

Perceived Impact of Sexual Abuse on Children's Cognitive and Social Development in Awka South Local Government Education Authority of Anambra State

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Abstract

This study investigated the perceived impact of sexual abuse on children's cognitive and social development in Awka South Local Government Education Authority of Anambra state. Three research questions guided the study. The study adopted a descriptive research design. The population of the study consisted of 612 Primary school teachers in the 45 government primary schools in Awka South Local Government Education Authority of Anambra State. A self-structured questionnaire was used as an instrument for data collection titled "Perceived Impact of Sexual Abuse on Children's Cognitive and Social Development Questionnaire (PISACCSDQ)" developed by the researcher. Three experts validated the instrument. The reliability of the instrument was determined by Cronbach Alpha method which yielded the coefficients of 0.80, 0.84 and 0.88 respectively. The overall reliability coefficient of the instrument was 0.84. Mean was used to analyze the collected data. The findings of the study revealed among others that identified emotional stress, disrupted attachment, inadequate family support, social isolation are the impact of sexual abuse on the cognitive development of children. Based on the findings, recommendations were made among others that the state government and educational authorities should create strong legislation that protects children from sexual abuse.

Keywords: Abuse, Trauma, Cognitive and social development.

Introduction

Child abuse is a devastating and complex issue that affects children worldwide, causing irreparable harm to their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. It encompasses various forms of maltreatment, including physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, and sexual abuse. Child abuse can occur in any setting, including homes, schools, communities, and institutions, and can be perpetrated by family members, caregivers, or strangers. Child abuse is a heinous crime that can take many forms, including physical, emotional, and sexual exploitation. According to Owolabi in Mboho (2019) Child abuse is defined as 'the non-accidental omission of any act by a caretaker upon a child under the age of 18 years which causes or creates a substantial risk of serious physical or emotional injury, or which constitutes a sexual offence such as rape or molestation. In this context, child abuse can be defined as a situation where a child is denied his basic/fundamental human right as a child/person.

Child abuse can take the form of neglect, Physical abuse, Psychological abuse, Emotional abuse, child labour, vagrancy, female genital mutilation, child marriage, kidnapping, sexual abuse, among others, especially in Nigeria (Ede and Kalu, 2018). This is in line with Owolabi in Mboho (2019) who stated that child abuse takes different forms, and most times, parents and guardians are the worst offenders of this crime. Child abuse takes different forms, and most times, parents and guardians are the worst offenders of this crime Owolabi in Mboho (2019). For the purpose of this research, focus will be dwelled on sexual abuse.

Sexual abuse is any unwanted or forced sexual contact or behavior. It involves exploitation, coercion, or manipulation of a person for sexual purposes. This can include physical contact, such as rape or molestation, or non-physical actions, like sexual harassment or exploitation. Sexual abuse can occur in various settings, including homes, schools, workplaces, or online platforms. It is a serious violation of a person's physical and emotional boundaries, causing harm and trauma (Afolabi & Lawal 2021). The term sexual abuse which is also referred to as molestation or assault is abusive sexual behaviour by a person upon another person. American Psychological Association (2018) elucidates that Sexual abuse is usually perpetrated using force or by taking advantage of someone. The use of a child or other individuals younger than the age of consents, for sexual stimulation is called child rape, and when force is sudden, short in duration or infrequent, it is called sexual abuse. Sexual abuse also comes in various forms like non- consensual sexual touching, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, rape or sexual assault. The offender or perpetrator is referred to as a sexual offender or molester.

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a particularly devastating form of trauma that can have long-lasting impact on a child's development. CSA is a violation of a child's trust, bodily autonomy, and sense of safety. Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA) is a traumatic experience that involves sexual contact or exploitation of a child by an adult or older child. CSA can take many forms, including physical contact, exposure, or exploitation through media. This abuse is a betrayal of trust, violating a child's innocence and vulnerability. Child Sexual abuse is defined by Khartri as cited in Mboho (2019) as the employment, use of persuasion, inducement, enticement, or coercion of any child to engage in, or assist any other person to engage in, any sexually explicit conduct or simulation of such conduct for the purpose of producing a visual depiction of such conducts. Child sexual abuse (CSA) is any form of sexual interaction between an adult or adolescent and a child, whether it is in a position of trust or power over the child (Gbenga-Epebinu, 2020). UNICEF (2020) revealed that more than 120 million individual worldwide face forced sexual acts during their childhood. Most are females (89%), and 11% are males. As a opined by Theoklitou as cited in Obiefuna (2023), child sexual abuse refers to the participation of a child in a sexual act aimed towards the physical gratification or financial profit of the person committing the act. The researcher sees sexual abuse as any non-consensual sexual act or behavior, including unwanted contact, intimidation, or exploitation that violates a child's physical or emotional well-being.

