

Impact of Parental Substance Abuse on Child Welfare in Nigeria

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Abstract

Parental substance abuse significantly affects child welfare, impacting children's physical health, emotional stability, and developmental progress. This study examined the intricate relationship between parental substance use and child outcomes through Family Systems Theory. The qualitative study collected data from academic journals, text books, internets and others. The study discovered that the primary effects of parental substance abuse on children include health hazards, psychological distress, and hindered social and educational development. Indirectly, substance abuse can destabilise the family unit, strain finances, and compromise housing, often triggering child protection measures. Effective responses require early detection, treatment for parents, and strong support services for children. This study highlights the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to lessen the harmful impacts of parental substance abuse on children. The study recommended that: parents should be careful with the use of drugs and other related substances in the presence of their children because it directly or indirectly affects children's behaviour. It also recommended that social work interventions and support strategies should be provided by the government to combat the impact of parental substance abuse on child welfare

Keywords: Parental, Substance Abuse, Child, Welfare, Interventions Strategies

Introduction

The global issue of substance abuse presents a notable challenge, with its occurrence varying across different regions. In Nigeria, substance abuse is on a high increase, especially among groups like university and secondary school students. Akintayo (2021) explored Nigeria's diverse cultural landscape and childcare practices, shedding light on how these cultural aspects influence the nation's child welfare systems. This reality points to the need for a deep understanding of cultural factors that affect the impact of parental substance abuse on child welfare in Nigeria.

Afees *et al* (2022) performed a cross-sectional study among university students in southwestern Nigeria to assess the prevalence and awareness of drug and substance abuse. Their research highlights the urgent need to tackle these issues among the youth. Similarly, Idowu *et al* (2018) investigated substance abuse among secondary school students in an urban area of Oyo State, South West Nigeria, and emphasised the necessity of early intervention to prevent long-term adverse effects on child welfare.

Additionally, Musa *et al* (2021) conducted research at a secondary school health institution in Kano, Nigeria, uncovering high rates of alcohol, cannabis, and inhalant use among students. This underscores the immediate need for policy actions and interventions to reduce substance abuse among Nigerian children. Understanding the distribution and trends of substance abuse is crucial for devising effective strategies to lessen its impact on child welfare. Popoola and Adeoti (2016)

used a counting method to evaluate child welfare deprivation in rural Nigeria, stressing the importance of focusing on the child as the central element in assessing child welfare issues. This method offers a detailed view of child welfare deprivation, which is essential for addressing the various challenges faced by Nigerian children.

In Nigeria, substance abuse poses a threat not only to parent's health but also to children welfare systems. The intricate relationship between parental substance misuse and child welfare necessitates a comprehensive approach that takes into account cultural, social, and economic dimensions. By examining the prevalence of substance misuse among secondary school students, researchers and policymakers can gain a better understanding of the specific problems faced by Nigerian children. Akintayo (2021) highlights the impact of Nigeria's multicultural context on childcare practices, suggesting that efforts to enhance child welfare must be culturally aware and contextually relevant.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are;

- i. To examine the direct and indirect effects of parental substance abuse on child welfare.
- ii. To assess social work interventions and support strategies to combat the impact of parental substance abuse on child welfare.

Methodology

This qualitative study utilised academic databases with specific search terms related to "parental substance abuse," "child welfare," and related topics. It focused on peer-reviewed studies and theoretical frameworks exploring how parental substance abuse affects children's physical health, emotional well-being, social development, and educational achievements

Literature Review

The abuse of substances like alcohol, drugs, and other dangerous items is a major global health problem (Afees *et al*, 2022). In the UK, many young people are misusing these substances, leading to serious health problems (Onigbogi *et al*, 2023). The patterns of behaviour and psychology in substance misuse are intricate, involving the interaction of individual actions, mental health issues, and substance use (Idowu *et al*, 2018). Understanding the extent and awareness of substance misuse is crucial to addressing it effectively, particularly among vulnerable groups such as students in educational institutions (Onigbogi *et al*, 2023; Sarkingobir & Dikko, 2020).

