

Analysis of Family Instability and Childhood Socialization in Keffi Town, Keffi Local Government Area of Nasarawa State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study examines the influence of family instability on childhood socialization in Keffi town, Keffi Local Government Area of Nasarawa State, Nigeria. A survey research design was adopted for the study. The study was carried out using 381 respondents from 190 households who were selected through clustered sampling. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire with 10 items. Descriptive statistics of simple percentages was used for data analysis. Results from the analysis showed that the major causes of family instability include poor communication, financial strain and infidelity & lack of trust which in turned affect children development in the family. It could be concluded that family instability where there are separation, divorce, family disagreement, and crisis can negatively impact on childhood socialization. Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended among others that there should be open communication, respect one another opinions, hold family meetings, and eat together in the study area by the parents/intending couples on the need to maintain and sustain their marriages to avoid separation/divorce.

Keywords: Family Instability, Development, Parental, Separation, Childhood Socialization

Introduction

The family is one of the oldest institutions that exist in a constant state of mutual interaction and the smallest social unit, yet the most fundamental institution in any society Udonwa and Iyam (2025). It is the basic social institution from which other institutions have grown. Umezulike, Nwadinobi and Afunugo (2019) see family as the basic unit of society and as a group of people of various ages usually related by birth, marriage or adoption. Family instability is a state where there are crises in the family between family members. Udonwa and Iyam (2025) viewed family stability as an adaptation between family members to a point where there are companionship and agreement on basic issues, values, affection, intimacy and accommodation of each other (Omoniyi-Oyafunke, Falola, & Salau, 2014; Johnson, Kalil & Dunifon, 2022 and Haliru, Adeyinka & Bodinga, 2023).

A study conducted by Sarker (2024) found that family instability is the break-up of a family unit, the dissolution of fracture of a structure of social roles. Family instability carries with it many consequences which can manifest in many ways. At the family level there is high level of indiscipline as no one is in control. In unstable families, it is „everyone for himself“ as there is no recognized authority to control the family. The consequences of this will be nothing but chaos. Emotional stress, which is expressed in unhappiness, sadness, worry, anger, boredom is also a feature of unstable family. The family may become isolated as none may want to interact with them. Because members of the family are unhappy, they try to vent this unhappiness through aggression. Low performance in school may also be an effect of family instability on children as they find it difficult to cope with family crises. This is because children from

unstable families may be going through psychological and emotional instability themselves. They hardly concentrate and are likely to be deviants in society (Ifemeje, 2018).

It is obvious that when the psychological needs of children in any family are not met mainly due to existing disagreement between spouses, the children become frustrated and easily pick up antisocial behaviours within and outside their immediate environment (Udonwa and Iyam 2025). Therefore, the instability of one family may rub off on the achievement of the products of that family (children). In most societies, instability in the family may manifest itself in many ways, for instance high crime rate, that is, robbery, murder, suicide, cultism, drug addiction and prostitution. These are all social vices that destroy the individual and the society, yet instability in families as shown in an earlier study by Ifemeje (2018) is on the increase. Given the devastating impacts of instability on the individual and the society at large, there is every cause to isolate those factors that promote it while attempt must also be geared at determining those that promote stability (Odehale, & Killian, 2021 and Haliru, Adeyinka & Bodinga, 2023).

Child's early experiences shape who they are and affect lifelong health and learning. To develop to their full potential, children need safe and stable housing, adequate and nutritious food, access to medical care, secure relationships with adult caregivers, nurturing and responsive parenting, and high-quality learning opportunities at home, in childcare settings, and in school. Research shows that many children face instability in their lives (Omoniyi-Oyafunke, Falola, & Salau, 2014 and Haliru, Adeyinka & Bodinga, 2023). Researchers from various fields of study – developmental psychology, sociology, economics, public policy, demography, and family studies – have independently explored different domains of instability in the supportive structures that predict children's outcomes. However, little effort has been made to look across research disciplines and study contexts to synthesize our knowledge base and draw connections among the various domains of instability (Sandstrom & Huerta, 2023).

