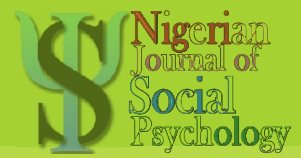


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Harmful Parenting and Adverse Childhood Experiences in Nigeria: Implications and Counselling Interventions

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Abstract

This paper looks at how Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and harmful parenting habits affect Nigerian children's psychological, social, and developmental health. It discusses the connection between the emergence of ACEs and harmful parenting behaviours (such as neglect, emotional and physical abuse, and overcontrol). The discourse uses Attachment Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, and Resilience Theory to examine the long-term effects of ACEs on children's mental and physical health. In order to lessen the consequences of ACEs, this discussion emphasises the value of counselling therapies, such as trauma-informed care, parental psychoeducation, and community-focused tactics. To minimize harmful parenting behaviours and lower the prevalence of ACEs in Nigeria, recommendations for policy changes, public awareness campaigns, professional development, and the creation of easily available support networks were suggested.

Keywords: *detrimental parenting, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), therapeutic interventions, child protection legislation*

Introduction

Parenting practices have a significant impact on children's social, emotional, and psychological development. A complex interplay of social, cultural, and economic factors has produced parenting practices in Nigeria that are harmful to the welfare of children (Herbell & Bloom, 2020). Behaviours that jeopardise a child's physical, mental, and emotional health are referred to as harmful parenting. In addition to more subtle but no less damaging behaviours like emotional manipulation, authoritarian discipline, and verbal abuse, these practices can include overt forms of abuse like physical violence and neglect (Rowell & Neal-Barnett, 2021). Certain parenting techniques are deeply ingrained in Nigerian culture and are commonly justified as moral instruction or discipline. Most people agree that physical punishment is a legitimate way to change children's conduct. In addition to being used in homes, corporal punishment—such as beatings or floggings—is also institutionalised in schools, where it is seen as an essential tool for maintaining order (Arnold *et al.*, 2023).

This approach, although commonly accepted, has demonstrated detrimental impacts on children's development, such as heightened aggression, emotional detachment, and diminished self-esteem. In addition to physical punishment, emotional abuse and neglect represent other prevalent forms of detrimental parenting in Nigeria (Rowell & Neal-Barnett, 2021, Adikwu *et al.*, 2023, Stella, 2024). Numerous parents, encumbered by financial difficulties, unintentionally overlook their children's emotional requirements. The obligation to secure fundamental needs frequently restricts the capacity to cultivate caring and supporting connections. Children raised in such environments often express feelings of abandonment and emotional insecurity, which may result in behavioural problems or mental health issues in adulthood (Owolabi, 2023, Olaitan & Olasehinde, 2024). Poverty impacts a significant number of Nigerian families, leading parents to employ severe discipline as a misguided strategy to cope with the stress and frustrations stemming from economic hardship (Obiagu, 2020, Greene *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, in numerous rural and economically disadvantaged communities, child

labour is institutionalised, with children anticipated to augment the family's income from a young age (Lange *et al.*, 2018, Agugua *et al.*, 2024). This expectation frequently undermines their education, health, and overall well-being, so condemning them to a cycle of neglect and abuse

Systemic difficulties intensify the incidence of detrimental parenting in Nigeria. The absence of effective child protection measures and inadequate enforcement of current legislation render numerous children susceptible to maltreatment (Wattanatchariya *et al.*, 2024). Nigeria has accepted international agreements, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC); yet, the execution of child protection policies frequently fails owing to insufficient financing, corruption, and societal apathy (Ifeakandu, 2019, Agbede, 2020). Harmful parenting practices are not limited to particular regions or social strata in Nigeria. They traverse both rural and urban environments, impacting children from various backgrounds. Children in marginalised areas are disproportionately impacted due to restricted access to school, healthcare, and social support systems. In these contexts, conventional ideas and patriarchal standards frequently bolster (Arikewuyo & Babatunde, 2020, Zhang *et al.*, 2022).

Any parental action, practice, or approach that adversely affects a child's physical, emotional, or mental health is considered harmful parenting. It includes acts of omission, such as neglect, abandonment, and the failure to provide a safe and loving environment, as well as actions of commission, such as physical abuse, verbal assault, and emotional manipulation. While guiding and discipline are important aspects of parenting, destructive parenting distorts these values and frequently goes beyond the bounds of constructive correction into areas of harm, control, and abuse (Omumu *et al.*, 2012, Narayan *et al.*, 2021).

