

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Child Sexual Abuse in Boys: A Retrospective Investigation

ABSTRACT

Objective: Although recent studies have increased public awareness of child sexual abuse, certain aspects of the issue remain unclear. While research on sexual abuse in girls is abundant, there is limited focus on boys in our country. This study aims to explore the characteristics of cases involving sexual abuse of boys in the province of Türkiye.

Methods: The study is descriptive and retrospective in nature. A total of 245 boys who underwent forensic interviews for alleged sexual abuse between September 2017 and March 2023 at the Child Advocacy Center in the province of Türkiye were retrospectively examined.

Results: The study included 245 boys aged 3-18 with a mean age of 11.04±3.39. The most common type of sexual abuse was non-penetrative contact (57.6%). Delayed disclosure was primarily attributed to factors such as threat, fear, and shame. Sexual abuse predominantly occurred in public places (56.5%). There were significant among age groups concerning the identity of the reporters, initial disclosure persons, the existence of abuse, and reporting time. However, no significant differences were found in the presence of multiple suspects, recurrent abuse, and the incident location. Post-abuse behavioral changes in children included fear of the perpetrator (15.5%), emotional changes (15.5%), physiological changes (9.4%), and the displaying of risky behaviors (4.1%).

Conclusions: The study emphasized the importance of not overlooking sexual abuse among male children. The findings underscore the need for enhanced awareness and intervention strategies to address sexual abuse in boys within the country.

Keywords: Sexual Abuse, Male, Child, Adolescent, Child Advocacy Center.

Erkek Çocuklarda Cinsel İstismar: Retrospektif Bir Araştırma ÖZET

Amaç: Son yıllarda yapılan çalışmalar çocuk cinsel istismarı konusunda toplumsal farkındalığı artırmış olsada, konunun bazı yönleri hala belirsizliğini korumaktadır. Ülkemizde kız çocuklarına yönelik cinsel istismar araştırmaları oldukça fazla iken, erkek çocuklarına yönelik araştırmalar sınırlıdır. Bu çalışma, Türkiye'de erkek çocuklara yönelik cinsel istismar vakalarının özelliklerini araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Yöntem: Çalışma tanımlayıcı ve retrospektif niteliktedir. Türkiye'nin bir ilindeki Çocuk İzlem Merkezi'nde Eylül 2017 ile Mart 2023 tarihleri arasında cinsel istismar iddiasıyla adli görüşme yapılan toplam 245 erkek çocuk retrospektif olarak incelenmiştir.

Bulgular: Çalışmaya yaşları 3-18 arasında değişen ve yaş ortalaması 11,04±3,39 olan 245 erkek çocuk dahil edilmiştir. En yaygın cinsel istismar türü penetratif olmayan dokunmadır (%57,6). Bildirimin gecikmesi öncelikle tehdit, korku ve utanç gibi faktörlere bağlanmıştır. Cinsel istismar ağırlıklı olarak kamuya açık yerlerde gerçekleşmiştir (%56,5). Bildirimde bulunanların kimliği, ilk bildirimde bulunan kişiler, istismarın varlığı ve bildirim süresi açısından yaş grupları arasında anlamlı farklılıklar bulunmuştur. Ancak, birden fazla şüphelinin varlığı, tekrarlayan istismar ve olayın gerçekleştiği yer açısından anlamlı bir farklılık bulunmamıştır. Çocuklarda istismar sonrası davranış değişiklikleri arasında failden korkma (%15,5), duygusal değişiklikler (%15,5), fizyolojik değişiklikler (%9,4) ve riskli davranışlar sergileme (%4,1) yer almaktadır.

Sonuç: Çalışma, erkek çocukların da cinsel istismar açısından ihmal edilmemesinin önemini vurguladı. Bulgular, ülke içinde erkek çocuklarda cinsel istismarı ele almak için gelişmiş farkındalık ve müdahale stratejilerine duyulan ihtiyacın altını çiziyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Cinsel İstismar, Erkek, Çocuk, Ergen, Çocuk İzlem Merkezi.

INTRODUCTION

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a global public health issue that disrupts the physical and mental well-being of children (1). Children who are victims of sexual abuse experience a range of short and long-term physical, social, psychological, and behavioral problems (2,3). Major depression, suicidal tendencies, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorders, antisocial personality disorder, and sexual dysfunction are among the observed adverse outcomes in victims of sexual abuse (4,5).

