

## **School help professionals' ideas on child abuse and neglect**

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### **Abstract**

**Method:** In this study, a qualitative research has been carried out; there were interviews with 50 school counselors working in Sinop; they stated their ideas on child abuse and neglect.

**Analysis:** Data collected via semi constructed interviews have been subjected to descriptive and content analysis. The participant counselors were asked three questions.

**Findings:** In this study, the counselors have been able to differentiate features and to determinate the negligence and abuse cases. However, it has been determined that the counselors' information on intervention is limited.

**Conclusion:** Although counselors have enough information on features and about the neglected and abused child they think that their knowledge is insufficient. Counselors should participate in conferences, seminars, symposiums or any information sharing process on child negligence and abuse.

*Keywords:* child negligence; child abuse; school professionals

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### **1. Introduction**

As a negative event child abuse and neglect can be defined as any physical and/or psychological harm, which parents or caregivers inflict on children who are in their care or custody or for whom they are responsible, as the result of physical, sexual or emotional actions, of omission or commission, which interfere or threaten the adequate development of the child and violate the community demands concerning the good treatment of children (Muela, et al., 2012: 7). Definitions of child abuse or maltreatment have two main components: harm, which may be a harmful action or a harmful consequence, and a person or persons responsible for the harm (Gough, 1996). As has been pointed out by Gough (1996), childhood itself is a social construct where ages defining childhood have varied throughout history and across various socio-cultural groups of the human societies (Al-Shail and Hassan, 2012: 24). A child is considered abused if he or she is treated in a way that is unacceptable in a given culture at a given time (Meadow, 2007: 1).

Child abuse constitutes all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, exploitation (commercial or other types of exploitation), resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity. The abuse takes place in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power. Some types of child abuse are naturally more common, such as cases of child neglect, than other types, such as sexual abuse. Further, certain types of abuse are often difficult to document or characterize, compared to other types that are readily evident in a number of ways (Al-Shail and Hassan, 2012: 26).

Worldwide, more than 200,000,000 children under the age of 18 years old were victims of child sexual abuse in 2002 alone (Lampinen and Sexton-Radek, 2010: 7). Child abuse and neglect affect approximately 12 of every 1,000 American children (Forum, 2008). Many women in families also face the threat of violence and are nearly nine times as likely as men to experience intimate-partner violence. In addition, 7.7% of women are raped by an intimate partner each year (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Battering also exists within same-sex relationships, although rarely are the

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needs of those women and men met by social services or public policy (Renzetti, 2007). These data suggest that social workers must pay attention to many different aspects of family life, particularly as they relate to issues of gender inequality and age-specific problems (Mezey and Sanford, 2009: 67).

The frequency of child negligence and abuse phenomenon, with its aspects that are and that are not reflected to the press, is defined as “non-accidental injuries of children as consequences of actions performed or cannot be performed by the parents or the persons responsible for the child” (Kempe, 1989). Child negligence and abuse that takes many forms such as physical, emotional, sexual, economic abuse, negligence and incest, is a quite common phenomenon. The researches show that abuse, which is observed at a rate of 1-10% in the world, is observed at the rate of 10-53% in our country (Yilmaz, Isiten, Ertan and Oner, 2003). In the research of the a research group (2001) where children applying to or brought to five hospitals in west part of Turkey over a period of eighteen months have been scanned, 32% of the children have been diagnosed with child abuse. (Ahioglu, 2004). The prevalence of child sexual abuse of girls has been estimated to be approximately 27%, while the prevalence in boys has been estimated at approximately 16% (Finkelhor et al., 1990).

Meadow (2007) states that types of abuse as follows:

Physical abuse (non-accidental injury)—The prototype of physical abuse—“the battered baby”—was described by Kempe (1962) et al. of Denver, Colorado, in 1962 and has been well publicized ever since. Physical abuse entails soft tissue injury to the skin, eyes, ears, and internal organs as well as to ligaments and bones. Burns and scalds are included. Most of this abuse is short term and violent, though it may be repetitive. There are subgroups with more long term persistent injury, including poisoning, suffocation, and fabricated or induced illness.

Neglect—This is failing to provide the love, care, food, or physical circumstances that will allow a child to grow and develop normally. It is also intentionally exposing a child to any kind of danger.

Sexual abuse—This occurs when dependent, developmentally immature children and adolescents participate in sexual activities that they do not fully comprehend, to which they are unable to give informed consent, and that violate the social taboos of family roles. Such abuse ranges from inappropriate fondling and masturbation to intercourse and buggery. Children may also be forced to participate in producing pornographic photographs and videos, or to be victims of abuse through the extended family network and sex rings.

