



**PARENTAL INDULGENCE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL
WELL-BEING AMONG PRE-PRIMARY LEARNERS IN KENYA:
A MULTIDIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS OF EVIDENCE
FROM THARAKA-NITHI COUNTY**

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Abstract:

Psychological well-being in early childhood provides an important foundation for emotional regulation, self-esteem, anxiety management and social competence. Although parenting is widely recognized as a critical developmental context, empirical evidence from sub-Saharan Africa remains limited regarding how distinct forms of parental indulgence relate to children's psychological functioning. This study examined the relationship between parental indulgence practices and psychological well-being among learners in public pre-primary schools in Tharaka-Nithi County, Kenya. The study was guided by Social Cognitive Theory and Ecological Systems Theory and employed a

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convergent mixed-methods design within a cross-sectional correlational framework. Quantitative evidence comprised 327 learner observation checklists and eight teacher questionnaires, supplemented by qualitative interviews with parents. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson product-moment correlation and chi-square analysis, while qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis. Behavioural indulgence was the most frequently observed form of parental indulgence (66.1%), followed by relational indulgence (28.7%) and material indulgence (5.2%). Pearson correlation analysis revealed a differentiated pattern of associations. Material indulgence was weakly positively associated with emotional regulation ($r = .18, p < .05$), self-esteem ($r = .24, p < .05$) and social skills ($r = .15, p < .05$), but was not significantly associated with anxiety management ($r = -.12, p > .05$). Relational indulgence demonstrated moderate-to-strong positive associations with emotional regulation ($r = .51, p < .01$), self-esteem ($r = .57, p < .01$), anxiety management ($r = .43, p < .01$) and social skills ($r = .60, p < .01$). In contrast, behavioural indulgence was negatively associated with emotional regulation ($r = -.33, p < .01$), self-esteem ($r = -.29, p < .01$), anxiety management ($r = -.41, p < .01$) and social skills ($r = -.35, p < .01$). The supplementary chi-square analysis based on the eight teacher respondents was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(12) = 13.00, p = .369$. The findings indicate that parental indulgence is not a homogeneous parenting practice: relational warmth and emotional availability were positively associated with psychological functioning, whereas behavioural permissiveness was consistently associated with poorer outcomes. The study concludes that early childhood parenting interventions should emphasize a combination of emotional warmth, responsive caregiving and developmentally appropriate behavioural structure rather than treating indulgence as uniformly beneficial or harmful.

Keywords: parental indulgence; psychological well-being; pre-primary learners; relational indulgence; behavioural indulgence; emotional regulation; Kenya; early childhood development

1. Introduction

Early childhood is a critical developmental period during which children acquire foundational emotional, social and behavioural competencies. Children's experiences during these years influence their capacity to regulate emotions, establish relationships, develop self-worth and adapt to increasingly structured social and educational environments. The World Health Organization's Nurturing Care Framework consequently identifies responsive caregiving, security and safety, opportunities for learning and health and nutrition as interconnected foundations for optimal early childhood development (World Health Organization [WHO], UNICEF & World Bank Group, 2018).

Psychological well-being during the pre-primary years extends beyond the absence of psychological difficulties. It includes children's ability to regulate emotions,

maintain positive self-perceptions, manage anxiety and establish productive relationships with peers and adults. These competencies are particularly consequential as children enter formal educational environments where they must negotiate classroom routines, peer interactions, behavioural expectations and emerging learning demands. The family is one of the most proximal contexts within which these competencies develop. Through everyday interactions, parents and caregivers provide emotional security, model behaviour, establish expectations, respond to children's distress and create opportunities for children to practice autonomy and self-regulation. Consequently, parenting practices may function as developmental resources or risk contexts depending on their form and intensity.

One relatively underexamined parenting practice is parental indulgence. Indulgence is often conceptualized as excessive accommodation of children's wishes, needs or behaviours. However, treating indulgence as a single construct may obscure important differences in what caregivers actually provide. The present study distinguishes three forms: material indulgence, relational indulgence and behavioural indulgence. Material indulgence refers to excessive provision of possessions, gifts or rewards; relational indulgence concerns extensive emotional availability, affection, protection and accommodation; and behavioural indulgence refers to excessive freedom, weak behavioural expectations and limited consequences for inappropriate conduct.

This distinction is theoretically important because warmth and permissiveness are not necessarily synonymous. A parent may be highly emotionally responsive while simultaneously maintaining clear behavioural expectations. Conversely, a parent may be highly permissive while providing limited structure. Contemporary parenting research increasingly supports examining specific parenting dimensions rather than relying exclusively on broad parenting-style categories. A systematic review and meta-analysis by Goagoses *et al.* (2023), for example, found that positive parenting dimensions such as warmth and support were associated with lower emotion dysregulation, whereas negative parenting dimensions were associated with greater dysregulation. Similarly, a large meta-analysis by Huang *et al.* (2026) found that positive parenting was positively associated with children's subjective well-being, whereas negative parenting was negatively associated with well-being. Importantly, the meta-analysis also found moderation by age, gender and cultural background, underscoring the importance of context when interpreting parenting effects.

