

https://dspace.org/

Parenting practices and marital breakdown A phenomenological study of divorce in Eswatini

Phumuzani Mpofu; L G MAMBA; Simangele Mayisela

https://hdl.handle.net/10539/47209
DOAJ

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

International Journal of Studies in Psychology
E-ISSN: 2710-2327, P-ISSN: 2710-2319
Vol 5, No. 3, pp 117-124. https://doi.org/10.38140/ijspsy.v5i3.2216
GAERPSY Publishing, 2025
Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivatives (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) licence.

History of the article
Submitted 26 August 2025
Revised 07 September 2025
Accepted 10 September 025
Published 30 October 2025

Parenting practices and marital breakdown: A phenomenological study of divorce in Eswatini

[1]Phumuzani Mpofu, [2]Lungile Goodness Mamba and [3*]Simangele Mayisela
[1,3]Department of Psychology, University of Witwatersrand, South Africa
[3]Department of Psychology Counseling, Eswatini College of Theology, Eswatini
[1*]Primary author: emontero@uniminuto.edu

***Abstract*—**The rising divorce rates in Eswatini underscore the urgent need to investigate factors affecting family stability, particularly the influence of parenting practices on marital satisfaction. This study explores how early childhood experiences, shaped by parental styles, contribute to marital breakdown and identifies strategies for fostering healthier relationships. A qualitative approach within a transformative paradigm was employed, using a phenomenological design to capture participants' lived experiences. Ten divorced individuals from urban and peri-urban areas of Manzini were purposively selected. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to reflect on their upbringing and marital experiences. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes within the narratives. The study was informed by Freudian psychoanalytic theory, focusing on the phallic stage to understand how early relational experiences influence adult interpersonal dynamics. Results indicated that individuals raised with divergent or inconsistent parenting styles were more likely to experience marital discord and eventual divorce. Marital behaviors often mirrored patterns established in childhood, highlighting the intergenerational transmission of relational dynamics. Participants reported that unresolved childhood emotional experiences influenced communication, conflict resolution, and intimacy in their marriages. The study concludes that early parenting practices significantly shape adult relationships, emphasizing the need for interventions that promote balanced and authoritative parenting. Implications include integrating discussions of childhood upbringing into premarital counseling, developing parenting education programs, and encouraging therapists to explore clients' early family experiences when addressing marital challenges. These findings call for broader cultural reflection in Eswatini on generational relational patterns and challenge the notion that divorce arises solely from immediate marital conflicts. While acknowledging limitations related to individual agency and societal influences, the study affirms that nurturing emotionally secure childhoods is crucial for fostering stable and fulfilling adult relationships.

Keywords: Childhood experiences, Divorce, Parenting styles, Psychoanalytic perspective, Psychosexual stages

To cite this article (APA): Mayisela, S., Mpofu, P., & Mamba, L. G. (2025). Parenting practices and marital breakdown: A phenomenological study of divorce in Eswatini. *International Journal of Studies in Psychology, 5*(3), 117-124. https://doi.org/10.38140/ijspsy.v5i3.2216

I. INTRODUCTION

THIS study explored the relationship between parenting styles and their potential contribution to the high divorce rate in the Kingdom of Eswatini. Marriage has traditionally been a cornerstone of societal stability, providing a framework for family life, social cohesion, and personal fulfillment. However, not all marriages endure, and some couples face the problematic reality of divorce. Given the significant impact marital relationships have on individual and collective well-being, examining the factors shaping these relationships is crucial. A Divorce, though not a new phenomenon, can arise from various factors. Poorly managed marriages can lead to dissatisfaction, eventually resulting in divorce. The increasing divorce rate in Eswatini has raised concerns about the stability of family structures. Studies have identified multiple factors contributing to marital breakdowns. Over recent decades, marriage patterns have undergone significant changes, with variations in union and dissolution trends across different regions.

Globally, divorce rates have been rising, as the United Nations (2023) noted, with approximately 750,000 to 800,000 divorces occurring annually in the U.S. alone; U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). In China, over 2.6 million couples filed for divorce in 2024, a slight increase from the previous year (China Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2024), while South Africa reported about 23,710 divorces in 2020, with financial strain and disagreements over money being common catalysts (Statistics South Africa, 2021). In Eswatini, divorce has become a major social concern, with a noticeable increase in divorce rates. According to the Central Statistics Office (CSO) 2023, divorces rose from 232 in 2022 to 395 in 2023. Similarly, between April and September 2024, 270 marriages ended (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2024). Financial challenges have been identified as a primary cause of divorce, leading to issues such as infidelity, mistrust, and poor communication (Times of Swaziland, 2024). Cultural practices and legal frameworks also influence marital dynamics in Eswatini, where divorce is seen as a threat to the social fabric. Additionally, the growing trend of parents spending less time with their children has exacerbated marital difficulties (Times of Eswatini, 2024). Economic instability, including unemployment and financial stress, has been identified as a key driver of divorce in Eswatini (Dlamini & Ntshangase, 2020).

While these factors are well-documented, the role of early childhood experiences and parenting styles in shaping marital stability remains largely unexplored. Research has shown that positive parenting practices can improve parent-child relationships, behaviour

management skills, and reduce children's emotional and behavioural difficulties (Kjøbli et al., 2023). Youvan (2024) emphasised how early attachment, communication, and emotional patterns established in the family of origin significantly influence marital expectations and behaviours. In Eswatini, the concept of family extends beyond the nuclear unit to include a broad network of relatives. Parenting is often a communal effort, with multiple family members contributing to a child's upbringing. According to Miljof et al. (2020), parenting involves a variety of strategies to nurture children's emotional, psychological, social, and intellectual development. Diana Baumrind (1971) identified four main parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful/uninvolved, each with varying impacts on child development and behaviour.

