

The Relationship Between Childhood Maltreatment and Self-Esteem Among Youth

Nurul Nabilah Abdul Razak & Asma Perveen*

Department of Psychology and Counseling, Faculty of Human Development,
Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, 35900 Tanjung Malim, Perak, Malaysia.

*email: asmaperveen@fpm.upsi.edu.my

Published: 25 March 2025

To cite this article (APA): Abdul Razak, N. N., & Perveen, A. (2025). The Relationship Between Childhood Maltreatment and Self-Esteem Among Youth. *EDUCATUM Journal of Social Sciences*, 11, 42-49. <https://doi.org/10.37134/ejoss.vol11.sp.5.2025>

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.37134/ejoss.vol11.sp.5.2025>

Abstract

This present study aimed to investigate the relationship between childhood maltreatment and its effect on self-esteem among youth. This study was conducted as cross-sectional survey design by using online survey via Google form. Total number of (n =156) participants from youth age 18 to 30 with 47.4% male respondents and 52.6% female respondents who are willingly to participate in the study. Instruments Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) and Rosenberg Self -Esteem Scale (RSES) were used to collect data. Results indicated that emotional neglect has the highest number of childhood maltreatment experience by youth but emotional abuse has the most severe case. The childhood maltreatment showed a significant negative correlation with self-esteem. Among the respondents, the increase in the level of childhood maltreatment were correlated with the decrease of self-esteem. Through this study, the implications of screening children condition and environment in early age with extensive intervention are important to prevent such adverse complications.

Keywords: childhood maltreatment, self-esteem, youth

INTRODUCTION

Childhood maltreatment is a worrying social problem because it is prevalent throughout the world and is associated with psychological and behavioural effects on victims. There are several studies that investigated the relationship between childhood maltreatment and self-esteem among youth (Azaf et al., 2022; Makhubela, 2019; Mwakanyamale & Yizhen, 2019). Although maltreatment from childhood is something that a lot of individuals have experienced, it is still a concerning issue especially in today's society. The issue is alarming because there are still some adults who experienced this traumatic event who did not believe they had been abused and felt like it is normal for them to be punished (Downey & Crummy, 2021). As a result, the inflicted maltreatment has taken a toll on themselves which affected their internal mental health such as having low self-esteem.

At the same time, having low self-esteem due to maltreatment during childhood has been linked to mental health outcomes (Thoma et al., 2021). Individuals with low self-esteem during adult or even childhood can affect individuals mentally or physically and at the same time it brings impairment to their daily function such as lack of confidence in themselves. Lacking confidence or having low self-esteem especially for youth will negatively influence their social communication (Masselink, Roekel, & Oldehinkel, 2018) which later will negatively affect them such as increase their anxiety, stress, loneliness, and in risk of developing depression (Berkel et al., 2020).

BACKGROUND

Childhood maltreatment is a serious issue that affects a lot of kids all over the world. Media have reported numerous kinds of news about these global issues and it has attracted a lot of attention globally. Based on research, Malaysia have recorded 6,061 cases of child abuse in 2019, in which it has been increasing drastically from the previous year (Shaari et al., 2021). This is worrying as every state in Malaysia have many cases that reported on child abuse mainly Selangor. This state recorded the highest number of abuse cases compared to other states in Malaysia for most years (Zailah, 2022).

In Asian countries population study, sexual abuse on children is reported at 41.9% where most of the victim has been abuse by person, they already know (Solehati et al., 2021). On top of that, 300 million children between the ages of two and four regularly endure physical and psychological abuse at the hands of their parents and other adult caregivers (World Health , 2022). These statistical facts show that childhood maltreatment is still happening in this modern era where the children are supposed to be living safely away from negative surroundings.

Furthermore, the perpetrator of this maltreatment is usually someone who is close to the child such as the parents, family members, and neighbours (Solehati et al., 2021). Regardless of the abuser, the effects of the maltreatments can cause many problems on the children especially during adulthood. Maltreatment during childhood can leave a permanent scar in an individual's life where they can have extremely damaging repercussions that linger for a very long time. Children may exhibit a variety of major physical, emotional, and behavioural issues following this terrible experience (Berkel et al. 2020).

Such maltreatment has been linked to not only a huge range of mental health outcomes, but it also causes low self-esteem in the long term (Thoma et al., 2021). Having low self-esteem during adult or even childhood can affect individuals mentally or physically and at the same time it brings impairment to their daily function such as lack of confidence in themselves. A research also stated that low self-esteem will negatively affect an individual such as increase their anxiety, stress, loneliness, and in risk of developing depression (Berkel et al., 2020).

