



## Childhood Trauma and Adolescent Violent Behaviour: A Regression Analysis of Emotional, Physical Abuse, Neglect, and Witnessing Domestic Violence

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**Abstract:** A past experience of childhood trauma remains a major predictor of violent conduct amongst adolescents in low income and or developing countries as exemplified by Uganda, Kampala in particular. About the effects of emotional and physical abuse, neglect and witnessing domestic violence toward adolescent violent behaviour, this study employed a correlational research design. Two hundred and fourteen adolescents were interviewed through administration of assessment questionnaires measuring the level of trauma exposure and the presence of violent behaviours. Multiple correlation and regression analysis procedures were used in treating the data.

The result showed that there was significant positive correlation between violent behavior and being emotionally or physically abused (0.486,  $p < .01$ ), and witnessing domestic violence (0.447  $p < .01$ ). The degree of association explained by abuse was higher than that by neglect, and the results of the regression analysis further confirmed that emotional and physical abuse emerged as the strongest predictors (Coefficients = 0.316,  $p < .01$ ), followed by, witnessing domestic violence (Coefficients = 0.185,  $p < .01$ ), while neglect did not significantly predict adulthood dating violence (Coefficients = 0.059,  $p > .05$ ). Overall, the seven independent variables explained 24.7% of the violent behaviour, ( $R^2 = .258$ ;  $F_{(7, 92)} = 23.093$ ,  $p < .01$ ); this shows that there are other variables that may influence the violent behaviour.

From these results it is pointed out that child maltreatment is significantly associated with violence in youths and therefore calls for the incorporation of trauma-sensitive approaches. Some of the possible recommendations, include: Schools, policies, and mental health workers should use programs addressing the impact of abuse and domestic violence; child protection laws should be reinforced, and there should be increased access to mental health for adolescents in a bid to curb violence among youngsters and enhance better development.

**Keywords:** Childhood trauma, adolescent violent behaviour, emotional abuse, physical abuse, neglect, witnessing domestic violence.

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## Introduction

Youth violence is emerging as such a rising factor in economies with a potential to wreak havoc on social stability and individual well-being. That also means youths that use violence also experience disruptions of education, legal troubles, and long-term psychological consequences. In addition to what was earlier discussed, violent behaviour may be conceptualised in two perspectives. First, it can be viewed as the physical proven aggression aimed at other people, with the help of fighting, bullying, or attacks (Hamby, 2017). Second, it is perceived as not only the bodily harm but also its consequences that are delivered with the help of words and threats – verbal manipulation (World

Health Organisation, 2020). These behaviours are peculiar to adolescent people and more often manifest at the tween ages from twelve to eighteen years. The adolescents having violent behaviour among them have symptoms of impulse control disorder, shown of hostility; these symptoms lead to poor interpersonal relationship, involvement in criminal activities and long-term socio-economic productivity of these adolescents is likely to be compromised (Mousoulidou, Christodoulou, and Goutoglou, 2025).

Globally, adolescent violence varies significantly by region. In European countries, approximately 20% of adolescents report engaging in violent behaviour, with higher rates observed in urban areas of the United Kingdom and France (UNICEF, 2022). The prevalence is considerably higher in Africa, where nearly 40% of

adolescents engage in violent acts, driven by socio-economic instability and weak protective structures (Aboagye et al., 2021). In West Africa, countries such as Nigeria and Ghana report violence rates around 30%, often linked to poverty and communal violence (Aniche et al., 2023). In East Africa, including Uganda, the situation is more severe, with nearly 50% of adolescents reporting involvement in violent behaviour, largely due to exposure to domestic violence and the lingering effects of conflict (UNICEF, 2022). Specifically, in Uganda, more than half of the adolescent population has either experienced or perpetrated violence, with long-term implications such as mental health issues and reduced employment prospects (Perry et al., 2024).

