

# Bringing acts of kindness into Public Protection: Prosocial Approaches to Child Protection in Arusha

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## Research Article

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# Abstract

Violence against children remains a major child protection concern in Tanzania, requiring responses that complement formal legal and regulatory mechanisms with relational and community-based approaches. This study examined how acts of kindness are institutionalized within public strategies for addressing violence against children in Arusha City. Guided by Ubuntu philosophy and an interpretivist paradigm, the study employed a qualitative design in Arusha. Data was generated through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions involving community members, and documentary review of relevant policies, regulations, reports, and guidelines. Participants included social welfare officers, community development officers, police officers, NGO representatives, and community members selected through purposive and non-proportional quota sampling, with data saturation guiding the sample size of 64 participants. Data was transcribed, translated into English, and analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. The analysis identified several manifestations of kindness in child protection practice, including family and community-based care, children's participation, frontline practice, trusted community authority, social norm formation, and NGO-led prevention. The study concludes that kindness can strengthen child protection when embedded within formal structures, community relationships, accountability mechanisms, and sustained preventive practices.

## Introduction

Violence against children remains a major global public health and socioeconomic concern, with consequences for children's physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development. Maria et al. (2021) describe physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, together with neglect, as key forms of violence against children, while Barchi and Abinader (2025, p. 817) highlight consequences that may extend across the life course, including effects on physical and emotional well-being, neurodevelopment, relationships, educational and professional achievement, and patterns of behaviour. In this broader context, responses to violence have largely focused on formal mechanisms such as rules, sanctions, and regulatory measures. Gutierrez et al. (2019, p. 63), however, draw attention to the values and attitudes that shape prosocial behaviour, indicating the relevance of interpersonal and relational dimensions alongside formal approaches in addressing violence against children. Studies from high-income countries provide examples of the role of prosocial behaviour in building harmony, which is against any form of violence in societies. Pardon et al. (2023), in Finland, found an association between teaching kindness, compassion and caring and prosocial behaviours among young children, while Hill and Laredo (2020), in the United Kingdom, illustrate how acts of kindness can contribute to social solidarity and challenge practices of control and dehumanisation. Unwin (2018, p. 18) similarly highlights the role of kindness and human relationships in public policy and service provision, noting how emotional responses and human interaction shape policy processes. This situates kindness and compassion within a broader understanding of children's social environments and suggests that relational practices can be considered alongside formal violence-prevention measures to foster supportive environments and prosocial development among children.

In Latin America, child protection is situated within social and institutional environments where violence against children remains widespread and where family, school, and community relationships can either increase vulnerability or support children's development. Within this context, understanding child protection involves not only children's exposure to violence but also the social and relational processes through which children are supported, protected, and encouraged to develop prosocial behaviour. Devries et al. (2019, p. 2) estimated that 58% of children aged 0–17 in Latin America and the Caribbean experience physical, sexual, or emotional abuse annually. In Colombia, Mejia et al. (2006) identified family and peer support as protective processes that can foster adaptation to adversity. Pundir et al. (2020) emphasise the importance of caregiver support, social norms and values, safe environments, and education in strengthening child protection, while Cerna-Turoff et al. (2021) highlight household and individual factors influencing children's exposure to violence. Abdullah et al. (2022) further identify collective responsibility, cultural values, family networks, and informal social mechanisms as resources that can complement formal protection systems. This shows how informal prosocial practices, cultural values, family networks, and collective forms of care, particularly those embedded in Indigenous communities, can be recognised and connected with public child protection strategies.

