Student Perceptions Relating to Family Abuse: A Phenomenological Study in Turkey

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Abstract

In this study it is aimed to investigate the perceptions of primary school students' exposed to family abuse. This study was conducted with thirteen students studying in the province of Sakarya in Turkey. The research is formed in qualitative patterns. In this study, "snowball sampling", one of the sampling methods, is used. According to the research results, the students have been exposed to physical, emotional and economic abuse. There are some important findings such as emotional irritation, physical strikes, running away from home, tending to respond to violence with violence, feeling humiliation and contempt, having difficulty to focus on the courses and their schools, working at home or outside. The children participating in the interview stated that they were exposed to family abuse emotionally, physically or economically as a result it is clearly seen that their moods, behaviors and their school marks are highly and badly affected from this abuse and neglect. Most of the children did not want to reveal this fact by the fear of their families; however, it is easily understood that, in fact, they really want to get help to get rid of this situation. There are also some suggestions such as increasing the social measures to decrease the risk of family abuse, application of the scales to the students in the schools for determining the family abuse and collaboration of the school administration, provincial social services director, guide service, classroom teacher to improve the awareness towards the increasing family abuse.

Keywords: Child abuse; Child neglect; Emotional abuse; Physical abuse; Economical abuse.

Simply stated, child abuse is the bad treatment of a child under the age of eighteen by a parent, caretaker, someone living in their home or someone who works with or around children. Child abuse is a worldwide problem with medical, legal, and ethical issues. It can mainly be described under the terms of physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse and neglect (Onal, 2007). The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) defines child abuse and neglect as: "at a minimum, 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" (CAPTA, 1974). World Health Organization (WHO) defines 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 (WHO, 1999).

Child physical abuse is commonly defined as the non-accidental infliction of any type of physical harm or injury onto a child by a parent or caretaker (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychology, 2001). The most common forms of physical abuse include hitting, kicking, punching, biting, whipping, and burning. Physical abuse can be identified by physical indicators such as welts, human bite marks, bald spots, burns, skeletal and head injuries, lacerations, and abrasions, discoloration of skin, and unexplained bruise marks in various stages of healing (Prevent Child Abuse North Carolina, 2002). Children who are physically abused are more likely to have suicidal thoughts, learning impairments, conduct disorder, a poor self-image, abuse drugs or alcohol, sexually act out, and/or show signs of depression (Kolko, 2001). Adults who were physically abused as children have problems establishing intimate personal relationships. They are at higher risk for anxiety, depression, substance abuse, medical abuse, medical illness, and problems with school or work (Straus, 1994). Furthermore, adults abused as children tend to continue the cycle of abuse by abusing their own children (Cappell & Heiner, 1990).

Emotional child abuse is maltreatment which results in impaired psychological growth and Development (Garbarino & Garbarino, 1994). Emotional abuse is defined as any behavior which interferes with a child's mental health or social development. This includes name-calling, shaming, shouting and yelling at the child, comparing the child to others in a negative manner, and making the child feel worthless or a failure. It also includes failing to give the child the affection and support necessary for the development of a child's emotional, social,

physical and intellectual well-being. This includes withholding physical affection, not telling the child he/she is loved and cared for, withdrawal of attention, and lack of praise and support (Falzon, 2007). Most emotional abuse occurs for many of the same reasons that physical abuse occurs. Parents are vulnerable to becoming involved in maltreatment if stresses in their lives build up or if they are unable to manage these stresses. They may also have diminished capacity for understanding and dealing with children (mental retardation, psychopathology, alcoholism, and drug abuse), false ideas about children's needs, or sadistic psychosis (Garbarino & Garbarino, 1994). The consequences of emotional child abuse can be serious and long-term. During their childhood, victims may fail to thrive or their developmental progress may be halted. Some may also become poorly adjusted emotionally and psychologically (Emotional Abuse & Young Children, 1995). As teenagers, they find it difficult to trust, participate in and achieve happiness in interpersonal relationships, and resolve the complex feelings left over from their childhoods. As adults, they may have trouble recognizing and appreciating the needs and feelings of their own children and emotionally abuse them as well (Garbarino & Garbarino, 1994).

