



THE EXAMINATION OF PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' RECOGNITION OF CHILD NEGLECT AND ABUSE ¹

Okul Öncesi Öğretmenlerinin Çocuk İhmal ve İstismarını Tanıma Durumlarının İncelenmesi

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Öz

Yaşamın ilk sekiz yılını oluşturan erken çocukluk yılları, gelişimsel açıdan kritik yıllar olarak adlandırılır. Bu yıllarda çocuklarla yapılan araştırmalar, gerekli bakımı alamayan veya ihmal edilen çocukların diğer çocuklara kıyasla daha fazla sorun yaşadığını ortaya koymuştur. Bununla birlikte, çocuğun temel gereksinimlerini karşılamak, topluma uyum sağlamasında oldukça etkilidir. Çocuk ihmal ve istismarı, anne, baba ya da çocuğun bakımını üstlenen kişiler tarafından çocuğa uygulanan toplumsal kurallar ile uzmanlar tarafından uygunsuz ya da zararlı olarak değerlendirilen, çocuğun büyüme ve gelişmesini bozan ya da sınırlayan eylem ya da eylemsizliklerdir. Öğretmenler, çocukların sağlıklı büyümesi, gelişmesi ve korunmasında önemli role sahiptirler. Ayrıca ihmal ve istismar vakalarının erken tespit edilmesinde de etkilidirler. Bu noktadan hareketle çalışmanın amacı, okul öncesi öğretmenlerinin çocuk ihmal ve istismarını tanıma durumlarını demografik değişkenler açısından incelemektir. Araştırmada genel tarama modeli kullanılmıştır. Araştırmanın örneklemini oluşturan 341 okul öncesi öğretmeni, 2020-2021 eğitim öğretim yılında Konya il merkezi Meram, Selçuklu ve Karatay ilçelerinde bağımsız anaokulu ve anasınflarında çalışmaktadır. Araştırmada veri toplama aracı olarak Karadağ, Sönmez ve Dereobalı (2014) tarafından geliştirilen "Çocuk İhmal ve İstismar Belirtileri Ölçeği" ile "Demografik Bilgi Formu" kullanılmıştır. Veriler SPSS26 paKet programı kullanılarak analiz edilmiştir. Bulgular analiz edilirken demografik bilgilerin belirlenmesi amacıyla frekans ve yüzdeler hesaplanmıştır. Değişkenlerin normal dağılım varsayımı karşılanmadığından ikili grup karşılaştırmalarında Mann-Whitney U-Testi, değişkenlerin normal dağılım varsayımının sağlandığı gruplarda ise tek yönlü varyans analizi (ANOVA) testleri kullanılmıştır. Araştırma sonucunda kadın ve erkek okul öncesi öğretmenlerinin çocuk ihmal ve istismarını tanımaları arasında cinsiyete göre anlamlı bir fark olmadığı; ancak 31-35 yaş aralığındaki öğretmenler ile 46 yaş ve üzeri olan öğretmenlerin çocuk ihmal ve istismarını tanımaları arasında istatistiksel olarak anlamlı bir fark olduğu bulunmuştur. Ayrıca evli öğretmenler ile bekar öğretmenler arasında çocuk ihmal ve istismarını tanımaları açısından istatistiksel olarak anlamlı bir fark tespit edilmemiştir. Araştırmanın bir diğer sonucuna göre öğretmenlerin çocuk ihmal ve istismarını tanımaları mesleki kıdeme göre ve öğretmenlerin çocuk ihmal ve istismarını tanımaları arasında hizmet içi eğitim alıp almama değişkenine göre istatistiksel olarak anlamlı bir fark bulunmadığı tespit edilmiştir. Araştırmanın sonuçları ilgili alan yazınla tartışılmış ve öneriler sunulmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Okul Öncesi, Öğretmen, İhmal, İstismar.

