

Master Thesis

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**The influence of a parenting intervention on the parenting knowledge and behaviour of
parents in Malawi**

Abstract

Parenting in Malawi is defined by a division of roles for mothers and fathers, where mothers take care of the children, and fathers provide income for the family. Factors like poverty and teenage pregnancies make parenting difficult for parents in Malawi. Because of this, a parenting intervention called the Parenting Challenge has been developed to support parents in gaining parenting knowledge and skills to assist them with parenting regardless of their circumstances. This research investigated the influence of this parenting intervention on the parenting knowledge and behaviour of parents in Malawi. Interviews have been conducted with twenty parents who participated in the sessions. In addition, the sessions were observed to explore how the intervention influenced parenting knowledge and behaviour. Findings revealed that the Parenting Challenge influences the communication between partners, which relates to other findings in the study. After taking part in the sessions, parents mentioned that they are now able to control their emotions, and no longer involve children in conflict. In addition, the intervention influenced how parents discipline their children, which for some parents led to using less physical discipline. The intervention does increase the knowledge of parents on providing for the physical needs for their children, but only a small amount of parents mentioned they changed their behaviour accordingly. Recommendations are provided to further develop the Parenting Challenge, such as including sessions on business management and agriculture, so that parents can generate income to provide for their families and take care of their children.

Key words: *parenting intervention, Malawi, parenting knowledge, behaviour change*

Abstract

Ouderschap in Malawi wordt bepaald door een rolverdeling voor moeders en vaders, waarbij moeders voor de kinderen zorgen en vaders het gezin van inkomen voorzien. Factoren als

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armoede en tienerzwangerschappen maken het ouderschap moeilijk voor ouders in Malawi. Daarom is de *Parenting Challenge* ontwikkeld; een opvoedingsinterventie om ouders te ondersteunen bij het verwerven van kennis en vaardigheden op het gebied van opvoeding om hen te helpen bij het opvoeden, ongeacht hun omstandigheden. Deze studie onderzocht de invloed van deze opvoedingsinterventie op de opvoedingskennis en het gedrag van ouders in Malawi. Er zijn interviews gehouden met twintig ouders die hebben deelgenomen aan de sessies. Daarnaast zijn de sessies geobserveerd om te onderzoeken hoe de interventie de kennis en het gedrag van ouders beïnvloedde. Uit de bevindingen bleek dat de *Parenting Challenge* de communicatie tussen partners beïnvloedt, wat verband houdt met andere bevindingen in het onderzoek. Na deelname aan de sessies gaven ouders aan dat ze hun emoties onder controle konden houden en kinderen niet meer bij conflicten betrekken. Daarnaast beïnvloedde de interventie hoe ouders hun kinderen disciplineren, wat voor sommige ouders leidde tot minder gebruik van fysieke discipline. De interventie vergroot de kennis van ouders over de fysieke behoeften van hun kinderen, maar slechts een klein aantal ouders gaf aan dat ze hierin ook hun gedrag hadden veranderd. Er worden aanbevelingen gedaan om de *Parenting Challenge* verder te ontwikkelen, zoals het toevoegen van sessies over bedrijfsvoering of landbouw, zodat ouders meer inkomen kunnen genereren om voor hun kinderen te zorgen.

Trefwoorden: *opvoedingsinterventie, Malawi, opvoedingskennis, gedragsverandering*

Introduction

Parenting occurs everywhere in the world, but ideas about parenting differ over time and from place to place (Van Esch & de Haan, 2017). Every culture holds different beliefs, practices, and behaviours that are viewed as normal in their culture, but are not necessarily common in other cultures (Bornstein, 2012). Different cultures will therefore have different views and beliefs about parenting and the roles of men and women in parenting. Certain local parenting practices that are perceived as normal in Malawi can differ from what is considered 'good' parenting in western cultures (Van Esch & de Haan, 2017). Over the last few decades, for example, participation of women in the labour market has increased in the Netherlands (Van de Vijver, 2007), as well as in many other regions of the world (The World Bank, 2012). In these countries, the roles of men and women have therefore become more complex, including in their parenting activities (Priyashantha et al., 2021). As such, there has been a shift from the traditional way of parenting to a more egalitarian attitude, where men and women are expected to contribute equally to both providing for and taking care of the children (Walter, 2018). However, in many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, like Malawi, the ways in which roles are divided in the household are more strictly defined, which influences the parenting behaviour of men and women (Manda-Taylor et al., 2017). Women are the primary caregivers for the children, and are responsible for cooking and cleaning, whilst men are primarily occupied with farming, doing business, or doing piece work to earn income (Carrim, 2017).

However, it is not only the culture in Malawi that defines how parents go about raising their children. In Malawi, there are multiple problems that influence parenting and the development of children. Families are exposed to factors that make childrearing very challenging, such as poverty and teenage pregnancy. Even though rates are slightly declining, the national poverty rate in Malawi in 2020 was still 50.7%, and the COVID-19 pandemic

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continues to heavily affect the economy (The World Bank, 2022). Poverty affects the physical development of children, since many families in Malawi struggle with food insecurity (Harrigan, 2008). Malawians are heavily dependent on rain-fed agriculture, especially maize. The agricultural sector provides a livelihood to 80% of the population (The World Bank, 2022). However, when the weather conditions are not favourable, this often means limited food supply (Fisher & Lewin, 2013).