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to examine the prevalence of childhood maltreatment experienced by youth, the level of self-esteem among youth and relationship between childhood maltreatment and self-esteem among youth.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

In this study, the researcher used the quantitative approach and cross-sectional online survey method to collect data to study the relationship between childhood maltreatment and self-esteem among youth. The online survey was distributed randomly to the target population using a link to access the questionnaire. This is a cross-sectional study in which the participant answers the survey only at one point in time. One advantage of cross-sectional studies is the ability to measure relationships between variables (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2021). Accordingly, the researcher chose to use an online survey method and a cross-sectional design to collect data to examine the relationship between childhood maltreatment and self-esteem.

In this study, the researcher used the quantitative approach and cross-sectional online survey method to collect data to study the relationship between childhood maltreatment and self-esteem among 156 youth aged 18 to 30, studying in tertiary institution at Malaysia. The sample were selected using convenience sampling.

Instruments

Each participants received a questionnaire comprising of four sections: 1) screening; 2) demographics; 3) Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ); and 4) Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (RSES). In the screening section, the questions were asking whether the respondents have experience mistreatment such as physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical neglect, and emotional neglect during

childhood and whether the respondent are orphan or have been adopted. The demographics section included age, gender, current university, and participant state of origin.

Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ)

This self-report inventory is a 28-item used to screen for a history of abuse and neglect in individuals, particularly those over the age of 12, assessing emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, as well as emotional and physical neglect (Bernstein, Stein, Newcomb, Walker, Pogge, Ahluvalia, et al., 2003).

Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (RSES)

This scale is a 10-item scale that measures global self-worth by measuring both positive and negative feelings about the self. The scale is believed to be unidimensional. All items are responded using a 4-point Likert scale format ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (Rosenberg, 1965).

Procedures

The survey was disseminated through online channels such as emails and social networking sites. For the emails, the survey was sent through the official university student email. The social networking channels that have been utilised include Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram. Considering that these sites contain people from various background, the survey was only distributed through private group that contained only Malaysian university students in each social site. Those who are interested and fits all the listed criteria had fill out the given online survey. Participation of the participants in this experiment was completely voluntary. The correlation between childhood maltreatment and self-esteem were analysed using Pearson Correlation.

Participants

This research has received 156 respondents with 74 (47.4%) male respondents and 82 (52.6%) female respondents who are willingly to participate in the study. The range of the participants age is from 18 to 30 years old ($M = 23.10$; $SD = 2.62$). The highest participant's age is 21 with 16%, followed by 22 years old (15.4%).

Furthermore, the respondent originated from states around Malaysia with Selangor stated the highest respondent at 57 people (36.5%) followed by Perak with 19 people (12.2%). As for the respondent educational states, most of the respondent are from the university in North Malaysia with 75 respondents (48.1%) followed by university in West region with 46 respondent (29.5%).

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics on study Variables

The result also reported regarding the mean and standard deviation of each variable involved in the study. From analysing the data collected, the mean value and standard deviation of both variables were obtained. As referred to the objectives of the study, the independent and dependent variables were analysed to see the result for mean and standard deviation. The mean score for level of self-esteem is 28.46 ($SD = 4.83$), meanwhile as for the childhood maltreatment, the mean score 78.42 ($SD = 20.84$).

Level of childhood maltreatment

The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire was used to identify the level of childhood maltreatment experienced by the respondents. This questionnaire has five sub variable and the range of score is varied from 5 to 25 for each sub variables. Higher score for each sub variable seemed to provide a quantitative overall of maltreatment the respondents experienced which means higher scores indicating higher maltreatment. Accordingly, in the research the participants score highest at emotional neglect ($M =$

17.42, $SD = 5.74$), followed by emotional abuse ($M = 15.99$, $SD = 5.39$). The result was summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 Mean, Standard Deviation and Percentage for sub variables of CTQ

Domains	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Physical Neglect	13.01	4.13
Physical Abuse	12.46	4.99
Emotional Neglect	17.42	5.74
Emotional Abuse	15.99	5.39
Sexual Abuse	7.78	4.38

Based on the above results, the respondent least likely experienced sexual abuse ($M = 7.78$, $SD = 4.38$) during their childhood. Lower level of maltreatment indicate that they experience less sexual abuse compared to other types of maltreatment.

