

Child Abuse in the Family: An Analytical Study

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ABSTRACT

The prevalence of child abuse in the world is 47 per 1000. According to the Child Protective Service agency (CPS) more than 3 million children were abused in the USA in 1998. There was 1.7% increase in comparison with 1996. The prevalence of child abuse in the USA is 15 per 1000. A cross-sectional study was conducted in order to determine the frequency, and influential factors on child abuse among families in Tehran. A sample of 420 students was selected from secondary school girls in Tehran in 1999. A questionnaire was used for data collection, and the collected data were analysed through statistical tests such as χ^2 and other forms of descriptive tests. The findings of research showed that in terms of abnormal (unexpectedly bad) behaviour, 28% of the sample were faced quarrelsome and bitted by their fathers. The mothers' reactions for similar behaviour were more or less the same: 34.9% quarrelsome and 7% biting. Child abuse, physically and emotionally, has had significant relation with socioeconomic status of families as well as having interaction with mentally ill or addicted person(s) among families. Mothers' employment, religious beliefs, and parents' educational attainments also demonstrated significant relations with child abuse. A statistically significant relationship has also been found between mothers' employment, addicted or mentally ill person among family members, and doubtful child sexual abuse. To prevent child abuse the following actions should be taken:

Education of parents about children rights and how to treat their children.

Establishment of centers to protect the children at risk.

Education of young couples to take more responsibility of having children.

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INTRODUCTION

More than three million children (3,295,000) were abused in the USA in 1997, which indicates a 1.7% increase compared with the previous year (1996). According to N.A.S.I.C, 15 per 1000 American children were abused in 1997. The types of abuse were physical abuse 22%, sexual abuse 8%, neglect 54%, emotional abuse 4%, and other types of abuse 12%. Today 47 per 1000 children are reportedly the victims of child abuse. In spite of lack of reliable information about deaths resulting from child abuse, 1185 children died as a consequence of child abuse and child neglect (4). The rate of the reporting of child abuse by people indicates the increase of 41% in 1997. 1,054,000 children were recognized as true cases of child abuse in the same year. About 84320 new cases of child abuse were accepted by setting, includes 8% of the total cases of child abuse.

According to statistical reports, more than three children die every day due to abuse and neglect. Younger children are more exposed to this type of death. Between 1995 and 1997, 78% and 38% of the children who died in this way were under 5 and under 1, respectively. 44% of deaths resulted from child neglect, 51% from physical torture and 5% from both child-neglect and physical abuse (punishment) by parents (8). Generally, any kind of behaviour that causes child's physical and emotional annoyance is called child abuse. Child abuse

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happen plenty of times, done by those who have the legal responsibility of the child such as father, mother, foster parents, baby sitter, and so on. At the first glance it seems that Islamic Republic of Iran, due to strict cultural and religious regulations which support and protect human rights, may slightly face a problem such as child abuse or child neglect. But the problem does exist (more or less), mainly because of a young population (51.4% under 19 and 39.5% under 15).

Socio-economic and demographic characteristics of our society (Iran) are alarming. According to some reports, in Iran child abuse is practiced but they not very clear. In the last three years only 6 cases of child abuse have been registered in the legal Medical Center.

This study focuses on frequency of child abuse among families and intends to analyze its relationship with socio-economic and demographic factors and contexts.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

420 lower secondary school girls from Tehran were selected by sequential method in 1997- 98 as the study sample. Initially Tehran was divided into 5 geographical areas, namely North,

South, East, West, and Central part. From each area, 2 schools and from each school, an equal number of students were selected randomly. A questionnaire was used for data collection. The Data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. The dependent variable in this study was "child abuse", and age, sex, family size, education and occupation of parents, addiction of family members, social interaction, religious beliefs, and residential area as of Tehran were considered as independent variables.

RESULTS

Findings demonstrate that 58.8% of the sample mothers were illiterate (or at a very primary schooling level), and 41.2% had high school or tertiary level education. The corresponding figures were 45.9% and 54.1% for the fathers' respectively. The majority of the mothers (83.1%) were housewives. The fathers of the students were mainly employed as businessmen (37.9%), government employees (24.5%), and workers (10.2%). Socio-economic situation of the sample was described as satisfactory by most of the students. 71.2% of the study population lived in their own houses, but 19.2% of them were tenants. The family size of 29.2% of the students was 1-3, of 51.7% was 4-5, and of 19% was 6 or more. About 7% of the parents of the sample had died or divorced, and 7.4% described their own family atmosphere as unpleasant or very unpleasant.

Findings also revealed that there are significant relationships between child abuse of children and variables such as parental attainments, economic status of family, presence of addicted or mentally ill person among family members, and families social interactions. X^2 test demonstrated no significant relationship between emotional abuse of children and other variables such as age and occupation of parents, family size, birth order, residential area, and religious beliefs of families (Table 3).

A significant relationship was observed between physical child abuse and variables such as mothers' occupation, economic status of the family, having an addicted or mentally ill person among family members, social interactions and religious beliefs of family. But no significant relationship was observed between physical child abuse and the rest of the variables (Table 3).

Statistical analysis also showed a significant relationship between mothers' occupation, having an addicted or mentally ill person in family, and possible sexual abuse.

DISCUSSION

In this study a significant relationship between parents' age and child abuse was not observed. This is not consistent with findings of other investigation. This inconsistency is explained by the age structure of the parents of our study population. The

parents in this study were not young (under 20), but in other studies they were young (2).

Families facing child abuse and child neglect are characterized by low level education of parents (9). In the present study also a significant relationship between parents' educational attainments and emotional child abuse was observed. Although a significant relationship between educational attainments of parents and possible doubtful physical and sexual abuse of children was not been observed in this study, the relationship was quite significant in a study which was conducted in Khorram Abad (a south west city in Iran).

According to many studies the parents' misbehaviour is mainly due to environmental stressors such as occupation, poverty, unemployment and so on (10). A significant relationship was found between fathers' occupation and child's (physical, emotional, sexual) abuse. No such relationship was observed between mothers' occupation and child emotional abuse; rather, such a relationship existed between mothers' occupation and sexual, and doubtful sexual abuse of children, particularly among housewives mothers. In fact it was more frequent among housewives (7). There is a similarity between findings of these two studies. Economic status of family strongly related to child physical and emotional abuse.

Although child abuse and misbehaviour can be found among all types of families and social classes(8) with different socio-economic status, it is more practised in lower social classes, as it is shown in the present study. This study revealed that the frequency of child abuse among families with no strong religious beliefs is higher, but there was no significant relation between religious status of family and emotional, and doubtful sexual abuse of children (6).

There is more evidence about the relationship between social isolation/interaction and child abuse or child neglect. Studies have pointed out that among families with no considerable social relations and interactions, the rates of child abuse are higher (11). The present study also revealed a relationship between physical and emotional abuse of the child with social

relations of families. The Khorram Abad study also demonstrated a significant relation between these two variables. Some studies have stressed on the relationship between sadist parents and family size. A significant relation between "physical and emotional child abuse" and "family size" has been reported(6). But in the present study, because of limited family size of the study population no significant relationship between family size and types of child abuse was observed (7).

Although the first or second child have reportedly been the victims of child abuse among families (according to literature), and despite the fact that other studies have reported a significant relationship between birth order and child abuse experience (11), in this study no significant relation was demonstrated between these variables.

The personality characteristics of sadist parents-lack of self-esteem, inability insympathy, or being mentally ill-are known as very dominant factors with regard to child abuse. In a study, a significant relationship between physical and emotional child abuse and having a mentally ill person among family members was observed. The present study also has emphasized on a significant relationship between these two variables and doubtful sexual abuse of children as well.

Social isolation and addiction are two main factors the family system (1). These two factors in relation to personality characteristics of the parents, result in child abuse (1). The Khorram Abad study also has shown such a relationship. In the present study a significant relationship between having an addicted person among family members, and physical emotional, and doubtful sexual abuse of children was observed.

Regarding the findings of the study to prevent child abuse it is necessary to take following actions:

1. Education of parents concerning children rights;
2. Education of parents about how to treat their children;
3. Establishment of centers to protect the children at risk; Establishment of Hot Line Telephone;
5. Education of young couples about taking more responsibility of having children.

