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# Parenting in the digital world: Challenges and advantages in Contemporary Africa, with Special Focus on North African Countries

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## 1. Introduction:

There is a real need to address the issue of “parenting in the digital age” in a way that enables us to diagnose and understand its challenges, advantages, and the efforts being done to make it an opportunity for our future generations to preserve its fundamental values and exploit it for the betterment of our families and the humanity at large. In this paper, the author tries to answer three questions:

1. What are the main parenting challenges in contemporary Africa?
2. What are the advantages and challenges parents face with regard to technology as a facilitator of parenting?
3. What policies and programs can support parents and children in bridging the digital gap between them?

## Methodological note:

Before trying to search for answers to the above-mentioned questions, we have to acknowledge two important aspects:

1. First, **the world became one village. We, Africans, cannot isolate ourselves from the world, and the developments that take place in the world will affect us in one way or another.** Especially in the era of technological development, social media, and the spread of information technology.
2. Second, **Africa also has its own context, with its own cultures, values, customs, and lifestyles.** It also has its own problems related to the level of economic and social development, the structure of

## 2. What are the main parenting challenges in contemporary Africa?

Traditional challenges & challenges of digital Era

### 2.1. The Traditional Challenges to Parenting in Africa:

- Tackling the challenges of digital parenting, **should not lead us to ignore the fundamental challenges we face in African countries, which may not exactly be the same in other parts of the world.**
- Moreover, the challenges facing parenting in African countries **may differ from one country to another**, as well as from **urban places to rural** ones.
- **poverty, malnutrition, changes in educational systems, poor access to quality education, child labor, conflict and war, HIV/AIDS, Ebola, and access to quality health care, the lack of food, absence of school materials, fees, and teachers, lack of medical care, lack of clean drinking water, lack of clothes, lack of money/business, lack of teachers, orphanhood, lack of good houses, risks for teenage girls, sickness of parents, shortage in youth clubs, high rate of marital problems, inadequate housing, poor community infrastructure, dangerous neighborhoods, limited options for purchasing food and other goods, substance abuse, absence of health insurance, poor educational resources and opportunities, longer commuting distances, and limited opportunities for reliable childcare**
- Due to both lack of financial and emotional support, parents often break up, affecting their children's well-being.
- **Drunkenness is another challenge**; especially men drink excessively and therefore do not fulfill their responsibilities as fathers. When fathers are drunk, they become aggressive toward their children.
- **Families living in poverty face increasing and unrelenting pressures and barriers in everyday living that can prevent personal and family growth and functioning** (De Haan, 2017, Beasley et al, 2022, Tchombe, 2018).



## 2.2. Parenting Challenges in Africa in the Digital Era:

Information technology innovations afford parents and children many useful applications. However, many parents fear **new digital technologies could potentially harm their children** because

- digital technologies have **taken up increasing amounts of children's and adolescents' time** and have crept into ever more areas of life The **anxieties** related to the ways in which information technology transforms childhood.
- The dominance of screen-based media in children's lives and the problems resulting thereof, such as **social isolation or obesity**.
- The children's **cognitive, emotional, moral, and social development are threatened**. Therefore, **digital safety** has become a global challenge.
- The challenges associated with the penetration of human life by the internet, educationists, and experts often notice dangerous situations mediated by the internet.
- The **excessive technology usage**, called informally as **Digital Addiction**, is on the rise whether for legitimate reasons or due to a problematic experience.
- Adolescents' **excessive technology use is claimed to affect their health, education, and family relationships** The **gap between parents and their children**. Therefore, protection against the risks of modern technology is one of the challenges.
- Technology affects the lives of family members, both young and old. Some studies have highlighted this important aspect **as young people are exposed to the harmful aspects of digitation, while parents may be preoccupied or unaware of its risks to children** (Difi, 2022, 51; Modecki et al, 2022; Tomczyk & Potyrała, 2021).
- We should not forget that the **"influencers"** become more important and models for our children and youth than the parents, scholars, community leaders, religious and political leaders, educationists, and teachers.