In the Global South, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, child protection is embedded within social environments shaped by family relationships, community structures, cultural values, and locally established systems of care. Within these contexts, children's experiences of violence include physical, sexual, psychological, and other forms of victimisation. Edwards et al. (2024, p. 593) report that, across Africa, estimated rates of childhood sexual abuse have reached as high as 78%, while physical abuse has been reported at rates of up to 45%, including up to 27% when restricted to cases involving an adult perpetrator. These patterns form part of a broader child protection context in which the care and safety of children are shaped not only by formal services but also by the families, communities, and social relationships in which children are embedded. Abdullah et al. (2022) describe it as community-based approaches that draw on cultural resources, collective responsibility, and informal social control alongside formal protection systems. Such approaches are consistent with African indigenous value systems that emphasise mutual support, compassion, collective care, and shared responsibility for children. Abdullah et al. (2023) further illustrate this through the Ubuntu framework, in which kindness and caring are understood as expressions of interconnectedness and community responsibility, particularly within rural communities. Similarly, Johnson and Sloth-Nielsen (2020) situate child protection within interconnected formal and informal systems, highlighting how children's well-being is shaped by relationships across families, communities, and wider social structures. This presents child protection in Sub-Saharan Africa as a multidimensional context in which formal protection mechanisms operate alongside family and community relationships, cultural values, and everyday practices of care, compassion, kindness, and mutual support.

In Tanzania, child protection is situated within a context where violence against children remains widespread and where formal protection systems operate alongside family and community-based forms of care. Ng'ondi (2015, p. 10) reports that nearly three in ten females and approximately one in seven males experienced sexual violence before age 18, while around three-quarters of girls and boys

experienced physical violence. Barchi and AbiNader (2025) and Edwards et al. (2024) further situate Tanzania within regional evidence on sexual and physical violence and school-based child protection interventions that strengthen teacher-student interactions and discipline practices. Community participation also forms part of Tanzania's child protection framework. Mbunda and Nyaki (2024) report that community members are recognised as important actors in protecting children, although community awareness and responses to child sexual abuse remain uneven. Alongside these formal and community mechanisms, Lembuka (2024) describes Tanzania's Ujamaa intersections as interconnected structures involving families, extended families, neighbourhoods, local leadership, and other community resources, through which Ubuntu-informed practices have been linked with child rights and protection. McAlpine et al. (2024) further demonstrate that community practices and cultural norms can both sustain harmful power relations and provide resources for reshaping them, highlighting the importance of understanding local meanings and practices within child protection.

The existing literature provides important evidence that kindness, compassion, community care and Ubuntu can contribute to positive relationships and the protection of children (Binfet & Passmore, 2019; Hill & Laredo, 2020; Pardon et al., 2023; Passmore & Oades, 2022). It also demonstrates the value of relational approaches in reducing violence through improved parenting, supportive relationships and changes in attitudes towards violence (Gutierrez & Dorais, 2019; Fryburg, 2022). However, these relational values have largely been examined as individual behaviours, cultural norms or interpersonal practices, rather than as values that can be deliberately embedded within institutions. Limited attention has been given to how kindness, Ubuntu and other relational values can be translated into institutional policies, practices, relationships and everyday ways of working to address violence against children. This study addresses this gap by examining how acts of kindness, Ubuntu and other relational values can be institutionalised through community participation in addressing violence against children in Arusha, Tanzania.

## **Conceptualising Kindness as a Relational Practice**

Malti (2020) conceptualises kindness as a multidimensional virtue grounded in compassion and gentleness, encompassing emotional, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions such as empathy, respect, perspective-taking, helping, sharing, and comforting. These dimensions develop across childhood and adolescence, highlighting the importance of developmentally sensitive approaches that nurture both self-oriented and other-oriented kindness. Hill and Laredo (2020) extend this conceptualisation by framing kindness as a relational and political practice of social solidarity, in which everyday acts of care and support promote human dignity, social justice, and collective responsibility. Similarly, Binfet and Passmore (2017) refer to children's experiences of kindness through concrete relational practices, including helping, respect, encouragement, and advocacy, with teachers identified as important adult agents within everyday school environments. This positions kindness as a socially embedded practice that develops and is expressed through relationships and institutional contexts, making it relevant to

understanding children's experiences of care, safety, dignity, participation, and respect within families, communities, schools, and child protection institutions.

