

The Effect of the Skillful Parenting Program on Experienced Parental Competence in Rural  
Western Kenya

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### **Abstract**

Parenting programs are widely implemented and studied in Western countries. They have shown to be effective in both improving parenting and reducing child problem behaviour. However, parenting programs in developing countries lack evidence. The current study analyses the effect of the Skillful Parenting program in rural Western Kenya on experienced parental competence. A mixed methods pre- and post-test design, including both quantitative (six-item Likert-scale) and qualitative (interview) data, is used to study the effect. The results show that the parenting concept of the participants shifts from a primarily economic perspective (focussing on food, education and farming) toward a psychological perspective (focussing on parent-child interaction). Moreover, parents show an increased score on experienced parental competence on the quantitative scale. This increase is supported by the interviews in which parents report an increased agency in the development of their children. Adding to the limited, mostly quantitative, research on parenting programs in developing countries, this study gives valuable insight into parents' parenting ideas and experiences after participating in a parenting program.

## INTRODUCTION

In the first years of life family members, and especially parents, are the most important determinants of the child's experiences and also later in life family remains a large influence on child behaviour. Therefore, many interventions addressing child outcomes focus on parenting (Grusec & Davidov, 2008; Richter & Naicker, 2013). Parenting programs, in which parents actively acquire parenting skills, have been shown to both improve parental skills, knowledge and self-efficacy, as well as to reduce child problem behaviour (Kaminski, Valle, Filene, & Boyle, 2008). Although robust evidence is found for the effectiveness of parenting programs in Western countries, research in low- and middle-income countries is limited (Knerr, Gardner, & Cluver, 2013; Mejia, Calam, & Sanders, 2012; Ward & Wessels, 2013).

The transition from an agrarian society to an urbanized, modern society, that many African communities are facing today, influences parenting. Due to migration, urbanization, and industrialization parenting becomes a more individualized task, the parent-child relationship becomes less hierarchal, and parents have to guide their children through contexts they themselves have no knowledge of. Moreover, due to HIV and AIDS the amount of single-parent families and children raised by grandparents increases (Bigombe & Khadiagala, 2003; Evans, Matola, & Nyeko, 2008). In addition, poverty puts children at risk for developing emotional and behavioural difficulties, increases family stress and decreases maternal responsiveness (Kiernan & Mensah, 2011; Slopen, Fitzmaurice, Williams, & Gilman, 2010; Waylen & Stewart-Brown, 2010). These trends have led to increased implementation of parenting programs in Sub-Saharan Africa (Aidoo, 2008). This study, therefore, will research the effect of the Skillful Parenting program, developed and implemented in Kenya, on experienced parental competence. This study, which is a Master thesis project, is carried out within the Skillful Parenting research project of Utrecht University (de Haan, 2013).

### **Parenting programs**

A parenting program is a structured process of education and training intended to enhance the parenting skills of participants (Bunting, 2004). Parenting programs can have different theoretical backgrounds. Behavioural programs are based on the principles of social learning and positive reinforcement. Cognitive-behavioural programs restructure the way parents think about their child's behaviour. Relationships-based programs focus on skills like communication and understanding behaviour in the context of a relationship. However, most programs use components from all abovementioned theories and are so-called multidimensional interventions (Bunting, 2004; Richter & Naicker, 2013). Lindquist and Watkins (2014), who studied seven

widely-used parenting programs, indeed find that there are large similarities between parenting programs. According to them, all parenting programs reviewed aim to teach parents methods and beliefs that align with a democratic parenting style. The programs have a focus on regulating child behaviour by encouragement and positive disciplining techniques (more behavioural-orientated techniques), fostering a positive parent-child interaction by effective communication, cooperation and respect (more relationship-based techniques) and educating parents about the motivations and needs underlying child behaviour (more cognitive-behavioural techniques). Parenting programs can differ in the amount of sessions, qualifications of the person who delivers the program, targeted recipients, and therapeutic components. In addition, the setting of the program can be individual home-visits or group-sessions with multiple parents (Kaminski et al., 2008; Lundahl, Risser, & Lovejoy, 2006).

In Western countries parenting programs have shown to improve parenting and to reduce child problem behaviours (Kaminski et al., 2008; Lundahl et al., 2006). The programs lead to better management of child behaviour, less harsh parenting, and greater sensitivity and responsiveness of parents towards their children, also in the long term (1-20 years following the program) (Richter & Naicker, 2013; Sandler, Schoenfelder, Wolchik, & MacKinnon, 2011). Kane and colleagues (2007) reviewed four studies that interviewed parents about their experiences with the group-based parenting programs they participated in. According to parents, the programs aided the acquisition of parental knowledge and skills. Moreover, parents experienced feelings of acceptance and support from other parents in the parenting group. This enabled parents to regain control and feel more able to cope with their child's behaviour, which led to a reduction in feelings of guilt and social isolation, increased empathy with their children and confidence in dealing with their children's behaviour.

