Parenting 1-2-3: Zimbabwean Mothers' Expression of Maternal Warmth and Leadership in Masvingo Urban

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Abstract
This study examined Zimbabwean mothers' expression of maternal warmth as leaders of their young children aged one to three years in Masvingo urban. The study was informed by Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory. The study used a phenomenological descriptive survey design with an open-ended questionnaire and focus group interviews with thirty-eight purposefully selected mothers as data collection methods. The design facilitated to bring to the surface deep issues and to make the voices of the mother participants heard. To make sense of the collected data, the researchers applied the grounded theory of data analysis to identify five themes under which the results were presented and discussed. This study established that Zimbabwean mothers understand the provision of maternal warmth to young children as being extremely important. The mothers positively expressed warmth and love to their children under three years of age within a cultural perspective. The study established that the mothers created an upward parenting spiral by prioritizing things that made children feel loved and happy. It was established that children who feel loved were autonomous, happy, cooperative and lovable. Regarding strictness, the study found that mothers were firm and fare, displaying an authoritative parenting style where children's needs and support were met. This study recommends that parental education on expressing warmth to ensure holistic development for children aged one to three year is needed. The government through the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare should step up efforts to help capacitate mothers with entrepreneurship skills for them to acquire resources needed for their young children.
Keywords: parenting spiral, maternal warmth, mother, leadership, authoritative parenting

Background of the Study

Nurturing care includes availing child protection from violence, responsive interactions, and opportunities to learn. Mothers are the main providers of warmth and care for children from birth to three years (Smith et al., 2018). However, the phenomenon has not been well investigated in Zimbabwe as a context of child development. Maternal warmth pertains to the quality of the affectional bond between a mother and her child (Leo, 2008; Etikin, 2014; Wang, 2008). Babies and young children need mothers who are emotionally available and nurturing. The practice involves mother attributes such as responsive mother-child interaction, provision of learning opportunities and warmth (Smith et al., 2018). Maternal warmth also involves the physical and verbal behaviours mothers use to express their feelings. The affectional bond between mothers and their children has been found to be associated with children's positive developmental outcomes in Western cultures (Leo, 2008; Cheah et al., 2015). This is debated by researchers regarding the differences in cultural meanings of maternal warmth, particularly among African families (Etikin, 2014; Cherry, 2018). Since maternal warmth is associated with children's positive developmental outcomes, it should be realised that as developmentally appropriate practice, children thrive and develop in an environment of warm relationships (Mcdowell & Valentino, 2018; Henninger, 2016). Generally, maternal love and acceptance such as social touch, have been found to be associated with children's prosocial behaviour and high academic performance. Such children were also found to be less aggressive (Etikin, 2014; Cheah et al., 2015). Consistently, Social touch has been found to be a powerful force in human development, shaping social reward, attachment, cognitive, communication, and emotional regulation from infancy throughout the life span (Cascio, Moore and McGlone, 2019),

Although maternal warmth was seen to be beneficial to a child's development, expression of maternal warmth tends to be culturally relative (Wang, 2008; Juang, Qin, & Park, 2013). Literature shows that Asian mothers are often characterized as low in expressing love to their children and harsh in their parenting. The impression was made prominent by Amy Chua's "Tiger mother" controversy (Juang, Qin, & Park, 2013; Cheah et al., 2015). The Asian mothers' lower rate of expressing warmth is viewed to be attributed to their lesser valuing of maternal warmth compared to European or American mothers (Cheah et al., 2015). However, these findings were taken in contexts outside Africa, including in Zimbabwe. Henceforth, it is the focus of this study to explore Zimbabwean mothers' expression of warmth in their leadership role to their children in order to feel the gap in research and advance the frontiers of the existing body of knowledge.