Emotional abuse—This has no generally agreed definition. Some authors regard a child as abused if he or she has a behavioral disturbance to which the parents fail to respond appropriately in terms of modifying their behavior or seeking professional help. Most would consider a child to be emotionally abused, however, if the child’s behavior and emotional development were severely affected by the parents’ persistent neglect, rejection, or terrorization.

Most abuse occurs within the family. The adult may harm the child both actively and passively and by acts of both commission and omission. One parent may be active in beating the child, another just as harmful in failing to protect a child from the sexual advances of a cohabitant. A parent who fails to provide food or love for a child may also commit physical assault. At least half of the abuse that occurs, sometimes over lengthy periods of the child’s life, goes undisclosed at the time, even though it is known or suspected by a person or people not directly involved (Meadow, 2007: 1-2).

Child abuse occurs across socioeconomic, religious, cultural, racial, and ethnic groups. The causes of child abuse or maltreatment are numerous, multiple, and complex. There is no single profile that describes all families within which child abuse occurs. On the other hand, supportive, emotionally gratifying relationships with a healthy network of relatives or friends may help minimize the risk of parents abusing their children, especially during stressful life events. Based on this understanding, research has recognized a number of risk factors commonly associated with child maltreatment. However, the presence of these factors does not necessarily always result in child abuse and neglect. The factors that may contribute to child

maltreatment in one family, such as poverty, may not result in child abuse in another family (Al-Shail and Hassan, 2012: 25).

**Table 1.** Abuse Possible Adverse Outcomes

Types of abuse	Possible adverse outcome
Emotional abuse or neglect: impact is most profound if it is experienced in the first two years of life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Failure to thrive</li> <li>• Attachment disorders</li> <li>• Concentration and learning</li> <li>• Poor interpersonal relationships</li> <li>• Aggression</li> </ul>
Physical abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 30% of abused children grow up to be abusive parents</li> <li>• Attachment disorders</li> <li>• Post-traumatic stress disorders</li> <li>• Externalizing behavior problems (aggression, delinquency)</li> <li>• Poor peer relationships</li> <li>• Academic underachievement</li> </ul>
Sexual abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sexualized behaviors</li> <li>• Self-harming behaviors</li> <li>• Post-traumatic stress disorder</li> <li>• Chronic low mood</li> <li>• Depression</li> <li>• Drug and alcohol misuse</li> <li>• Bulimia nervosa</li> </ul>
Witnessing domestic violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anxiety and fears</li> <li>• Sleep disturbances</li> <li>• Depression</li> <li>• Aggression</li> <li>• Poor interpersonal relationships</li> </ul>

Forbes, 2007: 71

In addition, there is high incidence of child abuse and neglect in families where domestic violence is commonplace

The sexual exploitation of children is the involvement of dependent, developmentally immature children and adolescents in sexual activities that they do not fully comprehend and are unable to give informed consent to and that violate the social taboos of family roles (Hobbs, 2007: 42).

Neglect is family related issue. Parents have rights regarding their children. They also have duties to those children (Table 2). Child neglect is the failure to perform these duties. The concept of parental duty appears in the law and is based on the combination of a biological truth and a social imperative. The biological truth is that the rate at which human offspring develop the skills for independence is slow compared with that of most other mammals.

**Table 2.** Purpose of parental duties

Duty	Purpose
Food	Growth and development
Clothing	Protect the child adequately
Shelter	Protect the child from extreme weather, keep them safe, and allow a place for sleep
Safekeeping	Prevent reasonably foreseeable and avoidable injury or illness
Nurturance	Promote attachment on which development of empathy and other characteristics largely depend
Teaching	Move the child towards being independent in a way that is safe for the child and not dangerous to other

Child neglect and abuse is a deep problem that should be handled in an interdisciplinary manner. However, the problem, which is mainly handled from legal and medical aspects, should also be approached from the educational perspective. Increasing the contributions of the educators who are in direct contact with the children is critically important for the resolution of the problem. This is because, in short (Maher, 1991): (1) The behaviors of the child who has been abused change. Since they are informed on the normal development features of the children, the teachers may observe and identify the changes in the child and abnormal behaviors more easily. (2) An abused child seeks someone to share his secret with. He wants to share the issue with a natural and trustable person. Teachers are frequently approached for help related to this issue. (3) The increase in the reported cases of child abuse is significant and the identification of such cases is easier by teachers in compulsory education. (4) For studies in which children are the focus, the suitable place is the school for different professionals who work in the school environment. Teachers play an important role in child focused studies. (5) Child abuse cases do not have any social, economic class difference, place, locality borders. These are cases that may be encountered at all social levels. All teachers are aware of this legal problem.

