



Impact of Psycho-Social Interventions on the Well-Being of Autistic Children in Rehabilitation Centres in North Central Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the impact of psycho-social interventions on the well-being of autistic children in rehabilitation centres across North Central Nigeria. The research was motivated by the increasing prevalence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the region and the observed gap in structured, evidence-based caregiver support within rehabilitation institutions. Despite caregivers playing a critical role in shaping the developmental outcomes of autistic children, many face emotional exhaustion, societal stigma, and inadequate institutional support, which may negatively influence their caregiving effectiveness and, by extension, child well-being. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design and targeted a population of 1,826 registered caregivers in government-approved rehabilitation centres. A sample of 327 caregivers was selected using simple random sampling. Data were collected using a validated structured questionnaire titled "Psycho-Social Interventions and Caregiver Behaviour Inventory (PSICBI)". Data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation, with a benchmark mean of 3.00 for interpreting significance. Findings revealed that several psycho-social interventions including individual counselling ($\bar{x} = 3.42$), group therapy ($\bar{x} = 3.31$), and caregiver-child bonding exercises ($\bar{x} = 3.55$) are actively implemented and positively influence the emotional, social, and adaptive development of autistic children. However, the limited availability of mental health professionals ($\bar{x} = 2.78$) emerged as a significant gap. Caregivers' behaviours such as empathy ($\bar{x} = 3.70$), consistent emotional support ($\bar{x} = 3.48$), and structured routines ($\bar{x} = 3.25$) were found to enhance child well-being, while emotional burnout and stress-induced withdrawal hindered optimal care. The study concludes that while psycho-social interventions contribute meaningfully to the well-being of autistic children, their effectiveness is constrained by caregiver stress and lack of institutional support. It recommends improved access to trained mental health professionals, regular psycho-educational programs, targeted caregiver support policies, and community-based stigma reduction strategies to promote sustainable, high-quality care for autistic children in institutional settings.

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INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition characterised by impairments in social interaction,

communication challenges, and repetitive behaviours. These symptoms often require continuous, structured, and specialised care to support affected children's development and

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quality of life. In Nigeria, particularly in the North Central Geo-Political Zone, institutional awareness, diagnostic services, and structured interventions for autistic children are still emerging. Consequently, many families and stakeholders rely on rehabilitation centres, which serve as essential points of care and support. Within these settings, the psycho-social attributes and interventions of caregivers play a crucial role in shaping the developmental trajectory and well-being of children with ASD (Bakare et al., 2020; Ebigo, 2021).

Psycho-social interventions in rehabilitation contexts refer to structured activities, strategies, and support mechanisms that promote caregivers' emotional regulation, empathy, effective communication, and social engagement skills while working with autistic children. The psychological well-being and social conduct of caregivers are directly linked to the consistency and effectiveness of the care they provide. However, caregivers in North Central Nigeria often operate under conditions of emotional strain, societal stigma, poor remuneration, and limited institutional support. These stressors can lead to negative caregiving behaviours such as emotional detachment, irritability, and neglect, which may hinder the progress and psychological well-being of autistic children (Ugochukwu & Ezeokoli, 2021; Yahaya, 2023).

Empirical research has shown that positive psycho-social interventions, such as emotional support training, structured routines, reflective listening, and stress management techniques, can significantly enhance caregivers' capacity to interact constructively with autistic children. These interventions improve the children's emotional regulation, reduce behavioural issues, and promote social and adaptive functioning (Adeosun, 2022; Owoyemi & Akinbote, 2023; Musa et al., 2021). However, implementation of such interventions in the North Central region remains inconsistent due to limited research, policy gaps, and insufficient institutional prioritization.

Moreover, cultural misconceptions about autism, such as beliefs that it is a spiritual punishment or curse, continue to influence how

caregivers and communities respond to autistic children. These attitudes can reduce caregivers' empathy, weaken their commitment, and affect the quality of interventions provided (Afolayan & Olorunfemi, 2020; Onifade et al., 2023; Chukwu et al., 2021). The absence of culturally appropriate training, professional psychological support, and ongoing monitoring of caregiver well-being further compounds these challenges (Ibrahim et al., 2022; Yusuf et al., 2020). When caregivers lack adequate psycho-social support, their ability to engage meaningfully with autistic children is significantly impaired.

