

Mother-Child Relationship: The Children's Experiences

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine mother-child relationship using children's experiences. Two groups of children were examined using both structured and unstructured interviews as well as questionnaire. The groups consisted of 59 children between the age of 3 and 7 who were interviewed in their classrooms as well as 60 children between 8 and 11 who were given questionnaires to respond to. The first group of children were videotaped and their responses were categorized and analysed using qualitative method. Also the responses of the second group were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The results revealed the children's diverse responses. The implications of these were discussed and further suggestion were made.

Key words: Physical contact, Relationship, Social development, Physical reward.

INTRODUCTION

The UN General Assembly's special session on children in May 2002 advocated for a world fit for children in which all children get the best in life. The children are to have ample opportunity to develop their individual capacities in a safe and supportive environment that will promote their physical, psychological, social, cognitive and cultural development. In order to achieve these, the family unit is seen to be the best provider of the ideal environment.

Parental involvement in the child's education has also been found to enhance learning and increase children's achievement in school at all levels (Epstein cited in Ogunsanwo, 2003). When parents, particularly mothers are at home and available to provide the necessary bonding with children, play with them, tell them stories and spend quality time with them, children are happy, feel secured and are stable, they enjoy schooling and achieve high scores in their academic work (James & Nick, 1971; Nwagbara, 2005; Ekine, 2002). Moreover, early relationship with mothers are the foundations on which social competency and peer relationships are built, therefore parents who support positive emotional development, interact with their children affectionately and show consideration for their feelings bring up children with early emotional competencies, less behavioural problems both at home and at school (Boyd et al, 2005). Emotional attachment between mother and child has also been found to help children grow up into stable adults who have self control and can self regulate their emotions. Such children feel more secure and comfortable venturing out into the world and exploring it (Rosen, 2001).

Furthermore, Oates (2010) asserts that warm and supportive parenting facilitates the development of strong and secure relationships between parent and child. It can act as a buffer, and prevents undesirable child outcomes among many things. Conversely, parenting which is harsh and neglecting increases the risk of poor child outcomes.

The quality of parent-child relationships is significantly associated with:

- Learning skills and educational achievement: Children's reading ability is associated with the reading environment around them.
- Social competence: Parental warmth, lack of conflict and control play an important role in developing children's social skills.
- Children's own views of themselves: Including their sense of self-worth.

This relationship can only be built if mothers set examples of values in their behaviour and interaction with the children. Children tend to imitate their parents in behaviour while very few social skills are learnt by listening to parents. Adult and teenage children even say that they enjoy physical contact with their mothers, want to do many simple things alone with them such as listening to the stories of their (mothers') early lives, watching the television with them and just talking and sharing with them alone, they claim such contacts mean the most to them and they are remembered for a very long time (Kurt, 2010).

Statement of the problem

In Nigeria, traditionally, the care of young children was the collective responsibility of the family and relations, with the mother at home most of the time. With changes in the status of mothers, they started leaving their homes in pursuit of economic activities and for various reasons; other relatives are no longer available. The purpose of this study therefore, was to find out the level of contact Nigerian mothers have with their children and discuss the adequacy or otherwise in promoting social and emotional development as well as providing an

aspect of parental involvement in children's education.

Research Questions

This study was designed to answer the following questions:

- (1) What kind of contact do children have with their mothers?
- (2) How often do mothers read to their children?
- (3) Is physical contact age dependent?
- (4) Do children freely discuss their personal issues with their mothers?

Methodology

Participants and setting

The study was conducted in two Nursery/Primary schools in two local Government areas of Ibadan Oyo State of Nigeria. 69 children between age 8–11 and 48 children age 3-7 as well as three interviewers (who interviewed the age 3-7 children) participated in the study. The interviewers were class teachers and the head teacher of one of the schools who are well known to the children. The interviewers, hereby referred to as teachers were given a brief training on how to interview children in groups (classes) a relaxed manner (children were allowed to move freely because they cannot sit still). The children between the age of 3 and 7 were interviewed in their different classes using questions prepared on different areas of contact which they might have had with their mothers and how they spend time with their mothers.

