Volume 2 Issue 2

International Journal of Social Work and Development Studies (IJSDS)

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
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Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

International Journal of Social Work and Development Studies (IJSDS)

Vol 2 Issue 2

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Vol. 3. Issue 1.
ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

THE IMPACT OF CHILD ABUSE ON THE PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEENAGERS IN CALABAR METROPOLIS, CROSS RIVER STATE, NIGERIA

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ISSN: 3115-6940
EISSN: 3115-6932

ABSTRACT

Child abuse remains a major social and public health concern with significant implications for the psychosocial development of adolescents. This qualitative study examined the impact of child abuse on the psychosocial development of teenagers in Calabar Metropolis, Cross River State, Nigeria, with particular focus on identity formation, independence, and peer relationships. A total of 26 adolescents were purposively selected for the study based on their experiences and knowledge related to child abuse. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes in participants' experiences. The findings revealed that experiences of child abuse negatively affected adolescents' identity formation, resulting in low self-esteem, feelings of insecurity, emotional instability, and difficulties in developing a positive sense of self. The study also found that abuse hindered the development of independence, as many participants reported fear of decision-making, reduced self-confidence, and excessive dependence on others for guidance and validation. Furthermore, child abuse adversely influenced peer relationships, with participants reporting trust issues, social withdrawal, difficulties in forming meaningful friendships, and challenges in social interaction. However, supportive peer networks and positive social environments were identified as important protective factors that enhanced coping, resilience, and psychosocial adjustment among affected adolescents. The study concludes that child abuse poses significant challenges to key aspects of adolescent psychosocial development, particularly identity formation, independence, and peer relationships. It recommends the provision of early psychosocial interventions, school-based counselling services, strengthened child protection mechanisms, and supportive family and community environments to promote healthy psychosocial development among teenagers in Calabar Metropolis.

Keywords: Child abuse, psychosocial development, adolescents, identity formation, independence, peer relationships.

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ISSN: 3115-6940
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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Child abuse remains a major social and public health concern across the world, affecting millions of children and adolescents irrespective of culture, race, or socioeconomic background. It encompasses all forms of physical, emotional, and sexual maltreatment, as well as neglect, that result in actual or potential harm to a child's health, development, dignity, or survival (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). Child abuse constitutes a violation of children's rights and poses significant risks to their physical, emotional, social, and psychological wellbeing (Kefale et al., 2024). Although child abuse can occur at any stage of development, its effects are particularly profound during adolescence, a period characterised by rapid psychological, emotional, and social changes (Strathearn et al., 2020).

Adolescence is a critical stage of human development during which young people strive to establish a clear sense of identity, develop independence, and build meaningful relationships with peers. These developmental tasks are essential for healthy psychosocial functioning and successful transition into adulthood (Branje et al., 2021). Psychosocial development refers to the interaction between psychological processes and social experiences that shape an individual's personality, behaviour, emotional wellbeing, and social competence (Teague et al., 2023). According to Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory, adolescence is marked by the stage of identity versus role confusion, during which individuals seek to understand who they are and how they fit into society (Erikson, 1968). Successful navigation of this stage results in a strong sense of self, whereas unresolved challenges may lead to confusion, insecurity, and difficulties in social adjustment.

Experiences of child abuse can significantly disrupt the normal course of psychosocial development. Children who are exposed to abusive environments often experience fear, insecurity, rejection, and emotional distress, which may persist into adolescence (Widom et al., 2015). Such experiences can undermine their confidence, distort their self-perception, and affect their ability to interact positively with others. Research has consistently shown that abused adolescents are more likely to experience psychological problems such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, emotional instability, and behavioural difficulties (Melamed et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2023). These challenges may negatively influence their ability to achieve important developmental milestones associated with adolescence.

One of the key areas affected by child abuse is identity formation. Identity formation involves the development of a stable understanding of oneself, including personal values, beliefs, goals, and social roles (Ragelienė, 2016). Adolescents who experience abuse may struggle with feelings of worthlessness, self-doubt, and confusion about their personal identity. Studies have shown that exposure to abuse is associated with poor self-concept, reduced self-esteem, and difficulties in emotional regulation among adolescents (Robert & Ghazali, 2025; Cavins, Lee & Kim, 2025). As a result, affected teenagers may find it difficult to develop a positive self-concept and maintain emotional stability.

