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A Bibliometric Study on Childhood Emotional Neglect and Abuse

Çocukluk Çağı Duygusal İhmal ve İstismarı Üzerine Bibliyometrik Bir Çalışma

Pelin Pekince[1], Mehmet Kanak[2], Neslihan Avcı[3]

[1]Kırklareli University, Kırklareli
[2]Sivas Cumhuriyet University, Sivas
[3]Gazi University, Ankara

ABSTRACT

Objective: This study used bibliometric analysis to map the network structure of research on childhood emotional neglect and abuse and to identify the most influential journals, authors, countries and concepts in the field.

Method: The Web of Science Core Collection was searched using the terms "emotional abuse", "emotional neglect", "emotional maltreatment", "psychological maltreatment", and "verbal abuse" in article titles, with no restriction on publication year.Following expert evaluation, 958 English-language articles that either directly involved children or addressed childhood emotional neglect and abuse in adult samples were included. Analyses were conducted by employing performance analysis and science-mapping techniques.

Results: Child Abuse & Neglect was both the most productive journal in the field and the source cited most frequently within the reference lists of the analysed articles. The largest share of publications originated from the United States, followed by China, Türkiye, Canada and the United Kingdom. The most frequent author keyword was "emotional abuse", followed by "depression", "adolescence", "emotional neglect" and "psychological maltreatment". In recent years, the concepts of self-compassion, longitudinal study and childhood psychological abuse have become prominent.

Conclusion: The findings provide a framework for understanding the scientific structure of the field. The study may also help researchers working on childhood emotional abuse to identify research topics and select target journals.

Keywords: Emotional abuse, child abuse, psychological maltreatment, bibliometrics

ÖZ

Amaç: Bu çalışmanın amacı, çocukluk döneminde yaşanan duygusal ihmal ve istismara odaklanan araştırmaların ağ yapısını bibliyometrik analiz yoluyla ortaya koymak ve alandaki en etkili dergileri, yazarları, ülkeleri ve kavramları belirlemektir.

Yöntem: Web of Science Core Collection'da "emotional abuse", "emotional neglect", "emotional maltreatment", "psychological maltreatment" ve "verbal abuse" terimleriyle, yayın yılı kısıtlaması olmaksızın makale başlıklarında tarama yapılmıştır. Uzman değerlendirmesi sonucunda doğrudan çocuklarla yürütülen ya da yetişkin örneklemlerinde çocukluk çağı duygusal ihmal ve istismarını ele alan 958 İngilizce makale analize dahil edilmiştir. Analizler performans analizi ve bilim haritalama teknikleriyle gerçekleştirilmiştir.

Bulgular: Child Abuse & Neglect, alanın hem en üretken dergisi hem de incelenen makalelerin kaynakçalarında en sık atıf alan kaynağıdır. En üretken ülke ABD olup onu Çin, Türkiye, Kanada ve Birleşik Krallık izlemektedir. En sık kullanılan yazar anahtar kelimesi "emotional abuse" olmuş; bunu "depression", "adolescence", "emotional neglect" ve "psychological maltreatment" izlemiştir. Son yıllarda "self-compassion" (öz-şefkat), "longitudinal study" (boylamsal çalışma) ve "childhood psychological abuse" (çocukluk çağı psikolojik istismarı) kavramları öne çıkmıştır.

Sonuç: Bulgular alanın bilimsel yapısına ilişkin bir çerçeve sunmaktadır. Ayrıca çalışmanın duygusal istismar konusunda çalışmak isteyen araştırmacılara araştırma konusu belirleme ve dergi seçiminde yol gösterebileceği düşünülmektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Duygusal istismar, çocuk istismarı, psikolojik istismar, bibliyometri

Address For Correspondence: Pelin Pekince, Kırklareli University, Faculty of Health Sciences, Department of Child Development, Kırklareli, Türkiye
e-mail: pelinpekince@klu.edu.tr
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Introduction

Stressful experiences in childhood, especially childhood maltreatment involving both abuse and neglect, began to be studied in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Glaser 2011, Gama et al. 2021). Child maltreatment is defined as any act of commission or omission by a parent or other caregiver that results in harm, potential for harm, or threat of harm to a child, whether or not that harm is intended (Gilbert et al. 2009). Since then, while sexual abuse and physical abuse have been frequently investigated, the effects of emotional abuse and emotional neglect have remained comparatively understudied (Barnett et al. 2005, Teicher et al. 2006, English et al. 2015). One reason emotional abuse has received less attention is that the child welfare system has focused on physical abuse, physical neglect and sexual abuse (Teicher et al. 2006, English et al. 2015). In addition, the difficulty of distinguishing emotional abuse from other types of maltreatment, its ambiguous definitions and the belief that it causes children less harm have all contributed to the limited attention paid to emotional neglect and abuse (Gracia 1995, Hovdestad et al. 2005, Egeland 2009).

Reaching a consensus on the definition of emotional abuse took a long time, and the definitions themselves were the subject of considerable debate (English et al. 2015). Glaser (2002) describes emotional abuse as including harsh discipline, conditional parenting and humiliation. She distinguishes five categories of emotional abuse and neglect: emotional unavailability, negative attributions to the child, developmentally inappropriate interactions, failure to recognise the child's individuality, and failure to promote the child's social adaptation. Similarly, Working Together (2010) defines emotional abuse as persistent emotional maltreatment, while APSAC (1995) characterises it as a repeated pattern of caregiver behaviour or as one or more extreme events. Across these definitions, different terms such as "emotional harassment, psychological harassment, verbal abuse, emotional maltreatment and psychological maltreatment" are used interchangeably with the term emotional abuse to describe a wide variety of parenting behaviours believed to be psychologically harmful to children (Brassard et al. 2019, Taussig and Culhane 2010a). Brassard et al. (2019), for example, use the term "psychological maltreatment" and define it as a recurring pattern of caregiver behaviour that violates a child's basic psychological needs, thereby encompassing both emotional abuse and neglect. The term childhood emotional maltreatment is likewise used to cover both emotional abuse and emotional neglect (Bernstein et al. 1994, Egeland 2009, Peterson et al. 2018). Taken together, these definitions and terms converge on a set of common defining characteristics, indicating a growing consensus (Brassard and Donovan 2006, Trickett et al. 2009, Wolfe and McIsaac 2011, English et al. 2015); the parallel use of the terms "emotional" and "psychological" is mostly seen as reflecting the traditions of different scientific fields (Glaser 2011). Building on these commonalities, the literature emphasises that emotional neglect and abuse can occur passively, through a failure to act, inadequacy, unwillingness, or indifference in supporting, anticipating, or responding to the child's needs (Glaser 2002, Iwaniec 2006) or actively, intentionally and cruelly, such as by terrorising, humiliating, torturing, exploiting, ignoring and criticising the child (Garbarino et al. 1986, Hart et al. 1987). As this consensus has grown, so has awareness of emotional abuse, and research has turned to documenting its extent. Meta-analyses conducted worldwide show that emotional abuse is the most prevalent form of child maltreatment in self-report studies and that emotional neglect ranks among the most prevalent (Stoltenborgh et al. 2012, Stoltenborgh et al. 2013, Stoltenborgh et al. 2015). More recent commentary goes further, arguing that the accumulated evidence now warrants treating childhood emotional abuse as a public health priority in its own right rather than as a secondary correlate of other maltreatment subtypes (Mathews and Dube 2025).

Children's cognitive and emotional capacities are not yet developed enough to cope with conflicting parental behaviours (Tomison and Tucci 1997). From a developmental trauma perspective, emotional abuse can heighten children's stress responses by affecting their physiology and can adversely affect neurodevelopment (Yates 2007). According to Heim et al. (2013), emotional abuse harms a child's brain development, affecting emotional and physical health as well as social and cognitive development, and producing changes in the brain regions involved in understanding and controlling emotions and in recognising and responding to the emotions of others.

The changes that emotional abuse produces in childhood have long-term effects that persist into adulthood. Because the negative cognitions involved are conveyed directly by the perpetrator, emotional abuse can have a stronger impact on the child than physical or sexual abuse (Cohen and Thakur 2021). Childhood emotional abuse therefore warrants examination not only for its short-term impact on children but also for its long-term consequences, particularly in close relationships (Berzenski and Yates 2010). Relational experiences of emotional abuse with close caregivers in childhood have been found to be associated with various negative outcomes, such as post-traumatic stress disorder in adolescence and adulthood (Burns et al. 2010, Taussig and Culhane 2010b, Taillieu et al. 2016, Nöthling et al. 2019, Hoeboer et al. 2021, Watts et al. 2025), emotion regulation difficulties in adulthood (Burns et al. 2010, Peter et al. 2026), emotion regulation difficulties in childhood (Chang et al. 2003, Shipman et al. 2007), poor mental health in adolescence (Infurna et al. 2016, Cohen et al. 2019, Cohen and Thakur 2021, Wang et al. 2024), cognitive disadvantage (Hart and Rubia 2012), higher levels of psychological distress, anxiety, depression and paranoia (Miller-Perrin et al. 2009, Coates and Messman-Moore 2014), increased aggression (Shaffer et al. 2009, Berzenski and Yates 2010, Chen et al. 2012, Şenkal Ertürk et al. 2020, Wu 2026), and greater difficulty and dissatisfaction in close relationships (Mullen et al. 1996, Messman-Moore and Coates 2007, Reyome et al. 2010, İme 2026). These associations are also supported by recent evidence syntheses. A meta-analysis of the link between emotional abuse and emotion regulation in adulthood quantifies this relationship (Amini-Tehrani et al. 2026). A systematic review of mediation studies reports that impaired emotion regulation accounts for the psychopathology associated with emotional abuse, but not for that associated with emotional neglect (Schaumburg and Nimtz 2026). This distinction is notable, given that the two subtypes are most often treated under a single heading in the literature. These effects on the child appear to be shaped by a number of factors, such as the nature, frequency, intensity and duration of the abuse, the individual characteristics of the victim, the relationship between the child and the abuser, the reactions of others and accompanying factors that may aggravate its effects or account for some of its consequences (Emery and Laumann-Billings 2002, Iwaniec et al. 2006).

This body of evidence on the effects of emotional abuse depends not only on how the phenomenon is named but also on how it is measured. Accordingly, Taussig and Culhane (2010a) note that studies of emotional abuse, a phenomenon investigated under different terms across scientific fields, use a range of measurement methods. These can take the form of retrospective or prospective self-reports, teacher reports, parent reports, social worker reports, child welfare records and observational data. However, research assessing emotional abuse across different disciplines is thought to have methodological limitations, such as reliance on retrospective reports from adult community samples, single-method measurement of abuse, a focus on cumulative childhood adversities, and a narrow definition of mental health (Cohen and Thakur 2021). These limitations point to the need for alternative methodological approaches.

Definitional and methodological questions of this kind also carry over into clinical practice. Childhood emotional neglect and abuse reach mental health services largely indirectly, through the depressive, anxious and post-traumatic presentations with which they are associated (Cohen and Thakur 2021, Hoeboer et al. 2021). In clinical practice, they are identified through much the same retrospective instruments that structure the research literature (Taussig and Culhane 2010a). Which construct is screened for, under which name and with which measure, therefore depends on how the research field has settled these questions. Establishing where this literature is produced, which instruments it rests on and which terms it uses is therefore not a matter of bibliometric interest alone. This information is of direct concern to clinicians and mental health researchers. It indicates what the available evidence base does and does not cover when a history of childhood emotional maltreatment is being assessed.

In recent years, bibliometric analysis has become a powerful tool for discovering and mapping patterns in scientific literature (Aria and Cuccurullo 2017). Existing bibliometric studies have concentrated on the broader keywords “child abuse” and “child maltreatment” (Tran et al. 2018, Bayrak and Özkan 2024, Ünaldı 2024), and there are studies addressing domestic violence (McCormack et al. 2021) and child sexual abuse (Vega-Arce et al. 2019). More recent mapping continues to expand. The child abuse and neglect literature has been mapped for the 2000–2025 period through a social work lens (Cebeci 2026). In that study,

maltreatment is treated as a single field rather than being disaggregated into its subtypes. However, we found no bibliometric study that addresses emotional neglect and abuse specifically, a topic marked by ongoing debate over terms, definitions and methodological challenges. Conducting an in-depth examination of studies on emotional neglect and abuse, analysing their trends, mapping the conceptual infrastructure across various sources, and identifying the leading authors and countries will serve the main purpose of this research, while also highlighting the gaps in the existing literature.

Based on a comprehensive set of international documents, the literature on childhood emotional abuse has been thoroughly examined. In this context, the study investigated the general characteristics of the literature and its development over the years, the relationship between the most cited sources, the most productive authors, and the most frequently used keywords, the distribution of publications and citations by journals, the productivity and impact of authors and institutions, the number of publications by countries and the levels of international collaboration, the most cited publications, the conceptual structure of the field according to author keywords and how this structure has changed over time, as well as the relationships among the most frequently co-cited sources.

Method

This study uses bibliometric analysis to reveal the network structure of research on childhood emotional neglect and abuse and to identify the most influential journals, authors, countries and concepts in the field. Bibliometric analysis makes it possible to map the characteristics and development of scientific output in a research area through the quantitative analysis of publication data (Li and Hale 2016). It reveals where output is concentrated by country and institution, which journals and authors carry the field, and which concepts are used together. It also helps to identify gaps in knowledge and allows researchers to position their own contribution within the field (Donthu et al. 2021). As only publicly available bibliographic records were analysed, ethics committee approval was not required.

Data Collection

The Web of Science (WoS) database is generally preferred in bibliometric analysis studies because it indexes citations and references in detail (Merigó and Núñez 2016). Therefore, the search was performed on 14 July 2026 in the Web of Science Core Collection (Social Sciences Citation Index, Science Citation Index Expanded, Emerging Sources Citation Index, Conference Proceedings Citation Index and Book Citation Index) using the following query in the title field (TI), with no restriction on publication year: TI=("emotional abuse" OR "emotional neglect" OR "emotional maltreatment" OR "psychological maltreatment" OR "verbal abuse").