Literature has identified various factors contributing to adolescent violent behaviour, including socio-economic conditions, peer influences, and exposure to community violence. Classical studies by de Lima Dias (2023) and Kahina (2023) have underscored the role of environmental and social influences on the development of violent tendencies. However, emerging research highlights childhood trauma as a critical, yet often overlooked, predictor. Childhood trauma includes experiences of emotional abuse, physical abuse, neglect, and witnessing domestic violence, all of which have lasting effects on an individual's behaviour (Downey and Crummy, 2022). While extensive research exists on peer and socio-economic factors, the specific impact of childhood trauma on adolescent violent behaviour remains underexplored, particularly in low-income settings such as Uganda. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating how different forms of childhood trauma uniquely contribute to violent behaviour in Ugandan adolescents.

Emotional abuse is a key component of childhood trauma and is widely recognized as one of the most damaging forms of maltreatment. It is defined as the consistent exposure to verbal assaults, humiliation, or psychological manipulation by caregivers, which can leave deep emotional scars (Crenshaw and Caprioli, 2024). Unlike physical abuse, emotional abuse may not leave visible wounds, but its impact on psychological development is profound. Adolescents who experience emotional abuse often exhibit low self-esteem, heightened anxiety, and an increased sensitivity to criticism (Gao et al., 2024). These symptoms can manifest as aggressive outbursts, hostility, or social withdrawal. Studies have consistently shown that emotional abuse is a significant predictor of violent behaviour. Chong et al. (2022) found a strong correlation between emotional abuse and externalizing behaviours, emphasizing that prolonged exposure to emotional maltreatment heightens the risk of violent tendencies. This evidence highlights the insidious nature of emotional abuse, as its long-term effects often go unnoticed until maladaptive behaviours, such as aggression, emerge.

Similarly, physical abuse plays a critical role in the development of violent behaviour among adolescents. Physical abuse is characterized by the deliberate infliction of physical harm, such as hitting, punching, or burning, which can lead to both physical and psychological damage (Bilo et al., 2023). Adolescents who have been physically abused often exhibit visible injuries, but more critically, they may develop an aggressive disposition as a defensive response to their environment. Research underscores the strong association between physical abuse and violent behaviour. Mossige et al. (2016) reported that children who experience physical abuse are twice as likely to engage in violent acts during adolescence compared to their non-abused counterparts. This

increased propensity for violence can be attributed to the normalization of aggression as a means of resolving conflict, as well as the internalization of violent responses modeled by abusive caregivers.

Neglect, another critical form of childhood trauma, is defined as the failure to provide for a child's basic physical, emotional, or educational needs (McCoy and Keen, 2022). Unlike overt abuse, neglect is often more insidious and difficult to detect, yet its effects are equally damaging. Adolescents who experience neglect frequently exhibit signs of malnutrition, poor academic performance, and emotional withdrawal. Neglected children often suffer from developmental delays, both cognitively and emotionally, which can lead to maladaptive behaviours. Muniz et al. (2019) found that children who experience neglect are at a significantly higher risk for both internalizing problems, such as depression and anxiety, and externalizing behaviours, including aggression. This suggests that the absence of caregiving and nurturing can create a void that manifests in violent behaviour as adolescents seek control over their environment.

Witnessing domestic violence is also a critical factor in the development of violent behaviour. This form of trauma occurs when children are exposed to ongoing verbal, emotional, or physical conflict between caregivers, which can have profound psychological effects (Dye, 2018). Children who witness domestic violence often experience chronic fear, anxiety, and confusion, which can lead to emotional dysregulation and aggressive behaviours. Research by Carnevale et al. (2020) found that children who witness domestic violence are twice as likely to engage in violent behaviours themselves, as they internalize the violent dynamics they observe in their home environments. These children often learn to associate violence with power and control, thereby normalizing aggression as a coping mechanism.

