



---

# The Parenting Challenge

---

Research Report

(September 2018)



### Our Mission

Help a Child provides a future for children in need, their family and their entire community.

### Our Vision

As a Christian non-profit organization Help a Child wants every child – regardless of their social, political, religious, ethnic or economic background – to have a life in dignity, with love and with a promising future.

2018, Liesbeth Speelman

The Parenting Challenge has been developed by Liesbeth Speelman, Marga Baaijens and Inge de Kroon, Child Development office, Help a Child, The Netherlands.

It has been adapted and contextualized by Roreen Mzembe of Help a Child Malawi and Lois Silo (consultant)

For more information, please contact:

Help a Child The Netherlands

P.O. Box 40169

8004 DD Zwolle

The Netherlands

Phone: +3138 460 4648

Mail: [Liesbeth.speelman@redeekind.nl](mailto:Liesbeth.speelman@redeekind.nl)

Web: [www.redeekind.nl](http://www.redeekind.nl) or [www.helpachild.org](http://www.helpachild.org)

Help a Child Malawi

Area 5, Along Kamuzu Procession Road, (on top of 7/11 Supermarket)

Lilongwe, Malawi

Phone +265 (0)991 363 944

Email [roreen.mzembe@hacmalawi.org](mailto:roreen.mzembe@hacmalawi.org)

Web [www.hacmalawi.org](http://www.hacmalawi.org) and [www.helpachild.org](http://www.helpachild.org)

# TABLE OF CONTENT

1 Background.....	4
1.1   Introduction.....	4
1.2   Theory of Change.....	4
1.3 Parenting: how it started.....	5
2. The Parenting Challenge .....	6
2.1 Approach & The Manual.....	6
2.2 The Research .....	7
2.3 The Results.....	7
2.4 Challenges.....	11
2.5 Conclusion.....	11
3. Recommendations.....	11

# 1 Background

## 1.1 | Introduction

Help a Child (in Dutch: Red een Kind) is a Christian, international relief and development organization, founded in 1968 in the Netherlands. Help a Child provides a future for children in need, their family and their entire community. By empowering vulnerable communities we help them to change their own living conditions and opportunities in a sustainable way. Help a Child works in areas with a high incidence of poverty or in places where children and families are extra vulnerable due to disasters or (imminent) conflicts. We work together with various Dutch, international and local partners. Help a Child works across India, Kenya, Ethiopia, Malawi, Burundi, Rwanda, DRC, Uganda and South Sudan. In cooperation with knowledge organizations, capital funds and institutional donors like DFID and EU, Help a Child develops innovative programs, for example about youth & work, mother and child care and the transition of relief help towards sustainable development. Besides that Help a Child is supported by a broad constituency of individual sponsors, churches, foundations, companies and schools.

Working together with local partners and structures is in Help a Child's DNA from the very start. In the early days the focus was on giving support to individual children in boarding institutions and residential centers. Over the years Help a Child came to realize that children could be and should be helped in a more sustainable way: by remediating the root causes of poverty. And to do this in the place where children belong: amongst their own family members and within their own community. This is why today we carry out holistic community programs, also called Child Centered Community (CCCD) Programs. CCCD can be seen as Help a Child's signature program.

## 1.2 | Theory of Change

Help a Child wants each child to live a dignified and loving life and have a promising future. Wellbeing of children through supportive communities, that is our goal. This overall objective of improved holistic child wellbeing can be unpacked in four more specific domains of child wellbeing:

1. Physical development to become healthy and strong;
2. Cognitive development to foster lifelong learning and a growth mind-set;
3. Social & emotional development to become self-confident, respectful and emotionally stable;
4. Spiritual development to live a life with purpose, hope and dignity.

In order to contribute towards holistic child wellbeing there are four pathways of change defined. These are the conditions on community-level (and at the same time the anticipated changes of our approach) that are crucial to safeguard the children's wellbeing in the community:

- A. Children are able to overcome barriers to participate successfully in life;
- B. Parents are able to take care of themselves and their children;
- C. Youth are self-reliant and ready for work;
- D. Communities are able to link to and make use of economic opportunities and services and gradually take full ownership of their own development.



