

The Power of Reliable Support Networks in Shaping Orphans' Lives in Nyamagana District, Tanzania

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ABSTRACT:

The study on the power of reliable support networks in shaping orphans' lives in Nyamagana district-Mwanza region, Tanzania, aimed to explore how emotional, peer relationship and community and faith-based support systems contribute to the holistic development of orphans. The research focused on identifying the forms of support available and how they shape orphans' overall development. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, the study involved 8 orphans, 4 caregivers, and 3 social workers from four institutionalized care facilities selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using interview guides and analyzed thematically. The study revealed that caregivers, social workers, peers, community members, and faith groups provide essential emotional and social support that fosters resilience and identity among orphans. The study concludes that reliable support networks are vital in promoting the holistic development and future independence of orphans. It recommends that care institutions strengthen community participation and external partnerships to enhance the quality of orphan care and ensure sustainable psychosocial growth.

Keywords: Holistic development, Institutionalized care facilities, Orphans, Reliable Support networks and Resilience.

1. INTRODUCTION

Globally, UNICEF (2024) estimates that there are over 153 million orphans worldwide, with Sub-Saharan Africa accounting for nearly 59 million. Causes such as conflict, poverty, and diseases like HIV/AIDS and COVID-19 have worsened the problem (United Nations, 2020). Studies in countries such as Nigeria, Mozambique, and Ethiopia show that many institutions lack adequate resources, trained caregivers, and child-friendly environments (Nhacolo et al., 2024; Oboh et al., 2024; Rygaard, 2024). Similar conditions exist in Uganda and Rwanda, where institutionalized children face limited social interaction and unstable emotional support (Ruiz-Casares et al., 2025).

The care of children has traditionally been the shared responsibility of families and communities. However, in Tanzania today, social and economic challenges have weakened these traditional safety nets, leaving many children without parents or adequate support. Poverty, family breakdown, and diseases such as HIV/AIDS have contributed to a growing number of orphans, with more than 2.5 million children reported to have lost one or both parents (UNAIDS, 2021; World Forgotten Children Foundation, 2024). For these children, losing parents does not only mean the absence of food and shelter but also the loss of emotional, social, and psychological care essential for their holistic development.

In the Mwanza Region, particularly in Nyamagana District, the situation is critical. Research has shown that orphans in this area face challenges such as poor health, limited education opportunities, and emotional

struggles. For example, Franz et al. (2023) found high levels of parasitic infections among 144 orphans in Mwanza, while Solile et al. (2023) observed limited access to health and social services. The Nyamagana District Social Welfare Office (2020) further reported that institutionalized orphans often suffer from depression, anxiety, and behavioral issues. These findings highlight the urgent need for not only material support but also strong emotional and social connections that promote resilience and belonging.

Despite the existence of interventions such as TASAF and local initiatives like Jijenge-Pamba, the needs of many orphans remain unmet. The district hosts an estimated 61,124 orphans but has only six care facilities (Mwanza Regional Social Welfare Officer, 2025). Most facilities are overstretched, understaffed, and struggle to provide meaningful emotional support. Studies (Christopher & Mosha, 2021; Nabunya et al., 2022) confirm that orphans continue to experience poor academic performance, weak emotional health, and limited life skills. This raises a key question: why do orphans continue to experience social and emotional challenges despite the existence of policies and programs intended to protect them?

Although numerous programs and facilities exist to support orphans in Tanzania, most focus primarily on meeting physical needs such as food, clothing, and shelter, while neglecting the importance of emotional and social support networks. Studies (Omar, 2021; Vedasi et al., 2021; Shirima et al., 2023) reveal that orphans in institutional care often lack consistent relationships, peer connections, and community. As a result, many experience loneliness, stigma, and low self-esteem, which hinder their holistic development. In Nyamagana District, where children continue to face these challenges despite multiple interventions, there is limited empirical evidence on how reliable social networks comprising caregivers, peers, and community organizations shape orphans' emotional and social well-being. This gap in knowledge justifies the need for the current study. This study aimed to explore the power of reliable supportive networks on holistic development of orphans with focus on the influence on emotional support, the role of peer relationships and contribution of community and faith-based organization on overall growth of orphans.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical review

