

Influence of Adverse Childhood Experiences on Maladaptive Behaviors among Preadolescents in Selected Primary Schools in Kiambaa Sub-County, Kiambu County, Kenya

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Abstract

Preadolescence, typically defined as the period between nine and twelve years of age, represents a critical stage of development during which children may become susceptible to maladaptive behaviors, particularly when exposed to adverse childhood experiences. This study examined the prevalence and influence of such experiences, specifically parental neglect, and childhood abuse on the behavioral outcomes of preadolescents in selected primary schools within Kiambaa, Kiambu County. Grounded in ecological systems theory, the study employed a descriptive research design and utilized structured questionnaires for data collection. A representative sample of four hundred and eighty-nine pupils was selected through stratified random sampling from a target population of eight hundred and eighty-six. Data analysis incorporated descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression techniques. The results indicated a moderate occurrence of adverse childhood experiences among participants, with clear associations between these experiences and maladaptive behaviors, including aggression, anxiety, and diminished self-esteem. The study concludes that adverse childhood experiences substantially contribute to emotional and behavioral difficulties in preadolescents. It recommends targeted interventions, including teacher training for early detection of abuse and neglect, school-based domestic violence awareness initiatives, and strengthened caregiver engagement in mental health dialogue, as essential strategies to support resilience and healthy development.

Keywords: *Adverse Childhood Experiences, parental neglect, childhood abuse, Maladaptive Behaviors, Preadolescents*

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1. Introduction

According to Meghali (2017), maladaptive behaviors as an anomaly from the expected or normal behavior. According to Dorcas, Jamil, and Hans (2018), types of maladaptive behaviors include antisocial behavior, substance abuse, and conduct problems. Antisocial behavior is disturbing dysfunctional actions concerning the emotions and welfare of others (Emily, 2021). Substance abuse is a form of risky use of any substance that is capable of changing one's emotional state. Using a substance in a manner that is not intended and more than prescribed

results in abuse (Buddy, 2022). Conduct problem refers to any disruptive behavior like aggression towards other children and oppositional behavior (Dypti, Sandra, Choon, & Sita, 2019). There is a likelihood of learning some of the maladaptive behaviors for example aggression from home especially where they witness vehemence.

No one can refute the fact that children with maladaptive behavior become a strong basis of concern and great anxiety not just for parents but teachers as well (Nall, 2019). Children who have been exposed to early childhood difficulties exhibit maladaptive behaviors. A general assortment of behavioral problems for instance antisocial behavior comes to a climax in the preadolescent years. The existence of behavioral problems in this stage could be adverse to the child's life. The study concluded that there is a higher prevalence of maladaptive behavior within the global scope. It is common to find that preadolescents exhibit behavioral problems because, at that stage of development, they have some autonomy to express themselves (Bushra & Bilal, 2020).

Leonard (2020), defined adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) as hypothetically distressing happenings that transpire in childhood. These may include vehemence, abandonment; observing vehemence in the family; or having a family member attempt or die by suicide. Research findings highlighted that children who had experienced various ACEs displayed the inability to express, accept, and cope with feelings. They also had several maladaptive problems such as anger outbursts, disobeying set rules, physical fights, stealing, and bullying others (Dee, Emily, Hannah, Kirsten, Kram, Tucker, Sara, & Damian, 2020).

According to the World Health Organization (2018), ACEs are some of the greatest intensive and often occurring causes of stress that children may undergo early in life. The persistent stress in childhood not only interferes with the initial brain development but compromises the functionality of the nervous and immune systems. This often than not may lead to the children adopting maladaptive behaviors that eventually become serious difficulties for instance abuse of alcohol, unprotected sex, eating disorders, and other illnesses (WHO TEAM, 2020). This enhances the understanding of why some children are more vulnerable to mental disorders than others.

The more ACEs, a young person experiences, the more the likelihood of developing long-lasting health illnesses and dangerous behaviors, which can also affect future generations. These results in adverse consequences in the future, for instance, abridged educational and professional accomplishment, heart disease, plumpness, despair, substance abuse, and negligence. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2019), there is a connection between being exposed to ACE as among the top ten prominent sources of death (Bradford, 2020). These statistics can be mitigated by addressing the effects of ACEs through creating awareness. Research also shows that early intervention can avert the consequences of early adverse experiences (Pineda, 2022).