Abstract

The early childhood years, which constitute the first eight years of life, are called developmentally critical years. Research conducted with children in these years revealed that children who did not receive necessary care or were neglected experienced more problems than other children. However, meeting the child's basic needs is very effective in helping him adapt to society. Child neglect and abuse involve behaviors or omissions by caregivers—such as parents—that harm or impede a child's development, and actions or inactions that are considered inappropriate or harmful by experts and that disrupt or limit the child's growth and development. Teachers have an important role in the healthy growth, development and the protection of children. They are also effective in detecting cases of neglect and abuse early. Starting from this point, the aim of the study is to examine preschool teachers' recognition of child neglect and abuse in terms of demographic variables. A General Screening Model was used in the research. 341 preschool teachers, who constitute the sample of the research, work in independent kindergartens and kindergartens in Meram, Selçuklu and Karatay districts of Konya city center in the 2020-2021 academic year. "Child Neglect and Abuse Symptoms Scale" and "Demographic Information Form" developed by Karadağ, Sönmez and Dereobalı (2014) were used as data collection tools in the study. The data were analyzed using the SPSS26 package program. While analyzing the findings, frequencies and percentages were calculated to determine demographic information. Since the normal distribution assumption of the variables was not met, Mann-Whitney U-Test was used in pairwise group

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comparisons, and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were used in groups where the normal distribution assumption of the variables was met. As a result of the research, it was found that there was no significant difference between the recognition of child neglect and abuse by female and male preschool teachers according to gender; however, there was a statistically significant difference between the recognition of child neglect and abuse by teachers aged 31-35 and those aged 46 and over. In addition, no statistically significant difference was found between married and single teachers in terms of their recognition of child neglect and abuse. According to another result of the research, it was determined that there was no statistically significant difference between the recognition of child neglect and abuse by professional seniority and between the recognition of child neglect and abuse by the variable of whether or not teachers received in-service training. The results of the research were discussed with the relevant literature and suggestions were presented.

Keywords: Preschool, Teacher, Neglect, Abuse.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood years, called the first eight years after birth, are vital in terms of acquiring physical, cognitive and language skills, self-care skills and socio-emotional skills (Fernald et al., 2017; Toprakçı, 2010). In these years, meeting and protecting children's physical, social and emotional needs is very important for their development (Altındağ and Sağlam, 2012). Research shows that children who do not receive adequate care or are neglected face more challenges than their peers (Baginsky, 2003; Beissel, 2007; Davidov and Grusec, 2006). However, meeting the child's basic needs is very effective in helping him/her adapt to society (Nelsen, Lott, and Glenn, 2007; Solter, 2020).

Child neglect and abuse is the social rules applied to the child by the mother, father or those who care for the child and actions or inactions that are considered by experts to be inappropriate or harmful and that disrupt or limit the child's growth and development. In these cases, the child's physical, sexual, social and emotional development may be damaged and his health and safety may be endangered (Kaya, 2017; Taner and Gökler, 2004). Kurtay (2012) defines "child neglect" as the failure of those who are primarily responsible for the child's care to meet the necessary needs for their physical or emotional development; It defines "child abuse" as behaviors that negatively affect the child's health, physical and psychological development, knowingly or unknowingly, by the child's family, individuals around him or the state.

In many countries of the world, regardless of their level of development, children can be maltreated (Toprakçı, 2017; WHO, 2006). While some children are forced to work in conditions that are not appropriate for their age and development level, some children may have to live in the middle of war. Some children were abandoned and deprived by their families. These children cannot meet their basic needs, and some of them may become disabled or lose their lives (Pala, 2011).

Turkey signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child on September 4, 1990. This convention was established to protect the rights of children and prevent child abuse and neglect from occurring worldwide. Children's rights are included within the scope of human rights with this agreement. Accordingly, all responsibilities regarding the healthy growth and development of the child must be taken into account (Polat, 2007). The Convention on the Rights of the Child states that child abuse and neglect must be addressed comprehensively at both social and individual levels (Tunca and Özer, 2015).

