

**Parenting in Malawi: An Exploratory Study on the View of Parenting of Malawian  
Parents and the Influence of the Parenting Challenge on this View**

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### **Abstract**

Each parent has his or her own view on parenting (Keller et al., 2005). The parenting view influences parenting practices (Mowder, 2005). Parenting practices are of influence on the development of the child, and can lead to positive or negative outcomes for the development of the child (Respler-Herman et al., 2012). Little is known about the parenting view of parents in Malawi. As it is crucial to know these views of parents, this research explored the parenting view of Malawian parents. Parenting can be enhanced by interventions focusing on positive parenting (Shenderovich et al., 2019), such as the Parenting Challenge of the Dutch NGO Help a Child. Therefore, this research also focused on how this parenting intervention influenced parenting views of Malawian parents. To answer the research questions, 20 photovoice interviews were conducted and six sessions of the intervention were observed. Results showed that the Malawian parenting view mainly focuses on practical aspects such as the provision of food, school needs, and clothing for their children. Besides, the results showed that the Parenting Challenge influenced the parenting view of the parents participated. These findings contribute to the knowledge on parenting views in Malawi and possible influences of parenting interventions. Recommendations are made to Help a Child and other organisations on how to further develop and adapt a parenting intervention. Suggestions for further research are also provided.

*Keywords:* parenting, parenting view, parenting intervention, Parenting Challenge, Malawi

### **Samenvatting**

Elke ouder heeft een eigen kijk op het ouderschap (Keller et al., 2005). De opvatting over het ouderschap hangt samen met de manier hoe ouderschap gerelateerde activiteiten worden uitgevoerd (Mowder, 2005). Deze activiteiten zijn van invloed op de ontwikkeling van het kind en kunnen tot positieve of negatieve uitkomsten van de ontwikkeling van het kind leiden

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(Respler-Herman et al, 2012). Er is echter weinig bekend over de ouderschapsopvattingen van ouders in Malawi. Daarom richtte huidig onderzoek zich op de ouderschapsopvatting van Malawische ouders. Daarnaast is bekend dat het ouderschap verbeterd wordt door het inzetten van interventies gericht op positief ouderschap (Shenderovich et al., 2019), zoals de Parenting Challenge van de Nederlandse NGO Help a Child. Hierdoor richtte het huidige onderzoek zich ook op hoe deze interventie van invloed is op ouderschapsopvattingen van Malawische ouders. De onderzoeksvragen zijn aan de hand van twintig *photovoice* interviews en observaties van zes sessies van de interventie beantwoord. Gebleken is dat de ouderschapsopvatting kan omschreven worden als praktisch, waarin waarde wordt gehecht aan het zorgen dat aan de basisprincipes, zoals voeding, schoolbehoeften en kleding, van hun kinderen wordt voldaan. Daarnaast bleek de Parenting Challenge van invloed op de ouderschapsopvatting van de deelnemende ouders. De bevindingen uit dit onderzoek dragen bij aan de literatuur over de ouderschapsopvattingen in Malawi en over mogelijke invloed van ouderschapsinterventies. Aanbevelingen voor vervolgonderzoek en voor Help a Child en andere organisaties over de verdere ontwikkeling van een interventie zijn gegeven.

*Sleutelwoorden:* ouderschap, opvatting over ouderschap, ouderschapsinterventie, Parenting Challenge, Malawi

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### **Parenting in Malawi: An Exploratory Study on the View of Parenting of Malawian Parents and the Influence of the Parenting Challenge on this View**

The quality of parenting is a crucial factor for a child to be able to develop its full potential (Sherr et al., 2017). The behaviour of parents has a life-long impact on the child's health, wellbeing, and education (Shenderovich et al., 2019). Defining parenting, and especially good parenting, is a challenging task as parenting cannot be generalised and depends on the child and the context (Bray & Dawes, 2016; Eve et al., 2014; Seay et al., 2014; Sherr et al., 2017). In this research, good parenting is referred to as parenting practices carried out by a parent resulting in positive outcomes for the child, such as well-being (Smith, 2010). In order to describe what is meant by good parenting, the six main aspects of good parenting from the study by Eve et al. (2014) are used in this study and will be explained further below. According to Eve et al. (2014), it is important for parents to (1) have a clear insight into the role of a parent, (2) have willingness and ability to be a parent, (3) meet the day-to-day versus complex/long-term needs, (4) put the child's needs before own, (5) foster attachment in behaviour and activities of children, and (6) find balance in being consistent versus flexible in setting boundaries (Eve et al., 2014). These themes are suitable for use in this research as they are broadly agreed upon by professionals and focus on – in contrast to most research – positive instead of negative aspects of parenting (Eve et al., 2014).

