



## CHANGES IN FAMILY STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON WELLBEING OF CHILDREN IN MURANG'A COUNTY

### Who is this aimed at

- Children Services and Social Protection policy makers and planners in government and institutions

### Context

- Families are recognized for contributions they make to their members and society but have not received a substantial focus in policy making and programme implementation
- Very little information is available on experiences of family changes in structure and function which have influenced patterns of family formation and family life
- Globally, these changes have affected the most vulnerable; families with young children

### Key Messages

- Changes in family structure and function impacts on children's well-being and development
- Creating a nurturing, supportive, and stable family environment is crucial for promoting children's well-being in the face of changing family structure and functions<sup>1</sup>
- Family wellbeing is a collective responsibility and requires multi-sectoral collaborative efforts targeting the families, employers, learning institutions, CSOs, FBOs, communities and media

### Overview

The 2022 Study on the Status of the Family in Kenya; Case Study Murangá County was one of the first studies to be conducted in Kenya focusing on families<sup>2</sup>.

This policy brief summaries research findings on the changes in the family structure and function and the implications on wellbeing of children. It presents suggestions on policy interventions to prevent adverse consequences associated with the changes and provide recommendations on how the family can cope and overcome the threats on wellbeing of children.

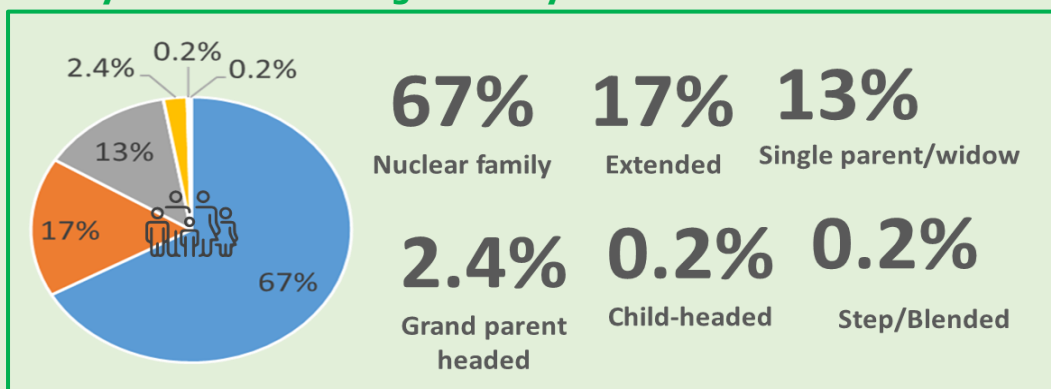


<sup>1</sup> Dixon, L., Stewart, B., Burland, J., Delahanty, J., Lucksted, A., & Hoffman, M. (2001). Pilot study of the effectiveness of the family-to-family education program. *Psychiatric Services*, 52(7), 965-967.

<sup>2</sup> National Council for Population and Development (NCPD) Study on the Status of Families in Kenya; A Case Study of Murang'a County (2022)

## KEY FINDINGS

### Family Structure Murang'a County



- More than two-thirds of families in Murangá are nuclear family
- 17% are Extended families
- 13% are single parent families

## Changes in Family Structure and Implication on Children's Wellbeing

### i. Rise in Cohabitation

Commonly referred to as "come we stay" or "come we risk" is becoming common in Murang'a; two people decide to live together and have children with no legal obligations. This is a temporal and risky affair that is likely to dissolve with negative consequences on the children.

*"In fact, most of the marriages are cohabitation, there is no legal document. They have not legalized it and that is why we have many reported cases in the Children's office. They meet and give birth to children, then things don't work out and so they separate. They then come here in the office for child support issues. This is prevalent especially in the young generation, 25 and below" (Key Informant, MCA, Murangá)*

*"...like more than 3/4 of the population here we call married are not exactly married I think those people are cohabiting. People are finding it easy to "come we stay" because they probably think they can walk in and out as it suits them so there is no commitment and I think that is why we have all these things happening in the nuclear family, they take off when they get tired, sometimes you find the children are living alone or in streets" (Key Informant, County Director Social Development,*

### ii. Rise in Single Families

The number of single-parent is on the rise, with one parent typically taking on the primary caregiving responsibilities. Some of the reasons cited were divorce or separation due to alcohol abuse, or the choice to raise a child as a single parent. Single-parent families may face additional challenges, such as financial strain and limited time for parental involvement, and a potential lack of a positive male or female role model in their lives which can affect children's development and welfare<sup>3</sup>.

