Prevalence of intrafamilial child maltreatment in the Nordic countries: A review

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Prevalence of Intrafamilial Child Maltreatment in the Nordic countries: A Review

There are differences in the prevalence rates of child maltreatment between countries, as well as variation in how these rates change over time. This review examined the prevalence of different forms of intrafamilial child maltreatment in the Nordic countries and possible changes in the prevalence rates over the past two decades. We conducted a systematic search of the databases PsycINFO, ISI Web of Science and PubMed and of self-report studies investigating the prevalence of one or several forms of child maltreatment in non-clinical samples published from 1990 to the present. In addition, we searched for unpublished reports. A total of 24 Nordic studies were included. The findings suggest a prevalence of child sexual abuse by a parent in the range of 0.2–1.2 per cent, a prevalence of severe physical abuse in the range of three to nine per cent and a prevalence of witnessing domestic violence in the range of seven to 12.5 per cent in the Nordic countries. Markedly more girls than boys were exposed to sexual abuse. The results indicate a decline in the prevalence of sexual abuse by a relative and of parental physical abuse over the past 20 years, but no corresponding changes in the prevalence of witnessing domestic violence. There is a lack of studies on the prevalence of neglect and emotional maltreatment. Copyright © 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key Practitioner Messages:
- Knowledge of intrafamilial child abuse and witnessing domestic violence in the Nordic countries is expanded.
- Prevalence studies not published in the international scientific literature are included. Trends in prevalence rates are shown.
- Differences between Nordic prevalence rates and the rates found in high-income countries as a whole are explored and discussed.
- Attention is drawn to the influence of contextual factors on the prevalence of child maltreatment.

Key Words: prevalence; child maltreatment; child sexual abuse; child physical abuse

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Kathrine Kloppen, Magne Mæhle and Øyvind Kvello designed the study together. Kathrine Kloppen collected and analysed the data, as well as drafted and wrote the manuscript. Magne Mæhle, Øyvind Kvello, Siren Haugland and Kyrre Breivik provided critical revisions and supervision.

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Forms of child maltreatment

Different forms of child maltreatment (Gilbert et al., 2009):

- sexual abuse
- physical abuse
- emotional abuse
- neglect
- witnessing domestic violence
Background

«Perhaps the most frequently asked question about the problem of child abuse and neglect is the one of prevalence» (Hobbs, 2005)

The prevalence and patterns of child maltreatment in the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) might be influenced by societal factors
Research questions

1. What is the Nordic prevalence of physical, sexual and emotional abuse, neglect and witnessing domestic violence?

2. Has there been a change in the prevalence rates over the past 20 years?
Method: systematic literature search

- Databases: PsycInfo, Web of Science and PubMed
- Search for “grey literature”
- Inclusion criteria:
  a) non-clinical, population-based samples
  b) self-report surveys
  c) investigated childhood prevalence
  d) distinguished between intra- and extrafamilial maltreatment
  e) published from 1990 onwards
Results: 24 included studies

- 11 of the studies were published internationally
- 15 studies investigated more than one form:
  - sexual abuse: 14 studies
  - physical abuse: 15 studies
  - witnessing domestic violence: 9 studies
  - neglect and emotional maltreatment: 1 study

- Large methodological differences
Prevalence of child sexual abuse (CSA)

- CSA by a (step)parent: 0.2–1.2% (average for both genders)

- CSA by a family member (including incest):
  - boys 0.1–1%
  - girls 0.7–3.1%

- A reduction in the prevalence during the past 20 years
Prevalence of child physical abuse (CPA)

- Prevalence of serious (step)parental CPA: 3–9%
- Girls reported more exposure to mild CPA than boys
- Marked reduction in Finland, stable level in Sweden, no figures for the other countries
Prevalence of witnessing domestic violence (WDV)

- 7–12% had witnessed violence against one of their parents
- Girls reported such exposure more often than boys
- Witnessing violence increased the risk of direct physical violence markedly
- Stable level of prevalence during the past 10 years
Nordic prevalence rates in an international perspective: CSA

The prevalence of intrafamilial sexual abuse is similar to what is found in the UK (Cawson et al., 2000; Radford et al., 2013)

CSA is less associated with SES, educational level or ethnicity than other forms of child maltreatment (Collin-Vezina et al., 2013; Runyan, 1998)
Nordic prevalence rates in an international perspective: CPA and WDV

The prevalence of intrafamilial CPA and WDV seems to be in the lower range compared to what is found in other high-income countries (Gilbert et al., 2009). WHY?

- a comprehensive welfare system
- a regular public health system for mothers and toddlers
- kindergarten
- low acceptance of physical discipline
- lower prevalence of intimate-partner violence => lower prevalence of direct physical violence
We still lack knowledge of …

► the prevalence of neglect and emotional maltreatment
► the total number of children who are exposed to one or several forms of maltreatment
► the number of children who are exposed to more chronic forms of maltreatment
► the prevalence of «polyvictims»
► exposure in different age groups
Take home message

It is important that future prevalence studies are based on the same methodology, so that they can be compared

- The NSPCC study by Radford et al. (2011)
- Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ; Hamby, Finkelhor, Omrod, & Turner, 2004)