

# **INFLUENCE OF CHILD ABUSE ON CLASSROOM BEHAVIOUR AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AMONG PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS**

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## **Abstract**

This study was carried out to examine the relationship between child abuse and children's attention span in class; and the relationship between child's active involvement in parent's business and attitude to classwork. A descriptive research design of survey type was adopted for the study. The population for this study comprised all teachers in primary and secondary schools in both public and private sectors in Ado local government area of Ekiti State, Nigeria. The sample consisted of 200 teachers drawn from 10 schools through stratified random sampling. A questionnaire tagged 'Child Abuse and Classroom Behaviour Questionnaire (CACBQ)' was used to collect data. Expert judgements were used to ensure face and content validity. Test-retest method was used to determine the reliability and a reliability coefficient of 0.72 was obtained. Data collected were analysed by using Pearson Product Moment Correlation. The result revealed that there is a significant relationship between child abuse and children's attention span in class. The result also showed that there is a significant relationship between child's active involvement in parent's business and his/her attitude to classwork. Based on these findings, it was recommended, among others, that the effects of child abuse on children's classroom behaviour and later academic performance 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.

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**Keywords:** Classroom behaviour, academic performance, attention span, attitude

## **Introduction**

According to the Oxford Learners Dictionary of Current English (Hornby, 2000), abuse is defined as the use of something in a way that is wrong or harmful. Notably, Moss and Moss (1990) technically defined child abuse as any act of commission and omission on the part of the parent, guardian or caretaker that results in non-accidental physical or mental injury, or sex abuse. Youngson (1995) said child abuse is a distasteful subject that attracts euphemism and doctors talk about non-accidental injury when they mean assault. Child abuse therefore refers to an unfair, cruel or violent treatment of a child in a physical, sexual or emotional way including child labour.

Child abuse has emerged as one of the serious social problems that need the attention of the public. All over the world, there are children working like slaves, they beg in the streets, toil under the sun in the field and plantations and work day and night in shops and factories. Millions of children lose their lives, some are denied education and never experienced the joy of childhood due to the type of abuse they experienced at an early age.

Throughout history, children were considered as property. Parents had the unrestricted authority to do to a child whatever they deemed necessary. Usually, the father made all the disciplinary decisions. In ancient Rome, the father had the authority to sell, kill, maim, sacrifice or do anything to a child as he saw fit. Typically, the father exercised this power if the child was born deformed, weak, disabled or in any way different than what was considered as normal. Historically, parents have used their children for profit. In America during industrialization, children were placed in apprenticeship workhouse, orphanages, placement mills, factories, farms and mines. In England, five year old children worked for 16 hours a day in factories which shackled in chains. They often whip them to get them to work harder (Bagnell, 1985).

From 1870 to 1930, over 8000 children were taken off the street of Dublin and London, and then shipped to Canada to work on farms and in factories. In 1886, John Kelso, a globe reporter wrote about the child abuse that many of these children were experiencing. In 1887, the Toronto Humane Society was formed with the mandate to prevent cruelty to animals and children. The Children Aid Society was formed in 1891 with Kelso as founding president. He was instrumental in getting the government in 1893 to pass the first bill in Canada to protect children in the United States. The month of April is Child Abuse Prevention Month (Bagnell, 1985).

Childhood is expected to be the best time to lay a foundation of balanced social and emotional stability for an expected adult. It is during childhood that the ingredient on which the child should grow is expected to

be put in place. Child abuse has been recognised as a violation of the rights of the child through adoption of the convention on the Rights of the Child by many countries including Nigeria. This convention recognises the significance of liberty, equality and nurturance as essential for the preservation of children's integrity as individuals. Some of these principles include respect for the dignity of children as members of the human community; family protection and assistance to sustain children in natural environment for their growth and well-being; and state protection of children from exploitation and abuse.

Despite all these, there are still high incidences of the problem of child abuse in Nigeria. There are prevalent cases of violent physical abuse which sometimes lead to death of the child, child sexual abuse, child labour, child emotional abuse and child neglect. In the media, there are reports of incest, child prostitution, child trafficking, child prostitution street children and the almajiris in the northern part of the country. Children abound on the streets hawking their wares when they should be in school laying solid foundation for their future. Some abused children that manage to be in school do not fully devote their time to their studies.

Some research works pointed to negative associations between child abuse and school performance. According to Kendall-Tackett and Eckerode (1996), Rowe and Eckenrode (1999) and Shonk and Crachetti (2001), maltreated children receive lower grades, and get suspended from school and retained in grade more frequently. Children who are maltreated are also prone to difficulty in forming new relationships with peers and adults, and in adapting to norms of social behaviour (Shields, Cicchetti and Ryan, 1994 and Toth and Cicchetti, 1996). Shonk and Cicchetti (2001) advocated that childhood maltreatment can influence children's performance of competencies (e.g. engagement in academic tasks and paying attention in the classroom) that are necessary for optimal learning and achievement in school. Also, Slade and Wissow (2007) found that more intense childhood maltreatment is associated with greater probability of having a low GPA ( $P = 0.001$ ) and problems completing homework assignment ( $P = 0.007$ ). A study by Zolotor, Kotch, Dufort, Winsor, Catellier and Bou-Saada (1999) found a similar pattern of multivariate results using data derived from substantiated reports to child protective services agencies.

