

# **PARENTS' LEVEL OF KNOWLEDGE AND ATTITUDE TOWARDS SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN: IMPLICATION FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE GIRL-CHILD**

**BY**

**MARY NGOZI NNAMANI (Ph.D)**  
**DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION ENUGU STATE**  
**UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY (ESUT)**  
**EBEANO CITY**

## **Abstract**

*This study was a cross-sectional survey research, designed to determine parents' knowledge and attitude towards sexual abuse of children in Enugu South L.G.A., of Enugu State. The instrument for data collection was the questionnaire and the population for the study consisted all parents in Amechi Awkunanaw, Enugu South L.G.A. A sample of 200 parents (100 males and 100 females) was purposively selected for the study. Results showed that the parents had low knowledge (39.2%) and poor attitude (36.1%) towards the sexual abuse of children. Levels of knowledge and attitude of the respondents were independent of their gender and educational background. The implication of the findings of the study is that the healthy development of the girl-child victim would be greatly jeopardized as a result of the physical and emotional trauma as well as social mal-adjustment to the future relationship with people. Based on the findings, it was recommended, among others, that schools and community organizations within the locality should sponsor education/enlightenment programs to make parents aware of the pre-conditions for, symptoms of and consequences of sexual abuse, so they could take precautionary measures towards preventing sexual abuse of young persons, or be alert to help victims early enough.*

## **Introduction**

Healthy sexuality is a vital component of every individual's reproductive health and implies the control over one's body, informed and responsible choice in sexual relations. Hence, a lack of healthy sexuality or worse, sexual abuse and coercion can have serious health consequences including unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Sexual abuse may be described as a deliberate involvement in, or exposure to sexual actions without informed consent. The sexual abuse of children deserves

special attention, mainly because of its consequence on this naive and vulnerable group of the society. Sexual abuse includes incest and rape and can occur in adolescence or even earlier in childhood (pre-school and school-age years). It involves an adult, usually a man, forcing or persuading a child, frequently a girl, to participate in sexual act. The problem is not new, but the comprehension of the enormity of the problem is surely new. Larson (1990) reported that as many as 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 10 boys will be victims of sexual abuse before reaching the age of 18.

Sexual abuse of children takes many forms and may include sexually suggestive language; prolonged kissing; looking and petting, vaginal and/ or anal intercourse, and oral sex (Berger, 1994). Most time, sexual contact is often achieved without overt physical force and though there may not be obvious signs of physical harm but it has life long consequences which are likely to be even more traumatic and long-lasting than those of violence against women. Despite the fact that children are more likely to be sexually abused by an adult known to them, the extent of incest and childhood sexual abuse is difficult to measure because of lack of reporting and lack of memory (Stein, Marshall and Tropp, 1993). Victims who reported are sometimes subject to the harassment of male police and justice officials, who may believe that the rape victim actually provoked the rape (Scarpitti and Andersen, 1989).

Rape is the fastest growing violent crime. Rape, which may be seen as a fusion of aggressive and sexual impulses by the attacker, has also been defined by Comb, Hales and Williams (1991) as the sexual penetration of a female or male by means of fear, force, or fraud. Rape usually involves force or the threat of forces and also includes situations in which the victim is unable to give consent because of being drunk, drugged, or mentally ill or retarded. Brownmiller (1985) noted that because the victim is generally unprepared to handle the unforeseen, unanticipated traumatic event, she/he experiences disequilibrium and loss of control. Tejumola (2002) noted that majority of victims recover from the crises and adapt in the same way as individuals adapt to bereavement and other life threatening

trauma. However, Mezzy and King (1989) stated that the event is rarely forgotten and frequently results in changes in the individual's attitudes and behaviour towards himself, strangers, friends and family.

Another common form of sexual abuse of children is incest. Though every country's legal system defines it differently, incest can be defined as sexual contacts that occur between family members. Most incest occurs between older male relatives and younger female children in families. Accurate estimate of the extent of incest and other forms of sexual abuse within families are very difficult to establish. Herman (1981) inferred that the Freudian legacy which discounted incest as existing only in the imagination of the child meant that for years, clinicians and social scientists treated incest as an occasional problem. Russell (1986) reported that the most careful study of incest-that is, based on a large representative sample of women-indicates that 16 percent of women have been sexually abused by a relative by the time they are 18 years old. Prior studies had estimated that father-daughter incest involved 1 percent of all girls, with other forms of incest ranging between 4 and 12 percent of the population. Other instances of sexual abuse of children are most often committed by friends who have access to children within the family setting and by people normally trusted by parents: doctors, dentists, teachers, and baby-sitters.

