

An Overview of Child Neglect and Abuse: Types, Causes, Impact and Prevention

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ABSTRACT This study aims at investigating the definitions, types and causes of child neglect and abuse, as well as their impacts on children, preventive efforts, and offers suggestions. Child neglect is the inhibition of a child's physical, psychological, moral or social development due to negligence on the part of the parents, caregivers or other adults to provide the basic essentials. Child abuse, in its broadest sense, is the child being intentionally exposed to circumstances, which result in the inhibition of his/her physical, sexual, economic or psychological development by parents, caregivers or other adults. Children who are exposed to neglect or abuse suffers from health problems, such as, psychological problems, developmental delay, depression, low self-esteem, aggressive behavior, poor academic and work performance, learning disorders, difficulties in peer relationships or criminal tendencies. In order to mitigate its impact, the causes of child neglect and abuse should be identified and preventive measures should be taken both governmentally and as a community.

INTRODUCTION

Child abuse and neglect coupled with its adverse effects on the individual have been revealed to be a major problem (Norman et al. 2012). Being exposed to such maltreatment in childhood will result in psychological health problems in adolescence and adulthood (Green et al. 2010; Gilbert et al. 2009; Gokce 2010). Healthy development of a child can be achieved through a healthy relationship with the parents (Gultekin and Canturk 2004). This relationship does not only affect the current behavior of the child, but it also plays a critical role in the determination of future behavior. At times, a parent-child relationship can develop negatively as a result of parental neglect and abuse (Aral et al. 2006; Campbell and Thompson 2015). As neglect and abuse of a child by an adult, such as the mother, father or caregiver, inhibits and limits child development, such behavior is also considered wrong or detrimental by social rules and professionals. Such actions or inactions, physically, psycho-

logically, sexually or socially harm the child, as well as, threatens his/her wellbeing and safety (Taner and Gokler 2004; Paul and Eckenrode 2015; Svensson et al. 2015).

Maltreatment towards children has a heavy cost on society, as it causes lifelong social and health problems, among which arise several adverse outcomes, such as psychological problems, developmental delay, posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, low self-esteem, aggressive behavior, and health problems, such as pulmonary, hepatic and cardiovascular diseases, poor academic and work performance, learning disorders, difficulties in peer relationships and criminal tendencies (McCloskey and Walker 2000; Huth-Bocks et al. 2001; Skopp et al. 2005; Perry et al 2007; Teicher et al. 2006).

The present study aimed at investigating the types, causes, impacts of child neglect and abuse, as well as making useful recommendations for its prevention.

Definition and Types of Neglect and Abuse

According to the definition stated by the World Health Organization (WHO) in the year 1985, an intended or unintended act by an adult, society or country, which adversely affects a child's health, physical growth, or psychosocial development, is considered as child abuse. In other words, abuse is defined as intentionally

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using physical force directly, or by threat against oneself, another person, a group or a society in a way that ends or might probably lead to injury, death, psychological trauma, developmental disorder or loss. Abuse does not only include physical conducts, but also attitudes and behaviors that could harm children's sexual and emotional health and limit their development (Anonymous 2003).

With respect to the type of treatment a child is subjected to, the causes of these treatments and their impacts on the child, child abuse is categorized as physical, sexual, economic or emotional abuse, whereas, child neglect is categorized as physical or emotional neglect (Taner and Gokler 2004). These different forms of abuse and neglect has become a public health issue affecting the society, social institutions and organizations, legal systems, educational systems and businesses, as well as, families (Oral et al. 2001; Hedin 2000).

Physical abuse is using physical aggression as a means of threatening, intimidation and discipline. Hitting with an object, kicking, punching, slapping, pushing and shaking a person are all forms of physical abuse. Physical abuse is the easiest type of abuse to define and identify (Christien 2015; Beitchman et al. 1992).

