

# Evaluation of Adolescents' Perceptions of Family in Child Sexual Abuse Cases Reported to Forensic Authorities: A Qualitative Study

## Adli Makamlara Bildirilen Çocuk Cinsel İstismarı Olgularında Ergenlerin Aile Algılarının Değerlendirilmesi: Nitel Çalışma

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**ABSTRACT Objective:** This study aimed to evaluate the family perceptions of adolescents in cases of child sexual abuse reported to judicial authorities. **Material and Methods:** In this qualitative investigation, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 children who were exposed to qualified sexual abuse and lived in a northern Turkish city. The criterion sampling method, a purposive sampling technique, was used to select study participants. Interviews were carried out until data saturation was achieved. All interviews were meticulously recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data. The Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research checklist guidelines were adhered to throughout the study. **Results:** In the analysis of the data, three overarching categories (reflections on family relationships, sexual abuse and relationships with family, and situations in the family that are desired to change or improve) and eight sub-themes (mother, father, siblings, directly or indirectly, cognitive dimension, emotional dimension and behavioral dimension) were obtained. **Conclusion:** In this study, it was found that the outcomes related to family dynamics of adolescents who were victims of sexual abuse are very important for healthy mental development. In this context, early detection of negativities related to family dynamics and identification of risky families are very important.

**Keywords:** Adolescent; child sexual abuse; family; qualitative research

**ÖZET Amaç:** Bu çalışmanın amacı, adli makamlara bildirilen çocuk cinsel istismarı vakalarında ergenlerin aile algılarının değerlendirmektir. **Gereç ve Yöntemler:** Bu nitel araştırmada, Türkiye'nin kuzeyindeki bir şehirde yaşayan ve nitelikli cinsel istismara maruz kalmış 15 çocukla yarı yapılandırılmış derinlemesine görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Çalışma katılımcılarını seçmek için amaçlı bir örnekleme tekniği olan ölçüt örnekleme yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Görüşmeler veri doygunluğuna ulaşılan kadar sürdürülmüştür. Tüm görüşmeler titizlikle kaydedilmiş ve daha sonra kelimesi kelimesine yazıya dökülmüştür. Verileri yorumlamak için tematik analiz kullanılmıştır. Çalışma boyunca Niteliksel Çalışmaları Raporlama İçin Birleştirilmiş Kriterler kontrol listesi yönergelerine uyulmuştur. **Bulgular:** Verilerin analizinde 3 kapsayıcı kategori (aile ilişkilerine yansımalar, cinsel istismar ve aile ile ilişkiler ve ailede değişmesi veya iyileşmesi istenen durumlar) ve 8 alt tema (anne, baba, kardeşler, doğrudan veya dolaylı olarak, bilişsel boyut, duygusal boyut ve davranışsal boyut) elde edilmiştir. **Sonuç:** Bu çalışmada, cinsel istismar mağduru ergenlerin aile dinamikleri ile ilgili çıktıların sağlıklı ruhsal gelişim için çok önemli olduğu bulunmuştur. Bu bağlamda aile dinamikleri ile ilgili olumsuzlukların erken tespiti ve riskli ailelerin belirlenmesi oldukça önemlidir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Adölesan; çocuk cinsel istismarı; aile; nitel araştırma

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Child abuse is a grave violation of children's rights and is a universal problem with medical, legal, and psychosocial dimensions that every child is likely to face.<sup>1</sup> Sexual abuse is defined as the use of a child by an adult to obtain sexual pleasure and satisfaction, and when sexual abuse occurs within the family, it is called incest.<sup>2</sup> Research has demonstrated that traumatic childhood experiences like sexual abuse have severe and enduring effects on victims, leading to negative physical, psychological, social, and behavioral consequences for their future growth and development.<sup>3,4</sup> A study conducted by the World Health Organization in 2017 revealed that around 15 million girls aged 15-19 were forced into sexual intercourse or other sexual acts at some point in their lives. Most concerning was the fact that, on average, 90% of these girls reported the perpetrator as someone they knew. Among adolescent boys who experienced sexual abuse, friends and partners were found to be the most common perpetrators.<sup>5</sup> Numerous studies have investigated the impact of sexual abuse on children, yielding significant findings. Among these studies, it has been observed that children exposed to sexual abuse may experience short-term manifestations such as anxiety, insomnia, somatization, amnesia, sleepwalking, and various phobias.<sup>6,7</sup> Traumatic experiences that occur during childhood leave a number of negative biopsychosocial effects on children in both short and long term.<sup>8</sup> These effects manifest themselves as negative returns in the following periods, affecting the social functioning of the child, family society and public health.<sup>6</sup> There are many familial, personal and social sociodemographic and socioeconomic risk factors in child sexual abuse. In this context, it is stated that family has an important effect on abuse. Factors such as intra-family relationships, the death of the mother and father or one of them, severe incompatibility between spouses, alcohol use, unemployment, divorce and separation, the family being too crowded, the spouses being too young, low cultural and economic levels, children being out of unwanted marriage or having serious diseases such as mental retardation increase the risk of abuse.<sup>9</sup> Considering that the influence of parents, with whom the child spends a significant part of his/her time and who have an important contribution to the shaping of

