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STRENGTHENING FAMILY CONNECTEDNESS IN FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN WITH BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS: KEY EXPERTS' AND PRACTITIONERS' EXPERIENCES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PARENTING PROGRAMMES

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ABSTRACT

Parenting enhancement contributes to the development of positive child behaviour and strengthening of family connectedness. This qualitative study explores the experiences of 10 experts (social workers, child and youth care workers, and researchers) in the field of parenting through semi-structured interviews to strengthen family connectedness in families with children with behavioural problems (FCBPs). Using Tesch's qualitative analysis, three main themes emerged: (a) barriers to family connectedness, (b) parenting styles, and (c) parenting programmes in strengthening family connectedness. The findings of the study highlight the barriers experienced by experts and the lack of evidence-based parenting programmes in the strengthening of family connectedness in FCBPs in rural areas in South Africa. The study therefore recommends that practitioners in the field of parenting should receive specialised parenting training on how to strengthen family connectedness in FCBPs.

Keywords: children with behavioural problems; family connectedness; parenting; parenting programmes

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Parents or caregivers are typically the first individuals who interact with their children, playing a fundamental role in fostering family connectedness through their parenting style and parenting practices. Baumrind (1967) identified a significant correlation between authoritarian, permissive and authoritative parenting styles, noting the influence of each style on child behaviour, parental interactions and the monitoring of child behaviour. Research has shown

that children from authoritarian parents display maladaptive behaviour, drop out of school at a young age, disregard family values and become dismissive of, or mistrust, parental figures (Reyneke, 2015).

Masud, Ahmad, Cho and Fakhr (2019), in their analyses of 34 studies, found a direct link between parenting styles and aggression. Misbehaviour, antagonism, rule-breaking and problematic behaviour in children are signs of harsh, cold and inconsistent parenting (Silva & Sandström, 2018). According to Roman, Makwakwa, and Lacante (2016), South African mothers tend to be more authoritative in how they parent their daughters compared to their sons. Authoritative parents interact with their children in ways that show independence, restraint and warmth, whereas permissive parents exhibit little control and are more accepting of their children's behaviour (Hughes *et al.*, 2011). Authoritative parents establish firm boundaries, give children options, allow them to learn from their mistakes as they grow, and foster their sense of belonging.

Children who have a strong relationship with their parents grow up resilient and learn how to cope with challenging environments (Shenderovich *et al.*, 2018; Walsh, 2011). Therefore, children with behavioural problems (CBPs) are more likely to have a sense of belonging in the family when their parents are kind, supportive, consistently monitor their behaviour, and involve them in household tasks and family activities.

Family connectedness promotes healthy families, safeguards children from trauma or abuse, and fosters the development of positive child behaviour (Umberson & Thomeer, 2020). There is a link between child development and child behaviour from early childhood (Simons & Sutton, 2021), which is evident in how parents respond to their child's behaviour. Children with weakened parent-child relationships often display disrespectful behaviour, reject family values, experiment with substances and drop out of school (Reyneke, 2015). CBPs who are unhappy within their family environment tend to become disobedient, aggressive or internalise behaviour, resulting in feelings of depression or anxiety (Achenbach *et al.*, 2016). As a result, the quality of the parent-child relationship significantly influences how parents monitor their child's behaviour, resolve conflicts and build a bond with their child. Parents who provide consistent love, support and positive guidance not only promote social learning, but also reinforce family connectedness (Danhouse & Erasmus, 2023).

Parenting programmes have been extensively studied in high-income countries; however, there has been limited attention devoted towards low-income and rural areas in South Africa (Smokowski *et al.*, 2018; Ward, Gould, Kelly & Mauff, 2015). This discrepancy is notable despite the emphasis that the revised White Paper on Families in South Africa places on the strengthening of families and the enhancement of family bonds of vulnerable families (Republic of South Africa, 2021). Parenting programmes equip parents with the knowledge and skills necessary to become confident and competent in their parenting role, while also working to prevent behavioural problems in children (Lachman *et al.*, 2017; Lachman *et al.*, 2016).

A South African parenting programme, which employed a randomised controlled trial to lower the incidence of child abuse, revealed that educating parents on how to deal with problematic

behaviour enhances parent-child interactions (Lachman *et al.*, 2017). The study by Smokowski *et al.* (2018) observed that parenting programmes reduce the incidence of child abuse, violence and harsh parenting. Furthermore, parenting programmes lessen problematic behaviour, minimise family conflict, increase parental engagement and lower family violence (Britto, Ponguta, Reyes & Karnati, 2015). However, in South Africa, parenting programmes are limited, with less focus on strengthening family connectedness in families with children with behavioural problems (FCBPs) in rural areas. Wealthier nations, such as in North America and Europe, have emphasised how important it is to understand the practitioner's perspective on parenting programmes, which differ greatly from the contexts of South Africa and other low- and middle-income countries (Doubt *et al.*, 2018). This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the experiences of key experts and practitioners in the implementation of parenting programmes to strengthen family connectedness in a rural area in the Cape Winelands.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Attachment shapes how children perceive the world and how they relate to attachment figures. Bowlby (1973) refers to the first six months of the child's existence as crucial for the formation of attachment. Parents who are responsive to their children by way of speaking, having physical contact, expressing their love and reassuring them of their safety, form a strong bond with their child (Borst, 2015). The quality of the attachment is based on the awareness and attentiveness of parents to their child's emotional needs (Hoeve *et al.*, 2012).

