

The Mental Health of A Nigerian Child : A Literary Commentary

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ABSTRACT

Mental health, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), is a state of well-being that allows individuals to handle life's stresses, recognize their abilities, learn effectively, and contribute to their communities. Mental and physical health are interconnected, influencing a child's ability to succeed in education, work, and social life. In Nigeria, children's mental health is significantly affected by various factors, including limited access to mental health services, insecurity, academic pressures, socioeconomic challenges, and family dynamics. Poor care-giving, unfair living conditions, and societal neglect further worsen mental health outcomes for children.

Assessment of child mental health involves various tools, however language barriers and cultural stigmatization complicate access to mental health care, requiring translation and adaptation of some assessment tools.

Nigeria's lack of a structured child and adolescent mental health policy places children at risk. Key factors influencing child mental health include family structure, economic stability, education, community security, and access to healthcare. Emotional intelligence, attachment styles, and school environments also play crucial roles. Economic hardships exacerbate mental health issues, while proper early childhood care and education can serve as protective factors.

The country's weak healthcare system, inadequate funding, and social stigma hinder effective mental health interventions. Efforts are being made to integrate mental health into primary healthcare, train professionals, and develop community-based programs. Collaboration between government, private sectors, and non-profit organizations is essential to improving child mental health. Increased funding, policy reform, awareness campaigns, and research are needed to create a comprehensive and effective mental health system for Nigerian children.

Keywords: Child mental health, Mental health, Screening.

INTRODUCTION

Mental health according to the World Health Organization (WHO) can be defined as the state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well, work well and contribute to their community [1]. Mental and physical health are closely related and they can affect each other as physical health deals with the state of the body. Due to the complex interactive relationship that the mental health of a child has with their physical health while influencing their ability to succeed at school, work and even in the society, this has become paramount to talk about [2]. The mental well-being of children in Nigeria can be checked into a myriad of factors such as limited access to mental health services, insecurity, academic/educational pressures, socioeconomic challenges as well as the family and social dynamics as seen in the quality of the care giver and care given with other interactions of unfair living conditions, resulting in poor mental health outcomes for the average child [3,4]. All these put together has exaggerated the need for concern, as many children are facing a range of mental health issues, following the neglect of matters pertaining to it and this has been measured using certain scales [5,6,7].

INSTRUMENTS OF MEASUREMENTS

There are various instruments of measurements when it comes to assessing the mental state of an individual, [8]. Some of them have been modified specifically for children and adolescents, for example the Depression Self Rating Scale (DSRS) and the Child Post Traumatic Stress disorder (PTSD) Symptom Scale (CPSS) . Some others used data from international organizations and bodies like the United Nations International Children Funds (UNICEF) and WHO composite international diagnostic interview [9,10], and at national levels, data was sourced from Nigeria violence against children (NVACs) and other NGOs [6]. It was also necessary to use screening tools well suited for a particular place as well as, take into consideration language barriers as there were cases where, the instrument used for testing had to be translated. These translations were done to address issues of understanding, communication and among others, stigmatization [11].

RISK FACTORS

As Nigeria still struggles with having a well-structured child and adolescent mental health policy [10] and strategy, children continue to be endangered [6]. The factors for evaluating what may predispose or protect

the mental state of a child can be classified at the various levels; of the individual themselves, their families, learning environment, their community, problems of insecurities happening around them, poor nutrition[4,7,8,12] and economic instability [8]. The interplay of the factors listed has been seen to affect children emotionally and in the way they interact with their society by way of their attachment. Individuals with a higher emotional quotient tend to handle issues better than was seen in people with low self-esteem. [7,13,14]. More so, a child's attachment style can be responsible for their secure and insecure behaviour and this was majorly adopted by their family's style of parenting and childhood experiences [12]. However, the learning environment can help alleviate some of the problems pertaining to a child's behaviour like in cases of bullying and academic instability although, the problem must be tackled holistically when identified [8,15]. Also, the economic stability of a community and family could help to provide a secure early childhood care, education and allow for proper child development and where absent can make a child vulnerable[5,7,16]. These factors generally can be ascribed to the determinants of health whose entire purpose is aimed at the well-being of a person.

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

Generally, health coverage is weak and inequitable, largely among different socioeconomic groups and this has crept into the mental health system as well. All this can be improved by adequate funding [10] and diversification of the mental health system into the cadres of health care, especially the primary healthcare, with a view to enhancing affordability and quality of care [17]. Moreover, the stigmas surrounding mental health issues in Nigeria often discourages individuals from getting help [15], therefore limiting many children who need this help from receiving it. This is so because, the culture is such that it discourages children from participating in matters or discussions concerning their healthcare or general well-being [18]. This is mostly the case for children from marginalized communities, who are often at greater risk of mental health problems and face additional barriers to accessing care [7]. Sadly, the authority of parents and guardians supersedes that of the child over their well-being, and can go against the will of the child but should supposedly be in the child's own interest however, most of the sections of the Nigerian Child Right Act are yet to be implemented [19]. Also, in a study conducted by WHO in 2006, children seem to use mental health hospitals the most in Nigeria but, they also declared limited information from the records when compared to other age groups [20]. Forward to this study, the WHO and the FMOH met to reach a consensus, for which they drafted policies to close the gaps in Nigeria mental health care and this to a large extent remains unimplemented for want of funds. [21].

CONCLUSION

Lastly, no one factor is specifically responsible, it takes a number of factors interacting at different levels and times to ignite a mental health ailment [16]. The mental health system has taken a positive turn to review its policies[10,17] and efforts are being made to effect this into the child rights and mental health policies while improving access and awareness to mental health services for children [22,23]. It is worth mentioning that there are ongoing efforts to address most of these issues and improve the state of child mental health in Nigeria. As the case maybe, there are organizations and initiatives working to raise awareness about the importance of mental health and to provide support to children and families in need as well as enhance mental health [24]. Additionally, some government and non-governmental organizations are working to improve access to mental health services for children [12], including by training mental health professionals and developing community-based programs to support children's mental well-being [7,8], while taking into consideration including mental health in primary health care and improving the care to WHO standard of care[17,25,26].

RECOMMENDATION

It would be of utmost importance to the entire mental healthcare system that further studies are done in relation to this topic. Also, more attention can be given to record keeping in the health care systems and funding should be allocated to creating awareness and research. More so, policies and acts can be reenacted so as to protect child with a view to creating rooms for rehabilitation where certain children have become vulnerable and improving maternal literacy programs which has also been shown to greatly impact child well-being and mental health [26]. This is a call not just to the government but to the private sectors and the non-profit organizations.

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