Parenting may also be related to anxiety through complex and potentially bidirectional pathways. van der Bruggen *et al.* (2008), in a meta-analysis of 23 studies involving 1,305 parent-child dyads, reported a substantial association between child anxiety and parental control, while cautioning that correlational evidence cannot determine whether parenting contributes to anxiety, children's anxiety elicits particular parenting responses, or both processes operate simultaneously. These assertions suggest that the developmental consequences of parenting cannot be reduced to a simple continuum from "strict" to "indulgent." Instead, children's psychological functioning may

depend upon the balance among warmth, responsiveness, autonomy, behavioural structure and guidance.

1.2 Context and Research Gap

Despite increasing international interest in parenting and child well-being, empirical evidence concerning specific dimensions of parental indulgence remains limited in Kenyan early childhood settings. The thesis underlying this article identifies a specific empirical gap concerning parenting practices and psychological well-being among learners in public pre-primary schools in Tharaka-Nithi County. The study is particularly relevant in a context where children may experience changing family structures, parental absence, alternative caregiving arrangements and socioeconomic pressures. Such conditions may shape how caregivers express affection, provide material resources and establish behavioural expectations. The present study therefore addressed two related gaps. It examined parental indulgence in a Kenyan pre-primary context and disaggregated indulgence into material, relational and behavioural dimensions, thereby testing whether apparently contradictory effects may be concealed when indulgence is treated as a single construct.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The study investigated the influence of parental indulgence practices on the psychological well-being of learners in public pre-primary schools in Tharaka-Nithi County, Kenya. The corresponding null hypothesis stated that there was no statistically significant influence of parental indulgence practices on learners' psychological well-being.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by Social Cognitive Theory and Ecological Systems Theory. Social Cognitive Theory provides a basis for understanding how children acquire behavioural and emotional competencies through observation, modelling and reciprocal interaction with significant caregivers. Parents therefore provide important models for emotional expression, coping, interpersonal behaviour and self-regulation.

Ecological Systems Theory complements this perspective by locating children's development within interacting social environments. The family represents a proximal microsystem, but children's psychological functioning is simultaneously shaped by school, peers, community conditions and broader socioeconomic and cultural systems. The thesis conceptual framework explicitly positions parental indulgence alongside other parenting practices and identifies children's age and gender and community child-welfare programmes as intervening contextual factors.

Together, these perspectives suggest that parental indulgence should be interpreted as one component of a broader developmental ecology rather than as an isolated causal determinant.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a convergent mixed-methods approach embedded within a cross-sectional correlational design. Quantitative data were used to establish patterns of association between parental indulgence and psychological well-being, while qualitative parent interviews provided contextual explanations of caregiving practices. The correlational design was appropriate because the study examined naturally occurring parenting practices without manipulating parental behaviour. However, because the data were collected at one point in time, the findings are interpreted as associations rather than causal effects.

3.2 Participants and Data Sources

The target population comprised 48,357 participants, including 23,939 learners, 23,939 parents and 479 teachers. A sample was selected through stratified and proportionate random sampling across the county. Teachers constituted the principal quantitative respondents because of their sustained observation of learners' emotional, behavioural and social functioning within school environments. Parents provided qualitative information concerning caregiving and indulgent practices within the home. The quantitative dataset comprised 327 learner observation checklists and eight teacher questionnaires, with all administered instruments returned for analysis. A return rate of 100% for both categories of instruments was attained. The distinction between these two sources is crucial to interpreting the statistical results. The learner observation checklist data provided the principal sample for the Pearson correlation analysis, whereas the chi-square hypothesis test reported in the thesis appears to have been calculated from the eight teacher questionnaires. Parents also participated in qualitative interviews, providing contextual accounts of indulgent parenting practices.

3.3 Measures

The study operationalized parental indulgence as a multidimensional construct comprising material, relational and behavioural indulgence. This operationalization was guided by the conceptual framework, which conceptualized parental indulgence as a pattern of parenting characterized by the provision of excessive resources, affection, protection, autonomy or accommodation beyond what may be developmentally appropriate. The three dimensions were measured using indicators that captured the extent to which parents provided material benefits, emotional and relational support, and behavioural latitude to their children.

