

Family Dynamics and Substance Abuse among Adolescents in Port Harcourt Metropolis

Obindah Fortune (PhD), Gloria Matthews (PhD)

Department of Educational Psychology, Guidance and Counseling, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

Abstract. This study examines the relationship between family dynamics and substance abuse among adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis. The study specifically investigated the influence of parenting styles, family cohesion, and family conflict on adolescent engagement in substance use. The research adopted a correlational design, with a population of senior secondary school students in Port Harcourt. A sample of 400 adolescents was selected using a multistage sampling technique. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire adapted from standardized instruments and rated on a 4-point Likert scale. The reliability of the instrument was confirmed through a pilot study, yielding Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.79 to 0.85. Data were analyzed using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient at a 0.05 level of significance. The results indicated a significant negative relationship between parenting styles and substance abuse ($r = -0.412, p < 0.05$), and between family cohesion and substance abuse ($r = -0.388, p < 0.05$). Conversely, a significant positive relationship was found between family conflict and substance abuse ($r = 0.429, p < 0.05$). These findings suggest that authoritative parenting and strong family cohesion serve as protective factors, while high family conflict increases the risk of adolescent substance use. The study concluded that family dynamics significantly influence substance abuse among adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis. It was recommended that parents adopt authoritative parenting strategies, strengthen family cohesion, and manage conflict constructively. Additionally, school and community programs should incorporate family-focused interventions to reduce adolescent substance abuse. The study underscores the importance of considering family environments in developing policies and interventions aimed at mitigating substance abuse among adolescents.

Key words: Family Dynamics, Parenting Styles, Family Cohesion, Family Conflict, Substance Abuse, Adolescents, Port Harcourt Metropolis, Correlational Study.

Introduction

Adolescence is a pivotal developmental phase characterised by significant physical, emotional, and social changes. During this period, individuals are particularly susceptible to engaging in risky behaviours, including substance abuse. In Nigeria, the prevalence of substance use among adolescents has been a growing concern, with studies indicating that family dynamics play a pivotal role in influencing these behaviours. Family dynamics encompass the patterns of interaction, roles, and relationships among family members. These dynamics significantly shape adolescents' behaviours and coping mechanisms. Healthy family environments characterised by supportive relationships, open communication, and emotional warmth can serve as protective factors against substance abuse. Conversely, dysfunctional family environments marked by poor communication, conflict, and lack of emotional support can increase the risk of adolescents engaging in substance use as a coping mechanism (Lander et al., 2013).

Port Harcourt, the capital city of Rivers State, Nigeria, has witnessed a concerning rise in adolescent substance abuse. A study conducted in Obio-Akpor Local Government Area, a part of the Port Harcourt metropolis, revealed that a significant number of junior secondary school students engage in substance use. Factors such as peer pressure, curiosity, and family-related issues were identified as contributing to this behaviour (Atilola, 2013).

Several family-related factors have been identified as influencing adolescent substance abuse. Parental substance use, family structure (e.g., single-parent or polygamous families), and the presence of family conflict have been linked to higher rates of substance use among adolescents. For instance, adolescents from families with a history of substance use disorders are more likely to engage in similar behaviours due to modelling and lack of supervision (Ojo et al., 2022).

Understanding the relationship between family dynamics and adolescent substance abuse is crucial for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies. Programs aimed at strengthening family relationships, improving communication, and providing support can mitigate the risk factors associated with substance use. Additionally, integrating family-based approaches into treatment plans for adolescents can enhance the effectiveness of interventions (Saladino et al., 2021). The interplay between family dynamics and adolescent substance abuse in Port Harcourt metropolis underscores the need for comprehensive approaches to address this issue. By focusing on enhancing family functioning and providing support to adolescents, it is possible to reduce the prevalence of substance abuse and promote healthier developmental outcomes for young individuals in the region.

Statement of the Problem

Substance abuse among adolescents has increasingly become a visible and worrying issue in Port Harcourt metropolis. From personal observation and engagement within schools and youth communities, many adolescents appear to be experimenting with or regularly using substances such as alcohol, tobacco, and other psychoactive drugs. These behaviours often manifest in truancy, declining academic performance, aggression, and social withdrawal. In interacting with adolescents, it is evident that family environments play a major role in shaping their choices and coping strategies. Some adolescents come from homes where there is little parental supervision or guidance, frequent conflict, or poor communication, which seems to leave them vulnerable to peer pressure and risky behaviours. Conversely, adolescents from supportive and cohesive families tend to exhibit healthier coping mechanisms and appear less likely to engage in substance use.

