

**CHILD ABUSE AND SOCIO-EMOTIONAL BEHAVIOUR OF SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN IN
PORT HARCOURT, RIVERS STATE**

Theresa Ibiwari Japhet
tessyforlife2000@yahoo.com

Abstract

This research focused and examines child abuse and school aged children's socio-emotional behaviours in Port Harcourt in Rivers State. This work is a correlational research design which sampled 400 children using a multi-stage sampling method. The study administered structured questionnaires to assess physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, and socio-emotional behaviours. The Pearson correlation technique was used to test and validate the three hypotheses. The findings show a moderate positive correlation between physical abuse and socio emotional behaviours. There was a strong positive correlation between emotional abuse and socio emotional behaviours. There was a positive correlation between neglect and socio-emotional behaviours. The study showed Port Harcourt school-age children go through abuse a lot in different forms which abuse is the greatest. Based on these findings, positive discipline by parents, enhancement of counselling in schools, and counselling in child-welfare resources, more supervision by child welfare and more active intervention.

Keywords: child abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse, neglect, socio-emotional behaviour

Introduction

Everywhere in the world, the various manifestations of child maltreatment, such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect, present a serious issue in terms of public health and safety, as well as a violation of the rights of children. The World Health Organization (2024) describes child maltreatment as the emotional and physical abuse, sexual neglect, exploitation, and emotional/physical neglect that results in actual damage or potential damage to a child's health, health, survival, or dignity and well-being. Studies show that abuse and/or violence of any sort that occurs during childhood is prevalent in nearly every part of the world and results in almost universal, longitudinal, and widespread damage to the victims in such damage to the victims in the cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral realms (World Health Organization, 2024; UNICEF, 2020).

Recent large-scale systematic reviews in Nigeria highlight continued violence against children, encompassing sexual abuse, other forms of violence, and overall neglect of this issue. National and local levels of data collection confirm the high prevalence of physical and sexual violence and psychological abuse of children and adolescents in Nigeria. Furthermore, children, even those who suffer abuse, do not access help within the formal systems. Ifayomi, a service provider with the United Nations, details the Port Harcourt and Rivers State. These studies confirm the abuse and the neglect of street children and the out-of-home youths. These studies justify the socio-economic and household stressors. Port Harcourt, a major urban center, the socio-economic complex, and household stressors make this area very Child Abuse neglect. There is an urgent need to investigate the effects of abuse on children's functioning and functioning.

Children aged approximately 6 to 12 are in a phase of development in which they consolidate certain socio-emotional abilities: emotion regulation, relations with other children, prosocial actions, self-esteem, and adjusting to school which are all important predictors of mental health and social outcomes in the future. During the formative years of maltreated children, measurable deficits in

socio-emotional functioning become evident, such as increased aggression and other externalizing behaviors, greater social withdrawal, difficulties in peer relations, a negative self-concept, and recognition and regulation of emotions (Norman et al., 2012; Young, 2014). Research and meta-analytic studies have identified various sub-types of maltreatment (physical, emotional, sexual, neglect) and showed it is a greater risk factor for a range of internalizing disorders (anxiety, depression), externalizing disorders (conduct disorders, and aggression), and for a lack of social competence (Norman et al., 2012; Kurtz, 1993).

The neurodevelopmental systems underlying socio-emotional functioning are affected by the toxic or chronic stress due to abuse. neurobiological and ecobiodevelopmental models explain the ways prolonged activation of the stress response, in cases where buffering adult relationships are absent, alters important neural circuitry and systems, especially the hippocampus, prefrontal cortex, and amygdala, as well as the body's stress response. This has far-reaching effects on the ability to recognize emotions, inhibitory control, the processing of rewards, and social processing (Shonkoff et al., 2012; Harvard Center on the Developing Child, 2015). These biological disruptions, combined with impaired attachment relationships and socio-environmental instability, result in the creation of complex cycles of socio-emotional disturbance in a child; these complexities manifest in the child's later years as classroom behaviour problems, difficulties with peers, problems with learning, and mental health challenges (Shonkoff et al., 2012; Norman et al., 2012).

The socio-cultural context also influences both prevalence and outcome. In many Nigerian communities, cultural norms surrounding corporal punishment, low awareness of child protection rights, and poverty, alongside limited access to child-focused mental health services, increase the vulnerability of children and decrease the likelihood of early detection and intervention of socio-emotional issues (UNICEF, 2022; Ifayomi, 2024). Urban centres like Port Harcourt also present additional risk factors such as family dissolution due to economic hardship, exposure to violence in the community, and higher numbers of street-connected children, all of which increase the risk of neglect and complicate the socio-emotional healing process (Gabriel-Job & Ofurum, 2024; Chioma, 2024).

