INFLUENCE OF BLENDED FAMILY STRUCTURES ON THE QUALITY OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS: A CASE OF STUDENTS IN SELECTED PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN NAIROBI COUNTY, KENYA

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DECLARATION

This dissertation is my original work and has not been submitted to any other institution or university other than the Pan Africa Christian University for academic credit.

Sign ……..... Date: …….....
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This dissertation has been submitted for examination with our approval as the University Supervisors.

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Table of Contents

DECLARATION ..... **ii**
DEDICATION ..... **viii**
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ..... **ix**
ABSTRACT ..... **x**
LIST OF TABLES ..... **xi**
LIST OF FIGURES ..... **xiii**
ABBREVIATION AND ACRONYMS ..... **xiv**
OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF TERMS ..... **xv**
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY **1**
Introduction 1
Background to the Study 1
Statement of the Problem 5
Purpose of the Study 6
Objectives of the Study 6
Research Questions 7
Assumptions of the Study 7
Justification and Rationale of the Study 8
Significance of the Study 9
Scope of the Study 10
Delimitations of the Study 12
Chapter Summary 13
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW **15**
Introduction 15
Prevalence of Blended Family Structures 15
Blended Family Structures 20
Step-Parent Blended Families Structures 20
Step-Sibling Blended Family. 24
Biological and Step-Sibling Blended Families Structures 28

Differences in family relationship quality between blended and non-blended families 34
Parent–Child Relationships in Blended and Non-Blended Families 37
Step-Sibling Relationships in Blended and Non-Blended Families 40
Family Attributes Influencing Relationship Quality across Family Structures 45
Influences of Blended Family Structures on the Quality of Family Relationships 55
Emotional Well-being of Students in Blended Families 56
Behavioral Influence on Students in Blended Families 58
Strategies for Enhancing the Quality of Family Relationships 60
Open Communication 61
Problem Solving 67
Feedback Mechanism 71
Trust and Emotional Bonds 77
Theoretical Framework 81
Family Structural Theory 81
Attachment Theory 83
Conceptual Framework 85
Synthesis of Research Gaps 87
Chapter Summary 92
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY 93
Introduction 93
Philosophical Underpinning 93
Application of Critical Realism 94
Research Design 95
Target Population 96
Sampling Technique 97

Sample size 99
Types of Data 101
Research instruments 101
Instrument Pre-Testing 103
Reliability of the Instrument 103
Validity of the Instrument 104
Data Collection Procedure 105
Data Analysis 106
Ethical Considerations 108
Chapter Summary 109
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION 111
Introduction 111
Response rate 111
Demographic Information of the Respondents 112
Age of the Respondents 112
Gender of the Respondents 113
Respondents' Year of Study 113
Prevalence of Blended Family Structures among Students in Private Universities in Nairobi County 114
Types of Blended Family Structures of the Respondents 116
Family relationships quality between blended and non-blended family structures among students in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya. 118
Communication among Respondents from both Blended and Non-Blended Families 118
Emotional Support among Respondents from both Blended and Non-Blended Families 123

Conflict and Stress Management among Combined Respondents in the Study 127

Family Cohesion and Unity in Blended and Non-Blended Family Backgrounds 132

Summary of Quality of Family Relationships in Blended and Non-Blended Families 138

Influence of Blended Family Structures on Dimensions of Family Relationship Quality 141

Comparisons of Communication in Different Family Structures 144

Comparisons of Emotional Support in Different Family Structures 147

Comparisons of Conflict and Stress Management in Different Family Structures 150

Comparisons of Family Cohesion and Unity among Different Family Structures 154

Strategies for enhancing the quality of family relationships 157

Role of Parents in Fostering Healthy Family Relationships 159

What Respondents Can Do to Improve Family Relationships 161

Suggestions on Strategies to Improve the Quality of Family Relationships 164

Chapter Summary 165

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AND CONCLUSIONS 167

Introduction 167

Summary of Findings 167

Prevalence and Types of Blended Family Structures 167

Family relationship quality between blended and non-blended family structures 168

Influence of Blended Family Structures on Family Relationship Quality 169

Strategies to improve family relationships 171

Recommendations 172

Families and Step-parents 172

Schools and Community Programs 173

Counselors and Therapists 173

Policy Makers and Social Service Providers 173

Areas of Future Research 174

Conclusion 175

REFERENCES 177

APPENDICES 215

APPENDIX I: CONSENT FORM 215

APPENDIX II: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR STUDENTS 216

APPENDIX III: PAC ISERC CONSENT FORM 223

APPENDIX IV: RESEARCH LICENSE 224

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to the Almighty God; my rock and the pillar of strength, my dear wife; Nanetia, and my dear lovely children; Gachira, Kihigo, Wamaitha and Katoiye whose overwhelming support provided me with strength to succeed in my academic journey.

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ABSTRACT

Quality family relationships are those characterized by strong social support among members, while blended families contain step-parents and/or step-children. This study assessed the influence of blended family structures on the quality of family relationships: a case of students in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya. It was guided by four objectives; to: establish the prevalence of blended family structures, examine differences in family relationship quality between blended and non-blended families, examine the influence of blended family structure, and to explore strategies for enhancing the quality of family relationships. Family Structural Theory and the Attachment Theory informed this study. Convergent parallel mixed methods research design was employed targeting 32000 students aged 18-35 years from 4 purposively selected private universities. Cochran's formula helped get a sample size of 380 students. Data was collected using semi-structured questionnaires adapted from the Family Assessment Device (FAD) and Family Environment Scale (FES). The tool's validity was assessed using both face and content validity, while Cronbach's alpha was used to measure reliability. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 31 helped in analyzing quantitative data, while qualitative data were thematically analysed. . From the findings, 78.7% of the respondents were from non-blended families, while 21.3% were from blended families. From the blended ones, the majority were raised by both step-parents (40%), followed by step-siblings (36.7%), step-father and real biological mother(15%), and lastly biological father and stepmother (8.3%). Additionally, family structure had a significant influence on relationship quality ($p < .001$), with non-complex blended families reporting lower scores in communication (M difference = 2.44, SE = 0.424), and emotional support (M difference = 2.167, SE = 0.454). Strategies used to enhance family quality included communication (35%), emotional support (31.88%), quality time (28.44%), and professional counselling (9.63%), with 90.49% endorsing counselling. These findings show that family structure shapes students' psychosocial and interpersonal experiences and thus recommends private universities to establish counselling and peer support for blended-family students, as 90.49% endorsed counselling and these families reported lower relationship quality.

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Summary of Research Gaps 89

Table 2 Student Population in Private Universities in Nairobi County 97

Table 3 Sample Frame 99

Table 4 Sample Size 101

Table 5 Summary of Data Analysis 107

Table 6 Types of Respondents' Blended Family 117

Table 7 Communication among Respondents from both Blended and Non-Blended Families 118

Table 8 Comparing Communication in Blended versus Non-Blended Families 120

Table 9 Independent Samples t-Test of Communication in Blended vs. Non-Blended Families 121

Table 10 Emotional Support of Respondents from both Blended and Non-Blended Families 123

Table 11 Comparison of Emotional support in Blended and Non-Blended Families 125

Table 12 Independent Samples Test Emotional Support in Blended vs. Non-Blended Families 126

Table 13 Conflict and Stress Management among Combined Respondents in the Study 127

Table 14 Comparison of Conflict and Stress Management in Blended and Non-Blended Families 129

Table 15 Independent Samples Test of Conflict and Stress Management in Blended and Non-Blended Families 131

Table 16 Family Cohesion and Unity in both Blended and Non-Blended Family Backgrounds 133

Table 17 Family Cohesion and Unity in Blended Family and Non-Blended Families ... 135

Table 18 Independent Samples Test of Family Cohesion and Unity in Blended Family and Non-Blended Families ... 136

Table 19 Influence of Blended Family Structures on Dimensions of Family Relationship Quality ... 142

Table 20 Pairwise Comparisons of Communication in Different Family Structures ... 144

Table 21 Pairwise Comparisons of Emotional Support in Different Family Structures ... 148

Table 22 Pairwise Comparisons of Conflict and Stress Management in Different Family Structures ... 151

Table 23 Pairwise Comparisons of Family Cohesion and Unity among Different Family Structures ... 155

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Conceptual framework 86

Figure 2 Age of the Respondents..... 112

Figure 3 Gender of the Respondents..... 113

Figure 4 Respondents Year of study..... 114

Figure 5 Prevalence of Blended Family Structures among Students..... 115

Figure 6 Quality of Family Relationships in Blended and Non-Blended Families 139

ABBREVIATION AND ACRONYMS

AAM	Academic Achievement Motivation
COVID-19	Corona Virus Disease 2019
CUEA	Catholic University of East Africa
FAD	Family Assessment Device
FES	Family Environment Scale
FOO	Family of Origin
FPC	Finite Population Correction
FST	Family Systems Theory
JD	Juvenile Delinquency
KCAU	Kenya College of Accountancy University
KHDS	Kenya Health Demographic Health Survey
KNBS	Kenya National Bureau of Statistics
NACOSTI	National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation
PAC	Pan Africa Christian University
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
USIU-A	United States International University-Africa
WHO	World Health Organization

OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF TERMS

Blended Families: These are families formed when two individuals who have biological children from previous relationships agree to remarry and build a family (Carr & Utz., 2020). For this study, it consisted of both stepfather families and stepmother families.

Children: children are human beings below the age of 18 years (UNICEF, 2021). Additionally, the term refers to sons and daughters of parents, regardless of age(UNICEF, 2021). In this study, the term is operationalized to mean university students aged 18–35 years who, while legally adults, remain in a child-parent relationship in their family. It will be used interchangeably with either young adults or university students.

Complex Stepfamily: This term refers to a family where both parents, father and mother, remarry or agree to cohabit and both bring along children from previous relationships that may not even be their biological children (Burgoyne & Clark, 2023). This study used the term complex stepfamily to mean a marriage that has at least a child who has both parents as step-parents.

Family: Family is a unit made up of parents and their children living together as one single unit (Chambers & Gracia, 2021). For this study, the term family refers to a group of people related by blood or even through marriage, including step and biological children.

Family Relationship: This is a bond that refers to "any combination of filiation or conjugal connections that connect two persons directly or through a third party" (Zakaria et al., 2022). In this study, family relationships refers to the different connections in a family, which can include blood relations or those formed through marriages or even legal bonds.

Quality of Family Relationship: It is the closeness, strength, and positive interactions in a family (Gennari et al., 2024). In this study, quality of family relationships was used to refer to the love, harmony, and understanding among both blended and non-family members.

Quality Marriage Relationship: This refers to a healthy and strong relationship between couples (Prime et al., 2022). The researcher used quality marriage relationships to represent the nature of different marriage characteristics, including trust, affection, communication, and satisfaction.

Sibling Relationship: It is the bond between siblings in a family that has at least a common biological or non-biological parent (Gachenia et al., 2022). This term was used in the study to mean the relationship between brothers and sisters, either biological or non-biological.

Stepchildren: This refers to children from a previous relationship with only one parent being the biological parent (Gachenia et al., 2022). In this study, it refers to those children or young adults from previous relationships that come with parents who decide to remarry.

Simple Step-Family: It is a family formed when a person with a child remarries a person who is not a biological parent to the child (Burgoyne & Clark, 2023). In the context of this study, it includes blended families in which children from previous marriages are present.

University Students: Students who are enrolled in any university to pursue higher education (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012). For this research, it means any person enrolled in a university for academic reasons aged between 18 to 35 year

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Introduction

This chapter provides information on the background of the research, specifically on the effects of blended families on the quality of family relationships. It also covers the background of the study, including the problem statement, research objectives, research questions, justification, and the significance of the study, as well as its scope and chapter summary.

Background to the Study

A family is an integral part of every human being. The law describes a family as "a group of individuals related by blood, marriage, or adoption who are entitled to various legal rights and responsibilities" (Baker, 2023). There are various types of families, including nuclear and blended families. Blended families comprise family dynamics that describe a couple with children from former relationships or marriages who have decided to form a new family bond (Miller, 2023). This family structure is a product of different factors, such as couples divorcing, the death of a partner, separations, and also having a child outside marriage. When such a situation arises, the affected individuals may choose to remarry or cohabitate and bring their children along. This creates a stepfamily-like relationship, where we have step-parents and stepchildren (Ganong & Coleman, 2017).

There are various categories of relationships within blended families, including those between siblings. Njoroge and Kirori (2018) observed that blended families can be categorized into three main types: full, half, and step-siblings. full siblings refers individual sharing two biological parents and living under the same roof together. full siblings are raised together by the same biological parents , a

mother and a father (Fingerhut, 2024). Half-siblings are raised by different parents but share at least one biological parent (Chacha & Taabu, 2024). The relationship between kids in such families can vary since it largely depends on the conditions under which they grow up. Stepsiblings, on the other hand, are children from another family that join to create a new family after marriage; these siblings are unrelated and do not share any biological parents (Krejčová et al., 2023). It is evident that the relationship between kids in stepfamilies may be challenging since it is not a natural one but rather a situational one (Gyuris et al., 2020).

A plethora of study findings show that blended families are on the increase globally (Sloan, 2021; Sobotka & Berghammer, 2021). This has been attributed to an increase in divorces and remarriages (Helgertz & Tegunimataka, 2024). For example, in the United States of America, at least one in every three people is from a blended family (Lundberg et al., 2016), with 40% of adults having a stepchild or parent and 16% of families being blended (Wiemers et al., 2024). Additionally, the different minority groups, including Latin, White, and African-American children, are more likely to belong to blended families when compared to Asian children (Pew Research Centre, 2015; Wiemers et al., 2024). A study in Sweden indicates that nearly 25% of children below 18 are from families characterized by separated or divorced parents. In comparison, 60% of the children live with both parents (Helgertz & Tegunimataka, 2024), which reflects a broader trend in the Western region, where divorces, remarriages, and cohabitations are standard practices. However, in countries such as Korea, where divorce was traditionally discouraged (2.5% in 2000), the number of blended families is on the rise, currently accounting for 25% of marriages (Kim & Okazaki, 2022; Statistics Korea, 2019). This shift has been attributed to changing

family dynamics and is believed to be due to the young generation in Korea delaying or even forgoing marriage altogether.

In Africa, the number of blended families is also on the rise, primarily due to higher divorce and remarriage rates, as well as changing family dynamics. For example, statistics from South Africa indicate that approximately 40% of children come from families with at least one step-parent, with this figure varying across different racial and socioeconomic groups (Statistics South Africa, 2024). The number in Nigeria is lower but still significant, with at least 25% of children having at least one step-parent (Nigeria Population Commission, 2019). In Kenya, the prevalence is very high, with statistics showing that there are more children and young adults from blended families (at least one step-parent) compared to those from other family structures, with the figures standing at approximately 60% (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2022). These numbers have been attributed to rising rates of divorce and remarriage, which have been normalized even in villages where traditional beliefs are strong (KNBS, 2019). However, despite evidence of its prevalence, integrating these families can be challenging due to a strong emphasis on traditional family ties, which may lead to resistance from both nuclear and extended families (Nduati et al., 2020). This is further complicated by community expectations, cultural beliefs, and financial difficulties (Njoroge & Kirori, 2018). Despite this, the blended family can continue to thrive through open communication, support, and the building of stronger family bonds, while respecting and maintaining family traditions (Njoroge & Kirori, 2018).

According to Brik et al. (2024), a quality family relationship refers to relationships that promote love, care, nurturing, and enable the family members to experience their value and flourish in life. Quality relationships shield individuals

from external stresses and ensure stability in the lives of family members (Johnson, 2021). In blended families, quality relationships depend on emotional support for the kids, adjustment to the new arrangement, and open communication (Travers, 2021). Some blended families manage their challenges, whereas others face difficulties in establishing boundaries, forming their identity, and negotiating their roles (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). For African societies, challenges include identity issues resulting from different naming systems, sibling rivalry (Connidis, 2015), and confusion among young adults regarding their role in the family, due to school issues, relocation, and reduced interaction with friends (Chambers & Gracia, 2021). Conflicts between spouses during divorce influence the loyalties of family members, while adjustment to new parent-child relationships creates problems (Jensen, 2021).

Existing studies have provided several effective strategies for improving relationship quality in blended families. According to Braithwaite & Oliver-Blackburn (2024), Open and constructive communication enables individuals to communicate emotions and negotiate roles without any accusations. Communication among students living far from their families helps resolve potential disputes and develop social support (van Es et al., 2023). Participating in family-related activities like meal preparations, trips, and holidays helps improve the bond between family members regardless of the geographical distance (Braithwaite & Oliver-Blackburn, 2024). Family therapy is also found to be very efficient in resolving problems; a meta-analysis of 41 research studies proved that family therapy contributes to developing communication, enhancing emotional connection, and dealing with conflicts in various families (van Es et al., 2023). In Kenyan communities with low financial resources, family therapy conducted by lay counsellors considerably improved the performance of families and avoided disputes (Puffer et al., 2020). Other techniques

are setting certain rules at home, maintaining proper boundaries, building trust based on support, and exemplifying parental empathy and equality (Coleman et al., 2022; Li & Sun, 2022).

While there are many blended families in Kenya (KNBS, 2022), limited empirical research has been conducted on how the structural arrangements of blended families impact the quality of family relationships among university students, especially those in Nairobi County. Additionally, existing literature on the subject addresses' adolescents in secondary school settings or the general population, but not emerging adults studying in private universities. This study aimed to establish the influence of blended family structures on the quality of family relationships among students in private universities in Nairobi County.

Statement of the Problem

Blended families are on the increase globally and locally, with a study by Wikle and Hoagland (2020) pointing to the many complications found in blended families, especially in the area of step-parents and teenagers. Existing studies show that difficulties, including issues related to authority and loyalty, result in emotional distress and conflict within blended families (Abuya et al., 2019; Iruka et al., 2024). The significance of the problem is quite pronounced: children raised in blended families face greater risks than other adolescents raised in intact families (Bray, 2019). Non-traditional relations between siblings and non-participation by step-parents result in poor academic and behavioral outcomes among teenagers (Mostafa & Joshi, 2018; Troy et al., 2022). The additional strain experienced during reorganization in remarried families further complicates the situation. When left unaddressed, these issues will lead to ongoing instability in the family, a deterioration in the emotional well-being of adolescents, and ongoing conflicts that will prevent

harmony and development for all family members (Abuya et al., 2019; Iruka et al., 2024). Proper communication and trust-building can mitigate such problems (Braithwaite & Oliver-Blackburn, 2024), but without interventions, this pattern will persist.

While there have been numerous studies on the effects of family blending structures on relationship quality within the developed nations and also findings showing that blended families in Kenya stand at approximately 60% (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2022). Which is significantly high, there is limited research on the impact of blended family structures on family relationship quality among developing nations, with none done that focuses on the university student population of private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya. This study, therefore, sought to fill this gap by focusing on the effects of blended families' structures on the quality of family relationships among students in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of blended family structures on the quality of family relationships among students in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya.

Objectives of the Study

This study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To establish the prevalence of blended family structures among students in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya.
2. To examine differences in family relationship quality between blended and non-blended families among students in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya.

3. To examine the influence of blended family structures on the quality of family relationships among students in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya.
4. To explore strategies for enhancing the quality of family relationships among students from blended families in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the prevalence of blended family structures among students in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya?
2. What are the differences in family relationship quality between students from blended families and those from non-blended families in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya?
3. What are the influences of blended family structures on the quality of family relationships among students in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya?
4. What are the strategies for enhancing the quality of family relationships among students from blended families in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya?

Assumptions of the Study

This study assumed that blended families are measurably prevalent among students in selected private universities in Nairobi County, and that students would provide accurate and reliable reports about their family structures and relationship qualities, which could then be meaningfully categorised and analysed. It was further assumed that blended family structures exert specific effects on the quality of family

relationships among these students, and that effective strategies to enhance family relationship quality in blended families can be identified and implemented within Nairobi County.

Justification and Rationale of the Study

The present study aimed to address critical gaps in the understanding of blended families in Nairobi County, Kenya. Establishing the prevalence of these families among the target group of students in selected private universities in Nairobi County was justified for several reasons. First, it provided an indicative understanding of how common blended family structures were within this demographic. This information would prove helpful to educators, policymakers, and social workers who were developing programs and policies tailored to the needs of these families. Additionally, such information on prevalence could help allocate resources and establish support services to assist blended families (Smith, 2020). An in-depth exploration of the different qualities of family relations among students from blended families could allow a deeper understanding of the emotional and social dynamics of these family structures. The influence of blended family structures on interaction within families, communication and ultimately, satisfaction in relationships among family members is of utmost relevance. Such understanding could yield an informed basis for interventions and support mechanisms meant to enhance cohesion and stability within the family (Jones & Brown, 2019).

Studying the influences of blended family structures on the quality of family relationships among students was crucial in identifying both positive and negative effects of this form of family life. For example, an investigation into these aspects helped the researcher identify areas where students needed extra support and some possible obstacles unique to blended families. This is useful for educators who

counsel students from blended families, as it enables more targeted support (Burgoyne & Clark, 2023). The findings also help stakeholders identify strategies to enhance the quality of family relationships among blended families, which is imperative for fostering healthy family environments. It also creates awareness of specific strategies that stakeholders can implement, as well as evidence-based interventions aimed at improving family dynamics. This can lead to better social outcomes for students, as strong family relationships are linked to overall well-being and success in various life domains (Thompson, 2021). Finally, the study is justified by its potential to contribute to the academic literature on family studies, provide practical insights for improving family dynamics, and support the development of policies and programs that benefit blended families in Nairobi County, Kenya.

Significance of the Study

The major thrust of this study is found in its capacity to contribute practical insights as well as implications in the understanding and improvement of family dynamics in blended families in Nairobi County, Kenya. Educators and school administrators will utilise the research outcomes on prevalent blended families to inform their understanding of their students' demographic composition. This prevalence would help in developing empowered educational policies and support systems tailored to the unique needs of students from blended families, which could yield more population-effective education practices and better academic outcomes for those students (Smith, 2020).

By examining the qualities of family relationships, the study reveals how blended family configurations affect the psychosocial development of adolescents. It provides insight into targeted interventions for enhancing the emotional and social well-being of students drawn from these families when counselling, psychology, and

social work practitioners use its results. Optimizing family relationships will contribute to better mental health and social adjustment for these adolescents (Jones & Brown, 2019). Understanding the influence of blended families on family relationship quality is necessary for policymakers. The findings would also inform future family policies and programs that address the unique challenges faced by blended families. Policies that favour stability and coherence within families will enhance the well-being of children and adolescents, creating healthier environments in their families (Burgoyne & Clark, 2023).

This type of study has practical relevance for practitioners working with blended families by identifying effective ways to promote healthy relationships among them. It could offer some evidence-based recommendations for interventions aimed at promoting positive family dynamics, strengthening communication, and enhancing relationships, which would be helpful for family therapists, counsellors, and community organisations in their support of blended families as they navigate the unique challenges they face (Thompson, 2021). This research enriches the family studies literature within the context of blended families in Kenya. Such research fills a void in the literature regarding empirical evidence and insights into this milieu, resulting in a more well-rounded understanding of how blended families operate. Future researchers could expand on this element of inquiry to include other related areas and broaden the knowledge base (Ganong & Sanner, 2023). In summary, this study is significant because it can help inform educational practice, psychosocial interventions, policy formulation, and the academic literature to improve the quality of family relationships and the welfare of students from blended families in Nairobi County, Kenya.

Scope of the Study

This dissertation aimed to investigate the influence of blended family structures on the quality of family relationships among private university students in Nairobi County, Kenya, specifically targeting students aged 18–35 years. Blended families, characterized by the merging of different family units, often present unique challenges that can affect the cohesion and relational quality within the household (Travers, 2021). Research indicates that students from blended families often experience difficulties forming close bonds with their step-siblings and step-parents, which can strain overall family dynamics (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). These challenges may also extend to parent-child relationships, where changes in family composition can lead to reduced emotional support and increased conflict (Ma et al., 2022). Furthermore, the adjustment to new family roles and the presence of multiple parental figures can complicate communication and mutual understanding among family members (Jensen & Sanner, 2021). To capture both the breadth and depth of these experiences, the study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, collecting quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously and then integrating the results separately (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study examined how these dynamics impact students' emotional well-being and their ability to maintain healthy relationships within their blended families, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of family structures within the context of Kenyan society.

Limitations of the study

Study limitations are the unique challenges that arise during the investigation and are outside the researchers' control (Akanle et al., 2020). The following are the limitations: This study was limited to Nairobi County and not just the county but to only four selected private universities. Because of this, generalization of results' applicability was limited to the students in other universities, both public and private,

and also from other areas, rural and urban. Despite this limitation, the researcher assumed that most students from the selected universities in Nairobi County come from different places and backgrounds and thus represent other areas.

Additionally, since the responses were based on respondents' willingness to respond, the researcher anticipated that some respondents may choose not to participate in this study, which would have negatively affected the study. To manage this, the study used Google Forms, which were simple to fill out and thus encouraged a high response rate. Consequently, the researcher also made it a personal responsibility to communicate with each respondent and request them, which increased the response rate. However, those not willing to participate were not forced to do so.

The study also depended on self-reported data, which comes with its challenges, including being characterized by different types of bias such as response bias, desirability bias, memory bias, and recall bias or memory bias which puts into question the reliability and validity of the instruments used. To deal with this, the researcher pretested the instruments to assess the responses from students from another related university, then concentrated on their responses to assess the bias and find solutions, including even changing questions. Despite these limitations, the study generated valuable insights and paved the way for future research.

Delimitations of the Study

The study's scope and boundaries have been intentionally defined to focus on specific aspects of blended family structures in Nairobi County, Kenya. These delimitations helped ensure that the researcher focused on selected private universities, making the research process manageable and achievable within a reasonable timeframe, while also paying attention to research rigor. The study was

also limited to private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya. This geographical limitation was intentional to provide a detailed and contextual analysis of blended family structures within a specific urban setting. This delimitation helped to control for regional variations and provided a more focused study area (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2019). These delimitations were established to ensure that the study remains focused, manageable, and within the available resources and time frame.

They also helped provide clear boundaries for interpreting the findings and applying them to similar contexts. Participants were drawn from students who voluntarily consented to participate, ensuring ethical standards were maintained. The study employed self-administered questionnaires via Google Forms to ensure a broader reach and convenience for participants. The study focused on identifying strategies to enhance family relationships from the perspective of university students, without assuming uniform applicability across all family types.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided an introduction to the research, which is the influence of blended families' structures on the quality of family relationships among students in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya. It began by providing a general background to the study, narrowing its scope from global to local. It is evident from the various subsections of the chapter that there has been a growing interest in the issue of blended family structures, with evidence showing that they have been adopted in different parts of the world. It has also provided a clear explanation of the research problem and identified the existing knowledge gap that this research aimed to address, as it needed to be filled. Subsequently, it has provided an outline of the study's purpose and objectives, as well as the research questions that were addressed. This was followed by an exploration of the significance of the study,

the assumptions made during the study, the scope of the study, and finally, the limitations and delimitations of the study. Elaborating on this, it provided a better understanding of the topic and the need for the study. The next chapter provides a review of existing literature on the topic.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter offers a detailed examination of the empirical and theoretical literature. The empirical literature review is thematically organized in line with the specific objectives of the study. Accordingly, the literature review covers the prevalence of blended family structure, it compares the quality of family relationship between blended and non-blended family. This is followed by a focus on how blended family structure influences the quality of family relationship and lastly it looks at the different strategies that when used can help enhance the quality of family relationship among blended family structure. After this, the relevant theories guiding these studies are discussed in-depth followed by an explanation of the conceptual framework which focused on the different variables, their indicators and their relationships. This is followed by synthesis of the gaps within the exiting literature reviewed which warrants the current study and ends with a chapter summary.

Prevalence of Blended Family Structures

According to a definition by Jabber et al. (2023), blended families refer to those families where couples have children from previous relationships. These couples together with the children, cohabitate to form a blended family structure (Carr & Utz, 2020). Blended families' structures have a rich history, with the main association being that they emerge during the remarriage of widowed individuals (Ayadi et al., 2025). To show how old it is, during agrarian economies, remarriages happened with the aim of ensuring the availability of labor through bearing more children and also continuity of inheritance (Chacha & Taabu, 2024). During this time, the focus was on solving prevailing challenges. These challenges included labor force, despite the fact that divorce was not a norm. In the 20th century, divorce became a

socially accepted norm for marital dissolution, and this cemented the prevalence of blended families' structures (Bukhtiar et al., 2025). During the 1960s and 1970s, the divorces peaked, and remarriage became a reasonable portion of new families (Russell & Rowley, 2025). As of 2017, in America only, at least 30 percent of marriages were made up of a partner who had been married (Sassler & Lichter, 2020).

Current data indicates that in every four people who have undergone divorce, one is likely to remarry. Furthermore, it is estimated that 65% of remarriages involve blended families owing to the presence of children from the previous marriage (Ayadi, et al., 2025). As families go through various stages from single to marriage, divorce, and remarriage, they bring along their children (Bean et al., 2020). Although there has been a decline in marriages since 2000 with the rate reducing from 8.2 from a population of 1000 to 6.2 (Bieber, 2024), the level of remarrying among couples stands at two in every five marriages. Globally, there has been a change in life, especially with a decline in two-parent households and a rise in remarrying, cohabitation, and divorce. Remarriage and divorce are bringing transformation in the lives of various individuals across the globe in various ways (Pryor, 2020).

Blended family structures are now evident in different continents and countries. In America, acceptance and prevalence of blended families have gradually evolved over the years. They were less common in the 1990s and were mostly formed out of remarriages after the death of a spouse (Probert, 2025). By the early 2000s, their prevalence increased and was driven by rising cohabitation and divorce rates (Pew Research Center, 2015). By 2024, the issue of blended families has become normalized due to societal acceptance and thus significant structures in American family dynamics (Madanes, 2019). Studies suggest that the prevalence of blended family structures is approximately 40% in America, with African-Americans being

the highest on racial comparison with approximately 60%, followed by Hispanics at 46% and lastly the White Americans at 39% (Pew Research Center, 2015). Further findings from the study show that at least 1300 new blended families are formed in America daily (Pew Research Center, 2015). Evidently, from the findings above, it can be concluded that the prevalence of blended families in America is at 40%, with the Hispanic ethnic group having the highest prevalence at 60%.

In the United Kingdom, data from the Children's Commissioner for England indicates that about 10% of children in the UK are from blended families, while the prevalence of blended families stood at 33% as of 2021(Children's Commissioner for England, 2022). This data reflects variations in definitions and data collection methods. This percentage is a significant increase from the early years. In early 1996, a report from the Office for National Statistics in the United Kingdom placed the figures at around 5 percent of families (Office for National Statistics, 1981). These statistics changed to around 10% in the 1990s (Office for National Statistics, 1996). As evident in studies above, one can conclude that blended families in the United Kingdom have been on the increase over the years, with the figures expected to rise more because of different contributing factors such as the high rate of divorce, changing societal norms, and also growing acceptance of the different family structures, including blended.