## **Kindness, Prosocial Behaviour and Violence Prevention**

The literature suggests that promoting kindness can provide an alternative to approaches that focus predominantly on identifying and suppressing antisocial behaviour. Binfet and Passmore (2017) observe that educational and psychological studies have given attention to antisocial behaviour and other positive attributes. Similarly, Gutierrez et al. (2019) argue that conventional violence-prevention approaches have often concentrated on inhibiting antisocial behaviour while giving less attention to positive values, humanity and prosocial behaviour. Gutierrez et al. (2019)'s discussion of Humanity Education, developed in the context of post-genocide Rwanda, illustrates an approach that seeks to promote humanity, positive attitudes and prosocial behaviour as part of violence prevention and healing. Malti (2020) provides further support for this orientation, noting evidence linking empathy-related constructs with reductions in aggression and arguing that interventions nurturing kindness reduce engagement in risk behaviours. This suggest that violence prevention should not be limited to responding to harmful behaviour after it occurs, but should also involve deliberately cultivating the relational capacities and positive social environments through which children learn to care for and respect others.

## **Collective Responsibility for Child Protection through Ubuntu and Kindness**

Within an African context, the relational dimensions of kindness as the expression of Ubuntu can be understood through related indigenous collective values. Gade (2012) distinguishes between understandings of Ubuntu as a moral quality of a person and broader understandings of Ubuntu as an African philosophy, ethic or worldview concerned with human interconnectedness. Mugumbate and Chereni (2020) similarly describe Ubuntu as a set of values and practices through which people understand themselves in relation to others and the wider community. This collective orientation is particularly relevant to child protection because responsibility for children is not necessarily confined to parents or formal institutions but rather to the broader community. Abdullah et al. (2023) provide empirical evidence for this position, finding that Ubuntu is associated with a lower tendency toward child neglect, with community care and compassion forming important dimensions of the relationship. Abdullah et al. (2023) identify respect, community care, collective solidarity, collective survival, and compassion as normative underpinnings of Ubuntu. The authors therefore argue for child-protection approaches that work with communities and local leaders to strengthen practices of mutual childcare, parental support, social solidarity, and community participation.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study is theoretically grounded in Ubuntu philosophy, an African relational worldview that understands human personhood, dignity, and wellbeing as emerging through interconnected relationships with others and the wider community. Gade (2012) distinguishes Ubuntu as both a moral quality expressed through virtues such as generosity, empathy, forgiveness, and considerateness and as a broader philosophy or worldview centred on human interconnectedness. Similarly, Mugumbate and Chereni (2020) conceptualise Ubuntu as a collection of values and practices through which individuals understand themselves in relation to others and to the wider relational and communal environment. Mulumba and Carvalho (2024) further associate Ubuntu with respectful human relations, kindness, preservation of life, and people-centred responsibility, while Breda (2019) develops Ubuntu as an African theory for social work grounded in interconnectedness, solidarity, human dignity, and community relationships. These principles provide a relevant philosophical basis for understanding the institutionalisation of kindness in child protection, where responsibility for children extends beyond individual caregivers to families, communities, local leaders, social service providers, government institutions, and other actors. Ubuntu offers a lens for examining how indigenous practices of kindness connect with formal child protection policies, structures, and everyday practices in Arusha City.

## Methodology

This study used a qualitative research design with an interpretivist approach to explore how acts of kindness, such as positive, reciprocal, and communal practices, are included in public strategies to address violence against children in Arusha City, Tanzania. The interpretivist approach helped to understand participants' experiences, meanings, and perceptions within their social and cultural settings, rather than aiming for universal or statistically generalisable results (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). The research took place in eight purposively chosen wards<sup>1</sup> of Arusha City from 10 April to 13 May 2025. Participants were social welfare officers, community development officers, police officers, NGO representatives, and community members. The study used purposive and non-proportional quota sampling to capture a range of perspectives from different socioeconomic and geographical backgrounds. Data saturation guided the inclusion of 16 semi-structured interviews and six focus group discussions (FGDs) with 48 adult community members who joined the study voluntarily after giving informed consent (Ames et al., 2019; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Data collection included semi-structured interviews, FGDs, and a review of relevant child-protection laws, policies, plans, regulations, guidelines, and reports, enabling comparison across sources (Bowen, 2009; Nyumba et al., 2018; Ruslin et al., 2022). Interviews and FGDs were held in Swahili, recorded with participants' consent, transcribed, and translated into English. The transcripts were cross-checked against the original Swahili to preserve meaning. Permissions were obtained from the relevant authorities. The confidentiality, anonymity, and right to withdraw for participants were protected throughout the study. Data was analysed thematically using Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. This involved getting familiar with the interview, FGD, and document data, then systematically coding and comparing information across the dataset. Codes were grouped into broader patterns and checked against the study objectives and the full dataset to ensure consistency. This process led to six final themes, developed through repeated review and

