

SEXUAL ABUSE OF MENTALLY DISABLED PERSONS

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ABSTRACT

Child abuse encompasses all behaviors directed at a child by someone in their immediate environment, such as parents or other family members, caregivers, or any adult, which experts and society deem inappropriate and harmful. Generally, children suffer abuse in different ways. These include physical abuse, emotional-social abuse, and sexual abuse. Abuse is generally directed at all children. However, children with disabilities, especially those with intellectual disabilities, are more frequently abused. Therefore, families with intellectually disabled children need to be vigilant about sexual abuse directed at children, be aware of the signs that indicate abuse, and be aware of the devastating effects that such an incident will have on the child in order to protect their children in this regard. This study examines the risk of sexual abuse of individuals with intellectual disabilities from a multifaceted perspective. Individuals with intellectual disabilities are a group that is more vulnerable to sexual abuse due to cognitive limitations, communication difficulties, problems with self-expression, and social isolation. The aim of this article is to analyze in detail the causes of abuse, risk factors, protective and preventive mechanisms, the role of families and institutions, as well as scientific findings in national and international literature. A qualitative research method was used, and more than 30 scientific sources were examined. The findings show that the risk of sexual abuse for individuals with intellectual disabilities is high due to lack of education, inadequate family supervision, lack of social support, and weak institutional control mechanisms. However, protective education programs, increasing family awareness, and strengthening early reporting systems significantly reduce the risk of abuse.

Keywords: Individuals with intellectual disabilities; Sexual abuse; Child abuse; Social risk factors; Protective intervention; Educational programs

Introduction

Individuals with intellectual disabilities are considered to be at high risk of sexual abuse due to their developmental limitations. Because these individuals have limited abilities to assess their environment, defend themselves, and communicate, they are less likely to recognize, reject, or report abuse. Sexual abuse is not only physical harm but also a serious crime that causes long-term psychological, social, and behavioral trauma. International research shows that individuals with intellectual disabilities are 4–7 times more likely to experience sexual abuse than their peers. Therefore, the subject is of great importance both academically and socially. This article aims to examine sexual abuse in individuals with intellectual disabilities in a multidimensional way and to establish a scientific basis for protective interventions.

Children with intellectual disabilities often experience serious difficulties in understanding and retaining information. They cannot easily generalize from one situation to another, and therefore each topic must be taught separately, and special assistance is required to enable them to transfer the knowledge they have learned in one situation to another. For this reason, the sexual education of individuals with intellectual disabilities requires special attention. The sexual urges of individuals with intellectual disabilities can cause serious problems. However, with appropriate education at an early age, this problem can be minimized (Mermer, 1993). Individuals with intellectual disabilities can respond positively to the attention and affection offered to them. The judgment of individuals with intellectual disabilities is weak, and their reasoning abilities are limited. Therefore, they may silently and irrationally accept a proposal for sexual intercourse or sexual intimacy without knowing that they could be sexually exploited (Shindell 1975, Kempton 1972, Mermer 1993, Morgan 1987).

Today, many countries around the world have deterrent laws regarding child sexual abuse. These cover many issues, including the use of children as physical-sexual objects, pornographic displays, kissing or caressing children, etc. While all these issues are punishable by law separately, child sexual abuse is also determined by the age of consent. The age limit may vary from country to country. Generally, 14-18 years is accepted as the average age of consent. Although all sexual acts performed on children through coercion are considered sexual abuse, consensual sexual contact between children of similar ages is not considered abuse (Kutchinsky 1991, Kvam 2000).

Although there is no definitive link between mental disability and abuse, these children are considered to be at risk for abuse. Research on this subject indicates that one of the most significant types of abuse seen in individuals with intellectual disabilities is sexual abuse (Öner, Sucuoğlu 1994; Widom and Ames 1994; Fallon et al. 2002; Kvam 2000; Chamberlain et al. 1984). According to mythology, in ancient times, it was believed that sexual intercourse with disabled children was harmful, that these children were inadequate in terms of sexuality, and that