The most harmful types of adversity, abuse and neglect, are observed to be particularly common worldwide (Miguel, et al., 2022). Epidemiological estimates show that 39 to 61 percent of adults worldwide have experienced at least one major form of child maltreatment or household dysfunction (Loreto, Betzabe, & Andres, 2022). Adverse childhood experiences are a worldwide public health issue. Before the age of 18, around two-thirds of all children face some kind of adversity. Over the past 20 years, it has gained widespread acceptance that early exposure to traumatic experiences has an impact on a child's cognitive, affective, relational, and behavioral development (Burkhart Levers-Landis, & Huth-Bocks, 2022)

1.1 Problem Statement

The presence of ACEs in preadolescents influences their behavior negatively and this could be detrimental to their existence and future. The 2019 Violence Against Children Survey report reviewed that, childhood vehemence is still on the increase. It was established that 40 % of girls and 50 % of boys experience physical vehemence from their parents and caregivers (Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, Kenya, 2020). Preadolescents may exhibit externalizing behaviors such as bullying because of experiencing childhood adversities (Rebecca, 2021). Children experiencing adversity in childhood go through difficulties in their development. These may include learning problems, difficulty coping with negative emotions, externalizing behavior problems, and social growth.

Children and adolescents' maladaptive behavior is of major concern to parents, teachers, and the community in general. 70 % of children in Kenya are at danger of abuse and neglect, most frequently by their parents (Janelle, Lisa, Christine, Darius, Martha, Victoria, & David, 2020). Preventing ACEs can assist children and adults be successful and possibly lower the possibility of conditions such as mental illnesses, as well as reducing risky conduct like abusing drugs and alcohol. This will also help in taking preventive measures rather than trying to find a cure later.

However, there is a paucity of studies on the influence of ACEs on maladaptive behavior among preadolescents, and do not draw attention to the plight of Kenyan children. This study, therefore, sought to further the research in this area in the Kenyan context. This justifies the need to conduct a study exploring maladaptive behavior and how it's influenced by adverse childhood experiences. This also explained the need for this research to fill the gaps in the body of knowledge to understand what influence ACEs have on the maladaptive behaviors of preadolescents in Kenyan primary schools, particularly in Kiambaa Sub-County.

1.2 Research Objectives

- i. To assess the prevalence of ACEs among the preadolescents in selected primary schools in Kiambaa Sub-County.
- ii. To establish the influence of parental neglect and childhood abuse on maladaptive behavior among preadolescents in selected primary schools in Kiambaa Sub-County.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Review

The Ecological Systems Theory also known as human ecology was proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in the 1970s. It elucidates the impact of social surroundings on the development of individuals, positing that the environment in which one is raised shapes every aspect of their life. It explains how encountering different environments in life may impact behavior to different degrees. Behavior is impacted by different factors not just the person's views and opinions. This hypothesis underscores the idea that a child's development is influenced by their engagements with others and the surrounding environment. Therefore, a person's thinking patterns, emotional experiences, and preferences are influenced by social factors (Renn & Arnold, 2019).

There are several systems within this theory namely: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The microsystem is the direct contact with family, friends, classmates, teachers, neighbors, and others. If for example, children have detached and unfriendly relationships with their parents, this will harm them. These experiences in childhood can lead to a child's externalizing behavior (Saul, 2023). The mesosystem comprises the

interactions amongst the microsystems in one's lifetime. The implication is that whatever a child experiences at home may be associated with the school experience. For instance, a child abandoned at home may find it difficult to develop an optimistic relationship with the teachers (Crawford, 2020).

The exosystem refers to the connections that are between two or more situations. Bronfenbrenner found out that places and people that a child may not directly interrelate with may still influence their lives. These places and people can be neighbors, relatives, and parents' workstations. An example is a mother who is not treated well at her workstation and may mistreat her children at home. This tends to have a negative influence on the children's growth (Grace & Zandile., 2019). The macrosystem is comprised of the children's ethnic patterns and beliefs, particularly their main opinions and concepts, as well as governmental and economic systems. For instance, children growing up in peaceful surroundings will experience a different kind of development than children in war-torn surroundings (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022).

