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## Assessment of the Influence of Parenting on the Increase of Students' Suicidal Tendencies in Selected Public Universities in Kenya

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### **Abstract:**

*Suicide is one of the leading causes of death globally, with students being the most affected. Parents and relatives play a crucial role in eradicating suicidal thoughts in students. However, less has been done on how parenting contributes to suicidal tendencies in students, hence this study. A social survey that targeted second-year students in public universities was employed. Five universities were selected using the convenience sampling technique, while the purposive sampling technique was employed to select the respondents. Data were then analyzed using SPSS and Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics were calculated, and graphs, charts, and tables were generated. The study reported that many parents interacted well with students, with most variables recording above 70%. On the parental level of involvement in students' lives, fewer parents (<36%) were reported to be involved always. On parental availability, a higher percentage (56%) was recorded to be available in their children's lives only when they become aware of suicidal intentions. Even though parents interact with and are involved well in students' lives, their availability when the students experience suicidal thoughts is wanting, hence an increase in completed suicide. Therefore, a strong association between parents and their children is recommended to monitor and identify earlier any unusual change in the behaviour of the students. This information could be useful to policymakers on how to improve mental health in learning institutions.*

**Keywords:** Completed suicide, mental health, parental availability, students' lives, suicidal thoughts, suicidal intentions

### **1. Introduction**

Life is vital and too precious to be ended. However, it has been reported that, on average, one person commits suicide and dies every 40 seconds (Nguyen et al., 2021). Suicide has been ranked as one of the leading causes of death globally (Wesonga et al., 2021), with students being the most affected (Nguyen et al., 2021). It is victimizing approximately one million people worldwide annually (Raeisei et al., 2015). Besides, approximately 80% of suicides reported transpire in low-middle-income countries (Biswas et al., 2020; Wesonga et al., 2021). Attempted suicide is one indicator of mental health (Wesonga et al., 2021), which is attributed to factors such as gender, economic situation, age, divorce, family, lack of social support, marital status, unemployment, and lack of finances. Physical and mental illness are all relevant factors to suicidal attempts (Braaten & Darling, 1962; Raeisei et al., 2015; Nguyen et al., 2021). Parents and relatives play a crucial role in eradicating suicidal thoughts in their children (Veas et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2021). However, fewer studies exist on how parents influence students' suicidal tendencies in learning institutions, hence this study.

An estimation by WHO in 2016 stated that 800,000 deaths are due to suicide globally (Lew et al., 2020; Wesonga et al., 2021). WHO also estimated that by the year 2020, suicidal deaths were to be 1.53 million (Nguyen et al., 2021). Moreover, the ratio of attempted suicide to completed suicide has been estimated to be 20-40:1 (Kazi & Naidoo, 2016). Therefore, suicide can be defined as wishing to die, planning and ideation (Wesonga et al., 2021). It is when an individual violates the laws of nature by deciding to end their own life (Castillo-Zúñiga et al., 2022).

Approximately 30% of the victims who lose their lives to suicide have personality disorders. Personality disorder and its associated characteristics, hopelessness (Braaten & Darling, 1962), impulsivity, emotional instability and interpersonal turmoil are linked to suicide and suicidal ideation and non-suicidal self-injury behaviour. In psychiatric disorders, depression records the highest percentage (58%) of suicide risk (Raeisei et al., 2015). Globally, depression is a serious health problem with a higher prevalence rate and a tight correlation between tendencies towards depression and suicide (Raeisei et al., 2015). In Africa, suicide rates have been meagre. It is treated as a taboo and failed attempt, which is punishable by law. Therefore, some communities may fail to report it due to stigma and other consequences associated with it (Wesonga et al., 2021). Besides, dissemination of this message is curtailed since many people view it as taboo to discuss suicide and its associated death. Thus, many researchers fear diving into this area (Braaten & Darling, 1962).

