

***Marital Status as Determinant of Caregivers' Attitude towards Feeding of Children and Rest/Sleep in Early Childhood Education Centres in Calabar Municipality***

**Regina Anyungwu Achu**

*Department of Curriculum and Teaching  
University of Calabar, Calabar  
[reginaachu71@gmail.com](mailto:reginaachu71@gmail.com)*

**Wonder'Kachidi Nickaf Bartholomew'Zango**

*Federal University of Education, Pankshin  
Plateau State, Nigeria  
[bartholomewwonder@yahoo.com](mailto:bartholomewwonder@yahoo.com)*

**Cecilia Oluchi Odoh**

*Department of Early Childhood Education  
University of Nigeria, Nsukka  
[Lolocecilia90@gmail.com](mailto:Lolocecilia90@gmail.com)*



**Abstract**

*This study adopted an ex post facto research design to investigate the influence of caregivers' marital status on their attitude towards childcare practice in early childhood care and education centres in Calabar Municipality of Cross River State, Nigeria. It was guided by three hypotheses. The population of this study comprised of 74 caregivers in 23 early childhood care and education centres in Calabar Municipality. All the 74 caregivers constituted the sample. A validated instrument entitled "Caregiver Attitudinal Scale (CAS)" was used for data collection. The Cronbach's alpha reliability for the instrument was 0.76. Data collected were analysed using mean, standard deviation and ANOVA. The findings of the study showed that there was a significant influence of marital status on caregivers' attitude towards feeding of children; there was no significant influence of marital status on caregivers' attitude towards sleeping/rest of children; there was a significant influence of marital status on caregivers' attitude towards learning and instruction. Based on the findings, it was recommended, among others, that school proprietors and managers of caregiving centres should ensure that preference is given to married teachers in the recruitment of caregivers because they will understand how best to handle other peoples' children.*

**Keywords:** marital status, caregiver, attitude, feeding, rest/sleep

## **Introduction**

The increasing number of Early Childhood Care and Education Centres (ECCE) in the country appears to have come with excessive child abuse of different dimensions, maltreatment to children with unethical and unprofessional acts on the part of the caregivers and their support staff in every nook and cranny of each state. Some of the childcare centres are found in public primary schools, town, or village halls or square, batchers, warehouses or even mushroom houses, and uncompleted buildings. To this end, individuals who are not trained caregivers/teachers (professionals) are employed to work or teach in the childcare centres. Opiyo et al. (2022) observed that these untrained caregivers/teachers seem to exhibit negative attitude towards childcare practices. This appears to be a thing of concern to parents and society considering that childcare centre is a stepping stone to early childhood and other levels of education.

Furthermore, early childhood care and education is associated with studies in creche as well as nursery classes. American School of Paris (2021) stated that early childhood focused on the critical developmental milestones, skills, and concepts that children attain during early period of their lives, from social emotional skills to the beginnings of numeracy, literacy, and critical thinking. Similarly, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2020) regards early childhood care and education (ECCE) as a fundamental and integral part of the education system and a solid foundation on which to build lifelong education, lives, and careers. These definitions are in line with the explanation of Nnachi and Ojigbo (2013), that early childhood education is the education for preschoolers. It is any programme within a learning environment outside the home which caters for the needs of children from birth through four years prior to formal learning in primary school. Accordingly, the Federal Republic of Nigeria, in her National Policy on Education (FRN, 2014) defined early childhood care and education as the education given in an educational institution to nursery school children prior to their entering primary school. It is for children aged three through five years, in preparing their entry into primary school. Operationally, early childhood care and education is referred to as the education given to children aged birth to four years prior to their entering primary school. Early childhood care and education provides interventions for the cognitive, physical, social, moral, and emotional development of the child. This education is fundamental to the development of a child.

Childcare is the care of a child or children provided by a nursery, playgroup, or childminder while parents are at work or are absent for another reason. Childcare, according to World Health Organization (WHO) (2004), is the physical, social, and health care given to a child.

