

PROMOTING CHILD DEVELOPMENT THROUGH HOLISTIC PARENTING EDUCATION

This position paper argues that:



- **Parents need guidance** on how to support children's physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development.
- **Cognitive development begins at birth**, and emergent literacy is one of the most important foundations for later school and life achievements.
- **All parents, literate or illiterate**, can support children's literacy development through simple home activities.
- **Rwanda needs a holistic parenting education programme** that helps parents learn about positive parenting & how to develop emergent literacy skills in the home environment.

Early childhood (age 0-6) is a critical stage of human development. Significant development of the brain, body, and emotions happens during the first years of life. Interactions with family and the wider environment in the first years can have a long-term impact on physical health, on social and emotional well-being, and on cognitive or intellectual capacities—and consequently on national development as well. What children lack during these early years may never be fully compensated for, no matter how much their conditions improve later in life.¹

Parents are the first educators of their children.

From birth, each moment of play, exploration, and observation is a learning moment for a young child. Parents and caregivers can play a key role in making the most of these moments. Rwanda's proposed Revised Family Policy promotes a Positive Parenting approach, but **parents need knowledge and skills in order to put these ideas into action.**

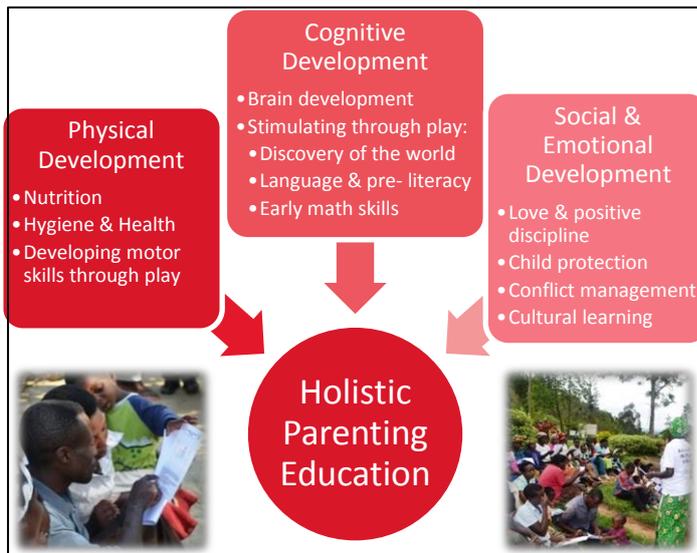
With training, parents can become even more effective providers of the care and stimulation that babies and young children need to develop properly.² Community-based holistic parenting education is an effective way of reaching families and children, especially the youngest (ages 0-3) and those who may not yet be able to access formal early childhood care and education services.³

Parents are the first educators of their children, but they need knowledge and skills in order to provide effective care and stimulation.

¹ CDC, "The Science of Early Childhood Development: Closing the Gap between What We Know and What We Do," (Harvard University: Center on the Developing Child, 2007).

² Judith L. Evans, "Parenting Programmes: An Important Ecd Intervention Strategy," (UNESCO, 2006).

³ Nikita Tolani, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, and Sharon Lynn Kagan, "Parenting Education Programs for Poor Young Children: A Cross-National Exploration," (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 2006).

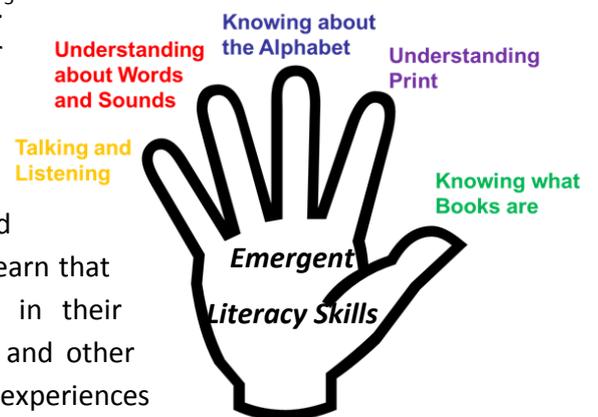


Holistic parenting education involves attention to at least three major areas of early childhood: physical, cognitive, and social/ emotional development. **By making a commitment to supporting parenting education in these three areas, Rwandan governing institutions will ensure a strong foundation for achieving national development goals, helping parents raise a population of physically, mentally, and emotionally healthy children and youth.**

Of these three areas of parenting education, the cognitive dimension is the least well-understood and the most often overlooked, especially for the youngest children (ages 0-3). Yet cognitive development begins at birth, and the learning that sets the foundation for future school and life achievements begins long before children walk through the classroom door. **Emergent literacy is a particularly important foundation for all later learning.** Numerous studies confirm that low achievement in literacy correlates with low educational achievement, high rates of school dropout, poverty, and underemployment later in life.⁴

The process of becoming literate begins very early.⁵

Infants begin to learn the individual sounds of language, or “phonemes” from their earliest imitations of their caregivers’ speech. Soon after, children begin learning an increasingly rich range of vocabulary and language structures through conversations with their parents and other caregivers. Also at a very young age, children can learn that printed text has meaning, through exposure to text in their environment—such as signs, labels on household items, and other reading materials found around the home. From these experiences with printed text, they learn that different letters of the alphabet have different names and corresponding sounds. And finally, children can also learn book awareness from a young age—how to turn pages, in which direction to read, and what books are used for.