The first category, insight, is perceived as the core aspect of good parenting and is defined as understanding one's role as a parent. This includes understanding and knowing the individual child, and acknowledging the limitations they have as a parent and undertaking action to improve on these limitations (Eve et al., 2014). Research even stated that the insight a parent has on certain parenting matters can be seen as a protective factor for child maltreatment (Mullick et al., 2001).

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Secondly, to be a good parent, willingness to be a parent at all times as well as ability to parent is needed, in which parents combine their own parenting skills and motivation (Eve et al., 2014). Within the willingness to be a parent, parents take responsibility for their child and problems that may occur. Parents need to have the knowledge on the basic needs of a child and need to be able to provide for those needs. Both willingness and ability can be enhanced by attending parenting education programs (Eve et al., 2014; Tomison, 1998).

The third aspect is day-to-day versus complex/long-term needs. A day-to-day task of a good parent is to meet the physical, emotional, and cognitive needs of the child (White, 2005; Woodcock, 2003). Moreover, there is the expectation of parents to guide and support their child(ren) to become an independent person (Eve et al., 2014). It is said that for this to happen, parents need to get into the role of a role model (Bandura, 1971; Eve et al., 2014).

Fourthly, it is expected of parents to put the child's needs before their own needs. Within child protection this aspect is seen as a primary principle. There is a greater risk of parents maltreating their child if they do not put the child's needs before their own (Eve et al., 2014).

Within the fifth aspect of fostering attachment, parents need to engage in behaviours and activities of their child (Eve et al., 2014). As a result of attachment, the child's psychological and social development will be stimulated (Howe, 2010).

The last aspect is consistency versus flexibility. Good parenting involves giving the child consistency and setting boundaries (Eve et al., 2014). Although, a parent should also be able to have a flexible ability to keep adapting to the changing needs of the child(ren) (Azar & Cote, 2002).

### **Parenting in Malawi**

Malawi is classified as one of the world's most underdeveloped countries, with about 63% of the children living in multi-dimensional poverty (UNICEF Malawi, 2020). Here and

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in other African countries, parents are faced with economical, material, (social-)emotional and health challenges (Sherr et al, 2017). This makes parenting in these countries very different from parenting in WEIRD societies, as the WEIRD world faces less of these abovementioned challenges. WEIRD stands for Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (Henreich et al., 2010). Most research is based on WEIRD populations and therefore not applicable to a non-Western context as it ignores certain populations within the research (Bray & Dawes, 2016; Henreich et al., 2010; Langdon, 2013). Therefore, the population that is included in this research needs to be compared with previously done research that was conducted in a similar or the same context (Henreich et al., 2010; Rabello de Castro, 2020).

The first thing to undertake when counteracting the WEIRD perspective is using a broad definition of a parent. In contrast to Western countries, where the mother-child relationship is central in defining good parenting, in non-Western contexts children are commonly cared for by several caregivers (Keller, 2016). In South and Eastern Africa, all those who take care of children and adolescents are defined as parents. Furthermore, the households in which the children grow up in, differ in composition and size compared to Western contexts (Bray & Dawes, 2016). The practical care and the responsibility for the upbringing of the children is often taken up by mothers and grandmothers, whilst fathers fulfil the role of providing (Bray & Dawes, 2016). Research conducted in Cameroon showed for example that the parenting system of primary care is important for parents in that context. Primary care includes the nursing or feeding of the child and stimulating activities that are health-promoting (Keller et al., 2005).

### ***Factors related to positive parenting in Malawi***

As outlined above, the African context differs in many aspects from the WEIRD context. This is also reflected in the research of Sherr et al. (2017) which identifies several barriers and stimulating factors that are specific for good parenting in the Malawian context.

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Three factors were positively associated to good parenting: being the biological parent of the child, parental mental health, and living in a household with multiple adults. Poverty and stigma were found to be negatively associated to positive parenting (Sherr et al., 2017). Being the biological parent of the child ensures a higher motivation for being a good parent (Menna et al., 2014). Non-biological parents are more likely to show a lower quality of parenting for their children. This lower parenting quality can have several causes. For example, a parent who suddenly has to take care of the child of a relative who passed away but also has to deal with grief themselves or the fact that change is difficult for children which causes parenting challenges (Chi et al., 2015; Sherr et al., 2017). Besides, mental health of a parent and living in a household with multiple adults are also of a positive influence on parenting. In their study, Sherr et al. (2017) found that a household with multiple adults, which is common in an African context, is supportive and protective when there are depressed parents in the household. This results in depressed parents being enabled to perform parenting well as they are supported by other adults in the household. Poverty causes parents to be preoccupied with ensuring shelter and enough food in the household. This results in parents lacking time and energy to build a good child-parent relationship (Sherr et al., 2017). Stigma also takes the attention away from (the awareness of) being a good parent. It is stated that interventions enhancing parenting could reduce stigma which results in the focus being on parenting instead of the negative consequences of stigma (Sherr et al., 2017).

