

The effect of positive parenting practices on social cognition in early childhood in the English regions of Cameroon.

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ABSTRACT

Social cognition is the way in which people process, store, and use information in social contexts to explain and predict their own behavior and that of others. The early acquisition of socio-cognitive skills is the building block for successful and adaptive functioning in various domains of life. Positive parenting has been found to be beneficial in the development of social cognition. However, the effect of positive parenting practices on social cognition in early childhood in the English Region of Cameroon has not been previously investigated. The present study examines the effect of positive parenting practices (support, stimulation, structure and positive discipline) on social cognition in early childhood. It is assumed that positive parenting practices have significant effects on the social cognition in early childhood. Mowder (2005) Parent Developmental Theory (PDT) and Tchombe (2019) Mediated Mutual Reciprocal theory (MMR) were used to support this study. The predictive correlational design was adopted for the study. The sample consisted of 265 parents having children between 1-4 years old. Positive parenting practices were measured using the CECPA-Questionnaire and social cognition in early childhood using the ESC-Inventory. Data was analyzed using the linear regression. Revealed that positive parenting practices have a strong effect on the quality of social cognition in early childhood. Specifically, the findings showed the positive effects of parental support, stimulation, positive discipline, and structure, on early child social-cognition. This study points to the implication of addressing and enhancing positive parenting as a quality of preventing or reducing social-cognition challenges. Counsellors and Psychologists should focus on educating parents about the importance of being supportive, structured, affectionate, sensitive, responsive and communicative with children. Positive parenting practices and positive discipline is recommended of parents to help children grow up with positive behaviours for proper adaptation in the environment.

Key Words: Positive parenting practices, Social Cognition, Early Childhood

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RÉSUMÉ

La cognition sociale est la manière dont les gens traitent, stockent et utilisent les informations dans des contextes sociaux pour expliquer et prédire leur propre comportement et celui des autres. L'acquisition précoce de compétences sociocognitives est la pierre angulaire d'un fonctionnement réussi et adaptatif dans divers domaines de la vie. La parentalité positive s'est avérée bénéfique pour le développement de la cognition sociale. Cependant, aucune étude n'a encore été menée sur l'effet des pratiques parentales positives sur la cognition sociale dans la petite enfance dans la région anglophone du Cameroun. La présente étude examine l'effet des pratiques parentales positives (soutien, stimulation, structure et discipline positive) sur la cognition sociale dans la petite enfance. Cette étude part du principe que les pratiques parentales positives ont des effets significatifs sur la cognition sociale dans la petite enfance. La théorie du développement parental (TDP) de Mowder (2005) et la théorie de la réciprocité mutuelle médiatisée (Mediated Mutual Reciprocal theory) de Tchombe (2019) ont été utilisées pour étayer cette étude. Le modèle de recherche corrélacionnelle prédictive a été adopté pour l'étude. L'échantillon était composé de 265 parents ayant des enfants âgés de 1 à 4 ans. Les pratiques parentales positives ont été mesurées à l'aide du questionnaire complet sur la parentalité dans la petite enfance (CECPA-Questionnaire) et la cognition sociale dans la petite enfance à l'aide de l'inventaire sur la cognition sociale précoce (Early Social Cognition Inventory). Les données ont été analysées à l'aide de la méthode de régression linéaire. Les résultats révèlent que les pratiques parentales positives ont un effet important sur la qualité de la cognition sociale dans la petite enfance. Les résultats ont notamment montré les effets positifs du soutien parental, de la stimulation, de la discipline positive et de la structure sur la cognition sociale des jeunes enfants. Cette étude souligne l'importance d'aborder et d'améliorer l'éducation parentale positive en tant que qualité permettant de prévenir ou de réduire les problèmes liés à la cognition sociale. Les conseillers et les psychologues devraient s'efforcer d'éduquer les parents sur l'importance du soutien, de la structure, de l'affection, de la sensibilité, de l'écoute et de la communication avec les enfants. Il est recommandé aux parents d'adopter des pratiques parentales et une discipline positive pour aider les enfants à grandir en adoptant des comportements positifs afin de s'adapter correctement au milieu dans lequel ils vivent.

