

Emotional Abuse among in-School Adolescents in Ekiti State, Nigeria

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Abstract:-

Background: Physical abuse at school is more frequently discussed than emotional abuse. Emotional abuse is more difficult to assess and has significant implications for children's mental development, and this receives less attention. Children who are repeatedly neglected, shamed, terrified, or humiliated suffer as much as, if not more than, children who are physically harmed. Child abuse is a major social issue as well as of public health importance. The objective of this study is to determine the prevalence of emotional abuse among the adolescents in the senior secondary schools in Ekiti and its socio-demographic determinants.

Methods: This was a cross sectional study among adolescents in senior secondary schools in Ekiti state. Multistage sampling technique was used in selecting 450 adolescents by simple random sampling. An adapted self-administered questionnaire was used. Data were collected with this instrument by trained research assistants. Data was entered into and analyzed with SPSS version 25. Descriptive statistics was done using percentages, mean and standard deviation while inferential statistics was generated using chi square and binary logistic regression. Level of statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Results: The female respondents were 187 (41.6%) while the males were 263 (58.4%). The early, mid, and late adolescents were 190 (42.2%), 220 (48.9%) and 40 (8.9%) respectively. 66% of in-school adolescents experienced emotional abuse with discriminating being the most experienced form. The likelihood of being emotionally abused as an adolescent in the late stage was 38% more compared to early adolescents with p value of 0.045 and was also 66% higher among the male respondents compared with female with p value of 0.044.

Conclusion: The adolescents in senior secondary schools experience various forms of emotional abuse and younger age and female sex are associated with the likelihood of experiencing it more. School authority should organize periodic enlightenment programs for the teachers. The government should have a policy with respect to training for the teachers on the effect of

emotional abuse and consequences of abusing the students.

Keywords: prevalence emotional/psychological abuse, adolescents, in-school, Ekiti.

I. INTRODUCTION

The term "child abuse" encompasses a range of actions, active or passive, that adults inflict on children in their care, posing a threat to the child's emotional, intellectual, and social growth. [1] Emotional abuse of a child, is defined as the systematic psychological degradation of another individual, carried out through words, gestures, and policies. It can occur within individuals or groups of children [2]. In simpler terms, it constitutes any disciplinary or motivational practice (excluding physical violence) that causes psychological harm to children [3].

Given that children and adolescents spend a significant portion of their time at school, the school environment holds substantial importance in their lives. Viewed from a socio-ecological perspective, the school represents a crucial microsystem, entailing various social activities and interactions with peers and teachers. Therefore, the school environment significantly influences the well-being and developmental progress of children and adolescents [3]. When the reverse is the case, emotional abuse by educator impacts on the students' academic abilities. [7] Unfortunately, pupils have reported experiencing their first psychological abuse within a school setting. (6)

Psychological abuse can be caused by the ignorance, immaturity, defended lifestyle, and conscious or unconscious aggression, as well as prolonged coldness, rejection, and hostility exhibited by parents or primary caretakers, leading to disruptions in the child's normal physical and/or emotional growth, or causing behavioral issues [4].

Teachers' psychological maltreatment of children can manifest in various ways. When a teacher fails to recognize a child's value or the importance of their educational needs, it is known as rejection. Discrimination occurs within the classroom when teacher direct questions mainly to students expected to answer correctly, overlooking others who may

be considered less brilliant. The use of threats by teachers represents a form of dominance, which can result in negative attitudes from students towards the subject being taught. Frequent demeaning, negative labeling, and the absence of a positive emotional climate fall under the category of degradation. This includes actions like mocking, belittling, name-calling, and treating individuals as if they were much younger. Explicitly stating that a young student is unintelligent, useless, or scolding them in front of classmates qualifies as verbal assault [5]. In an educational context, adults are supposed to prioritize creating a safe environment that supports and nurtures the dignity and growth of students (6).