In the research carried out by Walsh, et. al. (2008), they have evaluated 32 hypothetical physical abuse and negligence scenarios among 254 teachers, based on the probability of 5 point Likert scale type abuse and negligence. The variance of the teachers' determination and points reporting could only be modestly accounted for school membership. In the full model, it has been determined that the most important effect in determination and reporting was the circumstance feature of type, frequency and intensity, especially in child physical abuse and negligence. At teacher level, it has been determined that the strongest determinant in reporting was the attentiveness for legal reporting liabilities. The both findings and reporting were not as strong as the effect of the teacher's education, characteristic effects at school level, which arose as a counter-intuitive finding.

However, the researches demonstrate that the teachers' resource is not adequately utilized in this issue. This is not a condition unique to our country. In the research on the determination and reporting of child abuse by teachers, by O'Toole, Webster, O'Toole and Lucal (1999), it has been determined that the teachers are able to identify the symptoms from the behavior of the victims within the range of 50.30-50.99%, and that they report these within the range of 51.08-55.6%. These rates may be interpreted as that every one of two cases can be identified by teachers and that every one of the two identified cases are reported. In the same research, it has been determined that the teachers are faced with numerous problems in reporting the cases they have identified, that they are "scared" in identifying the symptoms and deciding to report especially due to "masked" student behaviors.

According to the results of the research, teachers have consulted professional support more in abuse cases aimed at disabled children. Whereas, numerous researches on the role of educators in the determination of child neglect and abuse cases around the world demonstrate that teachers may have a significant role in perceiving and reporting of child abuse and negligence cases (Stern,1991).

Considering that all children at compulsory education age are with teachers in schools and the teachers' ability to differentiate between normal and abnormal behavior, due to their pedagogic formation, one of the best solution is to make teachers effective in determination and referral of the cases. Pre-service and in-service trainings play a critical role in the achievement of this. The training requirements of teachers on child neglect and abuse is not particular to this profession only. The study by Kocaer (2006) has also demonstrated the need for training on this issue for health personnel. In order for the training to be efficient, the contents of the information to be provided have to be composed according to the requirements of the participating group.

Neurological and biological changes, observable with neuro-imaging techniques, occur as a result of abuse or exposure to abuse (McCollum 2006). These changes

contribute to medical, social, behavioral, and emotional problems during childhood and later in life (Pernicano, 2010: 7).

Interventions for children: Treatment for the child should take into account several factors, including the child's symptoms, developmental stage, strengths, the type and context of the abuse, the degree of parental support, and current social circumstances (Forbes, 2007: 72).

Programs aimed at preventing child abuse vary along multiple dimensions. At the outset, those seeking to implement a prevention strategy must identify their overarching goal and, consequently, the scope of the program they will need to employ. Indicated (or tertiary) prevention programs are the most narrow in scope in that they target families with a history of maltreatment and seek to prevent the re-occurrence of abuse (Abrams and Portwood, 2010: 37).

Counselors can help victims begin to process their experiences of abuse and help them understand that they are not to blame for their partner's actions. A victim impact statement can be a powerful tool for victims to express how their partner's abuse has affected them personally. It also allows the victim to express her opinion on how the defendant should be punished and/or how the case should be resolved. In some cases, a victim advocate may also serve as an expert witness to provide testimony on the dynamics and implications of intimate partner violence (Mele, 2009: 98).

One of the challenges we face is the constant education of attorneys, judges, and juries in child-abuse issues. Much work can go into pretrial preparation and the filing of motions to make the child's courtroom experience less threatening and more beneficial to the trier of fact. It is essential to have an interest in the legal system and a willingness to participate in both the investigation and prosecution of child abuse (Smith, 2009: 162).

Traumatization can occur each time a child relates an abuse incident he or she has experienced, or in false-allegation cases when a child is coached (Lau and Treacy, 2009: 167). Because the social work profession often lacks education and training in investigative interviewing and legal prosecution in child-abuse cases, additional training is required for forensic interviewers in these areas (Lau and Treacy, 2009: 168)

Recent studies have examined instruction in forensic interviewing, such as structured interview protocols and the extended forensic evaluation model (Carnes, Nelson-Gardell, Wilson, & Orgassa, 2001; Conte, Sorenson, Fogarty, & Rosa, 1991; Poole & Lamb, 1998). In addition, the Child Advocacy Center (CAC) model has been established as a strategy to prevent repeated child interviewing, as well as an effort to ensure that legitimate cases move forward for prosecution, whereas nonlegitimate cases do not. CACs provide a safe, child-friendly atmosphere for children and families to receive services (Cronch et al., 2005).

