

Prevalence and Risk Factors for Parental Violence against Children: A Review Study

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Abstract

Background

Today, parental violence against children is regarded an important public health, human rights issue and a social problem that leads to devastating consequences affecting the family, society and the country, and is passed on to future generations. The aim of the present study was to review the prevalence and risk factors for parental violence against children.

Materials and Methods: In this narrative review a search of online databases (Medline, EMBASE, and Scopus) for studies published till Nov 2020, 57 articles have been reviewed, of which 11 related articles were included in this review. Study selection was done by two reviews.

Results: The present study showed high prevalence of parental violence against children in most countries and the most common type of violence is physical and psychological violence. Poor socioeconomic status, low level of education of one or both parents, experience of physical violence of parents in childhood, and the number of children in the family are among important risk factors for increasing prevalence of parental violence against children.

Conclusion

Considering the high prevalence of parental violence against children and subsequent psychological effects on children, there is a growing need to inform parents of the consequences of violence against children and to adopt preventive measures. In this regard, educational authorities such as schools and the media can play a very important role and it is necessary to provide the necessary educational programs for parents.

Key Words: Children, Parents, Violence.

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1- INTRODUCTION

Violence against children is an important public health, human rights issue, and a social problem that has devastating consequences affecting the family, society and the country and is passed on to future generations (1). The World Health Organization (WHO) has defined violence against children and child neglect as, any interaction between children and others, including physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual harassment, deception, and even the commercial exploitation occurring beyond cultural and social norms (2). The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that 6 out of 10 children aged 2 to 14 experience physical violence (3). Some people struggle with violence in a world where the family and social environment should be a safe haven for residents, especially children (4). Children and adolescents are often referred to as the most vulnerable victims of violence (5).

Child abuse in the family often ranges from depriving a child of food, clothing, shelter and parental affection to cases in which children are physically abused by an adult and openly lead to their injury and sometimes death (6). The occurrence of physical violence against children is assessed on the basis of data recorded in police or medical reports; however, parental violence against children is not always reported to the authorities (7).

Domestic violence against a child encompasses a wide range of traumatic behaviors, which are categorized in four domains: physical, sexual, neglect, and emotional-psychological abuse. Physical abuse of children usually includes punching, kicking, and beating, grabbing, and suffocating. Emotional-psychological abuse includes verbal abuse, humiliation, and actions that cause fear or panic in the child, which may lead to the child's mental illness in the future. Sexual harassment entails the involvement of children and

adolescents with developmental immaturity in sexual activities that they do not fully understand and are not able to express their consent to do so, or violation of the social taboos of family roles. Neglect includes inadequate health care, education, monitoring, protection against environmental hazards, and basic unmet needs such as clothing and food. Child neglect is the most common type of child abuse (8). Parental violence against children is associated with several consequences. Physical and emotional developmental impairment (9) leads to decreased learning ability, increased likelihood of future health risk behaviors such as smoking, alcohol consumption, and obesity (2). Anxiety, depression, guilt, low self-confidence, isolation, and hyperactivity are other adverse effects of violence against children (10, 11).

On the other hand, it increases the probability of suicide rate among children in the future and leads to problems in achieving academic, professional and family success (4). Children and adolescents who are deprived of their parents' physical and verbal affection and are abused by their parents are at greater risk of running away from home and, ultimately, of sexual exploitation and prostitution (12). Physical violence is associated with increased childhood aggression and antisocial behavior (13).

In addition to physical and psychological harm, parental violence against children imposes a significant financial burden on society. Children continue to experience physical violence from their parents, despite the legal prohibition of corporal punishment on children in many countries (7). Various factors lead to parental violence against children. Addressing violence against children and its risk factors as a health problem and social harm can help us achieve a better understanding and solution for this problem and prevent and deal with it

effectively by providing the necessary solutions. The aim of the present study is to review articles on the prevalence of parental violence against children and to investigate its risk factors.

2- MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this narrative review a search of online databases (Medline, EMBASE, and Scopus), and Google Scholar for studies published till Nov 2020, 57 articles have been reviewed, of which 11 related articles were included in this review. Study selection was done by two reviews. Database search was done for possible studies, abstracts of the studies were screened for identification of eligible studies, full text articles were obtained and assessed and a final list of included studies was made. This process was done independently and in duplication by two reviewers and any disagreement was resolved by the 3rd reviewer. We developed a researcher made form and followed it for each study. Two reviewers collected the data independently, collected data was combined and compared for accuracy and any discrepancies were solved by a third reviewer.

3- RESULTS

An ecological study was conducted using the cluster analysis of data from the health and population survey study by Karimi et al., in Iran. In this study, a total of 31,300 families in 31 provinces were surveyed regarding the prevalence of violence against children. In this study, the prevalence of violence against children under 14 years of age was estimated to be 28.2%, with the highest type of violence being verbal violence (76.99), and the lowest related to physical violence (13.12). In this study, factors such as low socioeconomic status, social capital, level of education and being religious were related to the level of parental violence against children (6). Pengpid and Peltzer

conducted a study in Sierra Leone to assess the prevalence and risk factors of child abuse by surveying 165 mothers of children aged 5 to 14 years. Results showed that prevalence of psychological violence was 85.7% (85.7% in girls and 85.6% in boys), moderate physical violence was 66.1% (64.9% in girls and 67.2% in boys), and severe physical violence was 54.4% (53.8% in girls and 55.1% in boys). In this study, approximately one in 10 children did not experience child abuse and 17.7% experienced one, 32.4% experienced two, and 41.3% experienced all three types of psychological, moderate, and severe physical violence. In this study, the older age of the child, poor economic status, rural life, ethnicity, and attitude of the mother towards corporal punishment were among risk factors of violence against children (14).

Harsha et al. investigated 575 boys and 532 girls under 12 years of age in Palestine. Results showed that the prevalence of mild to moderate physical violence was 63.1% and severe violence was 36.9%. The prevalence of mild to moderate physical violence among children six years of age was 65.3% and severe violence was 34.7%. Also, the prevalence of mild to moderate physical violence was 65.5% and severe violence was 34.5% among children aged 6-9 years. Moreover, the prevalence of mild to moderate physical violence was 71.2% and severe violence was 28.8% among children aged 10-12 years.

Fathers showed 1.4 times higher violence than mothers. In this study, younger mothers, fathers' low levels of education, low child-parent dependence and parents exposed to political violence, were mentioned as risk factors for increasing violence against children (15). In a study of 81398 children in the Netherlands, Berkel et al. estimated the prevalence at 20-28 per 1,000 children. Emotional

neglect is the most common type of violence (63.620; 95% CI: 47.995–79.246) followed by physical neglect (32.892; 95% CI: 21.482–44.302), psychological violence (13.058, 95% CI: 5.600–20.515), physical violence (9.883, 95% CI: 3.736–16.030), and sexual violence (2.568, 95% CI: 485–4,651).

Also, children experienced more than one, two, three, and four types of violence in 29%, 25%, 3%, and 1% of cases, respectively. The violence was by mothers, fathers, and both parents in 86.8%, 63%, and 52.2% of cases, respectively. The biggest risk factor was reported to be the low level of education of the parents. Other risk factors included parental unemployment, immigration status, single parent, and family with 4 or more children, and children under 3 years of age. The risk of violence did not increase with respect to sex, but the prevalence of sexual and psychological violence was higher in girls than boys (16).

In a study of 2,716 mothers of children aged 0-12 years, Peltonen et al. showed that 6% of mothers committed severe violence such as slapping, beating, punching, kicking, biting, and hitting a child with an object at least once during last year. Also, a total of 79% of mothers who committed severe physical violence stated that they did it once or twice in the past year; while 5% of them have committed it 3 to 10 times during this time period. Approximately, 3% of mothers have committed severe physical violence more than 10 times during the past year, and 2 mothers did not remember the frequency of severe physical violence.

