

The Prevalence of Child Abuse among Primary School Students

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ABSTRACT

Background: Child abuse is a major psychological and social problem in all countries and is affected by a set of cultural, social, and family factors as well as some characteristics of children. This study was conducted to determine the prevalence of child abuse among primary school students in Shahrekord.

Methods: This cross-sectional study was conducted in 2024 on 245 students from fourth to sixth grades in public schools of Shahrekord selected through cluster sampling. Four clusters were randomly selected from all primary schools in this area, 4 clusters were randomly selected and then the final sample (126 females) was randomly selected from the above sections. Hosseinkhani researcher-made Child Abuse Questionnaire was used in this study. Chi-square, t-test, analysis of variance, and correlation coefficient were used to analyze the data.

Results: The results of the study showed that 30.6% of children experienced physical abuse, 56.4% of them had experienced emotional abuse, and 99.6% experienced negligence as a type of abuse. The data showed only a significant relationship between negligence and fathers' education ($p=0.032$), so increasing fathers' education level led to more negligence. There was a significant relationship between having an experience of emotional-psychological abuse and having an experience of physical abuse ($P < 0.001$), i.e., students who had higher score in emotional-psychological dimension reported more child abuse in physical dimension.

Conclusion: Considering the high prevalence of child abuse among students, it is necessary to take steps to reduce child abuse by educating parents on correct pedagogical methods.

Keywords: Child Abuse, Physical Abuse, Emotional Abuse, Parents, Students

Introduction

The issue of child abuse is a form of domestic violence seen in all social groups and it is recognized as a health and social problem worldwide, and it is also observed in all developed and developing countries (Malekshahi F, 2011; Tarkashvand F, 2013; Wathen & Macmillan, 2013). Kemp et al. first introduced child abuse as Battered Child Syndrome (Kempe CH, 1962), highlighting its significance due to various consequences it can cause, including social instability, while emphasizing children's vulnerability due to their age and lack of skills (Malekshahi F, 2011).

The World Health Organization identifies child abuse as any intentional physical, psychological, sexual, or negligent abuse of a child by a person responsible for his or her well-being and health (Momayezi F, 2011; WHO, 2006). Scher also defines child abuse as any physical, psychological, sexual and negligent violence against children (Scher, 2004). Emotional or psychological child abuse includes verbal threats, ridicule, derogatory beliefs, shielding the child, lack of food and shelter, etc. Such behaviors cause psychological harm and disrupt the child's development (Abolghasemi A, 2012; Raheb GH, 2009; Vizeh O, 2008). Physical abuse includes injuries such as trauma, burns, fractures, biting, pushing, wounding, and other forms of physical injury that last for at least 48 hours. Sexual abuse also includes any interaction or contact between a child and an adult with the aim of satisfying an adult without child's knowledge and consent. Negligence includes lack of health care, abundance, lack of adequate supervision, lack of enrollment in school, poor nutrition, poor clothing and hygiene, lack of inhibition from substance, and alcohol use (Raheb GH, 2009; Vizeh O, 2008).

Despite the hidden nature of child abuse, research has shown that child abuse is widespread worldwide (Mikaeli, 2012; Wathen & Macmillan, 2013). More than two million cases of child abuse have been reported involving parents and guardians. In families where a man physically

abuses his wife, the rate of child abuse is 1.5 times higher than other families (Sahbaei F, 2006; Tahmasebin H, 2012). In 2009, the US Department of Health reported 2.5 million child abuse cases, 80% of which were perpetrated by parents, and 1,770 abused children were died (Health, 2009). Every year, millions of children around the world are abused physically, sexually, emotionally or neglected (Abbasi, Saeidi, Khademi, & Hoseini, 2015). Although it is the right of every child to enjoy a healthy and non-violent life, raising children and paying attention to their psychological and physical characteristics has not been addressed sufficiently in our country. Due to children's vulnerability and the pivotal roles they have, paying attention to them should be a priority in national programs of each country (Naghavi A, 2004; Tarkashvand F, 2013).

