Quality of Family Relationships among Children from Homecare into Families in Nairobi County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT:

The quality of family relationships among children from home care into families after reintegration has been a growing concern in Nairobi County, Kenya. Children from homecare are being reintegrated into families without being attentive to the quality of relationships between the family members and the reintegrated children. Therefore, the objective of the study was to determine the levels of quality of family relationships among children from homecare into families in Nairobi County, Kenya. The study was anchored on Attachment Theory by John Bowlby. The study adopted quantitative design. The research instrument used was a standardized questionnaire, adopted Brief Family Relationship Scale (BFRS) for data collection. The target population was 270 and the sample size of the study was 161 respondents consisting of children, and parents. Proportionate sampling was used for the children respondents. Means and percentages for descriptive statistics and Pearson's Correlation for inferential statistics was used in the analysis of the data. The findings revealed that the level of quality of family relationship was moderate (M=2.84 Std=.76). The study therefore recommends that families should be trained to address emotional regulations and communication challenges.

Key words: Quality of family Relationships, Children, Homecare, Integration (or Reintegration) into Families

I. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In many parts of the world, including Kenya, children leave their families due to a range of challenges that compromise their safety, emotional well-being, and sense of belonging. Many of these children report experiences of neglect, abuse, or unfair treatment at home, which compel them to seek refuge elsewhere. In the absence of a supportive family environment, some end up living on the streets, while others are taken into residential care facilities operated by charitable organizations. It also examines the quality of family relationships that develop or re-emerge following reintegration. The topic of the research was the quality of family relationship among children from home care into families. And the research question was; what are the levels of quality of family relationships among the reintegration of children in Nairobi County, Kenya.

The research assessed the levels of quality of family relationships among children from home care into families. Golombok S (2015) work focuses on new family forms and their impact on child development. Her research indicates that the quality of family relationships, rather than family structure, is a key determinant of children's psychological well-being, particularly during transitions from home care to family environments.

 Frimpong et aL(2022) studied that investigating the levels of quality of family relationships, comes as a result of children running away from their biological home to the residential home care due to some challenges like abandonment, rejection, trauma, abuses, excessive parental pressure, discrimination, lack of social support, emotional separation between the parents and their children, parental death, maladaptive parental style, and even anxiety. Giallo (2020) founded that all these affect the psychosocial wellbeing and the quality of family relationships among the children as well as their mental health. Those children who go through stigma prevent them from having effective interpersonal relationships and hinder psychological adjustments or development.

Global studies by Gerlach et al. (2020), said that for youth transitioning out of out-of-home care, knowing one's familial relationships is crucial to establishing stability and a sense of self. Just as not all youths need or choose to keep residing in the family home, young people who have aged out of care will have their own views about who they wish to live with in their late teens and early twenties. However, whether living with or apart from family, their family relationships continue to influence their lives.

In Europe, Desmont (2020) found out that healthy family relationships play a crucial role in the overall well-being and development of a child. They provide a strong foundation for emotional support personal growth, and a sense of belonging. Desmont (2020) studied that, when a child is taken home, it is because at the biological home, there is that healthy family relationship which offers a safe and nurturing environment where the child can be free and able to express their feelings, share their thoughts, and seek support during challenging times.

Desmont et al. (2020) further discussed that when it comes to the day-to-day lived life experiences of adolescents who have left foster care and join with the biological family, the quality of the connection is entirely dependent on the presence of family bonds. Desmont and colleagues highlighted that this bonds will show the real picture of how family relationships continue to figure out in the child's life. But if the family relationships remain ambiguous and difficult to manage, the care that a child could have received in the family will be a challenge for the child.

The findings of Young et al. (2019) showed that in Sub-Saharan Africa families and all-encompassing support systems is vital throughout the adolescent-to-adult years. Help with housing and finances is a necessary part of growing up, but the emotional support and connections that families provide are invaluable resources for helping young people find their place in the world and form their sense of identity.

