

Original Article

Child abuse: Effects on the child and family in selected villages in Enugwu-Ukwu, Njikoka Local Government Area of Anambra, Nigeria

Achema G^{1*}, Emmanuel A², Odinigwe N³

¹School of Nursing and Public Health, Howard College, University of Kwazulu Natal, Durban – South Africa. ²Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Cape Town South Africa. ³Grimard School of Midwifery, Anyigba, Kogi State, Nigeria

*Corresponding author: achemagoddi@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

Background: Child abuse is a major problem that has been living with man and seen by many as one of his day to day activities. **Aim:** The study aimed to ascertain the practice and effects of child abuse on the child and family in selected villages in Enugwu-Ukwu, Njikoka Local Government Area of Anambra state, and also to identify the factors associated with child abuse among the children. **Methods:** The study is a descriptive survey design using self-administered interviewer questionnaire. Four villages were purposively sampled for the study; Oruokwe, Awobu, Urukpeleke, and Uruogbo). Systematic sampling technique was adopted in sampling subjects. **Results:** Findings showed that the most common associated factor with child abuse with parent/guardian is poverty (50.7%) and low social economic status (34.5%). The practices of child abuse are majorly concerned with starving the children (44.2%) and kicking/shaking the children (41.2%). The effects on the child abuse on the child and family could lead the abused children into early marriage (26.5%) and unwanted pregnancy (22.5%). **Conclusion:** The study indicated that child abuse in Njikoka LGA is due to poverty/low socio-economic status. The practices of child abuse borders on starving the children, kicking/shaking them and that, the effects of child abuse could lead the children into early marriage and/or having unwanted pregnancy. Therefore, social awareness campaign on child abuse and effects should be adopted and effective child abuse laws should be enacted by the government and stiff penalties and sanctions should be melted out to the offenders.

Key words: Practices, effects, factors, child abuse, family, villages

INTRODUCTION

Child abuse is an act which individuals, institutions or processes engages in which directly or indirectly harms the children or damages their prospects of a safe and healthy development into adulthood.^[1] It is viewed as anything done to a child that poses a significant harm or damages to the

physical, sexual, emotional and mental development of the child.^[1] It is a problem that can result from a complex combination of factors which will make parents and/or caregivers to abuse the children which are inherent in individuals, families, social factors, single parenthood, poverty, drug abuse, alcohol abuse and mental health problems.^[1] Child abuse is a problem that

has been living with man and seen by many as one of his day to day activities and it entails the betrayal of a caregiver's position of trust and authority over a child. It takes many different forms like child labour, trafficking, early marriage, neglect and so on.^[1] It has been attributed to poverty, family size, unemployment, bounded labour, unscrupulous employers of labour among others.^[1]

Historically, it is difficult to indicate specifically when child abuse started, hence, it appears that children have always been abused and neglected owing to this line of thought; De Mouse^[2] remarked that history of child abuse is a nightmare from which we have recently begun to awake. The further back in history, one goes, the lower, the level of child care and the likely, children are killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorized and abused. In ancient human society, child abuse was rife and its ill nature attracted little or no moral consideration.^[2] In about the second century, a Greek physician repeatedly instructed midwives to examine children and eliminate the unfit ones.^[3] The Roman law of twelve tables had a prohibition, banning the raising of defective children. In some places in Africa, Children born as twins were only recently allowed to live.^[3]

Evidently from the fact before us, the origin of child abuse is closely tied up with the origin of man's token freedom of the will.^[3] Children down the history of human society have been subjected to innumerable shades and forms of abuse and maltreatment which includes: physical, emotional, psychological and sexual abuse; others are child neglect, trafficking and child labour.^[4] The physical abuse is the most frequently reported form of abuse and this is technically defined as wilful physical injury inflicted upon the child.^[4] It was also asserted that, it can take the form of shaking, kicking, burning, starving the child and any act that is harmful to the child's body.^[4] Emotional/Verbal abuse as injury of psychological self which may be as a result of parental hostility in form of continuous terrorizing, rejection, insult, criticism or in form of humiliating.^[4] Sexual abuse which is not largely reported by children may be due to threats, rape, incest, sexual assaults and violation while Incest is the most secretive, and discovery is accidental.^[4]

