The attitudes of adults toward child abuse

Mehrnaz Yektaa *, Fatemeh Bagheriann, Mohammad Ali Salehi Nezhadn

a Department of Psychology, University of Tehran, P. O. Box 14155-6456, Tehran, Iran
b Department of Psychology, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran

Abstract

This study investigated the young people attitudes and awareness about child abuse. Seventy university students (20 males, 50 females) completed the researcher-made questionnaire. The results revealed that the levels of education of participants were positively associated with their reaction toward child abuse as well as awareness about child abuse. The birth order of participants was significantly associated with being beaten. This is notable that most of the participants recognized beating was an acceptable form of discipline and informing family as the best coping way toward child abuse. Results and implications are discussed.

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Keywords: child abuse; attitude; adult;

1. Introduction

According to the World health organization report on the consultation on child abuse and prevention (1999) “Child abuse or maltreatment constitutes all forms of physical and/or emotional ill treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power.” Furthermore, Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act CAPTA (1974) defines child abuse and neglect as “any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker, which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation, or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm”. There are four types of child abuse: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional/ psychological abuse, and neglect. Physical abuse is all the acts of commission that results in an actual physical harm of the child or that has a potential for physical harm, such as hitting with a hand or any materials, punching, kicking, biting, shaking, throwing, stabbing, burning, choking or beating the child (Runyan, Wattam, Ikeda, Hassan, & Ramiro, 2002; Goldman, Salus, Wolcott, & Kennedy, 2003; Hanci, 2002). Child sexual abuse is the use of the child by a person who is at least six years older than the child, for sexual gratification or allowing another person to do it (Runyan et al., 2002; Hanci, 2002). The child can be coerced to engage in an unlawful sexual activity, the child may be used in prostitution or other illegal sexual activities or the child may be used in any pornographic material in the cases of child sexual abuse (WHO, 1999). The other type of child abuse is emotional abuse. It occurs as a result of the failure of the caregiver for supplying supportive and appropriate environment for the child (WHO, 1999). Emotional abuse refers to the aggressive behaviours of the parents and to the great expectations of parents and other adults from the child more than his abilities (Runyan et al., 2002) and shouting at the child, belittling, cursing, leaving alone, frightening intimidating, not meeting the psychological needs, making comparisons among the siblings, not valuing, playing down, humiliating, displaying over pressure or behaving so protective (Hanci,
Neglect refers to the failure of the caregiver – especially the parents – to provide health, education, emotional development, nutrition, shelter and safe living conditions for the child (WHO, 1999). The studies indicate that there are several correlates of child abuse. In most countries, girls are twice more vulnerable to infanticide, sexual abuse, nutritional and educational neglect, and forced prostitution than boys (Runyan et al., 2002). In addition, females report more physical and psychological abuse than males (Al-Qaisy, 2007). The prevalence of physical abuse shows differences with respect to the age of the child victim. It is reported that girls in puberty are more likely to suffer from physical abuse (Taner & Gökler, 2004; Powers, Eckenrode, & Jaklitsch, 1990). Sexual abuse has not been found to be significantly related with socioeconomic status (SES). It is stated that child sexual abuse can be observed in any SES (Hedin, 2000, Taner & Gökler, 2004). Children who have been exposed to a sexual abuse may display anxiety disorders, sleeping disorders, nightmares, phobia, physical complaints and fear reactions. Children who have experienced emotional abuse display behaviours like cutting oneself loose from their family, developing a dependent personality structure, having feelings of worthlessness and displaying inadaptable and aggressive behaviours (Paavilainen & Tarkka, 2003). In addition, the abused child can’t form secure attachments with their parents and this situation results in problems in forming relationships in the later ages (Kerr, Lopez, Olson, & Sameroff, 2004). More recent research suggests differences between male and female participants regarding attitudes toward child sexual abuse (Logan, 1980; Fingleton, 1989; Hazzard, & Rupp, 1986; wellman, 1993; Tennfjord, 2006; Al-Moosa, Shajji, Fadhli, Bayed, & Adib, 2003). Previous studies showed among the participants, beating was an acceptable form of discipline (Earls, McGuire, & Shay, 1994; Fontes, 2002; Hunter, Jain, Sadowski, & Sanhueza, 2000; Qasem, Mustafa, Kazem, & Shah, 1998; Orhon, Ulukol, Bingoler, & Gulnar, 2006).

Considering all of these findings, the seriousness of child abuse is obvious and the attitudes towards child abuse. Actually, the laws and the attitudes of the countries regarding child abuse and neglect show variances. According to the 2005 laws of USA, physical abuse is guilt. There are welfare institutions for children in Australia, England and Canada. These institutions protect the child as long as an abuse situation is explained by the child or denounced by another person. Child gets amends from his/her parents until she/he becomes an adult. In a study, the attitudes and level of knowledge of the physicians in the Eastern Anatolia cities were examined (Açık, Deveci, & Oral, 2004). According to the results of the study, although awareness in child abuse and neglect cases increase, physicians in Eastern Anatolia did not have adequate knowledge and proper attitudes towards diagnosing and reporting child physical abuse. It has been argued that it is probably due to the lack of graduate and continuing education that they do not comfortably report child physical case abuses. In another study done with the pediatricians in Kuwait, the knowledge, attitudes, and experience of the pediatricians to the child maltreatment were examined (Al-Moosa, Al-Shajji, Al-Fadhli, Al-Bayed, & Adib, 2003) and similar results were reported. In another study, examining exactly the attitudes of people towards child sexual abuse, it was found that women were more negative to sexual contact between adults and children (Tennfjord, 2006). The primary aim of this study was to investigate the attitudes of participants towards child abuse behaviours with respect to their gender, age, educational level and other demographical variables.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants of present study consisted of 70 students (20 males, 50 females) from different faculty of different university in Tehran. Their mean age was 22 years (sd=1.822) for all participants, 22 (sd=1.02) for males, and 20 (sd=0.75) for females.

