

Erosion of Traditional Discipline Norms: Discovering the Rise of Permissive Public Parenting among Modern Nigerian Families

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Abstract: *Historically, Nigerian parenting systems have been defined by strict behavioural expectations, collectivistic social surveillance, and immediate public correction to enforce respect and self-regulation (eko ile / ikpa esi). However, recent observational trends in contemporary urban Nigerian settings reveal a growing prevalence of permissive public parenting, characterized by parental apathy, non-intervention, and tolerance of unruly preschool behaviour in public spaces. This conceptual paper explores the sociocultural shifts driving the perceived erosion of traditional discipline norms among modern Nigerian families. Integrating Baumrind's Parenting Styles Theory with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Framework, this paper examines how urban migration, Western media influence, the rise of the nuclear family model, and misinterpretations of gentle parenting strategies contribute to a decline in public behavioural enforcement. Furthermore, the paper analyses the psychological friction parents face between avoiding public scenes and enforcing traditional discipline under modern public scrutiny. By analysing existing literature on African socialization practices and contemporary family dynamics, this article developed a theoretical framework for understanding how changing socioeconomic structures alter parental authority and child self-regulation. The paper concludes with theoretical implications for developmental psychology and offers recommendations for culturally grounded family intervention strategies.*

Keywords: permissive parenting, traditional discipline, public child behaviour, nigerian families, cultural socialization, self-regulation, Eko Ile, Ikpa Esi.

INTRODUCTION

Across traditional African societies, particularly in Nigeria, the socialization of children has historically been an explicitly collectivistic enterprise. Rooted in indigenous philosophies of social cohesion, filial piety, and community responsibility—often captured by the proverb "*It takes a village to raise a child*"—child discipline was neither confined to the private domestic sphere nor exclusively reserved for biological parents. In indigenous Nigerian cultures (such

as Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa-Fulani paradigms), public behaviour was considered a primary indicator of a child's moral foundation and a direct reflection of family honour, encapsulated in concepts such as *Eko Ile* (home training in Yoruba) or *Ikpa Esi* (upbringing in Igbo). Children who exhibited low behavioural control or public temper tantrums were immediately corrected by parents or nearby adults to maintain social equilibrium and uphold communal standards of respect.

In contemporary urban Nigeria, however, a noticeable behavioural shift is occurring in public and commercial spaces, such as shopping malls, religious centres, supermarkets, or recreational parks. Contrary to historical expectations of firm public correction, an increasing number of parents demonstrate passivity, non-intervention, or overt tolerance when preschool-aged children exhibit disruptive externalizing behaviours (e.g., screaming, grabbing items, throwing tantrums, or disobeying direct instruction). Rather than executing immediate behavioural corrections, modern parents frequently ignore the behaviour, engage in prolonged passive negotiations, or retreat into digital distractions (e.g., smartphones).

While substantial developmental literature in Western contexts has documented the transition from authoritarian to permissive and authoritative parenting styles, African developmental psychology literature still focuses on traditional views. A significant number of empirical literature confirms the historical reliance on severe physical discipline and authoritarian control within Sub-Saharan African homes in general and in Nigerian families in particular. National demographic surveys conducted in Nigeria reveal that up to 85% to 90% of children aged 1–14 have experienced violent discipline or physical punishment as standard home correction (UNICEF & NBS, 2017). Empirical investigations across West Africa consistently identify physical discipline—ranging from caning to painful physical postures—as the dominant mechanism used by parents to demand strict obedience and public decorum (Adegoke & Esere, 2018; Nwoburu et al., 2019). While culturally rationalized opinion sees it as necessary for character building, longitudinal empirical research demonstrates that such authoritarian control often yields low long-term emotional self-regulation in children (Lansford et al., 2018).

Qualitative and ethnographic studies of African socialization consistently emphasize the communal, moral, and social dimensions of child-rearing. Scholars of African developmental psychology underscore that indigenous child education operates within a collectivistic matrix where child development is viewed as a process of community integration rather than isolated nuclear family training (Nsamenang, 2006 as cited in Nyuyshu et al., 2025; Twum-Danso Imoh et al., 2022). In the Nigerian context, qualitative studies on Yoruba culture evaluate the core construct of *Eko Ile* (home training), demonstrating that moral education is designed to instill public self-regulation, respect, and character (Olaniyan, 2016; Oyinloye, 2022). Under this traditional model, public behaviour is subjected to constant communal surveillance, ensuring that any public misbehaviour reflects on the child's home training and invites collective correction (Olaniyan, 2016).

