

# **Child Abuse and Emotional Stability among Senior Secondary School Students in Cross River State, Nigeria**

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## **Abstract**

Survey data collected from 2,000 Senior Secondary Two (SS II) Students in Cross River State, Nigeria were analysed to determine the influence of child abuse on later emotional stability of the individual. Four dimensions of child abuse namely: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and child neglect were considered in the study. One Way Analysis of Variance was used in testing the hypothesis at 0.05 Alpha levels. The result obtained showed a significant influence of child abuse on the individual later emotional stability.

## **Introduction**

Emotional stability is an essential ingredient for the individual's growth and wholesome development. An emotionally stable individual is far ahead of his counterparts who are emotionally unstable in many respects. Although that is the case, many school going individuals especially at the secondary school levels are highly emotionally unstable, and this is always a matter of concern to teachers and school administrators.

Emotion itself is a psychological state of strong feeling such as expressed in happiness, sadness, disgust and other forms of inner feelings. It is a positive or negative feeling involving cognitive, physiological and behavioural reactions to events (Passer and Smith, 2001). To Isangedighi (2007), emotion is an aroused state which is the product of the mind. When there is an emotional arousal, one observes bodily changes resulting from the activities of the brain and the autonomic nervous and endocrine systems. Though the involvement of the brain in emotional discharge is not so well understood, it is noted that emotion involves important interaction between the cortical and subcortical areas (Borod, 2000; Edward, 1998).

Children who go to school need a level of emotional stability for functionality. An emotionally disturbed child is a disadvantaged child in the school setting. It is therefore important that the growth process of the child is such that he/she grows up as an emotionally stable individual. Isangedighi (1986) believes that the quality and amount of learning an individual is capable of having, is largely influenced by his psychological well being. So one's predisposition towards success or failure is moderated by his emotional status. Thus, an emotionally disturbed child cannot make much gain in learning as a child who is emotionally stable (Stone and Rowley, 1968). Emotional stability is a sign of well adjusted personality, while unstable emotion signifies maladjustment. When faced with challenge or frustration, it is the adjusted personality that would be able to respond appropriately. Emotional instability is harmful to learning, since learning is a process of self-growth. Therefore any form of personality inadequacy like emotional instability would be injurious to it.

When there is a direct emotional disturbance, the more complex forms of learned and

intelligent behaviours will be disrupted making the fine motor skills like writing to be jerky and erratic and may even lead to the paralysis of reasoning (Isangedihi, 2007). Thus unstable emotions such as anger, fear and anxiety bring about conflict and tension and eventual dislocation of thought processes. Good parental care usually serves to guarantee the development of healthy personality. That is why in all cultures, parents or caregivers give adequate attention, love and care to their offspring or wards.

The United Nations, in the universal declaration of human rights (UNICEF 2001 and 2003) proclaimed that “childhood is entitled to special care and assistance”. It also adds that, “the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality characteristics, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding. The paradox of this is that, in the 21st century world, some parents or caregivers still see relationship with their children as a paradigm of the old concept of spare the rod and spoil the child. Today childhood still face a great danger. The child is still vulnerable to several attacks from within and outside the family. Thus, parents and caregivers are seen maltreating, neglecting, or even failing to provide the necessary love, care and attention necessary for the child’s normal healthy personality development. Human history is littered with stories of adult brutality and wickedness to children. These attacks range from physical abuse, exploitation, deprivations (neglect), exposure to certain adverse conditions, sexual abuse, and child trafficking (Isangedighi, 2007).

For centuries, child abuse has been recorded in literature, art and science in all parts of the world. There are untold stories of variety of violence against children, child mutilation, child murder, child ritual, torture, infanticide and other forms of cruelty. Records abound showing how malnourished, weak and unkempt children were traded away by parents or family members for economic gains, or as a sheer means of getting rid of them. For example, Ebigo (1990) reveals that the International Labour Organization declared that not less than 10 million African children under the age of 15 years are abused. United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) also confirm that about 16 million African children of about 13 years work. These children work for long hours, being underfed and underpaid. The International Labour Organization (ILO) in 1999 estimated that about two hundred and fifty million children between the ages of 5 and 14 years are engaged in odd jobs. Sixty-one percent (61%) found in Asia, thirty-two per cent (32%) in Africa and seven per cent (7%) in Latin America. The official number of child labourers is about 5.5 million in United States.

