

# CHILD ABUSE IN THE FAMILY: COUNSELING STRATEGIES

BY

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## Abstract

*Child abuse is a universal problem that occur in societies where human beings exist. It is a maltreatment of children in the guise of correcting or disciplining them. It has various forms and the degree of its severity differs from one incident to another. Children of all ages are abuse regardless of their ages, sex or bodily make up. This paper attempts to discuss the pattern of child abuse, causes and counseling strategies for curbing child abuse. Recommendations are highlighted.*

## Introduction

Despite the effects of world nations organisations like United Nations, International Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF), Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO'S) and the recent child right Act of 2003 which was signed into law on 31<sup>st</sup> July 2003, by Federal Government of Nigeria, many parents and guardians still abuse children. The U.S.A, Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA ), (42 U.S.A.C.A;5106g), as amended by the Keeping Children and Families Safe Act of 2003, Defines child abuse as "any resent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or care taker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual or exploitation, or an act or Failure to act which presents an imminent risk or serious harm".

Gellas (2005) also defined child abuse, as intentional acts that result in physical or emotional harm to children. The term child abuse covers a wide range of behaviour, from actual physical assault by parents or other adult caretakers to neglect of a child's basic needs. Child abuse is also sometimes called child maltreatment .Although the extent of child abuse is difficult to measure, it is recognized as a major problem, especially in the cities. It occurs in all income, racial, religions and ethnic groups in an urban and rural areas. It is however, more common in some groups, especially those below the poverty line i.e. The poor cultures around the world have different standards in deciding what constitute abuse. In Nigeria parents punish their children by hitting them or using abusive words when they feel the child has err.



### Patterns of Child Abuse

There are several/ different types of child abuse, and some children experience more than one form. Hodges, (2001) documented the following as child abuse:

1. **Beating and Battering Children:-** The use of corporal punishment is more or less universal in African culture, as the saying goes: 'spare the rod and spoil the child'. The use of beating as a means of shaping behaviour may not be harmful when applied with caution and only rarely. However, in many cases the punishment meted out to children are extremely harsh and are both physically and emotionally damaging to the healthy growth of the child. Some parents got to the extent of cutting the skin of offenders and applying pepper to the incision or to sensitive parts of the body. Unexplained bruises, broken-bones, or burn marks on a child may be signs of abuse.
2. **Street Children:-** These are children that wander in some of the Nigerian cities, they have no contact with their families. Undoubtedly, they have exceptionally harsh and hazardous way of life. They live under bridges, motor parks, markets, dilapidated or abandoned houses (Oloko, B-1992 as cited in Hodges. 2001) the public is less concerned of the existence of young children on the streets. Such children are exposed to frequent illnesses due to malnutrition, inadequate clothing and lack of opportunities for bathing. They survive by engaging in menial activities like head loading, pushing wheel barrows, sweeping the market places, etc.
3. **Sexual Exploitation of the child:-** Child prostitution has become rampant in many Nigeria cities (Adedoyin and Adeyoke, B1995 cited in Hodges, 2001). The girl-child hawking also exposes many of the innocent girls to sexual promiscuity. The problem of child prostitution has taken an international dimension with the emergence and increase in the rate of trafficking in children and women.
4. **Gender Discrimination:-** The majority of Nigerian communities are patriarchal, where there is preference for male children. This social system places the girl-child at a disadvantage, hence, not much effort is made towards educating her even ensuring that she gets the much needed attention, care and affection.
5. **Female Genital Mutilation-** This refers to the various forms of female circumcision, in which the private part of the girl-child is mutilated in the name of forestalling sexual promiscuity and avoidance of diseases. This in human practice causes a great deal of bleeding and even death in a number of instances.
6. **Psychological Trauma:-** Many of the Nigeria homes are characterised by marital conflict between husband and wives, among co-wives and other form of inter-family squabbles. In all these crisis situations children are at the receiving end and in the process they experience a lot of distress and miseries. Others forms of child abuse that result in trauma are rape, discriminatory treatment, etc. These negative experiences do not promote healthy growth and development among children. Emotional abuse destroys a child's self esteem, such abuse commonly include repeated verbal abuse of child in the form of shouting, threats, degrading or humiliating criticism.
7. **Economic Marginalization:-** In the event of the death of the male spouse or divorce, women and children are exposed to economic deprivations and marginalizations. This was because many of the Nigerian communities do not have accepted criterion for inheritance or way of ensuring the up-keep of the divorce and their children where such rules exist, they are abused in most cases. This exposes the young ones in particular to untold hardship, which jeopardizes their future well-being.
8. **Discriminatory Treatment:-** Marital conflicts lead to divorce in many cases and the children may be left in the custody of their father. In such a situation, the children are left under the care of their step-mothers. More



often than not adopted children are exposed to distressing experiences like inadequate feeding and an undue labour. This problem also applies to children adopted by relatives, who are not equally treated as biological children of the household.