In Southern Europe, there exists evidence of the prevalence of blended families, with statistics showing that it is generally lower than in America and the United Kingdom. Specifically, in Spain, as of 2014, 14.49 percent of families were blended (Oliva et al., 2014). The figures in Germany are lower, with approximately 7% of families being blended in nature, with the figures varying depending on the region; with the Eastern Germany figures being approximately 10% while the western

side being 5% (Nixon & Hadfield, 2016). In Italy, a study that focused on family dynamics indicated that stepfamilies stood at 13.8% in 2008, a figure higher than a study done in 1972 that showed only 6.5% of families were blended (Italian Sociological Review, 2018). Additionally, in Denmark, as of 2022, blended families made up 10% of all families (Danish School of Education, 2022). From the figures above, blended family prevalence is evident in Southern Europe; with Spain having the highest percentage at 14.49% Germany is the lowest at 7%.

In Western Europe, blended families in Poland are about 8.2% of all families (Szczepaniak, 2016). Consequently, in Slovenia, blended families, also referred to as reconstituted families, form an important part of the evolving landscape of Slovenia, with data from the 2018 census showing that 5.2% are blended families (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2018). Additionally, in Estonia, findings from a study commissioned by the social affairs ministry show that the prevalence of blended families stood at 12%. There is little evidence from countries such as Russia and Ukraine, with reasons being the instability brought about by existing war (Tarku, 2022). Hence, evidence of blended families from Western European countries shows that the presence is highest in Estonia and the lowest in Slovakia.

Research from China, which is a country deeply rooted in traditions and cultures that discourage divorce, indicates marital instability in the past few decades, with rates as low as 3% of divorce in 2016, with 16.3% of the divorced remarrying. From the survey, it is also evident that despite the fact that divorce and remarrying were issues in the past decades, as time passes, they have become normalized (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2017). Japan is among the countries with the lowest percentage of blended families, with only 2% of the families being stepfamilies (Raymo et al., 2024). This figure is even lower in India, with only 1% of

the existing families being blended (International Institute for Population Sciences, 2011). In summary, some Asian countries, such as Japan and Iran, have an insignificant percentage of blended families, with this being attributed to their culture and traditional belief in family, which has led to very low divorce rates, consequently affecting remarriage.

According to Azimi (2023), the divorce rate in Iran stood at 2.27% per 1000 people as of 2016. In fact, the prevalence of blended families is low in Asia with the highest country being China with only 3% and others like Iran having less than 0.03% which shows the influence of factors such as culture on the formation of blended families. Just like other parts of the world, Africa has not been left behind in embracing blended family structure despite their existing limited data. For example, as evidence of the existence of blended families in South Africa, in 2016, there were 25,326 divorces in total, with 55 percent being of families with children below 18 years, thus a possibility of blended family formation (Statistics South Africa, 2016). In Nigeria, findings from a study aimed at finding out family composition among adolescents in the area of Cross River State found that 30% of the 210 children in the study are from blended families, thus confirming the existence of a blended family structure (Ezenwaohaetorc, 2021).

In Uganda, just like in the other African countries, evidence of blended family structure exists. Findings from a study that focused on children's care and living arrangements in Uganda among children aged 0-17 show that approximately 44% of children don't live with their biological parents, which shows a potential presence of blended families (Uganda Bureau of Statistics & ICF, 2022). In Kenya, the prevalence of blended families is also not clear, with studies focusing on the causal factors. Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, & ICF. (2023) found out that the share of

children who lived in households with either step-parents or half-siblings was estimated at about 60%. From the above statistics, though not direct, it is clear that there exist blended families in Africa, even though the exact figures are not clear due to limited data.

Blended Family Structures

Different types of blended family structures exist, but the most widely known and clearly understood blended family types include step-parent families, step-sibling families, and families that consist of both biological and step-siblings (Wasserman, 2020). Each of these family types presents unique relationship dynamics, emotional complexities, and adjustment challenges. Understanding this dynamic is important because it helps examine how young adults and children adapt, bond, and create a functional family unit (Jensen & Sanner, 2021). The different blended family structures include step-parent(s), step-sibling(s) and finally Biological-and-step-sibling blended families as narrated here below:

Step-Parent Blended Families Structures

Step-parent blended families are the basics of blended families. The structures develop as a result of a biological parent remarrying, which brings a step-parent (stepfather or stepmother) into the family. The relationships within such a family setup are characterized by having a non-biological, active-participant parent to care for and raise children. This also creates a special range of problems and complications because it is a matter of the introduction of a step-parent into the relationship between a parent and a child, which can be very difficult to adapt to by all involved (Zafran, 2022).

Blended families with step-parents are on the rise, and this is mainly because of the high divorce rates, remarriage, and living together. The alterations of society

and especially the modern family forms have reshaped the established boundaries of families and made step-parent families one of the most frequent forms of blended family (Ganong et al., 2024). As an example, the research in the United States shows that about 20 percent of families have at least one step-parent, and the figure is higher among younger couples younger than 55 (Zafran, 2022). On the same note, in Japan, 2 percent of the households with infants are stepfamilies, on average, and the same is representative of the new trends in the formation of families in Asia (Tani et al., 2017).

A study by Pearson et al. (2019) conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa on the basis of data on 33 African countries (2006-2015) discovered that an average of 2.5% of children live with a stepfather. There is a wide fluctuation in the prevalence of stepfamilies within the region, whereby in Burkina Faso, it is just 1.1% and in Gabon, it is 6.3%. Such statistics reveal the difference in the number of step-parent families present all over the world, indicating the potential impact of cultural, social, and economic factors on the formation of a family. According to Li and During (2022), although step-parent blended families are regarded as a by-product of contemporary societal developments, the relations within the family are not so simple, which means that time and effort are needed to reach harmony in the relations.

Step-parenting is a process that is normally accompanied by numerous difficulties (Mashile et al., 2022). Among the main challenges, one can distinguish cases when step-parents are trying to establish their authority as parents, which may be rejected by stepchildren (Ganong et al., 2022). Blended families typically expose young adults to another feeling of divided loyalty because they have parents and a new step-parent (Egginton, 2023). This conflict may create tension, especially where step-parents attempt to create a disciplinary authority or too hastily play a parental

role (Ganong et al., 2022). According to Crapo et al. (2023), this may be resisted by children who may feel that the relationships with their biological parents are threatened. This strain may result in emotional conflict among the children, who may develop feelings of resentment, insecurity, and bewilderment.

Besides this challenge of bringing about authority, it is also accompanied by the problem of the difference in parenting styles between the birth parents and step-parents. As an illustration, a new spouse might discipline, communicate, and express their emotions differently, which might be confusing and frustrating to the children used to a different style by a natural parent (Sanner et al., 2018). Such a misfit can lead to parenting inconsistencies, which adds to not having family structure and stability (Mashile et al., 2022). It may also lead to tension between biological parents and step-parents because each of them may feel unappreciated or undermined in his or her position.

In spite of these difficulties, there is also evidence of growth and development in step-parent blended families. A step-parent can offer children other sources of support, care, and guidance, particularly in cases where the biological parent is dead or cannot play some parenting roles (Ganong et al., 2019). By taking on the role, step-parents will have a chance to play a constructive role in the emotional, educational, and psychological growth of children and assist them to cope with the different challenges of their family structure (Jabbari et al., 2023). In time, the relationship between a step-parent and a child may also be a thriving source of positive influence, should both a step-parent and a biological parent devote their time and efforts towards the development of a trusting and respectful relationship (Akshaya et al., 2025).

Step-parents role involves being a caregiver, support system, and in many cases the family stabilizing component (Grüning et al., 2024). However, patience and

time need to be employed in this role. It is notable that step-parents should not attempt to fill the space of a biological parent but instead strive to become a supplement to the cause of emotional support, encouragement, and guidance (Egginton, 2023). With the help of a consistent and understanding form of interaction, step-parents may gradually establish some form of a relationship with their stepchildren, gaining their trust and creating a closer bond. Such step-by-step building of trust is the key to the effectiveness of blended families.

Effective communication is one of the most critical issues in determining the success of a step-parent blended family (Fox, 2022). Open, respectful, and continuous communication should also be the top priority of both biological parents and step-parents so that the expectations and duties of all the family members can be coordinated (Kariuki & Wambui, 2021). It is also necessary that the biological parent and the step-parent share their needs, concerns, and expectations, as well as listen to the needs and concerns of the children (Fox, 2022). When communication is efficient, misunderstandings may be reduced, and a conducive or nurturing atmosphere in the family may be created.

The first stage of integration of a step-parent into a family can be a difficult one; however, with time and patience, one can create a working and healthy family (Oliver-Blackburn, 2023). The principle of gradual development is one of the important aspects in this process. Those families that invest time and energy into gradually assimilating the step-parent into the existing family dynamics tend to have an easier time with the transition (Akshaya et al., 2025). This will be a slow process, which allows the children to adapt to the new family setup and enables the step-parents to define their place in the new family. The family can also find its way

through the complications of a blended family as the roles become more defined and the boundaries are established (Sanner et al., 2018).

To build rapport in a step-parent family, it is necessary to pay attention to common experiences and family time. Family activities like meals, outings, and joint projects can be used to develop a sense of common identity and belonging (Ganong & Sanner, 2023). They can equally be used to develop emotional connections as well as form positive memories, which are essential in enabling the children to accommodate their step-parent as a member of such a family (Papernow, 2013). Such activities also assist the step-parents and biological parents to coordinate efforts in ensuring they raise children together and collaborate harmoniously and in respect to one another (Fox, 2022).

Step-Sibling Blended Family.

Step-sibling families develop as a result of two parents who have their own offspring in the relationship getting married and uniting their children (Kara, 2024). In this setup, the children do not have any familial bonds and will have to adjust to new family structures and establish sibling-like relationships using common family resources, habits, and daily tasks (Araujo, 2025). The resulting order creates a complex socio-psychological environment which includes sibling competition, identity negotiation, and territoriality. It makes it more challenging to integrate because there is no genetic connection, which means that previously separate identities and family functions have to be reconciled (Araujo, 2025).

The arrangement of relationships between step-siblings may be significantly different in blended families (Araujo, 2025). Despite this difference, when compared with the relationship between biological siblings, there are cases when full integration in families is achieved, in which case, step-siblings become closely acquainted with

each other, work together on household tasks, and engage in common routines and activities (Landon, 2022). This is an ideal situation that encourages cooperation and emotional connection amongst the siblings who act as a unit (Coleman, 2024). Partial integration, on the other hand, can take place, which involves a little contact and continued distinct schedules, space, or social group. This partial integration is likely to cause isolation or competition, especially when children regard their bond with a step-sibling as second when compared with that with a genuine parent (Leopold et al., 2025). The level of integration is mainly based on how willing the children are to accept each other and how much the parents make an effort to provide a way of bonding and connecting the children.

The number of step-sibling families is very high in different parts of the world. In the U.S. Census Bureau (2021) show that about 15 to 20 percent of children in blended families are step-siblings, which is connected to the tendency to remarry and the intricacies of the modern family setups. In a similar fashion, the research carried out in New Zealand (Gath et al., 2021) indicates that 6.3-7.5 percent of children under the age of 17 years shift to stay with a step-parent, step-siblings, or both, which highlights that the presence of the step-sibling relationships is rather high in New Zealand. A survey of households in Brazil has also shown that 34 percent of children reside with stepfathers, with even more living with biological fathers, 17 percent, this being a more diverse approximation in comparison to the formation of families in various cultures (Gath et al., 2021).

Step-sibling situations are also predominant in the African context, but then, the processes of integration vary based on cultural expectations and socioeconomic statuses. In Ethiopia, almost 17.6 percent of children younger than the age of 18 years live in the family of a non-biological parent, which is much higher than the values of

the neighboring African countries like Rwanda (15 percent) and Uganda (15.7 percent) (Tekeba et al., 2024). The rate of children with a step-parent in sub-Saharan Africa underscores the highly dynamic and shifting family structures on the continent, implying that the concept of step-siblings is a pervasive and growing occurrence.

The process of integration is one of the major problems that step-sibling families face. The children in step families are not those children who chose their new arrangements but are forced into it by their parents and the fluctuating conditions (Araujo, 2025). This forced assimilation can trigger serious emotional and mental problems as children can be alienated, displaced, or resentful of the new members of the family (Landers et al., 2024). The problem is more severe in the case of older children who can be faced with the dilemma of loyalty or being unwilling to create relationships with step-siblings (Kırhan, 2022). Also, the emotional bond children have with a biological parent may make it difficult to accept a new partner as an equal member of their family unit, which aggravates the integration process (Ganong et al., 2022).

Active involvement of parents in integrating the step-siblings must be adopted. This will be done through embracing a positive attitude and understanding amongst the kids, developing adequate time and space to engage with them, and easy communication **(**Papernow, 2018). Promoting family, always doing things together, and treating others with respect are part of the strategy that would help ease integration and develop a harmonious environment. Parents can alleviate the misconception and foster good relationships between step-siblings by allowing family members to express their ideas, feelings, and expectations toward each other (Zafran, 2022). However, studies conducted by Guin (2024) warn that integration progress without taking the emotional preparedness of children as a measure and creating an

encouraging environment possesses the potential to backfire and cause tension, isolation, and conflict.

The gradual method of integration is usually more effective than integrating fast. Children will be more successful in creating lasting ties with step-siblings when they are allowed to build their connection at their own time (Coleman, 2024). Such bonds play a central role in the general family stability and emotional well-being. With time, the children might start perceiving each other as family, and their relationships might then turn into the real ones between a brother and a sister (Oliver-Blackburn, 2023). In addition, providing opportunities to spend time together as a family and having some form of joint activities (outings, games, joint projects, etc.) may contribute to family identity and belonging. Such activities will minimize the emotional gap between step-siblings and build a unified family unit (Ganong & Sanner, 2023).

There can be external support systems in step-siblings as well. Through family therapy or counseling, family members may get through the intricacies of step-siblings by offering secure children to air their feelings and parents to be advised on the avoidance of conflicts, as well as how to facilitate positive relationships (Landon et al., 2022). The blended family peer support networks and community groups provide extra resources; they are good sources of advice and support, which make the children and the parents feel less lonely in their plight (Ganong & Sanner, 2023).

Finally, the effectiveness of the relationships between the step-siblings in the blended family depends on the joint action of the parents, the step-parent, and the children themselves (Ganong & Sanner, 2023). Through patience, understanding, and openness, step-sibling families can also form helpful relationships that are similar to those of sibling relationships (Jabbari et al., 2023). This is not an easy task and

requires constant dedication and purposefulness. However, when properly implemented, one can end up with a functional and emotionally satisfactory family unit.

Biological and Step-Sibling Blended Families Structures

This type of blended family combines both shared and non-shared children, where individuals with kids from previous marriages remarry but still get kids together, and thus the biological child ends up living with step-sibling (s) under the same roof (Araujo, 2025). This type of blended family structure introduces a very unique relational hierarchy and also emotional dynamic. According to Coleman and Ganong (2020), the presence of both stepchildren and biological children often reinforces the difference between the insiders and outsiders, mostly when it comes to emotional closeness, family roles, and parental attention.

Over the years, biological and step-sibling blended families have become increasingly common due to rising cases of divorce, remarriage, and cohabitation. According to Coleman & Ganong (2020), a growing number of blended families not only include step-parents but also a blend of biological and stepchildren. For example, Statistics Canada shows that among young married or cohabiting couples (below 55 years), 52 to 62 percent of them have a step-kin relationship, such as step-siblings or step-parents, thus evidencing the presence of biological and step-kin relationships (Utami, 2024). In Wales and England, census data for 2021 showed that there were 547,000 families with stepchildren. From this population, 51.6 percent of households that have 5 or fewer members contain both step- and biological children. In America, World Metrics (2024) reports that approximately 16.8 percent of children in the United States are from blended families, with 66 percent of these families including at

least a biological parent and a child of one, a scenario which leads to the presence of both biological and step siblings living together.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2023), millions of children in the United States have been raised in a family with a step-parent or a step-sibling (a long-term change due to divorce, nonmarital parenting, and remarriage). According to the Office for National Statistics (2022) in the United Kingdom, stepfamilies constitute a significant number of couple families, and dependent children reveal that blended families are no longer an oddity because societies are designed to accommodate them in modern times. In Canada, Statistics Canada (2022) indicates that stepfamilies constitute a significant number of couples that have children, and both simple and complex stepfamilies (where one or both partners have children with them or in common) exist within the provincial jurisdictions.

In a biological and step-siblings blended family, the combination of full siblings, half-siblings, and step-siblings develops stratified kinship reactions that do not coincide with the nuclear approaches. This has been described by scholars as a complex family structure, where the children may be a biological child to the parents and a stepchild to the step-parents and a half-sibling to the newly born child (Brown & Manning, 2022). Such intersecting identities have the ability to influence the sense of belonging and perceived status of the children in the home. According to research, children can interpret any kind of disparity in treatment, or even an apparent disparity, as favoritism, particularly when biological parents seem to be more emotionally involved in their common child (Ganong &Coleman, 2017).

The adjustment of such families at the emotional level is determined by the remarriage time, the age of the children, and the nature of the relationship between the couple. According to Papernow (2018), integration of a stepfamily is not an

immediate change to a unified unit, and as a rule, it is a gradual process of development. Initial phases are characterized by a lack of clarity in roles and expectations, particularly on discipline and authority (Brown & Manning, 2022). The step-parents find it difficult to provide their legitimacy, whereas biological parents are torn between their partner and the child. Upon adding a biological child shared by both parents, it may either make or break the family, which is what parents do with relationships inclusively (Coleman & Ganong, 2020).

The biological and step-sibling blended families are also influenced by socioeconomic factors. Parenting decision-making and household stability can be complicated by economic strain, child support relationships, and the interaction between multiple households (Pew Research Center, 2023). The kids who change homes can experience the loss of routines, schooling, and peer interaction, which affect their academic and emotional achievements. Nonetheless, studies indicate that supportive practices of parenting, including regular communication, co-parenting with nonresident parents, and justifiable rule-setting, can offset such stressors and ensure desirable adjustment (Brown & Manning, 2022).

Modern views are beginning to criticize the deficit-based approaches to blended families. Instead of focusing solely on these places as conflict sites, scholars place emphasis on the positive aspects of them, such as the establishment of broader support systems, exposure to different views, and the acquisition of adaptability and conflict-resolution skills by children (Paparnow, 2018). When parents make deliberate efforts to create inclusive family discourses, i.e., so that no children should feel excluded due to their biological affiliations to parents, family cohesion will be enhanced. Bonding can be reinforced between sibling groups by rituals and collective

activities, as well as explicit communication regarding roles, and less insider-outsider differences can be created (Ganong & Coleman, 2017).

It is evident that blended family structure continues to grow and comes with unique characteristics that challenge the traditional idea of what families mean, and thus, the need to think more deeply about the different issues in such a relationship, such as identity, belonging, and the existing relationships. Quality of family relationships between blended and non-blended family structures

Family relationships encompass communication patterns, emotional bonds, shared roles, and also general interactions among members of a given family. Different indicators help in assessing family relationship quality, including closeness among members, support, communication, conflict resolution, and the overall functioning of the family (Hosokawa et al., 2023; Segrin & Flora, 2018). Family structure plays a very critical role in shaping and enhancing these relationships, with notable differences being observed between blended and non-blended families due to issues such as unclear family boundaries, divided loyalties, and role ambiguity as a result of family transitions (Jensen & Sanner, 2021; Wagner et al., 2025). By comparison, non-blended families often report a higher level of relational predictability and stability, which positively influences their level of family satisfaction and also emotional security (Hosokawa et al., 2023; Segrin & Flora, 2018). Despite these challenges, studies emphasize that high-quality family relationships are achievable in blended families when there are deliberate efforts made towards emotional support, communication, and gradual integration (Kariuki & Wambui, 2021; Njoki et al., 2025). Intentional targeted strategies such as structured family routines, open dialogue, and mediation efforts by parents have been found to

be very influential in enhancing family quality through enhancing cohesion and relational satisfaction (Hosokawa et al., 2023).

The mass studies on demographics put stress on the significance of consideration of the relational quality of any type of family system. According to U.S Census Bureau (2024), about majorities of the children experience at least one major change in their families (such as a divorce, a remarriage, or change in their cohabitation) prior to their adulthood. Such occurrences generally imply that families will have to renegotiate roles, expectations and communication patterns. Studies demonstrate that therapy regarding such transitions is greatly linked to the future outcomes of such changes, including trust, level of attachment security, and their level of cohesiveness (Jensen & Sanner, 2021). Families allowing joint decision making in times of transition allege easier adjustments. By comparison, the ones that conceal issues, or leave the conflict between parents unaddressed, have more difficulties.

According to the recent Pew Research Center data (2023), the factor of parental involvement appears to be a major protective aspect in any type of family. Even in a complex family structure, children who reported at least one emotional caregiver are resilient and less anxious. Constant effects of emotional stability appear to reduce the pressure that may be caused by blended families. The literature on blended and non-blended families all agrees that relating to parental warmth and responsiveness is accurate concerning the satisfaction in relationships and child well-being (Hosokawa et al., 2023).

Sibling dynamics is another key though complicated households' aspect that affects the quality of family relation in both blended and non-blended family. Wagner et al. (2025) discuss that the crucial relationship within a family is the relationship between siblings, whether biological, half, or even step. For biological sibling, this

relationship is often better than when compared to non-biological families (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Better sibling relationships might help in alleviating a strain between parents and children. On the contrary, the lack of competition may be worsened by constant competition. Such strategies as cooperative interaction, joint responsibility, and equal distribution of domestic advantages boost sibling relationships and reduce a sense of preference (Njoki et al., 2025). These findings indicate that subsystems within the family are interconnected and sibling connections need to be included in broader relational assistance.

Family relationships are now being transformed by computer-mediated forms of communication. Technology is being used by an increasing number of families to facilitate day-to-day activities and also as a way of keeping in touch emotionally by parents or relatives who have moved out (Tammisalo & Rotkirch, 2022). According to the Pew Research Center (2023), a great number of families communicate through digital technology to maintain contact. In the hands of well-wishers, these tools help in continuity of Relationships. However, the wrongful or discord-filled communication may aggravate the lack of understanding. Thus, healthy families are the prerogative of digital literacy and good communication principles (Baruah, 2025).

Family relationships are also influenced by economics and policy. According to statistics provided by Statistics Canada (2022), financial stability, such as family support services, and insured parental jobs enhance the well-being of a family. Money issues are also likely to increase parental conflict and reduced emotional availability which in turn directly reduces relationships quality. Counseling, parenting programs, and community mediation, on the other hand, assist families in bettering their communication and conflict management (Jensen & Sanner, 2021).

Present day family research has switched to emphasis on strengths rather than disadvantages. They consider blended families as flexible, expanded kinship, and cooperative (Wagner et al., 2025). Numerous blended families establish conscious strategies, such as new shared practices or family histories that develop belonging and unity. With time, the practices minimize confusion of boundaries and clarification of relationships, providing an emotional security like in non-blended households (Hosokawa et al., 2023).

In general, the evidence demonstrates that family structure poses unique challenges, but does not determine the relational quality of a family. Communication, emotional responsiveness, fairness and outside support are the most critical issues. They always lead to the satisfaction and stability of families (Pew Research Center, 2023; Statistics Canada, 2022; U.S. Census Bureau, 2024).

Differences in family relationship quality between blended and non-blended families

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security (Hosokawa et al., 2023; Segrin & Flora, 2018). Despite these challenges, studies emphasize that high-quality family relationships are achievable in blended families when there are deliberate efforts made towards emotional support, communication, and gradual integration (Kariuki & Wambui, 2021; Njoki et al., 2025). Intentional targeted strategies such as structured family routines, open dialogue, and mediation efforts by parents have been found to be very influential in enhancing family quality through enhancing cohesion and relational satisfaction (Hosokawa et al., 2023).

The mass studies on demographics put stress on the significance of considering the relational quality of any type of family system. According to the U.S Census Bureau (2024), the majority of children experience at least one major change in their families (such as a divorce, a remarriage, or a change in their cohabitation) prior to their adulthood. Such occurrences generally imply that families will have to renegotiate roles, expectations, and communication patterns. Studies demonstrate that therapy regarding such transitions is greatly linked to the future outcomes of such changes, including trust, level of attachment security, and their level of cohesiveness (Jensen & Sanner, 2021). Families allowing joint decision-making in times of transition make easier adjustments. By comparison, the ones that conceal issues or leave the conflict between parents unaddressed have more difficulties.

According to the recent Pew Research Center data (2023), the factor of parental involvement appears to be a major protective aspect in any type of family. Even in a complex family structure, children who reported at least one emotional caregiver are resilient and less anxious. Constant effects of emotional stability appear to reduce the pressure that may be caused by blended families. The literature on blended and non-blended families all agrees that relating to parental warmth and

responsiveness is accurate concerning the satisfaction in relationships and child well-being (Hosokawa et al., 2023).

Sibling dynamics is another key though complicated aspect of households that affects the quality of family relations in both blended and non-blended families. Wagner et al. (2025) discuss that the crucial relationship within a family is the relationship between siblings, whether biological, half, or even step. For biological siblings, this relationship is often better than when compared to non-biological families (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Better sibling relationships might help alleviate the strain between parents and children. On the contrary, the lack of competition may be worsened by constant competition. Such strategies as cooperative interaction, joint responsibility, and equal distribution of domestic advantages boost sibling relationships and reduce a sense of preference (Njoki et al., 2025). These findings indicate that subsystems within the family are interconnected, and sibling connections need to be included in broader relational assistance.

Family relationships are now being transformed by computer-mediated forms of communication. Technology is being used by an increasing number of families to facilitate day-to-day activities and also as a way of keeping in touch emotionally by parents or relatives who have moved out (Tammisalo & Rotkirch, 2022). According to the Pew Research Center (2023), a great number of families communicate through digital technology to maintain contact. In the hands of well-wishers, these tools help in the continuity of Relationships. However, the wrongful or discord-filled communication may aggravate the lack of understanding. Thus, healthy families are the prerogative of digital literacy and good communication principles (Baruah, 2025).

Family relationships are also influenced by economics and policy. According to statistics provided by Statistics Canada (2022), financial stability, such as family

support services and insured parental jobs, enhances the well-being of a family. Money issues are also likely to increase parental conflict and reduce emotional availability, which in turn directly reduces relationship quality. Counseling, parenting programs, and community mediation, on the other hand, assist families in bettering their communication and conflict management (Jensen & Sanner, 2021).

Present-day family research has switched to an emphasis on strengths rather than disadvantages. They consider blended families as flexible, expanded kinship, and cooperative (Wagner et al., 2025). Numerous blended families establish conscious strategies, such as new shared practices or family histories, that develop belonging and unity. With time, the practices minimize confusion of boundaries and clarification of relationships, providing an emotional security like in non-blended households (Hosokawa et al., 2023).

In general, the evidence demonstrates that family structure poses unique challenges, but does not determine the relational quality of a family. Communication, emotional responsiveness, fairness, and outside support are the most critical issues. They always lead to the satisfaction and stability of families (Pew Research Center, 2023; Statistics Canada, 2022; U.S. Census Bureau, 2024).

Parent–Child Relationships in Blended and Non-Blended Families

Parent-child relationships are very key to the overall function of a family and significantly differ across the two-family structures. In non-blended families, parent-child bonds are often strong because they are established as early as childbirth and nurtured across the different developmental stages through stable parental authority, shared history, and long-term interactions (Hosokawa et al., 2023; Kiura et al., 2020). These factors often lead to a higher trust level, consistent discipline practices, and emotional security. Additionally, daily routine activities such as shared meals, family

leisure time, and homework support further strengthen emotional bonds and also cultivate a sense of predictability in this relationship (Wagner et al., 2025).

In blended families, parent-child relationships, primarily between step-parents and stepchildren, are a more complex issue and often develop gradually. According to Scharp and Thomas (2016), while biological parents mostly remarry for support and companionship, children mostly don't accept and immediately integrate into the new family setup, thus finding it hard to accept the new parental figure. Additionally, Ganong et al. (2019) found that step-parents often go through a hard time in trying to establish authority and emotional closeness with the stepchild, mainly during the early stages of the integration, thus lowering the perceived relationship quality when compared to that of non-blended families.

Recent studies indicate that the quality of a relationship between the step-parents and children relies on the speed at which authority and discipline are incorporated. The authors of Jensen and Sanner (2021) discovered that step-parents who become caring mentors and are not hard-knuckled authoritative figures have a lower chance of mistrust and more opportunities to establish sustainable intimacy. The step-by-step family power shift enables children to attentively acclimatize psychologically to the new position, increasing their own resilience and attachment. Equally, Coleman and Ganong (2020) also state that the involvement of step-parents is best realized when the biological parents support and legitimize the role of the step-parent at home.

The demographics reveal the necessity to work on the relations between parents and their children in new families. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2024), remarriage or cohabitation of parents is being experienced by the majority of children at younger ages, thus making step-parent child relationships common.

According to the Pew Research Center (2023), attitudes toward fairness, consistency, and emotional support in remarriages are primarily affected by life satisfaction and behavioral adaptation in general. These results highlight that the relational quality, rather than family structure, is a predictor of child well-being.

The Attachment Theory provides viable information to a blended family. Kids who have an uncompromised bond with at least a single caregiver, be it biological or step-parent, are more resilient in family transitions (Krejcova et al.,2023). Responsiveness, reliability, and emotional availability create secure attachments, and this is needed most in stressful or conflict situations. The step-parents who are patient and understanding in response help children to look at the new arrangement as a helping one rather than an intimidating one.

There are also conflict-management strategies that determine the course of relations. As Segrin and Flora (2018) observe, relationships between parents and children get better with time, provided that families adopt constructive conflict management, which includes calm discussion, compromise, and problem-solving. In blended families, the low expectations or the loyalty tensions usually bring about misunderstanding. Structured family meetings and mediation with the assistance of a guide aid in reducing hostility and clarity (Gyuris et al., 2020) through the redefinition of the family rules and the development of a common purpose.

Blended families have an impact on the relationship between parents and children based on socioeconomic and situational factors. Emotional availability and parenting consistency may be destabilized by economic pressure, residential mobility, and liaising with non-resident parents (Pew Research Center, 2023). Nevertheless, congenial co-parenting of natural parents, which is marked by a respectful conversation and collaborative decisions, helps children to avoid stress and develop

trust (Jensen & Sanner, 2021). This partnership will allow children to consider transitions as ordinary rather than indicators of instability and rejection.

Recent articles note long-term advantages of establishing relationships in blended families. Educational motivation, mental well-being, and peer competence thereof are the same among youth with positive interactions with step-parents as they are among children in non-blended households (Krejcova et al., 2023; Pew Research Center, 2023). Parental support in early adulthood, be it biological or not, is predictive of greater educational persistence and emotional flexibility (U.S Census Bureau, 2024).

In general, modern data show that although blended families might undergo conflict in relations in the course of structural adjustments, such parenting approaches as deliberate, co-parenting, and gradual role negotiation can help to strengthen parent-child relationships. These observations confirm the fact that close and positive parent-child relationships can be effective even in a variety of family forms, provided there is continuation, empathy, and orderly communication.

