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Relationship between Parenting Styles and Perceived Stress among Single Mothers in Kayole Sub- County, Nairobi County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT :

Globally single motherhood is a growing phenomenon with significant social and economic implications particularly in urban settings where single mothers face substantial stress due to financial constraints, lack of social support, and parenting demands. This study examined the relationship between parenting styles and stress levels among single mothers in Kayole Sub-County, Nairobi, Kenya. The study was grounded on Baumrind's Parenting Styles Theory, Family Stress Model, and Cohen's Perceived Stress Theory. The study employed correlational research design targeting 390 single mothers, with a sample size of 210 selected participants through cluster sampling. Data was collected using Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSDQ) and Perceived Stress Scale (PSS). The collected data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation and regression analysis with SPSS version 27. The results showed a strong negative correlation between authoritative and perceived stress ($r = -0.920, p < .001$), suggesting that as authoritative parenting increases, perceived stress significantly decreases. In addition, the results showed a strong positive correlation between authoritarian parenting style and perceived stress ($r = 0.905, p < .001$), indicating that higher levels of authoritarian behaviours characterized by rigidity, control, and low emotional responsiveness are associated with increased maternal stress. Furthermore, the results showed no correlation between permissive parenting style and perceived stress ($r = 0.082, p = .241$), suggesting it neither alleviates nor exacerbates stress levels. The study concluded that parenting styles significantly predict maternal stress, with 86.3% variance explained. Recommendations include 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, perceived stress, single mothers, Kayole, Nairobi, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

The global discourse on parenting stress and child adjustment underscores the profound impact of parental roles and stressors on child development. Golombok et al. (2021) conducted a study in the United Kingdom, examining single mothers by choice, and found that while children raised in such families generally exhibited positive adjustment, higher levels of parenting stress were linked to child difficulties in middle childhood. Similarly, Qian et al. (2021) studied Chinese mothers and revealed that those with higher educational attainment experienced lower parenting stress, suggesting that socioeconomic factors play a pivotal role in parental well-being. Additionally, Clauser et al. (2020) investigated parents of children with autism in the United States and found that while parenting style did not directly influence parental stress, the severity of autism symptoms significantly heightened stress levels. These studies collectively highlight the intricate connections between parenting stress, socioeconomic status, and child developmental outcomes across different cultural contexts.

Furthermore, parenting stress is exacerbated by co-parenting conflicts and authoritarian parenting styles. Camisasca et al. (2022) explored this dynamic among Italian parents, demonstrating that negative co-parenting increased parenting stress, which in turn fostered authoritarian tendencies and led to child adjustment difficulties. Similarly, Rajgariah et al. (2021) conducted a cross-sectional study in India, comparing working and non-working mothers, and found that working mothers experienced heightened stress, negatively affecting parent-child relationships. Moreover, Seguin et al. (2021) investigated parenting stress during the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada and noted a significant rise in stress levels due to increased child screen time, further illustrating how external crises can amplify parenting challenges. These studies collectively emphasize that parenting stress, particularly when coupled with rigid parenting styles or external stressors, has detrimental effects on child behaviour and overall family dynamics.

The permissive style, characterized by high warmth but low control, has mixed effects on single mothers' stress levels. On one hand, Grolnick et al. (2020) found that in Slovakia, the supportive, lenient approach can help reduce immediate stress by fostering a sense of emotional connection. However, the lack of structure may lead to behavioural issues in children, causing long-term stress for mothers as they navigate difficulties in managing their children's behaviour. In addition, the uninvolved style, marked by low warmth and low control, is the most detrimental, with studies showing that mothers who exhibit this style often experience the highest levels of stress. These mothers may feel overwhelmed by their inability to effectively manage both their personal lives and their children's needs (Van der Kooij et al., 2021).