The prevalence rates of child sexual abuse vary, with approximately 18-20% in girls and 8-10% in boys (6). While it is suggested that boys are affected by sexual abuse two times less than girls, it is believed that male victims are underreported, and there is insufficient research on this matter (7,8). Incidence studies on sexual abuse in boys indicate that a significant proportion of abuse victims are male: 37% in Canada and 47.5% in the United States (9,10).

Despite an increase in national and international studies on child sexual abuse, there are still aspects of this issue that remain incompletely understood (11). Aspects such as the extent of sexual abuse against boys, disclosure, the identity of perpetrators, and observed behaviors in children are among the areas that need further exploration (12). While scientists have extensively examined sexual abuse in girls, there are indications that sexual abuse of boys has been overlooked (7). Describing the experiences of sexual abuse is often a complicated, complex, and painful process for victims. Previous research has shown that some male victims of CSA may delay disclosing their experiences for years, while others may never disclose at all (8,13). Factors such as fear of re-victimization, the stigma of being labelled as homosexual, and feelings of shame reduce the likelihood of reporting by boys (14,15). This negatively impacts the motivation of boys to report and complicates the acquisition of accurate data. Furthermore, failure to make an official report can lead to the continuation of abuse, further victimization, and the abuse of other children (16). Making an official report is crucial for ending the abuse and ensuring that victimized children receive the necessary therapeutic interventions (15–17).

In our country, sexuality is generally considered taboo, and while cases of sexual abuse against girls are increasing, those against boys are not being reported sufficiently. Prejudices about homosexuality and perceptions of boys being strong contribute to the overlooking of sexual abuse against boys (18).

Comparisons between child and adolescent periods have been limited in a few of studies. A recent study highlighted that the perpetrators were familiar during adolescence, while they were strangers before adolescence (19). Another study

reported differences in the type, number, onset, method, and proximity of the perpetrator based on the child's developmental stage (20). Most studies on child sexual abuse have relied on mixed-gender samples to compare the prevalence of sexual abuse between the two genders (21,22). Additionally, there have been limited studies explicitly focusing on sexual abuse in boys, and these studies have mainly concentrated on the general characteristics of children. The present study aimed to compare the sociodemographic, clinical, and abuse-related characteristics of boys who were victims of sexual abuse during pre-adolescence and adolescence. We hypothesized that family characteristics, type of abuse, perpetrator profile, and reporting characteristics would differ between pre-adolescence and adolescence.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This retrospective descriptive study was conducted at the Child Advocacy Center in the Turkish province. Researchers created a data form specific to the study's objectives. The data form included variables such as demographic information of the child and the suspect, type of sexual abuse, location of the incident, the status of repeated abuse, the time elapsed between the occurrence of sexual abuse and its reporting, factors delaying the reporting of abuse, and observed behaviors in the child. The study received approval from the local ethics committee (Approval No: 321/05.12.2022).

Between September 1, 2017, and February 28, 2023, the files of 245 boys who underwent forensic interviews were retrospectively reviewed. Victim statements, forensic interview reports, and information notes were thoroughly examined and recorded in the data form.

Cases were analyzed in two age groups, pre-adolescence (3-11 years) and adolescence (12-18 years), following the literature and based on the developmental stages of children (20). The suspects were classified according to the provisions of article 103/3/c-d-e of the Turkish Penal Code (23). Accordingly, individuals known to the child but without any familial relationship, such as friends, acquaintances, partners, teachers, and dormitory staff are categorized as "extra-familial abuse"; biological or stepfathers, biological or step-siblings, uncles, aunts, grandfathers, and their children are categorized as "domestic abuse"; and individuals unknown to the child without any kinship relationship were categorized as "strangers". The time elapsed between the occurrence of the incident and its reporting was categorized as early reporting (0-72 hours) and delayed reporting (4 days and above) per the literature (24).

The study was analyzed using SPSS 24.0 software. Continuous variables were expressed as mean and standard deviation, while categorical variables were presented as numbers and

percentages. Chi-square tests were used for descriptive analyses of frequency and percentage values and to compare categorical variables. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS

Between September 15, 2017, and March 31, 2023, 1395 cases were referred to the Child Advocacy Center. Of the forensic cases evaluated for alleged sexual abuse, 17.6% were boys ($n=245$). The age range of boys was 3-18 years, with a mean age of 11.04 ± 3.39 . The number of cases in the pre-adolescent and adolescent groups was similar. Moreover, 64.9% of the participants ($n=159$) had a nuclear family structure. There was a significant

difference in family characteristics between the pre-adolescent and adolescent periods. According to post-hoc analyses, fragmented families were significantly more common during adolescence compared to pre-adolescence. Peer abuse was significantly higher in the adolescent period compared to the pre-adolescent period. The age of the suspect was significantly different between groups. Post-hoc analyses indicated that adult suspects were significantly higher during adolescence compared to pre-adolescence. Extra-family suspects were predominant in both age groups ($n=162$). No statistically significant difference existed in the suspects' identities among the victim age groups (Table 1).

