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## Dimensions of Child Abuse and Neglect and the Need for Family Counselling

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper examined the dimensions of Child Abuse and Neglect and the need for family counselling to curb the menace. It discussed the concept of Abuse and Neglect under the following sub-headings; physical abuse, physical neglect, including definitions and examples of such concepts. It also discussed the physical and behavioural indicators of each concept. This paper also discussed sexual abuse, emotional abuse as well as siblings abuse and the role of guidance counsellors in reducing the incidence of abuse and neglect in families.*

### **1. Introduction**

Domestic violence is gaining much ground in the present day society and has to be checked to prevent it from assuming uncontrollable dimensions. Every attempt should therefore be made to reduce its occurrence because violence breeds violence since young people who are victims of parental violence are likely to grow up to abuse their own children or others entrusted into their care.

### **2. Concept of Child Abuse and Neglect**

A child can be abused/ or neglected in a variety of ways: These include: physical abuse, physical neglect, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, sibling abuse and very recently child trafficking. This study intends to discuss variety of child abuse and neglect as well as to examine the implications of child abuse and neglect and the need for family counselling.

#### *2.1. Physical Child Abuse*

Various authors have defined child abuse differently. In this study, the researcher defines child abuse as any act of maltreatment, torture or inhuman treatment meted out to a child by a person or persons under whose care a child is entrusted, or any others taking advantage of children's inability to fend for or defend themselves. Harper (2013) saw physical abuse as the most easily recognized and the most often reported kind of maltreatment. According to him, the marks of physical abuse are visible on the child. Repeated physical maltreatment of children can easily be recognized by trained personnel like guidance counselors. The marks of physical abuse on victims include: unexpected bruises on the face, lips, mouth, reddish eye caused by a forceful slap; swollen bruises like the shape of cane, or belt on different surface areas of the body as well as slap marks on the cheek. Behaviourally, physically abused children exhibit the following characteristics: aggressiveness, destructiveness to self and others; going home late after school (indicator of fear of going home). Others include coming late to school, cheating, stealing, lying, inability to form good peer relationship.

#### *2.2. Physical Neglect*

Child neglect differs from child abuse. Child neglect is the denial of the basic rights and needs of the child by a person who is responsible for the child's welfare occurring as acts of omission or commission (UNICEF, 2013). Examples of Child Neglect include: denying the child the right to education, the right to medical care, the right to good food and clothing, exploiting the child for monetary gains such as sending the child to hawk, to beg for money, or engaging them in child labour, forcing children into prostitution, abduction of children, child trafficking, child conferment and lack of proper supervision of the child.

Children who are physically neglected can easily be detected by the guidance counselors in their various schools. (Eddy King 2010). According to him, most often they wear dirty, tattered or torn clothes, lack medical treatment. Behaviourally, they are habitually absent from class due to non-payment of school fees. Physically they look under-nourished, always seem to be hungry and emaciated. (Behaviourally, they beg others for food or even steal food. They come to school late and depart late. In class they often sleep or day dream during lessons and look tired and worn-out most of the time. They do not relate well with peers and teachers. Physically neglected children often look timid, shy, inhibited and immature. They are inconsistent in bathing, come to school late and while away their time after school in order to return late after the close of school.

### 2.3. Sexual Abuse

Sexual Abuse may be viewed as a special form of physical maltreatment. It is a serious crime against children, and often results to physical and emotional damage to victims (Fredrick 2013) American National Centre for Child Abuse and Neglect (ANCCAN, 2010) defined sexual abuse as contacts between a child and an adult in which the child is being used for the sexual stimulation of the perpetrator or another person. According to Harold (2011), the effects of sexual abuse vary depending on the victim's personality and type of incident. The victim is likely to have behavioral problems including withdrawal, difficulty at school, psychological harm that can result to extreme, depression and physical harm including cuts and bruises.

Writing on rape Eddyking (2010) observed that typical after-effects for the victim include range, guilt, depression, loss of self-esteem, shame, sexual adjustment problems and in many cases, a lasting mistrust of male-female relationships. Sexually abused children may have difficulties in school, including low grades and truancy. Many children who run away from home are incest victims, and many adolescent pregnancies and early marriages are associated with sexual abuse in the family (Ugonwigbo, 2009). To prevent this act of brutality or aggression to exploit, subordinate, humiliate and degrade the victim, it is recommended that parents should listen to their children and observe them psychologically. Corn (2004: 503) highlighted some hints or signs that parents should watch out for as signs of child molestation. They include:

1. The child fears being seen nude (for instance, during bathing) when such fears were absent before.
2. The child develops physical complaints, such as headaches, stomach-aches and other stress symptoms.
3. The child displays anxiety, fidgeting, shame, or discomfort when any reference to sexual behaviour occurs.
4. The child becomes markedly emotional and irritable.
5. The child engages in hazardous risk taking, such as jumping from high places.
6. The child reveals self-blame or self destruction or suicidal tendencies.
7. The child exhibits a loss of self esteem or self worth

### 2.4. Emotional Abuse

According to Harper (2013) emotional abuse involves actions by a parent or caregiver that interfere with the health; personal and social development of a child. Duberman (2011) observed that emotional abuse and neglect are committed by those parents who fail to provide a living environment in which children thrive, learn and develop. Such failures may be manifested by ignoring, threatening, terrorizing or blatantly rejecting the child.