In Nigeria, alcohol is frequently abused and often considered a mark of maturity among the youth (Idowu *et al*, 2018). This societal acceptance leads to its widespread misuse, especially among secondary and higher education students (Alex-Hart *et al*, 2014). The misuse of cannabis is also significant among Nigerian students, showcasing the varied spectrum of substance misuse in the country (Afees *et al*, 2022). Parental substance abuse severely affects child welfare, leading to neglect, abuse, and other negative experiences that hinder children's development (Onigbogi *et al*, 2023). Supporting families and protecting children from the effects of parental substance misuse is essential (Onigbogi *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, social factors, especially peer pressure, increase

substance use among adolescents, highlighting the need for specific policy measures to tackle these issues in urban areas (Sarkingobir & Dikko, 2020; Idowu *et al.*, 2018).

Prevalence and Demographics

The impact of parental substance abuse on children's welfare is a growing concern in Nigeria. An increasing number of school students are using substances (Onigbogi *et al.*, 2023), highlighting the negative effects on children with addicted parents. Studies in Nigeria show a high prevalence of substance use among secondary school students in Lagos, signalling a pressing need for solutions (Onigbogi *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, research from southwestern universities reveals that many undergraduates are aware of and partake in substance use, underlining the necessity for targeted interventions (Afees *et al.*, 2022).

In Nigeria, understanding the influence of parental substance use on child welfare involves considering factors such as age and economic status. These elements shape the degree of substance use among parents and subsequently affect their children's well-being. Evidence shows that substance use cuts across all age groups and economic classes, making it a widespread problem in Nigeria (Onigbogi *et al.*, 2023; Afees *et al.*, 2022). Knowing the demographics of parents involved in substance use is vital for creating effective interventions that support both parents and their children.

Parental substance abuse in Nigeria poses major challenges for child welfare, affecting the safety and well-being of many young individuals. Children from families dealing with substance misuse are particularly vulnerable and may need specialised care to meet their unique needs (Choi, 2019). The significant number of children in out-of-home care due to parental substance misuse points to the urgent need for comprehensive strategies that focus on their well-being (Choi, 2019). Tackling the root causes of substance dependency and offering appropriate treatment and support can significantly strengthen the efforts of Nigeria's child welfare systems in protecting and aiding children impacted by this widespread issue.

Theoretical Frameworks and Models: Family Systems Theory

Family System Theory was propounded by Psychiatrist Murray Bowen (1959) and it posits that families operate as interconnected entities where each individual's actions and behaviours impact others. This perspective is particularly useful in understanding how substance abuse disrupts familial balance (Shaari & Kasim, 2023). Substance abuse profoundly changes family dynamics, altering roles and responsibilities and creating a turbulent environment that results in stress and instability (Torres *et al.*, 2015). For example, a parent struggling with substance misuse may become emotionally unavailable, leading to long-term consequences for a child's emotional well-being and development (Lee *et al.*, 2023; Coffman & Swank, 2020).

The erratic behaviour linked to addiction can cause conflicts and domestic violence, further weakening relationships (Lee *et al.*, 2023). Family Systems Theory also discusses triangulation, where addiction becomes the central issue in family conflicts, disrupting normal parent-child boundaries and communication (Shaari & Kasim, 2023; Torres *et al.*, 2015). Substance abuse introduces secrecy and denial, fostering mistrust and hindering collective efforts to seek help (Lee *et al.*, 2023). The theory highlights the necessity of family-wide interventions, as the actions of one

member, such as a parent with a substance use disorder, impact the entire family unit (Shaari & Kasim, 2023). It aids in comprehending the extensive effects of substance misuse on family dynamics and informs the creation of supportive recovery interventions (Torres *et al*, 2015).