Childcare is about providing services to parents when they need it most - during the working hours of the day, and children have safe and secure place to go where they will receive daily necessities such as feeding, care giving, napping, and other activities. Practice on the other hand is defined as an act of carrying out an exercise or activity after training or learning. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2014), practice is observable behaviour, habit or skills often performed without conscious decision and in response to something in the environment or to knowledge or attitude.

Unfortunately, the attitude that caregivers exhibit towards childcare practice is a thing of concern to parents and society. It has been observed that caregivers use derogatory statement, abusive language, and generally maltreat children. World Health Organization (WHO, 2024) observed that abuse and neglect of kids constitute child maltreatment. In the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust, or power, it encompasses all forms of physical and/or emotional maltreatment, sexual abuse, neglect, carelessness and commercial or other exploitation that actually or potentially harms the child's health, survival, development, or dignity. It has been observed that children are often left without supervision. This neglect of children is most often attributed to the attitude of caregivers.

Play-based curriculum works to quench children's thirst for curiosity and provide opportunity for hands-on practices in a way that responds to their questions. Hands-on, minds-hearts-on learning is in line with the principle that learning is an active process. According to Study pool (2023), hands-on-minds-on-hearts-on learning encourages the children to experience and engage in learning with their hands, analyse with their minds and invest with their hearts. It also means that three domains must really be in touch together - the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. This approach focuses on the child as a whole, as the method is most effective when a child is intellectually, physically, and emotionally involved in an activity. Caregivers have no reading or learning materials for birth to four years' child, no affection and responsive communication with their children. The situation appears to be the same with that of ECCE centres in Calabar Municipality. It has been observed that ECCE in public primary schools in Calabar lack instructional materials for children's learning at this level (birth to four years), and children are denied attention. There also appears to be language barrier between the children and the caregivers, as a result, they are unable to communicate and pass information on issues such as children's feeding, and sleep.

Children's feeding is the action of a person feeding another person who cannot otherwise feed themselves. According to Perez-Escamillia et al. (2021), responsive feeding involves reciprocal nurturing feeding practices between the caregiver and the child that encourage

the child to develop preferences for healthy foods and beverages and to eat autonomously. Sasaki (2017) states that there are three basic aspects of feeding: what, when, and how much. These aspects represent the quantity (how much) and quality (what and when) of feeding. Caregivers take active care in the feeding of children by being responsive to the child's clues for hunger and also encouraging the child to eat. However, there appears to be a delay in feeding of children, among the ECCE in public primary schools in Calabar. Feeding time may be overlooked; this appears to make the children cry all through as children do not have long eating span, so they struggle among themselves over items. This might also be the reason why some children cry excessively when they are taken to school, which makes them unteachable, and may sleep all through the day.

Sleep is the time for restoration and for children's bodies to recharge and retain the information they have learned throughout the day. Sleep is a specific state of consciousness that occurs on a cyclic basis. It is a period of rest and recuperation for the body and the brain. Dawkins (2018) states that sleep is an essential part of everyone's routine and an indispensable part of a healthy lifestyle. Dawkins also asserts that kids who regularly get an adequate amount of sleep have improved attention, behaviour, learning, memory, and overall mental and physical health. Sleep is as important for good health as a diet and exercise. Some kids have a hard time falling asleep, while others have difficulties staying asleep. Those infants who are nursed, carried, or strapped into a sling may find a cot to be isolating and frightening. A toddler accustomed to taking two naps during the day may also find it difficult to shift to a new afternoon sleep. It has been observed that some caregivers force children to sleep, some may even use drugs like piriton to induce sleep on the children other than petting them to sleep, which may have adverse effect on them. Evidence from research states that maltreatment and use of abusive language purposefully harms a child's self-worth. Overton (2022) states that emotional abuse includes, giving children the silent treatment, mocking a child, shouting, or yelling to silence them, not allowing them to express views or opinion, threatening, bullying, limiting physical contact, withholding words of affirmation and love, and many more others. However, childcare and attitude may be influenced based on caregivers' demographic determinants because they affect their performance and ability to deliver effectively.