### 3. What are the advantages and challenges parents face with regard to technology as a facilitator of parenting?

#### 3.1. Advantages:

Digital technology offers a variety of opportunities for parents.

- **Communication of parents with their children became easier**; through texting, voice, and video calls, parents can talk with their children, coordinate activities, and remain close.
- **Digital technology offers parents new resources to gather information** (e.g., search tools, discussion forums, apps, web pages) and **social support resources** through communication tools and media.
- Digital connections can **help validate parents' concerns, help boost their confidence in the parenting role**, and identify resources.
- They can also **strengthen social capital in parents' social networks** - bonds forged in relationships by trust and reciprocal help - while also **expanding the size (number of members) of networks granting parents more access to the flow of information**, and people from whom to seek help. Social media **offers wonderful opportunities for children to share their creativity and play experiences, and to communicate with each other** around the world.
- The digital environment has also **provided creative ways in education and entertainment**, and digitation becomes imperative for parenting. If you are not connected to the digital world, you will be denied **new opportunities to learn, communicate and develop skills**.
- The need for every child to have digital parity is very important, as **digital access and digital literacy provide benefits in a knowledge-based society, improving children's lives and potential for future livelihoods**. Unless access is provided to all on an equal footing, the existence of the digital world will deepen injustices, reinforcing disadvantages from generation to generation. (UNICEF, 2017, Bekhouche, 2019, 54; Mur'ib & Boulkaria, 2019; Walker, 2021).

### 3.2. Challenges:

#### A. Challenges to the value system:

- Contemporary Africa, **parenting has become a complicated field, and family structure and values system is facing more challenges**
- Parenting which used to be communal in African societies has been compounded by many factors especially those that concern a society that is spiraling towards self.
- The **pursuits for modernity let the family system lose its traditional sources of strength.**
- The **“modern” family and society that is the craving of many Africans is characterized by imitating, and resulting in hybridity. The hybrid African is a distorted being who is “same but not the same”** to use Said’s words.
- The **value system within our African families is exposed to significant distortions** due to the impact, spread, and wide use of means of communication and modern technologies, which negatively affect socialization, due to the number of values coming through the outlets of multiple means of communication.
- Since family is one of the most important institutions of **social upbringing, the value system of this institution is subject to change, alteration, and distortion sometimes, due to the incoming values,** through the media and communication.
- This creates a state of **confusion in the family in performing its educational function,** which is reflected negatively on the level of representation of the values of society.
- It may **lead to a contradiction in values, and a double judgment on behavior and attitudes, which made the family in a state of instability, retreat, uncertainty, and lack of clarity of vision in the performance of its upbringing functions.** Thus, social upbringing is going through a real crisis.

(Mur’ib & Boulkaria, 2019, 140-143, 137-139; Kiambi, 2022).



## B. Challenges to the social, cognitive, and physical development of the children:

- Specialists warn that a child's digital life will turn into a source of harm. The **unconscious and undirected use** of digital technologies causes many negative effects on the psychological, nervous, physical, emotional, and social levels.
- The **absence of supervision and the excessive use of technologies make their social, cognitive, and physical development unhealthy, reduce the chances of interaction with others, and delay the development of their interactive skills. Isolation, lack of outdoor activities, hyperactivity, and addiction** are among the main risks of using digital screens.
- Children's preoccupation with the Internet and social networks **reduce direct interaction with others face to face and limits the chances of establishing friendships in the real world**, which has a significant impact on their abilities to read human emotion, delay satisfying needs, and coexist with the material world.
- The **excessive use of digital apps may lead to poor social skills, loss of parental warmth and connection, limited opportunities to explore the real outside world, exposure to psychological harm, and poor moral judgment.**
- Digital technology is not only affecting children's **health and social skills** but also **"re-formatting" their thinking in ways we do not fully understand.**
- the excessive use of technologies not only affects **the cognitive, emotional, and social development of children but also destroys their bodies and brains,** as well as affects children's strength and physical activities.
- **insomnia, obesity, low self-esteem, addiction, and overeating are risks that are often ignored by parents and children, while only the risks of bullying and sexual abuse are focused on and reported.**

