

The Influence Of Parish-Based Spiritual Counselling On Parents' Nurturing And Caregiving Practices: Evidence From St. Antioch Parish, Isiolo County, Kenya

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Abstract

Parenting plays a critical role in children's holistic development, yet many families face social, economic, and relational challenges that affect nurturing and caregiving. Within Catholic communities, parish-based spiritual counselling has become an important pastoral approach for supporting parents in their family responsibilities. Despite its growing use, empirical evidence on its contribution to parenting practices in Kenyan Catholic parishes remains limited. This study examined the influence of parish-based spiritual counselling on parents' nurturing and caregiving practices at St. Antioch Parish in Isiolo County, Kenya. The study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected from 330 parents using structured questionnaires, while qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with 19 key informants comprising clergy and catechists. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and linear regression, whereas qualitative data were analysed thematically before the findings were integrated during interpretation. The findings show that parents who participated in parish-based spiritual counselling reported better understanding of their children, greater patience and forgiveness, more empathetic approaches to discipline, improved family communication, and stronger household harmony. Regression analysis further established that parish-based spiritual counselling significantly predicted positive parenting outcomes ($\beta = 0.615$, $p < .001$). Interview data complemented these findings by indicating that counselling provides opportunities for reflection, dialogue, emotional support, and constructive conflict resolution, enabling parents to apply Christian values more consistently in family life. The study concludes that parish-based spiritual counselling contributes positively to nurturing and caregiving practices by strengthening the relational, emotional, and spiritual capacities of parents. It recommends strengthening parish family ministries through structured counselling programmes and equipping clergy and lay pastoral leaders with appropriate counselling competencies to enhance support for families.

Keywords: *parish-based spiritual counselling; positive parenting; nurturing and caregiving; family ministry; Catholic parish; Isiolo County, Kenya.*

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I. Introduction

Families across the world are raising children within increasingly complex social environments shaped by economic uncertainty, changing family structures, rapid technological change, and shifting social expectations. These realities have altered the demands placed on parents and increased the need for supportive systems that strengthen families and promote healthy child development. Parenting is increasingly recognised as a developmental process influenced not only by individual family characteristics but also by wider social, cultural, and institutional environments that shape caregiving practices and family wellbeing.¹

Positive parenting is commonly characterised by emotional warmth, responsiveness, consistent discipline, and moral guidance that foster children's holistic development. Research has consistently shown that nurturing parenting contributes to children's emotional regulation, social competence, psychological wellbeing, and healthy adjustment across the life course. Conversely, inconsistent or harsh parenting practices are associated with poorer developmental outcomes.² Consequently, parenting is now widely understood as a dynamic process

that requires continuous support from both families and the wider community.³

Parents, however, do not raise children in isolation. Economic hardship, psychosocial stress, marital conflict, and changing cultural expectations frequently reduce their capacity to provide stable and responsive care. In many settings, faith-based institutions have become important partners in supporting families by complementing formal social services and providing emotional, moral, and spiritual resources that strengthen family functioning.⁴

Within Christian pastoral ministry, parish-based spiritual counselling represents one such form of support. Through pastoral accompaniment, spiritual direction, sacramental life, catechesis, and family ministry programmes, parish communities provide opportunities for parents to reflect on family relationships, strengthen communication, and cultivate constructive approaches to child-rearing. Unlike counselling models that focus primarily on psychological (2016).

Functioning, parish-based spiritual counselling integrates spiritual formation with practical guidance for everyday family life. Studies have shown that active religious participation is associated with greater parental empathy, patience, forgiveness, emotional responsiveness, and stronger family cohesion.⁵ Religious commitment has also been found to moderate negative parenting behaviours while promoting prosocial relationships within families.⁶

Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa reflects similar patterns. Faith communities frequently serve as accessible sources of resilience for families living under conditions of poverty, social change, and limited access to professional psychosocial services. Through spiritual formation, moral guidance, and communal support, churches strengthen family relationships and contribute to children's social and moral development.⁷ Christian teaching on parenting likewise emphasises the formative role of spiritual guidance in nurturing responsible and morally grounded family life.⁸

The Kenyan context mirrors these broader developments. Churches remain among the most accessible institutions providing pastoral counselling, marriage preparation, parenting education, mentorship, and family life programmes. Studies conducted within Kenyan church settings indicate that parental involvement in church-based programmes strengthens children's spiritual formation, enhances family relationships, and improves parenting competence.⁹ Community-based parenting initiatives have similarly demonstrated that locally available support systems contribute to improved caregiving practices and child wellbeing.¹⁰

