



OPPORTUNITY

7

Build simple, loving connections for every child

DECEMBER 2018

## Connecting South Africans around motherhood: Three strategic insights that have shaped the mission of Embrace

*Embrace is a national movement to help create connected, supported and celebrated motherhood journeys for all women in South Africa. In this learning brief, we explore key lessons that helped Embrace evolve from a programmatic, city-wide initiative into a national movement for motherhood.*

The transition into parenthood is a vulnerable time for women. Between 9% and 21% of new mothers experience depression during pregnancy or after the birth of their baby, and it has been shown that a mother's mental health can negatively affect the development of her child<sup>1</sup>. The 'First 1 000 Days' describes the time from conception to a child's second birthday when a baby's brain develops faster than at any other time in a person's life. What happens during this time plays a vital role in helping children grow up to be happy, healthy and well-adjusted<sup>2</sup>.

Support from others can help to lower feelings of depression and anxiety in a new mother by boosting her sense of self-esteem and competence as a parent, and by making her feel less isolated<sup>3</sup>. Such support has also been shown to reduce preterm births<sup>4</sup>, and to increase the length of time women breastfeed,

as well as the length of time they breastfeed without introducing any other types of liquids or foods<sup>5</sup>. Given that in South Africa, 27% of children under five years of age are nutritionally stunted<sup>6</sup>, supporting new mothers is an important strategy to strengthen human capital development in the country.

To reduce the vulnerability of small children, more than services and programmes are required, a societal response is needed. Once mothers and babies leave post-natal clinics at six weeks of age, they only visit health services for vaccinations or when they are sick. We therefore need to create networks of care and support for new mothers and young children in communities. Such connections, including connections to modest opportunities, help to build lifelong resilience in children.



**“Motherhood is something that should matter to all of us, not just individual mothers. Embrace holds society to account for the lack of real social structures of support and services offered to mothers.”**

Rumbi Goredema Görgens, Embrace Operations Manager

1 McLeish, J. & Redshaw, M. 2017. Mothers' accounts of the impact on emotional wellbeing of organised peer support in pregnancy and early parenthood: a qualitative study. *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth*, 17:28. Access at: <https://bmcpregnancychildbirth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12884-017-1220-0>

2 Ilifa Lanbantwana. 2017. The First 1000 Days of Life Factsheet. Access at: <http://ilifalabantwana.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/THE-FIRST-1000-DAYS-OF-LIFE.pdf>

3 McLeish & Redshaw. 2017.

4 Ickovics, J. R., Kershaw, T.S., Westdahl, C., Magriples, U. Massey, Z., Reynolds, H. & Rising, S. S. 2007. Group Prenatal Care and Perinatal Outcomes: A randomized trial. *Obstet Gynecol*, 110(2 PT 1): 333-339. Access at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2276878/>

5 Renfrew, M. J., McCormick, F.M., Wade, A., Quinn, B., & Dowswell, T. 2012. Support for Breastfeeding mothers. Access at: <http://summaries.cochrane.org/CD001141/support-for-breastfeeding-mothers#>

6 Said-Mohamed R., Micklesfield L., Pettifor J., & Norris S. 2015. Has the prevalence of stunting in South African children changed in 40 years? A systematic review. *BMC Public Health* 15(1):1-10.

Embrace is growing a nationwide support network for new mothers – a movement that hopes to represent the voice of mothers in South Africa. Driven by the idea that an ‘Embraced Mother’ raises a thriving child, Embrace has made it its mission to tackle some of the structural and social dynamics that shape the experience of early motherhood.

Structured around Embrace’s three mission areas – to inspire, mobilise and connect – this learning brief shares three strategic approaches that have evolved from pivotal moments in Embrace’s journey. This journey has seen the initiative shift its focus and strategy from one that aimed to programmatically connect and support mothers for the sake of their baby’s development, to a movement that champions the powerful experience and contribution of motherhood first and foremost. Embrace firmly believes that by supporting mothers we empower them to ‘mother’ better, and in so doing, we strengthen the social fabric of South Africa.

## INSPIRE

**Can we elevate the social status of motherhood to one we can all connect to?**

In 2016, Julie Mentor, Project Leader for Embrace, returned from maternity leave feeling overjoyed, but also overwhelmed by the prospect of being a mother for the second time. She dived straight into work by facilitating a session giving mothers from Khayelitsha the opportunity to reflect on their motherhood experiences.

