



# The child abuse reporting guideline compliance in Korean newspapers

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Child abuse  
Reporting guidelines  
Newspapers  
South Korea

## ABSTRACT

The rate of child abuse has sharply increased worldwide, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the media's role in addressing child abuse cases is crucial, several international and formal organizations have established child abuse reporting guidelines. This study investigated how closely journalists follow reporting guidelines in addressing child abuse cases. Five major Korean presses and 189 articles from January 1, 2018, to January 31, 2021, were selected using the keyword "child abuse." Each article was analyzed using a guideline framework consisting of 13 items regarding the five principles of the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare and Central Child Protection Agency reporting guidelines.

This study identified a radical growth in media reporting on child abuse cases in South Korea; almost 60% of the articles analyzed came from 2020 and 2021. More than 80% of the articles analyzed did not provide abuse resources, and 70% did not provide factual information. 57.1% of the articles instigated negative stereotypes, and about 30% explicitly mentioned certain family types in the headlines. Nearly 20% of the articles provided excessive details about the method used. Approximately 16% exposed victims' identities. Some articles (7.9%) also described victims as sharing responsibility for the abuse.

This study indicates that the media reports of child abuse in South Korea did not follow the guidelines in many facets. The present study discusses the limitations of the current guidelines and suggests future directions for the news media in reporting on child abuse cases nationwide.

## 1. Introduction

According to the [Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare \(2020\)](#), the number of child abuse cases in South Korea has been increasing annually. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, the risk of child abuse has increased owing to the heightened stress and social isolation of children and their families ([Rosenthal & Thompson, 2020](#)). The number of child abuse cases has increased sharply in South Korea since the beginning of the pandemic. According to the [Korean National Policy Agency \(2020\)](#), the number of child abuse reports in families between February and March 2020 was 1558, up 13.8 % from 2019. Additionally, according to the [Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare's \(2022\)](#) analysis of child abuse cases in Korea the total number of reported child abuse cases tallied in 2021 was 53,932, a significant increase of about 27.6 % compared to the previous year.

Of the 37,605 cases judged as child abuse, the age range of 13–15 years accounted for the largest portion of victims with 8693 cases (23.1

%), followed by those aged 10–12 years with 8657 cases (23.0 %), and 7–9 years old with 7219 cases (19.2 %) ([Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2022](#)). In terms of family types of child abuse victims, 23,838 cases (63.4 %) occurred in families with biological parents, 4618 cases (12.3 %) in mother-and-child families, 3707 cases (9.9 %) in father-and-child families, and 1980 cases (5.3 %) in remarried families ([Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2022](#)). Regarding the relationship between assailants and victims, parents accounted for the highest number of cases, with 31,486 cases (83.7 %), followed by 3609 cases (9.6 %) involving surrogate caregivers, and 1517 cases (4.0 %) involving relatives ([Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2022](#)). Among the confirmed reports of child abuse, 45.1% were reported by fathers (16,944 cases), 35.6% by mothers (13,380 cases), and 3.2% by childcare teachers (1221 cases) ([Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2022](#)).

Regarding types of child abuse, 16,026 cases (42.6 %) involved multiple types of abuse ([Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2022](#)). This was followed by 12,351 cases of emotional abuse (32.8 %), 5780

*Abbreviations:* WHO, World Health Organization; UNICEF, United Nations Children's Fund; CDC, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; NAPAC, National Association for People Abused in Childhood; PRISMA, Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses; CCTV, Closed-circuit television.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107037>

Received 19 September 2021; Received in revised form 29 September 2022; Accepted 25 May 2023

Available online 30 May 2023

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cases of physical abuse (15.4 %), 2793 cases of neglect (7.4 %), and 655 cases of sexual abuse (1.7 %) (Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2022). Among the cases involving multiple forms of abuse, the highest prevalence was observed for physical abuse and emotional abuse, accounting for 13,538 cases (36.0 %). Additionally, emotional abuse and neglect comprised 1011 cases (2.7 %); physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect comprised 798 cases (2.1 %); and 16 cases (0.0 %) included all types of abuse (Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2022). Thus, the issue of child abuse is severe, and it is a global concern. Worldwide, child abuse reporting has almost doubled from 8 % to 17 % since the school closures due to COVID-19 (Save the Children, 2020). Therefore, child abuse cases have received significant media attention.

Naturally, the media's role in addressing child abuse cases is growing. However, the more media reports there are about child abuse cases, the more likely they are to trigger copycat crimes (Jung & Lee, 2017). Moreover, these reports often undermine the human rights of victims (Lee & Jung, 2016), an issue observed in relation to suicide (Kim et al., 2015). According to Kim et al. (2015), newspapers have a significant influence than television in inducing copycat suicides because of their easy accessibility and reproduction through various media outlets (Stack, 2002). Therefore, newspapers reporting on child abuse must exercise greater caution. However, some studies have suggested that media coverage of child abuse increase the public awareness on the issue (Saint-Jacques et al., 2012). Moreover, the increase in reporting helps individuals recognize the importance of reporting child abuse (Saint-Jacques et al., 2012).

