

# EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN AS THEY AFFECT INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

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## **Abstract**

Child abuse takes varied dimensions and cuts across geographical and socioeconomic spectrums in Nigeria. However, this paper looked at emotional and physical abuse as they affect the intellectual development and academic achievement of children. Emotional abuse can engender poor cognitive development just as physical abuse can result to permanent injury. Suggestions were made on how to reduce child abuse and its consequences. Some of which are that focus should be on breaking the cycle of abuse by organizing workshops and seminars for abusive parents on child rearing techniques and psychology of children. And that couples should be encouraged to embrace family planning and appreciate the need to have small families that they can comfortably manage.

## **introduction**

A normal and functional human being capable of contributing to the growth of society must be wholistically developed, meaning that all the components of man (cognitive, affective, social, moral and physical) must be nurtured and developed. Some children have behavioural and learning problems resulting from skewed development, which stem from physical abuse (such as humiliation, depreciation, neglect, rejection, ridicule, disparagement) or physical abuse (such as striking, pushing, hitting or flogging).

Although researchers (Emery 1989; Kempe and Heifer, 1972; Parke and Collmer (1975), agree that there is yet no universally accepted definition of child abuse. Zigler and Hall (1989), contended that, the United States law, however, defined child abuse as the "physical or mental injury, sexual abuse, negligent treatment, or maltreatment of child under the age of eighteen by a person who is responsible for the child's welfare under circumstances which indicate that the child's health or welfare is threatened thereby".

Erickson (1968) showed that feelings of worthlessness and helplessness that attend abuse interfered with developmental tasks such as learning, trust and achieving autonomy. Abused children sometimes perform poorly academically, and usually teachers unaware of abuse misinterpret the poor performance as low intelligence quotient but, the reality is that these 'underachieve'^ who are potential school dropouts might have sustained neurological injury during abuse especially in the early stages of life. Hitting a child on the head, for instance, or violently shaking an infant can lead to structural damage involving the Central Nervous System (CNS).

In Nigeria, where legislation against child abuse is almost non-existent, some children suffer psychological abuse, which affects their school performance. This paper will attempt to show how some abusive parents are responsible for the poor academic performance of their children because of injuries sustained during physical abuse.

## **Physical Abuse and Cognitive Function**

The Central Nervous System (CNS) is pivotal in human functioning and damage to any part of it has consequences on behaviour. Some children come to school with neurological problems, but because in this culture, diagnostic tools are not readily available, such problems remain undetected and unsuspecting teachers simply label, such children as slow learners. The gravity of brain injury in cognitive performance becomes obvious when one considers the variegated cognitive deficits that result when the brain receives insufficient oxygen (anoxia) during childbirth. Because cognitive deficits resulting from physical abuse do not manifest immediately, but later, identifying representative sample of children with learning problem due to abuse is rather difficult.

However, Martin (1976) indicated that, teachers can identify pupils with neurological problems that usually impede learning if they focus on function. Can this child perform certain activities children of his age can perform? Can he talk, walk, swing his hands, see, smell, hop and so on? When a

child cannot perform age-appropriate functions, then the child may have neurologic dysfunction resulting from damage to the brain inflicted without outward evidence of external head injury. He further suggested that, abused children are at a higher risk of having learning disorders in school. Corroborating this finding, Martin and Rodeheffer (1976), reported that, abused and neglected children are over-represented in the educational handicapped classes in the US. Many of these children have neurologically - based problems such as visual and language deficits considered educational handicaps. In a study, Elmer and Gregg (1967) sampled twenty-two children with multiple bone injuries resulting from physical abuse, and 57 percent were found to have IQ below 80. In a normal population, however, approximately 11% would have IQ below 80. In another study, researchers (Morse, Sahler, Friedman 1970), found that of the 25 abused and neglected children hospitalized three years previously for injury sustained from abuse, 42% had cognitive deficits and were functioning on the retarded range.

