

# Family Kinship: For Better or for Worse

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## Abstract

*Kinship, especially the family bond between parents and children, forms the foundation of human survival and flourishing. From conception, life itself is sustained by connection: in the womb, the umbilical cord nourishes the unborn child with oxygen and nutrients, while after birth relationships act as extended cords that transmit love, security, and resources across the lifespan. Families are therefore the most critical institutions of human development. When rooted in love, they nurture resilience, belonging, and joy. When love is absent—through neglect, abuse, or disconnection—they become destructive, starving the soul and perpetuating cycles of pain. Love, however, is not self-generated. It originates in God, who is the ultimate attachment figure and heavenly Father. His secure presence enables parents to love one another and raise children in environments of safety and dignity.*

*Kinships anchored in God's love thus become fertile soil for identity formation, emotional strength, and generational continuity. Conversely, when this divine foundation is lacking, family bonds themselves can become fragile and harmful, amplifying human insecurity. This truth takes on special significance within African and Afrodescendant contexts. Despite being among the most religious populations globally, these communities often remain disproportionately affected by poverty, violence, and systemic inequities. While slavery, racism, and structural injustice explain much of this condition, they do not provide the final answer. A deeper paradox exists: religiosity without transformation, worship without secure attachment to God's love. The root crisis lies in broken kinships and disordered relationships with the divine. The path forward requires more than ritual or cultural religion. It calls for the recovery of loving, God-centred families that mirror divine kindness and embody resilience. The restoration of kinship underwritten by the God of love is not only the panacea for African misery but also the universal foundation of human flourishing.*

**Keywords:** Kinship; Human flourishing; Divine love; Family bonds; African religiosity.

## Defining Family Kinship: Being Related and Being in Relationship

Kinship is both structural and relational. To be related is a matter of biological, legal, or ritual connection. Spouses are related to each other by law, creed, or covenant; a child is related to a parent by genetic inheritance; siblings are related by shared parentage. Relatedness is, therefore, structural, mechanical, and often involuntary. One cannot choose one's parents or siblings.

Relationship, or kinship in its fuller sense, goes beyond biology and structure to describe how related individuals treat and care for one another. Whereas being related is about

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connection, kinship is about communion. It involves the quality of the bond—the presence or absence of love, trust, and mutual concern.

As I argued in *When Love Hurts* (Maturlu, 2025c), love is the active concern and mutual commitment for provision of needs for the growth and wellbeing of another. This definition emphasizes responsibility over sentiment. In families, kinship is not fulfilled by the bare fact of blood ties but by the lived practice of love, kindness, and care.

The distinction is vital: families can be genetically connected but relationally fractured; conversely, adoptive or spiritual families can be unrelated by blood yet deeply bonded by love. This aligns with the sociological insight that kinship is both a structure and a practice—a set of roles and a set of lived commitments.

### **Love and Kindness: The Heart of Kinship**

At the heart of kinship lies love expressed as kindness. Kindness is love in action—the small, consistent gestures of care, patience, generosity, and attunement that sustain bonds over time. Gottman and Silver (1999) demonstrated in their decades of marital research that kindness is the single most important predictor of long-term relational satisfaction (Williams & Mohammed, 2009). My own work expands on this by showing that kindness functions as a transgenerational force: families that model kindness transmit not only emotional security but also resilience in adversity (Maturlu, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c).

Love, in this sense, is not primarily a feeling but a discipline. It is learned, practiced, and sustained through daily choices. In the biblical sense, love is commandment, covenant, and imitation of God. The apostle Paul describes love as patient, kind, not envious, not boastful, not proud (1 Corinthians 13:4–7). Jesus reframed love as the identifying mark of discipleship: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35, NIV).

When kindness becomes the governing ethic of family life, spouses feel cherished, children feel safe, and intergenerational trust deepens. Conversely, when kindness is absent—replaced by harshness, indifference, or abuse—family life becomes insecure, unstable, and damaging.

### **Kinship as a Site of Violence**

Yet kinship is not only a source of life; it can also be a site of death. The very relationships meant to provide care and protection are, paradoxically, those most likely to inflict harm. Globally, data confirm that homicide is primarily a family affair. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) reports that more than half of all women killed worldwide are murdered by intimate partners or other family members. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023) likewise identifies family-related homicide as one of the leading forms of lethal violence, with Africa and the Americas recording the highest prevalence. We are more likely to be killed not by a random stranger but by those we call husband, wife, parent, sibling, or uncle.

The dynamics of such violence are diverse. In the case of intimate partner violence, control, jealousy, and cycles of abuse often culminate in lethal outcomes. Domestic femicide remains one of the most alarming manifestations of this pattern, with African women experiencing the world’s highest rates of partner-perpetrated killings (UNODC, 2023). For children, the threat likewise comes not from outside predators but from within their own homes. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2020) estimates that four in five children worldwide are subjected to violent discipline, while homicide is a leading cause of death among children under five, often committed by parents or stepparents.

Men, too, are not exempt. In many African and Afrodescendant communities, cycles of broken kinship fuel fraternal conflicts, gang violence, and retaliatory killings rooted in kinship ties. In these contexts, the absence of God’s love

transforms family bonds into instruments of fear and coercion.