Cases of emotional abuse also occur when most parents are not moved when their babies cry or express signs or emotions that call for attention. Emotional abuse often results to depression (Miller, 2009). Miller gave danger signals for depression to include;

1. A general and lasting feeling of hopelessness and despair.
2. Inability to concentrate, making reading, writing and conversation difficult – a situation of feeling that activities are slowed down because the mind is absorbed by inner anguish.
3. Changes in physical activities such as eating, sleeping and sex. Frequent physical complaints with no evidence of physical illness.
4. Loss of self esteem, with the attendant questioning of one's personal worth or value.
5. Withdrawal from others due to immense fear of rejection.
6. Threats or attempts to commit suicide, viewed as a way out of a hostile environment and a belief that life is worthless.
7. Misdirected aggression and irritability.
8. Feeling of guilt in many situations. A depressed person assumes he or she is wrong in most circumstances.

### 2.5. Sibling Abuse

The most common form of jealousy during early childhood exists when children realize that they must share their parents' love. This can be a particularly disturbing event and can give rise to sibling rivalry – a form of competition between children of the same family for the attention and love of their parents.

Sibling rivalry is most likely to develop when the parents exercise inconsistent discipline or if they are over indulgent towards a particular child (Martin, 2009). Siblings often learn physical violence in the home usually from their parents. Gelles (2008) in his study observed that 76% children who were repeatedly, abused by their parents also assaulted their siblings while only 15% of those whose parents do not use violence on physically assaulted their siblings.

In order to prevent sibling violence in the family, parents have to take the following measures:

1. Avoid showing any kind of favouritism or comparing one child with the other.
2. Avoid exercising corporal punishment.
3. Giving the children a strong clear message that violence is not acceptable in the family.
4. Avoid coercive discipline with its attendant higher rates of fighting between siblings.

### 2.6. Implications for Counselling

Since education is a key towards the development of an all-rounded individual, acquiring sound education by citizens will reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect in families. Education is the key to preventing abuse and neglect and counselling is needed to help abusive families. Child abuse and Child Neglect should not only be viewed in terms of the family alone but should be regarded as a societal problem.

### 2.7. Prevention of Child Abuse

Treating the problem of child abuse involves the following three interrelated strategies;

1. **Increasing Parents Self Esteem:** Parents who maltreat children are commonly viewed as people who need more positive ways of coping with their many problems. Counselors working with abusive parents are often quite successful in facilitating positive behavioural changes. By focusing on these parents' strengths, a therapist can enhance the development of the parents' self esteem and parenting skills. A counselor can also provide referrals to other community services such as financial aid and for families in economic distress, food and help in the provision of better housing as well as enlightening such families on birth control/family planning, adoption services and day care.
2. **Increasing parents' knowledge on children and positive childrearing techniques:** Many programmes for troubled parents entail parent discussion and support group component. Groups of parents often facilitated by a professional can get together to share stories about life's 'ups' and 'downs' and to offer advice and support. Child abuse and neglect hot lines are also available to parents round the clock for help in dealing with difficult child rearing situations.
3. **Devising Community support networks for families under stress:**  
There are a number of things the society can do to prevent the abuse and neglect of children. These include working to reduce sources of societal stress such as poverty, racism, inequality, unemployment and inadequate child care, promoting educational and employment opportunities for both men and women; supporting sex education and family planning programs in an effort to reduce unplanned and unwanted pregnancies

### 3. Conclusion

Child abuse can retard children's intellectual and social development in many ways. Abused children tend to have lower IQ scores, learning problems, lower grades and poorer school performance than children who are not abused and neglected. Many abused children are aggressive and fearful. Other problems related to abuses and neglect include: inability to trust people, difficulty in relating with both peers and adults; generalized unhappiness, poor self image; and the tendency to engage in juvenile delinquency; joining gangs, running away from home, truancy and becoming involved in violent crime (Gelles 2008). These are ugly circumstances which call for more concerted efforts on the path of guidance counsellors, parents and both the state and federal governments to tackle more effectively.

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