



Attributes of parenting identities and food practices among parents in Nairobi, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Dramatic changes in daily life are leading to increased rates of obesity and non-communicable diseases (NCD) in Kenya, including among children. Parenting plays a vital role in helping children establish healthy eating habits to prevent obesity and NCDs. The objective of this study was to describe parenting identity and how attributes of parenting influence food parenting practices in an urban Kenyan context. A qualitative study design was employed with 18 participants recruited using quota sampling to include parents who were born in (n = 8) or migrated to Nairobi in the last five years (n = 10). In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted by an experienced ethnographic interviewer that inquired about parenting identity and food parenting practices. Transcripts were analyzed using thematic coding in a multi-step and emergent process. Parents described their parenting identities as an integration of tradition and personal experiences during their upbringing with the modern realities of daily life. Their own experiences with discipline, modern urban lifestyles, and social pressures were dominant influences on their identities. Parenting identities included four distinct but related attributes: good disciplinarian, trustworthy, protective, and balanced provider and nurturer. Food parenting practices were described as expressions of parenting identity and included the goals: children becoming better eaters; nourishing through food; impart joy; and bonding. The study findings illustrate the influence of modern urban lifestyles on food parenting identities and practices. Understanding emerging identities and practices in rapidly changing low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) contexts is essential for health promoting policies and programs.

1. Introduction

Dietary patterns in the sub-Saharan African (SSA) context are changing and leading to increased obesity and non-communicable disease risk with persistent undernutrition (Kimani-Murage et al., 2015; Steyn et al., 2012, Popkin, 2022). In Kenya, between 2000 and 2016, children ages 5–19 showed decreasing prevalence of underweight but also increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity, ranging from 3.5% to 19% based on age, with higher overweight and obesity among females (21.0%) than males (16.9%) (Global Nutrition Report [GNR], 2020; Kyallo et al., 2013). The globalization of food systems, along with technological advances, income growth, and urbanization, coincide with changes in dietary patterns and energy expenditures, often referred

to as the nutrition transition (Peters et al., 2019; Popkin et al., 2012; Steyn et al., 2012). The nutrition transition involves a shift from primarily starchy staple diet to include a higher proportion of animal source foods, sugar, and fat (Popkin et al., 2012). These globalization processes are further accompanied by demographic shifts, such as women's employment outside the home (Meyer, 2003), higher attainments in education (Marginson & Wende, 2007), lower birth rates (Tsen & Furuoka, 2005), as well as changes in family size (Anchalesh, 2012) and structure (i.e., from multi-generational to two- or single-parent households) (Yang & Neal, 2006). Such dramatic changes in all areas of life likely correspond to changes in the dietary patterns and food parenting practices of families in LMIC.

Parents have a vital role in structuring children's diets. Parents

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influence their children's dietary patterns through food provision, modeling their own dietary habits, and food practices that reinforce behaviors they view as appropriate (Birch, Savage, & Ventura, 2007; Burke, Jones, Frongillo, Blake, & Fram, 2019). Food parenting practices, the strategies that parents use to structure their children's dietary behaviors and intake (Blake, Davison, Blaine, & Fisher, 2021; Hughes et al., 2013) have been studied primarily in high-income countries. While some evidence is emerging from SSA settings, little is known about food parenting practices beyond infancy and early childhood years (Ndemwa et al., 2017; Olack et al., 2011; Peters et al., 2019).

Food parenting is a central aspect of parenting and parenting itself is central to the identities of many adults (Blake & Bisogni, 2003; Khandpur, Charles, Blaine, Blake, & Davison, 2016; Tsushima & Burke, 1999). A fully functional adult will form multiple interrelated identities that are specific to the domains of their life (e.g., occupational, moral, ethnic, interpersonal etc.) (Blake, Freedman, Colabianchi, Bell, & Liese, 2013; Meca, Paulson, Webb, Kelley, & Rodil, 2020). Parenting identities are defined by physical, psychological, and interpersonal attributes (American Psychological Association, 2015) as well as the affiliations with children, and between them and other adults (Fadjukoff et al., 2016). Parenting identities include attributes they ascribe to themselves as caregivers of children (e.g., disciplinarian, friend) in relation to their commitment to the parenting role and the culturally appropriate ideas, values, and rules conceived as important in the upbringing of children (Fadjukoff et al., 2016).

In the diverse context of SSA, some parents strive to instill traditional cultural values grounded in respect and responsibility, which has discipline at its core (Mawusi, 2013). Traditionally, parenting extends beyond biological parents to include adults in the community to help raise children and facilitate entry into adulthood (Mawusi, 2013). In some literature, these are represented as traditional and complementary ideals of *kuhlonipha*, which means respect for elders, and *ubuntu*, meaning humanity and connection (Mkhwanazi, 2014). The parenting literature from SSA countries highlights traditional ideals, much of which is rooted in rural settings, but little is known about how parenting identities are transitioning in urban areas against the backdrop of globalization and demographic changes (van Esch and de Haan, 2017). New parenting identities are emerging among young parents in South Africa, which appear to be associated with modernization, education, and self-regard, but how these identities are reflected in parenting practices remains largely unexplored (Bray & Dawes, 2016).