Studies in Iran have shown that parents generally believe that physical punishment is sometimes necessary for raising their children. This type of attitude towards physical punishment is related to cultural values and the standards of society (Aliverdineia A, 2013) The family is a reflection of the whole society and it is a social symbol. If the environment is full of stress, anxiety, danger and abuse for the child, it will lose its efficiency and importance in fostering a creative, dynamic, committed and responsible generation and it will cause various social harms (Habibi S, 2017; R, 2009). Patterns of violent behavior are embedded in the family and cultural structures of the society (Raheb GH, 2009) and the occurrence of parental abuse is not dependent on a single factor. The most important consequence of child abuse is mortality, but this phenomenon has other consequences, some of which may not appear until adolescence and adulthood, which are called dormant or hidden consequences of child abuse (Raheb GH, 2009; Tarkashvand F, 2013). Destructive effects of child abuse on children's future need more attention and further research in order to educate families about child abuse and prevent children and consequently the family and

society from this great harm (Habibi S, 2017).

The results of studies have indicated that the profound consequences of child abuse affect not only the development and personality of the child, but also the family and society. Given that children are the creators of the future of any society, their physical and emotional health is the focus of all societies. Hence, it is necessary to consider it as the priority for psychosocial planning in all societies. Therefore, this study was designed and conducted to investigate the prevalence of physical, emotional-psychological, and negligence abuse in primary school students in Shahrekord and determining the relationship between these dimensions and demographic variables.

Methods

The present study was a cross-sectional study conducted in 2024. The study population included all male and female students of public schools in the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades in Shahrekord. Among which, according to the sample volume formula (considering the maximum sampling error of 5% and confidence interval of 95%) (Droegemueller & Silver, 1962), 245 students were selected as the sample.

Inclusion criteria included informed written consent, voluntary participation, and being a student. Exclusion criteria included incomplete or incorrect completion of questionnaires and lack of appropriate physical condition to answer questions. The study population was all public primary schools of Shahrekord. The sampling method was two-stage cluster sampling. From all primary schools in this area, 4 clusters (2 female' schools and 2 male' schools) were randomly selected and then the final sample (126 female and 119 male) was randomly selected from the above sections.

All information obtained from this study was reported in a group and it was completely confidential. The research instrument was Hosseinkhani standard child abuse questionnaire taken from different international standard questionnaires including JVQ and ICAST-C. The

mean values of clarity and relevancy of the questionnaire were 80.36% and 92.5%, respectively, and range of relevancy of the questions was between 90.14 and 97.2. Further analysis of the data showed that mean values of ICC and Cronbach's alpha coefficient were, respectively, 0.95 and 0.92 (Hosseinkhani Z, 2013). This questionnaire had 26 questions that measure three dimensions of child abuse including emotional-psychological, physical, and negligence.

The questionnaire had two sections, including 10 questions, and one section included six questions. Items were scored on a three-point Likert scale (never = 1, often = 2, always = 3). Children who gave a positive answer to at least one of the questions in each dimension were categorized in the group of abused children. Children who gave a positive answer to at least one of the questions in all dimensions were categorized in the group of general abused children (Hosseinkhani Z, 2013). Data were analyzed using SPSS statistical software version 25. In all tests, the confidence interval was 95%, and the significance level was considered to be < 0.05 . Chi-square, t-test, analysis of variance, and correlation coefficient were used to analyze the data.

Results

In this cross-sectional study, 245 students were studied. The age range was 9-13 years and mean age was 11.06 ± 1.06 years, and 48.6% of the students were male and the rest were female. The highest number of students were in the fourth grade (34.7%) and the lowest number of students were in the fifth and sixth grade (32.7%). The educational status of most students was good and 63.3% of them reported their GPA as very well. Moreover, 56.7% of mothers and 52.2% of fathers had diploma and post-diploma education. Generally, 30.6% of children experienced physical abuse, 56.4% of them experienced emotional-psychological abuse and 99.6% of them experienced negligence as a type of abuse (Table 1).

Table 1. Prevalence of physical, emotional-psychological, and negligence abuse in primary school students in Shahrekord

Degree of abuse	Absolute frequency of physical abuse	Absolute frequency of emotional-psychological abuse	Absolute frequency of negligence
Never	170 (69.4%)	107 (43.7%)	1 (0.4%)
Often	71 (29%)	135 (55.1%)	9 (3.7%)
Always	4 (1.6%)	3 (1.2%)	235 (95.9%)
Total prevalence	75 (30.6%)	138 (56.36%)	244 (99.6%)

Regarding type of physical abuse, the most common type of abuse was pinching (4.08%) and slapping (2.04%) and the rarest type was objects throwing (0.4%). The highest frequency in the dimension of emotional-psychological abuse was related to fighting and shouting leading to crying (4.08%) and comparing the child with family and friends (3.26%).

