

## **ABSTRACT**

Of the different types of child abuse, emotional abuse has been identified as the least studied form and contributing to severe and long term consequences in the child.

Due to the culture specific nature of factors related to emotional abuse, study instruments that have been developed to identify emotional abuse, may or may not be appropriate for use in Sri Lanka. Hence an attempt was made to develop a reliable and valid instrument in the form of a self-administered questionnaire to measure emotional abuse in school children aged 13-15 years.

Development of the study instrument was done systematically following the steps in developing a summated rating scale. This initial phase included the following: defining emotional abuse and identifying the major categories of abusive behaviours, item generation, achieving content validity, developing the draft questionnaire, pre-testing the questionnaire, assessing social acceptability. Then the draft questionnaire was used for item analysis and assessing the reliability and validity of the instrument.

This resulted in the development of an instrument which included 46 items and having a good internal consistency in terms of a Cronbach alpha of 0.8867 and a

test re-test correlation of 0.7333. The validity of the instrument in terms of sensitivity and specificity were 76.9% and 51.4% respectively, at a cut-off score of 95 and above, identified by a ROC curve. The assessments made by a Psychiatrist, was considered the "gold standard".

The validity of the instrument developed was further supported by establishing construct validity by different approaches where significant differences in the mean score between "high risk" and "normal" populations and those identified as "abused" and "not" were demonstrated. The ability of the instrument to predict negative outcomes i.e 96.4% of poor school performance and 83.6% of poor school attendance, too were identified as supporting its validity.

The phase 2 of this study attempted to determine the prevalence of emotional abuse using a cross sectional community based approach. Using a multistage cluster sampling technique a sample of 1310 students aged between 13-15 years in 44 clusters were selected from the schools in the Gampaha District. The prevalence of emotional abuse in this group was 10.2%.

A child detected as "emotionally abused" by the instrument developed was identified as a "case" and a comparable "normal" child as a "control". "Cases" identified from a 50% sub sample of the original study population were compared with the "controls" and relevant information was collected from the mothers of the

children using an interviewer administered structured questionnaire. A case was compared with two controls to improve the power of the study, as the numbers of cases were restricted to 64. An individual matching on age and sex was done as a measure to reduce confounding.

A matched analysis identified several risk factors which had a statistically significant relationship with emotional abuse. Findings of the study show that the indicators of close contact of the mother with the child i.e limited time spent by the mother with children, lack of interest by the caregivers to participate at the interview on the first request and the mother not living with the child were identified as important risk factors contributing to emotional abuse. This association was demonstrated in the descriptive study too.

In addition, preferential treatment of male children, domestic violence in the family were significantly associated with the occurrence of emotional abuse. Logistic regression after controlling for the effects of confounding indicated that domestic violence, lack of interest in the caregivers to participate at the interview and male preference were significantly associated as risk factors for emotional abuse.

The instrument developed in this study shows satisfactory reliability and validity, hence could be used as an instrument to screen children to identify emotional

abuse. The prevalence of emotional abuse identified as 10.2% indicates the existence of the problem. During the phase 1 of this study which was carried out in a “selected” school, the prevalence of emotional abuse was identified as 27.5%. This indicates that this problem may be high in certain sub-populations, highlighting the need for further studies.

The association of emotional abuse with negative outcomes like poor school performance and poor school attendance indicates the need to develop activities to minimize the occurrence of emotional abuse and its negative sequelae. The focus of such programmes should be parents of young children, future parents and would be parents specially the mother.