

Child victimization as a component of family violence in Abha CityAbdulwahab Mohammad Al-Almaei¹, Hassan M. Al-Musa²¹ Resident, Family Medicine Programme, Aseer Region, Saudi Arabia² Family & Community Medicine Department, College of Medicine, King Khalid University, Abha, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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Abstract: Objectives: To assess prevalence of child victimization among intermediate school children in Abha City, and to identify risk factors associated with its occurrence. **Subjects and Methods:** The researcher included 700 intermediate school children in this study (350 boys and 350 girls in Abha. The data collection sheet comprised the personal characteristics and a modified version of the “Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire” was constructed. **Results:** The majority of school children were victimized by different types of maltreatment during the past year. Neglect was of the highest prevalence (98%), followed by psychological abuse (91%), emotional bullying (89.9%), physical abuse (88.1%) and lastly abduction (4.6%). Regarding indirect victimization at home, 88.9% of schoolchildren witnessed violence between their parents while 94.6% witnessed physical violence against their brothers/sisters. Poly-victimization occurred among 95.3% of schoolchildren. Physical abuse was more among girls than boys, more among schoolchildren with younger parents ($p=0.005$ for fathers and $p=0.037$ for mothers), more among more educated fathers ($p=0.049$), and more among students with fathers whose occupation is either military or professional ($p=0.004$). Exposure to emotional abuse was more among younger students ($p=0.013$) and those with more educated fathers ($p=0.021$). Exposure to neglect was more among girls than boys (99.1% vs. 96.9%, respectively, $p=0.039$), less among students with last birth order ($p=0.043$) and among students with more educated fathers ($p=0.021$). Exposure to abduction was more among students with more number of brothers or sisters ($p=0.006$) and more among less educated parents ($p=0.004$ for fathers and $p=0.013$ for mothers). Bullying was less among girls than boys (81.2% vs. 86.9%, respectively, $p=0.040$), more among younger students ($p=0.001$), more among first-born students ($p=0.020$) and more among those with younger fathers ($p=0.002$). Emotional bullying was more among younger students ($p=0.003$), less among students with more number of brothers or sisters ($p=0.001$), more among those with younger fathers ($p<0.001$), and more educated parents ($p=0.034$ for fathers and $p=0.033$ for mothers). Indirect victimization was more among girls than boys (97.1% vs. 92.2%, respectively, $p=0.005$), more among non-Saudi students ($p=0.004$) and was significantly less among students with more number of brothers or sisters ($p=0.007$). Witnessing domestic violence was more among girls than boys (92.4% vs. 85.5%, respectively, $p=0.004$), less among students with more number of brothers or sisters ($p=0.006$), more among those with more educated fathers ($p=0.013$) and more among unemployed mothers ($p=0.031$). Polyvictimization was more among younger students ($p=0.018$), more among non-Saudi students ($p=0.033$), less among students with more brothers or sisters ($p<0.001$), more among those with more educated fathers ($p=0.002$) and was more among unemployed mothers ($p=0.009$). **Conclusions:** Prevalence of child victimization among intermediate schoolchildren in Abha City is high. Neglect is the type of highest prevalence. Most schoolchildren witness violence between their parents and physical violence against their brothers/sisters. Polyvictimization affects the majority of intermediate school schoolchildren. Characteristics associated with higher occurrence of maltreatment are: being a girl, younger age, being non-Saudi, young parent, higher parental education, professional occupation of the father and mother’s unemployment.

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1. Introduction

Exposure to violence has a negative impact on physical, emotional, and cognitive well-being. Body injury and mental health problems are some of the many health consequences that result from physical violence.¹ Exposure to domestic violence within the family has been shown to have adverse effects on children in particular.² Such children are at increased risk of physical abuse and their cognitive development

and academic performance are frequently stunted.³ They are more likely to have poor self-esteem and are at greater risk for later substance abuse.^{4,5} Family violence is a significant problem worldwide. Between 2 and 4 million women are physically battered annually in the United States. Spousal abuse not only can be physically and psychologically devastating to victims, but it can also have similarly devastating effects on their children.⁶ Richardson et al.⁷

emphasized that a prerequisite for preventing further domestic violence-related morbidity is being able to identify risk factors for victims experiencing current domestic violence.