This study was grounded in Attachment Theory, developed by John Bowlby (1969), which emphasizes that children have an inborn need to form close emotional bonds with caregivers. According to the theory, secure attachments established during childhood create a foundation for healthy emotional, social, and cognitive development. When children experience consistent love, care, and protection, they develop trust, self-worth, and the ability to form healthy relationships later in life. Conversely, a lack of secure attachment may lead to emotional distress, insecurity, and difficulties in social adjustment.

In the theoretical review, several researchers have utilized attachment theory to explore the dynamics between caregivers and orphans in institutional care settings. For instance, Panter-Brick (2002) integrated this theory to examine how cultural contexts influence caregiving practices, demonstrating that while the need for secure attachments is universal, the methods for achieving these bonds vary across cultures. Similarly, Putnick (2015) highlighted the significance of stable caregiver relationships in promoting emotional well-being, advocating for training caregivers to build these vital connections. Cyrulnik (2021) further emphasized the role of emotional bonds in promoting resilience, suggesting that social support can serve as a protective factor that enables children to recover from adverse experiences. Collectively, these studies underscore that attachment theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how social support systems contribute to orphans' holistic development in institutionalized settings.

Therefore, Attachment Theory provides a strong conceptual foundation for this study by explaining how reliable emotional bonds and consistent care foster not only emotional stability but also social confidence, resilience, and personal growth among orphans. The theory underlines that when caregivers and support networks offer dependable affection and guidance, children experience a sense of belonging and safety essential components of their holistic development.

Empirical review

Studies have shown that having reliable support networks is very important for the overall growth of orphans. Perry et al. (2019) found that children who receive care and support from others are able to handle problems better and become emotionally stronger. This shows that emotional connections help orphans face their challenges with confidence. In the same way, Ng'ondi (2014) discovered that orphans who are supported by guardians are more likely to get important social services, which improve both their education and emotions. These studies clearly show that strong support networks help orphans to live better and grow well in care centers.

Christopher and Mosha (2021) also found that emotional support from caregivers improves the mental well-being of orphans. Altogether, these studies suggest that orphans need different kinds of help emotional, educational, and material to develop fully. When institutions provide this kind of complete support, they help orphans become more confident, resilient, and prepared for a better future. Most past studies have focused on how support networks help orphans in general, but few have deeply explored how these networks affect the emotional and social development of orphans in institutional care. This leaves a gap in understanding how caregivers, peers, and community groups together shape the holistic growth of orphans, especially in Nyamagana District.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological research design. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and meanings within their natural settings. According to Neubauer et al. (2019), a phenomenological design focuses on understanding the subjective meanings and interpretations that individuals assign to their lived experiences. This approach enabled the researchers to explore how orphans perceive and experience reliable support networks and how these networks influence their emotional, social, and overall development. Through this design, rich narratives and personal insights were obtained, providing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Sampling procedures

The selection process involved collaboration with the management of the four (4) care facilities in identify individuals who can provide in-depth perspectives. Also, orphans were chosen based on their length of stay in the facilities to ensure they can offer well-informed insight. Caregivers and social workers were selected for their ability to share observation and experiences related to the social support dynamic within the facilities. Purposive sampling was used to select twelve (12) orphans aged at least 13years old and above with the inclusion of four (4) caregivers and three (3) social workers.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Nyamagana district- Mwanza region in Tanzania specifically within the four care facilities which were Upendo Daima, Village of Hope, Console and Tawfiq.

Data Collection Method

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 15 participants, including orphans, caregivers, and social workers to gather insights on the importance of support networks in lives of orphans. These interviews were done in a private environment from ten to fifteen (10-15) minutes for children and twenty to thirty (20-30) minutes with caregivers and social workers.