However, the effectiveness of parenting programs in non-Western countries is far less studied. One of the most important issues to take into account when implementing parenting programs in low- and middle-income countries is the cultural diversity regarding parenting. Culture determines the nature of children's daily routines, parenting, and childrearing arrangements (Harkness & Super, 2002; Nsamenang, 2008). An often-reported distinction is made between traditional (non-Western) and modern (Western) models of childhood. Within traditional societies, due to hard economic circumstances and high infant mortality rates, emphasis is put on the physical survival of children and children are often valued for their economic benefits. When children are young they contribute to the household income or household chores and when they grow up they form an old-age security for their parents. Obedience by children and interdependent family relationships are highly valued. In Western

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countries, due to societal changes like decreasing family size and increasing investment in children's education, children are mainly of psychological value. Parents enjoy the benefits of having children in terms of companionship and pride. Parents intensively invest in the development of their children, parent-child relationships are more egalitarian and autonomy is highly valued (de Haan, 2011; Kagitcibasi & Ataca, 2005; Keller et al., 2004; LeVine, 2003). As a consequence, the nature of what is regarded as normal or difficult child behaviour differs across cultures (Richter & Naicker, 2013). In addition, in non-Western countries children are often parented by several people and spend a lot of time with their peers (Nsamenang, 2008) and the influence of parenting behaviours on child outcomes might be moderated by culture (Phoenix & Hussain, 2007). Since parenting practices differ by culture and society, parenting programs should be adapted to the socioeconomic context of low- and middle-income countries and to the cultural values, knowledge and practices of local communities (Evans et al., 2008; Mejia et al., 2012; Nsamenang, 2008; Richter & Naicker, 2013). Even programs that are qualified as evidence based, might not be effective in settings that do not match with the values, and traditions of the population on which the evidence of effectiveness was based. Not adapting a program to the local context and language is likely to compromise both engagement and outcomes (Kumpfer, Pinyuchon, Teixeira de Melo, & Whiteside, 2008; Lau, 2006).

Three reviews were found on the effectiveness of parenting programs in developing countries. All three reviews included quantitative studies on parenting programs ranging from South-America, to Asia and Africa. The results suggest that parenting interventions are effective in improving parent-child interaction and parental knowledge (Knerr et al., 2013) and can have a positive influence on child development in developing countries (Engle et al., 2011; Mejia et al., 2012). Both Knerr and colleagues (2013) and Mejia and colleagues (2012), however, stated that the majority of the studies lacked methodological rigor (e.g. no baseline demographic data or poor reliability and validity of instruments) which makes the internal validity of the studies unclear. In addition, Mejia and colleagues (2012) argue that the cultural acceptability of the programs must be taken into account. Some programs studied are not developed in the country in which they were implemented and it should be researched whether these imported interventions are effective and consistent with the values and traditions of the implementation country.

Four recent studies on the effect of parenting programs on parenting behaviour and child outcomes were conducted in Africa. The effect of international parenting programs, adapted to the local context, was studied in respectively South Africa, Ethiopia, Mozambique and Kenya (Cooper et al., 2009; Klein & Rye, 2004; Skar, Sherr, Clucac, & von Tetchner, 2014;

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Vandenhoudt et al., 2010). In South Africa mothers received guidance in parenting through home-visits, during the last trimester of pregnancy and the first six months after birth, by trained mothers from the local community. Mothers were randomly assigned to the intervention or the no-treatment control group. Videotaped mother-child interactions at both six and twelve months postpartum showed that mothers in the intervention group were significantly more sensitive (e.g. involvement and responsiveness) in interactions with their infants. The intervention was also associated with a higher rate of secure infant attachments at 18 months, as measured by the Strange Situation Procedure (Cooper et al., 2009). In Ethiopia a parenting program, including five home-visits and five group meetings, was implemented with mothers of infants and toddlers. Parent-child interactions were videotaped and responsive and mediational (e.g., encouraging or following child-initiated interactions) behaviours performed by parents were discussed and parents were encouraged to expand this. Within the program there was a strong focus on the sensitization of parents and caregivers to the child's needs and to the parents' own cultural values and behaviour in interactions with the children. Parents were randomly assigned to the intervention or the control group (receiving home-visits by local community workers about basic health and nutrition). Observations and culturally adapted questionnaires and interviews were used to study the effect. Results show that one year after the program mothers in the intervention group were more sensitive towards their children, used less harsh discipline techniques, and felt more optimistic about their potential to affect their child's development than were the mothers in the control group. Even six years after the program these effects could still be seen and the children of the mothers who participated were better (socially and emotionally) adjusted (Klein & Rye, 2004). In Mozambique an international parenting program was implemented with parents of preschool children. The parents took part in 10-12 weekly group sessions, with additional follow-up visits at home for six weeks. The program aimed to provide parents with information about children's psychosocial development and increase their basic caregiving skills and ability to give social support to children. It emphasized the parents' own positive cultural practices that were activated and confirmed. After the intervention the parents, and a comparable group of parents not receiving intervention, answered standardized multiple-choice questions that were used in Norway to evaluate the same program and were piloted in Mozambique. The results show that parents who participated reported better parenting skills, better child adjustment, and higher self-efficacy compared to the control-group (Skar et al., 2014). In Kenya an American parenting program, focusing on increasing parenting skills and communication about sexuality, was extensively researched in and adapted to the local situation (Poulsen et al., 2010). Parents of children, 10-12 years old, took part in a five-

session group-program. Standardized interviews, using multiple-choice questions, before and after the program showed that both parents and children reported an increase in parental positive reinforcement and higher levels of parental monitoring after the program. Children also reported and improved parent-child relationship (Vandenthoudt et al., 2010).

