

Child Neglect and Impact on Child Mental Health: A Systematic Review and Implications for Child Psychologists

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Abstract: *This paper was a systematic review that discussed the impact of child neglect on child mental health and highlighted the implications of these on the practice of child psychology. Theoretical knowledge was drawn from theories of parenting and health models, and a secondary data collection method was done using online access to empirical studies. The major observations from literature showed that the global prevalence of child neglect was relatively high across different cultures. The major causes of child neglect were highlighted to be unplanned pregnancy of child, socio-economic status of caregiver, personality of caregiver, educational qualification of caregiver, style of parenting adopted by the caregiver and strength of parent-child relationship between parent/caregiver and child. The major informants of child neglect were identified to be people close to the victim such as a neighbor or a peer. Lastly, the major impacts of child neglect on the mental health of children were suicidal risks, criminal tendencies/deviance behaviors, depression, anxiety disorders, poor academic grades, lower IQ, difficulty forming and sustaining healthy social relationships with others and feelings of isolation. Consequently, the discussion, implication of findings for child psychologists, limitation of study and recommendations were thus presented in this paper.*

Keywords: Child Neglect, Child Mental Health and Child Psychologists

1. Introduction

The global prevalence of child abuse is relatively alarming (Child Right Act, 2018). Of the several forms of child abuse, this paper discussed childhood neglect, its impact on child mental health and implications for child psychologists. Childhood neglect is a form of child abuse that indicates an absence in meeting the crucial needs of a child (American Psychological Association, 2018). To neglect a child means to purposely ignore a child's basic needs by the caregiver, consequently this neglect has certain physical or psychological implications for child development on the child (National Institute of Mental Health, 2018). Hence any denial of child from his or her right may be considered part of child neglect.

World prevalence has it that globally there is a forty percent (40%) increase in childhood neglect from 2000 to 2018. Furthermore, in 2018 it was reported that globally, the incidence of childhood neglect accounted for seven (7) in every incidence of child abuse (United States Department of Health & Human Services, 2018). Childhood neglect is absence of supervision that is done from parent/caregiver to child is mostly detected by individuals that are close to the neglected child or live close to the neglected child. Thus making it uneasy to be identified through face validity.

In essence, childhood neglect is a concept in child psychology that describes the purposeful or deliberate intention of a parent or caregiver to ignore the essential and basic needs of their child or children. A child who is a victim of child neglect is usually referred to as a *neglected child*. Sometimes, children who experience neglect from their parents or caregivers usually feel inferior to their non-neglected counterparts, consequently increasing the propensity of neglected children for developing mental health symptoms/psychopathologies.

Mental health in children is defined as a complete state of psychological, emotional and social wellbeing in children (National Health Institute, 2018). Children with a good mental health usually have specific similarities such as positive thinking and positive emotions. Huppert, (2009) defined child mental health as comprising both good feeling and sufficient functioning in all or most spheres of life. Thus, child mental health is centered on the condition of children with regards their psychological and emotional wellbeing. Child mental health encompasses the cognitive, behavioral, emotional and social wellbeing of children.

One of the early proponents of the field of child mental health Ryff (1989) postulated that child mental health consists of a child's positive relationships with others, personal mastery, autonomy, a feeling of purpose and meaning in life and personal growth and development. In other words, child mental health is a state in a child that is characterized by experience of self-determination and personal growth, the purpose and achievement of goals, the meaning in life, the actualization of personal capabilities and potentials, the commitment with the existential challenges and the self-realization (Keyes, 2016).

In summary, child mental health is conceptualized as a very crucial aspect of a child's everyday functioning. This is justified by the expectation that child mental health can equally determine the physical and social functioning of children. Consequently, maladjustment in child mental health can be a pathway for developing physical and social maladjustments as well. In summary, mental health in children is imperative for the overall wellbeing of children. Hence, it is crucial for investigations into the barriers of child mental health.