Data Collection Instruments

The research instrument used in this study was the interview guide, which helped the researcher to collect detailed information from participants. The tool contained open-ended questions that allowed orphans, caregivers and social workers in institutionalized care facilities to freely share their views and experiences. The interview guide was chosen because it made it easier to explore sensitive issues such as emotional support, education and daily challenges faced by orphans. It also helped researchers to ask follow-up questions for clarify whenever responses were not clear. This instrument was useful because many orphans were free and comfortable to express themselves.

Also, researchers used recorder for capturing everything which participants expressed during the interview. The recorder was used under the permission of the participants. During the interview researchers took short notes on what was said and facial expression of the participants which help to state their emotions and feelings. These instruments ensured accuracy and reliability of data while made it easier for researchers during data analysis.

Data Analysis Method

The study used thematic analysis with the help of NVivo software to analyze the qualitative data collected from the participants. Researchers analyzed the interviews by first reading the answers through out to understand them well. Then grouped similar ideas together and generate themes. Finally, researchers used these themes to explain the kind of reliable support networks orphans receive and how it helps their overall growth. During the presentation of data, the use of direct quotations from the participants were involved to ensure that the study reflects participants' true experiences and makes the research findings more valid and believable.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers made sure that the whole study was done honestly, safely, and respectfully. Before data collection, the permission was obtained from St. Augustine University of Tanzania, Mwanza Regional and District offices, and the care facilities. All participants, especially the orphans, were fully informed about the purpose of the study and agreed to take part voluntarily. During data collection, participants were treated with respect, their names were kept secret, and they were free to withdraw at any time. The researchers avoided plagiarism by properly crediting all sources, stayed truthful about the study's aims and methods, and maintained integrity when writing the report. These actions helped to protect participants, ensure trust, and keep the research accurate and ethical.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Demographic Information of Participants

The study involved a total of 15 participants from four care facilities in Nyamagana District (Village of Hope, Upendo Daima, Console, and Tawfiq). These included 8 orphans, 4 caregivers and 3 social workers. Among the orphans, 3 were male and 5 were female, aged between 11 and 18 years. Most (4) were in O-level education, while others were 2 in primary and 2 in A-level. The period of stay in the care facilities ranged from 2 to 18 years, indicating varied experiences of institutional life. Among caregivers and social workers, 4 were female and 3 were male, aged 26 to 55 years, with caregiving experience ranging from 1 to 13 years. These variations in age, gender, and experience provided diverse insights into the role of support networks in the holistic development of orphans.

The findings underscore the significance of reliable support networks in promoting the holistic development of orphans. The following themes emerged from the data:

4.2 Emotional Support on Psychological Well-Being of Orphans

Theme 1: Emotional Support and Guidance

This study showed that emotional support from caregivers and social workers was important in helping orphans feel understood and cared for. Orphans explained that when they share their struggles and receive advice, they feel stronger and happier. Caregivers also confirmed that small acts of listening and guiding help children to believe that they are valued. The children's own words showed how they see caregivers as family figures. By receiving comfort and advice, they feel relieved from stress and encouraged to think positively about their future. This means the support networks within institutions give orphans strength to face challenges with confidence. One child, a 17-year-old from Village of Hope described the significance of mentorship from caregivers:

"I talk to our caregivers. They give me good advice and help me think about things differently. This makes me feel better. Sometimes when I am sad or worried, they talk to me calmly and remind me that every problem has a solution. It was then that I realized they truly care about us, not only as children in the center but as part of their family." (P4, Aug 2025)

A 35 years old caregiver from Village of hope also explained how lack of support from external networks brings problems to children:

“ We had a case where a child lacked emotional support after losing a family member. Without help, the child isolated themselves and performed poorly in school. It was then that we understood how loneliness can deeply hurt a child’s mind. The child used to cry silently and didn’t want to talk to anyone. When we started to comfort and spend time with them, their mood slowly changed. They began smiling and joining others during study time and games. It showed me that love and emotional support can heal pain faster than anything else. I now make sure every child receives care, no matter their situation.” (P13, Aug 2025)

These findings indicate that reliable support networks, both within institutions and from external actors, are crucial in meeting orphans’ emotional needs. By providing consistent listening, encouragement, and care, these networks help children manage emotional challenges, strengthen resilience, and build confidence, which are all essential for holistic development.

