

EFFECTS OF FREQUENT DOMESTIC CONFLICT, VIOLENCE ON SOCIAL BEHAVIOURS, AND COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOOL CHILDREN IN NORTH EASTERN, NIGERIA

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The study assesses the effects of frequent domestic conflict, violence on social behaviours and cognitive development of school children in North Eastern Nigeria. It is generally observed by the researcher that young children between the ages of one to ten years fall victim of circumstances that happen among family members. Three objectives and three research questions were formulated which guided the study. A survey research design was used for the study, The population for the study was 8676 both children of nursery and primary schools in all the colleges of Education in the North East Geo-political zone of Nigeria. A sample of 367 nursery and primary school children were selected through a purposive sampling technique from 3 Colleges of Education in the area of study. Instruments for data collection were Family Violence Questionnaire (FVQ) for interview, observation and continuous assessment records were used to assess their social behaviour and cognitive development. Simple Percentages, Means and standard deviations were used to answer all the research questions. The finding revealed that among others there was 63% prevalence of frequent domestic conflict and violence in the study area and there was the effect of these tendencies on the social and cognitive development of school-age children in the North Eastern state of Nigeria. It was concluded that frequent domestic conflicts and violence in homes in the North Eastern State of Nigeria have influenced a lot of children and stirred up violence in them right from their childhood. It was recommended that Parents and grown-up members of the family should be enlightened on the effect of frequent domestic conflicts and violence to minimize the rate of negative effects on the children's social behaviour and cognitive development.

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**Introduction**

The family is made up of a group of persons; young and old and it is the basic unit of social life, it forms the link between the individual and the society. Amagon and Wakjissa (2011) opined that the family is the basic unit of social institutions; it is a system of accepted norms and a procedure for getting jobs done. They further explained that family is a type of kinship grouping which provides for the rearing of children and meeting certain human needs. The family could be nuclear, polygamous or

extended, which may include uncles, cousins, grandparents, wives of sons and their children as members of one family having to do their domestic activities together. Anyakoha and Eluwa (2012) stated that members of the extended family may live in towns or cities, but when they return to the villages they come together as one family. They further stated that conflicts could be a common feature in some extended families or even within the nuclear family. The North-East -geopolitical zone is not an exception to this type of family setting.

Domestic conflict is the misunderstanding that may occur in homes among family members as they interact with one another during their day-to-day activities (Anyakoha and Eluwa 2012). These may occur because of natural individual differences among people, it may be a conflict of ideas, actions and values. Gyuse (2015) stated that frequent conflict does not necessarily mean that something is wrong; rather the way conflict is dealt with is the real problem. Espino (2010) defined domestic violence as the intentional use of physical abuse by one's spouse or partner that causes pain or injury. Gilchrest and Graham (2014) defined domestic violence as any intentional abuse of family members. The family members could be children, spouses or any member of the family subsystems.

Laura (2011) stated that in many homes where domestic violence occurs, the parents are under the misconception that their children are unaware of the violence even if it has taken place close to the children. They may not witness the actual violence but they do hear the fighting, hear the screams and see the injuries. They are also traumatized by the parent's emotional pain and suffering after the violence has taken place and this directly or indirectly has devastating effects on their cognitive growth. Witnessing domestic violence can lead children to develop an array of age-dependent and negative effects (Cumming, 2012). Children who witness violence in the home and children who are abused may display many similar psychological effects (Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson and Zak, 2011) these children are at greater risk for internalized behaviours such as anxiety and depression, and for externalized behaviours such as fighting, bullying, lying or cheating. They are also more disobedient at home and school and are more likely to have social competence problems such as poor school performance and difficulty in relationships with others. Melissa (2012), stated that nursery as well

as primary school children who witness intimate violence may develop a range of problems, including psychosomatic complaints such as headaches, abdominal pain e.t.c. Five to nine-year-old children who witness frequent domestic conflict and violence display inappropriate attitudes about the use of violence as a means of resolving conflict and indicate a greater willingness to use violence themselves.

The United Nations Children's Fund UNICEF (2006) and United Nations Secretary General's study on violence against children reported that infants and small children who are exposed to violence in the home experience so much added emotional stress that can harm the development of their brains and impair cognitive and sensory growth behaviour. Changes can include excessive irregularities, sleep, problems with toilet training and language development. As they grow, children who are exposed to violence may continue to show signs of problems. Primary school-age children may have more trouble with school work and show poor concentration and focus, they tend not to do well in school. Edileson, Ellerton, Seargen, Kirchberg and Ambrose (2010) were of the view that children exposed to domestic conflicts and violence often have conflicting feelings towards their parents, for instance, distrust and affection often coexist for the abuser. The child becomes overprotective of the victim and feels sorry for them; they often show signs of anxiety, depression, aggression and hostility. Some other symptoms of domestic conflicts and violence in school-age children include isolation from friends and relatives to stay close to siblings and victimized parents. A study carried out by UNICEF (2006) further showed that forty percent of children from

violent homes had lower reading abilities than children from non-violent homes.

