

# Child Abuse, Its Impact And Social Problem

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## Abstract

*In recent years, the number of children that have suffered abuse has increased worldwide. The tender years of early childhood offer great promise and challenge. All children are shaped by their early life experiences. Unfortunately, some children experience child abuse. The common types of child abuse experienced by these children are physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, child neglect and emotional neglect. To be clear, a focus on early childhood is not a panacea to all social ills. Nonetheless, it is the period when children are most dependent on their caretakers and when profound physiological changes which are the foundation of a child's attitudes and habits are formed. It is on this premise that this paper discusses the different types of child abuse, factors that increase a child's vulnerability to abuse, the impact of child abuse on cognitive development, the impact of child abuse on attachment and resiliency's influence on the impact of child abuse. This paper also discusses the consequences of child abuse and neglect and recommendations on what can be done to prevent child abuse and neglect are also given.*

**Keywords:** *Child, abuse, neglect, consequences, prevention.*

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the number of children that have suffered abuse has increased worldwide. Research has established that child abuse is prevalent in Nigeria. According to Reference [1], the maturational difficulties, ignorance, helplessness, insecurity, illiteracy, frustration and arental poverty of children in the country make them highly vulnerable to abuse by exploitative and oppressive adults who are ever eager to take advantage of the weakness and insecurity of

children. The tender years of early childhood offer great promise and challenge. All children are shaped by their early life experiences. Children grow optimally in safe homes and communities with nurturing, dependable and attentive caregivers [14]. Children who experience enriching environment view the world as a safe, exciting place to learn and explore. Unfortunately, some children experience child abuse. Child abuse is used to represent all forms of child maltreatment. At a minimum, child abuse is defined as an act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which presents an imminent risk of serious harm or results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation [23].

Reference [15] provides the following elaboration for clarification:

**Physical Abuse:** The infliction of physical injury as a result of punching, kicking, biting, burning shaking or otherwise harming a child. The parent or caretaker may not have intended to hurt the child; rather the injury may have resulted from over-discipline or physical punishment.

**Child Neglect:** Failure to provide for the child's basic needs. Neglect can be physical, educational, or emotional. Physical neglect includes refusal of or delay in seeking health care, abandonment, expulsion from the home or refusal to allow a runaway to return home, and inadequate supervision. Educational neglect include the allowance of chronic truancy, failure to enroll a child of mandatory school age in school, failure to attend to a special education need.

**Emotional Neglect:** This includes such actions as marked inattention to the child's needs for affection, refusal of or failure to provide needed psychological care, spouse abuse in the child's presence, and permission of drug or alcohol use by the child. The assessment of child neglect requires consideration of societal standards of care. Failure to provide the necessities of life may be related to poverty.

**Sexual Abuse:** This includes fondling of a child's genitals, intercourse, rape, sodomy, exhibitionism, commercial exploitation through prostitution or the production of pornographic materials.

**Emotional Abuse:** Acts or omissions by the parents or other caregivers that have caused or could cause serious behavioural, cognitive and emotional disorders. Greater attention has been paid to another form of emotional neglect, that is, the witnessing of domestic violence. Reference [16] details three of the risks faced by children living in domestically violent homes: the risk of observing traumatic events, of being abused themselves, and of being neglected.

When one delves more deeply into the issue of child abuse, the complexities of etiology and definitions can cloud the issue. Virtually all communities have children subjected to severe physical punishment or receiving care which is below the community's standards [24]. Legal definitions vary and community standards differ. More importantly, beyond these debates and discussions are children – children who are growing up in nurturing or harmful environments. If the function of the family is to nurture one another, then family violence is the antithesis of this. Family violence, of which child abuse is just one form, is common to all societies and ranges from spanking to homicide [10], [13].

To be clear, a focus on early childhood is not a panacea to all social ills. Nonetheless, it is the period when children are most dependent on their caretakers and when profound physiological changes which are the foundation of a child's attitudes and habits are formed [3], [7]. This focus on the tender years has gained attention in other arenas such as juvenile crime. More and more evidence seems to suggest that successful efforts to curb violent behaviour should begin early in life [3]. Reference [7] state that poor parenting itself is the single factor most likely to respond to a preventive strategy because it is easily identified early in a child's life and very likely that its association with subsequent criminality is a causative one.

Child abuse continues to be a substantial problem. According to Reference [25], confirmed child fatalities from child abuse have increased in both number and rate over the years. It is generally agreed that child abuse and neglect remains underreported [2], [17], [24]. On the risk factors for child abuse, Reference [28] states that research has linked certain characteristics of the child and caregiver, as well as features of the family environment to child abuse and neglect.

