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Child Abuse and Its Relation to Quality of Life of Male and Female Children

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Abstract

It is an established fact that family strengths can promote positive outcomes for children; of course these strengths include high quality parent-child relationships. On the other hand, family violence and child abuse can lead to negative consequences regarding child well-being and quality of life. On the long run, child's mental health and psychological adjustment are compromised. This study aims at investigating the relationship between child abuse (physical abuse, psychological abuse and neglect) and quality of life in children of abusive fathers and mothers. This study operates on the assumption that child abuse affects all dimensions of children's quality of life; however the effect on each dimension is not necessarily the same. Male and female children completed Child Abuse Scale (CAS) and Children's Quality of Life Questionnaire (CQOLQ), both measurements were prepared by the author. Results of the study indicated significant negative relationship between child abuse in two types (physical abuse and emotional abuse) and the total score of CAS on one hand, and the family life dimension of CQOLQ on the other hand. Results also indicated significant negative relationship between total score of CAS and total score of CQOLQ in the male sample, while no similar relationship was indicated in the female sample. The findings of the study concerning the general score of quality of life assessment were discussed in the light of literature of the subject, and clinical implications of the results were also discussed reaching at some recommendations to help alleviating the negative impact of child abuse.

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Keywords: Child Abuse, quality of life, child's quality of life.

1. Introduction

Parent-child relationships are vital to children's healthy development psychologically and physically. Quality of these relationships has an important impact on the children's well-being that can be manifest in childhood and, later on, in their adulthood as well. Although individuals may form many interpersonal relationships throughout their lives, parent-child relationships are the most critical determinants of their development, adjustment and well-being.
In the past, researchers paid more attention to ways of preventing child abuse than to the consequences or effects on the abused child. It was argued that it is more important to prevent abuse than to study its consequences. But due to difficulties in defining the term "child abuse", many researchers now are convinced that more attention is needed to be paid to the consequences of different situations before defining them as abusive or neglectful (Corby, 2006:85).

1.1. Statement of the problem

Assuming that child abuse adversely affects all dimensions of children's quality of life, yet it is expected that the impact will not be equal on all dimensions. Identified most affected areas of the child's quality of life could be used in the future as indicators of the severity and types of abuse suffered by children. This study is designed to examine the link between different types of child abuse inflicted by parents (physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect) and the child's quality of life. The study is also designed to assess the differences between male and female children with regard to this link.

1.2. Literature review

Child abuse and neglect are highly contested concepts, underpinned by and subject to a range of political and cultural factors particular to the society in which they occur. Therefore, child abuse and neglect are not phenomena that lend themselves to easy definition or measurement (Corby, 2006:79). This means that child abuse or neglect cannot be defined unless we take the cultural context into consideration, for what is considered to be abusive or neglectful in one society could be acceptable in another. Female circumcision, for example, is considered abusive and illegal in Britain, but it is acceptable and even desirable in Egypt. Although no solid definition of child abuse can be widely agreed upon, the main areas of abuse remain the same: physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse and neglect. The American School Counselor Association defined child abuse and neglect in a way that might help us reach a common understanding of the term. Child abuse was defined as: The infliction of physical harm upon the child's body by other than accidental means, and the continual psychological damage or denial of emotional needs. Neglect was defined as: The failure to provide necessary food, care, clothing, shelter, supervision or medical care for a child (American School Counselor Association, 1999: 1).

In the context of parent-child relationships, child abuse types are more likely to be: physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect; rarely expected is sexual abuse within the Egyptian family. This study focuses on the physical, emotional abuse and neglect which can be defined as follows:

Physical abuse: Deliberately causing a physical significant harm. This may involve hitting, shaking, throwing, punching, slapping or kicking.

Sometimes it is argued that corporal punishment could be a justifiable means of discipline that helps in controlling a child, but serious bodily harm cannot be justified on the grounds that it constitutes reasonable punishment (Corby, 2006: 89).

Emotional abuse: The persistent emotional ill-treatment of a child such as to cause severe and persistent adverse effects on the child's emotional development. It may involve conveying to the children that they are worthless or unloved, inadequate, or valued only insofar as they meet the needs of another person. It may feature age or developmentally inappropriate expectations being placed on children. It may involve causing children frequently to feel frightened, or the exploitation or corruption of children (Department of Health, 1999: 5-6).

