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An Exploration of Parenting Styles Adopted By Single Mothers in Kayole Sub- County, Nairobi, Kenya

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ABSTRACT :

Single motherhood is a growing phenomenon globally, with significant social and economic implications particularly in urban settings such as Kayole Sub-County, Nairobi, where single mothers face substantial stress due to financial constraints, lack of social support, and parenting demands. This study examined the parenting styles adopted by single mothers in Kayole Sub-County, Nairobi, Kenya. The study was grounded in Baumrind's Parenting Styles Theory. The study employed descriptive research design. The study targeted 390 single mothers, with a sample size of 210 selected through cluster sampling. Data was collected using Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSDQ). The collected data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and particularly the mean with SPSS. The results for adoption of authoritarian parenting style among single mothers ranged from 2.91 to 3.04, suggesting moderate use of controlling and punitive practices. Spanking ($M=3.04$), yelling ($M=2.99$), and withholding affection ($M=3.02$) were the most endorsed behaviours, with relatively high consistency (SDs mostly below .90). The results on adoption of authoritative parenting style among single mothers demonstrated strong use of authoritative parenting, with consistently high mean scores (ranging from 3.97 to 4.09) across all indicators. The highest-rated behaviours included considering children's wishes ($M=4.09$), respecting their opinions ($M=4.09$), and sharing warm moments ($M=4.07$). Results on permissive parenting behaviours recorded the lowest overall endorsement, with mean scores between 2.52 and 2.67. The most reported behaviour was yielding to tantrums ($M=2.67$), while difficulty disciplining and spoiling children followed closely. Standard deviations above 1.0 across all items suggest wide variability in permissive tendencies. The study recommends implementing authoritative parenting training programs, developing holistic psychosocial support services, and creating community-based interventions to reduce harsh parenting practices while addressing underlying stress factors among single mothers.

Key Words: Parenting styles, Single mothers, Kayole, Nairobi, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

Parenting as a fundamental aspect of child development, is influenced by various factors including socioeconomic status, family structure, and cultural norms. In particular, single mothers, who often face unique challenges in raising children alone, tend to adopt different parenting styles compared to two-parent households. The type of parenting style a mother adopts can significantly affect both her well-being and her children's development, particularly in high-stress contexts like those faced by single mothers. This empirical review explores the parenting styles adopted by single mothers, with a focus on global, continental (Africa), and local (Kenya) perspectives, drawing on recent research to provide a comprehensive overview.

The global landscape of parenting styles reflects a variety of models shaped by cultural, social, and economic contexts. In the Western world, Baumrind's (1966) typology of parenting styles authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful has been widely used to classify parenting approaches. The authoritative style, characterized by warmth, responsiveness, and high expectations, is often regarded as the most effective for fostering healthy emotional and behavioural development in children (Baumrind, 1991). In single-mother households, however, stress and financial instability can challenge the adoption of an authoritative style. A study by Milner et al. (2020) examined single mothers in the U.S. and found that high levels of stress and limited resources often lead to authoritarian parenting, marked by strict rules and less emotional warmth. This approach, while effective in maintaining discipline, can strain the parent-child relationship and increase the risk of anxiety and behavioural problems in children.

Moreover, a global perspective shows that single mothers in different parts of the world exhibit diverse parenting strategies based on their cultural norms. In societies where collectivism prevails, such as in many Asian countries, single mothers may emphasize communal child-rearing practices, relying on extended family support (Jia & Yuan, 2021). Conversely, in individualistic societies, single mothers may prioritize independence and self-reliance, which can influence their approach to discipline and nurturing (Dumont, 2022). Research by Hines (2019) also highlighted how socioeconomic factors, including poverty and lack of social support, compel single mothers to adopt less optimal parenting strategies, often resorting to neglectful or permissive styles due to overwhelming stress. These challenges are compounded by the absence of a co-parent, further exacerbating the emotional and physical demands placed on single mothers.

Parenting stress is a significant and prevalent challenge faced by the majority of parents. According to Berryhill and Durtschi (2016), parenting stress is defined as the aversive psychological reaction to the demands of being a parent. As Parke (2018) explains, it occurs when the demands of parenthood surpass the perceived available resources to meet those demands. Okelo et al. (2023) note a global increase in parenting stress, while Nayantara et al.

