



The relationship between nursing students' adverse childhood experiences and attitudes toward reporting child abuse and neglect

Hemşirelik öğrencilerinin olumsuz çocukluk deneyimleri ile çocuk istismarı ve ihmalini bildirme tutumları arasındaki ilişki

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between nursing students' adverse childhood experiences and their attitudes towards reporting child abuse and neglect.

Method: This descriptive and relation-seeking study included students studying in the nursing department of a university. The questionnaire form used to collect data included questions to describe the students, the Adverse Childhood Experiences Turkish Form (ACETF) and the Healthcare Provider Attitudes Toward Child Maltreatment Reporting Scale (ACMR).

Results: 58.9% of nursing students had a history of at least one type of abuse. The three most common types of abuse were psychological abuse (35.7%), physical abuse (24.3%) and psychological neglect (22.9%). Nursing students' ACMR score was 47.33 ± 6.77 and in the correlation analyses, the ACETF score was significantly positively associated with ACMR score ($r = 0.257$, $p < 0.001$).

Conclusion: The study results showed that more than half of the nursing students had experience of childhood abuse and their attitudes towards reporting child abuse were at an average level. In addition, students with negative experiences in childhood had higher attitudes towards reporting child abuse.

Keywords: Child abuse; neglect; nursing student; report

ÖZET

Amaç: Bu çalışmanın amacı, hemşirelik öğrencilerinin çocukluk çağı olumsuz yaşantıları ile çocuk istismarını ve ihmalini bildirme yönelik tutumları arasındaki ilişkinin belirlenmesidir.

Yöntem: Tanımlayıcı ve ilişki arayıcı türde olan bu çalışmaya bir üniversitenin hemşirelik bölümünde okuyan 280 hemşirelik öğrencisi dahil edildi. Verilerin toplanmasında kullanılan anket formunun içeriğinde, öğrencileri tanımlayan soruların yanı sıra Çocukluk Çağı Olumsuz Yaşantılar Ölçeği Türkçe Formu ve Sağlık Çalışanlarının Çocuk İstismarını/İhmalini Raporlamaya Karşı Tutumlarını Belirleme Ölçeği yer aldı.

Bulgular: Hemşirelik öğrencilerinin %58,9'u en az bir tür çocukluk çağı istismarına maruz kalmıştı. Öğrencilerin en sık maruz kaldıkları ilk üç istismar türü sırasıyla; psikolojik istismar (%35,7), fiziksel istismar (%24,3) ve psikolojik ihmaldir (%22,9). Öğrencilerinin Sağlık Çalışanlarının Çocuk İstismarını/İhmalini Raporlamaya Karşı Tutumlarını Belirleme Ölçeği toplam puanı $47,33 \pm 6,77$ idi. Korelasyon analizi sonucunda, öğrencilerin çocukluk çağı olumsuz yaşantıları ile çocuk istismarını/ihmalini raporlamaya karşı tutumları arasında pozitif bir ilişki olduğu belirlendi ($r = 0,257$, $p < 0,001$).

Sonuç: Çalışma sonuçları, hemşirelik öğrencilerinin yarısından fazlasının çocukluk istismarı deneyimi yaşadığını ve çocuk istismarını bildirme yönelik tutumlarının ortalama düzeyde olduğunu gösterdi. Ayrıca, çocuklukta olumsuz deneyimler yaşayan öğrencilerin çocuk istismarını bildirmeye yönelik tutumları daha yüksekti.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çocuk istismarı; ihmal; hemşirelik öğrencisi; raporlama

Introduction

Adverse childhood experiences are a concept that includes various traumatic events encountered by children and adolescents under the age of 18. Incidents such as physical, sexual and emotional abuse, as well as physical and emotional neglect and parental separation are evaluated within this scope (Çelik & Hocaoglu, 2018). Childhood trauma is considered a widespread public health crisis worldwide (Dube, 2018). According to the World Health Organization, nearly 1 billion children worldwide have been subjected to abuse (WHO, 2020). In Turkey, it is reported that about 43.5% of university students have experienced abuse during their