### **Views on parenting in Malawi**

Each parent has his or her own view on parenting (Keller et al., 2005). The parenting view influences parenting practices (Mowder, 2005). These parenting practices are of influence on the development of the child, and can lead to positive outcomes for the child, such as a good well-being, or negative outcomes, such as poor school results (Respler-Herman et al., 2012). Therefore, it is crucial to know how parents view parenting as it relates

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to the parenting practices. However, little is known about the parenting view of parents in Malawi. For this reason, this research focuses on exploring the parenting view of Malawian parents.

### **Influence of a parenting programme**

As stated above, parenting is a challenging task (Eve et al., 2014; Seay et al., 2014). Therefore, many interventions are developed all over the world to help parents with their parenting by teaching them knowledge and skills related to the concept of parenting (Mebratu et al., 2022). Several studies showed that parenting interventions have improved the relationship between child and parent, stimulated the use of positive parenting practices and declined child abuse (Barlow & Coren, 2018; Shenderovich et al., 2019). This resulted in improvements of the relationship between parent and child and the well-being of the child as well as the parent (Barlow & Coren, 2019; Sumargi et al., 2015).

There are several factors that influence the outcomes of an intervention. Three key factors that are of influence are (1) facilitator fidelity, (2) participant attendance and (3) engagement (Shenderovich et al., 2019). (1) According to various studies, facilitator fidelity or quality is linked to stronger positive changes in certain parenting or child behaviour outcomes (Breitenstein et al., 2010; Cantu et al., 2010). In low-income countries, such as Malawi, it is common that facilitators of an intervention are not always professionals (Patel et al., 2011). As a result of an effective intervention, participants will probably get the most out of the intervention if they (2) always or at least regularly attend and (3) are actively engaged during the sessions (Shenderovich et al., 2019). To lower the barrier for parents to come, an intervention should be affordable and held on an accessible location (Sumargi et al., 2015). Concluding, it is important to ensure that these three factors – facilitator fidelity, and participant attendance and engagement – are taken into account when (further) developing an effective intervention.



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### **The Parenting Challenge**

The Parenting Challenge is an intervention method developed by the Dutch NGO Help a Child (HAC) to help parents with their parenting. This intervention method aims to have a positive influence on parenting skills and knowledge on parenting. This is done in a manner that is adapted to the culture and context of non-Western countries by using a group-based approach which is fitting to African contexts (Lachman et al., 2016). It also focuses on changing attitudes about parenting by promoting positive parenting. The manual of the Parenting Challenge consists of eleven modules. The first module is obligatory for all groups. Other modules are optional and can be chosen according to the interest of the group. Examples of topics in the modules are education, health and hygiene, and importance of play. Every module consists of one to four sessions that each take up one and a half to two hours. Furthermore, the sessions consist of participatory activities which are guided by the facilitators. The number of modules – and therefore topics – is decided by the group of parents, and therefore the total duration of the Parenting Challenge differs per group.

The group sessions are led by two facilitators who facilitate the sessions and give information about certain topics when needed. These facilitators are local community members and are trained by the experts of HAC Malawi. As the content of the sessions is determined by the group of parents, there is a bottom-up approach regarding the subjects that are discussed.

Although HAC aims for their intervention to be effective, it has not been scientifically researched if and how the Parenting Challenge is of influence to parents. Therefore, this research also focuses on exploring how participating in the Parenting Challenge influences the parenting view parents in Malawi have.

### **Theoretical and social relevance**

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Firstly, this research has a theoretical relevance as it focuses on exploring the parenting views of parents in Malawi. The views on parenting of parents in Malawi has not been previously studied. As parenting views and parental practices are closely related, this has an influence on the development of children (Respler-Herman et al., 2012). This research will contribute to the academic literature on parenting views in Malawi.

Secondly, there is also a social relevance as this research will give Help a Child insight in how participating in the Parenting Challenge influences and contributes to the parenting view of Malawian parents. Improving parenting can have many important outcomes, such as improved well-being of the child and parent and a better parent-child relationship. An intervention, such as the Parenting Challenge, can help to achieve this improvement (Barlow & Coren, 2018; Shenderovich et al., 2019). Therefore, it is relevant to explore the influence of a parenting intervention in order to improve parenting. Moreover, if a clear picture emerges of the parenting views, the intervention can be further developed by being aware of these views and by then taking these views into account.

### **Research questions**

In this research, there is one central research question: ‘How does participating in the Parenting Challenge influences the parenting views of Malawian parents?’. This research question consists of the following two sub questions: (1) ‘What is the view on parenting of parents in Malawi?’ and (2) ‘How is the Parenting Challenge of influence on this view?’.