Despite these developments, empirical evidence examining parish-based spiritual counselling as a distinct pastoral intervention remains limited, particularly within Catholic parish settings. This gap is more evident in northern Kenya, where environmental uncertainty, economic vulnerability, and changing pastoralist livelihoods continue to place considerable pressure on family life. In Isiolo County, faith communities often provide an important source of spiritual and psychosocial support for families facing these challenges, yet little empirical research has examined how parish-based counselling influences parents' nurturing and caregiving practices.¹¹

St. Antioch Parish in Isiolo County offers an appropriate setting for investigating this relationship because it has established family ministry programmes that include spiritual counselling, catechesis, and pastoral accompaniment for parents. Although these initiatives constitute an important dimension of parish life, limited empirical evidence exists regarding their influence on everyday parenting practices. This study therefore examines the influence of parish-based spiritual counselling on parents' nurturing and caregiving practices at St. Antioch Parish, Isiolo County, Kenya. In doing so, it contributes empirical evidence to the growing literature on faith-based family support and provides insights that may strengthen pastoral ministry and family life programmes within Catholic communities.¹²

II. Methodology Research Design

This study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to examine the influence of parish-based spiritual counselling on parents' nurturing and caregiving practices at St. Antioch Parish in Isiolo County, Kenya. The design was considered appropriate because it enables the concurrent collection and separate analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, which are later merged during interpretation to generate a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.¹³

Mixed-methods approaches are particularly useful in social research where numerical data alone cannot fully explain lived experiences and contextual realities.¹⁴

Study Area

The study was conducted at St. Antioch Parish in Isiolo County, a Catholic parish serving a diverse population and implementing structured family ministry programmes, including spiritual counselling, catechesis, marriage preparation, and pastoral accompaniment. The parish provided a suitable context for examining how pastoral interventions influence parenting practices within a real-life faith community setting.

Target Population

The target population comprised approximately 5,000 registered parish members, with emphasis on parents of children below eighteen years. Parish priests and catechists were included as key informants due to their active involvement in pastoral counselling and family ministry programmes within the parish.

Sample Size and Sampling Procedures

A total sample size of 370 respondents was determined using Yamane's sampling formula, which is widely used in social research for estimating sample sizes in finite populations. This total sample comprised 350 parents for quantitative data collection and 20 key informants for qualitative interviews. Stratified random sampling was used to select parent respondents to ensure proportional representation across parish zones. In addition, purposive sampling was applied to select the 20 key informants based on their direct involvement in pastoral counselling and family ministry activities

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaires captured data on participation in parish-based spiritual counselling and indicators of nurturing and caregiving practices. The interviews provided deeper insights into pastoral experiences of family transformation and counselling outcomes. The combination of both methods enhanced triangulation and improved the credibility of the findings.¹⁵

Validity and Reliability

Content validity was ensured through expert review of the instruments, while a pilot study conducted at Holy Family Parish in Isiolo County helped refine clarity, structure, and contextual appropriateness of the tools. Reliability testing of the questionnaire produced Cronbach's alpha values between 0.86 and 0.90, indicating strong internal consistency of the measurement scales.¹⁶

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 25 through descriptive statistics and linear regression analysis to examine the relationship between parish-based spiritual counselling and parenting practices. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's framework, which provides a structured approach for identifying and interpreting patterns within qualitative data.¹⁷ The findings from both strands were integrated during interpretation in line with the convergent parallel mixed-methods design.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Tangaza University Institutional Scientific and Ethics Review Committee, the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI), and the Diocese of Isiolo.¹⁸ Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all respondents, and confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the study in accordance with established ethical research standards.¹⁹

III. Results

This section presents the empirical findings of the study on the influence of parish-based spiritual counselling on parents' nurturing and caregiving practices at St. Antioch Parish in Isiolo County, Kenya. The results are presented in three parts: response rate and reliability analysis, demographic characteristics of respondents, and findings on parish counselling and parenting practices. Quantitative and qualitative findings are integrated at the level of presentation, consistent with a convergent mixed-methods design.

Response Rate

Out of the 370 targeted respondents, 349 returned usable instruments, yielding an overall response rate of 94.3 percent. Parents/guardians accounted for 330 completed questionnaires (94.3 percent), while 19 key informant interviews were successfully conducted with priests and catechists (95.0 percent). This response rate was considered sufficient for statistical analysis and reliable interpretation of findings.

