AN EXAMINATION OF CHILD NEGLECT IN TERMS OF SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

Utku Beyazıt¹, Aynur Bütün Ayhan²

¹Assist. Prof. Dr, Akdeniz University, Kumluca Health Sciences Faculty, Child Development
Department, Antalya, Turkey

²Prof. Dr., Ankara University, Health Sciences Faculty, Child Development Department, Ankara,
Turkey

Abstract. Child neglect is the situation where adults are incapable of meeting the needs, maintaining the wellbeing and providing protection for the children under their care. In order to prevent child neglect, it is crucial to identify the families in the risk group. In this regard, identifying the socio-demographic factors relevant to child neglect would help in identifying the children under the risk. Thus, this study aimed to examine child neglect in terms of socio-demographic variables. The participants of the study consisted of 402 secondary school students in Ankara, Turkey. The students were administered “Socio-Demographic Information Form” in order to gather socio-demographic information. The students were also administered “Multidimensional Neglectful Behavior Scale (10-15 Years Form)” in order to assess their neglect experiences by their parents. As a result, it was found that children’s neglect experiences by their mothers and fathers differed according to children’s age, grade level, school success, whether they spend time on social media, the level of their relationships with their parents and whether they actively spend time with their mothers and fathers. It was also found that children’s neglect experiences differed according to the age and education level of their fathers. As a result of the research, certain proposals as with the prevention of child neglect were brought for the prevention of child neglect.

Keywords: child, child neglect, socio-demographic variables

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1. Introduction

Child neglect is described as the situation where adults are incapable of meeting the needs, maintaining the wellbeing and providing protection for the children under their care and thus, the child's development being affected negatively (Scannapieco and Connell-Carrick, 2005; Palusci, 2011). While child neglect is generally examined under various headings as physical neglect, medical neglect, emotional neglect, supervisory neglect, cognitive neglect and educational neglect (Straus, 2004; McCoy and Keen, 2014), it is difficult to distinguish the neglect types from each other as it occurs chronically and multiple types occurring simultaneously (Howe, 2005; Laskey, 2011).

Every year, millions child neglect cases are reported but approximately one third of these cases are being recorded as identified (Baysal and Şahin, 2014). In their report in 2003, UNICEF suggested that child maltreatment is an issue in both developed and developing countries. According to the report, 3500 children every year lose their lives due to maltreatment in industrialized countries (UNICEF, 2003). In a meta-analysis study where data from seven hundred and ninety-five studies were examined, it was found that for physical neglect the prevalence rate is 19.2% in North America continent and 6.5% in Europe whereas, for emotional neglect the rate is 14.5% in North American and 30.1% in Asia (Stoltenborgh et al., 2013). Not many studies exist about the prevalence and status of child neglect in Turkey; and although physical neglect is seen more, it is ignored unless the case results in death or severe injuries (Pakiş et al, 2008).

Neglect can result in both physical and developmental consequences. Physical findings may result in growth failure without an organic reason (Smitherman, 2011; Block and Krebs, 2015) and developmental problems such as decrease in cognitive abilities and academic failure during school period (Stone, 2007; Nadeau and Nolin, 2013), bedwetting and learning difficulties (Lewin and Herron, 2007; Chen et al., 2011), communication problems (De Paul and Guibert, 2008); behavioral problems such as aggression and lying (Fang and Corso, 2007; Kotch et al., 2008); depression, anxiety and conduct disorder (Nikulina, 2011; Norman et al., 2012). Severe cases of neglect may result in death (Schmidt, 2011).

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Child neglect occurs more frequently if certain risk factors exist in the family and the child (Hindley et al, 2006). Child requiring special care due to premature birth (Dunn et al., 2002; Bugental and Happaney, 2004); being born as a result of unplanned pregnancy, being disabled (Doğru, 2006; Kantarcı et al., 2013); are factors that increase the risk for child neglect. Child's age and gender are also among the risk factors regarding children (Chen et al., 2011; Perez-Fuentes et al., 2013; Douglas, 2014); that is, younger children are exposed to neglect more compared to older children. Types of neglect, on the other hand, differentiate based on gender; girls are exposed to educational neglect whereas, boys are exposed to physical or supervisory neglect (Beyazova, 2014, Clement et al., 2016). Various studies on risk factors relevant to parents showed that low education (Güler et al., 2002; Dallar Bilge et al., 2013) and low socio-economic level (Schumacher et al., 2001; Berger, 2004; Duva and Metzger, 2010; Lee et al., 2012); violence and communication problems between spouses (Waldfoegel et al, 2010; Nicklas, 2012); having children at an early age (Köse et al., 2013), number of children in the household (Altıparmak et al., 2013); social isolation and lack of social support (Berry et al., 2003; Lewin and Herron, 2007) and various mental problems of the parents (Stith et al., 2009) are among the most prominent risk factors.

