



# EMOTIONAL SECURITY, RESPONSIVENESS AND SENSITIVITY ON PARENT-CHILD ATTACHMENT AS CORRELATES OF PREVENTION OF SEXUAL ABUSE AMONG FEMALE STUDENTS IN PUBLIC SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN PORT HARCOURT METROPOLIS

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated emotional security, responsiveness, and sensitivity on parent-child attachment as correlate of sexual abuse prevention among female public senior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis. To achieve the objectives of the study two research questions and two hypotheses guided the study. A correlational research design was adopted with a population of 27,752 female senior secondary school students. The sample was 379 female students aged 15-18 determined using the Cochran's formula for the determination of a minimum sample size. Two instruments were used for data collection, the Emotional security, responsiveness and sensitivity questionnaire (ESRSQ) and Sexual abuse prevention questionnaire (SAPQ). The content and face validity of both instruments was determined by test experts and experts in guidance and counselling while the internal consistency method was used to determine its reliability using the Cronbach Alpha statistics which yielded an overall reliability coefficient of 0.695 which was considered strong enough for use. Data were analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) and Multiple Regression Analysis (MRA). Findings revealed a significant positive relationship between emotional security ( $r = 0.621, p < 0.05$ ), responsiveness ( $\beta = 0.425, p < 0.05$ ), and sensitivity ( $\beta = 0.398, p < 0.05$ ) with sexual abuse prevention. The results suggest that emotional security, responsiveness and sensitivity are crucial for preventing sexual abuse. It was concluded that emotional security, parental responsiveness, and sensitivity are vital predictors of sexual abuse prevention among female students. The study recommends strengthened parental bonding programmes and child protection education emphasizing emotional closeness and responsive communication within families.

**Keywords:** Emotional Security, Prevention, Responsiveness, Public Senior Female Secondary Students,, Sensitivity, Sexual Abuse.

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## INTRODUCTION

Sexual abuse among female adolescents has become a persistent public health and social problem, particularly in developing countries where discussions about sexuality and child protection are often shrouded in silence. In Port Harcourt metropolis, cases of sexual abuse involving secondary school girls continue to rise despite increased advocacy and policy interventions. This situation calls for deeper examination into protective factors within the family environment, especially the quality of the parent–child attachment relationship. Research in developmental psychology has consistently shown that secure attachment relationships formed in early life play a crucial role in shaping a child’s emotional regulation, trust, and resilience against victimization.

Parent–child attachment is a multidimensional construct that captures the emotional bond, trust, responsiveness, and mutual communication between parents and their children. Among its several dimensions, emotional security and responsiveness and sensitivity have received significant attention for their role in safeguarding children from risky and abusive experiences. Emotional security, as proposed by attachment theorists like Bowlby (1988) and Ainsworth (1991), reflects a child’s perception of safety, acceptance, and affection in the parental relationship. A child who feels emotionally secure is more likely to disclose threats, avoid risky relationships, and develop confidence to resist manipulation or coercion. Conversely, children who experience inconsistent affection or emotional neglect often exhibit vulnerability to exploitation, including sexual abuse.

Responsiveness and sensitivity, on the other hand, capture the parent’s ability to perceive and appropriately respond to the child’s emotional and physical needs. Parental sensitivity marked by warmth, empathy, and availability encourages open communication and trust. Studies such as those by Main and Cassidy (2007) and Thompson (2016) emphasized that parents who are emotionally responsive and sensitive foster resilience in children and reduce the likelihood of abuse by strengthening communication and early reporting behaviours. In contrast, parents who are emotionally distant or unresponsive tend to raise children with insecure attachments, who may seek comfort and validation outside the family, thereby increasing exposure to abusive circumstances.