*"Here we call it "come-we-risk" because these people are not well prepared for marriage but are living together. After sometime; like a year or so they part ways and go separate ways if he gets a job transfer to another place, he will just relocate alone leaving her behind and then get into another relationship in his new place of residence...and you might find he is married and already has children" (FGD, male never married 35-60, Murangá urban)*

### iii. Blended Families on the Rise

Formation of blended or stepfamilies is on the rise: this refers to Remarriage or re-partnering after divorce or death of a spouse. These families consist of a couple and their children from previous relationships. Adjusting

<sup>3</sup> David, H. P. (1978). Healthy family functioning: a cross-cultural appraisal. In Consultation on family health (pp. 327-342). Geneva: World Health Organization

to a new family structure, navigating relationships with stepparents and stepsiblings, and dealing with potential conflicts can impact children's well-being and stability.

#### iv. Grandparent-headed Families (Skip Generation) is Surging

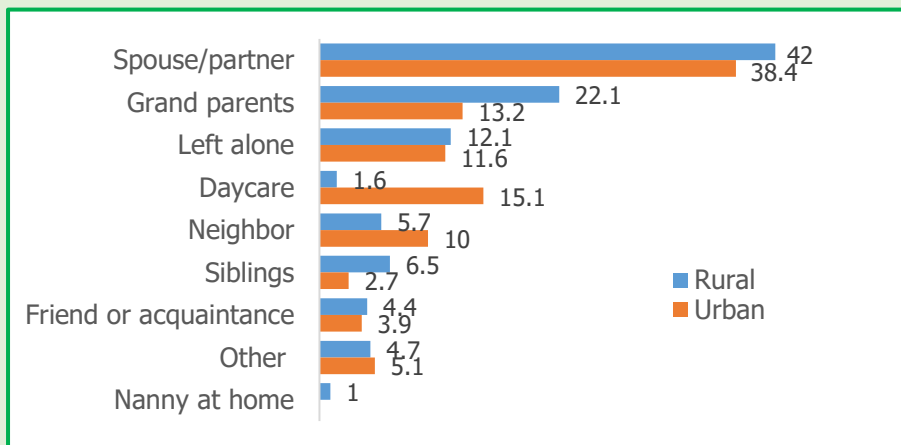
In some cases, grandparents were taking on the primary caregiving role for their grandchildren due to various reasons, such as parental absence due to work, separations or divorce, alcohol and substance abuse, or death. Grandparent-headed families provide a stable and supportive environment for children, but they may also face challenges related to financial strain, health issues, and intergenerational conflicts.

### Changes in Family Function and Implication on Children’s Wellbeing

#### i. Shift in Gender Roles

Traditional gender roles are evolving with both parents increasingly participating in paid work outside the home and men also taking on caregiving responsibilities<sup>4</sup>. This can impact children's well-being as they may experience changes in caregiving arrangements and family dynamics. When parents are working, children are either left alone or may spend more time with grandparents, in child daycare or with other family and non-family members. Quality childcare, supportive relationships with caregivers and security are important for children's well-being.

Figure 2: Percent Distribution of Main Child Care Arrangement by Residence



- 22% of children in rural and 13% in urban are left with grandparents
- 12% of children in both rural and urban are left alone when the mother is away

*“There is a huge change because nowadays unlike in the past, our fathers are mostly busy working away from our homes and therefore, their time of advising and guiding their children is very limited or not there at all. Women are also working away from their homes and so turning away from their household duties and care of children” (FGD, married Male 35-60, Murangá, rural)*

*“Nowadays people move to urban areas in search for employment and young parents abandon their children with the grandparents; this forces the grandparents to take up parenting roles for grandchildren, an extra burden” (FGD, Older Person 60+ Murangá, rural)*

