

**JOURNAL OF
EARLY
CHILDHOOD
ASSOCIATION OF
NIGERIA 2017 6(1
&2) 16 - 26**

PRESCHOOLERS' EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS' VERBAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE

By

Olufunke CHENUBE, Ph.D

Department of Early Childhood Care and Education
College of Education, Agbor, Delta State

Veronica ANAEZIONWN

Department of Early Childhood Care and Education
College of Education, Agbor, Delta State
and

Clara MOEMEKE, Ph.D.

Department of Curriculum Studies and Instructional
Technology
College of Education, Agbor, Delta State

Abstract

The impact of verbal and psychological abuse on children may not be immediate, but it is lifelong. Many parents and teachers take verbal abuse as normal without considering the emotional wounds and pains it leaves on young children. This study focused on preschoolers' experiences of verbal and psychological abuse by their teachers. One hundred and one preschoolers in five public ECCE centres in Delta North Senatorial District were purposively selected for the study. The instrument used for the study was Preschoolers' Verbal and Psychological Abuse Questionnaire developed and validated by the researchers. The results of the study established the prevalence of verbal and psychological abuse in preschoolers. It was recommended that schools should put strategies in place to identify and sanction teachers and caregivers who abuse children verbally or psychologically.

Keywords: Verbal, Psychological, Abuse, Preschoolers

Introduction

Child abuse has attracted global concern in recent times and it comes in different forms and shapes. Although physical violence is obvious because it sometimes leaves the child with scars, bruises, and broken bones, there are other forms of violence against children that are not too obvious but equally have a damaging and lasting negative impact. These other forms of violence are either psychological or verbal and they affect the emotional well-being of a child and may have an effect on the child's mental health. Verbal abuse is a form of

emotional abuse and, unlike physical abuse, it is not easily seen or detected. It is defined as behaviours, speech, and actions of parents, caregivers, or other significant figures in a child's life that have negative mental impact on the child (Carey, 2015). It ranges from yelling obscenities to quiet put-downs. (Kleinschmidt,2016). LaBeir (2014) opines that psychological abuse may take any of these forms: indifference-to the child's needs or temperament, which may be different from his or her siblings; humiliation-when the child fails at a task or misunderstands instructions; denigration- negative description of something the child achieves or expresses interest in. It may also be in the form of neglect - failing to provide essential emotional support or recognition of the child's needs; unrelenting pressure -to serve parental expectations, often accompanied by negative comparisons of the child to others who “follow the programme.

Shaffer, Yates & Egeland (2009) argue that babies and preschool children who are being emotionally abused or neglected may:

- be overly affectionate towards strangers or people they do not know too well,
- lack confidence or become wary or anxious,
- not appear to have a close relationship with their parent, for example when being taken to or collected from nursery, etc, and
- be aggressive or nasty towards other children and animals.

They add suggested that older children who suffer emotional abuse may use language, act in a way or know about things that you would not expect them to know for their age, struggle to control strong emotions or have extreme outbursts, seem isolated from their parents or lack social skills or have few if any, friends. LaBeir (2014) opined that children who are emotionally abused and neglected face similar and, sometimes, worse mental health problems than children who are physically or sexually abused. The American Psychological Association pointed out that children who had been psychologically abused suffered from anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, symptoms of post-traumatic stress, and “suicidality” at the same rate and, in some cases, at a greater rate than children who were physically or sexually abused. Psychological abuse was most strongly associated with depression, general anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, attachment problems, and substance abuse.

