



Association between childhood emotional abuse with self-esteem among students in Dar es salaam, Tanzania

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Abstract

Background: Emotional abuse is the mostly widespread type of childhood experience which result from the following aspects: the relationship between a parent and a child, the interaction that shapes the relationship, and potentially harmful interactions which may lead into impairment on a child's developmental and emotional health. This form of abuse is believed to affect the overall psychological adjustment of the child as a result, victims may experience psychological distress with symptoms of low self-esteem, depression and anxiety. This study investigates association between emotional abuse with self-esteem among students in Dar es salaam, Tanzania.

Methods: This was a cross-sectional, community-based study of secondary school students that was conducted in randomly selected schools in Dar es salaam, Tanzania. The data collection process started July 2019 and was completed in July 2020. Each participant was contacted and informed about the purpose of the research, confidentiality issues, and reporting of the results. A multistage cluster sampling technique was employed to obtain a required number of the study participants. Rosenberg self-esteem scale and the Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) questionnaires were used to measure the variables under this study.

Keywords: childhood emotional, abuse, psychological distress

Introduction

Emotional abuse has no specific definition; it has been defined differently by different authors ^[1]. Emotional abuse occurs when there are acts of omission or commission causing harm or pain on the child's well-being, and this may be reflected as emotional distress or abnormal behavior to the child ^[2]. The omission and commission acts may occur one at once or both. These actions include isolating, spurning, exploiting, terrorizing, and denying emotional responsiveness on the child ^[3]. Also it can refer to a repeated pattern of behaviors that express to children that they are worthless, unwanted, unloved, or only of value in meeting parent's / guardian's or another's needs; this leads to lasting damage to their well-being and development ^[4].

The problem of emotional abuse is not limited to Dar es salaam, Tanzania, but relatively occurs all over the world. Around the world the prevalence of Emotional abuse is approximated to be 46% ^[5]. According to previous studies the rate of emotional Abuse was 41% in the USA, 33% in England, 28% in Canada, and 24% in Australia ^[6].

The rate was demonstrated to be slightly higher in East Asia and the Pacific Region for 51.3% and 68.5% for Korea and China respectively ^[7].

Childhood emotional abuse in the country paralyzes children personal career integration, national development and achievement of plans laid in a given country ^[8].

In most of the time, emotional abuse is masked within other form of child maltreatment when they co exist ^[9]. In Dar es salaam, Tanzania studies showed that emotional abuse increased risk of low self-esteem ^[10]. The effort towards reduction of mental

illnesses like psychological trauma, anxiety, chronic depression and post-traumatic stress disorder will not be successful unless children are raised in safe environments at home, school and other socialization areas where they are nurtured ^[11].

Knowing the association of emotional abuse and the impact associated with synergize the existing evidence-based interventions that are applied to prevent emotional abuse ^[12]. If it is left unattended childhood emotional abuse might lead to mental and psychological problems ^[13]. Other studies have demonstrated that emotional abuse affects the overall school performance, social relationship and peer interaction. Some other study has linked the severity of Emotional abuse with intellectual functioning ^[14].

Very limited comprehensive studies which have looked at the association between childhood emotional abuse and self-esteem in Dar es salaam, Tanzania, and it has been reported that emotional abuse on children is associated with psychological distress, maladaptive behavior and is linked with economic decline ^[15].

Emotional abuse can generally be associated with several factors in the environment where a child is either grown or ever experienced at one or more times; these factors are like family interaction/behavior, school interaction, social community, socioeconomic status, guardian demographic ^[16]. The negative interaction in any of the mentioned arena might result into a psychological trauma to a child. The long standing trauma associated with characteristics and behaviors such as reduced school performance, negative self-esteem, suicidal behavior,

drug abuse and some more other forms of mental disorders [17]. Childhood emotional abuse affects individual child intellectual function and might also inflict pains to the family structure functioning and entangle the burden to the society outside those family members [18].

Emotional abuse is the most prevalent form of child maltreatment and is increasingly recognized as an essential component of child maltreatment and the unifying concept that connects cognitive, affective, and interpersonal problems related to physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect [19]. Emotional abuse involves repeated interactions between a parent and child that are often verbal in nature that negatively affect the emotional, social, cognitive or even physical development of a child [20]. These interactions typically include acts of commission as well as omission, such as spurning, terrorizing, isolating, exploiting and denying emotional responsiveness [21].