In Ghana, Sirbu (2022) studied the quality of the connection between the child and the family of origin and found that this connection should constantly be cultivated. Similarly, it is essential for parents or caregivers to convey their desire for reunification with the child, since both parties possess the right to refuse. As one child suggests:-

"Before we are reintegrated our families should come and see us here, talk to us and give us the feeling that they want us back. The social workers also should guide us in the process." Sirbu (2022).

Delap (2020), conducted a study in Kenya and mentioned that when discussing on the quality of the family relationships during the reintegration process there are inevitable situations wherein returning a child to the original caregivers or extended family may not be in his or her best interests, or even possible at this point. This might have been due to a history of abuse or other child safety problems, parental infirmity or death, and even the way the family feels about these children who abandoned home and destroy the family's image and humiliate the family.

The reviewed empirical literature related to reintegration and quality of family relationship among the children from home care, focussed on the levels of quality of family relationships among children from homecare into families.

Bob M., (2020) discussed the role of a literature review in research and mentioned that; it consists of studying the publications that have been done on the topic under study. This section of the research brings clarity in the way the researcher tackles the topic by bearing in mind what others have discovered using their specific methodologies, research sites or countries, objectives, and samples.

Ismayilova et al. (2023) conducted a qualitative study in Azerbaijan to examine the emotional and interpersonal dynamics of family reunification for children (ages 8–16) transitioning from institutional care. The study highlighted challenges such as trust-building, communication breakdowns, and struggles with authority figures within families. While reunification brought initial joy, many children exhibited Behavioral issues like social withdrawal, emotional dysregulation, and aggression, straining family relationships. The authors emphasized the need for culturally responsive, trauma-informed interventions to address relational trauma, enhance emotional regulation, and strengthen family bonds during reintegration.

Girme and Overall (2021) explored family bonds among youth transitioning out of foster care in America (USA), emphasizing their role in shaping identity and security. The study found that while family ties significantly influence young people's lives, not all desire or require living with their biological families. Teens and young adults often prefer autonomy in deciding their living arrangements, even as familial connections continue to impact their emotional and social development. This underscores the complexity of family relationships, where attachment persists beyond cohabitation.

Lasker (2020) investigated mental health outcomes for children reunited with families after homelessness, noting better results compared to those in institutional care. However, the study highlighted challenges in impoverished contexts like Zambia, where reintegration programs face systemic barriers. Children shared diverse family connections biological, extended, or foster reflecting varying levels of support. Family dynamics before and during foster care influenced post-reunification adjustment, with stable relationships (e.g., marital or sibling bonds) fostering resilience, while strained ties hindered integration.

Birhanu et al. (2021) examined parent-child and sibling relationships in Ethiopia, finding that positive interactions with fathers and siblings strongly correlate with healthy child development. Parental approval and sibling affection boosted self-esteem, whereas conflicts often led to Behavioral issues. However, the study uniquely found no direct link between the strength of family ties and reintegrated children's adjustment, contrasting with prior research. This suggests contextual factors may override familial bonds in shaping outcomes.

Pitillas (2020) studied reintegration challenges for children in Zimbabwe separated from families, advocating for trauma-based preparation before reunification. The research stressed the importance of addressing the root causes of separation and initiating the process with supervised family visits. Effective implementation requires understanding theoretical frameworks behind interventions to ensure consistency. Without deliberate preparation, children and families risk unresolved trauma and relational strain during reintegration.

Despite the growing global focus on deinstitutionalization and the reintegration of children from homecare settings into family environments, there was limited empirical research on the actual quality of family relationships experienced by these children after placement.

Most existing studies have emphasized outcomes such as psychological adjustment, academic performance, or long-term well-being, but few have directly assessed the nuances of parent-child relationships, emotional bonding, and family dynamics in the post-placement phase. Additionally, context-specific studies in low-income or culturally distinct settings are scarce, making it difficult to generalize existing findings to diverse populations.

