

# **.Perceptions of caregivers regarding factors that perpetuate differential parenting in Katlehong, Johannesburg, South Africa**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Caregivers hold different attitudes and feelings towards their children. Consequently, interactions between caregivers and their children differ from child to child, thereby perpetuating differential parenting. The act of favouring one child over the other is regarded as differential parenting, and it causes animosity between siblings, parents and within the entire family. This study explored the views of caregivers concerning factors that instigate differential parenting in Katlehong, Johannesburg. The study was qualitative in nature and an exploratory design was employed in the study. A snowball sampling technique was utilised and one-on-one interviews were conducted to gather data. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to guide the interviews. Findings indicated that differential parenting is an unequal treatment of children, and that, it is perpetuated by a number of factors including behaviours of children and the socio-economic status of the family. The study proved that differential parenting has more negative effects than positive, as such caregivers need to be equipped with skills on parenting.*

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## Introduction

Virasiri, Yunibhand & Chaiyawat (2011) define parenting as a process of rearing a child or children, in particular the care, love, and guidance given by a parent. Moran, Ghate and van der Merwe (2004) view parenting in relation to nurturance and socialisation as they claim that parenting involves the provision of care directed towards children's physical, emotional and social needs. Parenting involves a sense of responsibility for the parents to provide care and basic needs for the children. Furthermore, Moran et al. (2004) and Bornstein (2002) indicate that parenting is a task where parents prepare their children for the physical, psychosocial and economic situations which they will inevitably experience and are expected to flourish. Parenting can have varying results depending on the manner in which it is carried out by the parents. Research has consistently indicated that different parenting styles utilised by parents yield different results. The results of the parenting style used can be seen in, amongst other things, the child's behaviour, self-esteem, cognitive and social development (Rosli 2014). Therefore, parenting plays a huge role in determining the person that a child will become in future. According to Rauer and Volling (2007) early familial environment has a large influence on the relationships that people form later in their lifetime.

There are a variety of parenting styles which parents use as a way to guide their process of parenting, and these are *authoritarian*, *authoritative* and *permissive* parenting styles (Sarwar 2016). Authoritarian parenting is typified by high levels of control, authoritative parenting is characterised by warmth and reasoning and permissive parenting is characterised by high levels of warmth and low levels of control (Halpenny & Watson 2010). There are instances where parents utilise different parenting styles with each of their children where one child receives warmth and attention

and the other is neglected. This can be referred to as differential parenting. Due to the differing aspects of parenting styles children will differ as well. Parenting and the style of parenting utilised by parents can be influenced by a variety of factors; both personal and environmental. Meunier, Boyle, O'Connor and Jenkins (2013) are in agreement with the idea that personal factors influence a style of parenting as they claim that parent's attitudes towards parenting are largely influenced by the manner in which they were parented.

According to Moremi (2002), parenting styles signify the parents' attitude and behavioural practices towards their children. A significant amount of time is invested on different parenting styles. However, the fact that parents may use different parenting styles when raising their children has not been extensively explored. Differential parenting is described as the extent of positivity or negativity a child receives in comparison to other children in the family (Browne & Jenkins 2012). This negatively affects children and families. According to Boyle, Jenkins, Georgiades, Cairney, Duku and Racine (2004), differential parenting can have negative effects on self-esteem and adjustment for children who view themselves as less important than their sibling. The child receiving negative response from parents may portray low self-esteem and find it difficult to adjust in new environments.

Furthermore, according to Moremi (2002) children raised in different parenting styles adjust differently in the same situation. Also, the relationship between children who receive different forms of parenting can be negatively affected and can lead to sibling rivalry. According to Cramer (2002), parenting is influenced by characteristics of the child, sources of stress and support; such as marital relations, social networks and occupational experiences of parents, and the personality of the parent. While there is an extensive literature on different parenting

styles (Cramer 2002; Moremi 2002; Halpenny & Watson 2010), there would seem to be a paucity of research focussing on differential parenting and factors that lead to parents adopting this parenting style. Therefore, the study was expected to contribute to the existing knowledge about parenting styles. In addition, the study also had the potential to enhance the understanding about the parents' different style of parenting in order to develop programmatic guidelines about parenting.

## **PARENTING: AN OVERVIEW**

There are various ways in which one can be a parent. According to Onyebuchukwu (2014), parenting occurs through giving birth, surrogacy, and fostering, step-parenting and legal custody. Parenting is a private affair which takes place in a family context based on emotional ties that bind family members together (Halpenny & Watson 2010). This definition of parenting contradicts the African proverb- “it takes a village to raise a child”, as the definition explains the process of parenting as private and taking place amongst family members. The African proverb emphasises the engagement of the wider community when parenting; which makes the process less private. Parenting style is defined as parents' attitude towards the child or children that is communicated to the child / children as a result of an emotional climate in which the parents' behaviours are expressed (Moremi 2002). The manner in which the parents view, treat and respond to their children determines the nature of parent-child relationship. Onyebuchukwu (2014) claims that there are three types of parenting styles, namely authoritative, authoritarian and permissive style. Parenting styles convey differences in parents' attitudes towards children enacted in different families.