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2. Purpose of Paper

The following are the purposes of this paper:

- 1) To present a review of the impact of child neglect on child mental health
- 2) To indicate the implications of the impact of child neglect on child mental health for the practice of child psychology
- 3) To make suggestions for further studies.

3. Methodology

The present paper adopted a systematic review methodology. Consequently making the researcher to adopt four (4) theoretical frameworks and several empirical studies as observed from literature. Empirical studies from 2014 to 2018 were accessed and reviewed appropriately with relevance to the topic of this paper. The research title, purpose, methodological processes and major findings of each reviewed empirical study were clearly presented. In essence a secondary data collection method was deployed in this paper, i.e. a data collection method, where data were collected from already existing data.

4. Theories of Child Neglect

The Baumrind Theory of Parenting

A popular theory of parenting called the Baumrind theory of parenting was developed by Diana Baumrind in the late 1940s and 1950s. In this study, the Baumrind theory is adopted for the purpose of explaining the role of child neglect in predicting child mental health. According to Baumrind, there are four (4) main styles of parenting and the parenting style adopted by a parent/caregiver can predict whether a parent/caregiver will neglect his child or not. These parenting styles are namely; **authoritative, authoritarian, permissive-indulgent and permissive-uninvolved**. **Authoritative parenting style** describes a parenting style that is featured by parents/caregivers that gives sufficient support and resources to their child/children. **Authoritarian parenting style** describes a parenting style that is featured by high expectations and very low levels of feedback and nurturance from the parents/caregivers to their children. In essence, authoritarian parents/caregivers makes a lot of demands from their children and do not make available the necessary support needed to meet such demands. Consequently, children raised by authoritarian parents/caregivers have high propensity for developing psychopathologies or mental health problems.

Permissive-indulgent parenting style, describes a parenting style that is featured by parents/caregivers who show love and provide little or no rules towards their children. Children raised by permissive parents usually experience love and freedom from parents at the same time low guidelines from same parents, consequently such children have little propensity for being obedient to constituted authorities. The last style of parenting which is **permissive-uninvolved parenting style** describes a parenting style that is featured by total or almost total absence of involvement at all between parent/caregiver and child. This style of parenting breeds room for child neglect from the parent/caregiver to child.

Hence, due to the absence of involvement of parent/caregiver in the child's life, there is high propensity that such child could be influenced and misled by peers who are ignorant about life.

In addition to the four (4) styles of parenting, Baumrind conceptualized four (4) dimensions of parent/caregiver-child relationship, namely; **parental control, maturity demands, clarity of communication, and nurturance**. **Parental control** describes a dimension of parent-child relationship that is concerned with the extent to which parents/caregivers creates and enforces rules on their children. **Maturity demands** describes a dimension of parent-child relationship that is concerned with the expectations of parents/caregivers towards their children in meeting up with the responsibilities associated with the child's maturity. **Clarity of communication** refers to effective communication between parent/caregiver and child, such communication may not be limited to talking alone, but also includes body language expressions. Lastly, **nurturance** refers to affection and warmth given from parent/caregiver to child.

By applying this theory to the present paper, it could be expected that the propensity for child neglect developing could be predicted from the type of parent-child relationship or parenting style that is adopted by a parent/caregiver. Hence, the implication of the Baumrind's theory for this paper is that in a bid to avoid child neglect, parents/caregivers will be encouraged to practice a parent-child relationship and parenting style that breeds constant involvement between parents/caregiver and child/children, equips the child/children with necessary coping skills needed to survive in the society and at the same time addresses the basic needs of the child.

Attachment Theory of Parental Bonding

Attachment is the bond that is formed between a parent/caregiver and a child. One of the earliest theorists and proponent of attachment in child psychology, John Bowlby after conducting experiments developed a theory of attachment referred to as *Bowlby attachment theory*. According to Bowlby several factors accounts for bonding between parents/caregivers and children. Consequently, it becomes imperative that these factors are taken into great consideration by parents/caregivers, in order to enable them build a solid bonding between them and their children. Additionally to the hallmark of this theory, Bowlby proposed that every child is born with an innate propensity for attachment with their parents/caregivers, and this innate propensity for attachment formation in children is what motivates them for parental bonding.