interpretation of the data. Combining interview, FGD, and document methods allowed comparison across sources and identification of both similar and differing views. Careful documentation of the coding and theme development process helped strengthen the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings (Nowell et al., 2017; Stahl & King, 2020).

## Findings

This section presents the key themes emerging from the qualitative analysis of institutionalised kindness in child protection practices in Arusha City, highlighting how family and community care, children's participation, frontline practice, trusted community authority, and preventive approaches are incorporated into formal child protection structures

## Community and Family-Based Care

The analysis indicates that family and community-based alternative care constitutes a primary pathway through which informal practices of kindness are integrated into the formal child protection system. Documentary material demonstrates that the Law of the Child Act, 2009<sup>2</sup> and the Law of the Child (Fit Persons) Regulations, 2019<sup>3</sup> establish a formal framework for identifying, assessing, registering, training, supervising, and monitoring Fit Persons. This arrangement is significant because it shows that care traditionally provided through kinship, neighbourhood, and community relationships is not necessarily displaced by the introduction of formal child protection systems. Rather, existing relationships of care can be recognised, regulated, and linked to statutory responsibilities. In this context, institutionalisation refers to the transformation of informal willingness to care for vulnerable children into an organised protection mechanism. The practical application of this process was described by a Community Development Officer:

*"Yes, fit person. If you see a child going through difficult circumstances and there is no shelter to take them, the fit families are selected to temporarily care for the child, ensuring that they stay and live well until a permanent solution is found." - Judi (Community Development Officer)*

A related theme highlights the importance of community trust in determining participation in alternative care. Although Fit Persons undergo professional assessment, their suitability also depends on community recognition as dependable individuals willing and able to care for children. This demonstrates a key feature of institutionalised kindness: formal regulation does not eliminate the relational foundations upon which community care depends. Instead, professional assessment and community recognition operate in a cycle, creating a hybrid arrangement that combines institutional accountability with locally established trust. The relationship between formal assessment and community legitimacy is articulated by a Social Welfare Officer:

*"This means when a child experiences violence or is at risk of experiencing violence, research shows that the family remains a vital environment for the child's growth. So, if that child has been separated or lost*

*from their family, and thus is at risk of violence, information is sent to the police, and the child is then referred to the alternative family system, specifically to the trusted person. This individual will already have been assessed by a social welfare officer and selected by their community as someone who volunteers, is dependable, and can accommodate the child, given their available resources.” - Kevo (Social Welfare Officer)*

The analysis further shows that institutionalisation extends beyond individual families to encompass the responsibilities of local government. The Fit Person Regulations require social welfare departments to establish and maintain a pool of Fit Persons to respond to children in need of care. As a result, community caregiving becomes integrated into the organisational infrastructure of child protection, rather than relying solely on spontaneous acts of generosity. The formal responsibility assigned to local government is illustrated in the following regulatory provision:

*“4(1) in accordance with the regulation 7(2)(f) of the child protection regulation, the head of the social welfare department in each district shall establish and maintain a pool of fit persons to meet the needs of children in the care of the local government authority or under a place of safety.” - Fit Person Regulation (p. 4)*

These findings demonstrate that family and community-based alternative care provides a concrete example of how an indigenous or community-based ethic of collective responsibility can enter formal child protection implementation. The process does not simply transfer responsibility from the state to communities; rather, it connects community willingness to care with assessment, regulation, supervision, and referral. The analysis suggests that kindness becomes institutionalised when community care is given formal recognition, procedural support, and organisational continuity.