Children who experience warm maternal care show traits such as positive early stimulation; confidence, high self-esteem, autonomy and self-efficacy (Cheah et al., 2015; Hill, 2016; Chan et al. 2017). Good communication skills and adjustment in school environments are also seen to manifest (Jennings, 2008). Mother's expression of warmth goes

hand in hand with mother leadership in the context of child development such as the home. Mother leadership in the home is a process of influencing children to archive set goals with warmth and positive regard. It involves a mother's ability to support and inspire their young children to achieve positive development (Jennings, 2008). As the first leaders in a child's life, mothers usually show profound love to their children. They possess key skills in childcare such as patience, organisation, and flexibility. Most mothers embrace diversity and communicate with their young children affectionately providing positive role models (Cheah et al., 2015).

Theoretical Framework

The study was tethered on Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. According to the theory, a child is embedded in a complex network which needs to be understood well (Donald et al., 2010; Santrock, 2014). In his theory, Bronfenbrenner explains how the environment affects a child's growth and development. The key components of the Ecological Systems Theory are Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, and Chronosystem (Santrock, 2014). Disturbance or mis-dance in one level may result in negative ripple effects, for example, deprived maternal warmth and guidance. Figure 1 below shows the visual interconnectedness of the Ecological Systems Theory.
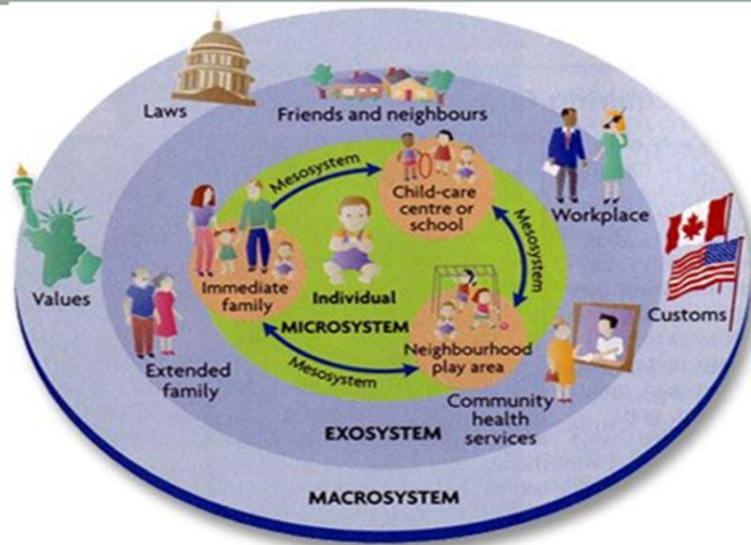

Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory
(in Berk & Roberts, 2009, p. 28)

Regarding the problem statement, developmental deficits appear in the first year of life and are substantial by three years. Emotional security, social competence and ability to learn are dependent on early childhood experiences. Children growing up in a warm and nurturing environment derive long term benefits (Cascio et al., 2019). Contrary, children from insecure disrupted backgrounds who experience emotional deprivation and lack of warmth, may develop significant delay indicators. Though researchers have reported varying parenting activities of warmth expression (Cheah et al.; 2015; Cascio et al., 2019), there are limited reported researches carried out in Zimbabwe.

The purpose of this study

The purpose of this study was to explore ways in which Zimbabwean mothers, as leaders, express maternal warmth and the impact on child development. The study was guided by the following research questions:
- o How do Zimbabwean mothers perceive and express maternal warmth to their young children?
- o Why is it important for mothers to express maternal warmth toward their children?

