

Media release

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THE IMPORTANCE OF STRENGTHENING CAREGIVER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS IN LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS IN SOUTH AFRICA

“If children feel safe, they can take risks, ask questions, make mistakes, learn to trust, share their feelings, and grow.” ~ Alfie Kohn

The first 1 000 days in a child’s life holds the key to unlocking his or her life-long potential. By the age of five, almost 90% of a child’s brain will be developed. These are the formative years, where factors such as adequate healthcare; good nutrition; quality childcare and nurturing; a clean and safe environment; and early learning and stimulation will, to a large extent, determine a child’s future.

Against the backdrop of a country where families are increasingly faced with challenges such as lack of psychosocial support, economic pressure, health problems and an under-resourced and overwhelmed welfare system, providing an enabling environment with policies, programmes and services that give caregivers (i.e. parents, families and other people who look after children) the knowledge and resources to provide nurturing care for young children is crucial.

Nobel prize-winning economist James Heckman has said “investments that bolster the parenting capacities of families are the most effective way to promote social mobility and foster equal opportunities”. Decades of university research has confirmed that secure children exhibit increased empathy, greater self-esteem, better relationships with parents and peers, enhanced school readiness, and an increased capacity to handle emotions more effectively when compared with children who are not secure.

Caregivers are the foundation for early childhood development (ECD). They are the first and most important teachers, who play a crucial role in developing the intellectual, social and physical abilities of children. In order to be able to do this, caregivers can only provide their children with nurturing care when they are emotionally, financially and socially secure *themselves*. For this reason, it is imperative that social investors focus on family strengthening and strengthening caregiver/child relationships.

The biggest threats to high-quality ECD are extreme poverty, insecurity, gender inequities, violence, environmental toxins, and poor mental health. All these things affect caregivers and reduce capacity to protect, support and promote young children's development. Perhaps more importantly, they often endure beyond individual lives and lead to multi-generational challenges.

Currently, 5% of the national budget (~R75 billion) goes towards ECD; the vast majority for primary healthcare for mothers and children. Only 6% goes to early learning, nutrition support, responsive parenting and early intervention.

More interventions are needed to empower caregivers and communities to strengthen home-care practices, including playing with and stimulating children by utilising household materials; recognising and tracking developmental milestones; nutritional and psychosocial support; and how to keep children safe and healthy. Caregivers must also be able to participate in social networks, be empowered to make decisions in the best interest of the child and be affirmed in the important role they play in the lives of the children in their care.

Tshikululu Social Investments, South Africa's leading social investment manager, recognises the importance of investing in strengthening caregiver child relationships in low-income households.

We work with clients that have invested in interventions that promote health, nutrition, security, safety, responsive caregiving and opportunities for early learning for young children. More than six of the trusts we manage have a direct or indirect interest in ECD, and the investments we make on behalf of our clients in this space are aligned to the United Nation's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Embedded in the SDGs on hunger, health, education and justice are targets on malnutrition, child mortality, early learning and violence; targets that, together with others, contribute to an agenda for improving the lives of young children through high-quality ECD.

By working together with various partners, social investors who are serious about ECD can help influence and produce improved child outcomes. These investments will enable South Africa to build a more capable, productive and valuable workforce that pays dividends for generations to come. The earlier the investment the greater the return

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