

## **OPINIONS OF PARENTS IN IMO STATE TOWARD CHILD ABUSE PRACTICES**

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### **Abstract**

*This study investigated opinions of parents in selected Local Government Areas in Imo State toward child abuse practices. The cross-sectional survey design was adopted for the study. The sample for the study comprised 789 adult parents randomly drawn from three Local Government Areas. The sample consisted of 363 male and 426 female parents. A self structured and validated 4-point scale questionnaire was used to elicit data. The reliability index of the questionnaire resulting from Crombach alpha computation was 0.65. Mean scores were computed for collected data. T-test and ANOVA statistical formulae were employed for the analysis of hypotheses. The findings revealed that majority of the respondents exhibited positive opinion toward all the types of child abuse practices studied. The findings also revealed that high proportion of parents strongly agreed that many children were victims of multiple abuses. The opinions of parents on child abuse practices did not vary by gender and age cohorts. It was therefore concluded that parents in Imo State do not protect the rights of children as provided by the Child Rights and Welfare Acts. It was therefore recommended that children's rights Ombus – people or children's commissioners should be appointed by the government. Their official duty should be to represent the interest of children and investigate as well as address all forms of reports regarding child abuse practices in Imo State.*

## **Introduction**

Protection of children from any form of abuse is central to the existence and sustenance of modest civilization in Nigeria. Hence in recent years, concern for the child abuse issue has become increasingly dramatic involving parents, teachers, social workers, the police and court challenges. Article XVI of Rights and Welfare of the Child (Olanmi, 2007), stipulates that specific legislative, administrative, social and educational measures shall be taken by State Parties to the Charter on Human Rights to protect the child from all forms of abuse while in the care of a parent, legal guardian or school authority or any other person who has the care of the child (Olanmi, 2007). The Act defines the child (UNICEF, 2007) as one who is below the age of eighteen years. Part one of the Act (Olanmi, 2007) provides that every child has an inherent right to: survival and development, name and nationality; freedom of expression, association, thought, conscience and religion; protection of privacy; right to education, recreation, cultural activities, health and health services, and shall be protected from all forms of economic exploitation.

Child abuse (African Network for Prevention and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect) (ANPPCAN), 2006) is an act

of omission or commission, physical or psychological mistreatment or neglect of a child by his/her parents, guardians, care giver or other adults that may endanger the child's physical, psychological or emotional health and development. Child abuse is a crime of harming a child in a physical, sexual or emotional way (Hornby, 2011). It encompasses acts of disregard and contempt for the rights of the child (Olanmi, 2007).

A child protection (Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), 2011) is defined as keeping children safe from child abuse and neglect, while child neglect is the failure of parents or other caregivers, for reasons not solely due to poverty, to provide the child with needed, age appropriate care, including food, clothing, shelter, protection from harm, supervision appropriate to the child's development, hygiene, education and medical care (Child Welfare League of America, 2011).

Several opinions and submissions of different authorities from foreign and local sources (Olukoshi & Aminu, 1992; Vasuder, 1993; Toberts, Doren & Thornton, 2002; Bicklery & Beech, 2002; Arizona's Child Abuse Info Centre, 2003; College, 2004; Mason, 2005; Igbokwe, 2006; Onuzulike 2006, Mangold, 2008) corroborate that the World in general and Nigeria in particular is

plagued with incidences of child abuse and neglect. Prevalence of physical, mental or emotional injury, mal-treatment, torture, lack of access to rest, leisure and enjoyment had been identified by many authors. Other abuses include lack of medical care, inadequate nutrition, lack of safe drinking water, poor hygiene and sanitized environment. Exposure to female genital mutilation has been widely substantiated by the authors. Child pornography, child trafficking, introducing

psychoactive drugs and use of

Child Abuse and Neglect Information (2006), emotional abuse is the acts or omissions by the parents or other caregivers that have caused or could cause serious behavioural, cognitive, emotional or mental disorders. Emotional abuse can also be seen as any attitude, behaviour or failure to act on the part of the caregiver which interferes with a child's mental health, social development or sense of self worth. Emotional abuse is an often misunderstood form of trauma that can cause damage to a child's developing brain, resulting

