Navigating Teen Parenthood in Nairobi: Insights from African Christian Families

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Abstract

Parenting is a critical role for Christians. It necessitates a close relationship between parents and their children. In this article, the author features data obtained through a structured questionnaire distributed to 240 teenage respondents in three different churches in Nairobi, namely CITAM-Karen, Holy Family Minor Basilica and PCEA - Ruai. In addition to this, 114 teenagers were interviewed in a bid to close some gaps that emerged from quantitative research. Thus the study adopted a mixed research design (Gray, 2009).
Results reveals that parents with teenage children are facing an unprecedented challenge in the form of FM radio entertainment programs that air content that appears to diminish parental roles. Using George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory, this study observes that FM radio morning entertainment programs have cultivated a particular worldview, that parental guidance is outdated, among heavy consumers of the programs.
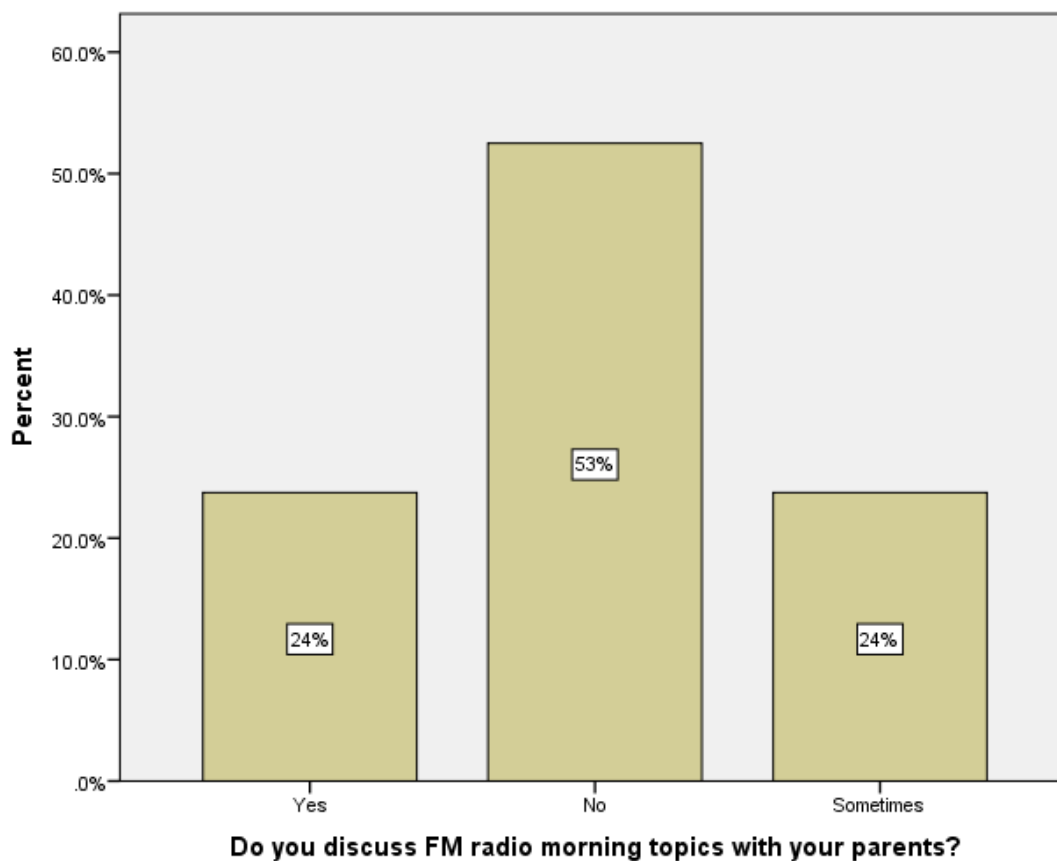
Introduction

In African communities, parents are expected to cater for the general wellbeing of their children. This involves nourishing them with both physical material and spiritual needs. Such a task is always faced with challenges. In this article, we analyze data focusing on African worldview on parenting. Data shows that parents consider it their obligation to cater for the proper upbringing of their teenage children. As they embark on this task today, they face a challenge: FM radio entertainment programs appear to hold sway more than parents themselves in certain critical areas of these teenage children's lives.

