview with Adanech Abiebie

Mayor of Addis Ababa



**“My hope is for Addis to
be the best city in Africa
to raise a child and to be
a mother”**

In March 2021 the city of Addis Ababa in Ethiopia launched a new early years initiative – Children: The Future Hope of Addis Ababa ECD programme. By 2026, the mayor of Addis Ababa aims to achieve city-wide coverage for services in parent coaching, childcare and pre-primary education, and to expand 1,000 daycares and build 12,000 playgrounds. Additionally, the city is setting up a Centre of Excellence, Innovation and Learning, which will provide technical support to the city administration and host study tours and seminars for leaders in other parts of Ethiopia and Africa interested in investing in early childhood development at scale.

The city's bold plan has already generated interest from several regional governments in Ethiopia and from international foundations who have pledged support including Big Win Philanthropies, the Van Leer Foundation, ELMA Philanthropies and the Hilton Foundation. Mayor Adanech Abiebie sat down with Van Leer Foundation CEO Michael Feigelson to share why she put early childhood and family wellbeing at the top of her agenda, and the prosperous future she envisions for the residents of Addis Ababa.

How did your leadership journey start? What made you want to be the mayor of Addis?

My interest in leadership began as a young girl. I grew up in a village and from an early age I wanted to create a better life for women and families in my community. As a student I volunteered to provide social services and took up leadership opportunities like being a class monitor or head of a club. Many of the girls I studied with were bright, but were not able to finish their education and go to college. There was a lot of social pressure to get married young.

I then trained as a teacher but did a lot of work outside the school classroom, from providing community literacy programmes to volunteering for the electoral committee during elections. This is when I decided to run for district council, where I began to engage in leadership-prompted community services. I wanted to bring about change on issues that had a direct impact on women, but as a district councillor my jurisdiction was limited. My conviction

was strengthened after I studied law. I then had to choose between becoming a lawyer or going back into public service. I chose the latter, continuing my journey pursuing women's rights – this path led to becoming the Mayor of Addis.

“I think that investing in early childhood is the best way to achieve long-term transformation and to make the people of Addis prosperous.”

You've made early childhood development your signature agenda. Why did you make this choice?

As a mayor, there are many competing priorities that need to be addressed every day. Looking at all of these, I put investing in early childhood development at the top of my administration's agenda. I think that investing in early childhood is the best way to achieve long-term transformation and to make the people of Addis prosperous. I believe that it is a strategic node to break the vicious circle of poverty. I want to make sure no child is left behind.

This vision aligns with the national government's philosophy about investing in people. For me, there is no better example of a people-centred decision than investing in children.

We know that for children to do well, it's important that their parents are also doing well. How do you see this programme supporting the health and wellbeing of mothers?

The wellbeing of families and mothers is key for ensuring good outcomes in children. This is why every development effort in my administration is centred on families.

As part of the Future Hope of Addis early childhood development programme, we've hired 2,200 parent coaches and plan to hire another 2,800. This workforce will allow us to reach households

across the city and part of their responsibility is to ensure the wellbeing of mothers.

We also strengthened social protection schemes for women, and developed nutrition-smart agriculture programmes to ensure healthy food is on the table, particularly for families below the poverty line. We also have several initiatives to create jobs for women in vulnerable circumstances, such as a new injera factory in Addis which employs 4,000 people.

My hope for the future is for Addis to be the best city in Africa to raise a child and to be a mother.

After visiting the programmes this week, I had the impression that the Future Hope of Addis itself is going to contribute to economic development in the city, not just in the long term but in the present. Is this part of the strategy and rationale for the programme as well?

We see early childhood programmes as having multiple benefits. The expansion of childcare will create jobs and support mothers' participation in the workforce. Through the parent coaching programme, we are hiring 5,000 women to do home visits. The 12,000 playgrounds will be built by micro-enterprises that will be trained to build with natural, sustainable materials, so that is also a way of investing in small businesses in the city. It is all interlinked.

You also have said that you want these ideas to extend to other parts of Ethiopia and other countries in Africa. How do you see the ideas you are demonstrating in Addis travelling to other places?

We need to grow together as a continent. The journey starts with being humble and learning from others. As we scale up, we hope to learn not only from our experiences but also the experiences of our African brothers and sisters. We hope that the Center of Excellence, Innovation and Learning will

enable this kind of exchange. Recently we signed an agreement with colleagues in Kenya to help with the design of our childcare curriculum and conducted our first study tour for leaders from other regions of Ethiopia. In the future, we hope to host leaders from many other parts of the continent so we can learn together.

“As we scale up, we hope to learn not only from our experiences but also the experiences of our African brothers and sisters.”

Do you have any advice for other mayors thinking about their policy agenda?

Don't count the years you stay in office, but the legacy you will leave behind. If you invest in children and families, they will carry your legacy long after your term is over. I also advise mayors, as leaders, to provide opportunities for others to engage and flourish.

My success is not just mine. Many have joined hands and hearts. I am grateful to my party and my prime minister Dr Abiy Ahmed for entrusting me with this programme and for providing the opportunities for me to serve my nation.

➤ Find this article online at earlychildhoodmatters.online/2023-12

Community-based networks matter for mothers' mental health

How StrongMinds supports women experiencing depression

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Caregivers – parents, family members, friends or professionals – play a central role in all households. Families and communities can thrive only when caregivers are working from a foundation of good mental health, which means having the necessary support to care for themselves. StrongMinds has treated depression in nearly 400,000 people in sub-Saharan Africa over the past decade, the majority of whom are women, often mothers or grandmothers, struggling with the overload of juggling household, financial and childcare responsibilities.

Caregiving responsibilities can be a significant source of stress. Research from the last three decades indicates that caregivers commonly experience impaired health habits, psychological distress and psychiatric illness (Schulz and Sherwood, 2008), and that these are even more pronounced among caregivers experiencing violence and displacement (World Health Organization, 2022). Prossy's story offers an insight into this. (The names mentioned in this article have been changed for anonymity.)

Prossy, a 30-year-old South Sudanese woman, fled her home with her four children to escape the country's violent civil war. After the long journey to Palabek refugee settlement in northern Uganda, she learned her husband had been unfaithful and she felt abandoned and isolated while trying to make a new home.

She was severely depressed, and had begun making plans to end her life, when she encountered a StrongMinds volunteer Peer Facilitator, who came through the settlement conducting mental health outreach. Prossy learned more about her depression symptoms and agreed to join a StrongMinds therapy group.

Over the following weeks, Prossy learned positive coping techniques, including how to improve her communication skills and resilience. Once her mood improved, she began to take better care of herself – and her children. Prossy also made a new group of friends who have continued to meet and support each other in the years since their therapy sessions ended.



“According to the WHO, up to 85% of people in low- and medium-income countries have no access to effective mental health treatment.”

Why mothers need mental health support

Mothers are particularly impacted by the mental health challenges of caregiving, with one in three experiencing clinically significant anxiety or depression during pregnancy or in the first few years of her child's life (Shuman et al., 2022).

When a pregnant woman is depressed, the safety of her pregnancy is compromised. She is at greater risk for obstetric complications, symptoms that involve visits to clinics and hospitals, and greater need for pain relief during labour (WHO and United Nations Population Fund, 2008).

And yet most pregnant women, mothers and caregivers have no access to mental healthcare. According to the World Health Organization, up to 85% of people in low- and medium-income countries have no access to effective mental health treatment. Caregivers who are older, disadvantaged socioeconomically, and have limited

support networks are more likely to report poorer psychological health (Schulz and Sherwood, 2008).

The impact of the StrongMinds approach

The StrongMinds group therapy model provides direct care to women who are living with depression in low-resource communities in sub-Saharan Africa. When a woman recovers from depression, her entire ecosystem flourishes – particularly her children, who enjoy better health and education outcomes as a result. A woman who has received depression treatment can also better recognise the signs of depression in herself and others, deploy emotional tools to prevent future depressive episodes, and leverage her lived experience as a way to help others who may be struggling. As Prossy shared, “I encourage StrongMinds to reach out to more women in the settlement so they can also undergo the life change I went through.”

Our model for treating depression is rooted in Group Interpersonal Psychotherapy (IPT-G) and facilitated by lay counsellors over a period of six to ten weeks. The WHO (2016) recommends IPT-G as cost-effective first-line treatment for depression in low-resource settings.

The majority of StrongMinds' clients – people who are experiencing depression in Uganda and Zambia – are mothers in their childbearing years and adolescents. Our groups provide safe and easily accessible spaces for pregnant women, new mothers, and caregivers of young children. Children are nursed, play and sleep while the women open up about their struggles and find peer support.

A mother named Doreen, who sought support from StrongMinds in Zambia when depressed due to conflict within her household, says of her fellow group members:

“Sometimes we come together to boost our businesses. Also, if I have a challenge with my schoolchildren, they come to my aid and support me if I need help finding resources or even things that the child needs to get back to school. It really helps us because we are able to support each other in the day-to-day challenges.”

Approximately 80% of those who complete StrongMinds therapy are depression-free at the conclusion, and those results are sustained six months later. StrongMinds graduates report feeling more engaged with their children and communities. Among the women we treat, we see a 28% increase after treatment in those who say they have someone to turn to for social support. In part this relates to the support networks formed in the groups.

“When a woman recovers from depression, her entire ecosystem flourishes.”

StrongMinds’ data also shows that, after therapy, our clients’ children go to school more often (a 30% increase), and their families eat more meals together each day (a 13% increase). Many patients become more economically productive, with 16% of clients reporting that they are able to work more frequently after completing therapy. The individuals we treat also report improved self-confidence and self-esteem across all areas of their lives, which improves their overall wellbeing.



Photo: Karin Scherbrucker

Treating depression at scale is a global challenge, one that StrongMinds addresses by leveraging community. To date, we have reached almost 400,000 women and adolescents in Uganda and Zambia, with the positive impact being felt by more than 1.6 million family and household members. By creating a support network for caregivers through the StrongMinds group therapy model, we are improving individual and collective wellbeing and livelihood outcomes for generations to come.