Sexual abuse of a child is inappropriately exposing or subjecting the child to sexual contact, activity, or behavior. Sexual abuse includes oral, anal, genital, buttock, and breast contact. It also includes the use of objects for vaginal or anal penetration, fondling, or sexual stimulation. This sexual activity may be with a boy or a girl and is done for the benefit of the offender. In addition, exploitation of a child for pornographic purposes, making a child available to others as a child prostitute, and stimulating a child with inappropriate solicitation, exhibitionism, and erotic material are also forms of sexual abuse (Sexual Abuse & Young Children, 1999). Occurrences of sexual abuse, which can also be directed at young children, tend to rise after the onset of puberty, with the highest rates occurring during adolescence. Findings from several international studies show rates of sexual abuse to be 1.5-3 times higher among girls than boys. Estimates suggest that males account for 25-35% of child sexual abuse victims (Finkelhor, 1994). Factors that may increase a child's risk of sexual abuse include being between the ages of 7 and 13 (Finkelhor, 1994), having the absence of a parent from the home, and being a young child who appears isolated, depressed, or lonely (Basic Facts about Child Sexual Abuse, 1996). The majority of sexual abuse of children is done by someone the child knows (Prevent Child Abuse America, 1999). Sexual abuse can occur within the family (by a parent, step-parent, guardian, older sibling, or relative) or outside the family (often by a person well known by the child and family) (Sexual Abuse & Young Children, 1999).

Looking at a number of retrospective surveys, results have indicated that no more than 10-30% of the offenders were strangers (Finkelhor, 1994). Although children who have experienced sexual abuse may be too frightened to tell anyone, there are physical and behavioral signs that may be seen Behavioral signs are extreme changes in behavior (loss of appetite, eating disorder, clingingness, withdrawal, aggressiveness); recurrent nightmares, disturbed sleep patterns, or a sudden fear of the dark; regression to infantile behavior (bedwetting, thumb sucking, excessive crying); fear of a particular person or fear of being left alone with a particular person or at a particular place; frequent lying, and delinquent behavior or a fall in grades at school (Prevent Child Abuse America, 1999). Polansky's conceptual definition of child neglect is widely accepted; "A condition in which a caretaker responsible for the child, either deliberately or by extraordinary inattentiveness, permits the child to experience avoidable present suffering and/or fails to provide one or more of the ingredients generally deemed essential for developing a person's physical, intellectual and emotional capacities." (Polansky, Gaudin, & Kilpatrick, 1992). For CAPTA, neglect is failure to provide for a child's basic needs. Neglect may be: Physical (e.g., failure to provide necessary food or shelter, or lack of appropriate supervision), Medical (e.g., failure to provide necessary medical or mental health treatment), Educational (e.g., failure to educate a child or attend to special education needs), Emotional (e.g., inattention to a child's emotional needs, failure to provide psychological care, or permitting the child to use alcohol or other drugs) (CAPTA, 1974). Many researchers have indicated that child neglect is strongly correlated with poverty and unemployment (Menick, 2001; Wolfe, 1999). It was also suggested that the size of the family could also increase the risk for all abuse types. Data from a range of countries indicate that household overcrowding increases the risk of child abuse (Youssef, Attia, & Kamel, 1998; Kim et al., 2000).

Method

The Research Model

The research was developed in qualitative design. Qualitative Research Method, taking place in the natural environment, is a more convenient method to get more understanding and meaning from the experiences and to make healthier interpretations from them. In this research, phenomenonology pattern which is one of the appropriate qualitative research designs is used. Phenomenology pattern is a research design creating the opportunity

to review the phenomena deeply which we know in fact but when explained on the scientific findings we cannot produce sharp rhetoric and is creating rich discourse to interpret (Yaman, 2010).