Searching within the title field was preferred in order to identify studies that explicitly focus on emotional neglect and abuse with high topical precision, thereby limiting the retrieval of tangentially related records. These search terms had been determined beforehand by examining 50 articles randomly selected from the Google Scholar and WoS databases, and by identifying the terms most commonly used to denote the phenomenon. Only journal articles were selected among various document types, yielding a total of 1,013 records downloaded from the database, of which 993 remained after the removal of 20 duplicate records. Screening against the inclusion criteria was carried out by the first author together with an independent expert holding a doctorate in child development, who is not an author of the present study, each decision being reached by consensus. Records that could not be assigned on the basis of title and abstract were treated as borderline and adjudicated by examining the full texts. Because screening was conducted jointly rather than in parallel, a formal measure of inter-rater agreement was not computed. At this stage a total of 800 articles reporting studies either conducted directly with children or addressing childhood emotional neglect and abuse within adult populations were selected for analysis. Because the initial term list may have missed studies published under alternative designations of the same phenomenon, the search was expanded in two further stages on 11 August 2026. Each stage was restricted to journal articles and, through a NOT operator, to records not retrieved at any earlier stage, so that the three searches are mutually exclusive.

The second search, TI=("psychological abuse" OR "psychological aggression" OR "emotional harassment" OR "psychological harassment") NOT TI=("emotional abuse" OR "emotional neglect" OR "emotional maltreatment" OR "psychological maltreatment" OR "verbal abuse"), returned 371 records, of which 108 met the inclusion criteria.

The third search, TI=("verbal harassment" OR "psychological violence" OR "emotional violence" OR "verbal aggression" OR "psychological neglect" OR "emotional deprivation" OR "mental abuse") NOT TI=("emotional abuse" OR "emotional neglect" OR "emotional maltreatment" OR "psychological maltreatment" OR "verbal abuse" OR "psychological abuse" OR "psychological aggression" OR "emotional harassment" OR "psychological harassment"), returned 414 records, of which 43 met the inclusion criteria. Sixteen terms were searched in total.

Because the initial search had been conducted four weeks before the two supplementary searches, it was rerun on 11 August 2026 in order to align the retrieval window: eight records indexed in the interval were identified, of which seven met the inclusion criteria and were added. The final corpus therefore comprises 958 articles and corresponds to the literature indexed in the database up to 11 August 2026. Because the WoS BibTeX export wraps long fields across multiple lines, which the import routine may misparse, the author and keyword fields of the exported records were unwrapped to single lines prior to import. Author keywords were then harmonised using a two-tier thesaurus. The main analysis applied the lexical layer only (unification of singular/plural forms, hyphenation and spelling variants), leaving conceptually distinct labels such as “emotional abuse”, “emotional maltreatment” and “psychological abuse” as separate terms. The semantic layer, which merges these labels into common concepts, was applied in a sensitivity check; the full thesaurus is provided as supplementary material. In this check, merging the variant labels raised “emotional abuse” to 473 occurrences and consolidated the remaining definitional terms under “emotional neglect” (132), “psychological maltreatment” (125) and “child maltreatment” (102), while leaving the relative ranking of the substantive keywords (depression, adolescence, anxiety) unchanged; the conclusions of the main analysis are therefore robust to the level of harmonisation. The same inclusion and exclusion criteria were used at all stages of the selection process (Neipp and Beyebach 2024). This approach provides insights into the most productive journals, authors, countries and institutions, along with the most frequently cited articles. Study selection was conducted and reported in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 statement (Page et al. 2021). The process is summarised in Figure 1.

The grounds for exclusion were recorded at each stage of screening. Of the 993 records screened in the first search, 193 were excluded: 180 because the studies did not concern childhood emotional maltreatment and 13 because they were not published in English. A further 635 records were excluded in the supplementary searches and the verification search. In total, 828 records were excluded: 781 at the screening stage and 47 at the eligibility assessment. At the screening stage, 768 records were removed because their title and abstract did not indicate that the study concerned childhood emotional maltreatment. These comprise records relating to adult samples or contexts together with records carrying no childhood focus. A further 13 were removed because they were not published in English. The remaining 1,005 records proceeded to the eligibility assessment, at which 47 were excluded once the abstract or full text showed that they did not concern childhood emotional maltreatment. These figures correspond to those reported in Figure 1.

Data Analysis

All computations were carried out in the R environment (version 4.6.1; R Core Team 2026) using the bibliometrix package (version 5.4.1) and its web interface, biblioshiny (Aria and Cuccurullo 2017). Institution-level counts were derived from the WoS affiliation records at the article level (each institution counted once per article), with organisational variants (sub-units, system-level umbrella names and address-format differences) consolidated manually, since the affiliation module of biblioshiny counts author appearances rather than articles. Descriptive performance indicators (annual scientific production, average citations per article and the most productive journals, authors, institutions and countries) were computed first. Science-mapping techniques were then applied, including keyword co-occurrence analysis, thematic mapping based on centrality and density (Callon et al. 1991, Cobo et al. 2011), trend-topic

analysis, a three-field plot linking cited references, authors and keywords, and co-citation analysis of cited references. All keyword co-occurrence, thematic-map and trend-topic analyses were conducted on the harmonised author keywords.

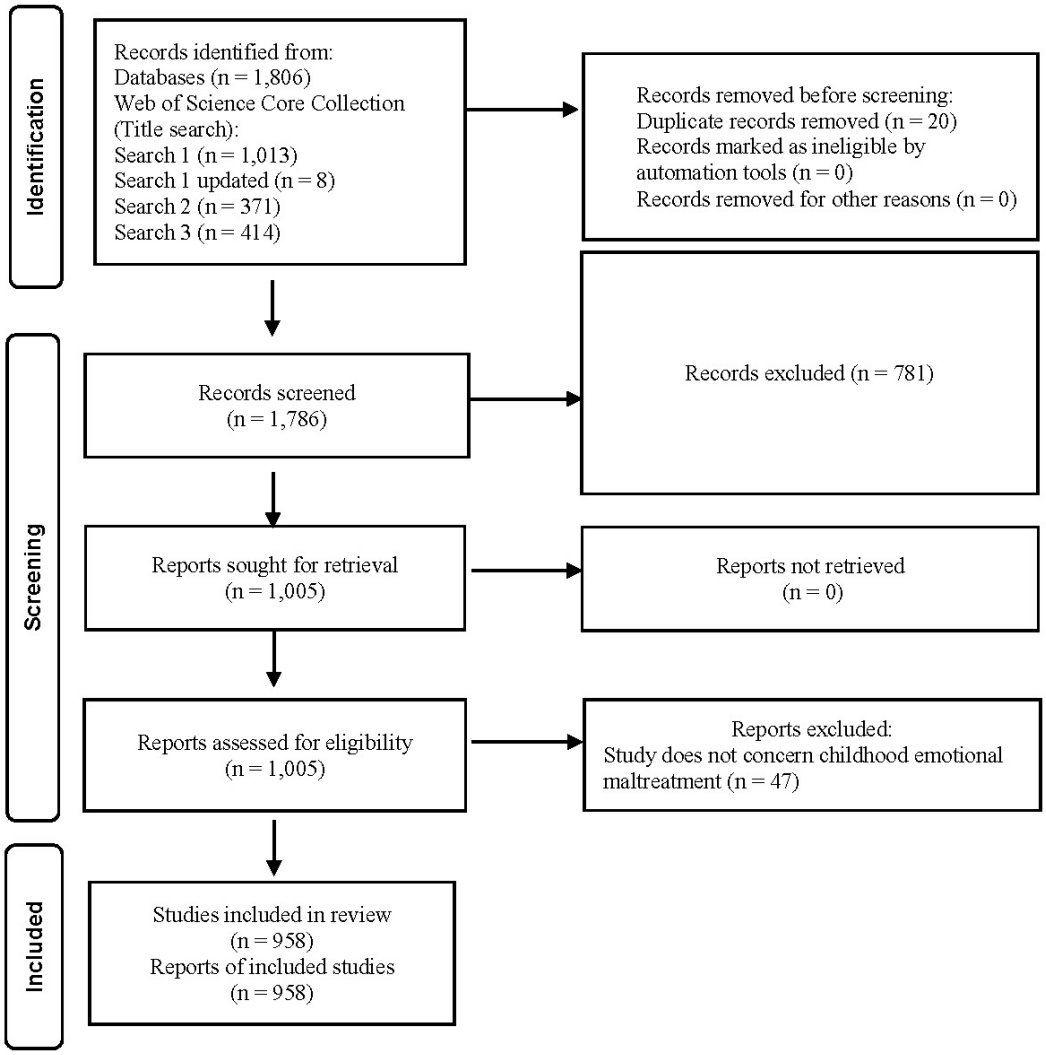


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram

Adapted from the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram template for new systematic reviews that included searches of databases and registers only (Page et al. 2021). Records excluded at screening (n = 781): study does not concern childhood emotional maltreatment, comprising adult samples or contexts (intimate-partner, marital and dating relationships; workplace settings; elder abuse) and records with no childhood focus (n = 768); non-English publications (n = 13).

All network analyses used the Louvain clustering algorithm with association-strength normalisation. The keyword co-occurrence network (Figure 15) and the co-citation network (Figure 17) were each restricted to the 50 most frequent nodes (the software's default threshold, retained to keep the networks legible), with isolated nodes removed and a minimum of two edges per node.

The thematic map (Figure 14) was computed on the 250 most frequent author keywords, with a minimum cluster frequency of five per thousand documents and three labels per cluster. The thematic evolution analysis (Figure 16) used cutting points at 2010 and 2020, yielding the periods 1982–2010, 2011–2020 and 2021–2026. For the author-level analyses (Figures 7 and 9), transliteration and abbreviation variants of the 10 most productive authors were manually merged (Arslan G. = "Gokmen" + "Goekmen"; Baker A. J. L. = "Amy J. L." + "Amy"; Brassard M. R. = "Marla R." + "Marla"). The counts reported in the text therefore differ slightly from the unmerged software output displayed in the figures. Institutional indicators were computed on the same basis. Name variants denoting a single institution were merged before analysis (Mehmet Akif Ersoy University = "Mehmet Akif Ersoy Univ" + "Burdur Mehmet Akif Ersoy Univ", following the addition of the province name to the university's title; North Sichuan Medical College and North Sichuan Medical

University, following its renaming). By contrast, legally distinct entities sharing a name element, such as Leiden University and Leiden University Medical Center, were kept separate. Each institution was counted once per article. The values reported for Figure 10 therefore refer to numbers of articles rather than to the number of author affiliations recorded within them.

Sensitivity Analysis of the Search Strategy

Restricting the query to the title field maximises topical precision but reduces sensitivity. The consequences of this choice were therefore examined empirically. On 15 August 2026 the same 16 terms were rerun in the topic field (TS), which searches titles, abstracts, author keywords and Keywords Plus. The title search retrieved 1,807 records and the topic search 15,225, of which 13,418 were not retrieved by the title search. This surplus proved to consist largely of records outside the scope of the present study. The reason is that the terms concerned are also standard in the intimate-partner, workplace and elder-abuse literatures. The highest-ranked record returned by the topic query, for instance, was a study of elder abuse in Japan. To compare like with like, the topic search was therefore restricted to records that also refer to childhood in the topic field (child*, adolescen*, youth, "young people", pediatric, paediatric, infant*, toddler*, "school-age", juvenile). This yielded 9,217 records, or 9,215 once duplicates were removed. The core indicators of this scope-matched corpus were then compared with those of the corpus analysed here. Author keywords were harmonised with the same lexical thesaurus in both cases.

The performance indicators proved robust to the change of search field. Child Abuse & Neglect ranked first as the most productive source in both corpora, and seven of the 10 leading journals were common to the two lists (Spearman $\rho = 0.79$ across the shared ranks). Eight of the 10 leading countries were likewise common to both. The United States and China ranked first and second in each ($\rho = 0.95$). The only change among the first five was the order of Türkiye and Canada. The annual production profiles were closely aligned across the 43 years common to the two corpora ($\rho = 0.92$). Mean citations per article (26.54 against 30.16) and the international co-authorship rate (19.1% against 23.9%) were of comparable magnitude. The broader corpus, however, was less concentrated. Its Bradford core comprised 26 sources against 9.

The keyword profiles, by contrast, diverged sharply. Only five of the 10 leading author keywords were shared, and the rank correlation was negligible ($\rho = 0.10$). The most frequent keywords of the scope-matched topic corpus were "adolescence", "child abuse", "childhood trauma" and "child maltreatment", with "emotional abuse" in sixth place. In the present corpus, however, "emotional abuse" ranks first and six of the 10 leading keywords are designations of the construct itself. Terms such as "intimate partner violence" and "domestic violence" remained among the most frequent keywords of the topic corpus despite the childhood restriction. The records added by a topic search are therefore not predominantly further studies of childhood emotional abuse, but studies of child maltreatment in general in which emotional abuse figures as one variable among several. The title-based strategy adopted here is accordingly best understood as defining a topically coherent corpus rather than as an incomplete sample of a larger one. Nevertheless, as acknowledged in the Discussion, studies that address emotional neglect and abuse without naming them in their titles remain outside its scope.

Results

General Characteristics and Annual Development of the Corpus

Figure 2 summarises the main characteristics of the corpus. The 958 articles appeared in 341 sources between 1982 and 2026, cited a total of 32,592 references and used 1,797 different author keywords. They were written by 3,273 authors, and 79 of these authors published single-authored articles. Each document had an average of 4.25 co-authors, which indicates that research on childhood emotional neglect and abuse is largely team-based. However, only 19.1% of the articles had international co-authors, so most collaboration took place within national borders. The annual growth rate was 9.14% and the average document age was 7.78 years, which points to a young literature that is growing quickly. On average, each article received 26.54 citations.



