

RESEARCH ARTICLE/ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ

# The effect of the violence against children and its prevention course on university students' awareness of domestic violence and their sensitivity to violence against children

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## Abstract

**Aim:** This study aimed to evaluate the effect of the "Violence Against Children and Its Prevention" course on university students' awareness of domestic violence and their sensitivity to violence against children.

**Material and Method:** The study was conducted during the 2021-2022 academic year at a state university located in the Mediterranean region. One hundred students who enrolled in the elective course "Violence Against Children and Its Prevention" participated in the study, with 81 students completing it. Data were collected using the Student Identification Form, the Domestic Violence Awareness Scale (DVAS), and the Sensitivity to Violence Against Children Scale (SVACS) through a Google survey. Descriptive statistics, Shapiro-Wilk, Man-Whitney U, Kruskal Wallis, and Wilcoxon tests were used for data analysis. Ethical approval was obtained before the study.

**Results:** The average age of the students was 21.1±2.2 years, with 23.5% male and 90.1% second-year undergraduate students. DVAS scores showed statistically significant differences based on gender and family type before the course, but these differences disappeared afterward. SVACS scores showed differences based on gender, class level, and parental education level before the course, but only gender and father's education level differences persisted after the course. DVAS scores significantly increased after the course ( $p<0.05$ ), whereas SVACS scores did not show statistically significant changes ( $p>0.05$ ).

**Conclusion:** Future randomized controlled studies are recommended to evaluate the effectiveness of different educational programs aimed at increasing sensitivity to violence against children.

**Keywords:** Violence Against Children, Domestic Violence, Awareness, Sensitivity

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Violence against children is defined as all forms of physical-emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, commercial or other exploitation of children resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, life, development, and dignity (UNICEF, 2007; UNICEF, 2013). Children may be exposed to violence in various ways at home, at school, at work, or in the media (Tezel, 2002; Bayat & Evgin, 2015; Hillis, Mercy & Saul, 2017). More than 1 billion children between the ages of 2-17 are exposed to violence worldwide (Hillis et al., 2016). In our country, 73 percent of children experience domestic violence, 74 percent emotional violence, and 23 percent physical violence. (Çocuğa Karşı Aile İçi Şiddetin Önlenmesi Projesi, 2012; Bernard van Leer Vakfı, 2014). These figures on violence against children are only the tip of the iceberg. Meta-analyses conducted with global data reveal that reported sexual abuse is 30 times higher and physical abuse is 75 times higher than official reports (Hillis, Mercy & Saul, 2017).

Violence against children is a significant problem that can cause lifelong and even intergenerational effects. In order to understand the mechanisms of intergenerational transmission of violence, it is necessary to consider both direct and indirect transmission processes (Black, Sussman & Unger, 2010; Eriksson & Mazerolle, 2015; Fitton, Yu & Fazel, 2020; Guedes et al., 2016; Widom & Wilson, 2015). Although children are exposed to different types of violence by different people and in different places, the majority of them are abused within and by their families. They even become invisible victims of this process by directly witnessing or being exposed to violent incidents between adults within the family (Nüfus Bilim Derneği ve Birleşmiş Milletler Nüfus Fonu, 2013). In the literature, it is stated that attitudes toward the use of violence are learned in the family; when children witness or are exposed to violence in the family, they are more likely to condone the use of violence in their relationships in adulthood (Franklin & Kercher, 2012; Lansford et al., 2014; Costa et al., 2015; Sardinha & Nájera Catalán, 2018; Gracia, Rodriguez, Martín-Fernández & Lila, 2020; Copp, Giordano, Longmore & Manning,

2019). Furthermore, previous research reports that adolescents and adults who experience childhood trauma are at high risk of violent behavior (Fitton, Yu & Fazel, 2020; Bosqui et al., 2014; Craig & Zettler, 2021; Milaniak & Widom, 2015; Ross & Arsenault, 2018).

In order to prevent violence against children, it is necessary to identify and eliminate the factors that lead to violence and to increase awareness and sensitivity towards violence. At the same time, awareness and sensitivity towards violence are essential in developing anti-violence attitudes and behaviors (Collyer, Brell, Moster & Furey, 2011). Being aware of violence against children and being sensitive to violence can also be considered a sign of reacting to violent behaviors. Cultural, environmental, and individual factors are influential in the development of violence-related behaviors, awareness, and sensitivity to violence. Prevention of violence against children is possible by increasing individual and social awareness and sensitivity towards violence against children.