Table 5.1
Response Rate(n=349)

Category	Target Sample	Valid Responses	Response Rate
Parents/Guardians	350	330	94.3%
Key Informants	20	19	95.0%
Total	370	349	94.3%

Reliability of Instruments

Internal consistency of the research instrument was assessed using data collected during the pilot study at Holy Family Parish (n = 37). Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for each construct, and all recorded values were well above the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating strong reliability and suitability of the instruments for the main study.

Table 4.2 Reliability of Study Constructs(N=37)

Variable	Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
Parish Counselling	5	0.87	High Reliability
Bible Study & Prayer	5	0.88	High Reliability
Spiritual Mentorship	5	0.86	High Reliability
Parish Teachings	5	0.89	High Reliability
Positive Parenting Outcomes	5	0.90	High Reliability

All constructs demonstrated acceptable to high internal consistency, confirming the stability of the research tools prior to the wider data collection at St. Antioch Parish.

Demographics Characteristics of Respondents

Age Distribution

The majority of respondents were aged 30-49 years (40.9 percent), followed by those aged 40-49 years (24.2 percent). This indicates that most participants were within active parenting age groups.

**Table 4.3
Age Distribution(n=330)**

Age of respondent	Frequency	Percent
18-29	45	13.6
30-39	135	40.9
40-49	80	24.2
50-59	50	15.2
60 and above	20	6.1
Total	330	100.0

The results indicate that the largest proportion of respondents were aged 30-39 years (40.9%), followed by those aged 40-49 years (24.2%). Participants aged 18-29 years and 60 years and above formed the smallest proportions. Overall, the distribution shows that most respondents were within active parenting age groups, ensuring relevance to the study context at St. Antioch Parish.

Gender and Marital Status

Females constituted 59.7 percent of respondents, while males accounted for 37.9 percent. Most respondents were married (69.7 percent), indicating that the study largely reflects two-parent household structures, although a significant proportion represented single, widowed, divorced, or separated households (30.3 percent).

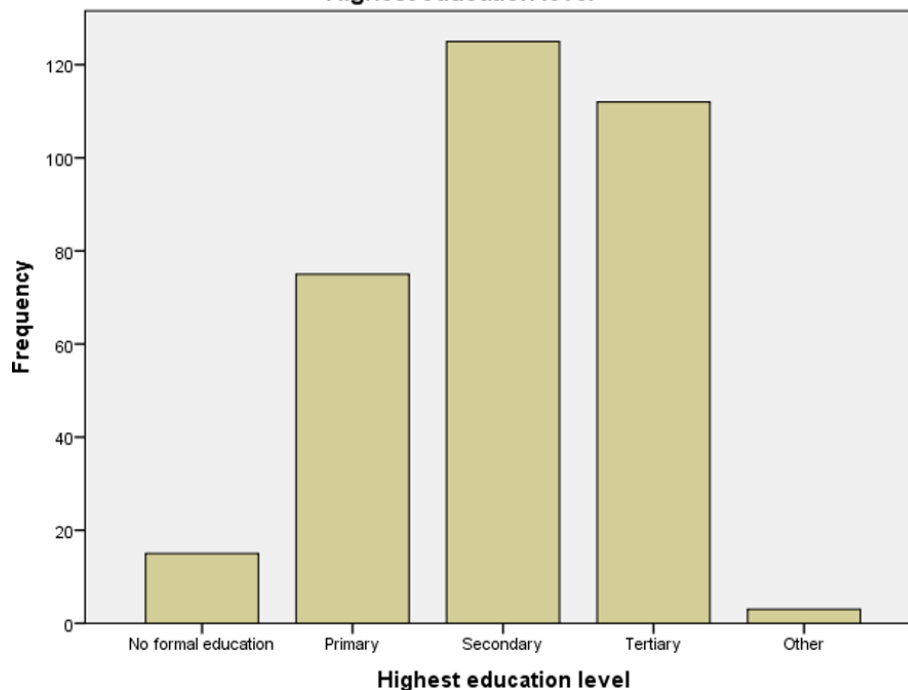
Table 5.4: Marital Status (n = 330)

Status	Frequency	Precent
Single	50	15.2
Married	230	69.7
Widowed	20	6.1
Divorced	15	4.5
Separated	15	4.5
Total	330	100

Educational Attainment of Respondents

Educational attainment was examined to describe the educational profile of parents who participated in the study.