Another crucial form of negative parenting is emotional abuse, characterised by activities that degrade, belittle, or emotionally weaken a child. Name-calling, public humiliation, and constant criticism are examples of such behaviours (Ifayomi *et al.*, 2024). By depriving a young child of their sense of value, these behaviours can cause long-lasting emotional damage and feelings of inadequacy and insecurity. Another widespread problem is neglect, which occurs when parents or other carers neglect to provide for a child's fundamental requirements. This type of injury includes the lack of emotional support, caring, and attention in addition to basic needs like food, clothing, and shelter. Children who are neglected lack the safety and stability they need to develop normally, which frequently results in feelings of emotional estrangement and abandonment (Zhao *et al.*, 2023, Omumu, 2024).

Also, overcontrol or excessive authoritarian parenting poses significant risks to a child's autonomy and psychological growth (Woods-Jaeger *et al.*, 2018). Unknowingly, parents who enforce strict restrictions, restrict their children's freedom, and exert excessive control over them may cause anxiety, low self-esteem, and a lack of judgement. Structure and direction are vital, but too much control stifles a child's growth in resilience and self-assurance. When combined, these harmful parenting techniques produce circumstances that impede children's overall growth and make them more susceptible to negative consequences in adolescence and adulthood.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic situations or events that happen in childhood and have a significant negative impact on a person's long-term development, health, and general well-being (Treat *et al.*, 2019). Felitti *et al.* (1998) conducted a groundbreaking study that introduced the concept of ACEs, classifying these experiences into three primary categories: domestic dysfunction, abuse, and neglect. Every domain depicts a

range of unfavourable circumstances that children could face, many of which lead to long-term psychological, emotional, and physical suffering (Portwood *et al.*, 2021). Physical, emotional, and sexual abuse by carers or other adults in a child's life are all included in the category of abuse. While emotional abuse encompasses actions that disparage or degrade a kid, such as verbal humiliation or frequent criticism, physical abuse includes acts that cause physical harm, such as punching or beating. Children who experience sexual abuse, a severe kind of trauma, are subjected to inappropriate or exploitative sexual behaviour, which typically causes significant psychological harm (Brown, 2016, Grady *et al.*, 2016, Ifayomi *et al.*, 2024).

Neglect, the second domain, includes both emotional and physical abuse. When providers are unable to provide a child with adequate food, shelter, and clothing, it is referred to as physical neglect (Grady *et al.*, 2016, Treat *et al.*, 2019, Omumu, 2024). Lack of affection, attention, and emotional support is known as emotional neglect, and it causes children to feel abandoned, alone, and emotionally unstable. The third domain, household dysfunction, emphasises detrimental conditions within the familial context. Children subjected to domestic violence, substance misuse, untreated mental illness, or parental separation may encounter instability and terror. Incarceration of a family member introduces extra stress and stigma, undermining the child's sense of security and normalcy. Harmful parenting practices often directly contribute to these Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), interlinking with wider systemic and environmental factors to sustain cycles of trauma and hardship (Choi *et al.*, 2020, Kumari, 2020). For example, harsh punishment, indifference to emotional needs, or exposure to unfavourable household situations can create an environment that encourages Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which can have a significant impact on a child's development. ACE-affected children are more likely to suffer from mental health conditions like anxiety and depression, long-term conditions like diabetes and high blood pressure, poor academic performance, and difficulties forming and maintaining good relationships, among other negative consequences (Murphy *et al.*, 2013).

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and bad parenting are made worse in Nigeria by socio-cultural norms and financial hardship. Practices like as corporal punishment, forced child labour, and verbal abuse are typically accepted and justified as necessary for discipline or survival. These cultural standards muddy the distinctions between acceptable parenting and abuse, making it difficult to challenge entrenched behaviors. Also, economic challenges force many families to prioritise survival above nurturing, worsening neglect and exposing children to exploitative labor or risky situations.

The frequency of harmful parenting and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in Nigeria significantly impacts individual welfare, societal progress, and the nation's future. Children subjected to such experiences have an increased likelihood of acquiring mental health disorders, including depression and anxiety, as well as physical health issues, such as heart disease and obesity, in later life (Webster, 2022, Chenube, 2023). The long-term impacts not only diminish individual potential but also impose a considerable strain on healthcare and social systems (Bhutta *et al.*, 2023, Howard *et al.*, 2023).