In order to prevent child neglect, it is crucial to identify the families in the risk group. In this regard, it is believed that identifying the socio-demographic factors relevant to child neglect would help in identifying the children under the risk. Thus, this study aimed to examine child neglect in terms of socio-demographic variables.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The study group consisted of 402 children who were studying in two different secondary schools in the city center of Ankara, during the 2017-2018 Spring Semester. The average age of the children is 12.31 ± 1.38 with 49.8% (n=200) of them being female and 50.2% (n=202) being male. Among the children, 26.1% (n=105) were from 5th grade, 24.4% (n=98) from 6th grade, 21.6% (n=87) from 7th grade and 27.9% (n=112) from 8th grade.

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2.2 Instruments

In the study Socio-Demographic Information Form was administered in order to gather data regarding the socio-demographic background of the children. In addition, Multidimensional Neglectful Behavior Scale 10-15 Years Old Child Form was administered in order to examine the neglect experiences of the children.

Socio-Demographic Information Form: The form, which was prepared by the researchers, included questions about the gender, age, grade, academic achievements, number of siblings, relationships with their parents, social networking, parents' age and level of education.

Multidimensional Neglectful Behavior Scale (MNBS) 10-15 Years Old Child form: Multidimensional Neglectful Behavior Scale 10-15 Years Old Child Form was developed by Kaufman Kantor et al. in 2004 in the United States of America with the aim of assessing the neglect experiences of children by their parents. The original scale includes two different forms as Mother Form and Father Form each of which consists of 65 cards. Each form includes 9 sub-dimensions: emotional, cognitive, supervisory and physical neglect, abandonment, insufficient protection and use of alcohol, depression and social desirability. In the reliability analysis of the scale, the Cronbach Alpha coefficient for internal consistency was found as .95 (Kaufman Kantor et al., 2004).

The Turkish adaptation of the scale was conducted by Beyazıt and Bütün Ayhan (2018). The Turkish Mother Form of the scale includes 51 items and 8 sub-dimensions, namely, cognitive, emotional, physical and supervisory neglect; insufficient protection, general neglect, depression and social acceptance. The Father Form includes 57 items and 9 sub-dimensions: cognitive, emotional, physical, supervisory and general neglect; abandonment, failure to protect, depression and social acceptance. During implementation, children are individually shown cards with pictures and asked which children in the pictures look most like themselves. Each card shows drawings regarding the evaluation of children's neglect experiences. Children's responses are recorded in two separate forms, one for mother and one for father, and each response showing their neglect experiences are given one point. The scores for depression and social acceptance are not included in the total neglect scores. For the Father Form, the minimum score is 0 and the maximum score is 41. For the Mother Form, the minimum neglect score is 0 and the maximum neglect score is 35.

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The high scores received from the scale indicate high levels of neglect experienced by the child. The reliability analysis results of the Turkish form showed that the Cronbach Alpha coefficient for the Mother Form is 0.832 and for the Father Form, it is 0.908 (Beyazıt and Bütün Ayhan, 2008). The internal consistency analysis conducted for this study showed that the Cronbach Alpha value for the Mother Form is 0.69 and for the Father Form, it is 0.81.

2.3 Data Collection and Data Analysis

Required permissions for the administrations of the instruments were provided from the Ministry of National Education. For the implementation of the instruments, school directors and teachers were contacted to determine the suitable days and time. During implementation, children were informed about the aim of the study and their oral consent was taken regarding their participation in the study. The instruments were implemented to only those children who accepted to participate in the study. Prior to the onset of the analysis, normality test was conducted in order to determine whether the data collected meet the parametric test conditions or not. The results of the Kolmogorof-Smirnov test, showed that the scores of the Multidimensional Neglectful Behavior Scale do not show a normal distribution ($p>.05$). Hence, Mann Whitney U test was performed to compare variables with two groups, and Kruskal Wallis-H test to compare variables with three or more groups (Büyüköztürk, 2004).