## **Participation, Mutual Support, and Relational Protection**

The analysis shows that children’s councils and children’s clubs serve as institutional spaces where children enact kindness through everyday relationships characterised by respect, mutual assistance, and responsibility. Rather than viewing children solely as passive recipients of protection, these structures promote an understanding of both rights and responsibilities. Furthermore, it supports the argument that violence prevention should prioritise the cultivation of positive social environments instead of focusing exclusively on the suppression of antisocial behavior. The relationship between rights, responsibility, and kindness was articulated by an NGO representative:

*“Yes, indeed, because in the children’s council, there are two main issues: the rights of the child and, secondly, the very important responsibility of the child. Regarding the rights of the child, we educate each other about our rights and demand that policymakers uphold them. The second issue of responsibility is where we encourage each other that, while we have rights, our responsibility is to love one another, not to discriminate based on our differences in academic performance, appearance, or religion.” - Jacky (NGO Representative)*

A further pattern is that children's clubs institutionalise kindness by embedding positive relationships within the daily school environment. The focus extends beyond identifying or reporting violence to include developing friendships, mutual support, and constructive relationships between children and teachers. The evidence builds upon this perspective by illustrating how child protection programs intentionally organise these relational experiences. The relational orientation of children's clubs was described by an NGO representative:

*"We work with children's clubs. Within these clubs, we discuss safe environments in schools. A safe school environment includes relationships among students and between students and teachers. The aim is for a child to wake up in the morning feeling excited to go to school because of the positive acts taking place there. We also ensure that bullying is eliminated, and friendships and mutual support are encouraged." - Chausiku (NGO Representative)*

Another dimension of safe spaces is institutional responsiveness to children's experiences. The analysis shows that children participating in protection meetings can shape reporting mechanisms by identifying approaches that may be inaccessible or inappropriate for younger children. This demonstrates that participation itself becomes a form of relational protection: institutions respond not only to abstract policy requirements but also to children's experiences of safety, accessibility, and dignity. Such responsiveness strengthens the connection between kindness and institutional practice because kindness is expressed through designing systems around the needs of those whom the system is intended to protect. The influence of children on reporting mechanisms was explained by an NGO representative:

*"Also, the national plan of action to end violence against women and children (NPA-VAWC) has helped children who have participated in these meetings to influence committees to align with children's needs. For instance, they can now advise that if we adopt this method, children will not be able to access it easily. For example, telling children to report abuse to the police... It is not always suitable for young children. So, finding ways to make it easier for children to report abuse, like through counselling desks at schools or suggestion boxes, has also been important." - Jacky (NGO Representative)*

This study demonstrates that children's safe spaces are more than physical locations for protection services. They function as institutional environments where children learn, practice, and sustain prosocial relationships. Through councils, clubs, and participatory mechanisms, kindness is linked to children's rights, mutual responsibility, participation, and institutional responsiveness.

## **Transitioning from Individual Compassion to Frontline Practice**

The analysis indicates that institutionalised kindness is manifested in the routine activities of frontline personnel. Social welfare officers, community development officers, police, schools, and non-governmental organisations operationalise broad child protection commitments through education, counselling, community engagement, referral, and reporting mechanisms. The decentralised structure of

child protection committees serves as a mechanism for translating national policy into community-level action. This institutional reach was described by a Community Development Officer:

*“Looking at it from a policy perspective, we have committees under the National Plan of Action to End Violence against Women and Children (MTAKUWA). These committees exist from the highest levels down to the wards and neighbourhoods.” - Najma (Community Development Officer)*

The analysis also shows that community facing personnel support institutional structures by translating formal policy into daily interactions. Community development officers and community-based police actors engage directly with communities through education, awareness initiatives, and relationship-building. The involvement emphasises the significance of the implementation environment, which asserts that policy outcomes depend not only on formulation but also on implementing organisations, actors, and environmental conditions. The contribution of community-based actors in translating policy into everyday behaviour was articulated by a police officer:

*“There are many programmes that directly reach the community. For example, even education efforts from the Community Development Department and the presence of a community-based police officer... who is not a formal police officer...are intended to align community behaviour with policy.” - Meku (Police Officer)*

