

The role of the health sector in supporting parents and caregivers to meet their parenting potential



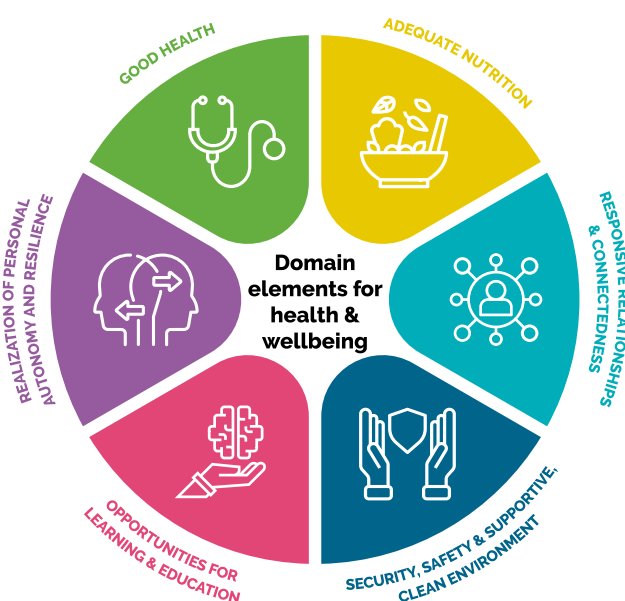
Background

Supporting parents and caregivers requires a whole-of-society approach, with coordinated responses from the health, education, social services, private and other sectors. This brief focuses on the role of the health sector specifically.

The health system has always provided valuable support to parents and caregivers in addressing the key domains of health and well-being of children and adolescents (Fig.1).

This Brief provides a rationale for why the health sector should support parents and caregivers, describes the type of support they need, and outlines the key building blocks of the health sector response. The Annexes include examples of what service providers can do and relevant World Health Organization guidelines, publications and training packages that can inform the strengthening of health systems to better care for caregivers and support them on their parenting journey.

Figure 1. Domains of child and adolescent health and well-being



Source: (1)

Key definitions

- **Parents and caregivers** refer to adults who are responsible for the daily care and support of a child or adolescent. Primary caregivers include parents, families and other people who are directly responsible for the child or adolescent at home.
- **Parenting** is a core human process that helps ensure the physical, emotional, financial,

and psychological wellbeing of children and youth. It comprises the interactions, behaviours, emotions, knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and practices associated with the provision of nurturing care. Parenting should always be understood within the contexts and cultures in which families live.

- In this document we use the terms **parents and caregivers** to refer to the person and **parenting** (or caregiving) to refer

to the interactions, behaviours, emotions, knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and practices associated with the care of the child or adolescent.

- A **parenting support intervention** is a set of structured activities to help parents/caregivers improve parent–child interactions and the overall quality of parenting that a child receives.

Why should the health sector support parents and caregivers?

Parenting is a critical accelerator for positive outcomes for children and adolescents (2,3,4). Providing support to caregivers can:

- improve physical and mental health
- improve child and adolescent development
- increase wages and productivity
- improve academic achievement
- increase social cohesion
- decrease cycles of violence

What type of support do parents and caregivers need?

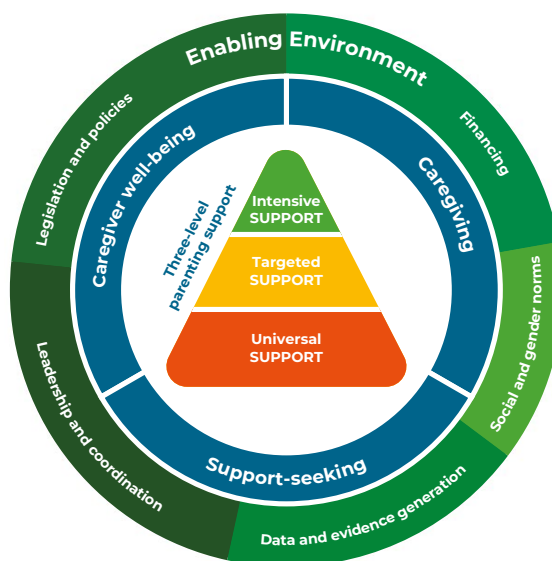
Support for caregivers should focus on:

