

Causes and Consequences of Child Abuse as Perceived by Secondary School Students in Itesiwaju Local Government: Implications for Counselling Practice

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Abstract

Child abuse is very prevalent among young adolescents and it is a great source of concern to education stakeholders in Nigeria. The study therefore, examined the causes and consequences of child abuse as perceived by secondary school students in Itesiwaju Local Government, Oyo State. A researcher-developed instrument tagged: “Causes and Consequences of Child Abuse Questionnaire (CCCAQ)” was used to collect data from the respondents. Six hundred (600) respondents participated in the study, and stratified random sampling technique was used to select the participants to ensure a balanced representation among secondary school students based on gender. The findings revealed that inaccessible to quality education, financial difficulties, and lack of medical health care were the major causes of child abuse, while the study also revealed that low academic performance, emotional disturbances and sexual coercion/rape were the major consequences of child abuse among respondents. The study thus recommended that government should make education completely free to enable every child in the society have equal access to quality education. Counsellors in collaboration with the non-governmental organisations should organise awareness programmes, workshops and seminars with a view to educating all concerned on dangers and consequences of child abuse in Itesiwaju Local Government.

Key words: Causes, Consequences, Child abuse, Secondary schools, Students

Causes and Consequences of Child Abuse as Perceived by Secondary School Students in Itesiwaju Local Government: Implications for Counselling Practice

Introduction

The development and progress of any nation depend on the quality of its citizens. Child abuse deprives a nation or community of the opportunity to fully develop its citizens' potential and harness the talents needed for national growth. In Nigeria, child abuse is often compared to cancer due to its pervasive nature, largely influenced by the child's environment. Neglect hinders the socio-political and economic development of children. Millions of children lose their lives, some are denied education, and many never experience the joys of childhood due to the abuse they endure at an early age. This poses a significant threat to the development of children's personalities and undermines the overall progress and stability of society.

According to Osuala (2022), any person under the age of 18 years is a child and largely dependent on a caretaker for survival and maintenance. Child abuse is a compound word formed from "child" and "abuse." A child refers to an infant, a very young person, a son or daughter, or an offspring, while abuse refers to improper treatment or violent attacks, often expressed in words. Child abuse can be described as intentional acts that cause physical or emotional harm or the failure to provide for a child's basic needs, such as food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. It includes maltreatment, battering, or deprivation of essential needs experienced by children at home, on the streets, in religious institutions, or at school by adults (Eze & Ugwuanyi, 2022; Ibrahim, Mohammed & Musa, 2022).

Child abuse can be physical, involving hitting, beating, burning, or biting a child. It can also be emotional, which includes constantly blaming, putting down a child, excessive yelling, and shaming. It involves any form of sexual activity or exposure to sexual stimulation that is inappropriate for the child's age (Effiom & Lucy, 2022). Child abuse is the act of inflicting serious physical injury and emotional torture on a child or person, whether intentional or unintentional, and it could endanger the child's physical, emotional, social, moral, and educational development. Child abuse can harm children physically, emotionally, and sexually, or even lead to their death. Harmful behaviours from teachers, parents, peers, guardians, siblings, so-called mentors, and society in various forms can also contribute to child abuse.

There have been reported cases of violence against children such as torture, kidnapping, shootings, sexual harassment, rape, child labour, child maltreatment, street hawking, corporal punishment and abuse of substances (Ahmed & Bala, 2020; Obiora & Eze, 2020). It is estimated that over two million children suffer from one form of abuse or another in Nigeria every year (Women Education Unit, 2022).

Substance abuse among parents can be a significant contributing factor to child abuse. Alcohol and drug use, such as cocaine and heroin, are common among parents involved in child abuse. This is because substance intake may aggravate stress and stimulate violent behaviour. The World Health Organization (2024) reported that approximately 53,789 children were physically harmed, sexually abused, or murdered in Nigeria between 2014 and 2024. The most common reasons for child abuse during this period stem from alcoholism and cocaine and heroin consumption by parents who maltreat their children. Many of these issues also arise from poor parenting skills, street hawking, divorce and separation, domestic violence, and substance abuse.