Franey and Geffner stated that although there are many types of child abuse but the most common type is child labour which is one of the problems that occur as a result of responses to economic problems.^[5] Most societies expect children and young people to do a kind of work and this is particularly the case in some developing countries where Children and young people are expected to play a part in family work from an early age, and also, where there is a low socio-economic status of a family.^[5] The young children are sent out to trade in order to raise money for the family. The emphasis on the rights of the child distinguished between child work and child labour.^[5] Child work is seen as activities which do not harm the child, whereas child labour are activities that can harm the child.^[5] They further asserted that, the types of child abuse includes-some form of child's slavery, trafficking of children, prostitution, debt bondage, teenage marriage, starvation, deprivation of educational opportunities, and unlawful detention.^[5]

On the risk factors for child abuse, Sobey posited that the factors includes single parenthood, young mother of less than 18 years, lower social classes, lack of mothering, social isolation, poor family support, post natal depression and psychiatric illness.^[6] Others are unemployment, poor housing, financial problems, unwanted pregnancy or baby of the wrong sex, unrealistic expectation of baby, recent bereavement, and history of child abuse in one of the parents, alcohol or drug abuse, step parents syndrome, children's criminal record of one of the parents and chaotic life styles.^[6] Cluster of these 'risk factors' many of which are interrelated may provide a warning signal in any family for child abuse.^[6] Research on attachment and bonding has also demonstrated the importance of early-parent-child interaction within the first few days of life particularly with prematurity and babies born with minor ailments; the less the parent-infant contact during the prenatal period, the more likelihood of abuse and neglect.^[7]

Depahilis and Salus in their view posited that child's age as well as physical, mental, emotional, and social development can greatly increase or decrease the likelihood of abuse; younger children due to their size

and development status are particularly vulnerable to physical, emotional/mental abuse.^[8] It must be emphasized however, that although, there are characteristics which make children vulnerable, children are not responsible in any way for their abuse.^[8] Such characteristics may include pre-maturity, disability and/or chronic illness. Others inherent in the parent that can lead to abuse of the child includes being a victim of abuse, strictly disciplined parent and dejection.^[8]

Effects of child abuse cannot be overemphasized; Anusiem posited that child abuse is not without any consequences.^[4] The effects can be noted in almost all the aspects of the individual; physically, there are incidence of impaired development, failure to thrive, malnutrition, severe illness as well as physical harm in form of cuts, burns and bruises resulting to disabilities and physical handicap.^[4] Consequent upon lack of caution, there is also an endangering incidence of a life time low self esteem. Emotionally, there are evidences of poor self image, alcohol or drug abuse, unusual behaviour, depression, apathy and/or suicidal attempt.^[4] Educationally, it leads to incapacity in the acquisition of essential/basic skills. It also breeds disinterest in learning, disruptive attitude, school phobia and improper psychological growth and development.^[4] It was also seen on this note that, abused children and their families presents with a range of complications and effects. Commonly, it is noticed that physical injuries could not have occurred in any way which the parents describe, and there may be delay in seeking treatment for the child.^[4] Children may appear either unusually passive, expressing no emotion whatsoever, or be excessively cowed, withdrawn or overly friendly to strangers.^[4] There can also be inappropriate age related behaviour and a child who has been sexually abused can act in a sexually provocative manner.^[4]

Beers and Thomas in their assertion said, in addition to obvious physical injuries, other effects include—emotional and mental health problems and that such problems may develop immediately or later in life which may persist into adulthood.^[9] On the physical abuse, they commented that bruises, burns, welts or scrapes are

common.^[9] These marks often have the shape of the object used to inflict them such as belt, lamp cord among others.^[9] Cigarette or scald burns may be visible on the arms or legs, sometimes, these injuries result in disfigurement.^[9] Toddlers who have been intentionally dunked into a hot bath tub have scald burns and the splash of hot water may cause small burns on the body.^[9] They also documented changes in behaviour among sexually abused; such changes may occur abruptly and be extreme.^[9] Children may become aggressive or withdrawn or develop phobias or sleep disorders, they may behave in sexual ways inappropriate for their age – this may lead to early marriage and/or unwanted pregnancy.^[9] Sexual abuse may also result in physical injuries to the vaginal orifice as well as the tendency to fall victim of sexually transmitted infections, especially that of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).^[9]