With food being a major aspect of parenting and with the rapid demographic, dietary, and technological changes experienced in the last 20 years in SSA, it is important to examine food parenting practices. This manuscript reports results from a formative study on attributes of parenting identity and relationships of parenting identity to child feeding practices among young, lower-middle income participants living in Nairobi, Kenya. The analysis answered the following research questions (RQ):

- 1) How do parents describe their perspectives and experiences with parenting in relation to their upbringing?
- 2) What attributes do parents use when describing themselves as parents?
- 3) How do parent identity attributes relate to specific food parenting practices?

2. Methods

2.1. Sample

This formative study was conducted in August 2020 by a highly specialized ethnographic research agency. The agency was actively conducting ethnographic research in the community and had conducted preliminary steps to identify and screen eligible study participants through a local market research firm in Nairobi. Eighteen participants

were recruited from this consumer panel. Participants were contacted via their mobile phones and were screened for inclusion. Participants were selected to vary by criteria expected to be related to attributes of parenting identity and relationships of parenting identity to child feeding practices (Anchalesh, 2012; Bray & Dawes, 2016; Marginson & Wende, 2007; Meyer, 2003; Tsen & Furukawa, 2005; Yang & Neal, 2006). Quota sampling was used to ensure that the sample was split evenly between parents born in Nairobi ($n = 8$) and parents who had migrated to Nairobi in the last five years ($n = 10$). Within each of these groups, further quotas were set for households with one, two, or more than two children. Other inclusion criteria were households with children between the ages of 3–9 years of age, mix of single and dual-parent households, household income between 25 000–50 000 KSH/month (235–475 USD), parents between the ages of 25–35 years old, who had completed at least primary education, were homemakers, self-employed or had entry-level formal jobs.

Interviews were conducted in participants homes by an experienced ethnographic interviewer. All interviews were audio recorded. For dual-parent household, both mothers and father were interviewed on the same visit, with mother's interview taking place first and representing most of the interview duration (around 2–3 h), and father's interview (30 min) at the end; neither in the presence of the other. Interviews with mother and father from the same household were combined for the analysis of parenting identity and practices. All interviews were conducted in English. The lead author has full access to the data reported in the manuscript. The study received ethical approval by HLM Lab, Research and Ethics, based in Washington D.C.

To elicit information about parenting identity, mothers were first asked to reflect on their childhood and how their parents raised them. Then they were asked to describe themselves as a mother and what would the child say about the type of parent they were. Mothers were also asked to reflect on their hopes and dreams for their children, including any anxieties they face in raising their children. Fathers were asked to elaborate if they would describe themselves as a traditional or a modern father. To elicit information on food parenting practices, mothers were asked to describe the food and meals choices and what factors are considered when making those decisions. They were also asked to comment on the tensions around food, like fussy eating, time, or financial constraints. Fathers were asked to describe the foods/meal occasions where only they provide for the child and how they experienced mealtimes in the home.

2.2. Analysis

Transcripts were analyzed using a multi-step and emergent strategy (Patton, 2015). Coding was conducted by LIR and SDS. Seven steps were completed for this analysis: (1) Manual annotation of three transcripts capturing parents' (both mothers and fathers) descriptions of parenting in relation to their upbringing, attributes of traditional and modern parenting, and food practices with children; (2) development of a codebook reflecting the topics identified in step 1; (3) debrief of codebook among authors; (4) coding of transcriptions using NVivo 12, which was guided by the codebook while enabling emergence of themes within parameters of research questions; (5) debrief among authors about emergent themes and subthemes; (6) completion of coding with review of coded text for thematic representation (e.g., parenting attributes); and (7) review of coded text to summarize relationships between parenting attributes and food parenting practices. Coded passages were extracted and organized by parenting attribute using Nvivo 12. Investigators reviewed extracted material and listed all mentions of food parenting strategies and goals by participant. These were organized into a table and extracted passages were used to prepare written summaries to describe relationships between parenting attributes and goals and food parenting practices. Data analysis meetings were held bi-weekly with coders during the analysis phase. All co-authors met six times to discuss the analysis and emerging results.

3. Results

3.1. Parents' experiences of traditional and modern parenting

A total of 18 mothers of children aged 3–9 completed the interviews. Fourteen interviews were conducted with both the mother and father (Table 1). Every mother but one was employed outside the home and 12 mothers had two or more children. Parents' perspective and experiences of traditional and modern parenting (RQ1) reflected the following interrelated themes: integration of upbringing with modern realities, values, personal relationships, social media, concerns about safety, child discipline, religion, parents changing roles, and social expectations.

