

## Protection children from exploitation

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### ABSTRACT

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**Purpose:** To examine the effects of child abuse and the measures taken to protect children at various levels of prevention and intervention.

**Material and methods:** A literature search was performed in the databases of Medline, PubMed, CINAHL, and Google Scholar and in the Greek database Iatrotek based on the years 1992 to 2013. A classic literature search for scientific publications and studies from libraries was also conducted. From a total of 58 studies, only 30 were selected. The criteria for selecting studies were as follows: a) articles written in Greek and English, and b) articles that referred to the subject of this review using the terms child abuse, consequences, prevention, and treatment.

**Results:** Reference is made to the types of child abuse, their impacts, and risk factors that may have a positive or negative role in the occurrence of the phenomenon. Furthermore, the problem of child abuse is approached in terms of the changes and improvements needed at the legislative, social, research, and therapeutic levels in order to provide

protection to child victims of abuse. The large number of negative effects on children's development, which are not limited to childhood but also leave mental and emotional scars into adulthood, underlines the need for stronger measures to reduce the incidence of child abuse. Furthermore, due to the complexity of the phenomenon, it requires a concerted effort and a single plan of action, not only at the regional and national levels but also at the international level.

**Conclusions:** Child abuse has multifactorial causes and requires a concerted effort and a single plan of action, not only at regional and national levels but also at the international level, in order to deal with it. Therefore, at this point, professionals who come into regular contact with children should be alert to possible signs of physical abuse in the children they serve as well as signs of abuse that are less visible, such as behavioral or psychological signs, and these professionals should act in ancillary roles.

**Key words:** children, child abuse, protection

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The phenomenon of child abuse gathers the attention not only of the scientific community but the summary of society as well. The reason for this increased interest was the mobilization of the media and more concerted efforts of government and non-governmental organizations, with the main goal the raising of public awareness about the harmful effects of child abuse in the normal course of development of a child [1]. Nowadays, the protection of children from all forms of abuse is defended by national and international regulations to ensure the rights of the child. Thus, most countries are committed to taking measures to address the problem in a preventive or therapeutic intervention [2]. The incidence of child abuse cannot be based only on reports of incidents that are reported to the prosecutors or the police because they are only fictitious figure. In all delinquent behaviors there is a "dark figure" of facts that are not mentioned and which clearly alters the picture of the phenomenon [3]. So, the social services in their effort to have a more complete picture of child abuse beyond the official figures, should be extended to other data collection techniques, since it seems that children are not easily reveal the abuse and the assumption can be much later [4]. Of course, this does not mean that thereby disappears "dark figure" of child abuse, because there will be no incidents recorded from one or the other method. Also, the fact, that the abuse is intertwined with feelings of guilt and shame is reasonable to conclude that a significant proportion of the victims don't report it – even sometimes never - the abuse that has been taken place, in some public authority or social entity [2]. So, at this point you must act ancillary professionals who come into regular contact with children (e.g. doctors, nurses, teachers, etc.) and may find "suspicious" signs in behavior and the psyche of children.

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of child abuse and the measures taken to protect children at various levels of prevention and intervention. Furthermore, this study looks at the changes and improvements that are necessary to increase the levels of protection for children from the legal, social work, research, and therapeutic perspectives.

## **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

A literature search was performed in the databases of Medline, PubMed, CINAHL, and Google Scholar and in the Greek database Iatrotek based on the years 1992 to 2013. A classic literature search for scientific publications and studies from libraries was also conducted. From a total of 58 studies, only 30 were selected. The criteria for selecting studies were as follows: a) articles written

in Greek and English, and b) articles that referred to the subject of this review using the terms child abuse, consequences, prevention, and treatment. It was found 58 studies of which 33 were selected. To retrieve the relevant topic surveys and studies, initially has been conducted a study of the abstracts of all articles in order to distinguish those that finally are going to be analyzed. It became as well careful exploration of bibliographical references of articles in order to identify more and better information on the subject and to exclude cases of biased research.

### **Child abuse**

Child abuse is a multidimensional phenomenon including social, legal, and human dimensions. Therefore are continuing concerns around divergence in terminology and the poor quality of much of the research aimed at establishing both incidence and impact [5]. In the last decades, the child abuse was identified as a particular phenomenon among the circumstances of violence. Until our days, there was a big range of knowledge that was added, and indeed, the various researchers around the world were adopting different definitions for the phenomenon of abuse [6]. Child abuse can take many different forms, it may be obvious to others, or not, it may happen once or happens repeatedly; it can be fixed relatively to the form, and may be getting all the forms in a case of a child it can have irreversible consequences and can lead-up to death [5]. In Greece, child abuse is defined as "violence, or neglect of a child or teenager from a person who trusts and depends (e.g. parent) [7]. In U.S., each state has developed its own definitions regarding what constitutes child abuse, but all are clear and accept that the child abuse is a serious case [8]. A very clear and comprehensive definition of child abuse is the one formed by the African Network for the Prevention and Protection Against Child Abuse and Neglect, according to which child abuse is deliberate or "no exposure to risk a child at physical, health, emotional, moral and educational [9]. The UN Convention also for the rights of the child and signed by Greece - provides for the protection of the child from any form of violence. Specifically, Article 19 states that: "States Parties shall take all appropriate measures, legislative, administrative, social, educational, to protect children from all forms of violence, injury or abuse, physical or mental, abandonment or neglect... [10, 11].

