

# Association between Spousal Relationship Quality and Mother-child Attachment Styles among Mothers in Blended Families in Selected Churches in Nairobi County, Kenya

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## ABSTRACT

Dysfunctional spousal relation can significantly affect the mother child attachment within a family setup. This in turn leads to emotional insecurity, behavioral issues in children, and strained family dynamics that may hinder healthy child development. This research sought to investigate the influence of spousal relationships on mother-child attachment for both biological and step-children within blended families in Nairobi County, Kenya. Both attachment theory by J. Bowlby (1950) and structural family theory by Salvador Minuchin (1960) were used. A quantitative cross-sectional research design was employed with a sample of 170 mothers. A structured self-administered questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data on the study objectives. Participants signed an informed consent before participation and the research adhered to ethical guidelines on confidentiality and anonymity. The study used descriptive statistics to summarize and interpret data. Pearson correlation coefficient was used to determine the relationship between spousal relationships and mother-child attachment. SPSS version 27 was used to analyze data. The findings established a high-quality spousal relationship, a high level of mother-child closeness depicting secure attachment and moderate level of mother-child conflict. There was a weak positive relationship between quality of spousal relationship and mother child closeness, and a weak negative relationship between quality of spousal relationship and mother child conflict,  $p < 0.05$ . The study concluded that spousal relationship was positively associated with secure mother-child attachment. The study recommends implementation of therapeutic intervention strategies geared towards enhancing secure parental attachment and reducing insecure attachment within blended families and further research in the area of blended families.

**Keywords:** Spousal relationship, mother–child attachment, blended families, religious beliefs.

## INTRODUCTION

Spousal relationship is the bedrock on which the family relationships are founded, influencing not only parenting practices but also the emotional and social connection within the family structure. A strong spousal relationship leads to emotional security, cooperation, and resilience. This is especially so when navigating the complexities of modern family structures such as blended families. Spousal relationship is also referred to as marital relationship, marriage or matrimony (Wimalasena, 2016). However, this study uses the term spousal relationship in accordance with Wimalasena (2016), in his analytical study of definitions of “marriage,” which refers to it a social, legal, and religious institution. This therefore means that the relationship is identified culturally where customs, beliefs and values are involved in shaping the relationship in different cultures or communities, as well as both communal and individual gratitude held about the relationship; by the law of the land that makes it more legitimate, and by the couple’s religion-where religious values and beliefs apply.

Spousal relationship leads to formation of a family. Oxford dictionary defines a family as a group of one or more parents and their children living together as a unit. Alan John Barnard in Britannica (2025) views a family as a group of persons united by the tie of marriage, blood, or adoption, and constitutes a single household and interacting with each other in their respective social position. From the many definitions of a

family, this study adapts the definition of a family as a “group of people living together that consists of two legally married adults-man and woman, and their offspring forming the nuclear family.”

Ember et al. (2021) in their article defined family as a group of persons united by the ties of marriage, blood or adoption and constituting a single household while interacting with each other at their respective social positions such as spouses, parents, children and siblings on one hand. On the other hand, the structural theory defines a family as a system of hierarchically arranged subsystems (spousal, parental, sibling) with defined interpersonal boundaries and rules that regulate interactions and support essential family functioning, such as child-rearing and economic cooperation. In this regard, these definitions form the base for this study because they outline key variables that are of interest to the study such as the spousal relations, mother-child attachment and the outcome of such interactions.

The kind of family created depends on the nature of the relationship. Although there are different types of families such as nuclear, extended, blended and single-parent families among others, the highest percentage of spousal relationships indicated couples married and in their first marriages. However, there is a shift from the traditional or what is normally referred to as “normal” relationships due to changing dynamics. For instance, statistics indicate an ever-increasing rate of divorce globally (Raley & Sweeney, 2020), and the partners getting into another relationship. This has led to the emergence of step-families or blended families. These families come with their unique dynamics that influence and impact members in different ways compared to the nuclear family. This study focuses on blended families as a unit of study.

Although this structure of a family was not common, it is becoming increasingly evident that blended families are on the rise owing to different socioeconomic factors globally. While global nationalized statistics have not been established, inference can be made from several countries that have published this information. According to Raley and Sweeney (2020), 40% of marriages in the United States and other similar developed countries are blended families. Njoroge & Kirori (2018) argued that the rising prevalence of blended families is a testament to the resilience of couples in pursuit of better family connections for themselves and for their children. This family structure may serve different purposes like preserving family lineage especially in an African culture, social and emotional connection as well as support.

