

Parents who believe their children can have a better future are more likely to read and play with them

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Every day, a small group of women make their way through the community of Sweetwaters, near the South African city of Pietermaritzburg, with bags of toys and books. They work as home

mentors supporting families who signed up for an early childhood development intervention. They swap puzzles and stories and provide resourceful activities for children and caregivers. Even the older siblings often sit and join the stories and games.

[An estimated 40% of homes](#) in South Africa do not have children's books, according to Unicef data. In Sweetwaters, my research team has found (and reports in a forthcoming academic article), that number gets up to 83%.

Two decades ago a non-profit organization, [iThemba](#) Projects, was established to partner with the community of Sweetwaters to provide opportunities for education and mentoring. (The word *ithemba* means "hope" in the predominant local language, isiZulu.)

The organization's child development intervention focuses on getting parents to read to, play with and talk to their children, whether newborn or already in school. The organization believes that if it could change parents' beliefs about children's potential, this would instill hope in a community with the [highest HIV](#) infection rates in the world, [high unemployment](#), and [low access](#) to early childhood education.

iThemba's approach is in line with what's long been established by developmental psychology researchers: that playing and reading time [in early childhood](#) has [long-lasting](#) positive effects.

In a recent [collaborative paper](#) involving my research team from the US and iThemba, we set out to understand how parental beliefs and behaviors changed throughout the intervention and what best explained their progress.

We know that playing and reading are parenting practices that positively influence children throughout their lives. But how can non-profits

support parents in high adversity contexts? How long does it take to change parenting habits? And what are the necessary preconditions?

We used program data from between 2019 and 2021 to answer these questions. We found that length of time in the program before the pandemic influenced how much reading and playing happened during the 2020 COVID lockdown. We also found that parents who believed their children could have a better future than them were more likely to read and play with them.

What the research found

As part of iThemba's program, 157 homes were visited every two weeks by mentors—most of whom live in the community—for up to two years. The mentors tracked caregivers' reading and playing behaviors on every visit and parents reported on their support system and beliefs about children every six months. The program encourages parents to engage in some reading and play behaviors every day.

The best predictors for parental reading and playing were the amount of time people spent in the program, whether they had friends they could depend on, and how hopeful they were about their child's future.

South Africa had [several strict lockdowns](#) during the pandemic. The program paused from March 2020 until November that year, then home visits resumed with masks and outside.

The pandemic disrupted the rhythms of most households and was especially stressful for those with young children. But the families who had been in the program for at least a year before the onset of COVID were most likely to continue reading and playing with their children during the pandemic. Moreover, the parents who reported having people they could count on to help with childcare were more likely to read and

play.

When the program restarted in November those same families were more hopeful than those who had not had much time in the program before the first lockdown. As a psychology researcher who studies [virtuous hope](#), I found this aspect especially striking.

Virtuous hope is morally driven. It is the desire for a better future that serves a common good, rather than hope for personal success or fame; it often involves personal sacrifice and long-term thinking. Even after accounting for program engagement and support systems, parents who believed—and hoped—their children could have a better future were more likely to read and play even when their daily lives were altered by something as disruptive as a global pandemic.

Slow but sustainable

However, neither hopefulness nor childhood development can occur in a vacuum. The work of iThemba Projects in Sweetwaters suggests that a relationally-driven home visitation program is a necessary catalyst. Unlike many other interventions, this one is focused on relationship building. It expects change to happen over two years rather than over the course of a weekend-long seminar. It recognizes that parents and caregivers need support, not just information.

The parenting changes being measured are slow, yet sustainable. Caregivers slowly built habits of playing and reading with their children and reported higher beliefs that these practices were important for child development. Most [existing parenting](#) interventions in low and middle income countries are less than 12 sessions. Psychology is filled with micro-interventions, focusing efforts on brief workshops. However, we typically saw stable family improvements only after six months to one year (25 sessions). This should not be surprising. Forming new habits,

establishing a support system, and building hope take time.

Hope cannot be studied in a vacuum. Nor can it be divorced from the human drive for the betterment of one's community. This kind of hope cannot be quickly cultivated. It is sown through repeated visits, long-term family-community partnerships, and colorful [children's](#) books.

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