Parents described their parenting identities as an integration of personal experiences during their upbringing with the modern realities of daily life. Living in Nairobi was considered to be an opportunity to provide beyond their children's basic needs. Women reported more active participation in income generating work but were still responsible for most household activities. They explained that being present for their children is both a personal desire and a social expectation from their families and local community. These personal experiences often reflected their own upbringing and how parents' role today was different to their parents' role in the past.

“Previously mothers used to be ... they used to just take care of things happening at home. Most of our mothers never use to go to work. Most of our mothers tend to give birth, take care of the babies, cook for the family and ... and ... and maybe can I say too much submissive? Yeah, they were just there to be seen and not to be heard unlike today whereby women are rising up, women are taking on so many challenges; women are learning to know that we can do what our male counterparts can do, yeah most mothers nowadays are literate, yeah. Most mothers nowadays today are literate; they take control of the family.”-Respondent 014

Mothers described how personal relationships with their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers as well as messaging from social media informed their views on parenting. Parents raised their children with the same values they were raised with and sought to cultivate traditional values. For some parents, especially recent migrants, one way of

Table 1
Characteristics of study participants.

	Number (Total number of participants = 18)
Interview participant(s)	
Mother (single-parent household)	4
Mother and father	14
Average Age in years	32 (range 25–35 y)
Origin	
Nairobi native	8
Urban migrant	10
Number of children	
1 child	6
2 children	8
≥3 children	4
Maternal occupation	
Homemaker	1
Small business owner	4
Service sector (e.g., Florist, Bartender, Secretary, Receptionist, Office assistant, Beautician, Aircraft controller)	8
Professional (e.g., nurse, teacher, supervisor, trainer)	5
Paternal occupation (when reported)	
Uber Driver	2
Businessman	1
Vendor	1
Telecommunications	1
Unknown	13

retaining the connection to traditional ways was exposing children to rural lifestyles. For all parents it was important to understand the environment their children were growing up in, so they familiarized themselves with online content their children had access to. Both native-born and migrant parents shared the view that raising children in the current generation is marked by unique challenges, including internet activity, social media, drugs, and crimes against children. One parent described that,

“back then when we were growing up, we did not have a lot of ... like the computers and the TVs. ... playing we got to learn from just playing with the rest of the kids. We were not exposed as much. So it was pretty safe so as to speak. Right now the exposure is so much, I mean there's like danger in every corner and then the fact that there are bad people out there like pedophiles and people who are just looking out to abuse the children, right now there are so many and they are around the computers and the TVs. It's like they are everywhere.”—Respondent 005

This concern about the safety of their children, especially given the younger age range of their children, was a sentiment that all parents shared. Concerns around safety also extended to children's exposure to inappropriate online content and its related ill-effects on child behavior.

The integration of discipline was prominent; parents described experiences of harsh punishment during their upbringing that contributed to substantial fear and limited bonding opportunities with their parents, while expressing gratitude for how formative discipline was to their character and their achievements. Parents explained that in their own parenting, they sought to balance the benefits of discipline while making the experience more positive for their children, with awareness that harsh punishment was less acceptable today. One parent described this balance stating that,

“it's very different because uh ... us we ... used to be beaten totally. When you are found with a mistake, you will be beaten thoroughly but nowadays we will just sit down with the kid, talk to them, tell them this is wrong, and never repeat this one again. You know with our parents even before listening to you, they just hear you did this and that there and there but with me it is very different ... different with the girls. I will sit with them and then tell them “this is wrong next time don't do this”.-Respondent 017

Religion was also a motivating factor for using discipline, such as disciplinary actions guided by religious principles around right and wrong. In addition, most parents strived to instill spirituality to build moral character which went hand-in-hand with different forms of discipline. Parents reported adapting to roles that come with the more chaotic urban lifestyles, including the use of cell phones, social media and exposure to advertising and marketing messages.

The role of fathers was also changing. Compared to the past, parents felt that fathers today took on a role in parenting through assisting children with homework and helping their wives with cooking. One mother said, “most times I talk to my husband because we are co-parenting, we are doing parenting together.” In this new shared parenting roles, fathers had more opportunities to bond with children as mothers took on new roles outside the home. Mothers expressed that to the extent that they embraced more father-child bonding, they also longed for those one-on-one moments with their children.

Parents also talked about social pressures. They described a fear of being judged negatively on the basis of their child's behavior, with negative judgements largely directed at mothers. Parents expressed this judgement was something experienced with neighbors and others they encountered in their daily interactions. Parents noted that in the past raising children included grandmothers and others in the community. Today parenting was structured primarily around a nuclear family unit, and this shift made them feel vulnerable to judgement, where the “mother is the one to be blamed” for the child's bad behavior.

