



Influence of Parental Communication on Pre-school Children's Socio-emotional Development in Ngong Ward in Kenya

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Abstract:

Parents influence a lot how children interact with their social surroundings as well as play a part in children's social and emotional behaviours. Children who can use language effectively to negotiate social situations or those who have the intellectual ability to consider another's point of view are more likely to acquire strong social skills. Sound parent-child relationship is based on effective communication that is friendly and respectful in manner. This study sought to examine the influence of parental communication on pre-school children's socio-emotional development in Ngong Ward in Kajiado County, Kenya. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design. The study population was constituted of 1,707 parents and teachers from 82 private and public pre-schools in Ngong Ward. The study used a sample of 199 subjects. Since the target population was heterogeneous, stratified and simple random sampling techniques were employed during sample selection. Data collection was conducted by means of a questionnaire which had close ended items. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data. Quantitative responses based on Likert scale were coded in the computer by the use of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21. Processed data were then presented using frequencies, percentages and summarized using Tables. The study found that parental communication is vital for the development of socio-emotional development in children. Further, the ability of the parent to keep communication lines open and to interact with the emotional side of their children goes a long way in influencing positive emotional responses in the pre-school children. The study recommends that there is need to engage parents at all levels of the child's engagement in school to not only maximize the child's potential in academics and performance but also to help build confidence and self-efficacy in pre-school learners.

Keywords: Parental communication, parental involvement, preschool children, socio-emotional development

Introduction

Despite the fact that children's emotional well-being during their early years has a powerful impact on their social relationships, between 9.5 and 14.2 percent of children between birth and five years old experience social emotional problems that negatively impact their functioning, development and school-readiness (Janice, Rachel & Jessica, 2009). According to a study

conducted by Trawick-Smith (2014), children who are emotionally healthy are able to establish and maintain positive relationships with adults and peers. Children's social-emotional development involves more than just expressing emotions. It entails taking turns, becoming independent in following routines, interacting more with peers, engaging in meaningful relationships with others, controlling emotions, and developing a positive self-image. These skills are crucial for children's successful participation in school and home experiences and for their overall growth.

The emotional well-being of parents largely determines a young child's social and emotional development (Michigan Department of Community Health, 2009). For instance, parents who have had positive life experiences are better equipped to be emotionally available and responsive to a young child than are the parents who have not. When parents and young children are emotionally tuned in to each other, caregivers can more easily read the child's emotional cues and respond appropriately to his or her needs. This responsive relationship between the young child and parents supports healthy development in communication, cognition, social-emotional competence, and moral understanding. A study carried out by Susan and Lisa (2008), found that the interactions and experiences that children have in the home and family setting provide a framework for how the child will interpret his or her environment and give meaning to culturally-framed events. Even the degree to which children are prepared to benefit from later schooling is predicated in part on what transpires before they enter the school door.

Other studies have illustrated that high levels of parent involvement in the development of children are associated with high and positive levels of academic achievement and social-emotional development (Flouri & Buchanan, 2004; Overbeek, Stattin, Vermulst, Ha, Engels & Engels, 2007). According to Raver (2002), children draw upon positive styles of self-regulation and social skill to help them cope with new contexts of pre-school. However, children who are persistently emotionally deregulated and behaviourally disruptive have been found to receive less instruction from teachers and to have fewer opportunities for learning from peers (McClelland & Morrison, 2003). Socio-emotional development for children's later academic achievement has been seen to relate to preschool experiences which, according to Magnuson, Ruhm and Waldfogel (2007), may pose both risks and benefits to children's long-term chances of success in school.

Young children's expression of positive and negative emotions may play a significant role in their development of social relationships. Positive emotions appeal to social partners and seem to enable relationships to form, while problematic management or expression of negative emotions leads to difficulty in social relationships (Denham & Weissberg, 2004). The use of emotion-related words appears to be associated with how likable preschoolers are considered by their peers. Children who use emotion-related words were found to be better-liked by their classmates (Fabes, 2001). Infants respond more positively to adult vocalizations that have a positive affective tone (Fernald, 1993). Social smiling is a developmental process in which neurophysiology and cognitive, social and emotional factors play a part; seen as a "reflection and constituent of an interactive relationship" (Messinger & Fogel, 2007). It appears likely that the experience of positive parental emotions is a particularly important contributor to pre-school children emotional well-being and psychological health (Fredrickson, 2003; Panksepp, 2001).

Thus, the study sought to examine the influence of parental communication on pre-school children's socio-emotional development in Ngong Ward in Kajiado County.

