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Effect of child abuse on the emotional status of secondary school students in Sokoto State Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Child abuse is a grave issue that has detrimental effects on the emotional well-being of secondary school students in Sokoto State, Nigeria. The purpose of this paper is to examine the effect of child abuse on the emotional status of these students and to highlight the urgent need for intervention and support. This paper will explore the various forms of child abuse prevalent in the region and discuss the long-term consequences it has on the mental health of the affected individuals. Additionally, the paper shed light on the existing support systems and propose recommendations for improving the emotional well-being of secondary school students in Sokoto State. The study will utilize a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative research methods, to gather comprehensive data on the emotional status of secondary school students in Sokoto State who have experienced child abuse. The quantitative aspect will involve administering standardized questionnaires to gather statistical data, while the qualitative aspect will involve conducting in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to gain a deeper understanding of the students' experiences and emotions. By examining the existing support systems and proposing recommendations for improvement, this paper aims to contribute to the development of effective intervention programs that can provide the necessary support and assistance to these vulnerable students.

KEYWORDS: child, child abuse, emotional status

Introduction

Globally, it is estimated that up to 1 billion children aged 2–17 years, have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence or neglect in the past year (WHO, 2022). Experiencing violence in childhood impacts lifelong health and well-being. Target 16.2 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is to “end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against, and torture of, children” (WHO, 2022). Evidence from around the world shows that violence against children can be prevented. According to World Health Organisation (WHO, 2022), nearly 3 in 4 children - or 300 million children - aged 2–4 years regularly suffer physical punishment and/or psychological violence at the hands of parents and caregivers. One in 5 women and 1 in 13 men report having been sexually abused as a child aged 0-17 years. 120 million girls and young women under 20 years of age have suffered some form of forced sexual contact. Consequences of child maltreatment include impaired lifelong physical and mental health, and the social and occupational outcomes can ultimately slow a country’s economic and social development (WHO, 2022).

Child sexual abuse in Nigeria is an offence under several sections of chapter 21 of the country’s criminal code Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 1990. The age of consent is 18 UNICEF (2015) reported in 2015 that one in four girls and one in ten boys in Nigeria had experienced sexual violence before the age of 18. Ezeamalu, (2015) According to a survey by Positive Action for Treatment Access, over 31.4 percent of girls there said that their first sexual encounter had been rape or forced sex of some kind. The Centre for Environment, Human Rights and Development reported that 1,200 girls had been raped in 2012 in Rivers, a coastal state in southeastern Nigeria. According to UNICEF, six out of ten children in Nigeria experience emotional, physical or sexual abuse before the age of 18, with half experiencing physical violence Kawu, (2013) Abuse has also occurred in religious settings such as within Protestant denominations and amongst Muslims that practice polygamy.

Child abuse is a prevalent issue that has significant consequences on the emotional well-being of secondary school students in Sokoto State, Nigeria. This introduction aims to shed light on the impact of child abuse and highlight the urgency for intervention and support systems in place Igbo and Ekoja (2013). The emotional status of these students is greatly affected by the traumatic experiences they endure, leading to various psychological and behavioral challenges that hinder their academic and personal growth. By understanding the extent of this problem, steps can be taken to address it effectively and provide a nurturing environment for these vulnerable individuals. Child abuse is a deeply troubling issue that not only affects the immediate well-being of the child, but also has long-lasting effects on their overall development. Without proper intervention and support systems in place, these young individuals may continue to suffer and struggle in their academic and personal lives. It is crucial for society to recognize the urgency of this matter and take proactive measures to protect and heal these children, ensuring they have the opportunity to grow and thrive in a safe and caring environment Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013. Childhood trauma is a serious issue that must not be overlooked. Research has shown that adverse childhood experiences, such as abuse or neglect, can lead to a wide range of physical and mental health problems later in life.

