

---

---

**Difference in the perception of the socially unacceptable  
behaviour for the male and the female preschool children  
among the Saudi parents**

**Dr Basma Alghufali**

Dr. at Princess Nourahbint Abdulrahman University  
(PhD - Canterbury Christ Church University).

**Abstract**

Socially unacceptable behaviour is a relatively new field of research in child psychology domain. This research looks at difference in parents' perception of socially unacceptable behaviour among preschool boys and girls in Saudi Arabia. Data for this research was collected using self administered questionnaire survey from 211 parents (123 fathers and 89 mothers) of kindergarten children studying in different kindergartens in Saudi Arabia. Findings of this study indicate that there is some noticeable difference between parents' perception of socially unacceptable behaviour among preschool boys and girls in Saudi Arabia.

## مستخلص:

يعتبر السلوك غير المقبول اجتماعيا هو مجال جديد نسبياً في الدراسات خصوصاً في مجال علم نفس الطفل. حيث ركز هذا البحث على الاختلاف في وجهات النظر من قبل مجموعه من الآباء والأمهات الذي بلغ عددهم ٢١١ عن طريق الاستبيان. للتعرف على السلوك الغير مقبول اجتماعيا من وجهة نظر الوالدين وتحديداً في البيئة السعودية ، بين الصبيان والفتيات في مرحلة ما قبل المدرسة من سن اربعة الى سبع سنوات في مدينة الرياض في المملكة العربية السعودية حيث أن التعليم الإلزامي يبدأ من عمر سبع سنوات وهي المرحلة الابتدائية . تم جمع البيانات الخاصة لهذه الدراسة باستخدام استبيان عن طريق الإدارة المدرسية وذلك لغرض جمع البيانات من أولياء الأمور . حيث تشير نتائج هذه الدراسة إلى وجود اختلاف ملحوظ بين إدراك الآباء والامهات للسلوك غير المرغوب به إجتماعيا في مرحلة ما قبل المدرسةً ومن أهم العوامل التي تفسر هذا الاختلاف هو التوجه الثقافي والديني للمجتمع السعودي حيث توصلت للنتائج عن طريق جمع البيانات من خلال الاستبانات.

## Keywords

socially unacceptable behaviour; problem behaviours; gender differences; parent perception of social skills, kindergarten children.

## Introduction

The issue of socially unacceptable behaviour among children has been widely discussed (Hameed-ur-Rehman & Sadruddin, 2012). However, the discourse on the subject is far from over because researchers find multiple perspectives of looking at this issue. For example, some researchers looked at diagnosis and intervention (Hameed-ur-Rehman & Sadruddin, 2012; Suito, Sechrist & Plikuhn, 2009) while others have looked at causes of children's social behaviour such as familial factors (Suito, Sechrist & Plikuhn, 2009; Cunningham & Thornton, 2006), socio-economic factors (Chowdry et al., 2010), gender (Cunningham, 2001), upbringing (Yekta, 2011), and cultural background and ethnicity (Hameed-ur-Rehman & Sadruddin, 2012; Isanski & West, 2009).

One of the aspects that have not received sufficient interest in past research is the issue of gender bias in socially unacceptable behaviours. The demarcation between the two genders in the society is a subject for discussion in social studies. The complexity of the social precedents is responsible for inducing notable implications towards the large scale differences between the social and personal behaviour of females and males (Shek, 2005). The varying social precedents that are established in different regions and cultures is responsible for creating distinct perceptions regarding acceptable standards of behaviour from adolescents and the gender roles in the society (Abdi, 2010).

This study is intended to investigate the differences in perception of Saudi parents regarding socially unacceptable behaviour in context of preschool male and female wards in Saudi Arabia. The understanding of the vital aspects of the theme of this paper is based on a detailed illustration of cultural precedents that are related to segregation on the basis of gender. The study would also reflect on the prominent demarcations between masculinity and femininity as well as the depiction of the acceptable behaviours from male and female members of Saudi Arabian society. The case

of Saudi Arabia is of particular interest due to high level of gender segregation in the Saudi society.