Growing up in a protective environment helps children be physically and mentally healthy and happy, and have a sense of self-actualization. At the same time, growing up in a protective environment will reduce the likelihood of children being exposed to neglect and abuse (Bellamy, 2004). Teachers have an important role in the healthy growth, development and the protection of children. They are also effective in early detection of cases of neglect and abuse (Can, 2016; Karaman Kepenekçi and Nayır, 2012; Pelendecioğlu and Bulut, 2009). The child may carry many negative events experienced in his family to school. In this case, the first person expected to notice the bad things in the child's family environment is the teacher (Erginer, 2007).

It is important for the teacher to investigate the problem in cases such as sudden behavioral changes in the child, aggressive behavior, emotional damage and low academic success. In this way, some problems can be solved before they escalate (Beyazova and Şahin, 2001; Kenny and McEachern, 2002). Therefore, preschool teachers, who are in constant interaction with children, should be knowledgeable about recognizing, preventing and intervening in the signs and risks of child neglect and abuse. The aim of this study is to examine preschool teachers' recognition of child neglect and abuse in terms of demographic variables.

METHOD

Research Model: General Screening Model was used in this research. This model, commonly employed to make generalizations about a population, involves collecting information either from the entire population or a representative sample. (Karasar, 2008).

Study Group: The study sample consisted of 341 preschool teachers working in kindergartens located in the Meram, Selçuklu, and Karatay districts of Konya, Turkey, during the 2020-2021 academic year. A random sampling method was used, ensuring that each member of the population had an independent chance of being selected (Ural and Kılıç, 2006). 323 (94.7%) of the teachers participating in the research are women and 18 (5.3%) are men. When the ages of the

teachers are examined; 17 (5.0%) were in the 20-25 age range, 50 (14.7%) were in the 26-30 age range, 91 (26.7%) were in the 31-35 age range, 72 (% 21.1) are in the 36-40 age range, 64 (18.8%) are in the 41-45 age range, and 47 (13.8%) are in the 46 and over age range. When the marital status of the teachers participating in the research is examined; 271 (79.5%) are married and 70 (20.5%) are single. Additionally, when the number of children their teachers have is examined; 75 (22.0%) said they did not have children, 67 (19.6%) said they had one child, 150 (44.0%) said they had two children, and 49 (14.4%) said they had only one child. He reported having three or more children. When the professional seniority of teachers is examined; 52 (15.2%) between 1-5 years, 59 (17.3%) between 6-10 years, 104 (30.5%) between 11-15 years, 73 (It was determined that 21.4% of them had professional seniority between 16-20 years, 28 (8.2%) had 21-25 years of professional seniority, and 25 (7.3%) had 26 years or more of professional seniority. 115 (33.7%) of the teachers stated that they participated in in-service training on neglect and abuse, while 226 (66.3%) did not participate. Additionally, 148 (43.4%) of the teachers stated that they took courses on child neglect and abuse during their undergraduate education, while 193 (56.6%) stated that they did not.

Data Collection Tools:

Demographic Information Form: This form included seven questions designed to gather demographic information about the teachers, covering gender, age, marital status, number of children, professional seniority, participation in in-service training on neglect and abuse, and completion of courses on neglect and abuse during undergraduate education.

Child Abuse and Neglect Signs Scale (CANSS): The adaptation of this scale, originally developed by Karadağ, Sönmez, and Dereobalı (2014), was also conducted by the same authors for Turkish use. To assess the construct validity, an exploratory factor analysis with Varimax rotation was performed, yielding an eigenvalue of 12.12 and explaining 35.65% of the variance. In order to determine the reliability of the measurement tool in terms of internal consistency, the Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient was calculated and the alpha value of the scale was $\alpha = .94$; The scale shows strong internal consistency. Due to the repetition of some items, these items were removed and the scale was reduced from 40 items to 34 items. A five-point Likert type evaluation range was determined in the evaluation of the measurement tool. For each item, 1 point was given for the "strongly disagree" response, 2 points for the "disagree" response, 3 points for the "undecided" response, 4 points for the "agree" response, and 5 points for the "completely agree". The highest score that preschool teachers can get from this scale is 150 and the lowest score is 30.

