



## **Influence of Child Abuse on Aggressive Behaviour Among Secondary School Adolescents in Keffi, Nasarawa State, Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

This study examined the influence of child abuse on aggressive behaviour among secondary school adolescents in Keffi, Nasarawa State, Nigeria. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design and focused on senior secondary school students in Government Secondary School, Kofar Hausa, Keffi. A total of 235 participants made up of both male and female students were selected using proportionate random sampling. Data were collected using the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) and Aggression Scale. The findings revealed that exposure to different forms of child abuse significantly predicts aggressive behaviour among adolescents in Keffi [ $R = .556$ ,  $R^2 = .310$ ,  $F(5,229) = 20.543$ ,  $p < .001$ ]. Specifically, physical abuse ( $\beta = .445$ ,  $p < .01$ ), emotional neglect ( $\beta = .177$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and emotional abuse ( $\beta = .163$ ,  $p < .01$ ) had significant positive influence on aggressive behaviour. However, physical neglect ( $\beta = .074$ ,  $p > .05$ ) and sexual abuse ( $\beta = .050$ ,  $p > .05$ ) did not show significant influence. The study concluded that child abuse increases the likelihood of aggressive behaviour among adolescents. Based on this, it was recommended that government and child protection agencies should strengthen laws, improve reporting systems, and create more awareness to prevent child abuse and reduce aggressive behaviour among young people.

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## **Introduction**

Adolescence is a very important stage in human development because it is a period when many physical, emotional, and social changes take place. During this stage, adolescents begin to develop their identity and become more aware of their environment. However, this period is also associated with different behavioural challenges, including aggressive behaviour (Cracco et al., 2017). Aggressive behaviour refers to actions that are intended to harm others either physically or psychologically (Jung et al., 2019). Among secondary school students, this behaviour can be seen in the form of fighting, bullying, verbal abuse, and other violent acts. Aggression can be caused by factors such as frustration, rejection, poor communication, and lack of proper support from family and society (Gr?ning & Dimitrova, 2024). Aggression can be grouped into different forms such as physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility. While some of these involve direct actions like fighting, others involve emotional reactions such as anger and hatred (Leshem & Mashal, 2024). In many cases, adolescents use aggression as a way of expressing their feelings or responding to difficult situations. In Nigeria, aggressive behaviour among secondary school students is becoming a serious concern. There are increasing reports of bullying, violence, and other forms of misconduct among students. This situation affects both the victims and those displaying the behaviour, as it can lead to poor academic performance and social problems (Sydney-Agbor, 2016).

One major factor that has been linked to aggressive behaviour is child abuse. Child abuse refers to any harmful act by parents or caregivers that can cause physical, emotional, or psychological harm to a child (Oginyi et al., 2024). It includes physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect. These experiences can affect the normal development of a child and influence their behaviour later in life (Okafor et al., 2023). Children who experience abuse may develop emotional problems such as anger, frustration, and anxiety. These emotional problems can later lead to aggressive behaviour, especially during adolescence. Studies have shown that childhood maltreatment is strongly associated with deviant behaviours, including aggression (Uye et al., 2024). However, the way abuse affects behaviour may differ from one individual to another depending on factors such as the severity and frequency of the abuse (Van Wert et al., 2017). Based on this, it is important to examine how child abuse influences aggressive



behaviour among adolescents, especially within the Nigerian context. Therefore, this study focuses on secondary school adolescents in Keffi, Nasarawa State.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Aggressive behaviour among adolescents in secondary schools has become a growing problem in Nigeria, and Keffi is not an exception. Many schools experience cases of fighting, bullying, and verbal abuse among students, which creates an unsafe learning environment (Sydney-Agbor, 2016). One of the possible causes of this problem is child abuse. Children who are exposed to abuse at home may develop aggressive behaviour as a way of coping with their experiences or as a result of what they have learned from their environment (Brady et al., 2021). This suggests that early negative experiences can influence how adolescents behave in school and in society. However, not all adolescents who experience abuse become aggressive, which shows that the relationship is not always the same for everyone. Despite this, there is still limited research focusing specifically on the influence of child abuse on aggressive behaviour among secondary school students in Keffi, Nasarawa State. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the influence of child abuse on aggressive behaviour among secondary school adolescents in Keffi in order to provide better understanding of the problem and possible solutions.

## **Hypotheses**

H0: Child abuse will have significant no influence on aggressive behaviour among adolescents in Keffi.

H1: Child abuse will have significant influence on aggressive behaviour among adolescents in Keffi.

