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DIVORCE AND CHILD ABUSE AS INDICES OF BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS AMONG CHILDREN IN OWERRI MUNICIPAL, NIGERIA

Leonard Chioma Onwukwe

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Authors' Affiliation

Department of Psychology,
Imo State University, Owerri,
Nigeria

Email:
leonabraham1975@gmail.com,

leonardonwukwe@imsuonline.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of divorce and child abuse on behavioural problems among children in Owerri Municipal, Imo State, Nigeria. Three hypotheses were formulated and tested using a sample of 499 pupils (250 males and 249 females) randomly selected from three primary schools within the municipality. Participants' ages ranged from 9 to 12 years ($M = 10.95$). The Children's Behaviour Questionnaire (Rutter, 1967) and the Child Abuse Inventory (Onwukwe, 1999) were used for data collection. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted, and data were analyzed using two-way ANOVA. Results revealed a significant influence of both divorce and child abuse on children's behavioural problems, as well as a significant interaction effect between the two variables. The findings underscore the need for effective family counselling, child protection interventions, and supportive educational environments to mitigate behavioural difficulties among affected children.

Keywords:

Divorce,

Child Abuse,

Behavioural Problems,

Attachment,

Owerri,

Introduction

Behavioural problems in children refer to persistent patterns of maladaptive or disruptive behaviours that interfere with learning, social adjustment, and healthy psychological development. Such behaviours—ranging from aggression and defiance to withdrawal and anxiety—often signify deeper emotional or environmental disturbances (Murata, 2020). While occasional misbehaviour is normal during development, persistent deviant patterns may indicate underlying psychosocial stressors such as parental conflict, divorce, or abuse (Ogundele, 2018).

Behavioural disorders are broadly classified as internalizing (e.g., anxiety, depression, withdrawal) or externalizing (e.g., aggression, conduct problems, delinquency). Internalizing problems manifest as inward distress, loneliness, and psychosomatic symptoms, while externalizing problems are outwardly disruptive, such as fighting, bullying, or defiance (Campbell, Shaw, & Gillion, 2000; Almeida & Santos, 2024). Both categories of problems can have lifelong consequences for children's social functioning, academic achievement, and emotional regulation.

In Nigeria, family instability and child maltreatment have become pressing concerns due to rising socioeconomic pressures and weakening traditional support systems (Ntoimo & Akokuwebe, 2014). Divorce and child abuse, in particular, have been implicated as major predictors of behavioural maladjustment among school-age children. Divorce, defined as the legal dissolution of marriage, disrupts family cohesion and the child's emotional attachment to parents (Hammond, 2018). Similarly, child abuse—comprising physical, sexual, emotional, and neglectful acts—violates the fundamental rights of the child and undermines healthy psychological growth (Gonzalez, Bethencourt, & McCall, 2025).

This study therefore investigates the joint and independent effects of divorce and child abuse on children's behavioural problems in Owerri Municipal,

aiming to contribute to family and developmental psychology literature within the Nigerian context.

Several studies indicate that children from divorced families experience higher levels of emotional distress, behavioural difficulties, and social maladjustment compared to their peers from intact homes (Amato & Cheadle, 2008; Weaver & Schofield, 2014). Divorce disrupts the stability and attachment security that children rely on for social and emotional regulation (Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2002). Prolonged parental conflict and separation can lead to both internalizing and externalizing disorders (Theunissen, Velderman, Cloostermans, & Reijneveld, 2017; Sillekens & Notten, 2020).

Behavioural problems refer to patterns of actions or reactions that deviate from accepted social norms and impair a child's ability to function effectively in family, school, or community settings. They encompass a wide spectrum, including aggression, oppositional defiance, withdrawal, and anxiety (Campbell, Shaw, & Gillon, 2000). Researchers generally classify these problems into two broad categories: internalizing and externalizing disorders. Internalizing behaviours—such as depression, anxiety, and withdrawal—are inwardly directed, while externalizing behaviours—such as aggression, hyperactivity, and delinquency—are outwardly disruptive (Almeida & Santos, 2024; Ogundele, 2018).

Empirical evidence shows that behavioural problems in childhood are predictive of long-term maladjustment, including academic underachievement, delinquency, and substance use (Farrington, 1997; Georgiou & Symeou, 2018). These problems do not occur in isolation but are shaped by contextual factors such as parenting style, family stability, socioeconomic conditions, and exposure to violence (Bongers *et al.*, 2021).

Parental divorce has been consistently associated with adverse child outcomes across cultural contexts.

It disrupts the family structure and reduces the emotional security that children derive from consistent parental presence (Amato & James, 2010; Weaver & Schofield, 2014). Wallerstein, Lewis, and Blakeslee (2002) found that children from divorced homes often internalize feelings of guilt, insecurity, and loss, which persist into adulthood. Similarly, a longitudinal study by Sillekens and Notten (2020) revealed that the effects of parental divorce extend beyond childhood, leading to externalizing behaviours and poor interpersonal relationships in adulthood.