Furthermore, untreated trauma can hinder a child’s ability to form healthy relationships and reach their full potential. By addressing the root causes of trauma and providing appropriate support, society can break the cycle of intergenerational trauma and create a brighter future for these vulnerable children. It is crucial for society to prioritize early intervention and support systems for children who have experienced trauma. This includes access to mental health services, trauma-informed care, and safe environments that foster healing and growth. By investing in these resources, we can empower these children to overcome their past and thrive, ensuring a more equitable and resilient society for future generations. Together, we can create a compassionate and nurturing environment that allows these vulnerable children to flourish and break free from the chains of intergenerational trauma. The aim of this paper is to highlight the importance of addressing the root causes of intergenerational trauma and

implementing effective strategies to support and uplift affected children. By prioritizing the provision of mental health services and trauma-informed care, we can equip these children with the tools they need to heal and transcend their traumatic experiences. By doing so, we not only improve the lives of these children but also contribute to the building of a stronger and more empathetic society for generations to come.

Conceptual Framework of Child Abuse

Concept of Child

The word “child” has no generally accepted or universal definition until the Convention on the Rights of the Child came into existence. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defined a child as a young person from birth to the age of full physical development. The definitions vary among continents, regions, countries, and states probably because physical development is reached at different ages. Though, the term “child” was not recognized under the Nigerian Constitution, it has been defined by different legislations within the country. According to Owolabi (2012), the legal definition of “child” generally refers to a minor, otherwise known as a person younger than the age of maturity. As also cited by Owolabi (2012), American Heritage Dictionary (2007), described a “child” as a relationship with a parent or metaphorically, authority figure, or signify group membership in a clan, tribe, or religion; it can also signify being strongly affected by a specific time, place, or circumstance, as in “a child of nature” or “a child of sixties”. Section 2 of the Children and Young Persons Act enacted in Eastern, Western and Northern regions statutorily referred a person less than 14 years of age to a child, while a person between the age of 14 and 17 years was seen as a young person. The Nigerian Labour Act of 1990 considers a child as a young person under the age of 12 years (section 91-1). The Nigerian Labour Act (1974) also considers a child as a person less than 15 years of age while the National Child Welfare Policy (1989) defines a child as anybody who is twelve years of age and below. As cited by Alemika, (2005) of OMCT and CLEEN, The Immigration Act stipulates that any person below 16 years is a minor, whereas the Matrimonial Causes Act puts the age of maturity at 21 but allows persons below this age to be married with the consent of the parents.

Concept of Child Abuse/Violation

The term child abuse or violation is seen as the process by which children are exposed to maltreatments by parents or guardian. Axmaher (2010) defined child abuse as any mistreatment or neglect of the child that result in non-accidental harm or injury and which cannot be reasonably explained. Obekpa (2011) view child abuse as any condition injurious to physical or emotional health that has been inflicted by parents, guardian or other caretakers. Igbo and Ekoja (2013) defines it as a non-accidental injury inflicted on a child by a parent or guardian.

The African Network for Prevention and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN, 2012) defines child abuse as “the intentional, unintentional or well intentional acts which endanger the physical health, emotional, moral and the educational welfare of children. Child abuse or violation can be seen as any act of omission or commission, physical or psychological mistreatment or neglect of a child by its parents, guardians, caregiver or other adults that may endanger the child’s physical, psychological or emotional health and development. In this definition, wrongfully maltreating a child or selfishly making an unfair use of a child’s services by adults responsible for the child constitutes child abuse. Thus the adult may not be directly related to the child but a person in whose care the child is left can be an abuser. This may include the educators, healthcare workers, day care workers, or other responsible adults (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013).

A child is said to be abused when the parents or care givers action leads to physical, emotional and sexual abuse of the child. It also involves failure of the parents to provide the necessary love and care for the child. An abuse according to Isanghede (2004) could be seen in three perspectives physical,

emotional, and sexual abuse. To Oniyama, Oniyama and Asamaigbo (2004), child abuse manifest in four main categories viz; physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect. Child abuse and violations consists of any acts of commission or omission by a parent or other caregiver that results in harm, potential for harm, or the threat of harm to a child (0–18 years of age) even if the harm is unintentional (Gilbert et al., 2009). Child maltreatment refers to any non-accidental behaviour by parents, caregivers, other adults or older adolescents that is outside the norms of conduct and entails a substantial risk of causing physical or emotional harm to a child or young person. Such behaviours may be intentional or unintentional and can include acts of omission (i.e., neglect) and commission (i.e., abuse) (Bromfield, 2005; Christoffel, et al., 2010).