Regardless of the wide range of documented information, it seems to me there are profound and pertinent gaps that relate to Port Harcourt. First, a large proportion of the Nigerian literature spends a considerable amount of time and energy detailing the prevalence and various forms of abuse and/or focusing their studies on the adolescent and undergraduate populations. Within Rivers State and specifically, there are even fewer studies that have systematically reviewed and chronicled the socio-emotional outcomes of maltreatment of children of primary school age (Ifayomi, 2024; Gabriel-Job & Ofurum, 2024). Second, there is a category of studies that does explore socio-emotional functioning, but their studies use a variety of measures that are quite different from one another and/or are cross sectional and clinic-based, which makes the findings to have limited relevance to school populations. Third, there is a dearth of locally actionable data that link subtype of abuse and socio-emotional domains, which have been neglected, such as; peer relations, emotional regulation, prosocial behaviour, withdrawal and/or aggression, in combination with the various household and community risk factors. The overall combination of these factors create a situation and/or a set of circumstances whereby it becomes even more challenging for educators, health workers and policy makers in Rivers State to create and implement focused prevention, school-based screening and/or intervention programs.

Thus, focusing on the link between child abuse and socio-emotional behaviour in school-aged children in Port Harcourt is well warranted. Localised research can advance the understanding of

the (a) correlation of the different forms of maltreatment and particular socio-emotional variables in children of school age, (b) elucidation of the mediating or moderating contextual elements (family support, caregiver education, poverty, community violence), (c) identification of resource documentation to assist in school-based early intervention and referral. These would inform child-protection within the education system in Rivers State and other urban centres in Nigeria and mitigate the consequences of mal-adaptive coping and the psychosocial and educational effects of abuse in children (Norman et al., 2012; World Health Organization, 2024).

Problem Statement

The continuous impact of different types of child abuse (physical, emotional, sexual and neglect) on children's social and emotional development within a Port Harcourt context is insufficiently documented and explained. Port Harcourt is a city situated within Nigeria, a country that is yet to fully come to terms with and address the consequences of child abuse. Port Harcourt is also a city that has multiple reports of (possibly) child abuse related violence, with the only investigations being academic and focusing on the adolescent cohort, resulting in a troubling knowledge gap regarding school-age children and the maltreatment of children. Teachers of basic schools in Port Harcourt have children in their classrooms displaying aggression, emotional dysregulation, withdrawal and poor social relations, yet their concerns about the unique child abuse and/or neglect suffered by children within Port Harcourt schools remain unsubstantiated. The absence of such context driven unidirectional and/or correlated evidence is a threat to effective school child abuse and neglect case absence. Strong evidence is imperative to bring about a strong case for evidence driven school child abuse and neglect programmes and psychosocial support in Port Harcourt. For a case to be built on strong evidence, Port Harcourt requires research on the relationship between child abuse and the socio-emotional behaviour in children of school-age.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study is to examine the relationship between child abuse and socio-emotional behaviour of school-age children in Port Harcourt, Rivers State.

The study sought to:

1. determine the relationship between physical abuse and the socio-emotional behaviour of school-age children in Port Harcourt.
2. examine the relationship between emotional abuse and the socio-emotional behaviour of school-age children in Port Harcourt.
3. assess the relationship between neglect and the socio-emotional behaviour of school-age children in Port Harcourt.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between physical abuse and the socio-emotional behaviour of school-age children in Port Harcourt?
2. What is the relationship between emotional abuse and the socio-emotional behaviour of school-age children in Port Harcourt?
3. What is the relationship between neglect and the socio-emotional behaviour of school-age children in Port Harcourt?

Hypotheses

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between physical abuse and the socio-emotional behaviour of school-age children in Port Harcourt.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between emotional abuse and the socio-emotional behaviour of school-age children in Port Harcourt.

Ho3: There is no significant relationship between neglect and the socio-emotional behaviour of school-age children in Port Harcourt.

Literature review

1. Child abuse: concept and overview

Child abuse, or child maltreatment, encompasses physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, psychological abuse, as well as neglect. This maltreatment occurs in a context in which there are relationships of responsibility or trust, and results in harm to the child's health, development, or violation of the child's human dignity (World Health Organization, 2024). Worldwide, there are estimates of the exposure to any maltreatment in childhood that significantly increases the likelihood of such individuals experiencing several potentially negative mental health outcomes, social dysfunction, and educational challenges throughout their lives (Norman et al., 2012). On a country level, Nigeria and its recent local studies country office reports, show to us the still very high levels of violence against children, the under-reporting and child-protective legal system deficiencies, the mental health of the children who suffer violence, and the lack of mental health resources, which tend to raise the public health burden of the abusive and neglect maltreatment of children and poor outcomes in urban Port Harcourt (UNICEF, 2022; Gabriel-Job & Ofurum, 2024).