Despite anecdotal and observable evidence suggesting a link between family dynamics and adolescent substance abuse in the metropolis, there is limited empirical research that clearly maps out this relationship within the context of Port Harcourt. The lack of such research hinders the development of targeted intervention programs that could support both families and adolescents in mitigating the problem. This study, therefore, seeks to examine how various aspects of family dynamics, such as parental support, family cohesion, and conflict, relate to substance abuse among adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis.

This formulation draws directly from the researcher's observations of adolescent behaviour, interactions within family settings, and the apparent consequences of dysfunctional family structures on youths' engagement in substance use.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The study aims to examine the relationship between family dynamics and substance abuse among adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis.

1. To determine the relationship between parenting styles and substance abuse among adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis.
2. To examine the relationship between family cohesion and substance abuse among adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis.
3. To investigate the relationship between family conflict and substance abuse among adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between parenting styles and substance abuse among adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis?
2. What is the relationship between family cohesion and substance abuse among adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis?
3. What is the relationship between family conflict and substance abuse among adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis?

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant relationship between parenting styles and substance abuse among adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis.
2. There is no significant relationship between family cohesion and substance abuse among adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis.
3. There is no significant relationship between family conflict and substance abuse among adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis.

Literature Review

Adolescent

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage marked by significant physical, emotional, and social changes. During this period, individuals are particularly susceptible to engaging in risky behaviours, including substance abuse. In Nigeria, the prevalence of substance use among adolescents has been a growing concern, with studies indicating that family dynamics play a pivotal role in influencing these behaviours.

Parenting Styles and Adolescent Substance Abuse

Parenting styles encompass the strategies and approaches employed by parents in raising their children. These styles significantly influence adolescents' behaviours and coping mechanisms. Authoritative parenting, characterised by warmth, support, and clear expectations, has been associated with lower rates of substance abuse among adolescents. Conversely, permissive and neglectful parenting styles, marked by leniency and lack of supervision, have been linked to higher instances of substance use (Ehondor et al., 2025).

In a study conducted in Ido, Nigeria, Ehondor et al. (2025) found that parenting styles and self-esteem jointly predicted substance abuse among in-school adolescents. The study revealed that permissive parenting was positively correlated with substance abuse, while authoritative parenting showed a negative correlation. These findings underscore the importance of parental involvement and guidance in mitigating adolescent substance use.

Family Cohesion and Adolescent Substance Abuse

Family cohesion refers to the emotional bonding and support among family members. High levels of family cohesion are associated with positive adolescent development and reduced likelihood of engaging in substance abuse. A study by Abiola et al. (2023) in Ibadan, Nigeria, found that adolescents from families with strong emotional bonds and supportive relationships were less likely to engage in substance use. The study highlighted the protective role of family cohesion in promoting healthy adolescent behaviours.

Conversely, a lack of family cohesion, characterised by emotional distance and lack of support, can increase the risk of substance abuse. Research by Ojo et al. (2022) in Lagos, Nigeria, indicated that adolescents from families with low cohesion were more susceptible to peer pressure and substance use. These findings suggest that fostering strong family relationships can serve as a protective factor against adolescent substance abuse.

Family Conflict and Adolescent Substance Abuse

Family conflict involves disagreements and tensions among family members, which can create a stressful environment for adolescents. High levels of family conflict have been linked to increased risk of substance abuse among adolescents. A study by Ajiboye et al. (2022) in Lagos, Nigeria, found that adolescents from families experiencing high levels of conflict were more likely to engage in substance use. The study suggested that family conflict disrupts the adolescent's sense of security and coping mechanisms, leading to increased vulnerability to substance abuse.

Similarly, a study by Olorunlambe et al. (2023) in Abuja, Nigeria, found that adolescents from families with high conflict levels exhibited higher rates of substance use. The study emphasized the need for interventions aimed at reducing family conflict to mitigate the risk of adolescent substance abuse.

Theoretical Review

Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST) posits that human development is influenced by multiple layers of environmental systems, ranging from immediate settings like the family to broader societal and cultural contexts. The theory comprises five interrelated systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The microsystem, which includes the family, peers, and school, is the most immediate environment affecting adolescents' behaviours. The mesosystem involves interactions between microsystems, such as how family experiences influence school performance or peer relationships. The exosystem encompasses environments that indirectly impact adolescents, like parental workplaces or neighborhood safety, while the macrosystem includes cultural values, societal norms, and laws. Finally, the chronosystem captures changes over time, such as shifts in family structure or societal attitudes toward substance use (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Tunde et al., 2021).

