

## PERCEPTION OF CHILD'S ABUSE IN KIRKUK – IRAQ

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Child maltreatment is reported in all cultures globally. It usually resulted from interactions of many factors (parental depression, stress, and social isolation, etc....). Child abuse has become an increasingly widespread phenomenon in Iraq, with social networking sites playing a major role in detecting any abuse and torture cases. **Objective:** To identify the perception of child abuse and its types among professionals whom in close contact with children. **Materials and Methods:** A cross sectional study was conducted in Kirkuk city- Iraq. A total of 340 professionals closed to children (doctors working at PHCCs, school and kindergarten teachers) participated in the study. A questionnaire with a known reliability and validity was used. Data were collected by face to face interviews. Chi square test was used. P value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant. **Results:** Kindergarten teachers had the highest perception for child's abuse among other professionals (52; 83.9%), while schoolteachers had the least one among the study sample (141; 71.2%). School teachers and doctors had a significant high perception for neglect abuse (p = 0.00). Kindergarten teachers had a significant high perception for physical abuse (p = 0.00). All the three professionals had a significant low perception for sexual abuse (p = 0.00). **Conclusions:** Awareness of child abuse and neglect is improving in Iraq. Physical abuse and neglect were shown to be the most prevalent forms of maltreatment of children in Kirkuk city.

### INTRODUCTION

A child generally means a person who is younger than age 18 years or who is not an independent minor. Maltreatment is any recent act or failure to act on the part of a caretaker, which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation.<sup>[1]</sup>

Child's maltreatment is reported in all cultures globally. It usually resulted from interactions of many factors (parental depression, stress, and social isolation, etc....).<sup>[2]</sup> Child maltreatment constitute a major concerns to professionals from different disciplines due to its immediate and long term effects on children. Every year, a substantial proportion of infants and children die, some left disabled.<sup>[3]</sup> For the survivors, maladjustment problems are encountered during childhood and adulthood life.<sup>[4,5]</sup> Therefore, accurate and early diagnosis of children who suspected to be victims of abuse can ensure appropriate evaluation, investigation, and outcomes.<sup>[6]</sup>

Child abuse has become an increasingly widespread phenomenon in Iraq. The issue of domestic violence against children is not something new, but was not much under the spotlight before. Social networking sites expose these violations, which may help in finding solutions. The abused children are afraid to file a complaint in police station and turn to social media to voice their concerns. Children are being trafficked by their parents; others had a burned face to force them begging in the streets.<sup>[7]</sup> Lack of legislation and deterrent measures to limit this disturbing behavior were factors that increase the spread of this phenomenon among Iraqi society. Literatures concerned about this horrible behavior against children were scarce in this country. That was the impetus to carry out this study.

### OBJECTIVES

To identify the perception of child abuse and its types among professionals whom in close contact with children.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

A cross sectional study was conducted in Kirkuk city/Iraq. A total of 340 professionals (doctors working at PHCCs, school and kindergarten teachers) participated in the study. A questionnaire with a known reliability and validity was used.<sup>[8]</sup> Data were collected by face to face interviews.

Chi square test was used. P value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

### Operational definitions

**Physical abuse:** Intentional use of physical force against the child, like hitting, beating, kicking, biting, burning, poisoning and suffocating, etc.<sup>[9]</sup>

**Sexual abuse:** Any completed or uncompleted sexual act, sexual contact or even exploration of a child by a caregiver, including physical harm to the genital area.<sup>[10]</sup>

**Emotional abuse:** The most prevalent type of child abuse and the most hidden under-reported one. The victims will experience difficulties in physical health and

neurophysiological, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development.<sup>[11]</sup>

**Child neglect:** Failure of the caregiver to provide the needed food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and supervision to the degree that affect child's health, safety and wellbeing.<sup>[12]</sup>

## RESULTS

Figure (1) shows distribution of abuse perception among professionals. Kindergarten teachers had the highest perception for child's abuse among other professionals (52; 83.9%), while schoolteachers had the least one among the study sample (141; 71.2%). Table (1) shows distribution of child's abuse perception among professionals according to abuse types. School teachers and doctors had high perception for neglect abuse (135, 58; 31.8%, 53.7% respectively). Kindergarten teachers had high perception for physical abuse (51; 46.4%). All the three professionals (schoolteachers, kindergarten teachers, and doctors) had lowest perception for sexual abuse in children (6, 6, 3; 1.4%, 5.4%, 2.8%, respectively).