Sexual abuse has multiple consequences on the victims. For instance Scarpitti and Andersen (1989) found a strong relationship between the experience of abuse in childhood and

adolescence and later experience of sexual victimization. Hence the authors reported that nearly half of female prostitutes and drug users were sexually abused as children. From a developmental point of view, Berger (1994) observed that one of the most troubling long-term sexual abuse consequences of incest was that the young person may never learn what a normal adult-child or man - woman relationship should be. Furthermore, Kempe and Kempe revealed that female victims of sexual abuse may have a distorted view of sexuality, and thus are more likely to marry men who are abusive. Sadly, the authors observed that if such men begin to abuse their daughters, the mother is less alert to the problem or feels trapped again, and unable to help. In addition, adolescents victims of abuse, whether they are male or female, tend to become involved again in violent relationship, either as the abuser or the abused (Billingham and Sack, 1986; Boulton and Smith, 1989). Thus, in several ways, the effects of sexual abuse may be transmitted from generation to generation.

Prevention of sexual abuse requires recognizing factors that foster sexual abuse and putting a stop to or at least guarding against them. Accordingly, Mausksch explained that knowledge is essential to determine both the extent and quality of information that persons have about a particular issue or behaviour before a change can be effectively initiated. Thus knowledge is a means towards practice. Studies are not common in literature on parent's knowledge on problems of sexual abuse of children. Yet parent's role in the

identification of physical and emotional health problems, including tackling the problems with a positive attitude, are important for the healthy development of the child. This is a requirement for the development of and promotion of the physical, emotional, social and overall well-being of the girl-child, individual family members as well as other members of the wider society.

The sexual exploitation of the girl child remains a serious and widespread problem. Indications are strong that the majority of such sexual abuse crimes are never reported to the authorities. This may be as a result of the police and the courts' history of callous or even abusive treatment on victims. Thus only a fraction of the actual cases of child sexual abuse are referred for treatments. Consequently the victim suffers from the experience itself, which occasionally causes physical damage and frequently results in psychological damage; leading to the loss of her sense of security and personal worth. A consistent guilt - ridden repression of feelings generated by sexual assault, has been reported by Morse and Furst (1982) to affect every aspect of the victim's life.

Whether incidence of sexual abuse is properly handled and reported or not, parental reaction after the act can be as critical as the act itself in the girl-child's later development and reactions. Such parental reaction is reasonably influenced by the level of knowledge possessed by the affected parents. Hence the researcher was motivated to investigate the level of knowledge and attitude towards children's sexual abuse among parents of Amechi Awkunanaw, in Enugu South Local Government Area of Enugu State.

### Research Questions

The following research questions were answered.

1. What is the level of parents' knowledge on sexual abuse of the girl-child in Amechi Awkunanaw?
2. What is the attitude of parents towards the problem of sexual abuse of the girl-child in Amechi Awkunanaw?

**Hypotheses:** The following null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 significance level

- Ho<sub>1</sub> Level of knowledge of sexual abuse of the girl-child, among parents in Amechi Awkunanaw is independent of gender;
- Ho<sub>2</sub> Level of knowledge of sexual abuse of girl-child, among parents in Amechi Awkunanaw is independent of educational background;
- Ho<sub>3</sub> Attitude of parents in Amechi Awkunanaw towards sexual abuse of girl-child is independent of gender.
- Ho<sub>4</sub> Attitude of parents in Amechi Awkunanaw towards sexual abuse of girl-child is independent of educational background.

### Method

The cross-sectional survey design was used for the study. This method was chosen because it is concerned with determining the status of the phenomena under study and permits the description of the situation in its natural setting (Best, 1977; Maudline and Parker, 1995). The population for the study consisted all parents in Amechi Awkunanaw, Enugu South local Government Area of Enugu State. 200

parents were purposively selected (100 males and 100 females). A simple random sampling technique was made possible during the April 2007 gubernatorial and house of assembly election (14/04/07), when people enthusiastically filed out, expecting to vote for the candidates of their choice. This technique was successful through the co-operation of three research assistants. The questionnaire was the instrument used for data collection. It was made up of three sections. Section A contained personal data dealing with gender and educational background of the respondents. Section B contained 8 items regarding parents' knowledge of girl-child sexual abuse problems. Section C has 8 items regarding the attitude of parents towards girl-child sexual abuse problems.

