THE IMPACT OF THE 21ST CENTURY CO-PARENTING OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES ON THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNERS A CASE OF MAUN DISTRICT

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

A B S T R A C T

ABSTRACT

The focus of the paper was to explore the impact of 21st-century co-parenting opportunities and challenges on the social development of early childhood learners. Thirty parents, twenty documents, and ten teachers were selected to be part of the study. The study applied attachment theory which contends that children are born with a psycho-biological system. A qualitative approach and a case study design guided the process of the study. Interviews, document analysis, and questionnaires were the tools used to collect data. Collected data was qualitatively presented, analysed, and interpreted to make informed decisions. The results showed that the modelling of conflict resolution and support system are attributed to consistent co-parenting. Furthermore, established was that children raised under co-parenting may exhibit emotional distress and lack of stability among others. From the findings, it can be concluded that it is essential for parents to recognise the importance of providing a stable, supportive, and nurturing environment for their children. Therefore, we recommend that by prioritizing effective communication, consistency, and cooperation, parents can help alleviate the negative impacts of co-parenting challenges and promote positive social development in their children.

1. Background to the study

The concept of co-parenting has gained prominence because of societal changes and shifts in family dynamics. Traditional notions of family structure, which primarily revolved around the idea of a married couple raising children together, have evolved to include a broader range of parenting arrangements. Co-parenting has emerged as an alternative approach to the care of children that emphasises collaboration, shared responsibilities and mutual support among parents who are not romantically involved. Co-parenting can have significant implications for social development due to its unique dynamics and the emphasis on cooperation and communication. According to Fabricius & Luecken (2007), children raised in healthy co-parenting environments tend to experience positive social outcomes. They further mention that they exhibit enhanced social well-being, greater resilience, improved self-esteem, and a more developed sense of empathy and interpersonal skills. Children's learning starts from birth in programmes that are called early childhood education. Early childhood learners are defined as children from birth to eight years old these children go through remarkable growth (height/weight) and brain development. This is a critical period during which children are highly influenced by their surrounding environment and people (UNESCO, 2015). According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), (2015) early childhood

education is the branch of academia that involves teaching children from birth to approximately eight years old. The focus is largely on preparing students for a lifetime of learning, which involves the development of their social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs.

The positive impact of co-parenting on social development can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the collaborative nature of co-parenting encourages effective communication and problem-solving skills, as parents must work together to make decisions regarding their children's upbringing. This fosters a sense of stability, consistency, and predictability in the child's life, which is crucial for their social and emotional development. Gadoua (2014) chronicles that marital partnership is a non-romantic marriage where the parents stay together and live as a family for the sake of their children. She further mentions that from the outside, a parenting marriage looks the same as a traditional marriage for when you're in a parenting marriage, you still go out to dinner and the movies together as a family. Though it is difficult for both spouses, marital partnerships deliver several benefits to children. Not only do they ensure kids have a consistent, stable upbringing, but they also ensure that both parents are present during important activities and events.

Exposure to diverse caregiving styles can contribute to the child's social adaptability and broaden their understanding of relationships. According to Shweta (2020), social development refers to the process by which a child learns to interact with others around them. Social development most often refers to how a child develops friendships and other relationships, as well as how a child handles conflict with peers. Social development is the emerging ability of young children (ages 0–5) to "form close and secure adult and peer relationships; experience, regulate, and express emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways; and explore the environment and learn — all in the context of family, community, and culture" (Yates et al., 2008, p. 2). The findings of Mize, Pettit & Lindsey, (1999) revealed that children in co-parenting arrangements had more positive emotional socialisation experiences and demonstrated better emotion regulation skills.

The above studies provide some insights into the social development outcomes of children in co-parenting arrangements. However, it is important to note that each family structure can vary widely, and individual circumstances may significantly influence children's social development outcomes. One such circumstance is the quality of co-parenting relationships. The quality of the co-parenting relationship between the parents can significantly impact the social development of children. When parents cooperate, communicate effectively and maintain a respectful relationship, it creates a more stable and supportive environment for the child's social development. Research demonstrates that

parents' ability to effectively cooperate as co-parents is an important determinant of children's well-being in divorced families, especially when the children are young (Adamsons & Pasley, 2005; Pruett, 2007) However, it is important to acknowledge that co-parenting arrangements can also present challenges and potential negative outcomes. Poor communication, conflict between co-parents, or inconsistent parenting practices can have adverse effects on children's social development. High levels of conflict and tension within the co-parenting relationship can create emotional stress and disrupt the child's sense of security and trust.