She wanted to run a well-facilitated session, but having been off work for a while, she felt out of place and a little nervous. “In the moment I let my guard down,” shares Julie, “and I asked the women, ‘is anyone else feeling really, really tired today? I was up all night with my baby’...” There were giggles, there were nods, and Julie recalls one woman reaching over and rubbing her back, reassuringly.

“I realised that when I came into this group there were huge differences between us – in a way, everything was separating us – but there was one thing connecting us: the social identity of motherhood,” says Julie. She adds: “But it was not only motherhood, but honest motherhood. We acknowledged the dark parts of being a mother, parts that often lead to postnatal depression, while savouring the good parts, like yearning for our children because they were not there with us, or enjoying the simple act of sipping our tea in a moment of reprieve from the burdensome tasks of motherhood.” Bonding around these



shared experiences, the mothers were able to let their guard down, and the session went on seamlessly from there. It was a strategic breakthrough for Embrace.

Julie realised that if mothers do not recognise the shared motherhood identity in each other, and in their facilitators from the onset, there can be no true community of mothers. There will only be teachers and learners, or mentors and mentees. The golden thread of a shared motherhood identity allows for honesty, which creates a safe space for women for deep listening, empathy and sharing.

Growing from this moment of inspiration, Embrace has since shifted the way in which it views engagements with mothers: the shared identity of motherhood comes first before anything else. While the original model for Embrace<sup>7</sup> had support for mothers at its heart, a focus on babies eclipsed a focus on motherhood.



As a result, some members in the network focused their energies on helping babies, rather than partnering with moms on equal terms. So while the intention of making connections between mothers was to build relationships that can ultimately reshape society around the wellbeing and development of children, the approach fell into a common trap in South Africa – entrenching the power differentials, rather than challenging them.

## MOBILISE

**Can we galvanise around the social identity of motherhood?**



Later in 2016, another simple idea turned out to be a key strategic development for Embrace as a movement.

The idea was for people to spend one hour visiting, spoiling and celebrating moms and nursing staff in maternity wards in public hospitals on Mother’s Day. After a couple of weeks of planning, Embrace mobilised 100 women to visit 490 new moms at 12 Western Cape hospitals. They called the initiative ‘Mother’s Day Connect’. The event not only delighted both the visiting mothers and the moms and nurses in maternity wards, it also captured the public imagination, and led to a number of lasting interpersonal connections between mothers.

<sup>7</sup> Embrace was established in 2013. Then known as Cape Town Embrace, it was positioned as a city-wide initiative aimed to protect and develop the potential of all 75 000 babies born in Cape Town every year. The hope was to connect each child in the city who might otherwise be excluded, to a network of support that links their parents to another caring adult – most likely associated with a faith- or community-based organisation.

'Mother's Day Connect' illustrated to Embrace the potential of creating opportunities for connections to happen spontaneously, leapfrogging some of the awkwardness of engineering one-on-one connections. Up until this stage, the Embrace network worked by connecting vulnerable moms, who were generally identified via non-profit organisations or public clinics with supporters<sup>8</sup>, who were mostly identified via faith-based organisations.

There are many initiatives that use specific days, like Mandela Day, for example, to drive charitable giving, but 'Mother's Day Connect' was never about charity. It was symbolic. It showed that South African women were willing to reflect on the motherhood journeys of other mothers – on a day normally dedicated to celebrating their own motherhood experience. It also showed that they were keen to honour and show support for new mothers.

Both the number of facilities and the number of mothers visited during 'Mother's Day Connect' nearly doubled from 2017 to 2018. In 2017, 400 women visited 27 facilities and 1 520 moms in the Western Cape. In 2018, 774 volunteers visited 49 facilities and 3 000 new moms in eight provinces and 12 new cities.