Despite the extensive research on other predictors of adolescent violent behaviour, the role of childhood trauma, particularly in Uganda, has not been sufficiently explored. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the unique contributions of emotional abuse, physical abuse, neglect, and witnessing domestic violence to violent behaviour among Ugandan adolescents. By understanding these relationships, this research will provide critical insights for developing targeted interventions to reduce violence and improve the long-term outcomes for at-risk youth.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between childhood trauma specifically emotional and physical abuse, neglect, and witnessing domestic violence and violent behaviour among adolescents in Kampala, Uganda. By exploring the extent to which these forms of trauma contribute to violent behaviour, the study seeks to provide empirical evidence that can inform policies, interventions, and support programs aimed at mitigating the effects of childhood trauma and reducing adolescent violence.

## Research Questions

1. What type of relationship exists between childhood trauma (emotional and physical abuse, neglect, and witnessing domestic violence) and violent behaviour among adolescents in Kampala, Uganda?

2. What is the joint contribution of emotional and physical abuse, neglect, and witnessing domestic violence to violent behaviour among adolescents in Kampala, Uganda?
3. What is the relative contribution of emotional and physical abuse, neglect, and witnessing domestic violence to violent behaviour among adolescents in Kampala, Uganda?

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative correlational research design to examine the relationship between childhood trauma and adolescent violent behaviour in Uganda. Correlational designs are appropriate for exploring associations between variables without manipulating them (Creswell, 2014). Regression analysis was used to determine how emotional abuse, physical abuse, neglect, and witnessing domestic violence predict violent behaviour.

### Participants

The sample comprised 214 adolescents (ages 12–18) from secondary schools and youth rehabilitation centres across Uganda. Participants were selected using a multi-stage sampling technique: districts were stratified by socio-economic status, schools and centres were randomly chosen, and adolescents were selected systematically. Inclusion criteria required adolescents to be enrolled in school or residing in a rehabilitation centre, with informed consent obtained from parents for minors.

### Measures

1. Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ):

Childhood trauma was assessed using the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (Viola et al., 2016). This validated instrument

measures emotional abuse, physical abuse, neglect, and witnessing domestic violence, with items rated on a five-point Likert scale. Higher scores indicate greater exposure to trauma, and the CTQ has demonstrated high reliability ( $\alpha = 0.79–0.94$ ).

2. Youth Self-Report (YSR) Aggression Subscale:

Violent behaviour was measured using the aggression subscale of the Youth Self-Report (Kendall, 2020). This tool assesses the frequency of aggressive behaviours (e.g., fighting, bullying) over the past six months, with items rated on a three-point scale. The subscale has shown strong reliability ( $\alpha > 0.85$ ).

### Procedure

Data were collected over three months by trained research assistants. Participants completed the questionnaires in supervised settings to ensure confidentiality and accuracy. Ethical approval was obtained from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST), and informed consent was secured from participants and parents where applicable.

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics summarized the sample characteristics and trauma exposure levels. Multiple regression analyses were conducted to assess the predictive power of the trauma indices on violent behaviour. Assumptions of linearity, normality, and multicollinearity were checked, and statistical significance was set at  $p < .05$ .

## Result

**Research Question 1:** What type of relationship exist between childhood trauma (Emotional and physical abuse, neglect, witnessing domestic violence) and violence behaviour among adolescents in Uganda.

Table 1: Multiple Correlation summary of variables under investigation

Variables	Mean	St.dv	1	2	3	4
<b>Violence Behaviour</b>	20.467	8.472	1.00			
<b>Emotional physical abuse</b>	5.089	2.460	0.486**	1.00		
<b>Neglect</b>	5.089	2.894	0.369**	0.633**	1.00	
<b>Witnessing domestic violence</b>	3.313	2.154	0.447**	0.718**	0.599**	<b>1.00</b>

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Table 1 reveals that there is a significant relationship between violence behaviour and emotional physical abuse ( $r=0.486$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), witnessing domestic violence ( $r=0.447$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and neglect ( $r=0.369$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). This implies that high influence of childhood traumas like emotional and physical abuse, neglect and witnessing domestic violence will increase the engagement of adolescents in violence behaviour in Kampala, Uganda.