From the analysed available literature it can be stated that a critical theoretical and empirical gap exists regarding the emergence of permissive public parenting in rapidly urbanizing African societies. Existing studies predominantly assume that Nigerian parents who avoid public physical discipline maintain authority through delayed home correction or democratic

dialogue. However, little conceptual research addresses the phenomenon of parental non-intervention and behavioural apathy in public spaces—where low behavioural control in children is met neither with traditional correction nor with constructive authoritative guidance. Furthermore, existing literature fails to synthesize how global parenting movements (e.g., misconstrued "gentle parenting" or "permissive modernism") interact with the breakdown of extended family support systems in urban Africa. This paper addresses this gap by offering a conceptual analysis of the sociocultural, economic, and psychological mechanisms driving the rise of permissive public parenting in urban Nigeria. To address the identified research gap, this article sets out to critically analyse the historical evolution of child discipline norms in Nigeria, contrasting indigenous communal control (*Eko Ile*) with contemporary urban parenting practices. It will also examine the socioeconomic and structural drivers—including urbanization, Western digital influence, nuclear family isolation, and economic fatigue—that facilitate permissive public parenting. In addition, it will attempt to deconstruct the psychological dilemmas experienced by modern Nigerian parents in public spaces, focusing on the fear of public spectacle, crowd judgment, and the misapplication of modern non-punitive parenting concepts; and propose an integrative conceptual framework linking macro-level cultural shifts to micro-level parent-child interactions and child self-regulation outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

To provide a robust foundation for understanding permissive public parenting in urban Nigeria, this research integrates two complimentary theoretical frameworks: Baumrind's Parenting Styles Typology (as expanded by Maccoby & Martin) and Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory. Baumrind (1966, 1971) conceptualized parenting styles along two fundamental dimensions: Parental Demandingness (the extent to which parents show control, maturity demands, and discipline) and Parental Responsiveness (the extent to which parents show warmth, acceptance, and support). Maccoby and Martin (1983) refined this framework into four distinct quadrants:

1. Authoritative: High Demandingness, High Responsiveness.
2. Authoritarian: High Demandingness, Low Responsiveness.
3. Permissive (Indulgent): Low Demandingness, High Responsiveness.
4. Uninvolved (Neglectful): Low Demandingness, Low Responsiveness.

In the traditional Nigerian context, parenting leaned heavily toward the Authoritarian or Authoritative spectrum, where demandingness regarding public obedience was non-negotiable. (Oyinloye, 2022) However, the emerging public demeanour observed in urban Nigerian parents maps directly onto Permissive/Indulgent Parenting (characterized by high emotional warmth or leniency coupled with an absence of clear behavioural boundaries) or Uninvolved Parenting in public settings (Osegbue, 2025). By applying Baumrind's model, this paper posits that modern Nigerian parents are increasingly abdicating the dimension of *demandingness* in public spaces, allowing children's low self-regulation to go unchecked.

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory

To explain *why* parenting styles are shifting from authoritarian/authoritative to permissive in public spaces, Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979, 1994) provides a multi-layered lens:

Microsystem: The immediate interactional space between the parent and child in a public domain (e.g., a child throwing a tantrum in a Lagos supermarket).

Mesosystem: The links between the home environment, public onlookers, and school/church settings. The weakening of community-enforced discipline creates a breakdown in mesosystem alignment.

Exosystem: External environments impacting the parent, such as demanding corporate work schedules, economic strain, and prolonged urban commutes, leading to parental fatigue and burnout.

Macrosystem: The overarching cultural values, global social media influences, socioeconomic transitions, and changing legal/rights frameworks regarding child handling in modern Nigeria. Synthesizing these theories illustrates that permissive public parenting is not merely an individual failing of parental willpower, but a systemic outcome resulting from structural shifts across the macro- and exosystems impacting micro-level parent-child dynamics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Globally, early childhood developmental research establishes that self-regulation—the capacity to monitor, manage, and adapt emotions, attention, and behaviours to situational demands—is a pivotal milestone of the preschool years (ages 3–6). International empirical literature demonstrates that pre-schoolers possess immature executive functioning skills, making public environments with high sensory stimulation (e.g., bright retail displays, loud noises) common triggers for externalizing behaviours such as tantrums and non-compliance. Studies in North American and Western European contexts have long explored how parental responses in public spaces influence developmental outcomes. Research by Eisenberg et al. (2003) and Gottman et al. (1996) on emotion socialization highlights that co-regulation—where parents remain calm, set firm boundaries, and validate child emotions—fosters long-term emotional intelligence and compliance. Conversely, studies on permissive parenting show that a persistent failure to enforce boundaries in public settings correlates with long-term externalizing behavioural problems, low frustration tolerance, and impaired peer relationships. Furthermore, Western sociological literature (e.g., Netzer et al., 2014) highlights the phenomenon of "parental audience anxiety." In modern retail and public spaces, parents report feeling intensely monitored by surrounding adults. When faced with a child's public meltdown, Western parents frequently exhibit one of two extremes: over-arousal leading to public harshness, or retreat into passivity to avoid escalating a public scene.