Material indulgence referred to the extent to which parents provided children with gifts, possessions, financial or material benefits and other tangible rewards, including benefits that may exceed the child's immediate developmental or educational needs. The dimension therefore captured the material expression of parental accommodation and the tendency to meet children's wants through the provision of tangible resources.

Relational indulgence referred to the extent to which parents demonstrated heightened emotional availability, affection, protection, quality time and close interpersonal interaction with their children. Although emotional responsiveness and parental warmth are generally considered positive dimensions of parenting, the present study focused on their potentially indulgent expression, particularly where excessive protection, accommodation or parental involvement may limit children's opportunities to develop age-appropriate autonomy and coping capacities.

Behavioural indulgence referred to the degree to which parents permitted excessive freedom, maintained weak or inconsistently enforced rules, communicated unclear or inconsistent expectations and imposed limited accountability for children's behaviour. This dimension captured the extent to which parental practices reduced behavioural boundaries and consequences, thereby potentially limiting children's development of self-regulation and responsibility.

The dependent variable, psychological well-being, was operationalized through four dimensions: emotional regulation, self-esteem, anxiety management and social skills. Emotional regulation referred to learners' ability to recognize, manage and appropriately express their emotions in response to everyday experiences and challenges. Self-esteem captured learners' perceptions of their own worth, competence, and personal value. Anxiety management reflected learners' ability to cope with worry, fear, tension, and other anxiety-related experiences without substantial disruption to their everyday functioning. Social skills referred to learners' capacity to establish and maintain positive interpersonal relationships, communicate appropriately, cooperate with others, and participate effectively in social interactions.

The operationalization of both parental indulgence and psychological well-being was therefore consistent with the conceptualization which explicitly identified material, relational and behavioural indulgence as dimensions of parental indulgence and emotional regulation, self-esteem, anxiety management and social skills as dimensions of psychological well-being. This multidimensional operationalization enabled the study to examine not only the overall association between parental indulgence and learners' psychological well-being but also the contribution of its constituent dimensions to specific aspects of learners' psychosocial functioning.

3.4 Reliability

The study reported an overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of $\alpha = .711$, exceeding the conventional .70 criterion and indicating acceptable internal consistency for the overall instrument. However, because parental indulgence and psychological well-being are multidimensional, future analyses should report reliability separately for each subscale.

3.5 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the prevalence and perceived implications of parental indulgence. Pearson product-moment correlation was used to examine

relationships between the three indulgence dimensions and four dimensions of psychological well-being.

4. Results

This section presents the findings on parental indulgence and learners' psychological well-being in public pre-primary schools in Tharaka Nithi County. The results are organized according to the study objectives, beginning with the prevalence and dimensions of parental indulgence, followed by its relationship with the psychological well-being of learners.

4.1 Prevalence of Parental Indulgence

The study determined the prevalence of parental indulgence practices among learners in public pre-primary schools in Tharaka Nithi County. Establishing the prevalence of the different forms of parental indulgence was significant because it provided a contextual understanding of how indulgent parenting was predominantly manifested among the learners. Table 1 presents the distribution of learners according to the predominant form of parental indulgence observed.

Table 1: Distribution of Observed Parental Indulgence Practices

Form of parental indulgence	Frequency	Percentage
Material indulgence	17	5.2
Relational indulgence	94	28.7
Behavioural indulgence	216	66.1
Total	327	100.0

Behavioural indulgence was clearly the most prevalent form, accounting for 66.1% of the observed cases, followed by relational indulgence (28.7%) and material indulgence (5.2%). The predominance of behavioural indulgence suggests that parental indulgence in the study context was expressed primarily through excessive tolerance, weak monitoring and limited enforcement of behavioural expectations, rather than through material provision. The relatively low prevalence of material indulgence may partly reflect socioeconomic circumstances within the study setting, where many households may have limited capacity to provide excessive material goods. Relational indulgence, meanwhile, reflected a pattern of excessive accommodation or prioritization of children's immediate happiness over the establishment of appropriate expectations and boundaries.

3.2 Teachers' Perceptions of Indulgence and Psychological Well-Being

Teachers' perceptions of the psychological implications of parental indulgence were examined to provide contextual insights into how different forms of indulgence may influence learners' psychological well-being. Specifically, teachers assessed the perceived

effects of material, relational and behavioural indulgence on resilience, anxiety and frustration management, respectively, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Teachers' Perceptions of the Psychological Implications of Parental Indulgence

Indicator	N	M	SD
Material indulgence reduces resilience	8	3.63	0.52
Relational indulgence increases anxiety	8	3.88	0.64
Behavioural indulgence weakens frustration management	8	3.50	0.76

The findings indicate that the highest mean was recorded for relational indulgence increasing anxiety ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 0.64$), followed by material indulgence reducing resilience ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.52$), while behavioural indulgence weakening frustration management had the lowest, though still relatively high, mean ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 0.76$). The relatively high rating for relational indulgence suggests that excessive protection, emotional over-involvement or limited opportunities for age-appropriate autonomy may be perceived as increasing children's vulnerability to anxiety. This interpretation is consistent with recent evidence by Borelli *et al.* (2015). linking parental overprotection with childhood anxiety and suggesting that excessive parental control can interfere with children's development of autonomy and coping capacities. The finding is particularly relevant in early childhood, when children are developing independent coping and self-regulatory capacities.