... These forms

teachers reported that they were prone to punish children with beating especially for behaviours implying moral corruption. Humiliating verbal abuse (emotional abuse) was opined to be experienced by fifty percent of the children; physical abuse (including insufficient care of the child's hygiene, clothing, nutrition, leaving the child unattended) was perceived to be experienced by one third of children. Among various forms of child abuse, sexual abuse was least noticed by respondents. Other scholarly studies (Drake, 1999; Dunebook, 2003: Child W-16

abuse while allegations of emotional abuse were the least reported, two percent. Dunebook (2003) established abuse rate of 1.7 victims per 1,000 female children and 0.4 victims per 1,000 male children.

Studies of Corwin & Olafson (1999), Gudin (1999) and National Child Abuse and Neglect System (2006) agree that the critical effect of abuse in most children is withdrawal leading to depression and lack of concentration in school. Neglected children according to the authors have the most

plagued with incidences of child abuse and neglect. Prevalence of physical, mental or emotional injury, mal-treatment, torture, lack of access to rest, leisure and enjoyment had been identified by many authors. Other abuses include lack of medical care, inadequate nutrition, lack of safe drinking water, poor hygiene and sanitized environment. Exposure to female genital mutilation has been widely substantiated by the authors. Child pornography, child trafficking, introducing children to use of narcotic drugs and use of children in criminal activities as well as abduction and stealing have also been widely reported. Child begging, child hawking, child prostitution and sexual abuse cases are regularly published in newspapers. Straus (2004) perceived physical abuse as one of the forms of abuse which persistently occurs in schools especially in the form of correction or corporal punishment. Corporal punishment is the use of physical force with the intention of causing bodily pain, for the purpose of correction or control. Sexual abuse is the employment, use of persuasion, inducement, enticement, coercion of any child to engage in, or assist any other person to engage in any sexual explicit conduct or simulation of such conduct for the purpose of producing a visual depiction of such conduct (Khartic, 2004). According to National Cleaning House on

Child Abuse and Neglect Information (2006), emotional abuse is the acts or omissions by the parents or other caregivers that have caused or could cause serious behavioural, cognitive, emotional or mental disorders. Emotional abuse can also be seen as any attitude, behaviour or failure to act on the part of the caregiver which interferes with a child's mental health, social development or sense of self worth. Emotional abuse is an often misunderstood form of trauma that can cause damage to a child's developing brain, resulting in long-term learning difficulties. These forms of abuses are often found within social institutions like families and specific organizations (Karen & Tallon, 2010) such as Athletic Organizations, Child Care Centres, Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), Boys Scouts, Red Cross Society, Big Brother, the Church and so on.

In the omnibus studies conducted in seven Eastern European Countries (Sajkowska, 2011) among adult citizens on their perceptions of the scale of child abuse among parents, it was concluded that: prevalence of corporal punishment of children was high; parents behaviours toward their children should be regulated by law; acceptance of interference in the way parents treat their children was more than fifty per cent. A significant proportion of parent

teachers reported that they were prone to punish children with beating especially for behaviours implying moral corruption. Humiliating verbal abuse (emotional abuse) was opined to be experienced by fifty percent of the children; physical abuse (including insufficient care of the child's hygiene, clothing, nutrition, leaving the child unattended) was perceived to be experienced by one third of children. Among various forms of child abuse, sexual abuse was least noticed by respondents. Other scholarly studies (Drake, 1999; Dunebook, 2003; Child Welfare League of America, 2003; Khartri 2004; Human Rights Report in Nigeria, 2010) reported other child abuses including denial of freedom of speech, thought, fear, choice and the right to make decisions as well as ownership over one's body as impediments to children's healthy growth and well being. The Wang & Holton (2008) study amassed the following figures regarding child abuse; a total of 763 cases of child abuse and neglect were reported and 566 of these cases were indicated; fifty four percent of the cases were on neglect; twenty-five percent involved physical abuse; twelve percent involved sexual abuse; and nine percent were unspecified. Children's Action Alliance Study (2002) reported six percent sexual abuse, sixty percent neglect, thirty-two percent physical

abuse while allegations of emotional abuse were the least reported, two percent. Dunebook (2003) established abuse rate of 1.7 victims per 1,000 female children and 0.4 victims per 1,000 male children.