In Africa, studies on parenting stress and child adjustment further affirm these global trends. Carroll (2022) conducted research in South Africa assessing the effectiveness of a positive discipline parenting program and found that it significantly reduced parenting stress and improved child adaptive behaviour, reinforcing the importance of structured parental guidance. Additionally, Lanjekar et al. (2022) explored parent-child relationships

and cognitive development in Nigeria, revealing that hostile parenting styles increased peer stress and family stress, consequently affecting children's cognitive growth. Greenlee et al. (2022) studied families of autistic children in Egypt and observed that maternal stress was consistently higher than paternal stress, especially in daily interactions, reaffirming the gendered burden of parenting stress. These findings suggest that culturally relevant interventions tailored to parental needs can play a critical role in mitigating stress and fostering positive child development.

In countries like South Africa, where single motherhood is increasingly common, the authoritative style has been found to be effective in reducing stress among mothers. Single mothers who practice authoritative parenting report better coping strategies and emotional well-being, as they tend to engage in open communication with their children and set clear, consistent boundaries. These mothers also benefit from a supportive social network, which is a critical factor in reducing maternal stress (Mokoena et al., 2021). However, authoritarian and permissive styles are also common in some African contexts, and their impact on stress levels varies depending on the specific socio-economic conditions. For instance, in rural areas where resources are limited, authoritarian styles may reflect a more pragmatic approach to managing children in a challenging environment, but this can also increase stress by exacerbating parent-child conflicts (Nzume, 2018).

Uninvolved parenting, which is often a reflection of extreme financial or emotional distress, is especially prevalent in impoverished African communities. In these contexts, the lack of parental engagement is directly related to the mother's mental and emotional exhaustion, and this type of parenting style is strongly correlated with higher stress levels in mothers (Chikodzi et al., 2022). The failure to provide consistent emotional and material support to children can lead to a cycle of poor maternal mental health, further compounding the stress experienced by single mothers.

Kenya, like many other African nations, grapples with high levels of poverty, inequality, and gender-based violence, all of which exacerbate the stress experienced by single mothers. In the Kenyan context, single motherhood is often stigmatized, and mothers who raise children without the support of a partner face substantial societal pressure (Mwangi et al., 2020). These pressures can shape the parenting styles that single mothers adopt, which in turn influence their stress levels. Research conducted in Nairobi and other urban centres reveals that the authoritative parenting style is linked to better psychological outcomes for single mothers. These mothers tend to have a more balanced approach to parenting, where they set boundaries while maintaining emotional warmth and support. Such a style has been associated with lower levels of maternal stress and better child outcomes (Kamau et al., 2021). However, single mothers in low-income communities are more likely to adopt authoritarian or permissive parenting styles, depending on their personal experiences and resources. Authoritarian parenting, in particular, is associated with heightened stress, as these mothers struggle to maintain control in environments where economic hardship and social isolation are prevalent (Mutisya & Mitullah, 2020).

The role of extended family networks in Kenya is also significant in understanding how parenting styles impact stress levels. In many Kenyan communities, extended family members such as grandparents, aunts, and uncles often play a role in child-rearing. This support network can alleviate stress for single mothers by providing assistance with childcare and emotional support. However, the lack of such support, especially in urban areas, may increase the tendency toward uninvolved parenting, which can further elevate stress levels in mothers (Nyanjom et al., 2019). Additionally, single mothers in Kenya face challenges in balancing work and childcare, with many working long hours in the informal sector to make ends meet. This can lead to burnout and a greater reliance on permissive or uninvolved parenting styles, as the mother may be too exhausted to engage in active discipline or emotional support. These factors contribute to heightened stress, as single mothers may struggle to meet both their personal needs and their children's emotional and developmental needs (Nabwire & Muturi, 2021).

Across the global, continental, and local contexts, it is evident that parenting styles significantly influence the stress levels of single mothers. The authoritative style tends to promote better mental health and lower stress, while authoritarian and uninvolved styles are associated with higher stress. However, the socio-economic and cultural contexts in which single mothers operate play a critical role in shaping their parenting practices. In African and Kenyan contexts, the lack of institutional support, economic challenges, and societal expectations exacerbate the stress experienced by single mothers, often leading to less optimal parenting styles. For policy and practice, it is crucial to recognize the importance of providing single mothers with emotional and financial support. Programs aimed at educating mothers about different parenting styles, as well as providing resources such as childcare support and mental health services, could help reduce maternal stress and improve both parent and child outcomes. Interventions that encourage the authoritative style of parenting, while addressing the unique challenges faced by single mothers, could lead to more positive outcomes in terms of maternal well-being and child development.