Mots clés : Pratiques parentales positives, cognition sociale, petite enfance

Introduction and Background

Social cognition is the way in which people process, remember, and use information in social contexts to explain and predict their own behavior and that of others (Fiske and Taylor, 2013). Children's social cognition may be influenced by multiple factors, both external and internal to the child. Social cognition consists of a range of abilities that enables understanding the intentions, thoughts, beliefs and behaviors of oneself and others that are fundamental to successful social interaction (Frith, 2008). Children's early cognitive skills lay the foundation for life-long learning and well-being. Individual differences in

mental abilities, language, executive control, and early literacy are linked to preschool and school-age learning, as well as adulthood achievement, educational, and occupational out-comes (Ahmed et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2010; Scarborough et al., 2009; Wade et al., 2018). Identifying modifiable contributors to early cognition is essential to policy and programming designed to reduce early disparities in development. Children's developing competencies are, in part, constructed within cooperative social exchanges (Carpendale & Lewis, 2004). The

mutually responsive stance between a child and their parent(s) is built within a positive parent–child relationship. That is, a parent who is sensitive to their child’s subtle and overt cues promotes an eager, willing stance in the child, who then reciprocates the exchange within and across interactions over time (Kochanska et al., 2015). This dynamic creates fertile grounds for the parent learning about the needs of the child and tailoring their input accordingly, while also motivating the child to engage and commit to learning in their social environments both within the parent–child relationship and beyond. The mutually responsive stance is also important in the disciplinary context; for instance, a strong relational foundation between a parent and a child may lead a child to accept parents’ bids for power and control, rather than interpreting such acts as hostile or threatening (and thus responding in an oppositional manner; Kochanska et al., 2009). All these dynamics have to be properly managed in the process of parenting.

Parenting is a process of raising, promoting, and supporting the physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development of a child to adulthood and across the lifespan. Good parenting is a process whereby a parent meets a child’s needs according to the cultural standard that changes from generation to generation (Smetana, 2017). Parenting offers support and care to the child in painful or stressful situations and gives confidence when the child is in non-distressing or non-stressful conditions. Sensitive parenting with young children provides an emotional climate for them. Supporting and sensitive parenting offers children security and confidence; parents promote reasonable regulations and self-initiation in social and non-social experiments (Lanjekar et al., 2022). The impact of parenting is immediately felt on the child at the start of life. Therefore, how children interpret and

experience the world is a consequence of positive or aversive parenting. Positive parenting is the warm and supportive relationship between parents and children, which serves as a protective and supportive factor in individual development early in life and beyond including social cognition (Liu et al., 2017).

Positive parenting includes emotional responsiveness and sensitivity (e.g., responding to distress, affection/warmth), cognitive responsiveness (e.g., maintaining children’s focus of attention, responding to infants’ exploratory and communicative actions), and positive behavioural guidance/management (Prime et al., 2023). Positive parenting has been found to be beneficial in the development of social cognition. The mutual responsible interactions between children and their parents creates a platform for positive parent–child relationship. This is to say that, a parent who is sensitive to their child’s subtle and overt cues promotes an eager, willing attitude in the child, who then reciprocates the exchange within and across interactions over time (Kochanska et al., 2015).

Positive parenting takes different forms based on the currently activated relationship between parent and child (Grusec, 2011). Positive parenting is conceptualized within an attachment framework and can be characterized by behaviours such as sensitivity, warmth, acceptance, and nurturance (Ainsworth, 1979), as well as consideration of infants’ intentions, thoughts, and emotions (i.e., mind-mindedness; Laranjo et al., 2008). Also, positive parenting can be understood within a sociocultural framework, wherein parents respond promptly and contingently to infants’ exploratory and communicative actions, serving to expand their individual learning through an interpersonal exchange (Bernier et al., 2010; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2014). Therefore, both the cognitive and affective responsive behaviours characterize

positive parenting in infancy and throughout early childhood (Landry et al., 2008). The early acquisition of socio-cognitive skills is the building block for successful and adaptive functioning in various domains of life.

