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## OPINION PIECE

### **Global Day of Parents: “The effects of the pandemic on all family life indicates the need for a holistic, ecological approach to intervention” – UP expert**

*By Dr Liana le Roux, senior lecturer and programme manager of the MSW Play-based Intervention in the Department of Social Work and Criminology at the University of Pretoria. Global Day of Parents is commemorated annually on 1 June.*

The family forms the immediate environment in which people, including the most vulnerable members of society, receive care, support and protection. The Global Day of Parents is observed annually on 1 June, and highlights the importance of the family as a basic unit of society.

It is widely accepted that stable families are at the core of strong societies, whether it's a nuclear family (parents and their biological children), a single-parent household, a polygamous family, a family formed through cohabitation, a grandparent- or child-headed household or a multi-generational family. The family unit is where the basic needs of food, shelter, clothing and safety are met. Within this environment, members can experience nurturing, and develop a sense of identity and belonging.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unexpected phenomenon that has placed South African families in unknown territory. Amid uncertainties and threats related to the transmission of the virus, the much-needed measures by government to curb the spread of infections brought about drastic change in people's lives.

We are well aware of the frustrations of people who are confined to their property for most of the day – not being able to move around freely to go to work, socialise with friends and family, visit local shops, or to attend school, university or practise extramural activities. In an unprecedented situation, changes in family life involved members being in close proximity for most of the day, parents having to assume responsibility for their children's schooling and, for many, social isolation when living alone or in institutions such as old-age homes.

Without doubt, the effects of COVID-19 have brought about immense challenges. Many parents, caregivers and/or breadwinners are confronted daily with uncertainties related to employment, possible dismissal, their ability to earn a living wage, access to financial or other material support, and the immediate and long-term economic impact of the pandemic, among others.

Unexpected changes and uncertainties affect the social and emotional well-being of all members of a family, including children. Children depend on adults – whether they are parents, caregivers, grandparents, older siblings or member/s of the extended family – for their physical, socio-emotional and educational growth and development. The pandemic presents a significant challenge to parents and caregivers to create a nurturing home environment while having to cope with their own uncertainties and stress.

For most South African families, the pandemic affects their entire livelihood and, too often, the safety and survival of family members, and has aggravated the adverse circumstances that a large percentage of these families have experienced for most of their lives. This includes poverty, unemployment, HIV and Aids, poor housing, crime, substance abuse, domestic and gender-based violence, and child abuse.

Media images of large numbers of people waiting in line for the distribution of food parcels and for access to clean drinking water highlighted the social and economic inequality in South Africa. Sadly, COVID-19 also highlights the many social ills in South African families and society, as shown by reports of the increase in calls to helplines with regard to domestic violence and abuse. In such situations, women and children are especially vulnerable, and an increase in gender-based violence and child abuse may become evident. Whether these problems flow from family stressors related to the pandemic or are existing family patterns worsened due to the pandemic may become clear only in future.

For social workers and other service professionals, the wide-ranging effects of the pandemic on all aspects of family life and well-being indicates the need for a holistic, ecological approach to intervention. Government, the private sector, welfare organisations, educational institutions and volunteers must work together towards enhancing the health, livelihoods, and the socio-emotional well-being of families amid the challenge of stretched resources. The African concept of *ubuntu* motivates us to look out for and support one another in every way possible.

Interventions must be implemented with the recognition that not all families have the same needs or access to the same resources. Whereas many find themselves in dire situations, they also have strengths that can be tapped into. A strengths-perspective is important considering the projections that the pandemic is expected to continue over the next months and the effects may be felt for years to come.

While social work services may have a strong focus on material and psychosocial support, crisis intervention and helping families to work through traumatic experiences to address the immediate effects of the pandemic, prevention and early-intervention services should not be overlooked. Developmental social work with its focus on social and economic development asks of social workers to seek opportunities for services such as family strengthening and skills development to empower families to move towards optimal socio-economic functioning beyond the present COVID-19 crisis.

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