3.2. Attributes of parenting identity in Nairobi

Parent identity included four distinct but related attributes: good disciplinarian, trusted by children, protective, and balanced provider and nurturer (Table 2). These attributes emerged from answer to questions ‘how would you describe yourself as a parent and how would your children describe you?’ and related to RQ2. Each of the 18 parents’

Table 2
Attributes of parenting identity in Nairobi.

<p>Good disciplinarian: A parent who establishes a code of behavior for their children to follow, which includes rules to follow, and sometimes uses punishment to correct disobedience. A good disciplinarian,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Guides and teaches children to make good choices <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o “As a parent you are like a teacher to your children, you teach them the way of life and then in providing you have to provide for them because no one from out will come look. So you as a parent if you are there, you have to look after them.” – Respondent 002 o “They do what they see, yeah what they see not what you tell them. So if you can be that role model, then that’s the footstep they follow. So I try so much to be there for her, Tell her “look at me, do I do this? No, I don’t, so this is the way you should” – Respondent 013 - Uses words first to resolve issues, rather than physical punishment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o “When I think it’s necessary and I also talk to them, yeah. And after talking and you repeat whatever I said now the corporal punishment will come in.” – Respondent 014 - Establishes parenting authority <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o “By toughness I mean I need when I see this one here and I say it once, I can use my eyes and I look ... I expect when I look at you like this and I look at this you remove it. She knows ...” – Respondent 006 o “If you give in to their demands you will be a prisoner to their demands.” – Respondent 002 - Negotiates discipline with the child <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o “Nowadays I come sit with them, “why didn’t you do this”? at least we have that interaction, we negotiate ... those days there were no negotiation, they know that so long as you are a child ... a child’s opinion doesn’t count.” – Respondent 012 <p>Trustworthy: A parent who earns their children’s trust through consistent and supportive behavior. A trustworthy parent,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fosters communication with their child <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o “And I try to be as open, I try to let them know that they can always approach me with anything.” – Respondent 008 o “I want us to have that open curtain where we can talk openly.” – Respondent 005 o “He’s starting to learn me and I’m learning about him and now like we can spend time together.” – Respondent 016 - Supports their child’s efforts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o “I think more so much is support, my support especially me as the parent because I am like the only person they know, me and the dad so much so close. So I think they need our support a lot.” – Respondent 008 - Is dependable and keeps their promises <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o “I’m a promise keeper, if I tell you I’ll buy a ball, I’ll buy you a ball definitely ... I keep my promise to them.” – Respondent 012 - Treats children fairly <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o “I’m a loving mother ... I will say because I treat all the kids equal.” – Respondent 017 <p>Protective: A parents who keeps their children safe. A protective parent,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Monitors their child’s whereabouts, online and social media use, and associations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o “I think nowadays we are very watchful” – Respondent 008 o “Now it’s dangerous you can’t let your baby go out just wandering, you have to know where he is, whose playing with them, like that.” – Respondent 003 - Protects their child from dangerous and predatory people <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o “I believe that I am a protector, my children know that I have their back and they know that when you inflict pain, their mother ... will also inflict that pain” – Respondent 014 o “We are scared, we can’t even trust our neighbors, we don’t know how they will do your children like nowadays they are killing there’s children molestation.” – Respondent 004 <p>Balanced provider & nurturer: A parent who balances between providing for basic needs and nurturing emotional needs. A balanced provider & nurturer,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Finds ways to make a child feel loved with limited means <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o “I can say that mothers of nowadays, we are friendly, we are loving yeah we are caring more than our mothers.” – Respondent 004 o “It was Sunshine’s birthday and I didn’t have money ... when she went to school she knew there was no birthday for her. So in the evening I made ends meet and I cooked a little bit of Biryani, pilau, chicken and some chips because she loves and I baked her cake for her ... So when she came back, she felt the love. There was no money but whatever was available, it made it look wow.” – Respondent 013

descriptions of themselves included more than one attribute, with different explanations of how they personally embodied these attributes. Of these attributes, good disciplinarian and trusted by children were the most frequently described.

3.2.1. Good disciplinarian

Good disciplinarian was a key identity attribute noted by 14 of 18 participants. Being a good disciplinarian involved training children to obey rules or a code of conduct. It was about valuing the integration of discipline in all aspects of parenting and could be expressed in multiple ways. The main expression was in guiding children towards a positive path, to know right from wrong and conduct themselves accordingly. Parents used terms such as being a “guide”, “mentor”, and “coach” and in some cases as a “teacher”. Some used the phrase “role model” or “lead by example”, where parents’ own actions aligned with their guidance. Guiding children included building children’s spirituality and giving children some freedom to decide. Another expression was establishing parental authority, which included some “negotiation” with the children. Parents felt it was important for their expectations to be recognized by the children with minimal need to further indicate what those were. The final expression was punishment. Physical punishment was seen as a last resort when words or negotiation did not resolve issues. A good disciplinarian may use punishment to correct disobedience but did not automatically opt to “cane” children.