**Research Question 2:** What is the joint contribution of childhood trauma (emotional physical abuse, neglect and witnessing domestic violence) on violence behaviour among adolescents in Kampala, Uganda.

Table 2: Regression summary showing joint contribution between the independent variables on the dependent variable

<b>R= 0.508</b>		<b>Adj R<sup>2</sup>=0.247</b>			
<b>R<sup>2</sup>= 0.258</b>		<b>Std Error= 7.352</b>			
Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	f	sig
<b>Regression</b>	3938.148	3	1312.716	24.286	<b>0.00</b>
<b>Residual</b>	11351.123	210	54.053		
<b>Total</b>	15289.271	213			

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Table 2 reveals that there is a joint contribution of emotional physical abuse, neglect and witnessing domestic violence to the prediction of violence behaviour among adolescents in Kampala, Uganda. Regression coefficient  $R=0.508$ ,  $R^2=0.258$ ,  $\text{Adj } R^2=0.247$ . The three factors combined; they account for 24.7% variance in adolescent's violence behaviour. However, the remaining percentage (75.3%) accounts for the change in violence behaviour of adolescents that are beyond this study. Therefore, emotional physical abuse, neglect and witnessing domestic violence jointly predicted the violence behaviour of adolescents in Kampala, Uganda.

**Research Question 3:** What is the relative contribution of emotional physical abuse, neglect and witnessing domestic violence

Table 3: Regression summary showing relative contribution between the independent variables on the dependent variable.

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	11.649	1.194		9.758	<b>0.000</b>
Emotional Physical Abuse	1.088	0.316	0.316	3.444	<b>0.001</b>
Neglect	0.172	0.234	0.059	0.737	<b>0.462</b>
Witnessing Domestic violence	0.726	0.349	0.185	2.084	<b>0.038</b>

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Table 3 reveals that two out of the three factors (emotional physical abuse and witnessing domestic violence) are significant predictors of violence behaviour among adolescents in Kampala, Uganda while neglect is not a significant predictor.

The most potent predictor is emotional physical abuse ( $\beta=0.316$ ,  $t=3.444$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and witnessing domestic violence ( $\beta=0.185$ ,  $t=2.084$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) except neglect ( $\beta=0.059$ ,  $t=0.737$ ,  $p>0.05$ ). This implies that emotional physical abuse and witnessing domestic violence will increase the tendency of violence behaviour among adolescents in Kampala, Uganda by 31.6% and 18.5% respectively.

## Discussion of Findings

The first research question explored the relationship between childhood trauma specifically emotional and physical abuse, neglect, and witnessing domestic violence and violent behaviour among adolescents in Uganda. The findings demonstrate significant positive correlations between all forms of childhood trauma examined and violent behaviour, emphasizing the profound impact of early adverse experiences on adolescent aggression. The results revealed a strong positive correlation between emotional and physical abuse and violent behaviour ( $r = 0.486$ ,  $p < .01$ ), indicating that adolescents who experience higher levels of such abuse are more likely to engage in violent acts. This finding aligns with prior research by Fong, Hawes and Allen, (2019), who found that physical abuse significantly increases the likelihood of externalizing behaviours, such as aggression. Mazza et al. (2020) similarly highlighted that emotional abuse can heighten the risk of aggressive behaviour due to its detrimental effects on emotional regulation. These results suggest that emotional and physical abuse disrupt adolescents' ability to manage anger and frustration, fostering violent responses, particularly in the context of limited emotional support.

