

## **Summary: Literatuurscan oorzaken geweld tegen kinderen en jongeren in afhankelijkheidsrelaties**

### **Background**

Violence against children committed by people placed in a position of care and trust is a topic associated with considerable societal uproar. Different cases of child abuse have shocked the Dutch society tremendously in the last couple of years. Among these instances was the sexual abuse of minors in the Roman Catholic Church and also the Amsterdam day-care sexual abuse case; the prime suspect of the latter being accused of abusing a few dozen infants and toddlers. Furthermore, physical abuse committed by parents is also a topic of major concern. Recent yearly estimates of the number of children victimized by child abuse vary from 118.000 to over 180.000.

Such shocking cases and numbers raises the question: where does all that violence come from? The recently published report of the Committee Deetman, which addresses the research on the sexual abuse of minors in the Roman Catholic Church, provides a lot of questions with an answer. However, it also shows that a lot is still unknown about the aetiology of child abuse. Following the report, the Minister of Security and Justice has, also on behalf of the State Secretary for Health, Welfare and Sport, promised the Dutch House of Representatives a research on the underlying causes of sexual violence and other forms of violence within relationships of dependency. Therefore, the WODC (Research and Documentation Centre) has ordered a literature review on the aetiology of child abuse, which had to answer three main questions:

- What is the current knowledge of the aetiology of child physical abuse and child sexual abuse?
- Are there options for intervention?
- Which topics require further examination and which shape should future research concerning these topics take?

### **Demarcation and definitions**

Physical child abuse mainly occurs within the family context. Therefore, with respect to physical abuse, we will solely focus on the role of the family. However, given the recent attention for sexual abuse in the Catholic Church and in youth care (reports Committee Deetman et al., 2011a and Committee Samson, in preparation), we discuss the aetiology of sexual abuse both within and outside the family. Domains outside the family being discussed are institutions,

school, leisure activities and religious organizations. The following broad definition will be followed, based on article 1, paragraph 6 of the Youth Care Act: 'Child abuse is 'every form of threatening or violent behaviour towards minors of a physical or sexual nature. This behaviour is forced on minors actively or passively by parents or others towards whom minors feel dependent and lack freedom. This behaviour (threatens to) cause serious harm in the form of physical or psychological damage'. Given the limited amount of time for the current literature study, we do not focus on other forms of child abuse such as neglect or emotional abuse. Also, we do not pay attention to other forms of abuse within completely different domains - like the problem of loverboys. Furthermore, the role of abuse within different cultures will not be discussed in this paper. Finally, given the scarcity of relevant literature, we will not take into account the influence of the Islamic culture on physical and sexual abuse.

## **Method**

To answer the questions posed above, we conducted a systematic literature study. We used relevant keywords to search several databases for meta-analyses, reviews and other relevant studies. Furthermore, we hand-searched three relevant journals in the field of child physical and sexual abuse and we scanned the reference list of all the articles we have found and used. After the initial article collection, the following articles were selected for the literature study: meta-analyses from 2000-2012, reviews from the last 20 years, longitudinal prospective studies and retrospective studies from the last 20 years, if published in a peer reviewed journal. Next, the results of the articles were summarized and discussed within clear sections. In addition, all articles were included in a separate table (see Attachment 1), providing information about the specific risk factor, the kind of study (meta-analysis, review, longitudinal etc.), the conclusion of the study, statistical findings and, if available, the sample size.

## **Results**

### *Risk factors child physical abuse within the family*

One of the leading and most cited theories attempting to explain the origin of child physical abuse is the ecological model of Belsky (1980), based on the ecological model of Bronfenbrenner (1979), whose model explains the development of a child from several overlapping and interacting systems, or levels. Belsky (1980) distinguishes four systems, or four levels of factors, which combine and interact to determine the parents' behaviour. The first level is the ontogenetic level. What is important here is the developmental history and the individual characteristics of the parents, which they bring into the second level, the micro-system. The micro-system is made up of relationships within the family system, as well as

individual characteristics of the child and factors in the parents' lives that are currently influencing their functioning. The third level, the exo-system, is the family environment, including (among other things) the neighbourhood, institutions, the social network and work. Finally, the macro-system contains the society at large and the culture, influencing the three other systems (see also Baartman, 1996; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2005). The model of Belsky centralizes the parent within a network of factors that, dependent on their nature, can increase or decrease the carrying capacity of their family. The literature study shows that the majority of factors are related to those people raising the child, mostly parents, and therefore correlate with the developmental history and individual characteristics of the parents. The most important factors seem to be a parental history of child abuse and parental psychological and psychiatric problems. Moreover, children with a physical or mental disability appear to be at increased risk for victimization.