### Data collection and Analysis

In order to gain cooperation from the respondents, three research assistants, who were members of the community, and were also undergraduates of Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT) were used. The questionnaire was administered on the respondents. Some of the respondents, who were not literate, were assisted by the research assistants who elicited response from them after duly explaining the items to them, and making sure they fully understood them. Completed copies of the questionnaire were collected on the spot. All the copies were returned giving 100% return rate. All the 200 copies of the questionnaire were found useable for the study. Responses to the questionnaire were analyzed by first obtaining the frequencies (by counting the responses). Secondly, percentage was used for determining the level of knowledge of sexual abuse problems and the level of attitude towards girl-child's sexual abuse

among parents in Amechi Awkunanaw. This was achieved by adopting Okafor's (1977) criteria for describing level of knowledge. Thus a proportion of less than 20% was considered 'very low' (VL), 21%-39% 'low' (L), 40% - 59%; average (A), 60 - 80% high' (H), and above 80% 'very high' (VH), level of knowledge. In the like manner, a proportion of less than 20% was considered very poor (VP), 21-39% 'poor' (P), 40-59% 'average' (A), 60-80% 'good' (G), and above 80% 'very good' (VG), level of attitude. The chi-square test was used to verify the four postulated hypotheses of no significant differences. This was because the chi-

square test was suitable for comparing observed differences between two or more variables whose data are discrete and can be counted. Each of the hypotheses was verified at .05 probability level. The result was presented in tables and each followed by a brief discussion. The Statistical Computer Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) batch system was used for the analysis.

**Results**

**Table 1**  
**Frequency distribution of parents' knowledge of sexual abuse of girl-child in Amechi Awkunanaw (n=200)**

S/N	Items	F	%	Decision
1	Rape as a crime does not take place only in dark and hidden places	47	23.5	L
2	Rape is usually committed by persons known to the victim	50	25.1	L
3	Incestuous relationship can result abnormalities in offsprings resulting from to such pregnancies.	91	45.5	A
4	Victims suffer damages such as irritations of the genitals and sexually transmitted diseases.	106	53.2	A
5	Sexual abuse has led to increase in illegal abortion among our girls as a result of unwanted pregnancy, and may have ultimately led to severe bleeding and even death.	99	49.5	A
6	Victim of sexual abuse may withdraw from people and may become unusually hostile.	52	26.2	L
7	Victim of sexual abuse may not tolerate excellent sexual relationship with husband in future, leading to marital and gynecological problems.	86	43	A
8	Victim suffers symptoms such as stomach pains, bleeding, nausea and vomiting	94	47.4	A
	Overall	626	39.1	L

Filed survey, April, 2007  
Table 1 reveals a low level of knowledge on sexual abuse of girl-child among the

respondents (overall low level of 39.2%)

**Table 2: Parents' attitude towards girl-child sexual abuse**

S/N	Items	F	%	Decision
1	I will take serious my child's description of an experience in which she was touched by an adult in an inappropriate way.	88	43.8	A
2	I will advise my girl-child to submit to rape, if resistance does not wok instead of having her killed.	75	37.4	P
3	I will ask less questions immediately, about what happened, but instead provide her with emotional support and reassurances.	71	35.5	P
4	I will take her to hospital/physician for sexual assault treatment.	93	46.5	A
5	If there is possibility of sexually transmitted disease or pregnancy, I will seek medication.	76	38.1	P
6	I will keep the sexual abuse a private or family matter.	66	33.5	P
7	I will be concerned with assembling evidence that can be used to prosecute the attacker if known.	49	24.5	P
8	I will contact an official in my local child-protection system (child welfare worker or police).	61	30.5	P
	Overall	579	36.1	P

**Field survey, April 2007**

Table 2 shows (overall-36%) that the respondents have a poor level of attitude towards sexual abuse of girl-child.

**Table 3**

Summary of chi-square analysis of parents' level of knowledge on sexual abuse of girl-child by gender and educational background.

Variable	$\chi^2$ CaL	$\chi^2$ - Table	df	Decision
Gender	3.81	5.00	2	NS
Educational Background	1.32	9.49	4	NS

**Field survey, April 2007**

Table 3 shows the summary of chi-square analysis of levels of knowledge on sexual abuse by gender and educational background. It revealed that the null hypotheses which stated that the levels of knowledge on sexual abuse of children are independent of

gender and educational background were accepted.

**Table 4**  
**Summary of chi-square analysis of levels of attitude towards sexual abuse of girl-child by gender and educational background.**

Variable	X <sup>2</sup> CaL	X <sup>2</sup> - Table	df	Decision
Gender	1.66	5.99	2	NS
Educational Background	4.21	9.49	4	NS

**Field Survey, April 2007**

Table 4 shows that the level of attitude of the respondents is independent of gender and educational background. The hypotheses were therefore accepted.