Ethical Considerations: This study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles as approved by the Aksaray University Human Research Ethics Committee on December 18, 2020, under protocol number 2020/13-54.

Data Analysis: "Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS 26.0. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to summarize demographic information. As the assumption of normal distribution was not met for some variables, the Mann-Whitney U-Test was applied for pairwise comparisons. For groups where the normality assumption held, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were conducted."

RESULTS

Table 1. U-test Results of Child Neglect and Abuse Symptoms Scale Scores of Preschool Teachers According to Gender

Gender	N	Rank Average	Rank Total	u	p
Woman	323	172.39	556881.50	2458,500	0.270
Male	18	146.08	2629.50		

Table 1 shows that there is no statistically significant difference between the scale scores of male and female teachers ($U = 2458$; $p = 0.270$). In other words, male and female preschool teachers' views on perceiving signs of child abuse and neglect are similar.

Table 2. ANOVA Result of Child Neglect and Abuse Symptoms Scale Scores According to the Ages of Preschool Teachers

Variance Source	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Squares	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Significant Difference
Intergroup	10739,548	5	2147,910	3,348	0.006	(31-35 years)-(46 years and above)
Within groups	214933,684	335	641,593			
Total	225673,232	340				

* $p < 0.05$

Table 2 shows that there is a statistically significant difference between the child neglect and abuse symptoms scale scores of teachers in different age groups ($F(3,348) = 3.348$; $p < 0.05$). This difference is between teachers in the 31-35 age group and teachers in the 46 and above age group. Accordingly, preschool teachers aged 31-35 recognize the signs of child neglect and abuse better than teachers aged 46 and over.

Table 3. U-test Results of Child Neglect and Abuse Symptoms Scale Scores According to Marital Status of Preschool Teachers

Marital status	<i>N</i>	Rank Average	Rank Total	<i>u</i>	<i>p</i>
Married	271	174.33	47243.00	8583.00	0.220
Single	70	158.11	11068.00		

Table 3 shows that there is no statistically significant difference between the scale scores of married and single teachers ($U = 8583$; $p = 0.220$). In other words, the ways married and single preschool teachers perceive signs of child abuse and neglect are similar.

Table 4. U-test Results of Child Neglect and Abuse Symptoms Scale Scores According to Preschool Teachers' Status of Having Children

Having children	<i>N</i>	Rank Average	Rank Total	<i>u</i>	<i>p</i>
Yes	266	175.74	45948.00	9513.00	0.540
No	75	164.84	12363.00		

When Table 4 is examined, it is seen that there is no statistically significant difference between the scale scores of teachers with or without children ($U = 9513$; $p = 0.540$). In other words, the perceptions of preschool teachers who have children and those who do not have children are similar in terms of identifying signs of child abuse and neglect.

Table 5. ANOVA Result of Child Neglect and Abuse Symptoms Scale Scores According to the Number of Children of Preschool Teachers

Variance Source	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Squares	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Intergroup	2331,399	3	777,133	0.919	0.432

Within groups	281492,975	333	845,324
Total	283824,374	336	

Table 5 shows that there is no statistically significant difference between the child neglect and abuse symptoms scale scores of teachers with different numbers of children ($F(3,333) = 0.919$; $p=0.432$). These findings show that the perceptions of preschool teachers with different numbers of children towards recognizing signs of child abuse and neglect are similar.

Table 6. ANOVA Result of Child Neglect and Abuse Symptoms Scale Scores According to Professional Seniority of Preschool Teachers

Variance Source	Total of Blacks	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Squares	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Intergroup	5515,813	5	1103,163	1,311	0.259
Within groups	281898,076	335	841,487		
Total	287413,889	340			

Table 6 shows that there is no statistically significant difference between the child neglect and abuse symptoms scale scores of teachers with different seniority ($F(5,335) = 1.311$; $p=0.259$).