Parents as Moral Teachers

Parents are pivotal for moral uprightness of teenagers. Msafiri (2010, 6) emphasized that this role was continuous in the Chagga community in Tanzania, and perhaps in other communities as well. Mbiti (1969, 208) emphasizes that morality has a hierarchical nature. He portrays a picture whereby one avoids offending an individual higher than him/her in age and status. Thus, a person may only offend those of higher or of similar rank in the social stratum. Consequently, parents would hardly offend their children either intentionally or unintentionally. In this sense, parents ought to consistently correct their teenage children; they cannot abrogate this responsibility with the pretext that they might harm their feelings. Therefore, parents retain a critical role in teenagers' lives.

In the reasoning of Mbiti (1969), teenagers should pay heed to their parents' counsel. The reason given for this is that parents are at a higher level in the moral social order. This requires teenagers to be ready to consult parents on critical love matters affecting their lives. Such matters would

include new ideas brought to their attention by FM radio entertainment programs. As shown in Graph 1 below, this study revealed that majority of teenagers (53%) did not discuss topics heard on radio with their parents. This would imply that these teenagers did not think that parents had the moral authority to guide them on such matters. It would also indicate that teenagers have other significant people they share their life experiences with other than their parents.
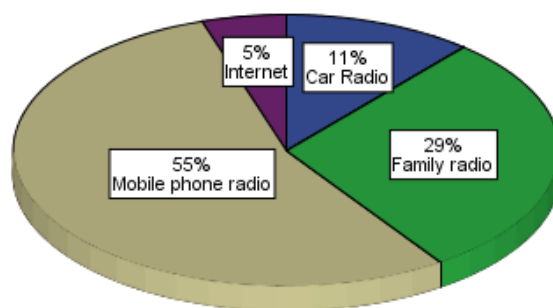

Graph 1: Debate on FM Topics

Parental Roles in Deciding what Teenagers Learn
In traditional African communities, parents had explicit control on who educated their teenage children (Mbiti, 1969, 109). They would even decide on career paths for their teenage children. Thus, parents wielded direct control over their children's education, career, and by extension, their future. Granted, society was then less dynamic and complicated than today. This worked well since sources of education and information were community based. Kisembo, Magesa and Shorter (1998, 144) underline that in the traditional African setting, education remained tightly regulated corporately by the community. This ensured that new ideas that came to the community were scrutinized before they could be accessed by teenagers. This method was fundamental in moral guidance of teenagers.

With the onset of modern communication technology, a lot has changed on the way in which people access information. Teenagers are able to receive enormous information via FM radio stations, accessed through a variety of ways. In this study, it was noted that 54.6% of teenagers listened to their favourite FM radio programs through their mobile phone radio, equipped with

earphones. This gave an aura of privacy that allowed them to enjoy the programs without reference to or audit from parents. In this manner, parents, and indeed other people, were shut out of the picture. They were, therefore, not able to know what their teenagers were listening to. Consequently, parents might not have had a chance to add an input on the contents of certain programs as they would in the case of accessing programs through family radio. As illustrated in Graph 2 below, the study observed that only 29% of teenagers accessed FM entertainment programs through a common family radio handset. Parent respondents added that their teenage children were not always with them when FM entertainment programs were aired owing to different schedules that constituted their lifestyles. During the morning shows, for example, many teenagers would be travelling to school. This limited parents' ability on deciding what ought to arrest the attention of their teenage children.
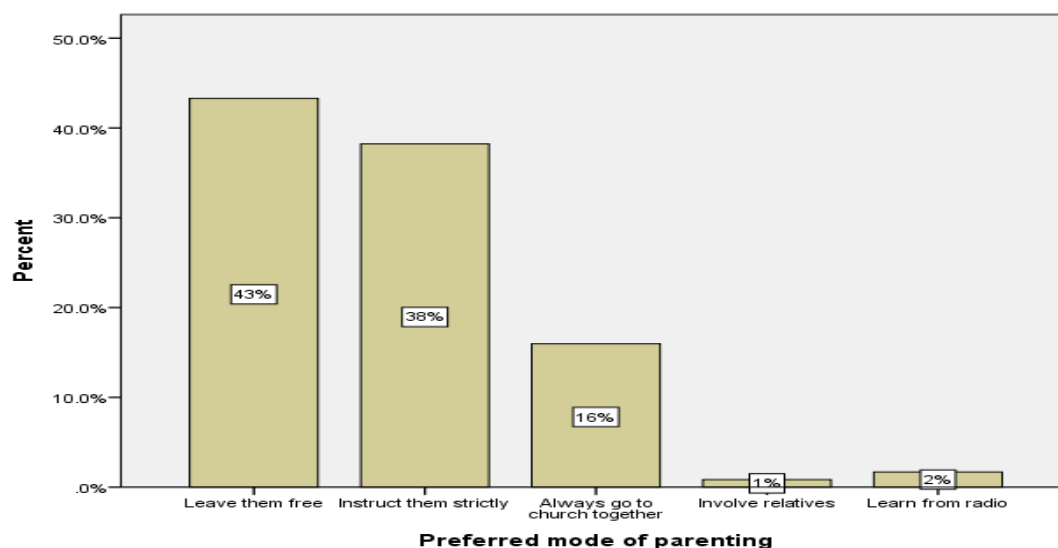