Emotional mistreatment by educators is widespread across different cultural contexts, but there are significant variations both within and between regions. (3) Child abuse is a critical societal concern with significant public health implications. (1) Among the various forms of child abuse (sexual, psychological, and physical), psychological maltreatment or abuse stands out as the most devastating due to its profound impact on the development of school children. (6) What sets psychological maltreatment apart is its challenging nature of detection, as well as the fact that a perpetrator can target multiple victims simultaneously. [6]

While physical injuries can heal, the emotional scars resulting from being belittled, blamed for things beyond a child's control, ridiculed, shamed, threatened, treated coldly, singled out in school, or subjected to distressing acts such as being locked in a closet, may be irreparable. (5)

Remaining silent may seem acceptable when there are no consequences, but the impact of teacher maltreatment on the teacher-student relationship can lead to children fearing their instructors and actively avoiding them. (6) This dynamic replaces the initial respect for teachers with fear. When children endure emotional abuse from those expected to protect and support them, it can detrimentally affect their development, causing fear, anger, aggression, low self-esteem, insecurity, communication difficulties, aversion to authority, peer relation challenges, learning difficulties, as well as mental disorders like sleep problems, school phobia, feelings of hopelessness, and anxiety. (2) Despite being acknowledged as a complex, persistent, and growing problem, it has not received sufficient attention. (6)

Prevalence rates based on student reports varied significantly across different regions: lifetime prevalence (Europe: 22–98%; Americas: 6–98%; Asia: 5–91%; Middle East: 31–60%; Africa: 31–86%). The consistently higher rates of emotional violence reported by students in European, American, and Middle Eastern countries, along with the trend in African and Asian countries, are influenced by the legal stance on corporal punishment in these regions. Countries with bans on corporal punishment tend to exhibit relatively higher emotional violence rates, potentially indicating its use as an alternative to discipline. In countries where corporal punishment is legal, the lower prevalence of emotional violence may stem from students not perceiving it as violence in itself. (3)

A comprehensive review of studies in China found that the prevalence of child abuse was 19.6% among the individuals studied. (10) In a study conducted in Yemen, 55.2 percent of students reported experiencing emotional abuse at least once during their school careers, with male students (72.6%) experiencing it more than female students (26.1%). This was mostly perpetrated by the teachers. (9) A retrospective study carried out in Zimbabwean schools indicated that the most prevalent form of abuse was psychological/emotional and this was experienced by 54% of the males and 46% of the females. A study conducted in Edo state Nigeria showed the existence of seven types of psychological abuse (terrorizing, dominating, rejecting, discriminating, verbal assaulting, humiliating, and ignoring) in secondary schools. Findings indicated that psychological maltreatment affects 66.4 percent to 86.2 percent of students.

The impact of enduring psychological abuse is significant, as it often becomes a defining characteristic in the child's life. Consequently, individuals who have experienced psychological abuse struggle to reach their full potential as capable adults. The importance of avoiding psychological abuse of students is paramount, as it not only humiliates and dehumanizes them but also erodes their self-concept, leading to a dislike for school, demotivation, character deformation, shyness, confusion, disgrace, and fear. (6) It has the most devastating consequences among all forms of child abuse. (6)

Discriminatory behaviors, such as selective attention and favoritism, lead to jealousy and animosity among students, detrimental to the learning environment. Ignoring behaviors from teachers deprive children of necessary stimulation and response, negatively affecting intellectual and emotional development. (5)

Additionally, students who have suffered mental abuse exhibit slower psychological development, impacting their self-esteem and fostering a negative perception of themselves, their abilities, and the world around them. This underscores the urgent need for effective interventions to combat this public health threat.

Emotional abuse can also undermine students' psychological resilience, highlighting the necessity for psychological counselors to establish a deeper understanding of their students, identify those who have faced abuse, and work collaboratively to enhance their psychological resilience. (11) To carry out an intervention, there is need to know the burden of disease in our environment. Hence this study is to determine the prevalence of emotional abuse experienced by in-school adolescents in Ekiti-State and its relationship with sociodemographic characteristics.

II. METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted in Ekiti State, in the western part of Nigeria and is one of the country's thirty-six states. It shares its borders with Kwara and Kogi States to the north, Osun State to the west, and is bounded by Ondo State to the east and south. Ekiti State is divided into three senatorial districts: Ekiti Central, Ekiti South, and Ekiti

North. (12) The study focused on secondary schools within Ekiti State, where, in accordance with the educational system, students spend a total of 6 years in secondary school—3 years in Junior secondary schools and 3 years in senior secondary school after the first 6 years in primary school. The research design employed for this study was a cross-sectional approach, involving senior secondary school adolescents from all three senatorial districts in Ekiti State.

A. Study Population

The study population will be made up of selected adolescents in senior secondary schools in the three senatorial districts of Ekiti State. Adolescents (Age 10 – 19 years) in secondary schools in the three senatorial districts of Ekiti State were used for the study. Adolescents in the three senatorial districts of Ekiti States that were absent in school during the study for one reason or the other were excluded. The sample size was determined using the formula for calculation of single proportion Leslie Fischer's formula for $> 10,000$. A total sample of 380 was used, considering 5% precision, 95% confidence interval, assuming 10% non-response rate.

B. Sampling Technique

Multistage sampling technique was used for this study. For stage one, one local government area was selected from each senatorial district using simple random sampling by balloting. In stage two, one secondary school per local government was selected using simple random sampling by balloting. Stage 3 was the selection of arms in different classes. Proportionate sampling method was used in stage four to select the required number of students in each school. Systematic random sampling was used in selecting the students from each arm in the school to get the required number needed.

C. Study Instrument

An adapted self-administered questionnaire (13) was used. Each questionnaire has two sections: Section A: socio-demographic characteristics, Section B: Prevalence of emotional abuse. Ten percent of the sample size was used to pre-test the questionnaire in a secondary school different from the selected ones.

D. Data Collection and Analysis

Two medical students and a nursing student were trained as research assistants, who helped in the collection of data. The questionnaire was checked on the field to ensure that they are properly filled. SPSS version 25 was used in the analysis of the questionnaire. Univariate analysis was done using percentages and mean where applicable. Chi-square was used for bivariate analysis to check association between the dependents and independent variable while binary regression was used for the multivariate analysis.

E. Ethical Approval

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Ekiti State University Teaching Hospital. Approvals were secured from the Ministry of Education as well as the principals of each school. For students, assent or consent was acquired based on their age. The information collected from participants was treated with strict

confidentiality. Participants were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage.

III. RESULTS

A. Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Respondent

Table 1 shows that equal number of students were recruited from each school 150 (33.3%), and slightly more than half 248 (55.1%) of the students were senior secondary school students, a few more than half 263 (58.4%) of the students were male students, while almost half 220 (48.9) of the students were in their middle adolescent age. Majority of the respondents were Christians 404 (89.8), and almost all 429 (95.3%) of the respondents were day students.

B. Prevalence of emotional abuse among secondary school students

Figure 1 revealed that more than six out of ten 299 (66.4%) of the students had once experienced emotional abuse. In observing the forms of emotional abuse experienced by secondary school students as depicted in table 2, and following the ranking order from the mostly experienced to the least experienced; the 1st ranked form of emotional abuse is the discrimination expressed by teachers asking questions from students who are more likely to get them right (mean= 3.54), while the 8th ranked which is also the least experienced form of emotional abuse is terrorising expressed by teacher threatening to hurt students (mean= 2.46). Other forms ranging from the 2nd to the 7th are as follows: verbal assault (mean= 3.44), degrading attitude of the teacher (mean= 3.21), dominating (mean= 3.15), ignoring experienced by the student (mean= 2.76), isolating expressed by the teacher (mean= 2.74), and rejection (mean= 2.59).