Emotionally, Beers and Thomas still asserted that, children who are emotionally abused tend to be insecure and anxious about their attachment to other people because they have not had their needs met consistently or predictably.^[9] They may seem unemotional or uninterested in their surroundings their behaviours may be mistaken for mental retardation or a physical disorder.^[9] Children emotionally neglected may lack social skills or be slow to develop speech and language skills and children who are isolated may be awkward in social situations and will have difficulty forming normal relationship.^[9] Older children may not attend school regularly or may not perform well when they do attend.^[9] They also posited that physically neglected children may appear undernourished, dirty and may lack appropriate cloths.^[9] They may frequently be absent from school, in extreme cases, they may be found living alone or with siblings without adult supervision, physical and emotional development may be slow.^[9]

Early intervention with maltreated children can minimize the effects of child abuse and neglect.^[10] It is equally or even more important to prevent problems before they occur. Child abuse can be prevented by the formation of child abuse prevention programs with a structured activity, to provide a strategy that is designed to reduce or manage the cause of child abuse

and therefore reduce the occurrence of child abuse.^[10] Also, the formation of laws which prevents children from trading (hawking) and working can be used by people in authority.^[10] Therefore, a sound legal regime that guarantees the fundamental human rights of the victims at national and international levels should be in place in a bid to avert this scourge.^[10]

Parents can be empowered educationally and financially via employment so as to be able to solve and cater for their families. Knowledge of family planning and adequate practice of contraception is also responsible for the welfare of their families.^[3]

The study thus sought to ascertain the practice and effects of child abuse on the child and family in selected villages in Enugwu-Ukwu, Njikoka Local Government Area of Anambra state, and also to identify the factors associated with child abuse among the children.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Enugwu-Ukwu, Njikoka Local Government Area of Anambra State. The town is situated in the heart of the state and comprises of 10 villages (Awobu, Osili, Uruokwe, Uruogbo, Avomimi, Urukpeleke, Ire, Urunnebo, Umuokpaleri and Umuakwu). The study adopted a descriptive design and the study population was the inhabitants of these villages, and the study targeted children between 7 to 18 years. Purposive sampling technique was used for sampling the villages to be studied – this specifies elements which satisfy predetermined criteria. Although the criteria used are based on researcher's judgement. Four villages were purposively sampled (Uruokwe, Awobu, Urukpeleke and Uruogbo).

These villages are situated along the main road in the centre of the town and are among the largest villages in the town. Systematic sampling technique was adopted in sampling the houses; in this case, one out of every three houses was picked and a targeted child of every family was selected for the study. Five hundred (500) respondents were sampled for the study out of the target population of one

thousand two hundred (1,200). The sample inclusion criteria include:

- i. The child must be between 7 – 18 years
- ii. The child must be staying with a parent and/or guardian
- iii. The child must have been abused at one time or the other
- iv. The child must be able to talk and understand concepts in order to answer the questions

The instrument used for data collection was a self-administered interviewer questionnaire. The researcher explains and clarifies points and options for the respondents who cannot read the questions correctly and appropriate responses were coded. The questionnaire return rate was 95%. Data collection process lasted for a period of three months. Data collected was analysed with the use of descriptive statistical procedure – frequencies and percentages were then used to present summary tables for relevant variables.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The age distribution showed that 33% of the respondents are below 10 years, 53% are between 10-15 years and 14% are above 15 years. The sex distribution showed that 27% of the respondents are males while 73% are females. Their educational status showed that 34% of the respondents attended primary school, 28% attended secondary school, while 13% attained tertiary education and 25% had no formal education.

The distribution of the relationship of the children with guardian at the time of the abuse showed that 31% of the children were staying with their step parents, 24% were staying with their aunties, 21% were being taking care of, and staying with their mothers, while 15% of the children were being taking care of by the visitors who came to visit their homes at the time of the abuse, and 9% of them were being taking care of by their fathers (Table 2).