This study anchors Mowder's (2005) Parent Developmental Theory (PDT) which provides a framework for understanding individuals' parenting perceptions and behaviors as well as understanding how individuals continually reevaluate their ideas about parenting overtime. According to the PDT six primary characteristics (i.e., bonding, discipline, general welfare and protection, responsivity, sensitivity) are associated with the parenting role. This theory is not only useful in terms of understanding and working with parents, but also for exploring parental similarities and differences (e.g., cultural) as well as child development outcomes (e.g., social development). (PsycINFO Database Record (c) 2016 APA, all rights reserved). Mowder (2005) demonstrated that parents as social beings perform behaviours that involve six primary characteristics: bonding, discipline, education, general welfare and protection, responsivity, and sensitivity (Mowder & Shamah, 2011). This theory states that a seventh parenting characteristic, negativity, which encompasses negative parenting behaviours, such as spanking, influence the social role of children in future to a great extent. Mowder (2005) describes bonding as the affection, love, and regard that the children get from their parents and parents feel for their children; Discipline practices are associated with the methods that are adopted by the parents to teach their children to act according to a certain set of consistent rules and the benchmarks set by the parents themselves; Education is the transmission of Self-Conscious Emotions information that is transmitted from parent to child, and involves protection of their children from any kind of harm, both internal and external and meeting their basic needs such as clothing,

food, and shelter; Responsivity is defined as the extent to which parents involve with their children in different prospectives, which can involve listening, interacting with, assisting, and encouraging children; Sensitivity is the degree to which parents accurately discern what their children are communicating and match their responses to their children's needs. The Parent Developmental Theory were expanded to incorporate the Negativity Index in order to clearly describe the positive and negative behaviours in which parents engage. Those behaviours that reflect negative parenting and behaviours such as yelling, spanking, demeaning, and paying insufficient attention to children is known as Negativity (Mowder, 2005).

A cross sectional study conducted by Ana Okorn et al. (2022) examined the associations between positive parenting practices and child social-emotional difficulties in relation to child age and parental gender amongst Dutch families. Their findings revealed that there was increased support from both mothers and fathers, and maternal provision of structure are associated with lower levels of child externalizing and internalizing behaviours. There are contemporary views that both mothers and fathers play important roles in child development (Cabrera, Fitzgerald, Bradley, & Roggman, 2014), studies examining both mothering and fathering are still relatively scarce (Cabrera, Volling, & Barr, 2018). Some studies that have differentiated the impacts of mothers' and fathers' positive parenting on toddlers' and preschoolers' social-emotional cognition have shown the importance of mothering and fathering depending on the kind of positive parenting practice under study (e.g., Jeong et al., 2019; Kerr et al., 2004; Lipscomb et al., 2011; Van Aken et al., 2007; Wittig & Rodriguez, 2019).

The current study therefore aims at describing the prevalence of positive parenting among parents with children between 0-4 years and to examine

the effects of positive parenting practices (support, stimulation, structure and positive discipline) on their social cognition.

Methodology

The study was carried out in the North West and South West Region of Cameroon. The sample was purposefully selected within the cities of Buea and Bamenda. The predictive correlational design is adopted for this study. The sample consisted of 265 parents having children between 1-4 years old. Positive parenting practices were measured using the Comprehensive Early Childhood Parenting Questionnaire and social cognition in early childhood using the ESC-Inventory. Data was analyzed using the SPSS 21 statistical package and inferences were made using the linear regression.

Measures

Positive Parenting practices were measured by the five subscales of the Comprehensive Early Childhood Parenting Questionnaire (CECPAQ; Verhoeven et al., 2017). In this study, the four positive parenting subscales, support (13 items; e.g, “I notice when my child is sad or doesn’t feel good.”), stimulation (13 items; e.g, “I tell my child stories or read books to him/her.”), positive discipline (4 items; e.g, “I explain to my child why certain rules must be followed.”), and structure (12 items; e.g, “When my child misbehaves, I let my child out of a punishment early.” (reversed-coded)), were used. Parents indicated how often they show the described parenting behavior on 6-point scale, ranging from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*always*). For eight items, ratings were made on 6-point scales that were anchored by one effective and one ineffective response to the presented parenting situation. For each subscale, a mean score was created based on the raw scores, with higher scores indicating higher levels of specific parenting practices. The subscales of

parental support, stimulation, positive discipline, and structure all showed good internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alpha’s for mothers/fathers respectively: .88/.88 for Support, .82/.86 for Stimulation, .75/.77 for Structure, and .76/.77 for Positive Discipline (Verhoeven et al. 2017).

Ethical Principles The authors affirm having followed professional ethical guidelines in preparing this work. These guidelines include obtaining informed consent from human participants, maintaining ethical treatment and respect for the rights of human or animal participants, and ensuring the privacy of participants and their data, such as ensuring that individual participants cannot be identified in reported results or from publicly available original or archival data.

