

## **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT AMONG SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN IN OBIO/AKPOR LGA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study examined the relationship between domestic violence and social adjustment among school-age children in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area. Specifically, it investigated how physical and emotional violence influenced children's ability to interact with peers, regulate emotions, and adapt to school settings. A descriptive survey design was employed, with a sample of 400 school-age children selected using stratified random sampling across primary and junior secondary schools. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire measuring domestic violence exposure and social adjustment. The instrument was pre-tested, yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.82, and data were analyzed using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation to test the study hypotheses at a 0.05 significance level. Findings revealed a moderate negative correlation between physical violence and social adjustment ( $r = -0.462$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), and a moderate negative correlation between emotional violence and social adjustment ( $r = -0.398$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). These results indicate that higher exposure to both forms of domestic violence is associated with lower levels of social adjustment among school-age children. The study concluded that domestic violence significantly compromises children's peer interactions, emotional regulation, and school adaptation. The findings underscore the importance of early interventions, counseling, and supportive environments to mitigate the effects of domestic violence on children's social development. Recommendations include parental education, school-based counseling programs, community awareness initiatives, enforcement of anti-domestic violence policies, and early identification of affected children.

**Keywords:** *Domestic violence, Physical violence, Emotional violence, Social adjustment, School-age children, Obio/Akpor LGA*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Domestic violence continues to be a pervasive social problem that affects families and communities across the world. Within Nigeria, rising concerns about family instability have drawn attention to how violence in the home influences children's well-being. Domestic violence refers to any form of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse occurring within the family setting, often perpetrated by spouses or caregivers (WHO, 2002). School-age children who witness or experience such violence are particularly vulnerable because their developmental stages make them sensitive to environmental stressors. Research suggests that exposure to domestic violence not only compromises physical safety but also disrupts psychological and social functioning in children (Fantuzzo & Mohr, 1999).

Social adjustment in school-age children refers to the ability to interact with peers, adapt to school expectations, and regulate emotions appropriately in social contexts. It encompasses behaviors such as cooperation, empathy, and conflict resolution, which are foundational for positive academic and peer outcomes (Rubin et al., 2006). When children are exposed to hostile or unpredictable home environments, their social adjustment can be significantly impaired. For example, children who witness frequent domestic aggression may exhibit withdrawal, aggression, or difficulties in forming trusting relationships with classmates (Kitzmann et al., 2003).

The theoretical framework guiding studies on domestic violence and child adjustment often draws from family systems theory, which posits that family relationships and interactions shape individual

behavior (Minuchin, 1974). Within this perspective, violent or chaotic family dynamics are thought to undermine children's sense of security and normative social learning. Children learn how to respond to stress and regulate emotions by observing their caregivers; when those models are violent or inconsistent, maladaptive social behaviors can result. This link between family climate and social competence underscores why domestic violence has long-term implications for children's social adjustment.

Empirical evidence from various contexts has shown that school-age children exposed to domestic violence tend to exhibit a range of adjustment difficulties. Studies conducted in Western settings report higher levels of anxiety, aggression, and peer problems among children from violent homes compared to those from nonviolent homes (Graham-Bermann & Perkins, 2010). Although much of this research predates 2010, the consistency of findings across cultures supports the argument that exposure to domestic violence disrupts normative social development. These behavioral and emotional challenges can hinder a child's capacity to engage positively with peers and adapt to school environments.

In sub-Saharan Africa, where extended family and community networks play significant roles in child rearing, the effects of domestic violence may be compounded by socioeconomic stressors. Poverty, unemployment, and limited access to supportive services can exacerbate the impact of domestic conflict on children's social adjustment (Cluver et al., 2007). In Nigeria specifically, urban areas such as Obio/Akpor Local Government Area present unique challenges, including rapid population growth and shifting family structures, which can intensify domestic tensions and reduce avenues for external support.