Graph 2: Mode of accessing radio programs

Primacy of Parenting for Christian Parents
African Christian parents desire to impart Christian values on their teenage children. Msafiri (2010, 35) notes, "some parents are very concerned about inculcating in their children a deep spirit of prayer, piety, worship and reverence for God." Therefore, parents would go out of their way to offer a good example to their children, especially those in formative teenage. This would in turn translate into them carrying on these values to the next generation.
The study observed a balance between teenagers who were liberal and those who opted for strict parenting. In this, majority (43%) of teenagers indicated that if they became parents, they would

leave their teenage children free to learn from their peers. A significant number (38%) thought that strict parenting would be better. A smaller group accounting for 16% reported that they would consider enforcing church attendance for their children. As reported in Graph 3 below, this kind of distribution suggested a state of divergent views perhaps arising from the mode of parenting adopted by parents. Some teenagers who were interviewed felt that their parents were needlessly strict and authoritative while FM radio presenters emphasized on freedom. A teenager (OI# 66, 01/04/15) remarked; "there are so many cases reported by radio of our parents misbehaving, but when they come home they want us to believe that they are very holy. They should leave us alone to make our decisions." Such a comment would resonate with an episode on Classic 105 FM that depicted unfaithfulness in marriage (Clip #1) This depicts what Kisembo, Magesa and Shorter (1998, 146) predicted that teenagers brought up by strict parents were likely to rebel, resent and even disassociate themselves from parents. In our study, some teenagers were observed to take encouragement in their pursuit from FM entertainment programs on Classic 105 as well as Kiss 100. They cited "freedom and independence" as promoted by these stations to be an important aspect of their lives (Clip #2). In the episode referred to above, TMK had a program lamenting about the tendency of parents controlling their teenage children. Presenters set the tone that such a scenario was not to be accepted. They then invited teenagers to call and air comments. This would create a barrier between parents and their teenage children, limiting the degree of dialogue and consultation present between them. Consequently, teenagers tend to hold divergent opinions on parenting as noted in Graph 3 below where respondents appear split on the best modes of parenting. It is noteworthy that majority of the parents opted for allowing teenagers to be free to determine their own destiny. In the teachings of Catholic, Protestant and Pentecostal theologies, it would seem odd to hold that position. Such freedom is constantly emphasized through entertainment programs on both Kiss 100 FM and Classic 105 FM. In another episode, TMK presented virginity as pervasion, blaming parents for insisting that their daughters should abstain from premarital sex (Clip#3). Presenters in the program referred to argue that parents should leave teenagers free to enjoy themselves. Such a view would worry parents as they uphold Christian teaching on sexual purity. This concept of freedom, however, does not mention the need for responsibility on the part of the media consumer. This seemed to be a shortcoming that many in the audience, would probably not realize.
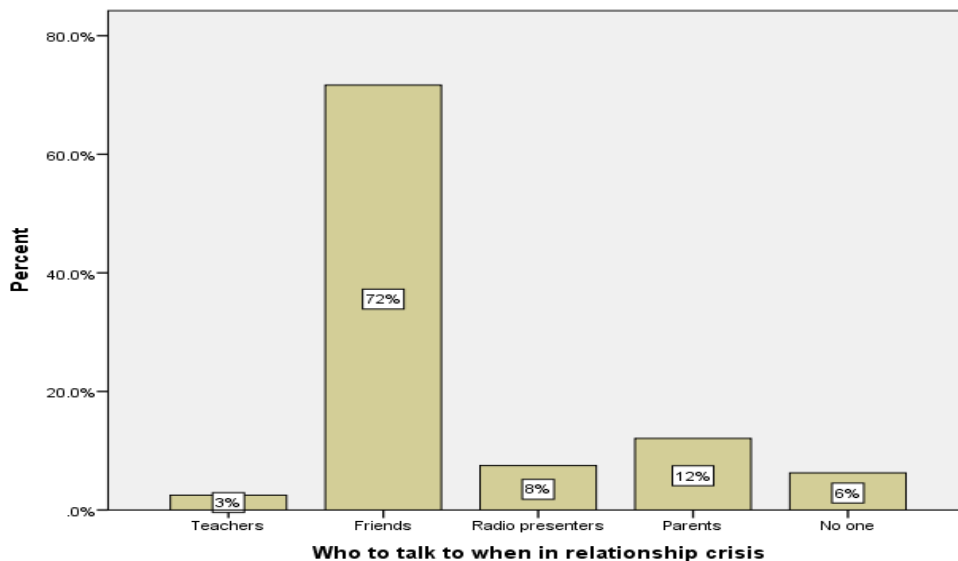
Graph 3: Mode of Parenting