Petro (2016) states that the effects of emotional abuse in children who experience rejection demonstrate that they are more likely than "accepted" children to exhibit hostility, aggressive or passive-aggressive behaviour, to be extremely dependent, to have negative opinions of themselves and their abilities, to be emotionally unstable or unresponsive, and to have a negative perception of the world around them. Vardigan (2016) in a New Hampshire study, found that verbally abused children demonstrated higher rates of physical aggression, delinquency, and interpersonal problems. Verbal abuse can cause delayed

development. The slowdown may appear in a child's physical, social, academic, or emotional development

Parents, caregivers, preschoolers' teachers, and other significant adults in the lives of the children are the main culprits in the emotional abuse children suffer. As earlier indicated, this form of abuse is sometimes subtle and unnoticeable but the impact is equally damaging like the physical punishment. Sometimes when children offend teachers and caregivers subject them to some of the following actions: abuse or call them nasty names (labeling); yell or shout; threaten; deprive children of their playtime; deny children of their food or refuse to attend to a child when there is a need for it. Abuse by a primary caregiver damages the most fundamental relationship with a child; when the person that is expected to care, secure, and protect the child abuses the child where will the child turn to? Other forms of emotional abuse by adults are constant belittling and shaming a child; making negative comparisons to others; telling a child he or she is "no good," "worthless," "bad," or "a mistake,"; ignoring or rejecting a child as punishment, giving him or her the silent treatment; limited physical contact with the child-no hugs, kisses, or other signs of affection.; exposing the child to violence or the abuse of others, whether it be the abuse of a parent, a sibling, or even a pet.((Smith &Segal, 2016) it could also be in the form of "scapegoating", blaming or use of sarcasm and making mocking remarks.

Parents and caregivers may try to explain why they use verbal abuse on children. The reason often includes disciplinary measures, uncontrollable strong emotions when children upset them, and normal ways of parents or caregivers showing love to erring children instead of spanking. In developed countries, the abuse of children is usually reported and taken seriously. Efforts are put in place also to identify caregivers and parents who abuse children physically or psychologically. In recent times, reporting abuse of children is beginning to gain attention in Nigeria, though it is under-reported. The major focus has been on physical and sexual abuse, yet verbal and psychological abuse is so common and seen as the norm despite the immediate and later life-damaging effects. This study, therefore, assessed preschoolers' experiences of teachers/caregivers' actions that border on verbal and psychological abuse.

The children do not understand the concept of abuse but they experience it in different forms. The study focused on finding out the prevalence of verbal and psychological abuse among preschoolers. The study hypothesized that Preschoolers do not experience any form of verbal or psychological abuse from their teachers/caregivers and secondly that the gender of the teacher/caregiver will not affect the verbal or psychological abuse experienced by Preschoolers.

Methodology

The study is a cross-sectional study of One hundred and one (101) preschoolers attending five ECCE centres located in public primary schools in Delta North Senatorial District of Southern Nigeria. The preschoolers were 4-5 years old and

in nursery three as of the time of the study (3rd Term of the 2015/16 academic session). The schools and the pupils were purposively selected for the study from two local government areas in the senatorial district. Since the Preschoolers were minors, official permission was sought and obtained from the school heads before the commencement of the study.

The instrument for the study was the Preschoolers' Experiences of Verbal and Psychological Abuse Questionnaire and it was validated by experts in the Department of Early Childhood and Care, College of Education, Agbor Delta State. It had two sections; Section A was on the preschooler's demographics-name of school, age, sex of class teacher; Section B had 15 items that focused on actions of the caregiver/teachers that tend towards verbal and psychological abuse in the class and how the children feel about those actions. Questions 1-5 were on experiences of verbal abuse (yelling, shouting, labeling) 6-10 focused on psychological abuse (denial of food or playtime because of offenses) while questions 11-15 were on the effects of the abuse.