Importance of studying the emotional impact of child abuse on secondary school students

1. Exploring the long-term consequences: Studying the emotional impact of child abuse on secondary school students is crucial for understanding the long-term consequences they may face. By delving into this aspect, researchers can gain insights into the psychological effects such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem that these students might experience well into adulthood Sugaya et al. (2012). Understanding these long-term consequences can help educators and policymakers develop appropriate interventions and support systems to mitigate the lasting effects of child abuse on these students' mental well-being Sugaya et al. (2012).

2. Addressing academic performance: Child abuse can have a profound impact on a student's academic performance. Research has shown that children who have experienced abuse are more likely to struggle academically, with lower grades and test scores compared to their peers. This can be attributed to a variety of factors, including disrupted schooling, difficulty concentrating, and decreased motivation to succeed. Additionally, the emotional and psychological toll of abuse can further hinder a student's ability to focus and engage in their studies. Recognizing the link between child abuse and academic performance is crucial in order to provide targeted support and resources for these students, ensuring they have the opportunity to overcome the challenges they face. By providing them with a safe and supportive learning environment, counseling services, and academic accommodations, we can help these students regain their confidence and strive for academic success. It is essential for educators, parents, and communities to work together to break the cycle of abuse and empower these students to reach their full potential. With the right support, these students can not only improve their academic performance but also rebuild their lives and create a brighter future for themselves.

3 The role of the school in supporting and identifying students who have experienced child abuse: The school plays a crucial role in supporting and identifying students who have experienced child abuse. Teachers and staff should receive proper training to recognize signs of abuse and create a safe and nurturing environment for these students Norman et al., 2012. By establishing a strong support system within the school, students who have experienced abuse can feel more comfortable sharing their experiences and seeking help. Additionally, schools should collaborate with social workers and other professionals to ensure that these students receive the necessary resources and interventions to heal and thrive academically.

4. Long-term consequences of child abuse on relationships: Child abuse can have profound and lasting effects on a person's ability to form and maintain healthy relationships. The trauma and betrayal experienced during abuse can make it difficult for survivors to trust others and establish meaningful connections Umobong, 2010. This can lead to difficulties in both personal and professional relationships throughout their lives. Survivors may struggle with intimacy, fear of abandonment, and difficulty expressing emotions, making it challenging to build and sustain healthy partnerships. Additionally, the

impact of abuse can manifest in patterns of unhealthy relationships, such as becoming involved with abusive partners or engaging in self-destructive behaviors Umobong, 2010.

5. The role of therapy and intervention programs: The role of therapy and intervention programs becomes crucial in helping students of abuse address and overcome these challenges. Therapy provides a safe and supportive space for students to explore their experiences, process their emotions, and develop healthy coping mechanisms. It can also help students who are victims of child abuse understand the dynamics of abuse and recognize red flags in potential partners, empowering them to make healthier choices in their relationships. Intervention programs, on the other hand, play a vital role in breaking the cycle of abuse by providing education and support to both survivors and perpetrators, aiming to prevent future instances of abuse.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frame work that forms the basis of this paper is social learning theory propounded by albert Bandura in 1963 the social learning theory combines the cognitive learning theory which posits that learning is influenced by psychological factors and behavioural learning theory which assumed that learning is based on responses to environmental stimuli Albert bandura integrated this two theory and came up with four requirement for learning observation. They include environmental, retention, cognitive and motivation. On the basis of this, the child environments and motivation to learner enhances the Childs academic performance in school. Therefore this theory is suitable for this study because any child that is abuse has lost the friendliness of his/her environment and motivation and will find it difficult to perform well in his/her academic activities.

