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# Effects Of Parental Separation On Psychosocial Well-Being Of Children In Secondary Schools In Ibadan North Local Government, Ibadan, Oyo-State

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## Abstract

The observation of a rise in separation cases raises a major concern of its effect on children at this particular developmental stage of life who are already facing very many changes happening in their life. Few studies have examined the effect of parental separation on psychosocial well-being of children among in-school teenagers in Nigeria. This study aimed to add to this body of literature by examining the effect of parental separation on social, spiritual, intellectual, psychosocial well-being on in-school teenagers in Ibadan North Local Government Area of Oyo State, Nigeria. The study adopted cross-sectional research design involving a sample of 400 in-school students in the study area using an adapted standardized validated instrument. Among other findings, it found a significant inverse relationship parental separation and psychosocial wellbeing among teenagers in Ibadan North LGA and almost half (42.4%) of the respondents who have separated parents have known about it for more ten years. This implies a teenagers who have the separated parents are more likely to experience ill-health psychosocially and these may also transcend to their intellectual well-being. Among others, policy makers should enact policy that mandate schools on the concurrent assessment of students' socio-demographics especially their parental status, their relationship and living condition periodically to continually evaluate social well-being, emotional well-being, and spiritual well-being. This will constantly help the teachers, school authorities, parent/guidance and other concerned bodies on the mental state of the students' which is most necessary and determines their academic performance.

**Keyword:** Social well-being, Emotional well-being, Spiritual well-being, Psychological well-being

## Introduction

The institution of marriage involves two individuals who have come together in union with the hope of spending their whole life married and building a family together as a complete family unit comprising of the couple and their children (Van Pelt, 2008). However, staying married has become a difficult task. Challenges such as poor communication, living with an imperfect mate, nagging partner, destructive habits, lack of coping skills in times of conflicts, unaddressed sexual issues, financial challenges and a busy work schedule have greatly contributed to the rise in marriages failing (Reiter, Hjorleifsson, Bredablik & Meland, 2013). Parental separation has a great impact because the children are still getting socialized into the society. In most cases, all the stakeholders who include the couple undergoing the separation and the children involved in the separation process are affected by the changes happening in one way or another.

According to Newman and Newman (2015), people get married with the hope of having a lifetime satisfying union with their partner. These people marry for love, for companionship, for friendship, for a parental, for financial stability and for intimacy among other reasons. The idea of staying

married and having children while growing old together is the image most people who get married have. This is however sometimes not the case. Marriage is an institution that has been facing numerous challenges in the past and many people end up getting into separation which affects the well-being of their children (Reiter, Hjørleifsson, Breidablik & Meland, 2013).

The observation of a rise in separation cases raises a major concern of its effect on children at this particular developmental stage of life who are already facing very many changes happening in their life. This increases chances of parental separation affecting their social, intellectual and emotional well-being (Adofo & Etsey, 2016). The negative effects of parental separation upon children depend upon factors, including the age and sex of the child at the time it occurs, the amount of conflict within the parental unity, and the degree of co-operation between the separated parents (Wolfinger, 2005). Each of these factors, alone or interaction with each other influences the psychological health of the child and the ability of the child to do well at school. In general, children who have recently experienced a parental dissolution have a more difficult time with education and academic expectations at school than children from a stable parental or "happy parental". This is visible in the children's ability to adjust to the reality of their parents' separation, most circumstances, children of separated homes, are only disposed to the negative effect of their current parental situation such children show resilience in adjusting to the effects of parental separation (Brownlee, 2007).

The failure of marriages has negatively affected the social well-being, emotional well-being, intellectual wellbeing, and spiritual well-being of children caught up in the marital conflict that leads to parental separation. The parent is viewed as the basic unit of a society that provides growth and development of its members through human interaction, emotional bonding and enduring relationships (Agochiya, 2010). The parental environment is very crucial for an adolescent in enabling them cope with life issues and day-to-day challenges during this crucial stage of development. Through guidance from parents, the adolescent is able to comfortably deal with conflicts, shape their behaviour and actions as well as learn how to effectively bond with both the parental and those in the external world such as friends in school.

Children's reactions to separation vary depending on the parental level and characteristics, the level of conflict, gender, individual temperament, parents' emotional reactions and amount of time the adolescent spent with each parent (Brooks, 2011). Some children become aggressive and insecure as a result of parental separation while others become more caring and completely adjust to the new parental set up especially if they were properly prepared for the separation or if their parental environment was filled with spousal violence, abuse or severe conflict, separation comes as a relief to such children (Strong et al. 2008).

