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Exceptional dedication to violence prevention wins researcher prestigious UCT vice-chancellor award



Professor Cathy Ward

Photo: Supplied

Growing up during apartheid, Professor Cathy Ward became aware of the systemic nature of violence in South Africa and its devastating effects on society at a young age. This sparked her interest in research around violence prevention and has led to the creation of Parenting for Lifelong Health, an evidence-based, non-commercialised suite of programmes dealing with conflict in the home. Her exceptional dedication to violence prevention has been recognised with the 2020 University of Cape Town (UCT) Alan Pifer Award.

The prestigious award is the Vice-Chancellor's annual prize in recognition of outstanding welfare-related research. It is presented to a UCT researcher whose work has contributed to

the advancement and welfare of South Africa's disadvantaged people. This year, it is shared between Ward and Professor Ambroise Wonkam.

"There is an enormous amount of violence that gets perpetrated by people who are supposed to be keeping other people safe," says Ward, who is a professor in the Department of Psychology. "This has led to a South Africa that struggles with a huge burden of violence, which is one of the things that we are going to have to conquer if we are going to be successful at having a truly democratic South Africa."

Early in her career, Ward decided that this was a vision worth pursuing and that one simply had to start somewhere. With the home often being the first place children experience violence and, in turn, learn to emulate this behaviour, Ward decided to focus her research on conflict resolution between parents/caregivers and children.

She started investigating various evidence-based programmes for preventing violence against children that had been developed in high-income countries. While these programmes had impressive outcomes, they proved to be expensive and often relied on high-tech aspects such as video content, making them incompatible with users in rural South Africa and other low- to middle-income countries.

Recognising the need for similar programmes that are free, accessible and culturally specific, Ward joined forces with researchers at Oxford, Bangor and Reading universities in the United Kingdom, as well as Stellenbosch University to develop a suite of open access, non-commercialised parenting programmes to prevent violence in low-resource settings.

This resulted in Parenting for Lifelong Health, which is made up of four programmes, each focusing on a specific age group (infants, toddlers, young children and teens). Endorsed by the World Health Organisation, UNICEF, USAID and the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, the programmes are available for free on the WHO website.

Over a short period, Parenting for Lifelong Health has had an outstanding impact in South African society and continues to improve the lives of families daily. An estimated 81 000 cases of child abuse have been directly averted through these programmes, which make use of mechanisms such as comic strips and roleplay to keep costs low and make the content more accessible.

The idea is that entities working in communities affected by violence can access these materials and present parenting workshops. Although it is not a prerequisite, Ward strongly recommends that organisations making use of the materials receive some training beforehand, which is coordinated by Clowns Without Borders South Africa.

Since its successful launch in South Africa, Parenting for Lifelong Health has become a sought-after tool for prevention of violence against children worldwide.

Building on its success so far, the researchers behind Parenting for Lifelong Health are also working on a number of expansions.

"A lot of these families are affected by intimate partner violence as well," says Ward. "So, we're working on adapting our teen programme to address couples and co-parenting conflict as a means of reducing conflict in the family more broadly." In the broader group, digital versions of the programmes are also being developed, and similarly adapted and expanded (including to try to reduce couples conflict).

Ward has also started working on a new programme focusing on reducing violence against children at schools.

Story by Nadia Krige, UCT News

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