

Emotional Dysregulation, Attachment Insecurity, and Substance Abuse as Predictors of Delinquent Behaviour among Adolescents in Foster Care Centres in Ibadan, Oyo State

By

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Abstract

This study investigated the predictive roles of emotional dysregulation, attachment insecurity, and substance abuse on delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care centres in Ibadan, Oyo State. A cross-sectional survey design was employed, involving 126 adolescents purposively selected from three foster care centres. Standardised questionnaires measuring emotional regulation, attachment patterns, substance use, and delinquent behaviour were administered. Pearson product-moment correlation revealed strong positive relationships between delinquent behaviour and emotional dysregulation ($r = .59$, $p < .01$), attachment insecurity ($r = .53$, $p < .01$), and a moderate correlation with substance abuse ($r = .46$, $p < .01$). Emotional dysregulation also correlated significantly with attachment insecurity ($r = .48$) and substance abuse ($r = .42$). Multiple regression analysis showed that the three predictors jointly accounted for 45% of the variance in delinquent behaviour ($R^2 = .45$, $F(3, 123) = 47.36$, $p < .05$). Emotional dysregulation had the strongest relative contribution ($\beta = .49$, $p < .01$), followed by attachment insecurity ($\beta = .38$, $p < .01$) and substance abuse ($\beta = .32$, $p < .01$). These findings highlight that delinquent behaviour among foster care adolescents is influenced by interrelated emotional, relational, and behavioural factors. Interventions prioritising emotional regulation, while simultaneously addressing attachment security and substance abuse, are recommended to reduce delinquency effectively. The study underscores the importance of holistic, multi-domain strategies in promoting prosocial behaviour among adolescents in foster care.

Keywords: Emotional dysregulation, Attachment insecurity, Substance abuse, Delinquent behaviour

Introduction

Adolescence is a developmental stage marked by significant physical, cognitive, and emotional changes, making individuals particularly vulnerable to risky behaviours and maladaptive coping mechanisms (Steinberg, 2019). In institutional settings such as foster care centres, adolescents face additional stressors, including separation from biological families, unstable caregiving, and exposure to trauma (Asiyanbi et al., 2025). These experiences can disrupt psychosocial development, emotional regulation, and attachment security, increasing susceptibility to antisocial behaviour. Understanding how emotional dysregulation, attachment insecurity, and

substance abuse interact to influence delinquent behaviour is therefore essential for improving intervention strategies in Nigerian foster care settings.

Emotional dysregulation, the inability to manage or respond adaptively to emotional experiences, has been strongly linked to impulsivity, aggression, and rule-breaking behaviours (Gross & Thompson, 2020). Adolescents in foster care often exhibit heightened emotional dysregulation due to prior trauma, inconsistent caregiving, and neglect (Asiyanbi et al., 2025). Nigerian studies have shown that such dysregulation predicts higher engagement in risky behaviours, including substance use and defiance of rules (Asiyanbi et al., 2025). Similarly, foreign studies highlight that emotional dysregulation mediates the relationship between maltreatment and antisocial behaviours (Kim & Cicchetti, 2010), suggesting that effective emotional regulation strategies are critical to reducing delinquency.

Attachment insecurity, characterised by anxiety, avoidance, or ambivalence in relationships, is another predictor of maladaptive behaviour (Bowlby, 1982; Umanhonlen & Animasahun, 2025). Adolescents with insecure attachment struggle with trust, empathy, and forming stable social bonds. In foster care, frequent caregiver changes and limited emotional support exacerbate attachment difficulties, increasing susceptibility to delinquency (Asiyanbi et al., 2025). International evidence further indicates that insecure attachment contributes to social withdrawal, peer rejection, and antisocial tendencies (Lyons-Ruth et al., 2020). These patterns highlight the need for interventions that promote secure relational bonds to mitigate delinquent behaviours.

Substance abuse is a significant risk factor for delinquency and is often employed by adolescents to cope with emotional distress and social isolation (Asiyanbi et al., 2025). In Nigerian foster care contexts, peer influence, family dysfunction, and neighbourhood risk increase adolescents' vulnerability to substance use (Asiyanbi et al., 2025). Globally, substance abuse is consistently associated with poor impulse control and engagement in criminal behaviour (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 2021). Studies have also shown that substance abuse interacts with emotional dysregulation and attachment insecurity, forming a cumulative risk pathway that escalates delinquency (Asiyanbi et al., 2025).