The chronosystem involves the evolutions and changes in a person's lifetime. This may also include a combination of social and historical factors that might impact an individual. One common instance of this is how marriage break up, as a key life shift, may impact the couple's connection and their child's behavior. Bronfenbrenner's theory proves the diversity of interrelated influences on children's development through the various ecological systems. A child may act in discrepancies in different contexts. An instance where children often bully small children at school may indicate they could be horrified sufferers at home (Olivia, 2023).

Ecological theory, particularly as articulated by Bronfenbrenner, offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how various environmental systems influence an individual's development. However, one notable limitation of this theory is the lack of extensive research on the specific interactions between a child's family and their broader neighborhood environment (Elliot & Davis, 2018). While the theory posits that these multiple layers of environmental contexts (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem) interact to affect developmental outcomes, there is insufficient empirical investigation into how these interactions specifically impact the child's behavior and development. This gap is significant because the nuanced interrelations between a child's immediate family dynamics and the surrounding neighborhood influences can be complex and multifaceted yet remain underexplored. Furthermore, testing the theory empirically poses challenges, as it is difficult to isolate and measure the direct causal effects of these interrelated systems. Although ecological systems theory suggests that environmental factors can influence developmental outcomes, establishing direct causality between these systems and specific effects remains challenging (Elliot & Davis, 2018).

However, in this study, this theory is crucial because it offers a thorough framework for comprehending the intricate relationships that affect a child's behavior and development. It places a strong emphasis on the interactions between a person's immediate environment (microsystem), relationships between environments (mesosystem), indirect impacts (exosystem), societal and cultural factors (macrosystem), and the passage of time (chronosystem). The researcher will examine how negative childhood experiences can influence preadolescent maladaptive behaviors within the framework of these interconnected systems by using a holistic approach. The implementation of the theory can also guide the creation of interventions and policies that cater to the multifaceted needs of children and families in diverse ecological environments (Paul, 2023).

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Prevalence Rates of Adverse Childhood Experiences among Preadolescents

A study conducted among children in the United States to estimate the prevalence of adverse childhood experiences found that a higher prevalence rate was among children in rural areas. The study concluded that children living in rural areas were more vulnerable to exposure to parental separation or breakup than their colleagues (Elizabeth, Janice, Elizabeth, & Kevin, 2019). A survey, conducted by the National Survey of Children's Health across the states in America, concluded that at the national level, ten percent of children had experienced three or more ACEs. Adverse consequences linked to Adverse Childhood Experiences encompass issues such as alcohol dependency, substance misuse, feelings of despondency, self-harm, compromised physical well-being, and increased risk of obesity. During their developmental years, children who have encountered ACEs are prone to facing difficulties in academic performance, along with emotional and behavioral problems (Vanessa & David, 2018).

Research carried out in Norway revealed that 65.8% of those who participated had encountered at least one ACE and 28% experienced two or more ACEs. In this research, the most commonly observed subtype of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) was household dysfunction. This category was characterized by the occurrence of life stressors, including parental divorce, parental drug use, parental psychiatric issues, and financial problems. About 18.2% of participants disclosed experiencing some form of abuse, with physical abuse being the most frequently reported. Notably, girls reported notably higher instances of emotional and sexual abuse, while boys reported significantly more cases of physical abuse (Rosalie, Hans, Sigrid, & Sara, 2022).

A survey was done from 2013 to 2017 in elementary schools of Bengbu, Anhui Province, China among children aged 8 to 11 years to identify the most common ACEs. The total number of participants was 1766 out of which 75% had experienced at minimum one while 21.5% had experienced 4 or more ACEs. The study reported that children who had experienced high ACEs were at higher risk for future distress and antisocial aggressive behavior directed externally at others (Lei, Yuhui, Chun, S., & Ying, 2019)

Research on the prevalence of adverse childhood experiences among Vietnamese high school pupils concluded that ACEs are a predominant community health problem in Vietnam. Out of 644 respondents, 74% had at minimum one ACE, and 27% had experienced three or more ACEs. Both males and females had experienced sexual abuse at a prevalence rate of more than 10 % (Trang, Hoang-Minh, & Bahr, 2022).

In the South-west, Nigeria a study on prevalence and predictors of adverse childhood experiences among youths in rural communities concluded that lack of resources and poor schooling led to the high incidences of ACEs among the youths in rural south-west. Majority of the participants 92% had adverse childhood experiences. Emotional negligence, bodily negligence, mental abuse, and family substance abuse were the most common. Poverty and mothers with low primary education were the predictors of experiencing ACEs (Salawu & Owoaje, 2020).