The cerebral cortex of the brain is the center of learning and damages to this part of the brain will result in impaired mental ability. A plethora of research (Martin and Rodeheffer 1979; Cichetti and Carlson 1998) indicates that abused children manifest learning deficits; they are intellectually handicapped and score poorly on IQ test. A probable explanation for the intellectual deficiency is the cerebral injury sustained during the high intensity physical abuse though not all learning problems are attributable to abuse, other constrain (e.g. genetic factors) exist. Learning is equally compromised when sensory deficits results from neurologic damage sequel to physical abuse. For instance, visual and auditory problems impede learning; the child not only learns with more effort, but also understands less and consequently, achieve less academically because of the neurologic distortions. The neurologic damage resulting from physical abuse, interferes with the brain's ability to process information properly; as a result, the child is unable to make sense of the world around him, and learning is, thereby, compromised, hence, researchers (Martin and Rodeheffer 1976), documented that "correlations between neurologic integrity of the child and his ability to learn, solve problems, know things and understand his world" exist.

### **Emotional/Psychological Abuse**

If 'physical abuse can spawn neurological problems that impair intellectual ability, psychological abuse is even more insidious and deleterious to the overall psychological functioning of the individual. Lefrancois (1992) described emotional abuse as those "parental behaviours that cause emotional and psychological harm to the children, but are not instances of physical abuse or neglect" (p.542). Unlike physical abuse the effects of emotional abuse are not only invisible, but also manifest years later. A study by Brassard (1987) showed that, they could be more harmful than those of physical abuse and since it involves the whole person, Wolock and Horowitz (1984), indicated that, it usually involved serious adjustment problem among others. Emotionally abused children are insecurely attached to their parents and constantly afraid of being hit on a flimsy excuse.

In Nigeria, where child abuse is mistaken for training and, therefore, shield abusers from social sanction, abused children come to school with all sorts of physical and psychological deficits that interfere with learning and school experience. Academic failure blamed on abuse, elicits further emotional assault such as humiliation, and denigration, additive components to the stultification of learning.

Dodges, Bates and Petti (1987), have shown that psychological abuse engenders aberrant behaviours such as withdrawal and isolation, hypothesized to be precursors of depression, which mediates the development of learning problems. Consistent with the above finding, Emery (1989), showed that, abused children exhibit low self-esteem; tend to be anxious, fearful, and above all aggressive. Similarly, George and Main (1979), established that, abused and non-abuse 1 - 3 year old in a day care center reacted differently to the fussing and crying of their classmates. While the non-based toddlers reacted positively to the distress of their peers by showing concern, the abused ones reacted aggressively to the same distress, becoming angry themselves, and then physically attacking the crying child. This corroborates the finding of other researchers Kliinas - Dougan and FCistner (1990) that abused children are more likely than their non-abused counterparts to react violently to-a distressed peer, suggesting that abused children have learned front their own experience and modeling that distress signals, rather than elicit attention and concern, often yield the opposite effect of eliciting aggressive behaviours-Aggressive children have been found (Emery 1989), to be rejected by their peers, thus, in cooperative learning

during school hours, such children are excluded from every group, as they have not learnt to work collaboratively with others. All these negative effects of emotional abuse militate against academic performance.

Parental behaviour that suggest mental cruelty (such as persistent degradation, ridicule, deprivation of both contact and comfort) are instances of psychological abuse with serious consequences on the personality of the child and can engender a variety of developmental deficits including cognitive deficiency. When a child constantly receive negative' feedback for every behaviour, he begins to view himself negatively and incapable of positive behaviour. Girls are more susceptible to such internalization of negative attitude, thus, building them into their self-concept.

Paradoxically, abusive parents aim at eliciting compliance from the children they abuse, but often they achieve the opposite effects of eliciting defiance. Crockeberg and Litman (1990) have demonstrated that physical punishment used liberally and arbitrarily most often engenders defiance as the target has become inured to it as very behaviour even innocuous ones lead to emotional violence or physical assault.

### **The Ecology of Abused and Development**

Learning is a neurologically based function that occurs in a social setting. Martin and Rodeheffer, (1976), delineated certain factors that typify an abusive environment with deleterious effects on mental ability: these include an unpredictable and non-nurturing world, restriction of learning opportunities and inadequate stimulation and support among others.

