

Learning under the Tree

An evaluation of the ICS Skilful Parenting Programme in Kenya by Utrecht University



Research in brief

Skilful Parenting is a parenting and family support programme, developed by ICS, designed to improve the well-being of vulnerable children and their families. It aims to promote positive parenting practices and family relations, with the ultimate goal of preventing violence against children and promoting children's positive development. The University of Utrecht evaluated the programme and concluded it has a **significant impact on parenting competence**; the belief of a parent in his or her ability to effectively manage parenting tasks. Parents experience a **positive change in parenting practices, in family functioning and in the relationship with their child and spouse**. The effects of Skilful Parenting can be understood by the way it is grounded in local culture and local definitions of parenting, its participatory approach and the focus on the parent as an agent of change.

Evaluation Overview

Country	Kenya
Research Partner	Utrecht University
Evaluators	MSc Ruben Peter van Esch & Prof. Dr. Mariëtte de Haan
Funding	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Netherlands
Period	2014-2015
Sample	100 parents

Children need a safe and positive home to grow up happy and healthy, but this is far from reality for many children in developing countries. Over 200 million children under the age of five in developing countries are not meeting their developmental potential due to exposure to multiple risks including poverty, lack of nurturing and responsive care, poor health and nutrition and violence.¹ For example in Kenya where two out of three children experience physical violence during childhood, often by the hands of their parents.²

A growing body of research from low and middle-income countries shows that parenting programmes can be effective for reducing levels of violence against children and promoting optimal child development in low-resource settings. However, most evidence derives from parenting programmes that find their origin in a Western setting and many evaluations use quantitative data and highly standardized measurements, making it hard to distinguish the level of adaptation and to understand the mechanisms of behavioural change. This study of the ICS Skilful Parenting programme in Western Kenya aims to address this gap.

Evaluation

Since 2012, ICS has invested in the design and implementation of Skilful Parenting; an innovative parenting programme designed specifically for rural areas of East Africa. Skilful Parenting is a 12-week, group-based programme for parents and caregivers with children aged 0-18. Mothers, fathers, grandparents and other caregivers come together on a weekly basis under guidance of a local facilitator who is trained and certified by ICS to deliver the Skilful Parenting modules. Parents gain knowledge and skills, reflect on their role and parenting style, and share their daily parenting experiences and dilemmas among each other. The group sessions are combined with community awareness-raising events and embedded in the work of Agrics; a social business, started by ICS, that provides smallholder farmers with quality farm input on credit and agricultural extensions services to increase their yields and income.

The researchers of Utrecht University relied on a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods to measure the effects of the Skilful Parenting programme¹ on parents and caregivers in West Kenya. Parenting competence and social support were measured before parents participated in the programme through a set of pre-defined survey questions and open-ended questions. For this measurement a total of 113 parents were selected from five farmer groups (registered with Agrics) in Busia and Kakamega counties. The researchers made sure that in the sample there was an equal representation of gender, schooling level, age, family size, caretaker role and relevant ethnic characteristics of parents. After the parents had

¹ This study has only looked at the basic 5 modules of the Skilful Parenting programme while the full programme consists of 7 modules.

participated in the programme, a similar survey was conducted to measure how their perceptions and experiences had changed. The number of respondents of the second survey had decreased to 90 parents because not all parents who filled out the first survey could be traced. In addition to the surveys, in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 parents (directly after the programme and several months later) and mini-ethnographies of 10 parents to explore how the programme is adapted to local context and to understand the effects of the programme given its contextualized approach.

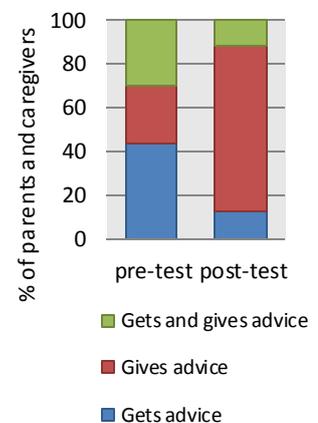
Results

- 1. Skilful Parenting has a significant effect on experience parenting competence:** Parenting is still considered to be difficult, but parents said that they feel better parents after participating in the programme. They also scored significantly higher on two items of the survey's parenting competence scale during the post-test. This is a significant outcome as research shows that a higher experienced parenting competence is related to greater parental warmth, responsiveness and monitoring and less harsh and inconsistent discipline.³
- 2. Parents become active agents of change rather than passive transmitters of traditional ways of parenting:** Parents show new considerations of the way their behaviour affects their children. Parenting beliefs and practices are traditionally handed down from one generation to another. Parents who have participated in the Skilful Parenting programme start reflecting on the effectiveness of current ways of parenting in their environment. Due to the programme, parents feel empowered to influence their children and start to talking about teaching or guiding their children.

