

Parenting early adolescents in the postmigration context: a qualitative study of African refugee women's experiences

Vincent Chirimwami, Irin Pimentel-Mannan and Kevin Luyamba

Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine how African refugee mothers experience parenting early adolescents after resettlement in the United States. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and phenomenological orientation, the study explores how parenting is shaped by interactions among family relationships, schools, child welfare systems, community networks and broader cultural expectations in the postmigration context.

Design/methodology/approach – Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 African refugee mothers living in Oregon who were parenting at least one child between 11 and 14 years of age. Interviews were conducted in English or Swahili, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis in Atlas.ti. In addition to exploring lived experiences of parenting early adolescents, the interviews included a brief exploratory discussion of the Family Check-Up (FCU) as a potential culturally responsive parenting support.

Findings – Five interrelated findings emerged. First, mothers described parenting early adolescents as increasingly complex because early adolescence is a developmental period marked by growing autonomy, identity exploration, and heightened peer and school influence. Second, participants described cultural negotiation rather than a simple opposition between "African collectivism" and "Western individualism"; they were actively trying to preserve valued parenting norms while adapting to a globalized social environment. Third, mothers reported that stress, fear and emotional exhaustion constrained their parenting, particularly when worries about child welfare intervention discouraged help-seeking. Fourth, participants drew on faith, kinship and community relationships as sources of resilience. Fifth, mothers viewed FCU-related supports as potentially useful when delivered in culturally and linguistically responsive ways.

Research limitations/implications – This study is based on a small qualitative sample of 13 African refugee mothers in one U.S. state, which may limit the transferability of findings to other refugee populations and contexts. Participants also varied in country of origin and migration histories, which may shape parenting experiences differently. Future research should include larger and more diverse samples, including fathers and extended family members, and examine how parenting experiences evolve over time. Longitudinal and intervention-based studies are needed to assess the effectiveness of culturally responsive parenting programs and mental health supports for refugee families navigating early adolescence.

Practical implications – The findings highlight the need for culturally responsive parenting supports for refugee families raising early adolescents. Programs should build on cultural strengths such as faith, kinship and community networks while providing guidance on navigating host-country parenting norms and child welfare systems. Interventions such as the FCU may be effective if adapted to be culturally relevant, linguistically accessible and flexible for working parents. Schools, health providers and social service agencies should partner with community-based organizations and cultural brokers to reduce institutional mistrust and improve access to services for refugee families.

Social implications – Supporting refugee parents during early adolescence can strengthen family relationships and promote positive developmental outcomes for youth in resettlement contexts. Addressing structural barriers – such as language access, economic instability, and fear of child welfare systems – can improve trust between refugee communities and public institutions. Community-based and culturally responsive approaches may reduce social isolation and enhance family well-being.

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Strengthening these supports can contribute to improved parent–child relationships, better adolescent adjustment, and greater social integration for refugee families within host societies.

Originality/value – *The study extends qualitative scholarship on refugee parenting by focusing specifically on African refugee mothers raising early adolescents, a developmental period that has received comparatively limited attention in refugee family research. By integrating an ecological framework with mothers' lived accounts, the study shows how parenting challenges are produced not only within families but also through institutional, cultural and structural conditions. The findings have implications for culturally responsive parenting interventions, community-clinical partnerships, and systems-level supports for refugee families.*

Keywords African refugee mothers, Early adolescence, Parenting, Postmigration, Phenomenology, Ecological systems theory, Qualitative research, Family Check-Up

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Parenting in the postmigration context is often shaped by a convergence of displacement-related adversity, unfamiliar institutions and the daily demands of rebuilding family life after resettlement. Refugee caregivers must negotiate housing instability, language barriers, financial hardship, shifting gender and family roles, and the challenge of understanding new educational and child welfare systems. For many families, these pressures are not peripheral to parenting; they become part of the parenting environment itself. Prior scholarship has shown that postmigration stress can compromise parental efficacy, disrupt family routines and intensify intergenerational tension, especially when children adapt more quickly to host-country institutions and norms ([Betancourt et al., 2015](#); [Deng and Marlowe, 2013](#); [Eltanamy et al., 2023](#)).