Child abuse may also affect adolescents' ability to develop independence. Healthy independence enables young people to make decisions, take responsibility for their actions, and develop confidence in their abilities (Ruiz & Yabut, 2024). However, abusive experiences may create feelings of helplessness, fear, and dependence, limiting adolescents' capacity to function autonomously (Petersen et al., 2014). Research indicates that adolescents who experience adverse childhood experiences often demonstrate lower self-confidence and greater difficulty in making independent decisions (Vrolijk et al., 2020; Beyers, Soenens, & Vansteenkiste, 2024).

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Similarly, peer relationships play a vital role in adolescent psychosocial development. Positive peer interactions provide emotional support, social acceptance, and opportunities for learning interpersonal skills (Carapeto et al., 2025). However, adolescents who have experienced abuse may encounter difficulties in establishing and maintaining healthy friendships. Feelings of mistrust, fear of rejection, social withdrawal, and poor communication skills often hinder their ability to build meaningful social relationships (Afifi et al., 2016). Studies have demonstrated that supportive peer relationships contribute significantly to emotional wellbeing, resilience, and positive psychosocial adjustment among adolescents (Tadonio et al., 2025).

Despite growing awareness of the harmful consequences of child abuse, many cases remain underreported, particularly in developing countries where cultural beliefs, stigma, and limited access to support services discourage disclosure (Tsangue et al., 2022). In Nigeria, child abuse continues to be a significant social problem affecting the wellbeing of many children and adolescents. While previous studies have examined the psychological and behavioural consequences of abuse, much of the existing literature has focused on quantitative assessments of mental health outcomes. Limited qualitative research has explored how adolescents themselves perceive the influence of child abuse on their psychosocial development, particularly regarding identity formation, independence, and peer relationships (Muldoon et al., 2024; Branje et al., 2021). This gap in knowledge underscores the need for context-specific studies that capture the lived experiences of affected adolescents. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the influence of child abuse on the psychosocial development of teenagers in Calabar Metropolis, Cross River State, Nigeria, with particular emphasis on identity formation, independence, and peer relationships.

1.1. Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study is to examine the impact of child abuse on the psychosocial development of teenagers in Calabar Metropolis. Specific objectives include:

1. To examine the impact of child abuse on identity formation among teenagers in Calabar Metropolis.
2. To investigate the impact of child abuse on independence among teenagers in Calabar Metropolis.
3. To assess the impact of child abuse on peer relationships among teenagers in Calabar Metropolis.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in two complementary theories that explain how child abuse may impact the psychosocial development of teenagers. These theories are Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory and Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory. The theories provide a useful framework for understanding how experiences of child abuse may affect adolescents' identity formation, independence, and peer relationships, which are key dimensions of psychosocial development.

1. Psychosocial Development Theory

The Psychosocial Development Theory was developed by Erik Erikson (1968) to explain human development across the lifespan. According to the theory, individuals progress through eight psychosocial stages, each characterised by a developmental crisis that must be resolved for healthy psychological and social functioning. Successful resolution of each crisis contributes to positive personality development, whereas failure may result in psychological and social difficulties (Erikson, 1968).

The stage most relevant to this study is Identity versus Role Confusion, which occurs during adolescence. During this stage, young people strive to establish a

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coherent sense of self by exploring their beliefs, values, goals, and social roles (Erikson, 1968). Successful resolution of this developmental task leads to identity achievement and psychological wellbeing, whereas failure may result in role confusion, insecurity, and poor psychosocial adjustment (Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010; Meeus, 2011). Contemporary literature also emphasises that identity formation is one of the primary developmental tasks of adolescence and plays a critical role in emotional wellbeing and social functioning. Adolescents who fail to establish a stable identity often experience difficulties in social relationships and psychological adjustment.

The theory further suggests that environmental experiences significantly influence adolescent development. Child abuse represents a negative developmental experience that may interfere with identity formation by creating feelings of rejection, insecurity, fear, and low self-worth. Such experiences can undermine adolescents' confidence in themselves and their ability to function independently. Abuse may also affect their capacity to establish healthy social relationships, thereby disrupting psychosocial development. Consequently, adolescents who experience abuse may struggle with identity confusion, emotional instability, and social maladjustment.

This theory is relevant to the present study because it explains how child abuse may hinder the successful completion of the developmental tasks associated with adolescence, particularly identity formation, independence, and the development of healthy interpersonal relationships.