Figure 2. Descriptive information of the studies

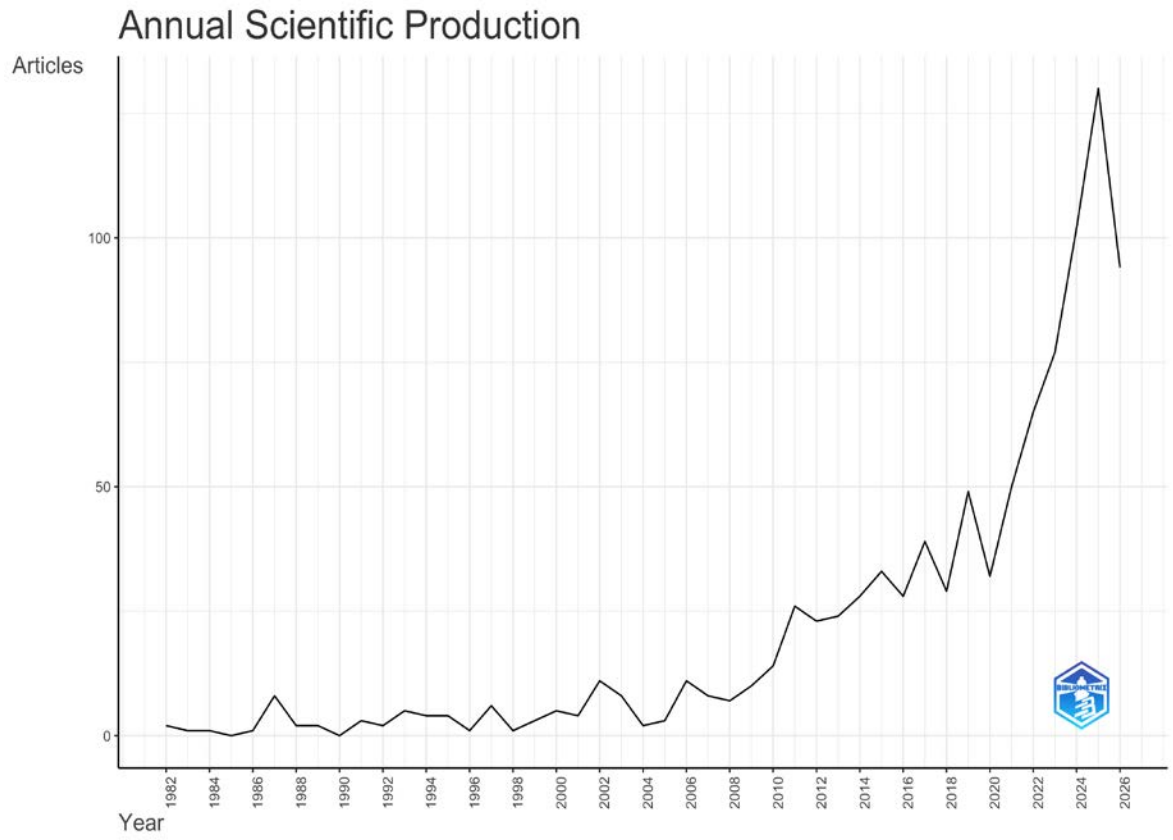


Figure 3. Number of publications by year

Figure 3 shows that few articles on childhood emotional neglect and abuse were published before the late 2000s. Between 1982 and 2008, a period of 27 years, only 105 articles were published, which corresponds to 11% of the corpus. The number of articles started to increase after 2009, rose sharply from 2021 and reached its highest level in 2025, with 130 articles. The smaller number for 2026 does not indicate a decline in interest; the data for that year are incomplete because they were collected before the year ended. Between 2021 and 2025 alone, 424 articles were published, which is 44.3% of the corpus, and 309 articles, or 32.3%, appeared in the last three complete years from 2023 to 2025. Together with the annual growth rate of 9.14%, this concentration shows that childhood emotional neglect and abuse has become one of the fastest growing topics in research on maltreatment.

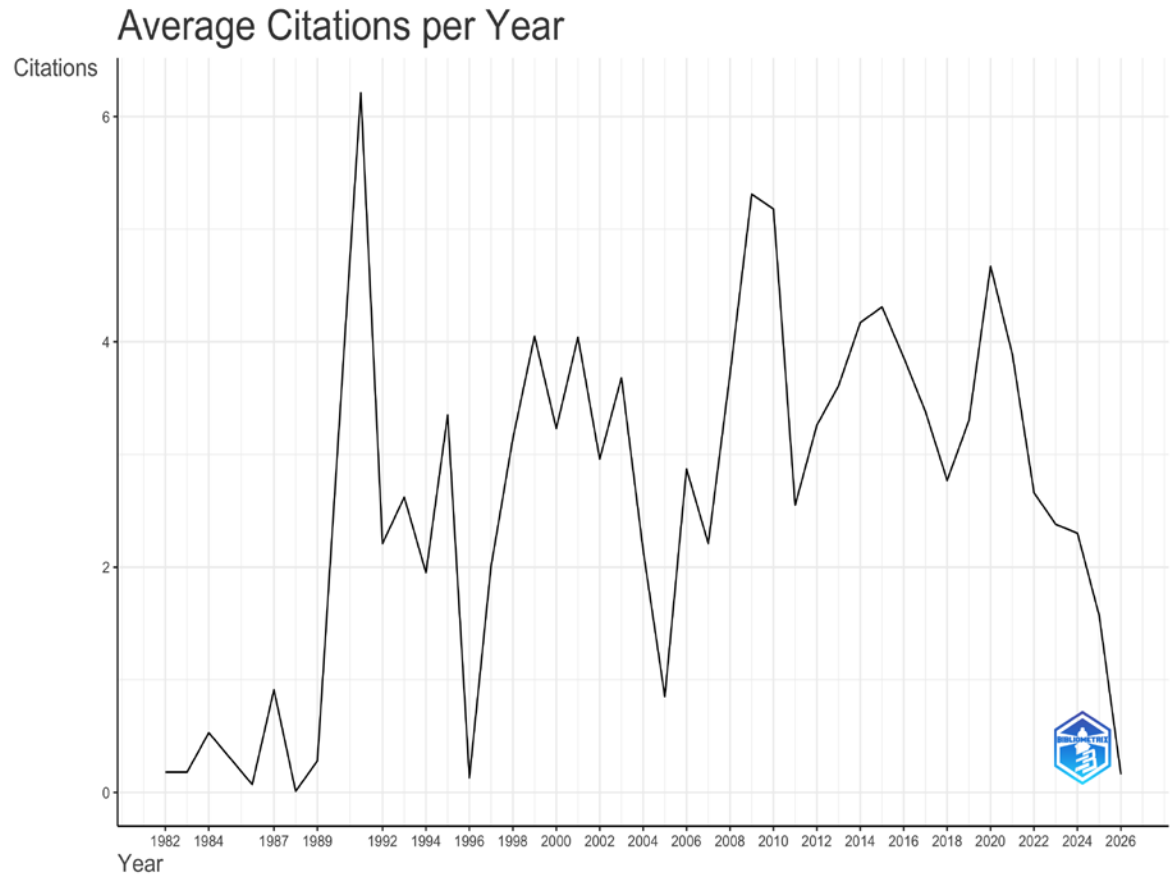


Figure 4. Average number of citations per article by year

Figure 4 shows that, although publication volume has been highest in recent years, the average number of citations per article peaked in 1991, with secondary peaks around 1999–2001, 2009–2010, 2014–2015 and 2020. The 1991 value is based on only three articles, all of them highly cited (Claussen and Crittenden 1991, Vissing et al. 1991, Zweig-Frank and Paris 1991). The 1991 peak should therefore be read as the trace of a few foundational studies rather than as evidence of a particularly influential year. The article by Claussen and Crittenden (1991) also appears as a node in the definitional cluster of the co-citation network (Figure 17). The other peaks suggest that much of the foundational literature on this topic was published in those years, while the 2020 peak points to more recent influential studies that have quickly gathered citations. The steady decline after 2020 is expected, because this indicator is normalised by document age and recent publications have had only a short time to be cited.

Links among Cited References, Authors and Keywords

The three-field plot places the most frequently cited references on the left, the most productive authors in the middle and the most frequent keywords on the right (Figure 5). The vertical position of each box shows the strength of its links, not its total number of citations or uses. Among the references, measurement instruments are the most prominent. Four versions of the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire appear in the plot: those of Bernstein et al. (1994, 1997, 2003) and that of Bernstein and Fink (1998). Next to them are conceptual and epidemiological studies by Glaser (2002), Teicher et al. (2006), Stoltenborgh et al. (2012, 2015) and Norman et al. (2012). Some methodological sources, such as Hu and Bentler (1999), Podsakoff et al. (2003) and Preacher and Hayes (2008), are also among the most cited references, which shows that many studies in this field use survey-based mediation designs. The leading authors and references are most closely connected with the keywords adolescence, psychological maltreatment, depression, emotional abuse, childhood emotional maltreatment, emotional neglect and anxiety.

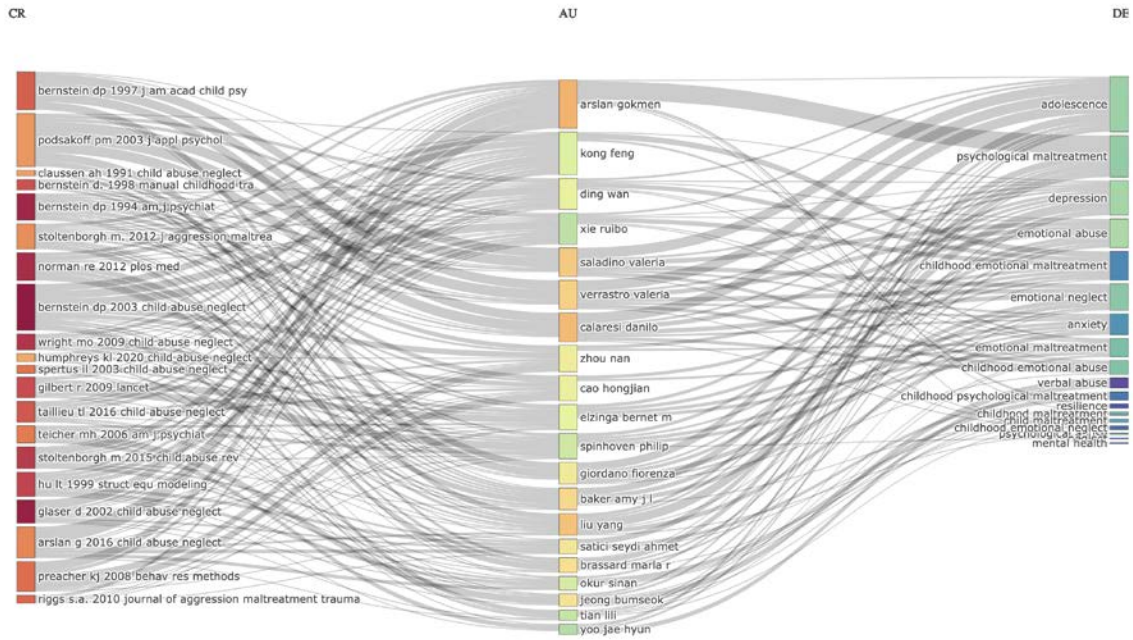


Figure 5. Relationship between cited references, authors, and keywords in articles

Distribution of Publications and Citations across Sources

Table 1 lists the 10 journals that published the most articles on the subject among the 958 articles retrieved from WoS, together with the number of articles in each

Table 1. Frequencies of journals that contain the most publications on the subject	
Sources	**Articles**
Child Abuse & Neglect	156
Children and Youth Services Review	29
Journal of Interpersonal Violence	26
Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma	21
Current Psychology	20
Journal of Affective Disorders	20
Journal of Family Violence	20
Frontiers in Psychiatry	19
Frontiers in Psychology	17
BMC Psychiatry	10

Child Abuse & Neglect published the most articles on the subject (156), followed by Children and Youth Services Review (29) and the Journal of Interpersonal Violence (26) (Table 1). The concentration is very high: the leading journal alone accounts for 16.3% of the corpus and has published more than five times as many articles as the second journal. The 10 journals in the table, which make up 2.9% of the 341 sources in the corpus, together account for 35.3% of the output.

The composition of this list is as informative as its ranking. Five of the 10 journals specialise in maltreatment, violence and child welfare (Child Abuse & Neglect, Children and Youth Services Review, Journal of Interpersonal Violence, Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma, Journal of Family Violence), and they account for 252 of the 338 articles in the top 10. The other five are general psychology and psychiatry journals (Current Psychology, Journal of Affective Disorders, Frontiers in Psychiatry, Frontiers in Psychology, BMC Psychiatry). Because Current Psychology, the Journal of Affective Disorders and the Journal of Family Violence each published 20 articles, they are grouped by subject rather than by rank in the table. Research on childhood emotional neglect and abuse is thus based mainly in child protection journals, but it also reaches a second, clinically oriented readership. This division corresponds

to the distinction between the definitional and outcome-oriented strands identified in the keyword analysis (Figure 15).

Table 2. Most locally cited sources (number of citations received within the reference lists of the analysed articles)

Sources	Local citations
Child Abuse & Neglect	4.249
J Affect Disorders	799
Am J Psychiat	681
Dev Psychopathol	640
Child Dev	425
J Interpers Violence	419
Pers Indiv Differ	418
J Child Psychol Psyc	417
J Pers Soc Psychol	409
Child Maltreatment	406

*Source names appear as abbreviated in the cited-reference records.

Child Abuse & Neglect is also the most frequently cited source in the reference lists of the analysed articles, with 4,249 local citations, followed by the Journal of Affective Disorders (799) and the American Journal of Psychiatry (681) (Table 2). These counts reflect citations made by the articles in the corpus, not the total citations that these journals have received. They therefore identify the sources that form the intellectual base of research on childhood emotional neglect and abuse.

Read together with Table 1, this list shows a mismatch between where the field obtains its knowledge and where it publishes. Only three journals appear in the top 10 of both tables. The other seven most locally cited sources, including Development and Psychopathology (640), Child Development (425), the Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry (417) and Child Maltreatment (406), are heavily cited but are not among the 10 most productive journals (Table 1). The intellectual base of the field thus lies largely in developmental psychopathology and psychiatry, whereas its own output is concentrated in specialist maltreatment journals and in general psychology and psychiatry journals.

