Awareness of Child Abuse and Neglect Among the Saudi Population: A Systematic Review

Nahi Sabih Q Alruwaili¹, Abdulaziz Mohammed Mukhlef Alanazi², Naif Mohammad Alrawaili², Abdullah Khalid M Alzalbani³, Malek Saad M Alanazi³, Fahad Abdullah J Alotibi³, Rakan Zuwayyid Aqayl Alanazi³, Mooj Mohammed Alruwaili³, Abdulrahman Mohammed M Alanazi

¹Consultant Psychiatrist, Eradah Complex and Mental Health, Arar, Saudi Arabia
²General Practitioner, Ministry of Health, Arar, Saudi Arabia
³Faculty of Medicine, Northern Border University, Arar, Saudi Arabia

*Corresponding author’s: Nahi Sabih Q Alruwaili

Article History
Received: 06 June 2023
Revised: 05 Sept 2023
Accepted: 04 Nov 2023

Abstract

Background: Child abuse and neglect (CAN) is a pressing global issue with profound implications for the well-being of children. Study aim: The aim of this systematic review is to examine the existing literature and synthesize evidence on the awareness, knowledge, and attitudes towards child abuse and neglect within the Saudi population. Methods: This systematic review synthesizes the existing literature to illuminate the awareness, knowledge, and attitudes surrounding CAN within the Saudi population. Ten studies spanning the years 2019 to 2023 were meticulously analyzed, offering a comprehensive snapshot of CAN perceptions across various segments of society. Results: The studies, encompassing diverse methodologies and populations, collectively underscore the commendable levels of awareness and knowledge demonstrated by healthcare professionals, including primary health care physicians, nurses, and medical practitioners. Notably, several studies reveal that these professionals exhibit robust recognition of different forms of child abuse, a vital aspect in the identification and prevention of abuse cases. While positive attitudes towards CAN were prevalent among healthcare providers, barriers to reporting were highlighted. Fear of consequences and uncertainty emerged as key deterrents to reporting among medical and dental students and nurses, respectively. These findings emphasize the necessity for creating supportive environments that empower professionals to report suspected cases of abuse while addressing apprehensions. Parental perception of CAN also came into focus, revealing a disparity between the recognition of CAN as a common problem and adequate knowledge of emotional abuse and neglect. These findings point towards a need for targeted public awareness campaigns that differentiate between disciplinary practices and abusive behaviours. Conclusion: In conclusion, this systematic review offers a nuanced understanding of the Saudi population's awareness, knowledge, and attitudes towards child abuse and neglect. The synthesis of findings across diverse studies informs future interventions, advocating for enhanced awareness, reporting, and prevention strategies. By empowering individuals and professionals alike, a safer environment for Saudi children can be nurtured, fostering a future free from the shadows of abuse and neglect.

Keywords: Child abuse and neglect, awareness, knowledge, attitudes, Saudi population

1. Introduction
Child abuse and neglect (CAN) are globally recognized as significant public health issues with profound and lasting consequences for the physical, psychological, and social well-being of children (Lang et al., 2020). CAN encompasses various forms, including physical, sexual, emotional abuse, and neglect, and can occur in diverse settings such as households, schools, and communities (Strathearn et al., 2020). While the detrimental effects of CAN are well-documented, its prevalence and impact can vary across cultures and regions (Lang et al., 2020; Swedo et al., 2020).
Saudi Arabia, as a diverse and culturally rich country, is not exempt from the challenges posed by CAN (AlFarhan et al., 2022). The societal values, norms, and dynamics unique to Saudi Arabia may influence perceptions, awareness, knowledge, and attitudes towards CAN (AlFarhan et al., 2022). Addressing CAN requires a comprehensive understanding of these factors, as well as an assessment of the existing awareness, knowledge, and attitudes within the Saudi population (Owaidah et al., 2022).

Given the significance of this issue, it is imperative to examine the current landscape of CAN awareness, knowledge, and attitudes among different segments of the Saudi population. Such insights can guide the development of targeted interventions, policies, and educational programs to promote greater awareness, accurate recognition, and effective response to cases of child abuse and neglect.

Study Aim

The primary aim of this systematic review is to comprehensively examine the existing literature and synthesize the collective evidence on the awareness, knowledge, and attitudes towards child abuse and neglect within the Saudi population.

