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**THE INFLUENCE OF FAMILY STRUCTURE ON CHILD ABUSE
IN LOW INCOME COMMUNITIES (BUKOM)**

BY

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DECLARATION

DECLARATION BY STUDENT(S)

I hereby declare that this research is a result of my own original research and that, no part of it has been presented for another degree in this university or any other higher education institute. I further declare that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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CERTIFICATION BY SUPERVISOR

This Dissertation has been prepared and presented under my supervision according to the guidelines for supervision and formatting of Dissertation laid down by the University of Media, Arts and Communication UniMAC-IJ.

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ABSTRACT

Child abuse continues to pose significant challenges in low-income urban settings, where family structures, communication patterns, and cultural norms intersect to shape children's welfare. This study examined how different family typologies; nuclear, extended, single-parent, blended, and kinship households, influence risks of abuse in Bukom, a densely populated community in Accra, Ghana. Guided by Ecological Systems Theory and Communication Accommodation Theory, the study focused on the role of caregiver-child communication, cultural practices, and community-based interventions in shaping child protection outcomes.

Using a descriptive exploratory qualitative design within an interpretivist paradigm, the research engaged 30 participants, including caregivers, adolescents, community leaders, and social workers, selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews in English and Ga and analyzed thematically. Findings revealed that while nuclear families provided role clarity, they were undermined by economic strain; extended and kinship families offered resilience but suffered from role ambiguity and neglect; single-parent and blended families faced heightened risks of abuse. Across all structures, poor communication, corporal punishment, gendered discipline, and cultural justifications normalized maltreatment. The study concludes that child protection in Bukom requires strengthening parenting education, fostering community engagement, improving institutional collaboration, creating safe spaces, and promoting gender-sensitive interventions.

Keywords: Family structure, Child abuse, Communication, Cultural norms, Bukom

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to God Almighty for His grace and guidance; to my lecturers for their academic support and mentorship; and to my family, especially my children, who are my greatest motivation and friends for their encouragement, patience, and unwavering support throughout my master's program.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION.....	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
CHAPTER ONE.....	1
INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.0 Introduction	1
1.1 Background of the Study	1
1.2 Problem Statement.....	3
1.3 General Objective.....	5
1.3.1 Specific Objectives.....	5
1.3.2 Research Questions.....	5
1.4 Scope of the Study	6
1.5 Significance of the Study.....	7
1.6 Limitations of the Study	8
1.7 Organization of the Study.....	9
CHAPTER TWO	10
LITERATURE REVIEW	10

2.0 Introduction.....	10
2.1 Theoretical Review	10
2.1.1 Ecological Systems Theory	10
2.1.2 Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)	12
2.2 Relevance of the Theories to the Study.....	13
2.3 Review of Related Literature	14
2.4 Conceptual Framework.....	20
2.5 Operationalization of Key Terms and Concepts.....	25
CHAPTER THREE	27
METHODOLOGY	27
3.0 Introduction.....	27
3.1 Research Design	27
3.2 Population	28
3.3 Sample and Sampling Technique	30
3.4 Data Collection Instrument	33
3.5 Data Collection Procedure	34
3.6 Sources of Data	36
3.7 Data Analysis	37
3.8 Ethical Considerations	39
3.9 Chapter Summary.....	40

CHAPTER FOUR.....	41
DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS, AND DISCUSSION.....	41
4.0 Introduction.....	41
4.1 OBJECTIVE 1: To Examine How Different Family Structures Influence The Risk Of Child Abuse In Bukom.....	41
4.1.1 Nuclear Families and Role Clarity.....	41
4.1.2 Extended Families and Shared Caregiving.....	43
4.1.3 Single-Parent Households and Vulnerability	45
4.1.4 Blended/Stepfamilies and Conflict.....	46
4.1.5 Kinship Systems and Resilience/Risks	48
4.2 OBJECTIVE 2: To Evaluate The Role Of Caregiver-Child Communication In Shaping Experiences Of Child Welfare And Abuse In Bukom.....	51
4.2.1 Open Communication as a Protective Factor.....	51
4.2.2 Authoritarian and Harsh Communication Styles	53
4.2.3 Silence, Avoidance, and Emotional Neglect	55
4.2.4 Verbal Aggression and Normalization of Abuse.....	56
4.2.5 Communication as Prevention and Support.....	58
4.3 OBJECTIVE 3: To Examine How Cultural Norms And Disciplinary Practices In Bukom Influence Child-Rearing And The Risk Of Abuse	60

4.3.1 Corporal Punishment as a Culturally Accepted Norm.....	60
4.3.2 Discipline as a Reflection of Parental Authority and Respect....	62
4.3.3 Harmful Traditional Practices and Child Well-being.....	65
4.3.4 Gendered Norms in Discipline	67
4.3.5 Pathways to Positive Discipline and Cultural Change.....	69
4.4 OBJECTIVE 4: To Provide Recommendations For Interventions And Community-Based Strategies To Reduce Child Abuse In Low- Income Urban Settings Like Bukom.....	71
4.4.1 Existing Support Systems and Their Limitations.....	71
4.4.2 Role of Community Leaders and Local Institutions	73
4.4.3 Gaps in Parenting Education and Communication Training	75
4.4.4 The Need for Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration	77
4.4.5 Recommendations for Sustainable Interventions.....	79
4.6 Discussion of Results	81
4.6.1 Influence of Family Structures on Child Abuse.....	81
4.6.2 Role of Caregiver-Child Communication in Shaping Child Welfare.....	82
4.6.3 Cultural Norms and Disciplinary Practices in Relation to Child Abuse	84
4.6.4 Interventions and Community-Based Strategies for Preventing Child Abuse	85

CHAPTER FIVE	87
SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION	87
5.0 Introduction.....	87
5.1 Summary of Key Findings.....	87
5.2 Conclusion.....	90
5.3 Recommendations	90
5.4 Suggestions for Future Studies.....	93
REFERENCES.....	96
APPENDIX.....	107

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

This chapter looks at the background of the study, outlines the problem it seeks to address, and presents the objectives, research questions, scope, significance, and limitations of the research. It also provides a summary of how the entire study is organized.

1.1 Background of the Study

Family structure refers to the composition, roles, and relational arrangements within a household, typically encompassing nuclear, extended, single-parent, and blended families (Demo & Acock, 1996; Amato, 2005). These structures influence children's emotional, psychological, and physical development by determining patterns of caregiving, supervision, and discipline (Conger et al., 2010; Belsky, 1993). Research has consistently found that children in non-traditional households—especially those raised in single-parent and step-parent families—face increased risks of abuse and neglect due to limited adult supervision, caregiver fatigue, and inconsistent parenting (Dubowitz et al., 2011; Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2012; Amato, 2000). In nuclear families, while caregiving responsibilities may be shared more evenly, high levels of parental stress, unresolved conflict, and lack of extended familial

support can also contribute to adverse child outcomes (Luthar & Becker, 2002; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Blended families often experience role ambiguity and complex emotional relationships, further complicating protective caregiving dynamics (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Juby et al., 2001).

In communities like Bukom—characterized by dense population, poverty, and social instability—the influence of family structure on child well-being is particularly pronounced (Awumbila & Ardayfio-Schandorf, 2008; GSS, 2022). The socioeconomic challenges in such environments magnify the vulnerabilities associated with non-nuclear family types, as caregivers may be absent for long work hours or unable to provide consistent emotional support (UN-Habitat, 2014; Evans et al., 2012). The absence of fathers or secondary caregivers in single-parent households often leads to weakened child monitoring and exposure to external dangers (Amato & Keith, 1991; Carlson & Corcoran, 2001). In extended families, generational conflicts and differing views on childrearing—especially around corporal punishment—can exacerbate the risk of abuse (Lansford et al., 2010; Akmatov, 2011). Moreover, overcrowding and housing inadequacies in Bukom further strain familial relationships, creating environments where frustration and harsh discipline are common (UNICEF, 2021; Owusu & Yankson, 2007).

Effective communication within families is a protective factor that helps prevent child maltreatment by enhancing emotional bonding, setting

clear expectations, and ensuring appropriate conflict resolution (Coyne et al., 2014; Walsh, 2012). However, many families in Bukom lack the knowledge or resources to adopt such practices. Poor communication skills, compounded by cultural beliefs that normalize corporal punishment and emotional harshness, contribute to harmful childrearing practices (Lansford et al., 2005; Holden et al., 2017). The intergenerational transmission of abuse, where parents repeat punitive methods they themselves experienced, is also facilitated by weak communicative frameworks and low parental education levels (Straus & Paschall, 2009; Gershoff, 2002). Families in low-income settings often operate with limited exposure to alternative disciplinary approaches, making them more likely to view physical punishment as necessary and acceptable (UNICEF, 2020; Boafo, 2019).

Despite policy frameworks like Ghana's Child and Family Welfare Policy, communication-centered interventions in Bukom remain minimal and under-resourced (UNICEF Ghana, 2020; Osei, 2016). Social and Behavior Change Communication (SBCC) strategies, which can empower caregivers with positive parenting skills and knowledge of children's rights, are rarely implemented consistently at the community level (Boafo, 2019; SADC, 2015). Existing campaigns often rely on mass media, which may not adequately reach households lacking access to radio, television, or internet (GSS, 2022; C4D Network, 2018). This lack of tailored communication outreach creates a critical gap in preventing abuse and promoting child

safety. The current study addresses this vacuum by investigating how varying family structures and internal communication patterns within households in Bukom influence the prevalence and forms of child abuse, aiming to offer targeted, context-sensitive recommendations for intervention and policy reform.

1.2 Problem Statement

While child abuse has been widely researched from legal, psychological, and sociological perspectives, its communicative and structural origins—particularly in low-income, urban communities like Bukom—remain insufficiently examined. Many studies have attributed child maltreatment to poverty, economic instability, and caregiver stress (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005; Sedlak et al., 2010; WHO, 2020). However, these structural explanations, though valid, do not entirely clarify why abuse persists even among families sharing similar socio-economic conditions (Runyan et al., 2015; Lansford et al., 2005). What remains underexplored is how internal family communication dynamics, weakened parental supervision, and a lack of child protection knowledge intersect to perpetuate child abuse within such vulnerable communities (Evans et al., 2012; Coyne et al., 2014).

In Bukom, a coastal, densely populated community in Accra, family structures are often complex, non-nuclear, and shaped by cultural, economic, and migratory factors (Awumbila & Ardayfio-Schandorf, 2008; GSS, 2022). Households may consist of single parents, extended relatives, cohabiting partners, or stepfamilies, each introducing different challenges

for communication, role clarity, and authority in parenting (Demo & Acock, 1996; Amato, 2005). Research has shown that children in single-parent or blended families face heightened risk of abuse due to unclear parenting roles, reduced adult supervision, and elevated emotional stress among caregivers (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2012; Dubowitz et al., 2011). Despite this, there is limited localized empirical evidence on how these specific structures operate in Bukom and how they influence child-monitoring and discipline strategies.

A growing body of literature now suggests that ineffective communication between caregivers and children plays a critical role in increasing the risk of abuse, especially in environments where traditional discipline methods are normalized (Gershoff, 2002; Lansford et al., 2014). In Bukom, where formal education levels are generally low and access to parenting education is limited, myths surrounding discipline—such as the belief that corporal punishment builds character—persist and are rarely challenged through structured awareness programs (Akmatov, 2011; Boafo, 2019). Moreover, many caregivers lack the interpersonal communication skills necessary for emotional regulation, conflict resolution, and positive parenting (Walsh, 2012; Coyne et al., 2014). This communicative gap contributes not only to violent disciplinary practices but also to emotional neglect and psychological harm to children.

Development communication interventions have proven effective in shifting harmful social norms and improving parenting behaviors when

they are culturally sensitive and community-based (UNICEF Ghana, 2020; SADC, 2015; Osei, 2016). Unfortunately, such interventions remain sparse in Bukom, often limited by funding constraints and insufficient integration with local governance structures (Owusu & Yankson, 2007; MoGCSP, 2015). As a result, families are left without the necessary knowledge or tools to practice protective parenting, and children remain vulnerable to abuse. This study, therefore, aims to bridge the knowledge and intervention gap by exploring how various family structures in Bukom influence child abuse through the lens of intra-family communication practices and communal knowledge deficiencies related to child welfare.

1.3 General Objective

To examine how different family structures influence child abuse in Bukom, with particular emphasis on communication practices and parental knowledge.

1.3.1 Specific Objectives

1. To identify the types of family structures present in Bukom and their characteristics.
2. To examine how communication patterns within various family structures affect child supervision and discipline.
3. To assess parental awareness and knowledge of child protection principles across different family types.

4. To evaluate the presence and effectiveness of development communication interventions related to child abuse in Bukom.

1.3.2 Research Questions

1. What types of family structures exist in Bukom, and what are their defining characteristics?
2. How do communication practices within different family structures influence child supervision and disciplinary methods?
3. What is the level of parental knowledge on child protection and child rights in Bukom?
4. What development communication interventions are currently in place to address child abuse, and how effective are they?

1.4 Scope of the Study

This study is geographically limited to Bukom, a highly populated, low-income metropolitan area in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. Bukom is distinguished by its distinctive socio-economic dynamics, conventional family customs, and restricted access to child protection services, rendering it an optimal environment for examining the intricacies of family structure and child abuse. The research acknowledges that the specific circumstances of Bukom—such as congestion, poverty, and insufficient institutional support—directly affect familial behavior and communication patterns, therefore impacting child welfare results.

The research thematically examines the confluence between family structure, intra-family communication, and the prevalence of child maltreatment. This study will analyze how various family structures—specifically nuclear, extended, single-parent, and mixed families—affect caregiving norms, parental authority, disciplinary methods, and communication dynamics. Special emphasis will be placed on the impact of communication failures, misinformation regarding parenting, and deeply rooted cultural beliefs on the prevalence of physical, emotional, or neglect-related child abuse in these households.

The study employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing semi-structured interviews as the principal data collection technique. Participants will consist of caregivers from diverse family configurations, together with key informants including child welfare officers and community leaders. The selection of a qualitative design facilitates a profound, contextual comprehension of the lived experiences of families in Bukom. Additionally, it streamlines the analysis of complex, subjective issues—like interpersonal communication, parental stress, and social influence—that questionnaires struggle to accurately measure.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study offers timely and context-specific insights into the intersection of family structure, communication patterns, and child abuse in low-income Ghanaian communities—an area that remains underexplored in both communication and child welfare literature (Creswell, 2014; Miller-

Perrin & Perrin, 2012). While broader studies have highlighted poverty and caregiver stress as general contributors to child maltreatment (Sedlak et al., 2010; Cicchetti & Toth, 2005), this research addresses a critical knowledge gap by investigating how internal communication dynamics and structural composition within households directly impact children's well-being in Bukom. It adds depth to existing literature by exploring how family structures shape caregiving norms and emotional regulation strategies (Coyne et al., 2014; Lansford et al., 2010).

The findings have significant practical implications for the design of child protection interventions. Development communicators, social workers, and community-based organizations can use the study's insights to develop tailored Social and Behavior Change Communication (SBCC) campaigns, particularly those aimed at improving parental communication, emotional responsiveness, and non-violent discipline (UNICEF, 2020; Boafo, 2019). Interventions that work well in middle-income settings often fail in places like Bukom due to contextual dissonance; this research aims to correct that by generating bottom-up knowledge (Akmatov, 2011; SADC, 2015). It also supports advocacy for more community-engaged programming under Ghana's Child and Family Welfare Policy (MoGCSP, 2015).

From an academic perspective, the study contributes to theoretical discussions on family systems, child development, and communication for social change (Walsh, 2012; Coyne et al., 2014). It promotes an

interdisciplinary approach, drawing from social work, development communication, and public health to propose communication-based strategies for reducing child abuse. Moreover, it provides a valuable model for future qualitative research in similar urban, low-income contexts across Sub-Saharan Africa (Owusu & Yankson, 2007; UN-Habitat, 2014). The findings are expected to benefit both scholars and practitioners seeking to understand the contextual drivers of abuse and protective caregiving in African urban slums.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

Although relevant and methodologically rigorous, this study has several drawbacks. The research's spatial focus limits it. Restricting the findings to Bukom, a coastal Accra slum, limits their applicability to rural or middle-income Ghanaian groups (Awumbila & Ardayfio-Schandorf, 2008; GSS, 2022). Bukom helps explain urban poverty and family dynamics, but its culture, livelihoods, and settlement patterns may not reflect Ghanaian life (UN-Habitat, 2014; Evans et al., 2012). Thus, extrapolating findings beyond the research area requires caution.

Second, child abuse is sensitive, which may prejudice participant disclosure. Underreporting or socially desirable reactions may result from cultural norms that condone corporal punishment as discipline (Gershoff, 2002; Lansford et al., 2005) and fear of legal or social ramifications. Additionally, caregivers may downplay or deny abusive behaviors they consider normal, which can skew findings. To mitigate this danger,

confidentiality, pseudonymity, and a safe interview environment will be used (Seidman, 2013; Creswell, 2014).

The positionality of the researcher may also affect data interpretation. According to Bourdieu (2003), researchers' cultural and epistemological perspectives might influence how participant narratives are classed. This risk is higher in qualitative investigations that involve interpretation (Patton, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This issue will be mitigated by triangulation, member checks, and reflexivity (Tracy, 2010; Silverman, 2013). These measures improve credibility but do not remove bias. By understanding these limitations and incorporating checks and balances, the study seeks to accurately and ethically portray the issues under inquiry.

1.7 Organization of the Study

This research is structured into five chapters. Chapter One introduces the study, outlining the background, problem statement, objectives, research questions, scope, significance, limitations, and structure. Chapter Two reviews relevant theoretical frameworks and empirical literature. Chapter Three outlines the research methodology, including design, population, sampling, and data collection procedures. Chapter Four presents and analyzes the data. Chapter Five discusses findings, draws conclusions, and offers recommendations for policy and practice.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

Chapter Two reviews scholarly and empirical literature relevant to understanding the influence of family structure on child abuse in low-income communities, particularly in Bukom, Accra. The chapter is structured into six key sections. It begins with a theoretical review, followed by an analysis of the relevance of the theories to the study. Next, it presents a comprehensive review of related empirical studies, an elaboration of the study's conceptual framework, the operationalization of key terms and concepts, and finally, a summary of the chapter. The review draws from global and Ghanaian contexts to inform the present study.

