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# Punitive Violence against Children: A Psychoeducational Parenting Program to Reduce Harsh Disciplining Practices and Child Beating in the Home

**Violencia punitiva contra los niños: un programa psicoeducativo para reducir las prácticas de disciplina severas y maltrato a los niños en el hogar**

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**Abstract.**

While parental harsh disciplining of children is a global concern, children living in Nigeria often experience particularly high levels of harsh discipline. Constrained by the lack of parenting skills to effectively manage children, most Nigerian parents rely too heavily on the use of violent methods in the disciplining of their children, which poses a huge threat to their well-being and development. Given the high levels of harsh parenting and the lack of understanding of its harms, we set out to develop a program of intervention called *Psychoeducational parenting program to prevent violence against children (PEPVAC)*, guided by psychological principles of social learning theory, to help parents reverse the trend. We tested the effectiveness of the program using a quasi-experimental design with questionnaire and observation as data collection tools. Participants were 300 parents of children age 3-12 years, who endorsed using harsh discipline. Parents ( $n = 150$ ) who received the 8-week intervention were compared with parents in the control group ( $n = 150$ ). A mixed-model ANOVA revealed that the PEPVAC parents demonstrated a reduced use of harsh disciplinary tactics and a decreased incidence of parents beating their children compared to parents in the control group who continued with business-as-usual. Findings suggest that PEPVAC can be a useful intervention tool in the prevention of punitive violence against children, especially in a culturally-oriented country like Nigeria with over 91 million population of children who are at risk of disciplinary violence in the home.

**Resumen.**

Si bien la disciplina severa de los padres hacia los hijos es una preocupación mundial, los niños que viven en Nigeria a menudo experimentan niveles particularmente altos de disciplina severa. Restringidos por la falta de habilidades parentales para manejar eficazmente a los niños, la mayoría de los padres nigerianos dependen demasiado del uso de métodos violentos en la disciplina de sus hijos, lo que representa una gran amenaza para su bienestar y desarrollo. Dados los altos niveles de crianza severa y la falta de comprensión de sus consecuencias, nos propusimos desarrollar un programa de intervención llamado *Programa de crianza psicoeducativa para prevenir la violencia contra los niños (PEPVAC)*, guiado por los principios psicológicos de la teoría del aprendizaje social, para ayudar a los padres. Probamos la efectividad del programa utilizando un diseño cuasi-experimental con cuestionario y observación como herramientas de recolección de datos. Los participantes fueron 300 padres de niños de 3 a 12 años, que aprobaron el uso de una disciplina severa. Los padres ( $n = 150$ ) que recibieron la intervención de 8 semanas se compararon con los padres del grupo control ( $n = 150$ ). Un ANOVA de modelo mixto reveló que los padres de PEPVAC demostraron un uso reducido de tácticas disciplinarias severas y una menor incidencia de padres que golpeaban a sus hijos en comparación con los padres del grupo de control que continuaban con las conductas habituales. Los resultados sugieren que PEPVAC puede ser una herramienta de intervención útil en la prevención de la violencia punitiva contra los niños, especialmente en un país culturalmente orientado como Nigeria, con más de 91 millones de niños en riesgo de violencia en el hogar.

**Keywords.**

Child beating, harsh discipline, punitive violence, parenting intervention, child development.

**Palabras Clave.**

Maltrato infantil, disciplina severa, violencia punitiva, intervención parental, desarrollo infantil.

## 1. Introduction

Disciplining a child is considered as an important aspect of parenting. Although the need for child discipline is widely acknowledged, there has been increasing concern over the use of harsh and abusive disciplinary practices, which has generated much debate among researchers (United Nations Children's Funds (UNICEF), 2010), and on the concerns about its effects on children's developmental outcomes (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Smith, 2012, April).

At the outset it is important to note how key terms are used in this paper for consistent reference and understanding. In the current study, the term 'harsh discipline' is conceptualized to include all forms of punitive techniques used by parents to cause some degree of physical pain and psychological discomfort for disciplinary purposes (e.g., beating, slapping, yelling, verbal abuse, name calling and other harsh punitive practices), in line with the current literature (e.g., Baker-Henningham & Francis, 2018).