Marital status is a state of being married or unmarried. Marital status is a legally defined marital state. Ontario Human Rights Commission (2006) views marital status as the status of being married, single, widowed, divorced, or separated and includes the status of living with a person in a conjugal relationship outside marriage. Similarly, Ramezankhani et al. (2019) view marital status as married versus never married, divorced, and widowed. Marital

status is the personal status of each individual in relation to the marriage laws or customs of a country. Sociologists refer to marital status as an achieved characteristic, in the sense that marital behaviour is socially defined and influenced, rather than having any biological properties. Operationally, social marital status is a person's relationship status in terms of whether she or he forms a couple relationship with another person living in the same residence, and the nature of that relationship.

Personal observation has it that married women always go the extra miles in caring for children more than the singles. In an investigation of women's marital status in caregiving experiences, Brady (2022) found that married women provided fewer hours of care than did unmarried women. Women who are married do much of caregiving than those who have never married or who have been married previously. However, women who are divorced or widowed do not differ significantly from never-married women in the odds of caregiving. Caregivers are not only responsible for children's academic work, but also a major contributor to caregiver-child interaction and emotional involvement. The emotionality as reflected in the care of children is the fundamental attributes in early childhood care and education. Similarly, these caregivers are expected to complete daily lesson plan, and provide emotional stability in their marital status. This appears to make the caregivers have a negative attitude towards caregiving. In sum, the chances of caregiving may be affected by the roles of marital status.

Early childhood care and education needs an experienced caregiver who understands the job because of their tender nature. There is a broad consensus among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers that the quality of early childhood services depends on well educated, experienced and competent staff. A caregiver who has spent a long time on the job is more likely to know the nitty-gritty of the job, and so, he or she will be able to relate more appropriately with the kids on knowledge gained on the job. In the opinion of Ngwoke et al. (2013), teachers are not only known as implementers of educational policies, but they stand as significant figure playing the role of monitors, guidance counsellors and builders of personality. Aversely, some of the newly employed ECCE teachers posted to ECCE centres, maybe because of their young age and the fact that the nature of the job needs agility, and a lot of strength, which they have, thus considered fit for the job. But this young age, though educationally qualified, may lack experience of handling children of this calibre, some may be there only to wait for a greener pasture, or even for admission to further their education, hence, may lack passion for the job, which may be reflected in their attitude towards the care for the children. This may result in the maltreatment of children and the use of abusive language and may even feel disturbed when the children are in need of care. Some may even make use of derogatory statements in a bit to carry out their duty. Overton (2022) states that

emotional abuse is mocking a child, bullying, shouting, or yelling to silence a child, and many others. This attitude is detrimental to children's development.

The attitude of caregivers towards childcare practice appears to be a thing of concern. In Calabar Municipality, ECCE is provided for children between the ages of six weeks to five years. ECCE programme is organized for children both in public and in private primary schools. The responsibility of caregiving is mostly handled by caregivers who are mostly females, both married and unmarried. According to Omidire et al. (2015), these responsibilities include creating an enriching learning environment and looking after the basic needs of the children under their care, nurturing of children under their supervision, providing safety, educational environment for children; caregivers shape the lives of children especially in the formative years of birth through four years and influence the way children see reality about themselves.

The attitudes some caregivers display towards their duties is grossly unprofessional and worrisome. Some of the caregivers neglect the care of children placed under them, abuse and maltreat the children. Overton (2022) states that emotional abuse is mocking a child, bullying, shouting, or yelling to silence a child, and many others. This brings to question the ability of these caregivers to take care of the children, thus, the need to study the demographic determinants of caregivers in Calabar Municipality, in Cross River State.

Ashiono and Mwoma (2015) conducted a correlational study on marital status and the parenting styles employed by parents in Kisauni District, Kenya. Stratified sampling technique was used to select preschools while purposive sampling technique was used to select preschool children to participate in the study. A sample size of pre-school child together with their parents was purposively selected based on their performance level in curricular activities from 20 preschools. A questionnaire and interview were used to collect data on parents' demographics and their parenting styles. One-way ANOVA was utilized for data analysis. The findings indicate that parents' marital status does not influence their parenting styles. The study concluded that there is no significant relationship between parents' marital status and the parenting styles they employ in bringing up their children.