Another factor that can influence children's social development outcomes is parental conflict. High levels of conflict between co-parents can negatively affect children's social development. Witnessing conflict and experiencing parental disagreements can lead to increased stress and emotional instability, which may negatively impact the child's ability to form healthy social relationships. Children who are exposed to high levels of ongoing parental conflict are at higher risk of various behaviours and social-emotional problems, as well as more problematic parent-child relationships (McHale et al 2002). Research has shown that parental involvement and support can impact children's social development outcomes: The level of involvement and support from both co-parents is crucial for children's social development. When both parents actively participate in their child's life, provide emotional support, and engage in activities that promote social skills, it can have positive effects on the child's social development.

This paper explores the concept of co-parenting and its impact on social development. It delves into the various aspects of co-parenting, including communication, cooperation and the emotional well-being of children. Also, the paper explores some opportunities for 21st-century co-parenting. In addition, it examines the potential challenges faced by co-parents and the strategies they can employ to foster a healthy and supportive environment for their children's social growth.

2. Research Questions

- How do the 21st-century co-parenting opportunities affect the social development of early childhood learners?
- How do co-parenting arrangements impact the formation of secure attachments on children's social development in early childhood settings?
- What are the potential conflicts and tensions between co-parents affecting the social development of early childhood learners?
- What are the best practices for supporting the social development of early childhood learners in co-parenting arrangements?

3. Theoretical Framework

This research hinges on the significance of a secure and consistent attachment to the primary caregiver, especially the mother. The theory emphasizes the importance of early childhood experiences in shaping future relationships and behaviour of young children. The psychological theory of attachment was first described by John Bowlby, a psychoanalyst who researched the effects of separation between infants and their parents (Fraley, 2010). Bowlby hypothesised that the extreme behaviours infants engage in to avoid separation from a parent or when reconnecting with a physically separated parent—like crying, screaming, and clinging—were evolutionary mechanisms. Bowlby thought these behaviours had possibly been reinforced through natural selection and enhanced the child's chances of survival. These attachment behaviours are instinctive responses to the perceived threat of losing the survival advantages that accompany being cared for and attended to by the primary caregivers. Since the infants who engaged in these behaviours were more likely to survive, the instincts were naturally selected and reinforced over generations. These behaviours make up what Bowlby termed an "attachment behavioural system," the system that guides us in our patterns and habits of forming and maintaining relationships (Fraley, 2010). Research on Bowlby's theory of attachment showed that infants placed in an unfamiliar situation and separated from their parents will generally react in one of these ways upon reunion with the parents:

- Secure attachment: These infants showed distress upon separation but sought comfort and were easily comforted when the parents returned; Secure attachment: Children who can depend on their caregivers show distress when separated and joy when reunited. Although the child may be upset, they feel assured that the caregiver will return. When frightened, securely attached children are comfortable seeking reassurance from caregivers. This is the most common attachment style.

- Anxious-resistant attachment: A smaller portion of infants experienced greater levels of distress and, upon reuniting with the parents, seemed both to seek comfort and to attempt to "punish" the parents for leaving. Avoidant attachment: Infants in the third category showed no stress or minimal stress upon separation from their parents and either ignored the parents upon reuniting or actively avoided the parents (Fraley, 2010, Santrock, 2016). Children with an avoidant attachment tend to avoid parents or caregivers, showing no preference between a caregiver and a stranger. This attachment style might be a result of abusive or neglectful caregivers. Children who are punished for relying on a caregiver will learn to avoid seeking help in the future.