Step-Sibling Relationships in Blended and Non-Blended Families

The relationships of siblings are also a significant difference between the two family institutions. In a non-blended family system, siblings usually have the same family history, biological relationships, and set rules and traditions which ultimately lead to the development of a long-term attachment and familiarity (Segrin & Flora, 2018; Smith 2021). The fact that siblings grew up together as a household and underwent common family ceremonies gives them a feeling of continuity and emotional stability, which binds their relationships (Carter et al., 2023; Kiura et al., 2020). Regardless of the possibility of sibling rivalry, which becomes apparent due to shared identity and parental consistency, the degree of cooperation and cohesion

among siblings increases (Gyuris et al., 2020; Krejcova et al., 2023)? Parenting uniformity in non-blended families provides the siblings with clear expectations, which assist them in getting through possible conflicts. Though being natural, sibling rivalry in such families is less problematic as the siblings are brought up in a more stable and predictable setting (Hosokawa et al., 2023; Lee & Kim, 2021). Actually, most of the non-blended families develop an appreciation of their relationships due to their strong and trustworthy relationships during childhood (Anderson & Phillips, 2024; Scharp & Thomas, 2016).

Within blended families, though, these relations are more diverse and multifaceted, as they involve step-siblings who might vary as a result of age, culture, background, and emotional attachment (Sanner et al., 2018; Miller & Sullivan, 2022). The blended families are described as having the quick family change, whereby the children are suddenly supposed to fit into new family patterns, and this may complicate the creation of sibling relationships. Recent research (Rojas, 2021) confirms earlier results by Papernow (2013), who states that competition over parental attention, the perception of favoritism, and lack of insecurity regarding new roles in the family are the typical problems in blended families, resulting in their greater level of rivalry than in non-blended ones. Those include the feeling of insecurity because of children worrying about their positions in the family structure and a fear of being displaced by a new parent or a step-brother or sister (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Perez & Stevens, 2023). As an illustration, in most instances, children can think that the love of their biological parents is divided between the new family members, which results in the sensation of jealousy and emotional distress (Sanner et al., 2018; Thompson, 2022).

One of the tasks that blended families face over non-blended families is the phase of adaptation, in which new siblings can have more conflict, as some people whose role is being redefined by the new family might see their role differently (Brown & Stone, 2020; Patel & Dutta, 2024). Children can also oppose the entry of new step-siblings and new step-parents into their lives, perceiving them as competitors for affection, materials, or time. This opposition may mean more disorganized sibling interactions, as compared to sibling interactions that are more organized in non-blended families (Dong & Li, 2023; Kiura et al., 2020). Introduction of the new members of the family entails renegotiation of their identities and relationships by children, and therefore, sibling bonds within blended families are weaker in the short run. However, when trust is made, such relationships may turn into a source of strength and mutual help (Hughes, 2024; Nguyen & Harper, 2020). The situation is totally different when it comes to non-blended family structure since adaptation is smoother as it builds with time and with slight pressure, mainly because of the original family bond that exists by blood (Dong & Li, 2023).

Age is another very important factor that determines the quality of sibling relationships, as Razbani (2024) states. Recent longitudinal findings indicate that younger children in a blended family settle more easily into the new structure and build attachment more quickly than adolescents, who experience difficulty in fighting the allegiances, mainly because of the problem of emotional attachment. Children who are younger and more adaptable tend to form close relationships with their new step-siblings faster, less bound to a predetermined understanding of the family role, and less exposed to an aversion towards the changes that the blending process will cause (McLanahan, 2021; Torres & Garcia, 2024). Conversely, teenagers tend to be more dismissive of a new family setup, since they will be more prone to emotional

and loyalty tension (Nguyen & Harper, 2020). The mentioned age gap in adjustment may lead to a gap in the relationships between siblings in the blended family, as older children tend to report being alienated and suspicious of their step-siblings (O'Neil, 2022; Papernow, 2013). For non-blended families, age also affects the quality of family relationships, but differently, since they grow from scratch within the family, and thus the attachment is stronger with time, and they do not need to adapt and expect a foreign family structure

On the same note, Nguyen and Harper (2020) also found that adolescents raised in blended families indicate that sibling cohesiveness tends to be lower when compared to those brought up in non-blended families. This can be explained by emotional and psychological issues relating to adolescence, as well as the difficulty of adapting to the blended family system (Zafar & Iqbal, 2025). Along with not being ready to exclude their new step-siblings as their family members, adolescents might struggle to understand their emerging new relationships, mostly when the latter seem to be forced or unnatural (Landon et al., 2022). They might not want to develop tight relationships with step-siblings; they can consider them as strangers or obstacles to their family structure. This opposition may be especially acute in cases when children believe that the existence of step-siblings makes their place in the family uncertain or jeopardizes their bond with their biological parent (MacAlister, 2022). This is different when it comes to non-blended families since the cohesiveness is more natural with normal wrangles not necessarily linked to one sibling viewing the other one as a threat (Zafar & Iqbal, 2025).

However, healthy and good sibling relationships in both blended and non-blended families lead to a general family satisfaction level and emotional intelligence (Njoki et al., 2025). Studies have continued to demonstrate that sibling relationships

are essential when it comes to social and emotional growth amongst children, and good sibling relationships also translate to improved coping skills, emotional control, and social skills (Wagner et al., 2025). Siblings in the context of blended and non-blended families are primary sources of emotional support, as they help each other to enjoy companionship, experience, or a sense of belonging (Larrue, 2025). Once formed, these positive sibling relationships have the potential to bring children essential emotional stability in a transition time in blended families (Gyuris et al., 2020). Key aspects that can lead to healthy sibling relationships are practical communication, conflict management, and supported family relations (Krejcova et al., 2023).

All in all, although non-blended families are more likely to have better relations and predictability, blended families with deliberate behaviours and plans (which could be communication, emotional support, shared activities) could still achieve the same level of sibling cohesion (Hosokawa et al., 2023; Wagner et al., 2025). Such tactics play a very essential role in minimizing the conflicts, strengthening the connections based on emotions, and increasing the overall functioning of a family in blended families (Zafar & Iqbal, 2025). Therapists and counselors in family environments encouraged the use of family-like building activities, like frequent family meals, problem-solving sessions together, and joint activities, which are likely to help step-siblings build trust and establish deeper emotional connections (Landon, 2022). When such attempts are made regularly, even in a blended family, there is an opportunity that the siblings will make a long-lasting relationship grounded on shared family values and mutual respect. Therefore, the early phases of blending may be problematic, but with the help of supportive tactics,

relationships between the siblings and positive results for the whole family process can be achieved (Araujo, 2025).

Family Attributes Influencing Relationship Quality across Family Structures

Existing family relationship studies show that different family attributes, including affection, companionship, emotional support, and shared activities, are key in enhancing family relationship quality in both blended and non-blended families (Brown & Smith, 2021). According to Wagner et al. (2025), they serve as key foundational processes that help in promoting strong family and emotional bonds, overall well-being, and also developing adaptive and stable family functioning. Despite being beneficial to both family structures, their impact and way of expression can significantly vary depending on family structure.

Affection , which is the expression of love, warmth, and intimacy, is an important aspect of optimal family functioning and psychosocial development (Segrin & Flora, 2018). In family systems, affection is a verbal and nonverbal process of communication that conveys feelings of closeness, warmth, and security between parents and children, siblings, and spouses. In non-blended (nuclear) families, affectionate interactions typically develop naturally through long-term co-residence, shared history, and ongoing caregiving, which are important for the development of secure attachment and emotional competence (Roman et al., 2025). In contrast, affection in blended families, where one or both spouses have children from previous relationships, may develop slowly due to the complex dynamics of the new family.

In non-blended families, affectionate behaviors are deeply rooted in parents' routines and involvement. Family routines, such as meal times, play, interactions, and bedtime, provide regular opportunities for physical touch and emotional expression. Studies on family routines show that predictability promotes family cohesion and

facilitates children's emotional well-being (Hosokawa et al., 2023). These predictable patterns of lovingness are linked to increased trust between parents and children, resulting in developmental benefits such as better emotion regulation, higher self-esteem, and improved social adjustment (Roman et al., 2025). For instance, children who are regularly treated to loving behaviors such as hugs, praise, and supportive comments exhibit lower anxiety and greater resilience when faced with stressful situations (Jensen, 2021).

However, blended families face the challenge of developing loving behaviors in unique ways. Since step-relatives do not have a long history of emotional connection, loving behaviors need to be deliberately developed rather than being deeply rooted in family ties. Studies on stepfamily dynamics show that children in blended families may be resistant to loving behaviors from step-parents, either out of loyalty to biological parents or fear of being replaced (Jensen et al., 2017). This resistance can lead step-parents to adopt a cautious or reserved approach to affection, further prolonging the development of deep emotional connections. Stepchildren may also test the genuineness of affectionate gestures, interpreting inconsistency as insincerity, particularly during early adjustment phases (Jensen et al., 2017).

According to family systems researchers, it is essential to have stable routines and shared experiences that enable stepfamily members to interact in low-pressure contexts (Roman et al., 2025). Shared caregiving experiences, such as participating in school activities, working on homework, or engaging in recreational activities, create opportunities for affectionate behaviors to be expressed and internalized. Over time, positive interactions help to create emotional security and reduce initial resistance (Hosokawa et al., 2023). Furthermore, emotional intimacy in blended families is further enhanced when biological parents are supportive of the step-parent role,

communicating to the children that affectionate involvement with both parental figures is acceptable and safe.

One of the most important developmental aspects of affection is its impact on children's psychological outcomes. Longitudinal research has shown that children in families characterized by high levels of affectionate involvement have better emotional regulation and improved peer relationships than children in families characterized by low levels of consistent affectionate involvement (Jensen, 2021). In blended families, the experience of affectionate relationships with both biological and step-parents is associated with lower levels of internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, suggesting that secure affective relationships across family subsystems (Jensen et al., 2017).

The quality of sibling relationships is also important in the display of affection. In non-blended families, siblings share a standard biological tie and a shared family history, which often foster a reciprocal style of caring behavior. In blended families, the relationship between step-siblings may not necessarily involve affectionate intimacy due to a lack of familiarity or feelings of competition. However, when families employ collaborative approaches that foster cooperative participation, step-siblings exhibit more pro-social behavior and mutual support (Hosokawa et al., 2023). This finding underscores that affection in family systems extends beyond parent-child relationships to include peer relationships.

Companionship Friendship in blended versus non-blended families is characterized by support, shared pleasure, and the building of significant relationships within family formations (Luscher et al., 2022). This makes it a fundamental aspect of healthy family functioning, as it provides members with a sense of belonging, a collaborative identity, and shared experiences. Companionship in non-blended

families is usually a natural process in which people engage in traditions, leisure activities, and other daily activities. Experiences like vacation time, celebrations, and dinners together may not only be a source of fun but also a sense of connectivity and trust (Hosokawa et al., 2023). In comparison, blended families tend to face greater barriers to companionship due to a lack of compatibility in histories, expectations, or the need to negotiate new roles in relationships.

Better relational quality and emotional stability are associated with family companionship. The literature indicates that members who regularly participate in mutual activities report increased proximity, reduced conflict, and enhanced emotional support (Hosokawa et al., 2023). Friendship also provides children with an opportunity to exercise social skills, such as cooperation, conflict management, and empathy, which enhance peer relations and school performance. By fostering a good relationship with their partners, parents would facilitate an interdependent, problem-solving relationship that cushions them against life transitions (Roman et al., 2025). Blended families do not begin this relationship together; they form it along the way, which can be a very challenging experience, as companionship is more difficult to cultivate. The relationships formed between step-siblings tend to start more in the peer relationship than in the family, and they are influenced by personalities and allegiance to biological parents (Jensen et al., 2017). Those initial trends may create an emotional barrier or misinterpretation, provided families establish the prospects of positive interaction. However, studies show that relationship quality can be enhanced through intentional approaches, such as new traditions or collaborative work. Collaborative sports, art, or volunteering activities organized in teams offer preplanned environments in which children and adults collaborate towards shared

objectives, fostering interdependence and enjoyment among one another (Hosokawa et al., 2023).

Companionship is also achieved through informal social communication, like idle chatting, family game nights, and group hobbies, among others (Natiq, 2024). Children demonstrate greater peer competence and emotional well-being in blended families when their parents promote such informal interactions (Roman et al., 2025). Such informal occasions cushion stress and create a story of cohesion and selflessness that cuts through formal obstacles. Parents influence companionship patterns. In non-blended families, parent-to-child and child-to-parent companionship develops through regular nurturing and time spent together in day-to-day life, which increases the sense of parental presence and children's trust in their parents. Parent-child companionship has to be established through conscious actions rather than in the context of disciplinary dealings in blended families. It is also proposed that emotional distance can be reduced and perceived support enhanced through one-on-one time with step-parents, through shared hobbies or outings (Jensen et al., 2017). This time together fosters relationships, and children perceive step-parents as partners rather than merely authority figures.

The socialization role of companionship is crucial to the long-term success of child development. Companionate interactions are associated with increased self-esteem, improved coping mechanisms, and greater social competence (Jensen, 2021). These happen more in blended families when circumstances are pro-social, permitting open interaction, mutual assistance, and collective fulfillment. In the long run, friendship enhances immediate pleasure and builds relationship skills that children bring into adolescence and their adult years (Hartup, 2022).

Overall, non-blended families enjoy the companionship that naturally arises from consistent practice and shared past (Larrue, 2025). According to Araujo (2025), blended families must also deliberately develop companionship through both formal and non-formal communication. Additionally, in situations where these endeavors have been successful, blended families exhibit qualities such as proximity, collaboration, and emotional stability, not less than nuclear families (Natiq, 2024). However, companionship is not merely a positive affective activity but also a relational cohesion mechanism and adaptive functioning foundation in all forms of families (Hosokawa et al., 2023; Jensen et al., 2017; Roman et al., 2025).

Shared Activities These refer to instances when family members collaborate, e.g., in meal preparation or sports. They build trust, improve communication, and strengthen family identity (McCarthy et al., 2017). Shared activities are followed to establish positive interactions, share emotions, and provide support to others in both blended and non-blended families (Fox, 2022). However, their frequency, perceived experiences, and implications are also quite different across various types of families in which they frequently occur, where challenges and benefits from previous relationships and family continuity are expressed (Heard, 2024).

Shared activities are a component of a defined culture in non-blended families. Dinner customs, holiday celebrations, weekend outings, and team sports are common and provide children with frequent opportunities to build strong connections (Hosokawa et al., 2023). Such moments serve as anchors: a familiar environment where children receive emotional feedback, observe problem-solving in action, and develop social capacities. For example, assistance with cooking or the organization of festivities will promote bilateral communication, admiration for one another, and a sense of mutual success. Research indicates that these experiences lead to greater trust

in family members, reduce conflict, and enhance children's emotional security (Roman et al., 2025).

Additionally, joint activities influence children's thinking processes and their social development. Studies reveal that joint entertainment, housework, or other forms of recreation enhance perspective-taking, emotional control, and resilience (Jensen, 2021). These advantages do not end with formal rituals; informal instances of distribution also help bolster belonging and appreciation. Moreover, according to Ahmed (2024), Shared activities also play a critical, as well as complicated, role in blended families. Since such households do not share a common history, institutions will have to develop or reproduce routines. In addition, Ganong & Sanner (2023) states that the absence of a universal pattern can be a temporary hindrance to shared identity, and collaboration will be imposed rather than being natural. Children might be reluctant to take part in family activities when they regard them as forced and irrelevant. Nevertheless, studies indicate that cohesion can increase significantly through deliberate joint activities in blended families (Hosokawa et al., 2023).

Tasks in blended families that prefer cooperation rather than competition create bridges between families (Heard, 2024). For instance, community service projects, shared artwork, or planning events bring members together on common ground, which helps them build group identity and understanding. Such activities minimize the sense of isolation among stepchildren and foster a sense of shared success (Roman et al., 2025). Fun and informal moments together, like hiking, playing games, or doing what they share as hobbies, will help in bonding without any expectations, and lets step relations develop naturally as time elapses.

In non-blended families, parents tend to be in control, providing an example of teamwork, whose participation rules are followed by the children (Zafar & Iqbal,

2025). When there are two parenting families with a stepfather and mother, the two need to liaise to ensure that the activities remain cohesive and significant to all parties involved. Research indicates that parental consultation leads to better satisfaction (as children are allowed to choose activities or adjust schedules) and can help them feel more alike and part of the community (Jensen, 2021).

Similar activities also determine sibling relationships. In a non-blended family, they bring in solidarity and support (Ganong & Sanner, 2023). In blended families, activities that bring step-siblings together, e.g., team games or joint projects carefully selected, reduce rivalry and increase positive interactions (Ganong & Sanner, 2023). With time, these instances transform distant step-relationships into ones of help and understanding.

In both forms of family, joint activities are not mere moments; they shape family narratives and histories. Achievements, comedy, and problem-solving create shared memories that bring families together (Ganong & Sanner, 2023). Regardless of whether activities occur naturally in non-blended families or are deliberately developed in a blended one, studies support their contribution to building cohesion and psychological well-being (Landers et al., 2024).

Emotional Support Mechanisms. Emotional support is another key family attribute that influences the quality of family relationships. According to Russell et al. (2022), some behaviors that fall under the emotional support mechanisms include active listening, empathy, validation, and responsive communication, which enable family members to overcome stress and conflicts, and develop trust. With emotional support, psychological well-being is promoted, relationship bonds are strengthened, and adaptive family functioning is enhanced (Segrin & Flora, 2018). Although emotional support is a basis of the relational aspect of both blended and non-blended

families, structural history and role clarity differ in how they express and internalize support.

According to Kaltiala et al. (2023), emotional support in non-blended families is likely to predict existing patterns of caregiving and predictable patterns of relationships. The emotional histories of parents in nuclear families are usually long, and they can respond to their children's emotional needs (Bowen, 2024). This consistent responsiveness fosters emotional safety and interpersonal competence. These initial emotional bases forecast greater interpersonal ability and mental soundness over time.

Moreover, non-blended families often provide emotional support and predictability (Kulkarni et al., 2024). The atmosphere of free communication and trust is built through constant validation of feelings, support for children during stress, and the ability to listen to concerns and worries, which builds child-parent relationships (Shorer & Marciano, 2025). Children brought up in such environments also develop adaptive coping strategies, reduced internalizing symptoms, and a sense of mastery over their emotional problems (Ahmed, 2024). Blended families, on the other hand, tend to face additional barriers to integrating emotional support. Since families do not always have a long emotional history, step-parents must build trust and legitimacy before their support behaviors are accepted wholeheartedly (Ani, 2024). Efforts at emotional intimacy might be viewed as encroaching and counterfeit by stepchildren, particularly where transitions in the past have been violent. It may lead to resistance in the initial stages of integration (Jensen et al., 2017). Empirical studies of the processes in stepfamilies have established that emotional support provided by step-parents increases with time as relational trust develops and roles are defined.

Intentional emotional support interventions in blended families commonly imply reinforced communication patterns, joint problem-solving, and sensitive validation of emotional encounters (Araujo, 2025). Research indicates that those families that actively create a safe environment in which they feel free to express their emotions are more likely to report higher levels of relational satisfaction and psychological health (Duca et al., 2023). These plans help reduce ambiguity around emotional roles and strengthen a common determination to support one another. There is also parental coordination in households that impacts the effectiveness of emotional support. With respectful communication and the demonstration of a single message of support by biological parents and step-parents, children will be more inclined to internalize a sense of emotional security within living arrangements (Ani, ,2024). In contrast, inconsistent support, including variations in emotional availability or even opposing messages, may exacerbate emotional distress among children and destabilize relationships with family members (Suprihantono & Rizal, 2025).

Notably, emotional support in blended families does not always rely on the figures of parents. Peer-like relationships with step-siblings, as well as supportive interactions among siblings, are also included in the family's emotional ecosystem (Natiq, 2024). When step-siblings listen to each other with empathy and reciprocal support in stressful situations, they replenish emotional resources within the family, fostering resilience and well-being (Oliver-Blackburn, 2023).

In both family setups, the emotional support system is directly related to psychological consequences such as self-esteem, emotional control, and adaptive coping (Duca et al., 2023). Suprihantono and Rizal (2025) indicate that children who have reported understanding and being assisted by caregivers have lower levels of depression and anxiety, and higher levels of social competence and life satisfaction

(Pavić et al., 2024). Even though blended families might need deliberate efforts to develop adequate emotional support, studies have consistently shown that, with such mechanisms in place, their relational satisfaction and emotional well-being are similar to those of non-blended families (Shorer & Marciano, 2025; Segrin & Flora, 2018).

Influences of Blended Family Structures on the Quality of Family Relationships

Contemporary changes in marriage, divorce, remarriage, and cohabitation have led to a significant rise in blended family structures, reshaping the emotional and behavioral environments in which young people develop (Venkareddy, 2025). Because the family is the primary context for socialization, shifts in family composition can influence emotional regulation, attachment security, discipline practices, and interpersonal interactions (Ahmed, 2024). For university students navigating identity formation, autonomy, and academic demands, the quality of family relations play a crucial role in shaping both their behavioral and emotional well-being. Emotional outcomes, including anxiety, stress, self-esteem, and depression, are often directly linked to the degree of perceived support from parents, family cohesion, and even clarity in communication (Xiang et al., 2022).

Similarly, different behavioral patterns, including internal behaviours such as social isolation and withdrawal, and external behaviours such as defiance and aggression, are either positively or negatively influenced by relational stability, the level of conflict in the family, and consistency in parenting (McFarquhar, 2025). While non-blended families are frequently associated with continuity and predictability, blended families may require adaptation to new roles, expectations, and attachments, which can temporarily heighten emotional vulnerability or behavioral challenges (Ganong, 2020). However, growing evidence suggests that supportive

relational processes rather than family structure alone ultimately determine whether students experience resilience or distress in both emotional and behavioral domains.

Emotional Well-being of Students in Blended Families

According to Oggiano (2022), emotion refers to the physical and mental condition resulting from neurophysiological changes and is associated with feelings, thoughts, and affective experiences. Among university students, emotional well-being is an important part of overall functioning, and family structure significantly influences emotional outcomes (Luciano, 2025). Although traditional nuclear families tend to promote continuity and stability, blended family formations resulting from divorce, remarriage, and cohabitation have introduced structural changes that may alter emotional control and psychological adaptability among students (Ganong & Sanner, 2023). It has long been established that family structure has an interaction with emotional health indicators, including stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms in children and young adults, and non-intact families tend to have more emotional problems than intact families (Ban, 2025)

University students from blended families often face emotional difficulties, such as adapting to new family roles, step-relationships, and a new household, which are reflected in increased stress responses, emotional insecurity, and difficulty with identity formation in the context of emerging adulthood (Ganong et al., 2024). These patterns can be explained through an attachment theory. Changes during transitions, such as the separation of parents or the arrival of step-parents, cause a momentary disruption to established attachment relationships, and students need to renegotiate their expectations for the availability of emotional resources and support (Ganong & Sanner, 2023). Lack of consistency in caregivers' responsiveness to such transitions is perceived by students, who regularly complain of heightened emotional sensitivity

and an inability to trust new and unfamiliar parental figures, particularly when communication patterns are ambiguous or opposing (Ban, 2025; Jensen et al., 2017). In addition, unresolved loyalty dilemmas may further exacerbate internal stress and add to the confusion of identity in new adulthood. It is not only a childhood phenomenon.

Although early emotional responses to blended family changes can be distressing, longitudinal studies show that outcomes can be positive and change as family processes become more adaptive (Tavares et al., 2024). Students with a report of stable, supportive communication with both biological and step-parents show a decrease in emotional uncertainty over time (Oliver-Blackburn, 2023). Stability in parental presence and clarity in family roles create a sense of predictability, mitigating stress and fostering emotional safety. Notably, family cohesion, i.e., mutual support and emotional involvement, has been consistently linked to positive emotional states and greater purpose in adolescents and young adults, even in structurally diverse families (Roman et al., 2025).

Support from sources outside the immediate family also influences students' well-being. Peer relationships play a significant role as a source of emotion during transitional times. Students at universities who interact with positive peers, share their stressors with close friends, and attend organized counseling services exhibit lower levels of isolation and increased emotional strength (Sun et al., 2020). Additionally, according to findings from a study by Tangco-Siason (2025), support systems, which involve institutional support services, entail family systems viewpoints, including campus counseling services that prompt students to reflect upon their families, promote emotional awareness and coping mechanisms among the students in a

manner that academic performance and social interactions are bolstered simultaneously

On the other hand, a lack of emotional support or unresolved tension within the family may increase the adverse consequences **(**Papernow, 2018). According to Ban (2025), discontent with family relationships, high conflict, or emotional neglect has been associated with amplified depressive symptoms, which reduces the coping abilities in students. Such adverse courses may culminate in less academic involvement, social adjustment difficulties, and even withdrawal or school dropout in cases where emotional distress is not addressed (Duca, 2023).

As is evident, students in blended families might have difficulties with initial feelings, which are not inherent to the family arrangement. Emotional well-being is primarily influenced by the quality of emotional support, clarity in communication, parental involvement, and peer/counseling networks. In the presence of supportive, intermittently stable relational processes, students in blended families demonstrate better emotional outcomes, resilience, and academic engagement, highlighting that the influence of family structure is mediated by relational processes rather than being predetermined.

Behavioral Influence on Students in Blended Families

Behavior refers to what one does and how they react and respond to the environment, in relation to development, environment, and relationships. The common behavioral typology in family research is externalizing and internalizing (Stoddard-Bennett et al., 2023). According to Rizwan et al. (2024), family setup is a key factor that shapes behavioral outcomes, especially for college students who are forced to navigate a complex social, emotional, and academic setting. Kids in non-blended families tend to face consistent, steady behavioral demands because they

have predictable parental involvement, established patterns, and well-defined roles (Fox, 2022). Conversely, the blended students are also prone to difficulties in adjusting to the new parental figures, blending step-siblings, and new roles in the family (Ganong & Coleman, 2017).

According to empirical studies by Shui and Aubyn (2015), the students in blended families have been found to have a higher level of externalizing and internalizing behaviors as compared to the students in non-blended families Among the behavioral manifestations, there can be defiance, temper tantrums, dropout of school, shunning social life, or unwillingness to engage in extracurricular activities (Nielsen et al., 2025). The causes of such behaviors include poor routines, inconsistent discipline, role ambiguity, and limited emotional access for parents and step-parents (Jensen et al., 2018). Non-blended families, on the other hand, offer a predictable, cohesive environment that strengthens behavioral norms and reduces vulnerability to maladaptive behaviors.

The quality of family relationships is a key determinant of behavioral outcomes across different family structures. Behavioral problems are forecasted by high levels of interparental conflict, inconsistent discipline, and lack of emotional support, and the absence of maladaptive behavior is buffered by supportive and cohesive family conditions (Hosokawa et al., 2023). Step-parents who act as authoritative figures in blended families without first developing an emotional bond can be perceived as illegitimate and, in this context, as opposing or defiant (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Conversely, families, both blended and non-blended, that shape collaborative problem-solving, working, and emotional control patterns are likely to promote adaptive responses and decrease both externalizing and internalizing problems (Wagner et al., 2025).

Peer networks and school situations also mediate behavior outcomes. Stressed students who join helpful peer groups, reducing the impact of maladaptive behavior, or deviant groups, which strengthen risk behaviors, can also join deviant groups (Havewala et al., 2021). Moreover, interventions implemented in the university, such as social-emotional learning, behavioral support programs, and mentorship, were indicated to ameliorate self-regulation, emotional coping, and prosocial behavior in students in blended families (Jensen et al., 2018)

Cultural and societal contexts also determine behavioral outcomes. Collectivist cultures, such as those in Kenya, place a high value on respecting elders and family unity, which can lead to additional stress during blended family transitions (Njoki et al., 2025). Biological and step-parent conflicts can also cause issues of loyalty; this may manifest as subtle resistance or overt defiance toward biological or step-parents, depending on the family communication style and the student's coping strategies. Longitudinal research has shown that these behavioral problems tend to be short-lived and resolve as roles become clear, routines are established, and emotional support is provided (Jensen & Sanner, 2021; Stoddard-Bennett, 2023).

The parenting style remains an important variable that shapes behavioral outcomes. Even in blended families, authoritative parenting, which is warm, with boundaries and constant rules, minimizes externalizing and internalizing behaviors (Brown & Stone, 2020). Family-focused interventions, such as counseling and programmed interventions, are also beneficial for adaptive behavior because they foster mutual understanding, emotion management, and problem-solving (Smith, 2020). These strategies can be used alongside peer support and school programs to improve behavioral adjustment and academic and social interactions.

Strategies for Enhancing the Quality of Family Relationships

Current studies highlight several strategies for improving the quality of family relationships with a major focus on communication, respect, patience and shared activities. For instance, a study by Sayed & Sinha (2024) indicates that communication is an important tool because it helps in resolving any conflicts and also in building trust and thus strengthening family relations. Additionally, another study by Carr and Utz (2020) further identifies spending quality time together as a family and also participating in shared activities can help to enhance emotional connection further and thus a better family relationship. In such a complex and challenging family structure, it is important to apply and identify different relevant strategies so that it becomes strong and lives longer.

Open Communication

Open, effective communication in blended families is very important for enhancing the quality of blended-family relationships among students, as it helps build trust and strengthen family cohesion. A study by Smith (2020) found that open family dialogue minimizes conflict, reduces misunderstandings, and enhances emotional family bonds, leading to a high-quality blended family relationship. Further research indicates that well-structured communication among blended family members, such as frequent family meetings, helps create a conducive, safe environment for expressing feelings, fears, and concerns (Kariuki & Wambui, 2021). When parents and step-parents advocate for open communication and prioritize listening and empathy, they succeed in creating a peaceful blended family with fewer issues, as the young adults feel a sense of belonging and also security (Brown & Stone, 2020). This is because, according to Kiura et al. (2020), families that allow their students to express themselves freely and openly are always better positioned to resolve problems constructively. Additionally, targeted education programs focused

on communication strategies significantly improve family cohesion and satisfaction (Gyuris et al., 2020; Krejčová et al., 2023).

In addition to minimizing conflict, free communication is important for establishing family roles and expectations in blended families (Heard, 2024). Restructuring the family usually creates confusion about authority, discipline, and emotional boundaries. Assumptions can be used instead of understanding without intentional conversation, resulting in tension and relational distance (Araujo, 2025). Research based on family systems views highlights the importance of communication in boundary negotiation and role definition to enable step-parents and stepchildren to develop overlapping expectations (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). The dialogue between family members will help them gradually establish relational identities, improving psychological safety and reducing ambiguity (Heard, 2024).

