

# Sharing Stories: A digital intervention for caregivers with young children in the COVID-19 era to promote child social, emotional and language development, responsive parenting and parental mental wellbeing in Zambia, Tanzania, and Uganda

<b>Submission date</b> 25/11/2020	<b>Recruitment status</b> No longer recruiting	<input type="checkbox"/> Prospectively registered <input type="checkbox"/> Protocol
<b>Registration date</b> 02/12/2020	<b>Overall study status</b> Completed	<input type="checkbox"/> Statistical analysis plan <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Results
<b>Last Edited</b> 06/11/2023	<b>Condition category</b> Other	<input type="checkbox"/> Individual participant data

## Plain English summary of protocol

### Background and study aims

Parents and caregivers of young children are facing substantial challenges in the COVID-19 era, with potential devastating impacts on the health, wellbeing, and development of young children globally, and especially in low resource settings. New modes of reaching caregivers are essential as traditional face-to-face approaches to group-based parenting programmes are not available. The Sharing Stories intervention is a fully digital programme, delivered to caregivers of young children over WhatsApp to promote child social, emotional and language development and positive, responsive parenting, combined with support for caregivers' mental wellbeing. The digital intervention is based on an in-person, evidence-based shared reading programme, which guides caregivers in how to use digital picture books in playful ways to support their children's learning and development. The key aim of the programme is to equip caregivers with a variety of skills that they can apply when sharing a picture book with their child. Importantly, these skills emphasise a learning through play approach, where shared reading techniques are applied to engage children in playful, positive and responsive way. In addition, caregivers receive intervention content to promote parental mental health and strategies for coping with stress.

Through partnering with the Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative (REPSSI) and the Africa Early Childhood Network (AfECN), the programme will be pilot tested in Tanzania, Zambia and Uganda. The aim of the study is to assess the differences in outcomes for caregivers and their children who participated in the Sharing Stories intervention; to assess the acceptability of the intervention and caregivers' participation and engagement; to determine barriers and facilitators of successful implementation.

### Who can participate?

The intervention is designed for primary caregivers of children between the ages of 9 - 32 months. Primary caregivers with children in this age range, who have access to a working smartphone in their household and living in selected areas in Zambia, Uganda and Tanzania will be invited to participate.

### What does the study involve?

The Sharing Stories intervention is delivered over a six-week period, with all content delivered to caregivers over WhatsApp. The intervention content focuses on the following:

1. Shared reading to encourage positive, responsive parenting: caregivers receive content on how to use shared reading to promote their children's learning and development through techniques such as pointing and naming; responding with encouragement and praise; mimicking actions; making links between the pictures and the child's life; talking about feelings; having conversations about what is happening in the story
2. Support for caregiver mental health and wellbeing: caregivers will also receive messages about the importance of taking care of themselves and staying healthy, strategies to cope with stress and difficulties in their life, and how to access support.

A weekly WhatsApp group chat session (lasting between 1-2 hours) is used to deliver the intervention content over 6 weeks, complimented by recap messages throughout the week. Each WhatsApp group consists of 30 to 40 participants, and is moderated by two trained intervention facilitators, fluent in the local languages. All intervention content is available in the local languages. Through WhatsApp, caregivers receive a combination of text and audio messages, photos, infographics and short video clips to promote responsive parenting through shared reading activities, and support for caregiver mental health and wellbeing. In addition, caregivers receive two digital picture books a week. Caregivers will receive a weekly data bundle for the duration of the 6 weeks to enable participation.

As part of the formative work, rapid consultations in each country were conducted with stakeholders (program staff and caregivers) to help inform the development of the digital intervention. Caregivers with young children (between the ages of 9-32 months) will be randomly assigned to either the intervention or comparison group. Participating caregivers will be assessed at baseline and post-intervention on measures of child social, emotional and language development; positive, responsive parenting behaviours; parenting stress and caregiver mental health. In addition, interviews will be conducted with the intervention facilitators and a selection of participating caregivers to obtain feedback on the acceptability of the intervention.

