

# CHILD MALTREATMENT IN TURKEY: COMPARISON OF PARENT AND CHILD REPORTS

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## SUMMARY

**Background and Aim:** Child maltreatment, i.e. abuse and neglect, is a significant problem worldwide and can cause impaired physical and mental health throughout life. The true extent still remains unknown in all countries, including Turkey. The aim of this study was to apply the two versions of the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) Child Abuse Screening Tool of ICAST-C and ICAST-P, which are used to assess child and parent feedback and to compare reports given by children and those given by parents. This is the first study of its kind conducted in Turkey.

**Methods:** First, ICAST was translated into Turkish by bilingual experts. Students and their parents were asked to complete ICAST-C and ICAST-P respectively, with the help of trained researchers. In total, data from 2,608 matched reports (2,608 children and 2,608 parents) was obtained. Descriptive statistics were used to evaluate demographical variables, and chi-square tests were employed to investigate the statistical significance of comparisons.

**Results:** The present study demonstrated that Turkish parents consider rebukes, insults and corporal punishment effective ways of disciplining children. According to parents' reports, the use of psychological abuse was most prevalent against boys aged 16, while the use of physical abuse was most prevalent against boys aged 13. A statistically significant relationship was found between parents' economic conditions and child abuse ( $p < 0.01$ ). No significant relationship was detected between maternal educational levels and child abuse ( $p > 0.05$ ). However, the relationship between paternal educational background and psychological abuse was observed to be significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). A comparison of children's and parents' reports shows that parents tended to under-report child maltreatment.

**Conclusions:** The results show that there is a significant healthcare problem in Turkey, since child maltreatment is prevalent, but parents are not generally aware of its extent. Possible approaches to changing this situation include efforts to increase education levels, promoting public awareness, and strengthening political commitments.

**Key words:** child abuse and neglect, child maltreatment, ICAST-C, ICAST-P, parental reports, public health

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## INTRODUCTION

Child abuse and neglect (CAN) is a major public health and social welfare problem around the world (1). According to the World Health Organization (WHO) reports, CAN is a very common worldwide phenomenon, yet also one of the most unrecognized and under-researched (2). Various case definitions exist for various types of CAN. Giovannoni defined abuse as acts of omission that result in harm, and defined neglect as acts of omission that have negative effects (3). According to Gilbert et al. physical abuse is the intentional use of force or implementations against a child that results in, or has the potential to result in, physical injury; psychological (emotional) abuse is an intentional behaviour that conveys to a child that he/she is worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered, or valued only in meeting another's needs; and neglect is the failure to meet a child's basic physical, emotional, medical, or educational needs, the failure to provide adequate nutrition, hygiene, shelter, or the failure to ensure a child's safety (4).

Different screening tools are used to explore the prevalence of CAN in different countries (5–8). In order to address deficiencies in previous screening tools due to cross-cultural, multicultural and multinational differences, the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) developed Child Abuse Screening Tool instruments. The two versions of International Child Abuse Screening tools (ICAST) are known as ICAST-C and ICAST-P. The former is multinational, multilingual, and consensus-based instrument designed to measure the prevalence of child victimization (9), while the latter is a similar instrument which measures the prevalence of abusive parental behaviour towards children (10). Although widely used to measure CAN data in the US, European countries and other countries in both East and West, these tools have only recently been recognized in Turkey. A Turkish study measuring the negative childhood experiences using the ICAST-C screening tool showed that Turkey is confronted with a very significant health problem, which also presents a potential risk to adults (11).