Reports also abound, on heart breaking stories of children being highly abused even to a point of death by family members or caregivers. For example, Femi (2004) carried out a survey of prevalence of child abuse and neglect as perceived by parents and guardians in Okene, Kogi State, Nigeria. An average of 3 cases are reported per year, however, these cases are not the total number of cases taken to the courts yearly. The average age of the victims was 7 years, while that of the assailants was 26 years. Child abuse has many side effects some of such effects may be feeling of distress and trauma leading to instability emotionally. This study was therefore carried out to establish if child abuse leads to a later life of emotional instability.

## **Literature Review**

Several authors have attempted the definition of child abuse in different ways. For instance, Kemp (1980) defined child abuse as a situation in which a child is suffering from serious physical injury inflicted upon him by a person in a way other than accidental. An example is a child suffering harm by reason of neglect, malnutrition, or sexual abuse, growing without necessary and basic physical care or is growing up under conditions which threaten his physical and emotional survival.

UNICEF (2003) defines child abuse as; the portion of harm to children that results from human action or inaction that is proscribed, proximate and preventable. African Network for the Prevention and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect, (ANPPCAN, 1986) in Ebigo (1990) defines child abuse as: the intentional, unintentional or well intentional acts which endanger the physical, emotional, moral and the educational welfare of the child. These acts are those unacceptable normally to the community. In some cases, however, such acts include behaviour that may be acceptable by the community but may endanger the well being of the child, although the child may or may not perceive those acts as abuse.

It is important to note that every child whose home environment allows for the development of trust, love and self confidence is the one who will develop stable emotion. Therefore, children who spend the earlier years of their lives in family situations where they are constantly battered or punished, criticized or left most of the time without being provided for may develop emotional instability. Hence Clarizio and Mccoy (1970) indicated that children who are found in this type of family situation are usually characterized by chronic fear, anxiety, hatred and insecurity. Also, Stone and Rowley (1968) in their study of child abuse and its influence on emotional stability studied 116 children (82 boys and 34 girls) who were referred to the child psychiatry service of the University of Iowa in United States of America (USA) for diagnosis and possible treatment of emotional disorder. They discovered that the achievement of those emotionally disturbed children was below average. The obvious conclusion was that child abuse of any kind has adverse effect on the emotional stability of an individual and a devastating effect on learning. They concluded that emotional stability is a sign of well adjusted personality, while instability signifies maladjustment. Thus, under the face of challenge or frustration, it is a person who is emotionally stable that would be able to appropriately respond. The emotionally unstable may not be adequately disposed for appropriate response.

Aschcraft (1970) compared the scholastic performance of emotionally disturbed children who were given psychological treatment with the performance of children who were not. At the end of five years they were worse than the untreated children. Hence child abuse such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and child neglect has adverse effect on the emotional stability of the individuals in question.

Judd (2004) used 639 New York state families and their children for nearly two decades. Children with documented instances of childhood abuse or neglect were more than four times as likely to develop emotional instability in early adulthood. She observed that there is a pretty high prevalence of child abuse by caregivers across all personality characteristic problems. She notes that one of the key problems appears to be neglect. Probably more of emotional neglect more of lack of attention to a child's emotional needs. To support this, Becker (1996), indicated that a child who is emotionally abused will frequently

exhibit unstable emotion. Some parents and caregivers publicly humiliate their children by the kind of words they use on them. Some children were frequently called “imbecile,” “dummy” or “useless”. Depression can occur because one is afraid to take chances and risk making an error, after all in such family, making an error meant taking the chance of being devastated by humiliation and ridicule. What is particularly insidious about this form of abuse is that the child and the adult survivor often have no ideas “what hit them.” There are no memories and no physical evidence of being beaten, molested, or abused because the bruises and the scars are invisible. It is the soul that is injured, (Becker, 1996).