Authoritative parenting, characterized by a balance of warmth and control, fosters children's autonomy, trust, self-discipline, and higher self-esteem (Li et al., 2023). Children of authoritative parents tend to perform well academically, have better social skills, and experience fewer mental health issues. In contrast, authoritarian parenting, which is rigid and controlling, often leads to lower academic achievement, poor social skills, and diminished self-esteem, as well as higher risks of anxiety and delinquency (Alegre, 2011). Permissive parents are warm but indulgent, providing few rules and little control. This can result in children who struggle with self-discipline, poor academic performance, and difficulty forming healthy relationships. Neglectful parenting, where parents are emotionally detached and uninvolved, leads to the most severe outcomes, including poor academic performance, low self-esteem, and a heightened risk of substance abuse and delinquency (Alegre, 2011).

In Eswatini, a mix of these parenting styles is evident. Some parents adopt a permissive style, others follow an authoritarian approach, while neglectful behaviours, particularly evident in the high number of fathers who are brought before the court and legally compelled to support their children. Such parents display clear negligence. Some mothers are similarly negligent, often due to substance abuse, showing a lack of concern for their children. We have even read in the news about women who abandon their children to live with boyfriends, leaving the children to be cared for by their grandparents or other relatives. Authoritative parenting, which encourages healthy communication and balanced discipline, is the most beneficial. Effective parenting is crucial for fostering positive behaviour and emotional growth, ultimately contributing to healthier future relationships (Subagia, 2021

This study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the psychological factors influencing divorce in Eswatini, offering valuable insights for family therapists, counsellors, and educators. The findings will inform strategies to enhance marital stability and promote healthier family relationships, ultimately improving societal well-being.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Parenting in Eswatini has traditionally followed a communal, extended family model, but there has been a noticeable shift towards the more prevalent nuclear family structure in recent times (Mpofu & Tfwala, 2022). Parenting styles in Eswatini, ranging from authoritative and authoritarian to permissive or neglectful, have significant implications for children's emotional and psychological development and future relationship patterns. The literature review for this study aimed to examine the effects of different parenting styles on children's behaviour, consistently underscoring their crucial role in shaping behavioural, emotional, and social development. While many studies have explored various causes for marital breakdowns, this research specifically shifts its focus to the impact of parenting styles, particularly through the lens of psychoanalytic theory.

Several studies have highlighted the significant influence of parenting style on children's social development and intimate relationships (Candelanza et al., 2021; Fadlillah & Fauziah, 2022). For example, research indicates that parenting style can predict children's behaviours and help reduce problem behaviours (Golan & Crow, 2004; Tsoi et al., 2018). Fan (2023) found that individuals raised with an authoritative parenting style are more likely to develop healthy, close relationships. Moreover, meta-analytic findings indicate a strong correlation between authoritative parenting and advanced moral reasoning, illustrating its impact on moral development. This research emphasises the importance of reflecting on early experiences with primary caregivers, as these often evoke deep, unresolved emotions.

Drawing on Sigmund Freud's psychosexual theory, particularly the phallic stage (ages 3-6), this study explores how parenting practices during this critical period shape future relationship patterns. The phallic stage, characterized by the Oedipus/Electra complex, gender identity development, and superego formation, is pivotal. Experiences during this stage, shaped by parental interactions, can lead to unresolved conflicts that later manifest in adult relationships. Inappropriate or inconsistent parental responses during this stage can result in difficulty forming healthy intimate relationships. Similarly, harsh discipline can produce a rigid or weak superego, impacting moral reasoning and behaviours.

Sarwar (2016) argues that effective parenting is authoritative, emphasizing the need to understand children's mindsets. Positive parenting, characterized by emotional warmth, fosters social development and adaptive behaviours (Subagia, 2021). Margolin (2000) identifies parental style as a significant source of marital conflict. Masud et al. (2019) suggest that children with authoritarian parents are often well-behaved but may also become aggressive and socially withdrawn. Rojas (2023) links parental overprotection to child aggression, indicating that overprotection may hinder self-development and interpersonal skills. Pinquart (2022) highlights the importance of emotional warmth in parenting, noting that chronic negative emotions can compromise this. Yun et al. (2019) found that authoritarian or permissive parenting styles negatively affect children's self-esteem, while authoritarian styles can have a positive influence in certain contexts.

Neglectful parenting, defined by a lack of responsiveness and demandingness, is linked to various negative outcomes. Setiana and Darmayanti (2020) note that neglectful parenting often leads to substance use, while Kumari and Kang (2017) observed correlations between parental neglect and negative emotional outcomes. Gómez et al. (2016) found that physical or verbal punishment in parenting is associated with increased aggression and victimisation in children. Johal and Kaur (2015) noted that control and independence in parenting influence aggression differently in boys and girls. Watiningsih et al. (2018) connected authoritarian or permissive parenting styles to increased temper tantrums in young children. Yang et al. (2014) found that poor parental care is linked to higher rates of behavioural problems, and Yap et al. (2014) associated high parental control with increased aggression, anxiety, depression, and other problem behaviours in children.

Parental divorce and separation leading to single parenting is another aspect that is associated with adaptive parenting, with one parent overcompensating for the absent parent or dissociating from their parenting role as a defence mechanism. These single parents may lean towards either authoritative or permissive parenting styles, with children showing maladaptive behaviours, psychosocial, and gender identity challenges (Mpofu & Tfwala, 2022).