Methodology

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design, which is suitable in describing the characteristics of a large population; it makes use of large samples, thus making the results statistically significant even when analysing multiple variables. The design also allowed the researchers to collect data, summarize, present and interpret it for the purpose of making concrete generalizations and suggestions for further research.

The study population constituted of 1,707 parents and teachers from 82 pre-schools in Ngong Ward, both private and public pre-schools. The study used a sample of 199 subjects which was calculated using Nassiuma (2000) finite sample size computation formula. Since the target population was heterogeneous, stratified and simple random sampling techniques were employed during sample selection. Data collection was by means of a questionnaire which had close ended items. Pilot testing of the instrument was done by administering the questionnaires to 10% of the study sample.

Validity of the research instrument was determined through content validity while reliability was measured by use of Cronbach's alpha value. A score of 0.854 was attained thereby qualifying the research instrument as acceptable and reliable. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data. Quantitative responses based on Likert scale were coded in the computer using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21. Processed data were then presented using frequencies and percentages; and summarized in Tables. The researcher also observed ethical and legal issues in research like the principle of confidentiality, anonymity, and acknowledgement of other people's input throughout the whole study.

Results

Demographic Information

The study sought to investigate the following demographic information: gender and age bracket. Nearly two thirds (64%) of the study respondents were female and the remaining, 36%, of them were male. This shows a good representation of the study population by gender. On the other hand, more than half (56%) of the study participants were between 18-35 years, a third (33%) of them were within 36-50 years and the remaining, 11%, were 51 years and above. This implies that the respondents were fairly distributed by age thus the findings were not biased. In addition, the study return rate was 65% (129) which was considered to be a good sample representation as it surpassed 50% of the total sample.

Influence of Parental Communication on Preschool Children's Socio-emotional Development

The study sought to establish the extent to which parental communication influences pre-school children's socio-emotional development. Both parental communication characteristics and parental involvement behaviours were assessed the extent to which they influence pre-school children's socio-emotional development.

Characteristics of Parental Communication

The respondents were required to rate various items on characteristics of parental communication basing on how often one thought the item takes place. Table 1 shows the distribution of the study participants by opinions on various items that measure the extent to which parental communication characteristics influence pre-school children's socio-emotional development.

Table 1

Parental communication

Item	Very Often		Often		Sometimes		Never	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
I keep lines of communication open to my children;	43	33	65	50	21	17	—	—
I listen to my children patiently;	86	68	22	18	21	16	—	—
I know what makes my children sad;	—	—	43	33	65	50	31	24
I let my children know when I am pleased with them;	86	66	43	33	—	—	—	—
I let my children know when I am angry with them;	43	34	65	50	21	16	—	—
My children tell me when he/she is annoyed;	—	—	21	16	43	34	65	50
I like to have fun with my child;	43	31	21	16	68	53	—	—
I plan enjoyable activities for my children;	—	—	—	—	108	84	21	16

As shown in Table 1, majority (83%) of the respondents, with 50% “often” and 33% “very often”, indicated that parents keep the line of communication with children open. Only 17% of the respondents reported that they keep lines of communication open sometimes. On the other hand, slightly over two thirds (68%) of the respondents indicated that they listen to their children with patience always.

On whether the parents knew what make their children sad, half (50%) of them indicated that they only know sometimes, a third (33%) of them pointed out that they never know when their children are sad. With regard to whether parents let their children know when they are pleasant, two thirds (66%) of the study participants were affirmative to the statement.

Majority (84%) of the study respondents reported that they always let their children know when they are angry with them. On whether the children tell their parents when they are annoyed, half (50%) of the respondents were never told. A third (34%) of them agreed that sometimes their children tell them when they are annoyed.

Slightly more than half (53%) of the respondents indicated that sometimes they like to have fun with their children. Another 47% of them reported that in most times, they like having fun with their children. In addition, 16% of the respondents indicated that they had never planned enjoyable activities for their children.

Parental Involvement Behaviors in Communication

This study sought to establish the extent to which parental involvement behaviours in communication influence pre-school children's socio-emotional development. The respondents were required to indicate the rating of the tool basing on the extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement provided. Table 2 shows their responses.