Devine and Lundberg (1977) put 24 subjects through situations purporting to represent anger, disgust, fear, pleasure, sexual excitement and neutrality. For instance, subjects were shown a pornographic film or a place of cal-faces and were asked to rate their feelings before and after each experience using an ACL, (Adjective Check List). There were significant differences in reported emotions in the words relevant to the various situations. There was also good individual stability of response. Also Santrock (1995) have indicated that the higher the level of abuse and neglect of an individual, the lower the emotional stability of such an individual, thereby predisposing the child to anxiety and depression. To Egaland, Sroufe and Erickson (1988), abused children suffer hurt in their emotion and spirit hence it has a lot of influence on their emotional stability.

The way child sexual abuse was placed on the public and health agenda put a stronger emphasis on the adult consequences of abuse, than on the immediate implications for an abused child. The relationship between child sexual abuse and adult psychopathology tended initially to be conceptualized in terms of a chronic form of posttraumatic stress disorder (Linderberg and Distad 1985, Bryer, Nelson, Muller and Kroll, 1987; Craine, Henson and Colliver, 1988). This model focused on trauma-induced symptoms; most particularly disassociate disorder such as desensitization amnesias, and even multiple personality such as emotional instability and introversion/extroversion. The idea was that child abuses have reverberated down the years to produce a post-abuse syndrome in adult life. In its more sophisticated formulation, this model attempts to integrate the damage inflicted at the time to the victims’ psychological integrity, by the child abuse and the need to repress the trauma, with resultant psychological fragmentation (such as depressive mood, restlessness etc). It latter manifests itself in adult life as mental health problems and problems of interpersonal and sexual adjustment (Rieker and Carmen, 1986). The post-traumatic stress model found its strongest support in the observation of clinicians dealing with individuals with histories of severe and repeated abuse.

There is a wide range of potential adverse adult outcomes associated with child abuse (physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and child neglect). However, there is no unique pattern of these long-term effects and no discernible specific post-abuse syndrome. This suggests that child abuse is best viewed as a risk factor for a wide range of subsequent emotional problems. In studies on the long-term impact of child abuse, that employ adult subjects, it is all too easy to forget the abuse that occurred in childhood, and to resort to applying inappropriate adult-centred conceptualization.

It is important to note that, child abuse occurs during a period in life where complex and, hopefully, ordered changes are occurring in the child’s physical, psychological and social well being. Hence, the state of flux leaves the child vulnerable to sustaining damage that will retard, pervert or prevent the normal developmental processes (emotional

development). The impact of abuse is likely to be modified by the developmental stage at which it occurs. A child who has already had to cope with, for example a problematic family background or prior emotional abuse, will be more vulnerable to the additional blow of child abuse. A child from a more secured and privileged family background may well be equally distressed at the time of the abuse, but is likely to sustain less long-term developmental damage.

### **Methodology**

*Subjects:* A total of two thousand students randomly selected from twenty secondary schools in Cross River State, Nigeria were used for the study. The subjects (1000 males and 1000 females) ranged in age from 15 to 17 years.

**Instrumentation:** An instrument captioned Students Opinion Questionnaire (SOQ), was used for data collection. The research instrument had three Sections: A – C. Section ‘A’ elicited from the respondents their demographic information such as age, sex, school type and class. Section ‘B’ was a 20 – item Likert-type scale that measured the prevalence of child abuse such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and child neglect. Section ‘C’ was a 10-item Likert –type scale that measured the respondents’ emotional stability. A total of 2000 copies of the questionnaire were administered, out of this number, 1,973 were properly filled and returned

*Data Analysis and Results:* The data generated were analysed using One Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). The hypothesis was tested at 0.05 level of significance.

*Hypothesis:* Child abuse does not significantly influence emotional stability of senior secondary school students

- (i) Influence of child abuse on emotional stability of students. The mean scores and standard deviations of the respondents in child abuse across the dimensions of emotional stability are presented in table 1.

