

**CHILD ABUSE – RELATED NEGLECT AS PREDICTORS OF MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES
AMONG SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL ADOLESCENTS IN PORT HARCOURT
METROPOLIS**

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Abstract

The study investigated child abuse – related neglect as predictors of mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt Metropolis. Correlational research design was used for the study. Two objectives, two research questions were answered while seven corresponding null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance. A sample of 400 senior secondary school adolescents from a population of 5,326 students was used for the study. Multi Stage Sampling Technique was used to compose the sample for the study. . Instruments for data collection were titled Childhood Neglect Questionnaire and Mental Health Challenges Scale. The reliabilities of the instruments were estimated using the Cronbach Alpha reliability method of internal consistency. The following reliability coefficients were obtained for the study: Childhood Neglect Questionnaire 0.780, and mental health challenges scale 0.917. Research questions were answered using simple regression while the hypotheses were tested using t- test associated with simple regression. Findings revealed among others that there is a moderate positive prediction between the four types of neglect and mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt and the prediction is also significant. Based on the findings, it was recommended that parents should check on the emotional well-being of their children to enable them identify early signs of mental health issues and proffer interventions

Key Words: *Child Neglect, Mental Health Challenges, Senior Secondary School and Adolescents.*

1.1 Introduction

Child abuse and neglect constitute global public health concerns that threaten the psychosocial wellbeing of children and adolescents. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) estimates that one in four children worldwide experience some form of neglect or maltreatment before adulthood. Neglect, often less visible than physical or sexual abuse, involves failure of parents or caregivers to provide adequate physical, emotional, educational, or medical care, thereby impairing a child's development (Dubowitz, 2013).

Adolescence represents a dynamic developmental stage marked by rapid biological, cognitive, and socio-emotional changes. Globally, about 1.2 billion people fall within the adolescent age group of 10–19 years (United Nations International Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2021). This age is characterized by increased exploration, identity formation, and greater reliance on peer relationships, but it also coincides with heightened vulnerability to mental health challenges. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) reports that one in seven adolescents globally suffers from a diagnosable mental disorder, with depression, anxiety, and behavioral conditions being the most common. Exposure to neglect during this period increases vulnerability to depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, substance abuse, and poor academic performance (Norman et al., 2012).

A child might be left hungry or dirty, or without proper clothing, shelter, supervision or medical care. This can lead children and youths into danger or risk of any sort. And neglect can have long-lasting

impact on the physical and mental wellbeing of these persons. Child neglect can come in various forms but categorically there are four types of child neglect.

Physical neglect: This can be referred to as when a child's basic needs, like food, clothing and shelter are not met or the children are not properly supervised or kept safe from dangers.

Educational neglect: This refers to a situation where a parent or caregiver fails to give the child the required education.

Emotional Neglect: This deals with a child not getting the required nurture and stimulation he/she needs. This could come from acts of ignoring, humiliating, intimidating or isolating him/her.

Medical Neglect: This is when a child is not given the right or proper medical attention he/she deserves. This includes dental care and rejecting or ignoring medical recommendations.

Neglect can have adverse effects on childhood. Children who have been neglected may face short-term and long-term impact. These involves; problems with brain development, taking risks, like running away from home, use of drugs and alcohol or breaking the law, getting into dangerous relationships, difficulty with relationship in later life, including with their own children and an increased probability of having mental health challenges like depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder among others. Any child can suffer neglect, but some children and youths are more vulnerable than others. This has to do with children who are born prematurely, have a disability, have complex health needs, are in care seeking asylum. (Brandon et al, 2013). There are other problems and life issues or situations that can make it difficult for parent and caregivers to satisfy their child's needs. When one or more of these situations occur, it can place a child in danger of neglect.

In Nigeria, rapid urbanization, economic hardship, and cultural pressures exacerbate child neglect (Ogunyemi, 2019). Port Harcourt, a metropolitan hub of the oil-rich Niger Delta region, presents unique socio-economic challenges where adolescents face inconsistent parental attention due to unemployment, migration, and community unrest. While studies in Nigeria have examined physical and sexual abuse, limited empirical research has focused on neglect as a predictor of adolescent mental health challenges. The connection between neglect and adolescent mental health is complex. Empirical evidence suggests that neglected adolescents are at heightened risk of depression, low self-esteem, social withdrawal, and behavioral problems (Norman et al., 2012; Widom, 2017). Widom (2017) also found that neglected adolescents had twice the likelihood of developing depression and anxiety disorders in adulthood compared to non-neglected peers.