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is a prevalent issue in society, in which 8% to 31% of girls and 3% to 17% of boys have been sexually abused (Vrolijk-Bosschaart, Verlinden, Langendam, De Smet, Teeuw, Brilleslijper-Kater, & Lindauer, 2018). Thus, it is important to further explore the impact that sexual abuse can have on the growth and development of a child. It is important to note the traumatic outcomes that child sexual abuse has on a child's sexual behavior, psychological functioning, and cognitive development.

The cognitive development of a child can also be affected if when they have been sexually abused. To further understand the implications of sexual abuse on cognitive development, it is critical to explore what defines it. Unfortunately, when children are sexually abused, their intellectual abilities can be affected. Research has shown that those who have experienced child sexual abuse have a decrease in school performance, and their communication skills are jeopardized (Güven, Dalgiç, & Erkol, 2018). Furthermore, in a study done on school-aged girls by Daignault and Hébert as cited in Camila (2019), it was reported that those who had experienced sexual abuse were affected in their vocabulary and knowledge and required additional academic services. Evidently, sexual abuse impacts a child's cognitive development. Considering that in school-aged children their cognitive skills are still developing, having an impediment in academics can be a serious hardship. In relation to Piaget's stages of cognitive growth, children who have trouble with their intellectual abilities may not be able to move from the concrete operational stage.

Child sexual abuse disrupts a child's cognitive development as cognitive development involves the progressive acquisition of mental processes, including attention, memory, language, problem-solving, and decision-making, shaped by Nigerian cultural values which sexual abuse shatters (Oyebamiji, 2022). Ogunyemi (2022) defines cognitive development encompasses the growth and maturation of mental processes, including perception, attention, memory, language, and problem-solving, influenced by socioeconomic factors. Cognitive development, according to the researcher, can be defined as the involvement of growth and enhancement of mental processes. Cognitive development is intertwined with social and emotional development. Children with cognitive difficulties may struggle with social relationships, emotional regulation, or academic achievement. Targeted interventions can support cognitive development, promoting overall well-being and life success.

Child Sexual abuse can disrupt a child's social development, causing struggles with trust, boundaries, and emotional connection, impacting their ability to form healthy relationships. The trauma resulting from CSA can significantly impact a child's social and cognitive development. To the researcher, trauma leaves nothing but a negative impact on the cognitive growth and development of children as it affects their mental process and alters the brain structure and function. The cognitive distortions caused by trauma leads to difficulties with emotional regulation which creates challenges in a child's social development and forming and maintaining healthy social relationships.

Social development encompasses the acquisition of skills necessary for effective interpersonal relationships, emotional regulation, and social integration. Healthy social

development is critical for children's ability to form and maintain relationships, develop emotional intelligence, regulate emotions and behaviors, and acquire social norms and values. Factors like family dynamics, cultural background, and socioeconomic status can influence social development. Children exposed to adversity, such as abuse or neglect, may require targeted support to promote healthy social development. The researcher refers to social development as the process by which individuals learn to interact, relate, and communicate effectively with others, developing skills, attitudes, and values necessary for successful relationships and community involvement.

Childhood sexual abuse can have devastating impact on cognitive and social development, leading to long-term consequences. Early identification, intervention, and support are crucial to mitigate these effects. Providing a safe, nurturing environment and access to specialized care can help traumatized children heal, recover, and develop resilience. Addressing this issue requires a collaborative effort from families, communities, and professionals to ensure the well-being and protection of vulnerable children. The study aims to investigate the perceived impact of sexual abuse on children's cognitive and social development in Awka South Local Government Education Authority.

Statement of the Problem

Sexually abused children often suffer profound and long-lasting impact on their cognitive and social development. Trauma from sexual abuse can disrupt normal brain development, impairing cognitive processes such as attention, memory, and executive function. This can lead to difficulties with learning, academic achievement, and problem-solving, ultimately affecting their overall cognitive development. Furthermore, sexually abused children may experience emotional regulation difficulties, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which can hinder their ability to form healthy relationships and interact with peers.

The social development of sexually abused children is also severely impacted. Trauma can lead to social withdrawal, isolation, and difficulties with trust, intimacy, and attachment. These children may struggle with social skills, empathy, and emotional intelligence, making it challenging to form and maintain healthy relationships. Moreover, sexually abused children may exhibit aggressive or hypersexual behavior, further complicating their social interactions. The stigma and shame associated with sexual abuse can also lead to self-blame, low self-esteem, and self-concept disturbances, exacerbating social development difficulties.