The 116-child helpline exemplifies the institutionalisation of kindness through an accessible response system. Although kindness may begin with an individual’s recognition of a child’s mistreatment, the helpline creates a formal channel to communicate and address such concerns. This process transforms kindness from a personal disposition into an institutional capacity to respond to vulnerability. Thus, institutionalised kindness encompasses both the conduct of officials toward children and the accessibility of protection systems for those at risk. The practical application of this mechanism was described by a Social Welfare Officer:

*“People have really been using the 116 helpline.... We have been advocating for it for a long time. If you see something happening near you, like a child being mistreated, call 116.” - Kevo (Social Welfare Officer)*

This study shows that frontline institutionalisation is achieved through the integration of organisational structures, personnel, and accessible procedures. Committees facilitate organisational coordination, community-based personnel bridge policy and everyday social life, and reporting mechanisms enable concerns to enter the formal protection system. Furthermore, it shows that institutionalised kindness does not entail codifying every compassionate act, but rather establishing structures that enable caring, responsive, and protective actions to be consistently implemented.

## Trusted Community Authority

The analysis indicates that local and religious leaders serve as a critical link between formal child protection structures and community-based authority systems. Documentary material shows that religious leaders, influencers, and other community actors are integrated into ward-level child protection

structures alongside government officials, teachers, police, health workers, and civil society organisations. Their inclusion marks a transition from perceiving community leaders solely as informal supporters to recognising them as active participants in formal child protection governance. The role of religious leaders in addressing violence was described by a community participant:

*“Leaders in their communities, particularly religious figures, are often the first to intervene when children are exposed to violence or neglect. Their talks and teachings frequently promote kindness and advocate for the humane treatment of children.” - FGD3 (Community Members)*

A further argument is that community authority is institutionalised through decentralised child protection structures. Committees established from higher administrative levels to wards and neighbourhoods create formal channels for community actors to engage in child protection activities. The organisational reach of these structures was emphasised by a Community Development Officer:

*“Looking at it from a policy perspective, we have committees under the National Plan of Action to End Violence against Women and Children (MTAKUWA). These committees exist from the highest levels down to the wards and neighbourhoods.” - Najma (Community Development Officer)*

The analysis also shows that trusted community actors can translate formal protection objectives into locally meaningful messages and practices. Their value extends beyond information dissemination; they have the familiarity, social legitimacy, and relationships that make formal child protection messages understandable and actionable within communities. The broader mechanism linking community-based actors to policy implementation was illustrated by a police officer:

*“There are many programmes that directly reach the community. For example, even education efforts from the Community Development Department and the presence of a community-based police officer... who is not a formal police officer...are intended to align community behaviour with policy.” - Meku (Police Officer)*

This theme matters because it reflects institutional recognition of locally legitimate forms of authority. Rather than replacing community structures with formal state mechanisms, the analysis suggests that public child protection strategies can create institutional pathways that enable community legitimacy, moral authority, and local knowledge to contribute to protection. This represents a hybrid form of institutionalisation, where formal accountability and community legitimacy function together, closely reflecting the emphasis on collective responsibility and the integration of formal and informal systems.

## **Institutionalising Kindness as a Social Norm**

The analysis indicates that community sensitisation and parental education constitute an important mechanism through which kindness moves from an individual value towards a socially reinforced norm. The Public Strategies to End Violence Against Children (2024/25-2028/29) (URT, 2024), incorporate awareness-raising, family strengthening and community participation, while implementation involves trained community representatives who communicate child protection, positive parenting and children's rights. In Arusha, sensitisation is not limited to occasional awareness campaigns; it is connected to

community structures and repeated household-level engagement. The routine nature of this outreach was described by a community participant:

*“There is also education being given. Even our organisation is involved in teaching people to do good deeds. The government provides education, and every Thursday, each street has a representative who addresses children’s issues. So, the representative goes, gets educated, and then returns to the community. They go around their entire street, house by house, to provide education. So, the government is, let us say, giving us a lot of support.” - FGD2 (Community Members)*

The analysis further suggests that parental education can contribute to changes in behaviour among adults who previously used violence. This is important for understanding kindness as a violence-prevention strategy because it shows that kindness is not necessarily an innate personality trait. Instead, it can be taught, reinforced, and incorporated into parenting practices. Accounts of behavioural change among parents were reported by a Community Development Officer:

