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Development and initial validation of a scale to measure emotional abuse among school children aged 13–15 years in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Objective: To develop a scale to measure emotional abuse among school children aged 13–15 years in Sri Lanka that can be used in field settings.

Method: Emotional abuse was defined based on available literature. Review of literature and discussions with a panel identified 85 items indicating abusive behaviors. Content validity and social acceptability were achieved by getting the views of this same panel and parents, respectively. Item analysis and assessment of validity were carried out based on the responses to the draft instrument by 105 children aged 13–15 years attending a school in an urban slum area. The test–retest reliability of the scale was assessed using the responses from 144 students from a different school. Criterion validity was established by comparing the independent assessments of a psychiatrist for the presence or absence of emotional abuse with the respective scores of the children on the scale.

Results: The scale developed to assess emotional abuse included 46 items having a Cronbach alpha of .89. The test–retest reliability was .73. A cutoff score of 95 was identified at a sensitivity of 76.9% and a specificity of 51.4%.

Conclusions: A scale that had a satisfactory level of reliability and validity was socially acceptable, which could be used in school settings in Sri Lanka was developed to enable identification of emotional abuse among school children aged 13–15.

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Keywords: Emotional abuse; Development of a scale; Reliability; Validity

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Introduction

Abuse of children is found in all societies, to varying degrees and in many forms. Of the different types of child abuse, most research has focused on the areas of sexual and physical abuses. Published literature on emotional abuse is limited and could be attributed to the fact that it is the most difficult form of abuse to identify. However some researchers have highlighted the long-term negative consequences of emotional abuse (Skuse, 1989).

To conduct epidemiological research on emotional abuse of children in different country settings, it is necessary to have a practical method of ascertaining the presence or absence of emotional abuse, which can be used in field situations. Clinical assessments to identify emotional abuse involving large numbers of children may pose many practical problems and may not be feasible.

Several study instruments have been used to identify emotional abuse among children in Western countries. These include: Child Abuse and Trauma Scale (Sanders & Becker-Lausen, 1995), Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (Bernstein et al., 1994), and Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, Hamby, Finklehor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998). The use of these same instruments in Asian societies including Sri Lanka may not be appropriate due to the differences in the cultural practices in bringing up children. It has also been reported that children in the “teen years” experienced the greatest amount of emotional abuse (Jones & McCurdy, 1992). This study aimed to develop a valid and reliable instrument to assess emotional abuse in children taking into consideration the 13–15-year age group and the cultural differences in child rearing evident in Asian countries like Sri Lanka.

Method

The steps detailed below were followed in developing the scale: define emotional abuse, generate a list of abusive behaviors of parents and care givers, achieve content validity, design and pre-test the draft scale, assess social acceptability, analyze items to be included in the final scale, develop a composite score, test the validity of the scale, identify a cutoff point and assess test–retest reliability.

Emotional abuse was defined by identifying the different definitions used by researchers through a literature search and finalized following discussions with pediatricians, psychiatrists, child psychologists, chairman of the Child Protection Authority and Police and Legal officers working in the field of child abuse. The focus was on defining emotional abuse in such a manner that it could be identified before sequelae occurred in the child. A universal definition was agreed upon taking this into consideration.

Generation of abusive behaviors: Abusive behaviors of parents and caregivers to be included in the scale and the different sub categories of emotional abuse under which these behaviors could be grouped were identified through a literature survey which included perusal of available study instruments. The behaviors identified from this review were pooled together and duplications were removed. Items that were culturally acceptable and appropriate for the age group to be studied were selected and some were modified according to cultural appropriateness.

Content validity: The initial list containing 38 parental/caregiver behaviors that could cause emotional abuse in children were sent to a panel. In addition to those identified above, a group

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