However, relying on the responses of either the child or the parent alone might affect the reliability of the results (12). Parent reports of child maltreatment may involve response bias and provide significant underestimates (13, 14). Therefore, in order to determine the prevalence of CAN, child responses are considered as more accurate (15–17). However, the use of child reports without comparison with adult reports may also be problematic, since abused and neglected children tend to underreport the abuse or neglect experienced because they feel a sense of loyalty to parent (18–20). Thus, some studies in the child maltreatment literature found substantial differences between child and parent reports (21), while others revealed moderate agreement levels (22). Considering these concerns about the reliability of reports from a single information source (either child or parent), this study aims to achieve a more balanced view comparing data from both groups in order to examine the consistency of responses. This involves applying the ICAST-P tool in Turkey for the first time.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Sample

The present study gathered data from three populous provinces: Izmir, Denizli and Zonguldak, representing western, central and northern regions of Turkey, respectively. The questionnaires were distributed to 5th, 7th and 10th grade students, with the respective ages of 11, 13 and 16, representing the (late) childhood, pre-adolescent and adolescent stages of life. Target schools for this study were identified by using “Random Number Generator” software, which ensures that a random sample set was generated.

In total, 5,125 students (2,415 from Izmir, 1,403 from Zonguldak and 1,307 from Denizli) responded to this study, while only 2,642 parents (1,380 from Izmir, 735 from Zonguldak and 527 from Denizli) participated. After the elimination of partially filled, mismatching (in terms of child and parent details), and child questionnaires without corresponding parent versions, the total number of paired questionnaires was determined to be 2,608 (1,357 from Izmir, 727 from Zonguldak and 524 from Denizli).

### Survey Instruments

ICAST-C and ICAST-P were used as data collection tools for children and parents, respectively. In the context of this study, survey questions were translated into Turkish using scale retranslation, and adapted to the Turkish sample.

5th graders were given the shorter version of ICAST-C questionnaire form, and 7th and 10th graders, the longer version. The short version included 37 questions in total, 17 about psychological abuse, 15 about physical abuse and 5 about positive parenting, while the longer version included 42 questions, consisting of 19, 16 and 7 questions about the aforesaid issues, respectively. Parents were given the ICAST-P questionnaire form, with 40 questions (17 about psychological abuse, 16 about physical abuse and 7 about positive parenting).

These survey instruments include questions about sexual abuse, but these were eliminated from the current study due to legal and ethical restrictions.

### Design

This study was designed as the Turkish contribution to the Balkan Epidemiological Study on Child Abuse and Neglect (BECAN). BECAN was established with the aim to prevent child abuse and neglect through the development of systematic research, promoting collaboration among public and private institutions and increasing public awareness. This approach was based on that of the Japanese Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, JaSPCAN (23). After agreement among the nine Balkan states, i.e., Greece, Turkey, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, Macedonia, Croatia, and Serbia, BECAN became eligible for funding under the European Union Seventh Framework Programme.

In the first phase of this study, bilingual experts translated the English version of ICAST-C and ICAST-P tools into Turkish, and the terminology was reviewed by an expert in child maltreatment. It was decided to exclude some survey questions for cultural and legal reason.

In the second phase, the research team underwent field research training. This training covered issues such as gaining familiarity with the basic terminology in respect of CAN, the impacts of neglect on children, the applicable legislation, the ethical dimension of the study, the importance of confidentiality, the principle of non-harming, and the actions that should and should not be taken in the event of severe cases of CAN.

In the third phase, appointments were made with randomly chosen target schools. At the appointed time, the students completed the ICAST-C tool under the supervision of trained researchers. The questionnaire forms were coded without recording the identity of the student, but it was ensured that each child survey code was linked to the corresponding parent survey, ICAST-P. Children were also given the parent forms to deliver to their parents. The researchers collected the delivered child and parent surveys and matched them using the codes.

### Statistical Analysis

SPSS 16.0 was used for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were calculated for demographic characteristics. Chi-squared tests were used to examine the levels of agreement between the matched child and parents reports according to the different types of child maltreatment.

## RESULTS

The parent response rate was only 51.88% of the child rate. A total of 2,608 matched surveys were obtained, and the response rates for Izmir, Zonguldak and Denizli were 52.03%, 27.88% and 20.09%, respectively. Thus, the response rate was the highest in the western region, which included Izmir, one of the most developed cities of Turkey.

