

## Australasian Association of Parenting & Child Health

### POSITION STATEMENT RESPONSIVE PARENTING

#### AAPCH

The Australian Association of Parenting and Child Health (AAPCH) is an international organisation of key agencies in Australia and New Zealand providing early parenting education, guidance and support for professionals working with families and young children. AAPCH is committed to optimising the physical, social and emotional health and wellbeing of children.

#### AIM

This position paper seeks to provide guidance on the importance of responsive parenting in the early years of life which is a sensitive period in biological and social development. To ensure the best outcomes for children AAPCH strongly believes that all clinical interventions, parental education and/or guidance should be informed by evidence based studies to enhance the development of positive parent-child relationships.

#### DEFINITION

A newborn communicates needs in many ways and crying is one of the most effective forms of communication. Crying is the survival mechanism intended to create a response from parents to ensure that the child is protected and nurtured. Excess stress [e.g. crying, trauma] bathes the brain in stress hormones<sup>i</sup>. When the parent responds sensitively e.g. comforts the crying child, hormones such as dopamine flood the brain, helping the infant become calm and enhancing the bond between the infant and parent<sup>ii</sup>.

*'The security of knowing that someone is on his side, watching out for him, is what allows a child to risk bumps, scrapes, and disappointment – in other words, to learn, grow, and develop resilience. When children feel securely connected to us, they learn to love themselves and to love others' (Markham, 2014 pp 39)<sup>13</sup>.*

#### KEY PRINCIPLES FOR RESPONSIVE PARENTING

During the early years of life while the brain is undergoing rapid development the trajectory of the child's health and wellbeing is being shaped<sup>iii</sup>. Neuroscience evidence and best practice frameworks have provided a strong base for parenting support services to invest in the early years. A parenting style that is high in warmth and responsiveness has been positively associated with the best outcomes for children<sup>iv</sup>.



## Australasian Association of Parenting & Child Health

### POSITION STATEMENT RESPONSIVE PARENTING

The impact of positive parental investment of accessible, responsive caregiving from early infancy is linked to outcomes that include<sup>v</sup>.

- good mental and physical health
- healthy lifestyles
- the ability to confidently engage with others
- the development of self-esteem and a positive sense of self.

#### PHYSICAL, SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHILD

Parental influence on a child's well-being and development is greater than any other single socio-environmental factor<sup>vi</sup>. A strong foundation for a child's physical, social and emotional well-being requires responsive environments and supportive relationships to facilitate emerging capabilities, and strengthen the development of physical and mental health<sup>vii</sup>. From birth children seek to communicate their needs and develop a relationship with their parents. A fundamental task for any child is to work out how to get their needs met. Early sensitive caregiving; warmth, and attunement to cues, sets in motion the ongoing development of neurological pathways for emotional modulation<sup>viii</sup>.

#### THE PARENT CHILD RELATIONSHIP

The process of parenting is complex and Brookes (1991) defined "the process or state of being a parent includes nourishing, protecting, and guiding the child through the course of development<sup>ix</sup>". Responsive parenting refers to the development of a nurturing, responsive, reliable and trusting relationship with their child<sup>x</sup>.

The ability of parents to observe and interpret their child's behaviour from their child's perspective is fundamental to providing sensitive and responsive care giving. The relationship that builds through the process of a child communicating their needs and a parent responding appropriately leads the child to feel secure with the parent. Responsive parenting can therefore be viewed as having the capacity to respond appropriately to their child's needs, the ability to respond sensitively and contingently in order to provide timely, effective, nurturing care. Responsive, sensitive parenting is achieved by recognising the signals and body language of the child and responding contingently, to meet the child's needs<sup>xi</sup>.

*'Responsiveness, a mother's/caregiver's prompt, contingent and appropriate interaction with the child, is a vital parenting tool with wide-ranging benefits for the child, from better cognitive and psychosocial development to protection from disease and mortality' (WHO 2006 pp.996)<sup>xii</sup>.*



## Australasian Association of Parenting & Child Health

# POSITION STATEMENT RESPONSIVE PARENTING

### REFERENCES

- <sup>i</sup> White, C., Simon, M., & Bryan, A. (2002). Using Evidence to Educate Birthing Center Nursing Staff: About Infant States, Cues, and Behaviors; Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, Inc. Volume 27 (5), September/October 2002, pp 294-298.
- Perry, B., Pollard, R., Blakley, T., Baker, W. & Vigilante, D. (1995). Childhood trauma, the neurobiology of adaption, and “use-dependent” development of the brain: How “states” become “traits”, *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 16:4, Winter, 271-291.
- <sup>ii</sup> Cozolino, L. (2006). *The neuroscience of human relationships: Attachment and the developing social brain*, New York; W.W. Norton & Company.
- Huntington, B. (2005) *Responding to the cry of a baby*. Early Learning Initiative for Wisconsin Public Libraries: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.
- <sup>13</sup> Markham, L. (2014). *Calm Parents, Happy Kids*. Croydon, Random House Group.
- <sup>iii</sup> Winter, P. (2010). *Engaging Families in the Early Childhood development Story*, Neuroscience and Early childhood development: summary of selected literature and key messages for parenting. Early Childhood Services, Department of Education and Children’s Services. South Australia
- <sup>iv</sup> National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. (2004). *Children’s Health, the Nation’s Wealth: Assessing and Improving Child Health*. Committee on Evaluation of Children’s Health. Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
- <sup>v</sup> Siegler, R., DeLoache, J., & Eisenberg, N. (2011). *How children develop* (3rd Ed.) New York: Worth Publishers.
- <sup>vi</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2012). *Social and emotional wellbeing: development of a Children’s Headline Indicator*. No: PHE 158. Canberra: AIHW
- <sup>vii</sup> National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2012). *The Science of Neglect: The Persistent Absence of Responsive Care Disrupts the Developing Brain: Working Paper 12*.
- <sup>viii</sup> Zeanah, C. (2009). *Handbook of Infant Mental Health* (2n Ed.) Guilford Press
- <sup>ix</sup> Brooks, J. (1991). *The process of parenting* (3rd Ed.). Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield.
- <sup>x</sup> Harper Browne, C. (2014, September). *The Strengthening Families Approach and Protective Factors Framework: Branching out and reaching deeper*. Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Social Policy.
- <sup>xi</sup> Australian Association for Infant Mental Health. (2006) *Position Paper 2: Responding to Babies’ Cues* Issued September
- <sup>xii</sup> Bulletin of the World Health Organization. (WHO) *Responsive parenting: interventions and outcomes*. *Public Health Review* December 2006, 84 (12)

Prepared October 2017