Research done in rural Uganda found that the cumulative number of ACEs that occurred in 'childhood had statistically significant associations with adult depression and suicidal ideation. Studies have indicated a high prevalence of ACEs amongst children and adolescents linked to depression and suicidality. Among the 1,458 respondents, 90 % had been exposed to a minimum of one ACE during their childhood. A greater number of respondents reported bodily

abuse, psychological manipulation, and living with an adult who was abusing substances such as alcohol. Although the prevalence of most ACEs was similar across both males and females, most males reported psychological manipulation, while females reported attempts or enactment of sexual assault (Charlotte, 2021)

A study to establish the prevalence of ACEs and their connection with substance use was done in Kenya. In this study, ACEs were defined as traumatic or distressful events that children may undergo through early life. These experiences include different forms of abuse, abandonment, unstable family, and living in a violent community. Repeated exposure to these distressful experiences may lead to adverse coping mannerisms like substance abuse or self-harm. 93% of the participants had been exposed to at least one ACE. The conclusion was that there was a high prevalence of ACEs among those who had substance use disorders (Sarah, Keneilwe, Anne, & Mary, 2018).

2.2.2 Influence of Parental Neglect and Childhood Abuse on Maladaptive Behavior among the Preadolescents

According to the Children's Bureau in the United States of America, Neglect during childhood can result in enduring consequences that span across one's lifetime and even affect subsequent generations. The repercussions include potential connections to later physical and psychological issues, such as diminished self-worth, potentially paving the way for engaging in risky behaviors like substance abuse. Moreover, children subjected to abuse or neglect may be prone to developing antisocial traits during their maturation, increasing the likelihood of engaging in criminal activities in adulthood. Additionally, there is an elevated risk of these individuals developing posttraumatic stress disorder, contributing to enduring challenges like depression, suicidal tendencies, substance abuse, and persistent oppositional or defiant behaviors well into adulthood. These difficulties can impede their academic success and hinder the formation and maintenance of meaningful relationships (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019).

In the United Kingdom, child neglect is characterized by a parental failure to provide essential necessities like food, clothing, shelter, and education, either through refusal or delay. It encompasses various forms, including physical neglect, emotional neglect, health neglect, and educational neglect. Prolonged and frequent instances of child neglect can lead to a range of behavioral issues in children, such as anger, aggression, hostility, and compromised personality development. These children may also exhibit poor school attendance, engage in risky behaviors, and display signs of self-harm and substance abuse. According to 2021 statistics from the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), neglect stands out as the most prevalent form of child abuse (NLS Admin, 2023).

A research study conducted in Sweden provided significant insights into the prevalence and impact of childhood maltreatment on behavioral issues. The study found that 17.5% of the participants reported experiencing some form of maltreatment, highlighting a substantial proportion of the population affected by negative childhood experiences. Additionally, 13.8% of the participants exhibited severe behavioral problems, underscoring the serious consequence of such maltreatment. The research revealed notable gender differences in the experiences and outcomes related to maltreatment. Specifically, boys were more likely than girls to disclose experiences of neglect and to exhibit higher levels of overall behavioral problems. This included a greater prevalence of criminal and socially destructive behaviors among boys compared to their female counterparts (Thorbjorn, Torbjorn, & Arne 2021). These findings, as

reported by Thorbjorn, Torbjorn, and Arne (2021), suggest that boys might be more vulnerable to the adverse effects of neglect and maltreatment, potentially leading to more pronounced behavioral issues. The study highlights the importance of considering gender differences when assessing the impacts of childhood maltreatment and developing targeted interventions to address the specific needs of different groups affected by these experiences.