Moreover, regarding to the types of child abuse are the followings [5, 12]:

1. Body (injuries, bites, burns, poisoning)
2. Sex (sexual abuse, sexual exploitation)
3. Child neglect
4. Secondary abuse.

The official statistics of countries reveal a very large number of abuses annually. In U.S. e.g.

approximately 899,000 children are abused annually, of which 6,700 were hospitalized and a small percentage of them died (children under 5 years) [13]. In Greece, the percentage of children who are abused annually is estimated at 28,000. 10 % of children less than five years are examined in hospitals for injuries are abused and 8% of abused children also have some form of disability [14]. Furthermore, statistics show that children who are more at risk of physical abuse are those which are coming from low social - economic levels of society, but of course this doesn't mean that child abuse is not found in the upper social layers [13]. A final dimension of child abuse that is of great interest is related to the percentage of references made to official organizations. Some forms of abuse reported more frequently than others. For example, child sexual abuse is the least reported forms because of the guilt and stigma that accompany the victim notification of such a situation [9, 15]. So, health care professionals are invited to become the " voice " of these children. This requires training in abuse issues, so they can detect suspicious behaviors in children and their families [16].

#### **Impact of child abuse**

Punishment and mainly physical is the most common type of child abuse, which, at the same time, is more tolerated by society in the guise of re-education and the demarcation of the child [5]. In cases of parents who apply corporal punishment, it is observed that notions of discipline and punishment are used as identical. According to their reasoning, it is hard to have discipline without punishment or fear. An additional element that denies the significance of this is that research data reveal that using them does not lead to the adoption of desirable or acceptable behavior, but rather enhances the event of inappropriate behavior and contributes to increased aggressive behavior [17]. As to the forms of child abuse, they usually come from the family environment, or in non - family circle. Regarding the first category, it seems that 7-10 % of child abuse is mainly parents. While this percentage increases to 20% for cases where children are victims of abuse (e.g. bullying) from people outside the family circle [13]. Most alarming is the data relating to child deaths due to abuse exercise. In the United Kingdom recorded one to two deaths per week due to the abuse they receive from their parents. In U.S., the number is larger and rises to two to three child deaths per day [18]. Most aggregate data provided by the World Health Organization (WHO), according to which in 2002, the number of children who died from physical abuse was approximately 31,000. Deaths were mainly young children, below the age of 5 and were a result of brain injury, shock, abdominal or even due to suffocation [16]. In recent studies also found that the simultaneous presence of force between the

parents and the child victimization, significantly increases the risk of internal and external disturbances from that mere exposure to one of two stressors [2]. Moreover, girls exhibit more intrinsic problems than boys and perhaps this is due to the way of raising girls and the role of their gender, which reinforces the passivity and receptivity [19, 20]. However, it is important to note that girls exhibit extrinsic problems and that is the same aggressive as boys, just what differentiates them is the way expressions of aggression [5]. In addition, it was confirmed that children living under these conditions have more psychiatric problems than children who do not experience conditions of violence and that a proportion of children exposed to parental violence and physical abuse and 36.6 % showing endogenous, compared with 33 % presenting exogenous disturbances [19]. Of course, there is the possibility of children being abused to adopt aggressive behavior towards others. Among the common psychological effects shown to children being abused physically is excitement, depression, withdrawal, lack of satisfaction and has low self-esteem [20]. Another area that seems to hit the social networking where these children have difficulty in forming social relationships with peers, and show increased difficulty in forming a bond with other people in general [21] . Thus, it becomes apparent that these children exhibit a number of short and long-term consequences, which can start from scratch and result in death. These effects cover all the fields of action of the child, like the emotional, the behavioral, social and school (e.g. absenteeism, poor performance, etc.). However, the quality of children's life will be determined by the existence of protective or aggravating factors, the temperament of the child and the frequency of abuse that exists [1,2] .