The lowest frequency was related to permanent swearing (0.81%). The results of negligence dimension indicated that the highest frequency was related to family's inattention to

the student's interest in clothing (4.89%), failure to provide educational needs such as pencils, books, and notebooks (4.08%). The lowest frequency in this dimension was related to usual lack of meal preparation when the child was hungry (2.04%).

The mean score of different dimensions of child abuse in students showed that the highest mean score belonged to the dimension of negligence (86/73±8/51), which means that the students were more faced with negligence and ignorance than anything else (Table 2).

Table 2. Mean scores of emotional-psychological, physical and negligence dimensions of child abuse in students participating in the study

Dimension	Mean ± SD
Emotional-Psychological	39.29±9.43
Physical	39.92±8.18
Negligence	86.73±8.51

Table 4 shows that there was only a significant relationship between the dimension of negligence and fathers' education (p=0.032), so that an increase in the fathers' level of

education led to more negligence. There was no significant relationship between other demographic variables and dimensions of child abuse (Table 3).

Table 3. The relationship between child abuse dimensions and demographic variables in students participating in the study

Variables	Age P-value	Sex P-value	Grade P-value	Father's Education P-value
Emotional-psychological dimension	0.39	0.82	0.89	0.44
Physical dimension	0.10	0.20	0.25	0.51
Negligence dimension	0.71	0.99	0.72	*0.03

*(P < 0.05)

The findings presented in Table 5 indicated that there was a significant relationship between having an experience of emotional-psychological abuse and having an experience of physical abuse ($p = 0.000$), i.e, students who had higher score in emotional-psychological dimension reported more

child abuse in physical dimension. Moreover, there was a significant inverse relationship between emotional-psychological and negligence dimensions ($p=0.000$), but no significant relationship was found between negligence and physical dimensions (Table 4).

Table 4. The relationship between child abuse dimensions in students participating in the study

Dimension	Emotional-Psychological Dimension	Physical Dimension	Negligence Dimension
Emotional-Psychological		**P <0.001 r= 0.465	**P <0.001 r= -0.243
Physical			P=0.223 r= -0.078
Negligence			

**($P < 0.001$)

Discussion

If a person is abused in his childhood and has experienced it throughout childhood, it provides the ground for formation of an unhealthy and uncompromising personality. Therefore, childhood is very important in shaping the personality of people in the later stages of their lives. Child abuse has a great impact on formation of people's experiences and these experiences play a role in their lives and personalities (Drakhshanpor F, 2014; Geeraert, Van den Noortgate, Grietens, & Onghena, 2004; Zielinski, 2009).

This study aimed to investigate the prevalence of child abuse among primary school students and the extent of child abuse and its dimensions in Iranian children. According to the results of the present study, the prevalence of child abuse in Iran regarding physical, negligence, and emotional-psychological abuse was 30.6%, 99.6%, and 56.3%, respectively, which is a relatively high prevalence compared to other societies. According to the study of Vizeh O (2008), 49.46% of children reported that they were emotionally abused and the most common forms were shouting and cursing, which were 66.3% and 62.5%, respectively.

In a study conducted in Vietnam, Nguyen revealed alarming statistics: 47.5% of respondents reported experiencing physical abuse, 39.5% faced emotional abuse, and 29.3% suffered from neglect

(HT., 2006). Disturbingly, negligence emerged as the most widespread issue, affecting an overwhelming 95.9% of participants. In contrast, research highlighted emotional abuse as the predominant concern, with rates of 7.3% and 52.1%, respectively (Malekshahi F, 2011) (Mikaeli, 2012). Physical abuse also stood out in their findings at 56.4%. These discrepancies underscore the critical need for awareness and intervention, as variations in study methodologies and definitions of abuse significantly shape our understanding of these issues.

In a study (R, 2009), it was reported that most children's fathers were unemployed and illiterate (31.1%), and most mothers, like fathers, were illiterate and only 31.2% of them had diplomas and post diploma education. It was in contrast to the present study in which most parents had a diploma and post diploma education and only 4.9% of them were illiterate.

In a study (Khoshabi K, 2007), there was a significant relationship between parents' education and the prevalence of physical and emotional abuse and negligence, and the incidence of abuse was higher in mothers and fathers with low education. Researchers (Tarkashvand F, 2013; Zargar F, 2006)(Sahbaei F, 2006) (Habibi S, 2017) showed in their studies that parents' level of education was inversely related to child abuse, as



if, lack of education led to the highest rate of child abuse. In a study (Tarkashvand F, 2013), it was indicated that there was a significant and inverse relationship between emotional abuse and father's education.