Aguboshim (2021) conducted a study on how parental marital status influence academic performance in IT subjects of in-school adolescents. Data was collected from 720 senior secondary school students. Probability sampling technique was adopted as much as possible. Questionnaire was the major instrument for data collection, while t-test was used for data analysis. Results show that the mean academic performance in subjects among in-school

adolescents from parents married and living together was significantly higher than those from divorced or geographically separated couples.

Alkazam and Al-Dujaili (2022) conducted a study on assessment of knowledge and attitude among caregivers of children. The study used a descriptive design. A non-probability purposively selected sample of 52 caregivers were chosen from the Imam Hussein Autism Centre along with 37 and 15 samples from Imam Ali Institute in Najaf City. Questionnaire was used to collect data. The result shows that there is no significant relationship between attitude of caregivers and their demographic data; except marital status which shows that there is a significant relationship between marital status and overall attitude of caregivers towards children's feeding. All the primary caregivers were married and one of the caregivers was a widow.

Hasen et al. (2023) conducted a study on socio-demographic variables affecting caregivers' attitudes towards the provision of healthy breakfast and lunchboxes to children in their care. Only Quintile 5, (40 schools) in Bloemfontein were approached by the researchers. Public and independent schools were included in the study. The study used self-administered questionnaires items focused on nutritional knowledge, attitudes towards foods and practices of learners and/or caregivers. Participants were caregivers of learners who were aged 6-12 years. Data were captured in duplicate in a Microsoft excel spreadsheet and verified, after which the data were analysed, using statistical analysis system (SAS, version 9.4). Result of findings shows that there was no significant difference between socio-demographic variables and the attitudes of the caregivers regarding whether a healthy lunchbox helped their child to concentrate at school. Most caregivers agreed that healthy food packed into a lunchbox would help reduce the risk of their children developing certain diseases. There was a significant difference between younger and older caregivers perceiving that healthy food was tasty.

A study was conducted by Kelly and El-Sheikh (2011) on marital conflict and children's sleep: Reciprocal relations and socioeconomic effects. A community sample of 176 school-age children and their parents participated at T1 and T2 which is test 1 and 2, with a 2-year interval between waves. Mothers, fathers, and children's sleep was measured via actigraphy and self-reports. Latent variable modelling indicated that T1 marital conflict predicted increases in children's sleep disruptions longitudinally; Results were more pronounced for African-American children and those from lower homes. Further, children's sleep disruptions at T1 predicted increases in marital conflict over time. Results demonstrate the importance of reciprocal relations between a prevalent familial stressor and a fundamental facet of children's health, especially when considering the sociocultural milieu.

Shinomiya et al. (2021) conducted a study titled sleep and the general behaviour of infants and parents during the closure of schools as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Comparison with 2019 data. This study compared cross-sectional data from online surveys describing the sleep behaviour of infants and caregivers. The data used were originally collected to be subjected to machine learning to develop applications addressing children's sleep habits. The participants were caregivers with children aged between 18-30 months. As part of obtaining participants' consent, a research briefing was presented online to the subjects to brief them on the research purpose and general outline of the study. The study used questionnaire items in the interactive sleep awareness application. A t-test and/or chi-squared test was used to compare two groups for variables such as age. A Cramer's V was further used to measure the effect size. For analysis, a Mann-Whitney U-test was first conducted to compare the data of the two years and examine the differences in sleep habits and lifestyles. The result of the findings shows a statistically significant interaction between the total sleeping hours and the percentage of outdoor play of the children. An especially significant change in this regard was found in families of those staying at home group. However, notably, when the Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated for the relationship between two variables, no significant correlation was found.

### **Purpose of the study**

The general purpose of this study was to investigate the demographic determinants of caregiver's attitude towards childcare practices. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Determine the influence of marital status on caregivers' attitude towards learning and instruction.
2. Ascertain the influence of marital status on caregivers' attitude towards feeding of children.
3. Ascertain the influence of marital status on caregivers' attitude towards sleep/rest.

