Significance of Healthy Family Structure in Preventing Child Sexual Abuse: A Prospective Controlled Study

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to determine the socio-demographic characteristics of victims, parents, and accused or suspected child abusers, and to evaluate the conditions that constitute the risk factors for children falling victim to sexual abuse in Eastern Anatolian Region of Turkey. Personal data files of 63 victims of child sexual abuse were analyzed and compared with 201 individuals in a control group. The children's age, gender, educational level, number of siblings, and the nature of the event they experienced, were all examined. In addition, parents' educational and economic levels; and parents' relationship, were also evaluated. Of the victims 66.7% were female (n=42), while the average age of the victims was 14.2 years. A total of 52.4% (n=33) of the victims were exposed to major crime, and 47.6% (n=30) were exposed to simple sexual activity. Risk factors for children who were exposed to sexual abuse were parental conflict, low educational level of the father, non-working father, low economic level of the family, and crowded family. Domestic violence negatively affects family members, especially children, and is a main risk factor for children becoming victims of abuse.

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Introduction

These days, it is quite common for children to be abused physically, sexually, and emotionally by adults [1, 2]. Child sexual abuse is a form of abuse in which an adult uses a child for sexual satisfaction by force, threat, or bait [3]. Child sexual abuse is the most difficult type of child abuse to detect. Sexual abuse can take several forms, including rape, incest, oral sex, and caressing of genitalia [2]. According to data from the World Health Organization, 20% of women and 5%–10% of men report having been sexually abused as children in 2006 [4]. Although the frequency and prevalence of child sexual abuse in Turkey is not certain, it is estimated to have a frequency of 15% [5]. Risk factors for child sexual abuse generally include the following: one or both parents being deceased, unemployment, severe irreconcilable differences between spouses, divorce or separation, over-crowded family, low socioeconomic status, low educational level, poor parent-child relationship, immigration, and existence of major diseases [6, 7].

In this study, we aimed to determine the socio-demographic characteristics of children, parents, and accused or suspected child sexual abusers concerning the same act and identifying the factors that led children to become victims of sexual abuse in Erzurum, the largest city in eastern Turkey.

Materials and methods

Personal data files belonging to 63 victims of child sexual abuse who were admitted to Ataturk University Medical Faculty, Department of Forensic Medicine, were analyzed and compared with the control group. Findings such as age; gender; child's educational level; family characteristics (such as number of children); work and health status; parents' educational and financial problems; and parental conflicts were evaluated. The nature of events, as well as the suspects' characteristics, including age, gender, and marital status, were evaluated. Socio-demographic survey was designed to gather information such as age, gender, education level, parents' employment status, family's socioeconomic status, and number of children in the family. Economic levels of the family were grouped according to the family's inability to provide sufficient financial resources to meet minimum basic needs. In our study, mothers who were housewives were grouped as "unemployed". Parents' education levels were grouped into either "low educational level" (completion of primary and junior high school) or "high educational level" (completion of high school and university). The presence of physical or mental illness—or death—was examined. The

parents with physical or mental illnesses (or who had died) were grouped as "parents with health problems," and those suffering no illness or death were grouped as "parents without health problems." Parental disputes, physical or psychological harm between spouses, divorce, or living separately were examined, and victims' parents were grouped as either "those with parental conflict" or "those without parental conflict."

The control group consisted of volunteers who were admitted to a general pediatric outpatient clinic and had no pronounced physical or mental illnesses. Statistical Package for Social Sciences software (SPSS 20.0, Chicago, IL, USA) was used for statistical analysis. A chi-square (x^2) test was employed for the comparison of categorical variables. The differences between normally distributed numeric variables were evaluated through students' t-tests. The variables that were found to be significant in the univariate analysis ($p<0.05$) were included in the multiple logistic regression analysis. Statistical significance was assumed for $p<0.05$.

Results

The victims of sexual abuse were mostly adolescent girls in primary or junior high school (66.7%) with a mean age of 14.2 (SD: ± 14.2; 6-18). There were no statistical differences between victims of sexual abuse and the control group in terms of age and gender (Table 1). Of the victims of sexual abuse, after the event, 19% (n=12) either left school or their cases were suspended; their school performance got worse 42.9% (n=27); or they married without an official license 4.8% (n = 3). Of the cases, 6.3% (n=4) were mentally retarded and one was deaf/mute; 52.4 % (n=33) were victims of a major crime; and 47.6 (n=30) were victims of simple sexual activity. When the accused or suspected were examined in these offences, all were male and 77.8% (n=49) were older than 18 years of age. A total of 52.4% (n=33) were between 19 and 30 years of age, and 68.3% (n=43) were single. In total, 66.7% (n=42) of the cases were acquaintances of the children, 12 of the cases were relatives of the victim, and 79.2% (n=19) of the children's parents had severe irreconcilable differences. The number of children was not associated with being a victim of sexual abuse (Table 1). Although the number of children was not significant to becoming a victim of sexual abuse in univariate analysis, there was significance in logistic regression analysis with the Enter method (Table 2). Parental conflict, financial problems, low education level of father, unemployed father, and number of children in the family were parameters associated with sexual abuse in multivariate analysis (R2: 0.614; Table 2). The presence of financial problems in the family increased the possibility of sexual abuse to children 18.2 times (95% CI: 3.490–94.114).

Parental conflict increased the possibility of sexual abuse to children by 40 times) (95% CI: 9.083–176.633).

Table 1. Bivariate analysis of data belonging to children who are sexual crime victims.