The temperament of children which is one's emotional reaction to events, is also imperative for predicting the strength of bond that exist between parents/caregivers and children. Consequently, children with positive temperament have stronger tendencies of forming solid bonds with their parents/caregivers, if their parents/caregivers adopt an appropriate style of parenting i.e. the authoritative parenting style (Bowlby, 1969). Consequently, by applying the Bowlby attachment theory to the present study, it would be expected that child neglect is determined by the strength of bonding between a parent/caregiver and the child/children.

Thus, the implication of this attachment theory for the present study is that parents/caregivers that form a solid bonding with their child have little likelihood for neglecting their child. In contrast, parents/caregivers that forms a weak bonding with their child have very high propensity for child neglect towards their children.

5. Theories of Mental Health

Six-Factor Model of Psychological Wellbeing

The six (6) factor model of psychological wellbeing was developed by Carol Ryff (1989). This is a model for explaining and understanding the mental health, as well as the dimensions of and the factors contributing to the mental health of individuals. According to this model, mental health is experienced by achieving a state of balance affected by both challenging and rewarding life events. Furthermore, according to Ryff, six (6) important aspects of human functioning are conceptualized in describing the mental wellbeing of individuals, namely: *Autonomy*, which is the control of one's life by one's self (Ryff, 1989). A mentally healthy person must be autonomous, i.e. has sufficient levels of internal evaluation, assessing the self on personal standards and achievements while not conforming to the standards of others.

Second of the six (6) dimensions is *Personal growth* which describes the ability to better one's self to become a fully functioning person, self-actualized and accomplish set goals (Ryff, 1989). For an individual to experience sufficient mental health, such individual is required to engage in a culture of continuous improvement by continually evolving and solving problems thereby expanding one's talents, abilities and efficiency.

Third of the six (6) dimensions is *Environmental mastery* which describes a person's self-regulation of the actual and imagined environment through physical or mental tendencies (Ryff, 1989). In this third dimension, mental health implies that a person sufficiently relates with a variety of people in diverse situations and adapt to various contexts upon demand. Being in control of physiological and cognitive arousal is significant in improving individuals' control and understanding of their surroundings, as well as their mental health as implied here (Ryff, 1989).

Fourth of the six (6) dimensions is *Purpose in life*, which is the next dimension and describes the importance of one's existence and involves the setting and attainment of goals, which increases value of life (Ryff, 1989). Consequently, mental health also requires that a person is aware that he or she has a greater goal and purpose in life (Ryff, 1989). Purpose in life makes life appear more meaningful. Fifth of the six (6) dimensions is *having positive relationship with others*, this is an imperative component of mental health as well. This suggests that we need to maintain healthy social relationships in order to report a good mental health as well (Ryff, 1989). A good relationship with others will yield a tolerance and understanding of others, on the other hand poor relationship can cause frustration (Ryff, 1989). *Self-acceptance* which is the last dimension and is concerned with a person accepting one's self as one is truly is, and this includes acceptance of past, present and future. By applying

the six (6) factor model of psychological wellbeing to the present study, it would be expected that the mental health of children can be predicted by the six (6) important factors highlighted in the model of psychological wellbeing. Hence the implication of this is that a fault in any of these six (6) dimensions of psychological wellbeing can serve as a breed for mental health dysfunctions in children. Consequently, child psychologists during case management of neglected children should consider it imperative to assess for the negative impacts of child neglect on the six (6) dimensions of psychological wellbeing.

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping

Antonovsky and Kats, (1967); Lazarus and Cohen, (1977) developed the transactional model of stress and coping for the purpose of developing a theoretical model for explaining how the encounters of stressors can predict mental and physical wellbeing in individuals. This theory adopts a cognitive-behavioral framework for providing explanations on how to cope with stress breeding situations and consequently has been applied largely to the impact of child neglect on child mental health.

