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Impact of Family Instability On Children's Well-Being: Case of Ruben Primary School in Mukuru Slum, Nairobi County, Kenya

**Njagi Ann Njoki, Dr. Niceta Ileri (Prof) & Dr. Alice Omondi
(Phd)**

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^{1*} Njagi Ann Njoki, ²Dr. Niceta Ireri (Prof) & ³Dr. Alice Omondi (Phd)

^{1,2,3} Africa International University

*Corresponding Author's Email: annnjoki38@gmail.com

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Abstract

Family plays a crucial role in shaping identity, fostering a sense of belonging, and supporting child development. However, family instability, particularly step-parenting and remarriage, can negatively impact children's social well-being. This study examined the influence of step-parenting and remarriage on children at Ruben Primary School in Mukuru Slum, Nairobi, using Bowen's Family Systems Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as the theoretical framework. Employing a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 65 randomly selected adolescents aged 13–16 through survey questionnaires and analyzed using SPSS. The findings revealed that 70% of respondents reported a high level of social disruption, 23% a moderate impact, and 7% a low impact, indicating that family instability affects children's ability to form social relationships, leading to trust difficulties, peer relationship struggles, and emotional distress. The study recommends targeted interventions such as counseling, family support programs, and parental sensitization initiatives to mitigate these effects, while policymakers and community stakeholders should collaborate to strengthen family-oriented policies that promote children's well-being in blended families.

Keywords: *Impact, Family instability, Children's well-being*

1.0 Introduction

According to the Health Resources and Services Administration (2017), a family is a fundamental social institution that contributes to the development of society. A family can be defined as a group of individuals related by birth, marriage, or adoption who live together and are considered members of one household. Wilson and Tonner (2020) further describe a family as a unit symbolized by shared living arrangements, cooperation in daily affairs, and the collective upbringing of children. Despite its foundational role in society, the family institution faces numerous challenges that threaten its stability. These challenges weaken family bonds, reduce intimacy levels, and diminish the sense of belonging among its members. Such disruptions, commonly referred to as family instabilities, undermine the core functions of the family unit.

One significant form of family instability is gender-based violence (GBV), which often leads to separation or divorce, resulting in remarriage and the presence of stepparents in children's lives. A study conducted in the United States by the Step Family Foundation (2021) found that over 50% of families are remarried or re-coupled. According to the US Bureau of Census (2021), approximately 1,300 new stepfamilies form daily, and over half of US families involve

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remarriage or re-coupling. The report also highlights that the average marriage in the U.S. lasts only seven years, with one in two marriages ending in divorce. Among divorced individuals, 75% remarry, but 66% of those who remarry or cohabit experience relationship breakdowns when children are involved. Additionally, 80% of remarried or re-coupled partners with children are also working professionals, further complicating family dynamics.

The American Psychological Association (2021) explored the challenges of remarriage and found that couples entering a second marriage benefit from moving into a new home instead of one of the partner's previous residences, as this creates a shared space and fosters a sense of belonging. Financial management also plays a role in family satisfaction, with couples using the "one-pot" method—combining their financial resources—reporting higher levels of family satisfaction than those who maintain separate finances. Furthermore, the APA (2021) notes that children in stepfamilies often receive emotional support from their stepparents, who step in to fill the role of an absent biological parent. However, despite the emotional support provided, stepparents may struggle to fully meet the emotional and psychological needs of their stepchildren, as the biological parent's absence continues to impact the family dynamic.

The challenges of forming stepfamilies are particularly pronounced among adolescents, who often struggle to accept and bond with a stepparent. The State Government of Victoria (2021) found that many adolescents resent being disciplined or guided by a stepparent and may prefer confiding in their friends rather than attempting to build a relationship with the new family member. This resistance often stems from unresolved anger over their biological parents' separation, emotional distress, and a sense of loss regarding parental love. As a result, stepfamilies may struggle to achieve full cohesion, with children feeling a sense of shame for having a stepfamily instead of what they perceive as a "normal" family (Department of Health, State Government of Victoria, 2021). These emotional barriers highlight the complexities of stepfamily relationships and the need for patience, understanding, and support systems to help families navigate these transitions successfully.