C. Association Between Socio-Demographic Characteristics and Prevalence of Psychological Abuse

Table 3 revealed that students' demographic characteristics such as class ($\chi^2= 5.07$, p -value=0.024), gender ($\chi^2=5.195$, p -value=0.023), adolescent staging ($\chi^2=8.817$, p -value=0.012) and religion ($\chi^2=6.451$, p -value=0.040), were found to be significantly associated with the exposure of the students to emotional abuse.

Table 4 showed binary logistic regression on the determinants of exposure to emotional abuse among the students. The male students were 66% (AOR 0.657, 95% CI 0.436-0.989, p -value= 0.044) more likely to have been exposed to emotional abuse compared to the female students. Also, those in the middle adolescence stage were about 35% (AOR 0.347, 95% CI 0.131-0.916, p -value= 0.033) more likely to have been exposed to emotional abuse compared to those in the early adolescent stage. In the same vein, those that were in the late adolescent stage were 38% (AOR 0.389, 95% CI 0.154-0.980, p -value= 0.045) more likely to have been exposed to emotional abuse compared to those in the early adolescent stage.

IV. DISCUSSION

It has been revealed that children who experience emotional abuse tend to struggle in school due to difficulties concentrating on their studies. The key finding of our study indicates that a significant percentage 66% of our participants have experienced emotional abuse. This is comparable to a study conducted in Edo State, Nigeria, where the range was 66.4%-86.2% of students facing emotional abuse from their teachers in the classroom.

Our participants reported experiencing all the 8 types of emotional abuse, however in varying frequencies. The students mentioned experiencing discriminating, verbal assault, dominating, ignoring, degrading, and isolating repeatedly once or twice every academic year and reported to have experienced rejecting and terrorizing not recently but in the time past. This is noteworthy because such emotionally abusive practices pose risks to the emotional, intellectual, and social development of adolescents (1) and can damage their personal identity (4). In fact, emotional abuse can have lasting effects, unlike physical injuries (5).

Discriminating emerged as the most experienced form of emotional abuse, as teachers directed questions toward certain students more likely to answer correctly (5). This aligns with the Edo-state study, where discrimination was also prevalent, [5]differing from the findings in Kwara State, where verbal assault was more prominent (17). The selective attention and neglect characteristic of discrimination can lead to negative emotions among students, such as hatred and jealousy (5). In this study verbal assault is the second most prevalent emotional abuse. Verbal assault, including being called derogatory names is detrimental to students' overall well-being, affecting their personality and self-esteem (5).(16),

Our study found that students also experienced degrading behaviour from their teachers, such as public humiliation, which is rooted in the cultural practice of scapegoating, used to discourage unwanted behavior within a group. Unfortunately, this diminishes students' identity, dignity, and self-worth in the learning environment (5).(16),

Dominating behaviors from teachers such as blaming students for not paying attention is the 4th prevalent form of emotional abuse in this study. This can hinder growth, competence, confidence, and independent thinking among students (15). Ignoring, intentionally not acknowledging the presence, value, or contribution of others, was also experienced by our participants. This behavior can demotivate students and hinder their emotional growth (16). Isolating, where students are prevented from associating with peers is the 6th most experienced form of emotional abuse from our study, perhaps due to the communal nature of Nigerian society (5). However, in the findings from Kwara State, isolating was the second most reported form of emotional abuse (17).

In contrast, the act of rejecting is not widely observed, such as conveying to an individual that they are worthless and unwanted, for instance, a teacher blaming a student for personal or work-related issues. (16) Additionally, the use of

threats, referred to as terrorizing, is also not commonly experienced.(16) This corroborates the findings from the Kwara State study, in contrast to the Edo State study where rejecting and terrorizing were more frequently reported (5, 17). Reasons for these maybe due to different cultural beliefs and practices as Nigeria is a multi-ethnic country.