3.2.2. Trustworthy

The trustworthy attribute was noted by 13 of 18. A trustworthy parent was a parent that children could talk to. Parents described gaining trust of their children by fostering communication and creating a safe environment in which children can “open up”. Fostering communication with children was often contrasted with their own upbringing where that openness to communicate with parents was absent. Parents wanted to be the person their children could turn to, which was sometimes referred as wanting to “be their friends”, and they made conscious efforts to demonstrate this to their children. For example, parents described the importance of checking in with their children to see if anything was troubling them, or carving out protected time to talk, especially between mothers and daughters. Parents felt they could further develop this closeness by participating in the children’s activities, such as learning a new dance. Being trustworthy also had a functional aspect - it allowed parents to know about their children’s lives, while also helping the children get to know their parents. Other ways to be trusted was to show encouragement to their children, to be dependable, and to treat equally all siblings.

3.2.3. Protective

Being protective was described as an important attribute for some parents, particularly those who reflected that their children were not as safe as they had been while growing up. This attribute was common to both native-born and migrant respondents and might be related to living in Nairobi. Parents described not only the importance of being perceived by their children as a protective figure but also their fear, which came from the many new and unknown dangers, such as information and individuals their children came into contact, especially through the internet. Although parents had set up parental controls on the devices, they felt it was important to monitor what children saw behind the screen and worried that they could not always do so. Parents who referenced this attribute described the modern environment as “wicked” and “very dangerous”, with exposures that were unimaginable when they were growing up, such as bullying, drug use, kidnapping, and sexual abuse. These perceptions were heightened by parents’ own media consumption and what they perceived to be an absence of strong community cohesion of the past. Another reason for some parents to be protective of children was their own fear about not being around long enough for their children, although they rarely made specific mention of the circumstances under which this could happen.

3.2.4. *Balanced provider & nurturer*

For some parents, being a balanced provider and nurturer was another relevant attribute that was rooted in the desire to be seen as nurturing even when money was lacking or demands on their time might keep them busy. Being a provider entailed the provision of basic needs such as shelter, education, food, and ensuring their financial means allowed them to do that. It meant meeting the physical needs of the child as a basic parenting requirement. While being a nurturer was related to the parents' drive to bring occasions of joy to children, which also brought joy to parents. This might include buying something special that costs more or spending quality time to their children, which meant scaling back from income-generating activities. Being a nurturer who met the emotional needs of the child was important, but it was less important than providing for their children.

3.3. *Food parenting practices in relation to parenting identity*

Parents described several food parenting practices (Table 3), defined as the behaviors parents use to structure their children's dietary intake. Food parenting practices were identified through a thematic analysis. Some of the food parenting practices were introduced by parents as expressions of their parenting attributes and included the following goals: children becoming better eaters; nourishing through food; imparting joy; and bonding. Bonding was especially prominent as most parents described sharing time together during family mealtime; often an opportunity to learn about each other's days and derive joy from the experience. The following sections describe the connection between each of the identity attributes and food parenting practices to achieve these goals (relates to RQ3), with the same parent relying on multiple strategies to achieve different goals (Table 4).

In being a good disciplinarian, it was important for the children to become better eaters and make good choices.

“Umm ... things like eh ... when he was growing up, he didn't like something like porridge [a breakfast dish consisting primarily of

Table 3

Food parenting practices.

Food parenting practices
Adapt meals to ideas child introduces to the family Mothers' integration of foods that children request after learning about them from others (e.g., friends, and cousins)
Apologize with food Use the foods that children like as a way of apologizing or making it up to child
Balance preferences and budget Decision-making dilemma between wanting to respond to children's food preferences, and limited financial means to do it
Break dietary routine Eating out, having takeaway, or preparing something unexpected as a break away from dietary routine
Demonstrate love through food Provisioning of foods that children enjoy, usually through meal preparation; this practice also brings parental satisfaction, gratification
Manage fussy eater Ways in which parents deal with a child who has difficulties eating
Provide foods that are filling Provision of foods that 'hold the stomach', i.e., carry the child to the next meal or day
Threaten with food Ways by which parents apply discipline through food
Reject child requests Rejection of child requests, usually referencing rules and expectations of which children are aware
Respond to child preferences or requests Provision of food based on what child enjoys or has requested regardless of parental satisfaction
Reward with food Use of food as a means to provide a reward or treat
Share kitchen space with children Allowing children to help in the cooking with parental guidance, but does not appear a chore; instead, appears to have focus on sharing time together and teaching something

Table 4

Parenting Identity Attributes and related goals and food parenting practices^a.