Family violence includes acts intended to cause physical harm against a person within the family, and these exposures can be direct in the form of victimization or indirect in the form of witnessing.⁸ Prior research estimates that 25% of children aged 10–16 years experience a completed victimization in the previous year; one in eight experiences an injury and 1 in 100 requires medical attention for violence-related injuries.⁹ Child abuse occurs disproportionately in homes in which domestic violence exists.¹⁰ Children of battered women are 6 to 15 times more likely to be abused. In cases of severe wife abuse, the coexistence of child abuse may be as high as 77%.¹¹

Most studies report that more than 90% of American families use spanking as a means of discipline, a much lower percentage report harsh or abusive spanking. Child abuse or neglect is rarely identified. A recent study, in which 31% of 173 abused children with head injuries were seen by physicians after the injury without the diagnosis being recognized.⁶ One key risk factor in identifying child abuse is spousal/partner abuse. An association between domestic violence and child abuse/neglect has been suggested in research. In fact, children in homes in which their mothers are battered are at greater risk of physical abuse from either parent.¹² This study aims to assess prevalence of child victimization among intermediate school children in Abha City, and to identify risk factors associated with its occurrence.

2. Subjects and Methods

Study design: Cross sectional research design

Population and sampling: Intermediate schoolchildren in Abha City constitute the study population. 700 intermediate school children in this study (350 boys and 350 girls). Following a simple random sample, the researcher selected an intermediate school for boys and another one for girls in Abha City. Following consecutive sampling, 350 registered students in each selected school were asked regarding the occurrence of child victimization, using the data collection tool.

Data collection tool: The researcher constructed a data collection sheet, which comprises the following two parts: 1- Personal characteristics: Age, school, gender, nationality, number of siblings, birth order, age of parents, parent's education, father's occupation, mother's employment. 2- The "Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire" (JVQ): The adapted form of the child self-report version of this questionnaire was used to assess the extent of adolescents' victimization related

to family violence. The questionnaire investigates the occurrence of any form of child maltreatment by a caregiver within the last year, (i.e., physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, abduction); sibling victimization (i.e. emotional bullying); indirect victimization (witnessing domestic violence or witnessing parent's assault of a sibling) and polyvictimization, which was defined within the present study as having experienced four or more different kinds of victimizations within the previous year.¹³

Finkelhor et al. (2005)¹³ strongly endorsed the JVQ and stated that, in a test of construct validity, items correlated well with measures of traumatic symptoms and the instrument showed adequate test-retest reliability. They concluded that the JVQ has potential for use in research as well as clinical evaluation concerning the victimization of children.

The researcher only used parts of this questionnaire that are applicable to adolescents in Abha, and excluded some parts that would jeopardize its use, e.g., items related to sexual assault by a family member. With the kind help of a Professor of English in the King Khalid University, the researcher translated the data collection sheet into simple Arabic language. A pilot study was implemented by applying the data collection sheet on 35 intermediate level schoolchildren whose responses were not included into the data of this study. The pilot study helped to test the wording and clarity of items included into the data collection sheet.

The researchers fulfilled all the required official approvals. Before data collection, the researcher fully and clearly explained the purpose and procedure to participant students. Anonymity was assured to participants and the researcher assured all participants that their data will be used only for research purposes, and no harm is ever expected to occur as a result of their participation in this study.

Statistical design

The data were collected and verified by hand then coded before computerized data entry. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 21.0 was used for data entry and analysis. Descriptive statistics (e.g. number, percentage) and analytic statistics (e.g., χ^2) were applied. P-values <0.05 were considered as statistically significant.

3. Results

Table (1) shows that half of the study sample were boys (50%). Most schoolchildren aged 13-15 years (80.1%). Most of them were Saudis (82.6%). More than one third of students had more than 5 siblings (39%), while 60% had 1-5 siblings and 1% of schoolchildren were the only children in their families. Regarding the birth order of school children, more

than one quarter of schoolchildren were first born (27%), 19.1% were the youngest while 53.9% were born in the middle between the youngest and the eldest. The last year's total scholastic percent scores of more than half of schoolchildren were 95% or more (51.3%).

Table 1: Personal characteristics of study sample

Personal characteristics	No.	%
Gender		
• Boys	350	50.0
• Girls	350	50.0
Age groups	89	12.7
• <13 years	561	80.1
• >15 years	50	7.1
Nationality		
• Saudi	578	82.6
• Non-Saudi	122	17.4
Number of siblings (brother and sisters)		
• 0	7	1.0
• 1-5	420	60.0
• >5	273	39.0
Birth order		
• First (or the only child)	189	27.0
• Middle	377	53.0
• Last	134	19.1
Last year's total scholastic percent score		
• <95%	341	48.1
• >95%	359	51.3

Table 2: Parents' personal characteristics

Personal characteristics	No.	%
Fathers' age groups		
• <40 years	81	11.6
• 40-60 years	574	82.0
• >60 years	45	6.4
Mothers' age groups		
• <40 years	372	53.1
• 40-60 years	322	46.0
• >60 years	6	.9
Father's educational level		
• Illiterate	36	5.1
• Primary	79	11.3
• Intermediate	91	13.0
• Secondary	181	25.9
• University	219	31.3
Father's occupation		
• Military	163	23.3
• Professional	184	26.3
• Clerical	106	15.1
• Retired/Unemployed	113	16.1
• Others	134	19.1
Mother's employment		
• Employed	246	35.1
• Unemployed (housewife)	454	64.9

