

HELPDESK RESPONSE 213

Parent and Caregiver Engagement in Kenya

Gaps, opportunities, and emerging questions for future research

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Abbreviations and acronyms

CBC	Competency-Based Curriculum
ECD	Early Childhood Development
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
KICD	Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development
KKL	Keep Kenya Learning
PEE	Parental Empowerment and Engagement
RELI	Regional Educational Learning Initiative
SMS	Short Messaging Services

1. Introduction

This Helpdesk Topic Brief is intended for anyone working in the field of parent and caregiver engagement¹ in Kenya who is interested in exploring how EdTech can enhance participation. It serves as a precursor to an upcoming Kenya sandbox, which will test ways in which EdTech can potentially support parents and caregivers in engaging learners in communities that are hard to reach and affected by climate change and conflict.

Since 2020, Kenya's education system has faced significant disruptions. The global Covid-19 pandemic closed schools for 9 months, affecting approximately 18 million learners in pre-primary, primary, and secondary levels of education ([↑Gichuhi & Kallsta, 2022](#)). In addition to pandemic-related closures, learners in the Northern and Northeastern regions of Kenya have also been significantly affected by climate-related challenges, including droughts and floods. For many communities in these regions, particularly pastoralists, water is essential, as it sustains their livestock, which serves as a primary source of food and income. Without water, families are forced to migrate to sustain their livestock, often pulling children out of school. In April 2024, floods displaced nearly 300,000 people (approximately 58,000 families) across the country ([↑OCHA, 2024](#)).

Conflict continues to disrupt access to education for young Kenyan learners, especially in the border regions. Kenya is host to one of Africa's largest refugee camps, with over 400,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, primarily from Somalia, South Sudan, and other neighbouring countries affected by conflict and crises ([↑UNHCR, 2025](#)). School disruptions, such as those listed above, typically mean that learners stay at home and are out of school.

Research has shown that parental engagement can have a positive impact on children's learning outcomes and encourage continuity of learning ([↑Rousoulioti et al., 2022](#); [↑UNESCO, 2021](#)). However, parents and caregivers are often ill-equipped to provide learning continuity at home because they lack the resources and capacity to engage their children.

¹ This topic brief examines various ways parents and caregivers interact with learning, particularly in home-based settings, where they support learning at home through activities such as reading, playing, or assisting with homework ([↑Senechal, 2006](#)). This brief uses the terms parent and caregiver interchangeably, referring to all caregivers regardless of age, gender, or family relation to the child.

With this context in mind, there is an opportunity to explore how EdTech solutions can support parent and caregiver engagement to improve learning continuity at home.

EdTech Hub has a long history of engagement in Kenya, collaborating with institutions such as the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), the World Bank, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), and others to address education challenges. Through initiatives like the ‘[Raising Readers](#)’² project with Worldreader, EdTech Hub has shown that parents and caregivers are an underused but valuable resource in improving children’s reading outcomes (↑[Nicolai et al., 2022](#); ↑[Nicolai et al., 2023](#)). Through the EdTech Hub’s ongoing work with [Keep Kenya Learning](#) (KKL)³, an initiative that emerged in response to Covid-19-related school closures to assist caregivers with learning at home, the Hub has expanded its knowledge of EdTech for caregivers. KKL and KICD lead the Parental Empowerment and Engagement (PEE) consortium, which brings together educators, child development experts, and community leaders to promote parental involvement. By fostering partnerships among these stakeholders, the consortium aims to help children reach their full potential and grow into empowered, ethical citizens. Their work follows the 2019 Guidelines on Parental Empowerment and Engagement (↑[KICD, 2019](#)), with oversight from the KICD and collaboration with the National Parents Association (NPA).

Through three experimental sprints, KKL, EdTech Hub, and Busara conducted research to explore how caregivers in Kenya support learning at home. Findings suggest that key needs included building caregiver confidence, fostering community support, and enhancing digital literacy (↑[Mbatha et al., 2021](#)).

The following overview builds on the Hub’s research to examine how parents and caregivers in Kenya have continued to support learning continuity during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. This topic brief highlights effective strategies for engaging caregivers in Kenya, including fostering community support through networks and support groups, providing targeted capacity-building and training, and utilising diverse modalities.

² See <https://edtechhub.org/evidence/edtech-hub-research-portfolio/technology-to-improve-parent-and-caregivers-engagement-and-literacy-learning-kenya/>. Retrieved 20 May 2025.

³ See <https://keepkenyalearning.com/>. Retrieved 9 June 2025.