3. Results

An examination of the Multidimensional Neglectful Behavior Scale-Mother Form revealed that scores varied between 0 and 23 with a mean score of 5.12 ± 4.23 . On the other hand Father Form scores varied between 0 and 38 with a mean of 8.66 ± 6.64 . Table 1 shows the comparison of Multidimensional Neglectful Behavior Scale-Mother Form scores according to the children's socio-demographic characteristics.

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Table 1. The Comparison of Multidimensional Neglectful Behavior Scale-Mother Form Scores according to the Children's Socio-Demographic Characteristics

Socio-Demographic Characteristics	n	Mean Rank	χ^2/Z^a	p	Difference
Socioeconomic Status					
Low	149	193.74	1.640	0.440	
Average	114	200.00			
High	139	211.05			
Age					
10 years old	43	151.30	49.294	0.000*	1, 2 - 4
11 years old	91	156.79			1, 2, 3, 4 -5
12 years old	77	187.50			
13 years old	86	218.04			
14 years old and above	105	257.52			
Gender					
Female	200	195.17	-1.093	0.275	
Male	202	207.77			
Grade					
5 th grade	105	154.80	45.454	0.000**	1-2, 3
6 th grade	98	190.07			1, 2, 3 - 4
7 th grade	87	197.36			
8 th grade	112	258.50			
Number of Siblings					
No siblings	65	172.40	5.544	0.136	
1 sibling	212	197.75			
2 siblings	70	188.69			
3 and more siblings	29	156.48			
Mother's age					
40 years old and younger	272	198.89	0.925	0.630	
41-50 years old	124	207.09			
51 years old and above	5	165.00			
Mother's education					
Graduate of primary school	72	211.69	0.949	0.814	
Graduate of secondary school	69	201.01			
Graduate of high school	138	202.17			
Graduate of university	123	195.05			
Level of relationship with mother					
Well	349	190.17	24.268	0.000**	1 - 2, 3

^aZ value is determined by Mann-Whitney U, χ^2 value is determined by Kruskal-Wallis test results. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

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Moderate	47	269.83			
Poor	5	309.60			
School Success					
Successful	212	170.36	37.547	0.000**	1-2
Moderately successful	163	228.64			1, 2 - 3
Unsuccessful	27	282.20			
Social networking					
Yes	308	207.97	-2.376	0.018*	
No	92	175.51			
Time spent on social media per day					
Less than half an hour	89	143.93	7.239	0.065	
30 minutes-1 hour	88	164.36			
2-3 hours	86	175.71			
More than 3 hours	66	180.31			
Spending time with mother					
Yes	293	177.15	-6.925	0.000**	
No	109	266.95			

Table 1 shows the findings of the analysis performed to compare the scores of Multidimensional Neglectful Behavior Scale-Mother Form according to the children's socio-demographic characteristics. The results of the Mann Whitney-U test revealed that the neglect scores did not differ according to the gender of the children ($z=-1.093$; $p>.05$). However, children's neglect scores were higher in terms of social networking ($z=-2.376$, $p<.05$) and spending time with mothers ($z=-6.925$, $p<.01$); that is, the children who are involved in social networking through their cell phones or computers and the children who do not spend time with their mothers had significantly higher mean ranks.

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The results of the Kruskal Wallis test revealed that the neglect scores did not differ according to socio-economic status ($\chi^2 = 1.640$; $p > .05$), number of siblings ($\chi^2 = 5.544$; $p > .05$), mother's age ($\chi^2 = 0.925$; $p > .05$), mother's education ($\chi^2 = 0.949$; $p > .05$) and the daily duration of social networking ($\chi^2 = 7.239$; $p > .05$). On the other hand, children's neglect scores were higher in terms of children's age ($\chi^2 = 49.294$; $p < .01$), grade ($\chi^2 = 45.454$; $p < .01$), level of relationship with mother ($\chi^2 = 24.268$; $p < .01$) and school success ($\chi^2 = 37.547$; $p < .01$). A further examination by using Mann Whitney-U test revealed that the children who were 13 years old and 14 years old and above; who were attending to 7th and 8th grade; whose relationship with mother were poor and who are moderately successful and unsuccessful at school had significantly higher mean ranks.