Figure 5.2
Educational Attainment of Respondents
Highest education level



The findings show that secondary education was the highest level attained by the largest proportion of respondents (125, 37.9%), followed by tertiary education (112, 33.9%).

Respondents with primary education accounted for 75 (22.7%), while 15 (4.5%) reported having no formal education. A further 3 respondents (0.9%) fell within other or unspecified educational categories. Taken together, 237 respondents (71.8%) had attained at least secondary education, indicating that most participants had completed secondary school or progressed to tertiary-level education. This educational profile reflects the diversity of parents participating in the study and provides useful context for understanding the findings presented in the subsequent sections.

Respondent's Occupation

Occupational status was examined to describe the socio-economic background of the respondents participating in the study.

Table 4.5
Occupation of Respondents(n=330)

Respondent occupation	Frequency	Percent
Business	50	15.2
Casual	53	16.1
Farmer	58	17.6
Other	52	15.8
Teacher	58	17.6
Unemployed	59	17.9
Total	330	100.0

The findings indicate that unemployed respondents constituted the largest occupational group (59, 17.9%), followed by farmers and teachers, each with 58 respondents (17.6%). Casual workers accounted for 53 respondents (16.1%), while 50 respondents (15.2%) were engaged in business activities. A further 52 respondents (15.8%) reported occupations that fell within other categories. The distribution shows that the study included parents from a range of occupational backgrounds, providing a broad representation of the socio-economic circumstances within St. Antioch Parish.

Household monthly income

Household income was examined to describe the economic background of the respondents participating in the study.

Table 4.6
Household Monthly Income(n=330)

Household monthly income	Frequency	Percent
<10,000 Ksh	95	28.8
10-24,999 Ksh	120	36.4
25-49,999 Ksh	65	19.7
50-99,999 Ksh	30	9.1
Prefer not to say	20	6.1
Total	330	100.0

The findings show that the largest proportion of respondents reported a monthly household income of between Ksh 10,000 and Ksh 24,999 (120, 36.4%), followed by those earning less than Ksh 10,000 (95, 28.8%). Sixty-five respondents (19.7%) reported monthly incomes ranging from Ksh 25,000 to Ksh 49,999, while 30 (9.1%) earned between Ksh 50,000 and Ksh 99,999. Twenty respondents (6.1%) preferred not to disclose their household income. Taken together, 215 respondents (65.2%) reported a monthly household income below Ksh 25,000, indicating that a substantial proportion of the participants came from lower-income households.

Number of children in household

The number of children in each household was examined to describe the family size of the respondents participating in the study.

Table 4.7.
Number of Children in Respondent Households (n = 330)

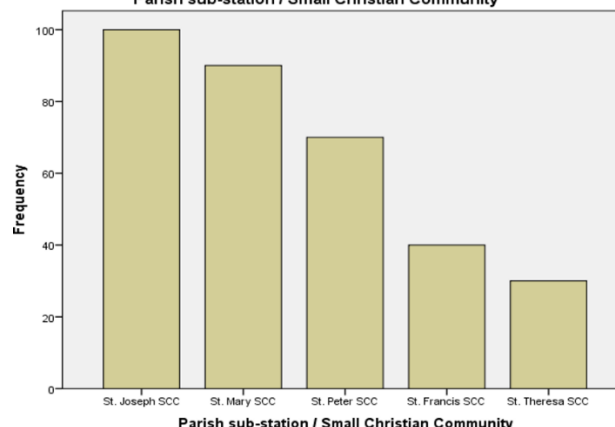
Number of children in household	Frequency	Percent
1-2 Child	75	22.7
3-4 Children	145	43.9
5-6 Children	70	21.2
6 or More Children	40	12.1
Total	330	100.0

The findings indicate that households with three to four children constituted the largest group (145, 43.9%), followed by households with one to two children (75, 22.7%). Seventy respondents (21.2%) reported having five to six children, while 40 (12.1%) had six or more children. The distribution shows that respondents represented households of varying sizes, with families raising three to four children forming the largest proportion of the study population.

Parish Sub-Station/Small Christian Community

Respondents were asked to indicate the Small Christian Community (SCC) to which they belonged in order to describe their distribution across the parish's pastoral units.