The quality of spousal relationships in any kind of a family is impacted on by many factors that could range from sociocultural to religious to personal factors. The couples also transition from just being partners to being parents with the birth of their first child. This transition may affect the spouses’ relationship quality because of factors such as spending less time together, parenting stress, individual and child well-being among others (Carlson & Godberg, 2014). Consequently, this quality affects other areas of an individual life as well as of those around them. Some of these areas affected include but are not limited to parenting, family bonds, child development as well as other child developmental outcomes such as academic performance among others (Carlson & Godberg, 2014; Zemp et al, 2025). Family scholars according to Carlson et al (2014), have recognized the interdependence of family relationships that include husband and wife, mother and father, parents and children and the siblings. These relationships are a concern for this study since they will help identify their impact on formation of mother-child attachment bonds.

The quality of spousal relationship within the blended family is at the core of how relationships within the blended family will be formed. It forms an environment in which the marriage can thrive or break and can consequently influence other relationships in the family. This is supported in a study by Kazungu et al. (2020) who further added that it is the spousal relationship that sets the tone for the overall family dynamics, influencing the emotional climate of the household. This includes the nature in which other relationships within the family are formed such as that of a mother and child (Kazungu et al., 2020). When the family structure is blended, the quality of spousal relationship is subjected to a layer of complexity that is not experienced in a nuclear family (Travers, 2021). These unique complexities within a blended family further influences the parents’ relationship with the children further impacting the attachment formation.

Parenting, emotional well-being and development of children are greatly affected by the already unique spousal relationship that results from the formation of a blended family. A study done by Scholarworks &

Brown (2020) demonstrated that the massive changes that children undergo when forming a blended family can have long lasting psychological implications on them. Additionally, children in blended families are more at risk of being neglected and mistreated and hence be at a higher risk of having mental health issues even in their adulthood compared to those in the traditional families (Scholarworks & Brown, 2020). These challenges are said to often reflect increased stress and behavioral issues in children, who are said to be 30% more likely to experience difficulties than those in traditional families (Jensen & Ganong, 2019).

Within the blended family, the influence of spousal relationship on mother-child attachment becomes even more pronounced with many different factors influencing the same relationship. According to Travers (2021), the parents must not only manage their own spousal relationship, but must also be aware of how this relationship is hampering their relationship with the stepchildren. He further added that lacking to do so, may result in an increased risk of stress and conflict. Unresolved spousal issues from the previous relationships, which may further be exacerbated by the presence of an ex-spouse, are significant factors for blended families. Despite legal provisions for divorce and remarriage, custody issues further complicate the interactions within blended family settings (Martin-Uzzi et al., 2013). This highlights the importance of understanding the influence of spousal relationships on other family dynamics. Therefore, this research is essential and timely and aims at filling a contextual gap in Kenya by providing insight into the dynamics of how mother-child relationships are affected by the spousal relationship within the ever-expanding number of blended families.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The prevalence of blended families has increased rapidly becoming a common family structure globally, including Kenya thus posing a challenge on parenting issues and consequently on children's developmental outcomes. While precise figures on the prevalence of blended families in Kenya are scarce in the available studies, data suggests a substantial and growing presence of blended families, driven by factors like high rates of single motherhood and remarriage after union dissolution. The rise in blended families is attributed to the rising rate of divorce, remarriages and cohabitation not ignoring death as a contributing factor. While this family structure offers hope for having stability and belonging, they do also present challenges that are unique to them compared to traditional nuclear families. Lack of clear role definition in such families, and the African culture that does not address blended family issues complicate the process of loss and grief between the spouses and that of children, and also in rebuilding a new relationship in the African context. Other factors including co-parenting responsibilities leave the families to navigate these transitions without guidance, leaving mothers especially more vulnerable to relational strain and parenting stress which consequently influence mother-child attachment. The formation of quality, healthy spousal relationships is one of the key challenges in blended families besides being vital in fostering a secure mother-child attachment. Poor-quality spousal relationship tends to disrupt the emotional climate of the home leading to weakened mother-child bonds, which in the long run affects a child's different developmental outcomes. Remarriages and blended families face unique challenges that are met with standard solutions. The impediments these family units face are specific to them; however, the strategies proposed to help are often derived from methods used to support a traditional family structure. Failure to identify factors that promote stability threatens blended family resiliency. Research indicates that challenges faced by blended families are defined, but factors that contribute to blended family stability have not been studied thoroughly. Understanding these factors can improve in programming as well as implementation of relevant intervention programs that focus on blended families. Mother-child attachment has been under-researched mainly focusing on its impact on children's developmental outcomes.

However, little research has focused specifically on how spousal relationship quality influences mother-child attachment styles within blended families globally and more so in the Kenyan context. This gap is more evident within the faith-based communities where culture and religious expectation further increase the complications of the blended families. As such, this study will explore the influence of spousal relationships on mother-child attachment styles among women in blended families attending selected churches in Nairobi City County, with the aim of informing culturally sensitive support mechanisms for blended family systems.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical Review

Attachment theory by John Bowlby (1950) and Structural family theory developed in the 1960s by Salvador Minuchin were used to guide the study.