American Psychology Association (2021) support this reality in that “Remarriage may resurrect old, unresolved anger and hurts from the previous marriage, for adults and children. For example, hearing that her parent is getting remarried, a child is forced to give up hope that the custodial parents will reconcile, or a woman may exacerbate a stormy relationship with her ex-husband, after learning of his plans to remarry, because she feels hurt or angry.”

There may be indifference in step-children relationships, Fosco and Feinberg (2015) observed that “Children and adolescents who are exposed to inter-parental conflict are more likely to perceive it as threatening to their well-being or that of the family, which in turn is a key risk factor for internalizing problems. Also, children “with conflictual family relationships may experience the transition to stepfamily life as a significant loss, source of stress, and threat to their emotional security” (Cummings et al., 2006). Parental divorce/separation and remarrying is associated with an increased risk for child and adolescent adjustment problems, including academic difficulties (e.g., lower grades and school dropout), disruptive behaviors (e.g., conduct and substance use problems), and depressed mood (Dohoon & McLanahan, 2015).

1.1 Statement of Problem

Families are unique in their experiences and, those facing challenges such as separation and divorce and re-marrying suffer more than first-married families. Step Family Foundation (2021) in their study realized that “role ambiguity, dealing with stepchildren and ex-spouses are only a few of the issues which are unique to these families. In this study, it is clear many

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families are facing separation or divorce thus ending in re-marriages, exposing children to more pain and turmoil of dealing with the separation of one of the biological parents.

Goldberg (2013) observed that after a family transition, children often experience increased ambiguity in behavioral expectations, disruptions in their sense of security, and difficulties integrating into blended families. As a result, they may turn to peer groups for support and intimacy that was previously provided by caregivers. In the informal settlements of Mukuru kwa Ruben, family instability is a widespread issue, with many families experiencing separation, divorce, and remarriage. Similar to findings from other studies on the effects of stepfamilies, Mukuru kwa Ruben is not an exception, as children in these households often struggle with the presence of stepparents who introduce new rules and routines, creating conflict and emotional distress. This transition not only affects the children but also causes tension between the new partner and the biological parent, further straining the family unit.

Sandstorm and Huerta (2013) emphasized that parenting and family environments should ideally mitigate the negative effects of instability on children. However, their findings indicate that family instability weakens the quality of parenting and disrupts the home environment, ultimately harming a child's development. In unstable families, the introduction of new authority figures, inconsistent parenting styles, and shifting household dynamics make it difficult for children to establish a sense of normalcy. The emotional toll on children in stepfamilies can manifest in behavioral issues, academic struggles, and difficulties in forming secure relationships. In Mukuru kwa Ruben, where economic hardships further exacerbate these issues, children from unstable families are particularly vulnerable to social challenges, including neglect and diminished parental support.

The challenges of family instability, particularly separation, divorce, and remarriage, clearly have a profound impact on children's well-being. This study reaffirms that instability in the family structure disrupts children's social and emotional development, often leading to negative long-term outcomes. As step-parenting becomes increasingly common in these environments, it is essential to explore ways to provide emotional and psychological support to affected children. Without intervention, the ongoing cycles of instability in such communities will continue to weaken family cohesion, negatively influencing the upbringing and future prospects of children.

1.2 Purpose of Study

The purpose of the study was to determine the impact of family instability on children's well-being in Ruben primary school in Mukuru slum.

2.0 Literature Review

This section details the theoretical and empirical literature. Each of the underlying components is discussed as below;

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study was informed by Bowen's Family System Theory (1974) and ecological systems theory on children development by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979). The first theory shows how the family systems affect each other while the second theory shows how child development is affected by the ecosystems surrounding his/her growth in the family setting.

2.1.1 Bowen's Family System Theory

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The family system's theory was developed by Bowen Murray in (1974) and believed that "a family acts as a unit (or system) that influences the individual members of that family and that families should be studied as systems, not as loose, unrelated interactions between individuals. According to Kerr & Bowen's theory (1988) found out similar patterns of human emotional system. His theory aimed at neutralizing family anxiety either because of very close ties of the members or if there is a great distance in the relationships.