It appears that emotional abuse experience is commonly involved in all types of child abuse, though it may occur alone.

Neglect: The persistent failure to meet a child's physical and/or psychological needs, likely to result in the serious impairment of the child's health or development. It may involve a parent or caregiver failing to provide adequate food, shelter and clothing, failing to protect a child from physical harm or danger, or the failure to ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment. It may also include neglect of, or unresponsiveness to a child's basic emotional needs (Department of Health, 1999: 6).

Although this definition of neglect has been criticized for the ambiguity of some of its terms, like: Persistent
failure, serious impairment and basic emotional needs (Corby, 2006: 91), it is still one of the most exclusive definitions that could be relied on.

It is expected for a child that the impact of abuse would be most serious if it is inflicted by their own parents in situations of what can be called "domestic violence" (Jouriles et al, 2008:221). Seriousness of the domestic abuse experience stems from the tragic fact the child is abused by the very persons he/she turns to for satisfying the needs of love and protection. Studying the causes and consequences of abusive and neglectful parenting is important for all practitioners involved in safeguarding children, it helps with handling the adverse situation created by the phenomena.

Child abuse has adverse long term consequences physically and emotionally. Physically, studies have demonstrated that child abuse, neglect and other circumstances that disrupt the parent-child relationship are significantly associated with many leading causes of adult death, such as stroke, cancer and heart disease, and with heavy health service utilization (Stirling & Jackson, 2008: 667). Child abuse is also known as one of the determinants of child's "nonorganic failure to thrive" (Dubowitz et al, 1989 & Corbry, 2006: 93). Emotionally, there is evidence of linkages between being abused and mental illness, drug abuse, delinquency and violent criminality (Corby, 2006: 196 & Fraad, 2008: 85). It is also common that abused children adopt some survival tactics to protect themselves in the face of their abusive parents, they behave in a way they think will make their parents happy like having no appetite to play or become self-critical (Lambie, 2005:252 & Corby, 2006:185). The long-term harm may also include developmental delay, learning disorders, problems in forming relationships, interpersonal and social difficulties, aggressive behavior, depression and low academic achievement (Lambie, 2005:252). As adults, people who were abused in childhood, tend to have poor quality romantic relationships (Larsen et al, 2011: 435).

As for the immediate consequences of child abuse, neglected children show many manifestations of insecure attachment (Stirling & Jackson, 2008: 670), they are described as more demanding, anxious or more difficult to console. Immediate effects of abuse for older children may include feelings of helplessness, being hopeless and ashamed. Victims of abuse may feel unworthy of having friends and fearful that their "family secret" will be revealed; therefore, they may isolate themselves and withdraw (Lambie, 2005:252). There is evidence that emotional abuse directly attacks child's self-esteem and self-image. Emotionally abused children show lack of self-confidence, extreme shyness and feelings of inadequacy. They also show inability to engage in and enjoy pleasurable activities (Romeo, 2000: 185).

Child's quality of life is one of the most critical areas which can be affected drastically by maltreatment. While positive parent-child relationships have proved to help children through the most distressing situations (Orbuch et al, 2005:182), child abuse by parents is expected to have negative effects on child's well-being and quality of life.

The term "quality of life" refers to the satisfaction of a person towards his life. The W.H.O. considers quality of life as a broad ranging concept affected in a complex way by the person's physical health, psychological state, level of independency, social relationships, personal beliefs and their relationship to salient features of their environment. WHO defines quality of life as:" individuals' perception of life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns" (World Health Organization, 1997:1). As for child's quality of life definition, there is evidence that children's perspectives may be different from those of adults (Casas, 2005:1), that's why studies of child's quality of life should take children's own opinion into consideration in the definition and measurement of the subject. Although objective criteria of quality of life do exist, especially concerning environmental and socioeconomic aspects, it is important to focus upon the subjective perspective in the context of defining and measuring quality of life (Halpern, 1993: 487). Youngsters in general are well known to be much more risk-taking than adults; it is very important for them to have new and amusing experiences. For adults security is much more important and thus they take measures to ensure security; however the security measures imposed by adults will usually be regarded -by youngsters- as too strict measures taken to control their lives (Casas, 2005:6).