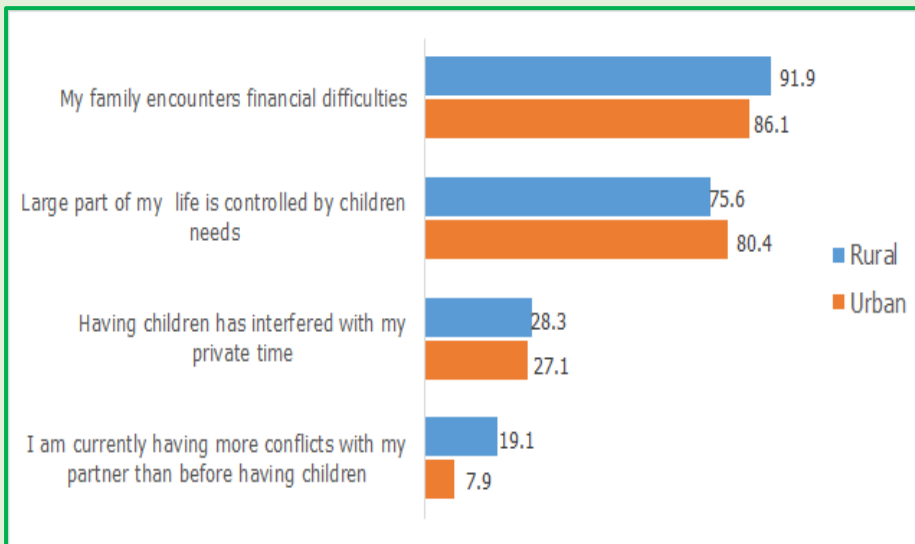


<sup>4</sup> Waringa, J. (2016). Changing Family Structures and their implications on the gender roles in Nakuru Municipality, Nakuru County, Kenya. International Journal of Research in Applied and Social Sciences. [www.ijras.ac.in/meaningful-life/connectedness/community](http://www.ijras.ac.in/meaningful-life/connectedness/community)

## ii. Economic Pressures Due to High Cost of Living and Unemployment

Due to economic pressures associated with continuous diminishing family land, high cost of living and unemployment in Murang'a county, families are facing financial challenges in bringing up children. Financial stress in families can impact children's health, growth and development, mental health, economic support, child rearing, educational outcomes, and overall well-being<sup>5</sup>.

**Figure 3: Percent Parental Experiences on Bringing Up Children by Residence**



- A big proportion of families in rural (92%) and urban (86%) encounters financial difficulties bringing up children

*“Nowadays people are avoiding a large family size. In my family, we are eleven siblings. In those times, lands were very productive and full of food for household consumption –bananas, cassava and sweet potatoes. This food is now scarce unlike in the past. Back then people would afford having large families due to availability of food plentifully. Nowadays, the cost of living is too high, for example, assume if you have five children and a 2kg packet of maize flour is now retailing at ksh. 200. Life is hard. (KII, MCA)*

*“Things have changed now. In the past, a couple in a family used to have a minimum of nine children but nowadays it is very rare seeing a couple having more than three children. And this due to poverty, unemployment and the continuous decrease in the family land size” (FGD, Married Female Participant 35-60, Murangá, urban)*

*“..this region relied heavily on agriculture some years back especially coffee and tea when these crops went down, there was a lot of hopelessness because this is not like Nairobi where you can do so many hustles to provide for the family so the hustles are limited...we have very few industries for macadamia nuts and mangoes, so the well-being of the family is deteriorating mainly because of poverty, unemployment and alcohol abuse associated with the state of hopelessness” (KII, County Official, Social Development)*

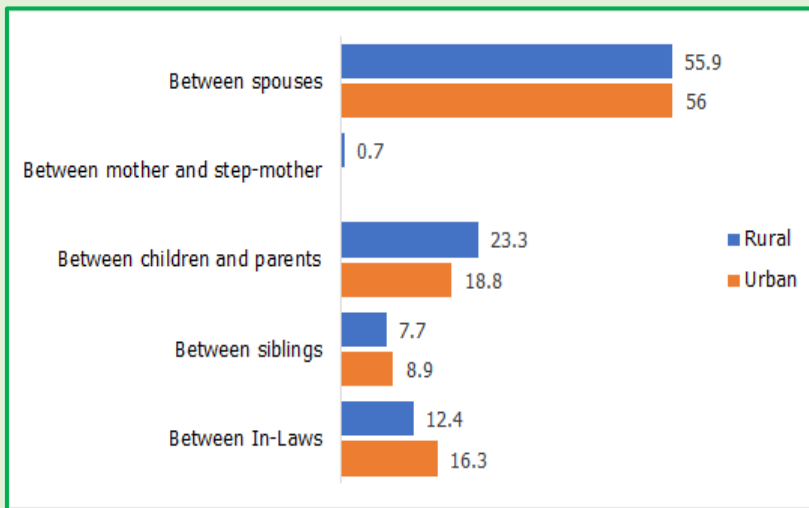


## iii. Family Conflicts

Financial pressure was also cited as responsible for conflicts in the families which undermines the stability of the family and mental well-being of children.

