

## **INFLUENCE OF GENDER AND AGE ON BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS AND EXPERIENCE OF CHILD ABUSE AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS**

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study was carried out to examine the influence of gender and age on behavioural problems (aggressive behaviour and truancy) and experience of child abuse among secondary school students. A descriptive research design of survey type was adopted for the study. The population for this study comprised all public secondary school students in Ekiti State. The sample consisted of 200 students drawn from five secondary schools through simple random sampling. A self-designed questionnaire tagged “Child Abuse and Behavioural Problems Questionnaire” (CABPQ) was used to collect data. Expert judgements were used to ensure face and content validity. Test-retest method was used to determine the reliability and a reliability coefficient of 0.70 was obtained. Data collected were analysed by using t-test. The results showed that gender and age do not significantly influence aggressive behaviour and truancy; and also do not influence experience of child abuse among students. Based on these findings, it was recommended among others, that all education stakeholders, particularly the counsellors, should plan intervention programmes to help students who engage in aggressive behaviour and truancy; and students who experience child abuse. The focus of these programmes should be on students of both sexes and students of all ages in the school.*

**KEYWORDS:** Aggression, Truancy, Child abuse, Schools

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Behavioural problems abound among students in our schools. All children have moments when they do not behave properly. They can go through different phases as they develop and become more independent. Prominent among behavioural problems observed in schools are aggressive behaviour and truancy. Behavioural problem occurs when the child continues to behave badly. It also becomes a problem when the behaviour is out of ordinary and seriously breaks the rules accepted in the home and school. This conduct disorder can cause a lot of distress to children, families, schools and local communities (Rutter and Taylor, 2008).

A tragic problem in the lives of children that attracts persistent media headlines is the case of child abuse. Research has shown that child abuse is associated with a broad array of negative outcomes that may emerge at different stages of children's lives. It has been reported that child abuse leads to both short and long-term negative consequences for children's physical and mental health, cognitive skills and educational attainment; and most especially, social and behavioural development (Chalk, Gibbons and Scarupa, 2002).

All these three problems shall be examined.

## AGGRESSION

Pioneering research into aggression processes during adolescence date back to the 1950s. Most early studies focused on male samples, and particularly on young men, on the assumption that men are more aggressive than women. Over the last sixty years, however, the conceptualization of aggression has changed, especially in terms of gender perspectives. The change is attributable, at least in part, to an increase in the number of antisocial and criminal acts committed by young girls. Since the 1980s, there has been a steady increase in research analyzing problems of aggressive behaviour among children and adolescents at school, reflecting the growing seriousness of these problems in some European countries and the United States (Skiba, 2000; Olweus, 2001 and Smith, 2003). These behaviours involve aggression against school property and that of other classmates, as well as aggression against teachers and peers themselves (Astor, Pitner, Benbenishty and Meyer, 2002; and Herrero, Estevez and Musitu, 2006).

Focusing on aggression towards peers at school, Little, Henrich, Jones and Hawley (2003) distinguished between overt aggression, a type of behaviour which involves direct and manifest violence (e.g. hitting, pushing); relational aggression or harming others through manipulation of interpersonal relationship (e.g. spreading rumours, excluding a peer from a group); and instrumental aggression, used by aggressors to achieve their immediate goals (e.g. hitting a peer to get money). Regarding factors that may underlie these problems, previous research has documented the association between aggressive behaviour in adolescence and particular individual and social factors, these later relating mainly to the family and school contexts, the most important social contexts for development and psychosocial adjustment in this period of life (Musitu and Garcia, 2004). Prior studies examining the link between individual variables and aggressive behaviour in adolescence have demonstrated, for instance, that aggressive adolescents are normally unable to anticipate the negative consequences of their behaviours for the victim, showing lower levels of empathy (Evans, Heriot and Friedman, 2002; and Olweus, 2005).