Studies of Corwin & Olafson (1999), Gudin (1999) and National Child Abuse and Neglect System (2006) agree that the critical effect of abuse in most children is withdrawal leading to depression and lack of concentration in school. Neglected children according to the authors have the worst delay in language comprehension and expression while the psychologically neglected children score lowest in intelligence quotient tests.

Thus, theoretical and previous empirical studies had proved that globally and locally there is high scale of a wide range of child abuse, and opinions concerning the dynamics of the various aspects of child abuse are polarized, reflecting basic differences in values of respondents. Of great importance are the responses of adult care givers especially parents who are endowed with direct child care responsibilities and one of the principal institutional arenas to which the child's rights legislation in Nigeria must be implemented. The central problem in this present study therefore, was to account for the differing responses toward child abuse practices among parents in selected Local

Government Areas in Imo State, Nigeria and to assess individual characteristics influencing these response positions.

**Five research questions and two hypotheses were postulated to guide the study**

**Research questions**

1. What are the opinions of parents toward child abuse practices in Imo State?
2. What is the opinion of the parents on physical abuse practices?
3. What is the opinion of the parents on sexual abuse practices?
4. What is the opinion of parents on emotional abuse practices?
5. What is the opinion of parents on child neglect?

**Hypotheses**

1. There is no significant difference in the opinion of parents in selected Local Government Areas in Imo State on child abuse practices according to gender.
2. There is no significant difference among opinion of parents in selected Local Government Areas in Imo State on child abuse cases according to their various ages.

**Methodology**

The cross sectional survey design was employed for the study. This design was deemed the most appropriate for the study because it collected data from members of a population with one or more distinct characteristics and had been used in similar studies by Khartri (2004), National Child Abuse and Neglect System (2006), and Sajkwoska (2011),

The population studied involved all adult male and female parents in three selected Local Government Areas in Imo State totaling 262,127 (National Population Commission, 2006). The sample used for the study was 789. The sample consisted of 363 male parents and 426 female parents, representing five percent of the population.

Random sampling was used to select three Local Government Areas; Obowo, Isu and Ngor-Okpala. Fourteen communities were chosen from Obowo Local Government Area while eight communities were selected from Isu Local Government Area. Twenty-one communities were selected from Ngor-Okpala Local Government Area. The male and female subjects were serialized. To select five percent from each category, every eighteenth adult parent in each array was chosen which yielded 363 male parents and 426 female parents as total sample. **Primary**

data were collected from the respondents using a self constructed four-point scale questionnaire. The five research questions and two null hypotheses postulated for the study guided the construction of the questionnaire. The four-point opinion survey questionnaire was structured as follows: Strongly Agree = 4 points, Agree = 3 points, Disagree = 2 points and Strongly Disagree = 1 point. A criterion mean point ( $4 + 3 + 2 + 1 = 10 = 2.5$ ) was established to

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decide either positivity or negativity in opinion of parents toward child abuse practices. Any point above 2.5 was deemed positive opinion while below 2.5 was negative. The reliability index of the instrument resulting from Cronbach alpha computation was 0.65. The instrument was administered with the aid of five trained research supervisees of the author who administered, interpreted and retrieved copies of the questionnaire from all the consenting respondents on the spot. The hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance employing the t-test and ANOVA statistical formulae.