It is on the premise that the study aims to investigate the perceived impact of sexual abuse on children's cognitive and social development in Awka South Local Government Education Authority and explore evidence-based interventions to promote healthy development and recovery.

Purpose of the Study

The general purpose of the study is to find the perceived impact of sexual abuse on children's cognitive and social development in Awka South Local Government Education Authority, the study sought to;

1. Examine the impact of sexual abuse on the child cognitive development in Awka South Local Government Education Authority.
2. Investigate the impact of sexual abuse on the child social development in Awka South Local Government Education Authority.
3. Find out the strategies for the rehabilitation of sexually abused children in Awka South Local Government Education Authority.

Research Questions

The following research questions were posed for the study

1. What is the impact of sexual abuse on the cognitive development of children in Awka South Local Government Education Authority?
2. What is the impact of sexual abuse on the social development of children in Awka South Local Government Education Authority?
3. What are the strategies for rehabilitation of sexually abused children in Awka South Local Government Education Authority?

Methodology

The design of the study is a Descriptive survey research design. This is in line with Nworgu (2015) who described descriptive survey design as that which aims to collect data on, and describe in a systematic manner, the characteristic features or facts about a given population. This design is considered appropriate for the present study, which aims at collecting data from the target population for the purpose of describing in a systematic manner the fact on the perceived impact of sexual abuse on children's cognitive and social development in Awka South Local Government Education Authority. The study was conducted in Awka South Local Educational Authority. The decision to use Awka South of Anambra State for the study was based on the fact that there seems to be no extensive research covering this area. The population of the study comprised all the 612 primary school teachers in the 45 government primary schools in Awka South Local Government Area of Anambra State (Source: Anambra State Universal Basic Education Board ASUBEB, 2024)

The sample size for this study was 100 primary school teachers out of the 45 government primary school teachers in Awka South. The researcher employed simple random sampling technique to select 20 government primary schools in Awka South. Simple random sampling technique was also used to select 5 teachers from the 20 Government primary schools that were sampled for the study in Awka South.

The research instrument for the study was a structured questionnaire, designed by the researcher. Titled "Perceived Impact of Sexual Abuse on Children's Cognitive and Social Development Questionnaire (PISACSDQ)". The instrument consists of two

sections A and B. Section A sought information on respondents' personal data, while section B contained 20 items that sought information required to answer the research questions. Section B was broken into three clusters. The first cluster consists of 6 items which sought the opinion of respondents regarding the impact of sexual abuse on the child required to answer research question one. The second cluster consists of 7 items which sought the opinion of respondents regarding the impact of sexual abuse on the child required to answer research question two. The third cluster consists of 6 items which sought the opinion of respondents regarding the strategies and support systems that promote healthy development and recovery in sexually abused children required to answer research question three. Very importantly, section B contains items in three subsections which were structured on a four point scale of Strongly Agree (SA) =4, Agree (A) =3, Disagree (D) =2 and Strongly Disagree (SD) =1. The essence was to ensure that the researcher evaluated properly the perceived impact of sexual abuse on children's cognitive and social development in the study area.

The instrument was duly validated by three experts one from measurement and Evaluation in the Department of Educational Foundations, and two from Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education) all from the faculty of Education Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The corrections and suggestions of the experts were used to fine-tune the current copy of the instruments. To ascertain the reliability of the instrument, test-retest approach was used. 20 copies of the instrument were tested on 20 government primary school teachers in Awka North Local Government Education Authority, which is outside the study area. It was done to generate data which was used to determine the reliability of the instrument. Data was collected by the use of questionnaire. 100 questionnaire was administered to the respondents by the researcher with the help of 5 research assistants who were duly trained on how to administer the questionnaire politely. The instruments were administered to the respondents during school hour with the permission of the schools' authority, which gave them the opportunity to explain any word that they may not understand. However, because of the direct delivery method that was used, all the copies of the questionnaire was distributed and collected back and used for analysis. Mean was used to analyze the data collected. The decision point was 2.50. Therefore, any item with a mean of 2.50 and above is regarded as agreement. While any item below or less than 2.50 will be regarded as disagreement.

Results

Research Question One: What is the impact of sexual abuse on the cognitive development of children in Awka South Local Government Education Authority?

Table 1: Mean Rating of Respondents on the impact of sexual abuse on the cognitive development of children.