Other studies conclude that aggressive adolescents at school show a very strong need for social recognition; they would like to be considered as powerful, socially accepted, different and rebellious by their classmates (Rodriguez, 2004). This wish to be recognized as a rebel implies, moreover, that these adolescents hold rather negative attitudes towards authority. In fact, it has been documented that aggressive adolescents normally show somewhat negative attitudes to institutional authorities such as the police, the law, and also the school and teachers (Adair, Dixon, Moore and Sutherland, 2000; Estevez, Herrero, Martinez and Musitu, 2006). There is statistical evidence that gender differences are more significant during adolescence than at any other stage in development. This is one reason why recent research in this field has centred on the examination of gender differences in antisocial and aggressive behaviour at school (Estevez, Povedano, Jimenez and Musitu, 2012). Despite the growing amount of research over recent decades, contradictory findings on sex differences in adolescent aggression continue to be published. The contradiction may in some cases be traced to differences in the frequency and type of behaviour analysed. The findings and conclusions of many research papers, for example, depend on the instruments used to measure aggressive behaviour, as well as on the definition of violence or aggression adopted by the researcher (Estevez et al, 2012).

Gender is one of the individual factors that has been used as a predictor of differences in aggression (Anderson and Bushman, 2002). Broadly speaking, research in this area in the form both of reviews and meta-analyses (e.g. Eagly and Steffen, 1986; Bettencourt and Miller, 1996)

and individual studies (e.g Richardson, Vandenberg and Humphries, 1986; Grotpetter and Crick, 1996) has found that men tend to engage more than women in direct aggressive behaviour (physical and verbal); however, the evidence regarding the various forms of indirect or relational aggression (e.g spreading rumours, excluding someone from the group) is less clear (Bjorkqvist, Osterman and Lagerspetz, 1994; Crick and Grotpetter, 1995). A study by Crick and Grotpetter (1995) found that indirect or relational aggression poses a serious risk for social adjustment among adolescents, and that this type of behaviour is more common among girls than boys.

Research into both types of aggression has shown that young boys and girls more often resort to direct aggression (physical and verbal), and rarely make use of indirect or relational aggression (Galen and Underwood, 1997; Ortega and Monks, 2005). As they mature, boys tend to keep using direct aggression strategies whilst girls tend to make more use of indirect strategies (Crick, Casas and Nelson, 2002; Crick and Nelson, 2002). Concerning school violence during adolescence, there appears to be no clear consensus among researchers regarding sex differences in indirect aggression, although most authors agree that boys engage in physical aggression at school more than girls do. One explanation for this might be that adolescents are subjected to intense gender socialization by family, teachers, peers and the media (Catalano and Hawkins, 1996). The gender-role expectations of boys and girls may thus be associated with life experiences which reinforce those expectations, contributing to the persistence of what White (2002) has termed “gender differentiated patterns of aggression”. For example, in early childhood girls talk in a low, soft, friendly tone three times more often than boys, who tend to shout more. Girls thus appear to learn very quickly that aggressive behaviour is punished socially, while the same behaviour in boys is accepted and often rewarded.

Another study revealed that a positive family environment is a stronger protective factor for girls in the development of problems of behaviour at school, whereas for boys this is the case for a positive classroom environment. Nevertheless, both social contexts seem to play an important role in both genders although with a different strength (Lopez, Perez, Ochoa and Ruiz, 2007). Also Ojewola (2014) in his own study found that gender has no effect in the influence of media violence on aggressive behaviour among secondary school adolescents. On the other hand, he found a significant difference in influence of media violence on aggressive behaviour on the basis of age range.