The present study focuses on African refugee mothers parenting early adolescents in the USA. This focus is important for three reasons. First, early adolescence, typically spanning ages 10–14, is a unique developmental period marked by rapid cognitive, emotional, biological and social change. It is often a period of firsts as youth encounter expanded peer influence, greater exposure to digital and school-based norms, emerging independence, and increased experimentation with identity, boundaries and risk ([Arnett and Jensen, 2023](#); [Sawyer et al., 2018](#)). These transitions can strain parent-child relationships in any context, but they may be especially complex in refugee families navigating resettlement.

Second, parenting in refugee families cannot be understood through a simplistic binary in which African cultures are imagined as uniformly collectivist and Western societies as uniformly individualist. Such a dichotomy risks freezing culture in place and overlooking the role of globalization, migration, media, schools and transnational social ties in reshaping parenting expectations both before and after migration. African families are themselves internally diverse and already shaped by modernity, urbanization and global cultural circulation ([Arnett, 2002](#); [Lansford, 2022](#); [Rombo and Lutomia., 2016](#)). Thus, the central issue is not whether mothers move from a traditional world to a modern one, but how they negotiate parenting across overlapping and sometimes conflicting value systems.

Third, mothers warrant focused attention because they often bear the primary day-to-day responsibility for children's emotional care, discipline, communication with schools, and navigation of services during resettlement. In many refugee households, women also carry substantial caregiving and economic burdens while attempting to preserve family continuity under stressful conditions ([Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2020](#); [Leyendecker et al., 2018](#)). Focusing on mothers therefore offers an analytically important window into how parenting is experienced at the intersection of gendered caregiving roles, migration stress and institutional adaptation. This focus does not imply that fathers or other caregivers are unimportant; rather, it reflects the composition of the participant group and the need to understand one important caregiving perspective in depth.

To guide the study, we drew on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which conceptualizes child and family development as embedded within nested and interacting

systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Paat, 2013). At the microsystem level, parenting unfolds through daily interactions between mothers and adolescents. At the mesosystem level, family life is shaped by the connections among home, school, religious communities and social service settings. The exosystem includes settings that indirectly affect parenting, such as employment conditions, agency practices and neighborhood supports. The macrosystem includes broader cultural norms, immigration discourses and child welfare expectations. The chronosystem draws attention to time, including migration histories and developmental transitions into adolescence. This framework is especially useful for refugee parenting because it situates maternal experiences not only within family relationships, but also within the broader institutional and sociocultural environments in which those relationships are negotiated.

Within this ecological framing, the study asks: How do African refugee mothers describe the experience of parenting early adolescents in a postmigration context? How do they interpret the role of stress, mental health, cultural change and institutional systems in shaping parenting? What strengths do they rely on, and what forms of support do they view as helpful? A brief exploratory component also examined mothers' responses to the Family Check-Up (FCU), not as a primary phenomenological construct, but as a practical prompt to understand whether a strengths-based parenting intervention might resonate in this context.

Literature review

Parenting in refugee resettlement contexts

The postmigration phase is often characterized by economic hardship, social isolation, uncertain legal and institutional environments, and difficulty navigating health, school and social service systems (Simich *et al.*, 2006). For refugee parents, these conditions can destabilize familiar parenting routines and alter family roles. Children may acquire language proficiency and institutional knowledge more quickly than parents, creating role reversals that affect authority and dependence (Deng and Marlowe, 2013). Prior studies with immigrant and refugee families have described tensions around discipline, communication and parental legitimacy when children become cultural brokers or appeal to host-country norms and laws (Leyendecker *et al.*, 2018; Rasmussen *et al.*, 2012).

Parenting early adolescents

Early adolescence is a distinct developmental period rather than merely a smaller version of later adolescence. During these years, young people undergo major biological changes associated with puberty, increasingly complex social cognition, heightened sensitivity to peer evaluation, and stronger desires for voice and autonomy (Arnett and Jensen, 2023; Sawyer *et al.*, 2018). School transitions, digital media exposure, shifting friendships, and the early emergence of romantic or risk-oriented curiosity can intensify family negotiation around boundaries, trust and discipline. Parental warmth, monitoring and consistent communication remain central predictors of youth well-being during this period, yet these tasks become more demanding as early adolescents seek greater independence (Baig *et al.*, 2021).