2. Social Learning Theory

The Social Learning Theory was proposed by Bandura (1977) and emphasises that human behaviour is learned through observation, imitation, and interaction with others in the social environment. According to Bandura, individuals acquire behaviours, attitudes, emotional reactions, and social skills by observing the actions of significant others such as parents, caregivers, teachers, and peers. The theory highlights observational learning as a major mechanism through which behaviour is learned and maintained. Bandura argued that learning occurs through four key processes: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. Individuals first observe a behaviour, retain it in memory, reproduce the behaviour, and then continue or discontinue it based on expected outcomes (Bandura, 1977). Through repeated observation, children and adolescents may internalise behaviours displayed within their social environment and subsequently adopt similar patterns of behaviour.

According to Social Learning Theory, children and adolescents acquire behaviours, attitudes, and emotional responses through observation, imitation, and interaction with significant others within their environment (Bandura, 1977, 1986). Through repeated exposure to abusive behaviours, adolescents may internalise aggression, fear, hostility, or maladaptive coping strategies, which may influence their relationships with peers and their psychosocial adjustment (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020).

In the context of child abuse, adolescents who grow up in abusive environments may be exposed to aggression, hostility, intimidation, fear, and dysfunctional interpersonal relationships. Through observational learning, they may internalise these negative behaviours and emotional responses. Consequently, abused adolescents may develop distrust, social withdrawal, poor communication skills, aggressive tendencies, or difficulties in forming positive peer relationships. Such learned behaviours can negatively affect their psychosocial development and social adjustment. Conversely, Bandura's theory suggests that supportive family relationships, positive peer interactions, and healthy social environments can promote adaptive behaviours and resilience among adolescents. Positive role models may help abused teenagers

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develop healthier coping mechanisms, stronger social skills, and more positive interpersonal relationships despite adverse childhood experiences.

The relevance of Social Learning Theory to this study lies in its explanation of how behaviours and social interactions are shaped by environmental experiences. The theory provides insight into how child abuse may influence adolescents' peer relationships, social behaviour, and independence through processes of observation and imitation.

3. Application of the Theories to the Study

The two theories complement each other in explaining the relationship between child abuse and psychosocial development among teenagers. Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory explains how child abuse may interfere with the successful resolution of the identity versus role confusion stage, thereby affecting adolescents' identity formation and independence. Social Learning Theory complements this perspective by explaining how abusive family environments may shape adolescents' behaviours, emotional responses, and peer interactions through observational learning. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive explanation of how child abuse may influence identity formation, independence, and peer relationships, which are critical dimensions of psychosocial development among teenagers.

4. Study Area

The study was conducted in **Calabar Metropolis,** which is the capital city of **Cross River State** in southern Nigeria. Calabar Metropolis consists mainly of two local government areas: **Calabar Municipal** and **Calabar South**. The metropolis is known for its rich cultural heritage, tourism activities and growing urban population.

Calabar Metropolis lies in the coastal region of southern Nigeria and serves as an important administrative, commercial and educational centre in the state. The city has several educational institutions, healthcare facilities and social service organisations that support the wellbeing of residents, including teenagers and young people. The population of the metropolis is made up of people from different ethnic backgrounds, with the Efik being one of the dominant ethnic groups. The city also hosts residents from various parts of Nigeria due to economic and educational opportunities.

The choice of Calabar Metropolis as the study area is based on its urban characteristics and diverse population, which provide an appropriate setting for examining social issues affecting young people, including child abuse and psychosocial development among teenagers. The presence of schools and community environments where teenagers interact also makes it suitable for investigating issues related to identity formation, independence and peer relationships.

Furthermore, rapid urbanisation and social changes in the metropolis have contributed to various social challenges affecting adolescents. These include family instability, economic pressures and exposure to different social influences, which may increase the vulnerability of teenagers to experiences such as abuse or neglect. Studying teenagers within this environment provides useful insights into how such experiences influence their psychosocial development.

Therefore, Calabar Metropolis provides an appropriate context for exploring the relationship between child abuse and the psychosocial development of teenagers, particularly in understanding how identity formation, independence and peer relationships shape their developmental outcomes.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Child abuse and psychosocial development of teenagers

Child abuse represents one of the most significant adverse childhood experiences affecting the psychological, emotional, and social development of young

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people. During adolescence, individuals undergo important developmental changes involving identity formation, emotional regulation, independence, and social relationships. However, exposure to physical, emotional, or sexual abuse during childhood can disrupt these developmental processes and increase vulnerability to psychological distress, behavioural difficulties, and poor social adjustment. Recent empirical studies have consistently demonstrated that childhood maltreatment is associated with negative psychosocial outcomes during adolescence.