Developing awareness and sensitivity to violence is a process that starts in the family and continues in school and professional life. In vocational education, the individual needs to be aware of his/her own prejudiced and discriminatory views and to put the knowledge he/she has acquired into practice. At this point, university students are considered to be a key population because university students are more sensitive to most issues concerning the social structure and closer to intellectual life than adults (Koca, Bektaş & Çağan, 2019; Özyürek, Kürtüncü, Sezgin & Kurt, 2020). Therefore, increasing the awareness and sensitivity of university students who choose a profession that requires close interaction with children is one of the most essential conditions for reducing violence against children. Professionals who graduate with theoretical and behavioural competencies in combating violence against children from the vocational training process can mediate change and increase social sensitivity. At this point, the first thing to be done is to determine their awareness of domestic violence and their current level of sensitivity towards violence against children. At the same time, they are still students, and to increase these

levels as much as possible. In this context, it is necessary to evaluate the results of whether the courses given are practical or not.

This study was conducted to evaluate the effect of the "Violence against Children and its Prevention" course on university students' sensitivity to violence against children and their awareness of domestic violence.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 2.1. Type of Research

This research is a pretest-posttest quasi-experimental study.

### 2.2. Population and Sample

The study population consists of students (N=100) taking the elective course "Violence against Children and its Prevention" at a state university in the Mediterranean Region in the 2021-2022 academic year. In the study, all students constituting the universe were included in the sample without calculating the sample. However, since participation in the study was

voluntary, the study was completed with 81 (81.0%) students.

### 2.3. Data collection

Violence Against Children course is one of the courses offered online among the standard, elective courses of the university in the spring semester of the 2021-2022 academic year and is preferred by students from various university departments. This course is an elective course that continues for 14 weeks, 2 hours a week. The course is taken by 100 students studying in different departments of faculties of education, science and sciences, engineering architecture, economics and administrative sciences, health sciences, sports sciences, and theology. In the course content, the concept of the child and its historical process, the value given to the child and children's rights, laws and regulations related to the survival and protection of the child, the concept of violence against children and domestic violence, risk factors and protective factors of violence against children and domestic violence, types of violence (physical, emotional, sexual, neglect, peer bullying, dating violence)

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the students participating in the study

Features	Variables	N	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	62	76,5
	Male	19	23,5
Grade Level	2nd grade	73	90,1
	3rd grade	6	7,5
	4nd grade	1	1,2
	5nd grade	1	1,2
Family type	Nuclear family	70	86,4
	Extended family	7	8,6
	Single parent	4	5,0
Number of siblings	None	6	7,4
	1	28	34,6
	2	21	25,9
	Three and above	26	32,1
Mother education level	Not literate	5	6,2
	Primary School	36	44,4
	Secondary School	13	16,0
	High School Graduate	13	16,0
	University Graduate	14	17,4
Father's education level	Not literate	1	1,2
	Primary School	22	27,2
	Secondary School	23	28,4
	High School Graduate	21	25,9
	University Graduate	14	17,3
Witnessing violence	Yes	31	38,3
	No	50	61,7
Parental violence	Yes	5	6,2
	No	76	93,8
Receiving training on violence	Yes	15	18,5
	No	66	81,5
Total		81	100,0

and symptoms, INSPIRE strategies in preventing violence against children are discussed.

In the study, using data collection tools, a pre-test was conducted before the course content was given, and a post-test was conducted after the topics were finished and before the final exam. The data were collected online via Google survey. In the first article of the first form used in the Google survey, there is a consent page explaining the rationale of the research. The participant could switch to the research questions by reading and approving the consent. Answering the data collection tools took an average of 5-15 minutes. Thanks to the opportunity and convenience provided by the Google survey, the researchers downloaded all

responses, converted them into SPSS format, and analyzed them.

## 2.4. Data Collection Tools

The study collected data using the Participant Information Form, Awareness of Domestic Violence Scale (ADVS), and Sensitivity to Violence Against Children Scale (SVACS).