Living in poverty also increases violence and neglect, which negatively influences healthy child development (Jensen et al., 2021). One of the reasons for violence is that parents in Malawi often use violence to discipline their children (Richter & Dawes et al., 2008). However, this can cause behavioural problems (Madhlopa et al., 2020), affects the children's social skills (Yildirim et al., 2020), and it affects their educational level (Sherr et al., 2016). In Malawi, two out of every three people experience violence in their childhood, mostly in the context of physical punishment (Blaney et al., 2019). The most recent data available shows that physical violence was experienced by 42% of girls and 65% of boys (Ameli et al., 2017).

Another challenge influencing parenting in Malawi is the high rate of teenage pregnancy, with 29% of girls between the ages of 15 and 19 being pregnant or having children in 2016 (National Statistical Office, 2017). The reasons for this are broad, such as a lack of education, living in rural areas (Kassa et al., 2018), the impact of poverty, and a lack of economic empowerment, especially for girls (Kaphagawani & Kalipeni, 2017). COVID-19 has increased teenage pregnancy in Malawi even more, with 40.000 cases of teenage pregnancies having been recorded from March to July 2020, which is an increase of 11% when compared to the same period a year before. (UNICEF, 2020b). Teenage pregnancy brings with it a wide range of problems. For example, it often means that the parents drop-out of school, which contributes to the cycle of ongoing poverty. As well as this, there is evidence that the children of teenage mothers more often tend to attain low levels of education (Fall et

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al., 2015). Malawi already has low education attendance, with only 51% of girls and 52% of boys finishing their primary education. In addition, only 16% of children enter secondary school and only 24% of these children graduate (UNICEF, 2020a). Another problem that teenage pregnancy brings is that it increases economical strain upon families who already have little to spend, since pregnant teenagers often rely on their parents for their physical needs (Sedgh et al., 2014).

Poverty, food insecurity, and the high rate of teenage pregnancy are examples of factors that make raising children difficult for parents in Malawi. To support parents and their children in spite of such difficulties, parenting interventions have been created for different contexts and different purposes. Parenting interventions are programs that aim to improve the knowledge, attitudes, practices, and skills of parents, often with the goal of supporting the development of children (Jeong et al., 2021). Earlier studies have shown that these interventions can influence the knowledge and skills of parents and contribute to a healthy child development (Eshel et al., 2006; Kachingwe et al., 2021). Parenting interventions are broad and can serve multiple purposes. For example, some parenting interventions focus primarily on the physical needs of children, such as providing food and sanitation, to support the physical development of children (Jones et al., 2003). Other interventions focus on the cognitive development of children (Obradović et al., 2016; Murray et al., 2016). There are also interventions that aim to increase the affectionate relationship between parents and children and the responsiveness of parents to their children (Eshel et al., 2006), to support their emotional development.

One intervention that focuses on all these aspects of child development is the Parenting Challenge. This is an intervention created and used by the humanitarian organisation Help a Child. The intervention aims to improve the parenting skills and knowledge of parents in countries like Malawi through interactive group sessions, so that

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parents can adequately take care of their children (Help a Child, 2022). There are nine different modules, each consisting of approximately four sessions. The modules cover different topics, like keeping children healthy, feeding children, sexual education, and dealing with family issues. In addition, the intervention does not only aim to equip parents with adequate parenting knowledge and skills to take care of their children, but it also addresses the importance of education, which is a major factor in eradicating poverty (Durstun & Nashire, 2001).

The current study

In this study, the influence of the Parenting Challenge in Malawi will be researched. This study will explore the changes in knowledge and behaviour of the participating parents, and what the working elements of the parenting programme are that caused these changes. In addition, the findings will be analysed for how they relate to each other. The research question is ‘What is the influence of the Parenting Challenge on parents in Malawi?’ This study will contribute to scientific research, since it gives more insight into what the working elements of a parenting intervention are. The results can inform scientists and organisations who aim to develop other parenting interventions. In addition, having proof of the influence of this intervention is relevant for organisations like Help a Child, as this means that more donors can be attracted. This can lead to such organisations having more money available to support parents and their children through difficult circumstances.

Theoretical framework: the Parenting Challenge

To explore the influence of the Parenting Challenge on parents in Malawi, a short version of the intervention is developed, in which the main elements and topics of the Parenting Challenge are discussed. This short version consists of two sessions per week, for a

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duration of three weeks, resulting in a total of six sessions. The themes of the sessions are summarised in Table 1. Some studies show that parenting interventions between three and six months long show the best results (Pinquart & Teubert, 2010), which is why it is useful to evaluate if a shorter version of the Parenting Challenge could already begin to have an influence on parents. This can be useful for conflict areas where there is insufficient time for a long intervention (El-Khani et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2017).

