

## Child Abuse: A Common Problem in Curaçao?

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To assess the prevalence of child abuse among high school students in Curaçao.

**Methods:** A questionnaire survey among high school students up to 17 years of age was conducted. The questionnaire was based on existing literature and validated questionnaires. The questionnaire used was analysed and adapted to the situation in Curaçao by a panel of experts on child abuse. The primary objective was to gain insight into the incidence, prevalence and various forms of child abuse among students in Curaçao. Five forms of child abuse are distinguished in the literature: physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and exploitation. Furthermore, the degree of confidence of the students in general practitioners (GPs) as care providers in the field of child abuse was explored.

**Results:** Questionnaires from 545 of the 628 respondents were included. In total, 43% of the respondents had ever-experienced an event which could be defined as (a form of) child abuse. More than one-third of the respondents reporting child abuse ever had an experience that could be interpreted as physical abuse. More than 15% of the respondents reporting child abuse had experienced sexual abuse. Girls experienced significantly more sexual abuse than boys. Emotional abuse in the last year was experienced by 3% of the respondents. One per cent of the respondents ever-experienced neglect. According to most respondents, GPs were not seen as care providers in cases of child abuse; they believed that GPs were mainly to be consulted for illnesses or physical symptoms and not for forms of child abuse.

**Conclusion:** The prevalence of ever-having-experienced a form of child abuse is estimated at 431 per 1000 students. Child abuse, particularly physical abuse, is common in Curaçao, and is probably comparable to other surrounding countries. General practitioners were not seen as care providers in identifying and reporting cases of child abuse according to most respondents.

**Keywords:** Child abuse, Curaçao, high school, maltreatment

## Abuso Infantil: ¿Un Problema Común en Curazao?

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### RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Evaluar la prevalencia del abuso infantil entre estudiantes de secundaria en Curazao.

**Métodos:** Se aplicó un cuestionario entre estudiantes de secundaria de hasta 17 años de edad. El cuestionario se basó en la literatura existente y cuestionarios validados. El cuestionario usado fue analizado y adaptado a la situación de Curazao por un panel de expertos en abuso infantil. El objetivo principal fue profundizar los conocimientos acerca de la incidencia, prevalencia y diversas formas de abuso infantil entre estudiantes en Curazao. La literatura distingue cinco formas de abuso infantil: abuso físico, abuso emocional, abuso sexual, negligencia y explotación. Además, se exploró el grado de confianza de los estudiantes en los médicos generales (MGs) como proveedores de cuidado en el área del abuso infantil.

**Resultados:** Se incluyeron los cuestionarios de 545 de los 628 encuestados. En total, 43% de los encuestados nunca habían pasado por una experiencia que pudiera interpretarse como (forma de) abuso infantil. Más de un tercio de los encuestados a los que se les pidió reportar abuso infantil, jamás

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había tenido una experiencia que pudiera interpretarse como abuso físico. Más del 15% de los encuestados sobre abuso infantil habían experimentado abuso sexual. Las niñas experimentaron significativamente más abuso sexual que los niños. El abuso emocional en el último año fue experimentado por 3% de los encuestados. El uno por ciento de los encuestados jamás experimentó negligencia. Los médicos generales no eran vistos como proveedores de cuidado en los casos de abuso infantil, de acuerdo con la mayoría de los encuestados. Según ellos, los MGs deben ser consultados principalmente en el caso de enfermedades o síntomas físicos, y no en casos de formas de abuso infantil.

**Conclusión:** La prevalencia de nunca haber experimentado una forma de maltrato infantil se estima en 431 por 1000 estudiantes. El abuso infantil, en particular el abuso físico, es común en Curazao, y es probablemente comparable a otros países circundantes. Los médicos generales no eran vistos como proveedores de cuidado en cuanto a identificar y reportar casos de abuso infantil, según la mayor parte de los encuestados.

