

## **FAMILY INTERACTION AND DEATH OF PARENTS AS CORRELATES OF CHILD ABUSE**

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### **Abstract**

This study was carried out to examine the relationship between family interaction and child abuse among public secondary school students in South-west Nigeria. A descriptive research design of exploratory type was adopted for the study. A total of 1,440 public secondary school students in 36 schools from nine local government areas in south-western states of Nigeria, were sampled for this study. Out of these students, 695 students were found to be abused and their responses formed the data that were analysed for this study. A self-constructed questionnaire titled 'Child Abuse Questionnaire' (CAQ) was administered on the students after validation. The instrument has construct validity co-efficient of 0.76 and a reliability co-efficient of 0.83. The statistical technique that was used to analyse the data collected was Pearson Product Moment Correlation. The result showed that there was a significant relationship between family interaction and child abuse among these secondary school students. Based on this finding, it was recommended, among others, that parents should always relate to their children with love and affection; and should desist from administering corporal punishment on their children in anger. It

was recommended that parents should provide the needs of their children and that government should embark on enlightenment campaign to educate parents on their duties and responsibilities towards their children.

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**Keywords:** Child abuse, neglect, maltreatment, psychological damage

## **1.Introduction**

Child abuse is any form of physical, psychological, social, emotional or sexual maltreatment of a child whereby the survival, self-esteem, growth and development of the child are endangered. Child abuse includes physical abuse, child neglect and sexual abuse. Physical abuse is defined as bodily injury to a child resulting in skin bruising, bleeding, burns, fracture of any bone, soft tissue swelling, or death, when the injury is not otherwise justifiably explained. A neglected child is one without proper prenatal care, and/or who lacks subsistence, education, medical or other care necessary for the child's well being due to the conduct or omission of the parents, guardian or other custodian. Sexual abuse includes rape, molestation, incest, prostitution or pornographic activities or other similar form of sexual exploitation harming or threatening to a child (Children's Trust Fund of Oregon, 2009).

Child abuse appears to occur majorly in the family. Ogunseye (2010) reported the case of mother who beat her daughter to death because she was slow in learning ABC. She also reported the case of a father who beat his daughter to death for defecating in their one-room apartment. Ogunseye interviewed a psychiatrist concerning this case. The reaction was that first, we need to find out if the parents of these children are normal. Unfortunately, not all parents are wise disciplinarians. Fatigue and stress often cause parents to behave in ways that may harm their children. Many Nigerian parents defend physical punishment, usually because that is how their own parents dealt with them. The idea seems to be, "I didn't turn out so bad, so what was good enough for me will be good enough for my children". The problem however, is that physical punishment is usually delivered in anger and exasperation. When parents' emotions run high, they can easily lose control. Maltreatment syndrome is described as the end result of three potentiating factors: the abuse-prone personality of parents; characteristics of the child that make him vulnerable for scapegoating; and current environmental stress.

Inexperienced parents may have unrealistic notions about how children should behave in general and about what is appropriate behavior for the age of the child. Often one child in a family becomes the target of parental displeasure. These children may be at high risk because they are difficult, handicapped or unwanted. Some people seem predisposed to react to any stress with violence, and when the stress is caused by a child, the stage is set for abuse.

Sexual abuse of children by one of the parents or step-parents also frequently occurs in the home. Most of such cases are probably never reported, and statistics, for that reason, are likely to be low. One reason that such acts are not reported is that the children are too young to know exactly what is happening to them. If they are aware of what is happening, children sometimes are afraid of retaliation or punishment if they tell. Others may feel guilty.

Child neglect is another form of maltreatment of children. While child abuse is an overt act of violence to a child, neglect is failure to take care of a child's physical and emotional needs. Neglect is often more difficult to recognize than other types of child abuse. Neglect can only be seen by outsiders when children are hungry, not properly dressed, left unattended under risky circumstance or not given proper medical care. All these features of child abuse negate the United Nations convention and O.A.U charter on Rights of the child. The basic principles of children's right according to the U.N in 1989, among others are that a child has the right to live and be allowed to survive and develop and that a child is entitled to adequate rest, recreation (leisure and play) according to his age and culture. Also, every child must be protected from indecent and inhuman treatment through sexual exploration, drug abuse, child labour, torture, maltreatment and neglect.

