



# School Phobia among Early Child Development Learners in Abia State

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**Abstract:** The purpose of the study was to find out the opinion of teachers on school phobia among early child development (ECD) pupils in Abia state. The descriptive research design was used in the study to found out if they exhibit school phobia, the causes and possible ways of handling such children. The population consisted of all the 2391 teachers in the ECD centers in the state. Simple random sampling was used to select 7 schools from each of the 17 local government areas of the state while purposive sampling was employed to select only 2 ECD teachers in the selected schools to give a total of 238 teachers which is about 10% of the entire population. Data were collected by administering a 22 item questionnaire to the teachers and analyzed using frequency counts and percentages. It was observed that these pupils actually exhibit school phobia which is caused by seeing strange faces around, coping with school rules and activities amongst others. The teachers also opined that to handle such children, teachers should be friendly, act as surrogate parents, use educational video films and make the school look like home. Some of the recommendations made in the study were that teachers and the school environment should be attractive to the child; parents were advised to have cordial relationship with their child's teacher and consult him/her when the situation persists. It was concluded that that since school phobia exist among ECD pupils teachers, parents and schools should work hands on deck to make young children love school.

**Key words:** School Phobia, Early child Development (ECD), Abia State

## Introduction

Phobia is defined by the Longman dictionary as a strong, unreasonable dislike or fear of something. School phobia is therefore a strong or an excessive and unreasonable fear for school. Obinaju (1992) says school phobia is fear directed towards school, schooling and the school programme. This is very common among pre-school children otherwise called early child development pupils. The structure of the Nigerian education system begins from the Early Child Care and Development Education for children aged 0 – 4 years. It is the care, protection, stimulation and learning promoted in children from age 0 - 4 years in crèche or nursery (FRN, 2013). The National Policy on Education states the objectives of the Early Child Care and Development Education as to: (a) Effect a smooth transition from the home to the school; (b) Prepare the child for the primary level of education; (c) Provide adequate care, supervision and security for the children while their parents are at work; (d) Inculcate social oral norms and values; (e) Inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music and the use of toys, etc; (f) Develop a sense of co-operation and team-spirit; (g) Stimulate in the child good habits, including good health habits; and (h)

Teach the rudiments of numbers; letters, colours, shape, forms etc, through play (FRN, 2013: 5). To achieve these goals the Federal government of Nigeria situates Early Child Development (ECD) centres within existing primary schools across the nation.

The importance of early child care and development education can be seen in the objectives of the Federal Government of Nigeria stated in her national policy. The Early Child Development (ECD) centres are structured such that they young children can learn to make friends, socialize very well with other children, take care of themselves, their belongings and that of other children, learn to make choices and follow instructions, learn cognitive and motor skills, secure social and emotional development and all-round solid foundation for mature and useful childhood.

While school can be fun to some children from the first day at school it might be traumatic to others. The sudden change from home to school or from parents to an unknown teacher or care giver is often resisted by children. This resistance is often expressed through extreme fear or phobia for school. Mables (2014) identifies symptoms of school phobia as paleness, stomach trouble, trembling, frequent visits to toilet, nausea just before it is time to leave the house and unexplained body pains. She added that these symptoms suddenly disappear if the child is allowed to stay at home only to reappear when there is pressure to go to school. It is necessary at this point not to confuse school refusal or truancy with school phobia. Ingles, Micia and Monteagudo (2015), describe school refusal behavior as a child's refusal to go to school and/or persistent difficulty to remain in class for the entire school day which manifests in children and adolescence from 5 – 17 years of age. In other words, school refusal/truancy is a child's refusal to attend or stay in school motivated by a desire to satisfy odd or juvenile desires. While school phobia is a common childhood behavior motivated by a strange or sudden change from the usual. Most children with school phobia display shy and introverted behavior, physically compliant, some throw tantrums, are irrationally fearful and unfriendly to others around them (Fremont, 2003). Mables (2014) observed that these symptoms happens not only to new entrants but also to other children in similar environment sometimes after a prolonged absence from school as a result of illness, an abrupt change in class or a prolonged holidays. School phobia is a common behavior among very young children when they are away from their home or parents. Akpan (2013: 135) opined that knowing, caring, giving special treatment and showing friendly gestures will make the child look forward to being in school every day. She also advocated that teachers of very young children should play, sing, dance and talk with them, visit them at least once in their homes and talk one on one with their parents to show care and familiarity.

