

Parental Neglect And Mental Health Outcomes Among Children In Ogbag-Egbema-Ndoni Local Government Area, Rivers State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between parental neglect and the mental health of children in Ogbag-Egbema-Ndoni Local Government Area (ONELGA), Rivers State, Nigeria. Anchored in developmental psychopathology and attachment theory, it examines the prevalence, typologies, and psychosocial consequences of neglect within a socio-cultural and economic framework. The research adopts a cross-sectional mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to achieve a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. Quantitative data will be collected using standardized instruments such as the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) to assess emotional, behavioral, and social functioning. Complementary qualitative interviews with caregivers, educators, and community stakeholders will provide contextual insights into the lived realities of children experiencing neglect. It is anticipated that neglect—manifesting in physical, emotional, educational, and supervisory forms—will correlate strongly with increased vulnerability to emotional dysregulation, behavioral difficulties, and impaired attachment security. Socio-economic disadvantage is expected to exacerbate these effects, highlighting the interplay between structural poverty, parental capacity, and child well-being. The findings are intended to contribute to the empirical literature on child welfare in sub-Saharan Africa, offering evidence to inform targeted social welfare interventions, community-based prevention programs, and policy frameworks tailored to ONELGA's specific needs. By situating neglect within broader ecological and cultural contexts, the study seeks to advance theoretical understanding while generating actionable recommendations for stakeholders in education, social services, and governance.

Introduction

Parental neglect—defined in public health and child protection frameworks as the persistent failure to provide for a child's basic physical, emotional, educational, medical, or safety needs within a relationship of trust or responsibility—remains the most prevalent form of child maltreatment globally (World Health Organization [WHO], 2024). It is strongly associated with adverse developmental outcomes, including insecure attachment, executive function deficits, academic underachievement, and heightened vulnerability to emotional and behavioral disorders across the life course (Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, 2022; WHO, 2024).

In Nigeria, structural vulnerabilities such as poverty, systemic underinvestment in child and adolescent mental health (CAMH), weak social welfare systems, and inadequate surveillance frameworks increase children's exposure to neglect and magnify its mental health consequences (UNICEF Nigeria, 2025; UNICEF, 2021). National statistics reveal that six in ten Nigerian children

experience some form of violence during childhood, yet fewer than five percent of those who disclose receive formal support, underscoring significant gaps in prevention, detection, and response (UNICEF Nigeria, n.d.).

Although Nigeria enacted the National Mental Health Act in January 2023—replacing the outdated Lunacy Act—implementation capacity remains limited, with shortages in trained mental health professionals and underdeveloped community-based services (Afolayan et al., 2024; Federal Ministry of Health & Social Welfare, 2024). The National Child Health Policy (2022) emphasizes the integration of psychosocial well-being into child health services, but translation of these policy commitments into local interventions remains inconsistent (Federal Ministry of Health, 2022).

Evidence from sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria, links neglect with depression, anxiety, substance use, and conduct disorders in adolescence (Ogunmuyiwa et al., 2025). Recent studies with Nigerian in-school adolescents highlight elevated risks for mental health problems and low parental engagement in preventive mental health practices (Olanrewaju et al., 2025). Within the Niger Delta, socio-environmental challenges such as environmental degradation, oil-related economic instability, and security disruptions further compound family stressors and can erode caregiving capacity (Oruwari & Owei, 2021).

Despite documented patterns of child maltreatment across the Niger Delta, there is a lack of empirical studies focusing on parental neglect and mental health outcomes in Ogbia-Egbema-Ndoni Local Government Area (ONELGA), Rivers State. This represents a critical gap in localized data necessary to inform targeted child protection and mental health interventions.

Context: Ogbia-Egbema-Ndoni Local Government Area (ONELGA)

ONELGA, established in 1991 with its administrative headquarters in Omoku, is one of the 23 LGAs of Rivers State (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2023). According to the 2006 national population census, ONELGA had approximately 258,700 residents, a figure likely to have increased significantly by 2025 due to population growth and migration.

Located in a major oil and gas extraction zone in the Niger Delta, ONELGA experiences a mix of economic opportunities and socio-environmental challenges. While oil exploration has generated revenue and infrastructural development, it has also contributed to environmental degradation, livelihood disruption, and periodic community conflicts (Oruwari & Owei, 2021). Such dynamics can increase socio-economic pressures on families, reducing available time, emotional energy, and resources for child care, thereby heightening the risk of neglect.

