

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN'S BEHAVIORAL DEVELOPMENT IN ALTERNATIVE CARE AND FAMILY SETUPS: A CASE STUDY OF MERU DISTRICT, ARUSHA

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### ABSTRACT

This study compares the behavioral outcomes of children raised in alternative care institutions and family setups in Meru District, Arusha, Tanzania. It seeks to identify preferred and non-preferred behaviors and the underlying factors influencing these behaviors. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 86 parents and 20 caregivers through open-ended questionnaires and interviews. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, while qualitative data were thematically analyzed. The findings indicate that children in alternative care are more likely to exhibit behavioral challenges such as physical aggression, restlessness, lying, and anxiety. These behaviors are primarily attributed to inadequate caregiver-child ratios, limited individual attention, psychological distress stemming from parental absence, and weak integration with the surrounding community. Conversely, children raised in family setups demonstrate more positive behaviors, including cooperation, emotional stability, and problem-solving skills, which are strongly influenced by parental guidance, community support, and religious values. The study also notes instances of resilience among children in alternative care when provided with consistent care and emotional support. The study concludes that institutional care often poses significant barriers to children's psychosocial development, while family environments tend to foster more favorable behavioral outcomes due to close parental involvement and supportive networks. It recommends targeted caregiver training, improved caregiver-child ratios, and the prioritization of kinship care to better support children in alternative care. These findings aim to contribute to evidence-based policies and practices for improving child welfare in Tanzania and similar contexts.

**Keywords:** Child behavior, family setup, alternative care, psychosocial development, caregiver-child relationship.