Table 2

Parental involvement behaviours in communication

Item	Very often		Often		Sometimes		Never	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
I normally smile to my children;	40	31	46	36	43	33		
I am keen on appreciating my children when they do something good;	26	20	66	51	16	12	21	16
I encourage my children to talk about their feelings;	36	28			93	72		
I give my child alternatives when they express sadness;	6	1	43	33	81	63		
I encourage my children when they are feeling disappointed or frustrated;	64	49	65	51				
I observe my children's facial expressions to understand their feelings;	70	54	59	46				
I respond to my children's expressions (i.e. facial, verbal, etc.);	43	33	86	66				
I give my children attention when they express sadness;	43	33	43	33	20	16	23	18
I ignore my children's positive feelings like joy;	21	16			21	16	86	67

From Table 2, two thirds (67%) of the study respondents indicated that they normally smile to their children. On whether the respondents were keen on appreciating their children when they do something good, over two thirds (71%) of them reported they appreciate their children frequently.

On the item with regard to encouraging children to talk about their feelings, over two thirds (72%) of the respondents pointed out that they do it sometimes. Another 63% of the respondents reported that sometimes they give their children alternatives when they express sadness. On the other hand, all of the study respondents indicated that they encourage their children when they get disappointed or frustrated.

On whether the respondents observe their children's facial expressions so as to understand their feelings, all of the respondents noted that they do so frequently. As well all of them pointed that they even respond to their children's expressions. Two thirds (66%) of the respondents reported that they give their children attention when they express sadness. Only 18% of them noted that they have never given their children attention when they express sadness. Further, two thirds (67%) of the study participants have never ignored their children's positive feelings like joy.

Discussion

The study found that majority (83%; with 50% "often" and 33% "very often") of the respondents indicated that they keep the lines of communication open to their children. Another two thirds (66%) of the respondents indicated that they listen to their children with patience always. These findings are in congruence with a study that was conducted by Stright, Gallagher and Kelley (2008) that found, children's early emotional development takes place in the dynamic interaction between the parent-child relationship and the environment that they are developing in.

A third (33%) of the respondents pointed out that they never knew when their children are sad. Besides, on whether the children tell their parents when they are annoyed, half (50%) of the respondents indicated that their children never told them. This could be attributed to poor relationship between parents and children or family conflicts. On the other hand, two thirds (66%) of the study participants were affirmative that when parents are pleased with their children, they let them know. Roberts and Strayer's study (as cited in Zhou *et al.*, 2002) has shown that children who have more experience with expressing their emotions, both positive and

negative, are better at understanding the feelings of those around them. In the same vein, Parental impact on the social behavior may be the cause for positive and negative responses from a child (Goddard, 1994).

The study also found that majority (84%) of the respondents pointed out that sometimes they plan enjoyable activities for their children. When parents spend time with their children, they get to understand them well and can handle them easily without neglecting their expressions. Studies show that children whose parents spend enough time with them show greater social and emotional development, including more resilience to stress, greater life satisfaction, greater self-direction and self-control, greater social adjustment, greater mental health, more supportive relationships, greater social competence, more positive peer relations, more tolerance, more successful marriages, and fewer delinquent behaviours (Allen & Daly, 2007; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). Thus, for children to develop completely in both socially and emotionally parents must create enough time with them in order to nurture and understand them.

All the study respondents reported that they were always keen to their children's emotional expressions. Two thirds (66%) of the respondents also indicated that they give their children attention when they express sadness. The study finding was in agreement with previous studies that revealed that minimizing children's emotional expression or punishing them for expressing negative emotions increases children's intensity of emotional expression, making them more emotionally reactive and less emotionally self-regulating (Eisenberg, Fabes, Shepard, Guthrie & Murphy, 1999; Fabes, Leonard, Kupanoff & Martin, 2001; Topham, Hubbs-Tait, Rutledge, Page & Kennedy, 2011). In the same vein Balson (1994) found that effective communication between parents and children is a two-way process involving listening and expressing. Further, Balson reported that to listen effectively that parent needs to give the child their undivided attentions, notice the child's feelings and the words used and actively neglects on what is being conveyed.

Conclusion

Although this study was parental-centric involvement on children socio-emotional development, other stakeholders such as teachers and the general community play a big role in socio-emotional growth of children. The ability of the parent to keep communication lines open and to interact with the emotional side of their children goes a long way in influencing positive emotional responses in the pre-school children. Children whose parents spend much time with them are more understanding, sociable, perform well in school and are able to handle personal problems even when they grow up. In addition, parental involvement influences the way children display socio-emotional competences in school. Thus, there is need to engage parents at all levels of the child's engagement in school to not only maximize the child's potential in academics and performance but also to help build confidence and self-efficacy in pre-school children.

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