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# Sexual abuse among children with disabilities in Saudi Arabia: Survey Study

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## Abstract

Sexual child abuse in developing nations is common because there are minimal rules on children's safety and minimal knowledge on the topic. The objectives are to determine the existence of sexual abuse phenomenon concerning Saudi Arabia's disabled children. A quantitative survey research was carried out by assessing sexual abuse prevalence in the Tabouk region. Forty participants fulfilled the study questionnaire. The survey questionnaire on this study contains 20 items. The results showed that the children with intellectual disabilities are more vulnerable to sexual abuse. 90% of the respondents averred that they had been sexually abused when a child with a disability. From the findings, school administration plays an important role in preventing the impacts of sexual abuse on impaired children. Findings also brought light to school administration's role in acknowledging sexual abuse against disabled children.

**Keywords:** Disabled Children, Sexual Abuse, Developmental disabilities, Intellectual disabilities, School administration

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## 1. Introduction

Many research studies are showing the vulnerability of disabled children to abuse; this is mainly because they rely on others even for daily support and, furthermore, are socially isolated (1, 2). The research also indicates that while 9% of the nondisabled are exposed to various forms of abuses, 13% of their disabled counterparts were.

In particular, there has been an established association between maltreatment of children and disability. However, research studies do not explain the aspects that characterize disability regarding the risk in maltreatment towards children (3, 4). This is also true that besides the disabilities, risk factors for the abuse of a disabled child involve other factors besides them.

Sexual abuse cases have grown in number but research studies about its nature towards disabled children remain scarce. Intellectually disabled children below 18 face sexual abuse when they confront unwanted sexual contact (5, 6). Emotional pressurization appears as the most common type of sexual abuse which children experienced according to reported incidents throughout

which perpetrators employed forcing and threats (7). This investigation studies children with disabilities within the Tabouk region to understand how their susceptibility to sexual abuse compares to unaffected children.

It has been observed that adult participants with disabilities had a greater risk of experiencing sexual victimization compared to their minor counterparts. The highest type of disability found to be risk-facilitating with respect to sexual victimization was sensory impairment. The odds of sexual victimization among individuals with a disability were substantially higher in the African countries, compared with all others, and substantially lower in the Western Europe sample than in the United States. There were no significant differences between eras.

The UN Convention supports the protection of children with disabilities from abusive treatment. Article 19 of the UN Convention posits that protection of the child from all forms of mental or physical damage, violence, mistreatment, and sexual abuse is cardinal (8). Also, Article 2 of the UN Convention states that all children enjoy equal rights that are not subjected to discrimination.

Article 23 unequivocally identifies rights of a child with a disability to increase self-sufficiency and full participation in community life and events (8). Article 7 addresses appropriate measures to ensure disabled children their best rights are preserved (8, 9). This would mean proper handling that offers protection to prevent maltreatment or abuse to such children.

Pervasive indications exist which signal disabled child abuse. In general, these signs are divided into two categories: behavioral and physical. A disabled child who undergoes abuse shows behavioral warnings such as anxiety as well as low self-esteem and isolation and depression and substance abuse alongside low interpersonal interaction and no social skills (10). Rough sleeping patterns combined with unpredictable eating and attendance at school and agitated behaviors signal the potential risk of abuse to disabled children. The physical indicators of abuse present as genital area pain or bruising alongside urinary tract infections and walking difficulties and limb bruising.

The threat of child sexual assault is growing. Most cases of child sexual abuse in Saudi Arabia go undetected (11). Data from the National Family Safety Registry (NFSR) showed that, between 2011 and 2016, child sexual abuse accounted for 14% of all child maltreatment cases (12). Fifty-six percent of the instances involved sexual abuse of disabled children. Seventy-three percent of sexual abuse involves touching, sixty-three percent involves genital touching, and fifty-six percent include physical contact (13).