Research Methodology

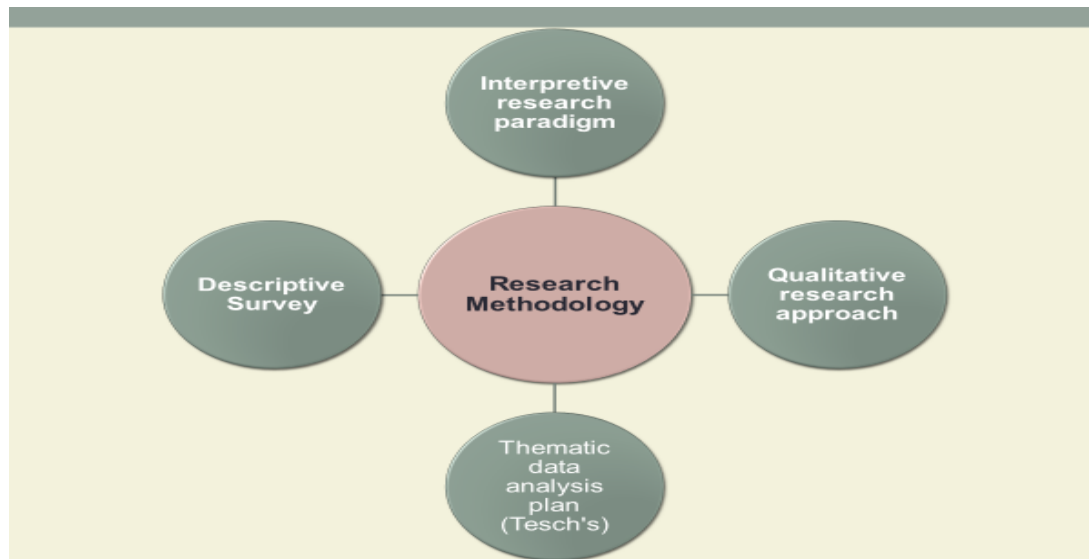Figure 2 below gives a summary of the methodology applied in this study.

Figure 3: Research Methodology

The interpretive research paradigm was the philosophy which guided the study. Interpretivists posit that information is better understood in the perception of the participant (Creswell, 2014). The study adopted a phenomenological descriptive survey design in order to explore and present Zimbabwe mother's expression of warmth and its impact on child development. The phenomenological approach was used to highlight the specific ways mothers show warmth to their children. One of the advantages of the phenomenological design was that it allowed the researchers to gain an understanding of social phenomena from participants' perspectives in their natural settings (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; De Vos et al., 2011).

Sample and Sampling
The sample comprised thirty-eight (38) purposively selected mothers with children aged one to three years in Masvingo urban. In this study, purposive sampling was found to be more realistic than other sampling methods in terms of time, effort and cost needed in finding informants as propounded by (Tuckman and Monetti, 2011; Bernard, 2012). to the researchers

Research Instruments
Data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire adapted from Cheah et al. (2015), and focus group interviews on mother-child interactions. Creswell (2014) argues that, capturing what people say in their own words is the most important contribution of qualitative research to understanding human behaviour and perception. The advantages of using focus group interviews in this study were that it allowed the researchers to adapt the questions as necessary, clarifying doubt and ensure that the questions were well understood by repeating or rephrasing the questions (De Vos et al., 2011; Patton, 2012). Another advantage of using focus group interviews in this study lies in the quality of the data obtained (Tuckman and Monetti, 2011). This implies that the participants were able to seek further clarification on some of the responses through probing. Open-ended questionnaires enabled the researchers to collect large amounts of data in a short space of time as the mothers in the study were all literate (De Vos et al., 2011).

Data Collection Procedures
To allow for the collection of as much relevant information an initial visit to preschools and baby clinics in Masvingo urban was undertaken to identify 38 mothers with children one to three years. Days the mothers were to be met were also noted. A letter addressing participants was used as a cover note for the questionnaire an focus group interviews. This was one other means of trying to develop a supportive atmosphere for the fieldwork. Appointments with mothers for focus group interviews were made in advance. Before interviews mother completed the questionnaire. This allowed the researchers to obtain a 100% return rate.

Trustworthiness
Trustworthiness was achieved by conducting a pilot study. The processes enabled the researchers to ascertain the reliability of data sourced.

Data Analysis
Data from the 38 open-ended questionnaires and the five focus group interviews were explored. Themes and descriptive statistics were used to present the results. Data were analysed using ground theory and themes to determine the views of the mothers (De Vos et al., 2011). Vignettes were employed to analyse and present data (Cohen & Manion, 2010). The analysis of data warranted quantitative processes. Therefore, this study employed the qualitative means of presenting and analysing information.