**Palabras clave:** Abuso infantil, Curazao, escuela secundaria, maltrato

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## INTRODUCTION

Child abuse or maltreatment constitutes all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial/other exploitation, resulting in

actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power [Explanation Frame 1]. Despite

### Explanation Frame 1

#### **Child Abuse**

##### *General definition*

Child abuse or maltreatment constitutes all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power.

##### *Physical abuse*

Physical abuse of a child is that which results in actual or potential physical harm from an interaction or lack of an interaction, which is reasonably within the control of a parent or person in a position of responsibility, power or trust. There may be single or repeated incidents.

##### *Emotional abuse:*

Emotional abuse includes the failure to provide a developmentally appropriate, supportive environment, including the availability of a primary attachment figure, so that the child can develop a stable and full range of emotional and social competencies commensurate with her or his personal potentials and in the context of the society in which the child dwells. There may also be acts toward the child that cause or have a high probability of causing harm to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development. These acts must be reasonably within the control of the parent or person in a relationship of responsibility, trust or power. Acts include restriction of movement, patterns of belittling, denigrating, scapegoating, threatening, scaring, discriminating, ridiculing or other non-physical forms of hostile or rejecting treatment.

##### *Neglect and negligent treatment*

Neglect is the failure to provide for the development of the child in all spheres: health, education, emotional development, nutrition, shelter, and safe living conditions, in the context of resources reasonably available to the family or caretakers and causes or has a high probability of causing harm to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development. This includes the failure to properly supervise and protect children from harm as much as is feasible.

##### *Sexual abuse*

Child sexual abuse is the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violate the laws or social taboos of society. Child sexual abuse is evidenced by this activity between a child and an adult or another child who by age or development is in a relationship of responsibility, trust or power, the activity being intended to gratify or satisfy the needs of the other person. This may include but is not limited to:

The inducement or coercion of a child to engage in any unlawful sexual activity.

The exploitative use of a child in prostitution or other unlawful sexual practices.

The exploitative use of children in pornographic performances and materials.

##### *Exploitation*

Commercial or other exploitation of a child refers to use of a child in work or other activities for the benefit of others. This includes, but is not limited to, child labour and child prostitution. These activities are to the detriment of the child's physical or mental health, education, or spiritual, moral or social-emotional development.

*Source: Report of the Consultation on Child Abuse Prevention. Geneva: World Health Organization, Social Change and Mental Health, Violence and Injury Prevention; 29-31 March 1999:13-16.*

international effort for more recognition of the rights of children, worldwide, child abuse is a huge and underestimated problem (1–9). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), more than 57 000 children perish annually as a result of physical abuse (6, 7). Approximately one in ten is neglected or psychologically abused (8). Multiple surveys on sexual abuse show rates ranging from 7% to 36% for women and 3% to 29% for men (9). Child abuse often remains a hidden problem, because the perpetrators are usually part of the family, or it occurs in the school or work environment (6, 7).

Each form of child abuse is associated with different risks for health and social functioning in childhood, adolescence and adulthood (6–8, 10–14). According to the WHO, as well as Dutch law, mental, sexual or physical violence against children should be forbidden (7, 15).

### Child abuse in the Caribbean

Physical domestic violence against children is prevalent in the Caribbean. Moccia and UNICEF found that over 80% of 2–14-year old children experienced violent forms of discipline (including verbal aggression), and physical punishment was reported to be done to more than half of all 2–14-year old children, with the prevalence ranging from 52% (Trinidad and Tobago) to 73% (Jamaica). In Belize, as many as 80% of the school-aged children involved in the study reported being unloved by their mother while they were growing up and in Jamaica, 97% of the 11–12 year olds interviewed reported verbal aggression from an adult at home (16).

### Curaçao

Curaçao, a Caribbean island, is part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands with an autonomous status and independent legislation and has about 150 000 inhabitants. In the last 25 years, emigration from Antilleans in Curaçao to the Netherlands has become a common phenomenon. As such, the same number of inhabitants in Curaçao also lives in The Netherlands.