*Figure 1: the four pathways of change in Help a Child's ToC*

Help a Child is applying the above-mentioned Child Centred Community Development approach programs (CCCD) in several African countries and India. As reflected in the Theory of Change, it includes several interventions. All interventions are directly or indirectly contributing towards the increase of well-being of children and youth. Main interventions are: establishment of Self Help Groups (SHG), farmers/producers groups, children's clubs in schools and skills training in agriculture or another vocation for youth (for more information see [www.helpachild.org](http://www.helpachild.org)).

### 1.3 Parenting: how it started

The Parenting Challenge is one of the interventions under the 2<sup>nd</sup> pathway of the Theory of Change of Help a Child. It has been developed in response to the finding that more attention for the role of the parents was required. These group-approaches used by Help a Child work very well, especially in African settings: supporting each other and learning from each other. Although these activities do have impact on the well-being of children, we realized more could and should be done, since a lot of the problems children face have to do with financial AND social problems. Parents (those who are taking care of children) are the main educators for children, they influence the well-being of children in many ways. The mothers are being reached reasonably through the SHGs, but it depends on the group if and what kind of social problems are being discussed. And the fathers are not reached, yet they are important too in the life of children.

In 2016 a pilot, focusing on parents (both the mothers and the fathers, biological and not biological parents) was therefore conducted in Ethiopia. The main problems of problems (related to their children's well-being) were identified. These were: not understanding children, disrespect by children and lack of knowledge on child development. A training package was designed for parents to address these challenges: in seven sessions the parents learned about their roles and responsibilities as parent and the basics in child development. Two students from the University of Utrecht (masters Youth, Education & Society) conducted a research, including a baseline and post-line assessment. The staff of local partner EKHHC-Kuriftu provided feedback on the manual. The results were promising and indicated a positive change in the parents towards their children. The main recommendation was to increase the number of sessions and topics.

In 2017 Help a Child built upon the pilot by the design of a (more) comprehensive Parenting approach: The Parenting Challenge. Also this intervention strategy was tested, this time in Malawi and Uganda. Two students of the University of Utrecht conducted the baseline research. The post line assessment was done by the partner organizations and analyzed by Help a Child staff.

## 2. The Parenting Challenge

### 2.1 Approach & The Manual

The Parenting Challenge is a method developed by Help a Child, using knowledge and experience from the field and from other methods (Parents Deal of War Child Holland and What's Up, Parents?! of Help a Child South Sudan).

The goal is to improve parenting skills for mothers, fathers and other caretakers through practical parenting group sessions, so that they can provide adequate and relevant support to their children. It is a group-based method, whereby the parents are actively involved in discussions and group-work and are sharing their own thoughts and ideas. The facilitator facilitates the discussions, and only teaches about some topics where needed. In this way the process of internalization is strong and more sustainable than in a more top-down way.

The manual has eleven Modules at the moment, more can be added depending on the need in the community. The 1<sup>st</sup> Module, called The Basics, is obligatory for all groups. The other modules are optional, depending on what the group would like to know more about. The topics of the modules include:

- The Basics: how to get started, roles and responsibilities of parents, parents in the old days and parents now, the basics of child-development and assessing the needs
- Supporting children in their education
- Social Emotional Support
- Protecting Children
- Feeding our Children
- Keeping Children Healthy
- Importance of Play
- Sexual Education
- Critical Family Issues Affecting Children
- Positive Discipline (available Oct 2018)
- Communication in the Family (available Oct 2018)

All the modules are available at <https://howto.helpachild.org/themes-and-tools/parenting>

Each Module has several sessions, normally between three and five sessions. Each session takes about two hours. It depends on the group how often in a week they are available. The groups in Malawi and Uganda met one time in a week. The groups in Ethiopia met twice a week. The groups in South Sudan (What's Up, Parents?!, focusing more on cultural influences in parenting) decided to finish the whole pack of eight sessions in two full days in a row, because otherwise people would forget, or move to other places with their cattle.

Each session has a similar build up:

- At the beginning of each module and each session there is information for the facilitator. This is short, and to point, in easy language, so that facilitators (normally people from the community itself) do not need too much time or skills to read long and complicated text;
- Exercises are for the group. The facilitator can follow the instructions easily;
- Welcome to the group: a brief introduction of the session and in some cases recap of last session



- Exercises: practical exercises, normally done in small groups. Exercises can be creative (role plays or games) or group discussions;
- Feedback to the group: the facilitator provides feedback about the exercise, giving a summary, highlighting key points and link to the next exercise. This feedback is very important, since it emphasizes the key learning points, and shows the flow of the topics in the sessions;
- Homework: simple and practical assignments for people to do at home, to increase the practical application of what is learned in the group;
- Closure: a nice, joint closure through a song, dance or game. It is meant for group bonding, releasing tension from the sometimes difficult discussions and for leaving in a positive mood, with a good feeling.

