

A Review on the Child Abuse During COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Child abuse cases were underreported, despite increased calls to social helplines during the COVID-19 lockdown. This literature review highlights global child abuse cases during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aims are to identify the prevalence of different child abuse types and discuss the factors associated with increased child abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic. Electronic databases such as PubMed, Google Scholar, and ScienceDirect were searched. **The review shows** an increase in all four types of child abuse based on several studies, committed mainly by parents. Sexual abuse and child neglect were more prevalent in low-income countries as children were forced to self-exploitation to ensure continuous resources during this pandemic. Several factors contributed to this surge in child abuse cases, such as parental stress secondary to lockdown measures, financial issues, and increased exposure to abusers. The increase in incidences of child abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic is primarily due to social and financial restraints. Hence, this review is anticipated to assist the stakeholders with strategies to halt the escalation of child abuse.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, child abuse, child neglect, lockdown measures, prevention strategies

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Introduction

Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) was declared a “public health emergency of international concern” by the World Health Organisation on January 30, 2020, and upgraded to a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2021). Following the rapid increase in the number of infected cases and death tolls worldwide, most countries have relegated complete lockdowns to prevent the virus from spreading at an unprecedented rate. Such restrictions, such as lockdown measures, social distancing, and closure of schools, are especially challenging for parents. These parenting challenges are further complicated by the demands of working from home, economic difficulties, job losses, and social restrictions on parents.

Child abuse has significant implications on a child’s life. During the COVID-19 pandemic, child abuse is expected to rise as life pressure increases. The stress parents or caretakers face perhaps transferred to the child as a place for outrage. It eventually has short-term and long-term impacts on the children. It has been hypothesised that the pandemic's considerable alterations to daily family life may intensify parental stress and intra-familial tension, leading to an increase in adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as spousal violence, child abuse, and neglect (Global status report on violence against children, 2020).

Several countries have observed an upsurge in reports of possible child abuse and domestic violence through designated helpline services. In Malaysia, the number of calls to the *Talian Kasih* hotline during the first month of lockdown increased by up to 500 per cent from the pre-pandemic levels (The Star, 1st June, 2021). Other countries have also reported similar findings. In the United Kingdom, calls to the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children increased by 20 per cent (BBC News, 1st June, 2021), while in Uganda, the Uganda Child Helpline (UCHL) received a 13-fold increase in calls with a majority concerning child neglect, physical and sexual abuse, sadly there were two cases child murder (Sserwanja et al., 2020).

Despite these alarming findings, data on the exact prevalence of child abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic is still limited. The findings in this review are hoped to assist in developing guidelines and interventions to prevent child abuse in the future. Therefore, this review aimed to study child abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic as a stakeholder guide. We highlight the prevalence and number of Child Abuse from pre-pandemic to COVID-19 Pandemic in Malaysia and other countries, focusing on different types of child abuse (i.e., physical, psychological/emotional, sexual, and neglect) across several studies. This review

will also present the factors leading to increased child abuse rates during the COVID-19 pandemic. We hope this review can serve as a basis for future interventions to exalts the progression of this disaster in a child's life.

Method

Electronic databases such as PubMed, Google Scholar, and ScienceDirect were searched using terms such as "COVID-19", "child abuse," "children," "paediatric," and "prevalence." In addition, several journal and newspaper articles from 2018 to 2021 were read and retrieved based on their relevance, and their findings were included in this literature review.

Results

Prevalence and number of child abuse from pre-pandemic to COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia and other countries

The number of child abuse has increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as proven by the evidence. Table 1 shows the number of child abuse cases reported during the first nine months of the last three years, according to the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development in Malaysia (Free Malaysia Today, 4th June, 2021).

The decrease in cases in 2020 (when COVID-19 first began) is postulated to be due to underreporting, not because of an actual decrease in abuse. This is due to the lockdown measures which allow child abuse cases to be hidden from the public eye. Before this, schools played an integral role in detecting suspected abuse cases and reporting them to the authorities for further investigation. This decrement in the number of reported cases is also observed in other countries, such as Brazil (Borges et al., 2021). With most studies showing that the incidence of child abuse is ever prevalent during this pandemic, one can expect that the actual number of cases in Malaysia has increased compared to pre-pandemic levels.