## **Empirical Review**

Several studies have examined the impact of child abuse on maladaptive behaviours among adolescents. Most of these studies agree that experiences of abuse have negative effects on children, and one of such effects is aggressive behaviour. For instance, Uye et al. (2024) investigated the influence of child abuse on aggressive behaviour among in-school adolescents in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. The study used a cross-sectional survey design and selected 195 students from five secondary schools. Data were collected using validated questionnaires. The findings showed that child abuse significantly predicts aggressive behaviour among adolescents. The study concluded that child abuse is an important factor contributing to aggression and recommended that parents, teachers, and policymakers should work together to reduce child abuse.

Similarly, Alokun and Osakinle (2015) examined the relationship between child abuse and aggressive behaviour among secondary school students in Ekiti State, Nigeria. Using a descriptive survey design, the study selected 200 students through random sampling. Data were collected with a self-designed questionnaire. The results revealed a significant positive relationship between child abuse and aggressive behaviour, indicating that students who experience abuse are more likely to show aggressive tendencies.



Outside Nigeria, Olson et al. (2024) conducted a longitudinal study in the United States to examine the relationship between child maltreatment and behavioural problems. The study followed 1,354 children from early childhood to adolescence. The findings revealed that children who were exposed to maltreatment showed increased externalizing behaviours such as aggression at different stages of development. The study also found that early behavioural problems could increase the risk of further maltreatment, showing that the relationship between abuse and behaviour is continuous.

In another study, Madhlopa et al. (2020) carried out comparative research in Malawi and China to examine the relationship between child maltreatment and behavioural problems. The study involved 739 parents and assessed children's behaviour using standard instruments. The findings showed that both physical and psychological abuse were associated with aggressive behaviour and other emotional problems. This suggests that the negative effects of child abuse are not limited to one culture but occur across different societies.

Auslander et al. (2016) also examined the relationship between childhood abuse and aggression among adolescent girls. The study found that emotional and physical abuse were significantly related to higher levels of aggression, while sexual abuse did not show a significant relationship. The study further revealed that psychological factors such as depression and post-traumatic stress play a role in explaining how abuse leads to aggressive behaviour.

Furthermore, Van Wert et al. (2017) investigated the link between child maltreatment and aggressive or criminal behaviour using data from 1,837 cases. The findings showed that children who experienced severe and multiple forms of abuse were more likely to display aggressive behaviour. Neglect was also found to be an important factor associated with aggression.

Lastly, Ellenbogen et al. (2013) examined how the severity of physical abuse relates to later aggression among adolescents. The study found that both the frequency and severity of physical abuse significantly predicted aggressive behaviour. However, this relationship was more significant among female adolescents.

Overall, these studies show that child abuse is a strong predictor of aggressive behaviour among adolescents, although the extent of its influence may vary depending on factors such as type of abuse and individual differences.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study is based on relevant theories that explain the relationship between child abuse and aggressive behaviour.

### **Social Learning Theory and Intergenerational Transmission of Violence**

Social learning theory suggests that people acquire behaviours by observing others, imitating their actions, and engaging in cognitive processing (Bandura, 1977). This theory asserts that criminal tendencies and unlawful behaviours are not innate but rather developed through exposure to such conduct (Akers, 1973). In



the context of child maltreatment, social learning theory explains that abusive behaviours are often learned through experience (Daigle & Mufti?, 2016). It proposes that individuals who mistreat or neglect their children may be replicating patterns of abuse they either endured or witnessed during childhood (Daigle & Mufti?, 2016). Supporting this notion, Widom (1989a) highlighted that parents who were victims of abuse in their youth are more likely to engage in abusive behaviours themselves.

This idea is closely related to the concept of intergenerational transmission of violence, also known as the cycle of violence. According to Widom (1989a), children who experience abuse are more likely to engage in violent or aggressive behaviour later in life. Similarly, Milaniak and Widom (2015) found that individuals who were abused as children are more likely to become abusive parents. However, not all abused children become aggressive. Widom (1989b) explained that some children are able to overcome the effects of abuse due to the presence of protective factors such as support from others. This shows that while child abuse increases the risk of aggression, it does not determine behaviour completely.

### **Ecological Model**

The ecological model explains that human behaviour is influenced by different environmental factors such as family, school, peers, and society (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). According to this model, a child's development is shaped by interactions within these different environments. Belsky (1980) applied this model to explain child maltreatment and argued that abuse is caused by multiple factors, including family stress, poor parenting, and social conditions. This means that child abuse does not occur due to a single cause but as a result of several interacting factors. The ecological model also explains that aggressive behaviour develops when risk factors such as abuse are high and protective factors such as support are low (MacKenzie et al., 2011). Therefore, adolescents who experience abuse in a negative environment are more likely to develop aggressive behaviour. Despite this limitation, the ecological model provides valuable theoretical insights, helping to explain the connection between maltreatment and behavioural issues. It also offers a framework for integrating knowledge across different environmental influences to improve intervention strategies.