Table 7. U-test Results of Child Neglect and Abuse Symptoms Scale Scores According to In-Service Training Received by Preschool Teachers

Receiving in-service training	<i>N</i>	Rank Average	Rank Total	<i>u</i>	<i>p</i>
Yes	115	182.24	20957.50	11702.50	0.133
No	226	165.28	37353.50		

Looking at Table 7, it is seen that there is no statistically significant difference between teachers who received in-service training and teachers who did not receive in-service training ($U = 11702.50$; $p = 0.133$). These findings showed that the perceptions of preschool teachers who received and did not receive in-service training towards recognizing signs of child neglect and abuse were at similar levels.

Table 8. U-test Results of Child Neglect and Abuse Symptoms Scale Scores According to the Status of Preschool Teachers Taking Courses During Their Undergraduate Education

Whether or not to take courses during undergraduate education	<i>N</i>	Rank Average	Rank Total	<i>u</i>	<i>p</i>
Yes	148	185.53	27458.00	12132.00	0.017
No	193	159.86	30853.00		

* $p<0.05$

As shown in Table 8, there is a statistically significant difference between teachers who took courses on child neglect and abuse during their undergraduate education and teachers who did not take courses ($U=12132$; $p<0.05$). This difference is in favor of those taking courses in undergraduate education.

CONCLUSION, DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of the research, no significant difference was found between female and male preschool teachers' recognition of child neglect and abuse in terms of gender. When the literature was examined, studies with similar results were found (Karakoç, 2017; Kürklü, 2011; Sağır and Gözler, 2013; Yaşar, Kızıltepe and Kandir, 2014). However, there are also studies showing that there is a statistically significant difference between preschool teachers' knowledge levels about child neglect and abuse depending on their gender (Celiloğlu, 2018; Kınay Gündoğdu, 2020; O'toole et al., 1999).

According to another result of the research, a statistically significant difference was found between the recognition of child neglect and abuse by teachers aged 31-35 and those aged 46 and over. Accordingly, it was determined that teachers aged 31-35 were more familiar with child neglect and abuse than teachers aged 46 and above. In a similar study, Bülbül et al. (2019) found that there was a statistically significant difference in classroom teachers' knowledge levels about child neglect and abuse between different age groups. This situation may have been influenced by the high awareness of teachers who graduated from a bachelor's degree at a young age regarding the subject. It is also thought that young teachers may have been affected by the sensitivity about neglect and abuse in recent years. However, Ayekin (2014) found that the attitudes of preschool teachers in different age groups towards sexually abused children were similar and there was no statistically significant difference. Again, some studies have revealed that there is no statistically significant difference in teachers' recognition of the signs and risks of child neglect and abuse in terms of age variable (Alim Doğan, 2019; Barlık, 2018; Celiloğlu, 2018; Duman et al., 2019; Karakoç, 2017; Uysal and Özsoy, 2003).

Another striking result of the study is that there was no statistically significant difference between the married teachers and single teachers in the sample in terms of their recognition of child neglect and abuse. When the literature was examined, studies that reached similar results were found (Bağ, 2019; Barlık, 2018; Bülbül et al., 2019). In addition, Sağır and Gözler (2013), in their study with preschool and primary teachers, found that married teachers had higher awareness levels on the subject than single teachers.

According to another result of the research, there was no statistically significant difference between the recognition of child neglect and abuse by teachers who have children and those who do not have children. When the literature was examined, similar findings were reached with the research results (Bağ, 2019; Kınay Gündoğdu, 2020; Kürklü, 2011). Walsh et al. (2005) found that teachers who are parents can recognize the symptoms and risks of physical and sexual abuse and neglect and have more confidence in this regard.

