

PSYCHOLOGICAL MALTREATMENT OF CHILDREN IN KASHMIR

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Abstract

Background: Psychological maltreatment is the most damaging and persistent form of child abuse. The aim of this study was to explore and describe the psychological maltreatment among children.

Methods: A qualitative study was conducted in district Srinagar among children experiencing psychological maltreatment. Twenty (20) children residing in different parts of district Srinagar were included in the study.

Results: Twelve out of the twenty children were experiencing psychological maltreatment in the form of terrorizing and degrading; missocializing was found among four respondents; three respondents were experiencing isolation whereas only one respondent was experiencing rejecting.

Conclusion: Children who experience psychological maltreatment showed a sort of negative psychological impact affecting their feelings/life situation. Ability to cope up depends on the personal perception of psychological maltreatment as well as its level, magnitude and frequency.

Keywords: Child abuse, Psychological maltreatment, Children, Srinagar, Kashmir.

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BACKGROUND

Children are arguably, the most criminally victimized people in the society. They suffer high rates of all the same crimes that adults do, plus a load of offenses specific to their status as children (Finkelhor, 2008), such as child psychological maltreatment. Child psychological maltreatment is a repeated pattern of damaging interactions (Glaser & Prior, 1997; Buntain, Kemper, bell & Babonis, 1994), between adult(s) (usually parent/parents) and a child in terms of making the child feel; worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, only value of in meeting another's needs (Chamberland, Fallon, Black, Trocme & Chabot, 2012), or seriously threatened with physical or psychological violence (Hart, Brassard & Karlson, 1996). Painful singular incident such as contentious divorce (Klosinski, 1993), exposure to domestic violence or to adult intimate partner violence has been included as a form of psychological maltreatment (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2011; Hibbard et al., 2012). Most of the psychological maltreatment occurs within the family although the family being a safe place for sustenance and care (Perrin & Perrin, 2008). Psychological maltreatment rarely occurs in isolation as a pure form of maltreatment (Ney, Gung & Wickett, 1994; Osofsky, 2003; Schneider, Ross, Graham, & Zielinski, 2005), rather it is at the core (Barnett, Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2005; Trickett, Mennen, Kim & Sang, 2009), and is embedded in all forms of child abuse and neglect (Garbarino, Guttman & Seeley, 1986; Hart, Germain & Brassard, 1987; Hart, Gunnar & Cicchetti, 1996), because every form might be potentially damaging to a child's feelings of self-worth and self-esteem (Hart et al., 2011).

Psychological maltreatment is a multi-dimensional construct, as per the general consensus in the research literature, but there is much debate so far the most appropriate organizational framework (in order to capture these dimensions) is concerned (Baker & Festinger, 2011). American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (1995) has however, offered one of the most widely recognized frameworks for the evaluation of suspected psychological maltreatment and it lists six categories of parental behaviours that constitute psychological maltreatment as; spurning, terrorizing, exploiting/corrupting, denying emotional responsiveness, isolation, mental/medical/educational neglect. The usefulness of this approach has been validated by the empirical research (Brassard & Donovan, 2006; Hart, Brassard, Binggeli & Davidson 2002). Besides, the organizational frameworks developed by several researchers have identified various sub-types of psychological maltreatment as; rejecting, degrading, terrorizing, isolating,

missocializing, exploiting, denying emotional responsiveness and close confinement (Baily & Baily, 1986; Garbarino et al., 1986; Hart & Brassard, 1991; O'Hagan, 1993; Schneider et al., 2005). Psychological maltreatment is not only the most challenging and prevalent form of child abuse (Hibbard et al., 2012), but also the most underreported form (Barnett et al., 2005; Trickett et al., 2009). There are many challenges associated with psychological maltreatment including the difficulties to define, identify and assess its severity or to establish the threshold for child protection services intervention (Baker, 2009; Brassard & Donovan, 2006; Glaser, Prior, Auty & Tilki, 2012; Hart et al., 2011). However, professionals have proposed many conceptual definitions to guide research, clinical practice and social policy (Perrin & Perrin, 2013).

In Kashmir, children are vulnerable to abuse both within and outside the families. Parental behaviours such as shouting, insulting, or threatening the child are common, such behaviours are perpetrated and experienced in mild or moderate forms in some cases whereas these are more severe, chronic and potentially harmful forms in other cases. Keeping in view these situations the present study was carried out to explore the 'Psychological Maltreatment among Children in Kashmir'. In this study psychological maltreatment was defined as the repeated pattern of parental behaviour in terms of rejecting, degrading, terrorizing, isolating or missocializing the child.

METHODS

A qualitative, exploratory and descriptive analysis was used in this study with the objective to explore and describe the psychological maltreatment among children. The children were of single ethnic and religious background i.e. Kashmiri Muslims residing in different pockets of district Srinagar. Children chosen/selected were identified through one year unstructured observation. Twenty children from twenty different families were included in the study, comprising the equal proportion of boys and girls. The target population consisted of children who were experiencing psychological maltreatment. Since the study was about children, therefore, the researcher strictly adhered to the 'ethical standards of working with children'. Data was collected using in-depth unstructured interviews. The questions were unstructured and the respondents were asked to describe their experiences in relation to psychological maltreatment. Data was analysed qualitatively.