Table (2) shows that the age group of most schoolchildren's fathers was 40-60 years (82%), while that of their mothers was <40 years (53.1%). Almost half of fathers had university education (45%), while 24.6% had secondary level and 5.1% were illiterate. On the other hand, 31.3% of mothers had university education, 25.9% had secondary level and 12.7% were illiterate. More than one quarter of fathers (26.3%) had a professional occupation (e.g., teacher, engineer, physician, etc.), while 64.9% of mothers were unemployed (i.e., housewives).

Table 3. Prevalence of different type of victimizing among the study sample

Personal characteristics	No.	%
Direct victimization at home		
• Physical abuse	617	88.1
• Psychological abuse	637	91.0
• Neglect	686	98.0
• Abduction	32	4.6
• Physical bullying	589	84.1
• Emotional bullying	629	89.9
Indirect victimizing at home		
• Witnessing violence between parent	622	88.9
• Physical violence against a brother/sister	662	94.6
Polyvictimization	667	95.3

Table (3) shows that the majority of school children were victimized by different types of maltreatment during the past year. Regarding direct victimization, neglect was of the highest prevalence (98%), followed by psychological abuse (91%), emotional bullying (89.9%), physical abuse (88.1%) and lastly abduction (4.6%). Regarding indirect victimization at home, 88.9% of schoolchildren witnessed violence between their parents while 94.6% witnessed physical violence against their brothers/sisters. Polyvictimization (i.e., insulted by 4 types of victimization or more) occurred among 95.3% of schoolchildren.

Table (4) shows that the exposure of intermediate level schoolchildren to physical abuse within the past year was significantly more among girls than boys (92.7% vs. 83.8%, respectively, $p < 0.001$) and also significantly less among school students with more than 5 brothers or sisters ($p = 0.036$). On the other hand, victimization by physical abuse did not differ significantly according to students' age groups, nationality, or birth order. Moreover, the students' total percent scholastic score did not differ significantly according to exposure to physical abuse.

Table 4: Prevalence of Direct Victimization at home

Personal characteristics	Physical Abuse					Emotional Abuse					Neglect					Abduction					
	No.	%	No.	%	p-value	No.	%	No.	%	p-value	No.	%	No.	%	p-value	No.	%	No.	%	p-value	
Gender																					
• Boys	301	83.8	58	16.2	<0.001	324	90.3	35	9.7	0.477	348	96.9	11	3.1	0.039	16	4.5	343	95.5	0.882	
• Girls	316	92.7	25	7.3		313	91.8	28	8.2		338	99.1	3	0.9		16	4.7	325	95.5		
Age groups																					
• <13 years	83	93.3	6	6.7	0.265	88	1	1	1.1	0.013	89	100.0	0	0.0	0.236	4	4.5	85	95.5	0.482	
• 13-15 years	491	87.5	70	12.5		506	55	55	9.8		549	97.9	12	2.1		24	4.3	537	95.7		
• >15 years	43	86.0	7	14.0		43	7	7	14.0		48	96.0	2	4.0		4	8.0	46	92.0		
Nationality																					
• Saudi	507	87.7	71	12.3	0.447	524	54	54	9.3	0.491	566	97.9	12	2.1	0.754	29	5.0	549	95.0	0.219	
• Non-Saudi	110	90.2	12	9.8		113	9	9	7.4		120	98.4	2	1.6		3	2.5	119	97.5		
Number of siblings (brother and sisters)																					
• 0	6	85.7	1	14.3	0.036	4	3	3	42.9	<0.001	6	85.7	1	14.3	0.067	0	0.0	7	100.0	0.006	
• 1-5	381	90.7	39	9.3		395	25	25	6.0		412	98.1	8	1.9		11	2.6	409	97.4		
• >5	230	84.2	2	15.8		238	35	35	12.8		268	98.2	5	1.8		21	7.7	252	92.3		
Birth order																					
• First (or only child)	167	88.4	22	11.6	0.297	167	22	22	11.6	0.139	187	98.9	2	1.1	0.043	6	3.2	183	96.8	0.382	
• Middle	123	91.4	11	8.2		127	7	7	5.2		134	100.0	0	0.0		5	3.7	129	96.3		
• Last	327	86.7	50	13.3		343	34	34	9.0		365	96.8	12	3.2		21	5.6	356	94.4		
Last year's total scholastic percent score																					
• <95%	299	87.7	42	12.3	0.714	311	30	30	8.8	0.855	331	97.1	10	2.9	0.086	17	5.0	324	95.0	0.609	
• ≥95%	318	86.6	41	11.4		326	33	33	9.2		355	98.9	4	1.1		15	4.2	344	95.8		

The exposure of intermediate level schoolchildren to emotional abuse within the past year was significantly more among younger students ($p=0.013$) and was significantly more among students with 1-5 brothers or sisters ($p<0.001$) (Table 4). However, victimization by emotional abuse did not differ significantly according to students' gender, nationality, or birth order. Moreover, the students' total percent scholastic score did not differ significantly according to exposure to emotional abuse.