In its guidelines for investigative interviewing in cases of alleged child sexual abuse, the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC, 1997) stated that "Investigative interviewing in cases of alleged abuse requires specialized knowledge. This knowledge can be acquired in a variety of ways (e.g., formal course work, individual reading, workshops and conferences, professional experience and supervision), and should include familiarity with basic concepts of child development, communication abilities of children, dynamics of abuse and offenders, categories of information necessary for a thorough investigation, legally acceptable child interviewing techniques, and the use of interview aids (such as drawings or anatomical dolls). Specialized knowledge is especially important when young children are interviewed" (APSAC, 1997, p. 2).

"The forensic interview" is an essential component of the fact-finding process in cases of physical and sexual abuse. The goal of the interview should be to obtain a statement from a child in a developmentally sensitive, unbiased, and truth-seeking manner that will support accurate and fair decision-making in the criminal justice and child welfare systems (Lau and Treacy, 2009: 168). The forensic interview is a critical component of a child-abuse investigation.

When abuse or neglect is substantiated on someone in the home, the goal for treatment may be family reunification, termination of parental rights, or out-of-home

placement. For family reunification, family relationships ultimately need to change, not just the individuals within the family. Programs for family violence rarely treat the family as a unit, and few programs address the cross-generational trauma that is often present in CPS-involved families. When community programs focus exclusively on education and skills development, individuals learn to say what professionals “want to hear” and to do what is expected of them in order to get through the court system; the process becomes one more of compliance than of change (Pernicano, 2010: 4).

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1. Objective*

The main aim of this study is to find out what are the counselors or guidance practitioners’ ideas on child abuse and neglect cases. Whether or not do they have sufficient information features, determining and intervention of child abuse and neglect cases?

### *2.2. Participants*

The research group comprises 50 school counselors in other word guidance practitioners employed in 60 different schools in Sinop the most part of Black Sea in Turkey. Counselor is a professional who carries out counseling process. Counseling denotes a professional relationship between a trained counselor and a client. This relationship is usually person to person, although it may sometimes involve more than two people. It is designed to help clients to understand and clarify their views of their life space, and to learn to reach their self-determined goals through meaningful, well informed choices and through resolution of problems of an emotional or interpersonal nature (Burks and Steffle, 1979: 14). Counselors are to regard other pupil personnel specialists primarily as referral sources to help those whose needs demand their specialized kinds of service. Counselors are knowledgeable as well about the referral agencies that exist outside the school (Shetzer and Stone, 1981: 70).

### *2.3. Instrument*

The three semi constructed interview questions were applied to the participants which are fifty school counselors. These questions are (1) Please share me what do you know about features of neglected and abused children! (2) Could you tell me how do you determine neglected and abused children? and (3) Please tell me about your knowledge on how do you intervene neglected and abused children?

### *2.4. Procedure*

The semi constructed interview form and sample cases developed by literature research have been asked in writing to a group of 22 persons, comprised of the professionals employed at the schools, hospitals and child centers the information collected in the preliminary implementation have been shared with the same group by a confirmation meeting and new contributions have been obtained. Afterwards, the re-structured questions have been asked to fifty participants by interview via by one by meeting in their schools. Care has been taken to assure that the same counselors are not present in both groups.

### *2.5. Data analysis*

A qualitative research has been carried out interviews with 50 school counselors working in Sinop. There were 350 minutes interviews recorded and 60 pages and 26100 words transcribed in those interviews records. In the research, descriptive and content analyses have been made on the data collected by interview. Additionally, the

collected data have been compared with the contents of the responses given to the sample cases later on.

