

Violence Sensitivity and Violent Discipline Use of Parents With Disabled and Non-Disabled Children

Umran Cevik Guner¹, Dondu Batkin Erturk², Medine Koc³

¹Department of Pediatric Nursing, Tokat Gaziosmanpaşa University Faculty of Health Sciences, Tokat, Türkiye. ORCID iD: 0000-0002-8677-0414. umranccevik@hotmail.com (Corresponding Author)

²Department of Midwifery, Tokat Gaziosmanpaşa University Faculty of Health Sciences, Tokat, Türkiye. ORCID iD: 0000-0002-7430-3130

³Department of Mental Health Nursing, Tokat Gaziosmanpaşa University Faculty of Health Sciences, Tokat, Türkiye. ORCID iD: 0000-0001-9298-8885

ABSTRACT

Aim: Children with disabilities are more vulnerable than non-disabled children. The family is the key point in preventing and starting violence against children. However, data on the violence sensitivity and violent discipline used by parents with disabled children are quite insufficient. This study aimed to determine violence sensitivity and violent discipline used by parents with disabled and non-disabled children.

Methods: One hundred and fifty-five parents (with 60 disabled and 95 non-disabled children) completed the Violence Sensitivity Towards Children Scale with sociodemographic and disciplinary practices information form.

Results: In this study, it was determined that the Violence Sensitivity Towards Children Scale's mean score of the parents with disabled children (41.66 ± 5.30) was lower than that of the parents with non-disabled children (44.18 ± 4.94), and the difference between them was statistically significant. It was also found that the percentages of discipline used by the parents with disabled children and of the parents with non-disabled children were 96.7% and 84.2%, respectively, and using verbal violence most frequently. A statistically significant difference was found between the two groups only in terms of verbal and physical violence.

Conclusion: The study concludes that parents with disabled children are less sensitive to violence against their children and they resort to violent discipline more than parents with non-disabled children.

Keywords: disabled children, parents, violence

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Introduction

Violence against children is a global problem. Violence, which has devastating effects on children, affects families, communities, and nations (1). Violence can take place against any child in any country of the world, regardless of age, gender, religion, ethnic origin, socio-economic status, disability, educational background, and skills. However, disabled children are at a significantly greater risk than non-disabled children (2).

Parents with disabled children face some psychological, economic, educational, and social challenges (3,4). These children are more dependent on their parents than their non-disabled peers, and parents play an important role in their children's protection, care, and acquisition of desired behaviors. Physical, financial, and emotional problems, parental pressure, stress, and communication problems with the child are among the reasons that make parents with disabled children more inclined to inflict violence (5). Compared to other children, children with mental and developmental disabilities are at a higher risk of maltreatment at home (6-9). A systematic review has reported that disabled children are 3.7 times more likely to be victims of violence, 3.6 times more likely to be victims of physical violence, and 2.9 times more likely to be victims of sexual violence (10).

Having a disabled child can negatively affect parents' quality of life, financial status, and working conditions (11,12). These difficulties expose parents to increased stress, depression, and anxiety, domestic problems, frustration, and lower quality of life (9,13-17). These problems can cause parents to develop feelings such as anger and denial against their disabled children or can lead to violence between spouses or against the disabled child (12,15,18). It has, for this reason, been reported that increased problems of parents of disabled children compared to the parents of nondisabled children may lead them to abusive parenting (8,9,13).

The least studied group in studies on child neglect and abuse conducted in our country is parents. Whereas, parents have a key role in the onset and

prevention of child abuse and neglect. Parents' unawareness and negative attitudes about child neglect and abuse are important risk factors for the emergence of child abuse and neglect. In addition to this, being sensitive to violence is an important step in preventing violence. Sensitivity refers to the ability of a parent to discover their children, to adequately interpret their developmental needs and stimuli related to safety and autonomy, and to respond correctly to these needs and stimuli. Violence sensitivity, on the other hand, refers to parents' ability to prevent their children from being harmed by child neglect as well as by physical, emotional, or sexual abuse (19). As in the development of violent behaviors, many environmental, individual, or cultural factors affect individuals' perceptions of violence and sensitivity to violence. The interpretation of the concept of violence and violent behaviors may vary depending on how the individual perceives acts and behaviors. For this reason, recognizing aggression or a tendency to violence is an important step in controlling them.

The challenges caused by the child's disability can affect parents' perspectives about their children, their acceptance of their child, and their attitudes toward their child. Therefore, further research is needed to explore parents' violence sensitivity and their use of violent discipline. This study aimed to determine violence sensitivity and violent discipline used by parents with disabled and non-disabled children.