The perception that material indulgence reduces resilience ($M = 3.63$) further suggests that excessive provision may limit opportunities for children to experience manageable challenges, delayed gratification and problem-solving. Grolnick *et al.* (2019). emphasizes that self-regulation develops through children's repeated engagement with situations requiring the management of emotions, impulses and behaviour rather than through the removal of all challenges. Thus, while material provision is important for children's basic and educational needs, excessive material gratification may have diminishing developmental value when it substitutes for opportunities to develop coping and self-regulatory skills. The finding that behavioural indulgence weakens frustration management ($M = 3.50$) implies that excessive permissiveness and weak behavioural boundaries may restrict children's opportunities to learn how to tolerate disappointment, regulate impulses and cope with frustration. This is consistent with evidence emphasizing the importance of parent-child co-regulation and appropriately structured parenting in the development of children's regulatory capacities (Lobo & Lunkenheimer, 2020). The findings imply that teachers viewed parental indulgence less as a uniformly beneficial form of parental support and more as a potential developmental risk when it becomes excessive. The practical implication is that parents and early childhood practitioners should seek a balance between warmth and responsiveness on the one hand and age-appropriate boundaries, autonomy and opportunities for children to cope with manageable challenges on the other. Importantly, because these are teachers' perceptions rather than direct measures of children's psychological outcomes, the findings should be

interpreted as contextual evidence rather than evidence of a causal effect of parental indulgence.

4. Pearson Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was performed to determine the direction and strength of the linear associations between the three dimensions of parental indulgence (material, relational and behavioural indulgence) and the four dimensions of learners' psychological well-being: emotional regulation, self-esteem, anxiety management and social skills. The analysis provided a basis for determining whether variations in parental indulgence were systematically associated with variations in learners' psychological well-being, as presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Associations between Parental Indulgence Dimensions and Psychological Well-Being

Parental Indulgence Dimension	Emotional regulation	Self-esteem	Anxiety management	Social skills
Material Indulgence	.18	.24	-.12	.15
Relational Indulgence	.51	.57	.43	.60
Behavioural Indulgence	-.33	-.29	-.41	-.35

Note: Anxiety was reverse-scored, so positive coefficients indicate better anxiety management.

The findings in Table 3 reveal a pronounced multidimensional pattern, as discussed, to establish how each dimension is associated with the respective aspects of learners' psychological well-being.

4.1 Material Indulgence

Material indulgence demonstrated a comparatively weak and differentiated pattern of association with the psychological well-being of learners. Specifically, material indulgence was positively and significantly associated with emotional regulation ($r = .18$, $p < .05$), self-esteem ($r = .24$, $p < .05$) and social skills ($r = .15$, $p < .05$). In contrast, its association with anxiety management was weak and statistically non-significant ($r = -.12$, $p > .05$). Although the statistically significant relationships indicate that higher levels of material indulgence tended to coexist with more favourable outcomes in selected domains of psychological well-being, the relatively small correlation coefficients suggest that these associations were limited in magnitude.

The positive association between material indulgence and emotional regulation ($r = .18$, $p < .05$) suggests a modest relationship between the provision of material resources and learners' capacity to manage and express emotions appropriately. However, the small magnitude of the coefficient indicates that material provision alone is unlikely to constitute a major explanatory factor for emotional regulation. Material resources may contribute indirectly to children's sense of comfort, security or satisfaction, particularly where such resources address legitimate developmental needs. Nevertheless, emotional regulation is a complex developmental competency that is also shaped by children's

interactions with caregivers, opportunities for emotional communication, modelling of appropriate emotional responses and the consistency of behavioural expectations within the home and school environments. Consequently, the present finding should not be interpreted as evidence that material rewards independently enhance children's emotional regulation.

A somewhat stronger, although still modest, positive association was observed between material indulgence and self-esteem ($r = .24, p < .05$). This finding suggests that children who experienced greater levels of material provision also tended to report or demonstrate relatively more favourable self-evaluative functioning. One possible interpretation is that material provision may sometimes communicate parental care, recognition and investment in the child. Gifts, clothing, learning materials and other forms of provision may therefore have symbolic as well as practical significance within the parent-child relationship. Where children perceive such provision as an expression of parental concern and acceptance, it may contribute to positive self-perceptions. Nevertheless, the relatively small correlation indicates that material provision represents only one of many factors potentially associated with self-esteem.