### **Masculinity and feminism**

The perception of socially acceptable behaviour is dependent on the general definitions of masculinity and femininity in the society of Saudi Arabia. The feminised theories are reflective of the profound advocacy for the social oppression and agency of women in social life extending across varying domains. The feminist theory reflects on the investigation of particular aspects such as communication, experience, philosophy of women that is also characterized by the inclusion of varying theories and assumptions intended for guidance of contemporary research. the promotion of gender studies are explicitly reflective of the cultural construction followed in order to establish unique precedents for guidance of sexual disparities in terms of economic, political, symbolic and subjective contexts (Alsuwaida, 2016). The placement of masculinity and femininity traits in context of preschool education is associated with the prominent references towards learning and social behaviour of preschool children (Hameed-ur-Rehman, & Sadruddin, 2012).

The social concerns arising from the understanding of distinct social identities of children could be identified as a major subject of research in the case of gender and social studies (Abdi, 2010). Masculinity has been comprehensively associated as a major highlight of socially acceptable behaviour studies and is associated with the impact of gender on the society. The understanding of the individual elements responsible for social construction of gender is related to the recognition of feasible endeavours in order to develop a critical and transformative relation to the concerned individual (Alsuwaida, 2016).

Alsuwaida (2016) comments that, it has been recognized that construction of gender is based largely on the recognition of precedents for action with respect to the norms and behavioural

understanding related to specific gender. Structure of social relations is largely based on the reproductive disparities that are reflected in the social processes. The scope of masculinity is profoundly related to the perception of a male regarding the choice of clothes, occupation and friends. The requirements of social identity from a masculine perspective are recognized in the form of the distinctions related to interactions with higher authorities, potential partners and friends in social circle. In the case of preschool children the ambiguities pertaining to definition of masculinity arise from the contextual description provided by the parents thereby leading to compliance with expectations (Hameed-ur-Rehman, & Sadruddin, 2012; Abdi, 2010; Nourani, 1999). Structure and understanding of the social perceptions regarding masculinity as well as the valuation for higher growth for women could be considered as some of critical gaps identified in context of the research on social studies.

The implications of masculinity are primarily derived from patriarchy that is reflective of the favouring of aggressiveness and violence as primary characteristics (Alsuwaida, 2016). The western societies have a considerably distinct presentation of the differences between masculine and feminine traits thereby implying the polarity between two genders. On the contrary, the subdued feminine nature in the case of the Islamic societies and the basis of the specific traits observed in individual gender is a contrast to the western society (Abdi, 2010; Nourani, 1999). The responsibility of parents in this case is observed clearly as children are more likely to perceive the differences in gender from the behaviour of the parents that can be associated with comprehensive differences that develop over the course of time and impose long term impacts on the dominating nature of a particular gender (Omar, 2011).

### **Promotion of socially acceptable behaviour**

The socially acceptable behaviour in Saudi Arabia could be associated with the complexities that arise from reflection on the drastic disparities vested in the social structure and culture of Saudi Arabia. It is essential to observe that promotion of masculinity in

males and femininity in females is recognized on the basis of expectations that differ from person to person. It is also essential to observe that the social expectations of adult human beings is credible thereby validating the right of individuals to determine the feasibility of social behaviour of children. The complexities in the social behaviour of children are subject to notable ambiguities that are perceived in context of multifaceted and naive nature that implies the lack of affective, cognitive and behavioural competences (Brestan, Foote & Eyberg, 2004).

The implications for gender segregation in the culture alongside observing the expectations of masculinity from males and females depicted by parents have a coherent impact on the social behaviour of children. The expectations of parents from their children regarding social behaviour are largely based on the gender as well as the age of the children. The perception of socially unacceptable behaviour on behalf of parents is based on the deviation from precedent norms of behaviour. The precedent norms of behaviour can be identified in the requirement of masculine traits from young preschool children. Masculinity promotion in small children is judged by the parents through coherent references to the deviation from accepted norms of masculinity (Broidy et al., 2003).

The example of parents promoting their male preschool children to work and strive for accomplishing certain objectives and realization of insufficiencies on the basis of their lack of abilities to achieve the goal could be considered as a vital requirement for observing socially unacceptable behaviour. This factor is also largely influenced by the representation of masculinity in adult males which they require to see in their children also. The crucial role of adults in determining the behavioural feasibility of children is also highlighted in majority of research studies pertaining to the behaviour of students in preschool (Brozina & Abela, 2006).

