

A Comprehensive Overview of Research and Policy Perspectives on Dental Health and Child Neglect in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Child abuse and dental neglect require the attention of healthcare practitioners, particularly those in the dental profession. Children subjected to abuse or neglect frequently exhibit oral signs and symptoms, placing dentists in a crucial role in early identification and intervention. This review explores the multifaceted dimensions of child neglect and its adverse effects on dental health in Saudi Arabia. Relevant papers published since 2000 discussing child dental neglect were retrieved. In Saudi Arabia, similar to numerous other nations, there is increasing acknowledgment of the necessity for a comprehensive approach to tackling child abuse and neglect. Recent studies conducted in Saudi Arabia have highlighted the understanding, attitudes, and conduct of healthcare experts concerning child maltreatment reporting. These outcomes underscore the importance of customized educational and training initiatives aimed at bolstering the capabilities of dental professionals to identify and address instances of child abuse and dental neglect, especially in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: Neglect; Child Neglect; Health Professionals; Dental Care; Clinical Factors

Introduction

Saudi Arabia is not immune to the global issue of child neglect. Although the Saudi Arabian society cherishes and values its children, various factors contribute to child neglect, including dental neglect. Consequently, a substantial proportion of Saudi Arabian youths face preventable dental health problems [1].

Childhood abuse and neglect, a pervasive and concerning issue worldwide, encompasses various forms of maltreatment. Among them, dental neglect, which is often overshadowed by overt forms of abuse, has become a growing concern, particularly in Saudi Arabia [2]. Dental neglect pertains to inadequate provision of dental care, resulting in poor oral health outcomes. Dental professionals, given their expertise and regular interactions with patients, are well positioned to identify signs of abuse and neglect, underscoring the need for comprehensive education in this domain [3].

This review aimed to explore the multifaceted dimensions of child neglect and its adverse effects on dental health in Saudi Arabia. By examining the existing policies and identifying gaps, we can advocate for the implementation of strategic and targeted interventions. These interventions will not only raise awareness about the importance of dental health but also ensure equitable access to quality dental care services for children, regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds.

This review also seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on child welfare in Saudi Arabia and offer a roadmap for policymakers to address the critical issue of child neglect concerning dental health. The challenges are formidable, but with concerted efforts and comprehensive policy reforms, Saudi

Arabia can protect its most vulnerable population-its children-from the silent threat of dental neglect and pave the way for a healthier, happy future.

Additionally, this review delves into the essential elements of incorporating child abuse and dental neglect education into dental curricula and training programs, emphasizing the importance of early exposure, integration with clinical training, and Saudi Arabia-specific considerations. Drawing on both general guidelines and Saudi Arabia-specific research findings, we explored how dental education can contribute to a proactive approach to addressing these critical issues, ultimately safeguarding the well-being of children.

Literature Review

Our review was prepared through an electronic search of PubMed, Science Direct, Medline, Google, Cochrane Library, Google Scholar, and EMBASE databases. Relevant papers published in English since 2000 discussing child dental neglect were retrieved. Original and review papers were included. All eligible articles were read by the authors. A data form was used to record useful findings.

Child neglect and dental neglect

Child neglect is a complex and multifaceted issue that can

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have serious consequences on a child's physical and emotional well-being. Child neglect refers to a form of maltreatment characterized by the failure of caregivers or parents to provide for a child's basic physical, emotional, educational, or medical needs, resulting in harm or risk of harm to the child's health and well-being. Neglect can take various forms, including physical neglect (e.g., inadequate food, clothing, and shelter), emotional neglect (e.g., lack of emotional support or supervision), educational neglect (e.g., failure to provide proper education or support for schooling), and medical neglect (e.g., failure to seek necessary medical care for the child). Dental neglect is an important concern that often goes unrecognized [4]. Here, we define and explore the different forms of neglect, focusing on dental neglect.

The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD) defines dental neglect as follows: "Dental neglect is the willful failure of parent or guardian, despite adequate access to care, to seek and follow through with treatment necessary to ensure a level of oral health essential for adequate function and freedom from pain and infection." This definition highlights that dental neglect involves more than just a lack of access to dental care and emphasizes the importance of parents or guardians seeking and following through with the necessary dental treatment for their child's oral health, including addressing pain and infection [5]. Dental neglect can lead to serious oral health issues that should be recognized and addressed to ensure children's well-being. Changes in behavior are frequently observed in these children; however, it is probable that child dental neglect reflects social isolation, as it is recognized as a potential indicator of other forms of neglect [6].