Neglect was also found to be significantly correlated with violent behaviour ( $r = 0.369$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Adolescents who experience neglect often lack the emotional and social resources necessary to develop healthy coping mechanisms, which can lead to increased aggression. This finding is consistent with the work of Cao et al. (2024), who noted that neglect is a key predictor of both internalizing and externalizing behaviours. However, the

correlation between neglect and violent behaviour in this study is lower than that of emotional and physical abuse, suggesting that while neglect is influential, its impact may be less direct than overt forms of abuse.

In addition, the study found a significant positive relationship between witnessing domestic violence and violent behaviour ( $r = 0.447$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Adolescents exposed to domestic violence often model the aggressive behaviours they observe, as noted by Estrada et al. (2020), who found that such exposure significantly increases the likelihood of violent behaviour. Liu and Xu (2023) similarly argued that witnessing domestic violence normalizes aggression, creating a cycle of violence that perpetuates across generations. The strength of the correlation observed in this study underscores the critical role of family dynamics in shaping adolescent behaviour, particularly in environments where domestic violence is prevalent.

These findings are consistent with much of the existing literature, but they also highlight unique aspects of the Ugandan context. Compared to studies conducted in Western countries, where correlation coefficients are often slightly lower (Lemuel et al., 2021), the stronger relationships found in this study may reflect the compounded effects of socio-economic challenges and limited access to mental health resources in Uganda. This suggests that the impact of childhood trauma on violent behaviour may be amplified in regions with fewer institutional supports.

The second research question investigated the joint contribution of childhood trauma emotional and physical abuse, neglect and witnessing domestic violence on violent behaviour among adolescents in Kampala, Uganda. The regression analysis revealed a significant combined predictive effect of these trauma factors on violent behaviour, with a regression coefficient of  $R = 0.508$  and an adjusted  $R^2$  of 0.247 ( $p < .01$ ). This indicates that these three factors collectively account for 24.7% of the variance in adolescent violent behaviour, while the remaining 75.3% is explained by other factors not included in this study.

These findings align with previous research demonstrating the cumulative impact of multiple forms of childhood trauma on the development of aggressive behaviour. For example, Salo, Appleton and Tracy, (2022) noted that exposure to multiple types of

adversity significantly increases the risk of externalizing behaviours such as violence. The current study's findings reinforce the idea that childhood trauma does not act in isolation but rather exerts a synergistic effect on behavioural outcomes, suggesting that adolescents exposed to more than one type of trauma are at heightened risk of engaging in violent behaviour.

The observed variance (24.7%) is consistent with findings by Konkoly Thege et al. (2017), who reported that cumulative trauma exposure accounted for approximately 20–30% of the variance in aggressive behaviour across various populations. However, the relatively moderate explanatory power of this model suggests that other contextual factors—such as peer influence, socio-economic status, and community violence—may also play a substantial role in shaping violent behaviour. This is consistent with the study of Riaz (2022), which posits that adolescent behaviour is influenced by a complex interplay of individual, family, and environmental factors.

Contrasting findings in Western contexts often indicate a slightly higher predictive power of trauma on violent behaviour, potentially due to differences in measurement tools or socio-cultural factors. For instance, Zalta et al., (2021) highlighted that in contexts with stronger social support systems, the impact of trauma on violent behaviour may be mitigated. In contrast, in resource-constrained settings such as Uganda, limited access to mental health services and social support may amplify the effects of trauma on adolescents' behavioural outcomes. Additionally, the findings emphasize the critical role of witnessing domestic violence, which, as shown by Gerber, De Santis and Cianelli, (2021), often has a compounding effect on other forms of trauma. Adolescents who experience multiple forms of trauma, including neglect and abuse, may internalize violent behaviours as normative, further reinforcing the cycle of aggression. This suggests that interventions aimed at reducing adolescent violence in Kampala should adopt a holistic approach, addressing multiple dimensions of childhood trauma simultaneously.