Children in less-literate families may not develop these emergent literacy skills at home.

But children in less-literate families may not develop these emergent literacy skills at home. Recent studies from different parts of Rwanda have observed, for example, that: two-way conversations with children are rare; few families expose children to printed text; and writing materials are often not available at home.⁶

⁴ C.E. Snow and A. Ninio, "The Contracts of Literacy: What Children Learn from Learning to Read Books," in *Emergent Literacy: Writing and Reading*, ed. W.H. Teale and E. Sulzby (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1986).

⁵ F. Lancy, "The Conditions That Support Emerging Literacy," in *Children's Emergent Literacy: From Research to Practice*, ed. F. Lancy (London: Praeger, 1995).

⁶ Catherine Honeyman, "Collaborative Child-Raising Practices in Rural Rwanda: A Case Study of Six Communities in Gatsibo, Nyaruguru, and Bugesera," (Kigali, Rwanda: Plan International-Rwanda, 2013); Michael Tusiime, Elliott Friedlander, and Sima Malik, "Literacy Boost

Promoting emergent literacy in the home is not difficult to do: with some guidance, any parent—whether literate or illiterate—can help their children build a better literacy foundation. Literate parents can, of course, begin reading picture books and stories to their children from a very young age. But even illiterate parents can engage in a number of other simple literacy-promotion activities—see the final page of this document for some examples and ideas.

Any parent—literate or illiterate—can help their children build a better literacy foundation through simple home activities.

Parents need training in order to understand how and why to carry out emergent literacy and other simple child development activities at home.

Parents need training in order to understand how and why to carry out emergent literacy and other key child development activities at home. As Rwanda considers a nationwide program for promoting *Positive Parenting*, in conjunction with the Revised Family Policy, there are many ways that the Rwandan government and its development partners could educate parents on cognitive issues as well as on physical, social, and emotional development. The monthly parents' meetings for example, *Umugoroba w'Ababyeyi*, represent an opportunity to educate parents nation-wide on how to support emergent literacy. In order to do so, however, these meetings would have to be structured with clearer guidance and, if possible, supported by specific educational materials.

Parenting education on emergent literacy promotion could also occur through sponsored radio programmes, at *umuganda* meetings, or at school meetings held for parents of primary school students. Finally, the current Rwandan Child Rights Policy proposes instituting the role of a community-based Social Worker. The role of these social workers could be broadly conceived to address all aspects of child development, and their preparation could include training for how to educate parents on a wide range of issues—including promoting emergent literacy in the home.

Possible Modalities for Parenting Education and Promoting Emergent Literacy

- Create a **national structure for coordinating** parenting education initiatives.
- Distribute discussion guides and suggested activities for **Umugoroba w'Ababyeyi**.
- Conduct **radio programs** on physical, social, emotional, and cognitive child development, as well as on positive parenting and promoting emergent literacy in the home.
- Ask **umudugudu** leaders to speak about holistic parenting during **umuganda** meetings.
- Discuss home-based literacy promotion at **school meetings** held for parents.
- Train **community-based Social Workers** on holistic child development, including cognitive development, and on how to offer parenting education in the **umudugudu**.

Rwanda's development partners and governing institutions could collaborate to create and disseminate a national program of parenting education, focusing on physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development—including emergent literacy. By supporting the well-being of Rwandan children, such a program will lay the foundations for national development.

SIMPLE ACTIVITIES PARENTS CAN DO TO PROMOTE LITERACY AT HOME

Talk, Sing, and Play with your Child

- 0-1:** Sit face to face with your infant and sing, or talk about his/her body parts, good qualities, likes and dislikes. Pause frequently and wait for a reaction (sounds or gestures) before continuing.
- 1-3:** Involve your toddler in your daily activities, allowing him/her to playfully help with small tasks as a game. Explain what you are doing, ask him/her questions, and help him/her to name objects.
- 1-6:** Teach your child songs, proverbs, prayers, or stories you know. Introduce new & longer words.

Read with your Child

- 0-4:** At least once per day, sit with your child and look at any kind of book or reading material together. Talk and ask questions about what is in the pictures. Read out loud, repeat together.
- 5-6:** As you read together, help your child start to recognize familiar shapes, letters & combinations, and words. Encourage your child to read out loud any letter, sound, or word s/he knows.
- For illiterate parents:** Look at books and describe pictures together. Ask an older child to read out loud.



Write with your Child

- 1-4:** Allow your child to play with writing utensils and scraps of paper, or to draw with sticks in the dirt. Show them how to trace lines or copy shapes you draw. Make it fun; don't worry about perfection.
- 3-6:** Create sequences of shapes, symbols, or letters. Have your child try to copy the sequence, on paper or by drawing in the dirt.
- Have your child tell you a story or idea; write down what they say.
- 5-6:** Write down the names of familiar objects; have your child try too.

Create a Literate Environment

- Hang child-appropriate pictures or posters on the wall; change them from time to time if possible. Talk with your children about what they show.
- Have some books or other reading materials in the home that children are allowed to touch. Teach them how to hold the books without tearing pages.
- Have some paper, a pencil, pen, or colors that your children can reach. Allow them to play with them and practice using them.
- Share books with your neighbors so your children can read new things.