The result presented in Table 1 shows the sizes, mean scores and standard deviations of the three groups of respondents based on their level of child abuse (physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and child neglect) on emotional stability. The results of comparing the group means of the subjects across the four dimensions of child abuse are shown in Table 2. The comparison produced F-values of 519.88, 295.032, 838.027 and 752.707 for physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect respectively. Each of these F-values was greater than the critical F-value of 2.99 at .05 level of significance with 2 and 1970 degrees of freedom. With these results, the null hypothesis was rejected. This implies that child abuse (physical, sexual, emotional and child neglect) has a significant influence on individual’s emotional stability.

**Table 1: Mean scores and standard deviations of emotional stability of students**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Group</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
Physical Child Abuse	Low	521	25.69	5.44
	Moderate	764	18.91	5.14
	High	688	16.88	3.96
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1973</b>	<b>19.99</b>	<b>5.99</b>
Sexual Child Abuse	Low	508	22.09	6.25
	Moderate	684	22.84	6.21
	High	781	16.44	3.27
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1973</b>	<b>19.99</b>	<b>5.99</b>
Emotional Child Abuse	Low	667	25.51	5.46
	Moderate	656	18.36	4.55
	High	650	15.97	2.72
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1973</b>	<b>19.99</b>	<b>5.99</b>
Child Neglect	Low	672	25.27	5.56
	Moderate	539	18.84	4.91
	High	762	16.15	2.89
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1973</b>	<b>19.99</b>	<b>5.99</b>

**Table 2: Analysis of variance: Influence of child abuse on emotional stability.**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Source of</b>	<b>Sum of</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Ms</b>	<b>F</b>
		<b>Variation</b>	<b>Squares</b>	<b>(Mean Square)</b>	
Physical Child Abuse	Between groups	24445.81	2	12222.91	19.88*
	Within Groups	46317.01		1970	23.51
	Total	70762.82		1972	
Sexual Child Abuse	Between Groups	16309.967	2	8154.983	295.032*
	Within Groups	544452.850		1970	27.641
	Total	70762.82		1972	
Emotional Child Abuse	Between Groups	32528.943	2	16264.472	8.027*
	Within Groups	38233.874		1970	19.408
	Total	70762.817		1972	
Child Neglect	Between Groups	30651.574	2	15325.787	52.707*
	Within Groups	40111.243		1970	20.361
	Total	70762.817		1972	

\* Significant at .05 level; critical  $F_{2,1970} = 2.99$ ; N = 1973

To understand which group (s) showed the significant influence, multiple comparison analysis was carried out using Fishers' Least significant difference (LSD) analysis. The result is presented in Table 3.

**TABLE 3: Fishers' least significant difference (LSD) multiple comparison analysis: influence of child abuse on emotional stability of senior secondary school students**

<b>Variables Group</b>	<b>Low (Levels)</b>	<b>Moderate (n=521) (n=764)</b>	<b>High (n=688)</b>	
Physical Child Abuse	Low	25.69a	6.78b	8.81
	Moderate	24.64*c	18.91	2.03
	High	31.30*	3.39*	16.88
	<b>MSW =</b>	<b>23.51</b>		
Sexual Abuse	<b>Low (n=508)</b>	<b>Moderate (n=684)</b>		<b>High (n=781)</b>
	Low	22.09 <sup>a</sup>	-0.39 <sup>b</sup>	5.65
	Child Abuse	Moderate -1.27 <sup>c</sup>	22.48	6.04
	High	18.85*	21.95*	16.44
	<b>MSW =</b>	<b>27.64</b>		
Emotional Child Abuse	<b>Low (n=667)</b>	<b>Moderate (n=656)</b>		<b>High (650)</b>
	Low	25.51 <sup>a</sup>	7.15 <sup>b</sup>	9.54
	Child Abuse	Moderate 29.54*c	18.36	2.39
	High	39.28* 9.81		15.97
	<b>MSW =</b>	<b>19.41</b>		
Child Neglect	<b>Low (n=672)</b>	<b>Moderate (n=539)</b>		<b>High (n=762)</b>
	Low	25.27a	6.43b	9.12
	Neglect Moderate	24.62*c	18.84	2.69
	High	38.20*	10.59*	16.15
	<b>MSW =</b>	<b>20.36</b>		

a - Group means are placed along diagonal

b - Differences in Group means are above the diagonal

c -Fishers' t-value are below the diagonal

\* - Significant at .05 level (Critical t = 1.96)