they were not sexually attractive. However, in later times, the realization that disabled children could be easily rendered helpless by the abuser placed these children in a high-risk category (Kvam 2000). Most people believe that children with moderate mental disabilities are at higher risk of sexual abuse. This is because children with mental disabilities often have serious difficulties in understanding and remembering things. Again, these children cannot easily generalize from one situation to another. They may interpret the closeness and attention offered to them as a sign of affection. Therefore, they may irrationally and silently accept a proposal for sexual intercourse or sexual intimacy without knowing that they could be sexually exploited (Shindell 1975, Kempton 1972, Mermer 1993, B.Ö.İ.R. 2005). Research indicates that mentally disabled males are more interested in sexuality than females (adults or adolescents) and that this interest increases with IQ in both sexes. Research findings also indicate that sexual deviance is more common among individuals with intellectual disabilities due to their quality of life, misguidance, sexual abuse, inability to find employment, inability to express themselves, and lack of adequate help with their problems, as well as their sexual urges and problems. Furthermore, studies have found that the rate of abuse among girls is between 12-17%, while among boys it is between 5-8%.

Objective

The main objective of this study is to identify risk factors for sexual abuse in individuals with intellectual disabilities, analyze the forms in which abuse occurs, and develop preventive strategies.

On the other hand, it comprehensively examines the individual, familial, and environmental factors that increase the risk of sexual abuse in children with intellectual disabilities. It is known that children with intellectual disabilities are more vulnerable to abuse due to reasons such as cognitive limitations, communication difficulties, inability to express themselves, lack of social awareness, and high dependence on caregivers. Accordingly, the aim of this study is to systematically identify risk factors and develop scientifically based recommendations for the protection of these children.

This study was also prepared to emphasize that sexual abuse of children with intellectual disabilities is a problem that is not sufficiently discussed in society and often remains hidden, and to identify gaps in this field by analyzing the existing body of knowledge in the literature. In addition, contributing to increasing the awareness levels of families, teachers, special education experts, and social service workers on the subject is among the important goals of the study.

Another objective of the study is to explain why privacy education, protective measures, and early intervention programs are of vital importance and to offer recommendations for developing children's abilities to recognize, express, and seek help regarding abuse. Thus, the aim is to create a scientific resource that can be used both in the academic field and by practitioners.

The sub-objectives of the research are as follows:

- To reveal the social, psychological, and environmental factors that lead to abuse in individuals with intellectual disabilities,
- To evaluate the role of families and institutions in abuse,
- To examine protective intervention models in the international literature,
- To analyze the impact of early awareness and safety education.

Importance

This research offers important contributions to both field experts and families. By explaining the reasons for the high risk of abuse on a scientific basis, the study assists in the development of educational content, internal policy regulations, and intervention programs aimed at raising family awareness. It also contributes to understanding the existing gaps in the protection of individuals with intellectual disabilities. This study is of great importance in terms of protecting children with intellectual disabilities from sexual abuse and raising awareness in this area. The literature frequently emphasizes that individuals with intellectual disabilities are at much higher risk of sexual abuse compared to their typically developing peers. However, this issue is often overlooked in society, and families, educators, and professionals are not sufficiently aware. In this context, the study is important from both a scientific and a social perspective.

From a scientific perspective, the study systematically reviews the existing literature to identify risk factors for sexual abuse of children with intellectual disabilities, protection mechanisms, and international practices. It thus contributes to identifying gaps in academic knowledge and guiding future research.

From a social perspective, the study aims to raise awareness among families, teachers, special educators, and social service professionals. This will enable the protection of children, the strengthening of early intervention mechanisms, and the dissemination of protective measures. Furthermore, by providing data and recommendations for policymakers and relevant institutions, the study establishes a scientific basis for enhancing the safety of children with intellectual disabilities.

Finally, the study is also valuable in terms of defending children's privacy rights and ensuring their development in a safe environment. The widespread implementation of protective programs and training will help raise awareness among both families and society and contribute to reducing abuse cases in the long term.

Theoretical Basis

The theoretical basis of this research is based on three main theories: Social Learning Theory, Attachment Theory, and the Behavioral Approach. Social Learning Theory emphasizes that abuse is mostly learned through observation and modeling. Attachment Theory states that individuals who experience insecure attachment are more vulnerable to external threats. According to the Behavioral Approach, communication limitations in individuals with mental disabilities increase the risk because they make it difficult to express abuse. This theoretical framework is important for understanding the causes of abuse and protective factors.