There are two known theories that have been proposed to explain the existence of suicidal ideation and engagement in the behaviour. Interpersonal Theory of Suicide (ITS) explains that one's desire to commit suicide is determined by the co-existence of an increased level of feeling or lack of environmental belonging and a feeling of burdensomeness. Integrated Motivational-Volitional Model (IMV) on the other hand, states that suicidal behaviours are caused by a complex combination of motivational and volitional phase factors (Nguyen et al., 2021). Tendencies towards suicide have been looked into by clinicians, theoreticians and experimenters and distinctions have been made on the attempted, threatened and completed suicide (Kazi & Naidoo, 2016) and the idea behind the distinctions have been the significant differences in relation to suicide (Braaten & Darling, 1962).

Earlier studies report that low incidences of accomplished suicide can be linked to the policy of prior diagnosis and treatment for depression and emotional problems. Dialectical-behavioural and cognitive-behavioural therapy have been prescribed as treatment for depressive disorders, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia (Castillo-Zúñiga et al., 2022). Therefore, the swiftness in mobilizing society and community members, plus the efficiency and effectiveness of rescue organizations, bear weight on suicide incidences. Consequently, this calls for lay people to be acquainted with signs of suicide trends so that the end result of suicide can be prevented before it becomes a reality (Braaten & Darling, 1962). Religion has also been treated as a mediator towards psychological and physical health outcomes in psychotherapy to treat mental illness (Kazi & Naidoo, 2016).

Suicidal cases are mostly attributed to depression, which is high in university and college students (youths) compared with other populations (Biswas et al., 2020; Lew et al., 2020). Moreover, it has been demonstrated that suicidal tendencies are common among undergraduate students compared with graduate students (Raeisei et al., 2015). It has also been reported that the suicide rate has been higher in age brackets of 15-29 than in younger or older. However, the general trend for completed suicide (suicide leading to death) has been increasing with an increase in age (Lew et al., 2020; Wesonga et al., 2021; Castillo-Zúñiga et al., 2022). It has again been reported that attempted suicide has been on the rise in women than in men, but higher incidences of completed suicide by men than women (Kazi & Naidoo, 2016). This has been associated with male aggressiveness, participating in risky behaviours and success determined, thus completing the act. Women are, however, regarded as inclined less to the act due to the feeling of responsibility they have for children (Kazi & Naidoo, 2016; Wesonga et al., 2021; Castillo-Zúñiga et al., 2022).

Research done at the College of Cornell showed that in males, there is a high score on depression, psychasthenia and schizophrenia scales, while females have high scores on the depression and schizophrenia scales (Braaten & Darling, 1962; Biswas et al., 2020) hence increase in completed suicide in males (Wesonga et al., 2021). It has also been demonstrated that the most recurrent common indications of suicide include elevation of depression and psychasthenia, exhibiting a combination of feelings of unworthiness, hopelessness, self-blaming, frustrations and anger (Braaten & Darling, 1962; Lew et al., 2020; Wesonga et al., 2021). Depression disorder is, therefore, characterized by low energy and interest, poor concentration, guilt, poor appetite, and changes in cognitive ability, activity, sleep, and speech, among others (Raeisei et al., 2015). The motives behind suicide have again been associated with but not limited to the following: drug abuse (Wesonga et al., 2021), failure in social and academic life, inability to tolerate the discrepancy between physical appearance and what the person wants to be, shame, self-hatred, punishment to those who subject them into the situation and morbid guilt (Braaten & Darling, 1962; Lew et al., 2020).

Studies have been done on suicide, its associated causes and the end results (Nguyen et al., 2021; Wesonga et al., 2021). However, less has been done on the tendencies to suicide incidences in university students. Paradoxically, previous studies demonstrate increased suicide incidences in students with good academic pursuits compared with poor and average-performing students. This can be attributed to pressure from parents to retain their performance or increase (Braaten & Darling, 1962).