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological Systems Theory, initially proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), is a foundational framework in developmental psychology that emphasizes how environmental systems interact to influence a child's growth and behavior. These systems include the microsystem (immediate environment such as family and school), mesosystem (interactions between microsystems), exosystem (external settings that indirectly affect the child), macrosystem (cultural and societal influences), and

chronosystem (life transitions and historical events). At the microsystem level, the family serves as the most direct influence on a child's development. In the Bukom context, this perspective is crucial for examining how different family structures—such as nuclear, extended, single-parent, or child-headed households—affect daily interactions between children and caregivers (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Tudge et al., 2009).

The theory is particularly relevant in understanding how structural deficiencies in low-income communities intersect with familial communication. In Bukom, where many families live in overcrowded housing with limited resources, the influence of the exosystem is pronounced. For instance, factors such as parental unemployment, inadequate health services, and weak child protection systems contribute to heightened caregiver stress and, subsequently, strained parent-child relationships (Garbarino, 1992; Wekerle et al., 2009; WHO, 2016). These external stressors often trickle down to the microsystem, leading to inconsistent discipline, emotional neglect, or physical abuse, particularly in households where multiple caregivers rotate roles or where parental presence is sporadic due to economic migration (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005; Sedlak et al., 2010).

Furthermore, the ecological framework underscores the significance of time and change, as captured by the chronosystem. In Bukom, rapid urbanization, changing cultural norms, and exposure to digital media may

influence shifts in parenting styles and community child-rearing practices. For example, traditional extended family caregiving models are increasingly giving way to fragmented family systems that lack cohesion and effective monitoring (Nsamenang, 2010; Boafo, 2019). The absence of structured development communication programs compounds this problem, as many caregivers are left without guidance on positive discipline or emotional intelligence. This theory, therefore, provides a robust structure for examining how layered environmental systems—particularly communication breakdowns within family units—impact the prevalence and nature of child abuse in urban Ghanaian communities like Bukom (Lansford et al., 2014; Evans et al., 2012).

2.1.2 Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)

The Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), developed by Howard Giles (1973), explores how individuals adjust their communication behaviors—such as speech, tone, vocabulary, and non-verbal cues—based on their interaction partners, power dynamics, and cultural expectations. The theory distinguishes between convergence (adapting to reduce social differences) and divergence (emphasizing distinctiveness), which are often seen in parent-child interactions. In family settings, especially in diverse and hierarchical societies like Bukom, adults may unknowingly diverge

from their children's communication needs, leading to misunderstandings or emotional distance (Williams & Nussbaum, 2001; Soliz & Harwood, 2006). For instance, authoritarian parenting that enforces strict obedience without space for dialogue can be viewed through CAT as a failure to converge communicatively, thus exacerbating the risk of verbal and physical abuse.

In Bukom, where cultural norms emphasize adult authority and child compliance, communication mismatches are especially prevalent in households with non-biological caregivers or step-parents. Such dynamics often limit children's ability to express their emotions or report mistreatment (Bavel & De Winter, 2013; Lansford et al., 2015). CAT provides a valuable lens for examining how cultural scripts and power imbalances in communication can foster conditions for abuse—particularly emotional neglect or punitive discipline. It explains how caregivers' refusal or inability to adapt their communication styles to children's developmental levels can result in conflict, misinterpretation of behavior, and a lack of empathy (Akmatov, 2011; Darling, 2007). This is especially problematic in low-income households where stress and lack of parental education reduce the likelihood of intentional, child-centered communication.

Moreover, the theory highlights the role of social identity and in-group membership, which is pertinent in family structures that include extended relatives or blended families. Children in such arrangements often

experience variable treatment based on their perceived social position within the household, leading to differential communication accommodation (Soliz & Rittenour, 2012). For example, a biological child may receive more affirming language and attention compared to a stepchild, reflecting divergence in communication strategies that can foster feelings of rejection and emotional harm. By framing these disparities within CAT, this study can investigate how caregiver-child interactions differ across family structures and how these differences relate to incidences of abuse in Bukom. The theory therefore offers not only a linguistic but also a socio-cultural framework for understanding abuse rooted in communication failure (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991; Jones et al., 2004).

2.2 Relevance of the Theories to the Study

The Ecological Systems Theory offers a multidimensional framework for understanding how a child's immediate and distant environments interact to shape developmental outcomes. This theory is particularly applicable in low-income communities like Bukom, where external pressures—such as poverty, housing deficits, and unemployment—intersect with internal family dynamics to influence child welfare (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Wekerle et al., 2009). In such environments, overcrowded living conditions and limited financial resources contribute to caregiver stress and emotional unavailability, increasing the risk of physical and emotional maltreatment (Sedlak et al., 2010; Dubowitz et al., 2011). Furthermore, the

lack of access to community support systems and weak institutional responses—such as under-resourced child protection services—amplify the vulnerability of children in these areas (UNICEF Ghana, 2020; Garbarino, 1992). The theory reinforces the need to understand child abuse not only as a product of individual behavior but also as a result of systemic failure at multiple societal levels.

Complementing this structural view, the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) provides insights into the micro-level interactions within families that can either mitigate or exacerbate risks of abuse. CAT posits that the way individuals adjust their communicative behaviors based on social context can significantly influence relationship outcomes (Giles, 1973; Williams & Nussbaum, 2001). In Bukom's context, where cultural norms often emphasize parental authority and child obedience, communication tends to be top-down, and emotional responsiveness is limited (Lansford et al., 2015). This communication style may lead to misunderstandings, reduced empathy, and heightened conflict, particularly in non-nuclear or single-parent households where roles and expectations may be less clearly defined (Bavel & De Winter, 2013). These mismatches in communication patterns often conceal abuse or make it difficult for children to report or resist it (Akmatov, 2011).

Together, these two theoretical lenses—Ecological Systems Theory and Communication Accommodation Theory—enable a holistic understanding of child abuse in Bukom by integrating both macro-

structural and micro-communicative determinants. While the former focuses on the societal and environmental conditions that indirectly shape family functioning, the latter examines the quality and adaptability of interpersonal exchanges within the family unit (Boafo, 2019; Coyne et al., 2014). This integrative approach is crucial for designing development communication strategies that are both context-sensitive and behaviorally effective. By aligning structural interventions (such as social support and economic empowerment) with communicative capacity-building (such as parent-child dialogue training), stakeholders can address the multifaceted nature of child abuse in urban low-income settings like Bukom.

2.3 Review of Related Literature

1. Lansford et al. (2014) – Parenting Style and Child Abuse

In a landmark cross-national study, Lansford et al. (2014) investigated how parenting styles influence child abuse across various cultural contexts. Their research involved a sample of 1,300 families from nine countries and employed structured interviews through stratified sampling methods. The study found that children raised under authoritarian regimes—characterized by high demands and low responsiveness—were more susceptible to physical and emotional abuse. These findings resonate with Baumrind's (1991) theory on parenting styles, which asserts that punitive approaches undermine emotional security. Further research by Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor (2016) corroborates that physical punishment often escalates into abuse, reinforcing Lansford et al.'s conclusions. Although the

study had limited representation from African urban slums, it emphasized how emotional regulation and the tone of parental communication significantly shape child wellbeing (Odongo, 2018; Lansford & Deater-Deckard, 2012).

The relevance of this study to the current investigation in Bukom lies in its illumination of communication patterns within authoritarian households. In communities facing economic and spatial constraints, such as Bukom, stress-related authoritarianism may be normalized, especially among overburdened single parents (UNICEF Ghana, 2021; Owusu-Bempah, 2020). Authoritarian parenting often results in fear-based obedience, silencing the child's voice and obscuring instances of emotional or physical harm (Kotch et al., 2008; Gershoff, 2010). Moreover, authoritarianism is more likely to be employed in households where caregivers lack access to parenting resources or psychosocial support systems (Wekerle et al., 2009). These structural deficiencies make the Lansford et al. (2014) study particularly informative for interpreting patterns in Bukom's low-income environments.

This new study is also based on the flaws in Lansford et al.'s work. Even though it covers a lot of cultures, it doesn't work as well because it doesn't include enough informal communities in Africa, like Bukom. But we may still use the common link between parenting tone and child maltreatment to look at things that happen in specific places. This study improves on the findings of Lansford et al. by adding cultural and environmental aspects

that are specific to Ghana's urban slums, such as how extended family networks or stepparenting arrangements affect communication (Boafo, 2019; Amo-Adjei & Annim, 2015). So, Lansford et al. give us a useful but incomplete base, which our work builds on with data that is relevant to the situation.

2. Boafo (2019) – Social and Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC) and Child Welfare

Boafo (2019) conducted a focused qualitative study in Accra to evaluate the role of Social and Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC) strategies in promoting child welfare. Involving 50 caregivers from communities including Bukom, the study used thematic analysis to assess communication and discipline strategies. A major revelation was the widespread knowledge gap regarding non-violent child-rearing methods. Caregivers largely relied on physical punishment, indicating limited exposure to positive parenting models (UNICEF Ghana, 2020; Twum-Danso, 2009). This aligns with earlier findings from Lansford et al. (2014) and corroborates the theory that a lack of communication adaptation often results in abuse (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Akmatov, 2011).

The study's results are extremely useful because they show what families in Bukom have actually gone through. Boafo's research showed that stress, cultural expectations, and not being exposed to enough media are common causes of communication problems. This is based on Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles, 1973), which says that if

caregivers don't change the way they talk to kids to fulfill their emotional needs, the kids are more likely to feel distant and hurt (Williams & Nussbaum, 2001; Bavel & De Winter, 2013). Boafo's research shows that even in homes with two parents, communication problems might grow if there aren't any supporting interventions or if the roles of the parents are strictly defined (Amoah & Koduah, 2018). So, this study gives us a useful way to look at how media, tradition, and access to resources all affect parenting.

One problem with Boafo's study was that it didn't break down the data by family structure, like single-parent vs. step-parent families. It did a good job of pointing out problems with communication tactics, but it didn't go into enough detail about how family factors affect these problems. This study builds on Boafo's work by looking at how different types of families in Bukom—single-parent, extended, and step-parent households—communicate and how often they mistreat their children (Akmatov, 2011; Evans et al., 2012). In addition, while Boafo's research focused on media and community education, this study goes further into the family dynamic by looking at how communication patterns inside families can lead to child abuse in homes that are not very stable (Garbarino, 1992; Kotch et al., 2008).

3. Evans et al. (2012) – Child-Headed Households and Abuse in South Africa

Evans et al. (2012) used ethnographic methods to investigate the vulnerabilities of child-headed households in South Africa, a setting with structural similarities to Ghana's urban slums. Sampling 30 households affected by HIV, they found that the absence of adult supervision often resulted in children being exposed to both intra-family and external abuse. Communication was minimal or distorted, often resulting in the normalization of neglect and exploitation (Cluver et al., 2011; Wekerle et al., 2009). Their research supports Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, illustrating how the breakdown of the microsystem (i.e., immediate family) directly affects child protection outcomes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Cicchetti & Toth, 2005).

This study's findings are particularly relevant for Bukom, where some households are headed by minors or elderly grandparents with limited caregiving capacity. The absence of adult guidance disrupts the mesosystem's functionality, which includes schools, religious bodies, and peer networks that might otherwise compensate for poor parenting (UNICEF Ghana, 2021; Amo-Adjei & Annim, 2015). Communication within these households often lacks structure or regularity, creating a fertile ground for emotional neglect, substance use, or sexual abuse (Twum-Danso, 2009; Dubowitz et al., 2011). Evans et al.'s study also supports findings from Boafo (2019) by identifying the absence of mentoring relationships as a risk factor.

However, Evans et al.'s study focused narrowly on HIV-affected families, limiting its generalizability. Nonetheless, the core theme of household vulnerability and broken communication lines is applicable to Bukom's context. This study extends their work by examining how various forms of non-traditional family arrangements—not only child-headed households—affect dialogue, discipline, and protection. Moreover, Evans et al. did not explore how community-based interventions might mediate risks. This research aims to fill that gap by situating family-level communication within broader community and institutional supports or failures (Sedlak et al., 2010; Kotch et al., 2008; Garbarino, 1992).

4. Dubowitz et al. (2011) – Economic Stress and Child Abuse in Baltimore

Dubowitz et al. (2011) conducted a longitudinal study in Baltimore, USA, to explore the relationship between economic hardship, parental stress, and child maltreatment. Using data from 300 families and advanced regression analysis, the study showed that financial constraints significantly increased the risk of verbal abuse, emotional neglect, and inconsistent caregiving. These findings affirm the stress-abuse model proposed in earlier studies by Belsky (1993) and Sedlak et al. (2010). Families living in poverty were more likely to employ harsh disciplinary tactics due to the psychological burden of unmet economic needs (Gershoff, 2010; Cicchetti & Toth, 2005).

While the study's context is vastly different from Ghana, the psychosocial dynamics are relevant. In Bukom, high unemployment and substandard

housing mirror many of the stressors identified in Dubowitz's study. Caregivers in such environments face a chronic lack of support, which affects their patience, communication style, and problem-solving capacity (Boafo, 2019; UNICEF Ghana, 2020). Dubowitz et al.'s findings reinforce the need to understand child abuse not merely as an individual pathology but as an ecological outcome shaped by macroeconomic and institutional shortcomings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Garbarino, 1992).

The study's limitation lies in its Western-centric framework, which may not fully capture the collectivist cultural values prevalent in Ghanaian communities. Nonetheless, the research provides valuable insight into how economic stress transforms caregiving behavior—a dynamic equally visible in low-income areas like Bukom. This study leverages Dubowitz's stress model while integrating cultural factors such as respect for authority and extended kinship roles that may either mitigate or exacerbate abuse (Wekerle et al., 2009; Akmatov, 2011; Twum-Danso, 2009). Therefore, Dubowitz et al. serves as a comparative benchmark for interpreting similar phenomena in Bukom.

5. Akmatov (2011) – Household Composition and Child Maltreatment Across 28 Countries

Akmatov (2011) conducted a comprehensive quantitative study involving data from 28 countries to assess how different family compositions influence child maltreatment. The study revealed that children living in households with stepparents or non-relatives were at significantly higher

risk of experiencing abuse compared to those in nuclear families. Using multivariate logistic regression, Akmatov identified household structure as a major predictor of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse (Sedlak et al., 2010; Lansford & Deater-Deckard, 2012). His findings align with global child protection data, which show that non-biological caregivers often lack emotional investment, increasing the likelihood of harm (Gershoff, 2010; Cluver et al., 2011).

The relevance of Akmatov's study to Bukom is profound. The community hosts a range of family types, including stepparent and grandparent-headed households, often driven by migration, divorce, or death. These structural complexities frequently result in unclear caregiving roles, making it difficult for children to establish secure attachments (Evans et al., 2012; Boafo, 2019). Communication in such households may be restricted, formal, or authoritarian—factors that Akmatov identifies as precursors to maltreatment. The findings underscore the need for localized child protection strategies that consider the nature of household composition alongside income or education.

However, Akmatov's study, while broad, lacked contextual depth, particularly in African slums like Bukom. His data does not account for cultural practices that may either amplify or dampen the risk of abuse within extended family systems. This study builds on his work by applying a qualitative lens to understand the nuanced relationships between family structure and communication. It also examines whether community

institutions play a role in bridging caregiving gaps within non-traditional households (UNICEF Ghana, 2021; Amo-Adjei & Annim, 2015; Kotch et al., 2008). In this way, Akmatov provides a foundational framework that this research adapts to the Ghanaian context.

2.4 Conceptual Framework

1. Family Structural Typologies and Risk Levels

Family structure has long been associated with varying levels of risk for child abuse. Research consistently shows that children raised in non-nuclear families—such as single-parent, extended, or blended households—are more vulnerable to maltreatment due to imbalances in caregiving responsibilities and household stress (Amato, 2005; Akmatov, 2011). For instance, single-parent households often experience limited supervision, economic strain, and psychological burden, all of which contribute to higher incidences of child neglect or abuse (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2012; Waldfogel, 2000). Blended families, involving step-parents or unrelated adults, have also been linked to higher rates of physical and emotional maltreatment due to weakened emotional bonds and identity conflicts (Schwartz & Finley, 2010; Dubowitz et al., 2011).

Extended family structures may provide additional support but can also create inconsistent discipline norms and role confusion, especially in urban slum areas like Bukom where poverty often forces multiple families to cohabitate (Evans et al., 2012; Lansford et al., 2014). In such contexts, the

presence of multiple caregivers with differing ideologies about child-rearing can heighten the risk of miscommunication, neglect, or abuse (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; UNICEF Ghana, 2020). This complexity often reduces the capacity for stable emotional support, a key factor in child resilience.

In Ghana, the rise of urbanization has also led to shifts in family formations, with many low-income households deviating from traditional nuclear structures (Boafo, 2019; Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). These shifts, while adaptive in some contexts, can create child protection gaps. The Bukom setting presents a unique lens through which to assess how these structural variations interact with stress and caregiving quality to shape child safety outcomes (Sedlak et al., 2010; Badoe, 2005). Therefore, understanding structural typologies is essential to identifying families at heightened risk of abuse and guiding targeted interventions.

2. Caregiver Communication Competence

Effective caregiver communication is essential for fostering a healthy emotional environment and mitigating abuse risks. Caregivers who communicate clearly, empathetically, and in an age-appropriate manner tend to have stronger bonds with their children, reducing the likelihood of harsh discipline or emotional neglect (Coyne et al., 2014; Williams & Nussbaum, 2001). Positive communication models reinforce behavioral expectations without fear or coercion, improving children's psychosocial development and trust (Bavelas & Chovil, 2000; Darling & Steinberg,

1993). Conversely, communication characterized by shouting, threats, or silence can undermine children's sense of security, making them more susceptible to abuse.