In sum, the first studies in Africa seem to find evidence for the effectiveness of parenting programs in improving parenting behaviour and child development. However, the amount of studies is limited and the majority of the studies focus on the effect of home-visits of parents with young children. In addition, all studies research international programs that are not developed in the country of implementation. Although all programs described above claimed to be culturally sensitive, it was not clear to what extent (with the exception of the study of Vandenhoudt and colleagues (2010)) the program was adapted to the specific context. Moreover, almost all data collected are quantitative and highly standardized, which makes it difficult to study to what extent the instruments are fully understood by parents and measure the assumed concepts.

### **Skillful Parenting program**

ICS Creating Change has, together with local partners, developed and implemented the Skillful Parenting program in rural areas of Western Kenya. The goal of the program is, by working with parents on strengthening their parenting role, adding to prevent child abuse, neglect and family disintegration.

The program is based on the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 2012) which states that parents will change their parenting behaviour if they are convinced of the need for and their capability to change. The program contains five modules, which focus on family relations, parental roles and responsibilities, self-care & self-esteem, values & discipline, and communication. Each parent-group consists of 18-24 members (manual Skillful Parenting program, 2012). With regard to the aforementioned categories of parenting programs it can be stated that the Skillful Parenting (SP) program is 'multi-modal' containing both relation-based and cognitive-behavioural components. The focus is on changing parenting behaviour and ideas, while only indirectly influencing child behaviour. Compared to other parenting programs SP does not focus on a high-risk target group (e.g. parents of children with problem behaviour), but includes all parents in the rural areas of Kenya that want to participate. However, like aforementioned, both poverty and the transitions African communities are facing form possible difficulties when raising a child.

The SP program is developed based on international literature regarding the effective components of parenting programs. It was adapted to the local context with the idea that change cannot be forced. The developers of the program wanted to facilitate change by respecting the culture and the local habits of the parents and at the same time-sharing new information and skills with them (B. Ogutu, personal communication, February 22, 2015). Adaptations for example are that the module on family relations included the broader community, since it is common that more people are involved in raising a child. In addition, the expression of affection was discussed with parents instead of prescribing them ways to do this (e.g. kissing and hugging that is often recommended in international programs does not fit the local traditions).

### **Parenting in Kenya**

In Kenya 42.9 percent of the population is below 15 years of age (Kenyan National Bureau of Statistics, 2014) and 45.9 percent of Kenyans live below the absolute poverty line (Kenyan National Bureau of Statistics, 2007). Most communities are patrilineal and decision making concerning the economic and political well-being of the family is the domain of men, while social responsibilities, especially concerning the care and rearing of children and the day-to-day running of the family and homestead are the responsibility of women (Mburugu & Adams, 2005; Njue, Rombo, & Ngige, 2007; Tudge & Odera-Wanga, 2009). Mothers are in charge of taking care of infants' basic training until children are able to operate independently (i.e., talk, walk and eat without much assistance) at about the age of three (Wadende, Fite, & Lasser, 2014). Fathers are involved with the teaching of skills to their older sons.

Children are highly valued in Kenyan families and they are considered to be the fulfilment of marriage. Single adults are considered incomplete until the establishment of a family through marriage and childbearing. Parents have the primary responsibility to provide for their children in order to meet their physical and social-emotional needs. Where parents are incapacitated and cannot provide for the needs of their children, the extended family is obligated to fill the gap. Especially in the rural areas, grandmothers play an important role in the upbringing of children, both because of tradition and due to high morbidity rates of parents (Wadende et al., 2014). The strong relations between family members ensure that resources are distributed and that adult relatives share monitoring and supervision over young children. Polygamy is widespread among Kenyan communities and caretaking tasks can be divided by wives (Njue et al., 2007).

In Kenya parents, in general, are less involved in conversations with their children (Tudge & Odera-Wanga, 2009) and children receive more physical punishment (Lansford et

al., 2010) compared to other developing or developed countries. In agricultural societies with less food-security, like rural Western Kenya, children are taught to be obedient and have more responsibilities (e.g. contributing to work or performing household tasks) (Harkness & Super, 2002). Mburugu and Adams (2005) interviewed over 1200 Kenyan parents and their study showed that more than 75 percent of the parents in rural areas think that parenting now is harder than it was when they were children. The main reason is that it is hard to provide education and clothing to their children. In addition, parents have the feeling that children do not respect or listen to their parents as they once did. In addition, Swadener (2002) shows that school fees are often high compared to family income. Also sickness and nutrition are seen as major problems for families.