There are many other factors that could also contribute to child abuse in Nigeria, such as family size, economic condition, poverty, population pressure, broken home, lack of education/illiteracy, and traditional/cultural factors. According to Adewale and Adebayo (2020), many children in Nigeria are highly vulnerable to income gap or poverty, cultural values, religious incidence and unstable economic and social factor. It is assumed that poverty is the leading factor behind child abuse, and unequal gender relations are also important determinants. In Northern Nigeria, most girls are trafficked primarily into domestic service, street hawking and commercial sexual exploitation. While boys tend to be trafficked into street vending, agriculture, mining, petty crime and the drug trade (Bello & Yusuf, 2021).

Fashola and Akinola (2023) stated that a large family size could be a contributing factor to child abuse, as child abuse is more likely to occur in poor, crowded homes with large families. It is important to note that the traditional idea of raising a large family as a source of pride in society is now considered one of the major causes of child abuse. This is due to the neglect and abuse suffered by children; instead of parents providing the basic necessities of life, children are often expected to provide for the family and are exploited daily. Single-parent families are also more likely to abuse their children than married parents. This is because single-parent families typically earn less money than other families, which may account for the increased risk of abuse (Effiom & Lucy, 2022).

Child abuse may permanently affect the psychological wellbeing of a child. Abused child(ren) usually exhibit some psychological problems like anxiety, lowered sense of self-worth, an inability to relate to peers, reduction of attention span and learning disorders, feeling of guilt and shame, social withdrawal, self-depressive symptoms, high level of anger and aggression, sadness, social isolation and feelings of stigmatization (Osuala, 2022). In severe cases, abused children may also develop psychological complications like increase in rates of psychiatric disorders like depression, acute phobia,

disassociation, intrusive (disturbing) thought, more serious level of anxiety, fear, depression, loneliness, anger, hostility, and guilt, distorted cognition, such as chronic perceptions of anger and confusion, illogical thinking, inaccurate image of the world, shattered assumption about the world and difficulty in determining or in comprehending complex role, and difficulty in thinking through or resolving social problems and behaviour problems often develop after abuse including violence and juvenile crime. Child abuse poses a hazard to society, as abused children may become involved in street begging and hawking. They are also more easily mobilized during crises to act as thugs or engage in other criminal activities. Child abuse exposes children to further dangers, such as working in industries or serving as domestic servants. These children are likely to work in excessively hot, damp, dusty, and unsanitary conditions, which increase the transmission of communicable diseases. They may also be exposed to toxic chemicals and other hazardous agents, raising the risk of chemical poisoning, as well as neurobiological or respiratory disorders (Ajayi & Ogunleye, 2021). Additionally, child abuse can lead to poor mental health, fatigue, and psychological stress, which may result in emotional injury, impaired growth and development, disabilities, and other adverse health effects (Ibrahim, Mohammed & Musa, 2022). According to Effiom and Lucy (2022), among street hawkers, children who work throughout the day or late into the evening, or those who trade on major highways, are more likely to experience serious falls or assaults from adults than other street hawkers.

Child abuse can result in both short-time and longtime harm, including psychopathology in later life sociality, antisocial behaviour, anxiety, alcoholism (Ahmed & Bala, 2020). Psychological effects of child sexual abuse include post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, eating disorder, poor self-esteem, dissociative disorder. Child sexual abuse also has both social and physical effects on the victims. The social stigma of child sexual abuse may compound the psychological harm to children. Sexual abuse may cause infections, sexually transmitted diseases or internal lacerations which in some cases may lead to death (Alokan & Olatunji, 2014). In addition, children who are sexually abused initially may show an unusual interest in sexual organs. They may demonstrate abnormal behaviour like public masturbation or public display of their genitals. Long effects may include depression, low self-esteem, and sexual problems such as avoidance of sexual contact, confusion about sexuality, or involvement in prostitution (Bello & Yusuf, 2021).

