

Welfare Services and the Development of Children Under Five Years in Ibeno Local Government Area

Grace Joseph Akpakip, PhD

Department of Educational Psychology
Federal College of Education, Ididep-Ibiono
Akwa Ibom State
e-mail: graceakpakip74@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between welfare services and the development of children under five years in Ibeno Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The study focused on three key welfare services: healthcare, early childhood education, and social protection services. A descriptive survey research design was adopted. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered to parents, caregivers, and welfare service providers within the Local Government Area. The sample consisted of 322 respondents selected through a multi-stage sampling technique. Data were analysed using simple linear regression. The findings revealed that there is a significant relationship between healthcare services and the development of children under five in Ibeno Local Government Area; there is no significant relationship between early childhood education and the development of children under five in Ibeno Local Government Area. The study concluded that comprehensive and accessible welfare services play a critical role in the holistic development of children under five years. Recommendations were made for government and stakeholders to strengthen and expand welfare service delivery to improve early childhood outcomes in the area.

Keywords: Childhood, Development, Early, Education, Healthcare

Introduction

The provision of welfare services for children under five years of age remains a cornerstone for promoting early childhood development, especially in regions where child vulnerability is high. Welfare services—such as healthcare, early childhood education, and social protection—have been identified as critical interventions for ensuring children’s physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development. Recent global frameworks, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasize the importance of investing in child welfare to reduce inequalities and promote long-term development outcomes (UNICEF, 2021; World Bank, 2020).

Healthcare services for children in this age group are essential in reducing morbidity and mortality while enhancing overall development. Evidence suggests that access to immunizations, nutrition counseling, maternal health, and disease prevention programs plays a vital role in the survival and healthy growth of children under five (WHO, 2021; UNICEF, 2021). Primary health services, such as regular child check-ups and early diagnosis of diseases, are crucial in ensuring timely interventions that positively affect long-term health outcomes (Nguyen *et al.*, 2022).

Early childhood education (ECE) is another significant welfare service influencing child development. High-quality ECE fosters early cognitive stimulation, language development, and social skills essential for later academic success and life outcomes (OECD, 2020; Anderson & Sims, 2021). Children who attend structured ECE programs are more likely to develop emotional resilience and self-regulation, attributes linked with lifelong learning and adaptability (Yoshikawa *et al.*, 2021).

Despite the proven benefits of welfare services, disparities in access and quality persist in many developing countries, including Nigeria. In Ibeno Local Government Area (LGA) of Akwa Ibom State, the extent to which these services are accessible and their direct impact on children's development remains underexplored. Some children may benefit from integrated welfare programs, while others are excluded due to socioeconomic, geographic, or systemic barriers (Akwa Ibom State Government, 2023). The absence of localized data on welfare service coverage and effectiveness hampers evidence-based policy formulation.

Given these gaps, this study investigates the impact of welfare services that is healthcare, early childhood education, and social protection on the development of children under five in Ibeno Local Government Area. The findings aim to support the design of responsive and context-specific interventions that foster equitable child development across the region.

Statement of the Research Problem

Despite the recognized importance of welfare services for the holistic development of young children, there is a paucity of empirical research examining the impact of these services on children under the age of five in Ibeno Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The existing literature on early childhood development in the region has primarily focused on broader issues, such as access to healthcare and education, without a comprehensive assessment of the specific welfare services available and their influence on the multifaceted aspects of child development.

Furthermore, the unique cultural, socioeconomic, and infrastructural contexts of Ibeno Local Government Area may shape the accessibility and utilization of welfare services, warranting a contextualized investigation. Understanding the current state of welfare services and their impact on the development of young children in this local government area can provide valuable insights to inform the design and implementation of targeted interventions and policies to support the well-being of this vulnerable population. It is against this background that the present study aims to investigate the relationship between welfare services and the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development of children under five years old in Ibeno Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between welfare services and the development of children under five years old in Ibeno Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study sought to determine:

- i. the relationship between healthcare service and the development of children under five years old in Ibeno Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.
- ii. the relationship between early childhood education service and the development of children under five years old in Ibeno Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following questions were raised to guide this study

- i. What is the relationship between healthcare service on the development of children under five years old in Ibeno Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria?
- ii. What is the relationship between early childhood education service on the development of children under five years old in Ibeno Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria?

Null Hypotheses

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between healthcare services and the development of children under five in Ibeno Local Government Area.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between early childhood education and the development of children under five in Ibeno Local Government Area.

Methodology

This study adopted a correlational design to examine the relationship between welfare services and the development of children under five years old in Ibeno Local Government Area. This design was chosen because it allows for the collection of data from a large number of respondents and facilitates the analysis of current trends, opinions, and relationships between variables.

The population of the study comprised parents, caregivers, and welfare service providers (including healthcare workers, teachers in early childhood education centers, and social workers) in Ibeno Local Government Area who are responsible for or provide services to children under five years old. The total population under consideration was 1644. A total of 322 was statistically determined as sample size using Taro Yamane sample formula. A total sample of 322 respondents was selected using a multi-stage sampling technique. First, ten communities were randomly selected from the wards in Ibeno Local Government Area. From each community, households and service centers (such as health clinics and early childhood centers) were systematically selected. Respondents within these settings were then chosen through purposive sampling, targeting individuals directly involved in child care and welfare provision.

The instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled: "Welfare Services and Child Development Questionnaire (WSCDQ)". The questionnaire was closed-ended questions grouped under the three main welfare service categories: healthcare- 5 items, early childhood education- 5 items, and social protection – 5 items, and also, child development-10 items using the scale of Strongly Agree (SA)- 4 points, Agree (A) – 3 points, Disagree (D)- 2 points, Strongly Disagree (SD)- 1 point.

The instrument was validated by three experts in Early Childhood Education and Public Health from the University of Uyo. To determine its reliability, a pilot test was conducted in a neighboring local government area, and the instrument yielded a Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.87, indicating high internal consistency. Data were collected through direct administration of the questionnaires by the researchers and two trained research assistants. Respondents were guided on how to complete the forms, and in cases where literacy was an issue, assistance was provided through interviews.

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) to summarize the responses, and inferential statistics using simple linear regression analysis was used to test the relationship between welfare services and various dimensions of child development. All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 25.0.

Result and Interpretation

Research Questions 1: What is the relationship between healthcare service and the development of children under five years old in Ibeno Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria?

Table 1: Result of Simple Linear Regression Analysis of the Significant Relationship Between Healthcare Services and The Development of Children under five in Ibeno Local Government Area (n = 322)

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.949 ^a	.900	.900	1.249

a. Predictors: (Constant), Healthcare Services

Table 1 shows that the result of research question one. From the table (Table 1: Model Summary), the correlation coefficient (r) which shows the relationship between healthcare services and the development of children under five in Ibeno Local Government Area is .949. This shows that there is a positive and significant relationship between healthcare services and the development of children under five in Ibeno Local Government Area. Also, the table showed the value of coefficient of determination R^2 which means changes in the dependent variable that is caused by changes in independent variable as .900. This implies that the significant relationship between healthcare services and the development of children under five in Ibeno Local Government Area is 90 percent.

Research Questions 2: What is the impact of early childhood education service on the development of children under five years old in Ibeno Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria?

Table 2: Result of Simple Linear Regression Analysis of the Significant Relationship Between Early Childhood Education and the Development of Children under five in Ibeno Local Government Area (n = 322)

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.986 ^a	.972	.972	.660

a. Predictors: (Constant), Early Childhood Education Services

Table 2 shows that the result of hypothesis two. From the table (Table 2: Model Summary), the correlation coefficient (r) which shows the relationship between educational services and the development of children under five in Ibeno Local Government Area is .986. This shows that there is a positive and significant relationship between educational services and the development of children under five in Ibeno Local Government Area. Also, the table showed the value of coefficient of determination R^2 which means changes in the dependent variable that is caused by changes in independent variable as .972. This implies that the significant relationship between healthcare services and the development of children under five in Ibeno Local Government Area is 97.2 percent.

Research Hypotheses

Null Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between healthcare services and the development of children under five in Ibeno Local Government Area.

Table 3: Result of Simple Linear Regression Analysis of the Significant Relationship Between Healthcare Services and The Development of Children under five in Ibeno Local Government Area (n = 322)

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	4503.028	1	4503.028	2888.506	.000 ^b
	Residual	498.863	320	1.559		
	Total	5001.891	321			

a. Dependent Variable: Development of Children Under Five Years

a. Predictors: (Constant), Healthcare Services

b.

Table 3b: Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	5.288	.547		9.665	.000
	Healthcare Services	1.723	.032	.949	53.745	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Development of Children Under Five Years

Source: Researcher's Computation (2025)

Table 3 shows that the result of hypothesis one. Table 3a shows ANOVA between the regressed variables. The F-statistics have the value of 2888.506 with the corresponding p-value of 0.000 which is less than the alpha value of 0.05 ($p \leq 0.05$). This further strengthened the fact that the regressed variables are significant and also exhibit a relationship between them. Equally, in Table 3b, the β value of the analysis was 5.288 with a t-value of 9.665 and the p-value of 0.000 which is less than the alpha value of 0.05. This buttressed that the independent variable (healthcare services) has positive and significant effect on the development of children under five in Ibeno Local Government Area. Thus, the estimated model is $Y = 5.288 + .900X_1$

Null Hypothesis 2: There is no significant relationship between early childhood education and the development of children under five in Ibeno Local Government Area.

Table 4: Result of Simple Linear Regression Analysis of the Significant Relationship Between Early Childhood Education and the Development of Children under five in Ibeno Local Government Area(n = 322)

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	4862.681	1	4862.681	11177.729	.000 ^b
	Residual	139.211	320	.435		
	Total	5001.891	321			

a. Dependent Variable: Development of Children Under Five Years

b. Predictors: (Constant), Early Childhood Education Services

Table 4b: Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.150	.308		6.987	.000
	Early Childhood Education Services	1.888	.018	.986	105.725	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Development of Children Under Five Years

Source: Researcher's Computation (2025)

Table 4 shows that the result of hypothesis two. Table 4a shows ANOVA between the regressed variables. The F-statistics have the value of 11177.729 with the corresponding p-value of 0.000 which is less than the alpha value of 0.05 ($p \leq 0.05$). This further strengthened the fact that the regressed variables are significant and also exhibit a relationship between them. Equally, in Table 4b, the β value of the analysis was 2.150 with a t-value of 6.987 and the p-value of 0.000 which is less than the alpha value of 0.05. This buttressed that the independent variable (educational services) has positive and significant effect on the development of children under five in Ibeno Local Government Area. Thus, the estimated model is $Y = 2.150 + .986X_2$

Discussion of Findings

The findings on correlation coefficient (r) which shows the effect of healthcare services on the development of children under five in Ibeno Local Government Area is .949. This shows that there is a positive and significant relationship between healthcare services and the development of children under five in Ibeno Local Government Area. The finding is supported by (WHO, 2021; UNICEF, 2021) who reported that access to immunizations, nutrition counseling, maternal health, and disease prevention programs plays a vital role in the survival and healthy growth of children under five. Congruently, Nguyen *et al.* (2022) reported that primary health services, such as regular child check-ups and early diagnosis of diseases, are crucial in ensuring timely interventions that positively affect long-term health outcomes.

The findings on coefficient (r) which shows the relationship between educational services and the development of children under five in Ibeno Local Government Area is .986. This shows that there is a positive and significant relationship between educational services and the development of children under five in Ibeno Local Government Area.

The finding is supported by OECD (2020); Anderson and Sims (2021) who reported high-quality ECE fosters early cognitive stimulation, language development, and social skills essential for later academic success and life outcomes. Correspondingly, Yoshikawa *et al.* (2021) reported that children who attend structured ECE programmes are more likely to develop emotional resilience and self-regulation, attributes linked with lifelong learning and adaptability.

Conclusion

The study investigated the relationship between welfare services specifically healthcare services, and early childhood education and the development of children under five years in Uyo Local Government Area. Findings revealed that each of these welfare components significantly relationship between the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development of children in this age group. Access to healthcare services ensured healthy growth and disease prevention; and early childhood education contributed to cognitive. The

results underscore the critical role of government and community-driven welfare programs in shaping early childhood development outcomes. Where welfare services were adequately provided, children demonstrated improved growth and development indicators. Conversely, lapses in these services were associated with developmental delays and vulnerability among children.

Recommendations

- i. Government and stakeholders should improve access to quality healthcare services for children under five by equipping health centers, employing skilled health professionals, and ensuring free or subsidized healthcare services.
- ii. Local authorities should establish more early childhood education centers, particularly in underserved areas, and ensure they are staffed with qualified caregivers and equipped with age-appropriate learning materials.
- iii. Targeted interventions such as nutrition programs, conditional cash transfers, and child support schemes should be expanded to reach vulnerable families and orphans, reducing the risks of malnutrition and neglect.

References

- Akwa Ibom State Government. (2023). *Annual Health and Development Report*. Uyo: Ministry of Health.
- Anderson, K., & Sims, M. (2021). The role of early childhood education in promoting holistic child development. *Early Child Development and Care*, 191(11), 1715–1726.
- Nguyen, P. H., Scott, S., Avula, R., Tran, L. M., & Menon, P. (2022). Child health and development outcomes in relation to community-based health and nutrition programs in low-income settings. *Lancet Global Health*, 10(3), e421–e430.
- OECD. (2020). *Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care*. OECD Publishing.
- UNICEF. (2021). *The State of the World's Children 2021: On My Mind – Promoting, Protecting and Caring for Children's Mental Health*. New York: UNICEF.
- WHO. (2021). *Primary Health Care and Health Systems for Resilient Health Outcomes in Early Childhood*. Geneva: World Health Organization.
- World Bank. (2020). *Investing in Early Years: A Global Priority*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank.
- Yoshikawa, H., Wuermli, A. J., Britto, P. R., & Brossard, M. (2021). Effects of early childhood education on child development and school readiness: A meta-analysis. *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy*, 15(1), 1–22.