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PARENTAL SUPERVISION, DISCIPLINE AND RULE SETTING AND CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR IN SELECTED LOCAL GOVERNMENTS OF RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION

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ABSTRACT
Parenting plays an important role in shaping children's behaviour, character, and overall development. Many parents in the selected communities face economic hardship, changing family structure, and limited access to professional family support, yet little is known about how they supervise and discipline their children. This study examined the level of parental supervision among parents and how parental discipline and rule setting influence children's behaviour in selected Local Governments of Rivers State, Nigeria, with a view to drawing implications for social work intervention. The study was anchored on Family Systems Theory, which views the family as an emotional unit in which the behaviour of each member affects the others. A descriptive survey design was adopted. The population was 1,201,965 residents of Obio/Akpor, Port Harcourt and Emohua Local Government Areas in Rivers State, from which six communities were selected through a multi-stage procedure. The sample was determined with the Taro Yamane formula and allocated proportionately to the communities, the questionnaire respondents were children in middle and late adolescence living with their parents or primary caregivers, and practising social workers were interviewed. Data were collected with a structured questionnaire and an interview guide, and were analysed with mean, standard deviation, chi-square (goodness-of-fit) and thematic analysis. The findings revealed that parental supervision was low, with children allowed to make most decisions without guidance and parents often too busy to attend to their children's emotional needs, and that parental discipline and rule setting significantly influenced children's behaviour. Mood-dependent, inconsistent discipline was the most common discipline practice, followed by demands for strict obedience, and respondents agreed that excessive punishment makes children fearful or withdrawn and that little discipline leads to poor behavioural control. Social workers linked weak supervision to economic hardship, long working hours, marital conflict and single parenting. The study concluded that weak supervision and inconsistent discipline are central parenting challenges in the study area and important targets for social work intervention. It recommended sensitisation on supervising children's activities, sessions that bring both parents together to agree on consistent rules and positive, non-violent discipline, and the linking of parenting support to livelihood programmes.

Keywords: Parental supervision, discipline, rule setting, children's behaviour, parenting styles, social work intervention, Rivers State

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Introduction

The family is one of the most fundamental and enduring social institutions in human society, and it is within families that children first learn language, values, norms and roles. The way parents raise their children, referred to as parenting style, has long been recognised as a critical factor influencing child outcomes such as self-esteem, academic achievement, social competence and behavioural adjustment (Kuppens & Ceulemans, 2019). Parenting style, which is the general emotional climate of the home, is distinguished from parenting practices, which are the specific things parents do to reach particular goals, such as supervising children's activities, setting rules and responding when rules are broken (Kuppens & Ceulemans, 2019; Smetana, 2017). Meta-analytic evidence shows that behavioural control, including monitoring and rule setting, is one of the dimensions of parenting most consistently associated with fewer behaviour problems in children and adolescents, while harsh control and psychological control are associated with more (Pinquart, 2017), and that harsh control is linked with anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation in adolescence (Gorostiaga et al., 2019).

Harsh discipline remains common across the world. The World Health Organization estimates that about 1.2 billion children aged 0 to 18 years experience corporal punishment at home each year, and that across 49 low- and middle-income countries children exposed to it are on average 24 per cent less likely to be developmentally on track than their peers (World Health Organization [WHO], 2025). The weight of evidence shows that physical punishment harms children (Gershoff et al., 2018), and child welfare practice treats harsh physical punishment as a risk to children's safety and well-being (Crosson-Tower, 2019). Nigeria reflects this pattern. The 2021 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey found that nine in every ten Nigerian children aged 1 to 14 years had been subjected to at least one form of violent discipline by caregivers, an increase of five percentage points over five years (National Bureau of Statistics & UNICEF, 2022). Parenting in many Nigerian homes combines strong parental authority with communal child-rearing, so that a child may be watched and corrected by grandparents, older siblings and neighbours as well as by parents, or, where these networks have weakened, by no one consistently.

In Rivers State, the pressures on parenting are sharpened by the social effects of an oil-based economy, including rural-urban migration, youth unemployment, the high cost of living, long working hours and the erosion of traditional family structures. In Port Harcourt Metropolis, parents report adolescents' resistance to parental control, peer pressure, exposure to drugs and social media, inconsistent discipline between mothers and fathers, financial constraints and poor communication between parents and adolescents as their main challenges, and they often use punishment to control behaviour (Nweke et al., 2025). Social workers address parenting challenges through counselling, parenting education, home visits and referrals, and the design of such interventions depends on knowing how parents in a community actually supervise and discipline their children (Hepworth et al., 2016). This study therefore examined the level of parental supervision among parents and the influence of parental discipline and rule setting on children's behaviour in selected urban and semi-rural communities of the Rivers East Senatorial District of Rivers State, and drew out the implications of the findings for social work intervention.