- In later years, researchers added a fourth attachment style to this list: the disorganized-disoriented attachment style, which refers to children who have no predictable pattern of attachment behaviours (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004). These children display a confusing mix of

behaviour, seeming disoriented, dazed, or confused. They may avoid or resist the parent. In such cases, parents may serve as both a source of comfort and fear, leading to disorganised behaviour (Bosman et al., 2020).

It makes natural sense that a child's attachment style is largely a function of the caregiving the child receives in his or her early years. Those who received support and love from their caregivers are likely to be secure, while those who experienced inconsistency or negligence from their caregivers are likely to feel more anxiety surrounding their relationship with their parents. However, attachment theory takes it one step further, applying what we know about attachment in children to relationships we engage in as adults. These relationships (particularly intimate and/or romantic relationships) are also directly related to our attachment styles as children and the care we receive from our primary caregivers (Firestone, 2013).

Throughout history, children who maintained proximity to an attachment figure were more likely to receive comfort and protection, and therefore more likely to survive to adulthood (Sevimli, 2010). Through the process of natural selection, a motivational system designed to regulate attachment emerged. In Bowlby's attachment theory, it is reported that secure attachment between mother and child lays the foundation for healthy psychological development (Sevimli, 2010). Secure attachment has a positive relation with social skills, self-regulation, being able to get organised, and being able to adapt to school. In contrast to this, it is revealed that children experiencing insecure attachment show aggressive and maladaptive behaviours (Moss et al., 1998). So, what determines successful attachment? Behaviourists suggest that it was food that led to forming this attachment behaviour, but Bowlby and others demonstrated that nurturance and responsiveness were the primary determinants of attachment. When children receive quality caregiving, children learn that they can depend on the people who are responsible for their care, which is the essential foundation for attachment.

Children who are securely attached as infants tend to develop stronger self-esteem and better self-reliance as they grow older. These children also tend to be more independent, perform better in school, have successful social relationships, and experience less depression and anxiety. Research suggests that failure to form secure attachments early in life can have negative behaviour in later childhood and throughout life.

4. Sample and its Description

The sample size was 30 parents who were randomly selected from five different early childhood learning centres, 10 early childhood development teachers from five reception classes, and 20 assessment documents from the five respective centres.

5. Research Design and Methodology

A qualitative research approach and a case study were adopted for the study. A case study is ideal when a holistic, in-depth investigation is required to understand a particular phenomenon or experience (Babbie, 2008; Okeke, 2010; Creswell, 2014). Cresswell (2008) defines qualitative research as an investigation procedure of understanding the different systematic habits of inquiry that explore a social situation or human problem. It is based on a naturalistic phenomenological philosophy that views reality as multi-layered, interactive and "a social experience", (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010:322-323). This entails the use of multi-method strategies of data collection such as structured and semi-structured open-ended interviews, participant observation and open-ended questionnaires to study the problem from the participants' perspective. This approach was followed because it sought to understand the impact of the 21st co-parenting opportunities and challenges on the social development of early childhood learners. Data was collected using face-to-face interviews, document analysis and questionnaires. The decision to embark on the case study was further influenced by the fact that the original data was collected from a population large enough to be described directly.

6. Data collection methods

6.1 Interviews

Boyce (2006) stipulates that interviews can be defined as a qualitative research technique which involves conducting interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular programme or situation. Newman (2000) says that an interview is a face-to-face discussion. Thus, an interview is a dialogue whereby questions are asked, and answers are given on a face-to-face interaction. Pruit and Rugely (2009) describe an interview as an interaction between the researcher and the interviewee. Interviews are important in research because they allow the researchers to an insight and context into the topic as the interviewer gets firsthand information from the interviewee. It also allows interviewees to express themselves in their mother tongue to emphasise certain points. This enables the researcher to be able to watch the actions and feelings of the respondents during the conversation. Therefore, the interview in this study was intended to question the ECD teachers on the impact of the 21st century co-parenting opportunities and challenges on the social development of early childhood learners.

6.2 Document analysis

Ribson (2002) mentions that document analysis is the systematic exploration of written documents or other artefacts such as films, videos and photographs. Document analysis gives information that would be difficult to get in any other way. It directs the researcher when conducting the research and is relatively low-cost, particularly when documents are easily accessible. Also, many documents are of

good quality, and some are detailed. However, analysing documents can be time-consuming and it depends on the role of the researcher. In this study continuous performance assessment reports on children's social development were randomly selected and analysed.