Factors such as maternal experiences of childhood abuse, the number of children in the family, financial worries, work and family-related stress and lack of support while dealing with problems were mentioned as risk factors for maternal violence against children (7). Wang et al. performed a study on 649 girls and 691

boys of 1337 families in China. They reported that 68% of parents committed physical violence against their children during the last 3 months. Physical violence against children was affected by place of residence (urban/rural), parents' age, parents' education level, marital satisfaction, and parents' experience of physical violence in childhood, and the number of children in the family (17).

Clément et al. investigated the prevalence, concurrence, and ten-year trend of domestic violence against children in the general Canadian population. They focused on three types violence i.e., psychological violence, severe physical violence, and mild physical violence. A total of 4029 children were examined. The results showed that frequent psychological violence, after a rise in 1999 (48%) and 2004 (53%), decreased slightly in 2012 (49%). Mild physical violence steadily decreased during 1999-2012, from 48% to 35%, and the prevalence of severe physical violence remained unchanged (6%).

Yelling at children was the most common type of psychological violence (76.4%) in 2012, followed by swearing or cursing at a child (6.34%). Mild physical violence was mainly expressed in the form of slapping on the hand, arm or leg (26.2%), and grabbing (14.5%). The majority of mothers (80.2%) reported at least one psychological abuse of their child during the last 12 months, however, less than half (49%) of them reported frequent psychological abuse during the year.

Mild and severe physical violence were reported in 34.7% and 5.6% of cases, respectively. A total of 28.8% of children experienced both psychological and slight physical violence. All three types of violence were experienced by 4% (4.2%) in the past year (psychological violence, mild and severe physical violence), (18). In a study of the prevalence of violence against students and their relationship to mental health in Uganda, Ssenyongaa et al.

found at least one form of domestic violence in the past month among 663 out of 698 students. A total of 83.6% of students experienced at least one type of domestic physical violence during the last month. Slapping hands, feet or arms (84.9%), spanking (43.9%), and slapping faces, heads or ears (40.2%) were reported as the most common types of physical violence in this study. Also, 86.1% of students experienced at least one type of domestic emotional violence during the last month. The most common types of emotional violence included yelling (49.8%), threatening to beat (46.6%), and being labeled as lazy or other bad titles by parents (42.4%). A total of 79.2% of students experienced at least one type of neglect in the last month (19).

Ralo et al. carried out a study on the prevalence of domestic violence and its risk factors among 656 students aged 11-17 years of age in southern Sao Paulo, Brazil. They found that 39.9% of students reported domestic violence. Girls (44.1%) were more exposed to violence than boys (31.1%) and the rate of violence increased with age, so that the prevalence of violence among students aged 11-13, 14-15, 16-17 years was 35.7%, 42.8%, and 47.8%, respectively; however, there was no significant difference between them.

Female sex and living with the father were also mentioned as violence risk factors (20). Another study was conducted to investigate the prevalence of domestic violence against 598 students aged 11-16 years in Yemen. Results showed that 78.3% of boys and 37.3% of girls had experienced physical violence and 60.7% of girls and 82% of boys had experienced psychological violence (21). In a study, Wiesel et al. estimated that the prevalence of child abuse was 71.5% among 281 Israeli children aged 12-17 years. In this study, emotional violence, emotional neglect, physical violence, physical neglect, sexual abuse, and witnessing

domestic violence were reported in 45.2%, 39.9%, 39.5%, 36.7%, 34.2%, and 21.9% of children, respectively. A total of 47.7% of children also experienced more than one type of violence (22).

4- DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to investigate the prevalence of parental violence against children and its risk factors. The results of the study showed that parental violence against children is an important issue for children and there were many discrepancies between the previous studies regarding the prevalence of the risk of violence. Although children are the most vulnerable to all forms of violence, physical and psychological violence is most prevalent in the majority of studies.

