

Emotional Abuse among Secondary School Students in Igumale Community, Benue State, Nigeria: A Cross-sectional Survey

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Abstract

Abuse against children particularly emotional abuse is a serious unnoticed public health issue requiring thoughtfulness as it negatively affects the developmental milestones of the growing child. The study aimed to determine the prevalence of emotional abuse and the significant difference in the prevalence of emotionally abused students based on age, gender and parents' level of education. A cross-sectional research design was adopted for the study. The population of the study consisted of 800 students from two public and four private secondary schools in Igumale community. A sample size of 300 students was selected using a multi-stage sampling procedure. Two research questions and three null hypotheses guided the study. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data. Data collected were coded and entered into SPSS version 22 for analysis. The research questions were answered using frequency and percentage while chi-square statistics was used to test the null hypothesis at a .05 level of significance. Results show that 51.0% proportion of secondary school students experienced emotional abuse. There was no significant association in the emotional abuse experienced by secondary school students based on gender and age and not parents' level of education. The study recommends greater investments in programs to stop and report child abuse emphatically emotional abuse.

Keywords: Emotional Abuse, Adolescents, Secondary Schools, Students, Benue State.

Introduction

Abuse against children particularly emotional abuse is a serious yet unnoticed public health issue that requires intervention. This is because it negatively affects the developmental milestones of the growing child. There

is a rise in the proportion of abused children both in developed and developing nations. Hillset. al (2016) posited that 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. Recent abuse reports globally show that violence against children is an epidemic of abuse and that over one billion children experience violence every year, with devastating short and long-term consequences including injury and death of thousands of children each year (Global Report, 2021). Widespread child abuse exists across East Asia and Pacific Regions with 17 %- 35% prevalence for both girls and boys respectively while the prevalence estimates for emotional abuse range from 18-41.6%, showing a wide range across countries in the region (UNICEF, 2014). In Africa, cases of child abuse are documented in the literature. In East African countries, there is an extensive report of incidences of child abuse especially through the media. Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya are not left out as the abuse includes child battering and domestic fights which have adverse effects on children's well-being (Devaney, 2015). Child abuse is not isolated to particular social groups or areas however, it is rampant in many of the world's poorer countries and even more so in Nigeria (Okooboh, 2016). A report by UNICEF (2014) indicated 47% level of child abuse with vulnerability to negative consequences. Oladosu, et. al (2021) reported that 100% of the respondents in their study experienced domestic abuse in the past year. UNICEF (2017) reported that abuse in all its forms is a daily reality for many Nigerian children and only a fraction ever receive help. UNICEF further reported that six out of every 10 children

experience some form of violence in Nigeria and that Nigeria has the largest number of child brides in Africa with more than 23 million girls and women who were married as children, most of them from poor and rural communities. Abuse exists in different forms and anyone can be abused. World Health Organization (2007) highlighted forms of child abuse to include physical and emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect and exploitation that results in actual or potential harm to the child's health, development or dignity. This study focused on emotional abuse because emotional abuse is subtle in nature, appears to be ignored and goes mostly unnoticed. Emotional maltreatment of a child is the most challenging form of child abuse and neglect because it is more subtle to detect (Dye, 2019). Emotional abuse can be allusive, and its very nature allows it to hide in plain sight (Hart and Glaser, 2011). Emotional abuse is perhaps the most damaging type of abuse, that leads to long-term consequences (Heim et.al., 2013). Thus, the a need to understudy the prevalence of emotional child abuse among secondary school students in the Ado community. Emotional abuse also referred to as psychological abuse, is the persistent emotional maltreatment of a child in such a way as to cause adverse effects on the child's emotional development (Devon Children and Family Partnership, 2023; Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board, 2023). It can be in the form of humiliating a victim a family member privately or publicly, controlling what