Also, Table 4 shows that the exposure of intermediate level schoolchildren to neglect within the past year was significantly more among girls than boys (99.1% vs. 96.9%, respectively, $p=0.039$) and was significantly less among students with last birth order ($p=0.043$). On the other hand, prevalence of neglect did not differ significantly according to students' age groups, nationality or number of siblings. Moreover, the students' total percent scholastic score did not differ significantly according to exposure to neglect.

The exposure of intermediate level schoolchildren to abduction within the past year was significantly more among students with more number of brothers or sisters ($p=0.006$) (Table 4). On the other hand, prevalence of abduction did not differ significantly according to students' gender, age groups, nationality or birth order. Moreover, the students' total percent scholastic score did not differ significantly according to exposure to abduction.

Table (5) shows that the exposure of intermediate level schoolchildren to bullying within the past year was significantly less among girls than boys (81.2% vs. 86.9%, respectively, $p=0.040$), was significantly more among younger students ($p=0.001$) and was significantly more among first-born students ($p=0.020$). On the other hand, prevalence of bullying did not differ significantly according to nationality or number of

siblings. Moreover, the students' total percent scholastic score did not differ significantly according to exposure to bullying.

Table (5) shows that the exposure of intermediate level schoolchildren to emotional bullying within the past year was significantly more among younger students ($p=0.003$), significantly less among students with more number of brothers or sisters ($p=0.001$). On the other hand, prevalence of emotional bullying did not differ significantly according to gender, nationality or birth order. Moreover, the students' total percent scholastic score did not differ significantly according to exposure to emotional bullying.

Table (6) shows that the exposure of intermediate level schoolchildren to witnessing domestic violence within the past year was significantly more among girls than boys (92.4% vs. 85.5%, respectively, $p=0.004$), and was significantly less among students with more number of brothers or sisters ($p=0.006$). On the other hand, witnessing domestic violence did not differ significantly according to students' age groups, nationality or birth order. Moreover, the students' total percent scholastic score did not differ significantly according to witnessing domestic violence.

Table (7) shows that the exposure of intermediate level schoolchildren to polyvictimization within the past year was significantly more among younger students ($p=0.018$), was significantly more among non-Saudi students ($p=0.033$) and was significantly less among students with more number of brothers or sisters ($p<0.001$). On the other hand, prevalence of polyvictimization did not differ significantly according to students' gender, or birth order. Moreover, the students' total percent scholastic score did not differ significantly according to exposure to polyvictimization.

Table 5: Prevalence of bullying according to personal characteristics

Personal characteristics	Physical Bullying					Emotional Bullying				
	No.	%	No.	%	p-value	No.	%	No.	%	p-value
Gender										
• Boys	312	86.9	47	13.1		330	91.9	29	8.1	
• Girls	277	81.2	64	18.8	0.040	299	87.7	42	12.3	0.063
Age groups										
• <13 years	80	89.9	9	10.1		87	97.8	2	2.2	
• 13-15 years	476	84.8	85	15.2		502	89.5	59	10.5	
• >15 years	33	66.0	17	34.0	0.001	40	80.0	10	20.0	0.003
Nationality										
• Saudi	480	83.0	98	17.0		516	89.3	62	10.7	
• Non-Saudi	109	89.3	13	10.7	0.083	113	92.6	9	7.4	0.265
Number of siblings (brother and sisters)										
• 0	7	100.0	0	0.0		7	100.0	0	0.0	
• 1-5	362	86.2	58	13.8		391	93.1	29	6.9	
• >5	220	80.6	53	19.4	0.073	231	84.6	42	15.4	0.001
Birth order										
• First (or the only child)	171	90.5	18	9.5		173	91.5	16	8.5	
• Middle	109	81.3	25	18.7		116	86.6	18	13.4	
• Last	309	82.0	68	18.0	0.020	340	90.2	37	9.8	0.330
Last year's total scholastic percent score										
• <95%	292	85.6	49	14.4		312	91.5	29	8.5	
• ≥95%	297	82.7	62	17.3	0.094	317	88.5	42	11.7	0.162