- **Strengthening parenting behaviours:** empowering caregivers to provide supportive, attentive care for their children and adolescents
- **Promoting support-seeking:** raising awareness about services and support available; and
- **Supporting caregiver wellbeing:** providing support for caregiver wellbeing and guiding them to prioritize their own physical and mental health.



The key building blocks for supporting caregivers of children and adolescents across the life course are presented in Figure 2: existing services, three-level parenting support, and an enabling environment.

Figure 2. Key building blocks for supporting caregivers of children and adults



Source: Adapted from UNICEF Europe and Central Asia's Parenting support framework for the early years (5).

1 Existing services

The health sector should use opportunities in existing services to strengthen parenting behaviours, support-seeking and caregiver wellbeing across the life course. Available facility-, community- and school-based services can be leveraged to include:

- Elicitation of parental, child or adolescent concerns;
- Psychosocial and environmental assessment;
- Comprehensive physical examination, including growth and development monitoring;
- Screening/checking for relevant conditions;
- Counselling and delivery of relevant interventions;
- Anticipatory guidance; and
- Extra support or referral to more specialized services when necessary.

2 Three-level parenting support

The health sector should match the level of support that caregivers receive to the intensity of their needs (6). All caregivers can benefit from universal support for improve parenting behaviours, support-seeking and wellbeing. However, services should also identify caregivers who need more support and facilitate linkages to more intensive interventions, specialized services within the health system, or to services provided by other sectors when needed. The three levels of parenting support are pictured in Figure 2 and described below.

- **Universal support** for improving parenting behaviours, support-seeking and wellbeing includes promoting positive parenting through information, guidance and behaviour modelling during routine visits.
- **Targeted support** for caregivers with specific needs, for example community-based support groups for caregivers in humanitarian settings.
- **Intensive support** for caregivers with complex needs, for example individualized counselling for caregivers of children with developmental disabilities.

3 An enabling environment

The health sector should collaborate with other services and sectors to create an enabling environment for caregivers (see outer circle of Fig 2). This relies on a comprehensive legislative and policy framework, effective coordination mechanisms, adequate financing, robust data and evidence generation, and the promotion of supportive social and gender norms. Access to information, resources, and quality services across health, education and social welfare systems are key to the network of support that parents need (7).



How should the health sector deliver support to parents and caregivers?

To ensure that health services are supportive of parents and caregivers, the health sector should use three principles: remember, strengthen and add.



Remember

A lot of what health service providers are already doing is designed to be supportive of caregivers and parenting.

Examples:

- Notice that a pregnant woman looks anxious during a routine check-up and encourage her to reach out for support.
- Support a new parent to make eye contact during feeding.
- Respond to concerns about a child's school-readiness.
- Guide caregivers on how to discuss pubertal changes and menstrual health with their adolescent.

Strengthen

When existing services are strengthened and delivered at a high quality, it reduces the need for future help-seeking or treatment.

Examples:

- Ensure that all interactions with parents and caregivers are caring and respectful, build on existing strengths, and provide supportive, non-judgmental responses to their concerns.
- Create pathways for follow-up support through personalized messages or check-ins for parents and caregivers who missed appointments or families in need of additional support.

Add

Small but effective actions ("quick wins") can be added to existing services to optimize the support that caregivers and their children receive. These additions do not have to be complicated or costly.