## **Method**

### **Research design**

This qualitative research design is explorative as it aims to gain new insight regarding the view on parenting of Malawian parents and explore the influence of the Parenting Challenge on this parenting view in Malawi. This research is part of a larger research into the effectiveness of the Parenting Challenge. Therefore, there was a larger data collection and not all data collected was relevant for answering the research question of this thesis. Data

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collection was done through photovoice interviews and by observing the intervention sessions by two researchers.

### Participants

For this research, photovoice interviews were held with 20 Malawian parents after they attended the Parenting Challenge. Both fathers and mothers between the ages of 23 and 68 participated. More information on participant characteristics can be found in Table 1. The participants were selected through quota sampling by random selection from the two groups participating in the Parenting Challenge for this research.

**Table 1**

*An overview of the participant characteristics*

Parent number	Gender	Age	Marital status	Amount of children	Ages children
1	Female	34	Married, 18 years	4	16, 10, 8, 4
2	Female	34	Married, 24 years	4	16, 12, 9, 4
3	Male	34	Married, 11 years	4	12, 11, 9, 1
4	Female	55/56	Not married	8	33, 30, 28, 24, 17, 16, 12
5	Female	29	Married, 12 years	5 (2)	5, 4, 4 and some months, 15, 15
6	Female	30	Married, 10 years	5	12, 10, 8, 2, ...
7	Male	52	Married, 28 years	6 (2)	25, 16, 12, 8, 1, some months
8	Male	68	Married, 47 years	7, used to be 8 but one passed	Can't remember ages, some are 46, 45, 44

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9	Male	38	Married, 13 years	4	12, 9, 5, 3 month old baby
10	Male	35	Married, 14 years	7 (3)	15, 10, 4, ...
11	Female	23	Married, 5 years	2	4, 2
12	Female	30	Married, 8 years	6	12, 11, 10, 9, 8, 6
13	Female	23	No	2 ( <i>and 2 elderly</i> )	14, 15
14	Female	26	Married, 7 years	3 (2)	5, 4, 2
15	Female	29	Not married	3	10, 8, 4
16	Female	23	Married, 4 years	3	14, 10, 1.5
17	Male	44	Married, 14 years	5	13, 10, 7, 4, baby
18	Male	35	Married, 3 years	2	3, 1
19	Male	23	Married, 2 years	3 (2)	17, 16, 1
20	Male	30	Married, 13 years	3	13, 6, 3

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*Note.* All in italic refer to not being the biological children of the parent.

To guarantee the anonymity of the participants, no additional specific characteristics have been described. This choice does not prevent a focused and valid answer to the research questions.

### **Instruments and procedure**

The intervention used for this study consisted of six group-based sessions. The first module of the Parenting Challenge was shortened and adjusted prior to the intervention. The number of sessions was reduced to six sessions as this represents the core of the intervention. Although there is no optimum number of sessions, the mean number of sessions in intervention with large effect sizes ranges from six to eight (Van der Klink et al., 2001). This new and shortened version of the first module was used during the sessions. An overview of the content of these sessions can be found in Appendix A.

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The data collection method was qualitative in nature. It consisted of conducting 20 photovoice interviews. By using the photovoice method, it was possible to evaluate the parents' attitudes and knowledge after the intervention and what changes were caused by the intervention. For these photovoice interviews, to gain more insight into their views on parenting, the participating parents were asked to take photos of parenting moments that are challenging for them and parenting moments that they are proud of. Subsequently, the parents were interviewed about their photos and were asked to explain what could be seen on the photos. Furthermore, they were asked about how they viewed good parenting and about the sessions of the Parenting Challenge, for example what they learned during the sessions and whether their view on parenting changed as a result of the intervention. An interview list was used during the semi-structured interviews (Appendix B). Half of the interviews were conducted online through Microsoft Teams and the other half via mobile calling due to poor internet connection.

The interviews with the parents were conducted in mid-May 2022. An interview lasted 30 minutes on average. This duration of the interviews was long enough to get all questions answered, but prevented participants from being overburdened. Before starting the recording, the participant was asked for permission to record. After starting the recording, this was asked again. Besides the participant, the interviewer and a translator were present during the interview. The interviewer led the conversation during the interview, using the interview list as a guide. The interviews were translated on the spot by the translator from English to Chichewa (the local Malawian language) and vice versa.

Besides the photovoice interviews, the six intervention sessions in which the parents participated were recorded on film. Based on these filmed sessions, observation notes were made. By using this methodology of observation, insight was generated into the process by which the influences are explored. The observation notes were made on the training activities

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to gain an insight in the view on parenting at the beginning of the intervention. The video materials have not been archived for privacy reasons.