The results agree with Christopher & Mosha (2021) who found that in Dar es Salaam, orphans with caregivers who provide emotional care develop better psychological well-being and higher self-esteem. On other hand, the variation with the present study is that Christopher & Mosha focused on overall caregiver support, but this study extends the point by showing how even short talks with caregivers or mentors in Nyamagana bring hope and emotional balance to children. This variation may be because the current study used qualitative interviews to capture orphans’ personal feelings, while previous study used surveys.

4.3 Peer Relationships on Orphans’ Social and Behavioral Development

Theme 1: Building Safety and a Sense of Belonging

This study revealed that reliable networks, especially caregivers and community visitors, make orphans feel safe and valued. Orphans explained that being remembered, helped, and cared for gave them security. Caregivers said that such support reduced children’s fear of neglect and gave them confidence in the care system. Orphans shared that when adults responded to their needs, such as sickness or school challenges, they felt protected. A 55 years old caregiver from Village of Hope also reflected on the impact of collaborative support in strengthening children’s well-being:

“These networks contribute greatly to building a sense of connection and support, which is vital for the children’s growth and self-confidence. It was then that I saw how small acts of love and attention can change how children feel about themselves. When we spend time with them, they smile more and start trusting others. They begin to believe that they are worthy of care. The children become open and express their feelings freely without fear. I’ve noticed that when they feel safe, they perform better in school and interact more positively with their friends.” (P10, Aug 2025)

In addition, a 16-year-old from Console explained how supportive adults within the institution make them feel secure in times of need:

“Yes, it makes me feel safe. Because if I fall sick or my younger sibling is unwell, we tell our caregiver. She checks if there is medicine, and if not, she informs the mother. That makes me feel secure sharing any problem. It was then that I knew I could trust them with my worries and needs. I feel like I have someone who cares for me like a real parent would. Even when I have small issues at school, I can talk to her without fear. She listens and gives advice, and that helps me calm down. I am happy because I know I am not alone.” (P8, Sept 2025)

These findings indicate that building safety and a sense of belonging through reliable support networks is essential for orphans’ holistic development. When caregivers, communities, and peers provide consistent reassurance, children feel secure, valued, and integrated into their environment. This stability forms the basis for confidence, resilience, and the development of healthy relationships, all of which are central to their long-term well-being.

The results support Ndoorian (2021) who explained that children in home centers with strong support networks developed a higher sense of security and emotional stability. Conversely with this study is that while, Ndoorian focused mainly on family settings, this study expands the idea by showing that belonging does not come only from family but also from reliable caregivers and external visitors. This disparity is because this study explored multiple sources of support in institutionalized care facilities, while Ndoorian studied family-based homes.

Theme 2: Peer Support and Social Connection

Support networks also function strongly within peer relationships, where friendships provide companionship, advice, and emotional comfort. These bonds allow children to share experiences, reduce loneliness, and strengthen their sense of self-worth. Insights from the four (4) children highlight how essential peer support is to their holistic development.

One child age 14 from Upendo Daima explained the importance of sibling-like support within the center:

"I talk to my elder brother here at the center. I share with him about my studies because he is in Form One, and he helps me with English. After teaching me, I feel hopeful that I will perform well in my studies. It was then that I started to enjoy learning and to believe in my abilities. We often study together and encourage each other to do better. When I don't understand something, he explains it slowly until I get it." (P6, Sept 2025)

Another participant from Tawfiq (age 15, 9 years in the institution) emphasized the value of trustworthy friendships:

"I talk to my loyal friend. They listen to me and give me good advice. After talking to them, I feel better. It was then that I understood how important friends are in life. My friend always reminds me to stay positive and to focus on my goals. When I am sad, they know how to make me laugh again. Sometimes we walk together and talk about our dreams. Having a friend makes me forget my past pain and gives me hope for the future. I thank God for giving me a good friend who truly understands me." (P2, Aug 2025)