Table 1. The distribution of relative frequency of students in terms of the level of parent's educational, Tehran, 1998

Parent	Level				
	Illiterate	Elementary	Guidance	High School	University
Mother	9.3	19.3	30.2	26	15.2
Father	7.1	17.2	21.5	26.3	27.8

Table 2. The distribution of relative frequency of students in terms of responses to the question: If you don't do as you are supposed to, what will be the following fellow's behavior with you

If you don't do as you are supposed to	Shouts and quarrels	Curses	Beats me	Behaves well	More than one case of abuse	Others
Father	28.1	1.7	2.7	46.7	3.2	12.8
Mother	34.9	3.6	3.4	45	3.1	12.8
Brother	24.4	6.6	8.8	13.9	5.4	20.5
Sister	18.9	5.8	3.9	17.7	1.9	22.3

Table 3. The relationship between emotional abuse and some variables in respondents, Tehran, 1998

Indep.var	Character	Emotional abuse						Result of stat. test
		Yes		No		Sum		
		N	%	N	%	N	%	
Father's age	Less than 40 yrs more than 40 yrs	111	27.4	47	11.6	158	39	$X^2 = 0.0468$ P=0.828
		176	43.5	71	17.5	247	61	
		87	70.9	118	29.1	405	100	
Mother's age	Less than 35 yrs more than 35 yrs	128	30.1	56	14.3	184	44.4	$X^2 = 0.2335$ P=0.63
		165	40.7	65	14.9	230	55.61	
		293	70.7	121	29.2	414	100	
Father's Literacy	illiterate & low L. High sch and univ	150	36	41	9.8	191	45.8	$X^2 = 10.33$ P=0.0013
				81	19.5	228	54.2	
		295	70.7	122	29.3	417	100	
Mother's Literacy	illiterate & low L. High sch and univ	189	45.1	57	13.6	246	58.7	$X^2 = 10.21$ P=0.0014
				65	15.5	173	41.3	
		297	70.9	122	29.1	419	100	
Father's job	Self-employed	115	28	40	9.7	155	37.7	$X^2 = 4.25$ P=0.23
	Worker	29	7.1	13	3.1	42	10.2	
	Employee	75	18.2	26	6.4	101	24.6	
	Other	72	17.5	41	10	113	27.5	
	Sum	291	70.8	120	29.2	411	100	
Mother's job	Housewife	247	58.9	101	24.2	384	83.1	$X^2 = 0.0088$ P=0.92
	Employee/work	50	12	21	4.9	71	16.9	
	Sum	297	70.9	122	29.1	419	100	
Family's Financial Status	Well	158	38	82	19.7	240	57.7	$X^2 = 6.5$ P=0.039
	Mod	121	29.1	35	8.4	156	37.5	
	Bad	15	3.6	5	1.2	20	4.8	
	Sum	294	70.7	122	29.3	416	100	

Family size	Less than 4	175	41.8	75	17.9	250	59.7	$X^2 = 0.23$ P=0.62
	More than 4	122	29.1	47	11.2	169	40.3	
	Sum	297	70.9	122	29.1	419	100	
Birth order	Lower than 2	157	37.6	75	18	23.2	55.6	$X^2 = 3.2$ P=0.73
	Higher than 2	140	33.6	45	10.8	185	44.4	
	Sum	157	71.2	120	28.8	417	100	
Existence of mentally ill in the family	Yes	61	14.6	8	2	69	16.6	$X^2 = 12.55$ P=0.004
	No	233	56.1	114	27.3	347	83.4	
	Sum	294	70.7	122	29.3	419	100	
Existence of an addict member in the family	Yes	15	3.6	1	0.3	16	3.9	$X^2 = 4.32$ P=0.037
	No	277	66.9	121	29.2	398	96.1	
	Sum	292	70.5	122	29.5	414	100	
Degree of Family's social contacts	High	20	4.8	4	1	24	5.8	$X^2 = 7.1$ P=0.03
	Adequate	218	25.4	105	52.2	323	77.6	
	Low	56	13.5	13	3.1	69	16.6	
	Sum	294	70.7	122	29.3	416	100	
Religious status of the family	High religious	35	8.5	17	4.1	52	12.6	$X^2 = 2.86$ P=0.41
	Religious	110	26.6	54	13.1	164	39.7	
	Moderate	143	34.6	49	11.9	192	46.5	
	Unrel	4	1	1	0.2	5	1.2	
	Sum	292	70.7	121	29.3	413	100	

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