

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE****CHILD MALTREATMENT AMONG ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN IN JIMMA TOWN****INDRYAS LEMMA\*, MD****ABSTRACT**

**BACKGROUND:** *Child abuse and maltreatment is one of the major offences on children. It can have various forms including physical, psychological and sexual abuse. The Objectives of this study was to assess the magnitude of various forms of child maltreatment among elementary school children.*

**METHODS:** *A cross-sectional study was conducted in two elementary schools in Jimma town in June 2000. A total of 227 children selected by simple random sampling were interviewed using a structured questionnaire.*

**RESULTS:** *Majority (80.0%) of the studied children encountered some form of physical punishment of which 21.0% had abusive punishment as evidenced by bruises, lacerations or swelling reported as a result of the punishment. Teachers were responsible for the majority (40.7%) of punishment followed by parents (31.0%) and others. In addition, 77.5% of the studied children had some form of verbal maltreatment including insult, curse, harassment or threat to harm. No child reported sexual abuse in this study but 25 (11.0%) encountered bad secret (sexually seductive word, picture or written message) mainly from a neighboring child (44.0%) followed by classmate (28.0%) and others.*

*Statistically significant association was found between child's age and the risk of having physical punishment ( $p < 0.05$ ) but not between child's sex, with whom the child currently lives and physical punishment ( $p > 0.05$ ).*

**CONCLUSION:** *the consequences of child maltreatment are detrimental to the physical, psychological and mental development of children. Teachers, parents and other members of the community should be educated on the various forms and consequences of child maltreatment.*

**KEY WORDS:** School children, child maltreatment, child abuse.

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## INTRODUCTION

Child abuse and maltreatment has been one of the major offences on children. In countries with reliable mortality reporting, the world health organization (WHO) estimates that 1/5,000 to 1/10,000 children under five years die each year from physical violence (1). According to different studies and reports, child maltreatment has several forms in Ethiopia. It can be in the form of excessive corporal punishment by parents, teachers or others; excessive child labor; harmful traditional practices including early marriage and the like (2-4).

Although there is no clear definition of verbal maltreatment in literatures so far, words repeatedly expressing disapproval, criticism, hostility, scorn and ridicule are considered as part of psychological and emotional abuse (5).

Sexual exploitation of children on the other hand is becoming an increasingly identified form of child maltreatment especially in the developed world. However studies on sexual abuse of children are difficult due to variation in the definition of child sexual abuse among different cultures and literatures and the taboo associated with reporting cases of sexual abuse (6).

Child maltreatment can have several harmful consequences which are often immediate, impinging on the formative years and long lasting, following victims throughout their lives. For instance maltreated school children have numerous difficulties in adapting to school including poor performance, low school grades, and low social competence (5,7).

The consequences of child sexual abuse are particularly worse. Sexually abused child may suffer physical damage, contract sexually transmitted infections including HIV, and variety of psychological trauma like feelings of low self esteem,

rejection, guilt, fear, anxiety, distrust, hostility, post traumatic stress disorder and others (5,6).

This study is carried out to assess the prevalence of physical punishment including excessive punishment, verbal and sexual maltreatment among elementary school children. It will also try to describe socio-demographic variables that may be related with child maltreatment.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted in Jimma town, 335 kms south west of Addis-Ababa in June 2000 in two elementary schools with a total student population of 811. Simple random sampling was used to calculate the sample size using the prevalence of physical punishment to be 80% from a previous study (2). Accordingly, the total sample size was calculated to be 246, which was proportionally allocated between the two schools. Then proportional number of students was selected for grades 1-6 depending on the total number of students in each grade.

Selection of a specific student for interview was made by using systematic random sampling and the first student was selected by lottery method using the student's roll number as a reference.

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the ethical committee of Jimma University. The Interview was conducted by either a psychiatric nurse or a medical general practitioner in a room with adequate privacy after asking the willingness of each selected student. Explanation on what is meant by physical punishment, verbal maltreatment and sexual maltreatment was given to the children during interview. Female students were interviewed by female interviewers and vice versa so as to decrease fear and increase confidence in communication.

Observation was also made for any physical evidence of punishment and findings recorded. A structured questionnaire was used to collect the data.

Data on the child's socio-demographic characteristics, family and issues related to child maltreatment were collected. Students were asked about any form of physical punishment, verbal maltreatment and/or sexual maltreatment within the past four weeks prior to the date of interview. For those students with a positive response, further information on the type of maltreatment, who was responsible and other data was collected.

Data was entered into SPSS for Windows 7.5, frequencies and descriptive statistics were obtained. Association between variables was tested by using a chi-square test with the level of significance at  $p < 0.05$  and 95% confidence interval.