**Participant Information Form:** The form, which the researchers developed in line with the literature, includes the following characteristics: age, gender, grade, family type, number of siblings, mother, and father education level, witnessing violence, the environment in which violence was witnessed, experiencing violence from parents, the type of violence perpetrated

**Table 2.** Comparison of the mean scores obtained from the scales before and after the Violence Against Children course according to the demographic characteristics of the students

	Domestic Violence Awareness Scale		Sensitivity to Violence against Children Scale	
	Pre-Study	Post-Study	Pre-Study	Post-Study
<b>Gender</b>				
Female	57,7±2,8	57,5±4,2	23,9±1,9	24,4±3,4
Male	53,6±4,3	56,2±4,6	28,2±5,2	26,4±4,5
<b>p</b>	<0,001	0,063	<0,001	0,027
<b>Grade level</b>				
2nd grade	57,0±3,7	57,1±4,4	24,9±3,5	24,8±3,6
3rd grade	55,8±3,4	58,6±1,7	30,6±6,5	25,8±5,9
4nd grade	53,5± 0,7	55,0±5,6	28,5±4,9	22,5±2,1
<b>p</b>	0,152	0,516	0,152	0,516
<b>Family type</b>				
Nuclear family	55,0±5,6	57,2±4,4	25,0±3,6	25,1±3,9
Extended family	52,0±5,4	56,8±4,2	25,1±2,4	25,1±3,9
Single parent	57,7±3,2	57,0±4,08	23,0±1,4	22,2±1,2
<b>p</b>	0,018	0,904	0,018	0,904
<b>Number of siblings</b>				
None	56,8±5,4	55,1±7,5	26,1±6,0	26,8±6,7
1	57,1±3,1	58,1±2,8	25,7±4,5	24,3±3,3
2	56,9±4,2	58,0±2,7	24,3±1,9	24,0±2,7
Three and above	56,3±3,5	56,0±5,4	24,2±2,2	25,7±3,9
<b>p</b>	0,558	0,535	0,558	0,535
<b>Mother education level</b>				
Not literate	58,2±1,9	51,6±9,7	23,2±0,8	29,0±7,4
Primary School	57,2±3,5	57,8±2,9	23,9±1,8	23,9±2,5
Secondary School	55,5±3,0	57,7±2,7	26,0±2,9	24,4±1,8
HighSchool	58,3±2,3	58,0±2,3	24,0±2,6	25,0±3,2
University	55,0±5,2	56,2±5,8	28,0±6,0	26,0±5,4
<b>p</b>	0,084	0,710	0,084	0,710
<b>Father's education level</b>				
Not literate	59,0	42,0	24,0	39,0
Primary School	58,0±2,4	57,0±5,1	23,5±1,8	23,7±3,4
Secondary School	56,8±3,3	57,6±3,4	24,1±1,6	25,3±2,3
HighSchool	55,5±4,7	56,8±4,3	25,5±4,3	25,0±3,7
University	56,5±3,8	58,4±2,0	27,6±4,9	24,7±4,3
<b>p</b>	0,450	0,246	0,450	0,246
<b>Total</b>	56,8±3,6	57,2±4,3	24,9±3,5	24,9±3,7
<b>p</b>	0,036		0,505	

by parents, and receiving previous education on violence.

**Domestic Violence Awareness Scale (DVAS):**

It was developed by Özyürek and Kurnaz (2019) to determine individuals' awareness of domestic violence. The answers to the three-point Likert-type scale are graded as Agree (1), Partially Agree (2) and Disagree (3). The scale consists of 4 dimensions and 20 items: Defining Domestic Violence, Consequences of Domestic Violence, Acceptance of Domestic Violence, and Normalisation of Domestic Violence. Items numbered 11-20 in the scale are scored in reverse order. The higher the scores obtained from the scale, the higher the awareness of domestic violence (Özyürek & Kurnaz, 2019).

**Sensitivity to Violence Against Children Scale (SVACS):**

This scale developed by Özyürek (2017) was used to determine university students' sensitivity to violence against children. The three-point Likert-type scale consists of 19 items and one dimension. Items 3, 6, 12, 14, and 18 in the scale are negative and are reverse scored. The lowest score that can be obtained from the scale is 19, and the highest score is 57. The higher the score obtained from the scale, the higher the sensitivity to violence against children (Özyürek, 2017).