Basic Assumptions of System Theory

1. **Triangles:** a relationship system comprised of three people. Triangles usually have one side in conflict and two sides in harmony, contributing to the development of clinical problems.
2. **Differentiation of Self:** having a sense of one's individuality separate from the family unit. Highly differentiated people are more likely to pursue goals independently while those with a less developed sense of self may seek validation from other people and experience co-dependency.
3. **Nuclear Family Emotional Process:** how the family operates in emotional interactions. Bowen believed the nuclear family experienced issues in four main areas: marital conflict (or intimate partner conflict), dysfunction in a spouse or partner, emotional distance, and impairment of one or more children, leading to arguments, criticism, under-performance, over-performance, and/or distancing behavior.
4. **Family Projection Process:** the transmission of the parents' anxiety, emotional concerns, and/or relationship problems onto the child, who may develop emotional issues as a result. Rather than address their own problems, parents try to fix perceived problems in their children that remind them of their own. They treat their children as if something is wrong with them. This shapes their development such that the children grow to embody their parents' fears and perceptions.
5. **Multigenerational Transmission Process:** Bowen believed the roots of the most serious human problems are generations deep. The multigenerational transmission process determines the levels of "self" people develop. It also impacts the way they interact with others, affecting the selection of a spouse or intimate partner. People choose partners with similar levels of differentiation. Small differences in levels of differentiation between parents and offspring lead to significant ranges of differentiation among individual family members over generations.
6. **Emotional Cutoff:** distancing from the family or cutting off all contact to reduce stress or avoid conflict without resolving the issues at hand. In so doing, distancing family members may place too much importance on present and future relationships, causing undo strain and stress.
7. **Sibling Position:** the tendency of the oldest, middle, and youngest children to assume specific roles within the family relationship system. This is typically due to differences in parental expectations and parental discipline. For example, an executive who's an oldest child may work well with an assistant who's a youngest child. Likewise, people whose sibling rank positions are complementary may be less likely to divorce than if their positions are at odds.

8. **Societal Emotional Process:** Bowen treated parents in the criminal justice system and saw how external influences could affect the family system. Thus, this principle of family systems theory suggests that social and cultural forces can influence family relationships. As people experience greater anxiety during periods of societal regression, ramifications occur within the emotional systems of family units.

Some Criticisms Against Family System Theory

Bowen family therapy has been criticized for its lack of research examining its impact on counseling on Child welfare. Additionally, there are criticisms regarding the cultural relevance of the treatment, particularly in working with couples and families in Nigeria. Some key criticisms of Bowen's theory include the limited literature available to guide mental health practitioners in working with parents of substance abuse, as well as the expectation that cultural differences may limit the relevance of the therapy. Another criticism is the lack of guidance for mental health practitioners working with transgender minors and their families, particularly in navigating the transition process and addressing the distress experienced by both the youth and their parents.

In spite of the criticisms against this family system theory, this study still finds it relevant taking into consideration the fact that the family as a biological entity that is wholistically connected. The wholistic connection entails that if one part of the family is suffering or is in pains, all the other parts of the family will be equally affected. This further implies that if parents being role models in their families are involved in practices or behaviours that are morally and medically detrimental and unacceptable, children who are integral parts of those families can be equally affected negatively. Take for instance, in Nigeria where some parents who send their children to buy alcohol or *Indian hemp (sp)* for them; it is likely that those children will end up taking the alcohol and so on. Substance abuse by parents has another disadvantage of denying children access to money as in most instances, their parents use it in purchasing drugs or alcohol.

Direct Impacts on Child Welfare: Physical Health

The impact of parental substance abuse on child welfare, particularly physical health, is significant. Akin *et al* (2017) found that children placed in foster care due to their parents' substance abuse face health issues arising from both exposure to harmful substances and neglect, leading to unmet medical needs and worsening health conditions. Hlahla and Mothiba (2022) highlight that parents of children who abuse substances also experience health issues due to the stress of caregiving, which can increase their stress levels and negatively affect their ability to care for their children and manage their behaviour. Stella (2024) points out that heavy use of alcohol or drugs impairs parental judgment, leading to neglect and abuse, which undermines children's basic needs and overall well-being. Calhoun *et al* (2015) address strategies to reduce the negative effects of parental substance abuse on children, focusing on improving their substance use, mental health, and behavioural outcomes. Furthermore, Lewis *et al* (2014) noted that continuous substance abuse within families results in ongoing health problems for children, as parents may prioritise their addiction over their children's health needs.

Emotional and Psychological Well-being

The emotional and psychological health of children in the child welfare system is significantly affected by their parents' substance abuse, leading to complex and costly challenges. Kim *et al* (2021) highlight that when parents' substance issues are not addressed, their children often experience mental health and addiction problems, resulting in prolonged periods in foster care and repeated involvement with the system. Fay-Ramirez and Eggins (2019) emphasise that substance abuse undermines the stability needed for reuniting children with their parents, leading to emotional struggles and self-esteem issues due to inconsistent home environments.