*“We have cases where some parents have changed because they learned about the good deed of kindness. They used to be perpetrators, but now they are a good example of treating their children nicely. Moreover, we can directly connect their behaviour change with learning to be kind.” - Suzy (Community Development Officer)*

Education also appears to strengthen children’s capacity to recognise violence within relationships that may otherwise be interpreted as caring. The analysis indicates that children are taught to distinguish between parental love, punishment and violence. The role of education in developing this understanding was explained by a Community Development Officer:

*“Since we are officers, we often take the initiative to provide education in schools. Because even a parent can commit violence against their own child, this education helps a child to differentiate between parental love and punishment, and also between love, punishment, and violence, even if it comes from their own parent.” - Siwema (Community Development Officer)*

The evidence show that community sensitisation institutionalises kindness through repetition, education and social reinforcement. Policy provides the mandate, community representatives provide the delivery mechanism, schools and community meetings provide institutional platforms, and families provide the everyday environment in which behaviours are reproduced.

## **Innovation, Prevention and Community-Based Protection**

The analysis indicates that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) occupy a critical institutional position between public policy and community practice. Rather than functioning independently of the state, NGOs engage in governance, prevention, service delivery, counselling, advocacy, child empowerment, and community mobilisation. This role is significant because institutionalisation does not require that all practices be directly mandated by government regulations. NGOs enable the adaptation of broad policy commitments to local contexts while maintaining alignment with formal child protection

frameworks. Their impact is particularly notable in the transition from reactive intervention to preventive strategies. This shift was articulated by an NGO representative:

*“Currently, as an organisation, we have returned to focusing on the core goal of preventing violence, rather than waiting for violence to happen and then rushing to save the survivor. So, we start by preventing violence. Our prevention approach focuses on three main areas: schools, families, and peer groups.” - Chausiku (NGO Representative)*

A further explanation is the way NGOs integrate direct support for vulnerable children with efforts to facilitate family and community reintegration. Instead of viewing children as permanently separated from their social environments, certain NGO programmes offer temporary assistance while preserving connections with parents and communities. This approach illustrates how community-based protection can complement formal protection structures while maintaining the relational foundations of care. The relationship between NGO support, children, and family reintegration was described by a Community Development Officer:

*“Yes, there are. That is why I said the community, and there are NGOs. These NGOs are here in our neighbourhood. Some children live in difficult conditions. Just last week, we visited an NGO called The Foundation Africa Twamit. It supports youth, women, and children. They take in children under 5 years old who are in tough situations. They have a school in Moshono where they raise the children until they reach Standard One, then hand them back to the parents to continue their care. So yes, these efforts exist.” - Wema (Community Development Officer)*

The analysis also indicates that NGOs institutionalise kindness by positioning children as active participants in violence prevention. Children are engaged not only as recipients of services but also as agents who develop awareness of their rights, challenge the normalisation of violence, and participate in protective processes. Furthermore, it shows that kindness can function as a collective practice in which children contribute to protecting their peers. The significance of child empowerment was articulated by an NGO representative:

*“Most of my work has involved engaging directly with youth and children, ensuring they are not just passive recipients of interventions but that they feel empowered, build their own understanding of children’s rights, and take part in reducing violence. Our programmes are largely focused on working with children, because they also play a key role in reducing violence, including by challenging the normalisation of violence.” - Jacky (NGO Representative)*

The study shows that NGOs contribute to institutionalisation in three interconnected ways: they translate policy into locally adapted practice, shift attention towards prevention, and create spaces in which children and communities participate actively in protection. It also suggests that institutionalisation can occur through organised communities of practice in which child protectors share experiences and reproduce protective behaviours. The role of such spaces in spreading kindness was described by an NGO representative:

*“Although the government does not have formal systems to celebrate acts of kindness, in the NGO sector, we have good examples of such practices. For example, at Spirit for Change, we work with child protectors, believing they are doing the work in a selected manner and providing a space for them to come together and share their experiences. This helps spread acts of kindness.” - Jacky (NGO Representative)*

The evidence relating to NGOs extends the study’s central argument by demonstrating that institutionalisation encompasses more than formal legislation. It can occur through organisational partnerships, prevention programmes, child participation, community-based services, and communities of practice. NGOs thus provide an institutional space where formal child protection policy and locally embedded prosocial practices interact, enabling kindness and collective responsibility to be adapted, reproduced, and sustained within routine child protection work.

