



Determining the sensitivity of university students studying in the field of health to violence against children: A descriptive study

Sağlık alanında okuyan üniversite öğrencilerinin çocuğa yönelik şiddete duyarlılıklarının belirlenmesi: Tanımlayıcı bir çalışma

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ABSTRACT

Aim: The study was conducted to determine the sensitivity of the students studying in the faculty of health sciences to violence against children.

Methods: This descriptive study was conducted with the students studying midwifery, nursing, nutrition and dietetics, and social work departments of the faculty of health sciences in a big university in northern Turkey between May and June 2022. The sample of the study was composed of 766 students. Personal Information Form and Sensitivity to Violence Against Children Scale (SVACS) were used to collect data in the study. The SPSS-21.00 program analyzed data. The results were considered statistically significant at $p<0.05$ within a confidence interval of 95%.

Results: 77.5% of the students stated that they have not previously attended training on violence against children. The mean total score of the participants from SVACS was 53.86 ± 4.51 . The students studying at the social services department, who were first graders and had a patriarchal family type, were determined to have lower mean SVACS scores ($p<0.01$).

Conclusion: In conclusion, it was observed in the study that most of the students had a high sensitivity to violence against children. However, they have not attended any training on this issue.

Keywords: child; health sciences; sensitivity; university students; violence

ÖZ

Amaç: Bu çalışma Sağlık Bilimleri Fakültesinde öğrenim gören öğrencilerin çocuğa yönelik şiddete ilişkin duyarlılıklarını belirlemek amacıyla gerçekleştirilmiştir.

Yöntem: Tanımlayıcı nitelikteki bu araştırma Mayıs-Haziran 2022 tarihleri arasında Türkiye'nin kuzeyinde büyük bir üniversitenin Sağlık Bilimleri Fakültesinde ebelik, hemşirelik, beslenme ve diyetetik ve sosyal hizmet bölümlerinde eğitim gören öğrenciler ile gerçekleştirilmiştir. Araştırmanın örneklemini 766 öğrenci oluşturmuştur. Verilerin toplanmasında Kişisel Bilgi Formu ve Çocuğa Yönelik Şiddete Duyarlık Ölçeği (ÇOYŞDÖ) kullanılmıştır. Veriler SPSS-21.00 programı ile analiz edilmiştir. Sonuçlar %95'lik güven aralığında, $p<0.05$ anlamlı kabul edilmiştir.

Bulgular: Öğrencilerin %77.5'i daha önce çocuklara yönelik şiddet ile ilgili eğitime katılmadıklarını ifade etmişlerdir. Katılımcıların çocuğa yönelik şiddete duyarlık ölçeği toplam puan ortalaması 53.86 ± 4.51 olarak bulunmuştur. Sosyal hizmet bölümünde ve birinci sınıfta okuyan öğrenciler ile ataerkil aile tipine sahip olan öğrencilerin, daha düşük ÇOYŞDÖ puan ortalamalarına sahip olduğu belirlenmiştir ($p<0.01$).

Sonuçlar: Çalışmada öğrencilerin çoğunluğunun çocuklara yönelik şiddet ile ilgili eğitime katılmamalarına rağmen çocuğa yönelik şiddete ilişkin duyarlılıklarının yüksek düzeyde olduğu görülmüştür.

Anahtar kelimeler: çocuk; duyarlılık; sağlık bilimleri; şiddet; üniversite öğrencileri

Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), child abuse is defined as "any physical and/or emotional types of ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect and commercial or other forms of exploitation that cause actual or potential damage to the health, survival, development or dignity of the child in the context of a relationship seen under the age of 18 years old" (WHO, 2022). Violence against children is the abuse and neglect of children under the age of 18. Being sensitive to the violence against children is a sign of showing a response to violent behaviors (Aktay, 2020). Violence against children refers to the abuse and neglect of children under the age of 18 years old. Nearly 3 out of every 4 children aged 2-4 are regularly exposed to physical punishment and/or psychological violence by their parents and babysitters worldwide. One out of every five women and 1 out of 13 men have reported being exposed to sexual abuse between 0-17 years old (WHO, 2022). The rate of beating and slapping among the