Across the African continent, historical literature emphasizes the communal nature of socialization. Nsamenang (1992, 2006), a pioneer in African child development theory, conceptualized child-rearing in Sub-Saharan Africa as a process of "social integration" where children learn social responsibility, obedience, and interdependence within a communal matrix. In a regional study on parenting practices in East and West Africa, Serpell and Nsamenang (2014) noted that indigenous African socialization prioritizes social competence and respect for adult authority above individual self-expression. Public misbehaviour by a child was

historically interpreted as an affront to the collective integrity of the extended lineage. Consequently, communal intervention was a standard cultural practice: neighbours, elders, and strangers possessed social license to verbally correct or report a child acting out in public. However, local research from the past decade indicates a rapid erosion of this communal safety net. Studies across Sub-Saharan Africa demonstrate that rapid urban growth, internal rural-to-urban migration, and the adoption of gated residential living have fragmented extended family structures (Nwankwo, & Ekpenyong, 2021). As highlighted in compilations on African parenting experiences, urban African parents increasingly find themselves isolated in nuclear units, devoid of extended family support, and hesitant to allow community members to discipline their children due to rising privacy concerns and safety anxieties.

In Nigeria, empirical literature on child discipline has historically focused on the dominance of strict, often authoritarian practices. Olaniyan (2016) detailed the cultural architecture of *Eko Ile* among the Yoruba, noting that moral rectitude, public decorum, and immediate deference to authority were systematically drilled into young children. Similar cultural imperatives exist across Igbo (*Ikpa Esi*) and Hausa (*Tarbiya*) traditions. Historically, failure to comply in public resulted in immediate physical or verbal correction. Subsequent research by Alemika and Chukwuma (2011), along with UNICEF national surveys (2014), revealed that up to 85–91% of Nigerian children experienced harsh or violent discipline (e.g., spanking, yelling) as primary methods of behavioural control. These findings spurred a generation of psychoeducational research and public health campaigns aimed at reducing violent parenting in Nigeria (Nwoburu et al., 2019).

In recent years, Nigerian educational and psychological scholars have observed a sharp departure from traditional strictness, particularly within urban middle- and upper-class populations. Olowu and Taiwo (2022) conducted a comparative analysis of urban vs. rural parenting in South-Western Nigeria, finding that urban parents were significantly more likely to adopt democratic, flexible, or highly permissive stances compared to their rural counterparts who maintained strict compliance expectations. Bello and Mustapha (2023) explored the influence of Western media and digital parenting forums on educated urban Nigerian parents. Their study noted that while modern parents intentionally reject the punitive, harsh beating methods of their own childhoods, many lack alternative behavioural management tools. Consequently, in attempting to practice "gentle" or "modern" parenting, they inadvertently drift into permissive indulgence—offering warmth without establishing enforceable behavioural boundaries. Greensprings Educational Research (2025, 2026 summaries) highlighted that modern Nigerian parents have become increasingly "friendly" and conflict-averse with their children, leading to challenges in discipline management. Children raised under these emerging permissive conditions frequently exhibit low self-control, rude behaviour in public settings, and a heightened sense of entitlement.

The literature reveals a paradox in contemporary Nigerian society: while the traditional cultural narrative demands high public decorum (*Eko Ile*), structural urban realities and ideological shifts have produced a growing population of parents who exhibit public apathy or non-intervention toward child misbehaviour. The underlying drivers of this paradox require

systematic analysis. Based on the examined literature, this paper identified four primary socio-psychological factors behind the rise of permissive public parenting in urban Nigeria:

1. Structural & Economic Fatigue
2. Rejection of Historical Harshness without Mastery of Authoritative Alternatives
3. Public Scene Avoidance & Crowd Dynamics
4. Disintegration of Communal Surveillance (Eko Ile)

Modern urban living in major Nigerian metropolitan centres (such as Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, and Ibadan) imposes severe time and energy demands on working parents (Nwankwo, & Ekpenyong, 2021). Long corporate working hours, intense economic pressures, and exhausting daily commutes consume parental cognitive and emotional resources. When parents take young children to public spaces (e.g., shopping malls or eateries on weekends), they often experience severe parental burnout. Enforcing behavioural boundaries requires active cognitive effort, consistency, and emotional regulation. Exhausted parents frequently choose the path of least resistance—ignoring minor or moderate public misbehaviour or capitulating to a child's demands (e.g., buying candy, handing over a smartphone)—to secure temporary peace, resulting in functional permissiveness.