Entries in Table 3 indicate that Fishers' t-value of 24.64, 31.30 and 3.39 (for physical abuse) respectively. Each of these was significant at .05 levels. The interpretation is that the emotional stability of students with low level of physical abuse was significantly higher than the emotional stability of students with both moderate level (t =24.61); and the emotional stability of students with high level (t = 31.30). Also, the emotional stability of students with moderate level of physical abuse was significantly higher than that of

students, with high level of physical abuse ( $t = 3.39$ ).

The second part of table 3 indicates that the emotional stability of students with low level of sexual abuse was not significantly different from the emotional stability of students with moderate level of sexual abuse ( $t=-1.27, p>.05$ ). However, the emotional stability of students with low level of sexual abuse was significantly higher than that of students with high level of sexual abuse ( $t=18.85, p<.05$ ). Also, the emotional stability of students with moderate level of sexual abuse was significantly higher than that of students with high level of sexual abuse ( $t=21.95; p<.05$ ).

From this result, differences existed between those who were highly abused and those who were lowly abused in terms of their emotional stability. But such significant differences were not found between those who were moderately or lowly abused.

Entries in the third part of this table indicate Fisher's  $t$ -value of 29.54, 39.28 and 9.81 respectively. Each of these was significant at .05 levels. The interpretation is that, the emotional stability of students with low level of emotional abuse was significantly higher than both the emotional stability of students with moderate level ( $t=29.54$ ) and the emotional stability of students with high level ( $t=39.28$ ). Also, the emotional stability of students with moderate level of emotional abuse was significantly higher than that of students with high level of emotional abuse ( $t=9.81$ ).

Entries in the last part of table 3 indicate Fisher's  $t$ -value of 24.62, 38.20 and 10.59 respectively. Each of these was significant at .05 levels. The interpretation is that the emotional stability of students with low level of child neglect was significantly higher than both the emotional stability of students with moderate level ( $t=24.62$ ) and the emotional stability of students with high level ( $t=38.20$ ). Also, the emotional stability of students with moderate level of child neglect was significantly higher than that of students with high level of child neglect ( $t=10.59$ ).

## **Discussion**

The study revealed that there is a significant influence of child abuse (physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional and child neglect) on emotional stability of the senior secondary school students. The students, who were highly abused, were more unstable than the rest. This is supported by studies carried out by Clarizio and Mccoy 1970; Stone and Rowley 1968; Aschcraft, 1970; Judd, 2004; Becker, 1996, Santrock 1995; Egeland, 1988 and Miller and Miller 1997).

However, in a study carried out by Iheanacho and Nanjwan (2004) on child maltreatment and manifest anxiety in Calabar Metropolis Nigeria, it was observed that the different types of child maltreatment has no significant relationship with manifest anxiety. However, their study, did not investigate the relationship between child abuse and latter emotional stability, hence the difference. The study shows that the higher the level of abuse the lower the emotional stability of the child. This is so because, child abuse may occur during a period of life where complex and, hopefully ordered changes are occurring in the child's physical, psychological and social being. Hence, a state of flux leaves the child vulnerable to sustaining damage that will retard or prevent developmental processes. That being the case, the impact of the abuse is likely to be modified by the developmental stage at which it occurs. A child who already has for example a problematic family background to cope with or prior emotional abuse, will be more vulnerable to the additional blow of child



sexual abuse. A child from a more secured and privileged background may well be equally distressed at the time by any form of child abuse.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the findings, one may conclude that child abuse of any form has a significant influence on the emotional stability of the individual. In view of this, the government at all levels should carry out an awareness campaign on the influence of child abuse on the emotional stability of children. Social support network and psychotherapeutic interventions should be provided for victims. These measures will help them to appreciate their conditions better and become well disposed to prevent further damage to their emotional stability. School guidance counsellors should be encouraged to assist abused children so as to help them develop stable emotions. Also parents who do not want their children to develop emotional instability should stop abusing them.

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