Active parental participation is essential for the cognitive and social growth of children, whereas neglect from parents will clearly have a detrimental effect. Among 618 Chinese adolescents aged between 11-15 years on examining the influence of parental neglect, found out that, it can result to various challenging behaviors. These may include, a higher likelihood of experiencing depression, triggering thoughts of suicide, and engaging in self-harming behavior (Qing-Qi, Wei, Ya-Fei, & Xiao-Pan, 2022). In research that was conducted among Chinese children in six districts of Chongqing, found that the duration of daily parent-child interactions affected the behavioral problem scores. Parents' neglect of their children affects the children's mental health and facilitates the development of psychological behavioral problems (Yu Y, et al., 2020)

In South Africa, a significant worry arises as children below the age of five experience the highest rates of neglect, while those aged four to nine encounter the second-highest rates. The adverse effects resulting from neglect are frequently more severe and enduring compared to those arising from other types of child maltreatment (Schmidt & Lenette, 2019). The results of a study conducted in Mufulira District in Zambia on parental child neglect were that 25% of the two hundred participants were classified as neglected. The examination revealed that neglected children commonly face social issues such as criminal inclinations, antisocial personality traits, and reduced social integration. A noteworthy statistical correlation was identified between the overall neglect score and each of the three social problem categories. (Ruth & Bestern, 2023)

In a study carried out among pupils in primary schools in Tanzania, concluded that a notable correlation exists between neglect and the manifestation of internalizing and externalizing issues in children aged six to nine. The results indicated that, in comparison to non-neglected children, those who experienced neglect displayed higher levels of aggression (Tobias, Victoria, Markus, & Katharin, 2018). The Children's Society asserts that inadequate parental care frequently serves as a catalyst for the risky and detrimental behaviors of adolescents, exerting a notable influence on both their well-being and mental health. The research reveals that neglect plays a substantial role in the prevalence of issues such as drug misuse, overt delinquency, and various forms of delinquent behavior among adolescents residing in the Mukuru slums of Nairobi County, Kenya (Maina, 2022).

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are defined as highly stressful and potentially traumatic events that occur during childhood, according to Rasna (2023). Unlike isolated incidents, ACEs involve prolonged exposure to various hardships over time, which can significantly impact a child's mental, emotional, and physical health. These experiences are not limited to a single type of trauma but encompass a range of challenging situations that affect a child's overall development. There are ten distinct types of ACEs, as detailed by Michael (2020). They include physical abuse, which involves intentional harm such as hitting or shaking; physical neglect, where essential needs like food and medical care are not met; and emotional neglect, characterized by a lack of affection and emotional support. Emotional abuse, another type, involves verbal attacks and rejection that harm a child's self-worth. Sexual abuse refers to inappropriate sexual interactions with a child, while substance abuse involves

exposure to the harmful effects of a caregiver's drug or alcohol misuse. Additionally, mental illness in a caregiver can create an unstable environment for a child, and violence against the mother or primary caregiver can expose a child to distressing and dangerous situations (Michael, 2020).

Physical abuse is a situation where a parent or caregiver physically hurts the child in any way like hitting, beating, or kicking once or more than once but this does not include spanking. Emotional abuse involves a parent or a grown-up at the home verbally abusing or putting the child down severally. This makes the child feel unwanted, worthless, imperfect, and unloved. Sexual abuse entails someone older than you by at least 5 years or a grown-up touching the child sexually making the child touch them sexually, or coercing the child to have sexual intercourse once or severally (Autumn & Melanie, 2017).

Emotional neglect is a lack of emotional care such as fondness or love from parents or caregivers. It also entails ignoring rejecting or preventing children from interacting with others or grown-ups. This can lead them to commit crimes or abuse alcohol and drugs or both. School-going children may not attend school regularly, have poor performance, or may have challenges relating to their peers and teachers. Physical neglect occurs when parents or caregivers don't give the children the basic needs, and supervision, and safeguard them from impending detriment (Alicia, 2020).

3. Methodology

The study employed a descriptive research design. The study was conducted in selected primary schools within Kiambaa Sub-County, specifically focusing on Waguthu, Mayuyu, and Muongoiya Primary Schools, all located in Muchatha Ward, Gathanga Village. For this study, the population comprises 836 pupils who are in their late childhood, specifically between the ages of 9 and 12, attending three primary schools in Kiambu County. A representative sample of 489 pupils was selected through stratified random sampling from a target population of eight hundred and eighty-six. The research instrument for collecting data in this study from the sampled respondents was a questionnaire. Data analysis incorporated descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression techniques.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Prevalence of ACEs among Preadolescents

The first objective was to assess the prevalence of ACEs among preadolescents in selected primary schools in Kiambaa Sub-County. Descriptives on ACEs among the preadolescents are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptives on ACEs among the preadolescents