Obinnaju (1992) conducted a study on school phobia among pre-primary children in Akwa Ibom state and confirmed that it does exist in pre-primary schools in Akwa Ibom state could this be peculiar to Akwa Ibom state alone? This study seeks to find out if school phobia exist among preschool children in other places like Abia state.

The objectives of the study were to:

- (a) Find out (by characteristics) if early child development pupils in Abia State exhibit school phobia.
- (b) Find out the causes of school phobia.
- (c) Seek teachers' opinion on possible ways of handling children who have school phobia.

- (d) Conclusion.
- (e) Recommendations.

### **Research Method**

A descriptive survey research design was used for the study. According to Osuala in Akintunde (2015) descriptive survey focus research on people, their opinion, attitudes motivation and behavior. It is therefore suitable for this study because the frequency counts of teachers were used to determine their opinion on the symptoms, causes, prevention and treatment of school phobia among Early Child Development (ECD) pupils in Abia state. Located in the south eastern region of Nigeria, Abia State lies within approximately latitudes  $4^{\circ} 40'$  and  $6^{\circ} 14'$  north, and longitudes  $7^{\circ} 10'$  and  $8^{\circ}$  east. The state shares common boundaries to the north with Ebonyi State; to the south and southwest with Rivers State; and to the east and southeast with Cross River and Akwa Ibom States respectively. To the west is Imo State, and to the northwest is Anambra State. ([http://www.nigeriagalleria.com/Nigeria/States\\_Nigeria/Abia/Abia\\_State.html](http://www.nigeriagalleria.com/Nigeria/States_Nigeria/Abia/Abia_State.html)).

The population consisted of all the 2391 teachers in the ECD centres in Abia State. Simple random sampling was used to select 7 schools from each of the 17 L.G.As of the state to give a sample of 119 schools. Purposive sampling was employed to select only 3 ECD teachers in the selected schools to give a total of 238 ( $17 \times 7 \times 2 = 238$ ) which is 10% of the entire population.

A 22 item questionnaire divided into three sections and titled teachers opinion on the symptoms, causes, prevention and treatment of school phobia in ECD pupils. (TOSCPTSPECDP) was used to illicit response from the teachers. Data were collected by visiting the schools with the help of research assistance who were briefed by the researcher on what to do. Data collected were analyzed using frequency counts and percentages. The items were dichotomously scored using Yes or No, while the opinion that has the higher percentage was considered as the opinion to be accepted.

### **Results and discussion**

Table 1: Characteristics of pupils with school phobia

s/n	Items	Yes	%	No	%	Decision
1	Refusal to leave the parent to follow the teacher.	194	81.5	44	18.5	Accept
2	Refusal to play or share with other children.	156	65.5	82	34.5	Accept
3	Crying incessantly.	176	73.9	62	26.1	Accept
4	Refusal to talk to anyone in the class.	179	75.2	59	24.8	Accept
5	Attempting to run away.	180	75.6	58	24.4	Accept
6	Rejection of snacks/food during	49	20.6	189	79.4	Reject
7	Throwing tan trumps.	75	31.5	163	68.5	Reject

<b>8</b>	Expressing aggressiveness.	83	34.9	155	65.1	Reject
<b>9</b>	Looking frightened.	151	63.4	87	36.5	Accept
<b>10</b>	Stomach ache, fever, nausea.	34	14.3	204	85.7	Reject
<b>11</b>	Pant wetting/soiling.	83	34.9	155	65.1	Reject

Table 1 shows teachers' opinion on the characteristics of ECD pupils who have school phobia. Refusal to leave the parent to follow the teacher, play or share with other children, incessant crying, not talking to anyone, attempting to run away and looking frightened had varying high frequency counts 194, 156, 176, 179, 180 and 151 out of a total sample size of 238 which gives 82%, 66%, 74%, 75.2%, 76% and respectively. These characteristics indicate that ECD pupils in the area of study actually exhibit symptoms of school phobia, it also goes to support the assertions of Obinaju (1992) that school phobia is common among pre-school children. The result in table 1 also shows that rejection of snacks/food during, throwing tan trumps, expressing aggressiveness and pant wetting/soiling had lower frequency counts of 49, 75, 83 and 83 with 21%, 32%, 35% and 35% respectively indicating that teachers did not find these symptoms much among ECD pupils. This is against the observation of Mables (2014) who identified symptoms of school phobia as paleness, stomach trouble, trembling, frequent visits to toilet and nausea. Although the result did not completely rule these out, they however had low frequency counts and percentages, therefore were rejected in the study as symptoms of school phobia in ECD pupils.

