NATIONAL PARENTING POLICY EASY READ

Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. January 2017
RATIONALE

A report of the Cabinet Appointed Committee to Examine the Status of the Institution of the Family in Trinidad and Tobago (August, 2004) concluded that “poor parenting skills and practices” were having a detrimental effect on family life in Trinidad and Tobago. The document identified, inter alia, areas of concern regarding parenting practices in Trinidad and Tobago, which included:

- Insufficient and ineffective communication within some families;
- Poor and at times abusive methods of discipline;
- Poor socialization skills in some instances;
- The negative influence of the media / cable television; and
- Changes in community and societal values.

To supplement the insights into parenting approaches in Trinidad and Tobago presented above the Government also utilized additional data sources. These included two (2) consultation reports on the National Parenting Policy and one (1) National Social Worker Consultation. Additionally, UWI Family Development and Children’s Research Centre (FDCRC) and the Islamic Ladies Social and Cultural Association submitted position papers on the National Parenting Policy. Analysis of the aforementioned consultation outcomes, the position papers coupled with data above provide valuable understandings of parenting needs in twenty-first century Trinidad and Tobago.

Several areas of concern pertaining to parenting practices in Trinidad and Tobago have therefore been identified through the national consultations. These include insufficient and ineffective communication within some families; poor and at times abusive methods of discipline; poor socialization skills in some instances; negative media influences; and changes in community and societal values. Moreover, parental strengths were identified, and these encompassed unconditional parental love for their children; skill in money management; drive and determination to survive; adherence to positive traditions; strong religious influence; an eagerness to learn in order to improve self and family and respect; and responsible fathers.

Emanating from these national consultations were clear understandings of what parents wanted in support of their parenting roles. These parental wants included understanding how a child’s brain develops; how to discipline appropriately; building a positive relationship with my child; health care of my child; and balancing work and family life.

Trinidad and Tobago already has legislation that seeks to support parents, both as duty bearers and rights holders, in their parenting roles. The delicate balance that exists between the rights of parents and the rights of the child can give rise to multiple tensions, particularly regarding parental rights and responsibilities and the power of the State to intervene in family life. The supportive approach articulated in the National Parenting Policy will serve to alleviate some of these tensions through the coordination of current parental support interventions and the introduction of additional interventions as necessary.
The Government, through the outcomes of the previous consultations, is mindful that the nation’s parents want access to high quality information, advice and support. Government is also mindful that the levels of information, advice and support will vary between families and so will the modes of delivery of support services. The National Parenting Policy will, therefore, identify the avenues through which these support services will be delivered and expanded.

CONTEXT

The role of parenting is central to child development and family wellbeing. The influence of parents on their children’s development cannot be overstated and makes the support of positive parenting a legitimate concern of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. Parenting is essential for child development and good parenting has been demonstrated to provide a solid underpinning for the cognitive, social and emotional development of children. Moreover, parental influence on a child’s well-being and development is greater than any other single socio-environmental factor. The quality of parental relationships is essential to children’s development, whatever the family form in which the child is located.

A variety of family forms are found in Trinidad and Tobago and exist as nuclear, single parent, extended, blended or step, cohabiting, grandparent-led, foster and group home, adoptive parent, sibling families and co-custody families. As a result of limited national data on some of these family forms, insights into trends are difficult to assemble, however, some trends in shifting family forms can be gleaned. The Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago is mindful that there are particular groups of parents that can be considered vulnerable. These groups, which are not homogenous, include single parents, teenage parents, grandparents as parents, disabled parents and parents of disabled children all potentially face potential challenges in performing their parenting role.

Domestically, the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago has ensured that the rights and responsibilities of parents are clearly articulated in the Children Act 2012 and in the Vision 2030 national development wherein it is stated that the family is “...... the foundation of the society (and) contributes to its growth, development and stability”. The National Parenting Policy therefore represents another vital step in the social transformation process.

At a global level, recognition has been also given to the importance of the parental role. This recognition has been articulated through several international conventions and covenants including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child all of which Trinidad and Tobago is a signatory.