All sessions are in fact for men and women. It depends on the culture if it is possible to have men and women jointly in the groups. It is preferred to do this, since both fathers and mothers do have a role to play in the homes and in raising children, so in the groups they can share about this. Some exercises are better done with unisex groups. If this is the case, it is indicated in the exercise itself.

## 2.2 The Research

In order to be able to measure impact of the Parenting Challenge, a pre- and post-assessment research was conducted, in two locations in Malawi (Edingeni and Zilakoma) and one location in Uganda (Cinya). The pre-test was designed by students from the Masters Youth, Education and Society, University of Utrecht. They used an ethnographic approach, in order to make the questionnaire appropriate in terms of the context. Via free listing of problems parents of children face, key informant interviews and focus group discussions, the main issues parents face were identified and wordings were contextualized. Based on this the questionnaires were designed, 1 for Malawi and 1 for Ugandan context (see annex 1). The questionnaires have many similarities, which made comparison possible. The questionnaires used a Lickert scale of 1 to 10.

Selection of parents was done by the project staff. Criteria were: parents from the community, willing to participate, preferably both mother and father. All participants were interviewed by staff or enumerator, filling in the questionnaire.

Facilitators of the Parenting Challenge were staff and community volunteers, trained by Help a Child staff in training of three days. They were supervised by the project officers of the partner organizations (WACRAD and LISAP in Malawi and AEE in Uganda). All groups finalized four modules. After the sessions were finished, the post assessment was done: all participants were interviewed again, using the same questionnaire. Additional qualitative questions were asked too (see annex 2). This was done individually in Edingeni and in Cinya, Arivu. In Zilakoma it was done through Focus group discussions.

Pre-and post-assessment were compared and qualitative data analyzed. The results are shown in the next paragraph. In order to compare the 3 questionnaires, coding of topics was used, counting the frequency, not personal change. For quantitative results significant changes in perceptions of parents were calculated while using Standard Deviation with 95% confidence rate. The results are shown in the next paragraph.

## 2.3 The Results

A total of 160 parents were involved in assessment of the Parenting Challenge, 52 men and 108 women. This is close to 100% of the Parenting Challenge participants.

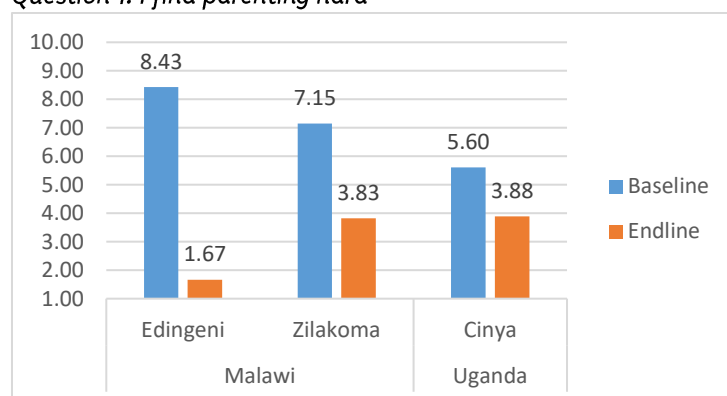
Location	Total participants	Mothers	Fathers
Edingeni, Malawi	42	30	12
Zilakoma, Malawi	40	22	18
Cinya, Arivu, Uganda	78	56	22

Total	160	108	52
-------	-----	-----	----

Most parents finalized the training and participated both in the pre and post assessment. A small number participated in the pre-assessment and in the 1<sup>st</sup> session and then decided to drop out, because they expected something else (material gains). In The groups in Uganda a few people joined after the pre-assessment, but before the 3<sup>rd</sup> session.

Generally both the quantitative and the qualitative results show that parents did improve their parental skills and attitude. For example when asked to comment on the statement: I find parenting hard, most parents admit it is now easier. Overall the change is significantly on this question.