#### *Risk factors sexual abuse within the family*

There are several theories attempting to explain child sexual abuse. Well-known integrated theories are Finkelhor's Precondition Theory, the Quadripartite Theory of Hall and Hirschman, the Integrated Theory of Sexual Offending of Ward and Beech and the Integrative Theory of Sex Offending of Stinson et al.

Although it has been acknowledged that these integrated theories contain components that, when combined, can be important for the prevention of sexual abuse, it is also recognized that these theories lack empirical evidence. Therefore, we will only discuss empirically supported risk factors. In addition, again we will use the model of Belsky to order the risk factors, with the aim of comparing the results for child sexual abuse with those for child physical abuse.

As was the case with physical abuse, characteristics of the parents seem to be the most prominent risk factors for sexual abuse, such as a parental history of sexual abuse and parental attachment problems (among other things having difficulty with intimate relationships). Other important factors with regard to sexual abuse are sexual beliefs and parental cognitions. Finally, as was the case with physical abuse, children with a physical or mental disability are at increased risk for sexual abuse.

#### *Risk factors sexual abuse outside the family*

Besides sexual abuse within the family, we also looked at sexual abuse outside the family, namely at care institutions (including foster care and day-care), schools, sport clubs and religious institutions. The most important theories of sexual abuse (within and outside the family) centralize the perpetrator, without much consideration of situational characteristics.

Even so, empirical studies examining the risk of sexual abuse within different domains (institutions, schools, sport clubs) hardly ever discuss perpetrator characteristics. Of course, this does not mean that perpetrator characteristics are not important. It does mean, however, that studies within different domains so far have not found domain-specific perpetrator characteristics. In addition, one has to take account of the scarcity of research within specific domains. For example, there are no meta-analyses and only two reviews regarding sexual abuse within institutions, there is only one review regarding sexual abuse at schools and sport clubs and the other studies are retrospective in nature. Very often, these studies only provide data on prevalence of risk factors and need to be interpreted with caution.

Risk factors for sexual abuse within care institutions are primarily found on the side of the perpetrator and the victim. These mainly concern static, unchangeable characteristics like gender and age. Again, children with a disability are at increased risk for sexual abuse. Furthermore, there is a certain amount of research regarding the *modus operandi* of perpetrators in institutions. This is not a risk factor in itself, but a description of the perpetrator's behaviour, which, eventually, leads to sexual abuse.

Remarkably, perpetrators of sexual abuse within the school domain appear to be well performing and popular teachers. However, research on this topic is mostly qualitative. Also, vulnerable children (insecure, estranged from parents, showing risky behaviour) seem to be at increased risk for abuse within the school-domain.

In recent years, there is increasing attention for sexual abuse within sport clubs, boy scouts and other voluntary organizations (De Haas et al., 2009), but the research literature is still limited. Risk factors related to sexual abuse within the sport-domain refer to the perpetrator, the victim and characteristics of the sport-domain itself. The scarce research shows that perpetrators are often in a coaching role and that they, like abusing teachers, are successful and popular. These findings are based on qualitative studies with small sample sizes, however. Almost none of the factors relating to abuse within the sport-domain has been empirically studied. So, it is basically a matter of theoretical assumptions about a relation between aspects of the sport-domain and sexual abuse.

Lastly, we studied literature on sexual abuse within a religious context. The literature we discussed only concerned abuse within the Catholic Church and did not contain reviews or meta-analyses but solely retrospective studies. We did not find any study examining factors relating to sexual abuse within the Protestant-Christian domain or the Muslim domain. Studies on the Catholic Church focus mainly on the perpetrators and the environment. Research data are generally descriptive. Some studies contain data on control groups of non-abusers or abusers who assault children independent of their religious profession. Studies on factors relating to the religious environment do not provide a clear picture.

## **Policy recommendations**

The literature review summarized above shows that certain measures are necessary to prevent child physical and sexual abuse. However, in order to break the intergenerational cycle of abuse, attention should also be paid to childhood abuse therapy. With respect to preventing family related physical abuse, it seems important to subject high-risk families to specific prevention and intervention strategies. It will be possible, then, to provide parents with tailored support early on and for a longer period of time. Providing victims and their parents with treatment is important to prevent repeated victimization and to prevent victims of becoming perpetrators themselves. What is striking is that precisely those programs including more specific prevention and intervention strategies, like the often-used 'Regional Approach Child abuse' (RAK), seem to be inadequate to make a change for the better. Therefore, more attention for specific prevention and intervention programs seems desirable.