While considering the sample in which 16,010 high school students aged between 15 to 18 years have contributed and thus developed a result related to sexual abuse, wherein even among them, 13% of population faced sexual abuses (13). In the different descriptive analysis where research at Dammam, Saudi Arabia, out of these 85 % were due to sexual assault cases (2). The fear is that the real prevalence rate of child sexual abuse is higher than recorded in the National Registry.

The major reasons for not reporting the crime are the stigma attached to mentioning sexuality and the embarrassment endured by the victim (14, 15). This serious issue, child sexual abuse, is well silenced by most of the families in the world. Cases of disabled children have worsened, and children are not now able to present their case and voice against injustice. Hence, there is a need to estimate the actual prevalence of child sexual abuse in Saudi Arabia

and to come up with a strategy for public awareness of this crime.

This research evaluates sexual abuse within disabled children in Saudi Arabia. The research further investigated what forms of disability make children more susceptible to sexual abuse. Through its findings this study serves as motivation for authorities to develop educational programs which enhance disabled children's understanding of sex. Through its existing framework the study not only collects data on prevalence rates but also helps recognize the variables that lead to increased sexual abuse risk for children with disabilities.

## 2. Literature Review

Children with disabilities face increased risk of experiencing neglect along with sexual assault. The systematic review documents showed a rate of 13.7% of child sexual violence stemming from disability (16). The research data from Bahrain indicated 58% while Egypt showed 29.8% of sexual assaults according to (17, 18). Medical examination of children admitted to Dammam hospitals showed that sexual assault made up 85% of all cases (19). Research showed that intellectually disabled children experience increased risk of sexual abuse since they lack knowledge about sexuality (13). The observed behaviors combined with physical symptoms create a range for assessing whether abusive incidents have occurred with disabled children.

Throughout Saudi Arabia sexual and violent abuse negatively impacts children at rates of 5-10% men and 20% women. Children belonging to the disabled category remain the most susceptible segment (2). Children facing sexual abuse develop emotional and psychological issues most notably when the abuse stays secret. Child Sexual Abuse transitions through different ethnic and socioeconomic settings without prejudice yet several identifiable variables seem to link with such cases. Groups facing increased risk of sexual abuse include families facing disruptions and victims of domestic violence along with preschoolers who have physical disabilities and children from working families. Driving alone and employing nannies for care put children at risk too.

Research demonstrates that children with disabilities face more elevated risks than typical children for incidents of abuse and sexual mistreatment. Saudi Arabian CSA study identified disabled children as specific targets of abuse because sexual abuse in Saudi Arabia now presents as

a widespread health issue (20). An Adverse Childhood Experiences International Questionnaire obtained data from 10,156 individuals who were older than 18 years old. In Saudi Arabia disability and chronic health problems along with diabetes and obesity and syndrome affect children in ways that make them particularly susceptible to child sexual abuse. The World Health Organisation documents that sexual abuse affects between 15 and 20 percent of the world's child population (21).

Recent research demonstrates that sexual abuse toward disabled children happens without any meaningful attraction between perpetrator and victim. The prevalence of sexual abuse constitutes an aggressive form of sexual attack. Disabled children face increased risk because they have limited protection options. Analysis of child abuse rates in Saudi Arabia shows disabled children represent 24 percent of all reported cases (2). A research investigation into physical abuse within Saudi Arabia revealed sexual abuse made up 85% of total cases while non-sexual child mistreatment formed 12% of reported cases and sexual abuse and non-sexual abuse together composed 3% of incidents affecting children from Saudi Arabia. According to a study data indicates that children with disabilities face higher rates of sexual abuse than typical children (12).