The implications for portrayal of socially unacceptable behaviour among children were identified in the form of gentle, likeable and humble traits (Elias & Berk, 2002). On the other hand,

the socially unacceptable behaviour precedents are identified in the form of biting, tantrums, lying, fighting and stealing. Children could be able to engage effectively in the social circles effectively thereby implying prominent references towards the humility as a socially unacceptable behaviour. The reflection on a gender perspective in order to identify the notable changes identified in the last 70 years in the form of access provided to women for involvement in the labour market in the developed world (Espinosa, 2002). The society in Saudi Arabia is largely reflective of the coherent participation of men in housework and childcare. The implications of changes in the governance perspectives of modern leaders in the Saudi Arabian monarchy are also identified as a cognizable impact on the perception of gender in the society.

## Methods

This is a quantitative research which involves collecting data from parents of Saudi children studying in preschool nurseries using the questionnaire survey. The sample for this study included parents of Saudi preschool children studying in nurseries in cities of Jeddah and Riyadh. For sake of convenience of the respondents questionnaires were drafted in both English and Arabic. Respondents were contacted through management of the nurseries. In total 943 parents were contacted. However, out of these only 558 agreed to participate in the research. In total 558 questionnaires were sent to parents. In total data collection included 13 nurseries, 8 in Riyadh and 5 in Jeddah.

Respondents were initially contacted through the school management. It was clarified that their participation was voluntary and there were no benefits offered to those who agreed to participate. Also the respondents were informed that all the responses will be collected and treated anonymously. No specific selection criteria was used to identify the respondents except that they should be parent of one of the children studying in the nurseries included in the survey.

Out of the 943 parents contacted, 558 parents agreed to participate in the survey. Printed version of the questionnaire was handed out to the parents when they came to collect their child(ren) from school. One drop box was left at the exit of the nurseries for 15 days for participating parents to drop completed questionnaires. Out of the 558 questionnaires distributed 231 were completed and returned.

Several different kinds of socially unacceptable behaviours were investigated. These included:

- Physically unacceptable behaviour
- Verbally abusive behaviour
- Lying
- social-related behaviours
- Fearful behaviour
- Lack of discipline
- Strange habits

Structure of the questionnaire was as follows

**Table 1:** Number of items for each variable in the questionnaire

Item	Number of questions
Demographic information: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender</li> <li>• Age</li> <li>• Profession</li> </ul>	
Physically unacceptable behaviour	6
Verbally abusive behaviour	5
Lying	5
Social-related behaviours	4
Fearful behaviour	5
Lack of discipline	6
Strange habits	5

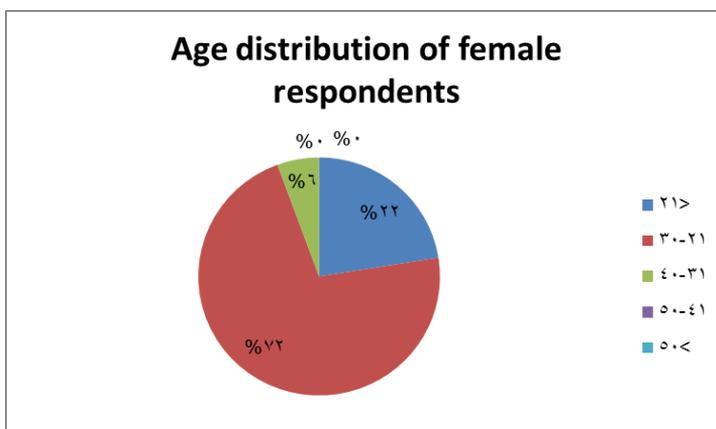
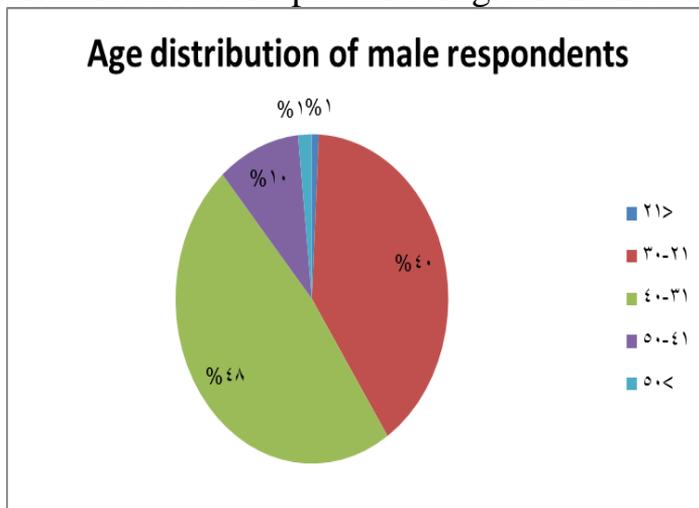
In total, the questionnaire consisted of 39 questions. A questionnaire survey was conducted between March 2017 and May 2017.