### **Experienced parental competence**

This study will use experienced parental competence as the outcome measure to research the effects of the SP program. Parental competence can be defined as the belief of a parent in his or her ability to effectively manage parenting tasks (Deković et al., 2010). Research shows that there is a strong link between parental experienced competence and parenting, with higher experienced competence relating to greater parental warmth, responsiveness and monitoring and less harsh and inconsistent discipline (Slagt, Dekovic, de Haan, van den Akker, & Prinzie, 2012; Jones & Prinz, 2005; Sanders & Woolley, 2005).

Moreover, several studies have shown the effectiveness of parenting programs in improving parenting sense of competence (Deković et al., 2010; Graf, Grumm, Hein, & Fingerle, 2012; Kane et al., 2007), which consequently led to an increase in positive parenting behaviour (Deković et al., 2010).

The present study will use both quantitative and qualitative data to research the effect of the SP program on experienced parental competence. It is expected that participating in the program will enhance feelings of experienced parental competence.

## **METHODS**

### **Design & Measurements**

A mixed methods design, including both quantitative and qualitative data, was used to study the effect of the SP program on experienced parental competence. Both before and after the program parents participated in a survey (quantitative) and an interview (qualitative). In addition, the personal characteristics of each parent were examined. The survey was used to

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clearly measure the difference in experienced parental competence before and after the program, while the interviews were used to contextualize the survey data and give insight into the way parents view the constructs included in the survey.

*Quantitative measurements.* A self-rated scale was used to measure experienced parental competence. The items (6) were measured on a six-point material-spatial-audio Likert scale. A material-spatial-audio Likert scale was chosen so that illiterate parents could join the procedure without any problems, and all parents could take part in the same measurement procedure. Parents were asked to walk up and down between six points (represented by concrete objects) along a line, and to stand at one of the six points as a way to present their answer. The parents started at point one (total disagreement) and could walk up to point six (total agreement). In addition, parents had to give a verbal statement why they choose the position on the Likert Scale. This minimalizes misinterpretations of the scale. The survey is based on the subscale ‘parental competence’ of the NOSI (Nijmeegse Ouderlijke Stress Index, the Dutch version of the Parenting Stress Index; de Brock, Vermulst, Gerris, & Abidin, 1992). The NOSI has been used before in international research on parenting and it was chosen in this study for its relatively ‘content free’ approach (with respect to the underlying norms on parenting). The parenting survey was adapted to the socio-cultural context of Kenya and items were presented in both English and Kiswahili. The suitability of the scale in the West Kenyan context is supported by a pilot-study (van Esch & de Haan, 2014).

*Qualitative measurements.* A highly standardized interview was conducted, including questions concerning experienced parental competence. In addition, during the post-intervention measurement questions were asked about how the SP program has effected parents. Questions were presented in both English and Kiswahili. Table 1 contains the (main) questions that were analysed during the interviews regarding experienced parental competence. For the interpretation of the parents’ answers the context of their answers within the entire interview was used.

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Table 1. *Analysed interview questions*

<i>Pre-intervention</i>	<i>Post-intervention</i>
Do you find raising your children to be a difficult task?	What do you think you are doing well as a parent after the end of the program?
Name one thing that has helped you to be a good parent?	What do you think you are not doing as well you would like to/should as a parent after the end of the program?
Name one thing that you wish you did better as a parent?	What could you tell me that changed about being a parent after participation with the skillful parenting program?
	What do you feel/think is the most important way that the skillful parenting program has effected you as a parent?

During the pre-test parents were asked whether they find parenting a difficult task. This question was implemented in the interview to learn *why* participants found parenting a difficult task. During the pre-test it was noticed that parents answered dichotomous (yes/no) without giving much explanation about their personal experiences but instead pointing to difficult (economical) circumstances. In addition, the question turned out to be experienced as very direct, possibly resulting in socially acceptable answers. For that reasons it was expected that the question would not give much insight in parents' experienced competence and it was not iterated during the post-test.

Since it seemed the cultural norm to agree that you are a good parent, it was decided to ask parents about specific elements of parenting that helped them as a parent or what they wanted to do better. By doing so, the respondents could talk more about what helps them feel competent, rather than if they did or didn't feel competent (making the questions less direct). Thereby the factors that parents take into account when evaluating their own competency could be analysed.

It was noticed that during the pre-test parents did not explain or elaborate extensively on their personal experiences or attitudes. Therefore, during the post-test parents were asked what they felt had changed in particular after participating in the program in their situation as a parent. It was expected that asking more directly about the process helps the parents elaborate on any possible transformation they had experienced.

Local post-graduates who fully mastered both English and Kiswahili executed both the survey and the interview. They took several days of training in which they gained interviewing skills and knowledge and got familiar with the instruments (van Esch & de Haan, 2015).

### **Sample**

The aim of the study was to select 100 caregivers participating in the SP program (de Haan, 2013). Since a dropout of some parents was accounted for, 113 parents were selected to participate in the study. Participants were selected based on their availability during the fieldwork period. Only parents who possessed basic skills in the Kiswahili language were included. Most parents participating in the SP program first took part in an agricultural program of ICS focused on improving farming skills.