Bertozzi, Levine, Martinez and Gertler (2004) reported that the death of a parent is one of the most severe traumas that a child can suffer which could lead to child abuse. They found that the loss of a parent causes emotional distress and deprives the orphaned child of love, nurturing, values and information. Habitual verbal harassment of a child by disparagement, criticism, threat and ridicule could be referred to as emotional and psychological abuse. This includes threats, name calling, belittling and shaming (National Association of Counsels for Children, 2007). A parent's childhood history and experience with his/her own family of origin, his peers, friends and social environment dictate his relationship and interaction with his/her children. Mothers who experience unresolved anger and distress and had a troubled relations

with their parents; tend to have insecure relationship with their children or spouse. Definitely, this will lead to violence between partners and violence between parents and children.

## **2.Statement of the problem**

There is media campaign against the prevalent exposure of children to this social problem called child abuse. In the society, one can observe children engaged in child labour when they should be in school laying a strong foundation for their future. Cases of rape and child prostitution abound in the society. Due to the economic situation in the country, some parents are neglecting their children to engage in struggle for survival. Parents beat their children to death with the slightest provocation. Family time, when family come together to interact affectionately and share their experience, is no longer a common feature of many homes. Bryant (2010), observed that family time is not only a descriptive term that offers a perspective on some aspect of family togetherness; it is a prescriptive term that directs families to act in certain ways.

In schools, many students are affected with anxiety, depression, passive or withdrawal behavior; some engaged in disruptive, inappropriate acts or delinquent behavior. Some do not have necessary materials needed in the school. All these types of negative behaviors usually affect students' academic performance (Ale, 2007).

The psychological damage to children who are victims of abuse is of much concern as the physical danger. Likely outcomes to the children have been shown to be negative self-image, difficulty in relating to others, failure to trust others, and poor ability to handle their own aggressive impulses. These abused children are likely to repeat the pattern when they become parents. Consequently, crucial research hypotheses were raised.

## **3.Hypotheses**

Specifically, the following hypotheses were tested.

1. There is no significant relationship between family interaction and child abuse among public secondary school students in South west Nigeria.
2. There is no significant relationship between death of parents and child abuse among public secondary school student sin South west Nigeria.

#### **4.Methodology**

The researchers used descriptive research design of exploratory type. The plan of study involved the use of questionnaire to collect data in order to test the hypotheses raised in the study. The target population for this study was made up of public secondary school students in south west Nigeria, who were within the age range of 9 – 18 years. Multistage random sampling was used in drawing out the sample. Since the study is on south west Nigeria as a whole, the researchers recognized the states, local government areas and schools. The researchers therefore selected the sample in stages.

Out of the six states in the south west Nigeria, three were randomly chosen. Also, out of the local government areas in each of the three states, three were selected by simple random sampling technique. In each local government area, four secondary schools were selected by simple random sampling. Copies of questionnaire were given out to 1440 students in 36 schools. Exploratory method was then used. Out of the questionnaire, the researchers brought out those of abuse students; that is, those who scored 200 and above out of the 300 score obtainable from the questionnaire. The respondents that scored 200 and above were 695 in number. The questionnaire were used in data analysis.

A self-designed questionnaire called Child Abuse Questionnaire (CAQ) was used for this study. The instrument consisted of three parts. Part A was designed to collect information on background characteristics of respondents including educational status of parents/guardians. Part B consisted of 27 items which elicited student's responses on child labour; sexual abuse, physical abuse and child neglect; while part C consisted of 33 items which brought out some psychosocial factors including family interaction and death of parents.

The methods used in validating the instrument were face, content and construct validities. For face validation, the experts determined at face level the appropriateness of the instrument in measuring what was studied, to ascertain if the instrument elicits the intended responses on child abuse and the psychosocial factors.

Expert judgments were used in determining the content validity. The experts checked the extent to which the items were representative of the content, practices and factors specified by the theoretical concept being measured. The scores of the test administration of 30 abused secondary students were correlated with that of Child Abuse and Neglect Test (CANT) (2008) using Pearson Product Moment Correlation. A correlation coefficient of 0.76 was obtained. This

indicated that the research instrument used (CAQ) clearly measures the same construct with CANT.