6.3 Questionnaire

A questionnaire is a structured data collection instrument that consists of a set of predetermined questions designed to gather information from respondents (Tusting, 2022). Parents involved in this study completed a questionnaire on the impact of 21st-century co-parenting opportunities and challenges on the social development of learners.

7. The Results

The results showed that collaborative decision-making, positive role modelling, expanded support network, enhanced parental involvement, positive role modelling, expanded support network, enhanced parental involvement, exposure to diverse environments, flexibility, and adaptability skills, coordinated social support, communication difficulties, inconsistent parenting styles, emotional conflict stress, loyalty conflicts, limited quality time, parental stress, and well-being. The results are specifically presented below.

How do the 21st-century co-parenting opportunities affect the social development of early childhood learners?

Collaborative Decision-making

For collaboration and decision-making, it needs parents who are willing to accept each other as equals. From the questionnaires administered among parents of different age groups most of the parents stated that they are comfortable with co-parenting because it allows them to work together and make informed decisions about their children. The teacher's interview also confirmed the benefits of collaboration and decision-making on the social development of early childhood learners.

Positive Role Modeling

Positive role modelling should be exhibited by both parents to allow the child to imitate and learn as they interact. The interviewed teachers and responses from parents collectively indicated that co-parenting offers children the opportunity to witness their parents cooperating, respecting each other's opinions, and finding common ground irrespective of the fact that they are not staying together hence, this impacts positively on the young learners.

Enhanced Parental Involvement

Enhanced parental involvement can be practical if parents participate fully in all school activities to support the child's learning. Interviewed teachers disclosed that co-parenting enhanced parental participation in school activities. They further expressed that their involvement positively impacted their children's self-esteem and emotional and social competence.

Exposure to Diverse Environments

Exposure to diverse environments can only be realised if both parents are open and flexible in allowing children to visit extended families. Some parents mentioned that co-parenting exposes their children to diverse environments when they spend time in different households, neighbourhoods, and communities. Reports also suggested that diverse environments are key to the social development of young learners.

How do co-parenting arrangements impact the formation of secure attachments on children's social development in early childhood settings?

Emotional Conflict and Stress

Emotional conflict and stress can be a result of unresolved issues between parents while they are still married or in a romantic relationship. A good number of documents also evidently showed that some learners experience a lot of emotional conflict. Furthermore, teachers interviewed revealed that some learners exhibited anxiety and a sense of insecurity. Others highlighted that children's stress can be picked during planned and free play activities. Through the questionnaires, a handful of parents admitted that repeatedly they argue in front of their children unintentionally.

Loyalty Conflicts

Loyalty requires two parties to be open and frank with each other to avoid conflicts. Parents exposed that when children are very young loyalty is not an issue, however, as they grow older, they begin to keep secrets. Interviewed teachers also highlighted their observation of some learners during house play.

What are the potential conflicts and tensions between co-parents affecting the social development of early childhood learners?

Communication Difficulties

Effective communication involves varied approaches for smooth transitions of different activities. Interviewed teachers revealed that some of their parents do not have effective communication. One teacher shared that in some cases they receive contradicting instructions about the child.

Parental Stress and Well-being

Parental stress and well-being could be a result of co-parenting challenges that are not resolved. It was stated during interviews that some learners are experiencing stress and anxiety as a result of their parents being preoccupied with conflicts and emotional stress. Documents also exposed that some learners experience stress and anxiety.

What are the best practices for supporting the social development of early childhood learners in co-parenting arrangements?

Flexibility and Adaptability Skills

Flexibility and adaptability are indispensable skills for social interactions as they enable individuals to

navigate different social settings. Teachers highlighted that both parents require these skills. Most of the parents admitted that they require these skills, however, others felt that it was always the father adapting not the mother.

