

# Summary

## Background to the study

To date, there are no figures available in the Netherlands on the scale of child abuse. Such figures are sorely needed; in order to effectively tackle this problem, and monitor the effects of the countermeasures, detailed knowledge of the nature and scale of child abuse in our country is an absolute prerequisite. The *Pupils on abuse* study aims to contribute to this vital knowledge. On the one hand, the study focuses on the prevalence of child abuse, that is to say, the number of individuals who have been abused at one point in their lives. On the other hand, it focuses on the incidence of child abuse, that is to say, the number of young people who have experienced some form of child abuse during the past twelve months.

In *Pupils on abuse*, child abuse is understood to mean: behavioural acts towards children which may be regarded as serious forms of physical/psychological violence, neglect or sexual abuse. The exposure of children to serious violence between parents is also considered to be a serious threat to their safety and, as such, a form of child abuse. In addition, the study focuses on other forms of victimization, such as bullying, theft and discrimination.

## Study objective and question

This study aims to provide information which can be used in the (further) development, direction and evaluation of the approach to child abuse in the Netherlands.

In deciding how to obtain this information, a choice was made for a direct approach to the adolescents themselves. They are, after all, the ones who know best what has happened to them and, thus, an important source of information.

The following questions should be answered in the course of the study:

1. To what extent have adolescents in the first four forms of secondary school experienced child abuse?
2. Is there a relationship between the incidence of the discernable categories of child abuse?
3. What is the connection between the incidence of child abuse and other forms of victimization?
4. Which characteristics distinguish adolescents who have not experienced child abuse from those who have frequently been subjected to child abuse?

## Research design and working method

At the outset of the study, there was no suitable Dutch questionnaire available for obtaining a reliable assessment of the extent to which adolescents consider themselves to be the victim of (seriously) threatening incidents, including neglect, child abuse and sexual abuse. A new questionnaire was put together especially for

this study: the unpleasant and nasty incidents questionnaire (Dutch: Vragenlijst Vervelende en Nare Gebeurtenissen; VVNG).<sup>1</sup>

Between December 2005 and April 2006, 1,845 pupils took part in the study by completing the VVNG. The study was carried out across the country, at a total of 14 randomly selected secondary schools. The students were taken from both the practical and theoretical programmes of the VMBO [Prevocational Secondary Education], HAVO [School of Higher General Secondary Education] and VWO/gymnasium [Pre-university Education]. In order to guarantee the representativeness of the study, a stratified sample was used when selecting schools. Using "Pupils on child abuse" as a basis, one can confidently draw conclusions regarding the scale of child abuse among native Dutch adolescents in the first four forms of secondary school. With regard to the prevalence of child abuse among non-native Dutch adolescents, the study revealed that conclusions can only be drawn with the necessary caution.

## Findings

### Child abuse as experienced by the young people

Over one third of the adolescents indicated that they had experienced an incident at one point in their lives which may be regarded as a form of child abuse. Nearly twenty per cent of the adolescents appear to have experienced one form or another of child abuse during the past twelve months (see table).

#### Prevalence and incidence of child abuse per category (# per 1000 young people)

Category	Prevalence <sup>a</sup>	Incidence <sup>a</sup>
Neglect <sup>b</sup>	52	-
Psychological aggression by parents	221	120
Domestic violence	157	83
Sexual abuse	79	44
<i>Outside their (extended) family</i>	70	40
<i>Within their (extended) family</i>	23	9
<i>Exposure to parental conflict: physical confrontation and/or threatened with a weapon</i>	117	41
Total across all categories	373	195

<sup>a</sup> Number of adolescents per 1000. Prevalence: experienced at one point in their lives. Incidence: experienced during the past twelve months.

<sup>b</sup> With regard to "Neglect", the adolescents were exclusively questioned about early childhood experiences; no data offering insight into the incidence of this form of child abuse was collected.

Both the prevalence and incidence figures revealed that *Psychological aggression by parents* and *Domestic violence* (physical abuse) are the most prevalent categories of child abuse. The incidences of *Sexual Abuse* and *Exposure to parental conflict* are roughly the same; the prevalence figures are not, however. A larger number of

<sup>1</sup> Based on the *Dating Violence Questionnaire* (Douglas & Straus, 2006) and the *Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scales* (CTSPC; Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore & Runyan, 1998).

adolescents reported having witnessed violent confrontations between their parents at one point in their lives. Most of the sexual acts or activities took place with or by persons outside the (extended) family environment. Only prevalence data was collected on the different forms of *Neglect*. This revealed that these forms of child abuse were reported least often. On the whole, the study revealed that there were no great differences between boys and girls. *Sexual abuse* occurs three to four times as often amongst girls, however. Conversely, boys reported a greater number of serious forms of *Neglect*.