the victim can and cannot do, withholding information from the victim, or deliberately doing something to make the victim feel diminished or embarrassed. It also involves isolating the child from friends and family, implicitly blackmailing the victim by harming others when the victim expresses independence or happiness. According to Adeboye, et al.(2021), emotional abuse is non-contact violence including verbal and non-verbal behaviours resulting in emotional, social, cognitive and somatic consequences in functioning and adjustment. Contextually, emotional child abuse is emotional maltreatment including non-verbal behaviours, deprivations, and age-inappropriate expectations from parents and other significant others that have long-lasting effects on the emotional development of the secondary school student. It is important to note that the persistent emotional abuse of a child causes serious damage to mental health and wellbeing with devastating and long-lasting effects on a child's emotional health and development. Umah (2021) asserted that emotional abuse is often covered and masked as moral training and cultural norms. In a Cohort study, Kisely, et.al (2018) observed that emotional abuse was the most common form of child abuse. Kurtz, et. al, (2022) reported the average prevalence recorded by the MIC study was as high as 57.8 % for females and 59.2 % for male children in Africa. In Nigeria, the 2014 Nigeria Violence Against Children Survey (VACS) found that

17% of girls and 20% of boys experienced emotional abuse from a parent, caregiver or adult relative (National Population Commission of Nigeria, 2016).

Emotional abuse is associated with risk-taking behaviours including higher rates of suicidal behaviours, alcohol misuse, infrequent use of condoms by males, and multiple sexual partners in the past 12 months in females (Christoffersen et al., 2010; Annor, 2020). Emotional abuse is assumed to be present in all other forms of abuse, though it can stand out as well. It consists of any attitude or behaviour which interferes with a child's mental health or social development, such as yelling, screaming, name-calling, shaming, negative comparisons to others, and telling children they are bad or not good. Emotional abuse of students by teachers can be in different forms and with peculiar characteristics. They include rejecting, isolating, discriminating, degrading, terrorizing, dominating, ignoring and verbally assaulting children. Discrimination against children in the classroom can be perpetrated by teachers, when they are very selective in assigning tasks to students (Aluede et. al, 2012). In the school setting, where teaching and learning take place, the importance of children's mental health should not be underestimated (Aluede, et. al 2012). Emotional abuse abounds in homes, schools, and religious groups and is merely seen as a family, school, or religious issue whereas it is a gross criminal offence (Umah, 2021). This is

why inadequate training of teachers and poor supervision of schools have left many students emotionally abused with no reaction from parents. Often, parents consider emotional abuse as a training process and as such condone it, thus, making it difficult for children to identify and process their own emotions or those of others. WHO (2022) averred that when abuse becomes chronic, it results in toxic stress with adverse effects on brain development and increased risk for posttraumatic stress disorder, learning, attention, memory and immediate physical injuries in addition to emotional problems, such as anxiety. Long-term effects of abuse include increased risk of experiencing future violence, victimization, substance abuse, sexually transmitted infections, lower educational attainment, and limited employment opportunities. Stoltenborgh (2015) observed that child maltreatment has predominantly been focused on sexual abuse, with far less attention paid to psychological maltreatment (emotional abuse) and that child maltreatment, particularly psychological maltreatment, is associated with a broad range of negative long-term health and developmental negative outcomes extending into adolescence and young adulthood. The study concluded that the overall quality of life was lower for those who had experienced emotional abuse and neglect but not for those who had experienced physical or sexual abuse. The implication is that emotional abuse has more effect on the child than other types of abuse.

Emotional abuse can affect the psychological development of secondary school students, which could make them develop unusual or negative behaviours such as bullying, aggression, isolation, abnormal fear, depression, anxiety, higher levels of anger and/or disobedience, and drug abuse. Individual child's responses towards child abuse depend on many factors such as age, gender, parents' level of education and the family environment (Holt, et. al, 2018). George and Okoye (2021) found that age and parents' education level were significantly associated with emotional abuse among adolescents. Agu (2021) reported gender and age differences in the experience of emotional abuse among secondary school students. Also, Mba (2022) found an association between parents' education level and emotional abuse of students,

The home is where the children find their happiness and spend a lot of time with their families. Children should be given adequate love, care, support and protection in order not to experience or witness abuse from their parents or caregivers. However, adolescents including secondary school students seem to be exposed to emotional abuse across the country. In Nigeria, there are limited facilities for emotionally abused children to receive the psychological services necessary for emotional healing and growth. Emotional abuse can be more dangerous to the child's welfare than other forms of abuse, as it negatively affects the child's self-esteem and self-image, causing devastating, life-long

consequences. The researchers observed that there is limited empirical evidence on the prevalence of emotional abuse among secondary school students in Igumale local government area of Benue State. This study, therefore, aims at filling this gap.