In Nigeria, where more than 40% of the population is under 15 years old, the consequences of harmful parenting are particularly significant. Children constitute the nation's most essential asset for development and innovation. Nonetheless, the persistence of harmful parenting methods undermines their ability to contribute meaningfully to society. Moreover, the normalisation of these practices sustains cycles of violence, poverty, and inequality, hindering national advancement and intensifying prevailing societal problems (Okoroafor & Njoku,

2012, Cooke *et al.*, 2019, Ifeakandu, 2019, Stella, 2024). In a socio-cultural setting where traditional traditions regularly conflict with modern perspectives on child rights and welfare, addressing these concerns is extremely important.

This paper's primary goal is to investigate the relationship between detrimental parenting styles, the frequency of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), and the critical role that therapy plays in mitigating their consequences. In order to clarify how harmful parenting practices, contribute to the development of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and their subsequent effects on children's psychological, emotional, and social well-being, this discourse also focused on the kind and frequency of harmful parenting in Nigeria. It also emphasises how important counselling is as a preventative, therapeutic, and intervention tool.

Theoretical Framework on Harmful Parenting and ACEs

Several psychological theories can be used to explain how Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and bad parenting affect a child's development. These include theories of resilience, ecological systems, and attachment. Each paradigm provides a unique viewpoint for understanding the intricate relationships between social concerns and parenting styles that impact children's wellbeing, especially in settings like Nigeria where socio-cultural norms and financial difficulties make matters worse. The importance of early relationships between children and their carers on emotional, social, and cognitive development is highlighted by attachment theory, which was first developed by Bowlby (1969) and then further developed by Ainsworth (1989) (Cassidy *et al.*, 2013). According to the hypothesis, a child's attachment style—secure or insecure—with their primary carer has a lasting impact on their ability to control their emotions and form wholesome connections for the rest of their lives (Goddard, 2020, Dockery, 2021). Secure attachments are cultivated when carers regularly and sensitively address the child's needs. Nonetheless, detrimental parenting behaviours, like neglect, emotional abuse, or inconsistency, undermine attachment connections and result in insecure attachment patterns, which may present as anxiety, withdrawal, or challenges in establishing trustworthy relationships (Ainsworth, 1989, Vertel, 2023).

Children subjected to neglect may cultivate avoidant attachment, marked by emotional detachment and a predilection for independence. However, children who experience emotional or physical abuse may develop ambivalent or disorganised attachment styles, which are typified by uncertainty, fear, and a lack of faith in providers (Bowlby, 1969, Mikulincer & Shaver, 2022). Negative parenting practices like emotional neglect and physical punishment are common in Nigeria, making it more difficult for kids to build secure relationships. Attachment disturbances can lead to long-term difficulties with self-esteem, emotional control, and relationship stability (Narayan *et al.*, 2021, Zhao *et al.*, 2023). In order to foster stable attachment and prevent the development of emotional and social difficulties in babies, treatments aimed at improving caregiving practices are crucial.

A thorough understanding of how various environmental layers affect a child's development can be gained from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2000, Tudge & Rosa, 2019). Ecological Systems Theory (Cooke *et al.*, 2019). The notion emphasises how a person's family, community, school, and broader cultural and societal factors interact with them in a way that is interdependent. Microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem are the five tiers into which the systems are divided. Because neglect, abuse, and maladaptive parenting techniques often occur in this immediate environment, the microsystem—which includes direct interactions with carers, peers, and educators—is especially relevant when assessing damaging parenting (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, Tudge & Rosa,

2019). The mesosystem emphasises the interconnections among many components within the microsystem, shown by the relationship between home and school. Children subjected to detrimental parenting may have a series of challenges, including subpar academic achievement and behavioural problems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The exosystem, encompassing indirect factors like a parent's profession or community support networks, amplifies the effects of detrimental parenting. Due to widespread poverty, limited access to social services, and high unemployment rates, Nigeria usually lacks resources, which makes stress and neglect worse and encourages bad parenting habits (Greene *et al.*, 2020, Herbell & Bloom, 2020).