Table 1

Content in the manual of the parenting sessions

Session	Title	Content	Goal
1	Starting a parenting group	Getting to know the parents in the group and establishing rules for during the sessions. Discussing what a good parent is, what their role is as a parent, and what their responsibilities are.	Getting to know each other and explaining the goal of the group sessions.
2	Our own childhood and childhood nowadays	Parents compare their own childhood to the childhood of their children nowadays. Parents are encouraged to find differences and similarities in upbringing and challenges that are faced.	Understanding the situation of the children.
3	The parental balance	Discussing challenges parents can face and thinking about possible solutions for these challenges.	Reflecting on problems and strengths, and deciding how to continue learning.
4	Action and reaction	Parents talk about communication and the importance of checking if information they receive is true before responding to them. It is discussed how to respond to their children when parents are stressed.	Understanding how the mood of a parent influences the behaviour of the child.
5	What does a child need to develop?	Discussing the different stages of the development of children, from 0 to 18 years old. Discussing physical, cognitive, social and emotional, and moral and spiritual development.	Knowing the different stages and areas of development of children.
6	What is needed for the (near) future?	Parents recall all they learned in the sessions, and think about concrete plans to ensure they will continue to raise their children well. Parents think of topics they would like to learn more about.	Thinking of a concrete plan to ensure parents will continue raising the children well.

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Every session lasts for approximately two hours, and has three to five exercises. The first exercise is usually around fifteen minutes long, and is often a fun exercise to start the session in a relaxed manner. After that, several interactive exercises are carried out, usually in smaller groups. After most exercises, parents are asked to come to the front, and present what they have discussed in their small group to the whole group. Two facilitators will guide the group discussions during the sessions, giving additional information where necessary. After a session is finished, parents are given 'homework', which entails thinking about the session of that day and trying to apply what they learned during the session in their homes.

Method

This research is part of a bigger effect study conducted by Help a Child to study the influence of the Parenting Challenge. Therefore, not all collected data is relevant for the current research. Only the information and data that is relevant for this study will be discussed here. The aim of the current research is to explore the influence of the Parenting Challenge on parenting knowledge and behaviour, and how these findings relate to each other. In addition, the working elements of the intervention will be analysed, which will be useful information for the implementation of the Parenting Challenge and similar interventions.

Population and sample

This research has been conducted among parents living in a rural setting in Malawi who voluntarily agreed to participate in the Parenting Challenge. Parents were defined as those who take care of children in their household, regardless of it being their biological children. The parents were divided into two groups of approximately twenty parents, with men and women combined in each group. The sample taken for the research consisted of twenty randomly selected parents, ten from each group. Parents had been randomly selected

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by the staff of Help a Child in Malawi, by using a list with names of all participants and picking number 1, 3, 5, etcetera. After being selected and before starting with the sessions, parents were informed about the study and were asked to sign an informed consent paper. The twenty selected parents ranged from 23 to 68 years of age, with an average age of 34.75 years old. There were eleven women and nine men among the participating parents. The parents take care of an average of 4.3 children, ranging from 0 to 46 years old. Only one man did not participate in all six sessions; he could not attend three of the sessions due to illness.

Data collection method

There are two ways in which data has been collected, both qualitative in nature. Since the aim of the research is to gain an in-depth understanding of the influence of the parenting sessions on the knowledge and behaviour of parents, a qualitative design was chosen. Before conducting the research, ethical permission was requested from the University of Utrecht and from the ethical Committee in Malawi, to ensure that participants would not be harmed, nor have their privacy violated during the research. Method 1 consisted of observing the six sessions of the parenting intervention for the two groups. This would give more insight into changes in parenting knowledge and behaviour that were expected to occur after parents had attended the parenting sessions. Because of COVID-19, the research could not take place in Malawi, but had to be performed online. Therefore, the sessions have been filmed and were translated, so that the observing could take place from a distance. The translation was visible on the bottom of the video recordings. During the observations, notes were made of the content that parents discussed during the sessions, which provided more insight into how the parents view parenting and where the changes in knowledge and behaviour come from.

The second method consisted of semi-structured interviews, partly based on the photovoice method. The interview questions are included in Appendix A. The interviews

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focused on changes in parenting knowledge and behaviour after the parents had taken part in all of the parenting sessions. For the photovoice method, the parents were asked to take one or two photos of their parenting on the basis of the following question: ‘What are parenting moments that you find challenging?’ This question is important for this research, since it is valuable to know if the Parenting Challenge supports parents with their biggest challenges and if the intervention is sensitive to the needs of the parents. After interviewing the parents about what they saw on the photos and why they took them, additional questions were asked to gain more insight into the changes in the parenting knowledge and behaviour of the parents. The interviews were held over a period of two days. Because of COVID-19, the interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams, with a local translator present to help with the communication. Since the internet connection in Malawi was insufficient to conduct the interviews via Teams on the second day, ten interviews were conducted over the phone.