punishments given to children is relatively high in Turkey. One out of every five parents beats their children, and one out of every three parents slaps their child (Akbaş, 2020). Silence, pessimism, physical, mental, and social developmental delay, anxiety, depression, antisocial behaviors, difficulty in peer relations, feeling shame and guilt, eating/sleeping disorders, increase in criminal behaviors, physical aggressiveness, and sexual behavioral problems may be observed in children who were exposed to violence (Bal Yılmaz, 2016; Caliskan et al., 2019; Yoon et al., 2016). Conditions such as low education level of the society, poverty, traditional and patriarchal social structure, nonbiological father figures, tolerance against violence in the society, previous exposure to violence inside the family, lack of communication, and lack/deficiency of social support systems for the individuals cause an increase in the violent behaviors against the child. Prevention of violence against children is a global human right and an important community health issue (Bayat & Evgin, 2015; Henry, 2018;

Hillis et al., 2016; Pereda & Díaz-Faes, 2020). Cultural, environmental, and individual factors effectively develop violent behaviors and sensitivity to violence. However, society's perception of violence against children is essential at this point. Patriarchal norms still dominate, especially within the family in Turkish society, and have a powerful effect on domestic relationships. Therefore, preventing violence against children is possible by enhancing individual and social sensitivity to violence (Aktay, 2020). The fact that some types of violence are not perceived as violence in some populations makes it difficult to collect data and take action on this issue (Yilmaz et al., 2022). It is mandatory to address four fundamental elements (the individual, society, culture, and communication) and to implement a multidisciplinary team approach in this context in order to prevent violence against children (Li et al., 2017; Ozyurek et al., 2020; Sahebihagh et al., 2017). Cases can not be adequately detected due to the inadequacy in the knowledge and experience of professionals providing service to children on violence against children, child abuse and neglect signs, recognition of risk factors, and an overlooked community health problem. It is essential for healthcare professionals, who meet hundreds of children per day, to be reasonable observers and to exhibit positive attitudes and proper behaviors in terms of preventing and reducing violence and promoting child and community health (Duke & Borowsky, 2015; Li et al., 2017; Sahebihagh et al., 2017).

Healthcare professionals have duties in line with ethical and occupational codes, such as recognizing child victims of violence, ensuring privacy and safety, getting accurate anamnesis and performing a physical examination, referring to other professionals when necessary, and guiding individuals about social support systems (Sahebihagh et al., 2017). Moreover, healthcare professionals who graduated with theoretical and behavioral competencies in struggle with violence against children from professional education may contribute to increased social sensitivity (Ozyurek et al., 2020). Studies with university students in Turkey's faculties of medicine, dentistry, nursing, health sciences, physical therapy and rehabilitation, and child development have shown that there is a high level of sensitivity among students toward violence against children (Koca ve ark., 2019; Ozyurek ve ark., 2020; Yıldız & Evcili, 2020). Previous studies have reported that education given to students studying in the field of health about child abuse, neglect, and violence against children affects their knowledge and attitudes positively (Buyuk, 2019; Sezici et al., 2019; Soldatou et al., 2020; Turan, 2022; Uysal et al., 2022). This research will determine the sensitivity of healthcare personnel candidates in different health fields who will care for children and their families, towards violence against children, and will enable the creation of training programs that will improve the sensitivity of individuals by determining their needs in this field.

The study was conducted to determine the sensitivity of the students studying in the faculty of health sciences of a big university in northern Turkey to violence against children.

Methods

Study design and participants

This was a descriptive study. The study was conducted with the students studying midwifery, nursing, nutrition and dietetics, and social work departments of the faculty of health sciences in a big university in northern Turkey between May 1

and June 1, 2022. The universe of the study was composed of a total of 2034 students who were studying at the departments of health sciences faculty, who provided at least four years of education and would provide service to children in their professional lives, including midwifery (n=453), nursing (n=661), nutrition and dietetics (n=533) and social work (n=377). A sample calculation formula from a known universe was used. The sample of the study was determined as 502 participants (<http://etikarastirma.com/tr/icerik/bilgi-merkezi/10>). Inclusion criteria were being volunteered to participate in the study and being able to speak Turkish. The students who were unwilling to participate and were absent from school during specified dates were excluded from the study. The study was completed with 766 students approved to participate and accessed between the study dates.

Data collection instruments

In the study, Personal Information Form and Sensitivity to Violence Against Children Scale (SVACS) were used to collect data.