<sup>5</sup> Aye, et al (2016). Family conflict and managing strategies; implication for understanding emotion and power struggles. Global Journal of Psychology Research

**Figure 4: Percent Distribution of Conflicts Among Family Members by Residence**

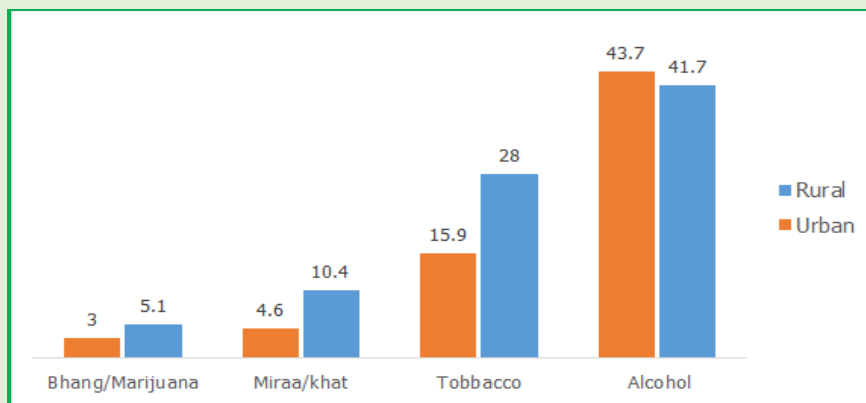


- Conflicts in the family is mostly between spouses and there is no marked difference between rural (56%) and urban families (56%)
- Conflict between children and their parents is higher in rural families (23%) compared to urban families (19%)

#### iv. Influence of Alcohol Abuse

Reduced ability for the man to provide and fulfil his roles in the family due to unemployment aggravates the problem of alcohol and substance in families. This is a cause of domestic violence, child abuse, neglect and abandonment affecting the cognitive development and emotional well-being of children in Murang’a county<sup>6</sup>.

**Figure 5: Percent Drug and Substance Abuse within Families by Residence**



- Alcohol use was reported in 44 percent of families in urban and 42% in rural

*“The role of provision has changed...Women are taking more roles in their families because of alcoholism and drug abuse by their husbands who have abandoned their roles and responsibilities and so, the roles of the father in the family are drifting towards the mother” (KII Chief, Murangá)*

*“Also customarily, in the past people were taking marriage roles more seriously but now things have changed...due to alcohol and substance abuse, the husband become irresponsible” (IDI, Child Protection, Murangá)*

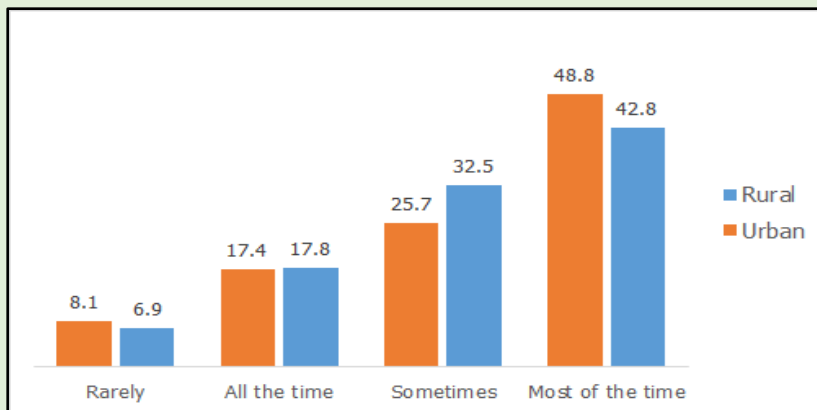
#### Change in Parenting

The level of parental involvement and active engagement positively impacts on children's emotional and cognitive development.