➤ Find this article online at earlychildhoodmatters.online/2023-13

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Strong parents, healthy children

What it takes for municipal governments to give parents the support they need

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Once you have a child your life will never be the same again. Parenting is challenging, and you learn parenting only by doing, but that doesn't mean parents are on their own.

When presenting the second phase of the Solid Start Action Programme (*Actieprogramma Kansrijke Start*) to the Dutch parliament in 2022, Maarten van Ooijen, Secretary of State (Ministry of Health), emphasised:

"The ambition of the Solid Start programme remains unchanged: a solid start for every child. Fortunately most children manage to make a good start in life with the loving support of their parents. If extra support is needed – due to for example medical, developmental or social circumstances – our Solid Start programme is available for everyone who needs it.

Our message to parents is: please do not hesitate to ask if you need a helping hand to give your child the best possible start in life."

The ambitious Solid Start Action Programme was launched by the Dutch government in 2018. It is based on the conviction that every child deserves

the best possible start in life, and that parents are crucial to support this start. Our strategy for the programme is based on supporting professionals who support families – including healthcare professionals, professionals from the social domain and those who work for municipal government services – to interact more effectively with each other, and with the informal networks on which families rely.

"A good start leads to a better chance of healthy outcomes – and a good start depends on support for parents."

In 2022, the programme entered its second phase. It aims to put a local Solid Start approach and interventions on a structural basis in every municipality, so new and future parents in vulnerable situations receive the help, care and support they need in a timely manner. This ambition follows from

the 2021 coalition agreement, which commits the Dutch government to the broader societal agenda of achieving a [healthy generation in 2040](#) (De Gezonde Generatie, 2023).

Children build on the foundation of their first 1,000 days for the rest of their lives. A good start leads to a better chance of healthy outcomes – and a good start depends on support for parents. As our 2022–2025 strategy tagline puts it, “*Sterke ouders, gezonde kinderen!*” (“Strong parents, healthy children!”).

Why services must be joined up

A wide range of issues can put parents under stress that compromises their ability to care for their young children. Perhaps they are worried about money or an insecure housing situation. Perhaps they have physical or mental health issues, or face struggles with substance abuse or violence.

Services exist to tackle each of these issues, but they do not always link up with each other or ask questions that go beyond their domains. A healthcare provider, for example, might never know if a patient is facing eviction. A debt counsellor might not find out that a man they are working with is about to become a father.

By taking an integrated approach, municipalities can better identify when parents need support and connect them with the service providers that can help most effectively. Since we began the Solid Start programme, we have seen how powerful the results can be. Here is testimony from a midwife in Delft:

“The integrated approach took some getting used to in practice. In the beginning I had trouble asking pregnant women about income, debts and diet. But I notice that it is a good way to remove topics from the taboo atmosphere and make them open for discussion. Now that I see the results, I don’t want to go back.”

The earlier we can support parents, the better it is for their children. Ideally, that means starting support before a child is even conceived.

“By taking an integrated approach, municipalities can better identify when parents need support”



Photo: stenkoviad

Overcoming barriers to an integrated approach

The two main pillars of the second phase of the Solid Start programme are supporting municipalities to learn from each other on two primary pathways:

- 1 Ensuring proper care for new and future parents through sustainable regional and local agreements, and arranging the preconditions for cooperation between medical and social services
- 2 Optimising support for parents from professionals and informal networks by strengthening professionalism, cooperation, and the informal social networks of new and future parents.

Our experience in the first phase of the programme, since 2018, has helped us identify the main barriers and bottlenecks to achieving an integrated approach that includes the following:

Training

As illustrated by the midwife from Delft, professionals who have trained to focus on one domain may need additional guidance on how to start conversations about other relevant issues and suggest appropriate sources of further support.

Agreements

New agreements may need to be put in place, both among municipal service providers and with other local organisations on which families rely, in areas such as data exchange, access to interventions and coordination between services.

Finance

Taking a longer-term perspective, supporting parents to give their children a better start can be expected to pay for itself many times over. But in the short term, integrating services can incur additional expense for municipalities. The Solid Start programme is now anchored in national policies through the *Healthy and Active Life Accord* (*Gezond en actief leven akkoord*, GALA), with a sustainable funding arrangement through the Specific Allowance (SPUK), and Integral Care Agreement (*Integraal Zorgakkoord*, IZA). Through the SPUK arrangements, all 342 municipalities in the Netherlands receive funding in order to benefit the building of local Solid Start coalitions.

Regulations

We strive to facilitate and anchor agreements between different stakeholders such as municipalities and health insurance providers in (national) policy (GALA, see above).

➤ Find this article online at earlychildhoodmatters.online/2023-14

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Solid Start 2022-2025: A Good Start for every child!

Goal

Every municipality has a local Solid Start approach that includes various interventions so that parents, now and in the future, receive the right care and support that responds to their needs.

Mission!

Focus

Local and regional agreements ensure the right care close to parents and future parents

- Lasting regional and local agreements
- Framework (of conditions) for cooperation between the medical and social domains

Professionals and informal network provide optimal care for parents and future parents

- Strengthen skills
- Strengthen collaboration
- Strengthen informal network

Actions

Local and regional agreements ensure the right care close to parents and future parents

1. Chain approach for Solid Start in all municipalities
2. Creating and strengthening of local coalitions
3. Stimulate regional collaboration
4. Incorporate knowledge built on practice and involve those with experiential expertise
5. Strengthen skill set of professionals (schooling and training, guidelines and standards, better signalling and working sensitively)
6. Invest in healthy pregnancy
7. 'Currently Not Pregnant' programme in all municipalities

Professionals and informal network provide optimal care for parents and future parents

8. Prenatal home visits by JGZ (Youth Health Care)
9. Facilitate integrated family clinic approach
10. Strengthen the connection between general practitioners and local coalitions
11. Facilitate the informal network, and local coalition support organisations, to play a stronger role
12. Build and encourage strong parenting
13. Stimulate language development
14. Enable knowledge development

Ensuring sustainable practice

Administrative agreements

Long-term financing

Appropriate regulations

Long-term learning infrastructure, including monitoring

Urgency and connecting

Source: Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, 2023

↑ National Solid Start strategy for 2022-2025 in the Netherlands

interview with Diana Rodríguez Franco

*Former Secretary for Women's Affairs in
the City Government of Bogotá*



**“A city that
acknowledges those
who care for us”**

Imagine a place designed to care for caregivers. Where someone else looks after their young children and does the laundry, while they exercise, study, do therapy or simply breathe. This is the idea of the Care Blocks, a project launched during the pandemic in Colombia's capital city Bogotá that has served over 400,000 women and their families in 20 locations so far. Diana Rodríguez Franco, Former Secretary for Women's Affairs in the City Government of Bogotá, tells journalist Irene Caselli how the Care Blocks were established, and why they are here to stay.

How does caregiving affect the wellbeing and opportunities of women in Bogotá?

Social norms about the gender-based division of labour mean women are expected to do unpaid care work – washing, ironing, cooking, caring for children, the elderly, people with disabilities. All those care jobs – jobs that sustain life, that sustain families, without which no person would survive – have disproportionately fallen on women's shoulders.

In Bogotá, 1.2 million women are dedicated exclusively to unpaid care work – they spend, on average, around seven to eight hours a day caring for someone else. Of those women, 90% are low-income earners and 70% have not studied beyond primary school – if they have studied at all. Girls commonly drop out of school because of caregiving expectations.

We know that this overload of care generates mental and physical health problems. Two out of ten women caregivers have chronic mental and physical health conditions that arise from their unpaid work and having no free time for themselves.

How do the Care Blocks address this problem?

The Care Blocks address the issue of time poverty for caregivers – for the mother, the grandmother, the aunt, the cousin. We offer these women training, respite and income-generating services, which are the three main things that they have sacrificed because of the care overload.

At the Care Blocks they can finish high school in a flexible way regardless of age. Or they can learn

to use computers and digital skills, they can learn another language, they can learn to ride a bicycle or to swim. They can learn about entrepreneurship and develop business skills or attend workshops to improve their resumés. They can get psychosocial or legal support when needed. There are free public laundromats, washing machines and dryers, so the women do not have to spend several hours a day handwashing their children's or their relatives' clothes.

But the essence of the Care Blocks is to ensure that women can attend by taking care of those they usually care for – that is, children under 13 years of age, elderly people, and those with disabilities.



“We offer these women training, respite and income-generating services, which are the three main things that they have sacrificed because of the care overload.”

Why is the work of the Care Blocks so important?

When we raise the educational level of women and give them more free time, allowing them for example to have more medical check-ups, we know they will have better physical and mental health, and greater social capital.

This has a direct impact on children. We know that children who grow up in homes where caregivers

have more education and more free time are less likely to be victims of violence. In these safer environments, there is a greater probability that they will break the cycles of violence and poverty.

In order to have healthy children, children in the educational system, children who are less likely to be victims of intra-family and sexual violence, we need healthier caregivers with more free time and more training.

What does the project mean for the city?

First, it is an acknowledgement. It means that Bogotá is now a city that acknowledges those who care for us, a city that places this acknowledgment at the centre of its policies – not only through symbolic services, but also through meaningful actions and programmes for those who have historically supported families and society.



“This is a very simple thing: it is an issue of dignity that we addressed.”

Second, this project helps achieve a more inclusive city because it tackles the needs of women. Historically, cities have been designed by men for men, but in Bogotá – as in many cities around the world – women make up the majority of the population. This policy allows us to focus on that 52% of the population who have never been the focus of politics in cities. It makes Bogotá a more inclusive, more egalitarian city that is closer to its citizens.

Third, Care Blocks not only solve a gender problem, they help to solve a mobility problem that is also a climate change problem. Care Blocks bring services closer to citizens, so they no longer need to move around the city to access services, emitting greenhouse gases and generating more pollution. In the city, women move around a lot. We go from the house to leave our children at daycare, to attend to the needs of elderly people, to pick up medicines, to the market, and so on. If we place all these services in an area accessible on foot within a radius of no more than 800 metres, then we will reduce congestion in the city.

Over 400,000 families have attended the Care Blocks. Quantitative studies on their impact are underway, but anecdotally the response you receive on a regular basis is enthusiastic.

Could you share some stories that have touched you most?