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study examined how Sigmund Freud's phallic stage of psychoanalytic theory offers valuable insights into the influence of early childhood experiences on adult behaviours, particularly in relation to the rising divorce rate in Eswatini. The phallic stage, the third phase in Freud's model of psychosexual development, is a period when children become aware of gender roles and sexual identity, with pleasure derived from their genitalia. Freud (1920) emphasised that early

childhood is critical in psychological development, as children undergo turbulent psychosexual stages, each focused on different areas of the body. To achieve healthy adult development, children must progress through these stages sequentially. If libidinal drives are repressed or inadequately discharged, children may experience a sense of deficiency and dissatisfaction, which Freud termed "fixation."

Fixation can result from either excessive or insufficient parental response during any stage, leading to anxiety that may persist into adulthood. Individuals who are fixated at this stage may exhibit specific behavioural tendencies. For example, men may become overly aggressive or excessively submissive, while women might display flirtatious or attention-seeking behaviours. In contrast, satisfaction during this stage promotes the development of a healthy personality. The quality of parenting during the phallic stage, especially in terms of emotional warmth, intimacy, trust, communication, boundaries, and support, has lasting effects on a child's ability to form healthy relationships, develop self-esteem, and manage emotions.

Freud's concept of psychosexual stages highlights that unresolved childhood conflicts, especially those involving parental relationships, continue to influence adult behaviour, often unconsciously, and contribute to marital dissatisfaction (Freud, 1905). Insufficient affection and emotional security during childhood can leave unresolved conflicts that significantly impact sexual identity and future relationships (Freud, 1905). The parenting style, whether authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, or neglectful, determines how children resolve conflicts, which has lasting implications for their ability to manage relationships. Emotional neglect or inconsistent parenting during the phallic stage can carry unresolved issues into adulthood, influencing marital dynamics and contributing to challenges with intimacy, authority, and emotional regulation, potentially leading to divorce.

Some scholars critique Freud's psychosexual stages as irrelevant in the African context (Blauner, 2024). In this decolonial scholarship era, the use of Freud's psychosexual theory is still relevant in the context of Eswatini. This theoretical underpinning was used in studies conducted with success in Eswatini (Mpofu & Tfwala, 2022) and similar contexts.

The reviewed literature provides a comprehensive overview of various parenting styles and their psychological, emotional, and behavioural implications for children. However, notable gaps remain. First, there is a lack of context-specific research that examines how cultural, economic, and social changes in Eswatini, particularly the shift from extended to nuclear family structures, affect parenting practices and outcomes. While many studies are referenced globally, few focus directly on Eswatini, creating a gap in culturally relevant findings. Second, although the literature frequently mentions the impact of parenting styles on child development, there is limited integration of psychoanalytic theory, especially Freud's psychosexual stages, as a primary framework in empirical studies, making this study's theoretical approach relatively novel. Third, while many studies address parenting's effects on childhood outcomes, fewer explore how early parenting experiences, particularly during the phallic stage, influence adult relationship patterns and long-term psychosocial functioning. Finally, the literature largely overlooks fathers' roles and gender dynamics in parenting within the Eswatini context and rarely considers how parenting styles may interact with broader systemic issues such as poverty, education, or shifting family roles. These gaps underscore the need for locally grounded, theory-informed research on parenting and its developmental consequences.

IV. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study explore the prevalent parenting styles used in Eswatini and how early childhood experiences, shaped by parenting practices, influence adult relationships. It further explores strategies that can support families in Eswatini in alleviating marital strain and enhancing relationship stability through effective parenting practices.

V. METHODS

Research approach

This study employed a qualitative approach. Qualitative methods offer the tools needed to investigate the subtleties of human behaviour and interactions, capturing the complexity inherent in these phenomena (Lim et al., 2023). A qualitative approach is appropriate for this study because it explores the complex and subjective ways parenting practices influence divorce within Eswatini's socio-cultural context.

Research design

This study used a phenomenological design, which allowed for an in-depth exploration of personal experiences, perceptions, and the psychological impact of the individual participant's childhood parenting experiences on their divorce. The design is suitable for engaging with participants who have gone through divorce, particularly focusing on their views and describing their parents' parenting experiences, with a focus on its influence on their intimacy, communication, conflict resolution, and divorce risk.

Participants

The study purposively recruited ten divorced participants who were asked to reflect on the parenting styles of their parents or guardians and how these influenced their marital stability. In qualitative research, sampling aims to collect data that provides a deep understanding of the phenomenon being studied, focusing on its complexity, diversity, and context, rather than on numerical data as in quantitative research (Alam, 2021). The sample included both men and women, capturing a range of experiences, with the sample size determined by data saturation. Their age ranged from twenty-three years upwards. Participants were chosen based on their ability to clearly recall their early childhood experiences, particularly the parenting styles, discipline methods, and emotional warmth exhibited by their parents or guardians. To be eligible for participation, the participants' marriages must have lasted at least three years before the divorce occurred.

Data collection tools

Semi-structured interviews

The semi-structured interviews were employed to collect data through mail-written responses and in-person interactions. In-depth semi-structured interview guides from 5 males and 5 females from the public were conducted, considering their previous marriage. The recordings were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Research site

The study was conducted in the Manzini region of Eswatini, the country's most populous and economically active area. The region is characterised by urban and peri-urban settlements, offering a diverse social and cultural context. Urban areas such as Manzini city provide exposure to modern lifestyles, formal employment opportunities, and shifting family dynamics. In contrast, the peri-urban areas blend traditional practices and emerging urban influences. This combination makes the region suitable for exploring how parenting practices and related social factors may influence family stability and contribute to the high divorce rate.

