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Parenting programmes that enhance family connectedness in families with children with behavioural problems: A scoping review

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ABSTRACT

Family connectedness is a critical protective factor in child development. Parenting programmes provide a means of enhancing relational quality and reducing behaviour-related challenges, particularly in African and low-resource settings. This scoping review maps the existing literature on parenting programmes that enhance family connectedness in families with children with behavioural problems (FCBP). The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) guidelines and included qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies published in English between 2010 and 2020. Major electronic databases were searched and supplemented by grey literature searches, reference list screening, and African-focused sources such as African Journals Online (AJOL). A total of 43 studies were identified. The review found that few studies explicitly measured family connectedness as a primary outcome. However, parenting programmes commonly incorporated components such as parental emotional awareness, communication, positive parenting, parental monitoring, and discipline. These elements were associated with improved parent-child bonding, reduced parental stress, and decreases in children's behavioural difficulties. Both in-person and online delivery formats demonstrated positive outcomes. Nevertheless, gaps remain regarding fathers' engagement and contextual and cultural challenges. The findings highlight the importance of culturally grounded, relationship-based parenting programmes for social work practice, policy, and future research.

KEY TERMS: family connectedness, families with children with behavioural problems (FCBP), parenting programmes, South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Family relationships characterised by emotional support, shared caregiving, positive communication, and collective responsibility contribute to children's emotional and behavioural development. Within this context, family connectedness has become an important protective factor in child development and family well-being. Behavioural problems in children may disrupt these family relationships, weaken communication, and negatively affect parenting practices and overall family functioning. Parenting programmes have been implemented to address behavioural difficulties and strengthen parenting practices. However, less attention has been given to how these interventions enhance family connectedness as a relational outcome. This scoping review mapped parenting programmes that enhance family connectedness in families with children with behavioural problems (FCBP) using a PRISMA-ScR-guided methodology. The article presents the theoretical framework, methodology, results, discussion, and implications for social work practice.

BACKGROUND

Family connectedness is essential for effective family functioning and positive child development. The African Charter on Human and People's Rights affirms that the family is fundamental to all aspects of child development, shaping identity, belonging, support, and connectedness (Makiwane & Kaunda, 2018). Family connectedness promotes family well-being through warmth, open communication, mutual support, and consistent involvement (Woodman & McArthur, 2018). Families with strong connectedness enjoy spending time together, establish shared routines, and approach life's challenges with resilience (Liu & Merritt, 2021). Despite the significance of family connectedness, many South African families continue to grapple with the enduring effects of apartheid, reflected in poverty, social inequality, and community violence. These challenges erode intergenerational bonds and disrupt traditional caregiving roles (Cluver et al., 2020).

Socio-historical factors, single parenting, parental conflict, substance abuse, and poverty weaken the parent-child relationship and expose families to emotional fragmentation, family disconnection, and increased behavioural problems in children (Pannilage, 2017). Such behavioural problems increase parental stress, disrupt communication, and erode the parent-child relationships, creating a cycle of disconnection and dysfunction within the family unit (Ribas et al., 2024). Parenting practices in these contexts play a role in shaping children's behaviour. Harsh discipline, inadequate supervision, limited parental warmth, and inconsistent routines contribute to the emergence and persistence of behavioural problems (Sangawi et al., 2015). Responsive parenting and strong family bonds foster resilience and prosocial behaviour (Awiszus et al., 2022). Socio-economic pressures, intergenerational trauma, and limited access to parenting resources often constrain families' ability to sustain healthy connectedness (Tomlinson et al., 2022). Parenting programmes have been identified as valuable interventions that support parents in becoming more attuned to their children, improving communication, and expressing support towards them.

South African policy recognises the importance of family support in child development, as reflected in the White Paper on Families (Department of Social Development, 2012) and the National Development Plan (Stiglingh-Van Wyk, 2020). Parenting programmes such as Parenting for Lifelong Health (PLH) have been locally adapted to address violence prevention, discipline, and child development (Cluver et al., 2020). However, greater clarity is needed on how these programmes foster family connectedness among FCBP. This ScR addresses this gap by mapping parenting programmes that promote family connectedness in FCBP. The focus extends beyond behavioural outcomes to the nurturing of positive family relationships, including communication, emotional responsiveness, mutual respect, and shared time. Emphasis is placed on culturally relevant interventions, especially those implemented in African and other low-resource settings.