Emotional abuse believed to negatively affect the emotional, social and cognitive development of a child, making them more prone to substance abuse and other forms of psychopathology [22]. Emotional abuse is thought to be the most common form of maltreatment and tends to accompany other forms of maltreatment, such as physical and sexual abuse [23].

Emotional Abuse encompasses both emotional abuses as well as emotional neglect. Emotional neglect involves rejecting, isolating and emotionally disregarding a child [24].

Emotional abuse refers to verbal assaults on a child's sense of worth or well-being, or any humiliating, demeaning, or threatening behaviour directed toward a child by an older person [25]. Emotional neglect refers to the failure of caretakers to provide a child's basic psychological and emotional needs, such as love, encouragement, belonging and support. Emotional neglect involves rejecting, isolating and emotionally disregarding a child [26].

Emotional abuse have been reported to cause significant harm to the child's development, and this harm extends into adolescence and adult life [27].

Unlike cases involving physical or sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect are believed to be the least likely to be reported by victims; victims are rarely able to display visible proof and therefore lack a sense of legitimacy [28].

Globally, the prevalence of Emotional abuse has been estimated to be 36% of children [29]. One study in Turkey found that approximately 51% of children were psychologically maltreated [30].

According to agency reports, the prevalence of emotional abuse in England, the USA and Canada ranged from 11-34% [31]. A high prevalence ranging from 31.3% to 68.5% has been reported in East Asia and the Pacific Region [32].

Previous studies e.g., [33] and [34] have reported a strong positive correlation between Emotional abuse and low self-esteem. This correlation between low self-esteem and emotional abuse is derived by the fact that emotional abuse in children can negatively affect the cognitive, social and emotional development of a child [35].

Self-esteem can be explained as continued self-evaluation and self-belief that one is strong, worthy, famous and successful [36]. Individuals with high self-esteem feel quite positive about their characteristics and competencies, which can positively influence well-being, while low self-esteem can lead to many emotional

and behavioural problems [37].

Many studies have also evaluated the relationship between self-esteem and emotional and behavioural problems [38]. Findings from these studies suggest that individuals with more emotional and behavioural problems have lower self-esteem. Parents play a keyhole in the development of self-esteem, which reflects individuals' evaluations of themselves and their competencies [39]. Emotional abuse experiences include parental acts that negatively affect mental health and development [40]. Emotional abuse is also associated with psychological distress, which is largely defined as a state of emotional suffering characterized by symptoms of depression (e.g., lost interest; sadness; hopelessness) and anxiety (e.g., restlessness; feeling tense) [41]. Psychological distress is reported to be an indicator of the mental health of the population in public health [42].

The Emotional abuse of children is widespread and is believed to affect the overall psychological adjustment of the child [43]. As a result, victims may experience psychological distress, with symptoms of low self-esteem, depression and anxiety that may result in substance [44].

However, it has been suggested that in a cultural environment, where harsh disciplining techniques are accepted, the adverse impact on recipients may be minimal [45].

Studies conducted in Asia countries have reported that many children are exposed to high levels of Emotional abuse [46]. Experiences from Dar es salaam, Tanzania show that parents often employ harsh emotional discipline practices and believe that they do not harm their children [47].

Several studies show a strong association between exposure to Emotional abuse and low self-esteem [48]. Emotional abuse is extremely common in Dar es salaam Tanzania, yet not as broadly researched as sexual and physical abuse [49].

Decades of research on Emotional abuse in childhood have resulted in publications on the subject in the developed countries, especially the U.S. and Europe. Studies have shown that emotional abuse has a negative impact on a child's well-being and healthy development, especially in relation to low self-esteem [50].

Despite the fact that many studies have focused on maltreatment in childhood, there is an insufficiency of published data that define association of childhood emotional abuse with self-esteem among students in Dar es salaam. This knowledge gap prompted the author to conduct this study.

Methods

Study design

A cross-sectional, community-based study was conducted at randomly selected secondary schools in Dar es salaam Tanzania, between July 2019 and July 2020.

Study participants

A total of 3193 students participated in this study. 1543(48.3%) participants were male and 1650 (51.7%) were female. The participants' age ranges from 13 to 18 years old.

Data collection method and tool used

The instruments that were used are two different questionnaires to measure the variables under the study.