In authoritative parenting style, parents encourage verbal give-and-take, give reasons behind rules and use power and reason to

achieve objectives (Sawar 2016). Parents who practise authoritative parenting are more interactive with their children as they respond to their children's needs and explain the reasons behind the rules that are put for the children to follow, as a result children become socially responsible and independent (Moremi 2002). This form of parenting is regarded as effective because of the outcome it yields and the impact it has on children. According to Benoit (2009) Black and Coloured children rated their parents as more overprotective and less emotionally warm as compared to White children. The results are different for authoritarian style of parenting where parents are less affectionate and controlling, and children parented using this style tend to lack spontaneity and more likely to be withdrawn and anxious when frustrated (Moremi 2002). Authoritarian parenting style is characterised by parental demandingness and firm control and this style of parenting has been associated more with Black than White families (Benoit 2009). This form of parenting is less effective as the children later portray negative qualities when faced with adversity. Lastly, permissive parenting includes parental warmth and lack of control (Moremi 2002). Sawar (2016) describes permissive parents as those that show low levels of demandingness and high levels of responsiveness. Permissive parenting allows children to regulate their own behaviour, as a result children tend to be rebellious, disobedient and dependent on adults (Moremi 2002), and this parenting style is not always effective.

## **CONCEPTUALISING DIFFERENTIAL PARENTING**

Differential parenting can be conceptualised as the amount of negativity or positivity a child experiences relative to the family average (Browne & Jenkins 2012). Differential parenting is more likely to take place in families characterised by several children, as in situations where there are groups of people, there is bound to be competition. The discomfort, personal insecurity and social anxiety of children increases as they engage in competitive

practices over parental behaviour, experience fear over losing their privileged position in the future or experience poor sibling relationships (Boyle et al. 2004). Positivity towards a child by the parent includes characteristics like warmth, responsiveness, support and stimulation; where negativity towards a child involves characteristics like disapproval, harshness, hostility and punitiveness (Boyle et al. 2004). Extensive literature available on differential parenting does not focus on the factors that perpetuate differential parenting, but the focus is on effects that differential parenting has on children and the families. The effects of differential parenting range from child maladjustment in society to sibling rivalry.

The saying “mothers love their sons but raise their daughters”, which is common among African-American countries suggests that mothers provide warmth and affection for their sons, while having higher expectations, more responsibilities and stricter discipline for their daughters (Varner & Mandara 2013). Conversely, a study conducted by Mascaro, Rentscher, Hackett, Mehl and Rilling (2018) proved that fathers of daughters and fathers of sons react differently to their children's behaviour, emotions and actions as fathers of daughters are more happy when playing with their daughters as compared to fathers of sons. As a result, based on gender, children are treated differently by parents. Culture and religion are viewed as factors that may contribute to the differences in parental treatment between males and females. Through gender socialisation, a process of learning social expectations and attitudes associated with one's sex, males and females differently learn how to behave.

Parents may indirectly express their attitudes when they encourage gender-typed behaviours and activities by providing gender-typed toys or stating and endorsing gender stereotypes (Leaper & Friedman 2007). The study conducted by Varner and Mandara

(2013) shows differences of how treatment received by children based on gender is affected by presence of both parents and living with a single-parent. A father is viewed as a dominant parent. Consequently, his views on child rearing based on gender will influence the mother's way of interacting with children of different genders. This shows that the presence of a second parent affects the manner in which the other parent interacts with the children (Varner & Mandara 2013).

Birth order can be described as the position of a child in a family relative to other sibling (Ng, Mofrad & Uba 2014). It is argued that last born children are often rebels whose views centre on changing the world, while first born children simply stick to the manner in which things are run in the household (Ng et al. 2014). From this, one can deduce that children in different positions in the family behave differently because of their standing in relation to other children in the family. According to Ng et al. (2014), the differences in terms of treatment towards children is largely affected by the needs and signals presented by each child in the family. The younger ones are more dependent on the caregivers for provision of food and other necessities, whereas the older ones are regarded as responsible and capable of taking care of their needs (Ng et al. 2014). Hence, the treatment is not similar. Birth order influences the treatment children receive from their parents. The youngest being the favoured one by the parents (Ng et al. 2014). There are connotations attached to being a first born, for example, being expected to behave like an adult and being responsible for the last born. Parents discipline older children more than they discipline younger children and parental control weakens from first to last born (Ng et al. 2014).