## Findings

**Table 1** Summary of respondent's opinion on different types of child abuse practices.

Types of child abuse practice	Response options						
	SA	A	SD	D	Total	x	Decision
Physical abuse	187	1654	1409	1377	6312	8.92	Positive
Sexual abuse	1320	1566	1404	1233	5523	7.0	"
Emotional abuse	1874	1499	1061	1061	5523	7.0	"
Child neglect	1077	1052	910	906	3945	5.0	"
<b>Grand total</b>	<b>6163</b>	<b>5771</b>	<b>4792</b>	<b>4577</b>	<b>21303</b>	<b>6.98</b>	

Table 1 shows that generally, the mean scores obtained relative to opinions of parents on child abuse practices on all the range of child abuse issues were above the defined normative mean. Since the total grand mean of 6.98 was superior to the criterion mean of 2.5, it was concluded that majority of the respondents exhibited positive opinion toward child abuse practices.



**Table 2** Result on opinioon of parents toward physical abuse practices

S/N	Statements on physical abuse practices	Response options					Mean score
		SA	A	D	SD	NX	
1.	It is sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a good and hard spanking	97 (97)	129 (258)	228 (648)	335 (1340)	789 2379	3.0
2.	When children do something especially good, they should be rewarded for it	369 (1476)	227 (681)	107 (212)	87 (87)	789 2456	3.1
3.	As a general rule, children should be seen and not heard	178 (178)	81 (162)	251 (753)	279 1116	789 2209	2.8
4.	Children should never be allowed to hit each other when they have argument	308 (1220)	285 (855)	111 (222)	88 (88)	789 2385	3.0
5.	It is okay for parents to slap their teenage children who talk back to them	32 (32)	180 (360)	278 (834)	299 (1196)	789 2422	3.1
6.	Parents who spare the rod will spoil the child	255 (1020)	240 (720)	191 (382)	103 (103)	789 2225	2.8
7.	You have to be careful not to praise children too much or it may go to their head	343 (1372)	236 (708)	123 (246)	89 (89)	789 2415	3.1
8.	Most parents do not discipline their children often enough	293 (1173)	276 (828)	121 (242)	99 (99)	789 2341	2.9
Total					23.8		
Grand Mean					2.98		

Table 2 shows that the mean scores obtained for each of the statements on physical abuse practices were higher than the normative mean of 2.5. With a grand mean score of 2.98 superior to the criterion score of 2.5, it was cocncluded that greater proportion of parents exhibited positive opinion toward physical abuse practices

**Table 3** Result on opinion of parents toward sexual abuse practices

S/N	Statements on sexual abuse practices	Response options					Mean score
		SA	A	D	SD	NX	
9.	Some children are sexually abused by older children	295 (1180)	217 (651)	212 (424)	65 (65)	789 (2320)	2.9
10.	Most children who are sexually abused do not belong to the child's family	82 (82)	129 (258)	291 (873)	287 (1143)	789 (2361)	2.9
11.	Most of the time children are sexually abused when they are alone at night and outside their home	315 (1260)	278 (834)	107 (212)	89 (89)	789 (2395)	3.0
12.	Sexually abused boys are usually not homosexual	276 (1104)	279 (837)	127 (254)	107 (107)	789 (2302)	2.9
13.	Children from reputable families are not victims of sexual abuse	112 (112)	233 (466)	235 (705)	209 (836)	789 (2113)	2.7
14.	Only young girls are victims of sexual abuse	130 (130)	219 (438)	215 (645)	225 (900)	789 (2113)	2.7
15.	Majority of sexual abuse perpetrators are retarded or mentally ill	110 (110)	211 (422)	217 (651)	251 (1004)	789 (2184)	2.8
<b>Total</b>		<b>1320</b>	<b>1566</b>	<b>1404</b>	<b>1233</b>	<b>5523</b>	<b>19.9</b>
<b>Grand Mean</b>							<b>2.84</b>

Table 3 indicates that the mean scores obtained on opinion of parents toward sexual abuse practices on all the seven statements were above the normative mean of 2.5. The grand mean of 2.84 was equally higher than the normative mean. The implication was that the respondents demonstrated positive opinion on sexual abuse practices.