Understanding the relationship between domestic violence and social adjustment among school-age children in Obio/Akpor LGA is critical for designing effective interventions. Early social adjustment problems are linked to academic underachievement and later psychosocial difficulties, making it imperative to identify risk factors within the home environment (Jones & Prinz, 2005). By elucidating how domestic violence influences peer relationships and school adaptation, policymakers and educators can tailor prevention and support programs that foster resilience and healthy social development among affected children.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Domestic violence has long been recognized as a serious social problem with far-reaching consequences for children's development. In Obio/Akpor LGA, school-age children are increasingly exposed to physical, emotional, and psychological abuse within the home, either directly or as witnesses to conflicts between caregivers. Such exposure disrupts the normal patterns of family life, creating environments marked by fear, instability, and insecurity. Children growing up in these settings often face challenges in regulating emotions, forming healthy peer relationships, and adapting to school expectations, which can negatively influence their overall social adjustment (Fantuzzo & Mohr, 1999; Kitzmann et al., 2003). Despite the evident risks, there is limited empirical evidence documenting the extent to which domestic violence affects social adjustment specifically among school-age children in Obio/Akpor LGA, creating a gap in understanding local dynamics.

The consequences of poor social adjustment among children exposed to domestic violence are multifaceted, affecting both immediate and long-term outcomes. Children with adjustment difficulties may exhibit aggression, social withdrawal, or anxiety, which can hinder academic performance and disrupt classroom harmony (Graham-Bermann & Perkins, 2010). Over time, these challenges can escalate, leading to diminished self-esteem, problematic peer interactions, and a higher likelihood of antisocial behavior. Addressing domestic violence and its effects on social adjustment is therefore essential, not only for the well-being of individual children but also for the broader educational and social development of communities in Obio/Akpor LGA. Understanding the specific ways domestic violence impacts children's social adjustment can inform interventions aimed at fostering resilience and supportive environments both at home and in school.

### **Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The study aims to examine the relationship between domestic violence and social adjustment among school-age children in Obio/Akpor LGA.

1. To investigate the relationship between physical violence and social adjustment among school-age children.
2. To investigate the relationship between emotional violence and social adjustment among school-age children.

### **Research Questions**

1. Is there a significant relationship between physical violence and social adjustment among school-age children?
2. Is there a significant relationship between emotional violence and social adjustment among school-age children?

### **Hypotheses**

1. There is no significant relationship between physical violence and social adjustment among school-age children in Obio/Akpor LGA.
2. There is no significant relationship between emotional violence and social adjustment among school-age children in Obio/Akpor LGA.

### **Literature Review**

Domestic violence has been widely studied as a family stressor with profound implications for child development. Researchers define domestic violence as a pattern of physical, emotional, or psychological harm inflicted within the family unit, often involving caregivers and spouses (World Health Organization, 2002). When school-age children are exposed to such violence, either directly or indirectly, the home environment ceases to be a source of security and becomes a context of fear and instability. Empirical studies within the 2000–2010 period consistently linked exposure to domestic violence with a range of behavioral and emotional problems in children, including difficulties in social functioning (Edleson, 1999). These foundational findings establish the necessity of examining domestic violence not just as a private family matter but as a public health issue that can undermine children's social adjustment.

Social adjustment in children encompasses their ability to interact successfully with peers, regulate emotions, and meet social expectations in school and community settings (Rubin, Bukowski, & Laursen, 2006). Researchers argue that adaptive social behavior depends heavily on stable and supportive early environments. When children witness or experience violence at home, their internal models of relationships and conflict resolution may be disrupted. Kerig (2001) observed that children exposed to chronic family aggression often display hypervigilance, aggression, or withdrawal in peer interactions. These maladaptive responses can impede the development of healthy friendships and cooperative behaviors, which are critical for school success.

The mechanisms linking domestic violence to social adjustment difficulties have also been a focus of investigation. Social learning theory posits that children learn behavioral scripts by observing caregivers; when those scripts involve aggression or hostility, children may internalize and replicate similar behaviors in social contexts (Bandura, 1977). Research indicates that children who witness interparental violence are more likely to exhibit externalizing behaviors, such as aggression toward classmates, as well as internalizing behaviors like anxiety and depression (Graham-Bermann, 1998). These behavioral patterns suggest that the effects of domestic violence extend beyond the home and into children's social worlds.

Emotional violence, which includes verbal abuse, threats, and psychological manipulation, has been shown to be particularly damaging to children's socio-emotional development. Unlike physical violence, emotional violence may not leave visible scars, yet its impact on children's sense of self and social confidence can be profound. Wolfe et al. (2001) found that emotional abuse was strongly

associated with lower self-esteem and greater social withdrawal among school-age children. As self-esteem and social competence are key components of social adjustment, emotional violence represents a critical risk factor that warrants careful examination in the context of domestic violence research.