There are three level of maltreatment for each sub variable which are low, moderate, and severe. The Table 2 below shows about frequency of the childhood maltreatment domains.

Table 2 Frequency of Physical Neglect based on CTQ score level

	Level	<i>f</i>	%
Physical Neglect	Low	52	33.3
	Moderate	58	37.2
	Severe	46	29.5
Physical Abuse	Low	53	34.0
	Moderate	57	36.5
	Severe	46	29.5
Emotional Neglect	Low	55	35.3
	Moderate	62	39.7
	Severe	39	25.0
Emotional Abuse	Low	67	42.9
	Moderate	38	24.4
	Severe	51	32.7
Sexual Abuse	Low	78	50.0
	Moderate	27	17.3
	Severe	51	32.7

Based on the results for physical neglect, there was 52 (33.3%) respondents who experienced less maltreatment, 58 (37.2%) respondents experience moderate physical neglect and 46 (29.5%) respondents experienced severe neglect during their childhood. According the results for physical abuse, there are approximately 53 respondents out of 156 who experience low level of physical abuse, while 57 or 36.5% of the respondents experience moderate abuse and 46 of them experience severe physical abuse. As for emotional neglect, there are 55 (35.5%) respondents who have been less likely to be emotionally neglected during their childhood. 62 (39.7%) respondents believe they were moderately neglected while 39 (25.0%) respondents believe they have been severely emotionally neglected. Compared to the emotional abuse in table 4.8, there are more respondents in severe level with 51 (32.7%) of them. 67 (42.9%) respondents experience low level of emotional abuse while 38 (24.4%) experience moderate level of emotional abuse. In this research, the 78 (50.0%) participants

score low on experiencing sexual abuse, 27 (17.3%) score moderate, and 51 (32.7%) participants experience severe experience of sexual abuse.

Level of Self Esteem

The total scores for each item were summed to provide a quantitative as an overall score of self-esteem. RSES had utilised from 0 to 40 scoring scale which means that the 0 being lowest possible score and 40 being the highest possible score. Therefore, the lower scores indicate the lower level of self-esteem. Participants in the highest quartile were put in the low level of self-esteem. The results have been summarised in Table 3 below.

Table 3 Level of Self Esteem

Self Esteem	Frequency (<i>f</i>)	Percentage (%)
High	61	39.1
Low	95	60.9
Total	156	100

Correlation between Childhood Maltreatment and Self Esteem

Person correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between childhood maltreatment and self-esteem which are measured by two different kinds of measurements that CTQ and RSES respectively.

Results indicated that the childhood maltreatment had a significant strong negative correlation with self-esteem, $r(156) = -.671, p < .001$. Among the respondents, the increase in the level of childhood maltreatment were correlated with the decrease of self-esteem.

DISCUSSION

This study shows that childhood maltreatment is relatively widespread among adolescents. The results indicate that the respondents most frequently experienced emotional neglect (26.15%), followed by emotional abuse (24%). These findings were confirmed by a research that emotional abuse and emotional neglect are the most common maltreatment experiences of adolescents (Azaf et al., 2022). However, compared to emotional neglect (39 respondents), there were more severe cases of emotional abuse (51 respondents) experienced by the adolescent population. This indicates that emotional abuse is the most common in all cases of childhood maltreatment. Similarly, a longitudinal study conducted in Guangzhou, China, reported a high prevalence of maltreatment, with emotional, physical, and sexual maltreatment being the most common forms of child maltreatment (Guo, et al., 2021).

In another similar study using the CTQ, the prevalence of emotional maltreatment was highest among the other types of maltreatment (Gama, et al., 2021). However, the results of the current study do not confirm the findings of previous research where the physical maltreatment is the most common. In this cross-sectional study, 3509 10–12-year-olds in Selangor state were surveyed and males were more likely to be maltreated than females (Ahmed, et al., 2015). Correspondingly, in an Australian-based research, 3500 maltreated participants aged 16 years old and above agreed that they experienced physical abuse the most with women having significantly more cases of abuse than men (Mathews, et al., 2023).