### What are the possible benefits and risks for participating?

There are a number of potential benefits to the study. Participants are very likely to benefit from the ongoing engagement with new content on parenting, digital books for their young children, and support from peer parents and caregivers as well as from a structured curriculum. At a societal level, this study can potentially produce plans for developing and evaluating a cost-effective, scalable digital early childhood and parenting support intervention, which is deliverable in low and middle-income country (LMIC) contexts, for the improvement of parent and child wellbeing.

The potential risks include psychological distress when discussing issues relating to mental health and parenting, especially during this stressful global emergency, during the assessment and intervention sessions. In the event that a participant shows signs of extreme emotional

distress, researchers will follow their standard and already-established participant safety policy and make a referral to a local counselling and health service, under the guidance of the Principle Investigator, the in-country implementation partners and project managers.

Where is the study run from?

Stellenbosch University (South Africa) has partnered with the Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative (REPSSI) to implement the study in selected areas in Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. REPSSI have an established presence in all three countries, and is working with a local organisation in each country to implement the research:

Zambia: ChildFund

Uganda: Community Transformation Foundation Network (COTFONE)

Tanzania: Kimara Peer Educators and Pastoral Activities and Services for People with AIDS Dar es Salaam Archdiocese (PASADA)

When is the study starting and how long is it expected to run for?

June 2020 – May 2021

Who is funding the study?

LEGO Foundation (Denmark)

Who is the main contact?

Prof. Sarah Skeen, skeen@sun.ac.za

## Contact information

### Type(s)

Scientific

### Contact name

Prof Sarah Skeen

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## Additional identifiers

### Clinical Trials Information System (CTIS)

Nil known

## ClinicalTrials.gov (NCT)

Nil known

## Protocol serial number

Nil known

# Study information

## Scientific Title

Does a digital intervention, delivered to caregivers with young children in Zambia, Tanzania and Uganda, promote child social, emotional and language development, responsive parenting and parental mental wellbeing when compared to a wait-list control group?

## Acronym

Sharing Stories

## Study objectives

Compared to control-group participants, children and their caregivers who receive the intervention will have:

1. Better child social and emotional development outcomes
2. Better child language outcomes
3. Less negative and more positive, responsive parenting behaviours

Compared to control-group caregivers, caregivers who receive the intervention will have:

4. Less parenting stress
5. Better parental mental health

## Ethics approval required

Old ethics approval format

## Ethics approval(s)

1. Approved 01/07/2020, Stellenbosch University Health Research Ethics Committee (Stellenbosch University, Private Bag X1, Matieland, 7602, South Africa; +27 (0)21 938 9657; elr@sun.ac.za), ref: N20/06/026\_COVID-19
2. Approved 16/07/2020, ERES Converge IRB (33 Joseph Mwilwa Road, Rhodes Park, Lusaka, Zambia; +260 955 155 633; eresconverge@yahoo.co.uk), ref: No.2020-Jul-001
3. Approved 10/09/2020, National Institute for Medical Research (P.O. Box 9653, Dar es Salaam, 11101, Tanzania; +255 22 2121400; nimrethics@gmail.com), ref: NIMR/HQ/R.8a/Vol.IX/3507
4. Approved 27/08/2020, Mbarara University of Science and Technology, (P.O. Box 1410, Mbarara Uganda; +256 485433795; sec.rec@must.ac.ug), ref: MUREC 1/7

## Study design

Pilot interventional randomized controlled trial

## Primary study design

Interventional

## Study type(s)

Prevention

## **Health condition(s) or problem(s) studied**

Child social, emotional and language development, responsive parenting, parental mental wellbeing

## **Interventions**

A pilot randomized control trial to evaluate a digital group-based parenting intervention for caregivers of young children aged between 9 and 32 months. Caregiver-child pairs are stratified based on child age (9 - 20 months and 21 - 30 months) and randomized to an intervention or waitlist control group using a sealed envelope. Data are collected at baseline and post-intervention. Data collectors are blinded to group allocation.

