Parental Knowledge about Child Abuse & Prevention Efforts

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Abstract

Child abuse is prevalent in every community in the United States. In Texas alone, there are an average of 200,000 child abuse and neglect cases reported each year (Pulido, 2015). When the parents of the children are well educated on child sexual abuse they are more capable of teaching and communicating with their children about being safe, preventing sexual exploitation, and creating an overall safe environment for their children (Pereda et al., 2009). This research assesses parental knowledge of child abuse. The study is a mixed methodology and has a sample size of 125 participants through purposive sampling techniques. The participants were parents 25 years of age and older residing in a rural community. Researchers use a survey which included a demographic questionnaire, several qualitative questions developed by the researchers, and the Child Abuse Quiz created by Childhelp USA which is made up of eight quantitative questions. The research is informed by the Cognitive Theory due to the focus on how the thought processes of parents relates to their extent of knowledge and experiences with child abuse. The results of the research negated the hypothesis that more than 50% of participants have limited knowledge on child abuse, however the research showed that only 57% of participants had adequate knowledge on child abuse. The researchers intend to use the results to adapt existing child abuse education materials for parents in rural communities to increase their knowledge of child abuse.
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Introduction

Child abuse is a concern across America. Child abuse occurs when a parent or caretaker physically, emotionally, or sexually abuses, neglects, or abandons a child. Around 1 in 10 children report being sexually abused. Fifteen percent to 32% of women reported being sexually abused as children, and 5% to 16% of men reported being sexually abused as children. In 2009, 24% of children reported being sexually abused and in 2012, 62,936 cases of child abuse occurred nationwide. Around 90% of elementary schools in the United States offer prevention training programs and more than 85% directed programs in the last year (Pulido, 2015).

Abuse and neglect of a child is an act that has been taking place since the beginning of time. Child abuse is a leading cause of emotional and behavioral problems across a lifespan. The purpose of the research is to provide an analysis of data gathered in order to create the best plan of action for providing prevention methods.

Advocacy for child abuse assists to spread important knowledge to both children and parents. Advocating child abuse helps parents and other caregivers to understand how to recognize the signs and symptoms of abuse. It also benefits parents to learn parenting skills and coping skills. Spreading knowledge to children about what child abuse is can help them know the difference between proper and improper touch and know that it is acceptable to reach out for help. Advocating for child abuse awareness is important, but sometimes people have a difficult time accepting that (Pulido, 2015).

While past and current child abuse prevention efforts have shown to be effective in decreasing reported child abuse cases, it is still important to realize it is far more common than
most would like to accept. With each case of abuse a child’s health and well-being is being affected (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011).

According to American Journal of Public Health (2015), child abuse prevention should be a top priority. Child abuse not only affects a person as a child but can also affect their mental health into adulthood. Many victims do not even tell anyone about the abuse they experienced until they are an adult. Child abuse prevention programs have been found to be effective in increasing students’ knowledge of child abuse and protective behaviors (Brassard, 2015). There have been many different efforts to help communities better understand how to prevent child abuse from happening. Parent education seems to be the best way to teach prevention. If someone can get the parents to understand it, then the parents can talk to their children about it. When the parents of the children are well educated on child sexual abuse they are more capable of teaching and communicating with their children about being safe, preventing sexual exploitation, and creating an overall safe environment for their children (Pereda et al., 2009). The researchers believe that implementing more parent focused child sexual abuse education will help dissolve these misconceptions about how safe their children may or may not be. More specifically, providing knowledge throughout the community about the extent of child abuse knowledge.

**Problem Statement and Objectives**

This research focuses on the lack of knowledge on child abuse and prevention efforts in a rural community in Texas. Researchers assessed how educated parents are on the issue of child abuse. The research objectives included:

O1: To expand a level of proficiency in discussing and preventing child abuse.
O2: To assess areas where improvements can be made in current child abuse education and prevention methods
O3: To provide an increased awareness about child abuse in a rural community.

Researchers developed the following research question:

“How educated are parents in a rural county in Texas on the issue of child abuse?”