Therefore, the study addressed a critical gap by focusing specifically on the levels and determinants of family relationship quality among children who have transitioned from homecare to families, with the goal of informing both social work practices and child welfare policies.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study used quantitative method design. The design involved collecting and analysing quantitative data. Hence, quantitative data was the primary. According to Creswell et al. (2018), quantitative research approach is superior in using quantitative approach alone as it involves inductive and deductive thinking. The quantitative research design assisted the researcher to accomplish the study. The researcher's target population consisted of children from selected homes within Nairobi County, Kenya. A total of 270 children was the target population. Given that the selected homes engage in the reintegration of vulnerable children, they constituted a valuable source of obtaining the relevant information for the research. Parents of reintegrated children were included to provide insights into post-reunification family dynamics.

Purposive Sampling was used to choose respondents using the questionnaires and also according to their age. These selected homes were chosen based on active participation in reintegration programs, accessibility for data collection, diversity in institutional size and management. This technique was employed because it reduces biases and prejudice, and gives equal opportunity to the whole population to participate. A proportionate stratified sampling method was used to allocate the final sample size of 161 children across the three homes based on population size and a Slovin formula was used to estimate the sample size.

The key informants were selected purposively, including parents based on their expertise in reintegration processes and direct involvement in family support systems. The 10 key informants can provide valuable insights and information for the in-depth interviews, and can address the research questions effectively.

The researcher used a questionnaire to collect data. The questionnaire had two sections: the first focused on demographic data while the second section focused on quality of family relation in which the brief family relationship questionnaire was by Fok et al (2014) was used. The scale has a total of 19 items and three factors, cohesion 8 items, expressiveness 4 items, and conflict resolution 7 items respectively. This scale was used to measure the relationship dimension in family functioning. To score a Brief Family Relationship Questionnaire, typically each item is rated on a Likert-type scale that is 1 to 5 with the scores for each relevant subscale being summed together, resulting in a higher score indicating a greater perception of that specific family dynamic; depending on the questionnaire, some items needed the reverse- scored before summation. Interpretation of the scores always refers to the specific scoring instructions and normative data provided with the questionnaire to accurately interpret the meaning of the scores. The questionnaire aimed at collecting quantitative data.

Permission was gotten from National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). It is a government agency in Kenya responsible for regulating and promoting research, science, technology, and innovation. NACOSTI oversees research licensing, ensures ethical standards in scientific studies, and supports the development of science and technology policies in the country.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To find out the levels of quality of family relationships among children from home care into families brought different components that shows clearly how the level of quality of family relationship among the reintegrated children and their families after transition. A descriptive survey design used standardized tools like questionnaires to collect data and describe characteristics of a population.

Table 1: Levels of Quality of Family Relationships

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Cohesion	144	1.00	5.00	2.5425	.96714
Expressiveness	144	1.00	5.00	2.7361	1.14001
Conflict Resolution	144	1.00	5.00	3.2321	.83810
Quality Of Family Relationship	144	1.00	5.00	2.8374	.76141

Table 1 presents the descriptive analysis related the quality of family relationships through different components: cohesion, expressiveness, conflict resolution, and overall quality of family relationships. The overall quality of family relationships is not very strong, with low scores in cohesion and expressiveness. Conflict resolution is relatively high, suggesting that some families can manage disputes effectively, which may support reintegration. There is high variability across different families, meaning some children experience positive relationships while others face significant challenges. These findings are in consonance with the findings of Mubita (2020) who studied children living on the streets of Nairobi and found out that the children may have difficulties when they go from alternative care to live with their families independently.

The component of cohesion measures the emotional bonding and connectedness within the family. The mean score of 2.54 (on a scale of 1 to 5) and considering that this is the mid-point suggests moderate family cohesion, indicating that reintegrated children may not feel a strong sense of belonging or support within their families. The relatively high standard deviation (0.97) suggests variability in experiences some families have strong cohesion, while others have very weak cohesion.

On the other hand, expressiveness reflects the ability of family members to openly express their feelings and thoughts. The mean score of 2.74 is slightly higher than cohesion, but still in the lower range, implying that reintegrated children may experience limited communication and emotional expression in their families. The high standard deviation (1.14) suggests significant differences among families, with some being highly expressive while others are very reserved.