The use of harsh discipline by parents as a corrective technique for their children is a global phenomenon. Available evidence suggests that this practice is widespread across almost all nations around the world (Runyan et al., 2010). However, there are variations in the forms and rates of harsh discipline among countries and among communities within countries. There is abundant evidence that it is more prevalent in developing countries (Runyan et al., 2010; UNICEF, 2010) and remains a common practice in homes, despite increasing evidence of its potential harm and ineffectiveness (Lansford & Deater-Deckard, 2012; Runyan et al., 2009).

Studies conducted in African countries show that harsh disciplining of children is common in Kenya (Ayiro et al., 2019), Ghana (A. Twum-Danso, 2013; A. O. Twum-Danso, 2016), Uganda (Boydell et al., 2017), and in Tanzania (Hecker et al., 2016), amongst many others, with all studies demonstrating high levels of violence and the exposure of children to severe parental punishment. A large sample survey examining the prevalence of disciplinary practices in 24 developing countries found that 63% of caregivers reported the use of physical violence with their children and 66% reported the use of psychological aggression, during the last month (Lansford & Deater-Deckard, 2012).

In the case of Nigeria, Africa's most populous country (Africa Population, 2018), similar circumstances are being reported. The use of harsh discipline has been the prevalent parental disciplinary technique in homes and many children continue to experience high levels of harsh discipline on a regular basis, as evidenced by research findings (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2011; Nuhu & Nuhu, 2010). A UNICEF (2014) study in Nigeria found that on average about four in five children aged 2-14 (about 91% of children surveyed) had experienced

violent discipline at home in the month prior to the survey. Another study by National Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF (2014) that looked at disciplinary practices of Nigerian parents found that 84.9% of children aged 1-14 had experienced violent discipline by their caregivers during the month preceding the survey. It is evident from all the above-cited studies that most children suffer violence at a very young age, which can be particularly harmful. Unfortunately, many parents are unaware of the harms such practice can have on children (Deb, 2018). This lack of understanding on the part of parents has contributed in perpetuating the practice.

Within the traditional context of Nigeria, every member of the community gets involved in the disciplining of the child (Amos, 2013). Besides parents and older siblings, children also receive punishment from other members of the community. Consequently, the average Nigerian child is exposed to high levels of harsh discipline in different contexts (home, school, community, and in care settings). The socio-cultural beliefs and attitudes about childrearing are among the most salient factors contributory to the prevalence of parental harsh discipline. One such example is an age-old adage "spare the rod and spoil the child", which tends to encourage child beating and harsh disciplining. In Nigeria, as in most African countries with strong cultural beliefs and support for the use of harsh discipline, most parents consider harsh punishment as part of their culture and a traditional method of rearing children. Parents beat their children as a form of discipline, and use cultural beliefs to justify their actions, believing that their children will behave well after being severely punished. Parents who do not bring up their children with an iron hand (harsh punishment) were seen as negating the child-rearing processes (Ajayi, 2013). Thus, the use of harsh discipline by parents has remained a deep rooted cultural practice of controlling children's behavior and is passed on from one generation to the next (Fatimilehin & Hassan, 2016; Nduka et al., 2012), culminating in what Halpenny et al. described as the "cycle of intergenerational transmission of parenting practices" (p. 64).

One theory that is useful in understanding the etiology of parental harsh discipline is social learning theory (Bandura, 1986). The theory provides an important framework for understanding the transmission of violent practices. It emphasizes the importance of the social context and views violence as a practice that is learnt through a process called 'behavior modeling'. Through the process of social learning, children exposed to violence in the home tend to see violence as a norm; consequently, transmitting the same practice also to their own children, allowing the cycle to continue (Deater-Deckard et al., 2003; Roskam, 2013; Snyder & Bub, 2008). However, just as social learning contends that all human behaviors (including parenting behavior) are learned, social learning also posits that learned behaviors can be un-

learned (Ryan et al., 2007), which by implication means violence against children can be prevented.