#### Question 1: I find parenting hard



When parents were asked: “If you compare yourself as a parent, before and after this training, do you feel you became 1 = far worse , 2 =worse, 3 = same, 4= better, or 5 = far better, parents in Edingeni and in Cinya<sup>1</sup> gave themselves a 4.6 and 4.3 on average. As reasons for their answers they mentioned the following:

- *I am now able to cook nutritious meals for my children (mentioned 33 times);*
- *I now can support my child with education (by paying fees & scholastic materials, guiding and supporting) was mentioned 62 times;*
- *I understand my child now better (39 times);*
- *I feel my spouse and I are now working together in raising the children (33 times);*

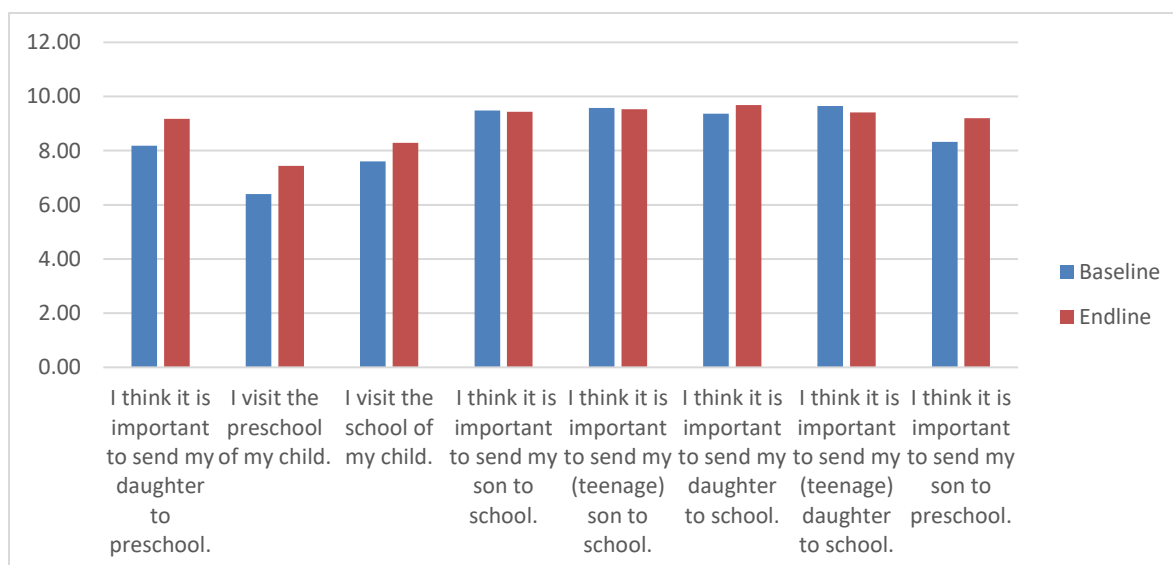
Questions were clustered in four themes: education related questions, parental cooperation, health and nutrition, and love and care.

#### Supporting Education.

Although many parents already rated positive about questions related to supporting their children in education, there is still some improvement. When asked about the most important lesson learned, 30 people mentioned they are now realizing the importance of education and to support their child in school.

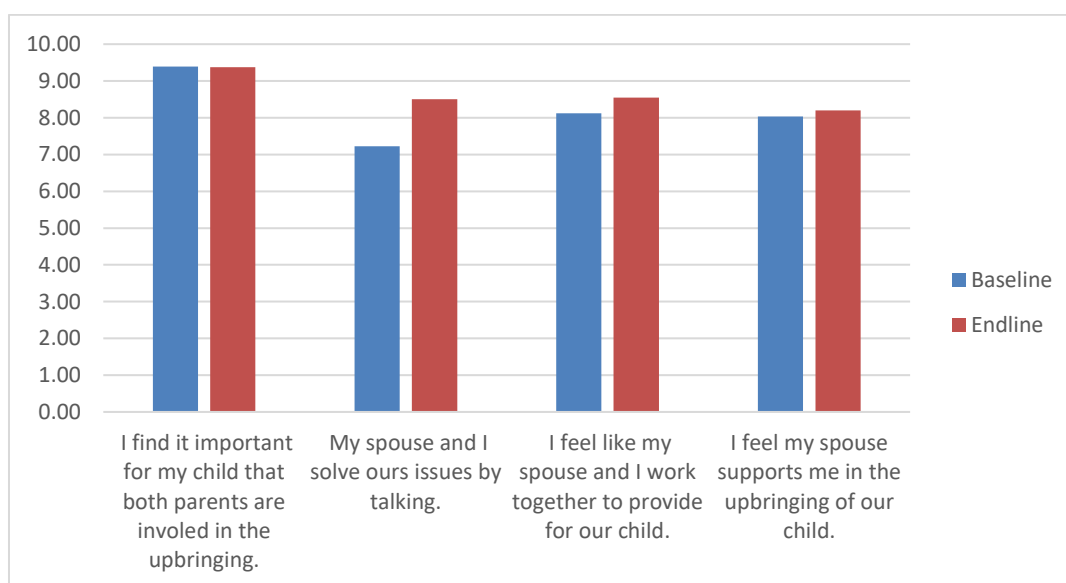
<sup>1</sup> In Zilakoma qualitative questions were asked via Focus group discussions, not individual.