The 113 parents participated in the pre-test. However, despite various attempts of the researchers to reach parents at their homestead, only 90 parents participated during the post-intervention measurements. Due to the low quality of some of the transcriptions only the interviews of 77 parents are used for the data-analysis (van Esch & de Haan, 2015).

### **Data-analysis**

The effect of the SP program on experienced parental competence, as measured by the 6 Likert-scale items of the parental survey, is analysed by using a dependent t-test measuring the difference between the pre- and post-intervention data. The statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) is used to analyse the data.

The interviews were transcribed and translated from Kiswahili to English by local research assistants. The interviews are analysed using content analysis (Boeije, 2009; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). First the interviews were coded using Nvivo. Based on our research question, we used the first 20 interviews to select representative topics and concepts for the coding of the other interviews. Secondly, overarching themes were selected to investigate the possible change in experienced parental competence. Where possible the outcomes were quantified to study the differences between pre- and post-intervention interviews. During the process of analysis the individual codes as well as the context of the entire interview were used for interpretation.

## **RESULTS**

### **Descriptive statistics**

90 parents (68 female), participating in the SP program, completed the survey both before and after the program. At the start of the program, parents were on average 43.97 years old ( $SD = 9.86$ ; range: 20-70 years) and each parent took, on average, care of 4.23 ( $SD = 2.08$ ; range: 0-10) children. The majority of the parents received primary education (63.3%) as the highest form of education, others received secondary (27.8%), higher (2.2%) or no (6.7%) education. Most parents were farmer by occupation (71.1%); others were carpenter (12.2%), small

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business owner (7.8%), community health worker (5.6%) or had other jobs (preacher, researcher, vehicle driver: all one parent). Most of the parents (82.2%) were married (widowed: 8.9%; single: 6.7%; divorced: 2.2%). The majority of the parents belonged to the Luhya (66.7%) or Teso (31.1%) tribe. Two parents belonged to other tribes (Luo and Sabaot). The parents (N=90) participating in both pre- and post-test survey did not differ from parents unable to reach during the post-test (N=23) on their pre-intervention experienced level of parental competence (Mann Whitney U test;  $p = .08$ ). Neither did the groups differ on gender ( $p = .38$ ), age ( $p = .43$ ), marital status ( $p = .69$ ), amount of children ( $p = .97$ ), education level ( $p = .23$ ), occupation ( $p = .63$ ) or tribe ( $p = .12$ ).

The interviews of 77 parents could be analysed. The parents whose interviews were analysed did not differ significantly from the parents of who the interviews were not analysed on experienced parental competence at the survey (Mann Whitney U test; pre:  $p = .92$  and post:  $p = .35$ ). Neither did the groups differ on gender ( $p = .82$ ), age ( $p = .90$ ), marital status ( $p = .69$ ), amount of children ( $p = .46$ ), education level ( $p = .82$ ), occupation ( $p = .89$ ) or tribe ( $p = .79$ ).

### **Statistical analysis**

The reliability of the experienced parental competence scale was measured using Cronbach's alpha. The scale at the pre-test had a relatively low reliability, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .44$ , and at the post-test the reliability was moderate, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .70$ . Further inspection showed that removing items in an attempt to improve reliability was ineffective. The assumption for a dependent t-test, having a normal distribution of the differences, was met (Kolmogorov-Smirnov test;  $p = .20$ ).

*Dependent t-test.* After participating in the SP program parents experienced greater parenting competence ( $M = 4.22$ ,  $SE = .82$ ) than before the program ( $M = 3.65$ ,  $SE = .69$ ),  $t(89) = -6.58$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r = .57$ .

### **Text analysis**

#### ***Change in parenting concept***

Both at the start and the end of the program parents were asked about their experienced parental competences (what helped them to be a good parent/what they were doing well) and their experienced parental difficulties (what they wanted to do better/what they were not doing as well as they would like to). Most parents answered these questions by mentioning parental behaviours, without specifying to which level they felt competent about these behaviours. Therefore, below the parenting behaviours described will be analysed to study the participants'

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understanding of what parenting is. This analysis will give insight into the concept of parenting for the participants both before and after the training.

### Shift away from an economic perspective..

In general, the parents' answers show that they regard parenting at the start of the program primarily in terms of providing children with food and education, and making money or farming to be able to do so. This 'economic perspective', in which parenting is seen as the way to promote the physical survival of children and to help them to get a better life by educating them, was mentioned by 49 percent of the parents as an experienced competence and by 63 percent of the parents as an experienced difficulty at the start of the program. When analysing the parents' answers more in-depth it is seen that many parents describe that being able to provide food and education to their children has helped them to be good parents (23%)<sup>1</sup> or that they would like to do this better (47%). Parents especially struggle with paying school fees for their children and would like to educate their children to a higher level. For example, one mother (30 years) says "*One thing I want to do as a parent is to enlighten my children by educating them, to clothe them and provide them shelter*". In accordance with this mother's statement, parents also mention providing clothing, shelter and healthcare (in addition to food and education) as experienced competences or difficulties, although less frequently. Moreover, farming or having income are regularly mentioned, since it makes providing children with basic needs possible as is explained by this mother (39 years): "*It helps me because I farm and when I get the harvest I sell and get school fees, eee...and feeding the children because a child cannot go to school without eating well*". 34 percent of the parents say that farming helps them to be good parents, while 22 percent would like to farm better.