The broad cultural standards and societal values that shape parenting styles are represented by the macrosystem. Nigerian cultural views on discipline, especially the use of corporal punishment, can make it difficult to distinguish between abuse and proper parenting (Tudge & Rosa, 2019, Ofoha & Ogidan, 2020). The chronosystem, which examines the effects of time and historical transformations, is pertinent, as changes in cultural views towards child-rearing and resource availability affect parenting practices. As a result, the Ecological Systems Theory highlights the need for multi-level interventions that address the societal and cultural factors that lead to bad parenting as well as individual behaviours (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The study of resilience theory looks at the strategies that people use to overcome hardship and adjust well to new circumstances. According to this view, resilience is a dynamic process that is influenced by personal characteristics, family support, and community resources rather than being a fixed trait. Through emotional control, adaptive coping strategies, and the ability to build healthy connections in spite of early trauma, children exposed to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) may demonstrate resilience (Kumari, 2020, Dockery, 2021, Narayan *et al.*, 2021). Important elements that promote resilience include personal qualities like optimism, self-efficacy, and emotional control, which enable children to effectively cope with stress and trauma. The negative effects of abusive parenting are lessened by supportive relationships, especially those with non-abusive individuals. These connections offer stability, emotional support, and role models for constructive communication. In the Nigerian context, building resilience might mean creating community-based programs that teach children trauma coping skills and strengthening social and familial support systems to ensure children have access to the material and emotional resources they need to thrive (Mampane, 2020). Enhancing resilience also heavily relies on community resources, such as social services, healthcare, and educational opportunities.

Context and Causes of Harmful Parenting in Nigeria

Parenting customs in Nigeria are closely related to centuries-old cultural norms, societal expectations, and traditional beliefs. Some of these techniques have unintended consequences that result in the continuation of negative parenting styles, even if many of them are driven by the desire to instill in children's moral principles, discipline, and respect (Ofoha & Ogidan, 2020). Negative parenting in Nigeria is usually caused by socio-cultural factors that affect children's social, emotional, and psychological development in addition to the family dynamic. Nigeria is a diverse country with more than 250 ethnic groups, each of which has its own customs and views on raising children. Notwithstanding regional variations, specific parenting practices are prevalent and ingrained in Nigerian society, some of which may adversely affect children's development. These practices, frequently regarded as “*normal*” or “*traditional*,” encompass corporal punishment, verbal abuse, neglect, and excessive control. Corporal punishment is frequently rationalised as a means of upholding discipline, safeguarding familial honour, and equipping children for future success in a competitive society. A considerable number of parents and carers claim that physical punishment is essential for correcting

children's misconduct and instilling respect for authority (Oates, 2011). Nevertheless, the application of corporal punishment has demonstrated adverse impacts on children's psychological and emotional health. Research demonstrates that children who experience corporal punishment are at an increased risk of developing behavioural issues, including aggression, anxiety, and depression (Gershoff, 2002, Cuartas, 2023). Children subjected to physical punishment may internalise violence as a legitimate conflict resolution method, thereby continuing cycles of abuse.

In Nigerian society, physical punishment is occasionally regarded as a rite of passage—an anticipated aspect of upbringing that embodies tough love or serves as preparation for life's problems. The harm that physical punishment causes, including both acute physical pain and long-lasting emotional trauma, is frequently hidden by this cultural normalisation of it. The use of harsh words, insults, and derogatory remarks is common in many Nigerian homes. Parents commonly use phrases like "*you're worthless*," "*you will never amount to anything*," or "*you're a failure*" to reprimand their children for perceived mistakes or shortcomings. Such remarks can have a significant negative impact on a child's mental health and sense of self, leading to issues like sadness, hopelessness, and low self-esteem (Lawal & Abdulmalik, 2020, Ofoha & Ogidan, 2020, Tzouvara *et al.*, 2023).

The lack of caring, nurturing, and emotional support that children require from their carers is known as emotional neglect, and it is often linked to verbal abuse. Some Nigerian communities place a strong cultural emphasis on children being "*seen but not heard*," meaning that the *practical parts of childrearing*—like making sure children do well in school or complete household chores—often take precedence over the emotional needs of children (Agbede, 2020). Children who don't receive emotional validation may grow up without the skills necessary to properly express or control their emotions, which can result in long-term emotional problems. Neglect in Nigerian parenting is generally a result of economic difficulties, lack of education, and societal pressures rather than purposeful cruelty. In certain families, especially those in rural or underprivileged areas, parents may struggle to meet the fundamental requirements of their children, such as providing food, proper shelter, or access to education. Economic issues often lead to a situation where parents are physically present but emotionally distant, as they are focused with survival. In other instances, neglect may manifest as a lack of interest in a child's emotional or academic development, particularly when children are expected to conform to rigid gender roles or are pressured to prioritise economic contributions to the family, such as working in the family business or performing laborious tasks from a young age.