Prevalence of dental neglect in Saudi Arabia

Dental neglect is common and can be influenced by various factors, including parental education, socioeconomic status, and cultural beliefs. Understanding the prevalence of dental neglect in Saudi Arabia is essential for effectively addressing this issue and developing appropriate interventions. Although the specific prevalence figures may vary, several studies have elucidated the extent of dental neglect among children in Brazil. The prevalence of dental neglect in Saudi Arabia is a growing concern, particularly among children of disadvantaged backgrounds [7].

The 2010 National Oral Health Survey of Saudi Arabia provided valuable insights into the oral health status of children in the country. The survey indicated that a significant proportion of children experienced dental caries and oral health problems that could be associated with dental neglect. The prevalence of dental caries was particularly high among school-aged children with a significant proportion of untreated carious lesions. Additionally, a study conducted in Abha, Saudi Arabia reported a high prevalence of dental caries among primary school children, which can be indicative of dental neglect and inadequate oral healthcare practices [8,9].

These studies underscore the common occurrence of dental neglect in the pediatric population of Saudi Arabia. The presence of dental caries and related oral health problems serves as a sign of possible neglect, underscoring the necessity for focused

interventions, public awareness initiatives, and enhancements in dental care accessibility. These efforts are crucial for addressing this important issue and enhancing the oral health and overall well-being of children in the nation.

Types dental neglect

Dental neglect can lead to a range of oral health problems, including cavities, gum disease, tooth decay, and tooth loss. Neglected dental issues may result in pain, discomfort, and difficulties eating and speaking, which can affect a child's overall quality of life. Dental neglect can manifest in various ways, each highlighting a different aspect of inadequate oral care or the failure to address a child's dental needs [10]. These types of dental neglect must be identified and addressed to protect children's health. One type of dental neglect is when a caregiver fails to seek dental care even when dental issues or pain are obvious and also misses dental appointments. This type of neglect may aggravate dental problems, leading to worsening of the condition. These dental problems include untreated dental caries, untreated dental trauma, untreated periodontal conditions, and malocclusion. The most common type of dental neglect is untreated carious lesions [5].

Dental caries can have serious consequences for a child's oral health if left untreated, making it a critical aspect of dental neglect. Dental trauma, which includes injuries to teeth and supporting structures, is common among children. However, when dental trauma is left untreated, it can lead to severe consequences and is considered a form of dental neglect [11]. Untreated dental trauma can have substantial and long-lasting consequences on a child's oral health and overall well-being. Neglecting preventive dental care such as regular checkups, cleaning, and the application of dental sealants is another form of dental neglect. Preventive care is essential for maintaining good oral health and addressing oral health issues early [12,13].

Dental neglect can also involve caregivers' failure to ensure that their children maintain proper oral hygiene. This includes neglecting to teach children how to brush and floss their teeth and not providing the necessary tools for oral care. When caregivers do not promptly address a child's dental pain or infection, this constitutes another form of dental neglect. Ignoring these issues can result in prolonged suffering and the exacerbation of dental problems.

Moreover, caregivers who do not provide their children with a healthy diet that promotes oral health may exacerbate dental neglect. It is critical for caregivers to meet a child's nutritional needs, because malnutrition can have an adverse effect on oral health [14].

Early Childhood Caries (ECC) as a sign of child neglect: ECC is a considerable dental health concern in young children in Saudi Arabia and can be viewed as a result of neglect in some cases. ECC, characterized by severe tooth decay in the primary teeth, often reflects inadequate oral hygiene practices and a lack of essential dental care, which may stem from neglectful caregiving. The high prevalence of ECC in Saudi Arabia highlights the importance of dental neglect as a contributing factor. Multiple studies and surveys have consistently documented a high percentage of children affected by ECC,

emphasizing the magnitude of this issue [15,16].

Clinical diagnosis of child dental neglect: The AAPD provides guidance for recognizing and reporting child abuse and neglect, including dental neglect. This emphasizes the importance of performing a thorough dental examination to identify indicators of neglect [14].

Examination and investigation: Diagnosing child dental neglect is a critical step in identifying cases and providing timely interventions. Clinical diagnosis involves a thorough examination and investigation by dental professionals to assess the oral health of a child and determine whether neglect is present.