While a substantial amount of research claims that child maltreatment leads to academic failure, a body of literature conversely claims that the said relationship differs depending on the personal experience of the individual and the specific type of maltreatment encountered (Coohy, Renner, Hua, Zhang and Whitney, 2011; and Taffee and Gallop, 2010). The shift in perspective of the literature stems from the gap between the ways in which the construct of child maltreatment was formerly measured and is currently

defined. Specifically, child maltreatment is defined as any act or series of acts of child abuse or neglect performed by a parent or other caregiver (e.g. religious leader, coach or teacher) that result in harm to a child (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011). Because there are many different components that make up child maltreatment, researchers deconstructed this definition by type (i.e. abuse versus neglect), length of time, and severity when examining how it relates to academic success (Coohey et.al., 2011). As a result, some recent literature shows that certain factors may compensate for the negative impact that maltreatment has on children's academic achievement by allowing them to positively adjust to their negative situation.

Studying multiple dimensions of child abuse and neglect; Chalk, Gibbons and Scarupa (2002) reported associations between childhood abuse and neglect and language deficits, reduced cognitive functioning and attention deficit disorders; other studies do not report significant differences between maltreated children and others on measures of cognitive functioning, language skills or verbal ability. They also found that both neglected and physically abused children tend to do poorly in school, as evidenced by low grades, low standardized test scores and frequent retention in the same grade, but neglected children fare the worst. All these point to the fact that child abuse affects the cognitive and educational outcomes of the abused children.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Success within the academic environment is an important value instilled during childhood. Children who are able to gain academic success within their school years are more likely to have an overall sense of well-being throughout childhood and into adulthood. Although it may be ideal for all children to perform well within the school environment, there are many outside factors that can hinder a child's potential for academic success.

Recent development in the society, coupled with economic realities, influence parents' behaviour and attitudes towards their children. Hardship forces parents to solicit for the assistance of their children in the trade in order to improve the socio-economic viability of the home. Poverty is one of the psychosocial determinants of child/abuse including child labour which could have a far-reaching effect on academic performance.

It appears that there is a continuous decrease in children's interest in school activities resulting in flagrant disobedience to school rules and regulations such as truancy, absenteeism and even school drop-out. Failure of both internal and external examination has also reached a disturbing rate.

Negative health outcomes related to child maltreatment such as neglect, hunger and all forms of abuse (sexual, physical and emotional) including child labour are strong indicators of poor academic performance

(Centers of Disease Control and Prevention, 2011). Children who are maltreated are less attentive and engaged in school, have higher absenteeism, lower grades, lower test scores, and are more likely to drop out of school than children who are not maltreated (Shonk and Cicchetti, 2001; Vig and Kaminer, 2002; Leiter, 2007; Langsford, Miller-Johnson, Berlin, Dodge, Bates and Pettit, 2007).

Also, children in households with frequent interpersonal conflict and physical, sexual, or other abuse may develop a heightened sensitivity to threats and a hostile pattern of response to perceived and actual threats from others (Rapport, Denney, Chung and Hustace, 2001). Emotional and behavioural problems may also result in cognitive impairment and greater concentration difficulties (Carlson and Kashani, 1988; Manly, Cicchetti and Barnett, 1994); poorer motivation (Carlson and Kashani, 1988; Shonk and Cicchetti, 2001); impaired short-term memory (Lauer, Giordani, Boivin, Halle, Glasgow, Alessi and Berent, 1994); or higher impulsivity and impaired executive function (Manly et al., 1994) – that result in reduced ability to perform well on school assignments and tests. Middle and high school students who do not adhere to schools' rules of conduct and who perform poorly academically have worse long-term employment outcomes and lower earnings in adulthood (Cawley, Heckman and Vytlačil, 2001; Heckman and Rubinstein, 2001).

The results of these studies of child maltreatment have potentially far-reaching implications for education policy. In view of all these, evidence of the impacts of child abuse on classroom behaviour, which leads to academic performance, among primary and secondary school students in Ado Local Government Ekiti State, Nigeria is needed to establish evidence of effects on schooling attainment in the general education population and on economic outcomes in adulthood. To this end, the following hypotheses were generated.

### **Hypotheses**

Specially, the following hypotheses were tested.

1. There is no significant relationship between child abuse and children's attention span in the class.
2. There is no significant relationship between child's active involvement in parent's business and his/her attitude to classwork.

### **Methodology**

The researchers used descriptive research design of survey type. The plan of study involved the use of questionnaire to collect data in order to test the hypotheses generated in the study. The target population for this study

was made up of all teachers in primary and secondary schools, both public and private, in Ado Local Government, Ekiti State, Nigeria.