Table 6: Prevalence of witnessing domestic violence according to personal characteristics of study sample

Personal characteristics	Witnessing Domestic Violence				
	No.	%	No.	%	p-value
Gender					
• Boys	307	85.5	52	14.5	
• Girls	315	92.4	26	7.6	0.040
Age groups					
• <13 years	85	95.5	4	4.5	
• 13-15 years	495	88.2	66	11.8	
• >15 years	42	84.0	8	16.0	0.068
Nationality					
• Saudi	512	88.6	66	11.4	
• Non-Saudi	110	90.2	12	9.8	0.614
Number of siblings (brother and sisters)					
• 0	7	100.0	0	0.0	
• 1-5	385	91.7	35	8.3	
• >5	230	84.2	43	15.8	0.006
Birth order					
• First (or the only child)	164	86.8	25	13.2	
• Middle	123	91.8	11	8.2	
• Last	335	88.9	42	11.1	0.369
Last year's total scholastic percent score					
• <95%	302	88.6	39	11.4	
• ≥95%	320	89.1	39	10.9	0.810

Table 7: Prevalence of polyvictimization according to personal characteristics of study sample

Personal characteristics	Polyvictimization				
	No.	%	No.	%	p-value
Gender					
• Boys	322	89.7	37	10.3	
• Girls	314	92.1	27	7.9	0.273
Age groups					
• <13 years	87	97.8	2	2.2	
• 13-15 years	507	90.4	54	9.6	
• >15 years	42	84.0	8	16.0	0.018
Nationality					
• Saudi	519	89.8	59	10.2	
• Non-Saudi	117	95.8	5	4.1	0.033
Number of siblings (brother and sisters)					
• 0	7	100.0	0	0.0	
• 1-5	396	94.3	24	5.7	
• >5	233	85.3	40	14.7	<0.001
Birth order					
• First (or the only child)	178	94.2	11	5.8	
• Middle	124	92.5	10	7.5	
• Last	334	88.6	43	11.4	0.071
Last year's total scholastic percent score					
• <95%	310	90.9	31	9.1	
• ≥95%	326	90.8	33	9.2	0.963

The exposure of intermediate level schoolchildren to physical abuse within the past year was significantly more among schoolchildren with younger parents ($p=0.005$ for fathers and $p=0.037$ for mothers), was significantly more among more educated fathers ($p=0.049$), and was significantly more among students with fathers whose occupation is either military or professional ($p=0.004$). On the other hand, prevalence of exposure to physical abuse did not differ significantly according to their mothers' educational status or employment.

The exposure of intermediate level schoolchildren to emotional abuse within the past year was significantly more among students with more educated fathers ($p=0.021$). On the other hand, prevalence of exposure of the schoolchildren to emotional abuse did not differ significantly according to their fathers' age or occupation, their mothers' educational status or employment.

The exposure of intermediate level schoolchildren to neglect within the past year was significantly more among schoolchildren with younger mothers ($p<0.001$), was significantly more among more educated parents ($p<0.001$ for fathers and $p=0.014$ for mothers) and was significantly more among students with fathers whose occupation is either clerical or professional ($p=0.021$). On the other hand, prevalence of exposure to neglect did not differ significantly according to their fathers' age group or

their mothers' employment.

The exposure of intermediate level schoolchildren to abduction within the past year was significantly more among less educated parents ($p=0.004$ for fathers and $p=0.013$ for mothers). On the other hand, exposure to abduction did not differ significantly according to their parents' age group, fathers' occupation, or mothers' employment.

The exposure of intermediate level schoolchildren to bullying within the past year was significantly more among those with younger fathers ($p=0.002$). On the other hand, exposure to bullying did not differ significantly according to their mothers' age group, parents' educational level, fathers' occupation, or mothers' employment.

The exposure of intermediate level schoolchildren to emotional bullying within the past year was significantly more among those with younger fathers ($p<0.001$), more educated parents ($p=0.034$ for fathers and $p=0.033$ for mothers). On the other hand, exposure to emotional bullying did not differ significantly according to their mothers' age group, fathers' occupation, or mothers' employment.

The exposure of intermediate level schoolchildren to indirect victimization within the past year was significantly more among those with more educated fathers ($p=0.007$) and was significantly more among unemployed mothers ($p=0.049$). On the other hand, exposure to indirect victimization did not differ

significantly according to their parents' age groups, or mothers' educational level.

The witnessing of intermediate level schoolchildren to domestic violence within the past year was significantly more among those with more educated fathers ($p=0.013$) and was significantly more among unemployed mothers ($p=0.031$). On the other hand, exposure to indirect victimization did not differ significantly according to their parents' age groups, mothers' educational level, or fathers' occupation.