Dentists conduct a comprehensive visual examination of the child's oral cavity, including the teeth, gums, tongue, and oral mucosa. The overall condition of the mouth is assessed. Radiographs may be taken to assess dental issues that are not visible through visual inspection, such as proximal caries or the extent of dental caries.

Dentists also assess the presence and extent of caries. The number, location, and severity of the cavities are examined, and gingival health is evaluated, including signs of gingivitis or periodontal disease.

Oral hygiene practices can be assessed in terms of brushing, flossing, and use of fluoride products. Dentists gather information about the child's medical and dental history, including previous dental treatments and relevant health conditions. Additionally, photographs may be taken to document a child's oral condition, providing visual evidence for diagnosis and future reference.

Identification of neglect

To identify dental neglect, dentists should assess children's oral health against age-appropriate standards and guidelines. This evaluation aids in recognizing variations in the expected patterns of oral development and well-being. Dentists should also look for indicators of neglect, such as not seeking timely treatment for severe dental cavities or traumatic injuries, not following through with prescribed treatment plans, or allowing the child's oral health to worsen due to neglect or delay [6,12].

Communication and reporting

Dental professionals are in a unique position to recognize and assess potential cases of dental neglect as they often have regular contact with children and their families. It is crucial for dental professionals to remain vigilant in their clinical examinations and investigations, as the early detection of dental neglect can prevent further harm to the child's oral health and overall well-being. Reporting suspected cases of neglect is essential to ensure that appropriate interventions are performed to protect the child's welfare [6].

If dental neglect is suspected, then dental professionals have a legal and ethical obligation to report their findings to the appropriate authorities. This may include child protective services or law enforcement.

In 2008, the Minister of Health officially approved a mandatory reporting law for cases of child abuse and neglect among

healthcare professionals, and a corresponding directive was sent to all hospitals in Saudi Arabia. This law ensures the anonymity of the person reporting and safeguards the confidentiality of the information provided. Neglecting to report a case of child abuse and neglect can have disciplinary consequences for professionals, such as fines, temporary work suspension, or a combination of both, in accordance with the Saudi Health Practice Bylaw [17].

Discussion

Factors contributing to child neglect in Saudi Arabia

Child dental neglect is an important public health concern, and its relationship with Socioeconomic Status (SES) has been widely studied. SES encompasses economic and social factors including income, education, occupation, and access to resources. Research has consistently shown a strong association between SES and child dental neglect, with SES serving as both a determinant and a consequence of neglect [18].

In the context of child dental neglect, a strong emphasis on familial values and traditions in the Saudi Arabian society can lead to particular consequences. Although these cultural values typically prioritize the welfare of children, specific norms may unintentionally foster dental neglect, particularly when oral health concerns are not properly addressed. For instance, parents often prioritize their children's education and provide for their basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter, demonstrating a commitment to their well-being [6].

Parental education plays a pivotal role in shaping the oral health of children. Parents with higher educational levels are more informed about the importance of regular dental checkups and proper oral hygiene practices than those with lower educational levels. They are also more likely to seek preventive dental care for their children and promptly address dental issues, thereby reducing the risk of dental neglect [19].

The parental employment status can also affect children's dental health. Employment factors, such as access to dental insurance and flexibility in scheduling dental appointments, can influence a family's ability to address dental neglect. Research has shown that most dentists believe that child abuse and neglect is more prevalent in households with lower socioeconomic status than in those with middle or higher socioeconomic statuses [20]. Previous studies have associated child abuse and neglect with factors such as low socioeconomic status, poverty, temporary housing, and parental unemployment [21].

In a research effort led by Quinonez et al., in the United States, an investigation was undertaken to examine the obstacles hindering low-income children's access to dental care. This study identified the key factors that played a substantial role in causing dental-care delays or neglect, including financial impediments, challenges related to transportation, and insufficient awareness of dental health [22].

Insufficient awareness and knowledge of child welfare issues, including dental health, can contribute to neglect. Parents and caregivers who lack information about the importance of routine dental checkups and proper oral hygiene practices may inadvertently neglect their children's dental health [23].

Access to healthcare, including dental care, can be challenging in certain regions of Saudi Arabia. Remote rural areas may have limited access to healthcare facilities, making it difficult for families to seek dental care for their children. Additionally, healthcare costs and insurance coverage can be barriers to accessing necessary services [24].