Table 1. Relationship between the child's developmental stage and demographic characteristics

	Pre-adolescent group (n=124) n (%)	Adolescence group (n=121) n (%)	p^1	Post-hoc p-values	
Family characteristics					
Elementary	88 (71.0)	71 (58.7)	.019	El vs. Ex	.860
Extended	16 (12.9)	12 (9.9)		El vs. Fr	.007
Fragmented	20 (16.1)	38 (31.4)		Ex vs. Fr	.046
Age of the suspect					
6-12 years (pre-adolescent)	31 (28.4)	14 (12.3)	<.001	6-12 vs. 13-18	.191
13-18 years (adolescent)	35 (32.1)	27 (23.7)		6-12 vs. >18	<.001
> 18 years (adult)	43 (39.4)	73 (64.0)		13-18 vs. >18	.013
Profile of the suspect					
Extra-family ²	82 (66.1)	80 (66.1)	.359		
Domestic ³	28 (22.6)	21 (17.4)			
Strangers	14 (11.3)	20 (16.5)			

¹ $p < 0.05$; ² Extra-family: Friends, acquaintances, partners, teachers, dormitory staff, etc.

³ Biological or stepfathers, biological or step-siblings, uncles, aunts, grandfathers, and their children.

The incidence of sexual abuse occurred in public settings for 33.9% of adolescents ($n=41$) and in outdoor settings for 33.9% of pre-adolescents ($n=42$). There was no significant difference between the groups regarding the location of the incidents. However, there was a statistically significant difference in the reporting profile of those reporting the incidents before and after adolescence. According to post-hoc analyses, family reporting was significantly higher during pre-adolescence compared to adolescence.

There was a statistically significant difference between age groups regarding the person to whom the incident was first disclosed. The pre-adolescent group more frequently disclosed the abuse to family members ($n=77$; 62.1%), while the adolescent group disclosed the abuse more often to non-family members ($n=80$; 66.1%). Characteristics specific to sexual abuse are presented in Table 2. In

our study, multiple suspects were relatively rare ($n=28$; 11.4%), and nearly half of the cases ($n=111$; 45.3%) involved recurrent abuse. However, the majority of sexual abuse cases involved non-penetrative contact ($n=141$; 55.5%). Factors such as threats, fear, shame, mutual sexual activity, or receiving money or gifts contributed to delayed reporting. There was no statistically significant difference between age groups regarding the type of sexual abuse, number of suspects, repetition of abuse, and factors delaying reporting. However, there was a statistically significant difference in the reliability of statements about abuse between the groups. Statements from the pre-adolescent group were less reliable than those from the adolescent group. Male adolescents reported sexual abuse later than pre-adolescent boys. Physical, emotional, and psychological changes in children who are victims of sexual abuse are presented in Table 3.

Table 2. Comparison of Characteristics of Sexual Abuse among Groups

	Pre-adolescent	Adolescent	<i>p</i>	<i>Post-hoc p-values</i>	
	<i>n (%)</i>	<i>n (%)</i>			
Scene of the incident					
Victim's own home	30 (24.2)	23 (19.0)	.166		
Public places (school, place of worship, Quran course, dormitory)	28 (22.6)	41 (33.9)			
Outdoor areas (park, garden, forest)	42 (33.9)	31 (25.6)			
Perpetrator's home	24 (19.4)	26 (21.5)			
The person reporting the abuse					
Parents	71 (57.3)	49 (40.5)	.026	Pa vs. Te .048	
Teachers	34 (27.4)	42 (34.7)		Pa vs. Ot. .016	
Others ¹	19 (15.3)	30 (24.8)		Te vs. Ot. .051	
The first person to whom the child disclosed the abuse					
Domestic	77 (62.1)	41 (33.9)	<.001		
Extra-family ²	47 (37.9)	80 (66.1)			
Type of sexual abuse					
Contact with penetration	43 (34.6)	38 (31.4)	.715		
Non-penetrating contact	71 (57.3)	70 (57.9)			
Verbal (non-contact)	10 (8.1)	13 (10.7)			
Repetition of abuse					
None	70 (56.5)	64 (52.9)	.333		
Present	54 (43.5)	57 (47.1)			
Multiple suspects					
None	110 (88.7)	107 (88.4)	.552		
Present	14 (11.3)	14 (11.6)			
Time elapsed until the incident's disclosure					
Early reporting (first 72 hours)	49 (55.1)	35 (36.8)	.013		
Delayed reporting (>72 hours)	40 (44.9)	60 (63.2)			
The factors delaying the disclosure					
Reported immediately	36 (36.4)	36 (40.4)	.645		
Threat	21 (21.2)	16 (18.0)			
Fear (fear of harm to oneself or being misunderstood)	19 (19.2)	13 (14.6)			
No abuse, just an allegation	9 (9.1)	5 (5.6)			
Shame	3 (3.0)	7 (7.9)			
Mutual sexual activity	6 (6.1)	4 (4.5)			
Receiving money/gifts	3 (3.0)	5 (5.6)			
Reported but not believed	2 (2.0)	3 (3.4)			
Procedures performed in the center					
Only forensic examination	29 (23.4)	30 (24.8)		.267	
Only mental examination	7 (5.6)	4 (3.3)			
Both forensic and mental examination	9 (7.3)	3 (2.5)			
No consultation requested (only forensic interviews)	79 (63.7)	84 (69.4)			