This field lacks comprehensive research that focuses on sexual abuse of disabled children in the setting of Arab States. The topic of sexual abuse along with violations of personal dignity remains forbidden in these states (2). Religious customs play a role in creating great reluctance for the population to publicly discuss sexual abuse beyond standard social boundaries. This identified research gap receives attention because Tabouk became the selected location for research that studies sexual abuse experiences of disabled children in Saudi Arabia.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **2.1. Study Design**

A quantitative survey design stands as the foundation for this present study. Demonstrative along with inferential statistical methods analyze the survey data. This instrument assesses how often sexual violence affects children with disabilities. The research design allows for formulation of generalized findings since it achieves better acceptability while remaining focused and rapid in addition to its objective and scientific nature better than a qualitative method. The research adopts positivism as its research approach while choosing to dismiss interpretivism

and pragmatism approaches. A quantitative research design matches the approach of positivism but interpretivism supports either qualitative research or mixed research designs and pragmatism follows likewise. Observations were used to validate the theory about sexual abuse toward disabled children through a deductive research design.

#### **2.2. Study Participants**

The Child Safety Centre within the Tabouk region served as the source for participant recruitment. A total of 40 participants took part in this study because they actively recorded and documented child maltreatment cases. The research utilized convenience sampling to select participants while establishing their eligibility criteria. Individuals who manage disabled children at school and maintain at least two years of experience in recording child abuse cases make up the participant pool. A comparison of employee profiles from Child Safety Centre against eligibility criteria leads to eliminating participants who fail to meet requirements. The study used a total of forty participants including twenty-five student guides and twenty teachers and ten psychologists across schools in Tabouk. The survey questionnaire obtained feedback from all participants while data collection proceeded based on documented cases including Intellectual disability (16), Hearing Impairment (6), Visual Impairment (4), Motor disability (6), learning disabilities (2).

#### **3.3. Data Collection Instrument**

A survey questionnaire collected data regarding disabled children's sexual abuse prevalence rates. The research instrument included 20 items which required different response scales. The study did not collect specific participant demographic information because of confidentiality requirements.

#### **3.4. Data Analysis**

All collected data from the 40 participants was entered into SPSS version 20. The research design prioritized sexual abuse prevalence evaluation in disabled children so descriptive statistics assessed collected data through percentages and frequencies and mean values and standard deviations. Linear regression analysis served to investigate the relationship between dependent and independent variables. The relationships received statistical evaluation at  $P \leq 0.05$  significance.

### 3.5. Validity and Reliability

Research began after conducting validity and reliability tests on the survey questionnaire. The survey questionnaire received content validity assessment through an expert review process that evaluated each questionnaire item for appropriate measurement of the research topic which focused on sexual abuse prevalence. The Content validity analysis confirmed that the survey instrument aligns perfectly with the research objectives. The questionnaire reliability was determined through Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient analysis of ten sample participants. The questionnaire reliability assessment followed George and Mallery (2019) standardized procedures. The research instrument achieved acceptable reliability based on its Cronbach's alpha value of 0.752 (22).

### 3.6. Ethical Clearance

The study of sexual abuse among disabled children in Saudi operates with sensitivity that demands ethical clearance. The researcher made sure to protect the research participants' moral and religious beliefs from harm. Research approval came from the Research and Ethics Committee operating at the Intellectual Disability Center in Tabouk. The research conformed to all requirements of the Helsinki Declaration for ethical research. Every participant maintained their safety throughout the data

collection period. All data received confidentiality protection while being used justly for research purposes. The research participants gave their consent for the study to guarantee their willingness to participate while verifying their voluntary status.

## 4. Results

The data in Table 1 demonstrates that over 95% of participants acknowledged sexual abuse of disabled individuals as a common occurrence. Additionally, 85% of participants stated their institutions operated awareness programs to protect disabled people from sexual abuse. The same 90% of participants reported child disabled people experienced sexual abuse. Social workers play a major role in resolving this issue according to 90% of the participants who answered the survey. The participants indicated physical harassment made up 65% of reported abuses while sexual rape made up 27%. The study revealed that 55% of participants identified children as the most vulnerable group to sexual abuse whereas 37.5% considered intellectually disabled people more susceptible. Participants agreed that most sexual abuse complaints occur after the assault takes place (97.5%). School administrators report sexual abuse in 40% of all cases that occur. The tables below display the mean and standard deviation with frequency for all findings.