**Discussion**

The findings in response to research question one revealed a low level (39.2) of knowledge of sexual abuse of girl-child among the respondents. This was not anticipated by the researcher. One had expected that the observed rampant cases of sexual abuse in the community resulting to unwanted pregnancies and suspected increase in number of people affected with HIV / AIDS, would have aroused the parents' curiosity to seek information on the issue, in order to take appropriate measures towards its prevention. However, such situation of poor knowledge (table 1) affirmed the earlier assertion of Chauhan that though it is the responsibility of the parents to inculcate good habits in their children and develop positive attitude towards sex problems, but that most parents are illiterate and lack the knowledge of sex problems.

The chi-square analysis indicated that level of knowledge of sexual abuse by respondents was independent of gender and educational

background. There seemed to be a controversy here, because one expects peoples' level of education to make a difference in any issue. However, this doubt could be cleared by the assertion of Irinoye, Oyeleye and Efeseke (2002) that despite increasing incidence of sexually transmitted disease/infections (STDs or STIs) and of reproductive tract infections (RTIs) associated with increasing sexual activity among adolescents -voluntarily or by coercion-across the globe; many parents do not talk to their children about sexuality until years after the child has been informed, or misinformed by friends and personal experience (Berger, 1984). Hence an event when a girl-child is sexually abused, may be an occasion for parents to show concern on knowledge of sexual abuse as a problem to the healthy sexuality development of the child.

The findings on in response to research question two revealed a poor level (36.1%) the attitude scale of the respondents towards sexual abuse of the girl-child. Specifically, the response that they would rather make sexual abuse a family affair could find explanations in the fact that the respondents likely relied on their cultural taboos against incestuous relationship. This was in line with assertions of Scarpitti and Andersen

that the incest taboo - strong cultural proscriptions against sexual relations between family members - allegedly prevented most people from engaging in incestuous behaviour. However, it is now-clear that the incest taboo was more a matter of keeping silent than actual prohibitions. However, where a father is involved, it is possible to imply the finding of Scarpitti and Andersen (1989) that mothers are often aware of the abuse, but are powerless to stop it; because of battering, mental illness, substance abuse, or other disabilities, or because they are responsible for large numbers of children. In addition, mothers' economic dependence on fathers may prevent them from confronting the situation.

Ironically, although facts exist that children are more likely to be sexually abused by an adult they know, but parents teach children to expect danger from strangers and not from trusted authority figures. Hence it is understandable that a violation of this trust is too terribly frightening and confusing. Sexual abuse involving rape should be handled as a specific type of aggression against the child as this will help to minimize the sexual significance of the trauma and to prevent lasting psychological reverberations. Hence Larson (1990) advocates that it is best that parents and physicians do not dwell on the sexual nature of the assault, otherwise the child may become insecure and anxious, without clearly understanding what is going on.

It is no surprise that the

respondents showed poor attitude to assembling evidence to prosecute the abuser, if known. This finds support in the confirmation of Morse and Furst that many crimes are never reported to the police, because the victims are unwilling to endure the painful processes of investigation and trial. Moreover, evidence abound that Police and the courts have a history of callous or even abusive treatment on rape victims. Indeed the female victim may be offered little sympathy and the police may adopt a cynical attitude suggesting that she had agreed to have sexual intercourse but later changed her mind afterwards. This attitude of the police is not too surprising taking into cognizance that most of them grew up in a culture that abound with stereotype about women. Finally, rape is not a crime that only takes place in dark alleys and involves strangers, because Lott, Reilly and Howard had reported that large proportion of rapes are committed by persons known to the victim and increasingly, that students report of "date rapes," including those on college campuses.

#### **Implication of the findings**

The finding of low level of knowledge and poor attitude towards sexual abuse of girl-child among the respondents showed that the respondents cannot validly create awareness in the younger ones, on factors that facilitate sexual abuse, and unbridled sexual interaction. This situation may have encouraged a continuing of the problem of sexual abuse of girl-child in the community. This situation is worsened if



the perpetrator is a family member. The psychological manipulation and humiliations accompanying such a situation may negatively affect the healthy development of the girl-child, before it is uncovered, if ever. Kempe and Kempe lamented that under the circumstances, victims have much higher than normal incidence of poor sexual adjustment and difficulties in sexual identity and preference. As teens, they are likely to run away from an intolerable situation; become pregnant; get involved in delinquency such as theft and substance abuse; engage in teenage prostitution and may attempt suicide.