When I visit the Blocks, I ask the women what impact the project is having on them. I have many vivid memories of their answers. Once a woman told me: “Secretary, I used to walk with a cane and after coming to yoga and dance classes I no longer need a cane.” For me, this is a very simple thing: it is an issue of dignity that we addressed.

Another woman I met cares for two adolescent children with disabilities. She told me that nobody had ever helped her take care of her children. She said that she had thought of suicide. “I did not see any alternative anymore,” she said. She told me: “Since I discovered the Care Blocks, now I come twice a week to exercise, do yoga or dance, and sometimes to use other services. It is the first time that someone helps me to take care of my children.”

As Secretary for Women’s Affairs, with a background as an academic and human rights activist, what does this initiative mean for you personally, collaborating with Claudia López Hernández, the first woman to be elected mayor of Bogotá?

I am the mother of two daughters, and my youngest was 9 months old when Claudia López took office in 2020. I was still breastfeeding when I became Secretary for Women’s Affairs. I also have a father with Alzheimer’s. I am in a position of privilege

because I have all the necessary support, I live in a very equitable home and work as a team with my partner. But I see what it is like to live while caring for others, I know what poverty of time is, I see what it is to be a woman.

The vision is for Bogotá to house 45 Care Blocks by 2035. With local elections in October 2023, and the new city administration taking over in January 2024, how has the programme been designed and implemented to ensure quality and sustainability?

First we included Care Blocks in the Land Use Plan (*Plan de Ordenamiento Territorial*). We adopted the whole system into law – not only the Care Blocks, but also care buses, a mobile version of the service that provides at-home assistance for those who cannot reach a Care Block. The law was

unanimously approved in March 2023. This means that when we leave this administration in December, the Care Blocks will continue.

But beyond laws, it is also necessary for citizens to take ownership of a project. So it is vital for women to be ready to go out and say: “No, they are not going to take my Block away from me. They are not going to take away my laundry, or my bicycle class, or my psychologist.”

I believe that for things to last, laws alone are not enough, and citizens’ approval by itself is also not enough – it is that mixture of ownership by different actors and stakeholders that makes things last over time.

➤ Find this article online at earlychildhoodmatters.online/2023-15

BOGOTÁ'S CARE BLOCKS

MANZANAS DEL CUIDADO





Giving Kenyan parents the option of quality affordable childcare

How Kidogo's franchise model benefits children, caregivers and "Mamapreneurs"

Sabrina Habib

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Kidogo

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Dinah used to wake up every morning with a difficult decision to make: where should she leave her twin baby daughters when she goes to work for the day as a cleaner? Dinah, in her early 30s, lives in Kangemi – one of the many informal settlements in Nairobi. Her choices for childcare were slim: she could leave the babies at home with her 7-year-old daughter, who would need to stay off school for the day, or pay to leave them in an informal daycare centre.

The daycare was Dinah's best option – but not a good one. In centres like this, one untrained worker can look after more than 20 babies and toddlers in a 3 metre by 3 metre corrugated metal shack. They typically do not engage with the children and focus on just keeping them quiet. Meanwhile mothers like Dinah struggle to be productive at work for fear of what state they will find their children in when they pick them up at the end of the day.

"I was really tired of the daycare," says Dinah. "My babies had lost weight, they were unhappy, they weren't being fed. I would pack food for them but when I picked them up in the evening, the food would be returned untouched. The

caregiver would claim that my babies had no appetite. They would also come home looking very dirty. It was terrible."

There are an estimated 6,000 centres like this in Nairobi's low-income communities. Children here miss out on the kind of nurturing, responsive care that builds brain development in the crucial early years of life. Many enter school with developmental delays, fail to get a solid education, and continue the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

"Children here miss out on the kind of nurturing, responsive care that builds brain development in the crucial early years of life."

Kidogo emerged in response to demand from mothers like Dinah for childcare that is high quality yet affordable. Through a social franchising approach, it trains daycare operators and certifies them as Kidogo "Mamapreneurs". After the initial training, Kidogo provides continuous coaching,

mentoring and support to Mamapreneurs to ensure that they consistently meet the franchise's quality standards.

How Kidogo is changing the narrative

Lydia Awuor, a 34-year-old woman living in Kangemi, left her job as a teacher after her school did not pay her salary for months. She decided to set up her own daycare centre but encountered a range of challenges that she did not know how to deal with. Her friend Hellen, a Kidogo Mamapreneur, suggested she enrol in Kidogo's programme so that she could develop entrepreneurial skills in early childhood care and education.

When Dinah expressed to her friends her growing dissatisfaction with her existing daycare, one of them introduced her to Lydia's new centre. After being trained by Kidogo in how to engage with parents, Lydia was able to talk to Dinah about the importance of early childhood development and how she runs her centre to ensure the wellbeing of the children she cares for.

"You can't compare the two centres, honestly," Dinah says. "Lydia really takes good care of my children. I fully trust her. I don't have stress at all because I know my babies are in good hands. I would previously constantly worry about them, now I can call just once a day to check in because I know they are OK. My babies have improved, they are healthy, they can use the potty now, feed themselves and can walk all on their own. I couldn't ask for more."

Dinah is happy to pay the equivalent of around USD 1 per day. It's a small price to pay for peace of mind. With her babies not getting sick as often, Dinah is able to work more consistently and earn a better living.

For informal daycare operators, collecting fees tends to be a challenging and sometimes confrontational process. However, Lydia's Kidogo coaching includes how to manage her finances and approach conversations with parents about payments. The professional nature of her relationships with parents



Photo: Daniel Macharia, Kidogo

↑ Mamapreneur spending quality time with a toddler in her care

fosters a deeper bond with them, as they appreciate that they are receiving a service that is worth paying for. They also begin to see Mamapreneurs as professionals.

"Parents used to think all daycares did was 'toilet work' like changing diapers," Lydia says. "They see me engaging their children, playing with them and they can see their children develop. They are different from the other kids."

Kidogo, in partnership with an external researcher, conducted research on parent perceptions and found

that parents in Kidogo centres shifted their priorities from affordability, distance from home, and safety to:

- 1 physical environment (i.e. cleanliness, safety and security, and space for the children to play)
- 2 caregiving skills
- 3 diet and nutrition, and
- 4 play-based activities

as the most important factors in their decision-making. These were promising findings, as they show that exposure to quality care can focus parental demand on quality early childhood care and education.

Lydia's centre has flourished, attracting new families through referrals and becoming trusted in the community. She now runs a multi-classroom centre with 33 children, and has employed two additional caregivers. She is earning three times more as a Mamapreneur than she did as a teacher and feels more respected by her family and peers.

"My husband was unemployed for five months," Lydia says, "and it was my business that paid our rent and fed our family. My husband spread the news in our village that I had qualified as a Kidogo Mamapreneur, and some came to celebrate with us."

↓ Mamapreneur educating children through play



→ Lydia Awuor (left) and Dinah

Kidogo has become the largest childcare network in Kenya, with more than 1,500 Mamapreneurs looking after over 38,000 children every day – a figure set to increase to 100,000 by 2027. Lydia and Dinah’s stories highlight the win-win-win of quality, affordable childcare: for parents, it can reduce stress and improve wellbeing; for caregivers and qualified providers alike, it can unlock earning potential; and for young children, it can ensure they receive the care, nutrition and stimulation they need to thrive¹.

¹ Watch these videos to meet a mamapreneur and father and son, who, like Lydia and Dinah, are experiencing quality, affordable childcare



Photo: Tabitha Susan Kidogo

“Lydia and Dinah’s stories highlight the win-win-win of quality, affordable childcare.”



← Scan the QR code to see Mamapreneur Eunice in action



← Scan the QR code to meet Eric and his son Justin, who attends Kidogo daycare

Videos: Daniel Macharia, Kidogo & Mathenge Nduhiu, Kidogo

➤ Find this article online at earlychildhoodmatters.online/2023-16

Singing lullabies soothes stress in parents

What if every family could create an original lullaby?





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Sometimes, inspiration is born of a great question. Jesse was discussing parenthood with his friend, a soon-to-be father, when he asked: “What is your lullaby about?” His friend was confused, and it took Jesse a moment to realise why.

As a new father, Jesse participated in Carnegie Hall’s Lullaby Project, which pairs new and expecting parents with an artist to write a personal lullaby for their baby. For Jesse, writing a lullaby to welcome his baby into the world had come to seem as inevitable as buying diapers, so he’d forgotten that people who hadn’t participated in the project didn’t do it.

Jesse’s question inspired us to reimagine the possibilities of the Lullaby Project. We began to ask more questions: Why couldn’t Jesse’s premise become true? Is scaling the Lullaby Project possible? What impact could this have on parents’ wellbeing? This article invites you into those questions as we investigate how to balance the delicacy of this project with the desire to make it accessible to all.

Singing to soothe stress

The Lullaby Project began at Jacobi Medical Center, a public hospital in the Bronx in New York City. Medical staff had observed that high stress levels among young parents often led to challenges for bonding with their infants. We wondered how music could help.

People have been singing songs to their children for as long as humankind has existed. Across all cultures, we sing songs to encourage sleep, to soothe our babies and ourselves. Scientific evidence

shows that it works: infant-directed singing can improve caregiver wellbeing, calm distressed infants, and enhance post-natal bonding (Sharman et al., 2023).

What might happen if pregnant women could step into a creative space where they could reflect on and express their hopes for their children in the form of personal lyrics and melodies? How might a highly personal lullaby, connected to a family's experience, culture and story, support young families?

“Infant-directed singing can improve caregiver wellbeing, calm distressed infants, and enhance post-natal bonding.”

We designed a pilot project to guide parents to write a personal lullaby for their child, and create a simple recording of that song. The response was enthusiastic. Soon the Lullaby Project spread to a dozen sites in New York City. At Carnegie Hall, the city's famous concert venue, we began an annual event with sessions on lullaby writing and composing methodologies, and strategies for building projects in different contexts and settings.

Gradually, through partnerships with more than 60 organisations, Lullaby spread around the world – from Chile to South Korea, from Cyprus to Australia. The annual event at Carnegie Hall now features professional arrangements and recordings of selected songs written in these diverse Lullaby projects.