The study borrowed some of Bowen's concepts to explain similar patterns. In a family, spouses may have a close emotional connection among themselves and with children, this enhances growth and strengthens family bond. The other side could be, there is the emotional breakdown between themselves due to unresolved conflicts in the family. This will end up creating emotional distance in their relationships and interactions, thus affecting children growing in that family. This is what Bowen refers it as emotional fusion or differentiation or emotional cut-off.

2.1.2 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner (1979) in his ecological systems theory on children's development, he argued that the social environment affects children's growth. Growing children find themselves entangled in various ecosystems surrounding them such as their home, school, friends, society, and culture. All these different environments where the children interact influence all aspects of their lives. The study shall focus on a growing child in the micro-system, the immediate environment surrounding the children who are growing up in a conflicting family.

The study agrees with Bowen on family system theory, the relationship in the triads father, mother, and children whether positive or negative, affects children both emotionally, cognitively and socially as well as in the ecological systems surrounding the growing children in the family, school, neighborhood and peers' interactions as well impacts emotionally, cognitively and socially.

2.2 Empirical Literature Review

Family stability contributes to the well-being of each family member. It has characteristics that Family stability plays a crucial role in fostering growth by providing support, love, security, and open communication among its members (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2021). However, when families experience instability, particularly through separation, divorce, and remarriage, children often struggle to adjust. Studies have shown that adolescents in blended families may resent their stepparents, preferring to confide in their friends rather than building relationships with the new family member (State Government of Victoria, 2021). The emotional turmoil caused by the absence of a biological parent leaves children feeling abandoned and ashamed of their family situation, making it difficult for them to accept the changes in their household (Department of Health, State Government of Victoria, 2021).

Globally, family instability affects children in profound ways. In Germany, Carroll (2020) found that children from divorced families experience a deep sense of loss and fear of replacement when their parent begins a new relationship. The study highlighted that rushing into a new relationship could further disrupt children's emotional well-being, as they are already struggling with the effects of divorce. In Uganda, Nankunda (2017) revealed that domestic violence and adult conflicts negatively impact children's welfare, yet many parents may not be fully aware of the consequences of their actions. Similarly, in Nigeria, Akinleke (2017) found that children from single-parent households performed worse academically than

those raised in two-parent families, indicating that family structure plays a role in shaping children's future opportunities.

In Kenya, particularly in Machakos County, family instability has been linked to various factors, including irresponsibility (74%), infidelity (51.3%), and violence (42.3%) (Masua, 2016). Other contributing factors include alcoholism, in-law conflicts, polygamy, and unemployment, all of which create hostile environments for children. NACADA (2010) found that in Central Kenya, alcohol abuse was a major contributor to family breakdowns, with abusers engaging in domestic violence, neglecting their children, and selling family property irresponsibly. These patterns indicate that substance abuse and other social vices not only harm marital relationships but also create a toxic atmosphere that affects children's emotional and psychological well-being.

The informal settlements of Mukuru kwa Ruben reflect these global and national trends, as many families face instability due to separation, divorce, and remarriage. Stepparents often introduce new ways of living, leading to conflicts that further strain family relationships. This disruption intensifies emotional distress for children and their biological parents, making it harder to create a cohesive family environment. Family instability is a reality in many homes, often stemming from challenges within the household itself. The consequences extend beyond the couple, deeply affecting children's upbringing and development. This study seeks to highlight the negative impacts of family instability on children, shedding light on the factors that disrupt their growth and well-being.

3.0 Research Methodology

The study implored descriptive research design, with a bit of qualitative research design embedded to support the question in the study. Sampling was done from a population of 500 participants of age 13 to 16 years who according to their developmental stage, getting a sample size (Chinelo & Chioma, 2019) of 65 participants with the capacity to participate in the study and be able to share their views, feelings, and their experiences from family instabilities in their homes in Mukuru slums. Concerning the target population, inclusion criteria was used where all boys and girls, age 13-16 years participated and as for exclusion criteria, adolescents outside this age group were not part in the study. The study adopted the simple random sampling where all members had a chance to participate (Etikan & Kabiru, 2017)

4.0 Results and Discussions

4.1 Step-Parenting/Remarrying Affects Children Socially Among Ruben Primary Students

The first objective of the study aimed to determine the influence of step-parenting/remarrying on children socially in Ruben primary school in Mukuru kwa Ruben slum. The study used ten statements to measure the level of step-parenting/remarrying affects children socially.