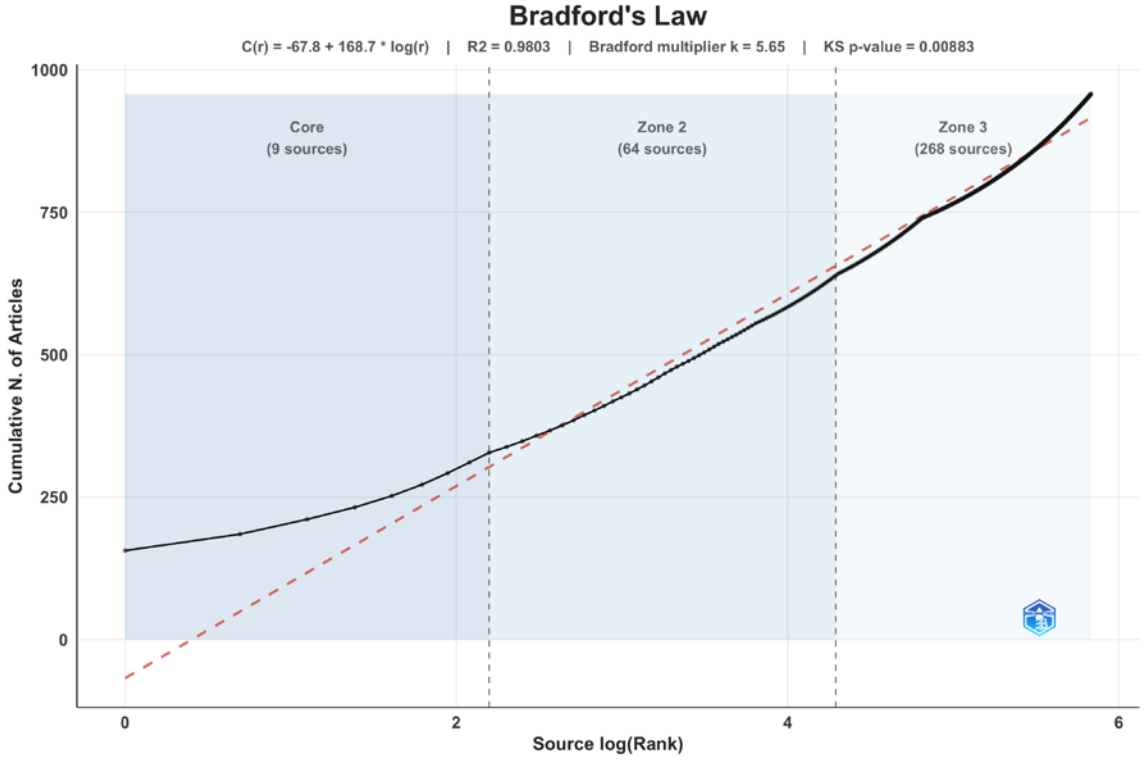


Figure 6. Bradford's law: distribution of sources by zone

The distribution of the 958 articles across 341 sources approximates Bradford's law (C(r) = -67.8 + 168.7 log r; R^2 = 0.98; Bradford multiplier k = 5.65). Nine journals form the core zone and contain 328 articles (34.2% of the corpus); Zone 2 consists of 64 journals and Zone 3 of 268 journals. Child Abuse & Neglect alone published 156 articles, nearly half of the core-zone output and more than five times as many as the second source. This confirms the journal's position as the disciplinary home of research on childhood emotional neglect and abuse. The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test indicates a significant deviation from the theoretical distribution (p = 0.009). As Figure 6 shows, the empirical curve lies above the fitted line throughout the core and second zones, which means that the leading sources account for a larger share of the literature than the model predicts. The field is therefore more concentrated than Bradford's law would predict. At the same time, the long tail of 267 journals that each published only one or two articles (all but one of the 268 sources in Zone 3) shows that the topic is also spread across a wide range of neighbouring literatures.

Distribution of Productivity and Impact across Authors and Institutions

The distribution of author productivity is examined with Lotka's law, and local impact is examined with the h-index.

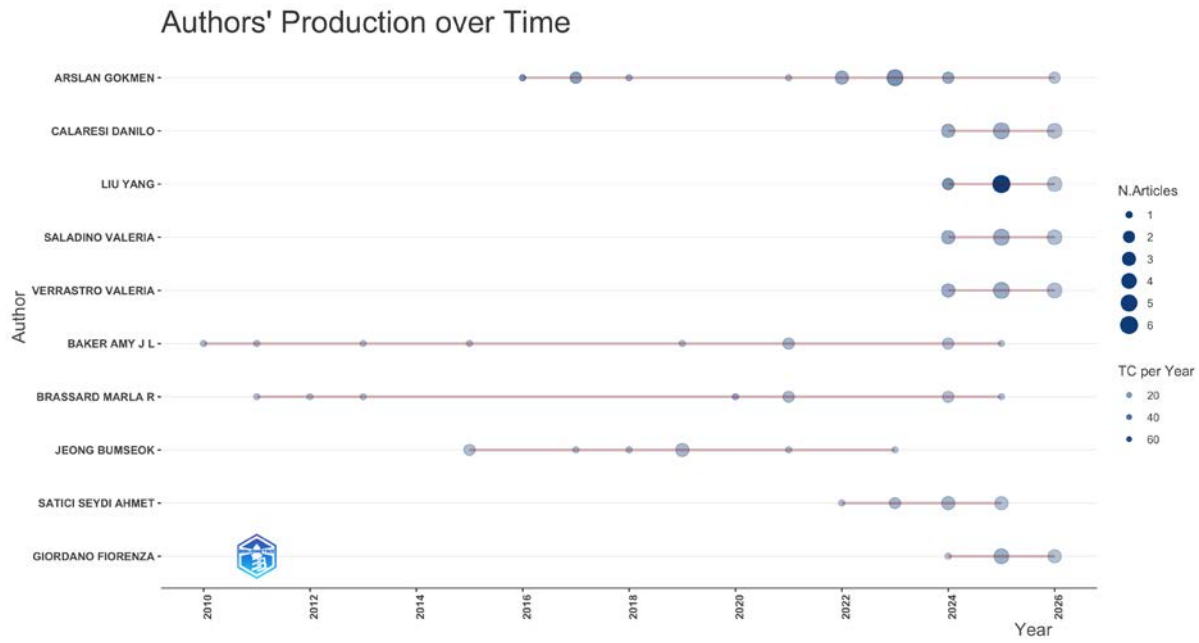


Figure 7. Production over time of the 10 most relevant authors on the subject

As Figure 7 shows, the most productive author on the subject is Arslan G., with 18 articles published between 2016 and 2026 and a peak around 2023. He is followed by five authors with 12 articles each, namely Calaresi D., Liu Y., Saladino V., Verrastro V. and Baker A. J. L., and then by Brassard M. R., with 10 articles. The figure also shows two different patterns of productivity. Some authors, such as Baker A. J. L. and Brassard M. R., have published in the field for more than a decade, whereas a group of highly active recent contributors, namely Saladino V., Verrastro V., Calaresi D. and Giordano F., produced most of their work between 2024 and 2026. The authors in this second group are co-authors from the same Italian research group. Author-level productivity in this field thus partly reflects the work of a small number of collaborative teams rather than that of individual researchers.

Author names were manually disambiguated for the 10 most productive authors, because neither the initials-based format nor the full-name format resolves all variants. Matching by initials merged different researchers (for example, 13 different authors appeared under "Liu Y"), whereas matching by full name split individual researchers across transliteration and abbreviation variants (for example, Arslan G. appeared as "Gokmen" and "Goekmen", Brassard M. R. as "Marla R." and "Marla", and Baker A. J. L. as "Amy J. L." and "Amy"). The counts reported above are based on the merged records. They therefore differ slightly from the values in Figure 7, which shows the unmerged software output.

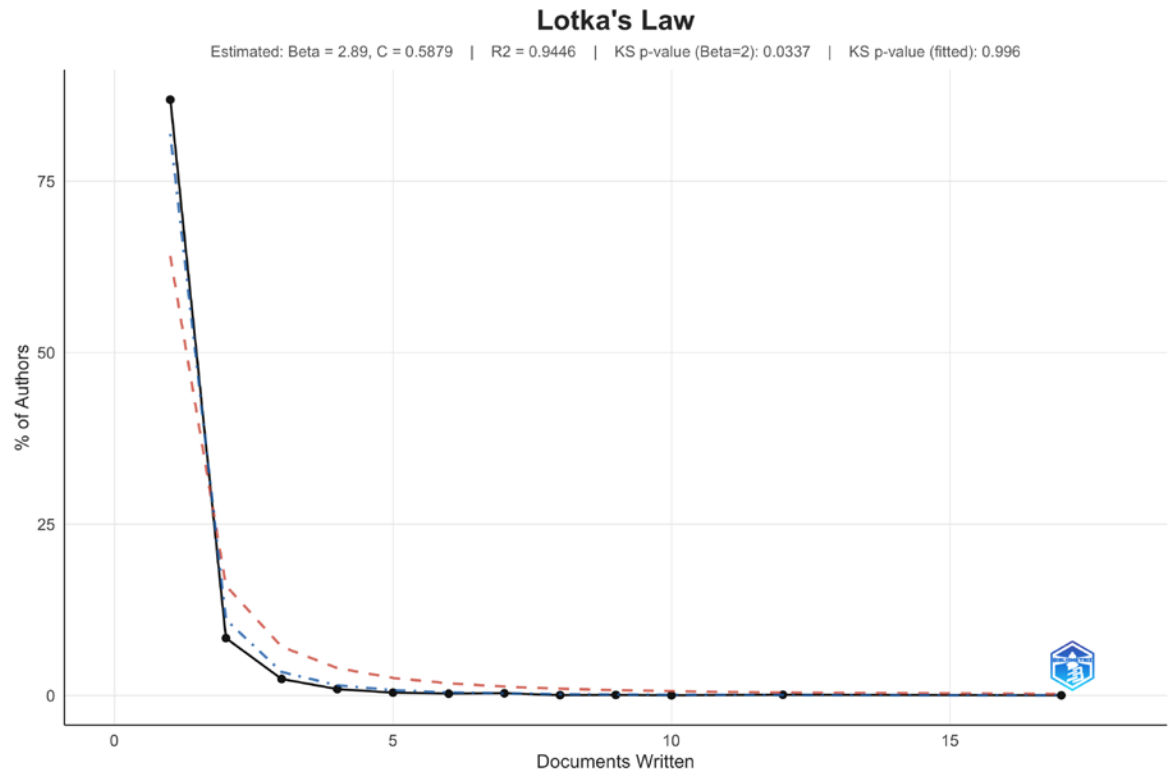


Figure 8. Lotka's law: author productivity distribution

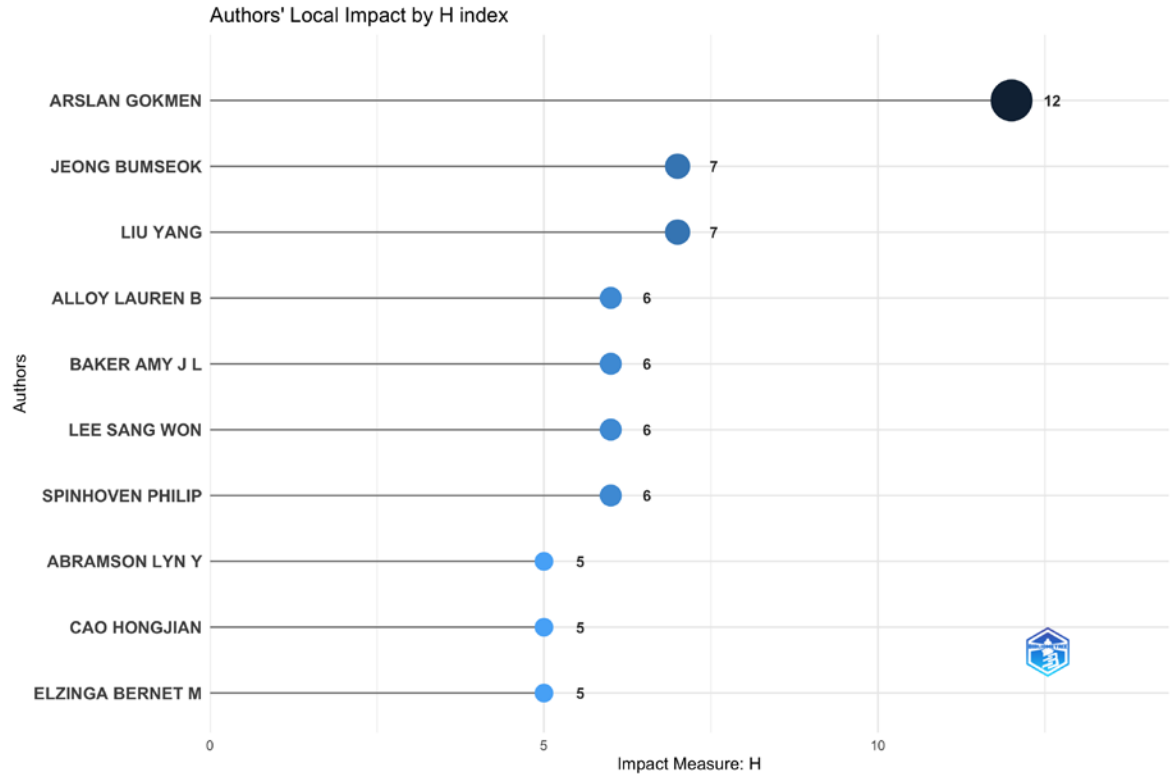


Figure 9. Authors' local impact by h-index

Author productivity followed a generalised Lotka distribution, with β = 2.89, C = 0.59 and R^2 = 0.94 (Figure 8). Of the 3,273 authors in the corpus, 2,844 (86.9%) contributed one article and 274 (8.4%) contributed

two. Only 45 authors (1.4%) produced five or more articles, and one author produced 17, or 18 after the name variants described above were merged. The classical Lotka exponent of 2 is rejected by the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test ($p = 0.034$), while the fitted exponent of 2.89 fits the observed distribution closely ($p = 0.996$). Productivity in this field is therefore much more concentrated than the classical form of Lotka's law predicts. Most of the literature comes from occasional contributors, and only a small core of researchers publishes regularly on childhood emotional neglect and abuse.