Statement of the problem

In the selected communities of Rivers State, many parents appear to communicate poorly with their children, supervise them inadequately and discipline them inconsistently or harshly, with negative consequences for children's behaviour. Reports of child neglect, teenage

pregnancy, school dropout, cultism and youth violence have added urgency to these concerns. Economic hardship keeps many parents away from home for long hours, so that children are left to make their own decisions without direction, while in other homes discipline relies on beating and shouting and depends on the mood of the parent rather than on clear and consistent rules. Children who are not properly guided at home are exposed to bad company, truancy and substance use, and children who are disciplined harshly may become fearful and withdrawn or, in some cases, stubborn and aggressive. Within the Rivers East Senatorial District, Port Harcourt, Obio/Akpor and Emohua Local Government Areas present these problems in different settings: Port Harcourt is the densely built state capital, Obio/Akpor is a rapidly expanding urban fringe, and Emohua is semi-urban and largely rural, with extended family networks and little formal service presence.

Most studies of parenting in Nigeria classify parents by their overall style and relate that style to an outcome in the child, such as antisocial behaviour, psychosocial well-being, social adjustment or drug use (Nnadozie et al., 2018; Akinnawo et al., 2020; Muza & Muhammad, 2020; Onukwufor & Chukwu, 2017). Few have measured specific practices such as parental supervision or discipline and rule setting, and none has done so across the urban and semi-rural communities of the Rivers East Senatorial District. Most also rely on parents' reports, although adolescents' own accounts of the parenting they receive often differ from those of their parents, who tend to describe their own behaviour more favourably (Korelitz & Garber, 2016). Onukwufor and Chukwu (2017) found that parenting style alone explained little of adolescents' drug use in Obio/Akpor and concluded that specific parenting practices need to be examined. Without evidence on how parents in the selected communities supervise and discipline their children, and on how these practices are seen to affect children's behaviour, social workers lack a basis for targeting counselling and parenting education. The problem of this study, therefore, was to examine the level of parental supervision and the influence of parental discipline and rule setting on children's behaviour in the selected communities of Rivers State.

Aim and objectives of the study

The aim of this study was to examine parenting styles and social work interventions in addressing parenting challenges among families in selected Local Governments in Rivers State, with particular attention to parental supervision and parental discipline and rule setting. Specifically, the objectives of the study were to:

1. examine the level of parental supervision among parents in the selected Local Governments in Rivers State; and
2. assess how parental discipline and rule setting influence children's behaviour in the selected Local Governments in Rivers State.

Research questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the level of parental supervision among parents in the selected Local Governments in Rivers State?
2. How do parental discipline and rule setting influence children's behaviour in the selected Local Governments in Rivers State?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses, each matched to one objective, were formulated and tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

H_{01}: The level of parental supervision among parents in the selected Local Governments in Rivers State is not significantly low.

H_{02}: Parental discipline and rule setting have no significant influence on children's behaviour in the selected Local Governments in Rivers State.

Literature review

Parental supervision

Parental supervision refers to the attention parents give to where their children are, what they are doing, whom they are with and how they are feeling, together with the guidance parents offer when children make decisions. Supervision belongs to the category of parenting practices, but its effect depends on the emotional climate of the home: a parent who supervises a child within a warm relationship is experienced very differently from one who supervises with suspicion (Kuppens & Ceulemans, 2019). Scholars generally regard open, two-way communication as the channel through which supervision works, since parents know most about their children's activities when children are willing to tell them. Parental control, parental knowledge and adolescents' disclosure all decline modestly across adolescence while secrecy increases, so that parents of older adolescents must work harder to stay informed (Lionetti et al., 2019). Parental warmth and behavioural control are associated with fewer externalising problems (Pinquart, 2017), and in South Africa a parenting programme that strengthened communication between caregivers and adolescents also reduced poor supervision (Cluver et al., 2018). In the United States, high parental monitoring reported by high school students themselves was protective against sexual risk behaviour, substance use, violence and poor mental health (Dittus et al., 2023), and in Lagos higher monitoring was associated with lower substance use among senior secondary school students, while unsupervised time was associated with higher use (Odukoya et al., 2018). Supervision is weakest in neglectful homes, where parents show little warmth, leave children to make their own decisions without direction or consequences, and communicate little with them. Children of neglectful parents are at high risk of emotional detachment, loneliness and low self-confidence, and they often display antisocial behaviour, truancy, delinquency and academic failure (Pinquart, 2017; Mutuku et al., 2019). In many Nigerian households supervision is shared with grandparents, older siblings and neighbours, but where economic pressure keeps parents away from home for long hours and extended family networks have weakened, children may be left without consistent adult attention.

Parental discipline and rule setting

Discipline and rule setting concern the way parents define acceptable behaviour and respond when children fall short of it. Baumrind distinguished firm control exercised with explanation, which she associated with authoritative parents, from restrictive control that relies on power and demands unquestioning obedience (Kuppens & Ceulemans, 2019). Recent reviews make a similar distinction between discipline that explains the effect of a child's behaviour on others, which helps children to accept parental values, and discipline that relies on power assertion, which is less likely to be internalised (Grusec et al., 2017). The way rules are communicated matters as much as the rules themselves. Children take on parental values when they perceive the parent's message accurately and accept it, which is less likely when rules are unclear or enforced unpredictably (Grusec et al., 2017). The meaning of physical discipline varies across cultures (Lansford, 2022), but the evidence shows that physical punishment is associated with aggression, antisocial behaviour, mental health problems and poorer relationships between parents and children (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Gershoff et al., 2018). A review of 69 prospective studies found that physical punishment consistently predicted increases in behaviour problems over time and was not associated with any positive outcome (Heilmann et al., 2021), and a Nigerian programme that taught parents alternative skills reduced

harsh discipline and child beating (Ofoha & Ogidan, 2020). At the other extreme, permissive parents set few rules and enforce them inconsistently, and their children often show impulsivity, disobedience and poor coping skills. Discipline that is too harsh and discipline that is too weak are therefore both seen as risks to children's behaviour, while discipline that is firm, explained and consistent is associated with self-control and confidence.