S/N	Impact of sexual abuse on the cognitive development of children	Mean (\bar{X})	Remark
1.	Emotional Stress	3.12	Agreed
2.	Absences from school	3.09	Agreed
3.	Various health problems	2.62	Agreed
4.	Social Isolation	3.02	Agreed
5.	Disrupted Attachment	2.90	Agreed
6.	Inadequate Family support	3.01	Agreed
Grand Mean		2.96	

Analysis in Table 1 revealed that the mean scores for items 1-6 are 3.12, 3.09, 2.62, 3.02, 2.90, 3.01, respectively, with an overall mean of 2.96. This reveals that the respondents agreed that items 1-6 are the impact of sexual abuse on the cognitive development of children.

Research Question Two: What is the impact of sexual abuse on the social development of children in Awka South Local Government Education Authority?

Table 2: Mean Rating of Respondents on the impact of sexual abuse on the social development of children.

S/N	Impact of sexual abuse on the social development of children	Mean (\bar{X})	Remark
7.	Low self-esteem	3.23	Agreed
8.	Loneliness and Depression	3.14	Agreed
9.	Emotional dysregulation	3.36	Agreed
10.	Guilt and Shame	3.25	Agreed
11.	Increased Aggression	3.34	Agreed
12.	Fear	3.21	Agreed
13.	Mistrust	3.18	Agreed
GRAND MEAN		3.24	

The analysis in Table 2 shows that the mean scores for items 7-13 are 3.23, 3.14, 3.36, 3.25, 3.34, 3.21, 3.18 and respectively with grand mean of 3.24. This implies that the respondents agreed that items 7-13 are the impact of sexual abuse on the social development of children in Awka South Local Government Education Authority.

Research Question Three: What are the strategies for the rehabilitation of sexually abused children in Awka South Local Government Education Authority?

Table 3: Mean Rating of Respondents on the Suggestions for sexually abused children.

S/N	Suggestions for sexually abused children	Mean(\bar{X})	Remark
14.	Implementing Education and Awareness Programs	3.24	Agreed
15.	Providing resources, workshops, and training for parents	2.98	Agreed
16.	Establishing community coalitions to advocate for child safety	3.09	Agreed
17.	Advocating for strong legislation that protects children,	3.33	Agreed
18.	Providing access to trained mental health professionals who specialize in trauma	3.21	Agreed
19.	Adults, including parents and teachers, should regularly reassure children that it's okay to talk about their feelings	3.34	Agreed
Grand Mean		3.73	

The analysis in Table 4 shows that items 14-19 have mean scores of 3.24, 2.98, 3.09, 3.33, 3.21, 3.34, and respectively, and an overall grand mean of 3.73. This indicates that items 14-19 are the strategies and support systems that promote healthy development and recovery in sexually abused children in Awka South Local Government Education Authority.

Discussion

Impact of sexual abuse on the cognitive development of children.

The study identified certain factors to emphasize the impact of sexual abuse on the cognitive development of children. Some were emotional stress, disrupted attachment, inadequate family support, social isolation. Owoaje and Elegbe (2021) opine that exposure to sexual abuse can lead to significant trauma that affects a child's brain development, leading to issues with memory, learning, and emotional regulation. Exposure to sexual abuse can lead to significant trauma that affects a child's brain development, leading to issues with memory, learning, and emotional regulation. In consonance, Ajuwon and Olowokere, (2018) discuss that trauma can affect brain areas involved in learning and memory, particularly the hippocampus, which can result in diminished academic performance. Children may struggle to focus in class and retain information, significantly hindering their cognitive development. Children who endure sexual abuse often experience intense emotions that they may not know how to manage. This emotional dysregulation can lead to impulsivity and difficulty in concentrating, both of which are essential for learning. Afolabi and Lawal (2021) note that children who experience abuse are often unable to keep up with their peers academically due to interruptions in their education. This can lead to long-term educational and cognitive challenges. In alignment, Ogunfowora (2020) opines that in Nigeria, 75% of sexually abused children had limited knowledge about sexual health.

Limited knowledge about sexual health and boundaries increases vulnerability to abuse. Children who are sexually abused may miss school or have difficulty engaging in their studies. Frequent absences can result in learning gaps and diminished academic performance, crucial for cognitive growth.