In recent years, global and regional efforts toward combatting violence against children and a worldwide campaign for its total ban in all settings have gained momentum. To date, 58 countries (eight in Africa) have banned all corporal punishment of children in all settings, including in the home (Global Initiative to End all Corporal Punishment, 2020). This is not so in Nigeria, which has over 91 million child population (UNICEF, 2014), making up nearly half of the entire 191 million population of the country (National Population Commission, 2017). It is generally believed that children are the future leaders and therefore constitute a potential crop of human resources that are needed for the continuity of the society (Opeyemi, 2017), hence exposing children to violent discipline seriously limits the possibility of achieving such an anticipated future leadership position. Thus, preventing and reducing violence against children is now a pressing global priority.

Parents are fundamental to their childrens development and as such should have a stake in the protection of their children from all violence. Thus, creating a safe home environment that prevents childrens exposure to harsh punitive discipline is critical to ensuring the well-being of children and families. To create this type of environment, parenting strategies would have to focus on an approach that supports the use of positive, non-violent practices (UNICEF, 2010).

Unfortunately, many Nigerian parents have limited familiarity with non-violent methods of discipline (Fatimilehin & Hassan, 2016). For this reason, and coupled with their limited knowledge about the harms of harsh discipline, it is imperative that parents be provided with some form of training to address their parenting needs.

The concerns mentioned above indicate a need to devise ways to help parents reduce harsh disciplining practices and at the same time to learn more positive ways of parenting to replace their existing, learned, abusive patterns. In view of this, we developed a program of intervention called *Psychoeducational parenting program to prevent violence against children (PEPVAC)*, designed to enlighten parents on the harms of harsh discipline and to equip parents with skills and information about discipline strategies that are non-violent. The present study was guided by a conceptual framework based on the premise that interventions, which promote parental understanding of new perspectives on discipline and promote positive parenting skills are central to creating safe and supportive environments for children (Sanders & W., 2002). Therefore, participation in PEPVAC activities may help parents feel the need to reverse their approach to discipline from one of relying on coercive and harsh strategies to one of adopting more positive methods, so that parents have the knowledge and skills needed to raise their children well.

An extensive search of literature revealed that this is the first study of its kind in Nigeria to develop and implement an interventional program to address harsh parenting and violence against children in the home. Previous research has focused on raising public awareness around the issue without taking a proactive interventional approach to address the problem. The current study would therefore be a significant attempt to fill that gap.

### 1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to provide at-risk parents with PEPVAC knowledge and skills that are needed to be effective parents, including teaching parents about child development, the dangers of using harsh discipline, and about positive discipline methods, as the intervention program, as well as to determine whether the program could impact changes in parenting behavior by assessing the frequency levels of harsh discipline practices. The research questions raised in this study include:

1. What changes in parenting behavior occurred as a result of parental participation in PEPVAC activities?
2. Are there any mean differences across three time points in the scores of the intervention and control groups on the frequency levels of harsh discipline practices?
3. How effective is PEPVAC in producing long-term changes in parenting behavior?

It was hypothesized that parents who participated in the PEPVAC intervention, when compared with the control group, would demonstrate less frequent use of harsh discipline tactics.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Participants

The target population of the study comprised all Nigerian parents of 3- to 12-year-old children. This category of parents was targeted because studies have found that corporal punishment is used more frequently on children of ages 6-12 years than on older children (Banda, 2006).

The study participants comprised 300 parents who were recruited through a multistage sampling process that involved snowball method, purposive sampling, and random sampling techniques. First stage sampling involved stratification of Nigeria along the three major regions: Northern, Western, and Eastern, as reflected in the old regional structure, with the headquarters of each region being selected as study locations: Kaduna, Ibadan, and Enugu, respectively. Second stage sampling was random selection of one local government area (LGA) within each study location. At third stage, two communities were selected from each LGA, one as the intervention and the second as the control arm. Stage four entailed household listing of the streets within each selected community out of which 13 streets were ran-