Coordinated Social Support

For coordinated social support to be realised, there is a need for parents to work together. From the interviews, it was revealed that co-parenting enhanced coordinated social support. On the other hand, questionnaires also showed that if parents work together, it can facilitate the coordination of social support services for the child. One parent shared her personal experience that it is very possible especially if parents place the child at the centre of all activities.

Consistent Parenting Styles

Some parents highlighted that a consistent parenting style can lead to behavioural change in forming healthy relationships with parents and peers. On the same note, teachers revealed that some learners easily make friends at school. From the questionnaires, it seemed that consistent parenting style depends on financial stability, level of education as well as one's upbringing.

Quality Time

Quality time needs the undivided attention of both parents. However, responses from the questionnaires seemed to reveal that quality time is one of the strategies that can be used by both parents to form positive attachments. Teachers' interviews also confirmed their observations that in some cases children who have quality time from both parents exhibit social skills like making friends. Sharing, communication and confidence. This was also observed in the social development documents.

Social Needs

Teachers indicated that extracurricular activities could assist early childhood learners to develop social skills and form secure attachments with caregivers. Documents showed that some learners had done counselling sessions.

8. Discussion

Based on the interview findings from the parents it was noted that co-parenting in the 21st century presents several opportunities that can have a positive impact on a child's social development. Notable positive opportunities are as follows: By fostering collaboration, co-parenting encourages parents to work together and make joint decisions regarding the child's upbringing. When parents effectively communicate and collaborate, it promotes a sense of consistency, stability, and predictability in the child's life. This is in line with the findings of Amato & Gilbreth, (1999) that the child's social development needs a secure and nurturing environment. Teachers' responses exposed that co-parenting offers an opportunity for parents to model healthy relationship dynamics and conflict resolution skills. When children witness their parents cooperating, respecting each other's opinions, and finding common

ground, they learn valuable social skills, such as effective communication, negotiation, and compromise.

From the questionnaire's parents' responses, it came out that co-parenting can expand the child's support network by involving both parents and their respective extended families. This broader network of supportive adults can provide the child with additional emotional support, guidance, and nurturing. It also exposes the child to different perspectives, experiences, and cultural backgrounds, fostering a sense of diversity and empathy. Feeney, Moravcik, and Sherry, (2016) reveal that co-parenting encourages active involvement and engagement from both parents in the child's life. When both parents are actively involved, it increases the opportunities for the child to receive emotional support, guidance, and attention. This involvement can positively impact the child's self-esteem, emotional well-being, and social competence. Furthermore, they declare that co-parenting can create a nurturing and stable environment that promotes healthy social relationships, emotional well-being, and overall social competence in children. This is echoed by Bowlby's attachment theory which emphasises a secure attachment to social relationships with children at a tender age.

Teacher's interviews revealed that co-parenting may involve the child spending time in different households, neighbourhoods, or communities. This exposure to diverse environments can broaden the child's horizons, increase their cultural competence, and foster adaptability. The same sentiment was also observed in the children's assessment documents on social development. This became evident that it provides opportunities for the child to interact with different social groups, develop a sense of tolerance, and appreciate diversity.

From the interviews, it was mentioned that co-parenting needs both parents to adapt and be flexible to arrangements made to create a conducive environment which will enable the child to form secure attachments. This concurs with Kennedy et al. (2004), that co-parenting often requires flexibility and adaptability from both parents. This adaptability can translate into the child's ability to adjust to changes, handle transitions, and cope with new situations. These skills are valuable for social interactions, as they enable the child to navigate different social settings and form connections with peers more easily. Kennedy et al (2004) further disclose that co-parenting can facilitate the coordination of social support services for the child. The findings from the teachers indicated that if parents work together, they can identify and address the child's specific social needs, such as counselling, therapy, or extracurricular activities that can be done at school. This coordinated support can enhance the child's social development by providing access to resources that promote their emotional well-being and social skills.

