

MOTHERS' PERCEPTION ABOUT THE SAFETY OF CRÈCHES FOR THEIR CHILDREN

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Abstract:

There is an increasing demand for Crèche and day care schools in urban centres in Nigeria because the number of full-time housewives is on a rapid decline. More mothers who would otherwise stay at home and look after their babies now work at a paid job or run their own small business to augment the family income. As a result, many households now view crèches as a matter of importance and not of convenience. This study therefore investigates mothers' views about the safety of their children in crèches. The descriptive survey research design was adopted. The sample comprises of ninety one parents who patronise some randomly selected crèches in Abeokuta metropolis, Ogun State, Nigeria. A questionnaire tagged 'Mothers' Perception of Crèche Questionnaire (MPCQ)' with Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.816 was used for data collection. The data collected was analysed using percentages, means and analysis of variance (at .05 level of significance). Majority of the sampled parents reported that there were unpleasant incidences (such as health challenges and injuries) at some crèches but they still had to keep their babies there while at work; while others reported incidences of missing babies in some crèches. It was recommended that more crèches which are healthy, safe, adequately staffed, easily accessible and affordable should be provided for working mothers to keep their babies while at work. Also, the conditions required to be met in order for crèches to be licensed should be reviewed and enforced for the safety of the babies, while unlicensed ones should be closed down.

Key Words: Mothers' Perception, Crèche, Day-care, Children's safety, Patronage

Introduction:

There is an increasing demand for Crèche and day care schools in urban centres in Nigeria. This could be attributed to the fact that the number of full-time housewives is on a rapid decline. The number of women of childbearing age into the labor force has been on a steady increase; which has necessitated parents to seek an alternative form of childcare for their children while they are at work (Marshall, Robeson, Tracy, Frye, & Robertson, 2013). Also, single parenting and the need for both parents to seek jobs in order to augment the family income (Ahin & Shin, 2013) due to the prevailing economic depression in Nigeria, as well as the change in the extended family structure where working mothers could keep their babies in the care of family members (Crosnoe et al., 2016) have drastically increased the mothers' need for crèche services for their babies (Del Boca, 2015). Also, the short maternity leave officially approved for working mothers, places increasing financial pressure on nursing mothers in Nigeria to return to work after childbirth, while their children are still very young. As a result, mothers of young babies are confronted with challenges of making good decisions in selecting the particular crèche in which to keep their babies (Coley et al., 2014).

More mothers who would otherwise stay at home and look after their babies now work at a paid job or run their own small business (Amosu et al, 2011; Atta, 2023). More women are achieving higher education that allows them to pursue promising careers (like men) in the workplace. Moreover, the current economic situation in the county has made it more imperative

for even those women who do not have any formal career aspirations to set up small businesses to ensure their financial independence or to augment the family income (Azu, 2013; Marcil et al, 2020; Affandy, 2023). The fact is that babies and toddlers can be a big distraction in the workplace and as a result, many mothers choose to enrol their babies in Crèches (Trautner, 2016). And as the size and number of cities grow, the demand and consequent establishment of convenience services (such as crèches) will continue to increase.

The increase in the demand for crèche services by working women of childbearing age, could lead to an increase in the enrollment of babies in crèches that are deficient. This may have have a detrimental impact on such babies' overall development, which may be difficult to remedy later in life (Krieg, Curtis, Hall, & Westernberg, 2015). There have been reported cases of inadequate disease prevention practices in some crèches as care givers lacked adequate training (Obiagwu, & Ajayi, 2021) and other cases where children were drugged, starved, suffered severe injury and even death (George, 2024). It is important that babies, especially those of low social economic status, be enrolled in good quality crèches which have been reported as essential for promoting cognitive, social, and emotional development for all children (Li et al., 2016).

Moreover, quality child care services are considered not only beneficial to the child but for the society in general (Good Start Early Learning, 2015).