According to Carpenter and Stacks (2011) Personality and behaviour problems among children exposed to violence in the home can take the forms of psychosomatic illness, depression, bed-wetting and suicidal tendencies later in life. They further opined that children between the ages of one to six years old who encounter frequent domestic conflicts and violence showed clinical levels of internalizing and externalizing behaviour problems such as depression, anxiety, high levels of general distress and some symptoms such as hyperactivity, new fears and aggressions, sleep disturbances, poor concentration and significant anxiety and excessive crying when separated from their caregiver. These children are at greater risk of substance abuse, juvenile pregnancies and criminal behaviours than those raised in homes without frequent violence. Some studies suggest that social development is also damaged. Some children lose the ability to feel empathy for others. Others feel socially isolated, unable to make friends easily due to social discomfort or confusion over what is acceptable, while some children from violent homes exhibit signs of more aggressive behaviour such as bullying and are more likely to be involved in fighting.

Cummings (2013) is of the view that domestic violence includes behaviours such as throwing objects, pushing, grabbing, shoving, slapping, kicking, biting, hitting, beating, choking, and threatening with words or objects such as a knife or gun. Such violent abusive behaviour patterns are done by one partner against another in an intimate relationship which could be the spouse or parent and child relationship. He further explained that domestic conflicts can be

identified through some acts of anxiety, depression isolation from people, and withdrawal of incentives others will want to stay closer for fear of staying alone, while others may keep quiet by trying to ask questions and give open-ended answers, giving rise to communication gap.

Anderson and Bushman in Reisberg (2011) observed that the ability to imitate starts very early in life and as children grow and mature the capacity for imitation grows as well and that the rate at which violence is portrayed at home and in the media affects children who watch them. Richard, (2011) opined that when parents and other grown-up members of the family are in conflict situations nursery and school-age children are seriously affected. While many people think that they are keeping the conflicts away from the children, the children notice tension in the home and it has a profound effect on their social behaviour and cognitive development. Richard further stated that some children respond to conflicts and violence by acting out, feeling sad and wanting to intervene, some become physically and verbally aggressive with their peers while some other children are portrayed by behavioural problems such as frequent illness, and isolation from parents and friends.

Kitsmann, (2012) opined that children of nursery and school age are at the stage where cognitive development is dominated, by intellectual curiosity and performance, because of this Erikson (2012) in Snowman, Mccown, Biehler, (2010) observed that children learn to win recognition by producing things which can help them to develop a sense of industry. Therefore, if children at this stage are encouraged to make and do things well, helped to persevere, allowed to finish tasks and praised for trying; it results in industry. If their efforts are unsuccessful or if they are denied or treated as bothersome

because parents or older siblings are cut off from them due to frequent domestic conflicts and violence, an inferiority complex sets in and such children may have few friends to interact with and may never learn to enjoy intellectual work or take pride in doing at least one kind of thing very well, at worst, they may believe they will never excel at anything socially and cognitively; while some children may have trouble thinking, impaired thinking, abstract reasoning, poor problem-solving skills and their memories affected.

These explanations give a clear indication of the fact that a peaceful environment is required for the best cognitive development of children. Cognitive development theory therefore emphasizes the role of understanding language, interpersonal thoughts and actions. According to Gardner (2013) Children know that certain things are “Bad” and other things are “Good” but they are massively influenced by their experiences, including what they see and what they do. Language as a key in cognitive development according to Nygotsky, (2010) is learnt through social and cultural experiences, interaction with peers and adults could be of great help. He further emphasized that children learn the language or speech through the act of ‘self-talk’ which could be referred to as ‘thinking out loud’. As children interact with adults socially, they develop their thinking abilities which is part of cognition as they communicate with them but when adults and peers are into frequent conflicts and violence the children do not have the right opportunity to interact and even when they have, they will only learn the unaccepted language thereby giving place to low and slow cognitive development.

Cognitive development according to Graham (2013) is the processes that people use to gain knowledge, language, thought,

reasoning and imagination which require a safe environment and take place in the brain. He further explained that cognitive development depends on the interaction between nature and nurture, often called heredity and environment, which means the two put together to bring about the effective development of the child. He further explained that infants and children who are exposed to violence in the home experience so much added emotional stress that can harm the development of their brains. Miller (2010) Opines that the right prefrontal part of a child’s brain can pick up the emotional atmosphere in a millisecond, affecting them deeply, emotionally and cognitively. Therefore, exposure to frequent conflicts and domestic violence threatens their development. As they grow children who are exposed to such conditions may continue to show signs of problems and often do poorly in school.