¹ Others: Hospital reports, law enforcement identifications, neighbor reports, witness statements² Extra-family: friends, neighbors, state employees

Table 3. Observed behavioral changes in child victims of sexual abuse

	n	%
No data	154	55.5
Fear of the suspect	38	13.8
Emotional changes ¹	38	13.8
Physiological changes ²	23	8.3
Displaying risky behaviors ³	10	3.6
Reluctance to go to school/Decreased academic performance	7	2.5
Increased interest in males/Sexual orientation uncertainty	6	2.1
Total	276***	100

*** More than one behavioral change can be observed in a child. Therefore, the number n exceeds the sample size.

¹ Aggression, emotionally withdrawn, social withdrawal, inertia, feel unwell, shame, hyperactivity

² Sleep problems, eating problems, enuresis/encopresis;

³ Increased interest in sexuality, self-destructive behavior, alcohol/substance abuse, suicide attempt

DISCUSSION

While awareness of child sexual abuse has been increasing in our country, studies explicitly focusing on boys remain scarce. This research explores the sociodemographic and abuse-related characteristics of boys who are victims of sexual abuse, comparing pre-adolescent and adolescent periods. The present study contributes to understanding the characteristic features of sexual abuse among preadolescent and adolescent boys. Although the subset of boys who are victims of sexual abuse in our study represents only a tiny portion of all abuse victims, the results provide significant insights into the experiences of boys, adding valuable data to the existing body of knowledge.

The study found statistically significant differences between preadolescent and adolescent boys regarding family characteristics, the suspect's age, the person reporting the incident, the initial disclosure recipient, and the reporting time to authorities. Furthermore, factors such as threat, fear, and shame contributed to the delayed reporting of incidents.

In our investigation, the age group most susceptible to sexual abuse was the pre-pubertal stage. A comprehensive study focusing on sexual abuse of boys highlighted that this form of abuse was predominantly prevalent among children aged 8 to 12 years (25). Similarly, another study indicated that boys faced a higher risk of sexual abuse during the ages of 9 to 12 years (18,26–28). Notably, the average age of the cases in our study was 11.04±3.39 years. These findings align with the existing body of literature, underscoring the vulnerability of pre-adolescent children to sexual abuse.

Our study revealed that boys predominantly experienced non-penetrative contact. While some studies suggest that boys are more often subjected to acts involving penetration (18,25), others have indicated frequent exposure to non-penetrative acts (28). The variation in findings across studies could stem from differences in sample size, age distribution within the sample, or the location from which the sample was drawn.

In the study, most suspects were found to be non-family members. Some studies have reported

that perpetrators are mostly known to the victim or the victim's family (29). However, there are also studies suggesting that perpetrators from outside the family are predominant (30). The findings underscore the complexity of perpetrator-victim relationships and highlight the need for further research to better understand the dynamics of familial and non-familial perpetration.

Adolescents who are victims of sexual abuse tend to disclose their negative experiences to peers (31) or professionals (31,32). As adolescents' language and cognitive abilities develop, they become less reliant on their parents, contributing to interactions with individuals outside the family, such as teachers, friends, police, neighbors, and others. In our study, the adolescents' initial disclosure of their experience of sexual abuse to someone outside the family was associated with this developmental shift.