Ethical Considerations
The researchers respected the right to dignity, protection from harm and privacy of the participants. The purpose of the study was explained to all the participants. The mother participants were assured of confidentiality, and where names were necessary only pseudo names were used. Consent forms were administered to the mother participants. Participation in the study was voluntary.

Findings and Discussion
Figure 3 below shows themes that were used to analyse and discuss the findings of the study.
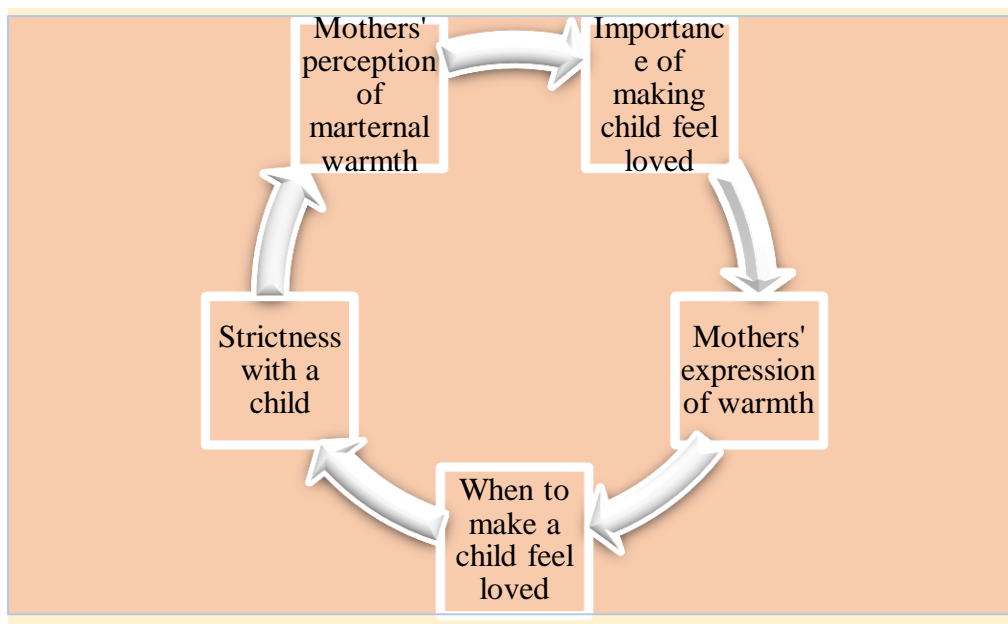

Figure 2: Themes derived from the findings of the research

All the mothers who participated in the study had ages ranging from 25 to 40 years. Hence, there was a good representation of both young and experienced mothers to deliberate on the parenting research problem. All the mothers were also literate. They could read and write in both Shona – the mother tongue, and in English.

Theme1: **Mothers' perception of maternal warmth**
Mothers understood maternal warmth as the love and warm relationship they share with their young children. The mothers reported maternal warmth as breastfeeding the child with happiness and giving good food to the child. Some mothers reported that it is carrying the child at the back or nicely cuddling him or her. Mothers, M3, and M6 added their voices by viewing that:

> *Maternal warmth is the love and affection given to the child. It is everything you do for the child with care and love. It acts like bathing the child, caring her on the back, singing to her, feeding her and protecting the child from danger and from hunger.*

> *Maternal warmth is when a mother praises her child, hug the child and smile at her. It's encouraging the child and soft reprimand to let the child know what is good and bad. A child needs to be loved by her parents especially the mother.*

Mothers also highlighted that maternal warmth is the quality of love, attachment and the affectional bond between a mother and her child. It involves a mother mostly being there for her child physically and emotionally. Mother M17 pointed out that:

> *It is the affection I give my child, the love I show her through my physical actions. How I talk to my child should show my verbal behaviour of affection so that my child will feel loved. I would say it is the warm bond I create between my child and me.*

The sentiments of the mother show that mothers understand what maternal warmth mean. These results are consistent with those of Cheah, Leung, and Zhou (2013) who found that mothers gave priority to attending to their children's physical and basic needs. Similar results were also found by Quin (2009) and Cascio, et al. (2019) that mothers in the particular studies worked hard and sacrificed much to provide their children with food and basic needs.