## RESULTS

A total of 227 children, 90% of the sample, from grades 1-6 were actually interviewed. Of these 131 (57.7%) were females and 96 (42.3%) were males, making male to female ratio of 0.73. The mean age was 9.36 years with range of 6-14 years.

Majority (72.2%) of the interviewed children live with both their father and mother. The rest lived in one parent home (19.9%) and with a relative (7.9%). The most common occupation for either male or female heads and the household was a government employee, 68.3% and 52.4% respectively followed by private business for males and housewife for females (Table 1).

Majority (80.6%) of the interviewed children have encountered some form of physical punishment within 4 weeks prior to the date of the interview. Of these forty children (21.9%) had evidence of punishment in the form of bruises, lacerations and/or swelling. Nine children

had demonstrable evidence of punishment at the time of data collection including healed scar in four children, darkening or reddening of the skin in four children and pus discharge in one child.

The commonest form of physical punishment encountered was beating (with sticks) followed by whipping, pinching, slapping and others in descending order. Teachers were responsible for the majority (40.7%) of physical punishment followed by parents (31.0%) and others (Table 2).

Among the Socio-demographic characteristics studied, age was significantly associated with the risk of having physical punishment ( $p < 0.001$ ). Children in the age group of 6-8 years were most affected. Other variables like child's gender, the family with whom the child lives and occupation of parents were found to have insignificant association with the risk of having physical punishment ( $P > 0.05$ ).

One hundred and seventy nine (77.5%) of interviewed children had encountered an insult, curse, harassment and/or threat to harm within the past 4 weeks prior to the date of interview. Classmates were responsible for majority (25.5%) of verbal offense followed by a neighboring child, male/female acquaintance, parent, sibling and others in descending order (Table 3).

Concerning sexual maltreatment, no child reported sexual abuse. Nevertheless 25(11.0%) of the interviewed children encountered bad secret (sexually seductive words/ written messages or pictures) within 4 weeks prior to the interview. Of these 14 (56.0%) were females while 11(44.0%) were males. A neighboring child was responsible for majority (44%) of cases followed by a classmate (28.0%), stranger and male/female acquaintance (8.0%) each. The offender was not reported in 3 cases (12%.) [Table 4].

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic characteristics of the studied elementary school children and their parents, Jimma town, June 2000.

Characteristics	Number	Percent
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	96	42.3
Female	131	57.7
<b>Age (Years)*</b>		
6-8	83	36.9
9-11	114	50.7
12-14	28	12.4
<b>Child currently lives</b>		
With both parents	164	72.2
In one parent home	45	19.9
With relative	18	7.9
<b>Occupation</b>		
<b>Male Parent</b>		
<b>/Guardian</b>		
Gov't employee	155	68.3
Private business	32	14.1
No information	30	13.2
Others**	10	4.4
<b>Female Parent</b>		
<b>/Guardian</b>		
Gov't employee	119	52.4
House wife	69	30.4
Private business	19	8.4
Others**	13	5.7
No information	7	3.1

\*Total adds up to 225 because information on age was missing from two children.

\*\*Includes NGO employee, unemployed, farmer...

**Table 2.** Prevalence and characteristics of physical punishment among the Studied elementary school children, Jimma town; June 2000.

Variables	Number	Percent
<b>Any Physical punishment</b>		
<b>Within the past 4 weeks</b>		
Yes	183	80.6
No	44	19.4
<b>Type of punishment</b>		
Beating	89	30.9
Whipping	88	30.6
Pinching	52	18.1
Slapping	37	12.8
Others*	22	7.6
<b>Who inflicted punishment</b>		
Teacher	118	40.7
Parent	90	31.0
Sibling	23	7.9
Class mate	22	7.6
Male/Female acquaintance	19	6.6
Others**	18	6.2
<b>Evidence of punishment reported</b>		
Yes †	40	21.9
No	143	78.1

\*Others include kick, box...

\*\*Others include neighbor, stranger, relative and chief of class.

†Include bruises, abrasions, lacerations and swellings.

**Table 3.** Characteristics of Verbal Maltreatment among the studied elementary school children, Jimma town, June 2000.

Characteristics	Number	Percent
<b>Any verbal maltreatment</b>		
<b>Within past 4 weeks</b>		
Yes	179	78.9
No	48	21.1
<b>Responsible person</b>		
Class mate	69	25.5
Neighbor	47	17.3
Male/female acquaintance	45	16.6
Parent	42	15.5
Sibling	36	13.3
Others*	32	11.8

\*others: include stranger, relative....

**Table 4.** Prevalence and characteristics of bad secret encountered among the studied Elementary school children, Jimma town, June 2000.

Characteristics	Number	Percent
<b>Bad secret* within the past 4 weeks</b>		
Yes	25	11
No	202	89
<b>Responsible person</b>		
Neighboring child	11	44
Class mate	7	28
Stranger	2	8
Male / Female Acquaintance	2	8
Not reported	3	12

\*bad secret is defined as any sexually seductive words, pictures or written messages communicated to a child including the suggestion to have sexual intercourse.

All of the offenders were children with similar age and opposite sex except two who were older and one who was younger. No adult offender was reported. More than half (56%) of the children who encountered bad secret informed a third person on what happened. Parents were the most frequently informed followed by teachers, siblings and friends in descending order.

## DISCUSSION

The study was conducted in the two non-government schools in Jimma town where a monthly fee of 30-40 birr is paid for every child. Moreover majority of the children have both parents working as a government employee. It can thus be inferred that majority of the studied children are from families of relatively better income.

One hundred and eighty three (80.6%) of the studied children encountered some form of physical punishment within four weeks prior to the date of interview indicating that physical punishment is a common phenomenon. The figure is similar to the finding in another study where 80% of urban and 76.0% of rural elementary school children encountered some form of physical punishment (2).

Majority (40.7%) of the physical punishment was inflicted by teachers contrary to the rules and regulations of the Ministry of education which prohibits physical punishment in schools (8).

This may not be surprising as there is an overall acceptance of physical punishment as a major disciplinary measure in schools by the community as shown in another study done in Jimma town (3). However the study clearly shows that the rules and the practice are different.

Another important finding was the evidence of physical punishment reported in 21.9% of those punished. This figure is

close to the finding in another study where 21% of urban elementary school children reported skin bruises and swelling as a result of physical punishment (2). Among the evidences reported in this study, majority were skin bruises followed by swelling and laceration. This clearly represents excessive physical punishment that can be categorized as abusive (6).

The finding of significantly higher rate of physical punishment in younger children was also seen in a similar study where the risk of being punished was 46% lower in children over the age of 12 years as compared to those 9 years old or less (2). These findings may indicate the vulnerability of younger children to various forms of maltreatment.

Contrary to texts, which describe higher rate of maltreatment including physical punishment in girls than boys, no statistically significant association was found between the risk of physical punishment and the sex of the child in this study (6).

It seems more appropriate to establish strict regulations against excessive physical punishment instead of formulating loose rules that prohibit physical punishment in schools, which was shown to be unsupported by the beliefs of the society (3). Moreover, the delineation between light physical punishment, authorized by the Ethiopian civil code of (1960) E.C. and abusive punishment, which is punishable by law, should be clearly defined to the public (9,10).

Another category of child maltreatment investigated in this study was verbal maltreatment encountered in 179 (77.5%) of the studied children. This was in the form of an insult/harassment, curse or threat to harm. Although it is very difficult to establish a direct cause and effect relationship between verbal maltreatment and its emotional consequences; repeated

words expressing hostility, criticism, scorn or ridicule are categorized under psychological or emotional abuse of children (6). As classmates are responsible for the majority of verbal maltreatment, teachers and parents can play a major role in correcting such practice.

Another category of child maltreatment addressed in this study was sexual maltreatment. There are several definitions for sexual maltreatment of children. For instance; any sexual exploitation of children whether consented to or not including: touching of a sexual nature, sexual intercourse and any behavior of sexual nature towards a child is considered as sexual abuse. In this same definition, sexual activity between children may be considered as sexual abuse if the difference in age or power between the children is significant (6).

Although there are several vague concepts in all the definitions, none of the forms of child sexual abuse commonly mentioned in literatures was reported in this study. However, 25(11%) of the interviewed children encountered bad secret, which includes sexually seductive words, written messages or pictures. Majority of these cases were encountered outside the school environment mainly by a neighboring child. No adult offender, close relative or family member was involved. These findings are reassuring when compared to other studies where child sexual abuse was not uncommon (11,12). Nevertheless, the findings indicate that it is not too early to give basic sex education for elementary school children, which is appropriate to their age, culture and level of understanding. Besides, the role of parents and teachers in teaching, counseling and prevention of sexual offenses on children can not be overemphasized as they are the most commonly informed persons by

children who encountered bad secret in this study.

However the finding in this study on sexual abuse cannot be conclusive as the sample size was computed based on the prevalence of physical punishment, which is much more common than sexual abuse. Thus a more specific study with larger sample size is needed to investigate sexual offences against children.

In conclusion, as the consequences of child maltreatment are detrimental to the physical, psychological and mental development of children; concerned authorities, health professionals, parents, teachers and other members of the society should be actively involved in understanding, detecting, reporting and prevention of all forms of child maltreatment.

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