<sup>6</sup> Pillai R. K. et al. (2022). Changing families and its effect on the health of family members in Kerala: A qualitative exploration

## i. Reduced Time Spend with Children

Figure 6: Percent Time Spend by Parents with Their Children by Residence



- Only 18 percent of parents in rural and 17 percent of parents in urban spend all the time with their children
- 8% and 7% of parents in urban and rural rarely spend time with their children

*“...parents don’t have time for the children. The man leaves home while it is still dark and he will come back when it is still dark, the children are asleep...so there is no time to talk to one another and you never get to know what the children do during the day you even don’t know what goes on in the home. All you think about is how you will get money. This contributes to a lot of issues in the home” (FGD, Female Married Participant 35-60, Murangá, Urban)*

*“There is also a change in the family values because parents are always busy at work...children [are] under the care of the house maids or day care. As parents return in the evening [they]find the children dozing. And so they have no time to counsel them nor time to know how their day was. There is also no time for children to visit their aunts and grandmothers and so [they] are unable to benefit from their counsel” (FGD Male Separated/widowed participant Murangá, Urban)*



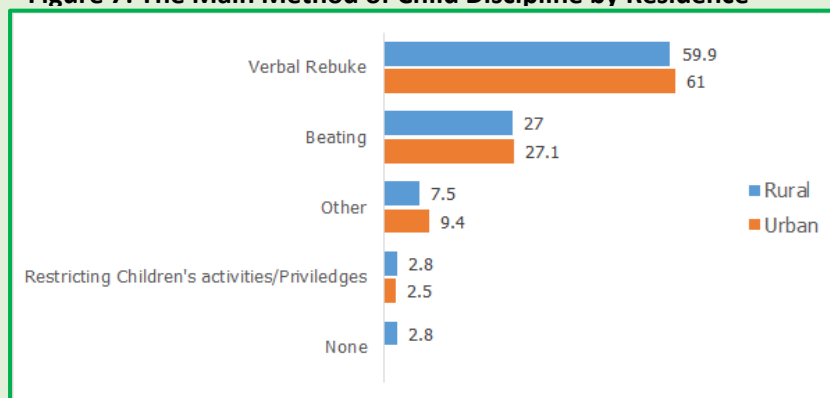
## ii. Rise in Co-parenting or Shared Parenting

In cases of divorce or separation, some parents in Murang’a opt for co-parenting arrangements where they share parenting responsibilities and decision-making for their children. When co-parenting is cooperative and focused on the best interests of the child, it can provide stability and emotional support. However, conflicts and inconsistent parenting can negatively impact children's well-being, causing stress, emotional difficulties, and disrupted relationships<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Aye, et al (2016). Family conflict and managing strategies; implication for understanding emotion and power struggles. Global Journal of Psychology Research

## Method of Child Discipline

Figure 7: The Main Method of Child Discipline by Residence



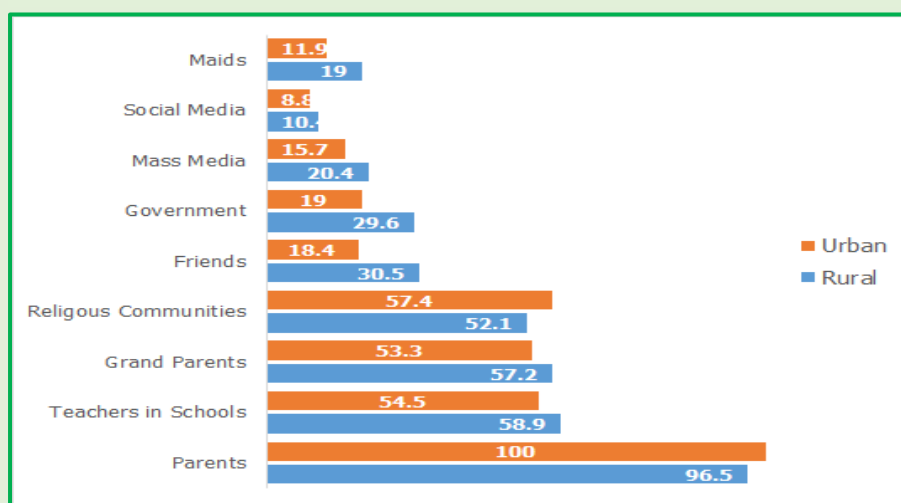
- The main method of child discipline in both rural (60%) and urban (61%) families is verbal rebuke
- Only 27% of parents in rural and urban beat their children.