Various theoretical approaches and models are used to understand and analyze the risks of sexual abuse in children with intellectual disabilities. This study is based primarily on Social Learning Theory, Attachment Theory, the Risk-Safety Model, and Privacy Development Theory.

Social Learning Theory proposes that individuals learn behaviors through observation and modeling. In this context, children with intellectual disabilities may not recognize or correctly interpret negative behaviors they observe in their environment. This situation makes it difficult for them to develop awareness and resistance to abuse.

Attachment Theory focuses on the quality of the bond the child forms with the caregiver. Insecure or overly dependent attachment relationships contribute to the child becoming vulnerable to abuse. Children with intellectual disabilities, especially since they are highly dependent on their caregivers, are at increased risk of being manipulated by malicious individuals.

The Risk-Protection Model states that children's individual characteristics, environmental conditions, and lack of social support combine to increase the risk of abuse. Factors such as cognitive impairment, communication difficulties, and social isolation are highlighted as elements that threaten the safety of children with disabilities.

The Privacy Development Theory addresses children's understanding of their own bodies, boundaries, and personal space. Children with mental disabilities may not sufficiently internalize the concept of privacy developmentally, which increases their vulnerability to abuse.

This theoretical framework helps to understand risk factors at both the individual and social levels and provides a scientific basis for developing protective measures. When the analysis and interpretations provided by the theoretical basis are combined with literature reviews and recommendations for practice, a comprehensive perspective on protecting children with intellectual disabilities from sexual abuse is formed.

Literature Review

Studies in the literature reveal that individuals with intellectual disabilities are one of the groups most at risk for abuse. Research conducted in the US, Europe, and Turkey has identified the following risk factors: lack of communication, social isolation, history of domestic violence, lack of institutional oversight, low awareness, and lack of education. Furthermore, international studies show that safety education programs are extremely effective in preventing abuse. A significant decrease in abuse rates has been observed among individuals with disabilities who participate in these programs.

The risk of sexual abuse among children with intellectual disabilities has been extensively studied in international and national literature in recent years. Studies reveal that these children are exposed to sexual abuse at a much higher rate than their typically developing peers. For example, reports by the American Psychological Association (2020) and UNICEF indicate that the risk of sexual abuse for individuals with intellectual disabilities is 3 to 5 times higher.

Research emphasizes that abuse of children with intellectual disabilities is usually perpetrated by people close to them. These individuals include family members, caregivers, teachers, or neighbors, and the abuse often goes unnoticed for a long time. The literature shows that children are unable to express the abuse due to communication difficulties and cognitive limitations, and that most cases remain hidden.

National studies also present similar findings specific to Turkey. For example, one study found that most staff working in special education institutions did not have sufficient knowledge to recognize abuse, while families were not aware of privacy education and protective measures. This situation reveals the inadequacy of protective mechanisms and systematic risk factors.

The international literature also emphasizes the effectiveness of protective education programs. A significant reduction in abuse cases has been observed among children with intellectual disabilities who have received safety training. These programs focus on privacy awareness, communication skills development, and creating a safe environment.

Additionally, the literature review shows that raising the awareness of families, teachers, and social workers is critical in preventing abuse. The need for a multi-level approach to protect children is supported by policies and practices that aim to minimize risks at both the individual and institutional levels.

In conclusion, the literature review reveals that children with intellectual disabilities are at high risk of sexual abuse, that this risk stems from social, familial, and individual factors, and that the implementation of effective protective programs is of vital importance. This analysis ensures that the strategies proposed in other sections of the study are scientifically grounded.

Methodology

This article is based on qualitative research methods. A systematic literature review was conducted during the data collection process, evaluating international journals, scientific books, UNICEF and WHO reports, legal texts, and current statistics. The data were processed using thematic analysis, and four main categories were identified: risk factors, protective mechanisms, psychological effects, and the role of institutions. This study is a theoretical and literature-based research examining the issue of sexual abuse in children with mental disabilities. No field application, survey, interview, or experimental method was used in the study. The main objective of the research is to conduct a systematic literature review through existing academic studies, books, theses, and international reports.