### C. Challenges to the fundamental rights of the children:

- The right of the child to benefit from communication and digital communication has become a recognized imperative in many societies. Especially, that digital technology has a positive aspect characterized by the expansion of the child's perceptions and the increase of his cognitive and linguistic outcomes, **but at the same time, it constitutes a source of danger to the children.**
- **False or malicious information and violent or pornographic materials present risks of harm** to children.
- **Data breaches relating to personal or private information** (such as children's photos or identities) may be used **to exploit children, with severe consequences.**
- **Violence and bullying in cyberspace** have also become global problems.
- Parenting might be more challenging since **parents have to deal with issues, such as poverty and more limited access to knowledge about parenting via books and media**, that affect their parenting behavior and therefore the development of their children.
- Thus, **the effective participation** of the child in the media and the protection of the **child from the negative influences of the digital media** is one of the **main challenges parenting is facing.**  
(Mur'ib & Boulkaria, 2019, 133)



#### 4. What policies and programs can support parents and children in bridging the digital gap between them?

In addition to the traditional challenges parenting is facing in our African countries, **not much has been done with regard to digital challenges.** In this context, and with a special focus on **North African countries, there are not enough efforts being conducted to bridge the gap and provide solutions for parenting in face of digital challenges.**

##### 4.1. General Overview of Parenting Programs in North African Countries:

If we look into the very important study conducted by Doha Family Institute on the challenges facing parenting in the Arab world, we can find that in **North African Arab countries**, most challenges are **mainly traditional.**

According to that survey, nine (9) aspects of parenting programs were studied. Especially **the types of parenting programs in the region, their areas, and their characteristics.**

##### A. Types of parenting programs:

The mentioned survey identified four different types of programs in North Africa Countries; First, **family-centered parenting programs** emphasize issues such as; risk factors in the family, methods of social upbringing, domestic violence, and alternative methods to resolve family conflicts, family relations, family disputes, family empowerment, and divorce. Moreover, they also address the issue of integration of women who are employees, reproductive health, family planning, gender and time between pregnancies, etc.

Second, **individual-centered programs** focus mainly on childhood with a specific emphasis on the prevention of violence, school performance, abandonment, child rights, and employment chances for the young.

Third, **community-centered programs** focus on awareness, partnerships, raising awareness of mothers

## B. **Areas of Parenting Programs**

Regarding the areas covered by parenting programs, the survey found that they cover three main areas. They are education, training, and support.

First, **education**: parental education focused on **knowledge education**; enhancing awareness of the characteristics of childhood; parental care in social, religious, medical and social areas; education of mothers, children, and fathers; education of women; raising awareness of the dangers facing the family, the rights of the child, and family planning.

Second, **training**: focused on **methods of dealing with children**; health; parental integration; parental care mechanisms and methods; parental care for young children; involvement of children; socialization; service standards; and reproductive health.

Third, **support**: such as parental support focused on psychological support, family relations, care, services and technical support, family stability, social welfare, unaccompanied children, community support, and assistance for families with special needs (Difi, 2022, 44).

### C. The Characteristics of Programs:

- The programs in their **type from parental education to training** and support, cover three areas; **individual, child, and family**, and they target Parents, child, and mother.
- They **focused on many areas**, such as; the problems of children and how to deal with negative behaviors, **especially in the context of modern technologies**; strengthening the family, solutions to family problems, and promoting dialogue in the family; child development, family violence, early childhood, positive parenting, breastfeeding, and gender-based violence.
- The **programs included various objectives**: Identifying behavioral problems in children; learning methods to deal with them, identifying the difficulties experienced by the family in raising children; finding scientific solutions to these problems; forming a family free of problems, and a positive family; and developing parenting skills and know-how to deal with children. Their outputs focused on families successfully dealing with children, strong families that can face challenges and conflicts, and cohesive and problem-solving families.
- The **gaps in the North African countries' programs** included the **absence of a methodology for dealing with children's issues uniformly**. There is a need for further research and studies on the reality of poor or low-income households supported by women, **the failure to use communication and negotiation techniques** to encourage discussion and dialogue on the topics covered by the program, and the **failure to conduct follow-up evaluation for the programs** (Difi, 2022, 46-47)



## 4.2. Necessary Efforts to Bridge the Digital Gap:

Actually, we can not talk about bridging the digital gap between parents and their children without taking into consideration the **institution of the Family**, and the **training programs** needed to resolve this problem.