Personal information form

This form was generated by the researchers by the literature and consisted of a total of 10 questions including students' sociodemographic characteristics (age, sex, department of study, grade, education level of the parents, employment status of the mother, family type, income level) and status of attending any education on violence against children previously (Koca et al., 2019; Ozbey et al., 2018; Ozyurek et al., 2020).

Sensitivity to violence against children scale (SVACS)

The scale developed by Ozyurek et al. (2020) measures the sensitivity of adults toward violence against children. A 3-point Likert-type scale consists of 19 items. Answers given to the negative statements (items 3,6,12,14, and 18) are reverse-scored. A high score taken from the scale is interpreted as a high perception of violence against children and awareness and a high level of sensitivity to this issue. Cronbach Alpha internal consistency coefficient of this one-dimensional scale was calculated as 0.82. It was found to be 0.72 in this study.

Data collection

The researchers collected data from the students studying in the university's health sciences faculty, where the study would be conducted between the indicated dates through a questionnaire method. Data collection instruments were distributed to the students after providing them with the necessary explanations, and they were given 15-20 minutes to complete. Completed questionnaire forms were collected later on.

Ethical aspect of the study

In order to collect study data, an ethics approval was taken from the Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee (decision no: 2022-137/ date: 02.25.2022), and an institutional permit was obtained from the faculty where the study was carried out. Students were provided information about the aim of the study, their questions were answered, and verbal consent was taken. Permission to use the scale in the study was taken from the relevant authors via e-mail. The study was conducted in compliance with the principles of the Helsinki Declaration.

Data analysis

The SPSS-21.00 program analyzed data. Descriptive statistics were performed using numbers, percentages, mean, standard deviation, and median. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test

analyzed the normality assumption of data. It was determined that it did not comply with the given normal distribution. Non-parametric tests (Mann Whitney U test, Kruskal Wallis test, and Tamhane test) were used to analyze data not showing normal distribution. The results were considered statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ within a confidence interval of 95%.

Results

Table 1. Some demographics of the students (n=766)

Characteristics	n	%
Age= 20.98±2.05 (Min=18-Max=38)		
Sex		
Female	675	88.1
Male	91	11.9
Department of study		
Nursing	304	39.7
Nutrition and dietetics	219	28.6
Midwifery	99	12.9
Social work	144	18.8
Grade		
1st grade	165	21.5
2nd grade	239	31.3
3rd grade	250	32.6
4th grade	112	14.6
The education level of the mother		
Elementary school	357	46.6
Secondary school	162	21.2
High school	175	22.8
University and higher	72	9.4
The education level of the father		
Elementary school	209	27.3
Secondary school	165	21.5
High school	231	30.2
University and higher	161	21.0
Family type		
Core family	702	91.6
Patriarchal family	64	8.4
Income status		
Income less than expenses	179	23.4
Income equal to expenses	512	66.8
Income more than expenses	75	9.8
Status of attending any education on violence against children		
Yes	172	22.5
No	594	77.5

The mean age of the students who participated in the study was 20.98±2.05 years old, and 88.1% were females. Among the students, 39.7% studied nursing, and 32.6% were third graders. It was declared that their mothers were elementary school graduates by 46.6%, that their fathers were high school graduates by 30.2%, that they had a core family by 91.6%, and that their incomes were equal to their expenses by 66.8%. Also, 77.5% of the students stated that they had not previously attended any training on violence against children (Table 1).

The mean score of the students on the sensitivity to violence against children scale was found to be 53.86±4.51 (Table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of SVACS

	X	SD	Min	Max
SVACS	53.86	4.51	19	57

SVACS: Sensitivity to Violence Against Children Scale; X: Mean, SD: Standard deviation, Min.: Minimum, Max.: Maximum

