The role of adverse childhood experiences as determinants of non-suicidal self-injury among children and adolescents referred to community and inpatient mental health settings

Philip Baidena,⁎, Shannon L. Stewartb, Barbara Fallona

a Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, 246 Bloor Street West, Toronto, ON M5S 1V4, Canada
b Faculty of Education, Western University, 1137 Western Road, London, ON N6G 1G7, Canada

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ABSTRACT

The objectives of this study were to examine the prevalence of, and determine the effect of adverse childhood experiences on non-suicidal self-injury among children and adolescents referred to community and inpatient mental health settings. Data for this study were obtained from the interRAI Child and Youth Mental Health dataset. A total of 2038 children and adolescents aged 8–18 years (M = 12.49; SD = 2.88, 61.1% males) were analyzed. Binary logistic regression was fitted to identify predictors of non-suicidal self-injury as a function of adverse childhood experiences, depression, and social support while simultaneously controlling for age, gender, type of patient, legal guardianship, marital status of parents/caregivers, history of foster family placement, and mental health diagnoses. Of the 2038 children and adolescents examined, 592 (29%) of this clinical sample engaged in non-suicidal self-injury. In the multivariate logistic regression model, children and adolescents who were physically abused had 49% higher odds of engaging in non-suicidal self-injury and children and adolescents who were sexually abused had 60% higher odds of engaging in non-suicidal self-injury, when compared to their non-abused counterparts. Other predictors of non-suicidal self-injury include: older age, female gender, inpatient status, depression, attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder, disruptive behavior disorder, and mood disorders. Children and adolescents who had some form of social support had a 26% decrease in the odds of engaging in non-suicidal self-injury. Assessment procedures for indicators of mental health, particularly among children and adolescents with a history of adverse childhood experiences, should also take into account non-suicidal self-injury. In addition to bolstering social support networks, addressing depression and related emotion regulation skills in childhood may help prevent future non-suicidal self-injury behaviors.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI), which is generally defined as “the direct, deliberate destruction of one’s own body tissue in the absence of suicidal intent” (Nock & Favazza, 2009, p. 9), is now recognized globally as a major public health issue, with up to 70% of children and adolescents with mental health problems engaging in NSSI (Kaess et al., 2013; Thomassin, Shaffer, Madden, & Lodzi, 2016; Weismoore & Esposito-Smythers, 2010; Zetterqvist, Lundh, & Svedin, 2014). Historically, NSSI has been considered primarily as a symptom of borderline personality disorder (BPD) such that in the third edition of the Diagnostic and

⁎ Corresponding author.
E-mail address: philip.baiden@mail.utoronto.ca (P. Baiden).

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The extant literature has found a history of ACEs to be associated with increased likelihood of a number of negative outcomes later in life, including anxiety and depression (Coohy, Dirks-Bihun, Renner, & Baller, 2014; Greger, Myhre, Lydersen, & Jozefiak, 2015; Larkin, Felitti, & Anda, 2014), suicide attempt (Dube et al., 2001), alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drug use (Braciszewski & Colby, 2015; Traube, James, Zhang, & Landsverk, 2012), poor self-esteem (Arslan, 2016), and risky sexual behavior (Anda et al., 2006; Noll, Haralson, Butler, & Shenk, 2011). Other longitudinal studies (e.g., Lewis et al., 2011), systematic reviews and meta-analyses (Agnew-Blais & Danese, 2016; Maniglio, 2010, 2012) have also found a strong relationship between ACEs and mental health problems. Using data from the longitudinal study of child abuse and neglect related investigations (Trocmé et al., 2010). According to the CIS-2008, more than two-thirds of the substantiated child maltreatment investigations were related to either witnessing domestic violence (34%) or neglect (34%), followed by physical abuse (20%), emotional abuse (9%), and sexual abuse (3%).

One consistent factor that has been identified as a significant predictor of NSSI among adolescents is adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) (Franzke, Wabnitz, & Catani, 2015; Glassman, Weierich, Hooley, Deliberto, & Nock, 2007; Gratz, 2006; Kaess et al., 2013; Zetterqvist et al., 2014). Yates (2009) observed that as much as 80% of those who engaged in NSSI reported having a history of ACEs. ACEs refer to distressing and/or traumatic events that occur during childhood, such as emotional, physical, and sexual abuse; emotional and physical neglect; caregiver risk factors such as of addiction or substance use, mental illness, incarceration, separation or divorce; and violent treatment of the mother (Saul et al., 2014).

Estimates based on data from the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS) suggest that the number of children and adolescents with investigated incidents of child abuse and neglect in Canada is on the rise (Trocmé et al., 2010). For instance, an estimated 135,261 investigated incidents of child abuse and neglect were conducted in Canada in 1998 representing a rate of 21.57 per 1000 children investigations. By 2008, this rate has increased to 39.16 investigations per 1000 children (235,842 child abuse and neglect related investigations) (Trocmé et al., 2010). According to the CIS-2008, more than two-thirds of the substantiated child maltreatment investigations were related to either witnessing domestic violence (34%) or neglect (34%), followed by physical abuse (20%), emotional abuse (9%), and sexual abuse (3%).

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