Parenting attribute	Goals and Food parenting practice (mentioned by respondent number)
Good disciplinarian A parent who trains children to obey rules or a code of behavior, sometimes using punishment to correct disobedience.	Goals: Nourish through food Become better eaters Practices: Share kitchen space with children (005, 014) Apologize with food (010) Threaten with food (012, 017) Reject child requests (010)
Trustworthy A parent who earns their children's trust through consistent and supportive behavior.	Goals: Bond during mealtime Practices: Balance preferences and budget (012, 015) Break dietary routine (001, 002,018) Respond to child preferences or requests (007, 008, 012, 016) Reward with food (009) Demonstrate love through food (007, 010, 014, 016) Provide foods that are filling (007) Manage fussy eater (004, 008)
Balanced provider and nurturer A parent who balances between providing for basic needs and nurturing emotional needs.	Goals: Nourish through food Impart Joy Strategies: Balance preferences and budget (003, 010) Break dietary routine (005, 008, 009) Respond to child preferences or requests (007, 011, 013,015) Reward with food (002, 004, 005, 006), 010, 016) Demonstrate love through food (004, 005, 008, 010, 011, 015, 017, 018) Provide foods that are filling (002, 004, 008, 009, 010, 017, 018) Manage fussy eater (006, 010) Adapt meals to ideas child introduces to family (003, 006)

^a The protective attribute was not related to any of the food parenting practices.

fermented millet flour]. But when you tell ... like the way my mum used to say “you have to take porridge because ...” as in they never used to explain. You have to take porridge but now you will tell him “I am giving you porridge its good because it will help you, it will give you energy when playing” (Respondent 018)

The good disciplinarian attribute overlapped with food rules related to eating healthy meals or not becoming obese. Rejecting a child's requests was related to the expectations and rules that parents set around food, which they could call upon when the request deviated from those expectations.

“She's like, “mum, every time its ugali, ugali, ugali [a stiff corn-meal porridge, a staple in Kenyan cuisine] lets do chips [French fries] today.” “no, if you eat these things everyday you'll be so chubby and will make you bad, as in it will make your body not to be okay.” So she understands.” (Respondent 011)

Although parents felt strongly about providing healthy foods, children often did not like or accept these foods. Parents talked about how often they rejected requests for unhealthy food. This struggle between the parent and the child was over healthy versus unhealthy foods with most parents saying they felt like they were losing. Parent who reflected on this aspect of food parenting did so in relation to being a good disciplinarian as well as a balanced provider and nurturer. In more extreme cases, a good disciplinarian could withhold certain foods/meals

as a way to apply discipline instead of defaulting to physical punishment, especially when older children were not behaving according to parental rules. A mother commented:

“Then when I get to the house, the first thing I check is the kitchen ... now, I will find the plates all over, they are not washed but they cooked and ate. Then they forgot to wash the dishes ... then I give them punishment which is not having the next meal. So I normally tell them that they should do things so that I don't quarrel them. They would just do things the way I have left the instructions. If I come back I find they have done what I said, I won't quarrel.” (Respondent 017)

The trustworthiness attributes often overlapped with using food to keep promises or to demonstrate responsiveness to children's needs. Among these parents, an important goal was to bond over meals, so breaking dietary routines was common. Adapting family meals to new ideas was one strategy to facilitate communication and trust; children voiced their ideas and parents accepted that idea into their cooking. Food was also a way parents built trust. One mother reported promising to make her daughter whatever she wanted and putting “all my energy with all my efforts in the meal and just surprise her ...” Another mother reported cooking together with her daughter to foster trust.

“... when we are cooking together we get to converse and I get to know what she's ... what she's really doing you know? She gets to open up because now it's easier its not like sit down here, do this, and let's do this, no. Just when we are doing our stuff and mostly ... mostly the stuff is cooking.” (Respondent 014)

When parents talked about being balanced providers and nurturers, they balanced two goals: the need to nourish their children and impart joy and treat them. Commonly mentioned foods include ugali, Indomie [packaged instant, flavoured noodles], porridge, chips, biryani [highly seasoned rice dish that contains some vegetables and protein, such as chicken or meat], and plain rice. Among households with restrictive food budget, parents sought ways to respond to food preferences despite the limited means. Providing foods that are filling, rewarding with food, responding to children's preferences for specific foods and demonstrate love through food were predominant food practices. One mother reported trying to “go with their [children's] preferences” and asking “*them what they would love to eat ...*” before preparing meals (Respondent 008). Another mother reported making a sumptuous dinner because “*at the end of the day when you are tired and going to sleep ... at least you should have good dinner ...*” (Respondent 002)."