Examples:

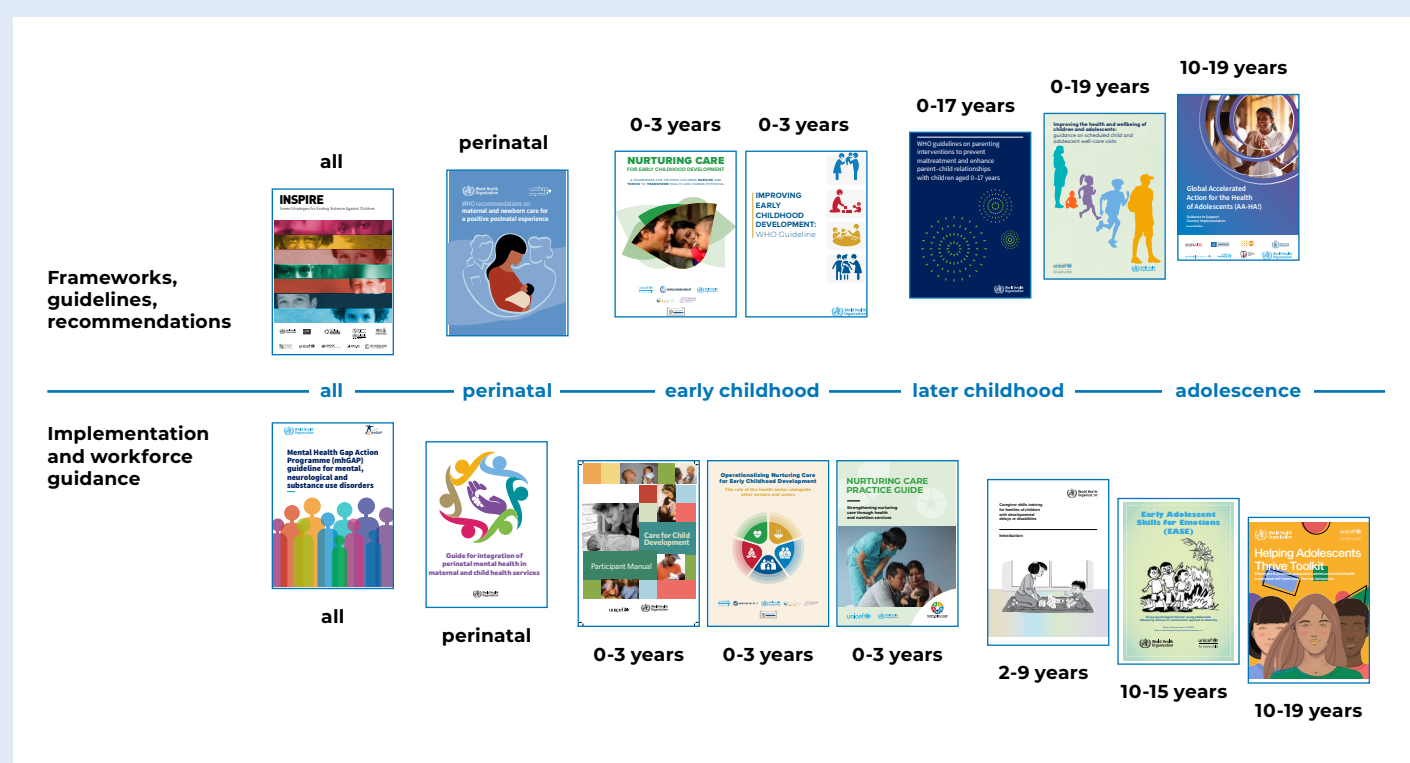
- During an ultrasound check-up in the third trimester, draw the parents' attention to their baby's ability to recognize their parent's voice in the womb.
- Model for the parent an empathic and caring response to the child's fear of a needle during an immunization.
- Provide low grade WIFI that patients can connect to, prompting them to register with their name, contact information and the age of their child/children, so that they can receive parenting messages relevant to their child's age.

Supporting parenting behaviours, support-seeking and wellbeing across the life course

Annex 1 provides examples of how health services can support caregivers at different stages of their child's development, from the antenatal period, through to adolescence. These examples and priorities are derived from guidance and resources published by the World Health Organization (Fig. 3). A comprehensive list of all relevant publications is provided in Annex 2.