**Hypotheses**

The proposed hypotheses relate to the education level of parents in a rural community in Texas on child abuse and prevention efforts. The hypotheses included:

H1: More than 50% of participants have limited knowledge on child abuse.
H2: There is a correlation between age and child abuse knowledge.
H3: Male participants report lower levels of trauma than female participants.
H4: Female participants 50 years of age or older are less likely to report severe trauma than female participants younger than 50.

**Literature Review**

The research is informed by Literature gathered and assessed. The literature focuses on the issue of child abuse, prevention efforts, and educational programs on child abuse. “Child Maltreatment Prevention: Past, Present, and Future” is an article which discusses the public awareness of child abuse. Child abuse began to spread in the 1980s as many began to look at intervention and ways to prevent child abuse from occurring. Two of the main focuses of the study are physical abuse and neglect and sexual abuse. Prevention plans included parent education and support groups, which were beneficial, but difficult to get to the families that did not believe they needed any assistance. The article then goes on to discuss the idea of home-based interventions and the ways they came to the forefront. This type of intervention proved to
be beneficial in helping form healthy attachments between parents and children, empowering parents to feel like capable caregivers, and identifying developmental delays early on in life. Since this move to home-based interventions, Federal legislation is looking to grow this evidence based model. While this model proves to be effective in serving many families, it does not help all families.

The article “School-Based Child Abuse Prevention Programs” is aimed to assist school psychologists working in early childhood and elementary schools understand the potential positive impact of abuse prevention programs in their school. They also help choose a high-quality program for their population, and gain awareness of the practical considerations of implementation. Evidence and school-based programs on the prevention of psychological or physical neglect by parents, are not manualized because it is difficult for children to protect themselves from neglect.

“Child sexual abuse prevention training for childcare professionals: An independent multi-site randomized controlled trial of stewards of child” assessed how different types of training affected child abuse professional's knowledge, attitude, and preventive behavior towards child sexual abuse. The study chose 352 newly recruited childcare professionals randomly at Stewards of Children in three different states. The sample was divided randomly into three groups, one of which received in-person training, the other web-based training, and the other was waitlisted and did not receive training. Participants were given a pre-test, post-test, and another test 3 months after training. These tests were created to evaluate child sexual abuse knowledge, attitude, and preventive behavior. The results of this experiment showed that being trained did impact child sexual abuse knowledge, attitude, and preventative behavior. It also showed that there were not any disparities between in-person training and web-based training. Lastly, the
results showed that brief training of childcare professionals has the potential to impact child sexual abuse prevention.

The article “Evaluation of a child abuse prevention curriculum for third-Grade students: assessment of knowledge and efficacy expectations” conducted research over children who were in the third-grade. The children involved in this curriculum were split into different groups and given the curriculum. The curriculum involved discussion as a class, and then the teachers would act out different scenarios and the children would respond accordingly. After giving the curriculum, the results showed a “statistically significant increase in child abuse knowledge from pretest to posttest with the intervention group.”

“Partnering with parents to prevent childhood sexual abuse” discusses the believed myths among parents about child sexual abuse like children in the pre-k age range and male, are at less of a risk of falling victim to sexual abuse. The researchers believe that implementing more parent focused child sexual abuse education will help dissolve these misconceptions about how safe their children may or may not be. One factor that makes parental and child education together hard is that the attendance rates are always low. Typically a parent believes they know how to educate a child on their own but there are a plethora of factors that play into sexual abuse and they may not know all of the facts that they need to address with children.

In the article “Prevention of child sexual abuse: evaluation of a community media campaign.” the author described the media they used to be any sort of educational pamphlets and/or public service announcements. One of the most effective ways to help with the prevention of child abuse is through the media. The researchers gave parents of children under the age of 18 either one of the media sources. After seeing the media, they were asked to answer a questionnaire with scenarios listed on them. The results from this study revealed “that those in
the combined condition had significantly higher knowledge scores than those in the no intervention condition.” Using media as an effort to help the community understand the basis of child abuse and how to prevent it is a good way to start out the prevention process.