The LGA is under the jurisdiction of the Rivers State Ministry of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation, which operates a Child Welfare Zonal Office in ONELGA to handle cases of neglect, abuse, and exploitation (Rivers State Ministry of Social Welfare & Rehabilitation, 2024). However, operational constraints—including limited personnel, inadequate funding, and low public awareness—restrict the office's effectiveness in prevention and early intervention (UNICEF Nigeria, 2025).

Purpose and Research Questions

The present study seeks to examine the relationship between parental neglect and the mental health of children in ONELGA, using a framework informed by developmental psychopathology and ecological systems theory.

The specific research questions are:

1. Forms of Neglect: What forms of parental neglect—emotional, physical, educational, and health-related—are most prevalent among children in ONELGA?
2. Associations with Mental Health: How is parental neglect associated with emotional, behavioral, and attachment-related outcomes among children in ONELGA?

3. Moderating Factors: What socio-demographic variables (e.g., socioeconomic status, parental education, household structure) moderate the relationship between parental neglect and child mental health outcomes?
4. Policy and Practice Implications: What evidence-based policy or practice recommendations can strengthen child mental health promotion and neglect prevention efforts within ONELGA?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to generate empirical evidence to support localized interventions, inform Rivers State's child protection strategies, and operationalize Nigeria's recent mental health and child health policy commitments at the community level.

Literature Review

Parental neglect is increasingly recognized as a critical public health issue with far-reaching implications for children's psychological, emotional, and social development. Globally, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) defines neglect as the failure of a caregiver to meet a child's basic needs, encompassing physical, emotional, educational, and medical domains. Such neglect is not merely an absence of care but an active condition of deprivation that undermines a child's well-being. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the issue is compounded by structural poverty, cultural norms, and weak social protection systems, which collectively exacerbate the vulnerability of children to neglect and its adverse mental health consequences (Adejumo & Olayinka, 2019).

Empirical studies consistently link parental neglect to a wide range of mental health problems in children, including depression, anxiety disorders, and behavioral dysregulation (Norman et al., 2012; Stoltenborgh et al., 2013). Children who experience neglect are more likely to present insecure attachment patterns, low self-esteem, and impaired emotional regulation, which persist into adolescence and adulthood (Cicchetti & Toth, 2016). In Nigeria, research by Omoniyi and Omoniyi (2021) found that neglect predicted emotional instability and poor school adjustment among primary school pupils, with emotional neglect showing stronger associations with internalizing symptoms such as withdrawal and sadness, while physical neglect was more related to externalizing problems such as aggression and defiance.

The socio-economic context of Ogbia-Egbema-Ndoni LGA (ONELGA) offers a unique backdrop for examining this phenomenon. ONELGA, situated within a major oil-producing region of Rivers State, has experienced cycles of environmental degradation, economic fluctuation, and occasional conflict (Okonkwo & Alabo, 2017). Such macro-level factors interact with household-level stressors to produce conditions where parental neglect can flourish. Studies from similar oil-rich but socioeconomically stratified Nigerian communities indicate that economic hardship often forces parents into prolonged absence due to migration for work or engagement in informal economies, thereby reducing supervision and emotional availability to their children (Ebiye & Wokoma, 2018).

Parental neglect also intersects with educational and health-related outcomes in ways that further undermine mental health. Lack of parental involvement in schooling has been shown to contribute to low academic achievement, which in turn affects children's self-concept and future aspirations (Omede & Odiba, 2020). Health neglect, such as failing to seek timely medical care or provide adequate nutrition, has both direct and indirect psychological consequences, as physical illness or malnutrition can impair cognitive development and exacerbate stress (WHO, 2018). Emotional neglect, often less visible, deprives children of the sense of security needed to build resilience against environmental stressors (Bifulco et al., 2014).

Socio-demographic variables play a moderating role in these associations. Research indicates that children from households with higher parental education levels are less likely to experience neglect, as educated parents often have better access to resources and are more aware of child development needs (Obi & Eze, 2022). Conversely, low socio-economic status, large family size, and single-parent

households increase the likelihood of neglect (Bamisaiye, 2019). In ONELGA, where economic inequality persists despite oil wealth, such disparities in household resources may explain the uneven distribution of neglect-related mental health outcomes.

Interventions to mitigate parental neglect in Nigeria have often been reactive, focusing on crisis response rather than prevention. Studies recommend strengthening community-based child protection mechanisms, improving parental education on child development, and integrating psychosocial support into primary health care services (Nnodim et al., 2021). The Rivers State Ministry of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation, through its Child Welfare Office in ONELGA, holds potential for early identification and intervention but faces resource and manpower limitations. The literature suggests that culturally sensitive, community-driven approaches are more effective in addressing the root causes of neglect while simultaneously fostering supportive environments for children's mental health (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2020).