Parenthood, therefore, remains to be the most crucial element in students' thoughts on suicide ideation. The interaction and involvement in the children's lives create a conducive environment where they can freely share their thoughts and feelings without fear (Mejía-Rodríguez et al., 2021). However, there have been wanting parent-student relationships, thus increasing incidences of suicide among the youths (Lew et al., 2020). Therefore, the objective of the study was to assess how parenting influences students' suicidal tendencies. This information can be useful to policymakers, learning institutions, and parents as it elevates the element of self-awareness and life preservation among youths.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Study Area

The study was conducted in five public universities' main campuses in Nairobi and Kiambu Counties in Kenya. The University of Nairobi (UoN), Technical University of Kenya (TUK), and Multimedia University (MMU) were located in Nairobi county. Kenyatta University (KU) and Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT) were located in Kiambu County.

### 2.2. Target Population

The study targeted year two students and students' counsellors working in students' welfare departments from the five universities (Table 1).

Category	JKUAT	UoN	KU	TUK	MMU	Total
Students	29500	84000	70000	9000	22000	214500
Counselors and welfare officers	7	12	10	4	6	39
Total	29507	84012	70010	9004	22006	214539

Table 1: Target population

### 2.3. Sample Size

The sample size was obtained from the target population by picking 10% of the total population. This was because the target population was very large and 10% would be an adequate representation. The sample was then distributed using a proportionate sampling technique in the five universities, i.e., calculated based on the percentage representation of the student population from each university in the total target population. The proportionate distribution was, UoN = 39%, JKUAT = 14%, MMU = 10%, TUK = 4.2%, KU = 33%. The sample size for the counselors was 100% per university. This is presented in table 2.

Category	JKUAT	UoN	KU	TUK	MMU	Total Sample Size
Students	3003	8366	7079	900	2145	21493
Counselors and welfare officers	7	12	10	4	6	39
Total	3010	8378	7089	904	2151	21532

Table 2: Sample Size

### 2.4. Sampling Techniques

A convenience sampling technique was utilized to choose the five universities since their locations were convenient. The purposive sampling technique was also used to select the students, the class representatives and the welfare officers/counselors. All the students in the second year were considered regardless of their specific programs of study. A stratified sampling technique was also employed in grouping the staff and counsellors according to their various responsibilities in the welfare/counselling departments.

### 2.5. Data Collection Instruments

Primary data was collected using key informant interview schedules and questionnaires, while secondary data were collected using documentary analysis of past related literature and the university records held by the relevant departments, showing how the students interacted with the departments. The key informant interviews and questionnaires (open and close-ended) were structured based on the research objectives. The questionnaires were used to collect data from the students. Nevertheless, key informant interview schedules were used to obtain data from the welfare officers/counsellors from the universities.

### 2.6. Reliability and Validity Testing

Reliability testing was applied to assess the consistency and stability of the measurement instruments, data collection methods, or statistical procedures. This study applied the internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha), which was relevant to the research context and objectives. A validity test was used to assess the quality and accuracy of the data collected. A panel of experts was gathered in the field to review the questions and provide their feedback on how well they represent the intended constructs or concepts.

### 2.7. Data Analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS software and Microsoft excel for quantitative data. Descriptive statistics such as: means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages were then calculated. Graphs, charts and tables were also generated.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. Parents' Behaviour and Interactions with the Students

The results showed that 82.50% of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that their parents were understanding and supportive of their feelings and emotions. Furthermore, 71.10% agreed or strongly agreed that their parents set reasonable expectations for them. Besides, 83.40% agreed or strongly agreed that their parents encouraged independence and decision-making. Moreover, 90.60% agreed or strongly agreed that their parents were responsive to their needs and concerns, while 99.10% agreed or strongly agreed that their parents provided a safe and nurturing environment at home. In addition, 79.80% agreed or strongly agreed that their parents communicated openly and effectively with them, while 70.90% agreed or strongly agreed that their parents provided guidance and helped them solve problems. Additionally, 96.80% agreed or strongly agreed that their parents respected their boundaries and privacy (Figure 1).