**2.5. Analysing the Data**

The data obtained in the study were analyzed using the SPSS 25.0 statistical package program. The suitability of the data for normal distribution was evaluated by the Shapiro-Wilk test. Percentage, standard deviation, frequency, and mean values were used to analyze descriptive data. Man-Whitney U test was used to evaluate the difference between two independent groups, Kruskal-Wallis test was used to evaluate the difference between three or more independent groups, and Wilcoxon test was used to evaluate the difference between pre-test and post-test scores.

**2.6. Ethical Aspects of the Research**

The research was conducted within the scope of ethical principles by observing all relevant articles on good clinical practice and the Declaration of

Helsinki. Ethics committee permission (Date: 2022/04 Approval No: 2022/620) and institutional permission were obtained for the research. Informed consent was obtained verbally and in writing from the students participating in the study.

**3. RESULTS**

The mean age of the students (n=81) in the study was 21.1±2.2 years; 23.5% were male, 100.0% were undergraduate students, and 90.1% were in the 2nd year of the undergraduate program. It was determined that 86.4% of the students' family type was nuclear family, 34.6% had only one sibling, 44.4% of the students' mother's education level was primary school, and 28.4% of the students' father's education level was secondary school. It was found that 38.3% of the students witnessed violence, and 6.2% experienced violence from their parents. In addition, 18.5% of the students stated that they had received prior training on violence (Tablo 1).

Table 2 shows the mean scores of the students in the ADVS. Before the study, it was determined that there was a statistically significant difference between the groups according to gender and family type ( $p<0.05$ ). While the mean score of male students was 53.6±4.3, the mean score of female students was 57.7±2.8. The mean scores of students from nuclear families were 55.0±5.6, those from extended families were 52.0±5.4, and those from single-parent families were 57.7±3.2. After the study, it was determined that these differences disappeared, and there was no statistically significant difference between the groups ( $p>0.05$ ). There was no statistically significant difference between the pre and post-study ADVS scores of the students who participated in the study according to their grade level, number of siblings, and mother and father education levels (Table 2). It was found that the total mean ADVS scores of the students increased after the study compared to before the study, and the difference between the groups was statistically significant ( $p<0.05$ ).

When the mean SVACS scores of the students in the study were analyzed in Table 2, it was determined that there was a statistically

significant difference between the groups according to gender, class level, and mother and father education level before the study ( $p < 0.05$ ). While the mean SVACS score of male students was  $28.2 \pm 5.2$ , the mean score of female students was  $23.9 \pm 1.9$ . After the study, it was determined that there was a difference between the groups only according to gender and father's education level ( $p < 0.05$ ). No statistically significant difference was found in the mean SVACS scores of the students participating in the study according to grade level mother and father education level ( $p > 0.05$ ). It was determined that there was no statistically significant difference in the total mean SVACS scores of the students after the study compared to before the study ( $p > 0.05$ ) (Table 2). In addition, a negative and poor correlation was found between ADVS and SVACS after the study ( $\rho = -3.90, p < 0.001$ )

#### 4. DISCUSSION

This study aims to evaluate the effect of the "Violence against Children and its Prevention" course on university students' awareness of domestic violence and their sensitivity to violence against children. The findings show that education has a significant effect on awareness and sensitivity. These findings are consistent with other studies in the literature and confirm that education improves violence awareness and prevention attitudes (Çeçen-Eroğul & Kaf Hasırcı, 2013; Walsh et al., 2018; Grossman, Neckerman, & Koepsell, 1997).

In the study, it was observed that the students' ADVS scores increased significantly after the training. This finding shows that the training program was effective. In the literature, similar training programs have been reported to increase awareness of violence and improve attitudes towards violence prevention (Arrojo and et al, 2023; Whitaker, Morrison, Lindquist, Hawkins, O'Neil, & Nesi, 2006). Arrojo et al. (2023) found that violence education programs for young people are effective in reducing violent behaviors. Whitaker et al. (2006) stated that violence prevention programs play an essential role in reducing violent behaviors in children and youth.

While differences were observed in awareness levels according to demographic variables such as gender and family type before the study, the disappearance of these differences after the training shows that the training was equally practical for all students. This finding shows that training programs can be effective in heterogeneous student groups (Wolfe, Crooks, Jaffe, Chiodo, Hughes, & Ellis, 2009). Wolfe et al. (2009) emphasized that school-based violence prevention programs are effective in different demographic groups.