The exposure of intermediate level schoolchildren to polyvictimization within the past year was significantly more among those with more educated fathers ($p=0.002$) and was significantly more among unemployed mothers ($p=0.009$). On the other hand, exposure to indirect victimization did not differ significantly according to their parents' age groups, mothers' educational level, or fathers' occupation.

4. Discussion

Violence against children has always occurred, but it has recently been subject to increased public attention. The problem now is not whether child victimization exists or not, but rather to what extent and what are the patterns, characteristics and risk factors for child abuse and neglect, and what are the best ways to prevent and respond to child abuse and neglect.⁴ This study aimed to assess prevalence of child victimization among intermediate school children in Abha City, and to identify risk factors associated with its occurrence. This study included 700 schoolchildren, most of whom aged 13-15 years, which mainly reflects the early adolescence phase, during which several changes take place comprising the physical size and strength, thinking and reasoning, feelings and emotions, and relationships with family and friends.¹⁴ Most of participants within the study sample were Saudis with more than one third of students had more than 5 siblings, which reflects the high fertility motives within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Results of this study revealed that very high rates of maltreatment of school children who were directly and indirectly victimized by different types of abuse during the past year. Neglect was of the highest prevalence (98%), followed by psychological abuse (91%), emotional bullying (89.9%), physical abuse (88.1%) and lastly abduction (4.6%). Regarding indirect victimization at home, 88.9% of schoolchildren witnessed violence between their parents while 94.6% witnessed physical violence against their brothers/sisters. Polyvictimization occurred among 95.3% of schoolchildren. In Yemen, Al-Thabhani (2004) investigated different forms of violence committed against children.¹⁵ He reported that 88.2% of children pointed out that the dominant

pattern of treatment by their parents when they make mistakes is punishment, the most commonly used means of is physical beating. These high rates of victimization among schoolchildren constitute a serious finding and should ring an alarm bell for the grave consequences expected to occur. Several studies documented the pervasive detrimental links between domestic violence exposure and behavior problems. Consistently, examination of prevalence of abuse among young adults has found that as many as 82% of students report a history of violence exposure (Scarpa, 2001).¹⁶ Children in the Arabian Gulf countries, just like other children everywhere else, are subjected to all forms of child abuse and neglect. The prevailing concept that implies that child abuse is low in this region and that other societies have lessons to learn from the low incidence of child victimization in our area proved to be not an evidence-based allegation.⁴

Infanticide is well recognized in the history of this region and was documented in the Holy Quran (81:8-9) "*when the girl-infant that was buried alive is asked: for what sin she was killed*".¹⁷ All Arabian Gulf countries have ratified United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and are bound to its articles, which unequivocally protect children from all forms of abuse (Articles 19 and 34) and from inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment (Article 37) and call the member states to take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social, and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation. However, none of the Arabian Gulf countries has a law that bans physical and humiliating punishment of children. Current penal codes are inadequate in protecting children, and even those articles that prohibit and punish severe forms of physical injuries are not enforced adequately.⁴ The lack of data about child victimization does not reflect low incidence of child abuse. Confronting these realities, though painful, yet it is a crucial step for an effective strategy to prevent child abuse and neglect in this region.² Many abused children live with the consequences of abuse without support or rehabilitation who themselves might become abusers and this maintains the vicious cycle of violence from generation to generation.⁴

Most research findings indicate that violence exposure during childhood and young adulthood significantly increases risk for a variety of negative outcomes later in life.¹⁸⁻²² Exposure to violence at home or witnessing it has a significant net detrimental association with mental health among children aged 12-17 years.²³⁻²⁴ Moreover, witnessing violence at home proved to be more damaging than witnessing violence in the community.²⁴ It has been confirmed

that polyvictimizations are common, that victimization risks are inter-correlated, and that children with multiple victimizations are more likely to be distressed and symptomatic.²⁵ Different studies reported variable rates for family violence and victimization among children. Estimates of the prevalence with which children witness or hear about violence in the community tend to exceed actual victimization. Lewit and Baker (1996) noted that the milder forms of violence (e.g., pushing, shoving, pulling, kicking, hitting, throwing an object) are quite common, with rates of victimization at 65% to 95%, with the higher rates found among younger children who appear more likely to use physical violence to settle disputes.²⁶