While there is a press rule requiring respect for the human rights of suspects for the benefit of the public interest and directing the media to only report necessary facts, reporters often violate this rule when a press competition begins (Lee & Jung, 2016). Media coverage of a particular crime does not necessarily reflect its true reality as it tends to distort, artificially construct, and simulate reality when reporting social issues such as crime (Payne et al., 2008). Lee and Kim (2008) presented the characteristics of and problems with crime reporting in the Korean media, including crime-reporting trends, disclosure-oriented reporting trends, sensational trends, and violations of human rights in crime reporting. Additionally, they noted that crime reports in the Korean media tend to overemphasize the investigation stage because the police and prosecution are the primary sources of coverage (Lee & Kim, 2008). That is, problems with media coverage of child abuse cases include emphasizing the brutality or deviance of criminals or perpetrators, a lack of in-depth coverage of the causes of child abuse, and provocative and sensational reporting trends (Lee & Jung, 2016). Additionally, a significant issue arises when reporting incidents involving children, as the media often fails to respect the human rights of children and lack of comprehensive awareness of these rights (Lee & Jung, 2016).

Several researchers have argued that special efforts are necessary to protect human rights in crime reports, especially when they involve minors and children (Hove et al., 2013; Mejia et al., 2012; Niner et al., 2013). Crime reports can have a tremendous emotional and cognitive impact on children, and exposure to violent crime reports increases their fear of crime (Yoo et al., 2016). Further, Lee and Jung (2016) reported that children exposed to violent crime news could overestimate the possibility of crime and suffer psychological trauma as if crime scenes are persistent. This finding shows that crime reports cause significant mental and emotional damage to children.

However, the number of studies on journalism and its accuracy in reporting child abuse cases is limited. For example, a study comparing newspaper reports of child abuse and neglect and data from real cases in England and Wales demonstrated that sexual abuse cases received the most media coverage, despite neglect and emotional abuse being the most frequent reasons for contact with child protective services (Davies et al., 2017). This pattern is also observed in the United States and Australia, indicating a tendency to treat sexual abuse cases as criminal rather than other child abuse (Davies et al., 2017). In addition, Cheit et al. (2010) revealed that the coverage of child sexual abuse is

influenced by various factors (i.e., severity, provocative factors, and impact of the incident). That is, shocking and provocative incidents receive greater media coverage.

Several international and nationwide organizations (i.e., the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), National Association for People Abused in Childhood (NAPAC), and National Children's Advocacy Center in the United States) have acknowledged the issue and established child abuse reporting guidelines. For example, UNICEF's "Guidelines for Journalists Reporting on Children" helps journalists report on all childhood issues, not only child abuse cases, and enables them to satisfy the public interest without compromising children's rights (UNICEF, 2021). These guidelines consist of six overarching principles, six guidelines for interviewing children, and seven principles for reporting on children's issues. The guidelines for reporting on children are as follows (UNICEF, 2021, Seven Guidelines for Reporting on Children):

1. Do not further stigmatize any child; avoid categorizations or descriptions that expose a child to negative reprisals – including additional physical or psychological harm, or lifelong abuse, discrimination or rejection by their local communities;
2. Always provide an accurate context for the child's story or image;
3. Always change the name and obscure the visual identity of any child;
4. In certain circumstances of risk or potential risk of harm or retribution, change the name and obscure the visual identity of any child;
5. In certain cases, using a child's identity (their name and/or recognizable image) is in the child's best interests. However, when the child's identity is used, they must still be protected against harm and supported in the event of any stigmatization or reprisals;
6. Confirm the accuracy of what the child has to say, either with other children or an adult, preferably with both;
7. When in doubt about whether a child is at risk, report on the general situation for children rather than on an individual child, no matter how newsworthy the story.

Similarly, the CDC presents "Suggested Practices for Journalists Reporting on Child Abuse and Neglect" (2016). These also offer essential guidelines for journalists, although they are more concise than the UNICEF's guidelines. However, the CDC's guidelines are significant as they specifically address neglect issues. The CDC guidelines suggest the following:

1. Examine the factors that contribute to child abuse and neglect and explain the impact on children, families, and communities;
2. Explore the long-term consequences of failing to prevent child abuse and neglect;
3. Focus on prevention strategies that work;
4. Protect children and avoid causing additional harm to victims and families;
5. Use language carefully when you report on child sexual abuse. (p.8)

Furthermore, NAPAC states specific language to use and to avoid in "Media Guidelines for Reporting Child Abuse" (2016). In addition, the National Children's Advocacy Center's "Media Guide for Reporting on Child Abuse" (2018) suggests specific issues and examples for considering the impact of publicly disclosing child abuse case details.