### **General Aggression Model (GAM)**

The General Aggression Model (GAM) is one of the most widely used theoretical frameworks for understanding aggression. The model which was developed by Anderson and Bushman (2002) integrates multiple psychological theories to explain how situational and individual factors contribute to aggressive behaviour (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). GAM is particularly valuable because it accounts for both short-term and long-term influences on aggression, making it applicable to various contexts, including interpersonal violence, media effects, and social conflict.

According to the model, aggression results from the interaction of personal factors, situational factors, and internal states. Personal factors include traits such as impulsivity and aggressive thinking patterns, while situational factors include experiences such as exposure to violence or stressful environments (Bettencourt



et al., 2006). Internal states involve emotions like anger, thoughts, and physiological arousal (Wilkowski & Robinson, 2010).

In the context of this study, child abuse can be seen as a situational factor that influences the internal state of the adolescent. For example, a child who experiences abuse may develop anger and aggressive thoughts, which can later lead to aggressive behaviour. The model also explains that repeated exposure to violence, such as abuse in the home, can lead to long-term aggressive tendencies (Huesmann & Kirwil, 2007).

Although the model has some limitations, it is useful in explaining how early negative experiences like child abuse can influence aggressive behaviour among adolescents.

## Research Design

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey research design. This design was considered appropriate because it allows the researcher to collect data from a large number of respondents at a single point in time. It also helps in examining the relationship between child abuse and aggressive behaviour among adolescents in Keffi.

## Population, Sample and Sampling Technique

The population of this study were students enrolled in the senior secondary classes at Government Secondary School Kofar Hausa, Keffi. Data pertaining to the student population indicate that there are currently 617 students in the senior secondary classes with 184 in SS1, 220 in SS2 and 213 in SS3. The sample size for the study was determined calculated to be 243 using Taro Yamani formula for sample size determination as shown:

Where:

$n$  = sample size

$N$  = Population size = 617

$e$  = tolerable error 0.5%

Class of Study	Population Size	Sample to be Selected
SS1	184	72
SS2	220	87
SS3	213	84
Total	617	243

As seen in Table 1, a larger proportion of the participants were selected from SS2, followed by SS3, with 84 students sampled. Simple random sampling technique was used in selecting the participants for the study.



## **Method of Data Collection**

Data was collected using a self-administered questionnaire consisting of standardized psychological instruments measuring the key study variables. Aggressive behaviours were measured using the aggression scale developed by Orpinas and Frankowski (2001). This scale is a psychological instrument designed to measure the frequency and intensity of aggressive behaviours in children and adolescents. The scale consists of 11 self-report items. Respondents are asked to indicate how frequently they have engaged in specific aggressive actions, such as hitting, pushing, threatening, or name-calling, over a given period. Responses are measured with a 6-point Likert-type response format (0 = 0 times, 1 = 1 time, 2 = 2 times, 3 = 3 times, 4 = 4 times, 5 = 5 times or more). The items are summed after scoring, and the total score ranges from 0 to 55, with higher scores indicating more reported aggressive behaviours.

Child abuse was measured using the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) developed by Bernstein and Fink (1998). The CTQ is a widely used self-report instrument designed to assess experiences of abuse and neglect. The questionnaire consists of 28 items covering five dimensions of child abuse, which include physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical neglect, and emotional neglect. Respondents indicate how often they experienced each situation using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Never True (1) to Very Often True (5). The scores are summed up, and higher scores indicate higher levels of childhood abuse and neglect.

## **Procedure**

A letter of introduction was obtained from the Department of Psychology, Nasarawa State University, Keffi and presented to the school authorities to seek permission to conduct the study. Approval was granted by the school management. The researcher was assisted by a teacher assigned by the principal during the data collection process. Simple random sampling was used to select participants. Pieces of paper marked "Yes" and "No" were folded and placed in a container for students to pick. Students who picked "Yes" were selected to participate, while those who picked "No" were not included. This method ensured fairness in the selection process. The selected students were informed about the purpose of the study and were given the opportunity to ask questions. Copies of the questionnaire were then distributed to them. The respondents were allowed to complete the questionnaire at their own pace, and the process took about 20 to 30 minutes. After completion, the questionnaires were collected immediately.

## **Method of Data Analysis**

The data collected were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics such as frequency, mean, and percentage were used to summarise the data. Regression analysis was used to test the influence of child abuse on aggressive behaviour among adolescents. All analyses were carried out using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

## Data Presentation and Analysis

### Respondents' Demographic Characteristics

A total of 243 questionnaires were administered to the students and they were all retrieved on the spot. From the 243 retrieved, eight were excluded as a result of too many missing items while the remaining 235 were processed for analysis.