Children have been subjected to innumerable shades and forms of abuse and maltreatment. Adewale and Adebayo (2020) identified physical, emotional, psychological and sexual abuse as forms of child

abuse; others non-sexual abuse includes child labour, kidnapping, and neglect. Physically abused children are generally more aggressive with their peers than children who have not been abused; they have more troubled interpersonal relationships, and have more depressive symptoms and affective disorders. Sexually abused children, in addition to their depressive and aggressive symptoms, have an increased frequency of anxiety disorders and problems with sex roles and sexual functioning. As adults, abused children have two or three times as many problems with substance abuse and depression as members of the general population. Furthermore, adults with the histories of childhood abuse and/or neglect have lower levels of education, employment, earnings, and fewer assets compared to adults who were not abused as children. Essentially, a number of studies had been conducted on nature of child abuse in Nigeria. For instance, Sarka (2021) investigated causes and consequences of child abuse in Gwagwalada and its implication on national security and development in Nigeria; Lawal and Adeleke (2022) worked on effects of child abuse on cognitive and emotional development in Nigeria; Effiom and Lucy (2022) examined child abuse and student's academic performance in Boki Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria. Despite several studies that have been conducted on nature of child abuse in Nigeria, to the best knowledge of the researchers, none of the previous studies in the existing literature have examined the causes and consequences of child abuse as perceived by secondary school students in Itesiwaju Local Government, Oyo State, Nigeria. This was the gap which the present study filled and contributed.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine the causes and consequences of child abuse as perceived by secondary school students in Itesiwaju Local Government, Oyo state, Nigeria. Therefore, the research responds to the following questions:

1. What are the causes of child abuse as perceived by secondary school students in Itesiwaju Local Government?
2. What are the consequences of child abuse as perceived by secondary school students in Itesiwaju Local Government?

Methodology

The descriptive survey design was adopted for this study because the researchers aimed to investigate the causes and consequences of child abuse as perceived by secondary school students in Itesiwaju

Local Government. The total population of secondary school students in Itesiwaju Local Government was 38,793. The samples were drawn from this population using a multi-stage sampling procedure to select the respondents. In the first stage, three towns (Ipapo, Otu, and Okaka) were selected out of the six that make up Itesiwaju Local Government using a simple random sampling technique (dip-hat method). In the second stage, a purposive sampling technique was employed to select one secondary school with a larger population of senior secondary school students in each selected town. In the third stage, a stratified random sampling technique was applied to select 200 students from each school (for a total of 600) based on gender to ensure balanced representation in the study.

The instrument for data collection was designed by the researchers adopting it from the literature review. The instrument was tagged: “Causes and Consequences of Child Abuse Questionnaire (CCCAQ)”. Content validity was done by five lecturers in the Department of Counselling and Human Development Studies, University of Ibadan. The reliability was done through a test re-test method; therefore the instrument was administered twice on a group of secondary school students at Aseyin High School (Senior) in Iseyin Local Government within an interval of two weeks. The correlation of the two sets of scores, using Pearson’s Product Moment Correlation was considered and the reliability coefficient was 0.86. Therefore, the instrument has three parts i.e. sections A, B and C. Section A dealt with demographic data of the respondents, section B sought for causes of child abuse, and section C focused on consequences of child abuse. Sections B and C were patterned in line with four (4) point Likert type rating scale format of: Strongly Agree = 4points; Agree = 3points; Disagree= 2points; and Strongly Disagree = 1point. The benchmark for the instrument was established by summing the response points and dividing by 4, resulting in a mean score of 2.5 (i.e., $4+3+2+1=10/4=2.5$). Mean scores up to 2.5 and above were accepted as the causes and consequences of child abuse while mean scores below 2.50 were regarded as not. Mean, standard deviation, and rank order were used to answer the research questions raised in this study.

Results

This is about the data that was gathered. It displays the study's findings along with a relevant interpretation. A total of 600 secondary school students in Itesiwaju LGA were selected for the study. The study identified the causes and consequences of child abuse as perceived by secondary school students in Itesiwaju Local Government, Oyo State, Nigeria.

Research Question 1: What are the causes of child abuse as perceived by secondary school students in Itesiwaju Local Government?