These studies demonstrate that child abuse is strongly associated with impaired psychosocial development among teenagers. However, the extent to which abuse affects specific developmental domains such as identity formation, independence, and peer relationships requires further investigation.

2.2. Child abuse and identity formation among teenagers

Identity formation is a central developmental task during adolescence. According to Erikson's psychosocial development theory, adolescents attempt to establish a stable sense of self, personal values, and future goals during the stage of identity versus role confusion. However, traumatic childhood experiences such as abuse may interfere with this process by affecting self-esteem, self-perception, and confidence. Research indicates that adolescents exposed to childhood abuse often experience difficulties developing positive self-concepts.

These findings suggest that child abuse affects not only emotional wellbeing but also adolescents' ability to construct a positive identity. Nevertheless, more research is needed to understand how these experiences influence teenagers within specific cultural contexts, particularly in developing countries such as Nigeria.

2.3. Child abuse and independence/autonomy development among teenagers

Developing independence and autonomy is another important aspect of adolescent psychosocial development. During adolescence, young people gradually develop decision-making abilities, self-confidence, and personal responsibility. However, abusive childhood experiences may interfere with the development of autonomy by reducing self-confidence and creating dependency or fear. Although previous studies have examined adolescent independence, limited attention has been given to how different forms of child abuse specifically influence teenagers' ability to develop autonomy and self-reliance.

2.4. Child abuse and peer relationships among teenagers

Peer relationships play a significant role in adolescent psychosocial development by providing emotional support, opportunities for social learning, and a sense of belonging. Healthy peer interactions contribute to confidence, communication skills, and social competence. However, adolescents who experience childhood abuse may encounter difficulties establishing and maintaining positive relationships with peers.

These findings indicate that child abuse can negatively affect adolescents' social relationships, although supportive peer environments may reduce some of the adverse consequences.

2.5. Literature gap

Although previous studies have established that childhood abuse negatively affects adolescent psychosocial development, several gaps remain. First, most existing studies have focused primarily on psychological outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and behavioural problems, with limited attention given to broader psychosocial domains including identity formation, independence, and peer relationships. This creates a gap in understanding how child abuse influences different dimensions of adolescent development simultaneously. Second, many existing studies have been conducted in Western countries, where

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social support systems, child protection mechanisms, and cultural contexts differ significantly from those in Nigeria. Consequently, findings from these settings may not fully explain the experiences of Nigerian teenagers who may face unique cultural, family, and institutional challenges. Third, limited empirical evidence exists regarding the experiences of teenagers in Cross River State, Nigeria. Existing Nigerian studies have largely focused on the prevalence and causes of child abuse, while fewer studies have examined its consequences for adolescent psychosocial development. Therefore, this study seeks to address these gaps by examining how child abuse influences the psychosocial development of teenagers, with particular emphasis on identity formation, independence, and peer relationships within the Nigerian context.

3.0. METHODOLOGY

- Research design: This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the influence of child abuse on the psychosocial development of teenagers in Calabar Metropolis. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enables researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of social phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The design provided an opportunity to explore how experiences of child abuse influence key dimensions of psychosocial development, including identity formation, independence, and peer relationships among adolescents.
- Study area: The study was conducted in Calabar Metropolis, Cross River State, Nigeria. Calabar Metropolis comprises Calabar Municipal and Calabar South Local Government Areas and serves as the administrative and commercial hub of the state. The metropolis is characterised by a diverse population, urbanisation, and varying socio-economic conditions, making it an appropriate setting for investigating social issues affecting adolescents, including child abuse and psychosocial development.
- Population of the study: The population for the study comprised adolescents aged 13–19 years residing in Calabar Metropolis. The study focused on teenagers because adolescence represents a critical stage of psychosocial development during which identity formation, independence, and peer relationships are actively developed. Participants were selected from communities within Calabar Municipal and Calabar South Local Government Areas.
- Sample size and sampling technique: A total of 26 adolescents participated in the study. The sample size was determined based on the principle of data saturation, which occurs when no new information or themes emerge from additional interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique commonly employed in qualitative research to identify information-rich cases relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. Recruitment was conducted through secondary schools and community youth centres in Calabar Municipal and Calabar South Local Government Areas, with the assistance of school counsellors and community leaders who helped identify potential participants meeting the inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria required participants to be adolescents aged 13–19 years residing in Calabar Metropolis, with self-reported or known experiences related to child abuse (physical, emotional, sexual or neglect), and willing to share their experiences and perceptions regarding child abuse and psychosocial development. Potential participants and their guardians were first approached with information sheets; those who expressed interest were screened for eligibility. The purposive sampling technique enabled the re-

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searcher to recruit participants who could provide detailed and meaningful insights relevant to the objectives of the study. To enhance trustworthiness, strategies including prolonged engagement, member checking of interview summaries with a subset of participants, peer debriefing among the research team, and maintenance of an audit trail of coding decisions were employed.