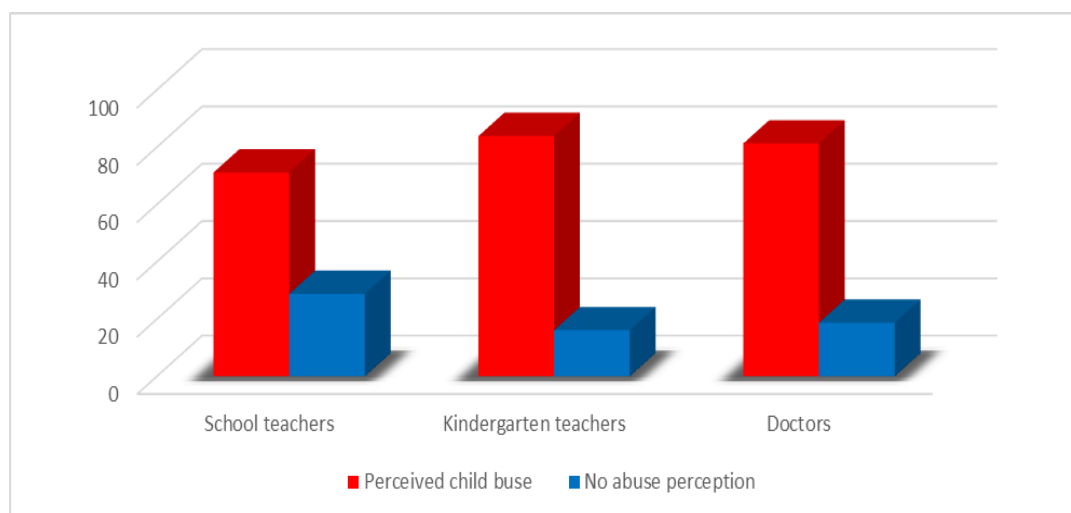


Figure 1: Perception of child's abuse among studied professionals.

Table 1: Perception of abuse types in children by professionals.

Professional	Type of abuse								Chi square P value
	Emotional		Physical		Sexual		Neglect		
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
Schoolteacher	52	12.3	87	20.5	6	1.4	135	31.8	840 0.00
Kindergarten teacher	23	20.9	51	46.4	6	5.4	30	27.3	330 0.00
Doctors	24	22.2	55	50.9	3	2.8	58	53.7	420 0.00

## DISCUSSION

The study showed high perception of abused children in general compared to previous study in Erbil.<sup>[13]</sup> This might be attributed to increase awareness about this

phenomenon. In the last three decades, beating, shouting, and even burning the child were considered acceptable and not uncommon in Iraqi society. Such punishments were considered important for the proper rise of children and to prevent them from repeating any mistake in

future.<sup>[14]</sup> In recent years, the fight against this phenomenon has begun. Several laws have been put in place to combat people responsible for child abuse and neglect.<sup>[15]</sup>

Kindergarten teachers had the highest perception for child abuse among other professionals (52; 83.9%). Since the diagnosis of maltreatment mainly depends on the observation of its sequelae rather than the observation the abusive behavior itself; therefore, spending lots of time with children might be very help in this situation.<sup>[8]</sup> Children at nurseries and kindergartens spent lots of time in classrooms. It is not uncommon for having one teacher responsible for most of the lessons in one class.

The study revealed that neglect is significantly recognized by schoolteachers and doctors more than other abuse types ( $p = 0.00$ ). Schoolteachers spent lots of time with children. Dirtiness, no food nor money for buying some, low school performance, and no motivation for participating in class activities might be all attributed to child's neglect by caregiver. Recurrent cold exposure, repeated PHCCs visits, prolonged sickness without treatment, and even self-harming might be attributed to child's neglect. These manifestations can be easily noticed by doctors. This finding is similar to that in Egypt<sup>[8]</sup> and in contrast to that in Turkey.<sup>[16]</sup>

The study showed that kindergarten teachers had significantly high perception for physical abuse rather than other abuse types ( $p = 0.00$ ). Presence of physical evidence of maltreatment (burns, bruises, injuries, etc.) can be easily noticed when spending enough time with children. Haj Yahia *et al*<sup>[17]</sup> and Shor *et al*<sup>[18]</sup> reported that childhood maltreatment manifested by externalizing behaviors and obvious signs of danger. This figure is in contrast to that in Egypt.<sup>[8]</sup>

Sexual abuse was the least type perceived by participants ( $p=0.00$ ). The ability to recognize child sexual abuse requires a high index of suspicion and familiarity with the verbal, behavioral and physical indicators of abuse.<sup>[19]</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Awareness of child abuse and neglect is improving in Iraq. Physical abuse and neglect were shown to be the most prevalent forms of maltreatment of children in Kirkuk city.

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