In South Korea, the Ministry of Health and Welfare and Central Child Protection Agency first proposed recommended guidelines for reporting child abuse cases in 2018 (Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare & National Center for the Rights of the Child, 2018). These guidelines comprise five principles that emphasize the potential for false coverage of child abuse to cause secondary damage, whereas credible reporting can help prevent child abuse. The five principles are as follows:

1. Children's human rights should be considered first.
2. When covering child abuse cases, the media must adhere to ethics.

3. When reporting child abuse cases, the media must adhere to the rules that the press must follow.
4. The report should be carefully reported, considering the specificity of child abuse cases.
5. Provide accurate information on child abuse prevention. (p.2)

Specific guidelines under these five principles are listed in [Table 1](#).

Journalists should exercise greater caution when reporting on child abuse cases because of the vulnerable nature of the subjects involved. Nonetheless, only a few studies have investigated the effectiveness of child abuse reporting guidelines. However, even though reporting guidelines are only recommendations and cannot be mandated, reporting that follows child abuse guidelines can help eliminate misunderstandings and prejudices about child abuse and detect early signs of undisclosed and hidden child abuse. Therefore, considering the specific case of child abuse, journalists should avoid provocative and sensational reporting. As a first step, one must understand the current situation of whether mainstream media complies with child abuse reporting guidelines and identify areas particularly requiring supplementation. Therefore, this study investigates how well journalists follow the 13 reporting guidelines and shed light on the guidelines' limitations while offering suggestions for the future directions of the news media in reporting on child abuse.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Sample

This study selected five major newspapers with the highest circulation in South Korea: *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, *Hankyoreh*, *Chosun Ilbo*, *JoongAng Daily*, and *Dong-A Ilbo*. In this study, conservative and liberal

**Table 1**  
Principles and Guidelines of Child Abuse Reporting.

Principle	Guideline
1) Children's human rights should be considered first.	Do not expose the identity of victims and perpetrators. Do not expose personal information. Do not use sensational photographs or videos related to abuse.
2) When covering child abuse cases, the media must adhere to ethics.	Do not directly interview victims and people around them. Do not interview close acquaintances such as friends or teachers. Do not expose the personal information of the child abuse reporters.
3) When reporting child abuse cases, the media must adhere to the press rules.	Do not describe details about the abuse methods. Do not instigate negative stereotypes. Do not label the case with the name of the victims or perpetrators.
4) The report should be carefully reported, considering the specificity of child abuse cases.	Recognize that victims and related agencies have the right to refuse coverage. Recognize that disclosure of child abuse investigation information is illegal. When the victim requests the deletion and correction of the report, it is mandatory to respond quickly. Report only once after the completion of the incident. Do not blame victims. Recognize that the coverage of child abuse is professional coverage.
5) Provide accurate information on child abuse prevention.	Provide accurate information about predictors and coping strategies. Promote the necessity of and methods for preventing child abuse.

*Note.* Adapted from "Guidelines for Reporting Child Abuse Cases" by the [Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare National Center for the Rights of the Child \(2018\)](#).

newspapers representing both sides of the political spectrum are included. *Kyunghyang Shinmun* and *Hankyoreh* are the most popular liberal newspapers, while *Chosun Ilbo*, *JoongAng Daily*, and *Dong-A Ilbo* are the most renowned conservative newspapers ([Hwang, 2012](#)). We selected articles from January 1, 2018, to January 31, 2021, as the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare and the National Center for the Rights of the Child announced the first official child abuse reporting guidelines in South Korea in 2018. We selected articles using the Naver search engine, which is the largest and most used search engine in South Korea ([Jobst, 2022](#)), with the keyword "child abuse" and the advanced option of "printed newspaper." This study followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines ([Moher et al., 2009](#)) to systematically review news articles. In particular, this study followed the checklist items of the methods, including eligibility criteria, information sources, search strategy, and selection process ([PRISMA, 2022](#)).

Following the PRISMA guidelines, this study first identified 19,870 records through the search engine and then removed 6308 duplicates, as the search engine automatically removes duplicates. Then, we sequentially screened the 1) titles, 2) previews, and 3) full texts of the articles according to the following exclusion criteria: (1) articles on child abuse in general and not on particular child abuse cases; (2) columns, opinions, and reviews.

First, of the 13,562 records, we removed 11,100 records because their titles did not match the inclusion criteria or this study's aim. That is, titles that were about child abuse generally and not about particular cases were all excluded. When it was unclear only by the title, we screened previews of articles, which are short descriptions of the articles, and excluded a total of 1339 articles because they did not meet the eligibility criteria. If it was still unclear from titles and previews, we screened 1123 full-text articles and excluded 934 irrelevant items from the final analysis. Articles that satisfied all of the criteria were included in the analysis. As a result, we analyzed a total of 189 articles ([Fig. 1](#)).