Data analysis method

The data that was gathered through the observations and the interviews has been stored on YoDa, which is a secure environment for storing and managing research data. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data from the interviews and the parenting sessions. With this method, groups of comparable data can be created, making it easier to find out the changes in knowledge and behaviour of all participating parents. To analyse the data, the qualitative data analysis software NVivo has been used. First, data was coded to group the specific statements parents made regarding the photos that they took, what they learned during the sessions, the knowledge that they gained, changes in their behaviour, changes in the behaviour of their children, their opinion on if the sessions helped them with their challenges, and about recommendations they gave to improve the Parenting Challenge. The

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data was then grouped by the following themes: *knowledge change parents, behaviour change parents, behaviour change children, improved challenging moment, and recommendations.*

Results

To gain insight into the influence of the Parenting Challenge on parents in Malawi, the answers from the interviews with the parents were analysed. This was done to explore to what extent the Parenting Challenge has influenced their knowledge and behaviour, and how the findings relate to each other. After this, the answers were linked to the content of the Parenting Challenge manual, and to what had actually been discussed in the sessions. This is done to investigate how the sessions contributed to the acquisition of specific knowledge or exerted influence on certain behaviour. The results of this analysis will be presented here.

Influence on challenging moments

Before taking part in the interviews, parents were asked to take photos of a challenging parenting moment. Based on these photos, the question was asked if the parenting sessions helped with the challenges parents are struggling with the most. There were twelve parents who mentioned that the Parenting Challenge helped them to solve or decrease the challenges they face. Five of these parents mentioned that the sessions helped them to tackle the challenge of providing food. The reasons they gave for this were that they now had better communication with their partner, learned to save money, and learned more about farming practices from other parents. With regards to how challenges were solved, four parents mentioned that better communication with the partner was the reason their challenges were conquered. Two parents said their challenges decreased, because after the sessions they felt empowered to do business in order to increase their income to take care of their children.

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Lastly, two parents mentioned their challenges decreased because they learned about budget planning.

Influence on knowledge and behaviour of parenting

In the interviews, parents were asked about parenting knowledge they gained during the sessions. The most commonly occurring findings, findings mentioned by six or more parents, will be discussed in further detail in this section. Gaining knowledge on parenting does not necessarily mean that parents will change their actual parenting behaviour. To verify if the findings which occurred most often also changed the behaviour of the parents, questions were asked about changes parents experienced in their behaviour regarding parenting. The answers parents gave about the influence of the Parenting Challenge on their knowledge and behaviour have been grouped and are shown in Table 2, accompanied by example quotes of what the parents have said. In addition, Table 2 shows in which sessions of the Parenting Challenge the topics have been discussed.

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Table 2*Knowledge and behaviour change parents*

Topic	Number of parents mentioning gained knowledge	Example quote knowledge gain	Number of parents mentioning changed behaviour	Example quote behaviour change	Discussed in session
Taking care of children	20	<i>This has really helped me because now I'm able to appreciate why I have to feed my children with six food groups.</i>	4	<i>I understood that children nowadays really need to be provided with good clothing, I made an effort to do piece works and get income, that I used to buy shoes for the children.</i>	1,2,3,4,5,6
Communication	14	<i>I learned that it is important to verify the source of the information. Otherwise you just react when you're told important speech or important content. So when you hear something, you should try and verify the source of the information to avoid getting the wrong messages.</i>	12	<i>I am now able to sit down with my wife and discuss, and resolve the issue together.</i>	2, 4, 6
Not involving children in conflict	9	<i>So in the event that I have a fight with my wife, we should be able to resolve the issues without really involving the children, or not in the face of the children.</i>	9	<i>And now, even when I have a fight with my husband, I make sure that I don't show it to the children.</i>	4

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Meaning of parenting	9	<i>Before these sessions I just thought well, as long as you have children, you're a parent. But I have come to appreciate that parenting is more than that. You need to have specific skills on how you can manage your home and have a peaceful one.</i>			1, 2, 3,4, 5, 6
Disciplining children	7	<i>Before doing the parenting sessions, I didn't really know that when a child is in the wrong, I can just talk to that child and teach them, not really using force. And then, right now I really appreciate that that is very possible.</i>	7	<i>Nowadays I am able to sit down with a child and tell the child, these are my expectations from you, and this is what you're supposed to do in this house without really using our physical methods of discipline.</i>	Not treated in a session
Controlling emotions	7	<i>I have learnt to keep my emotions under control. So in as much as maybe I would have a fight in my household with my husband, I am going to be able to handle myself in a way that I cannot show that to the children that there is conflict in the house.</i>	6	<i>Before, the moment I was lacking something, maybe I would have run out of resources in the household, I was going to pile all the emotions on the children. Sometimes I whipped them unnecessarily, but now I am able to appreciate to not be doing that anymore.</i>	4
Dealing with challenges	4	<i>For challenges that you can be able to avoid: if they happen to you instead of keeping them to yourself, you can share with your friends.</i>	4	<i>Before I would have a challenge and never share with anyone. Right now due to the sessions after learning something, I am able to approach others to support me when I have a challenge.</i>	3

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Relating with family	3	<i>It improved the level of understanding between the way I relate between myself and the children.</i>	2	<i>I have noticed that the children are more free in the household, and that it is better environment for the children to live in because I created time to interact with the children more specifically,</i>	
Development of a child	3	<i>I have learned how to support the development of a child from ages 0, in the stages of development. Like even when they try to learn how to crawl, how to walk.</i>			5
Not abusing children	2	<i>I have learned not to abuse children by giving them a lot of household chores the whole day, that's not good for the child.</i>			5
Not judging others			1	<i>Before, I would look at someone and have a bad perspective of people. I would judge someone just by looking at them. But this time around I am able to embrace everyone as they are.</i>	4