In The Netherlands, the prevalence of child abuse among high school students is estimated at 373 per 1000 students (17). Based on research among Antillean immigrants, more domestic violence (including child abuse) seems to occur in that group than in other minorities in The Netherlands (18). In Curaçao, the subject of child abuse was until recently sensitive and taboo. Societal debate was lacking and research not available. Recently, child abuse was placed on the policy agenda of the government, but research is still lacking.

The Foundation for Child Protection Service Curaçao was founded in 1947. During the first years, the focus was on advising and attending to dysfunctional families. Recently, they have expanded and included more preventive duties.

This foundation believes that the difficult socio-economic situation, poverty and the educational climate on the island is 'a good soil' for child abuse (19).

There are several risk factors for child abuse (20–25). Many of them, including prevailing socio-economic problems, are present in Curaçao (26). Approximately 40% of young people are living in single parent families and about one-third of the Curaçao population lives below the poverty line. There is much unemployment and substance abuse (24, 27, 28).

### Aim

The aim of this study was to investigate the incidence and prevalence of child abuse on the island of Curaçao, experienced by high school students. Before this research, there were only (nonregistered) estimated numbers based on reports and experiences by caregivers. We studied how many high school students in Curaçao ever-experienced some type of child abuse. Subquestions were: *'How many high school students have experienced child abuse in the past year?'* *'Which type of child abuse is most common?'* *'Are there differences between boys and girls?'*

Because of the existence of multiple risk factors, we suspected that child abuse is more common in Curaçao than in The Netherlands. The results are compared with results in The Netherlands because of the social, cultural and economic ties that exist traditionally between both countries.

In noticing child abuse, different professionals, including general practitioners (GPs), play an important role (29). Both Dutch and international studies show that many GPs and physicians have difficulties in identifying and reporting child abuse, and thus a major social problem is not adequately recognized (30–35). Hence, the fourth subquestion was: *'Do GPs in Curaçao contribute in identifying and reporting child abuse according to high school students?'*

### SUBJECTS AND METHODS

For the design and implementation of the study, a special panel of experts on child abuse was convened. This panel consisted of a psychologist at the Child Protection Service Curaçao, the president of Child Protection Service Curaçao, the director of Daal's Advisory<sup>1</sup> and advisor to the Department of Culture and Education Curaçao, an adviser on 'youth policy and prevention child abuse' and two GPs with special interest in child abuse.

Since there was no validated questionnaire available for the population of Curaçao, the "Questionnaire on experiences and events in high school students in Curaçao" was made. This questionnaire was developed following a literature review by the expert panel and based on an existing Dutch questionnaire. The Dutch questionnaire was based on validated American questionnaires (17, 36, 37). The panel translated and adapted the existing Dutch questionnaire to the situation in Curaçao (*eg* background, language, schooltype).

<sup>1</sup>Daal Advisory Group provides advice, training and projects in the areas of education, personal balance and diversity in society and organizations and has offices in The Netherlands and Curaçao.

**Explanation Frame 2**

The questionnaire had the following categories:

- General questions (age, gender, nationality, family composition, *etc*)
  - Multiple choice
- Questions about parents (nationality, education, employment, income, *etc*)
  - Multiple choice
- Experience with parents (care, help with problems, *etc*) during childhood
  - Statements (fully agree, fully disagree)
- Events within the family (verbally abused, threatened, beaten, sexually abused, *etc*)
  - Never, ever experienced or (1/2/3-5/> 6) in the past year
- Events outside the family (verbally abused, threatened, beaten, sexually abused, *etc*)
  - Never, ever experienced or (1/2/3-5/> 6) in the past year
- Events/experiences with parent/s (called names, threatened, beaten, sexually abused/raped, *etc*)
  - Never, ever experienced or (1/2/3-5/> 6) in the past year
- General questions regarding general practitioner (GP) visits (frequency, reasons for visits, asked about abuse, *etc*)
  - Never, ever experienced or (1/2/3-5/> 6) in the past year
- Confidence in the GP (regarding physical/emotional/sexual abuse, neglect, *etc*)
  - Statements (fully agree, fully disagree)
- Additional comments
  - Free

**Learning Box**

- Child abuse is a huge and underestimated problem worldwide.
- Child abuse in Curaçao is probably comparable to surrounding countries and slightly higher compared to The Netherlands.
- The incidence of neglect in Curaçao may be less compared to The Netherlands.
- The prevalence of child abuse among high school students in Curaçao is estimated at 431 per 1000 students.
- General practitioners (GPs) are not seen as care providers in cases of child abuse.