When mothers described trying to provide foods that their family enjoyed, they mentioned seeking to prepare meals at certain times of day when the family gets together,

“Uh ... I like preparing dinner because I do I myself and mostly maybe that is the time I'll ... I'll make maybe food that is loved by the family. So I prefer dinner than maybe lunch time or breakfast because most of the day ... during the day I am not around so I will not be able to make lunch for the kids. So the girls will make their own maybe like Indomie or rice or [stewed] kales. But at least for dinner I will make something nice or something they love most and I also do it with passion.” (Respondent 016)

4. Discussion

In this sample of lower-middle-income young parents living in Nairobi, four attributes, i.e., qualities or properties they ascribe to themselves, broadly defined being a parent: good disciplinarian, trustworthy, protective, and balanced provider and nurturer. These attributes reflect how this small cohort of young parents perceive themselves providing insight into their parenting identity and behaviors.

The concept of identity (i.e., ‘who am I’) captures the traits, social roles and social group memberships of individuals (Oyserman et al., 2012). To date, most of the research on parenting and food practices has been conducted in Western, high-income contexts and relates primarily to parenting styles: authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive/indulgent (Birch & Fisher, 1995; Power, Fisher, Mueller, & Nicklas, 2005). Parenting styles differs from parenting identity in that it captures the emotional climate (warm, nurturing vs. control/supervision) in which a parent's actions are undertaken (Darling & Steinberg, 1993). Parenting identity and styles are influenced by culture, the parent's own socialization and socioeconomic conditions, shaping their beliefs about what is acceptable and unacceptable in their own parenting (Fadjukoff et al., 2016; Rubin et al., 2006). In the U.S., for example, the indulgent feeding style, where parents make few demands but are highly responsive to children's needs, has been expressed more frequently among African American and Hispanic American mothers (Hughes, Power, Fisher, Mueller, & Nicklas, 2005). Understanding parenting identity and its relationship to child feeding is important for promoting healthy child diets. This study highlights important attributes of parenting identity in an urban Kenyan setting providing a foundation for future studies on relationships between food parenting child food habits.

Most parents in this study described being a good disciplinarian as an essential attribute of good parenting. They described the importance of being a good disciplinarian, not to achieve obedience for its own sake but to ensure good child behavior or to ensure their safety. This reflects the values of parental authority, respect, and responsibility in East Africa (Mawusi, 2013). In a study of Kenyan parents of the Luo ethnicity, parents were more likely to report that the success or failure of child-rearing depends largely on them. However, parents felt they were less strict than their own parents and elders, and they described a range of practices, from ‘mentoring’ or ‘teaching’ to ‘punishment’ (Oburu, 2011). Being a disciplinarian was connected to child feeding through food parenting practices that emphasized self-control and boundaries. Another study also found that discipline has shifted toward an authoritative style (Spera, 2005).

Being protective was another important attribute, which may reflect the mega-city i.e. larger, multi-cultural city environment. Parents expressed concerns over their children's safety, including injuries, unsafe friendships, and access to malicious content via the internet. In Kenya, internet and social media use via mobile phones is extremely high, with over 80% of Kenyans using Facebook for entertainment purpose (Wamuyu, 2020). The harms of high exposure to potentially harmful online content may include excessive advertising of highly palatable food to children (Green et al., 2020). Exposure to such advertising is reflected in child requests for foods such as chips and pizza.

Being trustworthy and a balanced nurturer and provider attributes seem to be closely related in our study. The latter may reflect ideas about achievements in their parenting efforts to meet the child's emotional and physical needs. Being trustworthy might reflect a style—how parents established trust and developed interpersonal bonds with their children. Parents reflected how they did not experience emotional connections or bonding with their own parents. This aligns with the findings from a report that today's parents in SSA increasingly seek to build trust and reciprocal relationships, rather than unilateral relationships where parents set rules that children must obey (Bray & Dawes, 2016). It is possible that parents in earlier generations were raising children during times of greater hardship where labor was more physically demanding, and food shortages were more common. In such circumstances physical needs might be prioritized over emotional needs (Nguyen, Frongillo, Blake, Shapiro, & Frith, 2020; Weber, Diop, Gillespie, Ratsifandrihamanana, & Darmstadt, 2021). In lower-middle-class group, where resources are more plentiful, parents can more fully consider the emotional needs of their children (Bray & Dawes, 2016).