In low-income urban settings like Bukom, the competence of caregiver-child communication is often compromised by socio-economic stressors and low educational attainment (Boafo, 2019; Lansford et al., 2010). Research has shown that when caregivers lack the skills or emotional regulation to manage conflict constructively, they are more likely to resort to punitive strategies, including physical and verbal abuse (Gershoff, 2002; Dubowitz et al., 2011). The communication gap is particularly wide in non-nuclear families, where secondary caregivers may lack the emotional closeness or authority to engage children meaningfully (Evans et al., 2012; Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2012).

Moreover, caregiver communication style is also influenced by intergenerational transmission of parenting norms. Studies indicate that caregivers often replicate the authoritarian or punitive styles they experienced as children, perpetuating cycles of poor communication and abuse (Osei, 2016; Badoe, 2005). Without targeted interventions—especially those that emphasize Social and Behavior Change Communication (SBCC)—many caregivers remain unaware of non-violent alternatives to discipline (UNICEF Ghana, 2020; Boafo, 2019). Therefore, enhancing caregiver communication competence is central to breaking the cycle of abuse in communities like Bukom.

3. Role of Cultural Norms on Discipline

Cultural beliefs and practices strongly influence how discipline is perceived and enacted within families. In many Ghanaian communities, including Bukom, corporal punishment is often viewed as an acceptable and even necessary part of child-rearing (Lansford et al., 2010; Badoe, 2005). Parents and caregivers may believe that physical punishment is essential for instilling discipline and respect, a notion rooted in longstanding socio-cultural values (Twum-Danso Imoh, 2013; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016). These cultural perceptions can normalize practices that, by global human rights standards, qualify as abusive (UNICEF Ghana, 2020; WHO, 2016).

Such disciplinary approaches are often reinforced by community elders, religious leaders, and even educational institutions, creating a collective tolerance for physical punishment (Boafo, 2019; Osei, 2016). In this environment, efforts to introduce non-violent disciplinary methods often face resistance or are perceived as foreign or ineffective (Lansford & Deater-Deckard, 2012; Twum-Danso Imoh, 2013). Children raised in these contexts may internalize violence as a natural aspect of authority relationships, increasing their vulnerability to both domestic and societal forms of abuse (Sedlak et al., 2010; Akmatov, 2011).

Additionally, cultural silence around emotional and psychological abuse further complicates child protection efforts. While physical discipline is often visible, verbal aggression and neglect are underreported and

underrecognized as harmful (Coyne et al., 2014; Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2012). In extended or blended families, these cultural scripts become even more layered, with discipline styles varying widely among caregivers. As a result, there is an urgent need to interrogate and reform harmful cultural norms around child discipline through education and SBCC programs (Boafo, 2019; UNICEF Ghana, 2020).

4. Stress and Overcrowding in Low-Income Settings

Poverty and overcrowding exert a significant influence on parenting behaviors and child abuse risk. In Bukom, where living spaces are typically cramped and shared by multiple family units, stress levels among caregivers are naturally high (Evans et al., 2012; Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). Studies have shown that caregivers under chronic stress are more likely to exhibit harsh, inconsistent, or negligent parenting practices (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005; Dubowitz et al., 2011). The psychological strain of financial instability, coupled with limited access to healthcare, food, and social services, creates a volatile environment for child-rearing.

Research also highlights the role of environmental stressors in reducing caregivers' emotional regulation capacities, making them more susceptible to reactive behaviors, including verbal outbursts and physical punishment (Sedlak et al., 2010; Gershoff, 2002). In overcrowded homes, privacy is minimal and parental supervision becomes difficult, further heightening the risk of neglect and abuse (Lansford et al., 2014; Boafo, 2019). Additionally, child safety is often compromised by external actors

such as neighbors or co-tenants, especially in shared living arrangements common in low-income communities (UNICEF Ghana, 2020; Osei, 2016). Despite these challenges, interventions remain scarce. Few programs target the specific emotional and behavioral impacts of environmental stressors on parenting within urban slums (Badoe, 2005; Boafo, 2019). By highlighting the nexus between poverty, stress, and abuse, this study emphasizes the need for community-based interventions that provide caregivers with coping tools, economic support, and access to social services. Without addressing these structural barriers, efforts to reduce child abuse may prove unsustainable (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005; Evans et al., 2012).

5. Absence of Communication-Based Interventions

A critical gap in child protection efforts within low-income communities is the absence of targeted Social and Behavior Change Communication (SBCC) strategies. SBCC has been effective in promoting awareness around public health issues, yet its application in parenting and child protection in Ghana remains limited (Boafo, 2019; Osei, 2016). Without culturally sensitive communication interventions, many caregivers lack knowledge of children's rights, non-violent discipline methods, and avenues for seeking help (UNICEF Ghana, 2020; WHO, 2016). This ignorance perpetuates cycles of abuse and silence, particularly in informal settlements like Bukom.

The lack of SBCC campaigns also results in weak community norms around reporting and intervention. In many cases, abuse is normalized or seen as a private matter, reducing the likelihood of external interference or support (Twum-Danso Imoh, 2013; Badoe, 2005). Furthermore, school systems, religious organizations, and local government structures often fail to integrate child protection communication into their outreach, missing key opportunities to shift attitudes and behaviors (Lansford & Deater-Deckard, 2012; Boafo, 2019). This vacuum fosters an environment where abuse can thrive without accountability.

Moreover, media and communication strategies have the potential to challenge harmful cultural norms and empower both children and caregivers with knowledge and resources (Coyne et al., 2014; Osei, 2016). Studies show that well-designed SBCC programs can significantly reduce corporal punishment and improve parent-child relationships (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; UNICEF Ghana, 2020). Therefore, integrating communication-based interventions is crucial for both prevention and response efforts. This study aims to provide evidence to support the development of such targeted, community-rooted SBCC programs in Bukom.

2.5 Operationalization of Key Terms and Concepts

Child Abuse: Any form of physical, emotional, sexual harm, or neglect inflicted on a child by a caregiver or household member (UNICEF, 2020).

Family Structure: The composition of the family unit, including nuclear, single-parent, extended, and blended configurations (Amato, 2005).

Communication Breakdown: Inadequate verbal or non-verbal exchanges between caregivers and children that hinder emotional support and discipline (Giles, 1973; Coyne et al., 2014).

Low-Income Community: A geographical area characterized by high poverty, unemployment, and limited access to basic services (GSS, 2022).

SBCB Interventions: Structured communication programs aimed at changing social and behavioral norms related to parenting and child protection (Boafo, 2019; Osei, 2016).

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

Chapter Three outlines the methodological approach adopted to investigate how family structure influences child abuse in low-income communities, focusing on Bukom. It describes the research design, population, sampling techniques, data collection instruments, procedures, sources of data, data handling and analysis strategies, and ethical considerations. This structure ensures methodological rigor and coherence aligned with the study objectives.

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a **descriptive exploratory qualitative research design**, considered suitable for investigating the complex and context-specific experiences of caregivers and families in relation to child abuse within diverse family structures in Bukom. A descriptive exploratory design is particularly appropriate in contexts where limited empirical evidence exists, as it allows researchers to explore phenomena in depth and describe them as they naturally occur, without imposing preconceived variables (Sandelowski, 2000; Polit & Beck, 2017). By employing this design, the study seeks to generate rich, contextualized insights into how structural and communicative dimensions of family life influence child maltreatment in a low-income, urban Ghanaian community.

The study is grounded in a **critical realist stance**, which recognizes that child abuse and family structure are shaped by real socio-economic and cultural forces, while also acknowledging that these realities are mediated by individuals' subjective experiences (Bhaskar, 1978; Fletcher, 2017). Critical realism bridges the gap between the objective existence of family structures and the subjective interpretations of communication, discipline, and caregiving within them. This makes it particularly valuable for understanding how broader structural conditions such as poverty, overcrowding, and social norms interact with lived experiences of families in Bukom (Easton, 2010; Archer, 1995).

Aligned with this, the research is informed by the **interpretivist paradigm**, which posits that knowledge is socially constructed and best understood through the perspectives of individuals embedded in their social environments (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Willis, 2007). Within this paradigm, phenomenological interactions—such as caregiver-child communication, emotional regulation, and discipline practices—are treated as central to meaning-making processes (Schwandt, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2017). This approach allows the study to capture nuances often overlooked in quantitative research, including interpersonal communication gaps, intergenerational parenting norms, and the socio-cultural framing of child discipline in Bukom (Patton, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3.2 Population

The target population comprised caregivers, parents, children, social workers, and community leaders residing in Bukom, an inner-city neighborhood in Accra known for its high population density, extended family households, and socio-economic vulnerabilities. These groups were selected due to their varying but interconnected roles in child-rearing, protection, and community-level decision-making. Based on local assembly reports and observational familiarity with the community, the accessible population was estimated at **between 1,500–2,000 residents** within the immediate study catchment area (AMA, 2023). This adjustment accounts for the high level of congestion, shared compound housing, and multi-family occupancy patterns typical of Bukom (Songsore, 2017).

As a researcher familiar with the Bukom context through previous academic and professional engagements, I acknowledge the potential for subjective assumptions about community size and social dynamics. To mitigate bias, population estimates were triangulated with official assembly data, and the sampling strategy (discussed in section 3.3) was designed to ensure diverse representation across family structures. Reflexivity will also be maintained throughout the analysis by consistently interrogating how my background and prior knowledge may influence interpretations (Berger, 2015).

The inclusion of **caregivers in both nuclear and extended family households** was critical, as research highlights that household composition significantly shapes child protection practices and

vulnerability to abuse (Dubowitz et al., 2011; Akmatov, 2011). **Children aged 10–17 years** were considered appropriate participants because, developmentally, they can articulate their experiences while still being within an age bracket often exposed to risks of neglect, exploitation, or maltreatment (UNICEF, 2019; Lansford et al., 2014). Their perspectives are essential for understanding abuse not only as reported by adults but also as lived by minors themselves.

Social workers and child protection officers were included to provide professional insight into patterns of abuse, institutional responses, and the interaction between family-level challenges and broader child welfare systems (Mathews & Collin-Vézina, 2019). Likewise, **community leaders** were selected due to their role in enforcing cultural norms and mediating domestic disputes in informal settlements (Boafo, 2019). This ensures that cultural and structural influences on family behavior are not overlooked.

In line with prior research, the selection of these groups reflects the recognition that studying sensitive issues like child maltreatment requires a multi-perspective approach that incorporates both those directly affected and those tasked with safeguarding vulnerable populations (Sedlak et al., 2010; Cicchetti & Toth, 2005). The Bukom context—with its overcrowding, poverty, and entrenched traditional norms—provides a unique lens for exploring how family structure intersects with child abuse risks in low-income communities.

3.3 Sample and Sampling Technique

A total sample size of 30 participants was selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. These non-probability methods are widely recommended for qualitative inquiries that seek to explore complex and socially sensitive issues such as child abuse within low-income contexts (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016; Palinkas et al., 2015). Purposive sampling allowed for the recruitment of participants with firsthand knowledge or lived experience of child-rearing practices and family dynamics in Bukom, while snowball sampling facilitated access to hard-to-reach groups such as adolescents exposed to abuse and caregivers reluctant to disclose sensitive information due to stigma or fear of social repercussions (Naderifar, Goli, & Ghaljaie, 2017).

To ensure cultural authenticity and grounded insights, **family inclusion was based not only on residence but also on cultural embeddedness** within Bukom. Participants were primarily drawn from families with **transgenerational roots in the community (10+ years of continuous residence)**, as these households typically exhibit shared caregiving practices and extensive kinship ties that reflect the cultural norms of Bukom (Songsore, 2017; Oppong, 2019). This strategy helped exclude recent migrants who may not yet be fully immersed in local family structures, thereby preserving the contextual relevance of the findings.

The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- **Adults aged 18 years and above**, actively involved in caregiving, community leadership, or child protection.

- **Adolescents aged 10–17 years**, who, with parental/guardian consent and assent, were included because they can meaningfully articulate experiences of family life, discipline, and abuse within households (UNICEF, 2019; Lansford et al., 2014).
- **Families with deep cultural and historical ties to Bukom**, defined as at least one generation of residence (10+ years), with kinship networks extending within Bukom and to other parts of Ghana.
- **Individuals with professional or community-level responsibilities** related to child welfare (e.g., social workers, opinion leaders).

The exclusion criteria were:

- Non-residents or transient individuals with limited social integration in Bukom.
- Families recently migrated (less than 10 years), due to potential cultural variation in caregiving norms.
- Children below the age of 10, given ethical concerns and their limited ability to articulate complex experiences.
- Persons unwilling or unable to provide informed consent/assent.

The final sample composition was:

- **15 caregivers** (10 females, 5 males), drawn across **nuclear, extended, single-parent, and kinship households**, ensuring representation of

the key family structures under study (Dubowitz et al., 2011; Akmatov, 2011).

- **5 adolescents** (3 females, 2 males), aged 10–17, recruited to reflect experiences from different household typologies.
- **5 community leaders** (3 males, 2 females), with transgenerational residency and roles in dispute resolution and community governance.
- **5 social workers/child protection officers** (balanced gender representation), providing institutional perspectives on abuse reporting, intervention, and family vulnerabilities.

This heterogeneity across **family typologies, gender, and generational position** was intentional, as it provided a multi-layered understanding of how family structure shapes child maltreatment. Including direct experiencers of different family types ensured alignment with the study's central focus, rather than limiting the sample to generic demographic categories (Sedlak et al., 2010; Cicchetti & Toth, 2005).

The determination of the 30-participant sample was guided by **theoretical saturation**, defined as the point at which no new categories or themes emerge during data collection (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Saturation in qualitative studies typically occurs within 12–30 interviews, depending on the homogeneity of participants and the scope of inquiry (Mason, 2010). In this study, thick description of the Bukom field context —

characterized by **overcrowding, poverty, kinship-based caregiving, and cultural norms around discipline** — ensured that a sample of 30 captured diverse perspectives across family structures, thereby balancing depth and breadth of analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The sampling logic followed this distribution:

- $n_1 = \text{caregivers} = 15$
- $n_2 = \text{adolescents (10–17 years)} = 5$
- $n_3 = \text{community leaders} = 5$
- $n_4 = \text{social workers} = 5$

Therefore, total sample size (n) = $n_1 + n_2 + n_3 + n_4 = 15 + 5 + 5 + 5 = \mathbf{30}$ **participants**. This distribution allowed triangulation of perspectives across household members, institutional actors, and cultural authorities, which enhances the credibility and contextual validity of findings (Tracy, 2020; Tong, Sainsbury & Craig, 2007).

3.4 Data Collection Instrument

An in-depth interview guide served as the primary data collection instrument. It consisted of open-ended questions designed to explore themes such as family type, disciplinary practices, communication patterns, supervision levels, and knowledge of child rights. The guide was developed through an extensive review of literature on child maltreatment and family structures and subsequently validated by two

child protection experts. These were **Dr. Ama Nyarko**, a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the University of Ghana with over 15 years of research and field experience in child protection and family studies, and **Mr. Kofi Mensah**, a Child Protection Officer at the Department of Social Welfare in Accra, with more than a decade of practical experience in managing child abuse cases in low-income communities. Their combined academic and field expertise ensured that the instrument was both theoretically sound and practically relevant (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2017).

The open-ended nature of the questions allowed participants to narrate their experiences in their own words, uncovering implicit attitudes, norms, and practices around child welfare that might not surface in close-ended questioning (Bryman, 2016; Patton, 2015). This approach was essential for capturing the lived realities of caregivers, adolescents, and community leaders in Bukom, where cultural norms strongly shape parenting practices.

To further enhance the instrument's reliability and cultural appropriateness, the interview guide was **pilot-tested with seven participants** drawn from different respondent categories: three caregivers, two adolescents, one community leader, and one social worker. This wider representation ensured that the questions were understandable across different age groups and social roles, and that they respected cultural sensitivities within Bukom. Feedback from the pilot testing led to

modifications in question phrasing, sequencing, and sensitivity, ensuring the guide was contextually grounded and ethically sound (Silverman, 2020).

The use of an interview guide enhanced consistency across interviews while retaining flexibility to adapt to participant responses. Probing questions and follow-up prompts were employed where necessary to clarify or expand on participant narratives, without imposing researcher bias or leading answers (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). This balance between structure and adaptability facilitated rich, nuanced data collection aligned with the exploratory design of the study.

3.5 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection for this study spanned a six-week period from March to April 2025, a duration deemed sufficient for conducting in-depth qualitative interviews while allowing time for trust-building and reflective analysis. The interviews were conducted in both English and Ga, depending on each participant's linguistic preference, to ensure clarity, comfort, and cultural appropriateness (UNESCO, 2018; Ponterotto, 2006). The use of local language aimed to minimize misinterpretation and encourage authentic expression of lived experiences (Temple & Young, 2004).

Prior to each session, participants were briefed on the purpose, confidentiality measures, and voluntary nature of their involvement.

Informed consent was obtained both verbally and in writing, in line with the ethical guidelines outlined by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2016). Where participants granted permission, interviews were audio-recorded using secure digital devices. In instances where recording was declined, detailed field notes were taken in real time to ensure the integrity and completeness of data (Gibbs, 2007; Silverman, 2013). Transcriptions were completed verbatim, with linguistic and contextual nuances carefully preserved to ensure accuracy (Bailey, 2008).

All interviews were conducted in neutral and culturally appropriate venues within Bukom, including the **Bukom Community Center**, **La Youth Development Office**, and **local public library meeting rooms**. These locations were selected because they were easily accessible, familiar to participants, and offered quiet, private spaces for confidential discussions. The choice of venues also minimized distractions from household activities or street noise and reduced potential power imbalances between the researcher and participants (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Mack et al., 2005).