The questionnaire conformed to the types of child abuse found in the literature: physical, emotional, sexual and neglect. The subject of exploitation of children was not explored due to the extent of the research and the lack of validated questions. The questionnaire contained 84 multiple choice questions about different events, as well as questions about identifying and reporting child abuse by GPs (Explanation Frame 2). Questions about neglect in the last year

were not included because of the lack of validated questions and the already partial independence of this age group.

Having once experienced a so-called “corrective tap” or being insulted once was not included in the prevalence/incidence of child abuse, which could lead to an underestimation of the prevalence. The survey was authorized by the Medical Ethics Committee of Curaçao.

**Research group**

The total student population in Curaçao high schools is approximately 9500 in 46 schools – 40 preparatory secondary vocational schools and six higher general secondary schools (Table 1); there are also four mixed private schools

Table 1: Demographics of secondary schools in Curaçao\*

Education	Number of schools	Male	Female	Total
Basic secondary education	20	1759	1683	3442
Basic secondary education (HAVO 1, 2)	3	280	419	699
Senior high school (HAVO/VWO 3, 4, 5, 6)	3	495	861	1356
Preparatory secondary vocational education (VSBO 3, 4)	20	1946	2140	4086
<b>Total</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>4480</b>	<b>5103</b>	<b>9583</b>

\*According to Central Bureau for Statistics (CBS), Dutch Antilles 2007.

HAVO = higher general secondary education, VSBO = preparatory secondary vocational education, VWO = pre-university education

(28). Twelve schools were randomly selected, but with a view to topographical distribution, type of school and level of education. We aimed at a sample size of at least 400 respondents (confidence interval 95%, false margin 5%).

The questionnaire was conducted among high school students from the seventh to twelfth grade. Participating classes within these schools were picked randomly. All students inside the classroom participated.

Before beginning the research, a pilot study was conducted among 21 students to identify whether the students were experiencing difficulties understanding or completing the questionnaire. The pilot analysis resulted in some minor changes in the questionnaire, but it was otherwise found useful for this survey.

Due to the size of the study, a ‘no objection’ system was chosen. Parents received an information letter with a return slip to object to participation in the study. The students could also decide not to participate by returning the questionnaire blank.

The questionnaires were completed anonymously and treated confidentially, so data were not traceable to individual students. During classtime, students filled out the questionnaire on paper. The questionnaires were placed in ad-

vance and students were not allowed to deliberate. After 45 minutes, they put the questionnaire in an envelope, sealed it and delivered it back to the researchers. At least one of the researchers was present the whole time in order to monitor the process and to answer questions if necessary.

Students 18 years or older were excluded. Incomplete questionnaires were also returned to the researchers and assessed individually on their usefulness.

### Statistical analysis

For analysis of categorical outcome variables, the Pearson Chi-square test was used. If the conditions did not suffice to the Chi-square test, the Fisher's exact test was used. If the Fisher's exact test could not be calculated, Monte Carlo simulation was used. For analysis of ordinal variables of two independent groups, the Mann-Whitney U test was chosen; in case of more than two independent groups, the Kruskal-Wallis test was used. The significance level was set at  $p < 0.05$ .

### RESULTS

All 12 schools that were approached cooperated. Six hundred and twenty-eight students returned the questionnaire, of which 545 questionnaires were included in the analysis (exclusion:  $n = 78$  because of age  $\geq 18$  years,  $n = 5$  because of being blank). The distribution by gender and education was representative with respect to the entire population of Curaçao. There may have been some over-representation of students of Dutch descent [research group (RG) 10% vs population group (PG) in 2001 4%; the PG of 2011 may show a higher percentage of Dutch descent] (28). Table 2 shows the demographics of the respondents.