2. Physical abuse

Willfully causing bodily injury or damage, or causing bodily injury or damage which one could reasonably foresee could occur, due to purposeful application of an aggressor's force is considered to be physical abuse (e.g., hitting, beating, shaking, or burning). The World Health Organization distinguishes physical abuse from culturally justified abuse of children omissions due to harm present, along with the punishment's social domination context and purposive intent (2024).

Abused children exhibit more aggression, other conduct problems, difficulties with emotion control, and poorer social skills (Norman et al., 2012). A major body of work postulates abuse's effects constructively, with physical abuse causing internalizing and externalizing psychopathology along with diminishing educational and social outcomes along with the perpetuation of social abuse (Norman et al., 2012). The handling of abuse reliant on social context, children of abuse, classroom, and peer abuse, aggressive, addictive, and threat-focused behaviors, social fleeing, and social hyper stir activity abuse to the school environment through uninhibited aggression, to unwittingly dominate upset social cases through uninhibited aggression to the environment, for example, the violent hypervigilance rather than rc social reactivity, classroom peer flight, or aggression to dominate is the root of social shape dysfunction (e.g., HPA axis). The violent hypervigilance rather than reactive social styles, flight to dominate social shape dysfunction largely abetted explain the functional breakdown of classroom abuse and aggression.

3. Emotional abuse

Chronic criticism, ignoring, humiliation, threats, and rejection are behaviors that impede in some way on a child's emotional well-being and include emotional, psychological, and verbal abuse. It seems to trigger the deepest consequences in development. However, of all forms of child abuse, emotional abuse is the most harrowing and arguably the most worst avoided. It is absolutely the most covert and emotionally bankrupt. And yet, the response is equally under - (WHO, 2024).

More and more emotional abuse is being more and more emotionally abuse research is being more and more emotionally abuseable, which predictions, predictions, generating the use of unique pathways. Children chronic emotional abuse, Children chronic verbal emotional regulation chronic

verbal emotional regulation advance so not, so not, not risk not risk exposed to chronic emotional abuse to risk emotional abuse.

Psychological maltreatment of children include "latent Vulnerability" to avoid hostile situations. They tend to have a higher rate of withdrawal, more pervasive low self-esteem, and a greater incidence of depressive and mood disorders social response.

4. Neglect

The term 'neglect' refers to instances where a caregiver does not satisfy a child's basic needs: physical, educational, psychological, and/or medical, and such neglect is done intentionally rather than being done by accident and is seen to be done chronically (WHO, 2024).

It has been shown neglect is related to a weaker attachment system, social development deficits, and self-regulation struggles. Although there is systematic and recent empirical work, the overwhelming consensus in recent studies on silent victims' is that there is a neglect-absence of in-depth understanding of self and emotion regulation-delay emotional understanding and social interaction deficits coupled with a concerning rise in problem behaviors (internally and externally) relative to peers. Neglect weakens the emotional competency building process by lack of emotional caregiving and scaffolding closure during crucial development phases and to emotional neglect. Trust, empathy, and classroom engagement become chronic deficits. An overwhelming consensus in recent studies and in-depth studies on neglect is the direct correlation of neglect and the presence of behavioral deficits and socio-emotional development during the child's school years.

5. Socio-emotional behaviour:

5.1. Emotion regulation

Emotion regulation is the ability to control the emotions a person feels and the goals people wish to accomplish. For example, people may want to control emotions related to anger and wish to calm down. Regulation of emotions helps school-age children support learning as well as develop relationships with their peers and obtain positive behavioral responses in the classroom.

Child maltreatment, particularly the emotional abuse and neglect of children, is extremely connected to the areas of automatic emotion regulation and the negative to little regulation of adaptive strategies. These negative effects help calm the connections between maltreatment and psychopathology. For example, a child may be maltreated and control their emotions poorly, resulting in greater risk for the child to have internal and external symptoms. The regulation of these emotions must be the focus of the intervention and socio-emotional outcomes of the maltreatment.

5.2. Peer relations

Friendships and being accepted by peers are integral components of child peer relations. The degree to which a child is accepted or rejected Social learning and emotional growth are enhanced when children have peer relations. Healthy peer relations form the basis of developmental learning.

Children with a history of maltreatment are at a greater risk of enduring peer abuse, being socially rejected, and having fewer friendships. Research indicates that maltreatment predicts peer relationship difficulties which are mediating variables for academic underachievement and behavior problems. Socio-emotional challenges are reflected in and worsened by poor peer relationships which have a cumulative negative effect across the developmental spectrum.

5.3. Prosocial behaviour

Prosocial behaviors are voluntary actions that are meant to help others, like sharing, helping, or cooperating. Prosocial behavior is a significant aspect of social competence demonstrated in school.