Figure 9 presents the local impact of the most productive authors, measured by their h-index within the corpus. Arslan G. has the highest h-index, with a value of 12, followed by Jeong B. and Liu Y., with 7 each, and by Alloy L. B., Baker A. J. L., Lee S. W. and Spinhoven P., with 6 each. This ranking is clearly different from the ranking by number of publications. Some authors with relatively few publications, such as Lee S. W., Alloy L. B., Abramson L. Y. and Elzinga B. M., reach impact scores similar to those of much more productive authors. In contrast, the authors of the recent Italian group identified in Figure 7 do not have the highest h-index values, although each of them has published 12 articles. This is consistent with the short time that publications from 2024 onwards have had to be cited.

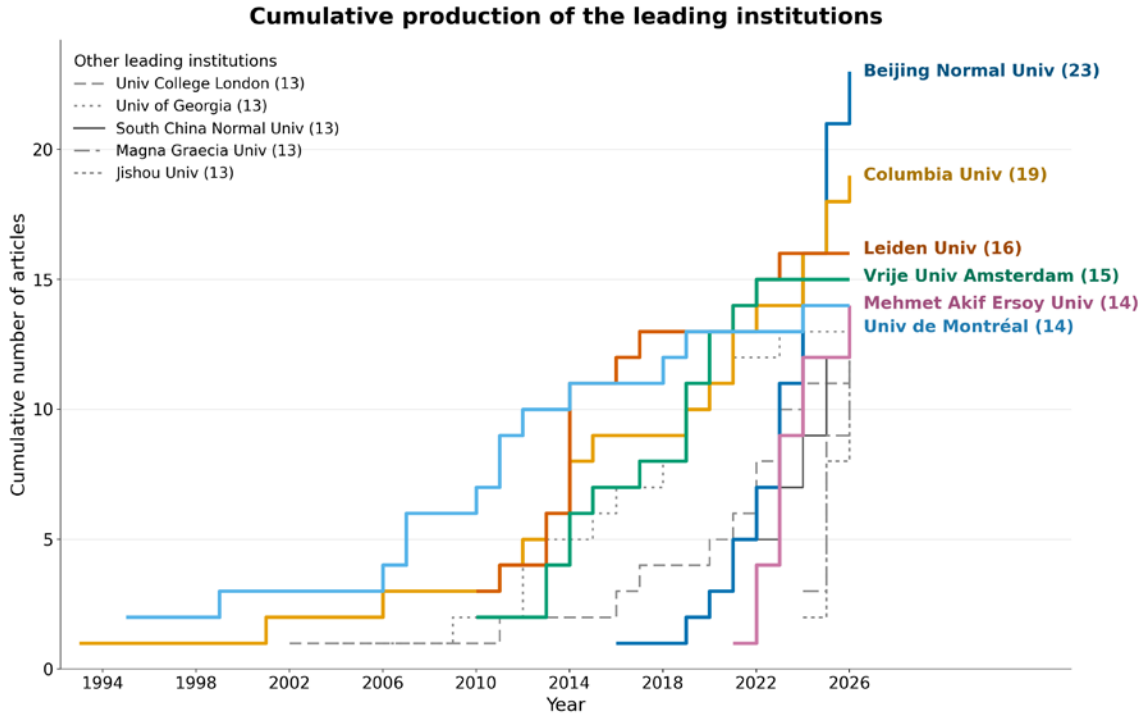


Figure 10. Total number of articles by institution and their cumulative growth by year

Figure 10 reports the 11 institutions that contributed at least 13 articles to the corpus. Beijing Normal University ranks first with 23 articles. It is followed by Columbia University with 19 articles, Leiden University with 16 and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam with 15, while Mehmet Akif Ersoy University and the Université de Montréal have 14 each. The other five institutions each contributed 13 articles: University College London, the University of Georgia, South China Normal University, Magna Graecia University of Catanzaro and Jishou University. These institutions differ less in the number of their articles than in the period in which they produced them. Columbia University published its first article in the corpus as early as 1993, the Université de Montréal in 1995, and Leiden University and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in 2010. Of these long-established centres, only Columbia has remained productive in recent years, with eight articles since 2021, compared with one for Montréal, three for Leiden and two for the Vrije Universiteit. The other institutions entered the field much later and produced almost all of their work in the last five years. Beijing Normal University first appeared in 2016 and contributed 20 of its 23 articles from 2021 onwards. Mehmet Akif Ersoy University published its first article in 2021, and all 14 of its articles appeared after that year. Magna Graecia University of Catanzaro and Jishou University appear only from 2024, and all 13 of their articles were published in the last three years. The institutional structure of this literature is therefore

divided between long-established centres whose contributions grew slowly over two decades and recently active institutions that produce a disproportionate share of current output.

The cumulative curves show how recent this structure is. For nearly two decades, the Université de Montréal was the largest contributor. Leiden University entered the field in 2010 and took the lead in the mid-2010s, but its cumulative output has not changed since 2023. The institutions that replaced it entered the field much later. Beijing Normal University joined in 2016 and South China Normal University in 2018, while Magna Graecia and Jishou universities published their first articles only in 2024. Beijing Normal University reached the same level as Leiden in 2024 and overtook it in 2025. The leading institutions of the field have thus changed within the last three years. This indicates that the growth shown in Figure 3 has been driven largely by institutions that were not part of this literature a decade ago.

Distribution of Output and International Collaboration across Countries

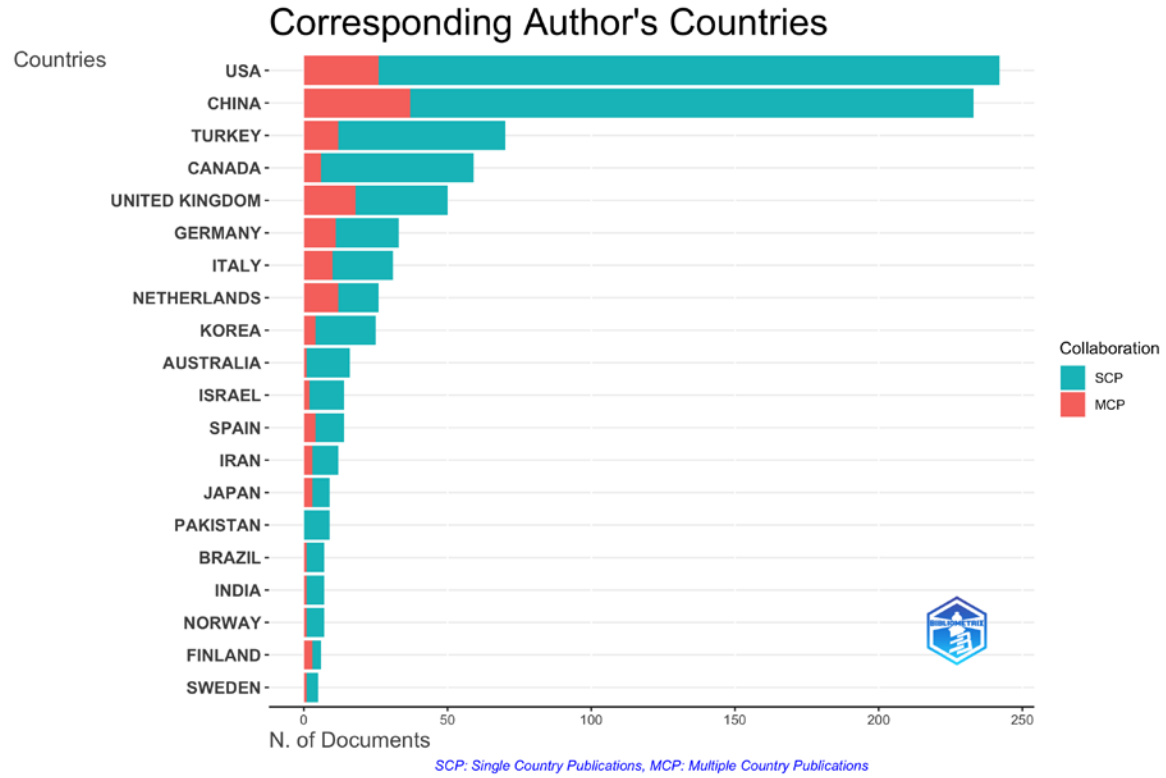


Figure 11. Distribution of corresponding authors by country and collaboration with other countries

*Note: The figure reproduces the Web of Science output, in which the country is labelled "Turkey"; the name Türkiye is used throughout the article.

Figure 11 shows how corresponding authors are distributed across the 57 countries represented in the corpus, and it distinguishes between single-country publications (SCP) and multiple-country publications (MCP). The United States produced 242 articles (25.3%) and China produced 233 (24.3%), so the two countries have almost the same output and together account for nearly half of the corpus. Türkiye is in third place with 70 articles (7.3%), followed by Canada with 59 and the United Kingdom with 50.

The share of internationally co-authored articles does not rise with a country's output. In the United States, only 10.7% of articles are multiple-country publications, and the share is 15.9% in China, 10.2% in Canada and 6.2% in Australia. European countries collaborate much more often. The share of multiple-country publications is 46.2% in the Netherlands, 36.0% in the United Kingdom, 33.3% in Germany and 32.3% in Italy. Because two countries with largely domestic output dominate the corpus, the overall international co-authorship rate reported in Figure 2 is only 19.1%. Figures 10 and 11 together show that national output is produced mostly within national institutions and that neither of the two leading countries concentrates its output in a few centres. In fact, the most productive institution in the corpus accounts for less than one tenth of the articles from its own country.

Table 3. Publications, international collaboration and citations by country							
Country	**Articles**	**SCP**	**MCP**	**MCP (%)**	**Citations**	**Average citations per article**	**Normalised citations**
USA	242	216	26	10.7	10.115	41.80	1.01
China	233	196	37	15.9	2.575	11.10	1.14
Canada	59	53	6	10.2	2.343	39.70	0.99
United Kingdom	50	32	18	36.0	1.982	39.60	1.02
Netherlands	26	14	12	46.2	1.410	54.20	1.13
Türkiye	70	58	12	17.1	1.247	17.80	1.24
Germany	33	22	11	33.3	655	19.80	0.98
Spain	14	10	4	28.6	459	32.80	0.77
Israel	14	12	2	14.3	367	26.20	0.52
Korea	25	21	4	16.0	338	13.50	0.48
Italy	31	21	10	32.3	276	8.90	1.59
Australia	16	15	1	6.2	177	11.10	0.35

*Countries are assigned by the country of the corresponding author. Normalised citations are computed by dividing each article's total citations by the mean number of citations received by all articles of the present corpus published in the same year; a value of 1.00 therefore denotes an article cited exactly as often as the average article of its publication year. The measure is reported because raw citation averages are strongly conditioned by publication age.

Table 3 presents the number of articles for the leading countries, the division between single-country (SCP) and multiple-country (MCP) publications, and the number of citations, both as raw counts and as year-normalised values. The United States has by far the highest total number of citations (10,115). However, articles from the Netherlands receive the most citations on average, with 54.20 citations per article, followed by those from the United States (41.80), Canada (39.70) and the United Kingdom (39.60). These averages depend strongly on how old the publications are. Across the 15 most productive countries, the correlation between the mean age of a country's publications and its average number of citations is $\rho = 0.71$, which gives an advantage to countries that entered the field early. For this reason, the last column of the table reports normalised citations. For each article, the number of citations is divided by the mean number of citations of all articles in the corpus published in the same year, so a value of 1.00 means that an article was cited as often as the average article of its year. This measure changes the ranking considerably. The average publication year is 2013.2 for the United States and 2016.3 for the Netherlands, and their normalised values are 1.01 and 1.13, which are close to or slightly above the expected level. China, whose articles are only 2.4 years old on average, reaches 1.14. The low raw averages of the newer countries therefore reflect the age of their articles rather than lower impact, and the gap between growth in output and citation impact is smaller than the raw figures suggest.

The Netherlands has the opposite profile. With 26 articles, it has the smallest output of the six most cited countries, but it has the highest average number of citations per article (54.20). This is consistent with the prominent position of Leiden University in Figure 10. Türkiye ranks third in output with 70 articles but sixth in total citations (1,247), and its raw average is 17.80 citations per article. However, its articles are among the most recent in the table, with an average publication year of 2022.4, and its normalised value of 1.24 is the second highest among the leading countries. Its contribution is therefore not limited to the number of articles. Italy's articles are even more recent, with an average publication year of 2024.0, and Italy has the highest normalised value in the table (1.59), based on 31 articles.

Table 4 lists the strongest links in the country collaboration network, which shows the level of international collaboration reported above in more detail. Together, the 958 articles connect 73 countries through 174 distinct collaboration links, so the network contains 6.6% of all possible country pairs. Sixty-six of these countries have at least one international link, and seven have none.

Three features of this network help to interpret the collaboration rates reported in Table 3. First, the two leading producers are not isolated from each other. The link between China and the United States, with 22 co-authored articles, is the strongest in the whole network. Their low multiple-country rates therefore do not reflect distance between them; they reflect the dominance of domestic research in both countries and, in the case of China, the concentration of its limited international work on a single partner. Second, the

breadth and the intensity of collaboration are different things. The United States has co-authored with 38 different countries and the United Kingdom with 30, whereas China has only 13 partners. Its total link weight of 47 is lower than those of the United States (105) and the United Kingdom (80), but it is spread over fewer partners, so China's links are, on average, stronger.