Conceptualizing family connectedness

Family connectedness refers to the quality of emotional and relational bonds that link family members through trust, open communication, and mutual support. It reflects the extent to which parents and children experience a sense of belonging, emotional closeness, and responsiveness within the family system. Scholars describe family connectedness as a multidimensional construct that includes communication between family members, emotional bonding, and responsive caregiving practices (Woodman & McArthur, 2018; Liu & Merritt, 2021). These relational processes create a supportive environment in which children feel valued and secure promoting healthy emotional and behavioural development. In this review, family connectedness is understood as a relational construct reflected through key dimensions frequently addressed in parenting programmes, including parent-child communication, emotional bonding, and parental responsiveness.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study initially drew on Attachment Theory and Social Learning Theory to explain emotional bonding, parent–child interaction, and behavioural learning processes associated with family connectedness. Recognising that family functioning and caregiving within many African contexts are shaped by interconnected family systems, communal caregiving, kinship networks, and collective responsibility, the theoretical framework was expanded to integrate Ubuntu philosophy and African Family Systems Theory. This integration provided greater contextual and cultural relevance by extending the focus beyond the individual parent–child dyad to broader relational, familial, and community-based systems that influence family connectedness. Attachment Theory and Social Learning Theory help explain parent–child relationships, emotional bonding, behavioural learning, and interactional processes commonly targeted in parenting programmes. Attachment Theory emphasises caregiver responsiveness, warmth, and emotional availability in fostering secure emotional bonds and children’s socio-emotional development (Bowlby, 1992).

Social Learning Theory explains how children acquire behaviours through observation, modelling, reinforcement, and interactions with caregivers (Bandura, 1977). Both these theories are grounded largely in Western individualist assumptions and therefore only partially account for family life in African contexts. To address this limitation, the Ubuntu philosophy and African Family Systems Theory extended the understanding beyond the individual parent–child dyad to include kinship networks, communal caregiving, interdependence, and collective responsibility. Ubuntu, “*I am because we are,*” emphasises relational identity, mutual care, compassion, and social interconnectedness (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013; Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020). African Family Systems Theory recognises that parenting and child development are embedded within multigenerational and communal systems in which caregiving responsibilities are shared among parents, grandparents, siblings, extended family members, elders, and wider community networks (Madhavan, & Gross, 2013; Ringson, & Sande, 2020, Mkhize, 2006). These systems contribute significantly to children’s emotional, social, and behavioural development (Makiwane & Kaunda, 2018).

African-centred perspectives foreground the socio-historical and structural realities that shape parenting and family functioning, including poverty, migration, violence, and the effects of colonialism and apartheid (Olabiyi et al, 2025). Communal caregiving and extended family support operate as important protective mechanisms that strengthen resilience and connectedness within families in many low resource African contexts (Reid et al 2025). Therefore, in this study family connectedness is conceptualised as an emotional and relational process shaped by belonging, shared caregiving, kinship support, reciprocity, and social cohesion. as important protective mechanisms that strengthen resilience and connectedness within FCBP (Reid et al 2025). By integrating Attachment Theory, Social Learning Theory, Ubuntu philosophy, and African Family Systems Theory, this study adopts an African-centred relational framework that recognizes both the micro-level processes of emotional bonding and behaviour change and the broader familial, cultural, and community systems that shape family connectedness.

METHODOLOGY

This scoping review (ScR) aimed to explore and map existing evidence on parenting programmes that enhance family connectedness in FCBP. The review was guided by the methodological framework proposed by Arksey and O’Malley (2005), further refined by Levac et al. (2010), and reported in accordance with the PRISMA-ScR (Tricco et al., 2018). In addition, the review was informed by African-centred social work and relational perspectives that highlight communal caregiving, interconnectedness, relational accountability, and the role of family and community systems in shaping child development and well-being (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013; Mkhize, 2006). These perspectives guided the interpretation and synthesis of findings by foregrounding relational processes within families and recognising the importance of extended family systems and communal caregiving practices within African contexts (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020).