Those who want to investigate the social cases such as abuse can reveal the underlying states not just the shown more healthily by using qualitative methods such as interviews and observations. Due to the nature of qualitative research, the findings cannot be generalized but it presents deep data related to family abuse.

Instruments

In the study, interview form for the students exposed to abuse was used. While developing this form, related literature research and expert opinions have been used. Interview method is a data collection tool which provides us why and what people think, their feelings, attitudes, experiences, wishes and explains their perceptions and descriptions of reality and the factors referring their behaviors. It is also a method like a conversation and it supplies the deeper information about the people (May, 1996; Punch, 2005; Robson, 2001). In the research standardized open-ended interview (Patton, 1990) is used as the structure.

Process

While writing the recorded data Mayring's (2000) descriptive record system is based. Content analysis approach is frequently used in the analyze of qualitative analysis of interview data and open-ended questions (such as, Bell, 1999; Robson, 2001). In our research categorical analyze of the content analyze types is used. First, the message is divided into units and then these units make a group which is previously identified (Tavşancil & Aslan, 2001). In that case, codes takes function as creating a full and meaningful group of independent parts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Creating categories and their subcategories allows researcher to re-examine the data (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner & Steinmetz, 1998). The perception of the faculty members, exposed to mobbing, about the organizational culture and climate is examined in twelve categories. The perceptions about family abuse of the students exposed to family abuse were examined in four main categories below.

Findings

Emotional Abuse Oriented Findings

Abusers constantly reject, ignore, belittle, dominate, and criticize the victims (Garbarino, 1994). All students participating in the interview stated that they exposed to verbal abuse from their families. For example; "*My mother says she does not love me, she will lock me to the basement and she regrets giving birth to me.*" [YB,K5,K]. "*They say they hate me.*" [EK,K4,K]. "*She says she will kill and beat me.*" [SK,K7,E]. "*When my father gets angry with me he says he will send me away from home.*" [MB,K7,E]. "*My father always humiliates us.*" [BS,K9,E].

Physical Abuse Oriented Findings

Physical abuse usually occurs in discrete, low frequency episodes and is often accompanied by frustration and anger toward the child (Kelly, 1983). The children are exposed to physical abuse from their families. For example; "*My father covers my face with blankets, I cannot breath.*" [AB,K6,E]. "*He beats me with rolling pins.*" [SK,K6,E]. "*My father always beats me when I annoy him.*" [MB,K7,E]. "*My father drinks alcohol too much and when he comes to home he beats my mother, my sister and me.*" [YA,K9,E]. "*My father drinks much; unfortunately we are exposed to physical violence.*" [Çİ,K8,K]. "*My father beats me and my mother even near the guests.*" [AU,K5,K]. "*My father beats all of us and he beats me harshly. He always has excuses for himself.*" [NU,K7,K].

Some of the students participating in the interview state that they are forced to do the housework requiring physical features above their ages and their physical development: "*When my mother is not at home, she has me wash the dishes, clean the house. Then, she has me do the laundry.*" [YB,K5,K]. "*When my mother comes from work, there are some dishes and she gets annoyed with me and asks why I don not wash them. We are six brothers and sisters; she wants me to do all the works in the house.*" [İS,K8,E.]. "*Hanging out the laundry, doing the housework, sweeping the house.*" [EK,K4,K]. "*He says I will go to the field or else he will beat me. When I do not do anything, he threatens to see in the evening, he has me work and he beats me.*" [SK,K6,E].