Methods

This comparative descriptive study was conducted between June and December 2018. The population of the study consists of the parents of 80 disabled children attending primary education (including kindergarten) in three special education schools affiliated with the Directorate of National Education in a province located in Turkey in the Middle Black Sea Region as well as the parents of non-disabled children in four primary schools with a similar socio-economic background, affiliated to the same Directorate of National Education and selected with the convenient sampling method. Inclusion

criteria were as follows: Having a child attending to a primary school where disabled and non-disabled children are educated; agreeing to participate in the research; having no reading and comprehension problems. The sample calculation was done with the G power 3.1 package program. Based on previous research on disciplinary enforcement situations in children with disabilities, the power analysis determined 60 as the minimum sample to be taken only for children with disabilities, with an effect size of 0.467, a power of 0.95, and an acceptable type I error size of 0.05 according to the chi-square test (11). The study included a total of 155 parents, of whom 60 were parents of children who met the inclusion criteria and were selected (without using any sampling method) from children studying at primary special needs schools, and 95 were parents of children attending primary schools.

For the study, permission was obtained from the Directorate of National Education, the Governorship Office, and the Clinical Research Ethics Committee of a university (Approved Number: 18 KAEK 135). Parents were informed that participation in the study was voluntary. Verbal and written consent was obtained from parents who agreed to participate in the study. The scale and information form were filled in by the participating parents. Filling in the scales took about 10 minutes. Data collection tools were an information form regarding the socio-demographic characteristics and disciplinary practices of the parents and the Violence Sensitivity Towards Children Scale (VSTCS). Sociodemographic and disciplinary practices information form was developed by the researchers based on the literature (8,11,20-22). The form consists of a total of 24 items related to the parents' age, job, and educational background, family type, the financial status of the family, number of children present in the family, the age and the gender of the child, the child's disability, whether parents resort to violent discipline, the discipline strategies used at home, the benefits/harms of the discipline strategies used at home, etc. The Violence Sensitivity Towards Children Scale (VSTCS), developed by Özürek (19) in 2017, consists of 19 3-point Likert-

type items ("agree," "partially agree," "disagree"). Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient was calculated as 0.82 for the overall scale. The higher the score from the scale, the more sensitive to and aware of violence the respondent is. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this study was calculated as 0.76.

The data were analyzed using the SPSS 20 package program. Descriptive statistical analyses (numbers, percentages), Pearson chi-square analysis, and since data showed normal distribution, independent groups t-test were used. Statistical significance was accepted at the $p<0.05$ level.

Results

There was no statistically significant difference between the parents with non-disabled children and those with disabled children in terms of parents' age, educational background, employment status, family type, income, number of children, and gender and age of the child (Table 1). Regarding the disabilities of the participating disabled children, 38.3% had a mental disability, 31.7% had physical disabilities, 23.3% had pervasive developmental disorders (autism, etc.), 10% had Down syndrome, 10% had a hearing impairment, and 5% had a visual impairment.

Regarding the scores from the VSTCS, it was found that the mean scores of the parents with disabled children (41.66 ± 5.30) were lower than those of the parents with non-disabled children (44.18 ± 4.94), and the difference was statistically significant (Table 2).

Ninety-seven percent of the parents with disabled children and 84% of the parents with non-disabled children reported that they used violent discipline measures to discipline their children, and the difference was statistically significant. The percentages of using verbal and physical violence among parents with disabled children were 76.7% and 15.0%, respectively, whereas the same percentages were 61.1% and 4.2%, respectively, among the parents with non-disabled children, which indicates a statistically significant difference between both parent groups. 16.7% of parents with disabled children and 8.4% of parents with non-disabled children were found to use silent treatment methods to discipline their

children, which indicates no statistically significant difference. 40.0% of parents with non-disabled children and 25.0% of parents with disabled children were found to use the loss of privilege (taking away a

specific item for a specific amount of time) method to discipline their children, which indicates no statistically significant difference (Table 3).