Nicole (2017) stated that children whose parents conflict feel as though they have done something wrong to create the conflicts and as a result, they have a difficult time concentrating in school. He further explained that some of the children respond to parental conflict by acting out, that is demonstrating behaviour problems, inability to manage anger and delinquency. Some of the children may respond by ‘turning inward’, that is showing signs of depression and isolation from friends and activities, so they end up not being able to interact well with others, having very poor levels of skill development and low self-esteem, while some children may have trouble thinking, thinking of all the things that take place between their family members. Advances in neuropsychology have shown that when exposed to conflicts or violence our brains release stress hormones that over time can change brain functioning leading to problems in school, truancy, impaired thinking, such as abstract reasoning, poor problem-solving skills,

and the general memory affected (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2013).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Children in nursery and primary schools in the North-Eastern states develop a wide range of problems in school which include psychosomatic complaints, such as headaches or abdominal pain, as well as poor school performance as a result of frequent domestic conflicts and violence they experience at home. It was also observed by the researcher that young children between the ages of one to ten years are generally falling victim to circumstances that happen among family members. Most of their learning behaviour is through the daily practice of what they see happening around them. Children exposed to frequent domestic conflicts and violence do not have the foundations of safety and security that are normally provided by the family. As a result of that, the children experience desensitisation to aggressive behaviour, poor anger management and problem-solving skills and learn to engage in exploitative relationships. Prevalence reports show that anger-related problems such as oppositional behaviour, verbal and physical aggression, and violence are some of the more common (Hamrin, 2017). The school-age children do not understand the meaning of the abuse that comes as a result of the conflicts and violence and may believe they did something wrong. This self-blame may cause the child feelings of guilt and worry since they cannot express their feelings verbally and these emotions can cause social behavioural problems.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The major objective of the study is to determine the effects of frequent domestic conflicts and violence on the social behaviour and cognitive development of school-age

children in North-Eastern states of Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

1. Ascertain the prevalence of frequent domestic conflicts and violence in the Northeastern states of Nigeria.
2. Identify the social behaviour of children from families with frequent domestic conflicts and violence.
3. Determine the levels of cognitive development of school-age children brought up in frequent domestic conflicts and violent homes.

### **Research Question**

Arising from the research objectives, the following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the prevalence of frequent domestic conflicts and violence in the Northeastern states of Nigeria?
2. What are the social behaviours of children from families with frequent domestic conflicts and violence?
3. What are the levels of cognitive development of school children brought up in frequent domestic conflicts and violent homes?

### **Methodology**

The research design for this study is a survey research design. The population for the study was 8676 of both children of nursery and primary schools in all the colleges of Education in the North East Geo-political zone of Nigeria. A sample of 367 nursery and primary school children were selected through a purposive sampling technique from 3 Colleges of Education in the area of study. The instrument used for this research was the Family Violence Questionnaire (FVQ) for interview, observation and children's continuous assessment record. The questionnaire is developed by the researcher and given to experts for content validation based on the research questions. The data collected were

analyzed using percentage, mean and standard deviation. The Percentage was used to analyze the bio-data while mean and standard deviation

were used to answer research questions one to three.

### Result of the Study

**Research Question One:** What are the prevalences of frequent domestic conflicts and violence in the North-Eastern states of Nigeria?

*Table 4.1: Prevalence of frequent domestic conflicts and violence in the North Eastern states of Nigeria.*

Items	Result	
	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Nursery Children	136	37
School Age Children	231	63
Total	367	100

The result reveals that 136(37%) nursery children and 231(63%) school-age children have witnessed the prevalence of frequent domestic conflicts and violence in the North Eastern State of Nigeria. On the overall

analysis, it can be deduced that the prevalence of frequent domestic conflicts and violence in the North Eastern State of Nigeria is 63%. This means that 43% did not witness frequent domestic violence in the study area.

**Research Question Two:** What are the social behaviours of children from families with frequent domestic conflicts and violence?

*Table 4.2: Showing Mean and Standard Deviation of social behaviours of children from families with frequent domestic conflicts and violence.*

	Items	Result		
		Mean	Standard Deviation	Remarks
1	Bully others	2.82	0.61	Agreed
2	Disobedient	2.56	0.31	Agreed
3	Aggressive	1.34	0.17	Disagreed
4	Do not tolerate other	2.64	0.56	Agreed
5	Not generous	2.49	0.66	Agreed
6	Timid	2.55	0.65	Agreed
7	Do not help others	2.58	0.61	Agreed
8	Cooperate	2.58	0.67	Agreed