Vulnerability to child abuse – whether physical, sexual or through neglect – depends in part on the child's age and sex. Young children are most at risk of physical abuse whereas the highest rates of sexual abuse are found among children who have reached puberty or

adolescence. In most places, boys are the victims of beatings and physical punishment more often than girls, while girls are at higher risk of infanticide, sexual abuse, forced prostitution, and educational and nutritional neglect. Globally, more than 130 million children between the ages of 6 and 11 years are not in school, 60% of whom are girls [28]. Other factors that increase a child vulnerability to abuse include being raised by very young parents, household overcrowding, a lack of income to meet the family's needs and the presence of other violent relationships in the home. It is worthy of note that the significance of child abuse is derived not only from its prevalence but also its impact.

### **The Impact of Child Abuse**

Beyond the impact of lost or damaged young lives, there are extensive costs from child abuse in both direct and indirect expenses. Direct costs are the money used in the child welfare system as well as the systems responding to abused and neglected children and their families including law enforcement, justice and health [21]. Even more to calculate are the indirect costs reflecting the long-term economic consequences of child abuse such as special education, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, welfare use, homelessness, juvenile delinquency and adult criminality. The costs of child abuse are tremendous.

### **The impact of child abuse on cognitive development.**

More recently, the consequences of child abuse and neglect have been discovered in the field of neurology. Attention has been focused on the impact of child abuse on cognitive development. Technical advances allow scientists to now study children's brain development at the cellular level. This has resulted in the startling and unsettling findings that child abuse not only results in emotional problems, but also in significantly altered physiology [11], [20], [9], [6], [5]. There remains a tremendous heterogeneity of impact from childhood violence, but it is becoming apparent that experience influences cognitive development [18]. Two aspects of brain development are especially relevant: the role of experience and sequential development.

At birth, the child's brain is the least developed organ of the human body. Initially, babies form many more connections between neurons in the brain than they will ever use or be able to maintain [22]. The brain later eliminates those that are rarely used in order to improve the speed with which the brain works, connections not used are slowly pruned away and those that are used are strengthened [22]. This 'use it or lose it' phenomenon allows our brain to function more efficiently and relates to Reference [19] notion of "windows of opportunities".

### **The impact of child abuse on attachment**

Neurophysiology is intimately connected to behaviour and attachment [11]. Thus, a variety of psychological disorders originate in early childhood trauma and attachment disturbances [26], [4]. Aggression, self-destructive behaviours, eating disorders and substance abuse can be understood as attempts at self-regulation [26], [4]. Loss of ability to regulate the intensity of feelings and impulses is possibly the most far-reaching effect of trauma and neglect [26].

Emotional regulation begins with the response of the parent to the child's behavior. The relationship between a child and primary caregiver provides the critical foundation in the development of a child and their development of close relationships and empathy. Caregivers are toys for the brain [22]. The experiences with caregivers help the wiring in the brain for attachment to others. Hence, the brain development appears to be intricately connected to attachment [20]. While attachments continue to be formed in later childhood and into adulthood, the fundamental patterns for these connections are shaped in the first two years of life [9]. The recent advances in brain research have revealed the neurobiology underlying attachment. Attachment is not a new concept but now the connection and complex interplay of nature and nurture are better understood and can be concretely observed. Attachment has been studied since the late nineteenth century [27]. Broadly defined, attachment is the lasting psychological connectedness between human beings [4].

### **Resiliency's influence on the impact of child abuse**

The capacity to form relationships, regulate emotions, and learn is formed in the early years of childhood. Change is always possible but becomes more difficult as the brain ages. Fortunately, children and adults, including their brains, are pliable. This differs from the often-used term of resiliency. Resiliency is an interesting concept but comes with difficulties as applied to abused children. Children are not resilient children are malleable [18]. Despite their less obvious expressions of anxiety and compliance the children who have experienced trauma without becoming aggressive may still be emotionally troubled [12]. Some children are more sensitive to social toxins in their environment and show marked responses rather quickly. Given the variability of children, their experiences and the impact upon them from child abuse, there is indication that some of these children who experience child abuse suffer greater life-long trauma more than the others [8].

### **The consequences of Child Abuse and Neglect.**

Apart from physical injuries such as bruises and welts, burns and scalds, lacerations and fractures, child abuse

is associated with a number of other consequences including:

1. Alcohol and drug abuse
2. Cognitive impairment and developmental delays
3. Delinquent, violent and other risk-taking behaviours
4. Eating and sleep disorders
5. Poor school performance
6. Poor relationships
7. Reproductive health problems
8. Post-traumatic stress disorders
9. Depression and anxiety
10. Suicidal behavior or self-harm

### **Recommendations on What can be Done to Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect**

Some of the effective responses for combating child abuse and neglect focus on child-rearing, parent-child relationships and the family environment. These include training in parenting – providing parents with information about child development as well as attachment and bonding, and teaching them to use consistent child-rearing methods and how to manage family conflict.

Much can also be done at the governmental level to prevent child abuse and neglect. These include measures to tackle poverty, improve educational and employment opportunities, and increase the availability and quality of child care. These measures have the potential to offset social and economic inequalities and improve child outcomes.

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