### **Ethics**

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from UU-SER and from the ethics committee in Malawi. Prior to the interview, the information letter and informed consent were orally translated to each participant as both the letter and consent were written in English. Before the recording started, the interviewer also shortly mentioned the bullet points of the information letter. All the data was stored on YoDa. Only the researchers and the supervisor of the university had access to the data, which guaranteed anonymity of the participants (Boeije, 2010).

### **Data analysis**

For the data analysis, the thematic analysis method was used, as this research aimed to explore the views on parenting and the experiences with the Parenting Challenge from a set of qualitative data. To analyse the data, the qualitative data analysis software NVivo 20 was used.

After the interviews were conducted, the interviews were transcribed. As a first step of analysis, the research familiarized herself with the data by reading through the data. The second step of coding consisted of highlighting statements, sentences, or quotes. After coding, the codes were grouped into themes. The combining of codes into themes was done collectively by two researchers. Discussions between the researchers took place, which provided a better understanding of the data. This increased the reliability of the research (Boeije, 2010). During the analysis, the data was screened for themes related to good parenting and the parenting views. Additionally, the six aspects of good parenting according to Eve et al. (2014) were also taken into account. When it became apparent that codes were not relevant for answering the research questions, they were not divided into a theme. An

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overview of all the themes can be found in Appendix C. The fourth step was to review the themes. This was done by selecting the themes relevant for answering the research questions, which resulted in six themes. The last step of the thematic analysis was to define and name the themes.

### Results

To get more insight into the parenting views of Malawian parents and into how this view is influenced by participating in the Parenting Challenge, 20 photovoice interviews were conducted and six sessions of the Parenting Challenge were observed. During the analysis of the results, six themes have been found relevant for answering the research questions (Appendix C). These themes are used to structure the result section.

#### Photovoice

Before the photovoice interviews were conducted, the parents were asked to take one or two photos of their parenting. To guide them they were asked to take a photo of a parenting moment that they found challenging and a moment they were proud of as a parent.

#### *Challenging parenting moments*

The parents described several moments that are challenging for them as a parent when talking about one of the photos they had taken. Five participants mentioned that it is challenging that they do not have enough financial capital to fend for the household. The parents showed this in the picture by the sad emotions on their faces on the photos and in their explanations with the photos. Parent 9 explained: “[...] *that picture depicts a moment where I am worried because of the problems that I have. [...] my challenge is to find enough finances to run my household. So that's what I was worried about because I don't have enough capital to run a business that can be able to bring in enough income to support the household*”. Furthermore, three parents indicated that the bad quality of their houses is challenging. Also, three parents stated that they find it challenging to provide their children with appropriate clothing. Not having enough food for their children was also mentioned by three of the

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parents. Other challenging moments that parents described were mostly personal or only applicable for a certain village, for example: *“Finding water is a challenge in my village. So I have to travel a long distance to get water to use at the house”* (parent 16).

### ***Proud parenting moments***

When describing the picture of one of the parenting moments that the parents are proud of, almost half of the parents said they are proud that they are able to feed their children, despite of the many challenges they face with this. Parent 13 explained: *“[...] I made this picture because it shows that in as much as there are challenges in my house to feed people, somehow I try to getting meals for the members of my household. So I am able to have a little bit of some corn, which may not last, but at least it's something that you can feed the people”*. Five parents mentioned being proud that they can cultivate for food or income. Parent 17 explained this: *“[...] I use the yield from the maize to feed my family, but when I have surplus I can also sell some, to find the basic needs in the households, like soap.”*

Things that were mentioned by three parents each were that they are proud that they can take care of their children, that they are able to keep animals at a household level, that they can produce some income for the household, and that they can support their children's education.

### **Tasks of a good parent**

In addition to the photovoice exercise, to gain insight into the parenting view of participating parents, the respondents were asked what they thought were tasks of a good parent. Among the interviewed parents, there was a reasonable unanimity on the tasks of a good parent: 14 parents said that a good parent needs to take care of the children. Several parents indicated that this refers to all the children in the household. Besides, 10 of the parents mentioned that a good parent should be able to send their children to school and support their school needs: *“[...] a good parent should be able to support their children with education and be able to provide them with notebooks and uniforms and things they need in school”*



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(parent 6). Three of the parents also mentioned that a parent should have a good discipline and should know how to teach this good discipline to the children. Besides tasks relating to children, taking care of the household, and knowing how to coexist with neighbours was also mentioned by three of the parents.

### **Tasks or certain behaviours that do not belong to a good parent**

The respondents highlighted different tasks and behaviour that a good parent should not do. Six parents stated that a good parent should not abuse the children and the partner. Parent 3 explained: *“a good parent should not exercise violence in the household, he should not be harsh to the children or to the wife”*. Five parents explained that a good parent should not give children not age appropriate tasks, as explained by parent 1: *“because that's [...] some sort of ill treatment for the children”*. Beside this, the following was mentioned several times by the parents: not neglect the children (5 parents), no fighting (with their spouse) in front of the children (4 parents), and not be involved in drunkenness and/or doing drugs (3 parents).