Throughout the study “Knowledge Gains Following a Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Program Among urban students” child abuse prevention is defined as a top priority. Child abuse not only affects a person as a child but can also affect their mental health into adulthood. Many victims do not even tell anyone about the abuse they experienced until they are an adult. One in ten children who have been abused actually report having been abused. Child maltreatment comes in many ways whether it be, sexual abuse, physical abuse or emotional abuse. People tend to ignore the signs and symptoms of child abuse, because they do not understand the prevalence of child abuse. Child abuse happens so frequently because most are not aware that the ones surrounding their children are actually the ones that are hurting them. Most believe predators are strangers, although that is not always the case.

“Prevalence of sexual violence against children and use of social services - seven countries” discusses sexual violence against children and the different types of social services that can help children cope with being abused. Within this article the author went into detail about victims of child sexual abuse do not usually seek out help from social services. Social services reach out to everyone with the hope that a child will come forward. The aim is to reduce the prevalence of child abuse and neglect. The purpose of the research is to determine the prevalence of child abuse and the quantity of people the seek out social services after being abused as a child and the people that do not seek out any sort of help after being abused as a child. The article showed more women sought out social services rather than men. This could show the reasons women use social services more than men after being abused as a child.
“Prevalence of self-injury, suicidal ideation, plans and attempts in adolescents aged 13 to 19 years of age” was to determine the prevalence of injuries that being abused as a child has caused. Children that have been abused sexually, mentally, or emotionally typically have outcries which can cause them to harm themselves or others. The study in the article aimed for people between the ages of thirteen to nineteen years old. The participants were abused as children and the study determined the risk factors of injuries that they have had, including wanting to take their own lives or being addicted to drugs because of their past abuse experiences. This study within the article was considered problematic because the prevalence in the article was low due to the age range of the participants.

**Conceptual/Theoretical Framework**

The researchers evaluated two different theories that are incorporated within their research. One of the theories is the Cognitive Theory. This theory was developed by Jean Piaget in 1936. Jean Piaget was the first psychologist to make a systematic study of cognitive development. The research is informed by the Cognitive Theory due to the focus on how the thought processes of parents relates to their extent of knowledge and experiences with child abuse (McLeod, 2009).

This theory is broken down into four different elements. These elements include sensorimotor, preoperational period, concrete operations period, and the formal operations period. According to an online article by Saul McLeod, “Simply Psychology, Piaget’s Theory”, the Cognitive Theory differs from others because it, “proposes discrete stages of development, marked by qualitative differences, rather than a gradual increase in number and complexity of behaviors, concepts, ideas, etc” (p. 1 para.8).
The Cognitive Theory focuses on development rather than learning. According to Piaget, children are born with a basic mental structure on which all learning and knowledge is based. This mental structure is both genetically inherited and evolved. Children construct an understanding of the world in which they live in and then experience events in their life between what they already know and what they come to discover in their environment (McLeod, 2009).

This theory translates into adulthood, as adults understand the world based on their experiences and their environment. If an adult has not been exposed to the experience of child abuse or been exposed to education on child abuse, they have no cognitive basis to understand the concept. This theory is instrumental in understanding the relationship between knowledge of child abuse and experiencing childhood trauma or being exposed to some form of child abuse education (McLeod, 2009).

The next theory chosen was the Ecological Systems theory. This theory was developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1979 (Salem Press Encyclopedia of Science, 2016). Authors Gunnur Karakurt and Kristin E. Silver define the theory as how the interactions that occur within a person’s systems impact their choices and behaviors (Karakurt & Silver, 2014). When there is a problem within a section of the system, the whole system is then affected. In order to keep a balance within the person, there must be a balance between all the systems.