Table 2: Demographics of respondents

Demographics (n = 545)		Number (n)	Rate
Gender	Male	255	46.8%
	Female	287	52.7%
	Unknown	3	0.6%
Age	11 years	1	0.2%
	12 years	34	6.2%
	13 years	105	19.3%
	14 years	80	14.7%
	15 years	89	16.3%
	16 years	133	24.4%
	17 years	103	18.9%
Class	1	145	26.6%
	2	153	28.1%
	3	109	20.0%
	4	93	17.1%
	5	36	6.6%
	6	4	0.7%
Schooltype	Unknown	5	0.9%
	VSBO/MAVO	335	61.5%
	HAVO/VWO	182	33.4%
	Basic	25	4.6%
	Unknown	3	0.6%

Table 2 (Cont'd): Demographics of respondents

Demographics (n = 545)		Number (n)	Rate
Country of birth	Curaçao	422	77.4%
	Aruba	2	0.4%
	Bonaire	3	0.6%
	St Maarten	4	0.7%
	The Netherlands	55	10.1%
	Suriname	2	0.4%
	Venezuela	12	2.2%
	Sto Domingo	15	2.8%
	Colombia	14	2.6%
	Guyana	1	0.2%
	Haiti	3	0.6%
	Other	12	2.2%
	Family composition	2 parent family, both own parents	281
2 parent family, mother + stepfather		53	9.7%
2 parent family, father + stepmother		12	2.2%
1 parent family, mother		119	21.8%
1 parent family, father		14	2.6%
Co-parenting		37	6.8%
Living with family		10	1.8%
Foster home		2	0.4%
Shelter/boarding school		3	0.6%
Other		1	0.2%
Unknown		13	2.4%
Family income	Low (Nafl 0–2500)	86	15.8%
	Avg (Nafl > 2500–10 000)	135	24.8%
	High (Nafl $\geq 10 000$ )	32	5.9%
	Unknown	292	53.6%

VSBO/MAVO = preparatory secondary vocational education, HAVO = higher general secondary education, VWO = pre-university education, Nafl = Dutch Antilean Florin

Physical assault within the family was ever-experienced by 37% of the respondents; 19% reported physical abuse in the last year. Most respondents did not fill in whether they had ever-experienced certain types of emotional abuse. During the last year, 3% reported experiencing emotional abuse. Sexual abuse was ever-experienced by 15% of the respondents. In the last year, this percentage was 10%. Neglect was ever-experienced by 1% of the respondents (Tables 3a, b).

Table 3a: Prevalence of forms of child abuse experienced

Form of child abuse	Number (n)	Rate (ever experienced)
Physical abuse	203	37.4%
Neglect	5	0.9%
Sexual abuse	85	15.6%

Table 3b: Incidence of forms of child abuse experienced in the last year

Form of child abuse	Number (n)	Rate (experienced last year)
Physical abuse	107	19.6%
Emotional abuse	17	3.1%
Sexual abuse	57	10.5%

In total, 43% of respondents ever-experienced an event which could be defined as child abuse. Ten per cent of the students experienced two types of child abuse and 1.7% three types or more (Table 3c). Physical abuse was the most

Table 3c: Prevalence of multiple forms of child abuse experienced

Multiple forms of child abuse	Number (n)	Rate (experienced ever/last year)
1 form of child abuse	157	28.8%
2 forms of child abuse	55	10.1%
≥ 3 forms of child abuse	9	1.7%
Unknown	39	7.2%

reported type of child abuse (Tables 3a, b). Girls reported significantly more sexual abuse than boys ( $p = 0.007$ ). For other types of child abuse, there was no significant difference between boys and girls ( $p = 0.090$ ) [Table 3d]