domly selected for block-listing from which 120 households were drawn. In stage 5, within each household, parents who had children between 3 and 12 years of age in their care were identified, targeting only the parent who served as the primary caregiver. Altogether, a total of 709 parents were identified across the six study communities. Finally, a screening test was carried out to identify the parents to be included in the study by selecting only those parents who endorsed using harsh discipline. The screening test comprised two questions that asked parents if they would support the use of beating as a discipline strategy for children in their homes; and whether they often used such method to discipline their children when they misbehaved. Parents who responded ‘yes’ to both questions were recruited. We are aware that answering “yes” to both questions is not a real indication that punitive practices are carried out, but at this stage of the sampling process, the screening questions only served to target parents who were favourably disposed toward the use of harsh discipline (i.e. parents at risk). It is on the main instruments (questionnaire and observation measures) that we measured the actual punitive practices through a pre-test post-test design. The screening process resulted in the identification of 619 parents, out of which 300 were randomly selected to form the sample for the study (50 parents per study site). The participants were primarily women ( $n = 249, 83\%$ ) while male participants accounted for 17% ( $n = 51$ ) of the sample (see Table 1)

## 2.2 Measures

(1). Parenting questionnaire (PQ) is a self-report measure developed for the study to assess the degree of parental endorsement of the use of harsh discipline for children. It consists of two sections: The first part gathers information on parental demographic background and the second part contains a 7-item parenting measure, which were validated. Four of these items constitute psychological punishment (shouted/screamed at child, cursed child, called child negative names, made child to feel ashamed), and three constitute physical (slapped child, spanked/hit child with an object, threatened to beat up child). The participants were asked to report how often during the past 2 weeks they had used each of the methods to discipline their children. We chose a 2-week referent period to help facilitate more accurate recall. The items were completed on a 4-point scale from 4 (always) to 1 (never). Ratings across the seven scale items were summed to produce an overall intensity score ranging from 7-28, with higher scores indicating greater endorsement of the use of harsh discipline for children. The internal consistency of the scale, based on the Cronbachs alpha, was 0.87.

(2). Home observation checklist (HOC): In-home observations of parent-child behavior were assessed using the HOC data sheet. Trained observers conducted the

Table 1

*Summary of Participants Characteristics (N = 300)*

| Description   | M or %                                 |            |
|---|--|------------|
| 1. Gender   | Male                                   | 51(17%)    |
|   | Female                                 | 249(83%)   |
| 2. Age  | 15–24 years                            | 30(10%)    |
|   | 25–34 years                            | 116(38.7%) |
|   | 35–44 years                            | 112(37.3%) |
|   | Above 45 years                         | 42(14%)    |
| 3. Educational level                                    | No formal education                    | 44(14.7%)  |
|   | Primary education                      | 59(19.7%)  |
|   | Secondary education                    | 104(34.7%) |
|   | Higher education                       | 93(31%)    |
| 4. Employment status                                    | Unemployed                             | 8(2.7%)    |
|   | Self-employed                          | 43(14.3%)  |
|   | Part-time employment                   | 160(53.3%) |
|   | Full-time employment                   | 89(29.7%)  |
| 5. Marital status                                       | Married                                | 238(79.3%) |
|   | Divorced/separated/<br>widowed         | 41(13.7%)  |
|   | Single parent who has<br>never married | 20(6.7%)   |
|   |  |            |
| 6. Number of children of parents within ages 3–12 years | 1 child                                | 57(19%)    |
|   | 2 children                             | 84(28%)    |
|   | 3 children                             | 86(29%)    |
|   | 4 children                             | 55(18%)    |
|   | 5 children                             | 11(4%)     |
|   | 6 children                             | 7(2%)      |

home visits to observe the quality of parent-child relationship, with specific focus on the parents reactions to childrens misbehavior. The HOC checklist consists of seven items pertaining to punitive practices (similar to PQ), constructed on a 5-point frequency scale (0, 1, 2, 3, >3 times). The observers were required to indicate the frequency of observed incidents by making a check mark in the appropriate space on the HOC data sheet each time the target behavior occurs. Thus, the observations were made using event sampling method. Items were scored on the basis of what was observed. Parents received a score of ‘0’ if they did not engage in any of the target behavior on an item. A total frequency score was derived by summing scores across the individual items, with higher scores indicating more frequent use of harsh discipline tactics. All items of the instrument demonstrated good reliability with Cronbachs alpha of 0.78.