Jesse's question made us wonder if we could go even further. But before we come back to the question of scale, another question: what evidence do we have on the impact of Lullaby?

Measuring impact on parents' wellbeing

At the annual event at Carnegie Hall, researchers discuss ways to measure the impact of our work on two generations – parents and children – and the connection between them.

Early qualitative evaluation has found compelling outcomes on parents' and other caregivers' wellbeing. When parents describe their experiences participating in Lullaby versus their daily lives, we see marked differences in five areas: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and achievement. These five areas comprise the PERMA™ framework for measuring wellbeing (University of Pennsylvania School of Arts and Sciences, 2023).

Parents told us that their experiences made them more confident about their capacity to parent well, and particularly to feel creative in their parenting. We also found that lullabies can help strengthen other important relationships: sharing their songs with family and friends can serve as a way to connect new parents with loved ones near and far.

In the Welsh town of Neath, a health visitor working with our UK partner's team observed:

“It's particularly beneficial in cases where we see that a family is at risk of becoming isolated ... We see real positive changes in confidence for parents and children taking part in these music sessions.”
(Davies, 2023)

Numerous lullaby writers voiced a sense of accomplishment and pride: they did not think they could write a song, but found new confidence with support from their artist partner. As one mother, Alexis, put it when introducing her *Song for Nico* at the [2022 Lullaby concert](#):

“Writing my lullaby ended up being a turning point in my pregnancy. I had spent the entire time feeling ill, anxious and depressed ... This process allowed me to find the words to share with Nico, but even more so with myself, a deep trust in the journey of parenthood, of growing, and of creating.”
(Carnegie Hall, 2022)

I believe there is another, perhaps less measurable, reason why this project is so powerful. Throughout the ages, lullabies have planted seeds of identity and lineage. These simple songs ultimately become vessels for families to carry with them across geography and time, an expression of love and joy



Photo: Fadi Kheir/ Weill Music Institute

↑ Father and daughter participating in the Lullaby Project concert



“Throughout the ages, lullabies have planted seeds of identity and lineage.”

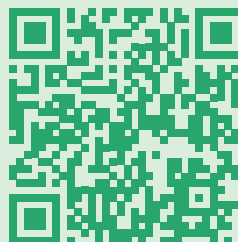
that can accompany parents through places where these qualities are scarce, providing comfort and a sense of home.

Many parents who participated in the project seem instinctively to sense this, too. They express gratitude that, through the song, a child will always know how loved she is, even beyond her parent’s life. Parents share the hope that their lullaby will be passed from one generation to the next, becoming a family heirloom.

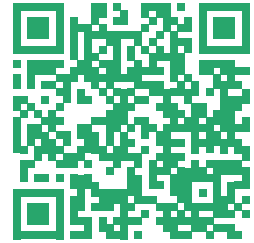
Here you can listen to original lullabies written by parents from around the world



← Scan the QR code to listen to [Lullaby Project music stream](#)



← Scan the QR code to listen to [Hopes and Dreams: The Lullaby Project](#)



↑ Scan the QR code to see the impact of the [Lullaby Project on caregivers](#)

Our strategy for scale

As Jesse's question makes clear, the impact on Lullaby participants can be so profound that they forget it isn't universal. So how can we scale the project so that more families experience that impact?

A word about "scale": we want to reclaim the notion of scale from the business context. This is not scale for the sake of numbers or revenue. This is about scaling-up a movement for tenderness, care, beauty and love. Most scaled interventions work hard to provide a standardised experience to a large number of participants. But with Lullaby we are working to scale the opportunity for a rich, personalised, individual experience.

In New Zealand, for example, we set out to integrate Māori cultural practices. As one teen mother who participated in the project put it, "For me, the option to have my song in te reo Māori felt like home."

First, we plan to explore how a Lullaby tech platform could increase access for parents and artists, centralise resources, and improve efficiency. The platform could connect lullaby artists to families; streamline administrative components of the programme, such as song-rights management;

facilitate monitoring and evaluation; and allow for the recording and sharing of families' songs.

New partnerships with entities that support families will also be integral to scale. We envision these partners to include regional and national NGOs and health systems, as well as major corporations who could provide the Lullaby experience as a wellness benefit to employees.

"Anyone has the ability to create and sing a lullaby, as humans have done for centuries."

For scale solutions to work, we are continuing to experiment with Lullaby methodology. We are exploring the efficacy of group lullaby writing, for example, followed by the opportunity to create a personal song with or without a facilitator. Our lead Australian partner is also experimenting with creating a library of lullaby music templates, to which personalised lyrics could be added.

Could such approaches increase efficiency while preserving the powerful impact on wellbeing we've seen in the current model?

At Carnegie Hall we believe in the superpowers of artists. We also know that anyone has the ability to create and sing a lullaby, as humans have done for centuries. But who can facilitate lullaby writing, in the context of our efforts to scale? Which artistic and human skills are most essential to draw out and support the writing of lullabies? Who, besides professional teaching artists, can we work with to bring the Lullaby Project to families most in need? Midwives and doulas? Social workers and nurses? Those offering support in refugee camps? Such people already have overwhelming responsibilities, so it's a big ask to add this to their portfolio. However, the positive impact could extend to them: a beautiful feature of Lullaby is the ripple effect of joy and connection that radiates from the writing process and influences everyone involved, including the facilitator.

Might a simple set of video resources, for example, enable community health workers to support lullaby writing in a way that maintains its impact? We intend to explore this exciting possibility with a partner in India that is working with tens of thousands of families.

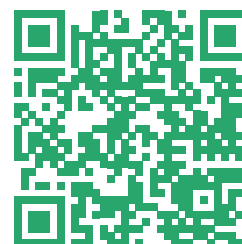
The final piece in our scale strategy is to bring together a diverse network of stakeholders, including celebrity artists, to showcase the power of

personalised lullabies to support parent and child wellbeing. This movement would share information about the realities that parents in high-stress environments face, spur catalytic events like "World Lullaby Day" to build public awareness, and create a roadmap to achieve a targeted set of related policy goals.

We imagine a future world in which many more parents understand how powerful it can be to create and sing personal songs to their children, and we have collectively created many more supports for them to do so. Then nobody will be confused when a friend asks them: "What is your lullaby about?"



Report: WolfBrown and Bernard van Leer Foundation, 2020



↑ Scan this QR code to [learn more](#) about the potential role of music making in the wellbeing of young families.

➦ Find this article online at earlychildhoodmatters.online/2023-17

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interview with
War Child



**“Our role is to help them
be the kind of parents
they wish to be”**

War Child is an organisation working to improve the lives of children in war and conflict zones around the world. It has recently launched a programme dedicated to the psychosocial wellbeing of caregivers grappling with extreme stress and anxiety. In a conversation with Tanmoy Goswami, War Child's team members explain how the programme works and share heartening early results.

Could you give us an overview of War Child's "care system" approach for children in conflict zones?

Hundreds of millions of young people around the world are living with the devastating effects of war and conflict. From our 25-plus years of experience working in conflict zones, we have learned that it's not enough to design programmes that only target children. We must also support the social structures meant to protect them – such as families, communities and schools – that are often acutely stressed and at risk of breaking down. The goal of our care system approach is to develop evidence-based services that can help mitigate the multi-layered impact of war and conflict on children, as well as the entire ecosystem around them. We offer targeted interventions in three main areas: psychosocial support, child protection, and education.¹

Tell us about "Be There", your intervention for caregivers.

Be There is a programme created in January 2022 to address the psychosocial wellbeing of caregivers looking after children from birth to age 12. Most of the participants are parents, but we've also had a few grandparents and step-parents. In conflict zones, these caregivers undergo extreme stress on a daily basis. They may be separated from family members, struggle with poverty and unemployment, and be forced to live in crowded quarters. They may experience a lot of trauma and anxiety caused by the violence and displacement. Through this programme, we give them a safe space to learn simple, evidence-based stress management tools and techniques

under the supervision of trained facilitators. Over nine sessions, we take them through practical exercises that, for instance, help them better manage their anger or frustration and prevent it from negatively impacting their own wellbeing as well as their relationship with their children. We believe that when caregivers feel supported, valued and respected, it also enables them to create a calmer home environment that's conducive to their children's learning and development needs.

Structure of the sessions

1. Energiser

2. Review Home Practice

3. Main-topic Exercise

4. Additional Exercise

5. Relaxation Exercise

6. Assignment for next time/Review

¹ An overview of the War Child care system, describing these interventions, can be found at <https://www.warchildholland.org/care-system-overview/>



↑ Women participating in a group Be There session

How do you find the caregivers who are most in need of the programme, and how did you design the programme so that it gives them what they need?

We work with local partners who have deep ties within the community and a close understanding of what the families need. They help us create awareness about the programme and enrol caregivers. Over the course of the programme, we strongly emphasise building trust and creating a non-judgemental environment. We communicate clearly at every stage that parents are the real experts, and they don't need us to teach them how to do their job. Our only role is to ask how we can ease their stress so that they can regain some agency, focus on their own wellbeing, and be the kind of parents they wish to be.

We treat caregivers not as passive participants but as co-creators of the programme. For instance, we ran a

small pilot of our learning material in Lebanon to seek feedback from caregivers. In the first draft, we had a muscle relaxation exercise, but most participants told us it didn't work for them. So in the final version we replaced it with a different technique. Similarly, in the first draft, we had no videos. However, caregivers said they learn better via videos, so now we have videos embedded in our material. These are little things, but they go a long way in driving the programme's long-term effectiveness.

Do you find that you need to adapt the programme significantly when you start working with caregivers in a new cultural context?

Yes, this is a key challenge. We organise workshops to ground our staff in locally relevant interpretations of ideas such as "stress" or "anxiety". Then, we go session by session to identify elements of the programme that can be changed while keeping the

core intact. For example, we may need to modify some of our relaxation exercises so that they're culturally appropriate. The process of adapting our manuals and methodology to a new cultural context is led by a team consisting of stakeholders with technical skills and people with deep familiarity with the local culture. This process takes between six weeks and two months.

What kind of results are you seeing from the programme so far?