It has been noted that only a small percentage of sexual abuse victims can immediately articulate their negative experiences, with a significant time gap often existing between the occurrence of abuse and its disclosure (18,33). Early reporting rates in children and adolescents vary between 26.4% and 58.5%, while delayed reporting rates range from 15% to 65.4% (12,32,34). The literature attributes this variability in reporting time to individual, familial, and cultural factors (24), as well as age, gender, the identity of the perpetrator, and the severity of the abuse (35). Our study revealed that adolescents tend to report later than children. The fear of being stigmatized as homosexual or the experience of threats might have contributed to the delayed reporting by adolescents. On the other hand, disclosing in public places may facilitate disclosure when there are multiple victims. However, if the victim is alone or unaware of other victims, they may choose not to disclose, contributing to delayed reporting.

There is an emphasis on the underreporting of sexual abuse experienced by boys (36). Reasons for non-disclosure by boys include the fear of re-victimization, threats, the stigma of being labelled as gay, fear of not being believed, and feelings of guilt and shame (24,29,37). Another study revealed

that perpetrators gave gifts or money to male victims to keep their interactions secret, threatening harm to them and their families (38). In our study, although no significant difference was observed between groups, factors such as threats, fear, and delayed realization of the abuse hindered reporting. In the study, the primary barriers to disclosure were threat and fear. Boys may have delayed reporting to prevent harm to themselves and their families.

Child sexual abuse can lead to various physical, emotional, and psychological impairments in the child. Studies have reported that boys who have experienced sexual abuse exhibit lower academic performance and engage in riskier behaviors (such as running away from home, suicide attempts, alcohol, and substance use) compared to those who have not experienced abuse (26,39). The study identified that victims experienced fear of the perpetrator, withdrawal, and shame and exhibited sleep and eating disturbances. Furthermore, victims showed academic underachievement, suicide attempts, and alcohol/substance use. The results of our study align with the existing literature. Accurately detecting changes in behavior in children can expedite the disclosure of the incident.

A comprehensive study on male child sexual abuse reported that the most common locations of incidents were the home of the victim or perpetrator, followed by outdoor settings such as parks, gardens, or forests (27). Another large-scale study demonstrated that boys were more likely to experience sexual abuse in their own homes or the perpetrator's home (30). In our study, however, the majority of the abuse incidents occurred in outdoor settings like parks, gardens, or forests. Our findings differed from other results in the literature. This discrepancy may be attributed to the predominance of non-family suspects in our study.

The age factor is crucial in the occurrence of sexual abuse and the reliable expression of victims (40,41). It has been reported that in forensic interviews, younger children may provide less detailed and shorter answers compared to older children, negatively impacting the reliability of their statements (42). Another study suggested that younger children might lack the language and cognitive development skills to understand or convey what happened to them (43). In our study, statements from adolescents were generally deemed reliable, while in the pre-adolescent group, the presence of abuse was considered doubtful. The better ability of adolescents to express themselves, coupled with higher knowledge, perception, and awareness levels regarding sexual abuse, may have

positively influenced the reliability of their statements.

Limitations and Strengths: The study should be interpreted considering its limitations. This research includes cases from the Child Advocacy Center in the Turkish province, where forensic interviews were conducted. Therefore, the results may be limited to children who sought services at this center, and more data might be required for generalizations. Additionally, subjective assessments, such as observed behavior changes, may impact the interpretation of research results. Furthermore, the study cannot encompass the perspectives of the children. Finally, cases of child sexual abuse are often subject to reporting issues, and therefore, the results of this study may not reflect the entirety of actual cases.

Studies in the literature often focus on adult samples investigating experiences of childhood sexual abuse. Studies specifically targeting the child and adolescent group, mainly focusing on males, are limited in Turkey. This comprehensive retrospective study, conducted at the local Child Advocacy Center and encompassing the files of 245 boys, represents a significant database. The study provides valuable information about the demographic characteristics of sexually abused boys, the type of abuse, locations of incidents, reporting times, and other critical factors. Moreover, by comparing different age groups, specifically pre-adolescence and adolescence, the study aids in understanding the experiences of children in different age ranges. This research not only contributes significantly to the literature on sexual abuse in boys but also outlines potential limitations for future research in this field.

CONCLUSION

The current study underscores the importance of considering factors such as the suspect's age, the victim's family structure, the individuals to whom the incident was first disclosed, the reporters of the forensic notification, and the duration until forensic reporting, particularly during the critical developmental stages of pre-adolescence and adolescence. Moreover, our findings shed light on the significant role of threat and fear as primary factors contributing to the delay in disclosure. This study contributes valuable insights into understanding the dynamics of child sexual abuse, highlighting the need for targeted interventions and support systems tailored to the unique needs of victims during different developmental stages, thus enriching the existing literature on this pressing public health issue.

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