Given the central role of caregiver behaviour in autism rehabilitation and the growing reliance on institutional care, understanding the impact of psycho-social interventions is essential. This study seeks to examine how psycho-social interventions influence the well-being of autistic children in rehabilitation centres across North Central Nigeria. The findings are expected to inform policy, enhance professional practice, and contribute to improving the standard of care for autistic children in institutional settings.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The increasing prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Nigeria has placed a significant burden on families and rehabilitation institutions, especially in the North Central Geo-Political Zone. Despite the growing demand for specialised care, many rehabilitation centres in this region are under-resourced and lack structured, evidence-based interventions to address the complex needs of autistic children. One critical yet under-examined aspect of autism care in these settings is the psycho-social behaviour of caregivers and the role of psycho-social interventions in enhancing caregiving practices.

Caregivers in rehabilitation centres often experience emotional exhaustion, societal stigma, low remuneration, and inadequate professional support, which negatively affect their mental health and social functioning. These stressors frequently manifest in undesirable behaviours such as emotional detachment, irritability, and inconsistency in caregiving. Such



behaviours are detrimental to the well-being and developmental progress of autistic children who require patience, structure, and emotional attunement. Moreover, prevailing cultural misconceptions about autism, often rooted in spiritual or moral beliefs, further influence caregivers' attitudes and undermine their ability to provide empathetic and informed care.

Although studies have highlighted the potential benefits of psycho-social interventions in improving caregiver performance and child outcomes, the implementation of such interventions remains limited in the North Central region. There is a lack of empirical data examining how specific psycho-social support mechanisms influence the emotional well-being, communication skills, and adaptive behaviours of autistic children in institutional settings. This gap in knowledge has hindered the development of targeted training programs, policy frameworks, and intervention models tailored to the unique cultural and institutional realities of the region. Therefore, there is an urgent need to investigate the impact of psycho-social interventions on the well-being of autistic children in rehabilitation centres within North Central Nigeria. Understanding the link between caregiver psycho-social support and child development outcomes is critical for improving the quality of care, reducing caregiver burnout, and informing sustainable policy and practice in autism care services.

Objectives of the Study

The study specifically aims to:

1. Assess the psycho-social interventions available in rehabilitation centres and their application in the care of autistic children in North Central Nigeria.
2. Examine the relationship between caregivers' psycho-social behaviours and the well-being of autistic children in institutional settings.
3. Evaluate the effectiveness of psycho-social interventions in enhancing the emotional, social, and adaptive development of autistic children.

Research Questions

1. What psycho-social interventions are currently available and implemented in rehabilitation centres for autistic children in North Central Nigeria?
2. How do caregivers' psycho-social behaviours influence the well-being of autistic children in these centres?
3. To what extent do psycho-social interventions improve the emotional, social, and adaptive development of autistic children in institutional care?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the descriptive survey research design, which enables the collection and analysis of data to describe existing conditions, practices, and perceptions. This design was chosen because it allows for an in-depth examination of psycho-social interventions, caregiver behaviours, and the well-being of autistic children in institutional settings. The research was conducted in the North Central Geo-Political Zone of Nigeria, comprising the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja and six states: Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, and Plateau. These areas were selected due to the presence of recognized rehabilitation centres catering to children with autism.

The target population for the study consisted of 1,826 registered caregivers working in government-approved rehabilitation centres across the North Central zone. This figure was provided by the Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management, and Social Development as of February 2025. The population distribution includes 490 caregivers in Benue, 320 in Kogi, 256 in Kwara, 130 in Niger, 200 in Nasarawa, 400 in Plateau, and 720 in the FCT. A sample of 327 caregivers was selected using the Taro Yamane formula at a 0.05 level of significance. Simple random sampling was employed to ensure fair representation of caregivers across the selected states. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled "Psycho-Social Interventions and Caregiver Behaviour Inventory (PSICBI)". The instrument

was designed to elicit information related to the three research questions:

1. Section A explored the types of psycho-social interventions currently available and implemented in rehabilitation centres (Research Question 1).
2. Section B examined caregivers' psycho-social behaviours and their influence on the well-being of autistic children (Research Question 2).
3. Section C assessed the impact of interventions on the emotional, social, and adaptive development of autistic children (Research Question 3).

The questionnaire was administered in person by the researcher with the assistance of two trained research assistants. The research assistants monitored questionnaire completion

and collected responses from caregivers in the rehabilitation centres. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, to interpret patterns in caregiver behaviour, availability of interventions, and observed outcomes on child development. A benchmark of 3.00 was used to interpret the responses. Items with a mean score of 3.00 or above were considered accepted or significant, while those with a score below 3.00 were considered insignificant or rejected.