Table 1: Mean and Rank Order of Causes of Child Abuse as Perceived by Secondary School Students in Itesiwaju Local Government, Oyo State, Nigeria

N	Items	Mean	SD	Rank Order
12	Inaccessible to quality education	3.89	.957	1 st
8	Financial difficulties	3.87	.853	2 nd
11	Lack of medical health care	3.85	.823	3 rd
5	Unconducive learning environment	3.81	.904	4 th
9	Lack of parental care	3.77	.740	5 th
7	Polygamous practices	3.69	.707	6 th
14	Deprivation of food in school	3.64	.555	7 th
15	Early marriage of parents	3.61	.657	8 th
2	Poor hygiene	3.60	.831	9 th
6	Spousal separation	3.57	.604	10 th
4	Excessive corporal punishment	3.53	.637	11 th
13	Inadequate protection from environmental hazards	3.51	.518	12 th
3	Child hawking before and after school	3.49	.645	13 th
1	Domestic violence	3.46	.626	14 th
10	Exposure of children to drugs	3.41	.848	15 th

Researcher's Fieldwork, 2024

Table 1 showed the mean and rank order of causes of child abuse as perceived by secondary school students in Itesiwaju Local Government of Oyo State. The table showed that all items were perceived as the causes of child abuse listed on the table. Therefore, items with mean values of 3.89, 3.87 and 3.85 respectively preceded others and were ranked 1st, 2nd, and 3rd. The items indicated inaccessible to quality education, financial difficulties, and lack of medical health care. In addition, items 3, 1 and 10

with mean values of 3.49, 3.46 and 3.41 were the least ranked items, that is, 13th, 14th and 15th. They indicated child hawking before and after school, domestic violence, and exposure of children to drugs.

Research Question 2: What are the consequences of child abuse as perceived by secondary school students in Itesiwaju Local Government?

Table 2: Mean and Rank Order of Consequences of Child Abuse as Perceived by
 Secondary School Students in Itesiwaju Local Government, Oyo State, Nigeria

N	Items	Mean	SD	Rank Order
10	Low academic performance	3.88	.890	1 st
4	Emotional disturbances	3.86	.742	2 nd
1	Sexual coercion/rape	3.84	.551	3 rd
5	Mental retardation	3.81	.737	4 th
3	Low self-esteem	3.79	.649	5 th
7	Juvenile delinquency	3.77	.774	6 th
12	Social isolation	3.73	.836	7 th
11	Personality disorders	3.71	.588	8 th
9	School dropout	3.69	.694	9 th
6	Suicidal behaviour	3.66	.817	10 th
14	Post-traumatic stress disorder	3.64	.742	11 th
13	Depression	3.51	.616	12 th
8	Educational deprivations	3.49	.527	13 th
2	Chronic health problems	3.47	.882	14 th
15	Aggressive behaviour	3.40	.614	15 th

Researcher's Fieldwork, 2024

Table 2 showed the mean and rank order of consequences of child abuse as perceived by secondary school students in Itesiwaju Local Government of Oyo State. The table showed that all items were

perceived as the consequences of child abuse listed on the table. Therefore, items with mean values of 3.88, 3.86 and 3.84 respectively preceded others and were ranked 1st, 2nd, and 3rd. The items indicated low academic performance, emotional disturbances and sexual coercion/rape. In addition, items 8, 2 and 15 with mean values of 3.49, 3.47 and 3.40 were the least ranked items, that is, 13th, 14th and 15th. They indicated educational deprivations, chronic health problems, and aggressive behaviour.

Discussion

There are many causes of child abuse that were revealed in the study, but the most significant that were perceived by secondary school students in Itesiwaju Local Government include: inaccessible to quality education, financial difficulties, and lack of medical health care. The study is in consistent with the opinion of Nwankwo and Okafor (2021) who stated that the economic down turn in Nigeria today contributed a lot to the increasing rate of child abuse and neglect. Families are breaking up daily, as a result of poverty. Children are force to live on their own without either parental or governmental support, hence subjecting them to the hazards of begging, child prostitution, delinquency behaviour, and crimes. Mohammed and Musa (2022) include frustration arising from lack of parenting skills, lack of medical health care, low income and unemployment, inability to communicate properly due to some mental or social disabilities, divorce and separation, lack of self-confidence, sickness, domestic violence, and substance abuse. The reason supporting this finding might be due to cultural and societal norms; shared cultural beliefs and societal values within the Local Government might lead students to hold similar views on what constitutes child abuse and its causes. Also, schools might offer similar curriculums or educational programmes that emphasize certain causes of child abuse, shaping students' perceptions uniformly.