Building on this, children's quality of life can be defined as a global view that considers many dimensions of a child's being (Bass & Beresin, 2009: 296). In other words, it is a subjective multidimensional view that is related to all the well-being aspects of the child; physical, psychological, social and environmental (Gaspar et al, 2009:42).

While some studies gave evidence that child abuse has long term negative effects on many aspects of an abused person's quality of life (Corso et al, 2008 & Stirling and Jackson, 2008), it is expected that child abuse would harm a child's quality of life immediately.
1.3. **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study is to examine the link between child abuse and child's quality of life. It also seeks to identify the differences between male and female children regarding that link.

2. **Procedures**

2.1. **Sample**

The sample consisted of 30 school student children (17 male and 13 female), they were students of fifth and sixth grade of primary school, their age ranged between 10 – 13 years, with mean=11.166 year and std. deviation=0.791. Sampling depended on reports of school counselors that chosen children might be victims of abuse imposed by their parents.

2.2. **Measures**

Child Abuse Scale (CAS): This scale was designed by the author to assess types and severity of child abuse. It consists of 30 items covering three types of abuse; (a) physical abuse: 10 items, (b) emotional abuse: 10 items, and (c) neglect: 10 items. To assess severity of abuse children responded to items on a Likert three point scale, with the score 1 for abused by no one, 2 for abused by one parent and 3 for abused by both parents.

Child’s Quality Of Life Questionnaire (CQOLQ): this questionnaire was designed by the author to assess levels of child's quality of life. It consists of 34 items covering four dimensions; (a) Self-esteem & Autonomy: 10 items, (b) Family life: 7 items, (c) Social life: 8 items, and (d) Recreation & wellbeing: 9 items. To assess level of quality of life children responded to items of the questionnaire on a Likert three point scale using smilies to answer a common question to all items: How do you feel about..? With the sad face smiley = 1, the neutral face smiley = 2 and the happy face smiley = 3.

2.3. **Method**

A descriptive relational design was implemented in this study. To collect data, a sample of 30 children (17 male and 13 female) completed the Child Abuse Scale (CAS), and the Children's Quality of Life Questionnaire (CQOLQ).

2.4. **Statistical analysis**

Pearson Correlation has been used to assess the correlations of variables of the study.

3. **Results**

To assess the link between child abuse (three types and a total score) to child's quality of life (four dimensions and a total score) Pearson Correlation matrix revealed the following:

| Child Abuse Scale | Self-esteem and Autonomy | Family life | Social life | Recreation-wellbeing | Total Score |
|-------------------|--------------------------|-------------|-------------|----------------------|-------------|
| physical abuse    | .270                     | -.474(***)  | .258        | .103                 | .070        |
Correlation matrix in Table (1) indicates that the physical abuse has a significant negative correlation to the second dimension (Family life) of CQOLQ ($r = -0.474, p < 0.01$), but has no significant correlations to the dimensions (Self-esteem & Autonomy, Social life or Recreation & wellbeing) or the total score of CQOLQ. It also indicates that the emotional abuse has a significant negative correlation to the second dimension (Family life) of CQOLQ ($r = -0.608, p < .01$), but has no significant correlations to the dimensions (Self-esteem and Autonomy, Social life or Recreation- wellbeing) or the total score of CQOLQ. As for the neglect subscale it has no significant correlations to any of the dimensions (Self-esteem & Autonomy, Family life, Social life or Recreation & wellbeing) or the total score of CQOLQ. The total score of Child Abuse Scale has a significant negative correlation to the second dimension (Family life) of CQOLQ ($r = -0.500, p < .01$), but has no significant correlations to the dimensions (Self-esteem & Autonomy, Social life or Recreation & wellbeing) or the total score of CQOLQ.