Results and Analysis

Research Question 1:

What psycho-social interventions are currently available and implemented in rehabilitation centres for autistic children in North Central Nigeria?

Table 1: Mean Responses of Caregivers on Available Psycho-Social Interventions in Rehabilitation Centres

S/N	Psycho-Social Interventions	N	Mean (\bar{x})	Std. Dev.	Decision
1	Individual counselling sessions for caregivers	327	3.42	0.81	Accepted
2	Group therapy and peer support programs	327	3.31	0.77	Accepted
3	Regular caregiver-child bonding exercises	327	3.55	0.68	Accepted
4	Psycho-educational workshops and seminars	327	3.12	0.84	Accepted
5	Access to mental health professionals for caregivers	327	2.78	0.91	Rejected

Source: Survey, 2025

The result in Table 1 presents the mean responses of caregivers on the availability and implementation of various psycho-social interventions in rehabilitation centres for autistic children across North Central Nigeria. The findings indicate that a number of psycho-social support systems are actively being utilized to address the needs of autistic children within these institutional settings. Notably, individual counselling sessions recorded a relatively high mean score of 3.42, signifying that personalized emotional support between caregivers and mental health professionals is a key component of intervention strategies. This form of therapy is essential as it allows caregivers to process their experiences, gain coping skills, and ultimately

offer better support to autistic children. Group therapy and peer support programs, with a mean of 3.31, are also reported to be commonly implemented. These interventions are critical in creating a sense of community among caregivers, fostering knowledge sharing, emotional validation, and collective problem-solving, all of which contribute positively to both caregiver and child well-being.

Furthermore, caregiver-child bonding exercises scored the highest with a mean of 3.55. This finding highlights the importance placed on nurturing close, consistent, and emotionally responsive interactions between caregivers and autistic children. These exercises help improve communication, trust, and emotional security,

which are crucial in the developmental journey of autistic children. The study also found that psycho-educational workshops and seminars (\bar{x} = 3.12) are available and implemented. These programs help equip caregivers with up-to-date knowledge, practical strategies, and a deeper understanding of autism spectrum disorders, thereby enhancing their competence and confidence in managing the unique needs of autistic children.

However, a significant gap was identified in the availability of mental health professionals for caregiver support, which was rated below the acceptable benchmark with a mean of 2.78. This suggests that despite the presence of several support mechanisms, there is inadequate professional psychological assistance available within many centres. The lack of regular access to trained psychologists, counsellors, or therapists may limit the effectiveness of

interventions, especially in cases requiring specialized support for caregivers experiencing burnout, emotional distress, or complex behavioural challenges from children. In summary, the findings demonstrate that while a number of psycho-social interventions are available and operational in these centres, there are still critical areas, particularly professional mental health support, that require strengthening. Addressing these gaps is necessary for a more comprehensive, sustainable, and effective psycho-social support system that promotes the overall well-being of autistic children in rehabilitation settings.

Research Question 2:

How do caregivers' psycho-social behaviours influence the well-being of autistic children in these centres?

Table 2: Mean Responses of Caregivers on the Influence of Their Psycho-Social Behaviours on the Well-being of Autistic Children

S/N	Psycho-Social Behaviour	N	Mean (\bar{x})	Std. Dev.	Decision
1	Caregivers show patience and empathy toward autistic children	327	3.61	0.69	Accepted
2	Caregivers provide consistent emotional support	327	3.48	0.72	Accepted
3	Caregivers demonstrate non-verbal communication and attentiveness	327	3.37	0.81	Accepted
4	Caregivers maintain calm and structured daily routines	327	3.25	0.74	Accepted
5	Caregivers express frustration or burnout openly	327	2.49	0.88	Rejected

Source: Survey, 2025

The result in Table 2 presents the caregivers' views on how their psycho-social behaviours influence the well-being of autistic children in rehabilitation centres. The findings show that the majority of the behaviours assessed were rated above the 3.00 benchmark, indicating that caregivers' attitudes, emotional availability, and interpersonal approaches play a significant role in improving the emotional and developmental health of autistic children. For instance, demonstrating patience and empathy (\bar{x} = 3.61) was the highest-rated behaviour, reflecting its central role in building trust and emotional safety for autistic children. These children often require

more time, gentleness, and understanding, and the ability of caregivers to offer this support directly impacts the children's stress levels, mood, and overall functioning.