On the other side, overcontrol, or extreme authoritarian parenting, is prominent in many Nigerian households. This kind of parenting emphasises rigid obedience and conformity, frequently at the price of a child's autonomy. Parents may enforce rigorous rules, limit personal expression, and make all decisions for their children, leaving little possibility for freedom or self-discovery. The emphasis on academic achievement and success, often linked to family honour, can contribute to overwhelming pressure on children to perform at their best, sometimes leading to anxiety, poor self-esteem, and burnout (Arikewuyo & Babatunde, 2020, Ofoha & Ogidan, 2020). The cultural expectation that children should be submissive to authority and comply with parental decisions can also limit their ability to think critically or assert their own identities. This overcontrol can cause long-lasting impacts, such as an inability to make independent decisions or trouble in handling personal relationships in maturity.

Gender significantly influences parenting practices in Nigerian society (Nwifo *et al.*, 2023, Sanni *et al.*, 2024). Conventional gender norms prescribe that boys should exhibit assertiveness, strength, and independence, whilst girls are instructed to embody submissiveness, nurturing qualities, and obedience. Such expectations frequently lead to gender-specific disparities in child-rearing practices. Boys may be urged to assume responsibilities and leadership positions from an early age, whereas girls may be tasked with domestic duties and instructed to prioritise familial care. This gendered parenting approach can lead to harmful practices, including unequal access to education and opportunities, particularly for girls. In many regions of Nigeria, females are anticipated to marry at a young age or contribute to familial responsibilities instead of seeking education, thereby constraining their personal development and potential. Boys, conversely, may experience pressure to conform to elevated standards of masculinity, resulting in emotional repression, violence, or an incapacity to exhibit vulnerability (Dockery, 2021, Chenube, 2023).

Socio-economic problems, including poverty, unemployment, and limited access to education, significantly influence detrimental parenting habits. Numerous Nigerian households have significant financial strain, potentially resulting in child neglect or emotional unavailability from parents (Okoroafor & Njoku, 2012). Also, the restricted access to social services, mental health assistance, and educational initiatives for parents intensifies the predicament, hindering their ability to obtain resources that could facilitate the adoption of healthier parenting practices (Lange *et al.*, 2018, Kumari, 2020, Fujiwara, 2022). The lack of definitive legal frameworks and policies to safeguard children from abuse further aggravates the situation. Despite initiatives to promote knowledge of children's rights in Nigeria, detrimental parenting practices including physical punishment, child labour, and neglect persist in numerous areas. Societal perceptions of child discipline frequently regard these methods as permissible, complicating efforts to contest or alter ingrained behaviours.

The economic and social landscape of Nigeria profoundly impacts parenting practices. Elevated poverty and unemployment rates significantly influence child-rearing, exacerbating detrimental parenting. Poverty restricts resources, intensifies stress, and influences parenting behaviors. Unemployment exacerbates financial instability, leading to feelings of helplessness, which can manifest in neglect, emotional abuse, and excessive control. Research demonstrates that parents in poverty are more inclined to employ severe discipline, neglect, or inadequately provide emotional support (Olabiyi, 2021, Owolabi, 2023). Unemployment also contributes to bad parenting practices, leading to emotions of inadequacy, guilt, and frustration, which may express in destructive parenting methods (Obiagu, 2020). The economic stress produced by unemployment can lead to authoritarian parenting, characterized by rigorous rules, severe discipline, and a lack of emotional warmth, hindering a child's emotional growth and autonomy.

The interplay between poverty, unemployment, and harmful parenting in Nigeria is exacerbated by cultural expectations and social conventions. In many Nigerian communities, parents, especially men, are expected to be providers and guardians, imposing pressure to fulfill these ideals despite economic adversity (Silva *et al.*, 2024). Consequently, some parents may engage in detrimental behaviors, such as corporal punishment or emotional neglect, to exert control in situations where they feel powerless. Cultural norms also influence parental perceptions and reactions to their children's behavior, with severe discipline often normalized as a means of cultivating obedience and respect. The absence of social services, community assistance, and support networks in many Nigerian regions intensifies the effects of poverty and unemployment on parenting. Unlike industrialised nations, Nigeria lacks access to social

safety nets, mental health services, and parenting programmes, leaving parents with limited resources to alleviate stress or acquire healthier parenting methods. To mitigate these effects, holistic solutions encompassing financial assistance, mental health resources, and parenting instruction are necessary.

