



# CoLab EVIDENCE REPORT

The critical role of parenting in early childhood development



# The critical role of parenting in early childhood development: An Evidence Report



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## ABOUT COLAB:

CoLab brings together families, clinicians, educators, policy makers, other practitioners and researchers to provide evidence to improve service delivery and community capacity to meet the needs of children, families and communities who are experiencing vulnerability. Our vision is that young children in Australia develop, learn and thrive so they can build a better future for themselves and their communities. CoLab has three priorities, including: providing better support to families experiencing adversity; advocating for place-based approaches to improve the ways that families, services and communities work together, and; advancing the economic understanding of early childhood, with a focus on where the best early investments can be made. CoLab was launched in 2017 through a partnership between Telethon Kids and the Minderoo Foundation, made possible by Minderoo's founding commitment to ensure every Australian child gets the best possible start in life.



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# The critical role of parenting in early childhood development: An Evidence Report



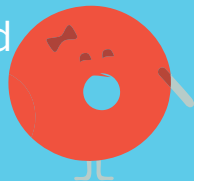
## RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- **Early childhood experiences** are fundamentally created and shaped by **parents** and the **family environment** – the quality of the experiences these relationships bring can have a **lasting impact on young children's lives.**



- At least one **responsive, nurturing and supportive relationship with an adult** is integral for multiple aspects of a **child's development, health and learning.**

- **Parents are their child's first teacher** and they play a **critical role** in supporting and fostering their child's learning, health and developmental outcomes – through the provision of a **positive and engaging home learning environment.**



- A **safe and secure home learning environment** is characterised by specific practices promoting children's health and safety, such as **nutrition, physical activity, immunisation and injury prevention.**

- **Parents' use of recommended parenting practices** is shaped by their knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and experiences of parenting, and it is important to take these into account when considering how to **best support parents to improve child development, health and learning.**

- The **wider community** has an important role in **supporting parents and families to ensure children reach their potential** – through mechanisms such as easy access to resources, well-coordinated service systems and evidence-based parenting programs.





# The critical role of parenting in early childhood development: An Evidence Report



## Introduction

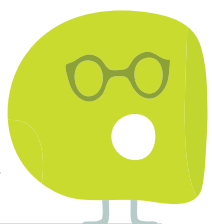
In the first few years of life, the family environment is the dominant setting in young children's lives. Their relationships in this immediate context have a powerful influence on multiple aspects of their development, health and learning [1-3]. Early childhood experiences are predominately created and shaped by parents\* (or primary caregivers), with these experiences having a lasting impact on young children's lives that extend well into adulthood [4]. The goal of parenting is to encourage, support and cultivate a range of mental, physical, socio-emotional and linguistic capabilities in children [5]. Ultimately, this assists children to successfully participate in and contribute to society, allowing them to experience an enjoyable and rewarding life, where they have a positive sense of identity and can relate well to others [5, 6].



This Evidence Report outlines why and how parenting matters in early childhood, and describes the parenting practices that are particularly important for encouraging healthy developmental and learning outcomes for young children. The quality of attachment in the parent-child relationship and the importance of nurturing and responsive interactions to healthy child development are discussed. The role of parents as their child's first teacher is also outlined, including the importance of providing a stimulating and enriching home learning environment. Parents' fundamental responsibility to ensure a safe and secure environment for their child is also addressed. This includes the provision of quality nutrition, health care and protection from harm, as well as a sense of predictability and security through regular routines. Recognising that parenting does not occur in isolation, the influence of contextual factors surrounding parenting behaviours are detailed. This report also discusses the use of communications science to frame messaging about parenting and the need for evidence-based parenting interventions to encourage effective parenting practices.

## Nurturing, responsive interactions

Nurturing child-caregiver relationships positively influence children's self-confidence, physical and mental health, motivation to learn, conflict resolution and emotional regulation, morals and ethics, the capacity to develop and sustain relationships, and eventually to be a caregiver oneself [9-11]. When a primary caregiver provides prompt, appropriate and sensitive responses to their child, it contributes to the establishment of secure attachment, allowing the child to feel a sense of emotional and physical security



\*In this report, the term 'parent' is used to refer to any adult, biologically related to the child or not, who fulfils the primary caregiver role





[12–16]. Through experiencing their primary caregiver as a secure base from which to explore the world, infants are reassured that their parent is available and responsive, and ready to assist, encourage and support them as they encounter challenging circumstances and manage difficult emotions [17]. Children who have a secure attachment to their caregiver are more socially competent, independent, responsible, cooperative, purposeful, and friendly. However, the consequences of poor caregiver-child attachment include developmental delays, disordered psychological patterns, as well as behavioural issues, and problems with emotional and social skills [18].