*Table 1. Prevalence of Sexual Abuse Among Disabled Children, Demographic Characteristics of Victims of Sexual Abuse.*

Variables	Frequency	Percent	Mean	Standard Deviation
Are there children who have been sexually abused with disabilities?				
Yes	36	90	0.10	0.304
No	4	10		
Do you think that sexual abuse has become a widespread phenomenon, especially in the environment of people with disabilities?				
Yes	38	95	0.5	0.221
No	2	5		
How many cases have been monitored?				
1	26	65	0.50	0.816
2	10	25		
3	2	5		
More than 4	2	5		

What are the majority of cases of sexual abuse reported to a specialist?				
Verbal Harassment	3	7.5	1.20	0.564
Physical Harassment	26	65		
Sexual Rape	11	27		
<b>Demographic Characteristics of Victims of Sexual Abuse</b>				
Which age stages are collective sexual abuse behaviour?				
Childhood	22	55	0.50	0.599
Adolescence	16	40		
Youth	2	5		
Which groups of people with disabilities are most vulnerable to sexual abuse?				
Intellectual Disability	15	37.5	1.65	1.929
Down Syndrome	11	27.5		
Visual Impairment	2	5		
Hearing Impairment	5	12.5		
Physical Impairment	2	5		
Autism	2	5		
Multiple Disabilities	3	7.5		

*Table 2. Preventive Services to Manage Cases of Child Sexual Abuse, Reported Perpetrators.*

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
Does your institution have preventive sexual awareness programs for people with disabilities?				
Yes	34	85	0.15	0.362
No	6	15		
Does the social worker have a role in providing awareness regarding sexual assaults?				
Yes	36	90	0.10	0.304
No	4	10		
When do you get a complaint or problem?				
After the assault occurs	39	97.5	1.03	0.158
During the assault occurs	1	2.5		
Who reported the case of sexual abuse?				
Family	14	35	0.90	0.778
School	16	40		

The child	10	25		
Do you find it difficult to recognize a child with sexual abuse quickly?				
Yes	38	95	0.05	0.221
No	2	5		
<b>Reported Perpetrators</b>				
Usually, a child with a disability is sexually abused by:				
Relatives	29	72.5	0.43	0.747
Friends	5	12.5		
Strangers	6	15		
Is the family notified if their child is sexually abused?				
Yes	39	97.5	0.03	0.158
No	1	2.5		

Table 2 demonstrates how institutional involvement proves helpful to victims who want to report bullying incidents as 85% of participants found this beneficial with 90% of social workers making an impact together with 95% of

respondents agreeing to receive harassment complaints. Most participants (72%) confirmed that relatives often function as perpetrators while 97.5% accepted the need to inform family members about abuse reports.

*Table 3. Treatment Options Available for Child Sexual Abuse Victims.*

Variables	Frequency	Percent	Mean	Standard Deviation
Does the abused child receive treatment?				
Yes	34	85	0.15	0.362
No	6	15		
Do you have programs that specialize in treating this type of abuse?				
Yes	32	80	0.20	0.405
No	8	20		
Does the family work with you to solve the problem?				
Yes	34	85	0.15	0.362
No	6	15		
What forms or modes of treatment are available to victims of sexual abuse?				
Medical	2	5	1.28	0.554
Psychological	25	62.5		

Both	13	32.5		
Is there cooperation from the school administration with the mentor to address and reduce the effects of sexual abuse?				
Yes	39	97.5	0.03	0.158
No	1	2.5		
Do you notice that a child who has been sexually abused with repeated abuse from time to time has become accustomed to and liked to abuse?				
Yes	38	95	0.05	0.221
No	2	5		

The participants confirmed that victims received suitable treatment in 85% of cases. The statistical results indicated programs delivered valuable support and family involvement provided beneficial assistance to victims according to 80% of the study participants. According to survey findings psychological interventions show higher potential for helping abuse victims than medical procedures because 62% of participants selected psychological treatment. A high percentage of 97.5% from the participants recognized

the essential role of school administration in mentoring victims and minimizing sexual abuse effects (Table 3).