The research found that co-parenting challenges lead to increased stress and emotional strain on both parents. When parents are preoccupied with conflicts and emotional distress, they may have less energy, patience, and emotional availability for the child. This can impact the child's social well-being and ability to develop secure attachments and healthy social skills (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Grych & Fincham, 2001; Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Papp & Dukewich, 2002; Herzog & Cooney, 2002; Jenkins & Smith, 1991). The impact of these co-parenting challenges on a child's social development can be significant. The documents showed that most of the children struggle with emotional regulation, have difficulty forming trusting relationships, exhibit aggression or withdrawal in social interactions, and experience challenges in peer relationships. They may also develop a negative perception of relationships and have lower self-esteem. This correlates with Bowlby's attachment theory that lack of consistent attachment leads to avoidant behaviours.

The study showed that communication can be a big challenge in co-parenting. Co-parents may struggle with effective communication, especially if there are unresolved conflicts or a breakdown in the relationship. Poor communication can lead to misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and an inability to make joint decisions regarding the child's upbringing. This lack of cooperation and coordination can create confusion and inconsistency for the child, impacting their sense of stability and security (Santrock, 2016).

Co-parents may have different parenting styles, rules, and expectations for the child. Inconsistent parenting can cause confusion and conflict for the child, as they may receive conflicting messages and have difficulty understanding boundaries and expectations. This inconsistency can lead to behavioural issues, anxiety, and difficulty forming healthy relationships with peers (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004). Parenting often involves ongoing interaction and potential conflicts between the parents. These conflicts can create a tense and emotionally charged environment, which can negatively affect the child's well-being and social development. Children may witness arguments, tension, and hostility between their parents, leading to increased stress, anxiety, and a sense of insecurity. (Bowlby, 1988, p. 125). It was also a study that discovered that Children of divorced or separated parents may feel torn between their parents, leading to loyalty conflicts. They may feel pressured to take sides or keep secrets, which can create emotional distress and a sense of divided loyalty. These conflicts can impact the child's ability to trust others, form healthy relationships, and develop a strong sense of identity.

Co-parenting arrangements often involve splitting time between two households, which can result in limited quality time with each parent. The child may experience feelings of loss, longing, and instability

due to the physical separation from one parent. Additionally, the child's social activities, friendships, and routines may be disrupted, affecting their social interactions and sense of belonging. (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Kalmijn, 2012). Co-parenting challenges can lead to increased stress and emotional strain on both parents. When parents are preoccupied with conflicts and emotional distress, they may have less energy, patience, and emotional availability for the child. This can impact the child's emotional well-being and ability to develop secure attachments and healthy social skills. Co-parents need to recognise these challenges and take proactive steps to minimise their impact on the child. Seeking support through co-parenting counselling, maintaining open and effective communication and prioritizing the child's well-being can help mitigate the negative effects of co-parenting challenges on a child's social development.

9. Conclusion

The opportunities and challenges presented by co-parenting in the 21st century have a significant impact on the social development of early childhood learners. The advancements in communication technology and changing societal norms have opened doors to greater collaboration and involvement between co-parents, which can positively influence children's social development. Effective communication between co-parents allows for the sharing of information, coordination of routines, and joint decision-making, all of which contribute to a consistent and stable environment for children. This consistency helps young learners feel secure and fosters their social skills and emotional well-being. Moreover, a positive co-parenting relationship, characterised by respect, cooperation, and support, is crucial. When co-parents work together and encourage the child's relationship with the other parent and extended family members, it promotes a sense of belonging and strengthens social ties. However, co-parenting in the 21st century also presents challenges. The complexities of coordinating schedules, maintaining consistent rules and discipline, and adapting to changing circumstances require flexibility and effective problem-solving. To mitigate these challenges, seeking professional help, such as family therapy or mediation, can provide valuable guidance and support in navigating co-parenting complexities. Overall, the impact of 21st-century co-parenting on the social development of early childhood learners depends on how co-parents embrace the opportunities and address the challenges.

10. Recommendations

The research study makes the following recommendations based on the findings.

- Open and effective communication between co-parents is essential through the use of various communication methods such as email, and text messaging, about the child's activities, progress, and any concerns.
- Establishment of a consistent routine schedule, including mealtimes, bedtimes, and rules, to create a smooth transition between homes.

- Parents should avoid speaking negatively about the other parent in front of the child, as this can be harmful to their well-being.

- Allow and facilitate regular contact, including visits, phone calls, and video chats.

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