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UCT WhatsApp-based study aims to improve parent-child relationships

New study seeking participants for a five-day parenting chatbot intervention

A groundbreaking WhatsApp-based study aimed at improving parent-child relationships through a five-day digital intervention is looking for South African parents with children between the ages of two and 17 to participate.

Led by Drs Jamie Lachman and Hlengiwe Gwebu of the University of Cape Town (UCT), under the [Global Parenting Initiative](#), the research collaboration includes [UNICEF South Africa](#), UCT, University of Oxford, University of Fort Hare, Parenting for Lifelong Health (PLH), [Clowns Without Borders South Africa \(CWBSA\)](#), and [IDEMS International](#). It combines expertise in research methodology, digital technology, child protection, and community engagement.

The study will be conducted from August to December 2024. Parents and caregivers across South Africa are eligible to participate, with a focus on those in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal. They must be 18 years or older, have at least one child aged two to 17 years, and have access to WhatsApp. The study will use a randomised controlled trial to assess the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of a five-day playful parenting chatbot intervention delivered via WhatsApp in collaboration with UNICEF.

"We aim to recruit 15 000 participants to be part of the first-ever study of a parenting chatbot in South Africa. Participants will be randomly allocated to receive one of three available programmes: ParentText, ParentText with an additional bonus course on child development, or WASHText – a hygiene and sanitation programme," says Zamakhanya Makhanya, the study's research manager based at UCT's Centre for Social Science Research (CSSR).

"The programmes have been developed with and for South African families," says Lulu Ngcobo, co-director of CWBSA, the main implementing partner for the study. "Messages in either English or isiZulu will be delivered to parents via WhatsApp and require less than five minutes of their time each day for five days. We are hoping that there will be benefits from whichever programme they receive."

Parents who participate will be requested to complete a baseline survey before receiving one of the three programmes and will be invited to complete two additional surveys after one and three months. All surveys will take place on WhatsApp. Participants who complete all three surveys will receive R150 airtime for their participation.

“Participant safety is paramount. The digital platform has built-in features to detect high-risk situations, with referrals to local support services and an independent trial steering committee will oversee the study, ensuring protocol adherence and participant safety. All of the participants’ identifying data will be completely anonymised, and we’re making every effort to ensure the content is localised to our participants’ context and language,” says Dr Jamie Lachman, honorary associate professor at UCT’s CSSR and study co-lead.

To participate, **WhatsApp “study” to +27 83 283 8620.**

More about the Global Parenting Initiative

The Global Parenting Initiative (GPI) is a five-year collaboration of universities, foundations, and implementing partners, to provide access to free, evidence-based, playful parenting support to every parent, everywhere, so that they are equipped with the knowledge and tools to help their children realise their learning potential and to prevent child sexual abuse, exploitation and family violence.

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