Table 1. Comparison between the socio-demographic characteristics of parents with disabled and non-disabled children (n=155)

Socio-Demographic Characteristics	Parents with Non-Disabled Children		Parents with Disabled Children		χ^2	p
	Number	%	Number	%		
Interviewed Parent						
Mother	66	57.4	49	42.6	2.855	0.091
Father	29	72.5	11	27.5		
Age of Parents (years)						
20-30	16	48.5	17	51.5	3.177	0.204
31-40	61	63.5	35	36.5		
41 years and above	18	69.2	8	30.8		
Parents' Educational Background						
Primary education	35	53.8	30	46.2	5.097	0.165
Secondary education	31	62.0	19	38.0		
Associate degree	7	58.3	5	41.7		
Bachelor's degree and higher	22	78.6	6	21.4		
Parental Employment Status						
Unemployed	61	57.0	46	43.0	2.669	0.102
Employed	34	70.8	14	29.2		
Family Type						
Nuclear family	74	60.7	48	39.3	0.097	0.755
Extended family	21	63.6	12	36.4		
Income Level						
Income less than expenses	17	45.9	20	54.1	4.873	0.087
Income equivalent to expense	63	65.6	33	34.4		
Income more than expenses	15	68.2	7	31.8		
Number of Children						
1	6	60.0	4	40.0	1.317	0.518
2	50	65.8	26	34.2		
3 and more	39	56.5	30	43.5		
Child Gender						
Female	45	64.3	25	35.7	0.483	0.487
Male	50	58.8	35	41.2		
Age of the Child						
4-6	29	52.7	26	47.3	2.635	0.105
7-10	66	66.0	34	34.0		

Table 2. Comparison of mean scores of parents with disabled and non-disabled children from VSTCS

Parents with Non-Disabled Children (n=95)	Parents with Disabled Children (n=60)	Test Value	p
$\bar{X} \pm SS$	$\bar{X} \pm SS$		
Average scores from VSTCS	44.18±4.94	41.66±5.30	t=3.006 0.003

Also, there was no significant difference between the groups in terms of sending the child to his/her room as a punishment. To the question, "Do your discipline strategies work?" most of the parents with non-disabled children (56.8%) answered, "they usually work," whereas most of the parents with disabled children (53.3%) answered, "they sometimes work." To the question, "Do your disciplining strategies harm your child?" 58.9% of the parents with non-disabled children and 66.7% of the parents with disabled children answered, "Not at all" (Table 3).

Table 3. Comparison between parents with disabled children and parents with non-disabled children in terms of whether they resort to violent discipline, the discipline strategies they use, and their views about these strategies

	Parents with Non-Disabled Children		Parents with Disabled Children		χ^2	p
	n	%	n	%		
Whether they resort to violent discipline against their children (n=155)						
Yes	80	84.2	58	96.7	5.843	0.016
No	15	15.8	2	3.3		
Discipline strategies used (n=138)*						
Verbal (yelling, scolding, insulting, etc.)	58	61.1	46	76.7	4.061	0.044
Physical (hitting, pushing, etc.)	4	4.2	9	15.0	5.572	0.018
Forbidding the things the child love	38	40.0	15	25.0	3.677	0.055
Locking the child in their room	2	2.1	2	3.3	0.221	0.639
Huff-Not talking	8	8.4	10	16.7	2.436	0.119
Do your discipline strategies work?						
Not at all	5	5.3	3	5.0		
They sometimes work	26	27.4	32	53.3	10.863	0.012
They usually work	54	56.8	21	35.0		
I have no idea	10	10.5	4	6.7		
Do your disciplining strategies harm your child?						
Not at all	56	58.9	40	66.7		
A little bit	22	23.2	13	21.7	1.311	0.519
I have no idea	17	17.9	7	11.7		

*Multiple options are selected

Discussion

The results of our study indicate that parents with disabled children scored lower from VSTCS and resorted to violent discipline more frequently than parents with non-disabled children. Although many studies have been conducted to investigate the discipline methods used by parents with disabled and non-disabled children (8,11,13,22-27); no study has been conducted to explore parents' violence sensitivity. In some studies measuring awareness of child abuse among parents with disabled children, it is stated that parents are not even sufficiently aware of the forms of violence against the child (23,28-30). There are even some studies that have concluded that parents do not consider physical punishment and violence against children as physical abuse (27,31,32). Pekdoğan (33) emphasizes that when mothers' awareness of child abuse decreases, their abusing potential increases. In their study comparing the child-rearing attitudes of parents with disabled and non-disabled children, Ayran and Baran (11) found that mothers with disabled children were overprotective and scored higher points from the strict discipline sub-dimension than mothers with non-disabled children. Similarly, Keskin et al (18) determined that the child-

rearing attitudes of parents with disabled children were oppressive, disciplinary, and overprotective. Consistent with the literature, in the present study, the parents with disabled children were less sensitive to violence, which we think may be associated with lower awareness levels of child abuse as well as the stress that parents experience due to the disability of the child, as indicated in the relevant literature. Parents' acceptance or rejection of their disabled children may also affect their sensitivity to violence against children and their potential for violence. Consciously or not, parents may neglect their children or may inflict physical, verbal, or emotional violence on them due to intense stress, anxiety, and depression (30,33). In previous studies, most of the mothers emphasized that they can care more about their children when they are informed and supported (4,9).

