

## **Strengthening community connections for parents with infants**

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Strengthening the community support for parents with infants is vital for all new parents and is especially important for parents who are isolated from family or had their own experiences of childhood adversity.

This paper, describes how two low cost evidence informed programs aimed at supporting parent-infant interactions strengthen as well as rebuild caregiving sensitivity. Fostering healthy parent-infant interactions by assisting parents to respond sensitively to their infant, supports the infant's lifelong social and mental health. Cue based, infant and child led programs such as First Touch infant Massage and The Garden Program are relaxed, playful and fun activities, which do not focus on correction of parental deficits but instead assist parents to notice their infant's communication and enjoy interacting with their infants. Through involving support people as well as parents in these programs, parental support networks are strengthened and community-wide infant mental health literacy is promoted.

Our flexibly delivered programs have defined program logics that enable timely access to parenting support in a space where parents feel comfortable and safe. Parents who complete these programs report they have improved parenting confidence.

We mostly offer these two programs to small groups of parents and their infants. Recently, we started offering them to individual parents and their infants. We have found one on one programs are particularly helpful when there are child protection concerns; during reunification of a parent to their infant from out of home care; for parents accessing structured access visits; and in at-home intensive targeted interventions with vulnerable parents.

Both programs include professional development training for community workers about infant mental health. The training develops infant mental health literacy and boosts the confidence of workers to engage positively with parents about their infants.