In Tabuk, Saudi Arabia, Al-Shlash et al. (1996) retrospectively analyzed 435 consecutive burn admissions of whom the prevalence of children (under 12 years physical abuse was 70% were children under 12 years.⁵ In Yemen, Alyaheri (2004) reported that approximately 80% of the mothers of the rural area use corporal punishment to discipline their children.⁶ Using the JVQ, in a national survey in USA, Finkelhor et al. (2005) studied 2,030 children about the experiences of victimizations of children 10–17 years old within the last year.²⁷ Of the 71% who had experienced any victimization, 69% had multiple victimizations in different episodes. Results of this study revealed that girls were significantly more affected than boys by direct victimization, (e.g., physical abuse, neglect), and also indirect victimization at home and witnessing domestic violence. On the other hand, bullying was significantly less among girls than boys. There were no gender differences regarding other types of victimization (e.g., emotional abuse, bullying, abduction or polyvictimization). Previous literature on child victimization at home has been mixed in regards to gender, with some studies indicating higher prevalence among males,²⁷ some in females and others reporting no significant gender differences.^{9,28}

In Brooklyn, USA, Springer and Padgett (2000) reported no gender differences were found in direct victimization at home in a sample of 11–14-year olds.²⁹ Furthermore, indirect victimization or exposure to witnessing of violence at home was higher for females than males. Hanson et al. (2006) found with their national study of adolescents that females were more likely than males to witness domestic violence while boys were at a higher risk of physical assaults.²⁸ These gendered patterns for victimization were also found in a sample of high school seniors.³⁰ Finkelhor et al. (2007a) also found males were at higher risk for polyvictimization, measured across a broad range of violence exposures.³¹ Expressing more victimization among girls than boys may be explained by the fact

that females are usually more emotionally vulnerable and have lower threshold to pain than males. Results of this study showed that younger schoolchildren were significantly at higher risk to be exposed to emotional abuse, bullying, emotional bullying and polyvictimization. Foster and Brooks-Gunn (2009) stated that some studies indicated that younger adolescents tend to have higher levels of exposure to violence than younger ones,³² such as the study of Malik et al. (1997)³³ while other studies indicate some inconsistencies in patterning of exposure by age.¹⁰ Older adolescents may be more likely to witness violence in the community but not in the home, and to be exposed to polyvictimization.²⁸

Nishina et al. (2005) noted that direct aggression of a physical or verbal nature is common in young children.³⁴ As children age, physical aggression tends to decrease and verbal aggression increases. These findings may be explained by that younger children may lack the ability to solve their problems and frequently put themselves in a wrong position. As children grow, their experience also grows, with increasing assertiveness, and changes in their capabilities and social skills, which usually result in building up more adequate problem-solving skills.³⁵ This study revealed that the number of siblings was either favorably or unfavorably associated with several types of violence to participant schoolchildren. Bigger family size was significantly associated with more physical abuse and abduction, but with significantly less emotional bullying and indirect victimization, witnessing domestic violence and polyvictimization. The size of the family can also increase the risk for abuse. A study of parents in Chile, for example, found that families with four or more children were three times more likely to be violent towards their children than parents with fewer children. However, it is not always simply the size of the family that matters. Data from a range of countries indicate that household overcrowding increases the risk of child abuse. Unstable family environments, in which the composition of the household frequently changes as family members and others move in and out, are a feature particularly noted in cases of chronic neglect.³⁶

Malik (2010) noted that children from larger families face physical abuse and neglect as well as psychological abuse and neglect due to a large number of family members to be taken care of by the parents.³³ On the other hand, children from smaller families with a lesser number of family members also feel abused or neglected.

Results of this study revealed that neglect was significantly less among students with last birth order while bullying was significantly more among first-born children. These findings can be well explained

by that youngest children (i.e., last born) usually enjoy more cuddling and less expectations than the rest of their siblings, and consequently, that child is rarely neglected. On the other hand, the eldest child (i.e., first born) usually faces higher responsibilities toward all members of the family, an obligation that the first born child frequently fails to fulfill and consequently, gets blamed or even punished for. This study showed that non-Saudi schoolchildren received significantly more polyvictimization than Saudi ones. These findings can be explained by the fact that non-Saudi parents who work and live far away from their home countries usually become more anxious and worried more than the Saudi parents. Moreover, non-Saudis are usually less economically privileged less socially supported than Saudis, being away from their own neighborhood, relatives and close friends. This stressful condition may frequently lead to violent behavior toward their children.

In a study of the Palestinian families, Khamis (2000) reported that working in another country and lack of money for the child's needs was one of the main reasons stated by parents for psychologically abusing their children.³⁷

Stress and social isolation of the parent have also been linked to child abuse and neglect. It is believed that stress can heighten the level of conflict in the home and the ability of members to cope or find support. Those better able to find social support may be less likely to abuse children, even when other known risk factors are present.³⁶ There are protective factors that can reduce the likelihood of child abuse occurring as well as mitigate the impact on a child when it does. Key protective factors include a lack of abuse-related stress, and strong neighborhood cohesion.^{11,38} It has been found in the present study that educational attainment of participant school children (as assessed by student's last year's total scholastic percent score) did not differ significantly according to types of child abuse. Nevertheless, results of previous research suggest that a history of childhood abuse is associated with low educational attainment and consequently poor physical and mental health in adulthood.³⁹⁻⁴⁰ Younger age of parents of participant school children within the present study was significantly associated with more exposure to some types of child victimization, i.e., physical abuse, neglect, bullying and emotional bullying.

