

## Childhood Abuse as Experienced by Early Childhood Education Students

*Jamal Ahmad \**

### ABSTRACT

The study aims to survey childhood abuse (CA) experiences among early childhood education students in Jordan. An open-ended survey question was used to collect data from 311 students. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Results revealed that all participants reported exposure to abuse during childhood, but differed in the types of abuse experienced. Participants reported verbal abuse most frequently and sexual abuse least frequently. Results also revealed that the most frequent abuser reported was the child's teacher and the least frequent was the child's friend. The effects of the abuse on the victims are presented.

**Keywords:** Childhood abuse; early childhood education students; Jordan.

### Introduction

There are many studies of the various facets of child abuse (Caffo, Forresi, & Lievers, 2005). It is recognized as a global issue (Olatunya, Akintayo, Olofinbiyi, Isinkaye, Ogundare, & Akinboboye, 2013). It is estimated that millions of children experience physical, sexual, and emotional abuse every year (Pala, Ünalacak, & Ünlüoğlu, 2011). According to the World Health Organization, child abuse is defined as all ill treatment that causes or potentially causes harm to a child (WHO, 1999).

Child abuse has been observed occurring within the home by family members, as well as other locations by other people (Kendall-Tackett, 2001). Abusers may be parents, siblings, or other family members, or neighbors, friends, or clergy. As such, children cannot avoid potentially abusive places or people. It can occur on the bus, marketplace, place of worship, and frequently by people the child knows (Desai, 2006).

Abuse in the home is the most prevalent across all cultures. Abusive parents are found in many studies across many cultures. In Egypt, 37.5% of students in a study reported abusive parents (Youssef, Attia, & Kamel, 1998). Similarly in Sweden 15.2% of children in a study reported that their parents hit them (Annerbäck, Wingren, Svedin, & Gustafsson, 2010). In Canada, the most frequently reported type of abuse is neglect by the child's parents (Hovdestad, Tonmyr, Hubka, & De Marco, 2005). The most common form of abuse in the United States is mothers neglecting children (Bundy-Fazioli & DeLong Hamilton, 2013). Furthermore, it has been found that mothers are the most likely abusers of small children. In Iran a mother beating her child is regarded as an acceptable form of discipline (Yekta, Bagherian, & Nezhad, 2011).

The effects of child abuse on the victim are many (Young & Widom, 2014; Walsh, Latzman, & Latzman, 2014; Habetha, Bleich, Weidenhammer, & Fegert, 2012). Child abuse can affect the child both in the short and long term, causing physical, behavioral, mental, and emotional harm, as well as negatively impact the rest of society (Springer, Sheridan, Kuo, & Carnes, 2007; Lansford, Dodge, Pettit, Bates, Crozier, & Kaplow, 2002; Shen, 2009; Wilson & Widom, 2010; Perez & Widom, 1994; Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, van IJzendoorn, & Alink, 2013).

Moreover, studies have found that children who were abuse victims were less likely to choose professional or skilled careers. Adults who report that they were abused as children have lower education levels and earn less than

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\* Department of Child Education, Queen Rania Faculty for Childhood,  
The Hashemite University, P.O box 330127, Zarqa 13133, Jordan.  
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non-abused adults (Curie & Widom, 2010).

Child abuse has been observed across all cultures and all levels of society (Futa, Hsu, & Hansen, 2001; Finkelhor, 1994). University students in Turkey were surveyed to determine whether child abuse impacted their self-perception and behavior. Results revealed that child abuse was an indicator of the students' negative self-perception. The study also found that the effects of childhood abuse are long-term (Çelik, & Odacı, 2012). In another study of students in Yugoslavia conducted by the World Health Organization, researchers found that child abuse predicted higher instances of drug abuse, attempted suicide, and early pregnancy (WHO, 2013). A government run survey of students in India indicated that child abuse was highly prevalent, with 99% of children reporting physical abuse (NCPCR, 2012). Another study of a different group of Indian students found that over half were physically abused as children (Bhilwar, Upadhyay, Rajavel, Singh, Vasudevan, & Chinnakali, 2015). Child abuse has also been reported in Japan (Takahashi, Kanda, & Sugaya, 2014), Kenya, Zambia, and the Netherlands (Mbagaya, Oburu, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2013). A study of students in South Africa found that of those abused, most knew their abuser (Madu, 2001). A survey of university students by Goldman and Padayachi (1997) found that 45% of female students and 19% of male students experienced sexual abuse before turning 17.