According to Gass (2011), the child's age influences how parents treat their children where the younger children are prone to receive

parent's affection, warmth and involvement more than the older children. This can be attributed to the idea that the younger child is more dependent on the parent and the parent is ought to respond to the child's needs in order to create a positive parent-child relationship. When compared to other children's characteristics, the child's age has also been shown to be the strongest child-specific predictor of maternal differential parenting within families (Gass 2011). Mothers are more likely to be responsive to the youngest child in comparison to older siblings. Similarly, Gutman and Feinstein (2010) claim that parenting behaviours are influenced by the stage of development a child is in as parents are more concerned with child's safety with younger children, more affectionate through kissing and caressing with infants and older children are taken for recreational outings as compared to other children. As such, differential parenting is also influenced by the child's stage of development.

The child's behaviour could also influence the manner in which parents respond, either positively or negatively, to the child's needs. There is paucity of literature proving the cause-effect relationship between the behaviour of the child and the manner in which parents treat and respond to their children. According to Putnam, Sanson and Rothbart (2002) literature that shows the cause-effect relationship between child's behaviour and the parents' response towards the child does not have empirical evidence of such links, therefore it is not fully persuasive.

Previously, the term 'socio-economic status' was viewed as a two-component construct that measured parents' educational achievement and occupational status. However, the term has developed to being viewed as a multi-component construct that put emphasis on parents' educational achievement, occupational status and household income (Gass 2011). The development of



the term allows one to see how parents are able to provide basic necessities for their children. There is a direct relationship between the parents' education and their way of parenting, where education is the strongest predictor of parenting behaviour and parent-child relationship (Gass 2011). This relationship is enhanced by the idea that educated parents are more prone to be aware of different perspectives about parenting, while those who are less educated are exposed only to the traditional way of parenting. Actions, decision-making and beliefs held by people are largely influenced by culture. According to Benoit (2009) parenting styles are culturally-bound. Less exposure to other ways of parenting, besides the cultural way, may be as a consequence of being less educated on other ways of doing things besides the culturally accepted way.

Again, the parents' inability to provide for the children's needs affects the manner in which parents respond to their children. This raises feelings of failure, stress and negativity, leading to these being transmitted to the child through differential parenting or even neglect and child abuse. Differential parenting negatively affects both children receiving positive and negative responses from parents. According to Boyle et al. (2004), differential parenting can have negative effects on self-esteem and adjustment for children who view themselves as less important than their sibling. The child receiving negative response from parents may portray low self-esteem and find it difficult to adjust in new environments. According to Moremi (2002) children raised in different parenting styles adjust differently in the same situation. Also, the relationship between children who receive different forms of parenting can be negatively affected and can lead to sibling rivalry.

## **A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ATTACHMENT STYLES AND DIFFERENTIAL PARENTING**

According to Levy, Ellison, Scott and Bernecker (2011) an attachment style is a person's characteristic ways of relating to intimate caregiving and receiving relationships with either parents, children or romantic partners. In situations where children need attention, support, care and protection-attachment figures respond to such needs accordingly. The first relationship that a child builds is with his primary caregivers. Parents play different roles in their children's life, including being an attachment figure which predicts the child's later social and emotional outcome (Benoit 2004). Hence, the attitude and feelings that parents project during the early stages of development towards the child play a significant role in how the child interacts with other people in future. There are four types of attachment styles, these are, secure, insecure-avoidant, insecure-disorganised and insecure-resistant (Nanu & Nijloveanu 2015).

According to Benoit (2004) sensitive and loving parents who deal with distress in an organised manner are more likely to have a secure attachment style with their children. Parenting that is typified by parental warmth and openness, constant support, monitoring and a degree of autonomy is referred to as positive parenting and is linked with secure attachment style (Nanu & Nijloveanu 2015). A secure attachment style is based on the notion of unconditional love. Whereas, insensitive and rejecting parents who deal with distress in an organised way are more likely to have insecure-avoidant type of attachment style with their children. Insecure-avoidant attachment style is typified by children who avoid or ignore a parent's presence, show limited response when parents are close by and display few strong emotional outbursts (Brotherson 2005). As such, such children resent and are hostile towards their parents. Insensitive and inconsistent parents who deal with distress in an organised manner tend to have an insecure-

resistant attachment style with their children. Moreover, a parent-child relationship typified by insecure-resistant attachment style is characterised by a child who show distress, fail to settle or take comfort when reunited with a parent (Maharik & Oppenheim 2016). On the other hand, parents who give care to their children in an unusual manner and respond to distress in a disorganised manner tend to have an insecure-disorganised attachment style with their children (Benoit 2004). A parent-child relationship typified by insecure-disorganised attachment style is characterised by children who are not predictable in their behaviour, show fear and confusion in the presence of a caregiver and struggle to cope when distressed (Brotherson 2005).