Table 2 shows the comparison of Multidimensional Neglectful Behavior Scale-Father Form scores according to the children's socio-demographic characteristics.

	n	Mean Rank	χ^2/Z^a	p	Difference
Socioeconomic Status					
Low	149	214.69	3.082	0.214	
Average	114	194.84			
High	139	192.82			
Age					
10 years old	43	134.03	60.839	0.000**	1 – 3, 4, 5
11 years old	91	149.73			2 – 3, 4, 5
12 years old	77	202.01			3, 4 - 5
13 years old	86	218.77			
14 years old and above	105	259.48			
Gender					
Female	200	195.39	-1.052	0.293	
Male	202	207.55			
Grade					
5 th grade	105	136.11	59.365	0.000**	1 – 2, 3, 4
6 th grade	98	195.86			2, 3 - 4
7 th grade	87	217.54			
8 th grade	112	255.28			
Number of Siblings					
No siblings	65	170.09	2.453	0.484	
1 sibling	212	193.62			
2 siblings	70	191.81			

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3 and more siblings	29	184.33			
Father's age					
40 years old and younger	153	182.29	6.791	0.034*	1-2
41-50 years old	214	213.68			
51 years old and above	35	210.99			
Father's education					
Graduate of primary school	47	238.34	14.231	0.003*	4 – 1, 2
Graduate of secondary school	62	226.65			
Graduate of high school	132	204.90			
Graduate of university	161	178.27			
Level of relationship with father					
Well	340	187.68	31.447	0.000**	1 – 2, 3
Moderate	55	275.50			
Poor	7	291.57			
School Success					
Successful	212	171.40	33.454	0.000**	1 – 2, 3
Moderately successful	163	228.92			
Unsuccessful	27	272.30			
Social networking					
Yes	308	208.07	-2.402	0.016*	
No	92	175.15			
Time spent on social media per day					
Less than half an hour	89	134.70	14.775	0.002*	1 – 2, 3, 4
30 minutes-1 hour	88	164.06			
2-3 hours	86	181.59			
More than 3 hours	66	185.51			
Spending time with father					
Yes	276	172.90	-7.319	0.000**	
No	126	264.15			

Table 2. The Comparison of Multidimensional Neglectful Behavior Scale-Father Form Scores According To The Children' Socio-Demographic Characteristics

"Z değeri Mann-Whitney U, χ^2 değeri ise Kruskal-Wallis testine ilişkin sonuçları belirtmektedir. * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$

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Table 2 shows the findings of the analysis performed to compare the scores of Multidimensional Neglectful Behavior Scale-Father Form according to the children's socio-demographic characteristics. The results of the Mann Whitney-U test revealed that the neglect scores did not differ according to the gender of the children ($z=-1.052$; $p>.05$) whereas children's neglect scores differed according to social networking ($z=-2.402$, $p<.05$) and spending time with fathers ($z=-7.319$, $p<.01$). That is, the children who are involved in social networking through their cell phones or computers and the children who do not spend time with their fathers had significantly higher mean ranks.

An examination of the Kruskal Wallis test results revealed that the neglect scores did not differ according to socio-economic status ($\chi^2=3.082$; $p>.05$) and number of siblings ($\chi^2=2.453$; $p>.05$). However, children's neglect scores were higher in terms of children's age ($\chi^2=60.839$; $p<.01$), grade ($\chi^2=59.365$; $p<.01$), father's age ($\chi^2=6.791$; $p<.05$), father's education level ($\chi^2=14.231$; $p<.05$), level of relationship with father ($\chi^2=31.447$; $p<.01$), school success ($\chi^2=33.454$; $p<.01$) and time spent on social media per day ($\chi^2=14.775$; $p<.01$). A further examination by using Mann Whitney-U test revealed that the children who were 13 years old and 14 years old and above; who were attending to 7th and 8th grade; whose fathers were 41-50 years old, graduate of primary and secondary school; whose relationship with father were poor and who are moderately successful and unsuccessful at school had significantly higher mean ranks.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to examine child neglect in terms of socio-demographic variables. The results of the study showed that child's age, grade, academic success, status of social media usage, level of relationship with parents and active time spent with parents are mutual variables for both mothers and fathers regarding neglect. The findings also indicated that, unlike mothers, fathers' level of neglect shows differences according to their age and level of education. In terms of the age of the child, the findings of this study are inconsistent with a number of studies in the literature.

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Various studies have shown that level of child neglect varies according to age; that is, younger children are neglected more (Chen et al., 2011; Perez-Fuentes et al., 2013; Soylu et al., 2013; Douglas, 2014). However in the present study, it was found that older children experienced higher levels of neglect. Although, children of all age groups are exposed to neglect, older children may be at risk particularly in terms of physical and supervisory neglect (Human Rights Association, 2008; Polat, 20017). A similar result was found in terms of the grade that the children attended. It is thought that the data gathered from the study regarding grade can be associated with age variable; that is, children at older grades are neglected more by their parents.