Theme 2: Importance of making a child feel loved
Regarding how important it is for a child to feel loved and cared for when interacting with her mother. All the mothers expressed that it was extremely important to love a child. The following vignettes illustrate the mothers' perceptions:

> *If the child feels loved, he will develop self confidence and trust. The child will trust the world and perform better in all aspects of life (M01)*

> *Because if I don't show the child the love and care she or he might be abused and would not be able to share what would have transpired in her life (M03).*

> *It is important to make a child feel loved because warm interaction plays a crucial role in intellectual development. A mother needs to allow the child freedom of speech so as to know his or her thoughts. It is important to strengthen the relationship or attachment bond (M07).*

> *For a child to feel loved is extremely important to the child and me. The child develops a strong bond with me, which is important to me in caring for her and also important for the child's development in all areas of development (M25).*

The perceptions expressed above by the mothers show that they understood the importance of providing maternal warmth to their young children. In the mothers' view, making their children feel loved and cared for helps the child to develop socially, emotionally, physically and intellectually. The mothers' perceptions might imply that in later life their children would be able to develop prosocial behaviour and positive social awareness and interaction patterns with peers (Selman, 2003). The participants agreed that making a child feel loved and cared for was of utmost importance. To further express their sentiments on the importance of making a child feel loved and develop interpersonal relationships, some of the mothers had this to say:

> *It is extremely important to make a child feel loved, because by making my child feel loved, she or he will be proud to be my child, will be confident and her self-esteem will be raised. My child will also listen to me knowing the mother loves her (M34).*

> *Making a child feel loved helps him to develop a sense of belonging so that he feels free and autonomous. The child develops confidence and trust. He can talk to parents and other elders without fear, even in the case of trouble (M24).*

> *Yes, a child needs to feel loved; it is important. It is for my child to develop trust in me and for my child to develop self-confidence, to be secure, develop a sense of belonging. The child learns to love others from me his mother (M16).*

> *Loving my child or expressing warmth to him is extremely important for the development of the child's personality, prosocial behaviour, social competence, sense of security, self-efficacy, self-confidence, and autonomy, you name it. The child develops holistically in a thriving environment full of love and care (M28).*

Consistent with the view of other mothers, M20 pointed out that sometimes she needed to balance, children need to be loved so that they develop self-esteem and self-efficacy and a sense of self-respect. Another participant stated that by showing love to her child, she modelled love and peace to him so that he will grow to be a loving person. The results

agree with findings in the literature. Chapman and Campbell (2012) view that children who feel loved to grow to be loving persons. Feeling loved and connected for a child is the emotional fuel that gets them through the day (Leo, 2008; Etikin, 2014). When mothers prioritise doing things that make their children feel loved they create an upward parenting spiral. When children feel loved they feel happy and are more positive, more cooperative, more loving, and more lovable (Leo, 2008). Literature shows that failure to give children sufficient love creates a downward parenting spiral (Leo, 2008; Etikin, 2014). Children who do not experience love and feel loved, become unhappy, negative, uncooperative, unloving, and less lovable (Leo, 2008). On the same issue, Chapman and Campbell (2012) proffer that doing things for children (acts of service) is only one of the ways children feel loved. Although mothers reported that they loved their children, a mother needs to ascertain that her child feels loved.

Theme 3: Mothers' expression of warmth
When participants were asked what exactly they do to make their children feel loved and cared for some said that they played with their children. Others reported that they told their children that they love them. Four participants had this to say:

> To make my child feel loved I prepare his favorite dish and we eat together; talk with a friendly voice and a smile on the face; go to a free and private place together, and share all stories that are interesting (M23).

> What I do is that I provide basic needs, for instance, giving enough food for adequate nutrition. I give the child time or an opportunity to share her needs and ideas. I allow my child the freedom to say what he wants (M33).

> I give attention to my child, leading and educating him. I want my child to learn from me how to love, so, I give him basic needs and protection. If he is not happy, I cuddle him and carry him on my back, you see. It is something I do conscience (M13).