Empirical evidence further underscores these associations. For instance, Hamilton and Finkelhor (2018) found that adolescents who reported high emotional security with their parents were significantly less likely to experience sexual abuse. Similarly, responsiveness and sensitivity have been linked to stronger protective attitudes and earlier disclosure of abuse incidents (Knutson & DeGarmo, 2016). A study by Johnson and Davies (2019) conducted in Cape Town, South Africa, explored the relationship between emotional security in the family and vulnerability to sexual abuse among adolescent girls. Their research utilized a mixed-method approach, combining surveys and in-depth interviews with 250 female secondary school students. The study found that adolescents who reported high levels of emotional security, characterized by parental warmth, trust, and open communication, were significantly less likely to experience sexual abuse compared to those in emotionally insecure environments. The authors emphasized that emotional security acts as a protective factor, reducing susceptibility to manipulation and exploitation by perpetrators.

González et al. (2021) conducted a longitudinal study on emotional security and childhood sexual abuse in Spain. Their study followed 500 participants over five years and found that children who had high emotional security within their homes were significantly less likely to

be victims of sexual abuse. The study suggested that a strong parent-child relationship, coupled with education on abuse prevention, played a crucial role in reducing victimization rates.

Johnson et al. (2015) conducted a study on the role of emotional security in mitigating childhood sexual abuse among adolescents in the United States. Their research, published in the *Journal of Child Abuse & Neglect*, examined 300 adolescents who had experienced various forms of sexual abuse. The study found that individuals who reported a higher level of emotional security within their families were significantly less likely to experience sexual abuse. The authors concluded that fostering emotional security through open communication, trust, and parental support could serve as a preventive measure against sexual abuse.

Adeyemi and Okonkwo (2017) conducted a study on emotional security and its impact on sexual abuse among secondary school girls in Lagos, Nigeria. The study examined 250 students and found that girls who felt emotionally secure at home and school were less likely to be victims of sexual abuse. The research highlighted that children from broken homes or those lacking parental affection and security were more vulnerable to abuse.

Parental responsiveness and sensitivity are critical components in the prevention of child sexual abuse (CSA). These attributes foster secure attachments between parents and children, creating an environment where children feel safe to disclose uncomfortable experiences and are less vulnerable to potential abusers. Ndubuisi (2016) conducted a comprehensive analysis of paedophilia and child sexual abuse within the Nigerian context, focusing on the deficiencies in parenting practices that contribute to the vulnerability of children in the digital age. The study highlighted that inadequate parental supervision, lack of open communication, and insufficient education about sexual matters significantly increase the risk of children falling victim to sexual predators. Ndubuisi emphasized the necessity for parents to adopt more responsive and sensitive approaches, including active monitoring of children's activities and fostering an environment where children feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics.

Adeyemi and Ogunleye (2018) explored the impact of parental sensitivity on adolescent vulnerability to sexual abuse in Lagos, Nigeria. The study, based on a mixed-method approach with 300 adolescents, revealed that high parental sensitivity, including active listening and emotional support, was a strong protective factor against sexual abuse. The findings emphasized that adolescents who received less parental attention were more susceptible to abuse due to limited supervision and weak parent-child communication (Adeyemi & Ogunleye, 2018).

Martínez and López (2021) conducted a study in Spain focusing on how parental responsiveness and sensitivity impact children's ability to recognize and resist inappropriate sexual advances. Using a sample of 400 adolescents, they found that children who experienced consistent parental warmth and responsiveness demonstrated higher levels of self-efficacy in rejecting sexual advances and reporting abuse cases (Martínez & López, 2021).

Smith et al. (2015) conducted a study in the United States examining the role of maternal responsiveness in reducing the risk of childhood sexual abuse (CSA). The study, using a longitudinal design with 500 participants, found that children with highly responsive mothers were significantly less likely to experience CSA. The authors argued that responsiveness fosters secure attachment, which enhances children's ability to disclose abuse early (Smith et al., 2015).

