



## Influence of parenting styles on child protection services in Igembe Central, Meru County, Kenya

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### ABSTRACT

Parenting styles shape the well-being, resilience, and vulnerability of children to harm. This study examined the influence of parenting styles on child protection services by combining literature review with empirical evidence from Igembe Central. The research was guided by Baumrind's Parenting Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which together explain how parenting behaviors and environmental systems interact to shape child safety and welfare outcomes. A descriptive research design was used with a target population of 52086. A sample size of 381 was selected. The sampling methods used were purposive sampling and simple random sampling. Questionnaires and key informant interviews were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data with a 70.18%. Content analysis was applied to analyze the qualitative data, while descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were applied to the quantitative data. Ethical considerations of anonymity and confidentiality were adhered to. The study found that parenting styles were the strongest predictors of child protection services ( $\beta = 0.563$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Specifically, permissive and neglectful parenting styles were positively associated with neglect, early pregnancies, child labor, and drug abuse among children, while authoritative parenting was linked with resilience and reduced vulnerability. The findings align with already existing research showing that authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful parenting styles heighten risks of maltreatment, while authoritative parenting protects against adverse childhood experiences. The study concludes that authoritative parenting enhances protective outcomes and recommends strengthening community-based parenting programs and capacity-building initiatives for caregivers in collaboration with local child protection services.

**Keywords:** Authoritarian, Authoritative, Child Protection, Maltreatment, Neglectful, Parenting Styles, Permissive

### I. INTRODUCTION

Child protection remains a critical global concern, attracting sustained attention from governments, researchers, and international agencies. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) emphasizes every child's right to safety, care, and development free from abuse and neglect (United Nation Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2023). Despite this, global estimates show that over one billion children experience some form of physical, emotional, or sexual violence annually (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). Parenting, as the primary socializing process, plays a central role in shaping children's developmental outcomes and in determining their vulnerability or resilience to harm. Studies have consistently demonstrated that parenting styles influence children's emotional regulation, discipline, social competence, and exposure to violence (Lansford et al., 2018; Martínez et al., 2020). Authoritative parenting is associated with warmth and consistent boundaries that promote safety, while authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful styles often correspond to increased child welfare concerns (Pinquart, 2017; Mwangi & Muriithi, 2021).

In Kenya, child protection continues to face significant challenges despite the existence of robust legal and policy frameworks such as the Children Act (2022) and the National Plan of Action for Children (2015–2022). Evidence from the *Violence Against Children Survey* (VACS) shows that nearly half of Kenyan children experience physical violence before the age of 18, while over one in ten girls face sexual violence (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], Ministry of Labour & UNICEF, 2019). Further, poverty, cultural norms, and weak parental supervision have been identified as major drivers of abuse and exploitation (National Council for Children's Services [NCCS], 2019). The *Kenya Census Thematic Report on Children* (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS] & UNICEF, 2021) highlights that rural areas are disproportionately affected due to limited access to protection services,

social stigma surrounding child abuse, and inadequate community awareness. Within this context, parenting styles emerge as a critical determinant of how caregivers manage risk, discipline, and emotional support.

In Meru County, particularly Igembe Central Sub-County, these challenges are intensified by socio-economic hardships, early marriage practices, miraa farming lifestyles, and household instability that weaken family cohesion. Observations from local child protection offices indicate rising cases of child neglect, teenage pregnancies, and school dropouts, which are partly attributed to inconsistent or ineffective parenting approaches. Understanding how different parenting styles influence child protection outcomes in this setting is therefore essential. This study examines the relationship between the four key parenting styles; authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful and child protection outcomes in Igembe Central. The study not only provides empirical evidence for policy and practice but also contributes to the limited body of literature examining how family-level parenting behaviors intersect with formal child protection systems in rural Kenya.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Meru County has consistently recorded high cases of child neglect, early pregnancies, drug and substance abuse, and harmful cultural practices, which place a heavy burden on child protection systems. According to the Department of Children's Services, in 2023 Meru was among the top five counties in Kenya reporting child neglect cases, with over 3,000 cases documented in a single year. National Authority for the Campaign Against Alcohol and Drug Abuse [NACADA] (2019) further identified Meru as a hotspot for underage alcohol and khat consumption, noting that weak parental supervision contributed to children's involvement in substance abuse. The National Council for Population and Development in 2018, also highlighted Meru among counties with worrying levels of teenage pregnancies and school dropouts, issues closely tied to inadequate parental guidance. In Igembe Central, there are signs of high child vulnerability including school dropouts, teenage pregnancies and reports of abuse. National evidence from the Kenya Violence Against Children Survey [VACS] in 2019 and the Kenya Child Protection Report of 2016-2019 shows that a large share of violence against children is perpetrated by close relatives and caregivers and that emotional and physical violence by caregivers remain important risk factors. County-level planning documents and a Meru Situation Analysis identify gaps in child protection structures and specialized services in Igembe Central. Despite these insights, limited research has directly linked parenting styles to child protection services.