Characteristic		Sexual Abuse (N = 63)	Control Group (N = 201)	p Value
Mean Age		14.2 ($\pm$ 3.04)	13.1 ($\pm$ 3.09)	0.19
Male		33.3%	33.8%	0.942
Mean Number of Children		4.2 ($\pm$1.6)	4.1 ($\pm$1.2)	0.594
Family Characteristics				
Parental Conflict	Yes	72.7% (24)	27.3% (9)	**<0.0001**
	No	17.6 (39)	82.4% (183)	
Father's Health (Ill or Deceased)	Yes	45.5% (5)	54.5% (6)	0.086
	No	22.9% (58)	77.1% (195)	
Mother's Health (Ill or Deceased)	Yes	70% (7)	30% (3)	**<0.0001**
	No	22% (56)	78% (198)	
Low Education Level of Mother	Yes	23.8% (60)	76.2% (192)	0.925
	No	25% (3)	75% (9)	
Low Education Level of Father	Yes	43.3% (55)	56.7% (72)	**<0.0001**
	No	5.8% (8)	94.2% (129)	
Employed Mother	Yes	20% (3)	80% (12)	0.738
	No	23.8% (58)	76.2% (186)	
Unemployed Father	Yes	42.3% (11)	57.7% (15)	**0.02**
	No	21.7% (50)	78.3% (180)	
Financial Problems	Yes	42.1% (61)	57.9% (84)	**<0.0001**
	No	1.7% (2)	98.3% (117)	

Table 2. Multivariate analysis of data belonging to children who are victims of sexual crime.

Characteristic	*p* Value	Odds Ratio	95% CI (Lower–Upper)
Parental Conflict	**<0.0001**	40.054	9.083–176.633
Financial Problems	**0.001**	18.124	3.490–94.114
Mother's Health (Ill or Deceased)	0.999	0	0
Low Education Level of Father	**<0.0001**	9.097	2.839–29.147
Non-working Father	**0.036**	0.241	0.064–0.910
Number of Children	**0.036**	0.760	0.522–1.033

(R- square: 0.614)

Discussion

Research suggests that multiple variables, rather than a single variable, increase the risk of child sexual abuse. The primary purpose of this study was to assess certain family characteristics of children who had been sexually abused. In this study, we found that the presence of parental conflict was the most important risk factor in children becoming victims of sexual abuse (Table 2). Family discord is a known risk factor for children being sexually abused [8, 9]. On the other hand, results from a few studies have suggested that childhood sexual abuse increases the risk of falling into domestic violence situations [10]. Disputes between parents affect children the most. Damage to cognitive, behavioral, social, and emotional functions may occur to children who are exposed to violence [11]. Domestic violence may cause parents to neglect their children, encounter problems with child care, and cause outsiders to become involved with the family. As a result of the deterioration of parental relationships, children may rebel and increase their chances of being exposed to sexual abuse.

In this study, we found that financial problems and an unemployed father were other risk factors associated with the family. In various studies, it has been reported that financial problems within the family and unemployment of the father are among the risk factors associated with child abuse

[12-16]. Unemployment of the father and financial problems are related to each other and contribute to the occurrence of domestic violence. Witnessing or being exposed to domestic violence directly and negatively affects children and their relationships with their parents. Stress and irregularities in family life caused by financial problems may cause the deterioration of standard housing conditions, and as a result, the abuse of children at home.

Low parental education level is another known risk factor associated with child abuse [16]. In our study, low education level of the father was found to be a risk factor, but low education level of the mother was statistically insignificant. According to a 2012 annual report from the Turkey Statistical Institute, among individuals older than 15, females were less educated than males across the country, and this difference was more pronounced in in eastern part of Turkey. For child abuse, showing no statistical difference in terms of being less educated as a mother was associated with a low education level for women in our region [17].

The greater the number of individuals living in the family or sharing a bed and room with parents, siblings, guests, and other friends or relatives, the more likely children were to suffer from sexual abuse [13, 14, 18]. In addition, being part of a crowded family was statistically significant in the likelihood of children being sexually abused.

Most of the offenders of sexual abuse cases are reported to be acquaintances of the children [19]. In our study, 66.7% (n=42) of the cases were acquaintances of the children and 79.2% (n=19) of these children's parents had severe conflicts and irreconcilable differences. It is thought that in a family with domestic violence, divorce, alcoholism, and substance abuse, children can move away from parental control, and this can be a facilitating factor in children becoming victims of sexual abuse. Abusers who are acquaintances are usually aware that the child lives in an unhealthy, unprotected family environment far from parental control; victims are not chosen randomly. Abusers can influence children, as they know of the children's problems with their families, and so they offer to meet the child's needs.

It is reported that rates of non-attendance at school and not getting age-appropriate education are more common in abused children and adolescents [20]. In our study, it was found that a significant portion of abuse victims showed a decrease in school success, and 19% (n=12) quit school. Dropping out of school or showing a decrease in school success implies a secondary injury due to a sexual act. Besides, in the long term, disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder, major

depression, and other adverse effects on behavioral or personality development constitute even greater negative results in abuse victims.

The presence of parental conflict, family financial problems, and low education level of the father all affect children adversely, thereby constituting important risk factors for being sexually abused. Besides psychological pathologies in abuse victims, conditions such as dropping out of school or deteriorating academic success rates can occur in the long term. In the family, which is the basic structural unit of society, establishing good relations amongst family members and children is likely to result in strong family ties and a healthy societal structure.

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