### 3. Results

The demographic characteristics of the research participants based on sex, fields, seniority and school of graduation, are provided in the following table (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Demographic Characteristics of the Teachers who have Participated in the Interview

		n	%
Sex	Female	29	58
	Male	21	42
School type	Elementary	30	60
	Middle	20	40
Length of service	1-5 Years	18	36
	6-10 Years	22	44
	11- more Years	10	20
Degree (diploma)	Education (counselor)	32	64
	Arts and Sciences (psychologist)	6	12
	Others	12	24
TOTAL		50	100

In this case the research findings are to be identified descriptively. The counselors do not find their level of knowledge on the neglect and abuse issue adequate. They have stated that although they can face neglected and abused children they don't know how they handle. The teachers are aware of the austerity of the child abuse and neglect problem and they are receptive to the problem. The counselors have stated that they need information on the basic facts related to the subject matter, identification criteria, how they should act when they are intervening, how they should approach the student, how they can save the student, and information on the legal aspects of the problem. They are stating that they should take courses on abuse and neglect in universities. The counselors are not informed on the legal dimensions of the issue. 92% of the group (46 counselors) is not aware of the features and determining the cases they have determined as negligence or abuse issue.

Content analyses of the research findings have also been made. As the method used in forming and coding the themes in the research, the words most frequently and commonly used by the teachers have been taken into consideration. The questions that have been raised to the counselors during interview and the frequency of the received responses are provided below.

How do you feature child negligence and abuse? In the responses to this question, a full definition pointing out to the physical, emotional and sexual aspects of the concept could not be attained. The teachers generally have approached abuse mainly as sexual abuse. 8% of the teachers have included the emotional aspect to their definitions.

**Table 4.** How do you feature child negligence and abuse?

Feature	n	%
Neglect: Families' failure when supplying their duties	48	96
Emotional abuse: Divestiture of child from love, affiliation, affection	38	76
Sexual abuse: Forcing child in sexual activities	50	100
Physical abuse: Violence that child faces	50	100

From the table it can draw that counselors have highly enough information about child negligence. Counselors' information about emotional abuse is a bit little less than others (%76 n=38). All counselors know about features of sexual and physical abuse.

Do you believe that you can identify those of your students who are neglected or abused? The table below illustrates how counselors determine child neglect and abuse cases.

**Table 5.** According to you, which are the symptoms to be watched out for?

Determinations	n	%
Lover academic achievement	46	92
Becomes introverted	50	100
Comes to school with wounds and bruises.	42	84
Behaves aggressively in class	40	80
Submissive	48	96
Crying	38	76
Total	50	100

All school counselors have sharing idea that all neglected and abused children are become introverted. Counselors think that neglected and abused children have lover academic achievement (%92 n=46). Especially in physical abuse cases children come to school with wounds and bruises (%84 n=42). Aggressive manner in class (%80 n=40). If a child faces abuse or negligence she or he becomes submissive (%96 n=48). Abuse and neglect causes child cry (%76 n=38).

How do you handle or intervene to the children who are neglected and abused? This last question' answer is generally passed by teachers. Mostly they said "I made individual counseling" (%92 n=46). None of counselors knows legal procedures of negligence and abuse cases.

#### 4. Discussions

Worldwide, more than 200,000,000 children under the age of 18 years old were victims of child sexual abuse in 2002 alone (Lampinen and Sexton-Radek, 2010). A child is considered abused if he or she is treated in a way that is unacceptable in a given culture at a given time (Meadow, 2007). Meadow (2007) states that abuse can be a neglect, physical, sexual or emotional one. Many forms of child abuse may lead to the death of the child. Child abuse occurs across socioeconomic, religious, cultural, racial, and ethnic groups.

Generally, it is believed that the teacher has a higher level of knowledge related to the issue. This study shows that the teachers in the group of the research are receptive to the subject, but do not have the adequate level of knowledge required in the

identification of the cases. Training practices based on training requirements and sample case studies will be more effective. Moreover, in relation to what will be experienced following the identification of the case, they are concerned that the child will not be adequately protected during that process. This situation leads them to be timid in intervention. Since there is no specific regulation, the educators are intervening in the event within the framework of their own knowledge and experiences and a standard approach does not exist.

Counselors can help victims of abuse and neglect begin to process their experiences of abuse and help them understand that they are not to blame for their partner's actions. (Mele, 2009). The forensic interview is an essential component of the fact-finding process in cases of physical and sexual abuse. The goal of the interview should be to obtain a statement of a child in a developmentally sensitive, unbiased, and truth-seeking manner that will support accurate and fair decision-making in the criminal justice and child welfare systems (Lau and Treacy, 2009).

Universities which are giving counseling degrees should open obligatory or elective courses on child abuse and neglect. Researches should encourage prepare the thesis in master and doctoral degrees on child abuse and neglect. Counselors working in schools should attend conferences, seminars or symposiums on child abuse and neglect. Ministry of Education should supply in-service training about child abuse and neglect for school counselors.

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