

The Effects of Domestic Violence on Pre-School Children in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Some empirical studies posit that children growing up in violent families are vulnerable to low cognition, and are likely to engage in youth violence. Domestic violence takes a devastating toll on children and society at large. Early childhood victimization, either through direct abuse, neglect, or witnessing parental domestic violence, has been shown to have demonstrable long-term consequences for antisocial behaviour, youth violence, adult violence tendencies, and other forms of criminality. The purpose of the paper is to examine the effects of domestic violence on the pre – school children and to devise possible solutions to ending the generating cycle of domestic violence in Nigeria taking into account the continuum of domestic violence with its effects following children through adolescence to adulthood. The study suggests that the circle of domestic violence in the country can be reduced significantly if the government implements the necessary measures recommended in this paper.

Keywords: Domestic violence, families, children

INTRODUCTION

There are three different views of children each relating to different era of civilization. The first is the Greco – Roman times. During this period children were taken to be miniature adult and this is depicted in the arts and paintings of that period. Children were not accorded any special status. As miniature adults, they were allowed to work on the fields and farms with little or no attachments to parents.

The second is the medieval period. With the decline of the Greco-Roman civilization, Christianity came to the fore. Under the religious tenets, man was born evil and so children were regarded as sinful, immoral and therefore their sinful nature needed to be exorcised through religious teachings and practices. As sinners, children were seen to be bad creatures and were subjected to various kind of punishment aimed at purging off their sinful nature.

Thirdly, is the age of enlightenment which emerged with the decline of the Church. John Locke (1632 – 1604) , a renowned philosopher and epistemological theorist of that era believed that a child's mind is (tabular rasa) meaning that children are naturally born without any mental content and their knowledge and skills are acquired and shaped through experience and perception. According to Locke, children were not innately bad but required adult-directed experiences to become good adult in future. Locke's proposition was opposed by Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778).

Rousseau proposed what Santrock (2003) called 'innate goodness' view of children. Rousseau laid the foundation of what is known today as 'progressive or child – centred education'. Rousseau suggested that education should adapt itself to the needs and abilities of children and not simply reflecting on adult priority. Arguably, Rousseau is the first child psychologist. He observed children carefully and noted how they behaved and learned. He thus attempted to adapt education to the child's level of development.

METHOD AND MATERIALS

This central discourse of this paper hinges upon; childhood education, child labour, and the effects of domestic violence on pre-school children including its effects on children mental development.

Pre – school children are tutored and raised up under the culture of violence. Children are flogged, punished and beaten for any misbehaviour in the home and in the classroom. Some families starve the children of food as a form of punishment. Studies have proved that what happens in the classroom is not developmentally appropriate for pre – school children (Idogo, 1987, 2010). It is a common sight to see a child of three years of age trekking a long distance with his or her senior siblings to school. When the child becomes exhausted and cannot cope with the older siblings in the long walk, the older siblings often resort to bullying.

In Nigeria, children still regarded as miniature adults that are expected to carry out some duties at home, in the farm and in the market beginning from about three years of age. Others of about six years of age are deployed by guardians and parents to undertake street hawking to raise funds for the family.

Child abuse and domestic violence often occur in the same family and are linked in a number of important ways that have serious consequences for the safety of all family members as well as for members of the larger community. First, where one form of family violence exists, there is a strong likelihood of the prevalence of other vices. Second, the impact on children of witnessing parental domestic violence is strikingly similar to the consequence of being directly abused by a parent, and both experiences are significant contributors to youth violence. Third, many of the factors highly associated with the occurrence of child abuse are also associated with domestic violence, and many of these are the same factors that put children at risk for youth violence and adult violence crime.

Family violence is oftentimes transferred to the children especially from their mothers who tend to express their revenge on their children. Pre – school children regress developmentally, and suffer from series of behavioural problems such as insomnia, nightmare, anxiety and violence towards their mates. Domestic violence has many effects on different levels of the child's cognitive development including attachment which is an important aspect of the child's development.

DISCUSSIONS

Judging from the ways and manners Nigerians handle their children, it appears we are still in the dark ages when children were accepted to be born sinful and evil and needed to be exorcised through punishment or that they are miniature adult that has to carry out our instructions and be moulded into the image we carve out for them. This may be the reason behind our violence attitude to children accusing them of witchcraft and wizardry.

Some of Nigeria's child rearing practices could be categorized as child abuse. Some Nigerians regard some form of child abuse as cultural ways of training and bringing up children. Western education to a large extent has not positively influenced our child rearing practices. According to the UNICEF Report (2008) on violence against children in Nigeria;

Physical and psychological violence against children occur both in schools and within families – not to mention violence that affect children living on the streets or exploited by adults. Although educational institutions should have the capacity to train and socialize children without exposing them to violence, corporal punishment is still considered as a positive educational tool. Reliable data on violence against children in Nigeria is scarce because violence is often not reported as it occurs mostly within the content where it is regarded as 'normal' such as within the family circle or behind the privacy of homes. The predominant cultural belief is that children must be submissive to elders therefore behaviour not in conformity with this is punished. The Committee on the Right of the Child noted with concern that there is a generally high level of acceptance of domestic violence even amongst law enforcement officers and court personnel.