The quality of communication also influences attachment security in blended families. By participating in supportive dialogues and affirming children's experiences, step-parents can enhance the likelihood of building trust-based relationships in the long term (Sanner et al., 2018). On the other hand, the shirking of sensitive conversations, such as loyalty issues or remarriage concerns, can worsen the emotional repression and withdrawal (Fox, 2022). It has been shown that, among teenagers and college students, those who experience their family atmosphere as open and communicative have higher self-esteem and less anxiety than those who view their family as restrictive or dismissive (Wagner et al., 2025). This implies that communication patterns have a direct impact on relational satisfaction and individual psychological outcomes.

The time and regularity of communication are also important. According to Araujo (2025), a family can be characterized by an increased need to talk more

deliberately at earlier stages as tensions arise. Adequate dialogue may be achieved through regular family meetings, joint decision-making, and a standard shared goal-setting process (Kariuki & Wambui, 2021). The practices normalize freedom of expression and reduce the likelihood that unresolved grievances will pile up over time (Ganong & Sanner, 2023). According to Zaripour (2024), active listening, paraphrasing, and solution-focused discussion are conflict-resolution methods that improve understanding among the parties and reduce the risk that a minor conflict will escalate into a larger one.

Culture also influences communication in blended families. According to Onwumechili and Akpan (2026), communication in collectivist cultures, such as most Kenyan cultures, might have historically focused on respect for rank and an indirect form of disaffection. On the one hand, these norms can foster harmony; on the other hand, they can prevent open dialogue about delicate matters related to remarriage or integration into a stepfamily (Njoki et al., 2025). Thus, communication intervention in blended families should strike a balance between cultural respect and promotion of positive openness. Culturally specific communication strategies, such as mediated conversations with counselors or faith leaders, can increase trust and reduce resistance among families (Karingu, 2025).

Besides parental communication, interactions between siblings and step-siblings also play an important role in shaping the family's atmosphere. According to Zaripour (2024), there has to be continuous negotiation of shared space, resources, and parental attention in peer-like relationships among siblings. It has been shown that sibling rivalry is reduced and cooperative behaviors are enhanced when parents model respectful communication and equal listening (Gyuris et al., 2020). Kariuki and Wambui (2021) state that the importance of inviting others to engage in everyday

activities and shared responsibility enhances and consolidates the interaction and positive communication patterns

Notably, communication in blended families does not just stop at verbal communication. Non-verbal messages, including tone of voice, facial expressions, and physical presence, are important elements in delivering acceptance and reassurance (Araujo, 2025). When students feel warmth and are cared for during interactions with other family members, they are more likely to convey messages and react positively than when they feel a cold reception and lack of attention (Brown & Stone, 2020). Although nonverbal communication is relevant to improving the quality of family relationships in blended families, there is a need for emotional sensitivity, especially from parents or older siblings, so that the young ones do not interpret it negatively, as this may worsen the situation and complicate bonding efforts (Ganong & Sanner, 2023).

In addition to nonverbal communication, Communication skills-based education and therapy interventions have also, over the years, proven to have quantifiable advantages. There has been a direct relationship between family-based training aimed at enhancing communication patterns that foster the development of empathy, assertiveness lessons, and collaborative problem-solving skills, and positive relational satisfaction and decreased conflict levels (Smith, 2020). Psychoeducational programs that address students' interpretation and adaptive responses to the problem of family communication can also be offered in university counseling centers (Ganong & Sanner, 2023). These efforts enable students to engage in open communication within their families and, in turn, understand one another and develop relationships.

This literature shows that open communication is important and plays a determinant role in relational quality in blended families. According to Araujo (2025), Structural transitions can bring complexity and uncertainty, but coherent, understanding, and culturally sensitive communication can help overcoming misunderstanding and promote cohesion. Notably, communication is not only a dispute-resolution tool but also an identity, trust-building, and emotional-validation tool (Ganong & Sanner, 2023). Resilience, academic and social engagement, and positive social adjustment are more likely among students whose family environments are supportive and communicative (Gyuris et al., 2020). Therefore, communication is to be understood as a process of relationships and as a protective value that contributes to the long-term stability and well-being of blended family systems.

Role of Technology in Communication. We live in a dynamic world characterized by technological advancement, which has affected different aspects of life directly or indirectly. In the communication sector, technology has profoundly impacted how organizations and individuals interact, connect, and share information. Because of this, technology has positively bridged the communication gap in blended families. With technology, blended families can now constantly communicate through chats like WhatsApp and also schedule and run meetings. This has promoted frequent communication, which would have been hard, especially in the busy lifestyle of urban environments (Brown & Stone, 2020). Studies show that blended families that use technology to enhance communication experience improved emotional well-being and stronger family relationships (Njoki et al., 2025). Despite these advantages, families should not over-rely on technology since it reduces meaningful physical communication (Mutuku et al., 2021). The best way forward is to integrate both technology and traditional communication methods, as this enhances both practical

and relational outcomes (Smith, 2020). Currently, technology is being incorporated into the counseling sector to enhance further trust-building and engagement (Kiura et al., 2020).

Findings from a study by Njoki et al. (2025) show that families, including blended families, who intentionally use different aspects of technology to enhance open communication often report improved emotional well-being and stronger relational bonds among family members, resulting in better relational quality. According to Araujo (2025), when used effectively, digital communication in blended families allows both biological and step-parents to maintain open and consistent communication with their children. Also, it enables biological and stepchildren to build a bond through personal information, helping them get to know each other.

In addition, Baude et al. (2023) state that digital communication platforms such as social media enable Biological and step-parents to remain in contact with their children even when unavoidable factors, such as education, work schedules, custody arrangements, and residential separation, limit physical proximity. For students enrolled in universities and living away from home, video calls, Petre et al. (2025) stated that constant social media messaging helps enhance family relationships by providing opportunities for advice, emotional reassurance, and ongoing parental involvement, thus ensuring that relational continuity is sustained despite physical distance. In addition, Syahril (2024) states that technology facilitates group communication, allowing family members to meet and celebrate individual and family achievements, share updates, and collaboratively make decisions that enhance inclusivity, collaboration, and shared identity within blended households.

Digital tools are also used to reduce misunderstandings among family members by enabling clear, documented exchanges of information, particularly

regarding family schedules, financial responsibilities, and academic matters (Elias et al., 2022). This can be done electronically through a shared digital family calendar and family group chat, which can help minimize conflict arising from miscommunication or unfulfilled obligations and responsibilities (Syahril, 2024). Additionally, according to Araujo (2025), online platforms offer virtual family counselling services, psychological education, and parenting webinars to strengthen communication competencies and relational resilience.

Despite these advantages, families should avoid excessive reliance on digital communication, as overdependence may reduce opportunities for meaningful face-to-face interaction and non-verbal emotional connection (Mutuku et al., 2021), according to Abed (2023). Non-verbal cues such as tone, facial expression, and physical presence remain essential components of relational bonding and empathy development. Overreliance on text-based communication may increase the risk of misinterpretation or emotional detachment if not complemented by in-person engagement. The most effective approach, therefore, involves integrating technological tools with traditional communication practices to optimize both practical coordination and relational depth (Smith, 2020). Currently, technology is also being incorporated into counseling and therapeutic interventions to enhance trust-building, accessibility, and engagement among blended family members (Kiura et al., 2020). When digital communication is used intentionally and balanced with direct interpersonal interaction, technology serves as a valuable facilitator of cohesion, emotional support, and effective communication within blended family systems.

Problem Solving

The influence of problem-solving on young adults differs depending on how parents communicate and handle disagreements within a broad spectrum of

seriousness (Harold & Sellers, 2018). Another study highlighted the adverse correlation between poor marriages and both parents' and children's well-being (Lizdek et. al., 2016). Likewise, Hellard et al. (2023) highlighted the effect of parental communication on children's well-being as they mature.

Problem-solving in blended families becomes even more important, as relationships, roles, and the incorporation of step-parents and step-siblings are complex and newly formed (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Such families differ in their expectations, parenting styles, and disciplinary strategies, which may lead to misunderstandings or conflict (Teshayev & Zaitov, 2022). In contrast with non-blended families, where roles, routines, and boundaries are likely to be clearly established, blended families also have to deal with further levels of relational ambiguity, tensions of loyalty, and stress of adjustment (Yeung & Lu, 2024). The lack of strong problem-solving tools means even minor conflicts, such as disagreements over household rules, homework, or shared duties, can escalate into ongoing tension and negatively affect relationships between parents and children (Hellard et al., 2023).

Studies have shown that blended families which apply collaborative conflict-resolution strategies such as active listening, negotiation, compromise, and shared rule-setting can be characterized by a greater extent of family cohesion, relational satisfaction, and emotional security than families that employ authoritarian, punitive, or avoidant styles (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Gorrell et al., 2019). Collaborative problem-solving entails involving all family members in arguments, acknowledging personal views, and setting agreements that are authoritative yet respectful (Falloon et al., 2023). For instance, structured family meetings give family members a platform to air grievances, clarify expectations, and collectively strengthen behavioral norms.

Such meetings foster emotional openness, allowing any tension to be resolved before it turns into resentment or chronic stress (Hellard et al., 2023).

As family-based therapy interventions emphasize, adaptive parental modeling is important for problem-solving (Falloon et al., 2023). Parents who own up to their errors, apologize when the need arises, and engage children in joint solution-seeking transfer positive conflict-resolution skills as they grow up. Such skills are not confined to the home, as they equip adolescents to manage peer relationships, academic demands, and social problems (Sanner et al., 2018). Ganong & Sanner (2023) indicates that in blended families, where adolescents may experience conflict over loyalty or feel that one parent receives more attention than the other, regular modeling of problem-solving behaviors by biological and step-parents is essential for developing trust, alleviating anxiety, and promoting cooperative interaction.

In addition, the development of conflict and the success of the problem-solving process in blended families depend on social, economic, and psychological aspects. As Teshayev and Zaitov (2022) emphasize, family conflict is not only a personal issue but also a socially important problem, with effects on adolescents' emotional states, academic success, and societal stability. Money limitations, housing issues, and workload demands may further exacerbate the tension unless addressed through collective problem-solving methods (Heard, 2024). Interventions in psychological counseling for blended families focus on helping parents understand their expectations, mediating conflicts, and empowering adolescents to express their concerns constructively (Zafar, 2025). Strategies such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and solution-focused therapy have been proven effective in reducing conflict intensity and fostering collaborative dialogue and understanding (Hellard et al., 2023; Smith, 2020).

Blended families also bring up distinctive problems and opportunities when compared to non- blended families. In non-blended families, problem-solving is usually a process that occurs within well-established hierarchies, where parents and children are accustomed to routines, authority, and norms for conflict resolution (Tamura & Lau, 2023). Conflicts are addressed predictably, and children can learn what is expected and the repercussions (Kiura et al., 2020; Segrin & Flora, 2018). Blended families, on the contrary, have to deal with two or more parental figures whose values and behavioral expectations may differ. According to research, teenagers in blended families report increased stress in family problem-solving, especially during the initial stages of integration (Njoki et al., 2025; Sanner et al., 2018).

The long-term developmental advantages of proper problem-solving in blended families are well-documented. Resilience in adolescents is promoted by families that develop collaborative behavior, appreciate varied opinions, and make joint decisions. According to Hellard et al. (2023), teenagers in blended families who use structured problem-solving systems acquire better emotional control, adaptive coping skills, and an enhanced sense of personal efficacy. Such teenagers are better positioned to handle stress, manage interpersonal relationships, and remain engaged in academic activities despite the reasonable stress of family restructuring.

It is also essential that community- and school-based interventions facilitate problem-solving in blended families (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2020). Parenting education programs, peer-support networks, and workshops on conflict-resolution techniques offer families practice that can be utilized in everyday life to adopt collaborative strategies (Ziad, 2024). External resources alleviate a sense of isolation, acknowledge the difficulties of adjustment, and underscore the importance

of regular communication and empathy (Jensen, 2021); Smith, 2020). In addition, Keshvari et al. (2025) suggest that adolescents should be involved in school counseling and peer mentoring programs to supplement family-based interventions, thereby allowing them to develop their problem-solving skills in social and academic settings.

Models of family therapy are based on systemic and relational theories, which hold that problem-solving is not only the resolution of a conflict situation but also the reorganization of interaction patterns that support tension (Matilda, 2023). It acknowledges that the conflict in blended families is usually caused by more underlying relationship dynamics, including ambiguous boundaries, divided loyalties, and incompatible expectations (Gesinde et al., 2025). Organized activities, including family check-ins, role clarification, and shared problem-solving, help address the underlying issues in conflict, contributing to short-term resolution and long-term relationship stability (Gorrell et al., 2019; Hellard et al., 2023).

Feedback Mechanism

Effective feedback is vital in promoting healthy, open communication in families, especially in blended families. This feedback in complex family structures is sometimes challenging but important because it enhances understanding, resolves conflicts, and, in the end, builds trust and harmony (Ganong et al., 2019). Feedback also helps avoid miscommunication and misunderstanding, which would have led to alienation (Washboard, 2020). Constructive, clear feedback using different techniques, such as confirming intentions and clarifying messages, is important because it helps minimize assumptions and strengthen bonds (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Example: when stepchildren give feedback on how they feel. In addition, positive feedback from family members can help promote family inclusivity and

acknowledge efforts made. Feedback also helps resolve family conflicts, mainly arising from rivalry or differences in parental styles, and helps adapt to the new family structure (Sadeeq & Aatiq, 2024).

Additionally, feedback promotes co-parenting by aligning communication among family members, ensuring children have consistency, and helping maintain shared decisions (Washboard, 2020). It also helps family members adjust to new family roles and embrace them, thus creating a cohesive family unit (Smith & Karam, 2019). Because of the advantages above, it is clear that feedback is vital for building a strong family and promoting effective communication.

The process of feedback within families is a core factor in emotional validation, communication quality, and developmental effects, which become especially relevant in a blended family when relational roles and expectations are actively discussed. Emotional validation, which refers to the expression of empathy towards another individual's inner emotional experiences, has been shown to mitigate emotional dysregulation and facilitate psychological adaptation in young people when consistently provided within family settings (Sheasgreen, 2025). young adults in blended families can experience divided loyalties, confusion about whom they belong to, and ambiguous parental roles. Adapting to new family structures and receiving frequent feedback and confirmation is particularly important. The studies on family cohesion also emphasize the importance of emotional connection and encourage communication as pillars of young adult's psychological well-being, suggesting that families with high emotional support and mutual communication are better at providing stable conditions that foster belonging and self-esteem in children (Roman et al., 2025).

There is empirical evidence linking family communication quality to emotional regulation and adjustment in young adults. The quality of co-parenting, defined as caregivers' effectiveness in coordinating and communicating their parenting practices, has been reported to have a significant predictive effect on children's emotion regulation skills and prosocial behavior (Pan et al., 2025). Similar findings were reported in a study that used a person-centered analysis of co-parenting patterns, which revealed that moderate and high-quality co-parenting were associated with improved child emotion regulation, lower emotional lability, and increased prosocial behavior relative to low-quality co-parenting (Pan et al., 2025). These results reinforce the conceptual stance that caregiver feedback interacts to create more transparent expectations and reduce behavioral inconsistency, which would otherwise cause emotional stress in children.

Even emotion regulation is closely connected to interactions within the family. Longitudinal research on parental warmth and child emotional regulation demonstrates that reciprocal warmth and family emotional responsiveness predict more competent emotional regulation in children and fewer behavioral problems in the future (Isdahl-Troye et al., 2025). Families that support positive emotional expression by providing encouraging feedback are important for regulating emotion both in the short and long run. Additionally, the effect of parental psychological resources, including self-compassion, on young adults' emotion regulation can be mediated by co-parenting cooperation, suggesting that relational alignment and emotionally responsive caregiving can be combined to facilitate healthy development effectively (Acar et al., 2025). The results of the present case are important, as they reiterate that emotional validation is not a simple exchange but a relational process that develops internal regulatory abilities and social action.

The study of blended family dynamics is always focused on communication as a complex factor that facilitates adjustment. Although the adjustment challenges related to forming a stepfamily such as role ambiguity and relational tension have always been widely documented in classical research, current research also notes that, psychosocial outcome of children in a stepfamily is directly related to parent-child interaction and step-parent-child interaction in terms of quality, as opposed to the existence of the blended family structure (Jensen, 2019). When children are linked in supportive and responsive ways to parental figures, internalizing and externalizing symptoms are reported to be lower, and relational affective quality, or the expression of feedback and emotional support, protects individuals against adjustment challenges. Although not necessarily newer studies, the results' repeatability across a wide range of settings enhances the value of these longitudinal studies in current blended-family research (Jensen, 2019).

Emotional Intelligence (EI), a valuable cluster of competencies including self-understanding, empathy, and adaptive social interaction, is also developed through feedback in family contexts. Although most of the literature on the family antecedents of EI is pre-2020, it has been repeatedly demonstrated that open and empathetic communication and validation positively affect children's emotional perception and social capabilities (King et al., 2023). EI developed within the family environment facilitates management of peer relationships, academic cooperation, and personal deficits in children as they develop. Parenting styles that promote emotional expression and offer constructive feedback, such as authoritative parenting, are linked with greater EI in adolescents, which, once again, implies that feedback processes are both relational and developmental (King et al., 2023).

Co-parenting in blended families is not only about being consistent in discipline but also about emotional coordination. Research on the quality of co-parenting demonstrates differentiated profiles that have disparate impacts on the emotional outcomes of children; high-quality co-parenting is related to the maintenance of emotional climates that minimize the negativity and maximize prosocial behavior, and low-quality co-parenting is linked to the disruption of emotional states and behavioral issues (Pan et al., 2025). Regular feedback among caregivers minimizes the risk of conflicting expectations that may bewilder children and cause emotional instability. In blended families with biological parents and step-parents who may have different beliefs or approaches, deliberate coordination, are grounded in respectful conversation, this will bring predictability and emotional security. These trends are supported by theory and empirical research demonstrating that family emotional environment and communication structure are among the most potent predictors of adaptive child outcomes (Roman et al., 2025).

Also, the literature on parent-mediated interventions for emotion regulation indicates that empowering nurturers listening to and responding to children's emotional expression which increases children's emotional growth compared to coercive or critical communication approaches (Acar et al., 2025). Parental coaching programs that focus on validation, active listening, and emotion coaching help children regulate their emotions, suggesting that feedback training is a practical strategy to reinforce family processes. Although intervention research focuses mostly on early childhood, the principles of responsive feedback and validation apply to all stages of life, including the case of an adolescent reintegrating into a blended family.

Feedback effectiveness is also largely impacted by the tone and framing of the feedback. As found in communication science studies, feedback presented in a

manner aimed at understanding as opposed to judgment, i.e. by using I statements or reflecting empathy, makes one less defensive and more likely to understand each other, whereas criticism and blame result in an escalation of conflict and discourages openness (Gino & Brooks, 2026). Although much of this work is generalized to family communication, its application in blended families is supported by findings that the provision of emotionally validating environments is positively associated with child emotional health and relationship functioning (Sheasgreen, 2025).

The dynamics of feedback are also influenced by culture. Although systematic reviews identify prevalent mechanisms of family cohesion across diverse societies, such as emotional support and mutual respect, the manifestation of these processes should be adjusted to cultural values regarding hierarchy, respect, and communication norms (Roman et al., 2025). Being respectful in expressing emotions and providing age-appropriate feedback helps balance cultural norms with psychological needs, thereby creating an environment in which emotional experiences are not only recognized but also incorporated into family matters.

Overall, the evidence from studies on blended family communication and developmental outcomes supports the importance of a feedback mechanism for emotional validation, relational stability, and adaptive child development. Caregiver support through emotional validation increases psychological security and facilitates children's internal regulation and coordinated co-parenting, and regular feedback organization decreases behavioral conflict and promotes prosocial functioning. The effectiveness of feedback depends on the quality, tone, and timing, as well as its empathetic framing, with responsive communication associated with emotional competence and more cohesive families. The combination of these results indicates that encouraging the emotionally supportive feedback patterns in blended families is

not only helpful but also the key to the success of the relationship and developmental stability.

Trust and Emotional Bonds

Emotional bonds refer to close patterns of connection, including affection, connectedness, and closeness, that allow individuals to establish meaningful and long-lasting relationships and are involved in the process of preserving harmony and psychological safety in family systems (Volodarska, 2019). At the core of the process of building these emotional relationships, there is the element of trust, which can be viewed as trustworthiness among family members on their part towards each other, the level of trust between them in the matter of reliability, honesty, and commitment to the well-being of the other party, and in the absence of which, emotional proximity and depth of relationships are hard to attain (Lee et al., 2023).

Among blended families, where the roles of relationships are rearranged and the new attachments have to be established, the establishment of emotional bonds and trust is essential because trust can help them transition to interactions of a less intimate nature, to the post-relational bonds that become supportive and long-lasting (Brown & Stone, 2020). Trust does not come out of thin air; it is formed through consistent, predictable behavior, open communication, and shared experiences that authenticate each member's emotions, perceptions, and sense of identity (Lee et al., 2023). Step-parents who consciously strive to learn the emotional needs of young adults, by showing genuine interest in their concerns, acting as an active listener, and responding in an empathic manner, have higher chances of building strong and reciprocal emotional relationships. The opposite holds since the lack of emotional attunement or behaviors that fail to adhere to family norms leads to alienation,

resistance, and emotional unresponsiveness (Gyuris et al., 2020; Krejcova et al., 2023).

Empirical evidence from Roman et al. (2025) proves that safe emotional bonds in blended families can be viewed as a protective factor among the children and adolescents; children and adolescents who describe the presence of strong attachment with both the biological parents and step-parent demonstrate higher resilience, improved social competence, and mental health outcomes in comparison to those who do not experience such stable connections (Mutuku et al., 2021). These benefits of emotional bonding are carried into young adulthood. In the case of university students who are exposed to increased independence, identity, and academic stressors, emotional support from family helps to reduce stress, alleviate feelings of loneliness, and boost well-being by giving the students a safe relational foundation on which they can chase personal and academic pursuits with confidence.

Intentional involvement in joint activities, including family meals, shared work, sports, or creative projects, fosters long-term interaction and recognition of each other, and such joint experiences serve as relational currency that builds trust and emotional bonds over time (Anderson & Phillips, 2024). Emotional attachment is further cemented through positive reinforcement, including recognition of accomplishments, praise for input, and experiences of gratitude, which help reinforce the feeling of being appreciated, valued, and understood as individuals by family members (Malik & Yousaf, 2022). In addition, open communication regarding family expectations, limits, and regulations not only minimizes misconceptions but also indicates respect for the voices of the members, which is central to the growth of trust and relationship clarity (Hernandez & Cortes, 2023).

In various types of families, emotional responsiveness, in the form of modeling empathy, active listening, and constant validation of emotions between parents and step-parents, makes a good emotional climate within the family; children learn to internalise such norms and replicate the same patterns of empathy and respectful communication with relationships outside the family (Kim & Park, 2025). On the other hand, dismissive or hostile communication patterns disrupt family coherence, impede the formation of trust, and create disrupted attachment, as well as feelings of emotional insecurity (Lee et al., 2023).

The contribution of parental modeling is exceptionally essential, as children and adolescents absorb relational standards by observing and engaging in relationships (Natiq, 2024). According to longitudinal studies, patience, regular responsiveness, and empathic encouragement, even during the process of resolving conflicts or misunderstandings, can be expressed openly and respectfully by family members, which significantly increases the degree to which children exhibit secure attachment, emotional regulation, and adaptive interpersonal skills (Marshall & Li, 2025). These processes make step-parents who are willing to engage in challenging conversations without being defensive an indicator of reliability and emotional safety, which further helps the blended family build trust.

Moreover, when conflict is purposefully resolved, and the emphasis is on building a meaningful dialogue rather than pointing accusing fingers at each other, the atmosphere of family building the capacity to solve problems collectively and maintaining the resilience of relationships is strengthened (Peterson et al., 2024). These positive feedback rituals have a very strong connection to the maintenance of stable emotional relationships since the family members feel heard and emotionally recognized, and therefore, fewer relationships will be withdrawn or adversarial.

The emotional connection and trust in blended families with integration issues are also supported with the help of structured therapeutic interventions (Ganong & Sanner, 2023). Combined family counseling programs using guided dialogues, psychoeducational elements, and emotion-focused interventions are helpful in enabling family members to express themselves, resolve conflicts, and acquire adaptive interaction patterns (Papernow, 2018). The role of family therapy is demonstrated through controlled studies that reveal improvements in empathy, heightened relationship satisfaction, and enhanced coping strategies among adolescents whose families are facing adjustment or conflict difficulties (Brown & Stone, 2020; Kiura et al., 2020). These treatment benefits can be explained not only by enhanced symptom measures but also by dynamic changes in relational processes: families learn to work together more deeply, with deeper emotion attunement, mutual respect, and consistent, supportive feedback. Notably, culturally sensitive interventions indicate that emotional bonding strategies are relevant and sustainable, as they are informed by each family's values, histories, and belief systems (Nguyen & Morales, 2024). Awareness of cultural and personal differences in the understanding and value of emotional expression makes the process of trust and bonding less imposed upon individuals and more built jointly, in a manner that respects individuals' backgrounds and expectations at the interpersonal level.

Besides official interventions, everyday relational practices facilitate trust and long-term emotional bonding. As family members consistently demonstrate reliability in the sense of adhering to commitments, promises, and expectations of behavior, they indicate dependability, which is an important aspect of trust (Lee et al., 2023). Trust is also strengthened by shared responsibility for home chores and decision-making, as each member has their voice heard and appreciated in defining the family life. These

patterns of mutually dependent reliability are eventually deposited into an emotional bank account of positive experiences in relationships, which, in turn, provide stress and uncertainty protection and conflict shielding (Hernandez & Cortes, 2023). Thus, the process of developing emotional relationships and trust is not accidental or fixed; it is a dynamic, continuous relational project that requires conscious effort, empathetic engagement, and consistency.

Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded in two main psychology theories ,namely; the Family Structural Theory and the Attachment Theory. These two theories focused on different aspects of this study with the Family Structural Theory viewing family as an interconnected system while the Attachment Theory focused on the relevance of early emotional bonds between young adults and their parents, guardians or caregivers. When used together, they helped in providing a clear way of understanding how the quality of family relationships is affected by blended family structures among university students.

Family Structural Theory

The Family Structural Theory was developed in the 1960s by Salvador Minuchin. According to Roussel (2023), Salvador Minuchin saw the family as a functional unit where each member plays a specific role and it is made up of subsystems that have defined boundaries, roles and hierarchies. The behavior of one member affects the whole system, and problems are best understood in the context of these interactions. Additionally, Minuchin also highlights the concept of homeostasis, which suggests that, naturally, families always resist changes to maintain stability even in situations where the stability is unhealthy. From a systems point of view, the addition of step-parents and step-siblings can upset existing subsystems and power

relationships, which may impact communication, trust, emotional ties, and feedback processes within the family. Authority and attachment relationship changes may impact conflict management styles, problem-solving methods, and even behavior outcomes among university students. This systemic orientation makes the theory particularly useful for examining complex family forms such as blended families

It has been widely used to help restructure family roles and also improve communication during therapies, mostly during challenging family transitions such as transitioning to blended families. Different scholars such as Baptist and Hamon (2022), Johnson and Ray (2016), and Becvar et al. (2023) have proved the relevance of these theories when it comes to blended families with findings highlighting unique stressors such as disrupted hierarchies, conflicts, mostly when it comes to loyalty and role confusion.

One of the most significant strengths of the Family Structural Theory in this research is the holistic perspective. This enables the researcher to study the characteristics of blended families, not as separate traits but as parts of a constantly shifting system. This enhances the definition of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The theory also offers appropriate concepts like boundaries, enmeshment, disengagement, and hierarchy, which are directly related to the variables in the study: communication, feedback, and conflict resolution. In addition, it considers the moderating variables of socio-economic conditions, age, and gender, which are very responsive to the external forces that influence the functioning of the system. This is particularly relevant in this study where the socio-economic conditions in Kenya can increase or reduce the relationship ties in blended families.

Despite the identified strengths, the theory has limitations. First, it has been found to undervalue of individual psychological processes including mental issues,

trauma and variations in personality which influences the quality of relationships. Additionally, despite taking into consideration the role played by external stressors, it does not thoroughly examine other relevant structural issues that supports inequality such as cultural believe and poverty rates which have a significant impact on Kenyan family structure. There is also a notable tendency of assuming that improved family structure automatically leads to improved family relationship quality which is not always the case.

In the Kenyan setting, where significant number of families are part of extended family structure and where concepts of role diffusion, hierarchy and respect are valued highly, this theory is particularly relevant to this study as it provides a clear framework used to analyse how family boundaries, roles, and power dynamics influence the quality of family relationships among university students and thus guiding on potential understanding and interventions.

Attachment Theory

This theory was developed by Pediatrician and psychotherapist Bowlby (1969) by merging different relevant principles from psychoanalysis, ethology and developmental psychology. It emphasizes the role played by early emotional bond between the children and care givers in shaping the child's lifelong social and psychological development (Bowlby, 1988). Drawing concepts from developmental psychology, psychoanalysis, and ethology, this theory argues that children are innately driven to form bonds and attachments, especially when under distress. "Strange Situation" study by Ainsworth et al. (1978) further expanded the theory by identifying clear key attachment styles, namely; secure, insecure-avoidant, and insecure-resistant. According to her, attachments influence, either positively or negatively, emotional regulation, social functioning and cognitive growth.

Specifically, insecure attachments lead to reduced motivation, poor classroom engagement, and thus poor academic performance, while secure attachments promote resilience, curiosity, and achievements such as academic performance (Bowlby, 1988). The application of this theory has mainly focused on education, therapy, and developmental psychology. In this study, the theory helped explore how early caregivers bond, including those by biological or step-parents, influences the student's wellbeing and quality of relationship. Additionally, understanding the different attachment styles identified by Mary Ainsworth helped in assessing the roles they play in shaping the social lives of students (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

This theory has a number of advantages thus relevant for measuring family relationships. First advantage is its strong explanatory power when linking the relationship to lifelong cognitive, emotional and social development of children. It has also been credited for providing clear attachment style categories which are not only measurable but also applicable in both therapeutic and educational context thus useful in assessment of students' behaviors and their emotional responses. In particular, it is useful in understanding different dynamics of blended families where step-parents and step siblings create variation attachment experiences. Additionally, by focusing on relational bond and not isolated behavior, the theory allows for creation of targeted interventions aimed at improving communication, emotional security and trust among family members.

Despite these advantages, its focus on early childhood is a limiting factor in its application to university students as it overlooks the ongoing cultural, social and environmental influences during adolescents' stage and also adulthood. Additionally, the theory may underrepresent the role played by technology, peer relationships and

broader socio-economic factors when it comes to developing and shaping attachment patterns.

In the Kenyan context, despite most of its early studies focusing on family structure in the West, this theory remains highly relevant mainly because children are raised in diverse family setting which includes blended families and non-blended families. This diversity often shapes the quality of attachment bond with biological parents, step-parents, and other caregivers. Through using this theory, the study examined how blended family structure influences students' relational outcomes including emotional bond, communication, problem solving and trust with different moderating factors such as their age, family socioeconomic status and gender affecting this relationship further.