Arab countries have also been studied for the prevalence of child abuse. It was found that child abuse was regarded as a form of discipline and therefore tolerated by those who witnessed it. The most common forms of child abuse reported in Arab countries by Arab high school students and university students are emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse (Aboul-Hagag & Hamed, 2012; Al-Fayez, Ohaeri, & Gado, 2012). Similarly, in Jordan, university students were surveyed for instances of child abuse. Verbal abuse was the most commonly reported type of abuse. Whether the child was abused depended on gender, monthly income, and parents' education and resident location among other factors (Al-Zboon, Ahmad & Al-Dababneh, 2015).

### **Child Rights and Abuse in Jordan**

While Jordan has a child protection system to address child abuse, there is little information about how often child abuse occurs in the country. The National Family Protection System was founded in 1997 to intervene in reported cases of child abuse. The Jordan River for Child Safety Program within the protection system attempts to decrease violence and abuse of children and intervene in families where such abuse is occurring (JRF, 2007).

Jordan has also implemented child protection measures in the education system. The Constitution of Jordan guarantees rights of children, promising to "protect motherhood, childhood and the old-aged...and protect them against abuse and exploitation". To support this mission statement, Jordan has signed many decrees to protect children. These include the Rights of the Child at the United Nations Convention, the Optional Protocol relating to Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and using Children in Pornography, and the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts. Jordan has also signed the Charter on the Rights of the Arab Child of the League of Arab States and the Arab Charter on Human Rights. To implement the goals of these decrees, Jordan has allocated resources to child protection programs that include shelters, counseling, healthcare, and legal services (Save the Children Sweden, 2008). The Ministry of Education has named child abuse identification and eradication as one of its objectives (MOE, 2011).

Despite all these efforts to decrease child abuse in Jordan, according to UNICEF and The National Council for Family Affairs (2017), it is still prevalent both at school and at home.

### **Importance of the Current Study**

Few studies exist surveying university students for their experiences of child abuse, and fewer still have been conducted in Arab countries. Thus, the current study is important from two aspects:

#### **The theoretical importance**

The students surveyed were studying to become teachers of children, which is significant because literature has mentioned that abused children are less likely to be in professional or skilled occupations (Curie & Widom, 2010). This study

will contribute valuable data to the existing body of research on the frequency and types of child abuse that exist in Jordan.

### **The practical importance**

It is hoped that this study will provide valuable information for decision makers in the teacher education programs, as well as for counselors and others who work with children. Moreover, this study can help future studies in the same subject matter.

This study investigated whether university students, particularly those studying to be teachers themselves, have experienced child abuse and if so, what types they have experienced. This study used qualitative methodology to answer the following research questions:

- (1) Did early childhood education students experience abuse as children?
- (2) Who were the perpetrators of the child abuse?
- (3) How were the victims of child abuse affected?

### **Method**

The study's design was based on the qualitative method of gathering data to determine the occurrence of child abuse among early childhood education students. The students that participated in the study were asked to self-report instances of abuse that they had experienced as a child. The survey method was used because the students were old enough to understand the questions. Moreover, they are now adults and may be more open to disclosing the abuse because there is no longer fear of the abuser or consequences of disclosing the abuse (Abdul Kadir & Desa, 2013). As adults, they are also likely better able to articulate answers to the survey questions.

While an in-depth interview is generally considered the best method for gathering data, this is not practical for surveying a larger population. Moreover, other researchers have commented on their preference for using a self-reporting survey to gather information on sensitive topics such as child abuse. It has been found that the open ended questions increase the likelihood of self-disclosure, especially among individuals who have never told anyone about the abuse (Pribe & Svedin, 2008; Abdul Kadir & Desa, 2013). It has been found that the prevalence of child abuse reports increases greatly when the research is conducted as a survey rather than an interview (Hussey, Chang, & Kotch, 2006).

