Title: Parenting in the Digital Era

Introduction

The science of parenting is a global phenomenon stretching across decades of research. The study of parenting has evolved into various facets. These facets include a focus on (1) various characteristics of parents such as gender, age, education levels, beliefs knowledge of child development, (2) parents and their behaviours relating to children such as their health, mental health, approach to work, relating to others, (3) parenting approaches and the effects on children such as the effects of parenting styles [authoritative, permissive, neglectful parenting] on the self-esteem of children, (4) understanding the parent-child relationship within various contexts such as culture, adversity and (5) the effects of child behaviour on parents. In developing the science of parenting different methodologies are used, quantitative, qualitative and mixed and each of these has different designs. From a methodological perspective, the research has also moved from basic descriptive and explorative to the implementation of interventions and programmes.

The science of parenting has shifted as society changed. This shift has especially been due to the digital era where connections in society are driven more by technology. These connections have over time become embedded in the family and parents have needed to adapt their parenting so as to remain connected to their children. Parents, in the 21st Century are known as digital parents which is defined as "Digital parenting is a popular yet polysemic concept that refers both to how parents are increasingly engaged in regulating their children's relationships with digital media (parental mediation), and how parents themselves incorporate digital media in their daily activities and parenting practices, and, in so doing, develop emergent forms of parenting" (Mascheroni, Ponte & Jorge, 2018).

The science is clear is that parenting cuts across societal structures, has shifted and changed across time and is prolific in developed countries, especially in the North. In the South, and specifically in Africa, the science regarding parenting could be considered emerging when compared with parenting information. Parenting in Africa has mainly been to understand the approaches parents use in relation to the effects on the behaviour and well-being of their children. These approaches are often based on Western perspectives and science regarding parenting styles and practices, in particular authoritarian, permissive, authoritative and neglectful parenting. What has evolved in the literature is that parenting in Africa is not simple but is quite complex. For example, parenting can never be studied only as the reciprocal relationship between the parent and child because other factors present challenges to parents.

Main parenting challenges in contemporary Africa

1. *Being vulnerable as parents*

   There are factors/systems/processes in society which create vulnerability in, between and amongst parents. Vulnerability is often considered too broad a term to define, but what it shows, according to McEntire, Crocker and Peters (2010) is that the creators of vulnerability can be found in societal systems especially those in economics and politics identified in ethnicity, race, poverty, socioeconomic status,

disability and gender. These combine and create social inequalities that create risks, shocks and stressors which challenge people's coping abilities. This was very evident during the Covid pandemic where a health pandemic created a nexus of societal systems which impacted on families foregrounding and exacerbating the existing social inequalities. There is global evidence on how parents had to work from home and mothers especially had multiple roles while caring for their children. Added to these mentioned vulnerabilities are violence (specifically gender-based violence), health and mental health. These factors create a cauldron of multiple risks for parents and potentially compromises their ability to parent.

In terms of human capability theory, human development becomes compromised because people do not have the capabilities to implement certain functionings and could be considered to live a life of deprivation (Chinyakata, et al, 2021). Deprivation refers to a state of disadvantage that is observable and demonstrable relative to the local community or wider society or nation to which an individual, family or group belongs. Deprivation in human capabilities mean that individuals do not have capability of general economic, political and technical strength to resolve issues and handle problems because the environment may not provide the opportunities to do so. Based on recent South African research on human capabilities in and through the family, the results show that there is human capability deprivation and this affects the well-being and human flourishing of families (Chinyakata, et al., 2021). For example, families in rural areas reported deprivation in health care, education and having recreational facilities, safety and security and a lack of opportunities to have an income.

According to a report focusing on Children, Technology and Play (Marsh and colleagues, 2020), the picture of the apartheid legacy of the integration of race and socio-economic status remains pervasive amongst South African parents impacting on access to and availability of technology resources. For example, the majority of White South African families are more likely to own devices while the Black families are least likely to own devices because of the disparities in socioeconomic status. In this report, Black parents were unable to (and did not think they would) acquire the technology devices due to their socio-economic status. Parents (especially in Black families) livelihoods depend on an income from government grants.

Parents, who are unable to flourish, may also be challenged in parenting their children (Chinyakata, et. al., 2022). For example, Goldschmidt et al. (2021) reported that parental substance abuse and exposure to violence significantly affect parental nurturance. Unemployed parents may have mental stress in trying to provide for their children which impacts involvement in the activities of their children. Similarly, parents who work long hours and full weeks or work away from their children, may not be present in the development of their children. Parents who do not monitor, socialise, instil positive values in their children, or become involved with their childen, may not facilitate healthy development of their children (Wolhuter & Van derWalt, 2020).

2. *Parenting in the extended family*

African research shows that parenting occurs within the extended family context because raising children is based on a collectivist approach (Hall & Mokomane, 2018; Sodi, et al., 2020). This extended family context consists of a household with three to four generations. Extended families will also include uncles, aunts or cousins. Single mothers, living in resource-constrained families, could be found to raise their children in an extended family, taking place in a social and community network (Ebrahim, 2014) through social mothers and fathers who may not necessarily be family members.