Research Design.

The study made use of interview and survey. The older children (8-11year olds) were given questionnaires to respond to while the younger children (3-7year olds) were interviewed. The interview method for collecting data was used in order to allow children have their own input in the study because, even though a lot of information is available about children, the children themselves are not always allowed to share their own view (UNICEF, as cited in Taina and Maata, 2011). The views of children are important and should be taken into account in parenting support programmes (Oates, 2010).

The interviews were conducted in the children's classes, in very relaxed and informal settings so that children became very free to express themselves. The children's responses were their (children's) own opinions and in some cases different from the interviewer's questions but were relevant to the topic. Children were allowed to discuss with each other and comment on the response of other children but were not allowed to laugh at other children except the child intentionally meant to share a joke with the class in which case the class was allowed some time to enjoy the joke. The children's interviews were videotaped and later viewed for analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

AGE 3-7 YEARS

The 3-4 year old were very relaxed and their responses showed that their mothers carried them often. One said her mother often carried her on her back anytime they went out. They all said they watched the television with their mothers but their mothers did not read to them. One said her mother read the bible to her which may imply that she often sat by her mother whenever she (the mother) prayed. They all said that their mothers hugged them and demonstrated the way the mothers hugged them. They however did not respond when asked whether they played games with their mothers and the few who responded did not understand what games meant. Even when examples of games were mentioned they said yes but when asked where they played the games they responded that they played at school which implied that they did not play games with their mothers. The probable reason for this may be that mothers may either be too busy to play or they may feel that the children were too young because the age group '5-6' children said they played finger games "after round one" with their mothers which they demonstrated in class. Only 30% of the age 3-4 children said that they slept in the same room with their mothers the rest said they slept on their own or with other siblings. 10% said their fathers or older siblings bathed them while the remaining 90% said that their mothers bathed them.

All the children said they usually went out with their mothers but when asked where they usually went, the responses were market shop and my mother's friend's house. None of them mentioned the zoo, amusement park or any other place where children have the opportunity to play or learn.

The responses of the 5-7 groups were not too different from the 3-4 year-olds except that they were more detailed in their explanations. They definitely knew that they were being interviewed and were interested in revealing their lives. They responded that they were rarely hugged or kissed by their mothers but anytime they did anything well, their mothers usually bought things for them and when asked the list of things used as reward they all said biscuits sweets, chewing gum, money. 50% of this group said that they didn't always play games with their mothers but about 30% said their mothers read to them, those who were read to indicated that the reading took place in the nights and weekends. They all said that they usually go on visits with their mothers but usually these visits were to friends and relations.

AGE 8-11 YEARS

Research question 1: What kind of contact do children age 8-11 have with their mothers?

Physical contact through some activities.	frequency yes /often	No	sometimes
Does your mummy read story books to you?	22	40	7
Do you watch television with your mum?	38	12	18
Do you go out with your mom to places?	37	12	20
Does your mummy bathe you?	16	53	-
Does your mom hug, kiss or touch you?	59	5	5

The results above show that when children become older, parents, especially mothers treat them as miniature adults and expect them to do things by themselves. This is revealed in the result showing that 76.8 % bathe themselves. This is supposed to be a daily opportunity for body contact with these children even at this stage, they are still in the late childhood stages and this age group is just beginning to develop their emotional competences and therefore, a lot of touch from their mother is expected to facilitate good self confidence and acceptability. In addition, 59.7% read by themselves. This does not encourage literacy skills in the children in the sense that when they make mistakes who will be there for them to look up to? Even at this stage mothers can still encourage their children's reading ability by sharing a book with them instead of leaving them all alone.

