



Original Article

## Frequency of child abuse and its complications in children referred to the social emergency department

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** Child abuse is considered a significant public health problem that its different consequences can affect victim lifespan. This study was conducted to determine the frequency of child abuse in children referred to Kashan Social Emergency.

**Materials and Methods:** This cross-sectional study was conducted by referring to child abuse records of Kashan Social Emergency during 2006 to 2016. Data were analyzed with SPSS-16 and Fisher Exact and Chi-square tests.

**Results:** The mean age of cases was  $8.06 \pm 4.28$  years. Among cases 192 (71.6%) were neglect, 95 (35.4%) experienced emotional, 87 (32.5%) physical, and 12 (4.5%) experienced sexual abuse. Among abused children, anxiety was reported as the most common complication of psychological abuse (12.3%). Academic failure and malnutrition were reported as the most common complications of neglect abuse. In the case of physical abuse, the most common complications were bruising, swelling, injury, and burns. Sexual promiscuity was a complication of sexual abuse. The complications of emotional and psychological abuse significantly correlated with the sex. The sexual and physical abuse and neglect complications had no significant correlation with sex. There are statistical differences between sex, physical neglect ( $P=0.04$ ) and physical abuse ( $P=0.001$ ).

**Conclusion:** It seems that neglect abuse is the most common child abuse among the cases referred to social emergency. The boys are more at risk of physical neglect and physical abuse.

**Keywords:** Child abuse, Complications, Social emergency

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## Introduction

Child abuse is the problem of millions of children and families, a phenomenon with a long history that can occur in any society (1). Child abuse has considerable consequences affecting children of any age, regardless of race, social rank, or religion (2). It consists of any physical harm, neglecting behavior, or violence towards a person under 18 years old, by a parent or any person in charge of their welfare and comfort, in a way that endangers the child's health welfare (3).

According to the latest reports in the United States, there are two million child maltreatment cases and 1200 to 1500 children killed by their parents each year (4). In 2013, over 100 cases of child abuse, some leading to death were reported by the Iranian society of child rights protection (5).

According to the child and adolescent maltreatment study by Euser in 2013, over 58% of the adolescent and 68% of the young individuals in the Netherlands have been the victim of at least one type of child abuse in their life. Out of 2261 cases of child abuse confirmed by child protective services, 3% sexual abuse, 11% physical abuse, 11% psychological abuse, 14% physical neglect, 10% academic neglect, 52% family violence, and 22% as other types of maltreatment were reported (6). In the study by Koji in 2015 in Suriname, it was shown that over 86% of the young and 95% of the adolescent have at least once been the subject of child abuse in the past (7).

In the study by Schilling in 2016 in Germany, it was shown that at least one percent of children are victims of child abuse each year (8). According to the study by Simsek in 2017, in Turkey, 51.4% of students have experienced at least one type of child abuse, consisting of 23.1% of physical abuse, 40.5% emotional abuse, and 11% of sexual abuse (9).

In Iran, Malekshahi showed that 5.4% of elementary students experienced constant abuse. The most common form of physical abuse being slapping, 7.3% have been emotionally abused, and 5.5% have experienced neglect (1). Another study in Iran, reported that a most common abuse is emotionally (91.6%) (10). Studies

conducted by Tavakkol and Hadianfard showed high prevalence of child abuse. Based on the results of a study by Hadianfar on ADHD children, almost 60% of the cases reported at least one type of neglect, and 35% of the cases had experienced psychological abuse (11,12).

Since child abuse and its significant influence on a child's mental health, cognitive-emotional development, and personality are being widely neglected in society, this study aimed to assess the prevalence and types of child abuse in children referred to social emergency of Kashan city. The findings can motivate the specialists trying to provide supportive and preventive programs in this field.

## Materials and Methods

This descriptive study approved by vice chancellor of Kashan University of Medical Sciences. All cases of child abuse referred to Kashan social emergency center during 2006 to 2016. All the cases of child abuse that were available for follow up by having complete contact information were included in this study, and the cases not available for follow up due to incomplete contact information, or the family is out of reach were excluded.

Child abuse complications were assessed by referring the cases to the family clinic for medical assessment, social emergency investigations about the children's conditions, and reports collected from schools about their educational status. The data regarding age and gender of the cases, the history of physical, psychological, sexual, and emotional abuse, also neglect in the fields of physical, medical, emotional, and academic, the data about their parents, and the abuse complications were collected.