	No		Yes	
	%	F	%	F
Did a parent act in a way that made you afraid?	69.3	339	30.7	150
Did a parent ever hit you so hard that you were injured?	76.9	376	23.1	113
Did a person at least five years older than you ever touch you in a sexual way?	95.7	468	4.3	21
Did you often feel that no one in your family loved you?	82.8	405	17.2	84
Did any member of your family attempt suicide?	92.4	452	7.6	37
Were your parents ever separated?	63.4	310	36.6	179
Was your mother beaten by your father?	80.0	391	20.0	98
Did you live with an alcoholic or who used drugs like bhang?	78.7	385	21.3	104
Was a family member mentally ill?	92.0	450	8.0	39
Did a family member go to prison?	75.7	370	24.3	119

The results as shown in the table showed that a significant number of the pupils who were 69.3% (339) indicated that their parents did not act in a way that made them afraid. Conversely, 30.7% (150) pupils specified that their parents acted in a way that frightened them. Further, results showed that the respondents who were 76.9% (376) indicated that their parents never hit them so hard to the point of injury. This shows that corporal punishment was not common amongst the parents. However, 23.1% (113) showed that their parents hurt them while beating them. In addition, the study findings were that 95.7% (468) indicated that no person at least five years older than them ever touch them in a sexual way. Though 4.3% (21) respondents indicated that they had been touched sexually by a person older than them by at least five years. This shows that there were few cases of sexual abuse in the three schools. These findings indicate few cases of sexual abuse in the three schools and align with Trang, Hoangh-Minh, and Bahr (2022), who found low levels of abuse in a Vietnamese study.

Additional outcomes showed that majority of the respondents who were 82.8% (405) indicated that they did not feel that no one in their family loved them. This implies that most children felt loved. Other results showed that majority of the respondents who were 92.4% (452) indicated that no member of their family ever attempted suicide. This shows that most pupils have not encountered suicide cases. In addition, majority of the respondents who were 63.4% (310) indicated that their parents never separated. This shows that most pupils came from stable families.

Further results showed that majority of the respondents who were 80.0% (391) indicated that their father had never beaten their mother. The study findings agreed with Rosalie, Hans, Sigrid, and Sara, (2022) who indicated that only about 18.2% (89) of participants disclosed experiencing some form of abuse, with physical abuse being the most frequently reported. This shows that most pupils came from families that did not experience violence. In addition, majority of the respondents who were 78.7% (385) indicated that they did not live with anyone who was an alcoholic or who used drugs like bhang. This shows that most pupils were not exposed to drugs. Other results showed that majority of the respondents who were 92.8% (454) indicated that none of their family members was mentally ill. In addition, majority of the respondents who were 72.7% (356) indicated that no family member was in prison. The study findings slightly differ with research by Nyaga et al. (2023) explored the influence of domestic

violence exposure on pupils' behavior in Kenyan public primary schools. The study found that 11.9% (58) of pupils witnessed domestic violence, 9.7% (47) were victims, and 12.9% (63) were both victims and witnesses (Nyaga et al., 2023). These findings indicate that a notable percentage of children experience domestic violence, which can negatively impact their psychological well-being and academic performance. Furthermore, a study by Mutua and Waweru (2023) examined the correlation between exposure to domestic violence and academic performance among pupils in Nairobi's informal settlements. Their research found a statistically significant, albeit weak, negative relationship between domestic violence exposure and academic achievement (Mutua & Waweru, 2023). This underscores the impact that domestic violence can have on children's educational outcomes.

Table 2: Prevalence of ACEs among the preadolescents

	Frequency	Percent
0 (none)	109	22.29
1-3 (Moderate)	287	58.69
4 or more(high)	93	19.02
	489	100

The results as shown in the table showed that majority of the pupils who were 58.69% (287) had a moderate level of childhood difficulty, 22.29% (109) had no reported adverse childhood experiences while 19.02% (93) had a high level of childhood difficulty. This shows that the prevalence of ACEs among the preadolescents was moderate. The study findings agreed with Sarah, Keneilwe, Anne, and Mary (2018) who concluded that there was a high prevalence of ACEs among those who had substance use disorders.