### **Day of a parent**

When asked about the day-to-day life as a parent, eight parents said that their day includes feeding their children. Next to this, eight parents mentioned a daily task is to send their children to school. Lastly, seven parents told that cultivating or farming is something they do in their daily life. Most of the times, they use this for creating an income or as food for the family. Several other things, such as cleaning the household, were mentioned by only a few parents.

### **Influence on view on parenting after Parenting Challenge**

All the parents said that their view on parenting changed after participating in the sessions. Some of the parents described this as a change in perspective on parenting, while other parents described this as a behaviour change. Three parents mentioned a change of

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perspective in the amount of responsibility, parent 15 said the following about this: *“There's a difference [in view]. Because before then, I just took it lightly that I am a parent. But now I am able to appreciate the amount of responsibility that I have on the time as well as the relevance of food diet”*. In addition, parent 6 explained: *“[...] this time around, I think parenting is a responsibility. So it's not just because you are married, you have a household and you have children, then you are parents. So being a parent is some state of being. You have to have some sort of responsibility. That is my view point after the sessions”*. Besides, one parent mentioned how her view on who a parent is changed: *“We were being told on who a parent is and we were told that a parent is everyone. Those that are married and even those that are not married but they are taking care of children. All those are parents”* (parent 12).

Parents described also a more practical knowledge and behaviour change. Six parents mentioned that their parenting view changed because they gained (more) knowledge about what it means to be a parent and what parenting involves: *“[...] there is a change. Before participating, I really didn't know that they need to feed children timely, so children must be given meals at appropriate times. And children must be supported to go to school. These are the skills that I really did not have much knowledge of before participating in the sessions as compared to now”* (parent 18). Parent 20 also explained the change: *“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”*. A change in interaction with their children and/or partner was also mentioned by parents. Three parents mentioned a change in interaction with their children. Parent 1 explained what this change implies: *“[...] I am also noting a change in the way I am able to interact with the children in the household and that even when I am not happy, or maybe I am moody, or maybe it's something bothering me, I am not emotional to the children,*

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*so I can be able to interact with the children”* (parent 1). Another three parents mentioned a change in interaction with their partner.

### **Observations on parenting view**

During the first session, the parents talked about good parenting. During the third exercise of the session, they discussed the meaning of being a good and responsible parent. All the groups mentioned that a parent is someone who keeps and raises children. Some groups stated that as a responsible parent you should also guide and take care of others. More than half of the groups also mentioned that a parent should be married.

### **Discussion**

This research aimed to get an insight into the parenting view of Malawian parents. In addition, the second objective was to explore how participating in the Parenting Challenge influences this parenting view. In order to answer the research questions, interviews with 20 parents were conducted after participating in the intervention. Furthermore, the sessions were observed and observation notes were used.

### **View on parenting**

This research showed that the Malawian parenting view mainly focuses on practical aspects of parenting such as the provision of the needs of children. This is concluded as the importance of basic needs such as having financial capital, good housing and food often emerged from the data. Interestingly, these factors are described by the parents to be a challenge as well as something they are proud of. For example, on the one hand they are proud that they are able to cultivate for some food or income, but on the other hand they find it challenging to provide their children with enough food and/or clothing. A possible explanation for this is that parents are proud of moments they worked hard for, even though it remains to be a challenge. This is in line with the study by Rutman and Van Bibber (2010),

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which showed that parents felt a sense of accomplishment if they engaged in what they considered to be positive parenting activities.

The importance of caretaking was also mentioned by a lot of parents. Within the notion of caretaking mainly basic needs of a child, such as feeding, clothing, and sending children to school, were brought up. This is in line with the research of Keller et al. (2005) that showed that in the African context parents value primary care. Primary care includes the nursing or feeding of the child and stimulating activities that are health-promoting (Keller et al., 2005). An explanation for this finding can be found in the fact that Malawi is a country in which people are faced with economical, material, (social-)emotional and health challenges (Sherr et al., 2017). These practical conditions must be met in order to raise a child well and to ensure a fruitful development and future (Seay et al., 2014). Given the challenges that the Malawian parents face, it is not surprising that the focus is so strongly on the provision of basic needs. In addition, many parents mentioned that they find it challenging not having enough financial capital. The study of Sherr et al. (2017) showed that poverty is a factor that is negatively associated with positive parenting. Therefore, there are differences when comparing to the Western context. The focus of the Western parenting view is mainly on how to establish a good child-parent relationship within the authoritative parenting style and not on meeting basic needs (Ulferts, 2020).

Besides the view related to practical matters, some parents mentioned that a good parent should have a good discipline and should know how to teach children this discipline. As a result of the intervention, discipline was mentioned more often by parents. However, parents were not asked to explain what they meant exactly with (good) discipline. Despite the fact that the results showed that parents consider discipline as an important factor of parenting, no further statements can be made on this.