2. Materials And Methods

Research Protocol and Question Formulation

A systematic review protocol was developed to guide the entire review process. The research question formulated was: "What is the awareness, knowledge, and attitude of the Saudi population towards child abuse and neglect (CAN) based on studies conducted in Saudi Arabia over the last five years?"

Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across multiple electronic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and PsycINFO. The search was limited to studies published within the last five years (2019 to 2023). The search strategy employed a combination of keywords and Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) terms related to child abuse, neglect, Saudi Arabia, awareness, knowledge, and attitude. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine the search results.

Study Selection Criteria

Studies were selected based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria encompassed studies conducted in Saudi Arabia, published in the English language, between 2019 and 2023, that examined awareness, knowledge, and attitudes towards child abuse and neglect among the Saudi population. Exclusion criteria included non-empirical studies, studies conducted outside Saudi Arabia, and those not related to the research question.

Study Screening and Data Extraction

The initial screening of studies involved title and abstract review, followed by full-text assessment to determine eligibility. Two independent reviewers conducted the screening process, with disagreements resolved through discussion and consensus. Data extraction was carried out using a standardized form that captured information including study title, year, city, study design, study setting, type of population, number of participants, study tool description, summary findings related to child abuse awareness, knowledge, and attitude, and any notable observations.

Data Synthesis and Analysis

Due to the heterogeneity of study designs and outcomes, a narrative synthesis approach was adopted. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns across the extracted data. The findings from individual studies were summarized, compared, and contrasted to draw overarching conclusions regarding awareness, knowledge, and attitudes towards child abuse and neglect in the Saudi population.

Ethical Considerations

As this review exclusively analyzed publicly available data from previously published studies, ethical approval was not required.

3. Results and Discussion

Overview of Included Studies

Table 1 provides an overview of the characteristics of the included studies in this systematic review. The selected studies were conducted across different years and cities within Saudi Arabia, employing
various study designs and settings to investigate the awareness, knowledge, and attitudes toward child abuse and neglect (CAN) among different populations.

**Table 1: Characters of the included studies.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Study Design</th>
<th>Study Setting</th>
<th>Type of Population</th>
<th>Number of Population</th>
<th>Study Tool Description</th>
<th>Summary Findings about Child Abuse Awareness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alsaleem et al., 2019</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Abha</td>
<td>Cross-sectional</td>
<td>Primary Health Care</td>
<td>PHC Physicians</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>Self-administered questionnaire</td>
<td>96.3% had good awareness of types of child abuse, 97.3% had good awareness of child neglect patterns. About 64% recorded underreporting of child abuse cases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gopalakrishna et al., 2020</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Riyadh</td>
<td>Cross-sectional</td>
<td>Medical and Dental</td>
<td>Medical and Dental UG students, interns</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>Self-administered structured questionnaire</td>
<td>Mean knowledge scores were 6.81 for medical and 6.35 for dental students (significant difference). Fear of consequences was the main barrier for not reporting (medical = 82.4%, dental = 68.5%). About 77% agreed on the need for further training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sulimany et al., 2021</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Nationwide</td>
<td>National Study</td>
<td>Dental Graduates</td>
<td>Dental Graduates</td>
<td>988</td>
<td>Self-administered questionnaires</td>
<td>About 60% had inadequate knowledge regarding CAN. Education about CAN, female participants, and government school graduates were</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Awareness of Child Abuse and Neglect Among the Saudi Population: A Systematic Review