Figure 3. A snapshot of WHO resources for supporting parents and caregivers across the life course



Conclusion

To support parents and caregivers, health systems should:

- Focus on fostering supportive relationships with parents and caregivers
- Recognize caregivers' existing strengths and respond to areas where support is needed
- Provide supportive services and referrals based on need, across the life course

All parents and caregivers need a supportive health system that provides them with quality services to support them on their parenting journey. Health service providers play an important role in introducing and reinforcing critical caregiving practices to improve the health and well-being of children, adolescents, and their caregivers.

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Development of this document

To develop this document, a WHO interdepartmental working group was formed with representatives from the Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health and Ageing Department (MCA);

the Department of Mental Health, Brain Health and Substance Use (MSD); the Department of Social Determinants of Health (SDH); and the Behavioural Insights Unit (BI). The representatives shared relevant expertise and WHO publications to inform the scope of this document. Stellenbosch University, upon declaring no conflict of interest, was recruited to develop the content drawing on existing WHO normative guidance and technical publications identified by the WHO interdepartmental working group. WHO staff in the six regional offices and WHO staff and government partners in six countries (Colombia, Kazakhstan, Jordan, the Philippines, Thailand, and United Republic of Tanzania) undertaking activities to advance support to parents and caregivers with and through the health sector were invited to provide feedback on the document virtually and in-person. The virtual consultation took place in November 2024 and the in-person consultation took place in February 2025 (Amman, Jordan). The aforementioned WHO interdepartmental working group made final decisions regarding the document.

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Examples of supporting caregivers across the life course and priorities for service providers

Routine health services (facility- or community-based) provide an opportunity to strengthen parenting behaviours, promote support-seeking and support caregiver wellbeing. Use existing services to provide information that can enable caregivers to support children's and adolescents health, development and wellbeing; develop and reinforce caregivers' knowledge and parenting skills; listen to and address caregivers' concerns; and facilitate linkages to relevant services when needed.



Strengthen parenting behaviours	Promote support-seeking	Support caregiver wellbeing
AT ALL STAGES		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide information on what to expect as children and adolescents grow and develop and how caregivers can best support the ongoing changes across all life stages. • Develop and reinforce the knowledge and skills of caregivers across all developmental stages. • Build caregivers' confidence in their parenting skills by affirming their abilities and praising steps they have taken to support their children's and adolescents' development. • Empower caregivers to provide attentive and appropriate care to their children and adolescents as they develop. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask caregivers if they have concerns about their children's or adolescents' health, development and wellbeing. • Inform caregivers about available services that they can access for additional support and facilitate referrals to health or services beyond the health sector as needed. • Identify any signs of harsh parenting or child abuse or neglect and provide support while facilitating access to child protection services where needed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask about how caregivers are coping and if they have concerns about their mental health or wellbeing. • Ask about any risks to wellbeing, such as substance use or elevated stress. • Respond supportively to caregivers' concerns and facilitate access to additional mental health care where needed.