Policy interest in separation has predominantly been driven by the (perceived) negative outcomes for the children involved. Children whose parents are separated score lower on a variety of emotional, behavioural, social, health and academic outcomes than children of continuously married couples (Amato, 2010, Mooney et al., 2009). The impact of parental conflict on children's post-separation adjustment has received considerable attention in literature. Most theorists agree that parental conflict, at the very least, provides some negative influences for children's adjustment to the separation (Grych & Fincham, 2002). Parental interaction has a better effect on children than the separation. In other words, the negative outcome of separation may increase pre-existing differences in the parental unit prior to the separation itself.

There are increased cases of couples separating in Nigeria (Tumuti, Ireri & Tumuti, 2012). Therefore, there is the need to investigate comparatively the effect of parental separation on the psychosocial wellbeing of children in secondary schools in Ibadan North local government in



Ibadan, Oyo state. The outcome of this study would benefit social and welfare agencies, educationists, decision/policy makers as well as other stakeholders, by enabling them to understand the effects of Parental separation, emotional well-being, social well-being and spiritual well-being of children in secondary school. Findings from this study would serve as a source of reference for future researchers who may wish to conduct similar studies. Finally, the study would fill the gaps in the body of knowledge by adding to the existing literature.

Separation is a legal agreement by which husband and wife choose not live together. Separation is the removal of children from the care-giver(s) to whom they are attached. Separation frees parents from the burden of child rearing (Caye, 2006). The separation limits can be established for parental behaviour and the child will get the message that the society will protect him or her even if the parent will not. Separation and divorce represent a cascade of potentially stressful changes in the social and physical environment of families. It is often associated with increased parental distress, reduced attention paid to the child by one or both parents, disruption of the home environment, conflict over money and custody/visitation, and reduced economic circumstances, all of which are stressors for children (Kelly & Emery, 2003; Stadelmann, Perren, Groeben, & von Klitzing, 2010). Parental preoccupation with issues pertaining to separation/divorce and adjustment to the new domestic arrangements can also interfere with effective parenting, which can lead to problems in their children (Laurin et al., 2015). This separation is a family as well as a personal crisis. It is a process that entails psychological risks as well as opportunity for the development of the stakeholders. They further stated that the process unfolds in distinct stages that are characterized by qualitative differences of themes and of degree of coping. Separation is associated with heart rending emotions, unspeakable sadness, depression, anxiety and much more. It leads to the creation of two households rather than one, with consequent increased cost and all parties involved suffer these effects.

Cayer (1996) as reported in Ahiaoma (2013) identify several types of separation as follows:

*No -faulty separation:* - It exists when a marriage partner does not need to show that the other marriage partner did or was at fault to obtain a separation. The reason for this includes incompatibility, irreconcilable differences and irremediable breakdown of the marriage. No-fault separation is usually preceded by a separation or deemed separation for 12 months and the separation applicable can be made by both parties jointly.

*Fault separation:* it is a common way of breaking a marriage. Fault separation occurs when one party is blamed by the other and viewed as causing the separation. Traditionally, couples were not just able to separation whenever they wanted to. One party to the marriage must have done something that warranted the other wanting to end the marital union. The distribution of property and will allow an immediate separation in states where there is a waiting period required for no fault separation.

*Summary separation:* A summary or simple separation available in some jurisdictions is used when spouse meet certain eligibility requirement or can agree on key issues before hand.

*Uncontested separation* refers to marriages that end up in separation because the two parties are able to come to an agreement (either with or without lawyer or mediators) about the property, children and support issues. When the parties can agree and present the court with a fair and equitable agreement approval of the separation is almost guaranteed. If the two parties cannot come to an agreement they may ask the court to decide how to split property and support issues with children among others.

*Collaborative separation:* Here the parties negotiate an agreed resolution with the assistance of attorneys who are trained in the collaborative separation process and often with the assistance of a neutral financial specialist and / separation coaches. The parties are empowered to make their own decisions based on their own needs and interest but with complete information and full professional support. Once the collaborative separation starts the lawyers are disqualified from representing the parties in a contested legal proceeding should the collaborative law processes end prematurely.

*Mediated separation:* involves a mediator facilitating the discussion between the husband and wife by assisting with communication and providing information and suggestions to help resolve their differences. At the end of the mediation process the separation parties have developed a tailored separation agreement that can be submitted to the court.