Table 2: Teachers opinion on the causes of school phobia.

s/n	Items	Yes	%	No	%	Decision
<b>1</b>	Sudden change in environment.	173	72.7	65	27.3	Accept
<b>2</b>	Seeing strange faces around.	228	95.8	10	4.2	Accept
<b>3</b>	Over petting at home.	71	29.8	167	70.2	Reject
<b>4</b>	Missing home and its comfort.	195	81.9	43	18.1	Accept
<b>5</b>	Leaving home for the first time to stay with unfamiliar people.	140	58.8	98	41.2	Accept
<b>6</b>	Incompatibility with school rules and activities	172	72.3	66	27.7	Accept

Table 2 shows teachers opinion on the causes of school phobia among ECD pupils in the study area. They include sudden change in environment, seeing strange faces around, missing home and its comfort, leaving home for the first time to stay with unfamiliar people and incompatibility with school rules and activities received higher frequency counts of 173, 228, 195, 140, 172 resulting to 73%, 96%, 82%, 59% and 72.3% respectively. According to these

findings teachers accept that school phobia is caused by the children seeing unknown people around them in an unfamiliar environment missing home to cope with school formalities and rules. This confirms the observations of Fremont (2003) and Mables (2014) that school phobia occurs when children are with unfamiliar people or get back to school after a prolonged holiday or sickness.

Table 3: Teachers' opinion on ways of handling children who have school phobia.

s/n	Items	Yes	%	No	%	Decision
1	The school environment should be child friendly.	236	99.2	02	0.8	Accept
2	Teachers should be friendly and act as surrogate parents.	238	100	0	0	Accept
3	Using the television and video films for relaxation and learning keeps children calm.	209	87.8	29	12.2	Accept
4	See a medical doctor.	14	5.9	224	94.1	Reject
5	See the class teacher.	193	81.1	45	18.9	Accept

Table 3 shows teachers' opinion on ways of handling children who have school phobia. All the respondents opined that teachers should be friendly and act as surrogate parents, this opinion had a 100% acceptance. This is in tandem with the opinion of Akpan (2013) that when a teacher shows care and friendly gestures to a child, it will make the child look forward to being in school every day. The study also showed that 99% of the teachers accepted that the school environment should be child friendly, while about 88% of the teachers opined that using the television and video films for relaxation and learning keeps children calm. 81% accepted that seeing the class teacher about the child's behavior will lead to a way out of the problem. Again, these agree with the assertions of Akpan (2013: 135) that teachers of very young children should spend the first five minutes of the school day to play, sing and dance with the children, visit them in their homes and talk often with their parents. The study shows that the idea of seeing a medical doctor on cases of school phobia among young children was not accepted as only 14 out of 238 representing 6% of the teachers indicated so. This therefore infers that for the teachers, school phobia does not require medical attention.

### Conclusion

The study has confirmed that school phobia exist among ECD pupils in Abia state and this is characterized by such attitudes as refusal to leave the parent to follow the teacher, refusal to play or share with other children, incessant crying, refusal to talk to anyone in the class, attempting to run away, throwing tantrums, looking frightened among others. The sudden change from home to school and having to stay with strangers without the presence of parents or known family members could make children dislike school. The school environment should not be too different from home and care givers and teachers should be surrogate parents to make the child feel secured. Handling school phobia in young school children is very needful if the goals of Early Child Development Education and the general goals of basic education are to be achieved.

Therefore teachers, parents and schools should work hands on deck to make young children love school.

## **Recommendations**

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

- The school environment should be calm, beautiful and attractive to the child.
- Teachers should be friendly and act as surrogate parents.
- Teachers should use the television and educational video films for relaxation and learning to make school look like home and keep children calm.
- Schools should provide good play ground and play materials for ECD pupils to make them love school.
- Teachers of ECD pupils should endeavour to visit them at home to make them that the teacher is not a stranger.
- Parents – teacher relationship should be cordial on issues relating to the child so that they could work together to help the child overcome school phobia.
- Parents should feel free to consult the teacher if the child continues to resist leaving home for school.

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