



Self reported awareness of child maltreatment among school professionals in Saudi Arabia: Impact of CRC ratification

Fadia S. AlBuhairan, Sarah S. Inam, Majid A. AlEissa, Ismail K. Noor, Maha A. Almuneef*

National Family Safety Program, King Abdulaziz Medical City, and King Saud bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences, P.O. Box 22490, Riyadh 11426, Saudi Arabia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 4 July 2011

Received in revised form 3 October 2011

Accepted 4 October 2011

Available online 9 November 2011

Keywords:

School professionals

Awareness

Child maltreatment

Saudi Arabia

ABSTRACT

Objectives: The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was ratified by Saudi Arabia 15 years ago; yet addressing the issue of child maltreatment only began in more recent years. School professionals play a significant role in children's lives, as they spend a great deal of time with them and are hence essential to protecting and identifying those in danger or at risk. The objective of this study is to identify school professional's awareness of child maltreatment and the existing national policies and procedures to examine the extent of efforts made in Saudi Arabia and to activate the roles of schools and school professionals in protecting children from violence and implementation of Article 19 of the CRC.

Methods: This was a cross-sectional study, where school professionals from randomly selected schools throughout the country were invited to participate in a self-administered questionnaire.

Results: A total of 3,777 school professionals participated in the study. Fifty-five percent of professionals had at least 10 years of work experience. A low-level of awareness of child maltreatment was found in about 1/3 of school professionals. Only 1.9% of school professionals had ever attended any sort of specific training on child maltreatment, though 69.3% of those who had not, were willing to attend future training. With regards to awareness of CRC Article 19 or policies and procedures addressing child maltreatment, only 22% reported being aware of it.

Conclusion: The majority of school professionals in Saudi Arabia have a low-intermediate level of awareness of child maltreatment, ratification of CRC, and related national policies and procedures, yet most are willing to attend training programs on this subject matter. Efforts need to be made in the country to fill this gap.

© 2011 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was adopted in 1989 when world leaders decided that children require a special convention to protect their individual human rights, as children often require protection that may differ from adults (UNICEF, 2008a, 2008b). Like many other countries, Saudi Arabia ratified the CRC in 1996 (Al Eissa & Almuneef, 2010), and with this, the country holds itself accountable for this commitment before the international community.

Article 19 of the CRC clearly states that children have the right to be protected from all forms of violence (UNICEF, 2008a, 2008b). This has been more explicitly explained with the more recent General Article 13 (GC 13) that describes how children are to be protected, what they are to be protected from, and who is responsible for such protection (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2011). Child maltreatment protection occurs at several levels and through community

* Corresponding author.

Table 1
Dimensions assessing participants' awareness about child maltreatment.

Existence and magnitude of child maltreatment in Saudi Arabia
Media coverage of child maltreatment
Existing efforts (policies, procedures, and mandated agencies) that aid in protecting children subjected to child maltreatment
Identification of cases of child maltreatment
Identification of perpetrators and dealing with them

and government efforts. Because teachers and other school professionals spend significant amounts of time with children, they are essential in preventing and identifying child maltreatment when it occurs and have been specifically mentioned in GC 13 ([United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2011](#)). In fact, the Child Maltreatment Information Gateway in the United States reported that professionals report 57% of the cases referred to and investigated by the Child Protection Services, and of these, 16% are reported by teachers ([Child Welfare International Gateway](#)).

Fortunately, training programs have been found to increase teachers' confidence in their ability to recognize signs of abuse, their reporting responsibilities, and how to respond effectively to a child's report of being abused ([Hawkins & McCallum, 2001](#)). Teachers have been found to be able to correctly identify the typical outcomes of physical and emotional abuse that mirror research findings on the actual effects of child abuse ([Zolotor et al., 1999](#)). However, personal beliefs are also influential: a teachers' intention to report child abuse has been associated with personal attitudes toward child discipline, punishment of perpetrators, professional responsibility, and perceived behavioral controls about reporting ([Feng, Huang, & Wang, 2010](#)). In addition to personal beliefs, knowledge and awareness of laws, policies and procedures related to reporting cases of child abuse and neglect have a major impact on the number of cases reported ([Walsh et al., 2008](#)). School professionals may be more inclined to report a case if their school's policies facilitate the process of reporting. School professionals' beliefs about whether reporting is likely to lead to positive outcomes for the child is also another important factor ([Walsh et al., 2008](#)).