Sexual abuse is using sexual activity as a means of threatening, intimidation and control. Sexual abuse can be physical or verbal. Exposing a child to sexual language, rape with or without consent, using a child in pornography or for prostitution, displaying pornographic materials, indecent exposure, physical contact with a child's genitals, and inducement or coercion of a child to touch an adult's genitals are all considered as sexual abuse (Beitchman et al. 1992; Black et al. 2011).

Economic abuse is depriving a person of the financial means required to maintain or sustain his/her life. Forcing a child into labor and seizing his/her earnings due to the financial difficulties the family experiences, in consequence of having a high number of children, urban migration or any other reason is considered as economic abuse (Gokce 2010).

Emotional abuse refers to the behaviors of adults surrounding the child that damages the child's personality or inhibits emotional development of the child through non-physical, but severe punishment or threats (Taner and Gokler 2004).

Physical neglect is the refusal or failure on the part of an adult, such as the parents or caregivers to fulfill the duty of providing food, accommodation, clothing, hygiene, play, education, safety and medical care for the child (DePanfilis and Dubowitz 2003).

Emotional neglect refers to the non-provision of adequate emotional support, lack of attention and love, and the child being exposed to violence. Most forms of physical and sexual abuse involve emotional abuse or neglect (Sahiner et al. 2001).

Causing conscious and intentional harm to a child's physical and emotional health is defined as active neglect, whereas child neglect due to causes, such as lack of information, means or care is referred to as passive neglect. Relative to physically abused children, neglected children have more severe, cognitive and academic deficits, social withdrawal and limited peer interactions, and internalizing problems (Kathryn and David 2002).

Effects of Neglect and Abuse on the Child

In this country and in the world at large, millions of children are exposed to one or more forms of domestic neglect or abuse (Spilsbury et al. 2007). A summary of the Report of the Independent Expert for the United Nations Study on Violence against Children (2008) reveals that annually, 150 million girls and 73 million boys experience rape or other forms of sexual violence throughout the world, and that perpetrators are usually family members of the children. The report stated that annually, more than fifty thousand children fall victim to murder, approximately one or two million children were hospitalized for physical injuries due to violence, whereas only sixteen countries prohibited violence against children, thereby, leaving the vast majority of the children in the world deprived of adequate legal protection (Waterston and Mok 2008).

In their study, Goddard and Hiller (1993) revealed that fifty-five percent of the children were subjected to physical abuse, forty percent of the children experienced sexual abuse, and the majority of these children were placed under protection. McGuigan and Pratt (2001) emphasized that the majority of children aged between six months and five years old were subjected to emotional violence by their parents.

Physical abuse involves physical violence, such as hitting with the hand or an object, pushing, shaking, burning or biting, directed towards the child by the parents or an adult responsible for the child's care (Yucel 1993). Physically abused children experience various undesired consequences, ranging from soft tissue injuries to deaths with unknown causes. Loss of memory, growth retardation, speech delay, social withdrawal, limited friends and peer relationships, academic failure and suicidal tendencies, as well as, interpersonal, cognitive, emotional and behavioral problems, are observed in these children. Children who are subjects of continual physical abuse constantly fear their parents, can easily lie to avoid a beating, and can be overly aggressive or overly withdrawn and diffident shying away from physical contact and proximity of an adult (Lewis 1992; Livingston 1987). In addition, impairment in cognitive skills and academic failure is frequently observed in these children (Kaplan et al. 1999; Gokler 2002). Furthermore, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts are more common in physically abused children (Tackett 2002).

Sexual abuse is a form of child abuse, in which an adult uses a child as a means to satisfy his/her sexual needs and desires (Green 1996). According to the National sexual violence resource center report (2015), one in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused before they turn 18 years. 12.3 percent of women and 27.8 percent of men were age 10 or younger at the time of their first rape or victimization (Black et al. 2011).