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
11 - 13 years	27	11.5
14 - 16 years	143	60.9
17 - 19 years	65	27.7
Sex		
Male	114	48.5
Female	121	51.5
Religion		
Christianity	135	57.4
Islam	100	42.6
Class of Study		
SS1	70	29.8
SS2	82	34.9
SS3	83	35.3

### Test of Hypothesis

H0: Child abuse will have significant no influence on aggressive behaviour among adolescents in Keffi.

H1: Child abuse will have significant influence on aggressive behaviour among adolescents in Keffi.

Variables	beta	t	df	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F	Sig.
Physical abuse	0.445**	7.871	5, 229	0.556	0.310	20.543	0.000
Sexual abuse	0.050	0.887					
Physical neglect	0.074	1.318					

Emotional neglect	0.177**	3.192					
Emotional abuse	0.163**	2.922					

\*\*Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\*Significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The results of the multiple linear regression analysis (Table 3) indicate that exposure to various forms of child abuse significantly predict aggressive behaviour among secondary school adolescents in Keffi [ $R=.556$ ,  $R^2=.310$ ,  $F(5,229)=20.543$ ,  $p<.001$ ]. The results further indicate that 31.0% of the variance in aggressive behaviour among the respondents can be explained by exposure to child abuse. Physical abuse [ $\beta = .445 < .01$ ] had the strongest and significant positive influence on aggressive behaviour, this is followed by emotional neglect [ $\beta = .177 < .01$ ] and emotional abuse [ $\beta = .163 < .01$ ]. Physical neglect [ $\beta = .074 > .05$ ] and sexual abuse [ $\beta = .050 > .05$ ] had no significant influence on aggressive behaviour.

## Discussion of Findings

Adolescence is a critical stage of development and experiences during this stage can greatly shape an individual's behaviour and wellbeing. The aim of the study is to examine child abuse and social support as predictors of aggressive behaviour among adolescents in Keffi.

The results of the analysis performed to test the first research hypothesis showed that child abuse significantly predicts aggressive behaviour among adolescents in Keffi. The finding confirms the stated hypothesis. The findings suggest that adolescents who experience more child abuse are more likely to display higher levels of aggressive behaviour. The finding is in line with related studies Uye et al. (2024); Auslander et al. (2016) and Olson et al. (2024) which also implicated the experience of child abuse in aggressive behaviour among adolescents. Likewise, the finding agrees with the assertion by Alokun and Osakinle (2015) that child abuse deprives the child of the experience of love and as such, the child will lack proper knowledge and ability of how to treat others in love.

Among the different forms of abuse examined in this study, physical abuse emerged as the strongest predictor of aggressive behaviour, followed by emotional neglect and emotional abuse. This suggests that when adolescents are repeatedly beaten, threatened, or physically punished, they will be more likely to imitate such violent patterns in their interactions with their peers. This finding is consistent with social learning theory, which explains that children learn behaviours through observation and direct experience. When violence is used as a method of discipline at home, adolescents may see it as an acceptable way of responding to conflict. Emotional neglect and emotional abuse were also significant predictors of aggressive behaviour, showing that the absence of warmth, care, and encouragement, as well as exposure to insults and humiliation, can damage adolescents' emotional development and increase their tendency to



react aggressively. These results agree with earlier studies such as those of Uye et al. (2024) which found that abused students were more likely to display aggressive behaviour in school. International studies by Madhlopa et al. (2020) in Malawi and China also support the view that physical and emotional abuse leads to externalizing problems like aggression.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study shows that child abuse plays an important role in shaping aggressive behaviour among adolescents in Keffi. Adolescents who experience abuse are more likely to become aggressive.

## **Recommendations**

The government and child protection agencies need to do more to prevent child abuse. Stronger laws, better reporting systems, and community awareness programs are necessary so that children are safe at home, in schools, and in the wider community, as protecting children from abuse will go a long way in reducing aggressive behaviour later in life.

Second, families should be given more support to strengthen their relationships with adolescents. Parents in particular need to understand the importance of showing love, guidance, and healthy discipline. Parenting seminars, family counselling, and open communication within the home can help reduce aggression in young people.

## **Limitations of the Study**

This study has a few notable limitations which include:

First, the study was carried out only among adolescents in Keffi, which means the findings may not fully represent adolescents in other parts of Nigeria.

Second, the study relied on self-reported data, and some participants may not have given completely honest answers, especially on sensitive issues like child abuse.

Finally, the study only used a quantitative design and did not include in-depth interviews or qualitative data that could have provided a richer understanding of the adolescents' experiences.

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