### Demographic Information

The following section gives the demographic distribution for the respondents of the 2,608 paired child-parent surveys. 57.09% of children were female, the age distribution is presented in Table 1. The average age of parents was 39.55 years, ranging between

**Table 1. Paired students – distribution by age and sex (N=2,608)**

Gender	5th grade	%	7th grade	%	10th grade	%	Total	%
Girls	446	30.00	379	25.40	664	44.60	1,489	57.00
Boys	362	32.35	317	28.33	440	39.32	1,119	43.00

18–60. 72.03% were mothers and 25.37% were fathers, as presented in Table 2. The educational status of caregivers was as follows: 59.70% of mothers and 42.07% of fathers had achieved a primary level of education or below, and only 6.97% of mothers and 12.42% of fathers had completed university or tertiary education, as shown in Table 3.

### Parents' Opinions Regarding Corporal Punishment

When parents were asked about their opinions regarding prevalence of corporal punishment in Turkey generally, 9.46% responded that there was almost none, 52.84% that there was some (i.e. it was practiced in 50% or fewer of families) and 37.70% that

it was common (i.e. it was practiced in more than 50% of families). When asked about the prevalence among their own family members, 79.67% of parents responded as very infrequent (none or almost none), 15.18% as occasional or some and 5.15% as frequent or common. The complete data from the report is given in Table 4. When these values were investigated, it was observed that parents reported lower frequencies of punishment in families with closer relationships between family members, friends and neighbours, while the frequencies sharply increased with the lower relationship levels to parents, as to their city, province, and country.

### Parent Feedbacks Regarding Psychological, Physical Abuse, Positive Parenting

Similar rates of psychological abuse were admitted by parents for boys and girls: 72.65% and 71.26%, respectively. Among the age groups, it was seen that 10th grade students, aged 16, were the most subjected to psychological abuse, with the rate of 74.55%, while the rates for the 7th and 5th graders were 73.42% and 66.83%, respectively. The Chi-square test between groups showed that the likelihood of being subjected to psychological abuse depended on age and gender ( $p < 0.05$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

Perception of the prevalence of physical abuse was also assessed. The physical abuse rates reported by parents show that boys were exposed to a higher level of abuse when compared to girls (45.85% vs. 37.95%). Rates of physical abuse were observed to be more prevalent among 7th graders, with 44.68%, compared to 5th graders, with 43.94%, and 10th graders, with 37.32%. Statistical analysis also showed that exposure to physical abuse is affected by the child's age and gender ( $p < 0.05$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

Parents' feedback regarding positive parenting was extremely optimistic. More than 92.50% reported taking a positive approach to their children regardless of age and gender. Thus, no statistical difference between age and gender groups was observed in this area.

**Table 2. Relationship level of parents and caregivers with children (N=2,608)**

	n	%
Mother	1,863	72.03
Father	656	25.37
Stepmother	3	0.12
Stepfather	1	0.04
Foster parent	1	0.04
Sister	23	0.89
Brother	10	0.39
Grandmother	12	0.46
Grandfather	8	0.31
Aunt	7	0.27
Uncle	2	0.08
Total	2,586	100.00
Did not respond	22	

**Table 3. Parental educational status (N=2,608)**

Educational Status	Mother (N=2,315)		Father (N=1,940)	
	n	%	n	%
None	77	3.33	12	0.62
Some years in primary school	92	3.97	55	2.84
Primary school	1,213	52.40	749	38.61
Middle school	317	13.69	410	21.13
High school	425	18.36	428	22.06
Vocational high school	29	1.25	45	2.32
University	141	6.09	218	11.24
Graduate School	21	0.91	23	1.18
Total	2,315	100.00	1,940	100.00
Motherless/fatherless	115		374	
Did not respond	178		294	

**Table 4. Parents' opinions regarding corporal punishment (N = 2,608)**

How many parents do you think resort to corporal punishment in order to instill proper behaviour?							
Region	Almost none/none	Less than a half	Almost a half	More than a half	Almost all	Total	Did not respond
In your country?	220	570	659	690	187	2,326	282
In your province?	314	909	551	311	78	2,163	445
In your city/village?	470	869	407	256	85	2,087	521
Among your neighbours?	1,108	653	176	140	84	2,161	447
Among your friends?	1,375	495	130	80	65	2,145	463
Among your family members?	1,732	246	84	57	55	2,174	434

Full details of the parent reports on psychological and physical abuse, and positive parenting are given in Table 5.