As for assessing the differences between male and female children regarding the link of child abuse and child's quality of life, the result was as follows:

Table 2. Pearson Correlations matrix between Child Abuse Scale (CAS) scores and Child’s Quality Of Life Questionnaire (CQOLQ) scores of male sample n=17

| Child Abuse Scale | Self-esteem and Autonomy | Family life | Social life | Recreation-wellbeing | Total Score |
|-------------------|--------------------------|-------------|-------------|----------------------|-------------|
| physical abuse    | 0.279                    | -0.494(*)   | -0.086      | -0.345               | -0.317      |
| emotional abuse   | -0.013                   | -0.576(*)   | 0.018       | -0.478               | -0.572(*)   |
| Neglect           | 0.232                    | -0.038      | -0.004      | -0.305               | -0.022      |
| Total Score       | 0.282                    | -0.613(**)  | -0.048      | -0.600(*)            | -0.491(*)   |

Note: ** = significant at .01 level (p < .01); * = significant at .05 level (p < .05)

Correlation matrix in Table (2) indicate that the physical abuse has a significant negative correlation to the second dimension (Family life) of CQOLQ ($r = -0.494, p < 0.05$), but has no significant correlations to the dimensions (Self-esteem & Autonomy, Social life and Recreation & wellbeing) and the total score of CQOLQ. It also indicates that the emotional abuse has a significant negative correlation to the second dimension (Family life) and the total score of CQOLQ ($r = -0.576, p < .05$) ($r = -0.572, p < .05$), but has no significant correlations to the dimensions (Self-esteem & Autonomy, Social life and Recreation & wellbeing) of CQOLQ. As for the neglect subscale it has no significant correlations to all dimensions (Self-esteem & Autonomy, Family life, Social life and Recreation & wellbeing) and the total score of CQOLQ. Total score of Child Abuse Scale has a significant negative correlation to the dimensions (Family life and Recreation & wellbeing) and total score of CQOLQ ($r = -0.613, p < 0.01$) ($r = -0.600, p < .05$) ($r = -0.491, p < .05$), but has no significant correlations to the dimensions (Self-esteem & Autonomy, and Social life) and the total score of CQOLQ.

Table 3. Pearson Correlations matrix between Child Abuse Scale (CAS) scores and Child’s Quality Of Life Questionnaire (CQOLQ) scores of female sample n=13

| Child Abuse Scale | Self-esteem and Autonomy | Family life | Social life | Recreation-wellbeing | Total Score |
|-------------------|--------------------------|-------------|-------------|----------------------|-------------|
| physical abuse    | -0.099                   | -0.411      | 0.560(*)    | 0.310                | 0.166       |
| emotional abuse   | -0.391                   | -0.627(*)   | 0.047       | -0.058               | -0.327      |
| Neglect           | 0.278                    | 0.019       | 0.100       | 0.330                | 0.253       |
| Total Score       | -0.034                   | -0.389      | 0.302       | 0.284                | 0.084       |

Note: ** = significant at .01 level (p < .01); * = significant at .05 level (p < .05)
Correlation matrix in Table (3) indicates that the physical abuse has a significant negative correlation to the third dimension (social life) of CQOLQ ($r = -.560, p < .05$), but has no significant correlations to the dimensions (Self-esteem & Autonomy, family life and Recreation & wellbeing) and the total score of CQOLQ. It also indicates that the emotional abuse has a significant negative correlation to the second dimension (Family life) of CQOLQ ($r = -.627, p < .05$), but has no significant correlations to the dimensions (Self-esteem & Autonomy, Social life and Recreation & wellbeing) and the total score of CQOLQ. As for the neglect subscale it has no significant correlations to all dimensions (Self-esteem & Autonomy, Family life, Social life and Recreation & wellbeing) or the total score of CQOLQ. Total score of Child Abuse Scale has no significant correlations to all dimensions (Self-esteem & Autonomy, Family life, Social life and Recreation & wellbeing) or the total score of CQOLQ.

Table 4. Pearson Correlation between Child Abuse Scale (CAS) total score and Child’s Quality Of Life Questionnaire (CQOLQ) total score according to gender (male - female)

| Correlation between Child Abuse Scale scores and Child’s Quality Of Life Questionnaire scores | male (n=17) | female (n=13) |
|---|---|---|
| Correlation | -.491(*) | .084 |

Note: ** = significant at .01 level ($p < .01$); * = significant at .05 level ($p < .05$)

Table (4) demonstrates the significantly negative correlation ($r = -.491, p < .05$) in the male sample, while no significant correlation was found in the female sample ($r = 0.048, p > .05$).