- Method of data collection: Data were collected through in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide developed in line with the study objectives. The interview guide contained open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' experiences and perceptions regarding the influence of child abuse on identity formation, independence, and peer relationships. The interviews were conducted in a conducive and private environment to ensure participants' comfort and encourage open discussion. With participants' permission, responses were recorded and supplemented with field notes to enhance data accuracy and completeness.
- Method of data analysis: The data collected from the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts, coding significant statements, identifying recurring patterns, and grouping related codes into broader themes and sub-themes. The themes that emerged were interpreted in relation to the objectives of the study and the theoretical framework to provide a comprehensive understanding of the influence of child abuse on adolescents' psychosocial development.
- Ethical considerations: Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the study. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Calabar Research Ethics Committee (Approval Reference: UNICAL/REC/2026/047) before the commencement of data collection. Participants were adequately informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences. Because the participants were minors, informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians, while assent was obtained from the adolescents before participation. To safeguard participants, interviews were conducted in private, neutral locations (school counselling rooms or community centres) by a trained researcher experienced in working with adolescents. A distress protocol was in place: if any participant became distressed, the interview was paused or terminated, and the participant was immediately referred to the school counsellor or a designated clinical psychologist affiliated with the study for support. Information on local child protection services and mental health resources was provided to all participants and guardians. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning pseudonyms or codes to participants and ensuring that no identifying information appeared in the research report. All information obtained during the study was treated with strict confidentiality and used solely for academic purposes. The authors declare no conflict of interest. This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. No generative artificial intelligence tools were used in the design, data collection, analysis, or writing of this manuscript.

4.0. FINDINGS

4.1. Demographic characteristics of respondents

A total of twenty-six (26) adolescents participated in the study. The demographic characteristics of respondents were examined based on age, sex, educational status, and type of child abuse experienced. The in-

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formation provides contextual understanding of the participants whose experiences informed the findings of the study.

The demographic characteristics indicate that participants represented different categories of adolescents within Calabar Metropolis. Female participants constituted a slightly higher proportion (57.7%) compared with males (42.3%). Most respondents were within the middle adolescent age group of 13–17 years (73.1%), indicating that the study captured experiences during a critical period of psychosocial development. Emotional abuse was the most commonly reported form of abuse, followed by physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect. Most participants identified parents or caregivers as the major perpetrators, highlighting the vulnerability of adolescents within family environments.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 26)

CHARACTERISTICS	CATEGORIES	FREQ (N)	PERCENT (%)
Age	13–15 years	10	38.5
	16–17 years	9	34.6
	18–19 years	7	26.9
Sex	Male	11	42.3
	Female	15	57.7
Educational level	Junior Secondary School	7	26.9
	Senior Secondary School	14	53.8
	Tertiary Institution	5	19.3
Type of child abuse experienced	Emotional abuse	9	34.6
	Physical abuse	7	26.9
	Sexual abuse	6	23.1
	Neglect	4	15.4
Source of abuse	Parent/caregiver	14	53.8
	Relative/family member	7	26.9
	Non-family member	5	19.3

Source: Fieldwork, 2026

4.2. Objective one: Impact of child abuse on identity formation among teenagers

The findings revealed that child abuse significantly influenced adolescents' understanding of themselves, their self-worth, confidence, and ability to develop a positive identity. Two major themes emerged: low self-esteem and negative self-perception, and feelings of insecurity and identity confusion.

Theme 1: Low self-esteem and negative self-perception

Many participants reported that experiences of abuse negatively affected how they viewed themselves. Continuous criticism, humiliation, rejection, and harsh treatment from caregivers contributed to feelings of inadequacy and reduced confidence. Participants explained that abusive experiences made them perceive themselves as less valuable and incapable of achieving personal goals.