Culture, globalization, and the limits of the collectivism-individualism binary

Cross-cultural literature often contrasts collectivist and individualist orientations in parenting. Although this distinction can be heuristically useful, it may oversimplify the realities of African immigrant and refugee families. Parenting beliefs and practices vary across African societies and are shaped by class, religion, urbanization, colonial histories, migration and global media (Arnett, 2002; Lansford, 2022). Arnett's work on globalization is especially useful here because it shows that youth and families increasingly negotiate local traditions alongside globally circulating models of autonomy, rights, consumption and identity.

Rombo and Lutomia's study of African immigrant parents in the USA similarly demonstrates that African parents do not simply transfer a static cultural model into the host country; rather, they interpret, revise and contest parenting norms in response to institutional and social pressures (Rombo and Lutomia., 2016). A more nuanced approach therefore treats parenting in migration as an ongoing process of cultural negotiation rather than a collision between two fixed cultural systems.

Mental health and parenting among refugee mothers

The cumulative effects of premigration trauma and postmigration stress can undermine parental well-being. Refugee mothers may experience chronic stress, anxiety, sadness, trauma-related symptoms and social isolation while simultaneously carrying heavy caregiving responsibilities (George *et al.*, 2015; Stuart and Nowosad, 2020). Mental health concerns may remain unaddressed because of stigma, distrust of formal services, limited language access, or fears that disclosure could trigger state scrutiny (McCann *et al.*, 2016; Shannon *et al.*, 2015). These stressors matter for parenting because emotional exhaustion can reduce patience, monitoring, responsiveness and opportunities for positive engagement with adolescents (Levitt *et al.*, 2005).

Why focus on mothers?

Although parenting is relational and frequently shared, mothers are often the caregivers most directly responsible for day-to-day family coordination during resettlement. They may manage meals, school communication, appointments, conflict mediation, and the emotional climate of the household while also navigating low-wage work and settlement demands (Akosah-Twumasi *et al.*, 2020; Leyendecker *et al.*, 2018). A focused analysis of mothers' narratives can therefore deepen understanding of how refugee parenting is gendered in practice. At the same time, the literature indicates the importance of future work that includes fathers, adolescents and extended family members.

Exploratory relevance of the family check-up. FCU is a strengths-based, family-centered intervention that aims to improve parenting practices, family relationships, and youth outcomes through assessment, feedback and tailored support (Dishion and Mauricio, 2015; Gill and Shaw, 2020). Because FCU has been shown to enhance parenting and reduce behavioral risk in diverse populations, it may offer a useful foundation for culturally responsive adaptation (Berkel *et al.*, 2020; Brennan *et al.*, 2013). In this study, FCU was included only as an exploratory component. After discussing their parenting experiences, participants were briefly introduced to the intervention and invited to reflect on whether such support felt relevant, acceptable or feasible for refugee families.

Method

Study design

This study used a qualitative design with a phenomenological orientation to examine the lived experience of parenting early adolescents after forced migration. A phenomenological orientation was selected because the study sought to understand how mothers interpreted and made meaning of parenting in a new social world, rather than to test predetermined hypotheses. Ecological systems theory informed the interview design and interpretation by sensitizing the research team to how parenting might be shaped by nested family, community, institutional and sociocultural systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Paat, 2013).

Participants and recruitment

Thirteen African refugee mothers participated in the study. Eligibility criteria included:

- African refugee background;

- residence in the United States for at least one year;
- being the parent or primary caregiver of at least one child between 11 and 14 years old; and
- ability to participate in English or Swahili.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling in collaboration with community-based refugee organizations in Oregon. These partner organizations assisted with outreach, trust-building and eligibility screening.

Participants originated from East and Central African countries, including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zambia, Kenya, Burundi, Tanzania and Uganda. Based on the demographic data set, participants had lived in the USA for an average of 7.4 years, with residence ranging from 2 to 16 years. Participants ranged in age from 28 to 60 years. Eight were married and five were single. Employment was concentrated in factory work, with other participants working as caregivers, a community health worker, and a housekeeper; one participant was unemployed.

Participant profile

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics available for the sample.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between January and March 2025 in locations chosen for participant comfort and privacy, including participants' homes, community-based settings and secure virtual platforms. Interviews lasted approximately 45–60 min. The lead author, who is fluent in English, Swahili and French, conducted all interviews in English or Swahili according to participant preference. When necessary, a bilingual community health worker provided support to clarify wording and ensure participants' comfort during the interviews.

