

Family Types and Psychosocial Wellbeing among Adolescents in Selected Public High Schools in Ruiru Sub-County, Kiambu County, Kenya

Judith Wangari Kibui¹, Amos Keya Alumada²

Pan Africa Christian University, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Adolescent period is a critical stage of human development, characterized by the acquisition of life values and behaviours that can last a lifetime. The family is crucial in determining psychosocial development throughout this formative period. The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between family subsystems and adolescents' psychosocial well-being in selected public high schools in Ruiru Sub-County, Kiambu County, Kenya. The study utilized correlational research design. The target population was 5,392 students of 10 public high schools in Ruiru Sub-County of Kiambu County, Kenya. From this, a stratified sample of 373 students was selected. Data was collected using the Family Assessment Device and Adolescent Mental Health Continuum-Short Form instruments. The data was analysed in SPSS version 31 using chi-square, correlation and linear regression techniques. Results showed that adolescents from two-parent families had the highest proportion of high psychosocial well-being (85.5%), followed by those from single-parent families (82.0%). In contrast, lower levels of psychosocial well-being were more common among adolescents from step-parent (30.0%) and extended families (35.3%). Chi-square tests showed these variations were statistically significant, $\chi^2 (3, N = 327) = 9.10, p < .05$. The results lead to the conclusion that family type plays a meaningful role in shaping adolescents' psychosocial well-being. Specifically, more stable and nuclear family arrangements – particularly two-parent families – appear to provide a more supportive environment for positive psychosocial outcomes, while step-parent and extended family settings may present structural or relational complexities that heighten vulnerability. Family-based counselling and parenting workshops could help families especially step-parent and extended ones to manage relational challenges.

Keywords: Adolescents, Family Subsystems, Psychosocial Wellbeing

INTRODUCTION

The family is the bedrock of society, and its health directly impacts the well-being of adolescents (Berman & Daneback, 2022). Family structure constitutes a critical context within which adolescents develop psychosocial competencies such as emotional regulation, self-concept, social skills, and resilience. The family, conceptualized as a mutually interdependent system, shapes adolescents' psychological outcomes through patterns of interaction, role allocation, and value transmission (Yan et al., 2022). Theoretical models of adolescent psychological well-being emphasize constructs such as empathy, anxiety regulation, emotional intelligence, and social competence, all of which are nurtured or constrained within family environments (Morales-Rodríguez et al., 2020). In two-parent families, the presence of both caregivers often facilitates role complementarity and emotional support, whereas alternative arrangements such as single-parent, step-parent, or extended family systems may restructure caregiving patterns and influence adolescents' psychosocial experiences (Maqubela et al., 2020). Thus, variations in family type potentially shape adolescents' psychosocial wellbeing through differences in support systems, boundaries, and stability.

Empirical evidence demonstrates that family disruption, particularly parental absence due to divorce or separation, is associated with adverse psychosocial outcomes (Yuxiao et al., 2019). Children from disjointed or non-intact families tend to report more emotional difficulties, negative affect, and reduced psychological

health compared to those from intact two-parent households. Single-parent and step-parent families may face challenges related to role strain, economic stress, and boundary ambiguity, which can affect adolescents' sense of security and belonging. Although extended family systems may compensate by providing additional emotional and instrumental support, they may also introduce complex hierarchical relationships that influence adolescents' psychosocial adjustment. Consequently, the type of family structure within which an adolescent is raised has significant implications for their overall psychosocial wellbeing.

Globally and regionally, demographic shifts have intensified the transformation of family structures. According to the 2017 UN World Population Prospects, sub-Saharan Africa accounts for 14% of the global population, with adolescents aged 15–19 comprising 23% of this population (Wainaina et al., 2021). Concurrently, the proportion of children growing up without both biological parents in Africa is increasing (Wasserman, 2020). Factors such as endemic conflicts, parental mortality, labour migration, and socio-economic constraints further destabilize traditional two-parent systems (Mabrouk et al., 2022). These structural changes weaken customary systems of social control and familial cohesion that historically safeguarded adolescents from psychosocial distress (Somefun, 2020). As a result, family type has become an increasingly salient factor in understanding adolescent psychosocial wellbeing within the African context (Umberson & Thomeer, 2020).