In the Nigerian context, family dissolution is becoming increasingly prevalent due to financial stress, infidelity, and domestic violence (Ntoimo & Akokuwebe, 2014). Children from divorced families are often exposed to inconsistent parenting, economic hardship, and relocation stress, all of which compromise emotional development (Eyo, 2018). Theunissen et al. (2017) further demonstrated that divorce predicts children's emotional and behavioural problems even after controlling for parental education and ethnicity. However, some research suggests that the impact of divorce varies with parental cooperation and post-divorce support systems (Amato, 2014). Thus, the severity of behavioural problems may depend on the quality of parental adjustment rather than divorce.

Child abuse—comprising physical, emotional, sexual abuse, and neglect—has profound effects on children's mental health and behaviour. The World Health Organization defines child abuse as any act or omission that results in potential or actual harm to a child's health, development, or dignity (Gonzalez, Bethencourt, & McCall, 2024). Studies consistently show that abused children are more likely to exhibit aggression, antisocial behaviour, depression, and anxiety (Moylan et al., 2010; Olson & Shenk, 2024).

For instance, Liu et al. (2024) reported that histories of childhood maltreatment significantly predict depression among university students, mediated by emotion dysregulation. Similarly, Olson et al. (2023) found that adolescents with a history of abuse and

low parental monitoring exhibit elevated internalizing and externalizing symptoms. A meta-analysis by Norman et al. (2012) concluded that childhood abuse increases the risk of developing mood and anxiety disorders by more than twofold. In sub-Saharan Africa, studies by Madhlopa, Qin, and Chen (2020) and Agbor and Onwuamaegbu (2010) have linked child abuse with poor academic performance, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal.

Although divorce and child abuse are distinct phenomena, they often intersect in their impact on children's psychosocial development. Family breakdown can heighten stress, reduce supervision, and create opportunities for neglect or abuse (Scott *et al.*, 2013). Conversely, households characterized by abuse are more likely to dissolve, creating cyclical patterns of instability and trauma (Hughes & Waite, 2009).

Empirical evidence suggests that combined exposure to divorce and maltreatment magnifies behavioural risk. In a comparative study, Spruijt (2007) found that children exposed to both family disintegration and abuse displayed higher rates of delinquency and emotional withdrawal. Similarly, Breivik, Olweus, and Endresen (2009) reported that poor parent-child relationships mediate the relationship between single-parent households and adolescent substance use. Thus, divorce and abuse represent converging risk factors that compromise secure attachment, emotional regulation, and social competence.

Child abuse has been linked to a range of psychological and behavioural outcomes, including aggression, delinquency, depression, and poor academic performance (Moylan et al., 2010; Olson & Shenk, 2024). Abused children often develop negative self-perceptions, emotional dysregulation, and social withdrawal (Spertus, Wong, Halligan, & Seremetis, 2003). Chronic maltreatment also predicts long-term risk for internalizing (depression, anxiety) and externalizing (delinquency, rebellion) disorders (Olson, Chow, Jones, & Shenk, 2023).

Two theories underpin this study: attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth et al., 1978) and social

learning theory (Bandura, 1977). Attachment theory posits that children require consistent emotional and physical availability from caregivers to develop security and trust. Thus, early emotional bonds with caregivers form the foundation of a child's security and personality development. Divorce disrupts these bonds, leading to insecurity, anxiety, and disorganized attachment patterns (Carlson et al., 1989). Children who experience neglect or abuse often develop insecure or avoidant attachment styles, predisposing them to behavioural and emotional problems (Cicchetti, Rogosch, & Toth, 2006). Securely attached children, in contrast, are better equipped to manage stress and form healthy social relationships (Tarabulsky *et al.*, 2008). In other words, Children with secure attachments tend to explore confidently, while those with insecure or disorganized attachments exhibit fear, withdrawal, or aggression.

The social learning theory suggests that children learn behaviours through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. When parents or caregivers exhibit aggression, neglect, or hostility, children internalize these behaviours as acceptable responses. Therefore, exposure to abusive or conflict-ridden parental behaviour tends to increase the likelihood of children replicating aggression or maladaptive coping strategies. Widom (1989) and Robinson and Breau (2019) demonstrated that children exposed to violence are more likely to exhibit aggressive or delinquent behaviours later in life. Hence, both divorce and abuse contribute to behavioural problems by modelling maladaptive coping strategies and undermining positive reinforcement.

Method

Design/Statistics

A cross-sectional survey design was adopted to investigate the influence of divorce and child abuse on children's behavioural problems. Data were analyzed using a two-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), with divorce and child abuse as independent variables and behavioural problems as the dependent variable.