The relationship between material indulgence and social skills was positive but comparatively weak ($r = .15, p < .05$). This finding suggests that material provision was associated with social functioning to a limited extent. The relationship may partly reflect the fact that access to age-appropriate possessions, play materials and other resources can facilitate children's participation in peer activities and social interaction. However, the weak magnitude of the association indicates that material resources alone are unlikely to explain substantial variation in children's interpersonal competence. Social skills are more directly developed through opportunities for interaction, communication, cooperation, emotional reciprocity and observation of appropriate interpersonal behaviour. The substantially stronger association observed between relational indulgence and social skills in this study ($r = .60, p < .01$) provides further support for the interpretation that the relational context in which resources are provided may be more consequential than the material provision itself.

Material indulgence differed notably from relational indulgence in its association with psychological well-being. Whereas material indulgence showed weak relationships with three of the four psychological domains, relational indulgence demonstrated moderate-to-strong positive associations with emotional regulation ($r = .51$), self-esteem ($r = .57$), anxiety management ($r = .43$) and social skills ($r = .60$), all statistically significant at $p < .01$. This contrast is theoretically important because it suggests that the psychological significance of parental support may depend less on the quantity of resources provided than on the nature and quality of the parent-child relationship through which support is experienced. Emotional availability, affection, communication and quality time may provide children with direct interpersonal experiences that are more closely connected to psychological adjustment than material provision in isolation. The association between material indulgence and anxiety management was particularly noteworthy because it was weak, negative and statistically non-significant ($r = -.12, p >$

.05). This indicates that the study did not provide sufficient evidence of a systematic relationship between material indulgence and learners' capacity to manage anxiety. The direction of the coefficient should therefore not be interpreted as evidence that material indulgence adversely affects anxiety management. Rather, the non-significant result indicates that, within this sample, variations in material indulgence were not reliably associated with variations in anxiety management. This finding is important because it cautions against assuming that the provision of material goods necessarily provides children with emotional protection or enhances their capacity to cope with anxiety.

The overall pattern therefore points to a distinction between material provision as a supportive resource and relational engagement as a developmental process. Material resources may contribute to children's comfort, participation and perceived parental investment, but their psychological effects appear relatively limited when considered in isolation. By contrast, relational forms of parental engagement involve repeated interpersonal processes through which children experience affection, responsiveness, communication, validation and emotional security. These processes may provide more direct opportunities for the development of emotional and social competencies. From a developmental perspective, the findings suggest that material indulgence should not necessarily be regarded as inherently detrimental to children's psychological well-being. Rather, its implications may depend on the extent to which material provision complements or substitutes for relational engagement and developmentally appropriate guidance. Material resources that respond to children's genuine developmental needs may function differently from excessive material rewards that are used primarily to compensate for limited parental interaction or to satisfy every child demand.

The findings also have implications for parenting interventions in early childhood. Parenting programmes should avoid framing material provision as a substitute for emotional availability and meaningful interaction. Parents may appropriately provide children with material resources while simultaneously prioritizing communication, affection, shared activities and opportunities for children to develop autonomy and social competence. In this regard, the findings support a broader conceptualization of parental support in which material resources constitute one component of the child's developmental environment, but relational responsiveness remains particularly important for psychological well-being.

4.2 Relational Indulgence

Relational indulgence exhibited the strongest and most consistent positive associations with all four dimensions of learners' psychological well-being. Specifically, relational indulgence was positively and significantly correlated with emotional regulation ($r = .51$, $p < .01$), self-esteem ($r = .57$, $p < .01$), anxiety management ($r = .43$, $p < .01$) and social skills ($r = .60$, $p < .01$). These findings indicate that higher levels of relational indulgence were associated with more favourable psychological functioning among the learners across the domains examined.

The relatively strong association between relational indulgence and social skills ($r = .60$) was the highest observed relationship, followed by the association with self-esteem ($r = .57$). The correlation with emotional regulation was also substantial ($r = .51$), while the relationship with anxiety management, although comparatively weaker, remained statistically significant ($r = .43$). This pattern suggests that relational dimensions of parental indulgence particularly emotional warmth, parental availability, quality time, affection and close interpersonal interaction may constitute important relational resources within the child's developmental environment. Such interactions may provide children with opportunities to experience emotional security, interpersonal affirmation and responsive communication, which are potentially conducive to the development of positive self-perceptions, emotional competence and adaptive social functioning.

