

## UNDERSTANDING ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES AMONG ORPHAN ADOLESCENTS; A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH STUDY

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### Abstract

This qualitative research study explored the nature, forms, and impacts of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) among orphan adolescents, as well as how they perceived these experiences. The findings revealed that orphan adolescents often face multiple types of adversity, including the loss of parents, emotional and physical neglect, and various forms of abuse. Participants described deep feelings of loneliness, insecurity, psychological distress, and fear. The lack of stable and caring caregivers further intensified their sense of neglect and unpredictability. Despite these challenges, many adolescents demonstrated resilience and the ability to find positive meaning in their hardships. Some viewed their experiences as opportunities for personal growth, self-reliance, and emotional strength. Supportive relationships with peers, caregivers, and community figures played a vital role in promoting recovery and emotional well-being. Overall, the study highlights the importance of developing trauma-informed interventions that address the complex emotional and psychological needs of orphan adolescents while fostering resilience and long-term healing.

### INTRODUCTION

Orphans are the most marginalized and vulnerable section of the society. As defined by United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, (2020) ; Bailey (2009), a child under the age of eighteen who has lost one of his or her parents is called an orphan. Similarly, a child whose parents are alive but unable to care for their children is called a social orphan (Browne, 2009; Yendork & Somhlaba, 2014).

Adverse childhood experiences are possibly due to traumatic events that occur before reaching the age of 18 that have long lasting negative impact on children mental and physical health (SAMHSA, 2014) that are now becoming more and more

concerned and having bad impact . Adverse childhood experiences have 3 major concerned area including neglect, physical, abuse and family problems. (Felitti et al., 1998)

Most of the adverse childhood experiences emphasized on original classifications of adverse childhood experiences that includes physical and emotional abuse, sexual and domestic abuse, family substance abuse, parental loss and separation of parents (Brown et al., 2010), recent research studies have detailed explanation of the definition of adverse childhood experiences that includes bullying, discrimination, racial injustice, financial sufferings, community violence and loss

of parent due to death. Recent research studies on adverse childhood experiences have suggested that mistreatments in family life at home, and their related challenges, should be included in peer victimization and community violence, especially in adolescents. (Karatekin & Hill, 2018).

### Objectives

1. To explore the nature and forms of adverse childhood experiences among orphan adolescents.
2. To understand the social, emotional and psychological impacts of childhood experiences on the mental health of orphan adolescents.
3. To identify how orphan adolescents perceived these childhood experiences.

### Methodology

#### Research Design

In this research study qualitative phenomenological approach was used for the in-depth exploration of adverse childhood experiences among orphan adolescents who are residing in orphan homes. Phenomenological approach used for the in-depth understanding of participant's feelings and how they understand and interpret their personal childhood adverse experiences.

#### Participants

Participants of that qualitative research study includes orphan adolescents from age range 12-18 according to WHO age range of adolescents. Purposive sampling technique was used for collecting the data from the participants who are residing in orphan homes from more than 3 years (Palinkas et al; 2015). Data was collected from 20 participants till the saturation level reached – the point where there were no new themes and information emerges. All the participants of that research study were between grade 1 and grade ten.

#### Data Collection

Data was collected from the participants through semi structured, in-depth interview, using the interview guide that explored the participants (orphan adolescents) childhood experiences,

coping mechanism and emotional response. Interview was taken by each participant individually that take almost 35 to 45 minutes. Written informed consent was taken from each participant before taking interview and in which explain all the study protocols, confidentiality and purpose of the research study. Interview was taken in Urdu language for the ease of understanding of the participants.

### Instruments

#### Participant's demographic Data sheet

A participant demographic dataset was utilized to collect the essential background information about 20 orphan adolescents that was the participants of the research study. That dataset includes gender, age, educational level, birth order, parental status and number of siblings. The sample consisted of 55% girls and 45 % boys, In term of age 50% participants were between the range of 12 -14, while 50% were between 15 to 18 years. Educationally 30% were enrolled in preparatory level and rest of 70% was attending grades 1 to grade 10. Regarding family structure, 35% participants having 1 Or 2 siblings, 40 % had 3 to 4 siblings and 25% had 5 or more siblings. Birth order was distributed as follows: 25% participants were the first born and 50% were second and forth born and rest of 25% was the last born. As for parental status, 50% of the participants having father alive and 50% have deceased father. Conversely, 65% have deceased mother but only 35% have living mothers.

#### Interview Protocol

A semi-structured, open-ended interview protocol was employed to collect qualitative data from the 20 participants. This method enabled an in-depth exploration of their personal experiences and perceptions, while allowing flexibility for the interviewer to probe emerging themes and clarify responses during the conversation.

The interview protocol was validated through expert review to ensure content accuracy and relevance to the study objectives. The expert panel consisted of two assistant professors, one expert in quantitative research, and one licensed clinical psychologist. The experts reviewed all interview

questions, discussed their alignment with the study purpose, and reached a consensus on necessary modifications to enhance clarity and comprehensiveness.

The interviews focused on exploring participants' experiences of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), their coping mechanisms, and the perceived emotional and social effects of parental loss. Each interview lasted approximately 35 to 45 minutes and was conducted in a supportive, confidential setting to encourage open and honest responses.