After the program the economic perspective on parenting was still mentioned by parents, but less often than at the start of the program. 32 percent of the parents mentioned the economic perspective (provision of basic needs and farming) as an experienced competence and 40 percent of the parents as an experienced difficulty. When analysing the specific behaviours it is seen that providing education and basic needs (food, clothing, shelter, healthcare) to children was mentioned by 31 percent of the parents as experienced competences

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<sup>1</sup> All percentages are based on the proportion of parents giving a specific answer of the total sample interviewed (77 parents). Since multiple specific behaviours (e.g. provision of basic needs or farming) can be mentioned by one parent, the sum of the percentages for specific behaviours is larger than the percentage of the overarching perspective (economic or pedagogical).

and by 35 percent as experienced difficulties. Farming, on the other hand, was hardly mentioned by parents as an experienced competence (<1%) or difficulty (6%) at the end of the program.

In sum, the results show that the importance of the economic perspective on parenting declines after the program (especially the importance of farming declines). Furthermore, it can be concluded that the provision of education and basic needs is more frequently seen as an experienced difficulty by parents than as an experienced competence.

### .. towards a pedagogical perspective

Within a 'pedagogical perspective' parenting is seen as taking responsibility for the social, emotional and cognitive development of children as a parent, and respond to the (psychological) needs of children. Parents see their children as active participants in interaction and try to stimulate their development through it. Parental behaviours, as described by parents in the interviews, related to communication with children, disciplining of children, guidance of children or the parent-child relationship, were in this analysis all seen as part of the pedagogical perspective. At the end of the program the pedagogical perspective was mentioned by 71 percent of the parents regarding their experienced competences and by 27 percent of the parents regarding their experienced difficulties. When analysing the parents' answers more in-depth it is seen that communication was mentioned by 25 percent of the parents as a competence and by 9 percent of the parents as an experienced difficulty. Regarding communication parents mentioned speaking to their children in a respectful or friendly manner, listening to their children and thanking their children if they did something well. For example, a father (34 years) answers about his experienced difficulties *"To improve on my communicating skill on children also okay to improve on my responses to the stages of a child"*. In accordance with this father's response some parents also mention that they adapt their behaviour to the child's development phase. In addition, 12 percent of the parents said they felt competent about their disciplining technique. Parents mention they use less physical punishment but instead talk with their children to correct them. This is illustrated by a mother's (35 years) answer *"I don't beat my children when I am angered, when they have done wrong I sit down with them and talk to them"*. None of the parents mentioned disciplining as an experienced difficulty. This could be explained by the sensitivity of the topic, which possibly made parents give social acceptable answers. Furthermore, parents feel competent about their ability to teach their children to behave properly (9%) or were not doing this as much as they would like to (9%). *"What I would like to do better as a parent, is how I guide my children to be well behaved"* explains a mother

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(50 years). Finally, parents mentioned to have a better relationship with their children and show them more love and respect (17%) or were not doing that as much as they would like to (6%). By contrast, at the start of the program parenting behaviours fitting the pedagogical perspective (communication, discipline, guidance or relationship) were far less mentioned as an experienced competence (18%) or difficulty (9%). Concluding, the results show that the importance of the pedagogical perspective on parenting increases after the program.

The shift from an economic perspective towards a pedagogical perspective on parenting is supported by the questions regarding experienced difficulty at the start of the program and the questions regarding the effects of the program at the end.

At the start of the SP program parents were asked if they found parenting a difficult task. Whether parents find parenting difficult or not, their reasoning is almost in all cases (86%) related to the ability of providing basic needs to their children or having the income to do so. This endorses the importance of the economic perspective on parenting at the start of the program.

When parents are explicitly asked what changed for them as parents after the program, the importance of the pedagogical perspective is indubitable. Parents state that due to the program the communication (48%) with their children changed (they speak friendly, listen, show love), they use less physical discipline (34%) and are able to guide their children better (13%). Furthermore, parents (25%) also report providing their children with healthy food and sending them to school after the training, which supports that provision of basic needs remains important.

### *Change in parental agency*

Since the concept of parenting seems to change after the program, it is hard to answer whether the experienced competence of the parents changes. Based on the answers analysed above also a shift in the way parents described themselves related to their parental behaviour can be identified. The same questions regarding experienced competences (what helped them to be a good parent/what they were doing well) and experienced difficulties (what they wanted to do better/what they were not doing as well as they would like to) are analysed researching the agency reported by parents regarding their own parenting behaviour. This will give insight in how influential parents define themselves in the development of their children.