The findings further suggest that the psychological implications of parental indulgence may depend substantially on the particular form in which indulgence is expressed. In contrast to material or behavioural forms of indulgence, relational indulgence appears to be more closely aligned with experiences of emotional connectedness and interpersonal support. The relatively strong positive association with social skills is particularly noteworthy, as sustained and responsive parent-child interaction may provide children with opportunities to observe, practise and internalize socially appropriate patterns of communication and interaction. Similarly, the positive association with self-esteem suggests that experiences of affection, acceptance and parental attention may contribute to children's perceptions of their own worth and competence. Nevertheless, the results do not establish that relational indulgence directly causes improvements in psychological well-being. Rather, they indicate that relationally oriented parental practices were positively associated with more favourable psychological outcomes among learners in the study context. This distinction is important because relational indulgence, as operationalized in the present study, incorporates characteristics such as warmth, emotional availability and quality parent-child interaction that overlap conceptually with broader constructs of responsive and supportive parenting.

4.3 Behavioural Indulgence

Behavioural indulgence exhibited a consistently negative pattern of association with all four dimensions of learners' psychological well-being. It was negatively and significantly associated with emotional regulation ($r = -.33, p < .01$), self-esteem ($r = -.29, p < .01$), anxiety management ($r = -.41, p < .01$) and social skills ($r = -.35, p < .01$). The strongest negative association was observed between behavioural indulgence and anxiety management ($r = -.41, p < .01$), indicating that higher levels of behavioural indulgence were associated with poorer capacity to manage anxiety. The findings therefore show that, unlike material and relational indulgence, behavioural indulgence was consistently associated with less favourable outcomes across all four dimensions of psychological well-being.

The negative association with emotional regulation ($r = -.33$) suggests that excessive freedom, inconsistent expectations, weak rules and limited accountability may

be associated with reduced opportunities for children to develop and practise behavioural and emotional self-regulation. Further, the negative association with self-esteem ($r = -.29$) indicates that permissive or insufficiently structured parenting may not necessarily enhance children's sense of competence and self-worth. Rather, appropriate behavioural expectations and consistent feedback may provide children with opportunities to experience responsibility, mastery and predictable limits, which are important contexts for developing a positive sense of self.

The comparatively stronger negative association with anxiety management ($r = -.41$) is particularly noteworthy. Although the correlation does not establish causality, the finding suggests that children experiencing greater behavioural indulgence may have fewer opportunities to develop adaptive coping strategies for managing distress and uncertainty. Consistent boundaries can provide children with predictability and opportunities to practise coping with disappointment, delay gratification and regulate impulses. When such experiences are limited, children may have fewer opportunities to develop the regulatory competencies required to manage challenging emotional situations. Behavioural indulgence was also negatively associated with social skills ($r = -.35$). This relationship may reflect the role of consistent behavioural expectations in helping children learn socially appropriate conduct, cooperation, turn-taking, responsibility and negotiation. Where behavioural limits are weak or inconsistently enforced, children may have fewer structured opportunities to internalize interpersonal expectations and regulate their behaviour in social contexts.

The findings suggest that behavioural indulgence represents the dimension of parental indulgence most consistently associated with poorer psychological well-being in the present study. The pattern across all four outcomes highlights the potential importance of balanced parenting that combines warmth and responsiveness with developmentally appropriate boundaries, consistent expectations and opportunities for children to exercise autonomy within a predictable structure. However, given the correlational nature of the analysis, these findings should be interpreted as associations rather than evidence that behavioural indulgence directly causes poorer psychological well-being.

5. Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings provide contextual explanations for the different patterns observed in the quantitative analysis. Analysis of parents' accounts indicated that parental indulgence was understood and practised through several interconnected dimensions, including affection, protection, quality time, communication, material provision and the granting of age-appropriate independence. These accounts suggested that parents did not necessarily conceptualize indulgence as excessive permissiveness; rather, many viewed their practices as legitimate expressions of parental love, responsibility and protection.

5.1 Indulgence as an Expression of Love and Protection

Parents frequently described indulgent practices as expressions of affection and parental responsibility. Their accounts suggested that providing children with material resources, protecting them from difficulties and accommodating their needs were motivated partly by a desire to ensure their comfort and well-being. One parent explained that *"I give my child what I can because I do not want her to lack"* (Parent 3). Another participant similarly noted that *"as a parent, you want to protect your child from suffering"* (Parent 6).

These accounts indicate that behaviours that may be classified analytically as indulgent may be perceived by parents as appropriate demonstrations of care. The findings therefore highlight an important distinction between the study's operational definition of indulgence and the participants' understanding of responsible parenting. From the parents' perspective, accommodation and provision were not necessarily intended to undermine children's independence or self-regulation; rather, they were often motivated by a desire to shield children from hardship, disappointment and emotional distress.