Physical abuse may include beating, squeezing, burning, lacerating, suffocating, binding, poisoning, exposing to excessive heat or cold, sensory overload (e.g., excessive light, sound, stench, aversive taste), and prevention of sleep (Wolfe, 1988). It is such an interesting

point that most of the students state they have some injuries as a result of their being exposed to the physical abuse from their families: *"I have so bad injuries on my face because he hits me harshly."* [YB,K5,K]. *"My mother beat me on the street and I fell down and my head started to bleed. After a while we went to the doctor and they sutured my head."* [AT,K6,K]. *"For example, when my father hits me harshly I look at my face in the mirror and see his five fingers marks and sometimes those marks last long."* [İS, K8,E]. *"I took my coat to go outside. She said that it was clear, I could make it dirty. She beat me and my arm turned black and blue."* [MB,K7,E].

Economical Abuse Oriented Findings

Children greatly need and deserve to be protected regardless of the life challenges and circumstances of their parents. However; some of the children cannot reach the welfare line they deserve. It is noteworthy that all of the students come from a lower socio-economic level: *"My family cannot afford my demands. I lost my cravat and I want them to buy me a new one but my mother told that we could not. Our deputy manager always warns me to buy."* [YB,K5,K]. *"All of my clothes were worn out, I liked a dress. I remember begging my mother to buy it but she did not buy."* [CD,K4,K]. *"I wanted clothes, I wanted some nice and neat clothes on me but my mother did not buy and I got disappointed."* [EK,K4,K].

Children are made to work miserably in order to earn little money. They struggle to earn enough money to feed their families. Some of the children stated that they worked after the school hours to help their families economically. *"My father gets angry when I do not go to bazaar; he wants me to work to earn money."* [SK,K7,E]. *"I help one of my relatives in his shop."* [AT,K6,K]. *" I work for my own requirements. I work at a shoemaker or bazaar. We have hazelnut groves in our village; we go there to pick them up. When I do not want to go with them, my father forces me to go; he is the only one who decides about this."* [İS,K8,E]. *"I earn money but my father takes it from me."* [BS,K9,E].

The Results towards the Physical, Emotional and Economic Impact of Children

Some of the children participating in the interview indicated that they want to respond to their families by showing violence against violence they exposed to. *"I want to go away but I have nowhere to go. If I go outside, he will catch me there. I want to respond them with the same."* [YB,K5,K]. *"For example, one time I pushed him to protect myself."* [MB,K7,E]. *"I will do the same to him when he beats me too much; I cannot stand it."* [İS,K8,E].

Some of the children indicated that they tried to protect themselves against the physical violence: "*If I have no place to hidden, I try to close my face.*" [CD,K4,K]. "*If my mother cases me, I close myself to the room and lock the door.*" [NU,K7,K]. "*I push her while closing my face.*" [EK,K4,K].

Most of the children cry against the physical violence: "*I feel bad and I cry.*" [YB,K5,K]. "*I worry too much and I cry in my bed.*" [AT,K6,K]. "*I feel sorry, I cry. I tell my grandmother that they will suffer the same when I grow up.*" [SK,K7,E]. "*I feel upset and cry when he pulls my hair.*" [EK,K4,K].

Children stated that the reason of their running away from home is the abuse they are exposed to from their families: "*My father told me to go away and never come back. I escape from home.*" [İS,K8,E]. "*They lock me to the basement for four days or so. They tell me to go away from home and I go to my aunt.*" [MB,K7,E]. "*I get angry when my father beats me and run away from home.*" [BS,K9,E]. "*I run to the balcony and go to my aunt from there. She protects me.*" [SK,K7,E]. "*Then, I relax and come back to home at night. They do not worry about me till that time and this is the worst thing ever.*" [İS,K8,E].

One of the important findings is that the children exposed to abuse cannot focus on their courses at school. "*I cannot focus on my lessons.*" [AT,K6,K]. "*It affects my lessons in a bad way. I cannot tell my friends that my mother is always beating me.*" [YB,K5,K]. "*I cannot concentrate during the lessons. I usually daydream at the school.*" [AU,K5,K]. "*When I come to school, I feel bad. I cannot participate in the lessons when I remember the happenings. I cannot share most of them because I do not want to make them unhappy.*" [MB,K7,E]. "*It affects my lessons and I want to cry on the course.*" [SK,K7,E]. "*I always remember them beating me*." [EK,K4,K].