(2020) observed that 46% of single mothers in the USA experience high levels of parenting stress, as indicated by their scores on the Parent Stress Index Short Form (PSI-SF). High scores on this index are associated with poorer child outcomes and maladaptive parenting practices.

Although research has acknowledged that single mothers face various challenges, including financial stress and emotional problems resulting in parenting stress (Berryhilla & Durtschi, 2016; Parke, 2018), there has been limited research on the specific impact of parenting stress on single mothers. Notably, single mothers tend to experience higher levels of parenting stress compared to their married counterparts (Okelo et al., 2023). In India, studies have primarily focused on working mothers and parenting stress (Mak, Lu, Minghui, Cheung, & Oon, 2020).

In Africa, parenting styles among single mothers are shaped by a combination of cultural expectations, economic pressures, and the absence of paternal involvement. African societies, characterized by extended family structures, often provide a support system that can mitigate the challenges of single motherhood. However, single mothers still face considerable stress due to the financial and emotional burdens of raising children alone. In Ghana, Ayebeng, Dickson, Seidu, and Amo-Adjei (2022) investigated maternal stress among single mothers, revealing economic challenges as a significant stressor. Social stigma also played a pervasive role, contributing to heightened stress levels. This aligns with the findings of Mbamba and Ndemole (2021), who noted that interventions in Ghana primarily address economic vulnerabilities and societal stigma. Tailored support systems considering the unique challenges faced by single mothers in the Ghanaian context are deemed crucial.

Research conducted in Nigeria by Akinmoladun et al. (2021) revealed that single mothers in urban areas face immense pressure to balance work and child-rearing responsibilities, which can lead to permissive or neglectful parenting styles. This lack of consistent discipline, coupled with emotional strain, can increase stress among both mothers and children, especially in situations where fathers are absent or unavailable for support. In Uganda, where traditional gender roles and expectations play a significant role, single mothers are often expected to play dual roles acting as both mother and father (Massarwi, Cluver, Meinck, Doubt, & Green, 2023). A study by Ojo (2020) on single mothers in Nigeria highlighted how these mothers often struggle with adopting the authoritative style due to the absence of male role models. As a result, many single mothers resort to authoritarian approaches, attempting to maintain control over their children's behaviour through rigid rules and limited emotional expression. In South Africa, Massarwi, Cluver, Meinck, Doubt, and Green (2023) explored stressors faced by single mothers, including economic instability, violence, and challenges in accessing education and healthcare. Economic instability emerged as a major stressor, with high levels of violence significantly contributing to stress.

In Kenya, single mothers face unique challenges that influence their parenting styles. The societal norms that emphasize male involvement in child-rearing, combined with high levels of poverty and unemployment, place immense stress on single mothers. A study by Kamau and Ndirangu (2021) indicated that approximately 30% of households in Nairobi were headed by single mothers, a trend attributed to factors such as divorce, abandonment, and the death of spouses. These mothers often find themselves in situations where they must balance work, household responsibilities, and child-rearing, making it difficult to adopt a consistent and supportive parenting approach. In a study conducted in Kayole, one of Nairobi's densely populated and low-income areas, Kamau (2022) found that single mothers often adopt an authoritarian parenting style, characterized by strict discipline and limited emotional warmth. This style was commonly associated with high levels of stress, as mothers attempted to maintain control over their children's behaviour in an environment where resources were limited, and social support was scarce. The pressures faced by single mothers in Kenya can lead to a permissive parenting style in some cases, particularly when mothers feel overwhelmed by the demands of work and home life. In such cases, mothers may become less involved in their children's daily activities, leading to a lack of supervision and potential behavioural issues (Njoroge, 2023). These challenges are compounded by societal stigmas surrounding single motherhood, which often leads to isolation and emotional distress.