Findings

Table 1: Socio-demographic composition of the study sample

No	Demography	Attributes	Frequency(percentages)
1	Parent sex	Female	175 (66%)
		Male	85(32.1%)
		Did not specify	5(1.9%)
		Total	265 (100%)
2	Child's sex	Girl	133(50.2%)
		Boy	128(48.3%)
		Did not specify	4(1.5%)
		Total	265 (100%)
3	Parents age	< 21 years	20 (7.6%)
		21-30 years	110(41.7%)
		31-40 years	80(30.2%)
		41-50 years	32(12.2%)
		>50 years	7(2.8%)
		Did not specify	16(6%)
Total	265(100%)		
4	Children's age (months)	< 13 months	87(32.8%)
		13-24 months	75 (28.4%)
		25-36 months	39(14.8%)
		37- 48 months	63(23.9%)
		Did not specify	1(0.4%)
		Total	265 (100%)
5	Region of Origin	South West	128(48.3%)
		North West	137(51.7%)
		Total	265 (100%)

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic information of the study. Based on the parents' sex, most of the respondents (66%) were female and 32.1% male. On the bases of the children's sex, about 50.2% were girls while 48.3% were boys. Most of the parents (41.7%) involved in the study were between the ages 21-30 years while children around 1 year of age (32.8%) were the most examined. About 51.7% and 48.3% of the respondents are from the North West Region and South West Region respectfully.

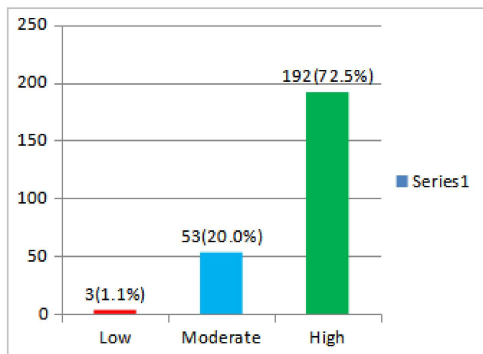


Figure 1: Illustration of level of Support

Figure 1 presents an illustration of the extent to which parents are supportive to the child's needs and demands. Most of the parents (72.5%) are highly supportive to their children's needs and demands. While 20% are moderately supporting and only 1.1% of the parents show low support to their children's needs and demands.

Table 2: Illustration of the level of support (the attributes)

SN	attributes	Low	Moderate	High
1	Sensitivity	9(3.4%)	62(23.4%)	186(70.2%)
2	Responsiveness	8(3.0%)	50(18.9%)	199(75.1%)
3	Affection	10(3.8%)	55(20.8%)	197(74.3%)

Table 2 presents the level of support based on the attributes of support. Most of the parents show a high level of sensitivity (70.2%), Responsiveness (75.1%) and affection (74.3%)

towards their children's needs and demands. Some of the parents show moderate levels of sensitivity (23.4%), Responsiveness (18.9%) and affection (20.8%). However, a few parents show low levels of sensitivity (3.4%), responsiveness (3%) and affection (3.8%) towards their children's needs and demands.

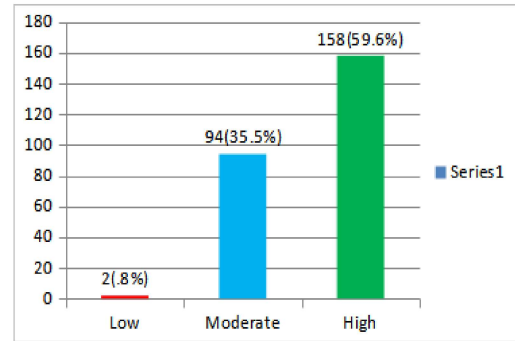


Figure 2: Illustration of the level of Stimulation

Figure 2 presents an illustration of the extent to which parents engage their children in learning activities. About 59.6% of parents highly engage (stimulate) their children in learning activities while about 35.5% of parents moderately engage their children in learning activities. Only about 0.8 parents do not provide stimulation to the children.