> To make my child feel loved and cared for, I buy gifts for her. I express my affection to the child, tell her that I love her. If my child does something good, I motivate her by telling her what she did is good. I allow my child to ask questions and I answer her truthfully so that she develops trust. It is something I do consciously and unconscientiously (M19).

Almost all mothers who participated in the study conformed the above sentiments that a young child can be made to feel loved through providing him or her with basic physiological and psychological needs. Findings established that warmth when experienced makes the child feel loved and cared for. The findings are consistent with those found by Smith et al., (2018), in their Binational – Zimbabwe and Brazil study, that young children need responsive care, which includes responsive caregiver-child interactions, provision of basic needs and opportunities to learn for them to feel loved and cared for. Consistently, the above sentiments resonate with Rohner et al., (2005) and Cheah et al., (2013) who found that comfort, nurturance, and support, are measures of maternal warmth which often focus on mother's physical and verbal expressions.

It should be noted that most of the participants submitted that they portray actions, behaviours, and models to make their children feel loved and cared for. Observations during focus group interviews showed that this was done within a 'Shona' cultural perspective. Mother M30 pointed out:

> To make my child feel loved and cared for, I play together with the child and carry her on my back. I tell her how beautiful and important she is. I tell the child folk tells "ngano" with moral values. I sing lullabies and take walks with my child. Sometimes we do little pieces of work together, like feeding the chickens and watering the garden. I model giving love to someone for the child to learn. I always give my child unconditional love.

The type of maternal warmth expressed above by the participant model Shona cultural practices of child care. Thus, the child would learn to give love and feel loved. Bandura (2008) believes that behaviour can be learned without necessarily being engaged in that kind of behaviour. According to Bandura, behaviour does not need to receive direct reinforcement for it to be sustained (Mwamwenda, 2010). Children hence learn to give and receive love through maternal warmth. They later show acts of love when its least expected. Cherry (2014) highlighted views that concur with Bandura's theory that children can learn new information and behaviours by watching their mothers. This is referred to as observational learning (Bandura, 2010). Consistent with these findings, in their research Cheah et al., (2015) revealed a significant overall effect of culture in mother's expression of maternal warmth to their children.

Experience shows that Zimbabwean mothers prioritize meeting their children's physiological needs- that is well fed and warmly dressed.

Theme 4: When to make a child feel loved and cared for
Submitting views on when a mother made her child feel loved and cared for, participants gave different incidences and times they make their children feel loved. Most of the results show that children were shown love during homework; when disappointed by friends during play; during weekends and school holidays; when the child performed well at school; when the child was sick; and during the mother's absence. Other participants gave the following responses:

I make my child feel loved and cared for any time I want. Sometimes I do it unconsciously. It can be when my child is feeling lonely; when he is requesting her needs; during his birthday; when he is hurt. I can say its every time. To be physically and emotionally there is what I do for my child (M35).

A child should be made to feel loved and cared for if, for example, he is hungry; if he is alone or is afraid of something. I give my child a special meal every Sunday evening, such as peanut butter rice and roasted chicken. I also show warmth to my child when I play with him, or take him for a walk to the grocery shops. I make sure I am always there for him (M26).

When the child is not well, I take good care of him and make him feel loved. I attend to my child and seek medical help if needed. When the child is not sure, or confident of himself, I show love. When he performs a task well, even if he fails, I just appreciate the effort(M22).

Still deliberating on time, a mother makes her child feel loved, most mothers indicated that they would show love to their children when they are in trouble, or they are sick. Others said that they would make sure to show love when they are talking to their children by making sure the tone of voice is correct, and there is a smile on the face. It was revealed that children need love when they need assistance, for them to develop trust. Participants M20 and M18 and M34 posited that:

I give my child warmth when she is crying or has fallen during play. I carry the child to comfort her. When the child shows that she needs food or attention, I will leave whatever I will be doing and attend to my child. I try what I can to provide for the child with my limited material and financial resources.