Research questions

The following questions guided the study:

1. What is the prevalence of emotional abuse among secondary school students in Igumale local government?
2. What is the prevalence of emotional abuse based on age, gender and parents' education level?

Hypotheses

The study hypothesizes that:

- H₀1. Emotional abuse is not significantly associated with the age of the respondents.
- H₀2. Emotional abuse is not significantly associated with the gender of the respondents.
- H₀3. Emotional abuse is not significantly associated with the parent's education level.

Methodology

Study Design: The study adopted the cross-sectional research survey design.

Study Population: The study was conducted in Igumale community which is one of the five districts in Ado LGA of Benue State. The population for the study comprised 800 secondary school students from six (two public and four private) secondary schools in Igumale Community (Post Primary

Education Board, Ado LGA, Benue State).

Study Sample Size and Sampling Technique: The sample size for the study was 300 respondents out of 800 students in Igumale community, selected using a two-staged sampling technique. In the first stage, two private schools were randomly selected in addition to the only two public schools in the study area. The selection of only two private schools was to give an equal representation of the two types of schools. This gave a total of four schools that participated in the study. The second stage involved a random selection of 300 secondary school students from the selected four schools. Students who were in Junior Secondary 3 and Senior Secondary 3 were excluded from the study because they were preparing for external examinations and did not have the time to participate in the study.

Instrument for Data Collection: The instrument for data collection was a questionnaire titled "Prevalence of Child Abuse Questionnaire (PCAQ), comprising 15 items. The PCAQ is divided into two sections; A and B. Section A contains 3 items on personal information such as age group, gender and parent level of education with varied response options. Section B contains five items that test for emotional abuse among the respondents and has two response options of Yes and No.

Validity and Reliability of the instrument: Face validity of the instrument was carried out by three experts from the Department of

Human Kinetics and Health Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The reliability of the instrument was calculated using the Split-half method of reliability. After computations, a reliability coefficient of .842 was obtained for the instrument and was adjudged appropriate for the study based on Cohen et.al. (2011) guidelines. **Method of Data Collection:** The researchers went to the selected schools and obtained permission from each of the principals of the schools to conduct the study. Teachers were briefed on the essence of the study and they helped in the distribution of the questionnaire to the respondents. Three hundred and twenty-five (325) copies of the questionnaire were hand-distributed to the respondents for a period of four days. Three hundred and ten (310) copies were returned giving a return rate of 95.4%. However, ten copies of the questionnaire were not properly filled out and were removed. Only 300 copies were viable and used for analysis.

Method of Data Analysis: The data from copies of PCAQ were coded and analyzed using the International Business Machine Statistical Package for Social Sciences, IBM-SPSS (version 22). The research question on the prevalence of emotional abuse and the prevalence of emotional abuse based on age, gender and parents' education level were analysed using frequencies and percentages while the null hypotheses were tested using the Chi-square statistics at a .05 level of significance. Cluster means were

analysed by obtaining the grand mean percentage of each variable considered.

Results

Data on the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents (Table 1) show that 43.0% were males while 57.0% were females, 56.7% were aged 10 – 14 years and 43.3% were aged 15-19 years. A good proportion (36.3%) of the respondents had parents with no formal education, 26.0% of the parents had primary education, 17.3% had secondary education and 20.3% had tertiary education.

Table1:Socio-demographic information of respondents

Socio-demographics	f	%
Gender		
Male	129	43.0
Female	171	57.0
Age		
10-14 years	170	56.7
15-19 years	130	43.3
Parents' Level of Education		
No formal Education	109	36.3
Primary Education	78	26.0
Secondary Education	52	17.3
Tertiary Education	61	20.3

Table 2 shows that among secondary school students, slightly more than half (54.2%) experienced emotional abuse while 45.8% did not experience emotional abuse. The table further shows that a very high proportion (92.3 %) of students have experienced being locked up in an enclosure such as a

toilet. Many (60.7%) have been forced to do something bad against their will, 43.7% have been constantly ignored by teachers, 39.3% experienced constant ridicule, and 35.0% have been constantly humiliated.