Furthermore, this research finding contrasts with a research that found physical neglect is the most common childhood trauma experienced by students in a correctional school in Malaysia (Ahmad & Mazlan, 2014). Although current research suggests that emotional abuse is the most common form of childhood maltreatment, a recent study in Netherlands found that emotional neglect was the most prevalent type of maltreatment where 484 of 663 participants have reported it as the main types of maltreatment (Berkel et al., 2020). The prevalence figures reported in these studies confirm the

observation that childhood maltreatment is not an out of the ordinary occurrence in Malaysia. The result of this study was clarified by a previous study in which the researcher highlighted that children who were maltreated in childhood due to depressed caregivers have lower self-esteem (Maruyama, et al., 2022). A possible explanation for this could be the lack of social interaction and maternal love by the mother. It is very important that children experience communication from an early age, as this teaches them how to communicate and interact with others (Jaafarawi, 2017).

Consistent with the findings, other study also reported particular outcomes where individual aged older than fifty were also affected by the maltreatment (Thoma et al., 2021). The researchers found that the higher emotional abuse or emotional neglect experienced by individual, the probability for high self-esteem is reducing in the future. The observed decline in self-esteem may be explained by the fact that experiencing these events inhibits the development of emotional-regulation capacities and interpersonal skills and impairs the mental processing of emotional situations. Childhood maltreatment may impair a person's ability to understand and control his or her emotions, which is one of the ways to increase the risk of psychological distress including low self-esteem. This study highlights that emotional abuse is more common than other types of maltreatment, which may overwhelm a person's ability to successfully regulate emotions due to repeated exposure to adverse affective conditions. Because emotional abuse is highly likely to be associated with poor mental health in adulthood, these overall findings point to the urgent need to identify and treat victims (Gama, et al., 2021). However, this research outcome does not support the previous research that indicate childhood maltreatment was linked to a number of unfavourable psychological outcomes, such as anxiety and depression, the study revealed that it was not significantly linked to self-esteem (Kessler, Davis, & Kendler, 1997). Likewise, the current research is contrary to that of Finkelhor and colleague, who found that after adjusting for other variables including depression and anxiety, it was discovered that childhood maltreatment experienced by college students was not substantially connected to self-esteem (Finkelhor et al., 2015).

This raises the possibility that childhood trauma is more widespread than is often assumed, and that its effects on the transition to adulthood and functioning as an adult are not limited to depression symptoms, but are broader in scope. One of the ways to counteract the fatality of trauma is to increase the frequency of implementation of programs that expose children in schools to the characteristics of abuse or neglect. The government can make this mandatory for all schools in the country so that relevant agencies such as the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development can identify children who need help. As seen in the literature, childhood maltreatment affects not only the body but also the mind. Therefore, further evaluation and diagnostic testing are needed, including more comprehensive screening for early detection and treatment to prevent such adverse complications.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that childhood maltreatment is prevalent among the youth, with emotional neglect and emotional abuse being the most common forms. Emotional abuse appears to be more severe than emotional neglect, indicating that it is the most prevalent type of maltreatment. The study highlights the negative impact of childhood maltreatment on self-esteem, emphasizing the importance of healthy relationships within families for children's well-being. To address childhood maltreatment, the research suggests implementing educational programs in schools to raise awareness about abuse and neglect. It is recommended making such programs mandatory and establishing screening processes to identify children in need of assistance.