These findings are in agreement with those of English (1998) and Mulpuri et al. (2011),⁴¹⁻⁴² who stated that the perpetrator of family violence against children is most likely to be a young parent. Similarly, Molnar et al. (2003)⁴³ found that an older age of the primary caregiver was associated with lower levels of parent-to-child physical aggression. This study showed that parents educational level was

significantly associated several types of violence against their children. Children of less educated parents (i.e., illiterate, primary or intermediate school levels) were significantly more liable to abduction than those of more educated parents (i.e., secondary or university levels). Nevertheless, children with more educated parents were more exposed to physical and emotional abuse, neglect emotional bullying, indirect victimization, witnessing domestic violence and polyvictimization than those whose parents were less educated. These findings are in agreement with those of Malik (2010),³³ who noted that mostly educated parents opt for less number of children as per scenario. Such families might have both parents working, sparing less time for the children, facing more professional stress, hence, children face high level of parental neglect. Nevertheless, several studies recognized an association between low educational level and child abuse. In Yemen, Alyaheri (2004)⁶ found that mothers in the lowest educational groups are far more likely to use corporal punishment than more educated mothers. In Bangkok, Thailand, a survey found an association between low parental education and both domestic violence and childhood abuse.⁴⁴

Moreover, Turner et al. (2006) reported that parents' educational level did not significantly differentiate child maltreatment levels among those aged 10–17 years, but lower parents' educational levels were associated with more witnessing of family violence.²³ This study indicated that fathers' occupation and mothers' employment were associated with the occurrence of certain types of victimization toward their children. Physical abuse was significantly more among schoolchildren with fathers whose occupation is either military or professional, while neglect was significantly more among children of fathers whose occupation is either clerical or professional. On the other hand, children of unemployed mothers reported significantly higher occurrence of indirect victimization, witnessing domestic violence and polyvictimization. These findings are in agreement with those reported by several studies. Molnar et al. (2003) stated that unemployment and lower socio-economic status were found to have higher levels of parent-to-child physical aggression.⁴³ Studies from several countries have found that lack of income to meet the family's needs increase the potential of physical violence towards children.^{8,45,46,48}

Foster and Brooks-Gunn (2009) noted that findings on family socioeconomic status and poverty are also consistent with stress and strain perspectives, as poverty is associated with harsher parenting as measured by the number of times the parent spanked the child.³²

The higher prevalence of child abuse according to certain fathers' occupations may be due to the highly stressful character of certain jobs (e.g., professional or military), which would frequently trigger more violent behavior against their children. It is to be noted that differences in results of research studies may be due to differences in methodologies and/or variations in study populations. Adolescents in different countries reported strikingly different rates of involvement in victimization reported between countries. These variations may reflect important cultural and social differences.¹² Child abuse is ignored or may even be tolerated and accepted as a form of discipline. Abused children continue to suffer and are left to face their destiny and even die without protection, abusers go unpunished, untreated, and they continue to abuse the same child and possibly others.⁴

Conclusions

The prevalence of several types of child victimization among intermediate schoolchildren in Abha City (as a component of family violence) is quite high. Regarding direct victimization at home, neglect is the type of child maltreatment of highest prevalence, followed by psychological abuse, emotional bullying, physical abuse and lastly abduction. Regarding indirect victimization at home, the majority of schoolchildren witness violence between their parents and physical violence against their brothers/sisters. Polyvictimization affects the majority of intermediate school children in Abha City. Schoolchildren characteristics associated with higher occurrence of intermediate level schoolchildren maltreatment in Abha City are: being a girl, younger age, and being non-Saudi. Educational attainment of participant school children is not affected by child abuse. Parents' characteristics associated with higher occurrence of intermediate level schoolchildren maltreatment in Abha City are: young parent, higher parental educational level, profession occupation of the father and mother's unemployment.

Recommendations

There is a pressing need for increasing public awareness, educating parents on a child's normal development and proper rearing practices and promoting alternatives to physical punishment. Endorsement of child protection laws, policies, and procedures for preventing and responding to child abuse and neglect. Identification of a child protection authority responsible for responding to child abuse and neglect. Establishing hotlines for immediate reporting of child abuse events and conducting nationwide research studies is urgently needed.

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