Data was collected after obtaining informed written consent from the social emergency manager and observing ethical considerations while maintaining confidentiality.

The data were analyzed using SPSS software, Chi-square, and Fischer exact tests.

## Results

Totally, 286 cases were included. The children's mean age was  $8.06 \pm 4.28$  years (girls:  $8.49 \pm 0.06$  years, boys:  $7.62 \pm 4.47$  years). Classified by the type of abuse, 192 cases (71.6%) of neglect, 95

cases (35.4%) of psychological abuse, 87 cases (32.5%) of physical abuse, and 12 cases (4.5%) of sexual abuse were reported.

Among the 286 cases, 33 cases of anxiety (12.3%), five cases of low self-esteem (1.9%), four cases of depression (1.5%), two cases of substance abuse (0.7%), and 89 cases of a mixture of multiple complications (33.2%), were reported as the most common complications of psychological abuse.

Academic failure in 81 cases (30.2%) and malnutrition in 12 cases (4.5%) were reported as the most common complications of neglect, and 27 cases (10.1%) were reported with a mixture of both.

Nine cases of bruising and swelling (3.4%) and five cases of each injury and burn were the most frequent physical abuse complications. Thirty-

eight cases had a mixture of bruising, injury, burn, bone fracture, and disability.

Out of the four cases with sexual complications, three cases (75%) had sexual promiscuity, and one case (25%) was ignorant toward moral values.

Substance addiction and divorce were the most common problems among the victims' families.

A significant correlation was found between physical abuse and the variable of the children's sex, the boys being 1.67 times more prone to physical abuse than girls ( $P=0.04$ ).

There was no significant correlation between the sex variable and psychological abuse and neglect (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Distribution of child abuse types in children referred to Kashan social emergency

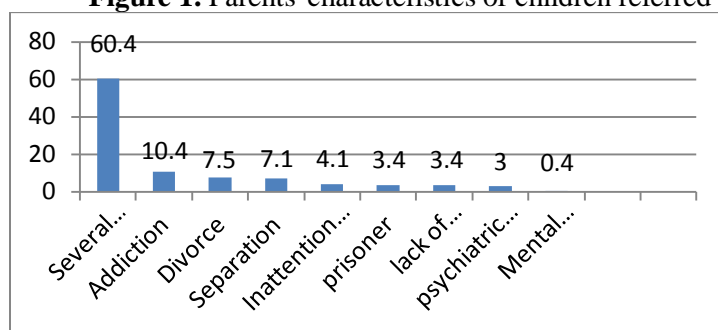
Gender Child abuse type	Girl		Boy		P	OR	CI	
	N	%	N	%				
Physical								
Yes	42	23.7	45	34.1	0.042	1.67	1.01	2.75
No	94	76.3	87	65.9				
Emotional								
Yes	47	65.4	48	36.4	0.75	1.08	0.65	1.78
No	89	65.4	84	63.6				
Physical neglect								
Yes	99	97.1	93	70.5	0.001	13.8	4.1	46.3
No	3	2.9	39	29.5				
Medical neglect								
Yes	99	72.8	91	68.9	0.487	1.20	0.71	2.04
No	37	27.2	41	31.1				
Educational neglect								
Yes	32	23.5	26	19.7	0.446	1.25	0.7	2.24
No	104	76.5	106	80.3				
Emotional neglect								
Yes	45	33.1	40	30.3	0.624	1.13	0.67	1.90
No	91	66.9	92	69.7				
Sexual abuse								
Yes	5	3.7	7	5.3	0.52	1.46	0.45	4.74
No	131	96.3	125	94.7				

The complications of emotional and psychological abuse significantly correlated with the sex variable. The boys are having 3.44 times more emotional complications.