### **Participants**

Participants in this study were 311 early childhood education students (9 males, 2.89 % and 302 females, 97.11 %) attending the University in Jordan during the academic year of 2017/2018. All students were selected from the Department of Childhood Education. The sample was purposely selected because past research has observed that abused children are less likely to pursue professional careers and Childhood Education is a professional career (Currie & Widom, 2010).

Participants' students age ranged between 20-24 years, and 78.5% of the students had a GPA of 2.60 – 4.0, 75% resided in a city, and 72% of fathers and 43% of mothers had higher education. Their parents' income ranged from 300 to 700 JD.

### **Data Collection**

The data was collected using a questionnaire of open-ended questions. The questions asked the students to list the types of childhood abuse they experienced as children, if any, to name the relationship of the perpetrator, to give a reason for the abuse, and to outline the effects they believed the abuse has had on them. The purpose of these questions was to allow students to give an account of their experience in their own words and with more details.

### **Procedures**

The researcher provided three assistant professors with copies of the questions and met with them to discuss the questions and how they could be worded. All three professors have a background education in child abuse and teach courses on it at a public University in Jordan. All assistants' comments and suggestions were taken into consideration and were incorporated in the final questionnaire. The revised questionnaire was then given to a small sample of 8 early childhood education students to judge the clarity of the questions and ensure the students accurately understood the meaning of the questions. The answers the students provided confirmed the clarity of the questions. Next, the

classroom schedule was obtained to determine all instructions that would be required to use class time to conduct the study. The instructor explained the purpose of the study and the questionnaire was distributed to all students in each classroom. Of all participants, only 3 questionnaires contained no answer to some questions. These questionnaires were not used in the final analysis of results.

#### ***Ethical Considerations***

All participants were asked to consent to participate after being informed of the purpose of the research. Anonymity was assured through the use of pseudonyms and the request that students refrain from writing anything that could reveal their identity. The study was conducted in the familiar setting of the university classroom. The participants were assured they could refuse to answer a question and to inform the researcher if they felt discomfort while completing the questionnaire.

#### ***Data Analysis***

Thematic analysis was used to review the participants' responses. Each question was analyzed separately. For question one, frequencies of each type of abuse were counted and ranked. For question two, frequencies of who perpetrated the abuse were also counted and then ranked. Question three was split into two sub-questions. Sub-question one was did the students experience negative effects from child abuse, and, if yes, identify the negative effects. With the help of two assistant professors from the department of child education, responses were codified and then placed in eight different categories: animosity toward abusers, painful memories, fear, low self esteem, hate life, stress, depression, dislike self. Sub-question two was whether the participant who experienced abuse intended to abuse children the same way. Responses were codified and then placed in three different categories (see table 3).

### **Results**

#### **Question 1**

The first question revealed the types of abuse early childhood education students experienced as children. The most frequently reported type of abuse was verbal abuse (35%), with physical abuse (31%), emotional abuse (24%), neglect (9%) and sexual abuse (1%) ranked behind.

**Verbal Abuse:** Of the verbal abuse, the most commonly reported type was insults and name calling. One student wrote that his parents would say he had a big head. Another student stated that his teacher would often call him a hyena when he didn't sit still in class.

**Physical Abuse:** Physical abuse included slapping, punching burning, strangling, shaking, cutting, pulling hair, and confining the child to a room. One student wrote that his teacher hit his hands with a stick for moving too much in class. Another student stated that his mother hit him and pulled his hair because he would break things and did not study.

**Emotional Abuse:** Emotional abuse included criticism, verbal threats, and shaming to make the student feel guilty. One student stated that the brother received preferential treatment and the parents would buy the brother things but not the student. Another student stated that he was terrified every time his parents would shout at him. One student recounted that he was always blamed and made to feel guilty for anything he did or said. He felt like his parents hated him and ignored him.

**Neglect:** Some participants reported experiencing neglect as a child. Some stated they were not fed well or provided with clean clothes. Others reported that they were not supervised.

**Sexual Abuse:** Only one of the participants reported sexual abuse. She stated she had been abused by a shopkeeper in a store.

#### **Question 2**

The purpose of the second question was to determine who the perpetrators of abuse were. The participants reported relatives, friends, and neighbors as abusers. Table 1 illustrates the frequency of types of abusers.