POLICY OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the National Parenting Policy are as follows:

- to ensure the development of effective multi-sectorial provisions to support parental empowerment in the performance of their parenting duties, irrespective of family form, in order to promote the optimal holistic development of children at all stages of growth;
• to improve the linkage between current parent support services in Trinidad and Tobago through the reduction of any existing service provision gaps and minimization of programme overlap to ensure that parenting needs are adequately met;
• to provide parenting education to persons who are not yet parents to ensure that they are equipped with knowledge and skills necessary to make responsible and informed decisions that pertain to becoming parents and parenting;
• to foster greater appreciation and support for responsible and effective parenting in Trinidad and Tobago; and
• to promote inclusive healthy family functioning that contributes to the building of strong communities in Trinidad and Tobago

POLICY PROVISIONS

The Government seeks to uphold the rights of parents and children, through the provision of an extensive range of services and programmes including:

1. Provision of child care
   ▪ Teen mothers returning to education: This group of potentially vulnerable mothers, should be supported in their efforts to gain further qualifications. To this end, subsidized child care at training facilities during classes/lectures will be expanded.
   ▪ Father-friendly child care services: Traditionally, services for parents have generally operated under the gendered assumption that parents equates to mothers. However, the contemporary reality is shifting from this assumption. Accordingly, all Government registered child care providers will be trained in providing father friendly services.
   ▪ Unemployed parents returning to educational and vocational studies: Subsidized child care will be provided for these parents as an incentive to further their qualifications and self-development.
   ▪ Nursery regulations: These regulations will serve to provide assurance to parents that their children will be attending government-approved institutions providing a safe, healthy environment for positive child development.

2. Attending to child health and development needs
   ▪ Consultation with parents with disabilities and parents of children with disabilities: These consultations will serve as an initial stage in the improvement of multiple services to these two potentially vulnerable groups of parents.
   ▪ Extended support for parents of children with disabilities: In some instances the health needs of children with disabilities will require longer term engagement with health services. This engagement can take a toll on parents and therefore additional support services for parents of children with disabilities will be offered in tandem with health services being offered and delivered to children with disabilities.
   ▪ Baby box initiative: A starter pack will be given to low or no income expectant mothers who have accessed medical care prior to their fourth month of pregnancy. The Means
Test of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services will be the measure utilized to determine eligibility.

- Father information pack: Fathers are now able to attend child birth in public hospitals, and the Government will also introduce a father’s information pack for all new fathers.
- Parental leave: As a result of rising female employment rates, the time for child care responsibilities has become more limited. Parental leave will serve to support working parents in the provision of paid leave for the purposes of child care or making arrangements for the child’s welfare.

3. **Financial support for low-income families**

4. **Education**
   - Strengthened age appropriate parenting education in HFLE: As parenting has been associated predominantly with mothers, the sensitization on fathers’ unique and essential role in childcare and development will be introduced and reinforced through a revised HFLE curriculum.
   - Strengthened age appropriate sex and sexuality education (HFLE): With the increasing trend in teen pregnancy, the prevention of this phenomenon is a priority. Age appropriate awareness of sex and sexuality is an essential step in pregnancy reduction which can start in schools.
   - Provision for the continued education of teen mothers: In opposition to the gendered exclusion of teen mothers, the inclusion of teen mothers in education will serve to recognize that support and continued education is necessary for this particularly vulnerable group of mothers.

5. **Housing needs, including repairs for lower income families**

6. **Building positive intra-family relationships**
   - Expanded relationship counselling services: Solid parental relationships bode well for the children in their care. Too often counselling is introduced in the latter stages of relationship decline. The gendered perceptions of counselling often inhibit fathers from attending relationship counselling, despite evident relationship fractures. As such, the promotion and expansion of access to father-friendly counselling service will provide avenues in which potential relationship breakdowns can be addressed at the early stages.
   - Partnership to be forged between Government and University of the West Indies Family Development and Children’s Research Centre in the development of parental support initiatives.
   - Flexible working hours: Some organisations already operate flexible working hours, though this may not be articulated in company policy. However, the introduction of flexible working hours has numerous potential benefits for parents and their families, as well as for the employers themselves. Parents are able to attend to child care needs such as the school run, a child clinic session or parent teacher consultations without having to be absent from work for the whole day, whilst the company is able to retain
valued labour and offer a more favourable work-life balance to current and potential employees.