I make the child feel loved during Christmas time, buying new clothes, cake and other gifts for the child. On her birthday if I have money, I buy her a cake, because children like cakes. With cakes, she feels loved and cared for. If the child is attending and ECD class, I make sure that the child always has a new uniform at the beginning of every term. I visit her grandmother with her often because she loves traditional stories her grandmother tells her.

Oh! I make my child feel loved many times. For example, during bedtime I read him a bedtime story and talk about the characters — every time I bath and dress my child. When my child shows good manners, I praise him and make him feel good.

The sentiments expressed by the participants reveal that mothers make their children loved at different times and occasions. The mothers' examples show a diversity of times catering for the uniqueness of the mother-child dyads. The above assertions are in line with findings in the United States of America by Camras et al. (2008) and Quin (2009) who established some significant positive expression of maternal warmth and its importance as well as the degree of maternal warmth expressions. Camras et al. (2008) also established the importance of, and why and how mothers expressed love to their young children. These findings are complemented by Cascio et al., (2019) who found that social touch is a powerful force in human development. Social touch fosters social shaping, attachment, cognitive development, communication, and emotional regulation of a child from infancy and throughout the life span.

In the process of expressing warm and providing leadership to their young children a mother knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way to her child (Hill, 2016). Figure 3 below common highlights traits shown by mothers when expressing maternal warmth as the first leaders of their children.
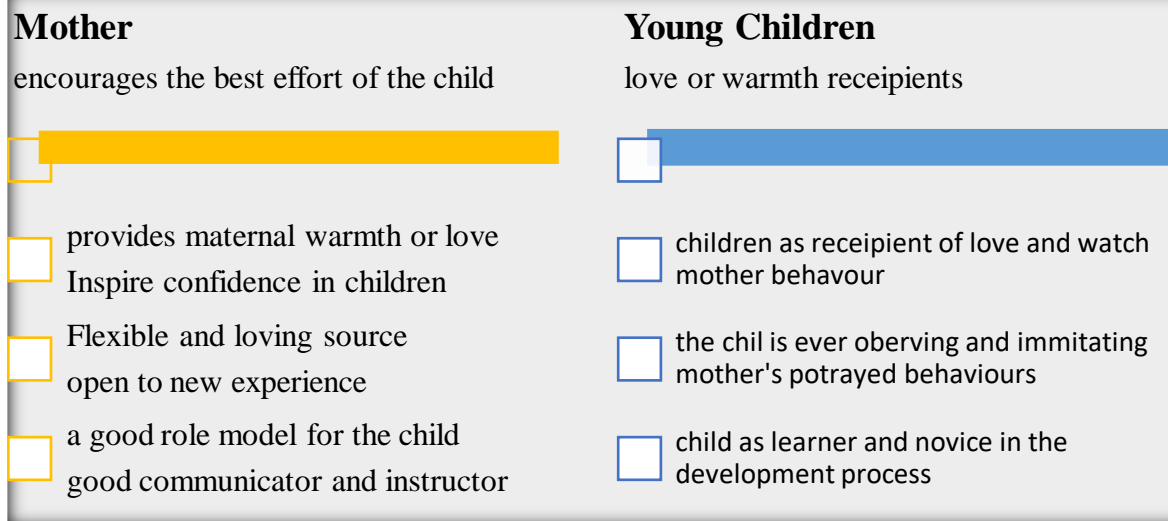
Mother

encourages the best effort of the child

provides maternal warmth or love
Inspire confidence in children

Flexible and loving source
open to new experience

a good role model for the child
good communicator and instructor

Young Children

love or warmth receipients

children as recipient of love and watch mother behavour

the chil is ever oberving and immitating mother's potrayed behaviours

child as learner and novice in the development process

Figure 3: **Mother's Expression of Warmth and Leadership Role**

As indicated in the figure showing results above, maternal warmth is enshrined in all the highlighted mothers' behaviours. These behaviours are responded to by the children's reciprocal actions. Cascio et al., (2019) in their longitudinal studies found that during infancy and early childhood, social touch and its neural, behavioural, and physiological contingencies contribute to reinforcement-based learning. It also impacts a variety of developmental trajectories.