### **Hypotheses**

The following null hypotheses were formulated to guide the study; they were tested at 0.05 level of significance:

**Ho1:** There is no significant influence of marital status on caregivers' attitude towards children's learning and instruction.

**Ho2:** There is no significant influence of marital status on caregivers' attitude towards children's feeding.

**Ho3:** There is no significant influence of marital status on caregivers' attitude towards children's sleep/rest.



## **Methodology**

The study adopted ex post facto research design. The design according to Saleh and Kowalczyk (2022) is a research method that looks into how an independent variable (groups with certain qualities that already exist prior to a study) affects a dependent variable. This entails particular characteristics or traits of a participant that cannot be manipulated. The design is considered appropriate for this study because the researchers did not manipulate the variable; the caregivers already acquired a marital status before the time of the study. The population of this study comprise 74 caregivers in 23 Early Childhood Care and Education Centres situated in public primary schools in Calabar Municipality Local Government Area of Cross River State (Cross River State Ministry of Education, Area Education Office Calabar, 2021). This population comprises both female and male caregivers who are currently teaching in these centres. The choice of the population is anchored on the fact that the caregivers are the ones with the firsthand information. These caregivers offer original thought and have not been modified by interpretation, hence the researchers will be equipped with the necessary information needed for this job. The sample for this study comprised of 74 caregivers in Early Childhood Care and Education Centres in the Local Government. The reason for settling with all the population was as a result of manageable size of the population.

One research instrument was used in this study. The instrument was tagged "Caregivers' Attitudinal Scale (CAS)". The CAS was developed by the researchers. The instrument has two sections (A and B). Section A of the CAS contains demographic information of the respondents while section B was designed to elicit information on caregivers' attitude toward childcare practices. Section B of the CAS has 45 items modelled on a four-point scale with response options of "Strongly Agree" (SA), "Agree" (A), "Disagree" (D), and "Strongly Disagree" (SD) with numerical values of 4, 3, 2, and 1, respectively.

To determine the face validity of the instrument, the CAS was given to three experts, two from the Department of Educational Foundations and one from Measurement and Evaluation Unit of the Department of Science Education, all from the Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Specifically, the experts were requested to validate the instrument in terms of appropriateness of the items, clarity of language, and suitability for the study, structure items, and to make suggestions for improvement of the instrument. Based on the validators' comments and corrections, the purpose of the study, research questions, and hypotheses were modified accordingly. Again, corrections made on some item statements were well articulated and hence corrected accordingly.

To determine the internal consistency of CAS, the instrument was trial tested on 25 caregivers in two preschools in Odukpani Local Government Area of Cross River State. The caregivers were used because they possess similar demographic attributes as those in the population under study but are not part of the actual study. The reliability test of CAS was determined using Cronbach Alpha method. The method was used because it is applied to polytomously scored items like the CAS items. An overall reliability coefficient of 0.76 (0.75, 0.62, 0.73 for learning and instruction, children feeding, and sleep/rest respectively) was obtained for the instrument.

The researchers met with the headteacher at the schools for permission to carry out a research study using the caregivers at the ECCE centres in each of the schools for the sample population. A face-to-face method of data collection was employed in the administration of the instrument. This approach was adopted in order to ensure high return and to enable face-to-face contact which facilitate lucidity in the course of instrument administration. The instrument was administered with the help of four research assistants. The researchers briefed the research assistants on the purpose of the study, and the professional conducts required of them during instrument administration. 74 copies of the instrument were retrieved from the caregivers immediately after completion in order to avoid missing copies of the instruments.

Data collected were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. The research questions were answered using mean and standard deviations while the formulated null hypotheses were tested using one-way analysis of variance statistics at 0.05 level of significance. For the purpose of taking decision on the research questions, any mean value below 40 point was considered as disagree while mean values of 40 points and above were considered as agree. For the hypotheses, any p-value equal to or greater than 0.05 was upheld while any null hypothesis with a p-value less than 0.05 was not upheld.

### **Presentation of results**

**H<sub>01</sub>:** There is no significant influence of marital status on caregivers' attitude towards children's learning and instruction.