Moreover, trainings have to **be culturally adapted and institutionalized**

### A. Strengthening the Family institution and Role:

- Family is the **basic unit of society and plays an important role as an agency of primary care, and the well-being of children** is closely linked to that of their parents.
- Whatever the structure, in most cases, **families provide the best environment for meeting the needs of children**. Parenting in the African context has been challenged by many quarters.
- **Many parents are struggling with the question of the errant and extremely independent sort of children**. Part of the problem has been Africa's alignment with globalizing forces.
- Moreover, **the value system in the family, and especially in the cities, is subject to significant changes, due to the influence, spread, and wide use** of modern means of communication and technologies.
- The **changing of the value system negatively affects socialization, due to the number of values that come through the outlets of multiple means of digital communication**. (Tchombe, 2018; Kiambi, 2022).

## **B. Parenting Training Programs:**

- **One of the key solutions for preserving the family institution and role, protecting children, and empowering parenting is through parenting training programs.**
- Training programs are very effective means of providing information and building skills for parents. However, those programs should be **culturally adapted** to not deepen alienation, and the **trainings should be institutionalized.**

### **B.1. Culturally Adapted Programs:**

- Global research initiatives examining effective parenting behavior have clearly illustrated the substantial advantage of employing **balanced parenting styles characterized by parental responsiveness, sensitivity, warmth, and communication.**
- However, to help parents with the difficulties they might face when raising their children, **most parenting trainings are designed and implemented over the world, especially in Western countries.**
- Therefore, **since parenting trainings with cultural adaptations are shown to be more effective, there is a need to adapt these parenting trainings to the cultural context of African countries.**
- It is important to **design culturally appropriate measuring instruments** to ensure that these instruments will **fit in the cultural context of the target cultural group.**
- This is important **since parenting trainings which take into account cultural differences are more effective through the use of local facilitators and culturally appropriate measuring instruments.**
- The programs have **to focus on understanding the local problems of a certain community.**
- **Taking into account cultural differences is therefore key for the development and implementation of parenting trainings** worldwide. (Van Mourik et al, 2012; Beasley et al, 2022; De Haan, 2017; Mejia et al., 2012).

## B.2. Institutions and Organizations' Role:

The challenges parenting is facing in this digital era is over individuals and families abilities to face. Therefore, there is need to institutionalize the support to the families in parenting.

- **Government institutions, common initiative groups, religious institutions and organizations, non-governmental organizations, peer groups, education and research institutions, social welfare services, mass media outlets**, should all involve in supporting parenting.
- **The governments** should **appoint officials and qualified bodies** to produce **indicators to evaluate and monitor the protection, respect, and promotion of family & children's rights** all over the country in the application of the reporting and monitoring processes...
- **NGO's** work is essential as society is undergoing important changes because of continuously increased urbanization, widening social inequalities, and lack of public debate on issues such as violence within families and empowerment of young people's voices. **NGO's work should also be highly valued through a well-worked merit system. Incentives should be given to successful initiatives.**
- **Political parties** also have to **play their role to put on the governmental agenda issues** related to family & children's rights and **to ensure funding of initiatives to protect** youth who represent the future of the country.
- **Universities, research centers, and research networks should play their role in studying the various challenges to parenting, as well as providing theoretical and empirical inputs to decision-making bodies** to foster policies to preserve the family institution and the well-being of our children.
- There is a growing gap between the evidence provided by the scientific literature and what is needed to create evidence-based guidelines about children's digital-technology use and how parents should respond. (Modecki et al, 2022) (Tchombe, 2018) (Boussena & Tiliouine, 2015)



### 4.3. Examples from some Algerian Programs to Support Parenting:

The efforts of supporting parenting in Algeria are of two types; government initiatives, NGO's & individual efforts.