In Kenya, the prevalence of children raised outside two-biological-parent families is rising, yet empirical research examining its psychosocial implications remains limited (Abuya et al., 2019). Although studies have explored related domains – such as single parenting and adolescent psychological wellbeing (Koderer & Kimani, 2021) or psychosocial interventions targeting youth outcomes (Magai & Koot, 2019) – there is insufficient direct investigation into how distinct family types shape adolescents' psychosocial wellbeing (Buehler, 2020). National data indicate notable levels of psychosocial distress among Kenyan youth, with reports highlighting emotional and behavioral challenges among adolescents (Erskine et al., 2024; Wado et al., 2022). In Kiambu County specifically, psychosocial disorders among adolescents have been documented at concerning levels (Chege, 2019), with such challenges negatively affecting academic engagement and social functioning (Duraku et al., 2023). However, these concerns have seldom been examined through a structural family lens that differentiates between two-parent, single-parent, step-parent, and extended family systems.

Despite evidence linking family disruptions to adolescent mental health outcomes, existing studies reveal conceptual and methodological gaps. For instance, Wanjao et al. (2023) examined parental separation and self-esteem but did not comprehensively analyze family subsystems or hierarchical relationships. Kimaru et al. (2020) focused on academic performance without addressing psychosocial wellbeing, while Owuor et al. (2023) investigated family size and dropout rates without capturing students' direct psychosocial experiences. Therefore, although psychosocial problems among adolescents are escalating, there is limited empirical evidence examining how specific family types influence psychosocial wellbeing, particularly among public high school students in Ruiru Sub-County, Kiambu County. This gap underscores the need for the present study to systematically explore the influence of different family types such as two-parent, single-parent, step-parent, and extended family structures on adolescents' psychosocial wellbeing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empirical literature consistently affirms that family subsystems significantly shape adolescents' psychosocial wellbeing, though scholars differ in emphasis and contextual interpretation. Studies converge on the view that supportive parent–child interactions, characterized by warmth, open communication, and emotional availability, enhance self-esteem, emotional regulation, and overall mental health (Frosch et al., 2021; Rovelli et al., 2022). Similarly, Zhu and Shek (2021) and Swanson et al. (2021) agree that the parental subsystem extends its influence beyond psychosocial outcomes to cognitive and physical development. Tafà et al. (2022) further assert that well-functioning parental subsystems predict thriving families. There is little disagreement on the detrimental impact of dysfunctional subsystems; Skinner et al. (2021) concur that conflict-ridden or neglectful dynamics contribute to anxiety, depression, and low self-worth. The point of convergence across these studies is that the quality and functionality of subsystems – rather than mere family composition – are central to adolescent wellbeing. However, a conceptual gap remains regarding how these subsystem dynamics

operate within distinct family types such as two-parent, single-parent, step-parent, and extended family systems.

Regarding the marital subsystem, several studies agree that marital quality significantly influences adolescents' psychosocial outcomes. Liu et al. (2024) found that improved marital quality predicted better child behaviour, while Wang et al. (2024) similarly observed that marital harmony influenced the severity of discipline practices. These findings converge with earlier assertions that marital satisfaction and parent-child warmth are interconnected (Frosch et al., 2021) and that children internalize relational models observed within marital relationships (Gao et al., 2019; Thornton, 2023). However, Ji et al. (2023) introduce nuance by arguing that maternal co-parenting plays a more direct role in adolescent ego-identity development than paternal marital satisfaction, suggesting partial disagreement on the relative weight of marital versus co-parenting dynamics. Ding et al. (2022) and Ronaghan et al. (2024) agree that both co-parenting and two-parent family structures provide stability, yet they acknowledge that structural presence alone does not guarantee positive outcomes. A methodological gap emerges, as many of these studies rely primarily on parental reports, limiting adolescents' direct perspectives on their psychosocial wellbeing.