The interview guide began with broad, open-ended prompts designed to elicit lived experience, such as: "Can you tell me what it has been like to parent an early adolescent since resettling in the USA?," "What has been most difficult, and what has helped you?" and "For a parent who needs support around parenting, what sorts of services or programs should be available to them?" Follow-up probes explored parenting beliefs and practices, communication and discipline, stress and emotional well-being, school and community experiences, coping and resilience, and perceptions of institutional systems. This broad questioning strategy allowed themes to emerge inductively while still attending to concepts suggested by the ecological framework and relevant literature.

Table 1 Participant demographics ($n = 13$)

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Country of origin</i>	<i>Years in U.S.</i>	<i>Age range</i>	<i>Marital status</i>	<i>Employment</i>
P1	DR Congo	8	30–40	Single	Community health worker
P2	Zambia	7	30–40	Married	Factory worker
P3	DR Congo	10	55–65	Married	Factory worker
P4	Kenya	2	25–35	Single	Factory worker
P5	DR Congo	8	30–40	Married	Caregiver
P6	DR Congo	6	40–50	Single	Factory worker
P7	Burundi	16	40–50	Married	Factory worker
P8	Burundi	5	50–55	Married	Unemployed
P9	Tanzania	10	30–40	Single	Factory worker
P10	DR Congo	10	40–50	Married	Factory worker
P11	DR Congo	3	40–50	Married	Housekeeper
P12	Uganda	5	25–35	Married	Caregiver
P13	DR Congo	6	30–40	Married	Factory worker

At the end of the interview, participants were shown a brief description and short subtitled video introducing the FCU. They were then asked a small number of exploratory questions about whether a strengths-based parenting support of this kind seemed understandable, acceptable or useful. These FCU-related questions were intentionally limited and are reported as an exploratory rather than central component of the study.

All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed *verbatim*. Swahili interviews were translated into English for analysis. Transcripts were reviewed against recordings when needed to preserve meaning and contextual nuance.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Oregon Research Institute (ORI) Institutional Review Board (IRB; Registration No. 278). All participants provided informed consent before participating. The consent process was conducted in a language understood by the participant, and participants were reminded that involvement was voluntary and could be discontinued at any time. To protect confidentiality, names and identifying details were removed from transcripts, and data were stored on ORI secure encrypted servers.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using [Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) six-phase thematic analysis. First, the research team read the transcripts repeatedly to become familiar with the data and documented initial reflections through analytic memos. Second, initial codes were generated line by line and segment by segment to capture significant features of the narratives. Third, codes were compared and grouped into candidate themes. Fourth, candidate themes were reviewed against the coded extracts and the full data set to assess coherence, distinctiveness and fit. Fifth, themes were refined, named and defined. Sixth, themes were synthesized into the final analytic narrative.

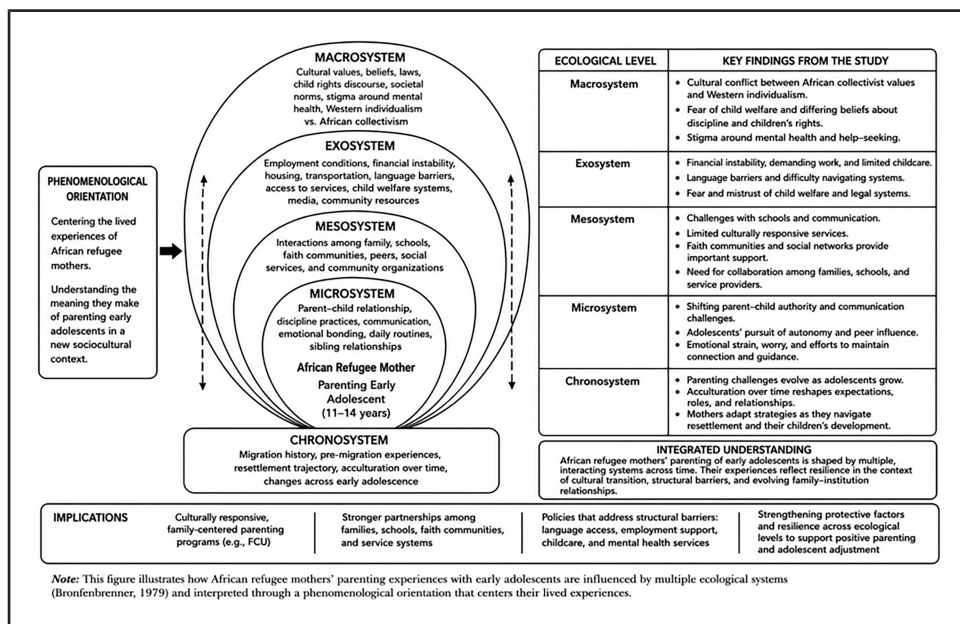
Atlas.ti ([ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, 2023](#)) was used to organize transcripts, support coding, retrieve text segments and maintain analytic memos. Although the interview guide included broad domains derived from the literature and ecological theory, the final themes were not imposed *a priori*; they were developed through iterative engagement with participants' accounts. To strengthen analytic rigor, two members of the research team independently reviewed a subset of transcripts and discussed coding differences until consensus was reached. Reflexive team discussions were used throughout to examine assumptions, positionality and interpretive decisions. Member checking was conducted with a subset of participants and a community health worker who reviewed summary interpretations and confirmed that the themes resonated with their experiences. After inductive themes were developed, the research team mapped each theme onto Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to clarify how mothers' parenting experiences reflected different levels of influence. Themes were not forced into the framework; rather, the ecological model was used as an interpretive lens to show whether each theme primarily reflected microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem or chronosystem processes. To enhance theoretical integration, the final themes were mapped onto Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems framework. [Figure 1](#) presents this conceptual alignment, illustrating how participants' lived experiences reflect multiple, interacting levels of ecological influence.