The reasoning behind choosing this theory was the connection between a parent’s knowledge and their child’s knowledge. They would not adequately be able to educate their own children on sexual, physical, or emotional abuse along with neglect. If they could not educate or did not know how to recognize the signs and symptoms of abuse, their own child could potentially be abused without their knowledge. Abuse leads to an imbalance in a person’s system. If a person was not educated on child abuse growing up, there could be a breakdown of
In order to keep a balance in the systems of their children, parents need to be educated on the signs and symptoms of child abuse. If a parent knows what to look for they could help their child sooner than they would be able to if they were not informed of the signs and symptoms of abuse. Parental knowledge plays a key role in the education of children and in order to keep a healthy balance between systems, children need to be knowledgeable on all forms of child abuse.

**Methods and Research Design**

The researchers conducted a mixed methodology study consisting of a predeveloped demographic questionnaire, one qualitative question and two quantitative questions developed by the researchers, and the Child Abuse Quiz created by Childhelp USA which is made up of eight quantitative questions. The surveys were completed by 125 participants. Participants consisted of male and female parents, 25 years of age and older residing in a rural community.

The qualitative question aimed to assess levels of childhood trauma that parents had experienced, and how this trauma effected their knowledge of child abuse. The Child Abuse Quiz was used as a determinate of each participant’s knowledge of child abuse. A score of six or more questions correct on the quiz was classified as having adequate knowledge of child abuse. This score was determined to be adequate because correctly answering six out of the eight questions on the Child Abuse Quiz, would be a score of 75%, proving that the participant had adequate knowledge about child abuse. A score of five or less on the eight question Child Abuse Quiz was determined to be inadequate knowledge of child abuse because it would equal a score of only 62%. Child abuse knowledge was determined to be the dependent variable in the
research. The researchers aimed to discover the effect age, gender, and trauma level each have on child abuse knowledge.

The researchers used several different methods to gather data. A large number of the surveys were collected through convenience sampling, relying on participants who were available. They distributed surveys to their community partner to hand out to parents they knew in the community. They also gathered surveys through snowball sampling, distributing surveys to other parents that participants suggested.

Analysis and Results

Throughout testing parental knowledge of child abuse, a number of surveys were conducted. In order to complete the surveys the participants had to be between the ages of 25 or older with a child. The surveys consisted of basic demographic questions. The demographic questions discussed age, race, sex, marital status, and the number of children the participants have. Both the quantitative and qualitative questions were coded and given numerical value. The data was compiled in Microsoft Excel using a coding sheet developed by the student research group.

Ages were grouped into increments of five, and were then given a numerical value based on those age groups. 103 participants ranged from 50 years of age or younger, this being 82% of the participants were between the ages of 50-25. 18% of the participants were over the age of 50, which would be a total of 22 participants. Gender was divided between male, female, and transgender. The gender was given a numerical value from one to three. 78% of the participants defined themselves as female, which is a total of 97 participants. 22% of the participants identified as male, which is a total of 27 participants. Only one participant identified as a transgender which was a total of 0.8% of the participants. Race and Ethnicity were separated by
African American, Asian, Caucasian, Hispanic, Native American, and other. The race and ethnicity were numbered from one to seven. 5% of the participants identified as African American. 8% of the participants identified as Asian. 74% of the participants identified as Caucasian. 11% of the participants identified as Hispanic. 1% of the participants identified as Native American, and 1% of the participants identified as other. The marital status was separated by married, single, separated or divorced, remarried, or widowed. The marital status was numbered one through five. The number of children that the participants had were separated between male and female children, and from there they were numbered by the number by the amount of children the participant had. The occupation of the participants was a qualitative question, the participant was able to write in what their occupation is. The occupation was listed between one through eleven. They were separated between child care or primary education, business, healthcare, secondary educators, ministry, social services, construction or maintenance, self-employed, unemployed, higher education, and other.