Davidson *et al* (2020) advocate for innovative approaches to address parental substance abuse to prevent repeated system involvement and mitigate its adverse effects. Lee *et al* (2023) explore the complex relationships between parental substance use and various forms of child abuse, noting that while substance abuse is associated with different types of maltreatment, it reduces the likelihood of sexual abuse, thereby highlighting the need for targeted interventions. Kepple (2018) recommends a comprehensive review of parental substance use patterns to develop tailored interventions that address the spectrum of abuse and neglect risks encountered by children.

Social and Behavioral Development

Substance abuse issues among parents have a profound effect on their children's well-being, influencing their social behaviour and mental health. Kim *et al* (2021) reveal that when parents' substance issues go untreated, it leads to mental health difficulties in children and adds pressure on the child protection system. This often results in children being removed from their homes and placed in care systems, where they may endure long-term placements and repeated reentries following reunification. Lloyd (2018) highlights that maternal substance abuse is a common reason for children being in care, illustrating the extensive impact on child welfare and the challenges it poses for family reunification. Choi (2019) underscores the necessity of incorporating substance treatment into child protection services to improve family stability and reduce ongoing system involvement. Fay-Ramirez and Eggins (2019) note that parental substance abuse disrupts the establishment of stable environments needed for effective family reunification. Davidson *et al* (2020) recommend adopting innovative intervention strategies to better address these issues within the child protection system, aiming to decrease repeated system entries and enhance outcomes for affected families.

Educational Outcomes

The effects of parental substance abuse on children are profound, particularly regarding their school performance. Children whose parents struggle with addiction frequently face challenges in learning and cognitive development (Dauber *et al*, 2012; Burrus *et al*, 2011). Effectively addressing substance abuse can positively impact these children's lives by reducing their time in foster care and improving the chances of family reunification (Bruns *et al*, 2012). Unfortunately, the lack of specific support within child welfare services often exacerbates these issues (Dauber *et al*, 2012). Integrating substance abuse treatment with child welfare services is beneficial. Approaches such as drug courts and family treatment programmes have proven effective in supporting families and enhancing their overall well-being (Bruns *et al*, 2012; Marsh *et al*, 2011). Additionally, these programmes offer financial savings by reducing foster care costs, highlighting

the need for a comprehensive support system to improve child welfare and address the educational and developmental challenges faced by affected children (Burrus *et al*, 2011).

Indirect Impacts on Child Welfare: Family Dynamics and Parenting Practices

In Nigeria, when parents struggle with substance abuse, it significantly impacts their children's well-being by altering family interactions and parenting methods (Weir *et al*, 2020). Children with substance-abusing parents often face neglect, mental health issues, and an increased likelihood of future substance use. These difficulties are exacerbated by unstable family environments and inconsistent parenting. The challenges extend to sibling relationships and overall family cohesion, influenced by both genetic and environmental factors (Kendler *et al*, 2019). Teenagers in Nigeria might also encounter peer pressure, mental health issues, and poverty, which can shape their views on substance use (Boateng & Agbleze, 2019). The lack of sufficient healthcare and social services in Nigeria further complicates the ability of parents with substance problems to maintain a stable home environment (Boateng & Agbleze, 2019). Additionally, poverty in neighbourhoods can heighten the risk of substance abuse, perpetuating a cycle of risk in poorer communities (Boateng & Agbleze, 2019).

Economic and Environmental Factors

In Nigeria, the welfare of children is significantly affected by parental substance abuse due to its economic and environmental consequences. Financial difficulties often lead to the neglect of essential needs, including food, clothing, and education (Neger & Prinz, 2015). These financial challenges can exacerbate family problems and increase the likelihood of child neglect or abuse (Freisthler *et al*, 2021). Additionally, substance abuse can cause instability in housing and unsafe living conditions, further endangering children's health and development (Freisthler *et al*, 2021). Addressing these issues involves systemic measures such as Family Treatment Drug Courts and Family Drug Courts, which combine legal and social support to tackle substance abuse and its effects on child welfare (Fay-Ramirez & Eggins, 2019; Lloyd, 2015). These courts aim to break the cycle of drug abuse and enhance family stability by recognising the connection between substance abuse and child maltreatment (Freisthler *et al*, 2021). To be effective, interventions must also improve parenting skills to support long-term recovery and reduce the risk of relapse (Neger & Prinz, 2015).