Notably, the SVACS scores did not show a statistically significant change after the training. This finding may indicate that sensitivity, unlike awareness, requires a more complex and in-depth training process. Attitude changes involving emotional and cognitive processes such as sensitivity can be achieved through information transfer and long-term and repetitive training (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011; Millar et al., 2022). Ttofi and Farrington (2011) stated that violence prevention programs are more effective with long-term and repetitive interventions. Millar et al. (2022) emphasize that emotional awareness and empathy training are essential in developing sensitivity to violence.

In the study, it was found that as students' awareness of domestic violence increased, their sensitivity to violence against children decreased. This outcome is unexpected and requires careful evaluation. Four possible reasons may explain this situation. First, as awareness of domestic violence increases, students may gain a deeper understanding of how prevalent this type of violence is in society and the conditions under which it occurs. However, this increased awareness may have led to certain forms of violence being perceived as normal or acceptable, thus reducing their sensitivity to violence against children. Second, this decrease in sensitivity might be related to students' defense mechanisms. As awareness of domestic violence grows, some students may have activated a psychological defense mechanism in response to the disturbing information. In other words, they may have become emotionally desensitized in order to protect themselves, seeking to feel less

emotional distress from violent events. Third, the students' attitudes toward violence and sensitivity could be influenced by societal norms and cultural factors. Their responses might be shaped by broader cultural views on violence and its acceptability. Lastly, the decline in sensitivity could be related to the content of the education itself. In this context, the educational materials could be revisited, and the teaching strategies could be restructured to adopt a more emotional and empathetic approach. Qualitative studies may be helpful in further exploring the reasons behind this negative correlation and in identifying areas for improvement in the educational framework.

The findings of the study revealed that gender and the father's education level were determinants of sensitivity to violence against children. Especially the lower sensitivity levels of male students suggest the effect of gender roles and patriarchal values. This situation emphasizes the importance of gender-based education programs and awareness-raising activities (Flood & Pease, 2009; Banyard, Plante, & Moynihan, 2004). Flood and Pease (2009) stated that training on gender equality and masculinity roles is effective in increasing men's sensitivity to violence. Banyard et al. (2004) emphasize that gender-based awareness programs are critical in combating violence. Education on violence prevention against children is addressed differently in international undergraduate programs, and there are differences in practice between developed and developing countries. In developed countries, child protection and violence prevention education is delivered systematically and comprehensively, raising awareness through compulsory courses and long-term programs (World Health Organization, 2016). Studies such as Whitaker et al. (2006) show that these programs are essential in reducing violent behavior. On the other hand, in developing countries, such training is usually carried out with the contribution of non-governmental organizations and international support and may be limited in content. In this study conducted in Turkey, the "Violence against Children and its Prevention" course offered to university students increased their

awareness of domestic violence. Still, it did not provide a statistically significant increase in their sensitivity to violence against children ( $p>0.05$ ). Similarly, Wolfe et al. (2009) found that school-based violence prevention programs are effective in different demographic groups. Such studies show that educational programs are essential in developing students' awareness and sensitivity toward violence. Therefore, it is recommended that long-term and more comprehensive educational strategies be developed to increase awareness and sensitivity.

### Limitations

One of the strengths of this study is that the entire population was included in the sample, thus minimizing sampling bias. However, the fact that the study was conducted in only one university and the data were collected by self-report brings with it the risks of generalisability and bias. These findings should be confirmed in future studies with larger samples, including different demographic groups and objective measurement methods. This study also contributes significantly to the literature on violence education and sensitization. Another limitation of the study is that the study was conducted only with students who chose an elective course on violence against children. Students with high sensitivity to this issue may have chosen the course, which may have caused the effect on the findings and sensitivity to violence against children not to be evaluated.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study shows that the "Violence against Children and its Prevention" course has a significant effect on university students' awareness of domestic violence. However, it is seen that it does not affect the scores of the SVACS. In addition, gender and the father's education level were found to be determinants of sensitivity to violence against children. The lower sensitivity levels of male students suggest the effect of gender roles and patriarchal values. In light of these findings, it is seen that in order to increase university students' sensitivity to violence, not only elective courses but also compulsory courses

targeting more comprehensive, emotional and cognitive processes within the framework of gender equality should be given or long-term educational strategies should be developed for university students. In the future, longitudinal and randomized controlled studies evaluating the effects of different educational strategies are recommended.

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