Conflict resolution assesses how well families manage and resolve conflicts. The mean score of 3.23 is higher than the previous dimensions, indicating moderate ability in handling conflicts. A standard deviation of 0.84 suggests that while some families manage conflicts well, others struggle significantly.

These findings suggest that interventions such as family counseling, parenting support, and communication training could help improve reintegration outcomes. This is a general measure of how reintegrated children perceive their relationships within their families. The mean score of 2.84 suggests a moderate but slightly negative perception of family relationships, indicating that many children struggle with reintegration. The standard deviation of 0.76 shows moderate variability in experiences among different families.

The above finding was supported by the study done by Gagnon et al. (2015) highlighting that reintegration success depended not only on the survivor's recovery but also on the family's resilience and access to support systems. He further emphasized on the bidirectional impact of reintegration on relationships, advocating for education, counseling, and family-centered care models to prevent caregiver burnout and strengthen bonds.

The findings suggest that while families show a moderate ability to resolve conflicts, they experience challenges in building emotional closeness and expressing themselves openly. The overall quality of family relationships is therefore moderate and may benefit from interventions focused on improving cohesion and communication within the family unit. This findings was in relation with the study done by Ismayilova et al. (2023),who conducted a qualitative study in Azerbaijan to examine the emotional and interpersonal dynamics of family reunification for children (ages 8–16) transitioning from institutional care. The study highlighted challenges such as trust-building, communication breakdowns, and struggles with authority figures within families. While reunification brought initial joy, many children exhibited Behavioral issues like social withdrawal, emotional dysregulation, and aggression, straining family relationships. The authors emphasized the need for culturally responsive, trauma-informed interventions to address relational trauma, enhance emotional regulation, and strengthen family bonds during reintegration.

The findings also was challenged by the study done by Desmont(2020) who emphasized that, a healthy family relationships play a crucial role in the overall well-being and development of a child. They provide a strong foundation for emotional support personal growth, and a sense of belonging. Desmont (2020) commended that, when a child is taken home, it is because at the biological home, there is that healthy family relationship which offers a safe and nurturing environment where the child can be free and able to express their feelings, share their thoughts, and seek support during challenging times.

IV. CONCLUSION

The quality of family relationships among reintegrated children was mixed. While there were moderate levels of mutual support and cooperation. A mean = 2.99), where children expressed that in their families they do things for each other without being asked showed the high levels of conflict and emotional dysregulation were prevalent. A (mean = 3.15) where children expressed that in their families they argue a lot showed openness in communication and problem-solving were moderately developed but inconsistent. A (mean = 3.32) where the children expressed that in their families they lose their tempers a lot, highlighted significant challenges in emotional regulation and communication. Pride in family membership was relatively low (mean = 2.25), suggesting that some children struggled with a sense of belonging post-reintegration.

V. RECOMMENDATION

There is need to strengthen caregiver readiness and training since caregivers need training in emotional regulation, communication, and conflict resolution to better support reintegrated children, and promote emotional communication and family bonding activities because families should engage in bonding exercises that encourage open communication and trust-building.

Promote collaborative and respectful communication with families by enhancing regular updates of sharing information about the child's progress and involve families in decision making process, acknowledge and respect the family's cultural background, beliefs, and practices in all interactions and work together to set common objectives that support the child's development and well- being. Such collaboration ensures that families feel valued and empowered, which is vital for the child's successful reintegration into the family setting.

Facilitate safe and meaningful family connection by maintaining consistent and positive contact between children and their families. This will foster a sense of belonging and identity by encouraging regular communication to support various forms of contact, such as phone calls, video chats, letters, or supervised visits, tailored to the child's comfort and safety. Celebrate important dates to help the children remember and participate in family birthdays, holidays and cultural events to reinforce familial bonds, provide support by being attentive to the child's feelings before, during, and after family interactions, and by offering appropriate support to process their experiences. These practices will contribute to building trust and reinforcing the child's connection to their family

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