- **Father support groups:** With the increasing involvement of fathers in their child’s lives, it is important to recognize that fathers may experience unique needs with regard to their parenting roles. The expansion of culturally sensitive father support groups will serve to provide safe non-judgmental spaces in which fathers can express their concerns regarding their parenting roles and through this, sharing experience access the relevant support services.

- **National parenting programme expansion:** The initial pilot of the National Parenting Programme to develop parent self-efficacy will be expanded, offering the opportunity for all parents to attend the programme and establish parental support groups within their communities. Positive behavioural management approaches will be demonstrated through this programme as part of a multi-agency approach to reduce harsh parenting practices.

- **Training in relationship counselling for healthcare staff who work with parents’ pre and post birth:** Healthcare staff work closely with parents, particularly mothers, just prior to and just after the birth of a baby. All relevant healthcare staff will receive relationship counselling training to equip them to support mothers-to-be and new mothers and fathers in the development and maintenance of healthy relationships.

- **Training in positive behaviour management strategies for parents,** to be delivered to trainee pediatricians. Harsh parenting practices including corporal punishment is of limited effectiveness and has potentially harmful unintended effects. Pediatricians’ advice is frequently sought in regard to child discipline and those versed in authoritative parenting approaches could advice accordingly, thereby reducing the practice of harsh parenting practices.

- **Public awareness campaign:** In its efforts to reduce harsh parenting practices, including the use of corporal punishment, a public awareness campaign will be launched with the requisite parallel law reforms.

- **Social Services Directory:** This directory will provide a comprehensive listing of social services delivered by the Government, civil society and the private sector.

### 7. Skills training

### 8. Safe non-judgmental spaces to voice concerns

**Policy Implementation Mechanisms**

The delivery of current parenting support services occurs through multiple agencies ranging from Government Ministries through to civil society organizations and the private sector. The proposed expansion of parenting support initiatives will continue through a range of agencies and organisations. Parenting services, as a result of their eclectic nature are accessed in a variety of ways. Some parenting support, including medical and educational services, is accessed as a result of child development needs and these services are often accessed directly,
and this will continue. Other parenting services are accessed through referral, for example birth registration through TTconnect. However, for certain parenting support services, such as relationship counselling, parents will need to be informed about the existence and location of the services.

1. **National Family Services Division Service Centres**

Service Centres will be established in every district to facilitate increasing awareness of the availability of parent support services and access to such services. If a parenting support service cannot be accessed directly at a Service Centre, an established referral system will allow parents’ access to the service most appropriate to their identified needs. To promote national awareness of parenting support services and the function of the Service Centres, a Social Services Directory will be published and updated on an annual basis. Copies of the directory will be made available to the general public through Social Sector Ministries, TTConnect and the Service Centres.

Some parenting support services will be accessed directly through the Centres. However, the majority of parenting support services will be accessed through an onward referral process. Accordingly, the Service Centre will provide parents with seamless service access through offering the following:

- Advice on the appropriate services required for specific parents support needs
- Advice on where the service can be accessed
- Advice on when the service can be accessed
- Advice on how the parent can access the service
- Supporting the parent(s) in accessing the appropriate service

2. **Multi-Sectoral Steering Committee**

The implementation of the National Parenting Policy will be driven and monitored by a multi-sectoral steering committee. This Committee will include representations from relevant Government Ministries, Civil Society Organisations, UNFPA, private sector and parents. Utilising the objectives of the National Parenting Policy, the Committee will identify indicators of progress of the implementation of the parenting policy, regularly monitor implementation and publish annual progress reports.

**Monitoring and Evaluation**

Development occurs through behaviour change, either between persons or between persons and their environment. A monitoring and evaluation approach that is sensitive to behaviour change, such as a developmental evaluation approach (Patten, 2002) would be required to assess the social impacts of National Parenting Policy implementation. The Parenting Centres will be ideally positioned to support this approach, given their ability to gather local data related to demand for and access to parent support service, among other critical data. Based on such data, a clearer perspective of local parenting needs and the requisite support services will
emerge, and as a consequence the appropriate development and targeting of services can be affected to ensure equity in parenting support service delivery.