Our findings revealed that older children experienced higher risk of psychological abuse compared to the younger ones. This is supported by another work which reinforced that late adolescents are more frequently exposed to emotional abuse. [4] Though there are few studies reports are in contrast to this, their reports shew that younger age group are more prone to psychological abuse compared to older ones. [3]The exact reasons for this phenomenon remain unclear and warrant further investigation.

Furthermore, our study indicates that male students experience more emotional abuse than their female counterparts, possibly due to the perception that they are less likely to adhere to instructions compared to females.

However, the class and religion of our study participants do not appear to be associated with the risk of exposure to emotional abuse. This agrees with the Kwara State study which reports no significant difference in the incidence of emotional abuse on the basis of class level. (17) and contrasts with the Ogun state- study in which the most potent predictor of emotional abuse were the class of the participants.[14] This difference maybe due to the predominant religion in the research location.

Since emotional abuse in adolescents can lead to various adverse outcomes, including post-traumatic stress disorder for both male and female victims, psychological abuse in dating relationships for both genders, poor school performance, involvement in bullying as either a victim or perpetrator for both genders, depression, social withdrawal, poor identity development, eating disorders, and self-mutilation, which are more likely for female victims, as well as delinquent acts, alcohol/drug abuse, abusive dating behavior, and suicide attempts or discussions, applicable to both male and female victims (16). All of which contribute to an unhealthy transition into adulthood. It is imperative that we stem its tide in our learning environments.

V. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions are drawn: 66% of in-school adolescents in Ekiti-State experienced emotional abuse with discriminating being the most experienced form of emotional abuse. Students experienced discriminating, verbal assault, dominating, isolating, degrading, and ignoring more frequently than they experienced rejecting and terrorizing. Also, late adolescents and male students are more likely to be emotionally abused whereas class and religion does not impact on the chances of being exposed to emotional abuse.

VI. RECOMMENDATION

School authority should organize periodic enlightenment programs for the teachers. The government should have a policy with respect to training for the teachers on the effect of emotional abuse and consequences of abusing the students.

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Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondent

Variable	Frequency	
	N = 450	(%)
Schools		
All saint’s Anglican college	150	33.3
Annunciation secondary school	150	33.3
Saint Augustine secondary school	150	33.3
Class		
Junior secondary school	202	44.9
Senior secondary school	248	55.1
Gender		
Male	263	58.4
Female	187	41.6
Age		
Early adolescents	190	42.2
Middle adolescent	220	48.9
Late adolescent	40	8.9
Religion		
Christianity	404	89.8
Islam	35	7.8
Traditional	11	2.4
Type of school		
Day	429	95.3
Boarding	21	4.7