Similarly, an 18-year-old from Village of Hope described the significance of interaction with peers and social participation:

"I enjoy interacting with other people. I have never believed that only reading and being locked inside makes us succeed. I really love socializing, and it makes me feel very happy. It was then that I realized that spending time with others makes me stronger and more confident. Through playing, singing, and sharing stories, I learn how to respect and understand people." (P3, Aug 2025)

A 16-year-old from Console reflected on how friendships within the institution make daily life fulfilling:

"I spend much time with my friends during playtime, study time, and worship. This makes me feel happy. It was then that I realized that true happiness comes from being around people who care about you. We share everything our books, our stories, and our food. When I am with my friends, I don't feel lonely anymore. My friends are like brothers and sisters to me, and I thank God for them every day." (P8, Sept 2025)

These findings suggest that peer support networks play a critical role in emotional and social development. Friendships, mentorship among siblings, and shared group activities promote resilience, enhance communication skills, and provide children with the sense that they are not alone. By encouraging peer interaction and supporting these bonds, institutions can support social competence and belonging, both of which are crucial for orphans' holistic development.

This aligns with Perry et al. (2019) who reported that orphans with supportive peers showed greater resilience and healthier coping strategies. While Perry focused on general resilience, this study goes further by showing that peer bonds inside institutions are equally important as family ties for holistic growth. The differences may be because this study collected direct statements from orphans about friendship and belonging. This study therefore contributes by showing that peer connections are as important as adult support in holistic development.

4.4 Community and Faith-Based Organization Promoting Orphans' Holistic Development

Theme 1: Access to Opportunities through External Networks

Reliable support networks extend beyond emotional care to provide children with access to opportunities that shape their academic and personal futures. Insights from one (1) caregivers and four (4) children showed that partnerships with mentors, caregivers, and communities create openings for growth, skill-building, and exposure that help orphans prepare for life beyond the institution.

One child of 14-year-old from Upendo Daima showed the role of peer guidance in creating academic opportunities, stating:

"I talk to my elder brother here at the center. I share with him about my studies since he is in Form One, and he helps me with my English subject. After he teaches me, I feel hopeful that I will perform well in my studies. It was

then that I began to believe in teamwork and helping one another. I feel stronger and more confident because of his support.” (P6, Sept 2025)

An 18-year-old from Village of Hope emphasized the role of social workers in providing supportive opportunities: *“I talk to the social worker here. I explain to her the challenges I go through because I feel she deserves to be told. After talking, I feel stronger. She listens carefully and always gives advice that helps me think differently. I trust her because she keeps my issues private and treats me with respect. Sometimes she even checks on me later to see if I’m doing better. I feel more hopeful about my future.” (P3, Aug 2025)*

Similarly, a 17-year-old at Village of Hope described the importance of caregiver advice in opening up new perspectives and opportunities:

“I talk to our caregivers. They give me good advice and help me think about things in different ways. This helps me feel better. They help me see that my problems do not define who I am. When I follow their guidance, I see positive results in my studies and behavior. I feel lucky to have such caring people in my life.” (P4, Aug 2025)

A 15-year-old from Console expressed the role of their guardian in enabling access to basic school-related needs: *“I talk to our mother. I tell her about my school needs, and she helps me with that. This makes me feel important. She always finds a way to make sure I have what I need, even when things are hard. When she supports me, I feel loved and motivated to do better in school. Her care makes me want to grow into a good and responsible person.” (P7, Sept 2025)*

These findings indicate that access to opportunities through external networks is not limited to material support but extends to mentorship, guidance, and exposure to new skills. By providing avenues for academic improvement, personal growth, and emotional strength, caregivers, peers, and community members empower orphans to imagine futures defined not by loss, but by potential and resilience.