We are currently in the process of measuring and collecting data on caregivers' attendance and their adherence to the lessons delivered in the sessions. But the stories we hear are already hugely encouraging. Parents tell us that they have made a lot of progress in their relationships with their children, and even with their partners and extended families. A lot of them say they were shocked to learn the amount of brain development that happens in the first 1,000 days of a child's life. Many mothers used to give smart devices to their one-year-old children because they didn't know the dangers. They say they are able to make better-informed decisions after attending the sessions.

“They sit together and practise relaxation techniques as a family, which is such a beautiful way to reduce interpersonal tension and create bonding.”

Many men who participate in our sessions say that they used to be angry at home all the time. Now they tell us that whenever they feel they're about to be angry, they can use a counting technique or a breathing technique to calm themselves. We know of caregivers who have turned the exercises from the programme into evening or weekend family activities. They sit together and practise relaxation techniques as a family, which is such a beautiful way to reduce interpersonal tension and create bonding.

Do you encourage caregivers to form a community?

Yes, one of our core objectives is to help caregivers feel empowered as a group. At the start of the programme, we create a WhatsApp group so they can stay in touch. We encourage them to keep meeting and tell them that we are always around if they need any support. We have witnessed a lot of success stories of this collective focus. For instance, in Jordan we've had women who took the initiative to transfer all the knowledge and skills they gained from the programme to other women in the community. We hope to create a sustainable community of people who can support each other after the programme ends.

War Child team interviewed

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Middle East Regional Representative

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Wider perspectives on wellbeing

Expanding how we understand care

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Hunter-gatherers teach us that supporting mothers has deep roots

How can we apply their lessons?

Nikhil Chaudhary

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Humans lived as hunter-gatherers for more than 95% of our history. Evolutionary psychiatrists believe that several contemporary mental health challenges can be better understood by reflecting on how “WEIRD” societies – meaning Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic – diverge from the hunter-gatherer lifestyle that human psychology may be adapted to. We call this idea “evolutionary mismatch”.

Many of us today live in countries that have come to be known among social scientists as “WEIRD”. The acronym helps us to remember how extremely unusual these societies are in the context of human social structures across time and space.

The nuclear family system is especially WEIRD and places a particularly heavy burden on mothers. Furthermore, “intensive mothering” narratives – the idea that women should be able to manage caretaking, primarily alone, using their maternal instincts – remain pervasive. Many people assume this is the “natural” human way, except it isn’t. My own [Nikhil Chaudhary’s] work with contemporary

hunter-gatherer communities¹, and my discussions with my co-author Annie Swanepoel who is a practising psychiatrist (page 89), have deepened my appreciation of how the differences between WEIRD and hunter-gatherer child-rearing practices may underpin many of the mental health difficulties mothers experience today.

I was previously unaware that guilt surrounding struggling to cope with child rearing was such a frequent burden on maternal mental health, and that the corresponding self-shame actually discourages mothers from seeking help, exacerbating the problem. From an evolutionary and anthropological perspective, struggling to cope is a predictable result of mothers lacking the kind of support structures that they have been shaped by natural selection to expect² and rely on.

We need to rethink social support structures and adjust our perception of childcare: it should not just be replacement care for children when their mothers are at work, but should aim to give mothers true respite from caregiving.

¹ It is important to stress that contemporary hunter-gatherer societies are modern human populations, they are not “living fossils”. It is only because their subsistence relies on hunting and gathering that aspects of their social and economic life can offer insight into how humans lived for much of our evolutionary history as a species.

² We are not referring here to conscious expectations, but rather the fact that our psychology has been shaped by natural selection to function under certain conditions. These are the conditions that our brain is “prepared for” or “expects”.

An evolutionary perspective from a WEIRD-country psychiatrist

by Annie Swanepoel

Understanding what we evolved to expect can help us see that many mothers are doing the best they can in very difficult circumstances. I grew up in South Africa and was familiar with the saying “It takes a village to raise a child”, but it was only when I discovered Nikhil’s research that I appreciated what it really means. It made me think differently about my own work as a consultant child psychiatrist in the UK. I realised that when mothers need psychiatric support, often the cause is not individual, but rather a societal failing.

I remember the total shock and overwhelm of having a newborn baby myself. Being a qualified doctor had not prepared me on a personal level for how needy babies are and how often they cry. While I had support from my husband and my parents, at the time I shared the widespread assumption that it is “normal” for a mother to be able to look after her baby on her own.

When Nikhil showed me his data, many years later, I was astonished by the idea that half the time, when a baby cried, someone other than the mother would step in. Can you imagine what a difference having that kind of support available would make to so many mothers – in how they feel, sleep, cope and can respond to their baby?

It is important for all of us to learn about this evolutionary context because of the shame and blame that often attaches to mothers who are finding it difficult to cope with caregiving. For example, I treated a 16-year-old girl called Tracy for behaviour problems. Her boyfriend had left her when she became pregnant, and Tracy decided to have the baby as a single mum with no family support.

Tracy struggled to handle or respond to her newborn, Poppy. She thought that Poppy’s cries meant one of two things: either that Poppy did not like her, or that Poppy was being naughty. I explained to Tracy that babies cannot yet think about whether they like someone and cannot yet be naughty, and that Poppy was only expressing how she felt moment by moment. However, I could see that Tracy was not taking it in and that it didn’t make sense to her.

“It is important for all of us to learn about this evolutionary context because of the shame and blame that often attaches to mothers who are finding it difficult to cope with caregiving.”

Tracy asked to be admitted to a psychiatric unit, which was led by a highly experienced psychiatrist who arranged for the staff to model how to approach Poppy – to wonder aloud why she might be crying, while demonstrating how to soothe her. After two months of inpatient care, Tracy’s change in attitude towards her daughter was clear. She had a much better understanding of how to interact with a baby.

When I hear about Akaya and Ndima [see Nikhil’s case study below], I think about Tracy and Poppy and so many other families I have worked with. I can see how much they would benefit from having other experienced and willing people around them all the time to help them.

<All names have been changed to protect confidentiality.>



↑ BaYaka hunter-gatherers preparing a meal together

Life for hunter-gatherer mothers

To be sure, hunter-gatherer life is far from a utopia for mothers. Typically, 30%–50% of children in such communities do not survive to adulthood (Apicella and Crittenden, 2015). A study of Hadza hunter-gatherer mothers in Tanzania found that this high risk of infant mortality was a source of significant anxiety, as you would expect (Herlosky et al., 2020).

“The idea that women should be able to manage caretaking using their maternal instincts remains pervasive ... this [isn't] the “natural” human way.”

Nonetheless, in day-to-day life hunter-gatherer mothers have access to a high degree of child-rearing support. Evolutionary anthropologists and ethologists often refer to humans as “cooperative breeders”, because it is well established that extensive “allomothering” – childcare provided by caregivers other than the mother – has been at the heart of our success as a species.

During my field work with BaYaka hunter-gatherers in Congo, I mentioned that I was interested in observing how infants were cared for. One mother, Akaya, invited me to observe her son Ndima, who was born about eight moons (months) ago.³ Over three days, I observed him for 12 hours, covering each hour of daylight (6 a.m. to 6 p.m.). I took note of anyone who directed any form of caregiving towards him.

In these 12 hours, as many as nine allomothers provided attentive, hands-on care to Ndima – such as washing him, playing with him, or carrying him around the camp. I counted 16 allomothers who spent some time in very close proximity to Ndima, such that they could watch over him and intervene if required. Ndima cried frequently, and would be soothed by Akaya, her husband, or one of four other friends and relatives.

My colleagues and I found that Akaya was responsible for only about half of Ndima's care, including supervision, holding, attentive care, or responding to his cries. It became even more evident to me just how invaluable Akaya's strong support system was when she became ill a few weeks later. She was able to spend her days resting and focusing entirely on her recovery, without having to worry whether Ndima would be looked after. Her friend Mondama nursed Ndima during this period.

Having observed almost 20 other children and compared the results with those of other anthropologists, we can say unequivocally that extensive child-rearing support is routine among hunter-gatherers (Chaudhary et al., 2023).

Policy options for WEIRD societies

Across the USA and Europe, post-natal depression rates often exceed 10% (Wang et al., 2021). Lack of social support is one of the most well-established risk factors (Hutchens and Kearney, 2020). In contrast, the study of Hadza mothers mentioned above found no association between women's scores on a post-natal depression scale and their level of

³ All names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

social support, presumably because *all* women had substantial and sufficient support.

Guilt, shame, and feelings of inadequacy are common among mothers who are struggling to manage to look after their children, and this reduces the likelihood that they will seek help. The vague but persistent concept of maternal instincts has inadvertently warped the perception of what is “natural” and what mothers really need. We believe that understanding that it is not unnatural to struggle alone can have a therapeutic and destigmatising effect in itself. We are currently working with a team from the UK’s National Health Service to produce information sheets conveying the importance of allomothering in human evolution.

However, reducing self-shame and stigma is really only a band-aid solution. Fundamentally, we need structural changes to realign levels of support in WEIRD cultures with those that mothers have been shaped by natural selection to expect and rely on. When childcare is used mothers for work, it means

women are simply reallocating their energy from one task to another, rather than getting the chance to recover and rebuild their energy.

In hunter-gatherer societies, and many others, elderly women are key caregivers; Germany plans to trial placing childcare facilities and retirement homes together. Hunter-gatherers also reside in multi-family camps; co-housing projects – where residences consist of multiple self-contained structures connected to shared spaces and facilities – are becoming increasingly popular in Europe.

Such solutions can help reduce the evolutionary mismatch that results in mothers feeling overburdened by their childcare responsibilities, and the corresponding guilt arising from the expectation that they ought to be able to care for their child alone. But it is also the duty of researchers, policymakers, employers, families and friends to provide the social infrastructure so that mothers receive the support they deserve and need.

➤ Find this article online at earlychildhoodmatters.online/2023-19

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Providing holistic care for Māori children and parents

Lessons from my clinic

Te Aro Moxon

Paediatrician

Waikato Hospital
New Zealand

I am the first Māori paediatrician in over 30 years in a region where more than a third of the children are Māori. My experience shows me that the healthcare system must invest in culturally appropriate care.