1 – Taking care of children

Of all topics parents mentioned gaining knowledge on, taking care of children was most often mentioned during the interviews, namely by all twenty parents. Parents mentioned that taking care of children consists of many different components. The answers parents gave that fall under the category of taking care of children are as follows, followed by the number of parents that mentioned gaining knowledge on that topic: providing nutritious food (7), adequate clothing (6), school needs (5), providing a good place to sleep (4), vaccinating children (2), good hygiene (1), providing good shelter (1), preventing diseases (1). It is interesting that all the things parents mentioned having gained knowledge on are physical needs. Nevertheless, all these answers, if implemented, would contribute to better child development.

However, with regards to behaviour change, only six parents actually mentioned a behaviour change in taking care of their children. Of these parents, three mentioned changing their behaviour regarding providing food, two on school needs, one a good place to sleep and one on clothing. With regards to providing food, one parent said they used to not give any thought to the type of food they gave their children, but now they try to vary the types of food they give their children so that they have adequate nutrition.

Taking care of the needs of children was discussed in every session in some way. Something explicitly mentioned in all sessions was that providing nutritious food for children is important. This is despite the fact that the Parenting Challenge manual mentions the actual word 'food' only once. Still, in session 5, the importance of providing nutritious food is discussed in depth by the parents. In session 1, taking care of the physical needs of children was explicitly discussed. In session 3, parents talked about the challenge of providing for the different needs of their children, and discussed possible solutions.

2 – Communication

The second biggest topic parents said to have gained knowledge on was communication, mentioned by fourteen parents. This entails communication with the partner, mentioned by nine parents, and the sending and receiving of messages, mentioned by seven parents. The sending and receiving of messages is referring to how parents respond to information they are told, and the importance of checking if what they hear is true before they respond to it. An example of such an answer is provided in Table 2. Communication with the partner was often mentioned in the context of solving conflicts and the importance of talking to one's spouse.

With regards to behaviour change, eight of the nine parents who mentioned gaining knowledge on communication with their partner said to have changed their behaviour accordingly. Instead of shouting and fighting, parents mentioned they learned to sit down and talk things over with each other, and are able to more peacefully coexist with each other in the home. Better communication with the partner is also given as a reason for other behaviour changes, like not involving children in conflict. In addition, two parents mentioned that because of better communication with their partner, they are able to work together and plan better, which enabled them to provide more food for their households. Concerning verifying the source of messages, only three parents mentioned a behaviour change. Lastly, four parents mentioned a behaviour change in communication with their children.

To understand these answers, it is helpful to know in which sessions the parents learned about communication. Knowing this will make it possible to target certain problem areas more specifically. The topic of communication came up in session 4. However, even though most of the parents mentioned gaining knowledge in communication with their partner, this has not been explicitly discussed in any of the sessions. What is discussed briefly in sessions 3 and 4 is that talking amicably with your partner is important in solving conflicts.

Communication with children has not been specifically discussed in the sessions. However, in session 6 parents did mention they learned to understand their children better based on session 2, which discussed differences and similarities between their own childhood and the childhood of their children now. Lastly, the importance of checking the source and truthfulness of messages they receive before reacting to them was explicitly discussed in session 4.

3 – Not involving children in conflict

During the interviews, nine parents mentioned to have learned not to involve their children in conflict, since this can have a negative effect on them. For example, one parent said the following: *‘When we have issues, we should not be emotional. So that when the children come home, I should not be shouting at them or not give them attention just because I am mad at my husband.’* Often parents said that not involving children in conflict is related to how they communicate with their partner, since they learned they should discuss things with their partner in a private room without the children present.

All parents who said they now understand it is important not to involve children in conflict, also mention they have changed their behaviour accordingly. This entails, among other things, that parents learned not to argue in front of the children, but in a private space like the bedroom where children cannot hear them. In addition, if parents do have an argument and their children come home, they now try to not let the children know or feel that there has been conflict. Some parents add that this also entails they no longer take out their emotions on their children.

The importance of not arguing in front of children or involving them in conflict has been discussed in one of the exercises in session 4. In this exercise, parents practiced through

role-play how to behave towards their children when they come home from school, after the parents had a conflict or when they are stressed.

4 – Meaning of parenting

Nine parents mentioned in the interviews that they gained knowledge on the meaning of parenting. Their answers indicate that parents have mostly learned to appreciate their role as a parent and understand the responsibility of being a parent. They learned that being a parent is more than just being married and having children. Parents did not specifically mention that learning about the meaning of parenting changed their behaviour, but only that their views on parenting and on what it means to be a parent had changed.

Since nine parents said they gained knowledge about the meaning of parenting, the expectation is this was discussed in the sessions. However, only in session 1 was the meaning of parenting explicitly discussed in one of the exercises. The answers that parents gave, however, indicate that they learned about the meaning of parenting throughout all the sessions. In session 6, the groups reflected on what they learned a responsible parent is, based on all the things they learned in sessions 1 to 5.