## 2.3 Description of the PEPVAC Program

The PEPVAC intervention program aims to prevent violence against children and promote the health and well-being of children through reducing parental harsh discipline practices and providing parents with skills to manage their children through non-violent ways. The program was developed using the principles of adult learning, positive reinforcement, and social learning theory. The intervention package (curriculum) included topics relating to child development as well as topics address-

ing positive parenting strategies, whereby participants were introduced to new skills on weekly basis. The lesson topics were structured into eight session modules of 2-hour weekly session and were delivered to participants using a variety of teaching methods that included direct instruction, demonstration, rehearsal, reflection, and review of homework tasks (see Table 2).

## 2.4 Procedure

Three training activities were conducted prior to program implementation. First, the program assistants were trained on the intervention package and its delivery processes. These trainers in turn trained the parent peer educators. Thereafter, the parent peer educators became the trainers that were responsible for delivering the intervention to the participants. In essence, we used a three tiered, train-the-trainer, model to implement the PEPVAC program. This delivery strategy of using parents to educate parents was adopted because peer education was found to be a powerful method of effecting social change (Kabara-Clark, 2014). The parent peer educators were trained extensively on PEPVAC curriculum and were provided with the knowledge and skills necessary to deliver the intervention. In choosing the parent peer educators, certain criteria were considered, which included being a caregiver to a child between the ages of 3 to 12 years, being resident in the selected communities for no less than five years, having an involvement in community development, being able to communicate effectively with good interpersonal skills, and having higher education qualification. The program assistants were eligible if they had the following: a PhD degree in education, psychology or related field, previous experience conducting interventional research, and ability to understand and speak the language of the local community.

The intervention parents were exposed to PEPVAC activities for eight weeks on a 2-hour weekly basis while the comparison parents received a placebo treatment during the same period on the topic “The importance of education to national development”. The placebo sessions taught parents the role education plays in nation building; the importance of education and the various ways in which education could contribute to national development in such areas as in economic development, improved-living standard, social, and infrastructural development; and how individuals and communities could help to promote the education process for sustainable development. The venue for the parenting classes was the meeting hall of the local community centers.

All measures were administered to the intervention group and control groups across three time periods: administration of pretest measures to establish baseline data, administration of posttest measures shortly following completion of the intervention to assess immediate changes in the outcome variables, and administration of follow-up measures 12 weeks after the post

intervention assessments to assess long-term effects of the program. While copies of the questionnaire were administered at the training venues, in-home observations were conducted at the participants homes at each assessment time point, with each observation lasting 35 minutes. All observations were conducted by trained observers who were unaware of the treatment status in each experimental condition. The data collection process lasted for a period of 20 weeks.

## 2.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the authors institution under Ref. No. NOUN/PER/01814/192/VOL.1. Parents were informed about the details of the study with an explanation that it was designed to help parents develop appropriate child management techniques in order to improve their parenting skills and enhance the positive development of their children. It was made clear that participation in the study was voluntary. Similarly, the consent of the participants was obtained amidst established rapport with the assurances of confidentiality and anonymity of their responses.

## 2.6 Data Analysis

Analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software package version 17. Through the use of SPSS, the data collected were analyzed by running a series of descriptive and inferential statistics. To assess the intervention effects, we conducted a mixed-model ANOVA, for the intensity and frequency outcomes, with one between-subjects factor (Intervention Type: PEPVAC program vs. Control) and one within-subjects factor (Time: Pre-test, Post-test, Follow-up). The level of significance was set at 0.05. Where the analysis demonstrated a significant Group x Time interaction, two sets of follow-up tests were conducted to determine the exact nature of the interaction. All Cohens *d* is reported as an indicator of effect size. Effect size of .01 can be interpreted as small, .05 as a medium effect, and .08 or more as large effect (Cohen, 1988).

## 3. Results

To compare the effect of the PEPVAC program on the intensity and frequency scores, we conducted a mixed-model ANOVA with experimental condition: PEPVAC program vs. Control, as a between-subjects factor and time; Pre-test, Post-test, Follow-up, as a within-subjects factor. Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics and summary of the ANOVA results.