Empirical evidence on step-parent and blended family structures reveals both convergence and divergence. Mohapanele et al. (2023) and Debowska et al. (2021) agree that stepfamilies may expose children to emotional distress, neglect, or violence, particularly in contexts of economic strain, thereby negatively affecting psychosocial wellbeing. These findings suggest that step-parent family structures may heighten vulnerability among adolescents. In contrast, Jensen and Sanner (2021) disagree with a wholly negative portrayal, noting that positive stepparent – child relationships can improve children's wellbeing over time, although the stepparent – biological parent relationship showed limited impact on outcomes. This divergence highlights a contextual gap, indicating that outcomes in stepfamilies depend on relational quality rather than structure alone. Additionally, the reliance on purposive sampling in some studies (Mohapanele et al., 2023) limits generalizability, revealing a methodological gap in understanding step-parent family dynamics across diverse populations.

The extended family subsystem is widely recognized as protective, though its strength varies across cultural settings. Herke et al. (2020) and Oropesa-Ruiz (2022) agree that grandparents and other kin provide emotional, financial, and cultural support that fosters identity development and resilience. Mabetha et al. (2024) and Wu et al. (2020) similarly converge on the importance of strong kin involvement in effective caregiving. However, Gómez (2021) challenges the exclusive focus on family subsystems by emphasizing the broader community's role in building resilience, suggesting that psychosocial wellbeing may extend beyond intra-family interactions. Bai et al. (2023) and Nwanmuoh et al. (2024) further complicate the discourse by noting the weakening of extended family roles in Western and increasingly urban African contexts. The convergence lies in acknowledging the extended family's traditional protective function, while divergence concerns the extent of its current relevance amid modernization. A conceptual gap persists regarding how extended family support interacts with other family types in rapidly urbanizing Kenyan settings.

In Kenya, evidence indicates variability in the strength and functionality of family subsystems (Kumar et al., 2018; Onsando et al., 2021). Dyaji and Kajom (2018) and Kumar et al. (2018) agree that weakening marital and parental subsystems – manifested through rising separation, juvenile delinquency, and socio-economic strain – signal instability in many households, particularly in urban areas. While some studies, such as Ayako et al. (2021), reveal mixed psychosocial outcomes influenced by cultural practices, they focus narrowly on arranged marriages, leaving broader family structural dynamics underexplored. Most studies examine isolated subsystems (marital, parental, or extended) or specific cultural practices without comparatively analyzing distinct family types. Furthermore, few studies directly capture adolescents' perspectives within public high school contexts. This reveals both conceptual and methodological gaps, underscoring the need to examine how family types influence adolescents' psychosocial wellbeing.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a correlational research design, defined as a systematic plan for integrating study components to examine relationships among variables (Muzari et al., 2022). This design was appropriate

because it quantitatively measured naturally occurring variables – family structure, family boundaries, and psychosocial wellbeing – without manipulation. Through statistical procedures, the design enabled the researcher to determine the strength and direction of associations and identify predictive patterns. The study was conducted in Ruiru Sub-County, Kiambu County, Kenya, within the Nairobi metropolitan region, an area characterized by diverse family structures and socio-economic backgrounds. The target population comprised 5,392 students drawn from 10 public secondary schools.

A stratified sampling technique was employed to ensure representativeness (Andrade, 2021; Zickar & Keith, 2023). The population was divided into strata based on schools and gender, after which proportionate random sampling was conducted within each stratum to enhance inclusivity and reflect population diversity (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). Form Two and Form Three students aged 13–19 were randomly selected, while Form Four students were excluded due to national examination preparations (Macharia, 2024; Majimbo et al., 2023). The study relied on primary data collected directly from participants to ensure relevance and contemporaneity (Kotronoulas et al., 2023), rather than secondary data, which refers to previously collected information (Taherdoost, 2021).

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data, while chi-square tests examined relationships between variables (Mishra et al., 2019; Saccenti et al., 2020). Findings were presented using tables and figures. Ethical standards were upheld through approval from the Institutional Scientific Ethics Review Committee (ISERC), acquisition of a National Commission of Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI) research permit, and authorization from county and school authorities (Hassan et al., 2021). Informed consent, confidentiality measures, secure data storage, and eventual destruction of questionnaires ensured participants' rights and data protection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The demographic profile of the respondents indicated a nearly equal gender distribution, with males being 49.5%) and females accounting for 50.5%. Regarding educational level, 42.8% of the respondents were in Form 2 while 57.2% were in Form 3. In terms of school category, the majority of participants (66.3%), were drawn from mixed schools, whereas 20.7% attended boys-only schools and 13.1% attended girls-only schools. Table 1 presents the distribution of respondents by family sub-systems.