The Family Stress Model (Conger et al., 1992) offers another useful theoretical lens to understand the relationship between parenting styles and stress among single mothers. This model focuses on how economic hardship and stressful life events influence family functioning, particularly parenting. According to the FSM, economic stressors lead to emotional distress, which in turn affects the parent-child relationship. For single mothers in Kayole, financial strain can exacerbate emotional distress, making it difficult for mothers to adopt optimal parenting practices. The model posits that high levels of stress and anxiety can reduce a mother's ability to provide nurturing, authoritative, and consistent parenting. Instead, she may resort to punitive, inconsistent, or neglectful practices, which increase the likelihood of negative outcomes for both mother and child. The Family Stress Model also emphasizes the importance of protective factors such as social support and coping mechanisms in buffering the impact of stress. In Kayole, where many single mothers may lack access to comprehensive support networks, the impact of stress may be more pronounced. Consequently, the FSM highlights how parenting styles may shift in response to the mother's emotional state and stress levels, further underscoring the critical role of economic and emotional stability in fostering positive parenting behaviours. This study examined the relationship between parenting styles and stress levels among single mothers in Kayole Sub-County, Nairobi, Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed correlational research design with aim of examining the relationship between parenting styles and perceived stress among 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 kilometres 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 three 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) and third section collected data using Perceived Stress Scale (PSS). 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, Pearson correlation analysis and regression analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examined the relationship between parenting styles and stress levels among 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.

Relationship between Parenting Styles and Perceived Stress among Single Mothers in Kayole Sub-County, Nairobi, Kenya

To determine the relationship between parenting styles and perceived stress among single mothers, correlation and regression analysis was conducted. Results are presented in table 2.

Table 2: Correlation between parenting styles and stress among single mothers

Correlations		Stress	Permissive	Authoritative	Authoritarian
Stress	Pearson Correlation	1	.082	-.920**	.905**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.241	.000	.000
	N	207	207	207	207
Permissive	Pearson Correlation	.082	1	-.023	.041
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.241		.741	.556
	N	207	207	207	207
Authoritative	Pearson Correlation	-.920**	-.023	1	-.942**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.741		.000
	N	207	207	207	207
Authoritarian	Pearson Correlation	.905**	.041	-.942**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.556	.000	
	N	207	207	207	207

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source (Field Data, 2025)

The Pearson correlation matrix reveals statistically significant relationships between parenting styles and stress levels among single mothers. Notably, authoritative parenting style shows a strong negative correlation with stress ($r = -0.920, p < .001$), suggesting that as authoritative parenting increases, perceived stress significantly decreases. This supports existing literature that identifies authoritative parenting as a protective factor against psychological distress due to its balance of warmth and structure (Baumrind, 2021; Kioko & Wambua, 2023). Conversely, the authoritarian parenting style exhibits a strong positive correlation with stress ($r = 0.905, p < .001$), indicating that higher levels of authoritarian behaviors characterized by rigidity, control, and low emotional responsiveness are associated with increased maternal stress. This aligns with empirical findings that authoritarian practices exacerbate parental burnout and emotional strain (Muriithi et al., 2022).

Interestingly, permissive parenting showed no correlation with stress ($r = 0.082, p = .241$), suggesting it neither alleviates nor exacerbates stress levels. The lack of significant association may be due to the inconsistent structure typical of permissive parenting, which neither demands high emotional labor nor provides stress-buffering consistency (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2020). Finally, the strong negative correlation between authoritative and authoritarian styles ($r = -0.942, p < .001$) indicates these approaches are largely incompatible, further reinforcing the inverse effects they have on stress. Overall, the findings emphasize the psychological benefits of authoritative parenting and the stress-inducing consequences of authoritarian approaches among single mothers.