The significance of relationships between violence types (verbal, physical and sexual rape) and age stages and significant disabilities was evaluated by linear regression analysis which appears in Table 4. Linear regression models demonstrate that type of disability along with the age stages vulnerable to sexual abuse together explain 2.5% of the total score variance.

*Table 4. Linear Regression Model Summary*

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. The error of the Estimates
1	0.157a	0.025	-0.028	0.572

a. Predictors: (Constant), which groups of people with disabilities are most vulnerable to sexual abuse? Which age group is most vulnerable to be victimized by sexual abuse?

Table 5 shows the ANOVA statistics from the Regression analysis. Our research question about whether independent variables can predict dependent variables is evaluated

using the P-value from the F value of Regression. This current research revealed an F value of 0.466 which produced a p-value of 0.043 that falls below the established alpha level (0.05). The obtained result demonstrates effective forecasting capabilities between independent and dependent variables.

*Table 5. ANOVA*

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	0.305	2	0.152	0.466	0.043B
Residual	12.095	37	0.327		
Total	12.400	39			

## 5. Discussion

Research has thoroughly examined quantitative survey data from participants while ensuring complete accuracy with research goals through the researcher's verification process. The study findings have been structured according to research objectives for discussion throughout the analysis.

### 4.1. *Prevalence of Sexual Abuse in Saudi Arabia*

The results show that sexual abuse of children with disabilities in Saudi Arabia increased considerably to higher levels than any other group.

The findings of this research support earlier studies which established sexual abuse of disabled individuals as a common problem (5, 23). The current study established that institutions run public awareness campaigns to educate people about disabled persons' sexual abuse problems. Developed countries run awareness programs through their higher authorities to teach citizens about their rights while protecting them from abuse (24).

Research data demonstrates that intellectual disability represents the primary medical condition which increases children's susceptibility to sexual assault. The research findings match with another study which establishes intellectual disability as a primary factor increasing sexual abuse susceptibility in children (25). Research indicates intellectual disabilities prevent children from understanding their rights while also preventing them from recognizing abusive sexual actions. The combination of intellectual disabilities leaves children vulnerable to sexual predators. The current research revealed that school administration has a central role in identifying and reporting sexual abuse cases. Healthcare professionals face challenges when they try to identify instances of child sexual abuse according to research findings. Psychological treatment programs were provided to disabled children who suffered sexual abuse to promote their healthy development into adulthood.

### 4.2. *Most common Abuse pattern*

The research study identifies three abuse patterns within disabled children including verbal harassment and physical harassment and sexual abuse. Research indicates physical harassment stands as the primary abuse pattern experienced by children with disabilities in Saudi Arabia. A research showed that disabled children face physical abuse to a large degree because they need help with everyday tasks and struggle to communicate about abuse

experiences effectively (25).

Research findings show that relatives committed most sexual abuse incidents against disabled children. International studies have shown that relatives tend to abuse disabled children. The present research showed how school administrators proactively work to decrease the sexual abuse consequences faced by disabled students. Since sexually abused children typically experience abuse repeatedly it becomes essential to deliver proper care and support services for their well-being.

### 5.3. *Most vulnerable age and nature of disability exposed to sexual assaults*

The current study established a statistically significant relationship between key predictive variables including disability types and child ages and different forms of abuse. Childhood represents the riskiest period when it comes to experiencing sexual assault according to study results. Children with intellectual disabilities face the highest risk of sexual abuse compared to those with physical and visual and hearing impairments. The research evidence reveals an immediate need for teaching children appropriate detection mechanisms and preventive steps for abusive situations. Children who have disabilities need education about proper and improper physical touch (25). Research shows that sex education programs help children with intellectual disabilities develop better protective abilities against sexual assault.