When elaborating on the way parents describe their parenting behaviours, it shows that parents at the start of the program report parenting practices that are more external. For example,

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parents feel competent about, or would like to do better at, their farming skills, their income or whether their children have food or go to school. These are all parenting practices that influence the environment in which children develop themselves. At the end of the program, however, parents report behaviours that are related to the interaction between themselves and their children. Parents seem to feel empowered in influencing their children, as is reported by a mother (50 years) *“I have big children who had no manners so through the training I have been able to teach them to be obedient”*. In addition, parents seem to notice what effect their behaviour has on the behaviour of their children. The next two examples show that parents see both their change in communication and discipline influence their child’s behaviour. A mother (42 years) says about communication *“I see a lot of changes even if I talk to my children they listen”* and another mother (60 years) tells about discipline *“One thing that has made me happy, in the past when my child makes a mistake, I would beat them with anger but after the training I was advised not to beat my children when am bitter because I can end up killing the child instead I should talk to the child which I see is working very well”*. In sum, it seems that at the start of the program parents do not frequently seem to think about themselves as actors in relationship to their children, but as actors in building the right conditions around their children to grow up. This changes after the program when parents report to be actively involved with their children.

### ***Other aspects related to experienced competence***

Regarding experienced parental competence several others aspects should be mentioned. First, it must be noted that 36 percent of the parents report to share the knowledge and skills they were taught during the SP program with parents that were not able to attend. Parents mention to give general teachings to others parents, but also to advise them in specific situations. Like one mother (40 years) explains *“There are some mothers who did not attend the training so when they see their child misbehaving, I have to approach them calmly and teach her that if she confronts her child yelling, the child won’t listen to you and so you have to bring the child close to you and calmly ask them what the problem is”*. That parents inform others about parenting suggests that they feel competent with their own parenting ideas and/or behaviour. At least, they feel more competent than the parents they give advice to.

In addition, 23 percent of the parents explicitly state that they gained knowledge or skills by participating in the SP program that changed them in a positive way. One mother (30 years) explains: *“I was thinking that parenting is difficult but now I see it is not difficult as so long as you have that knowledge or the skills or the tips of you as a parent to manage the family”*.

## DISCUSSION

The current study was conducted to research the effect of the Skillful Parenting program on experienced parental competence in rural Western Kenya. A survey and interviews were combined to analyse both the change in experienced parental competence as well as the parents' perspectives on parenting. The data of the survey show that parents feel significantly more competent regarding their parenting behaviour after participating in the SP program. However, the reliability of the survey was low during the pre-test measurement (during the post-test the reliability was moderate). Two explanations could be given for this difference in reliability. First, it could be that the survey procedure differed at the pre- and post-test. However, since the procedure was tested twice during a pilot study in which the procedure seemed suitable to the context and its participants and since during the current study much attention was paid to strictly follow the same procedure at different moments, this explanation is expected to be unlikely. A second explanation can be found in the parents' understanding of the concept measured in the survey. Although the survey was based on the NOSI for its broad cultural applicability and was adapted to the specific cultural context, it is possible that the concept of parental competence as measured in the survey was not fully understood by the parents before participating in the program. During the program parents were asked to reflect on their parenting behaviour and learned to think actively about their parenting role. This possibly enlarged their understanding of the survey items and therefore the reliability of the survey increased, as when the items refer to a clearly identified and understood construct, the homogeneity is likely to increase. This explanation is supported by the answers parents gave during the interviews. It seemed difficult for parents, especially at the start of the program, to reflect on their own parenting behaviour in psychological terms. Instead parents pointed to the environment they were parenting in. Since some degree of (psychological) self-reflection is required in the survey, this may explain why it was difficult for parents to understand the survey items at the beginning of the program, which led to a reduction of the reliability.

The interviews showed that the parents' concept of parenting shifted from a predominantly economic perspective (focussing on food, education and farming) towards a more pedagogical perspective (focussing on parent-child interaction). Moreover, parents' agency regarding their parenting increased. Parents saw themselves after the program more often as influential actors in the development of their children. Furthermore, parents reported to advise other parents after the program based on the knowledge and skills they acquired and explicitly reported on how their gained knowledge and skills changed them in a positive way.

Taken together the increased agency, the advising of other parents, and the self-reported positive change it can be concluded that parents felt more competent after participating in the SP program.

In addition, during the interviews parents explicitly mentioned some changes in their parenting *behaviour*. Parents described to use less physical discipline towards their children, communicated friendlier and listened more. Keeping in mind the main goal of the SP program of reducing the risk for child abuse and neglect, this endorses the effectiveness of the program.