Baldwin and colleagues conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis to examine the role of childhood neglect in predicting adolescent mental health problems. Their study synthesized evidence from over 30 peer-reviewed quantitative studies involving thousands of adolescents across multiple countries. By pooling data, the authors employed meta-analytic statistical techniques to establish effect sizes. Findings showed that child neglect significantly predicted depression, anxiety, conduct problems, and suicidality among adolescents, even after controlling for socioeconomic factors and other forms of abuse. The authors concluded that neglect is a robust cross-cultural predictor of mental health challenges, stressing the importance of early interventions.

Brandon et al. (2013). conducted a national-level analysis of serious case reviews (SCRs) in the United Kingdom, focusing on child neglect as a contributing factor to child harm and death. The study reviewed over 175 case files involving children who had suffered severe maltreatment. Using qualitative content analysis, the researchers highlighted how chronic neglect often went unnoticed by professionals until it culminated into severe outcomes. The findings revealed that neglect was both the most common form of maltreatment and the most overlooked, with long-term emotional and psychological implications for children. The study concluded that neglect is insidious, requiring better early detection systems by schools, healthcare, and child welfare agencies.

A longitudinal study in the UK by Gilbert et al. (2009) established that emotional neglect during adolescence strongly predicted suicidal ideation. In China, Li et al. (2016) reported that educational

neglect correlated with poor academic achievement and heightened depressive symptoms. Abubakar et al. (2015) found that neglected Kenyan adolescents reported low self-esteem, high stress, and greater risk of dropping out of school.

In the Nigerian context, Okafor and Ogbu examined the relationship between child neglect and adolescent mental health in Nigerian schools. Their study sampled 350 adolescents from five secondary schools in Anambra State using a purposive sampling technique. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted, and data were collected using structured questionnaires. Analysis using multiple regression revealed that neglect accounted for 42% of the variance in mental health outcomes, particularly in relation to low self-esteem, depression, and social withdrawal. The authors concluded that neglect is a strong contextual predictor of adolescent maladjustment, recommending urgent government policies to tackle family neglect in Nigeria.

In a more recent Nigerian study, Emorhievwunu and Emorhievwunu (2023) investigated the impact of neglect on psychosocial development among adolescents in the Niger Delta region. The study sampled 280 adolescents from both urban and rural schools using purposive sampling. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted, and the researchers used standardized instruments such as the Child Neglect Scale (CNS) and the Adolescent Mental Health Checklist (AMHC). Results indicated that neglect significantly predicted low self-esteem, social withdrawal, and poor academic adjustment. Interestingly, rural adolescents reported higher neglect scores compared to their urban counterparts. The study concluded that neglect is a major social problem that undermines adolescent well-being, and recommended community-level awareness campaigns and school counseling interventions.

Ogunyemi (2019) emphasized that neglect in urban Nigerian households often stems from economic strain, parental migration, or cultural child-rearing practices. Empirical work in Port Harcourt remains limited, though studies indicate rising adolescent vulnerability. Eke investigated child abuse and neglect as predictors of adolescent behavioral problems in Nigeria. The study involved a sample of 400 secondary school students in Enugu State, selected through multi-stage sampling. Employing a correlational survey design, the researcher used structured questionnaires validated by experts in psychology and education. Data were analyzed using Pearson's correlation and multiple regression analysis. Results showed that both physical and emotional neglect significantly predicted aggressive behavior, truancy, and low academic performance among adolescents. The study concluded that neglect has a direct negative impact on behavioral adjustment, reinforcing the need for parental education and school-based counselling.

Nwankwo (2020) investigated the relationship between child abuse, neglect, and psychological distress among adolescents in Southern Nigeria. The study population included adolescents in senior secondary schools, with a sample size of 400 students selected using stratified random sampling. Employing a correlational survey design, data were gathered using the Adolescent Abuse and Mental Health Inventory (AAMHI). Results demonstrated that neglect was the most significant predictor of depression and anxiety, accounting for over 35% of the variance in psychological distress. Emotional abuse was also linked to low self-esteem and social withdrawal. The study concluded that neglect and emotional abuse remain critical predictors of adolescent mental health challenges, and emphasized the need for preventive interventions and counseling support within schools. However, few studies explicitly examine neglect as a predictor of mental health outcomes, underscoring the relevance of this study. This study addresses this gap by examining the extent to which child abuse-related neglect predicts mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt Metropolis.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The researcher has observed that a lot of adolescents are faced with a lot of psychological or mental health problems that affect their daily lives. This could be as a result of the negative