However, marital instability has become a thing of concern in this contemporary society, and this is associated with separation, divorce, and widowhood. Separation and divorce are social phenomena created by either husband or the wife or both, but widowhood is beyond the control of human being, it is related to death and thus universal (Anima, 2018). Family instability disrupts the critical foundations of childhood socialization, leading to poorer cognitive, emotional, and social outcomes (Udonwa & Iyam, 2025). Children navigating shifting family structures often experience diminished academic performance, mental imbalances, and difficulties with peer competency and behavioural regulation as they age. Family instability characterized by residential and romantic transitions like divorce, separation, or the introduction of cohabiting partners fundamentally disrupts childhood socialization. Research highlights that these changes compromise a child's psychological security and hinder their ability to build peer competencies, regulate emotions, and achieve healthy development. Frequent changes in household structure degrade a child's sense of security, causing them to view their family environment as a source of threat rather than support (Sarker, 2024).

Cumulative levels of family instability are strongly linked to lower social adjustment, with particularly pronounced effects on childhood development particularly male child. Children frequently exhibit lower school engagement and increased early problem behaviours. Unstable homes frequently correlate with stress-related illnesses, poor academic performance, and higher rates of deviant or externalizing behaviours during adolescence. The profound effects of family instability on childhood socialization and development manifest in several key areas: structural, emotional, and relational instability often stem from financial constraints, lack of communication, and parental separation. These shifts fundamentally alter the child's daily environment and sense of security. Transitions from two-parent households to single-parent environments, or to environments with cohabiting partners, correlate with lower school

engagement and poorer cognitive achievements. Adolescents experiencing high family instability often face severe mental health challenges and degraded academic performance. Research highlights that family changes during early childhood have the most lasting impacts on social development. Studies have shown that the negative associations of early instability on peer competency and development can be especially pronounced for boys (Isaac, 2023).

The prevalence of negative behaviours has been linked to poor childhood socialization especially among families that are unstable or face with crises. Family instability has accounted for myriads of social problems identified in children. This instability is found in the form of parental crisis as crises families find it difficult to provide the basic care and needs of their children which may impact on the adult the child eventually becomes (Omoniyi-Oyafunke, et al. 2014 and Udonwa & Iyam, 2025). Separation and divorce are observed in the study area as major family instability variables negatively impacting on the socialization of children. It is the observation of the researcher that children from separated/divorced homes are more likely to develop negative behaviours in the society. However, single parenting has great implication on the upbringing of children. Reviewed literature affirmed that child socialization is hampered by family structure especially in single parent homes. It is based on these problems of family instability on childhood socialization this study was carried out.

Research questions

- i. What are the causes of family instability in Keffi town, Keffi Local Government Area in Nasarawa State?
- ii. How does family instability affect childhood socialization in Keffi town, Keffi Local Government Area in Nasarawa State?
- iii. In what way can family instability be tackled to enhance childhood socialization in Keffi town, Keffi Local Government Area in Nasarawa State?

Methodology

The study used social survey research design which involves the collection of data to objectively describe existing phenomena. The study area is Keffi town, Keffi Local Government Area in Nasarawa State located within Northcentral Nigeria. Area sampling technique was employed to sample 381 respondents from five four (4) electoral wards in Keffi town. Only the available and accessible members of the study population were used for the study. A structured questionnaire was designed by the researcher was used for data collection. The questionnaire contained 15 items. The response options of the questionnaire items were arranged under different variables. The questionnaires were administered physically to the respondents at their homes and neighbourhoods. Data generated through questionnaire was quantitatively analysed using descriptive statistics analysis of frequency distributions and percentage tables. The analysis was done through the aid of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21 program.

Results

This section presents the result of data collected by the researcher from the field. The section highlights the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents as it relates to the subject of the study in this regard, the study highlighted and analyzed the distribution of the respondents based on their age, sex, marital status, level of educational attainment, occupation, religion and marriage anniversary. As shown in table 1 below:

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N=381)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage%
Sex:		
Male	207	54.3
Female	174	45.7
Total	381	100
Age:		
20years and below	45	11.8
21-30years	125	32.8
31-40years	82	21.5
41-50years	71	18.6
51 and above	58	15.3
Total	381	100
Marital Status:		
Married	345	90.5
Widowed	14	3.7
Divorced/separated	22	5.8
Total	381	100
Educational Level:		
No formal education	175	45.9
Primary	26	6.9
Secondary	76	19.9
Tertiary	104	27.3
Total	381	100
Marriage Duration:		
5 years and below	32	8.4
6 – 10 years	83	21.8
11 – 15 years	137	36
16 – 20 years	96	25.2
21 years and above	33	8.6
Total	381	100
Religion:		
Islam	241	63.3
Christianity	138	36.2
Traditionalist	2	0.5
Total	381	100
Occupation:		
Civil/Public servant	93	24.4
Business/Petty trader	127	33.3
Farmer	114	29.9
Others, specify	47	12.4
Total	381	100

Source: Field Survey, 2026

The results in table 1 reveals that majority (54.3%) of the respondents in sampled population are males while 45.7% are females. The 8.6% difference of male over female respondents is because of the easy access to the respondents' males by the researcher in the sampled area (Keffi town). This implies that a larger proportion of the respondents were males in the sampled population. The age distribution of respondents in the table shows that 32.8% of the sampled population falls within the ages of 21-30years. This implies that most couples in the sample area are predominantly at the useful marriage life. Also, majority (90.5%) of the couple is married and has children with responsibility child's upbringing. From the table, majority of that couples in the study area are in their marriages with children's responsibilities. On the level of education attainment of the respondents, a huge percentage, 45.9% has no formal education. This is not surprising because the study area is made up of people with religious belief on Islam. On the marriage anniversary of the respondents, a greater percentage, 36% have celebrated between 11–15 years of their marriage life. This is because, considering the respondents' marriage anniversary, it can be inferred that the obvious reason for the high marriage anniversary is proportional to early marriage of the inhabitants of the study area who mostly practice Islam religion. There is always encouragement to marry early in life.

On the religion of the respondents, the table further reveals that 63.3% of the respondents practice Islamic religion. This clearly shows that Islam is the most dominant religion within sampled area, Keffi town. Basically, in Keffi town, Islam and Christianity are the main religious groups, but the dominance of Islam in the study area is due to the earlier contact between the people in the area with the Jihadist movement. Lastly, on the occupation of the respondents, significant percentages (33.3%) are into business and petty trading as means of livelihood. Therefore, the study area constitutes economically active people who are socially engaged in urban activities for sustenance. This could be due to available business opportunities in the study area, since the town is an urban settlement.

Table 2: Major causes of family instability

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Economic/financial strain	55	14.4
Poor communication	157	41.2
Infidelity & lack of trust	84	22.1
External interference	52	13.6
Shifting family dynamics	33	8.7
Total	381	100

Sources: Field Survey, 2026

Table 2 shows the major causes of family instability in the sampled area include poor communication (41.2%), infidelity & lack of trust (22.1%), financial strain (14.4%), and external interference (13.6%), as the result indicated that a total of 41.2% (majority) of the respondents in the study area picture marital instability as result of poor communication in the family. This means that family instability is caused by couple's disagreement as result of mistrust and misunderstanding between two personalities. Clashing parenting styles, varying disciplinary approaches, and disputes over household responsibilities create conflict between spouses and parents and children. Family instability is typically triggered by a combination of factors ranging from economic hardship, poor communication, to unresolved conflict. These challenges often manifest through shifting partner relationships, differing parenting styles, and external stressors, severely impacting the well-being of the household. Though, the primary triggers include poor communication, financial strain and infidelity & lack of trust.

Table 3: Effect of family instability on childhood socialization

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Emotional dysregulation and anxiety	52	13.6
Development of deviant habits	63	16.5
Impaired relationship formation	28	7.3
Academic and focus challenges	97	25.5
Aggression and antisocial behaviour	141	37.1
Total	381	100

Sources: Field Survey, 2026

Table 3 indicates the effect of family instability on childhood socialization in the study area. The results shows that majority (62.6%) of the total respondents said that children from unstable family develops aggression and antisocial behaviour, as well as academic and focus challenges. Children whose parents faces marital instability disrupts a child's primary socialization. It often results in behavioural challenges, impaired emotional regulation, academic difficulties, and insecure attachment styles. Rather than learning healthy coping mechanisms, children may display externalizing problems. This can manifest as bullying, defiance, and aggression toward peers, teachers, or parents. Psychological and emotional stress drain cognitive energy. Children from unstable environments often struggle to concentrate in class, exhibit poor academic performance, and have higher rates of school dropout. Family instability-frequent changes in

residential and romantic partnerships, parental stress, and chaotic home environments disrupts a child's foundational socialization. It frequently leads to emotional distress, impaired social competence, and behavioural problems.

