



## Research article

# Emotional abuse in childhood and suicidality: The mediating roles of re-victimization and depressive symptoms in adulthood



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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of emotional abuse in childhood, along with physical and sexual abuse, on suicidality in adulthood, and whether and how emotional abuse and depressive symptoms in adulthood mediate the association between the childhood emotional abuse and suicidality. The data were drawn from the 2012 Korean General Social Survey, a nationally representative survey with a multistage area proportional probability sampling method. Random effects regression and the Sobel test were used to analyze the relationships between childhood emotional abuse and suicidality and the mediating effects. Random effects models showed that emotional abuse in childhood was positively associated with suicidality in adulthood, even after controlling for physical and sexual abuse in childhood. Emotional abuse and depressive symptoms in adulthood mediated the association between emotional abuse in childhood and suicidality. Depressive symptoms also mediated between emotional abuse in adulthood and suicidality. These findings suggest that emotional abuse in childhood has indirect harmful effects on suicidality in adulthood. It increases suicidality through higher occurrences of re-victimization and depressive symptoms in adulthood. Practitioners and policy makers should recognize that experiences of emotional abuse in childhood may result in re-victimization in adulthood, which, in turn, lead to suicidality. Early intervention programs to reduce the likelihood of experiencing re-victimization may be critical for people exposed to emotional abuse in childhood.

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## Introduction

Childhood abuse has been identified as an important predictor of suicidality, including suicidal ideation and behaviors (e.g., Dube et al., 2001), as well as mental health outcomes such as depressive symptoms and anxiety in adulthood (Crow, Cross, Powers, & Bradley, 2014; see Lindert et al., 2014 for a review). Childhood abuse such as physical, emotional, and sexual abuse is positively associated with suicidality in adulthood (Dube et al., 2001; Jeon et al., 2009; Friestad, Ase-Bente, & Kjelsberg, 2014; Harford, Yi, & Grant, 2014) as well as prior to adulthood (Sigfusdottir, Asgeirsdottir, Gudjonsson, & Sigurdsson, 2013). The previous studies have suggested that the deleterious effects of childhood abuse can be sustained across decades of life.

The long-term influence of childhood abuse on suicidality can be explained by the stress process paradigm (Pearlin, 1989) and life course perspectives (Dannefer, 1987, 2003; O'Rand, 1996, 2003). Childhood adversities, including highly stressful life events, may have deleterious effects that do not diminish with time, but are rather sustained through the life course by modifying and affecting developmental and psychological processes, which in turn may encourage psychological, physical,

and/or behavioral manifestations of stress (Pearlin, 1989; Pearlin, Schieman, Fazio, & Meersman, 2005). Moreover, childhood adversity can lead to exposure to additional adversity later in life, with the effects of childhood adversity thereby sustained and accumulated over time (Dannefer, 1987, 2003; O'Rand, 1996, 2003; Pearlin et al., 2005). It is probable that childhood abuse leads to additional adversity such as interpersonal difficulties, decreased ability to form social attachments, and even re-victimization when abuse causes harmful effects on the developmental and psychological processes of exposed children.

Thus, childhood abuse can be a lifelong predictor of suicidality. However, questions remain regarding the relationship between childhood abuse and suicidality. First, relatively little is known about the effects of emotional abuse in childhood on suicidality in adulthood and underlying mechanisms. Compared with physical and sexual abuse (e.g., Goldney, Grande, & Taylor, 2009; Joiner et al., 2007; Martin, Bergen, Richardson, Roeger, & Allison, 2004; Ystgaard, Hestetum, Loeb, & Mehlum, 2004), researchers have paid relatively little attention to emotional abuse (Crow et al., 2014), perhaps because emotional abuse has been regarded as less harmful and critical than physical or sexual abuse. This distinction is supported by studies showing nonsignificant effects of emotional abuse on suicidality across different life stages (Kwok, Chai, & He, 2013; Ystgaard et al., 2004).