## Data Analysis

The 231 questionnaires received were analysed for missing responses and responses with 10% unanswered questions were discarded. 19 responses were discarded because of missing responses or obvious patterns in responses. Remaining 212 responses were included in the study. 58% of the respondents were male and 42% were female. Out of the 212 responses 163 were collected from nurseries in Riyadh and 49 from nurseries in Jeddah.

### Results

The age distribution of the respondents is given in the chart below:



Almost 88% of male respondents were in 21-40 age group while 94% of the female respondents were below 30 years of age. This indicates that the sample mainly consisted of youth. This is understandable because the target population consisted of parents of very young children (children under age of 5) and hence the parents were expected to be in their youth.

This means that the sample comprised of more men than women. In order to evaluate the impact of such a distribution, the T-test was conducted to compare the means of responses submitted by men and women. The table below summarises the results of the t-test:

**Table 2:** Comparison of means of responses from mothers and fathers

Variable	Gender	Mean	p-value
Physically unacceptable behaviour	Fathers	3.81	0.041
	Mothers	3.21	
Verbally abusive behaviour	Fathers	3.74	0.068
	Mothers	3.62	
Lying	Fathers	4.11	0.087
	Mothers	3.87	
Social-related behaviours	Fathers	3.22	0.066
	Mothers	3.46	
Fearful behaviour	Fathers	3.38	0.102
	Mothers	3.42	
Lack of discipline	Fathers	3.43	0.094
	Mothers	3.31	
Strange habits	Fathers	3.51	0.179
	Mothers	3.49	

\*Strongly disagree (range 0-1), Disagree (range >1 - 2), Neutral (range >2 - 3), Agree (range >3 - 4), Strongly agree (range >4 - 5)  
Responses indicate that for most of the variables there is no statistically significant difference between the responses given by men and women except for physically unacceptable behaviour. Even in that case the responses were not too divergent.

Next the responses were analysed for difference in what the parents considered as socially unacceptable behaviour among boys and girls children. The results are summarised below:

**Table 3:** Comparison of responses obtained for problematic behaviour among boy and girl children.

Which behaviour is socially unacceptable	Gender	Mean	Std deviation	p-value
Physically unacceptable behaviour	Unacceptable in Boys	3.37	1.21	0.008**
	Unacceptable in Girls	3.92	0.97	
Verbally abusive behaviour	Unacceptable in Boys	3.77	0.71	0.103
	Unacceptable in Girls	3.74	0.38	
Lying	Unacceptable in Boys	3.98	0.21	0.147
	Unacceptable in Girls	3.92	0.29	
Socialisation-related behaviours	Unacceptable in Boys	3.39	1.71	0.004**
	Unacceptable in Girls	3.62	1.03	
Fearful behaviour	Unacceptable in Boys	3.24	0.92	0.037**
	Unacceptable in Girls	3.12	0.78	
Lack of discipline	Unacceptable in Boys	3.49	1.27	0.053*
	Unacceptable in Girls	3.64	1.39	
Strange habits	Unacceptable in Boys	3.5	1.16	0.112
	Unacceptable in Girls	3.59	1.43	

\* significant at 90% confidence level

\*\* significant at 95% confidence level

<sup>†</sup>Strongly disagree (range 0-1), Disagree (range >1 - 2), Neutral (range >2 - 3), Agree (range >3 - 4), Strongly agree (range >4 - 5)

Results indicate significant differences in parents' perception of socially unacceptable behaviour for boys and girls for four out of the seven variables. Responses indicate that parents consider physically aggressive/unacceptable behaviour as more unacceptable among girls than in boys and the difference in their perception is statistically significant. Similar variation was observed for social related behaviours, fearful behaviour and lack of discipline. Physically unacceptable behaviour, social related behaviour and

lack of discipline were considered socially more unacceptable for girls than for boys while Fearful behaviour was considered more unacceptable for boys than for girls.