2.2. Instruments

2.2.1. Attitudes toward Child Abuse Scale (ACAS) - Attitudes towards child abuse Scale (ACAS) was developed by the researcher utilizing from the definition of child abuse types in the literature and Attitudes towards Child Sexual Abuse (ACA) measure (Tennfjord, 2006). The questions were reviewed by the peers. After the peer revision, the pilot study for the scale was done with 20 people. According to the results of the pilot study, revisions were made on the suggestions of the participants and the last form of the scale was formed. The aim of the instrument is to measure the attitudes of people towards child abuse behaviours. The scale is a 20-item self-report measure. These items include attitudes towards the physical, sexual and emotional abuse behaviours. The questionnaire is a 5 point Likert type scale. The response range of ACAS is between 1 and 5. 1 corresponds to
“Strongly Agree” and 5 to “Strongly Disagree”. Having high scores from ACAS indicates negative attitudes towards child abuse; having lower scores from CAAS indicates positive attitudes towards child abuse.

2.3. Procedure
Participants from the faculty of Psychology, Architecting, Economy, Engineering were invited to take part in this study. Those who approved gave verbal consent prior to commencement of the study and completed the self-report questionnaire. Participant were debriefed about the study and thanked for taking part.

2.4. Statistical analysis
The data was analyzed employing Spearman’s correlation in order to estimate the associations between education, gender and their attitudes, chi square in order to assess the correlation of order of birth and being beaten.

3. Results
Spearman’s correlation coefficients show that, gender and education are positively correlated with attitudes toward child abuse and correlation coefficients are statistically significant (p<0.001). According to the results, our hypotheses are supported. The results of Spearman’s correlation are presented in table 1. Chi squares show that, order of birth is positively correlated with being beaten. The results of χ² are presented in table 2. There was no statistically significant difference in the percentage of participants who reported being physically abused as children: 40% of females, 45% of males. The results revealed that 60% of females and 70% of males believed that beating is an acceptable form of child discipline in Iran.

| Variables                  | Gender | Education |
|----------------------------|--------|-----------|
| Attitudes toward cases     |        |           |
| Of child abuse             | 0.60   | 0.52      |
| Attitudes toward the       |        |           |
| Abusive child              | 0.50   | 0.65      |

*P< 0/05

|                        | value | Sig (2-sided) |
|------------------------|-------|---------------|
| Pearson chi-square     | 45.53 | 0.01          |
| Phi Cramer’s v         | 0.906 | 0.01          |
| N valid of cases       | 65    | 0.01          |

The results showed that the second children in families are more beaten than the first child and For parents, both physical and verbal severity scores of those with one child were higher than those with two children (p = 0/8). Most of participants declared that they were beaten by their mother. The results also showed no significant sex differences about being beaten (χ²=12/2, p=0/1, phi=0/7).

4. Discussion
According to the results of the present study, attitudes of people towards child abuse were predicted uniquely by their education. Surprisingly and contrary to previous study (Özgülük, 2010), we found positive association between education and attitudes toward child abuse. As the results showed, there is no significant sex difference in attitudes towards child abuse; this finding is contrary with previous studies (Logan, 1980; Fingleton, 1989; Hazzard, & Rupp, 1986; wellman, 1993; Tennfjord, 2006; Al- Moosa, Shaiji, Fadhli, Bayed, & Adib, 2003), and consistent with previous study (Özgülük, 2010). The results showed that in the families with one child physical and verbal punishment were higher than those with two children and the mother do the physical punishment more than the father. These results showed that beating was an acceptable form of discipline and it appears that disciplinary experiences practiced by parents in order to lessen the undesired behaviours of their children may lead
to the use of more appropriate and non abusive disciplinary methods for their next child. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Orhan et al, 2006; Minde, 2002). Previous studies in other developing countries indicate that physical disciplinary practices are likewise adopted by significant proportions of such countries, and this may be influenced by changes in society and also established long-standing customs concerning how children should be treated (Earls, McGuire, & Shay, 1994; Fontes, 2002; Hunter, Jain, Sadowski, & Sanhueza, 2000; Qasem, Mustafa, Kazem, & Shah, 1998; orhan et al, 2006).

It appeared that some forceful disciplinary methods were not considered as reported by participants. For instance, abusive and harmful acts such as “shaking a child” were found acceptable as discipline by some students. Thus, while students thought that harsh disciplinary methods should be accepted as discipline, the rate of considering these severe acts reportable as abuse was found to be low. Professionals who avoid recognition or reporting of child abuse may offer many reasons. For example some of the families or participant declared that the policy shouldn’t interfere in parenting or they do not have sufficient information about law and policies about child abuse. This finding of under reporting in our study may be a result of insufficient knowledge of students on the importance of violence in child rearing.

There are some limitations in this study. The issue of child abuse is a sensitive issue and not talked too much among the people, even not reported by the physicians (Woolf, Taylor, Melincoc, 1988; Al- Moosa et al., 2003; Açıkoğlu et al., 2004). Additionally, the measure used in this study was a self-report measure. Therefore, the objectivity of the data may not be totally fulfilled due to social desirability. The sample size was not large enough to generalize the findings to the population and due to some restrictions we couldn’t go for the younger students. Regarding to these limitations it seems that the lack of knowledge of students about child rearing violence and failure to recognize abuse as reportable are definitely important problems for child protection. Thus, it is vital that education programs on child disciplinary practices and abuse should be established for public in Iran. In addition further studies can be done with a larger and diverse sample.

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