#### **Conclusion and Recommendations.**

This study revealed a low level of knowledge (39.2%) and poor attitude (36.1%) towards sexual abuse of children among parents in Amechi Awkunanaw. This is an unfortunate situation which may have promoted a high incidence of sexual abuse cases in the community, leading to unpalatable consequences such as unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases including HIV / AIDS infection. This is a clear evidence of the parents' ignorance of their roles and responsibilities in protecting their children, especially the girl-child. Therefore, to facilitate the physical, mental and emotional development of the girl-child, it is recommended that:

1. Schools and community organizations within the locality should sponsor education/enlightenment programs to make parents aware of the pre-conditions for, symptoms of and consequences of sexual abuse, so they could take precautionary

measures towards preventing sexual abuse of young persons, or be alert to help victims early enough.

2. When a girl child has unexplained injuries or pain or exhibits sudden changes in behaviour it is wise to seek professional help.
3. If the girl-child has suffered a major trauma such as violence, sexual or physical abuse, or rape, psychotherapy can help the girl-child cope with reality of the situation and restore her self esteem.
4. Since vulnerability to sexual abuse is fostered by ignorance, education on Family-Life and Emergency Health Issues (FLEHI) in the schools, should begin at younger ages, and should include not just the specifics of biology but also discussion of appropriate relationship between adults and children, and between men and women. This may not only prevent young girls from being victims, it may also help them become adults who would not permit abuse to occur.
5. Parents, teachers and individuals should be vigilant to assist children by reporting of suspected cases of sexual abuse to the law enforcement agents, department of social welfare and child protection agencies.

## References

49,692-697

- Berger K.S. (1994). *The Developing Person through the Life Span* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed). New York: Worth Publishers.
- Best, J.W. (1977). *Research in Education*. Englewood Cliff Billingham, Prentice Hall Inc.
- R.E. & Sack, A.R. (1986). Courtship and Violence: The Interactive status of the relationship. *Journal of Adolescent Research* 1315 - 326
- Boulton, M. & Smith, P.K. (1989). Issues in the study of children's rough - and - tumble play. In M.N. Bloch and A.D Pellegrini (eds.). *The Ecological Context of Children's play*. Norwood, N.J: Ablex
- Brownmiller, S. (1985). *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Chauhan, S.S. (1981). *Advanced Educational Psychology*. New Dehli: Viskas Publishing House.
- Comb, B. Hales, D. & Williams, B. (1991). *An Invitation to Health* London; The Benjamin/Chumming Pub. Co. Inc.
- Finkelhor, D. (1984). What's wrong with sex between adults and children? Ethics and the problems of sexual abuse: *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*,
- Finkehor, D. (1998). *Sexually Victimized Children*. New York: the Free Press.
- Herman, J. (1981). *Father-Daughter Incest* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Irinoye, O.O, Oyeleye, B.A. & Efeseke, A.N (2000). Precautionary Measures used by Adolescents to Prevent Sexually Transmitted Infections and Pregnancy in Ile-Ife. *Nigerian School Health Journal* 12 (1&2), (18-27).
- Kempe, R.S., & Kempe C.H. (1984). *The Common Secret: Sexual Abuse of Children and Adolescents*. New York: Freeman.
- Larson, D.E. (1990). *Mayo Clinic Family Health Book*. New York: Morrow and Company, Inc.
- Lott, B. Reilly, M.E., & Howard, D.R. (1982). "Sexual assault and harassment: A Campus Community Case Study; Signs. *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 8 296319.
- Maudline, W. & Parker, P. (1995). Direct and Judgmental Measure of Family Planning Programme Input. *Family Planning Series* 26(5)281-295.
- Mausksch, I. G (1981). *Implementing Changes in Nursing*. Mosby: St Louis.

- Mezzy, G. & King, M. (1989). The Effects of Sexual Assault on Men: A Survey of 22 Victims. *Seventeen Magazine Survey*. Wellesley MA: Centre for Research on Women.
- Psychological Medicine*, (19205-09).
- Morse, D & Furst, M. (1982). *Women Under Stress*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co.
- Okafor, R.U. (1997). Sexual Knowledge and Sources of Sexual Information of Secondary School Students in Anambra State, Nigeria. *Health and Movement Education Journal*, 1 (1) 9-19.
- Russell, D. (1986). *The Secret Traumatic Incest in the Lives of Girls and Women*. New York: Basic Books.
- Scarpitti, F.R & Andersen, M.L (1989). *Social Problems*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Stein N. (1993). "No Laughing Matter: Sexual Harassment in K. 12 Schools," in Emilie Buchward, ed., *Transforming a Rape Culture*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Edition.
- Stein, N. Marshall, N.L., & Tropp, L.R. (1993). *Secrets in Public: Sexual Harassment in our Schools – A Report on the Results of a*