### **Truancy**

Truancy is any intentional unauthorised absence from compulsory schooling. This refers to absences caused by students of their own free will and not caused by poor medical conditions; it also refers to the action of students who attend school but do not go to classes (Wikipedia, 2014). Truant behaviour has potential to curtail possibilities of meaningful academic achievement. Truancy is a predictor of multiple health risk behaviours among adolescents. Truant adolescents have been reported to engage in risky sexual practices, illicit drug use, alcohol drinking and cigarette smoking. It was suggested that the unsupervised time that adolescents have when they are not in school allows them to initiate and maintain unhealthy behaviours (Azizi et al, 2010). Truancy, or unexcused absence from school, has been linked to serious delinquent activity in youth and to significant negative behaviour and characteristics in adults. As a risk factor for delinquent behaviour in youth, truancy has been found to be related to substance abuse, gang activity and involvement in criminal activities such burglary, auto

theft, and vandalism (Dryfoos, 1990; Rohrman, 1993; Bell, Rosen and Dynlacht, 1994; Hulzinga, Loeber and Thornberry, 1995; Garry, 1996).

Truancy in childhood may be associated with adverse social and health outcomes in life. Studies have reported that adults who were truants as adolescents were more likely to experience marital or job instability and psychological maladjustment when compared to their counterparts who were not truants as adolescents (Azizi et al 2010). Much of the work in the area of developmental pathways to delinquency shows that these behavioural problems often are followed by progressively more serious behavioural and adjustment problems in adulthood, including an increased propensity for violent behaviour (Dryfoos, 1990; Bell, Rose and Dynlacht, 1994; and Kelly et al, 1997). Further, adults who were frequently truants as teenagers are much more likely than those who were not to have poor health and mental health, lower paying jobs, an increased chance of living in poverty, more reliance on welfare support, children who exhibit problem behaviours, and an increased likelihood of incarceration (Dryfoos, 1990; Rohrman, 1993; Bell, Rosen and Dynlacht, 1994; Hawkins and Catalano, 1995; and Ingersoll and LeBoeuf, 1997).

Baker, Sigmon and Nugent (2001) identified some correlates of truancy:

- Family factors – These include lack of guidance or parental supervision, domestic violence, poverty, drug or alcohol abuse in the home, lack of awareness of attendance laws, and differing attitudes toward education.
- School factors – These include school climate issues, such as school size and attitudes of teachers, other students and administrators' inflexibility in meeting the diverse cultural and learning styles of the student. Schools often have inconsistent procedures in place for dealing with chronic absenteeism and may not have meaningful consequences available for truant youth (e.g out-of-school suspension).
- Economic influences – These include employed students, single-parent homes, high mobility rates, parents who hold multiple jobs, and a lack of affordable transportation and child care.
- Student variables – These include drug and alcohol abuse, lack of understanding of attendance laws, lack of social competence, mental health difficulties and poor physical health.

Left unaddressed, truancy during the preteen and teenage years can have significant negative effects on the student, schools and society. It is important to identify promising strategies to intervene with chronic truants, most importantly to address the root causes of truancy, and stop youth's progression from truancy into more serious and violent behaviours.

### **Child Abuse**

Child abuse is the physical, sexual or emotional maltreatment or neglect of a child. According to Herrenkohl (2005) in *Journal of Child Abuse and Neglect*, child abuse is any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation, an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm. Child abuse can occur in a child's home, or in the organizations, schools or communities the child interacts with. There are four major categories of child abuse: physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse and neglect.

**Physical Abuse:** Physical abuse involves physical aggression directed at a child by an adult. Most nations with child abuse laws consider the deliberate infliction of serious injuries, or actions that place the child at obvious risk of serious injury or death, to be illegal. Bruises, scratches, burns, broken bones, lacerations, as well as repeated ‘mishaps’, and rough treatment that could cause physical injury, can be physical abuse (Theoklitou, Kabitsis and Kabitsis, 2012).

**Sexual Abuse:** Child sexual abuse is a form of child abuse in which an adult or older adolescent abuses a child for sexual stimulation. Sexual abuse refers to the participation of a child in a sexual act aimed toward the physical gratification or the financial profit of the person committing the act (APA Board of Professional Affairs, 1999). Forms of child sexual abuse include asking or pressuring a child to engage in sexual activities (regardless of the outcome), indecent exposure of the genitals to a child, displaying pornography to a child, actual sexual contact with a child, physical contact with the child’s genitals, viewing of the child’s genitalia without physical contact, or using a child to produce child pornography (Martin, Anderson, Romans, Mullen and O’Shea; 1993).