One argues that attachment styles and differential parenting are linked as parents can apply different attachment styles with their children which can lead to different treatment towards children. In differential parenting, parents employ different types of responses to their children's distress, and consequently, children have different types of attachment towards the same caregivers. From the above discussion one can deduce that children who receive positive feedback from parents are more likely to have a secure attachment style with their caregivers, conversely, children who receive negative responses from parents are more likely to either have insecure-avoidant, insecure-resistant and insecure-disorganised attachment styles.

## **PSYCHOSOCIAL STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT AND DIFFERENTIAL PARENTING**

Erick Erickson identified eight stages of psychosocial development of human beings in (Lopiga, Perez & Tugade 2011). The study focused on the first six stages of development outlined by Eric Erikson as individuals interact mostly with their caregivers at these stages. According to Erikson, the person's ability to

successfully overcome the crises brought by each stage leads to successful development of one's personality later in his or her development; hence different stages influence one another (Fleming 2004). Parents react differently to children of different ages; as a result the treatment also differs (Ng et al. 2014). As such, parent's attitude towards children in different stages of development can instigate differential parenting.

The first stage, from infancy to eighteen months, involves basic trust versus basic mistrust where the child learns to trust and mistrust individuals around him or her (Fleming 2004). The child experiences mistrust when his basic needs are not met, such as feeding. Trust and hope develops when the caregivers present characteristics of affection and consistent provision of attention (Fleming 2004). A study conducted by Winston and Chicot (2016) shows that a healthy bond at infancy promotes attachment between mother and child. The mother and other mother figures have an important role to play in the development of trust as they nurture and present feelings of confidence towards the child and themselves. Therefore, the attitude that caregivers present to the child determines whether the child trusts or mistrusts the caregiver. Differential parenting in the first stage of psychosocial development manifests when parents have less human contact with their babies, minimal display of affection and poor response to child's needs (Winston & Chicot 2016). Therefore, younger babies may receive less attention than older children.

The second stage of psychosocial development is autonomy versus shame and doubt starts from eighteen months to three years. According to Erikson, children in this stage are eager to do things on their own; however parents view them as incapable of fulfilling tasks on their own (Fleming 2004). The need for children to have control over the tasks they engage in is followed by shame or doubt

when that activity is not fulfilled (Fleming 2004). It is suggested that caregivers should be patient with child's need to accomplish tasks on his own, however at times the patience can wear thin, consequently, the child becomes at war with the parents (Fleming 2004). In addition, children at this stage are described as irritable, non-compliant and aggressive (Roberts, Curtis, Estabrook, Norton, Davis, Burns, Briggs-Gowan, Peticlerc & Wakschlag 2018). Moreover, parents respond negatively to unwanted behaviour as such disobedient children are more likely to be criticised and receive harsh treatment from parents as compared to children who obey parents (Meunier, Bisceglia & Jenkins 2011). In essence, parents' reaction may be negative so to enforce their position as figures of authority. Children who exhibit disobedience to the caregivers' rules and instructions are more likely to be treated differently than the ones who easily follow the rules.

Initiative versus guilt is the third stage of psychosocial development and its starts from three to five years. According to Erikson children at this stage are locomotive, more active and feel the need to explore their surroundings (Fleming 2004). They explore their surroundings through playing. According to Leong and Bodrova (2005) pretend play teaches children the ability to negotiate and communicate with peers-this form of playing is encouraged by parents. This kind of playing is socially desirable as children learn their roles as boys or girls or what they would like to be in future. However, rough-and-tumble play which includes kicking, chasing, wrestling, grappling (Whitebread 2012) is not encouraged by parents as it is confused with aggressive fighting and children who engage in such play could be punished as compared to those involved in pretend play. Therefore, caregivers are more likely to be strict on children engaging in rough-and-tumble play than those engaging in pretend or symbolic play.

Industry versus inferiority is the fourth stage in Erikson's stages of development. According to Erikson this is the stage where children are in need of recognition by producing things (Fleming 2004). Recognition can be in a form of appraisal and provision of favourite toy or delicacy, through recognising the good work that the child has done, the child feels competent while the failure to do so leads to feelings of inferiority (Fleming 2004). This shows that children need positive responses from their caregivers for their efforts as negative responses negatively affect the way they view themselves. Differential parenting could manifest in this stage in instances where children with cognitive problems, for instance slow learners, get a lot of attention from caregivers as a way to assist the child perform better at complex tasks than the one who perform much better. Therefore, other children in the household may feel that they are not given attention.