A reliability test was carried out on 20 abused secondary school students using Pearson Product Moment Correlation. A reliability coefficient of 0.83 was obtained. On the basis of these psychometric properties, the instrument was found to be suitable for data collection.

Copies of the questionnaire were distributed by the researchers and the school counsellors in the schools to a sample of 1440 students in 36 schools. Researchers' presence during administration enhanced better understanding of the items in the instrument. Copies of the questionnaire were collected back immediately after completion. The data generated were subjected to Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis. The hypothesis was tested at 0.05 level of significance.

## 5. Testing the Hypotheses

### Hypothesis One

Ho: There is no significant relationship between family interaction and child abuse among public secondary school students in south west Nigeria.

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

Table 1:

**Pearson Product Moment Correlation summary on family interaction and child abuse**

Variable	N	X	SD	Real	rtable
Family Interaction	695	38.91	8.06	0.517	0.195
Child Abuse	695	90.25	12.42		

$P < 0.05$

Table 1 shows that the mean total score of family interaction is 38.91 with standard deviation of 8.06 while the mean total score of child abuse is 90.25 with standard deviation of 12.42. Since r-calculated (0.517) is greater than r-table (0.195), the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that there is a significant relationship between family interaction and child abuse.

### Hypothesis Two

Ho: There is no significant relationship between death of parents and child abuse among public secondary school students in South west Nigeria.

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

Table 2

**Pearson Product Moment Correlation summary of death of parents and child abuse**

Variable	N	X	SD	Real	rtable
Death of Parents	695	9.00	2.59	0.373	0.195
Child Abuse	695	90.25	12.42		

$P < 0.05$

Table 2 shows that the mean total score of death of parents is 9.00 with standard deviation of 2.59 while the mean total score of child abuse is 90.25 with standard deviation of 12.42. The r-calculated is 0.373 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 death of parents and child abuse.

The result of hypothesis one which shows that there is a significant relationship between family interaction and child abuse is not surprising. The probable explanation for this result is that in a home where members interact cooperatively and where there is warm and cordial relationship in the family; love and attention would be given to every child. Hence, no child in such home would feel neglected. Due to the love that binds all the family members together, the child would not be abused physically or emotionally. This finding is in line with Wikipedia (2010) which says in a family, which is not a dysfunctional one, there is not likely to be child abuse. In the same vein, Erupting Mind (2010) also says that unconditional love in a family will not lead to child abuse but to high level of internally generated self acceptance, self esteem and confidence.

The result of hypothesis two shows that there is a significant relationship between death of parents and child abuse. The logical explanation for this result is that when a parent dies, the other parent will now have to carry responsibilities of two people alone; and this may lead to inability to provide for the physical and emotional needs of the child. In a situation where the child lives with step-parent or guardian, he/she may be subjected to maltreatment and neglect because the love and attention in such homes may be directed at the biological children of the step-parent or guardian. This finding is in line with the report of Bertozi et al (2004) which says that the death of a parent can deprive a child of many basic necessities and can lead to child abuse.

## **6.Conclusion**

Evidence from this study has led the researchers to conclude that many secondary school students in South west Nigeria experience child abuse and two of the major causes of child abuse are lack of warmth and adequate family interaction on one hand and death of parents on the other hand.

## **7.Recommendation**

1. Parents should always relate to their children with love and affection and provide for their needs.
2. Children should be truthful, obedient and generally put up good behavior in the home, so as not to provoke their parents to anger.
3. Parents should desist from administering corporal punishment on their children in anger. They should allow their temper to cool before they discipline their children.
4. Parents who brutally harm their children in the name of correction should be convicted of crime.
5. Government should embark on enlightenment campaign to educate parents and let them know their duties and responsibility towards their children.
6. All existing policies from the International Convention on the Child should be implemented by the Federal Government, the State Government and the Local Government.
7. Serious consideration should be given to the establishment of an autonomous National Commission for the Child, to serve as a focus of national concern in matters affecting the child; assisting to design and monitor the implementation of relevant policies and as an organ of advocacy for protecting interests of the child.
8. Step-parents and guardians should show more love to their step-children and wards.



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