The relationships between maltreatment and impaired prosocial behaviors are complicated. Some maltreated children show less prosocial behavior as a result of a lack of empathy and/or trust. Other children may show prosocial behavior and empathy, but only with specific people. Studies show that these behaviors are motivated by emotional regulation and sympathy. Maltreatment has been shown to negatively impact these behaviors and is associated with lower prosocial actions.

5.4. Aggression / externalizing behaviour

When it comes to aggression tendencies and externalizing conducts there are things like rule breaking, being physically, and verbally aggressive, or showing opposition to authority, and these are all major disruptions to social and school function.

Some indicators that children will have aggressive issues and problem with conduct include physical abuse or some forms of neglect. Maltreated children frequently demonstrate and have a higher level of externalizing behaviours because of neurobiological threat sensitivity, abuse of psychosocial coercive regulation modeling, and deficient skills of emotional and behavioral control. A few of these problems include high chances of social rejection and disruptions in school defined as behavioral problems.

5.5. Withdrawal / internalizing behaviour

Getting internalizing or withdrawing behaviors might include things like anxiety issues, symptoms of depression, or even the way a person might complain about the body. When it comes to one's involvement at school, it might be about being less visible or partially desparticipating. When it comes to emotional abuse or neglect of a person, there are certain behaviors/ symptoms that are highly associated with depression, anxiety issues, or with emotional withdrawal. When a maltreated child grows up, there might be some depressed social or avoidant behaviors which might include emotional withdrawal, but that also permanently hinders their access to potential social peer or supportive relationships that are highly protective.

Methodology

In attempting to ascertain the connections that may or may not be formed between different kinds of child abuse and the socio-emotional behaviors of school-aged children in Port Harcourt, the study was carried out using the correlational survey strategy. The focus was on primary school children between six and twelve years old (the school age children). Given that the city is the capital of the state and urban center, the school-age children population was considerable. According to government data from 1999, the state has over 2805 government primary schools, a good number of which are in Port Harcourt. Based on the population of the metropolitan region of Port Harcourt in 2021 (3,171,076) and using data from other similar studies, estimated the population of eligible students in primary schools to be about 45,000 to 60,000. This is across different primary school grades and age groups from six to twelve years old (Basic 1 to Basic 6). According to estimates, about 600 students were sampled in other studies which used a correlational design (large cross-sectional design).

A total of 400 pupils were selected from the population for the study. A multistage sampling procedure was applied whereby the public primary schools in the metropolitan area of Port Harcourt were first stratified by sub-region (e.g. urban centre vs. peri-urban). Within each of the strata, 10 schools were selected randomly. After this, pupils from selected schools were sampled until the 400 target was reached. Two classes each from the selected schools (one lower primary and one upper primary) were randomly selected. Then simple random sampling was done from pupils of each of the selected classes. Then socio-emotional behaviour ratings were done by 40 class teachers (one per sampled class) for the pupils and this provided the teacher report data. The sample was

statistically powered (≥ 0.80) at the conventional $\alpha = 0.05$ and was adequate enough for detecting moderate effect sizes ($r \approx 0.20-0.30$).

In the procedure, the principal instrument used was the "Child Abuse and Socio-Emotional Behaviour Questionnaire (CASEBQ)." The instrument includes two sections: the child-report section evaluates three forms of maltreatment (i.e., physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect) and utilizes a 4-point Likert scale (i.e., "Never," "Sometimes," "Often," and "Always"); and the teacher-report section assesses students' socio-emotional behavior, covering the following subdomains: (i) emotion regulation, (ii) peer relations, (iii) prosocial behavior, (iv) externalizing behavior (i.e., aggression), and (v) internalizing/withdrawal behavior, similarly rated on a 4-point scale ("Not True," "Somewhat True," "True," and "Very True"). The construction of the questionnaire began as a child-report section and teacher-report section and was analyzed by 3 specialists (two Educational Psychologists and one Measurement, and Evaluation expert), who estimated the items regarding clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the items with their cultural feedback, which was used to finalize the tool. Prior to the main study, 30 students and 5 teachers from a primary school excluded from the sample frame were used for a pilot test. The pilot data was analyzed using Cronbach's alpha and the results showed that all the subscales of abuse and socio-emotional scales had an internal consistency of ≥ 0.78 and approximately 0.85, respectively, indicating the tool was reliable for the primary data collection.

After obtaining ethical approval from the relevant educational authorities and informed consent from the guardians and parents, trained research assistants distributed the pupil version of the questionnaires to the classrooms and offered assistance (in a manner that maintained confidentiality) and collected the filled-out questionnaires. The teachers then filled out their evaluations individually for the sampled students. For analysis purposes, all data was inputted into the SPSS version 25 software program.