Reasons for the breakdown of the partnership are (in the perspectives of the former couple): unfulfilled emotional needs, different attitudes towards gender roles (especially concerning work distribution within the family and responsibility of fathers), diverse educational and pedagogical principles, communication problems, absence of dyadic coping and conflict solving strategies, different priorities regarding spare time and family time, strong professional engagement and long workdays of men. From the female perspective, alcohol abuse was problematic, whereas men estimate sexual problems as a source of conflict.

According to Mba (1980) the causes of divorce in the traditional marriage system include; Changing family function such as education and recreation have been taken over by outside agencies, Causal marriages bring about hasty marriages and quick divorce, Job for women: women are no longer dependent on men for their livelihood. They now have their sources of income and thus feel freer to leave when difficulties arise in the marriage, decline in moral and religious sanctions, for example, the Roman Catholic Church is still opposed to divorce, but most others have taken a liberal view towards it. The philosophy of happiness is also one of the main goals of marriage are personal satisfaction and happiness. When these goals are not met, the marriage is dissolved and new mates are sought. More permissive divorce law: Divorce is so paramount that couples do not seek to heal or restore their broken relationships but rather they take the easy way out which is divorce or separation. Divorce on demand is now readily available with relatively less expenses. All these factors discussed above bring about unhappiness which consequently to failed marriages and eventually to permanent separation and divorce of the couples.

Separation is an event with seemingly paradoxical outcomes. D'Onofrio (2011) notes that while "parental separation is associated with approximately a one-half to two folds increase in the risk for impairing outcomes", they also state that "a majority of offspring who have experienced a parental separation do not experience these serious outcomes". What is effectively suggested by the research is that while the long term effects of separation are normally minimal, when they are negative they are extraordinarily negative for children's outcomes. Separation represents a pivotal and often traumatic shift in a child's world and from his perspective, a loss of family. When told of the news, many children feel sad, angry, and anxious, and have a hard time grasping how their lives will change. The age at which a child's parents separation also has an impact on how he responds and what he understands about the new family structure. Here is a brief summary of what children comprehend at different ages and how one can help ease their transition;

During infancy, babies are able to feel tension in the home (and between their parents) but can't understand the reasoning behind the conflict. If the tension continues, babies may become irritable and clingy, especially around new people, and have frequent emotional outbursts. They may also tend to regress or show signs of developmental delay. Children this age require consistency and routine and are comforted by familiarity. Therefore, it's helpful to maintain normal daily routines,

particularly regarding sleep and meals, during and after the separation. Provide your child with his favorite toys or security items, and spend extra time holding him and offering physical comfort. During the toddler years, a child's main bond is with her parents, so any major disruption in her home life can be difficult for her to accept and comprehend. What's more, kids this age are self-centered and may think they've caused their parents' breakup. They may cry and want more attention than usual, regress and return to thumb sucking, resist toilet training, have a fear of being abandoned, or have trouble going to sleep or sleeping alone at night. If possible, parents should work together to develop normal, predictable routines that their child can easily follow. It's also important to spend quality time with your child and offer extra attention, and ask trusted friends and relatives to do the same. Discuss your child's feelings (if she's old enough to talk), read books together, and assure her that she's not responsible for the breakup.

If school-age kids have grown up in a nurturing environment, it will be only natural for them to have a fear of being abandoned during a separation. Younger children, 5 to 8 year-olds, for instance, will not understand the concept of separation and may feel as if their parents are divorcing them. They may worry about losing their father (if they're living with their mother) and fantasize that their parents will get back together. In fact, they often believe they can "rescue" their parents' marriage. Children from 9 to 16 may blame one parent for the separation and align themselves with the "good" parent against the "bad." Children in secondary school can feel extreme loss and rejection during a separation, but parents can rebuild their child's sense of security and self-esteem. This may begin by having each parent spend quality time with the child, urging the child to open up about his or her feelings, reassuring the child that neither parent will abandon her, and reiterate that the separation is not her fault. (Likewise, parents should not blame one another for the split, but explain that it was a mutual decision.)

Finally, since school, friendships, and extracurricular activities are of increasing importance to children at this age, the child should be encouraged to get involved in events and pastimes she thoroughly enjoys. Children's self-esteem should be rekindled and are to be encouraged to reach out to others and not withdraw from the world.

Separation is viewed as a process that is linked to emotional distress, it causes growth for some children but developmental vulnerabilities for most because they are not able to effectively handle this process and who most of the time experience shock as they lose the non-custodial parent from their day to day interactions. Both parents are independently very important to the children as they grow. Each parent has a separate role that they play and contribute on a daily basis to ensuring that the children emotionally mature to be a stable adult.

