

# “The program encourages people not to have a heavy heart”: A qualitative study of a family strengthening program in Kenya

Greeson, J. K. P., Gyourko, J. R., Wasch, S., & Page, C. (2024)



## BACKGROUND

Millions of street-connected children worldwide, including thousands in Kenya, face severe challenges.<sup>1,2</sup> Reuniting these children with their families through effective interventions can significantly improve their outcomes.<sup>3,4</sup> Research underscores the importance of ongoing family support in ensuring the long-term stability of reintegrated families, especially in low- and middle-income countries.<sup>5,6</sup> Agape Children's Ministry (Agape) in Kenya exemplifies this approach with its *Family Strengthening Program* (FSP), which provides time-limited crisis intervention services to vulnerable families.<sup>7</sup> Evaluating such programs not only assesses their impact on family cohesion and child well-being but also informs global efforts to enhance similar initiatives.<sup>8</sup>

## STUDY AIMS

Exploring Agape's FSP from the perspectives of participating children, families, and service providers, this qualitative evaluation study elucidates barriers and facilitators of program completion. The overarching purpose of this work is to provide important context to the issues surrounding service provision to street-connected children and their families.

## METHODS

The present study assesses the experiences, beliefs, and attitudes regarding participation in the FSP in a sample of 12 families (including 12 children and 12 caregivers) who received in-home crisis intervention services from Agape. Study participants were enrolled in Agape's FSP and received services for varying lengths of time during the period from September 2022 through February 2023. The study also explores the perspectives of 11 Agape staffers who were involved in delivering or managing the FSP.

A semi-structured interview guide, developed in consultation with Agape leadership, was used to collect data from study participants. Interviews were conducted in Swahili or the family's tribal language and then translated to English and digitally transcribed. We also interviewed all Agape FSP clinicians who delivered the intervention during our in-person site visit in October 2022. Qualitative data were analyzed using a traditional content analysis approach.

## DISCUSSION

Caregivers and children receiving services through Agape's FSP reported direct benefits to themselves as individuals and noticeable improvements in overall family functioning. Findings from staff interviews indicate that Agape service providers are skilled in their professions, with strong knowledge of counseling, social work, and theology. Overall, results reveal high employee satisfaction, high client satisfaction, and the formation of positive protective relationships between staff and families. These findings can inform program growth and/or replication and should be used to continually refine program services to best meet the needs of recently reintegrated families.



Agape Children's Ministry provides comprehensive child and family services, including rescue, rehabilitation, reintegration, and redemption components, with main campus sites located in Kisumu, Kitale, and Nakuru, Kenya. Agape's *Family Strengthening Program*, the focus of this study, delivers time-limited crisis intervention services to high-risk families with children recently returned from the streets in rural Western Kenya.

## RESULTS

### Salient child/caregiver themes

**Spirituality/Religion:** 8 caregivers and 9 children indicated that religion was a key component of the FSP.

**Perceived Benefits:** Every parent/caregiver and all but one child reported a direct benefit from the program, including improved family relationships, improved communication, family stability, increases in feeling and showing love, and self-improvement.

**Support Needs:** Clients reported significant material and concrete needs, such as paying for education fees, general financial stress, and obtaining food. 5 caregivers and 7 children requested more counseling, teaching, and interaction with their service providers.

**Family Functioning:** 8 caregivers and 8 children noted that poverty heavily contributes to family breakdown, with 4 caregivers and 7 children specifically indicating that food insecurity causes children to go to the streets.

### Salient Agape staff themes

**Family-Community Dynamics:** Recognizing that family functioning is tied to how families operate in their local communities, Agape staff noted the importance of (i) ensuring that reintegrated children are accepted back in their communities and families, and (ii) working directly with the community at large.

**Stressors:** Working with vulnerable families is stressful work, as noted by every staff member. Domains linked to staff stress included children returning to the streets, food insecurity in families, parental apathy, and family violence.

## REFERENCES

1. Goodman, M. L., Mutambuzi, M. S., Gitari, S., Keiser, P. H., & Seidel, S. E. (2016). Child-street migration among HIV-affected families in Kenya: A mediation analysis from cross-sectional data. *Aids Care-Psychological & Socio-Medical Aspects of Aids/HIV*, 28(sup2), 168–175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540121.2016.1176672>
2. Republic of Kenya, State Department for Social Protection. (2020). *National census of street families report*. <https://www.socialprotection.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/National-Census-of-Street-Families-Report-.pdf>
3. Frimpong-Manso, K., Agbadi, P., & Deliege, A. (2022). Factors associated with the family reintegration stability for children with a residential care experience in Ghana. *Global Studies of Childhood*, 12(1), 56–69. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20436106221077699>
4. Schimmel, N. (2008). A humanistic approach to caring for street children: The importance of emotionally intimate and supportive relationships for the successful rehabilitation of street children. *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies*, 3(3), 214–220. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450120802032883>
5. Dybic, P. (2005). Interventions for street children: An analysis of current best practices. *International Social Work*, 48(6), 763–771. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872805057083>
6. Goodman, M. L., Gibson, D. C., Baker, L., & Seidel, S. E. (2020). Family-level factors to reintegrate street-involved children in low-and middle-income countries: A scoping review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 109, 104664. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104664>
7. Agape Children's Ministry. (2023). <https://agapechildren.org/>
8. Coren, E., Hossain, R., Pardo, J. P., Veras, M. M., Chakraborty, K., Harris, H., & Martin, A. J. (2013). Interventions for promoting reintegration and reducing harmful behaviour and lifestyles in street-connected children and young people: A systematic review. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 9(1), 1–171. <https://doi.org/10.4073/csr.2013.6>