Theme 5: Strictness with a Child

Within the context of fostering maternal warmth issues, mothers were asked how important it is for them to be strict with their children. Results showed that most of the mothers – twenty-seven out of thirty-eight, expressed that it was extremely important for them to be strict with their young children. Seven mothers reported that it was important to be strict; the remaining three mothers were of the view that it was not important at all to be strict to a child. The following were some of the reason given by mothers who proffered that it was extremely important to be strict to a child:

> *Being strict shapes the child's behaviour and makes the child to be focussed on what is expected of him by the mother. Because it is the role of the mother or parent to shape the child. Being strict shapes the child the way you want (M38).*
> *The child needs discipline and needs to be given the right way of living. For example, I am giving the child rules that need to be followed in the family from early childhood. You see, as it is said that you cannot teach 'an old dog' new tricks, so I have to bend the tree while it is still young. I teach my child the right path (M36).*
>
> *It is extremely important because that is where you develop good values like unhu/ubuntu in your child. The child will grow up with good manners and will not shame me (M10)*

In continuing to give their reasons for viewing that it is extremely important to be strict in parenting, some of the mothers reported that children need to know the boundaries of every situation; they need to engage in activities they are told to do in a specified time and have to listen to their parents. M14 emphasised that the mother should see to it that her strictness does not make the child become afraid of her.

Mothers who reported that it was not at all important to be strict to a child gave the following reasons:
> *It is not necessary for me to be strict to a child because I want her to be a good child when she grows up, a child with unhu, a loving child, hardworking, and a child who respect other people, one who feels for others. I want her to be a better child (M13).*
>
> *There is no need to be strict because a child should not be distracted, as she grows she learns from mistakes. You just redirect a child's behaviour, showing love and teaching her the right way (M19).*

An analysis of the results shows that generally, Zimbabwean mothers although they love their children they are strict with then. The sentiments expressed may fall into the authoritative type of parenting, for both mothers who found

strictness to be extremely imported in child care and those who found strictness to a young child as not important at all. Cherry (2018) avers that authoritative parenting focuses on balance in a child's development. In the approach, a mother shows reasonable demands and high responsiveness. Results in this study show that, although
the mothers might have had high expectations for their children; they had earlier reported meeting their children's needs and support. The mother participants stated providing their children love and warmth, in addition to limits and fair discipline. These results echo Cherry (2018) and Leo's, (2008) earlier findings. Regarding Zimbabwean mothers expression of warmth, the results show traits of most of the mothers in their parenting of young children. This implies that the mothers view commanding and self-confidence as likely to draw children's respect and trust.

Conclusion

This study provided documented results on Zimbabwean mothers' various ways of expressing maternal warmth to their children aged one to three years. Results of this study can guide future efforts in advancing knowledge of maternal warmth in different cultural contexts. Information collected confirms that Zimbabwean mothers express maternal warm and love to their young children from a cultural perspective. They provided expression of warmth in ways such as: being responsive; loving and bonding; carrying the child on the back; providing the child's needs; engaging in minor house chores; visiting grandmothers; telling the children folk tells; modelling prosocial behaviour; and being firm and fare with the child. It is significant, for this study, to point out that, even though the mothers provided warmth to their children, there are factors (such as limited material and financial resources) which militate against some mothers' full expression and provision of maternal warmth. The findings based on the five themes that were identified revealed that Zimbabwean mothers express maternal warmth to their children within a cultural perspective with a bias towards authoritative parenting style.

Recommendations

Basing on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

➢ Zimbabwean mothers should be educated of the enhanced need to express maternal warmth to their children aged one to three years to ensure holistic child development.
➢ The mothers should be engaged in parental education via different avenues including the national television.
➢ The government through the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare should step up efforts to help capacitate mothers with entrepreneurship skills for them to acquire resources needed for their young children.
➢ More research on the parental expression of warmth involving different cultural groups in Africa and other spaces globally should be undertaken.

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