Mean scores and standard deviations were calculated and the distribution for each of the various types of abuse (socio-emotional behaviour scores) were examined. M. Pearson's Product-moment correlation coefficient was utilized to assess the association of physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect on the total socio-emotional behaviour score and on the various sub scores (externalizing behaviour, internalizing behaviour, and prosocial behaviours). This was done by allocating a statistical significance of a 0.05 p-value. Socio-emotional behaviour scores were provided by the teacher reports and abuse was measured via pupil reports. This method further enhanced the common method bias. Except for the class and school codes, no identifying information was collected. The teachers and students were provided the information that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw without any consequences. In an effort to reduce the potential for research distress on the participants, pupils were reminded that they could skip any questions they did not wish to answer, and information was provided to them for local child support services in the event that participation in the research distress triggered adverse consequences.

Result

Table 1: Correlation Between Physical Abuse and Socio-Emotional Behaviour (Ho₁)

Ho₁: *There is no significant relationship between physical abuse and socio-emotional behaviour of school-age children.*

Variable	N	Mean	SD	r	p-value
Physical Abuse	400	21.44	6.82	0.32	0.000
Socio-Emotional Behaviour	400	58.73	11.09	—	—

A positive correlation ($r = 0.32$, $p < 0.05$) suggests that there is a slight relationship between physical abuse and emotional and social behavioural problems. In other words, with increasing

experiences of socio-emotional difficulties, there is increasing abuse is experienced. Given that $p = 0.05$, H_{01} must be rejected. Hence, there is a correlation between physical abuse and socio-emotional problems in school-age children.

Table 2: Correlation Between Emotional Abuse and Socio-Emotional Behaviour (Ho₂)

Ho₂: *There is no significant relationship between emotional abuse and socio-emotional behaviour of school-age children.*

Variable	N	Mean	SD	r	p-value
Emotional Abuse	400	25.11	7.25	0.41	0.000
Socio-Emotional Behaviour	400	58.73	11.09	—	—

The data suggests that emotional abuse and adverse socio-emotional behaviours have a greater correlation and a stronger association altogether than does physical abuse and the adverse socio-emotional behaviours ($r = 0.41$, $p < 0.05$). That is, the emotional abuse is more likely to lead to a greater socio-emotional dysfunction (e.g., anxiety, withdrawal, and aggressive behaviours). ##~ With the p value being significant, H_{02} could be rejected, thus emotional abuse does have a significant relationship with socio-emotional behaviours of children in the school age years.

Table 3: Correlation Between Child Neglect and Socio-Emotional Behaviour

Ho₃: *There is no significant relationship between child neglect and socio-emotional behaviour of school-age children.*

Variable	N	Mean	SD	r	p-value
Child Neglect	400	27.84	8.03	0.29	0.000
Socio-Emotional Behaviour	400	58.73	11.09	—	—

Your data shows a positive link between the neglect of children and socio-emotional behaviour ($r = 0.29$, $p < 0.05$). This means that due to neglect, the child has even more socio-emotional challenges to deal with, including the lack of ability to properly manage their own emotions, a. lack of positive behaviours towards others, and fluctuations in their ability to control behaviours. Given the positive correlation, your H_{03} must be rejected. Hence, there is no doubt that child neglect is a concern and has a very strong correlation with child socio-emotional behaviours.

Discussion of Findings

The links between indicators of socio-emotional behaviour of children and physical abuse in Port Harcourt highlight the psychological effects of physical abuse, particularly in school children. Weak positively correlated data indicates that the consequences of physical abuse and behaviour problem such as aggression, withdrawal, anxiety, low self-esteem, poor peer relationship. Thus, the effects of spousal abuse, violent parenting, and corporal punishment may impede the children's ability to self-regulate and have social interactions.

There is consistency between the findings and ecological and developmentally oriented hypothetico theories which state that children tend to lack emotional bonding and gain unadaptive behaviours when there is persistent contact with physical punitive measures. Children, likely to suffer the physical punitive measures from caregivers, will learn to internalise the negative emotions such fear and anger, which will manifest externally in aggression and internally as depression. Absence of public condemnation of physical punitive measures, as in the case of Port Harcourt, may further incite children to display violently aggressive behaviours within the school setting.

This data corroborates what Afifi et al. (2017) found, as they indicated an association between emotional and behavioral disorders with physical punishment and poor emotional regulation in children.

Research in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Nigeria, indicates that children suffering from physical abuse show even greater problem behaviors as well as lower prosocial behaviors. Eke (2020) also reported similar findings with Nigerian students, where victims of corporal punishment displayed greater antisocial behavior and more emotional dysregulation. The convergence of findings from various studies corroborate the findings from the present study.