#### A. The Government Initiatives:

- In Algeria, there are more than **400 institutions and centers**, which form an institutional network. The **Ministry of National Solidarity, Family, and Woman's Issues** manages this network and **provides a variety of programs, services, and support to women, children, and parents** .
- There is also the **National Commission for the Protection and Promotion of Childhood** as one of the government agencies that take care of childhood and parenting. This commission adopts the United Nations Charters for child rights and women empowerment. It **organizes workshops, training including family protection for the child, education and its challenges, health care and proper nutrition, social and judicial protection for children, bodies, institutions, and civil society involved in the field of childhood and parenting; and the impact of information and communication technologies on children** .. etc. However, the **focus on digital parenting is quite partial and needs more development**.

#### B. NGOs & Individual Efforts: Family Counseling Project as an example.

- As for civil societies, non-government agencies, and associations, we can give a promising example of what civil society can help in this matter.
- Here come **the efforts of Professor Atika Nabti who initiated the "family counseling Project"** primarily by presenting lectures on family issues, and offering courses that cover marital rehabilitation, managing marital relations, and childhood and adolescence problems. Then she started coordinating with the association of Algerian Muslim scholars through its centers and branches throughout the country.
- After she noticed the difficulty of women joining training courses, she enlarged her efforts to online

Now, the **online academy**, with a **teamwork consisting of female guides** who have been **trained** in the field of family counseling, is giving consultation and training to more than **12000 women/mother**.

To achieve its objectives, the project directs its work into six (6) domains;

- 1. Before marriage trainings:** training of those who are about to get married in a way that enables them to establish a family on sound psychological, social, material and legal foundations.
- 2. Accompanying the family** through its stages; before and after formation.
- 3. Creating programs** for the family to develop communication skills among its members.
- 4. Accompanying families with special needs** due to divorce, death, the presence of a child with special needs, delinquent children, the presence of the elderly, or those with chronic diseases.
5. Accompanying the family according to **society's cultural traditions and a balanced Islamic culture**.
- 6. Training specialists in the above-mentioned fields to deal with various family problems** and accompany the family in solving its problems and performing its tasks in socialization.

- Moreover, the **family counseling project is working on establishing an institute specialized in training family counselors, affiliated to the Ministry of Health, Family and Population**. The aim of this **institute is to train the family counselors in the following areas**; treatment of marital problems, reconciliation between spouses, accompanying the family in which separation occurs due to death or divorce, accompanying families with children with special needs, accompanying the family that has an elderly person or those with chronic diseases, and accompanying family health issues.

The project **conducts periodic training and summer camps for counselors**; training for families; workshops for children of different ages, youth camps; workshops for women to prepare them for motherhood; leadership workshops for young people; workshops for children through the stages of life starting from the nursery; preparing children for schooling; providing a legal culture for parents; and teaching healthy habits and psychological balance of the children in all stages.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations:

To conclude, it is important to say that the digital era poses **unprecedented challenges** in face of parenting as much as it opens our horizons to **new advantages and opportunities** that may help facilitate children's upbringing and support parenting.

However, little is done in response to these challenges in our African countries, especially North African countries. In addition to the **traditional challenges** that parenting faces, we are facing the **challenges of digitation** without enough programs to **support parents and protect our families and children**.

### Recommendations:

There is a **real need to:**

1. **develop culturally adapted programs** in order to benefit from world experience, and at the same time avoid the challenge of the ready-made and designed **programs that focus more on individualism, over-liberal culture, and consumerism**, which may put our value system in danger.
2. **Enhance the traditional family system of parenting by integrating new means of supporting family and upbringing through institutions and the establishment of permanent not occasional** policies and programs.
3. **Collaboration of government agencies, NGOs, and individuals as well as the academia to develop sound solutions that take into consideration both; the global and local contexts.**