**Table 1:** ANOVA result on influence of marital status on caregivers' attitude towards learning and instruction

Source	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1607.288	4	401.822		
Within Group	10737.807	69	155.620	2.582	.045
Total	12345.095	73			

Results in Table 1 shows ( $F(4,73) = 2.582$ ,  $p = 0.045$ ) the influence of marital status on caregivers' attitude towards children's learning and instruction. Since the p-value of 0.045 is less than alpha level of 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore, there is a significant influence of marital status on caregivers' attitude towards learning and instruction.

**Ho2:** There is no significant influence of marital status on caregivers' attitude towards feeding children.

**Table 2:** ANOVA result on influence of marital status on caregivers' attitude towards feeding children

Source	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4946.059	4	1236.515		
Within Group	13442.319	69	194.816	6.347	.000
Total	18388.378	73			

Result in Table 2 shows ( $F(4,73) = 6.347$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) the influence of marital status on caregivers' attitude towards feeding children. Since the p-value of 0.000 is less than alpha level of 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore, there is a significant influence of marital status on caregivers' attitude towards feeding children.

**Ho3:** There is no significant influence of marital status on caregivers' attitude towards children's sleeping/rest.

**Table 3:** ANOVA result on influence of marital status on caregivers' attitude towards sleeping/rest

Source	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1562.764	4	390.691		
Within Group	12760.371	69	184.933	2.113	0.89
Total	14323.135	73			

Result in Table 3 shows ( $F(4, 73) = 2.113$   $p = 0.089$ ) the influence of marital status on caregivers' attitude towards children's sleeping/rest. Since the p-value of 0.89 is greater than alpha level of 0.05, the null hypothesis is accepted. Therefore, there is no significant influence of marital status on caregivers' attitude towards children's sleeping/rest.

### Discussion of the findings

The findings of the study revealed that there is a significant relationship between marital status and caregivers' attitude towards learning and instruction. This could be so because when the married caregivers are teaching and directing the children, the procedure that the caregivers may use during learning and instructing the children could be different from the way single, separated and divorced caregivers will instruct the children. This finding disagrees with Ashiono and Mwoma (2015) who found that there is no significant relationship between parents' marital status and the parenting styles they employ in bringing up their children.

Another finding of this study revealed that there is a significant relationship between marital status and caregivers' attitude towards children's feeding. This could be so because when the married caregivers are feeding children, the method that the caregivers may use in feeding the children could be different from the way the single, separated, and divorced caregivers will use in feeding the children. The finding is in agreement with the study of Alkazam and Al-Dujaili (2022) which revealed that there is a significant relationship between marital status and overall attitude of caregivers towards children's feeding. The finding disagrees with the findings of Alkazam and Al-Dujaili (2022) that there is no significant relationship between marital status and attitudes of caregivers towards children's feeding.

The findings of the study with respect to hypothesis three revealed that there is no significant relationship between marital status and caregivers' attitude towards sleep/rest of children. This could be so because, whether the caregivers are married, divorced, separated or single, it is necessary to allow anyone who is sleeping or resting to rest very well. Furthermore,

most people already know it is necessary to pamper or pet children in order to make them sleep. From the findings of this study, single, separated, married, and divorced caregivers can help the children to sleep and rest very well.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the findings of the study, it is concluded that there is a significant influence of marital status on caregivers' attitude towards learning and instruction, and caregivers' attitude towards children feeding. There is no significant influence of marital status on caregivers' attitude towards sleep/rest. One can conclude that there is need for caregivers to be trained before they are allowed to take care of the children otherwise the children may be having issues with the caregivers which may hinder the children's progress in life.

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations were made based on the findings of this study,

1. School proprietors and managers of caregiving centres should ensure that preference is given to married teachers in the recruitment of caregivers because they will understand how best to handle other peoples' children.
2. Married caregivers should always develop the spirit of unity by directing and guiding the single caregivers on how to care for the children.
3. Single caregivers should always express submission, respect and humility among the married caregivers by so doing the single caregivers will acquire more experience on the best way to handle children.

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