Research Model

The study is built on a qualitative research model. Using the literature review method, the contents of previous scientific studies on the subject were analyzed, compared, and classified. This model allows for a comprehensive assessment of the risk factors for sexual abuse of children with intellectual disabilities.

Data Collection Process

Data were collected from academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, Google Scholar) and national publications. The keywords used in the search were: “children with intellectual disabilities,” “sexual abuse,” “risk factors,” “protective measures,” and “privacy education.” The literature collected was limited to the last 20 years and only peer-reviewed articles and reliable sources were selected.

Data Analysis

The contents of the collected studies were evaluated using the thematic analysis method. First, each study was summarized, then risk factors, protective strategies, and gaps in the literature were identified. The findings obtained as a result of the thematic analysis were linked to the “Theoretical Framework” and “Literature Review” sections, forming the scientific basis for the discussion and conclusion sections of the study.

Findings and Interpretations

The analysis revealed that sexual abuse of individuals with intellectual disabilities occurs for three main reasons: lack of education, weak family and institutional supervision, and social isolation. The data obtained show that safety training significantly reduces abuse. In addition, it was found that the rate of abuse decreased significantly in environments where family awareness was high. The findings are largely consistent with the results in the international literature.

Findings from the literature review reveal that children with intellectual disabilities are at high risk for sexual abuse. Analyses show that children's cognitive and communication limitations, lack of social awareness, and dependence on caregivers increase their vulnerability to abuse. Furthermore, it is understood that the majority of cases mentioned in the literature remain hidden and reporting rates are low.

Risk Factors

Cognitive Impairment: Children with intellectual disabilities have difficulty recognizing and understanding abuse. This makes them vulnerable to manipulation by abusers.

Lack of Communication: Children struggle to express their negative experiences. This delays the detection of incidents by families or institutions.

Social Isolation and Dependency: Most children with intellectual disabilities are highly dependent on caregivers and have limited social circles. These factors increase the likelihood of exposure to abuse.

Lack of Awareness: Families, educators, and social service professionals often lack sufficient knowledge about protecting children's privacy rights.

Findings Regarding Protective Measures

The literature emphasizes the effectiveness of protective education programs. Awareness of privacy, the development of communication skills, and the creation of safe environments increase children's capacity to protect themselves. Furthermore, raising awareness among families and teachers is critical for the early detection of abuse cases.

Comment

Analyses show that a multi-level approach is necessary to protect children with intellectual disabilities from sexual abuse. This approach should include raising awareness among children at the individual level, providing education at the family level, and strengthening supervision and support mechanisms at the institutional level. The findings in the literature offer concrete recommendations for practitioners and policymakers and provide a scientific basis for future research.

Conclusions and recommendations

This study shows that children with intellectual disabilities are at high risk of sexual abuse and that this risk stems from individual, familial, and social factors. The literature review reveals that children's cognitive limitations, communication difficulties, social isolation, and high dependence on caregivers create vulnerability to abuse. Furthermore, the fact that most cases of abuse remain hidden and reporting mechanisms are inadequate further emphasizes the importance of protective measures.

Recommendations

1. Family Education and Awareness: Families need to be educated about the privacy rights and safety of children with intellectual disabilities and the early signs of abuse. Seminars and guidance materials can increase families' awareness.

2. Programs for Educators and Professionals: Regular training programs should be organized for teachers, special educators, and social workers to strengthen their ability to recognize when children are at risk and intervene.

3. Privacy and Safety Education: Children should receive age-appropriate education on privacy and body awareness. This education will make it easier for children to express themselves and report abuse.

4. Institutional and Legal Measures: Control mechanisms in private educational institutions and care centers should be strengthened; clear protocols should be established to prevent cases of abuse. Furthermore, legal regulations and policies should be developed to ensure the protection of children with disabilities.

5. Recommendations for Future Research: Considering the gaps in the literature, it is important to conduct applicable and intervention-focused research in the future. In particular, ethical methods should be developed to enable children to recount their own experiences. In conclusion, protecting children with intellectual disabilities requires a multi-level and systematic approach. Steps taken at the individual, family, institutional, and societal levels will contribute to ensuring children's safety, protecting their rights, and raising social awareness. This study has created a resource that can guide both the academic literature and practitioners and policymakers.

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