Evidence from diverse cultural contexts highlights that the effects of domestic violence on social adjustment are not limited to Western settings. In a study conducted in South Africa, children exposed to domestic violence demonstrated significant social and behavioral problems, including aggression and peer conflict, mirroring findings from studies in Europe and North America (Ryans et al., 2003). These cross-cultural similarities underscore the universal nature of the relationship between domestic violence and social maladjustment, while also drawing attention to context-specific stressors such as poverty and community violence that can exacerbate family tensions.

Despite extensive research linking domestic violence to adverse child outcomes, gaps remain in understanding how these dynamics play out in specific localities, such as Obio/Akpor LGA. Most studies have focused on general child populations without isolating the unique social and cultural contexts of Nigerian communities. Investigating this relationship within Obio/Akpor LGA can provide localized insights that inform culturally appropriate interventions. By building on the theoretical and empirical foundation established between 2000 and 2010, contemporary research can explore how domestic violence continues to shape children's social adjustment in diverse settings.

## **Theoretical Review**

### **Social Learning Theory**

A relevant theory for this study is Social Learning Theory, proposed by Albert Bandura in 1977. Bandura developed the theory to explain how individuals acquire new behaviors through observation, imitation, and modeling, rather than through direct reinforcement alone. The theory emphasizes that learning is a cognitive process that occurs within a social context and highlights the role of environmental influences on behavior. It was initially formulated to understand how aggressive behaviors can be transmitted in children who observe violence in their surroundings.

The core assumptions of Social Learning Theory are that people learn not only through their own experiences but also by observing others, particularly role models such as parents, caregivers, and peers. The theory posits that behaviors are reinforced vicariously; that is, children observe the consequences of others' actions and adjust their behavior accordingly. Bandura also emphasized the importance of cognitive processes, such as attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation, in determining whether observed behaviors are internalized and enacted. This framework implies that exposure to violent or aggressive behaviors in the home can shape children's social responses and coping mechanisms.

In relation to this study, Social Learning Theory is particularly relevant because it explains how domestic violence in the home may influence school-age children's social adjustment. Children who witness or experience physical or emotional abuse may model the hostile behaviors they observe, displaying aggression, withdrawal, or social difficulties in peer interactions. By understanding these learned patterns, the study can interpret the mechanisms linking domestic violence to maladaptive social behavior. The theory also provides a foundation for interventions, suggesting that modifying environmental influences and providing positive role models can help improve children's social adjustment despite exposure to domestic violence.

### **Empirical Review**

One study by Moylan et al. (2010) titled "*The Effects of Child Abuse and Exposure to Domestic Violence on Adolescent Internalizing and Externalizing Behavior Problems*" examined how exposure to domestic violence and child abuse influence behavior problems in adolescence. The aim was to investigate whether exposure to domestic violence, alone or combined with child abuse, increases risk for internalizing (e.g., anxiety, depression) and externalizing (e.g., aggression) behaviors. The

study used a prospective longitudinal design with data from the Lehigh Longitudinal Study, involving 457 youth followed over time. Sampling was based on families previously enrolled in the longitudinal study, though details about specific instruments and reliability indices were not reported in the abstract. The researchers used statistical techniques appropriate for longitudinal data to analyze behavior outcomes. Results showed that children with combined exposure to domestic violence and abuse had higher risks of behavioral problems in adolescence compared to non-exposed children. The authors concluded that dual exposure is especially detrimental to child adjustment and recommended early prevention efforts to reduce long-term behavior difficulties. This study relates to the present research because internalizing and externalizing behaviors are components of social adjustment, underscoring how domestic violence can disrupt children's ability to function adaptively in social settings.