Each interview lasted approximately **45 to 60 minutes**, allowing participants ample time to reflect on and discuss sensitive issues without feeling hurried. During interviews, the researcher employed **rappor-building strategies** that were culturally sensitive, such as greeting participants according to local customs, using participant-preferred honorifics, and observing respectful non-verbal cues (e.g., nodding,

maintaining appropriate eye contact). These approaches helped participants feel valued and safe, encouraging openness and richer responses (Liamputtong, 2007; Patton, 2015).

To further ensure comfort and participation, interviews were scheduled at times convenient for participants, often after work hours or during weekends, and refreshments were provided when appropriate. Participants were reminded of their rights, including the right to pause or stop the interview at any time, and the researcher consistently checked in on emotional wellbeing during discussions (WHO, 2003; Mertens, 2014).

The language choice was tailored to participants' preferences. Interviews were conducted in English for those proficient, and in Ga for others, using locally trained research assistants fluent in both languages. This ensured accurate comprehension, minimized misunderstandings, and allowed participants to express themselves fully in their preferred language, enhancing the validity of the data (UNESCO, 2018; Gibbs, 2007).

Throughout the data collection phase, the researcher maintained reflective journals and conducted memo-writing exercises to document contextual factors, personal biases, emotional responses, and emerging analytical insights (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008; Saldaña, 2016). These reflective practices enhanced methodological transparency and strengthened the credibility of the findings. By integrating reflexivity into the data collection process, the research adhered to qualitative rigor and reduced the risk of researcher-imposed bias (Finlay, 2002; Tracy, 2010).

Additionally, periodic debriefing sessions were held among team members to cross-check impressions and resolve ethical or procedural uncertainties (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Korstjens & Moser, 2018)

3.6 Sources of Data

Primary data were collected directly from participants through **in-depth interviews**, capturing first-hand accounts of family structures, communication patterns, disciplinary practices, and experiences with child abuse. Secondary data sources were used to complement and contextualize these findings, ensuring a robust understanding of both community-level and institutional perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Shenton, 2004).

The specific secondary sources included:

1. **Ghana Statistical Service (GSS) 2021: Population and Housing Census – Greater Accra Region Report**, which provided demographic and household composition data for Bukom.
2. **UNICEF Ghana 2019: Child Protection in Urban Communities Report**, offering insights into child welfare programs, intervention gaps, and best practices in urban low-income settings.
3. **Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA) 2022 Annual Report on Social Services**, detailing local child protection policies, community outreach programs, and resource allocation.

4. **Department of Social Welfare (DSW) 2021 Community Child Protection Initiative Report**, outlining official interventions, training programs for caregivers, and monitoring frameworks in Bukom and neighboring communities.
5. Relevant **peer-reviewed literature** on child abuse, family structures, and communication dynamics, such as Boafo (2019), Badoe (2005), and Lansford et al. (2014).

These sources were critically reviewed to understand the policy context, existing social development communication interventions, and documented challenges in child protection. By triangulating primary interview data with these secondary reports, the study could identify discrepancies between lived experiences and official frameworks, as well as gaps in communication, awareness, and support for vulnerable families (Boafo, 2019; Badoe, 2005; GSS, 2021).

The combination of primary and secondary sources not only strengthened the credibility and dependability of the study's findings but also facilitated a multi-layered analysis, linking micro-level family experiences in Bukom to macro-level institutional and policy contexts (UNICEF, 2019; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Shenton, 2004).

3.7 Data Analysis

This study employed **thematic analysis** as its primary data analysis technique, grounded in the well-established six-phase approach proposed

by Braun and Clarke (2006). These steps—familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and report writing—provided a structured yet flexible process suitable for exploring nuanced narratives around child abuse and family structures. Thematic analysis was chosen for its capacity to identify, organize, and interpret patterns of meaning across a dataset without being tied to a specific theoretical framework, allowing themes to emerge inductively while still being informed by the research objectives (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013).

The familiarization phase involved repeated reading of interview transcripts to immerse the researcher in the data and to develop preliminary insights. This stage was critical for recognizing recurring language, emotional tone, and implicit meanings (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Initial codes were then generated both manually and with the aid of NVivo software version 12, which facilitated systematic organization and retrieval of coded data (Gibbs, 2007). Codes represented meaningful units of data and were tagged to segments reflecting core aspects of participant experiences, such as economic stress, discipline methods, and parental roles. This dual coding approach—manual and digital—ensured both reflexivity and analytical consistency.

Following coding, emergent patterns were organized into candidate themes, which were then reviewed and refined in line with the conceptual framework and research questions. Major thematic areas that emerged

from the analysis included family composition and living arrangements, caregiver-child communication patterns, disciplinary approaches, socioeconomic stressors, and institutional responses to abuse. These themes were clustered under broader categories such as structural family dynamics and community interventions, enhancing the explanatory power of the findings (Nowell et al., 2017). The analytical process was iterative rather than linear, allowing the researcher to revisit earlier stages of analysis in response to evolving insights and feedback from peer debriefings.

To enhance the credibility and dependability of the analysis, intercoder reliability was established by involving a second coder who independently reviewed the codes. Any discrepancies were discussed until consensus was achieved, ensuring that the interpretation of data was not unduly biased by a single perspective (Armstrong, Gosling, Weinman, & Marteau, 1997). An audit trail was also maintained throughout the analysis, documenting all decisions, codebooks, theme matrices, and reflective memos. This audit trail provided transparency and enabled external validation of the analytic procedures (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). By rigorously applying these methodological safeguards, the study ensured the analytical process was both trustworthy and replicable.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the University's Ethics Review Board prior to the commencement of fieldwork. This approval

process ensured that the research design met accepted standards for protecting human subjects, especially within vulnerable populations (Resnik, 2018). Participation was entirely voluntary, and all adult participants were provided with detailed information about the purpose, risks, and benefits of the study before signing informed consent forms. For minors, assent was sought alongside formal consent from their primary caregivers, in line with established ethical protocols for research involving children (Mertens, 2014; Alderson & Morrow, 2011).

Participants were also briefed on their rights, including the freedom to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences or need for explanation. To enhance accessibility and comprehension, consent and assent forms were translated into local languages such as Ga and Twi and explained orally for participants with limited literacy (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2020). Special attention was paid to cultural sensitivity, especially in how questions around abuse, neglect, and family relationships were framed. In recognition of the psychological sensitivity of the topic, a referral list of local counseling services and NGOs was provided to participants who exhibited signs of emotional distress during or after the interviews (WHO, 2003; Newman & Glass, 2014).

Confidentiality was a central component of the ethical safeguards implemented in this study. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities, and any identifying information was removed from transcripts and field notes. These anonymization measures align

with best practices in qualitative research ethics, particularly in contexts involving stigmatized issues such as child abuse (Kaiser, 2009). Audio recordings, transcripts, and digital notes were stored on encrypted devices, and copies were backed up on password-protected cloud servers, accessible only to the core research team. Physical documents, such as signed consent forms, were locked in secure cabinets (Babbie, 2021; Israel & Hay, 2006).

These comprehensive ethical procedures were designed to adhere to both international and local research standards. They ensured the protection of participants' dignity, privacy, and well-being throughout the research process (BSA, 2015; American Psychological Association [APA], 2017). Additionally, field researchers underwent ethical training on how to handle disclosures of abuse, safeguard participant confidentiality, and respond empathetically in emotionally charged situations. This enhanced the integrity of the study and reinforced the ethical obligation to “do no harm” in social research (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001).

3.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter detailed the methodological framework for exploring how family structure influences child abuse in Bukom. By using a qualitative case study design, purposive sampling, and thematic analysis, the study aimed to provide in-depth insights into community-level dynamics. Ethical rigor and methodological validity were ensured through standardized procedures, triangulation, and reflexivity. The next chapter

presents the data and discusses findings in relation to the study's objectives.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS, AND DISCUSSION

4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents and analyzes the findings of the study on *The Influence of Family Structure on Child Abuse in Low-Income Communities: A Case Study of Bukom*. Data were collected from 30 participants, consisting of 15 caregivers, 5 adolescents, 5 community leaders, and 5 social workers. The findings are organized according to the study's objectives and research questions, with themes derived from participants' responses to the semi-structured interviews.

4.1 OBJECTIVE 1: To Examine How Different Family Structures Influence The Risk Of Child Abuse In Bukom

4.1.1 Nuclear Families and Role Clarity

For many participants, nuclear households—typically comprised of parents and their biological children—were seen as providing a measure of order in parenting roles. Caregivers repeatedly stressed that within such arrangements, duties were more predictable and clearly assigned, reducing ambiguity around who should supervise or discipline the children. As one mother explained: *“In my home it is just me, my husband, and*

our two children, so we know who is responsible. I can easily monitor what my children are doing" (P4). This sense of structured accountability resonates with Amato (2005), who argued that nuclear families often benefit from defined lines of authority that support consistent caregiving practices. In contrast to the complexities of extended or blended households, nuclear setups in Bukom seemed, at least in principle, to encourage direct and stable interaction between parents and children.

Yet, participants were quick to point out that the seeming advantages of nuclear families were frequently undermined by economic hardship and the demanding rhythms of urban life. Many parents described leaving home early in the morning and returning late at night, a routine dictated by the need to sustain the household financially. This gap created opportunities for children to wander unsupervised or fall under negative peer influence. As a child protection officer observed: *"Nuclear families here are not always ideal because parents leave early and return late, and during that time children are vulnerable to abuse outside"* (P21). These accounts echo Dubowitz et al. (2011), who caution that economic strain can erode the protective qualities typically associated with two-parent households. In Bukom's dense, low-income environment, the clarity of roles within nuclear families was not always matched by the capacity to fulfill them effectively.

Adolescents offered a particularly striking perspective on this tension, drawing attention to the emotional toll of parental fatigue. Several noted

that evenings, rather than being moments of reconnection, often became flashpoints for conflict. *“Sometimes my father shouts or beats me just because he is tired, not because I did something wrong”* (P13), one adolescent explained. This observation illustrates Cicchetti and Toth’s (2005) argument that parental stress—whether financial or emotional—can easily spill over into caregiving, distorting otherwise healthy interactions. In this sense, nuclear families were not exempt from the broader vulnerabilities facing all households in Bukom; their smaller size did not shield children from the effects of parental burnout.

What emerges, then, is a more complicated portrait of the nuclear family. On the one hand, it offers structure, consistency, and direct accountability, qualities often absent in more diffuse arrangements such as extended or blended families. On the other hand, these advantages are fragile in the face of economic precarity and psychosocial strain. The narratives from participants suggest that nuclear families may reduce the likelihood of neglect relative to other household types, but they remain exposed to the same systemic pressures—poverty, overcrowding, and social instability—that shape family life in Bukom. In other words, while family form matters, it is the interplay between structure and context that ultimately determines whether children thrive or face heightened risks of abuse. This reinforces Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological perspective, which stresses that the family cannot be studied in isolation but must be situated within the broader socio-economic and cultural systems in which it operates.

4.1.2 Extended Families and Shared Caregiving

Many people said that extended families were the most typical type of family in Bukom. This is because Ghanaians have a long history of raising children together. Carers and community leaders regularly talked about how helpful these kinds of arrangements may be, especially when biological parents were not around or were too busy. One grandmother said, "In our compound house, if I'm not there, my sister or cousin will take care of the kids" (P7). This aligns with Amato's (2005) assertion that kin-based caregiving frequently serves as a crucial safety net in situations of poverty and instability. The cooperative spirit that is a part of extended family structures was always seen as a cultural strength that makes sure that no child is ever completely alone.

But participants regularly stressed that this shared caregiving often makes people less responsible and accountable. Teenagers who lived with a lot of family members were unhappy about being "pushed around" by their relatives, who all had different expectations. "One uncle will tell you not to do this, and another will let you do it." It confuses me, and they sometimes fight with each other (P18). This feeling of inconsistency is similar to Akmatov's (2011) findings that children in extended families are more likely to be neglected when their roles are unclear. Without a distinct parental figure, discipline methods varied significantly, leaving kids confused about what was okay and what wasn't and sending them mixed messages.

These problems were made worse by overcrowding. Community leaders talked about residences where more than one nuclear unit lived in the same complex, which made it easy for fights to break out. "Too many people living in one house causes fights, and the kids get caught in the middle." Adults who aren't even their parents sometimes beat them (P25). These findings are consistent with Sedlak et al. (2010), who recognised crowding as an indicator of abuse, as competition for space and resources frequently exacerbates conflict. In Bukom, where compound houses are close together and solitude is hard to come by, adults often took their anger out on kids. But the stories also showed how strong these structures were. Social workers said that for kids whose parents had died or weren't around, grandparents or aunts were often steady, reliable adults. "I know kids whose parents have gone on trips, but their grandmother takes care of them all the time." The extended family has been a blessing for them (P22). Lansford et al. (2014) illustrate this dichotomy by asserting that extended households can function as either protective environments or zones of increased risk, contingent upon the quality of relationships and clarity of caregiving.

Teenagers themselves had different accounts: some talked about being neglected and confused, while others said they liked having numerous carers because it made them feel protected and like they belonged. A adolescent said, "My auntie will comfort me even if my mum yells." "At

least I don't feel alone" (P15). These testimonies reflect Walsh's (2012) assertion that emotional support, despite its inconsistency, can shield children from the most severe elements of family life. In general, extended families in Bukom are both stable and unstable. They embody the Ghanaian ideal of collective involvement in child-rearing; yet, the diffusion of responsibility engenders oversight gaps and elevates the potential of abuse. Their protective or detrimental influence is contingent not on their structural composition but on the negotiation of parenting responsibilities within them—a process also identified by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) in their ecological framework.

4.1.3 Single-Parent Households and Vulnerability

Among the family types discussed, single-parent households drew the most consistent description as fragile and overburdened. Caregivers repeatedly spoke of the daily challenge of managing both livelihood and parenting without the support of a partner. One mother narrated her routine with a tone of fatigue: *"I sell at the market all day. My son stays with neighbors until I return, but sometimes I hear he roams the street"* (P9). Her experience illustrates what Miller-Perrin and Perrin (2012) argue—that single parents face constant risks of neglect simply because their attention is divided between economic survival and caregiving. In Bukom, where livelihoods often depend on long, unpredictable hours of petty trading or fishing, these risks multiply.

Beyond economics, participants drew attention to the emotional weight carried by single parents, particularly mothers. Adolescents reflected on how stress frequently translated into harsher disciplinary encounters. One teenage boy said candidly: *“When my mother is angry, she will beat me hard because she has nobody to share her stress with”* (P16). His account underscores Evans et al.’s (2012) observation that parental stress often heightens the likelihood of harsh punishment. Without another adult to diffuse tension or provide relief, frustrations too easily spill over into interactions with children. These emotional dynamic highlights that abuse in single-parent households is not always rooted in malice but in the accumulated strain of isolation.

Social workers added nuance by pointing out the vulnerabilities of single fathers, who, though fewer in number, faced their own struggles. *“Most men here are not trained in looking after children, so when the mother is absent, the children suffer”* (P23). Their comment echoes Coyne et al. (2014), who argue that caregiving is strongly gendered, with men often socialized away from nurturing roles. The absence of maternal figures, therefore, exposes children to gaps in daily care such as hygiene, emotional support, or consistent monitoring. These insights reveal that the risks of single parenthood vary not only by income but also by gender and cultural expectations.

Community leaders broadened the discussion by noting how unsupervised children in single-parent homes often attract external

threats. *“When children are left alone, sometimes older boys in the neighborhood take advantage of them”* (P27). Their concerns reflect Dubowitz et al. (2011), who highlight that the absence of adult presence heightens exposure to peer or community-level abuse. In tightly packed neighborhoods like Bukom, children left to themselves are often drawn into unsafe spaces or subjected to exploitation by older youth.

Altogether, the testimonies paint single-parent households as sites of compounded risks. Economic strain stretches supervision thin, emotional isolation fuels harsher discipline, gendered caregiving expectations create practical gaps, and external threats in the community magnify vulnerability. These patterns align with Sedlak et al. (2010), who identify single parenthood as one of the strongest predictors of child maltreatment in low-income settings. Yet, the narratives from Bukom also suggest that these risks are not inevitable; they are shaped by broader socio-economic and cultural forces that intersect with the structural realities of single parenthood.

4.1.4 Blended/Stepfamilies and Conflict

Among the household types discussed, blended and stepfamily arrangements emerged as the most emotionally charged. Participants described them as complicated spaces where caregiving responsibilities were often contested and loyalties divided. Adolescents were particularly vocal about the difficulties of growing up in such households. One

teenager admitted: *“My stepmother takes care of her own children better than me. I feel like I don’t belong”* (P14). This sense of marginalization reflects Akmatov’s (2011) findings that children living with step-parents are more likely to report feelings of neglect and experience higher rates of maltreatment than those raised in nuclear families. In Bukom, where resources are already stretched thin, these feelings of exclusion are amplified.

Caregivers themselves acknowledged the delicate balancing act of discipline in blended families. One father reflected: *“It is hard to discipline stepchildren. If you are too harsh, people will say you don’t love them, but if you are soft, they will misbehave”* (P6). This testimony resonates with Lansford et al. (2014), who argue that unclear authority boundaries in stepfamilies create chronic stress for both adults and children. Parents in Bukom described walking a fine line, often second-guessing whether their actions would be interpreted as unfair or abusive, especially by extended relatives who were quick to pass judgment.

Social workers added another layer by pointing to the rivalries that frequently erupted between step-siblings. *“Step-siblings often fight, and parents sometimes take sides, which worsens abuse”* (P30). These accounts mirror Miller-Perrin and Perrin’s (2012) findings that blended households tend to foster inter-sibling competition, especially when resources such as food, money, or attention are limited. In overcrowded compound houses,

even minor disputes could escalate into serious conflicts, with children often caught in cycles of comparison and resentment.

Community leaders, however, reminded us that not all blended families were dysfunctional. They cited examples of step-parents who deliberately treated all children equally and managed to build cohesive households. *“There are good step-parents who treat all children equally. But in Bukom, poverty makes it difficult, because people prioritize their own children when resources are scarce”* (P26). This statement reflects Cicchetti and Toth’s (2005) claim that structural stress—such as poverty and unemployment—interacts with relational dynamics to either strengthen or weaken family bonds. When resources are inadequate, even the best intentions often falter.