It appears that the experiences of the majority (209 per 1000) of the adolescents who had to deal with child abuse at one point in their lives (373 per 1000 adolescents) are limited to one of the discernable categories (thus: either neglect, psychological aggression between parents, domestic violence, sexual abuse or exposure to parental conflict). The remainder (164 per 1000) experienced incidents which can be grouped into two or more categories. Of these, a total of 17 adolescents (per 1000) had experiences of four or five different categories. The incidence figures revealed a similar pattern. Of all the adolescents who experienced a form of child abuse during the past year (195/1000), most had to deal with incidents of a single category (127/1000). The remaining 68 adolescents (per 1000) indicated having had to deal with forms of child abuse which can be placed in two or more categories. The incidence of all four categories of child abuse comprises 5 per 1000 adolescents.

#### **The relationship between different categories of child abuse**

Adolescents who have experienced several forms of child abuse within one category (for example, neglect, psychological aggression by parents, domestic violence, sexual abuse or exposure to parental conflict) often turned out to have various experiences within one of the other categories as well. The relationships are statistically not very strong. The strongest relationships were found between *Domestic violence* on the one hand and *Psychological aggression by parents* and *Exposure to parental conflict* on the other hand, i.e. adolescents who have experienced many different forms of physical violence (by their parents) often experience verbally aggressive behaviour by their parents as well.

#### **The relationship between incidence of child abuse and other forms of victimization**

The *Psychological aggression by parents*, *Domestic violence* and *Exposure to parental conflict* categories of child abuse are systematically related to the incidence of forms of victimization with a low impact, such as theft, bullying and other conflicts. Adolescents who had many different experiences with serious forms of abuse during the past twelve months were - coincidentally - often subjected to other forms of victimization as well.

#### **The characteristics of young people who have been frequently subjected to child abuse**

There appears to be a relationship between the variable *Sex* and, to a slightly lesser extent, the variables *Ethno-cultural background* and *Age* and the risk of child abuse. In comparison with boys, girls appear to run more than twice the risk of becoming a victim of child abuse. Adolescents who count themselves as belonging to a non-Dutch social group appear to run almost twice the risk of experiencing child abuse when compared with adolescents who consider themselves native Dutch. The age of

adolescents also appears to enhance the risk of abuse. The older the adolescent, the higher the likelihood that he or she was the victim of child abuse during the past twelve months.

Of the variables which characterized aspects of the living conditions and family situations of the adolescents, the *Number of parents* in the family appears to be relevant. Compared with families headed by two parents, adolescents who are being raised in other family configurations or forms of cohabitation run a greater risk of child abuse.

Experiences with other forms of victimization (such as arguments with parents, bullying in school, theft, discrimination or conflicts with teachers) appear to be demonstrably related to the prevalence of child abuse. The probability of child abuse becomes more substantial in case where there is an accumulation of incidents and experiences in which a adolescent is the victim.

There also appears to be a demonstrable, albeit small, connection between the antisocial behaviour of adolescents (such as theft, fighting and substance abuse) and the incidence of child abuse. When adolescents report a lot of antisocial behaviour, the odds that they have been subjected to child abuse are greater than in the case of children who do not report such behaviour.

Adolescents who have witnessed a lot of arguments between their parents appear to have a slightly higher probability of experiencing child abuse. A non-violent style of disciplining or child-rearing also appears to contribute to this risk, which is rather strange.

### **Conclusions**

Over a third of the adolescents appear to have experienced child abuse in the form of serious psychological aggression by parents, domestic violence, perceived physical conflicts between parents, sexual abuse and/or severe neglect at one point in their lives. One out of five adolescents was the victim of (a form of) child abuse during the past year. One out of fifteen adolescents was the victim of a combination of different forms of child abuse during the past year.

In comparison with other studies, one may conclude that the adolescents who took part in *Pupils on abuse* are more likely to have understated than overstated facts. As a result, it may not be ruled out that the estimate made of the degree of child abuse is somewhat conservative.

The results of *Pupils on abuse* are important and meaningful, but leave many questions unanswered. Follow-up research should concern a normal sample and be longitudinal in nature so that more will become known about the cause-and-effect relationships, about possible developmental trajectories and about the developmental outcomes in the long term.