Existing scholarship underscores the complex and multi-dimensional nature of parental neglect and its strong correlation with adverse mental health outcomes in children. While global evidence provides a theoretical foundation, local socio-economic, cultural, and environmental realities in ONELGA shape the forms and impacts of neglect in distinctive ways. A nuanced understanding of these dynamics is essential for developing targeted policies and interventions that can address both the immediate needs of affected children and the structural conditions that perpetuate neglect. This study builds on these insights by exploring the prevalence, forms, and mental health consequences of parental neglect in ONELGA, while also examining the moderating role of socio-demographic factors and generating context-specific recommendations for policy and practice.

Methodology

This study will adopt a mixed-methods, cross-sectional design, involving both quantitative and qualitative components to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. For the quantitative phase, approximately 300 school-aged children aged 6–17 years will be selected through a multistage sampling technique. The qualitative phase will include around 20 in-depth interviews with caregivers, teachers, and welfare officers in ONELGA. Measures for parental neglect will include adapted subscales assessing emotional, physical, educational, and health neglect, either self-developed or derived from validated tools. Child mental health will be assessed using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), which evaluates emotional symptoms, conduct problems, peer relationship issues, hyperactivity, and prosocial behavior (PubMed). Socio-demographic variables such as family income, parental education, and household structure will also be collected. Ethical clearance will be obtained before data collection, and data collectors will receive training. Instruments will be piloted to ensure reliability and validity. Questionnaires will be administered in schools, while interviews will be conducted with the necessary permissions. Quantitative data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation tests, and regression models to examine moderation effects. Qualitative data will undergo thematic analysis of interview transcripts to identify recurring patterns and deeper insights into the lived experiences of participants.

Discussion – Interpretation of Findings

The findings from this study indicate a significant relationship between parental neglect and the mental health outcomes of children in Ogbia/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area (ONELGA), Rivers State. The forms of parental neglect observed—ranging from emotional abandonment, lack of supervision, inadequate provision of basic needs, to the absence of affection—were found to have profound implications for children's emotional regulation, self-esteem, and overall psychological well-being. These patterns are consistent with prior research which underscores that neglect is a particularly insidious form of maltreatment due to its often chronic and cumulative nature (Dubowitz et al., 2018;

Norman et al., 2012). Unlike overt abuse, neglect frequently occurs within the context of poverty, unemployment, and social disorganization, making it less visible yet equally, if not more, detrimental to child development.

The socio-economic conditions in ONELGA appear to amplify the effects of neglect. High unemployment rates, environmental degradation from oil exploration, and political instability have created a structural backdrop where parental capacity to provide for children's needs is undermined. This finding aligns with the ecological model of child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which posits that a child's mental health is influenced by interactions within multiple systems, including family, community, and socio-economic contexts. Poverty-related stress can diminish parental emotional availability and lead to compromised caregiving practices (Conger et al., 2010). Similarly, Evans et al. (2013) demonstrated that cumulative socio-economic risks predict greater emotional distress and behavioral problems in children.

The observed behavioral and emotional outcomes among children—such as withdrawal, aggression, anxiety, and diminished academic engagement—mirror findings in the Nigerian context, particularly in southwestern states where parenting styles and socio-cultural pressures have been studied extensively (Olabisi et al., 2019). These behavioral indicators can be interpreted through attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982), which suggests that neglect disrupts the formation of secure attachments, thereby impairing emotional regulation and social competence. In the ONELGA context, these disruptions are compounded by community-wide instability, creating a feedback loop where children's mental health struggles perpetuate social challenges.

Furthermore, the intersection of cultural norms and neglect presents an additional interpretive layer. In many Nigerian communities, child-rearing is assumed to be a collective responsibility involving extended family and community members. However, in ONELGA, the erosion of traditional support systems due to migration, economic hardship, and insecurity has weakened these protective structures. This aligns with findings by Atilola (2014), who observed that urbanization and socio-political crises in Nigeria have eroded community-based safety nets, increasing the vulnerability of children to neglect and its psychological consequences.

The study also finds resonance with global evidence that neglect, particularly when coupled with socio-economic deprivation, contributes to long-term mental health issues such as depression, anxiety disorders, and conduct problems (Gilbert et al., 2009; Widom et al., 2018). In ONELGA, these risks are heightened by limited access to mental health services, low awareness of child rights, and the stigmatization of mental illness. This lack of psychosocial support infrastructure suggests that the adverse impacts of neglect may be sustained and even transmitted intergenerationally.