Sexual abuse was reported to be more frequent in families with divorced parents, domestic violence, alcohol and substance use, but can be experienced at any socioeconomic level (Hedin 2000). Most of the time, there is no physical indication of sexual abuse. However, in some cases, a medical examination can reveal certain indications. In sexually abused children, symptoms include abnormal or complete lack of interest in sexual activities, sleep disorders or nightmares, phobias, bedwetting, depression or estrangement from family members or friends, behavioral problems, attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder, lack of appetite and weight loss, being frequently ill, believing their bodies are dirty or there is something wrong with their genitals, not wanting to attend school, abnormal misbehavior and disobedience, overly aggres-

sive behavior, and the avoidance of drawings or games expressive of sexual abuse (Green 1996). Sexually abused children experience higher rates of depression and significantly low self-esteem. Therefore, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts in sexually abused children are more frequently observed with increasing age (Livingston 1987). Sexually abused individuals either avoid establishing relationships or have a tendency to show excessive closeness and have numerous, overly demanding and controlling relationships. Both styles are dysfunctional and are likely to result in loneliness (Tackett 2002).

The child is forced to quit school due to economic difficulties the family faces, and to find employment in order to survive in the time of economic poverty and to support his/her family in their struggle against poverty. The environment and type of work is generally, physically, and mentally unsuitable for children and endangers their physical and psychological wellbeing. Children are deprived of their childhood and their right to play and receive education, as well as, have health problems due to economic abuse and unhealthy working conditions (Yagci 2006).

Emotionally neglected and abused children are exposed to attitudes and behaviors that have negative impacts or are deprived of the attention, love and care they need, and therefore, they are psychologically traumatized according to social and scientific standards (Kara et al. 2004). Kent and Waller (1998) revealed that children's anxiety and depression levels were adversely affected by emotional abuse. In their studies investigating emotional abuse in adolescents, Mullen et al. (1996) and Savi (1999) emphasized that a sense of self in adolescents was negatively affected with increasing degrees of emotional abuse. Children, who experience emotional neglect and abuse become estranged from their families, are stressful, feel worthless, develop a dependent personality, and display maladjusted and aggressive behavior. These children have mixed emotions for their parents, such as having the feeling of love and hatred simultaneously, fear of abandonment, fear of expressing emotions, fear of injury, feeling angry for the violence and disorder in their lives, depression, feeling helpless and powerless, and feeling ashamed of domestic incidents. Ozturk (2007) reported that emotional abuse adversely affected children's personality development. Traumas resulting from emotional neglect and abuse are as

harmful as those of physical abuse, yet their symptoms cannot be easily observed (Polat 2002; Jain 1999).

Recent studies have revealed the negative impacts of child neglect on children. Research on juvenile delinquency reported higher criminal tendencies in children neglected by their families. According to the results of the review article by Smith and Walters (1987) on fathers and their role in the family, fathers contribute more to delinquency in male children than the mothers (Ulugtekin 1991). Furthermore, neglected children also experience difficulties with respect to food, accommodation, clothing, hygiene, play, education, safety and medical care.

Causes of Neglect and Abuse

Causes of neglect and abuse can be categorized into socioeconomic factors, characteristics of the perpetrator, and characteristics of the child (Bilge 2006).

Socioeconomic Factors: Family members experiencing financial difficulties can project their troubles on their relationships with each other. Although, neglect and abuse is considered to be more frequent in low socioeconomic level families, while the upper socioeconomic level families conceal such incidents (Bilge 2006). Low-income families encourage, and even force their children to work at a young age. Children are employed to engage in heavy labor, which is physically and mentally unsuitable for them or are forced into participating in illegal activities, such as begging, theft or prostitution, whereas middle and upper economic level families exhibit attitudes, which are emotionally traumatic for the child, such as expressing disappointment or accusation.