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childhood (Üstüner Top & Çam, 2021). A study involving nursing students in Turkey identified emotional neglect as the most commonly reported form of abuse (Mechmet & Gürsoy, 2023). However, since many cases of abuse and neglect remain unreported, the actual numbers are likely significantly higher (Salami & Alhalal, 2020). In addition to its prevalence, adverse childhood experiences contribute to multiple negative social, behavioral, and health outcomes across the lifespan (Dube, 2018). Therefore, early recognition of child abuse and reporting it to the authorities can help protect children from further abuse (Lee & Kim, 2018).

Nurses represent one of the professional groups that most frequently interact with children at risk of abuse and neglect and are therefore important in the early diagnosis and management of such cases (Lines, Grant & Hutton 2018; Jack et al., 2021). In addition, in many countries, nurses are legally obliged to report cases of child abuse or neglect (Chihak, 2009). However, research shows that nurses and nursing students, who will form the future workforce, face obstacles in reporting child abuse (Lee & Kim, 2018; Elarousy & Abed, 2019). It has been reported that 8.9% of nurses in Saudi Arabia report any type of child abuse (Salami & Alhalal, 2020), and 57% of school nurses in Sweden report suspected child sexual abuse (Sundler et al., 2021). In Turkey, it has been shown that 35.7% of nurses working in pediatric clinics encounter child abuse, but only 12.5% of these are reported to law enforcement (Polat Külcü & Karataş, 2016). In a study conducted with nursing students, it was reported that 27.6% of the students encountered/suspected any case of child abuse during their clinical practice training and their attitudes towards reporting were inadequate. Therefore, it is vital to develop the competence of nursing students in early diagnosis and management of child abuse and neglect cases during their professional education (Mehmet & Gürsoy, 2023).

Considering the magnitude of child abuse and neglect and its effects in the future, conducting current studies on the subject and revealing the situation can contribute to the planning to prevent abuse and neglect and to the preparation of educational curricula that will improve the competencies of nursing students. In addition, little is known about the extent to which nurses comply with their legal reporting obligations and what influences their reporting behavior. In this context, the aim of the study is to determine the relationship between nursing students' adverse childhood experiences and their attitudes towards reporting child abuse and neglect.

Method

Study Design and Setting

The universe of this descriptive and correlational study consisted of 654 nursing students studying in the Nursing Department of a university in the 2023-2024 Academic Year. Using Epi info 7.2 software, the required sample size was estimated as 242, taking a 5% margin of error, 95% confidence interval (CI), and a p-value of 0.05. The prepared online survey form shared with class representatives, who in turn shared the survey with their classmates. The study was completed with 280 (42.8%) students who approved and filled out the online survey form between March and May 2024. The inclusion criteria for the study were being registered in the Nursing Department of the relevant university, having a smartphone, and being willing to participate in the study.

Data Collection

The online survey form developed for data collection consisted of three parts. The first part of the questionnaire comprised questions on sociodemographic and their history of child abuse (such as encountered/suspected a case of child abuse and neglect). In addition, the second part of the questionnaire included the Turkish Form of Childhood Adverse Experiences, and the third part included the Scale of Healthcare Workers' Attitudes Towards Reporting Child Abuse.

Adverse Childhood Experiences Turkish Form (ACETF): The scale developed by Felitti et al. (1998) the Turkish validity and reliability study of the scale was conducted by Gündüz et al. (2018). There are 10 questions in the scale, each of which can be answered yes or no. A yes answer to each question corresponds to 1 point, and the scores that can be obtained from the scale vary between 0-10. An increase in the score indicates an increase in negative childhood experiences. The cronbach alpha coefficient of the scale was found to be 0.74. In this study, the chronbach alpha value of the scale was found to be 0.71.