One participant stated:

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"When my uncle always insulted me and told me that I was useless, I started believing that maybe I was really not good enough. I stopped seeing myself as someone who could succeed." (Respondent 06, Female, 17 years)

Another participant explained:

"The way I was treated made me feel different from other children. I always wondered why I was not loved like others." (Respondent 14, Male, 16 years)

These narratives indicate that abusive experiences affected adolescents' self-concept and confidence, making it difficult for them to develop a stable and positive identity.

Theme 2: Feelings of insecurity and identity confusion

Participants also described experiences of fear, uncertainty, and confusion about their personal worth and future aspirations. Some adolescents reported difficulties understanding themselves because their childhood experiences were characterised by rejection and emotional neglect.

A participant noted:

"I was always afraid of making mistakes because I knew I would be punished. This affected how I see myself because I feel I cannot do things correctly." (Respondent 03, Female, 15 years)

Another participant stated:

"Sometimes I ask myself why these things happened to me and whether I am actually important." (Respondent 21, Female, 18 years)

The findings suggest that abuse interfered with adolescents' ability to establish a secure sense of identity, consistent with Erikson's assertion that negative social experiences during adolescence may contribute to identity confusion.

4.3. Objective two: Impact of child abuse on independence among teenagers

The study found that child abuse negatively affected adolescents' development of independence and autonomy. Participants reported reduced confidence in decision-making, fear of expressing themselves, and dependence on others for approval and guidance.

Two themes emerged: fear of decision-making, and reduced self-confidence and dependence on others.

Theme 3: Fear of decision-making

Several participants indicated that abusive experiences created fear and hesitation when making personal decisions. Many reported that constant punishment or criticism discouraged them from expressing opinions or taking initiative.

One respondent stated:

"I always wait for someone to tell me what to do because I am afraid of making the wrong choice." (Respondent 09, Male, 16 years)

Another participant explained:

"Growing up, I was not allowed to make decisions. Everything I did was controlled, so now I find it difficult to decide for myself." (Respondent 18, Female, 18 years)

These accounts demonstrate that abusive environments limited adolescents' opportunities to develop autonomy and confidence in their abilities.

Theme 4: Reduced self-confidence and dependence on others

Participants also reported that abuse affected their ability to trust their own judgment. Some adolescents depended heavily on friends, teachers, or relatives for reassurance before making choices.

A participant stated:

"I always need someone to encourage me before I do

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anything because I do not believe in myself." (Respondent 11, Female, 17 years)

Another added:

"The abuse made me feel weak. Even when I know what to do, I still doubt myself." (Respondent 24, Male, 19 years)

The findings indicate that child abuse undermines psychological independence by reducing self-efficacy and confidence among adolescents.

4.4. Objective three: Impact of child abuse on peer relationships among teenagers

The study revealed that child abuse negatively influenced adolescents' ability to establish and maintain healthy peer relationships. Participants reported difficulties trusting others, social withdrawal, and fear of rejection. Two themes emerged: difficulty trusting others, and social withdrawal and difficulty forming friendships.

Theme 5: Difficulty trusting others

Many participants explained that abusive experiences affected their ability to trust people, including friends and classmates. Some believed that others might hurt or betray them because of their previous experiences.

A participant stated:

"I find it difficult to tell people my problems because I feel they may use it against me." (Respondent 05, Female, 16 years)

Another explained:

"After what happened to me, I do not easily trust people. I always think they may disappoint me." (Respondent 16, Male, 18 years)

These findings suggest that childhood abuse affects adolescents' perception of relationships and their willingness to establish emotional connections.

Theme 6: Social withdrawal and difficulty forming friendships

Some participants reported avoiding social interactions because they felt different, insecure, or uncomfortable around others. They described isolation and difficulties participating in peer activities.

One participant stated:

"I prefer staying alone because I feel people will judge me if they know what happened to me." (Respondent 07, Female, 17 years)

Another participant noted:

"Sometimes I want to make friends, but I do not know how to communicate with people." (Respondent 20, Male, 15 years)

However, some participants identified supportive friendships as important sources of emotional support and recovery.

A participant explained:

"My friends helped me because they listened to me and made me feel accepted." (Respondent 25, Female, 19 years)

This indicates that positive peer relationships may serve as protective factors that enhance resilience among adolescents affected by abuse.

4.5. Summary of findings

The study revealed that child abuse significantly influences the psychosocial development of teenagers in Calabar Metropolis. The findings demonstrated that abuse negatively affects:

1. Identity formation by producing low self-esteem, insecurity, emotional instability, and difficulties developing a positive self-concept.
2. Independence development by reducing confidence, increasing fear of decision-making, and creating dependence on others for validation.