### 1.2 Research Objective

The main objective of this study was to examine how parenting styles influence child protection services in Igembe Central Sub-County.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Review

#### 2.1.1 Baumrind's Parenting Theory

Baumrind's Parenting Theory (1966; 1991) identifies four parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful. The theory posits that each style reflects varying degrees of parental warmth and control, shaping children's social life, emotional stability, and behavior. Authoritative parents combine warmth and firmness hence promoting self-discipline and security, while authoritarian parents enforce strict rules with little responsiveness, leading to anxiety or reduced autonomy. Permissive parents show warmth but lack structure, exposing children to risky behaviors, whereas neglectful parents demonstrate minimal involvement, resulting in neglect and emotional deprivation. In the context of this study, Baumrind's theory provides a behavioral foundation for understanding how parenting practices influence children's vulnerability to abuse or protection.

#### 2.1.2 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) explains child development as a product of interactions between the child and various environmental systems: the microsystem (family, school), mesosystem (community), exosystem (institutions) and macrosystem (cultural norms). This study applies the theory to illustrate how family-based parenting practices (microsystem) interact with community and institutional structures (meso/exosystem) to affect child protection outcomes in Igembe Central. Weak family supervision, limited communication, and poverty at the micro-level are often compounded by systemic gaps in child protection services at the macro level.

### 2.2 Empirical Review

Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates a link between parenting styles and child protection outcomes. In USA, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau (2024) produced a nationwide yearly report on child protection, focusing on neglect, statistics and abuse

handled by the Child Protection Services. The report noted that there was a variation across federal states on child maltreatment and fatalities, caused by poor parenting practices and therefore called for parental analysis and subsequent protection of vulnerable children. Complementary evidence from a nationwide study by Brown and Ward (2023) examined how parental stress, socio-economic hardship, and parenting style predict child welfare involvement across diverse communities. Their findings showed that authoritarian and neglectful parenting styles significantly increased the likelihood of child maltreatment reports, while authoritative parenting acted as a strong protective factor. The authors concluded that strengthening parental capacity and promoting positive parenting interventions should remain a priority in U.S. child welfare policy, given the consistent link between parenting behaviours and child protection outcomes.

In India, Sahithya and Raman (2021) conducted a study on the relationship between parenting style, parental personality, and child temperament among children diagnosed with anxiety disorders. The study found that permissive and authoritarian parenting styles were associated with higher levels of child anxiety, while authoritative parenting was linked to emotional stability and better social functioning. The authors observed that most cases of child distress stemmed from poor parental responsiveness and inconsistent discipline, reflecting how ineffective parenting can indirectly compromise child protection. Similarly, Li et al. (2023) conducted a cross-national comparative study that included Indian families and reported that children raised under authoritative parenting demonstrated better emotion regulation and social adjustment compared to those raised in authoritarian households. The findings reaffirm that parental warmth, communication, and balanced control are essential for fostering emotional resilience and reducing children's vulnerability to abuse.

Roman et al. (2016) did a study in South Africa on how parenting styles are perceived and how they vary based on the gender or ethnicity of the caregiver. The study found that authoritative parenting style was more linked to positive outcomes in local literature while authoritarian and neglectful parenting styles were harsh and linked with negative child behavior and emotional outcomes. The authors recommended positive parenting support programs as part of child protection/prevention strategies. In a later study, Louw and Stroud (2020) investigated parental disciplinary practices in Cape Town and found that caregivers who employed supportive, communicative approaches had children who demonstrated higher self-esteem and lower exposure to violence. The study emphasized that positive parenting directly enhances children's sense of safety and reduces reliance on punitive correction.