The fifth stage is called identity versus role confusion, this stage takes place during adolescence. According to Erikson the basic task in this stage is to separate one's self from parents, especially the same-sex parent and develop an identity of one's own (Fleming 2004). It is clear that the teenager becomes a social being at this stage. Again, the teenager attempts to find out who they really are, as a result parents may not agree with most of the activities that the teenager engages into (Fleming 2004). During the search for identity the teenager engages in negative behaviour, like crime, substance abuse and many others. It is more likely that parents do not encourage such behaviour, as a result rebelling parents' expectation leads to the teenager being treated differently from other obedient children in the household.

Intimacy versus isolation is the sixth stage in Erikson's stages of psychosocial development. Intimacy or closeness is the basic strength of this stage where isolation is considered a crisis

(Fleming 2004). It is at this stage that individuals establish intimate relationships with other people. Differential parenting plays a negative role in how the individual perceives himself. Children who are subject to less positive and more negative treatment, relative to their siblings, exhibit poorer adjustment and relationship quality (Boyle et al. 2004). This suggests that those who experienced differential parenting are more likely to experience isolation. Parenting affects the relationships that one builds with other individuals in future. At this stage, it is rare that one becomes emotionally close to his or her caregivers as one attempts to create relationships with other people.

## **THE STUDY**

The study was qualitative in nature. According to Greenstein, Roberts and Sitas (2003), qualitative research is a broad approach in social research that is based upon the need to understand human and social interaction from the perspective of the insiders and participants in the interaction. The study employed an exploratory design located within a qualitative approach. According to Babbie and Mouton (2001), an exploratory design is normally used when a researcher examines a new interest or when a subject of study itself is new. The study population was made up of eight biological parents for children residing in Katlehong Township, east of Johannesburg. The sample was comprised of four men (fathers) and four women (mothers). These parents were between the ages of 28 and 55 years old with children aged between 5 and 26 years. The researcher chose this age group because parents within this age range usually have children who still live with parents at home. As such, participants could relate to the matter under investigation. The parents needed to be the sole caregivers of these children. The participants were either formally or traditionally married and /or in a partnership. Participants for the study were selected using snowball sampling technique. In this case, the researcher approached one couple who then referred the researcher to other

participants with similar characteristics in Katlehong.

A semi-structured interview schedule was used to address the aim and objectives of the study. Semi-structured interview schedules are flexible and allow the interviewee to share his concerns and views about the researched topic. A pre-test of the research tool was conducted with one couple who possessed the same traits as the research participants to assess its appropriateness. As the interviews were conducted face-to-face, the researcher had the advantage of clarifying confusions that emerged during the interview in instances where participants did not understand questions posed by the researcher. Thematic analysis was utilised to analyse data. Abiding by the ethics is significant when conducting any research with human subjects (Arifin 2018). The researcher was cleared by the University of the Witwatersrand's Non-Medical Ethics Committee. The researcher gave the participants consent forms to sign as a way to show that they agreed to be part of the study. The identity of participants remained anonymous and the information they shared was kept confidential. This was done in line with the argument made by Babbie and Mouton (2001) that research should never injure, embarrass or endanger the life, friendships and jobs of the participants.

## **CAREGIVERS' GENERAL UNDERSTANDING OF DIFFERENTIAL PARENTING**

### **Failure to treat children equally**

Similar views were held about differential parenting where participants viewed it as a bad and unacceptable way of treating and raising children. Participants were certain that treating and responding to children in different ways is not allowed as children need to be equal and the same in the eyes of their parents. Participants proved that the act of raising children differently is unacceptable. Thus, purposive selection with regards to preference



among siblings should be discouraged. Furthermore, participants believed that treating children differently has negative consequences on the child, hence parents should not engage in differential parenting. Moreover, participants associated differential parenting with the inability for parents to make their children feel equal and loved. The narratives of the participants follow:

Participant A: *“Parents need to understand that children will never be the same or do similar things because they are different individuals but that does not mean that parents should treat them differently”*.

Participant D: *“Whenever one child does something it is not recognised and you know when the other child does it, it gets recognised-that is painful and it can break the child”*.

Participant F: *“I do not get why parents choose between their children, you favour one child over the other, and how do you do that because they are both your children”*.

Negative parenting has undesirable implications on the development of emotions and behaviour therefore, children who experienced negative parenting are more likely to be anti-social and aggressive (Boyle et al. 2004). As such, failure to treat children equally has more negative implications than positive.