Data analysis

Reflexivity was maintained throughout the process to minimise bias during data analysis, with conscious reflection on how personal assumptions and perspectives could shape interpretation. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data, identifying commonalities and differences. Following Braun and Clarke's (2021) framework for reflexive thematic analysis, a systematic approach was applied to recognise and interpret patterns within the qualitative data. The analysis adhered to the six phases outlined by Clarke and Braun (2013): familiarisation with the data, coding, generating initial themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. To further enhance credibility, themes were refined through repeated engagement with the data, peer debriefing, and careful documentation of analytic decisions, ensuring that findings remained grounded in participants' accounts rather than researcher bias.

Ethical considerations

The study adhered to established ethical guidelines to protect the rights and welfare of participants. Informed consent was obtained from all patients before data collection, ensuring they fully understood the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning codes or pseudonyms instead of personal identifiers and securely storing digital and physical data. Efforts were made to minimise potential harm by creating a respectful and non-judgmental environment during data collection, ensuring that participation did not cause emotional distress or physical discomfort. Ethical clearance was sought and obtained from the Eswatini College of Theology's ethics committee, and the study was conducted in line with the principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, and respect for persons.

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Biographic results

Participant	Age	Occupation	Years in marriage	Gender
Participant 1	39	Nurse	10	Female
Participant 2	34	Business Consultant	7	Female
Participant 3	48	Warder	15	Female
Participant 4	27	Bank teller	4	Female
Participant 5	58	Stay at home mum	22	Female
Participant 6	36	High school teacher	9	Male
Participant 7	50	Civil Engineer	19	Male
Participant 8	60	Retired police officer	35	Male
Participant 9	29	Security personnel	3	Male
Participant 10	42	Veterinary Officer	13	Male

Factors influencing adult relationships in Eswatini

Parenting styles

This study revealed that four distinct parenting styles could commonly influence adult relationships in Eswatini. These include authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, and uninvolved.

Authoritative parenting

One participant shared a warm and loving upbringing, raised as the only child by their grandmother. They were taught respect and compassion, describing a childhood where they spent much time alone, playing in the yard or at the playground, but always surrounded by love and care.

"My grandmother was firm; she taught me respect and compassion, and never spared me corporal punishment when I transgressed. She used to allow me to play with other children, but this would be after I had done all the house chores required at home" (Participant 3 Female).

Fan (2023) found that individuals raised with an authoritative parenting style are more likely to develop healthy close relationships. This conclusion aligns with a substantial body of research indicating that authoritative parenting fosters emotional competence, secure attachment, and effective communication skills, key components of successful interpersonal relationships. For instance, a study by Li (2023) found that authoritative parenting styles positively predicted children's peer interactions, consistent with previous research. Additionally, a systematic review by Haridas et al., (2025) confirmed that authoritative parenting is associated with better quality mother-child relationships, contributing to healthier adult relationships. These findings underscore the importance of authoritative parenting in promoting the development of healthy close relationships.

Permissive parenting character tabulation

One participant described a nuanced parenting approach that blended elements of both authoritative and permissive styles. According to Baumrind's typology, permissive parenting is characterised by high responsiveness but low demandingness. Parents are warm and accepting but provide few rules or expectations. In contrast, authoritative parenting balances warmth with firm control, emphasising structure, discipline, and open communication (Baumrind, 1991). In the excerpt below, the participant's father demonstrates traits of both styles.

"*My father was a bit more lenient and balanced. He would apply corporal punishment quickly if I did something wrong, but sometimes, he would call me in, sit me down, and guide me about life Feed*"(Participant 9 Male).

The father's readiness to use corporal punishment may reflect residual authoritarian elements common in traditional African contexts, yet the subsequent guidance and emotional engagement align with authoritative practices. This hybrid model shows how cultural and contextual influences blur parenting categories, creating a unique mix of nurturance and discipline. Theoretically, the permissive dimension is evident in the father's leniency and emotional availability. At the same time, the authoritative traits are visible in his effort to guide the child and provide life lessons. This combination may promote emotional regulation, autonomy, and interpersonal skills in children (Li et al., 2023). However, as the participant implied, such parenting could also produce confusion or internal pressure, particularly when disciplinary actions are inconsistent or expectations are ambiguously communicated. Thus, while Baumrind's theory offers a structured lens through which to classify parenting styles, real-life practices often reflect a fluid interplay between these categories, shaped by cultural values, socioeconomic contexts, and evolving parent-child dynamics.

Authoritarian/autocratic parenting style

A third participant was raised by their grandmother in a firm yet compassionate environment. While strict discipline was enforced, the grandmother emphasised respect, love, and personal growth. She balanced authoritative traits, like setting clear expectations and showing compassion, with authoritarian elements, such as corporal punishment.

"My parents were strict and taught me respect. They never hesitated to administer corporal punishment when I misbehaved, but they also allowed me to playtime with other children" (Participant 3 Female)

Uninvolved/Neglectful parenting style

One participant described an uninvolved upbringing, especially with their stepmother, where the lack of emotional connection and support created a strained relationship. Their biological mother played a minimal role, mainly contributing to school fees, while their father and stepmother provided little emotional nurturing:

"*My mother was mostly absent during my upbringing, only contributing to school fees in the early years. I then went to stay with my father and stepmother, but the relationship with my stepmother was terrible. She never showed love or support, and it made our relationship very strained"* (Participant 5 Female)

An uninvolved or hostile stepmother can significantly harm a child's development. This study shows that children raised by uninvolved parents often face poor outcomes, such as low self-esteem and mental health risks (Alegre, 2011). Freud's phallic stage highlights how early interactions shape gender identity and resolve conflicts with parents. In homes with an uninvolved stepmother, children may experience inadequacy and confusion, leading to emotional challenges. These accounts reflect the varying parenting styles in Eswatini, from nurturing to strict or emotionally detached, each shaping how children perceive relationships, authority, and compassion.