### Parental Cooperation

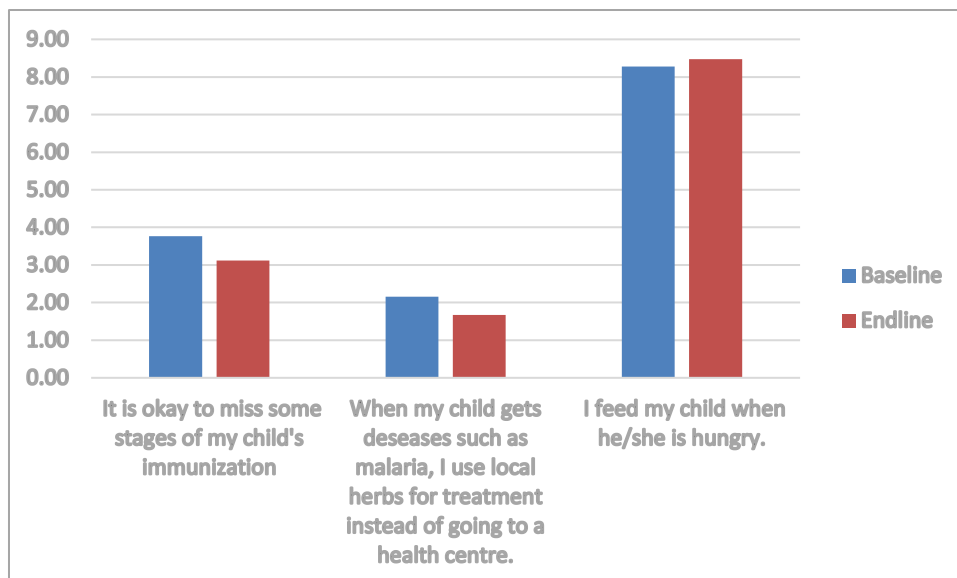
When the groups started couples were requested to come together to the group. Some couples did that, but in other occasions the mother came alone, since raising children is seen as a task for a woman. And a number of women was single parent, either because the husband had left or died.



In the quantitative questions the score at baseline was already quite high, so only the question 'my spouse and I solve our issues by talking' has improved. However, in the qualitative questions both women and men were very clear about the impact on their relationship. At least 33 people mentioned that they feel they are working now together with their spouse. And 20 people mention as lesson learned applying now at home, that they feel there is cooperation in the house, or as some of the people said: 'there is harmony in the home'. And one man admitted: I no longer beat my wife.

### Health and Nutrition

In general people had reasonable knowledge about nutrition and health. But when it comes to practice, it turned out there were still improvements to make at home level.

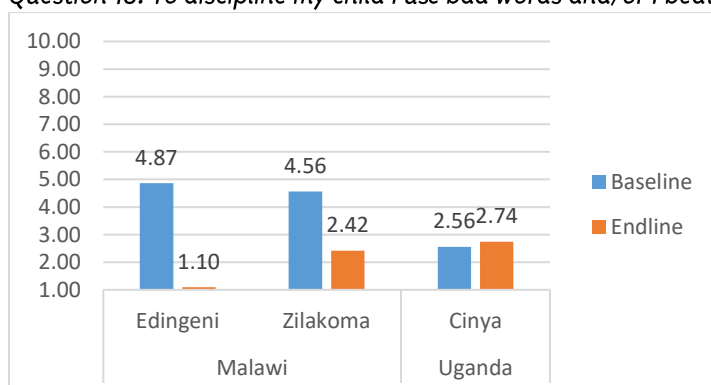


Some improvements can be seen in the graphs above. In the qualitative data people gave examples of what they have learned and what they are able to do now. People are now able to cook nutritious meals for their children, say 33 people. Another 12 people have made a (kitchen-) garden now, improving their food situation. And 18 people mention that around their house it is cleaner now, with rubbish pits and hand washing facilities at home. Four even dug a latrine, since they did not have yet. They were supported by the group.