Table 3d: Gender differences in different forms of child abuse experienced

Form of child abuse	Male	Female	Total (n)	<i>p</i> -value
Physical abuse	89 (43.7%)	114 (56.3%)	203	0.397
Emotional (last year)	9 (52.9%)	8 (47.1%)	17	0.615
Neglect	1 (20.0%)	4 (80.0%)	5	0.378
Sexual abuse	28 (31.9%)	57 (67.1%)	85	0.007

### Role of GPs in child abuse

General practitioners were not seen as care providers in identifying or reporting child abuse according to most respondents. They more often turned to their parents, other relatives or friends. Over 40% of the respondents indicated that they had no confidence in GPs when they wanted help with the different forms of child abuse; it also did not occur to them to call a GP. They often believed that GPs are only to be consulted with regard to illnesses, physical symptoms, medical disorders or diseases but not for family conflicts, bad behaviour of parents, danger, educational styles and the punishment methods used by parents *etc.*

### DISCUSSION

The experienced prevalence of child abuse among high school students is estimated at 431 per 1000 students. This means an estimated total number of 4248 maltreated high school students in Curaçao<sup>2</sup>.

Girls indicated that they experienced more events which could be defined as child abuse, but the difference between girls and boys was not significant. However, girls did report more sexual abuse (67.1% of all sexual abuse). This difference is in line with worldwide numbers on sexual abuse (8–9).

This study has several strengths and some limitations. One of the strengths is the quantitative contribution to the

study of the prevalence of child abuse in the Caribbean. Students gave their own report about their experiences and did this anonymously. Under or overestimation cannot be ruled out, but the absolute anonymity supposes the most reliable reflection of reality. It is unclear how the slight overrepresentation of Dutch-born students might reflect the differences in child abuse.

There are some limitations in this study. The questionnaire was not validated and tested for reliability, although it was based on a Dutch validated questionnaire and thorough literature research. We lacked information about emotional abuse over previous years as well as information about neglect during the past year.

Another limitation is the lack of primary school children included in the study. Because they are more vulnerable, the prevalence mentioned in this study may be an underestimation of the total prevalence.

Based on the high prevalence of violent forms of discipline elsewhere, these outcomes are comparable to surrounding countries.

The results obtained in Curaçao cannot simply be compared with the results of the Dutch study among secondary school students because of the changes made in the study design and questionnaire. With caution, however, we may assume that the observed differences approach actual differences. Comparing the results obtained in Curaçao with the data from The Netherlands, our data show some interesting differences. The prevalence of physical child abuse is more common in Curaçao than in The Netherlands (37.4% *versus* 15.7%), but compared worldwide, the numbers are quite similar (6, 8). High school students in Curaçao probably frequently face more violence in their environment than students in The Netherlands, but this might be less than in other surrounding countries. A possible explanation is the traditionally more violent forms of discipline and physical punishment, such as in other surrounding countries (16). The low to intermediate socio-economic situation in Curaçao may also contribute to this.

The prevalence of sexual abuse was also reported more in our study compared to The Netherlands (15.6% *versus* 7.9%), but not more than worldwide (8–9, 17). On the other hand, child abuse in the form of neglect is just a small part of the problem in Curaçao and is more prevalent in The Netherlands (1% *vs* 5.2%) as well as emotional abuse in the last year (3% *vs* 12%, respectively). The fact that neglect is rarely experienced in Curaçao could probably be explained by the tight social network of families; it is usual for three generations of families to live together on a compound. Hence, there are always care persons around.

This survey shows that child abuse, especially physical and sexual abuse, is common in Curaçao. For further research, it is recommended that a questionnaire on child abuse in the local situation of Curaçao be validated in order to justifiably extrapolate to the general population. It is also

<sup>2</sup>Based on 9853 high students on Curaçao (23)

desirable to examine more closely the risk factors for abused children in a representative study of the population.

High school students believe that a GP is mainly to be consulted for illness or physical symptoms. It is highly recommended that GPs be trained in this field to create better awareness of child abuse as well as to present themselves as care providers in child abuse. Information to high school students about where to address their problems could also lead to an increase in requests for help and optimal use of GPs as care providers. Child abuse counsellors might contribute to more awareness of the problem.

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