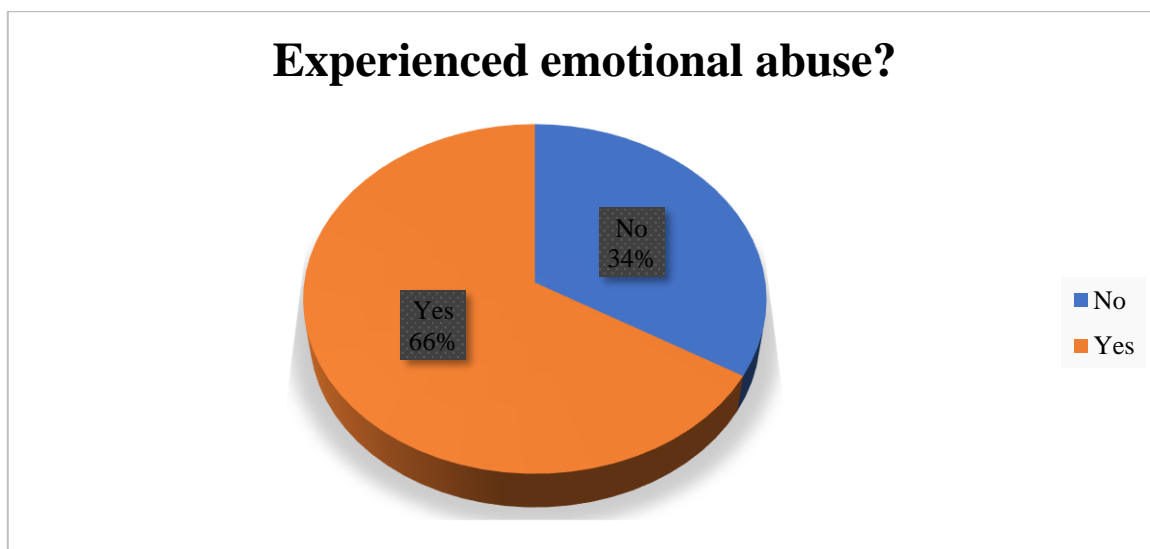


Fig. 1: Prevalence of emotional abuse among secondary school students

Table 2: Forms of Emotional Abuse Experienced by Secondary School Students.

Forms of emotional Abuse	Variables	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
Discriminating	Asked questions from students that are more likely to get them right	429	3.54	2.439	1st
Verbal assault	Shouted yelled or screamed at you very loudly	415	3.44	2.573	2nd
Degrading	Embarrassed you in front of the whole class	427	3.21	2.420	3rd
Dominating	Blamed you for not understanding a topic when not explained well	412	3.15	2.413	4th
Ignoring	Ignored you	407	2.76	2.353	5th
Isolating	Stopped you from associating to make you lonely	406	2.74	2.303	6th
Rejecting	Blamed you for his/her misfortune	423	2.59	2.272	7th
Terrorising	Threatened to hurt you	407	2.46	2.242	8th

N.B: Maximum= 7, Minimum= 1

Table 3: Association between Socio-Demographic Characteristics and Prevalence of Psychological Abuse Experienced by Respondents

Variable	Category	Exposure to emotional abuse		Total	χ^2	p-value
		Yes	No			
Name of school	All souls anglican grammar school, Ado-Ekiti	59(39.3)	91(60.7)	150	4.326	0.115
	Annunciation secondary school, Ikere Ekiti	42(28.0)	108(72.0)	150		
	St. Augustine secondary school. Oye Ekiti	50(33.3)	100(66.7)	150		
Class	Junior Secondary school	79(39.1)	123(60.9)	202	5.07	0.024
	Senior secondary school	72(29.0)	176(71.0)	248		
Sex	Female	74(39.6)	113(60.4)	187	5.195	0.023
	Male	77(29.3)	186(70.7)	263		
Adolescent staging	Early adolescent	74(38.9)	116(61.1)	190	8.817	0.012
	Middle adolescent	71(32.3)	149(67.7)	220		
	Late adolescent	6(15.0)	34(85.0)	40		
Religion	Christianity	143(35.4)	261(64.6)	404	6.451	0.040
	Islam	7(20.0)	28(80.0)	35		
	Traditionalist	1(9.1)	10(90.9)	11		
Type of school you attend	day	142(33.1)	287(66.9)	429	0.855	0.355
	boarding	9(42.9)	12(57.1)	21		

N.B: p-value is significant at $p < 0.05$.

Table 4: 3e on the predictors of emotional abuse among the students

Variable	Category	B	AOR	95% Confidence interval		p-value
				Lower	Upper	
Secondary school class	Junior secondary school		1.000			
	Senior secondary school	-0.236	0.790	0.486	1.284	0.341
Gender	Female		1.000			
	Male	-0.420	0.657	0.436	0.989	0.044
Adolescent staging	Early adolescent		1.000			0.098
	Middle adolescent	-1.060	0.347	0.131	0.916	0.033
	Late adolescent	-0.945	0.389	0.154	0.980	0.045
Religion	Christianity		1.000			0.054
	Islam	-1.492	0.225	0.028	1.809	0.161
	Traditional	-0.610	0.543	0.058	5.107	0.594

AOR – Adjusted Odd Ratio, p-value is significant at $p < 0.05$.