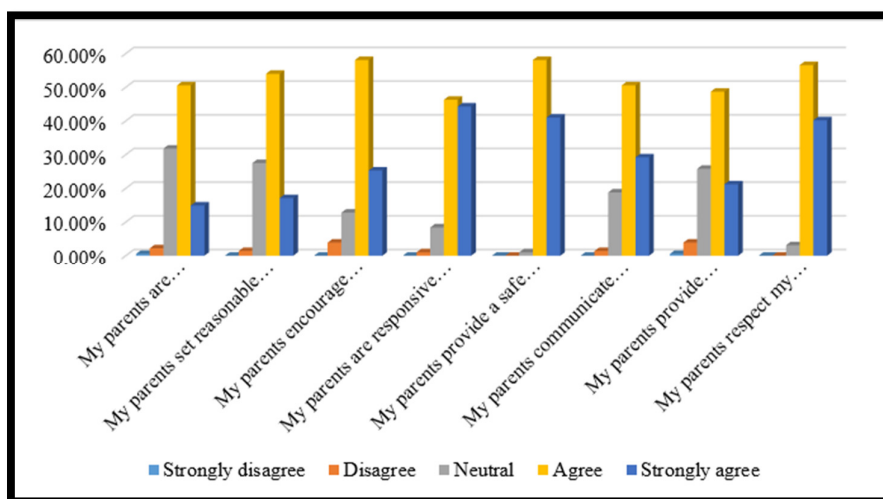


Figure 1: Parents' Behaviour and Interactions with the Students

A higher percentage of parents' understanding and support of students' feelings and emotions was reported. These findings collaborated with other studies in which concerned parents acknowledge their children's feelings and emotions and could offer help accordingly (Veas et al., 2019; Biswas et al., 2020). Moreover, parental understanding has been associated with a reduction in mental health problems among students, thus less probability of suicide ideation (Biswas et al., 2020). Positive parental association with students can make them seek help from parents, relatives, or friends, resulting in a low probability of suicidal ideation as loneliness, isolation, and thwarted belongingness is eradicated (Nguyen et al., 2021). Many parents were again reported to set reasonable expectations for their children in school. Similar results were given by Veas et al., who demonstrated that parents are consistent with the expectations and rules of their children (Veas et al., 2019). Parents' interactions, consequently, influence students' surroundings, which can be soft or tight (Nguyen et al., 2021).

The study also revealed that many parents could encourage students' independence and decision-making. This result was, however, contrary to other studies which report that parents encourage children's reliance on others for assistance (Veas et al., 2019). However, it was congruent with other studies that good parental behaviour and interaction could make students independent in making sound decisions whenever they are invaded with suicidal thoughts and think of better options other than taking life (Nguyen et al., 2021). This can only be done by parents if they ensure that they provide everything that is needed in the school for the students to perform, such as learning materials (laptop, PC, tablet) to improve their academic performance and avoid punishments (Mamun et al., 2023). Nevertheless, parents should not force their children into what they do not like, as this can trigger restlessness and agitation due to psychological burdens (Mamun et al., 2023).

A higher percentage of the respondents stated that their parents were responsive to their needs and concerns. Similar results were reported by previous studies that good interaction with students reduces evil thoughts of suicide in students, thus involving themselves in alternatives to solve their stresses, such as seeking help, engrossing in meaningful activities, and solving their problems (Nguyen et al., 2021).

A higher percentage was obtained for parents who offered a safe, nurturing environment at home. This result corroborates previous studies that show that parents' characters at home play an important role in modelling their future lives. Abusive, phone-addicted parents may in the future bequeath the same to their children, hence unsafe environments (Moral-García et al., 2020). The study was again similar to other studies, which reported that parents should be interested in discussing school issues with their children more often (Otani, 2020). These results were, however, contrary to other previous studies that parents are currently involved in their job activities, hence less responsive and concerned with their children's needs (Roskam & Mikolajczak, 2020). Parents' interactions with their children are, therefore, integral in the lives of the students. However, some parents have become less involved in upbringing and building relationships with their children, thus less interaction (Mejía-Rodríguez et al., 2021).