Early childhood experiences

The findings showed that early childhood experiences could influence adult relationships, particularly in marriage. Marriage brings together people with distinct childhood experiences, leading to misunderstandings and conflicts that emanate from a person's unresolved psychosexual conflicts. For example, someone from an authoritative household may struggle with a spouse from a permissive one, due to differing views on discipline and boundaries. Similarly, individuals from polygamous families may face difficulties with intimacy, commitment, and family dynamics.

One participant, raised in a polygamous household, shared how their marriage clashed with a spouse raised by a pastor, revealing mismatched expectations and practices around relationship dynamics:

"I was raised in a family where there were too many. My father was a polygamous individual. So, when I tried to get married, the wife I was married

to was raised by a pastor, who modeled her relationship with her parents. And I also modelled my relationship along what my father was doing. So as a result, we used to clash because our interests were different" (Participant 6, Male).

This conflict points to the complexities that arise when people from different parenting environments unite. The environment in which individuals are raised shapes their values and expectations. For example, someone with fewer children may struggle to adapt to a family with many, leading to discomfort and rifts. When individuals share similar parenting styles, however, it can ease these transitions.

However, when their upbringing differs significantly, it can result in differing values, interests, and unresolved Oedipal issues, where a child overidentifies with one parent's parenting style while loathing the other's.

This individual now finds constant companionship overwhelming, referring to another person as "a crowd." This highlights how early emotional neglect or instability can deeply influence one's ability to form and maintain intimate relationships later in life

"*To be honest with another person full-time is a problem. I never stayed with my parents. I stayed with the people that my mother gave me to. Because they did not have children. So, due to that experience, having somebody around me became a problem. It as a challenge. I see that person as a crowd because I grew up without anyone next to me. After all, the people I was living with did not have children. Most of the time, I was alone."* (Participant 6 Male)

Another participant shares the emotional challenges stemming from being raised outside their immediate family in isolation, which shaped their difficulty with intimacy and constant companionship later in life:

"During my early years, I was the only child living with my grandmother. I had no one to converse with or play with, which has continued even in my marriage. I would sit quietly on my laptop and show little interest in conversations" (Participant 1 Female).

The participant's childhood isolation and limited emotional support led to withdrawal and emotional detachment in their adult relationships, aligning with attachment theory, which suggests that early emotional neglect or instability affects the ability to form intimate relationships.

Additionally, one participant reflected on how their grandparents' peaceful conflict resolution influenced their relationship expectations. From a young age, children observe their parents closely, internalizing both subtle and overt cues about relationships, as seen with this participant adopting the quiet conflict resolution they observed between their grandparents:

"*My grandmother never raised her voice when speaking to my grandfather. I never saw them fight or argue publicly. When I sensed they were in conflict, they would sit next to each other and speak quietly. Conflict, shouting, and disrespectful communication demoralize me because I have not been used to it since childhood"* (Participant 1 Female).

The participant's aversion to conflict and tendency to emotionally withdraw in marriage stemmed from this learned behaviour. This response to conflict, avoiding confrontation and withdrawing emotionally, is common when individuals witness emotionally restrained conflict resolution in childhood. As they shared:

The participants also reflected on how their tendency to withdraw emotionally during conflicts in their marriage was a learned behaviour:

"*I avoided conflict in a marriage at all costs. I always take the blame, which causes me to withdraw emotionally because I hate arguments. I developed a thick skin, where I stayed quiet or went out to drink with my friends, thinking that would resolve the conflict because there would be no more arguments. Let the initiator win the argument, and whatever they say is right"* (Participant 4 Female).

The participant shared how childhood experiences of quiet conflict resolution and emotional detachment shaped their communication style in marriage, leading to conflict avoidance and emotional withdrawal, often resulting in self-blame. Several studies, including those by Candelanza et al. (2021) and Fadlillah & Fauziah (2022), highlight the significant impact of parenting styles on children's social development and intimate relationships. Early parental interactions, especially during disagreements, strongly influence conflict resolution and relationship behaviours in adulthood, as Smith-Etxeberria et al. (2022) notes. Family patterns of attachment, communication, and emotional expression impact marital expectations. Children learn through direct teaching and observing how parents handle love, conflict, and communication.

Another participant, raised in an environment of parental separation and inconsistent caregiving, explained how this emotional disconnection led to numbness and challenges in forming relationships as an adult:

"When I was born, my parents had already separated. My mother was there partially when I grew up, but I did not stay with her. She never played any role in my upbringing, nor did my father".

The participant's childhood emotional neglect and instability, including parental separation and inconsistent caregiving between multiple family members, contributed to challenges with emotional closeness and secure attachment in later relationships. This aligns with psychoanalytic theory, which suggests that disruptions in early caregiving impact relationship patterns. The participant's experience, particularly during the phallic stage of psychosexual development, may have influenced their gender identity and the resolution of the Oedipal/Electra complex. The lack of a stable, nurturing mother figure and a strained relationship with a stepmother likely hindered the participant's ability to form healthy relationships with women later in life.