Strengthen parenting behaviours	Promote support-seeking	Support caregiver wellbeing
ANTENATAL (PREGNANCY)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide information about how good nutrition, minimising stress, and healthy lifestyle choices during pregnancy benefit both mothers and their babies. • Foster early bonding and attachment e.g. draw caregivers' attention to their baby's ability to recognize caregivers' voices during the third trimester of pregnancy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide information about available antenatal information and support and link caregivers to these programmes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and strengthen opportunities to enhance partner and family engagement in antenatal care.
NEONATAL AND INFANCY (BIRTH TO 11 MONTHS)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide information about children's development focusing on what to expect across the developmental domains and how caregivers can support their children's development. • Support early bonding and attachment between caregivers and their baby. • Model warm and positive responses to baby's cries. • Build caregivers' confidence and competence to understand and respond to their baby's cues and needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask about and listen to caregivers' concerns about transition to home and address caregivers' concerns with empathy and supportive responses. • Provide guidance on breastfeeding and healthy dietary practices for the mother and how to access additional support if needed. • Provide information about how to recognize infant illness and how and when to seek help. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure good linkages between child health and perinatal or caregiver mental health care services. • Provide information to caregivers, partners and families about how to recognize perinatal or caregiver mental health problems and how to access additional mental health care where needed.
EARLY CHILDHOOD (1-4 YEARS)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide information about how to support the child's development including attention to safety, setting routines, and fostering a warm relationship. • Build caregivers' confidence to provide developmentally-appropriate activities and to engage with their child in a responsive manner. • Demonstrate how existing daily activities can support child learning. • Discuss and model positive discipline techniques. • Model empathic and caring responses e.g. if child is fearful of needles during immunization. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask about and address any caregiver concerns about the child (health, development, wellbeing) with empathy and supportive responses, and facilitate referrals to additional services as needed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enquire about the caregiver's childcare situation and experience of caregiving and facilitate access to additional support where needed. • Acknowledge and empathize with any caregiver frustrations about child behaviour, and normalize or contextualize challenging child behaviours.

Strengthen parenting behaviours	Promote support-seeking	Support caregiver wellbeing
LATER CHILDHOOD (5-9 YEARS)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empower caregivers to create safe environments by providing information about how to reduce exposure to risks during childhood. • Commend caregivers for their attention to their child's development e.g. for raising concerns during vision, hearing or school readiness assessments, and/or for supporting their child's social and emotional skills. • Provide guidance on positive approaches to discipline, including limit-setting, rules and consequences, and activities to boost social and emotional development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask about and provide information on developmental stages, transition to school, behaviour, and school functioning, and address any caregiver concerns, with empathy and supportive responses and facilitate referrals to additional services as needed. • Facilitate communication and information sharing with schools and protection services, as needed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enquire about the caregiver's experience of caregiving, particularly in the context of child developmental, social or emotional difficulties, chronic illnesses, or disabilities • Acknowledge and empathize with any caregiver concerns and facilitate access to additional support where needed.
ADOLESCENCE (10-19 YEARS)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide information on expected developmental changes. • Model or provide guidance to parents on developmentally appropriate skills and strategies to meet their adolescent's needs as they mature. • Empower caregivers to create safe environments for their adolescents by reducing exposure to risks. • Guide caregivers on how to discuss sensitive issues with their adolescents, including pubertal changes, menstrual health, gender, sexual health, mental health, and substance use. • Enhance caregivers' knowledge of how to encourage healthy behaviours in adolescents, including risk reduction strategies and protective behaviours. • Consider the adolescent's consent and confidentiality during interviews and physical examinations in the presence of caregivers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask about and provide information on adolescent behaviour and school functioning. • Address concerns raised by caregivers, the adolescent, or their teachers, and facilitate referrals to additional services as needed. • Facilitate links between primary health care, youth friendly health services and school health services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enquire about the caregiver's experience of parenting during the adolescent period. • Explore the specific needs of parents with adolescents with mental health difficulties, chronic illness, or disabilities. • Acknowledge and empathize with any caregiver concerns and facilitate access to additional support where needed.

Resources for each developmental stage

AT ALL STAGES



Guidelines on parenting interventions (0-17 years)

WHO guidelines on parenting interventions to prevent maltreatment and enhance parent-child relationships with children aged 0-17 years (WHO, 2022)



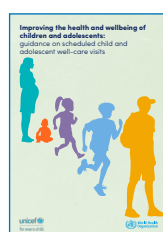
Handbook on parenting interventions (0-17 years)

Designing, implementing, evaluating and scaling up parenting interventions: a handbook for decision-makers and implementers (WHO, 2024)



INSPIRE Framework (0-17 years)

INSPIRE: seven strategies for ending violence against children. An evidence-based package to prevent and respond to violence against children (WHO, 2016)



Guidance on scheduled well-care visits (0-19 years)