The review addressed the following research question: *What parenting programmes enhance family connectedness in families with children with behavioural problems?* The PCC (Population, Concept, Context) framework (Pollock et al., 2023) was used to define the scope of the review. The population included FCBP aged 0–18 years excluding those with severe clinical diagnoses or serious psychiatric conditions. The concept focused on parenting programmes that enhance family connectedness, including communication, emotional bonding, parental responsiveness, and family routines. The context included community-based settings across diverse geographical regions, with relevance to African family systems characterised by relational interdependence, communal caregiving, and socio-economic adversity (Makiwane & Kaunda, 2018).

A comprehensive search strategy was implemented across multiple electronic databases, including Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost, PubMed, ScienceDirect, E-Journals, SAGE Journals, PsycArticles, and Scopus. The search was supplemented by manual reference list screening, grey literature searches, and African-focused sources such as African Journals Online (AJOL) to identify additional contextually relevant studies. Studies published in English between 2010 and 2020 were included. The study selection process was conducted in two stages. First, titles and abstracts were screened against predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to identify

potentially relevant studies. Second, full-text articles were assessed to confirm eligibility. Studies were excluded if they did not describe parenting programmes related to family connectedness in FCBP focused on severe clinical diagnoses or were published in languages other than English.

The search yielded a total of 8,457 records, including 8,452 identified through database searching and five additional records from other sources. After removing duplicates, 8,117 records remained and were screened. Of these, 8,017 records were excluded based on title and abstract screening. A total of 100 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility, of which 57 were excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria with 43 studies included in the review.

Data were extracted using a structured charting form that captured study characteristics, programme descriptions, components related to family connectedness, and reported outcomes. The extracted data were analysed thematically, and a narrative synthesis was conducted to identify recurring patterns, key programme components, and mechanisms through which parenting programmes contribute to strengthening family connectedness. The synthesis was interpreted through an African-centred relational lens that emphasises interconnectedness, communal caregiving, kinship support, resilience, and the socio-cultural contexts shaping family relationships and child development (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013; Makiwane & Kaunda, 2018).

