

### 3. Parenting behaviours and approaches

This chapter explores the following parenting behaviours and approaches: parenting style, the home learning environment, family relationships, health-related parenting behaviours and extreme parenting behaviours. The evidence from the literature suggests that a strong and secure attachment with parents is a significant predictor of improved child outcomes. Similarly, an authoritative parenting style, which combines a high level of warmth with firmness in setting boundaries, and a supportive home learning environment can help with school readiness and provide children with a strong foundation on which to develop their cognitive, emotional and behavioural skills.

#### a. Parenting Style

Stark differences have been reported between the parenting style of high-income and low-income families and these are associated with children's outcomes in later life. Maternal warmth and sensitivity, as well as parental responsiveness, have been identified in one study as significant factors in child development, accounting for 11 per cent of the gaps in numeracy and literacy in middle-income and low-income families, as well as nearly 20 per cent of the gaps in language acquisition and vocabulary in children.<sup>183</sup> 'Positive parenting', which includes a high level of warmth, low levels of harsh discipline, firmness in setting boundaries and engagement with the child in activities that foster learning and development, can improve children's outcomes.<sup>101</sup>

The way parents engage and communicate with their children is integral to their parenting style. In one study conducted in the United States, researchers found significant differences in the level of conversation and use of words in low and high-income families.<sup>79</sup> Children from families on welfare only heard approximately 600 words an hour, whilst children from high-income families heard over 2,100 words in one hour. It was estimated that by age three, children from poorer families heard 30 million less words. However, critiques of this study argued that there were flaws in the methodology employed, an ethnocentric bias (perception of others influenced by one's own culture) and a lack of an apparent use of a theory of language in the study. Similarly, another study conducted in the United States found that mothers with high educational qualifications tailored children's activities in an age appropriate manner which is more developmentally inclined to the child's learning ability (for example, selecting books to read based on the reading ability of the child), compared to mothers with lower educational attainment.<sup>95</sup>

Parents who invest time reading to their children are likely to have children with more extensive vocabularies.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, a secure attachment in infancy enhances social, cognitive and emotional skills in later life.<sup>162</sup>