Only 9.7% knew how to report CAN cases. Only 53% had good knowledge of CAN. Higher education and family income levels were associated with good knowledge. Most parents considered CAN a common problem but lacked knowledge of emotional abuse and neglect.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Design</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Study Population</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Findings/conclusions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alsalman et al., 2023</td>
<td>2023</td>
<td>Eastern Province</td>
<td>Cross-sectional</td>
<td>Parents with children &lt;18 years old</td>
<td>447</td>
<td>Self-administered online questionnaire</td>
<td>Associated with better knowledge scores. Only 9.7% knew how to report CAN cases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alkathiri et al., 2021</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Riyadh</td>
<td>Cross-sectional</td>
<td>Health care Providers</td>
<td>Physician and Nurses</td>
<td>308 Self-administered questionnaire</td>
<td>Majority had excellent attitude (64.2%) and excellent knowledge (90.3%). Pediatricians had lower knowledge (p&lt;0.001). Lack of knowledge was a common reason for underreporting (67.2%).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alharbi &amp; Moussa, 2023</td>
<td>2023</td>
<td>Riyadh</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Pediatric Nurses</td>
<td>Pediatric Nurses</td>
<td>70 Self-administered questionnaire</td>
<td>Pediatric nurses had adequate knowledge and positive attitude toward child abuse. Experience and middle age were associated with better knowledge and attitude.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Design</td>
<td>Population</td>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>Data Sample Size</td>
<td>Knowledge Levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aldukhayel et al., 2020</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Al Qassim</td>
<td>Cross-sectional</td>
<td>Primary Healthcare Physicians, Interns</td>
<td>Self-administered questionnaire</td>
<td>292</td>
<td>Majority had moderate (68.8%) to high (28.4%) knowledge levels. Factors associated with high knowledge included age &gt;30, non-Saudi nationality, having children, and studying outside Saudi Arabia. Pediatricians had lower knowledge (p&lt;0.001).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alshouimi et al., 2021</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>Cross-sectional</td>
<td>Medical Students</td>
<td>Cross-sectional questionnaire</td>
<td>403</td>
<td>Good knowledge about risk factors and symptoms, but lack of confidence. The majority believed further curriculum development and training are necessary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merwass et al., 2021</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>Cross-sectional</td>
<td>Medical and Dental Practitioners</td>
<td>Online self-administered questionnaire</td>
<td>371</td>
<td>Good knowledge (mean score 7.51). Females and governmental practitioners had higher knowledge. Training needed for dealing with CAN (65.2%). Majority believed uncertainty was prime reason for</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Awareness of Child Abuse and Neglect Among the Saudi Population: A Systematic Review

Ava

Available online at: https://jazindia.com

Salami & Alhalal, 2020

Study Characteristics

The studies were conducted between 2019 and 2023 in various cities across Saudi Arabia. A range of study designs were employed, including cross-sectional and quantitative approaches, allowing for a comprehensive examination of the awareness, knowledge, and attitudes of diverse populations. The study settings varied, including primary health care centers, medical and dental colleges, and pediatric units, reflecting the multidisciplinary nature of the investigation into CAN.

Type of Population and Number

The studies targeted different segments of the population, such as primary health care physicians, medical and dental undergraduate students, parents, pediatric nurses, and other healthcare providers. The number of participants ranged from 70 to 988, ensuring a robust representation of the chosen populations and increasing the generalizability of the findings.

Study Tool Description

To assess awareness, knowledge, and attitudes towards child abuse and neglect, the included studies utilized various self-administered questionnaires and structured tools. These tools were designed to capture participants' perceptions, understanding, and attitudes related to different aspects of child abuse, providing insights into the knowledge gaps and attitudes prevalent within the studied populations.

Summary Findings about Child Abuse Awareness

The summary findings from the included studies offer insights into the participants’ awareness, knowledge, and attitudes concerning child abuse and neglect. The findings collectively demonstrate a spectrum of understanding and attitudes within different segments of the population.

The study by Alsaleem et al. (2019) assessed primary health care (PHC) physicians’ knowledge and attitude towards child abuse in Abha. The findings revealed that 96.3% of the physicians exhibited good awareness of types of child abuse, and 97.3% demonstrated good awareness of child neglect patterns. However, a concerning 64% of physicians recorded underreporting of child abuse cases, indicating the presence of barriers hindering the reporting process.

Gopalakrishna et al. (2020) conducted a cross-sectional study among medical and dental undergraduate students and interns in Riyadh. The results highlighted that approximately 57.5% of participants had received formal training on CAN during their undergraduate studies. Medical participants displayed a higher mean knowledge score (6.81) compared to dental participants (6.35). Fear of consequences emerged as a predominant barrier (medical = 82.4%, dental = 68.5%) for not reporting suspected cases of CAN.
Sulimany et al. (2021) conducted a national study to assess knowledge levels and educational experiences among dental graduates regarding child abuse and neglect. The study revealed that around 60% of participants had inadequate knowledge regarding CAN. Notably, graduates from government schools who received dental education about CAN and female participants demonstrated significantly higher odds of having adequate knowledge scores.

Alsalman et al. (2023) investigated parents' knowledge and perception of child abuse and neglect in the Eastern Province. Only 53% of participants demonstrated good knowledge of CAN. Higher education and family income levels were associated with better knowledge. While most parents considered CAN to be a common problem, many lacked knowledge about emotional abuse and neglect.