his/her development, is very important in cases of child sexual abuse, it is thought that the findings to be obtained from the study will make an important contribution to the literature.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study was conducted using a qualitative method to evaluate family perceptions from the perspective of adolescents who were victims of sexual abuse. The study was conducted between March 15 and July 15, 2023, at the Child Monitoring Center of a state hospital in northern Türkiye. The criterion sampling method, which is one of the purposeful sampling methods, was used to determine the study group of the research. The inclusion criteria were to agree to participate in the study, to have been exposed to qualified sexual abuse, to be open to communication, and to be cognitively competent to answer the questions posed. The sample size was determined according to data saturation and 15 participants were interviewed.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the study was reported by the Consolidated Criteria for Qualitative Research Reporting guidelines.<sup>11</sup>

Interviews with adolescent children were conducted in a suitable environment using a voice recorder. The research questions were formulated in line with the relevant literature and 2 expert opinions. In this context, 5 main and sub-questions were formed. The 7-stage analysis method developed by Colaizzi was used to analyze the data.<sup>12</sup> The data were re-read independently by 2 researchers and themes and sub-themes were identified. The prominent data in the interview texts were identified and analyzed.

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical approval was obtained from Gümüşhane University Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (date February 2, 2023, no: E-95674917-108.99-164125). Necessary permissions were also obtained from the relevant institution. Written and verbal consent from the participants and their families before starting the interview retrieved. Records and transcripts were stored in a password-protected stored in the device. Study, 1964 Helsinki Declaration principles and ethics of the National Research Committee standards.

## RESULTS

The mean age of the children in the study was  $15.53 \pm 1.2$  years; fourteen were female, and all reported having a low income level. All the participants had been sexually abused by more than one person they knew. Six of the children had been exposed to domestic violence and 10 had tried suicide at least once. The demographic characteristics of the children in the study are presented in Table 1.

As a result of the analysis of the semi-structured interview data, categories, themes, and sub-themes were identified (Table 2).

### CATEGORY 1: REFLECTIONS ON FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

#### Theme 1: Mother

The data from the interviews with sexually abused children revealed that several negative factors related

to their mothers had a significant impact on the children and abandoning the children.

*"I love my dad more than my mom. He takes care of us. When we were little, my mom left and never really acted like a mother. She gave birth and left... I don't love her at all. I don't even want to see her face. I love my dad. He can be argumentative and shouts a lot at us. After getting out of prison, he started working. Well, I wish they didn't separate like the others." (P12)*

#### Theme 2: Father

Based on the data from interviews with the children, it is obvious that the situations described by those who had experienced sexual abuse by their fathers were profoundly traumatizing for these children.

*"What bothered me the most at home was my father's sexual acts against me rather than his prohibitions. I can never forget what he did to me when there*

TABLE 1: Characteristics of the participants

Participant number	Age	Gender	Education level/grade	Income level	Place of residence	Type of exposure to abuse	Number of exposures to abuse	Abuser/age (years)	History of domestic violence	Suicide attempt/ number
P1	14	Female	Secondary school/8	Low	District	Vaginal Oral	Repeatedly	Mother's lover/40	No	Yes/2 times
P2	15	Female	Anatolian High School/ 10	Low	District	Vaginal Oral	More than once	Boyfriend/19	No	Yes/3 times
P3	16	Female	Anatolian High School/ 10	Low	District	Anal	Repeatedly	Boyfriend/ 20	No	Yes/4 times
P4	16	Female	Religious Vocational High School/ 10	Low	Village	Vaginal	More than once	Relative/21	Yes	No
P5	15	Female	Vocational High School/ 10	Low	City	Oral	More than once	Stepfather/45	No	Yes/4 times
P6	16	Female	Vocational High School/10	Low	City	Vaginal Oral	More than once	Relative/21	No	Yes/20 times
P7	16	Female	Open Education/ 11	Low	District	Vaginal Anal	More than once	Boyfriend/ 21	Yes	Yes/4 times
P8	16	Female	Anatolian High School/ 10	Low	City	Vaginal Anal	Repeatedly	Father/ 46	No	No
P9	15	Male	Anatolian High school/ 9	Low	District	Anal	Repeatedly	Relative/18	No	No
P10	16	Female	Anatolian High school/10	Low	District	Vaginal Anal	More than once	Neighbor /54	No	Yes/4 times
P11	17	Female	Vocational High School/ 12	Low	City	Vaginal Oral	More than once	Relative /20	Yes	Yes/3 times
P12	12	Female	Secondary School/ 5	Low	District	Vaginal Oral	More than once	Father/ 34	Yes	No
P13	15	Female	Anatolian High school /10	Low	District	Vaginal	More than once	Boyfriend/ 17	Yes	No
P14	14	Female	Secondary school/ 8	Low	City	Vaginal	More than once	Father /43	Yes	Yes/6 times
P15	16	Female	Anatolian High school/ 10	Low	District	Vaginal Anal	More than once	Teacher/ 42	No	Yes/2 times