Parental responsiveness includes demonstrating acceptance

of an infant's needs and interests through responding to their signals in a prompt and sensitive manner [19]. When children reach out via babbling, speaking, gestures and facial expression, adults need to respond through similar gestures, vocalisation and engaging emotionally [19, 20]. Through these reciprocal and dynamic "serve and return" interactions between young children and their parents, neural connections that form the architecture of the developing brain are built and strengthened [20]. This complex brain circuitry then forms a foundation for the development of communication and social skills [20]. When there is a persistent absence of responsive care and a breakdown in "serve and return" interactions, as in situations of neglect, children's development and learning can be seriously compromised [21]. Socioeconomic status is recognised as a major factor impacting on parenting, with the chronic stress of poverty affecting some parents' capacity to engage in the warm and responsive interactions that support their children's development [1, 22–24]. However, a high-quality child-parent relationship is also an important protective factor for children experiencing adversity. Indeed, research shows that at least one stable relationship with a parent or caregiver is fundamental to children's positive development, even among those who face adversity [20].

Reliable and high quality interactions between a child and their parent are essential to healthy early childhood development and learning, and it is from these interactions that children acquire a basic understanding of how relationships work [9, 25]. When interactions between a child and their parent are characterised by nurturing and responsive care, children feel a sense of safety and security in their environment and an assurance that their needs will be adequately met [9]. They can feel confident to reach out, explore and learn more about the world. A reciprocal influence exists between the individual characteristics of a child and parenting behaviours. Rather than children simply being passive subjects of parenting [11], it is now well recognised that child development and learning is situated within the bidirectional relationship between a parent and a child [11, 26, 27]. In this way, characteristics of the child interact with parenting behaviour, and the 'goodness of fit' between these can determine developmental outcomes [11, 28]. This interactional relationship changes over time as the parent-child relationship evolves [11].

## A child's first teacher

Parents are their child's first teacher and have an important role in providing an enriching and stimulating home learning environment that supports their child's learning [29]. Through talking and listening to their child, and reading to them every day, parents are encouraging positive learning outcomes for their children [4, 30, 31]. Naturalistic observation of the home learning environment demonstrates the quantity of spoken words that adults use with children is positively associated with their cognitive ability [32]. Beyond the sheer quantity of words they hear, the conversational "back-and-forth" turn-taking that characterises early language exposure is particularly important, with beneficial impacts on young children's language-related brain function observed through neuroimaging [33].

Research demonstrates that a positive and engaging home learning environment can have a powerful influence on children's learning and development, even more so than a parent's education and social class [34, 35]. However, families in poverty may have limited capacity and resources to provide a safe and enriching home learning environment for their children [1, 24]. For instance, low family income can be a barrier to the parent-child book-reading that is crucial for young children's literacy development and lifelong learning [36]. When early childhood environments do not provide appropriate stimulation and positive experiences, the development of important foundational capacities of the brain can be compromised, with long-lasting effects [20]. This emphasises the critical importance of supporting parents, particularly those experiencing adversity, to create and maintain an enriching home learning environment for their child.



As part of their role as a child's first teacher, parents are well placed to support the executive function skill development in their children - which begin to emerge in the preschool years. Executive function encompasses a coordinating set of mental processes that ultimately provide the foundation for children's future social and cognitive development, school readiness and academic success. These skills underlie the capacity to focus, remember and follow instructions, make decisions, control impulses and regulate behaviour [37]. Parents can support their child's emerging executive function skills by transforming everyday moments into opportunities for learning [38]. A range of everyday learning experiences can help build and strengthen these essential life skills, including those that help develop age-appropriate capacities such as: focus and attention, self-control, understanding of emotions, communicating with others, making decisions, setting and reaching goals, and taking on challenges [38, 39]. For example, tasks like shopping and household jobs (e.g. sorting the washing) can be turned into experiences that improve children's ability to focus, organise and plan for the





future <sup>[40]</sup>. Importantly, parents' ability to successfully foster their child's executive function skills is dependent on them having well-developed executive function skills themselves <sup>[41]</sup>. Some adults can face everyday challenges that impact on their ability to use key executive function processes <sup>[41]</sup>. Yet, it is these core capabilities that enable adults to address life challenges and effectively manage parenting <sup>[41, 42]</sup>. As such, a dual-generational approach to skill development may assist in providing both children and their parents with the opportunity to benefit from well-developed executive function skills <sup>[38, 43, 44]</sup>.