Applying EST to adolescent substance abuse, the theory emphasizes that family dynamics are central to the development of risk or protective factors. Parenting styles, family cohesion, and family conflict are components of the microsystem that directly influence adolescents' attitudes toward substance use. For instance, authoritative parenting may foster self-regulation and resilience, whereas high family conflict may create stress that adolescents attempt to manage through substance use (Ehondor et al., 2025; Abiola et al., 2023). Similarly, the mesosystem highlights how family interactions shape peer relationships; adolescents from supportive families may be less susceptible to peer pressure, whereas those from dysfunctional families may seek approval or coping mechanisms through substance-using peers.

In the Nigerian context, several studies have used EST to explain adolescent behaviours. Ojo et al. (2022) applied the theory to examine family factors and psychoactive substance use, noting that adolescents' immediate family environment strongly predicted their engagement in substance abuse. Likewise, Ajiboye et al. (2022) highlighted that family conflict at the microsystem level increased the likelihood of adolescents adopting risky behaviours, including substance use.

By adopting the Ecological Systems Theory as a theoretical framework, this study situates substance abuse among adolescents within a broader environmental context, emphasizing that interventions must target family dynamics while also considering peer influence, school environment, and community norms. The theory thus provides a comprehensive lens through which the interplay between family factors and adolescent substance abuse can be understood and addressed.

Methodology

The study adopted a correlational research design to examine the relationship between family dynamics and substance abuse among adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis. This design was considered appropriate because it allowed for the investigation of the strength and direction of relationships between the independent variables parenting styles, family cohesion, and family conflict and the dependent variable, substance abuse.

The population of the study is 57,570 adolescents attending senior secondary schools within the Port Harcourt metropolis which is made up of Port Harcourt Local Government Area, Emouha Local Government Area, Ikwere Local Government Area, Oyigbo Local Government Area, Eleme Local Government Area, Obia/Akpor Local Government Area. According to the Rivers State Ministry of Education (2023). From this population, a sample of 400 adolescents was selected using a multistage sampling technique. First, five local government areas in the metropolis were randomly selected. Then, two schools were randomly chosen from each local government area. Finally, 40 students were systematically selected from each school to form the study sample, ensuring representation across gender and age.

The instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. Section A collected demographic information such as age, gender, and family type. Section B consisted of items measuring the independent variables parenting styles, family cohesion, and family conflict and the dependent variable, substance abuse. Parenting styles were measured using items adapted from the Parental Authority Questionnaire (Buri, 1991), family cohesion was measured using the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale (Olson, 2011), and family conflict was measured using items adapted from the Conflict Behaviour Questionnaire (Robin & Foster, 1989). Substance abuse was assessed through self-reported engagement in alcohol, tobacco, and other psychoactive substances. All items were rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree).

To ensure the reliability of the instrument, a pilot study was conducted among 40 adolescents in a school outside the sampled schools. The data obtained were subjected to Cronbach's alpha reliability analysis, which yielded reliability indices of 0.82 for parenting styles, 0.79 for family cohesion, 0.81 for family conflict, and 0.85 for substance abuse, indicating that the instrument was reliable for the study.

Data were collected with the assistance of trained research assistants, and ethical considerations were observed, including obtaining consent from school authorities, parents, and the respondents themselves, ensuring confidentiality, and guaranteeing voluntary participation.

The collected data were analyzed using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient (PPMC) to test the hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance. Descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, were used to summarize demographic characteristics and questionnaire responses. Interpretation of results was based on the correlation coefficients, where positive values indicated a direct relationship and negative values indicated an inverse relationship between variables.

Results

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between parenting styles and substance abuse among adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis.

Variable	N	Mean	SD	r	p-value
Parenting Styles	400	2.87	0.63	-0.412	0.001
Substance Abuse	400	2.56	0.71		

The Pearson correlation coefficient ($r = -0.412$, $p < 0.05$) indicates a significant negative relationship between parenting styles and adolescent substance abuse. This implies that adolescents exposed to authoritative parenting were less likely to engage in substance use, whereas permissive or neglectful parenting was associated with higher substance use. The null hypothesis is rejected.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant relationship between family cohesion and substance abuse among adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis.

Variable	N	Mean	SD	r	p-value
Family Cohesion	400	2.95	0.59	-0.388	0.001
Substance Abuse	400	2.56	0.71		

The correlation coefficient ($r = -0.388$, $p < 0.05$) shows a significant negative relationship between family cohesion and substance abuse. Adolescents from cohesive families were less likely to engage in substance use. The null hypothesis is rejected.

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant relationship between family conflict and substance abuse among adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis.

Variable	N	Mean	SD	r	p-value
Family Conflict	400	2.72	0.64	0.429	0.001
Substance Abuse	400	2.56	0.71		

The correlation coefficient ($r = 0.429$, $p < 0.05$) indicates a significant positive relationship between family conflict and substance abuse. Adolescents exposed to high family conflict were more likely to engage in substance use. The null hypothesis is rejected.