Table 1 Distribution of Respondents by Family Sub-systems

Which of the following family types bests describe your family	Frequency	Percent
Two-parent family	173	52.6%
Single-parent family	112	33.9%
Step-parent family	10	3.1%
Extended family	34	10.4%
Total	329	100.0%

The results indicate that a majority of the respondents (52.6%) came from two-parent families. This was followed by 33.9% from single-parent families, which may consist of either a mother or a father as the sole caregiver, 10.4% respondents from extended families, and 3.1% respondents from step-parent families. These findings suggested that over half of the participants were raised in two-parent family structures, with a notable proportion also coming from single-parent households. This finding compares well with the study by Macharia (2024) which also found that majority (68%) of the students were from two-parent family while 32% were from separated/divorced parents. The results suggest that while the traditional two-parent family still represents the majority of family sub-systems, a significant proportion of adolescents are being raised in single-parent families. This finding supports Petersen and Lesch's (2022) observation of the rising trend in single-parent families and affirms Kwan's (2021) argument that family structures are becoming less nuclear, with extended family types emerging. Figure 1 presents the distribution of respondents by level of emotional well-being.

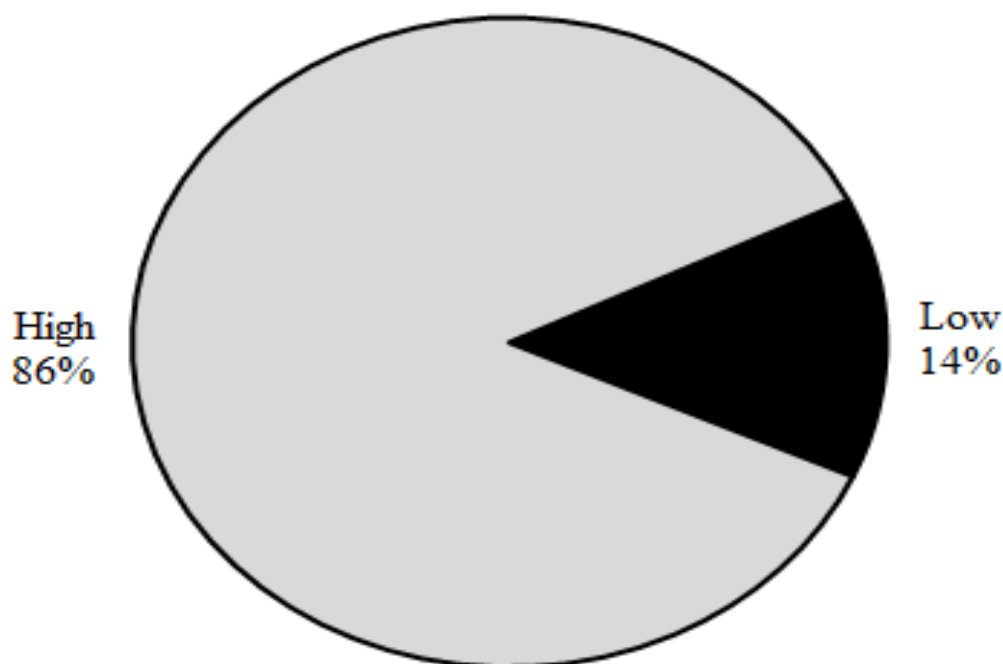


Figure 1: Respondents' Overall Level of Emotional Well-being

The findings show that a large majority of respondents reported high emotional well-being (86%), while a smaller proportion indicated low emotional well-being (14%). This suggests that most participants experienced positive emotional states, which is consistent with the research finding by Macharia (2024) which established that most respondents were emotionally stable. Figure 2 presents the distribution of respondents by level of psychological distress.