### 2.2. Analysis

We used the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare and Central Child Protection Agency ([2018](#)) reporting guidelines to create an analytical framework for this study. We analyzed each article using the guideline framework consisting of 13 out of 17 items from the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare and Central Child Protection Agency guidelines: exposure of identity; exposure of personal information; use of sensational photographs/videos related to the abuse; direct interview of victims; direct interview of people around victims; exposing the personal information of child abuse reporters; excessive details about the methods used; instigating negative stereotypes; designating the cases with the names of victims or perpetrators; one-off reporting; techniques implying that victims share responsibility for child abuse; providing accurate information about predictors and coping strategies regarding child abuse; emphasizing the necessity of personal and social efforts and specific methods to prevent child abuse. Four items (right to refuse being covered, protection of investigation intelligence, respect for a request to modify and delete, and professional cover) were excluded from the analysis framework because of their inherent subjectivity, making objective evaluation unfeasible.

Following the guidelines of [Chun et al. \(2018\)](#), we coded each item of the guideline by presence/yes (1) or absence/no (0). Before the coding and assessing procedure, two authors received practical training from experts in a systematic review. The two authors, a PhD candidate and PhD student from the Department of Social Welfare had approximately five years of research experience, specifically focusing on child and adolescent welfare. They went through several practice sessions to collect and analyze the data. In addition, we conducted an inter-observer agreement to minimize authors' potential subjective and inappropriate judgement errors. Thirty articles were randomly selected and assigned to the two coders. Then, "a cross-tabulation analysis was carried out to

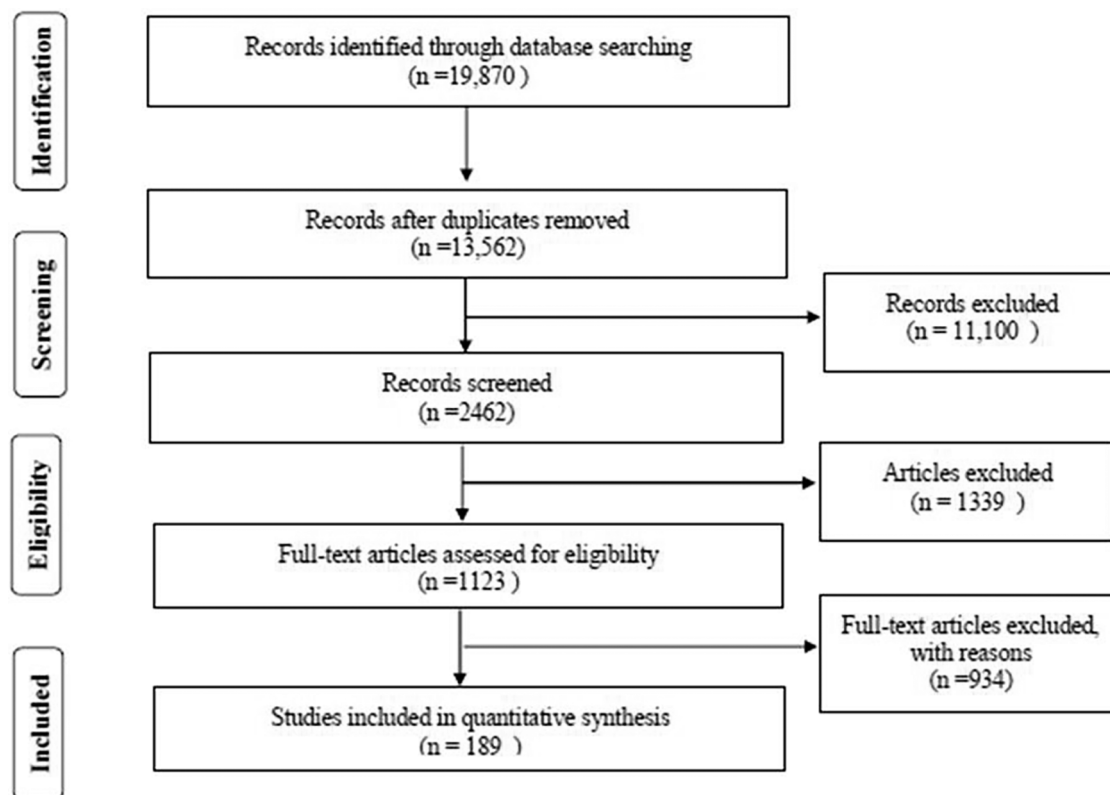


Fig. 1. Sampling Procedure.

create a merged dataset” (Chun et al., 2018, p. 3). If the two authors differed in their decisions about the coding results, a third person, a professor at the Department of Social Welfare, reviewed the results, and then all authors discussed together to make a proper judgment. The kappa coefficient was 0.835, which implies an “almost perfect” strength of agreement. After confirming the inter-observer agreement, the two coders individually examined the articles, and a reviewer performed the final quality check.