The questionnaire had items from three main following

instruments: Rosenberg self-esteem scale, and the Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) questionnaire.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale: This is a Likert scale developed by Dr. Morris Rosenberg. It consists of ten items, and it is used globally to assess adolescent's self-concept (Self-esteem), i.e., positive and negative feelings about oneself. It has been validated cross-culture and is an important tool, which is used in international surveys of World Health Organization (WHO) [51]. The instrument has excellent psychometric features and is used in assessing the link between child maltreatment and psychological adjustment [52].

The scale measures state self-esteem. Based on this respondent are asked to reflect on their current feelings. In the scale, there are five positively and five negatively worded statements. The items are rated on a 4-point scale from 1, which is strongly agree, to 4– which is strongly disagree, and the final score is determined as a total of all the ratings. The score ranges from 0 and maximum 40, with 40 being the highest score (each item ranges from a scores of 1 to 4). The higher the student's score, the higher level of self-esteem will be. Basically, the score between 15 and 20 is observed to be normal; and score <15 is considered to indicate low self-esteem, while score >25 is considered to indicate high self-esteem. There is a high level of reliability and validity on the scale for measuring global self-esteem [53]. Significantly, global self-esteem with test-retest correlations value between 0.82 and 0.88 is measured by a high level of reliability and validity [54]. The Cronbach's alpha of the scale in the present study was 0.83. *Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) questionnaires* were used in the assessment of the emotional abuse. ACE is made up of 38 items which assess the exposure to 10 types of ACEs based on abuse, neglect and household challenges. These subcategories of abuse, neglect and household challenges include emotional, physical, and sexual abuse for abuse; physical and emotional neglect, and the last being mental illness, substance abuse, and physical violence as household challenges. In the Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) questionnaire, a measure of emotional abuse, it is a measurement tool that demonstrates good reliability and validity among university students [55]. In the international settings, the measures of emotional abuse have demonstrated reliability and validity, due to that, they are highly used by the Centre for Disease Control [56].

Sampling technique

A multistage cluster sampling technique was employed to obtain the required number of study participants. A sampling frame from the list of school students from randomly selected schools was prepared and used to draw up the sample. From the sampling frame, study units were sampled through the simple random method until the required sample was obtained.

Study variables

In the study there were two variables, independent and dependent variables. Emotional abuse was the independent variable, while the dependent variables constitute self-esteem.

Quality assurance and control

To ensure quality in this research all techniques, systems and resources were arrayed to give assurance about data collection

process, data handling and data analysis. This research translated all questionnaire from its original language English to Swahili language so that all students understood the questions, questionnaire was submitted to students by a well-trained research assistant the responsibilities of those involved in the field for data collection.

Research plan was made known to all research team and data was handling in confidential manner. Researcher read the filled questionnaires and ensure completeness. Soon after collection, data was coded entered in software statistical package for social science (SPSS) and second cleaning were done.

Validity and reliability

Data collection tools were checked for validity and reliability. In reliability all questionnaires were checked for the extent of yielding the same results on repeated administration of the tool. The Cronbach's *alpha* was used to check internal consistence coefficient alpha is an internal consistency index designed to be used in tests which contain items which have no right answer.

All tools adopted for data collection. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was used to measure the internal consistence of the instrument and construct validity was measured by CFI.

Data analysis and presentation

Statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) version 20.0 (SPSS, Chicago IL, USA) for Windows was used in performing statistical data analysis. Descriptive statistics like mean (+Standard deviation) and ranges on one hand were calculated on continuous variables. On the other hand, on categorical variables, proportions and frequency tables were used to summarize the information.

Furthermore, the significance of association between the independent variables emotional abuse and dependent variables self-esteem in the categorical variables was tested by Chi square (χ^2). Multivariate logistic regression analysis was used to determine whether childhood emotional abuse predicts self-esteem during adolescence period, while the level of significance was considered as $p < 0.05$

Ethical consideration

All the participants were informed about the purpose of the study and were ensured that their answers would only be used anonymously for research purposes.

Thereafter they were asked if they were willing to participate on a voluntary basis. Thus, informed consent was sought from each participant before they were enrolled into the study. Permission to conduct the study in respective schools was also obtained from school authorities.

Study limitation and delimitation

This study covered few students from Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. This might bring difficult in generalization of the results. The researcher increased the sample size to foster variability of the subject which might prove the legacy of generalizing results.