Ainsworth and Bowlby identified four attachment styles – secure, insecure, avoidant and ambivalent – which have a significant influence on parent-child connectedness and child behaviour (Bowlby, 1973). Secure attachments are formed when parents are present, available and engaged in the lives of their children (Bosmans, Sanchez-Lopez, Finet & De Raedt, 2019). Insecure attachment influences the internal working model of children when they feel unloved or distant from their parents (Suzuki & Tomoda, 2015). Parents who provide inconsistent parenting can evoke feelings of either avoidance or ambivalence in their children's attachment style (Agbaria, Mahamid & Veronese, 2021). Children with an avoidant attachment exhibit minimal distress when their caregiver leaves and may not seek comfort or contact upon their return. Conversely, children with an ambivalent attachment often feel unsure of their caregiver's availability, resulting in heightened anxiety about the stability of their relationship (Scharfe, 2017). The trustworthiness and reliability of parents play a crucial role in nurturing a sense of security in children. This sense of security empowers children to feel safe, express their excitement and willingly share information about themselves with their parents (Louw & Louw, 2014).

Parenting has a significant impact on social learning depending on the frequency of interactions within the family setting. As a result, the degree of closeness within the family and the children's behaviour are dependent upon the social learning that occurs through observation, assessment and behaviour modelling (O'Connor *et al.*, 2013). Parents nurture appropriate behaviour and strengthen family relationships when they set boundaries, talk openly and praise their children (Horsburgh & Ippolito, 2018). Children who feel secure and loved within their family are more likely to seek guidance and emulate positive behaviours demonstrated by their

family members (Silva & Sandström, 2018). The chosen theoretical framework provided the basis for the interpretation of the findings.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research approach and design

This study explored the experiences of child and youth care workers, social workers and researchers in the implementation of parenting programmes to strengthen family connectedness in FCBPs. A qualitative approach, utilising an exploratory and descriptive design, was used to delve into the experiences of participants in the field of parenting. Qualitative research provides a means to explore and understand participants' lived experiences and their perspectives on the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2013).

The following questions guided the qualitative enquiry:

1. What does the concept of 'family connectedness' mean to you?
2. What are your experiences with strengthening family connectedness in FCBPs?
3. How do families cope with the problem behaviour of their children?
4. What skills do families need to develop stronger relationships within the family?
5. What existing support mechanisms are available to assist families in dealing with their child's problematic behaviour?
6. What suggestions would you make for including in a parenting programme aimed at teaching FCBPs to strengthen their connectedness in their families?

Participants and sampling method

The study collected data from a sample of 10 participants, namely two males and eight females, who possessed varying levels of experience ranging from 6 to 34 years in their respective fields, as shown in Table 1 below. Purposeful sampling was used to select social workers, child and youth care workers, and researchers with a deep understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Babbie, 2013). The inclusion criteria required that participants were either actively engaged in parenting programmes or employed within the field of parenting. For this study, the eligible participants were: (i) social workers with prior experience in implementing parenting programmes; (ii) child and youth care workers selected for their expertise in interacting with parents and addressing issues related to parental involvement; and (iii) researchers who were recruited based on their involvement in parenting-related research.

Social welfare organisations, child and youth care facilities, and researchers affiliated with research institutions were approached and invited to voluntarily participate in the study. Prior to the inclusion of the participants in the research project, the organisations were contacted and the study was presented to them to generate interest. Following this, the participants were provided with a comprehensive explanation of the study, ensuring that they were fully informed about its nature and purpose. Their consent to participate was obtained, with a strong emphasis placed on confidentiality as a critical ethical requirement for the study.

Table 1: Demographic information of the participants

	Gender	Age	Qualification	Occupation	Experience in the field of parenting or parenting programmes
1.	Female	59	BA Social Work	Social worker	28
2.	Female	31	BA Social Work	Social Worker	8
3.	Male	57	DIP Social Work	Social worker	34
4.	Male	34	BA Social Work	Social worker	11
5.	Female	35	BA Social Work	Social worker	3
6.	Female	39	BA Social Work	Social worker	11
7.	Female	29	MSW Social Work	Researcher	6
8.	Female	36	PhD Social Work	Researcher	13
9.	Female	44	Matric	Child and youth care worker	10
10.	Female	37	Matric	Child and youth care worker	8

Data collection and analysis

Data collection was undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic and strict adherence to mandated health protocols was maintained. Participants were given the choice to be interviewed telephonically, via Zoom or face to face. Only one participant opted for the online interviewing process, with the rest of the interviews being conducted in person at venues where the participants felt most at ease. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a predetermined interview guide, with each interview lasting for approximately 60 minutes. The decision to employ semi-structured interviews in this research was based on the recognition that this method offers a valuable means of collecting comprehensive data (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Interviews were conducted in Afrikaans or English to accommodate the preferences of the participants. With the participants' permission, interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. Data saturation was reached, indicating that sufficient information had been gathered, after which the transcription process was concluded.

The data analysis followed Tesch's eight steps, which involved organising the data into themes and sub-themes (Creswell, 2013). The findings were then presented in a narrative form, allowing for a comprehensive interpretation of the collected data (Creswell, Klassen, Plano Clark & Smith, 2011). Participants were assigned codes to protect their identities and maintain anonymity.

Trustworthiness in the study

Trustworthiness was ensured by addressing key criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Dependability was established through the creation of a transparent account of the research process, enabling other researchers to evaluate the reliability of the findings and potentially replicate the study.

The study's validity was enhanced by identifying common themes, using verbatim quotations and drawing conclusions from the data (Babbie, 2013). To ensure the study's reliability, the researcher utilised an interview guide containing predetermined questions (Creswell, 2013).

Transferability was facilitated by the researcher's inclusion of a comprehensive explanation of the data-gathering procedures supporting the study's conclusions. Reflecting on prior experiences and personal knowledge that might have influenced the study allowed the researcher to achieve confirmability.

The University of the Western Cape's (UWC) Human and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee approved the study (HS20/9/53). All UWC-specified ethical criteria were followed, as well as COVID-19 protocols. Each participant received a letter outlining the study's objectives, potential risks and the voluntary nature of participation. Upon receiving the assurance of confidentiality, each participant gave their consent. To maintain confidentiality, transcripts were assigned codes instead of using personal identifiers; this process was followed throughout the research process. Participants could choose the interview location, opting for places where they felt most comfortable.