Furthermore, single mothers in urban settings like Kayole often rely on extended family members, such as grandmothers or aunts, for support in child-rearing. This collaborative approach can sometimes ease the emotional burden on mothers, allowing them to adopt a more authoritative style. However, even with family support, economic hardship remains a significant challenge that influences parenting styles. A study by Nzuki (2020) found that single mothers in Nairobi were more likely to adopt an authoritarian style when they lacked financial stability, fearing that their children would stray into delinquency without firm control. The parenting styles adopted by single mothers are intrinsically linked to the stress they experience. As highlighted in various studies, stress can impact a mother's ability to be emotionally available to her children, which in turn affects her parenting style. High stress levels, caused by financial instability, lack of social support, and the demands of single parenthood, can lead to a higher likelihood of adopting an authoritarian or neglectful parenting style.

Research by Luthar and Cushing (2017) suggests that single mothers who adopt an authoritarian style often experience higher levels of stress due to the emotional toll of maintaining strict control over their children's behaviour. These mothers may feel compelled to be more controlling and distant, in part because they believe it is necessary to compensate for the absence of a male figure. However, this approach can lead to negative outcomes for both mother and child, including increased stress, emotional distance, and behavioural issues in children.

Furthermore, Mbithi (2019) reviewed the issues, challenges, and potential solutions related to single parenting in Kenya, emphasizing the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon and the need for targeted policies and interventions. Njuguna et al. (2022) explored the effects of single motherhood on the moral development of primary school children in Kalundu Zone, Kitui County, underscoring the influence of single motherhood on values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. The study recommended increased moral education and guidance for single mothers and their children. In Kitui County, Nyantara et al. (2020) investigated the effects of single motherhood on the socio-emotional development of children, revealing a negative impact on self-esteem, self-concept, social skills, and emotional regulation. The study advocated for increased counselling and psychotherapy to enhance the socio-emotional development of single mothers and their children. A study in Nairobi by Meda (2015) delved into the transformation of gender roles and family relations among single mothers, identifying shifts in roles such as becoming breadwinners and heads of households. The study suggested that empowerment and recognition are crucial for single mothers in Nairobi to overcome the challenges associated with their evolving roles and relations. This finding is consistent with research from Kenya, where single mothers in low-income areas like Kayole report feeling stressed and unable to enforce appropriate boundaries with their children (Njoroge, 2023).

Parenting styles among single mothers are shaped by a complex interplay of global, continental, and local factors, including cultural norms, economic conditions, and the availability of social support. Single mothers are more likely to adopt authoritarian or permissive styles due to the stress and emotional burden of raising children alone. In Kenya, single mothers in urban and low-income areas like Kayole face unique challenges that influence

their parenting decisions, often resulting in authoritarian or neglectful parenting styles. The relationship between parenting styles and stress is critical in understanding the challenges faced by single mothers. Stress not only affects their emotional well-being but also shapes the type of parenting they adopt, which can have lasting implications for their children's development. Therefore, providing social support, financial resources, and counselling for single mothers is crucial in fostering healthier parenting styles and reducing the stress that comes with single motherhood. One of the most widely recognized frameworks for understanding the impact of parenting styles on child development is Baumrind's (1967) Parenting Styles Theory, which categorizes parenting into four types: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful. These parenting styles are based on the dimensions of warmth and control. Authoritative parenting, characterized by high warmth and moderate control, is often associated with positive child outcomes, including social competence and emotional regulation. In contrast, authoritarian parenting, which is high in control but low in warmth, has been linked to child outcomes such as aggression and anxiety. Permissive parenting, characterized by high warmth and low control, can lead to children who struggle with self-regulation and authority, while neglectful parenting, with low warmth and low control, can result in behavioural and emotional problems.