Results

The study samples

The sample consisted of were 1650(51.7%) female and 1543(48.3%) male school students,

Table 1: Study sample

Male	Female	Total
N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
1543(48.3)	1650(51.7)	3193(100.0)

Association analysis of Emotional abuse by gender

The association analysis in table 2 shows a strong association between emotional abuse and gender ($r=0.13$, $p<0.01$).

Table 2: Association analysis among students (gender) and emotional abuse

Variable	Emotional Abuse	Gender of the students
Emotional Abuse	1	.130**
Gender of the students	.130**	1

** Association is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Association between self-esteem, age gender of the participants

Table 3 below shows a strong positive correlation between self-esteem and gender ($r = 0.51$, $p<0.001$).

Table 3: Association analysis of self-esteem by gender and age groups

Variables	1	2	3
Self-esteem	-		
Age of participants	.035	-	
Gender of participants	.001	-.195**	-

** Association is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The average self-esteem scores

The average self-esteem score of students was (22.12 \pm 4.734std deviation)

Table 4: Self-esteem mean scores

Mean	Mode	STD Deviation	N
22.12	20	4.734	3193

Prevalence of self-esteem by gender

As shown in Table 5; results showed that most students had normal self-esteem 2434(76.2) of which 1223(50.2%) reported to be female and 1211(49.8) males. The difference in score between male and female on self-esteem P -value = 0.01.

Table 5: Prevalence of self-esteem by gender

Country	Categories	N (%)	Sex n (%)		P-Value
			Male	Female	
China	Low self-esteem	57 (1.8)	17(29.8)	40(70.2)	0.001
	Normal Self-esteem	2434(76.2)	1211(49.8)	1223(50.2)	
	High self-esteem	702(22)	315(44.9)	387(55.1)	

Association between Emotional Abuse and self-esteem

The findings in Table 6 shows a strong positive association between Emotional abuse and self-esteem ($r= 0.55$, $p<0.001$),

Table 6: Association between Emotional abuse and self-esteem

Variables	M \pm SD	1	2	3
1. Self-esteem	27.6 \pm 4.2	-		
3. Emotional Abuse	10.4 \pm 2.3	.515**	-.086**	-

** Association is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**p < .001. M: Mean, SD=Std Deviation

Linear regression analysis between Emotional abuse and self-esteem

A simple linear regression model (Table 7) was calculated to predict self-esteem based on Emotional Abuse; $b=0.51$, (998) 35.08, $p<0.001$. A significant regression equation was found ($F(1,998) = 359.893$, $p<0.001$, with R^2 of 0.265.

Approximately 26% of the variance in self-esteem can be explained by Emotional Abuse.

Table 7: Linear regression analysis between Emotional abuse and self-esteem

R Square	Adjusted R Square	Df	F	T	Beta	sig
.265	.264	1998	359.893	35.083	.515	.000
.007	.006		7.37	41.05	0.86	.001

Dependent Variable: Self esteem

Predictors: (Constant), Emotional Abuse

Level of self-esteem on students with self esteem

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare effect of levels of self-esteem on the Emotional Abuse score among students. The Emotional Abuse score was statistically significantly different between different levels of self-esteem among students $F(2, 3190) = 54.476$ P value = 0.000.

Table 8: Prevalence of mean scores in self-esteem among students with Emotional Abuse

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P-Value.
Between Groups	8783.307	2	4391.653	54.476	0.000
Within Groups	257166.553	3190	80.616		

Discussion

The prevalence of emotional abuse in the present study may be an underestimate because this form of child maltreatment is mostly underreported to authorities for fear of being arrested by the police. Also, Emotional Abuse is often not recognized when other forms of maltreatment, such as physical and sexual abuse, coexist^[60]. The prevalence rates of Emotional Abuse may also be underestimated because they capture a wide range of parenting behaviours, and there is little to no consensus across studies as to what phenomena should be included^[61].

In the present study, the prevalence of emotional abuse was higher among female participants than male participants. This finding agrees with what has previously been reported,^[62] and^[63]. In this study, emotional abuse was reported in 24.7% of the participants.

The reason for the underlying vulnerabilities and gender influence on children with emotional abuse is unclear, and this requires further investigation.

This observation may be attributed to the lack of awareness and poor knowledge regarding which childhood experiences constitute Emotional abuse.

This calls for urgent preventive measures to reduce the occurrence of childhood Emotional abuse so as to reduce the potential adverse consequences of low self-esteem that occur during adolescence and adulthood.