Table 1 Number of Child Abuse Cases in Malaysia, 2018-2020.

Type of Abuse/Year	2018	2019	2020
Physical abuse	1703	1571	1120
Emotional abuse	124	113	131
Sexual abuse	1705	1865	1373

Neglect	2046	2521	1251
Total	5578	6061	3875

Physical Abuse

Numerous studies have reported an increase in the incidence of physical abuse among children spanning several countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. One such study was a retrospective cohort from the UK, which discovered an increase in the incidence of abusive head trauma (AHT) at the Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Foundation Trust during the first month in which a total lockdown was instituted throughout the country (Sidpra et al., 2020). There were ten reported instances of AHT, representing an increase of approximately 1493 per cent compared to the number of cases during the same month for the past three years. Upon radiological examination, it was found that most children (60%), whose ages ranged from 17 days to 13 months, suffered from a subdural haemorrhage. Other radiologic findings include cerebral enema, parenchymal contusion, skull fractures, subarachnoid haemorrhage, and extracranial fractures. A similar observational study was conducted in Maryland, United States, where there was twice as much incidence of injury cases secondary to physical child abuse (PCA) at a level I paediatric trauma centre during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to the year before (Kovler et al., 2020). All the reported injuries were caused by blunt trauma, resulting in scalp or face contusions, which accounted for most cases, followed by skull fractures, intracranial haemorrhage, and long bone fractures.

Another study in Germany reported that there was a 29.1 per cent increment of physical abuse relative to pre-COVID pandemic levels amongst 57 parents based on a representative survey conducted on 1024 parents in August 2020 (10). Another survey was conducted in Egypt in March 2020 amongst 1118 parents (Calvano et al., 2021). Regarding physical abuse, approximately 483 (43.2%) of the respondents physically abused their children during the study. These include shaking a child of fewer than two years old, kicking, choking, smothering, beating up, and threatening a child with weapons such as a gun or a knife.

Finally, a similar trend is also observed in another cross-sectional study conducted in the United States from mid-April to mid-May of 2020 (Abokresha et al., 2021). This study involved 342 parents and assessed the degree of psychological and physical abuse among respondents toward their children. This study reported that 61 (17.8%) of the parents involved had physically abused their

children a week into the COVID-19 pandemic through activities ranging from corporal punishment to severe assault.

Psychological/emotional abuse

Several studies reported the prevalence of psychological abuse. One study includes a survey conducted in the United States involving 405 parents (Lawson et al., 2020). Their findings indicated that 24.9 per cent of the respondents frequently yelled or screamed at their children during the pandemic. In comparison, 12.6 per cent indicated that they used harsh words towards their children more often, both of which are forms of verbal aggression, which is a part of psychological abuse.

In a study from Germany, out of 1024 parents, 332 (32.4%) reported occurrences of verbal or emotional abuse during the pandemic, with a 42.3% increment from pre-COVID-19 levels, while 82 respondents (8.0%) reported occurrence of non-verbal emotional abuse with an increment of 55.4% from pre-pandemic levels (Calvano et al., 2021). In Egypt, 88.7 per cent of the children partaking in the study experienced psychological aggression, including being threatened, shouted at, insulted, or wishing by their parents that they were never born (Abokresha et al., 2021). Finally, another study from the United States concluded that 163 (47.7%) of 342 parents were reported to be involved in psychological maltreatment of their children during a week into the COVID-19 pandemic (Lawson et al., 2020).