Tuatahi ake me mihi ki ngā tamariki, ki ngā whānau o te rohe o Waikato, o te ao whānui hoki e whai tonu nei i te ora. Kia piki te ora, kia piki te māramatanga ki a tātau katoa.

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge children and families who are seeking wellbeing, from the Waikato region (in New Zealand) and also worldwide. May we all grow in wellness and understanding.

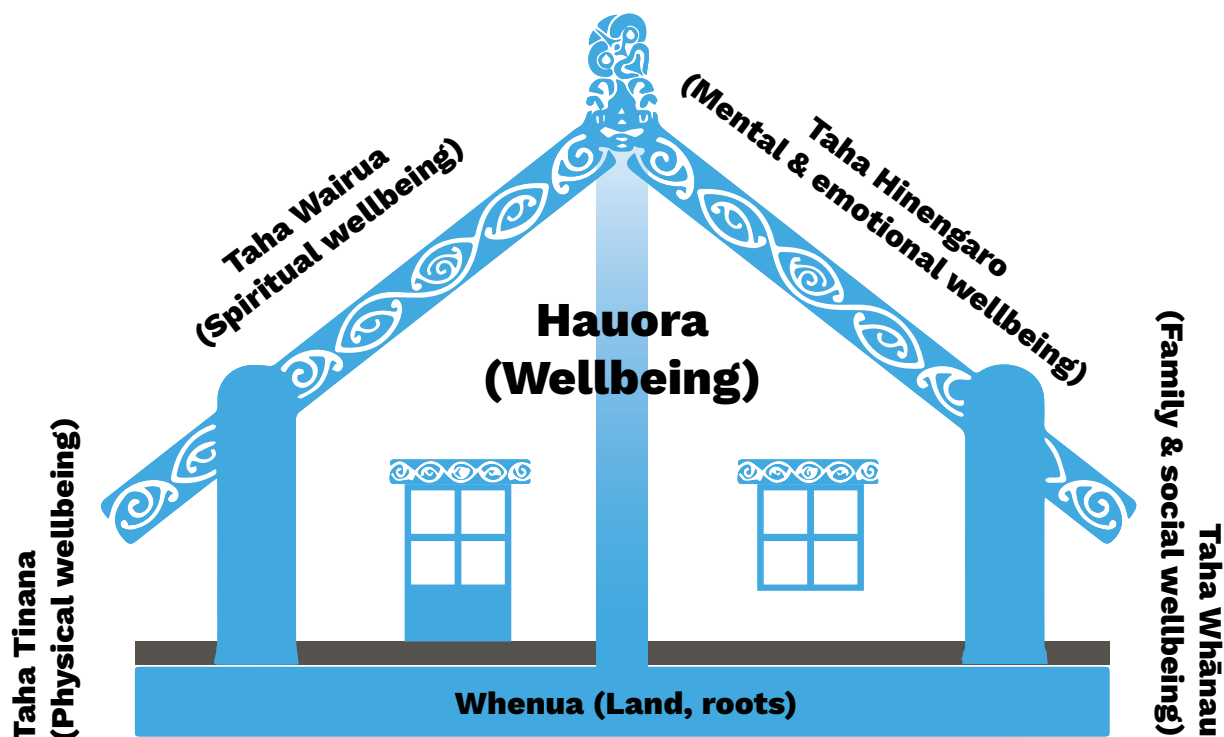
He uri tēnei o Ngāti Kahungunu, o Ngāi Tahu, o Ngāti Pākehā iwi e mihi atu nei ki a koutou katoa.

I am a descendant of Ngāti Kahungunu, and Ngāi Tahu tribes, and also of English heritage, and I greet you all.

I recently had the privilege of reviewing a 3-year-old Indigenous Māori girl in the paediatric outpatient clinic at Waikato Hospital, New Zealand. Her mother, who was understandably anxious, had brought her to the clinic because she was complaining about abdominal pain. I exchanged greetings in Māori with the mother before switching to English, her main language.

However, I soon learned that the girl attended a Māori-language preschool and that her primary language was Māori. So I spoke to her in Māori. When I examined her, I gave simple instructions in Māori which she duly followed. Throughout the review, her mother kept commenting on how well I seemed to be getting on with her daughter; she marvelled at how relaxed she was, as the girl had previously been quite scared when assessed by doctors.

Towards the end of the review, as I recapped the management plan to the mother, the young girl walked towards me, looked up at me and hugged my leg. It was an unexpected and special moment. Her mother told me how much less stressful she had found it to receive care for her daughter from a clinician who spoke the Māori language and understood their cultural context. They hadn't experienced this before.



↑ Māori health model *Te Whare Tapa Whā*, developed by Mason Durie

This was not surprising, as I am the first Māori paediatrician in over 30 years to work in the paediatric department in Waikato region in the North Island of New Zealand – despite the fact that 37% of the region's children are Māori (Stats NZ – Tatauranga Aotearoa, 2022a). In my work I see first hand the impact of health inequities on the Indigenous Māori population (Cure Kids, 2023); I

“I am the first Māori paediatrician in over 30 years to work in the Waikato region – despite the fact that 37% of the region’s children are Māori.”

have found that these children comprise about half of paediatric hospital admissions in the region.

Māori experience poorer health outcomes, compared to non-Māori, partly as an ongoing legacy of New Zealand's colonial past, but also because health services need to provide more holistic care to Māori families (Reid et al., 2017; Curtis et al., 2023; Sinclair and Lyndon, 2023). Across the country, Māori make up approximately 17.4% of the population (Stats NZ – Tatauranga Aotearoa, 2022b) but just 4.4% of doctors (Medical Council of New Zealand, 2022). As non-Māori doctors often treat Māori patients (Sinclair and Lyndon, 2023), they need specific training in cultural safety and in Māori cultural concepts (Curtis et al., 2019; Graham and Masters-Awatere, 2020). These include *Te Whare Tapa Whā*, a Māori health model which recognises four key components of wellbeing: *taha tinana* (physical health), *taha wairua*



(spiritual health), *taha hinengaro* (mental health), and *taha whānau* (family health) (Durie, 1984; Ministry of Health, 2017).

The *hui* process is a structure for Māori medical assessments that focuses on *whakawhanaungatanga* – the building of relationships in a culturally appropriate way (Lacey et al., 2011). Also, the importance of correctly pronouncing patients' names should not be underestimated to avoid patients feeling disrespected (Mauri Ora Associates, 2006; Pitama et al., 2011).

Why culture matters

Having a sick child is always stressful for caregivers. When the healthcare system adds to their stress rather than helping to alleviate it, the care they receive is less likely to be successful. Earlier this year, for example, I reviewed a Māori infant who had presented acutely to the emergency department

for assessment. They were seen by a junior doctor initially and the plan was to complete several investigations including blood tests and a CT scan of the head.

However, after a period of observation, the family felt that their child was well and did not need further investigations. They wished to return home to look after their other children. The family was on the verge of self-discharging against medical advice when the junior doctor requested that I, as the paediatrician on call, see them.

In keeping with the *hui* process, I introduced myself and spent some time building connection through the process of *whakawhanaungatanga* by explaining to them where my *iwi* (tribe) was based and enquiring about where they were from (Lacey et al., 2011). At this point I asked the family if they would like to begin the assessment with a *karakia* (prayer in Māori). They assented and asked me to say the *karakia*, which I did (*taha wairua*).

I then completed my assessment and carefully explained to the family why the investigations were necessary and why they needed to stay in hospital to ensure the physical wellbeing (*taha tinana*) of their child. The discussion also included careful responses to the family's questions so they could feel engaged in the process (*taha hinengaro*). In the end they agreed to the assessments, and a plan that included who would look after the other children at home (*taha whānau*).

It was crucial to listen to and consider the needs and worries of the parents, in a culturally appropriate way, so that I could provide the best care for their child. Understanding the range of Māori health perspectives and the diverse cultural needs of Māori is important in order to provide appropriate and effective healthcare and address the health inequities affecting Māori children (Graham and Masters-Awatere, 2020; Cure Kids, 2023).

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Decolonising public policy: a way forward for caregiver support in Brazil

In the *Tambor de Crioula*, dancers form a literal and metaphorical circle of care

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“Tonight, there’s *Tambor de Crioula*!” When Hadassa was born, Dona Maria prayed to São Benedito to strengthen her granddaughter’s weak lungs and muscles. Now that Hadassa is happy and healthy, she needs to pay back the saint with rhythm and dance. She’s called the whole community – and their drums – together.

Maria’s daughter Meire arrives early with Hadassa, now 18 months old. The baby girl arrives dressed just like her mother, with a long calico skirt, turban and ritual necklaces. They primped and combed and bathed as a form of respect to Dona Maria and St Benedict, but only have flip-flops on their feet: when the drums start, their bare feet will feel the dirt floor. Hadassa loves to feel the earth under her soles.

As close to 50 drummers and dancers prepare for the event in this small plaza in São Luís do Maranhão, Northern Brazil, Maria takes Hadassa from Meire’s lap. She walks with her, pointing out the plants around the small garden in this community made up of the descendants of runaway slaves. Two older girls ask Meire if they can teach Hadassa the

different rhythms. One shows the baby how to play the drum while the other spins so that her airy white skirt balloons around her in a swirl of laughter and dance. Hadassa is euphoric.

Three-year-old Apollo arrives with his grandfather, bringing another drum. Apollo joins Hadassa on the beaten dirt dance floor. The grandfather picks up each instrument, showing how different touches and beats make each drum speak with different voices. Apollo pounds one of the drums with a proud, firm beat.

Care through play

Many Africans forced into slavery in Brazil fled to freedom in communities called *quilombos*; in the state of Maranhão, they created the *Tambor de Crioula* to celebrate their liberty. The ritual is festive – participants dance joyfully and improvise on their drums – but it is also a form of thanksgiving to São Benedito, or St Benedict Manasseri, an Afro-Sicilian saint who became associated with the Yoruba deity Ossain.

“Your blessing, grandma?” comes the voice of a small child. Like the exchange of São Benedito’s grace for a joyful dance, these words are traded for kisses, hugs, and compliments. Like the drums, the act of asking for blessings connects past and present, children and elders. As the drums begin to play, a vigorous dance gives space for the “enchanted” – those who have passed away into the world beyond – to descend. Each child here grows up under the eyes of everyone in the community, learning to respect their ancestors and trade the small graces that make for a collective.