### **Unconsciously giving love and attention to one child over the other**

Of the eight participants, five indicated that most of the time parents may not be aware of the treatment they give to their children. These participants proved that at some points parents may not be aware that they are favouring one child over the other, hence children should voice their feelings. However, some participants indicated that they were closer to one or some of their

children and not to all of them. This shows that they are conscious about their feelings towards different children in the house. Female participants were conscious of the different relations they had their boy and girl children where girls received an unfair share of their mother's emotional resources while boys were at an advantage. In addition, participants agreed that they love all their children, but the degree of closeness with each one of them varies. Two participants said:

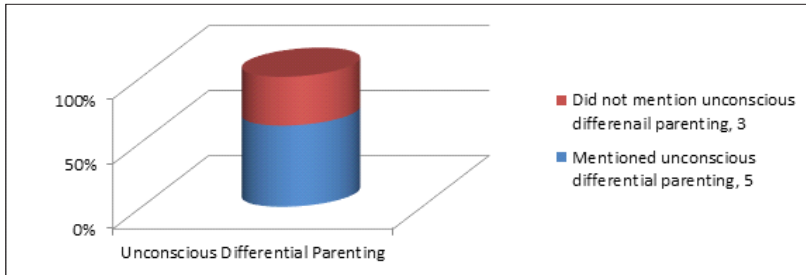
Participant E: *“It would be much better if the parent was doing it unconsciously as compared to treating your children differently on purpose”*.

Participant H: *“I am very close with the girls and my wife is close with the boy”*.

Bargh and Morsella (2008) prove that the Freudian model of unconscious is relevant in that it proves that the unconscious is the primary guiding force over our daily life as some participants have narrated. Moreover, parental love, especially a mothers' love, is associated with lots of affection through hugs and kisses (Manap, Idris, Zahrin & Ali 2015) as such when one child receives more affection than the other, it becomes more obvious that the mother interacts favourably with one child over the other. Therefore, one can say that differential parenting can be associated with mothers than with fathers.

**Figure 1**

**Caregivers' Understanding Of Differential Parenting: Unconsciously Giving Love And Attention To One Child Over The Other**



**Perceived Factors That Perpetuate Differential Parenting**

**The behaviour of the child**

Bicard and Bicard (2012) define behaviour as something that a person does that can be observed, measured and can be repeated. Five participants were consistent in mentioning the behaviour of the child as one of the factors that perpetuate differential parenting. Participants noted that parents respond to the manner in which children behave. Therefore, if the child behaves in an unacceptable manner then parents will respond negatively but when a child behaves in an acceptable manner then the child will receive a positive response. Participants understand that children behave differently, therefore; parents will respond differently to each individual child they give care to. It is important to note that the stage of development that the child is in triggers certain behaviours. This is one element that parents need to be aware of. Most participants mentioned that parents would not just treat their children differently, therefore, the way they treat their children is in response to the individual child's behaviour. The views of the participants are below:

Participant C: *“Parents decide to just give attention and love to the*

*one who is doing good when it is actually the one acting badly who needs support and guidance”.*

*Participant G: “Children who engage in bad behaviour like using drugs will not be treated the same as one who goes to school and listens to her parents”.*

Through data analysis participants failed to identify factors that may trigger certain behaviour in children as failure to understand the cause of behaviour may lead to caregivers responding unfavourably to the children. Moreover, parents are encouraged communicate expectations by describing and explaining expected behaviour to the child from a very young age (DiPierro & Brown 2016) as the child can internalise those expectations and continue to behave as expected.

## **Step-parenting**

Step-parenting can be described as an act of nurturing and raising children when partner(s) make a life together with the children from their previous relationships (Jensen, Shafer & Larson 2014). Findings revealed that differential parenting was also perpetuated by step-parenting, where caregivers' non-biological children were not treated the same as biological children of both parents. The concept of step parenting further indicated significance in that participants viewed it as the cause for fights between parents in which step children are blamed. In addition, participants were confident in that differential parenting is mostly evident in cases where children do not share the same parents. Participants emphasised that stepchildren receive negative responses from their parents, especially the step-parent. A participant expressed:

*Participant D: “My response will be based on my experience as a person who was raised by a step-father and a biological mother, my step siblings attended a better school than us as a result they received better education. We were expected to do more house chores than them even though they did not verbalise that”.*

Guiping (2002) argues that premarital children reduce the stability of the current marriage as they are a source of friction, and consequently, the presence of stepchildren is a major contributor in divorce rates. Hence, stepchildren receive negative treatment from their caregivers. Consequently, some participants advised that mothers who had their children before marriage should leave their children with grandparents or other significant others when they are getting married to a partner who is not the biological parent of the child.

