

Re-thinking the needs and roles of a peaceful family

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This year's International Day of the Family, has unprecedentedly been marked with a third of the global population staying in their homes with family due to the global lockdown. In Uganda, where movement of people remains largely restricted, men, women and children have had to stay at home in response to the presidential directives, since Wednesday, April 01, 2020 as part of effort to contain the spread of COVID-19.

However, many have faced it rough observing the lockdown directives. One of the major reasons is lack of peace in their respective homes. The lockdown has forced families to either tolerate or appreciate each other's shortcomings without having the 'luxury' of going to work or school as a means of escaping the heat at home. While the directives

last, men, women and children have to face and deal with their 'demons' in order to provide a bearable environment to enable them endure the rest of the lockdown without losing their sanity.

Movement restrictions in light of the pandemic threaten to fuel a surge in domestic violence and child abuse. In fact, UNFPA projects a one-third reduction in progress towards ending gender-based violence by 2030.¹

State minister in charge of Culture Peace Mutuzo says that over the last three months, child abuses cases have increased with 1600 cases being documented while 3037 cases of domestic violence have been reported.

A case in point involves a 21-year-old mother Abwoli Subra, a resident of Bweyogerere, Wakiso District who struggles to provide a peaceful upbringing for her three-year-old daughter Amooti. She calls it a struggle because she was raised in a very hostile environment by her mother whom she deems bitter.

"I always watched my mother quarrel, beat and yell at my sister and I. I think it is because she was bitter after divorcing my father. She used to drink and beat up my older sister, bring different men to our double roomed house, quarrel with neighbours and even repeatedly remind us of how useless our father was. She never told us she loved us" Abwoli narrates.

However, she says that her father claims he used to take care of all the bills from housing, clothing, medication in addition to sending a monthly allowance, a narrative she can testify to.

"I couldn't wait to clock eighteen and finally move out of my mother's house. I wanted peace, love and stability. I vowed my narrative would be different. I envisioned a perfect and peaceful family." She adds.

Abwoli's yearning for love and peace pushed her to look for comfort in a teenage relationship that resulted into a pregnancy at seventeen. With nowhere else to go, she

¹ https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_impact_brief_for_UNFPA_24_April_2020_1.pdf

remains stuck in her mother's house, surrounded by toxicity now also exposed to her daughter.

Research shows that excessive exposure to toxic stress can derail a child's healthy development, jeopardizing a child's health, learning and behavior across his or her lifetime.²

"I am turning out into the person I vowed not to be- my mother. I cannot help but finish my frustrations on my child. I only notice I have hurt her feelings after I see her crying. She resents me. Just like I resent my mother!"
Abwoli concludes.

A peaceful upbringing in the first years of life has a direct effect on personality and character outcome. UN child agency UNICEF says positive relationships early in life – relationships which are responsive, caring, safe and loving – promote brain development of a young child.

Ms. Carolyn N. Byekwaso from Child Health and Development Centre, CHDC Makerere University further explains that Children predisposed to violence at home or surroundings end up becoming violent and suffer mental setbacks

Science further explains that hormones such as oxytocin, which are released during early attachment and bonding, generate "freedom from anxiety, disturbance (emotional, mental or spiritual), or inner conflict"³ and can set the stage for positive and nonaggressive interactions in later life.⁴

In contrast, inconsistent relationships with parents or caregivers, lack of attachment, bonding and interaction, neglect or exposure to violence, can severely impact a child's nervous system and negatively impact her or his ability to trust, bond and relate with others. This impact can last for a lifetime.⁵

This year's celebrations should draw, special attention to "re-thinking the needs and roles of a peaceful family".

It is almost everyone's dream to belong to and create a peaceful family characterised by stability. The ideal lifecycle entails being born in a loving functional family,

getting a good education, graduating, stable employment, marriage, procreation and the cycle continues. However, to some, this remains an ideal out of their reach.

The needs of a peaceful family range from financial, health, social, spiritual to environmental variables. Studies describe these needs as determinants of a successful home and mental wellbeing.

It is therefore the role of a mother, hand in hand with the father, to nurture and look after the home. But this goes beyond surface value. It entails being the 'neck' of the home to ensure functionality and continuance.

Children's role in ensuring a peaceful home is often overlooked. However, they are the fabric that holds the family together. It is because of them that many couples decide to stay in dysfunctional relationships. It is therefore the children's role to ensure that they listen to and respect their parents, work hard at school and make their parents proud.

Children whose fathers are actively involved in their upbringing tend stay longer in school, have more esteem, bargaining power, long-lasting relationships and better value for money. These are findings of the Child Health and Development Centre (CHDC) Makerere University, from a six-year Parenting for Respectability program in Wakiso district– Uganda, aimed at preventing child maltreatment and violence.⁶

The role of a peaceful family is therefore core in the peace-building structure of society and the nation. It is from families that societies and nations draw leaders. Their leadership is informed by their characters and personalities that are deeply rooted in their upbringing.

Thus, as we reflect on this year's theme for the International Day of the Family, "A harmonious family: a key to sustainable peace and development", we should remember that we have the power to positively or negatively affect the development of our nation. It starts with the family!

2 UNICEF Early Childhood Development Section, 'Building Better Brains: New frontiers in early childhood development https://www.unicef.org/earlychildhood/files/03a_ECD_PB_Social_Cohesion_brief_ENGLISH.pdf

3 Masten, A. S., 'Promoting the Capacity for Peace in Early Childhood', in James F. Leckman, Catherine Panter-Brick and Rima Salah, eds., Pathways to Peace: The transformative power of children and families, Strüngmann Forum Reports, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass 2014

4 Gordon, Ilanit, et al., 'Oxytocin and Social Motivation', Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience, vol. 1, no. 4, October 2011, pp. 471–493, available at ; and Carter, C. Sue, et al., eds., Attachment and Bonding: A new synthesis, MIT Press, Boston, 2005

5 Teicher, Martin H., 'Wounds that Time Won't Heal: The neurobiology of child abuse', Cerebrum, vol. 2, no. 4, Fall 2000, pp. 50–67

6 <http://radioonefm90.com/report-cites-importance-of-fathers-in-child-upbringing/>

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