Prevalence of Child Abuse in Saudi Arabia from 2000 to 2015: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

Unfortunately, there have been only limited reports about the prevalence of child abuse and neglect in Saudi Arabia (SA). Determining the magnitude and extent of this phenomenon is essential to construct an effective strategy to counter and prevent it. The aim of this review was to provide an overview of the prevalence of child abuse and neglect in SA over the past 15 years (2000-2015). Studies were gathered by reviewing published papers in the Medline and Google Scholar databases reporting the prevalence of child abuse and neglect in SA over the past 15 years. In 2007, the prevalences of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect in previous studies were 7%, 15%, and 15%, respectively. Between 2000 and 2008, the prevalence of child physical abuse and neglect was greater than other forms of abuse. Additionally, the annual report of the National Family Safety Registry noted the same findings. In 2014, a study in Al-Kharj found that psychological abuse was most prevalent among teenagers. In conclusion, child physical abuse and child neglect were the most prevalent forms of abuse over the last 15 years, whereas the recognition of emotional abuse started late compared with other forms of abuse. Awareness of the phenomenon of child abuse and neglect is improving in SA. Consequently, the detection and reporting of such cases are growing across the nation.

Keywords: Child abuse; Child Physical Abuse; Child sexual abuse; Child psychological abuse; Child emotional abuse; Child neglect; Saudi Arabia

Introduction

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) define child maltreatment as "any act or series of acts of commission or omission by a parent or other caregiver that results in harm, potential harm, or the threat of harm to a child" [1]. The term commission (i.e., child abuse) is used to describe any intended act that can cause harm, potential harm, or the threat of harm to a child [1], whereas omission (i.e., child neglect) describes the failure of caregiver/s to deliver a child's basic needs (physical, emotional, medical/dental, and educational) to protect him/her from harm or potential harm [1]. Acts of commission (child abuse) can be physical, sexual, or psychological [1]. In contrast, acts of omission (child neglect) are physical, emotional, medical/dental, or educational [1].

Child maltreatment types

Types of child abuse (acts of commission)

Physical abuse, which is defined as "the intentional use of physical force against a child that results in or has the potential to result in, physical injury" [1]. In other words, any intentional action that can cause physical damage to a child is to be considered physical abuse. The emphasis on intention is related to the physical act itself, even if there were no or few consequences of that act.

Physical discipline and corporal punishment are forms of physical abuse, even if they do not cause any physical damage to the child, because of the intention of using power [1]. Münchausen syndrome by proxy and shaken baby syndrome (abusive head trauma) are also forms of physical abuse [2,3].

Münchausen syndrome by proxy is defined as the reporting of false signs and symptoms by caregivers and subjecting the child to extensive medical care and unnecessary hospitalization [3]. Münchausen syndrome by proxy is the most difficult type of abuse to be detected because healthcare providers usually depend on caregivers to provide the medical history of the child. Moreover, this type of abuse is common in mentally ill children [3].

Sexual abuse is defined as "any completed or attempted (uncompleted) sexual act, sexual contact with, or exploration of a child by a caregiver" [1]. Physical harm to genital areas is categorized as sexual abuse [1].

Psychological abuse is defined as "intentional caregiver behavior that conveys to a child that he/she is worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered, or valued only in meeting another's needs" [1].

Types of child neglect (acts of omission)

There are several types of child neglect. Physical neglect involves the caregiver failing to provide the child with the suitable and essential elements of survival, such as nutrition, clothing, hygiene, and shelter [1]. Emotional neglect involves the caregiver failing to fulfill the emotional needs of the child or, by abandonment, injuring the child's mental health [1]. Medical/dental neglect involves the child not receiving the appropriate health services for disease prevention or actual disease treatment [1]. Educational neglect involves the caregiver not offering or not paying attention to the child's schooling and education [1].

Many global reports have concluded that child abuse has countless physical, psychological, social, and economical effects [4,5,6]. Body bruises, abrasions, burns, lacerations, internal organ injury, physical disabilities and death are common physical consequences of child abuse [7,8], while emotional stress, which can trigger mental and neurological
problems, health problems, and behavioral problems, is the most commonly observed psychological consequence of abuse [5,9].

Global prevalence of child maltreatment

The prevalence of child maltreatment varies from one type to another and from one country and society to another.