Table 2: Prevalence of emotional abuse among the respondents (n=300)

Emotional abuse	Yes f (%)	No f (%)
Have your parents/siblings ever locked you up in an enclosure such as a toilet?	277 (92.3)	23 (7.7)
Have you ever been constantly ridiculed by your mates?	118 (39.3)	182 (60.7)
Have you been constantly ignored by the teachers in your school?	131 (43.7)	169 (56.3)
Have you ever been threatened by a classmate /teacher to do something bad, against your will?	182 (60.7)	118 (39.3)
Have you been constantly humiliated in your school or at home?	105 (35.0)	195 (65.0)
Cluster %	54.2	45.8

Table 3 shows that 55.6% of secondary school students aged 10-14 years experienced emotional child abuse while 52.3% of secondary school students aged 15-19 years experienced emotional abuse. Based on gender, 55.1% of males and 53.5% of females experienced emotional abuse. Based on parents' educational status, 56.3% of those whose parents had no formal education. 50.2% of those whose parents had primary education, 61.9% of those whose parents had secondary education and 48.8% of those whose parents had tertiary education experienced emotional abuse respectively.

Table 3: Prevalence of emotional abuse based on age, gender and parents' educational status (n=300)

	Age		Gender		Parents' Educational Status			
	10-14yrs (n=170) f (%)	15-19yrs (n=130) f (%)	Male (n=129) f(%)	Female (n=171) f(%)	NFE (n=109) f (%)	PE (n=78) f (%)	SE (n=52) f (%)	TE (n=61) f (%)
Have your parents/siblings ever locked you up in an enclosure such as a toilet?	169 (99.4)	108 (83.1)	122 (94.6)	155 (90.6)	103 (94.5)	78 (100.0)	50 (96.2)	46 (75.4)
Have you ever been constantly ridiculed by your mates?	60 (35.3)	58 (44.6)	44 (34.1)	74 (43.3)	45 (41.3)	23 (29.5)	24 (46.2)	26 (42.6)

Have you been constantly ignored by the teachers in your school?	76 (44.7)	55 (42.3)	62 (48.1)	69 (40.4)	48 (44.0)	32 (41.0)	22 (42.3)	29 (47.5)
Have you ever been threatened by a classmate /teacher to do something against your will?	103 (60.6)	79 (60.8)	77 (59.7)	105 (61.4)	71 (65.1)	38 (48.7)	41 (78.8)	32 (52.5)
Have you been constantly humiliated in your school or at home?	65 (38.2)	40 (30.8)	50 (38.8)	55 (32.2)	40 (36.7)	25 (32.1)	24 (46.2)	16 (26.2)
Cluster %	55.6	52.3	55.1	53.5	56.3	50.2	61.9	48.8

NFE= No Formal Education, PE= Primary Education, SE= Secondary Education, TE= Tertiary Education

Table 4 shows that emotional abuse was significantly associated with parents' level of education ($\chi^2 = 13.483$, $df = 1$, $p = .04$), but not with age ($\chi^2 = .592$, $df = 1$, $P = .442$) and gender ($\chi^2 = .965$, $df = 1$, $p = .326$). Hypotheses 1 and 2 are not rejected while hypothesis 3 is rejected.

Table 4: Association of emotional abuse with age, gender and parental level of education (n=300)

Variable	N	Yes f (%)	No f (%)	χ^2	D f	p- value	Decision
Age							
10-14years	170	95 (55.6)	75 (44.1)	.592	1	.442	Not significant
15-19years	130	70 (52.3)	60 (46.2)				
Gender							
Male	129	71 (55.1)	58 (44.9)	.965	1	.326	Not significant
Female	171	91 (53.5)	80 (46.8)				
Parental level of education							
No formal education	109	61 (56.3)	48 (44.0)	13.483	3	0.04*	Significant
Primary education	78	40 (50.2)	38 (48.7)				
Secondary education	52	32 (61.9)	20 (38.5)				
Tertiary education	61	29(48.8)	32 (54.5)				