Port Harcourt has also exacerbated the impact of physical abuse suffered by children owing to extreme poverty, overcrowded housing, and urban impact. Parents experiencing economic distress, and/or domestic violence, may themselves express violence, increasing the children's socio-emotional problems. Additionally, the large enrollments of public school students may lead teachers to overlook behavioral changes that may occur in a child due to a lack of physical discipline, thereby leaving the adverse outcomes of physical abuse unreported.

This illustrates that the ramifications of physical abuse are not confined to the home, and that it permeates the school environment. This may impact academic achievement, relationships with peers, and emotional well-being.

Research indicates that children who witness abuse or who are themselves victims may also become fearful of school-related adults. Other common behavioral manifestations of this fear may these children withdrawing socially or refraining from various school-related activities. Increased and unmitigated parental abuse results in children becoming adults phobic.

This extends to long-term concerns for their healthy development. In children's cases, trauma during these early stages may extend temporally into adolescence, at which point trauma may become increasingly difficult to cope with or may manifest into extreme volatility such as outbursts, substance use, or other comorbid mental health conditions.

Rejecting H_0_1 implies that for Port Harcourt the most pressing need should be the continued refinement and application of the community abuse education and child abuse protection policies, the provision of relevant child discipline programs, the training of educational guidance and social work personnel, and teachers for the specific purpose of identifying and managing the behavioral indicators that suggest the presence of physical abuse for the deployment of the primary interest of the study, the aim of which is to mitigate the overall violence against children, and in particular the physical violence.

The result that emotional abuse is more closely related than physical abuse was the primary abuse that demonstrates without question that the verbal aspect of abuse was the major factor of the unique and cumulative destructiveness of abuse. The emotional harm perpetrated abuse, text, and context of the study to clarify that emotional abuse in its only form is in standalone even without the presence of physical violence, and that emotional abuse for all the devastating consequences of abuse adversely the child to an extent that the abuse overwhelms the child to such an extent that the child is unable to regulate the loss of emotional control and self-conception in a significant manner.

The study indicates that emotional abuse is the most damaging form of abuse for school age children in Port Harcourt. Emotional abuse is one form of abuse that is without any apparent or obvious abuse but manifests in detrimental psychological damage within a considerable period of time.

Negative comments and disapproval from parents can impact the emotional and psychological development of their children. Such children may withdraw from social contact and become more responsive and sensitive to their 환경. Disapproving comments from parents can lead children to think and assess himself more negatively. While feeling angered or anxious, they may also withdraw from situations to have less contact with people. Feeling psychological pressure due to emotional abuse may also impact a child's social and emotional development, as well as their ability to interact with people and cope with stress effectively.

Many researchers and studies have gone on to develop claims that emotional abuse may be the most harmful, and Spinazzola et al. 2018 study, for example, joins the pack by highlighting Info that Spinazzola study and the Nwosu 2021 study, also carried out in Nigeria, demonstrated that emotional abuse and negative chronic disapproval by caregivers could lead children to have unstable and explosive anger. The world over, including Port Harcourt, children are emotionally abused in ways study indicate are typical of other children across the globe, with Port Harcourt continuing to be emotionally abuse based on the surrounding culture.

In numerous Nigerian homes, it is common for parents to, often unreflexively, practice verbal abuse toward their children when attempting to discipline them. Words like, "you are useless," "you can't do anything right," and, "I wish you were never born" i— while deemingly a loss of control of emotions and a breach to abusive standards; however, they are expressed and used as just frustration in most Nigerian homes. The children will experience negative self image and will probably become withdrawn socially and/or behave disruptively to avoid school tasks.

The emotional maltreatment of children is among the forms of maltreatment least known and least talked about. The emotional maltreatment of children is by nature different from the other forms of maltreatment because there are no visible injury marks and scathed skin. This is the type of abuse that no one sees and no one thinks is real but it can cause chronic and unrelenting disproportionate stress, relationship dysfunction and a vexatious inability to trust. There must be some port harcourt schools that have problems related to the behavioral issues that are a result of emotional abuse but port harcourt schools do not possess the systems to manage and respond to these problems.

The assumption of no Ho₂ makes it abundantly clear that emotional abuse is one of the leading determinants of children's socio-emotional outcomes. The impact strength of the association indicates that the emotional abuse of children is a primary focus if child and youth positive outcomes are to be prioritized. It is all emotional abuse that needs to be more widely known by educators and caregivers as the type of abuse that warrants more attention and should be the primary focus of abuse prevention because it can be more devastating in the long term. There should be an emphasis and improved allocation of resources for primary schools in the fields of guidance and counseling, early intervention programs, and training of parents to use other forms of communication that will result in positive outcomes.

The correlation between socio-emotional behavior and the discovery of child neglect highlights the absence of even minimal physical, emotional, and supervisory caring that can be severely detrimental to the children's mental health and wellbeing.