FINDINGS

The findings that emerged after analysing the data obtained from the interviews are presented in transcribed quotations below. The themes and sub-themes that emerged from the analysed and transcribed data are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Themes and sub-themes

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
Theme 1: Barriers to strengthening family connectedness	Sub-theme 1.1: Family structure
	Sub-theme 1.2: Emotional wellbeing of parents
	Sub-theme 1.3: Behavioural problems in children
Theme 2: Parenting style	Sub-theme 2.1: Understanding own parenting style
	Sub-theme 2.2: Setting boundaries
	Sub-theme 2.3: Communication in the family
Theme 3: Parenting programmes: Strengthening family connectedness	Sub-theme 3.1: Availability of evidence-based parenting programmes
	Sub-theme 3.2: Parent attendance in parenting programmes
	Sub-theme 3.3: Suggestions for programme content to strengthen family connectedness

Theme 1: Barriers to strengthening family connectedness

The study found that FCBPs experience challenges in strengthening family connectedness. The participants agreed that various factors, including stressors within the home, absence of

paternal or extended family support, challenges related to work-life balance, socio-economic factors and issues related to substance abuse significantly contributed to family dysfunction and hindered the development of family connectedness. One participant responded that: *“Dysfunctional and healthy families, both families experience the same problems, but it’s the dysfunctional families that experience the most problems”* (Participant 6). To strengthen family connectedness, it is crucial for parents to be less stressed and more focused on the child.

This theme underscores the importance of parents providing love, support and attentive care to influence child behaviour positively and foster family connectedness. Parents who are connected to their children are available and have an emotional presence in their child’s life. Social learning theory and attachment theory highlight the quality of the connection in the family and how this contributes to child behaviour.

Theme 1 is explored through three sub-themes: family structure, emotional wellbeing of parents and behavioural problems in children.

Sub-theme 1.1: Family structure

The data revealed the significant challenges faced by single parents, including limited resources, inadequate support and lack of security that parents provide to their children. Participants highlighted the strain that single parent mothers experience having to balance employment responsibilities and strengthen their relationships with their CBPs.

Single parent families, usually mothers, where the fathers are absent or not physically available, must work and provide in the physical and emotional needs of their children. This puts a lot of pressure on everybody in the family. (Participant 4)

Single parenting leads to a form of neglect in emotional support, because the single parent must solely focus on the financial support. (Participant 1)

What I have noticed is that there is no connectedness between the parent and the child. For example, if the single parent is working, it makes it very difficult for the parent and the child to have the parent-child relationship. (Participant 3)

The study shows that the absence of fathers, single parenting and parental financial constraints affect the emotional climate within the family, as well as the ability of parents to convey warmth and create a sense of safety for their CBP. Family structure and the socio-economic circumstances of the parent are directly linked to parenting and child wellbeing (Wilkinson & Andersson, 2019). Single parents exposed to poverty have emotional challenges which contribute to risky behavioural and educational outcomes in children (Ward, Makusha & Bray, 2015). Some participants highlighted that work-life balance, age of the parent and the number of children that single parents have all contributed to how parents navigate and preserve their relationship with their child.

The parent comes home from work. The mother cleans the house. Then the mother still has three or four younger children, and the older one is perhaps the one who is having problem behaviours, and he may need the attention. There is no time spent between the parent and child, which is actually very important. (Participant 3)

The parents are in their thirties, but then there are already five children in the family. The children don't get the support, love and acceptance they need from parents.
(Participant 9)

Balancing work responsibilities and the task of caring for children significantly influences the parent's availability, and their time spent with and emotional support provided to their children (Mokake, 2021). Parents who are emotionally unavailable are less involved in their child's life, resulting in the formation of insecure attachments (Girme *et al.*, 2021). Loving family environments strengthen children's ability to develop a positive self-esteem, improve their decision-making skills, and strengthen the parent-child relationship. However, one participant stated that parenting becomes difficult when parents feel unsupported.

Most of these families is very isolated and lack support from the extended family. The mother must provide in the needs of the children, and the children relies on the mother to provide whatever is needed, and there is not much support from either paternal or maternal families. (Participant 2)

Other participants reasoned that CBPs become perplexed about parental roles when stepfamilies and grandparents share caregiving responsibilities.

If there is stepfamily involved, it causes role confusion in children. The child ultimately does not have a clear picture as to, who is my caregiver. (Participant 1)

Most of the children doesn't have a close relationship with the mother or the father, when they grow up by their grandparents. (Participant 6)

The findings show that the involvement of multiple caregivers can contribute to a lack of clarity about the fulfilment of parenting roles and to whom children should reach out for guidance. According to a study conducted by Hoang and Kirby (2020), it was found that in Asian cultures, when co-parents, particularly grandparents, exert excessive control or are too involved, it can result in conflict and increased stress for the parents. Therefore, parenting figures should be consistent in how they parent, nurture and support their children for them to thrive.

Sub-theme 1.2: Emotional wellbeing of parents

This sub-theme shows that parents' past experiences with their own caregivers can make it difficult for them to bond with their own children or even reflect upon these experiences.

Some parents, because of the way they were raised, don't know how to engage, or build a connection with their children. (Participant 8)

After the seventh or eighth session, the mothers start to talk about the things that happened to them that had an impact on how they treated their child. (Participant 6)

The study conducted by Azhari *et al.* (2020) demonstrated that parental stress levels and their relationship with their own parents have a direct influence on the bonds they establish with their children. Furthermore, parental wellbeing is affected by their self-perception and self-awareness (Orth & Robins, 2022). The participants noted that parents tend to blame themselves

for their children's behaviour, which has implications for their health, mental wellbeing and availability for their children.