Improving the health and well-being of children and adolescents: guidance on scheduled child and adolescent well-care visits (WHO, 2023)



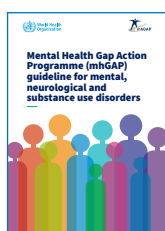
INSPIRE Handbook (0-17 years)

Action for implementing the seven strategies for ending violence against children (WHO, 2018)



Responding to child maltreatment (0-17 years)

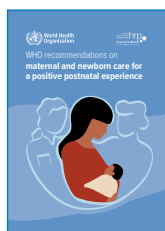
Responding to child maltreatment: A clinical handbook for health professionals (WHO, 2022)



mhGAP guideline for mental, neurological and substance use

Guidance for delivering delivering MNS interventions by health workers (WHO, 2023)

ANTENATAL (PREGNANCY), NEONATAL AND INFANCY (BIRTH TO 11 MONTHS)



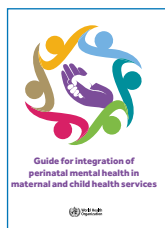
Maternal and newborn care

WHO recommendations on maternal and newborn care for a positive postnatal experience (WHO, 2022)



Kangaroo mother care

Kangaroo mother care: a transformative innovation in health care: global position paper (WHO, 2023)



Perinatal mental health

Guide for integration of perinatal mental health in maternal and child health services (WHO, 2022)

EARLY CHILDHOOD (1-4 YEARS)



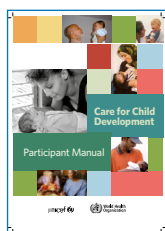
Improving early childhood development (0-3 years)

A WHO guideline providing global, evidence-informed recommendations on improving early childhood development (WHO, 2020)



Nurturing Care Framework (0-3 years)

Nurturing care for early childhood development: a framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential (WHO, 2018)



Care for child development (0-3 years)

Course on Counsel the Family on Care for Child Development: Participant Manual (WHO, 2012)



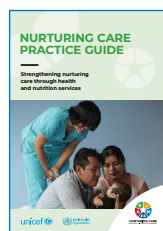
Operationalizing Nurturing Care (0-3 years)

Operationalizing nurturing care for early childhood development: the role of the health sector alongside other sectors and actors (WHO, 2019)



Caring for the child's healthy growth and development (0-3 years)

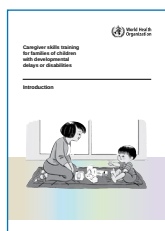
Caring for newborns and children in the community: a training course for community health workers (WHO, 2015)



Nurturing Care Practice Guide (0-3 years)

Nurturing care practice guide: strengthening nurturing care through health and nutrition services (WHO, 2022)

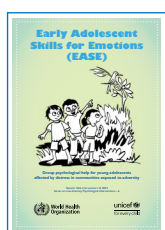
LATER CHILDHOOD (5-9 YEARS)



Caregiver skills training (2-9 years)

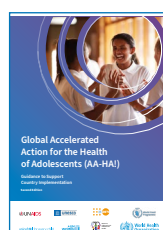
Caregiver skills training for families of children with developmental delays or disabilities (WHO, 2022)

ADOLESCENCE (10-19 YEARS)



Early adolescent skills for emotions (10-15 years)

Early Adolescent Skills for Emotions: group psychological help for young adolescents affected by distress in communities exposed to adversity (WHO, 2023)



AA-HA! (10-19 years)

Global accelerated action for the health of adolescents (AA-HA!): guidance to support country implementation (WHO, 2023)



Adolescent health (10-19 years)

WHO recommendations on adolescent health (WHO, 2017)



Helping adolescents thrive (10-19 years)

Helping adolescents thrive toolkit: strategies to promote and protect adolescent mental health and reduce self-harm and other risk behaviours (WHO, 2021)

FOR MORE INFORMATION

<https://www.who.int/initiatives/supporting-parents>

<https://support-parents.org>

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A mother and her young daughter engaged in play at a health facility in Colombia.
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