Effects of child sexual abuse on the victim(s) include guilt and self-blame, flashbacks, nightmares, insomnia, fear of things associated with the abuse (including objects, smells, places, doctor’s visits etc), self-esteem issues, sexual dysfunction, chronic pain, addiction, self injury, suicidal ideation, somatic complaints, depression (Roosa, Reinholtz and Angelini 1999), post-traumatic stress disorder, mental illnesses including borderline personality disorder and dissociative identity disorder (Widom, 1999), anxiety (Levitan, Rector, Sheldon and Goering, 2003), propensity to re-victimization in adulthood (Messman-Moore and Long, 2000), bulimia nervosa (Hornor, 2010), and physical injury to the child, among other problems (Dinwiddie et al, 2000).

In the United States, approximately 15% to 25% of women and 5% to 15% of men were sexually abused when they were children (Finkelhor, 1994; Gorey and Leslie, 1997; and Whealin, 2007). Most sexual abuse offenders are acquainted with their victims; approximately 30% are relatives of the child, most often brothers, fathers, mothers, uncles, or cousins; around 60% are other acquaintances such as friends of the family, baby sitter, or neighbours; strangers are the offenders in approximately 10% of child abuse cases (Whealin, 2007). In over one-third of cases, the perpetrator is also a minor (Finkelhor, Ormrod and Chaffin, 2009).

**Psychological Abuse:** Psychological or emotional abuse is defined as the production of psychological and social defects in the growth of a child as a result of behaviour such as loud yelling, coarse and rude attitude, inattention, harsh criticism and denigration of the child’s personality. Other examples include name-calling, ridicule, degradation, destruction of personal belongings, torture or killing of a pet, excessive criticism, inappropriate or excessive demands, withholding communication, and routine labeling or humiliation (Theoklitou, Kabitsis and Kabitsis, 2012).

Victims of emotional abuse may react by distancing themselves from the abuser, internalizing the abusive words, or fighting back by insulting the abuser. Emotional abuse can result in abnormal or disrupted attachment development, a tendency for victims to blame themselves (self-blame) for the abuse, learned helplessness, and overly passive behaviour (The National Center for Victims of Crime, 2015).

**Neglect:** Child neglect is the failure of a parent or other person with responsibility for the child to provide needed food, clothing, shelter, medical care, or supervision to the degree that the child's health, safety and well-being are threatened with harm. Neglect is also a lack of attention from the people surrounding a child, and the non-provision of the relevant and adequate necessities for the child's survival, which would be a lacking in attention, love, and nurture (Theoklitou, Kabitsis and Kabitsis, 2012). Some of the observable signs in a neglected child include: the child is frequently absent from school, begs or steals food or money, lacks needed medical and dental care, is consistently dirty, or lacks sufficient clothing for the weather (Child Welfare, 2012).

Neglected children may experience delays in physical and psychological development, possibly resulting in psychopathology and impaired neuropsychological functions including executive function, attention, processing speed, language, memory and social skills (American Psychological Association, 2012). Researchers investigating maltreated children have repeatedly found that neglected children in foster and adoptive populations manifest different emotional and behavioural reactions to regain lost or secure relationships and are frequently reported to have disorganized attachments and a need to control their environment. Such children are not likely to view caregivers as being a source of safety, and instead typically show an increase in aggressive and hyperactive behaviours which may disrupt healthy or secure attachment with their adopted parents. These children have apparently learnt to adapt to an abusive and inconsistent caregiver by becoming cautiously self-reliant, and are often described as glib, manipulative and disingenuous in their interactions with others as they move through childhood (Golden and Prather, 2009). Children who are victims of neglect have a more difficult time forming and maintaining relationships, such as romantic or friendship, later in life due to the lack of attachment they had in their earlier stages of life.