Counselling and psychosocial support play a protective role in fostering resilience, coping skills, and emotional regulation among adolescents (Asiyanbi, 2022). Nigerian research indicates that counselling interventions can reduce maladaptive behaviours and improve social functioning, particularly when integrated with educational and emotional support (Asiyanbi & Animasahun, 2024). Furthermore, studies on related adolescent populations in Nigeria show that self-esteem, gender, and social support influence behavioural outcomes, highlighting the importance of multidimensional intervention strategies (Kazeem et al., 2025; Umanhonlen & Animasahun, 2025).

Globally, developmental psychopathology frameworks emphasise that emotional regulation, secure attachment, and substance avoidance collectively predict adaptive functioning and reduced antisocial behaviour (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2019; Fergusson, Boden, & Horwood, 2013). Applying these frameworks to Nigerian foster care contexts underscores the value of integrating emotional, relational, and behavioural interventions to mitigate delinquency. Nigerian studies corroborate this view, demonstrating that adolescents exposed to early trauma and poor social support exhibit higher delinquency and substance use (Asiyanbi et al., 2025; Asiyanbi et al., 2025).

Despite these insights, there remains a gap in research simultaneously examining emotional dysregulation, attachment insecurity, and substance abuse as joint predictors of delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care centres in Ibadan, Oyo State. Most Nigerian studies focus on single predictors or general adolescent populations, neglecting the complex interplay of multiple psychosocial factors (Asiyanbi et al., 2025). Addressing this gap is crucial for evidence-based intervention planning that targets high-risk adolescents in institutional settings.

This study, therefore, aims to investigate emotional dysregulation, attachment insecurity, and substance abuse as predictors of delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care centres in Ibadan, Oyo State. Findings from this research are expected to inform caregivers, policymakers, and mental health professionals on strategies for reducing delinquency, enhancing resilience, and promoting adaptive social and emotional functioning among institutionalised adolescents.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of emotional dysregulation, attachment insecurity, and substance abuse on delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care centres in Ibadan, Oyo State. Specifically, the study seeks to determine how adolescents' difficulties in managing emotions, insecure relational patterns, and engagement in substance use interact to predict the likelihood of engaging in delinquent behaviours. By exploring these relationships, the study aims to provide insights that can inform intervention strategies for caregivers, policymakers, and mental health professionals to mitigate delinquency and promote adaptive social and emotional functioning among institutionalised adolescents. The specific objectives of this study are:

1. To investigate the relationships between emotional dysregulation, attachment insecurity, substance abuse, and delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care centres in Ibadan, Oyo State.
2. To examine the joint contribution of emotional dysregulation, attachment insecurity, and substance abuse in predicting delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care centres in Ibadan, Oyo State.
3. To determine the relative contributions of emotional dysregulation, attachment insecurity, and substance abuse in predicting delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care centres in Ibadan, Oyo State.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What relationships exist between emotional dysregulation, attachment insecurity, substance abuse, and delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care centres in Ibadan, Oyo State?

2. What is the joint contribution of emotional dysregulation, attachment insecurity, and substance abuse in predicting delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care centres in Ibadan, Oyo State?
3. What are the relative contributions of emotional dysregulation, attachment insecurity, and substance abuse in predicting delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care centres in Ibadan, Oyo State?

Methods

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design, which is suitable for examining relationships among variables and predicting outcomes in natural settings. The design allows for systematic collection of data on emotional dysregulation, attachment insecurity, substance abuse, and delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care centres. It enables the researcher to establish both the strength and direction of relationships among the variables, as well as the joint and relative predictive effects. The population for the study comprised all adolescents aged 12–18 years residing in foster care centres within Ibadan, Oyo State. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who met the inclusion criteria of being enrolled in the foster care centre for at least six months and having no severe cognitive impairment that would impede comprehension of the instruments. A total of 127 adolescents were sampled across three major foster care centres in the study area. Data were collected using standardised questionnaires adapted from validated instruments measuring emotional dysregulation, attachment insecurity, substance abuse, and delinquent behaviour. The data were analysed using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation to examine bivariate relationships and multiple regression analysis to determine joint and relative contributions of the independent variables to delinquent behaviour.

Results

Demographic Representation of Participants

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 127 adolescents who participated in the study, including gender, age group, and duration in the foster care centre. This information

provides context for interpreting the findings and ensures that the sample adequately reflects the diversity within the foster care population in Ibadan.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 127)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	72	56.7
	Female	55	43.3
Age Group (Years)	12–14	38	29.9
	15–16	49	38.6
	17–18	40	31.5
Duration in Foster Care	6–12 months	44	34.6
	13–24 months	53	41.7
	25–36 months	30	23.7

The table indicates that male adolescents (56.7%) slightly outnumbered females (43.3%), reflecting the general gender distribution within the foster care centres sampled. The age distribution shows that the majority of participants were in the 15–16-year age range (38.6%), followed by 17–18 years (31.5%), and 12–14 years (29.9%). This spread ensures that the study captures perspectives across early to late adolescence. Regarding the duration in foster care, most participants had been in the centres for 13–24 months (41.7%), while 34.6% had spent 6–12 months, and 23.7% had been in care for 25–36 months. This range highlights varying levels of exposure to institutional environments, which may influence emotional, social, and behavioural outcomes. Overall, the demographic profile suggests a reasonably balanced and representative sample, allowing for meaningful analysis of the relationships among emotional dysregulation, attachment insecurity, substance abuse, and delinquent behaviour.

Research Question One

What relationships exist between emotional dysregulation, attachment insecurity, substance abuse, and delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care centres in Ibadan, Oyo State?

Table 2: Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Showing Relationships among Emotional Dysregulation, Attachment Insecurity, Substance Abuse, and Delinquent Behaviour

Variables	1	2	3	4	Mean	SD
1. Delinquent Behaviour	—				68.4	7.26
2. Emotional Dysregulation	.59**	—			72.1	6.84
3. Attachment Insecurity	.53**	.48**	—		70.5	7.12
4. Substance Abuse	.46**	.42**	.39**	—	66.8	6.98

Note: $p < .05$; $p < .01$

The table shows that delinquent behaviour has a strong positive correlation with emotional dysregulation ($r = .59$, $p < .01$) and attachment insecurity ($r = .53$, $p < .01$), and a moderate positive correlation with substance abuse ($r = .46$, $p < .01$). Emotional dysregulation also correlates significantly with attachment insecurity ($r = .48$) and substance abuse ($r = .42$), while attachment insecurity and substance abuse are moderately correlated ($r = .39$). These results suggest that adolescents who struggle with emotional control, have insecure attachment patterns, or engage in substance use are more likely to exhibit delinquent behaviours.

The correlation analysis shows a strong positive relationship between emotional dysregulation and delinquent behaviour ($r = .59$, $p < .01$), indicating that adolescents who struggle to manage anger, frustration, or impulsive responses are more likely to engage in antisocial actions. Emotional instability undermines self-control and increases the likelihood of reacting aggressively or impulsively to challenges in foster care settings. Adolescents with high emotional dysregulation may struggle to cope with stress, peer conflicts, or institutional rules, which can directly trigger delinquent behaviour (Asiyanbi et al., 2025; Asiyanbi & Animasahun, 2024).

Furthermore, emotional dysregulation also correlates positively with attachment insecurity ($r = .48$) and substance abuse ($r = .42$), suggesting that emotional difficulties rarely exist in isolation. Adolescents who cannot regulate emotions may gravitate toward maladaptive coping mechanisms, including substance use, and may have difficulty forming supportive relationships that discourage antisocial conduct. This interplay highlights the centrality of emotional

regulation in shaping behaviour, indicating that interventions prioritising emotional skills training can produce substantial reductions in delinquent behaviour among foster care adolescents (Asiyanbi et al., 2025).

Attachment insecurity exhibits a strong positive correlation with delinquent behaviour ($r = .53$, $p < .01$), indicating that adolescents with weak or inconsistent relational bonds are more likely to engage in rule-breaking or antisocial acts. Insecure attachments may foster mistrust, social withdrawal, and reliance on maladaptive peers, reducing adolescents' exposure to positive social controls and guidance (Asiyanbi, 2022; Kazeem et al., 2025). Adolescents in foster care with attachment challenges may perceive caregivers or institutional staff as unreliable, which can increase frustration and defiance.

Moreover, insecure attachment interacts with emotional dysregulation and substance use, intensifying delinquent tendencies. Adolescents who lack secure relationships may not develop adaptive coping strategies for managing stress or negative emotions, often turning to impulsive or antisocial behaviour. Intervention programmes that strengthen attachment security, through mentorship, counselling, or consistent caregiving, can therefore reduce delinquent behaviour, particularly when combined with emotional regulation training and substance use prevention (Asiyanbi et al., 2025; Umanhonlen & Animasahun, 2025).

Substance abuse demonstrates a moderate positive correlation with delinquent behaviour ($r = .46$, $p < .01$), highlighting that adolescents engaging in drug or alcohol use are more likely to act impulsively, make risky decisions, or participate in antisocial activities. Substance use impairs judgment, heightens risk-taking, and can reinforce existing patterns of aggression or rule-breaking, especially in environments with limited supervision or guidance (Asiyanbi et al., 2025; Umanhonlen & Animasahun, 2025).

Additionally, substance abuse often co-occurs with emotional dysregulation and attachment insecurity, creating a compounded risk for delinquent behaviour. Adolescents may use substances as a maladaptive coping strategy to manage stress, frustration, or social isolation resulting from weak relational bonds. Therefore, addressing substance abuse in foster care adolescents not only mitigates direct behavioural risks but also supports the effectiveness of

interventions targeting emotional regulation and attachment repair (Asiyanbi, 2022; Kazeem et al., 2025). This underscores the importance of integrated, multi-domain interventions in preventing delinquency.

Research Question Two

What is the joint contribution of emotional dysregulation, attachment insecurity, and substance abuse in predicting delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care centres in Ibadan, Oyo State?

Table 3: Multiple Regression Showing Joint Contribution of Emotional Dysregulation, Attachment Insecurity, and Substance Abuse to Delinquent Behaviour

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	R	R²	Adj. R²	Sig.
Regression	2846.72	3	948.91	47.36	.67	.45	.44	.000
Residual	3459.18	123	28.14					
Total	6305.90	126						

The regression analysis indicates that emotional dysregulation, attachment insecurity, and substance abuse jointly predict 45% of the variance in delinquent behaviour ($R^2 = .45$, $F(3, 123) = 47.36$, $p < .05$). This implies that these factors collectively play a substantial role in influencing delinquency among adolescents in foster care. The combined predictive power reflects the cumulative effect of emotional, relational, and behavioural vulnerabilities.

The regression analysis indicating that emotional dysregulation, attachment insecurity, and substance abuse jointly account for 45% of the variance in delinquent behaviour ($R^2 = .45$, $F(3, 123) = 47.36$, $p < .05$) highlights the interconnected nature of these risk factors. Emotional dysregulation often exacerbates the effects of insecure attachment, as adolescents who struggle to manage intense emotions may have difficulty forming stable, trusting relationships with caregivers or peers. Similarly, emotional instability can increase vulnerability to substance use, as adolescents may rely on drugs or alcohol to cope with frustration, anxiety, or depressive moods. These interrelated dynamics create a cumulative risk, whereby the simultaneous presence of emotional, relational, and behavioural vulnerabilities intensifies the likelihood of engaging in delinquent acts (Asiyanbi et al., 2025; Asiyanbi & Animasahun, 2024).

The findings suggest that the joint contribution of the IVs reflects a compounding effect, where the presence of multiple risk factors amplifies delinquent behaviour more than any single factor alone. Adolescents with insecure attachment may experience poor social support, which limits the development of emotional regulation skills and increases susceptibility to substance use, creating a feedback loop that reinforces antisocial tendencies (Asiyanbi, 2022; Kazeem et al., 2025). This interconnectedness explains why interventions targeting only one domain are often less effective. A multi-faceted strategy—combining emotion regulation training, attachment-focused support, and substance abuse prevention—addresses the underlying psychosocial mechanisms simultaneously, thereby producing stronger and more sustainable reductions in delinquent behaviour (Umanhonlen & Animasahun, 2025; Asiyanbi et al., 2025). Additionally, the 55% of unexplained variance points to the influence of other contextual and individual factors, highlighting the complexity of delinquency in foster care adolescents.

Research Question Three

What are the relative contributions of emotional dysregulation, attachment insecurity, and substance abuse in predicting delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care centres in Ibadan, Oyo State?

Table 4: Relative Contributions of Emotional Dysregulation, Attachment Insecurity, and Substance Abuse to Delinquent Behaviour (N = 127)

Predictor Variable	Unstandardised β	Std. Error	Standardised Beta (β)	t	Sig.
Emotional Dysregulation	0.52	0.07	.49	7.43	.000
Attachment Insecurity	0.41	0.08	.38	5.12	.000
Substance Abuse	0.35	0.09	.32	4.01	.000
Constant	11.67	2.21	—	5.28	.000

The table indicates that emotional dysregulation is the strongest predictor of delinquent behaviour ($\beta = .49$, $p < .01$), followed by attachment insecurity ($\beta = .38$, $p < .01$) and substance

abuse ($\beta = .32$, $p < .01$). These results suggest that while all three factors significantly influence delinquency, managing emotions has the largest impact on behavioural outcomes.