Parenting practices and social work intervention

Social work intervention refers to the deliberate actions and strategies employed by social workers to address and resolve issues affecting individuals, families and communities, using professional knowledge of assessment, counselling, advocacy, referral and case management (Hepworth et al., 2016). Social workers address the needs of families at the micro level, through counselling, skill-building and crisis intervention with parents and children, and at the mezzo level, through work with community groups, schools and local institutions. Parenting practices are central to this work, because families are often referred to social workers when supervision breaks down or discipline becomes abusive, and because the content of counselling and parenting education depends on the practices it seeks to change. Evidence from randomised trials shows that parenting interventions reduce physical and emotional violence by parents, although their effects become smaller over time (Backhaus et al., 2023), and that a community-delivered programme in South Africa improved supervision and reduced corporal punishment but did not reduce inconsistent discipline (Cluver et al., 2018). In Nigeria, child protection social workers provide counselling and therapeutic support but face shortages of staff, high caseloads and limited resources (Isangha et al., 2024), and social work services are unfamiliar to much of the population (Okafor et al., 2022).

Theoretical framework

This study was anchored on Family Systems Theory, developed by Murray Bowen in the 1950s from his work with the families of patients with schizophrenia at the National Institute of Mental Health in the United States (Kerr, 2019). The theory holds that the family is an emotional unit in which the behaviour of each member affects, and is affected by, the behaviour of the others, so that the difficulties of an individual cannot be understood apart from the relationships in which they occur (Goldenberg et al., 2017). Bowen set out a number of interlocking concepts (Kerr, 2019). Family members are interdependent, and a change in one part of the system produces change in the rest. Individuals differ in their differentiation of self, that is, their ability to remain calm and think clearly under emotional pressure, so that poorly differentiated parents are more likely to react to their children out of anxiety than out of judgement (Calatrava et al., 2022). When tension rises between two people, a third person is drawn in to relieve it, and in families a child is often pulled into conflict between the parents, a process known as triangulation. Parents may pass their own anxieties and unresolved problems on to a child, who then carries them in the form of behavioural or emotional difficulty, through the family projection process. Patterns of relating, including ways of communicating with and disciplining children, are passed from one generation to the next through multigenerational transmission. Families also contain subsystems, such as the parental and sibling subsystems, separated by boundaries, and they tend to resist change in order to keep their stability, even when existing patterns are harmful (Goldenberg et al., 2017; Kerr, 2019).

These assumptions relate directly to the two objectives of this study. On parental supervision, because family members are interdependent, the way parents talk to, listen to and watch over their children reflects the emotional state of the whole system. Anxiety, marital conflict and triangulation can close channels of communication and weaken supervision, so the

theory directs attention to the family relationships that lie behind the level of supervision found among parents. On parental discipline and rule setting, rules and discipline express the boundaries of the parental subsystem. Multigenerational transmission explains why parents often discipline as they themselves were disciplined, and poor differentiation of self helps to explain discipline that is reactive and inconsistent. Children's behaviour is therefore read as a response to the rules and emotional climate of the family rather than as an isolated problem. The theory also suits the Nigerian setting, where grandparents, uncles, aunts and community members are active parts of the family system and share in decisions about child-rearing (Twikirize & Spitzer, 2019).

Empirical review

Kazemeini, Nazarzadeh and Dehghan (2018) studied parenting styles and the adjustment of female high school students in Mashhad, Iran. The study adopted a survey design; 243 students were selected through multi-stage cluster sampling, data were collected with Baumrind's parenting styles questionnaire and an adjustment inventory, and the data were analysed with analysis of variance. Students raised by authoritative parents were the best adjusted, while the lowest adjustment was found among students from authoritarian and then permissive homes. Kauser and Pinquart (2016) surveyed 1,140 students aged 11 to 17 years from five randomly selected schools in Lahore, Pakistan, and found that authoritative parenting was associated with lower levels of delinquency and neglectful parenting with higher levels, and concluded that Baumrind's typology is applicable in developing countries. Zareian, Tajikzadeh and Sarafraz (2017) studied 148 students in Shiraz, Iran, selected through multi-stage random sampling, and found through multiple regression that authoritarian and permissive parenting significantly predicted antisocial behaviour. García, Serra, Zacarés and García (2018), in a survey of 571 Spanish adolescents and 527 older adults, found that those raised in indulgent and authoritative homes had higher self-esteem and gave greater priority to social values than those raised in authoritarian and neglectful homes, and concluded that in the Spanish context high warmth with low strictness was the optimum strategy.