The safeguarding of children in Nigeria from harmful parenting practices is hindered by structural issues, including inadequate child protection legislation and its enforcement. Despite existing laws, deficiencies in legal frameworks, insufficient enforcement mechanisms, and a frail judicial system obstruct the protection of children's rights. Law enforcement agencies face challenges in enforcing child protection laws due to inadequate training, poor resources, and systemic corruption. This results in impunity for perpetrators and insufficient access to justice for victims (Brisibe *et al.*, 2024). Harmful parenting practices, such as corporal punishment and verbal abuse, are often normalized and entrenched in cultural frameworks. Public awareness about child protection laws and children's rights is limited, particularly in rural areas. Educational initiatives and outreach programmes are scarce, perpetuating detrimental practices and undermining the implementation of child protection legislation.

Consequences of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

The long-term consequences of ACEs may manifest as mental health disorders, impaired cognitive development, and difficulties forming wholesome relationships. Anxiety, sadness, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are among the psychological issues that are strongly linked to ACEs. These circumstances affect the child's wellbeing right away and can have long-lasting effects into adulthood, causing a traumatising loop that is difficult to break (Byansi *et al.*, 2023). Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) significantly increase a child's risk of acquiring anxiety disorders. There are various ways that anxiety can manifest, including social anxiety disorder, panic disorders, and generalised anxiety disorder. Children may develop heightened alertness and emotional dysregulation as a result of the ongoing stress and anxiety associated with living in an abusive or neglectful environment. People may have persistent worry, trouble focusing, and a generalised feeling of fear or discomfort as a result. Early-life trauma alters the way the brain's stress response systems develop, making young children more susceptible to stress as adults. Even in situations that don't pose a threat, this can result in increased anxiety reactions.

One common mental health effect of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) is depression. Children who experience emotional abuse, neglect, or dysfunction in their families may develop negative self-perceptions, feelings of inadequacy, and a generalised pessimism (Oral *et al.*, 2015). Lack of emotional validation or good reinforcement from carers frequently makes these feelings worse. Long-term stress and emotional discomfort associated with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) can change the chemistry of the brain, especially in areas like the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus that control mood (Rowell & Neal-Barnett, 2021). As these people get older, poor emotional processing in childhood can lead to the development of depressive symptoms, such as persistent melancholy, a lack of interest in activities, feelings of guilt or shame, and difficulties maintaining relationships.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) may develop as a result of exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), especially those involving physical or sexual abuse, domestic violence, or dysfunction in the home (Cooke *et al.*, 2019, Kumari, 2020, Webster, 2021, Tzouvara *et al.*, 2023). Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) can cause symptoms in children, such as nightmares, flashbacks, emotional numbness, hyperarousal (such as an increased startle reaction), and avoiding reminders of the trauma (Goddard, 2020, Cruz *et al.*,

2024). These symptoms can interfere with day-to-day activities, affecting social interactions, academic achievement, and general emotional health. PTSD is particularly harmful because it changes a child's sense of safety and trust in other people, which may lead to long-term difficulties in developing safe attachments and wholesome relationships. A number of coexisting mental health conditions, including anxiety and depression, can be brought on by the ongoing emotional upheaval associated with PTSD. To deal with their strong feelings and memories, children with PTSD may turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms including substance misuse, self-harm, or risky activities (Scully *et al.*, 2019). Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) often have psychological effects that last into adulthood, with those who experienced childhood trauma being more vulnerable to mental health conditions like PTSD, anxiety, and depression later in life (Fujiwara, 2022).

Additionally, the psychological effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) can lead to difficulties controlling oneself, low self-esteem, and heightened susceptibility to further trauma or abuse as an adult. People who have Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) may be more likely to be involved in violent relationships, struggle with substance abuse, or suffer from mental health conditions including anxiety and depression. People who have experienced childhood adversity are more likely to adopt harmful parenting behaviours, which perpetuates the cycle of abuse and neglect. The effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) often result in a cyclical pattern of trauma that is passed down through generations (Woods-Jaeger *et al.*, 2018, Rowell & Neal-Barnett, 2021).