One mother said, she knows she is hopeless. She is present but the problem just continues. (Participant 3)

Mothers forget their own interests and needs. I think a lot of these mothers' health is negatively affected. One of the mothers had a stroke and ended up in hospital. (Participant 4)

Mathibela and Skhosana (2021) support the views expressed by these participants, affirming that parents often blame themselves or experience depression when they believe they have not adequately fulfilled their role in raising their children. Additionally, children often exhibit behaviours similar to their parents, when the latter display signs of anxiety or dissatisfaction in their relationships with their CBPs (Ward, 2007). Parents serve as role models for their children, and children learn by observing and imitating their parents' behaviours. One participant mentioned that if parents experience challenges in their mental wellbeing, it impacts on their capacity to play with their children.

Parents does not know how to play with their children because nobody played with them. They don't know how to be playful, how to be silly, how to have fun with their children. I think that is important from a small age up until teenage years. (Participant 8)

Playful interactions between parents and children promote emotional connection, laughter and fun. They also enhance the overall wellbeing of families and foster a sense of connectedness (Shorer, Swissa, Levavi & Swissa, 2019). Responsive parents nurture secure attachments in their children. Playful parents exhibit higher emotional awareness of their child's needs and demonstrate the ability to recognise, express and manage their own emotions as well as those of their children (Menashe-Grinberg & Atzaba-Poria, 2017).

Sub-theme 1.3: Behavioural problems in children

Participants observed that children's behavioural problems often stem from the presence of family problems and the dynamics within the relationships between parental figures.

In most of the cases, especially children with difficult behaviour, there is another social issue involved in that family, sometimes it is substance abuse of the father or the mother. Domestic violence and poverty are also a big problem. All those issues have a[n] indirect impact on the family's ability to connect with one another and stay connected. (Participant 7)

Substance abuse in families and the conflict between parents in families contributes to a child's negative behaviour. (Participant 3)

Furthermore, the participants asserted that children brought up in households where substance abuse is prevalent often tend to experiment with substances themselves and disregard household rules. These behaviours act as obstacles to parents' efforts to cultivate stronger relationships with their children.

The main type of behavioural problem in children is substance abuse, and they do not adhere to any household rules; they have their own rules. These children do not attend school, despite parents going for assistance. (Participant 7)

Some of the children will explain that their mothers drink – doing drugs. Then they do the same, because there is nothing else they know. They do what the mother do[es] because they feel they belong there. (Participant 10)

In their study on Filipino adolescents, Pocsidio *et al.* (2021) found that parental influences have an impact on the externalising behaviours that children present. Furthermore, children exposed to less structure are more likely to express themselves in a similar ways as their parents. This can lead to aggressive behaviour, substance abuse or withdrawal from the parent, ultimately impacting on the parent-child relationship (Mathibela & Skhosana, 2021). Participants felt that parents become overwhelmed by the demands of parenting and feel frustrated when their children do not behave as expected.

Parents usually attack the child and not the problem, thus causing the child to rebel because the child's self-esteem is being compromised. (Participant 1)

What I usually see is that the parents, or the mother, usually lose control when it comes to the child, because she does not have much support. Dad usually says that the child should be chased away from home, but mom feels she must protect her child to the extreme and she then lose[s] control. (Participant 4)

Parents who experience distress often exhibit harsh, controlling or permissive behaviour, which hinders their ability to effectively control their child's behaviour and establish secure connections with them (Morris, Criss, Silk & Houlteberg, 2017). Disconnection between the parent and the child occurs with parents finding it difficult to address the behavioural problems of their children. Participants also noted that the continuous investment of parents in CBPs leads to the emotional neglect of other family members.

You will also find that other children in the household feels neglected because all the attention goes to the problem child. (Participant 1)

In many ways, the rest of the children are neglected, and it influences the marriage. There was a case where the father took his belongings and walked away, because the mother focused more on the child with the behavioural problems. (Participant 4)

A healthy and happy family dynamic depends on the wellbeing of every family member. Neglecting the emotional needs of any family member can have detrimental effects on children's development (Kirby, 2019). Therefore, if children feel unwanted and unsafe, they may withdraw from their parents, thereby affecting the parents' ability to strengthen family connectedness.

Theme 2: Parenting style

This theme explores the challenges encountered by parents with CBPs as they employ various parenting styles to address their children's behaviour, as well as the impact of these parenting styles on the parent-child relationship. A majority of the participants highlighted that FCBPs

frequently reported problems such as a lack of respect, limited involvement in family activities and poor communication between parents and children as behavioural challenges. The three related sub-themes are understanding one's own parenting style, setting boundaries and family communication.

Sub-theme 2.1: Understanding one's own parenting style

Most of the participants in the study agreed that parents with CBPs have a limited understanding of their own parenting style and its influence on their children's behaviour and the parent-child relationship. The study's findings, based on data collected from the participants, indicate that these parents encounter challenges in managing their children's behaviour and often feel uncertain about how to handle their children's conduct. Consequently, they turn to social service organisations for assistance to manage their children's behavioural issues. However, some of these parents do not share responsibility for addressing their child's problematic behaviour, leading to disengagement from the intervention process.

When they reported the problem, they expect social workers to fix the problems.
(Participant 2)

Some of the parents, for example, will leave all the work to the social worker, withdrawing themselves completely from the child. (Participant 1)

Parents lacking insight in their own parenting style often do not actively participate in addressing and managing their child's behaviour or fail to assume full responsibility for seeking solutions to address problematic child behaviour, ultimately becoming uninvolved and disengaged from their children (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017). In line with this, Baumrind (1967) demonstrates that uninvolved or permissive parenting, where parents display indifference and dismissiveness, is associated with negative developmental outcomes and weakened parent-child relationships. Uninvolved and negligent parents have no expectations and lack the ability to provide guidance or supervision, thereby contributing to negative child outcomes (Sanvictores & Mendez, 2022), resulting in children developing low-self-esteem, dropping out of school and having weakened parent-child relationships (Kuppens & Ceulemans, 2019). Authoritative parenting plays a crucial role in fostering trust, acceptance, strengthening the parent-child relationship and influencing child development positively (Checa & Abundis-Gutierrez, 2018). Hence, the participants underscored the importance of parents with CBPs being more involved and supportive of their children to effectively manage their behaviour.