9. **Child Marriage:-** Many of the Nigerian girls especially in the northern part are married off by their parents between the ages of ten and thirteen years, when they are too young for their consent to be sought or given. This cultural practice tends to negatively affect the chances of the girl-child to get good education. The other implication of early marriage is the likelihood of early pregnancy with the attendant risk of material mortality and morbidity, and the greater prevalence of vesico vaginal fistula (VVF).
10. **Abandoned children and Orphans:-** Another form of child abuse is the abandonment of children and orphans. Children are abandoned in public places due to various reasons including the fear of disgrace in the case of unwanted pregnancies and economic problems. In some cases you find orphans that cannot be adopted by any of their relatives. Such children are usually taken to the orphanages. The institution of orphans constitute a problem, the children are brought up in abnormal settings. This is to say that the children find it difficult to adjust to community life when they eventually leave the institutions.
11. **Children Born to Imprisoned Mother:-** In this case breast-feeding mothers or expectant mothers are convicted, as a result of which innocent children find themselves incarcerated. This kind of setting will definitely interfere with the normal psycho-social development of the child.
12. **Child-labour:-** The economic depression in the country has driven many children into different types of labour that are exploitative, hazardous and prejudicial to their welfare and development. Such work is exploitative and injurious to the physical, social, cognitive and moral

development of the child e.g. street-vending, scavenging, head-loading etc. these activities occupy the child throughout the day, which in most cases interfere with his educational pursuit or even deny him the opportunity for the necessary intellectual and moral development.

13. **Child Begging-Child begging** takes many forms e.g. the child begs entirely on his own, leads blind parent/relative or act as a front to parents who watch from a distance. Such unfortunate children more or less sleep on the street and run enormous risks especially in the cities where they beg for alms from people. The children suffer severe psycho-social consequences of engaging in such dehumanizing activities encounter with the general public.
14. **Ritual Killings-** The activity of secret societies has brought another dimension of child abuse, where even children are not spared in the human sacrifice (Ebigbo, B 2000 and Elsho-2000 cited in Hodges, 2001). Children are usually kidnaped by unknown persons

#### **Causes of Child Abuse in Nigeria**

The causes of child abuse in Nigeria are rooted in the socio-economic and political lives of the people. The causes of child abuse are as follows:

- i. **Superstitious Beliefs-** Superstitious beliefs are common among Nigeria communities, this is one of the major reasons behind many harmful traditional practices e.g. female genital mutilation, early marriage, ritual killings and even the sexual exploitation of virgins (Eweniyi, 2000; Hodges, 2001).
- ii. **Ignorance:-** Yet some of the acts of child abuse can be attributed to ignorance like child labour (Asogwu, 2002) and female genital mutilation (Hodges, 2001). In the former, the respective community was not even aware of the idea of child labour, while in the latter, the people are doing it out of the belief that it is a good cultural practice. In both cases, the community is unaware of the negative effect of those practices.



**Poverty:-** Most of the problems of child abuse in Nigeria can be traced to economic predicament facing the nation (Bukoye, 2004; Hodges, 2001). The problem attributable to poverty include begging, prostitution and hawking, where individuals engage in either as a means of boosting their economic fortunes. Likewise, children are discharged into streets or abandoned in public places or even taken to the affluent relatives for fostering, for no reason other than economic necessity. On the same note, depending poverty and material concerns lead to an atmosphere of tension and general nervousness which can easily cause intra-marital conflicts and their attendant consequences on poor children.

**Moral Decadence:-** The increasing rate of immorality among our people is another vital reason causing numerous acts of child abuse e.g. unwanted pregnancies leading to abandonment of children; ritual killings, child trafficking, ill-treatment of the adopted children (Eweniyi, 2000).

**Governmental Insensitivity:-** The level of child abuse in the country and abandonment of the task of the protection of children and women right to the non-governmental organizations (Hodges:2001) points to the insensitivity of the government to the entire problem. This calls for a re-think toward this unfortunate development.

### **Counseling Strategies for Curbing Child Abuse**

Having identified the different type of child abuse and the causes, it is now time to recommend ways and means of checking the problem of child abuse as follows:

i. **Orientation program for parents:-** School counsellors can contribute greatly in both the prevention and control of the problem of child abuse. In most schools there are parent teachers association (PTA), this is an appropriate forum where school counselors or other professional counselors could give a talk to parents on the dangers of child abuse, ways of preventing or controlling it and the appropriate parenting styles. The Executive Councils of the (PTA) can organize such programmes from time to time.

ii. **Counseling Child abusing Parents:-** Teachers can identify children that are victims of abuse, such cases should be referred to the school counselor, who will invite the respective parents for dialogue. The parents will be counseled on how to avoid such bad habit. Where the problem persists, the school authority should report the case to the higher authority for the purpose of taking an appropriate action.