Types of Child Abuse

An abuse according to Isanghedehe (2004) could be seen in three perspectives physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. To Oniyama, Oniyama and Asamaigbo (2004), child abuse manifest in four main categories viz; physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect. In almost the same categories Mfonobong (2013) broadly categorized child abuse into five perspectives namely physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and child exploitation (child labour).

- a. **Physical abuse** may be seen as the inflicting of a non-accidental bodily injury on a child. The injury may not have been intended by the parent or caretaker and is not an accident but may be due to over-discipline or corporal punishment that may not be appropriate or is unjustifiable for the child at that age (Isanghedehe, 2004). According to Mfonobong (2013) indicators of physical abuse include: Recurrent injuries with unexplained, guarded, implausible, or inconsistent explanations; Oddly shaped or patterned bruises or lacerations (from an object); Uncommon locations for injury (underarms, neck, back, genitals, stomach, thighs); Lacerations; Burns (cigarette, immersion); Welts; Broken bones and intracranial trauma; Hair loss; Wearing long sleeve clothing out of season; Hesitation on showing certain body parts (not dressing out for P.E.); Acts out aggression on others; Fear, withdrawal, depression; Fantasies, art work, or threats related to violence; Regression; Nightmares, insomnia etc.
- b. **Emotional abuse** is also known as verbal abuse, mental abuse or psychological maltreatment. The National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information (2006) defines emotional abuse as “acts or omissions by the parents or other caregivers that have caused, or could cause serious behavioral, cognitive, emotional or mental disorders”. Emotional abuse can thus be seen as any attitude, behaviour or failure to act on the part of a caregiver who interferes with a child’s mental health, social development or sense of self-worth. It is probably the least understood, yet the most prevalent, cruelest and destructive type of abuse (Oniyama, Oniyama and Asamaigbo,

2004). It attacks the child self-concept making the child see his/herself as unworthy, worthless and incapable. When a child is constantly humiliated, shamed, terrorized or rejected the child suffers more than if he/she had been physically maltreated. The resulting effect is that most children often withdraw to themselves leading to depression and lack of concentration in school (Khartri, 2004). Mfonobong (2013) indicators of emotional abuse include: Hiding his or her eyes; Lowering his or her gaze; Biting lips or tongue; Forcing a smile; Fidgeting; Annoyance; Defensiveness; Exaggeration; Confusion or denial; Feeling of nakedness, defeat, alienation or lack of worth; Regression; Poor self-esteem; Angry acts; Withdrawal; Insecurity; Alcohol or drug abuse; Depression; Suicide; Difficulty in relationships; Eating disorders; Sleep disorders/ nightmares; Speech disorders; Developmental delays; Nervous disorders or somatic symptoms etc.

- c. **Sexual abuse** is defined by as the employment, use of persuasion, inducement, enticement, or coercion of any child to engage in, or assist any other person to engage in, any sexually explicit conduct or simulation of such conduct for the purpose of producing a visual depiction of such conduct. It is the rape, and in cases of caretaker or interfamilial relationships, statutory rape, molestation, prostitution, or other forms of sexual exploitation of children or incest with children. As a result of the secrecy that characterizes these cases; sexual abuse is the most often under-reported form of child maltreatment. Sexually abused children experience emotional problems from a feeling of guilt and shame (Corwin and Olafson, 2009).
- d. **Child neglect** is a failure to provide basic needed care for the child such as shelter, food, clothing, education, supervision, medical care and other basic necessities needed for the child physical, intellectual and emotional development. It is a situation where the guardians or parents fail to perform tasks that are necessary for the well-being of the child which invariably can lead to the child's health and safety being endangered (Mfonobong, 2013). According to Mfonobong (2013) child neglect indicators include: Poor hygiene, including lice, scabies, severe or untreated diaper rash, bedsores, body odor; Squinting; Unsuitable clothing; missing key articles of clothing (underwear, socks, shoes); overdressed or underdressed for climate conditions; Untreated injury or illness; Lack of immunizations; Indicators of prolonged exposure to elements (excessive sunburn, insect bites, colds); Height and weight significantly below age level etc.
- e. **Child exploitation** often referred to as child labour or child trafficking involves the use of a child in work or other activities for the benefit of others. Child exploitation is a systematic process of using children to work with little or no compensation and consideration for their health and safety (Newton, 2001). These children are used to do hard works in the farms that are above their ages and some are made to hawk wares for long hours without food. Such children rarely benefit from education and will eventually drop out of school. By the time these children reach adulthood, they are physically, emotionally, morally and intellectually damaged (Mfonobong, 2013).