This health model perceives stressful or life threatening encounters as person-environment transactions (i.e. interaction between person and environment). This interaction is also strengthened by the impact of the external stressor. This is usually triggered first by the person undergoing the stress appraisal of the stressor and secondly by the available social and environmental resources for use to such person (Antonovsky and Kats, 1967; Cohen, 1984; Lazarus and Cohen, 1977).

By applying this health model of stress to the present paper, it would be expected that this model provides a theoretical basis for understanding how the perception of children towards stressful events around them can predispose them towards a good mental health or deteriorating mental health. For example, a child faced with neglect from his caregiver may not have his mental health affected if he perceives himself has having the right resources for survival despite the neglect he experiences from his caregiver. On the other hand, a child who is neglected by his caregiver and perceives himself as lacking the resources to cope with this neglect is very likely to have his mental health affected. Consequently a very important implication of this theory is that through mind restructuring and the right resources available, neglected children can have their mental health preserved.

6. Review of Empirical Studies

Childhood Neglect and Child Mental Health: Causes and Impacts

Wilkinson and Bowyer (2017) carried out a study to investigate the impact of child neglect on children's mental health. With a sample size of 214 children and 32 caregivers, data were collected using survey design and analyzed. The results of the analysis showed that, some of the major causes of child neglect were socio-economic status of caregiver, educational level of caregiver, personality of caregiver and caregivers' experience of child neglect. Further findings showed that child neglect had impacts on the mental health of children, such as low self-worth, depression, anxiety

disorders and suicidal risks. In addition, it was reportedly observed that there was a significant sex difference in the child mental health of neglected children, with male children reporting significantly higher mental health than their female counterparts.

Consequently to these findings, the researchers; Wilkinson and Bowyer (2017) concluded that child neglect is very harmful to the physical and mental wellbeing of children. Hence, interventions that buffer children against child neglect should be supported and strengthened. Furthermore, recommendations are that further studies will be required to extend knowledge on the impacts of child neglect on the mental health of children.

Herrenkohl, Wong, and Russo (2018) in a quest to understand the impact of neglect and abuse on child's development, carried out a study to investigate the impact of child neglect and abuse on the developmental process of children. With a sample size of 34 children who were selected from child neglect psycho-education programs, data were collected and analyzed. The results showed that, child neglect contributed to the development of developmental disorders, as well as bred inferiority complex and a lack of sense of purpose in the minds of neglected children. Consequently to these findings, Herrenkohl, Wong, and Russo (2018) suggested that the need for developmental delay assessment among neglected children is thus reflected by the findings from this study, hence, further studies will be required to bridge the knowledge gap on the impact of child neglect on the physical and mental health of children in other cultures.

Similarly, Kim and Dafu (2015) in China embarked on a study to investigate the influence of child neglect and abuse on the mental health of children. With a sample size 103 neglected children and their caregivers data were collected using questionnaires and analyzed. The results of the analysis showed that the major causes of child neglect were unplanned pregnancy among caregivers, socio-economic status, awareness of child's right, weak enforcement of child right act, religious and traditional beliefs. Further findings showed that, child neglect impact the mental health of children adversely, thus causing these children to be suicidal, depressed, anxious, and develop personality problems. It was also reportedly observed that neglected children reported poor academic grades and lower intelligence quotient (IQ). In this light, the researchers; Kim and Dafu (2015) suggested that adequate policies should be put in place that will mitigate against the socio-cultural triggers of child neglect, and adequate coping skills should be taught to children who are victims of child neglect.