REFERENCES

- Ahmad, A., & Mazlan, N. H. (2014). Substance abuse and childhood trauma experiences: Comparison between incarcerated and non-incarcerated youth. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 113, 161 - 170. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.01.023>
- Ahmed, A., Wan-Yuen, C., Marret, M. J., Guat-Sim, C., Othman, S., & Chinna, K. (2015). Child Maltreatment Experience among Primary School Children: A Large Scale Survey in Selangor State, Malaysia. *Plos One*, 10(3). Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0119449>
- Azaf, N. N., Vizabaskaran, K., Karisnan, K., & Jamaludin, A. N. (2022). Impact of Multi-Type Childhood Abuse on Psychological Development and Coping Strategies among Perdana University Students. *Malaysian Journal of Medicine and Health Sciences*, 18(1), 187-194.
- Berkel, S. R., Prevoo, M. J., Linting, M., Pannebakker, F. D., & Alink, L. R. (2020). Prevalence of child maltreatment in the Netherlands: An update and cross-time comparison. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 103, 104439. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104439>
- Bernstein DP, Stein JA, Newcomb MD, Walker E, Pogge D, Ahluvalia T, et al. Development and validation of a brief screening version of the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire. *Child Abuse Negl.* 2003;27:169–190. doi: 10.1016/s0145-2134(02)00541-0.
- Downey, C., & Crummy, A. (2021). The impact of childhood trauma on children's wellbeing and adult behavior. *European Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 6(1), 100237. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejtd.2021.100237>
- Finkelhor, D., Turner, H. A., Shattuck, A., & Hamby, S. L. (2015). Prevalence of Childhood Exposure to Violence, Crime, and Abuse: Results From the National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence. *JAMA pediatrics*, 169(8), 746 - 754. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2015.0676>
- Gama, C. M., Portugal, L. C., Goncalves, R. M., Junior, S. d., Vilete, L. M., Mendlowicz, M. V., . . . Pereira, M. G. (2021). The invisible scars of emotional abuse: a common and highly harmful form of childhood maltreatment. *BMC Psychiatry*, 21, 156. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-021-03134-0>
- Guo, L., Wang, W., Li, W., Zhao, M., Wu, R., & Lu, C. (2021). Childhood maltreatment predicts subsequent anxiety symptoms among Chinese adolescents: the role of the tendency of coping styles. *Translational Psychiatry*, 11, 340. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41398-021-01463-y>
- Hunziker, S., & Blankenagel, M. (2021). *Cross-Sectional Research Design. In Research Design in Business and Management*. Gabler, Wiesbaden: Springer. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-34357-6_10
- Jaafarawi, N. (2017). The Importance of Parent's Intervention in Early Years. *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, 7(12), 1673 - 1680. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.17265/2159-5836/2017.12.020>
- Kessler, R. C., Davis, C. G., & Kendler, K. S. (1997). Childhood adversity and adult psychiatric disorder in the US National Comorbidity Survey. *Psychological medicine*, 27(5), 1101 - 1119. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0033291797005588>
- Makhubela, M. (2019). The relation between low self-esteem and depressive mood in a non-clinical sample: The role of gender and negative life events. *Journal of psychology in Africa*, 29(1), 54-59. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2019.1568067>
- Maruyama, J. M., Valente, J. Y., Tovo-Rodrigues, L., Santos, I. S., Barros, A. J., Munhoz, T. N., . . . Matijasevich, A. (2022). Maternal depression trajectories in childhood, subsequent maltreatment, and adolescent emotion regulation and self-esteem: the 2004 Pelotas birth cohort. *European child & adolescent psychiatry*, 1-11. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-022-02022-6>
- Masselink, M., Roekel, E. V., & Oldehinkel, A. J. (2018). Self-esteem in Early Adolescence as Predictor of Depressive Symptoms in Late Adolescence and Early Adulthood: The Mediating Role of Motivational and Social Factors. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 47, 932-946. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-017-0727-z>
- Mathews, B., Pacella, R., Scott, J. G., Finkelhor, D., Meinck, F., Higgins, D. J., . . . Dunne, M. P. (2023). The prevalence of child maltreatment in Australia: findings from a national survey. *Medical journal of Australia*, 218, 13 - 18. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.5694/mja2.51873>
- Mwakanyamale, A. A., & Yizhen, Y. (2019). Psychological maltreatment and its relationship with self-esteem and psychological stress among adolescents in Tanzania: a community based, cross-sectional study. *BMC psychiatry*, 19(1), 1-9. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-019-2139-y>
- Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Shaari, M. S., Mariadas, P. A., Nangle, B., & Ridzuan, A. R. (2021). The relationship between economic growth and child abuse in Malaysia. *Economics bulletin*, 41(3), 1932-1946. Retrieved from <http://www.scopus.com/>

- Solehati, T., Pramukti, I., Hermayanti, Y., Kosasih, C. E., & Mediani, H. S. (2021). Current of Child Sexual Abuse in Asia: A Systematic Review of Prevalence, Impact, Age of First Exposure, Perpetrators, and Place of Offence. *Macedonian Journal of Medical Sciences*, 9(T6), 57-68. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.3889/oamjms.2021.7334>
- Thoma, M. V., Bernays, F., Eising, C. M., Maercker, A., & Rohner, S. L. (2021). Child maltreatment, lifetime trauma, and mental health in Swiss older survivors of enforced child welfare practices: Investigating the mediating role of self-esteem and self-compassion. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 113, 104925. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104925>
- World Health Organisation. (2022, October 8). *Child maltreatment*. Retrieved from World Health Organization: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/child-maltreatment>
- Zailah, S. (2022, September 6). *1055 child abuse cases recorded nationwide from Jan-June this year*. Retrieved from Bernama: <https://www.bernama.com/en/general/news.php?id=2118054>