The sexual and physical abuse and neglect complications had no significant correlation with sex (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Distribution of child abuse complications in children referred to Kashan social emergency

Gender Complications	Boy		Girl		P	OR	CI	
	N	%	N	%				
Physical	21.3	29	24.3	32	0.56	1.18	0.66	2.09
	78.7	107	75.7	100				
Emotional	18.4	25	43.7	31	0.001	3.44	1.81	6.51
	81.6	111	56.3	40				
psychological	57.4	78	49.2	65	0.18	1.38	0.85	2.24
	42.6	58	50.8	67				
Neglect	50	68	41.7	55	0.17	1.4	0.86	2.26
	50	68	58.3	77				
Sexual	1.5	2	1.47	2	1	1.03	1.43	7.42
	98.5	130	98.5	134				
Behavioral	5.9	8	5.3	7	0.83	1.11	0.39	3.17
	94.1	128	94.7	125				

**Figure 1.** Parents' characteristics of children referred to the social emergency in Kashan city

## Discussion

According to this study, different types of abuse could be found in almost all cases referred to as a social emergency, neglect being the most common type of abuse, followed by emotional and psychological abuse. Also, Witt's study in Germany showed that neglect to be the most common type of child abuse (13).

The studies by Miri, Zahrabi Moghaddam, Salmani, and Mohammadkhani, in different regions of Iran, showed psychological and physical abuse to be the most frequent types of abuse (5,14-16), and according to the studies by Simsek and Schilling in Turkey and Germany, emotional and physical abuse are the most frequent types of abuse (8,9). The results of the mentioned studies are not in concordance with this study.

According to researchers like Schnitzer, Gulino, and Yuan, some reasons affect the accuracy and reliability of the data about neglect, making the statistics on its victims to be wrongly reported less than the actual amount, reasons like diverse definitions of child abuse and means of

assessing it, diverse systems of assessing the cause of child mortality, wrong methods of determining the cause of child mortality that report an unknown or accidental cause for the death, whereas, with thorough investigations, a history of neglect or abuse can be found as a cause, and eventually a fault in collaboration and coordination among the organizations in charge of the matter (17).

In 2015, neglect, alone or combined with other types of mistreatment was reported as the cause of 72.9% of child mortality, whereas 43% of deaths were due to physical abuse. Medical neglect, alone or other types of mistreatment had caused 7.3% of child mortality (18). In this study, the most frequent neglect types were physical and medical, which is in concordance with Miri, Khooshabi, Jones, and McCurdy (5,19,20). Stoltenberg has reported physical neglect of high prevalence (21). In another study in the United States, physical and psychological abuse has been reported as the most frequent abuse type (22). The study by Andirouyan, in discordance with this study, has reported a

higher prevalence of emotional neglect (23). The difference between the results in studies regarding neglect can result from the parents' different outlooks on fulfilling their basic needs.

In this study, the most common complications of neglect were academic failure and malnutrition. The study by Kendall-Tackett, by this study, showed that the children that were the subject of neglect had a lower academic function and more disciplinary problems compared to their peers (24). Anxiety was the most common complication of psychological abuse in the present study. Silverman reported the victims of abuse to develop depression and anxiety later in life (25). McMillan et al. also showed that these children tend to show more psychiatric symptoms and suicidal behaviors in the future (26).

These studies show that abused children can be found in any society, only with different complications, resulting from different behavioral norms and outlooks, different levels of education, and different parenting faults in different societies.

Substance addiction was a common problem in the victims' families, and divorce was the most common among them. In the study by Khooshabi, divorce had the most correlation with child abuse (19).

In 2001, Black et al. stated that the parents' social problems, substance addiction, for instance, can increase the risk of child abuse (27).

According to Taylor's studies in 2005 and Edore in 2012, antisocial behaviors, addiction, and somatoform disorders in parents can increase child abuse among families (28,29).

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In this study, sexual abuse had the least frequency, while given the statistics on sexual abuse, the total amount seems to be more than what was reported in this study. Perhaps a reason for this could be concealing this type of abuse by the families afraid of its social consequences. One of the limitations of this study was the retrospective nature, which is associated with various biases like the data collection and the recall bias. Also, given that only the cases referred to the social emergency were assessed in this study, we were ignorant of the real prevalence of child abuse. Nevertheless, this study refers to child abuse in Kashan city. Specialists can help to prevent this phenomenon by holding educational workshops across the city and in schools, to increase the general knowledge on the excellent parenting methods, and on different types of child abuse and its various complications.

### Conclusion

According to the results of this study, child abuse, especially the neglect type, was very common among the cases referred to social emergency, and since physical neglect and abuse was more common among boys, it seems that boys are more prone to these types of abuse.

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