Table 4. Strongest country collaboration links

Country pair	Joint publications	Partner countries
China - USA	22	13 / 38
USA - United Kingdom	12	38 / 30
Türkiye - Australia	9	5 / 10
United Kingdom - Netherlands	7	30 / 13
China - United Kingdom	6	13 / 30
USA - Canada	6	38 / 14
USA - Netherlands	6	38 / 13
USA - Italy	6	38 / 12
USA - Korea	6	38 / 2
United Kingdom - Canada	6	30 / 14
Türkiye - United Kingdom	5	5 / 30
USA - Germany	5	38 / 19
United Kingdom - South Africa	5	30 / 8

*Note: Links are counted at the level of co-authored articles, irrespective of the country of the corresponding author. The third column reports, for each member of the pair in the order named, the total number of distinct countries with which it has co-authored at least one article in the corpus.

Table 5. Citation information of the 10 most cited articles

Paper	DOI	Total Citations	TC per Year	Normalised TC
Glaser D, 2002, Child Abuse Negl	10.1016/S0145-2134(02)00342-3	421	16.80	5.70
Spertus IL, 2003, Child Abuse Negl	10.1016/j.chiabu.2003.05.001	327	13.60	3.70
Sanders B, 1995, Child Abuse Negl	10.1016/S0145-2134(94)00131-6	324	10.10	3.02
Claussen AH, 1991, Child Abuse Negl	10.1016/0145-2134(91)90085-R	298	8.30	1.33
van Harmelen AL, 2010, Biol Psychiatry	10.1016/j.biopsych.2010.06.011	291	17.10	3.30
Taillieu TL, 2016, Child Abuse Negl	10.1016/j.chiabu.2016.07.005	283	25.70	6.67
Hanson JL, 2015, Biol Psychiatry	10.1016/j.biopsych.2015.05.010	279	23.20	5.40
Moeller TP, 1993, Child Abuse Negl	10.1016/0145-2134(93)90084-I	254	7.50	2.85
Kaplan SJ, 1999, J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry	10.1097/00004583-199910000-00009	254	9.10	2.24
Arslan G, 2016, Child Abuse Negl	10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.09.010	249	22.60	5.87

*Note: Total Citations is the number of citations the article has received in the Web of Science Core Collection as of 11 August 2026. TC per Year is Total Citations divided by the number of years since publication (2026 - publication year + 1). Normalised TC is Total Citations divided by the mean number of citations received by all articles published in the same year within the present corpus; a value of 1.00 therefore denotes an article cited exactly as often as the average article of its publication year.

Betweenness centrality is likewise concentrated in the United States, with a value of 243.3, and in the United Kingdom, with a value of 157.3, and these two countries connect most of the paths in the network. Third, the Louvain algorithm identifies three groups rather than one connected core. The first is centred on the United States and China and extends across Asia; the second includes the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Italy, Australia, Türkiye and South Africa; and the third is formed around Canada, Germany and the Nordic countries. Türkiye shows the same concentration: nine of its co-authored articles are with Australia and five with the United Kingdom, so its international presence depends on a small number of partnerships rather than on a broad network.

Most Cited Publications

As Table 5 shows, the most cited of the 958 articles is "Emotional abuse and neglect (psychological maltreatment): a conceptual framework" by Glaser (2002), with 421 citations. The ranking of the most cited documents did not change after the corpus was expanded, which indicates that the intellectual core of the field is stable. When normalised citation scores are considered, the studies by Taillieu et al. (2016) and Arslan (2016) stand out. This shows that recent studies have also achieved considerable influence relative to their year of publication.

Conceptual Structure and Thematic Change Revealed By Author Keywords



Figure 12. Word cloud of the most frequent author keywords

As Figure 12 shows, the most frequently used author keyword is "emotional abuse" (207 occurrences), followed by "depression" (111), "adolescence" (96), "emotional neglect" (86), "psychological maltreatment" (86), "childhood emotional abuse" (83) and "emotional maltreatment" (66). The word cloud shows how fragmented the terminology of the field is. Essentially the same construct is indexed under at least six different labels ("emotional abuse", "emotional neglect", "psychological maltreatment", "childhood emotional abuse", "emotional maltreatment" and "psychological abuse"), and these labels together account for more than half of the occurrences among the 10 most frequent keywords. Apart from these definitional terms, the most prominent substantive keywords are depression, anxiety, childhood trauma, mental health, resilience and emotion regulation. This shows that research on the mental health consequences of emotional maltreatment dominates the field.

As Figure 13 shows, the most recent terms in the field are self-compassion, longitudinal study and childhood psychological abuse (median year 2025), followed by the compound labels childhood emotional maltreatment, childhood psychological maltreatment and childhood emotional neglect (2024). The most frequent terms overall (emotional abuse, depression, adolescence and emotional neglect) cluster around 2021–2023, which means that they remain central to current research. In contrast, terms typical of the earlier literature, such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, amygdala, victimization and psychological violence, have median years between 2011 and 2015 and no longer appear on the recent agenda. Two shifts can be seen. First, the neurobiological vocabulary of the mid-2010s (amygdala) and the labels for co-occurring types of abuse (physical abuse, sexual abuse, domestic violence) have been replaced by constructs related to protective and self-related processes (self-compassion, self-esteem). Second, the growing use of "longitudinal study" as a keyword indicates a methodological move from cross-sectional towards longitudinal designs.

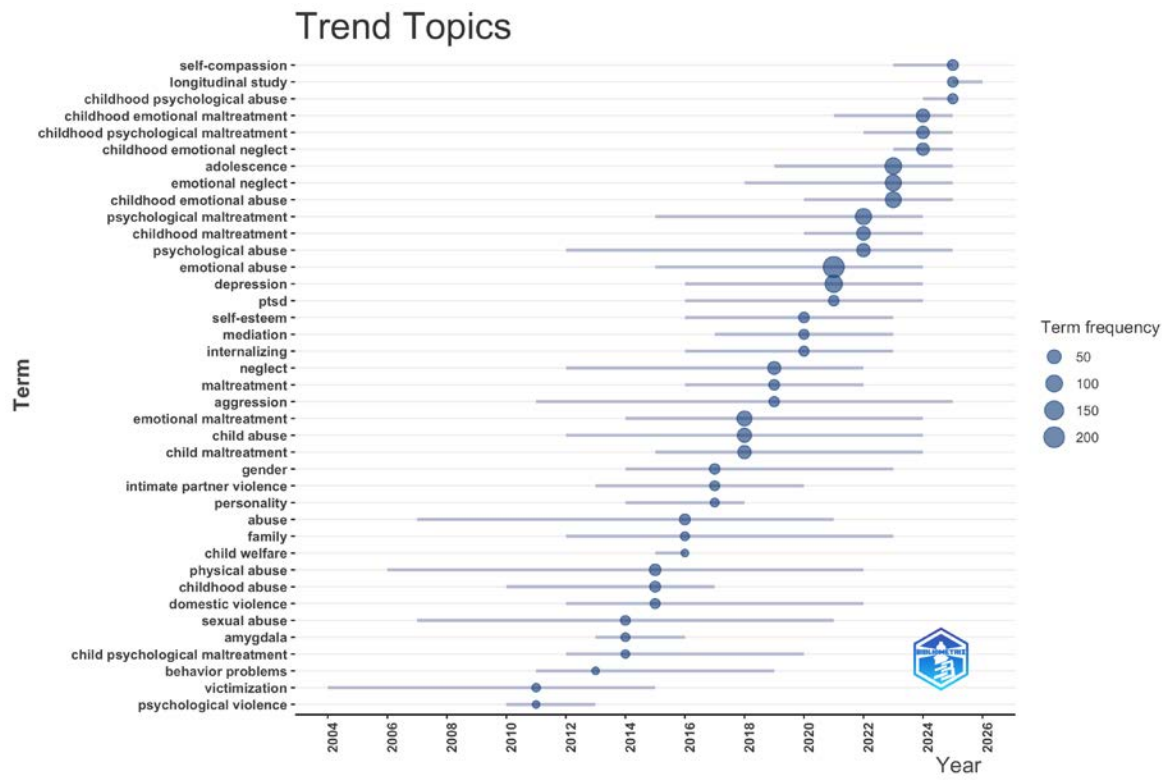


Figure 13. Trend topics by year

Figure 14 presents the thematic map of the author keywords. Themes are placed along two dimensions (Callon et al. 1991, Cobo et al. 2011). Centrality (horizontal axis) reflects the strength of a theme's links with other themes and therefore its relevance to the field. Density (vertical axis) reflects the strength of the links within a theme and therefore its level of development. The upper-right quadrant thus contains motor themes, which are both well developed and central to the field. The upper-left quadrant contains niche themes, which are well developed but marginal. The lower-right quadrant contains basic and transversal themes, which are important for the field but not yet well developed, and the lower-left quadrant contains emerging or declining themes.

In our thematic map, two clusters are located in the motor-theme quadrant. The first, formed by depression, childhood emotional abuse and anxiety, shows that research linking childhood emotional abuse to internalising outcomes has become both the most central and the most developed research programme in the field. The second, which includes emotional abuse, emotional neglect and childhood maltreatment, represents the defining vocabulary of the field. Its position near the intersection of the two axes shows that this definitional core is well developed but serves as a common reference point rather than as a separate research front. The basic-theme quadrant contains the cluster formed by adolescence, neglect and verbal abuse. Its high centrality and low density point to transversal concerns (the most frequently studied developmental period and two behavioural subtypes) that appear throughout the literature but have not developed into a coherent research programme. In the niche quadrant, psychological aggression, aggression and neuroticism form a small, well-developed but peripheral cluster. This cluster points to a research tradition focused on personality and aggression that is only loosely connected to the core of the field. Finally, two clusters are located in the lower-left quadrant, where emerging and declining themes cannot be distinguished by position alone. When they are read together with the trend-topic analysis (Figure 13), their directions appear to differ. In the cluster formed by emotional maltreatment, child abuse and psychological abuse, the two dominant labels have a median year of 2018 and are disappearing from the recent agenda. The cluster formed by psychological maltreatment, child and self-esteem, by contrast, has more recent median years (2020–2022) and is more likely to be a tradition that is still active, although it remains at the margin of the current core. The network structure of the relationships among the keywords is shown in Figure 15.