Sexual abuse

Cases of child sexual abuse have also been reported to increase throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. One such instance is a study conducted at the Paediatric Medical Emergency Department of the Children's Hospital of Rabat, Morocco, during the lockdown period from March 30 to June 2020 (Mekaoui et al., 2021). This study reported that 14 children who were victims of sexual abuse attended the emergency department for consultation, representing an increase of up to 2.3 times the number of cases in 2019 during the same period. Most of the victims were under the age of 13, with seven victims under the age of five, and male victims accounted for half of the instances seen. The child's parents and extended relatives were the most common perpetrators of child maltreatment. Three of the cases reported an incidence of sexual penetration. Besides that, in Uganda, it was reported in March 2020 that sexual abuse was the third most common form of child abuse, accounting for 20.1 percent of all instances (98 percent of the victims being girls and 17 percent of the perpetrators being family

members) (Sserwanja et al., 2020). In addition, according to a recent report by Save the Children (a children's charity in Uganda), 60% of the respondents observed increased sexual violence against children since the lockdown started.

Neglect

Neglect occurs when parents or caretakers fail to provide a child with basic needs, such as food, shelter, education, and emotional needs. There is an increase in children being neglected during this pandemic. One longitudinal study specifically researched the prevalence of child neglect in Quebec, Canada, beginning on 29th April 2020 (Bérubé et al., 2020). This study involving 414 parents determined whether the adult in the household has fulfilled three forms of the child's needs: cognitive and affection needs, security needs, and basic care needs amongst children of different age groups. It was discovered that during the COVID-19 lockdown, parents of older children (specifically teenagers aged 13-17) reported experiencing more difficulty ensuring their child's needs in all three domains were met than parents of younger children.

Some of the previous studies reviewed the occurrence of neglect, such as the study from Germany (Calvano et al., 2021). This time, out of the 1024 respondents, 157 (15.33%) reported occurrences of emotional neglect, while 96 (9.38%) reported supervisory neglect. The increment relative to pre-pandemic levels is 42.3 per cent and 40.8 per cent for both types of neglect, respectively. Finally, in Uganda, the UCHL reported that in March 2020, 52.6 per cent of all violence cases were reported concerning child neglect, with girls being the most affected (Sserwanja et al., 2020).

Factors associated with increased incidence of child abuse

Several factors contributed to the increment in the prevalence of child abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, according to the studies, the most significant element contributing to this phenomenon is heightened parental stress during the pandemic, which is impacted by other factors such as psychological effects, lockdown implications, and financial difficulties.

Stress has been shown to increase the severity of child maltreatment. Stress can cause cognitive, physical, and emotional weariness, putting undue strain on the parent-child bond. Parents are more inclined to choose harsh parenting as stress levels rise, increasing the risk of child maltreatment and adverse childhood experiences (ACE) (Calvano et al., 2021). Given COVID-19's novelty, it is likely to be experienced as a severe stressor for many parents and children worldwide. New

evidence suggests that parents' perceptions of COVID-19's influence are linked to increased parental stress and, as a result, a higher probability of harsh parenting (Brown et al., 2020). Another study found that parents with high levels of parental stress connected to parent-child interactions responded less to their children's cognitive and affective needs, raising the risk of child neglect (Lafantaisie et al., 2020). The pandemic has also led to parental psychological issues, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In one study, it was discovered that there was a strong association between the psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on parents and the practising violence against their children (Abokresha et al., 2021). Children to parents with probable PTSD have a nine times higher risk of being exposed to violent discipline than those to parents with no/mild psychological impact.

Although numerous public health measures have been implemented to limit COVID-19 transmission since its first appearance, they may have unintended consequences that worsen parent-perceived stress and poor parenting. Consequently, families are more likely to be socially isolated, unable to access supportive and educational services, and endure financial hardships, all of which can worsen stress in many households. Parents who must choose between limited social interactions and staying at home with their children may be especially vulnerable during this time since studies show that constant close contact under stress is a risk factor for aggressive behaviour and violence (Marques et al., 2020).

In addition, some families are facing other compounding problems, such as working from home while caring for and educating their children when schools and childcare centres are closed. Given the importance of school and childcare providers in detecting child abuse and neglect, children who were previously identified as at risk in these settings may be more vulnerable to maltreatment as they spend most of their time at home with their perpetrators, which for a majority of the cases are their parents (Ghosh et al., 2020).