In Saudi Arabia, although the CRC was ratified 15 years ago, addressing the issue of child maltreatment has recently emerged, and legislation addressing the matter has only recently been developed ([Al Eissa & Almuneeef, 2010](#)). It is important to assess the awareness and knowledge of community professionals who may encounter and work closely with victims of child maltreatment in order to identify the gaps and plan accordingly. This study was conducted with the aim of identifying school professionals' awareness of child maltreatment and the existing national policies and procedures that address child maltreatment, as this will reflect to what extent efforts have been made in Saudi Arabia to activate the roles of schools and school professionals in protecting children from violence, which in turn would reflect implementation of Article 19 of the CRC. For the purpose of this study, "school professional" will be used to reflect any individual working in the school setting, including teachers, principles, social workers, counselors, nurses, and administrative staff.

Methods

This is a cross-sectional study conducted in Saudi Arabia during 2009. Saudi Arabia occupies most of the Arabian Peninsula, with an area of 2,149,690 km² ([CIA](#)) and population of 27,136,977 ([The Central Department for Statistics and Information](#)). The country is made up of 13 regions, each with urban and rural governorates. Public and private gender-specific schools exist throughout all regions of the country.

A stratified cluster random sampling was conducted among school professionals throughout the country. Two governorates (one rural and one urban) from each of the 13 provinces in the country were randomly selected. Then one male and one female schools were randomly selected from each educational level (primary, intermediate, and secondary), yielding a total of 156 schools. All of the school professionals from each of the selected schools were invited to participate in the study.

Data were collected using self-administered questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire included demographic information. The second part contained 12 statements that addressed different dimensions relating to child maltreatment ([Table 1](#)) and were used to assess participants' awareness about child maltreatment. The third part of the questionnaire included questions about participants' training and education experiences on child maltreatment, one's ability to recognize and manage a case of maltreatment, and finally one's awareness of national policies on CRC implementation and local schools' procedures applicable to child maltreatment.

The awareness section of the questionnaire was assessed using a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 strongly agree. Each statement was considered to be of equal importance and was given equal value. Scores were thereafter summed: the highest possible score a participant could achieve was 60, and the lowest possible score was 12. Scores between 12 and 29, 30 and 49, and 50 and 60 points reflected "low", "intermediate", and "high" levels of knowledge and awareness of child maltreatment respectively, with higher scores reflecting better awareness and vice versa.

Descriptive statistical analysis was done utilizing Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 18. Only descriptive statistics is presented here.

Table 2
Demographics of school professionals.

	N (n = 3,777)	%
Profession		
Teachers	3,560	94.3
Others	217	5.7
Age (years)		
20–30	1,045	27.7
31–40	1,821	48.2
41–50	751	19.9
>50	71	1.9
Unknown	89	2.4
Gender		
Male	1,878	49.7
Female	1,899	50.3
Work experience (years)		
≤10	1,691	44.8
11–20	1,621	42.9
>20	452	12.0
Unknown	13	.3
Total	3777	100

Results

Demographics

A total of 3,777 school professionals participated. Ninety-four percent of school professionals were teachers ($n = 3,560$). There was equal representation of both genders, with the majority (48%) aged 31–40 years. Fifty-five percent of professionals had at least 10 years of work experience. Table 2 describes the demographics of the school professionals.

Child maltreatment awareness

Overall, a low level of child maltreatment awareness was noted in about 1/3 of school professionals (Table 3). Most male professionals had a low level of awareness (37.1%), whereas the majority of female professionals had a high level of awareness (36.7%). The differences in the levels of awareness among males and females were statistically significant ($p < .001$) for low and high levels of awareness (Table 3).

Child maltreatment training

Only 71 (1.9%) of school professionals had ever attended any sort of special training on child maltreatment. Out of those who attended training, the majority (54.9%) were females. Despite the low number of professionals who had attended training, 2569 (69.3%) of the remaining sample were willing to attend training courses on child maltreatment, with approximately equal interest from males and females, 48.9% and 51.1% respectively. Eighty-three percent preferred having training that lasted for at least 3 or more days duration, with 18% of those preferring that it be >7 days long.

Awareness and compliance with national and school child maltreatment policies

The last section of the questionnaire assessed participants' awareness and compliance with CRC Article 19, existing policies on child maltreatment, and how to deal with suspected or confirmed cases of child maltreatment. Only 22% ($n = 825$) reported awareness of CRC Article 19 or national policies or procedures addressing child maltreatment. Twenty-seven percent of the sample was unsure whether or not policies and procedures exist. Of those who were aware of the presence of policies and procedures, 53% had actually reviewed the policies, and only 41% had actually applied the procedures. Less than

Table 3
Participants' awareness of child maltreatment.