The mechanism between emotional abuse in childhood and suicidality has not been systematically examined. The pathway through which emotional abuse in childhood affects suicidality in adulthood should be explored. Childhood abuse may have long-term effects by modifying and affecting the psychological and developmental processes of exposed persons, and may lead to additional adversity over the life course. Investigating and identifying mediating factors between childhood emotional abuse and suicidality in adulthood would help understand how childhood emotional abuse can have long-lasting and far-reaching effects.

Childhood abuse increases the likelihood of mental health problems in adulthood by damaging emotion regulation (Crow et al., 2014) and self-esteem (Stein, Leslie, & Nyamati, 2002) and increasing startle reactivity (Jovanovic et al., 2009), which may lead to problems in social functioning. Because childhood abuse is not only harmful to self-esteem (Stein et al., 2002), but also to the developmental processes of learning to trust and form stable relationships with others (Dimitrova et al., 2010), people who are exposed to childhood abuse may experience additional adversity regarding social relationships in adulthood.

In this context, this study examines two potential mediators between emotional abuse in childhood and suicidality in adulthood: emotional abuse in adulthood (i.e., re-victimization) and depressive symptoms. Because childhood abuse can have harmful effects on social functioning as well as psychological processes, individuals exposed to emotional abuse in childhood may be more likely to be emotionally abused in adulthood as well. Although some studies have explored re-victimization in adulthood in terms of physical and sexual abuse (Alexander, 2009; Coid et al., 2001; Irwin, 1999; Stein et al., 2002) and emotional abuse (Chiu et al., 2013), there have been, to the best of the author's knowledge, no studies examining the re-victimization of victims of childhood emotional abuse and its mediating effects on suicidality.

Depressive symptoms may also be an important mediator as a psychological outcome affected by childhood abuse (Brodsky & Stanley, 2001). If childhood abuse leaves indelible imprints on the psychological processes of exposed children, it likely also has a significant effect on suicidality through psychological status. Although depressive symptoms have been identified as an important predictor of suicidality (Chabrol, Rodgers, & Rousseau, 2007) and also as an outcome affected by childhood emotional abuse (Crow et al., 2014), the role of depressive symptoms as a mediator between childhood emotional abuse and suicidality remains unclear. Childhood sexual abuse has been shown to have significant effects on both depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation (Goldney et al., 2009), but the mediating role of depressive symptoms has not been examined.

In contrast to Western societies, child abuse has relatively recently been recognized as a social problem in Korea. The Korean government ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991 (Kim, 2007). Child abuse, mainly physical abuse by parents, has been publicly reported in Korea since the mid-1990s, and the first law prohibiting child abuse, the Special Law for Family Violence Criminal Prohibition and the Protection of the Victim Act, was established in 1998 (Hahm & Guterman, 2001). The Korean Child Welfare Act (article 2), which defines child abuse as doing "harm on a child's health or welfare or physical, mental and sexual violence or cruel acts that are likely to impede normal growth of a child" including abandonment and nonintervention, was established in the year 2000. Due to the influence of Confucian family values, which give parents higher prestige regarding child discipline (Hahm & Guterman, 2001), physical punishment by parents has been often considered to be appropriate discipline for improving child behaviors, rather than abuse (Yang, 2009).

Interestingly, parents are not the only perpetrators of childhood abuse in Korea. Abuse by teachers and peers are also frequently observed in Korea (Kim, Kim, & Park, 2000; Lee & Kim, 2011). According to Confucian values, teachers operate similarly to parents in terms of child discipline, leading to relatively high prevalence of physical and emotional abuse by teachers in Korea. Physical and emotional abuse by older male schoolmates and peers also often occur in Korean society (Lee & Kim, 2011), which might be associated with the age-based hierarchical nature of Korean culture.

This study examines the effects of emotional abuse in childhood on suicidality in adulthood, and whether and how emotional abuse and depressive symptoms in adulthood mediate between childhood emotional abuse and suicidality. Although child abuse is now openly discussed more than ever in Korea, the discussion has focused on what are perceived to be more severe forms of child abuse, such as sexual abuse and physical abuse, rather than emotional abuse (Ju & Lee, 2010). However, emotional abuse in childhood has been shown to have critical effects on suicidality among Korean medical students, more so than physical or sexual abuse (Jeon et al., 2009). Little is known about whether emotional abuse in childhood has significant

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