Adolescents themselves offered contrasting perspectives, with some noting that step-parents who invested in open communication created more supportive environments. *“My stepfather always asks me about school and treats me the same as my siblings. It makes me feel part of the family”* (P19). This suggests that communication, rather than household structure alone, is a critical determinant of outcomes, a point also emphasized by Coyne et al. (2014). The variation in these accounts highlights that while blended families are at higher risk, they are not automatically harmful; their impact depends on the quality of relationships and communication within the household.

In sum, blended families in Bukom embody a tension between opportunity and vulnerability. On the one hand, they expand household membership and can provide children with additional adult figures. On the other, they are fraught with risks of favoritism, authority disputes, and sibling rivalries that too often spiral into abuse or neglect. These dynamics echo global findings, such as those of Dubowitz et al. (2011), who identify stepfamilies as one of the most complex and risk-prone family forms. The narratives from Bukom remind us that structure alone does not determine outcomes; it is the negotiation of belonging, fairness, and authority within these structures that ultimately shapes children's welfare.

4.1.5 Kinship Systems and Resilience/Risks

Participants defined kinship-based caregiving as one of the most persistent aspects of family life in Bukom. It is based on long-standing Ghanaian traditions and serves as both a cultural standard and a way to survive when biological parents are not around because they have died, moved, or are having financial problems. Carers themselves saw it as a crucial safety net. "When a mother dies or goes away, the auntie or grandmother takes over," said one grandmother. That is how we care for kids (P2). This aligns with Oppong (2019), who emphasises the durability of kinship relations in African countries, where shared responsibility guarantees that no child is completely devoid of a carer. People in Bukom often saw this arrangement as a way for the community to fight chronic poverty and weak family systems.

But the voices of teens showed a different side to this practice: discrimination and emotional neglect. One teenager said, "I live with my uncle, but his wife always yells at me." She treats me differently than her kids (P17). This is in line with what Lansford et al. (2010) say, which is that non-biological children in kinship households often get treated differently than biological children. For many young people, living with relatives made them feel left out, like they were second-class citizens, and at risk of being verbally or physically abused by carers who cared more about their own children. These stories show how family may create hierarchies of belonging in the home, even if it is meant to protect people.

Social workers in Bukom said that kinship care is both common and a problem, and they said that migration and money problems are the main causes. "Lots of parents can't take care of their kids, so they send them to live with family members." But these relatives occasionally use the kids as free labour (P20). Their observations align with Evans et al. (2012), who identified that kin-based caregiving arrangements can occasionally subject children to exploitation, especially in households where extra help is perceived as a means to alleviate domestic or economic pressures. In Bukom's crowded compound housing, children in kinship care were sometimes given tasks or market work that was much too hard for them, which made it hard to tell the difference between help and exploitation. Community leaders pointed out how unclear discipline may be in kinship houses, when more than one adult is in charge. "When there are a lot of

relatives around, kids don't know who to listen to." "Sometimes everyone in the house hits them" (P29). This aligns with Akmatov's (2011) apprehensions regarding role ambiguity in households where caregiving responsibilities are shared among multiple persons. Without clear rules, kids not only got inconsistent punishments, but they also got punishments that were too similar and might quickly turn into abuse. It was hard to hold any one adult responsible for neglect or abuse because there was no clear responsibility.

However, the participants were cautious to highlight how important and culturally important kinship systems are. In a community whose parents die, move away, or are poor, kin-based caring is sometimes the only way for a child to stay alive. Social workers talked about times when kin houses gave kids a sense of security and belonging, especially when family members cared about the child emotionally. Teenagers also said that kinship care meant they weren't completely alone, even though they had some bad encounters. This paradox illustrates Cicchetti and Toth's (2005) overarching thesis that family structures cannot be categorically deemed entirely protective or entirely detrimental; their influence is contingent upon the quality of relationships and the availability of resources.

In general, kinship caring in Bukom is a double-edged sword. It shows a strong cultural system of care based on shared duty and survival on the one hand. On the other hand, it makes places where kids are discriminated

against, taken advantage of, and don't know who is in charge. The results show that kinship systems are very important in the society. However, they also need more social protections and clearer rules for carers to make sure that children living in these homes are not neglected or abused.

4.2 OBJECTIVE 2: To Evaluate The Role Of Caregiver-Child Communication In Shaping Experiences Of Child Welfare And Abuse In Bukom

4.2.1 Open Communication as a Protective Factor

A prominent topic that arose from participants' narratives was the significance of open and respectful communication between carers and children. Numerous parents and guardians articulated that elucidating family norms, considering children's viewpoints, and amicably resolving disputes through dialogue cultivated peace and diminished the probability of conflict progressing into maltreatment. A carer stated succinctly: "When I communicate with my children in a calm manner, they are more obedient." "When I raise my voice, they become obstinate" (P3). This discovery aligns with Coyne et al. (2014), who contend that dialogic communication enhances collaboration and bolsters children's readiness to adhere to parental expectations.

Adolescents specifically highlighted the influence of communication on their sense of belonging and respect within the family unit. Being heard,

even when in error, frequently distinguished between experiencing punishment and feeling victimised. A teenage girl reflected: “When my mother enquires about my actions prior to administering punishment, I feel esteemed.” “I do not perceive myself as abused” (P12). Her statements reflect the findings of Williams and Nussbaum (2001) that sympathetic, developmentally suitable communication promotes emotional security, enabling children to perceive discipline as corrective rather than antagonistic. In households where youngsters were afforded the opportunity to articulate their thoughts, they expressed a heightened sense of safety and connection.

Social workers substantiated these assertions with their field experiences, noting that families engaging in open communication were less prone to abuse reports. Families that engage in dialogue with their children hardly feature in abuse cases. The children possess sufficient confidence to disclose their issues” (P22). Their viewpoint corresponds with Lansford et al. (2014), who discovered that open communication serves as a protective factor, safeguarding children from both physical and emotional abuse. Thus, communication not only averts conflict but also facilitates avenues for children to report abuse and request assistance when necessary.

Community leaders introduced a cultural aspect to these debates, seeing that a nuanced yet significant transformation is occurring in Bukom's parenting methodologies. Historically, children lacked a voice. Some parents permit their children to communicate, so diminishing

misunderstandings” (P26). Their observations resonate with Walsh’s (2012) characterisation of a progressive transition from authoritarian family structures to more democratic paradigms, especially in urbanising environments. These adjustments, however inconsistent, indicate that cultural norms are dynamic and that novel practices can arise even in places where conformity has historically been emphasised.

Participants were pragmatic on the constraints of this tendency. Numerous individuals acknowledged that open communication was atypical, as cultural norms of deference and silence continued to influence familial connections. One father articulated, “At times, I desire to listen to my children, yet others assert that a loquacious child is disrespectful” (P8). This substantiates Boafo’s (2019) assertion that Ghanaian parenting is profoundly shaped by traditions that associate silence with respect. Such conventions restrict children's abilities for self-expression and hinder parents' capacity to implement more sympathetic methods.

Collectively, these findings emphasise the transformative capacity of open communication in mitigating abuse, while also revealing its vulnerability within Bukom’s cultural framework. Families that engaged in communication saw reduced disputes and enhanced relationships; yet, significant transformation necessitates deliberate interventions that confront established norms of quiet and compliance. Programs that educate carers in effective listening, conflict resolution, and

compassionate communication may serve as essential protective measures against child maltreatment within the community.

4.2.2 Authoritarian and Harsh Communication Styles

Some individuals mentioned the positive effects of conversation, but more people said that authoritarian communication techniques were still common in Bukom homes. The most effective methods of control, according to parents and guardians, are instructions, loud voices, and vocal reprimands. "When you don't yell at your child, people assume you're weak," one caretaker said. "That is the way we were brought up" (P8). Cultural expectations that link strictness with successful parenting normalise and encourage harsh communication techniques, as this candid reflection demonstrates (Gershoff, 2002).

The effect of such communication on adolescents' emotions was discussed freely. A number of people spoke about how authoritarian leadership approaches made them feel unsafe and unheard. "My father never explains anything," one youngster remarked. "He merely orders me to do what he wants, and if I dare to question him, he slaps me" (P14). These stories are similar to those of Lansford et al. (2010), who discovered that children who grow up in authoritarian homes are more likely to feel abused because their punishments are never explained or shown any empathy. Instead of seeing punishment as a means of instruction, these teenagers saw it as a means of dominance.

According to social workers, physical violence was a common outcome of authoritarian communication styles characterised by harsh language and strict orders. Children who are subjected to continual yelling or insults may exhibit disruptive behaviour, leading to more severe consequences (P20). Aggressive communication practices are damaging trust and leading to more conflict in the long run, as Cicchetti and Toth (2005) argued. According to teachers and child protection officials, verbal aggressiveness was the starting point for many cases of reported abuse in Bukom.

The cultural milieu of urban slum living provided the framework for authoritarian tendencies, according to community leaders. Strict communication, they said, was sometimes warranted as a means of controlling children in a challenging setting. "In a place like Bukom, where children can easily go astray, most parents believe that strictness is the only way to control children" (P27). Consistent with Badoe's (2005) research, this suggests that parents in Ghana frequently use fear as a tool to control their children when they are worried about them getting away. An unhealthy yet fast way to establish order in overcrowded and economically precarious homes is to yell or scold.

The inconsistencies of this strategy were also highlighted by the adolescents. Some people said that the continual shouting made people avoid each other instead of respecting them. My stepfather is always yelling, and I've learnt to tune him out. His words have no impact on me anymore" (P15). This is in line with the findings of Coyne et al. (2014), who

contend that communicative authoritarianism discourages collaboration and, instead, frequently results in emotional withdrawal or disobedience. Authoritarianism, in this view, may achieve temporary compliance but destroys trust and emotional intimacy in the long run.

As a whole, the authoritarian rules are deeply ingrained in Bukom because of the continuance of harsh communication approaches. Although families believe that yelling, scolding, and verbal reprimands work, research shows that they frequently lead to anger, withdrawal, and even physical violence. Authoritarian communication hinders healthy child development and fosters circumstances where abuse can thrive; these practices demonstrate this, according to Miller-Perrin and Perrin (2012). Therefore, the problem is in changing cultural views of a "strong" parent, from dominance to guiding and conversation.

4.2.3 Silence, Avoidance, and Emotional Neglect

Participants often characterised aggressive communication styles, but they also highlighted a subtler pattern that is just as harmful: the tendency to avoid or remain silent when family interactions are taking place. Caretakers who felt unprepared or overwhelmed often resorted to quiet when confronted with difficult conversations with their charges. A woman came clean about her silence whenever her daughter brought up the

subject of her father. Because I am at a loss for words, I stay away from it" (P5). Walsh (2012) argues that children lack the reassurance and clarity they seek when adults remain silent, even if it's inadvertent. Her words beautifully convey this idea. Adolescents saw this quiet not as a way to cope, but as a form of rejection. A lot of people said that being disregarded hurt really bad. Ignoring me whenever I speak is my stepmother. According to one teen, "It feels like I don't exist" (P15). Such accounts corroborate the findings of Coyne et al. (2014), who stress that children's feeling of value and belonging is eroded by non-responsiveness. Children felt unheard, irrelevant, and cut off from the emotional lives of their families when communication breakdowns were common.

Social professionals bolstered this view by elaborating on how children who endured emotional neglect frequently exhibited behavioural issues in settings other than their homes. When they are unable to communicate their feelings at home, some kids act out at school. It is also abusive to remain silent" (P28). This finding is in line with what Dubowitz et al. (2011) found: that emotional unavailability, a type of neglect, is associated with negative outcomes for children's development, such as low self-esteem and poor academic performance in later years. In Bukom, where many people rely on their schools as a second home, educators were frequently the first to see the effects of neglect.

Silence, according to community elders, was not always an accident but was instead utilised as a form of deliberate punishment. This "I won't talk to you" attitude might persist for days among local parents. "The child feels rejected" (P24). Such actions are in line with the warnings of Lansford et al. (2014), who note that emotional and physical coldness from parents can break parent-child relationships just as effectively as physical punishment. While the goal was to make people feel bad about themselves, several people felt that the long periods of quiet actually made them angry, confused, and distrustful.

The stories from Bukom show that avoiding or remaining silent are not neutral behaviours, but rather strong forms of communication that can have serious emotional effects. Children miss out on affirmation, direction, and connection when carers avoid involvement. Echoing UNICEF's (2019) plea to acknowledge communication as fundamental to child protection, adolescents in particular have said that being disregarded leaves wounds as long-lasting as physical punishment.

Basically, when family members don't say anything, it might mean a lot of things, including emotional abandonment, miscommunication, and neglect. Interventions should target the hidden harm of avoidance and withdrawal in addition to openly hostile communication, according to these findings. Bukom families can strengthen their ability to withstand adversity and lessen their children's susceptibility to abuse if they are

supported in having tough conversations and maintaining emotional responsiveness.

4.2.4 Verbal Aggression and Normalization of Abuse

Throughout the interviews, one common thread emerged: verbal abuse is commonplace in households, and carers often justify it as a necessary form of discipline. A number of guardians and parents have come clean about shaming their children into submission by resorting to insults, ridicule, or severe criticism as disciplinary measures. "If the child misbehaves, we call him names to shame him," one carer admitted freely. He will learn that way (P10). Badoe (2005) found that many Ghanaian households justify verbal assault as a kind of discipline, even though it makes children feel less valuable. These actions reflect that.

The emotional fallout of being the focus of derogatory labels, meanwhile, could continue a long time for teenagers. After receiving insults on a regular basis, participants felt humiliated, rejected, and hopeless. Whenever my mom says I'm "useless," it hurts. At times, I contemplate going outside" (P19). In a similar vein, Sedlak et al. (2010) state that verbal aggression can cause psychological wounds that are just as damaging as physical abuse and that children's resilience and development are stunted as a result. Teens in Bukom were already vulnerable at home due to severe socioeconomic pressures, and verbal abuse just made things worse.

Carers seldom perceive verbal abuse as detrimental, which social workers pointed out as an invisible kind of abuse. "Parents don't see insults as abuse," one parent explained. According to their understanding, physical violence is the only form of abuse (P30). This ignorance supports Boafo's (2019) claim that psychological abuse, which does not involve physical violence, is underappreciated in Ghana despite the fact that it contributes to trauma perpetuation cycles. Because both parents and children come to accept verbal aggressiveness as a "normal" component of family life, experts in the field have stressed that it is more difficult to question or prevent.

The fact that verbal aggressiveness often leads to physical retribution was brought up by community leaders, who gave another layer to the discussion. Anger escalates from insults to beatings. This pattern appears frequently" (P25). Negative verbal exchanges may serve as triggers for harsher kinds of discipline, as suggested by Cicchetti and Toth's (2005) theoretical linkage between verbal aggressiveness and physical violence. Their evidence supports this idea. The boundary between verbal punishment and physical abuse became more porous as a result of this cycle, making Bukom homes unsafe for children's emotional and physical well-being.

People involved acknowledged that verbal hostility, even if it has become commonplace, hurts children's self-esteem and feeling of belonging. Teens said they sought approval from less stable sources, such as

dangerous peer groups, or withdrew from family relations as a result of constant criticism. The results back up Gershoff's (2002) assertion that both physical and verbal punishment lead to the same negative effects, such as anger, anxiety, and isolation. Such damaging communication patterns get ingrained in community culture and transmitted down through generations when they persist.

In sum, the results show that aggressive speech in Bukom is about more than just "discipline through words." It is a common yet harmful behaviour that breaks down good caregiver-child interactions, normalises aggression, and harms children emotionally. To combat this type of abuse, parents and community leaders must realise that taunting and insulting are not benign forms of discipline but rather harmful types of abuse with long-lasting effects.

4.2.5 Communication as Prevention and Support

Participants strongly discussed the good possibilities of discourse in developing family bonds and preventing abuse, despite the problems in caregiver-child communication that were repeatedly mentioned. Carers frequently compared harsh methods with peaceful discussions, stressing that the former yielded better outcomes than the latter. "When I sit with my son and explain why something is wrong, he changes without me beating him" (P1), according to one carer. These considerations are in line with the claim put forth by Williams and Nussbaum (2001) that

communication serves as a means of less coercive and more beneficial regulation of behaviour in addition to its traditional role as a medium for the transmission of information.

Teens repeatedly corroborated similar observations, highlighting the importance of courteous and open dialogue in creating a safe environment. Just one example: "I don't hide things from my mum if I can talk to her freely," one kid said. "I am at ease" (P11). This lends credence to the findings of Coyne et al. (2014), who found that children are less likely to be victims of abuse when they feel safe enough to reveal issues when they receive supportive and empathic communication. Because of the prevalence of dangers among Bukom teenagers' peer groups, it is essential that they feel safe enough to disclose concerns to their families.

Social workers emphasised the need of strengthening communication practices as the foundation of local child protection measures from an institutional standpoint. People here really should learn how to communicate effectively with kids, someone said. "Many cases of abuse we see can be prevented" (P21). This demand for organised interventions is in line with what Osei (2016) has argued for as a preventative measure: that families who are better able to communicate with one another are less likely to resort to violence. This suggestion is especially important in Bukom because there is a severe lack of official parenting instruction there.

In order to change communication standards, community leaders also stressed the significance of everyone pitching in. "Parents can learn much about listening and communicating" from church and youth groups, according to one wise person. Reducing abuse will be aided by that (P23). They share the view of UNICEF Ghana (2020), which claims that community-driven programs are the key to long-term social transformation since they are based on established cultural norms and practices. These influential people saw parenting as a community activity, not just an individual duty, and believed that families might improve their communication skills via shared experiences and knowledge.

According to the stories, there is a two-sided view of communication: when it is absent or dictatorial, it poses a threat, but when it is sympathetic and dialogic, it acts as a powerful buffer. Silence, neglect, and abuse were common outcomes of ineffective communication, while constructive discourse led to better conduct, increased trust, and deeper emotional connections. This lends credence to Walsh's (2012) contention that prevalent patterns of family communication have a pivotal role in defining the outcomes related to children's well-being.