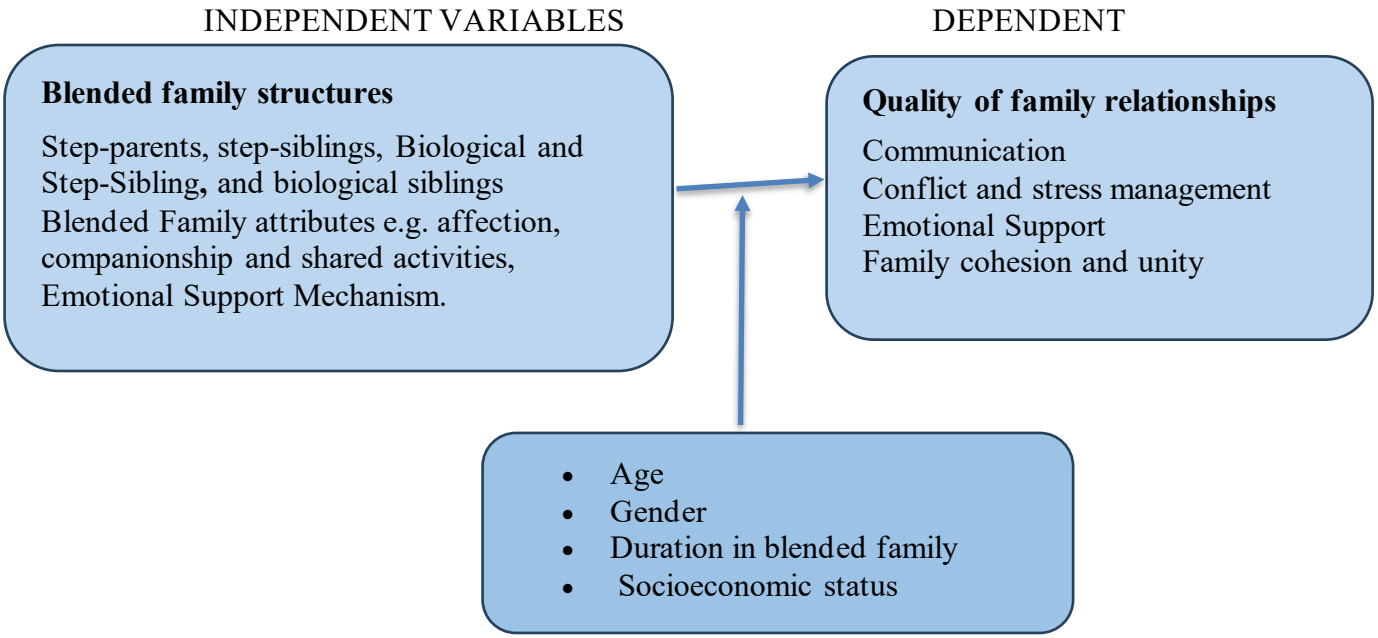
In this study, the theory was relevant as it provided a valuable framework that helps in understanding the influence of blended family structures on the quality of family relationships. Through focusing on attachment, the study generates relevant actionable insight that will help come up with interventions which will help strengthen family relationship and overall wellbeing.

Conceptual Framework

According to Miles et al (2020), conceptual framework is a written or visual product that explains, either in narrative form or graphically, the key concepts, factors, or even variables and the presumed relationship existing between them in a research study.

Figure 1

Conceptual framework



This study conceptualized that blended family structure (independent variable), characterized by step-parents, step-siblings, and biological siblings, and also different family attributes, affected the quality of family relationships (dependent variable) indicated by Communication, Conflict and stress management, Emotional Support, Family cohesion and unity. The strength of the dependent and independent variables reflected a correlation that was influenced by moderating variables such as socio-economic factors, age, and gender and Duration in blended family. By understanding and mapping out these relationships, this framework helped in providing a clear direction for the collection and analysis of data. Additionally, the researcher was able to focus on specific variables that were most likely to affect the study outcomes (Yao, 2024).

Synthesis of Research Gaps

In the last decade, blended families have become increasingly common and accepted globally with a number of studies being carried out highlighting the increasing complexity of relationships in such family structures (Sloan, 2021; Sobotka & Berghammer, 2021). However, most of these studies were carried out in western countries specifically Europe and the United States (Raymo et al., 2024; Oliva et al., 2014; Nixon & Hadfield, 2016). This limits their application to Africa as most African countries operate within very different family values and systems, cultural practices and also social expectation which may differently shape blended family's shape.

In addition, existing studies have also focused largely on adolescents and youth in blended families. While these studies provide very important developmental knowledge insights, there has been very limited attention on a much elderly group such as university students from blended families, who also face very unique development challenges including academic demands, identity formation and also navigation of relationships in blended families. The role of university students in supporting blended family students has also been largely unexplored (Tangco-Siason, 2025).

Quality of relationships in blended families also remains inconsistently defined with some scholar majorly focusing on cohesion and communication (Hosokawa et al., 2023) with others turning their focus to emotional support and bond (Wagner et al., 2025). Most of the existing studies also focuses more on parent-child relationships and overlooks the interconnected nature of different blended family sub

systems such as step-sibling relationships (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Sanner et al., 2018).

Addtionally, some of the studies on blended families relied solely on quantitative surveys (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2023; Statistics Canada, 2022) or qualitative interviews (e.g., Wagner et al., 2025; Jensen & Sanner, 2021) which clearly presented a methodological gap. These existing gaps informs the need for current study which seeks to address the gaps in terms of context, population, concept and methods by looking at family relationships in blended families among students in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya.

Table 1

Summary of Research Gaps

	Study by	Focus of the Study	Methodology	Findings	Knowledge Gap	How This Study Addressed These Gaps
1.	(Pew Research Center, 2015)	Prevalence of blended families in USA	Survey	High prevalence rates	Outdated and not student-focused	Used recent data and student population
2.	(Children's Commissioner, 2022)	Prevalence of blended families in UK	Census	Significant blended families	Did not assess relationship quality	Compared relationship quality indicators
3.	(Njoki et al., 2025)	Technology use and emotional well-being in blended families	Survey research in Kenyan context	Use of Technology to enhance communication improves emotional well-being	Did not compare technology communication quality between blended and non-blended families	Compared technology use patterns and their relationship to family relationship quality across both family structures
4.	(Oliva et al., 2014)	Prevalence of blended families in European	Survey	Moderate prevalence	No relationship comparison	Compared blended vs non-blended families
5.	(NBS China, 2017)	Divorce/remarriage patterns	Census	Low prevalence	No cultural relationship analysis	Examined cultural influence in Kenya
6.	(Wagner et al., 2025)	Family atmosphere and psychological outcomes in students	Survey research with university students	Open and communicative dialogue have higher self-esteem and less anxiety	Examined general family atmosphere without specifically comparing students from blended versus non-blended families	Compared psychological outcomes between university students from blended and non-blended families
7.	(Onwumechili & Akpan, 2026)	Cultural influences on family communication in	Cross-cultural communication research	Culture negatively influence	The study examined cultural influences generally without	This study examined how Kenyan cultural values influence communication patterns in blended

		collectivist cultures		communication because of ego	specifically focusing on blended family communication	families
8.	(Hellard et al., 2023)	Parental problem-solving and children's well-being	Longitudinal research	Parental communication significantly affects children's well-being	Examined general family dynamics without comparing problem-solving between blended and non-blended families	Compared problem-solving approaches and their effectiveness in blended versus non-blended families
9.	(Statistics South Africa, 2016)	Divorce statistics	National data	High divorce rates	No direct blended family analysis	Examined blended family prevalence directly
10.	(Ezenwaohaetorc, 2021)	Nigerian adolescents	Survey	30% blended families	Not focused on university students	Focused on university students
11.	(KDHS, 2022)	Kenya household structure	Survey	High step-family presence	No relationship quality assessment	Examined relationship quality
12.	(Wasserman, 2020)	Family typologies	Literature review	Identified types	No quality comparison	Compared quality across family types
13.	(Ganong et al., 2022)	Step-parent roles	Mixed methods	Integration challenges	Western focus only	Applied to Kenyan universities
14.	(Araujo, 2025)	Step-sibling integration	Qualitative	Conflict common	No comparison with non-blended families	Compared both family types
15.	(Hosokawa et al., 2023)	Relationship indicators	Quantitative	Identified key indicators	No African context	Applied in Nairobi universities
16.	(Ganong et al., 2019)	Parent-child relationships	Mixed methods	Adjustment challenges	Focus on early stages	Examined established relationships
17.	(Russell et al., 2022)	Emotional support	Clinical	Improves satisfaction	No comparison across family types	Compared blended vs non-blended families
18.	(Ban et al., 2025)	Emotional well-being	Longitudinal	Adjustment challenges	Focus on children only	Focused on university students
19.	(Xiang et al., 2022)	Student outcomes	Survey	Linked to family support	No comparison of family types	Compared blended vs non-blended
20.	(Sayed & Sinha,	Relationship	Review	Communication	No effectiveness	Tested strategies effectiveness

	2024)	strategies		improves quality	comparison	
21.	(Smith, 2020)	Open communication in blended families	Intervention research	Family dialogue minimizes conflict,	The study focused on communication benefits without adequately measuring relationship quality	This study quantified the relationship between communication quality and overall family relationship quality
22.	(Ganong & Coleman, 2017)	Communication in boundary negotiation and role definition	Family Structuraltheory research	Dialogue between family members helps establish relational	Focused on theoretical foundations without empirical data	This study provided empirical data
23.	(Sanner et al., 2018)	Communication quality and attachment security in blended families	Longitudinal qualitative research	Dialogues affirmation builds trust-based relationships	Did not compare attachment measures between blended and non-blended families	This study compared attachment security levels between university students from blended and non-blended families
24.	(Wagner et al., 2025)	Family atmosphere and psychological outcomes in students	Survey research with university students	Open and communicative dialogue have higher self-esteem and less anxiety	Examined general family atmosphere without specifically comparing students from blended versus non-blended families	Compared psychological outcomes between university students from blended and non-blended families

Chapter Summary

This chapter has offered an in-depth literature review on the different forms of blended family structures and their effects on the quality of family relationships. In this chapter, the global incidence of blended families was reviewed, with particular attention to their historical development and incidence in America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. Three main forms of blended families were reviewed: step-parent families, step-sibling families, and those with both biological and step-children. Comparative studies on the quality of relationships in blended and non-blended families were reviewed, with particular attention to parent-child relationships, sibling relationships, and other important aspects of family life, including affection, companionship, and communication. In addition, the chapter reviews the effects of blended family structures on the emotional and behavioral outcomes of university students. Strategies to improve the quality of relationships in the family were reviewed, with particular attention to open communication and cooperative problem-solving. In this chapter, the literature was informed by the Family Structural Theory and the Attachment Theory. A synthesis of the research gaps in terms of context, population, concept, theory, and method was offered, laying the groundwork for this study. Chapter Three will discuss the research methodology that guided this study.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology, including philosophical underpinnings, research design that guided the study, the target population, the sampling technique and the sample population for the study. Additionally, the type of data that was analyzed, the data collection procedures, and the pretesting of the instruments are outlined. Lastly, the chapter describes how data was analysed and the ethical considerations that were put in place when conducting the study.

Philosophical Underpinning

This research was grounded in a pragmatic philosophy, which follows an inductive approach and further focuses on comprehending human experiences (Morgan, 2020). It embraces the complexity of social phenomena and emphasises the need to take time and explore them within the context of the real world. Pragmatism acknowledges the scientific rigour of positivism but also highlights that human experiences cannot be fully understood in isolation (Dawadi et al., 2021; Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Central to pragmatism is the belief that truth is evident in the practical results of human behaviour resulting from their interactions with the world (Da Silva et al., 2018). This orientation is important because it allows the person undertaking the given research to remain flexible in their methods, drawing from approaches to data collection when needed (Grønmo, 2023). By adopting this philosophy, this study aimed to generate insights that were both theoretically useful and practically relevant in addressing fundamental challenges facing the universe.

Moreover, pragmatism adopts methodological pluralism, which implies that qualitative and quantitative approaches can be integrated where they can best solve the research problem. Instead of being limited to one worldview, the researcher relies

on the research questions and the implications of the results. This makes pragmatism very appropriate for research that involves dynamic social realities, which might be constrained by strict methodological lines. The philosophy also focuses on action-oriented knowledge, which urges the researcher to develop results that can inform policy, practice, and social change. Moreover, pragmatism focuses on context, interaction, and experience, which recognizes that meaning is constructed through engagement with particular environments and social conditions. In this way, the research will benefit from a good combination of empirical knowledge and experiential knowledge, which will enhance the applicability of the results.

Application of Critical Realism

This study is grounded in critical realism. According to Heeks and Graham (2025), critical realism is a philosophical stance that posits the existence of an objective reality that is independent of our perceptions. However, our understanding of it is always partial and mediated through experience. Critical realism offers researchers a clear framework for exploring the complexity of natural social phenomena by distinguishing between what is observed and the underlying, hidden structure that causes it (Willis, 2023). In this study, by combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, the researchers explored both the breadth, which refers to the observable phenomena of the study, and the depth, which involves the deeper mechanisms that influence them, such as the emotional support system that shapes student outcomes (Lauzier-Jobin et al., 2025). Through the use of this framework, this study was able to connect empirical data with the hidden, relevant structures, which provided valuable insight into understanding the different factors within a blended family that influence their personal lives.

Research Design

A research design is a framework for conducting a study that aims to minimise variables that could undermine the study's findings (Kumar & Praveenakumar, 2025). This study employed a mixed-methods research design combining both qualitative and quantitative methods to understand the influence of blended family structures on the quality of family relationships. Specifically, a convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), this type of mixed-methods research design collects both quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously, then separately integrates the results. The rationale behind using this method lies in its ability to validate findings by combining both broad trends and a detailed contextual insight (Leavy, 2022). As a result, it not only complements but also enriches the data (Dawadi et al., 2021). While qualitative data offered a measurable understanding of patterns and trends, quantitative data offered a much deeper insight into the context and meaning behind the identified patterns (Creswell & Inoue, 2025).

Integrating mixed methods enabled the researcher to explore not only when, who, where, how, and what in a descriptive manner, but also to focus on the 'why' behind certain family behaviours and interactions (Cooper & Schindler, 2014). For example, in this study, data were collected on who blended family members are, such as step-siblings and parents; the nature of the relationships; how and when interactions occur; and, finally, where harmony or challenges tend to manifest. The qualitative data collected were used to interpret and explain the identified patterns. The systematic and flexible nature of mixed-method design makes it the most preferred for understanding the complex emotional, social, and structural aspects of blended family life. By incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data, the study

provides a multidimensional portrayal of family relationships, informing counseling practice, policy, and future research.

Target Population

Mugenda and Mugenda (2019) identify the target population as the group of people of interest to a given study. According to Creswell and Plano (2023), it is essential to identify your target population early, as it provides the foundation for your research. This study targeted students enrolled in private universities within Nairobi County, Kenya. The students were chosen because they were in a critical stage of emotional maturity and identity development, and thus, were more aware of and affected by family dynamics (Branje et al., 2021). They were also more accessible for the study when compared to youth in villages across the nation.

The age group of 18 to 35 years was considered because it is the age bracket for the majority of university students, and it is what is referred to as the youth/young adults (African Union Commission, 2025), a group of students who have lived long in their family structure and thus have enough insight to share through experience (Mungham, 2023). It is also an age characterized by significant social and psychological transitions, which can either directly or indirectly be influenced by family structure. Private universities were considered due to their diverse nature of students with different backgrounds, which can be economic, cultural, or even geographic (Marangell et al., 2024). Lastly, due to the high concentration of private universities that have students from diverse backgrounds and family dynamics, including blended families, Nairobi County was considered ideal for the study. The data on private universities in Nairobi County and their enrollment is given below.

Table 2

Student Population in Private Universities in Nairobi County

No.	University Name	Student population
1	Africa International University (AIU)	3,000
2	Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA)	8,000
3	Daystar University	7,000
4	International Leadership University (ILU)	1,000
5	KCA University	15,000
6	Kenya Assemblies of God East University (KAGEU)	1,000
7	Management University of Africa (MUA)	2,000
8	Pan Africa Christian University (PAC University)	3,500
9	Riara University	2,500
10	Strathmore University	8,000
11	Tangaza University College	1,000
12	United States International University- Africa (USIU-A)	5,500
	Total	**52,000**

Source: Specific Universities' Websites

Sampling Technique

Sampling technique is a method used to select the representative sample to be used in the given research (Creswell et al., 2021). According to Lohr (2021), it is the process of selecting a subset of respondents from a target population so that inferences can be made about the entire population. To be able to get the sample population, the multistage sampling technique was used. According to Pawar et al. (2023), multistage sampling is used on a large population or that which is widely spread geographically. It involves breaking down the entire population into clusters and then selecting samples in clear successive stages.

In the first stage, stratified sampling was used to divide the 11 universities into two distinct strata, namely, religious universities and non-religious universities. This categorization was justified because religious orientation was likely to either positively or negatively influence family structures which was a key factor to this

study. Through stratification on this basis, the study sample was able to capture the different variations between faith-based and non-faith-based institutions, which not only increases the generalizability of the findings but also their diversity.

From the two strata, purposive sampling was then applied to select two universities that best represented student diversity. From the religious stratum, Pan Africa Christian University (PAC) and Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA) were chosen. PAC University was chosen because of its Pentecostal orientation and also because of its population of 3500 students from more than 20 nationalities with multiple Christian denominations. On the other hand, CUEA was chosen because of its diverse population of over 8000 students and its Roman Catholic religious orientation, an orientation not majorly targeted by PAC University that has a Pentecostal orientation. From the non-religious stratum, United States International University- Africa (USIU-A) and KCA University were selected. USIU-A stood out because its student population spans over 54 nationalities, thus offering a diverse population from different cultural and family backgrounds. An estimated 5500 students were from this university. KCA University, on the other hand was chosen because of being a large local non-religious institution with over 15,000 students predominantly Kenyan, which contrasts with student diversity in USIU-A orientation, thus enriching the diversity of the non-religious category. The total population from the four universities was 32,000 students.

Criterion sampling, a non-probability sampling technique where participants were selected based on a specified criterion relevant to the study (Campbell et al., 2020), was then used. For this study, the predominant criteria required the respondents to be students enrolled in the selected universities and be aged between 18 and 35 years because this age group represented the majority of students in the

university actively involved in campus social life, and who were either from blended families or had experience with peers from such families and were thus most likely to be influenced by social and cultural factors central to the research question.

This population after the sampling process formed the sample frame for the study from which the sample size was drawn. Rukmana (2024) defines a sample frame as the actual set of units from which a sample is drawn from.

Table 3

Sample Frame

No.	University Name	Student population
1	Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA)	8,000
2	Pan Africa Christian University (PAC University)	3,500
3	KCA University	15,000
4	United States International University (USIU)	5,500
	Total	**32,000**

Source: Specific Universities' Websites

Sample size

A sample, according to Burns and Grove (2015), is a portion of the population that is chosen for specific research. Baskarada (2014) observed that sample sizes, mostly in qualitative research, should always be small to allow the researcher a chance to do an in-depth case analysis of a given study. To further determine the appropriate statistical sample for this study from the sample frame of 32000 students, Cochran's formula combined with finite population correction (FPC) formula was used. This approach was the most preferred because Cochran's formula provides the initial sample size for the initial population while FPC adjusted the figure to reflect the actual finite population. A combination of both ensured unnecessary oversampling is avoided and efficiency is improved without sacrificing statistical validity of the data (Lakens, 2022).

Cochran's formula + finite population correction (FPC)

Step 1: Cochran's formula

$$n_0 \text{ (sample size)} = \frac{z^2 \times p(1-p)}{e^2}$$

n_0 = initial sample size

Z = 1.96 (Z–score for the desired confidence level (1.96 at 95%)

P= 0.5 (estimated proportion of the population, 0.5 used for maximum variability)

e = 0.05 (margin of error)

$$n_0 \text{ (sample size)} = \frac{1.96^2 \times 0.5(1-0.5)}{0.05^2} = \frac{3.8416 \times 0.25}{0.0025}$$

n_0 = 384.16

Step 2: Finite Population Correction (FPC)

$$n = \frac{n_0}{1 + \frac{n_0 - 1}{N}}$$

Where

n = adjusted sample size

N = total population (32,000)

$$n = \frac{384.16}{1 + \frac{(384.16-1)}{3200}} = \frac{384.16}{1 + 0.01197375}$$

n= 379.614

Sample population: **380.**

This sample size was distributed based on the university enrollment across the four selected universities with each university getting a portion based on the percentage of its population.

Table 4

Sample Size

No.	University Name	Student population	Percentage	Sample size
1	Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA)	8,000	25%	95
2	Pan Africa Christian University (PAC University)	3,500	10.9%	42
3	KCA University	15,000	46.9%	178
4	United States International University- Africa (USIU-A)	5500	17.2%	65
	Total	**32000**	**100%**	**380**

Source: Specific Universities' Websites

Types of Data

The data collected in the study were primarily from selected private universities in Nairobi County. Additionally, the data collected was both qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative data were collected from the open-ended questions in the questionnaire, while quantitative data were obtained from the closed-ended questions. Both types of data were collected from students in the selected private universities and administered in form of google form.

Research instruments

The data collection tool used in this study was a questionnaire which was administered online as google form to the respondents. The researcher incorporated items from both the Family Assessment Device (FAD) and Family Environment Scale (FES). FES focused on collecting data from independent variables linked to blended family structure, including family composition (biological siblings, step siblings, and step-parents). This tool was initially developed by Moos and Moos in 1974. The questionnaire consisted of 90 items, each on a 4-point Likert scale. It focused on assessing family relations from three main dimensions: personal growth, relationship,

and systematic maintenance, using 90 items across 10 different substances (Mitiku, 2024). The reliability of this tool was confirmed through findings from various studies, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.7 to 0.85 (Gan et al., 2018; Shao & Ni, 2021). For this study, FES was adapted to fit the Kenyan cultural context. Some of the questions asked under this tool included "I feel free to express my thoughts and opinions in the family" (expressiveness) and "Our family has strengthened overall family unity" (cohesion), which were rated on a 5-point Likert scale.

On the other hand, for dependent variables, the Family Assessment Device (FAD) was used. This tool was developed in 1983. It measures family dimensions across seven distinct dimensions, including communication, problem-solving, emotional involvement, and conflict resolution. It contains 60 different items that are rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Over the years, the FAD has demonstrated extreme reliability and validity, with internal consistency ranging from 0.72 to 0.92 (Epstein et al., 1983; Miller et al., 2000) across different cultures. For instance, different studies have shown its ability to measure social adjustment ($r = 0.56$) (Garcia et al., 2019). This researcher modified this tool to help address the specific challenges faced in blended families. For example, the FAD item "We are frank with each other" was modified to "I feel free to express my thoughts and opinions in the family." The application of both of these tools in my study went a long way in understanding different blended family dynamics, examining both relationship quality and structural aspects. Permission to use these tools was sought from the publishers, and the different adaptations to the tools reflected the cultural context of different blended families in the Kenyan settings.

Instrument Pre-Testing

Pre-testing involves distributing the instrument to a small sample of survey participants chosen or selected from the population for the whole study (Kimberlin & Winterstein, 2008). According to Connelly (2008), the pre-testing sample should be at least 10 per cent of the final sample population to help. This is further supported by Mugenda and Mugenda (2019), who state that the study pre-testing sample should be between 1% and 10% of the sample population, depending on the size of the final sample. For this study, considering the sample size of 380, Questionnaires were issued to 40 students (10.5 per cent) from Daystar University. Daystar University was selected for because it is a private university in Nairobi County with a student population profile relatively similar to the target universities, but it not among the four universities purposively selected for the main study. This pre-testing was instrumental in testing whether the research instrument was clear and compelling.

Additionally, it also helped test whether the results were consistent and whether the instruments effectively achieved the goal by capturing data aligned with the research objectives. Lastly, it also helped identify different logistical challenges, such as time and participants' cooperation. The researcher analysed the responses to determine if they met expectations or if adjustments needed to be made to the questionnaire.

Reliability of the Instrument

Instrument reliability refers to the degree of consistency of a tool in producing the same results. According to Smith (2025), research instruments should always be reliable, meaning they are designed in a way that guarantees consistent results across repeated trials. To establish the reliability of the questionnaire, which incorporated adapted items from the Family Assessment Device (FAD) and the Family

Environment Scale (FES), the Cronbach's alpha coefficient method was used. It assessed the internal consistency of each subscale within the questionnaire.

To establish reliability, Cronbach's alpha coefficient that is used to measure internal constancy of a tool was used. The different subscales from FAD and FES were examined. The family cohesion scale showed a very high average Cronbach's alpha of 0.81 which means that the tool has strong internal consistency. Similarly, the subscale on communication had an average Cronbach's alpha of 0.75 which is also acceptable. On the other hand, Emotional Support subscale also met the reliability minimum average alpha of 0.77. Lastly, the expressiveness subscale had an average alpha of 0.73 while that for conflict subscale had average Cronbach's alpha of 0.79, meaning all the subscale met the minimum threshold.

Validity of the Instrument

To establish the validity of the questionnaire, which incorporated adapted items from the Family Assessment Device (FAD) and the Family Environment Scale (FES), different approaches were applied. For content validity, the researcher sought expert review from experts in the field of psychology, including supervisors and lecturers from the PAC University. The Content Validity Index (CVI) was calculated with a score of 0.78, which indicates strong content validity. For face validity, the questionnaire was pre-tested with 20 students with their feedback showing that the questions were both relevant and clear to the target population. Additionally, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), helped in supporting construct validity with the results demonstrating that the items grouped together well as expected. This confirmed that the subscales were well aligned with intended constructs.

Data Collection Procedure

According to Denscombe (2017), data collection is the process of obtaining data from the field. For this study, the researcher adopted a series of steps to ensure that the data collection process was executed in line with ethical and legal requirements. First, the researcher took the proposal and presented it at the Pan African Christian University Institutional Scientific Research and Ethics Review Committee (ISREC) in order to secure ethical approval. Having been issued with clearance, the researcher then applied for and secured a research permit from NACOSTI and also obtained an introductory letter from the university

After receiving these clearances and the introductory letter from Pan Africa Christian University, the study participants were clearly briefed about the aim of the research, the procedure to be adopted, the voluntary nature of their participation, and that they had the freedom to decline filling the questionnaires at any point without facing any negative consequences. Since the participants were adults, each of them provided signed informed consent before participating in the study. The semi-structured questionnaire developed based on FAD and FES was converted into a Google form and sent through an online means through the student portal in the university and also distributed through class representatives, who spread it through their WhatsApp forums.

Respondents completed the questionnaire individually using their personal devices within a timeframe of 20-35 minutes. Data collected through the questionnaire were automatically captured on a confidential database created in Google Sheets and available only to the researcher. The researcher went through all completed questionnaires to identify responses that had more than 10% of the data missing to be excluded from analysis. All stages of data collection from initiating the

study at the university to collecting all completed responses took four weeks. There was no need for debriefing after data collection since the questionnaire did not contain information that could have made respondents feel uncomfortable or required an in-depth discussion afterwards, nor was there any deception involved. Respondents were not placed in situations involving any risks for their health or psychology.

Data Analysis

Data analysis, as defined by Popenoe (2021), is a process of organizing, ordering, and interpreting the vast amount of data that has been collected. It enables the researcher to understand the data gathered from the study, allowing for meaningful conclusions to be drawn. This study collected both qualitative and quantitative data.

Quantitative data, which were collected using a questionnaire containing items adapted from the Family Assessment Device (FAD) and the Family Environment Scale (FES), were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics, which included Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviation statistics were used in summarizing the characteristics of the respondents and the responses within the four categories of family relationship quality, Communication, Conflict and stress management, Emotional Support, Family cohesion and unity.

For inferential statistics, several tests were employed. Independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare mean scores between blended and non-blended family groups on each of the four relationship quality dimensions. Levene's test for equality of variances was used to assess homogeneity of variance before interpreting t-test results. When significant overall effects were found, post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni adjustment were applied to identify specific group differences. All

quantitative analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 31.

Qualitative data obtained from open-ended questions in the questionnaires was manually coded using thematic analysis. The procedure entailed going through the answers repeatedly in order to be familiar with them before proceeding to code them according to the themes generated from the four research objectives and indicators of each one. Each objective was coded in accordance with its themes, which included open communication, emotional support, conflict resolution, and family coherence among others. The use of the manual and objective-based thematic approach helped enrich the analysis by providing more context than quantitative data alone. The integration of both quantitative and qualitative data in this study was crucial for obtaining a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon.

Table 5

Summary of Data Analysis

	Research Objective	**Independent Variable**	**Dependent Variable**	**Statistics analysis**
1.	To establish the prevalence of blended family structures among students in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya.	Blended family structures	Prevalence among students	Descriptive statistics frequencies, percents, mean scores, std deviations, ANOVA
2.	To assess the quality of family relationships among students in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya.	Family relationship dimensions (cohesion, conflict and communication)	Quality of family relationships	Descriptive statistics (Mean, percentages, standard deviation). correlation analysis, ANOVA
3.	To examine the influence of blended family structures on the quality of family relationships among students in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya.	Blended family structures (types: step-parent, step-sibling, etc.)	Quality of family relationships	Inferential statistics: (ANOVA, Regression analysis, Correlation analysis
4.	To explore strategies for enhancing the quality of family relationships among	Student experiences, attitudes and	Suggested Strategies for	Thematic Analysis

	students from blended families in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya	recommendations	enhancing the quality of family relationships	

Ethical Considerations

Research ethics refers to the area of knowledge that provides rules and guidelines of conduct for researchers as professionals (Slotfeldt-Ellingsen, 2023). As it is, research ethics provide a mechanism for protecting the dignity and rights of research subjects and ensuring proper dissemination of research findings (Yadav, 2023). One fundamental feature of any research involving human subjects is ensuring that they are protected with appropriate ethical guidance. In Kenya, the prevailing ethical codes in qualitative research are minimal but crucial in guiding researchers towards ethical conduct at all times. Ethical considerations in research, including confidentiality, voluntary participation, and informed consent, are essential for maintaining the integrity of the study (Kang & Hwang, 2021). Additionally, according to Ahmed (2024), adhering to different ethical principles helps in building trust between the researcher and the respondent, thus enhancing the reliability and credibility of the collected data.

In this research, all ethical protocols were strictly adhered to in order to protect the well-being and rights of the participants. The research proposal and methodology were submitted to the Pan African Christian University Institutional Scientific Research and Ethics Review Committee (ISREC) for review and approval prior to commencing the study. They mandated the ethical consideration of the research, including participant consent, confidentiality, privacy, and any potential harm and risks associated with the research. A clearance certificate was obtained from the committee, and subsequently, applied for a license to conduct research from the

National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI), in accordance with the regulations in Kenya.