5 – Disciplining children

Another finding is that seven parents mentioned they gained knowledge on disciplining their children. Parents mention they learned about the importance of setting conditions and teaching self-discipline to their children, and that parents need to support their children in that.

Regarding behaviour change, seven parents mentioned they changed their behaviour with regards to disciplining their children. Three parents mentioned they no longer use violence as a tool in disciplining children, but now sit down with their children and talk with

them instead. Another finding is that two parents mentioned they now send their children to church, so that they can learn discipline there.

Even though parents mentioned gaining knowledge and changing their behaviour on disciplining their children, this topic is not discussed in any of the sessions. The word ‘disciplining’ is also not present in the Parenting Challenge manual. Possible sessions where parents could have picked up on the importance of discipline and non-violence are sessions 4 and 5. In session 4 it was discussed that parents should not unleash their emotions on the children when they are stressed or angry. In session 5 it is mentioned that children need to learn good behaviour from their parents, since parents have the primary responsibility of instilling good manners.

6 – Controlling emotions

Seven parents said they gained knowledge on the importance of keeping their emotions under control. This is mostly mentioned in relation to not involving children in conflict, either with the partner, or when there are other problems troubling the parents.

Six out of seven parents noticed a change in their behaviour with regards to controlling their emotions. They said that when they are unhappy or when there is conflict, they are now able to welcome them and interact with them properly, instead of unleashing their emotions on their children. Parents often mentioned controlling their emotions in relation to being able to communicate better with their partner.

This topic has mostly been discussed in session 4, where parents talked about how to deal with their stresses, and the importance of not unleashing emotions on the children. In session 3, where parents talk about solutions to problems, dealing with stresses is also mentioned. Moreover in session 5, the facilitator mentioned that parents must portray good behaviour in the presence of their children, so that they can copy their good conduct.

Change in behaviour of children

During the interviews, nine parents mentioned that they noticed a behaviour change in their children after attending the parenting sessions. These changes are shown in Table 3. The most frequent behaviour change parents mentioned in their children was that they are more comfortable in the home. Some parents said this is because the communication between them and their children has improved, and they understand each other better. This is something that has been discussed in session 2. Another parent mentioned that they used to have a lot of arguments with their partner, but now they are able to communicate better, leading to a more peaceful household.

Table 3

Changes in behaviour children

Mentioned behaviour change in children	Number of parents	Example
More comfortable in the home	5	<i>The children are now comfortable in the house. Before then, they were running away from me. So they just come drop their books from school and off they go. But this time around they are able to hang around the household. The home is now a little bit more peaceful and they can hang around their home as compared to what they were doing before.</i>
Better discipline	3	<i>I feel like I understand my children better and also they listen better.</i>
More love towards friends and parents	1	<i>I am noticing that my children have love towards their fellow friends as well as they have love towards me.</i>

Recommendations from parents for improving the Parenting Challenge

At the end of the interviews, parents were asked to give advice to improve the Parenting Challenge. Their answers are portrayed in Table 4. The advice of most parents was that the sessions should be continued, and that the existing topics should be elaborated on. However, thirteen parents also mentioned they would want sessions about business

management, agriculture, raising livestock or vocational training to be added. Six of these parents specifically mentioned that the reason they would like to have these topics included in the sessions is because they struggle with gaining enough income to adequately take care of their children. For example, some parents mentioned learning about the importance of feeding their children the six food groups, but are unable to do so due to lack of money or lack of animals they have.

Table 4

Advice for improving the Parenting Challenge

Advice	Number of parents
Elaborating on sessions / more sessions	12
Business management	6
Agriculture	6
Raising livestock at household level	4
Hygiene	3
Vocational skills training	3
Empowerment community activities	2
Gender-Based Violence	1
Housing	1

Other interesting findings

In the interviews, questions were asked to investigate what parents learned from the parenting sessions. However, some parents shared more information than the questions asked, which led to two other interesting findings: sharing gained knowledge and the importance of group work.

Sharing gained knowledge

Even though only two parents mentioned that because of the Parenting Challenge they can share their knowledge and support others, it is an important finding. This is because the

sharing of knowledge could be beneficial to community members who had not attended the parenting sessions. The importance of sharing knowledge with other parents is not discussed in any of the sessions, but at the end of session 6, parents are encouraged to keep sharing their knowledge with others. This could have contributed to parents mentioning this.

Importance of group work

Mentioned by two parents is that they appreciated the way in which the parenting sessions had been carried out. They mentioned that it was the group work that really helped them master the topics of that day. They added that if it was just the facilitators explaining, they would not have learned to master anything. It was said that they liked sharing information in the group, since it enabled them to learn from each other.

Discussion

Parenting interventions can help parents gain knowledge and develop skills to adequately take care of their children and support their development (Eshel et al., 2006). The Parenting Challenge aims to increase parenting knowledge and skills through interactive group sessions. However, the extent to which this intervention has an influence on parenting knowledge and behaviour remained unknown. Therefore, this research investigated the influence of the Parenting Challenge on the parenting knowledge and behaviour of parents in Malawi.