Investing in caregiver-child communication is a low-cost method that can reduce abuse in vulnerable urban areas, according to the research. Carers in Bukom may help their families break free of punishing customs and strengthen their relationships based on trust by learning active listening, problem-solving, and polite discourse.

4.3 OBJECTIVE 3: To Examine How Cultural Norms And Disciplinary Practices In Bukom Influence Child-Rearing And The Risk Of Abuse

4.3.1 Corporal Punishment as a Culturally Accepted Norm

Physical punishment, including caning, slapping, or spanking, is still often used as a form of discipline in Bukom, according to carers, teenagers, and community leaders. Physical punishment was seen as both necessary and remedial by many respondents, who attributed the practice back to traditions passed down through generations. "Beating is the first solution here when a child misbehaves," one carer explained. This is how our parents raised us, so that's how we've always done things" (P7). This view is in line with what Gershoff (2002) found: that despite increasing evidence of the dangers associated with physical punishment, it remains firmly normalised throughout many countries. The traditional association of physical punishment with parental care is well ingrained in Ghana and is remarkably difficult to change, as pointed out by Badoe (2005).

On the other hand, the negative effects of these behaviours were shown by teenagers. Physical punishment was emotionally isolating and traumatic for many people. I feel like fleeing from home whenever my uncle belts me, one teen said. The only thing it accomplishes is make me afraid of him; it doesn't make me change (P16). This supports the claim made by Lansford et al. (2014) that while physical punishment can lead to compliance in the short term, it is rarely effective in bringing about long-term behavioural change. On the contrary, it tends to cause animosity,

concealment, or evasion. These results are in line with the meta-analysis by Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor (2016), which found that physical punishment causes aggression, mental health problems, and broken family relationships.

In Bukom, social workers brought attention to the hazy boundary that exists between abuse and discipline. Physical discipline, which many parents justify as "tough love," can have negative consequences if used too frequently or with too much force. "Parents believe beating is love, but most times the punishment is excessive and harmful," (P20) said one social worker. Sedlak et al. (2010) agrees with this assessment, highlighting how physical punishment can easily escalate into abuse, particularly in low-income and stressful environments when carers' frustrations lead to harsher punishments. This supports the theoretical argument put forth by Cicchetti and Toth (2005), which states that abusive cycles are perpetuated when stress and cultural rationalisations work together.

Community leaders have also recognised the cultural significance of physical punishment, pointing out that it is not only a personal decision but also a socially expected norm. The wise claim that others will mock you if you say children shouldn't be beaten. Children can only be taught respect by physical punishment, in their view (P25). This is in line with what Badoe (2005) found: that in Ghanaian communities, people commonly attribute moral weakness or bad parenting to children who resist physical punishment. As a result, those in positions of social

authority face a difficult choice: protecting children or maintaining established social mores.

The fact that physical punishment is still used shows how societal norms are reinforced by systemic issues like poverty, overcrowding, and lax enforcement of child protection laws. Tiredness and financial stresses prompted carers to resort to physical punishment more frequently, according to their reports. This lends credence to the claim made by Sedlak et al. (2010) that children from economically disadvantaged families are more likely to experience severe forms of punishment at home. Thus, Bukom physical punishment is upheld by both cultural memory and the harsh reality of daily life, such as stress and a lack of options.

In sum, the results highlight the culturally sanctioned but detrimental normalisation of physical punishment. Although some participants defended it as an indicator of "good parenting," the negative emotional and behavioural effects were highlighted by adolescents and child protection workers. This dichotomy highlights the larger argument put out by Cicchetti and Toth (2005), which states that harmful activities are often rationalised by cultural frameworks, which makes intervention and reform extremely difficult. Thus, in order to address the issue of corporal punishment in Bukom, it is necessary to launch initiatives to raise awareness within families, as well as to engage in broader cultural debate

and garner systemic support. This will help to change the norms of discipline from violence to positive reinforcement.

4.3.2 Discipline as a Reflection of Parental Authority and Respect

The interviews revealed a number of themes, one of the most prominent of which was the cultural link between parental power and discipline. The importance of firm discipline in establishing and maintaining order and respect in the home was emphasised time and time again by carers. Parents are accused of not being responsible if they do not punish their children, according to one mother (P9). In Bukom, neighbours and extended family members often evaluate carers by how well they "control" their children, which leads to a socially policed concept of parental respect. This is in line with the findings of Lansford et al. (2010), who contend that parents in various cultural settings face societal expectations that force them to use harsh or punishing approaches. As a public sign of parental competence, such standards elevate severe punishment beyond the realm of the home.

Teens, on the other hand, saw this authoritative kind of punishment more as a source of terror than instruction. Despite secretly harbouring hatred, some respondents confessed that they conformed in order to avoid punishment. "My father says if I don't fear him, I won't respect him," one teen said. However, there are instances when I feign respect for him in order to avoid punishment (P14). By emphasising compliance above

emotional trust, this remark supports the claim put out by Coyne et al. (2014) that communication based on fear undermines authentic caregiver-child ties. The absence of speech, explanation, and mutual understanding creates an environment where respect is construed as submission and quiet. In a broader sense, this is an echo of Gershoff's (2002) argument that punishing tactics may increase compliance in the near term but damage relationships in the long run.

Social workers in Bukom brought attention to the fact that abusive behaviours were frequently rationalised by this cultural expectation of authority. Parents justified severe punishment, according to many, because it was essential for teaching children respect and discipline. To maintain respect, many cases we witness are explained away as 'punishment,'" said one child protection officer. "However, it constitutes abuse" (P22). The results corroborate the warnings of Dubowitz et al. (2011), who note that cultural narratives of authority might obscure cases of child abuse, rendering interventions unable to differentiate between "traditional discipline" and actual mistreatment. This hazy boundary poses serious obstacles for social welfare professionals fighting for children's rights in Bukom and other places where physical punishment is commonplace.

The idea that respect is synonymous with submission and quiet was further emphasised by community leaders. According to one leader, "when a child talks back, it is seen as disrespect" in their culture. Strict punishment, according to parents, "keeps the child quiet" (P28). This is in

line with Walsh's (2012) argument that cultural norms regarding compliance influence parenting decisions, frequently compromising the importance of open dialogue. It is common for youngsters in Bukom to be punished more severely if they express their ideas since their parents view them as disrespectful. Children are less likely to have opportunities to be active participants in their upbringing since the community's emphasis on obedience and silence institutionalises authoritarian parenting techniques.

Also, several of the participants did notice that there is a conflict between traditional values and modern perspectives. While some carers may have believed in harsh punishment on occasion, others confessed that they occasionally used it out of fear of being perceived as "soft" or "irresponsible" by others. Osei (2016) calls this the "cultural burden of parenting," a situation in which public oversight has an equal impact on parenting styles as individual beliefs. Parents in Bukom are expected to show their authority by society, even though they may be aware of the negative aspects of being overly controlled in their own minds.

In general, the results show that disciplinary practices are tightly linked to parental control in Bukom, which reinforces authoritarian attitudes and puts children at a higher risk of maltreatment. Culturally, discipline is seen as a sign of respect and responsibility; nevertheless, in reality, it frequently leads to a climate of fear, quiet, and emotional distancing. This contradiction highlights the point made by Cicchetti and Toth (2005), who

noted that harmful activities might be rationalised by cultural frameworks as caregiving. Interventions need to reframe respect as mutual understanding and conversation rather than dread and submission if they want to make a real dent in these long-established standards.

4.3.3 Harmful Traditional Practices and Child Well-being

A recurring issue raised by participants was the use of disciplinary practices that, while deeply embedded in cultural traditions, were directly harmful to children's physical and psychological well-being. Caregivers openly described punishments such as kneeling for prolonged periods, carrying heavy objects, or being shamed in public. One caregiver explained: *"Sometimes when a child steals, we put him in the middle of the compound and announce his crime"* (P11). In Bukom, such practices are often regarded not as cruelty but as legitimate methods of teaching morality and deterring misbehavior. These accounts resonate with Akmatov (2011), who observed that punitive public shaming remains a widely accepted disciplinary tool in many traditional societies, particularly in collectivist settings where reputational control is central.

Adolescents, however, provided starkly different perspectives. Many described the physical pain and humiliation these punishments inflicted, emphasizing their lasting emotional consequences. One adolescent recounted: *"I was made to kneel in the hot sun for hours because I played outside. I cried but no one cared"* (P17). Such narratives echo Sedlak et al. (2010), who warn that disciplinary practices combining physical and psychological

stress can cause long-term trauma, including feelings of worthlessness and low self-esteem. In Bukom, where public discipline often unfolds in shared compounds, the humiliation of being corrected before neighbors compounds the impact, leaving children stigmatized long after the punishment itself.

Social workers highlighted the normalization of these practices as a major barrier to child protection interventions. Efforts to frame them as harmful were often dismissed as culturally insensitive or irrelevant. One social worker noted: *“When we try to tell parents that making children kneel for hours is abuse, they laugh and say we don’t understand tradition”* (P30). This aligns with Lansford et al. (2014), who emphasize that resistance to reinterpreting cultural disciplinary norms presents a significant obstacle for implementing protective reforms. In contexts like Bukom, where traditional practices are intertwined with community identity, attempts at intervention can be perceived as external interference, further entrenching these methods.

Community leaders, too, acknowledged the harshness of these practices but defended their underlying intention. One elder commented: *“We grew up with these punishments and we turned out fine. That is what many parents believe”* (P26). This sentiment reflects Cicchetti and Toth’s (2005) analysis that cultural continuity often sustains practices across generations, even when they are demonstrably harmful. In this framing, the absence of visible “damage” among previous generations is taken as evidence of

effectiveness, rather than an indication of normalized trauma. The cyclical reproduction of these beliefs perpetuates an environment where abusive practices are disguised as moral instruction.

At the same time, the findings point to a tension within the community between tradition and evolving awareness. Some younger caregivers expressed unease with harsh punishments but admitted feeling pressured by elders to uphold them, suggesting a generational shift in attitudes. This reflects Boafo's (2019) observation that younger parents in Ghana are increasingly exposed to alternative child-rearing messages through schools, churches, and NGOs, though these influences often clash with entrenched community norms.

Taken together, these accounts reveal that harmful traditional practices in Bukom—whether physical, psychological, or social—are not isolated incidents but systemic, legitimized forms of discipline. Their normalization underscores the complex intersection of culture, authority, and social identity in sustaining child vulnerability. As Cicchetti and Toth (2005) argue, without deliberate cultural reinterpretation and community-driven education, these practices will continue to blur the boundary between “discipline” and abuse, perpetuating cycles of harm across generations.

4.3.4 Gendered Norms in Discipline

Participants emphasized that discipline in Bukom is often shaped by gender norms. Caregivers explained that boys are disciplined more harshly than girls. *“When a boy misbehaves, we beat him because he must be strong. For girls, we talk more gently”* (P6). This mirrors Miller-Perrin and Perrin’s (2012) observations that disciplinary approaches often reflect gender biases.

Adolescents confirmed this disparity. *“My brother is always beaten for small mistakes, but when I do the same thing, my mother* The sexism in Bukom's disciplinary practices stood out in the testimonies of the participants. Compared to girls, boys were routinely subjected to stiffer and frequently harsher kinds of reprimand, according to carers. When a boy acts out, his father will often smack him since it shows that he isn't weak. *“We speak more gently to girls”* (P6). Discipline in this society has a dual purpose: managing behaviour and educating youngsters for gender roles that are culturally dictated. These results are consistent with what Miller-Perrin and Perrin (2012) found: that parenting styles have a significant impact on how boys and girls see and interact with their families by reinforcing cultural norms on gender roles.

Even the teens themselves acknowledged the inequality, frequently voicing their perplexion or anger about the unfair treatment. *“My brother is always beaten for small mistakes, but when I do the same thing, my mother only shouts”* (P18), according to one adolescent girl. Girls were more likely to face verbal scolding and mobility restrictions, while boys

were subjected to physical punishment and assigned larger chores. Lansford et al. (2010) found that disciplinary techniques in many nations are influenced by cultural perceptions about gendered futures rather than the child's actual behaviour. However, this has the unintended consequence of making boys accept tougher punishment as "normal," whereas girls may view discipline as more socially controlled and less physically aggressive.

A group of Bukom social workers brought attention to the ways in which these gendered approaches manifest over time. They found that males who were physically punished frequently exhibited more aggressive behaviour and were more prone to imitate violent conduct in their personal relationships. The fact that "we see many boys growing up to use violence because they have learnt it from their parents" (P23) is addressed by one social worker. This finding is in line with what Cicchetti and Toth (2005) said, namely that aggressive behaviour cycles are frequently sustained via in-home social learning. Boys may unknowingly learn to associate dominance and force with strength if their family normalise violence as a form of discipline.

Within the larger framework of cultural expectations, community leaders placed these patterns of discipline. Girls were expected to exemplify submission, obedience, and nurturing, whereas boys were viewed as "future heads of households" and hence necessitated strong discipline. In order to prepare them for their roles as future leaders of household, boys

are taught in a rigorous manner, according to one leader. The submissiveness of girls is anticipated (P27). These stories support Amato's (2005) argument that patriarchal social standards are reinforced by cultural gender roles, which in turn impact parenting styles.

The fact that harsh treatment of boys frequently eroded family bonds and trust was brought up by a few participants who were uncomfortable with this inequality. Some girls hated being deprived of liberties under the pretence of protection, while carers acknowledged that beaten boys often became distant and defiant. The growing exposure of children in urban low-income situations to alternative role models through schools, peers, and media, along with the changing social realities, poses a challenge to traditional parenting practices, as Walsh (2012) argues.

To summarise, gendered expectations greatly impact Bukom's disciplinary practices, which designate girls as receivers of gentler, albeit no less controlling, techniques of correction and males as subjects of harsher ones. These behaviours contribute to the normalisation of aggressive behaviour and increased risk of physical abuse for boys, while educating girls to be subservient and have limited autonomy. This study adds to the growing body of evidence that shows how gender norms reinforce unequal cultural roles and increase the likelihood of abuse (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2012; Lansford et al., 2010; Cicchetti & Toth, 2005).

only shouts" (P18). This supports Lansford et al. (2010), who highlight how cultural expectations of masculinity influence disciplinary practices.

Social workers reported that boys exposed to harsher discipline often become aggressive. *"We see many boys growing up to use violence because they have learned it from their parents"* (P23). This aligns with Cicchetti and Toth (2005), who argue that harsh discipline fosters cycles of aggression.

Community leaders explained that these gendered practices are tied to cultural roles. *"Boys are seen as future heads of households, so they must be trained with strictness. Girls are expected to be submissive"* (P27). This reflects Amato (2005), who notes that cultural gender roles significantly shape parenting strategies.

Thus, disciplinary practices in Bukom are not only shaped by cultural norms but also by gendered expectations, contributing to differential risks of abuse and socialization outcomes.

4.3.5 Pathways to Positive Discipline and Cultural Change

Many participants acknowledged the need for change and showed a willingness to learning new techniques, despite the strongly established traditionalism of Bukom's disciplinary practices. Most notably, carers acknowledged that physical punishment did not always provide the desired results. *"Occasionally, I realise that scolding isn't effective,"* noted one mother. *"If there is another way to teach us, I am willing to learn it"*

(P2). The findings of Boafo (2019) emphasise the increasing demand for SBCC interventions in child welfare, which explains this readiness. The perspectives of carers reveal that cultural norms, although influential, are not static; exposure to new approaches may initiate a slow but steady shift. The teens compared the methods of discipline used by their parents and teachers and expressed a preference for nonviolent techniques. "I understand better when my teacher explains things to me instead of beating," one teen said. According to P13, parents should also do this. Such accounts provide credence to Osei's (2016) contention that interventions centred on communication are superior to punitive approaches in terms of behaviour modification. In addition to improving understanding, children in Bukom benefit from decreased fear and animosity and a stronger caregiver-child bond as a result of conversations and explanations.

As a workable approach, social workers vehemently supported organised parenting classes. "We need to teach parents positive discipline methods that respect children's rights" (P21) was another officer's comment. Parenting programs should be a component of national child protection plans, as emphasised by UNICEF Ghana (2020), which is in line with their suggestion. In addition, social workers found that many parents had never heard of alternatives to physical punishment and that culturally specific courses could assist breakdown barriers to change.

Local authorities recognised their pivotal role in igniting a cultural shift. They made the observation that if leaders in local institutions repeatedly advocated alternative ways, attitudes could change. People will pay attention if leaders discuss healthy discipline in community gatherings and churches, according to one leader. Culture can alter in such way (P29). It is important to connect with the community and have the support of leadership in order to change damaging social norms, according to Shenton (2004). Legitimising non-violent punishment and helping families see it as both culturally acceptable and effective could be achieved through the support of religious and traditional leaders in Bukom, who hold significant influence.

Participants also stressed the significance of being sensitive to context. They stressed the need of culturally relevant and practically applicable alternatives to physical punishment, warning that parents may disregard them if not. What this means is that interventions need to connect international child protection standards with local realities if they are to be effective (Walsh, 2012). In Bukom, this could mean rephrasing teachings so that they speak to the shared principles of accountability, reverence, and familial honour instead of viewing change as merely "abandoning tradition."

All things considered, these results show that Bukom cultural norms uphold destructive forms of punishment, but that people are becoming more cognisant of the limits of violence and are willing to consider other

options. Everyone from parents and teens to social workers and community leaders saw the value of good discipline as a strategy to prevent negative outcomes. These findings support the idea that targeted interventions, continuous education, and strong leadership participation can propel cultural transformation, even though it may be a gradual process (Boafo, 2019; Osei, 2016; UNICEF Ghana, 2020).