In Africa, Mutuku, Muema, Makau, Igoki and Kainyu (2019) sampled 240 students from eight randomly selected secondary schools in Mbooni East Sub-County, Kenya, and found that negative social behaviour was shown by 66.7 per cent of students from authoritarian homes, 66.7 per cent of those from neglectful homes, 51 per cent of those from permissive homes and 39 per cent of those from authoritative homes. Onsando, Mwenje and Githui (2021) adopted an ex post facto design with 68 male offenders aged 15 to 18 years at the Kamiti Youth Correction and Training Centre, Kenya, and found that authoritarian parenting (42 per cent) and permissive parenting (29.4 per cent) posed the greatest danger of delinquency. Cluver et al. (2018) evaluated a fourteen-session programme for parents and adolescents delivered by trained community members in 40 villages and urban sites in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, involving 552 families. Five to nine months after the programme, caregivers reported less corporal punishment, more involved parenting and less poor supervision, but the programme did not reduce inconsistent discipline.

In Nigeria, Nnadozie, Iorfa and Ifebigh (2018) studied 228 undergraduates aged 16 to 20 years and found through hierarchical regression that parenting styles accounted for an additional 11.2 per cent of the variance in antisocial behaviour, with authoritarian and, more strongly, permissive parenting emerging as significant predictors. Muza and Muhammad (2020) adopted an ex post facto design with 291 senior secondary school students in Jega Local Government Area, Kebbi State, and found that students from democratic (authoritative) homes had the highest mean social adjustment score (38.76), followed by those from autocratic homes (30.21) and

permissive homes (18.21). Akinnawo, Akpunne and Olajide (2020) surveyed 332 adolescents in Osun State and found that parenting styles significantly predicted psychosocial well-being, while family type and family size did not. In Port Harcourt Metropolis, which covers Port Harcourt City and Obio/Akpor, Nweke et al. (2025) surveyed 400 parents, of whom 386 returned the questionnaire, and found that parents often used punishment to control behaviour (mean 3.45) alongside rewarding positive behaviour and setting rules, and that inconsistent discipline between mothers and fathers and poor communication between parents and adolescents were among their main challenges. Odukoya, Sobande, Adeniran and Adesokan (2018) surveyed 437 senior secondary school students in Mushin, Lagos State, with a mean age of 15.3 years, and found that higher parental monitoring was associated with lower odds of substance use, while negotiated unsupervised time was associated with higher use. Mbachu et al. (2020), in a mixed-methods study of 1,057 adolescents aged 13 to 18 years in six communities of Ebonyi State, found that only 4.5 per cent had ever discussed sex-related matters with a parent and that parents' communication on such matters consisted mainly of warnings. Most of these studies classify parents by overall style, Odukoya et al. (2018) related monitoring only to substance use, and none measured parental supervision and discipline and rule setting, as reported by adolescents themselves, across urban and semi-rural communities of the Rivers East Senatorial District, which is the gap this study sought to fill.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. This design is appropriate because it allows the researcher to gather data from a sample of children aged 14 to 17 years and of social workers in their natural settings to describe existing parenting practices and the types of social work interventions available or needed. Survey designs provide a quantitative description of the trends, attitudes and opinions of a population by studying a sample of it (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), and semi-structured interviews with social workers were used to interpret the patterns identified in the questionnaire data. The study was carried out in Obio/Akpor, Port Harcourt and Emohua Local Government Areas in Rivers State, Nigeria. Rivers State lies in the Niger Delta region of southern Nigeria and is made up of twenty-three LGAs, which are grouped into three senatorial districts: Rivers East, Rivers South-East and Rivers West. The three LGAs were selected purposively from the eight LGAs of the Rivers East Senatorial District (Port Harcourt, Obio/Akpor, Ikwerre, Emohua, Etche, Omuma, Okrika and Ogu/Bolo) to represent different settlement types, and two communities were selected in each: Rumuokwuta and Ozuoba in Obio/Akpor, a rapidly growing urban fringe in which traditional and modern ways of life meet; Elekahia and Oroabali in Port Harcourt, the densely built urban core of the State, with diverse socio-economic backgrounds and the main concentration of welfare institutions; and Ogbakiri and Ibaa in Emohua, a semi-urban and largely rural LGA in which farming, fishing and petty trading are important sources of livelihood and traditional family values and extended family networks remain strong, while formal social services are fewer than in the metropolis.

The population of the study consists of the residents of Obio/Akpor, Port Harcourt and Emohua Local Government Areas, the three LGAs of the Rivers East Senatorial District from which the six study communities were drawn. The National Population Commission puts the population of Obio/Akpor at 462,350, Port Harcourt at 538,558 and Emohua at 201,057, giving a total population of 1,201,965 persons (NPC, 2022). Within this population, the target respondents were children aged 14 to 17 years living with their parents or primary caregivers in the six communities. The age range of 14 to 17 years was chosen because the Child Rights Act defines a child as a person below the age of eighteen years, so that seventeen years is the upper