### 5.4. *Role of Institutional Administration*

Results indicate that educational institutions including schools greatly assist children with disabilities to report instances of sexual abuse. Children with or without disabilities create stronger relationships with their educators because they freely discuss their life experiences between each other.

Teachers create emotional welcoming spaces that particularly apply to children. Teachers use their influence to develop their students' future capabilities while revealing their true potential and developing their personality toward exceptional achievement alongside boosting readiness along with competence and confidence that extends into both classroom success and real-world abilities (26).

### 5.5. *Limitation of Prevention Strategies*

The quantitative primary design of this study renders it vulnerable to participant biases which restrict

both the study results and findings. Preconceived notions together with widely accepted knowledge create significant hurdles that undermine study results. Time limits prevent researchers from achieving complete study outcomes because they must conduct surveys with participants at assigned times. The protection of both participant data privacy along with confidentiality issues presents ethical obstacles that constrain this study's progress.

Parent education combined with increased disability child sexual abuse awareness serves as a primary method to stop this abuse from happening. Disable children face challenges when learning which makes parental education essential for safeguarding disabled children's protection from sexual abuse. Established rules need to define appropriate boundaries between caregivers and their disable child patients. The staff members in disable children center management need education training as part of their standard practice. It is vital to educate the public about the dangerous consequences of sexual abuse against disable children because this education can serve to decrease such cases. The Saudi Arabian government must put into effect harsh rules and penalties to protect disabled children from sexual abuse.

## 6. Conclusion

The study evaluated how commonly sexual abuse occurs against children with disabilities across Saudi Arabia. Sexual abuse occurs frequently while children with intellectual disabilities experience disproportionately higher risks of sexual assault. Research showed that childhood represents an exceptionally fragile developmental period. The current research showed how important school administration is in acknowledging sexual abuse incidents involving disabled children. The study's prevalence results guide authorities in their work to create protective measures against sexual abuse. School administration together with social workers must collaborate with parents and policymakers to develop a strong policy system which both stops sexual assault against disabled children and delivers justice against their assailants.

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## Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there was no conflict of interest

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## Appendix

Studies Reviewed	Aim	Method	Findings
Al-Mahroos et al. (2015)	To identify the pattern of child abuse among children	Retrospective study	Bruises are the most common injuries in child abuse, but intercourse and swelling are other patterns as well. However, it is difficult to find evidence of sexual abuse among children.
Aboul-Hagag et al. (2012)	Determination of child sexual abuse among college children of Egypt	Cross-sectional survey	The main predators of child abuse are males and female children are more exposed to sexual abuse.
AlMadani et al. (2012)	To describe the forensic and socio-medical characteristics of child abuse in children and maternity hospitals of Dammam.	Descriptive case series	Most victims of sexual abuse are females and 85% of sexual assaults also take place in hospitals
Wissink et al. (2015)	Determination of sexual abuse among children with disabilities	A narrative review of literature	Disabled children are more exposed to sexual abuse
Blanchard- Dallaire and Hebert (2014)	To determine the social relation of the children who have encountered sexual abuse	Primary quantitative	Interpersonal trust is less among sexually abused children
Brilleslijper-Kater et al. (2004)	To determine the emotional reaction and sexual knowledge among young children who encountered sexual abuse	Primary mixed research	Nearly 25% to 35% of the children who are under the age of 7 have experienced sexual abuse.
Almuneef et al. (2019)	This study aims to investigate the long-term consequences of child abuse of disabled children in Saudi Arabia	Primary quantitative	Results have found that disabled children are at higher risk of sexual abuse and it impacts them psychologically
Omar and Alkhateeb (2019)	This study aims to explore the rate of child sexual abuse in Saudi Arabia	Secondary qualitative	Results suggest that children with disabilities are more vulnerable to child sexual abuse for their dependence on others.