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How to rebuild child-parent bond this festive season

Family time. The long holiday is here with us. Find tips to keep and strengthen your parent-child relationship. **P.15**

How to rebuild parent-child bond

BY MICHAEL AGABA

A quiet boy in Mbarara and a hardened single mother reveal a truth many families recognise: love can exist beneath silence. As school holidays begin, this moving reflection explores how empathy, communication and small daily gestures can transform strained parent-child relationships into lasting emotional connections.

In the dusty outskirts of Mbarara, lived a boy named Ampeire. At 12 years old, Ampeire was known for his quiet demeanour and curious eyes that often wandered beyond the hills that framed his village. But behind those eyes was a storm of questions, most of them about his mother, Ntasiimwa.

Ntasiimwa was a strong woman, hardened by years of struggle. She sold roasted maize by the roadside and raised Ampeire and his younger sister, Marjorie, alone after their father disappeared one rainy season and never returned. Her days were long, her words short, and her patience thin. Ampeire often felt like a shadow in her life—present, but unnoticed.

Their conversations were "Fetch water."

"Go to the market."

"Why are you late?"

Ampeire longed for warmth, for stories, for laughter. He saw other children embraced by their mothers, heard them called sweet names, watched them share secrets. But with Ntasiimwa, there was only silence or scolding.

One evening, after a particularly harsh exchange, Ampeire ran to the old mango tree behind their hut. He sat there until the stars blinked awake. His grandmother, Mukaaka, found him there and sat beside him.

"She loves you, you know," Mukaaka said softly.

Ampeire scoffed. "She never says it."

Mukaaka sighed. "Ntasiimwa lost her softness when your father left. She buried it so deep, she forgot where she put it."

That night, Ampeire began to see his mother differently—not as a cold figure, but as someone wounded, surviving. He started leaving small notes for her: "Thank you for the food," "I passed my test," and "I love you."

At first, she ignored them. Then one day, she replied with a single word on a torn piece of paper: "Good."

It was not much, but it was a crack in the wall. Months passed. The notes became conversations. The silence between them began to speak. Ntasiimwa started telling stories—about her childhood, about Ampeire's father, about her dreams before life hardened them.

Ampeire listened. And Ntasiimwa, for the first time in years, smiled.

School holidays have begun and I know parents who dread it not only for the amount of money they will spend on food and the general discomfort associated with having especially adolescents in the same house all the time, but also for the silence



they have to put up with their children during the season. There are many parent Ntasiimwas and child Ampeires but your relationship with your son or daughter can be different.

Quality time strengthens emotional bonds. PHOTO/FREEPIK

many of us can share how our parents never expressed any emotion towards us) but I want to believe that affection isn't absent—it is just different often embedded in subtle, meaningful acts.

Support for our children should also extend to their interests, dreams, and challenges. Encouraging children to pursue their passions and reassuring them during setbacks builds resilience and self-esteem.

Understand developmental needs

Every stage of childhood comes with unique emotional and psychological needs. Parents who educate themselves about these developmental phases can respond more appropriately to their child's behavior. For example, toddlers need patience and guidance, while teenagers require autonomy and respect. Adapting parenting strategies to match these needs fosters mutual understanding.

Model positive behaviour

Children often emulate their parents. By modelling kindness, honesty, responsibility, and emotional regulation, parents teach valuable life skills. Demonstrating how to handle stress, resolve conflicts, and treat others respectfully sets a powerful example that children are likely to follow.

Encourage independence

Allowing children to make choices and take responsibility for their actions helps them develop confidence and decision-making skills. Parents should provide guidance while also giving space for growth. This balance nurtures independence and shows trust in the child's abilities.

Resolve conflicts constructively

Disagreements are inevitable, but how they are handled can either strengthen or weaken the relationship. Parents should approach conflicts with calmness and a willingness to understand the child's perspective. Avoiding harsh criticism and instead focusing on problem-solving promotes mutual respect and emotional safety. Improving the parent-child relationship is a continuous journey.

Merry Christmas holidays and a happy New Year!

Open communication

One of the cornerstones of a healthy parent-child relationship is communication.

Parents should foster an environment where children feel safe expressing their thoughts, feelings, and concerns without fear of judgment or punishment.

This means listening actively, validating emotions, and responding with empathy. When children feel heard, they are more likely to trust their parents and seek guidance during difficult times.

Spend quality time together

Spending quality time together strengthens emotional bonds. Whether it's sharing meals, playing games, going for walks, or simply talking about the day, these moments create lasting memories and reinforce the sense of connection. It is not about the quantity of time but the quality, being fully present and engaged matters most.

Show unconditional love

Children thrive when they know they are loved unconditionally. Parents should express affection regularly through words and actions. I know African parents have been accused of being unaffectionate (and