For single mothers in Kayole Sub-county, the stress associated with balancing multiple responsibilities—such as work, childcare, and personal well-being—can influence their parenting style. The limited availability of social support, financial stress, and the challenge of maintaining a stable family environment can lead to more authoritarian or neglectful parenting styles. In contrast, mothers who have access to support systems or resources may engage in more authoritative parenting, which could mitigate the stress they experience and foster better emotional outcomes for both them and their children. Research has shown that single mothers often face higher levels of stress due to the demands of single-handedly managing household responsibilities (Amato & Keith, 1991). Parenting styles, in turn, can be influenced by the level of stress mothers' experience. For instance, authoritarian parenting may be a response to increased stress, as mothers may adopt more rigid rules and higher expectations as a coping mechanism to regain control over their chaotic circumstances (Dumas & Wolfe, 2013). Therefore, Baumrind's theory provides a foundation for understanding how stress affects parenting behaviour, which may vary according to the specific challenges faced by single mothers in urban settings like Kayole. The current study examined the parenting styles adopted by single mothers in Kayole Sub-County, Nairobi, Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed descriptive research design with aim of understanding the parenting styles adopted by single mothers in Kayole. The study was undertaken in Kayole, a Sub-County located in the eastern part of Nairobi, Kenya. Kayole is a densely populated residential area characterized by a mix of middle to low-income households. It lies approximately 15 kilometers from Nairobi's Central Business District (CBD) and is bordered by areas such as Umoja and Njiru. The population of Kayole has been steadily growing due to both its accessibility and relatively affordable housing. According to the 2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census, Kayole falls under the larger statistics of the Njiru Division, with an estimated population of over 200,000 people (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). The Sub-County, known for its vibrant but challenging urban setting, experiences both socio-economic disparities and a diversity of cultural backgrounds. Many households in Kayole are headed by single mothers, who face unique challenges in balancing parenting responsibilities with financial and emotional stress. The area is home to various educational institutions, health facilities, markets, and informal settlement zones, which are crucial to understanding the living conditions that influence the stress levels and parenting styles of single mothers.

The study targets single mothers aged 21 and above, representing diverse educational backgrounds, socio-economic statuses, and occupational roles. These participants provided valuable insights into their parenting styles. The target population was 390. The researcher adopted a clustered sampling technique, specifically single-stage cluster sampling, to ensure representativeness and accessibility. The first step involved defining the clusters based on geographical locations within Kayole Sub-county, where single mothers reside. These clusters represented the groups of single mothers from various neighbourhoods. The researchers ensure that each cluster is proportionately represented in the sample by considering the population of single mothers in each area. The total number of each cluster was calculated to give all participants equal opportunities to be chosen. A sample size of 210 participants was selected to participate in the study.

The questionnaire was divided into two sections: a demographic section to gather basic demographic data from respondents which included age, religion, academic level and number of children. The second section collected data on parenting styles using Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSDQ). Respondents provided their responses on a Likert scale ranging from 1 = Never | 2 = Rarely | 3 = Sometimes | 4 = Often | 5 = Very Often | 6 = Always. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics specifically the mean, standard deviation, frequencies, and percentages to describe the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The current study examined the parenting styles adopted by single mothers in Kayole Sub-County, Nairobi, Kenya. The demographic of the participants were presented followed by the findings of the study.

Demographic Details of the Participants

The study captured the demographic of the participants including age, religion, academic level and number of children. The demographic of the participants are presented in table 1.

Table 1: Demographic of the Participants

Age	N	%
18-24	18	8.7%
25-30	40	19.3%
31-36	54	26.1%
37-42	52	25.1%
43-48	33	15.9%
49-54	10	4.8%
Religion	N	%
Christian	78	37.7%
Muslim	77	37.2%
Hindu	13	6.3%
Others	39	18.8%
Academic Level	N	%
Primary School	19	9.2%
Form IV/ Secondary School	29	14.0%
Certificate/Artisan	60	29.0%
Diploma	49	23.7%
Bachelor's Degree	40	19.3%
Masters/PhD	10	4.8%
Number of children	N	%
0	16	7.7%
1	28	13.5%
2	60	29.0%
3	47	22.7%
4	35	16.9%
5	17	8.2%
6	2	1.0%
7	2	1.0%

Source (Field Data, 2025)

The findings in table 1 show that more than half of the respondents were between the ages of 31–42 years (51.2%), suggesting a mature and potentially experienced population of single mothers. A balanced religious distribution was noted, with Christians (37.7%) and Muslims (37.2%) nearly equally represented, while 18.8% identified with other religions. Academically, most respondents had post-secondary qualifications, with Certificate/Artisan (29%) and Diploma holders (23.7%) forming the largest groups, indicating a moderately educated sample. Only 4.8% had postgraduate education. In terms of parental responsibility, the majority had two or more children, with 29% having two and 22.7% having three children. Only 7.7% had no children, reinforcing the study's relevance to the parenting context. Overall, the demographic data depict a predominantly middle-aged, moderately educated, and religiously diverse group of single mothers.