Additionally, to enhance the accuracy and reliability, four evaluators were recruited to evaluate the articles and to confirm the objectivity and degree of agreement of the evaluation. The four evaluators were all female researchers in a master’s course on social welfare. The four evaluators also evaluated all of the articles, and Fleiss’s kappa coefficient was 0.891. As a result, a total of seven evaluators participated and the degree of agreement of analysis was almost perfect.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Newspaper and year of coverage

Of the 189 articles, the number of child abuse reports was highest in 2020 (n = 73, 38.6%), followed by 2019 (n = 44, 23.3%), 2018 (n = 37, 19.6%), and 2021 (n = 35, 18.5%). However, because we only included January 2021, we conducted a monthly analysis, and the results indicated that January 2021 had the highest number of reports (n = 35, 18.5%), and June 2020 (n = 33, 17.5%) had the second highest. Therefore, the number of child abuse reports is steadily and rapidly increasing, nearly doubling in 2020 compared to 2018. Further, because the results included 36% (68 articles) in only January 2021 and June 2020 during more than three years of data, these results merit attention.

Among the five mainstream newspapers, *Dong-A Ilbo* (n = 70, 37.0%) reported the highest number of child abuse cases, followed by *Kyunghyang Shinmun* (n = 44, 23.3%), *Hankyoreh* (n = 40, 21.2%), and *Chosun Ilbo* (n = 28, 14.8%). *JoongAng Daily* published a relatively small

number, with only seven articles (3.7%) regarding child abuse cases. These child abuse cases included 82.5% (156 articles) committed by family members, and the remaining cases (n = 33, 17.5%) involved individuals in various roles, including teachers, nurses, babysitters and others.

#### 3.2. Exposure of identity and personal information

Writers must not disclose the identities of child abuse victims and perpetrators. Moreover, it is important to protect children’s personal information and avoid violations of their rights. In principle, the current “Special Act on the Punishment of Child Abuse Crimes” prohibits disclosing personal information, including the real names of the victims and perpetrators of child abuse. The Act (article 35) mandates that child protection agencies, investigative agencies, and the media to strictly adhere to confidential information requirements to prevent secondary damage to the affected children. Due to the inherent nature of child abuse crimes in which the perpetrator is often a parent, any disclosure of the perpetrator’s identity can inadvertently reveal the victim’s identity. As a result, the perpetrator’s identity must also be private. In this study, 16.4% (31 articles) of child abuse reports exposed the victim’s identity, primarily revealing the child’s real name (e.g., Jung-In and Jun-hee).

#### 3.3. Use of sensational photographs/videos related to the abuse

It is recommended that pictures or videos containing child abuse scenes not be uploaded or provocatively reenacted. However, in this study, 11 articles (5.8%) utilized sensational photographs/videos to attract more readers, often posting a picture of the assault scene captured by closed-circuit television (CCTV). For example, one case used a photograph of a CCTV showing a teacher at a daycare center in Incheon pinching a five-year-old child’s arm. In addition, the reporter attached a picture of the child’s painful expression and bruise together. Elsewhere, another case posted the scene of abuse of a 14-month-old

baby where a worker in Geumcheon-gu center, Seoul, slaps the baby for not eating well during feeding.

### 3.4. Direct interview of victims and people around them

The media should avoid direct interviews with affected children as they may cause further pain to the victims. If necessary, the guidelines suggest covering them with third parties, such as counselors or lawyers at child protection agencies. For example, conducting surprise interviews at affected children's schools and residential areas should be avoided. In addition, journalists should be aware of the responsibilities and sensitivities involved in interviewing child abuse victims (CDC, 2016). In this study, only one case involved direct interviews with people around the victims, presenting an interview with a mother suspected of perpetrating child abuse. However, as the majority of articles reported on cases that resulted in the deaths of children, direct interviews were not feasible.

In addition, to protect the human rights of victims and their friends, family, and teachers, journalists should refrain from conducting interviews with the close acquaintances of affected children. For instance, journalists should avoid visiting schools or institutions of victims and informing people around them of the offense. However, six studies (3.2 %) conducted direct interviews with close family members or institutional workers. Although there were not many articles that did not follow the guidelines, it is still a critical issue requiring attention.

### 3.5. Exposing the personal information of child abuse reporters

Journalists should protect child abuse reporters and their personal information from personal and social threats. Exposing reporters' identities may also deter other potential reporters of child abuse incidents. We found one study that did not follow the guideline and disclosed the reporter's workplace, work position, and name.

### 3.6. Excessive details about the methods used

Journalists should avoid detailed descriptions and reenactments of abuse methods as much as possible. Excessive details may stimulate offenders, upset other survivors, and trigger flashbacks for those with post-traumatic stress disorder (CDC, 2016). Therefore, the Korean child abuse guidelines clearly state that the coverage of specific scenes should be minimal even if it is necessary to convey the seriousness of the crime. However, almost 20 % (36 articles) reported methods of abuse with excessive detail. For example, the Changnyeong incident emphasized the child abuse method with words such as "chain" and "seared by a frying pan." Furthermore, one article described the abuse methods in detail: "She is suspected of imprisoning her child in a travel bag for about 3 h, and locking the child in a smaller bag for nearly 4 h to die." Other articles similarly provided detailed descriptions, outlining the following methods: "Fire-heated iron chopsticks and glue guns are used to sear the child's feet and soles," "The child was chained to the veranda, and also forced underwater in the bathtub so that she could not breathe," and "The child was severely injured, including burns, and experienced the loss of some of their nails."