As a result of the research, it was determined that preschool teachers' recognition of child neglect and abuse did not show a statistically significant difference according to the number of children they had. In a similar study conducted by Barlık (2018), he did not find a statistically significant difference between teachers' awareness of child neglect and abuse, their status as parents and the number of children. However, Sağır and Gözler (2013) found in their study that there was a statistically significant difference in the awareness levels of preschool and classroom teachers regarding child neglect and abuse depending on the number of children they had.

Another result of the research found that teachers' recognition of child neglect and abuse did not vary according to professional seniority. Findings parallel to these results have been found in the literature (Duman et al., 2019; Sağır and Gözler, 2013; Sarıbaş, 2013). However, there are also studies showing that seniority is a predictive variable on the attitude towards reporting abuse (Choo et al., 2013 ; Greco et al., 2022). For example, Choo et al. (2013) concluded that teachers with fewer years of seniority had higher intentions to report neglect and abuse. Bağ (2019) determined that as teachers' professional seniority increases, they can recognize familial factors in child neglect and abuse, and the symptoms and risks of child neglect and abuse in general. Alim Doğan (2019) also found that preschool teachers' knowledge levels about the symptoms and risks of child neglect and abuse differ significantly according to professional seniority. However, O'toole et al., (1999) found that teachers with less professional seniority were more knowledgeable about which behaviors could be neglect and abuse. In his study, Kürklü (2011) found that teachers with 26 years or more of

professional experience were more likely to recognize child neglect and abuse than teachers with less professional seniority. It is thought that in parallel with the increase in teachers' professional experience, teachers have more knowledge about the family and social risk factors with which the child interacts, which may have affected their recognition of child neglect and abuse. Similarly, Fenton (2012) stated that teachers with more years of seniority had less concern about reporting abuse than those with less seniority, but the reporting rate did not depend on seniority. This also shows that teachers' attitudes may change over time.

Another result of the research found that there was no statistically significant difference in terms of teachers' recognition of child neglect and abuse in terms of the variable of whether or not they received in-service training. However, a statistically significant difference was found between the scale scores of teachers who took courses on child neglect and abuse during their undergraduate education and those who did not, in favor of those who took courses in their undergraduate education. When looking at the literature, similar results were found (Barlık, 2018; Koçtürk, 2018; Taş, 2017). In a study conducted by Uysal and Özsoy (2003), a statistically significant difference was found between teachers who received in-service training and those who did not, in the averages they gave to the stories about child neglect and abuse. In his study, Kenny (2004) found that teachers who received in-service training had more knowledge about neglect and abuse than teachers who did not receive it. In the study of Toros and Tiirik (2016), it was determined that providing teachers with training on child neglect and abuse contributed to the detection of these cases. When these results are evaluated as a whole, it is concluded that child neglect and abuse issues should be included in the undergraduate education program and in-service training should be organized for teachers. Through these trainings, teachers can both increase their knowledge on the subject and provide the opportunity to provide training to children and families on recognizing and preventing neglect and abuse. As a matter of fact, Melkman (2024) stated that educators should receive regular support and guidance to meet their professional and emotional needs in order to successfully deal with such sensitive and complex cases. Additionally, according to McKee and Dillenburger, (2012), the most frequently cited reason for educators not reporting is their lack of knowledge regarding identification and reporting procedures. This may be a result of limited child protection training offered to pre-service and in-service teachers(McKee and Dillenburger, 2012).

Depending on the research findings, the following recommendations are given;

- Pre-service and in-service training can be organized to ensure that preschool teachers gain awareness about recognizing and reporting child neglect and abuse,
- Preschool teachers can be encouraged to take an active role in studies to prevent child neglect and abuse in collaboration with other field experts such as doctors, psychiatrists and psychologists.
- Courses on child neglect and abuse and courses on child law can be included in undergraduate programs of universities as compulsory for pre-school teacher candidates.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATION

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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