

CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT: AN ADVOCACY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the possible impact of child abuse and neglect on the individual child and the society. The phenomenon of child abuse is regarded or seen as a situation in which a child is maltreated physically, psychologically or sexually by parents, guardians, relatives, caretakers, siblings, strangers or employers. The problem of child abuse became an essential academic issue in the 1960's when it received modern formulation by the American medical establishment as 'the battered-child syndrome'. There is concern over the immediate and remote impacts of the syndrome, especially in terms of personality development and health. This paper addressed this rising trend of child abuse and concluded that increased attention should be given by the society at large to the issue, sine it portrays grave danger to the well being of the child and produce and society after all.

Key Words: *Child, Abuse, Neglect, and Society*

INTRODUCTION

Child Abuse is a universal problem. It has existed and flourished throughout history in all cultures and ethnic background. Parents/Caregivers had unrestricted authority to do to a child whatever was deemed necessary, thus it gave rise to them using their child as profit as such considering them as property, which is an abuse. Most of these parents or caregivers do not intend to hurt their children but abuse is defined by the effect on the child not the motivation of the parent or caregivers (Finkelhor, 1986).

Tens of thousands of children each year are traumatized by physical, sexual and emotional abusers or by caregivers who neglect them, making child abuse as it is, shocking and disturbing. Most of us can't imagine what would make an adult use violence against a child, and the worse the behavior is, the more unimaginable it seems. But the incidence of parents and caregivers consciously, even willfully, committing acts that harm the very children they are supposed to be nurturing is a sad fact of human society that cuts across all lines of ethnicity and class.

Whether the abuse is rooted in the perpetrator's mental illness, substance abuse or inability to cope, the psychological result for each abused child is often the same: deep emotional scars and feelings of worthlessness. These abused children often carry this pain into adulthood, suffering all sorts of psychological traumas and neuroses.

Despite this knowledge, child abuse continues in disturbing numbers as such the resulting injuries that children and youths suffer are still far from understood, thus gave rise to this study.

Who is a child and what is abuse?. A child is a person who has not attained the chronological age of 18 years, while abuse refers to injury inflicted upon a child; which could be physically or psychologically. Neglect refers to inadequacies in the provision of psychological and physical needs such as good clothing, parental care, and emotional involvement (National Center of Child Abuse and Neglect, 1978).

This abuse is often based on the bonds of intimacy, trust and dependency. It is essentially seen as treating a person or even an animal in a cruel, inhuman or violent way. Thus, integrating the variables, child abuse and neglect can then be viewed as a situation in which a child is being maltreated either physically, psychologically or even sexually by parents, guardians, relatives, caretakers, strangers, siblings or employers.

The definition of child abuse and neglect have been very difficult to construe; due to its different manifestations with times and culture (Jekayinfa & Olawepo, 2011). However, Herren-Kohi (2005) defined child abuse and neglect as depriving children of their basic needs for safety, health, normal growth and development. Further, De Paul and Gonzalez (2001) saw child abuse as the ill-treatment of children in which a child sustains injury due to intentional acts of an adult. Also, the African network for prevention and protection against child abuse and neglect (ANPPCAN) construed child abuse and neglect as the intentional, unintentional or well intentioned acts that endanger the physical, health, emotional moral and the educational welfare of the child.

Originally, Kempe and Helfer (1980) in their "battered child syndrome" described child abuse and neglect as a situation in which a child suffers serious physical injury inflicted upon him/her by any means other than accidental means, is going without necessary and basic physical care or is growing up under conditions which threaten his physical or emotional survival. In that wise, UNICEF (1986) described child abuse as the "portion of harm to children that results from human action and inaction that is proscribed, proximate and preventable.

Going by modern standards, it seems that for centuries, the Nigerian child and indeed the African child was not accorded rights, but privileges. This is perhaps a fall out of all

traditional and cultural practices, which rested governance on adults, especially male adults. Hence, they were loved, but where over protected to the point of denial of certain forms of freedom, including freedom of expression and opinion. It is gratifying however, that due to international pressure, many African countries (Nigeria inclusive) have recognized the urgency to accord and protect the rights of children, as well as ensure their proper development. UNICEF and the National Policy on Children canvass that the following rights be accorded to children:

- Protection against indecent and inhuman treatment like abuse and neglect.
- Protection in a conducive environment to promote early stimulation to learning for the child.
- Entitlement of every child to receive compulsory basic education and equal opportunity for higher education.
- Promotion and encouragement of child-friendly principles in all relevant institutions.

Unfortunately, most Nigerian children have not been accorded these rights. Indeed, it is common to see many children on the streets of most cities hawking goods, playing and gallivanting when they are supposed to be in schools. This is neglect and abuse on the individual child.