Table 3: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.929 ^a	.863	.861	.16045

a. Predictors: (Constant), Authoritarian, Permissive, Authoritative

Source (Field Data, 2025)

The model summary reveals a strong positive multiple correlation ($R = .929$) between the combination of parenting styles (authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive) and stress levels among single mothers. The R Square value of .863 indicates that approximately 86.3% of the variance in perceived stress is explained by the combined influence of the three parenting styles. This is a substantial proportion, demonstrating a very high explanatory power. The Adjusted R Square (.861), which accounts for the number of predictors in the model, confirms the model's reliability. Additionally, the Standard Error of the Estimate (0.16045) is relatively small, indicating that the model predictions closely approximate the observed stress levels. These results suggest that parenting style is a critical determinant of maternal stress in this population.

Table 4: Analysis of Variance

ANOVA ^a		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	32.926	3	10.975	426.332	.000 ^b
	Residual	5.226	203	.026		
	Total	38.152	206			

a. Dependent Variable: Stress

b. Predictors: (Constant), Authoritarian, Permissive, Authoritative

Source (Field Data, 2025)

The ANOVA results show that the regression model is statistically significant, $F(3, 203) = 426.33$, $p < .001$. This high F-ratio confirms that the parenting styles as a block provide a significantly better fit for predicting stress levels than would be expected by chance. The regression sum of squares (32.926) represents the amount of variance in stress explained by the predictors, while the residual sum of squares (5.226) indicates the unexplained variance. Since the p-value is far below the conventional threshold of 0.05, the findings suggest that the model significantly predicts stress among single mothers based on their parenting style. This finding supports the hypothesis that parenting behavior is closely linked to maternal psychological well-being.

Table 5: Coefficient

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	2.787	.337		8.263	.000
Permissive	.044	.021	.054	2.079	.039
Authoritative	-.380	.049	-.603	-7.811	.000
Authoritarian	.210	.048	.335	4.333	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Stress

Source (Field Data, 2025)

The coefficients table provides insight into the specific influence of each parenting style on stress. The constant value ($B = 2.787$) reflects the baseline level of stress when all parenting styles are at zero. The authoritative parenting style has a significant negative effect on stress ($B = -0.380$, $\beta = -0.603$, $p < .001$), suggesting that an increase in authoritative behavior is associated with lower stress levels. This strong negative standardized coefficient (Beta) further affirms its role as a protective factor against stress. In contrast, authoritarian parenting shows a significant positive effect ($B = 0.210$, $\beta = 0.335$, $p < .001$), indicating that it contributes substantially to increased stress among single mothers. The permissive style, although statistically significant ($B = 0.044$, $\beta = 0.054$, $p = .039$), has a much weaker effect, implying minimal practical impact. The small effect size could suggest that permissiveness, while sometimes problematic, may not consistently intensify maternal stress unless combined with other risk factors. These coefficients align with established theory, confirming that authoritative parenting reduces stress, whereas authoritarian parenting increases it, and permissive parenting plays a minor role (Baumrind, 2021; Otieno et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

The research demonstrates a profound psychological connection between parenting approaches and maternal wellbeing, revealing that parenting styles function as both expressions of and influences on psychological health among single mothers. The strong inverse relationship between authoritative parenting and stress suggests that emotionally responsive, communicative parenting serves as a protective psychological mechanism, potentially providing mothers with a sense of competence, connection, and meaning in their parenting role. This relationship implies that when mothers engage in warm, supportive interactions with their children, they experience emotional reciprocity and validation that buffers against stress. Conversely, the strong positive association between authoritarian parenting and elevated stress indicates that harsh, controlling parenting behaviours create psychological burden for mothers, possibly due to the emotional labour required to maintain rigid control, guilt associated with harsh treatment, or the relational distance that such approaches create. The lack of significant relationship between permissive parenting and stress suggests that inconsistent or lenient parenting neither protects against nor contributes to maternal stress, possibly because it represents a neutral, albeit ineffective, coping strategy.

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