Characteristics of the Perpetrator: It can be said that characteristics, such as young age, low level of education, being a victim of neglect and abuse in childhood, aggressive personality, addiction to alcohol, medication or drugs, unemployment, underdeveloped sense of responsibility and justice, immature personality and having a personality disorder can cause the parents or the caregiver to commit child neglect and abuse. Kutlu et al. (2007) reported that mothers who themselves were subjected to punishment as they were growing up, also considered punishment to be a useful method, and therefore, punished their children more often.

Characteristics of the Neglected and Abused Child: Children with mental or physical disabilities, hyperactivity or adjustment disorders, or deadly or chronic diseases are frequent subjects of neglect and abuse. Attitudes towards unwanted or illegitimate children are generally negative and these children are deprived of any form of social status or right. In addition, parents have very high expectations of their first-born children, such as a high level behavior incongruous to their ages and high academic achievement (Bilge 2006).

While the neglect and abuse of babies and preschool children is more frequent, this rate decreases with age. With respect to gender, it can be said that female children are more frequently subjects of neglect and abuse than male children (Bilir 1991; Browne 1991).

Preventing Child Neglect and Abuse

Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child currently ratified by almost every country, pertains to children's right to protection from neglect and abuse (Gokler 2002). For a physically and psychologically healthy generation, the issue of neglect and abuse should be tackled from a social level and solutions should be proposed as a society (Bildik 2002; Turhan et al. 2006).

All members of different professions involved either directly or indirectly with children, should work in harmony to ensure successful prevention, intervention and supervision. In Australia, a system consisting of physicians, nurses, police officers, social workers, judges, probation officers, teachers and members of other professions employed in child protection or responsible for abused children, works in harmony for the protection and care of traumatized children and children at risk. Coordination eliminates discrepancies in practices and ensures effective implementation. All practices throughout the country should be non-conflicting. Coordination is critical for the effective and systematic implementation of all practices. Furthermore, universities, relevant public institutions and implementation areas, should work in harmony in the needs analysis and in the preparation of programs and practices, as well as in research. The significance and necessity of coordination in making effective policies should be emphasized (Mathias et al. 1995).

Children who are victims of abuse suffer from its effects for the rest of their lives. While the family environment is considered to be a place where children feel the safest, it is also where they are prone to a higher risk. Therefore, society, families and teachers should be informed about child discipline and abuse. For example, parents, teacher or members of different professions, providing services in cases of sexual abuse, should be informed through meetings or seminars, in order to educate children on how to protect themselves when faced with sexual abuse and how to say “no” (Ziyalar 1999).

Fighting against neglect and abuse is the responsibility of each and every member of the society. Particularly, health professionals, social workers, as well as psychological counseling and guidance experts, should be more aware of the issue. Creating more awareness among members of these professions, who should be supported in their efforts to provide counseling services to neglected or abused children, is integral in identifying families more disposed to commit child neglect and abuse (Bildik 2002; Keskin and Cam 2005).

Stress in the family is one of the causes of child neglect and abuse. Solutions for coping with family stress can be better and easily proposed after identifying whether the stress is economic or social. Training activities for neglect and abuse prevention involve the identification of people at risk, provision of counseling and protective services, in addition to conflict and stress management training (Bildik 2002; Keskin and Cam 2005).

Children who are victims of abuse experience losses in various domains. The most severe and irreparable is the loss of childhood. Loss of self-confidence, and desperation, severely affect the lives of these children. They suffer from chronic depression and anxiety. Therefore, a comprehensive posttraumatic program must be developed for both the child and the family (Kaya et al. 2004). Sustainability of parent training programs for families can be revised by making necessary adjustments. Participation of families at all levels and with varying needs, should be taken into account. Families might lack the knowledge and skills to conduct a needs analysis. Parent training programs should focus on helping parents recognize their abilities and incompetency. Reluctance of families to participate in the program resulting from the administration of the same

program to families, with various levels of knowledge and needs, can be alleviated through these adjustments (Olds et al. 1997).