According to Strong et al. (2008) separation is a long complicated process which starts way before the legal separation process. The emotional processes involved when the conflicts prior to the separation begin all take a toll on both the couple and their children who are aware of what is going on. Emotional issues such as undermining the other spouse's self-esteem, indifference and destructive criticism in the end all affect the children experiencing parental separation. As parents' separation, there are many issues that arise that could affect the emotional well-being of children such as issues of dealing with step parents, feeling unwanted by the parent that files for separation, issues of child custody, visitation and support matters among other issues. Parental separation causes separation distress which needs to be dealt with to avoid children getting into emotional stress. The worst nightmare is a child finding out that their family will no longer be together in the family structure of father, mother and children. Many children view parental separation as very traumatic. These children experience a lot of emotional turmoil during the period before parental separation which sometimes becomes a part of how they will later view life, relationships or

friendships. The children may sometimes become emotionally angry with their parents for interfering with their life and the comfort they were enjoying before the marital conflict began (Strong et al. 2008).

According to McLahan and Sandefur (1994), for children to grow up to be a successful adult, they need intellectual stimulation by understanding that working hard has benefits and pays off. In order, Children need close fulfilling relationship with their parents who are committed to their well-being, for them to be confident as they study. They need parents that constantly supervise their work and guide them to ensure they remain focused and on the right path. Single parenthood sometimes affects the quality of education for children of separation because in some cases, it is only one parent who has to take up the full responsibility of financing everything. Boys that use drugs get into trouble with their teachers and the consequences thereafter such as getting punished leads to loss of important school time that could have been used for learning. The brain functioning is greatly affected by use of alcohol and other drugs as indicated by Kalat (2013). These drugs end up slowing down the brain performance. In most cases, these children engage in alcohol consumption as a way of dealing with the frustrations as a result of the parental separation. Their schoolwork gets affected and starts to deteriorate as they get deeper and deeper into these externalizing behaviours. In most cases, these boys keep bad company that may also influence them to get into delinquent behaviours such as stealing from their peers. Adofó and Etsey (2016) suggest that boys are more likely to exhibit externalizing behaviour than girls due to parental separation. However, times are changing and girls are also exhibiting externalizing behaviour such as drinking and sexual aggression just like the boys. They feel lost and are trapped on how to find maturity identity with all the family problems around them. Both boys and girls end up being trapped in problems as they try to find ways to help in coping with parental separation, which in the end affects their intellectual well-being and generally their success later in life. Good education is known to give an individual better chance of understanding the world and having knowledge that helps them whether in self-employment or as they seek jobs.

According to Newman & Newman (2015), children try to achieve autonomy during this stage of development and may not seek advice from parents but mostly from their peers, which means having a social system is very crucial for them at this stage of life. Though they prefer seeking help from peers, the closeness and union with parents is still valued and when a serious problem arises, they seek advice from the parents. Children who continue to experience parental warmth also report lower levels of distress than those who report more distant relationship with parents. Those with distant parents may report depressed mood more than their peers who are enjoying the warmth of their parents.

Conflicts arise regularly between children and their parents as they interact such as on issues on household chores, curfews, friends, spending of money, going out to parties, school performance among other issues (Amato, 2012). As the children engage with their parents in resolving such problems, their social skills are being sharpened hence encouraging their social well-being. Secure attachments at home leads to better social skills with the world. Parental separation disorganizes this process because the children's normal growth process is affected as the individual focuses their energy on dealing with the current changes happening at home. Rosnati,

Barni and Uglia (2014) state that children from separated families attribute great importance to hedonism whereby they indulge in activities focusing on self-indulgence and enjoying life, like stimulation by having a varied life and being daring. These children adhere less to conformity, they may be disobedient and low on self-discipline as compared to their peers who are living with both parents in a marriage setting.

The children who have experienced parental separation experience significant loss of their close relationships such as close family friends, extended family members especially from the side of the parent that they no longer stay with and other social changes such as having to form new friends as they move school or homes if this comes with the separation (Amato, 2012). Parental separation destabilizes the teenager and affects their ability to form healthy social relationships and be in harmony with the community. As they lose these significant relationships, they start changing their perspective on social relationships. According to Makofane and Mogoane (2012), parental separation has a great impact on children. They start by grieving and then they begin on a journey of self-judgment, fear, guilt and anger. The process negatively affects how they relate with other people and the community with some of these children becoming reserved and refusing to form any social relationships. In some instances, if the period before parental separation was very difficult and domestic violence was involved, the children will avoid forming friendships especially with the gender of the parent that was violent due to prejudices formed during the violent pre-separation period.