Physical abuse: In 2014, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that 23% of children worldwide were physically abused [5]. In the USA, the Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4) concluded that 58% of American children are exposed to physical abuse at some point in their lives [10], whereas in Germany, the UK, and Denmark the prevalence rates of physical abuse were 12%, 8.2%, and 5.4%, respectively [11,12,13]. In addition, Romania and Italy reported that approximately 5% and 8% of their children, respectively, were exposed to physical abuse [4]. Unfortunately, most African and Asian countries lack recent and reliable statistics in this regard, yet older publications indicated a high prevalence of physical abuse in these regions. In 2010, the International Journal of Epidemiology issued the results of the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) of 28 countries, including nations in Africa and the former Soviet and Yugoslavian republic, as well as some other countries, such as Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria. The median physical abuse prevalence in African countries was 64.3%, and it was 45.5% in the former Soviet and Yugoslavian republics [14], whereas in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, it was estimated that 66.8%, 74.2%, and 81.4% of children, respectively, were physically abused [14]. The Gulf region has had similarly limited publications in this regard. In 2007, Al-Mahroos found in the literature from 1987 to 2005 that approximately 33% (50 out of 150) and 89% (24 out of 27) of total reported abuse cases were physical abuse cases in Bahrain and Kuwait, respectively [15]. A more recent retrospective review of medical records estimated that approximately 64% (152 of 237) of reported maltreatment cases in Bahrain were due to physical abuse [16].

Sexual abuse: According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 20% and 5-10% of girls and boys, respectively, had experienced sexual abuse universally [5]. Twenty-four percent of American children were reported to have been sexually abused through the sentinel survey method, in which all community specialists that treat children participated [10]. Whereas 9% of Romanian children were sexually abused [4], in 2013, Germany reported the percentage of sexually abused children to be approximately 6% [11]. In 2011, Radford et al. indicated that 0.2% of UK children had been sexually abused [12]. In Vietnam, a study conducted in secondary school students showed that 19.7% of them had been sexually abused [17]. In 2007, Al-Mahroos recorded the number of sexual abuse cases reported in the published medical literature or by national organizations over 18 years from 1987 to 2005 [15]. The study reported 3 sexual abuse cases among 27 total abuse cases in Kuwait (11%) and 87 of 150 cases in Bahrain (58%) [15].

Psychological abuse: More than one fourth of the children in the USA (27%) and 10.4% of the children in the UK were recognized as having been psychologically abused [10,12]. In Denmark, a stratified random sample of Danish children in 2013 showed that 6.1% and 4.4% of female and male children were psychologically abused, respectively [13]. Illland et al. found in 2013 that the level of psychological abuse in Germany was 10.2% [11], whereas Chile identified 8% of German children as having been psychologically abused [4]. Burkina Faso and Cameroon were estimated to have rates of 83.4% and 86.1% of psychological abuse in children, respectively [14]. To our knowledge, there is a deficiency of data about psychological abuse in the Arab world. According to the International Journal of Epidemiology, in 2006, Iraq and Syria reported rates of 79.9% and 83.1% of psychological abuse in children, respectively [14]. Yemen, in the same year, showed the highest proportion of psychologically abused children (92.3%) [14].

Child neglect: In 2010, a study showed that approximately 61% of children in the USA were neglected (47% neglected educationally, 38% physically, and 25% emotionally) [10]. Approximately 22% of Canadian children were classified as being neglected (19% physically neglected, and 11% educationally neglected) [4]. A total of 16.8% of UK children were reported to be neglected in 2011 [12]. In Denmark, 3% of a sample of Danish children stated that they were exposed to physical neglect [13]. Vietnam, as an example of Asian countries, reported that approximately 29% of secondary school children were neglected [17]. Moreover, girls showed a higher prevalence of neglect than boys (33.4% and 24.9%, respectively; P value <0.001) [17].

Determining the magnitude of child abuse and neglect phenomena in SA is important to construct an effective prevention strategy and to counter abuse. This review aimed to provide an overview the prevalence of child abuse in SA over the last 15 years (from 2000 to 2015) in an effort to obtain a more accurate estimate of the magnitude and extent of the problem.

Materials and methods

The authors reviewed published papers from the Medline and Google Scholar databases that reported the prevalence of child abuse in SA over the last 15 years. Studies that reported the prevalence of child physical abuse in SA were included if they fulfilled the following a priori criteria: 1. published between 2000 and 2015; 2. case reports, cross-sectional studies and review studies; and 3. written in English. In contrast, studies that investigated other outcomes and papers that presented unconfirmed cases of abuse were excluded. The search in the databases was performed based on the following keywords: child abuse, child physical abuse, child malnutrition, violence against children, physical discipline, corporal punishment, Murchhausen syndrome by proxy, shaken baby syndrome, child sexual abuse, child psychological abuse, child emotional abuse, child neglect, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, KSA and Saudi Arabia.

Each study was reviewed manually based on the title and abstract for primary exclusion. Then, the full texts of the remaining studies were reviewed and summarized. Many case reports and unconfirmed cases were found upon searching, making the estimation of the prevalence of child abuse very difficult.