The topic brief also draws attention to key gaps that exist within this evidence base. Finally, in response to the gaps and challenges highlighted, the brief introduces the upcoming Kenya [Sandbox](#)⁴ (an iterative methodology to generate real-time evidence) to test and strengthen parental and caregiver engagement in areas prone to school disruptions due to conflict or climate-related disruptions.

This topic brief is structured as follows: [Section 2](#) summarises key findings on barriers to caregiver engagement, including challenges related to remote learning and gender differences. It also presents potential strategies to strengthen caregiver engagement, such as fostering community through networks and support groups, leveraging diverse modalities, and providing capacity-building through targeted support. [Section 3](#) outlines next steps and provides an early look at EdTech Hub's sandbox initiative in Turkana County.

⁴ For more information on EdTech Hub's sandbox methodology, see <https://edtechhub.org/sandboxes/the-sandbox-method/>. Retrieved 19 June 2025.

2. Key findings from research

This section provides a brief overview of key findings from research on parent and caregiver engagement in Kenya, including research undertaken by Edtech Hub. It highlights commonly encountered barriers to caregiver engagement, followed by approaches that offer potential solutions to overcoming them.

Barriers to caregiver engagement

Caregivers play a vital role in supporting children's learning, particularly in contexts where access to formal education is limited. However, various challenges often impede parents and caregivers from supporting young learners at home. Understanding how to engage parents and caregivers meaningfully and mitigate the difficulties they face can help strengthen education outcomes and build a more resilient learning ecosystem.

Caregiver engagement and remote learning

Raising awareness about the potential of remote learning is one avenue for increasing caregiver engagement. However, inevitably, the availability of remote learning itself presents further barriers.

A large-scale survey on caregivers in Kenya, [↑Uwezo \(2020\)](#), found that parental awareness of children's remote learning was disparate, with two out of ten parents unaware that their children should continue learning remotely from home. Other challenges in engagement included access to digital learning, inaccessible platforms, and unprepared schools and teachers, which made remote learning difficult ([↑Uwezo, 2020](#))

Another study revealed that while 39.8% of Kenyan parents would recommend remote schooling due to its perceived benefits, 24.8% were opposed to it ([↑Emmanuel & Oduor, 2021](#)). In their recommendations, the authors urged the government to address barriers to remote learning and establish official standards and curricula for its implementation, to enhance effectiveness and parental support.

Gender differences in caregiver engagement

The Hub's research with KKL revealed that mothers are essential in shaping children's reading habits, as they are often the primary caregivers. In the Booksmart intervention, the majority of participants (74%) were mothers, reflecting their central role in caregiving and early learning ([↑Nicolai et al., 2023](#)). However, certain modalities may be more effective

with different genders. Messaging and nudges were slightly more successful in encouraging male caregiver involvement in children's reading. Male caregivers in the study unanimously found the messaging to be highly effective ([↑Nicolai et al., 2023](#)). A Keep Kenya Learning Project ([↑anon., 2021](#)) highlighted that both male and female caregivers valued a storytelling activity, which helped foster meaningful conversations with their children about previously taboo topics.

Support programmes, such as Moments That Matter (MTM), a partnership between Episcopal Relief & Development and Anglican Development Services of Nyanza (ADS-Nyanza) in Kenya, have been shown to be effective in empowering caregivers and promoting more gender-equal attitudes and practices on parenting among fathers ([↑Okelo et al., 2022](#)). By using a parenting empowerment approach that encouraged fathers' participation in home visits and group sessions, facilitated by trained volunteers and focused on responsive caregiving and early learning, fathers became more actively involved in caregiving activities ([↑Okelo et al., 2022](#)).

Although not specific to education, a 2023 evaluation of a parenting programme in rural Western Kenya found that while few fathers participated, those who did showed positive changes in caregiving ([↑Jeong et al., 2024](#)). Barriers to fathers' involvement included gender norms and opportunity costs. Recommendations for increasing male caregiver participation included offering financial incentives, flexible scheduling, and using gender-responsive strategies to enhance engagement ([↑Jeong et al., 2024](#)).

Potential approaches to increasing caregiver engagement

While much of the existing literature focuses on the barriers to caregiver engagement in Kenya, a number of promising strategies and lessons have emerged that can inform future practice. Highlighted below are three key approaches to strengthening parent and caregiver participation that have been identified through our review of caregiver engagement in Kenya:

1. Fostering community through networks and support groups.
2. Leveraging diverse modalities.
3. Providing capacity building through targeted support.

Fostering community through networks and support groups

Research conducted globally and in Kenya emphasises the important role that community networks play in successful parent engagement programmes. By leveraging existing social ties and shared spaces, communities can create supportive environments where parents can gain confidence and receive encouragement to become involved with their children's learning.