85% of the children actually responded that their mothers touched them but when asked to write what they did to warrant the touch: 70.2% indicated that the touch was usually as a reward for something good they did well such as passing exams, obeying their parents instruction or running errands. Children therefore have to earn the contact they receive from their mothers. The 0.07% that indicated that they have never been touched might be referring to as long as they were aware of since they did not remember what happened when they were babies. Mothers need to be encouraged to spend meaningful time with their older children and allow them to be children not expecting too much from them.

Question 2: how often does your mom read to you?

Table 2. Reading to children

Regularity of reading	Frequency	Percentage
No response	2	2.2
Often	15	16.9
Sometimes	69	77.5
Never	3	3.4

Table 2 revealed that, 77.5% of mothers seldom read to their children. This is rather disheartening and not encouraging if our children must be leaders because readers are leaders. If at this stage they cannot be encouraged to read nor are they read to then where will they develop interest in books?

Research question 3: Is physical contact age dependent?

Chi Square Table

Age	No	Yes	X2	Df	sig.
8	-	12			
9	2	26	41.54	4.	.0000
10	-	12			
11	-	2			
12	2	-			

Remark

significant

The result shows that as children grow older the tendencies for their parents to touch them keep declining because they feel that the children are getting old and independent. This may also be due to the fact that the children themselves feel that they are too old to be hugged or kissed by their mothers. They may consider such show of affection babyish and not encourage their mothers to touch them.

Research question 4:

Do children freely discuss their personal problems with their mothers?

	Frequency	percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Valid. 00	2	2.2	3-3	3.3
No	12	13.5	20.0	23.3
Yes	46	51.7	76.7	100.0
Total	60	67.4	100.0	
Missing system	29	32.6		
Total	89	100.0		

51.7% of children in this study said that they discuss personal issues with their mothers while 13.5% said they did not. Inability to discuss personal issues with mothers may be due to many reasons such as parenting style or mothers' busy schedule, however, the majority of the children responded positively which indicates that there still exists a level of mother-child closeness and trust between them and their mothers. This is essential for building the required social skills such as ability to form close relationships and trust others later in life.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that mothers in Nigeria are caring and attached to their children especially the very young ones. They still make some body contact even with the older ones (8-11) and also take them out. However, children also say that their parents seldom read to them which implies that parents are not encouraging their children to form the habit of reading whereas according to Whitehurst (1992), children who are read to at least three times a week do better later in their development than children who are not often read to. Also giving material rewards for children's good behaviour has been found to spoil children and prevent them from doing good except there is going to be a reward attached to the behaviour (Dewar, 2009) whereas children who are rewarded with hugs, kisses, simple words such as "I love you" or "good!" tend to repeat such good behaviours without any reward. One also feels that the spoiling of children with material rewards may later lead children to demand "bribes" in form of sweets or biscuits from people even parents before doing anything for them.

The study also reveals that many mothers do not spend leisure with their children by taking them out to interesting places where children will have the opportunity of playing with other children or enjoying themselves. Many mothers are too busy and may not be with their children until evenings and by the time they get home they are too tired to have bedtime stories with the children or even spend time reading with the children. Many cannot even afford to take these children out because the cost may not be within their reach.

The Nigerian child needs a lot of opportunities to be attached to the mother in order to grow into a well balanced adult who is emotionally stable and who can face his world with boldness and subdue it. The relationship with mothers should be developed early and all through life through a lot of body contact and spending enough time with the mother so that children can learn how to relate with others in a positive way and empathise with people as they grow older in life (Dewar, 2009)

RECOMMENDATION

Mothers are the primary caregivers in children's lives and a strong relationship and attachment with mothers goes a long way in the social and emotional development of their children. Mothers should spend a great deal of time with their children as babies, preschoolers up to the time they become youths and even adults so that they can become fearless, independent, loving and caring and so that they can take risks and become responsible in life. Since most mothers do not read to children and do not have time to take them out to see the world, the school should organise a lot of compensatory activities to fill the gap so that children will not be left behind in their reading experiences and exposure to high quality education

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