Interaction with Child Welfare Systems

In Nigeria, the strain on the child welfare system due to parental substance abuse is evident through increased interactions with child protection services, largely attributed to higher rates of child neglect or abuse, particularly when the abuser is a biological parent (Freisthler *et al*, 2021). This pressure impacts foster care and adoption processes, influencing decisions related to reunification and long-term placements (Akin *et al*, 2015). Parental use of illegal drugs, as opposed to alcohol, plays a significant role in child welfare interventions (Akin *et al*, 2015). Tailored programmes, such as those focusing on post-reunification training, are vital for addressing drug abuse and mitigating its adverse effects on children, as well as reducing re-entry into foster care (Akin *et al*, 2017). Children from such environments face numerous health, social, and behavioural difficulties, underscoring the need for robust support within Nigeria's child welfare framework (Smith *et al*, 2016). Additionally, reports highlight the profound impact of parental substance and mental health

issues on child welfare outcomes (Vis *et al*, 2022). An effective approach necessitates early detection, prevention, and intervention to support families and promote child stability (Akin *et al*, 2015).

Intervention and Support Strategies: Early Identification and Prevention

Assessing how parental drug abuse affects child welfare underscores the importance of early detection and intervention for protecting children (Banda, 2024). Proper screening methods can identify substance abuse problems early on, which allows for timely and specific interventions, especially for groups like street children in Malawi who encounter unique challenges not found in typical environments. Enhancing community awareness and public education is vital for spotting and preventing substance abuse, thereby equipping communities to offer better support to vulnerable families (Prinz, 2015). Effective management of substance abuse demands approaches that are sensitive to cultural and contextual factors, involving cooperation among child welfare services, mental health services, and the legal system to deliver comprehensive assistance (Freisthler *et al*, 2021). Parents play a critical role in addressing their children's drug issues, and understanding their methods is key to creating effective support programmes (Hlahla & Mothiba, 2022). Tailored interventions are essential as they address the specific circumstances and challenges each family faces (Kepple, 2018).

Treatment and Rehabilitation for Parents

Parents struggling with substance abuse face significant challenges within the child welfare system, which often results in their repeated involvement even after their parental rights have been previously revoked (Davidson *et al*, 2020). Addressing this issue requires innovative approaches to managing substance abuse among parents and preventing families from re-entering the system (Davidson *et al*, 2020). The Enhancing Permanency in Children and Families (EPIC) programme exemplifies this approach by fostering collaboration between agencies and courts to support families dealing with addiction, with the goal of increasing stability and permanency for affected children and families (Freisthler *et al*, 2021).

Methods centred on family treatment, such as family treatment drug courts, have proven effective in improving both legal and psychosocial outcomes by offering tailored support for families (Fay-Ramirez & Eggins, 2019). Evidence indicates that parental substance abuse increases the risk of child maltreatment, further exacerbated by factors such as mental health issues, unstable housing, financial difficulties, and a history of abuse (Lee *et al*, 2023). Tackling these challenges necessitates a comprehensive strategy that integrates programmes like EPIC, family treatment drug courts, and interventions tailored to specific substance abuse patterns to mitigate their impact on families and enhance child welfare outcomes (Kepple, 2018).

Support Services for Children

The negative effects of parental substance abuse on children's health and development are profound, increasing their vulnerability to mistreatment, emotional turmoil, psychosomatic issues, and the likelihood of developing substance abuse problems themselves (Weir *et al.*, 2020). In Nigeria, where substance abuse issues are escalating, programmes such as the Supporting Kids and Their Environment (SKATE) initiative strive to improve outcomes by embedding child-

centered interventions within the treatment of parental substance abuse (Lewis *et al.*, 2014). Implementing educational and enrichment activities is vital for counteracting these effects, providing children with opportunities for growth even in difficult home settings (Usher, 2021). Counseling services like Theraplay are also essential for offering emotional support and building resilience (Weir *et al.*, 2020). To tackle the widespread issue of cannabis abuse in Nigeria, it is necessary to implement targeted interventions that will establish effective treatment and support systems, safeguarding children and disrupting the cycle of substance abuse (Jombo *et al.*, 2020).