### Comparison of Children and Parents' Feedback

Table 6 shows the various findings of the comparisons between child and parent responses to different items of the instrument. For each item, parents tended to underestimate their negative behaviours and overestimate the positive ones. A significant difference was observed between the responses of children and parents to each item ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

### Relationship between Risk, Demographic Factors and Abuse Type

Past research has provided evidence that children experiencing abusive parenting are more likely to become abusive parents themselves (24–27). Parental cognitions are also considered as significant aetiological factors in CAN (28, 29). In addition, various socioeconomic factors may contribute to child abuse (30–33). In this part, the relationship between socioeconomic factors and child abuse were explored. Similar to past research, a statistically significant relationship was observed between exposure to physical

**Table 5. Parents' feedback regarding abuse and positive parenting (N = 2,608)**

		Psychological Abuse			Physical Abuse			Positive Parenting		
		n	%	$\chi^2$	n	%	$\chi^2$	n	%	$\chi^2$
Gender	Girl	1,061	71.25	6.40*	565	37.94	16.44**	1,407	94.5	1.11
	Boy	813	72.65		513	45.84		1,062	94.9	
Age (years)	11	540	66.83	18.01*	355	43.93	13.24*	751	92.94	12.36
	13	511	73.42		311	44.68		666	95.69	
	16	823	76.25		412	36.29		1,052	96.72	

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

**Table 6. Differences in findings in comparisons of the parent and child surveys (N = 2,608)**

Abuse type	Item	Parents' survey			Children's survey		
		No	Yes	Did not respond	No	Yes	Did not respond
Psychological abuse	I	1,967	526	115	1,829	691	88
	II	2,260	234	114	2,154	376	78
	III	2,260	230	118	2,262	265	81
	IV	2,442	54	112	2,493	77	38
	V	2,438	100	70	2,474	111	23
	VI	2,433	48	127	2,516	60	32
	VII	2,405	101	102	2,459	104	45
Physical abuse	VIII	2,453	75	80	2,456	123	29
	IX	2,433	52	123	2,502	65	41
Positive parenting	X	2,260	235	113	2,240	298	70

Item-I: Have you ever compared your child to other children in such a manner that leads to self-abasement?

Item-II: Have you ever knowingly put your child to shame in order to ensure that he/she feels uncomfortable or humiliated?

Item-III: Have you ever said "I wish you had never been born!"?

Item-IV: Have you ever abstained from taking him/her home?

Item-V: Have you ever frightened your child by threatening to summon a spirit, ghost or any other supernatural force?

Item-VI: Have you ever gone so far to tell him/her that you would kill him/her?

Item-VII: Have you ever locked your child in a dark or small room?

Item-VIII: Have you ever forced hot pepper into your child's mouth to make him/her suffer?

Item-IX: Have you ever forced your child to kneel down or to remain standing to make him/her suffer?

Item-X: Have you ever deprived your child of his/her money or rights?

abuse in childhood and the tendency to engage in physical abuse of children as a parent, while a similar relation was observed between the exposure to psychological abuse and the tendency to apply it as an adult ( $p < 0.01$ ). The parents who considered beating as an effective method of discipline were naturally those who tended to be physically abusive parents ( $p < 0.01$ ). Economic conditions were significantly related to both physical and psychological abuse ( $p < 0.01$ ). No clear relationship was observed between the mother's educational background and different abuse types; in contrast, there seems to be a significant relationship ( $p < 0.05$ ) between the father's educational background and psychological abuse. These results are shown in detail in Table 7.

## DISCUSSION

The current study shows that many findings in the child maltreatment literature are valid in the case of Turkey; for example, children were more likely than parents to report CAN, and parents' abusive approaches differed according to the age and gender of the child. Furthermore, there was a relationship between exposure to abusive parenting as a child, and practicing abusive parenting as an adult. Parental cognitions and socioeconomic factors were seemingly significantly related to child maltreatment.