Similarly, providing consistent emotional support (\bar{x} = 3.48) and engaging in attentive non-verbal communication (\bar{x} = 3.37) were also rated highly. These actions help autistic children feel understood even when verbal communication is limited. They also create a responsive and predictable caregiving environment, which research has shown to be particularly beneficial for children with autism. Maintaining calm and structured daily routines (\bar{x} = 3.25) was another behaviour perceived as

positively influencing well-being. Routines provide autistic children with a sense of predictability and reduce anxiety, thereby enhancing their ability to engage in daily activities and social interaction.

However, the item "caregivers express frustration or burnout openly" received a low mean score of 2.49, indicating that such behaviours are not supportive and may even be detrimental to the well-being of autistic children. This result points to the importance of supporting caregivers' mental health to prevent emotional fatigue from negatively affecting their caregiving role. In conclusion, the findings suggest that caregivers' psycho-social behaviours, particularly empathy,

emotional consistency, and structured routines, are critical to the well-being of autistic children in institutional care. On the other hand, signs of caregiver burnout highlight the need for institutional policies to support caregiver wellness in order to maintain effective and nurturing environments.

Research Question 3:

To what extent do psycho-social interventions improve the emotional, social, and adaptive development of autistic children in institutional care?

Table 3: Mean Responses of Caregivers on the Impact of Psycho-Social Interventions on the Development of Autistic Children in Rehabilitation Centres

S/N	Developmental Area	N	Mean (\bar{x})	Std. Dev.	Decision
1	Improved emotional regulation and expression in autistic children	327	3.47	0.71	Accepted
2	Increased social interaction and communication skills	327	3.35	0.77	Accepted
3	Better adaptive behaviour in daily activities	327	3.29	0.80	Accepted
4	Enhanced response to structured learning environments	327	3.11	0.75	Accepted
5	Reduction in disruptive or aggressive behaviours	327	2.95	0.84	Rejected

Source: Survey, 2025

The result in Table 3 illustrates caregivers' perceptions of how psycho-social interventions influence various aspects of autistic children's development within rehabilitation centres. The findings reveal that these interventions generally have a positive impact on children's emotional, social, and adaptive growth. For instance, the highest mean score was recorded under "Improved emotional regulation and expression" ($\bar{x} = 3.47$), suggesting that psycho-social support enables autistic children to better manage emotions like anxiety, frustration, or excitement. Interventions such as one-on-one counselling, structured routines, and emotional coaching appear to help children gain awareness and control over their emotional responses.

Similarly, caregivers noted a positive effect on social interaction and communication skills ($\bar{x} = 3.35$), an area where many children with autism typically face challenges. This suggests that group activities, bonding exercises, and

responsive caregiver-child interactions are effective in fostering improved social engagement and basic communication. The improvement in adaptive behaviours ($\bar{x} = 3.29$), such as dressing, eating, and basic hygiene, also reflects how structured psycho-social interventions help children function more independently in daily life. Additionally, enhanced response to structured learning environments ($\bar{x} = 3.11$) indicates that interventions have been somewhat effective in helping children adjust to classroom settings, follow routines, and respond to teaching instructions.

However, the area of reducing disruptive or aggressive behaviours received a mean score below the threshold ($\bar{x} = 2.95$), indicating that this remains a challenging area where current interventions may be insufficient. It suggests a need for more targeted behavioural strategies, professional input from clinical psychologists, or possibly the use of individualized intervention plans. In summary, caregivers

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perceive that psycho-social interventions significantly enhance the emotional stability, social abilities, and life skills of autistic children in rehabilitation centres. Nonetheless, some behavioural challenges persist, pointing to areas that require improved strategies and greater professional involvement.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study revealed that caregivers at rehabilitation centres across North Central Nigeria reported the availability and implementation of psycho-social interventions such as individual counselling sessions, group therapy, caregiver-child bonding activities, and psycho-educational workshops. These results are consonant with Okolo, Abah, and Tanko (2023), who asserted that such interventions are increasingly adopted in special education settings across Benue and Nasarawa States, with notable improvements in children's emotional responsiveness and caregiver-child bonding. However, the study also showed that access to mental health professionals scored below the acceptance threshold, indicating a critical gap in specialist support services. This observation is supported by Ede, Okonkwo, and Nwokeoma (2022), who posited that rehabilitation centres across North Central Nigeria often operate with minimal psychiatric or clinical psychological input, limiting the effectiveness of broader intervention frameworks.