The participant further reflected on how their upbringing in an emotionally hostile environment hindered their ability to give and receive love, as he shared:

"*My relationship with both my parents was numb because I was the centre of their separation. They would always fight over me. Why should I stay with the other one? I never felt their love, maybe a little from my father, because I stayed with him during my higher primary education. The relationship with my stepmother was the worst; she was never close, loved, or supported me, and this made my relationship with my stepmother very sour. My grandmother raised me"* (Participant 2 Female).

Emotional disconnection from early childhood can lead to relationship instability, with withdrawal, misunderstandings, and unmet emotional needs, especially when partners have different emotional backgrounds. Individuals raised in loveless or hostile environments often lack the emotional skills to give or receive love, perpetuating a cycle of disconnection. This cycle undermines relationship stability, as individuals struggle to connect with partners raised in loving environments, creating ongoing conflict.

Strategies for alleviating marital strain

The third research question aimed to seek strategies that can be implemented to help families in Eswatini alleviate marital strain and improve relationship stability through effective parenting styles. These strategies are discussed below.

Using formal structures like churches and Imiphakatsi

To address parenting challenges, participants suggested several strategies, including using community forums like churches and Imiphakatsi (Royal Kraals) to bring in specialists who can share best practices. Many parents use ineffective methods not out of intent but ignorance, so prospective and current parents need tools to adopt effective strategies. Additionally, workshops should educate both parents and children. Children often misuse their rights and need to learn their rights and responsibilities. This promotes better communication and respect, and prevents conflicts contributing to parental burnout.

These workshops aim to equip parents and children with the knowledge needed to create a healthier family dynamic. Parenting programmes that aim at preventing dysfunctional defence mechanisms among children, leading to fixation or disintegrated ego.. It is also crucial to avoid negligent parenting practices, such as overindulgence, which can lead children to become entitled or irresponsible. Rojas (2023) highlights a link between parental overprotection and child aggression,

indicating that overprotection may hinder self-development and interpersonal skills.

Ultimately, the goal of parenting is to be present in the lives of children, showing them love and providing guidance to help them grow into integrated individuals who are also capable of forming healthy relationships.

A particularly striking strategy proposed by the participant is the idea that people should marry those raised similarly. While not a formalized solution, this reflects a real emotional truth: shared backgrounds can reduce misunderstandings and increase empathy within the relationship (Berlamont et al., 2022)

"...if marriages are to be successful, people should marry those who were raised in the same way they were raised so that they may be able to understand each other" (Participant 10 Ma).

This reflects Calvo's (1993) assertion that "A person gets married as he/she knows marriage" (p. 115). Although this idea may not be universally applicable, it does point to a potential strategy. Premarital counselling that includes conversations about upbringing, values, and emotional expectations might help couples navigate differences better and build mutual understanding early on.

Promoting an authoritative parenting style

Further, participants suggested promoting authoritative parenting as a balanced approach that combines warmth and structure, supported by Sarwar (2016), who argues that effective parenting is authoritative and emphasizes understanding children's mindsets. This parenting style, which encourages open communication and appropriate conflict resolution, could help children develop the emotional tools necessary for healthy relationships in adulthood.

"I suggest that as parents, let us try to use the recommended authoritative parenting style, which is going to balance things, where if the child has done something wrong, you acceptably correct the child. You do not use the language that is going to make the child develop depression and other things, because these other parenting styles breed children who are fixated, which is caused by over-treatment, and under-treatment" (Participant 8, Male).

Autocratic parenting is ineffective, as it can lead to neglect or even abuse, with parents refusing to acknowledge or meet their children's needs. It is crucial to teach parents that parenting should be about balance, not control. To build a more stable society, parents should adopt an authoritative style, which involves correcting children respectfully without causing emotional harm. Overly controlling or excessively lenient parenting can result in emotionally fixated children, often due to over-treatment or under-treatment.

Participants emphasised that open communication and conflict resolution are essential in stable marriages. The breakdown of communication and developing defensive behaviours, often learned in childhood, can erode marital stability.

One participant shared how their tendency to withdraw emotionally during conflicts in their marriage was rooted in childhood experiences:

"I avoid conflict in a relationship at all costs. I always take the blame, which causes me to withdraw emotionally because I hate arguments" (Participant 4 Female).

This insight suggests that marital issues are often more about how couples handle conflict than the conflict itself, a skill shaped by early life experiences and emotional regulation learned from caregivers. Mutual understanding and respect, grounded in childhood experiences, are key to improving family dynamics and marital stability in Eswatini. To reduce marital strain, interventions must address the root cause: how children are raised, loved, and emotionally supported. Without these foundational skills, individuals may desire closeness but lack the capacity, perpetuating a cycle of broken relationships.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study explored the long-term impact of childhood parenting styles on emotional development, highlighting their influence on forming healthy relationships and navigating marital challenges. In Eswatini, extended caregiving, especially by grandmothers, combines authoritative and authoritarian methods, balancing discipline with respect and compassion to support emotional growth. However, a lack of stable relationships with both parents can negatively affect a child's emotional well-being, leading to feelings of abandonment. These findings align with Freud's psychoanalytic theory, suggesting that early caregiving experiences shape gender identity and future relationships. Disruptions, particularly with maternal figures, can hinder secure attachments. Effective communication, emotional support, and conflict resolution are crucial for fostering strong marriages and emotional stability. This study provides a foundation for future research and interventions to strengthen family bonds in Eswatini.