### 3.2. Parental Level of Involvement in the Students' Lives

Regarding the parental level of involvement in students' lives, 45.10% reported that their parents often attended school events, while 29.40% reported that their parents attended always. About regular conversations, 46.50% responded often conversations on academic progress with their parents while only 32.00% conversed always. Moreover, 53.00% of the respondents reported that their parents often participated in their children's extracurricular activities, while 28.70% did it always. Also, 33.30% of the parents often assisted their children with homework, while 35.70% did it always.

Moreover, 50.80% often engaged in discussing career aspirations, while 26.70% discussed always with their children. Moreover, 46.00% offered emotional support to their children more often during stressful moments, while 15.40% always did it. Social interaction encouragements reported that only 47.50% of the parents often participated in such, with 35.90% participating always. Regarding the encouragement of healthy lifestyle habits, 56.10% did it quite often, while only 17.80% of the parents did it always (Figure 2).

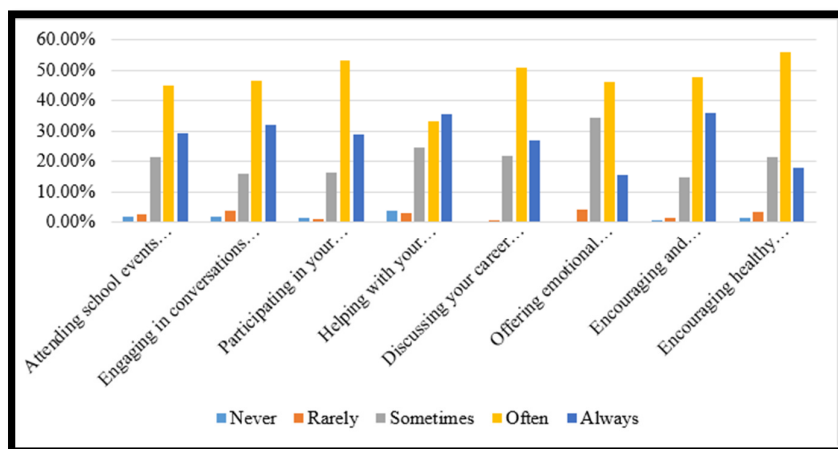


Figure 2: Parental Involvement in the Lives of the Students

Many respondents reported that their parents attended school events often. The results from this study, therefore, corroborated with other studies that parents attend school events (Veas et al., 2019), conferences and volunteering, monitor students' progress, review their work and engage in learning activities (Otani, 2020). A previous study by Otani demonstrated three mechanisms via which parents' involvement influences the education of the students; modelling school-related characters and attitudes, reinforcing specific aspects of school learning and instruction (Veas et al., 2019; Otani, 2020). However, parental involvement in students' academic lives could be due to exam failure, hence academic distress, quarrelling and disagreement with the parents on the subjects to study, hence suicide in some students (Mamun et al., 2023).

Many parents were reported to participate more often in their children's extracurricular activities. The findings were congruent with former studies that found that parents are concerned with students' academic achievement (Otani, 2020). Therefore, their involvement in the students' academic lives could increase students' academic performance. Similarly, concerned parents have been communicating more often with their children on school matters and are interested in their school issues (Veas et al., 2019), thus agreeing with this study. There are six categories of parental involvement: volunteering, communication, parenting, home learning, decision-making and community collaboration (Nguyen et al., 2021).

Many respondents also reported that conversations between them and their parents could often revolve around academic progress. Similar results were reported by other studies, indicating that parent-child discussion is often associated with academic achievement (Otani, 2020). Parents have also been reported to develop constant communication with their children on school activities, homework and reading habits, hence building on career aspirations (Veas et al., 2019). Parents' conversations with their children may encourage them to learn more and do more activities related to school, thus banking on confidence (Mejía-Rodríguez et al., 2021). The findings agreed with earlier studies that parental communication involvement can positively be associated with the attitudes and aspirations of the students; the more positive they become, the more they express themselves (Otani, 2020). Studies demonstrate that social connectedness is vital and that, if not taken care of can be the key factor in driving students' suicidal thoughts and behaviours (Nguyen et al., 2021).