Caregivers' psycho-social behaviours, including empathy, routine structuring, emotional regulation, and consistent interpersonal support, significantly impact the well-being of autistic children. This finding is consonant with Ibrahim and Audu (2021), who asserted that the psychological orientation and behaviour of caregivers in special education centres within the region play a crucial role in shaping children's emotional and social outcomes. Contrast emerges in the work of Musa and Adegoke (2020), who highlighted that without sustained caregiver training and institutional support, such positive behaviours are often short-lived, leading to inconsistent developmental outcomes.

Furthermore, the study revealed that psycho-social interventions contribute meaningfully to emotional regulation, social engagement, and adaptive behaviours among autistic children. This aligns with the national findings of Okafor et al. (2023), who posited that psycho-social programming, when consistently implemented, fosters self-regulation and social inclusion among children with autism. However, the limited effect of these interventions on severe behavioural issues, such as aggression or self-injury, contrasts with earlier assumptions that general psycho-social approaches are universally effective. Instead, these results support the argument that individualized behavioural interventions are essential for addressing complex behavioural challenges in institutional care settings.

The study also identified institutional constraints such as caregiver burnout, inadequate training, social stigma, and poor access to mental health infrastructure. These barriers are consonant with the assertions of Ede et al. (2022), who identified a widespread lack of institutional support for caregivers at government-approved centres across Northern Nigeria. Contrast is observed when compared with intervention models in more resource-privileged regions, as the North Central zone still contends with underfunding, societal misconceptions about autism, and inconsistent government oversight, all of which undermine the long-term impact of psycho-social interventions.

To conclude, the findings of this study are largely consonant with existing literature from North Central Nigeria and broader national contexts. They suggest that psycho-social interventions prove effective when delivered by stable, trained, and emotionally supported caregivers, although systemic inadequacies must be addressed to ensure sustainable developmental outcomes for autistic children in rehabilitation centres.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided clear evidence that psycho-social interventions play a significant role in improving the well-being of autistic children

in rehabilitation centres across North Central Nigeria. The findings show that interventions such as individual counselling sessions, group therapy, caregiver-child bonding activities, and psycho-educational workshops are actively implemented in many centres, and they positively impact emotional regulation, social engagement, and adaptive functioning among the children. Moreover, the study revealed that the psycho-social behaviours of caregivers, such as empathy, routine structuring, and emotional responsiveness, contribute substantially to the children's development and quality of care.

However, challenges such as caregiver burnout, limited access to mental health professionals, institutional underfunding, and community stigma often weaken the effectiveness and consistency of these interventions. Therefore, the findings have directly addressed the research topic by demonstrating that psycho-social interventions, when available and properly implemented, significantly enhance the emotional, social, and behavioural well-being of autistic children in institutional care. Psycho-social interventions are not only relevant but essential to the holistic development of autistic children in rehabilitation centres. Strengthening these interventions will ensure better outcomes for the children and more effective caregiving across the North Central region of Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made to enhance the effectiveness of psycho-social interventions and improve the well-being of autistic children in rehabilitation centres across North Central Nigeria:

1. Government agencies and stakeholders in the health and social development sectors should allocate more resources to rehabilitation centres to ensure regular access to professional psychologists, counsellors, and behavioural therapists. This will help bridge the gap in expert mental health support identified in the study.
2. Regular in-service training should be provided to caregivers on the use of evidence-based psycho-social techniques tailored to children with autism. Topics such as emotional regulation, communication, sensory support, and behavioural management should be emphasized to improve caregiver capacity and reduce burnout.
3. Rehabilitation centres should adopt standardized psycho-social intervention models that include individual counselling, group therapy, caregiver-child bonding activities, and psycho-educational workshops. These programs should be routinely evaluated for effectiveness and adapted to suit the developmental needs of the children.
4. Public awareness campaigns should be launched to address stigma and misinformation about autism within communities. Sensitization efforts can reduce caregiver stress, promote social acceptance of autistic children, and foster greater collaboration between families, schools, and care institutions.
5. Psycho-social care for children with developmental disorders should be integrated into national health and education policies. Clear guidelines and monitoring frameworks should be established to ensure consistent implementation and accountability across rehabilitation centres in the region.

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