The respondents gave informed consent in an electronic format after having been fully informed about the objectives, procedures, risks, and potential benefits associated with the research. Additionally, participants were assured that participation in the research was completely voluntary and that withdrawing from the study would not lead to any adverse consequences. To ensure anonymity, no personal identifying information was recorded in the research process, and only the researcher and his supervisor had access to the data used in the research. Electronic data was stored on a computer that was password-protected and backed up in an encrypted external storage device. All the data will be held for five years and then securely erased by specialized software. There was no need for debriefing since there was no deception and/or sensitivity in the process of answering the questionnaire, but participants were provided with contact information for free counseling services offered in Nairobi County.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provides an overview of the methodological framework of the study, starting with the philosophical base that established the pragmatic and critical realism approaches of the study design. The research design section of this chapter explained the convergent parallel design of the study, while the target population, sampling technique, and sample size sections identified the participants of the study and how they were selected. The research instrument section of this chapter explained the modified FES and FAD questionnaires that were developed and pretested for appropriateness, including pretesting and reliability and validity sections of the instrument. The data collection procedure and analysis sections explained how the

data was collected and statistically and thematically analyzed, respectively. The ethical considerations section of this chapter explained how the rights of the participants were ensured and upheld during the entire study process. Chapter four of this study will present the results and discussion of the study.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter presents the data analysis and findings on the relationship between the influences of blended family structures on the quality of family relationships, among selected private universities' students in Nairobi County, Kenya. The study was guided by the following four research objectives; To: establish the prevalence of blended family structures among students in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya; examine differences in family relationship quality between blended and non-blended families among students in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya; examine the influence of blended family structures on the quality of family relationships among students in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya and to explore strategies for enhancing the quality of family relationships among students from blended families in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya.

Response rate

The data collection was done using an online questionnaire administered to the selected sample of students as respondents. The tool consisted of adapted and incorporated items from both the Family Environment Scale (FES) and Family Assessment Device (FAD), selected from independent variables associated with blended family structure, which included family composition. A total of 380 questionnaires were administered, of which 310 were duly filled and returned, which indicated a return rate of 81.58%. This was a representation of a higher return rate, indicating a stronger cooperation from the respondents, which is an indication of both credibility and reliability of the results obtained. Additionally, a higher return rate checks the probability of non-response bias and is indicative that the data generated is

confidently used for further analysis and generalizations as well. Further, according to Draugalis et al (2008), a response rate that is above 80% reflects a standard to assess the quality of survey-based research, which supports the generalizability of the findings and mitigates the danger of prejudice due to non-responses. Likewise, Gray et al. (2026) posit that a higher response rate of above 80% qualifies the validity of the instrument and the accuracy of the approximations generated from the survey data. Therefore, the return rates for this study effectively satisfy the threshold, which is acceptable for the research.

Demographic Information of the Respondents

The demographic profile of the respondents who took part in the study is indicated in the following section. The information was vital to help give a thorough representation of the target population which may have had an impact on the findings with respect to the stated research questions.

Age of the Respondents

The age of the respondents is indicated in the figure 2 below.

Figure 2

Age of the Respondents

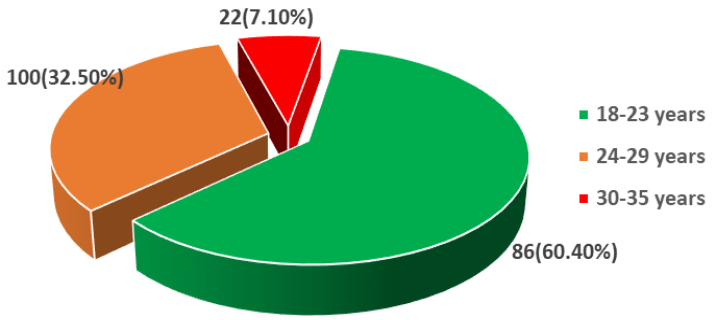


Figure 2 indicates that the majority of the respondents 60.4% were aged between 18 and 23 years followed by 32.5% in the 24 to 29 years age bracket while a small part of participants 7.1% were aged between 30 and 35 years. Generally, the

data indicates that most of the respondents (92.9 %) were young adults within the range of 18–29-years.

Gender of the Respondents

The research sought to establish the respondent's gender composition. The gender of respondents is indicated in Figure 3 below

Figure 3

Gender of the Respondents



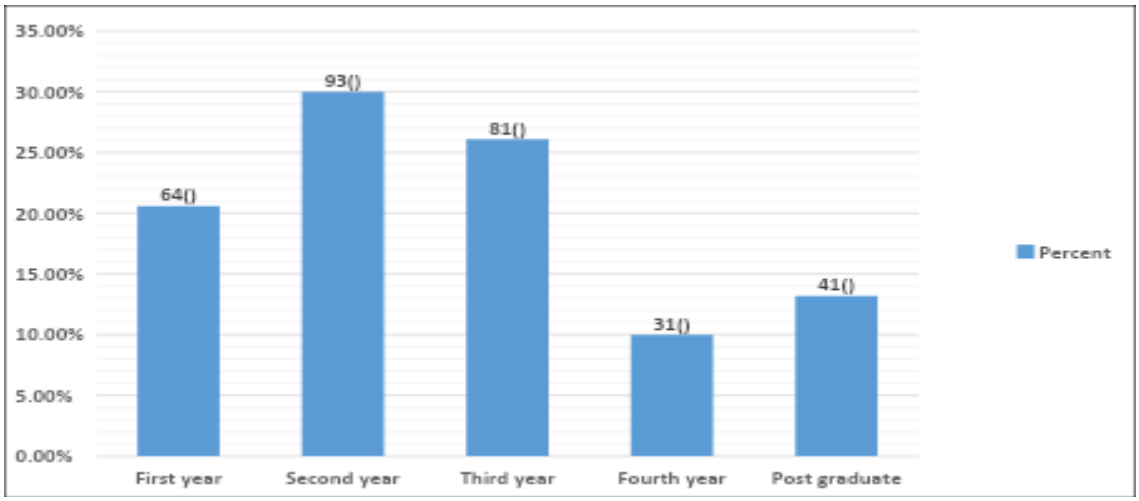
Out of all the total respondents, 51% were female while 49% were male. According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS, 2019), census, women constitute approximately 50.2 % and men 49.8% of the population. This near balance in gender representation reflects perspectives from both groups fairly at equal levels, which minimized gender-related bias thereby enhancing the representativeness of the findings.

Respondents' Year of Study

The research sought to find out the respondents' year of study. Figure 4 below presents the findings

Figure 4

Respondents Year of study



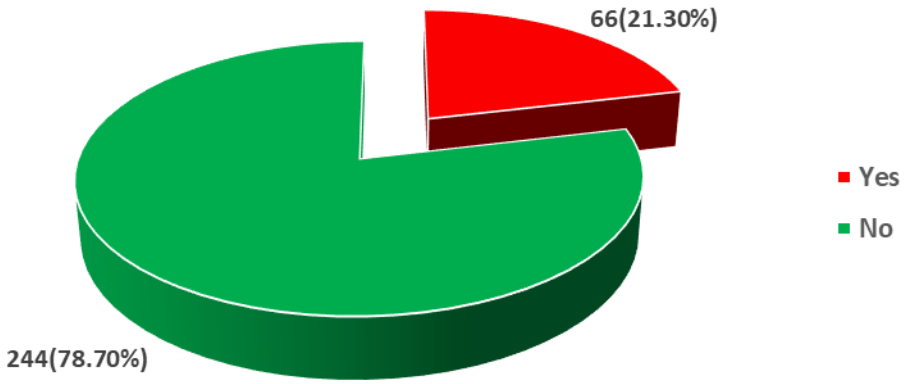
The findings presented on figure 4 indicates that majority of the respondents were in second year (30%), followed by third year 26.1 % and then first year at 20.60% of their study. Post graduate students also took place at 13.20%. This shows that respondents were drawn from different years of the study, which provided a broader representation of academic progress within the institution. Respondents were drawn from all levels which ensured that findings captured insights from those at the start of their academic journey as well as the once in advanced levels. This distribution promotes the density of the findings, as it mirrors varying levels of awareness, experience, as well as engagement with the university life

Prevalence of Blended Family Structures among Students in Private Universities in Nairobi County

The first research objective sought to examine the prevalence of blended family structures among students in private universities in Nairobi County. To achieve this objective, the selected participants were presented with a dichotomous (Yes/No) item which asked them to point at whether they came from a blended family. The findings are indicated in figure 5.

Figure 5

Prevalence of Blended Family Structures among Students



The results showed that most respondents were from non-blended families. Out of 310 respondents, 21.3% indicated they lived in blended families, defined as households where a biological parent is married to a step-parent, while 78.7% said they were not part of such structures.

The results showed that although blended families are present within the population studied, they make up a small percentage compared to non-blended families. These findings align with existing literature, which indicates that blended families are a significant minority in many societies. For example, studies in the United Kingdom have found that blended families comprise 10% to 33%, depending on the definition used (Children's Commissioner for England, 2022).

However, the findings contradict evidence from the U.S showing a prevalence of 40% (Pew Research Center, 2015). The findings further contradict findings by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics & ICF (2023), which found that the share of children who lived in households with either step-parents or half-siblings was estimated at about 60%. The disparity between the findings is largely explained by what is defined as a blended family in the survey, the context, and the sample characteristics. Unlike the specific focus of this study, which included young adults

aged 18-35 living with step-parents or siblings, the (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics & ICF, 2023) study focused on a broader understanding, which extended to children raised in families that have a step-parent, such as a polygamous family or an extended family, resulting in a higher percentage. Additionally, it also focused on children in general, not specifically students.

The targeted age group may also account for the variation. The KDHS (2022) focused on women aged 15–49 years and men aged 15–54 years, capturing a broader range of developmental stages, while the current study centers on youth aged 18–35 years, when many no longer reside with their families due to schooling, work, or independence, thus naturally reducing their blended family experience. Respondents' academic level further distinguishes the studies. This study targeted private university students, who are more likely to come from simple, stable families able to afford fees, potentially underrepresenting individuals from more complex and unstable households included in the Kenya Demographic and Health Survey. KDHS samples students from all academic and socioeconomic backgrounds, contributing to the higher prevalence observed.

Types of Blended Family Structures of the Respondents

Identification of the types of blended family structures represented in this research helps to define the diverse family arrangements from where the respondents come from. Table 6 provides a summary of types of blended family structures the respondent

Table 6

Types of Respondents' Blended Family

		Frequency	Percent
1	I live with my biological mother and stepfather.	9	15
2	I live with my biological father and stepmother.	5	8.3
3	I live in a family where both my parents have remarried, and I have step-parents on both sides.	24	40
4	I live in a family with children from both my father's and mother's other marriages (stepbrothers or stepsisters).	22	36.7
	Total	**310**	**100.0%**

From the findings in Table 6, which focused on the composition of blended families, who were 21.3% (66 respondents), 40% of these respondents pointed out that they lived in families where both of the parents had remarried and had step-parents on both sides. Another 36.7% of the respondents reported having lived in blended families, which include children who arise from the father's and mother's other marriages, resulting in the presence of step-siblings. Only smaller proportions lived with a stepfather and biological mother (15%) or stepmother and biological father (8.3%). These statistics clearly indicate that while blended families exist in the sampled population, they represent a relatively lower segment.

These findings are consistent with findings from existing literature, which shows that blended families are becoming increasingly complex over the years, with a single-step-parent structure transitioning to a complex structure involving both step-parents and step siblings (Araujo, 2025). The significant presence of step-siblings further supports studies that show that remarriages always involve parents with children from their previous marriages (Tekeba et al., 2024; U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Lastly, the lower proportions of respondents living with a single step-parent

(mother–stepfather or father–stepmother) align with global inclinations, where modest stepfamilies are less common as compared to more complex reconstituted families shaped after multiple remarriage occurrences (Cherlin, 2010). Overall, this finding confirms the existing and growing diversity of blended families

Family relationships quality between blended and non-blended family structures among students in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya.

The second research objective sought to examine differences in family relationship quality between blended and non-blended families among students in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya. The quality of family relationships was rated using four subscales, which included: Communication, Conflict and stress management, Emotional Support, Family cohesion and unity.

Communication among Respondents from both Blended and Non-Blended Families

The study observed communication patterns among respondents from both blended and non-blended families. The aim was to determine how family structure and systems shape interaction, understanding, and relational harmony. Comparing these groups highlights similarities or differences in how family members share information, resolve issues, and maintain supportive relationships. Table 7 presents a summary of the communication patterns observed among respondents.

Table 7

Communication among Respondents from both Blended and Non-Blended Families

		SD	D	N	A	SA	*n*	$\underline{x}$	*s*
1.	Family members listen to each other without interrupting.	30	43	86	71	78	308	3.40	1.27
2.	I feel free to express my thoughts and opinions in the family.	32	32	75	81	87	307	3.52	1.29

3.	Family discussions are respectful and constructive.	43	39	71	81	75	309	3.34	1.34
4.	Important family matters are discussed openly.	25	48	85	91	57	306	3.35	1.19
5.	There is mutual understanding during family conversations.	20	33	71	72	111	307	3.72	1.24
Aggregate Mean Score (x)=3.46, Std Dev (s)=1.12									

The results in Table 7 indicate a moderate level of healthy communication patterns among the family members. The respondents pointed out that family members sometimes listen to one another without interruption**,** which reflected a mean of 3.40 (s=1.27). Likewise, the statement *"I feel free to express my thoughts and opinions in the family"* recorded a slightly greater mean of 3.52 (s = 1.29). Respectful and constructive family discussions had a mean of 3.34 with a relatively higher variability (s = 1.34), which indicated that, though many families endeavor for positive dialogue there is always a challenge when it comes to blended families. Lastly, the extent to which important family matters are discussed openly had a mean of 3.35 (s = 1.19). The utmost indicator of positive communication was the observation of mutual understanding during conversations**,** which had the greatest mean of 3.72 **(s** = 1.24**).** This indicates that many families are able to understand each other even when discussions become very complex. Generally, the aggregate mean of 3.46 and SD of 1.12, pointing out a generally moderate level of effective communication within families, indicating that the communication within families is functional but not consistently strong.

This finding aligns with findings by Smith (2020), who found that open communication among family members helps strengthen family bonds, but is not uniformly practiced, resulting in a moderate outcome in communication. Consistent communication is important in families, with Kariuki and Wambui (2021) further noting that, while structured communication promotes trust and openness, its

inconsistent application can limit its effectiveness, thus supporting the need for consistent communication.

Further, analysis was done to compare communication between blended and non-blended families in Kenya.

Table 8 provides a comparison between communication patterns in blended families and non-blended families among respondents from the selected universities in Nairobi County, Kenya.

Table 8

Comparing Communication in Blended versus Non-Blended Families

	$\underline{x}$	*n*	*s*
Blended Family	3.51	62	1.06
Non-Blended Family	3.45	240	1.14
Total	**3.46**	**302**	**1.12**

The findings in Table 8 indicate variation in communication within respondents from both blended and non-blended families. Respondents from blended families posted a higher mean score of 3.51(s=106) based on 62 responses, which indicated a moderately positive perception of communication within their households. Respondents arising from non-blended families recorded a mean score of 3.45 **(s =** 1.14**)** from 240 participants, which reflected a similar but slightly lesser level of communication as compared to their blended-family colleagues. Generally, across all 302 respondents, the total mean score and SD were 3.46, respectively, with a deviation of 1.12**,** which pointed out that communication patterns were commonly consistent regardless of family type, with the least differences between the two groups. In general, the results show that blended families have a higher

communication pattern (M = 3.51, SD = 1.06) when compared to students from non-blended families (M = 3.45, SD = 1.14). These findings, despite the small difference, suggest that students raised in blended families perceive the role of communication in their household as more supported compared to those from non-blended families.

These findings align with those by Smith (2020), who indicated communication is higher in blended families when compared with that of non-blended families due to intentional efforts aimed at managing relationships between non-biological and biological family members. Additionally, Brown and Stone (2020) explain that mutual understanding is a product of empathetic listening, thus accounting for slightly higher mean scores for those from non-blended families. Overall, while communication is evident across the two-family structures, the slightly high score among blended family members shows that these households may be more actively involved in open and supportive communication to manage conflicts and maintain cohesion.

Table 9 below further presents the results of an independent t-test carried out to examine whether the mean differences of communication were significant between blended versus no-blended families.

Table 9

Independent Samples t-Test of Communication in Blended vs. Non-Blended Families

	Levine's Test for Equality of Variances	**t-test for Equality of Means**

		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Communication	Equal variances assumed	1.546	.215	.348	300	.728	.05562	.15970	.25866	.36990
	Equal variances not assumed			.362	99.967	.718	.05562	.15368	-.24928	.36052

Independent Samples t-Test of communication in blended vs. non-blended Families. An independent sample t-test revealed no significant difference in communication scores between respondents from blended and non-blended (intact) families. Levene's test confirmed equal variances, $F(1, 300) = 1.546$, $p = .215$. The mean difference was not statistically significant ($t(300) = 0.348$, $p = .728$; mean difference = 0.05562; 95% CI: –0.25866 to 0.36990), showing that family structure does not have a meaningful impact on communication.

This result agrees with existing literature. Family processes, like cohesion, communication quality, emotional climate, and relationship management, are stronger predictors of child and family well-being than structure alone (Amato, 2010). Lack of significant differences in these findings supports Olson (2000), who notes that effective communication depends more on interpersonal skills and practices than family composition. These findings underscore the role of communication in families. Visher and Visher (2019) indicate that blended or stepfamilies can function as well as complete families if they cultivate healthy communication, set clear boundaries, and maintain supportive relationships.

The results reinforce that communication is functional, not structural. Families can create strong communication systems when they prioritize openness, responsiveness, and mutual respect, regardless of their configuration.

Emotional Support among Respondents from both Blended and Non-Blended Families

The study examined emotional support among respondents from both blended and non-blended families. The goal was to determine how different structures influence the availability, consistency, and quality of emotional care. This comparison provides insight into how family composition shapes individuals' sense of security, belonging, and connections. Table 10 presents the overall analysis.

Table 10

Emotional Support of Respondents from both Blended and Non-Blended Families

		SD	D	N	A	SA	*n*	$\underline{x}$	*s*
1.	I feel loved and accepted by my family.	34	40	67	84	81	306	3.45	1.31
2.	My family provides comfort when I'm emotionally distressed.	26	40	81	67	95	309	3.53	1.28
3.	Family members encourage and support one another's goals.	28	35	74	70	102	309	3.59	1.30
4.	Family members show concern for one another's well-being during difficult times.	31	40	81	81	75	308	3.42	1.26
5.	My feelings are acknowledged and respected in the family.	38	40	75	78	77	308	3.38	1.32
Aggregate Mean Score ($\underline{x}$)=3.48, Std Dev (*s*)=1.18									

The results in Table 10 above show positive perceptions of emotional support across the five scaled indicators. The cumulative mean score of 3.48 (SD = 1.18) shows that, on average, respondents experience moderate to high levels of emotional support in their families. This result aligns with wider literature, which shows that

emotional support is a core part of healthy family functioning, regardless of family structure (Walsh, 2016).

Across the specific indicators, participants reported the highest agreement in the item *"Family members encourage and support one another's goals"* (M = 3.59, SD = 1.30). This posits that many families, which include blended or non-blended, actively promote a very supportive environment that values personal development as well as shared aspirations. Previous research supports these findings noting that goal support is a symbol of effective family structures and is powerfully associated with interconnection and adaptability (Skinner & McHale, 2020).

Participants reported higher perceived comfort during emotional anguish (M = 3.53, SD = 1.28) and greater feelings of love and acceptance in the family setup (M = 3.45, SD = 1.31). The findings echo previous studies: emotional reassurance, acceptance, and validation are key to family resilience and individual psychological wellness (Bowlby, 1988). Even in blended families, where changing roles present challenges, families may cultivate stronger emotional bonds that support adjustment and lasting stability (Ganong & Coleman, 2017).

The lowest scores, though still moderately positive, were for *"My feelings are acknowledged and respected in the family"* (M = 3.38, SD = 1.32) and *"Family members show concern during difficult times"* (M = 3.42, SD = 1.26). This pattern proposes some differences in emotional validation and empathic responsiveness across the family types. The findings align with Jensen and Shafer (2013), who indicate that stepfamilies may primarily struggle with emotional communication due to role uncertainty or loyalty conflicts.

Overall, the descriptive statistics point out that respondents, regardless of the family structure, observe their families as very emotionally supportive. This agrees

with a growing body of literature which emphasizes that the family functioning processes, rather than the structural and systematic configurations, are the most crucial determinants of emotional wellness in family relationships (Amato, 2010). Consequently, both blended and non-blended families may provide rich emotional support when they foster empathy, open communication, and mutual respect.

Table 11 presents a comparative analysis of emotional support between blended and non-blended families to establish if there is a difference and how significant it is.

Table 11

Comparison of Emotional support in Blended and Non-Blended Families

	Emotional Support		
	$\underline{x}$	***n***	***s***
Blended Family	3.47	63	1.129
Non-Blended Family	3.49	238	1.20
Total	**3.489**	**301**	**1.18**

An assessment of emotional support scores between respondents from blended and non-blended families revealed minimal differences across the two systems. Blended family participants posted a mean score of 3.47 (SD = 1.13, n = 63), and non-blended family participants a nearly matching 3.49 (SD = 1.20, n = 238). The overall sample mean was 3.49 (SD = 1.18, n = 301). These findings indicate both groups experience moderate emotional support, with no meaningful distinction related to family structure.

This pattern supports studies by Amato (2010), which found that family functioning processes such as communication, emotional responsiveness, cohesion,

and support are more influential to individual well-being than family structure. Similar mean scores suggest that respondents perceive emotional support consistently across family structures. This reflects research indicating that emotional support is a practical function, not strictly tied to structure (Skinner & McHale, 2020).

Table 12 further presents the results of an independent samples test carried out to examine whether the mean difference in emotional support between the two types of family structures was significant.

Table 12

Independent Samples Test Emotional Support in Blended vs. Non-Blended Families

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Emotional Support	Equal variances assumed	.467	.495	-.124	299	.902	-.02073	.16762	-.35060	.30915
	Equal variances not assumed			-.128	102.588	.898	-.02073	.16138	-.34081	.29935

An independent samples t-test was conducted to find out whether there was a significant difference in the perceived emotional support between participants from blended families and those arising from non-blended families. The Levene's test for equality of variances showed that the assumption of homogeneity of variance was

met, F(1, 299) = 0.467, p = .495. Consequently, the equal variances assumed findings were used for the interpretation.

The findings of the t-test indicated no statistically significant difference in the emotional support between the two-family groups, t (299) = –0.124, p = .902. The mean difference (–0.02073) was really small, and the confidence of 95% interval ranged from –0.35060 to 0.30915, which included zero. This suggests that respondents from both blended and non-blended families posit similar levels of emotional support, lacking expressive variation, which can be attributed to the family system.

Generally, the findings do posit that emotional support is a functional feature rather than structural. What appears to matter greatest is not whether a family is blended or non-blended, but how the family members intermingle, express care, communicate, and respond to each other's emotional requirements.

Conflict and Stress Management among Combined Respondents in the Study

Assessment of conflict and stress management among all the participants provided insight into how the individuals navigate the tension, resolve disagreements, and cope with challenges across different family systems. This analysis assists in revealing whether blended and non-blended family structures influence the strategies as well as the effectiveness of managing stress and conflicts.

Table 13 presents the results of the analysis of conflict and stress management among the combined respondents from both blended and non-blended families.

Table 13

Conflict and Stress Management among Combined Respondents in the Study

		SD	D	N	A	SA	*n*	$\underline{x}$	*s*
1.	Conflicts in our family are resolved calmly and respectfully.	77	52	59	42	78	308	2.97	1.52

2.	Family members have increased stress in our household.	32	32	85	87	72	308	3.44	1.24
3.	Disagreements between siblings are handled constructively.	36	23	74	81	96	310	3.57	1.31
4.	Tension between family members affects family harmony.	27	25	90	74	91	307	3.58	1.24
Aggregate Mean Score (x)=3.38, Std Dev (s)=.88									

The analysis shows that families manage stress, conflict, and daily disagreements with moderate efficiency. A mean score of 3.38 (SD = 0.88) indicates that respondents generally observe effective but inconsistent management. This points to an environment with positive interactions that can still be disrupted by occasional stress and tension.

Additionally, participants rated the item, *"Disagreements between siblings are handled constructively," positively (mean = 3.57, SD = 1.31). Similarly, they* endorsed *"Tension between family members affects family harmony"* (mean = 3.58, SD = 1.24). These findings indicate that while families attempt to address differences constructively, tension still disrupts harmony. This reflects that conflict and disagreement are normal in families, and their impact on functioning depends on resolution methods (Yang et al., 2025)

Remarkably, the item *"Family members have increased stress in our household"* had a relatively high mean score of 3.44 (SD = 1.24), indicating moderately raised stress levels. Furthermore, this aligns with findings by Okelo et al. (2024) who observed that such increased stress often stems from socio-economic pressures, daily responsibilities, schooling demands, and intergenerational obligations factors frequently reported in Kenyan households and other collectivist family structures.

The lowest-rated item, *"Conflicts in our family are resolved calmly and respectfully," ha*d a mean of 2.97 (SD = 1.52), indicating moderate agreement. This

suggests that while families sometimes resolve conflicts positively, these resolutions are not consistently calm or respectful. According to the Family Structural Theory, factors like emotional reactivity, communication patterns, and learned conflict styles strongly influence conflict management (Bowen, 1978). The low score may reflect common challenges in households, where conflict may escalate before resolution is reached.

Generally, the results show that family households experience both effective conflict management and significant stress and discord. This combination aligns with literature which emphasizes that few families operate consistently or harmoniously (Walsh, 2016). High scores for constructive handling of disagreements suggest many families display resilience. However, the elevated indicators of stress and tension identify specific needs for support and intervention, such as communication training, family counseling, and stress management skills.

To further contextualize these findings, Table 14 presents the results of the comparative analysis of conflict and stress management between blended and non-blended families.

Table 14

Comparison of Conflict and Stress Management in Blended and Non-Blended Families

	Conflict and Stress Management		
	n	***x̲***	***s***
Blended Family	3.4115	65	.76983
Non-Blended Family	3.3713	239	.91436
Total	**3.3799**	**304**	**.88439**

The study assessed levels of conflict and stress management between blended families (n = 65, *M* = 3.41, *SD* = .77) and non-blended families (n = 239, *M* = 3.37, *SD* = .91). The findings show that respondents from the blended families reported slightly higher mean scores on conflict and stress management than those from the non-blended families, though the difference is very insignificant (Mean Difference ≈ 0.04). This suggests that both family systems experience conflict and stress at very comparable levels, and engage the same methods to manage them. The slightly higher mean among blended families may mirror very deliberate efforts that are regularly required to maintain family stability. The nearly equal mean scores agree with findings by Walsh, (2016) who state that family systems alone do not necessarily forecast the general quality of conflict as well as the stress management; rather, the efficiency of coping mechanisms may perhaps be influenced by communication quality, interpersonal closeness, parenting style, as well as available social support organizations.

The SD shows slightly larger variability in non-blended families (*SD* = .91) as compared to the blended families (*SD* = .77). This may perhaps indicate a more varied experience in conflict and stress management among non-blended family households, Blended families, despite the complexities that are often associated with them, may have a more consistent adjustment profile, and this could be as a result of a more intentional effort at coordinating parenting styles or even the use of more targeted interventions such as family therapy or even the use of a more structured approach to step-parenting.

Generally, the findings validate that while blended families face exclusive challenges, their conflict and stress management levels are not significantly different from those of non-blended families. This blends with literature indicating that family

operation is shaped more by the quality of relationships and communication than by the family system itself (Amato, 2014).

Further, an independent sample t-test was conducted to examine whether the mean differences were significant. Table 15 presents the results of an independent samples t-test of conflict and stress management in blended and non-blended families

Table 15

Independent Samples Test of Conflict and Stress Management in Blended and Non-Blended Families

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		**t-test for Equality of Means**						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Conflict and Stress Management	Equal variances assumed	3.396	.066	.324	302	.746	.04020	.12390	-.20362	.28402
	Equal variances not assumed			.358	117.866	.721	.04020	.11232	-.18223	.26263

An independent samples t-test was done to compare levels of conflict and stress management between blended and non-blended families. The findings showed that the assumption of the homogeneity of variance was obtained at the conventional 0.05 level ($F = 3.396$, $p = .066$). Though the p-value is very close to the cutoff, it remains above .05, meaning the variability of scores between the two groups does not significantly differ. Therefore, the interpretation relies on the row assuming equal variances.

The t-test indicated no statistically significant difference in both conflict and stress management scores between blended and non-blended families, t (302) = .324, p = .746. The mean difference between the two groups was very minute (Mean Difference = .0402), with a confidence interval level ranging from –.2036 to .2840, indicating that the true population difference may have been negative or positive. The wide, crossing-zero interval confirmed that the variation is not expressive.

The findings align with existing literature, which states that blended family setups are usually described as more vulnerable to interpersonal strains due to loyalty conflicts, ambiguity, and the presence of composite step-relationships (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Papernow, 2013). The findings posit that conflict and stress management practices between the blended and non-blended families are mainly comparable.

Furthermore, existing literature emphasizes that both blended and non-blended families may experience the same levels of conflict that arise from parenting demands, economic pressures, personality differences, as well as developmental transitions (Walsh, 2016). Therefore, the lack of statistically significant differences in the present study supports the argument that family structures internal resources, instead of their composition, control the quality of stress and conflict management (Amato, 2014).

Family Cohesion and Unity in Blended and Non-Blended Family Backgrounds

The study explored family cohesion and unity among respondents from both blended and non-blended backgrounds to establish how different family structures shape togetherness, cooperation, and a shared sense of identity. This comparison provides insight into the strength of family bonds and the degree of belonging experienced within these households.

Table 16 below provides the results of the analysis of Family Cohesion and Unity in both Blended and Non-Blended Family Backgrounds.

Table 16

Family Cohesion and Unity in both Blended and Non-Blended Family Backgrounds

		SD	D	N	A	SA	*n*	$\underline{x}$	*s*
1.	Our family enjoys spending time together as a unit.	26	28	76	83	94	307	3.62	1.24
2.	There is a strong sense of belonging among all members.	35	40	68	79	88	310	3.47	1.33
3.	All siblings are treated equally and fairly.	27	33	83	71	93	307	3.55	1.27
4.	Our family has strengthened overall family unity.	27	33	83	71	93	307	3.55	1.27
Aggregate Mean Score ($\underline{x}$)=3.55, Std Dev (*s*)= 1.20									

The results on family cohesion and unity suggest that respondents generally perceive their families as moderately cohesive, with an aggregate mean score of 3.55 (SD = 1.20). This indicates that, on average, families whether blended or non-blended tend to report positive levels of connectedness, shared activities, and emotional bonding. Across the individual items, respondents agreed most strongly with the statement *"Our family enjoys spending time together as a unit"* (M = 3.62, SD = 1.24), suggesting that shared activities and family togetherness remain central markers of unity. Literature underscores the importance of shared activities as predictors of family functioning, arguing that collective routines and rituals enhance emotional closeness and strengthen identity within the family system (Lee et al., 2025). The relatively high score on this item aligns with research showing that time spent together fosters cohesion regardless of the structural composition of the family (Ganong & Coleman, 2017).

