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Ugandan households: A Study of parenting practices in three districts



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ABSTRACT

Ugandan households play a central role in child care and protection, and household-level practices influence the ways in which children are protected from adversities. This study was designed to identify community perceptions of protective and harmful parenting practices in three districts in Uganda. It employed free-listing interviews to determine priorities and practices deemed to be important in providing care and protection to children. Findings suggest that parenting practices can be grouped into seven basic themes, which are: Investing in children's future, Protection, Care, Enterprising, Relationship with neighbors, Intimate partner relationship, and Child Rearing. Investing in children's future, including educating children, was cited most often as a hallmark of positive parenting; while failure to care for children was most often cited as a hallmark of negative parenting. Concrete behaviors, such as walking a daughter to school; sewing a son's torn pants before going to church; and structuring study time at home were identified as concrete actions Ugandan parents undertake daily to promote their children's well-being. Conversely, specific contextual aspects of neglect and abuse were identified as central components of negative parenting, including lack of investment in children's education and not serving as a good role model. Building on community strengths is recommended as a principal means of enhancing household resilience and reducing childhood risk.

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1. Introduction

Scientific advances in neuroscience, epigenetics, psychology, and human development point to the need to examine childhood vulnerability and resilience from a social systems perspective (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). Beginning in utero and throughout childhood, the human brain responds to its environment, reshaping neural connections in line with social experience (Grantham-McGregor, 2007). Additionally, neglect, violence, and other adversities that disrupt safety and security in childhood can distort these processes with negative impacts that extend far beyond the suffering of individuals to encompass the rearing environments of future generations and societies they will compose (Engle et al., 2011). Indeed, critical human development milestones, including raw intellectual capacity, motor development, language acquisition, and social learning are achieved or not within the context of social interactions within the household. It is therefore important that we examine social interactions as sources of childhood risk and resilience.

Evidence indicates that poor parenting can influence children's well-being from early childhood, through adolescence, and throughout the life-course (Shaw, Owens, Giovannelli, & Winslow, 2001). A meta-analysis found that some parenting factors, including parent's level of anger, parents perceiving children as a problem, and parent-child relationship, were strongly associated with risk of child physical abuse and neglect (Stith et al., 2009). Conversely, a review of parenting programs for improving children's behavioral and emotional adjustment indicates the strength of evidence concerning the relationship between parenting and children's social, psychological, and emotional development, concluding that the "body of research suggests that early parenting is key to child emotional and behavioral functioning" (Barlow, Smailagic, Ferriter, Bennett, & Jones, 2010). A review of the role of child-caregiver interactions in the healthy physical and emotional development of children notes "caregiver-child interactions play a profound role in the development of children's self-regulation, cognitive development, language acquisition, and socio-emotional adjustment" (World Health Organization, 2004). Research on cross-cultural components of parenting for adolescent health indicates five core components of positive parenting: connection, behavior control, respect for individuality, modeling of appropriate behavior, and provision and protection (World Health Organization, 2007); however, the way in which each of these components is expressed locally and within a specific cultural context will vary (Bornstein, 2013). Despite the strength of evidence demonstrating the role of parenting in ensuring health and well-being of children, there are considerable gaps in the evidence concerning specific care practices in different cultural contexts, and how these practices might be harnessed to develop feasible, relevant, and effective interventions to improve parenting and, ultimately, promote child health and prevent harms against children.

In Uganda, households play the central role in child care and protection: children are raised in families; families are nested in households; households are nested in neighbourhoods or communities; and neighbourhoods-communities are nested in wider societal systems. Families and households are the 'frontline protectors' of children, yet household care environments and, in particular how relationships and interactions with caregivers may be able to protect children from the impacts of such adversities, have not been thoroughly researched. The identification of protective factors and key levers of social change will be especially important in order to develop programs and policies seeking to prevent violence against children, especially parenting and family-strengthening interventions (Table 1).

Research has documented multiple adversities to which children in Uganda may be exposed. These include HIV/AIDS, lack of access to safe water, stunting and malnutrition, lack of access to quality education, and exposure to various types of

Table 1
Key characteristics of three study sites.

| Region, district | Reasons for selection |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| <i>Central – Kampala district</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A metropolitan area where multiple ethnicities reside; • Formal sector employment higher than other two districts; • Division Orphan and Vulnerable Children [OVC]/Probation and Welfare Officer and Police Officer in Charge of Family and Child Protection report multiple child protection challenges in the specific division selected |
| <i>Western – Ibanda district</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural area where agriculture and cattle are primary economic activities; • Different ethnic groups live in this district as do migrants from Kigezi region in south western Uganda; • Has not experienced armed conflict or population displacement due to political violence • District Community Development Officer reports high levels of violence in the specific sub-county selected |
| <i>Northern – Lira district</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emerging from armed conflict and displacement • About 300,000 displaced persons returned home, following the longstanding battle between the Lord's Resistance Army and the Uganda People's Defence Forces; • Sub-county child protection officers reported high incidence of child abuse and neglect cases in the sub-county selected |

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