experiences they go through life, such as; physical abuse, (like parents inflicting injuries on them) sexual abuse like rape, sexual molestation or sexual harassment by those they trusted as their own. Some others go through emotional abuse such as having their parents use derogatory words on them by insulting them, laying curses on them among others, these they do probably as a result of the hardship they are going through at the time. For some other adolescents their parents or care givers send them out to hawk wares or sell items like food stuffs, pure water, fruits and other things in the streets before they go to school in the later part of the morning while their counterparts or mates have already gone to school to learn, this is so disheartening to these set of adolescents, that they feel very bad, dejected, rejected and feel some level of emotional distress, with their thoughts racing very far which can lead to suicidal tendencies or ideation as a result of formal educational deprivation. If this persists such adolescents may grow up losing out in life by going through educational difficulties or low academic performance or achievement. They may also experience low employment opportunities, low self - esteem, depression, anxiety among others. This may happen when parents or caregivers are from poverty stricken homes or low socio economic background. The researcher also observed that some parents or caregivers lack what it takes to give the right kind of supervision or guidance to their children or wards. They don't even monitor the activities of their children whether they are doing what is right or wrong. They are just busy trying to make ends meet financially not minding what goes on with their children at home. This is referred to as supervision neglect.

Some other parents are too busy with work that they don't have time to monitor how their children are faring in school, if they are doing well or not and see where they can offer their support towards the educational and emotional needs of their children. These of cause can lead to frustration, depression, anxiety disorders or even behavioural disorders. Some parents leave their children or wards with strangers inform of their house helps, so called relatives or friends who take undue advantage of their children and mess up their lives through one evil practice or the other.

Some other parents don't care if their children are looking dirty or unkempt or wearing torn clothes, or have not eaten, or even taking these children to the hospital when they are sick because probably the parents are afraid of high medical bills and resort to home care which can affect the health of the child. These and other issues could constitute trauma leading to mental health challenges like depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder or other psychiatric disorders. It is against this premise that the researcher is interested in investigating child neglect as predictors of mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis.

1.3 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study was to determine the prediction of child abuse neglect as predictors of mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis. Specifically, the objectives of the study were:

1. To ascertain the extent to which physical neglect predicts mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis.
2. To investigate the extent to which educational neglect predicts mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis.

1.4 Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to guide the study:

1. To what extent does physical neglect predict mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis?
2. To investigate the extent to which educational neglect predict mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis?

1.5 Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance

1. There is no significant prediction between physical neglect and mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis.
2. There is no significant prediction between educational neglect and mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The study holds significance in multiple ways:

1. It will expand the sparse literature on child neglect and adolescent mental health in Nigeria, providing empirical evidence for scholars and practitioners.
2. Findings from this study can inform child protection frameworks, education policies, and adolescent mental health strategies in Rivers State and Nigeria as a whole.

Methodology

The study adopted the use of correlational research design. It was used for the prediction of a criterion variable (dependent variable) on the basis of several predictor variables (independent variables), (Kpolovie, 2016). Nwankwo (2016) posited that correlation research design is the design that shows the direction and magnitude of relationship between two or more variables. The above descriptions by the two authors justified the design used for the study on child abuse – related neglect as predictors of mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis.

The population of the study comprised all 5, 326 students in senior secondary schools in Port Harcourt (Source: Senior Secondary Schools Board, 2023/ 2024). This population was chosen because adolescents in this group (typically 15 – 18 years) are at a critical developmental stage and may be particularly vulnerable to the impacts of neglect on their mental health. These students were chosen because they can understand the concepts in the questionnaires and are not in the examination year. A sample of 400 was used for the study. This was gotten using multi- stage sampling technique.

Two instruments were used to collect data for the study. They included the Child Neglect Questionnaire (CNQ) and the mental health challenges scale which comprised of Kutcher Adolescent scale, Beck Anxiety Inventory and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder scale.

Copies of the instruments were given to two other experts in measurement and evaluation, Counseling and human development centre Port Harcourt, Choba. Their inputs / suggestions were used for remodeling and correcting of the instruments

The reliability of the instrument; Child Neglect Questionnaire (CNQ) and Mental Health Challenges Scale (MHCS) were estimated using the Cronbach Alpha Reliability Method of internal consistency. The sample for determination of the Cronbach Alpha was 20 respondents. In line with Cronbach Alpha Method, every item in the instrument was analyzed for quality and selection. Reliability coefficients were Childhood Neglect questionnaire 0.780 and Mental Health Challenges Scale (Kutcher Adolescent Depression Scale 0.833, Beck Anxiety Inventory 0.824 and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Scale 0.903) respectively. These reliabilities indicate that the instruments are highly reliable.

Data was collected using self-reporting questionnaire which were adopted scales distributed to SS2 students in the 8 senior secondary schools through the use of questionnaires. The questionnaires were collected on the spot by the researcher on completion by the respondents on different days. The research questions were answered using simple regression while the test of hypotheses was answered using t – test associated with simple regression.