Results

Participant profile

[Table 1](#) presents the characteristics available for the sample. All 13 participants were mothers of at least one child aged 11–14 years. The sample included women from East and

Figure 1 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Phenomenological Orientation: a conceptual map of African refugee mothers' parenting experiences with early adolescents in the postmigration context



Central Africa, and the demographic profile reflected both relatively recent arrivals and longer-settled mothers, as well as variation in marital status and employment.

Overview of themes

Five interrelated themes were identified and interpreted through Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Theme 1 reflects the microsystem, mesosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem, as mothers described parent-child authority, school and peer influence, cultural expectations and developmental change during early adolescence. Theme 2 reflects the microsystem, exosystem and macrosystem, showing how stress, work demands, financial hardship and stigma affected mothers' day-to-day parenting. Theme 3 reflects the microsystem and mesosystem, as resilience emerged through family relationships, faith communities, kinship networks and informal support systems. Theme 4 reflects the exosystem and macrosystem, particularly language barriers, employment constraints, institutional fear, child welfare systems and broader cultural/legal expectations. Theme 5 reflects the mesosystem and exosystem, as mothers evaluated FCU in relation to community trust, service accessibility, language support and work schedules.

Theme 1: Parenting early adolescents amid developmental and cultural transition. This theme primarily reflects microsystem processes within mother-child relationships, while also showing how mesosystem influences from schools and peers, macrosystem cultural expectations, and chronosystem developmental change shaped parenting during early adolescence. Mothers described early adolescence as a period in which parenting became more demanding because children were no longer fully dependent yet were not mature enough to regulate their behavior consistently. Participants frequently linked conflict not only to cultural change but also to the developmental realities of early adolescence: children were asking more questions, testing boundaries, prioritizing peer and school influences, and asserting "rights" in ways mothers found unfamiliar or difficult to manage.

Participants described this period as one in which children's growing autonomy intersected with resettlement-related change. Many mothers contrasted the respect-based expectations they valued with what they saw as an expanding emphasis on individual choice and self-expression. However, their accounts did not suggest a rigid commitment to static tradition. Rather, mothers were actively trying to determine which practices should be preserved, which should be adapted, and how to maintain guidance without losing connection to their children.

Participant 1, a single mother community health worker from the Democratic Republic of Congo who had lived in the USA for eight years, explained, "Where we come from, the first lesson is to learn respect. However, here, even in school, children are taught things that lead them to lose that respect." Participant 4, a single mother factory worker from Kenya who had lived in the USA for two years, similarly described feeling unsettled when her child argued "as if we are equals," interpreting this as both a developmental change and a cultural shift in parent-child hierarchy. Participant 6 added, "In Africa, when a mother speaks, the child obeys. Here, my daughter tells me, 'I have rights.'" Several mothers also spoke about resistance to chores and household responsibilities, which they viewed as emblematic of broader changes in family obligation and authority.