**Effects:** Child abuse can result in immediate adverse physical effects but it is also strongly associated with developmental issues (Cohn, 2011) and with many chronic physical and psychological effects, including subsequent ill-health, including higher rates of chronic conditions, high-risk health behaviours and shortened lifespan (Dolezal, McCollum and Callahan, 2009). Maltreated children may grow up to be maltreating adults (Ertem, Leventhal and Dobbs, 2000; Thornberry, Knight and Lovegrove, 2012; Thornberry and Henry, 2012).

In the review of studies on these variables, one could see a relationship between them. It has been reported that child abuse may lead to aggressive behaviour among adolescents. Previous studies also showed that child abuse, most especially neglect, may lead to truancy among students.

### **Statement of the Problem**

There are prevalent cases of indiscipline and behavioural problems in Nigerian schools. Aggressive behaviour, which is rampant in schools, intrude not just on the rights of others but impairs the normal functioning of classroom and hostel life as well as other settings. The consequences of aggression are numerous and has implications for the aggressors, their victims, the school, family communities, educational system and the society at large. It affects the overall development of the individual by affecting their mental health, academic achievement and growth, psychosocial functioning and adjustment among others.

Truancy is also a behavioural problem in Nigerian schools. There are students who do not come to school regularly. These students are always nowhere to be found when they should be in

school laying a solid foundation for their future. Students who are chronically truant typically fall behind in grade level and drop out of school. Chronic truants are also at-risk for other behaviours, such as alcohol and drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and delinquency. Truants require extra time from teachers, teachers have less time to spend with the regularly attending students in the classroom when they must create make-up work for truants.

Also, consequences of child abuse pose problems in schools. What happens in the family of these students is very important. A lot of behavioural problems have been traced to the kind of interaction that exists in the home. Some recent studies suggest that family risk factors, such as weak affective cohesion and low parental support, are more strongly related to aggressive behaviour in girls than in boys (Blum, Ireland and Blum, 2003). Truancy also could be traced to the state of one's family. Some studies revealed that one of the observable signs in a neglected child is that the child would be frequently absent from school (Child Welfare, 2012).

Work has been done on the influence of gender on aggression but not much work has been done on the influence of gender and age on aggression. Also, not much work has been done on the influence of gender and age on truancy in schools. It is also discovered that much research was not carried out on the influence of gender and age on child abuse. Finding relationships between these variables is very important because it would enable one to know which group to focus more on or intensify attention upon when planning counselling interventions in schools. To this end, the researchers set out to investigate whether gender would influence aggressive behaviour, truancy and child abuse; and also whether age would influence aggressive behaviour, truancy and child abuse.

### **Hypotheses**

Specifically, the following hypotheses were tested.

1. Gender will not significantly influence aggressive behaviour, truancy and child abuse among secondary school students.
2. Age will not significantly influence aggressive behaviour, truancy and child abuse among secondary school students.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The researchers used descriptive research design of survey type. The plan of study involved the use of questionnaire to collect data in order to test the hypotheses generated in the study. The target population for this study was made up of public secondary school students who were in Senior Secondary School.

Simple random sampling was used to draw out the sample. Five schools were chosen randomly from both rural and urban areas of the state. In each school, 40 students of both sexes and of different ages were selected, making a total of 200 students.

A self-designed questionnaire called "Child Abuse and Behavioural Problems Questionnaire" (CABPQ) was used for the study. Part A was designed to collect information on background characteristics of respondents including their age (Ages 9 – 13 and 14 – 18) and sex. Part B consisted 22 items on child abuse and behavioural problems, which are aggressive behaviour and truancy.

The methods used in validating the instrument were face and content validity. Experts judgements were used to determine both. A reliability test was also carried out on 20 senior secondary school students who were not part of the sample. The scores obtained from two administrations of the questionnaire at two weeks interval were correlated by using Pearson Product Moment Correlation. A reliability coefficient of 0.70 was obtained. The instrument was found to be suitable for data collection.