The attachment theory argues that individual's emotional and relational development were significantly influenced by their early attachment experiences with caregivers. Bowlby posited that human beings have an innate biological drive to form emotional bonds with primary caregivers, adding that this was an evolutionary mechanism for survival (Quintigliano et al., 2021). According to the theory, early bonds shape an individual's internal working models, which in turn guides their expectations and behaviors in future relationships. Attachment theory has been useful in research to explain how early caregiver-child relationships have influenced developmental and relational behaviors throughout the life of individuals as shown by Cassidy et al., (2013). The theory has also been used in various contexts, such as understanding the attachment patterns among romantic relationships (Karakaş et al., 2020), among people with mental disorders and also how attachment style influences and is influenced by parenting (Fraley, 2019). In the context of this research, Attachment Theory provides a framework for understanding how the quality of spousal relationship influences the formation of bonds between a mother and her child.

Through the structural family theory framework, the study can infer that a weak or misaligned spousal subsystem can affect the emotional availability of the mother to her child. Similarly, the unclear roles within a blended family structure owing to the presence of previous partners can affect the proper attachment of the new mother to the child. Lastly, this framework helps explain how the mother's relationship with both spouse and child can be affected by the shifting hierarchies that are formed during the establishment of the blended family. The structural theory complements the attachment theory by adding a broader view of family systems perspective thus providing a focal point through which the quality of spousal relationship can be analyzed and its final influence on mother-child attachment determined, especially within the dynamic of blended family structure.

Structural Family Theory provides a better understanding of family dynamics especially those that are of key focus in this current study.

### Empirical Review

Guo (2023) while looking into the impact of spousal relationship on children's multi-domains in United States maintained that spousal relationship is the core of family relationships with an impact on children development. He affirmed that previous studies had found that good spousal relationship favored positive developmental outcomes whereas poorer relationships fostered negative developmental outcomes. Guo (2023) posits that children require a nurturing environment to flourish and grow. This is because spousal relationship is a pillar that provides essential support to the entire family structure. Additionally, the spouses' emotional resonance echoes beyond their relationship and resonate greatly within the lives of their children.

Adare et al. (2021) on their study on effect of parental marital conflict on child development and its mechanism in China emphasized the impact of spousal conflict on the children's emotional regulation. Stable spousal relationship provides children with secure emotional support which enables them to experience warmth and care within the family. Nonetheless, Adare et al. (2021) argued that as much as the quality of spousal relationship affects these different domains, the impact is moderated by the child's characteristics though the interplay between the spousal relationship and the child's characteristics should be assessed to conclusively confirm the nature of impact. Child characteristics may include but not limited to age, gender, temperament and well-being among others.

Wahyuningsil et al. (2020) did a meta-analysis of studies looking at parental marital quality or spousal relationship quality and adolescent psychological well-being and factors influencing their own well-being.

They found that spousal relationships contributed to the children's well-being. Factors such as financial support between the spouses, social interaction between family members and stability of the spousal relationship were identified as playing a key role.

A study by Mutlu et al. (2018) looked at how marital adjustment and maternal attachment in mothers of 1-4 months relate. They also looked at other factors that can influence the two variables. This research was done in a pediatric clinic in Turkey where 113 mothers gave data that was analyzed under a descriptive and correlational study design. The study utilized two data collection tools; the Maternal Attachment Index (MAI) for assessing maternal emotions and the Marital Adjustment Scale (MAS) which evaluated satisfaction, loyalty, communication, and conflict resolution in marriages. The researchers were able to associate higher maternal attachment among mothers with higher education, exclusive breastfeeding and spousal support in care giving. Other factors that were linked by the study to higher levels of maternal attachment were, employment, companionship marriages and 1-5 and 10-15 years of marriage. There was a significant positive correlation ( $r = 0.38$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) between maternal attachment and marital adjustment. This relationship was weak but nevertheless still significant.

In a study by Karanja (2016) where he examined the impact of marital instability on the development of children, the research provided insight on how spousal relationships can affect mother-child relationships. Using a quantitative survey, the researcher enrolled parents of teenagers aged 13 to 18 years. The data was then collected using quantitative questionnaires and was analyzed using SPSS. The research found that marital instability had a negative effect on parenting, with conflicts between spouses leading to parent-child relational conflicts. There was a likelihood of fostering secure and well-adjusted children where conflict within the marriage was low.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research utilized a quantitative cross-sectional research design. This non-experimental design allowed the researcher to describe and analyze relationships between the study variables numerically (Bryman, 2016), allowing the researcher to establish the presence or absence of a relationship between variables. The study target population was women in blended families attending selected churches in Nairobi County. The study utilized multi-stage sampling technique to arrive at a sample size of 170 participants. The study employed structured questionnaires to collect data. Pearson's correlation was used to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between spousal relationships and mother-child attachment.