These findings suggest that emotional closeness, consistent affection, and responsive parenting serve as natural buffers against sexual exploitation. Despite these insights, there remains limited research within the Nigerian context particularly in the Port Harcourt metropolis examining how emotional security and parental responsiveness collectively contribute to the prevention of sexual abuse among female students in public secondary schools. This study

therefore explores the relationship between emotional security, responsiveness, and sensitivity on parent–child attachment and the prevention of sexual abuse among female secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite growing awareness and advocacy against sexual abuse, incidents among female adolescents in Port Harcourt continue to rise. Many victims are unable to disclose or resist abusive situations due to weak emotional bonds and security, lack of responsiveness and sensitivity on the part of parents. Studies have emphasized that secure attachment relationships serve as protective factors against abuse, yet little is known about how specific dimensions of attachment such as emotional security, responsiveness, and sensitivity interact to influence abuse prevention in the Nigerian context. This gap necessitated the present study to examine how emotional security, responsiveness, and sensitivity in parent–child attachment contribute to the prevention of sexual abuse among female secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between emotional security, responsiveness, and sensitivity as dimensions of parent–child attachment and the prevention of sexual abuse among female secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis. Specifically, the study sought to:

- Determine the relationship between emotional security and sexual abuse prevention.
- Examine the joint and relative contributions of responsiveness and sensitivity to the prevention of sexual abuse.

### **Research Questions**

Two research questions guided this study:

- What is the relationship between emotional security and sexual abuse prevention among female secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis?
- What is the combined relationship between responsiveness and sensitivity and the prevention of sexual abuse among female secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis?

### **Hypotheses**

Two hypotheses further guided the study:

- There is no significant relationship between emotional security and the prevention of sexual abuse among female secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis.
- Responsiveness and sensitivity do not jointly and significantly predict the prevention of sexual abuse among female secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis.

## METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a correlational research design. The population consisted of 27,752 female students in public senior secondary schools in Port Harcourt metropolis. Using Cochran's formula, a sample size of 379 respondents was selected through a stratified random sampling technique. Two instruments titled Emotional Security and responsiveness questionnaire (ESRSQ) and Sexual Abuse Prevention Questionnaire (SAPQ) were used for data collection. The instrument was structured on a 4-point scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. Face and content validity of the instrument was determined by test experts and experts in guidance and counseling while a reliability index of .695 was obtained using the Cronbach alpha statistics, indicating good internal consistency. Data collected were analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) for single-variable relationships and Multiple Regression Analysis (MRA) for dimensions with two predictor variables, at a .05 significance level.

## RESULTS

**Research Question 1:** What is the relationship between emotional security and sexual abuse prevention among female secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis?

**H<sub>01</sub>:** There is no significant relationship between emotional security and sexual abuse prevention.

Table 1: Pearson correlation between emotional security and sexual abuse prevention

Variables	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD	p-value	Decision
Emotional Security	379	18	36	32.45	4.12	.000	Rejected
Sexual Abuse Prevention	379	3	4	3.98	3.98		

  

		Emotional Security	Sexual Abuse Prevention
<b>Emotional Security</b>	Pearson Correlation	1	.621
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	379	379
<b>Sexual Abuse Prevention</b>	Pearson Correlation	.621	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	379	379

The result in Table 1 shows that emotional security is (M = 32.45, SD =4.12) and sexual abuse prevention (M=28.76, SD = 3.98) are strongly and positively correlated (r=0.621, p < 0.05). The answer to research question one therefore is: Emotional security in parent-child attachment has a strong tendency to prevent sexual abuse among female secondary school students.

Furthermore the table reviews a p-value = .000 is less than the significance level of .05, showing that the result is statistically significant. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H<sub>01</sub>) is rejected. This means there is a significant relationship between emotional security in parent-child attachment and sexual abuse prevention among female secondary school students.

**Research Question 2:** What is the combined relationship between responsiveness and sensitivity and the prevention of sexual abuse among female secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis?

**H<sub>02</sub>:** Responsiveness and sensitivity do not jointly and significantly predict the prevention of sexual abuse among female secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis.

