Babies and toddlers are shaped by their experiences – and those experiences are shaped by their caregivers.

Try the following:

- Close your eyes.
- Think back to your own childhood, your earliest memories.
- Who were the people that mattered most to you?
- Can you see their faces, hear their voices, feel their hugs?
Caregivers are crucial for a strong start in first years of life

Studies show that warm, stimulating and responsive caregiving is one of the best predictors that children will do well in school, and go on to become happy and healthy adults. When parents and other caregivers talk, sing, read and play with their babies, they help build a healthy brain that’s wired to learn and interact with others.

In order to do this, parents need the support of communities, governments and the broader society. Quality services thought around families such as health and childcare, social protection and family-friendly city planning are some of the ways to materialize this support. This is particularly true for families experiencing poverty, insecurity, conflict, displacement, pollution, among other adversities that can negatively affect parents’ ability to provide a positive, stable and responsive environment to their babies.

The early years of life – from before birth to five years old – is a window of opportunity to improve lives. Babies’ and toddlers’ brains develop rapidly, and relatively small changes at this young age can have lifelong effects.

Brain building
One million synapses are created in a baby’s brain every second.

The scale of the problem
250 million children under 5 – across almost every country in the world – do not receive the care they need to reach their full potential.

The potential
US$6.40–17.60: estimated return for every USD 1 spent on high-quality early years programmes.

Sources
1 https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-science-of-ecd
2 www.thelancet.com/series/ECD2016
3 www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PII/S0140-6736(11)60889-1/fulltext?code=lancet-site
Coaching and supporting caregivers

Considering the wellbeing of caregivers in coaching programmes makes all the difference.

It may not be familiar to some caregivers to get down on their knees and play with their children – to tell them stories, ask them questions, sing them songs. Others may be stressed or short of time.

Service providers (such as health or community workers) can offer non-judgemental support and tools that encourage positive parenting behaviours for individuals or groups, remotely or in person.

Evidence-based coaching strategies that support caregivers to change their behaviour include the coach carefully listening to and observing the caregiver, and offering opportunities for the caregiver to:

- Observe demonstrations
- Practice activities
- Receive praise and advice
- Solve problems

What is Parents+

Parents+ combines early years coaching for parents and other caregivers with services designed to meet caregivers basic needs.

Considering the wellbeing of caregivers in coaching programmes makes all the difference. Parenting can be tough and stressful. Parental coaching and support services can help parents navigate life’s uneven waters—such as work stress, mental health problems or financial worries. Services, such as high-quality childcare, assistance with housing or counselling can equip parents with support and confidence so they can ensure their children thrive.
The health, wellbeing and behaviours of caregivers have a defining impact on the child, shaping their development, now and in their future. Specific caregiving actions can help give their children a strong start, such as:

- **Healthy feeding practices:**
  Mothers can breastfeed their baby to give them vital nutrients from their first days of life. Other caregivers can support young children to eat balanced and healthy food.

- **Non-violent discipline:**
  When caregivers behave in a calm, controlled and consistent way, children learn the world is a safe and predictable place. Caregivers can establish routines and reinforce positive behaviour through praise.

- **Caregiver-infant play:**
  Interacting back and forth such as by cuddling, eye-contact and gestures helps the child build an emotional bond and develop an understanding of the world.

- **Storytelling, singing and reading:**
  Parents can read and sing with their children, or tell them stories. This builds social and emotional skills, and lays the foundation for concentration, retention and learning letters and sounds.
Scaling support to reach more parents and children

We work with governments, municipalities, the private sector and non-profit organisations to deliver Parents+, incorporating the following approaches:

1. **Integration into existing systems**
   Coaching is more effective when combined with family-focused services such as antenatal and postnatal care, quality childcare, or social services. We draw from global evidence and adapt to local needs, identifying the most appropriate services for coaching parents.

2. **Use of behavioural science**
   We promote rigorous research and the systematic application of behavioural science to increase programme impact and sustainability. Programmes for caregivers often fail to incorporate behavioural principles for instance, by wrongly assuming a lack of information is the main barrier to behaviour change.

3. **Workforce development**
   Frontline workers are instrumental and careful workforce planning is critical. When bundling services, the expectations placed on existing service providers can change. We encourage healthy and fair workforce conditions and promote the professional development and supportive supervision of service providers.

4. **Data-driven decision making**
   We support the development of monitoring systems that produce actionable data for better decision-making. This includes developing new platforms and mechanisms to gather implementation data (i.e. what happens during a home visit) and outcome data (i.e. how children and families are doing), and to aggregate and visualise data to help professionals and policy-makers.

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**Getting Started: Parents+ Guiding Questions**

Integrating caregiver coaching into existing systems involves considering the following questions:

- **Service**
  What platforms already exist for reaching caregivers with coaching at scale? These include existing health and nutrition, social protection, education and childcare, and community services, as well as the opportunity to reach caregivers via mass media or public spaces they frequently visit.

- **Modality**
  What mode of delivery is suitable for the local setting’s culture and needs? Parent coaching can be delivered in various settings such as via group sessions, home visits, or individual counselling at another location such as clinic, or even remotely, supported by digital technology.

- **Dose**
  What dose is required to achieve the change we want to see?

  - **Frequency**: How often are contacts made? Daily, weekly, monthly?
  - **Intensity**: How long is each contact? 10 minutes, 30 minutes, two hours?
  - **Duration**: What length of time do caregivers participate? A week, 6 months, a year?

  There does not need to be a single delivery model, programs will often combine strategies.