Child abuse is a serious global problem that is deeply rooted in cultural, economic and social practices and it occurs in a variety of ways and places. According to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDA, 2006) reported by Gelles (2009), in the United States for instance, more than 900,000 children suffer severe or life threatening injury and some (1,000 to 2,000) children die as a result of abuse and those who survived often suffer emotional trauma that may take long for the bruises to be healed. In the same vein, Nigerian society is still plagued with incidence of child labour, child maltreatment, child marriage, child trafficking, neglect and child prostitution.

According to the publication titled child maltreatment 2008, the most recent and reliable source of child abuse and neglect data available, children are more likely to be the victims of neglect than any other type of abuse. In 2008, 73.3% of all Child abuse victims were victims of neglect. Physical abuse victims represented 16.1% of all victims, sexual abuse 9.1% of all victims and emotional abuse 7.3% of all victims. The remaining 4.2% of child victims experienced other types of maltreatments such as abandonment, threat of harm and in-utero drug exposure.

FORMS OF CHILD ABUSE/NEGLECT

Child abuse can be broadly categorized into four perspectives; physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse & child exploitation (child labour).

Physical Abuse/Neglect

It is the infliction of physical pain or injury on the child. Its most common form is subjecting a child to severe beating or extreme punishment for minor issues. It is also the denial of care, adequate nutrition and medical care. It leads to malfunctions of the child's body system.

Emotional Abuse/Neglect:

It is also known as verbal abuse, mental abuse or psychological maltreatment. It is seen "as the acts or omissions by the parents or other caregivers that have caused or could cause serious behavioural, cognitive, emotional or mental disorder", (National Clearing House on Child Abuse and Neglect Information, 2006). Emotional abuse includes spurning, exploiting, terrorizing, isolating and neglecting. It is the least understood but yet the most prevalent, cruelest and destructive type of abuse. It tends to attract the child concept. Khartin, 2004; pointed out that the resulting effect often times leads to depression and lack of concentration in school on the child.

Sexual Abuse/Neglect:

It is seen as taking advantage of a child's tender years and innocence in order to subject the child to engage in sexual activities that he/she does not fully understand and to which they cannot give any informed consent. Sexual abuse may be purely verbal rather than physical. It can take many forms and it is not restricted to only sexual intercourse, it covers a wide range of behaviour such as incest, molestation, statutory rape, prostitution, indecent treatment, abduction and defilement. These sexually abused children tend to experience emotional problems from a feeling of guilt and shame (Corwin & Olafsan, 1997).

Child Exploitation:

It is often referred to as child labour or child trafficking. It involves the use of a child in work or other activities for the benefit of others, these works are at times done under conditions that are harmful to the children's health. Newton (2001) defined child exploitation as a systematic process of using children to work with little or no compensation and consideration for their health and safety. These children do works that are above their ages and at times work long hours without food. By the time they attain adulthood, they have been physically, emotionally, morally and intellectually damaged or assaulted.

IMPACT AND CONSEQUENCES OF CHILD ABUSE

Child abuse and neglect have immediate and long-term consequences. In addition to negatively impacting on the child, child abuse and neglect impacts on the family, school, society and even future generations. Major impacts and consequences on the individual child are as follows:

Lack of Trust and Relationship Difficulties:

Abuse by a primary caregiver tends to damage the most fundamental relationship required as a child. Without this basic, it is very difficult to learn to trust people or know who is trustworthy; this can lead to difficulty in establishing and maintaining various forms of relationships (including marital relationships) due to fear of being controlled or abused (Scarfuto, 2010).

Trouble Regulating Emotions:

Abused children cannot express emotions safely. As a result, their emotion gets stuffed down and eventually manifests in unexpected ways. Adult survivors of child abuse struggle with unexplained anxiety, depression, or anger. Many a time, they turn to alcohol and drugs just to numb out the painful feelings (Smith, & Segal, 2012).

Core feelings of being “Worthless or Damaged”

If a child has been severely abused verbally especially with foul words, it is very difficult for that child to overcome core feelings. He/she tends to experience it as a reality. The child as an adult always feels worthless (cannot add a value) and the stigma and shame surrounding the abuse, often especially result to the child struggling with a feeling of being damaged. The child also tends to exhibit this behavior as an adult (Prevent Child Abuse, New York, 2003).

Psychological Development

These abuses tend to impact on the child's language development as well as their physical, mental, emotional and cognitive development. The abused child is at greater risk of experiencing academic problems and school failure. The stress of chronic abuse is seen to cause a “hyper arousal” response by certain areas of the brain, which may result in hyperactivity, sleep disturbances and anxiety as well as increased vulnerability to posttraumatic stress disorder, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, learning and memory difficulties (Perry 2001: Dallam, 2001). These abuses on the child, have also been shown in some cases to cause important regions of the brain to fail to form or grow properly, resulting in impaired development (D^a Bellis & Thomas, 2003).