The results provide an interesting insight into the cultural underpinnings that guide parents' perception of socially unacceptable behaviour among girls and boys. While physically unacceptable behaviour was considered highly unacceptable for girls, parents, especially fathers had a more moderate view of such behaviour among boys. Decisiveness and assertiveness are valued in Saudi culture as is highlighted by its high 'masculinity index' value on Hofstede index. This shows that parents may expect boys, who are expected to be breadwinners in the family to tough and able to take on challenges. On the other hand, girls are expected to play the role of family maker, home carer and thus need not be aggressive as they are not expected to compete in real world. Hence, physical aggressive behaviour among girls is considered much more negatively.

In socialisation related behaviour also, parents indicated a more liberal stance towards boys than girls. Girls are expected not to socialise with people of other gender but surprisingly parents were much more acceptable of their boys socialising with other girls. Also on aspects such as shyness, parents indicated higher desirability of shyness among girls than among boys with some parents selecting the 'highly undesirable' option for shyness among boys. This again could be linked to masculinity aspect of culture where boys are expected to face the world 'like a man' while females are expected to look after home and family 'like a woman'. In the same line, fearful behaviour was considered more undesirable among boys than among girls. However, the difference, although statistically significant, was not high and the overall response was close to neutral. This could be because parents may think of fearful behaviour as natural among young kids.

Lack of discipline was also considered less undesirable among boys than among women. This can also be linked to the future role

expectations for girls and boys. General expectation is for the boys to act like a man, with certain degree of flexibility over mischievous behaviour while girls are expected to strictly adhere to rules, as a child as well as when they grow up.

Lying and Verbally abusive behaviour were considered equally (i.e. no statistically significant difference observed) unacceptable for both boys and girls. This could be because such behaviour is strictly prohibited in Sharia principles, which influence Saudi culture to a great extent. Similarly, strange habits such as sucking thumb, improper eating behaviour, spitting etc. were considered inappropriate for both girls and boys.

## Discussion

The findings of the study indicate that there is a strong cultural influence on parents' perception of socially unacceptable behaviour among preschool boys and girls. Findings indicate that parents' perception in this case is guided by future role expectations of children. Some of the aspects related to discipline were considered essential for children, irrespective of gender. In Islamic culture obedience is considered an essential trait. Nourani (1999) found that 'taking orders' and 'following instructions' are the significant part of socially acceptable behaviour among children in Iran. Such expectation is also reflective of the high power distance culture of Saudi Arabia wherein orders given by people higher up in the hierarchy is considered desirable.

Parents in the earlier studies have been found to be equally concerned about the socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviour of their children (such as evidences from Iran, Turkey and Pakistan) (Semke et al, 2010; Hameed-ur-Rehman & Sadruddin, 2012; Kagitcibasi, 2013). Another finding of this study that also confirms the evidences from the literature is that parents in Muslim countries expect their children to be more obedient, responsible, less demanding and caring. The findings from study inform that parents expect their children to be responsible and children involving in

violent behaviour are unacceptable. Similar finding have been made by the other cross cultural studies that indicate that violent behaviour displayed by children is significantly unacceptable. Findings of this study inform that Saudi mothers and fathers have similar behavioural expectations from their children. The earlier studies have also found that parents have different expectations from their girls and boys. Girls are expected to be more obedient, responsible and self-resilient, while boys can be expected to be disobedient, argumentative and irresponsible (Ghorbani et al, 2004). This research confirms these findings and suggests that girls are expected to be more obedient and responsible in comparison to boys. On the other hand, boys are expected to be competitive and free of fear or shyness.

## Conclusion

This paper validated the role of parents, gender segregated culture and the contextual factors that are associated with the development of socially acceptable behaviour among children in Saudi Arabia. The elements which were used to address the research issue under concern i.e. perception of differences between socially unacceptable behaviour among male and female children that are engaged in preschool education in Saudi Arabia comprised of an evaluation of the perception of masculinity and femininity as well as the tolerance for specific behaviours expected from each gender. This paper confirms that despite significant improvements made in closing gender gap in the Kingdom, parents' perception of socially unacceptable behaviour among boys and girls remain somewhat divergent. This divergence can be explained by distinct Saudi culture of Masculinity and high power distance.