### 3.7. Instigating negative stereotypes

When reporting child abuse, journalists should avoid using expressions that may trigger prejudices. Particularly, writers must think carefully about using terms or expressions that contain bias against family types. For example, journalists should not highlight the stepmother in the headline, such as, "stepmother's murder of child." In addition, the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare and the Central Child Protection Agency guidelines suggest special considerations to avoid sensational and biased headlines. However, despite the recommendations, a considerable number, 57.1 % (89 articles), of the news

articles covering child abuse incidents involving family members directly used the terms such as "stepmother/father," "adoptive mother/father," "foster mother/father," "single mother," "housemate," "adopted children," and "stepdaughter/son". In particular, 31.4 % (49 articles) explicitly stated or emphasized the family types in their headlines.

### 3.8. Labeling cases with the names of victims or perpetrators

Naming child abuse cases may help readers remember these incidents. However, when referring to child abuse incidents, the case should not be named mainly using the sociodemographic information of the victims or perpetrators. For example, it is necessary to use an expression such as "Child abuse incident in Seoul" rather than using names like "Mr./Ms. 000 incident" containing information about the victims or perpetrators. However, 15.3 % (29 articles) labeled cases with the real names of the victims.

### 3.9. Reporting only once

For a single incident, journalists should avoid indiscriminate follow-up reports after completing the case, instead making one-time reports to prevent secondary damage to the victims and their associates. However, 21.2 % (40 articles) did not follow the recommended practice. In addition, the fact that the media did not cover many cases but rather only a few compelling cases is remarkable. Approximately 40 % of the articles (n = 72) focused on only four prominent cases: the Jung-In (n = 32), Changnyeong (n = 17), Suitcase (n = 15), and Jun-hee (n = 8) incidents. In other words, reporting on child abuse concentrate on a limited number of incidents.

### 3.10. Blaming victims

Journalists should not describe or blame victims as though they are also responsible for the child abuse. In this study, 15 articles (7.9 %) described child abuse cases with language that might imply that the victim's behavior caused or contributed to the maltreatment. For example, some articles mentioned that the maltreatment occurred because of child's disobedience and dishonesty.

### 3.11. Providing accurate information about predictors and coping strategies regarding child abuse

News stories that solely investigate isolated incidents of child abuse do not leave space to discuss prevention and solutions (CDC, 2016). Child abuse coverage needs to refute misconceptions and prejudices about child abuse cases and provide factual information to enhance an accurate understanding of maltreatment. Further, journalists should inform about signs or factors indicating child abuse and understand how to handle them when they encounter maltreatment. Unfortunately, approximately 70 % (129 articles) did not follow this guideline.

### 3.12. Emphasizing the necessity of personal and social efforts and specific methods to prevent child abuse

Journalists can expand news stories to provide potential solutions for child abuse by including information on prevention strategies. In addition, journalists should constantly promote the need for personal and social efforts to prevent child abuse. Moreover, they should provide institutional contact information for victims, their families, their friends, and concerned citizens. Further, articles should include suggestions of social improvement measures to prevent child abuse. However, 82.2 % (155 articles) did not follow these guidelines. In particular, no single article provided specific information on how and where to seek help (e.g., by hotline or local crisis phone numbers). Although 34 articles (18 %) suggested the importance of prevention and intervention in child abuse cases, their recommendations lacked practical specificity.

#### 4. Discussions

This study investigated how closely journalists follow reporting guidelines as well as the limitations of the current guidelines and suggestions for future news media directions in addressing child abuse. This study identified a radical growth in media coverage of child abuse cases in South Korea, as almost 60 % of the coverage analyzed occurred in two years (i.e., 2020 and 2021). Considering the vital role and impact of news media in “(1) informing and educating the public about child abuse, (2) influencing and shaping public understanding, perceptions and attitudes towards child protection, (3) empowering victims or observers of abuse to take action, and (4) exposing system failures and setting policy agendas” (Ho & Chan, 2018, abstract), the increase in child abuse news articles in South Korea is a positive phenomenon—increasing awareness and improving services and policies. For example, in practice, the stepmother of Jeong-in, the perpetrator of the Jung-in incident, was sentenced to life in prison following keen social attention and a social atmosphere that demanded strong punishment (Yu, 2021a). Nevertheless, this study indicates that the media highlighted only a few high-profile cases such as the Jung-In incident, the Changnyeong incident, the Suitcase incident, and the Jun-hee incident. In turn, only high-profile cases have attracted public attention and heated arguments (Whittaker et al., 2017). These results corroborate prior findings (Ho & Chan, 2018) which analyzed newspaper coverage of child maltreatment in Hong Kong and posed the problem of overrepresentation of the extreme and shocking cases that might distort the public’s view.