The study used ten statements to measure the level of step-parenting/remarrying affects children socially. The lowest score any participant could get was one, while the highest score any participant could get was fifty. Each statement was measured on levels 1-16 as low, 17-32 as moderate, and 33-50 as high. The results are presented in Table 1

Table 1: Step-Parenting/Remarrying Affects Children Socially

Levels	Frequency	Percent
Low	8	7 %
Moderate	16	23 %
High	41	70 %
Total	65	100

The study findings indicate that a significant proportion of respondents, 70% (n=41), reported that step-parenting and remarriage have a high social impact on children at Ruben Primary School in Mukuru kwa Ruben slum. Additionally, 23% (n=23) of the respondents indicated a moderate impact, while 7% (n=8) reported a low impact. These results highlight the widespread effect of family instability on children's social interactions, suggesting that most children in this setting experience challenges adapting to new family structures. The findings emphasize that step-parenting and remarriage introduce changes that may disrupt children's emotional well-being, affecting their sense of security and ability to form meaningful relationships.

The study further suggests that children from blended families often face difficulties in social integration, which can manifest in trust issues, struggles in forming peer relationships, and feelings of isolation. When a step-parent enters their lives, children may feel uncertain about their roles in the new family dynamic, leading to emotional distress. This disruption may cause them to withdraw socially, act out in frustration, or struggle with self-esteem issues. Such findings highlight the urgent need for structured support systems to help children navigate these transitions effectively. Family counseling, school-based mentorship programs, and social support initiatives could provide children with coping strategies to manage the emotional and social challenges associated with step-parenting and remarriage.

These results align with findings from Berkshire Health Care (2023), which identified anxiety and insecurity as key factors contributing to aggression in children. The study also found that children experiencing family instability often struggle with peer relationships, reinforcing the link between unstable family environments and social difficulties. Without proper emotional support, children in stepfamilies may develop behavioral problems, such as aggression or withdrawal, as a response to their feelings of neglect or confusion. Providing emotional security and fostering open communication within the family setting could help mitigate these negative effects and promote healthy social development.

The study also corroborates Nderitu's (2018) research on parenting styles, which found that children raised in uninvolved parenting environments often suffer from poor interpersonal relationships, low self-esteem, and multiple antisocial behaviors. The lack of parental monitoring, guidance, and mentorship in stepfamilies may further exacerbate these issues. When children do not receive adequate emotional support, they may struggle with expressing their emotions constructively and may engage in destructive behaviors. These challenges are not unique to Mukuru kwa Ruben but are observed globally, emphasizing the need for universal approaches in addressing family instability and its impact on child development. As such, this study underscores the necessity of comprehensive parental education programs to equip step-parents with the skills needed to create stable, nurturing environments for their stepchildren.

5.0 Conclusion

Based on the results, the study suggests that step-parenting and remarriage have negative social effects on children at Ruben Primary School in Mukuru kwa Ruben slums. It further pointed

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out that children in such family settings often experience emotional and social challenges, which impact their ability to form healthy peer relationships and maintain social stability. These disruptions highlight the need for supportive interventions in both home and school environments to help children adapt better to their changing family dynamics and mitigate the social difficulties they encounter.

6.0 Recommendations

The study recommends implementing targeted interventions such as counseling and family support programs to help children cope with the social disruptions caused by step-parenting and remarriage. Additionally, stakeholders, including schools, community organizations, and policymakers, should collaborate to raise awareness of mental health and its role in mitigating the negative effects of family instability on child development. Sensitization programs should be introduced to educate parents and guardians about the impact of family instability on children's well-being and encourage healthy parenting practices that foster emotional security and social stability for children in blended families.

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