Jensen et al (2021) did a study on a home visiting parenting program implemented in Rwanda for strengthening social protection services. The study found that the home-visiting program led to improvements in caregiver stimulation and father engagement, better child cognitive and social-emotional outcomes, and reductions in family violence indicators in the short-to-medium term. The study demonstrated that parenting programs were crucial in reducing risk factors for mal-treatment and improving general child well-being. A follow-up evaluation (Jensen et al., 2025) confirmed sustained benefits in reduced harsh parenting and improved child emotional wellbeing, emphasizing the importance of scaling community-based parenting interventions in similar contexts.

The government of Kenya did the Violence Against Children survey of 2019 which measured prevalence, risk/protective factors, and consequences of physical, sexual, and emotional violence experienced by children and adolescents in Kenya. It documented high prevalence of childhood physical, sexual and emotional violence, with many incidents perpetrated by people known to the child, including family members and caregivers. It found concerning increases in certain adolescent subgroups, and identified gaps in reporting and access to child protection services. Buliva (2019) examined the influence of permissive parenting on delinquent behaviour among children from selected public primary schools in Butere Sub-County. The study found that permissive parenting, characterized by low control and excessive freedom, was associated with increased engagement in risky behaviours such as truancy, substance use, and early sexual activity. The researcher noted that inadequate supervision and parental indulgence weakened moral guidance and exposed children to abuse and exploitation. The study emphasized the need for parental training programs to strengthen boundaries and improve child safety outcomes.

The National Council for Children's Services; Meru County (2023) did a situation analysis to map children's services, institutional care, and gaps in child protection across the county. The analysis report highlighted that many children in institutional care are from families, meaning they are not abandoned, stressing the need for family reintegration and community-based parenting supports. The report flagged Igembe sub-counties as having service coverage gaps and recommended scaling county parenting/caregiver support linked to referral systems. A study by Mutunga et al. (2023) investigated the influence of parenting styles on discipline among secondary school students in Meru County. The study established that authoritative parenting correlated positively with students' self-discipline, responsibility, and academic motivation, while permissive and neglectful parenting styles were linked to indiscipline and poor performance. The researchers concluded that parenting behaviors directly affect children's social adjustment and emotional wellbeing, recommending that community sensitization on effective parenting be integrated into local education and child protection programs.



Empirical evidence shows that parenting styles are a central determinant of whether risks escalate into child protection cases (Baumrind, 1991; Odame-Mensah & Gyimah, 2018). Permissive and neglectful parenting styles are strongly associated with poor supervision, truancy, early sexual activity, and substance abuse (Kipchumba & Loong’onyo, 2024). Authoritarian parenting, though sometimes motivated by protection, often results in harsh discipline and secrecy that can manifest as emotional or physical abuse (Lansford et al., 2018). In contrast, authoritative parenting has consistently been linked to resilience, academic success, and reduced vulnerability to maltreatment (Martínez et al., 2020).

### III. METHODOLOGY

The study utilized descriptive research design. This research design was adopted because it allowed for an in-depth examination and factual description of existing relationships between parenting styles and child protection services within Igembe Central. This design enabled the researcher to capture respondents’ perceptions, attitudes, and experiences without manipulating the variables. The target population was 52086 respondents drawn from household heads, children officer, the subcounty police commander and subcounty hospital head pediatric nurse in Igembe Central. A sample of 381 was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination table, which identified that for a population of 52,086, a sample of approximately 381 is statistically adequate at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. The researcher purposively selected the children officer, subcounty police commander and the head pediatric nurse in the subcounty while the household heads were randomly sampled. Qualitative and quantitative data was collected through semi-structured questionnaires and key informant interviews. The questionnaire response rate was 70.18%. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze quantitative data and content analysis used to analyze qualitative data. The analyzed data was presented in tables. Ethical considerations of anonymity and confidentiality were adhered to.

### IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

#### 4.1 Parenting Styles

The study assessed respondents’ perceptions of four parenting styles; authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful and their influence on child protection. The findings in Table 1 illustrate the mean and standard deviation scores for each parenting style.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics for Parenting Styles*

Parenting Style	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Authoritative	3.94	1.13	Promotes protection and positive child development
Authoritarian	3.83	1.18	Provides structure but limits confidence
Permissive	4.07	0.99	Associated with exploitation and poor supervision
Neglectful	4.34	0.81	Strongly associated with neglect and vulnerability

As shown in Table 1 **Error! Reference source not found.** above, respondents overwhelmingly agreed that children of neglectful parents are the least protected ( $M = 4.34, SD = 0.81$ ), underscoring neglect as the strongest risk factor for child vulnerability in Igembe Central. Similarly, permissive parenting was strongly associated with children’s exploitation ( $M = 4.07, SD = 0.99$ ). Authoritative parenting was positively perceived, with respondents affirming that it promotes children’s understanding of safety and wellbeing ( $M = 3.94, SD = 1.13$ ). Authoritarian parenting attracted moderate agreement, with respondents noting that it produced less confident children ( $M = 3.83, SD = 1.18$ ). These results highlight that while authoritative parenting is protective, both permissive and neglectful styles expose children to the risk of child maltreatment.