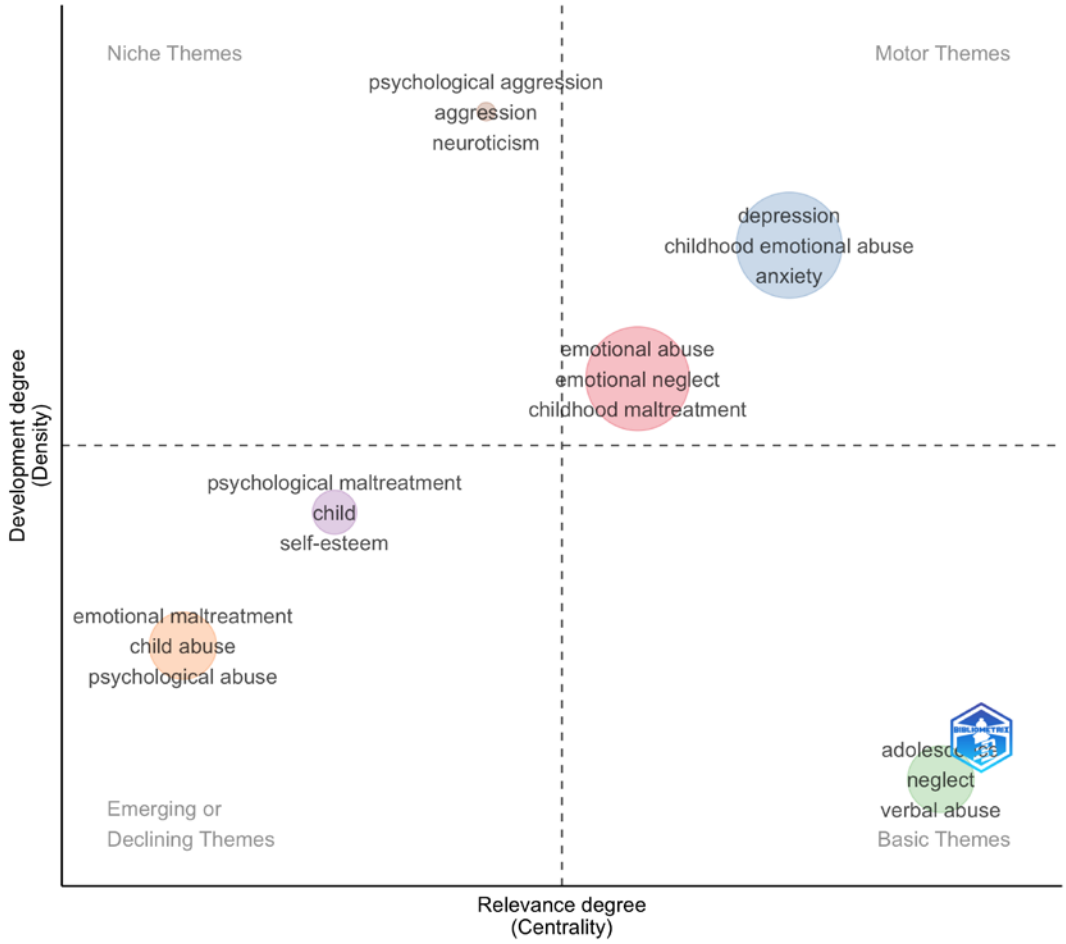


Figure 14. Thematic map of author keywords

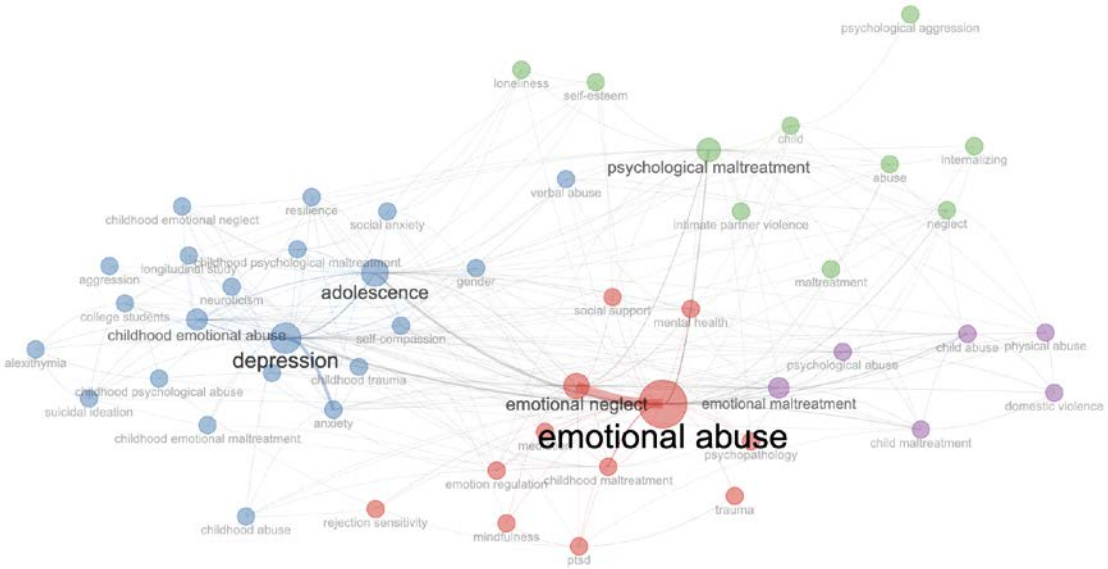


Figure 15. Co-occurrence network of the 50 most frequent author keywords

Figure 15 presents the co-occurrence network of the 50 most frequent author keywords. Node size is proportional to keyword frequency, edge thickness to the strength of co-occurrence, and colour to cluster membership identified by the Louvain algorithm. Four clusters can be distinguished. The first is centred on emotional abuse and emotional neglect, the two most frequent and most strongly connected terms in the network. It links the core phenomenon with the mechanisms and clinical correlates through which it is studied: emotion regulation, rejection sensitivity, trauma, PTSD, psychopathology, mindfulness, mental health and social support. The second cluster, currently the most active, is organised around depression, adolescence and childhood emotional abuse. It brings together the most frequently examined outcomes (anxiety, social anxiety, suicidal ideation), the compound labels typical of recent studies (childhood emotional maltreatment, childhood emotional neglect, childhood psychological maltreatment, childhood psychological abuse), constructs related to protective and dispositional processes (self-compassion, resilience, neuroticism, alexithymia), the populations studied (college students) and the methodological term longitudinal study. The third cluster is centred on psychological maltreatment. It combines the general labels child, abuse, neglect and maltreatment with internalizing, self-esteem, loneliness, intimate partner violence and psychological aggression, which confirms that research conducted under the label psychological maltreatment forms a partly separate tradition. The fourth cluster contains the typological vocabulary of co-occurring abuse: child abuse, physical abuse, psychological abuse, domestic violence and child maltreatment. Overall, this structure shows that the field is organised less around competing theoretical positions than around a division of labour. One strand names and classifies the phenomenon, a second examines its psychological mechanisms and clinical correlates, and a third, currently the most active, studies its consequences in adolescence.

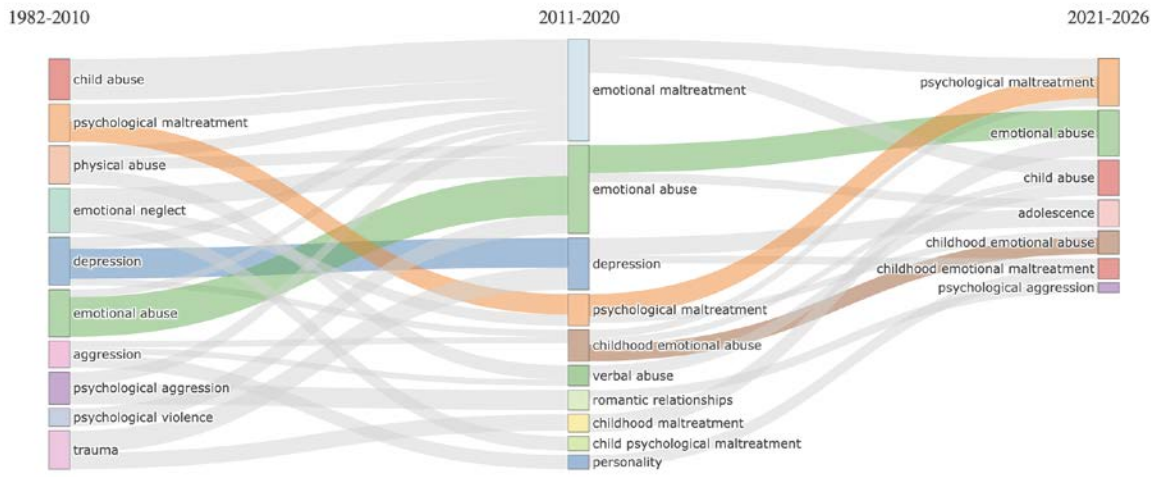


Figure 16. Thematic evolution of author keywords across three periods (cutting points: 2010 and 2020)

Figure 16 shows the thematic evolution of the author keywords across three periods separated by the cutting points 2010 and 2020 (1982–2010, 2011–2020 and 2021–2026). The width of each flow is proportional to the strength of the association between themes in consecutive periods. In the first period, the field is organised around a varied vocabulary in which several partly overlapping labels for the phenomenon and for the types of maltreatment that accompany it are used side by side (child abuse, psychological maltreatment, physical abuse, emotional neglect, emotional abuse, psychological aggression and psychological violence). This shows that no single name for the phenomenon had yet been established. In the second period, this vocabulary narrows to a smaller set of umbrella terms. Emotional maltreatment absorbs much of the earlier child abuse and physical abuse strands and becomes the largest theme of the period, while emotional neglect no longer appears as a separate theme and flows into the emotional maltreatment and emotional abuse streams. In the third period, the vocabulary becomes more differentiated again, this time around the compound labels typical of recent studies (childhood emotional abuse, childhood emotional maltreatment) and around the population studied, and adolescence appears as a separate theme for the first time. The map shows two continuities and two discontinuities. Emotional

abuse and psychological maltreatment are the only themes that remain separate nodes in all three periods. This confirms that emotional abuse is the stable conceptual core of the field and that psychological maltreatment is a parallel tradition next to it. Depression, in contrast, appears as a theme in the first two periods but not in the third, because it has been absorbed into the outcome-oriented clusters identified in Figures 14 and 15. Child abuse and psychological aggression, which were prominent in the first period and absent in the second, appear again as separate themes in the third. Because the last period covers five and a half years and the data for its final year were collected before the year ended, its themes should be read as a structure that is still developing.

Links among the Most Frequently Co-Cited References

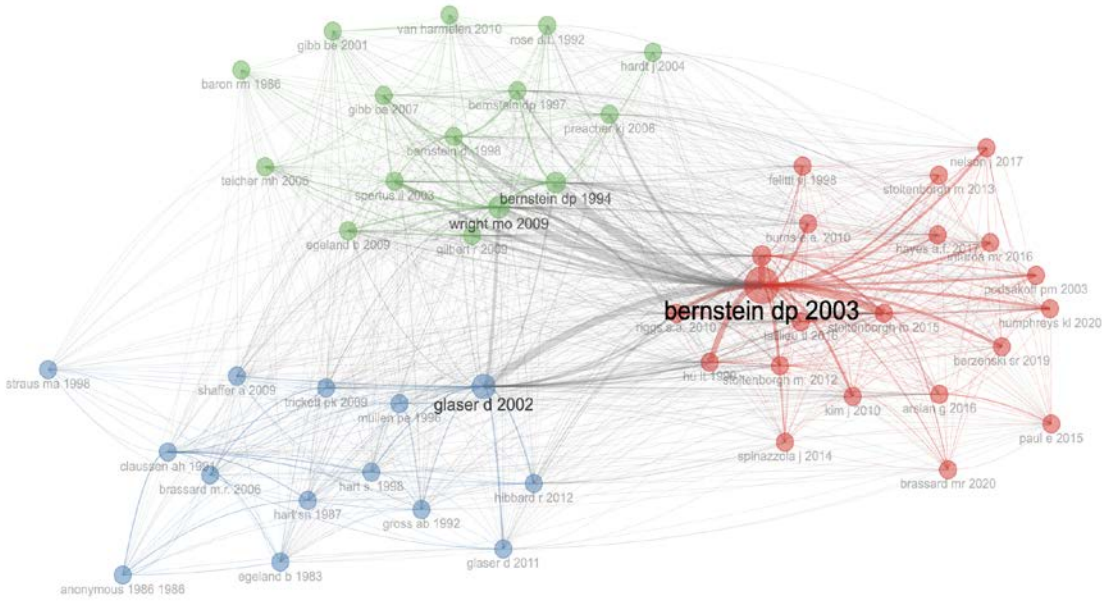


Figure 17. Co-citation network of the cited references

Figure 17 presents the co-citation network of the 50 most frequently co-cited references. Node size is proportional to the number of co-citations a reference receives, edge thickness to how often two references are cited together, and colour to cluster membership identified by the Louvain algorithm. Three clusters form the intellectual base of the field. The first is centred on Bernstein et al. (2003). It combines the short form of the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire with the prevalence meta-analyses of Stoltenborgh et al., reviews of long-term consequences, recent empirical studies and the statistical procedures these studies use. This cluster represents the current strand of the literature that focuses on measurement and prevalence. The second cluster is centred on Glaser (2002) and brings together the conceptual and child protection literature, including the psychological maltreatment guidelines of the 1980s and 1990s, Brassard and Donovan (2006) and Mullen et al. (1996). It corresponds to the definitional strand that is also visible in the keyword analysis (Figure 15). The third cluster is organised around the original Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (Bernstein et al. 1994) and studies of developmental mechanisms. It includes studies of cognitive vulnerability to depression, neurobiological correlates such as those reported by Teicher et al. (2006), the validity of retrospective recall and the mediation procedures typical of this strand. Two features of this structure are worth noting. First, the original Childhood Trauma Questionnaire and its short form belong to different clusters, which indicates that the two versions of the instrument serve separate research programmes rather than one continuous tradition. Second, the definitional cluster consists almost entirely of studies published before 2012, whereas more recent studies dominate the measurement cluster. The conceptual debate about what emotional abuse is has thus largely been replaced by research that measures its prevalence and consequences. (References recorded in Web of Science without an identifiable author appear in the network as “Anonymous”.)

Discussion

This study used bibliometric analysis to examine 958 articles on childhood emotional neglect and abuse indexed in the Web of Science Core Collection. The corpus was retrieved with 16 title terms that cover the alternative names under which the phenomenon is published. It includes studies conducted directly with children as well as studies of adult samples that address childhood emotional neglect and abuse. The analysis identified the leading journals, authors, countries and concepts of the field and mapped its conceptual and intellectual structure.

Child Abuse & Neglect was both the most productive source, with 156 articles or 16.3% of the corpus, and the most locally cited source, with 4,249 citations in the reference lists of the analysed articles. Bradford's law shows how strong this concentration is. Across the core and second zones, the empirical distribution lies above the fitted line, which means that the field is more concentrated than the law predicts (Figure 6). Research on childhood emotional neglect and abuse thus has an unusually clear disciplinary home. This home is nevertheless divided between specialist maltreatment journals and general psychology and psychiatry journals, and the division corresponds to the definitional and outcome-oriented strands identified in the keyword analysis (Figure 15). For authors, choosing a journal is therefore less a question of ranking than of deciding which of these two readerships a study should reach. Tables 1 and 2, taken together, also show a mismatch between where the field publishes and where it obtains its knowledge. Only three journals appear among the 10 leading sources in both lists. Development and Psychopathology, Child Development and the Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry are heavily cited, with 640, 425 and 417 local citations, respectively, although none of them is among the most productive journals. For researchers new to the area, this mismatch is more informative than any ranking: a study of childhood emotional neglect and abuse is expected to engage with a developmental psychopathology literature that is published mostly outside the specialist maltreatment journals in which such studies usually appear.

The country analysis shows that the United States, with 242 articles (25.3%), and China, with 233 articles (24.3%), produced almost the same number of articles and together account for nearly half of the corpus (Figure 11). They are followed by Türkiye with 70 articles (7.3%), Canada with 59 and the United Kingdom with 50. This distribution differs from earlier findings. In the bibliometric analysis of child abuse and neglect by Bayrak and Özkan (2024), the most productive countries were the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia, and China appeared only within the top 10. Earlier studies also noted that childhood psychological maltreatment received limited attention in East Asian societies, particularly in China (Zhai and Gao 2009, Liao et al. 2011). In the present corpus, China almost matches the United States, which suggests that this situation has changed considerably within a short time. Figure 10 shows where the change took place. Beijing Normal University entered the field in 2016 and overtook Leiden University, the long-standing leader of this literature, in 2025, and Jishou University published its first articles only in 2024. However, the three Chinese institutions among the 11 most productive, namely Beijing Normal, South China Normal and Jishou, account for 49 articles in total, roughly one fifth of China's output. The growth seen in Figure 3 is therefore based on a wider range of institutions than the ranking alone suggests.

These counts indicate research attention rather than prevalence. Childhood neglect and abuse occur at different rates in different societies and are also defined differently (Mahram et al. 2013). Publication volume reflects research capacity, funding and disciplinary traditions at least as much as the size of the underlying problem. The distribution does show where the evidence base of the field is currently produced and, when read together with the collaboration pattern, how unevenly this evidence is shared. The share of internationally co-authored articles does not rise with output volume. In the United States, only 10.7% of articles are multiple-country publications, and the share is 15.9% in China, 10.2% in Canada and 6.2% in Australia. European countries collaborate much more often, with shares of 46.2% in the Netherlands, 36.0% in the United Kingdom, 33.3% in Germany and 32.3% in Italy. Because the total is dominated by two countries whose output is largely domestic, the overall rate of international co-authorship is only 19.1% (Figure 2). Nevertheless, the two largest literatures are not isolated from each other, as the link between them is the strongest in the collaboration network (Table 4). The low rates reflect the dominance of domestic research in both countries and, in the case of China, the concentration of international work on

a single partner. Collaboration between the leading producers is thus limited but not absent. This is an important limitation for a phenomenon whose definition varies across research traditions, because the terminological fragmentation shown in Figures 12 and 15 calls for exactly this kind of cross-cultural comparison.