Neglect includes the absence of support, love, nutrition, security, guidance, or protection needed to keep the child safe, which is different from abuse. A child that is more neglected is also more likely to have socio-emotional issues like being needy, not having any confidence, or having any social contact, as well as being emotionally unstable.

When there is neglect, children feel the missing love and care that they expected from their caregivers. Emotionally, when caregivers neglect their children, children will develop insecure attachment with whoever. If children also do not have parents who teach and guide them, the children will grow up with poor emotional regulation and impaired social functioning. In the Port Harcourt area, cases of possible neglect are clearly defined by the single parent drop in the economy of the area and the increase in parental migration. This is especially the case for families in which one parent is working long hours and is left with very little time to emotionally support their children.

The attachment theory and the outcomes mentioned above are strongly correlated. According to this theory, children who experience the absence of a caregiver may develop emotional insecurity, extreme behavioral dysregulation, and a range of behavioral issues. This was also documented by Stoltenborgh et al. 2013 in the reports where Stoltenborgh and colleagues discussed a phenomenon where children exhibited a lack of emotional competence, where children did not possess the emotional skills to self-regulate. Neglected children also tend to exhibit a greater degree of school behavior issues. This was also the case in children Onyinyechi 2020 studied in Nigeria. Onyinyechi demonstrated that children with minimal parental mentoring and supervision displayed a greater degree of school behavior issues.

Also, the absence of caregivers in children's lives may also restrict the children's social and emotional development by not offering the children the essential opportunities to learn, eat, socialize, and interact with responsible adults.

Children sometimes become self-destructive and may have self-regulation issues and problems in working with their peers. Port Harcourt, children, live in cramped housing with minimal parental guidance. This may help to account for the lack of education.

The school's social support systems must absorb the consequences of children arriving at school having been neglected, in hunger, and lacking emotional and social support. These children also bring with them the emotional and social disabilities that limit the full range of active participation in learning and the social interaction adaptations of peer classroom learning. Such problems may be misinterpreted by educators as the indicators of an inclination towards underachievement, in learning and participation in school social activities, and may act as the catalysts of problems of an academic or educational nature. These problems also describe the 'set of systems, the systems of quick and easy responses, anticipatory emergency systems, and school-child protective systems of cooperative organizational systems, designed to protect and care for the neglected child'

The negative regressions on H_03 indicate that neglect stands out as the foremost predictor of the emotional and social problems of school children in Port Harcourt. This also provides an explanation for the neglect of Children within the Community social Action and Community social action programs that include training of parents, economic empowerment of parents to reduce the activities of the care giving burden, and social welfare officer's increased contact and supervision of neglected children. In comparison with the active abuse of a child, the neglect of a child is more severe in terms of the consequences. This also outlines the demand to include abuse neglect in systems designed to protect the child.

Conclusion

This research focused on and sought to assess the relationship and in the same way the socio-emotional behavioral patterns abuse of school-age children in Port Harcourt Rivers of the State of abuse physical, emotional abuse, and neglect abuse neglect and socio emotional Most abuse was found to have an impact on the socio-emotional neglect in children abuse physical abuse and emotional, and abuse, both of which were found to be neglect in children to emotional concerns of neglect abuse emotional neglect abuse Both emotional neglect abuse was abuse neglect in children abuse emotional were socio neglect emotional significant problems neglect abuse emotional socio behavioral problems neglect abuse the lack of neglect abuse emotional verbal bullying children emotional psychological neg.The results demonstrate that child abuse leads to significant socio-emotional issues for primary school children in Port Harcourt. This makes it clear that abuse intervention on abuse should include prevention and psychosocial assistance and psychosocial assistance in schools and families. In addition, emotional dysregulation, negative peer relations, isolation, and aggressive behavior are all be due to factors in abuse. Most importantly, it shows that abuse should be addressed in order to protect socio-emotional safety and socio-emotional development.

Recommendations

Consider the following recommendations that stem from the findings of this study:

1. In Port Harcourt, community leaders, government agencies, and NGOs should strengthen educational outreach on the risks associated with physical and emotional abuse. Programs should address positive discipline, communicative, and emotional scaffolding from caregivers.
2. Primary schools must have operational counselling departments staffed with abuse recognition and response training. Schools should have teachers receive refresher training on recognition, emotional first aid, and referral to child maltreatment services. Collaborate with social welfare departments, educational authorities, health institutions, and civil society to develop and create operational response and reporting systems for children who have experienced abuse and/or neglect. Implementing regular home visits, follow-up casework, and a community support system would enhance and extend sustainable outcomes.