In Nigeria, Itulua-Abumere (2017) investigated the consequences of child abuse in Nigeria: a case study of children in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria. Data were collected from a sample of 147 neglected children who were found on the streets of Niger-Delta. The questionnaires and interview design used in collecting data were analysed and the results showed that the most prevalent form of child abuse in the Niger-Delta was child neglect, and the consequences of this on the mental health of these children were that child neglect bred criminal tendencies, lack of

empathy, feelings of isolation and difficult in forming and sustaining a health social relationship with peers among neglected children research participants. Consequently, the researcher concluded that child neglect was common in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria, with impacts of adverse consequences on victims. However, it was not clear what impact socio-demographic information of neglected children had on their mental health, and the pattern of child neglect in other regions of Nigeria, hence further investigations may consider contributing these to knowledge.

Lastly, Obamina, Bamgboye and Nwadishi (2018) carried out a study in Southwest Nigeria to examine the impacts of child neglect on the mental functioning of children. With a sample size of 101 neglected children who were selected using a simple random sampling method data were collected and analysed. The results showed that child neglect showed no significant association with the mental health of children. However, further findings showed that the strength of parent-child relationship and style of parenting contributed to mental health among children. With respect to these, the researchers; Obamina, Bamgboye and Nwadishi (2018) recommended that the strength of parent-child relationship is pertinent to children's mental functioning, hence there is a knowledge gap on the other parental variables that predicts child mental wellness, in this light further studies may consider an extension in this area.

7. Discussion and Implications for Child Psychologists

From the systematic review presented in this paper, there are observations that the prevalence of child neglect is relatively high globally and most people aware of this incidence are people close to the victim such as the victim's neighbor or peer group according to the empirical studies reviewed from different cultures across the world. Thus, there is an implication for child psychologists to formulate more informant approaches for identifying cases of child neglect. Furthermore, most studies reported harmful effects of child neglect on the mental functioning of children. Hence it is becomes crucial for child psychologists to include regular mental health screening in the health routine of neglected child. Also, most of the causes of child neglect were psychosocial factors as found in literature. Consequently, child psychologists through psycho-education and other forms of psychosocial interventions can limit the psychosocial causes of child neglect.

Furthermore, due to observations from literature that neglected children with adequate coping skills did not perceive their neglect as a stressor and as such were able to cope adequately with their neglect, hence there is an implication for child psychologists to maximize the benefits of mind restructuring therapies and coping skills training in equipping neglected children with the basic resources needed to overcome their plight of neglect and preserve their mental health. Lastly, it is also important for child psychologists through family and couple therapy to strengthen the parent-child relationship and encourage parents/caregivers to practice an appropriate parenting style in order to close rooms for child neglect, on the long run this will help sustain the mental health of their child/children.

8. Limitation of Paper

The methodology of this paper was based on a secondary data collection method, hence this paper may be limited to the benefits of this type of data collection method. Nonetheless, the findings from this study are empirical and expected to yield positive therapeutic outcomes when applied to the practice of child psychology.

9. Recommendations and Conclusion

On the bases of the aforementioned discussion, the following are the recommendations from this paper:

- 1) Firstly, it is recommended that child psychologists through psycho-education and other forms of health promotion programs are required to periodically enlighten the general public on the adverse effect of child neglect on child's mental health.
- 2) Secondly, it is recommended that appropriate measures that run twenty-four (24) hourly should be put in place by psychologists and governments where people can report observations of child neglect.
- 3) Thirdly, because of the harmful effects of child neglect on the mental health of children, it is recommended that victims of child neglect should be periodically screened for mental dysfunction as part of their health routine.
- 4) Fourthly, it is recommended that children who are being neglected should be encouraged to speak up about this neglect without fear, and perpetrators of this should be adequately punished.
- 5) Lastly, further studies will be required to extend this study on specific child population, for example studying the effect of child neglect on the mental health of orphan children.

In conclusion, child neglect which is the deliberate deprivation of a child from his or her basic needs by the caregiver/parent is very harmful to the mental functioning of children. Consequently, greater efforts are required to mitigate against this ugly menace of child neglect in order to preserve the mental health of children.

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