### **Families' socio-economic issues**

Socio-economic issues are challenges and struggles experienced by families and communities in relation to poverty, unemployment, lack of resources and inability to meet daily needs (Taylor & Triegaardt 2018). Such issues negatively affect the functioning of families. Findings showed that financial difficulties faced by parents may have a negative impact on the treatment that caregivers give to their children. Six of the eight participants revealed that financial difficulties have an influence on the way in which parents treat their children. Data analysis revealed that the inability for parents to cater for the needs of all children encourages parents to cater for the needs of their children unequally. As a result, other children may feel rejected. Most importantly, participants viewed parenthood as, amongst other things, the ability to provide for the basic needs of the child. Specifically, participants raised the issues of providing the child with food, shelter, clothes and making sure that the child goes to school. Therefore, financial issues experienced by families hinder parents from accomplishing their basic responsibilities towards their children which leads to parents experiencing emotional distress, irritability, anger and so forth. Views of the participants are narrated below:

Participant B: *“When I buy something for my children I do not buy for all of them at the same time, when I see that one of them needs clothes more than the others I buy for that one because it is difficult*

*to buy for all of them at the same time”.*

*Participant F: “I buy things for my children based on the need or level of importance, so if it is not important it will have to wait”.*

*Participant H: “As a father, it can be very stressful if I cannot provide for my children especially if they need something that is very serious; what more if the parents are jobless?”*

Distressed parents show diminished nurturance and sensitivity towards their children, less affection and loss of privileges for children who are seen as old enough to understand the financial situation at home (Stuchell & Barrett 2010). Even though participants prove that fathers have a role of being providers which entails providing food and clothes for the children, everyone in the family gets affected when the role of the father is not accomplished fully. According to Stuchell and Barrett (2010:38) “financial distress negatively affects marital relationships, satisfaction, parent-child relationships, parenting practices and parenting satisfaction”.

### **Age of the child**

Two participants revealed that the age of the child influences the manner in which parents respond and treat their children. Participants added that younger children are expected to do as they are told by their parents without being given any reasons as to why they are asked to do something. Whereas participants found it easy to communicate with older children with regards to what is expected of him or her by the parents, consequently participants engage in a dialogue with older children. Participants communicate with older children based on the idea that older children are able to make independent and informed decisions on their own based on what their parents conveyed to them. On the other hand, younger children are not capable of making their own decisions as assumed by participants. Therefore, failure to do as expected by parents results in any form of punishment directed

towards the child. It is clear that older children receive a different treatment from the younger children. The views of the participant are narrated below:

*Participant B: “You can never treat an eighteen year old child like a seven year old child as their understanding of things is not the same”.*

Even though participants use the age of the child to justify their differing responses and treatment towards children, theories of development show that children improve on things they learn as they grow up. Davidson and Cardemil (2009) agree with Zolten and Long (2006) as they argue that when communication between parent and child is constrained at a very young age, children tend to become defiant in their teenage years which results in conflict in parent-child relationship.

## **Effects Of Differential Parenting On The Child, Parent-child Relationship And Relationship Between Siblings**

### **Risky behaviour during the adolescent stage**

Hurrelmann and Raithel (2005) define risky behaviour as behaviour with undesirable consequences that go hand in hand with a chance of harm or loss. Examples of such behaviours include tobacco use, alcohol abuse unprotected sex and so forth (Savi-Cakar, Tagay & Ikiz 2015). Findings showed that differential parenting encouraged risky behaviours among children, especially teenagers. Teenagers in particular are said to use drugs, teenage girls would have multiple children and engage in intimate relationships with multiple partners as a result of differential parenting. Participants have identified four risk behaviours, these are; “behaviours that contribute to unintentional injuries and violence, tobacco use, alcohol and other drug use, sexual behaviours that contribute to unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases”. Participants said:

Participant C: *“Girls will go around looking for men to give them the love that they did not get at home from their parents. As a result, they get pregnant several times and have a community of children because boys run away once they hear that their girlfriends are pregnant. Sometimes girls would throw themselves on sugar daddies because they need this love, they are angry”*.

Participant A: *“You would find that boys go around raping women and children or stabbing people and they would go to jail for that but when they are released they repeat the same things because it is one way in which they express their anger”*.

These findings concur with the arguments made by Meunier, et al, (2011) where they state that, differential parenting is associated with a range of challenges in children; especially in adolescents, such issues involve emotional issues, disorderly behaviour and mental issues.

### **Feelings of hatred towards parent(s)**

Hatred is a strong, negative feeling against the object of hatred and the object of hatred is seen as bad, immoral and dangerous (Navarro, Marchena & Menacho 2013). Findings of the study showed that children developed feelings of hatred towards parents because of differential parenting. Participants also argued that this is one way in which children express their anger towards the parents. Furthermore, this shows that children will exhibit neglect which they have observed from their parents as well. Participants associated the effects of differential parenting more with mothers where children are said to be angrier with their mothers than their fathers. Two participants expressed the following:

Participant E: *“Children are expected to assist their parents when they are older with money, food, and take their parents to the doctor when they get sick but because of the way their parents treated them when they were young- children might not help their parents in future”*.



Participant F: *“The relationship between a mother and a child will never be alright, more especially if she is unaware of her actions”*.