The item on *"a strong sense of belonging among all members"* received a slightly lower mean (M = 3.47, SD = 1.33), which is consistent with studies suggesting that belongingness can be more complex to cultivate in families with diverse or shifting structures, such as blended families (Ganong & Coleman, 2017).

Responses to *"all siblings are treated equally and fairly"* (M = 3.55, SD = 1.27) also show generally positive perceptions of fairness and equity. The findings agree with study by McHale et al. (2012) which reports that perceived fairness in the distribution of parental attention, resources, and discipline is a crucial determinant of sibling harmony and overall family cohesion (McHale et al., 2012).

The final item, *"Our family has strengthened overall family unity,"* also yielded a positive mean of 3.55, implying that families experience growth in unity over time. This is consistent with Olson's Circumflex Model, which posits that families often adapt and are strengthened through communication, problem-solving, and role adjustments (Olson, 2000). For blended families in particular, unity often develops gradually as members work through initial instability and negotiate new roles (Visher & Visher, 2019).

Generally, the results suggest that family cohesion is fairly strong across both blended and non-blended family structures. The current findings indicate that many families succeed in cultivating togetherness and belonging. This reinforces evidence that cohesion is less dependent on family structure and more strongly shaped by relational processes, including communication quality, fairness, shared activities, and supportive interactions (Amato, 2014).

Further analysis was done to compare family cohesion and unity between the two-family structures. Table 17 presents the results of the comparative analysis of family cohesion and unity between blended and non-blended families.

Table 17

Family Cohesion and Unity in Blended Family and Non-Blended Families

	Family Cohesion and Unity		
	n	***x̲***	***s***
Blended Family	3.58	65	1.22
Non-Blended Family	3.54	239	1.20
Total	3.55	**304**	1.20

The descriptive comparison of family cohesion and unity between blended and non-blended families reveals very similar mean scores, suggesting that both family structures experience comparable levels of togetherness, belonging, and collective identity. Blended families reported a slightly higher mean score (M = 3.58, SD = 1.22) compared to non-blended families (M = 3.54, SD = 1.20), although the difference is minimal. The overall mean score across respondents (M = 3.55) reinforces the notion that most families, regardless of structure, perceive themselves as moderately cohesive.

Existing studies support these findings by stating that blended families often face unique obstacles, including role ambiguity, loyalty conflicts, and difficulties integrating step-relations, leading to a moderate cohesion level. (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Papernow, 2013). Such challenges can initially hinder family bonding and cohesion. However, more recent research shows that with time, shared routines, and supportive communication, blended families can achieve cohesion levels comparable to those of non-blended families (Visher & Visher, 2019).

The slightly higher mean score among blended families may reflect successful adaptation processes. According to Olson's Circumflex Model, cohesion strengthens when families engage in open communication, shared decision-making, and effective

problem-solving strategies (Olson, 2000). Blended families that actively negotiate new roles, establish shared family norms, and intentionally build relational bridges among step-relations often experience improved unity over time (Pasley & Garneau, 2018).

For the non-blended families, the findings align with those by McHale et al. (2012) who states that stable biological relationships and consistent family histories often facilitate cohesion naturally through long-established patterns of interaction. Indeed, the nearly identical scores between blended and non-blended family systems underscore the point that cohesion is less a function of the family system and more a reflection of the relational processes, emotional climate as shared experiences with the findings aligning further with findings by Amato (2014) who states that family stability does not necessarily automatically guarantee higher cohesion, as interpersonal relations quality is shaped by communication patterns, parenting styles, as well as emotional support, which influence the family dynamics.

Table 18 presents the results of an Independent Samples T-Test of Test Family Cohesion and Unity in blended families and non-blended families

Table 18

Independent Samples Test of Family Cohesion and Unity in Blended Family and Non-Blended Families

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference

									Lower	Upper
Do you come from a blended family background	Equal variances assumed	2.257	.143	-.726	30	.474	-.119	.164	-.454	.216
	Equal variances not assumed			-.738	29.502	.466	-.119	.161	-.449	.211

An independent samples t-test was done to examine whether family cohesion and unity had a significant difference between respondents from the blended and non-blended types of families. The findings of Levene's test for equality of variances pointed out that the assumption of the homogeneity of variance was met ($F = 2.257$, $p = .143$), which meant that the variability in cohesion scores across the two groups was statistically very similar. Thus, the analysis and interpretation were based on the row assuming equality of variances.

The t-test revealed that there was no statistically significant difference in family cohesion and unity between blended and non-blended family types, $t(30) = –0.726$, $p = .474$. The mean difference (–0.119) was very small, and thus the 95% confidence interval (–0.454 to 0.216), which included zero, indicated that the observed difference is not meaningful and is perhaps attributed to chance.

The findings submit that both blended and non-blended types of families experience comparable levels of cohesion and unity, reinforcing the notion that the family system alone does not necessarily determine the quality of interpersonal bonds within the family setup. These findings agree with existing literature, which documents that a well-functioning blended family can achieve cohesion levels that are comparable to those found in the biological two-parent families (Visher & Visher,

2019). The absence of significant differences supports the argument that cohesion is largely shaped by interpersonal processes rather than structure. The observation aligns with the Systems Theory, which postulates that families adapt to transitions and reorganize roles in ways that maintain or rebuild unity in the course of time (Cox & Paley, 2003).

Moreover, research points out that blended families actively promote trust, engage in open and candid communication, establish shared values, and are able to overcome initial challenges that foster strong cohesion (Pasley & Garneau, 2018). Therefore, the lack of significant differences that are found in the study may reflect resilience and adaptive capacities of the blended families and the presence of healthy interpersonal practices across both family systems.

Generally, the results reveal that family cohesion and unity are not significantly different between blended and non-blended family systems. This suggests that both structures are capable of achieving as well as maintaining strong interpersonal bonds when supported by healthy family dynamic forces.

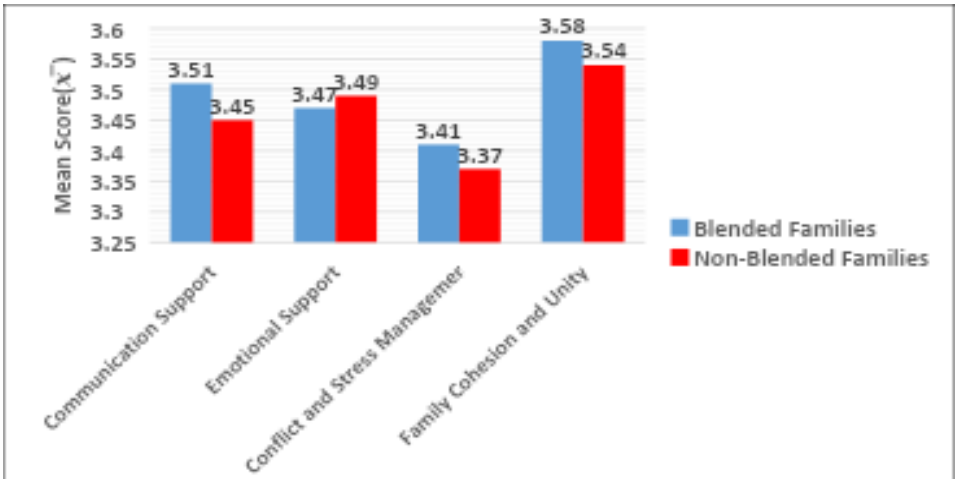
Summary of Quality of Family Relationships in Blended and Non-Blended Families

The study further explored the overall quality of family relationships, notably; communication, emotional support, conflict and stress management, and family cohesion and unity in both blended and non-blended types of families. In comparing the four dimensions across the two-family systems, the study aimed at determining whether meaningful differences exist in how families interact, support each other, handle challenges, and maintain unity. This outline provides a foundation for understanding interpersonal strengths and potential areas of weakness within diverse family backgrounds.

Figure 6 presents a comparative analysis of the four key dimensions of the family relationship quality, which include: communication, emotional support, conflict and stress management, and family cohesion and unity, between the blended and non-blended family types.

Figure 6

Quality of Family Relationships in Blended and Non-Blended Families



The results in Figure 6 above show that, across all the specified dimensions, the mean scores of both of the family types fall within a narrow range between 3.37 and 3.58, which suggests a generally moderate to strong relationship functioning irrespective of family type. This resonates with earlier literature that reports that families in general can maintain healthy relationships when key elements such as open communication are given priority (Brown & Stone, 2020).

Communication. In blended families, a slightly higher mean score was reported (3.51) compared to the non-blended type (3.45). Although the difference is slight, it may be indicative of adaptive communication strategies in blended families as they explore complex interpersonal dynamics, notably co-parenting, step-sibling relationships, and new household norms. Research indicates that blended families usually deliberately invest in communication practices that facilitate adjustment and

interpersonal integration (Papernow, 2013). This aligns very well with Olson (2000) observation that open and supportive communication is essential in maintaining cohesion across diverse family systems.

Emotional Support. Emotional support levels were closely matched in blended (3.47) and non-blended types of families (3.49). This resemblance suggests that both of the family types are capable of promoting emotional reassurance, empathy, and affection among members. Available literature indicates that emotional support is a function of interpersonal quality rather than the family system (Amato, 2014). The near similarity in emotional support also signals effective adaptation within blended types of families, as members work to launch trust and emotional bonds in the course of time (Ganong & Coleman, 2017).

Conflict and Stress Management. In both blended (3.41) and non-blended (3.37) types of families, the lowest scores were reported in this dimension. Though differences remain very minimal, this outline reflects the universal challenge of managing conflict and daily stressors within the family structures. Research notes that both blended and non-blended families face stress, which stems from financial pressures, school demands, interpersonal conflict, and role expectations (Cox & Paley, 2003). In blended families, however, they may experience additional stress related to step-relationships and the boundary ambiguity (Papernow, 2013), yet the findings indicate that their stress management levels remain comparable to those of the non-blended types of families.

Family Cohesion and Unity. Family cohesion and unity indicated the largest (though still modest) difference between the blended (3.58) and the non-blended families (3.54). The blended families reported slightly robust unity, which may perhaps reflect deliberate efforts to build family distinctiveness through shared

activities, impartial treatment, and inclusive decision-making. Available research has documented that blended families who nurture family rituals, promote fairness, and create shared meaning usually achieve higher levels of cohesion (Visher & Visher, 2019). Likewise, long-term research specifies that unity develops as families engage in the negotiation, adaptation, and emotional atonement (Lee et al., 2025).

General interpretation. The pattern across the four dimensions shows that both blended and non-blended types of families exhibit very similar levels of interpersonal functioning, challenging traditional assumptions that blended types of families necessarily experience poorer interpersonal quality. The small differences in favoring blended families in three of the four domains may reflect the resilience as well as adaptive capacity emphasized in contemporary family systems research (Ganong & Coleman, 2017).

Generally, the results support the opinion that healthy family processes, which include communication, fairness, emotional support, and collaborative problem-solving, are far more influential on the quality of the relationship than the family system itself.

Influence of Blended Family Structures on Dimensions of Family Relationship Quality

The third research objective examined the influence of blended family structures on the quality of family relationships among students in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya. To address this, a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine whether different types of blended family structures significantly influence four dimensions of family relationship

quality: communication, emotional support, conflict and stress management, and family cohesion and unity.

Table 20 presents the results of a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) carried out to examine whether different types of blended family structures significantly influence four dimensions of family relationship quality.

Table 19

ANOVA Influence of Blended Family Structures on Dimensions of Family Relationship Quality

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Communication	Between Groups	39.381	3	13.127	24.464	.000
	Within Groups	28.976	54	.537		
	Total	68.357	57			
Emotional Support	Between Groups	32.887	3	10.962	15.397	.000
	Within Groups	37.736	53	.712		
	Total	70.623	56			
Conflict and Stress Management	Between Groups	13.605	3	4.535	9.343	.000
	Within Groups	26.698	55	.485		
	Total	40.303	58			
Family Cohesion and Unity	Between Groups	36.591	3	12.197	11.997	.000
	Within Groups	55.916	55	1.017		
	Total	92.506	58			

Table 19 shows that across all four dimensions, ANOVA results revealed statistically significant differences ($p < .001$), which indicates that the type of blended family systems students live in plays a crucial role in shaping their interpersonal and psychosocial experiences. A one-way ANOVA was done to examine the influence of the blended family structures on different dimensions of the family relationship quality, which included communication, emotional support, conflict and stress management, and family cohesion and unity.

With ‘communication’, there was a statistically significant effect of the family structure, $F(3, 54) = 24.464$, $p < .001$. The ‘between-groups’ sum of squares was

39.381 with a mean of 13.127, while the within-groups sum of squares was 28.976 with a mean square of 0.537. This points out that differences in communication scores across blended family structures are notably significant. With regard to emotional support, the analysis discovered a significant effect of the family structure, $F(3, 53) = 15.397$, $p < .001$. The 'between-groups' sum of squares was 32.887 (mean square = 10.962) and the 'within-groups' sum of squares was 37.736 (mean square = 0.712), pointing out that family structure significantly influences emotional support among the family members.

In regard to conflict and stress management, there was also a significant effect, $F(3, 55) = 9.343$, $p < .001$. The between-groups sum of squares was 13.605 (mean square = 4.535), and the within-groups sum of squares was 26.698 (mean square = 0.485), which indicated significant variation in conflict management based on the family structure.

Lastly, the family cohesion and unity showed a significant effect of the blended family structure, $F(3, 55) = 11.997$, $p < .001$. The 'between-groups' sum of squares was 36.591 (mean square = 12.197) and the 'within-groups' sum of squares was 55.916 (mean square = 1.017), which indicated that cohesion and unity differ significantly across the family structures.

Generally, the results show that blended family structure significantly influences all measured dimensions of the family relationship quality, with significant differences being observed in the communication, emotional support, conflict management, and family cohesion and unity. This finding aligns with findings by Anato (2010), who emphasizes that family processes, notably cohesion, communication quality, emotional climate, and relationship management, are weaker

in blended family structures than in non-blended structures and are more influential predictors of the child's well-being.

Comparisons of Communication in Different Family Structures

The study examined pairwise comparisons of communication across different family structures to determine whether the quality of communication varies significantly between the blended and non-blended families. Through examining mean differences between specific groups, the analysis pinpoints where communication strengths and gaps are most pronounced. This provides a richer understanding of how family structure shapes day-to-day interactions.

Table 20 presents a pairwise comparison of communication across the different blended family structures and also non-blended family structures done through Post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni adjustment.

Table 20

Pairwise Comparisons of Communication in Different family Structures

Dependent Variable	(I) Factor	(J) Factor	Mean Diff (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.[b]	95% Confidence Interval for Difference[b]	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Communication	Not in a Blended Family	I live with my biological mother and stepfather.	1.919	.359	.000	.904	2.935
		I live with my biological father and stepmother.	.759	.478	1.000	-.592	2.111
		I live in a family where both my parents have remarried, and I have step-parents on both sides.	.272	.241	1.000	-.409	.953

		I live in a family with children from both my father's and mother's other marriages (stepbrothers or stepsisters).	-.521	.246	.354	-1.217	.176
	I live with my biological mother and stepfather.	Not in a Blended Family	-1.919	.359	.000	-2.935	-.904
		I live with my biological father and stepmother.	-1.160	.589	.500	-2.827	.507
		I live in a family where both my parents have remarried, and I have step-parents on both sides.	-1.648	.421	.001	-2.838	-.457
		I live in a family with children from both my father's and mother's other marriages (stepbrothers or stepsisters).	-2.440	.424	.000	-3.640	-1.240
	I live with my biological father and stepmother.	Not in a Blended Family	-.759	.478	1.000	-2.111	.592
		I live with my biological mother and stepfather.	1.160	.589	.500	-.507	2.827
		I live in a family where both my parents have remarried, and I have step-parents on both sides.	-.488	.526	1.000	-1.975	1.000
		I live in a family with children from both my father's and mother's other marriages (stepbrothers or stepsisters).	-1.280	.528	.160	-2.774	.214
	I live in a family where both my parents have remarried, and	Not in a Blended Family	-.272	.241	1.000	-.953	.409
		I live with my biological mother and stepfather.	1.648	.421	.001	.457	2.838

	I have step-parents on both sides.	I live with my biological father and stepmother.	.488	.526	1.000	-1.000	1.975
		I live in a family with children from both my father's and mother's other marriages (stepbrothers or stepsisters).	-.792	.330	.170	-1.726	.141
	I live in a family with children from both my father's and mother's other marriages (stepbrothers or stepsisters).	Not in a Blended Family	.521	.246	.354	-.176	1.217
		I live with my biological mother and stepfather.	2.440	.424	.000	1.240	3.640
		I live with my biological father and stepmother.	1.280	.528	.160	-.214	2.774
		I live in a family where both my parents have remarried, and I have step-parents on both sides.	.792	.330	.170	-.141	1.726

Post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni adjustment indicated significant differences in communication among adolescents from both blended and non-blended family structures. Precisely, adolescents living with their biological mother and stepfather reported significantly advanced communication scores than those not in a blended family structure(M difference = 1.919, SE = 0.359, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.904, 2.935]), including those living in families where both parents had remarried, with step-parents from both sides (M difference = 1.648, SE = 0.421, $p = .001$, 95% CI [0.457, 2.838]) and those that are living with step-siblings from both parents' other marriages (M difference = 2.440, SE = 0.424, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.240, 3.640]).

The results posit that adolescents in the custodial blended families with one biological parent and a step-parent may have and experience more effective and open communication than peers in the other family structures. Additionally, no statistically

significant differences were observed for adolescents living with their biological father and stepmother as compared to most of other types of families (all $p > .05$), nor between adolescents in the families where both parents had remarried and other family structures (all $p > .05$). However, adolescents living with step-siblings from both parents' previous marriages generally reported lower communication scores. This suggests the potential challenges inherent in complex blended family structures that include multiple parental figures and step-siblings.

The findings are consistent with previous research which demonstrates that family composition significantly influences the quality of communication. Notably, Papernow (2013) and Coleman et al. (2020) note that children within custodial biological parent–step-parent households usually experience better communication channels and greater parental availability as well. Conversely, blended families, which are complex due to multiple remarriages or step-siblings, may actually face role ambiguity, conflicting expectations, and relational stress, which may hinder effective communication (Ganong & Coleman, 2017)

Comparisons of Emotional Support in Different Family Structures

This study examined comparisons of the emotional support across different family structures to determine how effectively families meet the emotional needs of their members. In the assessment of variations between blended and non-blended family structures, the analysis will provide insight into how family composition would influence warmth, reassurance, and emotional connectedness as well.

Table 21 presents a pairwise comparison of emotional support across the different blended family structures and also non-blended family structures, done through Post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni adjustment

Table 21

Pairwise Comparisons of Emotional Support in Different family Structures

Emotional Support	Not in a Blended Family	I live with my biological mother and stepfather.	1.592	.384	.000	.506	2.678
		I live with my biological father and stepmother.	.646	.511	1.00	-.800	2.091
		I live in a family where both my parents have remarried, and I have step-parents on both sides.	.516	.258	.461	-.213	1.245
		I live in a family with children from both my father's and mother's other marriages (stepbrothers or stepsisters).	-.574	.263	.300	-1.320	.171
	I live with my biological mother and stepfather.	Not in a Blended Family	-1.592	.384	.000	-2.678	-.506
		I live with my biological father and stepmother.	-.947	.630	1.000	-2.730	.837
		I live in a family where both my parents have remarried, and I have step-parents on both sides.	-1.076	.450	.175	-2.350	.198
		I live in a family with children from both my father's and mother's other marriages (stepbrothers or stepsisters).	-2.167	.454	.000	-3.450	-.883
	I live with my biological father and stepmother.	Not in a Blended Family	-.646	.511	1.000	-2.091	.800
		I live with my biological mother and stepfather.	.947	.630	1.000	-.837	2.730
		I live in a family where both my parents have remarried, and I have step-parents on both sides.	-.130	.562	1.000	-1.720	1.461
		I live in a family with children from both my father's and mother's other marriages (stepbrothers or stepsisters).	-1.220	.565	.317	-2.818	.378

	I live in a family where both my parents have remarried, and I have step-parents on both sides.	Not in a Blended Family	-.516	.258	.461	-1.245	.213
		I live with my biological mother and stepfather.	1.076	.450	.175	-.198	2.350
		I live with my biological father and stepmother.	.130	.562	1.000	-1.461	1.720
		I live in a family with children from both my father's and mother's other marriages (stepbrothers or stepsisters).	-1.090	.353	.022	-2.089	-.092
	I live in a family with children from both my father's and mother's other marriages (stepbrothers or stepsisters).	Not in a Blended Family	.574	.263	.300	-.171	1.320
		I live with my biological mother and stepfather.	2.167	.454	.000	.883	3.450
		I live with my biological father and stepmother.	1.220	.565	.317	-.378	2.818
		I live in a family where both my parents have remarried, and I have step-parents on both sides.	1.090	.353	.022	.092	2.089

The analysis of post hoc comparisons revealed that adolescents' perceived emotional support varied significantly across different family structures. Adolescents who are living with their biological mother and stepfather reported very significantly higher emotional support as compared to those not in a blended family structure (M difference = 1.592, SE = 0.384, $p < .001$, 95% CI (0.506, 2.678). Additionally, they reported higher emotional support than adolescents who live with step-siblings from both the parents' other marriages (M difference = 2.167, SE = 0.454, $p < .001$, 95% CI (0.883, 3.450). To the contrary, adolescents living with step-siblings reported less emotional support, which is relative to those in custodial blended type of families with one biological parent and a step-parent (M difference = -2.167, SE = 0.454, $p < .001$). Furthermore, adolescents in families where both parents had remarried with step-

parents on both sides reported significantly greater emotional support compared to those in step-sibling households (M difference = 1.090, SE = 0.353, p = .022, 95% CI [0.092, 2.089]). However, no statistically significant differences were detected between adolescents living with their biological father and stepmother and most other types of families, which indicated that this particular arrangement does not necessarily consistently influence the emotional support.

The findings posit that custodial blended families with a biological parent and a step-parent tend to provide the most supportive emotional environment for the adolescents. This aligns with previous research, which indicated that children in stepfamilies with a custodial biological parent usually experience greater levels of emotional availability and responsiveness from the caregivers (Coleman et al., 2020; Papernow, 2013;). Equally, the complex blended family arrangements, mainly those involving multiple step-siblings, may decrease the quality of emotional support due to the presence of role ambiguity, sibling rivalry, and divided parental attention as well (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Urging in a similar vein, Amato and Sobolewski (2004) noted that adolescents in the complex stepfamily systems usually experience lower emotional well-being due to the challenges that are associated with adjusting to multiple parental figures.

Comparisons of Conflict and Stress Management in Different Family Structures

The study examined comparisons of conflict as well as stress management across different family structures to understand how families address tension and resolve disagreements. In examining blended and non-blended types of families, the analysis indicates how family composition will influence coping strategies, harmony, and general relationship stability.

Table 22 presents a pairwise comparison of conflict and stress management across the different blended family structures and also non-blended family structures, done through Post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni adjustment.

Table 22

Pairwise Comparisons of Conflict and Stress Management in Different Family Structures

Conflict and Stress Management	Not in a Blended Family	I live with my biological mother and stepfather.	1.144	.289	.001	.328	1.961
		I live with my biological father and stepmother.	.572	.384	1.000	-.514	1.658
		I live in a family where both my parents have remarried, and I have step-parents on both sides.	.136	.194	1.000	-.411	.684
		I live in a family with children from both my father's and mother's other marriages (stepbrothers or stepsisters).	-.303	.198	1.000	-.863	.257
	I live with my biological mother and stepfather.	Not in a Blended Family	-1.144	.289	.001	-1.961	-.328
		I live with my biological father and stepmother.	-.572	.474	1.000	-1.913	.768
		I live in a family where both my parents have remarried, and I have step-parents on both sides.	-1.008	.338	.032	-1.965	-.050

		I live in a family with children from both my father's and mother's other marriages (stepbrothers or stepsisters).	-1.447	.341	.000	-2.412	-.483
	I live with my biological father and stepmother.	Not in a Blended Family	-.572	.384	1.000	-1.658	.514
		I live with my biological mother and stepfather.	.572	.474	1.000	-.768	1.913
		I live in a family where both my parents have remarried, and I have step-parents on both sides.	-.436	.423	1.000	-1.632	.760
		I live in a family with children from both my father's and mother's other marriages (stepbrothers or stepsisters).	-.875	.425	.403	-2.077	.327
	I live in a family where both my parents have remarried, and I have step-parents on both sides.	Not in a Blended Family	-.136	.194	1.000	-.684	.411
		I live with my biological mother and stepfather.	1.008	.338	.032	.050	1.965
		I live with my biological father and stepmother.	.436	.423	1.000	-.760	1.632
		I live in a family with children from both my father's and mother's other marriages (stepbrothers or stepsisters).	-.439	.265	.990	-1.190	.312
	I live in a family with children	Not in a Blended Family	.303	.198	1.000	-.257	.863

	from both my father's and mother's other marriages (stepbrothers or stepsisters).	I live with my biological mother and stepfather.	1.447	.341	.000	.483	2.412
		I live with my biological father and stepmother.	.875	.425	.403	-.327	2.077
		I live in a family where both my parents have remarried, and I have step-parents on both sides.	.439	.265	.990	-.312	1.190

The analysis of post hoc Bonferroni comparisons indicated that adolescents' ability to manage conflict and stress differed across different types of family structures. Adolescents who live with their biological mother and stepfather demonstrated significantly higher conflict and stress management scores, compared to their peers not in a blended family set up (M difference = 1.144, SE = 0.289, p = .001, 95% CI [0.328, 1.961). Additionally, they scored higher than adolescents living in the type of family where both parents had remarried, with step-parents on both sides (M difference = 1.008, SE = 0.338, p = .032, 95% CI (0.050, 1.965)) and those living with step-siblings from both parents' other marriages (M difference = 1.447, SE = 0.341, p < .001, 95% CI [0.483, 2.412]). Adolescents who live with their biological father and stepmother did not differ significantly from other family types in conflict as well as stress management (all p > .05). In contrast, adolescents in step-sibling households or in families with step-parents on both sides typically reported lower scores.

The findings posit that custodial blended families, which consist of a biological parent and a step-parent, generate an environment that promotes improved conflict management and coping with stress among the adolescents. This is consistent with prior research, which indicates that simpler stepfamily arrangements offer clearer parental guidance, more steady routines, and consistent emotional support, which are

crucial for adolescents' development of conflict resolution skills (Coleman et al., 2020; Papernow, 2013). Equally, more complex blended family structures, notably with multiple step-parents or step-siblings, may lead to the development of role ambiguity, conflicting expectations, and interpersonal stress, which can hinder adolescents' ability to manage conflicts effectively (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Amato and Sobolewski (2004) likewise found that adolescents in complex stepfamily environments regularly experience higher levels of stress due to contending family demands and erratic parental attention.

Comparisons of Family Cohesion and Unity among Different Family Structures

The study made comparisons of family cohesion and unity among different family structures. Family cohesion and unity, which reflect the emotional bonding, support, and sense of togetherness among family members form critical indicators of the family functioning. Variations in family composition, notably blended and non-blended families, can influence the quality of the relationships. Understanding how cohesion and unity differ across family structures may provide insights into the dynamics that support or hinder healthy family interactions and general well-being.

Table 23 presents a pairwise comparison of family cohesion and unity across the different blended family structures and also non-blended family structures, done through Post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni adjustment.

Table 23

Pairwise Comparisons of Family Cohesion and Unity among Different Family Structures

Family cohesion and unity	Not in a Blended Family	I live with my biological mother and stepfather.	1.680	.396	.000	.560	2.799
		I live with my biological father and stepmother.	1.196	.526	.238	-.293	2.686
		I live in a family where both my parents have remarried, and I have step-parents on both sides.	.311	.265	1.000	-.441	1.062
		I live in a family with children from both my father's and mother's other marriages (stepbrothers or stepsisters).	-.516	.271	.583	-1.284	.252
	I live with my biological mother and stepfather.	Not in a Blended Family	-1.680	.396	.000	-2.799	-.560
		I live with my biological father and stepmother.	-.483	.650	1.000	-2.321	1.355
		I live in a family where both my parents have remarried, and I have step-parents on both sides.	-1.369	.464	.034	-2.682	-.056
		I live in a family with children from both my father's and mother's other marriages (stepbrothers or stepsisters).	-2.196	.468	.000	-3.519	-.873
	I live with my biological father and stepmother.	Not in a Blended Family	-1.196	.526	.238	-2.686	.293
		I live with my biological mother and stepfather.	.483	.650	1.000	-1.355	2.321
		I live in a family where both my parents have remarried, and I have step-parents on both sides.	-.886	.580	1.000	-2.526	.754

		I live in a family with children from both my father's and mother's other marriages (stepbrothers or stepsisters).	-1.713	.582	.035	-3.360	-.065
	I live in a family where both my parents have remarried, and I have step-parents on both sides.	Not in a Blended Family	-.311	.265	1.000	-1.062	.441
		I live with my biological mother and stepfather.	1.369	.464	.034	.056	2.682
		I live with my biological father and stepmother.	.886	.580	1.000	-.754	2.526
		I live in a family with children from both my father's and mother's other marriages (stepbrothers or stepsisters).	-.827	.364	.238	-1.856	.203
	I live in a family with children from both my father's and mother's other marriages (stepbrothers or stepsisters).	Not in a Blended Family	.516	.271	.583	-.252	1.284
		I live with my biological mother and stepfather.	2.196	.468	.000	.873	3.519
		I live with my biological father and stepmother.	1.713	.582	.035	.065	3.360
		I live in a family where both my parents have remarried, and I have step-parents on both sides.	.827	.364	.238	-.203	1.856

The post hoc Bonferroni comparisons indicate that adolescents' perceptions of family cohesion and unity differ significantly across family structures. Adolescents living with their biological mother and stepfather reported much higher levels of family cohesion and unity than those not in a blended family (M difference = 1.680, SE = 0.396, $p < .001$, 95% CI (0.560, 2.799)). They also reported higher cohesion compared to those in families where both parents had remarried, with step-parents on both sides (M difference = 1.369, SE = 0.464, $p = .034$, 95% CI (0.056, 2.682)). Similarly, greater cohesion was observed than among adolescents living with step-

siblings from both parents' other marriages (M difference = 2.196, SE = 0.468, p < .001, 95% CI (0.873, 3.519)).

Likewise, the adolescents living with their biological father and stepmother reported higher family cohesion and unity as compared to adolescents living with step-siblings from both parents' other marriages (M difference = 1.713, SE = 0.582, p = .035, 95% CI (0.065, 3.360). In contrast, adolescents living in complex stepfamily arrangements with multiple step-parents or step-siblings reported the lowest levels of family cohesion, which suggests that the presence of multiple parental figures and blended siblings may weaken family unity or complicate interpersonal dynamics.