“One thing that has made me happy, in the past when my child makes a mistake, I would beat them with anger but after the training I was advised not to beat my children when I’m bitter (...) instead I should talk to the child which I see is working very well”.

60-YEAR-OLD MOTHER
- 3. Skilful Parenting changes participants' definition of parenting:** The evaluation showed a shift in the definition of parenting from a primarily economic perspective with a focus on children's physical survival (food, education, farming) towards a more psychological perspective that considers the interest of children and their social and emotional wellbeing. Parents now include communication with children, child discipline and guidance, and the parent-child relationship as their responsibility. The role of parents in supporting social-emotional development is critical and lays the foundation for their future health and development. This outcome is equally important for parents themselves, especially fathers, as they previously appraised their worth as a parent based on their continuous struggle to provide their children with sufficient material resources.
- 4. Parents report greater parental warmth, responsiveness and monitoring and less harsh discipline:** When parents are asked what has changed for themselves due to their participation in the programme, they state that their communication (48%) with their children has changed (they speak friendly, listen, show love), they use less physical discipline (34%) and are better able to guide their children (13%). Almost one-fifth of the parents report that they feel they have an improved relationship with their offspring and say they show them more love and respect.
- 5. Parents report a better communication with their spouse and a change in the role division at home:** Almost two thirds of the parents report an improved relationship with their partner after the programme. Parents mention to have better communication with their partner, have fewer disagreements, and show more love and respect towards their partner. The role division between parents has changed, where father and mother now more frequently perform tasks together and women are more often involved in decisions that were previously only made by their husbands.
- 6. Skilful Parenting changes patterns of social support on parenting:** While social support is reportedly low in the communities, the experienced social support improves after Skilful Parenting. Parents feel more supported by their spouse and are more inclined to discuss parenting issues with teachers and religious leaders. At the same time the number of parent who receives advice drops after the programme (Figure 1). Parents are eager to share their experiences and knowledge with other community members, but have become less receptive, or even dismissive, regarding advice of non-participants.

Figure 1. Parent report about parenting advice



7. **Skilful Parenting is relatable, accessible and valued by parents:** Parents have a positive attitude towards the Skilful Parenting programme. Parents appreciate the opportunity to talk about parenting, which they commonly do not discuss in such a way with others in their community. Parents can easily relate to the programme's content because of the use of familiar examples and stories. In addition, the knowledge provided is perceived to be useful to change their parenting practices to make their lives easier and to create 'peace in the homestead'. The sessions about communication, self-care, stress-management and child development are most appreciated by parents.

Moving forward

The Skilful Parenting programme is characterized by several distinctive key elements that lend itself for a more general dissemination in the African continent, such as the interactive formats, its inclusive approach as well as the possibility to include notions of parenthood that fit the local context. It combines a parent-focused approach, in which personal growth and development of the parent is key, with a relational-community based methodology. It recognizes the role of the community in raising children as well as the importance of family relations beyond that of the relationship between the parent and child, including the discussion of the distribution of tasks based on gender roles and addressing communication between parents. The programme provides new ideas and methods for parenting without infringing on local values and norms regarding parenting. It relies on participants' input as well as on local facilitators to formulate and contextualize the training's content, inherently strengthening the adaptability of the programme itself and therefore its scalability.

While African governments and civil society increasingly recognize the potential of parenting programmes, they are inclined to make use of parenting programmes with a Western origin due to the lack of parenting programmes that have been developed for, and evaluated in, an African setting. This study highlights the importance of a context-specific approach to bring about behaviour change and to break the unconscious intergenerational transmission of parenting in a changing socio-economic environment. It identifies Skilful Parenting as an effective and scalable parenting programme to address risk factors and build protective factors as a pathway to optimal child development and lower rates of violence against children.

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References

¹ Grantham-McGregor, S., Cheung, Y.B., Cueto, S., Glewwe, P., Richter, L., Strupp, B. & the International Child Development Steering Group. (2007). Child development in developing countries: Developmental potential in the first 5 years for children in developing countries. *Lancet* 369(9555): 60–70.

² Violence against Children in Kenya: Findings from a 2010 National Survey. Summary Report on the Prevalence of Sexual, Physical and Emotional Violence, Context of Sexual Violence, and Health and Behavioral Consequences of Violence Experienced in Childhood. Nairobi, Kenya: United Nations Children's Fund Kenya Country Office, Division of Violence Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2012.

³ Slagt, M., Deković, M., de Haan, A. D., van den Akker, A. L., & Prinzie, P. (2012). Longitudinal associations between mothers' and fathers' sense of competence and children's externalizing problems: The mediating role of parenting. *Developmental Psychology*, 48, 1554-1562. doi:10.1037/a0027719