The data were collected by the research team and a trained researcher assistant. Each child was asked the 15 questions contained in the Instrument orally and their responses were marked accordingly. The children were asked the questions in English because it was the medium of instruction in the schools. In questions 1-10, each child's response was on the degree of his/her experiences- "Always" Sometimes" and "Never". They responded to items 11-15 with "Yes" or "No", depending on their experiences. Frequency count, mean rating, and student's t-test statistical procedure were used in analyzing the data. A benchmark of 1.50-2.49 was used for the prevalence of abuse (to indicate that it occurred sometimes) and below 1.50 was not occurring at all

Results

Table 1: Frequency, Mean, and Standard Deviation Respondents on the Verbal and Psychological Abuse

S/N	Question	Frequency		-X		SD	
		Always	Sometimes	Not at all			
1	Does your teacher abuse you or call you names when you do anything wrong?	60 (59.4)	30 (29.7))	11 (10.9)	1.51	.69	D
2	Does your teacher yell or shout at you when you do wrong	16 (15.9)	61 (60.4)	24 (23.8)	2.08	.63	E
3	Does your teacher abuse or yell at you in front of others?	27 (26.7)	57 (56.4)	17 (16.8)	1.90	.66	E
4	Does your teacher threaten to beat or injure you if you do anything wrong?	31 (30.7)	48 (47.8)	22	1.91	.72	E

5	Does your teacher abuse you when you fail your assignment or test?	25 (24.8)	58 (57.4)	18 (17.8)	1.93	.65	E
6	Has your teacher ever deprived you of your play time because you did anything wrong?	54 (53.5)	39 (38.6)	8 (7.9)	1.54	.64	E
7	Has your teacher ever denied you your food because you did anything wrong?	92	8	1	1.10	.33	N
8	Do you ever feel that there is nothing you do that your teacher ever likes?	64 (63.4)	37 (38.6)	-	1.37	.48	N
9	Do you feel rejected because of your teacher's attitude to you	42 (41.6)	53 (52.5)	6 (5.9)	1.64	.59	E
10	When you make mistake, are you always scared of your teacher's reaction?	31 (30.1)	48 (47.3)	22 (21.8)	1.91	.72	E

Table 1 reveals the frequency, mean, and standard deviation of the measures of verbal and psychological abuse of preschoolers. The result showed that children suffer different forms of verbal and psychological abuse in the classroom, except for questions 7 and 8 which are in the reverse form-"not denied food" and "there is nothing done that the teacher ever likes"

Table 2: Frequency of the Psychological effects on Preschoolers

S/N		Frequency		%	No %
		Yes	No		
11	Do you feel happy coming to school?	98	3	7	3
12	Are you afraid of your teacher?	64	37	63.4	36.6
13	Are you afraid of speaking with your teacher?	53	48	52.5	49.5
14	Do you obey your teacher just because you don't want her to shout at you?	71	30	70.3	29.7
15	If the school changes your teacher will you be happy?	25	76	24.8	75.2

The result in Table 2 showed some negative effects of teachers' abuse (63.4%) of the children were afraid of their teachers and 70.3% obeyed because they wanted to escape the shouting and abuse). The children still liked coming to school. Though they had fear of their teachers/caregivers. The motive for obedience to instructions was to avoid the abuse of their teachers.

Table 3: t-Test Analysis between Male and Female Teachers

	Mean	SD	N	df	Observed T Value	Critical T Value
Male Teachers	1.86	.27	5		1.18	1.96
Female Teachers	1.68	.33	96	99		

Table 3 indicates the t-test analysis between male and female teachers on the prevalence of verbal and psychological abuse of preschoolers. The mean scores of the male and female teachers were 1.86 and 1.18, which was less than the critical t value of 1.96. The result shows that there is no significant difference between male and female teachers' verbal and psychological abuse of preschoolers.

Discussion

The findings from the study showed the prevalence of verbal and psychological abuse among preschoolers in Delta North Senatorial District. The children's responses on the first 10 items indicated their experiences of the different forms of verbal and psychological abuse. The forms of abuse not prevalent among the sampled preschoolers are included: denying them food and not feeling there is nothing done that the teacher ever likes. It is commendable that teachers do not deny children food when they offend and the children do not feel that their teachers do not always like what they do. However, the results of items 1-6 and 9-10 clearly showed that children suffer different forms of abuse from their teachers/caregivers. It was indicated in the study that ninety children either always or sometimes had teachers call them names or abuse them when they did wrong things. This established the fact that calling children names when they offend is almost like a norm among teachers. If this trend is not corrected it becomes a cycle, as established in other studies, that children who suffer verbal abuse turn out to become abusers themselves (Vardigan, 2016).