RESULTS

Theme 1: Socio- Demographic Profile

The children who participated in the study were Kashmiri Muslims, in the age group of 11-14 years, residing in different pockets of district Srinagar. Out of twenty respondents; ten were boys and ten were girls. All the children were enrolled in regular schools. Three respondents belonged to low income families, twelve respondents belonged to middle income families while seven belonged to high income families. Only sixteen respondents had sibling(s) in their immediate families.

Theme 2: Parental Behaviour

Rejecting

Out of twenty only one respondent (a boy) mentioned that whenever he asked for any help from either of his parents, he faced disappointment as his parents either refused to help him or simply avoided or turned deaf ear. Moreover, he faced severe criticism on part of parents and that too on routine basis; his ideas/opinions were always rejected. He felt that he is either unwanted or unplanned. He could not really appreciate such hostile parental behaviour. During the interview session the researcher observed that the respondent was not able to maintain eye contact (despite of the repeated stimulations from the researcher), which may possibly be an indication of low self-esteem/low social competence resulting from hostile parental behaviour in terms of rejecting him. Children who are unwanted or unplanned are vulnerable to such parental behaviour.

Degrading

Six respondents (five girls and one boy) stated that whenever any mistake happened on their part their parents demonstrated the actions that severely deprecated them (children) in terms of calling names, publically humiliating, constantly insulting, etc. such severe abuse continue for two three days. All of these respondents did not liked to go to picnic with their families and they rarely attended any social gathering fearing severe criticism, humiliation in case of any mistake. They said they did not know what to do in such circumstances/situations and felt very frustrated. Such parental behaviour is likely to result in the social isolation of children. Moreover, humiliating a child publically harms his/her self-esteem; as a result the child is likely to exhibit attachment problems, low social competence, etc.

Terrorizing

Out of twenty respondents six respondents (four girls and two boys) revealed that they witnessed inter-parental abuse, constant intimate partner violence and domestic violence at their homes. Besides their parents set unrealistic goals, obviously the respondents were not able to meet the unrealistic expectations as a result they were continually yelled at by their parents. All these respondents mentioned that they were scared and also felt anger from such parental behaviour. Two of these respondents felt running away from home as the only way of getting rid of such inimical life situations. Children whose parents engage in setting unrealistic expectations, domestic violence, and intimate partner violence are vulnerable to such type of parental behaviour. Exposure to domestic violence by terrorizing children increases childhood depression, anxiety, aggression, and disobedience in children (Hughes & Graham-Bermann, 1998).

Isolating

Three (girls) out of twenty respondents said that they were rarely allowed to engage in normal social activities and even they were not allowed to play with the children of the locality as their parents feared that their wards may acquire/develop bad habits. These respondents mentioned that they felt lonely, frustrated and expressed the feelings of distance and disappointment. Such severe restrictions may hamper the normal growth and development of these children. Such unreasonable limitations on freedom of movement or social interactions may be harmful for these children as due to the lack of opportunities to engage in social activities the children are likely to develop anxiety and low self-esteem. Children of parents, who are unskilled or inexperienced in parenting, are vulnerable to such parental behaviour.

Missocializing

Four (boys) out of twenty respondents mentioned that they were allowed to do whatever they wanted, most often their behaviour was considered anti-social by the people around but that hardly mattered for them, as their parents appreciated, permitted and often encouraged such behaviour. Modelling, permitting and appreciating anti-social behaviour in a child results in corrupting or in other words missocializing the child, which may possibly lead to delinquency or criminality.

DISCUSSION

Without effective assessment the worst form of child abuse is likely to be repeated among generations, and as well as is likely to affect society both directly and indirectly, as the costs to the health of the individual, the costs to the health and social care systems will be large (Hibbard et al., 2012; Riggs & Kaniski, 2010). Universal parenting programs and the targeted interventions can be used to identify those at risk (Hibbard et al., 2012). Such population strategies are demonstrated successful in preventing child maltreatment (Prinz et al., 2009). Support needs to be in place for families who are facing challenges that makes positive parenting difficult, as children who are at risk for psychological maltreatment and its negative developmental health outcomes are those in families facing multiple sources of stress including substance abuse, mental health problems, family conflict, economic difficulties and little social support (Chamberland et al., 2012; Hibbard et al., 2012).

CONCLUSION

Psychological maltreatment is always damaging as it results in negative/harmful consequences for children in terms of low social competence, low self-esteem, negative emotional or life view, anxiety symptoms, depression, aggression, anger, frustration, anti-social behaviour/delinquency. At risk are the children whose parents are: involved in verbal or symbolic acts that express feelings of rejection; involved in domestic violence, intimate partner violence; inexperienced in parenting; involved in permitting anti-social behaviour. Children who experienced psychological maltreatment showed some level of negative psychological impact which affected their feelings/life. Ability to cope up depends on the personal perception of this type of child abuse, its level/magnitude and frequency. The role of the religious institutions is very crucial in order to sensitize masses about the importance of positive parenting such that the psychological maltreatment could be prevented as every child has a right to be brought up in a non-harmful manner.

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