**TABLE 2: Adolescents' perceptions of family child sexual abuse cases reported to forensic authorities**

Categories	Themes	Sub-themes
1. Reflections on family relationships	A. Mother	A1. Appearing overprotective
		A2. Failure to show affection
		A3. Constantly imposing restrictions
		A4. Constant arguments with the father
		A5. Not listening to children
		A6. Not caring for children
		A7. Abandoning children
		A8. Using physical violence
		A9. Using psychological violence
	B. Father	B1. Constant arguing with the mother
		B2. Sexual abuse
		B3. Using physical violence
		B4. Using psychological violence
		B5. Not caring for children
		B6. Not working
		B7. Committing a crime (going to prison)
		B8. Being overprotective
		B9. Drinking alcohol
	C. Siblings	C1. Ignoring the sibling
		C2. Believing to be in the foreground
2. Sexual abuse and relationships with family	A. Directly	A1. Being exposed to the father's abuse
		A2. Leaving home and abandoning children
	B. Indirectly	B1. Inadequate economic conditions
		B2. Mother working and leaving the child alone
		B3. Insufficient parental love
		B4. Insufficient parental attention
		B5. Domestic violence
		B6. Overly restrictive behavior of parents
3. Situations that are desired to change or improve in the family	A.Cognitive dimension	A1. Showing and making children feel loved
		A2. Appreciating children
		A3. Caring for children
		A4. Spending time with children
		A5. Protecting children
	B.Emotional dimension	B1. Establishing effective emotional bonding with children
		B2. No emotional violence
		B3. Having a father-daughter relationship
		B4. Loving children
	C.Behavioral dimension	C1. No physical violence
		C2. Avoiding overprotective behavior
		C3. Ending quarrels and arguments within the family
		C4. Communicating effectively
		C5. Listening to children
		C6. Non-drinking father

*was no one else in the house and how he beat me when I said I didn't want to (crying...)” (P14)*

### Theme 3: Siblings

In the interviews with the children, it emerged that their relationships with their siblings were generally positive, but they expressed feelings of not being valued as siblings.

*“I first told my elder brother what my father did to me, and he told my mother. At first, my family protected me. My father was arrested after this incident. I could not predict that it would come to this point. When I told my younger brother what I went through, he told me that he saw my father touching me, and when he asked him later, he denied it. At first, they didn't react much because they didn't know everything, but later they found out.” (P8)*

## CATEGORY 2: SEXUAL ABUSE AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILY

### Theme 1: Directly

The accounts of children who have been exposed to direct paternal sexual abuse are bloodcurdling.

*When it first happened, I told my mother everything my father did to me. My father was drunk in the evening. My mother saw what he did to me; she took me away from him and took me to another room. Then they argued. The next day, when my father sobered up, my mother called me to her and told me to tell her everything and my father what he did to me. I told ... (crying...). My father apologized and said he had been drinking and the matter was closed, but what he did to me continued for 2 years. My mother never noticed. We even continued to sleep in the same bed with my father from time to time.” (P14)*

### Theme 2: Indirectly

Children indirectly think that inadequate economic conditions and excessive restrictive behaviors of the mother and father are effective in increasing their exposure to sexual abuse.

*“I love my dad more than my mom. He takes care of us. When we were little, my mom left and never really acted like a mother. She gave birth and left... I don't love her at all. I don't even want to see*

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*her face. I love my dad. He can be argumentative and shouts a lot at us. After getting out of prison, he started working. Well, I wish they didn't separate like the others."* (P12)

### CATEGORY 3: SITUATIONS THAT ARE DESIRED TO CHANGE OR IMPROVE IN THE FAMILY

#### Theme 1: Cognitive Dimension

The interviews with the children revealed that, in the cognitive dimension, there were situations regarding desired changes or improvements within the family.

*"My parents are separated. It would be very nice if I could stay with my family, with my father and mother separately for ten days. I wish someone would say, 'Take this child and let him spend time with his mother and father', I would be very happy. I would love to spend time with my father and mother. I would like to have fun, laugh, and play games together."* (P9)

#### Theme 2: Emotional Dimension

The children expressed a desire for their families to establish meaningful emotional connections with them through parental love and affection and not apply emotional violence.