Stratified random sampling was used to draw out the sample. Three schools were chosen randomly from public primary schools and three schools were chosen from public secondary schools. Also, two schools were chosen randomly from private primary schools and two schools were chosen from private secondary schools. In each school, 10 teachers of both sexes were selected, making a total of 200 teachers.

A self-designed questionnaire called ‘Child Abuse and Classroom Behaviour Questionnaire’(CACBQ) was used for the study. The questionnaire consisted 25 items on child abuse practices, including child labour, and classroom behaviour.

The methods used in validating the instrument were face and content validity. Experts judgements were used to determine both. A reliability test was also carried out on small group of teachers who were not part of the sample. The scores obtained from two administrations of the questionnaire at two weeks interval were correlated by using Pearson Product Moment Correlation. A reliability coefficient of 0.72 was obtained. The instrument was found to be suitable for data collection.

Copies of the questionnaire were distributed by the researchers to a sample of 200 teachers in ten schools. Researchers’ presence during administration enhanced better understanding of the items in the instrument. Copies of the questionnaire were collected back immediately after completion by the researchers.

The data generated were analysed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation. The hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

## Testing of Hypotheses

Hypothesis one

Ho: There is no significant relationship between child abuse and children’s attention span in class.

In testing this hypothesis, Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used.

Table 1 Pearson Product Moment Correlation summary of child abuse and children attention span in the class.

Variable	N	X	SD	rcal	rtable
Child Abuse	200	14.45	6.71	0.994	0.195
Children’s attention span	200	8.63	3.97		

$P < 0.05$

Table 1 shows that the mean total score of child abuse is 14.45 with standard deviation of 6.71 while the mean total score of children’s attention

span is 8.63 with standard deviation of 3.97. Since  $r$ -calculated (0.994) is greater than  $r$ -table (0.195), the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that there is a significant relationship between child abuse and children attention span in the classroom.

### Hypothesis Two

Ho: There is no significant relationship between child's active involvement in parent's business and his/her attitude to class work.

In testing this hypothesis, Pearson Product Moment Correlation was also used.

Table 2 Pearson Product Moment Correlation summary of child's active involvement in parent's business and attitude to class work.

Variable	N	X	SD	rcal	rtable
Child's active involvement in parent's business	200	9.25	4.36	0.984	0.195
Attitude to class room	200	8.53	4.06		

$P < 0.05$

Table 2 shows that the mean total score of child's active involvement in parent's business is 9.25 with standard deviation of 4.36 while the mean total score of attitude to class work is 8.53 with standard deviation of 4.06. The  $r$ -calculated is 0.984 while the table value is 0.195. Since the  $r$ -calculated is greater than  $r$ -table, the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that there is a significant relationship between child's active involvement in parent's business and attitude to class work.

The result of hypothesis one shows that there is a significant relationship between child abuse and children's attention span in class. The probable explanation for this result is that a child who is maltreated has the tendency to think a lot and have his attention drifted away from the work at school. When a child is abused, he/she would find it difficult to concentrate in class and the child's level of assimilation would be affected, thus finding it hard to understand whatever he/she is being taught. This would make the child a passive listener and also a passive participant in the class which would culminate in poor academic performance.

This finding is in line with Shonk and Cicchetti (2001) who found a relationship between child abuse and child performance competencies such as engagement in academic tasks and paying attention in the classroom. In the same vein, Chalk, Gibbons and Scarupa (2002) also found an association between child abuse and attention deficit disorders.

The result of hypothesis two shows that there is a significant relationship between a child's active involvement in parent's business and

attitude to class work. The probable explanation for this result is that a child who is actively involved in parent's business may see no reason why he/she should go to school. Such child may find it difficult to perform well in class. Abused child may not do well in class because he/she comes late to the class. Most abused children are involved in enormous activities that deprive them of the opportunity to attend school punctually.

Child labour robs the children of the interest to learn. Children who have been contributing economically to their family income may be less interested in academic achievement resulting in lack of motivation that eventually affects both their learning and their future prospects. This finding is in line with Carlson and Kashani (1988) and Shonk and Cicchetti (2001) who found that child abuse leads to poorer motivation for academic success. It is also in line with Chalk, Gibbons and Scarupa (2002) who reported that abused children tend to do poorly in school.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Evidence from this study has led the researchers to conclude that child abuse negatively affects children's attention span in class; and that a child's active involvement in parent's business negatively affects his/her attitude to classwork.

It would be a good thing if the effects of child abuse on children's classroom behaviour and later academic performance could receive attention in education policy forums. Our findings suggest that educators (both, in primary and secondary schools) should be more aware that past or continuing child abuse could be negatively affecting a student's attention span and attitude to classwork; and consequently his/her academic performance. Greater awareness of child abuse could lead teachers to respond more effectively to students who appear to be inattentive, have poor motivation and perform inconsistently on assignments.

It is recommended that parents should always relate to their children with love and affection and provide for their needs. It is also recommended that all existing policies from the international convention on the child should be implemented by the Federal Government, the State Government and the Local Government.

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