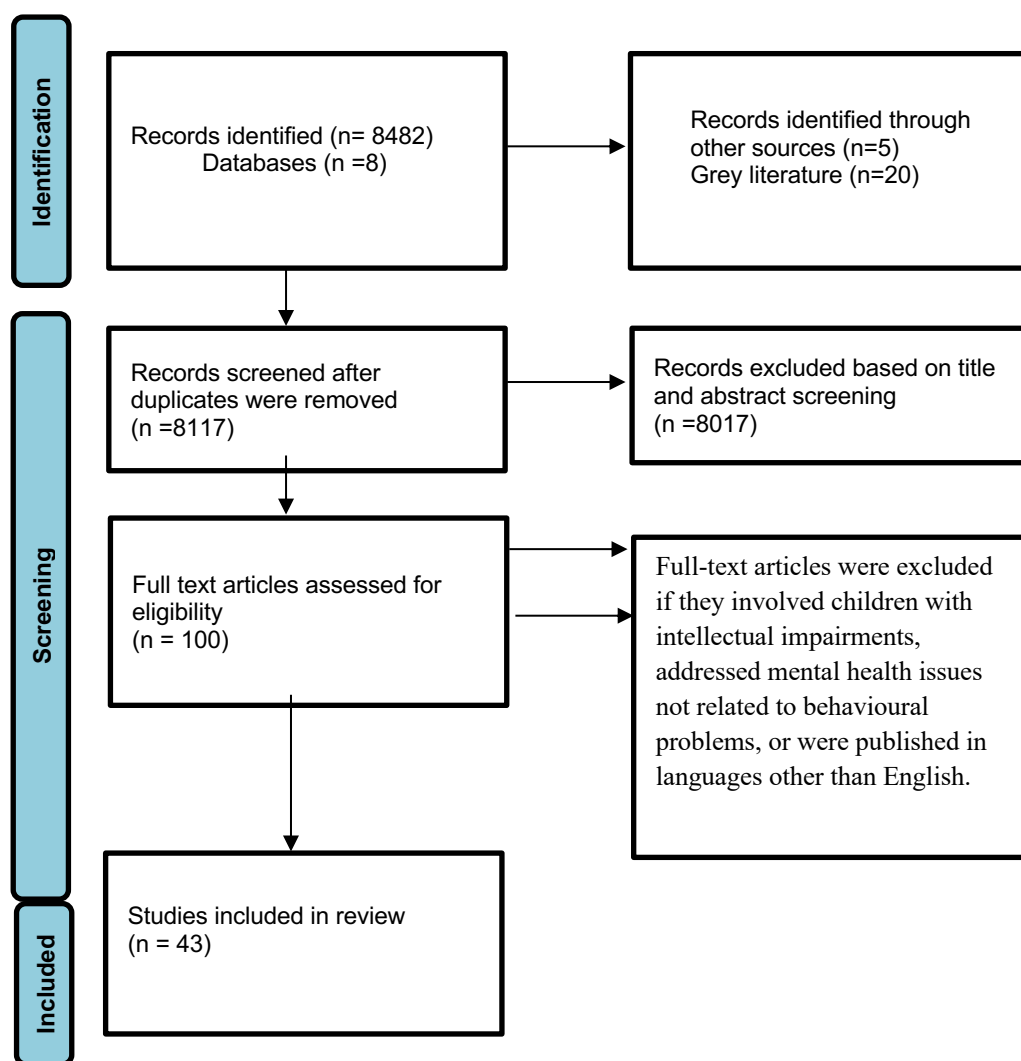


FIGURE 1: PRISMA flow diagram for the ScR process

RESULTS

This ScR included 43 studies evaluating parenting programmes designed to enhance family connectedness in

FCBP. A range of study designs was represented, including randomised controlled trials ($n = 22$), quasi-experimental designs ($n = 9$), pilot or feasibility studies ($n = 6$), qualitative studies ($n = 5$), and one mixed-methods study ($n = 1$).

Several parenting programmes implemented within African and low-resource contexts focused on strengthening parent-child relationships, communication, emotional responsiveness, and non-violent parenting practices. Parenting for Lifelong Health (PLH) and Sinovuyo programmes implemented in South Africa emphasised relationship-building, positive parenting, emotion support, and contextual adaptation for families experiencing poverty, violence, and social adversity (Cluver et al., 2017; Lachman et al., 2018; Shenderovich et al., 2019; Ward et al., 2020). Community-based and culturally adapted parenting interventions were also implemented in countries such as Turkey, Iran, Chile, and India (Arkan et al., 2020; Edrissi et al., 2019; Errázuriz et al., 2016; Arun & Kaur, 2020). The review additionally identified widely disseminated evidence-based parenting programmes, including Triple P – Positive Parenting Programme, The Incredible Years (IY), Parent–Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT), Parent Management Training – Oregon Model (PMTO), Strengthening Families Programme, and Tuning in to Kids (TIK)/Turning into Teens (TINT). Most programmes incorporated elements related to family connectedness. However, only a few measured connectedness components such as parent–child communication, emotional support, and positive interactions as primary outcomes. These relational elements were nonetheless associated with improvements in parenting skills, parent–child relationships, emotional responsiveness, and child behaviour. Family connectedness was generally embedded within programme design rather than being targeted explicitly. This highlights a significant gap, as the lack of direct focus limits both the systematic evaluation and full realisation of family connectedness as a protective factor for children with behavioural problems.