Malekpour (2007) argues that among many different relationships people form in their life time-the relationship between a mother and a child is the most important one. Therefore, if a mother-child relationship is poor as a result of differential parenting children exhibit anger and hatred towards the mother. This is based on the belief that mothers are the primary caregivers therefore affection is associated more with them than fathers. He further explains that “the bond between a mother and a child is strengthened as infants see, hear and move in the rhythm with his or her mother's voice in the first minutes and hours of life”(Malekpour 2007). Therefore, differential parenting affects the bond that was created between parents and children.

### **Sibling rivalry and lack of closeness among siblings**

Sibling rivalry can be referred to as a marked change in a child's behaviour that occurs in respond to the birth of a sibling and it manifests through physical or verbal fights, frustration, and persistent demands for attention (Pereira & Lopes 2013). Findings of the study revealed that differential parenting results in hatred and lack of closeness between siblings. Participants noted that younger children who were not treated the same fight a lot. Two participants noted that it is even more difficult to spend time with all children as children would feel like they are not given equal attention by the caregivers. This shows that siblings always compete for attention and resources from their caregivers; as a result they fight as parents cannot offer enough for all at the same time. Other participants proved that the effects of differential parenting on sibling relationships are usually evident during the adolescent stage. This is because at this stage children are aware of the situation around them. However, one participant noted that siblings can respond positively towards differential parenting as it can make them even closer to each other. Closeness in sibling

relationships provides siblings with the affection and support that they may not receive from their parents as a result of differential parenting. The views of the participants are narrated below:

Participant G: *“The older one thinks that the younger one gets attention more than her because I help her with homework and the younger thinks that we love the older one because we bought 'All Star' shoes for her”*.

Participant D: *“So, amongst us as children there was a very good relationship and communication than with our mother. Wherever I am I would think of my sister and not my mother”*.

Multiple studies fail to prove that differential parenting can have a positive influence at times as this kind of parenting is mostly viewed from a negative perspective. Meunier et al, (2016) take the stance of only viewing differential parenting negatively as they argue that differential parenting creates an atmosphere that is divisive. Differential parenting can have both negative and positive effects on sibling relationships. Meunier et al, (2011) argues that causes of sibling rivalry involve, amongst other things differential parenting as children compete for attention from their parents.

### **Communication breakdown**

Communication breakdown involves negative changes in ways in which individuals communicate with each other, at times it involves complete termination of interaction between individuals (Zolten & Long 2006). The findings revealed that differential parenting can have a negative impact on parent-child relationships as all participants mentioned that communication between parents and children gets damaged. It was highlighted that because of differential parenting, some parents and their children may not even communicate with each other once the child moves out of the house.

Participant E: *“I do not believe that children would even want to*

*communicate with their parents, but if they do it would be something meaningless as there is no bond between them anymore”.*

A parent-child relationship that is characterised by minimal interaction and rejection encourages communication breakdown between a parent and a child (Doinita & Nijloneanu 2015). Therefore, due to differential parenting and poor communication between parent and child there would be a complete breakdown of the relationship between parent and child and there would be no bonds between them as well.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The findings of the study revealed that there are several factors that perpetuate differential parenting. In addition, it was indicated that differential parenting has more negative effects than positive; hence it is advisable that parents avoid negative parenting towards one, some or all of their children. It is important that parents are given knowledge and skills about parenting as a way of assisting them to deal with the demands of being parents. In addition, if parents were to deviate from treating their children differently, family environments might become places where relationships between parents and children are nurtured and subsequently become characterised by positivity, and these are important for building stronger interactions with other individuals in society.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Recommendations regarding establishment of community organisations**

- Parents should attend parenting skills sessions offered by Social Workers working for the Department of Social Development and Non-Governmental Organisations to improve ways of parenting their children.

- All workspaces should incorporate programmes that assist staff members in dealing with issues that emerge in families with regards to parenting and many other social issues.
- The scope of School Social Work must be broadened where social workers are made available in all schools to render relevant services to the children, especially those who might be affected by differential parenting.

#### **5.4 Recommendations for future research**

- It is recommended that a multi-province or national study be done on differential parenting in order to allow for the findings to be applicable in other communities.

#### **Acknowledgements**

This research was supported by the Consortium for Advanced Research Training in Africa (CARTA). CARTA is jointly led by the African Population and Health Research Center and the University of the Witwatersrand and funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York (Grant No--B 8606.R02), Sida (Grant No:54100029), the DELTAS Africa Initiative (Grant No: 107768/Z/15/Z). The DELTAS Africa Initiative is an independent funding scheme of the African Academy of Sciences (AAS)'s Alliance for Accelerating Excellence in Science in Africa (AESA) and supported by the New Partnership for Africa's Development Planning and Coordinating Agency (NEPAD Agency) with funding from the Wellcome Trust (UK) and the UK government, "The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the fellow.

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