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3. Peer relationships by promoting mistrust, social withdrawal, and difficulties forming meaningful friendships.

Nevertheless, supportive relationships with peers, caregivers, and social networks were identified as important factors that helped adolescents cope with adverse experiences and improve psychosocial adjustment.

5.0 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study examined the impact of child abuse on the psychosocial development of teenagers in Calabar Metropolis, Cross River State, Nigeria, focusing specifically on identity formation, independence, and peer relationships. The findings revealed that child abuse significantly disrupts adolescents' psychosocial development by affecting their self-perception, emotional stability, decision-making abilities, and social interactions. The findings are discussed in relation to existing empirical literature and the theoretical assumptions of Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory and Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory.

5.1. Influence of child abuse on identity formation among teenagers

The study found that child abuse negatively influences identity formation among teenagers. Participants reported experiencing low self-esteem, insecurity, feelings of worthlessness, and difficulties developing a positive sense of self. Many adolescents indicated that repeated criticism, rejection, emotional neglect, and abusive treatment affected how they viewed themselves and their personal abilities. These experiences created uncertainty about their value, abilities, and future aspirations, thereby interfering with their ability to develop a stable identity.

This finding supports Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory, which identifies adolescence as a critical period characterised by the developmental crisis of identity versus role confusion. According to Erikson (1968), successful resolution of this stage requires supportive social experiences that allow young people to explore their values, abilities, and social roles. However, when adolescents experience abuse, rejection, or emotional insecurity, their ability to develop a coherent self-concept may be disrupted, resulting in identity confusion and poor psychosocial adjustment.

The finding is consistent with previous studies showing that childhood maltreatment is associated with difficulties in self-concept development, reduced self-esteem, and psychological distress among adolescents. For instance, Zhu et al. (2023) found that adolescents exposed to maltreatment were more likely to experience emotional difficulties, including depression and anxiety, which negatively affected their psychological functioning. Similarly, Hamel et al. (2024) demonstrated that child maltreatment contributes to emotional regulation difficulties, which may interfere with adolescents' ability to develop healthy self-perceptions and adaptive coping mechanisms.

The findings also align with recent evidence by Cavins et al. (2025), who reported that adverse childhood experiences influence adolescent functioning by affecting emotional wellbeing and engagement in developmental activities. The present study extends these findings by demonstrating, through adolescents' lived experiences, how abuse affects identity construction within the Nigerian context. Unlike studies that mainly examine psychological symptoms quantitatively, this study highlights the personal meanings attached to abusive experiences, including feelings of rejection, insecurity, and diminished self-worth.

5.2. Impact of child abuse on independence among teenagers

The study revealed that child abuse negatively affects adolescents' development of independence and autonomy. Participants reported difficulties making de-

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cisions, fear of expressing personal opinions, reduced confidence, and reliance on others for approval and guidance. These experiences suggest that abusive environments limit adolescents' opportunities to develop autonomy and self-efficacy.

The findings support Erikson's theoretical argument that healthy psychosocial development requires supportive environments that encourage competence, confidence, and responsible decision-making. Adolescents who experience abuse may internalise feelings of helplessness and inadequacy, making it difficult for them to develop independence. Rather than viewing themselves as capable individuals, they may become dependent on others because previous experiences have taught them to fear mistakes or negative consequences.

The findings are also consistent with research on adolescent autonomy development. Beyers, Soenens, and Vansteenkiste (2024) emphasised that autonomy during adolescence develops within supportive relational contexts where young people are encouraged to make decisions while receiving appropriate guidance. Conversely, controlling, threatening, or abusive environments may restrict autonomy development and reduce adolescents' confidence in their abilities. Similarly, Ruiz and Yabut (2024) found that autonomy and identity development are closely connected to adolescent wellbeing, suggesting that difficulties in one developmental area may negatively influence another.

Furthermore, the findings support Vrolijk et al. (2020), who reported that supportive parenting practices enhance adolescent emotional adjustment and reduce behavioural difficulties. While their study focused on positive parenting experiences, the present study demonstrates the opposite effect by showing how abusive parenting environments undermine confidence and independent functioning. The findings therefore suggest that adolescents require supportive relationships that promote autonomy rather than environments characterised by fear and control.

5.3. Impact of child abuse on peer relationships among teenagers

The study found that child abuse adversely affects adolescents' peer relationships. Participants reported difficulties trusting others, withdrawing socially, fearing rejection, and experiencing challenges in forming meaningful friendships. These findings indicate that abusive experiences within childhood may influence adolescents' perceptions of relationships and their ability to engage positively with peers.