The extended family phenomenon is often maintained due to economic factors which mean children, as adults remain in the family home when their more advantaged counterparts live on their own. There are positives for parents living in an extended family because family members can help with taking care of their children thus ensuring the care and well-being of children; the family can be a resource for conducting tasks efficiently and facilitating the well-being of parents; pooling individual resources means that there is a greater spending possibility for provision in the family; safety and protection can be found within the family. The family is identified as a shared system that nurtures, socialises and shapes the developing individual from childhood to adulthood, but the extended family could also be a challenge.

The extended family can create an environment of over-crowding, confusion for the child as to whom to listen to; violence; abuse and neglect; anxiety and stress and may not pool resources in the family. It could be that family members interfere in parenting. These negative aspects of the extended family can affect the well-being of parents and children, the development of the child, the parent-child relationship, and the parenting approaches used by parents. Having an extended family may mean that parents do not take up their own agency as parents because they leave parenting to other family members. In these contexts, grandparents become the primary caregivers (Hayley & Hamilton, 2005) and often they use their pensions to provide for the children in their care.

Thus, parenting in an extended family can either enhance or hinder parenting and the parent-child relationship, especially for single parents.

3. *Digitalization/Technology and the parent-child relationship*

Marsh and colleagues (2020) compared children in South Africa and the UK regarding access to technology and digital tools. The results show mark differences with South African children having far less access than children in the UK to tools such as tablets and smartphones, smart toys etc. The determining factor of access (or not having access) was indicated by household income which is also linked to social inequalities, especially seen in South Africa. This outcome is potentially more challenged in other African countries. According to Hung (2022) not having access has a myriad of implications for children and their parents.

The implications for parents in Africa could be as follows: (1) parents require money to purchase data to facilitate connections to provide support to their children. Purchasing data may be seen as a want rather than a need in terms of provision and

needs in the family, (2) if parents have access, they may not necessarily have the knowledge and skills to keep up with their children who may be more digitally savvy, (3) parents who are economically able to have access and resources, are constantly present as they multi-task through work and home transcending physical and digital spaces in connecting with their children, (4) parents who never switch off can experience parental burnout and mental health challenges which can spill over into the parent-child relationship. These aspects could then affect the well-being of their children.

The implications for children have been evident during the pandemic with children feeling and being socially and digitally excluded due to not having access to resources to learn, connect and engage. This has subsequent implications for mental health, and delayed development. For those children who have access, the expectation to be constantly present and to constantly perform can create stress and anxiety. Furthermore, time spent on devices has implications for health, well-being and relationships. Children may be more advanced than their parents and may therefore have better access, knowledge and skills than their parents. Children may then not share information with their parents and this could threaten the parent-child relationship in terms of trust and being involved in the lives of their children. Children may also feel that they are not provided with sufficient space for alone time because parents may be overly involved in the digital spaces in which children function. Children may feel that they are constantly under a microscope.

These factors challenge parenting, the parent-child relationship and parent and child well-being. Parents may not know how to navigate through these challenges and may be in a constant state of learning to navigate new tools, devices and platforms as the gap in parent-child communication widens. Parents may also not have the ability to help their children because they may not be as advanced.

Advantages and challenges parents face with regard to technology as a facilitator of parenting

There are many factors which could either impede or facilitate parenting. As a start, parents need to have abilities and be capable, that is the knowledge and skills, in order to get involved with the digital or technological activities of their children. A survey conducted during the pandemic in 19 countries with a sample of 4600 parents, focused on factors that influence parents in accepting and using technology to support their engagement in the learning of their children (Osorio-Saez, Eryilmaz & Sandoval-Hernandez, 2021). The results show that the complexity of the tools and platforms were especially a challenge as it compromised the ease of use of technology and motivation to engage due to their own lack of knowledge, skills and lack of experience. Furthermore, when there is a supportive network by others it creates a collaborative learning opportunity for both parents and children. The implications of this study is that it adds to the body of knowledge of regarding the importance of parental involvement in the activities of children such as learning, sport and play. Parental involvement not only enhances child development and well-being but the parent-child relationship as well.

In a qualitative study, technology is also used in the transition to parenting (Donelle, et al., 2021). For example, mothers used digital technologies to track their menstrual cycles,

monitor and document their pregnancies and the development of their babies post-birth. These tools were accessed for health information so that their parenting was enhanced. This means that mothers had more confidence in the way they parent and care for their babies, especially in the early years of the development of their children.

