Sleep Ecology, Sleep Regulation and Behavior Problems in Maltreated Preschoolers: A Scoping Review

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Abstract : Child maltreatment has a profound impact on children's development. In its victims, internalizing and externalizing problems are highly prevalent, and sleep problems are common. Furthermore, the environment they live in is often disorganized, lacking routine and consistency. In non-maltreated children, several studies documented the important role of sleep regulation and sleep ecology. A poor sleep ecology (e.g., lack of sleep hygiene and bedtime routine, inappropriate sleeping location) may lead to sleep regulation problems (e.g., short sleep duration, nocturnal awakenings), and sleep regulation problems may increase the risk of behavior problems. Therefore, this scoping review aims to map evidence about sleep ecology and sleep regulation and the associations between sleep ecology, sleep regulation, and behavior problems in maltreated preschoolers. Literature from 1993 was searched in PsycInfo, Pubmed, Medline, Eric, and Proquest Dissertations and Theses. Articles and thesis were comprehensively reviewed based upon inclusion/exclusion criteria: 1) it concerns maltreated children aged 1-5 years, and 2) it addresses at least one of the following: sleep ecology, sleep regulation, and/or their associations with behavior problems in maltreated preschoolers. From the 650 studies screened, nine of them were included. Data were charted according to study characteristics, nature of variable documented, measures, analyses performed, and results of each study, then synthesized in a narrative summary. The main results show all included articles were quantitative. Foster children samples were used in four studies, children experienced different types of maltreatment in six studies, while one was specifically about sexually abused children. Regarding sleep ecology, only one study describing maltreated preschoolers' sleep ecology was found, while seven studies documented sleep regulation. Among these seven studies, 17 different sleep variables (e.g., parasomnia, dyssomnia, total 24-h sleep duration) were used, each study documenting from one to nine of them. Actigraphic measures were employed in three studies, the others used parent-reported questionnaires or sleep diaries. Maltreated children's sleep was described and/or compared to non-maltreated children's sleep, or an intervention group, showing mild differences. As for associations between sleep regulation and behavior problems, five studies investigated it and performed correlational or linear regression analyses between sleep and behavior problems, revealing some significant associations. No study was found about associations between sleep ecology and sleep regulation, between sleep ecology and behavior problems, or between these three variables. In conclusion, literature about sleep ecology, sleep regulation, and their associations with behavior problems are far more scarce in maltreated preschoolers than in non-maltreated ones. At present, there is especially a paucity of research about sleep ecology and the association between sleep ecology and sleep regulation in maltreated preschoolers, while studies on non-maltreated children showed sleep ecology plays a major role in sleep regulation. In addition, as sleep regulation is measured in many different ways among the studies, it is difficult to compare their findings. Finally, it seems necessary that research fill these gaps, as recommendations could be made to clinicians working with maltreated preschoolers regarding the use of sleep ecology and sleep regulation as intervention tools.

Keywords : maltreated preschoolers, sleep ecology, sleep regulation, behavior problems
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