

MOTHERS AND FATHERS: FRONT-LINE CRIME FIGHTERS

Parenting Partners Caribbean has sometimes referred to positive parenting as “front-line crime fighting”. Why? Because the **parent-child relationship** is the central engine for the child’s development, and will shape whether that child grows with self-respect and respect for others, with skills to make good decisions, and with the strength to avoid bad ones.

Imagine the child about to be born...he or she has lived for nine months in warm, secure, dark surroundings; sleeping and eating whenever she or he feels like it; stretching and exercising at will (as all mothers-to-be know only too well, and some fathers who get kicked in the night). Then suddenly they struggle out, uncomfortably for all concerned, into bright lights, many hands, noise, and *what else?*

It is the *what else* that will make the very essential difference in the child’s development over the next few years. Whether the child was a planned and wanted child, or a burdensome accident; whether the child is received by two welcoming parents or only one; whether there are others in the infant’s world who will be happy at his or her arrival—these factors already are key elements of the child’s first environment. Why do these factors make such a difference? Because science has proven that the early development of the child’s brain—and thus its entire potential—is a direct result of the interactions within his or her closest world.

A CHILD IS BORN INTO RELATIONSHIPS. The child’s mother, father, other significant caregivers in and outside the family, lay the foundation for all aspects of development—physical, social, emotional, mental, spiritual/moral. While it is of course important that one or more persons see to the child’s hygiene, safety, food and clothing, it is equally important for one or more persons to provide sensory stimulation if full emotional and intellectual development is to take place. Singing, talking, touching, bright colours and items to attract an infant’s attention—these simple things are essential building blocks in the development of many aspects of the infant’s brain.

As an example, we of course all want our children to read; they can hardly succeed in life without being fully literate. Reports from our school system suggest, however, that we have not been very successful in helping many of them learn to read, and WANT to read. Some parents assume this is the school’s job. But waiting for teachers to instill this skill and interest is far too late. Children learn to want to read from adults around them who read, who read to them, and who enjoy reading and storytelling to them in the earliest years. Infants who can’t even hold books can enjoy the pictures and the sound of the adult’s voice; being close to the adult for this of course provides security and the growth of trust. And later on, stories also challenge and stimulate imagination and curiosity, planting the seeds of the child’s creative and problem-solving skills.

How else do these critical relationships shape development? Research internationally and here at home shows how a child’s social and emotional development, and the development of his or her values, are tied absolutely to the relationships with parents and

close caregivers. Emotional health must begin in TRUST—a baby’s trust that his or her basic needs will be met, that when the child wants attention, someone close will respond. Emotional health and confidence grows when children know they are LOVED and VALUED by those closest to them.

Some in our society cheat fathers out of the most valuable experiences of fatherhood by looking to them only for finance, and by not encouraging them to spend time with their young children, playing with them, reading to them, singing to them, building that trust that they will need later to be able to trust others. Daddy’s money will never substitute for those experiences—not for the child and not for him. Remember, fathers can do EVERYTHING mothers can do except breastfeed. Their special role with their children can help ensure a healthy confident child and a less stressful household, which results when all the necessary tasks of child-rearing are shared. This doesn’t mean that only fathers who live with their children can do this; many visiting fathers take their caring roles very seriously. They can and do provide this critical support to the child’s social/emotional health, just as well as a resident dad—if both the mother and the father of the child both understand how important his role is to the child’s development.

Children across Jamaica have told researchers how hurt they are by harsh physical and verbal treatment from their parents and guardians—this is true across classes. Especially when children perceive that they are treated this way unfairly, and/or for reasons they don’t understand; they become angry. Angry children can’t study well, they can’t relate well to others, and they often act out this anger in unacceptable behaviour. This is why we say that positive parenting is on the front line in fighting Jamaica’s spiraling crime rates. Positive parents who create environments—even in volatile communities—in which children feel loved, valued and protected—are the true crime-fighting heroes of our time. Parenting Partners Caribbean salutes those parents who sow those critical positive seeds in their children, despite difficult times and stressful conditions.

This article is submitted by Parenting Partners Caribbean(PPC), an NGO with over 18 years of experience in producing parenting support materials. Manuals and short video dramas can be obtained from PPC for use by facilitators of community- and school-based parenting groups. For more information, e-mail parentingpartners03@yahoo.co.uk or leave a message at (876) 968-2375.