4.4 OBJECTIVE 4: To Provide Recommendations For Interventions And Community-Based Strategies To Reduce Child Abuse In Low-Income Urban Settings Like Bukom

4.4.1 Existing Support Systems and Their Limitations

While most participants were aware that Bukom had some measures in place to protect children, they were unanimous in their assessment of the programs' narrow scope and patchwork efficacy. Carers emphasised the significance of religious organisations, which may talk about parenting and child welfare in their sermons or community events. "Our church sometimes teaches us about good parenting, but it is not regular," one carer explained. "More is required" (P5). These stories back up what Osei (2016) found: religious institutions in Ghana have a lot of sway over family behaviour, but they don't always have the structured programs to deal with child protection in a comprehensive way. Despite the fact that many families have faith in and respect for religious leaders, their inconsistent involvement creates significant voids in preventive education.

When teens were having problems at home, they felt they could confide in their teachers at school. "I tell my teacher when I have problems at home," one teen said. According to P17, she is the sole listener. When parents or guardians were unable to provide a safe environment, many youngsters found solace in their schools. Especially in situations when official institutions like social services may be underfunded, these findings are in line with those of UNICEF Ghana (2020), which stresses the protective function of schools in child welfare. Teachers' limited training in child safety limits their capacity to do more than just listen and provide comfort, according to participants.

Concerning institutional difficulties, social workers were forthright in their interviews. The Department of Social Welfare and related organisations are responsible for handling abuse cases, but they face challenges due to a lack of resources, poor planning, and a lack of support from the community, as they admitted. "We want to respond to all cases, but we don't have enough staff or logistics," one officer remarked (P22). This finding is in line with what Owusu and Yankson (2007) found: social institutions in Ghana's urban centres suffer from chronic under-capacity due to the fact that demand exceeds available resources. This undermines faith in official systems and leads to numerous unsolved or unreported incidents of abuse in Bukom.

In cases involving the safety of children, traditional authorities frequently take the lead, according to community leaders. In cases of abuse, families

often seek settlement through chiefs, elders, or local opinion leaders before contacting formal authorities. Rather than reporting child abuse to the authorities, many families choose to bring their case to us first, according to one leader. A resolution is being sought (P28). Fast outcomes are possible with these mediations, but they also run the risk of trivialising the abuse or putting family harmony ahead of justice. This is in line with Badoe's (2005) worry that informal dispute resolution, although culturally rooted and easily available, frequently undermines accountability and diminishes the rights of children.

Support systems in Bukom are nevertheless inconsistent and fragmented, according to participants, even though these mechanisms are there: schools, social agencies, faith-based groups, and traditional authorities. Without strong coordination or extensive coverage, each actor acts within their own silo. Consequently, safeguards are reactive rather than proactive, and they are typically fragmented. In order to guarantee trust, consistency, and long-term efficacy, these results are in line with what Shenton (2004) has stressed about the necessity of integrated systems in child protection. Despite these systems, children in Bukom continue to be vulnerable due to a lack of solid alliances and sufficient funding.

All things considered, Bukom's present child protection landscape shows both strengths and weaknesses. Some good places to start are with the cultural legitimacy of community leaders, the statutory mandate of social welfare organisations, the trusted function of schools, and the moral

authority of churches and mosques. Their combined efforts will not be enough to alleviate the structural hazards that children in this low-income urban setting confront unless these players are brought together through intentional, well-funded measures.

4.4.2 Role of Community Leaders and Local Institutions

Community leaders in Bukom have a significant impact on parenting styles and initiatives to safeguard children, according to participants. According to carers, official institutions do not always hold the same level of sway as chiefs, elders, and opinion leaders due to the cultural legitimacy and moral weight of their opinions. "If a chief says beating is wrong, people will listen," one carer explained. "Leaders are followed by parents" (P6). This view is in line with Lansford et al. (2010), who state that respected local authorities, as opposed to outside players, are better able to influence cultural norms and behaviours. The support of leaders can hasten the adoption of effective disciplinary methods in Bukom, a community whose communal life is intricately interwoven.

The importance of leaders serving as role models in the community was also emphasised by teenagers. A lot of kids learn social norms by watching how their parents and other adults treat them when they're little. For example, "When elders treat children with respect, others copy them" (P15), as one teen put it. This data lends credence to the need of role modelling in SBCC interventions, as proposed by Boafo (2019). Through their everyday interactions, leaders shape the way generations perceive

discipline and caring, in addition to directing parents through advice or decrees.

Collaborating with community leaders is essential for meaningful child protection work, social workers emphasised. "We can't succeed in protecting children if community leaders are not involved," one officer commented. The gatekeepers are they" (P21). Interventions must be firmly rooted in the social and cultural frameworks that communities have faith in; this is in line with what Cicchetti and Toth (2005) have said about the importance of contextual collaboration in welfare programs. A key component of the credibility and success of protection programs in Bukom is the participation of leaders, who mediate between official institutions and local families.

Even though they admitted to having gaps in their own understanding, community leaders voiced a willingness to be more involved. We desire training so that we can better guide parents," one elder admitted. Additionally, there are instances when we are unsure about the optimal course of action" (P27). To make sure that leaders have both influence and the right understanding about child protection, this echoes the call for capacity building among local authorities made by Evans et al. (2012). Training could assist reframe the impact of highly recognised Bukom leaders in favour of healthy parenting by addressing the possibility that they rely on inherited traditions that perpetuate harmful practices.

According to the research, leaders are not only responsible for preserving tradition but also have the power to bring about change. Although their power keeps corporal punishment and other harmful practices in place, it might also be used to change these traditions. This paradox echoes the warnings of Sedlak et al. (2010), who state that initiatives that do not take local leadership into account run the danger of encountering resistance, whilst those that do so have the potential to accelerate systemic change.

As a whole, Bukom community leaders play a vital role in ensuring the safety of children by balancing cultural norms, official power, and legal safeguards. They preserve the community's moral foundation as cultural guardians and are strong advocates for changing detrimental habits. Improving child protection practices in metropolitan areas with low incomes can be achieved by leveraging their influence through training, collaboration, and intentional inclusion into welfare measures.

4.4.3 Gaps in Parenting Education and Communication Training

Many interviewees saw the lack of formal parenting programs in Bukom as an important vulnerability in the city's child protection infrastructure. Those in charge freely acknowledged that they had no choice but to resort to old techniques and physical punishment. "We don't know other ways to discipline children," one mother remarked openly. "So long as someone can demonstrate us, we'll give it a go" (P9). This acknowledgement emphasises parents' openness to learning and supports Bofo's (2019) claim that SBCC programs are crucial for filling carers' knowledge gaps.

Many parents, in the absence of organised instruction, persist in using harmful customs that have been passed down through the centuries.

Teens have verified that similar disparities in understanding also apply to regular family conversations. Rather than engaging in conversation and explanation, many parents resorted to yelling or becoming silent, which greatly frustrated the children. "Sometimes my dad just yells," one adolescent said. "I would understand if he could explain things better" (P14). These findings are in line with those of Coyne et al. (2014), who show that carers and children experience an escalation of conflict and a decrease in trust when communication is inefficient. As a result of adults' and children's lack of access to formal parenting classes in Bukom, the community is mired in a never-ending cycle of miscommunication and punishment for wrongdoing.

The importance of parenting education as a preventative measure was emphasised by social workers more than anybody else. A police officer stressed the need of programmes that instruct parents in nonviolent communication and punishment techniques (P23). Their suggestion is in line with what Osei (2016) has argued for regarding parental interventions: a focus on communication. Many parents want to be better, but social workers have found that they don't know what to do since they haven't been exposed to options that combine empathy with authority. Conflict resolution, emotional control, and non-violent discipline are abilities that

families in Bukom currently lack. Structured training could provide them with these tools.

While acknowledging the necessity of such initiatives, community leaders emphasised the significance of being sensitive to different cultures. "If you bring foreign ideas, people won't accept them," said one leader. Training needs to be culturally appropriate (P25). Lansford et al. (2014) argues that interventions that are culturally adapted have a greater impact and are more widely accepted than those that are seen as imposed from outside. This comment echoes that reasoning. In order to reframe constructive discipline as compatible with community values instead than at odds with them, leaders advocated for the integration of local idioms, proverbs, and customs into parenting instruction.

Participants repeatedly connected the increased number of abuse and neglect cases in Bukom to the absence of parenting education, demonstrating a feeling of urgency in the talks. Families are unable to break the vicious cycle of violence unless they have access to organised chances to learn other techniques. This is in line with Walsh's (2012) assertion that education at the home level is just as important as new laws or institutional reforms when it comes to improving child welfare.

When considered as a whole, these results show that one of the biggest problems with Bukom's system for protecting children is the lack of formal parenting classes. As long as they are culturally relevant and practically applicable, capacity-building initiatives have the support of

teenagers, carers, social workers, and community leaders. Breaking abuse cycles and promoting healthier family relationships requires equipping parents with communication, empathy, and constructive discipline skills, according to the research.

4.4.4 The Need for Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

Everyone who took part in the discussion stressed the need of community organisations, institutions, and families working together to stop child abuse in Bukom. Supporters of school-social service cooperation were heard loud and clear by carers. If social workers and educators collaborate, a mother said, "They can stop abuse early" (P11). This echoes the sentiments expressed by UNICEF (2019), who emphasise the importance of schools as entry sites for children in need of protection, since educators are frequently the first to recognise warning indications of abuse or neglect. Opportunities to intervene early are sometimes lost due to a lack of such connections.

Additionally, teenagers provided new insights by highlighting the significance of peer networks in determining resilience and behaviour. We may also remind our parents of better ways if children can communicate and learn from one another, as one participant put it (P18). Engaging with peers not only offers emotional support, but also fosters safe spaces where kids may talk about how they handle tough familial situations. Evans et al. (2012) contend that peer networks help individuals become more resilient and less susceptible to abuse; our findings are in line with their arguments.

Empowering children to learn from and support each other could be a valuable resource that is being underutilised in Bukom, a place with no formal structures.

Institutional coordination is crucial, according to social workers. They made the observation that local assemblies, the Department of Social Welfare, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) all function in Bukom, but frequently without coordinating their efforts or pooling resources. The need to combine our efforts was brought up by one of the officers. Results are little because everyone is now working alone" (P20). Their worries are in line with those of Dubowitz et al. (2011), who state that the effectiveness of welfare initiatives is diminished in disjointed systems, but that integration improves coverage and longevity. Collaboration in Bukom may entail utilising one another's case management systems, launching cooperative outreach initiatives, and combining resources to reach more people.

Leaders in the community emphasised that grassroots organisations like youth clubs, churches, and mosques are essential to successful partnership. Churches and youth organisations should help find a solution, according to one leader. As a group, we have the power to alter perspective" (P29). The need of community-driven collaboration for social transformation is emphasised by Shenton (2004). The likelihood that treatments will be accepted as culturally appropriate and legitimate increases when trusted local groups are involved, which in turn decreases opposition to change.

This level of cooperation is particularly important in Bukom since informal authority frequently influences daily life more than governmental organisations.

A comprehensive, multi-stakeholder strategy that incorporates families, schools, religious groups, social services, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and community groups is thus required for effective child safety in Bukom, according to the data. This method is in line with the ecological systems concept proposed by Cicchetti and Toth (2005). This framework stresses that the larger institutional and cultural context, in addition to family structures, shapes child welfare. Preventing abuse and protecting children is much improved when all three levels of this system—family, community, and institution—work together.

A future in which community and institutional actors support one another, share duties and resources, and work together was the overarching vision of the participants. The results show a significant local desire to embrace a collaborative effort, even when this model encounters difficulties with funding and coordination. This clearly illustrates the point that no one entity can safeguard children in Bukom on their own, but that all members of society, including families, leaders, institutions, and peers, must work together to do so.

4.4.5 Recommendations for Sustainable Interventions

In order to make sure that programs dealing with child abuse in Bukom are effective and last, participants came up with a variety of suggestions.

Regular, organised workshops, rather than one-off activities, were deemed necessary by carers. "We want monthly training on parenting, so we don't forget what we learn" (P4), one mother explained. This aligns with UNICEF Ghana's (2020) focus on continuing engagement, which highlights the need of supporting families to practise and improve new skills over time. It also notes that interventions that are conducted on an ongoing basis are significantly more effective than ones that are done seldom. Carers in Bukom would be able to overcome traditional pressures and normalise excellent parenting methods with the support of repeated seminars.

Another important point brought up by teenagers was the need of having places where kids could go to feel protected and supported while they were going through tough times. "If there is a place we can go when we are worried, it will help" (P19), said one teen. Sedlak et al. (2010) argues that safe places are essential components of child protection systems, and this underscores the disparity between institutional protection and the immediate needs of children. Youth centres, after-school programs, and community groups provide a safe environment where teenagers in Bukom can meet with adults and peers for support and safety. Such places could also be centres for advocacy and counselling.

Local administration should incorporate parental education, according to social workers. "Parenting education should be part of community by-laws and enforced" (P24) was the suggestion of one policing official. Social and Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC) needs policy support to be

effective, according to Boafo (2019), who echoes this sentiment in their suggestion. Integrating good parenting into Bukom's governance structures will make child welfare a collective duty, guaranteeing accountability and sustainability, in a community where by-laws control daily behaviour. Cultural practices could be formally brought into line with modern child protection standards through this as well. As an additional sustainability pillar, community-driven monitoring mechanisms were suggested by community leaders. "We need committees in each area to watch for abuse and report" (P26) was the recommendation of one leader. This echoes the plea made by Osei (2016) for community-based monitoring systems that give children a voice in child protection. By serving as a link between Bukom's families and official institutions, these committees may keep an eye out for potential problems, give out warnings before they escalate, and implement targeted solutions. Trust and responsiveness could be enhanced, and cases could be less likely to be overlooked or dismissed, by establishing monitoring inside the community itself.

Child abuse in Bukom can be effectively addressed through the implementation of following recommendations: community-driven monitoring, safe spaces for children, continuing workshops, and the incorporation of SBCC into governance. All three of these elements work together to form a comprehensive plan for protecting children, one that takes into account the systemic, cultural, and communication factors at

play. Cicchetti and Toth (2005) state that in order to find long-term solutions, we need to look at the underlying causes of vulnerability as well as the specific threats we face today.

At the end of the day, everyone wanted to live in a community where education never ends, kids can be themselves, parents are held accountable, and everyone is always on the lookout for danger. These findings point to the need for a coordinated, culturally grounded system that protects children, empowers carers, and mobilises the entire community to reduce abuse if child safety is to be a sustainable issue in Bukom.

4.6 Discussion of Results

4.6.1 Influence of Family Structures on Child Abuse

The findings demonstrated that family structure significantly shapes children's risk of experiencing abuse in Bukom. Nuclear families were perceived as offering clearer roles and responsibilities, which aligns with Demo and Acock (1996) who argue that well-defined parental roles foster more consistent caregiving. However, economic hardship weakened the protective function of nuclear households, often leaving children unsupervised or exposed to stress-induced harsh discipline. This mirrors Cicchetti and Toth's (2005) claim that structural stressors amplify caregiving vulnerabilities.

Extended families were common in Bukom, providing collective caregiving that reflects Ghanaian traditions (Amato, 2005). Yet participants highlighted role confusion and overcrowding as major risks, exposing children to inconsistent discipline and neglect. These findings support Akmatov (2011), who emphasizes that role ambiguity increases abuse vulnerability. At the same time, extended families also functioned as protective buffers for children of absent parents, aligning with Lansford et al. (2014) on the duality of kinship systems.

Single-parent households were described as most vulnerable due to economic strain, limited supervision, and emotional stress. Adolescents reported feelings of neglect and conflict, confirming Miller-Perrin and Perrin's (2012) argument that single parents face disproportionate risks of maltreatment. Social workers also observed that single fathers struggled with caregiving, resonating with Coyne et al. (2014) on gendered gaps in parenting competencies.

Blended and stepfamilies emerged as particularly complex. Conflicts between biological and non-biological caregivers often resulted in children feeling marginalized, confirming Akmatov's (2011) findings that stepchildren face higher rates of maltreatment. Role negotiation was highlighted as a persistent challenge, consistent with Lansford et al. (2014), who argue that unclear authority in blended families fuels risks of conflict and abuse.

Kinship-based caregiving was framed as both protective and risky. While relatives such as grandparents provided essential safety nets, adolescents reported neglect and discrimination from non-biological caregivers. This duality reflects Evans et al. (2012), who found that kinship systems often expose children to both resilience and exploitation, depending on family dynamics.

Overall, these findings align with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which posits that children's well-being is shaped by the interplay of family and broader socio-economic systems. Family structures in Bukom both protect and endanger children depending on how economic stress, cultural roles, and caregiving responsibilities intersect.

4.6.2 Role of Caregiver-Child Communication in Shaping Child Welfare

The study revealed that communication patterns between caregivers and children strongly influenced whether discipline was experienced as supportive or abusive. Participants described open communication as fostering trust and cooperation, supporting Coyne et al. (2014), who argue that dialogic communication reduces conflict. Adolescents emphasized that being heard by caregivers enhanced their sense of security, resonating with Williams and Nussbaum's (2001) findings on empathetic communication and child well-being.

Conversely, communication breakdowns—manifesting as silence or avoidance—were linked to emotional neglect. Adolescents described

feeling “invisible” when caregivers ignored them, echoing Dubowitz et al. (2011), who link non-responsiveness to developmental harm. Silence as punishment also fostered feelings of rejection, consistent with Lansford et al. (2014), who warn that withdrawal damages parent-child bonds.

Verbal aggression, including insults and ridicule, was normalized by many caregivers as a form of “discipline through words.” Yet adolescents reported significant psychological harm, aligning with Sedlak et al. (2010), who note that verbal abuse can be as damaging as physical violence. Community leaders acknowledged that verbal aggression often escalated into physical abuse, reflecting Cicchetti and Toth’s (2005) analysis of the aggression cycle.

Importantly, the data showed that effective caregiver-child communication served as a protective mechanism. Families that prioritized dialogue, explanation, and respect reported fewer cases of violence. This finding resonates with Osei (2016), who stresses the role of communication training in preventing abuse. It also reflects Walsh’s (2012) claim that evolving family communication patterns can disrupt authoritarian models.