### 3.1 (Self-report) Intensity of parental endorsement of harsh discipline

The ANOVA analysis on the intensity scores yielded a significant main effect of group on parental endorsement of harsh discipline for children,  $F(1,297) = 69.56$ ,

Table 2

Summary of PEPVAC intervention Package

|           | Session Topic   | Session Content Description   |
|-----------|---|---|
| Session 1 | Orientation and introduction  | The session provided a general overview of PEPVAC, the overall goals and expected outcomes.   |
| Session 2 | Understanding the developmental stages of children                                  | The session taught parents about the stages of child development to understand why children behave the way they do.                 |
|           | Positive communication- focus on ‘dos’ instead of ‘don’ts                           | Parents learnt about the strategies for focusing on dos instead of donts, and how to limit their use of negatives.                  |
| Session 3 | Age-appropriate expectations for behavior   | This session discussed behaviors that can be expected from children at different stages and what is appropriate at given ages.      |
|           | Fostering positive parent-child interactions  | Parents learnt on how to interact positively with children.   |
| Session 4 | Common childhood behavior problems and the reinforcing factors - parental attention | The session discussed common childhood behavior problems and how the constant use of punishment can reinforce bad behaviors.        |
|           | Parents as role models to their children  | Parents learnt the importance of modeling good behavior and how children learn through observation.                                 |
| Session 5 | The harmful effects of harsh discipline part 1 (physical and social effects).       | The session familiarized parents on the effects of harsh discipline on physical and social development of children.                 |
|           | Focus attention on good behavior  | Parents learnt how to pay attention on good behavior, how to observe and catch children being good and praising their actions.      |
| Session 6 | The harmful effects of harsh discipline part 2 (cognitive & psychological effects)  | Parents learnt about the effects of harsh discipline on cognitive and psychological development of children.                        |
|           | Ignore unwanted behaviors   | Parents learnt on how to use ignoring strategy to decrease unwanted behaviors.  |
| Session 7 | Non-violent disciplinary methods  | Parent learnt examples of how to use non-violent methods and how to raise children without the use of violence.                     |
|           | Praise child when he/she behaves well   | Parents learnt how to use praise strategy to increase desired behaviors and how to praise and reward the child.                     |
| Session 8 | Review session and closing ceremony   | Parents reviewed all skills learned and developed an action plan by committing to contribute to the reduction of harmful practices. |

Note. Each program session followed the same 7-step format:

1. Recap skills taught in the previous session (after first session) (10 minutes)
2. Content instruction on child development (35 minutes)
3. Content instruction on positive parenting strategies (35 minutes)
4. Short Break: energizer /folksongs (5 minutes)
5. Group activities and skill practice (25 minutes)
6. Summary (10 minutes)
7. Refreshments

$p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .190$ ; a significant main effect of time on parental endorsement of harsh discipline for children,  $F(2, 296) = 46.92, p < .05, \eta^2 = .241$ ; and a significant interaction between time and group,  $F(2, 296) = 20.66, p < .05, \eta^2 = .123$ . Post hoc analyses showed that time ef-

fect was significant only within the intervention group,  $F(2, 297) = 17.55, p = .001$ . There was no significant time effect for the control group,  $F(2, 297) = 1.68, p = 1.10$ . Further analysis using the Sidak adjustment for multiple comparisons revealed a significant reduction in

Table 3

Means (M), standard deviations (SD), and ANOVA Results for outcome measures by time point and condition

|              | Intervention (n = 150) |                  |                  | Control (n = 150) |                  |                  | Analysis     |          |             |          |              |          |
|--------------|------------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|--------------|----------|-------------|----------|--------------|----------|
|              | Pre                    | Post             | Follow-up        | Pre               | Post             | Follow-up        | Group Effect |          | Time Effect |          | Group X Time |          |
| Mesasure     | M(SD)                  | M(SD)            | M(SD)            | M(SD)             | M(SD)            | M(SD)            | F            | $\eta^2$ | F           | $\eta^2$ | F            | $\eta^2$ |
| Self Ratings | 15.77<br>(4.056)       | 11.97<br>(4.118) | 11.15<br>(4.303) | 16.90<br>(5.37)   | 17.34<br>(5.313) | 15.41<br>(5.273) | 69.558**     | .190     | 46.922**    | .241     | 20.662**     | .123     |
| Observations | 16.42<br>(5.011)       | 12.57<br>(4.318) | 12.31<br>(4.333) | 16.27<br>(5.24)   | 16.34<br>(5.105) | 15.56<br>(4.613) | 57.603**     | .175     | 51.577**    | .364     | 23.931**     | .318     |