The results relate with Hole (2018), who found that strong economic and social support networks in Tanzania improved orphans’ school attendance and academic performance by creating stability and opening opportunity for growth. Yet, conversely with this study is when Hole focused on academic access and performance, this study shows that external networks also build resilience, confidence and hope for the future. This is because this study explored orphans’ own narratives of how support made them feel emotionally secure, whereas Hole relied more on academic outcomes. This study therefore add knowledge by showing that support networks are not only educational pathways but also sources of emotional encouragement.

Theme 2 Community and Faith-Based Support

Reliable networks of community and faith institutions serve as pillars of hope and continuity for orphans. Insights from the interviews demonstrate how communal and spiritual support strengthens the holistic development of children, giving them a sense of identity and belonging. A 45 years old caregiver from Console emphasized the critical role of churches and the surrounding community in providing practical and emotional help:

“The church we attend gives us support, and the surrounding community have also made efforts to provide help, such as rice, cooking oil. I realized that love can come from many people, not only family. Their help makes them feel remembered and valued. When we see people bringing gifts and food, our hearts are filled with joy. It shows that the community cares about their future.” (P12, Sept 2025)

Similarly, a 14 years old child from Upendo Daima reflected on the encouragement received from church activities:

“At church we pray together with others, participate in games, and in dancing competitions. This helps us connect with other children and learn from them. Through these activities, I meet new friends and learn discipline and teamwork. I always feel happy when we sing and dance for God. Church days are the best because they give me peace and hope.” (P6, Sept)

Another caregiver aged 55 years old from Village of Hope stressed the importance of government and faith collaborations in reinforcing social and emotional support:

“ Government institutions and different organizations support us with materials and medical services. The support helps us maintain good health and continue with school smoothly. When children are sick, medical help comes quickly. These services make them feel protected and cared for by the whole society.” (P10, Aug 2025)

A social worker with 45-year-old from Console added that:

“Partnerships with schools and community leaders create opportunities for training and practical exposure. They learn new skills, meet different people, and gain confidence to face the future. These partnerships also teach responsibility and independence. When they get such chances, they feel proud and hopeful for better days ahead.” (P15, Sept 2025)

These findings highlight that community and faith-based support not only provide essential resources but also create a sense of continuity, belonging, and identity for orphans. By linking children to communal care, they grow into responsible individuals who feel recognized, valued, and spiritually grounded in society.

This agrees with Malinga-Musamba (2015) who found in Botswana that community and family support improved emotional and social health of orphans. However, the difference with the current study is that while Malinga-Musamba emphasized material and emotional support generally this study adds that in Nyamagana, spiritual and community involvement not only provides materials but also helps children feel recognized and rooted in society. The difference might be because the inclusion of direct feedback from orphans about faith and social activities.

5. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that reliable support networks are very important for the overall growth and well-being of orphans in Nyamagana District. The findings showed that emotional support from caregivers, strong friendships among peers, and care from the community and faith-based groups help children to feel loved, safe, and confident. These networks also give orphans hope, courage, and guidance to face life challenges positively.

It was clear that emotional care and guidance helped children to open up and build trust with their caregivers. Peer relationships created a sense of belonging and friendship, while community and faith-based groups offered spiritual strength and opportunities for learning and growth. Together, these forms of support helped orphans to become more resilient, responsible, and prepared for life after leaving the institutions.

The study therefore concludes that the cooperation between caregivers, social workers, peers, and community organizations is very important in shaping the holistic development of orphans. Strengthening these relationships will help orphans grow into confident, independent, and hopeful members of society.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that local authorities and community organizations take an active role in supporting orphans by ensuring they receive the emotional and educational resources they need for growth. Caregivers should be well trained to provide meaningful emotional support and nurture healthy relationships, while institutions should create structured peer programs that build strong friendships and a true sense of belonging among children. In addition, regular reviews of existing support systems should be carried out to identify areas for improvement and strengthen the care provided. By working together in this way, stakeholders can greatly improve the psychosocial well-being of orphans and empower them with the confidence, resilience, and hope needed for a brighter and more independent future.

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