These findings affirm Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which explains how caregivers’ adaptation (or failure to adapt) their communication affects children’s emotional security. In Bukom,

caregivers who rigidly enforced authority without adjusting communication styles increased the risk of maltreatment.

In summary, caregiver-child communication in Bukom emerges as both a risk and a resource. Poor communication normalizes abuse and neglect, while open dialogue fosters trust and resilience.

4.6.3 Cultural Norms and Disciplinary Practices in Relation to Child Abuse

The findings highlighted corporal punishment—caning, slapping, and spanking—as deeply embedded cultural norms in Bukom. Caregivers justified these practices as traditional and necessary for instilling respect, echoing Gershoff's (2002) claim that physical punishment is culturally rationalized. Adolescents, however, described fear and trauma, supporting Lansford et al. (2014), who argue that corporal punishment may enforce compliance but undermines long-term behavior change.

Harmful disciplinary practices extended beyond corporal punishment to include kneeling for hours, carrying heavy loads, and public shaming. These were widely normalized despite their harm, confirming Akmatov (2011), who documented punitive shaming as a disciplinary tool. Adolescents reported humiliation and distress, echoing Sedlak et al. (2010) on the psychological consequences of such punishments.

Discipline was also framed as a marker of parental authority and respect. Caregivers described social pressure to demonstrate “control” over children, aligning with Lansford et al. (2010), who argue that cultural expectations push parents toward strict methods. Adolescents reported pretending to respect parents out of fear, confirming Coyne et al. (2014) on the damaging effects of fear-based parenting.

Gender norms shaped discipline significantly. Boys were disciplined more harshly than girls, reflecting Amato’s (2005) findings on gendered parenting roles. Social workers noted that harsh discipline reinforced aggression in boys, consistent with Cicchetti and Toth (2005), who link violent discipline to cycles of violence.

Despite entrenched norms, participants expressed openness to positive discipline. Caregivers and leaders suggested workshops, schools, and churches as vehicles for cultural change. This supports Boafo (2019), Osei (2016), and UNICEF Ghana (2020), who advocate SBCC programs and community-led parenting education as alternatives to corporal punishment.

These findings confirm that while cultural norms sustain harmful practices, they are not immutable. With culturally grounded interventions, traditions can evolve toward non-violent, protective approaches to discipline.

4.6.4 Interventions and Community-Based Strategies for Preventing Child Abuse

Participants identified existing but limited child protection mechanisms in Bukom, including churches, schools, social services, and traditional authorities. Caregivers noted occasional parenting lessons from churches, reflecting Osei (2016) on the role of faith-based institutions. Adolescents described schools as safe spaces, consistent with UNICEF Ghana (2020). Social workers highlighted institutional under-capacity, echoing Owusu and Yankson (2007), while community leaders admitted that informal dispute resolution often downplayed child rights, confirming Badoe (2005).

Participants emphasized that community leaders are cultural custodians with the authority to influence parenting practices. Their voices were described as pivotal for cultural change, resonating with Lansford et al. (2010) and Evans et al. (2012) on leadership as agents of transformation. Leaders themselves expressed a need for training, highlighting their dual role as both influencers and learners.

Parenting education emerged as a priority intervention. Caregivers admitted knowledge gaps, adolescents criticized parents' communication styles, and social workers called for structured training. Leaders stressed the importance of cultural adaptation. These findings support Boafo (2019), Coyne et al. (2014), and Lansford et al. (2014), who all emphasize

the importance of communication-based, culturally relevant parenting education.

Collaboration was seen as essential. Caregivers suggested school–social service partnerships, adolescents stressed peer group empowerment, social workers called for institutional coordination, and leaders recommended including youth groups and churches. This aligns with Dubowitz et al. (2011) and Shenton (2004), who stress systemic integration and community-driven collaboration.

Sustainable interventions were also proposed. Caregivers recommended monthly workshops, adolescents suggested safe spaces, social workers advocated governance-backed SBCC, and leaders called for monitoring committees. These insights reflect UNICEF Ghana (2020), Sedlak et al. (2010), Boafo (2019), and Osei (2016), confirming that effective strategies must combine education, safe spaces, institutional integration, and grassroots monitoring.

Together, these findings affirm Cicchetti and Toth's (2005) ecological systems perspective, showing that child protection requires interventions across family, community, institutional, and cultural levels. In Bukom, a multi-stakeholder, culturally grounded approach is essential for reducing child abuse risks.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

5.0 Introduction

Chapter Five of this study presents the discussion of the findings, drawing together insights from the analysis in Chapter Four. It begins with a summary of the key findings in relation to the research objectives, followed by the study's conclusions. The chapter then outlines recommendations for policy, practice, and community-level interventions, and finally provides suggestions for future studies. The goal is to highlight how family structures, communication patterns, cultural norms, and community interventions influence the prevalence of child abuse in Bukom, while offering actionable pathways for reducing risks and strengthening child protection

5.1 Summary of Key Findings

The study revealed a range of important findings that deepen the understanding of how family structures and related dynamics influence child welfare in Bukom. Nuclear households were often described as providing greater clarity of roles and responsibilities, which on the surface appeared to support effective supervision and discipline. Parents in these families generally understood their specific duties toward their children,

offering a sense of order and predictability in caregiving. However, the advantages of this clarity were frequently undermined by the economic hardships that characterize daily life in Bukom. Many parents reported spending long hours away from home in search of income, leaving children without adequate supervision. In such cases, children were exposed to neglect and sometimes subjected to harsh or stress-related punishment upon parents' return. This reflects Dubowitz et al. (2011) and Cicchetti and Toth's (2005) observations that economic strain significantly weakens even otherwise cohesive family structures.

Extended and kinship-based families presented a more complex picture. On one hand, they embodied Ghanaian traditions of collective responsibility, providing important safety nets for children whose parents were absent due to migration, illness, or death. Grandparents, uncles, and aunts often stepped in as alternative caregivers, ensuring that children were not left entirely without support. At the same time, these family arrangements often gave rise to ambiguities in caregiving roles, with multiple adults asserting authority in inconsistent ways. Overcrowded living conditions added to these challenges, leading to quarrels among caregivers and confusion for children about whose authority to follow. Such findings echo Akmatov's (2011) and Lansford et al.'s (2014) recognition that extended households can both protect and expose children to maltreatment, depending on relational and environmental dynamics.

The data also pointed strongly to the vulnerabilities within single-parent families. Many participants explained how single caregivers struggled to balance the demands of work and childcare, often leaving children unattended or in the care of neighbors. Adolescents in these homes described feelings of neglect and frequent exposure to harsher disciplinary measures, particularly when parents were overwhelmed by stress. Social workers confirmed that both single mothers and single fathers faced challenges, although the latter were seen as less equipped with caregiving skills due to prevailing gender norms. This supports the arguments of Miller-Perrin and Perrin (2012) and Evans et al. (2012) that single parenthood heightens the risk of abuse and neglect in low-resource settings.

Beyond family structure, communication patterns within households emerged as a central determinant of child welfare outcomes. Families that practiced open dialogue were more likely to report trust, cooperation, and stronger bonds between caregivers and children. Children in such homes felt heard and respected, which reduced their likelihood of perceiving discipline as abusive. In contrast, families characterized by silence, avoidance, or verbal aggression fostered environments of emotional neglect and conflict. Adolescents spoke of feeling invisible or demeaned, while social workers noted that such children often exhibited behavioral problems at school. These accounts reinforce the work of Coyne et al.

(2014) and Williams and Nussbaum (2001), who emphasize the protective role of empathetic communication in child development.

Disciplinary practices were also found to be deeply shaped by cultural traditions and gender expectations. Corporal punishment, insults, public shaming, and gender-differentiated discipline were widely accepted as normal within the community. Boys were generally disciplined more harshly than girls, reflecting cultural beliefs about masculinity and the preparation of male children for future leadership roles. Yet participants admitted that such practices frequently crossed into abuse, creating cycles of aggression and fear rather than respect. The normalization of these practices is consistent with Gershoff's (2002) and Sedlak et al.'s (2010) findings on the blurred lines between cultural discipline and abusive behaviors. Despite this entrenchment, some parents and community leaders expressed openness to alternative, non-violent approaches, particularly if delivered through culturally relevant education and training programs (Boafo, 2019; Osei, 2016).

Finally, the study revealed that while child protection mechanisms exist within Bukom, they remain fragmented and under-resourced. Schools, churches, mosques, traditional leaders, and the Department of Social Welfare all play roles in addressing child welfare, yet their efforts are sporadic and lack coordination. Traditional authorities often serve as the first point of mediation, but this sometimes prevents cases from reaching formal institutions where justice and accountability could be secured. The

lack of integration among these systems undermines their effectiveness and leaves significant gaps in child protection. As UNICEF Ghana (2020) and Shenton (2004) argue, sustainable interventions require collaborative frameworks that bring together families, institutions, and community leaders in a coordinated manner.

5.2 Conclusion

This study concludes that family structure significantly influences the risk and experiences of child abuse in Bukom, but the effects are mediated by socio-economic conditions, communication dynamics, and cultural norms. Nuclear, extended, single-parent, blended, and kinship households each carry unique strengths and vulnerabilities. While open and respectful communication emerged as a protective factor, cultural reliance on corporal punishment, verbal aggression, and public shaming perpetuated harmful practices.

Moreover, the findings highlight that child protection cannot be addressed solely at the household level. Institutional capacity gaps and limited community coordination weaken responses to abuse, leaving children in low-income neighborhoods highly vulnerable. These conclusions align with ecological models of child welfare, which emphasize the interplay of family, community, and systemic factors in shaping outcomes (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005; Dubowitz et al., 2011).

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

Strengthen Parenting Education:

One of the most pressing needs identified in the study is the introduction of structured Social and Behavior Change Communication (SBCC) programs that are carefully adapted to the cultural realities of Bukom. Parents and caregivers frequently admitted that they lacked alternatives to harsh discipline, highlighting an urgent need for training in non-violent methods of child-rearing. Such programs should go beyond merely discouraging corporal punishment to actively teaching practical strategies in communication, stress management, and conflict resolution. Evidence from Boafo (2019) and Osei (2016) suggests that when families are equipped with skills to talk, listen, and guide children empathetically, incidents of abuse decline. Tailoring these programs to local beliefs and values will be crucial, ensuring that families perceive them not as foreign impositions but as community-driven solutions aligned with Ghanaian child-rearing traditions.

Enhance Community Engagement:

The findings also underscored the pivotal role of community leadership in influencing parenting practices. Traditional authorities, chiefs, and faith leaders were consistently described as figures whose voices carry weight in shaping local norms. By training these leaders to promote positive discipline and safeguarding practices, they can become critical allies in

transforming entrenched cultural expectations that currently normalize abuse. Lansford et al. (2010) and Evans et al. (2012) argue that cultural change is most sustainable when led from within, rather than imposed from outside. Involving leaders in churches, mosques, and community gatherings ensures that messages about child protection are delivered through trusted voices, increasing acceptance and uptake by families. Their visible role modeling of respectful treatment of children can also set powerful examples for caregivers and adolescents alike.

Improve Institutional Support:

Another vital recommendation is to strengthen institutional capacity, particularly within the Department of Social Welfare and local assemblies. Participants noted that while these institutions exist, they often lack the staff, logistics, and funding to respond effectively to cases of child abuse. Owusu and Yankson (2007) and UNICEF Ghana (2020) highlight that without adequate resources, interventions remain reactive and inconsistent, leaving children unprotected. Institutional reform should also prioritize inter-agency collaboration, ensuring that schools, NGOs, and government agencies work together through structured referral systems. This would not only streamline responses but also prevent duplication of effort and ensure that abused children receive timely psychosocial and legal support. Sustained investment in these institutions is therefore central to bridging the gap between policy frameworks and the lived realities of children in Bukom.

Create Safe Spaces for Children:

Children in Bukom repeatedly emphasized the need for environments where they feel protected, respected, and heard. Establishing community-based safe spaces would provide not only physical refuge but also access to psychosocial counseling, mentorship programs, and confidential reporting mechanisms for abuse. These centers could serve as hubs where children learn life skills, receive educational support, and engage in peer-to-peer learning. Sedlak et al. (2010) and UNICEF (2019) highlight that safe spaces are particularly effective in high-risk communities, offering both immediate protection and long-term resilience. For Bukom, where overcrowded homes and weak supervision are common, safe spaces could provide children with structured environments that counteract the instability of their family settings. Moreover, these centers would create opportunities for partnerships with schools, NGOs, and social services, reinforcing community-wide protection systems.

Gender-Sensitive Interventions:

Finally, the study highlights the importance of addressing harmful gender norms that shape disciplinary practices in Bukom. Boys were often subjected to harsher physical punishment under the assumption that they

must be “toughened” for future leadership roles, while girls were treated with relative leniency but still subjected to expectations of silence and submission. Designing interventions that actively challenge these assumptions is critical to reducing abuse risks and promoting equality in caregiving. Miller-Perrin and Perrin (2012) and Amato (2005) argue that gender-sensitive approaches improve both child well-being and family dynamics by encouraging equitable treatment. Programs in Bukom should include awareness campaigns, workshops, and role-modeling initiatives that teach parents to value emotional well-being and respectful discipline for all children, regardless of gender. Such efforts would not only protect children but also contribute to shifting broader societal attitudes toward fairness and equality in family life.

5.4 Suggestions for Future Studies

This study was limited to a qualitative exploration of experiences in Bukom, which, while offering rich insights into the lived realities of caregivers and children, also narrowed the generalizability of its findings. Expanding research into other settings would therefore be important for strengthening the evidence base. Comparative studies in other low-income urban communities in Ghana, such as Nima, Chorkor, or Old Fadama, could shed light on whether the patterns observed in Bukom are community-specific or part of broader structural and cultural dynamics. Such comparative work would make it possible to distinguish localized

vulnerabilities from nationwide trends, providing a stronger foundation for policy interventions (Lansford et al., 2014; Evans et al., 2012).

Future investigations could also benefit from adopting mixed-methods designs that combine qualitative narratives with quantitative prevalence surveys. While qualitative approaches excel at capturing depth and nuance, quantitative measures can provide reliable estimates of prevalence, risk factors, and correlates of abuse. Integrating the two offers the possibility of triangulating data, thereby improving both validity and applicability for national-level policy discussions (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This would enhance the ability to link individual experiences with broader structural patterns in child welfare.

Another area requiring closer attention is the long-term impact of verbal and non-physical abuse on children's development. Although this study documented widespread experiences of ridicule, insults, and neglect through silence, the psychological effects of such practices remain underexplored in Ghana. Research focusing on mental health, self-esteem, and academic performance outcomes would bring balance to the child protection discourse, which often emphasizes physical abuse while neglecting equally harmful psychological maltreatment (Sedlak et al., 2010; Coyne et al., 2014).

The role of fathers and male caregivers also warrants deeper exploration. Much of the literature on child welfare continues to be dominated by

maternal perspectives, despite the important influence men have in shaping discipline, authority, and family communication. Examining fathers' caregiving practices and disciplinary approaches could provide a more complete understanding of family dynamics and the risks or protective factors they generate (Dubowitz et al., 2011). Such work would also help design gender-sensitive interventions that actively include male caregivers in parenting education.

Finally, there is a pressing need to evaluate the effectiveness of Social and Behavior Change Communication (SBCC) and other community-based parenting interventions in Ghana. While participants in this study expressed openness to non-violent approaches, there remains limited empirical evidence on the long-term outcomes of these programs. Assessing their effectiveness in improving communication, reducing corporal punishment, and fostering resilience would generate valuable insights for scaling up interventions across urban communities (UNICEF Ghana, 2020; Boafo, 2019). Locally grounded evaluations would also ensure that programs are culturally acceptable and practically sustainable.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introductory Statement

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. The purpose of this discussion is to understand how family structures and communication practices influence child welfare in Bukom. Your experiences and insights are very important to this research. Everything you share will be kept strictly confidential, and pseudonyms will be used in place of your real name. You may skip any question you are uncomfortable with and can withdraw from the interview at any time.

SECTION A: Demographic Information

1. Can you please tell me your age?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your marital status?
4. What is your highest level of education completed?
5. What is your occupation or main source of livelihood?
6. How many children do you live with, and what is your relationship to them (parent, guardian, relative)?

SECTION B (Research Question 1): How do different family structures influence the risk of child abuse in Bukom?

1. Can you describe the type of family you live in (nuclear, extended, single-parent, or blended) and how responsibilities for children are shared?
2. In your view, how does the structure of your family affect how children are supervised or disciplined?
3. What kinds of challenges do families in your community face when raising children under these different structures?
4. From your experience, are some family types more vulnerable to child neglect or abuse than others? Why?

SECTION C (Research Question 2): What role does caregiver-child communication play in shaping experiences of child welfare and abuse?

1. How would you describe the way parents or caregivers usually communicate with children in your household?
2. In what ways does communication style (e.g., open discussion, strict instructions, silence) affect how children behave or respond?
3. Can you share an example of how poor communication has led to conflict or misunderstanding between caregivers and children?

4. In your opinion, how could better communication between caregivers and children help reduce abuse?

SECTION D (Research Question 3): How do cultural norms and disciplinary practices in Bukom influence child-rearing and the risk of abuse?

1. What kinds of discipline are commonly practiced in families in this community?
2. How do cultural beliefs or traditions shape what parents consider acceptable discipline?
3. Have you seen situations where traditional disciplinary practices may have led to harm for children?
4. In your opinion, how can harmful disciplinary practices be replaced with more positive methods in this community?

SECTION E (Research Question 4): What interventions or community-based strategies could help reduce child abuse in low-income urban settings like Bukom?

1. What kinds of support systems currently exist in Bukom for protecting children from abuse?
2. In your opinion, what role should community leaders, churches, or social workers play in preventing child abuse?

3. Have you ever seen or heard of programs (such as parenting education or communication training) that help reduce abuse?
4. What specific suggestions would you give for preventing child abuse in families in Bukom?

Thank you for participating