Furthermore, unlike in some developed countries where birth rates are falling, the birth rate in Nigeria is on the increase with about 20,000 newborns every day (World Population Review, 2018). With the increase in the number of working mothers, these babies have to be kept in crèches while their mothers are at work. Similarly, more parents today are becoming aware of the benefits and positive effects of quality care during the early years on a child's development. This is considered a period of rapid language, cognitive and social development which should not be handled with levity. As a result, many households now view crèches as a matter of importance and not of convenience, preferring a formal crèche over an unstructured and unplanned babysitting arrangement which could raise several issues including child safety and abuse (The Nation, 2017; Aviad, et al, 2024).

Parental perception about where their babies are kept is considered of great importance because such decisions are part of their parental responsibilities (Scopelliti & Musatti, 2013). Among the factors that determine childcare choice are family needs, family resources, cultural norms, availability, affordability, and accessibility of such services (Coley et al., 2014). Navarro-Cruz (2016) identified five significant factors that determine parents' choice of childcare services as safety, trusting and loving staff, parents' involvement, strong curriculum and small pupils to teacher ratio. Forry et al. (2014) also found in their study that parents rated excellent and friendly staff, caring environment, and quality of physical structures, health, and safety as priorities. However, amongst all, trust ranked the highest. Importantly, no matter how high the quality of childcare services rendered in a crèche are, the ability to pay is a principal factor in accessing services (Spiers, 2015; Day Care Trust, 2010).

Besides, Petitclerc et al. (2017) listed the characteristics that influence parental preference of child care services as parent's education, family income and structure as well as the age of the child. In other words, those are the factors that determine parents' choice of childcare services for their children. This study, therefore investigates the perception of mothers about the safety of their children. It examines the factors responsible for their patronage of the chosen crèche for their children, their awareness of dangers in some crèches and the influence of such awareness on their decision making.

Research Questions

- i. What is the perception of mothers about crèches in Abeokuta metropolis?
- ii. What are the factors responsible for their patronage of crèches?
- iii. Are mothers aware of possible harmful effects of some crèches on their children?

Hypothesis

H0₁: There is no significant difference in the responses of the mothers based on:

- (a) age group,
- (b) educational qualification and
- (c) profession.

Methodology

This study adopted the descriptive survey research design. This research design is a design that critically examines events, opinions, objects, attitudes, subjects or ideas with the aim of providing accurate information about the phenomenon being studied (Adeyemo, 2006). The choice of this design enabled the researcher to critically, accurately and objectively describe the perception of mothers' perception about crèches and their safety for their children. Answers to three research questions and one hypothesis were sought in the study. The population comprised of all mothers in Abeokuta Metropolis of Ogun State, Nigeria. The sample comprises of ninety six parents who patronise some randomly selected crèches in Abeokuta metropolis. A questionnaire tagged 'Mothers' Perception of Crèche Questionnaire (MPCQ) with Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient for internal consistency of 0.805 was used for data collection. The questionnaire had four sections: section A had items which reflected the demographic data of the mothers. Section B had 5 items which sought information on the mothers' perception of crèches. Section C had 5 items which sought information on the factors responsible for the patronage of crèches, while section D focussed on the mothers' aware of the effect of crèches on their children. Sections B, C and D adopted a 4-point Likert scale of Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree. 96 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to the mothers with the help of one research assistant and the return rate was 100%. SPSS was used for data analysis. Simple percentages were used in answering the research questions, while Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) at 0.05 level of significance was used to test the hypothesis.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Information on Mothers