### Safe and secure environments

Parents have a vital responsibility to support their child's biological need for protection and safety, starting with the need for quality prenatal nutrition and abstaining from alcohol, drugs and smoking during pregnancy <sup>[4]</sup>. Parenting practices that promote positive child outcomes also include breastfeeding, immunisation, injury prevention, providing access to healthy food and opportunities for physical activity. <sup>[4, 11, 45–47]</sup> Another aspect of providing a safe and secure environment for young children relates to the appropriate use of digital technologies, including adhering to age-appropriate screen time recommendations <sup>[45, 48, 49]</sup>. Children will observe and imitate what surrounds them <sup>[50]</sup> and, as such, parents are key to modelling positive health and safe behaviours for their child to emulate. It's also important for parents to provide an environment where children can safely explore and socialise, and experience a sense of physical and emotional safety <sup>[51]</sup>. This is important because inconsistent parenting, trauma, neglect and abuse can increase stress on children while they are developing <sup>[52–54]</sup> and high levels of household disorganisation, instability and "chaos" are associated with poor cognitive, social and behavioural outcomes in children <sup>[4]</sup>. Parents can help support desired outcomes for children through regular routines, including having children participate in jobs around the house when they are old enough. Creating and



maintaining regular family routines all contribute to a sense of predictability and stability in children's daily lives, providing an ideal environment for the types of positive interactions and stimulating learning experiences that are necessary for healthy child development and learning [4, 55].

Parents also play an integral role in introducing their child to the social world, and helping them learn about appropriate behaviour in society in a safe and secure environment. Part of this has its basis in executive function - cultivating children's internal, independent capacity to regulate their own behaviour is a key developmental task of early childhood [56]. Ultimately, children's capacity to self-regulate means they can recognise situations in which an automatic or habitual response is not appropriate, and prioritise their thoughts, emotions and behaviour accordingly [57]. An important precursor to this is supporting children's socioemotional development, which parents can do by engaging children in conversations about their feelings, providing guidance in recognising, labelling and decoding emotions, and explaining their causes and consequences [58]. Particularly in the first few years of life, when self-regulatory skills (and the associated area of the brain that supports these skills) are still developing, parents are critical to monitoring and guiding (i.e. externally regulating) their young children's social behaviour [56]. In doing so, parents help prepare their child to work out the different expectations that different situations bring (e.g. what behaviour is appropriate in a school setting versus the home setting) [57]. It is recommended that parents use strategies to guide their child towards more appropriate behaviour, rather than the use of physical discipline which is associated with negative cognitive and behavioural outcomes in children [4].



### Parenting knowledge, attitudes and beliefs



When considering parenting practices associated with healthy child development and learning, it is important to recognise how these are shaped by knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about parenting. Parents with knowledge of child development and evidence-based parenting practices are more likely to engage in practices that promote their child's healthy development and learning [4]. However, it is not just knowledge that determines whether parents engage in positive parenting practices. Their use of such practices is also influenced by their attitudes and beliefs about parenting, including their perceptions about the roles and responsibilities of parents (and others) in raising children, and their own experience of parenting they received as a child. For instance, some people may assume good parenting is automatic and natural, which can undermine the potential for parenting to

be improved through supports that increase parenting knowledge and skills [5, 44, 59, 60]. Similarly, the public may hold misconceptions about child development as a passive, innate process of growth, thereby diminishing parents' responsibility to engage in active interactions with their child and the role of community-based structural supports to enable positive child development outcomes [45]. Parents may also vary in their beliefs about men's and women's roles in raising children, as well as their attitudes about parental involvement in their children's education [4, 45].





Parents' attitudes about specific recommended parenting practices can also determine whether they engage in practices, such as their attitudes towards breastfeeding and vaccination <sup>[4]</sup>. There is also variation in the way parents view the role of societal agents and support services, that can influence their willingness to seek support <sup>[4]</sup> Taken for granted ways of thinking, and implicit assumptions about parenting and early childhood, can undermine productive conversations and a fuller understanding about early childhood development and learning, and reduce support for solutions that align with evidence-based recommendations <sup>[45]</sup>.

### It takes a village

Parenting should not happen in isolation; rather, the context within which parenting occurs is vital <sup>[4, 45]</sup>. The environment external to the family can help facilitate positive parenting by ensuring parents are well supported to raise their child for positive development, health and learning outcomes. For instance, parents require access to resources to ensure positive experiences for their child - including secure housing, social support networks, programs and services, public transport infrastructure, and freely accessible green spaces and playgrounds <sup>[4, 45, 61, 62]</sup>. Indeed, the whole community contributes in raising a child and many different people and services within the community can support families and young children in this period of their life. Community support can lift the capabilities of parents and have a meaningful positive impact on children <sup>[5]</sup>. Accordingly, it is imperative for parents to draw on their support networks and the wider community to help foster healthy developmental outcomes for their child. As Gasden, Ford and Breiner (p. 34) <sup>[4]</sup>, assert "nearly every facet of society has a role to play in supporting parents and ensuring that children reach their potential" and "when parents and other caregivers are able to support young children, children's lives are enriched, and society is advantaged by their contributions".