*“There has been change in the parenting. In the past discipline was highly emphasized but nowadays it has been overlooked. Children are indulged so much vice that even while they are in the wrong, they are fondly referred as “kababa” and “kamum” (a little dad and little mom); they are less and lightly disciplined. If their parent are rich, these children are readily given whatever they ask and so when these parents pass away, these children end up becoming thieves. And as a result, they don’t go far and you might find the family has lost them. (FGD, Female Married Participant 35-60, Murangá, Urban)*

*“...when we were growing up our parents ruled over us. Children revered their fathers a lot and the mother would show the child that the father was the head anytime they did something wrong they were told your father will come and discipline you, that child would be afraid. Things that have changed, the men have put the cane down and is lost in alcohol, the young and they left the women to discipline the children who can’t control him. The children have gotten spoilt. mixed group older persons (60+), Murangá, rural)*

*“...we were brought up with a lot of discipline the parents in our past taught things that are not being taught to this generation Most of the parents these days you hear them saying I don’t bring up my children the way I was brought up so they spoil them with all the things that they missed making them so dependent on you that they can’t think. Somebody has started working you go and get him a good one bedroom you furnish the house instead of letting that person start from scratch and to value what he has worked for and you say I don’t them to start as I did (mixed group older persons (60+), Murangá, rural)*

Figure 8: Persons Suited to Teach Children Values and Morals by Residence



- Almost all study respondents were in consensus that parents are the most suited to teach their children values and morals, followed by teachers, grandparents and religious affiliations.

*“Each parent has a role in parenting and guiding the children at different ages and stages of development and instilling discipline. Roles and responsibilities are supposed to be assigned at an early stage of development by both parents. Children needs authority at home to be guided in life” (IDI, Leading Employer).*



## Influence of Technology and Digital Media

The rise of technology and digital media has influenced family communication patterns and changed family dynamics<sup>8</sup>. While technology can enhance communication and connectivity, it can also lead to challenges such as excessive screen time and limited quality face-to-face family interactions can negatively impact children's well-being, including their social development, emotional health, and academic performance.

## Influence of Religion

*“Families with strong Christian foundation, do uphold family values more than the families with no Christian background. Those families’ values are confined in good morals” (KII, Education Department, Murangá)*

*“The church has established groups and hold forums for youth and couple seminars and educational talks. In other churches like in our diocese we have a program called “womb to tomb” program which focus on human life from birth to death. Religion plays a good role in assisting the families. The church reconciles husbands and wives whenever there is a conflict and this is results to functional families. The church also creates awareness to the young adults who are about to start families. It teaches them how to have functional families” (FGD, Female Married Participant 35-60, Murangá, Urban)*



## Conclusion

Findings demonstrate that changes in the family structure experiences have a negative bearing on care giving environments, child development, economic resources, family savings and investments, parental time and attention, family conflict and well-being. Creating a nurturing, supportive, and stable family environment is crucial for promoting children's well-being in the face of changing family functions. A nurturing family environment foster children's well-being and promote healthy development. Family wellbeing is a collective responsibility and requires multi-sectoral collaborative efforts targeting the families, employers, learning institutions, civil society organizations, faith-based organizations, communities and media.

## Policy Recommendations

1. Fully implement the National Policy on Family Promotion and Protection
2. Fully implement Alcoholic Drinks Control (amendment) Bill, 2020 – that regulates sell, manufacture, pack or distribute an alcoholic drink
3. Reinforce legislations on Social Protection Act to protect wellbeing of children
4. Mobilize resources to ensure all counties in central region have active and functional rehabilitation centres that are economically friendly and offers quality services to address alcohol and drug abuse
5. Policies and programs aimed at reducing economic inequality and providing support to families can help mitigate the negative effects on children
6. Fully implement the Work Place Policy on Gender Mainstreaming 2021
7. Policies that aim at mainstreaming family well-being in programming to be encouraged so as to promote

<sup>8</sup> Nigatu, T. (2016). Changing Family Structure and Fertility in Sub-Saharan Africa



family welfare including parental competence, positive relationships, supportive parenting, parental involvement, healthy work-life balance, can help mitigate challenges faced by families<sup>9</sup>

8. Train community social/volunteer workers to provide counselling services to families (MOH and Social Protection) and give them incentives to trace and follow up on families<sup>10</sup>



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NCPD is a semi-autonomous government agency that formulates and promotes population policy and coordinates implementation of population programmes for sustainable development in Kenya.

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<sup>9</sup> AU. (2003). Plan of Action on the Family

<sup>10</sup> GOK. (2022). Draft Kenya National Parenting Training Programme Manual. Nairobi