The results of a study in China also showed that types of abuse, especially physical abuse, are higher in parents with lower education. However, in this study, a significant direct relationship was found between father's education and negligence, so that when father's education increased, students were more neglected by their fathers (Leung P, 2008). This can manifest in various ways, such as emotional unavailability, lack of involvement in education, or failure to provide basic needs. Fathers with higher education may have more demanding jobs that require longer hours or greater commitment, potentially leading to less time spent with their children. Educated fathers might prioritize career advancement or personal development over family time, inadvertently neglecting their children's emotional and developmental needs.

According to the results of this study, most of the students had an acceptable educational status, which is inconsistent with previous findings showing that the GPA of most children who were abused was under 14 and only 31.9% of them had a GPA above 18 (R, 2009). Moreover, in the present study, no significant relationship was observed between GPA and child abuse. However, other research has reported a significant inverse correlation between GPA and general abuse (Ghasemi S R, 2014), indicating that as the level of abuse increased, the student's GPA decreased and vice versa.

In a study, there was a significant relationship between student gender and different areas of child abuse except for negligence (Khoshabi K, 2007). However, the results (Zargar F, 2006) and (Ghasemi S R, 2014) showed that there was no significant difference between girls and boys in terms of child abuse, i.e. there was no difference between the rate of child abuse in boys and girls in this study, which is consistent with the results of

the present study. In Iran, child abuse is different for girls and boys as if under normal circumstances, boys are beaten and girls are more often blamed (Drakhshanpor F, 2014).

Reviewing various studies in terms of the relationship between parents' jobs and dimensions of child abuse indicates that in the study of (Khoshabi K, 2007), there was a significance relationship between mothers' jobs and the prevalence of physical and emotional child abuse, while there was no significance relationship between fathers' jobs and the prevalence of physical abuse. Moreover, the findings of the study by (Malekshahi F, 2011) in Khorramabad, (Miri S, 2006) in Bam, and (Zahrabi Moghadam J, 2012) in Ahvaz showed a significant difference between emotional abuse and maternal employment. So that in families with working and educated mothers less emotional abuse was reported, but the study did not find a significant difference between parents' jobs and child abuse.

What is important in this regard is the detrimental effect of culture on child abuse. Unfortunately, in most Iranian families, it is believed that use of physical punishment is necessary in raising a child, and parents' attitudes toward child punishment are subject to cultural values and standards (Azam Azade & Asadpour, 2021). Some parents believe that punishing a child makes their children braver and stronger. On the other hand, adults and parents do not take children seriously and they do any kind of child abuse to raise the child for a reason that he is now a child and he will forget it in adulthood. However, childhood abuse has a long-term impact on all aspects of their health, development, identity and well-being and it can lead to mal-performance and high-risk behaviors in future (Drakhshanpor F, 2014).

One of the limitations of the study is that since the target group was primary students, there was a possibility of inaccuracy in answering the questions.

Although the questionnaires were anonymous, it was possible for abused children to answer

questions incorrectly because of shame, embarrassment and fear of their parents. Another limitation of this study was low social and economic levels (public schools) of the students, which might affect the results of the study.

Conclusion

Among various dimensions of child abuse, students participating in this study were more faced with negligence and ignorance than anything else. Considering the high prevalence of child abuse in students, it is necessary to take steps to reduce child abuse by educating parents on the correct pedagogical methods.

Moreover, due to the high prevalence of negligence in the present study, informing parents about this type of abuse might be useful. In fact, due to the high prevalence of child abuse and its adverse effects on human health, it is necessary to establish appropriate mechanisms to raise the level of knowledge of families and try to eliminate or limit false cultural norms.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors hereby declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Ethical considerations

The informed consent form was signed by the participants. Participation was considered voluntary and participants' status and other data written on the questionnaire were not disclosed to keep their data confidential. The Committee of Ethics in Human Research at Shahrekord University of Medical Sciences, Shahrekord, approved this research.

Code of ethics

IR.SKUMS.REC.1396.278

Authors' contributions

Conceptualization, M.L. and L.Gh.; Methodology, M.L., Z.K, F.F., and M.J.; Analysis, M.L. and Z.K.; Article Writing, Z.K. and Z.D.

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