Healthcare Provider Attitudes Toward Child Maltreatment Reporting Scale (ACMR): The Turkish validity and reliability study of the scale, which was developed by Singh et al. (2017), was conducted by Turan and Erdoğan (2019). The scale consists of a total of 19 questions in the subscales reporting responsibility and reporting concerns. The items in the scale are scored as a five-point Likert. Higher scores indicate increased reporting attitudes. The cronbach alpha coefficient of the scale was found to be 0.82. In this study, the chronbach alpha value of the scale was found to be 0.70.

Ethical Considerations

Permission was obtained from the Ethics Committee of a university for the research (Decision dated 29.02.2024 and numbered 03/47). In addition, participants' consent was obtained through the informed consent form on the first page of the online survey.

Data Analysis

In this study, SPSS 25 was used to analyze the data. In addition to some descriptive statistical methods (number, percentage etc.), and correlation analysis was performed to define the relationship between the ACETF and the ACMR scale total and subscale scores. Statistical significance was determined as $p < 0.05$.

Study Limitations

This study is one of the limited studies on the subject in the literature. Therefore, it is thought that it will contribute to the literature. However, since the study included nursing students studying at a single university, the generalizability of the study is limited. For this reason, it is recommended to conduct multi-center studies with larger sample groups.

Results

Most of the participants were female (79.3%) and 4th grade student (33.9%). About one fourth of the participants smoke (23.9%) and drink alcohol (25.7%) (Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of the students (n=280)

Variables	n	%
Sex		
Female	222	79.3
Male	56	20.0
Not disclosed	2	0.7
Study year		
1	61	21.8
2	87	31.1
3	37	13.2
4	95	33.9
Relationship status		
Married	7	2.5
Single	196	70.0
In a relationship	77	27.5

Income perception		
Income < expenses	49	17.5
Income = expenses	193	68.9
Income > expenses	38	13.6
Family structure		
Nuclear family	230	82.1
Extended family	44	15.7
Living with relatives	6	2.1
Smoking		
Yes	67	23.9
No	213	76.1
Alcohol use		
Yes	72	25.7
No	208	74.3
Relationship with parents		
Good	194	69.3
Moderate	79	28.2
Poor	7	2.5
Perceived academic success		
Good	91	32.5
Moderate	172	61.4
Bad	17	6.1

80% of nursing students reported that they had not received any training/course on child abuse and neglect; 23.6% reported that they had encountered/suspected a case of child abuse/neglect (Table 2).

Table 2. Students' experiences during their practice (n=280)

Variables	n	%
Training/course on child abuse/neglect		
Yes	56	20.0
No	224	80.0
Encountered a case of child abuse/neglect		
Yes	31	11.1
No	249	88.9
Suspected a case of child abuse and neglect		
Yes	35	12.5
No	245	87.5
Causes suspicion		
Unexplained bruises	16	5.7
Child's timid behavior	31	11.1
Child being neglected	32	11.5

Participants' ACETF and Scale scores are given in Table 3. The ACMR scale score was 47.33 ± 6.77 (27-70).

Table 3. Descriptive presentation of the scale scores (n=280)

Scales	Mean	SD	Median	Min	Max	25%	75%
Total ACETF Score	1.57	1.8	1	0	10	0.0	3.0
Total ATRCMS Score	47.33	7.03	47	26	67	42	53
Reporting Responsibility	21.52	4.45	21	12	41	18	24
Reporting Concerns	25.79	5.48	26	9	45	23	28

Table 4 presents the distribution of the participants' ACETF scores. Accordingly, about half of the participants (58.9%) reported having at least one ACE. The three most common types of child abuse were psychological abuse (35.7%), physical abuse (24.3%) and psychological neglect (22.9%), respectively.

Table 4. Distribution of the participants' ACETF scores (n=280)

Adverse Childhood Experiences Turkish Form	n	%
Child abuse/neglect		
Psychological abuse	100	35.7
Physical abuse	68	24.3
Sexual abuse	40	14.3
Psychological neglect	64	22.9
Physical neglect	29	10.4
Family dysfunction		
Parents' divorce or death	36	12.9
Witnessing domestic violence	21	7.5
Living with a family member with substance abuse	29	10.4
Living with a family member with mental health issues	19	6.8
Incarceration of a family member	28	10.0

In the correlation analyses, the ACETF score was significantly positively associated with ACMR total score ($r = 0.257, p < 0.001$). The ACETF score was also significantly positively correlated with the Reporting Responsibility ($r = 0.129, p < 0.032$) and Reporting Concerns ($r = 0.254, p < 0.001$) subscales (Table 5).