Emotional abuse is strongly associated with low self-esteem in adolescents^[65]. This finding agrees with our study, which found that childhood emotional abuse was statistically significantly associated with self-esteem during adolescence. Parenting style

plays a crucial role in a child's social, cognitive and emotional development. A negative parenting style involving childhood emotional abuse may result in low self-esteem in adolescents that continues to adulthood [66].

The results reported here agree with previously published studies, demonstrating a negative association between childhood exposure to emotional abuse and self-esteem. Children exposed to high levels of emotional abuse have been reported to show very low self-esteem during adolescent. For childhood emotional abuse, negative impacts are believed to occur when the child internalizes the harsh treatment, including the negative messages from parents and/or care givers [67]. This results in insecurities, and the child develops maladaptive interpersonal schemas, which lead to dysfunctional behaviours [68].

Children in such situations tend to believe that they are worthless and that the world is unsafe and perceive everybody as abusive [69]. Those with low self-esteem tend to be more self-conscious and isolate themselves from others [70].

There are some limitations of the study that should be noted: first, the cross-sectional study design does not allow for the establishment of a causal relationship; therefore, only the association between emotional abuse and self-esteem was established in this study.

Second, the study participants included school students from randomly selected schools; therefore, the results cannot be generalized to the Tanzania population as a whole. Third, additional consideration should be given to the tendency of participants to under- or over-report incidents of maltreatment. Thus, the results must be interpreted with caution.

Exposure to emotional abuse was revealed to most of children, the rate of exposure reported in this study is slightly higher as compared to other study. Study done in Croatia about multiple type of maltreatment and its related adjustment in adolescent showed that almost two-thirds of respondents reported to be exposed to multi-type maltreatment in their earlier life [73].

Poor nurturing environment for the child including poor parent-child relation such as child's abuse effects child's self-esteem in a negative way. As it has been demonstrated in this study similar other studies have showed stronger negative relationship between neglect and abuse on self-esteem [74].

Conclusion

This study concludes that there is a significant association between childhood emotional abuse experience and self-esteem. Findings from these studies demonstrated that emotional abuse exists and has negatively affected self-esteem and among Tanzanian during adolescents.

The purpose of these studies was to build upon the extant literature concerning of childhood emotional abuse experience and its association with self-esteem. The results demonstrated that childhood emotional abuse experience is prevalent in our setting and statistically significant positively affected self-esteem among Tanzanian adolescents. Moreover, exposure to childhood emotional abuse experience during childhood was found to be associated with self-esteem.

The understanding of the interrelatedness of emotional abuse experience with self-esteem should be considered in the design of studies, treatments, and programs to prevent of emotional abuse as well as low self-esteem.

Urgent preventive measures aiming at reducing the incidence of childhood emotional abuse is necessary to lessen the incidence of low self-esteem.

Parents, caregivers and teachers will benefit from realizing the effects of childhood emotional abuse and be encouraged to take an alternative method of discipline.

It is urged that urgent preventive measures aiming at reducing the occurrence of emotional abuse are necessary to be undertaken to reduce the incidence of low self-esteem among Tanzanian students. This can be achieved through education efforts that highlight the negative effects of childhood Emotional abuse. Also, parents /care givers and teachers need to be educated about the potential negative consequences of childhood emotional abuse experience to raise awareness among them as a means of reducing low self-esteem.

Recommendations

Home and school environmental situations are expected to be an ideal and the best fit for safety for a child growth and development in both physically and psychologically. Situations have proven different that careful measures are to be undertaken by parents /guardians and other closely related people who come close to the child growing environment. That is so because studies have shown that Emotional abuse experience is the interplay of several variables including family environment in which children are brought up, parent-child relationships and methods of bringing up children.

Social organization protecting the child should be aware of the impact caused by emotional abuse occurring at home and school. They have to properly plan for intervention involving the parents, guardians and other people who come close to children psychological and physical growth.

This study has included only small parts in Tanzania A study that covers a very large area and a big population size is recommended to include the wider part of the countries for worthwhile generalization of the results.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

All participants were given information about the study and asked for their voluntary participation. Students were informed about the purpose of the study and ensure them that their answers would only be used anonymously for research purposes on a voluntary basis. Informed consent was sought from each participant before being enrolled into the study. Ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from Hubert Kairuki memorial university institutional ethic review committee before the commencement of the study. Permission to conduct the study was also obtained from respective school authorities.

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