Policy and Legislative Frameworks

Strategies for intervention and support are crucial for addressing the impact of parents' substance abuse on children's welfare. Prinz (2015) emphasises the importance of a comprehensive approach to family and parenting intervention. He highlights how normalising the pursuit of help, empowering parents to solve child-related problems, connecting them with community services, and promoting positive parenting principles are essential. This strategy not only addresses immediate issues but also fosters long-term benefits for families dealing with substance abuse. Early intervention is critical in supporting children of parents who abuse substances and in breaking the cycle of addiction within families (2021). Acting early can provide crucial support to children at risk due to their parents' substance issues, thus reducing the potential long-term harm to their development and well-being.

Freisthler *et al* (2021) discuss the EPIC (Enhancing Permanency in Children and Families) intervention, which focuses on substance misuse among parents in the child welfare system. This intervention stresses the need for collaboration between child welfare services, mental health providers, and juvenile courts to offer comprehensive support to families grappling with addiction. Such collaborative efforts are vital in addressing the complex needs of these families and ensuring the children's welfare.

Kepple (2018) explores the nuanced connection between parents' substance use and the risks it poses to children. The study underscores the necessity for tailored approaches in screening, assessing, and preventing issues to cater to the diverse needs of parents who use substances. By recognising the varying levels of risk associated with different substance use behaviours, child welfare systems can implement more effective strategies that provide targeted support where it is most needed.

Calhoun *et al* (2015) highlight the outcomes for children affected by their parents' substance abuse, emphasising the importance of interventions that address both parenting and substance issues. Their review of randomised controlled trials demonstrates the success of programmes focusing on parenting behaviours and substance use in improving family functioning and the overall welfare of children. This holistic approach recognises how parenting behaviours and substance use are intertwined in their impact on child welfare, advocating for comprehensive interventions to tackle these interconnected challenges.

Social Work Interventions and Support Strategies to Combat the Impact of Parental Substance Abuse on Child Welfare

- i. Parents seem to benefit most when the parenting intervention begins with fundamental psychological processes such as developing emotional regulation mechanisms, before teaching specific parenting techniques such as effective discipline strategies and avoidance of substance abuse.
- ii. Interventions might be more successful when family members and significant others are involved in the campaign against the use of substance and drug abuse. Families might help parents avoid the regression associated with the abrupt termination of services. It is recognized that some individuals are markedly isolated, which might necessitate yoking these parents with other peer partners. Additionally, cultural considerations should be taken into account when choosing or designing interventions for this diverse population involved in substance abuse.
- iii. Interventions need planned strategies for addressing these problems such as providing courtesy rides, meals, child care, and a safe, supportive, and non-judgmental environment.

Parents who are involved with struggling with substance abuse face conflicting demands. Child welfare agencies are financially and politically pressured to find permanent placements for children

Conclusion

When parents struggle with substance abuse, it significantly impacts their children's lives in various ways, including physical health, emotional well-being, social behaviour, and educational success. Theories such as Family Systems Theory, Attachment Theory, and Ecological Systems Theory help explain how a parent's drug or alcohol abuse influences a child's development. Children may suffer directly from health problems, mental stress, and behavioural issues, and indirectly from family instability, financial difficulties, and poor living conditions, often leading to interventions by child welfare services. To address these problems effectively, it is crucial to detect issues early, provide thorough treatment for parents, and offer robust support systems for children. However, many unknowns still exist about the full extent of these impacts, and there are gaps in creating effective policies. Future research should explore these less understood areas and focus on developing comprehensive and lasting solutions to support children in homes affected by substance abuse.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made;

- i. Parents should be careful with the use of drugs and other related substances in the presence of their children because it, directly and indirectly, affects children's behaviour
- ii. Social Work interventions and support strategies should be provided by the government to combat the impact of parental substance abuse on child welfare.

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