Many research studies conclude that psychopathologic symptoms are more likely to develop in emotionally abused children (Jantz, 1995). Children feel condescended and humiliated because of the abuse. "*Everybody looks at me when she beats me in front of them. She hits me and shakes me and I feel sorry. I want to do the same to her. I do not cry and I do not tell anyone what I have lived.*" [MB,K7,E]. "*Girls do not have too much value in the society.*"

Discussion

Because abusive behavior is often cyclic, many health and developmental problems in early childhood can lead to behavioral, educational, and psycho-emotional problems in later adolescence and adulthood, which could lead to the recurrence of abusive behavior (Cohn, 1997). It is seen that all of the children feel valueless, heartbreak and sadness; and they cannot love and trust in their families. These negatives are all reflected in their school. They stated the bad moments they have lived always come to their minds. Girls usually choose the path to relief in tears while boys are choosing to leave home. They all shared the desire to be loved by their families and they all want to live peaceful and happy like their other friends. Indeed, as a result of the interviews the emotional abuse oriented findings are similar to the findings of (Garbarino & Garbarino, 1994) in the same direction of feeling insecurity and complexity.

Farzon (2007) revealed the fact that physical, social, emotional and mental developments of emotionally abused children are affected negatively with the insults they are exposed to and the words that they hear from their families. According to the findings of the research, children hear humiliating words that affect their emotional development negatively. As a result of these bad words they hear and negative attitudes they see from their families, they believe that their families do not love them. It may be considered as a handicap to imagine a healthy future for tiny children while growing in such an environment.

The families of the children are waiting them to do housework. This housework expected from them are quite heavy for some of the children's age and physical strength but they still do it to make their families happy however they do not want to do. Physical abuse of the children stands out as a serious problem. Children victims of violence want to give the same respond to the person who practices violence. However, they cannot lift their hands against to the people who are their mothers and fathers. The child facing this difficult situation either tries to escape from this person or protect their bodies with their tiny hands. While boys tend to leave the home, girls choose to close themselves to a room to cry until their parents calm down. This emotional breakdown of physically abused children has been put forward by Kolko (2001). In addition poor self image, learned helplessness and communication disorders are among the findings.

Child labor is a situation when a child, below the age of fourteen years, is made to work in factories, mines, hazardous employment etc. Poverty, within the family or community, is the main reason why children have to go out to work. For many families,

income from the work of the children makes the difference between survival and destitution. Children are faced with compulsory labor and this has an adverse affect on the child. Children are working more on fields, shops or markets. Indeed, World Health Organization report reveals the fact that the compulsory labor affects the children's physical health, mental health and their education negatively. International Labor Organization (ILO) has estimated that 250 million children between the ages of five and fourteen work in developing countries, at least 120 million of these on a full time basis. The population of Turkey in 1995 was estimated to be 61.6 million. Around 35% of this population is within the 0-14 age group. The number of children within the 6-14 age groups is approximately 11.9 million (Household Labor Force Survey, State Institute of Statistics, October 1994.) An estimated 1.08 million (8%) of these children are employed in business, and another 2.8 million (23%) work in domestic labor (i.e., family operated farming or business.) Within the same age group around 13% do not attend school.

Suggestions

The scales to determine the family abuse should be implemented to the children in schools in certain period of times. In the context of family abuse, the collaboration of school administration, the provincial directorate of social services, guidance services and teachers should be increased. By determining the families of the students who are in economically difficult situations, scholarship can be given to the children of these families. If it is not possible, part time works (for example in library) can be supplied to the students in appropriate ages to contribute to their economy. The seminars about family abuse should be given to the families. In this seminar, especially "drama method" can be used to emphasize the negative impact of family abuse. To increase the awareness level of family abuse the media should be utilized through the programs and the advertisements.

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