These narratives suggest that the challenge was not simply that children were becoming "Westernized," but that early adolescence intensified a broader process of negotiating authority, respect and autonomy across multiple cultural frames. In ecological terms, tensions that appeared inside the home were deeply influenced by school norms, peer contexts, legal discourses about rights, and the developmental timing of early adolescence itself.

Theme 2: Parenting under stress and emotional strain. This theme reflects how microsystem parenting interactions were affected by exosystem pressures such as employment, housing and financial strain, as well as macrosystem stigma surrounding mental health and help-seeking. Mothers described exhaustion associated with rent, food insecurity, work demands, transportation burdens and the cumulative emotional strain of resettlement. Participant 9, a single mother factory worker from Tanzania, stated, "Sometimes, I'm too exhausted to ask my child about school. All I want is to sleep." Another mother explained, "I have so many worries about rent, food, and work. Sometimes, I don't even have time to sit with my children." These accounts showed how daily survival demands reduced energy for monitoring, communication and patient responses to children.

Importantly, stress was not described as a private or purely psychological issue. It was embedded in structural conditions and in fears about what disclosing distress might mean. Some mothers worried that expressing sadness, stress or emotional difficulty could be interpreted by outsiders as parental inadequacy. One participant stated, "If I mention feeling stressed, they might take my children away. So, I stay silent." Another added, "In our culture, discussing mental health issues is uncommon. Yet here, they suggest we need therapy. How can I convey my struggles to someone who doesn't understand me?" This meant that help-seeking was often suppressed even when participants recognized that their emotional strain affected parenting.

Participants' accounts showed how mental health, parenting and institutional trust were intertwined. Emotional exhaustion reduced mothers' capacity for monitoring, communication and calm discipline, but fear of being judged by service systems limited the support available to them. In this way, parenting stress was both a personal burden and a system-shaped experience.

Theme 3: Resilience through faith, kinship and communal support. This theme reflects microsystem and mesosystem sources of resilience, including mothers' emotional commitments to their children and the supportive roles of kinship, faith and community networks. Despite the burdens they carried, participants consistently described sources of resilience that helped them

continue parenting under difficult conditions. Faith was central. Mothers spoke of prayer not only as a spiritual act but as a practical coping resource that helped them sustain hope, regulate distress and remain focused on their children's futures. Participant 7, a married factory worker from Burundi who had lived in the USA for 16 years, noted, "When things become overwhelming, I pray. That is how we endure." Participant 10 similarly emphasized perseverance: "We left everything behind, but our children are our future. That is why we keep going."

Kinship and community relationships were another source of strength. Some mothers described relying on relatives, friends or trusted community members for child care, advice and emotional support. Others discussed the value of counseling or guidance if it came from someone who understood their language, culture and lived reality. As one participant explained, "If I struggle to find someone to help care for the children, I can turn to my relatives for assistance because managing them alone is overwhelming." These accounts suggest that resilience was relational rather than individualistic.

At the same time, participants made clear that resilience had limits. Faith and community support helped mothers endure hardship, but they did not eliminate the need for practical assistance, accessible services or institutional reforms.

Theme 4: Structural barriers and institutional fear. This theme reflects exosystem and macrosystem pressures that shaped parenting indirectly but powerfully, including child welfare systems, language access barriers, service systems, employment demands and broader legal-cultural expectations around discipline. Participants repeatedly described barriers that extended beyond family dynamics. Language difficulties interfered with understanding letters from schools, appointment reminders and service communications. Financial instability restricted mothers' options for child care and participation in supportive programs. Most strikingly, many participants described fear of child welfare and government systems. One participant recounted quitting her job because she feared her children would be taken away if she continued working. Others described receiving messages and school letters only in English, making it difficult to respond appropriately. As one mother put it, "There are times when I receive messages in English that I can't understand, leading me to miss appointments."

Equally significant was a pervasive fear of child welfare and government systems. Many mothers expressed concern that disciplinary practices common in their countries of origin could be interpreted as abuse in the USA. This uncertainty created a sense of vulnerability and constrained their ability to enforce discipline in ways consistent with their cultural expectations. One participant explained, "I can no longer discipline my child as I used to because it might be considered abuse. In Africa, discipline is a means of teaching. Now, I'm afraid that if I say something, they might take my child away." Another mother emphasized the cultural meaning attached to discipline, noting, "In our culture, discipline equates to respect. If you don't correct your children, they become spoiled. But here, we must remain silent because it's labeled as child abuse."