The third question examined the relative contribution of emotional and physical abuse, neglect, and witnessing domestic violence to violent behaviour among adolescents in Kampala, Uganda. The regression analysis presented in Table 3 indicates that emotional and physical abuse, as well as witnessing domestic violence, are significant predictors of violent behaviour, while neglect is not. Emotional and physical abuse emerged as the most potent predictor ( $\beta = 0.316$ ,  $t = 3.444$ ,  $p < .01$ ), followed by witnessing domestic violence ( $\beta = 0.185$ ,  $t = 2.084$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Neglect, however, showed no significant predictive power ( $\beta = 0.059$ ,  $t = 0.737$ ,  $p > .05$ ). These findings suggest that experiences of abuse and exposure to domestic violence substantially increase the likelihood of violent behaviour, whereas neglect alone may not exert the same influence in this context.

The finding that emotional and physical abuse is the strongest predictor aligns with existing literature. Smith and Pollak, (2020) found that children subjected to physical abuse are more prone to violent behaviour due to impaired emotional regulation and heightened sensitivity to perceived threats. Similarly, research by Khalid, (2023) emphasized the role of emotional abuse in fostering aggression, as prolonged exposure to verbal assaults and demeaning treatment can erode self-esteem and promote externalizing behaviours. The current study reinforces these

findings, demonstrating that such abuse has a profound impact on adolescents in Kampala, potentially due to the lack of adequate mental health resources and social support systems in the region.

Witnessing domestic violence also plays a significant role in predicting violent behaviour, which is consistent with research by Eisner and Malti, (2015), who noted that children who observe violence within the home often internalize aggressive behaviours as normative. Nkadameng, (2024) further highlighted that children who witness domestic violence are at a higher risk of developing aggressive tendencies because they may view violence as an acceptable method of conflict resolution. The finding that witnessing domestic violence contributes to 18.5% of the variance in violent behaviour underscores the critical influence of family dynamics and the urgent need for interventions targeting family violence.

In contrast, neglect did not significantly predict violent behaviour in this study, a result that diverges from some previous findings. Howe (2017) found that neglect contributes to behavioural problems, including aggression, albeit to a lesser extent than direct forms of abuse. The non-significant finding in the current study may reflect cultural or contextual factors unique to Kampala, where the effects of neglect could be mediated by other variables such as peer relationships or community influences. Alternatively, it may indicate that the forms of neglect experienced by the participants did not reach a threshold sufficient to provoke violent behaviour.

## Conclusion

This study investigated the relationship between childhood trauma specifically emotional and physical abuse, neglect, and witnessing domestic violence and violent behaviour among adolescents in Kampala, Uganda. The findings revealed that emotional and physical abuse and witnessing domestic violence are significant predictors of violent behaviour, while neglect did not exhibit a significant direct effect. Emotional and physical abuse emerged as the most potent predictor, underscoring its critical role in influencing aggressive tendencies. The study highlights the cumulative impact of multiple trauma types on adolescent behaviour, demonstrating that such adverse experiences contribute significantly to violent outcomes. However, a substantial proportion of the variance in violent behaviour remains unexplained, suggesting the influence of other contextual factors. These findings underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions to address childhood trauma in order to reduce adolescent violence and promote healthier developmental trajectories.

## Recommendations

1. Schools, communities, and social service agencies in Kampala should implement trauma-informed programs that provide counselling and psychosocial support to adolescents affected by emotional and physical abuse and exposure to domestic violence.
2. Programs aimed at educating parents and caregivers on the harmful effects of abuse and domestic violence should be prioritized. Parenting workshops can equip caregivers with non-violent conflict resolution skills and effective child-rearing practices.



3. Government and policymakers should enhance the enforcement of child protection laws to prevent abuse and domestic violence. Strengthening reporting mechanisms and ensuring accountability for perpetrators is essential.
4. Establish community-based support systems, such as peer mentorship programs and safe spaces, where adolescents can receive emotional support and guidance from trusted adults.
5. Expanding access to mental health services and training professionals in trauma-focused therapy can help address the psychological impacts of abuse and violence on adolescents.

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