Findings also revealed consequences of child abuse which was perceived by secondary school students in Itesiwaju Local Government include low academic performance, emotional disturbances and sexual coercion/rape. The findings of this study agreed with Usman and Mohammed (2020), who stated that there are cognitive implications of child abuse and these include difficulties in learning and academic performance. Effiom, Undieyaundeye and Akpama (2021) reported that the home environment of the child affects his or her academic performance. Effiom and Lucy (2022) agreed with the findings of this study which revealed that low academic performance, reduced cognitive capacity, sleep disturbance (causing poor concentration), difficulties in memory, language delays, understanding and expressing were effects of child abuse among students. Eze and Ugwuanyi (2022) also revealed that there were

many consequences of child abuse which include sexual coercion/rape, juvenile delinquency, post traumatic disorder, sexually transmitted diseases, educational deprivation, school dropout, examination malpractice, restiveness, cultism, and suicidal behaviours. The reason for this finding could be due to accessibility to information; the availability and access to information from similar sources like textbooks, online resources, or guest speakers could lead to a shared perception of the consequences of child abuse among students. Also, schools often integrate topics related to child abuse, its effects, and preventive measures into their curriculum, ensuring that students receive similar information and education.

Conclusion

Child abuse is a serious problem and its consequences are very devastating. The study concluded that several factors contributed to the problem of child abuse, including inaccessible to quality education, financial difficulties, and lack of medical health care. Also, the consequences of child abuse could lead to low academic performance, emotional disturbances, sexual coercion/rape, educational deprivation, mental retardation, and suicidal behaviour. Hence, there is need for urgent attention and provision for guidance and counselling interventions in addressing the causes and consequences of child abuse among secondary school students in Itesiwaju Local Government.

The findings of the study have implications for counselling in secondary schools in Itesiwaju Local Government and the entire Nigeria. Therefore, school counsellors should intensify efforts in the fight against the menace of child abuse by mass enlightenment campaigns on the dangers involved. Public sensitisation and awareness programmes which are related to child abuse should be extended not only in Itesiwaju Local Government but nationwide. Child abuse is every body's concern in the society, but not private matter to be solved within the family. It's related to legal frame work and rights, which must be addressed with a view to educating all concerned with child upbringing and child education. The school counsellor should show unconditional regard and acceptance, to those who are already victims of child abuse with a view of assisting them to resolve their situation. The counsellors should help the children to understand the law that protect them and how they can benefit from it and most importantly to speak out in face of the abuse.

Workshops need to be conducted for children as well as adults in school, where they are informed about the vulnerabilities and measures for protecting them from child abuse. Awareness among school going children must be raised in child-friendly methods which are easier for them to understand by guidance

counsellors and other education stakeholders. Child abuse has numerous consequences on both the victims and the entire society. Children with histories of maltreatment, such as physical abuse are at risk of developing severe emotional problems like HIV infection with its end result of death, mental problems like suicidal ideation and emotional trauma which can affect them throughout their entire life. Counsellors should embark on enlighten programmes to discourage child abuse and neglect. Such enlightenment could inform the relevant stakeholders on the consequences of child abuse to the society. Partners to be involved include regional human rights bodies, NGOs, Civil society and the children at large.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made based on the findings of this study:

1. Government should make education completely free to enable every child in the society to have equal access to quality education.
2. Government should provide accessible health care for improving children's well-being in school or in the community.
3. Government should improve the standard of living in the country so that parents will be able to provide for their children especially the students while in school.
4. Government should work with counsellors to intensify efforts in the fight against the menace of child abuse and create awareness campaign exercise to discourage parents from leasing out their children for early marriage, or any other reason for money making.
5. The school management should intensify campaign against child abuse. Greater awareness of maltreatment could lead teachers or counsellors to respond more effectively to students with low academic performance, emotional disturbances, sexual coercion/rape, mental retardation, and suicidal behaviour.
6. School counsellors, parents, school administrators, teachers and Non-governmental organisations should organise awareness programmes, workshops and seminars with a view to educating all concerned on dangers and consequences of child abuse.
7. The government should make sure that perpetrators of these vices are punished according to the law enacted for offenders and used as examples for others whose cases may not be reported; as many of these incidents are under close.

8. Parents should work hand-in-hand with school administrators, counsellors, and teachers to support abused learners and help them improve academically.

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