Fig 1: Age Group of Mothers

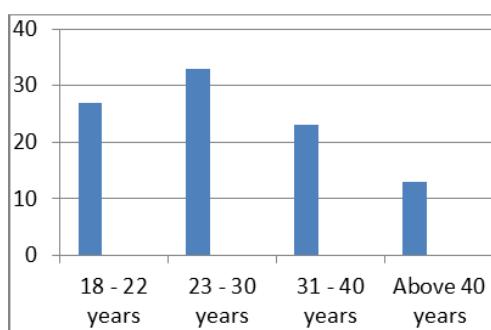


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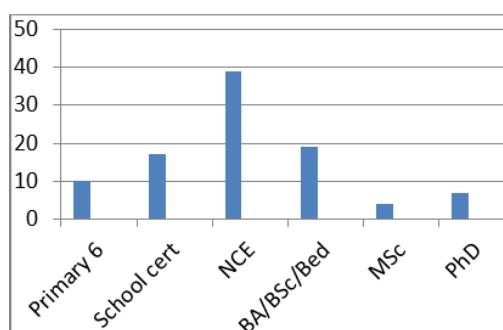
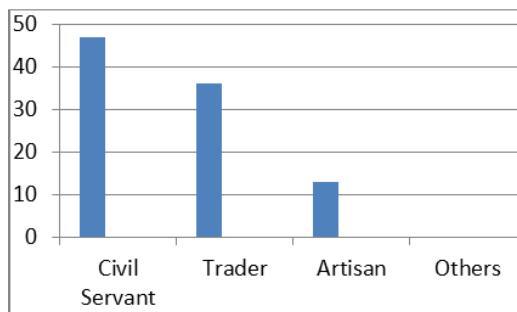


Figure 1 shows that most of the sampled mothers were aged 23-30 years (34.4%), while a few were above 40 years (13.5%). Figure 2 reveals that most of the sampled mothers had the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) (40.6%), while a few were holders of Doctor of Philosophy (7.3%) and Master's degree (4.2%). Displayed on figure 3 are the mothers' professions with the highest proportion being civil servants (49%), and the lowest artisans (13.5%). It is not surprising that most of the mothers patronising crèches are civil servants because the traders and artisans could decide to take their babies along to their places of work but civil servants could not.

Fig 3: Mothers' Profession

Research Questions 1: What is the perception of mothers about crèches in Abeokuta metropolis?

Table 1: Mothers' perception about crèches

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Crèches are places where children are kept for a while	61 (67.0%)	18 (19.8%)	5 (5.5%)	17 (18.7%)	91 (100%)
Some crèches have been reported for unpleasant occurrences	14 (15.4%)	54 (59.3%)	17 (18.7%)	6 (6.6%)	91 (100%)
I make use of crèches to keep my baby while busy or at work	25 (27.5%)	35 (38.4%)	25 (27.5%)	6 (6.6%)	91 (100%)
Most of the available crèches in my community are licensed and certified by the appropriate agency	19 (20.9%)	35 (38.4%)	26 (28.6%)	11 (12.1%)	91 (100%)
The use of crèches should not be encouraged due to some of the reported malpractices	17 (18.7%)	23 (25.3%)	40 (43.9%)	11 (12.1%)	91 (100%)

As shown in table 1, majority of the mothers (56.3%) believed that most of the available crèches in their community were licensed and certified even though they were not shown any proof to that effect. The mothers were probably not keen on verifying the claims of the crèche owners because of the pressing need to keep their babies somewhere to be able to focus on their jobs. This is corroborated by the findings of Krieg et al (2015) who stated that the increasing need of mothers to keep their babies somewhere in order to focus on their work forced some mothers to enrol in centers that were deficient, which could negatively impact their babies' development. A larger proportion (82.3%) of the mothers reported that crèches were places to keep children just for a while and that they did keep their children there while they were at work or busy for other reasons (61.5%). Similar to this finding, more mothers needed crèche services while working to augment the family income (Ahin & Shin, 2013) and due to change in family structure where relations are no longer available to babysit for such mothers (Crosnoe et al, 2016). Despite the reported cases (70.9%) of unpleasant occurrences in some centres as corroborated by Krieg et al (2015), Obiagwu & Ajayi (2021) and George (2024), mothers still felt compelled to drop their babies having no other alternatives. However, they (58.4%) believed that the use of crèches should be discouraged as a result of the reported malpractices. This could be as a result of their conviction that quality crèches are the best for both babies' and societal development (Good Start Early Learning, 2015).

Research Question 2: What are the factors responsible for their patronage of crèches?