Note. Lower mean scores suggest improvement

\*\* $p < .01$ .

the scores of the intervention group from pre-test (M = 15.77, SD = 4.06) to post-test (M = 11.97, SD = 4.12)  $p < .001$  and from pre-test-test (M = 15.77, SD = 4.06) to follow-up (M = 11.15, SD = 4.30)  $p < .001$ , indicating significant decreases in parental endorsement of the use of harsh discipline for children. However, there was no significant difference between the post-test scores (M = 11.97, SD = 4.12) and the follow-up scores (M = 11.15, SD = 4.30), indicating that the changes observed at post-test were maintained at follow-up. This shows that the intervention effect has a relatively high level of durability. The control group did not experience any of these changes over time. Based on these results it seems clear that the PEP parents demonstrated a significant reduction in endorsement of the use of harsh discipline for children than did the control group. The effect size measure was large ( $\eta^2 = .190$ ).

### 3.2 (In-home observation) Frequency of parental harsh discipline practices

The same pattern of results emerged for the frequency scores. As can be seen in Table 3, main effects emerged for each factor: a significant main effect of group on parental use of harsh discipline,  $F(1, 297) = 57.60, p < .05, \eta^2 = .175$ ; a significant main effect of time on parental use of harsh discipline,  $F(2, 296) = 51.58, p < .05, \eta^2 = .364$ ; and a significant interaction between time and group,  $F(2, 296) = 23.93, p < .05, \eta^2 = .318$ . Post hoc analyses showed that Time had an effect on the frequency scores of the intervention group  $F(2, 297) = 15.42, p = .001$ , and this effect was not statistically significant for the control group,  $F(2, 297) = 1.83, p = .167$ . Further analysis using the Sidak adjustment for multiple comparisons revealed a significant reduction in the scores of the intervention group from pre-test (M=16.42, SD=5.01) to post-test (M=12.57, SD=4.32)  $p < .001$  and from pre-test (M=16.42, SD=5.01) to follow-up (M=12.31, SD=4.33)  $p < .001$ , indicating significant decreases in the use of harsh discipline. However, there was no significant difference between the post-test scores (M=12.57, SD=4.32) and the follow-up scores (M=12.31, SD=4.33), indicating that the intervention gains were maintained from post-test to 12-week follow-up. No such differences

were observed in the scores of the control group. The result makes it clear that parents in the intervention group showed a larger drop in the use of harsh discipline tactics compared to the control group. The effect size for treatment effect was large ( $\eta^2 = .175$ ).

Overall, these results suggest that when parents participate in the PEPVAC activities, they become more likely to endorse fewer use of harsh discipline for children, reduce their use of harsh disciplining tactics on children, and engage in less harsh parenting; and that these reductions would be maintained at 12 weeks. These results thus provided statistical support for the hypothesis, which states that parents who participate in the PEPVAC intervention program, when compared to parents in the control group, would demonstrate a less frequent use of harsh discipline tactics.

## 4. Discussion

The current study evaluated the impact of a parenting intervention designed to reduce the levels of harsh disciplining of children in Nigeria. The intervention program specifically targeted parents who were favourably disposed toward the use of harsh discipline.

The study revealed that the PEPVAC parents demonstrated less endorsement of the use of harsh discipline for children and less frequent use of harsh discipline tactics than did the control group. The results of the study provided empirical support, which showed that the PEP program can be potentially effective in reducing the levels of parental harsh discipline practices and decreasing the incidence of parents beating their children.

The findings in this study are consistent with those of other researchers such as Durrant and Ensom (2012), who provided evidence to support the notion that providing education to the parents could reduce the use of physical punishment and childrens externalizing behaviors. This goes in line with the study by Scholer et al. (2010), who found that a brief intervention affected parents' attitudes toward using less physical punishment, and it is also in line with the findings of numerous studies which demonstrated the positive effects of parenting intervention (see Holzer et al., 2006; Lakes et al., 2011;

Peters & Durrant, 2009; Santini & Williams, 2016).