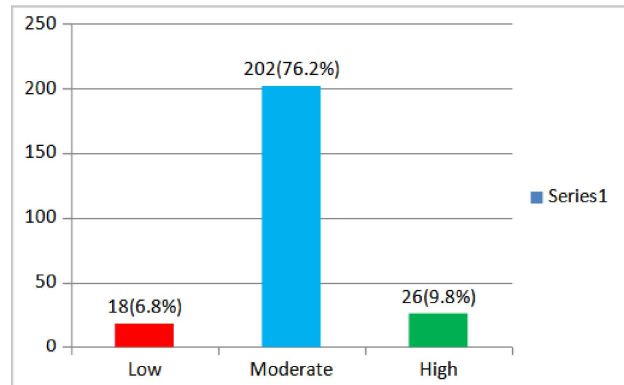


Figure 3 Illustration of the level of Structure

Figure 3 presents an illustration of the extent to which parents provide an organized environment and external structure for the child. Only about 9.8% of parents highly provide an organized environment and external structure for the child while most of the parents (76.2%) moderately

provide such structure. Only about 6.8% of parents are low in terms of providing an organized environment and external structure.

Table 4: Illustration of the level of structure (the attributes)

SN	attributes	Low	Moderate	High
1	Consistency	10(3.8%)	207(78.1%)	44(16.6%)
2	Over reactivity	59(22.3%)	166(62.6%)	34(12.8%)
3	Laxness	68(25.7%)	154(58.1%)	33(12.5%)

Table 4 presents an illustration of the attributes of structure. Most of the parents show a moderate level of consistency (78.1%), overreaction (62.5%) and laxness (58.1%). Some of the parents show low levels of over reactivity (22.3%), and laxness (25.7%) However, a few parents show high levels of consistency (16.6%), over activity (12.8%) and Laxness (12.5%).

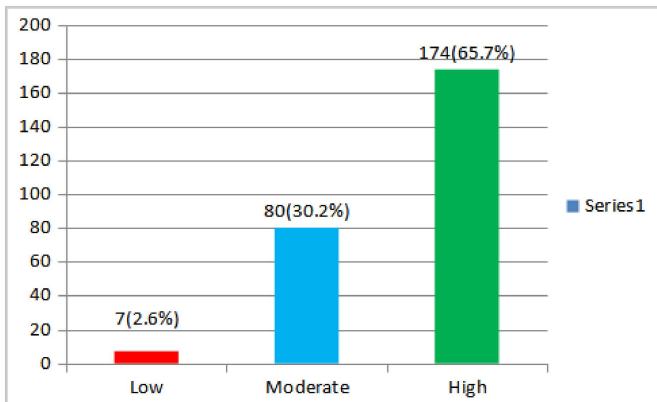


Figure 4 Illustration of the level of Positive discipline

Figure 4 presents a bar chart on the extent to which parents use disciplinary techniques that promote positive child behavior, including induction and praising. Most of the parents (65.7%) score high in terms of the provision of disciplinary techniques that promote positive child behavior, including induction and praising while 30.2% are moderate in the use of positive discipline. Only 2.6% of the parents score low in the use of positive discipline.

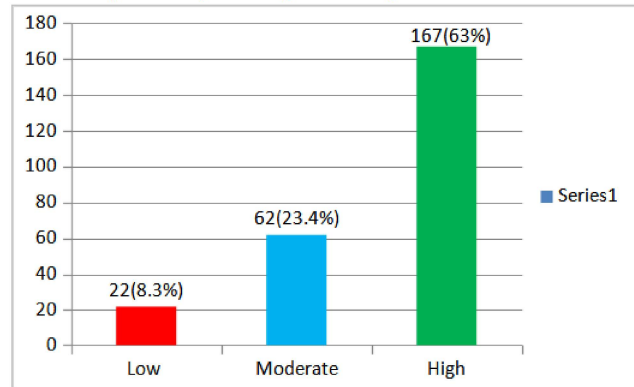


Figure 5 Illustration of the level of Social cognition in early childhood

Figure 5 presents a bar chart on the level of social cognition in early childhood. Most of the parents (63%) rated their children high on social cognition, while 23.4% rated their children moderate on social cognition. Only 8.3% rated their children low on social cognition.

