

# INCIDENCE AND FORMS OF CHILD ABUSE AMONG FOSTER AND STEP CHILDREN AND THEIR EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

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## Abstract

*The study was an analysis of the reported cases of child abuse in primary schools and social welfare office in Jos to ascertain its occurrence among foster and step children. The data used for the analysis were the reported cases of child abuse that were recorded and investigated by the school authorities. The records consisted of 137 reported cases obtained from seven randomly selected public primary schools and the social welfare office of Jos North Local Government Council. Four research questions were formulated to guide the analysis. The analysis was done using percentage. The result of the analysis showed that there was higher incidence of child abuse perpetrated on foster/step children than biological children and that the incidence was higher among girls than boys. The most frequent forms of abuse in order of occurrence were child labour, child neglect and physical abuse. The implications of these findings for the educational development of the children were identified.*

## Introduction

Media reports of physical abuse seem to suggest that step children and children living with relations of the extended family in the urban towns of Nigeria are more vulnerable to abuse than children living with their biological parents. Here are some instances. On 25th January, 2004, the National Television Authority (NTA)

Newsline reported on Bassey who tied and thoroughly beat his 14 year old son whose mother had been divorced and was accused by his step mother of being in secret society. In Jos on 6th August, 2004, the NTA local news also carried the news of a four-year old girl, the daughter of one Mr. Tema who was hospitalised at the University Teaching Hospital for severe horrific injuries she received from her aunt with whom she was staying. Elsewhere in Alaska State, the Anchorage daily News September 17, 2004 reported the odious unthinkable child abuse where Sherry Kelly and Patrick Kelley terribly abused the foster children in their care. They were accused of misdemeanour count of assailed and reckless endangerment and long-term abuse that police described as the worst cases of abuse they have recorded.

With repeated reports of the maltreatment of foster and step children, the researchers were motivated to investigate child abuse among children who were living with their relations in urban centres or those who were brought to the cities as house helps and nannies from the villages. The problem investigated was therefore the incidence and forms of child abuse perpetrated against step and foster children in urban centres using Jos as a case study. The purpose of the study was to obtain record of reported cases of child abuse from primary schools and social welfare offices in Jos and to analyse the records to ascertain the extent to which step children and foster children were victims of child abuse.

Recent researches on child abuse have focused on the abuse of step children and foster children. Hodges (2004) reported the propensity of step parents to hurt offsprings who were not their blood relations and concluded that there was a large over presentation of step children among child abuse or negligence within the home. These were first, foster children and secondly domestic servants/househelps. Child fostering was a widespread cultural practice in Nigeria where poorer families make arrangements for fostering of one or more of their children with prosperous relatives or community leaders. Child fostering was practiced among some ethnic groups in Nigeria where a childless relation was given some children to raise up to inherit him. Among the Afizere of Plateau State, Nyam (1988) reported that children were usually given to

childless relations who raised the children as their own even though the children may know their biological parents. He would see his foster father as his own father and would not make reference to his biological father for anything.

More recently, fostering in Nigeria took the form of rural children being placed in Urban Households to improve their opportunities for education and eventual employment or marriage. Hodges (2001) pointed out that the child so fostered would be expected to engage in household chores and assist in economic activities. With repeated reports of maltreatment of foster children, it appears the traditional system has become subject to abuse with children ending up, according to Hodges (2001) “in the custody of unscrupulous guardians unknown to their parents. Children exposed to the above situation are very vulnerable to child abuse. It was in the light of the above that the present study was undertaken to find out the incidence and forms of child abuse among such foster and step children. ,

To address the problem, the following research questions were posed:

1. What percentage of biological, foster and step children experienced child abuse.
2. Is there any gender difference in the occurrence of child abuse among primary school pupils.
3. Which age group is most vulnerable to child abuse at the primary school level?
4. What forms of child abuse are perpetrated against children in primary school?

## **Methodology**

The data obtained for the study were records of reported cases of child abuse by teachers and parents to headmasters in primary schools and reported cases to social welfare office in Jos North Local Government Area of Plateau State. These cases had been reported by teachers who observed the abuse in the children or by parents/guardians whose children/wards had been recorded and investigated by the school authorities. Data were collected from seven primary schools randomly selected from among public schools

in Jos. Initially ten primary schools were selected for the study but three did not have records of the reported cases. For adequate collection of data, the researchers designed a form to be filled by headmasters of the reported cases of child abuse in their schools. The form contained information on year of report, number of cases in the year of report, sex of victims, age of victims, types of abuse and status of victim in the family.

## Results

The results of the data collected in respect of the research questions are presented in the tables below:

**Research Question 1:** This was aimed at finding the percentages of biological foster and step children that experienced child abuse. The result is shown in table 1.

*Table 1 - Percentage Analysis of the Occurrence of Child Abuse Among Biological Offsprings and Foster/step Children.*

Year	Number of Cases reported	Status of child in the family		
		Biological Children	Step children	Foster
2003	83	15	17	51
2004	54	6	7	41
Total	137	21	24	92
Percentage 100		15.32	17.5	67.15

The result shows that most of the reported cases of child abuse were on foster children followed by the step children. Thus most of the cases of abuse were on foster and step children.

**Research Question 2:** Is there any gender difference in the occurrence of child abuse among primary school pupils?

The data answering this question are presented in table 2.