9	Friendly	2.31	0.63	Agreed
10	Not active	2.72	0.53	Agreed
11	Active	1.37	0.60	Disagreed
12	Unfriendly	1.54	0.59	Disagreed
13	Do not cooperate	2.52	0.68	Agreed
14	Help Others	3.32	1.0	Agreed
15	Not timid	1.39	0.50	Disagreed
16	Generous	2.81	1.24	Agreed
17	Tolerate others	3.18	1.34	Agreed
18	Not aggressive	3.19	1.28	Agreed
19	Obedient	2.74	1.42	Agreed
20	Do not bully others	2.96	1.33	Agreed

Table 4.2 shows that items (1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19 & 20) have a mean score of above 2.50, which means that both nursery and primary school children are aware of the social behaviours they display at school since they are from families with frequent domestic conflicts and violence, while

for items (3, 11, 12 & 15) having a mean score of less than 2.50 which means that both nursery and primary school children are not aware of the social behaviours they display at school since they are from families with frequent domestic conflicts and violence.

**Research Question Three:** What are the levels of cognitive development of school children brought up in frequent domestic conflicts and violent homes?

*Table 4.3: Showing Percentage of levels of cognitive development in school children brought up in frequent domestic conflicts and violent homes.*

Group	Result		
	N	Good Performance Level	Bad Performance Level
School Age	231	85.50	145.50

Table 4.3 shows the mean score of 85.50 of school age had good performance levels in their cognitive development while 145.50 had bad performance levels. This indicates that there are differences in the cognitive development level of school-age children from frequent domestic

conflicts and violent homes in the North Eastern States of Nigeria.

### Discussion

The result of the study revealed that frequent domestic conflicts and violence affect the social behaviour and cognitive

development of school children in North Eastern Nigeria. The study revealed that frequent domestic conflicts and violence affected both nursery-age and school-age children. Similarly, domestic violence and abuse are not limited to obvious physical violence. It can mean endangerment, criminal coercion, kidnapping, unlawful imprisonment, trespassing, harassment and stalking (National Network to End Domestic Violence, 2011). Furthermore, it was revealed that the most prevalent forms of domestic violence reported were physical abuse and economic disempowerment of women by spouses/partners which has a lasting effect not only on survivors but also intergenerational impacts on families especially the children and broader society (Semahegn & Mengistie, 2015).

The finding is in line with Laura (2011) who states that in many homes where domestic violence occurs, the parents are under the misconception that their children are unaware of the violence even if it takes place close to the children. They may not witness the actual violence but they do hear fighting and screams and see the injuries.

These children are also traumatized by the parent's emotional pain and suffering after the violence had taken place and this directly and indirectly has devastating effects on their cognitive growth. Witnessing domestic violence can lead children to develop an array of age-dependent and negative effects. Cumming (2012) states that children who witness violence in the home and children who are abused may display many similar psychological effects.

The school-age children have significant differences in their cognitive development. This was further confirmed by Bandura in John (2010) who emphasizes that

cognitive development and social behaviour have important links with the environment. His research program focused mainly on observational learning also called imitation or modelling, which is learning that occurs through observing what others do.

According to Osakwe & Odungiweru (2020), families from all social, racial economic, educational and religious backgrounds experience domestic violence in different ways. Children and young people need to grow up in a secure and nurturing environment. Where domestic or family violence exists, the home is not safe or secure and children are scared about what might happen to them and the people they love. Children who grow up in families where there is violence may suffer a range of behavioural and emotional disturbances. Furthermore, Children and young people do not have to see the violence to be affected by it. Studies show that living with domestic violence can cause physical, cognitive and emotional harm to children and young people (Maternowska, Catherine, & Fry, 2015).

Finally, the frequent domestic conflict and violence on social and cognitive development have an effect on both nursery and school-age children in the North Eastern States of Nigeria thereby affecting their behaviours, socially and cognitively.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the major findings of the study it was concluded that:

- i. Prevalence of frequent domestic conflict and violence in homes can be displayed among nursery and school-age children in the North Eastern States of Nigeria.
- ii. Most nursery and school-age children exhibit some undesirable behaviours because of their exposure to frequent

domestic conflicts and violence in the North Eastern States of Nigeria.

- iii. There are differences in the cognitive development level of nursery and school-age children from families with frequent domestic conflicts and violent homes in the North Eastern States of Nigeria.

### Recommendations

Based on the major findings, these recommendations were made:

- i. Grown-up members of the family should be enlightened on the effect of frequent domestic conflicts and violence to minimize the rate of negative effects on the children's social behaviour and cognitive development.
- ii. Parents should be enlightened on their roles as good models to their children because children learn faster at their tender ages and also believe that what their parents do is the ultimate.
- iii. Teachers should be encouraged to use methods of reward and punishment to curb and ameliorate the undesirable attitudes and poor cognition of the children from frequent domestic conflict and violent homes.

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