Copies of the questionnaire were distributed by the researchers and school counsellors to a sample of 200 students in five schools. Researchers' presence during administration enhanced better understanding of the items in the instrument. Copies of the questionnaire were collected back immediately after completion by the researchers.

The data generated were analyzed using t-test. The hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

## TESTING OF HYPOTHESES

### Hypothesis one

Ho: Gender will not significantly influence aggressive behaviour, truancy and child abuse among secondary school students.

In testing this hypothesis, t-test was used.

**Table 1: t-test of aggressive behaviour, truancy and child abuse by gender**

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	SD	Df	t	p
Aggressive Behaviour	Male	124	19.30	2.62	198	0.777	0.438
	Female	76	18.97	3.24			
Truancy	Male	124	22.59	3.56	198	0.899	0.370
	Female	76	22.08	4.38			
Child Abuse	Male	124	41.89	5.25	198	0.958	0.339
	Female	76	41.05	7.02			

$P > 0.05$

The result in Table 1 revealed that gender will not significantly influence aggressive behaviour ( $t = 0.777$ ,  $P > 0.05$ ), truancy ( $t = 0.899$ ,  $P > 0.05$ ) and child abuse ( $t = 0.958$ ,  $P > 0.05$ ) among secondary school students. The null hypothesis was accepted.

### Hypotheses Two

Ho: Age will not significantly influence aggressive behaviour, truancy and child abuse among secondary school students.

In testing this hypothesis, t-test was also used.



**Table 2: t-test of aggressive behaviour, truancy and child abuse by age**

Variable	Age	N	Mean	SD	df	t	p
Aggressive Behaviour	9 – 13	10	19.50	2.88	198	0.367	0.714
	14 – 18	190	19.16	2.87			
Truancy	9 – 13	10	24.30	3.50	198	1.595	0.112
	14 – 18	190	22.29	3.89			
Child Abuse	9 – 13	10	43.80	5.75	198	1.211	0.227
	14 – 18	190	41.45	5.98			

$P > 0.05$

The result in Table 2 showed that age will not significantly influence aggressive behaviour ( $t = 0.367$ ;  $P > 0.05$ ), truancy ( $t = 1.595$ ,  $P > 0.05$ ) and child abuse ( $t = 1.211$ ,  $P > 0.05$ ) among secondary school students. The null hypothesis was accepted.

The result of hypothesis one showed that gender does not significantly influence aggressive behaviour, truancy and child abuse. This means that both male and female students engage in aggressive behaviour; both male and female students engage in truancy; and both male and female students experience child abuse. The probable explanation for this result is that students of both gender are exposed to the same physical, social and psychological environment which could lead to conduct disorder and experience of child abuse.

The result of hypothesis two showed that age does not significantly influence aggressive behaviour, truancy and child abuse. This means that students of all ages in secondary schools engage in aggressive behaviour and truancy; students of all ages can also experience child abuse. The reason for this could be like the reason given above. Students of all ages are involved in multiple contexts which are the same. These contexts, such as family context and school context, can give rise to behavioural problems like aggressive behaviour and truancy; these contexts can also lead to the experience of child abuse.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Evidence from this study has led the researchers to conclude that gender and age do not influence aggressive behaviour and truancy among students; and that gender and age do not influence students' experience of child abuse. All education stakeholders, particularly the counsellors, should plan intervention programmes to help students who engage in aggressive behaviour and truancy; and students who experience child abuse. The focus of these programmes should be on students of both sexes and students of all ages in the school.

Parents should be encouraged to meet the needs of their children materially and emotionally. They should relate to their children with love and affection. In the school, students should be made to know the negative implications of aggressive behaviour and truancy. Also education stakeholders together with the government should make sure that every school age child attends school. Any student found outside the school during school hours should be taken into custody by law enforcement agents, to be returned to someone in authority at the child's school or to the child's parent.

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