5.2 Relational Indulgence and Emotional Availability

Parents also emphasized relational practices, particularly spending time with children, communicating with them, showing affection and being emotionally available. For example, one participant stated, *"I always make time to talk to my child and listen to her"* (Parent 2). Another explained that *"children need to know that their parents are there for them"* (Parent 5).

These accounts provide a possible explanation for the relatively strong positive associations between relational indulgence and the four dimensions of psychological well-being observed in the quantitative findings. Emotional availability and regular parent-child interaction may provide children with opportunities to communicate their feelings, receive reassurance, develop confidence and learn socially appropriate ways of responding to others. Thus, unlike material provision or behavioural permissiveness, relational forms of parental involvement may constitute a supportive interpersonal context within which children's emotional and social competencies can develop.

5.3 Protection, Independence and Appropriate Boundaries

Although parents valued protecting and supporting their children, the qualitative accounts also reflected an awareness of the need to promote independence. Some participants indicated that children should be given opportunities to undertake age-appropriate tasks while remaining within reasonable parental boundaries. One parent observed that *"I allow my child to do some things on her own, but I still guide her"* (Parent 4). Another emphasized that *"children need freedom, but there must be limits"* (Parent 7).

This finding is particularly relevant to the negative quantitative associations observed for behavioural indulgence. The parents' accounts suggest that supportive parenting was not necessarily equated with unrestricted freedom. Rather, participants appeared to recognize the importance of balancing autonomy with guidance,

supervision, and consistent expectations. Such a balance may provide children with opportunities to exercise agency while simultaneously learning behavioural regulation and socially appropriate boundaries.

5.4 Synthesis of the Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings indicate that parental indulgence was a multidimensional practice whose meaning depended substantially on the form it assumed. Parents commonly perceived affection, protection, material provision, communication and accommodation of children's needs as expressions of responsible caregiving rather than as excessive indulgence. At the same time, participants acknowledged the importance of allowing children age-appropriate independence while maintaining reasonable boundaries.

These qualitative accounts help contextualize the quantitative results. In particular, the emphasis on emotional availability, communication, affection and quality time provides a plausible contextual explanation for the stronger positive associations between relational indulgence and psychological well-being. Conversely, participants' recognition that children require guidance and limits provides context for understanding the consistently negative associations between behavioural indulgence and emotional regulation, self-esteem, anxiety management, and social skills. The qualitative findings therefore suggest that the psychological implications of parental indulgence may depend less on parental responsiveness per se than on how responsiveness is expressed and whether it is balanced with opportunities for autonomy, responsibility and self-regulation.

7. Discussion

7.1 The Central Finding: Indulgence is Multidimensional

The most important finding is that parental indulgence does not operate as a homogeneous construct. The three dimensions showed markedly different patterns. Relational indulgence was positively associated with all four psychological well-being dimensions, whereas behavioural indulgence was negatively associated with all four. Material indulgence occupied an intermediate position, showing small positive associations with three outcomes and no significant relationship with anxiety management. The result is an important methodological argument for disaggregating parenting practices rather than relying exclusively on broad parenting-style classifications.

7.2 Relational Indulgence and Psychological Well-being

The positive association between relational indulgence and psychological well-being is consistent with contemporary evidence emphasizing responsive caregiving and positive parenting. The WHO Nurturing Care Framework identifies responsive caregiving and secure relationships as fundamental conditions for healthy early development. Similarly,

Goagoses *et al.* (2023) found that positive parenting dimensions, particularly warmth and supportiveness, were associated with lower emotion dysregulation. Their meta-analysis also emphasized that parenting dimensions do not all have equivalent relationships with child outcomes.

The findings extend that evidence into a Kenyan pre-primary context. Relational indulgence was strongly associated with social skills ($r = .60$) and self-esteem ($r = .57$), suggesting that emotional availability and meaningful parent-child interaction may constitute important developmental resources. The finding should not, however, be interpreted to mean that excessive emotional accommodation is universally beneficial. Rather, the results suggest that the relational components embedded within the study's definition of indulgence may overlap with positive parenting and responsive caregiving. This distinction is conceptually important. It may be more appropriate to describe the positive dimension as relational responsiveness than to assume that all forms of indulgence are beneficial.

7.3 Behavioural Indulgence and Emotional Regulation

Behavioural indulgence showed a negative association with emotional regulation ($r = -.33$). This finding is consistent with research demonstrating that parenting practices involving low responsiveness, problematic behavioural regulation or inadequate developmental structure may be associated with children's emotion dysregulation. Goagoses *et al.* (2023) synthesized evidence from 30 studies and found systematic differences between positive and negative parenting dimensions in relation to emotion dysregulation. Positive parenting was associated with lower dysregulation, whereas negative parenting was associated with greater dysregulation.