The intervention is based on the World Health Organization's Parenting for Lifelong Health shared reading programme and the WHO Thinking Healthy programme. The Parenting for Lifelong Health shared reading programme will be combined with specific content on caregiver mental health and wellbeing, adapted for digital delivery via WhatsApp.

Caregivers in the intervention group will receive all intervention content on WhatsApp over a six-week period, using a combination of text and audio messages, photos, infographics and short video clips. A weekly WhatsApp group chat session is used to deliver the intervention content, complimented by recap messages throughout the week. In addition, caregivers receive two digital picture books a week. Each group consists of 30 to 40 participants, moderated by two trained intervention facilitators, fluent in the local languages. All intervention content is available in the local languages. Caregivers will receive a weekly data bundle for the duration of the six weeks to enable participation.

Caregivers in the control condition will receive no intervention during the duration of the trial.

## **Intervention Type**

Behavioural

## **Primary outcome(s)**

Measured at baseline and 6-weeks:

1. Child social and emotional outcomes, measured using the:
  - 1.1. Caregiver Reported Early Development Instrument Socio-Emotional long form
  - 1.2. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire
  - 1.3. The Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL) attention and aggression subscales - updated 02/06 /2021: the attention subscale was removed as hyperactivity-inattention is already measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), which is included in the baseline and follow-up questionnaire
2. Child language outcomes, measured using the Caregiver Reported Early Development Instrument Language long form
3. Positive, responsive parenting behaviours, measured using the
  - 3.1. Parent-Child Conflict Tactics scales
  - 3.2. The Family Care Indicators

## **Key secondary outcome(s)**

Measured at baseline and 6 weeks:

1. Parenting stress, measured using the Parental Stress Scale short form
2. Parental mental health, measured using the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 and the Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7

**Completion date**

31/05/2021

## Eligibility

**Key inclusion criteria**

1. Primary caregivers of children between the ages of 9 - 32 months at enrolment
2. Living in selected areas
3. Have access to a working smartphone in their household

**Participant type(s)**

Mixed

**Healthy volunteers allowed**

No

**Age group**

Mixed

**Sex**

All

**Total final enrolment**

734

**Key exclusion criteria**

1. Caregivers aged under 18 years

**Date of first enrolment**

25/08/2020

**Date of final enrolment**

30/11/2020

## Locations

**Countries of recruitment**

Tanzania

Uganda

Zambia

**Study participating centre**

**Community Transformation Foundation Network (COTFONE)**

Kyabakuza Trading Centre

Buyinja Road

Masaka Municipality

P O Box 589  
Masaka  
Uganda  
-

**Study participating centre**  
**ChildFund**  
Plot 9158, Lunsemfwa Road  
Lusaka  
Zambia  
-

**Study participating centre**  
**PASADA (Pastoral Activities and Services for People with AIDS Dar es Salaam Archdiocese)**  
Chang'ombe  
Dar es Salaam  
Tanzania  
70225

**Study participating centre**  
**Kimara Peer Educators:**  
P.O Box 77143  
Dar es Salaam  
Tanzania  
-

## **Sponsor information**

**Organisation**  
Stellenbosch University

**ROR**  
<https://ror.org/05bk57929>

## **Funder(s)**

**Funder type**  
Charity

## Funder Name

The LEGO Foundation

# Results and Publications

## Individual participant data (IPD) sharing plan

All data generated or analysed during this study will be included in the subsequent results publication.

## IPD sharing plan summary

Other

## Study outputs

Output type	Details	Date created	Date added	Peer reviewed?	Patient-facing?
<a href="#">Results article</a>		03/11/2023	06/11/2023	Yes	No