Discussion of Findings

The study established that parenting styles significantly influence substance abuse among adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis. Specifically, authoritative parenting, characterized by supervision, emotional support, and clear guidance, was associated with lower substance use, while neglectful or permissive parenting increased susceptibility. This aligns with the findings of Ehondor et al. (2025), who reported that adolescents experiencing permissive parenting had higher levels of substance abuse.

Family cohesion was also found to have a significant negative relationship with adolescent substance abuse. Adolescents from families with strong emotional bonds and supportive interactions were less likely to engage in substance use. This supports Abiola et al. (2023), who found that family cohesion acts as a protective factor against risky behaviours. Cohesive families likely provide emotional support and monitoring that reduce the need for adolescents to seek coping mechanisms through substances.

Conversely, family conflict exhibited a significant positive relationship with substance abuse. Adolescents from high-conflict households were more likely to engage in alcohol, tobacco, and other substance use. This is consistent with Ajiboye et al. (2022), who emphasized that conflict in the home creates stress and insecurity, increasing vulnerability to maladaptive coping behaviours such as substance abuse.

The findings support Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, emphasizing the microsystem's influence, particularly the family, on adolescent behaviour. The family environment, including parenting approaches, cohesion, and conflict, directly affects adolescents' risk behaviours. Adolescents' exposure to supportive or dysfunctional family settings explains variations in substance abuse patterns. The negative relationship between authoritative parenting and substance abuse suggests that adolescents benefit from structured guidance and emotional warmth. Parents who monitor behaviour, establish rules, and maintain open communication provide a buffer against negative peer influence and risky behaviours. Conversely, lack of parental guidance or excessive permissiveness appears to encourage experimentation with substances.

The protective role of family cohesion highlights the importance of emotional bonding and shared family activities. Adolescents in cohesive families are likely to experience higher self-esteem, stronger problem-solving skills, and better emotional regulation, which reduce the likelihood of engaging in substance use. Family cohesion may also enhance communication channels through which parents can educate adolescents about the risks of substance use.

The study further confirms that family conflict acts as a significant risk factor. Adolescents in homes with frequent disagreements, hostility, or inconsistent discipline may resort to substance use to cope with stress or escape emotional tension. The findings mirror previous studies in Nigeria (Olorunlambe et al., 2023) that emphasized the direct effect of parental disagreements and poor conflict management on adolescent deviant behaviours.

Importantly, the findings suggest that interventions to reduce adolescent substance abuse must target family dynamics. Programs that educate parents on effective parenting, foster cohesion, and teach conflict resolution may significantly reduce adolescent engagement in substance use. Community-based initiatives, school programs, and counseling services can complement family-level interventions.

Moreover, the findings reveal that family-related factors interact with adolescents' peer networks and school environment, consistent with the mesosystem perspective of Bronfenbrenner. Adolescents from supportive families are less likely to succumb to peer pressure, whereas those from high-conflict homes may seek acceptance among peers who engage in substance use, highlighting the need for holistic interventions.

The study confirms that parenting styles, family cohesion, and family conflict are significant predictors of adolescent substance abuse in Port Harcourt metropolis. These findings reinforce the necessity of family-focused strategies to prevent and mitigate substance use among adolescents, while also aligning with theoretical expectations from the Ecological Systems Theory.

Conclusion

The study concluded that family dynamics significantly influence substance abuse among adolescents in Port Harcourt metropolis. Parenting styles, family cohesion, and family conflict were all found to be significant predictors of adolescent engagement in substance use. Specifically, authoritative parenting and strong family cohesion were associated with lower substance abuse, while high levels of family conflict were linked to increased substance use. These findings underscore the critical role of the family as a primary microsystem in shaping adolescents' behaviour and supporting healthy development. The study also confirmed the applicability of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, highlighting how immediate family environments interact with broader social influences to affect adolescent behaviour. Overall, addressing family-related risk and protective factors is essential for reducing substance abuse among adolescents in the metropolis.

Recommendations

1. Parents should adopt authoritative parenting strategies characterized by warmth, guidance, and monitoring of adolescent activities to reduce the likelihood of substance abuse.
2. Families should engage in activities that enhance emotional bonding and communication, such as shared meals, discussions, and joint problem-solving, to create supportive environments for adolescents.
3. Counseling programs should be established to help families manage conflict constructively. Reducing exposure to family conflict can significantly lower adolescents' vulnerability to substance use.
4. Schools and community centers should implement family-focused prevention programs, including workshops, seminars, and mentorship, to educate parents and adolescents about the risks of substance abuse and the role of family dynamics in mitigating those risks.

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