During the Tambor, anyone can invent a verse, exchanged in call and response with the chorus: an introduction, a song of praise to patron saints or *orixás*, a homage to women, a challenge, a narration of everyday events, a farewell ... Rhythms and rhymes carry the heritage of the group from generation to generation, repeated, improvised and transformed.

Children – even the smallest babies – are always together with the adults: playing, running, inspiring laughter and requests to repeat. The child understands that she is the most important being at that moment in that place.

A circle of care for caregivers

As Meire dances into the centre of the circle, everyone’s attention falls on her. Baby Hadassa looks on with curiosity and admiration at the beauty and grace of her mother’s twirls and footwork. Other women enter the circle, chosen by a kind of pointing made with the belly-button. Hadassa joins the dance; the men beat a dozen interlinked rhythms. The community sings and responds in chorus, applause and cheers.

In the *Tambor de Crioula*, the community forms both a literal and a metaphorical circle of care for caregivers. While mothers enjoy a carefree moment on stage, their babies constantly move from one lap to the next. The experience strengthens the kind of connections in day-to-day life that form a network of mutual support, enabling mothers to share their burdens and find a safe place for their children while they work.



Photo: Natalia Correa

↑ Tambor de Crioula in action

In Portuguese, people say “*brincar*” to describe these festivals, the same word used for children’s play. “Games” for all ages, from the Tambor to rhyming games or dressing up at the carnival, integrate and socialise young children into a community of care. The community creates this supportive environment by mixing the sacred with dance, jokes, stories and shared joy.

“As a space for cultural and personal empowerment, the Tambor embodies resistance against hundreds of years of slavery, racism, and discriminatory public policy.”

Because of its link to African popular religiosity, the Tambor is an aesthetic environment, happy and motivating, valuing human connection, ritual meaning, and play. It creates wellbeing for mothers, fathers and children, reducing anxiety and breaking the cycle of toxic stress so common in a world of racism, sexism and heavy responsibility.

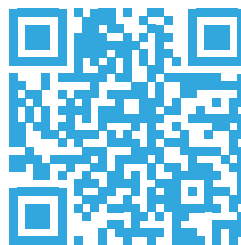
As a space for cultural and personal empowerment, the Tambor embodies resistance against hundreds of years of slavery, racism, and discriminatory public policy. Brazil was the last country in the western hemisphere to abolish slavery, and in the 150 years

since then, public policy has forced Afro-Brazilians into urban slums, criminalised their cultural and religious practices, excluded them from the job market, and limited their access to good schools and universities. In *quilombos*, favelas, and other spaces that Black Brazilians have built for themselves, rituals such as the Tambor form a space for passing resistance on to new generations – the foetus feeds on rhythm as on a mother’s placenta.

Building policy based on indigenous knowledge and experience

In 2022, Rita da Silva and Kurt Shaw (the brains behind *Usina da Imaginação*) worked with women from *quilombos* and indigenous communities in the states of Maranhão and Roraima to create a series of short documentaries to share their child-rearing techniques. As part of the *MIMUS* platform (Multiple childhoods, Multiple knowledges) the films show the importance of culture and inter-age play to support the physical and mental health of early childhood caregivers and children in general.

While the Tambor exemplifies this importance, it is just one example among many: the Guajajara people, for instance, celebrate a baby’s first steps with three days of music, dance, rituals and feasts; the



← Scan the QR code to visit the MIMUS platform online

Ye’kuana people make a point of taking their babies into the jungle every day to “weave an invisible string” that will always tie a child to nature. Festivals, music, rites, and community play are collective spaces for empowerment, cradles of resistance and support for a population that has been little understood by public policies.

For many years, early childhood policies in Brazil have often tried to force European and North American practices onto Afro-Brazilian and indigenous populations. For example, well-meaning efforts to motivate women to give birth in hospitals undermine centuries of traditional midwifery that provides essential antenatal support. Home visitors ask parents to play with plastic toys with their kids, subverting active play in nature and traditional care given by older children to younger. Nutritionists favour unfamiliar and expensive fruits such as apples

Video: Usina da Imaginação | Photo: Rita da Silva



↑ Scan the QR code to see the video
Karina Muniz: O aquilombar da Liberdade

or pears over readily available palm fruits, such as açai berries, and cupuaçu fruit. Hospitals and schools insist on dealing only with parents and not grandparents, who commonly raise kids in Afro-Brazilian and indigenous groups.

We argue that policy must instead be built from the inside out, based on the epistemologies of diverse communities and their aesthetic forms of belonging. Policy must be made *with* them and *by* them, not *for* them, respecting their collective spaces and practices for support, care, and empowerment for young children and their caregivers. These spaces already exist: public policy must strengthen them, not undermine them. Both indigenous and Afro-Brazilian communities struggle for decolonised public policy, supporting already extant practices like the Tambor, creating not a uniform childhood but multiple childhoods where dignity is possible.

This model is proven, even if it has never become national policy: the Kaingang people, for instance, have fought to use public funding for daycare to

support spaces where grandparents care for little kids, as they long have. We have been part of a movement to hire midwives and shamans in public hospitals in cities with large indigenous populations. In both Roraima and Xingu, western-trained doctors work together with traditional medical practitioners to develop policy and train medical staff.

“These spaces already exist: public policy must strengthen them, not undermine them.”

Recognising and strengthening these ritual environments and their cultural practices, favouring community life and the production of collective meaning: these elements form the basis for public policy that nurtures diverse forms of early childhood development and support for parents and grandparents, guaranteeing respect for their traditions and ancestry.

➤ Find this article online at earlychildhoodmatters.online/2023-21

With thanks to Kurt Shaw of Usina da Imaginação for translating this article for *Early Childhood Matters*.

Curious to learn more?



← Scan the QR code to read the 2020 *Early Childhood Matters* article on CanalCanoa, a platform for indigenous people to document their songs, stories and child-rearing practices on digital media.

Investing in the future of caregiving

Blending physical and digital villages of support for families

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Chian: I became a parent in 2020 – an incredibly isolating time due to the pandemic lockdowns. But in the face of adversity, there was ingenuity. I discovered a digital village of support: the hospital delivered antenatal classes via Zoom, the midwife checked in via FaceTime, Grandma and Grandpa beamed in over Skype, and my fellow pandemic mamas shared milestones and countless questions in WhatsApp groups.

Patrice: I am at a later stage of parenting – with 7- and 10-year-old daughters – but feel no less indebted to digital technology for keeping our family going. Here in the USA, we use ParentSquare to communicate with our kids' teachers; Milo to manage the "invisible load" of after-school activities, birthday party invites and remembering to bring stuffed toys on Friday; and without Good Eggs, dinner might not make it on the table.

But, of course, we both recognise that digital technology hasn't solved the vast majority of the pain points of family life. The cost of childcare has gone up 220% over the past three decades – significantly faster than other essential family expenses, and the supply crisis is all too real. The "child care cliff", as described by the Century Foundation, is daunting

(Kashen et al., 2023); more than 70,000 childcare programmes – one-third of those supported by American Rescue Plan stabilisation funding – will likely close, and approximately 3.2 million children could lose their child care spots this autumn. And far too many families caring for a child with a disability are left feeling too isolated and mired in red tape to access even the most basic of services.

As a managing partner of Reach Capital, I, Chian, spend my time looking for innovative solutions to these challenges. Since 2011, Reach has invested over USD 500 million in technologies that expand access to opportunity through education. Supporting families through a "digital village" approach is a key pillar of our strategy.

And I, Patrice, co-founded The Holding Co., a design lab that partners with organisations building the modern care solutions families want and need. Many of our partners are creating digital offerings that help make families feel less overwhelmed, more informed, and more supported in the journey of caring for young kids, disabled loved ones, and/or elderly parents.

We're not the only ones who see the possibility for and power of innovation and investment in the



care space. At The Holding Co., we published the [Investin.Care](#) platform, a central place for market insights into the care economy, with 200,000 views by August 2023 from journalists, business leaders, entrepreneurs and more. Venture capital investments in startups that serve families with young children skyrocketed in 2020 and 2021 as the pandemic forced everyone online (Gong, 2021).

“We’re not the only ones who see the possibility for and power of innovation and investment in the care space.”

While investment levels have receded from the high-water mark of 2021, they remain higher than before the pandemic. A growing number of companies are building digital services for a new generation of

parents who are looking for on-demand, media-rich, and social parenting tools.

Bridging the online and offline worlds

Some of these companies, like [Cleo](#) and [Maven](#), have digitised parent coaching services that were traditionally delivered offline – from planning for childbirth to lactation consultancy to learning baby sign language. One-to-one or group sessions facilitated by experts are increasingly available online and on demand. Other companies like [Brightwheel](#) and [HiMama](#) (now Lillio) have developed tech to help childcare providers navigate regulatory challenges or communicate with families.

Digital tools need not be substitutes for in-person interactions – they can lead to interactions. For instance, a friend was recently walking in a park and saw a group of mothers with babies, hanging

out together. She asked how they got to know each other, and they shared that they'd met on a mum-matching app called [Peanut](#), Tinder but for parents. With a recent survey showing that an unprecedented 51% of mothers report serious loneliness, such apps can make a difference (Weissbourd et al., 2021).

It's not just new parents who face mental health struggles; increasingly, so do our children. [Little Otter](#) is an example of online innovation that allows families to seek out mental health screening and customised online therapy for the whole family.

“Digital tools need not be substitutes for in-person interactions – they can lead to interactions.”

Many caregivers are thinking about how to make their children's screen time more educational, creative and social, without exposing them to the worst of the internet's addictive qualities. Many companies are stepping in with apps specifically designed to enhance kids' mental health and cognitive development, rather than harm it. For example, [Caribu](#) is an app that helps grandparents interact remotely with their grandchildren in educational ways, [Nurture](#) creates interactive learning experiences for families, while [Beanstalk](#) designs interactive live classes for preschoolers.