These concerns were compounded by shifting power dynamics between parents and children. As Participant 13, married factory worker reflected, "In Africa, when a mother speaks, the child obeys. Here, my daughter tells me, 'I have rights.' I don't understand." Participant 9, single mother described how this change affected her sense of parental authority and emotional well-being: "As a parent, I feel free when you have children who listen to you. . . But when they grow up here and you tell them something, they don't listen. When they don't follow your guidance as a parent, that freedom vanishes, and the joy is gone."

These narratives highlight the exosystemic and macrosystemic pressures shaping parenting in refugee resettlement. The issue was not merely that mothers lacked information; rather, many felt they were parenting under surveillance in a system whose

rules were unclear and whose consequences seemed severe. This institutional fear shaped discipline, help-seeking, employment decisions and willingness to interact with services. Participants' accounts also suggest a need for trusted cultural brokers who can help families navigate schools, health systems and child welfare expectations in ways that reduce fear without dismissing parental concerns.

Theme 5: Cautious openness to culturally responsive parenting support. This theme reflects mesosystem and exosystem considerations, as mothers evaluated parenting support in relation to community trust, language access, work schedules, service delivery, and relationships between families and formal support systems. When introduced to the FCU model, many participants responded positively to the idea of a strengths-based parenting support that focused on helping families rather than penalizing them. Mothers especially valued the possibility of guidance from a trusted coach who could explain how to parent effectively in the USA while respecting family dignity and cultural values. Participant 5 commented, "I appreciate the program because it instructs parents on how to support their children without being overly strict." Another mother added, "This program can enhance our understanding of our children. I am eager to learn how to guide my children without instilling fear."

However, participants' enthusiasm was cautious rather than unqualified. They raised concerns about whether such support would be available outside work hours, whether language would be accommodated, and whether facilitators would truly understand refugee family realities. One participant asked, "The program seems promising, but what if I have to work? Will they still offer assistance?" Another noted, "Many of us juggle multiple jobs. If the program is only available during the day, how can we attend?" Their responses suggest that intervention acceptability depends not only on content but also on delivery conditions, cultural humility and trust.

Because FCU was explored only briefly, these findings should be interpreted as preliminary. Even so, the responses indicate that refugee mothers may welcome parenting supports that are relational, practical, non-punitive and culturally responsive.

Discussion

Guided by ecological systems theory and informed by a phenomenological orientation, this study examined how African refugee mothers make sense of parenting early adolescents in a postmigration context. The thematic structure shows that mothers' parenting experiences were not confined to one ecological level. Instead, parenting was shaped by interacting systems: microsystem parent-child relationships, mesosystem connections among families, schools, faith communities and services, exosystem pressures such as work conditions and language access, macrosystem expectations surrounding culture, child welfare and children's rights, and chronosystem influences related to migration history and early adolescent development.

To further integrate the findings with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, [Figure 1](#) presents a conceptual map of how the identified themes operate across interacting ecological levels. Rather than representing discrete categories, the themes reflect overlapping processes occurring at the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem levels. This figure synthesizes the results to illustrate how refugee mothers' parenting experiences are shaped simultaneously by developmental transitions, institutional contexts and broader sociocultural conditions. As illustrated in [Figure 1](#), parenting challenges were not confined to the family context but were produced through dynamic interactions across ecological systems, reinforcing the importance of multilevel approaches to supporting refugee families.

One contribution of the study is its emphasis on early adolescence as a distinctive developmental context for refugee parenting. Participants' narratives confirmed that

adolescence is a period of many firsts. Mothers were not only managing cultural adaptation; they were also responding to children's increasing cognitive independence, peer orientation, identity exploration and challenges to authority. The findings therefore extend refugee parenting scholarship by showing how developmental transitions and migration-related transitions can become mutually reinforcing (Arnett and Jensen, 2023; Sawyer *et al.*, 2018).

A second contribution lies in moving beyond a static collectivist-versus-individualist framing. Participants often contrasted African and US parenting expectations, but their accounts were more nuanced than a simple culture clash narrative. Mothers were engaged in active cultural negotiation within a globalized social world. They were attempting to preserve valued forms of respect, responsibility and family cohesion while adapting to new norms about communication, children's rights and institutional accountability. This interpretation aligns with scholarship suggesting that immigrant parenting is better understood as dynamic and transnational rather than as a transfer of fixed cultural scripts (Arnett, 2002; Lansford, 2022; Rombo and Lutomia, 2016).