Some families are also experiencing financial strains due to the changing economy and increasing unemployment prevalent during this pandemic. The ripple effects of this pandemic's economic impact, including perceived financial difficulty, poverty, and food insecurity, all of which are linked to child maltreatment, can raise the likelihood of child abuse in various ways (Calvano et al., 2021). For example, one study found that children of parents who experienced job loss related to the COVID-19 pandemic were five times more likely to be psychologically maltreated during the pandemic (Lawson et al., 2020).

In addition, the risk of physical abuse among families with a job or financial losses increased. In certain countries, economic deficits have led to the depletion of basic needs and commodities. In order to ensure a continuous supply to survive the pandemic, some children even exploit themselves, resorting to sexual and child labour, further increasing the risk of child sexual abuse amongst these desperate children (Sserwanja et al., 2020; Bérubé et al., 2020).

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted human life of all ages. Movement Control Order (MCO) was implemented starting on 18 March 2020 in repetitive phases and was later known as Control Movement Control Order (CMCO). It was initially thought that the implementation of the MCO that caused the lockdown would encourage better bonding among family members as they have more time together. Perhaps this was only in the initial stage, as the pandemic worsened with repetitive lockdowns instructed by the government to break the chain of infection. This accumulated stress in individuals and resulted in stress. Particularly among families with issues like financial and loss of job. This review noted that the main finding was increased child abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic, with stress as the commonly reported cause. Therefore, it is worth discussing the effects of the increasing abuse to indicate the need to take prompt action by the stakeholders and to develop strategies to halt the escalation of child abuse.

Short-term effects of child abuse

The short-term effects of child abuse are felt instantaneously during the COVID-19 pandemic. The age of children subjected to abuse and neglect determines how they react to the abuse. Children as young as toddlers and pre-schoolers may begin to wet the bed and show signs of acute anxiety. In contrast, those in the adolescent age may begin to experiment with drugs and become antagonistic towards family members.

The first short-term effect of child abuse is the development of depression and anxiety (Beitchman et al., 1991). A child of any age and gender can experience depression and anxiety due to the abuse. However, it is usually associated with a higher prevalence amongst teenage girls and can be intermixed with guilt and anger. The altered sleep cycle, typically affecting pre-schoolers (Noll et al., 2006), is the known effect. Abusive behaviour may cause the child to develop nightmares, sleep disturbances, and hypervigilance which will diminish the overall

sleep quality and quantity. Sleep deprivation can also contribute to and exacerbate any associated negative emotions mentioned earlier.

Besides that, child abuse can also lead to regressive behaviours among children (Sadowski et al., 2021). It occurs when a child regresses to an earlier developmental stage emotionally, socially, or behaviourally, such as wanting a pacifier even after being weaned off. This phenomenon can occur at any age but is commonly observed in children aged three to four upon witnessing domestic violence within their household. Other than that, pre-schoolers subjected to abuse and neglect can develop separation-anxiety disorder (Sadowski et al., 2021). Constantly following a caretaker around the house and physical sensations like stomach aches and dizziness whenever a separation is expected are common presenting signs.

In addition, victims of child abuse may experience low self-esteem and self-worth due to their ordeal (<https://www.betterhelp.com/advice/abuse/12-long-and-short-term-effects-of-child-abuse>, 1st June, 2021). This occurs when a child internalises the abuse and comes to believe that they are the reason behind the acts of abuse or that they deserve to be abused in the place. If not adequately ameliorated, such feelings of incompetence and shame can carry into adulthood, becoming a long-term effect of child abuse.

Finally, one of the short-term effects of abuse, particularly towards teenagers, is engagement in risky behaviours (PubMed, 2021). Adolescents may start abusing drugs or engaging in unsafe sexual behaviours to cope with the emotional stress that comes with abuse. Teenage boys also tend to display aggressive behaviours, such as involving themselves in bullying or fighting with others in the school.