Characteristics of included studies

The included studies were conducted across diverse geographical and socio-economic contexts, including South Africa, Turkey, Iran, Chile, India, the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Sweden. Several interventions were implemented within low-resource and vulnerable communities affected by poverty, violence, and limited access to support services, particularly Parenting for Lifelong Health (PLH) and Sinovuyo programmes in South Africa (Cluver et al., 2017; Lachman et al., 2018; Ward et al., 2020). Most programmes targeted children in early and middle childhood, although some extended into adolescence. A smaller number of studies focused on vulnerable populations, including families experiencing socio-economic adversity and children in foster care through programmes such as The Incredible Years (IY) and Parent–Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT) (Bywater et al., 2011; Conn et al., 2018).

Programme settings and delivery formats

Parenting programmes were delivered across diverse community and family-based settings, including community centres, schools, homes, preschools, clinics, and, increasingly, online or digital platforms. Most interventions used group-based delivery formats ($n = 33$), while others incorporated home visits ($n = 4$), online self-directed modules ($n = 3$), or hybrid approaches ($n = 3$). Community-based and home-based approaches were particularly important within low-resource contexts, where programmes such as Parenting for Lifelong Health (PLH) emphasised accessibility, relational support, and caregiver engagement within families and communities (Ward et al., 2020). Online and parent–child dyadic approaches, including Triple P Online Brief Programme and Parent–Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT), further demonstrated flexibility in supporting positive parent–child relationships across diverse contexts (Baker et al., 2017; Fleming et al., 2020; Kimonis et al., 2014).

Components addressing family connectedness

Key components enhancing family connectedness were often embedded within broader parenting programmes. The most frequently emphasised element was parent–child communication ($n = 37$), which focused on verbal and emotional expression, active listening, emotional support, and validating children’s feelings. In South African interventions such as Parenting for Lifelong Health (PLH) and Sinovuyo, communication and positive parent–child interaction were strengthened through relationship-building, emotional responsiveness, and non-violent parenting practices (Cluver et al., 2017; Lachman et al., 2018; Ward et al., 2020). International programmes such as Tuning in to Teens (TINT) further highlighted emotion coaching to strengthen communication between parents and adolescents (Kehoe et al., 2020), while The Incredible Years (IY) employed guided role-play and group discussions to foster parent–child dialogue.

Emotional bonding and parental responsiveness promoted warmth, empathy, and secure attachment, with mindfulness-based approaches such as the Mindfulness-Enhanced Strengthening Families Programme (MSFP) improving relational quality (Coatsworth et al., 2015). Emotion regulation and coaching ($n = 22$), as reflected in

programmes such as Tuning in to Kids (TIK) (Wilson et al., 2012) and Triple P, improved parental responsiveness and reduced dismissive behaviours. Non-violent discipline and collaborative problem-solving ($n = 27$) proved particularly impactful in low-resource settings, with programmes such as PLH and PMTO reducing maltreatment risk and strengthening family connectedness (Cluver et al., 2017; Forgatch & Kjøbli, 2016). Although less common, co-parenting and couple-focused strategies enhanced overall family functioning and cohesion (Zemp et al., 2016).

Outcomes related to behaviour and family functioning

Most programmes ($n = 38$) reported positive outcomes related to parenting practices, family relationships, and child behaviour, including reductions in externalising behaviours such as aggression and defiance. In interventions such as Parenting for Lifelong Health (PLH) and Sinovuyo, improvements were observed in positive parenting, emotional responsiveness, non-violent discipline, and parent-child relationships within families experiencing socio-economic adversity (Cluver et al., 2017; Lachman et al., 2018; Ward et al., 2020). International programmes such as PMTO similarly demonstrated reductions in behavioural problems and improvements in family functioning (Forgatch & Kjøbli, 2016).

Enhanced parental self-efficacy, reduced parenting stress, and strengthened emotional connections were reported across 35 studies, including programmes implemented within child welfare and vulnerable family contexts (McDaniel et al., 2011). Several studies further reported improvements in parent-child bonding, trust, emotional responsiveness, and family cohesion, all of which contributed to stronger family connectedness (Homem et al., 2015). Improvements in broader family functioning and cohesion were noted in a smaller subset of studies. For example, Errázuriz et al. (2016) in Chile reported enhanced family dynamics, although challenges remained in adapting discipline strategies to local cultural contexts.