**Table1. The source of abuse as reported by participants' students.**

Source of abuse	Frequencies	Rank	Percentage
Teachers	176	1	57%
Mother	168	2	54%
Father	147	3	47%
Brother	90	4	29%
Sister	52	5	17%
Uncle	27	6	9%
aunt	23	7	7%
Grandmother	15	8	5%
grandfather	12	9	4%
Neighbors (Outsider)	8	10	3%
friends	6	11	2%

As shown in table 1, it is notable that the most persons that caused abuse for students was teachers (57%) followed by mothers (54%), fathers (47%), brothers (29%), sisters (17%), uncles (9%), aunt (7%), grandmothers (5%), grandfathers (4%), neighbors (3%) and the least was the friends (2%).

### Question 3

The third question asked if the participants perceived any negative effects from having experienced child abuse. The question was split into two sub questions. First, do you experience negative effects because of the child abuse and what are the negative effects. Over half (54%) of participants reported that they felt the abuse had caused a negative impact. The effects reported were specifically a resentment toward the abusers, stress, depression, and negative self-image.

**Table2. The negative effects of abuse as reported by students.**

The negative effects	Percentage
Hate abusers	50%
Low self esteem	12%
Fears	9%
Painful memories	7%
Depression	6%
Stress	5%
Dislike themselves	2%
Hate life	1%

Second, the question asked if the participants who experienced abuse intended to abuse other children in the same way, and 4.2% of participants responded affirmatively.

**Table 3. Participants' reasons for why they expect to abuse children.**

## Discussion

Child abuse has been found to negatively impact the success of children as adults. They are less likely to become skilled professionals (Dooley, Prause, & Ham-Rowbottom, 2000; Currie & Widom, 2010). This is of concern for the students currently studying to become teachers. Although the students have thus far demonstrated resilience in continuing their education to become teachers, the abuse could negatively affect their working status in the future.

In contrast to verbal abuse, sexual abuse was the least frequently reported type of abuse. This may be because of social or cultural factors that encourage females to remain silent about sexual abuse they experience. The victims may feel too ashamed or afraid of negative consequences if they reports sexual abuse, even in an anonymous questionnaire. In the case of females, if the sexual abuse is discovered it could shame the whole family or prevent the female victim from being able to marry. It may also be that the participants of the study did not experience sexual abuse. **It may also**

**be that they come from a healthy family and stable living environment.** Sexual abuse is sometimes viewed as an embarrassing secret (Emmert & Köhler, 1998; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 1999; Giardino, Datner, Asher, & Spencer, 2003). Many victims may even deny that it has happened to them (WHO, 2013). Recent research has observed that in addition to feeling ashamed and fearful, victims of sexual abuse may not know where they can go to report the abuse. It may be more culturally appropriate to seek help within the family, rather than professional help and counseling with a stranger (Palmer, Palmer, & Payne-Borden, 2012).

Based on answers to question two of the survey, the most frequent perpetrator of abuse for students was their teachers. Next were mothers, fathers, and friends. Many other studies found the same result – that abuse is caused by people the child sees most frequently (Desai, 2006; Desai, 2008). Teachers and parents are the most frequent abusers because they have the most contact with the children. Teachers were the most frequently named perpetrators of abuse perhaps because they do not view their behavior as abuse to the child but instead as a form of discipline to a misbehaving student. The teachers may be unaware of the impact their form of discipline could have on the student in the long term (Shumba, 2007). Teachers are responsible for educating children and helping them develop in a safe environment, however studies have found that some teachers consider their actions to be discipline, not abuse (Khan & Khan, 2014).

In addition to teachers, the results of this study found that parents can be the perpetrators of abuse, which is also similar to what studies of child abuse in other countries have found (Youssef, Attia, & Kamel, 1998; Annerbäck, Wingren, Svedin, & Gustafsson, 2010; Hovdestad, Tonmyr, Hubka, & De Marco, 2005; Bundy-Fazioli & DeLong Hamilton, 2013; Yekta, Bagherian, & Nezhad, 2011).

