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Child Abuse & Neglect 31 (2007) 143–159

Child Abuse
& Neglect

Child abuse and AIDS-related knowledge, attitudes and behavior among adolescents in Zambia[☆]

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Received 16 October 2003; received in revised form 20 July 2006; accepted 9 August 2006

Available online 14 February 2007

Abstract

Objective: To research the correlation between physical and sexual abuse by family members and AIDS-related knowledge, attitudes, self-efficacy and behavior among urban and rural adolescents in Zambia.

Sample: The sample comprises 3,360 adolescents, aged 10–19, from urban and rural Zambia; 2,160 of them attended school, while 1,200 of them did not.

Measures: Standardized scales were utilized to assess AIDS-related knowledge, attitudes, and self-efficacy. In addition, the adolescents reported the extent of their engagement in various high-risk behaviors and their lifetime experience of being sexually or physically abused.

Results: As the level of abuse experienced by the adolescents increased, their level of knowledge about HIV/AIDS, tendency to hold positive attitudes toward prevention, and level of self-efficacy regarding HIV/AIDS prevention decreased. Most importantly, when controlling for socio-demographic variables, findings indicate that past abuse was a key factor predicting participation in high-risk behaviors associated with HIV infection.

Conclusion: Physical and sexual abuse of adolescents in Zambia is significantly related to HIV risk behaviors. Future studies should investigate which factors mediate between the experience of abuse and the tendency to engage in risky behaviors.

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Keywords: HIV/AIDS; Adolescents; Child abuse; Sub-Saharan Africa

[☆] The study reported in this paper was supported by a grant from The Netherlands-Israel Development Research Program (NIRP) No: 95-8.

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Empirical data, based on large-scale epidemiological studies, on the rates of child abuse and neglect in Africa are not available (Collings, 2002). Moreover, the existing literature usually refers to South Africa and is based on small and unrepresentative samples. For example, Nadu (2002), who studied abuse experiences among high school students in South Africa, found that almost 20% were victims of parental or guardian sexual abuse, and almost 16% were physically abused. Adolescents raised by a step-parent or in a group home were significantly more likely to experience child abuse. Osagie and Akande (2001) estimated that several million children are abused in Africa annually; however, the number of abused children that are reported to child protective agencies is much smaller.

There is evidence that various mental health and behavioral problems linked with child sexual abuse increase the adolescents' participation in HIV-risk behaviors, and their vulnerability to HIV infection (Bartholow et al., 1994; Briere & Elliott, 1994; D'Angelo, Brown, English, Hein, & Remafedi, 1994; Elze, Auslander, McMillen, Edmond, & Thompson, 2001; Klein & Chao, 1995; Polusny & Follette, 1995; Rotheram-Borus, Mahler, Koopman, & Langabeer, 1996; Stiffman, Dore, Earls, & Cunningham, 1992; Thompson, Potter, Sanderson, & Maibach, 1997; Zierler et al., 1991). Specifically, studies on adolescent girls have shown that child sexual abuse is associated with early initiation of sexual intercourse, a greater number of sexual partners, less likelihood of practicing protective sex, and teenage pregnancy (Lodico & DiClemente, 1994; Nagy, Adcock, & Nagy, 1994). Other studies (Hernandez, Lodico, & DiClemente, 1993) reported that sexually abused boys were more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors, such as alcohol and drug use.

Less is known about the phenomenon of child abuse in Africa in general and its relation to the engagement in HIV risk behaviors in particular. Child abuse within the family or the immediate environment of the child should be discussed within the context of the hardship of living in Africa. In fact, African children and adolescents may suffer not only from intra-familial abuse but also from structural extra-familial neglect and abuse deriving from the conditions in which they live: poverty, war, orphanage, sicknesses, HIV/AIDS, and child labor (for a review see Lachman et al., 2002).

While these extra-familial factors that are related to child abuse and neglect should not be ignored, it is also important to understand the dynamics of intra-familial abuse in Africa. The existing research, however, focuses mostly on child sexual abuse in South Africa (e.g., Nadu, 2002; Nadu & Peltzer, 2000, 2001), and even less is known about this phenomenon in other areas of Africa.

Child maltreatment is categorized as four types of distinct offences: sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and child neglect (Kang, Deren, & Goldstein, 2002). The purpose of this study was to research the relationship between the first two experiences and AIDS-related knowledge, attitudes, and behavior among adolescents (aged 10–19) in Zambia. Thus, unless otherwise stated, the term “child abuse” refers to sexual and physical offenses against children and/or adolescents.

Child abuse and AIDS-related knowledge, attitude and behavior

Studies in the West suggest the existence of a strong connection between having had an experience of child abuse and the tendency to engage in high-risk sexual behaviors. Such studies, to the best of our knowledge, have not been conducted among African adolescents. However, more than 70% of the world's HIV-infected people live in Sub-Saharan Africa, where Zambia is geographically located. This statistic is particularly alarming considering that only 10% of the world's population resides in Sub-Saharan Africa (Essex, Mboup, Kanki, Marlink, & Tlou, 2002). Moreover, data show that the adolescents aged 15–19

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