*"I wished my mom would understand me, listen to me, not use violence against me, and not impose restrictions even on small things. I also wanted her to allow me to go out with my friends."* (P3)

#### Theme 3: Behavioral Dimension

Interviews with children include statements such as not using physical violence, not showing overprotective behaviors, and ending fights and arguments within the family.

*"My mom is very controlling, so I wish she wouldn't be so restrictive. My family often argues, and I wish that wouldn't happen. I wanted them to listen to me and value my opinions."* (P5)

## DISCUSSION

Children's perceptions of their families were examined through 3 distinct categories:

## REFLECTIONS ON FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Child sexual abuse is influenced by various sociodemographic and socioeconomic risk factors, encompassing familial, personal, and societal elements. Notably, the family environment in which the child is raised has a substantial impact on the occurrence of abuse. Factors contributing to this include the quality of relationships within the family, the presence of the mother and father (or one of them), significant marital discord, substance abuse, unemployment, divorce, crowded living conditions, young parental age, low cultural and economic status, and children born out of unwanted marriages.<sup>9</sup>

While the relationship between childhood sexual abuse and socioeconomic status remains somewhat unclear, a significant relationship has been observed with the mother's educational level, which represents a significant risk factor.<sup>9,13</sup> This study also highlights the presence of similar risk factors in cases of child exposure to sexual abuse.

## SEXUAL ABUSE AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILY

Domestic sexual abuse primarily involves close family members, such as birth parents and siblings. However, it's important to note that the key criterion for such abuse isn't solely blood relations; it also encompasses sexual interactions between family members who are not biologically related, such as stepmothers, stepchildren, or stepfathers.<sup>14,15</sup>

Domestic sexual abuse mainly occurs within the child's own home, and it can have profound psychological repercussions for children. This form of abuse can begin during infancy and persist into adulthood.<sup>16</sup> Tragically, children often remain silent about their experiences of sexual abuse due to the potential consequences and their deeply rooted fears. This underscores the critical need to identify risk factors to prevent sexual abuse and to become advocates for these voiceless children.

## SITUATIONS THAT ARE DESIRED TO CHANGE OR IMPROVE IN THE FAMILY

This study underscores the critical influence of familial factors, including communication issues and family violence, on child sexual abuse. The structure,



function, social, cultural, and economic aspects, as well as parental education, personality traits, behaviors, and attitudes within the family micro-system, significantly impact child sexual abuse and its aftermath. Effective communication within the family emerges as a pivotal factor both in protecting children from sexual abuse and in assisting them during the recovery process. Challenges related to communication, issues, and a lack of sharing about current events are among the difficulties faced by sexually abused children within the family environment. In cases where communication and sharing are lacking, children may be reluctant to disclose their experiences, allowing the abuse to persist for extended periods.<sup>17,18</sup> The study findings highlight the importance for children of not experiencing violence, establishing effective communication within the family, and feeling heard, loved, and valued.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study offers preliminary insights into the perception of family from the perspectives of children who were exposed to sexual abuse and the consequential effects on their mental health. The study demonstrates the detrimental psychological impact of sexual abuse on children and underscores the significance of the family concept across all dimensions of child sexual abuse. Comprehensive research

efforts are imperative to prevent the occurrence of abuse and neglect in children. Within the framework of protective and preventive interventions, it is crucial to identify high-risk families, raise awareness within families about abuse, and provide relevant training.

## Source of Finance

*During this study, no financial or spiritual support was received neither from any pharmaceutical company that has a direct connection with the research subject, nor from a company that provides or produces medical instruments and materials which may negatively affect the evaluation process of this study.*

## Conflict of Interest

*No conflicts of interest between the authors and / or family members of the scientific and medical committee members or members of the potential conflicts of interest, counseling, expertise, working conditions, share holding and similar situations in any firm.*

## Authorship Contributions

**Idea/Concept:** Nurten Gülsüm Bayrak, Sevda Uzun; **Design:** Nurten Gülsüm Bayrak, Sevda Uzun; **Control/Supervision:** Nurten Gülsüm Bayrak, Sevda Uzun; **Data Collection and/or Processing:** Nurten Gülsüm Bayrak; **Analysis and/or Interpretation:** Nurten Gülsüm Bayrak, Sevda Uzun; **Literature Review:** Nurten Gülsüm Bayrak, Sevda Uzun; **Writing the Article:** Nurten Gülsüm Bayrak, Sevda Uzun; **Critical Review:** Nurten Gülsüm Bayrak, Sevda Uzun; **References and Fundings:** Nurten Gülsüm Bayrak, Sevda Uzun.

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