DISCUSSION

Any type of neglect and abuse towards children will result in several mental health problems in an individual’s life (Campbell and Thompson 2015). A healthy relationship among the members of the family does not only affect the current behavior of the child, but also shapes the purpose of his/her future behavior (Middlebrooks and Audage 2008). Child neglect and abuse can be physical, psychological or sexual, all of which threatens his/her welfare (Paul and Eckenrode 2015; Svensson et al. 2015).

There are several reports written to expose the home maltreatment of children from any country and at any age. Adults who were maltreated as children have poor health outcomes, and there is accumulating evidence that early adverse childhood experiences are strong contributors to many adult diseases (Norman et al. 2012; Gilbert et al. 2009). According to Christen (2015), retrospective and prospective studies published in recent years have identified the strong associations that exist between cumulative traumatic childhood events, including maltreatment, family dysfunction, and social isolation, adult physical and mental health disease. Few studies, however, have specifically examined the association between a child’s physical abuse and the child and an adult’s health outcomes (Paul and Eckenrode 2015).

Victims of abuse in childhood are at risk of developing a variety of behavioral problems, including conduct disorders, physically aggressive behaviors, depression, poor academic performance, and decreased cognitive functioning (Ferguson et al. 2008; Fuchs 2015). There is emerging recognition that adverse childhood experiences, influence biological adaptations, like the immune system function (Johnson 2013).

The recognition that social and environmental exposures early in life are associated with biological changes that influence the health of individuals across generations, necessitates the resolve that future efforts at improving the health of the population require interventions that limit the exposure to adverse childhood experience and reduce toxic stress in young children (Garner and Shonkoff 2012).

Although there are severe consequences of maltreatment in childhood, several acts should be done in order to prevent it. The reasons behind any kind of maltreatment should be investigated and necessary precautions must be taken, which is an important responsibility of the community.

CONCLUSION

In view of the impacts of child neglect and abuse, it is apparent that preventive measures should be taken. Accordingly, the causes of neglect and abuse, as well as the children and families at risk can be identified, and the families can be instructed through various preventive programs. If a lack of education is determined to be one of the causes of neglect and abuse in families at risk, parents' training programs can be implemented, where the magnitude of physical and psychological harm resulting from neglect and abuse can be explained to the families, and they can be informed as to how they should behave toward children. Parents committing neglect and abuse due to psychological problems can be medically treated. Government support can be increased in case of economic difficulties. School programs for children can be developed to protect them from neglect and abuse. Centers where neglected and abused children can receive all the necessary love and support can be established. For support, prevention and supervision, with regard to child neglect and abuse, comprehensive and coordinated programs should be developed in consideration of the short and long term effects of child neglect and abuse.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Countries should declare comprehensive reports on the status of child maltreatment by means of standardized criteria, and should participate in standardized surveys conducted by the WHO and other bodies of the United Nations, in order to find possible solutions to the issue.

Governments should prepare national action plans with regard to the prevention of child maltreatment. It should not involve only child neglect and abuse, but generally, it should also take into consideration violence, education, justice and the rights of children.

The action plan should involve positive parenting for both male and female caregivers, school-based programs to train children to distinguish between signs of abuse or other types of maltreatment, training of professionals, such as teachers in early recognition and giving appropriate responses to maltreatment, to protect children from further hurt.

FOR FUTURE STUDIES

From a psychological point of view, the major causes of child neglect and abuse can be investigated and possible solutions can be applied in order to prevent it.

There might be studies inspecting the issue from the perspective of children's rights. Interrelating the rights of children with child maltreatment will give deep information to researchers.

There may be investigated studies on maltreatment, not only from the side of the family, but also from other contexts, such as juvenile halls or campuses.

LIMITATIONS

This study aims to make a contribution to the literature on child neglect and abuse, but it has some limitations. The study is a descriptive one, which defines and exemplifies maltreatment, and looks for possible ways to prevent child neglect and abuse. This can be considered as an overview of the issue, but with this form, the article may be beneficial for academic staff, teachers, counselors, psychologists, and researchers.

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