## References

- Abdi, B. (2010). Gender differences in social skills, problem behaviours and academic competence of Iranian kindergarten children based on their parent and teacher ratings. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 5, 1175-1179.
- Alsuwaida, N. (2016), Women's Education In Saudi Arabia, *Journal of International Education Research*, 12(4), 111.
- Baki, R. (2004), Gender-Segregated Education in Saudi Arabia: Its Impact on Social Norms and the Saudi Labor Market, *Education policy analysis archives*, 12(28), 28.
- Brestan, E. V., Foote, R. C. & Eyberg, S. M. (2004), The Dyadic Parent-Child Interaction Coding System: Reliability and validity with father-child dyads.
- Broidy, L. M., Nagin, D. S., Tremblay, R. E., Bates, J. E., Brame, B. U., & Dodge, K. A. (2003), Developmental trajectories of childhood disruptive behaviours and adolescent delinquency: A six-site, cross-national study, *Developmental Psychology*, 39, 222-245.
- Brozina, K. & Abela, J. R. Z. (2006), Behavioural inhibition, anxious symptoms, and depressive symptoms: A short prospective examination of a diathesis-stress model, *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 44, 1337-1346.
- Chowdry, H., Crawford, C., Dearden, L., Joyce, R., Sibieta, L., Sylva, K. & Washbrook, E. (2010), Poorer children's educational attainment: how important are attitudes and behaviour? Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Cunningham, M. (2001), The influence of parental attitude and behaviours on children's attitude towards gender and household labour in early childhood, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 63, 111-122.
- Cunningham, M., & Thornton, A. (2006), The influence of parent's marital quality on adult children's attitude towards marriage and its alternatives: main and moderating effects, *Demography*, 43(4), 659-672.

- Elias, C.L. & Berk, L.E. (2002), Self-regulation in young children: Is there a role for sociodramatic play? *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 17(2), 216-238.
- Espinosa, L. (2002), The connection between social emotional development and early literacy, *The Kauffman Early Education Exchange*, 1, 30-44.
- Eyberg, S. & Pincus, D. (1999), *ECBI and SESBI-R: Eyberg Child Behaviour Inventory and Sutter-Eyberg Student Behaviour Inventory—Revised, Professional Manual*. Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources.
- Ghorbani, N., Watson, P. J., Krauss, S. W., Bing, M. N., & Davison, H. K. (2004), Social science as dialogue: Narcissism, individualist and collectivist values, and religious interest in Iran and the United States, *Current Psychology*, 23(2), 111-123.
- Hameed-ur-Rehman, M., & Sadruddin, M. M. (2012), Study on the causes of misbehavior among South-East Asian children, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 2, 162-175.
- Isanski, B. & West, C. (2009), The body of knowledge: Understanding embodied cognition, *Observer*, 23(1).
- Kagitcibasi, C. (2013), *Family, self, and human development across cultures: Theory and applications*, Routledge.
- Nourani, K. (1999), *Social skills and adaptive behavior of Iranian preschoolers, teachers' and parents' ratings* (Doctoral dissertation, National Library of Canada=Bibliothèque nationale du Canada).
- Omar, A.R. (2011), *Masculinity and the acceptance of violence: a study of social construction*, The University of Iowa.
- Semke, C. A., Garbacz, S. A., Kwon, K., Sheridan, S. M., & Woods, K. E. (2010), Family involvement for children with disruptive behaviors: The role of parenting stress and motivational beliefs, *Journal of School Psychology*, 48(4), 293-312.

- Shek, D.T. (2005), Perceived parental control and parent–child relational qualities in Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong, *Sex Roles*, 53(9-10), 631-642.
- Sutor, J., Sechrist, J. & Plikuhn, M. (2009), The Role of Perceived Maternal Favoritism in Sibling Relations in Midlife. Purdue University, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 71, 1026 – 1038.
- Yekta, M. (2011), The attitudes of adults toward child abuse, *Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 30, 278-282.