#### **Treatment of children from exploitation**

The increase in the number of cases referred to social services for cases of child abuse, and exploitation has led the governments of several countries in establishing and amending the Criminal Code to protect minors. The lack of infrastructure in many countries, the lack of suitably trained professionals, and the absence of a legislative framework for certain forms of abuse, prompted the UN in shaping the Convention on the Rights of the Child [22]. With regard to child abuse emphasizes that each state should take the necessary measures (legal, social, educational) to protect the child from all forms of violence, injury, abuse or exploitation perpetrated by the parent or guardian of the child [5]. It also underlines the need for support and intervention programs for children who have suffered some form of abuse or exploitation and if the abuse is repeated criminal justice must intervene to protect the child [21]. Every case of child abuse reported to the competent authorities (police,

prosecution, etc.) leads to two types of legal proceedings: criminal and civil. Criminal procedures aim to prosecute the offender, while civil procedures designed to protect the child [23]. Empirical data show that the conviction in the case of child abuse is ensured mainly by two factors: (a) whether physical or medical evidence exists and (b) the child's ability to understand and to describe effectively the issue of abuse (e.g. crying) [23]. Considering, however, that most children who are abused are under 5 years old, where this age is characterized by reduced verbal and cognitive abilities, it is evident that the outcome of such a case in sentencing the offender is too difficult [5, 18]. Another legal difficulty level on cases of child abuse is the reduced frequency of reports from various people who have regular contact with children. In many countries, particularly the U.S. and the UK legal provisions are mandatory for professionals who come into frequent contact with children (e.g. nursing, medical personnel, mental health professionals, teachers, etc.), and in general, all persons who have frequent interactions with children, to report incidents of abuse to the competent authorities of breaking even in secret. [24, 25]. As for the Greek legislation, in recent years have occurred significant legislative reforms on child abuse. Specifically, it has been confirmed the decision of the Council of Europe (2007) on child abuse and genetically exploitation. This decision provides changes in level of prevention, stiffer penalties for perpetrators of sexual abuse, penalties for facilitators on child trafficking, changes in the reporting of cases of abuse and greater attention to the protection of the child who is being abused. A significant improvement was made in the legislation is the criminalization of sexual acts done via the Internet and the provision for harsher penalties for child abuse cases. And, anyone who forces a child to intercourse is punishable with imprisonment of at least 10 years, while until recently was imprisonment of 10 years (Penal Code, 1997) [26]. Penalties provided also for those involved to satisfy the sexual needs of others, forcing children to participate in prostitution. In this case, the middlemen, criminal penalties, like at least 10-year imprisonment and a fine of 10,000 to 50,000 Euros. Significant change came as the Law 3500/2006 on domestic violence. Domestic violence is considered any form of crime committed within the family context and victim of domestic violence can be one of the spouses, relatives and parents of children. The amendment of article that signaled the change of scenery with regard to child abuse is the 1532 of the Civil Code, according to which corporal punishment is not allowed to be used as a means of punishment, because as teaching method is unacceptable and undermines the dignity of the child. Imprisonment applied also for the person who causes terror or concerns a minor under

the threat of abandonment or violence, as well as for adults who expose minors to violent scenes [27]. However, it is reasonable to assume that addressing child abuse cannot be confined to the reporting of cases of people who spend a lot of time with children, but also extend to prevention level [28].

### **Prevention of child abuse**

Tackling child abuse prevention strategies consist in therapeutic interventions once there is a confirmed act of abuse. Prevention programs may involve either prevents harm to the child or to prevent the recurrence of abuse or related to prevention before there was an incident of abuse [13, 29]. Recipients of these programs may be children, parents, health professionals (e.g. pediatricians, nurses etc.) and professionals who regularly come into contact with children (e.g. teachers) [2, 16]. Prevention programs can take place in homes, schools, hospitals and even in child protection centers [5]. Prevention efforts actually focus either substantially reduce the risk of child abuse or increasing protective factors that prevent the occurrence of abuse [8, 30]. Moreover, at the level of prevention, police involvement can be very helpful, especially on child abuse over the Internet. It is estimated that one in five children is approached via Internet services with a view to sexual intercourse, which in some cases, the person who instigates this effort is an adult. The police can work in this area preventively and sedatives. Similar action can have the police regarding trafficking in child pornography [31]. The nursing staff also may have a multifaceted role in addressing an abused child, forming a secure relationship with these children [32]. It can help children to express themselves emotionally, as this is important in the healing process, through painting or playing roles [33]. One of the properties that can develop the nursing staff is becoming an expert in the trial of criminal cases of physical or sexual abuse of children. The nursing staff can also participate in preventive programs for child abuse. In a survey to evaluate the effectiveness of the program Cooperation Parents-Nurses, was found that training was beneficial for low-income families and single mothers, as it has succeeded reverse, the negative effects usually arise as child abuse, substance abuse and delinquent behaviors adopted [2,5].

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Child abuse has multifactorial causes and requires a concerted effort and a single plan of action, not only at regional and national levels but also at the international level, in order to deal with it. Therefore, at this point, professionals who come

into regular contact with children (e.g., doctors, nurses, teachers, etc.) should be alert to possible signs of physical abuse in the children they serve as well as signs of abuse that are less visible, such as behavioral or psychological signs, and these professionals should act in ancillary roles. The reduction of the victims of child abuse, therefore, is not a choice, but a one way option.

### **Conflicts of interest**

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

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