Interventions in Kenya show the benefits of parental engagement through support groups. Initiatives in Kilifi and urban informal settlements empowered caregivers, particularly of children with disabilities and in low-income areas, by fostering social support, reducing stigma, and improving parent–child communication (↑[African Population and Health Research Center, 2021](#); ↑[Bunning et al., 2020](#)).

These findings align with research that was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, including EdTech Hub's previous work with Keep Kenya Learning (KKL) and Busara (↑[Mbatha et al., 2021](#)). Insights showed that when learning is supported by an extended network, including siblings, relatives, neighbours, and peer groups, caregivers benefit from the mutual support, while children benefit from discussion groups and encouragement (↑[Mbatha et al., 2021](#)). This interconnected approach was also observed by the [Regional Educational Learning Initiative](#) (RELI),⁵ which reports that community-centred approaches were more effective than school-centric models (↑[Angoye, 2021](#)). Communities utilised spaces like churches, social halls, and converted *manyattas*⁶ as learning centres, complemented by in-person meetings to maintain parent engagement (↑[Angoye, 2021](#)). Together, these examples underscore the importance of collective action, trust-building, and connection in fostering effective learning at home.

Leveraging diverse modalities

Mobile-based interventions are widely used and have proven effective for parental engagement in various contexts. The use of Short Messaging Services (SMS), or text messaging, for education also grew during the Covid-19 pandemic. ↑[Keep Kenya Learning's \(2022\)](#) endline data collection,

⁵ See <https://reliafrica.org/>. Retrieved 9 June 2025.

⁶ A settlement or a compound—a term often used in East Africa.

which aimed to assess how their capacity-building programme had impacted caregivers, found that SMS was an effective way to communicate with caregivers, creating awareness of how they could be involved in their children's learning. Furthermore, a case study by [↑Jordan et al. \(2024\)](#) on SMS provided practical insights for future SMS-based initiatives, including the importance of timing and modular content design for flexibility. However, KKL found that the effectiveness of SMS messaging and their comprehension by caregivers were mixed, with only 11% correctly responding to manipulation checks ([↑Keep Kenya Learning, 2022](#)). Despite this, KKL still considers SMS an important method for sharing information.

In an informal settlement in Nairobi, SMS platforms improved caregivers' responsiveness to their children's developmental changes by providing activity cues that encouraged consistent engagement and assessment. In addition to SMS, radio, TV, and other forms of technology are being used to engage caregivers. The [↑Busara \(2020\)](#) caregiver mapping exercise revealed distinct preferences among segments. Rural caregivers favour phone, radio, and TV as sources of information, but rely on teachers as messengers. Low-income urban caregivers, who often have limited internet access and smartphone ownership, also prefer phone, radio, TV, and door-to-door methods, trusting teachers for communication. Furthermore, middle-to-low-income urban families with internet access via phones tend to use TV, teachers, and WhatsApp as their preferred channels ([↑Busara, 2020](#)).

In another study on the use of EdTech among Kenyan girls ([↑Watson et al., 2023](#)), however, caregivers of girls showed a preference for traditional, non-technical educational resources, such as textbooks and past exam papers. They voiced frustration over the limited support available through educational radio or television. While some guidance was occasionally shared via WhatsApp, they felt it was insufficient.

Many in-person programmes shifted to radio and TV during the Covid-19 lockdowns. The [A LOT-Change program](#)⁷ was adapted by piloting a one-hour radio show to replace face-to-face meetings. The initiative also included SMS reminders and radio promotions, resulting in a steady increase in listener call-ins and SMS engagement over time ([↑Muhia et al., 2020](#)). However, other studies show that TV lessons, WhatsApp messages,

⁷ See <https://aphrc.org/project/advancing-learning-outcomes-and-leadership-skills-among-children-in-nairobis-informal-settlements-through-community-participation-a-lot-change-2/>. Retrieved 10 June 2025.

and KICD materials are still inaccessible to many learners (↑[Uwezo, 2020](#)), highlighting the importance of capacity building, digital literacy training, and ensuring the most marginalised and rural families have access to digital learning.

Capacity building through targeted support

Parents can support their children's learning in both academic and non-academic ways, but many require targeted support to do so effectively, particularly those with limited formal education. For instance, KKL noted that rural parents found it difficult to answer children's questions due to their own low levels of education (↑[Mbatha et al., 2021](#)), and school heads identified parents' literacy levels as a barrier to engaging them during school closures (↑[Uwezo, 2020](#)). However, the global literature is limited in terms of evidence on interventions that engage with low-literacy caregivers. A notable exception comes from Botswana, which found promising evidence suggesting that parents of any educational level are capable of supporting their children's education and eager to do so (↑[Winthrop et al., 2020](#)).