The study has demonstrated the potential of PEPVAC as a viable intervention tool for parenting programming by showing that in spite of the strong societal beliefs and attitudes about child harsh disciplining, the program has made a difference by instigating positive changes in parenting behavior. The observed changes can be explained from a social learning perspective. It assumes that parenting behavior is learned and teaching parents new set of skills can change it. Therefore, the observed changes may be attributed to the new set of skills covered in the training sessions. The acquisition of these skills by parents and the effects of that experience may have led to increased levels of knowledge and understanding about parenting and child discipline; these effects in turn resulted in the observed changes in behavior. For instance, during the experience sharing session, most of the parents said they were no longer beating or yelling at their children and reported being overwhelmed by feelings of remorse for having treated their children so harshly, after they learnt about the different ways it can affect childrens lives. Also, the high level of interest and enthusiasm displayed by program participants during the training sessions, their active involvement, and the high attendance rate, as well as the report of parental experiences and feedback may also explain its success with parents.

Furthermore, the effects of the program were found to endure over time at 12-week follow-up. The result indicating the enduring effect of the program could be linked to the critical important nature of parenting and child discipline with its attendant responsibility for the stakeholders and the larger society, which may have predisposed the observed effects to be relatively long-lasting. It is however expected that further research would address the question on whether there will be a further stability or changes in this result in the future. However, there exists suggestive evidence that treatment effects can be successfully maintained over-time through periodic re-modification of behavior (Bandura, 1986).

The study has important implications for policy formulation and practice. The utility of the PEPVAC program in decreasing harsh disciplining practices in parents who are most at risk for harsh parenting is supported. Since the results of this study are favorable to the use of the PEPVAC program, this could inform intervention implementation aimed at promoting positive childrearing practices on a wider scale. Consequently, many more parents would be enlightened on parenting skills and be empowered to raise their children in a more secure, safe, and supportive home environment. Hence, the outcome of this study has the potential to influence government policy and practices most importantly, on the need to establish a national parenting support program for the prevention of child maltreatment, which is nonexistent at the moment. The provision of such policy

and support program is essential to promote the development of parenting competences, so that parents have the knowledge and skills needed to raise their children well, without using violence and thus become more effective in their parenting in ways that support their childrens optimal development. At a time when global efforts are geared toward preventing children from experiencing violence and reducing the rate of harsh discipline by parents, this study will be useful for the protection of children and securing a violence-free culture in Nigeria. Also, the study has the potential of encouraging a review of the school curriculum to include pre-parent training courses. If done, this could impact on future parents and can lead to a break in the cycle of violence.

Finally, within the local context of Nigeria, this study will offer a valuable contribution to knowledge in its exploration of the effectiveness of parenting interventions in decreasing harsh and abusive discipline practices.

## 5. Limitations

There are some limitations to this study. First, although the study had used a nationally representative sample of parents from the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria, this has limited the findings from being generalized to parents from the ethnic minorities. Consequently, in order to improve generalizability of results, future research should use a more diverse group that target parents from various ethnic backgrounds. Secondly, children were not included as participants in this study and therefore no child outcomes were measured. However, the children of the participants should be examined in the future to determine how they benefit from improved parenting. Thirdly, due to time constraints, the follow-up assessment was conducted within 12 weeks after completion of the intervention program, suggesting that the period could have been inadequate for an important intervention of this nature. A longer follow-up could shed further light on the durability of the intervention effects. A final limitation of the study concerns the sample, which comprised predominantly female parents.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the practical application of a parenting program developed within the framework of social learning theory as a means of engaging parents to reduce the levels of punitive violence against children. The findings of the study suggest that the PEPVAC program may have important behavioral and long-term consequences for parents. Because the use of harsh discipline is widely accepted and practiced in Nigerian society, the findings of the study has provided empirical support for wider implementation of the PEP intervention, which would help many more parents minimize the use of harsh discipline and ensure that all their efforts at managing behaviors contribute positively to

the well-being and development of their children.

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