Level of awareness	Male professionals		Female professionals		Total		P-value
	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	
Low	696	(37.1)	549	(28.9)	1245	(33)	<.001
Intermediate	607	(32.3)	573	(30.2)	1,180	(31.2)	NS
High	516	(27.5)	697	(36.7)	1,213	(32.1)	<.001
Missing	59	(3.1)	80	(4.2)	139	(3.7)	<.001
Total	1,878	(100)	1,899	(100)	3,777	(100)	

NS: not significant.

half (43%) believed that the procedures were comprehensive, and only 25.5% thought that the procedures were adequate or sufficient. Twenty percent had previously encountered at least one case of child maltreatment during their career.

Discussion

Child maltreatment has only recently gained attention in Saudi Arabia. The first local article addressing child maltreatment was published in 1991 (Al-Eissa, 1991). Since then, the country has taken several measures to address this issue, including ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child (CRC) in 1996 (Al Eissa & Almuneef, 2010). Since having a few policies established, it has now become necessary to examine the levels of awareness that those professionals who may directly or indirectly come into contact with victims of child maltreatment.

School professionals may be considered to be the “frontline” contact with children who are victims of child maltreatment. Despite the fact that more than half of the school professionals that participated in the study had been in the education sector for more than 10 years, only 1/3 had an overall “high” level of awareness of child maltreatment. Interestingly, there was a discrepancy between male and female professionals, with most females having a “high” level of awareness and most males a “low” level of awareness. The reasons for this are unclear; there was clearly a big deficiency in exposure to training or any sort of formal education on child maltreatment, so the difference in the levels of awareness among the genders cannot be explained by exposure to formal training or education. Furthermore, it is important to note that male and female schools although segregated, use the same educational curriculum. Having a higher level of awareness in female professionals may be attributed to the possibility that women tend to be more emotional and receptive to emotional cues relative to men.

Experience can affect one’s awareness of the issue; however, the difference in levels of awareness among men and women professionals is also not explained by their extent of experience or exposure to children who are maltreated, as the proportion of women who were exposed to maltreated children was smaller than the proportion of men. The number of school professionals exposed to child maltreatment is obviously an underestimate; low levels of awareness of the issue result in a higher threshold for professionals to accurately identify or even suspect cases of child maltreatment.

Fortunately, most participants reported willingness to attend training; this finding is encouraging and may indirectly reflect the interest, importance, and/or seriousness of the matter as perceived by participants. The most preferred method for training was through workshops and case discussions. Most participants expressed that they would prefer to have training that lasted more than 3 days. This was a great indication that in addition to the participants’ willingness to attend, they were keen to commit to the training. This could also mean that the thoroughness of the material provided was important to them.

Circulars and training programs in the Ministry of Education address the matter of child violence, however, not through directly addressing or teaching the CRC Article 19. Furthermore, there is no mandatory-reporting system for school professionals. In fact, the only professionals who are legally mandated to report cases of child maltreatment are those within the healthcare sector. The mandate was issued in 2007 and has been practiced ever since in healthcare facilities. Despite these facts, only a minority of the sample was aware of the presence of any policies and procedures addressing child maltreatment in the country, and of those, only a small portion have either reviewed the policies/procedures and/or believe that they are comprehensive. It was only very recently, in March 2011, that the Child Protection Act was approved by the Saudi Legislative Council; it has yet to be approved by the Cabinet of Ministers before it officially passes. This Act legally mandates all professionals working with children to report cases of suspected child abuse and neglect. With this history of lack of mandatory reporting, school professionals may have previously felt that reporting cases is not part of their responsibility, alongside the fact that there may be other reasons that would discourage them from reporting. Such reasons include: a teacher’s personal beliefs about child discipline, the type of abuse (physical, sexual and emotional), the child’s gender and age, the consequences of reporting, the teacher’s social and economic status, and experience with cases of child maltreatment (Webster et al., 2005). A school professional’s relationship with the parents has been shown to yield a mixed impact on the tendency to report (Crenshaw et al., 1995).