limit of childhood under Nigerian law (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2003); because children in this age range are old enough to speak for themselves and can give their own account of how their parents supervise and discipline them; and because middle and late adolescence is the period in which questions of supervision, rule setting and discipline are most contested within the family. Using Taro Yamane's formula at a 5 per cent margin of error (Adam, 2020), the sample size was $1{,}201{,}965 \div [1 + 1{,}201{,}965\ (0.05)^2] = 399.87$, approximately 400. A multi-stage sampling procedure, combining purposive, proportionate and quota techniques, was adopted: the sample was allocated to the three LGAs in proportion to their populations (Obio/Akpor 154, Port Harcourt 179 and Emohua 67) and, because the NPC does not publish population figures for individual communities, shared equally between the two communities in each, as shown in Table 1. At each household, the research assistants established whether the household contained a child aged 14 to 17 years, obtained the parent's consent and the child's assent, and invited one eligible child of the household to complete the questionnaire, until the quota for the community was filled. To be eligible, a child had to live in the same household as a parent or primary caregiver and to have lived in the community for at least twelve months before data collection. In addition, thirty practising social workers drawn from welfare offices, health facilities, faith-based organisations and non-governmental organisations operating in the six communities were purposively selected for interview, on the criterion of current or recent practice in family or child welfare within the study communities.

Table 1: Sample Distribution by Local Government Area, Settlement Type and Community

LGA	Settlement type	Community	Sample	% of sample
Obio/Akpor	Urban fringe	Rumuokwuta	77	19.25
		Ozuoba	77	19.25
Port Harcourt	Urban core	Elekahia	90	22.50
		Oroabali	89	22.25
Emohua	Semi-rural	Ogbakiri	34	8.50
		Ibaa	33	8.25
Total			**400**	**100.00**

Sample allocated to Local Government Areas by $n_i = (N_i \div N) \times n$ from a total population of 1,201,965 (NPC, 2022), and shared equally between the two communities in each. Source: Researcher's computation (2025).

The instruments adopted for this study were a questionnaire and an interview guide. Section A of the structured, self-administered questionnaire collected data on respondents' age, gender, class in school, religion, family type and the parent or caregiver with whom they live. Sections B to F contain 25 items on a four-point scale of Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2) and Strongly Disagree (1). This paper uses Section B (items 1 to 3), which measures parental supervision, and Section C (items 4 to 10), which measures parental discipline and rule setting and their influence on children's behaviour; the items in Sections B and C were adapted from the Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSDQ). Items 1 and 2 are worded negatively, so that agreement with them denotes weak supervision. The interview guide included open-ended questions focusing on experiences with parents facing challenges in child-rearing, types of social work interventions provided, challenges encountered in delivering support and suggestions for improving service delivery. Face validity was established by presenting the draft instruments

to the researcher's supervisor and experts in the Social Work Department, University of Port Harcourt, and content validity was ensured by reviewing the questionnaire against established parenting style measures such as the PSDQ. Reliability was established through a pilot test with 30 parents in Etche LGA, which was not among the selected communities, and the reliability coefficient of $\alpha = 0.85$ indicated high reliability. Data collection was supervised by trained research assistants familiar with the local dialects and cultural norms, participants were given adequate information about the purpose, procedures and their rights before agreeing to participate, responses were kept anonymous, and participants were free to withdraw at any time. Data were collected in 2025.

The research questions were answered with frequencies, means and standard deviations, using a criterion mean of $(4 + 3 + 2 + 1) \div 4 = 2.50$; an item with a mean of 2.50 or above was accepted, and a standard deviation of 1.00 or above was taken to show that respondents were divided. The hypotheses were tested with the chi-square goodness-of-fit test at the 0.05 level of significance. For each hypothesis, the responses to the items in the matching section were pooled, and the observed frequency in each response category was compared with the frequency expected if responses were spread evenly across the four categories, using $\chi^2 = \Sigma (O - E)^2 / E$ with 3 degrees of freedom. A null hypothesis was rejected where the computed value exceeded the critical value of 7.81 and the probability value was less than 0.05, and the effect size $w = \sqrt{(\chi^2 / N)}$ was reported. Interview data were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically through familiarisation, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and reporting. Quantitative analysis was carried out with SPSS version 26.

Results

Research question One: What is the level of parental supervision among parents in the selected Local Governments in Rivers State?

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics on the Level of Parental Supervision among Parents in the Selected Communities (N = 400)

S/N	Item	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Mean	Std. Dev.	Decision
1	Parents in my household allow children to make most decisions without much guidance or control.	117	141	105	37	400	2.85	0.95	Accepted
2	Parents in my household are often too busy or unavailable to attend to the emotional needs of their children.	102	137	122	39	400	2.75	0.94	Accepted
3	Lack of parental attention negatively affects children's emotional well-being.	107	137	81	75	400	2.69	1.06	Accepted
	Cluster mean						**2.76**	**0.98**	**Accepted**

Key: SA = Strongly Agree (4); A = Agree (3); D = Disagree (2); SD = Strongly Disagree (1). Criterion mean = 2.50. Source: Researcher's Fieldwork Survey (2026).