For those parents whose children are not in school, the social welfare departments at the local and state levels, should be vigilant enough to identify the parents of abused children for necessary guidance. Where the parents are found to be stubborn, a legal action should be taken against them, for the purpose of protecting the sanctity of the child.

The media can be used as an effective tool for helping the child abusing parents or the potential ones. This can be achieved by introducing radio and television jingles, where professional counselors, community leaders and parents will discuss the problem of child abuse and the various ways of eradicating it. The newspapers can also assist in this direction by devoting columns to it. The government and non-governmental organization can equally sponsor the production of hand bills, pamphlets for the purpose of educating the parents on this very serious problem.

iii. **Counseling for Economic Empowerment- poverty** was identified as one of the major causes of child abuse, therefore, the eradication of poverty and all its manifestations is one of the practical ways of addressing the problem of child abuse. Thus, counseling for economic empowerment can be used as a means of tackling poverty, which can be administered from two perspective. Firstly, vocational counselling should be provided to parents that are found to have abused their children or those parents that are facing economic problems who are potential child abusers, as a means of improving their economic fortunes. Such parents are to be provided with the basic information on how either to secure good job, improve their vocational skills or obtain credit facilities with which to put up an economic venture. Secondly,



the government should be guided by professional counselors on the appropriate group of people to be given support as a means of empowering the family units. Counselors should also sensitize the government on the need to empower families as a means of preventing and controlling child abuse.

iv. Orientation for children:- The war against child abuse will not be complete until the entire school children are involved. As parents we are quite aware of the difficulties involved in child rearing. Parents are aware of the fact that the behaviour of most children can be annoying which can easily provoke parents and lead to the problem of child abuse. Thus, as a means of preventing the problem of child abuse, school children should be counseled through orientation programmes and the regular teacher-pupil interactions, where they should be enlightened on the need and how to be of good behaviour. In addition where any of the children is found to be stubborn, behaviour modification therapy should be administered.

v. Counseling Child Abusing Parents by Behaviour Modification Approach:- This technique was founded by John B. Watson and E.L. Thorndike. The rationale of this approach is based on the idea that behaviour is learnt, and that anything that can be learnt can also be unlearned. Behavioural counseling, therefore, aims at eliminating or at least changing maladaptive behaviour. There is no doubt that child abuse is an abnormal behaviour that requires modification. The treatment can be administered through an interaction between the counselor and the client i.e. the child-abusing parent. The child abusing parent may approach the counselor voluntarily or be referred to the counselor by the educational, social welfare or law enforcement authorities. The client and the counselor should discuss on situations that cause the former to behave contrary to the norms. The counselor will try to identify the causes of the problem and establish the conditions for behavioural change or correction (Denga, 1983)

vi. Counseling the victim of abuse:- Professional counselors in conjunction with governments and non-governmental organisations should strive to rehabilitate victim of child abuse. This category may be those that are detached from their families, like the street boys or the abandoned children. Such unfortunate children should be rehabilitated, so that they can recover from the emotional/psychological trauma and lead a meaningful life.

The behaviour of many of the victims of child abuse may also be abnormal, which must have contributed to the negative behaviour in their parents. Where the counselors realize such a condition, the children should equally go through the behaviour modification therapy.

### Conclusion

Child abuse is a serious problem and its eradication requires an all encompassing approach. The paper proposed the use of counseling as a tool for the prevention and control of child abuse. The successful control of child abuse will guarantee the socio-emotional and psychological development of the child, which is indispensable for the emergence of a normal personality.

### Recommendation

There is need to have trained counsellors in schools. This is because children in primary schools are within the formative years. This is the period when significant changes take place in the appearance and behaviour of children. They manifest some behaviours like aggression, dependence, passivity etc. So they need counsellors to help them correct their misbehaviour and learn positive attitude towards themselves and others around them.

Also counsellors are needed in schools to help the young children to learn to copy with positive behaviour from their peers. It is in school that children socialise with others outside their family like class or school mates. This coming in contact with others influences the individual to demonstrate some skills expected of his age. The result could be either having confidence in being able to do things beside and with others or failure to achieve any



status with peers which leads to inadequacy and inferiority. The counsellor would assist the child to identify this social problems and begin to remedy it before it gets out of hand.

Again, the counsellors working in schools should gear themselves up by being prepared to receive unfavourable treatment from their colleagues and head. The counsellor would be seen as a rival who has come to snatch the popularity of the leader. This he can do by being fully prepared through mastery of his profession and discussing with the leader on the benefit of having a counsellor who is a partner in progress. Government should create more opportunity for people to acquire training in guidance and counselling so as to help children and youths in developing positive attitudes towards themselves and others around them.

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