The findings suggest that custodial blended families with one biological parent and one step-parent give adolescents stronger feelings of cohesion and unity. This may result from clearer family roles, predictable routines, and more consistent parental attention (Coleman et al., 2020; Papernow, 2013). In contrast, complex blended families may face role ambiguity, sibling competition, and divided parental attention, which can reduce adolescents' perception of unity (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Previous research indicates that higher family cohesion improves emotional well-being, conflict resolution, and resilience in adolescents. This highlights the protective role of cohesive family environments (Amato & Sobolewski, 2004; Olson, 2000).

Strategies for enhancing the quality of family relationships

The fourth objective examined strategies for improving the quality family relationships. Strong family bonds were often linked to intentional effort and quality time (28.44%). Spending time together, eating, playing games, sharing chores, and making decisions together all strengthen bonds. Even when schedules conflict, making time for each other builds connection. Open communication, prayer, and

collaboration can boost emotional closeness. One respondent noted that consistent togetherness, whether through joint tasks or joyful activities, strengthens family bonds. Respect, equity, and equality (19.00%) promote peace. Appreciation, affection, and emotional support (13.31%) build trust and safety. Constructive conflict resolution and cooperative problem-solving (16.87%) help build both trust and unity. "Effective dealing with disagreements in a level-headed and polite manner keeps misunderstandings from growing, and sets a good example for family problem-solving," one respondent said.

When families pray or uphold values, 5.25 percent feel more united and behave better. Professional counseling and psychotherapy (9.63%) may help families to learn healthy ways of communicating emotions, cope with stress, restore trust, and build resilience when problems continue. "When problems and challenges persist, professional counseling or therapy provides very important help. Families strengthen their bonds through shared spiritual or moral activities, such as praying together or upholding common values." These findings are supported by science. A comprehensive 41-study review found that family therapy improves support, communication, flexibility, and emotional bonding (Roman et al., 2025). In a study conducted by Zhang et al. (2023), the researchers found that productive communication increased the resilience of families living with depressed adolescents. Puffer et al. (2020) carried out a pilot study in Kenya where a family therapy package was provided by lay counselors. The intervention resulted in improved mental health outcomes in the family and reduced disciplinary practices and domestic violence. This proves that the intervention increases family functioning in a poor resource setting.

Role of Parents in Fostering Healthy Family Relationships

The findings show that strong, healthy, and harmonious family relationships are impossible without parental guidance and support. Positive role models (5.94%) like parents and other caregivers teach children to love, be patient, respect, and be honest. Family harmony, trust, and understanding are fostered when parents lead by example, treat their children fairly, and share tasks. Recent research shows that parental modeling predicts children's emotional adjustment, pro-social behavior, and family cohesiveness (Li & Sun, 2022). In 2021, a review found that children with empathic and consistent parents have stronger family bonds and stability (Morris et al.).

A common theme was justice and equality (13.13%), in which survey respondents stressed the significance of treating children fairly and giving them identical attention, resources, and emotional support. This finding aligns with findings by Rodriguez et al. (2023) showing that fair parenting is likely to improve sibling relationships, emotional stability, and resolve conflict. Another study found that families stick together and kids act out less (Kim & Woo, 2022). The participants ' stress on fairness is supported by the evidence, which links equity to stable and harmonious family relationships (Kim & Woo, 2022; Rodriguez et al., 2023).

Being an attentive listener and communicating openly were also crucial (21.09%). Families that allow open expression foster safety and understanding. The findings agree with existing studies, which show that honest discussion improves emotional safety, family cohesion, and conflict resolution (Chang & Boyd, 2021). Additionally, further studies show that communication is vital to healthy functioning (Liu, 2023).

Social, emotional, and moral support were highlighted as well (31.88%). Strong families are built on a parent's love, guidance, care, emotional support, spiritual encouragement, and help with basic needs. The findings align with a study that showed that closeness and shared beliefs strengthen family bonds in tough times (Hernandez & Almeida, 2022). Okelo (2025) found that spiritual and moral activities boost family well-being.

Conflict resolution and discipline were also key to family harmony (14.96%). Respondents indicated that family conflicts can be resolved peacefully and in private, which promotes cooperation and respect. Additionally, as per the findings, parenting that is loving but firm helps children feel guided, not punished, and builds trust and stability. The findings agree with the literature which demonstrates that constructive and respectful conflict resolution reduces overall stress and also strengthens family relationships (Chang & Boyd, 2021). In addition, Santos and Miller (2022) further support the findings by indicating that collaborative problem-solving approaches are key to reducing family conflict and improving child behavior.

The final guiding principles were leadership, direction, and shared responsibility (10%), and thus parents should guide, advise, and supervise while at the same time encouraging autonomy, involvement, and shared activities. This is supported by previous studies which show that family-based' interventions help enhance family communication, bonding, and adaptability (Roman et al., 2025). Additionally, findings from a Kenyan study further align with these study findings by demonstrating that lay-counselor-led family therapy helps improve mental health not only for children but also for parents and caregivers (Puffer et al., 2020). Overall, the results of this study suggest that counseling and guided family leadership play a significant role in strengthening family functioning.

What Respondents Can Do to Improve Family Relationships

From the responses, 35% of people believe open, honest, and respectful communication is the first step to improving family relationships. Many students mentioned being polite, honest about difficult topics, listening without interrupting, and not being silent. They stressed keeping in touch, staying calm, and communicating constructively; checking in with each other; respectfully sharing concerns; allowing everyone to express themselves; and communicating consistently, calmly, and constructively. The findings align with a study by Walsh (2021), who stated that family communication is a strong indicator of family cohesiveness and emotional health. Walsh (2021) says open communication helps families manage stress, regulate emotions, and build trust.

Kindness and acceptance (29.44%) also came out as key important themes. The children vowed to respect and honor all family members, regardless of age, without judgment. Step-parents and step-siblings showed the importance of accepting different emotions, perspectives, and personalities. Many students stressed the importance of empathy, friendliness, respecting personal space, and individuality. Other important daily actions included being polite even when disagreeing, showing empathy, and maintaining decorum. Other studies are in agreement with these findings, with findings from a family relations study indicating that politeness reduces hostility, increases secure attachments, and makes households more emotionally safe (Timmons et al., 2023).

Love, forgiveness, and emotional support were also valued (20.63%). Students agreed that helping each other, showing love, and being affectionate strengthen bonds. To enhance harmony, "chilling" before addressing the problems, forgiving quickly, giving an apology when wrong, and letting go of past hurts were among the

suggestions. Existing literature supports these findings, with Walsh (2021) indicating that forgiveness and emotional support enhance mental health and family bonds as well.

In addition, 18.13% of students emphasized home initiative and responsibility as well, which includes: helping with household chores, working on shared projects, following family rules, and acting suitably when called upon, with setting a good example standing out as crucial. Some respondents posited that supporting family, being honest about money, and contributing money when they could, enhanced family harmony. These findings align with the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe (2024) findings, which show that responsible and honest youth behaviors strengthen stable families.

Time investment was another key issue. Most students (20.50%) agreed that family traditions, vacations, shared meals, and fun activities can strengthen bonds. Being emotionally and physically present, celebrating, and intentionally creating moments of connection were suggested. Research supports that quality time together enhances emotional closeness and strengthens relationships (Timmons et al., 2023).

In conclusion, fostering harmony, collaboration, and inclusiveness sustains strong family connections. Emphasizing cooperation and appreciation can help families thrive amid challenges, ensuring that everyone feels valued and supported.

Emotional and spiritual stability were emphasized. 60% of students prayed for the family, while 6.5 percent provided spiritual support and sought therapy or counseling when needed. These findings align with existing research, which suggests spiritual practices can strengthen families and improve mental health. According to the 2022 Mental Health, Religion and Culture research, families who practice spirituality together have higher levels of harmony, mutual support, and ethical

cohesion. Timmons et al. (2023) recommends counseling for troubled families to reduce stress and improve relationships.

Finally, 17.19% of the respondents valued self-improvement which included perseverance, modesty, healthy boundary setting, humility in the face of adversity, thankfulness, optimism, and deliberate behavior change. Some of the survey respondents also reported that they wanted to listen more, not being judgmental, avoid stress by remaining neutral in the arguments, and progressively make their homes to be more peaceful. The findings are in line with those by World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe (2024) indicating that, emotional regulation as self-awareness decrease family conflict and boost mental health.

Further analysis indicates that most of the respondents think family counseling strengthens bonds (90.49%) and posited that they would recommend family counseling, believing it could raise communication, resolve disputes, and improve family relationships. Recent studies published in the past five years supported the current findings by indicating that structured family interventions are poised to improve communication, conflict, and trust (Carr & Utz, 2020). Additionally, family-based therapy helps families overcome trauma, conflict, and behavioral issues (Schniering et al., 2022).

A small minority of 26 people (8.52%) would not recommend counseling. Overall, the findings suggest that family counseling can improve family functioning and relational health. The 8.52 percent who would not recommend family counseling may be influenced by cultural beliefs, shame, or a lack of therapeutic knowledge. Recent research has identified these as common barriers to family help-seeking (Atilola & Olagunju, 2021). Still, the overwhelming yes vote shows that more people are seeing counseling as a way to help families resolve their issues in a positive,

accepting environment. The study's findings support the growing body of empirical evidence that family counseling strengthens family bonds.

Suggestions on Strategies to Improve the Quality of Family Relationships

According to findings most people believe that talking things out strengthens family bonds. Many stressed open communications, listening, and speaking one's mind without fear of repercussions. Existing literature by Roman et al. (2025) aligns with these findings by indicating that communication, which reduces misunderstandings and creates emotional safety, is the strongest indicator of family cohesiveness and resilience (Roman et al., 2025). Additionally, further supportive research shows that open-dialogue families have fewer conflicts and are happier (Zhang et al., 2023).

Second, treating family members equally was crucial. Respondents stressed the importance of not favoring, respecting boundaries, and treating everyone with dignity, especially children. The need for fairness aligns with a study by and Lee & Kim (2021), whose findings show that being fair as a parent helped the children feel better emotionally and bond with their respective caregivers, thus reducing the sibling rivalry. Another supportive study indicates that fairness improves family functioning and reduces stress in adults and teens (Santos & Miller, 2022).

Another key strategy was the importance of psychotherapy and counseling in solving long-standing family issues. Participants said professional guidance provides a safe space to discuss and resolve issues, bridge generational gaps, and repair damaged communication. The findings align with existing literature, which indicates that counseling boosts mental health, interpersonal resilience, and conflict resolution (Puffer et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2023). Moreover, sharing meals, talking, leisure activities, and purposeful bonding were also emphasized as ways to spend quality

time together. These acts of spending time together, according to Garcia and Torres (2022), improve the emotional connection and check behavioral issues in children as well as adolescents.

In addition, survey respondents emphasized the importance of teamwork and task division to improve family relationships. Modern Family-Systems Theory posits that families tend to perform better when members establish routines, divide tasks, and share the load in a fair process (Mwangi & Khasiani, 2021). Teamwork is also reported to raise family problem-solving abilities, as advanced by Kim and Lee (2022). Several of the respondents emphasised the significance of spiritual and moral practices in enhancing unity, peace, and good behavior. These include group prayer as well as shared values. According to Santos and Miller (2022), a connection to an advanced power can enhance moral growth, emotional support, and group resilience in the face of a challenge or adversity. these activities enhance family harmony by giving the members a sense of purpose as well as belonging. The findings show that open communication with mutual respect, emotional support, spending quality time together, collaboration, expert advice, and shared values are vital to a healthy family relationship.

Chapter Summary

The present analysis examined how adolescents' perceptions of family relationship quality vary across different blended family structures.. In total, four components were taken into consideration: communication, emotional support, conflict/stress management, and family cohesion. The results indicate that adolescents who belonged to custodial blended families (the biological mother along with the stepfather) obtained higher scores across all measured dimensions in comparison to their peers from either non-blended or complex blended families. Moreover, families

with both parents remarried performed better in all aspects when compared to step-siblings' families. Maternal custodial arrangement was shown to be the best one, although there is evidence of paternal arrangement promoting unity as well. Complex blended families demonstrated relatively low levels of relationship quality in general. Thus, the chapter can be concluded that custodial blended families represent the best environment for adolescents. Implications for practice are also provided here.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This chapter discusses the study's findings on how the blended family structures influence adolescents' family relationship quality across communication, emotional support, conflict and stress management, and family cohesion. The discussion links the results to existing literature, highlights practical implications, and provides evidence-based recommendations, concluding with the study's general contributions to understanding blended family dynamics and adolescent development. This section presents a summary of the findings as per the research objectives. The summary will include the findings and the implications of these findings.

Summary of Findings

Prevalence and Types of Blended Family Structures

The first objective focused on the prevalence of blended family structures among students in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya. The findings showed that the majority of the respondents (78.7%) were from non-blended families, with only 21.3% from blended families. This shows that blended families are the minority family structure within the sampled private universities in Nairobi, Kenya. Regarding the type of blended family structure, findings show that complex families were more common than simple step-parent families. Among respondents raised in blended families, 7.7% reported that they lived in families where both parents had remarried, with both parents being step-parents, while 7.1 percent indicated that they were from blended families that included step siblings from both parents. Only a smaller portion of the respondents (2.9%) lived with a stepfather and

biological mother, with (1.6%) reporting to live with a stepmother and biological father. These results overall demonstrate that despite blended families being significant, most of those raised in these families are more likely to come from complex reconstituted structures and not simple step-parent households.

In addition, the findings also highlight the growing complexity of family structures among the youth. The presence of complex blended family structures suggests that the trends of remarriage and family transitions are shaping the current family structures. These transitions could be related to changes in the presence of new authority figures in the parental role, changes in the role of siblings, and changes in household routines. The percentage of simple step-parent family structures is very low, suggesting that the experience of blended families is not always simple and straightforward but is complex and multi-layered. These differences in structures could have implications for emotional attachment, social support networks, and identity formation among university students.

Family relationship quality between blended and non-blended family structures

The second objective focused on examining the quality of family relationships between blended and non-blended family structures among students in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya. Five key dimensions, namely; communication, emotional support, conflict and stress management, and family cohesion and unity, were used to assess the quality of family relationships. The findings indicate that adolescents' perceptions of family relationship quality are significantly influenced by the family structure. Indeed, across all four dimensions, communication, emotional support, conflict and stress management, and family cohesion and unity, adolescents who live in custodial blended family types with a biological parent and a step-parent, a higher level of relationship quality was

consistently reported compared to those in the non-blended or complex stepfamily systems. In contrast, adolescents who reside in families with multiple step-parents or step-siblings have lower communication, decreased emotional support, weaker conflict management skills, as well as diminished family cohesion.

The findings highlight the advantages of simpler custodial blended family arrangements, which provide stable, supportive, and cohesive environments, as well as nurture adolescents' social-emotional development. In addition, findings also show that the clarity of parental roles and consistency in parental practices have an important role to play in improving relational outcomes in simpler blended families. When parental roles are clearly defined and parental authority is well-coordinated, adolescents feel emotionally competent and have open channels of communication. But in complex blended families, shared parental roles and divided loyalties create confusion and tension, thus affecting relational bonds.

These results underscore the importance of improving adaptive coping strategies in complex family environments. They also emphasize the need for needs-based interventions in the complex blended families, which include counseling, structured family routines, as well as community support programs, which enhance adolescents' well-being and reinforce positive family dynamics.

Influence of Blended Family Structures on Family Relationship Quality

The third objective examined the influence of blended family structures on family relationship among students in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya. One-way ANOVA results revealed the presence of statistically significant difference across the four-family relationship dimensions ($p < .001$). The findings show that family structure plays a major role in shaping the quality of students' psychosocial and interpersonal experiences.

Findings from Post hoc analyses show that students from a biological and step-parent, specifically in mother–stepfather households, reported a higher level of communication, emotional support, conflict management, and family cohesion level when compared to those from complex and non-blended families. In contrast, students from complex blended families, especially those with step-siblings from both parents' previous marriages or step-parents on both sides, generally reported lower relationship quality across all dimensions.

Moreover, the findings also indicate that the level of structural complexity in blended families might have an impact on the level of emotional security experienced by the students. When the roles are clearly defined and boundaries are well established, the students might experience a higher level of psychological adjustment and sense of belonging. On the other hand, the presence of multiple parental figures and the ever-changing patterns of loyalties might lead to confusion, ambivalence, and emotional turmoil. The transition to blended families might also impact the quality of relationships, especially when sufficient time and support are not available to help the students adjust to the new situation.

Overall, this finding shows that simple biological step-parent families provide a more supportive and stable environment, likely because of clear roles, predictable family routines, and consistent involvement of parents; conversely, complex family structure may introduce relational strain, role ambiguity, and strained parental relationships, which negatively impact the functioning of a given family. These findings support those of previous studies showing that family complexity has a direct relationship with increased interpersonal challenges for students (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Papernow, 2013).

Strategies to improve family relationships

The respondents identified several strategies that would help improve the quality of family relationships. The most cited strategies by the respondents were open respectful communication at 35%, love and emotional support at 31.88%, quality family time together at 28.44%, equity and fairness at 19%, conflict resolution at 14.96%, and collaboration/shared responsibilities at (10.2%). Moral and spiritual practices such as praying together and shared values were also pointed out (6.5%). professional counseling came out as another key strategy (9.63%), with an overwhelming majority of the respondents supporting its relevance (90.49%). These strategies reflect the different evidence-based practices shown to enhance trust, cohesion, and emotional resilience.

The findings imply that family structure alone cannot strengthen family relationships. The main solution is deliberate relational practices, including communication, emotional support, and collaborative problem solving, which are key in strengthening family relationships. Additionally, the inclusion of spiritual and moral practice highlights the role played by shared values in promoting resilience and unity. The strong endorsement of counseling as a strategy reflects the growing recognition and acceptance of structural psychosocial support as an effective strategy for addressing family issues. Overall, the findings underscore the need for evidence-based, holistic interventions that will help promote cohesion, trust, and emotional resilience.

Moreover, the results also show that in order to strengthen family relationships, there is a need for continuous effort on the part of all family members, rather than just depending upon the structural makeup of the family. Initiatives and programs designed to develop parenting skills, emotional intelligence, and effective

communication can greatly help in improving family relationship outcomes. Educational institutions, such as universities and community centers, can also help in this regard by planning family-oriented workshops and awareness campaigns that promote positive interaction patterns. The focus on fairness and cooperation also indicates that balanced participation in the family helps in developing mutual respect and avoiding resentment. Counseling services integrated with faith or value-based programs can also help in developing culturally appropriate support systems.

Recommendations

In light of the findings from data analysis, this study makes recommendations for different parties as follows:

Families and Step-parents

Families and step-parents play a vital role in the promotion of healthy adolescent development, mainly in blended family backgrounds. The study recommends that family members should clearly define their roles and responsibilities to minimize ambiguity and potential conflict, especially in intricate households with multiple step-parents or step-siblings. In such families, open, consistent, and respectful communication should be stimulated among all the family members to improve understanding, trust, and emotional bonding as well. Parents and step-parents should prioritize emotional support by actively listening to the adolescents, validating their feelings and providing one-on-one interactions that strengthen parent-child relationships. The families should have structured family activities, which include shared meals, recreational activities, and family routines to promote cohesion, unity, and a sense of belonging. Furthermore, teaching and modeling positive conflict resolution strategies may help adolescents navigate differences and manage stress efficiently.

Schools and Community Programs

Schools and community organizations may play a very supportive role for adolescents in blended families. Implementation of social-emotional learning programs and workshops can be able to equip adolescents with essential skills in communication, stress management as well as problem solving. The establishment of peer support groups provides adolescents with opportunities to share experiences, normalize challenges, and develop resilience. Training sessions and parental workshops are also recommended to guide step-parents and biological parents on nurturing positive family relationships, efficient co-parenting strategies, and managing the complexities of blended family dynamics.

Counselors and Therapists

Professional counseling and therapy are essential interventions for promoting family relationship quality in blended households. Counselors should focus on targeted family therapy for blended families, especially those with multiple step-parents or step-siblings, to address challenges such as role ambiguity, conflict, and weakened cohesion. Individual counseling for adolescents can support emotional regulation, coping skills, and adaptive strategies for navigating family stressors. Collaborative interventions involving all household members are encouraged to enhance communication, strengthen emotional support, and foster greater family unity.

Policy Makers and Social Service Providers

Policy makers as well as social service providers should recognize the exclusive needs of blended type of families in the design of supportive programs. Inclusive family guidelines that offer access to counseling, mentorship, and education as well as resources can strengthen family functioning and the well-being of

adolescents. Public awareness campaigns which highlight both the challenges and strengths of the blended type of families are recommended to educate communities and endorse best practices in nurturing positive family dynamics. Furthermore, funding of longitudinal and intervention studies may help to generate evidence-based strategies tailored to varied blended family structures.

Areas of Future Research

This study focused on the influence of blended family structures on the quality of family relationships among university students in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya. Contextually, this study was limited to only private universities in urban settings of Nairobi. Further studies can be done to extend to public universities in both urban and rural areas to be able to establish whether institutional or geographical context yields different results when it comes to blended family dynamics. Methodologically,

Contextually, while the study was limited to private universities in an urban setting, future research could extend to public universities and rural-based institutions to establish whether geographical and institutional contexts yield different relationship dynamics. Methodologically, mixed-methods convergent parallel design which used self-report questionnaires to collect data was used; future studies can focus on tracking changes in family relationships over a period of time using longitudinal designs or use observational methods to complement further support self-reported data. In terms of scope, this study targeted private university aged 18 to 35 years. Future studies should focus older adults above 35 years or those children below 18 years to be able to understand if the relationship is the same. Addressing these gaps would not only deepen understanding of blended family dynamics across diverse

contexts but also inform culturally responsive family interventions and policy formulation.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of blended family structures on perceptions of adolescents aged 18-35 years of family quality relationship, focusing on communication, emotional support, conflict and stress management, and family cohesion and unity. The results indicate that family structure significantly influences all four dimensions of family quality relationships. In adolescents who live in custodial blended type of families with one biological parent and a step-parent, higher communication, greater emotional support, more effective conflict and stress management, and stronger family cohesion were consistently reported compared to those in the non-blended families or complex stepfamily arrangements, which have multiple step-parents and step-siblings.

The findings emphasize that simpler blended family structures provide a more supportive and stable environment for adolescents, facilitating positive social-emotional development and general well-being. Equally, complex stepfamily arrangements seem to introduce challenges, notably role ambiguity, divided parental attention, and increased interpersonal stress, which may compromise the adolescents' insight into family functioning.

The study highlights the importance of needs-based interventions for blended families, especially those with multiple step-parents or step-siblings, which include structured family routines, emotional support strategies, and conflict resolution guidance. The schools, counselors, and policymakers are also called upon to provide the resources, programs, and policies that reinforce family cohesion and adolescent development across diverse family structures.

In conclusion, family structure is a vital determining factor of adolescents' family quality relationship. Understanding of the specific dynamics associated with varied blended family arrangements, parents, educators, counselors, and policymakers may help to implement strategies that can promote positive relationships, emotional support, and family unity, ultimately contributing to the holistic development as well as well-being of the adolescents.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: CONSENT FORM

Introduction: My name is Joseph N. Gachira, postgraduate student at Pan Africa Christian University. I am conducting research for the award of a Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Marriage and Family Therapy.

Purpose of the Study: To investigate the influence of blended family structures on the quality of family relationships among students in selected private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya.

Confidentiality: To ensure confidentiality, kindly do not fill your name or any personal information, all the information you write in the questionnaire is strictly confidential and will only be used for this research study.

Risks and benefits: The study carries no known risk. Since no expenses shall be incurred by the respondents, there will be no monitory compensation.

Statement of Informed Consent: I do understand that participation in this study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent to participate at any time.

Penalty or Benefit : There will be no penalty or benefit if I choose to withdraw. Additionally, I have been allowed to ask any relevant question related to this study in case I need clarification. I willingly give my consent to participate in this research.

_____ _____

Respondent signature

date

_____ _____

Researcher signature

date

APPENDIX II: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR STUDENTS

Introduction

My name is J. N. Gachira, a PhD student at Pan Africa Christian University. I am conducting a study entitled, ***"The Influence of Blended Family Structures on Quality of Family Relationships: A Case of Students in Selected Private Universities in Nairobi County, Kenya."*** Please be as honest and truthful as possible when answering the questions on the questionnaire below. Your information will be kept strictly confidential and used solely for the purposes of this study.

On this survey, do not indicate your NAME or ADDRESS. Thank you for your assistance.

Section A: Demographic Information ***(Tick appropriately)***

1.What is your age bracket?

☐ 18–23

☐ 24–29

☐ 30–35

2.What is your gender?

☐ Male

☐ Female

3.Which university do you currently attend?

☐ Kenya College of Accountancy University (KCAU)

☐ United States International University (USIU-A

☐ Catholic University of East Africa (CUEA)

☐ Pan Africa Christian University (PAC)

Others……

……..

4.What is your current level of study?

☐ First year

☐ Second year

☐ Third year

☐ Fourth year

☐ Postgraduate

5.Do you come from a blended family background?

☐Yes

☐No

6.Please indicate the type of family you come from based on biological and parental relationships (select one)

☐ Both biological mother and biological father

☐ Biological mother only

☐ Biological father only

☐ Biological mother and stepfather (non-biological father)

☐ Biological father and stepmother (non-biological mother)

☐ Stepfather and stepmother (neither biological parent present)

☐ Adoptive parent(s)

☐ Guardian(s) or other relatives (e.g., grandparents, aunt/uncle)

☐ Other (please specify): _____

Section B: Prevalence of Blended Families

Instructions: Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements by ticking (✓) the most appropriate response.

Scale:

1 – Strongly Disagree

2 – Disagree

3 – Neutral

4 – Agree

5 – Strongly Agree

No.	**Statement**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
1	I am familiar with the concept of					

	blended families.					
2	I personally come from a blended family.					
3	A significant number of my university peers are from blended families.					
4	Blended families are becoming more common in my community.					
5	I have friends or classmates who live in blended family settings.					
6	The number of students from blended families is increasing in university settings.					
7	Remarriage after divorce often results in blended families.					
8	Society is increasingly accepting blended family structures.					
9	Students from blended families are open about their family backgrounds.					
10	The university should provide support services that consider the needs of blended families.					

Section C: Quality Family Relationships Questionnaire

Below is a Quality Family Relationships Questionnaire focusing on the four key dimensions, namely, communication, emotional support, conflict and stress management, and family cohesion and unity. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale:

Scale:

1 – Strongly Disagree

2 – Disagree

3 – Neutral

4 – Agree

5 – Strongly Agree

Instructions: Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements as they apply to your family. Use the scale below:

1 = Strongly Disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neutral

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly Agree

No.	**Statement**					
	Communication					
1.	Family members listen to each other without interrupting.					
2.	I feel free to express my thoughts and opinions in the family.					
3.	Family discussions are respectful and constructive.					
4.	Important family matters are discussed openly.					
5.	There is mutual understanding during family conversations.					
B.	**Emotional Support**					
6.	I feel loved and accepted by my family.					
7.	My family provides comfort when I'm emotionally distressed.					
8.	Family members encourage and					

	support one another's goals.					
9.	Family members show concern for one another's well-being during difficult times.					
10.	My feelings are acknowledged and respected in the family.					
C	**Conflict and Stress Management**					
11.	Conflicts in our family are resolved calmly and respectfully.					
12.	Family members have increased stress in our household.					
13.	Disagreements between siblings are handled constructively.					
14.	Tension between family members affects family harmony.					
D	**Family Cohesion and Unity**					
15.	Our family enjoys spending time together as a unit.					
16.	There is a strong sense of belonging among all members.					
17.	All siblings are treated equally and fairly.					
18.	Our family has strengthened overall family unity.					

SECTION D: Strategies for Improving Family Relationships

7.What strategies do you think can help improve relationships in families?

_____

_____

_____

_____

8.What role should parents play in fostering healthy family relationships?

_____

_____

_____

_____

9.What efforts can you personally make to improve relationships with family members?

_____

_____

_____

_____

10.Would you recommend family counseling as a strategy to improve family relationships?

☐ Yes

☐ No

11.Are there any specific things your parents or guardians do that make you feel heard and understood

_____

_____

_____

_____

12. If you could suggest one key change or strategy that families could implement to improve their relationships, what would it be and why do you think it would be impactful?

_____

_____

_____

_____

APPENDIX III: PAC ISERC CONSENT FORM

Pan Africa Christian University
PAN AFRICA CHRISTIAN PAC UNIVERSITY Where Leaders are Made

Thika Road Campus | Valley Road Campus
P.O. Box 56875-00200 | +254 730955000 | +254 730955501/2
enquiries@pacuniversity.ac.ke | www.pacuniversity.ac.ke

REF: PAC/ISERC/101/09/25 Date: 29/09/2025
TO: Gachira, Joseph Nyingi (PMFT/13029/0/19)
PAC UNIVERSITY

Dear Sir,
RE: THE INFLUENCE OF BLENDED FAMILY STRUCTURES ON QUALITY OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS: A CASE OFSTUDENTS IN SELECTED PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN NAIROBI COUNTY, KENYA

This is to inform you that PAC_ *ISERC* has reviewed and approved your above research proposal. Your application approval number is PAC/ISERC/101/09/25. The approval period is 29th September 2025 – 29th September 2026.

This approval is subject to compliance with the following requirements;

i. Only approved documents including (informed consent and study instruments,) will be used
ii. All changes including (amendments, deviations, and violations) are submitted for review and approval by *PAC_ISERC*.
iii. Death and life-threatening problems and serious adverse events or unexpected adverse events whether related or unrelated to the study must be reported to *PAC_ ISERC* within 72 hours of notification
iv. Any changes, anticipated or otherwise that may increase the risks or affect the safety or the welfare of study participants and others or affect the integrity of the research must be reported to *PAC_ISERC* within 72 hours
v. Clearance for export of biological specimens must be obtained from relevant institutions.
vi. Submission of a request for renewal of approval at least 60 days prior to expiry of the approval period. Attach a comprehensive progress report to support the renewal.
vii. Submission of an executive summary report within 90 days upon completion of the study to *PAC_ ISERC*.

Before commencing your study, you will be expected to obtain a research license from National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) https://research-portal.nacosti.go.ke and also obtain other clearances needed.

Yours sincerely,
Dr. Jane Kihuthia

Chair, ISERC

APPENDIX IV: RESEARCH LICENSE

REPUBLIC OF KENYA

NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR SCIENCE,TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION

Ref No: **513436**

Date of Issue: **09/October/2025**

RESEARCH LICENSE



This is to Certify that Dr.. JOSEPH GACHIRA of Pan African Christian University College, has been licensed to conduct research as per the provision of the Science, Technology and Innovation Act, 2013 (Rev.2014) in Nairobi on the topic: THE INFLUENCE OF BLENDED FAMILY STRUCTURES ON QUALITY OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS: A CASE OF STUDENTS IN SELECTED PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN NAIROBI COUNTY, KENYA. for the period ending : 09/October/2026.

License No: **NACOSTI/P/25/4180546**

513436

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Ag. Director General
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