Summary of the results: Study results confirmed that dimensions of child's quality of life would be differently affected by different types of child abuse (physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect).

Emotional abuse was negatively correlated with CQOLQ dimensions of family life, self-esteem & autonomy, recreation & well-being, and the CQOLQ total score, but the negative correlation was not significant except for the family life dimension.

Physical abuse had a significantly negative correlation with the QCOLQ dimension of family life, but had no correlations with other dimensions or total score of CQOLQ.

Neglect had a negative but not significant correlation with the CQOLQ dimensions of family life, but no correlation has been found between neglect and other dimensions or total score of CQOLQ.

Child abuse as represented by total score of CAS had a significantly negative correlation with the CQOLQ dimension of family life, but no correlation has been found between CAS total score and other dimensions or total score of CQOLQ.

As for gender difference, results indicated that there is a significant negative correlation between child abuse and quality of life of male children, while no correlation has been found between child abuse and quality of life of female children. Data analysis of male sample indicated that most of CAS subscale scores were negatively correlated to most of CQOLQ dimensions (table 2). Data analysis of female sample showed less negative correlations between CAS subscales and CQOLQ dimensions (table 3).

4. Discussion and conclusion

Different types of child abuse proved to affect dimensions of child's quality of life differently. Emotional abuse proved to have negative effects upon child's quality of life more than the other two types of abuse; physical abuse and neglect. This result is consistent with results of Marianne James (James, 2000: 1), she thought that emotional abuse can be extremely damaging for a child. This result is also consistent with Corby's view, as he considered emotional abuse to be the most difficult type to identify and the most difficult type to deal with (Corby, 2006: 97). According to Romeo (Romeo, 2000: 185) emotional abuse directly attacks child's self-esteem; this can harm a child's well-being more than other types of abuse.
On the part of affected dimensions of child's quality of life, family life proved to be the most affected dimension. It was significantly affected by physical abuse, emotional abuse and the total score of CAS, it was also negatively affected by neglect, but the negative correlation was not statistically significant. This can be explained when we take into consideration that child abuse is inflicted by a parent or by both parents, this means that a child feels threatened by whom he/she considered to be the source of love and protection (Jouriles, 2008: 221), that could explain why family life was the most harmed area of child's quality of life. An abused child may look somewhere else for love and protection which he/she may find in nonfamily relationships or social support (Afifi & McMillan, 2011: 271).

Gender differences indicated that female children showed better resilience than male children regarding abuse experiences. Some studies discussed individual protective factors against abuse, like ego control and intelligence (Afifi & McMillan, 2011: 273), but the gender factor was not sufficiently discussed (Mohammadkhani et. Al., 2012: 31). The cultural context may explain why female children have shown better resilience; As daughters are usually more committed to family than sons in Egyptian culture, a daughter has to develop a stronger bond to family life, which may help her cope with difficult family circumstances including abuse.

5. Clinical implications

Child abuse studies had attention focused upon the long term consequences of abuse, but less attention has been given to the immediate effects of abuse. It is important to identify and understand characteristics of abused children, because they can be used as indicators of maltreatment when other ways of investigation fail to find out if a child is being abused. Furthermore, taking abused children's characteristics into consideration can improve our intervention plans; for sometimes imprudent intervention can make a situation worse.

6. Directions for future research

Results of this study indicated that coping with child abuse experiences vary according to gender of the child. Future research may investigate the protecting factors related to gender to answer the question: What factors can contribute to a female (or a male) child resilience after exposure to abuse experiences?

Studies of quality of life perspective is traditionally adult-centric (Casas, 2005: 1), this can be acceptable when studying adults' quality of life. But the subjective nature of quality of life makes it important to focus on children's view when studying child's quality of life. Future research of child's quality of life should give more attention to children's experiences and opinions for better understanding and assessment of children's quality of life.

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