It was again reported that many parents often encourage their children to have healthy lifestyles. This result was similar to other studies in that parents influence the behaviours of their children by influencing their physical activities. This could be done by parents when they use their children's free time so that physical activity practice occupies a higher presence in their future lives (Moral-García et al., 2020). However, students' lifestyles could be associated with parents' lifestyles, such as the attitude at home (Veas et al., 2019). Again, the results corroborated with previous studies that students' learning could be associated with verbal interaction and support from parents as well as social gains and guidance. However, parents' involvement in students' education can be linked to parents' educational background and level (Otani, 2020).

### 3.3. Availability of Parents to Students

The study reported that 13% of the students had their parents available for them often while dealing with suicidal thoughts, while "Not often" recorded 31%. However, 56% of the respondents recorded that their parents were always available after they became aware of their child's suicidal intentions (Figure 3).

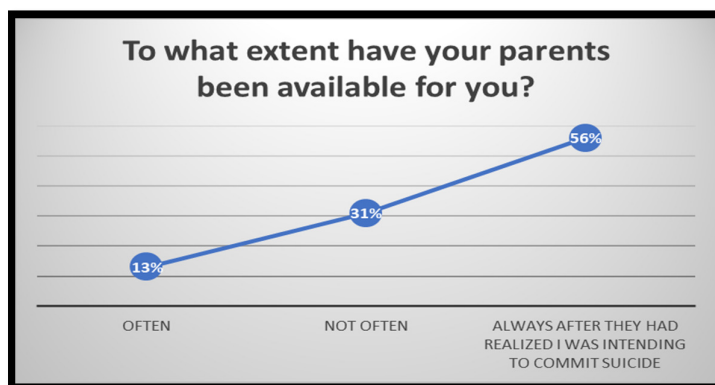


Figure 3: Parents' Availability to the Students

A higher percentage of parents was reported to only be available to their children after noticing their intentions to commit suicide. This result was against previous studies that demonstrated parents' availability into their children's lives, talk and create a conducive environment for them to open up and share their thoughts and feelings. With parental presence in students' lives, they tend to seek help from them before thinking of attempting, threatening, or committing suicide (Nguyen et al., 2021).

Parents' availability in children's lives can also help monitor their activities during their free time to put them on track and often be aware of what they are doing during their free time. Also, this can help parents understand their children's problems (Roskam & Mikolajczak, 2020). Moreover, the availability of parents to their children also allows parents to control them. However, pressure and much control by parents can also increase suicidal ideation and anxiety as some students may feel that their parents are too much on them. Nevertheless, some parents cannot handle their children's problems with calmness and effectiveness as they no longer find joy in staying with their children, hence dispose of them in schools (Mejía-Rodríguez et al., 2021). Therefore, there exists a strong association between suicidal ideation and parental relationships (Biswas et al., 2020).

#### 4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study reported that parents interact well with their children. Moreover, they are involved more often in students' academic matters, though not always due to other responsibilities, such as work. However, these parents have been less available to their children and only show up when they sense suicidal intentions in them. A strong association between parents and their children is, therefore, recommended to monitor and identify any unusual change in the behaviour of the students and this should inform national policies. Hence, there is an improvement in mental health among students. Peer connectedness in school and community activities should also be established to eliminate anxiety and distress in the students. There should be public awareness of suicide impacts, its causes and how to avoid them.

##### 4.1. Study Limitation

This study only utilized data from second-year students who were sampled; the results may, therefore, not be applicable to students from other classes. Moreover, the study solely focused on students' suicidal tendencies and the results may not be applicable to other populations, such as the old and parents. Furthermore, there could be a risk of bias since sampling was not done evenly. Obtaining the second-year student population from the universities for the study was not possible since the universities were stringent in their data and did not want to be associated with such a study due to fear. Suicide is illegal and many did not want to open up to talk about it as it was regarded as satanic.

##### 4.2. Ethical Consideration

Before data collection, ethical review and approval were sought from the Institutional Review Board or Ethics Committee. The consent of the respondents was also obtained and confidentiality and privacy of the participant's data were assured.

##### 4.3. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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