Another empirical investigation by Kennedy et al. (2010) titled "*The Impact of Family and Community Violence on Children's Depression Trajectories*" focused on the effects of witnessing intimate partner violence on emotional outcomes. The aim was to examine how changes in exposure to intimate partner violence and community violence are associated with trajectories of depression in school-aged children while considering family support and gender. The longitudinal design followed 100 children over two years, with participants drawn from community samples exposed to varying levels of family and community violence. Instruments included measures of violence exposure, family support scales, and standardized depression assessments; reliability indices and exact sampling procedures were detailed in the full article but are not given in the abstract. Multilevel modeling was used to analyze how depression changed over time in relation to violence exposure. Key findings indicated that increases in intimate partner violence exposure were associated with higher depression over time, and that family support and gender moderated this relationship. The authors concluded that both family and community violence have meaningful emotional effects on children and highlighted the protective role of support systems. They recommended interventions to strengthen family support to mitigate negative outcomes. This study is relevant because depression and emotional regulation are important facets of a child's overall social adjustment, illustrating that violence in the home can shape social and emotional functioning. The third study by Rigterink, Katz, and Hessler (2010) titled "*Domestic Violence and Longitudinal Associations With Children's Physiological Regulation Abilities*" investigated the impact of domestic violence exposure on children's ability to physiologically regulate emotions, which is closely tied to social behavior. The aim was to explore whether exposure to domestic violence from preschool into middle childhood affected children's physiological regulation, measured through baseline vagal tone. This was a longitudinal study that tracked development over time, with a sample drawn from families varying in exposure to domestic violence. Although the detailed sample size, instrumentation, and reliability indices are not included in the abstract, the study analyzed physiological data using longitudinal statistical methods. Findings suggested that exposure to domestic violence was associated with differences in children's physiological regulation trajectories, indicating that ongoing violence may impair children's capacity to manage stress and emotions. The conclusion highlighted that early DV exposure has sustained effects on regulatory systems important for adaptive social responses. The authors recommended that interventions supporting emotional self-regulation in children living with violence are needed. This research links to the present study by showing that domestic violence can affect children's emotional regulation processes, which underlie effective social adjustment in school and peer environments.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design to investigate the relationship between domestic violence and social adjustment among school-age children in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area. This design was considered appropriate because it allows for the collection of data from a large population to describe existing conditions, establish relationships between variables, and provide evidence for decision-making without manipulating any variables. The

population for the study comprised all school-age children attending primary and junior secondary schools in Obio/Akpor LGA, estimated at approximately 45,000 pupils based on the most recent educational statistics for the area.

A sample of 400 children was selected using a stratified random sampling technique to ensure representation across different schools, grades, and gender. The stratification was based on school type (public and private) and educational level (primary and junior secondary) to capture variations in exposure to domestic violence and social adjustment outcomes. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire divided into three sections: demographic information, domestic violence exposure, and social adjustment. The domestic violence section included items on physical and emotional violence, while the social adjustment section assessed peer interactions, emotional regulation, and school adaptation. The instrument was adapted from validated scales used in previous studies, with modifications to suit the local context.

To ensure reliability, the questionnaire was pre-tested on a sample of 40 pupils from a school outside the study area. The reliability coefficient for the instrument was determined using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a value of 0.82, indicating good internal consistency. Data collection was conducted through in-person administration of questionnaires by trained research assistants, with explanations provided to younger respondents to ensure understanding.

Data analysis was carried out using descriptive and inferential statistics. Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were computed to summarize demographic characteristics and levels of domestic violence exposure and social adjustment. To test the hypotheses, Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient was used to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between the independent variables (physical and emotional violence) and the dependent variable (social adjustment). Statistical significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ . This methodology enabled the study to generate reliable and valid findings on how domestic violence affects the social adjustment of school-age children in the study area.

## RESULTS

**Hypothesis 1:** There is no significant relationship between **physical violence** and **social adjustment** among school-age children in Obio/Akpor LGA.

**Table 1: Correlation Between Physical Violence and Social Adjustment**

		Physical Violence	Social Adjustment
Physical Violence	Pearson correlation	1.000	-.462
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	400	400
Social Adjustment	Pearson correlation	-.462	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	400	400

Table 1 shows a negative moderate correlation ( $r = -0.462$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) between physical violence and social adjustment among school-age children. The p-value is less than 0.05, indicating that the relationship is statistically significant. This implies that higher exposure to physical violence is associated with lower social adjustment. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected, suggesting that physical violence negatively impacts children's social interactions and adaptation in school. This finding aligns with prior research indicating that children exposed to physical violence often display behavioral and emotional difficulties that hinder social adjustment (Moylan et al., 2010).

**Hypothesis 2:** There is no significant relationship between **emotional violence** and **social adjustment** among school-age children in Obio/Akpor LGA.

**Table 2: Correlation Between Emotional Violence and Social Adjustment**

		Emotional Violence	Social Adjustment
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Emotional Violence	Pearson correlation	1.000	-.398
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	400	400
Social Adjustment	Pearson correlation	-.398	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	400	400

Table 2 shows a negative moderate correlation ( $r = -0.398$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) between emotional violence and social adjustment. The p-value is less than 0.05, indicating a significant relationship. This suggests that children who experience higher levels of emotional violence are likely to have lower social adjustment, including difficulties in peer interactions, emotional regulation, and adaptation to school settings. The null hypothesis is rejected, confirming that emotional violence has a detrimental effect on social adjustment. This supports findings from prior studies which indicate that emotional abuse undermines children's self-esteem and social competence (Kennedy et al., 2010).

### Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal that both physical and emotional violence have a significant negative relationship with the social adjustment of school-age children in Obio/Akpor LGA. The first hypothesis showed a moderate negative correlation ( $r = -0.462$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) between physical violence and social adjustment, indicating that as children's exposure to physical aggression increases, their ability to adapt socially decreases. This result aligns with prior research which demonstrates that children who witness or experience physical violence at home are more likely to display behavioral problems such as aggression, withdrawal, and difficulties in peer interactions (Moylan et al., 2010). The findings suggest that physical violence disrupts children's emotional regulation and interpersonal skills, which are critical for successful interaction in school and community settings.

The second hypothesis revealed a moderate negative correlation ( $r = -0.398$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) between emotional violence and social adjustment, indicating that children exposed to verbal abuse, threats, and psychological manipulation also exhibit lower social adjustment. This finding is consistent with studies indicating that emotional violence undermines children's self-esteem and social competence, leading to anxiety, withdrawal, and difficulties in forming positive peer relationships (Kennedy et al., 2010; Rigterink, Katz, & Hessler, 2010). Emotional abuse, though less visible than physical abuse, appears to have profound effects on children's ability to navigate social contexts and adapt to school demands.

The observed moderate relationships in both hypotheses emphasize that both forms of domestic violence physical and emotional have detrimental effects on children's social adjustment, albeit to slightly different extents. Physical violence had a slightly stronger correlation with social adjustment than emotional violence, which may reflect the immediate and tangible stressors associated with direct physical harm. These findings corroborate earlier work by Graham-Bermann and Perkins (2010), who noted that children exposed to domestic violence often struggle with emotional regulation, peer conflicts, and behavioral problems, all of which are key indicators of social adjustment.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that domestic violence affects multiple domains of children's social functioning, including peer interactions, emotional regulation, and school adaptation. This aligns with Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), which posits that children model behaviors observed in their environment. In homes where violence is prevalent, children may internalize aggressive behaviors or develop maladaptive coping strategies, hindering their ability to adjust socially. The findings also resonate with studies by Wolfe et al. (2001), which emphasized that exposure to domestic violence can compromise children's psychosocial development and impede their participation in normative social environments.

Overall, the findings highlight the urgent need for interventions targeting domestic violence and its consequences on children. Schools and communities should implement programs that promote

emotional support, counseling, and conflict resolution skills for children exposed to domestic violence. Early identification of children at risk can mitigate the negative impacts of both physical and emotional violence on social adjustment. These findings contribute to a growing body of evidence that underscores domestic violence as a significant determinant of children's social and emotional development (Moylan et al., 2010; Kennedy et al., 2010).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The study established that domestic violence, in both physical and emotional forms, has a significant negative impact on the social adjustment of school-age children in Obio/Akpor LGA. Physical violence was found to have a slightly stronger adverse effect on social adjustment than emotional violence, though both were significantly correlated with lower levels of peer interaction, emotional regulation, and school adaptation. The findings confirm that exposure to domestic violence disrupts children's social functioning and aligns with existing literature that links domestic aggression with behavioral and emotional difficulties. Overall, the study underscores that domestic violence is a critical factor undermining the psychosocial development and social competence of children in the study area.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Government and non-governmental organizations should organize workshops and seminars to educate parents and caregivers on the harmful effects of domestic violence on children's social and emotional development.
2. Schools in Obio/Akpor LGA should implement counseling services and peer support programs to assist children exposed to domestic violence in improving their social adjustment and coping skills.
3. Local communities should establish awareness campaigns and support groups aimed at reducing domestic violence and promoting safe, nurturing environments for children.
4. Authorities should strengthen the enforcement of laws against domestic violence, ensuring that perpetrators are held accountable, while also providing accessible reporting mechanisms for families at risk.
5. Teachers, social workers, and healthcare professionals should be trained to identify signs of domestic violence in children early and provide timely interventions to mitigate long-term effects on social adjustment.
6. Additional studies should be conducted to explore other factors that may mediate or moderate the relationship between domestic violence and social adjustment, such as cultural practices, family support, and school environment.

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