A child's scholastic chances are among the many aspects of their development that are greatly impacted by Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). A child's ability to focus, learn, and engage in school activities can be disrupted by the trauma and stress associated with ACEs, which can lead to lower academic performance and higher dropout rates. Academic progress is hampered by the complex effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on schooling, which can manifest in a number of ways, including cognitive deficits, emotional and behavioural problems, and a lack of social support (Treat *et al.*, 2019, Chenube, 2023, Vertel, 2023). ACEs can disrupt a child's normal brain development, particularly those linked to long-term stress and trauma. Long-term exposure to stress hormones like cortisol can negatively affect the brain's ability to process and remember information, leading to learning disabilities and cognitive impairments (Lund *et al.*, 2020). Particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of stress are the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex, two important brain areas linked to memory, focus, and problem-solving. Children who have experienced ACEs may therefore struggle with memory recall, focus, and reduced critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Their academic performance may be hampered by these cognitive deficiencies. Children who have experienced trauma may find it difficult to focus in class, complete assignments, or remember what they have learnt (Gilgoff *et al.*, 2020). A child's ability to follow directions or work constructively with peers may also be affected by ACEs, which could hinder their academic progress.

A child's social development is seriously hampered by adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which makes it extremely difficult for them to build relationships that are both healthy and productive. Many social problems, including attachment disorders, emotional regulation problems, and difficulties establishing trust, are commonly brought on by the trauma and neglect associated with ACEs (Felitti *et al.*, 1998, Greene *et al.*, 2020, Rowell & Neal-Barnett, 2021). These problems continue into adulthood, affecting a person's ability to build meaningful relationships in both personal and professional contexts. Because people who experience abuse or neglect as children are more likely to act violently as adults, adverse childhood experiences

(ACEs) are strongly linked to an increased risk of sustaining violence (Oral *et al.*, 2015, Leitch, 2017, Ifayomi *et al.*, 2024).

One common effect of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) is the inability to trust others, especially when children experience emotional abuse, neglect, or inconsistent caring. Healthy relationships are built on trust, and when that trust is betrayed early in life, people may carry the weight of that betrayal into adulthood. As a result, they can exhibit a generalised fear of closeness and vulnerability, which would make it difficult for them to interact with people or form meaningful, long-lasting relationships. Despite the lack of supporting evidence, people with trust issues can be extremely protective and frequently interpret the actions of others as malevolent or dishonest. In both personal and professional relationships, where cooperation and mutual trust are essential for success, this protective posture can lead to significant difficulties.

The increased likelihood that people would continue to use violence in their relationships and communities is one of the most alarming societal effects of ACEs. Children who grow up in abusive homes are more prone to act violently as adults (Goddard, 2020). The normalisation of domestic violence teaches children that using physical force, intimidation, and aggressiveness to settle disputes or establish authority is acceptable. Learnt behaviours often persist into adulthood, causing people to engage in abusive relationships or mistreat their children (Lorenc *et al.*, 2020). According to research, children who see or experience domestic abuse are more likely to participate in violent relationships as adults, either as perpetrators or victims (Woods-Jaeger *et al.*, 2018). As a result, trauma is passed down via family lines, creating an intergenerational cycle of violence.

Counselling Implications

In order to mitigate the negative effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and harmful parenting styles and promote healing, targeted, intentional treatments are required. In order to treat the psychological, emotional, and social effects of trauma that children and families experience, counselling is essential (Lorenc *et al.*, 2020, Rowell & Neal-Barnett, 2021). Through expert advice, trauma-informed techniques, and psychoeducation, counselling can help people break the cycle of trauma, promoting resilience in the face of hardship and healing. The following are crucial therapy implications aimed at reducing negative parental behaviours and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Counselling as an early intervention can help parents and children understand and process their experiences, develop healthy coping mechanisms, and improve emotional control (MacIsaac *et al.*, 2021). Through counselling, children can process trauma, express their feelings, and reframe unfavourable ideas in a safe setting (Lorenc *et al.*, 2020). Through counselling, parents can learn better parenting techniques, understand the repercussions of their behaviour, and break the pattern of abusive or negligent behaviour. Also, it is a vital tool for people dealing with mental health conditions like PTSD, sadness, or anxiety, which are commonly linked to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) (Goddard, 2020). It provides coping mechanisms to deal with these issues, helping people take back control of their life and make wise decisions for the future. Counselling can help reduce the stigma attached to mental health problems in Nigeria, creating an atmosphere that encourages people to seek help and obtain necessary resources.

Using trauma-informed counselling techniques is essential when working with kids and families who have had adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) (Panisch *et al.*, 2020). These approaches recognise the prevalence and impact of trauma and place a strong emphasis on creating a safe, supportive environment that promotes recovery (Zhang *et al.*, 2022). Recognising, validating, and respecting the experiences of traumatised children and

families, counsellors may help them understand that they are not at fault and create a safe and trustworthy environment.