Table 4: Ways to tackle family instability and improve childhood socialization

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Open communication & respect others' opinions	121	31.8
Engage in therapy & build a support network	47	12.3
Hold family meetings & eat together	88	23.1
Set clear guidelines and ground rules	59	15.5
Address emotional immaturity	66	17.3
Total	381	100

Sources: Field Survey, 2026

In table 4, result shows that the common ways to tackle family instability and improve childhood socialization open communication, respect one another opinion, regular family meetings and eat together with majority (54.9%) of the respondents in the sampled area. It implies that tackling family instability requires proactive communication, strong boundaries, and healthy conflict resolution. To build a secure and harmonious home environment, prioritize active listening, establish regular family routines, and take personal accountability. When needed, lean on professional counselling and your wider support network. Acknowledge that family members have the freedom to express their views boldly, even when disagreements. There is need to schedule regular, time-boxed discussions where everyone feels safe to share their thoughts, clarify issues, and brainstorm solutions together. Plan regular family meals, game nights, or outings that do not involve screens to build a foundation of positive shared experiences.

Discussion

The discussion of the findings is presented according to the research question directing the study and the findings were discussed under the following sub-headings:

On the causes of family instability, the result of this study indicated that the major causes of family instability in Keffi town in persistent family disagreement. This research finding is in line with the assertion of Evans, et al. (2021) that high parental family disagreement which strains household resources has weakened the stability and quality of home environments for many children and limited access to proper care and nutrition. The family acts as a primary social group where children learn behavioural norms, emotional regulation, and social competence simply by observing everyday life. When the family structure breaks down, this socialization process is compromised in several ways (Craigie, Brooks-Gunn & Waldfogel 2022). A study conducted by Shonkoff and Garner (2021) found that adolescents chaotic home environment creates uncertainty regarding the availability of parental support. Children may develop negative internal representations of relationships and increased callousness. Instability increases parental stress and financial strain, which can reduce parenting quality, supervision, and emotional investment in the child. Frequent changes are consistently linked to lower cognitive achievement, school adjustment problems, and increased externalizing behaviours, such as aggression toward families, peers and teachers (Cavanagh & Huston 2026).

On the effect of family instability on childhood socialization, the result of this analysis indicated that family instability has negative implications on children socialization in Keffi town of Keffi Local Government Area in Nasarawa State. This research finding is highly supported by the study finding of Ifemeje (2018) who concluded that there is a significant

relationship between divorce and child upbringing. The study of Taylor and Edwards (2022) also supports this finding by asserting that parental divorce has the potential to cause short-term family crisis, long-term chronic strain on the family and poor child upbringing and some changes in family structure can be positive for the child if such changes are in the context of strengthening the family's support system or reducing parental conflict in the home, in the case of a separation. In consonance to this finding is also the finding of Craigie, et al. (2022) who posits that most changes in family structure, depending on the context, introduce stress and emotional and financial insecurity in children's lives. While there has been considerable debate about the effects of divorce or a new marriage on children, and whether it is the change in parental unions or the underlying characteristics and behaviours of parents that impact children the most, increasing evidence has increasingly documented the negative effects of family instability on children. Taylor and Edwards (2022) show that parental divorce has the potential to cause short-term family crisis and long-term, chronic strain on the family and poor child upbringing. Some changes in family structure can be positive for the child if such changes are in the context of strengthening the family's support system or reducing parental conflict in the home, in the case of a separation. Experts posit, however, that most changes in family structure, depending on the context, introduce stress and emotional and financial insecurity in children's lives. Therefore, family instability in the form of divorce is associated with negative outcomes for children who are at the centre of parental relationships (Craigie, Brooks-Gunn & Waldfogel 2022; Johnson, et al. 2022 and Haliru, Adeyinka & Bodinga, 2023).