Table 2: Factors responsible for mothers' patronage of crèches

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
I patronise crèches because of my job or when busy for other reasons	53 (55.2%)	16 (16.7%)	18 (18.8%)	9 (9.4%)	96 (100%)
I patronise this crèches because the fees are affordable	22 (22.9%)	36 (37.5%)	23 (24%)	15 (15.6%)	96 (100%)
The socialisation of my baby with other babies is the reason for my patronage of crèches	23 (24%)	36 (37.5%)	33 (37.5%)	4 (4.2%)	96 (100%)
I believe that my baby will embrace early learning faster in crèches than at home	25 (26%)	40 (41.7%)	21 (21.9%)	10 (10.4%)	96 (100%)
Crèches ease mothers from the stress of children's tantrums and naughtiness	22 (22.9%)	24 (25%)	37 (38.5%)	13 (13.5%)	96 (100%)

As table 2 reveals that the factors responsible for the patronage of crèches by most of the mothers were their jobs or other responsibilities that kept them busy (71.9%) as reported by Ahin & Shin (2013); affordable fees (60.4%) as found by Coley et al (2014), Spiers (2015), and Petitclerc (2017); the opportunity for their babies to socialise with other babies (61.5%) and the possibility of faster and early learning (67.7%) as corroborated by Drange & Ronning (2020). However, crèches did not provide ease from the stress of children's tantrums and naughtiness since 52% of the respondents disagreed.

Research Question 3: Are mothers aware of possible harmful effects of some crèches on their children?

Table 3 shows that most of the mothers reported that the crèches operated in hygienic environment (54.2%). This was opposed to the finding of Obiagwu and Ajayi (2021) which reported inadequate disease prevention practices in many crèches as care givers lacked adequate training. The mothers were also aware of some occurrences in crèches that could affect their children negatively thereby rendering such centres unsafe, such as missing babies (52.2%), health challenges (53.1%) though not too serious, socio-emotional problems (54.2%), nonchalant attitude of the care givers (55.2%) as a result of which they did not respond promptly to the children's hunger and thirst (54.2%) even though they did not deprive the children of their food (55.2%). All these were similar to the findings of Obiagwu & Ajayi (2021) and George (2024) were many crèches were found to be breeding grounds for diseases while others engaged in harmful practices such as drugging and starving of babies. There were also reported cases of babies suffering severe injuries and even death.

Table 3: Mothers' awareness of possible effects of some crèches on their children

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Some crèches are fond of professional malpractices	10 (10.4%)	34 (35.4%)	30 (31.3%)	22 (22.9%)	96
Babies have been reported missing while under the care of caregivers	16 (16.7%)	34 (35.4%)	36 (37.5%)	9 (9.4%)	95
Some care givers deprive children in their care of their food	13 (13.5%)	30 (31.3%)	31 (32.3%)	22 (22.9%)	96

The environment of some crèches is not hygienic putting children at risk of health problems	21 (21.9%)	23 (24.0%)	36 (37.5%)	16 (16.7%)	96
My children experience health challenges from the crèches I patronise	12 (12.5%)	39 (40.6%)	36 (37.5%)	9 (9.4%)	96
There are reported cases of serious health challenges in some crèches	9 (9.4%)	22 (22.9%)	26 (27.1%)	35 (36.5%)	92
Crèches have caused socio - emotional problems for my child	12 (12.5%)	40 (41.7%)	25 (26.0%)	15 (15.6%)	92
My children are usually left hungry and thirsty at crèches	9 (9.4%)	43 (44.8%)	25 (26.0%)	15 (15.6%)	92
Nonchalant attitude of care givers has led to injury on my children	22 (22.9%)	31 (32.3%)	29 (30.2%)	10 (10.4%)	92
Crèches have had negative effect on my children	27 (28.1%)	41 (42.7%)	16 (16.7%)	8 (8.3%)	92

Overall, most of the mothers saw the crèches as unsafe places for their children (70.8%) and yet they did not adjudge the bad occurrences as due to professional malpractices (54.2%). This is probably because the mothers did not know which practices are expected of the caregivers as professionals. All they needed was a place to keep their children so that the mothers could attend to their jobs and other responsibilities.

Hypothesis

H0_{1a}: There is no significant difference in the responses of the mothers based on age group.