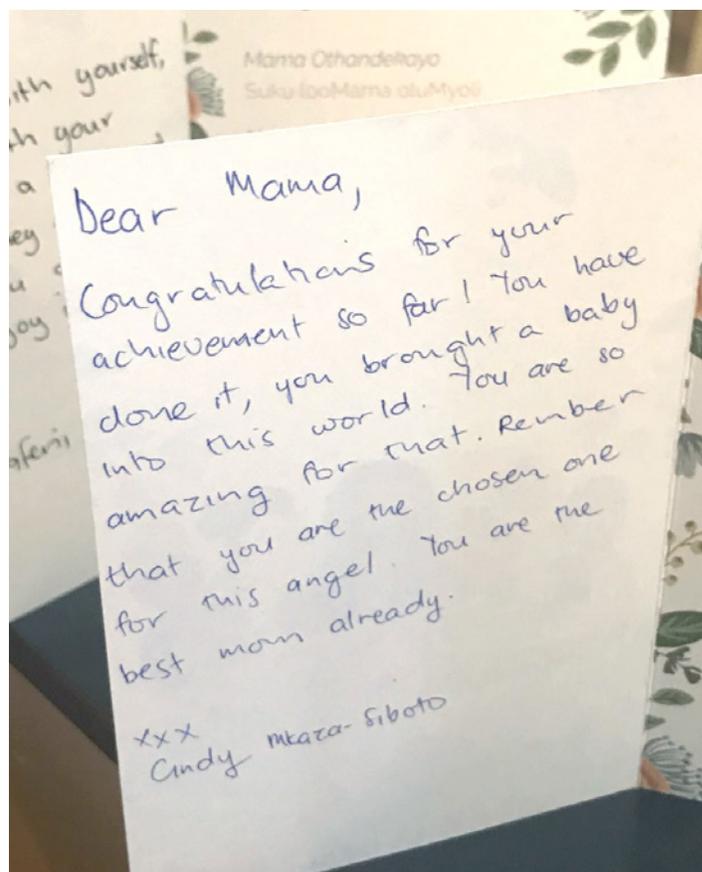


Says Rumbi Goredema Görgens, Operations Manager for Embrace: "To me the 'Mother's Day Connect' call to action felt different from the often commercialised pats on the back that mothers traditionally get on Mother's Day. It felt like another layer of meaning was being added, acknowledging some of the hard realities of motherhood in South Africa, where many new mothers leave the public hospital a day after giving birth, without anyone to support them or to celebrate the birth of their baby".

The continued success of 'Mother's Day Connect' further convinced the Embrace team that the common experiences of motherhood are a societal equaliser, and therefore a relatable mechanism for mobilising a movement.

Next, the team experimented by drawing together diverse groups of mothers around issues affecting the experiences of all South African mothers equally. For example, they rallied support for a public 'nurse-in' at a branch of Edgars to protest against the unfair discrimination against a mother from Mitchell's Plain who nursed her baby in public. More than 300 people signed up to join Embrace through the initiative.

In 2018, Embrace wanted to celebrate the courage of participants in a new social franchise for pre-and post-natal classes<sup>9</sup>, and mobilised its network of mothers to write 93 personalised letters of encouragement to these new mothers within 48 hours – an excellent response rate as most programme implementers will know.



8

Supporters were called 'connectors' at the time.

9

Flourish pre-and post-natal classes are an initiative of the Grow Great Campaign, which aims to drive a national commitment to a stunting-free generation by 2030. Read more about Grow Great and Flourish here: [www.growgreat.co.za](http://www.growgreat.co.za)

# CONNECT

## Can we sustain what connects us to build meaningful relationships?



The original Cape Town Embrace was based on a vision that drew substantially on the concept of social capital<sup>10</sup>, and the potential of increasing the resilience of children and families by connecting Capetonians, across divides, to create new networks through which social capital could be shared.

“We were very optimistic back then,” says Julie. “We knew people would buy into the idea of investing in a child’s life, but that it would be tricky to bring individuals from different socioeconomic statuses together. As we implemented, we saw that there was a sense of inequality in connecting individuals which they found very difficult to bridge in their relationships. It took us a long time to understand how we might attempt to change that dynamic.”

Adds Rumbi: “There is a sense that some social capital is worth more than others. For example, you might think that someone who is a nurse has more expertise to share, or that someone who is rich has more resources to aid babies and mothers. And often people whose perceived value to others is great, or comparatively great, get treated differently.” This awareness and experience of trying to connect people across divides surfaced another key strategy that has shaped Embrace as it is today and guides the Embrace team to continually ask:

How can the Embrace movement redefine thinking about social capital? And how can the movement promote dignity and respect for all members?

One of the most important tools in redefining how social capital is viewed, valued and managed in the movement, is Embrace’s Motherhood Manifesto<sup>11</sup>, a collection of statements about motherhood that underlie how members of the Embrace network relate to one another. The manifesto acknowledges a mother as the expert of her context and her child, and in doing so, gives her the space to share her lessons with confidence and to learn from other mothers.

There are also ways to channel the sharing of monetary or physical forms of social capital to downplay the charitable aspect of giving or sharing. With ‘Mother’s Day Connect’, for example, goods sourced and donated by mothers in higher socioeconomic groups often get handed out by visitor groups who did not necessarily source them. This serves to acknowledge that having access to certain forms of social capital, for instance, being able to source donations from local businesses, does not overshadow other forms of social capital, such as being able to communicate to hospital staff in their mother tongue.