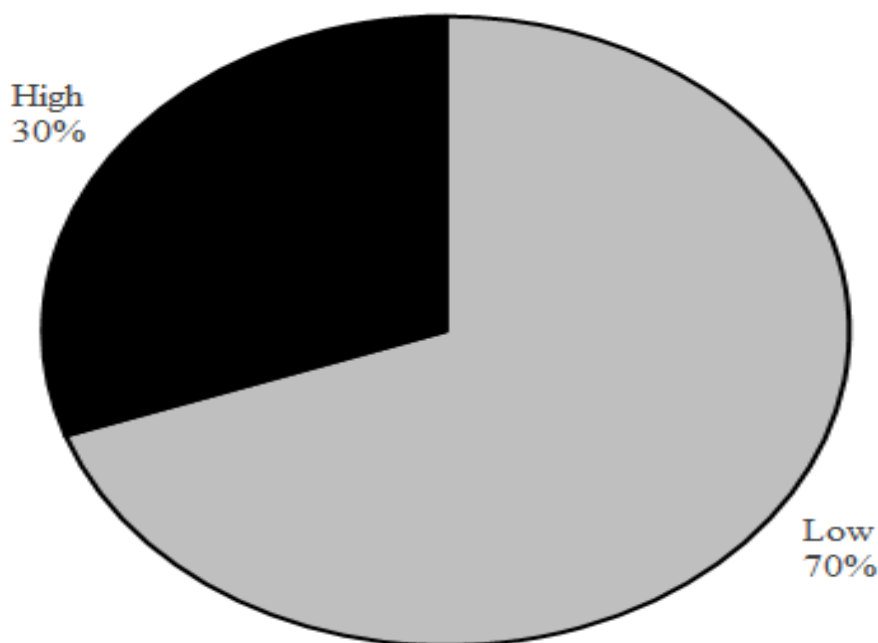


Figure 2: Respondents' Overall Level of Psychological Distress

The results indicate that most respondents reported low levels of psychological distress (70%), while a smaller proportion experienced high levels of distress (30%). This suggests that the majority of participants were generally able to manage stress and emotional challenges effectively, though a notable minority still faced considerable psychological strain. The low reports of overall psychological distress align with Lin et al. (2019) who suggest that family structures are responsible for psychological health of adolescents. Figure 3 presents the distribution of respondents by level of social functioning.

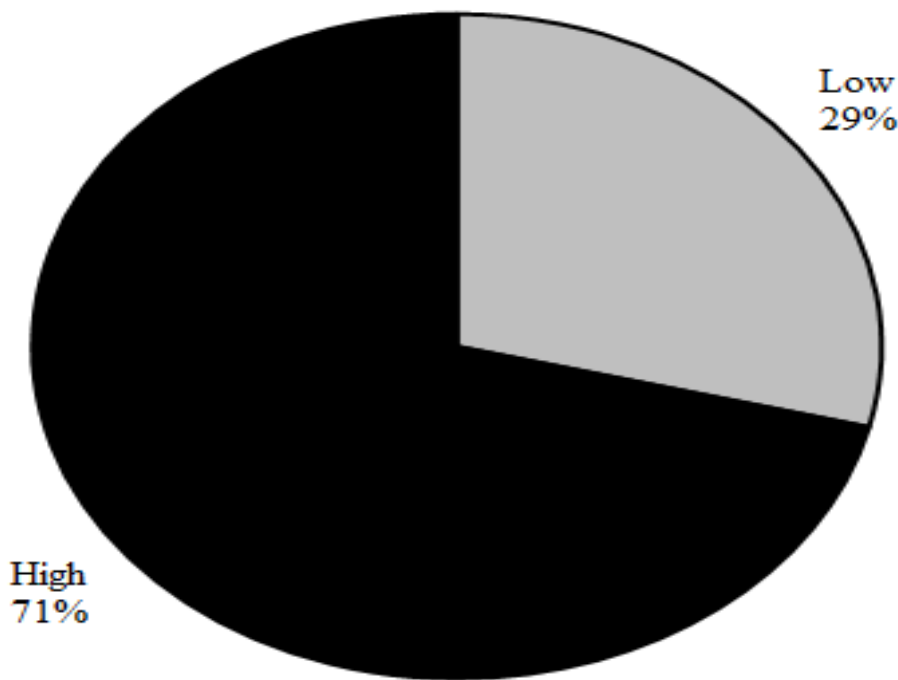


Figure 3: Respondents' Overall Level of Social Functioning

The results reveal that a majority of respondents reported high levels of social functioning (71%), while a smaller proportion indicated low levels (29%). This suggests that most participants maintained positive social relationships and effective interpersonal interactions, reflecting generally healthy social adjustment and engagement within their communities. This finding affirms Koch et al. (2021) who noted high levels of social functioning among adolescents in contexts characterised by stable family systems. Table 2 presents a cross-tabulation of family sub-systems and adolescent psychosocial well-being.