Modern Nigerian parents who grew up under strict, authoritarian, and often physically punitive regimes (*beating/flogging*) are consciously choosing to raise their children differently. However, a pedagogical gap occurs when parents abandon corporal punishment without acquiring effective, non-violent authoritative behavioural management skills. Influenced by global social media and Western parenting literature, many parents adopt terms like "gentle parenting" or "positive reinforcement". In practice, due to a lack of formal parenting education, "gentle parenting" is frequently misconstrued as permissive non-intervention—allowing children to act out without consequences under the mistaken belief that setting firm boundaries might cause emotional trauma.

In public settings, parents encounter unique social anxiety. Intervening firmly when a pre-schooler throws a tantrum risks escalating the child's emotional reaction, resulting in screaming, flailing, or crying that draws intense public scrutiny from surrounding shoppers or onlookers. To avoid creating an embarrassing public "scene," parents often deploy passive tactics: ignoring the behaviour, smiling apologetically to onlookers, or promising delayed discipline ("*Wait till we get home*"). From a developmental perspective, pre-schoolers (ages 3–5) possess limited working memory and immediate cause-and-effect cognitive processing. Delayed correction is largely ineffective for this age group; by the time the child returns home hours later, the neural association between the public misbehaviour and the consequence has lapsed, leaving the public misbehaviour functionally reinforced.

The shift from extended family living arrangements to urban nuclear isolation has altered public social dynamics. In traditional Nigerian settings, an onlooker who observed a misbehaving child would actively step in with verbal correction or assist the parent (Osegbue, 2025; Akinboade, & Adebayo, 2022). In modern urban centres, social fragmentation and heightened individualism have dismantled this communal contract. Onlookers now hesitate to intervene due to fears of hostile reactions from protective parents or accusations of boundary violation. Deprived of public community reinforcement and operating without extended family

backing, parents feel isolated and defensive, further driving them toward passivity in managing their children's public conduct.

Based on the discussed literature, this paper proposes the Cycle of Permissive Public Parenting in Urban Nigeria. Using a cycle (rather than a linear cause-and-effect timeline) to visualize permissive public parenting is a deliberate theoretical choice. It illustrates that this phenomenon is not a one-time event, but rather a self-sustaining behavioural trap that both the parent and the child get caught in over time. A linear model fails to explain *why* parents keep using permissive strategies even when they clearly do not improve the child's long-term behaviour. A cycle highlights the psychological concept of operant conditioning, where both parties are inadvertently "rewarded" in the short term.

Phase 1: Environmental Overstimulation and Low Self-Regulation

The cycle begins in sensory-dense urban public spaces—such as modern shopping malls, commercial supermarkets, fast-food eateries, or religious worship centres.

Preschool-aged children (ages 3–5) possess immature executive functioning skills, making them developmentally vulnerable to overstimulation caused by bright displays, media noise, and crowds. When exposed to desired consumer items (e.g., toys, sweets) or physical confinement, the child's low self-regulation manifests as externalizing behaviour—screaming, grabbing items, throwing body tantrums, or exhibiting outright defiance. In traditional settings, this trigger was met with immediate behavioural scaffolding or firm adult correction. In urban settings, however, it serves as the entry point into a cycle of adult avoidance.

Phase 2: Parental Cognitive Fatigue and Audience Anxiety

Upon the onset of the child's public misbehaviour, the parent encounters intense socio-emotional pressure governed by two psychological forces:

1. Parental Burnout and Cognitive Fatigue: Urban Nigerian parents—frequently exhausted from long corporate working hours, heavy traffic, and general economic stressors—lack the cognitive and emotional bandwidth required to manage an active behavioural struggle.
2. Audience Anxiety and Scene Avoidance: Unlike private domestic spaces, public spaces expose the parent to onlookers. In modern Nigeria, where traditional communal discipline (*Eko Ile*) has fragmented into individual social judgment, parents report feeling hyper-monitored. The parent experiences acute fear that enforcing discipline firmly will cause the child to scream louder, creating a public "spectacle" or drawing whispers of poor parenting from surrounding adults.