In Nigeria, children experience violence from their care – givers including their parents. Under normal circumstances, the cries of babies should attract attention, love and care; instead it attracts aggressive responses from care – givers at home, in day – care centres and in schools.

The baby goes through harmful rituals on the eighth day of his birth. Elaborate ceremonies are conducted for naming of children on the eighth day in most communities in Nigeria. The newly born is exposed to noise and more importantly he or she experience the taste of hot pepper in the mouth as one of the rituals of the ceremony; signifying the difficult ahead. Circumcision for either baby boy or girl is done on that same eighth day as culture demands. The female circumcision (Female Genital Mutilation – FGM), is still practiced in some communities as culture demands.

Early experience can dramatically alter the way genes are expressed in the developing brain. Good experiences help the brain to develop well (Lally 1998). Each child weaves his or her own intellectual tapestry, the quality of which depends on active interest and involvement in a wide variety of stimuli. The home environment provides the raw material for the growth and development of the brain. In a home where domestic violence exists, it will have a detrimental effect on the child's brain.

In Teicher, M.H. (2002), teachers provides an in – depth overview of studies suggesting that early maltreatment can have enduring and measurable effect on a child's developing brain, diminishing growth and reducing activity in key areas.

The U.S. department of Health and Human Services (2001) published the findings of a study conducted with approximately 826,000 children who were victims of abuse and or neglect. Each one of these children already may have suffered damage to their growing brains. Their brains may be locked into perceiving the world as cold or dangerous place. They may have great difficulties responding to the caring concern of others. Because their brains energies have been developed the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional capabilities one would expect of them.

Bremmer, J.D. (1999), conducted a study on the lasting effects of psychological trauma on memory and the hippocampus. The result showed that childhood abuse and other extreme stressors can have lasting effect on brain areas

involved in memory and emotion. He further stressed that the hippocampus is brain area involved in learning and memory that is particularly sensitive to stress.

According to U.S. News & World Report (1996) fear that results from violence can also harm a child's brain and it may not be reversible. It emphasizes that:

“Once viewed as genetically programmed, the brain is now known to be plastic, an organ moulded by both genes and experience throughout life. A single traumatic experience can alter an adult's brain: A horrifying battle, for instance, may induce the flashbacks, depression and hair – trigger response of post – traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). And researcher are finding that abuse and neglect early in life can even more devastating consequences, tangling both the chemistry and the architecture of children's brain and leaving them at risk for drug abuse, teen pregnancy and psychiatric problems later in life.”

Gaensbauer (1995) conducted a study of the effect of trauma on infants and discovered that the developmental implications of early trauma, particularly if it is severe, appear to be significant.

Having considered the above clinical implication on the effects of domestic violence on the pre – school children, it becomes necessary for everyone to do something worthwhile to change the situation both by prevention and intervention. This is very important to getting our pre – school children ready for easy transition to formal schooling which is one of the goals of our National Policy on Education (2004).

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Creation of Awareness: It is evident that domestic violence has debilitating multiplying effect on the individual, the family and the society at large. The first step towards the control of domestic violence is to create awareness through the media and various agencies related to health. Awareness of the effect of domestic violence on children is essential so that every one would be informed. Awareness creation should also be extended to parents. Seminars and workshops on good parenting should be organized for young couples planning to have children and to expectant mothers.

Inclusion of the effects of domestic violence in the school curriculum would equip the teacher on how to handle children experiencing domestic violence. Parents Teachers Association is another good venue to disseminate such information to parents.

Establishment of Preventive Structures: The most important structure is to promulgate an Act making any form of violence against children by parents a criminal offence that can earn them imprisonment or have the children taken away from them. The second is to have every state if not in every local government area, establish government-funded care homes, with trained staff, to take care of children who suffer from domestic violence. Such homes will be responsible to place affected children in foster homes and monitor their growth, development and education.

Parents who are involved in violence relationship and extend same to their children should be provided with clinical counselling sessions. Men who beat their partners in front of their children should be aware of the damages they are doing to their children's mental development.

Data Availability: There is dearth of information in almost all areas of our children's life. We do not know what is happening to our children in their families, in their communities and in their school. How do we know if parents are violent to their children? Social welfare workers in Nigeria seem not to be making any impact. This area should be looked into and the necessary empowerment given to those concerned.

With the empirical evidence of the debilitating effect of domestic violence on our children, and its multiplying effect on all and sundry, the government should as a matter of necessity enact laws to prevent any form of domestic violence. Most States have not adopted the Right of the Child Act (2003). The traditional rulers, community development workers and women organizations should assist in changing peoples' traditional belief through awareness creation in women groups especially in the rural communities.

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