The parent must be involved in the child's life, so that the parent can know the child's needs, participate in the child's positive interests, and pay attention to the negative interests. (Participant 5)

It is extremely important to offer children love and support. (Participant 1)

Authoritative parents exhibit warmth, affection and a deep understanding of their children's needs, nurturing close connections with their child (Singh, 2017). Involved and attentive parents play a pivotal role in their child's life by fostering social learning and nurturing strong parent-child bonds (Deming & Johnson, 2019). Furthermore, when children have parents who are actively present and engaged, they are more likely to successfully complete their education,

cultivate a healthy self-esteem and experience reduced levels of anxiety. The participants highlighted factors that contribute to parents' difficulties in managing their children's behaviour, including a lack of understanding of their children's temperament, developmental stage and how to align their actions with age-appropriate behaviour.

Parents don't understand how to deal with the child's temperament. Most of the times the way parents deal with the child whose temperament is different and more difficult ultimately lead to labelling the child as a problem child. (Participant 1)

It is important for parents to understand their child's developmental stage, as well as any problems or previous events that may have influenced their child's development. (Participant 7)

The study's findings emphasise the significance of parents dealing with CBPs acquiring a better understanding of child development and children's temperaments, and embracing an authoritative parenting approach to enhance parent-child relationships and promote positive outcomes for children. Parents who lack sufficient understanding of their child's developmental stages or temperament frequently encounter difficulties in adequately fulfilling their child's needs, managing their behaviours effectively (Jansen van Rensburg, Strydom & Grobler, 2016), and developing effective coping strategies (Vally & El Hichami, 2020). Therefore, parents who lack knowledge about child development may experience higher levels of stress and anxiety when faced with challenging parenting situations. This stress can, in turn, affect their parenting style and interactions with their children.

Sub-theme 2.2: Setting boundaries

This sub-theme explores parents' capacity to establish boundaries for their CBPs. The key findings underscore the central themes related to parenting styles, disciplinary approaches, and the significance of establishing clear boundaries for children. One participant stated that parents do set boundaries, but that CBPs disregard parental rules.

I do believe that the parents do put rules in place, but these children with difficult behaviour are boundary breakers, most of them. (Participant 7)

The approach to setting boundaries varies among parents, and consequently some participants believed that the use of harsh punitive disciplinary methods by parents to handle their children's behaviour creates emotional distance between parents and their children, exacerbating challenging behaviour.

Most of these children are smacked or got hit by their parents and that chases them away from home, where they are exposed to violence. (Participant 9)

Parents come from areas where corporal punishment was used and that is how they were raised – that is the way their parents raised them and that is the only way that they are familiar with. (Participant 8)

Authoritarian parents frequently employ inflexible and severe disciplinary methods without offering explanations, which can significantly impact on the decision-making abilities of children and strain the parent-child relationship (Zubizarreta, Calvete & Hankin, 2019). Perez-

Gramaje, Garcia, Reyes, Serra and Garcia (2019) found that parental warmth and authoritative parenting yield more favourable outcomes for child adjustment compared to authoritarian and neglectful parenting styles. Permissive or punitive parenting styles, often influenced by cultural factors, can pose challenges in terms of defining and enforcing boundaries within the family (Mijlof, Roman & Rich, 2023). Additionally, authoritative parenting encompasses a balanced approach that entails setting clear, age-appropriate boundaries, while simultaneously fostering a supportive and nurturing environment for children to thrive. Most participants observed that parents face challenges when it comes to defining or establishing clear boundaries for their children or involving them in household activities. This, in turn, impacts on their approach to managing their child's behaviour.

We have some mothers complain, the children just lay there. The child goes out with his friends, or just walk[s] around – don't know how to wash dishes or fold up the washing. (Participant 10)

When they eventually come to the office for help, and they list the problems, it is evident that there is an absence of house rules. There is no clear outline of what the children can and cannot do. (Participant 1)

Setting boundaries provides children with a clear understanding of expectations, consequences for their behaviour and when disciplinary measures will be enforced (Scott Hoffman, Hanson, Brotherson & Zehnacker, 2021). Permissive parenting is linked to a lack of guidance and limited consequences for a child's poor behaviour, whereas authoritative parenting allows for the establishment of rules and encourages open discussions between parents and children (Rathakrishnan *et al.*, 2023).

Sub-theme 2.3: Communication in the family

Most of the participants concurred that their families face challenges because of a lack of communication. This lack of communication is influenced by their parenting style, the level of closeness with their children and their approach to handling child behaviour. Some parents, as described by the participants, find it difficult to engage in positive communication, often resorting to aggressive tones of voice and fixating on their child's negative behaviour.

Most parents are very confrontational; they focus on the behaviour of the child, the negative behaviour of the child. (Participant 2)

They would scream and yell at the child as a way of communicating with the child. Sitting with the child and having a peaceful conversation is very difficult for these parents. (Participant 7)

Parents with poor communication skills often resort to aggressive behaviour as a disciplinary method, which can have a detrimental impact on their child's self-esteem (López-Martínez, Montero-Montero, Moreno-Ruiz & Martínez-Ferrer, 2019). Furthermore, an anxious-avoidant attachment pattern can develop, leading children to become emotionally distant from their parents and potentially display aggressive behaviour (Fuentes-Balderrama *et al.*, 2023). Poor communication is linked to neglectful or uninvolved parenting, resulting in children experiencing reduced emotional support and grappling with low self-esteem (Joseph & John,

2008). Most participants observed that when parents perceive their children's behaviour as too challenging to manage, they often decrease the amount of time they spend with their child. As a result, the children become less inclined to share information or open up to their parents.