Table 2 presents the level of parental supervision among parents in the selected communities of Rivers State. Each of the three items drew responses from all 400 respondents. The means for items 1, 2 and 3 were 2.85, 2.75 and 2.69 respectively, giving a cluster mean of 2.76, and their standard deviations were 0.95, 0.94 and 1.06, with a cluster standard deviation of 0.98. All three item means exceed the criterion mean of 2.50, so all three items were accepted.

Respondents agreed that parents in their households allow children to make most decisions without much guidance or control (2.85), that parents are often too busy or unavailable to attend to their children's emotional needs (2.75), and that lack of parental attention negatively affects children's emotional well-being (2.69). Because items 1 and 2 are worded negatively, agreement with them indicates weak supervision, and item 3 shows that respondents recognise the cost of that weakness. Items 1 and 2 recorded standard deviations below 1.00, which shows fairly close agreement, while item 3 recorded a divided response, with 75 respondents strongly disagreeing. Overall, 61.8 per cent of the 1,200 item responses were in the Agree or Strongly Agree categories. The cluster mean of 2.76 therefore indicates that the level of parental supervision among parents in the selected communities is low.

Research question Two: How do parental discipline and rule setting influence children's behaviour in the selected Local Governments in Rivers State?

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics on Parental Discipline and Rule Setting and their Influence on Children's Behaviour (N = 400)

S/N	Item	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Mean	Std. Dev.	Decision
4	Parents in my household set clear rules and explain the reasons behind them to their children.	124	116	87	73	400	2.73	1.09	Accepted
5	Parents in my household demand strict obedience without allowing children to question decisions.	112	135	111	42	400	2.79	0.97	Accepted
6	Discipline practices in my household depend largely on the mood or situation of the parents.	126	136	97	41	400	2.87	0.98	Accepted
7	Children raised with firm rules and emotional support show better self-control and confidence.	150	62	99	89	400	2.68	1.19	Accepted
8	Excessive punishment and strict control make children fearful or withdrawn.	118	124	85	73	400	2.72	1.08	Accepted
9	Children raised with little discipline often display poor behavioural control.	147	112	79	62	400	2.86	1.08	Accepted
10	The way parents discipline their children influences how children relate with peers and adults.	122	126	97	55	400	2.79	1.03	Accepted
	Cluster mean						**2.78**	**1.06**	**Accepted**

Key: SA = Strongly Agree (4); A = Agree (3); D = Disagree (2); SD = Strongly Disagree (1). Criterion mean = 2.50. Source: Researcher's Fieldwork Survey (2026).

Table 3 presents parental discipline and rule setting and their influence on children's behaviour in the selected communities of Rivers State. All seven items drew responses from the full sample of 400. The means for items 4 to 10 were 2.73, 2.79, 2.87, 2.68, 2.72, 2.86 and 2.79 respectively, giving a cluster mean of 2.78, with a cluster standard deviation of 1.06. All seven items exceed the criterion mean and were accepted. On discipline and rule setting (items 4 to 6),

respondents agreed that parents set clear rules and explain the reasons behind them (2.73), that parents demand strict obedience without allowing children to question decisions (2.79), and that discipline depends largely on the mood or situation of the parents (2.87). The highest mean among the discipline items therefore attaches to mood-dependent, inconsistent discipline, followed by strict obedience, while clear and explained rules recorded the lowest mean of the three and a divided response. On the influence of these practices on behaviour (items 7 to 10), respondents agreed that children raised with firm rules and emotional support show better self-control and confidence (2.68), that excessive punishment and strict control make children fearful or withdrawn (2.72), that children raised with little discipline display poor behavioural control (2.86), and that the way parents discipline their children influences how children relate with peers and adults (2.79). The comparatively large standard deviation on item 7 (1.19) shows that respondents were divided on the benefits of firm but supportive discipline: the item attracted 150 Strongly Agree and 89 Strongly Disagree responses, and 47.0 per cent of respondents disagreed with it. The cluster mean of 2.78 indicates that parental discipline and rule setting influence children's behaviour in the selected communities.

Test of hypotheses

H_{01}: The level of parental supervision among parents in the selected Local Governments in Rivers State is not significantly low.

Table 4: Chi-square Goodness-of-Fit Test on the Level of Parental Supervision (Items 1 to 3)

Response	O	E	O − E	$(O - E)^2$	$(O - E)^2/E$
Strongly Agree	326	300	+26	676	2.25
Agree	415	300	+115	13,225	44.08
Disagree	308	300	+8	64	0.21
Strongly Disagree	151	300	−149	22,201	74.00
Total	**1,200**	**1,200**			**120.55**

$\chi^2 = 120.55$; df = 3; critical value at 0.05 = 7.81; $p < 0.001$; w = 0.32. Decision: H_{01} rejected. Source: Researcher's Fieldwork Survey (2026).

Table 4 shows that the computed chi-square value of 120.55 exceeds the critical value of 7.81 at 3 degrees of freedom, and the associated probability value is less than 0.001. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected. The table shows where the departure from an even spread lies: Agree responses (415) exceed the expected frequency of 300 by 115, while Strongly Disagree responses (151) fall short of it by 149, so that 61.8 per cent of responses lie in the two agreement categories. Since agreement with these items denotes weak supervision, the level of parental supervision among parents in the selected communities of Rivers State is significantly low. The effect size of 0.32 is medium.