Figure 5,3
Small Christian Community
Parish sub-station / Small Christian Community

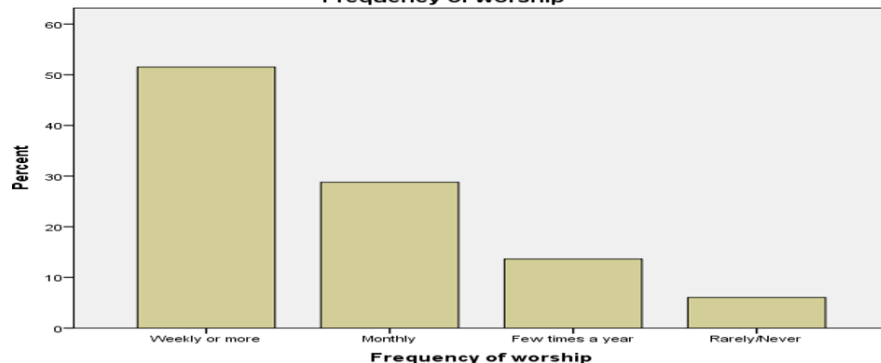


The findings show that the largest proportion of respondents belonged to St. Joseph Small Christian Community (100, 30.3%), followed by St. Mary (90, 27.3%) and St. Peter (70, 21.2%). St. Francis and St. Theresa had smaller memberships, accounting for 40 respondents (12.1%) and 30 respondents (9.1%), respectively. The distribution indicates that respondents were drawn from all the major Small Christian Communities within St. Antioch Parish, providing representation across the parish's principal pastoral units.

Church Attendance Frequency

Church attendance was examined to describe the level of respondents' participation in parish worship activities.

Figure 4.4
Frequency of worship



The findings show that 170 respondents (51.5%) attended church weekly or more, while 95 (28.8%) attended at least once a month. Forty-five respondents (13.6%) reported attending a few times a year, and 20 (6.1%) indicated that they rarely or never attended church. These results indicate that 265 respondents (80.3%) attended church at least monthly, whereas 65 respondents (19.7%) participated less frequently.

Parish Counselling and Nurturing Practices

Table 5.8 presents respondents' perceptions of parish-based spiritual counselling and its contribution to nurturing and caregiving practices.

Descriptive Statistics for Parish Counselling (n = 330)

Descriptive Indicators	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I have attended spiritual counselling sessions	330	3.51	1.20
Counselling has helped me understand my children better	330	3.36	1.37
Counselling encourages love and understanding in discipline	330	3.38	1.13
Counselling has made me more patient and forgiving	330	3.39	1.18
Counselling sessions improved harmony in my home	330	3.48	1.15
Composite Mean Score	330	3.42	1.21

The descriptive statistics indicate generally positive perceptions of parish-based spiritual counselling across the five measured indicators. Attendance at spiritual counselling sessions recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.20$). Respondents also agreed that spiritual counselling had enhanced their understanding of their children ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.37$), promoted love and understanding in disciplinary practices ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.13$), strengthened patience and forgiveness ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.18$), and improved harmony within the family ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.15$). The overall composite mean score was 3.42 ($SD = 1.21$), indicating a generally positive perception of the contribution of parish-based spiritual counselling to parents' nurturing and caregiving practices.

The interview data reflected similar experiences. Priests and catechists explained that parish counselling created opportunities for parents to discuss family challenges, reflect on their relationships with their children, and receive pastoral guidance on communication and conflict resolution.

One priest remarked:

"Parents who attend counselling are calmer in managing children, showing greater tolerance and understanding."
(Informant 1, Priest)

A catechist offered a similar perspective:

"Dialogue and listening have noticeably increased in homes after counselling sessions." (Informant 4, Catechist)

Several other interview participants reported that parents who attended counselling regularly were more patient during family disagreements, listened more attentively to their children, and were less likely to respond to conflict with confrontation. They also referred to improved communication within families and a greater sense of harmony in the home, reflecting the patterns reported in the questionnaire responses.

IV. Discussion

Parish counselling emerged as a significant predictor of positive parenting practices ($\beta = 0.615$, $p < .001$). Although participation levels were moderate ($M = 3.51$), parents who engaged in counselling consistently described greater emotional understanding of their children, increased patience, a stronger willingness to forgive, more empathetic approaches to discipline, and healthier family relationships. These patterns suggest that the value of parish counselling lies less in the number of sessions attended than in the opportunity it creates for reflection, honest conversation, and gradual behavioural change.

Accounts from priests and catechists offer further insight into these statistical patterns. Counselling sessions were described as environments where parents felt able to discuss family difficulties openly, examine strained relationships, and reconsider how they responded to their children. Parents who participated regularly were observed to communicate more calmly during disagreements, listen more attentively, and rely more on dialogue than confrontation when resolving conflict. Such observations illustrate the practical pathways through which pastoral counselling shapes everyday parenting.