4.2 Parental Neglect and Childhood Abuse on Maladaptive Behavior

The second objective was to establish the influence of parental neglect and childhood abuse on maladaptive behavior among preadolescents in selected primary schools in Kiambaa Sub-County. Descriptive results of parental neglect and childhood abuse are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Descriptive of Parental Neglect and Childhood Abuse

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The quality of my relationship with my parents/caregivers during childhood was positive.	9.80%	4.10%	9.60%	13.10%	63.40%
I often felt neglected by my parents/caregivers during my childhood.	45.80%	24.40%	12.70%	8.00%	9.00%
My parents/caregivers frequently spent quality time with me during my childhood.	10.60%	6.30%	7.60%	19.40%	56.00%
I have engaged in problem behaviors, such as substance abuse or risky behaviors, due to childhood experiences.	68.10%	15.10%	5.90%	5.90%	4.90%
My experiences of parental neglect have significantly influenced my current behavior.	62.00%	15.30%	11.50%	4.90%	6.30%
My early life experiences contribute greatly to my current mental and emotional well-being.	39.90%	14.70%	12.90%	8.60%	23.90%
Childhood abuse has adversely affected my ability to form healthy relationships.	57.50%	20.90%	8.00%	5.70%	8.00%
I felt emotionally unsupported by my caregivers during my childhood.	50.90%	21.90%	11.20%	5.50%	10.40%
I felt safe in my home environment during my childhood.	7.40%	3.10%	9.40%	11.20%	68.70%
I experienced verbal abuse (e.g., yelling, insulting) from my caregivers during my childhood.	46.80%	12.70%	13.30%	11.20%	16.00%
Parental neglect has had a negative impact on my academic performance.	56.20%	14.90%	14.50%	6.90%	7.60%
Childhood neglect has significantly affected my self-esteem.	57.30%	13.10%	13.50%	7.80%	8.20%
I had access to proper emotional support during stressful situations in my childhood.	16.20%	9.00%	11.90%	9.80%	53.60%
Parental neglect has influenced my ability to trust others.	40.30%	17.80%	19.80%	7.80%	14.90%
Childhood abuse has had a negative impact on my current stress levels.	55.00%	14.90%	12.90%	6.70%	10.60%

The findings from the table indicate that the majority of participants 63.4% (310) strongly agreed that the quality of their childhood relationship with their parents or caregivers was

positive. Additionally, 56.0% (274) strongly agreed and 19.4%(95) agreed that their caregivers frequently spent quality time with them. These results suggest that a substantial number of participants perceived positive early relationships, which are critical in shaping emotional well-being (Trang, Hoangh-Minh, & Bahr, 2022).

However, a contrasting portion of the participants 45.8% (224) strongly disagreed and 24.4% (119) disagreed reported that they often felt neglected during childhood, while 50.9% (249) strongly disagreed and 21.9%(107) disagreed that they felt emotionally unsupported. This highlights the presence of parental neglect, even in households where some children reported warmth. This mirrors the findings by Rosalie et al. (2022), who found that a portion of children experience emotional neglect or abuse despite overall family functionality.

The results further reveal that 68.1% strongly disagreed and 15.1% (74) disagreed that they engaged in problem behaviors such as substance abuse due to childhood experiences. Similarly, 62.0%(303) strongly disagreed and 15.3%(75) disagreed that parental neglect significantly influenced their current behavior. This suggests a possible resilience among respondents, despite early adversity, a trend also observed in Mutua and Waweru's (2023) study, which found only a weak negative correlation between domestic violence and academic achievement, suggesting that not all adverse childhood experiences lead to problematic outcomes.

On the psychological front, 39.9% (195) strongly disagreed and 14.7% (72) disagreed that early experiences contribute significantly to their current emotional well-being. Likewise, 57.5% (281) strongly disagreed that childhood abuse affected their ability to form healthy relationships, while 50.0% (245) strongly disagreed they were emotionally unsupported. These findings point to relatively low perceived long-term psychological impact for many respondents, though 23.9% (117) still strongly agreed their early life had a significant influence on their emotional state.

While 68.7% (336) strongly agreed that they felt safe in their childhood home, 46.8% (229) strongly disagreed and 12.7% (62) disagreed that they experienced verbal abuse such as yelling or insults. This shows a split in experiences of safety versus exposure to emotional abuse, supporting Nyaga et al.'s (2023) observation that a notable proportion of children both witnessed and experienced forms of domestic violence in Kenyan homes.