It was found that children who are neglected by their parents also have a low success rate in school. A number of studies in the literature also indicate the relationship between neglect and low school success (Stone, 2007; McBride et al., 2005; Nikulina et al., 2011). Parents are important stimuli for the cognitive development of their children. In addition to the many factors affecting brain development and academic success, it is also highlighted that the attention parents pay to the children and their attitude towards education have positive impact on the children's brain, academic success, analytical thinking skills, verbal skills, and language development (Pancsofar and Vernon-Feagans 2002). It is believed that, recently, many parents spend limited time with their children, the communication between parents and children are limited to daily, and although chronic neglect is not in question, parents are not able to pay sufficient attention to their child's education.

Other significant findings of the study showed that children who define their relation with parent as poor and those who do not spend active time with their parents have higher rates of neglect. Attitudes and behaviors such as not providing sufficient stimuli to children since infancy, not paying attention to the care, ignoring the child, not showing love and respect, not listening carefully to what the child is saying, not keeping the promises given to the child, ignoring the child's success, not providing the child with the love and affection he needs are defined as emotional neglect (Lewin and Herron, 2007; Beyazova, 2014).

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The more time parents spend with their children, the higher the quality of their relation (Lewis et al., 2008), parents' active sharing of the child's life has a positive impact on all developmental aspects of the child. In families where parents' involvement is insufficient and parent-child interaction is negative, parents do not show warmth and love; children do not feel safe and they are emotionally bruised (Polat, 2017).

In the present study, it was also found that children who use social media more have a higher rate of neglect. It is thought that children who do not receive sufficient attention from their parents tend to use social networks as a socializing tool and look for the attention they need in such contexts. Various studies also support this suggestion by showing that establishing social relations, looking for support and closeness are among the top reasons for the use of Internet among teenagers (Özcan and Buzlu, 2005, Kraut et al., 2002, Valkenburg and Peter, 2008). On the other hand, it is also believed that parents, who neglect their children, do not offer supervision to raise their children in a safe setting, do not set rules; do not guide children regarding right behavior and responsibilities to be fulfilled and do not protect children against the potential dangers of social networking; thus, children access the Internet in an unlimited manner and without supervision.

In the study, unlike the mothers, fathers' neglectful behaviors towards children showed differences depending on their age and level of education. In Turkish culture, traditionally mothers are seen as the primary caregiver of the child (Özen, 2009). However, equally important as the mothers' role, fathers also play a crucial role in a child's healthy development. It is stressed out that the involvement of fathers in a child's development, care and education is important for the cognitive, physical, social and emotional development of the child (Özkardeş, 2011). It was found in the study that fathers' at the age of forty or below have a lower rate of child neglect compared to other fathers. In contrast to this finding, the available literature suggests that older fathers are more attentive towards their children; and that age factor can be associated with emotional maturity and being aware of responsibilities (Castillo ve ark., 2011). It is believed that this finding may be resulting from the fact that equal gender roles are in the process of being established in Turkish society and the majority of young fathers are more involved in a child's care and education.

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The results of the study also showed that fathers who graduated from university have a lower rate of child neglect compared to other fathers. It is underlined that higher education level has a positive influence on the participation of father in the child's care (Shannon et al., 2005). Low education level, unemployment and low income level are among social stressors for neglect (Bahar et al., 2009). In this regard, low education level is believed to be leading to not only lack of knowledge and awareness regarding child neglect but also financial stressors. There are many studies available in the literature which emphasize that low education level is one of the risk factors regarding child maltreatment (Güler et al., 2002; Örsel et al. 2011).

This study is significant in terms of identifying certain socio-demographic factors which can be associated with child neglect. Identification of these factors is important for the efforts regarding the prevention of child neglect. Educational programs regarding child neglect should be designed for parents for the purpose of increasing the level of knowledge and awareness about the issue. It is crucial for the child's development for the parents to show the care and love needed by the child as all children need to feel that they are loved by their parents. It is equally important for the parent to not only meet the physical, medical and educational needs of children but also meet their emotional needs such as loving, acceptance and sense of belonging in addition to asking their thoughts and feelings, making the house a communication-friendly setting and establishing opportunities to spend quality time together. In addition, parents should monitor what children do outside of home and who they spend time with; and house setting should not be left unattended and without any rules. Habits such as watching TV and use of Internet should also be supervised and access to Internet should be monitored.

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