According to LeVine (2003) there is a hierarchy of parental goals ranging from ensuring basic survival to the acquisition of economic capabilities, and finally to the attainment of locally relevant cultural values. In traditional agrarian societies with high infant mortality rates caregiving behaviour is organized by the most basic goal of ensuring survival past infancy. When this basic goal is likely to be met parents will try to attain the other goals. Since in Kenya, due to poverty, providing basic needs can already be a challenge, it is comprehensible that, at the start of the program, providing food and education were the most mentioned parenting behaviours. The parents, having a traditional perspective on childhood (as discussed in the introduction of this paper), were during the program presented with a more modern parenting perspective. For example, the effects of using positive discipline, instead of punishment, and listening to children were explained to parents. As a consequence their parenting ideas changed. The results are in accordance with a study on migrants in the Netherlands. This study showed that after migration, when Moroccan parents came into contact with Western parenting ideas, their parental concepts changed (de Haan, 2011). However, the immigrant parents neither fully adopted the Western ideas nor stayed with their traditional parenting perspectives, instead new parenting ideas developed.

That the experienced parental competence of the parents increased is in line with earlier studies that showed an increase in parenting self-efficacy after participating in a parenting program (Deković et al., 2010; Graf et al., 2012; Kane et al., 2007). Research in Western countries showed that higher experienced parental competence, or parental self-efficacy as it is frequently called in the literature, relates to greater parental warmth, responsiveness and monitoring and less harsh and inconsistent discipline (Slagt et al., 2012; Sanders & Woolley, 2005). Although the relationship between parental experienced competence and positive parenting is not studied in developing countries, it is found within different ethnic groups in the United States (Ardelt & Eccles, 2001; Izzo, Weiss, Shanahan & Rodriguez-Brown, 2000). Afro-American mothers who felt more competent about their ability to influence their child's behaviour or the environment of the child encouraged their child more to use his talents,

involved their child in external activities and cooperated more with their child (Ardelt & Eccles, 2001). Moreover, first generation Mexican immigrant mothers who felt more able to manage their child's behaviour used more warmth and control (Izzo et al., 2000). Self-efficacy is a strong predictor of behaviour (Bandura, 1977) and therefore it is likely that experienced parenting competence will predict parenting behaviour in the Kenyan context as well. However, although there was a shift towards a pedagogical perspective on parenting, parents' ideas did not fully resemble the Western ideas of positive parenting as often described in the literature. Parents described using less physical discipline and communicating more to their children. However, their explanations on these were primarily focused on the presence of such behaviour and not on the quality. It therefore cannot be concluded that Kenyan parents with higher experienced parental competence will use more positive parenting strategies. However, since parents experienced more agency in the development of their children it is likely that they will try to actively influence their development more.

The current study adds valuable information to the earlier research on the effect of parenting programs in Africa. The earlier, mainly quantitative, studies showed the effect of parenting programs in Africa in improving parental responsiveness and communication, and children's attachment and adjustment (Cooper et al., 2009; Klein & Rye, 2004; Skar et al., 2014; Vandenhoudt et al., 2010). By using qualitative measurements the current study gave insight into the parenting concept and experienced competence of parents. This study asked parents about their experienced competences, without specifying what 'good parenting' was. That gave us the opportunity to analyse the parenting behaviour parents came up with themselves and this approach is fundamentally different from the earlier discussed studies on parenting program in Africa, which used standardized measures of specific parenting behaviours (based on Western ideas of good parenting).

In the present study it was noticed that at the start of the program parents were not used to reflect on their parenting behaviour. In addition, parents did not seem to regard themselves as actors in the development of their children. Therefore, it is recommended that in African parenting programs emphasis is put on increasing parental agency first. During the SP program the different roles and responsibilities a parent can have were discussed extensively. The program aimed to empower parents without prescribing specific parenting behaviours. This resulted in both an increase in reflection of parents on their behaviour and an increased parental agency. Based on our results it is also recommended that parenting programs in Africa should take into account the large differences in parenting concepts and should be adapted to the local parenting values and practices.

Several limitations of the current study should be noted. First, due to limited availability of participants and means this study did not comprise a control group. Therefore, the possibility that factors outside of SP program contributed to the improvements measured cannot be excluded. However, since both the quantitative and qualitative data support the increase in experienced parental competence and during the interviews parents attributed this effect to the program it is at least plausible that the effects are a result of the program. Furthermore, during the evaluation research of the SP program process data (e.g. observations of the program) were collected that could be used to analyse the contribution of the program to the effects found. These data are beyond the scope of this paper and will be discussed elsewhere. Secondly, there was a relatively high attrition rate of 23 parents not being able to reach for the survey post-test and an additional 13 interviews that could not be analysed. Due to difficult research circumstances and limited means, unfortunately we were not able to prevent this. However, since the groups did not differ significantly on all relevant variables, this is not expected to have influenced the results. Finally, the current study relies entirely on self-report of parents. This could have led to underreporting of parenting problems or an increase of social desirable answers by the participants. However, since parents were not aware of the specific focus of the study (analysing their experienced parental competence) parents could hardly have adapted their answers on this.

In conclusion, this study shows a change in parenting concept from a primarily economic to a primarily pedagogical perspective after participating in the SP program. In addition, parents seem to feel more competent regarding their parenting behaviour. They felt more agency in the development of their children and wanted to share their gained skills and knowledge with other parents. By using qualitative data the current study gives valuable insight in the experiences and concepts of the parents and thereby adding new information to the limited, mostly quantitative, research done on the effect of parenting programs in Africa.

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