In terms of education, 56.2% (275) strongly disagreed and 14.9% (73) disagreed that neglect negatively impacted their academic performance. However, 14.5% (71) remained neutral, and 7.6% (37) strongly agreed, indicating that a minority were academically affected again in alignment with Mutua and Waweru (2023).

Furthermore, 53.6% (262) strongly agreed that they had access to emotional support during stressful childhood situations, while 40.3% (197) strongly disagreed and 17.8% (87) disagreed that neglect influenced their ability to trust others. These findings reflect the nuanced effects of neglect and abuse as some children appear to have preserved core emotional strengths despite adversity.

Lastly, 55.0% (269) strongly disagreed that childhood abuse increased their stress levels, while 10.6% (52) strongly agreed. This shows that although most did not perceive lasting stress from abuse, a smaller yet significant portion still felt its psychological impact, this resonated with Rosalie et al.'s (2022) finding that physical abuse, though not prevalent, left emotional consequences for a subset of children.

Regression results on mitigating effects of adverse childhood experiences had a positive correlation with maladaptive behavior are presented in Table 4, Table 5, and Table 6.

Table 4: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.479a	0.229	0.228	2.70635

Results showed that the R was 0.479 which implied that parental neglect and childhood abuse had a positive correlation with maladaptive behavior. Further results showed that the R square was 0.229 which implies that parental neglect and childhood abuse explain 22.9% of the maladaptive behavior. According to (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022) when a child grows up in an environment of toxic stress, they find it hard to make stable and healthy relationships. Throughout their life, they will struggle with depression, finances, and keeping jobs. This impact can be passed down to generations.

Table 5: ANOVA results

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	1060.687	1	1060.687	144.817	.000b
Residual	3566.961	487	7.324		
Total	4627.648	488			

As shown in Table 5, the significant level for the Anova results is 0.00b. It is below the required threshold of 0.05. This can be said to mean that, regression model is significantly reliable hence good fit for making inferences.

Table 6: Regression Results

	Unstandardized Coefficients	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B		Beta		
(Constant)	7.475	0.343		21.815	0.000
Parental Neglect and Childhood Abuse	1.280	0.106	0.479	12.034	0.000

The results showed that parental neglect and childhood abuse had a positive and significant relationship with maladaptive behavior among preadolescents ($\beta=1.28$, $p=0.000$). This shows that pupils who experience parental neglect and child abuse have higher instances of maladaptive behavior. This is in agreement with (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019) who indicates that children subjected to abuse or neglect may be prone to developing antisocial traits during their maturation, increasing the likelihood of engaging in criminal activities in adulthood.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that the prevalence of ACEs among the preadolescents was moderate. Over 70% (342) of pupils experience some form of adverse childhood experiences. ACEs can lead to a number of maladaptive behaviors amongst the pupils. The more ACEs a person experiences, the greater the risk of negative outcomes.

The study also concluded that parental neglect and childhood abuse had a positive and significant relationship with maladaptive behavior among preadolescents. Parental neglect can increase the risk of maladaptive behaviors in preadolescents, such as behavioral problems, low self-esteem, and anxiety. Parental neglect also has a negative impact on a child's academic performance. This is because neglect can cause stress that disrupts early brain development. In addition, parental neglect can impact a child's ability to trust others. Neglect can make children feel unsafe and undermine their sense of self-worth. This can lead to difficulties in forming trusting relationships and coping with their environment.

6. Recommendations

The study recommends promoting positive parenting and mental health support to strengthen the generally supportive, non-violent family environments observed among preadolescents in Kiambaa Sub-County. Continued substance abuse education and violence prevention are key to sustaining low exposure rates. Strengthening community support systems and implementing school-based programs will foster emotional well-being and resilience. Regular monitoring of ACEs is essential to detect emerging trends and safeguard the well-being of preadolescents.

To address neglect and verbal abuse, the study highlights the need for improved emotional support within both schools and communities. Counseling services can help reduce the impact of these experiences. Educating parents on positive parenting, communication, and quality time is vital for improving relationships and reducing verbal abuse. Schools should provide academic support like tutoring for affected learners. Trust-building activities that foster healthy relationships and interpersonal skills are also essential. Regular monitoring ensures timely and effective interventions. Community awareness campaigns can reduce stigma and encourage families to seek help, ultimately creating a more supportive environment for preadolescents in Kiambaa Sub-County.

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