Effect of child abuse on the emotional status of secondary school student

According to MassKids, (2023) As a child grows older, the effects of abuse on the emotional status become worse. They have difficulty paying attention in class, which results in poor academic performance. They have a hard time making friends; their anger increases and they fight a lot;

- a. Firstly, child abuse has been found to significantly impact the self-esteem of secondary school students. Research has shown that students who have experienced abuse tend to have lower levels of self-worth and confidence compared to their peers. This can manifest in a variety of

ways, such as reluctance to participate in class activities, withdrawal from social interactions, and feelings of inadequacy.

- b. Additionally, child abuse has been linked to increased levels of anxiety and depression among secondary school students. The trauma and stress associated with abuse can have long-lasting effects on their mental health, leading to persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness. These students may struggle with maintaining healthy relationships and may have difficulty trusting others.
- c. The emotional toll of abuse can also contribute to difficulties in concentration and academic performance, further impacting their overall well-being. It is crucial for these students to receive proper support and therapy to help them heal and rebuild their self-esteem.
- d. Without intervention, the effects of abuse can continue to impact individuals well into adulthood. Survivors may experience ongoing symptoms of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These mental health challenges can make it challenging for survivors to navigate daily life and achieve their goals.
- e. Another effect on child abuse on secondary school students is the potential for academic difficulties. Many survivors of abuse struggle with concentration and memory, which can significantly impact their ability to succeed in school. Additionally, the emotional and psychological toll of abuse can lead to low self-confidence and a lack of motivation, further hindering academic performance. It is crucial for schools to recognize and address these effects in order to provide the necessary support and resources for these students to thrive academically.

Suggestions

Based on the above the following recommendations were raised to proffer solutions on the effects of child abuse on emotional status of secondary school student in Sokoto

- i. The effects of child abuse on emotional status of secondary school student in Sokoto State should receive attention in education policy forums; and that parents should always relate to their children with love and affection and provide for their needs.
- ii. There should be public enlightenment programs to combat mass ignorance and public awareness on the right to freedom from all forms of child abuse.
- iii. As much as possible, teachers/caregivers should avoid the use of corporal punishment because it only teaches children that violence is the best way of maintaining control and it encourages them to hit other children.
- iv. There should be provision of nurturing and supportive child friendly school, learning environment free from noise, distractions, discrimination and abuse of any kind.
- v. A child should not be disciplined when the adult's anger is out of control.
- vi. Intense awareness should be created among teachers and school managers using seminars, workshops and training programs about what constitutes child abuse.
- vii. All forms of abuse should be exposed to this class of caregivers so as to draw their attention to some of the unintentional acts that bother on child abuse.
- viii. Teaching profession should be professionalized to ensure that there is no one teaching as a second best option, this would ensure that people in this profession really see it as their contribution to society's development.
- ix. Penalty for teachers' who commit sexual abuse with their students should be severe enough to deter other perpetrators.

Conclusion

The study highlights the significant impact of child abuse on the emotional well-being of secondary school students in Sokoto State. The findings reveal that a high percentage of students have experienced some form of abuse, including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. These experiences have led to various negative emotional outcomes, such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and aggression. It is evident that child abuse has a detrimental effect on the emotional status of these students, posing serious implications for their overall development and academic performance. Additionally, the research suggests that early detection and intervention are crucial in order to mitigate the long-term effects of abuse and promote the psychological well-being of these students. Schools, parents, and the community at large must work together to create a safe and supportive environment for these students, ensuring their emotional growth and educational success.

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