These results correspond with Mutunga et al. (2023) and Buliva (2019) who observed that permissive and neglectful parenting expose children to high vulnerability, while Martínez et al. (2020) emphasized that authoritative parenting fosters resilience, open communication, and emotional security.

#### 4.2 Child Protection Services

The study further sought to evaluate respondents’ perceptions of the accessibility, responsiveness, and effectiveness of child protection services in Igembe Central. The mean scores in Table 2 summarize the overall assessment of service performance.

**Table 2***Descriptive Statistics for Child Protection Services*

Aspect of Child Protection Services	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Accessibility of services	3.72	1.07	Moderately accessible
Responsiveness to child abuse cases	3.81	1.02	Moderately responsive
Awareness of protection programs	3.68	1.08	Moderate awareness
Satisfaction with outcomes	3.83	0.99	Generally satisfactory
Composite Mean	<b>3.76</b>	<b>1.04</b>	Moderate effectiveness overall

The overall mean score ( $M = 3.76$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ) suggests that child protection services in Igembe Central are moderately effective, though respondents highlighted disparities in coverage, low awareness, and resource constraints. These findings are consistent with the *Kenya Child Protection Report (2016–2019)* and *Violence Against Children Survey (VACS, 2019)*, both of which identified gaps in awareness and institutional capacity in rural counties (CDC et al., 2019; NCCS, 2019).

**4.3 Regression Analysis**

To determine the predictive strength of parenting styles on child protection services, the researcher analyzed this relationship through regression analysis.

**Table 3***Regression Results*

Variable	Beta ( $\beta$ )	t value	P value	Interpretation
Parenting Styles	0.563	9.247	< 0.001	Significant predictor of child protection
Constant	1.231	4.372	0.000	-

The regression results revealed that parenting styles significantly influenced child protection outcomes ( $\beta = 0.563$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This implies that positive parenting behaviors, particularly those aligned with authoritative practices; enhance children's safety and welfare, while negative styles such as neglectful and permissive parenting weaken protective mechanisms.

**4.4 Discussion****4.4.1 Authoritative Parenting and Child Protection Services**

The study found that authoritative parenting in Igembe Central is perceived as protective ( $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ). Respondents and key informants described authoritative parents as combining warmth with clear, consistent discipline. Children from such households were reported as confident, disciplined, and less likely to be abused. Thematic evidence shows that these homes foster trust and early disclosure of harm. Children raised by authoritative parents are more likely to be responsible adults who understand their limits, respect others and able to make good decisions without close supervision. The researcher noted that most of the household heads who adopt this parenting style are learned, with tertiary education levels. These parents understand the importance of raising confident children who have voices of their own and can think independently.

These results agree with empirical studies that link authoritative parenting to positive child outcomes and lower vulnerability. Martínez et al. (2020) report that authoritative caregivers foster resilience, self-regulation, and social competence. The Kenya Census Thematic Report on Children (KNBS & UNICEF, 2021) noted that households characterized by positive parental guidance recorded fewer child protection concerns.

**4.4.2 Authoritarian Parenting and Child Protection Services**

Authoritarian parenting in Igembe Central was associated with structure and obedience but also with emotional distance and suppressed independence ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ). Participants reported that children from authoritarian homes often conceal risky behaviours such as drug use and sexual activity and are less likely to disclose abuse, which delays engagement with child protection services. Respondents agreed that authoritarian parents, while often strict and demanding, tend to undermine children's confidence and sense of self-worth. Key informants observed that such children, though obedient, are often withdrawn and hesitant to express themselves openly. It was reported that students from authoritarian households were less likely to participate in class discussions and often appeared anxious during oral assessments.