An interesting result from this study revealed that 94% of the students reported that they still remember the abuse they experienced as a child. Moreover, they still have negative feelings toward their abuser. This demonstrates to teachers and parents the lasting impact their abusive actions have on children. Previous research has found a similar result showing the lasting effects child abuse has on the adult victim. One study found that physical and sexual abuse was a common experience of female university students who suffered from depression (Abdul Kadir & Desa, 2013). The long lasting effects of abuse on adults can mean that adult victims abuse other children as well. The intergenerational transmission of child abuse theorizes that adults learned how to abuse children because they were once the victims of abuse themselves (as cited in Sneddon, Iwaniec, & Stewart, 2010). Based on this theory, it is important for victims of abuse to receive intervention and counseling so that they can recognize the same behaviors in themselves and work to avoid them and learn new ways to discipline children.

A surprising result of the study is that 4.2% of participants reported that they expected to abuse children because others had abused them. As Table 3 summarized, the participants pointed to reasons of cultural acceptance of abuse and viewing it as normal.

### **Conclusions**

All participants of the study reported experiencing abuse. The most surprising result is 4.2% of participants reported that they expect they will abuse children in the future. This is a powerful message for parents and teachers who use abuse as a form of discipline on children. The lasting effects are perpetuated with each generation. The United Nations has explicitly stated that children must be protected from maltreatment. Knowledge of the existence and extent of child abuse is the first step in raising awareness and developing services for victims. This study underscores the need for counseling programs for students who are victims of abuse.

### **Limitations and Future Studies**

#### **Limitations**

This study has limitations. It only surveyed early childhood education students at one university. The results cannot be extrapolated to the rest of Jordan. Second the study used an open-ended questionnaire, which limited the information to the questions that were asked. The students may not have revealed instances of child abuse because the questions were not specific enough to remind them.

### **Future Research**

Future research could employ the same methodology on a larger group of participants in different universities or different fields of study. Ideally, a national study could be done country wide to measure child abuse occurrences throughout the country. Additionally, a comparative study could be conducted between Jordan and other countries. This would serve as a body of evidence to justify implementing programs for intervention and counseling of child abuse victims.

### **Implications and Suggestions**

Evidence of child abuse among this sample of university students serves as proof needed to justify increased funding of programs that help them cope with the abuse. Child abuse should be a topic of discussion in teaching programs at universities. Seminars and conferences addressing child abuse will increase awareness about the types of abuse and how it can be recognized and eliminated. Students who are studying to become teachers of children should be taught the best way to discipline –children they will have in their classrooms in the future and recognize when children in their classroom may be abuse victims in the home. It is particularly important to provide counseling and support to child abuse victims, since according to the survey they expect that they will become child abusers themselves. Intervention may be a way to break the cycle and end the long lasting harm caused by child abuse.

Awareness of child abuse and its affects could be expanded to the community at large. Television programs about the issue can educate people on how to recognize child abuse and show how it negatively effects children long term. Places of worship may also serve as a good venue to reach the general public about child abuse. Hospital workers trained to recognize signs of child abuse in their patients can also be a good source for intervening and stopping further harm to the child. Furthermore, in an effort to address and mitigate the effects of childhood abuse, orientation programs for new teachers could include information on how to recognize and prevent child abuse in their own classrooms.

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## التعرض للإساءة في مرحلة الطفولة من وجهة نظر مجموعة من الطلبة الجامعيين

جمال أحمد \*

### ملخص

هدفت الدراسة الحالية إلى تعرّف أنواع الإساءة التي تعرض لها مجموعة من الطلبة الجامعيين في تخصص تربية الطفولة المبكرة في الأردن. ولتحقيق هدف الدراسة استخدم الاستبيان المفتوح لجمع بيانات من 311 طالباً وقد جرى تحليل البيانات باستخدام التحليل الموضوعي. وأظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن جميع المشاركين ذكروا أنهم تعرضوا للإساءة في أثناء مرحلة الطفولة، لكنهم اختلفوا في أنواع الإساءة التي تعرضوا لها. وذكر المشاركون أنهم تعرضوا للإساءة اللفظية أكثر من أنواع الإساءات الأخرى. كما كشفت النتائج أيضاً أن معلم الطفل هو الأكثر إساءة، والصديق هو الأقل إساءة وأخيراً عرضت الدراسة الآثار السلبية للإساءة كما ذكرها أفراد عينية الدراسة.

الكلمات الدالة: الإساءة، معلمي تربية الطفل، الأردن.

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