In their study investigating the child abuse potential of parents of healthy preschoolers, Yalçın et al (34) reported a low level of abuse potential. Similarly, in their study investigating the perceptions and attitudes of mothers about child neglect, Polat et al (35) found that mothers' perception and attitude scores were high. These results are consistent with our findings indicating that parents of non-disabled

children are more sensitive to violence against children than parents of disabled children.

Considering the use of violent discipline among study groups, it was seen that parents of disabled children resorted to strict disciplinary methods more frequently than parents of non-disabled children and that the difference between the groups was statistically significant. Consistent with our study, some other studies have reported that disabled children are at a greater risk of violent discipline (7,8,22,24,25,36).

When asked whether their discipline strategies worked, parents of disabled children reported that they sometimes worked. It is thought that parents of disabled children resort to verbal and physical punishments due to the physical and financial burden of caring for disabled children and their failure to understand the needs of the child and to communicate effectively with the child. Nonetheless, disciplinary punishments do not change the burden of caring for the child. This is because a disabled child is usually unable to react to punishments such as being yelled at or being beaten (6). They may also sometimes give excessive behavioral reactions. These findings suggest that violent discipline harms children's development and does not work in the long term. Therefore, it is very important that parents of disabled children are supported so that they can establish more positive and effective communication with their children.

In this study, it was found that parents with disabled children inflicted verbal and physical violence on their children more than those with non-disabled children. In their study on parents' perspectives on domestic violence against children with autism, Muhammedi et al (37) confirmed that physical violence and verbal violence were the most common forms of violence against autistic children. Ayran and Baran (11) found that mothers with disabled children inflicted physical violence on their children significantly more than mothers with non-disabled children. In their study conducted with 86 couples on physical violence against children with hearing loss, Jiang et al (25) reported that the rate of inflicting minor physical violence was 44.8% while that of severe physical violence was 15.7%. In their

meta-analysis studies, Jones et al (10) found that the rate of inflicting physical violence on disabled children was 4-20%. The findings of a study have shown that harsh parental discipline is associated with the severity of the symptom of the child, parenting stress, economic pressure faced by the family, and discrimination in the community (13). Our study is in parallel with the literature. According to some studies, because the child's disability creates stress on parents, parents may be resorting to violence due to a decrease in their coping abilities and feelings of consistency (5,26,36).

In our study, it was found that the use of the silent treatment method was more prevalent among parents with disabled children while the loss of privilege method was more prevalent among parents with non-disabled children; however, there was no statistically significant difference between the groups in terms of these two variables. Ayran and Baran (11) found that mothers with non-disabled children mostly sent their children to their room as a punishment whereas parents with disabled children mostly inflicted verbal punishments such as yelling, scolding, insulting, etc. A study revealed that 81% of mothers inflicted psychological violence on their disabled children (27). Regardless of the reason, all forms of violence that negatively affect children's development should not be used against any child, regardless of whether they are disabled or non-disabled.

Limitations

The first of these limitations was that the study was conducted in only one province. Since individuals' perceptions of the concept of violence are rooted in their culture and attitudes towards violence against children may differ between cultures, further research, both quantitative and qualitative, is needed in different areas of life. The second limitation was that data was collected using only a personal information form and a scale.

Conclusion

The study concludes that parents with disabled children are less sensitive to violence against their children and they resort to violent discipline more than

parents with non-disabled children. Besides the medical treatment for disabled children, supporting programs (home care and rehabilitation services, etc.) should be developed and implemented to strengthen the awareness, rehabilitation, and care services of parents, caregivers, and families. Increasing the awareness and sensitivity of all parents, especially parents with disabled children, is the primary preventive intervention against violence tendency and violence. Accordingly, it is recommended that disabled children should be carefully monitored to protect them from violence, and the violence sensitivity levels of parents of children in risky groups should be measured. Helping parents develop coping mechanisms to reduce parental stress can contribute to

parents' ability to cope with the child's incompatibility and care difficulties without resorting to violence as well as to use healthy discipline strategies.

Further studies, both quantitative and qualitative, are needed to determine the violence sensitivity levels of parents with disabled and non-disabled children and to describe, define, and evaluate the factors affecting parental violence against children. It is recommended that further research be conducted with a larger sample with different demographic variables in different provinces and districts.

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