Parenting Styles Adopted By Single Mothers in Kayole Sub-County, Nairobi, Kenya

To determine the parenting styles is adopted by single mothers descriptive statistics was run and results are presented in table 2.

Table 2: Authoritative parenting

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
I am responsive to my child's feelings and needs	4.03	.847
I take my child's wishes into consideration before asking them to do something	4.09	.906
I explain to my child how I feel about their good/bad behavior	4.05	.863
I encourage my child to talk about their feelings and problems	4.01	.856
I encourage my child to speak their mind, even if they disagree with me	3.97	.858
I explain the reasons behind my expectations	4.01	.830

I provide comfort and understanding when my child is upset	4.06	.831
I compliment my child	4.04	.929
I consider my child's preferences when planning family activities	4.04	.899
I respect and encourage my child's opinions	4.09	.925
I treat my child as an equal member of the family	4.06	.885
I provide reasons for my expectations	3.98	.844
I share warm and intimate times with my child	4.07	.887
Valid N (listwise)		

Source (Field Data, 2025)

Results in table 2 showed the adoption of authoritative parenting style among single mothers. The study demonstrated strong use of authoritative parenting, with consistently high mean scores (ranging from 3.97 to 4.09) across all indicators. The highest-rated behaviours included considering children's wishes ($M=4.09$), respecting their opinions ($M=4.09$), and sharing warm moments ($M=4.07$). These findings suggest a nurturing, communicative approach where mothers value emotional expression and shared decision-making. The narrow standard deviations (mostly below .90) indicate relatively consistent responses among participants. This trend reflects alignment with best practices in positive parenting, promoting mutual respect and emotional intelligence in children. Such engagement is likely to foster healthier parent-child relationships and reduce stress among single mothers, as authoritative parenting is linked with emotional regulation and autonomy in children.

The findings reveal that authoritative parenting is the most frequently practiced style among single mothers, with mean scores above 4 on most items, indicating behaviours such as responsiveness, reasoning, and emotional support are common. This aligns with Baumrind's (1991) typology, which identifies authoritative parenting as fostering autonomy and psychological well-being in children. In addition, Grolnick et al. (2020), who emphasize that authoritative parenting is associated with lower stress and healthier emotional development in children. In African contexts, Akinmoladun and Akinmoladun (2021) noted that despite economic hardships, many Nigerian mothers strive for authoritative practices as a way of promoting resilience and social competence in children. The relatively consistent scores (low standard deviations) also suggest internalization of this style, possibly due to cultural or religious teachings emphasizing nurturing and guidance. However, this trend contradicts earlier assumptions that single mothers in low-income settings default to authoritarian styles due to stress (Deater-Deckard et al., 2021). This variation may be explained by changing socio-cultural dynamics and increasing access to parenting education in urban and peri-urban areas (Kamau, 2022).

Table 3: Authoritarian parenting style

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
I say "because I said so" when asked to explain a rule	2.97	.872
I punish my child by removing privileges	2.93	.873
I yell when I disapprove of behavior	2.99	.797
I explode in anger toward my child	2.97	.855
I spank my child when they misbehave	3.04	.880
I criticize to improve behavior	2.94	.896
I use threats as punishment without justification	2.96	.886
I withhold affection as punishment	3.02	.884
I criticize my child for unmet expectations	2.98	.919
I struggle to change my child's way of thinking	2.94	.901
I remind my child of past behavioral issues	2.98	.830
I remind my child that I am the parent	2.91	.899
I remind my child of the things I do for them	2.98	.919
Valid N (listwise)		

Source (Field Data, 2025)