Results presented above reflect the Cultivation assertion that media programming can have significant effects on a large number of people (Severin and Tankard, 2001, 264). The results showed a near uniform effect of a population subtly embracing change in parenting, a vital cultural pillar. Such change appeared to challenge existing norms that required parents and other significant people in society, to be in firm control of their teenagers as well as their choices.

Parental Roles in Relationship Issues

Kisembo, Magesa and Shorter (1998, 146-147) narrate that matters touching on boy-girl relationships were handled in the African traditional setting by senior members of the community, such as grandparents, uncles and aunts. Parents would handle preliminary concerns and then refer teenagers to designated personnel. This was because such people were deemed to have the requisite experience to guide them on the right path. Grandparents were especially viewed to have a closer rapport with the grandchildren to responsibly transmit sex education (Richmond and Gesterin, 2011).

In the current era, both Classic 105 FM and Kiss 100 FM have ventured into the arena of relationships between boys and girls. Topics related to this area are a great attention to teenagers. This is done mainly though call-in shows where teenagers are encouraged to call the station and air personal concerns on relationship matters (Clip#4). Other teenagers are then encouraged to call and offer solutions on the subject. Such cases create feelings among teenagers that their own peers would have solutions to challenges that they go through as they relate to one another. Therefore, teenagers tend to think that radio "counselling" would be an alternative to sharing their relationship issues with their parents. Thus, as can be seen in Graph 4 below, allegiance of teenagers is now more inclined towards seeking guidance from their peers than parents. Indeed, 72% indicated that they preferred consulting their friends in the event of problems with members of the opposite sex. While peer counseling is welcome, it requires to be handled by people who have been trained and prepared for the enormity of the exercise. This cannot be said to be the case in instances of peer counseling encouraged and promoted by both Classic 105 and Kiss 100 FM. Results illustrated on Graph 4 indicate rising confidence of teenagers on one another as opposed to other members of the society.

Graph 4: Trusted Confidant

Conclusion

It is the conclusion of this study that parental guidance of teenagers in the urban set up is a challenging task. In Nairobi this is compounded by multiple sources of information that include morning shows on certain FM radio programs.

This study concluded that there is an apparent communication gap between parents and their teenage children. It appears that teenagers opt to share their inner feelings and sentiments with their peers. This can be harnessed in the form of peer counselling. Such teenage counsellors would be carefully trained in order to impart Christian values.

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Severin, W. J & Tankard J. W. (2001*). Communication Theories: Origins, Methods, and Uses in the Mass Media.* New York: Longman.

List of Sampled FM Programs on Kiss 100 FM and Classic 105FM

<u>**Audio Clips:**</u>

1. Why men cheat with house helps (Classic 105 FM, March 24, 2015)
2. Strict parents (TMK, March 1, 2015)
3. Are there any virgins left in Kenya? (TMK, August 15, 2015)
4. Is it wrong to date another person while on temporary relationship break? (TMK, October 22, 2015)