The study also identified other certain factors which emphasized the impact of sexual abuse on the cognitive development of children. A study by Odugbemi, Adebawale and Olowookere (2023) emphasize that stigma surrounding sexual abuse prevents children from seeking help, leading to further cognitive deficits due to a lack of peer support and interaction. Social learning is vital for cognitive skills, and isolation can lead to a slower developmental trajectory. Social isolation can limit social support, increase stigma, and reduce opportunities for cognitive stimulation. In agreement, according to Adewumi (2022), Social isolation can impair cognitive functioning in children who experience sexual abuse. Okafor (2019) found that Nigerian children who experienced sexual abuse and social isolation showed reduced cognitive performance.

Inadequate family or community support can exacerbate the cognitive impact of sexual abuse. Without appropriate emotional and educational support, children may struggle to recover and develop cognitively. Uche, Eze and Nwosu (2023) argue that effective intervention and support systems are crucial for mitigating the cognitive impacts of abuse. Lack of support can hinder a child's ability to reintegrate into educational environments, limiting cognitive development. In consonance, Ige, Oladeji and Osasona (2022) highlight that disrupted attachment can lead to social withdrawal and reluctance to participate in group activities, both of which are vital for cognitive development through social interaction and learning.

Impact of sexual abuse on the child social development

The findings also revealed that low self-esteem, loneliness and depression, Guilt and shame, fear and mistrust are the impact of sexual abuse on the social development of children. According to Hanson et al. (2019) found that children who experienced sexual abuse were more likely to exhibit social withdrawal, anxiety, and depression. Similarly, a study by Sperry and Sperry (2020) found that child sexual abuse was associated with difficulties in forming and maintaining healthy relationships, as well as increased risk of revictimization.

Children who experience sexual abuse often struggle to trust others, which can hinder their ability to form healthy relationships. According to Odukoya (2022), trust is fundamentally disrupted, leading to difficulties in establishing bonds with peers and adults. Victims may isolate themselves from friends and family, fearing judgment or misunderstanding. In agreement, a study by Nduka et al. (2021) highlights that many abused children retreat into themselves, affecting their social interactions and participation in group activities.

Victims may find it challenging to form or maintain friendships due to fear or mistrust. A study by Ibe et al. (2023) found that many children who have experienced sexual abuse face difficulties in peer acceptance, which can lead to loneliness and depression. Abused children may struggle with managing their emotions, leading to unpredictable

social behavior. In agreement, according to Adebayo (2022), emotional dysregulation can create misunderstandings with peers, making it hard for them to connect.

Strategies for rehabilitation of sexually abused children.

The results of this study provided valuable insights into the strategies for rehabilitation of sexually abused children. Some of the key findings are; implementing education and awareness programs, providing resources, workshops, and training for parents, providing access to trained mental health professionals who specialize in trauma, adults, including parents and teacher should regularly reassure children that it's okay to talk about their feelings.

Implementing Education and Awareness Programs are strategies Smith (2021) opines that implementing school-based programs that teach children about body safety, consent, and how to recognize and report inappropriate behaviors can empower children. Awareness campaigns can also educate parents and community members about the signs of abuse and the importance of intervention. Also, according to Miller and Jones (2022) Providing resources, workshops, and training for parents equips them with the knowledge needed to discuss sensitive topics with their children. This includes guidance on how to foster open communication and create a safe environment at home where children feel comfortable sharing their experiences.

Establishing community coalitions to advocate for child safety ensures that everyone plays a role in prevention. Creating anonymous reporting systems allows both children and adults to report abuse without fear of retribution, making it easier to intervene early (Johnson,2023). Hence, the reason why in Anambra there is a Child Abuse Helpline (08085753932, 08102678442) for this purpose. In alignment, according to Johnson (2020), advocating for strong legislation that protects children, such as mandatory background checks for individuals working with children and stricter penalties for offenders, helps create a safer environment. Policies should also promote education and training for professionals in child development and abuse prevention.

According to Davis (2022) survivors of child sexual abuse often face long-term psychological effects. Providing access to trained mental health professionals who specialize in trauma can help them process their experiences, develop coping strategies, and work toward healing. In agreement, according to Harris (2020) Children must feel safe and supported when disclosing abuse. Adults, including parents and teachers, should regularly reassure children that it's okay to talk about their feelings, making it clear that they will be believed and supported.

Conclusion

The study concluded that emotional stress, disrupted attachment, inadequate family support, social isolation as the impact of sexual abuse on the cognitive development of children. The study also concluded that the impact of sexual abuse on the child social development are low self-esteem, loneliness and depression, Guilt and shame and Guilt, fear and mistrust. The study also identified the strategies for rehabilitation of sexually abused children. It is hoped that the implementation of these strategies and the

recommendations of this study, the perceived impact of sexual abuse on children's cognitive and social development will be enhanced in Awka South local Government Education Authority and beyond.

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