One of the key principles of child abuse reporting guidelines is the human rights of the victims, perpetrators, associated individuals, and reporters. Therefore, the identity, personal information, and direct interviews of children and stakeholders should not be exposed or released (Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare & National Center for the Rights of the Child, 2018). Especially, journalists should consider children’s rights when they report child abuse (Mulugeta, 2014). However, our findings suggest that special attention is necessary, especially regarding children’s dignity. For example, we found instances of journalistic exposure to identity and personal information (16.4 %), designating cases with victims’ or perpetrators’ names (15.3 %), direct interviews with victims and people around them (3.7 %), and exposure of the personal information of the child abuse reporters (0.5 %).

However, Yu (2021b) has asserted that *Dong-A Ilbo* recently decided to disclose the real name of the victim Jung-In for the following reasons: (1) high public interest in the case, (2) reduced concerns and a lower likelihood of secondary harm to the victims, and (3) the potential to increase social awareness to prevent similar cases. Furthermore, international reporting guidelines such as those published by UNICEF, CDC, NAPAC, and the National Children’s Advocacy Center suggest that if children want to reveal their child abuse actively, family and others should support them rather than hide their cases unconditionally. In these cases, journalists should ensure reporting accuracy because credibility is critical. Therefore, even though the Korean reporting guidelines suggest not revealing the personal information of victims and assailants, journalists should properly disclose and discuss information when it is in the best interests of children who choose to report their abuse. Furthermore, experts require social consensus to expose the victims’ identities and provide accurate judgments. Subsequently, future child abuse reporting guidelines need to be detailed and differentiated according to the situation.

Further, this study emphasizes the urgent problem of sensational coverage of child abuse. Our analysis found that 20 % of the articles described the methods in excessive detail, and 5.8 % used sensational photographs/videos to attract more readers. Moreover, almost 60 % of the articles used the words “stepmother/father,” “adoptive mother/father,” “foster mother/father,” “single mother,” “housemate,” “adopted children,” and “stepdaughter/son,” when describing child abuse committed by a family member. In particular, 31.4 % of the reports

explicitly stated or emphasized the family types in their headlines. However, in 2016, 53.1 % of families included both biological parents, followed by father-child families (14 %), mother-child families (11.8 %), and second-marriage families (7.3 %) (Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare & National Center for the Rights of the Child, 2018).

Accordingly, the present research suggests that journalists should refrain from provocative reporting of child abuse cases, as the coverage in South Korea tends to over report child abuse cases by step-parents and distort the public’s perception. In addition, we found that more than 80 % of child abuse offenses are committed by family members, and approximately 17 % are committed by teachers, nurses, and babysitters. Our results correspond with the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare’s (2018) “Korean statistics of child abuse” national analysis. The Korean national analysis showed that families, including step-parents, were responsible for 76.9 % of abuse cases, while 15.9 % were perpetrated by significant others of parents, including those who worked with children. However, this phenomenon seems to be unique to Korea. For instance, Mendes’s study (2000) reported that child abuse cases perpetrated by family, including step-parents, are likely to be underreported in newspapers while the cases perpetrated by professionals who work with children are likely to be over reported in Australia.

Another urgent issue is that few articles provide specific information on prevention and accurate information about predictors and coping strategies regarding child abuse. More than 80 % of the articles did not provide prevention information, and approximately 70 % did not provide factual information on predictors and coping strategies. In particular, not a single article provided abuse resources (e.g., abuse hotspots or local crisis phone numbers). These findings align with prior studies indicating that most newspapers do not provide information on the causes or consequences of child abuse, child protection, or abuse resources (Ho & Chan, 2018). However, it is crucial that a journalist frame the child abuse problem as societal in its factors and interventions (Hove et al., 2013) and inform and help the public regarding how to identify, protect, and support a child and their family (Ho & Chan, 2018).

This study suggests practical and policy implications for Korean journalism on child abuse issues and reveals that the Korean media is currently not following the recommendations for reporting child abuse cases. Considering the seriousness of this issue, better training for journalists is necessary on what has been overlooked in child abuse reports so far (especially regarding excessively detailed descriptions or terminology that promotes prejudice). Furthermore, laws and policies are required to compel journalists to follow the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare and Central Child Protection Agency guidelines and protect children from unethical journalism. For suicide reporting, Seoul’s city government launched the Suicide Prevention Citizen Ombudsman in 2012 to monitor suicide-related websites and articles (Lee, 2012). Moreover, if the suicide rate starts to increase, the Ministry of Health and Welfare requests corrective measures from the Press Arbitration Commission (Lee, 2021). Child abuse reports should be monitored and regulated through concrete policies.