Phase 3: Non-Intervention, Passive Negotiation, and Permissive Capitulation

To rapidly resolve the public scene and restore social calm, the parent retreats into permissive non-intervention strategies. This phase typically manifests in three behavioural modes:

1. Digital Pacification: Handing a mobile smartphone or tablet to the dysregulated child to immediately freeze their attention, bypassing the need for behavioural instruction.
2. Passive Capitulation: Buying the contested item, candy, or toy that triggered the initial tantrum to quiet the child immediately.

3. The "Delayed Correction" Strategy: Issuing passive, unenforced warnings ("Wait till we get home"). Because pre-schoolers lack the long-term cognitive processing to connect delayed home punishment with immediate public behaviour, this warning is developmentally ineffective.

Phase 4: Negative Reinforcement and Behavioural Extinction Failure.

This phase represents the behavioural consolidation stage of the cycle, governed by principles of operant conditioning:

1. Child Reinforcement: The child learns that exhibiting externalizing behaviour in public settings yields tangible rewards (toys, snacks, smartphone access) or total freedom from rules. The child recognizes that the parent is unwilling to enforce rules in front of strangers.
2. Parental Negative Reinforcement: The parent experiences immediate, short-term relief (the child stops screaming). This relief negatively reinforces the parent's permissive behaviour, making the parent significantly more likely to resort to passive non-intervention during the next public outing.

Because behavioural extinction never occurs, the child's low self-regulation becomes entrenched. Over time, the child enters early childhood education (ECE) classrooms expecting identical permissive dynamics, leading directly to the parent-teacher relational strain, mutual blame, and classroom adjustment difficulties.

Suggestions and Recommendations

To mitigate the negative developmental impacts of permissive public parenting while respecting non-violent, culturally grounded child-rearing practices among Nigerian parents in present times, the following recommendations are proposed for researchers, educators, policy makers, and clinical practitioners:

For Developmental Psychologists and Family Researchers.

1. Researchers should execute observational and mixed-methods empirical studies across diverse geopolitical zones in Nigeria (e.g., comparing Lagos, Kano, Enugu, and Port Harcourt) to test the proposed conceptual framework in live public environments.
2. Indigenous psychological instruments should be designed to measure *Public Parental Self-Efficacy* and *Perceived Public Audience Anxiety* specifically within African urbanization contexts.

For Early Childhood Educators and School Leadership.

1. Schools and early childhood centres should bridge the gap between home and school by conducting workshops that teach **Authoritative Co-Regulation**. Parents must be equipped with concrete, non-violent strategies for boundary-setting in public spaces (e.g., pre-outing rule setting, positive reinforcement, clear time-outs).
2. Educational institutions should actively clarify the distinction between *authoritative positive discipline* and *permissive indulgence*, disabusing parents of the idea that gentle parenting requires non-intervention.

For Community and Religious Organizations.

1. Religious institutions (churches and mosques) and community associations, which play a central role in Nigerian social life, should incorporate evidence-based family life education into their programs.
2. Expanding structured psychoeducational interventions (such as the PEPVAC model developed by Nigerian researchers) to teach parents how to handle public behavioural challenges without resorting to either harsh beating or passive permissiveness.

For Public Policy and Child Welfare Agencies

1. The Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, alongside civil society organizations, should produce accessible public awareness campaigns focusing on practical early childhood self-regulation techniques.
2. Urban planning agencies should consider child- and family-friendly public spaces that provide dedicated spaces for dysregulated young children, reducing parental public anxiety during retail and civic outings.

CONCLUSION

The transition from traditional communal surveillance (*Eko Ile*) to permissive public parenting in urban Nigeria represents a significant cultural shift in contemporary African family life. Driven by rapid urbanization, parental fatigue, the breakdown of extended family safety nets, and the misapplication of modern parenting trends, many Nigerian parents in public spaces are abdicating behavioural control over pre-schoolers exhibiting low self-regulation.

This conceptual paper demonstrates that permissive public parenting is not simply an individual behavioural choice, but a complex response to socio-structural transformations. Unchecked public indiscipline deprives young children of the external scaffolding necessary to build emotional self-regulation and social competence. Rebalancing Nigerian parenting requires moving beyond the false binary of harsh corporal punishment versus passive permissiveness. By embracing an authoritative framework that combines indigenous values of respect and moral guidance with non-violent, developmentally appropriate discipline, modern Nigerian families can foster well-regulated, socially competent children capable of thriving in both public spaces and an interconnected world.

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