Contextual and cultural adaptation

Several studies reported adaptations of parenting programmes to address specific cultural and contextual realities, particularly within low-resource settings. Examples include Parenting for Lifelong Health (PLH) interventions implemented in South Africa and Chile, which incorporated culturally relevant language, contextual examples, flexible facilitation approaches, and community-based delivery strategies (Cluver et al., 2017; Ward et al., 2020; Errázuriz et al., 2016). These adaptations aimed to strengthen programme relevance within communities affected by poverty, violence, and social adversity. By contrast, many studies conducted in high-income settings reported limited cultural tailoring, highlighting a gap in responsiveness to diverse family and community contexts.

DISCUSSION

This scoping review found that parenting programmes strengthen family connectedness primarily through relational processes that improve parent-child communication, emotional responsiveness, supportive interactions, and non-violent parenting practices. Across interventions such as Triple P, The Incredible Years, Tuning in to Kids, and Parenting for Lifelong Health, programme components including emotion coaching, praise, problem-solving, and positive reinforcement associated with stronger parent-child relationships and reductions in behavioural difficulties (Cluver et al., 2017; Forgatch & Kjøbli, 2016; Lachman et al., 2018; Ward et al., 2020). The findings suggest that parenting programmes influence child behavioural outcomes not only through behaviour management strategies, but also through strengthening the relational processes underlying family connectedness.

The integrated theoretical framework utilized within the study broadened the understanding of how parenting programs enhance family connectedness in FCBP. Parenting practices characterised by warmth, emotional responsiveness, communication, praise, and positive reinforcement appeared to strengthen family connectedness in FCBP by improving parent-child relationships, supportive interactions, and behavioural outcomes. These relational processes reflect attachment-based and social learning mechanisms associated with emotional regulation, behavioural adjustment, and positive parent-child interaction (Bandura, 1977; Bowlby, 1992). Within African contexts, the emphasis on communication, collaborative problem-solving, emotional support, and non-violent parenting further reflects Ubuntu values of relational harmony, interconnectedness, and collective wellbeing (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013). The findings also highlight the importance of broader caregiving relationships within African family systems, where grandparents, extended family members, and kinship networks frequently contribute to caregiving, behavioural support, and the strengthening of family connectedness (Makiwane & Kaunda, 2018). Programmes such as Parenting for Lifelong Health and the Sinovuyo Caring Families Programme demonstrate how parenting interventions can be adapted within low-resource contexts while strengthening relational processes central to family connectedness in FCBP (Cluver et al., 2017; Lachman et al., 2018; Ward et al., 2020). These findings suggest that parenting interventions implemented within African settings may benefit from greater inclusion of extended family and communal caregiving systems within programme design and delivery.

An important finding of the review is that family connectedness was seldom measured explicitly as a primary programme outcome. Although many interventions promoted emotional bonding, communication, and supportive family relationships, programme effectiveness was more commonly assessed through reductions in behavioural problems, harsh parenting, and parental stress. Consequently, family connectedness frequently remained an implicit rather than directly evaluated construct (Woodman & McArthur, 2018; Liu & Merritt, 2021). This represents an important gap within parenting programme research, particularly within African relational perspectives where kinship support, belonging, and communal wellbeing are central to family functioning. Overall, the review suggests that parenting programmes may strengthen family connectedness by improving communication, emotional responsiveness, positive parenting practices, and relational functioning within FCBP.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Parenting programmes should incorporate culturally relevant and contextually grounded strategies that respond to structural challenges and utilise existing family and community resources to strengthen family connectedness. Within African contexts, policymakers and practitioners should prioritise adapting evidence-based interventions to local socio-cultural realities, including communal caregiving systems, kinship support networks, and collective approaches to child-rearing reflected in Ubuntu philosophy and African Family Systems Theory (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013). Integrating parenting programmes within broader social support systems may enhance family connectedness in families with children with behavioural problems (FCBP), improve child outcomes, and strengthen resilience within contexts affected by poverty, violence, and social adversity (Dawes & Bray, 2010; Richter et al., 2012).