Discussion

The relative importance of positive parenting practices on early childhood social cognition was studied. Specifically, the study addressed the effects of parental support, stimulation, positive discipline, and structure, on early child social-cognition. Results showed that, positive parenting practices (support [R=.403], stimulation [R=.369], structure [R=.438] and positive discipline [R=.348]) enhances social cognition in early childhood in the English regions of Cameroon. There is about 40% increase in chance that positive parenting practices will enhance early social cognition. Findings from this study align with those of several authors (Bai et al. 2021; Roopnarine et al. 2013; Emmers et al. 2021; Lanjekar et al. 2022). The study indicated a high prevalence of positive parenting and early social cognition. Accordingly, parental support practice (extent to which parents are attuned, supportive and acquiescent to the child’s needs and demands) is high among 72.5% parents, moderate among

Inferential Statistics

Table 5 *Linear Regression Analysis Results: Social cognition in early childhood (n=265)*

	b	SE	95% CI	β
SUPPORT	0.170*	0.026	[0.118, 0.222]	0.403
Sensitivity	0.471*	0.082	[0.310, 0.633]	0.362
Responsiveness	0.350*	0.062	[0.228, 0.473]	0.354
Affection	0.483*	0.079	[0.328, 0.638]	0.379
STIMULATION	0.210*	0.036	[0.140, 0.280]	0.369
Activities	0.600*	0.116	[0.372, 0.827]	0.326
Exposure	0.552*	0.107	[0.341, 0.763]	0.326
Toys	0.305*	0.067	[0.173, 0.437]	0.289
STRUCTURE	-0.260*	0.037	[-0.332, -0.187]	-0.438
Consistency	-0.482*	0.156	[-0.788, -0.175]	-0.203
over reactivity	-0.561*	0.081	[-0.720, -0.402]	-0.422
Laxness	-0.405*	0.070	[-0.543, -0.266]	-0.362
POSITIVE DISCIPLINE	0.447*	0.080	[0.289, 0.605]	0.348

Note: CI = confidence interval [lower bound, upper bound]; * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 5 presents the regression analysis results. Support practices significantly affects ($R = .403$, $B = .170$, $p = .000$) social cognition in early childhood; Stimulation practices significantly affects ($R = .369$, $B = .210$, $p = .000$) social cognition in early childhood; Structure significantly affects ($R = .438$, $B = -.260$, $p = .000$) social cognition in early childhood; Positive discipline significantly affects ($R = .348$, $B = .447$, $p = .000$) social cognition in early childhood

20% of parents and low among 1.3% of the parents. Stimulation (extent to which parents engage their child in learning activities) is high among 59.6% of the parents, moderate among 35.5% of parents and low among 0.8% of the parents. Structure (the extent to which parents provide an organized environment and external structure for the child) is moderate among 76.2% of the parents, high among 9.8% of parents and low among 6.8% of the parents. Positive discipline (the extent with which parents use disciplinary techniques that promote positive child behavior, including induction and praising) is high among 65.7% of parents, moderate among 30.2% of parents and low among 2.6% of the parents. Most of the children scored high on early social cognition while 62(23.4%) and 22(8.3%) of the

children scored moderate and low respectively on the early social cognition inventory (parent version).

Conclusions

Good parenting is how parenting meets the children’s needs according to the cultural standards that change from generation to generation. Cognitive development starts in the first year of life and then progresses gradually. Children require positive parenting in painful and different situations. Parenting gives a child the confidence to face crucial, challenging problems. Sensitive parenting and caregiving are required for the child’s maturity and cognitive development. Sensitive parenting is required for the proper cognitive development of a child. Proper

emotional management is required for proper emotional regulation. Positive parenting helps the child face non-social or social problems. Positive parenting is required for early cognitive development, emotional balance, and the maturation of thought. While negative, hostile parenting leads to depression and social and cultural problems. Parenting styles (authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and uninvolved parenting) have a psychological effect on a child's behavior.

Implications for Practice

By studying the effects of positive parenting practices on social cognition in early childhood, the study has advanced knowledge of effective positive parenting practices and the relevance to early childhood cognition in Cameroon. The continuing importance of a supportive and structured environment for child social- cognitive and emotional growth across toddler and preschool ages. These findings point to the significance of addressing and enhancing positive parenting as a quality of preventing or reducing toddlers' and preschoolers' social-emotional difficulties. Specifically, clinicians should focus on educating parents about the importance of being supportive, structured, affectionate, sensitive, responsive and communicative.

Conflict-of-Interest Disclosures

Each author signed a form for disclosure of potential conflicts of interest. No authors reported any financial or other conflicts of interest in relation to the work described.

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