Discussion of Findings

The findings of the study show a high prevalence of emotional abuse among students in Igumale. The finding was expected and therefore not surprising because cases of emotional abuse of children have been reported in the media. UNICEF (2017) reportedly stated that abuse in all its forms is a daily reality for many Nigerian children. Furthermore, emotional abuse abounds in homes, schools, and religious groups and is merely treated as a minor issue rather than a gross criminal offence (Umah, 2021). The study found that a good number of the students indicated being locked up in an enclosure, threatened, and constantly ignored. This finding agrees with the assertion that emotional abuse is the failure to provide the affection and support necessary for the development of a child's well-being, such as ignoring, withdrawal of attention, lack of praise, and lack of positive reinforcement (Aluede, et al., 2012; Akoloh et al., 2016). These findings imply that as students become withdrawn due to emotional abuse, they feel unwanted and unaccepted. This may lead to a feeling of worthlessness, loneliness, poor academic performance, drug misuse and abuse, sexual experimentation, depression, suicide, and living unproductive and unfulfilling life during adulthood. The findings also imply that abused secondary school students may not develop objective reasoning, may become aggressive and randomly transfer aggression to other people, and may become future abusers (Dye, 2019). These may have adverse effects on national development as many talents and abilities that should have been harnessed for national development are left undirected which may lead to decadence in the society. The study also found that a higher proportion (55.6%) of students

within the age range of 10-14 years and male students (55.1%) reported emotional abuse, than their counterparts. This finding agrees with the report that more male students within 10-15 years than female students experienced emotional abuse from a parent, caregiver or adult relative (National Population Commission of Nigeria, 2016). The study further indicated that a very high proportion of students whose parents had secondary education and those whose parents had no formal education reported emotional abuse. The reason could be that the more educated parents are enlightened enough to protect and care for their children emotionally and may be able to understand different developmental changes in their children. This makes them better equipped to build an emotionally stable family where children feel safe, wanted and understood. The finding also agrees with the assertion of Holt et al. (2018) that individual children's responses towards child abuse depend on such factors as age, gender, parents' level of education and the child-rearing environment.

The findings show that the null hypothesis which expected that emotional abuse will not be associated with the age of the students was not rejected. This implies that statistically, secondary school students who experience emotional abuse do not differ significantly based on their age and gender. The finding contradicts that of Karakurt and Silver (2013) who reported that age is significantly correlated with emotional abuse among their study participants, with younger participants experiencing more emotional abuse than older ones. The finding also contradicts the findings of George and Okoye (2021) in which there is a statistically significant difference in the proportion of in-school

adolescents that experienced emotional abuse based on age. Gender was not found a significant factor in emotional abuse in this study. This finding disagrees with the report of Agu (2021) that gender and age differences exist in the experience of emotional abuse among secondary school students. Further findings of this study showed that the hypothesis of no significant association between the emotional abuse experienced by secondary school students and parents' level of education was rejected. This implies that parental education level had a significant association with the emotional abuse among students. This finding agrees with that of Mba (2022) who reported an association between parents' education level and emotional abuse among students.

Limitations of the Study

The study was conducted in a single location among a few schools. This limits the generalizability of the findings of the study.

Conclusion

The findings of the study show that emotional child abuse is prevalent among the students in Igunmale community. Emotional abuse was not significantly associated with the age and gender of the

students but was associated with their parents' education level. These imply that children may experience emotional abuse irrespective of their age and gender. However, parental level of education could make a significant difference in emotional abuse among children. Children with highly educated parents are less at risk of abuse than children of parents with little or no education. This highlights the role of parental education in minimizing emotional child abuse among secondary school students.

Recommendations

The study recommendations were that educational institutions and other relevant agencies responsible for children's welfare, such as NGOs should make;

1. greater investments in programs that have been proven to stop the abuse - such as family counselling and home visits.
2. considerations for managing a prevention program, including community needs assessment, collaborating with community partners, family engagement and retention, cultural competence, training, and funding.

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