Counsellors can also help children control their anxiety, anger, and distress by teaching them strategies like mindfulness, deep breathing, and grounding exercises. These techniques help people better control their emotions and develop resilience by giving them the tools they need to deal with stressful situations. Empowering people to rewrite their life stories, narrative therapy helps children who have had Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) understand what happened to them, distance themselves from the trauma, and develop agency and hope (Leitch, 2017, Rowell & Neal-Barnett, 2021, Webster, 2022). In order to meet the multifaceted requirements of families affected by ACEs, trauma-informed family therapy improves communication, settles conflicts, and promotes stronger relationships among family members (Oral *et al.*, 2015). This approach helps parents understand their part in the trauma cycle, improve their parenting skills, and work together to provide a safe, nurturing environment for the kid.

In therapy, psychoeducation is a crucial tool, especially when addressing harmful parenting practices that result in Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) (Lyu & Lu, 2023). Parents' comprehension of how their behaviours impact their children's emotional and psychological well-being can be improved by educating them about the consequences of their actions. Parents who receive psychoeducation are more able to recognise the detrimental effects of bad parenting techniques on their children's development, including physical abuse, emotional neglect, and overcontrol. Also, psychoeducation teaches parents communication skills and constructive, non-violent methods of discipline that promote the healthy growth of their children (Ofoha & Ogidan, 2020). Counsellors can teach parents the value of nurturing, stability, and emotional support in the parent-child relationship (Herbell, 2020). The incidence of harmful parenting practices can be significantly reduced by providing parents with useful behaviour management techniques, such as setting clear limits without resorting to physical punishment (Ofoha & Ogidan, 2020, Silveira *et al.*, 2021). Parents can develop greater empathy for their children's situations through counselling. Becoming more empathetic and attentive to their child's needs, parents can break the cycle of trauma and foster a loving environment by realising how their actions affect their child's mental health. Encouraging self-awareness and guiding parents towards healthy connections with their children, psychoeducation helps parents identify patterns of abuse or neglect from their own upbringing, limiting the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next.

In order to reduce Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in Nigeria and bring about long-lasting change in parenting styles, community-based interventions are essential (Agbaje *et al.*, 2021, Chenube, 2023). Promoting healthy parenting with the support of established community leaders and organisations can help normalise constructive behaviours and lessen the stigma associated with obtaining counselling. Community leaders can support families and promote change in their communities by being trained to detect the warning signs of ACEs and destructive parenting styles. While cooperative collaborations among stakeholders offer comprehensive help for impacted families, creating support networks and public awareness campaigns can also change cultural norms and attitudes towards parenting. Communities can disrupt the cycle of ACEs and provide safer, more supportive settings for kids by banding together.

Conclusion

The harmful effects of abusive parenting and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on the wellbeing of children in Nigeria were discussed in this paper. Assessing the institutional, cultural, and economic factors that contribute to these challenges, the discussion underlined the pressing need for all-encompassing solutions. Reducing the prevalence of ACEs and promoting healthy parenting practices can be accomplished through policy changes, public awareness campaigns, professional training, and the establishment of easily accessible support networks. Addressing these issues would improve children's immediate results and promote the long-term growth of future generations that are more resilient and prosperous.

Recommendations

Based on the discourse in this paper, the following suggestions are recommended:

- Policymakers must prioritise the enhancement of child protection legislation and guarantee its stringent enforcement. This can be accomplished by enforcing current laws, such as the Child Rights Act (2003), and revising and augmenting legislation to tackle detrimental parenting practices.
- Initiatives to raise public awareness can have a big impact on attitudes and encourage better, trauma-informed parenting techniques. To raise awareness of the value of positive parenting, these initiatives should make use of forums, community seminars, instructional materials, and media outreach. Interaction with local elders and religious leaders can increase the reach and effectiveness of public awareness campaigns.
- In order to reduce negative parental behaviours and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), training programmes for teachers, counsellors, and medical professionals are essential. These professionals should receive training on how to spot ACE symptoms, provide assistance, and connect families with appropriate resources. To address Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), educators, counsellors, and medical experts can work together to develop a unified approach.
- Providing ongoing care to children and families affected by adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) requires the establishment of easily accessible, trauma-informed counselling and rehabilitation facilities. People can get the help they need while dealing with trauma through community-based counselling facilities, easily accessible mental health services, family rehabilitation programs, and support for families who are at risk.

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