Parental stress and mental health issues also contribute to child neglect. Parents overwhelmed by financial, emotional, or personal stressors may struggle to provide adequate care for their children, including their dental health needs. Understanding the connection between child dental neglect and socioeconomic status is crucial for developing targeted interventions and policies to reduce disparities in oral health outcomes among children from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Efforts should focus on improving access to dental care, promoting oral hygiene education, and addressing socioeconomic factors that contribute to neglect [25].

The lack of education and training in child protection and identification of child abuse and neglect is a barrier for dental professionals to recognize and address cases of neglect. Therefore, providing comprehensive education and training programs for dental professionals in Saudi Arabia on child protection, recognizing signs of neglect, and implementing appropriate interventions are crucial. This will empower dental professionals to play a proactive role in identifying and addressing cases of dental neglect, ultimately improving the oral health outcomes of children in Saudi Arabia. A study conducted by Almuneef et al., emphasized the importance of education and training for healthcare professionals, including dental practitioners, in recognizing and responding to child maltreatment, including neglect. This study highlighted the need for specialized training programs tailored to the Saudi context [26].

Policies and interventions to address child neglect in Saudi Arabia

Addressing child neglect is a multifaceted challenge requiring comprehensive policies and targeted interventions. In Saudi Arabia, several policies and initiatives have been implemented to combat child neglect, including those aimed at improving children's dental health.

Saudi Arabia implemented the Abuse Prevention Law of 2013 and the Child Protection Law of 2014, which explicitly address various forms of child abuse and neglect, including dental neglect. These laws emphasize the importance of safeguarding children's physical and mental well-being. They provide a legal framework for reporting child neglect cases and prosecuting perpetrators [27,28].

The Saudi Arabian government, in collaboration with healthcare organizations, has initiated public awareness campaigns to educate parents, caregivers, and the general public about the importance of dental health for children. These campaigns emphasize regular dental checkups, proper oral hygiene practices, and the consequences of dental neglect [29].

Saudi Arabia has made efforts to expand access to dental care

services, especially in underserved areas. This includes the establishment of dental clinics in remote regions. Increased access to dental care helps ensure that children receive timely and appropriate treatment for their oral health needs. Expanding dental services is a policy approach that can considerably contribute to addressing dental neglect in children. By addressing obstacles related to accessibility, affordability, and awareness, these policies actively contribute to enhancing children's oral health and mitigating the enduring repercussions of neglect [30].

Some schools in Saudi Arabia have implemented dental health programs that aim to promote oral hygiene among their students. These programs often include dental checkups, educational sessions on oral care, and the distribution of dental hygiene kits. Such initiatives play a crucial role in preventing dental neglect among school-aged children [31].

These policy measures and interventions exemplify Saudi Arabia's dedication to addressing child neglect including dental neglect. Although notable advancements have been made, it remains crucial to maintain continuous efforts to safeguard the welfare of all children and diminish the occurrence and consequences of child neglect in the nation.

Conclusion

Incorporating child abuse and dental neglect education into dental curricula and training programs is essential to ensure that future dental professionals are well equipped to identify, report, and address these critical issues. Dental neglect is a serious issue with a range of adverse consequences on children's dental health. It not only causes physical pain and discomfort but can also have lasting psychological and social effects. Addressing dental neglect through awareness campaigns and policies that promote access to dental care is essential to prevent these detrimental outcomes and ensure the well-being of children in Saudi Arabia and worldwide.

Further research is required to understand the prevalence and impact of dental neglect in children in Saudi Arabia. This could involve conducting surveys or interviews with dental professionals, parents, and caregivers to gather insights into the barriers and challenges in addressing dental neglect. Additionally, studies should explore the effectiveness of the interventions and strategies implemented in Saudi Arabia to improve the identification and management of dental neglect.

Through education and awareness campaigns, dental professionals can educate parents and caregivers on the importance of proper oral care and the potential consequences of neglect on children's overall health and development. In addition to education and awareness, it is essential for dental professionals to have a system in place to report suspected cases of dental neglect to appropriate authorities, such as child protective services to ensure that interventions and support are provided to children in need. By collaborating with healthcare providers, policymakers, and child protection agencies, dental professionals can contribute to the development and implementation of policies and programs aimed at preventing and addressing child neglect in Saudi Arabia.

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