Consequently, this neglect leaves the children with no one to guide them socially thus affecting them negatively in terms of learning healthy social skills and living in harmony with those around and the community. Makofane & Mogoane (2012) state that parental separation involves one parent moving out. If the children has to move together with that parent, the move causes a change in the residence and school, thus destabilizes the current social networks of the children. As this happens, the teenager has to adapt to another environment, new school, new neighborhood and all the changes that come with the separation. Some children have high coping mechanisms and will adjust to the changes quickly while others have low coping skills based on their personality which makes it difficult to adjust to the changes and hence negatively affecting their social well-being. The impact in some instances affects the children even as they move onto the next stages of development. According to Cui, Fincham and Durtschi (2010), children who have experienced parental separation while growing become young adults who are open to separation. Therefore, they fail to hold on to social relations that are not functional. They will not go out of their way to work extremely hard at relationships and having harmony with the community because they are open to the fact that if things do not work out in friendships, community unions or any other aspect linked to their social well-being, they can comfortably walk away or abandon it.

### **Theoretical framework**

The theory adopted for this study is attachment theory. The Attachment theory was first conceptualized by John Bowlby and later refined by Mary Ainsworth (Bretherton, 2002). The theory contends that a strong emotional bond with at least one primary caregiver is crucial for healthy child development. Attention is given in much of the literature to the child's mother as the primary caregiver (Cavanagh & Huston, 2008). Attachment theory offers insights into the depressed academic achievement of students from some subgroups of nontraditional families.

Attachment theory states that attachment is a key aspect to determining personality and behavior throughout an individual's lifetime. Attachment theory is focused on the relationships and bonds between people such as those between a parent and child. According to Bowlby 1969, attachment can be defined as a strong bond that develops first between parent and child, and later in peer and romantic relationships. Attachment is more than overt behavior, it is internal, being built into the nervous system, in the course and as a result of the infant's experience of his transactions with the mother (Ainsworth, 1967). This theory is relevant to the study on the premise that every individual belong to a family and there is always a bond that is attached to the family. In a situation where there is either a conflict, family comes first and children who are focus of this study are offspring

of family whom they are attached to. Therefore, any rift or discord to the bond of this attachment can be traumatizing

### **Methodology**

The study adopted cross-sectional research design involving a sample of students in secondary schools in Ibadan North Local Government Area. Being one of the five LGAs in the Ibadan metropolis which is the capital of Oyo state bounded by six LGAs, although it is dominated by Yorubas, it enjoys a mix of other indigenous cultures such as Hausa/Fulani, Igbos, Edos, Urhobos etc. Oyo is equally recognized as the state with the highest level of urbanization (85%), also the dense population equally increases the prevalence of teenage whose parents are separated in this area (Olaniyan, 2015).

The sampling technique adopted for this research is multi-stage sampling where purposive sampling technique was used to select six (6) secondary schools in Ibadan north local government area, Ibadan, Oyo state. Seventy-five (75) students were selected each from four (4) public schools and fifty (50) students each from two (2) private schools. This gave a composed sample of four hundred (400) participants in the six (6) secondary schools. This study adapted standardized and validated instruments with subdivisions which include; The 13 items used to measure social wellbeing scale were adapted from Corey Lee M. Keyes (1998). The 10 items used to measure emotional well-being were adopted from Ian Liddle and Greg Carter (2004) Stirling Children Wellbeing Scale (SCWBS). The 10 items used to measure spiritual well-being items were adapted from Daaleman, T.P. and Frey, B.B. (2004) Spirituality Index of Wellbeing (SIWB).

Ethical approval was gotten from an ethics board before commencement of the study and data collection was done with adherence to ethics of research by explaining the purpose of the study to each respondents and asking their permission to involve in the study by answering questionnaire and ensuring confidentiality of respondents' responses. The data generated from the field with the help of questionnaire were checked, cleaned, coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 20). The data were analyzed at both descriptive and inferential levels and presented in frequencies, Percentages, Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC), and Multiple Regressions analysis at 0.05 significance level of acceptance or rejection.

### **Results**

#### ***Socio-demographic Characteristics of Respondents***

The socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents including sex, age, educational level, ethnicity, religious affiliation, residence and status of how parents of the respondents are living at the time of the study are summarized and presented in table 1.