A number of studies identify a link between parental divorce and lower academic achievement and poor behavioural outcomes, even at early ages (Craigie, et al., 2022; Sandstrom & Huerta, 2023). According to the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study as cited in the study of Craigie, et al. (2022), children born to married parents who divorce by the time children are 5 years old have lower vocabulary and pre-reading skills and more aggressive behaviours at age 5 than children in stably married families. Similar findings are seen in children born to cohabiting parents; children whose unmarried parents live together at birth, but subsequently separate, demonstrate more aggressive behaviours and higher rates of obesity and asthma at age 5 than children in stable cohabiting or stable cohabiting-to-married families (Taylor & Edwards, 2022 and Haliru, Adeyinka & Bodinga, 2023).

In addition to parental separations, the formation of potentially unstable parental unions may have negative associations with child well-being. Family instability is linked to problem behaviours and some academic outcomes, even at early ages. Children's problem behaviours further increase with multiple changes in family structure especially in cohabiting parents. Family transitions that occur early in children's development prior to age 6 and in adolescence appear to have the strongest effects (Odewale, & Killian, 2021). While young children need constant caregivers with whom they can form secure attachments, adolescents need parental support, role models, and continuity of residence and schools to succeed which cohabiting does not provide (Sandstrom & Huerta, 2023). Children demonstrate more negative behaviours when they lack the emotional and material support at home that they need to smoothly handle a family transition (Haliru, Adeyinka & Bodinga, 2023).

On ways to tackle family instability and to enhance childhood socialization, the result of this study indicated that there should be open communication, regular family meetings and eating together to foster social cohesion for inclusive childhood socialization in Keffi town, Keffi Local Government Area in Nasarawa State, Nigeria. This finding is highly corroborated by Sandstrom and Huerta (2023) who asserted that, children's problem behaviours further increases with multiple changes in family structure especially in cohabiting parents and that children in cohabiting homes demonstrate more negative behaviours when they lack the

emotional and material support at home that they need to smoothly handle a family transition. To further support this analysis, Cavanagh and Huston (2026) asserted that children born into cohabiting parent families experience the most family instability, followed by single-mother families. To support this finding, Craigie, et al. (2022) documented that the temporary nature of some cohabiting relationships leads to changes in children's primary caregivers and instability in household resources which may mean loss of contact with one parent, changes in the home and care environments resulting from constrained financial resources, an increase in parental stress and depression from a lack of social support, and a decline in parenting quality. In supporting the implication of this variable on child upbringing, Shonkoff and Garner (2021) found that adolescents who transitioned from a single-mother family into an unmarried, cohabiting family (i.e., living with a mother's boyfriend) demonstrated more delinquent behaviours and lower school engagement than their peers who moved into a married stepfamily and their peers who remained in stable single mother families. Johnson, et al. (2012) also asserted that among children born to single parents, those who experience more instability display more negative behaviours than their peers born into stable families.

Conclusion/Recommendations

Family instability disrupts primary childhood socialization, severely limiting a child's access to emotional, social, and economic support in Keffi town. This breakdown leaves children vulnerable to deviance, poor academic performance, and delinquent peer groups, creating major societal challenges. Research highlights that broken homes and divorce lead to negative socialization outcomes. The absence of a stable, two-parent support system or repeated transitions in a child's household undermine their sense of trust and security. If a family is going through hard times, it may negatively impact in the socialization of the child especially in the provision of their basic needs.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

- i. Parents and intending couples should be sensitized on the need to maintain and sustain their marriages to avoid separation that could affect their children.
- ii. There is need for parents to shield children from explicit parental disagreements or loyalty conflicts is critical to preventing associated anxiety, depression, and hostility.
- iii. Couples should understand the need to bring up children in lovely and caring background so that the children will grow up to become good citizens through parental mentorship by portraying good character before their children.
- iv. Family needs to establish highly consistent routines, engaging in targeted relationship-building frameworks, and accessing professional and community support to foster healthy childhood socialization.
- v. There is need for parents to seek out professional family counselling and parental education provides specialized tools to handle the emotional and behavioural consequences of family instability.

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