In resource-constrained settings, the successful implementation of parenting programmes often requires flexible, accessible, and community-based delivery approaches. Integrating parenting interventions into existing community services such as schools, early childhood centres, clinics, faith-based organisations, and community structures may improve accessibility for families facing economic or logistical barriers to participation. Community-based approaches are particularly consistent with African relational perspectives that emphasise collective responsibility, social interconnectedness, and shared caregiving within families and communities (Mkhize, 2006). Training community facilitators and social workers to deliver group-based parenting programmes may further strengthen programme sustainability, cultural relevance, and community ownership. Such approaches may allow parenting interventions to be adapted to local socio-cultural contexts while maintaining the relational processes that promote emotional bonding, communication, parental responsiveness, and family connectedness.

LIMITATIONS AND GAPS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This ScR is constrained by the predominance of studies from Western, English-language sources, which may have excluded relevant evidence from non-English-speaking and underrepresented regions, particularly within Africa and other low-resource contexts. Few studies included long-term follow-up, thereby limiting understanding of the sustainability of family connectedness and behavioural improvements over time. Although communication, emotional bonding, and parental responsiveness were frequently addressed, fewer programmes explicitly focused on broader relational processes such as family routines, extended family involvement, communal caregiving, and family cohesion—dimensions that are particularly significant within African relational and collectivist contexts informed by Ubuntu and African Family Systems perspectives. In addition, most interventions were originally developed in high-income settings, raising concerns regarding their cultural relevance and contextual applicability within environments characterised by poverty, violence, inequality, and limited access to support services.

Future research should therefore prioritise the development and evaluation of culturally grounded parenting programmes within African and other under-resourced settings. Greater attention should be given to the longitudinal impact of family connectedness components, the mechanisms through which culturally adapted interventions strengthen relational functioning, and the role of extended family systems, kinship networks, and communal caregiving structures in supporting child and family wellbeing. Further research is also needed on integrated intervention models that combine parenting support with economic strengthening, psychosocial support, and community-based resources for families experiencing multiple adversities.

CONCLUSION

This ScR synthesised evidence on parenting programmes designed to enhance family connectedness in FCBP. Key relational components, including parent–child communication, emotional bonding, emotional responsiveness, and emotion regulation, consistently contributed to healthier family relationships and reductions in behavioural difficulties. The findings suggest that parenting programmes strengthen family connectedness not only through behaviour management strategies, but also through relational processes that promote trust, support, responsiveness, and positive parent–child interaction. Relational dimensions such as family routines, communal caregiving, extended family involvement, and overall family cohesion received less attention within the reviewed

interventions, despite their importance within African relational and collectivist contexts. Most parenting programmes were developed in high-income countries, raising concerns regarding their contextual relevance and cultural applicability within low-resource settings characterised by poverty, violence, inequality, and communal caregiving systems. The review therefore highlights the importance of culturally grounded and contextually responsive parenting interventions that recognise African family systems, Ubuntu values, and the broader social realities shaping family life. Strengthening family connectedness remains an important pathway for supporting child wellbeing, promoting resilience, and addressing behavioural challenges within families and communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Parenting programmes should be culturally and contextually adapted to African socio-economic realities by integrating communal caregiving systems, extended family involvement, and Ubuntu values.
2. Community-based delivery of parenting programmes through clinics, schools, early childhood development centres, and community organisations should be strengthened to improve accessibility and sustainability, with social workers playing a central implementation role.
3. Parenting interventions should align with South Africa's White Paper on Families by prioritising evidence-based family-strengthening and child-protection programmes within national policy and service frameworks.
4. Social workers and parenting practitioners should be trained in connectedness-focused approaches, including emotional coaching, non-violent discipline, communication skills, and the inclusion of extended family and culturally embedded support systems.

Culturally responsive and community-based parenting interventions remain essential for strengthening family connectedness in FCBP in under-resourced settings.

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