Bornstein argues that parenting develops within interconnected family, social, and community environments rather than through individual effort alone.²⁰ The experience at St. Antioch Parish reflects this perspective. Counselling provides a supportive environment in which parents receive guidance, encouragement, and opportunities for personal growth that extend beyond spiritual instruction into family life. Baumrind likewise identifies emotional warmth, consistent guidance, and appropriate discipline as defining characteristics of effective parenting.²¹ The behavioural changes described by participants closely mirror these characteristics, particularly the movement towards patient, supportive, and emotionally responsive parent-child relationships.

The changes reported by parents also carry broader developmental significance. Wang and Bhaumik observe that parenting characterised by responsiveness and emotional support contributes to children's emotional regulation, social competence, and long-term wellbeing.²² Although children's developmental outcomes were not examined directly in this study, the parenting practices reported by participants point towards conditions that previous research associates with healthy child development.

Spiritual formation appears to provide an additional explanation for these changes. Mahoney and Boyatzis maintain that religious beliefs and spiritual practices influence family life by strengthening shared meaning, relational commitment, and emotional connectedness.²³ Rich, Willemse, and Erasmus similarly conclude that religious participation encourages empathy, forgiveness, emotional regulation, and supportive parent-child relationships.²⁴ Parents interviewed during this study frequently described counselling as helping them pause before reacting, communicate more respectfully, and approach family disagreements with greater understanding.

Research conducted within Sub-Saharan Africa offers a comparable picture. Mhaka-Mutepfa and Maundeni found that faith communities strengthen resilience by providing hope, social support, and practical resources for families facing economic and social pressures.²⁵ Evidence from Kenya also indicates that church-based parenting programmes and mentorship contribute to parental competence while supporting children's moral and behavioural development.²⁶ The experiences reported at St. Antioch Parish suggest that parish counselling performs a similar function by providing continuous pastoral accompaniment that strengthens parenting within the realities of everyday family life.

This interpretation is further supported by UNICEF Kenya, which recognises community-based parenting programmes as important sources of support where specialised psychosocial services are limited or difficult to access.²⁷ Parish counselling appears to fill a similar role by offering parents a trusted setting where emotional support, spiritual guidance, and practical advice are integrated within the life of the local church.

Evidence from both phases of the study points in the same direction. Parents who participated in parish counselling described noticeable changes in how they related to their children, managed conflict, and communicated within the family. The qualitative accounts reinforce the statistical results by illustrating how these changes occur in practice. Within the context of St. Antioch Parish, parish-based spiritual counselling functions as an important pastoral resource that strengthens nurturing and caregiving while complementing, rather than replacing, formal psychosocial support services.

Limitation of the Study

The findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the study was conducted within a single Catholic parish in Isiolo County, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other parishes or faith communities with different pastoral, cultural, or organizational contexts. Second, the study relied primarily on self-reported data from parents and key informants, making the findings susceptible to response and social desirability bias despite the use of anonymity and confidentiality measures. Finally, the cross-sectional design captured respondents' experiences at one point in time and therefore does not permit conclusions about long-term changes in parenting practices resulting from parish counselling. Future studies employing longitudinal or multi-site designs would strengthen understanding of the sustained influence of parish-based spiritual interventions on parenting.

V. Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that parish counselling plays a significant role in promoting positive parenting among families in St. Antioch Parish. Parents who participated in counselling reported greater understanding of their children, increased patience and forgiveness, more empathetic approaches to discipline, and improved family relationships. These findings were reinforced by interviews with priests and catechists, who described counselling as creating opportunities for reflection, dialogue, and constructive conflict resolution within families. The convergence of the quantitative and qualitative evidence indicates that parish counselling extends beyond spiritual formation to support the emotional and relational dimensions of family life. The study therefore affirms the contribution of parish-based counselling as an important pastoral approach for strengthening positive parenting within faith communities.

Practical Implications

The findings suggest that Catholic parishes can strengthen family life by investing in structured and accessible parenting support programmes. Establishing a Family Life Office or a similar parish-based ministry could provide coordinated counselling services, parenting education, and referral pathways for families requiring specialised psychosocial support. Equipping clergy, catechists, and lay pastoral leaders with basic counselling and family support skills would further enhance the parish's capacity to respond effectively to contemporary parenting challenges while complementing professional social and mental health services where necessary.

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