Looking at redefining social capital is part of the spirit in which connection takes place in the network, but Embrace also employs interesting strategies to create opportunities for connection.

For example, Embrace is now in the process of learning how to create network action groups around motherhood. While doing this, it started seeking out stories of motherhood for the purpose of sharing and building a sense of belonging in the network, but the storytelling process has become a much more important strategy in itself.

Embrace found that some of the stories shared in those groups were so private and ‘sacred’ that they could not easily be re-shared in order to build solidarity. However, through the storytelling process, women who have known each other for years were discovering details about each other that they never knew, friendships deepened and actions and attitudes spilled over to other mothers in the community. “When you bring these good and bad moments of motherhood into the light, you can figure out how to solve them for a community bigger than yourself,” says Julie.

In 2017 Embrace facilitated an online book club on WhatsApp around Lindy Bruce’s book ‘Motherhood and Me’. The mothers who connected through the book club are still supporting each other through the WhatsApp group more than a year and a half later. And through Tuesday Check-in’s, mothers in the network get an encouraging email and a WhatsApp message to pass on to another mother in her personal network that she chooses to support. The idea is to encourage women to be intentional in encouraging other mothers in their lives. Embrace recently discovered that Tuesday Check-in’s also inspire support for groups of new mothers via WhatsApp chat groups.

## EMBRACE MOTHERHOOD MANIFESTO

### We, as mothers and mother supporters believe...

- We are diverse but united by our common experiences of motherhood
- Every mother can gain from and contribute to the movement
- Every mother is the expert on HER child
- Every mother is worthy of care and support
- We listen first and then speak
- We encourage and support rather than judge and criticise
- How we do things is as important as what we do
- Our voices and stories are powerful
- What divides us needs to be diminished
- Friendship and community are critical for our mental health and wellbeing
- There are many good practices of motherhood, but no single way to mother our children.
- We acknowledge and value the role of culture and beliefs in the way they shape our motherhood journey.
- We have the right to celebrate our children and honour our role as mothers of the next generation.

<sup>10</sup> Social capital includes everything that people share through networks to add advantage to others, such as information, mobility, time, money and useful items, expertise, experience, skills, acceptance, support, etc.

<sup>11</sup> Embrace’s Motherhood Manifesto has been translated into all South African languages, access it here: <https://www.embrace.org.za/manifesto/>

## In conclusion

Finding and bringing to light the things that connect people in a country with such diversity and inequality as South Africa is not easy, and few organisations attempt it. Those who do, continue to learn from the experience, with many well-intentioned attempts written-off as naïve or ill-conceived. Social capital is an interesting sociological concept and a powerful mechanism in society to strengthen groups of people, but the prerequisites for the sharing of social capital is trust and goodwill. Finding goodwill between diverse groups of people is perhaps not that hard, but building trust is.

Since its establishment, Embrace has taken every lesson to heart; as a result, the team has repeatedly reorganised their thinking and adjusted its strategy. The Embrace team's approaches and willingness to experiment in a respectful way can be of value to other organisations grappling with similar issues.

Connecting around the development and potential of children is a powerful idea, but inequality in South Africa is so great that it does not draw people together on an equal footing. The experience of motherhood is by no means equal either, but there are parts of motherhood that challenge as well as delight people in the same ways across groups and generations. These are the points of connection that have the power to bind mothers together and inspire them with a sense of solidarity, whilst recognising their own unique experiences of being a mother.

"Women speak to us because they trust us," says Julie. "They share their wisdom and insights with us because they know that we respect them and we are not going to judge. We want South Africa to become renowned as a country that really understands the complexities of motherhood and truly sees the value of mothers in society – and not in a tokenistic manner. Mothers are part of the foundational work of the next generation, worthy of being valued and respected. When that happens, we will happily walk away."

*Learning brief by **Thulile Seleka** and the **Embrace** team.*



*Julie (third from the right) and Rumbi (in pink in front) with a group of mothers who shared their motherhood stories as part of Embrace's #IamMother campaign.*



**This is the learning experience of:  
Embrace**

DG Murray House | 1st Floor | 1 Wodin Road  
Claremont | Cape Town.  
+27 21 670 9840 | [info@embrace.org.za](mailto:info@embrace.org.za)

[www.embrace.org.za](http://www.embrace.org.za)

**Published by:**

**DG  
MT**

[WWW.DGMT.CO.ZA](http://WWW.DGMT.CO.ZA)