**Table 2 - Comparison of Child Abuse on Male and Female Children.**

Year	Number of Reported Cases	Gender	
		Male	Female
2003	83	31	52
2004	54	15	39
Total	137	46	91
Percentage	100	33.57	66.43

The occurrence of child abuse among primary school pupils was higher among female pupils than male pupils. 91 out of 137 of all abused pupils were females, representing 66.42% of the cases of reported abuse.

**Research Question 3:** Which age group is most vulnerable to child abuse at the primary school level?

Table 3 contains the data to answer this research question.

*Table 3 - Occurrence of Child Abuse by Age*

Year	Number of Reported Cases	Age of Victims				
		1-3	4-7	8-11	12-15	16-18
2003	83	0	11	25	46	1
2004	54	0	8	19	25	2
Total	137	0	19	44	71	3
Percentage	100	0	13.87	32.11	51.82	2.18

From table 3, the age group most vulnerable to child abuse is 12 to 15 years which had 51.82% of the reported cases of abuse among the pupils.

**Research Question 4:** What are the forms of child abuse perpetrated against children in primary schools?

Data for answering the question are presented in table 4.

**Table 4: Forms of Child Abuse Meted on Children**

Year	Number of Reported Cases	Physical	Sexual	Emotional	Neglect	Labour
2003	83	22	1	3	27	30
2004	54	16	2	1	12	23
Total	137	38	3	4	39	53
Percentage	100	27.73	2.18	2.91	28.46	38.68

The forms of child abuse perpetrated on primary school pupils in order of frequency of occurrence (starting from the most frequent) are child labour, child neglect, physical abuse, emotional abuse and sexual abuse.

From the data presented and analysed, the salient findings of this study are:

1. Foster/step children are more vulnerable to abuse than biological children. Most of the abused children were foster/step children (116 out of 137, representing 84.67% of reported cases of abuse)
2. There was higher incidence of child abuse among female children than male children. 66.43% of reported cases were female children.
3. The age group most vulnerable to child abuse was 12-15 years with 51.82 of victims falling within this age bracket.
4. The most often perpetrated form of child abuse was child labour followed by child neglect and physical abuse. Cases of both emotional and sexual abuses were very low among primary school pupils. In order of hierarchy of occurrence, child labour constituted 38.68%, child neglect 28.46%, physical abuse 27.73% while emotional abuse and sexual abuse were 2.91% and 2.18% respectively.

## Discussion

Foster and step children are usually discriminated against in comparison with the children of their foster parents/guardians. For instance, while the children of foster/guardians go to private schools,

these other children are sent to public schools. These children are overworked with household chores and some are used for economic purpose such as hawking wares after or before coming to school. Headmasters reported that most of these abused children suffer multiple abuse of the triple evil of overworking (child labour), neglect and physical abuse. The educational development of these children is very bleak. Headmasters reported the educational problems of these children as late coming to school, high absenteeism, not having basic learning materials, starving, and poor academic performance. There is also a high likelihood of these children not continuing their education beyond the primary school level as many of the girls get married and the boys go on apprenticeship training for a trade like carpentry. Dropout rate is also higher among this calibre of children as headmasters reported that some of them do not complete the primary education. While these ones are sent to school, some of the foster and step children are out of school. In a study of persons attaining post basic literary class in a non-formal centre located in Jos, Haggai & Mang (2002) found that 48% of adults never had opportunity to attend school because they were serving other people as househelps and nannies.

The finding showed that more girls were abused than boys and this agreed with recent study by U.S. Department of Justice which found that more female prison inmates were abused as children than male children. More females were abused because the higher number of children serving as nannies and househelps in the urban centres are girls (Hodges 2001). The implication of this finding is that female education will lag behind the male counterpart because of poor performance at the primary level and consequently threat of dropping out of school.

Finally the age group most vulnerable to child abuse differ significantly with a vulnerable age of abuse in developed countries, which is 4-7 years and while there was no case of abuse from 1-3 years in this study, the statistics by NCASAA (2004) put the abuse at that age in developed countries at 21.8%. The children were much older here because they had to be old enough to perform household chores before they were sent to the urban centres as househelps and because of poverty which prevented their parents from sending them to school early.

## **Recommendations**

Child abuse has been linked with poverty in many researches on the problem (Santrock, 2001) and especially in the case of foster children nowadays in Nigeria (Hodges 2001). Often poor families do not have sufficient resources to care for their children and so will send them to relatives or persons working in the towns. The government should therefore devise an effective method of implementing poverty alleviation programme in the country to prevent peasants from the rural areas sending their children to the cities as domestic servants for economic purposes. Poverty alleviation can be effective in the rural areas by citing industries in areas where the local people produce the raw materials for such industries. In Plateaate for example, government should site industries for processing of grains, tomatoes and vegetables in areas that produce these commodities in large quantity.

In this country, there should be budget on child protection each year to ensure that there is sufficient fund to implement the child's Right Convention Policies on child protection.

Community leaders, programmes and services are particularly recommended for protecting children against abuse. In Nigerian towns, leaders of tribal associations should monitor the welfare of children brought from the rural areas and are in the custody of relatives in the town as domestic servants. Abusers should be sanctioned by the association and the abused child can be returned to his parents if abuse persists after warning the abuser.

The community should also put welfare services for alleviating families that need support especially in times of family stress such as death of bread winner and crisis. Communities should also establish crisis relieve centres and child abuse counselling. With community vigilance and care, child abuse can be drastically reduced. The community should also report child neglect to social workers and the police.

There should be legislation against child abuse and especially child labour and the legislation should be enforced by prosecuting offenders.

Social workers should visit homes with foster and step children and give counselling to abusive step parents and foster parents.



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