**Table 4 Result on the opinion of parents on emotional abuse practices.**

S/N	Statements on emotional abuse practices	Response options					Mean score
		SA	A	D	SD	NX	
16.	Partner/colleagues/friends try to trap children to do things to show that they are	356 (1424)	226 (678)	119 (238)	88 (88)	789 2428	3.1
17.	Most times parents disclose personal information of children to someone who discloses them to others	402 (1608)	206 (618)	105 (210)	76 (76)	789 2412	3.1
18.	Making fun of children or joke around about their flaw is an abuse	381 (1524)	241 (723)	112 (224)	55 (55)	789 2526	3.2
19.	Making children feel that every thing is their fault is an abuse	325 (1300)	278 (834)	116 (232)	70 (70)	789 2436	3.1
20.	Sometimes children are been humiliated in front of other children	312 (1248)	217 (651)	171 (343)	89 (89)	789 2330	2.9
21.	Most parents laugh at children's mistakes or admit to the child's shortcoming and weakness	91 (91)	169 (338)	237 (711)	292 (1168)	789 2308	2.9
22.	It is sometimes normal to use abusive words on children like you are ugly or you are not smart	27 (27)	162 (327)	209 (627)	391 (1564)	789 2542	3.2
<b>Total</b>		<b>1894</b>	<b>1499</b>	<b>1069</b>	<b>1061</b>	<b>5523</b>	<b>21.5</b>
<b>Grand Mean</b>							<b>3.07</b>

Relative to statements on opinion of respondents toward emotional abuse practices, table 4 shows that the mean scores obtained for each item exceeded 2.5 criterion mean score set for decision. The grand mean of 3.09 obtained from computation equally surpassed the normative mean; hence the conclusion that the respondents held positive opinion toward emotional abuse practices.

**Table 5** Result on opinion of parents toward child neglect

S/N	Statements on physical child neglect	Response options					Mean score
		SA	A	D	SD	NX	
23.	Sometimes a child's nutrition can be ignored due to poverty	348 (1392)	222 (666)	134 (268)	85 (85)	789 2411	3.1
24.	Children should be ignored outside the home when they behave wrongly	45 (45)	134 (268)	241 (723)	369 (1476)	789 2572	3.1
25.	Preventing the child from receiving special education is neglect	302 (1208)	281 (843)	146 (292)	60 (60)	789 2403	3.1
26.	Children should not be provided with adequate affection to avoid pampering	71 (71)	169 (338)	221 (663)	328 (1312)	789 2384	3.0
27.	Failing to get appropriate health care for a child is neglect	311 (1244)	246 (738)	168 (336)	64 (64)	789 2382	3.0
<b>Total</b>		<b>1077</b>	<b>1052</b>	<b>910</b>	<b>906</b>	<b>3945</b>	<b>15.3</b>
<b>Grand Mean</b>							<b>3.06</b>

Table 5 shows that parents who participated in the study had positive opinion toward practices that result in child neglect. The table shows that the calculated mean scores for each of the five statements on child neglect practices as well as the grand mean score obtained (3.06) exceeded the normative mean of 2.5, hence the decision

**Test of Hypotheses**

**Hypotheses 1**

**Null hypothesis:** There is no significant difference in the opinion of parents in selected Local Government Areas in Imo State on child abuse practices according to gender.

**Table 6 Result of t-test of difference in opinion of male and female parents on child abuse practices.**

Gender	SA	A	D	SD	Total	$\bar{x}$
Male	2770 (32.6%)	2082 (24.6%)	1706 (20.1%)	1920 (22.6%)	8478 (100)	23.35
Female	2778 (26.7%)	2816 (27.1%)	2533 (24.3%)	2283 (21.9%)	10410 (100)	24.43
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>5548</b>	<b>4898</b>	<b>4239</b>	<b>4203</b>	<b>18888</b>	

t- calculated = -0.17

t- table value = 1.96

df = 787

Level of significance = 0.05

**Decision**

The obtained data show that the calculated t-value was -0.17. Given that  $\alpha = 0.05$  from the t distribution table at 787 degrees of freedom, therefore the t- calculated of -0.17 was less than the t critical table value of 1.96. The null hypothesis was thus accepted. It was therefore concluded that there was no significant difference between the opinion of male and female parents on child abuse practices.