Results in table 3 shows the mean scores for adoption of authoritarian parenting style among single mothers ranged from 2.91 to 3.04, suggesting moderate use of controlling and punitive practices. Spanking ($M=3.04$), yelling ($M=2.99$), and withholding affection ($M=3.02$) were the most endorsed behaviours, with relatively high consistency (SDs mostly below .90). These findings imply that while authoritative strategies are preferred, authoritarian tendencies still appear, possibly as a response to stress or limited support systems. The reliance on commands ("because I said so") and reminders of authority suggests power assertion remains a tool for discipline. However, the relatively moderate scores may indicate an internal conflict between authoritarian impulses and a desire for emotionally supportive parenting. The results suggest a need for parenting support programs that reinforce positive discipline while reducing reliance on fear-based strategies.

Authoritarian parenting was found to be practiced "sometimes" (mean 2.9–3.0). This indicates that while single mothers may occasionally rely on strict discipline, it is not dominant. This partially aligns with Chikodzi et al. (2022), who found that single mothers under economic pressure often oscillate between authoritative and authoritarian practices depending on stress levels and child behaviour. The continued use of spanking and yelling (though not

frequent) reflects the influence of traditional African norms around obedience and discipline (Amoateng et al., 2004). Yet, the moderate usage contradicts Mokoena et al. (2021), who reported authoritarian styles as more prevalent among South African single mothers, highlighting cultural and contextual diversity across regions. The data also support Doom et al. (2022), who warned that even occasional harshness can contribute to elevated stress and affect child outcomes negatively if not balanced by warmth or explanation.

Table 4: Permissive parenting style

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
I find it hard to discipline my child	2.52	1.047
I give in when my child throws a tantrum	2.67	1.014
I spoil my child	2.53	.999
I ignore my child's bad behavior	2.55	1.096
Valid N (listwise)		

Source (Field Data, 2025)

Results in table 4 shows the findings on permissive parenting behaviours recorded the lowest overall endorsement, with mean scores between 2.52 and 2.67. The most reported behaviour was yielding to tantrums ($M=2.67$), while difficulty disciplining and spoiling children followed closely. Standard deviations above 1.0 across all items suggest wide variability in permissive tendencies. These findings imply that while some mothers may avoid confrontation or struggle with boundary-setting, permissiveness is not the dominant style. Given the stressors faced by single mothers, some may adopt lenient strategies to maintain harmony, especially in emotionally charged situations. However, the low-to-moderate means suggest that most mothers are still able to enforce structure and expectations, aligning more with authoritative or authoritarian patterns. Addressing permissiveness through parenting interventions can help mothers build firm but empathetic approaches to discipline.

Permissive parenting had the lowest means (2.5–2.6), indicating it is rarely practiced. This is consistent with Baumrind's (1991) theory that permissive parenting is generally discouraged in collectivist cultures that value authority and structured guidance (Jia & Yuan, 2021). This also supports Kamau & Ndirangu (2021), who found that permissiveness is viewed as weakness in parenting, especially among single mothers who bear the full burden of socialization. Moreover, Mutisya (2019) suggests that permissive behaviour may be less feasible in high-stress environments, where control is often prioritized to manage household chaos and limited.

CONCLUSION

The research reveals that single mothers in Kayole Sub-County predominantly embrace authoritative parenting approaches, demonstrating a conscious commitment to nurturing, responsive, and communicative relationships with their children. This pattern suggests that despite facing significant socioeconomic challenges, these mothers prioritize emotional connection, mutual respect, and collaborative decision-making in their parenting practices. The consistent adoption of authoritative behaviours indicates an internalized understanding of positive parenting principles, possibly influenced by cultural values emphasizing care and guidance, educational exposure to child development concepts, or religious teachings that promote nurturing relationships. The moderate use of authoritarian practices suggests that while single mothers occasionally resort to strict disciplinary measures, these represent situational responses rather than primary parenting philosophies. The minimal adoption of permissive parenting indicates that these mothers maintain clear boundaries and expectations for their children, rejecting lenient approaches that might undermine their authority or children's development. This distribution challenges stereotypical assumptions about parenting in resource-constrained environments and reveals the intentionality and wisdom that single mothers bring to their parenting roles.

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