



# Risk Factors for Child Abuse: Quantitative Correlational Design

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The aim of this research study is to identify risk factors typical of different types of suspected child abuse reported at a hospital. The study was based on 114 cases of children for whom some type of abuse was reported. Physical abuse was the most frequently reported of all types of suspected child abuse. Most victims of sexual abuse were female and at least half the cases of neglect and physical abuse were attributed to parents. Most cases were identified in the emergency room by nurses. Children older than 10 were more susceptible to physical abuse and neglect.

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CHILD ABUSE IS a serious social problem threatening the life and welfare of children and teens (Begle, Dumas, & Hanson, 2010; Crawford, 2010; Shefe et al., 2007) and overburdening the healthcare system (Fang, Brown, Florence, & Mercy, 2012). In many countries, including the United States (Dubowitz, 2007), England (Pritchard & Sharples, 2008) and Israel (Yehuda, Attar-Schwartz, Ziv, Jedwab, & Benbenishty, 2010), child abuse is the leading cause of children's referral to social services. In 2009, 45,588 reports of suspected child abuse were recorded in Israel, a sharp rise of 171% in a matter of 15 years (Ben Arie, Tzionit, & Berman, 2009). Most reports of child abuse in Israel focus on several main types: physical, sexual and neglect.

## Background

Child abuse is defined as physical, sexual, intellectual or mental maltreatment, whether through action, omission or continuous neglect (Yehuda et al., 2010; Zimmerman, 2006) or by a child caregiver causing intentional harm or threatening to cause harm to the child (Goldstein, 2005). Reporting child abuse in Israel is mandatory, based on the 1989 amendment to the Penal Law (amendment no. 26) part 6 sections 368a-368h, which obligates both professionals and the population at large to report violence towards minors or the helpless. Professionals have an increased obligation to report, according to section 368d (b), which states: "A doctor, nurse, social worker, social services worker, policeman, psychologist, criminologist or paramedical therapist, or a director or staff member at a residential home for minors or helpless people – who due to their occupation or work had reasonable grounds to think that an offense had been committed against a minor or a helpless person by someone responsible for him – must report this as soon as possible to a welfare officer or to the police; anyone violating this instruction – is liable for a six-month prison sentence."

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Hospitals and clinics are the first point of arrival for many children suspected of having been subjected to abuse. They provide children with initial protection, access to professional resources, proper references and care (Davidson-Arad & Benbenishty, 2010). Therefore, abused children are currently diagnosed based on the evaluations and diagnosis ability of staff who treat the children, mainly nurses, doctors and social workers. Nurses carry the most responsibility for detecting cases of violence, as they are often the first to see abused children when presenting at the hospital (Taylor, Baldwin, & Spencer, 2008). Types of abuse most often reported are physical violence, sexual violence and neglect, and they will be the focus of this study (Glasser & Chen, 2006).

Physical abuse is defined as an action that causes temporary or permanent damage to children's physical functioning, for example: hitting, causing intentional burns, hair pulling and choking (Crawford, 2010). Child sexual abuse is defined as engaging children in sexual activities they cannot understand or consent to, including genital or anal contact; exposing the child to exhibitionism, voyeurism or sexually explicit material; using the child in pornography; and pandering the child for sex by others (Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2011).

Child neglect refers to inadequate care of the child's basic needs, either physical or emotional. Child neglect may vary in type, severity and length (Currie, Stabile, Maniyong, & Roos, 2010). In the US, neglect is the most prevalent type of abuse, with over 794,000 cases in 2007. A study that examined the occurrence of neglect among a sample of 303 child victims of domestic violence found that 72.5% suffered from neglect (Mennen, Kim, Sang, & Trickett, 2010). Physical abuse is the second most frequent type of abuse; it is more common than sexual abuse and has a greater likelihood of being inflicted on both sexes, versus sexual abuse which is more typical of girls than boys (Springer, Sheridan, Kuo, & Carnes, 2007). Similar to the US findings, in Israel as well the most common type of abuse is neglect, followed by physical and then sexual abuse (Weisblay, 2010).

A literature review of child abuse shows that features of the child and of the family system were found to have a significant effect on the risk of child abuse. Conspicuous features are: mother's origin, mother's limited schooling, mother's young age at pregnancy, number of siblings (more than 2), baby's sex, baby's low birth weight, poverty in the family, and premature birth (Wu et al., 2004). The literature shows that recurring violence against the child together with a history of violence experienced by parents increase the risk of violence towards children (Sidebotham & Heron, 2006; Whitaker et al., 2008). Whitaker et al. show a high potential for abuse also among parents who felt less control over their child's aggressive behavior and developed a negative approach towards their own educational methods and their children's behavior (Begle et al., 2010).

The social-cultural setting has an effect on child abuse. Shawna, Guterman, and Yookyong (2008) examined 1257 fathers from 20 cities in the US and found that men of African

American origin who live with a spouse and are married have a greater risk of abusing their children than men who live with a spouse and are not married. This correlation was not found for men of Caucasian or Hispanic ethnicity. They also found that men of Hispanic origin are less inclined to inflict psychological abuse or physical abuse than men of African American or Caucasian origins. These correlations were found to be significant even after standardization for socio-demographic variables such as level of income and schooling. In addition, there is a correlation between mother's ethnicity and the involvement of child protection services. For example, Afro-American mothers were more inclined to report child abuse than mothers from European and South American origins (Begle et al., 2010). In addition, single-parent families were found to have almost double the risk of child abuse (Sidebotham & Heron, 2006).

In Israel, studies examining the effect of culture on child abuse found cultural differences in how violence was manifested in the family in regard to the assailant's and victim's sex. For instance, differences were found between Muslim, Druze and Bedouin Arabs and Christian Arabs. For example, Muslim and Druze mothers were more inclined to hit their children than Arab Christian mothers. In addition, differences were also found in the reporting of violence between Christian Arab society and Druze and Muslim Arab society (Weisblay, 2010).

There are also differences between the Arab sector and the Jewish sector, where members of the Arab sector are less inclined to reporting violence against children to welfare officers than members among the Jewish sector. This is a result both of cultural characteristics and of a shortage of professional human resources for detecting and treating such cases, and does not indicate a lower rate of child abuse in the Arab than in the Jewish sectors (Weisblay, 2010). Thus, in 2009 welfare officers at departments of social services received 33,751 new reports of child abuse, including 5253 new reports of child abuse in the Arab sector—1116 reports of domestic violence, 199 reports of sexual violence in the family, and 2368 reports of neglect. That year, 2433 files on domestic violence against minors were opened, including 242 in the Arab sector, and from January to October 2010 another 2066 files were opened, including 166 in the Arab sector (Weisblay, 2010).

In the Jewish sector, a similar disparity was found between the secular and Orthodox society (Haj-Yahia & Ben-Arieh, 2000). Thus, in 2009, the 33,751 reports included only 2194 cases of ultra-Orthodox children who had been subjected to violence and risk situations in the family. The reason for this disparity is that the obligation to report meets with only partial compliance in ultra-Orthodox society and the rate of applications to welfare officers regarding child abuse in ultra-Orthodox towns is low in proportion to that of the general population. Members of this sector are wary of the criminal process and of the publicity involved and also do not trust the police (Weisblay, 2010). This disparity was also evident between urban and rural families, with urban families

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