



## Physical and emotional abuse of primary school children by teachers

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### ABSTRACT

The existence of child abuse is unfortunately a reality of contemporary society. Although various organizations and researchers have been making progress in the struggle against abuse, it has not been decisively dealt with thus far. Most of the research on abuse has focused on the abuse of children in their family environment.

**Objective:** The aim of the present study was the investigation of abuse in the school environment and the effects of the gender and school grade of pupils, as well as the gender of teachers on the various forms of abuse.

**Methods:** The study utilized a questionnaire with a 5-point rating scale, with questions concerning physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect, which was completed in class by a sample of schoolchildren. The sample consisted of 1,339 pupils in the 4th, 5th, and 6th grade of primary school in the Republic of Cyprus, who lived in both urban and rural areas. Two pilot studies were conducted initially to ensure the appropriateness of the questionnaire. Permission to conduct the study was gained by the headmasters of the schools, and authorization to participate in the study was granted by the students' parents.

**Results:** More than half (52.9%) of the pupils reported neglect, almost a third (33.1%) reported emotional abuse, and almost one tenth (9.6%) reported physical abuse. The results of the statistical analysis revealed statistically significant differences between the 2 genders ( $p < .001$ ), with boys being the most vulnerable group, with regards to all forms of abuse, but no significant differences between the 3 grades and the teachers' gender ( $p > .05$ ). There were no significant differences between the 2 genders, the 3 grades and the teachers' gender with regards to the frequency of any form of abuse ( $p > .05$ ).

**Conclusions:** The gender of the pupils seems to be related to abuse, since more boys than girls reported being victims of abuse, while abuse is not depended on the school grade, or the teacher's gender. The findings from this study may justify some concern on behalf of the Ministry of Education, but also from educators and parents in the Republic of Cyprus.

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### Introduction

The term "abuse" incorporates the sum of active or passive actions that an adult inflicts upon a child which is under their care, that jeopardize the child's emotional and intellectual development, and social adjustment (Minimata Zois, 2006). There are many forms of abuse but they are usually distinguished into four categories (a) physical: defined as the intentional (non-accidental) production of a physical injury. Bruises, scratches, burns, broken bones, lacerations, as well as repeated "mishaps," but also rough treatment that could cause physical injury, are the results of physical abuse; (b) sexual: defined as a form of abuse that refers to the involuntary participation of a child in a sexual act aimed toward the physical gratification or the financial profit of the person committing the act; (c) emotional: defined as the production of psychological and social

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deficits in the growth of a child as a result of erroneous behavior such as for example loud yelling, coarse and rude attitude, inattention, harsh criticism, denigration of the child's personality; (d) neglect: defined as the lack of attention from the people surrounding a child, and the non-provision of the relevant and adequate necessities for the child's survival. In this case, children are lacking in attention, love, and nurture (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 1997).

Child abuse is a serious social problem as well as a matter of primary importance for public health (Theodore et al., 2005). This is because some of the results of studies related to child abuse are alarming. One study that took place in England in the late 1990s astonishingly found that 97% of 4-year-old children had been subjected to physical abuse and that in fact most of them had been experiencing this abuse more than once a week (Leach, 1999). In a study conducted by Widom (1993) it was reported that more than a million children were experiencing some sort of abuse in the USA at the time. Although the percentages of abuse seem to decrease as the age of the children increases, a report from the American Gallup Organization showed that 40% of 13-year-old children are abused, and even children as old as 15 have been reportedly abused. Unfortunately, it is also a known fact that the cases of abuse registered by social services of the various countries represent only a portion of the actual cases of children who have suffered abuse (Theodore & Runyan, 1999).

According to the Administration for Children and Families (2006), most of the factors that contribute to abuse are related to the child itself, its family, as well as the social environment. Evidence from other studies shows that age and gender are also directly related to incidents of abuse. It is easier for younger children to become subject to neglect, and the risk of sexual abuse increases with age (Mraovick & Wilson, 1999). Also, the personality of the child (i.e., short temper, aggressiveness, rude behavior etc.) may also be considered provocative by the perpetrator of abuse, driving them toward inappropriate actions (Administration for Children and Families, 2006).