Table 3 reveals the associated factors with child abuse. Majority of the respondents (50.7%) said poverty of the parent/guardian was associated with child

abuse, 34.5% associated it with ignorance, while 14.8% of the respondents asserted that, it was associated with victims of child abuse; that is if the person abusing the children was abused before.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age (years)		
<10	156	33
10-15	254	53
>15	63	14
Total	475	100
Gender		
Male	129	27
Female	346	73
Total	475	100
Educational level		
Primary	162	34
Secondary	133	28
Tertiary	59	13
No formal education	121	25
Total	475	100

Table 2: Distribution of relationship of the children with the guardian at the time of the abuse

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Step parents	146	31
Aunty	116	24
Mother	102	21
Father	40	9
Visitors	71	15
Total	475	100

Table 3: Responses on associated factors with child abuse

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Poverty	241	50.7
Ignorance	164	34.5
Victims of abuse	70	14.8
Total	475	100

The practices of child abuse as seen in the study showed that majority of the respondents (44.2%) said, starving the child was the most form of practice of child

abuse, 41.2% asserted, it is kicking/shaking the children, 14.6% said giving them other punishments aside from beating was a form of child abuse and no respondent said beating was a form of child abuse; this may likely be associated with African concept of beating as per correction of the child and not necessarily a form of child abuse (table 4).

Table 4: Responses on the practices of child abuse

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Beating	0	0
Punishing	69	14.6
Kicking/shaking	196	41.2
Starving the child	210	44.2
Total	475	100

Table 5 shows that a greater percentage of the respondents (26.5%) asserted that the effects of child abuse on the child and the family is early marriage practice (the victims marry early in order to move from the settings of an abuse) 22.5% of the respondents said, the effects of child abuse leads to unwanted pregnancy for the children, 9.7% said the effect is sexually transmitted infections, because the victims are often lured into unsafe sex, while 6.9% of the respondents asserted that it leads to delinquent behaviours for the children, and 4.7% said it leads the victims to engage in prostitution, but 29.7% of the respondents gave no response.

DISCUSSION

Findings showed that majority of the respondents projected poverty as the most associated factor related to child abuse. This corroborates the findings of Sobey which reported that lower social classes and/or poverty could suffice as risk factors for child abuse.^[6] The study also agrees with that of Franey and Geffner which documented that child abuse and/or child labour could be as a result of responses to economic problems such as poverty and low socio-economic status of the family- thereby making the family/guardian to send the younger children out to trade in a bid to raise money for the family.^[5]

Table 5: Responses on the effects of child abuse on the child/family

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Unwanted pregnancy	107	22.5
Prostitution	22	4.7
Sexually Transmitted Infectious	46	9.7
Delinquent behaviour	33	6.9
Early marriage	126	26.5
No response	141	29.7
Total	475	100

Starving the child and kicking/shaking the children were the most forms of child abuse practices revealed in the findings as well. This is consistent with Anusiem who posited that the practices of child abuse among others include shaking, kicking, starving the child and any other act that is harmful to the body of the child.^[4]

Among the findings, it was also realized that majority of the respondents said that the most prevalent effects of child abuse on the child/family is early marriage practices closely followed by unwanted pregnancy. This supports the submission of Beers and Thomas who documented that children who are abused frequently go into early marriage practices and/or could lead them to have unwanted pregnancy, especially children that are sexually abused.^[9]

It is thus concluded that child abuse practices in Enugwu-Ukwu, Njikoka LGA are majorly due to poverty and/or low socio-economic status. The most common forms of child abuse practices are starving, kicking and shaking the children, and that the effects are on early marriage practices and/or unwanted pregnancies. In view of the above, the following are recommended:

a. Effective child abuse laws should be enacted by the government and stiff penalties and sanctions should be melted out to the offenders

b. Non-Governmental Organizations should form support groups and intervention strategies towards abating child abuse

c. Social awareness campaign on child abuse and effects should be made at the urban, sub-urban and rural levels in a bid to enhance information dissemination on the consequences of child abuse

d. Access to quality education which is the key to ending the abuse of children should be enhanced; such an educational system must be qualitative, relevant, attractive and cost effective so that a greater number of children will be given the opportunity to gain proper education, thus reducing the practices of child abuse.

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Conflict of Interest: None declared



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