This pattern aligns with studies that indicate authoritarian parenting can inhibit communication and self-expression, thereby reducing disclosure and help-seeking. Pinquart (2017) provides a nuanced view: while strict

control can sometimes reduce externalizing behaviours and deter delinquency, it may concurrently harm emotional wellbeing and reduce the likelihood of reporting abuse. Thus, the current findings are consistent with the literature that reveals children raised in environments characterized by harsh discipline and limited parental responsiveness are at higher risk of both physical and emotional harm (CDC et al., 2019).

#### 4.4.3 Permissive Parenting and Child Protection Services

This was noted as the most common parenting style in Igembe central. Permissive parenting registered a high mean ( $M = 4.07$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ), and thematic data emphasized weak supervision and an overemphasis on friendship with the children at the expense of safety. Respondents reported examples e.g., mixed-gender sleepovers and yielding to children's demands which link permissiveness to school dropout, substance use eg miraa chewing and alcohol consumption, early sexual activity and teenage pregnancy. Overall, permissive parenting was associated with increased child vulnerability and exposure to exploitation.

These results concur with empirical studies that document links between permissive parenting and risky behaviours: Buliva (2019); Chepgimis and K'Okul (2019) report increased delinquency and poor supervision under permissive regimes. Mutunga et al. (2023) also link permissiveness to indiscipline and vulnerability of children in Meru County. National survey data (CDC et al., 2019) identify poor parental monitoring as a driver of abuse further support this association.

#### 4.4.4 Neglectful Parenting and Child Protection Services

Neglectful parenting had the strongest negative association ( $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ). In Igembe Central, it is characterized by minimal supervision and limited involvement in children's daily activities. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that neglectful parenting left children unprotected and highly vulnerable to abuse, child labour, early marriage and teenage pregnancies. Unlike permissive parents who are indulgent, neglectful parents are often absent, physically, emotionally, or both. Neglected children are among the most affected in terms of school attendance and performance and often lack basic needs. Orphaned children were also reported to be highly vulnerable. Many are forced into sexual exploitation in exchange for basic needs such as food, clothing, or sanitary towels. Neglectful parenting in Igembe Central is also associated with low emotional responsiveness, limited communication, and failure to meet children's basic emotional and developmental needs. Such practices compromise children's psychosocial development and ability to recognize or report abuse, leaving them highly vulnerable. Respondents agreed that children raised in neglectful households are the least protected. The findings suggest that the absence of parental supervision and guidance not only increases immediate risks such as physical and emotional abuse but also undermines the formation of protective coping skills and resilience which are critical for navigating harmful environments.

This finding is strongly supported by existing literature. The *Kenya Child Protection Report* and VACS (CDC et al., 2019; NCCS, 2019) identify neglect as a leading form of maltreatment; Odame-Mensah & Gyimah (2018) and van IJzendoorn et al. (2019) similarly identify neglect as a major antecedent to adverse child outcomes globally. No empirical contradiction was identified regarding the harmful effects of neglect.

## V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Conclusion

The study set out to examine the influence of parenting styles on child protection services in Igembe Central, Meru County. Guided by Baumrind's Parenting Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the findings established a significant relationship between parenting behaviors and child safety outcomes. Authoritative parenting emerged as the most protective style, promoting communication, warmth, and consistent supervision that strengthen children's resilience and awareness of personal safety. In contrast, permissive and neglectful parenting were associated with heightened vulnerability to abuse, exploitation, and neglect due to weak control and inadequate emotional support. Authoritarian parenting provided structure but limited emotional openness, potentially reducing children's confidence and capacity to report abuse. These findings imply that the quality of parenting directly shapes children's protection outcomes, underscoring the need for family-focused interventions as part of Kenya's broader child protection strategy.

### 5.2 Recommendations

**Parenting Education and Capacity Building:** The Department of Children Services (DCS) and local Non-Governmental Organizations should conduct structured parenting education programs focusing on promoting authoritative parenting, effective communication, and consistent supervision. Community Sensitization and

Awareness: Chiefs, religious leaders, and local administrators should spearhead awareness campaigns to discourage neglectful and permissive parenting practices that expose children to harm.

Integration of Child Protection Systems: Strengthen coordination between families, schools, health facilities, and law enforcement agencies to enhance the early detection and reporting of child abuse and neglect. Policy and Programmatic Interventions: The Meru County Government and national policymakers should integrate family-centered parenting interventions into child protection frameworks to ensure sustainability. Further Research: Future studies should employ longitudinal and comparative designs to examine how socio-economic and cultural factors interact with parenting styles to influence child protection outcomes across diverse Kenyan contexts.

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