The findings on sexual abuse outside the family do not provide many suggestions on how to approach sexual abuse in different domains. However, given the semi-professional context in which the abuse takes place, it seems justifiable to recommend measures also emerging from research of the Committee Gunning (2011) on the Amsterdam day-care sexual abuse case. Based on this report, some back-up measures have been implemented from government (among others a link between national data and foreign information). These recommendations mainly focus on the prevention of abuse. Some of these are in the field of control (for example by implementing behavioural codes and protocols), communication, personnel management (recruitment and selection, personnel training) but also in the field of the culture of organizations. That is to say, besides attention for protocol and behavioural codes, there has to be attention for creating a culture in which people talk to each other about their behaviour and share responsibility for the children's safety. It seems as though these recommendations agree with our literature study on risk factors within different contexts. Furthermore, opportunity, or basically the organization providing the opportunity, seems to be the obvious factor to target. Nonetheless, attention for abusers remains important, especially regarding treatment after the abuse took place.

Finally, in addition to the more general recommendations posited above, we would like to make some recommendations with regard to more specific risk domains and groups. As it turns out, parental psychiatric problems are an important risk factor for abuse. Therefore, children of parents with psychiatric problems deserve additional attention as well as an adequate response when these kinds of problems are identified. Within this framework, there currently are several initiatives, both within the Dutch mental health care institution (GGZ) and in regular hospitals. For example, hospitals, especially the emergency departments, are now obliged to invest in expertise with regard to child abuse.

The compulsory procedure for reporting child abuse and domestic violence, which will soon be implemented, stimulates the adult GGZ to show more concern for the safety of clients' children. Further implementation and continuation of these initiatives seems to be desirable.

In addition, since children with a physical or mental disability appear to be at increased risk for victimization, both within the family and outside, they should be given additional attention.

### **Recommendations further research**

Based on this literature review, we find several shortcomings with respect to child physical and sexual abuse research. First of all, there are very little longitudinal studies. As a result, it is impossible to make any definite comments on the potential causal relation between certain risk factors and child abuse. Conducting longitudinal research amongst high-risk families with small children is necessary to gain insight into such causal relationships. This is important for the development of adequate prevention and intervention programs which, given the long term consequences of abuse (English et al., 2005; Nagtegaal, 2012), are of major concern.

Meanwhile, there are some programs focusing on high-risk families in the Netherlands, for example VoorZorg (Pro Care). VoorZorg is a program supporting families with a high risk of problems in child raising, aiming to improve the health and developmental opportunities of mothers and their children and, as a result, to prevent child abuse. Within the context of the program, children and their mothers are followed for some years. The effects of the program are currently being examined (for example, Mejdoubi et al., 2011). In order to gain better sight on the long term effects of this intervention, it is important to follow these children and their mothers as long as possible (see also Olds et al., 1997), preferably along with a control group not receiving this intervention.

Furthermore, the literature review shows that research on risk factors for abuse in different domains outside the family is scant. First, our knowledge of the prevalence of abuse in these domains is insufficient. Second, for all we know, there are no prospective Dutch studies on the characteristics of abusers in these different domains, on their victims, or on the situations in which the abuse takes place.

A national prevalence study among high school students has been conducted every year for the last couple of years (see Alink et al., 2011), but this study also does not distinguish between specific domains in which the abuse occurred. One possible solution to this problem would be to add a couple of questions regarding the context of the abuse.

Furthermore, research on abuser characteristics, victims and situations could be conducted by selecting all abusers that have been convicted for an article 249 offence of the Penal Code in data of the Dutch Ministry of Justice (this data file contains all information on cases that have been dealt with by the public prosecution service). Article 249 of the Penal

Code criminalizes the sexual abuse of minors, stepchildren, foster children and children who are entrusted to care institutions. Care has to be interpreted broadly, since doctors, officials, teachers and care workers all fall within the range of this definition. Next, criminal records can be requested to assess background characteristics of offenders, victims and situational contexts. Consequently, insight can be gained into the *modus operandi* of offenders within different contexts, but also into other offender characteristics that are said to be relevant based on studies on sexual offenders in general. Then, general offender knowledge can be linked to offender knowledge within specific domains.

Since the present literature review was clearly demarcated, a few subjects that were ignored for the time being can be relevant for future research. One can think of abuse within different cultures, the link between abuse and child pornography (especially with regard to the role of internet) and the relation between sexual harassment and more severe forms of sexual abuse.

Finally, it has to be ascertained that child abuse can't ever be prevented entirely. However, this report aims to contribute to knowledge on abuse and to policy targeting this severe and pernicious problem.

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