The family continues with their normal activities and does not necessarily involve the child in family activities. They do not spend quality time with each other, because the parent will always focus on the negative aspects of the child and forget the strengths of the child. (Participant 5)

These children easily communicate their physical needs in terms of what they need for school, clothing and food, but on an emotional level they don't share what they feel, for example their fears, worries or concerns. (Participant 2)

Spending time with children is essential for fostering positive development and enhancing mutual understanding between parents and children (Webb *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, this practice enhances a child's adaptation in school and positively influences their academic performance. When children spend less time with their parents, it can lead to the development of insecure attachments, subsequently affecting their capacity to learn from one another (Rathakrishnan *et al.*, 2023). It is evident that the ability to develop trust and mutual understanding is compromised when there is infrequent communication between parents and their children. Positive communication plays a pivotal role in establishing trust, fostering respect, laying the foundation for building strong relationships, and aiding in the resolution of behavioural issues (Đurišić, 2018). Participants stressed the significance of parents engaging in clear communication, actively listening to their children and allowing their children the autonomy to express themselves.

Parents should not interrupt the child when they speak – give opportunity to finish speaking. (Participant 4)

Good communication means being a good listener. Providing that open-door policy for the child to feel safe to come and talk about anything, no matter what the problem. (Participant 6)

Parents and children who can communicate with each other using clear and appropriate language are better equipped to enhance and strengthen their connectedness (Đurišić, 2018). Parents who share an emotional bond with their child are more likely to experience mutual respect, engage in enjoyable activities together, communicate effectively and have a reduced likelihood of encountering behavioural problems (Tam & Yeoh, 2008). Authoritative parenting is characterised by clear communication, mutual respect, emotional bonding, and the establishment of a warm and nurturing parent-child relationship. This parenting style typically encourages open and effective communication between parents and children, which can lead to enhanced connectedness and reduced behavioural problems in children.

Theme 3: Parenting programmes - Strengthening family connectedness

This theme underscores the pivotal role of evidence-based parenting programmes in enhancing family connectedness within FCBPs. It encompasses three sub-themes: availability of evidence-based parenting programmes, parent attendance in parenting programmes, and

suggestions for programme content in strengthening family connectedness. The participants provided invaluable insights into the challenges and opportunities practitioners encounter when striving to improve family connectedness in FCBPs. In summary, this sub-theme highlights the urgent need for accessible evidence-based parenting programmes, specialised social worker training and tailored interventions for FCBPs. It also underscores the value of peer support within these programmes and acknowledges resource challenges that can hinder effective implementation.

Sub-theme 3.1: Availability of evidence-based parenting programmes

Most of the participants in the study expressed concerns about the lack of formal parenting training for practitioners. They also noted that there is an assumption that social workers should naturally possess the skills to offer parenting support, but often, the depth of exploration required is underestimated. Furthermore, the participants highlighted the limited availability of evidence-based parenting programmes aimed at enhancing family connectedness.

There are not many organisations that do have parenting programmes. There is very little training done, because they feel we as social workers should be able to do it, but we never know how deep we must explore. (Participant 3)

There are limited programmes, or it is incorporated with other programmes. If it is a substance abuse programme, then behavioural problems will be a component of that programme. Behavioural problems will never be the overall theme, it is presented as a sub-theme. (Participant 3)

The findings highlight a lack of evidence-based parenting programmes and training opportunities for social workers aimed at enhancing family bonding in FCBPs. Research by Forrester *et al.* (2019) established a connection between social worker skills, the reinforcement of family bonding, and positive outcomes in families. Training social workers to implement educational programmes is critical for programme compliance and effectiveness (Ward *et al.*, 2015). Parental interventions are effective in enhancing caregiver-child bonds, encouraging positive parenting practices, and mitigating instances of harsh parenting and child abuse (Barlow & Coren, 2018). Participants pointed out that various organisations employ diverse approaches to deliver parenting programmes and address problematic behaviours.

In our parenting groups we would include parents of children with difficult behaviour, and we would provide them with basic skills or techniques, how to handle your child with difficult behaviour, especially teenagers that are a bit moody. We would teach them, for example, how to talk to your child or that they should not hit their child (Participant 7)

I do research, then we write programmes, then we see what works and what doesn't work. Whatever comes out of the assessment, whether it's communication or how to improve my relationship with my child will be included in the programme. (Participant 4)

The results show parenting programmes are implemented in diverse ways and may not always be evidence-based. Evidenced-based parenting behaviours, which are based on theory and

research, provide insight into the extent to which the target group is being reached and how parenting interventions in families might be evaluated (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Trustworthiness of the content of the programme has a significant impact on the implementation of parenting programmes and the ability to improve family connectedness (Kilburn, Shapiro & Hardin, 2017). Participants agreed that parenting programmes are desperately needed, but that they should be able to address the specific needs of the family and provide peer support.

There is a definite need for parenting programmes, but it must not be [a] one-size-fits-all approach because parents' need[s] differs. (Participant 7)

It is usually better to learn from peers. There is educational value within group work, when it comes to sharing challenges with peers, learning best practice, learning how they deal with the same problem. (Participant 2)

Parenting interventions offer parents an opportunity to learn from each other and this often produces more favourable outcomes compared to one-to-one interactions with a social worker. Social learning encourages the observation, imitation and enactment of the behaviour that can influence parent-child relationships (O'Connor *et al.*, 2013). The participants highlighted the necessity for comprehensive training programmes tailored to parents dealing with children with behavioural problems. They stressed the significance of specialised and consistent evidence-based parenting education programmes designed to enhance family bonds.

Making it a specialised service, for example, a social worker identifies the specific needs and challenges of parents and refer[s] them then to colleagues who then specifically deal with parenting education or parenting training. (Participant 2)

If I look at how and when we do parent programmes, it needs to be done more consistently to have a long-term effect. By doing it quarterly like we do, it really doesn't have a visible impact on strengthening the connectedness. The families that come to the quarterly sessions, they don't get the right amount of help they need and there isn't really a positive change happening. (Participant 6)

The debate on specialising versus a more general approach to parenting interventions is ongoing. Nevertheless, it can be argued that when social workers specialise, their skills and effectiveness in working with families improve (Blom, 2004). However, some participants acknowledged that the limited availability and inadequate accessibility of resources have an impact on the implementation and quality of services provided to parents.