Table 2 Family Types and Adolescent Psychosocial Well-being Cross-tabulation

			Family Types				Total
			Two-parent family	Single-parent family	Step-parent family	Extended family	
Adolescent Overall Psychosocial Well-being	Low	Count	25	20	3	12	60
		% count	14.5%	18.0%	30.0%	35.3%	18.3%
	High	Count	149	91	7	22	269
		% count	85.5%	82.0%	70.0%	64.7%	81.7%
Total		Count	174	111	10	34	329
		% count	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The results show that adolescents from two-parent families had the highest proportion of high psychosocial well-being (85.5%), followed by those from single-parent families (82.0%). In contrast, lower levels of psychosocial well-being were more common among adolescents from step-parent (30.0%) and extended families (35.3%). The findings suggest that adolescents from two-parent and single-parent families generally reported better psychosocial outcomes compared to those from step-parent or extended family settings.

The high levels of psychosocial well-being reported among adolescents from two-parent and single-parent families align with Ding et al. (2022), Ji et al. (2023), and Ronaghan et al. (2024), who observed that co-parenting and two-parent family structures foster adolescent identity development and emotional stability. Conversely, the lower psychosocial well-being among adolescents from step-parent and extended families supports Debowska et al. (2021) and Mohapanele et al. (2023), who found that stepfamily contexts often expose children to conflict, neglect, or emotional instability, thereby compromising well-being. Although

Jensen and Sanner (2021) acknowledged that positive stepparent-child relationships can mitigate these effects, such outcomes were not evident in the present study.

Chi-square test was performed to test the relationship between family subsystems and psychosocial well-being among adolescents in public high Schools in Ruiru Sub-County, Kiambu County, Kenya. Table 3 shows the output.

Table 3 Chi-Square Tests of Family Structure and Adolescent Psychosocial Well-being

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	9.101 ^a	3	.028
Likelihood Ratio	8.039	3	.045
Linear-by-Linear Association	8.472	1	.004
N of Valid Cases	327		
a. 1 cells (12.5%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.83.			

The findings indicate a statistically significant association between the two variables, $\chi^2(3, N = 327) = 9.10$, $p < .05$. This suggests that adolescents' psychosocial well-being varied significantly across different family types. The significant linear-by-linear association ($p = .004$) further implies a consistent trend in the relationship, where certain family sub-systems were more strongly associated with higher levels of psychosocial well-being than others. The finding aligns with Babajide et al. (2020) and Simcock et al. (2020), who noted that family stability and supportive relationships enhance well-being, while disruptions increase vulnerability to emotional challenges. Similarly, the observed linear trend supports Bi and Wang (2021) and Tong et al. (2023), who found that adolescents from cohesive and stable family systems tend to exhibit higher psychosocial adjustment.

The stronger well-being in two-parent and single-parent households largely affirms Structural Family Therapy which predicts that stable family structure support healthy functioning by organizing roles and interactions within the family (Marti-Garcia et al., 2021). The lower well-being among adolescents in some step-parent or extended households suggests that not all non-nuclear forms automatically provide protective social integration. If boundaries are confused, the potential social support of extra kin may be undermined (Stapley et al., 2021). The findings therefore support Structural Family Therapy's emphasis on the functional quality of family type. This theoretically implies that interventions should target strengthening interactional processes rather than focusing on family type alone.

CONCLUSION

Adolescents from two-parent families reported the highest levels of psychosocial wellness, suggesting that cohesive and stable family environments foster emotional stability, social competence, and reduced psychological distress. Conversely, adolescents from step-parent and extended families exhibited lower levels of well-being, potentially due to weakened emotional bonds. Family-based counselling and parenting workshops could help families especially step-parent and extended ones to manage relational challenges. In addition, schools should create platforms such as parent-adolescent forums and mentorship programs that encourage family engagement in adolescents' social and emotional development.

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