In the current study, children were much more responsive compared to parents; 5,125 students compared to only 2,642 parents agreed to participate in the survey. Izmir, as the most developed region among the three, showed a higher response rate. The demographic analysis showed that the educational backgrounds of parents were generally low.

Similar to a study using data from a larger, nationally more representative sample, in this study, it was observed that males were more likely than females to have experienced physical abuse during childhood (34). This result was also obtained for psychological abuse. These observations can be interpreted as follows: harsher discipline for male children and adolescents can be partially explained by the deeply-rooted traditions of patriarchy of Eastern countries. Regarding age, it was observed that physical abuse is most prevalent at the 7th grade, i.e. at the age of 13, when young people are not considered to have reached adulthood. In contrast, psychological abuse was observed more prevalent at the age of 16, the age of adolescence at which physical abuse is considered less appropriate. In regard to positive parenting, no statistical difference was observed based on age

or gender groups; thus, parents reported a positive approach to all children.

When the child and parent reports were compared, it was observed that parents tended to underreport CAN, and overreport positive parenting behaviours, as discussed in the past studies (13, 14). This observation shows that parents tend to either be unaware of, or deliberately underestimate their abusive behaviours. The values given in Table 4 additionally show that parents accept the prevalence of CAN in Turkey generally, and even in their own city, but strongly believe that the frequency of CAN is decreasing within their immediate community, i.e. among their neighbours, friends and family members. The numbers for each of the items in Table 6 similarly shows that parents tend to overreport their positive behaviours while underreporting the negative ones.

Different studies have shown that parents who experienced abusive behaviour in childhood apply harsher methods discipline as adults (8, 24–27). The present study showed that this tendency applies in Turkey, those abused in childhood are more likely to become abusive parents themselves. Parents' economic conditions seem to be highly related to abusive behaviour. Thus, parents facing the challenges of surviving on low incomes are more likely to maltreat their children compared to those on higher incomes. An interesting result of this study is the absence of any relation between abusive behaviour and mother's educational background, suggesting that in Turkey, levels of maltreatment of children by mothers do not vary according to their educational level. In demographic analysis, it was reported that 72.03% of the parental respondents were mothers, showing the importance of the role of mother in a child's development. These results collectively show a potential risk for the future generation, since maltreatment received in childhood can greatly influence long-term wellbeing (35–37). In addition, the education level of fathers was observed to be significantly related with the tendency to practice psychological abuse, showing the key role of education in determining a father's likelihood to engage in abuse.

## CONCLUSION

This study is important as the first effort in Turkey to collectively and comparatively apply ICAST-C and ICAST-P, multinational, multilingual and consensus-based instruments, which allow a realistic estimation of child victimization levels. Thus, the results provide data which can be compared to corresponding data from other countries.

**Table 7.** Relationship between risk and demographic factors and abuse type

Factors	Abuse type	$\chi^2$	p value
Parent being exposed to violence by their own parents	Physical abuse	0.203	<0.01
Parent being exposed to snub/insult by their own parents	Psychological abuse	0.179	<0.01
Parent being of the opinion that beating is an effective method to discipline child	Physical abuse	0.160	<0.01
Economic conditions	Physical abuse	-0.061	<0.01
Economic conditions	Psychological abuse	-0.083	<0.01
Mother's educational background	Psychological abuse	-0.017	>0.05
Mother's educational background	Physical abuse	-0.018	>0.05
Father's educational background	Psychological abuse	0.076	<0.05
Father's educational background	Physical abuse	0.020	>0.05



An important outcome of the current work is the realization that Turkey is confronted with a significant public healthcare problem, since parents are either unaware of, or tend to deny the true extent of the prevalence of child maltreatment. The generally low levels of education attainment and harsh cultural impositions make the situation even more serious. Since the current generation will determine the future of Turkey, it is necessary to take action to prevent potential negative consequences of this trend. Achieving this goal will involve making efforts to increase educational levels, the promotion of public awareness and the strengthening of political commitments.

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### Ethics Committee Approval

Ethics committee approval was received from the Ethics Committee of Izmir Tepecik Education and Research Hospital Chief Physician Office Local Ethics Committee (29.11.2011–29).

### Conflict of Interests

None declared

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