## Discussions of the Findings

The formalisation of Fit Persons, family-based care and safe houses reflects the continued importance of extended family and community responsibility in protecting children. This is consistent with Roelen et al. (2017), who emphasise that alternative care in many communities is rooted in extended family systems and shared community responsibility, while Leonard et al. (2022) similarly highlight the collective principle that *“it takes a village to raise a child.”* Lembuka (2025) further supports the relevance of family and community-based care, although Wessells (2015) cautions that formal systems must remain responsive to local realities. At the same time, Van der Walt (2018) notes that poverty, urbanisation and limited resources can weaken traditional extended-family arrangements. This suggests that institutionalisation is most effective when it strengthens rather than displaces existing relational forms of care, while providing the regulation, accountability and resources required to protect children consistently.

Children’s councils, school clubs, protection desks and peer-support mechanisms demonstrate a shift from viewing children primarily as recipients of protection towards recognising them as participants in their own safety and the safety of others. This aligns with Mngarah and Gwajekera (2019), who show how participatory approaches such as Tuseme enable children to speak openly and contribute to solutions that affect them. Nambatya and Gubo (2016) similarly identify a movement away from adult-only decision-making towards more participatory models, while Murungi et al. (2021) emphasise the contribution of safe spaces to children’s social and academic wellbeing. The same institutionalisation is evident in frontline practice, where social welfare officers, community development structures, police, helplines and civil society organisations translate principles of care into everyday services. However, Mwapaura et al. (2022) identify staff shortages, high workloads and inadequate resources as continuing constraints, while Wessells (2015) stresses the persistent gap between policy commitments and implementation. Thus, the thematic account indicates that institutionalising kindness requires not only formal mechanisms but also adequately resourced systems capable of sustaining caring and responsive relationships in everyday practice.

The formal inclusion of local leaders within child protection committees allows existing sources of authority and trust to become part of prevention, mediation, counselling, referral and positive parenting interventions. This supports Wessells (2015), who argues that top-down child protection systems can miss important aspects of everyday community life and therefore require meaningful community involvement. Ellermeijer et al. (2023) similarly show that trusted leaders can guide families, mediate disputes, and encourage improved parenting practices. Community sensitisation and parental education further demonstrate how ideas of kindness and non-violent care can be transformed from individual or informal practices into shared social expectations. The thematic interpretation suggests that institutionalisation in Arusha City is best understood as a process of integrating indigenous relational practices with formal policy, professional services and community structures. Rather than treating kindness as separate from child protection, the emerging system incorporates collective responsibility, participation, trusted authority and community action into institutional mechanisms for preventing and responding to violence against children.

## **Conclusion**

The study concludes that institutionalising kindness within child protection in Arusha City is a relational and community-embedded process through which indigenous practices of collective care, compassion, mutual responsibility, and trusted authority are connected with formal protection mechanisms. The analysis shows that family-based care, children's participation, frontline services, community leadership, parental education, and NGO interventions create practical spaces to translate kindness into everyday child protection practice. Rather than replacing existing community relationships, formal systems can strengthen and regulate these practices through coordination, accountability, referral mechanisms, and sustained support. However, sustaining such approaches requires adequate resources, responsive institutions, and meaningful community engagement. The study positions kindness not merely as an individual virtue but as a socially and institutionally supported practice that can help address violence and promote children's safety, dignity, participation, and wellbeing.

## **Declarations**

## **Author Contribution**

Made substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data; or the creation of new software used in the work; Drafted the work or revised it critically for important intellectual content; approved the version to be published; and Agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

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## Footnotes

1. Ward is an administrative and local government unit within a district or urban authority
2. The Law of the Child Act, 2009
3. The Law of the Child (Fit Persons) Regulations, 2019