In terms of the parent-child relationship, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that technology is steeped within the family and has become either a distraction or a connection in the parent-child relationship. For example, parents can use technology as a babysitting tool, or they may not have control over the content accessed by their children on the internet or communication between the parents and their children may be substantially reduced. The reduction of in-person or face-to-face communication with parents could be due to (1) the constant availability of parents to their employers as they multi-task between work and home responsibility and (2) the long hours spent by children on their tools either for educational purposes or as a way of compensating for boredom or filling in for the unavailability of parents. However, parents also connect with their children to monitor the activities of their children, protect their children and facilitate a child's adjustment into adulthood. Thus, digital tools/technology facilitates or hinders the parent-child relationship. More recently, there is a focus on the transcendent parent (Lim, 2016), also including the helicopter or intrusive parent, a parenting practice which has been enhanced by the pandemic. The approach of this parent is to always be available, parents and children (of all ages) are linked all the time via smartphones and other mobile devices, and information of children is shared on social media (a new term known as sharenting). Lim (2019) describes transcendent parenting as follows: "*Transcendent parenting has emerged in light of significant transformations in the mobile media landscape that allow parents to transcend many realms: the physical distance between them and their children, their children's offline and online social interaction spaces, as well as timeless time that renders parenting duties ceaseless. In mobile communication, parents parent all over and all of the time, whether their children are by their side or out of sight*". While Lim (2019) indicates many benefits of transcendent parenting in terms of constant communication with the child and stronger protection of the child because the parent uses an app to track where the child is, this parenting practice raises concerns. The concern is indicated in terms of (1) boundaries, allowing for and respecting privacy of children, (2) parental burnout (potentially due to the ceaselessness of parental duties), health, mental health and general well-being of both the parent and child, (3) allowing for the child's sense of agency and taking responsibility, (4) allowing for the natural development of the child and (5) just being over-involved in the lives of their children.

To reiterate, there are advantages and challenges for parents and parenting, regarding the use of technology in raising their children. What is evident, is the need for easier access and less complex tools for parents to provide educational support to their children, parents also need to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to support their children and ''catch-up" with their children in the digital spaces their children function in especially in rural areas, a deeper exploration of parenting approaches in the digital spaces and how the parent-child relationship can be protected and enhanced through the constant availability of parents are needed. According to Bäckström (2022) "*A variety of digital sources may facilitate parental identification and adaption to parenthood"*. In addition, Marsh and colleagues (2020) found that adults/parents are more likely to use digital-play with their children than non-digital play. They also found that parents used digital tools as an incentive, calming mechanism and distraction tool.

Policies and programmes to support parents and children in bridging the digital gap

The digital and technological environments are constantly changing requiring parents to be in a constant state of learning, teaching, monitoring, and multi-tasking as they transcend the physical and digital spaces. In order to facilitate health and well-being for parents and the parent-child relationship, there are a few aspects to consider in addressing policies and programmes to support parents.

1. Providing access to parents and children: In developing countries and especially in rural communities, access remains a problem. There are various reasons as indicated but there should be a concerted effort from government to develop more pervasive infrastructure for access in these communities. Government should engage with services providers (private sector) to enhance responsible engagements in the digital spaces for children and their parents offering protection to children and support for parents.

2. Schools should be sites and spaces of learning and engagement advancing technology and digitilisation. Schools should offer training to parents with their children to strengthen their knowledge and skills so that parents can assist their children with their tasks. This will mean that parents are better able to communicate with their children and thereby improve the parent-child relationship. Parents will be able to overcome their technological and digital barriers in their engagement with their children. Teaching and learning should be in a hybrid format but this will mean that the education system should develop strong digital and technological systems to train and support parents while at the same time advancing digital and technological resources for children.

3. There should be support in communities which can offer parent-child relationship-strengthening support given transcendent parenting. This could be through short training sessions and informal brief counselling sessions located with either social workers or counsellors. Perhaps there are opportunities to integrate this into the school system. Parents could learn how to monitor yet not be intrusive in their engagement with their children. They can also learn how and when to mediate in the digital spaces and with the use of technology without comprising the development of their children. Parents can then also model appropriate behaviour for their children. Children can learn how to cope with the challenges of for example cyber bullying, not having support and ensure that they are being responsible and competent in functioning in digital spaces.

4. The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2007) provides key parenting dimensions which evolve into the roles which parents take on in the engagements with their children. These include connection, behaviour control, respect for individuality, modelling appropriate behaviour, and provision and protection. When parents are unable to fulfil their roles as parents, they may seek help. This will be the same in the technological and digital spaces. However, parents may not know how and where to seek help when they have to help and support their children for example. This information should be readily available where parents can access the information in communities, education, health facilities, etc. There should be constant awareness

raising and information sharing so that parents do not feel incompetent or stigmatised about accessing help.

5. There should be a whole society, multi-stakeholder approach to strengthen the parent-child relationship within the digital spaces with a focus on strengthening the parent. As there are existing parent-strengthening organisations and progammes, these could be utilised to integrate a focus on parenting in the digital spaces if this is not included already.

These policy and programme recommendations should be inclusive accommodating for gender, disability, race, language and any other characteristic which may 'other' parents and children who are differently abled and diverse.