Table 4: Mean of responses of mother by age group

Age Group	Mean	N	Std.	F-test	Sig. (p-value)
			Deviation		
18-22 years	54.4167	24	7.98323	.955	.418
22-30 years	53.5758	33	9.67933		
21-40 years	53.2381	21	10.31942		
Above 40 years	49.0769	13	10.39601		
Total	53.0769	91	9.51634		

Table 4 shows that mothers aged 18-22 years had the highest perception about crèches as safe places for their children while mothers aged above 40 years felt differently. This is probably because with age and experience with child rearing, the older mothers had come to realise the negative effect that some of the reported negative occurrences in crèches could have on children's growth and development. The table further reveals that the differences in the perception of the mothers about crèches as safe places for their babies were not significant. This could be because mothers aged 40 years and above formed the lowest proportion of the sampled mothers. The lack of significance in the perceptions was also submitted by Moon & Hasan (2024) who found no significant effect of parental factors on mothers' perception about childcare services for their children.

H0_{1b}: There is no significant difference in the responses of the mothers based on educational qualification

Table 5: Mean responses of mothers by educational qualification

Highest Educational Qualification	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	F-test	Sig. (p-value)
			n		
primary 6	40.6250	8	10.40518	4.803	.001
School Certificate	49.7647	17	9.36436		
NCE	55.4211	38	8.70114		
BA/BSc/Bed	55.4444	18	8.00898		
MSc	55.6667	3	2.08167		
PhD	55.4286	7	6.99660		
Total	53.0769	91	9.51634		

It is evident from table 5 that the higher the educational qualification, the higher the perception of the mothers of the crèches as safe places for their children. It could also be observed from the table that the differences in the mothers' perception of the sampled crèches as safe places for their children based on their educational qualification were significant. This shows that to make parental educational qualification enhanced the mothers' perception and helped them in taking good decision about the choice of crèches for their babies. This finding was corroborated by Petriclerc (2017) who found that parental education, family income and structure were strong determinants of parents' choice of crèches for their babies.

H0_{1c}: There is no significant difference in the responses of the mothers based on profession.

Table 6: Mean responses of mother by profession

Profession	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	F-test	Sig. (p-value)
Civil Servant	56.8000	45	6.66606	10.882	.000
Trader	51.1471	34	9.82308		
Artisan	44.5833	12	11.26102		
Total	53.0769	91	9.51634		

Table 6 reveals that civil servants had the highest perception of crèches as safe places for their babies while the artisans' perception was the least. This explains why most of the sampled mothers were civil servants and the artisans the least. As further revealed from the table, the differences in the mean perception of mothers about crèches being safe places for their babies based on profession were significant. Civil servants probably had to accept the safety of the crèches for their babies because they really have no option than to keep their babies there since these babies could not go along with them to work. Women have reported that taking children to their offices can be distractive and impact work productivity negatively (Trautner, 2016).

Conclusion

This study sought to find out the perception of mothers about crèches as safe places for their babies. It was revealed that the mothers reported that they kept their children in crèches while they were at work or busy for other reasons despite the fact that there were reported cases of unpleasant occurrences in such centres. However, they believed that the use of crèches should be discouraged as a result of the reported malpractices. The factors responsible for the patronage of crèches by most of the mothers were their jobs or other responsibilities that kept them busy, affordable fees, the opportunity for their babies to socialise with other babies and the possibility of faster and early learning. The mothers were also aware of some occurrences in crèches that could affect their children negatively thereby rendering such centres unsafe, such as missing

babies, health challenges, socio-emotional problems as well as nonchalant attitude of the care givers to their babies. Overall, the mothers adjudged the crèches as unsafe places for their children. There was no significant difference in their perception of the safety of the crèches for their babies based on the mothers' age group. However, their perceptions differed significantly based on their educational qualification and profession.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made: Considering the need of working mothers, and the importance of the early months/years to the child's later development, it is recommended that more crèches which are healthy, safe, easily accessible, affordable and adequately staffed with trained professionals should be provided for working mothers to keep their babies while at work. More importantly, the conditions required to be met in order to issue licences to crèches should be reviewed and enforced for the safety of the babies, while unlicensed crèches should be closed down. Crèches should also be established in workplaces so that mothers could keep a close watch on their babies in order to avoid unpleasant practices that could harm their babies. Furthermore, the length of maternity leave for mothers should be extended to six months so that the babies could enjoy exclusive breastfeeding for the six months recommended by UNICEF.

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