The findings also reinforce the importance of maternal mental health in refugee family well-being. Stress, emotional exhaustion, and fear constrained mothers' parenting capacity, yet participants often felt unable to seek formal support. This suggests that culturally responsive parenting interventions should not treat mental health as a separate issue from parenting. Instead, emotional well-being, stigma reduction and trust-building should be integrated into family support approaches (George *et al.*, 2015; Shannon *et al.*, 2015; Stuart and Nowosad, 2020).

The exploratory FCU findings should be interpreted with caution, but they are still useful. Participants were generally receptive to a strengths-based parenting model when it was framed as supportive rather than punitive. Their responses suggest that culturally adapted parenting support for refugee families is most likely to be acceptable when delivered in trusted settings, available in preferred languages, attentive to work constraints, and facilitated by people who understand the community context.

Implications for practice and policy

Several practical implications emerge from the findings. First, parenting support for refugee families should explicitly acknowledge early adolescence as a developmental stage requiring tailored guidance around autonomy, communication, monitoring, peer influence, and digital or school-based socialization. Second, service models should integrate cultural strengths rather than assume deficit. Faith, kinship networks and community reciprocity can be incorporated as assets in intervention design.

Third, immigrant and refugee communities may benefit from bridge-building structures that make government systems less opaque and threatening. Community health workers, cultural brokers, faith leaders and bicultural parent mentors may help families interpret school expectations, understand child welfare boundaries, and access mental health or parenting supports without fear. Fourth, institutions serving refugee families should invest in language-accessible communication, flexible scheduling and culturally responsive staff training. These are not peripheral accommodations; they are central conditions for participation and trust.

Limitations and directions for future research

This study has several limitations. The sample was small and limited to one US state, which restricts transferability. Although qualitative research aims for depth rather than statistical generalization, the experiences reported here may differ across refugee communities, migration pathways and local policy contexts. The sample also included only mothers, which means the study does not capture how fathers, adolescents or extended family members understand similar issues. A further limitation is that the study relied on self-

reported narratives, which may be shaped by recall processes or social desirability (Bernardi and Nash, 2023).

The participant profile available for manuscript reporting was limited to sample-level characteristics to preserve confidentiality in the analytic file. As a result, the study could not examine how experiences differed by family structure, employment status, parity or birth order of the focal adolescent. Future studies should collect and report richer participant descriptors where ethically feasible, as these characteristics may shape parenting challenges and resources in important ways.

A further limitation is that the study relied on self-reported narratives, which may be shaped by recall processes or social desirability. This concern may be especially salient when participants discuss discipline, distress or interactions with state systems. Finally, the FCU component was exploratory and brief; the study cannot be used to draw conclusions about FCU effectiveness or full intervention acceptability.

Future research should include fathers, adolescents and extended family members; compare families across different refugee groups and settlement contexts; and examine how parenting changes over time through longitudinal designs. Intervention studies are also needed to test culturally adapted parenting and mental health supports, including community-partnered adaptations of strengths-based models such as FCU (Brennan *et al.*, 2013; Nakeyar *et al.*, 2017; Stewart *et al.*, 2017).

Conclusion

This study highlights the complex interplay of developmental transition, cultural negotiation, mental health, resilience and systemic barriers in the parenting experiences of African refugee mothers raising early adolescents. The findings show that parenting in the postmigration context is not simply a matter of adapting family practices within the home. It is an ecological process shaped by institutions, community relationships, migration histories and broader sociocultural expectations. At the same time, the study demonstrates that refugee mothers are not passive recipients of these pressures. They actively interpret, negotiate and respond to them using the resources available to them, including faith, kinship and commitment to their children's futures.

For practice and policy, the findings suggest that effective support for refugee families must combine cultural humility with developmental specificity and structural responsiveness. Parenting interventions are more likely to succeed when they recognize early adolescence as a unique developmental stage, build on family and community strengths, reduce stigma around mental health, and create trustworthy bridges between refugee families and formal systems. Supporting refugee mothers in these ways has implications not only for individual family well-being, but also for adolescent development, school engagement and the broader health of resettled communities.

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