The findings support Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which explains that individuals learn behaviours, attitudes, and emotional responses through interactions with significant others. Adolescents who grow up in abusive environments may learn distrust, fear, aggression, or avoidance as normal patterns of interaction. These learned responses may subsequently influence their relationships with peers, limiting their ability to develop healthy social connections.

The findings are consistent with Tadonio et al. (2025), who found that poor peer relationships and psychosocial difficulties are common among adolescents experiencing emotional challenges. The study emphasised that difficulties in peer interactions may contribute to increased social isolation and emotional distress. Similarly, Ragelienė (2016) noted that peer relationships are central to adolescent identity development and psychosocial adjustment, meaning disruptions in social connections can negatively affect broader developmental outcomes.

However, the present study also revealed that supportive friendships can serve as protective factors for adolescents affected by abuse. Some participants indicated that positive peer relationships provided emotional support, acceptance, and encouragement. Thus, while abuse may damage adolescents' ability to establish relationships, positive peer environments

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can contribute to recovery and improved psychosocial functioning.

Thus, the findings demonstrate that child abuse has significant consequences for adolescent psychosocial development. The experiences shared by participants indicate that abuse not only produces immediate emotional distress but also affects important developmental processes, including identity formation, autonomy development, and social relationships. These findings reinforce Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory by demonstrating how adverse childhood experiences may interfere with adolescents' ability to successfully resolve developmental challenges associated with identity and independence. They also support Bandura's Social Learning Theory by showing how abusive environments shape adolescents' behaviours, emotional responses, and interpersonal relationships.

6.0. CONCLUSION

This study examined the influence of child abuse on the psychosocial development of teenagers in Calabar Metropolis, Cross River State, Nigeria. The findings revealed that child abuse significantly affects critical dimensions of adolescent development, including identity formation, independence, and peer relationships. Adolescents who experienced abuse reported low self-esteem, insecurity, emotional difficulties, and challenges in developing a positive sense of self. The study further showed that abusive experiences limited adolescents' ability to develop autonomy, as many struggled with decision-making, self-confidence, and independent functioning. Additionally, child abuse negatively affected peer relationships by creating trust issues, social withdrawal, and difficulties establishing meaningful social connections. However, supportive peer networks, positive social environments, and access to emotional support were found to enhance resilience and promote healthier psychosocial adjustment among affected adolescents. The study concludes that child abuse constitutes a major threat to the healthy psychosocial development of teenagers and requires comprehensive interventions involving families, schools, communities, and child protection agencies to prevent abuse and support affected adolescents.

7.0. RECOMMENDATIONS

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

1. Government agencies, child protection organisations, and community stakeholders should strengthen existing child protection systems to ensure early identification, reporting, and effective management of child abuse cases. Community-based monitoring structures should be established in respective community settings to protect adolescents from abusive environments.

2. Schools should establish or strengthen counselling units where adolescents affected by abuse can access psychological support, guidance, and confidential assistance. Professional counsellors and social workers should be trained to identify signs of abuse and provide appropriate interventions that promote emotional healing and positive identity development.

3. Social workers, psychologists, and healthcare providers should be well grounded in providing trauma-informed interventions aimed at improving self-esteem, emotional regulation, decision-making abilities, and social skills among adolescents who have experienced abuse.

4. Continuous awareness campaigns through government or non-state actors should be conducted to educate parents, caregivers, community leaders, and adolescents about the consequences of child abuse, inaugurate and implement available reporting mechanisms, and the importance of protecting children's rights. Community beliefs that

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EISSN: 3115-6932

normalise abusive practices should be challenged through advocacy and education.

5. Government agencies, social workers, schools, healthcare providers, law enforcement agencies, and non-governmental organizations should collaborate to develop comprehensive prevention and intervention strategies addressing child abuse and its psychosocial consequences among adolescents.

8.0. CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

The findings contribute to existing literature by providing qualitative evidence of how teenagers themselves experience the consequences of child abuse within the Nigerian context. While previous studies have largely focused on psychological outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and behavioural problems, this study highlights the broader psychosocial consequences of abuse, including damaged self-concept, reduced autonomy, and impaired social relationships. The findings therefore emphasise the need for culturally appropriate interventions that address not only the prevention of child abuse but also the long-term psychosocial recovery of affected adolescents through counselling, supportive relationships, and strengthened child protection systems.

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