



Anxiety disorders and depression among high school adolescents and youths in Nigeria: Understanding differential effects of physical abuse at home and school



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ABSTRACT

Despite the exposure of children to physical abuse in more than one setting in many regions of the world, little is known about the associations of physical abuse in different settings (e.g., at home and school) with anxiety disorders and depression among adolescents and youths. Using a convenience sample of 502 adolescents and youths ages 13–23 years from five public and three private senior secondary schools in Nigeria, the study examined associations of gender and physical abuse by parents with anxiety disorders as well as associations of physical abuse by parents and/or teachers with depression in the sample, 39.6% of whom had experienced physical abuse at home and in school. Findings suggest that physical abuse by parents was associated with anxiety disorders and depression than physical abuse by teachers. Being female was equally associated with anxiety disorders. Implications of findings for mental health, practice, research, and theory are discussed.

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Background

In some regions of the world children experience physical abuse in more than one setting (e.g., home and school) and suffer from anxiety disorders and depression related to the experience (Afifi, Mota, Dasiewicz, MacMillan, & Sareen, 2012; Gaudiano & Zimmerman, 2010; Gibb, Chelminski, & Zimmerman, 2007; Westenberg & Garnefski, 2003). Although research clearly suggests that physical abuse has deleterious effects on children (Springer, Sheridan, Kuo, & Carnes, 2007; Yen et al., 2008), most of what is known about its effects on depression and anxiety disorders was derived from data collected from societies (e.g., the United States) where children primarily experience physical abuse in a single setting (i.e., home) by a single perpetrator(s) (i.e., parents). In societies where children are exposed to physically abusive behaviors in more than one setting, psychological effects of physical abuse are equally generally examined from the perspective of a single setting (Chen & Wei, 2011; Frank-Briggs & Alikor, 2010; Omigbodun, Bakare, & Yusuf, 2008; Yen et al., 2008). However, using a single setting to examine psychological outcomes of abusive behaviors occurring in more than one setting, one cannot reasonably

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determine differential impacts of settings on physically abusive experience or psychological effects of the abusive experience in different settings. Knowledge about which setting deserves greater attention, given scarce resources, cannot be reasonably generated. This article therefore examines physical abuse at home and school among high school students in Nigeria for the purpose of determining the effects of settings on depression and anxiety disorders.

Rationale for the study

The rationale for examining psychological effects of physical abuse in two settings rests on assumptions of its relevance to educational policies, disciplinary practices, and adolescents' development. First, despite ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and promulgation of the Children's Right Act (CRA) 2003 to protect children from abuse in Nigeria, physically abusive behaviors by teachers persist in schools, where students spend almost one third of their day. Such behaviors have physical and sometimes fatal consequences for students (Mahmoud, Ayanniyi, & Salman, 2011; Obe, 2012; Oluwakemi & Kayode, 2007). Because physical abuse has significant psychological effects, examining its perpetration in school in relation to its perpetration at home can have significant implications for understanding dimensions of its psychological effects on adolescent and youth development.

Second, because existing knowledge regarding psychological effects of physical abuse is derived primarily from data collected about physical abuse in a single setting (i.e., parental physical abuse at home), the existing body of knowledge generated from a single setting may not be reflective of the experience of children who are exposed to physical abuse in more than one setting and may lack adequate mechanisms to address developmental challenges associated with physical abuse in different settings.

Third, examining psychological effects of physical abuse in more than one setting will generate fresh knowledge with potential broad-based impact on educational policies, disciplinary practices, mental health well-being, and educational outcomes of adolescents and youths in societies where exposure to physical abuse in more than one setting is the norm. Such new knowledge may also enhance interventions to meet psycho-educational challenges of new immigrants (from regions where children are exposed to physical abuse in more than one setting) in multicultural societies.

Psychological effects of physical abuse: theoretical considerations

Opinions vary on the impacts of corporal punishment on psychological well-being of children, even as corporal punishment remains the major prelude to physical abuse. Gershoff (2002) presented a process-context model to describe how corporal punishment affects children. According to Gershoff (2002), corporal punishment shapes "emotional and cognitive processes" of children such that expected outcomes or effects of corporal punishment on a child depend on "cognitive and affective processes" activated by the child following parental administration of corporal punishment (p. 551). Thus, the "cognitive and affective processes" connotes mediating factors to consider in understanding the effects of corporal punishment on psychological and behavioral outcomes in children. To be considered within this continuum are personal and behavioral characteristics of the child and parent, as well as the social-cultural context in which parental administration of corporal punishment occurs (Gershoff, 2002). Although an integral part of cognitive and affective responses relates to whether corporal punishment is perceived as a socially acceptable form of child rearing (Gershoff, 2002), it is possible that exposure to corporal punishment at home or at home and school may engender negative cognitive and affective responses from children in ways that may differ from no exposure to corporal punishment, particularly if the administration of corporal punishment is frequent and severe.

Physical abuse, anxiety disorders, and depression

Research on the effects of physical abuse has focused primarily on externalizing behaviors, such as physical aggression, while consistently overlooking internalizing reactions of children to physical abuse (Ani & Grantham-McGregor, 1998; Rodriguez, 2003). It is perhaps easy to overlook internalizing reactions because a host of factors other than physical abuse can be easily attributed to anxiety disorders and depression. For example, parental depression, perception of parental poverty, problems with peers, low self-esteem, drinking problems, being female, and large family size have been associated with depression among adolescents in Nigeria (Adewuya & Ologun, 2006). Recent findings also suggest that "not living with parents," as well as being in senior secondary class, was predictive of depression (Adeniyi, Okafor, & Adeniyi, 2011; Fatiregun & Kumapayi, 2014, p. 197). Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider anxiety disorders and depression when considering the consequences of physical abuse (Affi et al., 2012; Fergusson, Boden, & Horwood, 2008; Springer et al., 2007; Yen et al., 2008; Young, Abelson, Curtis, & Nesse, 1997).

As reasonable as it may seem to consider the interrelatedness of physical abuse, anxiety disorders, and depression, both psychological disorders are consistently found to be more related than physical abuse to other forms of child maltreatment. On the one hand, some researchers have found significant relationships between physical abuse and depression (Affi, Brownridge, Cox, & Sareen, 2006; Fletcher, 2009; Gaudiano & Zimmerman, 2010; Gibb et al., 2007; Schraedley, Gotlib, & Hayward, 1999; Toth, Manly, & Cicchetti, 1992; Widom, DuMont, & Czaja, 2007) and between physical abuse and anxiety disorders (Spinhoven et al., 2010; Stein et al., 1996). On the other hand, recent findings suggest that there are no relationships among physical abuse, anxiety disorders, and depression (Tonmyr, Williams, Hovdestad, & Draca, 2011). However, among

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