Knowledge and behaviour change

Through a combination of observing the sessions of the Parenting Challenge and conducting interviews with the participants of the intervention, it was found that the intervention, according to the parents, does have an influence on the knowledge and behaviour of the parents. Twelve parents mentioned that the Parenting Challenge helped them

to solve or partially solve the biggest challenges they face with regards to parenting. This shows that the intervention seems to be tailored to the needs of most parents. In addition, the results showed that knowledge has been gained in different areas and that the behaviour of the parents has changed after taking part in the Parenting Challenge. There are three topics in particular that parents gained knowledge on and changed their behaviour on, which are communication with the partner, taking care of children, and disciplining children.

Communication

The first main finding is that the Parenting Challenge led to an increase in knowledge and a change in behaviour regarding communication with the partner according to the parents. When there is conflict, parents mention they now sit down together and talk about their issues, instead of shouting and fighting. In addition, parents said that better communication between them and their partner reduced the amount of conflict in the household. This is similar to findings from two studies in Nigeria, which found that good communication has a positive influence on resolving conflict between partners (Adegboyega, 2021; Esere et al., 2011). What is interesting is that in relation to communication, parents also mentioned other behavioural changes that are linked to other findings in this study.

In the first place, six parents mentioned they learned about the importance of controlling their emotions when they have a conflict with their partner, and changed their behaviour accordingly. Parents said they will now sit down and discuss their problems with each other, rather than shout and fight. This is also found by Sanford (2007), who found that couples tend to use negative forms of communication when they are upset, and that this reduces couples' understanding of the importance of resolving conflict together.

A second finding from this study that is related to both better communication with the partner and emotion control is that parents mentioned that this contributed to involving their children in conflict less. In addition, parents mentioned that because of this, their children

seem to be more comfortable in the home. Sarrazin and Cyr (2007) found that continual parental conflict can have a life-long impact on the well-being of children. From this it could be inferred that since the Parenting Challenge causes parents to involve their children in conflict less, the intervention contributes to the well-being of children.

Lastly, some parents mention that because they are able understand each other better and are able to peacefully coexist with each other, they are able to plan better together and meet the needs of their children, such as providing food. This finding builds on what Randles (2014) recommended in his study involving low-income parents, which is that interventions should encourage partners to discuss their challenges openly together, including financial challenges. This finding is important, since many parents in this study mentioned that they struggle with providing enough food for their children.

Taking care of children

Another main finding is that despite all twenty parents mentioning that they gained knowledge on taking care of their children, only six parents said they changed their behaviour accordingly. During the interviews, taking care of children was always mentioned with regards to physical needs, with most parents mentioning gaining knowledge on providing food, clothing and school needs. One possible explanation for the difference between knowledge and behaviour change is that parents might want to change their behaviour according to their gained knowledge of providing certain physical needs for their children, but that they cannot afford to do so due to poverty, which is high in Malawi (The World Bank, 2022). This makes it seem like the intervention is not very sensitive to the economic situation of the parents in Malawi. In light of this, however, five parents did mention that the parenting sessions helped them to tackle the challenge of providing food for their family, either through better communication with their partner, learning to save money, or learning more about farming practices from other parents. This is an important finding, since many

parents in Malawi struggle to provide enough food for their families (The World Bank, 2022). This shows that the intervention has the ability to help parents with providing food for their children through discussing their challenges and learning from other parents. However, this might not be enough for all parents, especially for those who are the poorest. In order to further support parents in providing food and taking care of other physical needs of their children, the inclusion of sessions about business or agriculture could be of benefit.

Disciplining children

The third main finding concerns the issue of disciplining children. Two out of three people in Malawi experience violence in their childhood, most often in the context of physical punishment (Blaney et al., 2019). The Parenting Challenge shows scope to reduce this phenomenon. Of the seven parents who mentioned gaining knowledge on disciplining children, three mentioned that this has led them to change their behaviour with regards to physical punishment. Instead of using force, they now see the value of talking to their children. If the Parenting Challenge is able to reduce or stop parents from physically punishing their children, this will decrease the negative influence that violence has on the development of the children (Madhlopa et al., 2020; Yildirim et al., 2020). In addition, since violence negatively influences children's educational level (Sherr et al., 2016), less violence can contribute to better education for children, which is a step closer to alleviating poverty (Fall et al., 2015). What is interesting about this finding is that disciplining children is not specifically covered in the manual, nor was it discussed in the parenting sessions. The question then remains of why parents still mentioned a knowledge and behaviour change, with some specifically mentioning that physical punishment is not good for a child. One explanation could be that certain topics that were discussed are linked to the use of physical punishment. Clement and Chamberland (2009) found that parental stress is linked to using physical punishment. In addition, Criss et al. (2021) found in their study that parents who are

able to manage stress and have a good relationship with their children are less inclined to use physical punishment. It has been discussed in the sessions that parents should not unleash their emotions on their children when they are stressed or angry. Parents also discussed ways of dealing with challenges and parental stresses they face. It could be that learning about dealing with stress and emotion control contributed to parents changing their views and behaviour regarding discipline.