Alkathiri et al. (2021) assessed the knowledge, attitude, and practice of child maltreatment among healthcare providers in Riyadh. A majority of participants (64.2%) displayed excellent attitudes, and an even higher percentage (90.3%) exhibited excellent knowledge. Pediatricians, however, had lower knowledge scores. Lack of knowledge emerged as a common barrier to reporting (67.2%).

Alharbi and Moussa (2023) investigated the knowledge and attitude of pediatric nurses in Saudi Arabia regarding child abuse. The study found that pediatric nurses displayed adequate knowledge and a positive attitude towards child abuse. Age and experience were positively associated with knowledge and attitude.

Alshouimi et al. (2021) conducted a study among medical students in Saudi Arabia. The results indicated good knowledge about risk factors and symptoms of child abuse, but a lack of confidence. Participants highlighted the need for curriculum development and further training in this area.

The present systematic review sought to shed light on the awareness, knowledge, and attitudes of the Saudi population towards child abuse and neglect (CAN), as gleaned from a diverse array of studies conducted in Saudi Arabia. The findings synthesized from these studies offer a nuanced understanding of the complex landscape surrounding CAN awareness, uncovering both strengths and gaps in different segments of the population.

Across the studies, it is heartening to note that many participants, particularly healthcare professionals, displayed commendable levels of knowledge concerning the various facets of child abuse. The findings from Alsaleem et al. (2019), Alkathiri et al. (2021), and Merwass et al. (2021) collectively indicate that healthcare providers, including primary health care physicians, nurses, and even medical and dental practitioners, exhibited robust awareness of the different forms of child abuse. This knowledge is pivotal in the identification, intervention, and prevention of CAN cases.

However, a caveat emerges from the study by Sulimany et al. (2021), which points to a significant gap in the knowledge of dental graduates regarding CAN. This divergence highlights the need for a more uniform and comprehensive approach to CAN education across medical and dental curricula, ensuring that future practitioners are adequately equipped to address this critical issue.

Attitudes towards CAN appeared to be generally positive among the populations surveyed. The studies conducted by Alkathiri et al. (2021), Alharbi & Moussa (2023), and Merwass et al. (2021) demonstrated that healthcare professionals, including nurses and healthcare providers, exhibited positive attitudes towards CAN. Notably, pediatric nurses emerged as particularly proactive in recognizing their role in identifying and addressing cases of child abuse.

Interestingly, some studies unearthed barriers to reporting CAN cases, which warrant careful consideration. Gopalakrishna et al. (2020) indicated that fear of consequences was a significant deterrent among medical and dental students, pointing to a potential apprehension among future
healthcare providers. Similarly, Salami & Alhalal (2020) found that uncertainty was a major reason for underreporting among nurses. These findings underscore the importance of creating a supportive reporting environment, coupled with comprehensive education that emphasizes the legal and ethical implications of reporting suspected cases of abuse.

The studies delving into parental awareness unveiled intriguing insights. Alsalman et al. (2023) revealed that while parents perceived CAN as a common problem, a sizable proportion lacked adequate knowledge of the nuances of emotional abuse and neglect. This indicates a vital gap in public awareness that necessitates targeted awareness campaigns, focusing on differentiating between traditional discipline and abusive behaviour.

Implications and Recommendations

Collectively, the findings carry significant implications for policy, education, and practice. The identified gaps in knowledge, coupled with reported barriers to reporting, underscore the need for a comprehensive and standardized educational approach across various healthcare disciplines. Curricula should integrate evidence-based education on identifying and responding to CAN cases, addressing fears and uncertainties that could hinder reporting.

Public awareness campaigns can play a pivotal role in enhancing societal understanding of CAN, not only among healthcare professionals but also among parents and the general public. As observed in the study by Alsaleem et al. (2019), societal traditions and unclear reporting strategies could contribute to underreporting, highlighting the importance of cultural sensitivity in developing interventions.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this systematic review amalgamates findings from various studies to present a multifaceted overview of the awareness, knowledge, and attitudes towards child abuse and neglect among different segments of the Saudi population. While the healthcare community displays commendable awareness and attitudes, there is still room for improvement, particularly in standardizing education and addressing barriers to reporting. The insights garnered from this review can guide future interventions, fostering a safer environment for Saudi children by empowering individuals to recognize, report, and prevent child abuse and neglect.

References: