Government policy decisions often build on prior activities or actions by non-governmental stakeholders, including academia, civil society, and non-governmental organisations. The passage of Jamaica's National Parenting Support Policy in October 2012 is a case in point. This article reports on the background to the development of the policy, and early policy implementation.

The earliest published description of Jamaican family life was Edith Clarke’s *My Mother Who Fathered Me* in 1957. This detailed ethnographic study provided statistics on family structure and tremendous detail on parenting practices.

Nonetheless, at the newly independent Jamaica’s fledgling University of the West Indies (UWI), studies on the family between 1962 and 1980 focused primarily on family structure and kinship relationships, with little attention to parenting, as is evident from a review of the literature on child development during this period (Semaj, 1984).

Two factors would shift academic study to parenting practices, particularly to parenting the young child. First, the prevalence of malnutrition, and specifically kwashiorkor and marasmus, led to intensive study of malnourished children by researchers at the Tropical Medicine Research Unit at the UWI. Initially the focus was very medical and biochemical in nature. However, the noticeably impaired mental development of affected children led to efforts to improve children’s development by influencing parenting practices, specifically stimulation. Preventive efforts would lead to parenting
intervention programmes to ensure stimulation of children who were not malnourished (Grantham-McGregor et al., 1975), and would herald numerous publications in this area, which continue until today.

Simultaneously, in the 1960s to 1970s, the emerging early childhood movement, centred at the UWI, focused its early efforts on improving the quality of stimulation at preschools for children aged 3–6 years by providing training programmes for practitioners who had no formal training. In the late 1970s to early 1980s, concern about childrearing primarily for children aged 0–3 years led those in the early childhood movement to study parenting practices for this younger age group (Grant et al., 1983).

Between the 1980s and 2000, there were many publications on childrearing practices in Jamaica (Evans, 1989; Leo-Rhynie, 1997; Brown and Chevannes, 1998). Earlier studies tended to focus almost exclusively on parents of lower socio-economic groups and often used a deficit lens, suggesting that primarily parents living in poverty needed intervention, and that among this group there were few parenting strengths to be identified. Later studies began to identify cultural and family strengths across classes as a basis for interventions to change ineffective practices. Among the parenting challenges identified were limited parent–child interaction, limited father involvement, inadequate resources to provide stimulation in the home and gender differences in expectations for boys and girls.

**Longitudinal studies**

Large-scale epidemiological longitudinal studies would add a new dimension to the information on parenting. The Jamaican Perinatal Mortality and Morbidity Study (1986) on the pattern of the British Birth Cohort Study of 1958, enrolled some 10,000 children and families, or 94% of those born in the 2-month period September to October 1986 (Ashley et al., 1988). A large subset of these children, approximately 1700, who were living in the most urban areas of Kingston and St Andrew, were evaluated at 11–12 years and 15–16 years. Among the main objectives of the study was the determination of factors impacting children’s development and behaviour, with parenting structure and function among the factors considered important for study. Between the contacts at 11–12 and 15–16 years old, another epidemiological study of children’s development, the Profiles Project, was conducted, but this time the sample was a national one of 500 children aged 5–6 (Samms-Vaughan, 2005), who were seen again at 9 years old. The methodology of these studies, using population-based samples, ensured that families of all socio-economic backgrounds and types were included. In 2004, the inclusion of a parenting module in the annual national household survey, the Jamaican Survey of Living Conditions, also provided national data on parenting. However, full information from this survey was not published until 2009 (Ricketts and Anderson, 2009).

The longitudinal studies (Samms-Vaughan, 2001, 2004) identified the changes in children’s family structure as they grew. Only 55% were born within a married or common-law union. By the age of 6 years, only two-thirds of children had their biological parents as the main parenting figures and by 11–12 years, a half of parental unions had ended and marriages had increased somewhat from 18% to 26%. When parental unions ended, mothers largely continued their parenting role (82% and 86%), but for the small proportion who did not, the maternal mother-figure was typically a grandmother or another relative. When biological fathers were absent (65% and 70%) there was often no father-figure (11%) or multiple father-figures as the mother’s partners changed. Migration of mothers (28% and 33%) and fathers (21% and 27%) was the main reason for parental separation from children. Physical separation was often accompanied by emotional separation, as 17% of mothers and 25% of fathers who were separated from their children did not maintain contact when children were 11–12 years old.

Parenting impacted children’s outcomes in many ways. Parental stress was measured among parents of 6 year olds and was one of four factors that affected child
outcomes; the others were poverty, parental education and the quality of the home learning environment. At 11–12 years, children who lived in poverty who had the highest cognitive and academic outcomes were those whose biological parents were in stable relationships, who had their biological parents as main parenting figures and whose parenting figures had higher education and were aged between 40 and 49 years. Parental involvement, church attendance and participation in extra-curricular activities were other protective factors associated with improved school performance. The absence of the biological parents from the home and multiple mother-figures were associated with greater behaviour problems in children.

The main parenting recommendations were the need for parenting education and parental stress to become national priorities, because of their multiple impacts on children.

**Early state initiatives**

In 1991, the Minister of Education invited parenting groups to a meeting that aimed to strengthen the Ministry’s efforts to improve parenting through Parent–Teacher Associations. With initial support from the Ministry and UNICEF, the Coalition for Better Parenting became an umbrella non-governmental organisation of parenting groups and a resource centre for parenting materials. When funding from UNICEF ceased in 2001, the coalition had limited resources to continue a wide range of activities, but has continued to exist as an organisation supporting parenting.

The Early Childhood Commission (ECC) was established by the Government of Jamaica in November 2003, in response to a strategic review of Jamaica’s Early Childhood Sector. This review identified a number of activities taking place in the early childhood sector, but these were poorly coordinated. As a result, the establishment of a single entity for early childhood development (ECD) was recommended. The ECC’s remit is to advance ECD through a number of legislated functions, including advising the Minister of Education on policy; facilitating, coordinating, and monitoring and evaluating ECD plans and programmes; regulating early childhood centres; conducting research; and public education. The ECC is governed by a multi-sectoral Board of Commissioners representing government agencies and ministries and professionals trained in various aspects of ECD (education, health, nutrition). ECC activities are implemented through an operational arm.

The ECC Board, recognising the importance of parenting to ECD, took a series of actions to ensure that parenting was a central aspect of its activities. In mid-2004, a recommendation was made to the Minister of Education that a professional representing a parenting organisation be appointed to the Board and, by early 2005, a parenting policy to guide national parenting activities was recommended to the Minister of Education by the ECC.

Two important decisions were taken with regard to the parenting policy. First, it was decided that the policy would provide the support and guidance that all parents needed, and not be confined to parents at risk. Second, the policy would focus on parent education and support and would not be punitive. This led to the deliberate inclusion of the word ‘support’ in the name: the ‘National Parenting Support Policy’. It was felt that the Child Care and Protection Act (2004) already contained sanctions for inappropriate parental acts of commission (such as harsh punishment) or omission (such as negligence). Additionally, a national parenting policy could not be limited only to the early childhood years, as parenting continued to the age of 18 years and, some would argue, beyond this. The ECC therefore sought and received permission from the Minister of Education to undertake policy development for the childhood years from birth to 18.

The Board also recommended that the ECC be structured to support and promote parenting activities. A Parenting and Community Intervention Sub-Committee was established in December 2005. This was, at the time, the only regular meeting of professionals engaged in parenting programmes. Additionally, the position of Community Intervention Co-ordinator at the ECC was
expanded to become the Parenting and Community Intervention Co-ordinator. Research activities in parenting were also initiated to inform decisions on parenting; these included development of a parenting strategy (2005), mapping of existing parenting programmes across the country, and an audit of parenting education material (2006).

The Government of Jamaica’s guidelines on policy development require multiple consultations, as the original concept paper progresses through various stages and revisions. The lengthy process culminated in the passage of the National Parent Support Policy in the Jamaican Parliament in October 2012, with strong bipartisan support.

**Current policy and strategy**

The vision of the National Parent Support Policy is:

All parents in Jamaica – whether by virtue of having given birth, adopting or serving as guardians – recognize, accept and discharge their duty to ensure that the rights of children are always upheld, the best interests of children are always promoted, and their children are always loved and provided with opportunities and resources to achieve their full potential and ultimate fulfilment, within safe, caring and nurturing environments.

(Government of Jamaica, 2012)

The policy’s five goals are:

1. All Jamaicans make wise choices about becoming parents and make parenting a priority.
All Jamaican children are loved, nurtured and protected instinctively and unconditionally by their parents.

Each parent understands and applies positive practices in effective parenting.

An enabling institutional framework exists to support parenting.

The principles and implications of effective parenting are communicated to the public in user-friendly ways that enable comprehension of the material.

The policy document states that it is Jamaica’s first attempt at codifying a broad national understanding of parenting issues and at stating its commitments to strengthen and improve support services nationally. It also states that it lays the foundation for future activities and provides guidelines to sectors and agencies for moving forward in the development of annual operational plans. Policy objectives include defining and communicating a common framework for effective parenting and parenting practices (outlined in a user-friendly Parenting Charter); identifying, mobilising and coordinating national stakeholders and resources for promoting and supporting effective parenting; providing a platform for advocacy; laying the foundation for a National Plan of Action on Parenting Support; defining a coordinated legal framework; and increasing the use of effective parenting strategies. The extensive research on parenting, mostly from local researchers, provides the background to policy development.

At the same time, the ECC developed Jamaica’s first National Strategic Plan (NSP) for ECD 2008–2013 through a consultative process (Early Childhood Commission, 2008). The NSP had seven strategic objectives, placed in life cycle sequence. As such, parenting was the first of the strategic objectives, and activities to achieve this objective aimed to improve the access to and quality of early childhood parent support programmes. This was done through the development of a national parent support strategy and the establishment of parenting standards. As with the parenting policy, though initiated by the ECC, the parenting strategy and standards were not limited to parents of children under the age of 8 years.

The National Parenting Strategy consists of parenting programmes delivered through Parents’ Places. A Parents’ Place is a familiar neighbourhood place which welcomes and supports all parents and families to raise their children well. The concept encourages the use of existing buildings in communities to offer variable and flexible services, rather than expending limited resources on new buildings. These buildings could be located at or linked to a wide range of public or private services, such as health clinics, schools, libraries, social service agencies or churches. There are three types of Parents’ Places:

- **Level I** makes information available to parents.
- **Level II** also offers parenting support training programmes by trained facilitators.
- **Level III** also has the facility for specialist referral services.

Six parenting programme standards were identified. These addressed the physical environment, programme design (content and duration), programme administration, human resources, programme materials and programme monitoring and evaluation. Existing parenting programmes were encouraged to apply to become Parents’ Places.

**Implementation challenges**

Policy development must be supported by a plan for policy implementation. As the ECC could not be responsible for implementation of the policy for all age groups, the establishment of a National Parenting Support Commission (NPSC), constituted similarly to the ECC, was recommended. The NPSC’s Board of Commissioners includes representatives from key ministries, the private sector, the faith-based community, the newly established National PTA of Jamaica, and NGOs. The NPSC is also legally empowered to advise the Minister on parenting matters; coordinate, monitor and evaluate existing parenting programmes; and promote the creation of new programmes to meet identified needs. The NPSC is currently establishing...
Parents’ Places in primary schools across the country, while the ECC is establishing Parents’ Places in the early childhood sector.

Implementation of the Parents’ Places strategy has been challenging, due to human resource limitations; many communities, while able to identify a physical location, have been unable to identify trained parenting facilitators functioning in a voluntary capacity and do not have the resources to pay such professionals. As a result, Parents’ Places have been most successful where there are government institutions with established staff, such as schools.

Despite these challenges, Jamaica remains one of the few countries to have developed a national parent support policy. The drivers of policy development were the existence of a body of local research identifying the need for parenting support, and an institutional anchor that was supportive of policy development (ECC). Together, these also promoted policy implementation, particularly through the establishment of an institution designated to this function (NPSC). Implementation of the parenting policy is still in its early stages and will need to be evaluated over the next few years.

References