Results

Seven studies were accessed through the Medline database, and three studies were obtained from the Google Scholar database. One review study, three cross-sectional studies, two national level reports, and two case series reports were found; two additional papers consisted of diagnosed case reports.

Physical abuse

In 2000, Karthikeyan et al. published a case report discussing 2 physical abuse cases in Khamis Mushayt in the south of SA [18]. In 2007, Al-Mahroos searched the medical literature from 1987 to 2005 to determine the prevalence of child abuse and neglect in the Arabian Peninsula [15]. She found that 28 cases of 40 total reported abuse cases (70%) in Saudi Arabia were categorized as physical abuse cases or as cases of Münchausen syndrome by proxy [15]. In 2009, Al Eissa and Almuneef reported the prevalence rates of different forms of child abuse
recognized by the Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect team (SCAN) at King Abdulaziz Medical City at National Guard, Riyadh, during three different time periods: 2000-2004, 2005-2006, and 2007-2008 [19]. The total number of investigated abuse cases was 133, of which 65 (49%) were categorized as physical abuse [19]. Additionally, the authors found that physical abuse against children was a more prevalent form of abuse during the time periods of 2000-2004 and 2005-2006 compared with the time period of 2007-2008 (61%, 76%, and 39%, respectively) [19].

In 2008, a case report of physical abuse against a 15-month-old child with an insulin needle was reported in Riyadh [20]. In 2010, a case report of Münchhausen syndrome by proxy about a girl who was approximately 19 months old, who was admitted to King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center, was published [21]. The case was obscure and required a long time to be diagnosed because it was the first report of Münchhausen syndrome by proxy, which resembles Guacher disease in its manifestations [21]. The annual report of the National Family Safety Registry (NFSR) in 2010 noted that there were 292 reported cases of abuse and neglect in SA (National Family Safety registry 2010). Seventy percent (70%) of the cases (n=205) were reported as physical abuse, Münchhausen syndrome by proxy, or shaken baby syndrome. Furthermore, the annual report of the Hospital Based Child Maltreatment Registry in 2012 reported 263 cases of abuse, of which 94 cases (35.8%) were reported as physical abused (National Family Safety Registry 2010 did not diagnose any psychological abuse cases among 292 reported abuse and neglect cases [7]. The Hospital-Based Child Maltreatment Registry found that 5.3% of all reported abuse cases (14 of 263 cases) were registered as psychological abuse in 2012 [2].

Al-Eissa and Al-Jadaan conducted a descriptive study in Jeddah in the west of SA in 2013 [24]. Among the convenience sample of 12- to 18-year-old children whom they recruited, 90% of the children were diagnosed as having experienced psychological abuse [24]. In 2014, 75% of the cases that were diagnosed by Al Eissa et al. in Al-Kharj were cases of psychological abuse [23].

**Child neglect**

Al-Mahroos found a total of 40 cases of child abuse and neglect in the literature from SA, 6 of which were classified as neglect cases (15%) [15]. Al Eissa and Almuneef reported 43 cases of child neglect in Riyadh during the period of 2000-2008, and more than one-third of them (42%) were diagnosed in 2007-2008 [19].

In 2010 and 2012, national level reports in SA found that 41% and 38%, of abuse cases, respectively, fell under the definition of child neglect [2,7]. In 2014, half of the cases reported in Al-Kharj were categorized as neglect cases [23]. Table 1 summarizes the findings of the published papers about the prevalence of child abuse and neglect in SA between 2000 and 2015.

This study considered only 2 databases; therefore, it may have underestimated the number of abuse and neglect cases. Searching additional databases and including hospital records may result in a higher prevalence of child abuse and neglect cases. In addition, child abuse and neglect are sensitive issues in SA, and most caregivers will not seek medical help except in severe abuse and neglect scenarios, which may have affected the accuracy of the reporting and the overall prevalence of this issue. Finally, most of the included studies were case reports, case series studies, and cross-sectional studies, thus limiting the accuracy of detecting the exact extent of the problem.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Authors, year</th>
<th>Physical abuse</th>
<th>Sexual abuse</th>
<th>Psychological abuse</th>
<th>Child neglect</th>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>1533</td>
<td>1021</td>
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Table 1: Summary of published papers about the prevalence of child abuse and neglect in Saudi Arabia during 2000 and 2015.
Conclusion

Physical abuse and neglect were shown to be the most prevalent forms of maltreatment of children in SA [2,7,19,23]. Awareness of child abuse and neglect is improving in SA. Consequently, the detecting and reporting of such cases is increasing, which may facilitate further improvement of actions to counter child abuse. More large-scale studies and the recording of all available data in a national level registry are recommended.

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