Limitations of the research

The design of this study had some limitations. Firstly, the interviews were held within a week after the last session. Whilst this decreases the chance of external factors influencing the parenting knowledge and behaviour of the parents, it does not give any information about the long-term influence of the intervention. Second, the recordings of the sessions were not always adequate. Not everything that was said during the sessions was translated; sometimes the translator provided only a summary of what was said. This means that certain topics might have been discussed, but could not be implemented in this study. Thirdly, half of the interviews were held online through Teams, and the other half through the phone due to poor signal on the second day. This made interaction with the parents more difficult, and sometimes their answers were not clear. This could have led to the researcher not receiving certain information from the parents. In addition, the research was conducted by a researcher with a different cultural background to that of the participants, which might have influenced how certain data was interpreted.

Recommendations for research and practice

Following on from this study, there are several recommendations for future research. In the first place, since this study was conducted in a rural village in Malawi, little can be said

about the generalisability of the results. Since the Parenting Challenge is also implemented in other African countries, in India, and in Eastern Europe, it is recommended to conduct similar research in these other countries to find out if the intervention has the ability to influence parental knowledge and behaviour cross-culturally, and to establish whether the Parenting Challenge leads to similar results in other countries. Secondly, follow-up interviews with the parents are recommended. In that way, it will be possible to give a verdict on the long-term influence of the intervention. Lastly, since in Malawi and other African countries there is a pronounced difference in the roles of mothers and fathers in raising children (Carrim, 2017; Manda-Taylor et al., 2017), it would be interesting to research potential differences in the influence of the Parenting Challenge on men and women. With the results of such a study, alterations could be made to target the specific needs of mothers and fathers, which could improve the effects of the intervention.

There are also some recommendations for practice. These are based on the findings of the study and the advice parents gave in the interviews. First of all, this study showed that the short version of the Parenting Challenge, in comparison to the original intervention of several months, already has an impact on the knowledge and behaviour of parents. A short parenting programme can be useful, especially when used in conflict areas where a longer program is not feasible (El-Khani et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2017). However, adding sessions on business management, agriculture, or raising livestock is recommended. Doing so will equip parents with knowledge that can enable them to increase their income, which they could use to provide for the physical needs of their children. Six parents specifically mentioned that they would like sessions on these topics to be added because they struggle with earning sufficient income to adequately take care of their children. The inclusion of sessions about business and agriculture would therefore make the Parenting Challenge more suitable for parents in Malawi, especially since 80% of people in Malawi depend on agriculture for their

livelihood (The World Bank, 2022). In addition, since this study revealed that improved communication between partners can lead to several other outcomes that benefit children, it is recommended that the Parenting Challenge and other parenting interventions increase their focus on communication.

Conclusion

In summary, this study aimed to investigate to what extent the Parenting Challenge influences the knowledge and behaviour of parents in Malawi. Findings reveal that the intervention indeed had an influence on the knowledge and behaviour of parents, at least in the short term. The Parenting Challenge had a positive influence on communication between partners, leading to several other outcomes that benefit children. Therefore, an increased focus on communication is recommended for Parenting Challenge. The sessions also had an influence on how parents discipline their children, with some parents mentioning that they no longer use physical discipline. The intervention did influence parental knowledge on the physical needs of children, but only a small amount of parents mentioned that they changed their behaviour with regards to these needs. It is therefore advised to include sessions about business management or agriculture, since this will enable parents to increase their income and provide for the physical needs of their children. If the recommendations are taken into account, the Parenting Challenge has the ability to further contribute to a more peaceful home environment, and to the well-being and physical development of children in Malawi.

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Appendix A

Interview list

General questions

1. How old are you?
2. Are you married? For how long?
3. How many children do you take care of?
4. How old are your children?

Main questions

As I said earlier, we will first talk about the photos you have taken. Here we see the first photo you have taken.

Photovoice

1. What do you see on the photo you made?
2. Why did you make this photo?
 - a. (if necessary, ask the questions again that the photo is based on (aka, proud or challenging moment))

Repeat question 1 and 2 for the second (and third) photo

Thank you for these photos and your explanation. Next, we will talk about parenting and how you view this.

3. What should a good parent do?/What tasks does any good parent have in their? Anything else?
4. What is something a good parent should not do?
5. What does your day-to-day life look like as a parent?

Influence Parenting Challenge

6. What did you find most interesting in the sessions?
7. What did you learn from the sessions?
8. Was your view on parenting different before you participated in the parenting sessions?
 - a. If yes, can you give an example?
9. Is there a session that made a lot of impact on you?
 - a. If yes, was there a specific exercise within this session that made a lot of impact on you?
 - b. How did this have an impact on you?
 - c. How is that impact visible in your day-to-day life?
10. Has your own parenting behaviour changed since taking part in the sessions?

11. Is there anything else you remember that you learned during the sessions?
12. Have you been to all Parenting Sessions?
 - a. If not, how many sessions did you attend?
 - b. If there were sessions that you missed, why did you miss them?
13. Do you have any advice on how the Parenting Challenge could be improved?
14. Do you want to share anything else?