H_{02}: Parental discipline and rule setting have no significant influence on children's behaviour in the selected Local Governments in Rivers State.

Table 5: Chi-square Goodness-of-Fit Test on the Influence of Parental Discipline and Rule Setting on Children's Behaviour (Items 4 to 10)

Response	O	E	O − E	$(O - E)^2$	$(O - E)^2/E$
Strongly Agree	899	700	+199	39,601	56.57
Agree	811	700	+111	12,321	17.60
Disagree	655	700	−45	2,025	2.89
Strongly Disagree	435	700	−265	70,225	100.32
Total	**2,800**	**2,800**			**177.39**

$\chi^2 = 177.39$; df = 3; critical value at 0.05 = 7.81; $p < 0.001$; w = 0.25. Decision: H_{02} rejected. Source: Researcher's Fieldwork Survey (2026).

Table 5 shows that the computed chi-square value of 177.39 exceeds the critical value of 7.81 at 3 degrees of freedom, and the associated probability value is less than 0.001. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected. Strongly Agree responses (899) exceed the expected frequency of 700, while Strongly Disagree responses (435) fall well short of it, and 61.1 per cent of responses lie in the two agreement categories. Parental discipline and rule setting therefore have a significant influence on children's behaviour in the selected communities of Rivers State. The effect size of 0.25 is small to medium.

Qualitative findings

Table 6: Codes under the Parenting Challenges Theme from Interviews with Social Workers (N = 30)

Code	Category	IDI reports	Illustrative quotation
Harsh and punitive discipline	Authoritarian practice	1, 6, 12, 13	"Most parents believe that beating and shouting are the best ways to correct children."
Culture-led moral instruction	Traditional socialisation	2	"Children are taught to respect elders and behave well because it is our culture."
Dialogue and explanation	Authoritative practice	3, 14	"Some parents prefer to talk to their children and explain why certain behaviours are wrong instead of beating them."
Over-leniency and weak supervision	Permissive practice	4, 9, 15	"Some parents are too busy and allow their children to do whatever they want without correction."
Parental absence and non-involvement	Neglectful practice	5, 7, 16	"Some children raise themselves because their parents are not always available or concerned."
Inconsistency between co-parents	Co-parenting conflict	8	"One parent will punish the child while the other allows everything, and this causes problems in the home."
Poor parent-child communication	Emotional disconnection	10	"Parents don't listen to their children, so the children become angry and withdrawn."
Economic stress on parenting	Structural pressure	11, 36	"Financial pressure makes parents angry, and they take it out on the children."
Risky behaviour in poorly guided children	Child outcomes	17	"When children are not properly guided at home, they join bad groups outside."

Source: Researcher's analysis of interview transcripts (2026).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirty practising social workers drawn from welfare offices, health facilities, faith-based organisations and non-governmental organisations operating in the six study communities. Table 6 presents the codes that make up the parenting challenges theme. Social workers described parenting in the study communities as diverse but dominated by authoritarian and culturally driven discipline, enforced through corporal punishment, verbal reprimand and rigid control, and sometimes administered publicly to instil fear. Some parents guide their children through dialogue and explanation, but others are overly lenient, allowing children to make decisions without proper supervision, and some show minimal involvement, which social workers linked to poverty, marital conflict, substance abuse, single parenting and demanding work schedules. One social worker observed that "some parents are never around, so children roam the streets and get into trouble." On the effects of these practices, social workers reported that children from very strict homes "are always afraid to talk; they are scared of making mistakes," while others "become stubborn and aggressive because they are always beaten at home." Children whose parents "talk to them and still discipline them are more confident and open," whereas children who are allowed to do anything "often misbehave and don't respect elders."

Discussion of findings

The first finding is that the level of parental supervision among parents in the selected communities of Rivers State is low, a result confirmed by the test of the first hypothesis with a medium effect size. Respondents agreed that children are allowed to make most decisions without much guidance or control and that parents are often too busy or unavailable to attend to their children's emotional needs, and they also agreed that lack of parental attention harms children's emotional well-being, which shows that weak supervision is recognised as a problem rather than accepted as normal. This finding agrees with Nweke et al. (2025), whose respondents in Port Harcourt Metropolis named adolescents' resistance to parental control, peer pressure and exposure to social media and drugs among their main parenting challenges, all of which grow where supervision is weak. It is also consistent with Cluver et al. (2018), who found poor supervision to be common in South African families reporting conflict with adolescents, but who also showed that a community-delivered parenting programme reduced it, which suggests that low supervision in the study communities is open to change. The importance of the finding is shown by the evidence that behavioural control is associated with fewer externalising problems (Pinquart, 2017) and with fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression (Gorostiaga et al., 2019). Studies of neglectful parenting point the same way: Kauser and Pinquart (2016) associated neglectful parenting with higher delinquency, and Mutuku et al. (2019) found negative social behaviour among two-thirds of adolescents from neglectful homes.