Table 2: Model Summary of Regression Analysis

Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	Std. Error		
1	.547	.299	.296	.462		
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Regression		34.291	2	17.145	51.36	.000
Residual		80.456	376	0.214		
Total		114.747	378			
Predictors	B		Std. error	Beta	t	Sig
(Constant)	1.232		0.134		9.194	.000
Responsiveness	0.356		0.072	0.425	4.944	.000
Sensitivity	0.294		0.068	0.40	4.324	.000

In Table 2 shows the model summary of responsiveness and sensitivity produced:  $R = .547$ ,  $R^2 = .299$  (i.e., the two predictors jointly explain 29.9% of the variance in sexual abuse prevention),  $F(2, 376) = 51.36$ ,  $p = 0.000$ . The model is therefore statistically significant.

Responsiveness and sensitivity in parent–child attachment significantly predict the prevention of sexual abuse among female secondary school students. Individually, both responsiveness ( $\beta = 0.425$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and sensitivity ( $\beta = 0.398$ ,  $p < .001$ ) are significant positive predictors; responsiveness shows the slightly larger standardized effect.

The p-value for the model ( $p = 0.000$ ) is less than 0.05, therefore the null hypothesis ( $H_{02}$ ) is rejected. This indicates a significant relationship between the responsiveness, sensitivity and sexual abuse prevention. This suggests that higher parental responsiveness and sensitivity contribute meaningfully to reducing sexual abuse risk among adolescent girls.

## DISCUSSION OF MAJOR FINDINGS

The first finding of this study is found on tables 1 addressing emotional security, responsiveness and sensitivity on parent-child attachment and sexual abuse prevention. The findings of the study showed on Table 1 which answered research question 1 and tested hypothesis 1 revealed a strong positive relationship between emotional security and sexual abuse prevention among female secondary school students in Port Harcourt ( $r = .621$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This indicates that when children feel emotionally secure within their parent-child relationship, they are more likely to be protected from situations of sexual abuse. The rejection of the null hypothesis confirms that emotional security is a significant predictor of sexual abuse prevention.

This finding aligns with Bowlby’s (1988) attachment theory, which emphasizes that secure attachment between a parent and child provides a protective buffer against external threats and vulnerabilities, including abuse. Similarly, Smith and Carlson (2006) argued that children who develop a sense of safety and emotional support within the family environment are less likely to fall victim to predatory relationships outside the home. Their study revealed that

emotional availability of parents reduces children's risk-taking behaviors and susceptibility to exploitation.

Furthermore, Kuther and McDonald (2004) found that adolescents with stronger parental emotional bonds exhibited lower vulnerability to sexual harassment and coercion. This supports the present finding, suggesting that emotional security equips children with confidence, self-esteem, and protective mechanisms that reduce their risk of abuse.

In the Nigerian context, Ebigbo (2002) highlighted that children who lack parental emotional support often seek validation externally, which exposes them to abuse. The present finding therefore reinforces the argument that strengthening emotional bonds between parents and children in Port Harcourt is a vital strategy for combating sexual abuse.

Empirical studies support this outcome. For example, Thompson (2008) found that adolescents who reported high levels of emotional security with their parents demonstrated stronger coping skills and were less vulnerable to exploitation. Similarly, Johnson and Kenney (2010) observed that secure attachment relationships provided adolescents with confidence to disclose unsafe encounters, thereby reducing the likelihood of prolonged or repeated abuse. In the Nigerian context, Okafor and Opara (2015) also reported that emotional bonds between parents and children served as protective buffers against peer pressure and external threats, including sexual violence.

While this study was conducted in Port Harcourt, its findings corroborate broader international evidence. For instance, Miller and Crouch (2013) highlighted that children with secure emotional foundations tend to internalize parental guidance more effectively, making them more aware of risk behaviors and protective strategies. In contrast, those lacking emotional security were found to have difficulties trusting authority figures or confiding in parents, thus increasing their vulnerability to abuse.

The present study's results also carry practical implications for policy interventions. Emotional security encourages adolescents to perceive their parents as reliable sources of protection and guidance. When female adolescents feel emotionally supported, they are more likely to seek help immediately in the face of abuse or suspicious advances, thereby reducing the impact of such threats. Conversely, the absence of emotional security can create emotional isolation, fear, and secrecy, which abusers often exploit.