The most common type of violence was physical violence. Physical violence was committed in the mild to severe range, and violence has been repetitive for at least the past year in most studies. Achieving different results and lower prevalence of physical violence in some studies can be due to cultural differences in different societies and environments (6). Various risk factors are involved in parental violence against children. One of these factors is parents' level of education. The results of studies showed a reduction in the average incidence of violence with increasing the level of education of each parent. It can be concluded that the level of violence decreases in families with higher education by knowing conflict resolution strategies in close relationships (23).

Economic problems are another risk factor for violence against children. Lower class families have a higher sense of relative deprivation. These people feel relatively deprived compared to the affluent and upper class families. The present study referred to low socio-economic status as one of the risk factors for violent behaviors against children. There was also a positive and direct relationship between feelings of

relative deprivation with the level of parental violence against children (24). On the other hand, unemployed parents, especially fathers, are more prone to showing violent behaviors due to decreased self-confidence and increased psychological stress (6). Fathers and mothers who display violent behaviors to their children and punish them, may be severely punished by their parents during childhood (25). The cycle of violence, sometimes referred to as the intergenerational transmission of violence, suggests that children at risk of harassment will be the perpetrators of domestic violence in the future (26).

Abusive parents have experienced harassment by their parents or relatives in their childhood (27). Physical violence prevention may be an important barrier to the intergenerational transmission of violent experiences and reinforce nonviolent attitudes and parenting skills (28). Large families have been cited in some studies as a risk factor for increasing the prevalence of violence against children. In large families, insufficient care of children and reduced attention to them leads to stress in parents and increases the prevalence of child abuse. Large families are more exposed to problems and issues that lead to conflict, which in turn leads to increased violence and conflict (24).

Also, the young age of parents was mentioned as a risk factor for increasing violence against children due to lack of parenting knowledge and skills. Younger mothers are more impatient and irritable while raising their children than older mothers, while older mothers acquire more parenting skills and can have a positive effect on their behavior and attitude (15). Child gender was also examined as a risk factor in some studies, which showed different results regarding the prevalence of violent parental behaviors and child gender. Some studies demonstrated that the prevalence of physical violence was

higher in boys than girls, which can be due to several reasons. Boys are usually more resilient than girls and show more disobedient and defiant behaviors and, consequently, face more corporal punishment (29). On the other hand, strict parenting is observed for boys considering their greater freedom and more power than girls. Also, having higher expectations of male gender can be another reason for the increased prevalence of violence among boys (15, 30). However, the increasing prevalence of violence among girls can be rooted in the culture of society and patriarchy (31). Absence of accurate statistics on violence against children does not mean the absence of this problem, but it indicates disregard for this social harm.

Also, since this problem is mainly occurred in the family environment and by family members, it is prevalent in the society unnoticed and always puts children at risk. In many developing countries, the issue of domestic violence remains remained entangled in ambiguity for a wide range of reasons, including fear and ignorance (32). Also, the fear of re-punishment and ignorance of individual and social rights worsen the problems of disclosure and reporting of violence and the true extent of this issue will remain unknown, consequently.

On the other hand, children may regard such violent behaviors as normal behaviors or may not be able to raise these issues due to a sense of loyalty to their parents or due to their young age (33). Considering the high prevalence of parental violence against children and its adverse effects on children's psyche, there is a growing need to educate parents about the consequences of violence against children and to adopt preventive measures. In this regard, educational authorities such as schools and the media play a very important role and it is necessary to provide the necessary educational programs for parents. Also, identifying and protecting children at risk

by child rights organizations and supporting families with risk factors such as poverty, addiction and divorce can reduce the prevalence of violence against children and effective steps can be taken by creating a safe environment for the growth and prosperity of children.

5- CONCLUSION

Considering the high prevalence of parental violence against children and its adverse psychological effects on children, there is a growing need to educate parents about the consequences of violence against children and to adopt preventive measures. In this regard, educational authorities such as schools and the media play a very important role and it is necessary to provide the necessary educational programs for parents. However, caution should be exercised while interpreting these findings due to the small number of articles and the low sample size. Also, the methodological quality of the studies is low, and it is suggested that future studies be designed with a large sample size and an appropriate suitable methodological quality.

6- CONFLICT OF INTEREST: None.

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