#### Love and Care

The 'soft' part of parenting was less known by parents. In the quantitative questions there was one question which showed significant change in 2 of the 3 research locations. The group in Cinya scored already low on baseline and increased. Probably parents did not want to admit they were beating their children, since beating is very normal in the communities there.

#### Question 18: To discipline my child I use bad words and/or I beat/cane



When asked about the lessons learned after the Parenting Challenge people answered positively. Thirtynine parents admit they understand their child better now. Others mention they are now working together in the family (20 people) and 28 people say they are behaving well as a parent (listening, playing, spending time with my children). Eight people mentioned explicit the reduction of domestic violence in the house. And 2 people in Edingeni even mentioned that they had reduced seriously on alcohol.

## 2.4 Challenges

The pre- and post-assessment process was prepared for by 2 students from the University of Utrecht and carried out by the project teams in the countries. There were some challenges:

- The ethnographic design of the questionnaire was a good process, but all was done via email, since the Master students were not able to travel to the field locations. This caused sometimes confusion about what was required and how the assessments should have been done.
- There was a different understanding by interviewers of the questionnaire, causing differences in interviewing and answering. In 1 location the pre-assessment was filled in mainly using the numbers on the far ends (1 and 10), meaning the results are not very reliable.
- The score on the pre-assessment was generally high, probably because of the social desirable answers of parents. They did not want to admit that they had problems in terms of parenting, yet later in the group discussions they did admit this. This is being confirmed through the qualitative results too.
- Because of the distance and only email contact, it did not become clear how many parents did drop out. We know it was not many, but it did not become clear how many did drop out, for which reason and how many replacements were interviewed.
- The Post assessment was supposed to be done in 2 weeks after the training was finalized. However, in 1 location it was done after 2 months, because of busy schedules of the staff.

## 2.5 Conclusion

Based on the results it can be concluded that parents do improve their parenting skills by participating in the Parenting Challenge. Although there were many challenges, results do indicate an important change in parents, showing the strength of the Parenting Challenge. The topics were very much related to the situation of the parents. And making parents discuss together about parenting, the good skills they have and the challenges they face, helped them to think through it and learn from each other. It made them discuss and realize their own attitude and behavior. Because of the mutual understanding and group bonding, there was a lot of respect within the groups, ensuring no pinpointing but supporting each other. Since people come from the same communities, they know each other and their situations. So for example when discussing about hygiene, people knew one of the members did not have a latrine yet. This was discussed in the group and with joint effort of the group-members the home of the member now has a latrine. Same with use of alcohol in one of the communities (Edingeni). People were helped to reduce and even stop drinking, Having both mothers and fathers in the same training seems to be important too, as reported by a large number of participants.

Noteworthy is the fact that even though it is not an explicit aim the Parenting Challenge seem to have a positive impact on the reduction of violence in the homes and to increase harmony and cooperation in the family. This is a very promising effect in addition to the improvement in parenting skills and behavior that do contribute to children's well-being, like cooking nutritious meals, improved hygiene & health practices, investment in education and basic needs for children.

## 3. Recommendations

There is a good indication this method, the Parenting Challenge, does have a positive impact on the parenting style of parents and thus resulting in a positive impact on their children. Therefore it is recommended to continue and expand to other locations and countries.

With more Modules and thus more topics around parental challenges available, it is expected The Parenting Challenge can assist many parents and increase the wellbeing of children (and parents!) in many families.

Research in a scientific way is recommended, for instance PhD research via the University of Utrecht or another University, with researchers on the ground to guide the whole process. It can be done via a randomized trial with a control group, or via quasi experimental research, both with a higher number of participants. This will provide scientific evidence for the impact of the method, The Parenting Challenge.

Most likely the parents have changed because of the group discussions and the participatory methods, and not because the facilitator or trainer said they have to change. They have realized their own position and thinking, and this resulted in a more sustainable change, without relapsing in old behavior. (Most groups still continue meeting each other, now without the support of the organization). It will be good to find evidence for this, by following up 6 months or a year after the The Parenting Challenge has finished.