Long-term effects of child abuse

Child abuse has three significant long-term repercussions: physical, psychological, and behavioural. Even though the COVID-19 pandemic will someday come to an end, the long-term effects of abuse towards these children will only begin to show its true colours, causing relentless amounts of suffering to them in the future. The first long-term effect of child abuse is physical health problems (Afifi et al., 2016). Some physical effects of abuse can be instantaneously seen in victims, such as head injury and trauma, while others will only manifest over months and years.

However, child abuse victims are more likely to acquire a variety of long-term or future health problems, including malnutrition, hypertension, and diabetes. They are also in danger of having their brain growth delayed or improperly developed in areas like the amygdala and hippocampus, which will disrupt their emotional processing, memory, and learning. Other negative neurological manifestations of child abuse are impairment in cognitive skills and executive functioning. These functions include working memory, planning, and problem-solving. These functions' damage will result in learning disabilities and reduced academic performance, affecting the victim's future education and career prospects.

Besides physical health, child abuse and neglect can also cause long-term psychological effects (Heim et al., 2010). These usually manifest in psychiatric disorders such as depression, generalised anxiety disorder, borderline personality disorder (BPD), and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Studies suggest that childhood trauma from parental abuse will cause stunted or impaired neurological development, rendering victims vulnerable to the disorders mentioned earlier. Extra attention should also be paid to depressive patients with a history of child abuse, as some researchers have pointed out that these individuals are less responsive to antidepressant treatment.

Besides predisposing victims to debilitating psychiatric conditions, childhood abuse also exposes them to the possibility of adopting substance abuse to cope with the stress and anguish of said abuse (Cicchetti & Handley, 2019). This behaviour is commonly seen in adolescents who are more prone to partake in other risky behaviours and amongst children whose parents are substance abusers. Furthermore, physical abuse during the first five years of life was connected to a much higher chance of developing substance dependence later in life, according to a study that tracked numerous child abuse victims until they were 24 years old. This is unfortunate as it is detrimental to the victims. However, also their children as well, since victims of child abuse tend to be abusive towards their children, creating an endless cycle of abuse that will cease to end unless treatment is instituted.

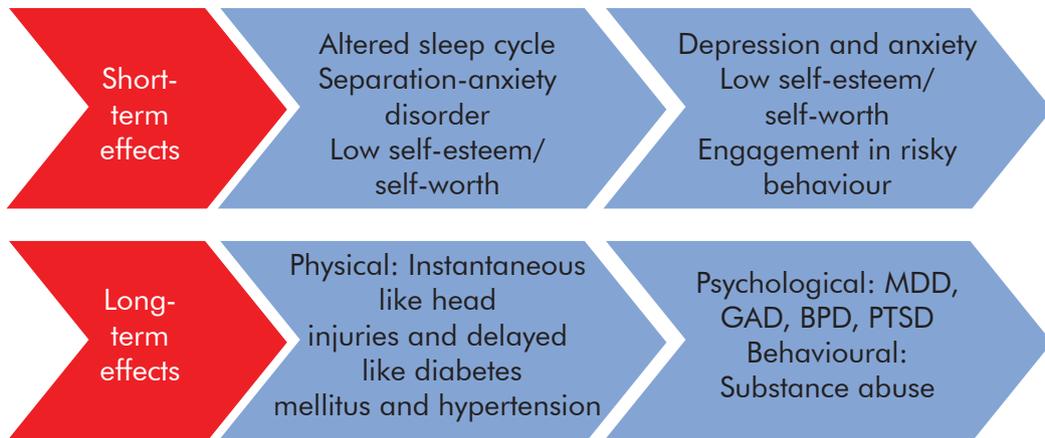


Figure 1 Short and long-term effects of child abuse towards the victims

Conclusion

In conclusion, if left untreated and undetected, child abuse can affect the future generation by leaving them with permanent physical and/or mental scars. Thus, numerous critical steps, such as the deployment of alternative child abuse detection tools, enhanced parental financial support for at-risk families as what has been done by the Malaysian Government, and improvements in case detection, referral services, and management of the multidiscipline team. Furthermore, a guideline and more vital legislation are strongly recommended as this will combat child abuse during this pandemic and prepare us for future outbreaks. In addition, further studies are essential to explain further on this life-threatening issue.

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