Resources in terms of venues, transport, access to telephones, fax machines are needed. Venues is a problem because venues are not free anymore. Even our partners are charging us to use their venues, so there must be available budgets and that is sometimes a problem. (Participant 2)

I don't think that parents have the necessary knowledge. Often social workers and psychologist[s] provide these wonderful courses with these wonderful skills, but it cost[s] a lot of money, to access this information. A lot of the time the books that you can buy is difficult to read and difficult to understand, and they are not practical. I

don't think that parents, many South African parents, have access to resources.
(Participant 8)

A lack of training and the organisational constraints in the distribution of resources for implementing training programmes can be barriers to delivering evidence-based parenting interventions (Wessels, Lester & Ward, 2016), especially in poorly resourced areas. This could impact on parents' participation in programmes and hinder their ability to attend parenting sessions (Whittaker & Cowley, 2012). However, one participant noted that despite the challenges in implementation, she observed positive changes in a family while presenting a parenting programme.

With one family I could see change after a few sessions. They were laughing with each other and only had good things to say about the other person. (Participant 6)

The findings show that parental participation and involvement in parenting programmes have a positive impact on family connectedness and child behaviour, regardless of the length or duration of the intervention. Parents who receive constructive support through parenting programmes feel more confident, have greater faith in their parenting skills and are better equipped to maintain family ties. Social learning, as facilitated by parenting programmes, offers parents the opportunity to transfer knowledge to their families and enhance their relationships with the CBPs (Shenderovich *et al.*, 2019).

Sub-theme 3.2: Parent attendance in parenting programmes

The participants in this study shed light on a recurring issue regarding the attendance of parents, particularly fathers, in parenting programmes. It was evident that mothers or grandparents were more likely to participate, while biological fathers were often absent or less engaged. This disparity was attributed to various factors, including the parents' work schedules and the support that single mothers receive. It is worth noting that most single mothers have to rely on grandparents to attend parenting programmes for their children with behavioural problems.

It's 50/50 between the mother and the grandparents. The biological fathers aren't usually involved. (Participant 6)

Because most of the fathers are absent, the mother alone must provide support if the child shows behavioural problems. (Participant 5)

Participation in parenting programmes poses challenges for parents with CBPs in low socio-economic family environments (Wessels *et al.*, 2016). Recruitment and retention in parenting programmes are hindered by factors such as working conditions, availability of transport, childcare arrangements and language barriers (Murray *et al.*, 2014). The majority of participants concurred that parents frequently look for immediate solutions to challenging child behaviour and are less inclined to voluntarily participate in group interventions.

The parents rarely come to these programmes of their own will. They will usually only come to the social worker, but do not come if programmes are presented in groups. (Participant 5)

Sometimes parents do not attend the programmes as often as one would expect. The programme may be for 2 or 3 days, and then they would only come once, or they do not attend. That is a challenge. (Participant 7)

Parental engagement in parenting programmes, as well as the level of participation in programme sessions, plays a crucial role in determining their exposure to parenting knowledge and how they subsequently impart that knowledge to their children. Koerting *et al.* (2013) state that attending parenting programmes is often stigmatised, leading to lower attendance rates among parents dealing with CBPs. Furthermore, this stigma stems from feelings of shame associated with seeking assistance, the belief that utilising services signifies parental failure, and there is also the apprehension of being labelled or judged. Therefore, low enrolment and attendance rates are not confined to programmes in poorly resourced settings (Wessels *et al.*, 2016), and parents' motivation to seek help may not necessarily align with their intention to complete or attend a parenting programme (Butler, Gregg, Calam & Wittkowski, 2020).

Sub-theme 3.3: Suggestions for programme content in strengthening family connectedness

In this sub-theme the participants provide insights into and recommendations for programme content that can impact on family connectedness within FCBPs. Key factors highlighted include emotional awareness, parental warmth, leadership skills, behavioural knowledge, communication skills, effective discipline and family involvement in religious activities. These recommendations are aimed at improving parent-child relationships, equipping parents to address behavioural challenges and ultimately nurturing stronger family bonds. One participant emphasised the importance of parents understanding how to recognise and respond to their children's emotional cues to enhance family connectedness.

What I always present to parents is how to be able to see emotions. You need to be able to tell if your child is in distress or anxious. I always gave little faces to the parents and then they had to portray it to the group. (Participant 3)

In their review of two parenting manuals based on attachment and social learning theory, Rooth, Forinder, Piuva and Söderbäck (2017) found that parents become more responsive when they could express warmth and support towards their children. Participants expressed a range of opinions, with many emphasising that parents should be equipped with leadership skills and encouraged to identify their strengths to effectively manage their children's behaviour and enhance family connectedness.

The first [manual] is teaching parents how to take the lead by being the parent and teach them how to provide structure to the family. (Participant 8)

I don't think they even realise what their strengths are and what their coping skills are. I think it is there, but many of them don't know or can't describe how they go through processes. (Participant 4)

Parents who offer guidance and support to their children increase the likelihood of their children completing their education and enhancing the parent-child bond (Orte *et al.*, 2015). Parenting programmes rooted in social learning theory play a role in behaviour modification and have an impact on the parent-child relationship (O'Connor *et al.*, 2013). Several

participants stressed the significance of incorporating specific content into parenting programmes. Suggestions from participants for elements to be included in parenting programmes included knowledge about child behaviour, listening skills and communication skills to promote stronger family connectedness.

Guidelines must be provided how to deal with the child with behavioural problems, and how to strengthen family ties. It should especially focus on how the parent spends his/her time with the child. (Participant 5)

Listening skills and communication skills. Don't react very quickly to something, especially when there is nothing really to react to. (Participant 10)

The findings show that when parents' listening skills are improved, they communicate better with their children, and this influences their disciplining methods and understanding of child behaviour (Yazici & Abali, 2020). Parent-child connectedness is further strengthened through effective discipline provided by the parent. Consistency in discipline and how it is received by the child plays a crucial role in nurturing the connection between the parent and child (Blizzard, Barroso, Ramos, Graziano & Bagner, 2018). One participant highlighted the importance of the encouragement of family involvement in spiritual activities as an important asset to strengthen family values and build stronger connections in the family.