Lessons from several early childhood development (ECD) interventions offer insights into effective approaches for building caregiver capacity and enhancing engagement. Successful programme elements include caregiver training and the development of strong engagement strategies. For example, the [Tayari ECD pilot](#)⁸ found that parents who attended weekly training sessions were more likely to engage in play-based learning activities with their children than those who only received take-home materials (↑[RTI International, 2019](#)). A study of an ECD programme in urban informal settlements in Kenya, ↑[Ssewanyana et al. \(2023\)](#) highlight the importance of well-planned mobilisation and sensitisation activities to secure caregiver buy-in by clearly communicating their roles and the benefits of participation.

Similar approaches were found in programmes beyond those for ECD. Providing training is an effective way to engage parents through digital tools, such as the BookSmart app (↑[Nicolai et al., 2023](#)). EdTech Hub's study with KKL in Kenya found that even a single half-day orientation introducing the BookSmart app and digital literacy concepts significantly increased parental engagement (↑[Smith et al., 2024](#)). Sensitising, as demonstrated ↑[Njeru & Kiriimi's \(2023\)](#) study on private primary schools in Tharaka South

⁸ See <https://werk.co.ke/programs/past-programs/tayari/>. Retrieved 10 June 2025.

Sub-County demonstrates how sensitising parents to Kenya's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) was crucial to addressing misconceptions about its cost and demands, clarifying caregivers' roles in their children's education, and enhancing their support for its implementation.

Beyond helping with homework or directly supporting academic content, parents can play a critical role in fostering supportive learning environments that nurture their children's overall development. Global evidence from the Covid-19 pandemic highlights the diverse ways that parents provided non-academic support. Studies have found that parents support learners by creating a suitable environment at home for learning, reducing chores and responsibilities, providing access to learning materials, and offering emotional support ([↑Bond et al., 2021](#)). Parents also established structured routines to support their children's study habits ([↑Bhamani et al., 2020](#); [↑Novianti & Garzia, 2020](#)).

Similar findings regarding parents' non-academic support were reported in a study of the parents of primary school children in Rangwe Sub-County ([↑Mabeya, 2020](#)). The most common way that parents reported supporting their children's learning was by ensuring that learners had the time and availability to attend remote learning programmes, followed by encouraging them to study. [↑Mabeya \(2020\)](#) concludes that, "despite many parents being unable to provide required instructional support, they went an extra mile to ensure that their children were supported with whatever they had to continue with their education" (p. 182). These findings highlight how parents often take active steps to support their children's education through practical, everyday strategies.

3. Next steps and EdTech Hub's sandbox in Turkana County

Global and local evidence from Kenya consistently illustrates that active caregiver engagement plays a crucial role in improving learning outcomes. Effective strategies often include leveraging existing community structures, such as religious groups and neighbourhood networks, to enhance caregiver engagement. Equipping caregivers with the necessary skills, tools, and confidence is vital, and digital literacy training is necessary for the effective use of EdTech. Additionally, recognising and addressing gender-specific roles and perceptions is key to increasing parental involvement.

However, more comprehensive research is needed to understand the diverse needs and preferences of caregivers in Kenya, particularly male caregivers and those with low literacy, to inform tailored engagement strategies. Further research is also needed to better understand the types of non-academic support parents provide, such as emotional encouragement and routine setting, and how these contributions impact children's learning outcomes

EdTech Hub's sandbox with parents and caregivers in Kenya's Turkana County aims to address some of these gaps. Turkana, a frontier county in Kenya,⁹ is a region that has been continuously impacted by climate change and conflict. Additionally, communities in Turkana are nomadic, which affects the frequency with which learners can consistently access formal schooling. This highlights the importance of parental engagement and support in minimising learning loss.

To strengthen the resilience of learning in contexts like Turkana, by improving how learners continue to learn when out of school, EdTech Hub's planned sandbox with Keep Kenya Learning aims to:

1. Test and iterate the intervention for emergency and hard-to-reach contexts, building capacity of hard-to-reach caregivers in the North and North East Kenyan region to support engagement in distance learning.

⁹ Located in northeastern Kenya.

2. Build a viable/sustainable model through the Parental Empowerment and Engagement consortium.
3. Capture insights and learnings from this intervention to support other implementers and stakeholders who support parents and caregivers in Kenya.

Figure 1. *Some photos from EdTech Hub's engagement with parents and caregivers in Turkana County, Kenya*





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