### Data Analysis

Data will be analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) a six step approach:

Six phase analysis process by Braun and Clark's (2006):

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defying and naming themes
6. Producing the final report

This dual level of inductive analysis confirmed that both explicit expressions of orphan adolescents underlying adverse childhood experiences that were accurately represented and defined. Transcribed interview detail was coded manually for the identification of patterns and their repetitive meanings that are related to adverse childhood experiences and resilience.

### Results:

#### Childhood Trauma

##### Subtheme 1: Challenges in Relationships

Participants also highlight challenges in their social interactions. A 12-year-old girl mentions, "People here argue over small things. I don't get into any specific arguments," reflecting frequent trivial disputes. An 18-year-old observes, "The girls here talk bad a lot," pointing to prevalent gossip and negative talk, which contribute to unsupportive social dynamics.

##### Subtheme 2: Internal Struggles

Participants expressed emotional difficulties due to separation from home, feeling mentally disturbed and longing to return. One participant remarked, "While living here, sometimes I get disturbed mentally. I often think about going home and wonder when I will finally return."

##### Subtheme 3: Conflicts and Challenges

Navigating frequent minor disputes in a social environment often involves staying neutral to avoid conflicts. This highlights a preference for maintaining peace amidst tensions. "People here argue over small things. I don't get into any specific arguments. I don't fight with anyone." – 15-year-old girl, Class Four

##### Subtheme 4: Freedom from Eviction Fear

A sense of security is deeply influenced by the absence of eviction fears. One participant, a 12-year-old boy in prep class, shared: "Living here has put an end to the fear of being forcibly evicted... I have also got the opportunity to study now. After studying, I can find a job as well." This highlights how stability in living conditions fosters feelings of safety and opportunity.

##### Sub theme 5: Experience of Loss and Separation

In these themes participant's emotional loss and separation from parents and sudden change .Orphan adolescents often described feeling of rejection, loss and separation from parents due to death.

*When my mother died, it was like my world stopped. I didn't know who to talk to or where to go. Everything felt dark after that.* (participants ,female 15 Years)

##### Sub theme 5: Exposure to Neglect and Emotional Deprivation

Many participants described emotional neglect, before and after the staying in orphan home. They experience feeling of unseen, unloved and emotionally neglected- experiences that depend their sense of isolation.

*"Here they gave us food and clothes, but sometimes no one really listens and understands. You can be crying inside, and no one will notice."* ( participanty , Female 14 Years)

Some recalled neglect in extended family setting before staying in the orphan homes, where their basic needs were met but emotional warmth and real care was absent.

*“After my parents died, I stayed with my uncle. He fed me but never talked to me with kindness, I felt like a burden.”*

*(Participant, Male, 17 Years).*

This neglect promoted feeling of unworthiness and loneliness, affecting their ability to trust others. The lack of consistent emotional care and neglecting leads to belief that they were not deserving love, care and any worth.

#### **Sub theme 6: Abuse and Maltreatment**

Several participants revealed that childhood bad experiences of physical and emotional abuse, that was before entering orphan home.

*“My aunt used to beat me with a stick when i didn’t finish household chores. She said i was lazy like my mother.” ( participant , Female 14 years)*

*My Uncle shouted at me, calling me names. I started to believe I was really useless.”(Participant, Male 16 years)*

#### **Sub theme 7: Stigma, Discrimination, and Social Exclusion**

Being labeled as “orphans” that leads to social stigma and exclusion within their community and in staying place.

*“People in the village call us ‘children without parents. They don’t want their kid to play with us.”*  
*(Participants, female, 14 years)*

*“At school, other students laugh when they find out we are from the orphan home. It makes me feel ashamed.”*  
*(Participant Male 16 years)*

#### **Sub theme 8: Emotional and psychological distress**

The orphan participants suffering from loss, neglect and stigma resulted in harsh significant emotional and mental challenges including, sadness, anger, low self-esteem and anxiety.

*“Sometimes I feel angry for no reason. Maybe it’s all because of bad experiences that happened with me in my childhood (participant, Male 13 Years)*

*“I always think too much at night and cry a lot. I miss my parents and family a lot, and I wish they could see me and meet me again” (participant, Female 14 Years)*

These entire emotional struggles are revealed as withdrawal and feeling of hopelessness and mood swings that reflecting psychological childhood trauma.

#### **Discussion:**

The results of the research study showed that orphan adolescents often experience multiple forms of adverse childhood experiences that include loss of parent due to death, emotional, physical, neglect and sexual abuse. Participants of that research study that are orphan adolescents described that they have feeling of loneliness, insecurity, psychological distress and fear, revealed that previous studies results revealed that orphans are more prone to childhood trauma as compared to non-orphan adolescents. (Cluver & Garder, 2007; Felitti et al., 1998). The findings of that research study showed that unpredictability and lack of reliable and caring caregivers sensitized the feeling of being neglect.

Although there are numerous challenges that many adolescents revealed resilience and the ability to learn from their experience some positive meaning. Some people have seen their difficulties as a motivation for personal growth and self-reliance, reflecting the post-traumatic growth described by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004). Supportive relationships from peers, caregivers, or leaders seemingly play a key role in promoting recovery and emotional stability, reflecting Masten's (2014) concept of 'ordinary magic,' where every day supportive systems enable resilience. These findings emphasize the need for trauma-informed interventions that not only address the psychological effects of adverse childhood experiences but also strengthen social support networks to promote healing and autonomy among orphaned adolescents.

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