Results And Discussions

This chapter dealt with presentation of data, analysis of data, interpretation of data, summary of findings and discussion of findings.

Research Question One: To what extent does physical neglect predict mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis?

Table 1: Simple Regression Analysis on the extent physical neglect predicts mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.541 ^a	.292	.291	.46090

Table 1 revealed that the regression coefficient R was calculated to be 0.541 while the regression squared value was computed to be 0.292. This shows that there is a moderate positive prediction between physical neglect and mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescent in Port Harcourt metropolis. Judging by the coefficient of determination which is 29.2% change in mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis can be predicted by physical neglect, while 71.8% was accounted for by other variables not considered in this study.

Research Question Two: To what extent does educational neglect predict mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis?

Table 2: Simple Regression Analysis on the extent educational neglect predicts mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.516 ^a	.266	.264	.46933

Table 2 revealed that the regression coefficient R was calculated to be 0.516 while the regression squared value was computed to be 0.266. This shows that there is a moderate positive prediction between educational neglect and mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis. Judging by the coefficient of determination which is 26.6% change in mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis can be predicted by educational neglect, while 73.4% was accounted for by other variables not considered in this study.

Hypothesis One: Physical neglect does not significantly predict mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis.

Table 3: T-test associated with Simple Regressions on how Physical neglect predicts mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis.

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	T
1	(Constant)	.266	.070		3.804
	Physical neglect	.557	.045	.541	12.366
					.000

Table 3 shows that the t-test calculated for physical neglect is 12.366 and the significant P-value of 0.000, is lower than 0.05 level of significance ($P < 0.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, this implies that physical neglect significantly predicts the mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis.

Hypothesis Two: Educational neglect does not significantly predict mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis.

Table 4: T-test associated with Simple Regressions on how educational neglect predicts mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	T
1	(Constant)	.538	.053		10.203
	Educational neglect	.341	.029	.516	11.588
					.000

Table 4 shows that the t-test calculated for educational neglect is 11.588 and the significant P-value of 0.000, is lesser to 0.05 level of significance ($P < 0.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, this implies that educational neglect significantly predicts mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis.

Discussion of Findings

- Physical neglect and mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis.

There is a moderate positive prediction between physical neglect and mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis and the prediction is statistically significant. This work is in alignment with Baldwin et al (2023) whose study revealed that childhood maltreatment is strongly associated with mental health problem. This work is also in agreement with Lippard et al. (2020) whose study revealed that childhood maltreatment is more prevalent and associated with increased risk for mental health disorders. This work is also supported by Bede (2015) whose study revealed that there is a significant positive correlation between child neglect and poor mental health status, parental occupation and family size significantly influenced both child neglect and mental health status of adolescents. The result is not in doubt, because when adolescents are not given the basic necessities of life (food, clothing, shelter among others), they are bound to face mental health challenges like depression, anxiety and posttraumatic stress disorders.

- Educational neglect and mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis.

There is a moderate prediction between educational neglect and mental health challenges among senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis and the prediction is statistically significant. This work is in alignment with Emorhievunu & Emorhievunu (2023) whose study revealed physical, educational, emotional and medical neglect had positive associations with psychosocial wellbeing and academic life of children in secondary school.

The result is also in agreement with Center for Disease Control (2021) whose study revealed that in 2019, the prevalence of mental health challenges among youths was also notably high in comparison to the years before as regards school or academic work. The reason for these similar results is due to the fact that when adolescents are faced with so much school work or academic work load it could lead to unnecessary stress, anxiety and other psychological problems that could affect their physical health.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

In conclusion the study found that physical neglect, and educational neglect had moderate significant prediction on the mental health of senior secondary school adolescents in Port Harcourt. The findings confirmed that child neglect—both physical and educational—is a significant predictor of poor mental health among adolescents. Adolescents who reported higher levels of neglect were more likely to experience heightened symptoms of depression, anxiety, conduct problems, and social withdrawal.

the study highlights a contextual reality in Port Harcourt metropolis. Rapid urbanization, economic strain, family instability, and academic pressures converge to heighten adolescents' vulnerability. In households where parents or guardians fail to provide consistent emotional support or basic needs, the cumulative stress manifests in mental health difficulties that spill into school performance, peer interactions, and long-term wellbeing.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study the following recommendations were made.

1. Rivers State government should strengthen mechanisms to ensure strict penalties for child neglect and better monitoring of at-risk households
2. Students should have the right support network or system that will enable them fight or resist the negative effects of physical abuse and child neglect.
3. Parents should take active parts in their child's education and academic programmes by doing this, parents are able to form a strong supportive network with teachers or educators to help them identify early signs of mental health challenges among their adolescent children and offer the right intervention and treatment where necessary.

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