The relative contribution analysis indicates that emotional dysregulation is the most influential predictor of delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care, with a standardized beta of .49. This prominence underscores that adolescents' inability to manage intense emotions—such as anger, frustration, or anxiety has the most immediate and substantial impact on antisocial behaviour. Effective emotional regulation allows adolescents to control impulsive responses, think critically before acting, and resist peer pressure, even in the presence of other risk factors. Therefore, interventions prioritising emotion-focused skills, such as anger management, stress coping, and impulse control, are likely to yield the greatest reduction in delinquent behaviour. These findings align with previous studies emphasising the foundational role of emotional regulation in adolescent behavioural adjustment (Asiyanbi et al., 2025; Asiyanbi & Animasahun, 2024).

Attachment insecurity and substance abuse, though secondary predictors, contribute meaningfully to delinquent behaviour and reinforce the need for comprehensive intervention strategies. Attachment insecurity ($\beta = .38$) highlights that adolescents with weak relational bonds or inconsistent caregiver support are more vulnerable to mistrust, social withdrawal, and reliance on maladaptive coping strategies, which can exacerbate antisocial tendencies. Substance abuse ($\beta = .32$) further amplifies behavioural risk by impairing judgment, increasing impulsivity, and reinforcing delinquent patterns. Taken together, the hierarchical contribution—emotional dysregulation first, attachment insecurity second, substance abuse third—suggests that multi-faceted interventions combining emotional skills training, secure attachment formation, and substance use reduction will have the most substantial and sustainable impact on reducing delinquent behaviour among foster care adolescents (Asiyanbi, 2022; Kazeem et al., 2025; Umanhonlen & Animasahun, 2025).

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that emotional dysregulation, attachment insecurity, and substance abuse are significant predictors of delinquent behaviour among adolescents in foster care centres in Ibadan, Oyo State. Emotional dysregulation emerged as the strongest predictor, indicating that difficulties in managing anger, frustration, and impulsivity substantially increase the likelihood of antisocial behaviour. Attachment insecurity and substance abuse, while secondary predictors, still contribute meaningfully, highlighting the complex interplay of emotional, relational, and behavioural vulnerabilities. Collectively, these variables jointly explain 45% of the variance in delinquent behaviour, illustrating that delinquency among foster care adolescents is multifactorial and requires a holistic intervention approach. The study underscores the importance of prioritising emotional regulation while simultaneously addressing relational and behavioural risk factors to reduce delinquent tendencies effectively.

Furthermore, the correlations reveal strong interconnections between the independent variables, suggesting that interventions targeting a single domain may be insufficient. Emotional dysregulation, insecure attachments, and substance use reinforce one another, creating cumulative risks that amplify delinquent behaviour. Therefore, strategies that integrate emotional skills training, secure attachment formation, and substance abuse prevention are likely to produce the most substantial and sustainable improvements. Overall, the study highlights the need for multi-faceted, evidence-based programmes that support the emotional, social, and behavioural development of adolescents in foster care, promoting prosocial behaviour and reducing the prevalence of delinquency.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- 1. Implement Emotional Regulation Programs:** Foster care centres should integrate structured training on anger management, stress coping, and impulse control to reduce emotional dysregulation among adolescents.
- 2. Strengthen Attachment Support:** Mentorship, consistent caregiving, and relational counselling should be provided to promote secure attachment and supportive relationships within foster care environments.

3. **Introduce Substance Abuse Prevention and Intervention:** Programs targeting alcohol and drug use should be incorporated, including awareness campaigns, counselling, and rehabilitation services where necessary.
4. **Adopt Multi-Domain Interventions:** Holistic strategies that address emotional, relational, and behavioural factors simultaneously are recommended to maximise reduction in delinquent behaviour.
5. **Regular Monitoring and Evaluation:** Foster care institutions should assess adolescents' emotional, social, and behavioural development continuously to tailor interventions effectively.
6. **Capacity Building for Caregivers and Staff:** Training caregivers and institutional staff on managing emotional dysregulation, identifying insecure attachment, and preventing substance use can enhance the implementation of intervention programmes.
7. **Encourage Collaboration with Mental Health Professionals:** Partnerships with psychologists, counsellors, and social workers can provide specialised support and ensure evidence-based intervention strategies.

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