## Hypothesis 2

There is no significant difference among opinion of parents in selected Local Government Areas in Imo State on child abuse practices according to their various ages.

**Table 7 Result of ANOVA test of difference in opinion of parents between the age of 20 – 39 years, 40 – 59 years and 60 years and above on child abuse practices**

<b>Sources of Variance</b>	<b>Sum of Squares (SS)</b>	<b>Degrees of Freedom (df)</b>	<b>Mean Squares (MS)</b>	<b>Cal. F Value</b>	<b>Critical F Value</b>
Among Groups	224.72	2	112.36	.0019	2.99
Within Groups	44513380.6	786	56632.79		
<b>Total</b>	<b>44513594.78</b>	<b>788</b>	<b>57241.57</b>		

The above table disclosed that the obtained F ratio of .0019 did not exceed the critical table F-value of 2.99, for df 2 and 786 at the .05 level of significance. Since the observed difference between the means did not exceed the F- critical value needed to reject the hypothesis, it was concluded that there is no significant difference among the mean scores of parents of different age groups studied on child abuse practices.

## Discussion of findings

One major finding of this study was that parents who participated in the study were of a positive opinion on all the types of child abuse practices studied. One possible explanation for this result is probably the current awareness created by Governor Rochas Okorochoa's rescue agenda, which has proposed severe penalty on parents who abuse their children in any form, including restraining them from benefiting from his free education programme. The present result is in consonance with the findings of Sajkowska (2011), English (2011), National Centre on Child Abuse Prevention Research (1999) and Administration for Children and Families

(2004) who in separate studies to ascertain the extent and consequences of child maltreatment established that children in their respective study areas were subjected to different types of abuses.

Too, the highest proportion of the parents exhibited positive opinion on physical abuse practices. The respondents strongly opposed physical abuse in their opinions. The findings show that the respondents indeed demonstrated general disapproval in using corporal punishment to discipline children. This finding contradicts the finding of Sajkowska (2001) in Bulgana where the highest proponents of physical maltreatment were found. Parents participating in the study demonstrated positive opinion on sexual abuse practices. They strongly admitted that most times children were sexually abused when they were alone at night or outside their home. This result is in agreement with earlier related studies conducted by Mangold (2008) and Mason (2005) who found that 18.6% and 9.9% of children in their study areas were sexually abused.

Although verbal abuse of children seems to be glossed over by parents, the opinion of the respondents suggests however that they perceived emotional neglect as a high level abuse. In the respondents opinions humiliating verbal abuse of children are

condemnable. This is in consonance with the finding of Mason (2005) in which 60.5% of children were perceived to have suffered from emotional neglect.

Opinion between male and female respondents on child abuse practices did not reveal stronger child right implementation ideology for any sex. This is evident in the inference from test of hypothesis which failed to favour any cohort as being superior in opinion on child abuse practices. This result did not justify the institutionally and culturally defined job of child care and related domestic responsibilities bestowed on women. However, this finding is in consonance with the findings of Bickley & Beeck (2002) whose findings clearly demonstrated that whether male or female, respondents had significant impact on opinion on child abuse practices.

### **Conclusions**

Based on the research questions and the corresponding hypotheses, the following major findings emerged from the study: Generally, the respondents demonstrated positive opinions on all the types of child abuse practices studied.

Parents strongly agreed that many children were victims of multiple abuse practices;

Nearly 50 percent of the parents believed that children should be rewarded when they do something especially good;

Parents strongly upheld that most times children were sexually abused when they were alone or outside their home;

The opinion of the parents was that most parents disclosed personal information of their children to people who disclosed same to others

The respondents strongly disagreed that children should be ignored outside the home when they misbehave; and

Gender and age did not pose variation in the opinions towards child abuse practices among the parents..

### **Recommendations**

On the basis of the conclusions drawn from the findings, it was recommended that children's rights ombuds people or children's commissioners whose official governmental duty is to represent the interests of children by receiving reports, investigating and addressing all forms of reports by individuals regarding child abuse practices, should be appointed by the government.

More sensitization by the media, NGOS, corporations on child abuse practices should be intensified for the general public.

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