The present study adds a specific interpretation: excessive behavioural freedom may limit opportunities for young children to practice frustration tolerance, behavioural control and emotional regulation. This interpretation is theoretically compatible with Social Cognitive Theory. Children learn self-regulatory behaviour partly through observing and responding to caregiver expectations. Consistent boundaries may provide opportunities for children to internalize behavioural standards, whereas inconsistent or absent boundaries may provide fewer opportunities for such learning.

7.4 Behavioural Indulgence and Anxiety Management

The strongest negative association involving behavioural indulgence was with anxiety management ($r = -.41$). The finding should be interpreted carefully because parenting and child anxiety may be reciprocally related. van der Bruggen *et al.* (2008) found a substantial association between child anxiety and parental control but emphasized that correlational designs cannot establish directionality. The study concerns behavioural permissiveness rather than parental control, so it should not be claimed to replicate the parental-control literature directly. Instead, the findings suggest that both insufficient and excessive behavioural regulation may be relevant to children's psychological adaptation through different mechanisms. Excessive control may restrict children's

autonomy, whereas excessive permissiveness may provide insufficient structure. Developmentally appropriate parenting may therefore involve an optimal balance between autonomy support and behavioural guidance.

7.5 Relational Warmth and Behavioural Structure

The most theoretically useful interpretation of the findings is therefore not "indulgence is good" or "indulgence is bad." Rather, the findings support a warmth-with-structure model. Children appear to benefit from: emotional availability; affection; meaningful parent-child interaction; opportunities for communication; responsive caregiving and appropriate social support. At the same time, children require: clear expectations; consistent boundaries; developmentally appropriate consequences; opportunities to experience manageable frustration and guidance in regulating behaviour. This interpretation aligns with the broader literature showing that positive parenting is associated with better well-being and emotion regulation, while negative parenting is associated with poorer outcomes.

7.6 Material Indulgence

Material indulgence showed considerably weaker relationships than relational indulgence. Its associations with emotional regulation ($r = .18$), self-esteem ($r = .24$) and social skills ($r = .15$) were small. This suggests that material provision alone is unlikely to be a major determinant of children's psychological well-being. Material resources may provide comfort and security, but they do not substitute for responsive relationships and developmental guidance. The finding is consistent with the Nurturing Care Framework, which conceptualizes child development as dependent upon an integrated environment of security, responsive caregiving, health, nutrition and learning opportunities rather than material provision alone.

8. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that parental indulgence is not a homogeneous parenting practice. Behavioural indulgence was the most prevalent form observed among learners, accounting for 66.1% of cases, while relational indulgence accounted for 28.7% and material indulgence for 5.2%. More importantly, the three forms showed substantially different relationships with psychological well-being. Relational indulgence was positively associated with emotional regulation, self-esteem, anxiety management and social skills, with the strongest relationships observed for social skills. Behavioural indulgence demonstrated consistently negative relationships with all four psychological outcomes, particularly anxiety management and emotional regulation. Material indulgence showed only weak positive relationships with selected outcomes.

The findings therefore challenge the assumption that parental indulgence is inherently harmful or beneficial. Instead, they suggest that the developmental consequences of indulgence depend on what the caregiver actually provides. Emotional

availability and relational connection may function as developmental resources, whereas behavioural permissiveness without adequate structure may undermine children's opportunities to develop self-regulation and coping competencies. The central practical implication is consequently not "less parental indulgence," but better differentiated parenting: warmth without overprotection, responsiveness without excessive accommodation, and behavioural freedom accompanied by clear and developmentally appropriate boundaries. This interpretation is consistent with contemporary evidence on positive parenting, emotion regulation and child well-being and with the WHO Nurturing Care Framework's emphasis on responsive caregiving and secure developmental environments.

9. Implications for Practice and Policy

9.1 Promote Warmth without Permissiveness

Parent education programmes should avoid framing emotional closeness as problematic. Instead, programmes should teach parents to combine warmth and responsiveness with clear behavioural expectations.

9.2 Strengthen Emotion Coaching

Parents should be supported to help children recognize emotions, communicate distress, tolerate frustration and develop age-appropriate coping strategies.

9.3 Encourage Positive Behavioural Structure

Parents should receive practical guidance on establishing consistent routines, rules and consequences without resorting to harsh or punitive discipline.

9.4 Strengthen Parent-school Collaboration

ECDE teachers should work collaboratively with parents to identify persistent difficulties in emotional regulation, anxiety management and social interaction. Such collaboration can facilitate consistent expectations between home and school. For Kenyan ECDE programmes, parenting interventions should consequently move beyond simple messages encouraging parents to be either "strict" or "permissive" and instead promote responsive, structured and developmentally appropriate caregiving.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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