The betrayal of kinship compounds trauma. Being harmed by a parent, spouse, or sibling cuts deeper than being harmed by a stranger, because it violates the innate expectation of care and protection. Research shows that children exposed to intrafamilial violence are more likely to develop insecure attachment styles, depression, and self-destructive behaviours, including suicide (Bridge et al., 2018; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Broken kinship not only kills bodies but also crushes spirits, perpetuating intergenerational cycles of insecurity and unfulfilled expectations (Maturlu, 2025d).

## God as the Source of Love

To flourish is to be rooted in love. But love does not originate in human beings; God—not each other—is the source of love. As Scripture testifies, “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:7–8, NIV).

In attachment theory, flourishing requires a secure base. Children thrive when caregivers are consistently available, responsive, and loving. Spiritually, God is the ultimate caregiver—the heavenly Father who provides a secure attachment figure for all humanity. When parents cultivate a secure personal relationship with God, they experience His love and inevitably pass it on to their children. Family kinships, secured by God’s love, become the soil in which identity, belonging, safety, and joy take root.

The Christian family, therefore, reflects God when love is central. Husbands are called to “love [their] wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25, NIV). Care for family is also framed as the test of genuine faith: “Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Timothy 5:8, NIV). Love within the Christian family is thus both an act of obedience and a witness to the world.

When kinship is underpinned by God’s love, it nurtures thriving. When it is deprived of this divine source, it becomes destructive.

## Insecure African Families: History, Religion, and Broken Kinship

The insecurity of African and Afrodescendant families illustrates this principle. Slavery, particularly in the diaspora, as depicted in the infamous “Willie Lynch” letter, though debated in authenticity, reflects historically accurate strategies slaveholders used to dismantle Black families and perpetuate dysfunction (Gates, 1993; Maturlu, 2025b; Wood, 1998). Fathers were humiliated through public punishments, mothers broken into submission, and children socialized into dependence. This calculated destruction of kinship bonds ensured cycles of fear, distrust, and brokenness that continue today.

Generational dysfunction remains visible. In the U.S., nearly half of Black children (49.7%) live in single-parent households compared to 24% of White children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2022), in the UK, 51% of Black Caribbean families are lone-parent households versus 22% of White

British families (. Such fragility exposes families to risks of poverty, neglect, and criminal justice involvement (Alexander, 2010; Bywaters et al., 2015).

Domestic and intimate partner violence (IPV) further destabilizes families. One in three women globally experience IPV, with Africa having the highest prevalence (WHO, 2021). In Nigeria, statistics by National Population Commission show that 36% of ever-married women report spousal violence (NPC, 2019), while in Kenya the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics report indicate 16% report physical violence in the past year (KNBS et al., 2023). Black women in the U.S. face the highest homicide rates among adult women, with over half linked to IPV (Petrosky et al., 2017).

Children bear the brunt. Four in five globally experience violent discipline, with Sub-Saharan Africa among the highest regions (UNICEF, 2020). This perpetuates trauma and disrupts development. Suicide rates are highest in Africa, especially among men (Jewkes, 2002; WHO, 2021), and rising among Black youth in the U.S. (Bridge et al., 2018).

Despite religiosity, African and Afrodescendant families remain disproportionately insecure. Religiosity without secure relationship with the God of love produces empty ritual but not transformation. The panacea for African misery is loving family kinship, underwritten by a secure relationship with Yahweh.

## **Scientific Insights: Why Love in Families Matters**

Contemporary research reinforces these conclusions. Neuroscience shows that secure attachment wires the brain for empathy, regulation, and resilience (Schoore, 2001). Developmental psychology confirms that children with secure family bonds exhibit higher academic performance, better mental health, and stronger social skills (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Mokomane, 2012). Lisa Miller (2013, 2021) demonstrates that spiritual parenting—parents fostering secure spiritual attachment—significantly reduces risk of depression and addiction in children, while enhancing meaning and thriving.

Conversely, family disruption correlates with adverse outcomes. The systematic review by Nukpe, et al., (2025) shows that family disruption undermines adolescents' social, emotional, and educational wellbeing globally. My own psychological models (Maturu, 2025a, 2025b) demonstrate how unspoken expectations and relational toxicity erode love and wellbeing. Ncube and Hall (2025) highlight how domestic violence fractures diaspora families, perpetuating cycles of trauma.

The conclusion is inescapable: family love, when rooted in divine love, is indispensable for human flourishing.

## **Practical Implications**

This discussion carries urgent practical implications. First, families must prioritize cultivating love rooted in God. This requires parents to deepen their own spiritual attachment to God through prayer, Scripture, and communal worship, modelling His love to their children. Second, churches and faith communities must equip families not with empty religiosity but with practical tools for nurturing kindness, forgiveness, and secure bonds. Third, policymakers must recognize that family security is a matter of public health and social stability. Interventions in education, healthcare, and justice systems must strengthen families rather than fragment them. Finally, individuals must commit to breaking cycles of insecurity—through counselling, mentorship, and forgiveness—so that future generations inherit love rather than trauma.

## Final Thoughts

Kinships are for better or for worse. They are the lifeblood of human existence and the soil of human flourishing. Rooted in God's love, family kinships nurture secure attachment, resilience, and joy. Deprived of love, they perpetuate trauma, violence, and despair. For Africa and her diaspora, religiosity alone is insufficient; only families secured in God's love can overcome the legacies of slavery, racism, and brokenness. The path to healing lies not merely in social reform but in spiritual renewal: restoring families to love by reconnecting them to the God who is love.

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