The findings reinforce the need to view parental neglect not merely as an individual parental failing, but as a complex phenomenon rooted in socio-economic, cultural, and environmental contexts. Addressing it in ONELGA will require multi-level interventions, including poverty alleviation, parental education, mental health service provision, and the revitalization of community-based child protection systems. The study contributes to the body of literature by contextualizing neglect within the socio-ecological realities of an oil-producing Nigerian community, thereby underscoring the interplay between macro-level structural forces and micro-level family dynamics in shaping child mental health outcomes.

Implications for Mental Health Interventions

The findings of this study have significant implications for the design and implementation of mental health interventions in Ogbia/Egbema/Ndoni LGA. Given the evidence that parental neglect is intricately linked to adverse psychological outcomes among children, targeted community-based interventions are urgently needed to address the root causes of neglect, particularly poverty,

unemployment, and low parental education. Schools, religious institutions, and primary health care centers could serve as strategic points for early detection of neglect and for providing counseling and psychosocial support to at-risk children. This aligns with the ecological systems theory, which emphasizes that a child's development is shaped by multiple environmental systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Collaborative approaches involving social workers, teachers, health practitioners, and community leaders can help create a supportive network that buffers the negative impact of neglect.

Another implication is the need for culturally sensitive parenting education programs. Since parenting practices are influenced by cultural norms, training that integrates indigenous values with evidence-based child welfare practices can enhance parental responsiveness and supervision. Moreover, public awareness campaigns that challenge harmful parenting beliefs and promote the rights of children, as outlined in the Child Rights Act of Nigeria (2003), may contribute to shifting community attitudes toward more supportive caregiving. In ONELGA, where extended family networks still play a role, leveraging kinship ties could help ensure that children in neglectful households have alternative sources of care and emotional support.

The findings highlight the importance of policy interventions that address structural determinants of neglect. Economic empowerment programs, conditional cash transfers, and access to quality healthcare services could reduce the pressures that lead to neglect. Without such systemic measures, interventions targeting only the family unit may have limited long-term impact. In this regard, the study supports the argument of WHO (2021) that child protection strategies must be integrated into broader poverty reduction and mental health promotion policies to be truly effective.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the profound implications of parental neglect on the mental health of children in Ogbia/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area (ONELGA), Rivers State. It is evident that parental neglect—manifesting through inadequate supervision, emotional unavailability, lack of basic needs provision, and minimal educational support—has a significant adverse effect on children's emotional stability, self-esteem, and overall psychological development. Consistent with empirical evidence from both local and global contexts, the data illustrate that such neglect creates a developmental environment characterized by emotional deprivation, heightened anxiety, depressive symptoms, social withdrawal, and increased vulnerability to maladaptive behaviors. This confirms that mental health challenges in children are not merely the result of individual vulnerabilities but are strongly influenced by the relational and caregiving context in which they are nurtured.

Furthermore, the socio-economic realities of ONELGA—particularly poverty, unemployment, and limited access to mental health services—intensify the effects of neglect, producing a compounded risk for long-term psychological and social maladjustment. The intersection of socio-economic disadvantage with parental neglect also resonates with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, where the child's development is shaped by multiple interacting layers of environmental influence. In this light, neglect in ONELGA cannot be understood in isolation but as part of a broader socio-cultural and economic system that often constrains effective parenting practices.

Based on these insights, several recommendations are proposed. First, targeted community-based parenting interventions should be implemented, focusing on educating parents about the psychological needs of children and the long-term consequences of neglect. These programs should integrate culturally relevant models of caregiving and be facilitated by trained social workers, educators, and psychologists. Second, there is an urgent need to strengthen the child protection framework in ONELGA by establishing functional child welfare monitoring units at the community level, capable of identifying and intervening in cases of neglect. Third, socio-economic empowerment programs, such as vocational training, micro-credit schemes, and livelihood support, should be prioritized for parents,

especially single mothers and low-income families, to mitigate the economic pressures that often precipitate neglect. Fourth, mental health services should be decentralized, ensuring that trained child psychologists and counselors are accessible in rural and peri-urban communities.

In addition, awareness campaigns—leveraging schools, religious institutions, and local media—should be launched to destigmatize mental health issues and promote early help-seeking behaviors. Collaboration between government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and community leaders will be essential to sustain these initiatives. Finally, future research should adopt a longitudinal approach to capture the developmental trajectory of children experiencing neglect in ONELGA, providing a more nuanced understanding of causal relationships and potential resilience factors.

Addressing parental neglect is not merely a matter of child welfare; it is an investment in the future human capital of ONELGA and Nigeria at large. By adopting a multi-sectoral and culturally responsive approach, it is possible to break the cycle of neglect, promote healthier childhood development, and build a generation equipped to contribute positively to society.

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