Table 3. Distribution of mean SVACS scores based on demographics of the students

	SVACS	
	X ± SD	Test Statistic, p
Sex		
Female	53.93 ±4.51	U=28049.000 p=0.177
Male	53.37 ±4.56	
Department of study		
Nursing	53.96±4.30 (b)	KW=13.619 p=0.003
Nutrition and dietetics	54.13±4.58 (b)	
Midwifery	54.97±3.74 (b)	
Social work	52.69±5.10 (a)	
Grade		
1st grade	51.46±5.79 (a)	KW=37.672 p= 0.000
2nd grade	54.23±4.08 (b)	
3rd grade	54.67±3.81 (b)	
4th grade	54.82±3.39 (b)	
The education level of the mother		
Elementary school	53.79 ±4.57	KW=5.153 p=0.161
Secondary school	53.31±4.67	
High school	54.25±4.10	
University	54.49±4.77	
The education level of the father		
Elementary school	53.66±4.76	KW=1329 p=0.722
Secondary school	53.82±4.71	
High school	53.94±4.19	
University	54.07±4.47	
The employment status of the mother		
Unemployed	53.82±4.48	U=27.555.500 p=0.241
Employed	54.15±4.81	
Family type		
Core family	53.99±4.51	U=16.472.000 p=0.000
Patriarchal family	52.45±4.41	
Income status		
Income less than expenses	53.34±4.92	KW=1.823 p=0.402
Income equal to expenses	54.08±4.30	
Income more than expenses	53.60±4.89	
Status of attending any education on violence against children		
Yes	54.58±3.45	KW=47.450.000 p=0.153
No	53.65±4.76	

SVACS: Sensitivity to Violence Against Children Scale; a-b: There is no difference between groups with the same letter; U: Mann Whitney-U test; KW: Kruskal Wallis U test

When mean SVACS scores were compared based on sociodemographic characteristics, it was observed that mean scores were significantly different based on the department of study; social work students were found to have lower mean scores than other departments ($p < 0.05$). Moreover, first graders were observed to have lower mean SVACS scores compared to the students of upper grades in the study ($p < 0.01$). It was also determined that students having a patriarchal family had a lower SVACS score than those with a core family ($p < 0.01$) (Table 3).

Discussion

It is possible to prevent violence against children by enhancing the consciousness and awareness of adults on this issue. Being sensitive to violence against children may be considered a sign of being able to respond to such events (Bross & Krugman, 2020; Hillis et al., 2016). In this study conducted with health sciences students, students' perception of violence against children was high. Sensitivity to violence against children was also found to be high in the studies which were carried out with students studying at the faculty of medicine, faculty of dentistry, and nursing and physical therapy and rehabilitation departments of the faculty of health sciences (Koca et al., 2019; Ozyurek et al., 2020). Moreover, similar results were found in the study, including nursing and child development department students (Yildiz & Evcili, 2020). The results of our research were found to be similar to the literature.

The current study found that most students (77.5%) have not attended any training on violence against children. Various results were observed in the previous studies. These ratios were found to be 32.3% among nursing students, 61.2% among midwifery students, 70.8% among child development and nursing students, and 59.2% among the students in various fields of health in the previous studies (Buyuk, 2019; Güdek-Seferoğlu et al., 2019; Kostak & Vatansever, 2015; Yıldiz & Evcili, 2020). In the study by Kurt et al. (2017) that evaluated the perceptions of last-grader university students of various disciplines (health, education, and theology) on abuse, neglect, and domestic violence, it was determined that 68.1% of the students had taken information about child abuse and neglect during their education. Increasing knowledge and awareness of violence against children is one of the most important conditions for reducing violence against children (Gemiksiz et al., 2019). In order to achieve this, it is thought that educating students on this subject may be effective in increasing their sensitivity to violence against children.

The students studying social work were found to have a lower sensitivity to violence against children than those in the other departments in this study. The lower score of social work students is an important finding. The sensitivity level of social workers to violence against children is important since they are a professional group that works actively with child abuse and neglect cases within multidisciplinary teams structured in child protection system and healthcare institutions (Kaya-Kılıç & Koca et al., 2019; Tekin, 2019; Turkkan et al., 2020). The priority task of the social work occupation is to ensure the presentation of the appropriate social work interventions to protect the child's best interests and maintain his/her well-being (Kaya-Kılıç & Tekin, 2019). This outcome may be caused by the less integration of child neglect, abuse, and violence subjects into the curricula. In the study by Koca et al. (2019), which was carried out with university students who were studying midwifery, medicine, health technician, physical therapy and rehabilitation, and nursing departments, the sensitivity of medical faculty students to violence against children was found to be higher than the students in the other departments. In the studies including students of nursing and medical faculty, it was determined that their knowledge and awareness of child abuse and neglect was not at an adequate level, and they required much more education on this subject (Alanazi et al., 2021; Gopalakrishna et al., 2020; Al-Qahtani et al., 2022; Cho & Kim, 2016; Güdek-Seferoğlu et al., 2019; Soldatou et al., 2020).