### **Influence of the Parenting Challenge on parenting view**

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The findings of this study showed that the Parenting Challenge had an influence on the parenting view of the participants as all the 20 parents mentioned a change in their parenting view and/or behaviour. Several parents mentioned having a feeling of responsibility after participating in the Parenting Challenge. In addition, parents indicated that they had gained knowledge on several topics, such as child development and nutritious food. Additionally, they also learned how to undertake actions to improve on their limitations as a parent. Lastly, parents mentioned that a positive change in interaction with their children as they were more involved in the behaviour and activities of their child(ren). The aspects of good parenting according to Eve et al. (2014) that seem to apply on the results of the current study are: having clear insight in the role of a parent, the willingness and ability to be a parent, and fostering attachment. However, the aspects in meeting the day-to-day versus complex/long-term needs, putting the child's needs before own, and finding balance in being consistent versus flexible do not correspond to the results.

An aspect of good parenting is the ability and the willingness to be a parent (Eve et al., 2014). Within the willingness and ability to be a parent, parents take responsibility for their child and problems that may occur. The findings of undertaking actions by a parent can be described as the insight in one's role as a parent (Eve et al., 2014). Also, the aspect of fostering attachment changed as parents reported to engage in behaviours and activities of their child (Eve et al., 2014). Two aspects, meeting the day-to-day versus complex/long-term needs and putting the child's needs before the own needs, were reflected in the parenting view of parents, as described above. However, parents did not mention these aspects being influenced by the intervention. The last aspect, consistency versus flexibility, was not mentioned by parents. It cannot be stated whether the reason for this not being mentioned is that parents do not value this or that the intervention does not address this. Concluding, three of the aspects of good parenting described in the study of Eve et al. (2014) are mentioned by

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parents after attending the sessions of the Parenting Challenge. As a result, the parenting of Malawian parents and consequently their parenting views are positively influenced by the intervention.

Another interesting finding is that several groups mentioned during the first session that a good parent should be married. However, a good parent being married was not mentioned by the parents during the interviews. One parent did explicitly mention that she learned that all who take care of children are parents, even when they are not married. The study of Kok et al. (2021) showed that with the occurrence of a teenage pregnancy, which is highly prevalent among youth below the age of 24, the response is often marriage. Given the majority of the participating parents having their first child before they reached the age of 24 years old, they will often have been married since a young age. As being married is common, many parents may have thought that a parent should be married. During the sessions of the Parenting Challenge, they learned that a parent is anyone who takes care of a child and therefore will not always be married. Consequently, the intervention was an influence on this part of the parenting view as parents did not mention marriage to be a part of parenthood during the interviews.

### **Limitations**

A limitation of the present study is that the view was only measured after the parents participated in the Parenting Challenge. It is possible that parents did not remember or explain their pre-intervention view accurately after participating in the Parenting Challenge. This may have influenced the findings of the current study. Although, as many concrete examples of the change in view and the view beforehand were given explicitly by the parents, it can be concluded that the outlined view is accurate.

Another limitation is that an employee of Help a Child spot-on translated the interviews. This and the research being conducted by researchers who were affiliated with the

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organization may have led to social desirable answers by the participants. Furthermore, because this study only focused on positive parenting view and behaviour changes, it lacks an insight in the unwanted or lack of change that the intervention may cause.

Due to the corona pandemic, the interviews were conducted online. This may have led to the participants being less open in their answers and to the researchers being less able to interpret the non-verbal attitudes of the participants. However, many parents gave concrete examples and a clear explanations, which provided reliable insight into their parenting and their view on parenting.

Lastly, the personality of the researcher needs to be taken into account as being of Western origin. It can be concluded that this was not of influence on the research as the WEIRD perspective was deliberately counteracted.

### **Recommendations**

Future research could further explore the parenting views of Malawian parents including variables such as age or sex. In the current research, no specific variables were taken into account, but it would be interesting to know whether there are differences in view based on these variables. Secondly, further research could explore how parenting views translate into parental practices as the parenting view and practical actions are interrelated (Mowder, 2005). Thirdly, it is recommended to conduct pre- and post-test interviews in order to gain a complete picture of the parenting view before and after participation in the intervention. Fourthly, future research should examine how parents describe discipline and how this affects their parenting and parenting view.

This research is valuable for Help a Child and other organisations that develop parenting interventions as it provides knowledge on the influence of the Parenting Challenge on the parenting views of Malawian parents. With this knowledge the intervention can be further developed and adapted, for instance by taking into account that parents value practical

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aspects of parenting. Besides, it is recommended for Help a Child to evaluate if the outcomes that came out of the data in this research are also desired as outcomes of the intervention.