### **Effect of Abuse**

It has been suggested (Emery 1986), that, there is no single behaviour pattern that characterizes abused children. Rather the effects of abuse are varied. They range from aggression and trouble peer relation (Dean Malik, Richards, Stringer, 1986; George and Main, 1979; Wolfe and Mosk, 1983), to depression (Kazdin, Colbus and Bell, 1985), to poor performance on cognitive tasks (HoIffman-Plotkin and Twentyman, 1984). Also researchers (Egeland and Faber 1984; Egeland and Stroufe 1981; Schneider-Rosen and Cicchetti 1984) found that abused children developed insecure attachment to their mothers and consequently demonstrate more delays in various areas of development, including cognitive development. Overall, these deficits and developmental arrests sequel to abuse constitute additive components in the stultification of learning.

### **Abused Child Who Achieves Academically**

Martin and Rodeheffer (1976) showed that some abused children demonstrated superior academic achievement. What could account for the superior intellectual ability since they came from dysfunctional, abusive homes characterized by a breakdown hi motherliness? Two identifiable factors were responsible for their cognitive ability. Such children were not emotionally deprived or neglected. Suggesting that, emotional or psychological abuse is much more debilitating, than physical abuse accompanied by cerebral damage. Physical abuse alone does not impair cognitive processes when the abusive parent is emotionally attached to the child and demonstrates sufficient investment in the child. Besides, in these homes, being clever is encouraged and rewarded rather than viewed as a basis for punishment.

### **Recommendations**

Dealing with child abuse must go beyond treating the victim. To be effective and comprehensive, prevention programmes should be focused on the ecological factors that lead to abuse, the following are some of the areas of emphasis:

- 1. Removing the Child from Abusive Parent:** It has been documented (Kempe and Kempe 1978) that child abusers are not limited to psychologically maladjusted people. But rather cut across races, social classes, and educational backgrounds. However, Belsky (1980); Egeland, Jacobvitz and Stroufe (1988), indicated that child abusers were themselves victims of abuse who begrugde their children loved because they never knew love themselves; it is impossible to give what one does not possess. The implication is that the spiral of abuse becomes intergenerational as one abused child will grow to be an abusive parent. Efforts should focus

on breaking the cycle of abuse by organizing workshops and seminars for parents, especially abusive ones, on child-rearing techniques and psychology of children. Beside, in Nigeria where children can be given to other families to rear, abused children can be removed from their abusive environment and sent to a caring family. Such early intervention will help the child to experience love and, thus, change this perception of the world as unsafe and unlivable to nurturing and lovable place to live. As an adult, such individual may not engage in abuse because the conflict of trust versus mistrust has been resolved positively through early intervention.

2. **Small Family:** It has been suggested (Light 1973), that ecological factors such as large family can engender child abuse. This is evident in Nigerian culture where large families, especially in rural areas, are still encouraged. The probability of abuse becomes high particularly now that the economy is distressed. Having many mouths to feed, but without sufficient resources, can result in stress and resultant abuse. Couples should be encouraged to attend seminars on family planning and appreciate the need to have small families that they can comfortably manage.

**Stable Family:** Also unhappy marriage can lead to child abuse. Unhappy marriage can alter or disrupt social emotional relationships in the family (Bronfenbre 1996). Children are likely to be neglected or abused in such dysfunctional families. Consequently, marriage preparation should be thorough so as to enable prospective couples understand their roles in marital relationships. Such understanding and faithfulness to responsibility enhance stability' in the home and the potential for abuse minimized. Research (Brendt, 1992), suggested that, in healthy marital relationships where parents share common knowledge about children's development, children are less likely to be abused.

4. **Public Awareness:** In the traditional Nigerian culture, it is still believed that a child belongs to all not just to the parents. As a result, there should be public awareness at community level of the dangers posed by abuse. Each community should enact legislation against abuse, and the attendant sanction in case of violation.

## Conclusion

Abuse is a social problem and an irrefutable reality. A denial or neglect of the problem of abuse on the assumption that is a purely domestic affair that lacks social implication is a costly assumption as abuse has direct repercussion on society, palpable when the abused grows to be a psychologically maladjusted adult. When, the streets are filled with abused individuals most of whom are school drop-outs who cannot achieve academically because of damage to the CNS as a result .of abuse, and who are also potential abusers, they can easily upset the social order as they can readily inflict physical or emotional pain on others on slightest provocation, for inflicting pain is all they know. Unless strict measures are taken to stem the cycle of abuse, Nigerian homes and ultimately Nigerian society will continue to experience friction.

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