Participants

The study comprised 499 pupils (250 males, 249 females) aged 9–12 years ($M = 10.95$), drawn from three primary schools in Owerri Municipal: Madonna Nursery and Primary School, Goshen Schools, and Imo State University Primary School. Participants were selected using a simple random sampling technique. The selection involved use of folded pieces of paper numbering 800, of which 499 was inscribed "A" and 301 "B". These were mixed up in a basket and participants who picked papers inscribed with "A" were selected for the study.

Instruments

Children's Behaviour Questionnaire (CBQ; Rutter, 1967) was used to measure child behaviour problems. This instrument initially contained 73 items but was reduced to 46 after a pilot study by the researcher. The CBQ measures behavioural problems on a 5-point Likert scale. The internal consistency coefficient established was .94, with a norm score of 119.92, above which behavioural problems are indicated.

Child Abuse Inventory (CAI; Onwukwe, 1999) – A 14-item scale measuring the frequency of abusive experiences on a 5-point Likert scale was used to measure child abuse. Reliability coefficients ranged between .46–.98, indicating acceptable consistency. Onwukwe (1999) obtained a coefficient of internal consistency of 0.98 and a concurrent validity coefficient of 0.77. Further validation established a split-half coefficient of .456 and a concurrent validity (Cronbach's Alpha) of .589 when compared with Child Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) by Pennebaker and Susman, (1988) (Akanno, 2021). Also, Ukanwa (2024) established a norm of 17.940 using primary and secondary school students (mean age = 14.10).

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the ethical research committee of the Faculty of Social Sciences Imo State University, Owerri. Permission was obtained from school authorities. The researcher

introduced the study to pupils, emphasizing confidentiality and voluntariness. Questionnaires were explained orally and completed with guidance. Out of 510 questionnaires distributed 505 were collected, six were improperly filled and hence

disbanded. Thus 499 questionnaires were used for data analysis. After completion, participants were debriefed to ensure no distress occurred. Data generated was analyzed using SPSS version 25.

Results

Table I: Mean and Standard Deviation scores of Divorce and Child Abuse on Behavioural Problems.

Variables		Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Divorce	Divorced	56.394	22.278	433
	Intact	45.969	21.630	66
Child abuse	Abused	56.939	22.389	431
	Not Abused	42.823	18.848	68
TOTAL		55.016	22.452	499

From the means obtained in table I above, children from divorced homes ($M = 56.39$) scored higher than their counterparts in intact homes ($M = 45.969$). Also, the table indicates that abused children ($M = 56.939$) scored significantly higher than their counterparts who were not abused ($M = 42.823$).

Table II: Two-way Analysis of Variance: Tests of Between Subject Effects of the variables Divorce and Child Abuse on Behavioural Problems.

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Divorce (A)	3609.503	1	3609.503	7.641	.006
Child Abuse (B)	10302.688	1	10302.688	21.808	.000
A X B	3686.966	1	3686.966	7.804	.005
Error	23388.137	495	472.420		
Total	1761409.00	499			

$P < .05$

As shown on the results obtained in Table II above, there was a significant influence of divorce on behavioral problems among children in Owerri Municipal ($F = 7.641, p = .006$). Similarly there was a significant influence of child abuse on behavioural problems among children in Owerri Municipal ($F = 21.808, p = .000$). Finally, it was found that there was a significant interaction effect of divorce and child abuse on behavioural problems ($F = 7.804, p = .005$).

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that both divorce and child abuse significantly contribute to behavioural problems among children in Owerri. These results corroborate previous findings that divorce increases children's risk of emotional and behavioural disorders (Amato & James, 2010; Weaver & Schofield, 2014). Divorce disrupts children's emotional security, leading to anxiety, aggression, or withdrawal (Wallerstein et al., 2002).

Similarly, consistent with Moylan et al. (2010) and Olson and Shenk (2024), the study found that child abuse—whether physical, emotional, or neglectful—significantly predicts behavioural maladjustment. Abused children internalize hostility and often externalize aggression, consistent with the intergenerational transmission of violence proposed by Bandura (1977).

The significant interaction between divorce and abuse suggests that the combination of family instability and maltreatment exacerbates children's vulnerability to psychological and behavioural dysfunctions. Such dual exposure may distort attachment security and foster maladaptive coping behaviours.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concluded that divorce and child abuse have critical influence on behavioural problems among children in Owerri. Family breakdown and maltreatment undermine the emotional foundation necessary for healthy child development.

School counsellors and psychologists should provide targeted therapy for children from divorced or abusive homes. Also awareness programs should emphasize positive parenting, conflict resolution, and emotional stability. More importantly, government and NGOs should strengthen child protection laws

and family support services. Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to track behavioural changes over time and across contexts.

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