## RESULTS

Findings on the association between spousal relationship quality and mother-child attachment styles among women in blended families in selected churches in Nairobi County, Kenya are presented on Table 1.

**Table 1:** Relationship between Quality of Spousal Relationship and Attachment Styles

|                                        |                     | <b>Mother-Child Closeness</b> | <b>Mother-Child Conflict</b> |
|----------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <b>Quality of Spousal Relationship</b> | Pearson Correlation | .309**                        | -.219**                      |
|                                        | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .000                          | .004                         |
|                                        | N                   | 170                           | 170                          |

Pearson Correlation findings established a weak positive relationship between quality of spousal relationship and mother-child closeness,  $r(168) = .309$ ,  $p = 0.00$ . This implies that a high-quality spousal relationship was

associated with a high level of mother-child closeness among women in blended families. The findings further established a weak negative relationship between quality of spousal relationship and mother child conflict,  $r(168) = -.219, p = 0.04$ . These findings indicate that an increase in quality of spousal relationship was associated with a decrease in mother-child conflict among women in blended families. The current findings are supported by Jensen et al. (2018) who asserted that in blended family contexts, children in families that maintain positive relationships experience a greater sense of stability and support while conflictual relationships impede family transition, seeing the family life as a loss, source of stress and a threat to their emotional security. This consequently affects the formation of attachment as well as other relationships within the family. The findings are further supported by Ferreira et al. (2024) who examined the correlations between young children's emotion regulation and parenting and marital interactions.

Table 2 presents summary of findings on quality of spousal relationship sub-scales and attachment styles

**Table 2:** Association between Quality of Spousal Relationship Sub-scales and Attachment Styles

| Subscale                      |                     | Mother-Child Closeness | Mother-Child Conflict |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Consensus</b>              | Pearson Correlation | .132                   | .042                  |
|                               | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .086                   | .583                  |
|                               | N                   | 170                    | 170                   |
| <b>Satisfaction</b>           | Pearson Correlation | .176*                  | -.192*                |
|                               | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .021                   | .012                  |
|                               | N                   | 170                    | 170                   |
| <b>Cohesion</b>               | Pearson Correlation | .239**                 | -.052                 |
|                               | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .002                   | .500                  |
|                               | N                   | 170                    | 170                   |
| <b>Affectional Expression</b> | Pearson Correlation | .155*                  | -.277**               |
|                               | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .043                   | .000                  |
|                               | N                   | 170                    | 170                   |

Pearson Correlation findings established a weak positive relationship between satisfaction, cohesiveness and affectional expression in a relationship with mother-child closeness,  $r(168) = .176, p = 0.02$ ,  $r(168) = .239, p = 0.00$  and  $r(168) = .155, p = 0.04$  respectively. These findings indicate that higher levels of satisfaction, cohesiveness and affectional expression in spousal relationship was correlated with higher levels of mother child closeness. The findings further established a weak negative relationship between satisfaction and affectional expression with mother child conflict,  $r(168) = -.192, p = 0.01$  and  $r(168) = -.277, p = 0.00$ . These findings indicate that an increase in levels of satisfaction and affectional expression in a relationship was associated with a decrease in mother child conflict among women in blended families.

A blended family comes with its unique dynamics and complexities that influence communication, interactions and other aspects of a family differently than in a traditional nuclear family (Mohseni & Salehi, 2024). The dynamics in such environments further impacts the boundaries, parenting- especially issues of disciplining children, formations of sub-units as well as interactions (Madhe, et al. 2024). Therefore, in a blended family where couples are satisfied in the relationship, are cohesive and affectionate to each other, is likely to mediate the communication and interaction patterns thereby influencing the mother child attachment positively. This is further highlighted by Wahyuningsil et al. (2020) who did a meta-analysis of studies looking at parental marital quality or spousal relationship quality and adolescent psychological well-being and factors influencing their own well-being. They found that spousal relationships contributed to the children's well-being. Factors such as financial support between the spouses, social interaction between family members and stability of the spousal relationship were identified as playing a key role.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Study findings established a weak positive relationship between quality of spousal relationship and mother child closeness, and a weak negative relationship between quality of spousal relationship and mother child conflict,  $p < 0.005$ . The study therefore concludes that spousal relationship was positively associated with secure mother-child attachment.

The study recommends implementation of therapeutic intervention strategies geared towards enhancing secure parental attachment and reducing insecure attachment within blended families and further research in the area of blended families. The study also recommends integration of faith-based counseling and psychotherapy in mental health intervention within blended families by collaborating with religious leaders trained in family and marital therapy.

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