This study has shed light on the status of school professionals’ awareness of child maltreatment and reflects some of the efforts taken by Saudi Arabia to comply with Article 19 of the CRC. A major gap identified is lack of training or education on the subject matter. Establishing widespread training programs, including the specific points that were addressed in GC 13, for school professionals is essential country wide, as the amount of training aides in accurate detection of cases (Hawkins & McCallum, 2001; O’Toole et al., 1999; Zolotor et al., 1999)]. It is also important to bear in mind that child maltreatment negatively impacts a student’s school performance and adaptive functioning (Yanowitz, Monte, & Tribble, 2003) and therefore places school professionals in a better position to suspect or detect cases of child maltreatment. Because personal attitudes, beliefs, and cultures can shape individual’s actions and responses to what is conventionally referred to as child maltreatment (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Feng et al., 2010; Webster et al., 2005), it is important to explore these factors in subsequent studies. This study did not explore school professionals’ views on corporal punishment in schools and any policies that may exist on this matter. This is an essential component that has important implications with Article 19 and should be explored in future studies.

Conclusion

The findings from this study provided a preliminary understanding of where Saudi Arabia stands in terms of awareness about child maltreatment in educational settings and how this plays a role in complying with the CRC. The majority of school

professionals in Saudi Arabia have a low-intermediate level of awareness of child maltreatment, and most professionals have not had any sort of training related to child maltreatment. Despite this fact, most are willing to attend lengthy training programs. Efforts need to be made in the country to fill this gap; training programs need to be established, as the awareness of school professionals about children's wellbeing is vital, and part of every child's wellbeing is his/her safety. The importance and need for training becomes even more vital with the implementation of the Child Protection Act; it is safe to assume that the number of cases reported will increase with this mandate; and hence, training will allow individuals to properly identify, handle and report cases of child abuse more adequately.

References

- Al-Eissa, Y. (1991). The battered child syndrome: Does it exist in Saudi Arabia? *Saudi Medical Journal*, 12(2), 129–135.
- Al Eissa, M. A. & Almuneef, M. A. (2010). Child abuse and neglect in Saudi Arabia: Journey of recognition to implementation of national prevention strategies. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 34(1), 28–33.
- Child Welfare International Gateway. US Department of Health and Human Services. *Educator's Role in Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention*. Available at URL: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/> [Accessed 20 October 2010].
- CIA – *The World Factbook*. Available at URL: <http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html> [Accessed 21 March 2011].
- Crenshaw, W. B., Crenshaw, L. M., & Lichtenberg, J. W. (1995). When educators confront child abuse: An analysis of the decision to report. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 19, 1095–1113.
- Feng, J. Y., Huang, T. Y., & Wang, C. J. (2010). Kindergarten teachers' experience with reporting child abuse in Taiwan. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 34(2), 124–128.
- Hawkins, R. & McCallum, C. (2001). Mandatory notification of training for suspected child abuse and neglect in South Australian schools. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 25(12), 1603–1625.
- O'Toole, R., Webster, S. W., O'Toole, A. W., & Lucal, B. (1999). Teacher's recognition and reporting of child abuse: A factorial survey. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 23, 1083–1101.
- The Central Department for Statistics and Information. Available at URL: <http://www.cdsi.gov.sa/english/index.php> [Accessed 21 March 2011].
- UNICEF. *Convention on the Rights of the Child* 2008. Available at URL: <http://www.unicef.org/crc/> [Accessed 2 May 2011].
- UNICEF. *Fact Sheet: A summary of the rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child* 2008. Available at URL: <http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Rights.overview.pdf> [Accessed 2 May 2011]
- United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. *General Comment No. 13 The Right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence* 2011. Available at URL: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/CRC.C.GC.13.en.pdf> [Accessed 27 June 2011].
- Walsh, K., Bridgstock, R., Farrell, A., Rassafiani, M., & Schweitzer, R. (2008). Case, teacher and school characteristics influencing teacher's detection and reporting of child physical abuse and neglect: Results from an Australian Survey. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 32, 983–993.
- Webster, S. W., O'Toole, R., & O'Toole, A. W. (2005). Overreporting and underreporting of child abuse: Teachers' use of professional discretion. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 29, 1281–1296.
- Yanowitz, K. L., Monte, E., & Tribble, J. R. (2003). Teachers' beliefs about the effects of child abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 27(5), 483–488.
- Zolotor, A., Kotch, J., Dufort, V., Winsor, J., Catellier, D., & Bou-Saada, I. (1999). School performance in a longitudinal cohort of children at risk of maltreatment. *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, 3(1), 19–27.