The data collected from the surveys was analyzed to determine if the hypotheses were supported or negated. The analysis was created by the average number of questions answered correctly from the Child Abuse Quiz, to observe the trends and correlations between the demographics and child abuse knowledge, and to determine the correlation between child abuse experience and knowledge of child abuse. The qualitative questions were given a numerical value based on the level of knowledge the participants had about child abuse. 41% of participants reported experiencing some childhood trauma. Thirty two percent of females reported some kind of childhood trauma while 30% of males reported some kind of childhood trauma. Seven percent of males reported experiencing severe childhood trauma and 9% of females reported experiencing severe childhood trauma, proving hypothesis three to be correct.
Thirty three percent of females over 50 reported experiencing childhood trauma and 43% of females 50 or under reported experiencing childhood trauma. Eleven percent of females over 50 reported severe childhood trauma and 9% of females 50 or under reported experiencing childhood trauma. This negated hypothesis four because a larger percentage of females over 50 reported severe trauma than females age 50 and younger.

Forty three percent of participants had inadequate knowledge of child abuse meaning they answered less than 6 questions correctly on the Child Abuse Quiz. Fifty seven percent of participants had adequate knowledge of child abuse meaning they answered 6 or more questions correctly on the Child Abuse Quiz. These results negated the first hypothesis, that more than 50% of participants would have limited knowledge on child abuse. However, only 10% of participants answered all 8 questions correctly on the Child Abuse Quiz.

**Strengths and Limitations**

The student group observed several strengths and limitations while conducting this research. The students used non-probability sampling, including convenience and snowball sampling. Non-probability sampling is the technique where samples are gathered in a process that does not give all the individuals in the population equal chance of being selected. The inconvenience of using non-probability sampling is that the biases of the researcher may be shown toward the subjects who were surveyed. When using convenience sampling the researcher may be collecting results from participants who have the same beliefs as themselves, and the diversity of the sample would hypothetically be limited.

Using snowball sampling can have a similar outcome. Snowball sampling is attaining a referral from someone that has filled out the survey, to one or more of their friends who may give you the same results as their friend. The diversity of the sample was limited and that can be
a direct result of convenience sampling. The demographics of the research were negatively impacted due to the use of non-probability sampling. For example, about 78% of participants are female, and of the 125 participants only 22 were over the age of 50. Additionally, the student researchers began seeking out people that fit into the less abundant categories posing an issue with the randomness. The sensitivity of the child abuse subject played a role in how the participants responded and whether they completed the survey. The researchers observed participants who refused to complete the survey due to the topic, and even experienced participants who disagreed with the correct answers and tried to change them on the survey.

A strength of convenience sampling is the researchers can ask anyone anywhere (within the guidelines) if they would like to complete the survey. This lead to referrals and completion of the surveys in a timely manner. Convenience sampling was affordable, and time efficient.

Another strength of the research was the method of collecting data. The tool used was a mixed methodology survey. The researchers were able to observe both qualitative and quantitative answers and data. The mixed methodology research design provided a holistic view of the knowledge of child abuse in the community as well as the lack there of.

**Ethical Considerations**

While conducting the research, the researchers had to take into consideration any ethical situations they might be faced. One of the ethical considerations was the topic. The conducted research pertained to child abuse, therefor the researchers needed to be prepared for a situation where the participant might disclose experiencing abuse as a child or disclose information about a child they know now who could be experiencing abuse. Included with the surveys were consent forms informing the participants of their rights before completing the survey. In the case of a participant experiencing abuse as a child, or knowing someone who is currently experiencing
abuse, the consent form provided the participants with contact information for a local agency with resources. Researchers were prepared with the knowledge of how to redirect a participant to the advocacy center if they felt it would be beneficial for them.

**Implications for Future Social Work Research**

The researchers plan to use the data they gathered and analyzed to improve current child abuse prevention education programs and provide information about what knowledge parents in rural communities are lacking. The researchers plan on doing so by looking over the gathered information and gauging what information parents need within the field of child abuse and neglect according to the responses provided on the surveys. It is critical to look at this analysis on a micro, mezzo, and macro level. For example, while working at a micro level, the group can help an individual client with the results if they are able to understand the community they are living in. When working with mezzo, the group could implement programs in small groups and families, more specifically, being able to gauge what information will be most pertinent to the parents which will be beneficial to a whole family setting. When working with macro, the group could facilitate agencies with resources needed to educate the parents in the communities they serve. Programs could be implemented in the community through outreach and different entities such as school systems and after school programs.
References


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