Based on the study's findings, several recommendations are proposed to address the impact of parenting practices on the high divorce rate in Eswatini. It is essential to encourage authoritative parenting, as this approach fosters a balanced upbringing, promotes cooperation, and contributes to healthier marital relationships. Recognising the lack of guidance in previous generations, a national parenting model should be established to assist parents in adopting effective practices. Marriage officers are encouraged to explore the backgrounds of couples, openly discuss potential family dynamic challenges, and provide proactive guidance to help couples build strong foundations. Parenting workshops organized through churches and Imiphakatsi (Royal Kraals), facilitated by child-rearing specialists, would further equip parents while educating children about their rights and responsibilities. In addition, the emotional impact of polygamy, particularly for children who may feel displaced, should be addressed through strategies aimed at supporting their emotional well-being. Finally, breaking the silence on emotional neglect is crucial, and parents should be encouraged to be emotionally present while schools and families work together to normalise emotional education.

VIII. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this article.

IX. DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are available upon request.

REFERENCES

Alam, M. K. (2021). A systematic qualitative case study: Questions, data collection, NVivo analysis and saturation. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal, 16*(1), 1-31. https://doi.org/10.1108/QROM-09-2019-1825

Alegre, A. (2010). Parenting styles and children's emotional intelligence: What do we know? *The Family Journal,* https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480710387486

Baumrind, D. (1966). Effects of authoritative parental control on child behavior. *Child Development, 37*(4), 887-907. https://doi.org/10.2307/1126611

Baumrind, D. (1967). Child care practices anteceding three patterns of preschool behavior. *Genetic Psychology Monographs, 75*(1), 43-88.

Baumrind, D. (1978). Parental disciplinary patterns and social competence in children. *Youth & Society, 9*(3), 239–267.

Baumrind, D. (1991). The influence of parenting style on adolescent competence and substance use. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 11*(1), 56-

Berlamont, L., Sels, L., Ickes, W., Ceulemans, E., Hinnekens, C., & Verhofstadt, L. (2022). Associations between affect and empathic accuracy during conflict interactions in couples. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships….* https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075221076453

Blauner, A. (2024). On the Couch: Writers Analyze Sigmund Freud.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Reflective thematic analysis: A guide to practice.* London: Sage Publications.

Calvo, R. R. (1993). The impact of culture in marriage cases. *Canon Law Society of America Proceedings, 55*, 108-120.

Candelanza, A. L., Buot, E. Q. C., & Merin, J. A. (2021). Diana Baumrind's parenting style and child's academic performance: A tie-in. *Psychology and Education, 58*, 1553–6939.

Chen, F., Garcia, O. F., Alcaide, M., Garcia-Ros, R., & Garcia, F. (2024). Do we know enough about negative parenting? Recent evidence on parenting styles and child maladjustment. *The European Journal of Psychology Applied to Legal Context, 16*(1), 37-48. https://doi.org/10.5093/ejpalc2024a4

Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2013). Teaching thematic analysis: Overcoming challenges and developing strategies for effective learning. *The Psychologist, 26*(2), 120-123. Retrieved from https://uwerepository.worktribe.com/index.php/preview/937606/Teaching%20thematic%20analysis%20Research%20Repository%20version.pdf

Dlamini, D. R., & Ntshangase, S. A. (2020). Economic pressures and their impact on marital satisfaction in Eswatini. *Journal of African Family Studies, 12*(1), 45-59.

Estlein, R. (2021). Parenting as a communication process: Integrating interpersonal communication theory and parenting styles conceptualization. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 13*(1), 21–33. https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12407

Fadlillah, M., & Fauziah, S. (2022). Analysis of Diana Baumrind's parenting style on early childhood development. *AL-ISHLAH: Jurnal Pendidikan, 14*(2), 2127–2134. https://doi.org/10.35445/alishlah.v14i2.487

Fan, W. (2023). The effect of parenting styles of original families on individuals' close relationships. *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, 8*, 1848–1853. https://doi.org/10.54097/ehss.v8i.4595

Freud, S. (1905). *Three essays on the theory of sexuality*. New York: Basic Books.

Freud, S. (1920). *Beyond the pleasure principle.* Vienna: International Psycho-Analytical.

Gallimore, R., & Kurdek, L. A. (1992). Parenting practices and child behavior: The role of warmth and punishment in children's social interactions. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 13*(2), 117-135.

Golan, M., & Crow, S. (2004). Parents are key players in the prevention and treatment of weight-related problems. *Nutrition Reviews, 62*(1), 39–50. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-4887.2004.tb00005.x

Gómez-Ortiz, O., Romera, E. M., & Ortega-Ruiz, R. (2015). Parenting styles and bullying: The mediating role of parental psychological aggression and physical punishment. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 51*, 132-143. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.10.025

Haridas, D. N., Shriyan, P., Tartour, A. I., Chivese, T., van Schayck, O. C., Nair, N. S., & Babu, G. R. (2025). Association of feeding and parenting styles with adiposity in young children: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *European Journal of Pediatrics*, *184*(8), 1-12.

Johal, S. K., & Kaur, K. (2015). Adolescent aggression and parental behavior: A correlational study. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science, 20*(7), 22-27.

Kjøbli, J., Melendez-Torres, G. J., Gardner, F., Backhaus, S., Linnerud, S., & Leijten, P. (2023). Research review: Effects of parenting programs for children's conduct problems on children's emotional problems–A network meta-analysis. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 64*, 348–356. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13697

Kumari, S., & Kang, H. K. (2017). Parental protection and emotional outcomes in children: A study on parental influence. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 26*(4), 1041-1049.