In the current study, first-grade students were found to have a lower sensitivity to violence against children compared to the upper grades. Koca et al. (2019) detected that the sensitivity of the students studying midwifery, medicine, health technician, physical therapy rehabilitation, and nursing departments to violence against children also increased as their academic grades increased. In the study by Ozyurek et al. (2020), the grades of the students studying in various departments related to health were not found to affect their mean scores. Moreover, it was determined in a study with midwifery students that education on this subject positively affected the level of awareness of child abuse and neglect (Buyuk, 2019). Also, in many studies, including nursing students, it was seen that training given on child abuse and neglect and, thus, violence against children affected both their knowledge levels and attitudes positively (Doran & Hutchinson, 2017; Güdek- Meral, 2021; Ozbey et al., 2018; Poreddi et al., 2016; Seferoğlu et al., 2019). In addition, the sensitivity of children who started to get informed about violence against children was found to be higher in the study conducted with the students of nursing and child development departments (Yildiz & Evcili, 2020). Moreover, a study carried out with the students in all faculties and colleges of a private university reported that the knowledge and awareness of the students who were educated on child abuse and neglect was higher (Uysal et al., 2022). This has suggested that the fact that students have more clinical and field experiences with the children and families, as well as their curriculum having more significant content on these topics during higher grades, may positively affect their sensitivity to this issue. Having information about violence against children, being aware of the signs of violence and having the right attitude towards violence can increase students' sensitivity in the health field.

The study found that students with a patriarchal family type had a lower perception of violence against children. Similarly, in the study by Yıldiz and Evcili (2020), the sensitivity of the students living in a large family was lower than those living in a core family. Also, the study by Koca et al. (2019) found that family structure did not affect the students' sensitivity to violence against children. In the study by Meral (2021), it was observed that nursing students living in a core family had a higher sensitivity to violence against children compared to those who were living in a large family and the ones who were living in a large family showed higher sensitivity compared to those who were living in a broken family. This situation has suggested that the education levels and child-rearing attitudes of the members of a large family may affect sensitivity to violence against children. It is important to determine which behaviors students encounter in their families are perceived as violence or which they do not perceive as violence. Whether the family structure is patriarchal, a core or a broken family may affect how violent behavior is perceived. For this reason, it is recommended that students' perceptions of violence should also be evaluated in future studies when assessing sensitivity to violence against children.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it was found in the study that most of the students had not attended any training on violence against children, but their sensitivity was at a high level. The study also found that students who were studying in the social work

department, who were first graders and had a patriarchal family type, had a lower perception of violence against children.

Enhancing the sensitivity of the healthcare students will enable them to exhibit appropriate behaviors in cases of violence against children and, thus, promote community health. It is suggested to include the subjects of violence against children comprehensively in the curricula of health-related departments of the universities and to add compulsory courses to the curricula on this subject. The students, including primarily those studying in the social work department, may be encouraged to attend activities such as conferences and seminars on violence against children during their undergraduate and professional education and may be oriented to carry out research in this field. It is recommended to conduct quasi-experimental/experimental studies examining the effect of educational programs on violence against children.

Limitations of the study

There are some limitations of the current study. Firstly, it was conducted only with the students studying in the faculty of health sciences and did not include the students in the other health sciences faculties in Turkey. Secondly, it was the interpretation of the outcomes based on students' statements. Thirdly, attitudes towards violence against children may be influenced by the students' personal characteristics and beliefs, especially cultural factors.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Committee Approval

In order to collect study data, an ethics approval was taken from the Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee Ethical of Ondokuz Mayıs University (decision no: 2022-137/ date: 02.25.2022).

Informed Consent

Participation in this survey was anonymous, consensual and voluntary with informed consent provided by all respondents.

Peer-Review

Externally peer-reviewed.

Author Contributions

E.T.B.: Literature Search, Design, Supervision, Critical Review, Concept, Writing Manuscript, Materials, Data Collection and Processing, Analysis and/or Interpretation

M.K.: Literature Search, Critical Review, Writing Manuscript, Materials, Data Collection and Processing, Analysis and/or Interpretation

H.U.: Literature Search, Writing Manuscript, Materials, Data Collection and Processing, Analysis and/or Interpretation.

E.G.S.: Literature Search, Supervision, Critical Review, Concept, Writing Manuscript

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