Startups are also helping busy parents plan off-screen activities that are age-appropriate, enlivening and fun. [Lovevery](#), for example, translates an enormous body of early childhood development research into age- and stage-appropriate play kits that help families engage in enriching play with their little ones. They have worked hard to make their platform and price point accessible for families from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. [Tinkergarten](#) trains caregivers to deliver outdoor learning activities in venues such as community parks.

A focus on impact to help families thrive

For any startup Reach Capital invests in, a key question is how to deliver impact as well as generate revenue. [Guardians Collective](#), which offers expert-led parenting circles, has a subscription model rather than an advertising model. That incentivises them to focus on creating value for caregivers that keeps them engaged month by month, rather than trying to get them to spend more time on the app to generate more clicks or to push specific products – building trust.

Guardians Collective also shows the importance of tone and approach. Caregivers are looking for advice and information that is based on research and evidence, but is also relatable and empowering. The community-led model is reflected in the way that the platform pairs four families with an early childhood educator who can share insight and developmental knowledge. Interestingly, while families sign up because of the expertise, the vast majority of the conversation is peer-to-peer, reflecting the power of common experiences.

At The Holding Co., we've also worked with companies that are not consumer-facing, but doing the quiet transformational work of building better systems for parents. One example is [Bridgecare](#), which is redesigning the “operating system” of the USA's childcare system so that states, counties and cities can more accurately keep track of where the childcare “deserts” are and make better policy in the long run – and, in the short run, help parents and professional caregivers find one another more easily.

“A future where families thrive will no doubt depend on our ability to continue to invest in and design services that meet modern families where are, at scale.”



A future where families thrive will no doubt depend on our ability to continue to invest in and design services that meet modern families where they are, at scale. Too many of these great approaches are just reaching a fraction of American families today,

as the majority of us scrape together systems with little outside support. Now is the time to bring the best of design, innovation, and investment strategy into the most central relationships in our lives.

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AI promises to make life easier for parents, but who is in control?

Retaining agency in the age of AI is critical for mental health



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It started like this: “Hey Siri, play *Thunder* by *Imagine Dragons*”. But now my 6-year-old daughter is so comfortable with Siri that, with one barked command, she can spawn entire playlists of songs neither she nor her parents have heard before but Siri knows she will like. (Her younger brother has come to believe that if you ask in the right way, you can conjure into existence a peppy kids’ number about literally anything in the world.)

At first, the magic of AI meant only one thing to me as a parent: convenience. AI was simply an always-on assistant to help me keep on top of my children’s ever-changing demands. Siri could play songs to keep my kids mollified while my hands were tied down driving, working or shopping.

But as my kids have grown, something has changed. The algorithms have become more ambitious – not only smarter, but more proactive. Rather than faithfully respond to commands, the technology increasingly takes matters into its own hands: I look at my photos, for example, and find that they’ve been organised into albums without my asking. AI is ready to assume control of all aspects of our lives, if we let it, from how we manage our meals to investments to shopping choices.

The big sales pitch is that all this makes life more convenient. Research suggests that the average person makes around 35,000 decisions per day, more than 200 about food alone (Graff, 2021). Making decisions is exhausting, especially for parents, and fatigue can be costly as it reduces the quality of our decisions. Surely, we should welcome the help?

But life for parents is about more than convenience. Agency matters. Research says our mental health is closely linked to our “internal locus of control” – the feeling of being in control of the consequences of our actions, as opposed to having our fate determined by outside forces (Shin and Lee, 2019). Which, in turn, seems related to the ability to cope with life challenges, such as scarcity of money or time, that can be particularly severe for parents (Groth et al., 2019). Indeed, feeling more in control as a parent may be linked with children’s own sense of agency, behaviour and emotional development (Morton, 1997; Freed and Thompson, 2011; Tone et al., 2012).



To be sure, time-saving hacks are critical for parents whose ability to concentrate on the things that matter is often under siege (Kalil et al., 2023). So reclaiming agency cannot be about shunning technology. Instead, it means using the technology we have to choose our own roadmap for how we can maximise our children's wellbeing – and our own.

“To take back control, we do not have to 'unplug' and give up on the convenience.”

I would not be exercising agency if I simply turned off the predictive algorithms on my kids' favourite entertainment platforms. Instead, I could exercise agency by choosing a parenting style that works for me and my family and applying it to their entertainment choices – and this could include choosing an algorithm to guide the individual entertainment decisions my kids make.

Already, AI-powered apps make it possible to reclaim some agency. You can first tell ChatGPT something about your preferences as a parent, and then ask for recommendations for books or movies in accordance

with this. Parents can start by reading, thinking and consulting with experts about different parenting styles and how they want to shape their children's development as well as their own lives. Then they can try to consciously choose the tools and technologies that propel their vision forward.

Algorithms can take away agency without us noticing. But AI-driven tools can be part of the solution, not just the problem. Imagine apps that, before they pick out movies for your kids or exercise routines for you, prompt you first to articulate your goals, parenting style, and vision for what attributes you would like your children to have. Such tools may not yet be widespread, but surely will be soon.

Having to make tough choices in response to technological advances is nothing new for parents. Video games brought worries about harmful content, but when used correctly they can also support kids' learning (Boudreau, 2021). With AI, the tradeoff is even closer to home: convenience has increasingly come to mean giving up control in the task of parenting itself. But to take back control, we do not have to “unplug” and give up on the convenience. Human-led parenting is still the best way to support children's development – and algorithms, if we use them wisely, can support the choices that we make.

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What we gain from being in nature with our children

Caregivers also benefit from green spaces close to home

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I am not a very playful mother. Playing with my two children never came easily to me. But I love to be outside, so whenever I had any spare time I took my children for a walk. We did not go very far when they were young, just to those patches of land that are available in every neighbourhood – the end of a street, a small yard, maybe a park.

Thinking back to these experiences, they brought a great array of benefits to me and to my family. I would cheer my daughter up as she tried to climb a gully, or I would share my son's wonder upon turning over a rock and discovering three kinds of bugs. These experiences were not only a way to enhance our connectedness to each other through our enjoyment of nature, and to nature itself, but also a powerful strategy to reclaim my children's attachment and strengthen my role as their mentor, compass and nurturer. These nature walks became some kind of ritual for us, an opportunity to talk and to spend some energy by being active outdoors. When we came home, all daily tasks – from picking up toys to brushing teeth – went much more smoothly.

When we hear about the benefits of nature to our health and wellbeing, it's all too easy to think of huge mountains and vast wilderness – the kinds of places most of us would have to travel for hours to get to. But contact with nature can also be on a very small scale: plants inside the house or trees outside the apartment building. Even contact with this kind of nature can bring benefits.

“These experiences were also a powerful strategy to strengthen my role as their mentor, compass and nurturer.”

The benefits of nature for caregivers include reducing anxiety, improving sleep quality, boosting mood, and enhancing overall emotional wellbeing (Jimenez et al., 2021). Nature also offers opportunities for activities that maintain physical health (World Health Organization (WHO), 2016). Parents and caregivers who live in greener

neighbourhoods are less stressed, and presumably bring less stress home to their children (WHO, 2016). Parents and caregivers who experience nature together with their children improve their communication and build stronger bonds (Izenstark and Ebata, 2022).

Regarding the benefits for children, the American Academy of Pediatrics published in 2021 a review of evidence that found a positive relationship between contact with nature and children's physical and mental health (Fyfe-Johnson et al., 2021). The evidence supports what traditional cultures have been telling us for centuries: a nature-rich childhood is crucial for children's development. Playing and engaging with nature makes kids healthier, happier and smarter (Islam et al., 2020). Children brought up with nature are also more likely to develop pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours (Chawla, 2006).

Agencies as varied as the WHO, UNICEF and the International Union for Conservation of Nature stress the importance of local and national governments ensuring safe and accessible green space in communities (Sugar, 2021). This requires reducing the barriers to access to nature that affect some communities more than others.

Natural play spaces designed for families

One initiative in Brazil that has been trying to address that challenge is the implementation of natural play spaces in small and unused areas of cities where there are few formal parks. These "pocket parks" can be a powerful strategy to spread access to nature through neighbourhoods that have been historically underserved.

However, they face resistance. Implementing natural play spaces is still not prevalent in Brazil; people are too attracted to traditional playgrounds and see nature as dirty or dangerous. Natural playgrounds are wrongly perceived as posing more safety, maintenance and resilience issues than wholly artificial environments that feature concrete and plastic play equipment. And the benefits of nature for caregivers are even less widely appreciated than the benefits for children.

Alana has been tackling this challenge through an advocacy and mobilisation strategy to promote natural play spaces. Since 2020 we have been working in partnership with the Van Leer Foundation's Urban95 project to establish a process that enables cities to design, implement and manage natural places on their own. We are currently working with seven cities across the country, and the response has been very positive. Parents and caregivers are involved in the process of design, planning and implementation and see these spaces as a strategy to enhance the family's access to open spaces and nature. Recent research conducted in one of the cities, Fortaleza, showed that more than 90% of parents and caregivers believe that natural play spaces increase time spent outside.

"These 'pocket parks' can be a powerful strategy to spread access to nature through neighbourhoods that have been historically underserved."

Reviving a collective memory in nature

Claudio Rodrigues, an architect and the head of urban planning for the municipality of Mogi das Cruzes in São Paulo, explains how taking a leadership role in the Urban95 initiative has changed his views:

"Despite the expected obstacles, there is also a collective memory and enthusiasm about being in nature for community bonding and wellbeing. People used to have quintais and terreiros (backyards and terraces) and those were important spaces for socialisation and culture. During my work with the Urban95 initiative I learned that the cultural connection to nature is not just something ancient and distant. There is a current and large desire and opportunity to re-engage our current lives with nature. The natural play spaces public policy is a way to address the right we all have to find that."



Photo: Rinaldo Martinucci

↑ Jardim Helena Natural Play Space, São Paulo, Brazil.

Today my children are 15 and 10 years old, and we still go on family walks every day to relax and connect with ourselves and with nature. Most of the time, the children are the ones who take the initiative. After a walk outdoors at the end of a

long and tiring day, we come back home ready to make dinner and enjoy a meal together. The joy and healing that comes from being in nature – and that helps to meet the challenges of parenting – should be available to everyone on a daily basis.

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