Despite the passage of a few years since the establishment of the present child abuse reporting guideline in South Korea, no revisions or supplements have been made to these guidelines thus far. It is imperative that South Korea continue to supplement and update its recommended guidelines for reporting child abuse. Compared to international child abuse reporting guidelines, Korea’s policies lack specificity. For instance, CDC and NAPAC guidelines in particular provide more detailed instructions for reporting sexual abuse. This information is essential considering the current state of provocative and sensational reporting of sexual abuse cases (Cheit et al., 2010; Hove et al., 2013). Therefore, South Korea’s recommended guidelines should incorporate and supplement this information.

International guidelines recommend specific examples noting that terminology in sexual abuse reporting should be more meticulous. For example, NAPAC’s (2016) “Media Guidelines for Reporting Child Abuse” present certain language that should be used and avoided, for

example, using “child abuse images” or “indecent images of children” instead of “child porn,” “kiddie porn,” or “child pornography.” Using terminology such as “child pornography” can convey adult sexual imagery (NAPAC, 2016). Instead of “affair” or “fling,” NAPAC (2016) recommends using “child sexual exploitation” to indicate abuse of children who have had sexual relationships with adults. As such, the Korean child abuse reporting guidelines should specify words that may threaten the protection of children’s rights and recommend avoiding their use.

In addition, there is no information on neglect in South Korea’s current guidelines. However, neglect encompasses a significant proportion of child abuse and is extremely serious (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002; Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2020). Korea generally considers confirmed physical or sexual abuse as clear child abuse. In contrast, emotional abuse and neglect are the most frequent types of abuse, but recognizing emotional abuse and neglect as child abuse is relatively rare (National Human Rights Commission of the Republic of Korea & Korea Human Resource Development Institute for Health & Welfare, 2006). In comparison, the CDC specifically refers to neglect, and Davies et al. (2017) consider neglect cases separately when comparing actual child abuse cases with reported articles. Further, Hove et al. (2013) have indicated that the media tends to underreport neglect even though it is the most prevalent type of child abuse. This disproportionate reporting of abuse types reflects journalists’ poor understanding of the problem of neglect. Therefore, Korea should study and supplement its guidelines for reporting neglect cases.

Furthermore, reporting child abuse incidents requires a level of professionalism similar to that of medical or environmental reports. Journalists should possess comprehensive knowledge of areas such as child development, psychology, counseling, human rights, and ethics. Although our study did not specifically evaluate journalists’ expertise or whether they adhered to professional standards, it was evident from some articles that the focus seemed to be on gaining public attention rather than on providing professional reporting. Moreover, according to the South Korean guidelines, victims should be allowed to contact reporters through police or related agencies. However, they should not be covered for a certain period so that the person in charge can focus on handling the situation. It is also necessary to recognize that there is a limit to children’s information and investigation intelligence. Further, if the victim requests the deletion or modification of the news articles, the journalist should respond quickly to minimize secondary damage caused by the publication. However, these criteria were also excluded in our analysis as we could not assess whether journalists followed these criteria simply by reading the article. Nevertheless, these criteria are still crucial and should be considered.

The limitations of this study are as follows. First, our article selection only included five major newspapers in Korea. With the high frequency of child abuse cases and the growing social interest, major domestic media and unreliable news sources have mass-produced articles on child abuse cases. As a result, provocative and sensational articles aiming only to garner public attention continue to be published. Therefore, there are concerns that publishing newspaper articles without properly following the guidelines for reporting child abuse cases will be more serious for smaller media companies. Nonetheless, as even major media outlets do not follow the guidelines, analyzing and researching major media is the first step toward consolidating guidelines for coverage of child abuse cases.

Second, because the guidelines for reporting child abuse cases in South Korea have not yet gained sufficient public confidence, it is likely premature to analyze articles based on these standards. In contrast, for suicide reporting guidelines, many organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), CDC, Samaritans, and Mindset have established their suicide reporting guidelines considering the guidelines’ impact and importance (Chun et al., 2018). Similarly, Korea introduced its first suicide reporting guidelines in 2004 and revised them in 2013 (Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2013). These guidelines are

widely known to journalists and the public and are acknowledged as essential considerations when reporting suicide cases. Nevertheless, many people may still be unaware of Korea’s child abuse reporting guidelines, leading to a lack of public confidence in analyses based on these criteria. Our study is significant because it is the first to examine Korea’s recommendation criteria for reporting child abuse.

## 5. Conclusions

This study is meaningful because there is a lack of analysis on child abuse reporting guidelines in South Korea although the coverage of child abuse cases is increasing at an alarming rate. These findings indicate that the current guidelines have not been followed effectively. Our research urges the importance of avoiding detailed, biased, and sensational descriptions and providing factual information and abuse resources to enhance social awareness of child abuse and to prevent and intervene in child abuse cases. We expect our results to arouse attention toward establishing more realistic and effective child abuse reporting guidelines and monitoring systems.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Serim Lee:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition. **Jieun Lee:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition. **Jongserl Chun:** Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

## Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the Child Fund Korea, Republic of Korea.

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