The interviews explain why supervision is low. Social workers described parents who are too busy to correct their children, children who "raise themselves" because their parents are not available, and children who "roam the streets" when parents are never around, and they linked these patterns to economic hardship, long working hours, marital conflict and single parenting. Read through Family Systems Theory, the framework adopted for this study, economic pressure raises anxiety within the family system and draws parental energy away from the parent-child relationship, so that the child's behaviour reflects the strain on the whole family rather than a failing of the child alone (Goldenberg et al., 2017; Kerr, 2019). Social work intervention aimed at supervision therefore has to address the pressures that keep parents away from their children as well as parents' knowledge of how to supervise.

The second finding is that parental discipline and rule setting influence children's behaviour in the selected communities, a result confirmed by the test of the second hypothesis. Two features of the findings stand out. First, mood-dependent discipline recorded the highest mean of the discipline items, ahead of strict obedience and of clear, explained rules, which shows that inconsistency is the most common feature of discipline in the study communities. This agrees with Nweke et al. (2025), whose respondents in Port Harcourt identified inconsistent discipline between mothers and fathers as a parenting challenge, and with Cluver et al. (2018), whose programme reduced corporal punishment but did not reduce inconsistent discipline, which shows how resistant this pattern is. The reliance on strict obedience is consistent with the national finding that nine in ten Nigerian children aged 1 to 14 years experience violent discipline (National Bureau of Statistics & UNICEF, 2022) and with the interviews, in which social workers reported that most parents believe that beating and shouting are the best ways to correct children. Second, respondents agreed both that excessive punishment makes children fearful or withdrawn and that little discipline produces poor behavioural control. The first part agrees with Gorostiaga et al. (2019), who associated harsh control with anxiety and depression, with Kazemeini et al. (2018), in whose study students from authoritarian homes had the lowest adjustment, and with Zareian et al. (2017), Nnadozie et al. (2018) and Onsando et al. (2021), who linked authoritarian parenting with antisocial behaviour and delinquency. The second part agrees with Nnadozie et al. (2018), in whose study permissive parenting was the strongest predictor of antisocial behaviour, and with Muza and Muhammad (2020), who found the lowest social adjustment among students from permissive homes.

The finding differs, however, from García et al. (2018), who found that in Spain warm but lenient parenting produced outcomes as good as authoritative parenting. The difference suggests that the effect of low strictness depends on culture, and that in communities where parents are expected to exercise authority, weak boundaries are more likely to be read by children as a lack of care. Respondents were most divided on whether firm rules combined with emotional support produce better self-control, the item with the widest dispersion in the cluster. Kazemeini et al. (2018), Muza and Muhammad (2020) and Mutuku et al. (2019) all found the best outcomes among children of authoritative parents, so the division is unlikely to reflect the effect of the practice itself. The interviews suggest a more likely explanation: many parents equate firmness with physical punishment, so that a firm but supportive approach is unfamiliar to them. Social workers also reported that one parent often punishes while the other allows everything. In Family Systems Theory, such inconsistency between parents draws the child into the parents' disagreement, a process of triangulation, and the habit of harsh discipline is passed from one generation to the next through multigenerational transmission (Goldenberg et al., 2017; Kerr, 2019). Social work intervention on discipline therefore needs to work with both parents together and to offer culturally acceptable alternatives to physical punishment.

Implications for social work intervention

The findings have several implications for social work practice in the study communities. Because low supervision is tied to economic hardship and parental absence, counselling and parenting education on supervision are unlikely to succeed on their own; social workers need to link families to livelihood support and to draw on extended family members, neighbours and community leaders who can share in watching over children. Because inconsistency is the most common feature of discipline, and because it arises partly from disagreement between parents, intervention should work with both parents together, helping them agree on rules and on how they will respond when rules are broken. Because many parents equate firmness with beating,

parenting education should show parents what firm but non-violent discipline looks like in practice, using local examples, proverbs and languages, rather than simply discouraging physical punishment. Finally, because respondents already recognise that both harsh and weak discipline harm children, social workers can build on this awareness as a starting point for change rather than treating parents as unaware of the problem.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the level of parental supervision among parents in the selected communities of Rivers State is significantly low, and that parental discipline and rule setting significantly influence children's behaviour. Children are commonly allowed to make decisions without guidance, parents are often too busy to attend to their children's emotional needs, and discipline depends more on the mood or situation of the parent than on clear and consistent rules. Respondents recognise that both excessive punishment and too little discipline harm children's behaviour, but they are divided on the value of firm discipline combined with emotional support, which many parents appear to confuse with physical punishment. These patterns reflect economic pressure, parental absence and disagreement between parents as much as parental choice, and they call for social work intervention that addresses the conditions of family life as well as parents' knowledge and skills.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. Social workers and the Rivers State Ministry of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation should provide community-based parenting education on supervision, emphasising parent-child communication and attention to children's emotional needs.
2. Parenting education should demonstrate firm, explained and consistent discipline as a culturally acceptable alternative to beating, using local languages, examples and proverbs.
3. Social workers should counsel both parents together, so that they agree on household rules and respond to misbehaviour consistently.
4. Social work agencies should link families under economic strain to livelihood and welfare support, since financial pressure and long working hours were identified as causes of weak supervision and harsh discipline.
5. Community leaders, churches and extended family networks should be engaged to share in the supervision of children, especially in communities where parents are often away from home.

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