

BULLYING AND ABUSE IN AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER DIAGNOSED IN CHILDHOOD: LIFETIME ASSESSMENT IN ADULTHOOD**Kübra Özmeral Erarkadaş¹, Müjdat Erarkadaş², Şahika Gülen Sismanlar¹**¹*Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Kocaeli University, Faculty of Medicine, Kocaeli, Türkiye*²*Clinic of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Gölcük Necati Çelik State Hospital, Kocaeli, Türkiye*

BACKGROUND AND AIM: Individuals with autism spectrum disorder(ASD) are at an increased risk for peer bullying and various forms of abuse. However, adverse life events in individuals with ASD have predominantly been examined through childhood-based cross-sectional studies, while lifetime data extending into adulthood remain limited.

This study examined the prevalence of lifelong adverse life events and differences among ASD subgroups in adults diagnosed with ASD.

METHODS: 87 individuals diagnosed with ASD in childhood were evaluated in adulthood. Based on adult clinical assessment, participants were classified as Autistic Disorder(AD, 49.4%), Atypical Autism(20.7%), Asperger Syndrome(AS, 24.7%), and loss of ASD diagnosis(LAD, 5.7%). Lifetime exposure to peer bullying, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, and criminal history were retrospectively assessed based on self- and/or caregiver-reports. Approval was received from Kocaeli University(GOKAEK-2022/20.21).

RESULTS: Peer bullying was reported by 49.4% of participants and differed significantly between diagnostic subgroups($p<0.001$),

with the highest rates in AS (90.5%), followed by LAD (80.0%), and the lowest rates in AD (23.3%) group. Sexual abuse was reported by 3.4% of participants, and all individuals with a history of sexual abuse belonged to the AS group, resulting in a significant group difference($p=0.021$). Emotional abuse was reported by 55.2% of participants and showed significant differences between subgroups ($p=0.001$), with the highest prevalence in AS(81%) group. Physical abuse was reported by 28.7% of participants, and differed significantly between subgroups ($p<0.001$), with the highest rates in AS(61.9%) group. 2.3% of participants had a personal criminal history, with no significant difference between groups($p=0.467$).

CONCLUSIONS: In this sample, individuals with ASD reported substantial lifetime exposure to bullying and abuse. Higher rates in AS group may be related to greater social engagement combined with persistent difficulties in interpreting social cues. In contrast, lower rates in the AD group may reflect increased parental supervision and limited social exposure. These findings highlight the need for lifelong, subgroup-specific preventive and supportive strategies for individuals with ASD.

Keywords: Autism spectrum disorder, adult, peer bullying, abuse