Religious practices should be encouraged. It does strengthen the family, because the family goes with the children to the church, and the children learn what is right and wrong in terms of the Bible and how to respect one another, which is linked to basic stuff that we need to know in life. (Participant 7)

Families who engage in religious activities together often experience an increased sense of security (Richardson, Hardesty & Jeppsen, 2015). This, in turn, has a significant impact on children's decision-making, their relationships with family members and the level of parental warmth exhibited by parents toward their CBPs.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article highlights the importance of evidence-based parenting programmes in improving family connectedness among FCBPs. The study's findings revolve around three main themes: barriers to strengthening family connectedness, parenting styles and parenting programmes. The following recommendations have been drawn from the findings:

- Support families – single parents (siblings and extended family)
- Promote work-life balance
- Enhance emotional wellbeing of parents
- Address substance abuse and family conflict
- Understand your own parenting style
- Set clear boundaries
- Parental involvement
- Cultivate mutual values
- Increase availability of evidence-based parenting programmes

- Specialisation in social work
- Overcome barriers to participation
- Emotional awareness and expression
- Education about child development
- Develop parenting skills (leadership, communication and coping skills of parents)
- Consistent discipline strategies
- Incorporate spiritual practices

The findings of the study suggest that parents of CBPs often seek assistance from social welfare organisations. However, there is a noticeable lack of adequate evidence-based training to effectively enhance family connectedness through parenting programmes. Therefore, it is recommended that training be provided to social workers and child and youth care workers to cultivate and promote the strengthening of family connectedness in FCBPs. Parenting programmes should be consistent, specialised, and tailored to the specific needs of the families. Social workers should receive training in delivering specialised evidence-based programmes, ensuring they have the necessary resources and skills to foster stronger family bonds in FCBPs. Advocacy for affordable resources, including venues, materials and training opportunities, particularly in poorly resourced areas, should be prioritised to ensure that parenting programmes are accessible to all.

Additional barriers should be addressed, including the encouragement of parents to advocate for more family support, ensuring their participation in parenting programmes. Special attention should be devoted to supporting single-parent families, especially when fathers are absent. This might involve more flexible schedules for parenting sessions. Social workers and child and youth care workers should promote an effective work-life balance to help parents reduce stress and allocate more quality time to their children, strengthening their family bond. Therefore, it is important to promote emotional awareness and expression within families so that they can better understand the emotions of their children and other family members. Improving the emotional wellbeing of parents will enable them to be more attentive and involved in their children's lives.

Family connectedness is an essential ingredient for a happy and fulfilling life, and it is closely linked to parenting and parenting styles, as demonstrated in this study. However, the study has revealed that several barriers hinder parents' ability to establish strong relationships with their children. These barriers include family structure, the emotional wellbeing of parents and behavioural problems in children. These barriers interconnect, making them crucial factors to address jointly in addressing FBCPs effectively. Understanding the influence of family structure on child development and child behaviour, as highlighted in the article, has proven to be a challenge for parents who seek to develop nurturing relationships with their children. Therefore, it is imperative for social workers and child and youth care workers to provide support or link parents to support networks, especially single parents, to relieve their financial strain, among other things. Teaching parents to balance work and family life has become an essential ingredient to relieve stress, engage in self-care, and for parents to become more available and present when interacting with their children. This could provide the opportunity

for playful behaviour between the parent and the CBP, and thereby provide the opportunity for bonding.

Parents should be equipped with strategies to enhance their understanding of different parenting styles, manage stress and cultivate emotional intelligence. Addressing the emotional needs of both parents and CBPs can have a positive impact on reducing conflicts in the parent-child relationship and enhance parents' ability to decipher and respond to their children's emotional cues effectively. To foster a stronger connection within the family, parents should be encouraged to develop greater self-awareness of their own parenting style, understand the influence of their parenting style on child behaviour, and recognise how role confusion might affect their relationship with their CBP. Self-awareness is thus key. Providing guidance and information about various parenting styles, with a focus on authoritative parenting, which promotes a strong parent-child bond, should be a key component of parenting programmes.

Social workers and child and youth care workers should actively encourage parents to engage in self-reflection regarding their own upbringing. This reflection can help parents identify any cultural norms and values that they may unconsciously transfer to their parenting practices, which could potentially hinder their engagement with their CBP. In addition to the aforementioned aspects, parents should also acquire knowledge related to setting appropriate boundaries, understanding child development stages and effectively encouraging age-appropriate behaviour in their CBP. Substance abuse and conflict management are aspects that should be included in the engagement with parents, helping them become knowledgeable about their impact on family relationships and how this could in turn influence family bonding.

Key experts and practitioners highlighted the importance of skills development for parents to strengthen their relationship with their children. Specific attention should be given to the development of the leadership, communication and coping skills of parents. Parents should be equipped with leadership skills to set boundaries and provide structure within the family. Parents should receive training in effective listening, communication and coping skills to improve parent-child relationships and teach parents how to respond calmly and thoughtfully to challenging situations. Furthermore, this support can be complemented by guiding parents to maintain consistency in their disciplinary strategies and emphasising the positive impact this consistency can have on the development of desirable child behaviour and the enhancement of family connectedness. Additionally, it is advisable to encourage the incorporation of spiritual practices within families to reinforce family values, respect and unity. By implementing these recommendations, social workers and child and youth care workers can assist families in overcoming barriers to family connectedness and establish a more supportive and nurturing environment, ultimately enhancing family connectedness and fostering positive outcomes for both parents and children within these families.

Additional research is needed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the impact of strengthening family connectedness. It is also crucial to conduct studies from the perspective of CBPs to explore their viewpoints and insights into this phenomenon.

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