Table 5. Correlations between the scale scores (n=280)

		ACMR Score	Reporting Responsibility	Reporting Concerns
ACETF Score	Spearman r	0.257**	0.129	0.254**
	p	p < 0.001	0.032	p < 0.001

** $p < 0.001$

Discussion

Childhood abuse is considered an important public health problem due to its prevalence and long-term effects (Shaw & De Jong, 2012). However, unfortunately, in this study, we found that more than half of the nursing students (58.9%) had a history of at least one type of abuse or neglect. Previous studies with nursing students have confirmed that students are exposed to varying degrees (Hedrick et al., 2021; Mehmet & Gürsoy, 2023; Söyünmez & Öz, 2024). The results demonstrate the need for appropriate support programs to protect against the long-term consequences of childhood trauma. The most common type of abuse in this study was psychological abuse. Supporting the study findings, the most common type of abuse has been reported in the literature as psychological abuse (Agbaje et al., 2021; Arabacı, Arslan, Dağlı & Taş, 2021). Since psychological abuse covers many forms of negative behavior, it is expected that its prevalence is higher than other types of abuse. However, students' different cultural characteristics may affect the way they perceive abuse. Behaviors perceived as abuse in one culture may not be perceived as abuse in other cultures (Yalçın Gürsoy & Tanrıverdi, 2020). It has been emphasized in the literature that what is perceived as child abuse may be different around the world, and therefore cultural structure and cultural parenting styles should be considered when defining child maltreatment (Salami & Al-Halal, 2020). Therefore, the prevalence may be higher than seen.

Although reporting cases of child abuse or neglect to the competent authorities is among the legal responsibilities of nurses, it has been reported in the literature that reporting rates are not at the desired level due to various obstacles (Einboden, Rudge & Varcoe, 2019; Khanjari et al., 2021). The result of this study showed that students' attitudes towards reporting child abuse were not at the desired level. Although the studies conducted with nursing students are limited in the literature, it is stated that the findings are similar (Cho & Kim, 2016; Turan, 2022; Yalçın Gürsoy & Mehmet, 2023). Therefore, it is important to provide nursing students with this responsibility throughout their education life. One of the reasons why students' attitudes

towards reporting are not at the desired level may be that a very low percentage (20%) of the students in this study have taken courses on child abuse. Including special courses on childhood abuse and neglect in the nursing curriculum may contribute to increasing students' awareness of the subject. Studies in the literature indicate that students should be given training to improve their skills in preventing child abuse, diagnosing it at an early stage, and reporting it (Tek & Karakaş, 2021; Jeon, Oh & Jeon, 2022).

Another important finding of this study was that students who were exposed to abuse and neglect in childhood had higher attitudes towards reporting child abuse. Although the number of studies in the literature is limited, one study reported that students with a history of abuse and neglect have higher reporting attitudes (Yalçın Gürsoy & Mehmet, 2023). This may be because students with a history of abuse internalize it and develop a positive attitude towards reporting it because they do not want other children to experience it.

Conclusion

As a result of this study, more than half of the nursing students who participated in the study were exposed to at least one type of abuse or neglect during childhood, and the students' attitudes towards reporting child abuse and neglect were at a moderate level. In addition, students' childhood traumas affected their attitudes towards reporting child abuse. Therefore, it can be suggested that topics related to child abuse and neglect should be increased in the nursing education curriculum or various projects should be developed to increase awareness in order to improve nursing students' attitudes towards reporting childhood abuse and neglect. Future researchers can address the thoughts of students who have been exposed to childhood abuse by using the in-depth interview method on reporting abuse.

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