References

- Afifi, T. O., Ford, D., Gershoff, E. T., Merrick, M. T., Ports, K. A., & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2017). *Spanking and adult mental health impairment: The case for the designation of spanking as an adverse childhood experience*. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 71, 24–31. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.01.014>
- Chioma, G. C. (2024). Child sexual abuse among street children: A comparative study in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. *International Journal of Environmental & Health Studies*, 2024. [Article].
- Eke, H. N. (2020). Corporal punishment and behavioural adjustment among primary school pupils in South-South Nigeria. *International Journal of Education and Development*, 8(3), 112–124.
- Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., ... & Marks, J. S. (1998). *Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the*

leading causes of death in adults. American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 14(4), 245–258.

Gabriel-Job, N., & Ofurum, I. (2024). Intra-familial child sexual abuse among adolescents in Rivers State, Nigeria: Analyzing contributing factors and victim–perpetrator characteristics. *Journal of AMPS, 26(12), 82–93.*

<https://journaljamps.com/index.php/JAMPS/article/view/734>

Gabriel-Job, N., & Ofurum, I. (2024). Intra-familial child sexual abuse among adolescents in Rivers State, Nigeria: Analyzing contributing factors and victim–perpetrator characteristics. *Journal of AMPS, 26(12), 82–93.*

<https://journaljamps.com/index.php/JAMPS/article/view/734> journaljamps.com

Goemans, A., et al. (2021). Child maltreatment, peer victimization, and mental health. *[Article]*. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10009486/> [PMC](#)

Ifayomi, M. (2024). Child sexual abuse in Nigeria: A systematic review. *Journal/Repository*. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC11545136/>

Kim, S. G., et al. (2021). Child abuse and automatic emotion regulation in children. *[Article]*. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8799759/> [PMC](#)

Kochanska, G., Philibert, R. A., & Barry, R. A. (2009). Interplay of genes and early mother–child relationship in predicting children’s conduct problems: A prospective study. *Psychological Science, 20(10), 1211–1218.*

Kurtz, P. D. (1993). The consequences of physical abuse and neglect on the school-age child: Mediating factors. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 17, 111–121.*

Norman, R. E., Byambaa, M., De, R., Butchart, A., Scott, J., & Vos, T. (2012). The long-term health consequences of child physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLOS Medicine, 9(11), e1001349.*

<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001349>

Norman, R. E., Byambaa, M., De, R., Butchart, A., Scott, J., & Vos, T. (2012). The long-term health consequences of child physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLOS Medicine, 9(11), e1001349.*

<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001349> [PMC](#)

Nwosu, J. C. (2021). Emotional maltreatment and psychological wellbeing of school-age children in South-East Nigeria. *Nigerian Journal of Educational Psychology, 15(2), 56–69.*

Onyinyechi, C. A. (2020). Parenting neglect and behavioural problems of pupils in public primary schools in Rivers State, Nigeria. *Rivers State Journal of Education, 12(1), 88–102.*

Scholarly review on neglect and behavior problems: Bennett, D. S., et al. (2025). Neglect and behavior problems in early childhood: A test ... *Child Psychiatry & Human Development*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10578-025-01851-1> [SpringerLink](#)

- Şenol, F. B., et al. (2021). The effect of child neglect and abuse: information studies. [Article]. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8526118/> [PMC](#)
- Shonkoff, J. P., Garner, A. S., Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, & Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care. (2012). The lifelong effects of early childhood adversity and toxic stress. *Pediatrics*, 129(1), e232–e246. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2011-2663>
- Spinazzola, J., Hodgdon, H., Liang, L.-J., Ford, J. D., Layne, C., Pynoos, R., ... & Kisiel, C. (2018). *Unseen wounds: The contribution of psychological maltreatment to child and adolescent mental health and risk outcomes*. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 10(2), 199–207. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000185>
- Stoltenborgh, M., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J., Alink, L. R., & van IJzendoorn, M. H. (2013). *The global prevalence of child physical abuse: A meta-analysis of 175 studies*. *Child Abuse Review*, 22(2), 75–95.
- UNICEF. (2022). *Child protection and violence against children in Nigeria*. United Nations Children's Fund.
- UNICEF. (2022). *Nigeria: Child protection and humanitarian action* (Country office reports and situation summaries). <https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/>
- Vecchio, G. M., et al. (2023). Children's prosocial and aggressive behaviors: The role of emotion regulation. [Article]. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, [volume], [pages]. [ScienceDirect](#)
- World Health Organization. (2020). *INSPIRE: Seven strategies for ending violence against children*. WHO Press.
- World Health Organization. (2024). *Child maltreatment* (Fact sheet). Retrieved November 5, 2024, from <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/child-maltreatment>. [World Health Organization](#)
- World Health Organization. (2024, November 5). *Child maltreatment*. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/child-maltreatment>
- Young, J. C. (2014). Long-term effects of child abuse and neglect on emotion processing and psychopathology. [Article]. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4117717/>.