Identity can be used to motivate individuals to think and act in ways that are identity congruent (Oyserman et al., 2012), and actions can help reinforce identity (Oyserman, 2009). Thus, food practices can be a means by which parents demonstrate the type of the parents they are or aspire to be. The third research question explored the relationship between parental attributes and food practices. Parents displaying attributes of trustworthy or balanced nurture provider appear to use warm, nurturing strategies. Many of the nurturing strategies expressed here, such as catering to the child preferences, food as reward, food as expressing love, may reflect high responsiveness that is characteristic of authoritative or indulgent parenting styles that vary in degree of control (Birch & Fisher, 1995; Vaughn et al., 2016). In Western contexts, using food as a reward strategy has been associated with higher caloric intakes regardless of child body weight. Such strategies may lead to poor self-regulation of food intake or emotional eating, which could lead to excessive consumption (Adise, Geier, Roberts, White, & Keller, 2019; Avula et al., 2011). In contrast, parents describing themselves as being good disciplinarians appear to use more directive strategies, such as setting food rules, or controlling strategies, such as threatening or punishing with food. In Western context, researchers have found an association between mothers who control their children's intake and lower weight gain (Farrow & Blissett, 2008) in early childhood and higher weight gain in late childhood (Birch & Fisher, 2000). However, in a recent systematic review, research studies using longitudinal designs to examine feeding practices have not reported consistent associations between parenting styles and body mass index (Sokol et al., 2017). In this study, some parents reported nurturing, trustworthy, and disciplinarian attributes of their parenting identity, and used both nurturing and controlling strategies, similar to what has been described as an authoritative parenting style (Birch & Fisher, 1995; Vaughn et al., 2016). More research is needed to examine relationships between attributes of parenting identity and food practices in SSA to guide development of interventions and programs for families with young children.

This study also explored parents' perspectives on how they were raised. While parents felt that living in Nairobi today meant they had to use a different approach to child feeding compared to their parents, they described being influenced by both traditional and modern forces. Most parents were influenced by social media in their parenting identities and food parenting practices and merging new ideas with more "traditional" aspects of parenting they learned from their mothers and grandmothers. Parents in this study were more likely to live in nuclear rather than the extended families' households they grew up in and mothers were more likely to work outside of the home. As a result, fathers were more active in day-to-day parenting responsibilities than prior generations. In East Africa, household size and fertility rates are decreasing while age of first marriage is increasing, changing the character of East African families (Ikamari & Agwanda, 2020). Together, this reflects the globalization process and demographic transition as families move towards nuclear type (Lesthaeghe, 2014).

Several aspects to our qualitative study merit comment. The cross-sectional design, small sample size, and descriptive analytical approach limits the extrapolation of the study findings. This research provides a general description of parenting of attributes across a wide range of children's ages. It is likely that attributes evolve as the child grows older. For instance, being a good disciplinarian might be relevant during early childhood while being protective might take more prominence as the child gains autonomy. Factors such as the child's age, temperament, household dynamics including gender roles between spouses (Dalberg & Steinberg, 1993), and food budget influence food practices in the moment and may deviate from the parent's ideal or identity-congruent strategy. In a U.S. study of relatively affluent parents, it was reported that food parenting among preschoolers is affected by situational factors, such as time pressures, parent's mood, work schedules (Loth, Uy, Neumark-Sztainer, Fisher, & Berge, 2018). We did not explore the spousal dynamics in relation to food parenting, so we are not able to further specify how the changing roles of mothers as wives or

employees affects the findings. The report from the research agency revealed that some mothers complained that fathers easily indulged children with their favorite foods, often overriding the mother's choice for healthier options. Our parenting identity attributes included the father's perceptions, although food parenting remain highly gendered, i. e., mother's main responsibility. We did not specifically ask where participants migrated from, nor did we ask if they migrated from a rural village or small city. Finally, the original research did not seek to categorize the home or external food environment, including the online and social media environments. The external food environment is likely to play a very important role in food parenting practices. For example, a recent study among families in Nairobi found that supermarkets improved children's access to more diverse foods (Demmler & Qaim, 2020).

The study findings indicate the need to further examine if these parenting identities are widely held by parents in Kenya and to what extent children's dietary patterns are affected by changing parent identities. Further research across different socioeconomic classes and urban/peri-urban/rural settings is needed to understand how these factors affect food parenting practices in SSA. A better understanding of parenting in SSA requires the use of valid and reliable measures. Future research to develop new or validate existing parenting measures normally used in Western context should be a high priority. The development of new measures will allow for discernment of important relationships between food parenting practices and children's diets, particularly in the context of a rapidly changing food environment.

This study resulted in the identification of attributes of parenting identities in urban Kenya that involve merging of modern and traditional ways of being. Rapid changes in daily life among urban Kenyan parents has led to changes in the way people parent, including the way they feed their children. Understanding emerging identities and practices is rapidly changing LMIC contexts essential for development of culturally sensitive health promotion policies and programs.

Author contributions

EM conceptualized the original formative study and research questions. LIR and SDD led the analysis, interpretation of findings and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. CB supported the analysis. All authors contributed to the interpretation of findings and reviewed drafts of manuscripts.

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Ethical statement

The study received ethical approval by HLM Lab, Research and Ethics, based in Washington D.C.

Declarations of interest

None.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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