Türkiye holds a distinctive position in this picture. It ranks third in output with 70 articles and is represented among the 11 most productive institutions: Mehmet Akif Ersoy University shares fifth place with the Université de Montréal, with 14 articles, all published since 2021. The most productive author of the corpus, who also has the highest local h-index, works in Türkiye (Figures 7 and 9). However, Türkiye's average citation rate is 17.80 citations per article, which is well below the rates of the Netherlands (54.20), the United States (41.80) and Canada (39.70). Like that of the other high-volume countries, its output consists mainly of single-country publications (Figure 11). At the same time, its publications are among the most recent in the table, with a mean publication year of 2022.4, and its year-normalised citation value of 1.24 is the second highest among the leading countries. Its contribution is therefore not limited to volume. For researchers working in Türkiye, this analysis points to collaboration and journal choice, rather than output alone, as the two main levers.

The most frequent author keyword in the corpus is "emotional abuse" (207 occurrences), followed by "depression" (111), "adolescence" (96), "emotional neglect" (86), "psychological maltreatment" (86), "childhood emotional abuse" (83) and "emotional maltreatment" (66) (Figure 12). This ranking says something about the vocabulary of the field. Researchers have long observed that terms such as emotional harassment, psychological harassment, verbal harassment, emotional maltreatment and psychological maltreatment are used interchangeably with emotional abuse to describe a wide range of caregiver behaviours considered psychologically harmful to children (Brassard et al. 2019, Taussig and Culhane 2010a). The keyword analysis shows how far this dispersion goes. Six labels for essentially the same construct account for more than half of the occurrences among the 10 most frequent keywords. The sensitivity analysis leads to the same conclusion from another direction. When the variant labels are merged into a single concept, this concept reaches 473 occurrences, more than twice the count of "emotional abuse" as a separate label. Research in this field is thus spread across a vocabulary that no single search term can capture. This is also why the present corpus required 16 title terms instead of the five used at the start of the search.

Glaser (2011) attributes the parallel use of "emotional" and "psychological" to the conventions of different scientific traditions rather than to a real difference between the phenomena they describe. Two independent analyses in this study support this view. In the co-occurrence network (Figure 15), psychological maltreatment is not part of the emotional abuse cluster; instead, it forms its own cluster together with the general labels child, abuse, neglect and maltreatment. In the thematic evolution (Figure 16), emotional abuse and psychological maltreatment are the only two themes that remain separate nodes in all three periods. Even in the sensitivity analysis, in which variant labels are merged, psychological maltreatment remains separate, with 125 occurrences. The maps therefore point to two naming traditions that have existed side by side for four decades and still organise partly separate bodies of research, rather than to a field that has failed to agree on a term.

Another reason for this dispersed vocabulary is that emotional abuse rarely occurs alone. It can occur in isolation, but it often accompanies other forms of maltreatment (Pears et al. 2008), so studies tend to examine several subtypes together. This is reflected in the structure of the field. The study by Mullen et al. (1996), which examined the long-term effects of physical, emotional and sexual abuse, is one of the central references of the definitional cluster in the co-citation network (Figure 17). In addition, the fourth keyword cluster in Figure 15 consists entirely of terms describing co-occurring forms of abuse: child abuse, physical abuse, psychological abuse, domestic violence and child maltreatment. The thematic evolution shows that this typological vocabulary was most prominent in the earliest period, when child abuse, physical abuse and psychological violence were among the leading themes. Since then, it has been replaced by compound labels that name the phenomenon more precisely, such as childhood emotional abuse and childhood emotional maltreatment (Figure 16). Similarly, Bayrak and Özkan (2024) report that the most cited articles in the child abuse and neglect literature address several dimensions of maltreatment together.

The thematic map places the cluster formed by depression, childhood emotional abuse and anxiety in the motor-theme quadrant, that is, among the themes that are both most central to the field and most developed (Figure 14). The same group also forms the largest and most active cluster in the co-occurrence network, where it includes social anxiety, suicidal ideation, self-compassion and resilience (Figure 15). The most established line of research in this literature is therefore the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and internalising outcomes in adolescence and young adulthood. This focus is consistent with the findings of the substantive literature. Emotional abuse is an underlying feature of other forms of maltreatment and is associated with psychological, social and developmental harm that is at least comparable to theirs (Chamberland et al. 2011, Taillieu et al. 2016). Studies of adolescents and university students have found that emotional abuse predicts psychological distress, anxiety and depressive symptoms (Miller-Perrin et al. 2009, Coates and Messman-Moore 2014, Cohen et al. 2019, McNeil et al. 2020). Burns et al. (2010) reported that a history of emotional abuse predicted emotional dysregulation more strongly than childhood sexual or physical abuse, and this effect has been attributed to impaired cognitive processing of emotional states and impaired development of emotion regulation skills (Dvir et al. 2014). Gama et al. (2021) also identified emotional abuse as the maltreatment subtype with the greatest impact and the strongest association with post-traumatic stress symptoms. The prominence of depression and anxiety in the keyword analysis therefore reflects where the evidence has accumulated; it is not an artefact of indexing. A 2025 umbrella review of 25 meta-analyses also links childhood emotional abuse to a wide range of negative psychosocial outcomes and ranks it among the maltreatment subtypes with the most consistently documented long-term consequences (Zhang et al. 2025).

The trend-topic analysis indicates that the field is also changing direction (Figure 13). Terms characteristic of the earlier literature (physical abuse, sexual abuse, amygdala, victimization) have median years between 2011 and 2015 and have receded from the recent agenda. The most recent terms are self-compassion, longitudinal study and childhood psychological abuse (median year 2025). Two shifts are visible. The first is from establishing that childhood emotional abuse affects development, a question addressed by the neuroimaging work of the mid-2010s (Heim et al. 2013), towards identifying what modifies its consequences. Self-compassion and resilience now appear as keywords within the outcome-oriented cluster (Figure 15), and the most productive author of the corpus works in precisely this vein, combining protective processes with instrument development (Arslan 2017). The second is methodological: the appearance of longitudinal study among the newest keywords suggests a transition from cross-sectional description towards designs capable of supporting developmental claims. Both shifts point in the same direction: a literature moving from documenting an association to explaining and modifying it. The most recent primary studies bear this out. A three-wave longitudinal study finds that self-compassion buffers the pathway from childhood emotional maltreatment to later psychological distress (Wu et al. 2026). A parallel investigation identifies self-compassion as a mechanism linking psychological maltreatment to depression (Xie et al. 2025). The protective-process and longitudinal turns that the trend-topic analysis registers as keywords are therefore already taking shape in the field's newest empirical work.

English et al. (2015) report a significant increase over the past two decades in the recognition and reporting of emotional neglect and abuse by mandatory reporters. This may have improved understanding of the social, emotional and behavioural consequences of emotional neglect and abuse for children in both the short and long term. Beyond these effects, research is also needed on prevention policies and effective parenting education. A 2011 review of parenting programmes found that no intervention programme directly targeted emotional neglect and abuse (Baker et al. 2011). The same review also found that, among the 10 evidence-based, guided universal parenting programmes reviewed for emotional neglect and abuse content, there was little information on what types of behaviours parents should avoid to prevent emotional neglect and abuse. This gap has persisted. A 2023 meta-analysis of parenting interventions reports that most trials merged physical and emotional violence in a single measure, so that effects on emotional violence could not be estimated separately (Backhaus et al. 2023). The trend-topic analysis suggests that the conceptual basis for such programmes is now taking shape: the constructs that have become prominent in the most recent literature, namely self-compassion, self-esteem and resilience (Figure 13), are precisely the protective processes on which preventive work would need to build. The parallel move towards longitudinal designs is what would allow their modifiability to be tested. However,

emotional abuse tends to occur more frequently than other forms of maltreatment, and it can disrupt learning and the achievement of developmental milestones over a longer period than other forms of abuse (Burns et al. 2010). This situation requires a specific focus on emotional neglect and abuse. Preventive interventions targeting emotional abuse may in turn help to interrupt the intergenerational cycle of abuse. Prevention on this scale also depends on public understanding, yet a recent systematic review reports that emotional abuse is still recognised less readily, and judged less harmful, than physical or sexual abuse despite comparable consequences (Morgan et al. 2026). Narrowing this gap in lay recognition is itself a precondition for the preventive work the recent trend data anticipate.

This study was limited to data from the Web of Science Core Collection. Although drawing on several databases can strengthen generalisation and reveal additional trends, a single database was used to avoid the inconsistencies and data losses that combining sources can introduce. A further limitation concerns the search strategy: restricting the query to the title field (TI) maximises topical precision but may reduce sensitivity, so relevant studies that address emotional neglect and abuse without naming these terms in their titles may not have been captured. Moreover, the corpus is bounded in time. The search reached back to the earliest record available in the database, but any older work not indexed there could not be included. Furthermore, the corpus was restricted to English-language articles, so findings published in other languages are not represented. Finally, author-level indicators depend on the disambiguation of author names; although transliteration and abbreviation variants of the most productive authors were manually merged, name ambiguity cannot be fully excluded for authors who share identical recorded names. The risk is not evenly distributed across the corpus. It is greatest for Chinese author names, where a limited stock of surnames is shared by a large number of researchers and where romanisation varies between records, as the 13 distinct authors recorded under a single abbreviated name in this corpus illustrate, and researchers affiliated with Chinese institutions account for a growing share of this literature. The author-level rankings reported here should therefore be read as close approximations rather than exact counts. The same qualification applies to institutions: although name variants of the leading institutions were merged manually, records that name a university without identifying its campus, such as the entries recorded simply as “Univ North Carolina”, cannot always be assigned unambiguously. A further consideration concerns the selection process itself: the records were screened by two assessors working jointly. Although this procedure allowed uncertain cases to be resolved as they arose, it does not yield a quantitative estimate of inter-rater reliability.

A further two limitations concern the treatment of keywords. The first is that the rules by which variant labels were merged were established by the authors rather than taken from an external standard. Every co-word analysis reported here, namely the keyword frequencies, the co-occurrence network, the thematic map and the trend-topic analysis, rests upon them. For this reason the main analysis was confined to the lexical layer, the semantic layer was reported only as a sensitivity check, and the complete rule set is provided as supplementary material so that readers may judge it; the boundary between a spelling variant and a conceptually distinct label nevertheless remains a matter of judgement. The second is that these analyses were based on author keywords alone, and 106 of the 958 records (11.1%) declare none. Such records are concentrated in the earlier literature: 65.2% of the articles published before 2000 carry no author keywords, against 27.5% for 2000–2009, 12.3% for 2010–2019 and 3.8% from 2020 onwards. Their median year of publication is therefore 2010 as against 2022 for the remainder. Keywords Plus, which Web of Science assigns algorithmically, was not used. The conceptual maps presented here therefore describe the vocabulary that authors themselves chose, and they under-represent the formative period of the field.

A final limitation concerns the coverage of the database itself. Book chapters, dissertations, professional practice guidelines and agency reports fall largely outside the Web of Science Core Collection, and the present corpus was in any case restricted to journal articles. Several of the definitional sources on which this literature depends, among them the APSAC practice guidelines and Working Together (2010), are documents of precisely this kind, which indicates that an established channel of the field’s output lies outside the analyses reported here.

Conclusion

The earliest record on childhood emotional neglect and abuse indexed in the Web of Science Core Collection dates from 1982, and the highest annual output was recorded in 2025. While American researchers have the most publications and citations in this area, Dutch researchers have the highest number of citations per article. At the individual level, the highest number of publications on emotional abuse belongs to a Turkish researcher, Gökmen Arslan. Furthermore, Chinese scholars have increasingly contributed to the literature, although most of these publications are single-country studies (Figure 11). In recent studies on childhood emotional abuse, concepts such as self-compassion, longitudinal study and childhood psychological abuse have gained prominence.

Three implications follow for the direction of the field. First, the terminological dispersion documented here imposes a practical cost on evidence synthesis: no single search term retrieves this literature, and reviews that rely on one designation will systematically miss part of it. The field would therefore benefit from an agreed reporting convention rather than from a further round of definitional debate. Second, although the two largest national literatures are more closely linked to each other than any other pair of countries in the corpus, both remain predominantly domestic and their international engagement is narrow. This limits precisely the cross-cultural comparison that a phenomenon defined differently across research traditions requires. Third, the constructs that have become prominent most recently, namely self-compassion, self-esteem and resilience, together with the turn towards longitudinal designs, indicate where the field is moving: from documenting the consequences of childhood emotional abuse towards identifying what modifies them.

Two of these findings bear directly on practice. The first is that the intellectual base of the field is anchored in measurement instruments, and in the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire above all, within a literature that remains divided over what to call its object. Clinical assessment inherits both features at once: what is recorded as emotional maltreatment depends on the instrument administered, and an instrument developed under one designation of the construct will not necessarily capture another. An agreed reporting convention would therefore serve clinicians as directly as it would serve reviewers. The second concerns prevention. That none of the evidence-based universal parenting programmes reviewed addresses emotional neglect and abuse directly (Younas and Gutman 2026) is not only a gap in provision but a mismatch in timing, since the constructs on which such a programme would build, namely self-compassion, self-esteem and resilience, are precisely those that have become prominent in the most recent literature. For Türkiye this is a question of national policy rather than of ranking alone: a literature that stands third in output and includes the most productive individual author of the corpus is a sufficient base from which to develop and evaluate preventive provision specific to emotional maltreatment. Its rate of international collaboration, 17.1%, indicates where such work could gain wider visibility.

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