Lastly, to give a more comprehensive overview of the influence of the intervention, it is recommended to conduct a longitudinal study which is carried out in different areas.

### **Conclusion**

In the current research, the parenting views of Malawian parents have been explored. In addition, the influence of the Parenting Challenge on this view was also explored. This research showed that the Malawian parenting view is mainly focused on practical aspects of parenting such as the provision of the needs of children. Besides, the results showed that the Parenting Challenge was of an influence on this view of parents by focussing on enhancing aspects such as willingness and ability to be a parent and fostering attachment (Eve et al., 2014). This study contributes to the literature on parenting views in Malawi. In addition, it also contributes to the development of interventions that help parents with parenting and thus enables children to develop optimally worldwide.



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**Appendix A****An overview of the six sessions**Session 1: Starting a Parenting Group

This session will focus on getting started as a group: getting to know each other and discussing the goal of this Parenting Challenge group.

Parents explore their own roles and responsibilities, as a mother and as a father. How are they doing so far? This will be used as a baseline for them.

Session 2: Our own childhood and children nowadays

“Children these days are suborn!” Is that true? Through a group exercise parents share about their own childhood, the nice parts, and the challenges. How was it for their parents?

And how is life for children now? And for themselves who are now parents? By comparing, they will realize there are differences but also lot of similarities (also cultural beliefs can be discussed here).

Session 3: The Parental Balance

Being a parent is not easy. There is no ‘school’ where you learn to be a parent. Maybe you had a good example from your own parents, but still it can be challenging.

The parents will make a balance, a pair of scales with all challenges on one side and their own strength, the things what help them through it, on the other side.

Session 4: Action and reaction

Children still need to learn a lot. And most of it they learn that from you, the parents. Your words, but also your actions towards the children, towards each other, towards other people.

What do children see? A loving and caring parent? Or a parent who is harsh and stressed?

What can you as a parent do to deal with your own stresses so that you can ‘unstressed’ towards your children?

Session 5: What does a child need to develop?

Children at different ages need a lot of things:

- Physical things like food, hygiene, and play;
- Cognitive things like learning words and going to school;
- Social emotional support, like safety and care;
- Spiritual and moral things, like learning what is right and wrong, having faith in themselves and in God.

Session 6: What is needed for the (near) future?

We have learned at least a bit in these few sessions. But what else can we do in the near future for our children and for ourselves as parents and couple?

Let us make a plan

- For at home;
- For this group;

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- For our community.

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**Appendix B****Interview list**

**Important!** Ask the translator to translate everything the parent says as literally as possible.

*Introduction*

1. Thank you for participating in this interview
2. Explain interview
  - The goal of the interview is so we get an insight in the intervention, so that it can be further developed. We need you, since you were the participating parents and you can tell us what is important for the improvement of the intervention. First, I will ask you some general questions. After this, we will talk about the photos you have taken. And after that, we will talk about parenting and your view on this. Lastly, we will talk about the sessions of the parenting challenge that you participated in.
3. Your participation will be anonymous in the research and no data will be able to lead back to you. This means that after this interview, your name will not be seen anywhere. There is no such thing as a wrong answer!
4. Is it okay that I record the interview? I will do this so that I do not have to write everything down whilst we are talking, and so that I will be able to listen all your answers again later. The recording will be deleted after we process the data. I will repeat these questions after I started the recording.

*Start recording*

*Repeat the question if it is okay to record the interview*

**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 a parent have?



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4. What is something a good parent should not do?
5. How do you see your day-to-day life as a parent?

*The last few weeks, you participated in the parenting sessions of the Parenting Challenge. The next questions will be about these sessions. This way, we can find out how the Parenting Challenge can be further developed.*

### Influence Parenting Challenge

6. What did you find most interesting of 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 the session 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. Did the sessions help you with the challenges you face, for example the challenge you captured in the photo?
12. Is there anything else you remember that you learned during the sessions?
13. 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?
14. Do you have any advice on how the Parenting Challenge could be improved?
15. Do you want to share anything else?

*This was the interview. I want to thank you for your participation. If you have any questions in the future, you can contact me through email or by contacting the facilitators of the sessions. Have a nice day!*

## Appendix C

Table 1

*An overview of the themes and subthemes*

Theme	Subtheme
Good parent	
What a good parent shouldn't do	
Day of a parent	
Description of challenging moment	
Description of proud moment	
<i>Interesting about the sessions</i>	
<i>Learned during the sessions</i>	
	<i>Behaviour change</i>
	<i>Knowledge</i>
<i>Change in behaviour of children</i>	
View change	
<i>Remaining challenges after attending the sessions</i>	
<i>(Partially) solved challenges after attending the sessions</i>	
<i>Advice of improving PC</i>	

*Note.* Themes in italic are not included in the results section.