The majority of studies locate the problem in the immediate family environment. It is however known that the problem of abuse is not only limited to a person's family but also to the broader environment in which they function. Problems of abuse by teachers within the school environment of children are often encountered, usually by parents, but unfortunately very little attention has been paid to the victimization of primary school pupils by their teachers. One of the first such attempts was made by Olweus (1999), who, in 1985, investigated abuse toward school children by their teachers on a sample of 2,400 pupils, and reported that about 2% of the pupils could be seen as being bullied by a teacher. An earlier related study, focusing only on emotional abuse within the school environment, was carried out by Krugman and Krugman in 1984. They identified 17 elementary-school pupils who were emotionally abused by their teacher. Noller and Piekarska (1991, cited in Piekarska, 2000), claim that similar research conducted in the 1980s in Polish educational institutions such as kindergartens, preschools, primary, secondary, and boarding schools, revealed that child abuse and neglect was a widespread phenomenon and was manifested through a variety of teachers' attitudes and behaviors toward students. Youssef, Attia, and Kamel (1998) investigated corporal punishment in the middle and high schools of Egypt, and found that 80% of the boys and 62% of the girls reported cases of corporal punishment by their teachers over the period of 1 year. Benbenishtry, Zeira, and Astor (2002) investigated abuse in the school setting in Israel on a sample of 10,410 pupils, grades 7–11, by the educational staff, and found that almost a quarter of them reported emotional maltreatment, almost a fifth reported being victims of at least 1 type of physical form of maltreatment, and 8.2% reported at least 1 sexually inappropriate behavior by a staff member. Eckenrode, Laird, and Doris (1993) identified 1,239 children with at least 1 substantial report of maltreatment at some time in their lives, in a study they conducted in a small city in New York State during the 1987–1988 academic year, on 8,569 children from kindergarten through grade 12. Although this represented 14.5% of the population, most of these reported cases involved neglect rather than physical or sexual abuse.

Since many children closely interact with teachers for 9 months out of the year, from age 5 until age 12, the main question that arises is whether, and to what extent, there is child abuse in schools by teachers. The aim of this study therefore has been the investigation of the phenomenon of child abuse within the school environment, through the collection of data from primary school children from grades 4, 5, and 6 (ages 9–12), concerning their experiences of abuse by their teachers. The research hypotheses were that abuse is related to the gender of the pupil, their school grade, and the gender of the teacher, and that the frequency of abuse is also related to these factors. Specifically, it was hypothesized that boys would be more liable for abuse than girls, that there would be more incidents of abuse among older children of both genders than younger ones, and that male teachers would be more likely to abuse their students than female teachers.

## Methods and procedures

The selection of schools was made through a list which is on the website of the Ministry of Education ([www.moec.gov.cy/pdf/public.primary.pdf](http://www.moec.gov.cy/pdf/public.primary.pdf)). Using this list, schools were selected from all towns and prefectures of Cyprus, provided there were sufficient distances between them, in an effort to represent as much of the country as possible. The researchers contacted the headmasters via telephone and asked for permission to enter their schools. Those headmasters who replied positively were visited by the researchers for further discussions in order for them to secure their permission to conduct the study. It is worth mentioning that the researchers were greeted with distrust and suspicion with regards to the purpose of the study, since most headmasters believed that it was a mistake on behalf of the Ministry to permit such a study, as it could potentially disrupt the normal functioning of the schools.

The sample consisted of 1,339 pupils in the 4th, 5th, and 6th grade of primary school in the Republic of Cyprus, who lived in both urban and rural areas. Of the sample, 653 were boys, 686 were girls, 382 were in the 4th grade (ages 9–10), 458 were in the 5th grade (ages 10–11), and 499 were in the 6th grade (ages 11–12). Of these pupils, 483 had a male teacher,

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