Also, A UNICEF report on child well being (2006) revealed that childhood emotional and sexual abuse are strongly related to adult depressive syndrome under the following factors:

- The child tends to have low self-esteem.
- They are passive and fearful
- They display aggressive and demanding behaviour
- They experience difficulty relating to other children and adults
- They tend to exhibit suicidal tendencies

Impact and Consequences on the Family and Society

Perhaps the most important impact or consequence of child abuse and neglect is the longer-

term impact to families. When these abused children grow up in homes where their needs are not met, when they become parents themselves they often have not learned effective parenting skills. These tend to affect the society because these children believe that it is the right attitude to life and thus exhibit those attitudes to children.

They also lack the social skills required to obtain help and thus experience emotional problems that impact on their ability to receive help that is offered. As adults, the victims of childhood abuse can feel hopeless, helpless, mistrustful and depressed. These children are more likely to fall into the vicious cycle of failing to meet the needs of their children. This unfortunate behaviour impacts on the future generations, our communities and the society as a whole. The society pays the price of these abuse directly and indirectly. The direct cost include those associated with maintaining a child welfare system to investigate allegations of child abuse and neglect while indirect costs represent the long-term economic consequences of child abuse and neglect. These include juvenile and adult criminal activity, mental illness, substance abuse and domestic violence.

Other Psychological Consequences

Psychologically, it is seen that a child who suffer from abuse is at risk of developing psychiatric problems or disorganized attachment style. The psychological consequences of child abuse and neglect include the immediate effects of isolation, fear and inability to trust. These factors can translate into lifelong consequences. When children cannot trust that someone will be there to meet their needs, they develop low self-esteem, anxiety, depression and hopelessness. These children are also more likely to engage in violent behaviours and as such are diagnosed with conduct and personality disorders. In one long-term study (Silverman, Reinherz & Giaconia, 1996), as many as 80 percent of young adults who had been abused met the diagnostic criteria for at least psychiatric disorder at age 21. These young adults exhibited many problems, including depression, anxiety, eating disorders and suicide attempts. Other psychological and emotional conditions associated with abuse and neglect include panic disorder, dissociative disorders attention – deficit/hyperactivity disorder and reactive attachment disorder (Teicher, 2000).

Behavioural Consequences

Not all victims of child abuse and neglect will experience behavioural consequences, however it is an evident consequence. When there are behavioural problems as a result of child abuse and neglect, these children are most likely to experience difficulty in following rules, difficulty during adolescence (teen pregnancy, low academic achievement, mental health problems and drug use (Kelley et al 1997; Swan, 1998); also temper tantrums, difficulty in peer relationships and being respectful.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Child abuse is a global problem and its impact is serious, as it tends to affect the child, family, and the society as a whole. This paper has been able to show the various forms of child abuse and neglect, the impact/consequences of these abuse patterns (physical, sexual, emotional and child exploitation) on the child.

It has been noted that the effects/impacts of this abuse and neglect vary depending on the circumstances of the abuse and neglect, personal characteristics of the child and the child's environment. The child is a key individual in the society as they are seen as future leaders, thus increased attention should be paid by the society at large concerning issues of child abuse. If anyone suspects or sees that a child is being abused or neglected, they should report. It might seem difficult as a lot of people are reluctant to get involved in other families' lives, but it is necessary for everyone to stand up for a child in need as the consequences of these abuse and neglect can be extremely dangerous. Inadequately supervised children can be harmed or even killed in accidents in the home, school or society. These children can also suffer long-term growth and development problems due to malnutrition or even suffer mental health problems. Neglect can result to limited access to education, which has consequences for these children as adults trying to find work, earn an income and become productive members of the society.

Teachers, guardians and parents should learn how to communicate effectively in different situations especially when the child is involved. They should avoid disciplining a child when their anger is out of control. Use of corporal punishment should be avoided as it only teaches children that violence is the best way of maintaining control and thus it encourages them to hit other children.

Government should organize public enlightenment programmes using seminars and workshops to combat mass ignorance as to what constitutes child abuse, and also emphasize/create awareness on the right to freedom from all forms of child abuse. Management of Agencies that help to prevent/control this abuse should ensure that they carry out their duties to the fullest in combating these abuse/neglect.

Government, corporate bodies and individuals should be very conscious on the issue of child abuse/neglect ensuring that it is prevented and rehabilitation measures are administered on the already abused ones.

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