For a community to provide better support to parents in caring for their children, it is important to frame communications about parenting in effective ways that support positive child development and learning<sup>[60]</sup>. In an Australian context, research has shown that it is important to recognise and promote parenting as a collective responsibility<sup>[5]</sup>. Through encouraging the public to see parenting as a social issue, rather than an individual issue (i.e. the responsibility to raise a happy healthy child is not only the obligation of parents), they are more receptive to messages about effective parenting<sup>[60]</sup>. Additionally, by assisting people to understand how parenting is affected by context, it can draw attention to the supports necessary to strengthen parenting practices - like affordable high-quality childcare,

assistance with housing and food, integrated health services delivery (e.g. community health nurses) and counselling services<sup>[60]</sup>. It is also important in communications about parenting to emphasise effective parenting as a means to promote more positive outcomes for children, rather than effective parenting being an end in and of itself<sup>[60]</sup>. Through reframing parenting messages to make child development and learning outcomes more salient, these messages are less likely to be interpreted as unwanted and intrusive parenting advice.

### Supporting parents through early childhood programs

The pivotal role of parents in shaping their child's developmental and learning outcomes underscores the need for evidence-based parenting support. For instance, evaluations of parenting programs suggest they hold much promise for improving outcomes for children and families<sup>[63, 64]</sup>. Several evidence-based interventions target the parenting practices described in this evidence report. For instance, the Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) program and the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program aim to improve parents' capacity to create an enriching home learning environment for their child<sup>[65, 66]</sup>. The Nurse Family Partnership (NFP) home-visitation program seeks to encourage prenatal health-related behaviours and sensitive competent parenting<sup>[67]</sup>, and the Triple P-Positive Parenting Program provides education and skill development activities to parents around creating a safe and engaging positive home learning environment, and using appropriate discipline<sup>[68]</sup>. Similarly, the Incredible Years parenting program delivers education on issues such as behavioural monitoring, encouragement, time out, and natural and logical consequences, to help parents encourage their child's good behaviour and reduce misbehaviour<sup>[69, 70]</sup>.

Evaluations from these evidence-based parenting programs demonstrate their potential to create powerful impacts in young children's lives. However, more research is needed on the long-term effectiveness of such programs. Ideally, early childhood programs should aim to address the needs of both children and their parents together, through fully integrated, two-generation programs, for the best chance of success<sup>[44, 71, 72]</sup>. An ongoing challenge is the successful scaling and effective implementation of early childhood programs (including parenting programs) in real-world settings, where they can reach a significant portion of the people who need them<sup>[67, 73, 74]</sup>. What works for whom and why, will differ substantially according to the community context<sup>[20, 63, 75]</sup>. As such, it is important that such programs are adapted to be appropriate and relevant to cultural and local contexts. These much-needed services can be difficult for the most vulnerable families to navigate, and accordingly it is recommended these programs form part of a well-coordinated approach to service delivery<sup>[76, 77]</sup>.



## Summary

This Evidence Report has described how positive parenting practices can promote and support various aspects of a young child's development and learning. Responding sensitively and promptly to a child's capabilities and engaging in reciprocal parent-child interactions facilitates the establishment of secure attachment and provides children with a sense of safety and security in their environment. Responsive caregiving and "serve and return" interactions promote healthy brain development, help protect children against the effects of adversity, and provide a solid foundation for other relationships they will encounter in their lifetime. Healthy early childhood development and learning also depends on an enriching and stimulating home learning environment, including the use of shared book-reading and conversational turn-taking to encourage early language exposure. Furthermore, providing opportunities for children to learn and to practise their emerging executive function skills is essential. Parenting practices that protect and promote children's health and safety are also critical, including adequate nutrition, physical activity and injury prevention and vaccination against illness. Additionally, consistent routines and appropriate behaviour guidance form part of a safe and secure environment that provides young children with a sense of predictability in their daily lives. The broader community are key in encouraging the use of evidence-based parenting practices to promote positive child development and learning outcomes, such as easily accessible community structural supports and evidence-based parenting programs. The wider community can also play an important role in framing their communications about effective parenting in ways that promote productive thinking and foster support for services to improve developmental and learning outcomes in children.



It is important to note that much of the research on parenting practices and their role in determining child outcomes is correlational, and further longitudinal research is needed to understand the longer-term impact of interventions and to help establish causal pathways <sup>[4]</sup>. Future research should also aim to explore how child development and learning outcomes are associated with the use of specific parenting practices by fathers, who are typically underrepresented in this field of research, as well as other caregivers, such as grandparents. Moreover, research attention should be directed towards investigating parenting for different groups across gender, age, race and culture <sup>[4]</sup>.

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