The study also established that caregivers/teachers yell or shout at the children. Over 70% of the sampled preschoolers either always or sometimes had experienced yelling or shouting from their teachers /caregivers. This probably accounted for about 90% of the children who felt rejected because of their teachers' attitude towards them. This corroborates past findings that showed that children who suffer verbal abuse have negative opinions of themselves and their abilities, can be emotionally unstable or unresponsive, and have a negative perception of the world around them (Petro, 2016). The result of this study has also established that adults abuse children when they fail a test and deprive them of their playtime. Labrier (2014) described it as humiliation. The majority of the preschoolers also indicated that they were always scared of their teachers. The plausible reason for this phobia is the ready abuse they will likely get from them.

Children that are abused will have low self-esteem and may always live in fear of the abuse that will trail their mistakes or offense. Although the children responded positively about coming to school, maybe because of their friends and escape from the likely boredom at home. However, about 63.4% indicated that they feared their teachers; and 52.5% were equally afraid to speak with their teachers; while 70.8% obeyed their teachers because they did not want to be abused. When children fear and obey adults because of fear of abuse, it is a clear indication of the absence of love and acceptance. Love and acceptance of each child form the bedrock of learning in early years; when children are afraid of their teachers who are supposed to stand in loco-parentis, the learning process can be hindered and the child's socio-emotional development is negatively affected.

The result showed no significant difference in the sex of the teacher in relation to abuse. This means that both male and female teachers and caregivers abuse children.

Conclusion

The findings of this study have shown the prevalence of verbal and psychological abuse in preschools in Delta North Senatorial District. It has been established that children experience different forms of verbal abuse, including yelling, shouting, calling names, and denial of playtime. The effect of the abuse is that children are not emotionally attached to their teachers. They obey them because of the fear of abuse. There is the need for caregivers and teachers who handle young children to understand the implications of verbal and psychological abuse on the total well-being of a growing child. Also, it is imperative for adults not to accept abuse, particularly verbal abuse, as the norm even if they suffered the same while growing up; the cycle should be broken.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are suggested:

- The teacher education curriculum for preschool should include courses on the different forms of abuse against children and how they affect children's development and the learning process
- Preservice teachers and In-service teachers who have suffered abuse should be encouraged to seek help so that they will not repeat the same to the children under their care.
- Measures should be put in place by relevant authorities to check for abuse in classroom practices. Both the government and private school owners should install close-circuit cameras in classrooms to have empirical evidence of abuse and prosecute offenders accordingly.
- Appropriate sanctions should be outlined for caregivers who abuse children.
- Children who have experienced abuse should be helped and counseled.

- The home and the school should work in partnership in the prevention of abuse by preschoolers.

References

- Carey, E, (2015) Child Emotional/Psychological Abuse. *Healthline Newsletter*
- LaBeir .D (2014) Childhood Psychological Abuse Has Long-lasting Impact. Retrieved from
The Blog <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/douglas-labier/childhood-psychological>
- Kleinschmidt, K. (2016) Child Abuse. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*,55(10) Supplement S1-S358
- Shaffer, A., Yates, T. M. and Egeland, B. R.(2009).The Relation Of Emotional Maltreatment And Early Adolescent Competence: Developmental Processes In A Prospective Study. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 33(1):36-44.
- Smith, M.A. and Jeanne, S.(2016) Child Abuse and Neglect: Recognizing the Signs and making a Difference. Retrieved online from
<http://www.helpguide.org/articles/abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect.htm>
- Petro, L (2016) Parenting should Be This Hard: You Deserve Support Retrieved from <http://www.teach-through-love.com/effects-of-emotional-abuse.htm>
- Vardigan B. (2016) Yelling at Children (Verbal Abuse) Children's Health Library