Li, D., Li, W., & Zhu, X. (2023). Parenting style and children emotion management skills among Chinese children aged 3–6: The chain mediation effect of self-control and peer interactions. *Frontiers in Psychology, 14*, 1231920. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1231920

Li, P. (n.d.). Four types of parenting styles and their effects on the child. *Parenting for Brain.* Retrieved from https://www.parentingforbrain.com/4-baumrind-parenting-styles/#other

Lim, W. M., Kumar, S., Pandey, N., Verma, D., & Kumar, D. (2023). Evolution and trends in consumer behaviour: Insights from *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour, 22*(1), 217–232. https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.2118

Margolin, G. (2000). Parenting and marital conflict: The role of parental style in children's emotional development. *Journal of Family Psychology, 14*(4), 506-523.

Masud, H., Ahmad, M. S., Cho, K. W., & Fakhr, Z. (2019). Parenting styles and aggression among young adolescents: A systematic review of literature. *Community Mental Health Journal, 55*(6), 1015–1030. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10597-019-00400-0

Miljof, S., Roman, V., & Edna, R. (2020). Understanding the parent-child relationshp in a south african context: a review of parenting and culture in family practice. *A Closer Look at Parenting Styles and Practices*

Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2025, July 30). *2024 Statistical Bulletin on the Development of Civil Affairs*. China Daily. Retrieved from https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202507/31/WS688af466a310c26fd717cc2e.html

Mpofu, P., & Tfwala, S. H. (2022). Dilemmas of children raised by single parents in the Kingdom of Eswatini. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Sociality Studies, 2*, 37-49. https://doi.org/10.38140/ijss-2022.vol2.04
.

Okunola, O., Gesinde, A., & Odukoya, A. (2020). Parenting styles and self-esteem of adolescents: A systematic review. In *Proceedings of INTCESS 2020 - 7th International Conference on Education and Social Sciences* (pp. 1341–1347).

Ortiz-Ospina, E., & Roser, M. (2020). Divorce rates and trends. *Our World in Data.* Retrieved from https://ourworldindata.org/divorce-rates

Pinquart, M., & Fischer, A. (2022). Associations of parenting styles with moral reasoning in children and adolescents: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Moral Education, 51*(4), 463–476. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2022.2082957

Rojas, S. (2023). Overprotection: Emotional intelligence and aggressive behaviors in children at the early education level of an educational institution in Trujillo. *Revista Climatológica, 23*, 1065–1073. https://doi.org/10.1234/revclimatologica.2023.1065

Sachdev, P. (2023). Authoritarian parenting: What is it? *WebMD*. Retrieved from https://www.webmd.com/parenting/authoritarian-parenting-what-is-it

Sarwar, A. (2016). Effective parenting and its impact on children: The role of authoritative parenting. *International Journal of Educational Research, 19*(2), 200-208. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2016.04.001

Setiana, S., & Darmayanti, D. (2020). The comparison of youth self-concepts assessed from parenting style. *JOMSIGN: Journal of Multicultural Studies in Guidance and Counseling, 4*(2), 42–50. https://doi.org/10.14414/jomsign.v4i2.1745

Smith-Etxeberria, K., Corres-Medrano, I., & Fernandez-Villanueva, I. (2022). Parental divorce process and post-divorce parental behaviors and strategies: examining emerging adult children's attachment-related anxiety and avoidance. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(16), 10383. **https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191610383**

Subagia, I. N. (2021). Parenting styles: Factors and implications for child character development. *Nilacakra.*

Times of Eswatini. (2024). *Times of Eswatini*. Mbabane: Times of Eswatini Publishing.

Tsoi, A. K., Wilson, S., & Thikkurissy, S. (2018). A study of the relationship of parenting styles, child temperament, and operatory behavior in healthy children. *The Journal of Clinical Pediatric Dentistry, 42*(4), 273–278.

Todorović, J. (2005). *Vaspitni stilovi roditelja i samopoštovanje adolescenata.* Niš: Prosveta.

United Nations, Statistics Division. (2023). *Demographic Yearbook 2023: Table 25 – Divorces and crude divorce rates by urban/rural residence.*

United Nations. https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/products/dyb/documents/dyb2023/Notes25.pdf

U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). *Title of Publication or Dataset*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government. Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/

Wang, S., & Gai, X. (2024). Bidirectional relationship between positive parenting behavior and children's self-regulation: A three-wave longitudinal study. *Behavioral Sciences, 14*(1)…. https://doi.org/10.3390/bs14010001

Watiningsih, A. P., Rismayanti, I. D. A., & Sriastiyani, N. N. (2018). The relationship between parenting style and temper tantrums at toddler age children in the Kalibukbuk Village. *Jurnal Kesehatan Midwinerslion, 3*(2), 175-180.

Xiang, R., & Lei, W. P. (2021). How do family parenting styles affect children's problem behaviors? *Education and Economy, 2021*(5), 49–57. https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1003-4870.2021.05.006

Yang, J., Kuo, J., Wang, L., & Yang, Y. (2014). Culture, parenting, and child behavioral problems: A comparative study of cross-cultural immigrant families and native-born families in Taiwan. *Transcultural Psychiatry*….. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461514532306

Yap, M. B. H., Pilkington, P. D., Ryan, S. M., & Jorm, A. F. (2014). Parental factors associated with depression and anxiety in young people: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, *156*, 8-23. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2013.11.007

Yun, B. X., Thing, T. S., & Hsoon, N. C. (2019). A quantitative study of the relationship between parenting style and adolescents' self-esteem. In *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research, 304: Proceedings of the 4th ASEAN Conference on Psychology, Counselling, and Humanities (ACPCH 2018).*

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The views, statements, opinions, and data expressed in all publications are solely those of the individual author (s) and contributor (s) and do not necessarily reflect those of GAERPSY or the editor (s). GAERPSY and the editor (s) assume no responsibility for any injury to persons or property arising from using any methods, instructions, products, or ideas in the published content.