Taken together, this study demonstrates that emotional security is not only a key dimension of attachment but also a powerful protective factor in sexual abuse prevention. By strengthening emotional bonds with their daughters, parents can contribute significantly to the overall safety, confidence, and well-being of adolescents.

The implication is that it suggests that policy interventions and programmes on sexual abuse prevention should include training parents on how to build emotionally secure relationships with their children.

The second finding of this study is found on Tables 2 addressing responsiveness, Sensitivity and Sexual Abuse Prevention the results showed that responsiveness and sensitivity jointly accounted for 29.9% of the variance in sexual abuse prevention. Both responsiveness ( $\beta = 0.425$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and sensitivity ( $\beta = 0.398$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) were significant predictors. This means that when parents are attentive and sensitive to their children's emotional and developmental needs, the likelihood of sexual abuse is greatly reduced. This finding is consistent with Ainsworth et al. (1978) classic research on maternal sensitivity, which concluded that sensitive responsiveness is the foundation of secure attachment. Children whose parents promptly and consistently respond

to their needs tend to have higher trust and feel safer in disclosing troubling experiences, including abuse.

Similarly, Cicchetti and Toth (2005) established that lack of parental responsiveness is a major predictor of children's vulnerability to maltreatment and abuse. They found that unresponsive parents fail to recognize cues of distress in children, thereby leaving them exposed to potential harm. Kerns and Brumariu (2014) further observed that adolescents with responsive parents were more open in discussing sensitive issues, including those related to sexuality and personal safety, which enhanced their ability to resist exploitation. In Nigeria, Uche and Eke (2016) reported that parental responsiveness was positively associated with female adolescents' awareness of risky environments and their ability to seek parental intervention in cases of suspected abuse.

Furthermore, Dwyer and Miller (2016) found that adolescents who perceive their parents as responsive were significantly more likely to disclose sexual harassment or abuse incidents at early stages, reducing prolonged exposure. Responsiveness reassures adolescents that they will be listened to and protected, which is crucial for fostering a culture of openness and safety.

The implication of this finding is clear because the responsiveness in parenting is more than simply reacting to a child's needs; it forms the basis of effective communication, trust, and a willingness to seek parental help. In the absence of responsiveness, adolescents may withdraw, suppress their concerns, or fear negative consequences, making them more vulnerable to abusers.

Thus, responsiveness stands out as an essential parenting practice that significantly contributes to preventing sexual abuse among female adolescents. Parents who demonstrate sensitivity and attentiveness help foster resilience, assertiveness, and protective awareness in their children.

In Nigeria, Okafor and Agbo (2016) reported that adolescents from homes where parents were less responsive to their emotional needs were more prone to sexual exploitation, especially in urban centers such as Port Harcourt. This supports the present study, as responsiveness and sensitivity appear to serve as protective mechanisms against sexual abuse. The implication remains that it promotes policy interventions and programmes on child protection should emphasize improving parental sensitivity to warning signs, emotional cues, and developmental needs of adolescents.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study successfully investigated emotional security, responsiveness and sensitivity on parent-child attachment as correlates of prevention of sexual abuse among female students in public senior secondary schools in Port Harcourt metropolis. The evidence revealed that secure parent-child emotional security attachment significantly contributes to the prevention of sexual abuse among female students, with statistical proof beyond reasonable doubt. Also, responsiveness and sensitivity, as dimensions of parent-child attachment, jointly and significantly predict the prevention of sexual abuse, showing that emotionally responsive and sensitive parents raise children with stronger resilience and disclosure of sexual abuse behaviour.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- Parents should foster stronger emotional bonds with their children through affection, attention, and trust-building activities that enhance emotional security.
- Parental education programmes should emphasize the importance of responsiveness and sensitivity to children's emotional and social needs to enhance communication and early disclosure of abuse.

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